

ALICE HOFFMAN

The
Invisible
Hour



SCRIBNER

LONDON NEW YORK SYDNEY TORONTO NEW DELHI



First published in the United States by Atria Books,
an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2023

First published in Great Britain by Scribner,
an imprint of Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2023

Copyright © Alice Hoffman, 2023

SCRIBNER and design are registered trademarks of The Gale Group, Inc.,
used under licence by Simon & Schuster Inc.

The right of Alice Hoffman to be identified as author
of this work has been asserted in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
www.simonandschuster.com.au
www.simonandschuster.co.in

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-3985-2618-1
ANZ Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-3985-2897-0
eBook ISBN: 978-1-3985-2620-4
Audio ISBN: 978-1-3985-2622-8

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either
a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance
to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover design: Christa Moffitt, Christabella Designs.

Cover image: Trevillion.

Interior design: Erika R. Genova.

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press.



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the
Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds
chain of custody certification SCS-COC-001185. FSC®
promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial
and economically viable management of the world's forests.

The
Invisible
Hour

I began my life for the second time on a June night in the year I turned fifteen. My name was still Mia Jacob, and I was still made of blood and bones, but when I stepped into the road on that night I walked into a different future. I left the way my mother had arrived, alone and in the dark.

The moon was yellow and the woods were pitch black. If you didn't know there were mountains and fields and that this was Western Massachusetts, you would think you had come to the end of the earth. In some ways that was true, at least for me. I could feel every breath that I took rattle inside my chest. Every heartbeat echoed. Freedom is not what you think it is. It's cold and hard and bright. That was what it felt like to change everything. To pick up the ashes and let them blow in the wind.

In the morning I was to be punished out in the cow field, in front of everyone, a cautionary tale so that one and all could see what happened to anyone who disobeyed. I was meant to beg and plead. I had asked to be forgiven in the past, but I was someone else now. I was the girl who knew how to escape, the one who could become invisible, who believed that a single dream was more powerful than a thousand realities.

They thought I only had a life that I lived here, but I had found other possibilities every time I read a book.

They locked me in the barn with the sheep. They told me I should think about what tomorrow would bring. But I had stolen a hammer from the men rebuilding a shed in the farthest field, and I'd left it underneath the hay in the barn. I'd always thought I might need to escape.

I worked on the lock for an hour or more, until my hands were blistering

and bleeding. Nothing, and then, all at once, the lock came apart in my hands.

I was wearing gray overalls and my mother's red boots. I looked like a prisoner, and that was what I'd always believed I was, but not anymore. My long red hair had been cut as a punishment in the spring, when I would not leave my mother's grave site and had to be torn away, the ferns I'd held on to still in my hands. My hair was too beautiful anyway, that's what they said, nothing more than a vanity, the sort of attribute that would make me look in a mirror and think I was better than everyone else.

*This time, the punishment was worse. They had hung a rope around my neck on which there was a badge announcing the rules I had broken. **A** for acts of wickedness. **A** for affront and for anarchy. **A** for avoidance and antisocial behavior. **A** for ambition. Tomorrow they would burn the letter **A** into my arm so I would never forget the reason for my punishment.*

*They had found books in my possession. Shakespeare's collected plays. The Blue Book of Fairy Tales, which had been my mother's favorite when she was a girl. Emily Dickinson's letters and poems. I am out with lanterns, looking for myself. Every time I had gone to town, I'd managed to sneak into the library. I knew there was magic there, and I knew they would do their best to destroy it. They'd burned my books tonight and I could still smell the sulfury scent of embers out in the field where they planned to punish me tomorrow. I had one more book, the one I loved best of all, hidden in the barn in a place where they'd failed to look. It was my treasure and my map. It was the book that had saved my life. Long ago, there had been other places where women were punished for being true to themselves. I kept *The Scarlet Letter* close to my heart when I left the barn and ran across the dark field. Sometimes when you read a book it's as if you were reading the story of your own life. That was what had happened to me. I woke up when I read the first page. I saw who I was and who I could be.*

The only other thing I took with me was a tiny painting I had found in a cabinet in the office. Take it, Evangeline who ran the office and the school had said when she saw what I'd found. No one wants that junk. It was a watercolor in shades of blue and green that I'd kept beneath my pillow. I looked at it every night and it always reminded me that the world was beautiful. It was beautiful even in the dark, with the soft green air all around me, and the fireflies drifting through the tall grass, and the white phlox growing wild in the woods.

The dogs all knew me, and they didn't stop me when I got to the gate; they didn't even bark. There were bats flickering through the trees. There were so many stars, but I didn't have time to look at them. I walked among the crowded thorns. I stood too close and bled. My mother didn't know how to unlock what kept us here, but I was different. I had the key in my hands, the book that was first published in 1850, the one that understood our story better than anyone who had ever known us. I left the badge that had been strung around my neck behind, making certain to tear it in two.

I went through the fields, then down the dirt road and past the old oak trees. In the distance there was Hightop Mountain, where bears still roamed. I knew what I had to do. Travel light. Don't look back. Take only what you need most of all. I slipped into the forest and headed toward town. I had been born here and had lived here all my life, but that was over now. I would remain invisible among the ferns and the pine trees, unseen by any passing traffic. Twigs and leaves crunched under my boots as I made my way through the dense greenery where the evergreens gave off a dark, earthy scent. It was the end of something and the beginning of something.

In every fairy tale the girl who is saved is the one who rescues herself.

When I came to town, I ran down the road. I ran faster than I ever had before. I went to the one place where I knew the door would be open. The place where I'd found the key. Long before the sun came up, before they went to the barn and found I was gone, before they began to search for me, I was at the library. That was when my life began.