

COUNTING BACKWARDS



a novel

JACQUELINE FRIEDLAND

*USA Today
Bestselling
Author*

COUNTING *a novel*
BACKWARDS

**JACQUELINE
FRIEDLAND**



HARPER MUSE

Counting Backwards

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Jessa

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If he caught me in the act, he'd be furious. I grabbed the white cardboard box off the bathroom counter and started tearing it into penny-sized pieces. I made sure to render each piece small enough that the picture of the baby on the packaging would be impossible to make out. After I'd created a small pile of fragments on the marble countertop, I wiped the whole mess into the shopping bag from the pharmacy, tied the handles into a tight knot, and tossed the bag into the trash. The test stick was resting between the double sinks. Behind it, a glass bottle holding a bouquet of skinny reeds emitted a pungent citrus scent. The air freshener had been a holiday gift from my friend Tate, but now the cloying notes of grapefruit were nearly turning my stomach. Maybe it was a sign.

Less than two minutes had elapsed so far. I stared at the strip of paper inside the little testing window, bending closer as it gradually became saturated. The control line had already begun to appear, faintly at first, but then stronger, a pink promise that this test was functional.

I stared so intently at the test that my vision began to blur, the one pink line morphing into a wavy haze of nothingness. If

I focused hard enough, could I see just what I wanted to see? At the sounds of movement on the other side of the closed door, I flinched—Vance was waking up and beginning his day.

The timer on my phone showed another two minutes and fifteen seconds before the test would be finished.

“Jess?” Vance called from outside the door, his deep voice still thick with sleep. His footsteps came closer, and he jiggled the locked doorknob. “Can I come in?”

My eyes shot back to the test.

“Um . . . yeah! One sec!” I grabbed the stick and stashed it in the cabinet below my sink. Tossing a few tissues into the trash to bury the pharmacy bag, I gave the toilet a quick flush for good measure and then opened the door.

Vance waited at the threshold with bleary eyes and a dark shadow of stubble blanketing his wide jaw. The old Tufts University t-shirt he’d slept in stretched against the muscles of his chest, and his olive-toned legs, thick like logs, were on display beneath his black boxer briefs. The chain necklace he wore was askew, with its silver Star of David pendant dangling off to the side near his left shoulder. The necklace had belonged to his grandfather, and Vance almost never removed it.

“Babe,” he said as he pressed his warm lips to my forehead and then made his way past me toward the toilet. “Why’d you get up so early?” He didn’t wait for me to answer before adding, “I think I drank three liters of seltzer before I fell asleep. All that ponzu sauce at dinner. Salty.”

Vance and his business partner, Arjun, had taken a client out the night before. They’d gone to some fancy new Japanese restaurant on the Upper West Side that everyone was raving about. It was hard to keep track of the many trendy eateries that Vance and his partners visited in their ongoing efforts to impress their high-maintenance clients.

Turning his back, he began to relieve himself. I wanted to keep guarding the hidden test, to make sure he didn't go digging for shaving cream or extra deodorant in that undersink cabinet. But he would know something was off if I just stood there watching him urinate, wouldn't he?

"I'd better get dressed," I said. Even so, I made no move to leave. Instead, I studied myself in the wide mirror that was mounted on the wall behind the sinks, buying time by taking in my appearance. Unlike many of my friends, I thought I looked my best first thing in the morning. Right after waking up, there was a slight puffiness to my face that rendered my sharp cheekbones a little less severe and made the angles beneath my hazel eyes more mellow. I smoothed my brown curls half-heartedly, not minding that they were wild as usual. My mother, whose own bouncy curls had once rivaled my own, used to describe their constant tangles as "chaos incarnate." All these years later, I could still hear the jingle of her laughter as she joked that trying to brush my hair in the bath was like participating in a sporting event. But I loved my hair. Not just because of the way the long flouncy curls seemed to be bursting with life, but also because of how each coiled tress allowed me to see a piece of my mother every time I glanced at my own reflection.

I leaned closer to the mirror, noticing a hint of purple beneath each eye. At thirty-one, I was often mistaken for a younger woman, which was fine, except at work. My physical appearance was just one more obstacle standing between me and the respect I wanted at my firm. The respect I deserved. I should have earned it by now. Instead, I was still scrambling to prove myself.

Vance looked over his shoulder at me as he continued to empty his bladder.

"You're going in today?" he asked.

"Just for a couple of hours. LDP depositions start on Tuesday, remember?" I heard the snippiness in my tone. It was harsher than

I'd intended, but I didn't have it in me to apologize. Instead, I left him there and made my way to the closet in hopes that my exit from the bathroom would hasten his own.

When we'd found our apartment last summer, it had been a definite upgrade from the prewar walk-up we'd shared since our wedding five years earlier. The amenity that finally convinced me I could handle leaving the West Village to relocate to the stodgier, uninspired streets of the Upper East Side like Vance wanted was not one but two walk-in closets in the bedroom. The eat-in kitchen and spare bedroom weren't so bad either. During our first visit to the apartment, we'd smiled tentatively at each other and talked about one day turning that second room into a nursery. My chest constricted remembering how hopeful we'd been then, even when we were still raw from our recent loss.

Choosing a semi-sheer floral blouse and a pair of navy slacks, I could already hear Tate in my mind, ribbing me for refusing to ever wear jeans to the office, even on a Saturday.

Vance was still clanging around in the bathroom, and it was all I could do not to shout at him to hurry it up. How much longer until I could get back to those results?

He called out to me then. "You remember I made us lunch plans with Mandy and Lou, right?"

Yeah. I remembered. But it wasn't just Mandy and Lou. It was Mandy, Lou, and AnneElise, their adorable, pink-cheeked, eight-month-old baby girl.

"Yup." My voice was still more brittle than I intended, my frustration about the interrupted pregnancy test getting the better of me.

He came out of the bathroom then, wiping a smudge of toothpaste from the corner of his mouth. I was buttoning my slacks and didn't turn away from the mirror, but he must have noticed something in the twist of my lips.

“You’re seriously mad about the depositions?” he asked. “I didn’t forget. I never forget.”

It was true. Vance always listened attentively when I talked about work, especially cases that were giving me trouble. He’d advise me about the right course of action, steering me through complicated corporate situations or tricky client relationships, his focus always on making sure I’d come out smelling like a rose. Vince was a finance guy, so the substance of his work differed from mine, but the attendant aspects of his banking job sounded very similar to my experiences in the corporate litigation world. We were both subjected regularly to dauntingly high expectations, rigid procedural rules, complex office politics, and clients whose demands were often well beyond the realm of possibility. On more nights than I could count, unloading work-related predicaments onto Vance had been the only way I managed to unwind. When he threaded his fingers through mine, telling me just what I should do about whatever I’d described, it was a balm to the frustrations I’d brought home from the office.

It had been almost seven years since I graduated from law school. Seven years. I’d given myself exactly that long to make partner at a law firm. Several of my peers had already reached that milestone at other firms, and even at my own office, a few had jumped the line ahead of me. I’d been working my tail off since the day I took the job at Dillney, Forsythe & Lowe, LLP, putting in brutally long hours and so many late nights. After one Big Mistake in my fourth year, I’d doubled down, out-billing every associate in the firm ever since. And now, finally, I was the lead attorney on one of the firm’s big cases. Other attorneys in the office had begun seeking me out for advice on their own matters, and things were looking up. Now that New Year’s had passed, new partners would be announced in a matter of days.

In a perfect world, I would have been four months pregnant by

now. I could see it all in my mind's eye: I'd be wearing loose, flowy tops, hiding a belly that was just beginning to bulge. Then, after being named partner, I'd start wearing all the cute, fitted maternity clothing that showed off my adorable bump. The other lawyers might be disappointed to discover that one of their new partners was pregnant. They'd worry, perhaps, about my continued dedication to the job, but by then, it'd be too late for anyone to take back my promotion. Then I'd continue to wow them with my stellar work anyway, and soon they'd wonder why they'd ever been concerned in the first place.

But this was not a perfect world. In this world I'd gotten pregnant accidentally the year before. It had been too soon, before I was ready to focus on anything other than meeting my career goals. When I miscarried at nine weeks, my primary emotion had been relief. But now, after the fourth month in a row of actively trying to make a baby, I still wasn't pregnant. Four months wasn't so long. I knew that, but I couldn't shake the feeling that it was karma, pay-back from the universe for my dark thoughts the last time.

With each passing month that we tried and failed to conceive, my anxiety escalated. For so long, I had told myself that once I had a baby, once there was another person in the world who shared a portion of my parents' combined DNA, the massive hole inside my heart would begin to repair itself. But when I peed on test stick after test stick, each stupid strip of paper producing only a control line, it occurred to me that I might never have the baby I so desperately wanted. I knew how badly Vance wanted the baby too, a child we would raise in the Jewish faith. He didn't mind that I chose not to convert, so long as we converted the baby and carried on his family's religious traditions. My own parents were basically lapsed Catholics. The only holiday we even recognized was Christmas, and I knew by the time I was eight or nine that they just did it for me. Every year, I was given the choice of blowing off the holiday

in favor of a trip to Orlando, but I always picked painting new ornaments with Mom and trying to wait up for Santa with Dad. If raising our future children Jewish meant more opportunities to celebrate holidays with family, I was all in.

Vance made his way across the room to the wide dresser beneath the wall of windows. Against the backdrop of the morning light, he stood suddenly motionless, regarding me. Maybe something about the pointed way I was still staring into the mirror gave me away, or maybe the despair was coming off me in waves so thick it was just impossible to overlook.

“This isn’t about the depositions,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“What do you mean?” I reached for a tortoiseshell hair barrette on the vanity table and placed it between my teeth, using both hands to twist pieces of my hair into place. I risked a glance at him. The sun shining through the window behind him was already so bright it felt glaring. I blinked and turned back to my own reflection. I didn’t want to engage in another shouting battle. Vance was so convinced that the only thing holding us back from conceiving was my own neurosis—my anxiety and my hyperfocus on the situation. After our last argument, he’d made me promise to stop taking pregnancy tests all the time, to at least wait until my period was late before peeing on another stick. He said the constant checking was too much pressure, that it felt excessive. I had acquiesced, even though the checking didn’t feel over-the-top to me. It felt comforting, like at least I knew where things stood inside my body. The wondering just made everything feel worse, as far as I was concerned. But I didn’t want to fight, so I’d agreed. Then yesterday, he’d walked in on me, stick in hand. My period wasn’t due for two more days, and we both knew it.

“You just don’t seem like yourself,” he said as he opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of running shorts.

I clipped my hair into place and didn’t respond.

“I’m trying to help you relax here,” he continued, “not stress you out even more. I can see the way everything is getting to you, even if you can’t. It’s like you’ve got blinders on. That’s why I’ve been saying you should cut back at work.”

As he uttered those words, I bit my lip so hard that my mouth filled with the taste of metal. If I were a man, no one would suggest taking it easy at work as a solution to fertility issues. Maybe it was Vance’s body that was failing us, not mine. And anyway, whether my ovaries were underachievers had nothing to do with how many hours I was billing at work, and I knew it. Why didn’t Vance know it too?

I whipped away from the mirror to face him, my anger getting the better of me.

“We’re doing this again?” My voice rose. “At the same time that you’re taking on more responsibility, raising your hand for every new client the firm brings in? And don’t get me started on the podcast, which was supposed to be a little hobby, a little something you were doing on the side, right? You’re treating it like a second full-time job. Meanwhile, I should just curl up in a ball and give up everything I’ve worked for? All these years you’ve been supporting my career only to take it all back as soon as my baby-making skills aren’t up to snuff?”

“Now it’s my fault that the podcast took off? That people are interested in hearing what I have to say? You know full well that getting my name out there is going to open doors for me in the future. We’ve talked about this.”

Tapping into his due diligence skills, Vance had started a podcast to help descendants of Holocaust victims track down lost or stolen heirlooms. As the show began to get more traction, he started getting invitations from financial institutions seeking advice about authenticating various financial assets. The networking opportunities had been piling up. Not to mention the synagogues

and Jewish organizations that had taken an interest in him for leadership roles.

“Apparently, hundreds of listeners think I know my shit,” he continued. “It’d be nice if you could show a little support here instead of thinking all the time about what a victim you are, poor little Jessa. When I say that you should take a step back, it’s not because we, as a couple, have too much to do. It’s because you cannot handle the stress you’re putting yourself under.”

“Support?” I growled back at him. “I’m not the one failing to show support!”

“Jessa.” His tone was maddeningly calm, a tactic he liked to use to highlight my own volatility. I was hot-blooded, sure, but I didn’t feel like apologizing for my big emotions.

I stared back at him, hands perched on my hips as I waited for him to say something else, hopefully to offer an apology of his own.

“I’m just pointing out what you’re refusing to see. You can’t do everything, and nobody’s asking you to,” he said as he stepped into his shorts.

If this were any other morning, one where we weren’t so thoroughly attacking each other, this would be the moment when I’d point out that it was too cold to go running in shorts. He was going to freeze, running like that in the middle of January, but I was too irritated to start our usual back-and-forth about his exercise gear, where I’d suggest sweatpants and he’d insist he was impervious to the cold. I would chuckle at his pigheadedness, and he’d smile back indulgently. For once, the predictability of it all didn’t feel enchanting.

He moved toward the unmade bed and began pulling up the comforter, putting everything back into its proper place.

Instead of helping, I stayed where I was, sizzling with indignation. This was the third time now that he’d declared I was work-

ing too hard, that my job was impacting whatever was or wasn't happening inside my uterus. Each time he said it, I felt like he was thinking mostly about the baby we'd lost, implying that if I'd taken it easier the year before, maybe we'd already have the child for which I was now so desperate.

"Look, I know how important this is to you, but you need to calm down about it all," he said as he tossed a pillow into place. "We don't want to become that couple friends with kids feel they have to tiptoe around. People will think we've become fragile, sad little flowers because you're not yet 'with child.'"

As he raised his hands to make air quotes, I curled my own fist at my side, pushing my fingernails into my palm. I stayed silent and he added, "We're tougher than that. I know we'll get there eventually. But you need to exhale a little in the meantime."

Vance was lucky. His parents were alive, and he had three vibrant brothers and an entire army of first and second cousins. His family celebrated not only the Jewish holidays they'd observed since he was a child, but thanks to multiple interfaith marriages, they'd also happily adopted the Christian and Hindu holidays of my sisters-in-law Laura and Jiyana. Vance's oldest brother, Darren, was the only one who'd married a Jew, my sister-in-law Vicky. But as long as all the children were raised Jewish, including an Orthodox conversion after being born to a non-Jewish mother, everyone was happy. His parents continued in their volunteer positions at the family's Reform synagogue, happily bringing the rest of us into the fold. I'd joined his family at one joyful occasion after another—festive bris ceremonies for our nephews Jonah and Kian, bar and bat mitzvahs for our teenage nieces as well as several of their cousins, and a never-ending cycle of other holidays and family celebrations. As much as he tried, Vance could never really understand what it was like for me to be an only child with deceased parents, to have spent eleven consecutive Thanksgivings at a quiet table for

two with Gram. It colored everything.

I didn't want to yell at him though. Continuing to argue wasn't going to achieve anything.

"I just need to finish out this last week knowing I've done everything in my power," I said. Whether I received that coveted brass ring or not, in eight days I'd be able to shift more energy to figuring out how to get pregnant. It seemed that having sex most nights of the week, like we'd been doing intentionally since October, simply wasn't enough. There were tips to learn about what to eat, how to time intercourse, what kind of underwear men were supposed to wear. But with the demands at the office, I hadn't found a second to spare for that kind of reading. Frankly, we were lucky there'd even been time for the sex.

He opened his mouth to respond, and I felt myself bristle in anticipation. But then I reminded myself of how much I loved him and of the certainty he brought to my life. I would be wise to take greater care with our relationship.

"You know what?" I interrupted before he could say something that would only stoke the flames of my temper. "It's a beautiful Saturday morning. Go enjoy your freezing run along the river. I don't want to argue with your cute face." I moved to where he was standing and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. I pasted on a smile so he'd accept my olive branch and continue on his way toward the kitchen, or even out of the apartment. Then I'd be able to get back to that pregnancy test, which was still waiting in the bathroom cabinet. I could feel it calling to me, the invisible pull getting stronger by the second.

If Vance was surprised by my sudden shift in demeanor, he didn't show it. Instead, he sighed as he looked down at me. I knew it would take time before things felt easy between us again. As much as I hated going behind his back with the pregnancy tests, I was sure that if I didn't keep checking myself over and over, I'd be

too distracted to function. And this was not the week to be off my game at work. If only I were more confident that Vance would be able to understand that kind of uneasiness. We had argued more in the past few months than in all five prior years of our marriage.

"Tell you what," Vance said. "Give me two seconds, and I'll walk out with you."

"Now?" I balked. "You go on ahead. I'm not ready."

"Yes, you are," he said, his eyes roving over me. "You look great. And I'm skipping coffee this morning. Something new I'm trying."

Was this something about caffeine and fertility?

He tossed the final velvet throw pillow onto the bed. "Let's go," he said, taking the Velcro band for his phone from the top of his nightstand and wrapping it around his arm, just above his bicep.

I glanced back toward the bathroom. These days, I felt like he was suspicious of me every time I went into a bathroom. Even if I'd been imagining the way his eyes bored into my back, I didn't have the bandwidth to deal with another argument about it at that moment. How could I possibly get back in there without tipping him off? The test's instructions had been very clear that after a certain length of time, the results could no longer be considered accurate. And first thing in the morning was the best time to test. If I didn't look before we left the apartment, it'd be a full day before I could try again.

"I just have to . . . I have to . . ." I started toward the bathroom, feeling so frantic in my need to retrieve the little stick that I completely blanked. I looked back at Vance, whose head was cocked to the side as he waited for me to finish. The harder I tried to think of a word, one single reasonable word to end my sentence in a logical way, the more I struggled. I winced, and the silence started to get weird. All those years of therapy as a child, and apparently panicking and freezing were still a part of who I was. Now that I'd faltered so conspicuously, anything I did behind a closed door in

the bathroom would seem suspect.

“Never mind,” I finally said, forcing myself to think about the big picture. If it meant protecting something between Vance and me, I could wait. There was nothing I could do except give in to him. I beelined for the bedroom door, grabbing my work tote from the floor along the way. “I’m good.”

HARPER
MUSE



Carrie

1912

It was one of them blindingly bright Virginia summer days. That's what I remember most about the morning the ladies came to take me away. I was home watching after the babies like usual because Mama was downtown again, looking to find herself a day's work. Doris was crawling across the dusty floor, stopping now and again to stare at her toes, and I felt a little sorry at the way the milk-white skin of her knees had gone gray from the dirt of the planks. Baby Roy was asleep in the old bassinet we'd got from Miss Jenny, who lived with her brother's family on the second floor of the house. Our family had two rooms on the first floor, right below them. I was just six years old at the time, you understand, but I loved to look after my own brother and sister, to be the one taking charge. Even if they was only half-related to me, that one half was enough.

When Doris tired herself out and set to acting fussy, I took her up on my lap and read to her from the newspaper Mama had brought home the week before. Mama told me she'd found the paper lying flat down on the ground on Main Street, where it didn't matter to nobody, and she knew I'd want to see it. Most of the words were too big for me to make out on my own, but the more

times I went over it, running my finger nice and slow under each letter, the clearer it would come to me. There were some pictures that helped me make sense of the writing too, like the advertisement for Old Henry Whiskey. I recognized that picture of the bottle easy.

Doris was too young to care anyhow whether she understood what I was saying. Even if I'd read it all perfect, she'd still be paying more mind to my hair, pulling the dark strands to her mouth. Mama was always after me to tie up my locks with twine, but I preferred to keep them loose. I already knew I wasn't a pretty girl, not like Lorna Mayfair, a girl my age from up the hill who looked just like one of those dolls behind the glass at the store. My hair was the one thing about me that made me proud, standing out sharp as it did against my white skin. So that's how we were that afternoon, Doris in my lap, sucking on my hair, Roy still sleeping peaceful, and me studying the photographs in the paper, when there came a pounding on the front door.

I hoisted Doris onto my hip and went looking, figuring it was someone searching for Mr. Gibson upstairs. Folks was always after him about monies he owed. When I opened the door, I found that lady, Miss Drummond, waiting on the splintered porch. She wore a slim skirt and buttoned-up blouse, her pale yellow hair pulled back so tight it gave me a headache just to look at it. There was another lady with her who I'd never seen before.

Miss Drummond looked over my shoulder to see behind me before she even spoke, like she wanted to know what-all was going on inside our little house.

"Hello, Carrie," she said, her words crisp and tight as her hairdo. "Is your mother at home?"

I shook my head at her as I squinted out into the sunlight. I didn't think to ask how she knew my name. "She's gone out for a workaday," I said.

The two ladies shared a look at that. I figured they thought I was telling fibs and that my mama was with a man, but she only took up with men on days when she couldn't find other work. Ever since my da left four years before, Ma did what she needed to take care of us. I'd heard her talking with her friend Sally from up the road. One night, the two of them sat on the steps of our porch, chewing tobacco and taking turns spitting into a can. Ma told Sally that the Olsens, who she cleaned house for, had moved to Tulsa. She shook her head when she said that, then complained that she'd needed to spend the afternoon with a fellow who gave her money for laying down with him.

I didn't understand back then, but I heard enough folks say that what Mama did with the men caused us to end up with Doris and baby Roy. They said it like them babies were a punishment. Ma didn't see it that way though. She always talked about my brother and sister being gifts from the Lord during hard times. She needn't have told me that bit, about them being little treasures, because I knew it on my own. Especially Doris. When she held on to my pinkie finger with her whole fist or looked up at me with her dark round eyes, I knew I couldn't love anybody more than I loved her.

"We'd like to bring you down to the CHS today for a stay. Do you have any belongings you'd like to pack up before we go?" Miss Drummond said.

Everyone around our parts knew about Miss Drummond and the CHS. She ran the Children's Home Society, where they took kids whose folks didn't want them no more. There weren't no reason why I should be going to a place like that.

"I can't go nowhere with you," I told her. "I'm looking after the babies now."

The woman beside Miss Drummond sucked in a breath so loud it was almost a hiss.

"But you're only five years old," the lady said, as if I couldn't care

for my own kin.

“Six,” I said, sticking my chin in the air. “Since last month.”

“Well, why don’t you go gather the other little one, and he can come along too.”

“Ma won’t want us leaving without her knowing about it first,” I told them. “She’ll have my hide about it.” And that much was the truth.

“Oh,” Miss Drummond said, looking real sad. Her eyes went down to the newspaper pages still hanging from my hand. “You like to read?” she asked.

I shrugged, wanting her to leave. “I guess.”

“Hmm.” She seemed like she was thinking on something as she looked again at the lady she’d brought with her. “It’s too bad you can’t come back with us. There’s story time happening in an hour, and Miss Willis always likes to have children read along.”

I did think a story time seemed like a nice thing to do, nice enough that it might even be worth a walk with Miss Drummond and her friend. Still, I didn’t want to disobey Ma.

“I could leave a note for your mother, if you’d like. As long as she knows where you’ve gone, she’ll think you’ve been responsible. I believe they’re reading *Old Mother West Wind* today. Isn’t that right, Mrs. Vestry?”

Now, I didn’t know much about different children’s books, but it just so happened that Miss Drummond had mentioned the very same book that Wendy Dinkins was showing off about just the week before. Her rich uncle from Norfolk had sent it, and she wouldn’t let none of the neighborhood kids even touch the drawing on the cover.

Thinking about Wendy’s neat yellow braids, and all them peppermint candies her uncle sent too, I was suddenly gathering up baby Roy out of the cradle. I told Miss Drummond that we didn’t have a pram for ferrying either of the little ones, so she would have

to carry Doris.

It wasn't but two hours later when Ma showed up at CHS.

I was sitting beside Miss Willis, the reading lady, looking at a picture book while two older boys hunched over a small table across the room, working on a drawing together. Miss Willis was asking me questions about the pictures we was looking at, like why was the bunny smiling, and what did I think that bunny was going to do with her bowl of porridge. That was when I heard shouting from down the hall. It only took a few seconds for me to recognize the rumble of Ma's husky voice, coming loud as if she was using a blow horn.

"You can't just come to my home and take them all!" she hollered. "Who do you people think you are, stealing my babies?"

I stood up from the small mat where we were sitting and peeked out the open doorway of the little library room. There was Ma in her work smock. Even from the other end of the hallway, I could see smudges on her arms, and I knew those spots of grime meant she'd got herself some cleaning work for the day. It looked like she'd been sweeping out somebody's hearth and chimney. She might have gotten paid in kind, like happened sometimes, when she traded her services with folks and came home with a sack of food. I was hungry just thinking on the grits and butter cake she'd got the week before.

My ma was a thick woman, tall too, with dark brown hair she kept short and blunt like the edge of a box, never letting it grow past her ears. Her sleeves were rolled higher than her elbows, probably for the hot day, and her thick muscles were plain to see even from looking at just the bottom half of her arms. I wondered if that skinny Miss Drummond was afraid, standing across from Ma's big body and all that shouting. But then Miss Drummond

took up like she was the one in charge, and I suppose she always was.

“Now, now, Miss Buck,” she said in a calm voice.

“It’s *Mrs.*,” Ma snapped back. “*Mrs.* Buck.”

Miss Drummond started over. “*Mrs.* Buck, we were just minding the children for a time so Carrie could come get a sense of the place. You needn’t get out of control. You can go on and take them home as soon as you like. But we hoped Carrie might like to stay on with us here.”

To stay at the CHS? I ought to have known. That Miss Drummond had tricked me. I should have remembered seeing Mallory Johnson’s aunt after seven-year-old Mallory had gone to the CHS. It was only a few days later that the girl was living with a whole new family. Her aunt Tilly had celebrated with a fresh bottle of whiskey in the street, hooting that she no longer had to look after her sister’s brat.

But I didn’t remember. Not then. What I was focused on in that moment was the small wooden shelf that must have held at least eight more books for children. I wanted to know what was inside each one. When Miss Drummond came to ask me what I wanted to do, whether I wanted to stay a little longer, it didn’t take much for her to convince me.

Once I agreed, Miss Drummond went and had a quiet conversation with my mama down the hall. I never did learn what she said to Ma in those hushed whispers, or why Ma agreed. She let Ma take Doris and baby Roy back home, keeping only me. Later, after everything that happened, I told myself that Miss Drummond must have made some awful threats to make Ma leave me the way she did. And Ma must never have realized what-all would happen next or how it would change everything.

About the Author

Photo by Rebecca Weiss



Jacqueline Friedland is a *USA TODAY* and Amazon bestselling author of historical and contemporary women's fiction. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, she earned a law degree from NYU and a Master of Fine Arts from Sarah Lawrence College. Jackie regularly reviews fiction for trade publications and appears at schools and other locations as a guest lecturer. She lives just outside New York City with her husband, four children, and two dogs.

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