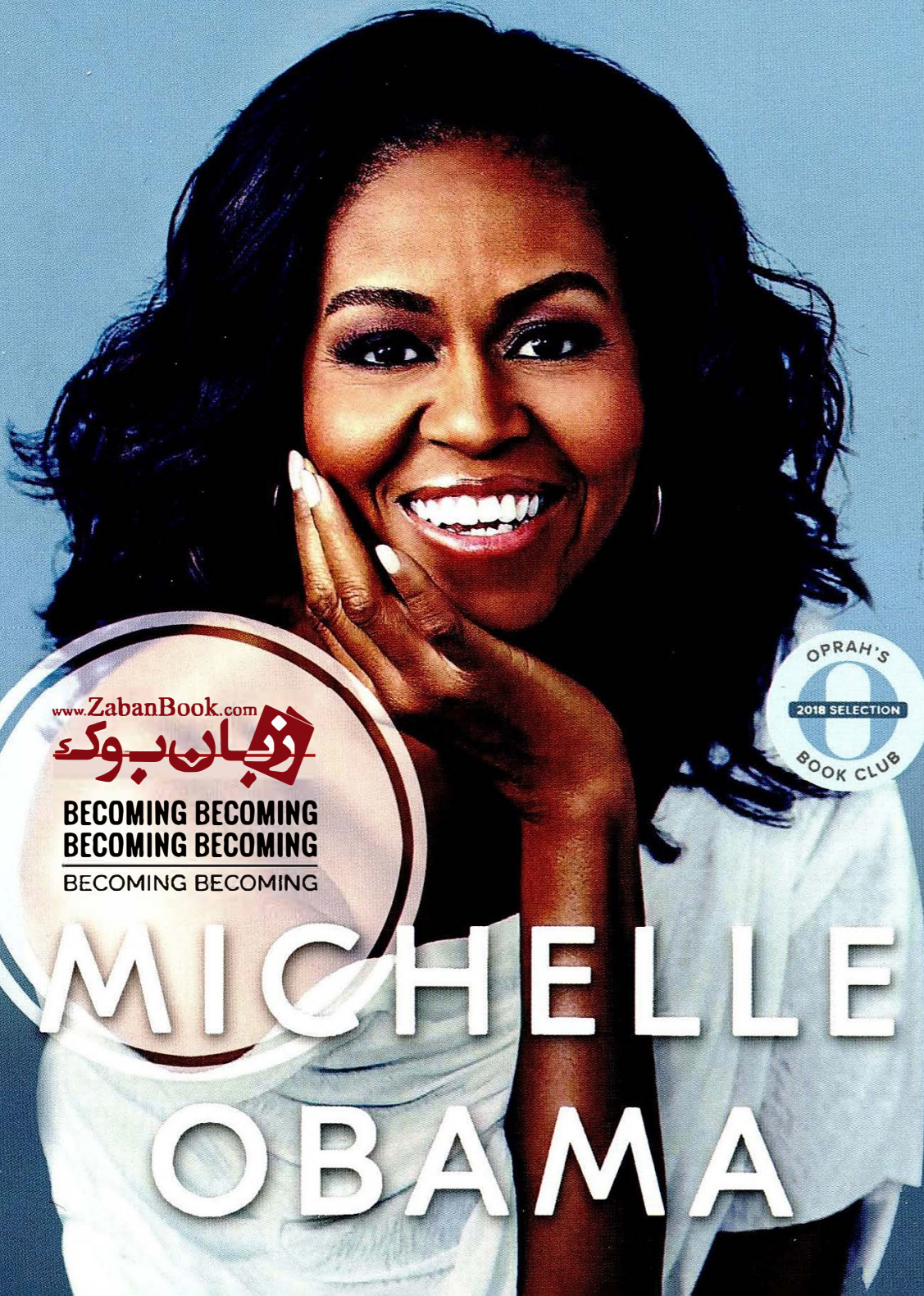


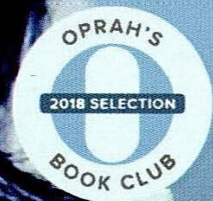
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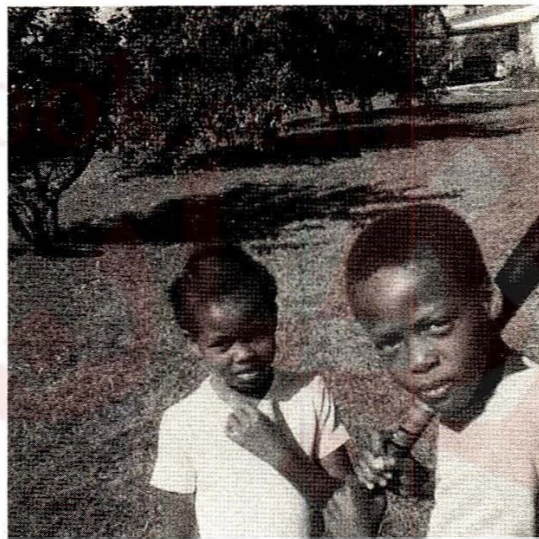
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Preface

March 2017

When I was a kid, my aspirations were simple. I wanted a dog. I wanted a house that had stairs in it—two floors for one family. I wanted, for some reason, a four-door station wagon instead of the two-door Buick that was my father’s pride and joy. I used to tell people that when I grew up, I was going to be a pediatrician. Why? Because I loved being around little kids and I quickly learned that it was a pleasing answer for adults to hear. *Oh, a doctor! What a good choice!* In those days, I wore pigtails and bossed my older brother around and managed, always and no matter what, to get As at school. I was ambitious, though I didn’t know exactly what I was shooting for. Now I think it’s one of the most useless questions an adult can ask a child—*What do you want to be when you grow up?* As if growing up is finite. As if at some point you become something and that’s the end.

So far in my life, I’ve been a lawyer. I’ve been a vice president at a hospital and the director of a nonprofit that helps young people build meaningful careers. I’ve been a working-class black student at a fancy mostly white college. I’ve been the only woman, the only African American, in all sorts of rooms. I’ve been a bride, a stressed-out new mother, a daughter torn up by grief. And until recently, I was the First Lady of the United States of America—a job that’s not officially a job, but that nonetheless has given me a platform like nothing I could have imagined. It challenged me and humbled me, lifted me up and shrank me down, sometimes all at once. I’m just beginning to process what took place over these last years—from the moment in 2006 when my husband first started talking about running for president to the cold morning this winter when I climbed into a limo with Melania Trump, accompanying her to her husband’s inauguration. It’s been

quite a ride.

When you're First Lady, America shows itself to you in its extremes. I've been to fund-raisers in private homes that look more like art museums, houses where people own bathtubs made from gemstones. I've visited families who lost everything in Hurricane Katrina and were tearful and grateful just to have a working refrigerator and stove. I've encountered people I find to be shallow and hypocritical and others—teachers and military spouses and so many more—whose spirits are so deep and strong it's astonishing. And I've met kids—lots of them, all over the world—who crack me up and fill me with hope and who blessedly manage to forget about my title once we start rooting around in the dirt of a garden.

Since stepping reluctantly into public life, I've been held up as the most powerful woman in the world and taken down as an "angry black woman." I've wanted to ask my detractors which part of that phrase matters to them the most—is it "angry" or "black" or "woman"? I've smiled for photos with people who call my husband horrible names on national television, but still want a framed keepsake for their mantel. I've heard about the swampy parts of the internet that question everything about me, right down to whether I'm a woman or a man. A sitting U.S. congressman has made fun of my butt. I've been hurt. I've been furious. But mostly, I've tried to laugh this stuff off.

There's a lot I still don't know about America, about life, about what the future might bring. But I do know myself. My father, Fraser, taught me to work hard, laugh often, and keep my word. My mother, Marian, showed me how to think for myself and to use my voice. Together, in our cramped apartment on the South Side of Chicago, they helped me see the value in our story, in my story, in the larger story of our country. Even when it's not pretty or perfect. Even when it's more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.

For eight years, I lived in the White House, a place with more stairs than I can count—plus elevators, a bowling alley, and an in-house florist. I slept in a bed that was made up with Italian linens. Our meals were cooked by a team of world-class chefs and delivered by professionals more highly trained than those at any five-star restaurant or hotel. Secret Service agents, with their earpieces and guns and deliberately flat expressions, stood outside our doors, doing their best to stay out of our family's private life. We got used to it, eventually, sort of—the strange grandeur of our new home and also the constant, quiet presence of others.

The White House is where our two girls played ball in the hallways and climbed trees on the South Lawn. It's where Barack sat up late at night, poring over briefings and drafts of speeches in the Treaty Room, and where Sunny, one of our dogs, sometimes pooped on the rug. I could stand on the Truman Balcony and watch the tourists posing with their selfie sticks and peering through the iron fence, trying to guess at what went on inside. There were days when I felt suffocated by the fact that our windows had to be kept shut for security, that I couldn't get some fresh air without causing a fuss. There were other times when I'd be awestruck by the white magnolias blooming outside, the everyday bustle of government business, the majesty of a military welcome. There were days, weeks, and months when I hated politics. And there were moments when the beauty of this country and its people so overwhelmed me that I couldn't speak.

Then it was over. Even if you see it coming, even as your final weeks are filled with emotional good-byes, the day itself is still a blur. A hand goes on a Bible; an oath gets repeated. One president's furniture gets carried out while another's comes in. Closets are emptied and refilled in the span of a few hours. Just like that, there are new heads on new pillows—new temperaments, new dreams. And when it ends, when you walk out the door that last time from the world's most famous address, you're left in many ways to find yourself again.

So let me start here, with a small thing that happened not long ago. I was at home in the redbrick house that my family recently moved into. Our new house sits about two miles from our old house, on a quiet neighborhood street. We're still settling in. In the family room, our furniture is arranged the same way it was in the White House. We've got mementos around the house that remind us it was all real—photos of our family time at Camp David, handmade pots given to me by Native American students, a book signed by Nelson Mandela. What was strange about this night was that everyone was gone. Barack was traveling. Sasha was out with friends. Malia's been living and working in New York, finishing out her gap year before college. It was just me, our two dogs, and a silent, empty house like I haven't known in eight years.

And I was hungry. I walked down the stairs from our bedroom with the dogs following on my heels. In the kitchen, I opened the fridge. I found a loaf of bread, took out two pieces, and laid them in the toaster oven. I opened a cabinet and got out a plate. I know it's a weird thing to say, but to take a plate from a shelf in the kitchen without anyone first insisting that they get it for me, to stand by myself watching bread turn brown in the toaster, feels as close to a return to my old life as I've come. Or maybe it's my new life just beginning to announce

itself.

In the end, I didn't just make toast; I made cheese toast, moving my slices of bread to the microwave and melting a fat mess of gooey cheddar between them. I then carried my plate outside to the backyard. I didn't have to tell anyone I was going. I just went. I was in bare feet, wearing a pair of shorts. The chill of winter had finally lifted. The crocuses were just starting to push up through the beds along our back wall. The air smelled like spring. I sat on the steps of our veranda, feeling the warmth of the day's sun still caught in the slate beneath my feet. A dog started barking somewhere in the distance, and my own dogs paused to listen, seeming momentarily confused. It occurred to me that it was a jarring sound for them, given that we didn't have neighbors, let alone neighbor dogs, at the White House. For them, all this was new. As the dogs loped off to explore the perimeter of the yard, I ate my toast in the dark, feeling alone in the best possible way. My mind wasn't on the group of guards with guns sitting less than a hundred yards away at the custom-built command post inside our garage, or the fact that I still can't walk down a street without a security detail. I wasn't thinking about the new president or for that matter the old president, either.

I was thinking instead about how in a few minutes I would go back inside my house, wash my plate in the sink, and head up to bed, maybe opening a window so I could feel the spring air—how glorious that would be. I was thinking, too, that the stillness was affording me a first real opportunity to reflect. As First Lady, I'd get to the end of a busy week and need to be reminded how it had started. But time is beginning to feel different. My girls, who arrived at the White House with their Polly Pockets, a blanket named Blankie, and a stuffed tiger named Tiger, are now teenagers, young women with plans and voices of their own. My husband is making his own adjustments to life after the White House, catching his own breath. And here I am, in this new place, with a lot I want to say.

Becoming Me

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I spent much of my childhood listening to the sound of striving. It came in the form of bad music, or at least amateur music, coming up through the floorboards of my bedroom—the *plink plink plink* of students sitting downstairs at my great-aunt Robbie's piano, slowly and imperfectly learning their scales. My family lived in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, in a tidy brick bungalow that belonged to Robbie and her husband, Terry. My parents rented an apartment on the second floor, while Robbie and Terry lived on the first. Robbie was my mother's aunt and had been generous to her over many years, but to me she was kind of a terror. Prim and serious, she directed the choir at a local church and was also our community's resident piano teacher. She wore sensible heels and kept a pair of reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She had a sly smile but didn't appreciate sarcasm the way my mother did. I'd sometimes hear her chewing out her students for not having practiced enough or chewing out their parents for delivering them late to lessons.

"Good night!" she'd exclaim in the middle of the day, with the same blast of exasperation someone else might say, "Oh, for God's sake!" Few, it seemed, could live up to Robbie's standards.

The sound of people trying, however, became the soundtrack to our life. There was plinking in the afternoons, plinking in the evenings. Ladies from church sometimes came over to practice hymns, belting their piety through our walls. Under Robbie's rules, kids who took piano lessons were allowed to work on only one song at a time. From my room, I'd listen to them attempting, note by uncertain note, to win her approval, graduating from "Hot Cross Buns" to "Brahms's Lullaby," but only after many tries. The music was never annoying; it

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This is my family, sometime around 1965, dressed up for a celebration. Note my brother Craig's protective expression and careful hold on my wrist.



We grew up living in the apartment above my great-aunt Robbie Shields, pictured here holding me. During the years she gave me piano lessons, we had many stubborn standoffs, but she always brought out the best in me.



Malia was ten years old and Sasha just seven in January 2009 when their dad was sworn in as president. Sasha was so small, she had to stand on a special platform in order to be visible during the ceremony.



The White House garden was designed to be a symbol of nutrition and healthy living, a springboard from which I could launch a larger initiative like Let's Move! But I also loved it because it's where I could get my hands dirty with kids as we rooted around in the soil.



The Fourth of July always gives us a lot to celebrate, since it's also Malia's birthday.

plan in earnest for what lay ahead. Barack and I were excited to stay in Washington but would build a legacy on the South Side of Chicago, which would become home to the Obama Presidential Center. We planned to launch a foundation as well, one whose mission would be to encourage and embolden a new generation of leaders. The two of us had many goals for the future, but the biggest involved creating more space and support for young people and their ideas. I also knew that we needed a break: I'd started scouting for a private place where we could go to decompress for a few days in January, immediately after the new president got sworn in.

We just needed the new president.

As the movie wrapped up and the lights came on, Barack's cell phone buzzed. I saw him glance at it and then look again, his brow furrowing just slightly.

"Huh," he said. "Results in Florida are looking kind of strange."

There was no alarm in his voice, just a tiny seed of awareness, a hot ember glowing suddenly in the grass. The phone buzzed again. My heart started to tick faster. I knew the updates were coming from David Simas, Barack's political adviser, who was monitoring returns from the West Wing and who understood the precise county-by-county algebra of the electoral map. If something cataclysmic was going to happen, Simas would spot it early.

I watched my husband's face closely, not sure I was ready to hear what he was going to say. Whatever it was, it didn't look good. I felt something leaden take hold in my stomach just then, my anxiety hardening into dread. As Barack and Valerie started to discuss the early results, I announced that I was going upstairs. I walked to the elevator, hoping to do only one thing, which was to block it all out and go to sleep. I understood what was probably happening, but I wasn't ready to face it.

As I slept, the news was confirmed: American voters had elected Donald Trump to succeed Barack as the next president of the United States.

I wanted to not know that fact for as long as I possibly could.

The next day, I woke to a wet and dreary morning. A gray sky hung over Washington. I couldn't help but interpret it as funereal. Time seemed to crawl. Sasha went off to school, quietly working through her disbelief. Malia called from Bolivia, sounding deeply rattled. I told both our girls that I loved them and that things would be okay. I kept trying to tell myself the same thing.

In the end, Hillary Clinton won nearly three million more votes than her

opponent, but Trump had captured the Electoral College thanks to fewer than eighty thousand votes spread across Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. I am not a political person, so I'm not going to attempt to offer an analysis of the results. I won't try to speculate about who was responsible or what was unfair. I just wish more people had turned out to vote. And I will always wonder about what led so many women, in particular, to reject an exceptionally qualified female candidate and instead choose a misogynist as their president. But the result was now ours to live with.

Barack had stayed up most of the night tracking the data, and as had happened so many times before, he was called upon to step forward as a symbol of steadiness to help the nation process its shock. I didn't envy him the task. He gave a morning pep talk to his staff in the Oval Office and then, around noon, delivered a set of sober but reassuring remarks to the nation from the Rose Garden, calling—as he always did—for unity and dignity, asking Americans to respect one another as well as the institutions built by our democracy.

That afternoon, I sat in my East Wing office with my entire staff, all of us crammed into the room on couches and desk chairs that had been pulled in from other rooms. My team was made up largely of women and minorities, including several who came from immigrant families. Many were in tears, feeling that their every vulnerability was now exposed. They'd poured themselves into their jobs because they believed thoroughly in the causes they were furthering. I tried to tell them at every turn that they should be proud of who they are, that their work mattered, and that one election couldn't wipe away eight years of change.

Everything was not lost. This was the message we needed to carry forward. It's what I truly believed. It wasn't ideal, but it was our reality—the world as it is. We needed now to be resolute, to keep our feet pointed in the direction of progress.

We were at the end now, truly. I found myself caught between looking back and looking forward, mulling over one question in particular: What lasts?

We were the forty-fourth First Family and only the eleventh family to spend two full terms in the White House. We were, and would always be, the first black one. I hoped that when future parents brought their children to visit, the way I'd brought Malia and Sasha when their father was a senator, they'd be able

Today I would trust her with my life not just because she has an amazing and curious mind but because she is a fundamentally kind and generous human being. I hope that this is just the beginning of a lasting friendship.

Tyler Lechtenberg has been a valuable member of the Obama world for more than a decade. He came into our lives as one of the hundreds of hopeful young Iowa field organizers and has been with us as a trusted adviser ever since. I have watched him grow into a powerful writer with an incredibly bright future.

Then there is my editor, Molly Stern, whose enthusiasm, energy, and passion instantly drew me to her. Molly kept me buoyed by her unwavering faith in my vision for this book. I am forever grateful to her and the entire Crown team, including Maya Mavjee, Tina Constable, David Drake, Emma Berry, and Chris Brand, who supported this effort from the beginning. Amanda D'Acierno, Lance Fitzgerald, Sally Franklin, Carisa Hays, Linnea Knollmueller, Matthew Martin, Donna Passanante, Elizabeth Rendfleisch, Anke Steinecke, Christine Tanigawa, and Dan Zitt all helped make *Becoming* possible.

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I would not be able to function successfully in this world as a mother, wife, friend, and professional without my team. Anyone who knows me well knows that Melissa Winter is the other half of my brain. Mel, thank you for being by my side through every step of this process. More importantly, thank you for loving me and my girls so fiercely. There is no me without you.

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of them.

Thank you to all the amazing women in my life who have kept me lifted up. You all know who you are and what you mean to me—my girlfriends, my mentors, my “other daughters”—and a very special thanks to Mama Kaye. All of you have supported me during this writing process and have helped me become a better woman.

The hectic pace of my life as First Lady left little time for traditional journaling. That is why I am so grateful to my dear friend Verna Williams, who is currently serving as the interim dean and Nippert Professor of Law at the University of Cincinnati College of Law. I relied heavily on the roughly 1,100 pages of transcripts resulting from our biannual recorded conversations during our White House years.

I am so proud of all that we accomplished in the East Wing. I want to thank the many men and women who dedicated their lives to help our nation, the members of the Office of the First Lady—policy, scheduling, administration, communications, speechwriters, social office, correspondence. Thank you to the staffs, White House Fellows, and agency detailees who were responsible for building each of my initiatives—Let’s Move!, Reach Higher, Let Girls Learn, and, of course, Joining Forces.

Joining Forces will always hold a special place in my heart because it gave me rare exposure to the strength and resilience of our outstanding military community. To all of the service members, veterans, and military families, thank you for your service and sacrifice on behalf of the country we all love. To Dr. Jill Biden and her entire team—it was truly a blessing and a joy to work side by side with you all on this very important initiative.

To all of the nutrition and education leaders and advocates, thank you for doing the thankless, everyday hard work of making sure all our children have the love, support, and resources they need to achieve their dreams.

Thank you to all of the members of the United States Secret Service, as well as their families, whose daily sacrifice allows them to do their jobs so well. Particularly to those who have and continue to serve my family, I will be forever grateful for their dedication and professionalism.

Thank you to the hundreds of men and women who work hard each day to make the White House a home for the families who have the privilege of inhabiting one of our most treasured monuments—the ushers, chefs, butlers, florists, grounds crew, housekeeping, and engineering staffs. They will always be

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BECOMING

As soon as I allowed myself to feel anything for Barack, the feelings came rushing—a toppling blast of lust, gratitude, fulfillment, wonder. Any worries I'd been harboring about my life and career and even about Barack himself seemed to fall away with that first kiss, replaced by a driving need to know him better, to explore and experience everything about him as fast as I could.

Maybe because he was due back at Harvard in a month, we wasted no time being casual. Not quite ready to have a boyfriend sleeping under the same roof as my parents, I began spending nights at Barack's apartment, a cramped, second-floor walk-up above a storefront on a noisy section of Fifty-Third Street. The guy who normally lived there was a University of Chicago law student and he'd furnished it like any good student would, with mismatched garage-sale finds. There was a small table, a couple of rickety chairs, and a queen-sized mattress on the floor. Piles of Barack's books and newspapers covered the open surfaces and a good deal of the floor. He hung his suit jackets on the backs of the kitchen chairs and kept very little in the fridge. It wasn't homey, but now that I viewed everything through the lens of our fast-moving romance, it felt like home.



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