

ZOE B. WALLBROOK

Edgar Award Nominee for Best First Novel

HISTORY



A MYSTERY

LESSONS

"A fun-and funny-academic mystery that deftly takes on tough topics."

—Kellye Garrett, award-winning author of *Missing White Woman*

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**SOHO
CRIME**

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PROLOGUE

Sam Taylor had five minutes to decide how he wanted to die. In the living room, bleeding out on a rug, gazing into the cold, indifferent eyes of an enemy. Or on the run, making it no farther than the outer hedges of his backyard before being struck down like a hunted pheasant.

The doorknob jiggled louder this time, rattling the gold chain on the doorframe and whatever was left of Sam's nerves along with it. That gold chain was the only thing keeping Sam alive, and that one simple fact plunged his body into ice-cold fear, numbing the tips of his shaking fingers as they pressed against his temples.

Sam scoured the den's bookshelves and thick pillows, eyes wild, before landing on a poker leaning up against the fireplace. As if thin, hard metal could be the difference between life and death. As if he wouldn't get laughed at right in his face.

Will they bury my body when it's over?

No.

They'd cremate it. He'd heard the rumors. The facility was an arsonist's dream. Tracing would be impossible. Sure, there'd be human DNA inside those ovens, but whose? It would take a decade of subpoenas before the cops figured out if his body was among those vacuumed into the sky.

Boots shuffled behind the door.

Swallowing back the sour tang of bile stinging his throat,

he reached for his laptop and began the purge, blinking at the bright fluorescent screen as his data drained away along with what little time he had left on this planet. All of the evidence, gone. Untouchable. Untraceable. Unknowable. His life's work—for what? To prove what?

The scrape of metal on the doorknob jolted Sam away from his laptop. They were almost inside. Death was so close he could reach across the living room and touch it. There were no plays left to make. It was over. Wasn't it?

A voice, small and soft, offered a solution, however outrageous. *Call her.*

He grabbed his phone and dialed the memorized number before he could change his mind.

"Hello, you've reached the voicemail of—"

He hung up. Tried again.

"Hello, you've reached the—"

Another redial.

"Hello, you've—"

He hurled his phone into the couch with the velocity of a Yankees pitcher. "Fuck."

He plunged his head between his thighs, squeezing blond tufts of hair with tight fists, enjoying the pain stinging his eyes while he hiccupped out a few short breaths.

A thought struck his chest with the force of a baseball bat.

I can still tell her.

He'd never wanted her to know. But if he phrased it right, he could lead her to the truth. Only she was smart enough to figure it out anyway. To take the data and run. To finish what he'd started. And then the world would finally know. There was little glory to be found in these last minutes of life but there might be honor in his death.

Sam grabbed his phone one last time. His thumbs flew across its screen. And just before the squeaking “pop” of a door hinging, before the rush of hard boots stormed his hallway, before rough hands groped his neck, before his bloodied face hit the rug, before the world went black forever, Sam hit send.

CHAPTER ONE

“Well, that went terribly.”

Daphne Ouverture, assistant professor of European history, scholar of modern French imperialism, and semiprofessional rambler on the horrors of colonial medicine, slammed her car door shut.

“What are we talking about here on a scale of one to five?” The car’s Bluetooth speakers took over, brightening Elise’s light soprano. “One being that time you set your date’s shirtsleeve on fire with a candle—”

“That was an accident,” Daphne muttered. “We went on like two more dates after that.”

“—and five being when you went out with that silver *fox* of a man who was super into you only for you to realize at dinner that he was the dad of one of your students?”

Daphne cringed while she maneuvered her car onto the road. No wonder she’d banned dating in Calliope.

“I wouldn’t say that date was a complete bust, though.” Elise’s grin was audible. “That guy was hot. Like if George Clooney was a rugby coach?”

“Elise, you’re one of my bestest friends on the planet but I beg you. Please stop. Remembering this is so horrifying I can’t drive straight.” Daphne’s short, chunky braids tickled the nape of her neck as she shuddered. “That’s what I get for thinking I could just casually flirt with somebody in the cereal aisle.”

"You can totally flirt, babe." Elise, as always, chose to see sunshine, puppies, and free SZA tickets where there was scorched earth. "You just gotta do it with the right person. And your Bumble date tonight, Ricky—he wasn't it."

Daphne slowed her car at a red light. "Nope."

If only that DM hadn't pinged during an especially boring faculty meeting, a month after she'd finally given up on dating, Daphne wouldn't be driving back home on a Saturday night strapped into a dress so tight she'd need the jaws of life later to wrest herself free from it. But the Asianists had decided to wade into the department's Sisyphean struggle to determine whether the Modern Istanbul survey course counted toward the European or Middle Eastern history minor for undergraduate students, thus locking horns, yet again, with the director of undergraduate studies, whose task it was to assign this designation for the next academic year. Daphne was only a first-year professor at Harrison University—a Bambi in the eyes of her colleagues—but even she'd lost all hope that the meeting could be salvaged once her colleague began to explain in precise detail the long history of translocal mail runners on the Silk Road. Ten minutes into the diatribe, a giggling panic had bubbled up in her chest at the realization that she'd locked herself into this career for the next thirty years.

She'd reached for her phone as if it was a life raft on the Lusitania, desperate to prove that there was more to her future at Harrison University than fights over the Mongolian postal system. And there he was, this stud named Ricky who had promised her dinners and front-row seats to whatever her heart desired. Daphne found the thin, hard shell she'd built up for herself begin to melt like the chocolate flan he swore he'd make her from scratch. She didn't know what she hated

more—wanting to feel wanted, or not being able to remember the last time someone had.

She'd been on enough dinner dates to know that the profile picture rarely matched the man. But lo and behold, the Ricky she'd met in the overstuffed restaurant appeared to be as dashing in person as he'd been on her phone screen. He'd swooped down to give her a peck on the cheek—and, she noticed, to check out her décolletage—oozing sex, adventure, and expensive aftershave. His scheming, twinkling brown eyes promised her a passionate night if she wanted it. And for the first time in a long time, she thought she might.

Not for the last time, Daphne cursed the Mongols.

“Did he like your story about Belgium, at least?” Elise asked.

“You mean how nineteenth-century Belgian colonial administrators in the Congo dismembered indigenous Africans for the purpose of scaring local villagers into creating profit for their newly emerging rubber industry?” Daphne gripped her steering wheel a bit too tight while changing lanes. “No, Elise, it turns out that explaining the evils of late-nineteenth-century European imperialism on a first date isn't exactly a seductive move.”

After her lengthy side quest into tooth extraction practices in the French Caribbean, Ricky had, understandably, become engrossed in his steak. He'd only lifted his eyes from his plate once—at 6 P.M., to ask the waitress for the check.

Elise's voice softened. “You'll find somebody, Daph. I know you will.”

“Will I?” Daphne asked, doubtfully.

“Absolutely, friend,” Elise replied. “You're just going through those first-year blues.”

That was one term for it.

Driving up the ramp onto the highway, Daphne could think

of a few others. Starting this tenure-track gig at Harrison University wasn't what she'd imagined. She had been elated when she got the phone call from the chair of the history department offering her the job. For the first semester, she'd floated around on campus in a daze, still not comprehending that *she'd done it*, damnit, *she'd really done it*. A job, fresh out of grad school—and at one of the most elite institutions in the United States, to boot? Barely a quarter of newly minted history PhD students landed any kind of tenure-track job at all. Eight months in and Daphne was a model of academic success, boasting a contract with a top university press to write her book on Black families in eighteenth-century France, a shiny new teaching award on her desk next to her favorite Josephine Baker coloring book, and a grant application to study in France that she was sure to win. Then the nagging feeling had set in like the gray clouds that loomed over campus the whole month of March.

Is this it?

Is this my life?

"You know," Daphne said, clearing the catch in her throat, "I generally don't mind my new life. I mean, I'm basically a crazy cat lady."

"That's not true," Elise corrected her. "You're a crazy *dog* lady."

Daphne's lips tugged into a smile. "Fine. But the same lesson applies. I'm either up to my eyeballs in course prep on campus or I'm at home with Chloe. My parents complain that I live like a hedgehog but they've accepted that my world is smaller than theirs. I thought I was fine with my life, too."

"And I'm sure most of the time you are," Elise said. "But let's face it, honey. You're smart, funny, beautiful—"

"Ha."

“—and bored.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m too exhausted to be bored,” Daphne said. “How about lonely?”

“That, too.”

“Men don’t have these problems,” Daphne grumbled. “Wait, that’s not true. At least none of the men *I* know have these problems.”

As far as she could tell, men in academia fell into two categories: They either went for someone so closely aligned to their own research that the couple became the disciplinary equivalent of siblings, or they chose to marry women with the intellectual aspirations of a house cat. Daphne didn’t want to date anyone at Harrison University—the thought of a colleague’s lips on hers made her recoil—but she couldn’t understand why most guys on dating apps were so put off by nerdy women like her. Most of the time, Daphne was so invisible she might as well have slapped a window decal on her forehead to prevent birds from smacking into her.

“We have become the men we wanted to marry,” Gloria Steinem once said, but guess what? Men kept getting married anyway. And Daphne was just out here collecting books and bubble pens and coffee mugs that said “Best Dog Mom” on them and dodging Harrison University’s awkward singles mixers for professors—which, let’s face it, usually meant drinking pinot grigio at a sad, makeshift bar in a dining hall and gossiping university politics with some unpartnered queer folks while a few straight women circled around the one eligible bachelor like hammerhead sharks.

Daphne pulled off the highway, snapping out of her gloom in time to hear Elise say, “You’ll find someone who loves you exactly for who you are, Daphne. I know it.”

"Thanks, Mom."

"I mean it!"

Daphne said goodbye to Elise as she entered downtown Calliope, the university town that she'd chosen to call home. Off-tune carillon bells from the top of Harrison's bell tower clanged to life seven times, their chimes ignored by students lounging on tiny chairs and even tinier tables outside of Office Hours coffee shop, even though the last rays of the cold April sun weren't warm enough to justify such summery behavior. A barista was scrubbing off a fresh splash of graffiti from the café's panel window right as Daphne slowed her car to a stop at a red light. She squinted to read the fluorescent orange feminist prose—the Femmes Fatales, Calliope's renegade anonymous feminist flash mob, had struck again. A skateboarder whooshed past this week's visual attack against the patriarchy, holding some book on Heideggerian philosophy in one arm and his fluffy white cat in the other—which had been cause for consternation the first time Daphne'd encountered it. Now it had become daily life.

Feeling a bit more chipper, Daphne pulled into the tiny garage in front of her house, drawing instant comfort at the sight of her Victorian cottage. It was tucked away into the corner of a hundred-acre park like a secret—*her* secret—and as she jangled her keys in the door, she joyfully breathed in the sea of lilac, purple, and periwinkle flowers that she'd planted out front.

Daphne caught a mouthful of furry limbs and soft, kissable ears as soon as she opened the door. She buried her nose in Chloe's black velvet fur. Who needed shitty men when there were perfectly good rescue dogs?

While Chloe scampered outside to do her business, Daphne lifted her chin up to the darkening sky. She took her phone out

to check for any calls she'd missed while on her plane crash of a date—and tilted her head at the bright notification on her screen.

Sam Taylor had called her? Four times?

That was weird.

She'd forgotten they'd swapped numbers. Or why. Sam was two years ahead of her on the tenure track at Harrison and in anthropology, a completely different department. She'd wisely chosen to avoid spending time with anthropologists in grad school after learning just what, exactly, ethnographic fieldwork entailed. Honestly it just seemed like a whole lot of grant writing and university-approved stalking.

Daphne looked up from her phone just in time to catch Chloe rolling and wiggling in the grass, paws extended in the cold night air. At least, she hoped it was grass. Chloe was an excellent dog who never jumped on people and never barked, but she sure loved to roll in smelly things. Anything at all, really. On one memorable walk, she had stopped, sniffed, and then rolled on an everything bagel.

Four times?

Maybe they were butt dials. Lord knows she'd done that before, the last time to the chair of her department while throwing her back out to Beyoncé's *Renaissance*.

Sam's text message put that hypothesis to rest.

Le chinois inventer l'eau sur la tête. Le Français inventer le silence.

"What in the shitty-ass French . . . ?"

She stared at the jumble of letters. Why was Sam texting her about Chinese people in barely passable French? That felt weirdly racist in a way she couldn't pinpoint yet.

The LCD screen of her cell phone went black in the time that Daphne's thumbs floated over it while she debated how to

respond, if she even wanted to. If she was being honest with herself, all she really wanted was to put her bad date behind her and crawl into pajamas, not subject herself to an anthropology professor's whims.

You okay? Daphne texted in spite of herself.

Chloe bounded back into the house, eager for her dinner, her post-dinner snack, and a belly rub or three, and Daphne shoved her phone back into her coat pocket and followed behind, praying Sam wouldn't text her back. Obligation may have forced her to send that message but that didn't mean she wanted an answer.

ONLY AN hour later, when she and Chloe had begun to nod off in front of the muted tones of her television, did Daphne convince herself to let that text message go. Sam had probably texted the wrong person. And even if he hadn't, he obviously couldn't be bothered to tell her what he'd meant about the French and their supposedly soundless behavior anyway. That just showed her how few French people Sam had met.

Move on, Daph. "Don't go looking for drama where none exists," had been her mantra during those political days of graduate school. It had helped her sidestep ancient battles between even more ancient professors and avoid social situations that suggested even a hint of compromise. The only way to emerge unscathed from the "DEI-charity case" label white students had derisively slapped on her during those early years had been to become invisible except on the page. She liked to believe the purity of her dissertation, "Family Matters: Race, Gender, and the Making of Black Families in Eighteenth-Century France," had saved her from being gobbled up by the leviathan of malice that hunted for Black women in academia's hallways.

“Keep your head down,” she mumbled, half asleep. There were classes to teach, papers to grade, another faculty meeting to endure. Swiping at her screen, Daphne deleted Sam’s text message and dropped her phone back on her nightstand. She needed a clean slate tomorrow—that’s what tomorrows were for, after all. And what was it that Elise was always telling her? “You’re a history prof, hon, so you know better than anyone—life’s for the living.”

Ha. Daphne turned in her sleep. As a historian she preferred spending her time with the dead over the living. At least the dead never sassed her back or asked why she was still single. Her mood darkened. If only, she thought glumly, the dead could teach her how to live.