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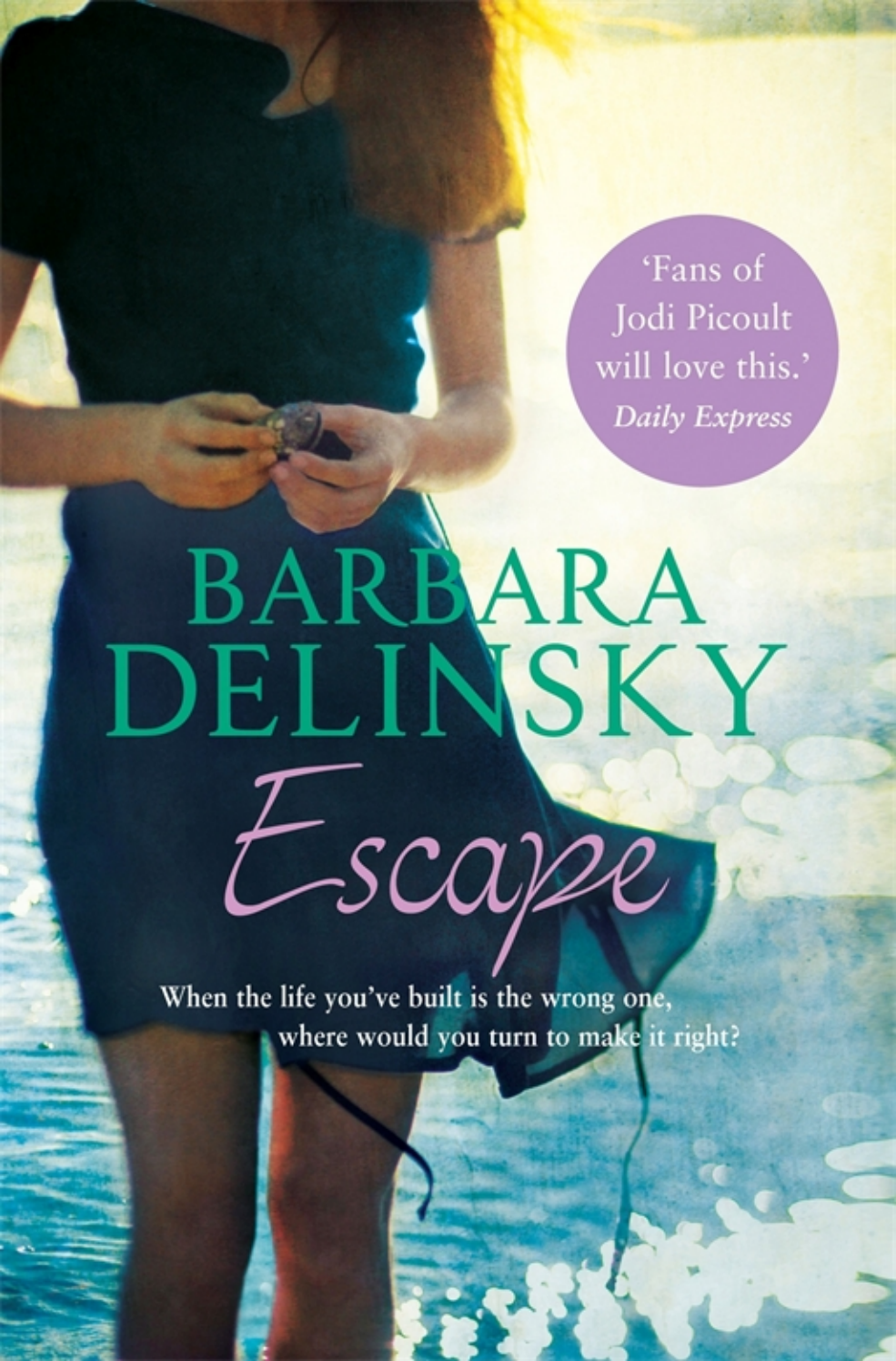
Escape

Written by Barbara Delinsky

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Daily Express

BARBARA DELINSKY

Escape

When the life you've built is the wrong one,
where would you turn to make it right?

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Barbara Delinsky

Canvas

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To Max, with endless Xs and Os

Chapter 1

Have you ever woken up in a cold sweat, thinking that you've taken a wrong turn and are stuck in a life you don't want? Did you ever consider hitting the brakes, backing up, and heading elsewhere?

How about disappearing – leaving family, friends, even a spouse – ditching everything you've known and starting over again. Reinventing yourself. Rediscovering yourself. Maybe, just maybe, returning to an old lover. Have you ever dreamed about this?

No. Me, neither. No dream, no plan.

It was just another Friday. I awoke at 6:10 to the blare of the radio, and hit the button to silence it. I didn't need talk of politics to knot up my stomach, when the thought of going to work did that all on its own. It didn't help that my husband, already long gone, texted me at 6:15, knowing I'd have my BlackBerry with me in the bathroom.

Can't make dinner tonight. Sorry.

I was stunned. The dinner in question, which had been on our

calendar for weeks, involved senior partners at my firm. It was important that James be there with me.

OMG, I typed. *Why not?*

I received his reply seconds before stepping into the shower. *Gotta work late*, he said, and how could I argue? We were both lawyers, seven years out of law school. We had talked about working our tails off now to pay our dues, and I had been in total agreement at first. Lately, though, we had seen little of each other, and it was getting worse. When I pointed this out to James, he got a helpless look in his eyes, like, *What can I do?*

I tried to relax under the hot spray, but I kept arguing aloud that there were things we could do if we wanted to be together – that love should trump work – that we had to make changes before we had kids, or what was the point – that my coyote dreams had begun when I started getting letters from Jude Bell, and though I stuffed those letters under the bed and out of sight, a tiny part of me knew they were there.

I had barely left the shower when my BlackBerry dinged again. No surprise. My boss, Walter Burbridge, always emailed at 6:30.

Client wants an update, he wrote. *Can you do it by ten?*

Here's a little background. I used to be an idealist. Starting law school, I had dreamed of defending innocent people against corporate wrongdoing, and by graduation was itching to be involved in an honest-to-goodness class action lawsuit. Now I am. Only I'm the bad guy. The case on which I work involves a company that produces bottled water that was tainted enough to cause irreparable harm to a frightening number of people. The company has agreed to compensate the victims. My job is to determine how many, how sick, and how little we can get away with doling out, and I don't work alone. We are fifty lawyers, each with a cubicle, computer, and headset. I'm one of five supervisors, any of whom could have compiled an update, but because Walter likes women, he comes to me.

I'm thirty-two, stand five-six, weigh one-twenty. I spin sometimes, but mostly power walk and do yoga, so I'm in shape. My hair is auburn and long, my eyes brown, my skin clear.

We gave them an update Monday, I typed with my thumbs.

Get it to me by ten, he shot back.

Could I refuse? Of course not. I was grateful to have a job at a time when many of my law school friends were wandering the streets looking for work. I was looking, too, but there was nothing to be had, which meant that arguing with the partner-in-charge of a job I *did* have was not a wise thing to do.

Besides, I mused as I slipped on my watch, if I was to put together an update by ten, I had to make tracks.

My BlackBerry didn't cooperate. I was hurrying to finish my makeup when it began making a noise. The wife of one of James's partners wanted the name of a pet sitter. I didn't have a pet, but could certainly ask a friend who did. Thinking that I would have had a dog or cat in a minute if our lifestyle allowed it, I was zipping on a pair of black slacks when another email arrived. *Why won't sharks attack lawyers?* said the subject line, and I instantly clicked DELETE. Lynn Fallon had been in my study group our first year in law school. She now worked with a small firm in Kansas, surely having a kinder, gentler experience than those of us in New York, and she loves lawyer jokes. I do not. I was feeling bad enough about what I do. Besides, when Lynn sent a joke, it went to dozens of people, and I don't do group email.

Nor do I do anything but blue blouses, I realized in dismay as I stood at the closet. Blue blouses were professional, my lawyer side argued, but I was bored looking at them. Closing my eyes, I chose a blouse – any blouse – and was doing buttons when the BB dinged again.

Okay, Emily, wrote my sister. *You booked the restaurant, but you haven't done music, photography, or flowers. Why are you dragging your heels?*

Kelly, it is 7 am, I wrote back and tossed the BlackBerry on the bed. I turned on the radio, heard the word ‘terrorism’, and turned it off. I was brushing my hair back into a wide barrette when my sister’s reply arrived.

Right, and in two minutes I have to get the kids dressed and fed, then do the same for me so I can get to work, which is why I’m counting on you for this. What’s the problem?

This party is over the top, I typed back.

We agreed. You do the work, I pay.

Mom doesn’t want this, I argued, but my sister was relentless.

Mom will love it. She only turns 60 once. I need help with this, Emily. I can’t hear myself think when I get home from work. If you had kids you’d know.

It was a low blow. Kelly knew we were trying. She knew we had undergone tests and were doing the intensive-sex-at-ovulation routine. She didn’t know that I’d gotten my period again this month, but I couldn’t bear to write the words, and then – *ding, ding, ding* – my in-box began filling. It was 7:10. I had to get to work. Burying the BlackBerry in the depths of my purse so that I wouldn’t hear the noise, I grabbed my coat and took off.

We lived in Gramercy Park in a condo we could barely afford, and though we didn’t have a key to the park itself, we had passed Julia Roberts on the street a time or two. I saw nothing today – no Julia, no pretty brownstones, no promising June day – as I hurried to Fifth Avenue, sprinting the last half block to catch the bus as it pulled up at the curb.

I was at my desk at 7:45, and I wasn’t the first. A low drone of voices already hovered over the cubicles. I awoke my computer and logged in, then logged in twice more at different levels of database security. Waiting for the final one, I checked my BlackBerry.

Are you going to yoga? asked the paralegal who worked two floors below me and hated going to yoga alone. I would be happy going alone, since it meant less chatter and more relaxation, which was the

whole point of yoga. But if I had to go home to change before the firm dinner, yoga was out. *Not tonight*, I typed.

Colly wants Vegas, wrote a book group friend. Colleen Parker was getting married in September, and though I had only known her for the two years I'd been in the group, she had asked me to be a bridesmaid. I would be one of a dozen, paying three hundred dollars each to wear matching dresses. And now a bachelorette party in Vegas? I was thinking the whole thing was tacky, when I spotted the next note.

Hey, Emily, wrote Ryan Mcfee. Ryan worked one cubicle down, two over. *Won't be in today. Have the flu. Don't want to spread it around.*

This should have been important. It meant one man-day of lost work. But what was one more or less in a huge cubicle room?

Logged in now, I set to gathering Walter's information. It was 7:50. By 8:25 I had a tally of the calls we'd received from last weekend's newspaper ads – and I could understand why our client was worried. The number of claimants was mounting fast. Each had been rated on a ten-point scale by the lawyer taking the call, with tens being the most severely affected and ones being the least. There were also zeros; these were the easiest to handle. When callers tried to cash in on a settlement with proof neither of harm nor of having ever purchased the product, they stood out.

The others were the ones over which I agonized.

But statistics were impersonal and, in that, relatively painless. I updated the figures on how many follow-ups we had done since Monday, with a numerical breakdown and brief summaries of the claims. At 8:55 I emailed the spreadsheet to Walter, logged in the time I'd spent making it, shot a look at my watch, and dashed downstairs for breakfast. Though I passed colleagues in the elevator, being competitors in the game of billable hours, we did little more than nod.

Going from the thirty-fifth floor to the ground and up again took time, so it wasn't until 9:10 that I was back at my desk with a

doughnut and coffee. By then the cubicles were filled, the tap of computer keys louder, and the drone of voices more dense. I had barely washed down a bite of doughnut when the phone began to blink. Hooking the earpiece over my head, I logged in on my time sheet, pulled up a clear screen on my computer, and clicked into the call.

‘Lane Lavash,’ I answered, as was protocol with calls coming in on the toll-free lines listed in our ads. ‘May I help you?’

There was silence, then a timid ‘I don’t know. I got this number from the paper.’

Frauds were confident. This woman sounded young and unsure. ‘Which paper?’ I asked gently.

‘The, uh, the *Telegram*. In Portland. Maine.’

‘Do you live in Portland?’ I readied my fingers to enter this information.

‘No. I was there with my brother last weekend and saw the ad. I live in Massachusetts.’

I dropped my hands. Massachusetts was prime Eagle River distribution area. We’d received calls from as far away as Oregon, from people who had been vacationing in New England during the time the tainted water was on sale. Strict documentation of travel was required for these claims, well before we looked at documentation of physical harm.

I cupped my hands in my lap. ‘Do you have cause for a claim against Eagle River?’

Her voice remained hesitant. ‘My husband says no. He says that these things just happen.’

‘What things?’

‘Miscarriages.’

I hung my head. This was not what I wanted to hear, but the din of voices around me said that if not this woman, someone else would be getting pieces of the Eagle River settlement. Miscarriage was definitely one of the ‘harms’ on our list.

‘Have you had one?’ I asked.

‘Two.’

I entered that in the form on my screen, and when the words didn’t appear, retyped them, but the form remained blank. Knowing that I wouldn’t forget this, and not wanting to lose the momentum of the call, I asked, ‘Recently?’

‘The first one was a year and a half ago.’

My heart sank. ‘Had you been drinking Eagle River water?’ Of course she had.

‘Yes.’

‘Can you document that?’ I asked in a kind voice, though I felt cold and mean.

‘Y’mean, like, do I have a receipt? See, that’s one of the reasons my husband didn’t want me to call. I pay cash, and I don’t *have* receipts. My husband says I should’ve made a connection between the water and the miscarriage back then, but, like, bottled water is always safe, right? Besides, we were just married and there was other stuff going on, and I figured I was miscarrying because it wasn’t the right time for me to be pregnant.’ Her voice shrank. ‘Now it is, only they say there’s something wrong with the baby.’

My mind filled with static. I tried to remember the company line. ‘The Eagle River recall was eighteen months ago. The water has been clean since then. It wouldn’t harm your baby.’

I heard a meek half-cry. ‘The thing is, we try to buy in bulk because it’s cheaper that way. So we had a couple of twenty-fours in the basement and kind of forgot about them. Then I got pregnant, and my husband lost his job, and money was really tight, so I saw the water and thought I was doing good by using what we had instead of buying fresh. I didn’t know about the recall.’

‘It was in all the newspapers.’

I don’t read newspapers, the ensuing silence said. ‘Newspapers cost money.’

‘So does bottled water.’

‘But the water from the tap tastes so *bad*. We thought of putting a filter on, but that costs more than the bottled water, and it’s not like we own this place.’

‘Maybe your tap water is tainted,’ I said, playing to script. ‘Have you asked your landlord to test it?’

‘No, because my husband drinks it, and he’s healthy. I’m the only one with the problem, and I only drink bottled water. I noticed your newspaper ad because I always drink Eagle River.’ Her voice was a whispered wail. ‘They say the baby won’t be right, and my husband wants to get rid of it, and I have to make a decision, and I don’t know what to do. This *sucks*.’

It did suck. *All* of it.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ she repeated, and I realized she wanted my advice, but how could I give that? I was the enemy, an agent for the company whose product had caused a deformity in her child. She should have been yelling at me, calling me the most cold-hearted person in the world. Some of them did. There had been the man whose seamstress wife had developed tremors in her hands and was permanently disabled. Or the woman whose husband had died – and yes, he had a pre-existing medical condition, but he would have lived longer if he hadn’t drunk tainted water.

The names they called me weren’t pretty, and though I told myself not to take it personally, I did. Thinking that this job *definitely* sucked, I swivelled sideways and lowered my eyes. ‘I’m Emily. What’s your name?’

‘Layla,’ she said.

I didn’t try to enter it on my form. Nor did I ask for a last name. This had become a personal discussion. ‘Have you talked with your doctor about options?’

‘There are only two,’ she said, sounding frightened. I guessed her to be in her early twenties. ‘My mother says I shouldn’t kill my baby. She says God chose me to protect an imperfect child, but she isn’t the one who’ll be paying medical bills or maybe losing a

husband because of it.' *Losing a husband* . . . Not on the formal list of 'harms' but a plausible side effect, one that had to resonate with any married woman in this room.

Or maybe not. We didn't talk about this – didn't talk about much of anything, because we were being paid by the hour to do our work, and time sheets would only allow for a lapse or two. What I was doing now was against the rules. I was supposed to stick to business and limit the time of each call. But Layla was talking quickly, going on about the bills that were piling up, and I couldn't cut her off. Somewhere in the middle of it, she said, 'You're a good person, I can tell by your voice, so my husband was wrong when he said I'd be talking to a robot. He also said we'd have to sign away our lives if we got money for this. Would we?'

I was stuck on *good person*, echoing so loudly through my fraudulent soul that I had to consciously refocus at the end. 'No, Layla. You'd have to sign a release saying that you won't further sue Eagle River, its parent company, or distributors, but that's it.'

She was silent for a beat. 'Are you married?'

'Yes.'

'With kids?'

'Someday.' I was on the clock, but I couldn't return to the claim form.

'I'm desperate for them,' Layla said in her very young voice. 'I mean, you work for a law firm. I work in a hardware store. Kids would give my life meaning, y'know?'

'Absolutely,' I replied just as a sharp voice broke in.

'What's happening here, Emily?' Walter asked. 'No one's working.'

I swivelled towards him, then rose from my chair enough to see over the cubicle tops. Sure enough, our team stood in scattered clusters, most looking now at Walter and me.

'Computers are down,' called one. 'Forms are frozen.'

Walter eyed me. 'Did you report this?'

I pushed my mouthpiece away. 'I hadn't realized there was a problem. I'm working with a claimant.' Adjusting the mouthpiece, I returned to Layla. 'There's a technical glitch here. Can I call you back in a few?'

'You won't,' she said defeatedly. 'And anyway, I don't know if I should do this.'

'You should,' I advised, confident that Walter wouldn't know what I was saying.

She gave me her number. I wrote it on a Post-it and ended the call.

'He should what?' Walter asked.

'Wait half an hour before going out, so that I can call her back.' I buzzed our technology department.

'Are you *encouraging* people to file claims?' Walter asked.

'No. I'm listening. She's in pain. She needs someone to hear what she's saying.'

'Your job is to document everyone who calls and tell them what medical forms we'll need if they want a piece of the pie. That's it, Emily. You're not being paid to be a shrink.'

'I'm trying to sort through claims so that we know which are legit and which aren't. This is one way to do it.' When I heard a familiar voice in my headset, I said, 'Hey, Todd, it's Emily. We're having trouble up here.'

'Already on it.' He clicked off.

I relayed the message to Walter, who wasn't mollified. 'How long 'til we're running again?'

It was 9:40. I figured we'd lost twenty minutes, thirty max. 'Todd is fast.'

Walter leaned closer. A natty dresser, he never looked ruffled. The only things that ever gave him away were his grey eyes and his voice. Those eyes were rocky now, the voice low and taut. 'I'm under pressure, Emily. We were named to manage this settlement only after I personally assured the judge that we could do it quickly

and economically. I can't afford to have my lawyers wasting time holding hands. I'm counting on you to set an example; this is important for your career. Get the facts. That's it.' With a warning look, he left.

I should have felt chastised, but all I could think was that if anyone was wasting time, it was the people who called us hoping for help. They wouldn't get what they deserved; the system was designed to minimize reward. Besides, how did you price out a damaged baby, a ruined life?

I was telling myself not to be discouraged – to keep avoiding wine and caffeine and always wash my prenatal vitamins down with *good* water – when a crescendoing hum came, spreading from cubicle to cubicle as the computers returned to life. I should have been relieved, but to my horror, my eyes filled with tears. Needing a distraction, even something as frivolous as Vegas talk from Colly's friends, I turned when my BlackBerry dinged. It was James. Maybe coming tonight? I wondered with a quick burst of hope.

Just got a brilliant idea, he wrote, and for a final minute, still, I believed. *The dinner Sunday night? That was his firm's dinner. I want you to do it up big – new dress, hair, nails, the works. I have to work tomorrow anyway. That would be Saturday, the one day we usually managed a few hours together. A couple of favours? Pick up my navy suit and my shirts. And my prescription. And get cash for the week. Thanks, babe. You're the best.*

I scrolled on, thinking there had to be more, because if that was all, I would be livid.

But that was it. *Thanks, babe. You're the best.*

Keyboards clicked, voices hummed, electronics dinged, jangled, and chimed, and still, as I stared at the words, I heard James's voice. *I want you to do it up big – new dress, hair, nails, the works.* Like I needed his permission for this?

Suddenly it all backed up in my throat like too much bad food – bad marriage, bad work, bad family, friends, feelings – and I

couldn't swallow. Needing air, I grabbed my purse and, as an afterthought, the Post-it with Layla's name and number.

Tessa Reid was as close as I came to having a friend in the firm, which was as sad a statement as any. We never socialized outside of work. I did know that she had two kids and two school loans, and that she shared my revulsion for what we did. I saw it in her eyes when she arrived at work, the same look of dread reflected in my own mirror each day.

She lived three cubicles to the right of mine. Ducking in there now, I touched her shoulder. Her earpiece was active, her hands typing. One look at my face and she put her caller on hold.

'Do me a huge favour, Tessa?' I whispered, not for privacy, because, Lord knew, my voice wouldn't carry over the background din, but because that was all the air I could find. I pressed the Post-it to her desk. 'Call this claimant for me? We were talking when the system went down. She's valid.' I was banking on that, perhaps with a last gasp of idealism. For sure, though, Tessa was the only one in the room whom I could trust to find out.

She was studying me with concern. 'What's wrong?'

'I need air. Do this for me?'

'Of course. Where are you going?'

'Out,' I whispered, and left.

A gaggle of clicks, dings, and murmurs followed me, lingering like smog even when the elevator closed. I made the descent in a back corner, eyes downcast, arms hugging my waist. Given the noise in my head, if anyone had spoken, I mightn't have heard, which was just as well. What could I have said if, say, Walter Burbridge had stepped in? *Where are you going?* I don't know. *When'll you be back?* I don't know. *What's wrong with you?* I don't know.

The last would have been a lie, but how to explain what I was feeling when the tentacles were all tangled up? I might have said that it went beyond work, that it covered my entire life, that it had been

building for months and had nothing to do with impulse. Only it did. Survival was an impulse. I had repressed it for so long that it was weak, but it must have been beating somewhere in me, because when the elevator opened, I walked out.

Even at 9:57, Fifth Avenue buzzed. Though I had never minded before, now the sound grated. I turned right for the bus and stood for an excruciating minute in traffic exhaust, before giving up and fleeing on foot, but pedestrian traffic was heavy, too. I walked quickly, dodging others, dashing to make it over the cross street before a light changed. When I accidentally jostled a woman, I turned with an apology, but she had continued on without looking back.

I had loved the crowds when I first came here. They made me feel part of something big and important. Now I felt part of nothing. If I wasn't at work, others would be. If I bumped into people, they walked on.

So that's what I did myself, just walked on, block after block. I passed a hot dog stand but smelled only exhaust fumes from a bus. My watch read 10:21, then 10:34, then 10:50. If my legs grew tired, I didn't notice. The choking feeling had passed, but I felt little relief. My thoughts were in turmoil, barely touched by the blare of a horn or the rattle of the tailgate of a truck at the curb.

Nearing our neighbourhood, I stopped for my husband's suit and shirts, and picked up his prescription, then entered the tiny branch office of our bank. The teller knew me. But this was New York. If she wondered why I withdrew more money than usual, she didn't ask.

The bank clock stood at 11:02 when I hit the air again. Three minutes later I turned down the street where we lived and, for a hysterical second, wondered which brownstone was ours. Through my disenchanted eyes, they all looked the same. But no; one had a brown door, another a grey one, and there was my window box, in which primrose and sweet pea were struggling to survive.

Running up the steps, I let myself in, emptied my arms just inside, and dashed straight up the next flight and into the bedroom. I pulled my bag from the closet floor, but paused only when I set it on the bed. What to bring? That depended on where I was going, and I didn't have a clue.