



LAUNDERED SHIRTS

LOOK BETTER

ON HANGERS

a novel by

Jane Collins-Philippe

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*Dedicated with love to the memory of my mother who shared
with me her delightful streak of insanity*

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Also by Jane Collins-Philippe:

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For Children:

Sail Away With Me

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Lynch by Inch

Claudia Stone looked down at the ten metre length of rope dangling from her hand and realised she had no idea how make a noose. Standing at the foot of the basement stairs, her flimsy peach-coloured peignoir plunged daringly at the neckline and swung about her ankles like water. This was the day, she'd decided earlier, her teeth clamped in determination. And this was the place. As far as the knot was concerned, she'd just have to ad-lib.

No one passing the Stone residence at 8 Wellington Drive in York Mills, Ontario that promising sun-bright day would ever have guessed what forty-six year old Mrs. Stone was up to. If the high wrought iron gates happened to be open, passers-by would likely notice the manicured lawn and the circular drive dressed in potted plants and skirts of blossoming flowers. They'd catch sight of the impressive old house almost hidden by towering spruce and weeping willow. A watchful eye

would certainly blink into the brilliance of the original stained glass window adorning the main entrance, but might fail to detect that the pillars supporting the veranda's ornate crown were forgeries. How fortunate were the people living there they would muse. How comfortable and happy they must be.

Houses often give false impressions.

Deep inside, Claudia Stone wasn't considering other people's assumptions. She wasn't giving a damn about what anybody thought about anything. For once in her life she couldn't have cared less. Her mind barely registered the icy chill emanating into her bare soles from the newly laid terracotta tiles. It was occupied instead with the sturdy oak beams overhead. Six of them. Claudia took a hesitant step forward, eyeing each beam like a hungry bird a worm. The rope she found in the garage was pure untreated hemp. Her husband had picked it up dirt cheap at Maynard's Hardware a month earlier. He intended to keep it in the trunk of his car to use as a tow rope once winter rolled around again. Claudia spotted it the other day, hanging from a hook next to the rake. She figured it would do the trick.

The oak beams had been exposed three weeks earlier when Stanley Edgerton Stone brought down the false ceiling. It was with no warning whatsoever that he'd begun the transformation of the basement into an *authentic old world pub*.

"We don't have any use for this damned rec room," Stanley told his wife in that snippety no-nonsense voice of his. Meaning that *he* didn't have any use for it. What business was it of his if his wife liked the basement just as it was? "I'm going tear the whole damn thing apart," he cried with excitement, smashing the sledge hammer into the genuine plaster walls.

"Noooooo," Claudia had protested, her stomach somersaulting into her oesophagus. As her husband plundered and pillaged, Claudia

plucked at her clothing and babbled in monosyllables. Negotiations were out of the question.

The subterranean cavity that Stanley regarded with such distain had been Claudia's sole sanctuary. For the past nineteen years she had barely cared that the hardwood floor was covered in cushy broadloom, and was equally indifferent to the brand-name wall-covering the previous owners had considered so chic. Rarely did she do more than glance at the pockmarked ceiling that was masking the original beamed structure of their century-old home. What mattered to Claudia was to be in her own company, with nobody looking.

Standing on the cool new floor in her sexy negligee, Claudia Stone recalled the fervour with which Stanley had battered her refuge to the ground. How could she forget his satisfaction as he hammered and slammed. The rampant enthusiasm he displayed as the white acoustic ceiling panels shattered in clouds of dust. Such heartless aggression. "Take that!" She heard him yell. "Bombs away!" She'd been tempted to run and hide, to scurry out into the garden and cower under the crab-apple tree with palms clasped to her ear holes. But Stanley insisted she be there to hand him the necessary instruments of annihilation. The sledge hammer. The saw. The wrench and crow bar. "I don't want to be going up and down the ladder every two seconds," he said, as though that were the only consideration. Claudia did her best to accommodate. Nevertheless, with each blow and wallop, every slam and bang, she winced in pain.

Three weeks after the first strike of the mallet, the carpeting was no more. In place of plaster there were now insulated wallboards, their starkness shocking in the dim light. Claudia suggested keeping the original plaster onto which a variety of interesting applications could be made. Her husband wouldn't listen. Rolls of paper that would give the walls the *stuccoed look* lay ready on the floor.

Despite the sun that burned through the morning haze outside, the cellar was damp and heavy with the smell of reconstruction. Fallen plaster. Fresh paint (the floorboards were done the day before). Tile grouting and an arsenal of various toxins. Not to mention the nauseous odour of wallpaper paste (on Saturday the laundry room had been papered in calculated shades of blue). Snakes of electric wiring writhed between the beams and the underside of floorboards belonging to the rooms above. Between the rafters and struts of the perpendicular hardwood flooring was a narrow space just deep enough to pass a line. Installation of the new ceiling, the kind that would leave half to three-quarters of the old beams in evidence, was to begin the following morning. The workmen were scheduled to arrive at eight-thirty.

It was now or never.

As Claudia's eyes scanned the hefty timbers in search of one appropriate to her task, her fingers unconsciously kneaded the coarse fibres of the rope. This attentiveness was involuntary. A nervous reaction. Almost a twitch. It would take several minutes before they'd register the roughness, the unkind rigidity and the prickly unyielding barbs that were undoubtedly going to chafe the tender skin of her neck. When realisation finally did hit, Claudia would understand just how much this was going to hurt.

That morning, at precisely seven-thirteen, Claudia Rose Mason Stone had chosen this as good a day as any for a lynching. It wasn't an impulse, but an idea that had been brewing in her psychic cauldron for some time. What triggered it is debatable – there was so much to choose from. At eight o'clock, as her husband walked out the door with a mumbled goodbye, a fairly distinct plan began forming. At nine thirty-six, Claudia was nothing if not resolute.

Hanging had not been her first choice as the means to an end,

though it seemed it would be her last. Jumping out of a high window had its appeal: No preparation was involved and no accessories required. But their house was surrounded by relatively soft ground and stood only two stories high. With Claudia's luck her spinal cord would be ruptured, her legs crushed on impact. She'd survive the fall and remain an invalid for the rest of her life. No, that plan had been scrapped weeks ago. Agony was not her objective. Going into the city centre to fling her body off some impartial rooftop seemed far too complicated and impersonal. Dying at one's own hands in one's own home appealed to her as a more suitable solution. Most importantly, she wanted Stanley to be the one to find her. It was unfortunate she wouldn't be able to see the look on his face when he discovered her lifeless corpse. Although, if what they said was true: that the soul leaves the body at the moment of death, hovering for a while between cadaver and irresistible white light before being released into the ethers, then perhaps she'd get her chance after all; Stanley came home for lunch on Wednesdays.

Despite having once been a Girl Guide, Claudia didn't know how to make the appropriate knot. The kind that can be tightened or loosened as required. The kind cowboys used whenever they had somebody to string up. She figured it wouldn't matter as long as the thing held. It was crucial, of course, that the drop be just right. The objective was for a quick snap of the neck. One thing Claudia didn't want was to dangle and flounder like a fish on a line, gobbing and flapping. That prospect struck her as shoddy and undignified. It would spoil the effect completely if she were found with eyes blood-red and bulging, tongue pink and protruding, her exquisite nightie covered with pee or excrement (she'd used the toilet three times already but you could never be sure). Claudia wanted her dead body to resemble a lovely silk drape, hanging in delicate disarray.

Most importantly, she didn't want it to hurt.