

“Warm, witty, and original.”

- Suzanne Koven

A LOT
OF
PEOPLE
LIVE
IN THIS
HOUSE

BAILEY MERLIN



Praise for *A Lot of People Live in This House*

“A smashing debut novel about love in the time of COVID! *A Lot of People Live in This House* broke my heart and pieced it back together page by page, character by character. What does it take to recover from trauma? In her beautiful book, Bailey Merlin makes a convincing case for applying liberal amounts of friendship and laughter.”

--Mary Kay Zuravleff, Author
Man Alive! and *American Ending*

“How do we balance our need for community with our need for privacy? How do we heal from loss and trauma, and from the pain of loneliness and isolation? The COVID-19 pandemic has raised these old questions anew, and Bailey Merlin’s warm, witty, and original novel offers some answers. I fell in love with the characters in *A Lot of People Live in This House*, and they will stay with me for a very long time.”

--Suzanne Koven, Author,
Letter to a Young Female Physician

“Most of us live our lives buttoned up in apartments or in homes, and if we’re lucky with a special few whom we love. Bailey Merlin imagines a different life, one in which her richly detailed characters cope with living together through the COVID pandemic in a communal household. Enter Rachel and Job, a married couple, reeling from the loss of their only child, searching for solace from a motley crew living together. Sharing a kitchen and sharing the intimate daily details of one’s life with strangers is at first more than Rachel can bear, but when Job is marooned in India, seemingly with no way home, Rachel must turn to her new family for emotional support in order to find strength to face some harsh facts about her own privileged life. *A Lot of People Live in This House* challenges us to rethink what family means in these stormy times and offers hope that there are many ways to live a fulfilling life.”

-- Neal Baer, MD, Executive Producer of *ER*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, and *Designated Survivor* and Co-Director of the Master’s Degree Program in Media, Medicine, and Health at Harvard Medical School

“A woman alone in a new city during a pandemic, mourning a number of devastating losses, discovers that true families, the kind that will save you, can be created through proximity, shared ritual, and kindness. I finished reading this moving first novel with a renewed belief in human nature and the power of real community. It’s a book that heals.”

—Susan Neville, Author

The Town of Whispering Dolls: Stories

“Bailey Merlin’s wonderful debut novel, *A Lot of People Live in This House*, is a freshly told and compelling description of a young couple attempting to cope after the loss of their unborn child. Set in Boston on the brink of COVID, Rachel moves into a group house with a large cast of characters while her husband travels to India to grieve privately. When COVID hits, complications arise in efforts to get Job home. And Rachel, ever adaptive and quick to solve problems, saves the day at the novel’s biggest crises. An original voice, not afraid to look at life head-on, with a lot to say!”

-- Donna Gordon, Author,

What Ben Franklin Would Have Told Me



Bailey Merlin is a talented writer with a rich background in fiction and media, medicine, and health.

She holds an MFA in fiction from Butler University and an MS from Harvard Medical School, and her writing has been published in numerous literary magazines, *The Lascaux Review*, *ellipses...*, *Honeyfire Literary Magazine*, *Bandit Fiction*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Chantwood Magazine*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Dime Show Review*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *Into the Void*, *Crack the Spine*, among others.

In addition to her writing, Bailey has co-performed a spoken word short story album, *Bug Eyes*, with award-winning jazz guitarist Richie Smith. She is also the librettist of the opera *¡Dime! An Opera in Four Acts*.

Based in Boston, Bailey lives in an intentional community with a dynamic cast of humans, a toddler, a dog, a cat, and a friendly ghost. You can find her thought-provoking and creative work on baileymerlin.com

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This is a work of fiction.
Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

*For The Bond House,
where I learned to live again.*

Sample



CHAPTER ONE

888 IS A GOOD NUMBER for a house, Rachel thinks as her Lyft drives off, leaving her at the end of the driveway of her new home. *Temporary home*, she resolves. In many cultures, the number eight is seen as a sign of prosperity because, turned on its side, eight is the symbol for infinity, of perpetual new beginnings. Prosperity aside, living with ten strangers isn't her idea of a good time.

She stares up at the great white house, and the great white house stares back, its many-windowed eyes framed with black shutters. She thinks it has too many eyes and that its bright red front door is too big. But what else can she expect with Federal-style architecture, especially in this part of the country? Nothing but symmetry and friezes. In a way, it is comforting to Rachel to know what to expect of the inside: high ceilings, curved open staircases, maybe the rogue Palladian window. The almost-architect inside of her breathes a little more freely. A little.

Rachel reaches into her thin snow coat—a poor panic purchase made in Atlanta after reading the Boston weather report the day before—and fishes out her cell phone. She calls Job. He answers right away. “Hello?”

“Do I have to do this?” she asks without ceremony.

“You made it!” he says, voice bright and more than a little relieved.

“I made it,” she says. Her backpack feels heavier than it did when she got off the plane, and her roller bag’s handle is awkward under her palm.

Snowstorm remnants cling to the bushes and brick steps, reminding her of an old life and bitter Chicago winters. Even still, that life was predictable. Whatever they’re trying to do now is something else entirely. “Are you sure we *want* to do this?” she asks, fighting hard to keep her voice from trembling. It was easier to be brave for Job when they were saying goodbye to one another in Egypt because bravery is easier to muster in warmer places.

Job hums, a patient sound. “Sweetheart, we’ve been over this. The rent is reasonable, it’s furnished, there’s enough space for all my shit, you liked Ted and Daniela. And, most importantly?”

She sighs, knowing he’s right and hating him for it. “*And* they have pets.”

“Exactly. Are you inside yet?”

“No, I’m on the driveway.”

“You’re just standing outside like a crazy person?”

She chuckles, breath fanning into a mist. “Yeah.”

“Cool. So...are you gonna go in?”

“We found this place on Craigslist,” she reminds him.

“Yeah, but we interviewed and met all those people. They were legit. Social media certified and everything.”

Rachel’s anxiety grasps at straws now, trying to find a way to back out of this deal.

“What if I get murdered? Serial killers have social media, too, y’know.”

Job is patient, though; he specializes in walking her through her anxieties. “There’s only a small chance that you’ll get murdered.”

She eyes the upstairs windows with suspicion. “Still a chance.”

“But like, there was a chance you’d get murdered on the way there. Hello, you got into a car with a stranger. And, you know what? You could even get hit by a car right now.”

The grotesque “what-if” game is enough to calm her nerves, it usually does, and Job has known that longer than she has. With the most ridiculous possibilities out in the open, seen for their ridiculousness, reality is easier to grapple.

Rachel’s gaze turns back down to the driveway. “I guess that’s true.”

Job’s voice is gentle again. “Then you better get inside, huh? At least you can fend off an attacker there. What are you going to do against a car?”

“Yeah.”

Her snow boots crunch against the asphalt as she takes the first step.

“Sweetheart? Take a breath.”

She stops and listens. He’s taking care of her from a million miles away, even though he was the one who needed to stay in India to learn to better cope with himself. Even though he’s the one who needs tenderness from her. Rachel stands taller and resolves not to be selfish; she resolves to be brave. She looks at the house

head-on, daring it to scare her. It doesn't blink. "Okay, I'm gonna do it. I'll call you when I get to my room. Okay?"

"Of course, sweetheart. I love you."

"Love you." She hangs up and opens her email to find the message chain from the owner.

Hi Rachel, we're all so excited that you'll be here on Sunday! There will definitely be some folks around the house when you get here. If you have any trouble finding a ride and/or don't want to take the T, let me know—I'd be more than happy to pick you up! If you get here by other means, come around to the side. We don't open the front door in the winter because it's too drafty, and I'm pretty sure the doorbell is broken (joy of old homeownership!). So just come around to the mudroom door (right side of the house) and call me. I'll let you in! xx Ted.

As she rolls up the hill, she wonders if his enthusiasm is a persona or if Ted really is just this jazzed to be alive. After meeting him and six of her soon-to-be roommates on a video call three weeks before, she's inclined to believe the latter. She follows his instructions all the same: up the driveway around the right side of the house, casting sidelong stares at the three-story building. She mumbles to herself, "How many rooms did they say this place was? Nine bedrooms? Ten? God, it must have cost the earth." Compared to all the other multi-family homes and four-story apartment buildings, this place is a veritable palace. Plus, from what she can tell from the outside and aged brick wall, it's well on its way to being a part of some historical society's next walking tour. It's hard to put a price on history, but something in the way of two million is probably about right.

She is careful walking up the stairs, opting to drag the roller bag behind her instead of bending down and picking it up—too top-heavy. When she gets to the door, she finds her phone again to call the number provided. Ted picks up halfway through the first ring.

“Hello, hello! Are you outside?” Ted’s voice is as bright as it had been over Skype all those weeks ago while Rachel and Job were in Egypt. She assumes he always sounds like he’s done a rail of coke.

“Oh, yeah, hi. I think I’m in the right place. Outside?”

“Fabulous. Two seconds! Ciao.”

Rachel looks over her shoulder towards the street and into an empty wooded lot that surprises her. Not too many empty spaces left in this part of the city from what she can tell. Scraggly oak trees burst out of the frozen ground, their branches already tall enough to tangle. She wonders how long developers have been trying to slap some condos into that bad boy.

There’s not much time to wonder about zoning board logistics as the door swings open to reveal a gregarious, well-dressed businessman in his early thirties.

“Hi! Welcome, welcome! So good to finally meet you in person!” There is no ceremony before he slings thin arms around her neck in a quick embrace, kissing Rachel on one cheek and then the other.

She stiffens but does not pull away. “Thanks, same to you.”

Ted steps back, still smiling, and puts his fists on his hips. He looks good in his expensive, navy-blue sport coat. “How was your flight?”

She shrugs and pretends she’s not horrible at small talk. “Pretty good. The flight out of Atlanta’s short.”

“Yeah, totally.” His face turns curious, the way faces do when someone wants the latest gossip but was raised better than to ask for it outright. “Were there any issues with the coronavirus thing? I saw on the news that flights were getting canceled in Europe.”

Rachel shrugs again, thinking about the two-hour wait time just to get through American customs after arriving in Atlanta. Everyone seemed tense, more than just jet-lag tense. It frightened her. She doesn’t say this, though, doesn’t know *how* to say it. Instead:

“Lines were long. People were trying to get home earlier, I guess, but it didn’t affect my flight. There haven’t been any cases reported in India.”

“That’s good, that’s good. Hopefully, Job will have the same experience.” Relieved, his smile returns. “Well, come on in out of the cold!” He steps out of the house to reach for the bulky roller bag. “Here, let me grab that for you.”

She leans beyond his reach, unwilling to relinquish her anchor. This is the bag that Job packed, which means that it is of him—that he is, in a way, with her. As long as he is with her, nothing can go wrong. “No worries, I’ve got it.”

Ted’s expression falls slightly. “Sure! Is that everything?”

“Yeah, this is me.” Rachel gasps in remembrance. “Oh! You mentioned that our other stuff arrived a few days ago?”

Ted lights up at the prospect of being useful. “Yep! We put the crates out in the garage, which I will show you whenever you want. And the boxes marked ‘House’ are up in your room.”

She blushes at the thought of someone making such a fuss over her. Traveling with Job has made relying on the kindness of others and accepting favors a more daily practice, but this generosity from total strangers makes her feel guilty in a deep way. “Really? I’m so sorry. Y’all didn’t have to do that.”

He waves her away. “No trouble at all! With all the hands we have around here, it only took a few minutes.”

“Well...I appreciate it.” She knows firsthand how heavy Job’s woodworking equipment is. It had taken them four weeks to get his whole workshop packed into storage.

“Of course. If you need any help with moving stuff one way or another, let us know.” He puffs out his cheeks and jokes, “That bench is something else, though. I didn’t realize they were so sturdy! But of course, they are. They have to be, right?” Ted laughs.

Rachel’s blush deepens. “Job will be happy to know it got here safely.” She quickly adds, “And, if it didn’t, we paid for the insurance.”

Ted bobs his head in enthusiastic agreement. “Good, good!” He claps his hands again and reaches for Rachel’s carry-on before she can stop him. Before she knows it, her piece of Job is in Ted’s grasp. “Well, let me grab your bag, and we’ll head up to your room.”

The red door swings into a small room full of snow boots, coats, umbrellas, reusable bags stacked into one another into infinity in the corner. Despite the grandiosity that the house had displayed from the road, it is obvious that regular people live here. This is a home. What strikes Rachel, though, is the smell: a sharp scent of onion and bacon. Her mouth waters as

Ted puts his hand on another doorknob, smiling over his shoulder.

“Some folks are in the kitchen, which is good. You can meet everyone in stages. We can be a lot all at once.”

Sample



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TWO HOURS LATER, RACHEL sits with her whole body squished into her desk chair, endlessly scrolling through news articles on her phone. None of it is good, and her back is beginning to ache. She hasn't heard from Job since he called earlier in the afternoon, and she hopes it is because he is getting some sleep and not because internet connection is no longer possible in India. What will she do if that is the case? Charter a plane like Yukiko had suggested? Was that really such an outlandish idea? After all, what wouldn't she do for him? She searches "charter private plane to India cost" and turns to a new page in her journal, printing "EMERGENCY OPTIONS" across the top. Anxiety is mostly horrible, but Rachel rather likes how organized she is in a pinch. There is comfort in the preciseness of her handwriting.

That comfort swiftly departs as she discovers the one-way cost of chartering a long-range jet from San Francisco. "Well, if I convince my twelve closest friends to take this once in a lifetime trip, it'll only cost twenty-thousand a person. What a deal," she grumbles as she puts her phone down and scratches out the heading at the top of the page, ruining it forever. Chucking the pen

across the room, Rachel rests her chin down on stacked fists before muttering “fuck” six times, then once more for good measure. “What are we going to do?”

There’s a knock on her bedroom door. It’s as if people in this house are lying in wait behind door knobs, listening for the opportune moment to bother Rachel. She stomps her feet down on the floor, already whipped into a whispered tirade, “Silly me thinking I could go twenty god-damned minutes alone.”

Her frustration builds as she gets closer to the door. She’s ready to give whoever is beyond it a piece of her mind. A glint of light catches the corner of her eye, throwing Rachel off-guard. Turning, she is pierced by the photo on the bedside table. Rachel’s mother stares at her from the frame, chastising from beyond the grave. “You mind that ‘tude,” she can hear.

“Okay, fine, whatever,” she says out loud with all the petulance of a teenager. Nevertheless, she pauses to take a deep breath. She counts to five, then lets it go. Feeling a little less like flying into a rage, she opens the door to Anabelle holding a top hat.

“Hey!” the red-haired woman chirps, smiling so big that it crinkles her huge eyes. “It’s *Chopped* night.”

Rachel blinks, taking in the dichotomy of Anabelle’s jeans and t-shirt against the blue surgical mask that covers her mouth. It seems strange. Then again, plenty of Asian countries do this regularly. Then again, there’s this whole top hat business. What’s that about? She realizes that she’s gone too long without speaking. “Sorry. It’s ‘what’ night?”

“*Chopped*. Y’know, like the show?” she leads. “Every month or so, we clean out the fridge and pantry

and do a cooking challenge to see which team can make the best dish with the given ingredients.”

Rachel blinks again, wondering what this conversation has to do with her.

In the face of silence, Anabelle pulls the hat in closer and rambles. “Vernon was in charge of the baskets this month, so I’m sure they’ll be super hard for no reason.”

Rachel says nothing.

At last, Anabelle looks a little uncomfortable, her eyebrows pulled together and her forehead creases deepening. “So, are you coming down now or...?”

Half-hiding behind the door, Rachel asks, “Is this something everybody knows about?”

The forehead creases smooth. “Well, yeah!”

“Really? Because I don’t feel like I have enough time to prepare.” This, at least, is a reasonable excuse to not want to participate in something. There seems to be a little light at the end of this conversational tunnel.

But Anabelle’s words bring on the avalanche, blocking off any chance of escape. “It’s on the calendar...”

“What calendar?” Rachel asks, but she knows full well what calendar. She remembers deleting the invitation from Ted the minute it hit her inbox.

“The Google Calendar?”

“Google Calendar?” she says, sounding the words out like she’s never heard them before.

Anabelle begins to nod in some sudden understanding. “Oh, oh, oh. Ted didn’t give you access to the calendar.”

As though conjured by his name, Ted exits his room at the far end of the hall and asks, “What didn’t I do?”

His sudden appearance furthers Rachel's door knob theory.

Anabelle makes space for Ted at the threshold, accusing with sisterly affection, "You didn't add Rachel to the house calendar."

Already Ted is reaching for his phone for reconfirmation that he is the perfect host. "I thought I did..."

No need to get caught in a lie. Rachel clears her throat, avoiding eye contact. "You probably did, and I forgot to accept the invite." Why attach yourself as deeply as a Google Calendar if you're only going to stick around for three months? Seemed a better idea to bullshit her way through house events than to have a new calendar clash with her pristine, color-coded lifestyle.

Ted flushes with what she thinks is relief. "Oh, no problem! Let me resend it."

"Let's head on down to the kitchen, then. We only have an hour and a half to cook." Anabelle and Ted start for the stairs but pause when they see that Rachel isn't coming. The force of their collective questioning gazes is enough to overpower her reluctance. She follows.

There is commotion in the kitchen as half a dozen of her housemates flit around, clearing the counter of its cornucopias and replacing them with appliances. An industrial blender, an induction burner, a panini press, and a stand mixer are each given a corner of the island and a stack of cutting boards placed in the center. The kitchen table is laden with varying sizes of white plates and bowls, looking like something out of an Ikea catalog.

Despite her annoyance at being corralled downstairs by the two pushiest people in the house, Rachel can't help but ask, "So...who's participating?"

"Names out of a hat style," Anabelle says, shaking the black top hat at her.

Of course, Rachel thinks.

"Six players, three teams. Each team gets a basket, a course assignment, and ninety minutes to work," Ted supplements before taking the stand mixer from Francesca.

Lorelei scoots past Rachel without a word, taking a seat with her laptop at the freshly cleaned island. "Do I have to participate?" Rachel asks, not much caring for the whine in her voice. "There's the Job thing, and my arms really hurt from hanging all that drywall." *Holy shit, that was this morning.* "I'm really not feeling it."

Anabelle thumps her on the shoulder. "If you're picked, you play. A sprained wrist wasn't enough to get Lorelei out of competing."

Without looking up, the German woman adds, "My team won, too. Chipotle cricket and chocolate truffles."

"They were delicious," Francesca says as she fills the dishwasher with liquid soap.

Vernon's plodding steps, which Rachel is familiar with already, hit the top of the basement stairs. She instinctively moves into the bathroom to get out of the way. Then he's in the kitchen with a giant rectangle in his arms. "Can someone grab that plug?" he says, casting a look over his shoulder. "The tail got away from me."

Ted stoops, the two of them walking the unwieldy shape across the room to sit on the fireplace mantle.

Plugged in, the rectangle blazes to life in neon red. It's an industrial-sized timer, like the ones on cooking shows. When Vernon dusts off his hands and rebuttons his coat, Rachel can appreciate how far he's gone for this bit. He's wearing a light blue linen suit with a heather gray button-up, a textured pink tie with matching pocket square, and rectangular glasses. *Oh my God, he looks just like Ted Allen.*

"Should I send a reminder?" Vernon asks the kitchen.

"Go ahead," Francesca replies for everyone.

Ten seconds later, doors open upstairs, and footsteps come flooding down. The mood in this room is different than it was in the attic just a few hours ago. They all seem to be humming with excitement, which makes Rachel resent them all the more. *Happy? At a time like this?*

"Made teams yet?" Markeya asks when she enters the kitchen. Rachel trails in after her, sticking to the cupboards to be as inconspicuous as possible.

"Just about to," Vernon answers. "Daniela, will you do the honors?"

The woman in question waddles across to the top hat, dipping in a perfect slender hand untouched by the bloating so common in pregnancy. *What doesn't she have?* Rachel wants to know before beginning a long, impassioned plea to the universe and any benevolent ghosts to keep her from being picked for this game.

Daniela takes out six strips of paper, making three piles. She takes the hat, and Vernon reads the names, sealing Rachel's fate. No surprise, of course. When has fortune ever been kind to her?