
Opening Extract from...

The Carriage House

Written by Louisa Hall

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THE CARRIAGE HOUSE

A NOVEL

LOUISA HALL

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

For Ben

· Book I ·

Yes, he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest.

—Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Chapter 1

From the time that his daughters could lift their rackets, William had loved nothing more than to watch them play tennis. As soon as the workday ended, he hurried home to get to their afternoon clinics in time. In the winter, he watched them play in the indoor courts, surrounded by echo, reverberation, and the smell of thick tarp and synthetic felt. Later, when they were old enough to compete, William spent his finest weekends at their tournaments, moving between athletic facilities that started, with time, to feel like home. After years of watching them play, he had begun to feel that there was something important—something historically continuous—about the ritual of walking to the club to see them perform.

The occasions for this ritual were less frequent now. Only when Diana came home from Texas for the ladies' club championship did he have the chance to resurrect that feeling. That crisp, fine pride of watching his girls on court. Elizabeth hadn't touched a racket since she took up acting, and now she'd committed herself to yoga, an activity that William could not bring himself to classify as an athletic pursuit. Izzy walked away from tennis for

no apparent reason when she was fourteen, and when she did, it was as though William lost a daughter. She shed every ounce of the nimble girl she had been, becoming instead an adult young creature who both saddened and confused him.

But today, the second of June, 2000, he would walk to the courts again. Today, as he used to do so often, he had hurried home from the office, speeding along the treacherous curves of Kennedy Drive, propelled by his desire to see Diana play. He had jogged up the stairs to change into casual clothes, charged with the same excitement that used to thrill him when his girls were in tournaments. As he pulled off his tie, William examined himself in the mirror behind his closet door. He was still a fine-looking man. He had held up well. He hung his coat on a wooden hanger and changed into a yellow polo. He held his breath while he tucked it in, then took stock of himself once more. Diana had played in national tournaments. What was the ladies' club championship compared to that? But still. Once more he would take his place in the lawn chairs behind the outdoor courts. Once more he would bandy jokes with the other members, who would lean against the fence, hoping to catch a glimpse of his Di. Once more her body's expert movements would awe them into silence, and afterward the two of them would walk home together, he and Di, best pals, her racket bag slung across her back.

Complete in his casual clothes, William hurried down the stairs. In the foyer, he stopped and looked out through the living room window to see Margaux planting pachysandra under the third linden tree. She was kneeling with her hands in the soil, her dark hair falling over her shoulders. Beyond her, the carriage house stood ragged against the sky, a ghost of its former glory. In its shadow, Margaux gardened, oblivious to its disrepair. Frustration spread through him. She had not remembered the sig-

nificance of the day. She would not come with him to see their daughter win the championship match. She would only continue gardening, face forward, as though the world in which William and their daughters lived had disappeared behind her.

In the kitchen, he passed Louise, absorbed in a gossip magazine, both feet up on a chair. William sometimes wondered whether he had accidentally hired her to lounge full-time in his kitchen, rather than to care for his wife. "Hello, Louise," he said pointedly, and she uttered something incomprehensibly Australian without looking up from her page. "Goodbye, Louise," he said, amused with himself, then took an apple for the road and stepped outside into the fading afternoon.

It was a perfect time of day. He had the sense that a net of light had fallen over the world. He crossed his yard and moved out onto the golf course that stretched behind the houses of Little Lane, smelling the grass beneath his feet, luxuriating in the give of the soil. He, William Adair, moved easily against the resisting force of the world. He was a presence, walking across the golf course in his yellow polo shirt. This knowledge expanded him. He didn't turn to dwell on the carriage house; instead, he moved forward, passing his neighbors' backyards. So generous did he feel, so vast, that he waved at Mrs. Cheshire, who was taking her laundry off the line. He wasn't annoyed by the flock of pink plastic flamingos that Sheldon Ball's kook of a mother had planted in their backyard and that Sheldon had failed to remove since her death. It was a pleasant sensation to lift so high above the issue of the flamingos, to ascend over the carriage house. He even waved at the Muslim man who'd moved in at the corner of Little Lane and Clubhouse Road. Uzmani stood up from whatever surreptitious hole he was digging in his yard. He glanced over his shoulder, turned back with a confused look, then lifted

his hand toward William. William shook his head at his own high spirits.

The clubhouse rose before him: redbrick facade supported by white columns, settled between two magnolia trees. The symmetries of its architecture buoyed him; William was a man who appreciated columns. Rather than moving straight through the clubhouse, he took his usual detour down the back hall, lined with wooden plaques commemorating club tennis champions back to 1892. Under Men's Club Champion, his own name—William Adair—appeared in gold paint seven times, from 1967 to 1974. Henry, his brother, won it from 1963 to 1965, before he went to war. Their father's name appeared six times, in the span between 1941 and 1951, when his famous rivalry with George Legg drew spectators from as far as Delaware. And on the ladies' plaque, William's girls. Despite their mother's genes, they were each born with enormous potential. Elizabeth was club champion from 1981 to 1983. At twelve years old, she beat Mrs. Weld, with her stolid thighs and her passive-aggressive pacifism in neighborhood association meetings. With her sunny collusions during the carriage house coup d'état. That was one of the best days of William's life. If only he could once more see Elizabeth running up to volley, staring across the net with such intensity that Mrs. Weld started cranking framers up onto the clubhouse roof, he would die a happy man.

And then. From 1984 to 1999 Diana reigned. What a satisfying thing it was to see, that column of Diana Adairs. Fourteen of them lined up, interrupted only by those two disappointing years. No one at the club could match that. Not Jack and Elaine Weld, with their simpering daughter. Certainly not that Cheshire girl. No, the clubhouse plaques belonged to the Adairs.

Only Izzy was absent. There were, of course, a couple of Isabelle

Adairs on the Girls' Club Championship plaque, from the years before she quit. But she was the most talented of them all. William considered the carpet beneath his feet. It was more threadbare than he'd appreciated before: he would have to speak to the committee about recarpeting. The awareness that his clubhouse was fading lodged a quick pain behind his left ribs. His left hand involuntarily twitched; he clenched it into a fist. If only she would play again! Everything could be righted. If Izzy would walk back out on court, her limbs swinging, the racket precise in her knowledgeable hands. Even Elizabeth could return to the game, now that she was back from L.A. and her children were both in school.

This prospect soothed him. His granddaughters, young as they were, already showed promise. The pain had passed in his rib cage, although his head had started to ache. William knew he shouldn't dwell on old defeats. It was enough that Diana still played, enough that he still could make the walk for the Championship Match. She wasn't finished yet. He'd picked her up from the airport three days ago, and when he saw her waiting on the curb, tears came to his eyes. She was standing, as she always had, with her racket bag slung over her shoulder, her hair in that familiar ponytail. When he pulled up, she swung the bag into the backseat, and it was such a familiar gesture that it pierced him to the core. His athletic girl. Every year she came back for the championship. She knew it made him proud.

Beyond the clubhouse veranda, the grass tennis courts stretched their backs beneath the sun until they reached the line of chestnut trees that bordered Breacon Avenue. The chestnuts bent their heads in the breeze. William breathed; the smell of early-summer foliage produced in him a vivid recollection of bringing his young family to the club when they first joined. His little tribe, the family he'd made for himself. As clear as day, William saw Izzy as a

baby in her mother's arms, the afternoon light across Margaux's face, the way Margaux seemed to look past the visible world of tennis courts and trees, an explorer scanning for islands. He saw Diana and Elizabeth as they once were, running out to the grass to turn cartwheels. Diana, ten years old and already more coordinated than any of the girls her age, outstripping Elizabeth, vaulting across the green. And Elizabeth right behind her, a show-off at fourteen, aware that she had her mother's looks. A friend of William's complimented her hair once, and she agreed with him: "Spun gold," she said, then twirled. Such brilliant girls. From the moment he'd seen them, his heart had pummeled him with pride.

In the stands behind court eight, Adelia had already found a place. She shaded her eyes with her hand and waved to him. William closed the space between them. "Miss Lively," he said, taking her hand, playing a Victorian gentleman. She grinned the dear old grin. "Sir William Adair," she said. "Of the Breacon Adairs. A pleasure, as always." She made a place for him at her side. It was comforting to sit with her. The pink cardigan she was wearing reminded him of the outfit she hated having to wear to church when she was nine years old, and the feel of her shoulder was as angularly girlish as it was when they played tennis on these very courts.

Beyond the bleachers, Diana was warming up against Abby Weld. Her body was loose; she jogged in place between shots, as she had since she started competing. She'd grown up jogging in place between shots. He hated to see her in that knee brace, but everything else about her movement had the particular sureness that only truly gifted athletes possess. She would have no trouble in this match. Elaine Weld boasted about how happy it made her daughter to play: "As long as Abigail's happy, we're happy," she liked to say with that ostentatiously shy smile. "Varsity at

Amherst is plenty good enough for us." But it was all baloney. What child is happy when she's losing? Not simpering Abigail Weld, with her mother's thighs and her tearfulness. Twice in the club championships, William had seen Abigail Weld break down and cry. She was not a happy girl, and furthermore she had a weak backhand and Diana would clobber her.

Diana warming up was a thing to see. There was a fluidity to her game, a perfection of technique, that made him relax into his seat beside Adelia Lively and feel the orchestra of his emotions tuning itself into a better harmony. The first game began and Diana served: up the ball rose, up to its highest point, and Diana unfurled her body. Liquid and matter at once, both feet lifting off the ground. She was still great. She won points tidily, as neatly as the little scoop of her leg and racket with which she picked up stray balls.

Of course, at twenty-eight she was no longer a prodigy. William watched her, contemplating this fact. When she came up to the net to take a sip out of her water bottle, he was surprised to realize that she was getting older. One does not expect one's children to age. She glanced over in his direction. She always found him in the crowd, even during her biggest matches. All her coaches had attempted to train this out of her. For years she had to give them a dollar every time she searched for William in the crowd. They worried that it broke her focus, but William understood what she was looking for. He pumped his fist in her direction; she nodded, returning to herself, then walked back out on court. There was the slight limp she had never shaken after knee surgery.

She wasn't the same after that injury. The year she was hurt, William continued flying to Texas for her team's biggest matches, but after a while it was just too grim, watching her sitting on the bench with that enormous knee brace, crutches by her side,

when she was supposed to be number one on the team. When she came back for summer break, she'd changed. His Diana, who had always been so sure. Adelia tried to help, God knows, but despite their efforts, Diana had lost something. And where had it gone? Where do these parts of our children fly off to?

Diana was returning serve now, swaying low with the sun in her eyes. She was squinting. Elizabeth would have stared straight through it, no matter how bright. But not Diana. William could see her wavering, and it pained him. She was so good-looking once, quick and blond in her pleated tennis skirts. Since then her hair had gotten darker. Today she'd drawn it back in a limp ponytail. It was the club championship, after all; William wished she'd presented herself with a bit more pride. He reminded himself to have Adelia speak to her about that. Four years in graduate school was too much. Particularly for his Di, who had always loved to play outdoors. He had never imagined her as an architect. He understood—respected, even—her desire to choose the family profession; he himself had become an architect because it was an honor to inherit his grandfather's firm. There was no dignity in breaking roughly with the past. And yet this was not the family tradition William had hoped his Diana would follow. Architecture had fallen so far from the days when his grandfather built his legacy. No, William had never dreamed his Di would spend her gifted life hunched over the plans for someone else's parking garage.

Texas, in general, hadn't been kind to Diana. The architecture was abysmal, and the cement dragged on and on. He blamed those hard courts for the problems with her knee. He should have encouraged her to come back home as soon as she had that injury; he should have insisted on it, architecture school be damned. Considering this, William felt himself growing out of tune. Out

of tune and helpless, watching his daughter play in a way that struck him as hopelessly old.

Beside him, Adelia squeezed his hand. "If only Margaux could be here to see this," she said. It was a silly thing to say, uncharacteristic of Adelia. William examined her profile. When she came back to Breacon, she seemed no older than the days when they played tennis after school. Then and now, people thought Adelia's looks were hard, but to William she had always been beautiful. Her eyelashes and eyebrows were so blond that her blue eyes seemed uncurtained. Her cheekbones were a warrior's: they deserved a streak of wet black paint. As Margaux faded, Adelia grew more fierce. And yet she, too, was growing old.

And where was Elizabeth? And Izzy? Over her second bowl of cereal that morning, Izzy had made a sound that William had interpreted as assent when he asked her to please support her sister. It was not as though she had anything else to do on a Friday afternoon. With all the scorn that an eighteen-year-old can summon, she had joined a sum total of zero scholastic activities. She had challenged herself only enough to get in to Ohio University, of all incomprehensible places, and they had considered themselves lucky at that. She, of all the Adairs, had time to watch Diana.

His daughters' absence darkened William's mood enough that he couldn't afford a false smile when Jack Weld trotted out from the clubhouse to sit beside Adelia. "William!" Weld said, grinning excessively across the line of her shoulder. He was the kind of man who sheathed his calculating nature in an overabundance of cheer, the type of enthusiastic spirit who might stab you in the back and pretend he was just playing tag. William did not return the greeting; Weld's presence revived his headache. "This should be a great match," Weld was saying, but it would not be a great

match. Abigail Weld was not even remotely in the same league as Diana. Weld stretched his legs. They were clothed in khaki shorts, culminating in a pair of weathered boat shoes. No socks. William hated sockless men in general, and in this case there was something particularly infuriating about the coiled athleticism of Weld's bare calves. "What a day for a match!" he said. Neither William nor Adelia was responding to him; he was engaged in a conversation with himself, forcing them to listen in. "Listen, William! I'm glad I ran into you here. I've been meaning to talk to you. I wanted to say that I'm sorry about the way things worked out with the carriage house petition. I find Anita Schmidt as odious as you do. But it looks like people are just ready to let it go."

"That's fine, Jack," William said, although it certainly was not fine. He refused to look at Weld. He wanted to be alone with Adelia. There was a clarity to her presence that he needed. She was so intently focused on the match that her nails had dug eight red crescents into her palms.

"Look, William," Weld continued. "Don't get me wrong. I'm with you. I understand the value of history on Little Lane. We have a past, and it wouldn't be right to let it go like that, with the snap of a finger. It will break my heart to see that carriage house torn down. But we have systems in place. Rules for governance. We can't just ignore the vote of everyone else on the street."

Adelia put one hand on William's thigh. "What a point!" she said. "Focus, William, she's playing, you've got to watch this."

But William couldn't focus. His eyes were losing their grip on the match. An image of his carriage house, decaying in Anita Schmidt's backyard, rose in his mind. It was a beautiful building once. Designed by his own grandfather, described in the papers as one of the foremost examples of shingle architecture in the United States. While other men of his generation dreamed of

making their fortunes in industry, William's grandfather dreamed of perfect spaces, of rooms designed so that within their walls you became a better version of yourself, more capable and brave. That was the kind of blood that ran in William's veins. Inside the carriage house, there was one cavernous room and a loft under thick cedar beams. Encompassed by slabs of hewn wood, the air was hushed. It held promise. One corner was rounded into a turret shape; the roof was a series of intersecting gambrels, one for the turret, one for the carriage room, one for the owl's nest that peeked up over the loft. Outside, the shingles were white on the siding, dove gray on the roof, weathered by decades of wind. It was the kind of house that belonged on a windswept beach, confronting the tumult. When William was a boy, there was a telescope in the owl's nest, pointed out over the downhill slope of Little Lane. As children, he and Adelia, best friends by proximity, played pirates in the loft, surveying the houses beneath them and crying out their barbaric yawps. What she lacked in gender and years, Adelia made up for with ferocity. One evening she very nearly cut off her finger for the sake of a complicated escape; William had to hold her hand above her head, in the cathedral light that filtered through the owl's nest, in order to prevent catastrophe. That carriage house, as it was maintained in those days, inspired William to go to architecture school. It was all that remained on Little Lane of his grandfather's craft. The main house was rebuilt after a lightning fire, and since the subdivision, neighborhood covenants had all but required the construction of stucco faux-colonials. The subdivision, sloppily executed by William's father, so that the carriage house fell on Anita Schmidt's plot of land. And now the carriage house, too, had been sacrificed by the neighborhood association in their crusade for democratic mediocrity. How far it had fallen from its

original form! His children had never known it as it once was. For them, it was a collapsing relic, rodent-infested, the window in the owl's nest shattered and never replaced.

William closed his eyes. He felt the crisp lines of his structure dissolving. "Weld," he said, summoning his reserves, "I will say this once, and then I will watch my daughter play. My grandfather built that carriage house. If Anita Schmidt would let me on her property, I'd take care of the rodent problem. It's a goddamn shame. That carriage house is my family. It's history."

"Of course it's history," Weld said. "But it's not actually historical, according to the county historical society." He lifted his palms, innocent as a murderous boy. "I'm with you, but as president of the neighborhood association, I can't just ignore the petition."

William's headache had escalated. It struck him that what Weld was doing amounted to aggravated assault. There were arrows of pain lancing the base of his skull, spots in the field of his vision. He pressed his temples between his thumb and middle finger, then tried focusing on Weld for one final word.

"I won't talk about the goddamn carriage house," he said. "My daughter is playing tennis. If you will, I'm going to focus on that."

Upon uttering this, he turned back to watch Diana, and his face went entirely numb.