

DEATH at Morning House



ALSO BY MAUREEN JOHNSON

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The Vanishing Stair

The Hand on the Wall

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13 Little Blue Envelopes

The Last Little Blue Envelope

The Key to the Golden Firebird

On the Count of Three

Girl at Sea

Devilish

Let It Snow

The Shades of London series

The Suite Scarlett series

The background of the cover is a detailed black and white illustration of a forest. It features several large, leafy trees and some bare, skeletal trees. A small, dark silhouette of a person is shown falling from a branch in the center of the page. The overall style is a fine-line, woodcut-like illustration.

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at

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HOUSE



MAUREEN
JOHNSON

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THE ALL-AMERICAN RALSTON FAMILY AND THEIR IDEAL SUMMER HOME

Photo essay in *Life* magazine, July 1932

Dr. Phillip Ralston of New York City and his wife, theater star Faye Ralston, have certainly mastered the art of good living. And they have quite a lot of lives in their care!

The doctor adopted six of his children in 1915 while working in England during the war. They welcomed their seventh child, Max, four years ago. The doctor and his wife spend most of the year in New York City and the older children board at school. In the summer, they come together in their private paradise in the Thousand Islands region. It is called Ralston Island now, though it was formerly known as Cutter Island. Their magnificent home is called Morning House. Built at a cost of four million dollars, everything in Morning House is designed to foster good health and creativity.

“Whenever my children show a gift in a particular direction,” Dr. Ralston says, “I make sure to nurture it.”

For this purpose, Dr. Ralston called in architect P. Anderson Little of Los Angeles to build a two-story playhouse that would not be out of place in a story by the Brothers Grimm. It is a cheerful place,

built of stone, with windows of varying sizes and a turret on the side. Most people would imagine a playhouse to be a small affair—this one is the size of a large family home. The first floor boasts a large library, an art studio, and a room for study. The second floor is high-ceilinged and features a large open space with mirrored walls and a ballet barre, as well as a piano and other musical instruments.

The family follows a precise schedule. They breakfast together at seven thirty each morning. Dr. Ralston and his family follow the natural diet prescribed by institutions such as the Battle Creek Sanitarium. There is no meat, no sugar, no coffee or tea. Instead, the family enjoys large helpings of yogurt, cooked fruits, nut cutlets, stewed peas, and custard. By eight, they are out on the lawn, practicing calisthenics in matching uniforms. The boys and the girls exercise together. After this, the group either swim laps in a walled-off lagoon that serves as an outdoor swimming pool or compete to see who can swim around the island the fastest.

“My daughter Clara is the strongest swimmer in the bunch,” Dr. Ralston adds proudly. “No one can beat her time to the shore and back. We’re working to get her into the next Olympics, though she would rather concentrate on her dancing.”

By nine thirty, exercises are complete for the morning. The children have two hours of

instruction led by Dr. Ralston. Topics include medicine, chemistry, heredity, history, politics, and geography. Lunch is served at noon—another round of nourishing natural foods. The children then have the afternoon to pursue their individual interests. There's another round of swimming at four. If the weather is inclement, they practice diving in the twelve-foot-deep pool in the lower level of the house. At dinner, the family reviews their day. They relax in the evening, sometimes with games, or perhaps with a motion picture.

It's hard to imagine a more wholesome and idyllic summer than one spent with the Ralstons at Morning House.

TWO CHILDREN DEAD IN MORNING HOUSE TRAGEDY

The New York Times, July 28, 1932

Tragedy has befallen the family of doctor and philanthropist Dr. Phillip Ralston. His youngest child, Max Ralston, aged four, was found drowned in the waters of the St. Lawrence River yesterday afternoon. It is thought the child left his room while his nurse was asleep and attempted to swim on his own. Hours later, overcome by grief, his oldest sister, Clara, aged 16, jumped four stories from the roof of the house. . . .



Petrichor. That's how this all started—from a single smell. Do you know this word? I learned it from Akilah Jones.

Akilah, Akilah, Akilah . . .

I first set eyes on her in freshman-year French. She was conjugating the absolute hell out of her first irregular verb and wearing a soft yellow sweater when I realized I was in love with her. I always knew I liked girls, but when I saw Akilah, I *knew* knew. I genuinely don't understand how you could see Akilah and *not* fall in love with her. The lift of her chin. Her ever-changing hair—braided, straight, natural, sometimes shot through with purple stripes. She played piano in our school's jazz band. She also played guitar. She smiled like she knew the joke you were about to tell and was already laughing. And her laugh? Like the bells of a cathedral.

I'd had four classes with her in total—freshman French I; biology and first-semester American history in sophomore year; and English III this last year. I usually didn't get to sit close to her, because my last name is Wexler and a lot of teachers go alphabetically, but our English teacher let us pick

our own seats at six tables around the room. Unfortunately, I was late on the first day and her table was full, but I snagged a pretty good seat nearby and basked in the warmth of her magnificence. I always tried to look my best before I got there, but I'm not working with what Akilah is working with.

I'm fine. I'm Marlowe Wexler and I'm fine.

My name makes it sound like I spend my time lurking around the shadowy alleyways of some big city. One of those alleyways full of old boxes, metal trash cans, and cats that knock things over and make that *yowllllll* sound. Like there's a bartender who knows my name somewhere. Like I have three ex-wives and I don't talk to two of them but there's something smoldering between me and the third one. We never got over each other. My name is more exciting than I am. Akilah was exceptional, and I was fine, and that was the problem.

I never got to spend any real time with her until that summer when we both got jobs at Guffy's, our local ice cream place. Guffy's has thirty-two homemade flavors and locally famous hot caramel sauce. Say you want your cone "hot bottom" and you'll get some of the caramel pooled into the bottom of your cone and everyone will laugh except us, because you can only hear this so many times before you think about putting your hand inside the waffle iron just to feel something again.

I had no idea Akilah would be working there too until I showed up for my second shift in a cat hair-covered T-shirt (which I could get away with by wearing the Guffy's apron) and my most awkward shorts (because people only saw me

from the waist up). She was behind the counter in a baby-blue romper and a Guffy's apron, scooping out some black raspberry ripple and smiling with the wattage of a power plant. I genuinely staggered in the doorway on seeing her and realizing that we would be working together. It was the most amazing thing that had happened to me up until that point. We were coworkers; just she and I would be behind the little counter two nights a week and one full day on weekends. (At least until I manipulated the schedule so that we had all our shifts together. I made this my mission.)

This is when I got to know Akilah properly. She was easy to talk to. If she said she liked a show, I went home and streamed that show until my eyeballs dried up. If there was a song she liked, that became my soundtrack. Sometimes my brain opens a chamber and says "fill me up." I'm not saying I know what I'm doing—I'm saying I can fill up my brain like a bucket and carry the information from place to place and it generally doesn't leak. I have no idea whether this makes me smart. But it definitely helped when I wanted to have things to talk to Akilah about.

"Do you know what my favorite smell is?" she said one day when we were in a lull and waiting for a customer to come by for a hot bottom. "Petrichor."

I was about to open my mouth and say "the smell of a flying dinosaur"? But something told me to shut it and nod knowingly. (That's a *pterosaur*, which you have to admit is pretty close.)

"That smell of soil after it's been struck by rain. That's


what it's called. That ozone-y, earthy smell. It's my favorite smell in the world."

That night I spent somewhere in the vicinity of six hours reading scented candle reviews until I found the internet's favorite petrichor-scented candle. It was thirty bucks. For thirty bucks, you expect a quality product, right? I ordered the candle, paid eight dollars for expedited shipping, and made my plan.

See, I had another job. I helped take care of our family friends Juan and Carlita's lakeside cottage on Lake Oneida, about ten minutes from our house. Juan and Carlita teach at New York University, but they used to be professors at Syracuse, where my dad works. They still came up some weekends and in the summers. I took care of the place for them when they were away. I mowed their tiny lawn if it needed it. I watered the flowers if they were dry. I gave everything a light dusting and vacuuming, flushed the toilets to keep sewer gas from building up, took in the mail, and generally kept the place alive. It was a super easy job. It only took me a few hours a week, and I was allowed to sit around there if I liked and study or whatever.

Or whatever.

We'd never had a super specific conversation about how to use the cottage, but I never did anything weird with it. No one ever said, "You can't take a date there, Marlowe." I felt that as long as I used the place responsibly and left it better than when I arrived, everything was fine. And it was fine. Until that night with the petrichor.



My parents won a gift card to the Cheesecake Factory in a raffle, which they let me have. I'd kept it in my wallet for eight months like it was my entire inheritance, too precious to be spent right away. This was the occasion I didn't know I had been waiting for. One night, as I was emptying out the soft serve machine, I turned to Akilah.

"I have this gift certificate to the Cheesecake Factory," I said, shrugging. "I need to use it. Do you want to . . ."

I gulped down some air.

". . . go?"

She looked over her shoulder at me from where she was refilling the toppings bar.

"Sure," she replied. "Can't let a good gift card go to waste."

I had already studied the schedule and knew that we both had Thursday night off. I wandered over to it and read it like it was all new information.

"We have . . . oh, we both have Thursday off. Are you . . ."

"Not doing anything," she said. "Let's go. Sounds fun."

From that point until Thursday, I itched and twitched my way minute by minute. I dumped every item of clothing I owned onto my bed and tried to figure out what to wear. I got a peachy-colored dotted blouse for my birthday (and if you squint you realize the dots on it are tiny horses). I considered it my lucky shirt even though it had never brought me any luck up until this point. Sometimes, you just have to believe in your shirt. I did a bunch of stuff with my hair that

went nowhere. I have brownish-reddish hair the consistency of which I think is best described as uncertain. Is it wavy? Is it straight? Will it stay if I try to put it up? It does not know. Stop asking it. It will zig when I need it to zag. I left it down and allowed it to do what it felt like it needed to do.

I picked her up. I drive a Smart Car, which is the smallest car in the entire world. It is red, so it looks like I'm cruising along in a cartoon apple. I inherited it from my grandparents, who bought it for driving around Key West, where they live, before they decided that it was ruining their image. It was given to me because it was considered a sensible way for me to get back and forth from school and could never be used for anything even remotely dangerous. What was I going to say on my crazed Smart Car spree? *Get in, nobody, because we're going to do a sweet twenty-one miles an hour, and definitely not on the highway.*

But it was a car and therefore I loved it. It tried its best even though it was very small.

Akilah was wearing white shorts and a red top that I think was new. She'd twisted her box braids into an elegant bun, partially wrapped in a red scarf. Akilah always had good makeup, but I could see that she had made a special effort, using a combination of white liner toward her nose and a darker one winging back off her eye, with layers of yellow and orange on her lids. The overall effect was that of two sunrises blossoming on her face.

"You look nice," she said. "I like your shirt."

I tried not to crumple up in my seat. Was that a good thing? Or did I normally look terrible and she was just happy that I tried?

It is often embarrassing to be me, but that night, walking into the Cheesecake Factory with Akilah Jones by my side, I felt like I was stepping into human society for the first time in a full and complete way. I was the best version of myself, bursting with a confidence I had never had previously. I wasn't expecting everyone to stand up and applaud, but if they had, I would have accepted it. It would have made sense.

"My favorite things are always in the appetizers," she said as we looked at the menu. "Do you want to get a few of those and share them?"

Sharing meant that this was going well. This wasn't my food over here and hers over there. These would be *our* apps that we'd enjoy together. We filled the table with sliders, crab puffs, pot stickers, and buffalo cauliflower.

"I feel kind of stupid," she said, "but I got you something. We were talking about makeup the other day . . ."

Well, Akilah had been talking about makeup. I had been saying that I was bad at it, that I misused color palettes, that I never understood why half the colors were there, and generally bemoaning my ineptitude.

". . . and I realized there is a perfect color lipstick for you. Here . . ."

She reached into her big red purse and pulled out a gold tube. She removed the cap and indicated I should give her my hand. My hands were cold from gripping a glass and I didn't

want to give her a partially wet, cold hand, but I also wanted to give her my hand in all ways. I extended one to her, and she took it. She held it, my palm touching hers (so warm, so soft) and she delicately drew a line of lipstick down the back of mine. It was a cheerful bright pink, not something I would have picked for myself, but pleasing to look at.

“Midnight Rose,” she said. “I thought it would be a good color for you. Do you like it? Because you were saying you thought your lips looked thin—I don’t think so, but—I think this would suit you.”

My head was swimming. Akilah Jones had been looking at my mouth. She bought me a lipstick.

We were going to *kiss*.

Akilah Jones was going to kiss me and then I would ascend into the sky and keep going up and up, high-fiving the International Space Station as I made my way out into the farthest reaches of the cosmos. Nothing was real, and yet all the stories were true. This was what people meant by being struck by love. I felt the bolt go in through the top of my head and it exited, somewhat weirdly, through my right hip. I jumped a little in my booth seat.

“Is it okay?” she said. “You don’t have to keep it.”

“No! No. No. I love it. I . . .”

“Try it on.”

Some fumbling with my phone, looking at my own ridiculous face on the screen as I applied it. She put a napkin over her finger and gently cleaned the edges of my work with her nail.

“It’s a good color on you,” she said. “You look amazing. I mean, even without, but . . .”

My actual, biological heart was going to actually explode. It was going to crack my ribs and flood my chest with blood. I forced myself to speak and prayed I didn’t spontaneously barf from the force of emotion.

“I like it. Love it. I mean, I love the color.”

She laughed, that bright noise of joy, and I was able to steady myself and make my move.

“I take care of this place on the lake,” I said. “A cabin. That I can use. Do you want to maybe see it or something . . . ?”

I lived and died in the pause before her answer, but she smiled and said, “Sure. Yeah.”

Check. Gift card. *Poot poot poot* to the lake in the Smart Car.

It had started to rain. The Smart Car does not love the rain because it is tiny like a spider and thinks it will be washed away. I don’t know how I drove because my hands were shaking and I gripped the wheel so hard I’m amazed it didn’t snap. I’d made sure the house was clean and that the floor cushions in the little living room were arranged *just so*. I made sure my phone was connected to the speakers correctly, because they had a tendency to crap out. I planned the playlist based on everything she had ever mentioned about music she liked. I placed the petrichor candle on a table by the window where the scent would blow onto us. As Akilah looked around the cozy living room, I lit the candle with a wobbly hand.

“I got this,” I said as casually as I could, “because you

mentioned you like the smell of petrichor . . .”

Akilah spun around to see what I was talking about. She fixed her gaze on the little flicker of light. It coughed a bit as it took a big gulp of oxygen from the slightly open window and then took a bigger bite of wick. The scent began to bloom.

“Oh my god,” she said. “Marlowe, that’s . . .”

Oh no. Oh no. *What. What?*

“. . . amazing. This is the best first date I’ve ever been on.”

Date.

I had to sit down because my legs could no longer hold me up. She plopped down on the cushion next to me. There was rain and thunder—a sign!—and there was this cloud of petrichor in the room.

“I’m really glad you asked me out,” Akilah said. “Because I was trying to work up the nerve to ask you myself.”

Kissing is weird. If you think about the concept, it seems gross. Absolutely should not work. There should be something more elegant than smacking down on someone else’s food and talking holes (I am a poet; let you me know if you want me to write your Valentine’s card). But once I felt that little puff of air from her nostrils as she came close, breathed in the scent of her shampoo, brushed the cool softness of her cheek, and felt her lips press to mine . . . my entire body seemed to liquify. I began my trip to the ISS. The astronauts were about to see Marlowe Wexler drift past the window. I lost all sense of time as we tangled our arms around each other and fell back against the floor cushions. The joy of looking at

her was topped only by the glory of pressing closer to her, and her to me. She rolled me slightly onto my back, and Akilah was over me. Everything was bright—even through my closed lids there was a luminescent glow, like we were creating light together. And warmth. And tiny crackling noises. Some kind of big orange thing that I was distantly aware had come into the room. I welcomed it, in my state of bliss. *Sure, new bright orange thing, hang out with us. Everything is perfect, everyone, and yes, you too, orange thing. The world is warm and wonderful and . . .*

Suddenly, Akilah pulled away and screamed.

The big orange friend—this visitor—was a wall of fire that had spread itself around the little table the candle had been on and eaten the billowing curtains on its way to the ceiling.

I want to be able to tell you that I was gallant and in control, that I pushed her behind me to keep her from the flames, that I ran to the kitchen for a fire extinguisher, because Juan and Carlita are the kind of responsible people who would have a fire extinguisher and of course it would be in the kitchen, and that I ran back in and extinguished the curtains and whisked Akilah out the door, and that she cried out “Marlowe, you saved my life *and* the house!” before we kissed under the moonlight by the lake and that we would laugh about it with our grandchildren.

Not so much.

I remember running around and saying “We gotta put it out, we gotta put it out” as Akilah was pushing me out the door and calling 911.

I remember trying to fill a flower planter from a bird-bath, forgetting that flower planters have holes at the bottom and that birdbaths do not contain enough water to put out house fires.

I remember I considered driving to Canada at twenty-one miles an hour in my tiny car to start a new life.

I remember standing on the little patch of grass and snot-sobbing and heaving while Akilah waved the fire truck in and shouted warnings to the neighbors, who had all come out to see the fire whipping up the side of the cottage.

This was where the date portion of the evening ended.