

When a privileged American mother becomes aware of her role in the unethical fashion industry, she's led on a path she never imagined life would take her. Readers follow along as they learn the ugly truth behind some of the world's most beautiful clothes. Showcasing her solid writing skills and delivering an engaging story, novelist Peyton H. Roberts makes her mark with this debut novel and proves to be a writer to watch.

— JULIE CANTRELL, *NEW YORK TIMES* AND *USA TODAY*
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Carrying forward the tradition of novels that hope to change the world by changing what we see of the world, *Beneath The Seams* examines our ingrained shopping habits and asks us to consider whether they truly match the lives we want to lead.

— KATE LEWIS, *MILITARY FAMILIES MAGAZINE* BOOK CRITIC

Beneath the Seams pulls back the curtain on the fashion industry and reveals the unflattering truth about how some of our clothes are made—oftentimes at the expense of others' lives. A wonderful story that leaves you thinking once you've finished the last page.

— LIANA GEORGE, AUTHOR OF *PERFECTLY ARRANGED*

The storytelling in *Beneath the Seams* is so vivid, it played out in my mind like a Hallmark movie.”

— KRISTIN VANDERLIP, AUTHOR OF *LIFE WORTH LIVING: A DAILY GROWTH JOURNAL*

Beneath the Beams

A SOCIAL IMPACT NOVEL

Peyton H. Roberts



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To Nick, Sadie and Nate

Grateful I'm forever stitched to you.

*"You can't buy happiness, but you can buy fabric,
and that's pretty close."*

– Unknown



August 2012

Shelby's insides twisted into a knot as the photographer stepped behind the tripod. Warm studio lights beamed down from the rafters, illuminating everything she wanted seen and absolutely nothing she didn't.

"Are you ready?" the photographer asked.

"Ready when you are." Shelby tamed a few strands of her blown-out, highlighted hair and smoothed the skirt of her holiday dress over her shapewear. After months perfecting every pore and curve of her exterior, she couldn't believe this long-awaited day was finally here. The next few minutes would launch her face, as well as her handmade brand, into the glossy pages of *Buzz Now Magazine*, a springboard from which anything felt possible.

The trouble was, Shelby wasn't the only one posing for the photos. Her young daughter Paisley, the unknown variable of the day, stood beside Shelby, wearing an identical crimson and white dress. Despite how frustrating they'd been to sew, their Christmas outfits turned out precisely how Shelby sketched

them to—a nod to Mrs. Claus but without looking like a costume.

As the photographer fine-tuned the lighting, Shelby used the remaining seconds to finesse Paisley's appearance. She ran her fingers through her daughter's golden ringlets then straightened a stray fold in the dress's ruffled skirt. The hem was last to adjust, but Paisley batted away her mom's hand.

"Stop, Mama."

"Stopping." Shelby didn't want to risk annoying her child, but the pressure to master every detail was intensifying by the minute.

The photographer, a polished local artist named Felipe, looked up from behind the tripod. Shelby's heartbeat accelerated. She leaned over to plant reminders into Paisley's ear. "Time to smile, Little P. Just like we talked about, remember?"

But Paisley didn't reply. Her eyes shifted left and right, examining the room full of backdrops, lamp reflectors, and stage lighting.

For weeks Shelby had coached Paisley to smile on command, bribing her with lollipops and extra screen time. Despite the trainings, the question remained whether a fickle four-year-old would feel like cooperating in the spotlight. More than any other trial since becoming a parent, this photo op was the one Shelby needed to conquer. Absolutely everyone would see the outcome of the next thirty minutes.

"Okay, it's go time," Felipe said. "Mom, I want you to kneel behind Paisley so I can capture your faces side by side. Now look right here and give me your best Christmas smiles."

Kneeling into position, Shelby glanced at her daughter for the promised smile. But Paisley's mouth was busy exploring a thick layer of pearly lip gloss.

"Little P, it's time to smile," Shelby said.

Suddenly shy, Paisley looked at the floor and stuffed her fists into the pockets of her dress.

"Let's get started," Felipe said. "Hopefully we'll see some smiles once we're warmed up."

Shelby slid her shoulder blades down her back and tilted her chin up, just slightly. Focusing her gaze straight into the camera, she smiled like it was the most important day of her life.

Felipe clicked away on his monstrous camera. Moments later, Paisley pulled one hand from her pocket and pointed at two large lamp reflectors. The camera clicks stopped.

"Mama, what are those umbrellas for?"

"Those aren't umbrellas, sweetie. They're Mr. Felipe's helpers. They create special magic with the lights to make our pictures look even more beautiful in the magazine." Shelby repositioned Paisley's arm at her side.

"Is it real magic? How's it work?"

"I bet Mr. Felipe can answer that." Shelby raised her eyebrows, happy to punt the question.

"The light bounces off the reflectors and softens across your faces," he said.

"Wait, light can bounce? Like a ball?" Paisley asked.

"Yes, exactly. But it can only bounce off a pretty smile."

Paisley blushed. A bashful grin crept onto her face.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Felipe said, and the clicks resumed.

After another minute of posing, Paisley twirled around to peek at the set. At their backs stood a faux Douglas fir, styled with twinkling lights, red velvet ribbon, and glitter-spangled gold ornaments. A colorful pile of foil-wrapped presents spilled out below the tree. Frosted windowpanes suggested a snowy winter morning. No one would have guessed it was easily a hundred degrees outside.

"Mama, can I have one of those?" Paisley pointed to a shimmery gold ball dangling from the Christmas tree. "They're so sparkly!"

Felipe stepped in. "Sweetheart, as soon as you let me have all

your beautiful smiles, you can pick out any ornament you want.”

Paisley’s eyes widened. Her lips slid into a generous smile.

“Excellent. That’s great, ladies.” *Click. Click. Click.* “Exactly what I want to see.” He checked the screen on the back of the camera. “These are looking great.”

The first hint of positive feedback brought Shelby a glimpse of relief. Hopefully all her efforts—the eyelash extensions, the months in the gym, her first-ever forearm waxing—would pay off.

Felipe continued. “Okay, Mom, let’s have you stand. I want these matching dresses to get the attention they deserve.”

As Shelby stood, Paisley inspected the tree again. “Mama, can I have one of those sparkly balls now?”

“Just need a few more really big smiles.” Shelby placed her fingertips on Paisley’s shoulders, pivoting her small frame to face the camera.

“Paisley, you don’t like Christmas, do you?” Felipe asked.

“Yes, I do.” Paisley giggled. *Click. Click.*

“You don’t like presents, do you?”

“I looove presents.” *Click click click.* An even wider smile grew across the girl’s face.

“You really don’t like Santa Claus, do you?”

“I love Santa Claus!” Paisley’s shoulders and hands shook with excitement.

“Excellent. Hold those smiles,” Felipe said. This guy knew his stuff. Shelby suspected he must be a father, or maybe someone’s favorite uncle.

“Mama, is Santa really coming?”

“Well ...” Shelby paused, formulating her reply. It was only August. But sure, Santa would come eventually. No use jeopardizing Paisley’s mood with a technicality. “Yes, Santa is coming,” she said definitively.

Paisley’s hazel eyes opened wide as walnuts. The biggest smile of the day exploded across her face, plumping up her

buttery cheeks. As it did, the forced smile Shelby had manufactured melted away, becoming something real.

“Got it! That’s the shot,” Felipe said. “Almost done, ladies.”

The thought of the photoshoot coming to an end, smiles in the bag, made the tension in Shelby’s jaw release. She folded the moment away into the sweet layers of victory.

Her thoughts immediately transitioned to the afternoon ahead. Like it or not, the most significant decision of her career was due tonight and waiting in her inbox. Beyond that, an ocean of tasks promised to consume every waking hour between now and Christmas Eve as thousands of her dresses arrived in stores across the country.

Shooing her to-do list out of her mind, Shelby squeezed Paisley’s little palm into hers.

“That’s a wrap,” Felipe said. He scrolled through the raw images on the camera’s screen. “These look fantastic. Nice work.”

Praise for all her efforts sent a rush of excitement that warmed Shelby’s skin. She kissed Paisley on her blush-swept cheek. The girl skipped off to the decorated tree to select an ornament. Shelby followed, amused.

Like Paisley, she wished with all her heart they could skip ahead to Christmas Day. But for entirely different reasons.



THE MAGNOLIA TREE stood as still as the brick mailbox when Shelby drove her Lexus into their driveway on Oak Blossom Lane. Considering the blowout hair appointments and makeup sessions, plus the traffic-filled drive to West U and back, it felt like a week had passed since they left the neighborhood that morning.

“Mama, can I get the mail?” Paisley asked.

“Sure. Just look out for cars.” The clicks and jingles of car seat buckles filled every crevice of the SUV’s interior as Paisley

tumbled out of the backseat onto the driveway. Bobbing from her wrist, the large gold ornament accompanied her on the endless hunt for new things.

As Shelby turned off the car's ignition, her ovulation tracking app pinged with a green light notification. Of all days. Hopefully Bryan would be home early.

Shelby began collecting the shopping, makeup, and garment bags from the car. Paisley meandered up the driveway sandwiching a messy stack of papers between her hands.

"Anything good today?" Shelby asked.

"It's all junk," Paisley said, mimicking how she heard adults describe most mail.

Thank goodness. Shelby didn't need anything else slowing her down. In addition to hauling every bag in from the car and putting it all away, she still needed to call her mom, upload teasers to Instagram, and conjure up dinner. Most of all, she needed to email Dennis the final designs for *Surface Trend Market* to carry in stores. This single decision could secure her dream job on their impressive design team.

"Cept for this one, maybe." In one hand, Paisley jumbled together carpet cleaning ads and fast-food coupons. In the other, she raised a business-sized white envelope. "Who's it from?" she asked, handing the envelope to Shelby.

"Let me see. It's from ..." Shelby eyed the return address label. "Oh! It's from the Caring Hope Organization."

"What's that?"

"It's the people who picked out a sponsor child for us."

"What's that?" Paisley asked.

"Kind of like a new friend."

"Like a playdate friend?" Paisley twirled a crispy ringlet around her pinky.

"No, we won't be able to play with this friend. This friend lives very far away."

"But if he lives very far away, then how is he our friend?"

Shelby collected her thoughts before offering a concise

explanation. "There are some children all over the world who don't have nearly as much as we do. We are going to share some of what we have with one of these children."

"Is he four like me?"

"I don't know. And we don't know if it's a boy or a girl. We won't know any of that until we open it up and read what it says."

"Can we open it?" Paisley asked.

Shelby's hands were as loaded down with bags as her mind was with obligations. She simply didn't have the capacity to add one more thing to this afternoon, especially knowing how many hundreds of questions Paisley's curious little mind would ask.

"Let's wait until Daddy gets home," she said. "We can all find out together."



THAT NIGHT AT DINNER, Paisley nearly fell out of her booster seat at the kitchen table, recapping every detail of the photoshoot to her dad. "I got to wear makeup, and they made my hair curly. It was the bestest day ever!"

"That's great, Little P. So everything went okay?" Bryan asked Shelby.

"As far as I can tell. The photographer sounded really happy. I took that as a good sign."

"Did you smile nice and pretty?" Bryan asked Paisley.

"Uh-huh," Paisley replied, her mouth full of dinner.

"Tell Daddy what you got to pick out for smiling so nicely," Shelby said, cutting a nibble of chicken with the side of her fork.

"An ornament from the Christmas tree." Paisley loaded her fork with a stack of elbow pasta.

"Good. I can't think of anything we need more in August than a new Christmas ornament. Which one did you pick?"

"The biggest, sparkliest one. I'm gonna sleep with it." Unlike other children, Paisley didn't have a favorite blanket or doll. Her

signature move was attaching herself to the newest item in her life, whatever that happened to be.

"Oh, perfect. You needed one more thing in your bed," Bryan said.

Shelby wondered at what point Paisley would be old enough to detect sarcasm. Thankfully, comments like this still went straight over her head.

"Daddy, I have ninety hundred macaronies on my fork. I bet you can't fit that many."

"Please don't play with your food," Shelby said.

Paisley shoved the cheesy pasta in her mouth, took a long slurp of milk, then slammed her magenta cup on the table. "The envelope! Mama, can we open the envelope? You said when Daddy got home we could open it."

"Sure, we can open it. Soon as we finish dinner." Shelby investigated Paisley's plate. "Eat your peas, please."

"What's in the envelope?" Bryan asked.

"We get a new friend, Daddy. 'Cept we don't know if it's a boy friend or a girl friend."

"Sure hope it's not a boyfriend." Bryan turned to Shelby, brows raised. "What's in the envelope?"

"Our new kid," Shelby said.

Bryan stopped chewing, his forest-green eyes brimming with questions beneath his dark, wavy hair.

"It's from the charity Maye told us about, the Caring Hope Organization."

His blank stare continued.

"We're sponsoring a child."

"Oh, right." Bryan resumed chewing. "How much does this cost again?"

"Not much. It's like \$39 a month. Tax-deductible. We can cancel it whenever." Shelby was awkwardly aware she sounded like a salesperson.

Bryan nodded. "Okay, Little P. I bet I can fit more peas on my fork than you can."

"No way," Paisley said.

After all the macaroni and cheese, most of the chicken fingers, and enough of the peas disappeared from their plates, Shelby piled the dishes on the kitchen counter and returned to the table with the white envelope.

"Mama, can I please open it?" Paisley asked.

"Let me get it started. You can do the rest." Shelby tore a corner of the envelope back.

Paisley ripped it open. A bundle of folded white pages flopped out onto the table. A 3" x 5" photograph fell onto the floor by Bryan's chair. Paisley hopped down to pick it up. Holding the picture in her hand, she stared into the face of a thin child in a muted blue dress, a smile lingering behind her eyes.

"She's a girl!" Paisley held onto the photo but handed the wordy pages to Bryan. "Who is she? What does it say?"

"Let's find out," Bryan said.

Instead of returning to her seat, Paisley stepped toward her mom's. Shelby wrapped her hands around Paisley's narrow waist and lifted the child into her lap.

Remembering their hair and makeup were still done, Shelby retrieved her phone from beneath the placemat. She stretched her arm out far as it would go and snuck a selfie to share with her growing list of Instagram followers.

Bryan cleared his throat and read aloud.

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence, We are sending you the introductory letter and latest photo of your newly sponsored child RUNA BINU ZAMAN, age 11, who resides near Dhaka, Bangladesh. With your commitment, your sponsored child may continue her studies, make a difference in her community, and fulfill her life's dreams. With overwhelming gratitude, Cedric Flores, Sponsorship Director, Caring Hope Organization."

An unexpected silence punctuated the room. Bryan's eyes scanned the page. Paisley's remained fixated on the picture.

"What do you think?" Shelby asked.

"That's interesting," Bryan said. "Did we pick the place?"

"We could have, but Paisley wanted to be surprised," Shelby said. "Any idea where Bangladesh is?"

"I feel like I should know this. It's in Asia." Bryan pulled out his phone. "Next to India. To the right."

"I'm completely unfamiliar with that part of the world," Shelby said.

"Same here. Remind me, how did we connect with Caring Hope?"

"Maye said they're in desperate need of more sponsors. I thought it would be fun to learn about a different culture and to broaden Paisley's perspective of the world. And maybe ours too, for that matter."

"What else does it say, Daddy?" Paisley snuggled down further into the soft welcome of Shelby's lap as Bryan continued reading.

"Runa is an only child who lives with her mother in a crowded community near Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Her mother works full-time but struggles to meet their family's needs on her own. Runa attends school and loves to read. Her favorite subject is Bengali, the national language. She enjoys playing with dolls and helping at home.

"Her health is satisfactory. The typical diet of the region is fish, rice, and vegetables, though fresh food is often difficult to afford. Homes in her neighborhood are typically constructed of corrugated iron sheet walls, a tin roof, and a dirt floor. By supporting this family, you are easing their struggles and helping them embark on a promising future."

Paisley sat still, silent in her mom's lap, her eyes tethered to the photograph of Runa.

"What are you thinking about, Little P?" Shelby asked.

"Why is the floor made of dirt?"

"They don't have a lot of money, Little P," Bryan replied.

"They can't afford to live in a big, finished house like the ones in our neighborhood."

"Don't her feet get dirty?"

"Maybe," Shelby said. "Or maybe she wears shoes inside her house? I don't know how that works."

"Can we ask her?" Paisley said.

Bryan scanned the paperwork. "Probably not."

"She lives very far away and doesn't speak English. The letter says she speaks Bengali," Shelby explained.

"Can we try?" Paisley persisted.

Shelby shrugged at Bryan. "I mean, I guess I could email the man at the bottom of the letter. No idea if he'll write back."

"Can you email him now?" Paisley asked.

"Not now. I have a lot to do tonight. But I can tomorrow." Shelby opened her task app and added the item to tomorrow's growing to-do list.

Paisley stared again into the picture. "Her dress looks old, Mama. Why is it old?" she asked, the Ferris wheel of whys still turning.

"They probably don't have extra money to buy new clothes," Shelby explained. "She might even wear clothes other children have outgrown. They're called hand-me-downs." Strange she hadn't used this term since becoming a parent. Shelby grew up wearing nothing but her cousin's pilling, stretched-out old clothes.

"Why can't they just get more money?" Paisley asked.

"Because that's not how money works," Bryan said. "You have to earn it in order to get it. They might not have many ways to earn it."

"I wish Runa could come play at our house," Paisley said.

"That's a nice thought," Shelby said. "Why don't we put her picture on the fridge?"

Paisley wriggled off Shelby's lap and skipped to the refrigerator. Relocating a squiggly stick figure drawing, she cleared a spot and pinned Runa's picture to the fridge with a butterfly magnet.

The microwave clock reminded Shelby of the time. Bedtime.

"Bry, can you get Paisley to bed so I can finish this deadline?"

“Not tonight. I’m meeting up with Jared.”

Shelby stared into him with the eyes of a wife who required further explanation.

“We have a bunch of details to tweak on the Nashville job.”

“Now?”

“Keith scheduled us in nonstop meetings all week. We just haven’t had enough time.”

“I could really use some help here.” Shelby picked at the cuticle on her thumbnail where her French manicure already started chipping. A screenshot scrolled through her mind of the mountain range of shopping bags and clothes piled across their bed. “I have a ton of stuff from this morning to put away, all these dishes, and I still have to email Dennis with the final decision.”

“I thought you told him already?”

“No. I keep going back and forth. I needed to get through this morning, so I could focus.”

“How about this—you put Paisley to bed. I’ll meet up with Jared now and clean the kitchen when I get back. Floors and all.”

It wasn’t a bad offer. Even without doing the dishes, Shelby would be pushing it to get everything done by midnight. But she didn’t want to spark an argument that would mess up their chances to try for a baby.

“Okay, that works,” Shelby said. “Thanks.”

“Goodnight, Little P. Be good for Mama.” Bryan kissed Paisley on the forehead.

“Goodnight, Daddy.” Paisley curled her hand into a small fist and rubbed an eye.

He grabbed his wallet and keys and exited to the garage.

The door shut.

Shelby glared at it, whether with envy or anger she didn’t quite know. Bryan had arrived home minutes before dinner. Food had only just disappeared off dishes, and he was already headed back to work.

Thirty more minutes of teeth brushing and book reading and

blanket tucking. Then she'd proceed with the daunting task of choosing which of her dresses would make or break her future with *Surface Trend*.

"You ready to go up, Little P?"

"Go fish." Paisley giggled.

Shelby blinked a heavy blink. Her eyes scanned the room, the dirty dishes on the dining table, soiled pans crowding the countertops. "It's been a long day. Up we go."

"Okay, but first I'm gonna say goodnight to Runa." Paisley leaned toward the fridge and pressed a gentle kiss against the picture. "Goodnight, Runa. I hope I get to play with you one day."



BY THE TIME Shelby got Paisley to bed and unpacked everything from the photoshoot, Bryan had texted he was on his way home. With the most pressing task still to tackle, Shelby sat down at the desk in the office and opened her laptop. A lump in her throat reminded her she was about to make the biggest decision of her life.

Of course, it wasn't. Not really. Surely deciding who to marry or when to start a family were far more significant crossroads. But defining as they were, those variables had been relatively easy to solve for. They hadn't stirred up such an intense inner struggle.

Bryan came from the dream of a stable, loving family. Throughout their college years, he proved himself hardworking, reliable, loyal—everything Shelby's father was not. The easy friendship between Shelby and Bryan stair-stepped its way to a delicious first kiss on the front steps of her dorm building at North Texas.

Three years later when he proposed under a sprawling live oak on a Hill Country hike, saying yes wasn't a tough decision. It felt like the next right step toward creating her own loving

family. Leaving the workforce after having Paisley was the next right step. When Shelby took the human resources job at an oil company's headquarters, she looked forward to training employees and resolving conflict.

Instead, she spent her workweek compiling detailed paperwork and tedious reports. But her income and benefits covered them while Bryan finished up his expensive architecture degree at Rice University. The move to Houston was well worth it so he could attend a top program in his hometown. But after Paisley was born, Shelby's drive to file reports and meet someone else's deadlines completely fizzled.

As she opened her email, her focus shifted from those earlier life decisions to the daunting choice awaiting her now. Which dresses would be the steppingstones to capitalize on winning the grand prize of *Buzz Now Magazine's* design contest?

Loading the file from Dennis, Shelby felt the cumulative weight of all her toil to reach this milestone. All the times in the early months of motherhood she put Paisley down for a nap, lowering the sweet baby gently into the crib, wrapped tight like a spring roll in soft organic muslin. All those naptimes tiptoeing out of the cool, dark nursery, pressing the door to the frame without making a sound.

Then speed-racing to the dining table to sew for the world's shortest 45 minutes until Paisley awoke, wailing to be held. Somehow the sleeping baby timer ticked away faster than any other clock.

Tonight's decision was the culmination of all that early work—all the hours spent hunched over the sewing machine, all the Friday afternoons hurrying to the post office, juggling stacks of boxes atop the stroller. She hoped by now a decisive gut feeling would lead her to select the perfect dress styles, as if the winning combination lay before her on a lottery ticket needing to be scratched off just right.

Her feet swiveled the office chair side to side. Staring at the PDF, a dozen of her matching dress styles stared back at her,

having been tweaked and formalized by *Surface Trend's* design team.

How to choose which two? Fit? Pattern? Trendiness? Gut feeling?

She considered the many learned lessons from owning a virtual dress shop the last few years. Which styles sold the best? And, just as important, on which styles could she confidently stake her brand's reputation?

Up to this point, her least expensive dresses amassed the highest sales, even though Shelby knew they weren't the most fashionable or complimented. But opting for nicer fabrics and more complex designs raised costs considerably. The more expensive the dress, the greater the risk of not selling enough units and not being invited to join *Surface Trend's* design team.

With that notion guiding her, she went against her instincts and chose the two dresses that cost the least to make. They were still plenty cute. Hopefully cute enough to lock in her dream job.

Clicking reply, she relayed her final choices to *Surface Trend's* design team and *Buzz Now's* editorial board. If nothing else, low prices meant the dresses were more likely to sell out.

As she sent the email, the garage door rumbled, interrupting the silence. Bryan was home. Shelby ran her fingernails through her done-up hair and moistened her lips with her tongue.

With this massive decision finally behind her, it was time to switch gears and seek progress on an entirely different dream.