

HOUSE  
*of*  
HEARTS

ALSO BY SKYLA ARNDT

*Together We Rot*

HOUSE  
*of*  
HEARTS

SKYLA ARNDT



VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC  
1745 Broadway, New York, New York 10019



First published in the United States of America by Viking,  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by Skyla Arndt

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

Viking & colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.  
The Penguin colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Books Limited.

Visit us online at [PenguinRandomHouse.com](https://PenguinRandomHouse.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 9780593693193

\$PrintCode

Printed in the United States of America

LSCH

Edited by Maggie Rosenthal

Design by Lucia Baez | Text set in Arno Pro

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.



To my darling boy, Pyro, for teaching me that  
the harder you love someone, the larger the scar.  
You are so, so loved, and you always will be. 🐾



There once was a girl  
whose heart was much too big,  
much too broken,  
so she dug within the garden of her ribs  
and ripped it right out







I didn't come to Hart Academy for a \$40,000 high school diploma, but something tells me "cold-blooded revenge" would've looked bad on my admissions essay. At the very least, I'm sure they wouldn't have sent me the brochure if they knew I'd cross the headmistress's eyes out in black Sharpie.

I slap on the smile I practiced in the mirror and bury my vendetta six feet deep. I'll unearth it later, but for now I need to look like any other perfectly adjusted, super-excited senior. I could at least pretend to be happy, right? I'm standing at the gates of the *crème de la crème* of boarding schools: a wealthy academy in Upstate New York where old-money families off-load their children each fall. Anyone in my shoes would be ecstatic to be here—well, almost anyone. My mother's wearing an identical pair of sneakers, and all she's doing is sniffing into a tissue.

"I promised myself I wouldn't cry," she says, crying.

She's been doing that all morning. It started after her tenth snoozed alarm, and it continued the entire three-hour drive in the car—Google Maps couldn't get a word in without my mother blubbering into the steering wheel.

I hand her the last Kleenex in the pack. We've gone through several. "I'll call every night."

She accepts my offering with a final blow of her nose. "You better! Oh, Violet, I'm so worried about you. You packed your pepper spray, right?" she whispers entirely too loudly. "You know I don't trust rich kids—their parents have good lawyers. They could get away with anything."

God, don't I know it.

I stretch that fake smile further for my mother's sake. It's starting to chafe. "Yes, Mom. It's in the front pocket of my duffel bag."

"And your little whistle?" she presses.

"Yes, Mom. It's on my key chain."

"What about—?"

"Mom, trust me, I've got it all. Do I have to show you my laminated checklist?" I swivel around to pull it out once again. My packing list (however small) has been highlighted and checked off several times over. If it were up to Mom, she would've packed a mismatched pair of socks, an old blanket I had when I was five, and then nothing else because she would've been too busy bawling.

"Oh, Violet, when did you get so grown up?"

Probably at age eight when Mom's deadbeat ex smashed a beer bottle against the wall and I spent the rest of the night in my room staging our elaborate escape. "I'm pretty sure I was born this way."

She harrumphs but doesn't argue with me there.

"Quit worrying so much. C'mon, isn't it breathtaking? It looks just like the website."

This time I'm not lying. It *is* breathtaking, but I'm also completely and utterly out of my element. Our trailer-park home is a far cry from

the Gothic gray stone library; our Ford Fiesta sticks out like a sore thumb against the lot of sleek armored cars. “Did you know this school was featured in *Architectural Digest*?”

I gesture to the building beside us. The Great Hall lies in the quadrangle like a sleeping beast, its enormous body embellished with sandstone and its oriel eye focused on the courtyard ahead. Students mill through its arched ribs, their bags slung across their backs and their phones poised at the ready. I don’t blame them; every inch of this place is begging to be immortalized on canvas. It’s beautiful. It’s perfect. It’s the site of an open murder investigation. Or at least it should be.

“C’mon!” I urge, tugging Mom deeper into the crime scene.

It hardly looks like one anymore. Instead of police tape and chalk lines, we’ve got cotton candy and balloon animals, WELCOME BACK, STUDENTS! strung high from dogwood trees. It’s a lesson in extravagance, a nightmare of confetti and rose topiaries and Golden Goose sneakers.

Nothing about it screams “a girl died here a year ago”—no funeral attire or memorial imagery scattered among the fairgrounds. My best friend’s death has been scrubbed away in time for orientation. Headmistress Lockwell and her family saw to that.

“Ooh, can we see that?” Mom’s voice rips me back to the present. She cuts off an exhausted custodian before he can toss a crumpled map into the trash. Smoothing out the wrinkled folds, she jabs at the center. “God, Vi, all right, I’ll give you one thing: This place *is* fancy. There’s a regulation tennis court and an Olympic-size swimming pool and—”

I cut her off gently. “We don’t have time to look at the pool, Ma. We need to get to the new-student orientation. We’re all the way over here, and we have five minutes to get there.”

“Here” is sandwiched between the Great Hall and Fitzpatrick-Wallace Library. “There” shines like a beacon in the distance, a journey beyond a sprawling family of green hills.

She huffs like a lectured child but doesn’t press the issue. Instead, she follows my lead as I push our way through the crowd. What we lack in money, I more than make up for in false confidence. My power walk is honed from years of customer service—shoulders back, chin up, arms crossed. It’s all about making the world believe you’re stronger than you really are so they don’t chew you up and spit you out.

Though, to be perfectly honest, I do feel like a used wad of bubble gum right now. But that’s less confidence-based and more due to the fact that the sun is stuck on the broiler setting.

Mom pauses to wipe a bead of sweat from her brow. Above our heads, a trellis reads *THE LITTLE GARDEN*. The space around us is a bleeding canvas of color: bright yellow marigolds, stalks of purple-bellied aconite and pink valerian, patches of poppies and beds of wormwood. All of which are tucked away inside carefully placed shrubbery.

“Aww, Violet, let’s stop for a second. I want a cute photo of you in front of the violets,” she says, like it’s an ingenious, novel idea and not something we’ve been doing since the day I was born. “Here, take this, I have to look for my phone.”

She passes me the wrinkled trash-pamphlet, and I squint through the creases as she looks. “‘Funded by an alumnus’s generous donation, the Little Garden is a curated collection of Shakespearean variety. A campus favorite, it is not uncommon to find students and staff alike basking in the beauty of—’”

I stop reading as red splatters the page.

... *Blood?*

The very thought has my lungs seizing and my mind hurtling sixty miles per hour back to the gruesome past. Back when my friend's body was found broken at the bottom of the school clock tower, a dark puddle beneath her soaking deep into the roots.

Her body wasn't even cold when the press statement was released. Headmistress Lockwell issued what can only be described as a tragedy Mad Libs, with "Emoree Hale" slotted conveniently into the blanks. I learned that day that anyone can rewrite history for the right price. A "tragic fall" became an "intentional jump," and one by one, everyone came to the consensus that Em had meant to die that day.

Everyone but me. Because I know she didn't jump. She was pushed. And as for the murderer? It was none other than the headmistress's eldest son, Percy Lockwell.

I growl at the memory and drag a sticky finger up the page. Just as I think I might pass out, I catch a whiff of cherry filling. Not blood but dripping jam.

"My bad!" Some girl squeezes past us with a half-assed apology, a jelly-filled donut poorly balanced in her hands. The stranger is as disorienting as this world around her—her outfit an eclectic hodgepodge of fabrics that pulls me out of my haze. I can't help but tally the cost—it's the type of mismatched attire that you can only pull off with an ungodly amount of self-assurance and money. The floral pattern of her mesh top has no relation to her striped skirt; the skirt has no link to the random tie slung loosely on her throat. Then there's the studded glasses and the knife-point of her earrings. None of it blends, and yet, on her, it's seamless.

She gives me a once-over, and I'm suddenly conscious of the

stain on my sleeve. Maybe I can pretend it's avant-garde.

"Oh my God! Wait, are you Violet Harper?" she asks, mid-bite.

Mom looks between us in a not-so-subtle attempt to suss out a connection. Meanwhile, Donut Girl is fumbling around with her belongings. Her messenger bag lifts open to reveal a camera that's worth more than several of my vital organs, but she pushes it aside to grab at her equally expensive phone. With a series of clicks, she's pulling up the student portal and flashing my photo. I've got that "sun-starved Victorian factory child" thing going on in my picture. The perfect casting call for a horror-movie extra: wispy, bone-pale hair, twiggy limbs, and dark shadows. A true ghost of a girl.

"We're roommates this year. I'm Birdie, remember? Birdie Pennington."

I swallow my nerves and take her manicured hand in mine.

Nothing about my roommate assignment was random. No one asked me if I was a morning bird or a night owl. Messy or organized. If I liked long walks on the beach or late nights hunched over my computer screen reading over the obituary of my best friend, wondering how everything broke apart in a single, horrifying instant—

No. Birdie was matched with me because the last roommate she had hit the pavement and broke every bone in her body. Now I'm here to fill a vacancy.

I chew the insides of my cheek, and my molars trace over the familiar scarred skin. *Don't think about that, and most importantly, don't cry.* Crying doesn't bring the dead back, and it certainly won't help me get my revenge. I don't know yet what that revenge will look like, but I do know one thing:

I'm going to haunt the Lockwells until the bitter end.

"Are you on your way to the new-student orientation?" Birdie

asks, unaware that her new roommate is plotting out someone's demise in her head.

"Yeah, it's part of crashing in here my senior year. I've got to play freshman today."

"You and me both," she says with a wave of her camera. "I'm on yearbook duty, so I've got to take pictures. In fact, I think I've got you beat—I've been 'playing freshman' all four years."

She snaps a couple photos on the way down to prove her point, the shutter flashing twice as we enter the Greek Theater. Stone slabs cut into a hill, giving the whole area the appearance of a naturally occurring formation. We take our seats in what could be an eighth world wonder, and Mom recycles the school pamphlet into a makeshift fan. More students have started to fill in around us, and understandably, they're all fresh-faced fourteen-year-olds with their parents.

The headmistress positions herself before the podium at long last. She might be exorbitantly rich, but her appearance is elegantly understated. No flashing designer labels or fancy blowout waves. She has a sheath of gray hair resting above her shoulders and a set of pale green eyes creased in the corners. The longer I look at her, the more I wonder whether wealth is skin-deep or if it's buried in her bones.

"Welcome, welcome," she speaks into the crinkle of a microphone. "My name is Meredith Lockwell, and I am the headmistress here at Hart Academy. As an alumna myself, I understand the mix of emotions on your faces today. Looking out at the crowd, do you want to know what I see? Excitement. Hope. Fear. For many of you, this is the first moment you fully embark from your parents' homes and begin a new chapter in your lives. Everyone standing before me today has made a great stride toward their academic futures—"

That's where I stop listening. The speech is a nauseating ordeal

that has me grinding my teeth and digging divots into my palms. It's complete with long monologues about the weight of a Hart diploma, grand declarations that Ivy League colleges will duel to the death for us, and smug sidebars about all the famous alumni who have sat on these very steps. That last part has students swiveling like there might be an autograph under their seat.

Their palpable excitement has me thinking about Emoree. How did she feel about all this? Was she nervous? Hopeful? Did she feel like the world was finally flinging its doors open for her?

"You remember Percy's club, right?" she whispered to me a year ago now, her voice whizzing through miles of telephone wires.

Percy Lockwell gave me premature scowl lines. She'd met the guy only a few days into her first semester, and he'd become a glorified conversation poltergeist in no time. He'd pop into every discussion as unwelcome as a plague pustule, and I'd spend the rest of the call waiting for it to burst into a Percy Lockwell crush-fest. He was her Prince Charming, the knight in shining armor to whisk her further and further away from her old life.

Until the day he ended her life altogether.

"Yeah, yeah, I remember. The Illuminati, right? Or was it the Freemasons? Skull and Bones? One of the three." I eyed a new stain on my work uniform.

She groaned into the receiver. "Hysterical, V. Very funny. No, it's nothing like that. I know I'm not in it yet, but there's no way they're holding Illuminati board meetings at a high school. *Anyway*, they have a pledge night coming up soon, and I want to join. I'd kind of do anything to get in, actually."

"A secret society of rich kids. That doesn't sound like the Illuminati at all." I picked at my nails. "Are you doing this for Percy?"

“Would that be such a bad thing if I was?” she asked after a quiet moment, and I could just envision her in her dorm room, kicking her feet at the thought of wedding bells and white picket fences in Nantucket. “I really like him.”

“That’s great, Em,” I said, injecting as much fake enthusiasm into it as I could. I’d come to learn that it was a finite resource of mine.

“I think he might like me, too,” she continued to prattle on, emboldened now. “I found an old half-heart locket shoved in my bag the other day. I have no idea who put it there, but I think it was him.”

As she was my best friend in the whole world, I should’ve been happy for her. Instead, I was sick and tired of her “fairy tales” and feeling like the dragon in her old castle.

I return to reality at the sound of Headmistress Lockwell clearing her throat and ushering in a small choir behind her. “Students, if you will, please give your full attention to our choir as they perform our school anthem.”

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out which chorister is the headmistress’s daughter. Sadie Lockwell is the spitting image of her mother, minus the fact that she hasn’t gone gray yet. Instead, her hair is dyed stark black against her skin, falling down the planes of her back like an oil spill.

The rest of the students scatter behind her, not a single one of them daring to strip away her spotlight as she approaches the mic. All except one. He branches away from the group and takes a seat behind a piano that was shrouded in white cloth moments earlier.

His fingers glide effortlessly across the keys as they begin to sing. It’s hypnotizing to watch him work, from the slight furrow in his brows to the dart of his tongue wetting his lips. Piano Boy’s no stranger, though. I recognize him from my late-night dates with Google.

Calvin Lockwell, aka Sadie's twin and the Lockwell Most Likely to Have an Enormous Digital Footprint. I'd know because I spent at least two business days scouring through his Instagram and I still didn't reach the end. There were thousands of photos of him: selfies on the hood of a Bugatti, the leather keys dangling from his grip; reels of him popping champagne, fizz erupting in the air to a chorus of laughter and cheers. His entire feed was backlit by purple strobe lights, his lips kiss-bruised and his eyes like spent cigarettes—stubborn flecks of amber engulfed in ash.

Beautiful in excess.

The song ends, and not long after, the applause dies with it. We're all hushed as Headmistress Lockwell personally welcomes us to Hart, one graduating class at a time. It's the welcome-day equivalent to "get up and tell the class five fun facts about yourself"; it might not be *quite* as mortifying, but close.

The freshmen flood the stands in a tidal wave of camera clicks and shuffling feet. Parents beam from their sidelines as the clapping drones on for several minutes. There are a handful of transfer sophomores next, and when junior year is called and not a single soul stands up, I know I'm in trouble. When new seniors are invited to stand at long last, I'm the only student on my feet.

It's every bit as awkward as you'd expect, only probably worse, actually, because my mom's decided now is a great time to cry again.

The applause trickles in slowly with my mother at the helm. She's sniffing, swatting messily at her cheeks with a mascara-blackened sleeve but still managing to clap because God forbid her baby is the only one who *doesn't* get clapped for. My new roommate is tilting the lens of her camera up to get me and my sobbing mother together in frame. There's

a low whispered current of gossip sifting through the crowd—“Who transfers their senior year?”

And Calvin is looking at me.

It’s not like everyone else’s casual pitying glance. No, he’s full-on staring, completely slack-jawed at the sight of me. Brows furrowed in a silent sort of horror. I can’t help but notice his teeth. They’re overbright, very Wolf that Ate Grandma. I’m struck by the idea of him opening his mouth wide, those pretty, perfect pearly whites snapping my head clean off. Weirder yet, I’m struck by the thought that I’d let him. It’s that magnetic charm, whatever’s swimming in the Lockwell blood to make them all Venus flytraps.

And maybe that’s all the rest of us are. *Flies.*



“Is it okay if I borrow my daughter for a second?” Mom asks after the presentation tapers to an end and she’s made a mess of her makeup. “I promise I’ll bring her back, just want to get my sappy Mom goodbyes out. It was lovely meeting you, Birdie. You actually remind me of”—she grimaces, catching herself too late—“an old friend of Violet’s.”

Birdie grins at that and scampers off. She doesn’t see the heat flooding my cheeks, my teeth grinding together, the heavy rush of grief, ever-present.

“Em,” I whisper when we’re alone, and it’s not a question but a horrifying revelation. “She reminds you of Em.”

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

I hiss in a breath. Count to ten. And then I blow it out. I can be objective about this without bursting into fat wet tears. “Why? It’s not like you’re wrong.”

Birdie and Em aren't exactly the same, I can tell that already, but there's familiarity in the way Birdie's eyes light up when she speaks. Not an Eeyore like me but a ray of sunshine stitched into the shape of a girl.

"Violet," Mom tries again, and her tone makes me wince. "I don't know about all this." She waves vaguely at that last part, gesturing to the world around us: the sprawling campus grounds and ivy-strewn buildings and families who look like they wouldn't survive another French Revolution.

I ball my fists on my lap. "This school will look great on a résumé. We talked about this. It'll help me get into a good college—"

"I don't care about college. I care about you. Are you sure you're okay?"

I stiffen to my very bones. "I'm fine."

Mom shifts her attention to a loose seam in her skirt. She's fixed that spot once before, but no matter how many repairs she makes, it always seems destined to unravel. "You're strong, Violet. You've always been strong. But there's a difference between being strong and being . . . whatever you are right now."

I don't say anything. My nails dig into the meat of my palms.

"You didn't cry at the funeral," she whispers. "And you went right back to school the next week. I thought you were in shock, but then . . . The point is, you didn't talk to me. Not once. Not when it happened. Not at the vigil. Not when you applied. Not now."

"Then take the hint already." We both wince at my tone, and I want to blurt out a sorry, but my stubborn tongue holds all the apologies in. "I'm okay."

I've always been okay because I've always had to be okay. I'm the stronghold for Mom, built to weather every storm. For the longest time,

I became that for Em, too. I was a rock for those always adrift. Now I'm the one lost at sea.

"I don't want you to worry about me."

She lowers her hand, and I hate the way I tremble beneath it. Hate the way I draw in a breath and avoid crying because that's exactly what she wants from me.

"I'm your mother. What else should I do?"

"Be proud of me."

Mom smears at her already-wet cheeks. "I am proud of you. You studied hard to get in and wrote a stellar admissions essay. You even got a heck of a nice scholarship to cover this place. You've done so much to be proud of, but, Violet, you're not happy. That's the problem."

I force a smile. I know it's as frayed as her skirt. "I am happy," I say, the words almost comical as my voice wavers. "I'm so happy right now."

Last time I lied this hard to myself, I was staring down at a closed casket. *Not dead, not dead, not dead.*

Mom opens her mouth to fight me further but doesn't get the chance. A familiar buzz shears through the tension, the gas station manager's name flashing across her phone screen. She grimaces down at the text:

the new guy's a no show . . . need you to work  
a double shift tonight ASAP

"What does he mean 'tonight'?" I ask, my voice too small in my throat. "You've got a hotel. You're here for the night."

She averts her eyes and studies a speck of dirt on her sneakers. "About that, Violet . . ."

"You never booked a room, did you?" I ask.

"I wanted to, but the hotels were all out of budget. And the cost of gas to get here and back alone—"

“It’s okay, Mom. Really. I get it.” I grip her hand and muster up another worn smile for her sake. “You should go. Birdie’s waiting for me anyway.”

“You sure? Promise you’ll call?” she asks, and we both know how hard it will be with her schedule. Two full-time jobs, bleary mornings and late nights. It breaks my heart to hear her voice like that.

“Promise.”

She pulls me in for a crushing, consuming hug. At this moment, I’m a kid in too-big shoes, drowning under the weight of fears twice my size. Back in the sandbox with cardboard armor and a play sword, pretending I could see the monsters in Em’s make-believe world, but I could only ever see the real ones.

“I love you.”

I mumble an “I love you” of my own into her hair and wave as she walks away, her silhouette growing tinier in the distance. It’s only after she’s gone that I readjust the chain slung across my throat. Just one more secret to pile high atop the rest of them.

The half-heart locket Percy gave to Em before she died. The one I found in my mailbox a week later, a single plea scrawled in our secret code:

If something happens to me, find Percy.

She said she was prepared to do anything to get into Percy’s club, but I wonder if she was prepared to die.