

DETROIT HUSTLE

A MEMOIR OF LOVE,
LIFE & HOME

A M Y H A I M E R L



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CHAPTER ONE

I STARE THE HOUSE SQUARELY in the eye. It stares back at me, unblinking, through its boarded-up windows.

Now, I say to it, now is the time. If you want us to build our lives here, you need to tell me now. This is your chance.

And I don't mean I say that in my mind. No, I am standing here in the early spring bluster, speaking out loud to a 1914 Georgian Revival that hasn't seen a better day in many, many days. The neighbors must think I am crazy or, more likely, just another New Yorker scoping cheap houses in the Motor City.

I impatiently tap my foot, daring the house to answer. My husband, Karl, looks on skeptically. And then, two signs: first, a giant white tomcat walks across the roof and stares at us, and second, as dusk settles over the city, a streetlight comes on. In a town known

for its lack of working streetlights—and nearly every other city service—a puddle of gold is forming right outside what could be our window.

Karl and I look at each other expectantly, silently hoping the other one is going to do or say the sensible thing. Like walk away.

The house is a three-thousand-square-foot box of fuckedupedness. It has no plumbing. No electricity. No heat. And I don't mean it's just missing a toilet or a boiler—there is essentially nothing left inside the walls. Every pipe, every radiator, every wire is stripped. Every door is missing. Every light fixture is long gone. There is no water heater, no furnace. There are no kitchen cabinets or sink. No stove, no refrigerator. What we have is a pile of bricks with character. Let's be honest: the house could be used as a set for *Falling Skies* or any other postapocalyptic show.

Still, we are inexplicably smitten. We can already imagine our lives inside these walls, despite the peeling Pepto-Bismol pink paint, sagging ceilings, mold-speckled surfaces, and sunroom that is shedding its stucco and letting the wind and rain inside. Karl mentally places his Baldwin grand piano in that room and imagines it bathed in late-summer twilight. I hear him playing the jazz standards and rolling blues he's partial to as I cook dinner using tomatoes and basil grown from an imaginary garden right outside his floor-to-ceiling windows. For now, though, it is just that: imagination. Every window is boarded over, the entire place shrouded in musty darkness punctuated only by the occasional crack of light, dust motes dancing in the stream. We use the glow of our iPhones to inspect the damage, a little trepidatious to walk through the house. We don't even want to step into Karl's future music room because we fear the waterlogged floorboards might collapse under our weight.

We venture up the staircase, which has the appearance of bad dental work thanks to all the missing and cracked balusters. We're cautious on the first few steps, testing them gingerly to see whether they hold. They do. Rocks and glass litter the cracked linoleum steps. As we walk past the stairwell window, we see tiny holes in the glass, evidence of how the debris came to be.

On the second floor the windows are mostly intact and unboarded, so we can actually see what lies before us. To our left are two bedrooms, one of which seems to be in decent condition. Although that's a lot like saying Velveeta is better than government cheese; there's only the finest line of difference. The better room has a hole in the center of the floor and features layers of peeling plaster and wallpaper. My favorite is a tiny 1940s-era floral print that peeps through in places.

This, I think, has potential. We could live in this room while we're renovating. I know the rule: take one room and make it your own. Frances Mayes taught me that lesson years ago when I read her book *Under the Tuscan Sun*. And again when I watched the movie, cheering on Diane Lane as she lovingly scoured a medallion of the Virgin Mary on her bed frame. I suddenly see myself in that movie, this house as my own Tuscan villa. *How hard can it be?* I think. *Frances did it.* (In my head we are on a first-name basis. I met her at a book signing once, so it's not totally crazy-town.)

Across the hall is the master bedroom and bathroom. Well, at least we think it is. This space is baffling: it is a warren of rooms that appear to have once housed a bedroom, a bathroom, and maybe a kitchen. There is a hole busted through the wall separating the bathroom and the "kitchen"—all the better to pass martinis and snacks to the person in the bath, perhaps? Where a tub once stood is now

just a gaping maw. The sunporch is even more mold infested and rickety looking than Karl's piano room directly below.

"Maybe someone had tenants up here at one point?" Karl suggests. "It would explain that weird staircase coming up the back side of the house."

Regardless, it all has to go.

We walk upstairs to the attic, which is a completely raw space, bare down to the studs. The floorboards are rough and you can see where they were once encased in linoleum. But on each side of the house is a dormer with windows opening up onto the Detroit skyline. To the south I can see the Detroit River through the trees. I wonder whether, in the winter, I'll be able to watch the barges and freighters slip by. I just know if I strain my ears, I'll be able to hear the sounds of buoy bells and the forlorn call of a foghorn. I imagine a library up here in the eaves, an overstuffed chair tucked into one of the dormers so I can while away the afternoon, novels tugging me into imaginary worlds. *This, I think, is my favorite room.*

Karl and I make our way back downstairs, slowly descending into the darkness in search of the kitchen. We finally identify it only because there is nowhere else a kitchen could be. The space is actually a nest of rooms all connected to one another through random doorways, each so tight and cramped it feels like a prairie dog town. The walls are painted the color of lemon meringue pie, and neither of us can figure out where a refrigerator might have gone or how anyone actually cooked in here. There is a tiny vestibule that you could call a mudroom except that "room" is too generous a description; I'm not sure you could have two humans in it at once. I see many dog-human-coffee-leash fiascos happening here. Right now it is home to one rolling office chair and two Pepsi bottles filled with

urine, signs of a former—or possibly current—squatter.

I try the back door and discover that it is nailed shut from the outside. It wouldn't have mattered: the house lacks a set of stairs to the ground. For now it is a door to nowhere.

Karl comes up from the basement to inform me that he found a toilet but is certain I don't want to see it. There is also a small brick room that would be a perfect cellar, its cool, dry environment useful for storing cases of wine as well as the pints of tomatoes, peaches, pickles, and jams I am already dreaming of canning each summer.

We walk outside to discover a long, lush backyard dotted with original gas lamps. Small purple globes of clover peek up through the grass. Maple trees and box elders line the yard on one side, shading a picturesque, ivy-covered carriage house. The remnants of a once-tended flower garden are evident, with spring bulbs sprouting and the heads of early daffodils bobbing in the wind. At the back of the long lot stands a three-car garage, its roof punctured by tree branches, that appears to be sinking into itself. Still, we look at each other in awe. We are not yet contemplating the maintenance and upkeep this yard will require; we are imagining the sparkling parties we could host.

The house is certainly nothing like what we imagined back home in Brooklyn. It's only been eight months since we left, but it feels like a lifetime ago. Back then Karl and I would often dream of a more sustainable life where we could try to open a business or work on a creative project without going bankrupt. We loved our neighborhood of Red Hook and couldn't imagine leaving, but we also couldn't imagine staying. Our rent was topping \$3,500 a month, and we were working just to keep our middle-class life afloat. We'd be deep into the evening, after a third nightcap or so, and we'd pull up Google Maps

and talk about where we'd go. I wanted New Orleans, but the South is too hot for my Tennessee-born spouse. We talked about the West, but I wasn't ready to return home to Denver. Most of California was out. Cleveland? Detroit without the cache. Philly? Maybe. Portland or Seattle? Hell, no. No tourist towns, with their happy lattes and endless bike lanes. Yes, those things are lovely and we enjoy them, but we wanted a place that was forging its future, not relaxing on its accomplishments. We wanted a working-class town with an entrepreneurial spirit.

Inevitably we would land on Detroit and the powerful lure of its cheap real estate. We fantasized about buying something small and quaint, fixing it up, and then enjoying a comfortable life with two salaries and no mortgage. We fancied ourselves economic refugees crashing on the shores of the Detroit River, coming to buy our freedom and future. But it was always just an idea, a possibility tucked safe within our minds. We were talking about Detroit in the dreamy way that New Yorkers always discuss other, less expensive locales and how much better it must be there. It's an idea, a game. You never actually do it.

Until you do. And then you find yourself standing in a city you barely know, in a neighborhood you can't pinpoint on a map, talking to a house that's most recent tenant was a raccoon.

We must be crazy. We have no family here, no ties to Detroit. Who moves to the murder capital of America to make a home and build a life?

A man walks across the street toward us, waving.

"Hi," he says. "I'm Jim Boyle."

Jim has lived across the street from this house for the past fifteen years, and it has been his nemesis for many of those years. He and the

other neighbors have had to deal with boarding it up, mowing the grass, and doing their best to arrest the decay. They are desperate for someone to bring this house back to life and end the cycle of vandalism and squatting taking place on one of the best blocks in the city.

The house stands as an aging sentry on this quiet, leafy block on Detroit's east side. It is the last empty house to be found on Van Dyke Place in the historic West Village neighborhood, so named because it sits just to the west of the ritzier, more glamorous Indian Village. That neighborhood is known for its extravagant mansions with carriage houses and ballrooms that were once home to the likes of Edsel Ford and Henry Leland, the founders of Lincoln and Cadillac. Meanwhile, the West Village is the more middle-class sibling—though one with its own listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Both factory workers and the former secretary of the Navy have called these blocks home, dwelling in gracious Queen Annes, Victorian townhomes, and modest duplexes all tucked beneath a canopy of trees. Even the apartment buildings boast three-story Ionic porticos and intricate stone carving on the façades, hinting to an era when the city was flush with cash and had a penchant for the ornate.

Still, even here there are signs of the struggles that have beset Detroit. The sidewalks are buckled and cracked. Abandoned homes sit open and exposed, their tender underbellies ravaged by the weather and human desperation. Even occupied homes seem to be starving for attention and maintenance. Gutters sigh heavy in the wind, and melted vinyl siding provides lasting evidence of the frequent fires. The nearest retail establishment is a party store (Michigan-speak for a bodega or off-brand 7-Eleven) or the gas station two blocks away that serves up bait and tackle along with diesel and unleaded. Vacant, weed-infested lots spread like a virus around the edges of the West

Village, and the main approach to the area is cloaked in darkness because there isn't a single working streetlight for blocks.

But we can also see the love just below the surface. Lawns are cut. Porches swept. Gardens planted. The empty lot next door to the house is maintained as the neighbors fight Detroit's tall prairie grasses, which can absorb a place as quickly as the kudzu of the South.

"What are your plans?" Jim Boyle asks. "Are you going to live in the house?"

His tone makes it clear that there is only one correct answer.

"Yes?" we reply, looking at each other and wondering what we have just committed to.

"You'll be fine. You can do this," Jim says. "My wife and I did ours, like, fifteen years ago. It'll be great."