

KAREN MALLEY

FINDING THE FUTURE
MEANS FACING THE PAST

FOLLOWING *the*
SPARROWS

A NOVEL

Following the Sparrows

Karen Malley

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Following the Sparrows
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Dedication

For Mom: my first reader and my biggest fan. You taught me I could do whatever God wanted me to do. Thanks for your encouragement and faith in me, Mom!

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1

Robert crossed the kitchen and thrust out his hand. "Want to explain this?"

No, no, no, no! That was the last thing she needed this morning. Kathryn grabbed back her latest monthly pill pack and shoved it into her pocket. A flush rose in her cheeks. "What's to explain?" She turned toward the coffee pot.

"Are you still taking them?"

Kathryn froze, travel mug in hand.

"They wouldn't have been under the mattress if you weren't trying to hide something."

Kathryn whirled around. "Well maybe you shouldn't go around snooping."

"I was taking the sheets off the bed, for Pete's sake. And that's not the point. I can't believe you've been lying to me all this time." His hands clenched in tight fists.

Kathryn pierced him with her gaze. "I didn't lie to you."

Robert took a step toward her. "I thought we agreed on this, Katie. Every month I hoped to hear I would be a dad, waiting for you to tell me the news, but no, you're still taking those stupid pills. Joke's on me, I guess."

Kathryn's voice quavered. "You don't understand." How could he?

"You're right. I don't understand! How can my wife lie to me for months, a year even, about something this important?"

"I can't do it. I don't deserve to be someone's mom."

Robert's expression softened. "Katie, I know it's scary, but we're in this together. Sure, we'll make mistakes, but..."

"I've made enough mistakes. I don't need to mess up someone else's life."

Robert's face clouded. "What mistakes? You keep saying things like that. What happened to you?"

She did not want to have this conversation. Maybe playing ignorant was the way to go. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You're not the same person you used to be. Back in college we talked about our future, about having a family. Ever since we left California... no, ever since that last year in California, you've changed. Now all you care about is working all the time. You won't even talk to me."

"I talk to you."

"Not in any way that matters. Not about what's going on in your head. I want to understand you." Robert gently lifted her chin so her eyes met his. "I'm going to ask you again. What happened to you? Why are you now such a terrible person you don't deserve to be a mom? Why don't I deserve to be a dad?"

The guilt threatened to swallow her. How she wished she could tell him the truth. "You do. I'm...I'm just not ready yet."

Robert sucked in a breath. "Will you ever be?"

Kathryn responded without thinking. "Is that all I am to you? A way to be a dad?"

Robert winced as if she'd physically dealt the blow. She'd gone too far, but his questions resurrected something she couldn't bear to face.

Robert spoke again, his voice thick with emotion. "I don't even know you anymore. Are you really trying to tell me nothing has changed?"

Kathryn wanted to lighten the tension. "Nothing happened. I'm still me. I work hard, that's all. You knew that about me before we got married."

Robert's frustration showed in his face. "Right. Everything's fine. I get it. I wish one day you would realize you can trust me. You can talk to me. How can I take care of you if you won't tell me what's wrong?"

Kathryn's gaze narrowed. "I don't need you to take care of me. I'm not that little freshman anymore. I've grown up, and you need to accept it." She turned back toward the coffee maker. "I need to get to work. Can we talk about this later?"

Robert waved a hand. "Whatever. Put it off like you always do."

Kathryn filled her mug, grabbed her bag, and started for the door before realizing Robert stood between her and her exit.

"Wait. Don't leave like this. I love you."

Kathryn's gut clenched. "I'm sorry, Robert. I don't deserve you."

"Don't be silly." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Have a good day."

~*~

As Kathryn eased into her lab coat, a sense of calm washed over her for the first time all morning. Standing in front of her hood, watching the magnetic

stirrer spin the amber liquid in her reaction flask, her world made sense. Ask her to develop a new synthesis for a complicated molecule or design a series of compounds for a new drug target, and she could do it without batting an eye. But figure out how to deal with the situation with Robert? It was like trying to do a fifty-step synthesis with a perfect yield. She'd never seen him so angry before.

Why did things have to be so complicated? He'd been nice this morning, of course. He was always nice, even when he had a reason not to be. It was like being married to a saint, for crying out loud. The problem was, he was right. She had changed. Telling him what happened was out of the question. So was having a baby, for that matter.

She pulled on her gloves and dipped a pipet tip into her flask to sample it. Work. Focus on work. That was the answer. She had proof she'd been making progress. She no longer thought about it every day, no longer looked over her shoulder, afraid Charlie would be standing there. She'd never be free of it, though. Not unless she got this project to work. That was her only hope. She tipped the drop from the pipet into a vial and filled it with solvent.

"Hey, Kathryn," called Li, the chemist who worked in the hood next to her. "What's the boiling point of acetonitrile?"

"I think it's around eighty, let me check." Kathryn pulled off her glove, reached into her pocket to pull out her phone, and stared at the pack of pills in her hand. Glancing around, she stuffed them back into her pocket. "Sorry, I left my phone at home."

"No biggie—I think you're right," Li said. "I'll finish setting this up and then double check."

Kathryn groaned. Just what she needed—to be carrying around her pills instead of her phone. What a morning. She brushed the thought away and dove into her work. After isolating the product from her reaction, starting two new ones, catching up with her lab notebook, and meeting with the biologists to go over the latest data, she barely found time to eat lunch, much less think about Robert or her past.

As the day drew to a close, though, she couldn't shake her unease. The feeling grew and swelled in her stomach, as if she'd swallowed something she shouldn't have done. She stretched out the kinks in her back and stepped away from the lab bench. What a long day, even by her standards.

It wasn't fair. Work usually afforded a haven, a place to tune out everything else. This was where she could forget about perfect Christian Robert trying to make her into something she wasn't. Forget about Charlie and everything that happened in California. She scowled at the flasks in her hood and her pile of dirty glassware. It would keep until tomorrow. She wouldn't be able to get anything else done tonight anyway. It was time to face the music with Robert. She peeled off her gloves, shed her lab coat, and headed out.

The summer heat hit her full in the face when she opened the door. The air was thick and heavy. By the time she reached her car, the hairs that had escaped her ponytail clung to her neck. After turning the key in the ignition and throwing the car in reverse, she bucked in her seat as she shifted to drive too quickly. She forced herself to drive cautiously out of the parking lot, all the while anxious to get home and leave the dread behind.

As she pulled up to a traffic light, Kathryn glanced

at the car next to her and froze. She sank in her seat and shoved her sunglasses against her face. A honk from behind jolted her—the light turned green. Stealing a glance to the right, the car was gone. Hands trembling, she made it the rest of the way to her neighborhood on autopilot.

She sat at the stop sign at the edge of the development until her breathing returned to normal. She talked herself down, her eyes glued to the rearview mirror. “Be rational. It’s been three years. How can he still wreak this havoc? What would he be doing on this side of the country anyway?” She rubbed her temples. “It’s not Charlie. I’m only thinking of him now because of this morning.” She took a deep breath. “Got to put on a calm front for Robert.”

She pulled in the driveway and pressed the button on the garage door opener. Her face paled as she took in the empty garage. Where was Robert? What if...what if Charlie went after Robert? After all this time of trying to protect her husband...

Kathryn ran into the house and found a note on the kitchen table.

Katie—I’m having dinner with Anne and Mark. I tried to call... Love you, Robert

She let out a breath and leaned against the counter. Robert was fine. She cursed at herself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. She was not some hormonal teenager. Why was she so agitated today? Nothing about this day was normal.

She picked up the note.

Robert still called her Katie. His sister, Anne, did too, and naturally her brother-in-law, Mark, picked up the habit. A twinge of guilt shot through her. At least the note showed Robert wasn’t still angry. He tried to

call. She should go find her phone.

Her stomach growled in protest.

Dinner first and then the phone.

She popped a frozen pizza into the microwave. No wonder Robert went to the Campbells' house. Who wouldn't prefer Anne's cooking to this frozen nightmare? It was good Robert's sister's family kept him company. Maybe spending time with his niece and nephew would take some of the pressure off.

Probably not. He'd been waiting a long time. A very long time.

She sat at the table with her pizza and diet soda. Here, with the familiar cherry cabinets and the hand carved table she'd bought on a rare antiquing trip with her mom, the anxiety drained away. The quiet enveloped her, with nothing but the sound of the wall clock ticking away the seconds. This was home. It was safe here. It had to be. She savored the quiet more than her dinner.

The ring of her cell phone made her jump. It must be Robert again. He was awfully late. Maybe he fell asleep on Anne and Mark's couch. She found the phone on the hall table, Robert's picture lighting the screen.

"Hey, sorry I left my phone at home."

An unfamiliar voice answered her. "Ma'am, I'm sorry to tell you this, but I'm calling you because this is the emergency contact number for this phone. You recognize this number, I presume?"

Kathryn braced herself. "Yes. This is my husband's phone. What happened?"

The deep voice answered. "My name is Officer Stevens. There has been a car accident."

Kathryn fought against the panic rising in her

chest. She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead, forcing herself to listen to the officer.

"We located the phone outside the wreckage of the car. Your husband was transported to County Hospital an hour ago. He's in critical condition. I suggest you get there right away. We'll arrange for his phone to be brought to the hospital. I'm sorry, ma'am. Are you in the area? Should we arrange for a ride for you?"

"Th-thank you, but no. I'll drive myself," Kathryn stammered.

She grabbed her bag and allowed herself to speed for the first time in her life. Amazingly making it there in one piece, she rushed through the front hallway toward the emergency room, slamming into a broad chest. Before she could fall backwards, strong hands steadied her. She glanced into the stranger's face and muttered an apology. His dark eyes bored into hers. Startled, she disentangled herself from him and continued down the hall, but couldn't help glancing back over her shoulder. He still stood where she'd collided with him, an elderly woman at his side.

She hurried to the emergency room where she found Anne huddled in the waiting area. "Anne, what happened?"

Anne jumped up and wrapped Kathryn in a huge hug, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Oh, Katie. You're here. Mark's been trying to call you." She grabbed Kathryn's hand. "Robert was on his way home from our house. He was on the phone with Mom when the accident happened. She immediately called us in a panic. Come, sit." She pulled Kathryn down on the seat next to her.

"How is he doing?"

“He’s in surgery now. I don’t know much.” Anne dabbed at her nose with a tissue. “They said something about broken bones, internal bleeding. Don’t know anything else.”

Kathryn let out a long breath. “Then he could still be OK, right?”

Anne met her gaze with watery eyes. “They aren’t optimistic. He lost a lot of blood. It took them a while to extract him from the car. But God can do anything. I’m praying as hard as I can.”

“Praying?” Kathryn snorted. At Anne’s wounded expression, Kathryn stilled. “Sorry. Yes, please go ahead. It can’t hurt.”

She settled herself into the family lounge next to Anne. She pulled out her phone, noted the missed calls from Mark and from Robert and was about to check her email when she shoved her phone back in her pocket. Email could wait. She wouldn’t be able to focus on it anyway.

As the minutes dragged on, her gaze wandered around the room. An older man with gray curls framing his face reclined in his chair, his eyes closed. An olive-skinned man in his thirties stared off into space, while a young blonde woman busied herself with her phone. They all seemed so normal, so calm. Not as though they were waiting to find out if their whole world would be turned upside down.

Kathryn leaned back in her chair. Closing her eyes, the drone of the TV at the end of the waiting room faded. How could this happen? What would she do if Robert didn’t make it? She shook her head. No. Robert was young and strong and would fight this.

~*~

Adam guided Mrs. Frederick into the elevator at County Hospital and pushed the button for the ground floor.

"Sounds like everything is going to be fine with your husband."

"No thanks to him, the silly man," Mrs. Frederick said, a weak smile on her face.

"The doctor said it was temporary. His blood pressure will stabilize, and we can pick him up in the morning. You may need to keep a closer eye on his medications."

Mrs. Frederick pressed a hand to her chest. "I was so scared when he collapsed."

"Of course, you were. That's why we're here." They exited the elevator and made their way down the hall. Within moments, a young woman flew around the corner and slammed square into Adam's chest.

"I'm sorry," the woman panted, as Adam tried to keep his balance. He gazed into the depths of her eyes, and an immediate connection singed him. He watched her run off, her honey-colored ponytail swaying behind her. To his amazement, she glanced back at him. Their eyes met for a second time before she disappeared around the corner. At that moment, a voice in his head came so clearly he nearly turned around to see who spoke. "Pray for her."

Pray for her? Where did that voice come from? God? Adam crinkled his brow. Never had he heard God speaking to him so unmistakably before, not for lack of listening. God was asking him to pray for a complete stranger? He turned to Mrs. Frederick. Her eyes danced, and the corner of her mouth peeked up.

"What?"

"She caught your attention, now didn't she, dear?"

"How could she not? She almost knocked me over."

"There's more to it, though, isn't there?"

Adam's eyes widened. "How do you always manage to read me so well? I only moved in across the hall a couple of months ago."

"Yes, God is good, sending you to us when we needed you most. Thank you again for bringing Stanley and me here tonight. I don't know what we would've done without you."

"You would've called the ambulance, just like anyone else."

Mrs. Frederick gave him a look. "True, but then you wouldn't have met this interesting girl you're still thinking about."

Adam shook his head. "To be honest, when she turned around and looked back at us..."

"At you, you mean," Mrs. Frederick interrupted.

Adam put his hand under her elbow and helped her down the hospital's front steps.

"Anyway, when she turned around, I heard God tell me to pray for her."

Mrs. Frederick stopped in the middle of the steps and leaned toward Adam. "Then you must."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Frederick. I will." He chuckled.

"What is it, dear?"

"It's funny how God works. Ever since I came here, I've been praying God would show me what He has for me here." They crossed the parking lot to Adam's truck, and he walked Mrs. Frederick around to the passenger side. "God has a sense of humor. All this time of not hearing anything, and he has to knock me over to give me a message."

Mrs. Frederick patted Adam's hand and hoisted

herself into the truck. Her eyes twinkled. "Some people listen to God, and others need a stronger push. All you need is a pretty girl to run you over, and God's got your attention."

Adam closed her door. When he came around and got in his side, Mrs. Frederick wasn't finished with him yet.

~*~

The smell of burnt coffee intruded into Kathryn's thoughts. She crossed the room and poured herself a cup. The frozen pizza she'd eaten earlier twisted around inside her. She gulped the coffee to try to settle her stomach, if not her nerves. Normally caffeine at this time of night was forbidden, but she needed to stay alert. A series of commercials played across the TV screen. Trailers for movies she'd never see, commercials for drugs she didn't take, and promos for shows she didn't watch. Nothing else in the world mattered right now. Only Robert. Oh, if only their last conversation weren't a fight.

She walked over to Anne, who sat with her head propped on her hands, hair covering her face. Sitting as quietly as possible, Kathryn tried not to disturb her. She glanced at her watch. When would the doctor finally come to tell them something? The minutes dissolved into an ever-deepening puddle that threatened to drown her.

She got up again.

She paced. Twenty-four steps to the far wall, twenty-four steps back.

By the time Kathryn convinced herself the doctor had forgotten them, a man in green scrubs approached

them. "Are you the family of Robert Baker?" Anne and Kathryn nodded in unison.

"Walk with me." He guided them down the hall toward the ICU, keeping a continual narrative as they went.

"Robert's condition is critical. He sustained numerous lacerations and fractures, including a complete break of his left humerus and multiple ribs. One of the ribs punctured his right lung, which collapsed. We've set the bones, and surgically repaired his lung, but he also suffered massive head trauma. Our biggest concern is the cerebral edema. We've put in a stent to relieve the pressure, but it's touch and go. We'll know more if he makes it through the next twelve to twenty-four hours."

Kathryn stopped in her tracks and stared at him. "Wait, what? If he makes it?"

The doctor turned toward her, and the harsh lines around his face softened. "Brain injuries are impossible to predict. He may not make it through the night. I'm sorry. Even if he does wake up, he may not be able to communicate again."

"Can we see him?" Anne asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes, but I wanted you to be prepared. I'm sorry there isn't more we can do for him."

Kathryn leaned against Anne to stay upright. Half her life. Half her life she'd been with Robert. Stable, predictable Robert. He was the one thing she thought she could count on in life. She took a deep breath and followed Anne into the hospital room.

2

“Adam, dear, why don’t you already have a young lady in your life? My Stanley and I were married when I was seventeen.” Mrs. Frederick’s forehead crinkled. “You must be nearly twice that.”

“Gee, thanks.” Adam started the engine. “It’s a long story, and I’m not up for telling it right now.”

Mrs. Frederick covered her yawn with a hand. “Perhaps that’s best. It is getting late. I need my beauty sleep before we pick up Stanley in the morning. You’ll tell me later, dear.” She leaned back against the seat, and within minutes, her soft snores filled the cab of the truck.

Adam spent the drive back to the apartment building praying for the girl with the haunted eyes.

With Mrs. Frederick safely stowed away in her apartment across the hall, Adam flopped on his couch and scrolled through his email. He stopped on a message from Africa.

*Adam my boy,
It pleases my heart you are seeking God’s
plan for your life. It is good you saw your
family again. Be patient. God will reveal
your path, but the journey begins with the
single step of faith. I think you still hold*

onto some resentment. Perhaps to forgive is what you need. Look deep down and judge whether there is more you need to release to God.

We are well here. The boys ask of you. Perhaps one day you will return. Today your place is in America. I pray for your peace.

Pastor Sambulo

Adam sat back against the sofa, his former pastor's words taking up lodging in his brain. He smiled, thinking of the boys. He loved the kids in Africa. Saying goodbye to them was the hardest part of leaving. And forgiveness? He'd forgiven everyone, right? It's not like he spent all his time thinking about what happened. He was moving on.

He let out a long breath. Be patient, Pastor Sambulo said. Patience was not his strength. He wanted to be actively working for God. Sure, the Fredericks appreciated him, but helping his neighbors was not exactly what he'd imagined when he finally dedicated his life to serving God. The active pace he'd kept in the mission field ill-prepared him for waiting on God. Still, what choice was there? He'd been back in the US for two months now, and the only thing he'd heard from God was to pray for the girl who ran into him at the hospital. Still, God knew best, right?