

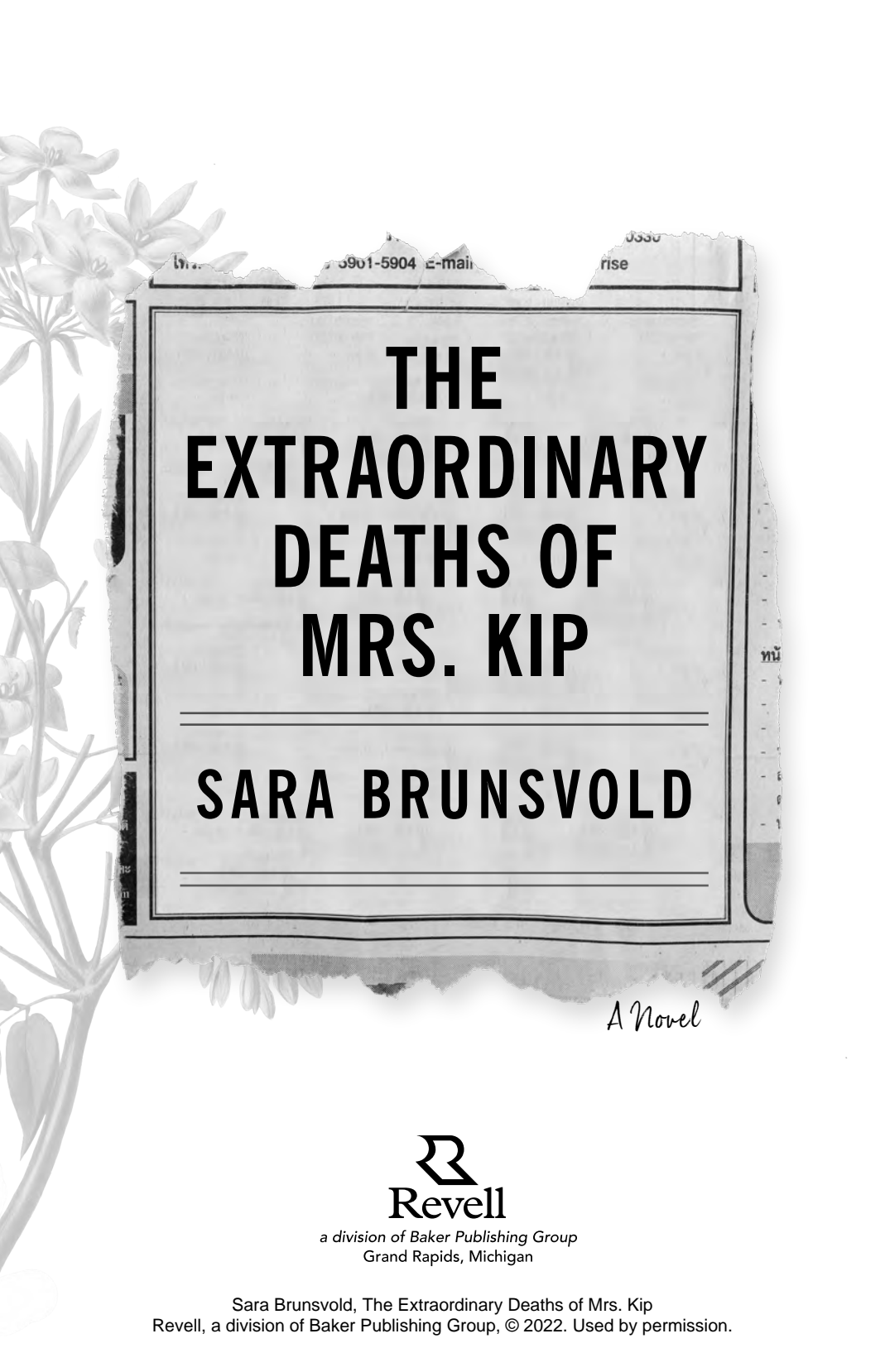
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THE EXTRAORDINARY DEATHS OF MRS. KIP

All the wild ways to die could never
compare to how she really lived.

SARA BRUNSVOLD

A Novel



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901-5904 e-mail
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Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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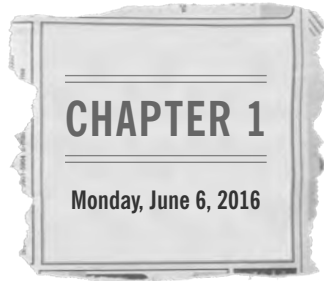
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CHAPTER 1

Monday, June 6, 2016

Clara Kip had prayed repeatedly to die in São Paulo. It truly seemed the smallest of requests. People died in Brazil every day. What was one more? Especially one who had dreamed of the country most of her life.

The Lord, however, gave her Kansas.

She watched the white line edging the Kansas City interstate pass by her window. It gently carried her toward a facility she'd hoped she would never need in a city she never thought she'd still be in, and she could only trust that the Lord was up to something. Because he usually was.

The facility's shuttle driver—a small, meaty man with a dark complexion and a nameplate above his head that read “Trey”—hummed softly as he drove. The notes floated into her imagination. She smiled, reshaping little blips of music into the dramatic, soul-tickling sounds of samba. Beats that made feet move on impulse and hearts soar with anticipation.

Her weary bones enlivened, the way they had when John taught her the dance steps.

Just once she would have loved to samba well past sundown in São Paulo, or walk along the Avenida Paulista strip, or enjoy a golden-fried *coxinha* hot from a street vendor's cart.

She looked at the Kansas sky stretched above her, streaks of clouds still tinged faint orange from the fading sunrise.

But not my will, Lord, she prayed.

Around gentle curves and over hiccup slopes, they traversed farther away from the little house that had been hers for decades, until the doctor had shown her the scan and said "aggressively metastasized." The annoying pain in her abdomen that had landed her in the hospital a week prior wasn't the UTI she had insisted it was to him and all those ER people.

After delivering the prognosis, the doctor refused to let Clara travel outside the country. Clara had called him a square.

Somewhere at a facility in the far southern outreaches of the city, her hospice team awaited her arrival.

Eventually the driver merged into an exit lane and peeked at her in the rearview mirror as they came to the stoplight. "Beautiful morning," he called back.

"Sure is, young man. God definitely got creative with that sunrise."

"That he did."

Clara considered his response. "Tell me, honey. Do you know Jesus?"

The driver's eyes twinkled. "Yes, ma'am, I do."

“Good. I can conserve my energy then.”

He chuckled. “I suppose so. Although I never mind talking about him.”

“Good for you, Trey. Talk about him a lot, especially when others seem uninterested. He loves that.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He turned onto a side street, slipping closer to their destination.

Outside the window, she caught sight of a young mother herding her kids into the SUV parked in their driveway. The littlest one skipped behind her mother, a pink backpack jiggling on her tiny shoulders. Off for another day of running headlong into new life. So much to learn and explore and discover. Clara pictured her friend Mai surrounded by her sweet little ones, specifically that one day at the airport, when their months of separation had come to a glorious end.

Only one reunion could be sweeter, in Clara’s estimation. She turned back to Trey. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“What do you think heaven will be like?”

He thought. “I really don’t know. Bright?”

“No doubt there.”

They rode in silence, then Trey asked, “What do you think heaven will be like, Mrs. Kip?”

Clara grinned. “Oh, honey. I think heaven will be the wildest ride yet.”

Trey parked under the awning of the main entrance to Sacred Promise Senior Care Center. The one-story building sprawled away from the main entrance in both directions.

One side comprised assisted living apartments with their own little porches, and the other, skilled nursing residence rooms with large picture windows. A thick screen of trees wrapped around the property, giving it an appearance of seclusion from the busy shopping center beyond. Of the various facilities the kind people of the University of Kansas Medical Center had shown her in brochures, Sacred Promise seemed to offer the closest proximity to unadulterated nature. One of many reasons Clara felt drawn to it. That, and they took Medicare.

Trey hopped out of his seat and pulled her leather suitcases from the rack at the front of the shuttle. "Let me take these to the sidewalk," he said as he headed for the steps. "I'll come back to help you."

Clara grunted at his subtle suggestion that she wait. She had been walking out to get her mail just fine until a week ago. She rose and ambled after him.

When he caught sight of his passenger hobbling down the steps, he rushed over with arms extended. "Please, Mrs. Kip, let me help you."

"Honey, I'm only dying. I'm not an invalid."

Regardless, he insisted she take his arm, which she did, but only because a lady never declines chivalry.

Safely on the sidewalk, she peered down at her suitcases. Poor, sad things. They had waited with her for more than half a century to see the ends of the earth. Sacred Promise wasn't even the ends of Kansas City.

Trey lifted them by the handles and nodded to the entrance. "After you, Mrs. Kip."

Clara gazed at the sliding glass doors of Sacred Promise.

Such an odd feeling to know that once she walked in, she would not walk out. She clung to the belief the Lord had something for her here, so she shuffled forward.

The doors opened to reveal a small foyer that tried ever so hard to look homey. Burgundy wingback chairs, a grandfather clock, and floral print wallpaper made her wrinkle her nose. On either side, a hallway led to the respective wings. And in the middle of the foyer stood a young woman with fiery hair and an expression that fell somewhere between moderately welcoming and completely bored.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kip.” Her voice registered minimal inflection. “Welcome to Sacred Promise.”

“Thank you. How are you today?”

“Fine, thanks. I’m from administration. I believe you’ve been speaking with the social worker, Rosario.”

“Yes.” Clara started to ask the gal what her name was, but she seemed intent to get on with their business.

“Rosario is out today, so I’ll be the one helping you settle in.”

“Fantastic,” Clara replied with a smile aimed at drawing out the friendlier side of the woman. Surely she had one.

But the gal turned on her heel and said over her shoulder, “Right this way.”

Clara looked at Trey, who raised his eyebrows, clearly thinking the same thing she was.

“She seems fun,” Clara whispered.

He laughed quietly.

Admin Gal led them through a door on the left side of the foyer. An etched gold plate on the wall identified it as the office.

When they arrived at the woman's desk, Trey set the bags down and stood close by as Clara lowered into the visitor's chair. "Can I be of any further assistance?" he asked her.

The gal cut in. "We can take it from here, thanks."

Trey started to respond, but Clara touched his hand. "You've been a blessing, honey. Thank you."

He smiled and dipped his head congenially. "God bless, Mrs. Kip."

"Same to you." She watched him walk away. "Such a sweet young man."

The gal gave what could be considered a smile. "Shall we begin?" Her pragmatism obviously was there to stay.

"Definitely," Clara replied. "Can't wait."

What Admin Gal lacked in pleasantries, she made up for in blazing efficiency. The paperwork blurred by.

At the end of it all, she stacked papers into a manila folder with Clara's name on it. "You'll be meeting Rosario and the rest of your care team within the next two days." She then rattled off the names of the doctor, nurses, and chaplain who rounded out the team, none of which stuck in Clara's memory.

Clara nodded nonetheless.

"Any questions?"

Even if Clara did have questions, the gal likely lacked the wherewithal for them. "I think I'm okay for now."

"In that case, let's get you to your room. I'll page an aide to help with your bags."

Five minutes later, their small parade exited the office—Admin Gal as marshal and a baby-faced aide named Jimmy bringing up the rear. *He* actually smiled, making him instantly delightful.

They trooped down the hallway toward the skilled nursing side and soon came to the activity room, the wing's central hub. Save for the buzzing nurse's station on the opposite end and a small aviary of chirping birds nearby, the room was graveyard quiet. Three other hallways radiated out from the room, one each to the north, the east, and the south. The floral wallpaper carried forward, coordinating with the cherry-finish dining table in the middle and the gaggles of emerald green–striped armchairs. Bouquets of silk flowers dotted the room, attempting to bring a semblance of nature—and life—into the place.

Had it not been for the silver tray of chocolate chip cookies waiting on the dining table, Clara would have written the place off entirely. She salivated at the sight of her favorite treat. She was tempted to break for one, but Admin Gal barreled onward to the north hallway, seeming to gather steam the closer she got.

Clara did her best to keep up, but despite her efforts, she quickly fell behind. Subsequently, so did Jimmy.

As if sensing the widening gap, Admin Gal looked over her shoulder and came to a stop. “I can get you a wheelchair if you'd like, Mrs. Kip.”

“I think a race car would serve me better, honey.”

Jimmy chuckled but quieted the instant Admin Gal shot him a look.

“If you believe a wheelchair would help you, I can get you one,” she repeated. “We want our residents to be comfortable and safe.” The words rolled out like a party line.

“I appreciate it very much,” Clara replied. “If you could just hold back the pace a bit, that would do the trick.”

“I’d be happy to,” she said, her expression not matching her promise.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, lumbering along at Clara’s slow pace. Her legs already felt the pinch.

Thankfully, only a few doors into the north hallway, Admin Gal stopped. “Here we are.” She pushed open the door to room 303 and motioned for Clara to enter.

Upon first glance, the four-hundred-square-foot space seemed comfortable enough. A private bathroom adjacent to the door. A spacious chest of drawers and a small square table with two dining chairs. A comfy-looking loveseat and reasonably comfy-looking armchair, both next to the picture window. Clara skipped right over the bed—the place to avoid as long as possible—and focused her attention on the view through the window. And her heart sank.

The window gave only an acrimonious view of the front parking lot.

“The loveseat folds out into a double bed, and the armchair by the window can also recline into a . . .” Admin Gal said more words, but Clara tuned out.

That view. A fat eyeful of nothing God-created.

Clara shook her head. “Excuse me, honey.”

Admin Gal’s monologue came to an abrupt end. “Yes?”

“I’d like a different room, please.”

“Is something wrong?”

“There are no trees.”

“I’m sorry . . . *trees*?”

“Or grass. The brochure promised a serene lawn, wooded acreage, and hummingbird sightings.” Clara pointed at the window. “That’s not it.”

The gal looked from the window to Clara. “I can assure you, Mrs. Kip, all of our rooms are identical.”

“And they are lovely indeed, but surely they don’t all face the parking lot, do they?”

“Well . . . no.”

“Then I’d like a room that does not.” To put an end to the matter, she called upon the gal’s own words. “It would make me comfortable.”

Admin Gal looked at Jimmy as if asking him if she’d heard correctly.

He put on a confused expression for her benefit, but as soon as she looked away, a smile inched onto his lips.

Clearly he and Clara were meant to be friends.

“Let me see what I can do,” Admin Gal replied. With brisk movements, she stepped into the hallway.

When she was gone, Clara gave Jimmy a wink and said quietly, “I’m a troublemaker.”

“Clearly,” he whispered back.