The Big Shuffle

by Laura Pedersen



About the Book

The Big Shuffle is the sequel to **Heart's Desire**, and the third book in the **Beginner's Luck** series.

Hallie Palmer, now 18, is summoned home from college in the second semester of sophomore year when her father suffers a sudden fatal heart attack. Hallie's mother goes into shock and is unable to care for her eight children still at home, six under the age of ten, including twin boys only five months old.

It's agreed that Hallie will take a leave of absence from school to manage the family. Her older brother Eric, now 20, is an engineering student on a full scholarship, and with finances now more precarious than ever, it's in everyone's best interest that he graduate on schedule and pursue professional employment.

After the well-meaning relatives depart, Hallie is overwhelmed by her new situation. There are bills to be paid, insurance claims to be filed, and children who need shuttling to school, sports, and speech therapy. Though the most startling revelation Hallie comes across when sorting through her parents' papers is not about the family finances, but a personal secret they've managed to keep from their children for the past twenty years. And once Hallie uncovers it, this knowledge changes her view of them.

With help from Bernard and Gil, Hallie attempts to organize the household chaos. Pastor Costello also lends a big hand, and all are impressed with his abilities when it comes to cooking, cleaning, and kids. Apparently several long ago summers as a counselor at Bible Camp left him with a skill set way beyond just fathoming The Great Beyond. And since his mother passed away the previous fall, Pastor Costello has the necessary time to devote to The Palmer Project.

Hallie has her ups and downs trying to keep her younger brothers and sisters afloat, while also trying to cope with the stressed out teenagers Louise, now 16, and Teddy, now 13. Of course Bernard believes the solution to keeping everyone occupied and focused on moving forward lies in launching a local production of "The Sound of Music," with the kids

performing as the Von Trapp family children.

Eventually a bad flu takes down much of the Palmer household, including Hallie. The cavalry arrives in the form of Olivia, who returns a month early from her trip to Italy and Greece, after she and Ottavio had a falling out.

While Hallie is convalescing and desperate to return to school as soon as possible, her boyfriend Craig announces that he's dropping out of the University of Minnesota. This causes friction in the relationship, since Hallie is now experiencing firsthand how important stability, responsibility, a steady flow of income, and particularly employee benefits, are to the health and prosperity of family life. Hallie and Craig no longer see eye to eye on how to pursue their future, and when Auggie returns from Russia, he and Hallie once again go out on a date.

Bernard and Gil remain busy raising the girls adopted from China, now aged 2 and 4. However, Bernard soon has a nemesis in the house by the name of Darius, who met Olivia while she and Ottavio were vacationing in Greece, and has shown up without warning. Bernard is horrified by the prospect of his mother dating Darius, who happens to be handsome, charming, and in his early forties, just the right age to be Bernard's older brother. Faster than you can say pineapple upside-down cake, Bernard is scheming to bring Ottavio back and unseat "the usurper."

Hallie soon realizes that life sometimes happens faster than we'd like it to, with each new day full of surprises, hopefully good ones, but not always. And in the case of the latter, you just do the best you can because there's always tomorrow.

Discussion Guide

1. When the Palmer family is in crisis it's decided that Hallie will leave school to take over and not her brother Eric, who is a year older. In your family are tasks typically divided into what is considered "men's work" and "women's work"?

2. The neighbor lady, Mrs. Muldoon, has a daughter in Arizona who wants her mother to come and live out there. Only Mrs. Muldoon has spent her entire life in town and doesn't want to leave. What are some of the pros and cons of having family members living nearby?

3. Do you belong to a community, organization, or close circle of friends that can rely upon each other when in need?

4. Are there any drawbacks to being part of such a tightly-knit circle?

5. What do you think is the worst possible age to lose a parent?

6. Hallie and Louise identify a trend in the Palmer family where the girls tend to go berserk during their teenage years while the boys stay the course. In your experience is it more common for boys or girls to have a difficult patch as teenagers, or the same for both?

7. Do you think it's possible to forecast how your friends or family members would react to a family crisis like the one Hallie experiences, or is it impossible to tell with people until they're actually in such a situation?

8. Louise leaves home shortly after her father dies. Do you think that some people can be so overwhelmed by circumstances that they know deep down their presence will only make things worse and so it's in everybody's best

interest that they remove themselves, at least for a period of time?

9. Have you ever had a relationship or a bad experience in a particular place and felt that the only solution was to leave?

10. At a certain point Hallie wonders if something she may have done has caused tragedy to strike. Do you believe that good and bad things happen in life based on our behavior?

11. Do you think the fact that Bernard and Gil are gay will influence the sexual identity of their adopted daughters?

12. When Craig drops out of college Hallie worries that he's jeopardizing his future. In our society is it best for all students capable of doing the work to finish college?

13. Olivia's boyfriend Ottavio turns out to be the jealous type and flies into a rage when she strikes up a friendship with a man. Is this type of situation between men and women understandable, and a testament to how much one person loves the other, or is it irrational and destructive to a relationship?

14. When Olivia takes up with a younger man, her son views this as scandalous. Why don't people seem to care as much if a man dates or marries a much younger woman?

15. Hallie goes out on a date with Auggie and it turns out to be a one-night stand. Do you find there's a double standard -- that when a young woman is seen to be playing the field she's looked upon as having loose morals, whereas such behavior is viewed as more acceptable and normal from a man?

16. Going out with Auggie seems to help Hallie realize what she really wants in a boyfriend. Is it necessary to date a number of individuals as a way to compare and contrast in order to determine the right person for a monogamous long-term relationship?

17. Hallie holds much of her grief inside because she's trying not to upset her younger siblings. Yet it seems to sneak out later in a fight with Craig and a panic attack while on her date with Auggie. Are there times when it's best to try and conceal your emotions or is this almost always unhealthy?

18. While going through some papers, Hallie discovers that her mother married and gave birth to her older brother earlier than she'd led the family to believe, largely because she regretted having dropped out of school. Is it okay for parents to keep some secrets if they're trying to set a good example for their children, or is honesty always the best policy?

19. Even though Hallie cares very much for Pastor Costello, she's extremely angry upon discovering that he has feelings for her mother. In your experience, do most children react negatively to the prospect of a parent striking up a new relationship after a death or divorce?

20. Hallie was under the impression that Pastor Costello was gay, and basically embarrasses herself when she finds out that he isn't. Have you ever made a mistake about someone's sexual identity that resulted in an awkward moment or situation?

21. Hallie and Craig finally decide to have a serious one-on-one relationship. How old must a person be to recognize true

love and function in a mature relationship, as opposed to just being caught up in an infatuation or what's often called "puppy love"?

Author Bio

Laura Pedersen is a former *New York Times* columnist and the author of 16 books and four plays. She has appeared on national shows, including "Oprah," "Good Morning America," "CBS This Morning," "Today," "Primetime," "Late Show with David Letterman" and many others. Her book LIFE IN NEW YORK won the Seven Sisters Book Award for best nonfiction. Laura writes for several well-known comedians.

Critical Praise

"Laura Pedersen's lively imagination has created a cast of zany characters and an unforgettable heroine."

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Publication Date: October 31, 2006
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 387 pages
Publisher: Ballantine Books
ISBN-10: 0345479564
ISBN-13: 9780345479563