Gripping! A fiery young woman returns home, compelled to undo a heart-twisting mistake. Layers of trouble meet her in a sultry North Carolina summer. Sara Johnson Allen delivers a pulsing, gorgeous debut novel full of schemes of survival, schemes of love.

—Mary-Beth Hughes, author of The Ocean House

This debut is a literary mic drop. From its propulsive start to its satisfying close, Down Here We Come Up captures the convergence of three women who must weigh what’s unpalatable against what’s best for their children. Maternal sacrifice beats at the heart of this book, but its blood courses through the evolving landscape of race and class in the American south, the expanding drug trade, and the exploitation and abuse of migrant workers. It’s an origin story and an examination of belonging composed in vibrant detail, with tone and themes reminiscent of Where the Crawdads Sing and Netflix’s Ozark. Down Here We Come Up, like the hospitality attributed to its setting, will draw you in and won’t easily let you go.

—Alena Dillon, author of Mercy House and Eyes Turned Skyward

Kate thought she’d escaped the poverty and shame of her childhood, but when the mistakes and betrayals of her past come calling, she’s faced with the debts she owes to history, to blood, and must decide how much she is willing to risk to settle them. Tender, honest, and thought-provoking, Down Here We Come Up is an illuminating journey to the dark heart of forgiveness and self discovery. A daring debut from a writer to watch.

—Meagan Lucas, author of Songbirds and Stray Dogs and Here in the Dark
From the moment Kate “borrows” her boyfriend’s car and drives south to confront her past, nothing seemed more important than reading *Down Here We Come Up*. This is a mother-daughter story like no other: vivid, suspenseful and full of high stakes questions about love, money, sex, children and immigration. A fabulous debut.

—*Margot Livesey*, author of *The Boy in The Field*

*Down Here We Come Up* stings, and it stings good. A mother’s love can be as real as it is transactional. A daughter’s roots can endure even as they destroy. Sara Johnson Allen’s North Carolina and larger American landscape are startlingly alive on the page. In the space between its scorched grass and freezer burned peas, the book sizzles and aches. A tenacious and moving work.

—*Simon Han*, author of *Nights When Nothing Happened*

In exquisite prose, Sara Johnson Allen explores motherhood in the face of wrenching economic and racial realities of the American south yet weaves moments of joy and exhilaration throughout. *Down Here We Come Up* is written with such empathy and grace that I felt I knew these women and will carry them with me for a long time.

—*Ana Reyes*, author of *The House in the Pines*
DOWN
HERE
WE
COME
UP
DOWN HERE
WE COME UP

SARA JOHNSON ALLEN

BLACK LAWRENCE PRESS
For my mother, Phyllis Hacken Johnson, who gave me everything.
PROLOGUE

JACKIE JESSUP’S APOLOGY to her daughter Kate refused to get lost in the stagnant air of her death. It rustled the tobacco leaves in the field beside her bungalow. It snaked through silver turkey houses and ripe hog lagoons before traveling across the acreage being clear cut for subdivisions east of Fayetteville. From there, it moved way down south, under concrete overpasses caught by sinking bayous on one side and rising seas on the other. The apology skimmed the rubble of neighborhoods left ruined and rotting after last year’s Category Five, when the levees broke and everything low was left to drown.

Jackie’s apology moved west across a country split into ill-fitting parts, some of the divisions made by grey lines on a map, some by beliefs handed down. Other breaks were created by different angles on the same story because, as Jackie had said many times, “A person cannot stand in two places at once. Use that to your advantage.”

Near Fort Worth, in the hot, dry middle, Jackie’s apology lagged, barely moved at all, although the words were still there.

“I should not have kept you from your daughter, but you kept me from mine.”

It was as close to an apology a stubborn con artist like Jackie
In the end, Kate heard none of it. She did not hear that which had travelled so far, so fast, too late. At the moment of her mother’s death, Kate was driving over the Bridge of the Americas into Juárez. She was crossing a border so wide it could only be partially sewn shut with razor wire, surveillance cameras, and border police.

It was a divide not unlike the one between people who love each other in complicated ways but cannot hear what needs to be said.
KATE LEARNED FROM Jackie all the different ways to calculate a value. There was a thing’s market value, the perceived value, the true value, the if-the-buyer-was-drunk value. There was the value of everything that fell between the cracks of the car seats of men staying over. Kate and her twin brother Luke had the job of reaching down into the tight spaces for escaped cash or jewelry. They could at least swipe a few CDs to sell, but not so many that the man, whoever he was this time, would notice he had been picked through.

Early on, Jackie insisted her children pocket food from the free lunch program at school for dinner. Two-for-one, she called it. She switched the price tags on items in the grocery store until the Food Lion introduced bar code scanners. She got away with it at the Piggly Wiggly for nearly another year, but eventually even the older grocery stores caught up.

She saw everything. Like the time she noticed from the back pew on a Sunday morning in March, when it was just starting to get good and hot, the preacher’s wife sweating through the back of her shirt, unfortunately white, showing a series of bruises across her shoulder blades. That warranted Jackie’s eyes narrowing slightly, the church bulletin flipped over and a note made in her formal,
old-fashioned cursive. That was their short-lived period as Free Will Baptists before they had been Seventh Day, then just run-of-the-mill Southern Baptists. Jackie eventually gave it up altogether because time was money and unless she could pull something back from the little she put in the offering plates, she might as well focus her resources elsewhere.

The kind of value Jackie hunted for went far beyond monetary. A bird in the hand was worth two in the bush. A pack of smokes was more valuable on the bedside table than all the way in the living room. An envelope mailed to yourself and left unopened gave proof of the date you knew something and wrote it in a letter. The imprint of the postmark stood witness. A box of old photographs bought at a yard sale, copies of other people’s rental agreements stolen from a dumpster behind the beach realty office. The yellow pages. Any scrap of information might prove to be worth something. Then again, it might not, but one could never know.

Kate was no good in school, but she was a fast learner. She watched Jackie add things up, subtract out costs, look for opportunities that would yield more, whether it was a carton of Kool 100’s or a white envelope stuffed with cash. Jackie could con people into anything because she saw ahead of everyone else by several moves. In a different set of circumstances, Jackie might have been a great chess player, someone who could beat the fast strategies of the men playing outside the Au Bon Pain in Harvard Square where Kate later followed her twin brother Luke when he received enough merit and need-based scholarships plus loan money that it didn’t matter he had no actual money.

Luke had their mother’s sense of scope, a patience for making one move that led to another then another, eventually landing where he wanted.
“I’m getting out of here,” he whispered to Kate in the darkness of the bedroom they shared.

“When? How?”

“Soon. College.” He was not even ten years old.

Kate lacked her brother’s patience. If Luke and Jackie were glaciers capable of steady, long-term calculation and grinding pressure, Kate was a volcano. She learned to spread sparks that eventually burned so fierce they devoured all the oxygen, leaving only black ash. Not every fire Kate set was intentional, but most were useful because another thing Jackie had taught her children was how to look for buried shine where everyone else saw rubble.

The morning Jackie called to drag up what her daughter had tried to put down, Kate was checking the roof vents at work in the university greenhouse. 87 degrees. 56 percent humidity. 8:21 a.m. Kate recorded it all on the chart by the control panel. After a bad week avoiding her boyfriend Charlie, she was glad she was the first one on shift this Friday, alone with just the sound of the ventilation fans. Everyone else who worked at the greenhouse had a master’s or PhD in botany. Kate only had a GED, but she knew what she was doing. She had worked in greenhouses since she was fourteen. She could effectively deadhead, pot, prune, graft, irrigate, and transplant, rarely consulting the databases other staff members used to see if something was full-sun or partial or how far one thing needed to be planted from another. Except for the other employees, Kate loved her work. She loved the invisible business of growing. She loved how at first, there was nothing but the blackness of the soil, some constellations of white fertilizer, but nothing visible, until the heat and light on the surface created enough pressure for something to push through.

Kate wound her dark brown hair on top of her head then
twisted in a pencil to secure it. The thick bangs she was trying to
grow out fell across her forehead. She pushed them to the side
as she lifted a limp habanera plant out of its plastic pot with her
thumb. Root rot. All the anti-fungal soil in the world wouldn't help
if the others who thought they were too good for that part of the
job kept replanting seedlings too deep.

Kate was finishing recording the blossom yields for the haba-
neras when her phone vibrated in the front pocket of her khaki
uniform shorts. She flipped it open to see a number with an unfa-
miliar 210 area code. She was about to clap it closed then realized
it might be Luke from someone else’s device.

“I thought you were already in Nantucket.” Kate held the phone
between her shoulder and cheek. Silence on the other end. “Hello?”
“I reckon you were expecting someone else.”

Kate could not reconcile her mother’s voice with the neat rows
of plants or the lines on her graph paper. Her skin already damp
from the greenhouse’s humid heat, she felt a drip run between her
shoulder blades.

“I know you’re there, Katie. I can hear you breathing.”
Kate drew a short breath. “What do you want, Mama?”
“So that’s the way you say hello after all these years?”
“It’s only been a few months, and you’re the one who said you
weren’t going to call me again.”
“I don’t recall saying that.”

Kate looked over her shoulder toward the window of the office.
Staff were not allowed to use phones in the houses. Kate sank down
on the concrete floor behind the plant table. She crossed her legs,
hers knees resting on her Timberland work boots. “Mama, I’m at
work. What do you want?”

“Listen to you,” Jackie said. “You might have forgot, but down
here, we show respect for our elders. Anyway, what kind of work? I thought you were a kept woman of some Harvard professor.”

Kate should have known better than to tell Jackie about Charlie. That last call, Jackie wanted Kate to invest in a new Cook Out franchise she claimed to be opening in Wilmington.

“Look, I need something.”

“I figured.”

“You say that like I’ve never done anything for you.” Jackie made a whistling sound as she inhaled again.

Kate could smell the Kool 100.

“Katie, I need you to come back home for a while.”

She heard the sound of someone punching the code into the keypad on the greenhouse door and pulled back smaller against the plant table. “Mama, that’s not going to happen.”

“I have something you want,” Jackie said.

Here it comes, Kate thought. Never something for nothing. She had to give her mother credit for that. Every deal had two sides.

“I need you to get someone’s children.”

Whoever had come into the far end of the greenhouse was writing with a squeaky marker on the whiteboard used to track workflow. Kate was careful to keep her voice down. “Whose children?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What children do you even know?”

“That’s what I need to talk to you about. In person.”

Through the legs of the tables, Kate now saw her boss Prendi’s blue Vans moving down the aisle toward her, his tapered jeans tight above his ankles. Kate pulled herself up onto the heels of her boots, but stayed crouched down.

“I have to go.”

“Don’t you hang up on me, Katie.”
Kate clapped her phone shut.
Prendi stood at the end of the row, staring at her where she crouched on the floor.

“Were you talking to someone?” Prendi shoved his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. “You know we don’t allow phones in the greenhouses.”

“Family emergency.” Kate stood but felt dizzy enough she might sink back to the floor.

Prendi stared at her, not the way other men did, something different. When she first started the job, Kate knew Prendi resented her the same way the other people who worked at the greenhouse did. No one else got three weeks off in a row like she was about to have. Just like getting Kate the job in the first place, a phone call from Charlie a few weeks ago left Prendi as a postdoc saying the only thing he felt he could to a tenure-track professor on the main campus where a building was named after his family. Yes. Of course.

“I wasn’t able to find anyone to cover your shifts, so could you please do the PH tests on the hybrids before you leave?”

Kate ignored her phone vibrating in her shorts front pocket. “Yes, and I’ll flush the irrigation system too.”

Kate opened a metal drawer in House Three. She turned off the phone. She gathered the soil test packages. Tearing open the first test with her teeth, she scooped tiny spoonfuls into the plastic test tubes. Although the April morning was still cool and flat grey outside, the houses were warming up. Kate used the edge of her T-shirt to wipe the sweat away from her eyes.

Kate knew heat. She knew it up and down like the motion of a paper fan in a closed-window church. Blot-a-cloth-against-your-sweaty-forehead heat. Waving-up-from-the-asphalt-like-a-mirage
heat. Wet heat. That was the kind she grew up with outside of Wilmington in the creaking, rotting bungalow with no air conditioning. Kate and Luke would steal the box fan from the living room, point it directly where they lay stuck to the sheets in the double bed. They pressed frozen wet washcloths like hard fossils into their armpits to bring their temperature down.

Crackling heat. “You’ve got a way of jumping out of the skillet and into the fire don’t you?” their neighbor Ruby Newkirk said when Kate was seventeen and pregnant and about to run away from home the first time.

Kate knew heat well enough to know Jackie’s call was a lit match dropped in kerosene.

She slipped into the women’s changing room and turned her phone back on. She leaned her shoulder against the metal lockers waiting for the display to come back.

She pressed “1” to play the only message left out of fourteen missed calls.

“Katie, we need you. I wouldn’t ask you to do something for nothing. I have something for you, something I know you still want.” There were voices in the background, several people talking over each other making it hard to hear at first. “Katie, I found her.”

Kate played the message again.
And again.

*Katie, I found her.*
Kate sat down on the lacquered wooden bench that divided the locker room. Jackie was probably lying. That’s what her brother Luke would have said.

*We need you.* What kind of “we?”

She skipped out on the rest of her shift. The entire ride back on the 66 bus, Kate tried to stay above all that Jackie’s call dredged up.
DOWN HERE WE COME UP

Usually when a memory rose up, Kate had the ability to remove it with fast, accurate scalp incisions that could cut the memory right out before it could take her over. Cut. It was only forty-eight hours of her life. Cut. It was something that she had already decided and couldn’t take back, like emptying a clip of ammunition that can’t be reloaded. Cut. It was something that was better for everyone. Cut. That puzzle-piece-clicking feeling when she smelled her baby’s skin. Cut. Running her bottom lip across the impossible petal softness of her daughter’s head. Cut. Surgical precision.

That had worked for eight years. Cut it out before the loss could flow through her. Follow Luke to Boston. Cut. When Charlie asked her out five years ago and she knew already they were wrong together, she still said yes. Cut. Every time she saw a four-year-old, then a five-year-old, then this year, eight-year-olds, Kate searched them for the features that might have formed from that sweet newborn face she had briefly held against her own. Cut. Somewhere, that girl. Cut. Kate had cut and cut and cut.