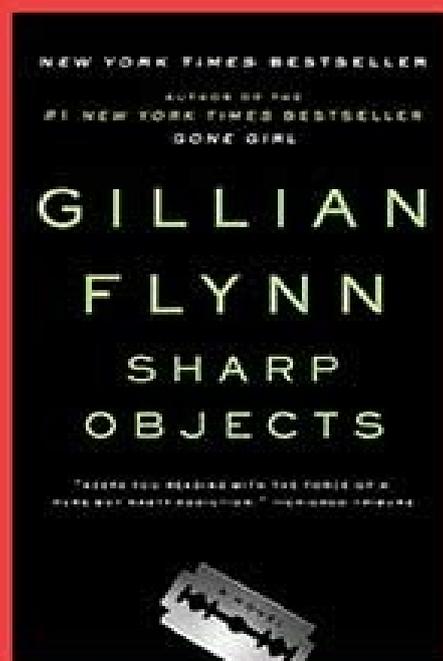
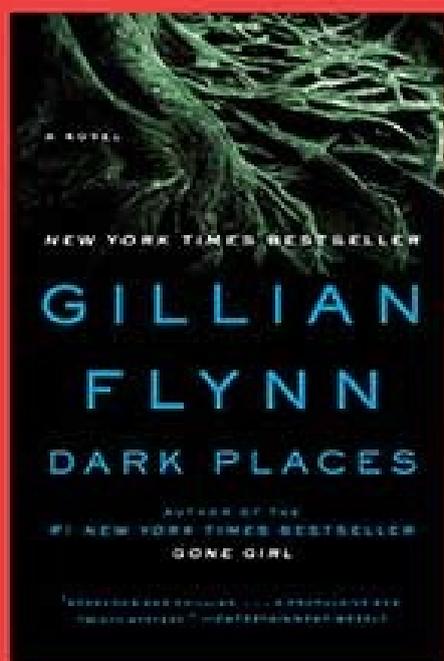
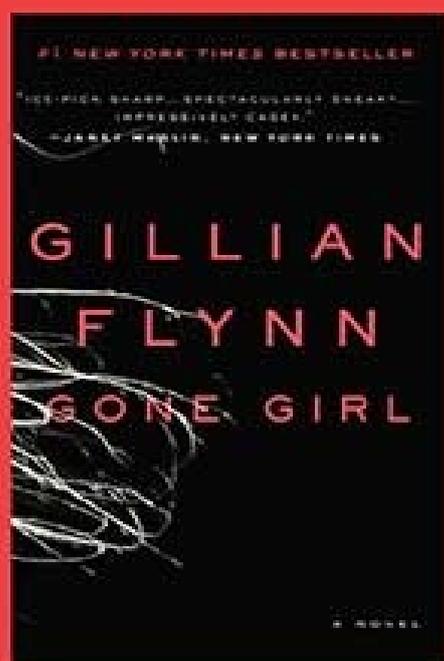


# THE COMPLETE GILLIAN FLYNN



G O N E G I R L

D A R K P L A C E S

S H A R P O B J E C T S

THE COMPLETE  
GILLIAN FLYNN

GONE GIRL,  
DARK PLACES,  
SHARP OBJECTS

BROADWAY  
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NEW YORK



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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"ICE-PICK SHARP...SPECTACULARLY SNEAKY...  
IMPRESSIVELY CAGEY."

—JANET MASLIN, NEW YORK TIMES

GILLIAN

FLYNN

GONE GIRL

A NOVEL

GILLIAN FLYNN

# GONE GIRL

A NOVEL

B\|D\|W\|Y  
BROADWAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

*To Brett: light of my life, senior  
and  
Flynn: light of my life, junior*

Love is the world's infinite mutability; lies, hatred, murder even, are all knit up in it; it is the inevitable blossoming of its opposites, a magnificent rose smelling faintly of blood.

—Tony Kushner, THE ILLUSION

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**part one**

**BOY LOSES GIRL**

# NICK DUNNE

THE DAY OF

When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. The shape of it, to begin with. The very first time I saw her, it was the back of the head I saw, and there was something lovely about it, the angles of it. Like a shiny, hard corn kernel or a riverbed fossil. She had what the Victorians would call *a finely shaped head*. You could imagine the skull quite easily.

I'd know her head anywhere.

And what's inside it. I think of that too: her mind. Her brain, all those coils, and her thoughts shuttling through those coils like fast, frantic centipedes. Like a child, I picture opening her skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it, trying to catch and pin down her thoughts. *What are you thinking, Amy?* The question I've asked most often during our marriage, if not out loud, if not to the person who could answer. I suppose these questions stormcloud over every marriage: *What are you thinking? How are you feeling? Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do?*

My eyes flipped open at exactly six A.M. This was no avian fluttering of the lashes, no gentle blink toward consciousness. The awakening was mechanical. A spooky ventriloquist-dummy click of the lids: The world is black and then, *showtime!* 6-0-0 the clock said—in my face, first thing I saw. 6-0-0. It felt different. I rarely woke at such a rounded time. I was a man of jagged risings: 8:43, 11:51, 9:26. My life was alarmless.

At that exact moment, 6-0-0, the sun climbed over the skyline of oaks, revealing its full summer angry-god self. Its reflection flared across the river toward our house, a long, blaring finger aimed at me through our frail bedroom curtains. Accusing: *You have been seen. You will be seen.*

I wallowed in bed, which was our New York bed in our new house, which we still called *the new house*, even though we'd been back here

for two years. It's a rented house right along the Mississippi River, a house that screams Suburban Nouveau Riche, the kind of place I aspired to as a kid from my split-level, shag-carpet side of town. The kind of house that is immediately familiar: a generically grand, unchallenging, new, new, new house that my wife would—and did—detest.

“Should I remove my soul before I come inside?” Her first line upon arrival. It had been a compromise: Amy demanded we rent, not buy, in my little Missouri hometown, in her firm hope that we wouldn't be stuck here long. But the only houses for rent were clustered in this failed development: a miniature ghost town of bank-owned, recession-busted, price-reduced mansions, a neighborhood that closed before it ever opened. It was a compromise, but Amy didn't see it that way, not in the least. To Amy, it was a punishing whim on my part, a nasty, selfish twist of the knife. I would drag her, caveman-style, to a town she had aggressively avoided, and make her live in the kind of house she used to mock. I suppose it's not a compromise if only one of you considers it such, but that was what our compromises tended to look like. One of us was always angry. Amy, usually.

Do not blame me for this particular grievance, Amy. The Missouri Grievance. Blame the economy, blame bad luck, blame my parents, blame your parents, blame the Internet, blame people who use the Internet. I used to be a writer. I was a writer who wrote about TV and movies and books. Back when people read things on paper, back when anyone cared about what I thought. I'd arrived in New York in the late '90s, the last gasp of the glory days, although no one knew it then. New York was packed with writers, real writers, because there were magazines, real magazines, loads of them. This was back when the Internet was still some exotic pet kept in the corner of the publishing world—throw some kibble at it, watch it dance on its little leash, oh quite cute, it definitely won't kill us in the night. Think about it: a time when newly graduated college kids could come to New York and *get paid to write*. We had no clue that we were embarking on careers that would vanish within a decade.

I had a job for eleven years and then I didn't, it was that fast. All around the country, magazines began shuttering, succumbing to a sudden infection brought on by the busted economy. Writers (my kind of writers: aspiring novelists, ruminative thinkers, people whose

brains don't work quick enough to blog or link or tweet, basically old, stubborn blowhards) were through. We were like women's hat makers or buggy-whip manufacturers: Our time was done. Three weeks after I got cut loose, Amy lost her job, such as it was. (Now I can feel Amy looking over my shoulder, smirking at the time I've spent discussing my career, my misfortune, and dismissing her experience in one sentence. That, she would tell you, is typical. *Just like Nick*, she would say. It was a refrain of hers: *Just like Nick to ...* and whatever followed, whatever was *just like me*, was bad.) Two jobless grown-ups, we spent weeks wandering around our Brooklyn brownstone in socks and pajamas, ignoring the future, strewing unopened mail across tables and sofas, eating ice cream at ten A.M. and taking thick afternoon naps.

Then one day the phone rang. My twin sister was on the other end. Margo had moved back home after her own New York layoff a year before—the girl is one step ahead of me in everything, even shitty luck. Margo, calling from good ole North Carthage, Missouri, from the house where we grew up, and as I listened to her voice, I saw her at age ten, with a dark cap of hair and overall shorts, sitting on our grandparents' back dock, her body slouched over like an old pillow, her skinny legs dangling in the water, watching the river flow over fish-white feet, so intently, utterly self-possessed even as a child.

Go's voice was warm and crinkly even as she gave this cold news: Our indomitable mother was dying. Our dad was nearly gone—his (nasty) mind, his (miserable) heart, both murky as he meandered toward the great gray beyond. But it looked like our mother would beat him there. About six months, maybe a year, she had. I could tell that Go had gone to meet with the doctor by herself, taken her studious notes in her slovenly handwriting, and she was teary as she tried to decipher what she'd written. Dates and doses.

"Well, fuck, I have no idea what this says, is it a nine? Does that even make sense?" she said, and I interrupted. Here was a task, a purpose, held out on my sister's palm like a plum. I almost cried with relief.

"I'll come back, Go. We'll move back home. You shouldn't have to do this all by yourself."

She didn't believe me. I could hear her breathing on the other end.

“I’m serious, Go. Why not? There’s nothing here.”

A long exhale. “What about Amy?”

That is what I didn’t take long enough to consider. I simply assumed I would bundle up my New York wife with her New York interests, her New York pride, and remove her from her New York parents—leave the frantic, thrilling futureland of Manhattan behind—and transplant her to a little town on the river in Missouri, and all would be fine.

I did not yet understand how foolish, how optimistic, how, yes, *just like Nick* I was for thinking this. The misery it would lead to.

“Amy will be fine. Amy ...” Here was where I should have said, “Amy loves Mom.” But I couldn’t tell Go that Amy loved our mother, because after all that time, Amy still barely knew our mother. Their few meetings had left them both baffled. Amy would dissect the conversations for days after—“And what did she mean by ...”—as if my mother were some ancient peasant tribeswoman arriving from the tundra with an armful of raw yak meat and some buttons for bartering, trying to get something from Amy that wasn’t on offer.

Amy didn’t care to know my family, didn’t want to know my birthplace, and yet for some reason, I thought moving home would be a good idea.

My morning breath warmed the pillow, and I changed the subject in my mind. Today was not a day for second-guessing or regret, it was a day for doing. Downstairs, I could hear the return of a long-lost sound: Amy making breakfast. Banging wooden cupboards (rump-thump!), rattling containers of tin and glass (ding-ring!), shuffling and sorting a collection of metal pots and iron pans (ruzz-shuzz!). A culinary orchestra tuning up, clattering vigorously toward the finale, a cake pan drumrolling along the floor, hitting the wall with a cymballic crash. Something impressive was being created, probably a crepe, because crepes are special, and today Amy would want to cook something special.

It was our five-year anniversary.

I walked barefoot to the edge of the steps and stood listening, working my toes into the plush wall-to-wall carpet Amy detested on principle, as I tried to decide whether I was ready to join my wife.

Amy was in the kitchen, oblivious to my hesitation. She was humming something melancholy and familiar. I strained to make it out—a folk song? a lullabye?—and then realized it was the theme to *M\*A\*S\*H*. Suicide is painless. I went downstairs.

I hovered in the doorway, watching my wife. Her yellow-butter hair was pulled up, the hank of ponytail swinging cheerful as a jump-rope, and she was sucking distractedly on a burnt fingertip, humming around it. She hummed to herself because she was an unrivaled botcher of lyrics. When we were first dating, a Genesis song came on the radio: “She seems to have an invisible touch, yeah.” And Amy crooned instead, “She takes my hat and puts it on the top shelf.” When I asked her why she’d ever think her lyrics were remotely, possibly, vaguely right, she told me she always thought the woman in the song truly loved the man because she put his hat on the *top* shelf. I knew I liked her then, really liked her, this girl with an explanation for everything.

There’s something disturbing about recalling a warm memory and feeling utterly cold.

Amy peered at the crepe sizzling in the pan and licked something off her wrist. She looked triumphant, wifely. If I took her in my arms, she would smell like berries and powdered sugar.

When she spied me lurking there in grubby boxers, my hair in full Heat Miser spike, she leaned against the kitchen counter and said, “Well, hello, handsome.”

Bile and dread inched up my throat. I thought to myself: *Okay, go.*

I was very late getting to work. My sister and I had done a foolish thing when we both moved back home. We had done what we always talked about doing. We opened a bar. We borrowed money from Amy to do this, eighty thousand dollars, which was once nothing to Amy but by then was almost everything. I swore I would pay her back, with interest. I would not be a man who borrowed from his wife—I could feel my dad twisting his lips at the very idea. *Well, there are all kinds of men*, his most damning phrase, the second half left unsaid, *and you are the wrong kind.*

But truly, it was a practical decision, a smart business move. Amy and I both needed new careers; this would be mine. She would pick one someday, or not, but in the meantime, here was an income, made

possible by the last of Amy's trust fund. Like the McMansion I rented, the bar featured symbolically in my childhood memories—a place where only grown-ups go, and do whatever grown-ups do. Maybe that's why I was so insistent on buying it after being stripped of my livelihood. It's a reminder that I am, after all, an adult, a grown man, a useful human being, even though I lost the career that made me all these things. I won't make that mistake again: The once plentiful herds of magazine writers would continue to be culled—by the Internet, by the recession, by the American public, who would rather watch TV or play video games or electronically inform friends that, like, *rain sucks!* But there's no app for a bourbon buzz on a warm day in a cool, dark bar. The world will always want a drink.

Our bar is a corner bar with a haphazard, patchwork aesthetic. Its best feature is a massive Victorian backbar, dragon heads and angel faces emerging from the oak—an extravagant work of wood in these shitty plastic days. The remainder of the bar is, in fact, shitty, a showcase of the shabbiest design offerings of every decade: an Eisenhower-era linoleum floor, the edges turned up like burnt toast; dubious wood-paneled walls straight from a '70s home-porn video; halogen floor lamps, an accidental tribute to my 1990s dorm room. The ultimate effect is strangely homey—it looks less like a bar than someone's benignly neglected fixer-upper. And jovial: We share a parking lot with the local bowling alley, and when our door swings wide, the clatter of strikes applauds the customer's entrance.

We named the bar The Bar. “People will think we're ironic instead of creatively bankrupt,” my sister reasoned.

Yes, we thought we were being clever New Yorkers—that the name was a joke no one else would really get, not get like we did. Not *meta*-get. We pictured the locals scrunching their noses: Why'd you name it *The Bar*? But our first customer, a gray-haired woman in bifocals and a pink jogging suit, said, “I like the name. Like in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Audrey Hepburn's cat was named Cat.”

We felt much less superior after that, which was a good thing.

I pulled into the parking lot. I waited until a strike erupted from the bowling alley—*thank you, thank you, friends*—then stepped out of the car. I admired the surroundings, still not bored with the broken-in view: the squatty blond-brick post office across the street (now closed on Saturdays), the unassuming beige office building just down the

way (now closed, period). The town wasn't prosperous, not anymore, not by a long shot. Hell, it wasn't even original, being one of two Carthage, Missouri—ours is technically *North* Carthage, which makes it sound like a twin city, although it's hundreds of miles from the other and the lesser of the two: a quaint little 1950s town that bloated itself into a basic midsize suburb and dubbed it progress. Still, it was where my mom grew up and where she raised me and Go, so it had some history. Mine, at least.

As I walked toward the bar across the concrete-and-weed parking lot, I looked straight down the road and saw the river. That's what I've always loved about our town: We aren't built on some safe bluff overlooking the Mississippi—we are *on* the Mississippi. I could walk down the road and step right into the sucker, an easy three-foot drop, and be on my way to Tennessee. Every building downtown bears hand-drawn lines from where the river hit during the Flood of '61, '75, '84, '93, '07, '08, '11. And so on.

The river wasn't swollen now, but it was running urgently, in strong ropy currents. Moving apace with the river was a long single-file line of men, eyes aimed at their feet, shoulders tense, walking steadfastly nowhere. As I watched them, one suddenly looked up at me, his face in shadow, an oval blackness. I turned away.

I felt an immediate, intense need to get inside. By the time I'd gone twenty feet, my neck bubbled with sweat. The sun was still an angry eye in the sky. *You have been seen.*

My gut twisted, and I moved quicker. I needed a drink.

# AMY ELLIOTT

JANUARY 8, 2005

## —DIARY ENTRY—

Tra and la! I am smiling a big adopted-orphan smile as I write this. I am embarrassed at how happy I am, like some Technicolor comic of a teenage girl talking on the phone with my hair in a ponytail, the bubble above my head saying: *I met a boy!*

But I did. This is a technical, empirical truth. I met a boy, a great, gorgeous dude, a funny, cool-ass guy. Let me set the scene, because it deserves setting for posterity (no, please, I'm not that far gone, posterity! feh). But still. It's not New Year's, but still very much the new year. It's winter: early dark, freezing cold.

Carmen, a newish friend—semi-friend, barely friend, the kind of friend you can't cancel on—has talked me into going out to Brooklyn, to one of her writers' parties. Now, I like a writer party, I like writers, I am the child of writers, I am a writer. I still love scribbling that word—WRITER—anytime a form, questionnaire, document asks for my occupation. Fine, I write personality quizzes, I don't write about the Great Issues of the Day, but I think it's fair to say I am a writer. I'm using this journal to get better: to hone my skills, to collect details and observations. To show don't tell and all that other writery crap. (*Adopted-orphan smile*, I mean, that's not bad, come on.) But really, I do think my quizzes alone qualify me on at least an honorary basis. Right?

*At a party you find yourself surrounded by genuine talented writers, employed at high-profile, respected newspapers and magazines. You merely write quizzes for women's rags. When someone asks what you do for a living, you:*

a) Get embarrassed and say, "I'm just a quiz writer, it's silly stuff!"

b) Go on the offense: "I'm a writer now, but I'm considering

something more challenging and worthwhile—why, what do you do?”

c) Take pride in your accomplishments: “I write personality quizzes using the knowledge gleaned from my master’s degree in psychology—oh, and fun fact: I am the inspiration for a beloved children’s-book series, I’m sure you know it, *Amazing Amy*? Yeah, so suck it, snobdouche!

Answer: C, totally C

Anyway, the party is being thrown by one of Carmen’s good friends who writes about movies for a movie magazine, and is very funny, according to Carmen. I worry for a second that she wants to set us up: I am not interested in being set up. I need to be ambushed, caught unawares, like some sort of feral love-jackal. I’m too self-conscious otherwise. I feel myself trying to be charming, and then I realize I’m obviously trying to be charming, and then I try to be even more charming to make up for the fake charm, and then I’ve basically turned into Liza Minnelli: I’m dancing in tights and sequins, begging you to love me. There’s a bowler and jazz hands and lots of teeth.

But no, I realize, as Carmen gushes on about her friend: *She* likes him. Good.

We climb three flights of warped stairs and walk into a whoosh of body heat and writerness: many black-framed glasses and mops of hair; faux western shirts and heathery turtlenecks; black wool pea-coats flopped all across the couch, puddling to the floor; a German poster for *The Getaway* (*Ihre Chance war gleich Null!*) covering one paint-cracked wall. Franz Ferdinand on the stereo: “Take Me Out.”

A clump of guys hovers near a card table where all the alcohol is set up, tipping more booze into their cups after every few sips, all too aware of how little is left to go around. I nudge in, aiming my plastic cup in the center like a busker, get a clatter of ice cubes and a splash of vodka from a sweet-faced guy wearing a Space Invaders T-shirt.

A lethal-looking bottle of green-apple liqueur, the host’s ironic purchase, will soon be our fate unless someone makes a booze run, and that seems unlikely, as everyone clearly believes they made the run last time. It is a January party, definitely, everyone still glutted and sugar-pissed from the holidays, lazy and irritated simultaneously. A party where people drink too much and pick cleverly worded fights,

blowing cigarette smoke out an open window even after the host asks them to go outside. We've already talked to one another at a thousand holiday parties, we have nothing left to say, we are collectively bored, but we don't want to go back into the January cold; our bones still ache from the subway steps.

I have lost Carmen to her host-beau—they are having an intense discussion in a corner of the kitchen, the two of them hunching their shoulders, their faces toward each other, the shape of a heart. Good. I think about eating to give myself something to do besides standing in the center of the room, smiling like the new kid in the lunchroom. But almost everything is gone. Some potato-chip shards sit in the bottom of a giant Tupperware bowl. A supermarket deli tray full of hoary carrots and gnarled celery and a semeny dip sits untouched on a coffee table, cigarettes littered throughout like bonus vegetable sticks. I am doing my thing, my impulse thing: What if I leap from the theater balcony right now? What if I tongue the homeless man across from me on the subway? What if I sit down on the floor of this party by myself and eat everything on that deli tray, including the cigarettes?

“Please don't eat anything in that area,” he says. It is *him* (bum bum BUMMMM!), but I don't yet know it's *him* (bum-bum-bummm). I know it's a guy who will talk to me, he wears his cockiness like an ironic T-shirt, but it fits him better. He is the kind of guy who carries himself like he gets laid a lot, a guy who likes women, a guy who would actually fuck me properly. I would like to be fucked properly! My dating life seems to rotate around three types of men: preppy Ivy Leaguers who believe they're characters in a Fitzgerald novel; slick Wall Streeters with money signs in their eyes, their ears, their mouths; and sensitive smart-boys who are so self-aware that everything feels like a joke. The Fitzgerald fellows tend to be ineffectively porny in bed, a lot of noise and acrobatics to very little end. The finance guys turn rageful and flaccid. The smart-boys fuck like they're composing a piece of math rock: This hand strums around here, and then this finger offers a nice bass rhythm.... I sound quite slutty, don't I? Pause while I count how many ... eleven. Not bad. I've always thought twelve was a solid, reasonable number to end at.

“Seriously,” Number 12 continues. (Ha!) “Back away from the tray. James has up to three other food items in his refrigerator. I could

make you an olive with mustard. Just one olive, though.”

*Just one olive, though.* It is a line that is only a little funny, but it already has the feel of an inside joke, one that will get funnier with nostalgic repetition. I think: *A year from now, we will be walking along the Brooklyn Bridge at sunset and one of us will whisper, “Just one olive, though,” and we’ll start to laugh.* (Then I catch myself. Awful. If he knew I was doing *a year from now* already, he’d *run* and I’d be obliged to cheer him on.)

Mainly, I will admit, I smile because he’s gorgeous. Distractingly gorgeous, the kind of looks that make your eyes pinwheel, that make you want to just address the elephant—“You know you’re gorgeous, right?”—and move on with the conversation. I bet dudes hate him: He looks like the rich-boy villain in an ’80s teen movie—the one who bullies the sensitive misfit, the one who will end up with a pie in the puss, the whipped cream wilting his upturned collar as everyone in the cafeteria cheers.

He doesn’t act that way, though. His name is Nick. I love it. It makes him seem nice, and regular, which he is. When he tells me his name, I say, “Now, that’s a real name.” He brightens and reels off some line: “Nick’s the kind of guy you can drink a beer with, the kind of guy who doesn’t mind if you puke in his car. Nick!”

He makes a series of awful puns. I catch three-fourths of his movie references. Two-thirds, maybe. (Note to self: Rent *The Sure Thing*.) He refills my drink without me having to ask, somehow ferreting out one last cup of the good stuff. He has claimed me, placed a flag in me: *I was here first, she’s mine, mine.* It feels nice, after my recent series of nervous, respectful post-feminist men, to be a territory. He has a great smile, a cat’s smile. He should cough out yellow Tweety Bird feathers, the way he smiles at me. He doesn’t ask what I do for a living, which is fine, which is a change. (I’m a writer, did I mention?) He talks to me in his river-wavy Missouri accent; he was born and raised outside of Hannibal, the boyhood home of Mark Twain, the inspiration for *Tom Sawyer*. He tells me he worked on a steamboat when he was a teenager, dinner and jazz for the tourists. And when I laugh (bratty, bratty New York girl who has never ventured to those big unwieldy middle states, those States Where Many Other People Live), he informs me that *Missoura* is a magical place, the most beautiful in the world, no state more glorious. His eyes are mischievous, his lashes are

long. I can see what he looked like as a boy.

We share a taxi home, the streetlights making dizzy shadows and the car speeding as if we're being chased. It is one A.M. when we hit one of New York's unexplained deadlocks twelve blocks from my apartment, so we slide out of the taxi into the cold, into the great What Next? and Nick starts walking me home, his hand on the small of my back, our faces stunned by the chill. As we turn the corner, the local bakery is getting its powdered sugar delivered, funneled into the cellar by the barreland as if it were cement, and we can see nothing but the shadows of the deliverymen in the white, sweet cloud. The street is billowing, and Nick pulls me close and smiles that smile again, and he takes a single lock of my hair between two fingers and runs them all the way to the end, tugging twice, like he's ringing a bell. His eyelashes are trimmed with powder, and before he leans in, he brushes the sugar from my lips so he can taste me.

# NICK DUNNE

THE DAY OF

I swung wide the door of my bar, slipped into the darkness, and took my first real deep breath of the day, took in the smell of cigarettes and beer, the spice of a dribbled bourbon, the tang of old popcorn. There was only one customer in the bar, sitting by herself at the far, far end: an older woman named Sue who had come in every Thursday with her husband until he died three months back. Now she came alone every Thursday, never much for conversation, just sitting with a beer and a crossword, preserving a ritual.

My sister was at work behind the bar, her hair pulled back in nerdy-girl barrettes, her arms pink as she dipped the beer glasses in and out of hot suds. Go is slender and strange-faced, which is not to say unattractive. Her features just take a moment to make sense: the broad jaw; the pinched, pretty nose; the dark globe eyes. If this were a period movie, a man would tilt back his fedora, whistle at the sight of her, and say, “Now, there’s a helluva *broad!*” The face of a ’30s screwball-movie queen doesn’t always translate in our pixie-princess times, but I know from our years together that men like my sister, a lot, which puts me in that strange brotherly realm of being both proud and wary.

“Do they still make pimento loaf?” she said by way of greeting, not looking up, just knowing it was me, and I felt the relief I usually felt when I saw her: Things might not be great, but things would be okay.

My twin, Go. I’ve said this phrase so many times, it has become a reassuring mantra instead of actual words: Mytwingo. We were born in the ’70s, back when twins were rare, a bit magical: cousins of the unicorn, siblings of the elves. We even have a dash of twin telepathy. Go is truly the one person in the entire world I am totally myself with. I don’t feel the need to explain my actions to her. I don’t clarify, I don’t doubt, I don’t worry. I don’t tell her everything, not anymore, but I tell her more than anyone else, by far. I tell her as much as I can. We spent nine months back to back, covering each other. It became a

lifelong habit. It never mattered to me that she was a girl, strange for a deeply self-conscious kid. What can I say? She was always just cool.

“Pimento loaf, that’s like lunch meat, right? I think they do.”

“We should get some,” she said. She arched an eyebrow at me. “I’m intrigued.”

Without asking, she poured me a draft of PBR into a mug of questionable cleanliness. When she caught me staring at the smudged rim, she brought the glass up to her mouth and licked the smudge away, leaving a smear of saliva. She set the mug squarely in front of me. “Better, my prince?”

Go firmly believes that I got the best of everything from our parents, that I was the boy they planned on, the single child they could afford, and that she sneaked into this world by clamping onto my ankle, an unwanted stranger. (For my dad, a particularly unwanted stranger.) She believes she was left to fend for herself throughout childhood, a pitiful creature of random hand-me-downs and forgotten permission slips, tightened budgets and general regret. This vision could be somewhat true; I can barely stand to admit it.

“Yes, my squalid little serf,” I said, and fluttered my hands in royal dispensation.

I huddled over my beer. I needed to sit and drink a beer or three. My nerves were still singing from the morning.

“What’s up with you?” she asked. “You look all twitchy.” She flicked some suds at me, more water than soap. The air-conditioning kicked on, ruffling the tops of our heads. We spent more time in The Bar than we needed to. It had become the childhood clubhouse we never had. We’d busted open the storage boxes in our mother’s basement one drunken night last year, back when she was alive but right near the end, when we were in need of comfort, and we revisited the toys and games with much oohing and ahing between sips of canned beer. Christmas in August. After Mom died, Go moved into our old house, and we slowly relocated our toys, piecemeal, to The Bar: a Strawberry Shortcake doll, now scentless, pops up on a stool one day (my gift to Go). A tiny Hot Wheels El Camino, one wheel missing, appears on a shelf in the corner (Go’s to me).

We were thinking of introducing a board game night, even though

most of our customers were too old to be nostalgic for our Hungry Hungry Hippos, our Game of Life with its tiny plastic cars to be filled with tiny plastic pinhead spouses and tiny plastic pinhead babies. I couldn't remember how you won. (Deep Hasbro thought for the day.)

Go refilled my beer, refilled her beer. Her left eyelid drooped slightly. It was exactly noon, 12:00, and I wondered how long she'd been drinking. She's had a bumpy decade. My speculative sister, she of the rocket-science brain and the rodeo spirit, dropped out of college and moved to Manhattan in the late '90s. She was one of the original dot-com phenoms—made crazy money for two years, then took the Internet bubble bath in 2000. Go remained unflappable. She was closer to twenty than thirty; she was fine. For act two, she got her degree and joined the gray-suited world of investment banking. She was midlevel, nothing flashy, nothing blameful, but she lost her job—fast—with the 2008 financial meltdown. I didn't even know she'd left New York until she phoned me from Mom's house: *I give up*. I begged her, cajoled her to return, hearing nothing but peeved silence on the other end. After I hung up, I made an anxious pilgrimage to her apartment in the Bowery and saw Gary, her beloved ficus tree, yellow-dead on the fire escape, and knew she'd never come back.

The Bar seemed to cheer her up. She handled the books, she poured the beers. She stole from the tip jar semi-regularly, but then she did more work than me. We never talked about our old lives. We were Dunnes, and we were done, and strangely content about it.

"So, what?" Go said, her usual way of beginning a conversation.

"Eh."

"Eh, what? Eh, bad? You look bad."

I shrugged a yes; she scanned my face.

"Amy?" she asked. It was an easy question. I shrugged again—a confirmation this time, a *whatcha gonna do?* shrug.

Go gave me her amused face, both elbows on the bar, hands cradling chin, hunkering down for an incisive dissection of my marriage. Go, an expert panel of one. "What about her?"

"Bad day. It's just a bad day."

"Don't let her worry you." Go lit a cigarette. She smoked exactly

one a day. “Women are crazy.” Go didn’t consider herself part of the general category of *women*, a word she used derisively.

I blew Go’s smoke back to its owner. “It’s our anniversary today. Five years.”

“Wow.” My sister cocked her head back. She’d been a bridesmaid, all in violet—“the gorgeous, raven-haired, amethyst-draped *dame*,” Amy’s mother had dubbed her—but anniversaries weren’t something she’d remember. “Jeez. Fuck. Dude. That came fast.” She blew more smoke toward me, a lazy game of cancer catch. “She going to do one of her, uh, what do you call it, not scavenger hunt—”

“Treasure hunt,” I said.

My wife loved games, mostly mind games, but also actual games of amusement, and for our anniversary she always set up an elaborate treasure hunt, with each clue leading to the hiding place of the next clue until I reached the end, and my present. It was what her dad always did for her mom on their anniversary, and don’t think I don’t see the gender roles here, that I don’t get the hint. But I did not grow up in Amy’s household, I grew up in mine, and the last present I remember my dad giving my mom was an iron, set on the kitchen counter, no wrapping paper.

“Should we make a wager on how pissed she’s going to get at you this year?” Go asked, smiling over the rim of her beer.

The problem with Amy’s treasure hunts: I never figured out the clues. Our first anniversary, back in New York, I went two for seven. That was my best year. The opening parley:

*This place is a bit of a hole in the wall,*

*But we had a great kiss there one Tuesday last fall.*

Ever been in a spelling bee as a kid? That snowy second after the announcement of the word as you sift your brain to see if you can spell it? It was like that, the blank panic.

“An Irish bar in a not-so-Irish place,” Amy nudged.

I bit the side of my lip, started a shrug, scanning our living room as if the answer might appear. She gave me another very long minute.

“We were lost in the rain,” she said in a voice that was pleading on the way to peeved.

I finished the shrug.

“*McMann’s*, Nick. Remember, when we got lost in the rain in Chinatown trying to find that dim sum place, and it was supposed to be near the statue of Confucius but it turns out there are two statues of Confucius, and we ended up at that random Irish bar all soaking wet, and we slammed a few whiskeys, and you grabbed me and kissed me, and it was—”

“Right! You should have done a clue with Confucius, I would have gotten that.”

“The statue wasn’t the point. The place was the point. The moment. I just thought it was special.” She said these last words in a childish lilt that I once found fetching.

“It *was* special.” I pulled her to me and kissed her. “That smooch right there was my special anniversary reenactment. Let’s go do it again at *McMann’s*.”

At *McMann’s*, the bartender, a big, bearded bear-kid, saw us come in and grinned, poured us both whiskeys, and pushed over the next clue.

*When I’m down and feeling blue*

*There’s only one place that will do.*

That one turned out to be the Alice in Wonderland statue at Central Park, which Amy had told me—she’d *told* me, she *knew* she’d told me *many* times—lightened her moods as a child. I do not remember any of those conversations. I’m being honest here, I just don’t. I have a dash of ADD, and I’ve always found my wife a bit dazzling, in the purest sense of the word: to lose clear vision, especially from looking at bright light. It was enough to be near her and hear her talk, it didn’t always matter what she was saying. It should have, but it didn’t.

By the time we got to the end of the day, to exchanging our actual presents—the traditional paper presents for the first year of marriage—Amy was not speaking to me.

“I love you, Amy. You know I love you,” I said, tailing her in and out of the family packs of dazed tourists parked in the middle of the sidewalk, oblivious and openmouthed. Amy was slipping through the Central Park crowds, maneuvering between laser-eyed joggers and

scissor-legged skaters, kneeling parents and toddlers careering like drunks, always just ahead of me, tight-lipped, hurrying nowhere. Me trying to catch up, grab her arm. She stopped finally, gave me a face unmoved as I explained myself, one mental finger tamping down my exasperation: “Amy, I don’t get why I need to prove my love to you by remembering the exact same *things* you do, the exact same *way* you do. It doesn’t mean I don’t love our life together.”

A nearby clown blew up a balloon animal, a man bought a rose, a child licked an ice cream cone, and a genuine tradition was born, one I’d never forget: Amy always going overboard, me never, ever worthy of the effort. Happy anniversary, asshole.

“I’m guessing—five years—she’s going to get *really* pissed,” Go continued. “So I hope you got her a really good present.”

“On the to-do list.”

“What’s the, like, symbol, for five years? Paper?”

“Paper is first year,” I said. At the end of Year One’s unexpectedly wrenching treasure hunt, Amy presented me with a set of posh stationery, my initials embossed at the top, the paper so creamy I expected my fingers to come away moist. In return, I’d presented my wife with a bright red dime-store paper kite, picturing the park, picnics, warm summer gusts. Neither of us liked our presents; we’d each have preferred the other’s. It was a reverse O. Henry.

“Silver?” guessed Go. “Bronze? Scrimshaw? Help me out.”

“Wood,” I said. “There’s no romantic present for wood.”

At the other end of the bar, Sue neatly folded her newspaper and left it on the bartop with her empty mug and a five-dollar bill. We all exchanged silent smiles as she walked out.

“I got it,” Go said. “Go home, fuck her brains out, then smack her with your penis and scream, ‘There’s some wood for you, bitch!’ ”

We laughed. Then we both flushed pink in our cheeks in the same spot. It was the kind of raunchy, unsisterly joke that Go enjoyed tossing at me like a grenade. It was also the reason why, in high school, there were always rumors that we secretly screwed. Twincest. We were too tight: our inside jokes, our edge-of-the-party whispers. I’m pretty sure I don’t need to say this, but you are not Go, you might

misconstrue, so I will: My sister and I have never screwed or even thought of screwing. We just really like each other.

Go was now pantomiming dick-slapping my wife.

No, Amy and Go were never going to be friends. They were each too territorial. Go was used to being the alpha girl in my life, Amy was used to being the alpha girl in everyone's life. For two people who lived in the same city—the same city twice: first New York, now here—they barely knew each other. They flitted in and out of my life like well-timed stage actors, one going out the door as the other came in, and on the rare occasions when they both inhabited the same room, they seemed somewhat bemused at the situation.

Before Amy and I got serious, got engaged, got married, I would get glimpses of Go's thoughts in a sentence here or there. *It's funny, I can't quite get a bead on her, like who she really is. And: You just seem kind of not yourself with her. And: There's a difference between really loving someone and loving the idea of her. And finally: The important thing is she makes you really happy.*

Back when Amy made me really happy.

Amy offered her own notions of Go: *She's very ... Missouri, isn't she? And: You just have to be in the right mood for her. And: She's a little needy about you, but then I guess she doesn't have anyone else.*

I'd hoped when we all wound up back in Missouri, the two would let it drop—agree to disagree, free to be you and me. Neither did. Go was funnier than Amy, though, so it was a mismatched battle. Amy was clever, withering, sarcastic. Amy could get me riled up, could make an excellent, barbed point, but Go always made me laugh. It is dangerous to laugh at your spouse.

“Go, I thought we agreed you'd never mention my genitalia again,” I said. “That within the bounds of our sibling relationship, I have no genitalia.”

The phone rang. Go took one more sip of her beer and answered, gave an eyeroll and a smile. “He sure *is* here, one moment, please!” To me, she mouthed: “Carl.”

Carl Pelley lived across the street from me and Amy. Retired three years. Divorced two years. Moved into our development right after. He'd been a traveling salesman—children's party supplies—and I

sensed that after four decades of motel living, he wasn't quite at home being home. He showed up at the bar nearly every day with a pungent Hardee's bag, complaining about his budget until he was offered a first drink on the house. (This was another thing I learned about Carl from his days in The Bar—that he was a functioning but serious alcoholic.) He had the good grace to accept whatever we were “trying to get rid of,” and he meant it: For one full month Carl drank nothing but dusty Zimas, circa 1992, that we'd discovered in the basement. When a hangover kept Carl home, he'd find a reason to call: *Your mailbox looks awfully full today, Nicky, maybe a package came.* Or: *It's supposed to rain, you might want to close your windows.* The reasons were bogus. Carl just needed to hear the clink of glasses, the glug of a drink being poured.

I picked up the phone, shaking a tumbler of ice near the receiver so Carl could imagine his gin.

“Hey, Nicky,” Carl's watery voice came over. “Sorry to bother you. I just thought you should know ... your door is wide open, and that cat of yours is outside. It isn't supposed to be, right?”

I gave a noncommittal grunt.

“I'd go over and check, but I'm a little under the weather,” Carl said heavily.

“Don't worry,” I said. “It's time for me to go home anyway.”

It was a fifteen-minute drive, straight north along River Road. Driving into our development occasionally makes me shiver, the sheer number of gaping dark houses—homes that have never known inhabitants, or homes that have known owners and seen them ejected, the house standing triumphantly voided, humanless.

When Amy and I moved in, our only neighbors descended on us: one middle-aged single mom of three, bearing a casserole; a young father of triplets with a six-pack of beer (his wife left at home with the triplets); an older Christian couple who lived a few houses down; and of course, Carl from across the street. We sat out on our back deck and watched the river, and they all talked ruefully about ARMs, and zero percent interest, and zero money down, and then they all remarked how Amy and I were the only ones with river access, the only ones without children. “Just the two of you? In this whole big house?” the single mom asked, doling out a scrambled-egg something.

“Just the two of us,” I confirmed with a smile, and nodded in appreciation as I took a mouthful of wobbly egg.

“Seems lonely.”

On that she was right.

Four months later, the *whole big house* lady lost her mortgage battle and disappeared in the night with her three kids. Her house has remained empty. The living-room window still has a child’s picture of a butterfly taped to it, the bright Magic Marker sun-faded to brown. One evening not long ago, I drove past and saw a man, bearded, bedraggled, staring out from behind the picture, floating in the dark like some sad aquarium fish. He saw me see him and flickered back into the depths of the house. The next day I left a brown paper bag full of sandwiches on the front step; it sat in the sun untouched for a week, decaying wetly, until I picked it back up and threw it out.

Quiet. The complex was always disturbingly quiet. As I neared our home, conscious of the noise of the car engine, I could see the cat was definitely on the steps. Still on the steps, twenty minutes after Carl’s call. This was strange. Amy loved the cat, the cat was declawed, the cat was never let outside, never ever, because the cat, Bleecker, was sweet but extremely stupid, and despite the LoJack tracking device pelleted somewhere in his fat furry rolls, Amy knew she’d never see the cat again if he ever got out. The cat would waddle straight into the Mississippi River—deedle-de-dum—and float all the way to the Gulf of Mexico into the maw of a hungry bull shark.

But it turned out the cat wasn’t even smart enough to get past the steps. Bleecker was perched on the edge of the porch, a pudgy but proud sentinel—Private Tryhard. As I pulled in to the drive, Carl came out and stood on his own front steps, and I could feel the cat and the old man both watching me as I got out of the car and walked toward the house, the red peonies along the border looking fat and juicy, asking to be devoured.

I was about to go into blocking position to get the cat when I saw that the front door was open. Carl had said as much, but seeing it was different. This wasn’t taking-out-the-trash-back-in-a-minute open. This was wide-gaping-ominous open.

Carl hovered across the way, waiting for my response, and like some awful piece of performance art, I felt myself enacting Concerned

Husband. I stood on the middle step and frowned, then took the stairs quickly, two at a time, calling out my wife's name.

Silence.

"Amy, you home?"

I ran straight upstairs. No Amy. The ironing board was set up, the iron still on, a dress waiting to be pressed.

"Amy!"

As I ran back downstairs, I could see Carl still framed in the open doorway, hands on hips, watching. I swerved into the living room, and pulled up short. The carpet glinted with shards of glass, the coffee table shattered. End tables were on their sides, books slid across the floor like a card trick. Even the heavy antique ottoman was belly-up, its four tiny feet in the air like something dead. In the middle of the mess was a pair of good sharp scissors.

"Amy!"

I began running, bellowing her name. Through the kitchen, where a teakettle was burning, down to the basement, where the guest room stood empty, and then out the back door. I pounded across our yard onto the slender boat deck leading out over the river. I peeked over the side to see if she was in our rowboat, where I had found her one day, tethered to the dock, rocking in the water, her face to the sun, eyes closed, and as I'd peered down into the dazzling reflections of the river, at her beautiful, still face, she'd suddenly opened her blue eyes and said nothing to me, and I'd said nothing back and gone into the house alone.

"Amy!"

She wasn't on the water, she wasn't in the house. Amy was not there.

Amy was gone.

# AMY ELLIOTT

SEPTEMBER 18, 2005

—DIARY ENTRY—

Well, well, well. Guess who's back? Nick Dunne, Brooklyn party boy, sugar-cloud kisser, disappearing act. Eight months, two weeks, couple of days, no word, and then he resurfaces, like it was all part of the plan. Turns out, he'd lost my phone number. His cell was out of juice, so he'd written it on a stickie. Then he'd tucked the stickie into his jeans pocket and put the jeans in the washer, and it turned the stickie into a piece of cyclone-shaped pulp. He tried to unravel it but could only see a 3 and an 8. (He said.)

And then work clobbered him and suddenly it was March and too embarrassingly late to try to find me. (He said.)

Of course I *was* angry. I had *been* angry. But now I'm not. Let me set the scene. (She said.) Today. Gusty September winds. I'm walking along Seventh Avenue, making a lunchtime contemplation of the sidewalk bodega bins—endless plastic containers of cantaloupe and honeydew and melon perched on ice like the day's catch—and I could feel a man barnacled to my side as I sailed along, and I corner-eyed the intruder and realized who it was. It was *him*. The boy in "I met a boy!"

I didn't break my stride, just turned to him and said:

- a) "Do I know you?" (manipulative, challenging)
- b) "Oh, wow, I'm so happy to see you!" (eager, doormatlike)
- c) "Go fuck yourself." (aggressive, bitter)
- d) "Well, you certainly take your time about it, don't you, Nick?" (light, playful, laid-back)

Answer: D

And now we're together. Together, together. It was that easy. It's interesting, the timing. Propitious, if you will. (And I will.) Just last

night was my parents' book party. *Amazing Amy and the Big Day*. Yup, Rand and Marybeth couldn't resist. They've given their daughter's namesake what they can't give their daughter: a husband! Yes, for book twenty, *Amazing Amy* is getting married! Wheeeeeeee. No one cares. No one wanted *Amazing Amy* to grow up, least of all me. Leave her in kneesocks and hair ribbons and let *me* grow up, unencumbered by my literary alter ego, my paper-bound better half, the me I was supposed to be.

But *Amy* is the Elliott bread and butter, and she's served us well, so I suppose I can't begrudge her a perfect match. She's marrying good old Able Andy, of course. They'll be just like my parents: happy-happy.

Still, it was unsettling, the incredibly small order the publisher put in. A new *Amazing Amy* used to get a first print of a hundred thousand copies back in the '80s. Now ten thousand. The book-launch party was, accordingly, unfabulous. Off-tone. How do you throw a party for a fictional character who started life as a precocious moppet of six and is now a thirty-year-old bride-to-be who still speaks like a child? ("*Sheesh,*" thought *Amy*, "*my dear fiancé sure is a grouch-monster when he doesn't get his way ...*" That is an actual quote. The whole book made me want to punch *Amy* right in her stupid, spotless vagina.) The book is a nostalgia item, intended to be purchased by women who grew up with *Amazing Amy*, but I'm not sure who will actually want to read it. I read it, of course. I gave the book my blessing—multiple times. Rand and Marybeth feared that I might take *Amy's* marriage as some jab at my perpetually single state. ("I, for one, don't think women should marry before thirty-five," said my mom, who married my dad at twenty-three.)

My parents have always worried that I'd take *Amy* too personally—they always tell me not to read too much into her. And yet I can't fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, *Amy* does it right: When I finally quit violin at age twelve, *Amy* was revealed as a prodigy in the next book. ("*Sheesh,* violin can be hard work, but hard work is the only way to get better!") When I blew off the junior tennis championship at age sixteen to do a beach weekend with friends, *Amy* recommitted to the game. ("*Sheesh,* I know it's fun to spend time with friends, but I'd be letting myself and everyone else down if I didn't show up for the tournament.") This used to drive me mad, but after I

went off to Harvard (and *Amy* correctly chose my parents' alma mater), I decided it was all too ridiculous to think about. That my parents, two *child psychologists*, chose this particular public form of passive-aggressiveness toward *their child* was not just fucked up but also stupid and weird and kind of hilarious. So be it.

The book party was as schizophrenic as the book—at Bluenight, off Union Square, one of those shadowy salons with wingback chairs and art deco mirrors that are supposed to make you feel like a Bright Young Thing. Gin martinis wobbling on trays lofted by waiters with rictus smiles. Greedy journalists with knowing smirks and hollow legs, getting the free buzz before they go somewhere better.

My parents circulate the room hand in hand—their love story is always part of the *Amazing Amy* story: husband and wife in mutual creative labor for a quarter century. Soul mates. They really call themselves that, which makes sense, because I guess they are. I can vouch for it, having studied them, little lonely only child, for many years. They have no harsh edges with each other, no spiny conflicts, they ride through life like conjoined jellyfish—expanding and contracting instinctively, filling each other's spaces liquidly. Making it look easy, the soul-mate thing. People say children from broken homes have it hard, but the children of charmed marriages have their own particular challenges.

Naturally, I have to sit on some velvety banquette in the corner of the room, out of the noise, so I can give a few interviews to a sad handful of kid interns who've gotten stuck with the "grab a quote" assignment from their editors.

*How does it feel to see Amy finally married to Andy? Because you're not married, right?*

Question asked by:

- a) a sheepish, bug-eyed kid balancing a notebook on top of his messenger bag
- b) an overdressed, sleek-haired young thing with fuck-me stilettos
- c) an eager, tattooed rockabilly girl who seemed way more interested in *Amy* than one would guess a tattooed rockabilly girl would be

d) all of the above

Answer: D

Me: *“Oh, I’m thrilled for Amy and Andy, I wish them the best. Ha, ha.”*

My answers to all the other questions, in no particular order:

*“Some parts of Amy are inspired by me, and some are just fiction.”*

*“I’m happily single right now, no Able Andy in my life!”*

*“No, I don’t think Amy oversimplifies the male-female dynamic.”*

*“No, I wouldn’t say Amy is dated; I think the series is a classic.”*

*“Yes, I am single. No Able Andy in my life right now.”*

*“Why is Amy amazing and Andy’s just able? Well, don’t you know a lot of powerful, fabulous women who settle for regular guys, Average Joes and Able Andys? No, just kidding, don’t write that.”*

*“Yes, I am single.”*

*“Yes, my parents are definitely soul mates.”*

*“Yes, I would like that for myself one day.”*

*“Yep, single, motherfucker.”*

Same questions over and over, and me trying to pretend they’re thought-provoking. And them trying to pretend they’re thought-provoking. Thank God for the open bar.

Then no one else wants to talk to me—that fast—and the PR girl pretends it’s a good thing: *Now you can get back to your party!* I wriggle back into the (small) crowd, where my parents are in full hosting mode, their faces flushed—Rand with his toothy prehistoric-monster-fish smile, Marybeth with her chickeny, cheerful head bobs, their hands intertwined, making each other laugh, enjoying each other, *thrilled* with each other—and I think, *I am so fucking lonely.*

I go home and cry for a while. I am almost thirty-two. That’s not old, especially not in New York, but fact is, it’s been *years* since I even really liked someone. So how likely is it I’ll meet someone I love, much less someone I love enough to marry? I’m tired of not knowing who I’ll be with, or if I’ll be with anyone.

I have many friends who are married—not many who are happily married, but many married friends. The few happy ones are like my

parents: They're baffled by my singleness. A smart, pretty, nice girl like me, a girl with so many *interests* and *enthusiasms*, a cool job, a loving family. And let's say it: money. They knit their eyebrows and pretend to think of men they can set me up with, but we all know there's no one left, no one *good* left, and I know that they secretly think there's something wrong with me, something hidden away that makes me unsatisfiable, unsatisfying.

The ones who are not soul-mated—the ones who have *settled*—are even more dismissive of my singleness: It's not that hard to find someone to marry, they say. No relationship is perfect, they say—they, who make do with dutiful sex and gassy bedtime rituals, who settle for TV as conversation, who believe that husbandly capitulation—yes, honey, okay, honey—is the same as concord. *He's doing what you tell him to do because he doesn't care enough to argue*, I think. *Your petty demands simply make him feel superior, or resentful, and someday he will fuck his pretty, young coworker who asks nothing of him, and you will actually be shocked*. Give me a man with a little fight in him, a man who calls me on my bullshit. (But who also kind of likes my bullshit.) And yet: Don't land me in one of those relationships where we're always pecking at each other, disguising insults as jokes, rolling our eyes and “playfully” scrapping in front of our friends, hoping to lure them to our side of an argument they could not care less about. Those awful *if only* relationships: *This marriage would be great if only ...* and you sense the *if only* list is a lot longer than either of them realizes.

So I know I am right not to settle, but it doesn't make me feel better as my friends pair off and I stay home on Friday night with a bottle of wine and make myself an extravagant meal and tell myself, *This is perfect*, as if I'm the one dating me. As I go to endless rounds of parties and bar nights, perfumed and sprayed and hopeful, rotating myself around the room like some dubious dessert. I go on dates with men who are nice and good-looking and smart—perfect-on-paper men who make me feel like I'm in a foreign land, trying to explain myself, trying to make myself known. Because isn't that the point of every relationship: to be known by someone else, to be understood? He *gets* me. She *gets* me. Isn't that the simple magic phrase?

So you suffer through the night with the perfect-on-paper man—the stutter of jokes misunderstood, the witty remarks lobbed and missed. Or maybe he understands that you've made a witty remark but,

unsure of what to do with it, he holds it in his hand like some bit of conversational phlegm he will wipe away later. You spend another hour trying to find each other, to recognize each other, and you drink a little too much and try a little too hard. And you go home to a cold bed and think, *That was fine*. And your life is a long line of fine.

And then you run into Nick Dunne on Seventh Avenue as you're buying diced cantaloupe, and pow, you are known, you are recognized, the both of you. You both find the exact same things worth remembering. (*Just one olive, though.*) You have the same rhythm. Click. You just know each other. All of a sudden you see *reading in bed* and *waffles on Sunday* and *laughing at nothing* and *his mouth on yours*. And it's so far beyond fine that you know you can never go back to fine. That fast. You think: *Oh, here is the rest of my life. It's finally arrived.*

# NICK DUNNE

THE DAY OF

I waited for the police first in the kitchen, but the acrid smell of the burnt teakettle was curling up in the back of my throat, underscoring my need to retch, so I drifted out on the front porch, sat on the top stair, and willed myself to be calm. I kept trying Amy's cell, and it kept going to voice mail, that quick-clip cadence swearing she'd phone right back. Amy always phoned right back. It had been three hours, and I'd left five messages, and Amy had not phoned back.

I didn't expect her to. I'd tell the police: Amy would never have left the house with the teakettle on. Or the door open. Or anything waiting to be ironed. The woman got shit done, and she was not one to abandon a project (say, her fixer-upper husband, for instance), even if she decided she didn't like it. She'd made a grim figure on the Fiji beach during our two-week honeymoon, battling her way through a million mystical pages of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, casting pissy glances at me as I devoured thriller after thriller. Since our move back to Missouri, the loss of her job, her life had revolved (devolved?) around the completion of endless tiny, inconsequential projects. The dress would have been ironed.

And there was the living room, *signs pointing to a struggle*. I already knew Amy wasn't phoning back. I wanted the next part to start.

It was the best time of day, the July sky cloudless, the slowly setting sun a spotlight on the east, turning everything golden and lush, a Flemish painting. The police rolled up. It felt casual, me sitting on the steps, an evening bird singing in the tree, these two cops getting out of their car at a leisurely pace, as if they were dropping by a neighborhood picnic. Kid cops, mid-twenties, confident and uninspired, accustomed to soothing worried parents of curfew-busting teens. A Hispanic girl, her hair in a long dark braid, and a black guy with a marine's stance. Carthage had become a bit (a very tiny bit) less Caucasian while I was away, but it was still so severely segregated that the only people of color I saw in my daily routine tended to be

occupational roamers: delivery men, medics, postal workers. Cops. (“This place is so white, it’s disturbing,” said Amy, who, back in the melting pot of Manhattan, counted a single African-American among her friends. I accused her of craving ethnic window dressing, minorities as backdrops. It did not go well.)

“Mr. Dunne? I’m Officer Velásquez,” said the woman, “and this is Officer Riordan. We understand you’re concerned about your wife?”

Riordan looked down the road, sucking on a piece of candy. I could see his eyes follow a darting bird out over the river. Then he snapped his gaze back toward me, his curled lips telling me he saw what everyone else did. I have a face you want to punch: I’m a working-class Irish kid trapped in the body of a total trust-fund douchebag. I smile a lot to make up for my face, but this only sometimes works. In college, I even wore glasses for a bit, fake spectacles with clear lenses that I thought would lend me an affable, unthreatening vibe. “You do realize that makes you even more of a dick?” Go reasoned. I threw them out and smiled harder.

I waved in the cops: “Come inside the house and see.”

The two climbed the steps, accompanied by the squeaking and shuffling noises of their belts and guns. I stood in the entry to the living room and pointed at the destruction.

“*Oh*,” said Officer Riordan, and gave a brisk crack of his knuckles. He suddenly looked less bored.

Riordan and Velásquez leaned forward in their seats at the dining room table as they asked me all the initial questions: who, where, how long. Their ears were literally pricked. A call had been made out of my hearing, and Riordan informed me that detectives were being dispatched. I had the grave pride of being taken seriously.

Riordan was asking me for the second time if I’d seen any strangers in the neighborhood lately, was reminding me for the third time about Carthage’s roving bands of homeless men, when the phone rang. I launched myself across the room and grabbed it.

A surly woman’s voice: “Mr. Dunne, this is Comfort Hill Assisted Living.” It was where Go and I boarded our Alzheimer’s-riddled father.

“I can’t talk right now, I’ll call you back,” I snapped, and hung up. I

despised the women who staffed Comfort Hill: unsmiling, uncomfoting. Underpaid, gruelingly underpaid, which was probably why they never smiled or comforted. I knew my anger toward them was misdirected—it absolutely infuriated me that my father lingered on while my mom was in the ground.

It was Go's turn to send the check. I was pretty sure it was Go's turn for July. And I'm sure she was positive it was mine. We'd done this before. Go said we must be mutually subliminally forgetting to mail those checks, that what we really wanted to forget was our dad.

I was telling Riordan about the strange man I'd seen in our neighbor's vacated house when the doorbell rang. The doorbell rang. It sounded so normal, like I was expecting a pizza.

The two detectives entered with end-of-shift weariness. The man was rangy and thin, with a face that tapered severely into a dribble of a chin. The woman was surprisingly ugly—brazenly, beyond the scope of everyday ugly: tiny round eyes set tight as buttons, a long twist of a nose, skin spackled with tiny bumps, long lank hair the color of a dust bunny. I have an affinity for ugly women. I was raised by a trio of women who were hard on the eyes—my grandmother, my mom, her sister—and they were all smart and kind and funny and sturdy, good, good women. Amy was the first pretty girl I ever dated, really dated.

The ugly woman spoke first, an echo of Miss Officer Velásquez. “Mr. Dunne? I'm Detective Rhonda Boney. This is my partner, Detective Jim Gilpin. We understand there are some concerns about your wife.”

My stomach growled loud enough for us all to hear it, but we pretended we didn't.

“We take a look around, sir?” Gilpin said. He had fleshy bags under his eyes and scraggly white whiskers in his mustache. His shirt wasn't wrinkled, but he wore it like it was; he looked like he should stink of cigarettes and sour coffee, even though he didn't. He smelled like Dial soap.

I led them a few short steps to the living room, pointed once again at the wreckage, where the two younger cops were kneeling carefully, as if waiting to be discovered doing something useful. Boney steered me toward a chair in the dining room, away from but in view of the *signs of struggle*.

Rhonda Boney walked me through the same basics I'd told Velásquez and Riordan, her attentive sparrow eyes on me. Gilpin squatted down on a knee, assessing the living room.

"Have you phoned friends or family, people your wife might be with?" Rhonda Boney asked.

"I ... No. Not yet. I guess I was waiting for you all."

"Ah." She smiled. "Let me guess: baby of the family."

"What?"

"You're the baby."

"I have a twin sister." I sensed some internal judgment being made. "Why?" Amy's favorite vase was lying on the floor, intact, bumped up against the wall. It was a wedding present, a Japanese masterwork that Amy put away each week when our housecleaner came because she was sure it would get smashed.

"Just a guess of mine, why you'd wait for us: You're used to someone else always taking the lead," Boney said. "That's what my little brother is like. It's a birth-order thing." She scribbled something on a notepad.

"Okay." I gave an angry shrug. "Do you need my sun sign too, or can we get started?"

Boney smiled at me kindly, waiting.

"I waited to do something because, I mean, she's obviously not with a friend," I said, pointing at the disarray in the living room.

"You've lived here, what, Mr. Dunne, two years?" she asked.

"Two years September."

"Moved from where?"

"New York."

"City?"

"Yes."

She pointed upstairs, asking permission without asking, and I nodded and followed her, Gilpin following me.

"I was a writer there," I blurted out before I could stop myself. Even

now, two years back here, and I couldn't bear for someone to think this was my only life.

Boney: "Sounds impressive."

Gilpin: "Of what?"

I timed my answer to my stair climbing: I wrote for a magazine (step), I wrote about pop culture (step) for a men's magazine (step). At the top of the stairs, I turned to see Gilpin looking back at the living room. He snapped to.

"Pop culture?" he called up as he began climbing. "What exactly does that entail?"

"Popular culture," I said. We reached the top of the stairs, Boney waiting for us. "Movies, TV, music, but, uh, you know, not high arts, nothing hifalutin." I winced: *hifalutin?* How patronizing. You two bumpkins probably need me to translate my English, Comma, Educated East Coast into English, Comma, Midwest Folksy. *Me do sum scribbling of stuffs I get in my noggin after watchin' them movin' pitchers!*

"She loves movies," Gilpin said, gesturing toward Boney. Boney nodded: *I do.*

"Now I own The Bar, downtown," I added. I taught a class at the junior college too, but to add that suddenly felt too needy. I wasn't on a date.

Boney was peering into the bathroom, halting me and Gilpin in the hallway. "The Bar?" she said. "I know the place. Been meaning to drop by. Love the name. Very meta."

"Sounds like a smart move," Gilpin said. Boney made for the bedroom, and we followed. "A life surrounded by beer ain't too bad."

"Sometimes the answer *is* at the bottom of a bottle," I said, then winced again at the inappropriateness.

We entered the bedroom.

Gilpin laughed. "Don't I know that feeling."

"See how the iron is still on?" I began.

Boney nodded, opened the door of our roomy closet, and walked inside, flipping on the light, fluttering her latexed hands over shirts and dresses as she moved toward the back. She made a sudden noise,

bent down, turned around—holding a perfectly square box covered in elaborate silver wrapping.

My stomach seized.

“Someone’s birthday?” she asked.

“It’s our anniversary.”

Boney and Gilpin both twitched like spiders and pretended they didn’t.

. . .

By the time we returned to the living room, the kid officers were gone. Gilpin got down on his knees, eyeing the overturned ottoman.

“Uh, I’m a little freaked out, obviously,” I started.

“I don’t blame you at all, Nick,” Gilpin said earnestly. He had pale blue eyes that jittered in place, an unnerving tic.

“Can we do something? To find my wife. I mean, because she’s clearly not here.”

Boney pointed at the wedding portrait on the wall: me in my tux, a block of teeth frozen on my face, my arms curved formally around Amy’s waist; Amy, her blond hair tightly coiled and sprayed, her veil blowing in the beach breeze of Cape Cod, her eyes open too wide because she always blinked at the last minute and she was trying so hard not to blink. The day after Independence Day, the sulfur from the fireworks mingling with the ocean salt—summer.

The Cape had been good to us. I remember discovering several months in that Amy, my girlfriend, was also quite wealthy, a treasured only child of creative-genius parents. An icon of sorts, thanks to a namesake book series that I thought I could remember as a kid. *Amazing Amy*. Amy explained this to me in calm, measured tones, as if I were a patient waking from a coma. As if she’d had to do it too many times before and it had gone badly—the admission of wealth that’s greeted with too much enthusiasm, the disclosure of a secret identity that she herself didn’t create.

Amy told me who and what she was, and then we went out to the Elliotts’ historically registered home on Nantucket Sound, went sailing together, and I thought: *I am a boy from Missouri, flying across the ocean with people who’ve seen much more than I have. If I began seeing*

*things now, living big, I could still not catch up with them.* It didn't make me feel jealous. It made me feel content. I never aspired to wealth or fame. I was not raised by big-dreamer parents who pictured their child as a future president. I was raised by pragmatic parents who pictured their child as a future office worker of some sort, making a living of some sort. To me, it was heady enough to be in the Elliotts' proximity, to skim across the Atlantic and return to a plushly restored home built in 1822 by a whaling captain, and there to prepare and eat meals of organic, healthful foods whose names I didn't know how to pronounce. Quinoa. I remember thinking quinoa was a kind of fish.

So we married on the beach on a deep blue summer day, ate and drank under a white tent that billowed like a sail, and a few hours in, I sneaked Amy off into the dark, toward the waves, because I was feeling so unreal, I believed I had become merely a shimmer. The chilly mist on my skin pulled me back, Amy pulled me back, toward the golden glow of the tent, where the gods were feasting, everything ambrosia. Our whole courtship was just like that.

Boney leaned in to examine Amy. "Your wife is very pretty."

"She is, she's beautiful," I said, and felt my stomach lilt.

"What anniversary today?" she asked.

"Five."

I was jittering from one foot to another, wanting to *do* something. I didn't want them to discuss how lovely my wife was, I wanted them to go out and search for my fucking wife. I didn't say this out loud, though; I often don't say things out loud, even when I should. I contain and compartmentalize to a disturbing degree: In my belly-basement are hundreds of bottles of rage, despair, fear, but you'd never guess from looking at me.

"Five, big one. Let me guess, reservations at Houston's?" Gilpin asked. It was the only upscale restaurant in town. *You all really need to try Houston's*, my mom had said when we moved back, thinking it was Carthage's unique little secret, hoping it might please my wife.

"Of course, Houston's."

It was my fifth lie to the police. I was just starting.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

JULY 5, 2008

## —DIARY ENTRY—

I am fat with love! Husky with ardor! Morbidly obese with devotion! A happy, busy bumblebee of marital enthusiasm. I positively hum around him, fussing and fixing. I have become a strange thing. I have become a wife. I find myself steering the ship of conversations—bulkily, unnaturally—just so I can say his name aloud. I have become a wife, I have become a bore, I have been asked to forfeit my Independent Young Feminist card. I don't care. I balance his checkbook, I trim his hair. I've gotten so retro, at one point I will probably use the word *pocketbook*, shuffling out the door in my swingy tweed coat, my lips painted red, on the way to the *beauty parlor*. Nothing bothers me. Everything seems like it will turn out fine, every bother transformed into an amusing story to be told over dinner. *So I killed a hobo today, honey ... hahahaha! Ah, we have fun!*

Nick is like a good stiff drink: He gives everything the correct perspective. Not a different perspective, the correct perspective. With Nick, I realize it actually, truly doesn't matter if the electricity bill is a few days late, if my latest quiz turns out a little lame. (My most recent, I'm not joking: "What kind of tree would you be?" Me, I'm an apple tree! This means nothing!) It doesn't matter if the new *Amazing Amy* book has been well and duly scorched, the reviews vicious, the sales a stunning plummet after a limp start. It doesn't matter what color I paint our room, or how late traffic makes me, or whether our recycling really, truly does get recycled. (Just level with me, New York, does it?) It doesn't matter, because I have found my match. It's Nick, laid-back and calm, smart and fun and uncomplicated. Untortured, happy. Nice. Big penis.

All the stuff I don't like about myself has been pushed to the back of my brain. Maybe that is what I like best about him, the way he makes me. Not makes me feel, just makes me. I am fun. I am playful. I am

game. I feel naturally happy and entirely satisfied. I am a wife! It's weird to say those words. (Seriously, about the recycling, New York—come on, just a wink.)

We do silly things, like last weekend we drove to Delaware because neither of us have ever had sex in Delaware. Let me set the scene, because now it really is for posterity. We cross the state line—*Welcome to Delaware!*, the sign says, and also: *Small Wonder*, and also: *The First State*, and also: *Home of Tax-Free Shopping*.

Delaware, a state of many rich identities.

I point Nick down the first dirt road I see, and we rumble five minutes until we hit pine trees on all sides. We don't speak. He pushes his seat back. I pull up my skirt. I am not wearing undies, I can see his mouth turn down and his face go slack, the drugged, determined look he gets when he's turned on. I climb atop him, my back to him, facing the windshield. I'm pressed against the steering wheel, and as we move together, the horn emits tiny bleats that mimic me, and my hand makes a smearing noise as I press it against the windshield. Nick and I can come anywhere; neither of us gets stage fright, it's something we're both rather proud of. Then we drive right back home. I eat beef jerky and ride with bare feet on the dashboard.

We love our house. The house that *Amazing Amy* built. A Brooklyn brownstone my parents bought for us, right on the Promenade, with the big wide-screen view of Manhattan. It's extravagant, it makes me feel guilty, but it's perfect. I battle the spoiled-rich-girl vibe where I can. Lots of DIY. We painted the walls ourselves over two weekends: spring green and pale yellow and velvety blue. In theory. None of the colors turned out like we thought they would, but we pretend to like them anyway. We fill our home with knickknacks from flea markets; we buy records for Nick's record player. Last night we sat on the old Persian rug, drinking wine and listening to the vinyl scratches as the sky went dark and Manhattan switched on, and Nick said, "This is how I always pictured it. This is exactly how I pictured it."

On weekends, we talk to each other under four layers of bedding, our faces warm under a sunlit yellow comforter. Even the floorboards are cheerful: There are two old creaky slats that call out to us as we walk in the door. I love it, I love that it is ours, that we have a great story behind the ancient floor lamp, or the misshapen clay mug that sits near our coffeepot, never holding anything but a single paper clip.

I spend my days thinking of sweet things to do for him—go buy a peppermint soap that will sit in his palm like a warm stone, or maybe a slim slice of trout that I could cook and serve to him, an ode to his riverboat days. I know, I am ridiculous. I love it, though—I never knew I was capable of being ridiculous over a man. It’s a relief. I even swoon over his socks, which he manages to shed in adorably tangled poses, as if a puppy carried them in from another room.

It is our one-year anniversary and I am fat with love, even though people kept telling and telling us the first year was going to be so hard, as if we were naive children marching off to war. It wasn’t hard. We are meant to be married. It is our one-year anniversary, and Nick is leaving work at lunchtime; my treasure hunt awaits him. The clues are all about us, about the past year together:

*Whenever my sweet hubby gets a cold*

*It is this dish that will soon be sold.*

Answer: the tom yum soup from Thai Town on President Street. The manager will be there this afternoon with a taster bowl and the next clue.

Also McMann’s in Chinatown and the Alice statue at Central Park. A grand tour of New York. We’ll end at the Fulton Street fish market, where we’ll buy a pair of beautiful lobsters, and I will hold the container in my lap as Nick jitters nervously in the cab beside me. We’ll rush home, and I will drop them in a new pot on our old stove with all the finesse of a girl who has lived many Cape summers while Nick giggles and pretends to hide in fear outside the kitchen door.

I had suggested we get burgers. Nick wanted us to go out—five-star, fancy—somewhere with a clockwork of courses and namedropping waiters. So the lobsters are a perfect in-between, the lobsters are what everyone tells us (and tells us and tells us) that marriage is about: compromise!

We’ll eat lobster with butter and have sex on the floor while a woman on one of our old jazz records sings to us in her far-side-of-the-tunnel voice. We’ll get slowly lazy-drunk on good Scotch, Nick’s favorite. I’ll give him his present—the monogrammed stationery he’s been wanting from Crane & Co. with the clean sans-serif font set in hunter green, on the thick creamy stock that will hold lush ink and his writer’s words. Stationery for a writer, and a writer’s wife who’s

maybe angling for a love letter or two.

Then maybe we'll have sex again. And a late-night burger. And more Scotch. Voilà: happiest couple on the block! And they say marriage is such hard work.

**NICK DUNNE**  
THE NIGHT OF

Boney and Gilpin moved our interview to the police station, which looks like a failing community bank. They left me alone in a little room for forty minutes, me willing myself not to move. To pretend to be calm is to be calm, in a way. I slouched over the table, put my chin on my arm. Waited.

“Do you want to call Amy’s parents?” Boney had asked.

“I don’t want to panic them,” I said. “If we don’t hear from her in an hour, I’ll call.”

We’d done three rounds of that conversation.

Finally, the cops came in and sat at the table across from me. I fought the urge to laugh at how much it felt like a TV show. This was the same room I’d seen surfing through late-night cable for the past ten years, and the two cops—wary, intense—acted like the stars. Totally fake. Epcot Police Station. Boney was even holding a paper coffee cup and a manila folder that looked like a prop. Cop prop. I felt giddy, felt for a moment we were all pretend people: *Let’s play the Missing Wife game!*

“You okay there, Nick?” Boney asked.

“I’m okay, why?”

“You’re smiling.”

The giddiness slid to the tiled floor. “I’m sorry, it’s all just—”

“I know,” Boney said, giving me a look that was like a hand pat. “It’s too strange, I know.” She cleared her throat. “First of all, we want to make sure you’re comfortable here. You need anything, just let us know. The more information you can give us right now, the better, but you can leave at any time, that’s not a problem either.”

“Whatever you need.”

“Okay, great, thank you,” she said. “Um, okay. I want to get the annoying stuff out of the way first. The crap stuff. If your wife was indeed abducted—and we don’t know that, but if it comes to that—we want to catch the guy, and when we catch the guy, we want to nail him, hard. No way out. No wiggle room.”

“Right.”

“So we have to rule you out real quick, real easy. So the guy can’t come back and say we didn’t rule you out, you know what I mean?”

I nodded mechanically. I didn’t really know what she meant, but I wanted to seem as cooperative as possible. “Whatever you need.”

“We don’t want to freak you out,” Gilpin added. “We just want to cover all the bases.”

“Fine by me.” *It’s always the husband*, I thought. *Everyone knows it’s always the husband, so why can’t they just say it: We suspect you because you are the husband, and it’s always the husband. Just watch Dateline.*

“Okay, great, Nick,” Boney said. “First let’s get a swab of the inside of your cheek so we can rule out all of the DNA in the house that isn’t yours. Would that be okay?”

“Sure.”

“I’d also like to take a quick sweep of your hands for gun shot residue. Again, just in case—”

“Wait, wait, wait. Have you found something that makes you think my wife was—”

“Nonono, Nick,” Gilpin interrupted. He pulled a chair up to the table and sat on it backward. I wondered if cops actually did that. Or did some clever actor do that, and then cops began doing it because they’d seen the actors playing cops do that and it looked cool?

“It’s just smart protocol,” Gilpin continued. “We try to cover every base: Check your hands, get a swab, and if we could check out your car too ...”

“Of course. Like I said, whatever you need.”

“Thank you, Nick. I really appreciate it. Sometimes guys, they make things hard for us just because they can.”

I was exactly the opposite. My father had infused my childhood

with unspoken blame; he was the kind of man who skulked around looking for things to be angry at. This had turned Go defensive and extremely unlikely to take unwarranted shit. It had turned me into a knee-jerk suckup to authority. Mom, Dad, teachers: *Whatever makes your job easier, sir or madam.* I craved a constant stream of approval. “You’d literally lie, cheat, and steal—hell, kill—to convince people you are a good guy,” Go once said. We were in line for knishes at Yonah Schimmel’s, not far from Go’s old New York apartment—that’s how well I remember the moment—and I lost my appetite because it was so completely true and I’d never realized it, and even as she was saying it, I thought: *I will never forget this, this is one of those moments that will be lodged in my brain forever.*

We made small talk, the cops and I, about the July Fourth fireworks and the weather, while my hands were tested for gunshot residue and the slick inside of my cheek was cotton-tipped. Pretending it was normal, a trip to the dentist.

When it was done, Boney put another cup of coffee in front of me, squeezed my shoulder. “I’m sorry about that. Worst part of the job. You think you’re up to a few questions now? It’d really help us.”

“Yes, definitely, fire away.”

She placed a slim digital tape recorder on the table in front of me. “You mind? This way you won’t have to answer the same questions over and over and over ...” She wanted to tape me so I’d be nailed to one story. *I should call a lawyer,* I thought, *but only guilty people need lawyers,* so I nodded: *No problem.*

“So: Amy,” Boney said. “You two been living here how long?”

“Just about two years.”

“And she’s originally from New York. City.”

“Yes.”

“She work, got a job?” Gilpin said.

“No. She used to write personality quizzes.”

The detectives swapped a look: *Quizzes?*

“For teen magazines, women’s magazines,” I said. “You know: ‘Are you the jealous type? Take our quiz and find out! Do guys find you too intimidating? Take our quiz and find out!’ ”

“Very cool, I love those,” Boney said. “I didn’t know that was an actual job. Writing those. Like, a career.”

“Well, it’s not. Anymore. The Internet is packed with quizzes for free. Amy’s were smarter—she had a master’s in psychology—*has* a master’s in psychology.” I guffawed uncomfortably at my gaffe. “But smart can’t beat free.”

“Then what?”

I shrugged. “Then we moved back here. She’s just kind of staying at home right now.”

“Oh! You guys got kids, then?” Boney chirped, as if she had discovered good news.

“No.”

“Oh. So then what does she do most days?”

That was my question too. Amy was once a woman who did a little of everything, all the time. When we moved in together, she’d made an intense study of French cooking, displaying hyper-quick knife skills and an inspired boeuf bourguignon. For her thirty-fourth birthday, we flew to Barcelona, and she stunned me by rolling off trills of conversational Spanish, learned in months of secret lessons. My wife had a brilliant, popping brain, a greedy curiosity. But her obsessions tended to be fueled by competition: She needed to dazzle men and jealous-ify women: *Of course Amy can cook French cuisine and speak fluent Spanish and garden and knit and run marathons and day-trade stocks and fly a plane and look like a runway model doing it.* She needed to be Amazing Amy, all the time. Here in Missouri, the women shop at Target, they make diligent, comforting meals, they laugh about how little high school Spanish they remember. Competition doesn’t interest them. Amy’s relentless achieving is greeted with open-palmed acceptance and maybe a bit of pity. It was about the worst outcome possible for my competitive wife: a town of contented also-rans.

“She has a lot of hobbies,” I said.

“Anything worrying you?” Boney asked, looking worried. “You’re not concerned about drugs or drinking? I’m not speaking ill of your wife. A lot of housewives, more than you’d guess, they pass the day that way. The days, they get long when you’re by yourself. And if the drinking turns to drugs—and I’m not talking heroin but even

prescription painkillers—well, there are some pretty awful characters selling around here right now.”

“The drug trade has gotten bad,” Gilpin said. “We’ve had a bunch of police layoffs—one-fifth of the force, and we were tight to begin with. I mean, it’s *bad*, we’re overrun.”

“Had a housewife, nice lady, get a tooth knocked out last month over some OxyContin,” Boney prompted.

“No, Amy might have a glass of wine or something, but not drugs.”

Boney eyed me; this was clearly not the answer she wanted. “She have some good friends here? We’d like to call some of them, just make sure. No offense. Sometimes a spouse is the last to know when drugs are involved. People get ashamed, especially women.”

Friends. In New York, Amy made and shed friends weekly; they were like her projects. She’d get intensely excited about them: Paula who gave her singing lessons and had a wicked good voice (Amy went to boarding school in Massachusetts; I loved the very occasional times she got all New England on me: *wicked good*); Jessie from the fashion-design course. But then I’d ask about Jessie or Paula a month later, and Amy would look at me like I was making up words.

Then there were the men who were always rattling behind Amy, eager to do the husbandly things that her husband failed to do. Fix a chair leg, hunt down her favorite imported Asian tea. Men who she swore were her friends, just good friends. Amy kept them at exactly an arm’s distance—far enough away that I couldn’t get too annoyed, close enough that she could crook a finger and they’d do her bidding.

In Missouri ... good God, I really didn’t know. It only occurred to me just then. *You truly are an asshole*, I thought. Two years we’d been here, and after the initial flurry of meet-and-greets, those manic first months, Amy had no one she regularly saw. She had my mom, who was now dead, and me—and our main form of conversation was attack and rebuttal. When we’d been back home for a year, I’d asked her faux gallantly: “And how are you liking North Carthage, Mrs. Dunne?”

“*New Carthage*, you mean?” she’d replied. I refused to ask her the reference, but I knew it was an insult.

“She has a few good friends, but they’re mostly back east.”

“Her folks?”

“They live in New York. City.”

“And you still haven’t called any of these people?” Boney asked, a bemused smile on her face.

“I’ve been doing everything *else* you’ve been asking me to do. I haven’t had a chance.” I’d signed away permission to trace credit cards and ATMs and track Amy’s cell phone, I’d handed over Go’s cell number and the name of Sue, the widow at The Bar, who could presumably attest to the time I arrived.

“Baby of the family.” She shook her head. “You really do remind me of my little brother.” A beat. “That’s a compliment, I swear.”

“She dotes on him,” Gilpin said, scribbling in a notebook. “Okay, so you left the house at about seven-thirty A.M., and you showed up at The Bar at about noon, and in between, you were at the beach.”

There’s a beachhead about ten miles north of our house, a not overly pleasant collection of sand and silt and beer-bottle shards. Trash barrels overflowing with Styrofoam cups and dirty diapers. But there is a picnic table upwind that gets nice sun, and if you stare directly at the river, you can ignore the other crap.

“I sometimes bring my coffee and the paper and just sit. Gotta make the most of summer.”

No, I hadn’t talked to anyone at the beach. No, no one saw me.

“It’s a quiet place midweek,” Gilpin allowed.

If the police talked to anyone who knew me, they’d quickly learn that I rarely went to the beach and that I never sometimes brought my coffee to just enjoy the morning. I have Irish-white skin and an impatience for navel-gazing: A beach boy I am not. I told the police that because it had been Amy’s idea, for me to go sit in the spot where I could be alone and watch the river I loved and ponder our life together. She’d said this to me this morning, after we’d eaten her crepes. She leaned forward on the table and said, “I know we are having a tough time. I still love you so much, Nick, and I know I have a lot of things to work on. I want to be a good wife to you, and I want you to be my husband and be happy. But you need to decide what you want.”

She'd clearly been practicing the speech; she smiled proudly as she said it. And even as my wife was offering me this kindness, I was thinking, *Of course she has to stage-manage this. She wants the image of me and the wild running river, my hair ruffling in the breeze as I look out onto the horizon and ponder our life together. I can't just go to Dunkin' Donuts.*

*You need to decide what you want.* Unfortunately for Amy, I had decided already.

Boney looked up brightly from her notes: "Can you tell me what your wife's blood type is?" she asked.

"Uh, no, I don't know."

"You don't know your wife's blood type?"

"Maybe O?" I guessed.

Boney frowned, then made a drawn-out yoga-like sound. "Okay, Nick, here are the things *we* are doing to help." She listed them: Amy's cell was being monitored, her photo circulated, her credit cards tracked. Known sex offenders in the area were being interviewed. Our sparse neighborhood was being canvassed. Our home phone was tapped, in case any ransom calls came in.

I wasn't sure what to say now. I raked my memory for the lines: What does the husband say at this point in the movie? Depends on whether he's guilty or innocent.

"I can't say that reassures me. Are you—is this an abduction, or a missing persons case, or what exactly is going on?" I knew the statistics, knew them from the same TV show I was starring in: If the first forty-eight hours didn't turn up something in a case, it was likely to go unsolved. The first forty-eight hours were crucial. "I mean, my wife is gone. My wife *is gone!*" I realized it was the first time I'd said it the way it should have been said: panicked and angry. My dad was a man of infinite varieties of bitterness, rage, distaste. In my lifelong struggle to avoid becoming him, I'd developed an inability to demonstrate much negative emotion at all. It was another thing that made me seem like a dick—my stomach could be all oiled eels, and you would get nothing from my face and less from my words. It was a constant problem: too much control or no control at all.

"Nick, we are taking this *extremely* seriously," Boney said. "The lab

guys are over at your place as we speak, and that will give us more information to go on. Right now, the more you can tell us about your wife, the better. What is she like?”

The usual husband phrases came into my mind: *She's sweet, she's great, she's nice, she's supportive.*

“What is she like *how*?” I asked.

“Give me an idea of her personality,” Boney prompted. “Like, what did you get her for your anniversary? Jewelry?”

“I hadn't gotten anything quite yet,” I said. “I was going to do it this afternoon.” I waited for her to laugh and say “baby of the family” again, but she didn't.

“Okay. Well, then, tell me about her. Is she outgoing? Is she—I don't know how to say this—is she New Yorky? Like what might come off to some as rude? Might rub people the wrong way?”

“I don't know. She's not a never-met-a-stranger kind of person, but she's not—not abrasive enough to make someone ... hurt her.”

This was my eleventh lie. The Amy of today was abrasive enough to want to hurt, sometimes. I speak specifically of the Amy of today, who was only remotely like the woman I fell in love with. It had been an awful fairy-tale reverse transformation. Over just a few years, the old Amy, the girl of the big laugh and the easy ways, literally shed herself, a pile of skin and soul on the floor, and out stepped this new, brittle, bitter Amy. My wife was no longer my wife but a razor-wire knot daring me to unloop her, and I was not up to the job with my thick, numb, nervous fingers. Country fingers. Flyover fingers untrained in the intricate, dangerous work of *solving Amy*. When I'd hold up the bloody stumps, she'd sigh and turn to her secret mental notebook on which she tallied all my deficiencies, forever noting disappointments, frailties, shortcomings. My old Amy, damn, she was fun. She was funny. She made me laugh. I'd forgotten that. And *she* laughed. From the bottom of her throat, from right behind that small finger-shaped hollow, which is the best place to laugh from. She released her grievances like handfuls of birdseed: They are there, and they are gone.

She was not the thing she became, the thing I feared most: an angry woman. I was not good with angry women. They brought something

out in me that was unsavory.

“She bossy?” Gilpin asked. “Take-charge?”

I thought of Amy’s calendar, the one that went three years into the future, and if you looked a year ahead, you would actually find appointments: dermatologist, dentist, vet. “She’s a planner—she doesn’t, you know, wing anything. She likes to make lists and check things off. Get things done. That’s why this doesn’t make sense—”

“That can drive you crazy,” Boney said sympathetically. “If you’re not that type. You seem very B-personality.”

“I’m a little more laid-back, I guess,” I said. Then I added the part I was supposed to add: “We round each other out.”

I looked at the clock on the wall, and Boney touched my hand.

“Hey, why don’t you go ahead and give a call to Amy’s parents? I’m sure they’d appreciate it.”

It was past midnight. Amy’s parents went to sleep at nine P.M.; they were strangely boastful about this early bedtime. They’d be deep asleep by now, so this would be an urgent middle-of-the-night call. Cells went off at 8:45 always, so Rand Elliott would have to walk from his bed all the way to the end of the hall to pick up the old heavy phone; he’d be fumbling with his glasses, fussy with the table lamp. He’d be telling himself all the reasons not to worry about a late-night phone call, all the harmless reasons the phone might be ringing.

I dialed twice and hung up before I let the call ring through. When I did, it was Marybeth, not Rand, who answered, her deep voice buzzing my ears. I’d only gotten to “Marybeth, this is Nick” when I lost it.

“What is it, Nick?”

I took a breath.

“Is it Amy? Tell me.”

“I uh—I’m sorry I should have called—”

“Tell me, goddamn it!”

“We c-can’t find Amy,” I stuttered.

“You can’t *find* Amy?”

“I don’t know—”

“Amy is missing?”

“We don’t know that for sure, we’re still—”

“Since when?”

“We’re not sure. I left this morning, a little after seven—”

“And you waited till now to call us?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to—”

“Jesus Christ. We played tennis tonight. *Tennis*, and we could have been ... My God. Are the police involved? You’ve notified them?”

“I’m at the station right now.”

“Put on whoever’s in charge, Nick. Please.”

Like a kid, I went to fetch Gilpin. *My mommy-in-law wants to talk to you.*

Phoning the Elliotts made it official. The emergency—*Amy is gone*—was spreading to the outside.

I was heading back to the interview room when I heard my father’s voice. Sometimes, in particularly shameful moments, I heard his voice in my head. But this was my father’s voice, here. His words emerged in wet bubbles like something from a rancid bog. *Bitch bitch bitch*. My father, out of his mind, had taken to flinging the word at any woman who even vaguely annoyed him: *bitch bitch bitch*. I peered inside a conference room, and there he sat on a bench against the wall. He had been a handsome man once, intense and cleft-chinned. *Jarringly dreamy* was how my aunt had described him. Now he sat muttering at the floor, his blond hair matted, trousers muddy, and arms scratched, as if he’d fought his way through a thornbush. A line of spittle glimmered down his chin like a snail’s trail, and he was flexing and unflexing arm muscles that had not yet gone to seed. A tense female officer sat next to him, her lips in an angry pucker, trying to ignore him: *Bitch bitch bitch I told you bitch*.

“What’s going on?” I asked her. “This is my father.”

“You got our call?”

“What call?”

“To come get your father.” She overenunciated, as if I were a dim ten-year-old.

“I— My wife is missing. I’ve been *here* most of the night.”

She stared at me, not connecting in the least. I could see her debating whether to sacrifice her leverage and apologize, inquire. Then my father started up again, *bitch bitch bitch*, and she chose to keep the leverage.

“Sir, Comfort Hill has been trying to contact you all day. Your father wandered out a fire exit early this morning. He’s got a few scratches and scrapes, as you can see, but no damage. We picked him up a few hours ago, walking down River Road, disoriented. We’ve been trying to reach you.”

“I’ve been right here,” I said. “Right goddamn next door, how did no one put this together?”

*Bitch bitch bitch*, said my dad.

“Sir, please don’t take that tone with me.”

*Bitch bitch bitch*.

Boney ordered an officer—male—to drive my dad back to the home so I could finish up with them. We stood on the stairs outside the police station, watched him get settled into the car, still muttering. The entire time he never registered my presence. When they drove off, he didn’t even look back.

“You guys not close?” she asked.

“We are the definition of not close.”

The police finished with their questions and hustled me into a squad car at about two A.M. with advice to get a good night’s sleep and return at eleven for a 12-noon press conference.

I didn’t ask if I could go home. I had them take me to Go’s, because I knew she’d stay up and have a drink with me, fix me a sandwich. It was, pathetically, all I wanted right then: a woman to fix me a sandwich and not ask me any questions.

“You don’t want to go look for her?” Go offered as I ate. “We can drive around.”

“That seems pointless,” I said dully. “Where do I look?”

“Nick, this is really fucking serious.”

“I know, Go.”

“Act like it, okay, *Lance*? Don’t fucking *myuhmyuhmyuh*.” It was a thick-tongued noise, the noise she always made to convey my indecisiveness, accompanied by a dazed rolling of the eyes and the dusting off of my legal first name. No one who has my face needs to be called Lance. She handed me a tumbler of Scotch. “And drink this, but only this. You don’t want to be hungover tomorrow. Where the fuck could she be? God, I feel sick to my stomach.” She poured herself a glass, gulped, then tried to sip, pacing around the kitchen. “Aren’t you worried, Nick? That some guy, like, saw her on the street and just, just decided to take her? Hit her on the head and—”

I started. “Why did you say *hit her on the head*, what the fuck is that?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to paint a picture, I just ... I don’t know, I just keep thinking. About some crazy person.” She splashed some more Scotch into her tumbler.

“Speaking of crazy people,” I said, “Dad got out again today, they found him wandering down River Road. He’s back at Comfort now.”

She shrugged: *okay*. It was the third time in six months that our dad had slipped out. Go was lighting a cigarette, her thoughts still on Amy. “I mean, isn’t there someone we can go talk to?” she asked. “Something we can do?”

“Jesus, Go! You really need me to feel more fucking impotent than I do right now?” I snapped. “I have no idea what I’m supposed to be doing. There’s no ‘When Your Wife Goes Missing 101.’ The police told me I could leave. I left. I’m just doing what they tell me.”

“Of course you are,” murmured Go, who had a long-stymied mission to turn me into a rebel. It wouldn’t take. I was the kid in high school who made curfew; I was the writer who hit my deadlines, even the fake ones. I respect rules, because if you follow rules, things go smoothly, usually.

“Fuck, Go, I’m back at the station in a few hours, okay? Can you please just be nice to me for a second? I’m scared shitless.”

We had a five-second staring contest, then Go filled up my glass one

more time, an apology. She sat down next to me, put a hand on my shoulder.

“Poor Amy,” she said.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

APRIL 21, 2009

## —DIARY ENTRY—

Poor me. Let me set the scene: Campbell and Insley and I are all down in Soho, having dinner at Tableau. Lots of goat-cheese tarts, lamb meatballs, and rocket greens, I'm not sure what all the fuss is about. But we are working backward: dinner first, then drinks in one of the little nooks Campbell has reserved, a mini-closet where you can lounge expensively in a place that's not too different from, say, your living room. But fine, it's fun to do the silly, trendy things sometimes. We are all overdressed in our little flashy frocks, our slasher heels, and we all eat small plates of food bites that are as decorative and unsubstantial as we are.

We've discussed having our husbands drop by to join us for the drinks portion. So there we are, post-dinner, tucked into our nook, mojitos and martinis and my bourbon delivered to us by a waitress who could be auditioning for the small role of Fresh-faced Girl Just Off the Bus.

We are running out of things to say; it is a Tuesday, and no one is feeling like it is anything but. The drinks are being carefully drunk: Insley and Campbell both have vague appointments the next morning, and I have work, so we aren't gearing up for a big night, we are winding down, and we are getting dull-witted, bored. We would leave if we weren't waiting for the possible appearance of the men. Campbell keeps peeking at her BlackBerry, Insley studies her flexed calves from different angles. John arrives first—huge apologies to Campbell, big smiles and kisses for us all, a man just thrilled to be here, just delighted to arrive at the tail-end of a cocktail hour across town so he can guzzle a drink and head home with his wife. George shows up about twenty minutes later—sheepish, tense, a terse excuse about work, Insley snapping at him, "You're *forty* minutes late," him nipping back, "Yeah, sorry about making us money." The two barely talking to each other as they make conversation with everyone else.

Nick never shows; no call. We wait another forty-five minutes, Campbell solicitous (“Probably got hit with some last-minute deadline,” she says, and smiles toward good old John, who never lets last-minute deadlines interfere with his wife’s plans); Insley’s anger thawing toward her husband as she realizes he is only the second-biggest jackass of the group (“You sure he hasn’t even texted, sweetie?”).

Me, I just smile: “Who knows where he is—I’ll catch him at home.” And then it is the men of the group who look stricken: *You mean that was an option? Take a pass on the night with no nasty consequences? No guilt or anger or sulking?*

Well, maybe not for you guys.

Nick and I, we sometimes laugh, laugh out loud, at the horrible things women make their husbands do to prove their love. The pointless tasks, the myriad sacrifices, the endless small surrenders. We call these men the *dancing monkeys*.

Nick will come home, sweaty and salty and beer-loose from a day at the ballpark, and I’ll curl up in his lap, ask him about the game, ask him if his friend Jack had a good time, and he’ll say, “Oh, he came down with a case of the dancing monkeys—poor Jennifer was having a ‘real stressful week’ and *really* needed him at home.”

Or his buddy at work, who can’t go out for drinks because his girlfriend really needs him to stop by some bistro where she is having dinner with a friend from out of town. So they can finally meet. And so she can show how obedient her monkey is: *He comes when I call, and look how well groomed!*

*Wear this, don’t wear that. Do this chore now and do this chore when you get a chance and by that I mean now. And definitely, definitely, give up the things you love for me, so I will have proof that you love me best.* It’s the female pissing contest—as we swan around our book clubs and our cocktail hours, there are few things women love more than being able to detail the sacrifices our men make for us. A call-and-response, the response being: “Ohhh, that’s so sweet.”

I am happy not to be in that club. I don’t partake, I don’t get off on emotional coercion, on forcing Nick to play some happy-hubby role—the shrugging, cheerful, dutiful *taking out the trash, honey!* role. Every wife’s dream man, the counterpoint to every man’s fantasy of the

sweet, hot, laid-back woman who loves sex and a stiff drink.

I like to think I am confident and secure and mature enough to know Nick loves me without him constantly proving it. I don't need pathetic dancing-monkey scenarios to repeat to my friends; I am content with letting him be himself.

I don't know why women find that so hard.

When I get home from dinner, my cab pulls up just as Nick is getting out of his own taxi, and he stands in the street with his arms out to me and a huge grin on his face—"Baby!"—and I run and I jump up into his arms and he presses a stubbly cheek against mine.

"What did you do tonight?" I ask.

"Some guys were playing poker after work, so I hung around for a bit. Hope that was okay."

"Of course," I say. "More fun than my night."

"Who all showed up?"

"Oh, Campbell and Insley and their dancing monkeys. Boring. You dodged a bullet. A really lame bullet."

He squeezes me into him—those strong arms—and hauls me up the stairs. "God, I love you," he says.

Then comes sex and a stiff drink and a night of sleep in a sweet, exhausted rats' tangle in our big, soft bed. Poor me.

# NICK DUNNE

ONE DAY GONE

I didn't listen to Go about the booze. I finished half the bottle sitting on her sofa by myself, my eighteenth burst of adrenaline kicking in just when I thought I'd finally go to sleep: My eyes were shutting, I was shifting my pillow, my eyes were closed, and then I saw my wife, blood clotting her blond hair, weeping and blind in pain, scraping herself along our kitchen floor. Calling my name. *Nick, Nick, Nick!*

I took repeated tugs on the bottle, psyching myself up for sleep, a losing routine. Sleep is like a cat: It only comes to you if you ignore it. I drank more and continued my mantra. *Stop thinking, swig, empty your head, swig, now, seriously, empty your head, do it now, swig. You need to be sharp tomorrow, you need to sleep!* Swig. I got nothing more than a fussy nap toward dawn, woke up an hour later with a hangover. Not a disabling hangover, but decent. I was tender and dull. Fuggy. Maybe still a little drunk. I stutter-walked to Go's Subaru, the movement feeling alien, like my legs were on backward. I had temporary ownership of the car; the police had graciously accepted my gently used Jetta for inspection along with my laptop—all just a formality, I was assured. I drove home to get myself some decent clothes.

Three police cruisers sat on my block, our very few neighbors milling around. No Carl, but there was Jan Teverer—the Christian lady—and Mike, the father of the three-year-old IVF triplets—Trinity, Topher, and Talullah. (“I hate them all, just by name,” said Amy, a grave judge of anything trendy. When I mentioned that the name Amy was once trendy, my wife said, “Nick, you *know* the story of my name.” I had no idea what she was talking about.)

Jan nodded from a distance without meeting my eyes, but Mike strode over to me as I got out of my car. “I'm so sorry, man, anything I can do, you let me know. Anything. I did the mowing this morning, so at least you don't needta worry about that.”

Mike and I took turns mowing all the abandoned foreclosed properties in the complex—heavy rains in the spring had turned yards into jungles, which encouraged an influx of raccoons. We had raccoons everywhere, gnawing through our garbage late at night, sneaking into our basements, lounging on our porches like lazy house pets. The mowing didn't seem to make them go away, but we could at least see them coming now.

“Thanks, man, thank you,” I said.

“Man, my wife, she's been hysterical since she heard,” he said. “Absolutely hysterical.”

“I'm so sorry to hear that,” I said. “I gotta—” I pointed at my door.

“Just sitting around, crying over pictures of Amy.”

I had no doubt that a thousand Internet photos had popped up overnight, just to feed the pathetic needs of women like Mike's wife. I had no sympathy for drama queens.

“Hey, I gotta ask—” Mike started.

I patted his arm and pointed again at the door, as if I had pressing business. I turned away before he could ask any questions and knocked on the door of my own house.

Officer Velásquez escorted me upstairs, into my own bedroom, into my own closet—past the silvery perfect-square gift box—and let me rifle through my things. It made me tense, selecting clothes in front of this young woman with the long brown braid, this woman who had to be judging me, forming an opinion. I ended up grabbing blindly: The final look was business-casual, slacks and short sleeves, like I was going to a convention. It would make an interesting essay, I thought, picking out appropriate clothes when a loved one goes missing. The greedy, angle-hungry writer in me, impossible to turn off.

I jammed it all into a bag and turned back around, looking at the gift box on the floor. “Could I look inside?” I asked her.

She hesitated, then played it safe. “No, I'm sorry, sir. Better not right now.”

The edge of the gift wrapping had been carefully slit. “Has somebody looked inside?”

She nodded.

I stepped around Velásquez toward the box. “If it’s already been looked at then—”

She stepped in front of me. “Sir, I can’t let you do that.”

“This is ridiculous. It’s *for* me from *my* wife—”

I stepped back around her, bent down, and had one hand on the corner of the box when she slapped an arm across my chest from behind. I felt a momentary spurt of fury, that this *woman* presumed to tell me what to do in *my own home*. No matter how hard I try to be my mother’s son, my dad’s voice comes into my head unbidden, depositing awful thoughts, nasty words.

“Sir, this is a crime scene, you—”

*Stupid bitch.*

Suddenly her partner, Riordan, was in the room and on me too, and I was shaking them off—*fine, fine, fuck*—and they were forcing me down the stairs. A woman was on all fours near the front door, squirreling along the floorboards, searching, I assume, for blood spatter. She looked up at me impassively, then back down.

I forced myself to decompress as I drove back to Go’s to dress. This was only one in a long series of annoying and asinine things the police would do in the course of this investigation (I like rules that make sense, not rules without logic), so I needed to calm down: *Do not antagonize the cops*, I told myself. Repeat if necessary: *Do not antagonize the cops*.

I ran into Boney as I entered the police station, and she said, “Your in-laws are here, Nick,” in an encouraging tone, like she was offering me a warm muffin.

Marybeth and Rand Elliott were standing with their arms around each other. Middle of the police station, they looked like they were posing for prom photos. That’s how I always saw them, hands patting, chins nuzzling, cheeks rubbing. Whenever I visited the Elliott home, I became an obsessive throat-clearer—*I’m about to enter*—because the Elliotts could be around any corner, cherishing each other. They kissed each other full on the mouth whenever they were parting, and Rand would cup his wife’s rear as he passed her. It was foreign to me. My parents divorced when I was twelve, and I think maybe, when I was very young, I witnessed a chaste cheek kiss between the two

when it was impossible to avoid. Christmas, birthdays. Dry lips. On their best married days, their communications were entirely transactional: *We're out of milk again. (I'll get some today.) I need this ironed properly. (I'll do that today.) How hard is it to buy milk? (Silence.) You forgot to call the plumber. (Sigh.) Goddammit, put on your coat, right now, and go out and get some goddamn milk. Now.* These messages and orders brought to you by my father, a midlevel phone-company manager who treated my mother at best like an incompetent employee. At worst? He never beat her, but his pure, inarticulate fury would fill the house for days, weeks, at a time, making the air humid, hard to breathe, my father stalking around with his lower jaw jutting out, giving him the look of a wounded, vengeful boxer, grinding his teeth so loud you could hear it across the room. Throwing things near her but not exactly at her. I'm sure he told himself: *I never hit her.* I'm sure because of this technicality he never saw himself as an abuser. But he turned our family life into an endless road trip with bad directions and a rage-clenched driver, a vacation that never got a chance to be fun. *Don't make me turn this car around.* Please, really, turn it around.

I don't think my father's issue was with my mother in particular. He just didn't like women. He thought they were stupid, inconsequential, irritating. *That dumb bitch.* It was his favorite phrase for any woman who annoyed him: a fellow motorist, a waitress, our grade school teachers, none of whom he ever actually met, parent-teacher conferences stinking of the female realm as they did. I still remember when Geraldine Ferraro was named the 1984 vice presidential candidate, us all watching it on the news before dinner. My mother, my tiny, sweet mom, put her hand on the back of Go's head and said, *Well, I think it's wonderful.* And my dad flipped the TV off and said, *It's a joke. You know it's a goddamn joke. Like watching a monkey ride a bike.*

It took another five years before my mother finally decided she was done. I came home from school one day and my father was gone. He was there in the morning and gone by the afternoon. My mom sat us down at the dining table and announced, "Your father and I have decided it would be best for everyone if we live apart," and Go burst into tears and said, "Good, I hate you both!" and then, instead of running to her room like the script called for, she went to my mom and hugged her.

So my father went away and my thin, pained mother got fat and happy—fairly fat and extremely happy—as if she were supposed to be that way all along: a deflated balloon taking in air. Within a year, she'd morphed into the busy, warm, cheerful lady she'd be till she died, and her sister said things like “Thank God the old Maureen is back,” as if the woman who raised us was an imposter.

As for my father, for years I spoke to him on the phone about once a month, the conversations polite and newsy, a recital of *things that happened*. The only question my father ever asked about Amy was “How is Amy?,” which was not meant to elicit any answer beyond “She's fine.” He remained stubbornly distant even as he faded into dementia in his sixties. *If you're always early, you're never late*. My dad's mantra, and that included the onset of Alzheimer's—a slow decline into a sudden, steep drop that forced us to move our independent, misogynistic father to a giant home that stank of chicken broth and piss, where he'd be surrounded by women helping him at all times. Ha.

My dad had limitations. That's what my good-hearted mom always told us. He had limitations, but he meant no harm. It was kind of her to say, but he did do harm. I doubt my sister will ever marry: If she's sad or upset or angry, she needs to be alone—she fears a man dismissing her womanly tears. I'm just as bad. The good stuff in me I got from my mom. I can joke, I can laugh, I can tease, I can celebrate and support and praise—I can operate in sunlight, basically—but I can't deal with angry or tearful women. I feel my father's rage rise up in me in the ugliest way. Amy could tell you about that. She would definitely tell you, if she were here.

I watched Rand and Marybeth for a moment before they saw me. I wondered how furious they'd be with me. I had committed an unforgivable act, not phoning them for so long. Because of my cowardice, my in-laws would always have that night of tennis lodged in their imagination: the warm evening, the lazy yellow balls bumping along the court, the squeak of tennis shoes, the average Thursday night they'd spent while their daughter was disappeared.

“Nick,” Rand Elliott said, spotting me. He took three big strides toward me, and as I braced myself for a punch, he hugged me desperately hard.

“How are you holding up?” he whispered into my neck, and began

rocking. Finally, he gave a high-pitched gulp, a swallowed sob, and gripped me by the arms. “We’re going to find Amy, Nick. It can’t go any other way. Believe that, okay?” Rand Elliott held me in his blue stare for a few more seconds, then broke up again—three girlish gasps burst from him like hiccups—and Marybeth moved into the huddle, buried her face in her husband’s armpit.

When we parted, she looked up at me with giant stunned eyes. “It’s just a—just a goddamn *nightmare*,” she said. “How are you, Nick?”

When Marybeth asked *How are you*, it wasn’t a courtesy, it was an existential question. She studied my face, and I was sure she was studying me, and would continue to note my every thought and action. The Elliotts believed that every trait should be considered, judged, categorized. It all means something, it can all be used. Mom, Dad, Baby, they were three advanced people with three advanced degrees in psychology—they thought more before nine A.M. than most people thought all month. I remember once declining cherry pie at dinner, and Rand cocked his head and said, “Ahh! Iconoclast. Disdains the easy, symbolic patriotism.” And when I tried to laugh it off and said, well, I didn’t like cherry cobbler either, Marybeth touched Rand’s arm: “Because of the divorce. All those comfort foods, the desserts a family eats together, those are just bad memories for Nick.”

It was silly but incredibly sweet, these people spending so much energy trying to figure me out. The answer: I don’t like cherries.

By eleven-thirty, the station was a rolling boil of noise. Phones were ringing, people were yelling across the room. A woman whose name I never caught, whom I registered only as a chattering bobblehead of hair, suddenly made her presence known at my side. I had no idea how long she’d been there: “... and the main point of this, Nick, is just to get people looking for Amy and knowing she has a family who loves her and wants her back. This will be very controlled. Nick, you will need to— Nick?”

“Yep.”

“People will want to hear a quick statement from her husband.”

From across the room, Go was darting toward me. She’d dropped me at the station, then run by The Bar to take care of bar things for thirty minutes, and now she was back, acting like she’d abandoned me for a week, zigzagging between desks, ignoring the young officer

who'd clearly been assigned to usher her in, neatly, in a hushed, dignified manner.

“Okay so far?” Go said, squeezing me with one arm, the dude hug. The Dunne kids don't perform hugs well. Go's thumb landed on my right nipple. “I wish Mom was here,” she whispered, which was what I'd been thinking. “No news?” she asked when she pulled away.

“Nothing, fucking nothing—”

“You look like you feel awful.”

“I feel like fucking shit.” I was about to say what an idiot I was, not listening to her about the booze.

“I would have finished the bottle too.” She patted my back.

“It's almost time,” the PR woman said, again appearing magically. “It's not a bad turnout for a July Fourth weekend.” She started herding us all toward a dismal conference room—aluminum blinds and folding chairs and a clutch of bored reporters—and up onto the platform. I felt like a third-tier speaker at a mediocre convention, me in my business-casual blues, addressing a captive audience of jet-lagged people daydreaming about what they'd eat for lunch. But I could see the journalists perk up when they caught sight of me—let's say it: a young, decent-looking guy—and then the PR woman placed a cardboard poster on a nearby easel, and it was a blown-up photo of Amy at her most stunning, that face that made you keep double-checking: *She can't be that good-looking, can she?* She could, she was, and I stared at the photo of my wife as the cameras snapped photos of me staring at the photo. I thought of that day in New York when I found her again: the blond hair, the back of her head, was all I could see, but I knew it was her, and I saw it as a sign. How many millions of heads had I seen in my life, but I knew this was Amy's pretty skull floating down Seventh Avenue in front of me. I knew it was her, and that we would be together.

Cameras flashed. I turned away and saw spots. It was surreal. That's what people always say to describe moments that are merely unusual. I thought: *You have no fucking idea what surreal is.* My hangover was really warming up now, my left eye throbbing like a heart.

The cameras were clicking, and the two families stood together, all of us with mouths in thin slits, Go the only one looking even close to a

real person. The rest of us looked like placeholder humans, bodies that had been dollied in and propped up. Amy, over on her easel, looked more present. We'd all seen these news conferences before—when other women went missing. We were being forced to perform the scene that TV viewers expected: the worried but hopeful family. Caffeine-dazed eyes and ragdoll arms.

My name was being said; the room gave a collective gulp of expectation. *Showtime.*

When I saw the broadcast later, I didn't recognize my voice. I barely recognized my face. The booze floating, sludgelike, just beneath the surface of my skin made me look like a fleshy wastrel, just sensuous enough to be disreputable. I had worried about my voice wavering, so I overcorrected and the words came out clipped, like I was reading a stock report. "We just want Amy to get home safe ..." Utterly unconvincing, disconnected. I might as well have been reading numbers at random.

Rand Elliott stepped up and tried to save me: "Our daughter, Amy, is a sweetheart of a girl, full of life. She's our only child, and she's smart and beautiful and kind. She really is Amazing Amy. And we want her back. Nick wants her back." He put a hand on my shoulder, wiped his eyes, and I involuntarily turned to steel. My father again: *Men don't cry.*

Rand kept talking: "We all want her back where she belongs, with her family. We've set up a command center over at the Days Inn ..."

The news reports would show Nick Dunne, husband of the missing woman, standing metallically next to his father-in-law, arms crossed, eyes glazed, looking almost bored as Amy's parents wept. And then worse. My longtime response, the need to remind people I wasn't a dick, I was a nice guy despite the affectless stare, the haughty, douchebag face.

So there it came, out of nowhere, as Rand begged for his daughter's return: a killer smile.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

JULY 5, 2010

## —DIARY ENTRY—

I won't blame Nick. I don't blame Nick. I refuse—refuse!—to turn into some pert-mouthed, strident angry-girl. I made two promises to myself when I married Nick. One: no dancing-monkey demands. Two: I would never, ever say, *Sure, that's fine by me (if you want to stay out later, if you want to do a boys' weekend, if you want to do something you want to do)* and then punish him for doing what I said was *fine by me*. I worry I am coming perilously close to violating both of those promises.

But still. It is our third wedding anniversary and I am alone in our apartment, my face all mask-tight from tears because, well, because: Just this afternoon, I get a voice mail from Nick, and I already know it's going to be bad, I know the second the voice mail begins because I can tell he's calling from his cell and I can hear men's voices in the background and a big, roomy gap, like he's trying to decide what to say, and then I hear his taxi-blurred voice, a voice that is already wet and lazy with booze, and I know I am going to be angry—that quick inhale, the lips going tight, the shoulders up, the *I so don't want to be mad but I'm going to be* feeling. Do men not know that feeling? You don't want to be mad, but you're obligated to be, almost. Because a rule, a good rule, a nice rule is being broken. Or maybe *rule* is the wrong word. Protocol? Nicety? But the rule/protocol/nicety—our anniversary—is being broken for a good reason, I understand, I do. The rumors were true: Sixteen writers have been laid off at Nick's magazine. A third of the staff. Nick has been spared, for now, but of course he feels obliged to take the others out to get drunk. They are men, piled in a cab, heading down Second Avenue, pretending to be brave. A few have gone home to their wives, but a surprising number have stayed out. Nick will spend the night of our anniversary buying these men drinks, going to strip clubs and cheesy bars, flirting with twenty-two-year-olds (*My friend here just got laid off, he could use a*

*hug*). These jobless men will proclaim Nick a great guy as he buys their drinks on a credit card linked to my bank account. Nick will have a grand old time on our anniversary, which he didn't even mention in the message. Instead, he said, *I know we had plans but ...*

I am being a girl. I just thought it'd be a tradition: All across town, I have strewn little love messages, reminders of our past year together, my treasure hunt. I can picture the third clue, fluttering from a piece of Scotch tape in the crook of the V of the Robert Indiana *Love* sculpture up near Central Park. Tomorrow, some bored twelve-year-old tourist stumbling along behind his parents is going to pick it off, read it, shrug, and let it float away like a gum wrapper.

My treasure-hunt finale was perfect, but isn't now. It's an absolutely gorgeous vintage briefcase. Leather. Third anniversary is leather. A work-related gift may be a bad idea, given that work isn't exactly happy right now. In our kitchen, I have two live lobsters, like always. Or like what was supposed to be like always. I need to phone my mom and see if they can keep for a day, scrambling dazedly around their crate, or if I need to stumble in, and with my wine-lame eyes, battle them and boil them in my pot for no good reason. I'm killing two lobsters I won't even eat.

Dad phoned to wish us happy anniversary, and I picked up the phone and I was going to play it cool, but then I started crying when I started talking—I was doing the awful chick talk-cry: *mwaha-waah-gwwahh-and-waaa-wa*—so I had to tell him what happened, and he told me I should open a bottle of wine and wallow in it for a bit. Dad is always a proponent of a good indulgent sulk. Still, Nick will be angry that I told Rand, and of course Rand will do his fatherly thing, pat Nick on the shoulder and say, “Heard you had some emergency drinking to do on your anniversary, Nicky.” And chuckle. So Nick will know, and he will be angry with me because he wants my parents to believe he's perfect—he beams when I tell them stories about what a flawless son-in-law he is.

Except for tonight. I know, I know, I'm being a girl.

\* \* \*

It's five A.M. The sun is coming up, almost as bright as the streetlights outside that have just blinked off. I always like that switch, when I'm awake for it. Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I'll pull myself out of bed and walk through the streets at dawn, and when the lights click off,

all together, I always feel like I've seen something special. *Oh, there go the streetlights!* I want to announce. In New York it's not three or four A.M. that's the quiet time—there are too many bar stragglers, calling out to each other as they collapse into taxis, yelping into their cell phones as they frantically smoke that one last cigarette before bed. Five A.M., that's the best time, when the clicking of your heels on the sidewalk sounds illicit. All the people have been put away in their boxes, and you have the whole place to yourself.

Here's what happened: Nick got home just after four, a bulb of beer and cigarettes and fried-egg odor attached to him, a placenta of stink. I was still awake, waiting for him, my brain ca-thunking after a marathon of *Law and Order*. He sat down on our ottoman and glanced at the present on the table and said nothing. I stared at him back. He clearly wasn't going to even graze against an apology—*hey, sorry things got screwy today*. That's all I wanted, just a quick acknowledgment.

“Happy day after anniversary,” I start.

He sighs, a deep aggrieved moan. “Amy, I've had the crappiest day ever. Please don't lay a guilt trip on me on top of it.”

Nick grew up with a father who never, ever apologized, so when Nick feels he has screwed up, he goes on offense. I know this, and I can usually wait it out, usually.

“I was just saying happy anniversary.”

“Happy anniversary, my asshole husband who neglected me on my big day.”

We sit silent for a minute, my stomach knotting. I don't want to be the bad guy here. I don't deserve that. Nick stands up.

“Well, how was it?” I ask dully.

“How was it? It was fucking awful. Sixteen of my friends now have no jobs. It was miserable. I'll probably be gone too, another few months.”

Friends. He doesn't even like half the guys he was out with, but I say nothing.

“I know it feels dire right now, Nick. But—”

“It’s not dire for you, Amy. Not for you, it never will be dire. But for the rest of us? It’s very different.”

The same old. Nick resents that I’ve never had to worry about money and I never will. He thinks that makes me softer than everyone else, and I wouldn’t disagree with him. But I do work. I clock in and clock back out. Some of my girlfriends have literally never had a job; they discuss people with jobs in the pitying tones you talk about a fat girl with “such a nice face.” They will lean forward and say, “But of course, Ellen has to work,” like something out of a Noël Coward play. They don’t count me, because I can always quit my job if I want to. I could build my days around charity committees and home decoration and gardening and volunteering, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with building a life around those things. Most beautiful, good things are done by women people scorn. But I work.

“Nick, I’m on your side here. We’ll be okay no matter what. My money is your money.”

“Not according to the prenup.”

He is drunk. He only mentions the prenup when he’s drunk. Then all the resentment comes back. I’ve told him hundreds, literally *hundreds of times*, I’ve said the words: The prenup is pure business. It’s not for me, it’s not even for my parents, it’s for my parents’ lawyers. It says nothing about us, not you and me.

He walks over toward the kitchen, tosses his wallet and wilted dollars on the coffee table, crumples a piece of notepaper and tosses it in the trash with a series of credit-card receipts.

“That’s a shitty thing to say, Nick.”

“It’s a shitty way to feel, Amy.”

He walks to our bar—in the careful, swamp-wading gait of a drunk—and actually pours himself another drink.

“You’re going to make yourself sick,” I say.

He raises his glass in an up-yours cheers to me. “You just don’t get it, Amy. You just can’t. I’ve worked since I was fourteen years old. I didn’t get to go to fucking tennis camp and creative-writing camp and SAT prep and all that shit that apparently everyone else in New York City did, because I was wiping down tables at the mall and I was

mowing lawns and I was driving to Hannibal and fucking dressing like Huck Finn for the tourists and I was cleaning the funnel-cake skillets at midnight.”

I feel an urge to laugh, actually to guffaw. A big belly laugh that would sweep up Nick, and soon we’d both be laughing and this would be over. This litany of crummy jobs. Being married to Nick always reminds me: People have to do awful things for money. Ever since I’ve been married to Nick, I always wave to people dressed as food.

“I’ve had to work so much harder than anyone else at the magazine to even *get* to the magazine. Twenty years, basically, I’ve been working to get where I am, and now it’s all going to be gone, and there’s not a fucking thing I know how to do instead, unless I want to go back home, be a river rat again.”

“You’re probably too old to play Huck Finn,” I say.

“Fuck you, Amy.”

And then he goes to the bedroom. He’s never said that to me before, but it came out of his mouth so smoothly that I assume—and this never crossed my mind—I assume he’s thought it. Many times. I never thought I’d be the kind of woman who’d be told to fuck herself by her husband. And we’ve sworn never to go to bed angry. Compromise, communicate, and never go to bed angry—the three pieces of advice gifted and regifted to all newlyweds. But lately it seems I am the only one who compromises; our communications don’t solve anything; and Nick is very good at going to bed angry. He can turn off his emotions like a spout. He is already snoring.

And then I can’t help myself, even though it’s none of my business, even though Nick would be furious if he knew: I cross over to the trash can and pull out the receipts, so I can picture where he’s been all night. Two bars, two strip clubs. And I can see him in each one, talking about me with his friends, because he must have already talked about me for all that petty, smeared meanness to come out so easily. I picture them at one of the pricier strip clubs, the posh ones that make men believe they are still designed to rule, that women are meant to serve them, the deliberately bad acoustics and thwumping music so no one has to talk, a stretch-titted woman straddling my husband (who swears it’s all in fun), her hair trailing down her back, her lips wet with gloss, but I’m not supposed to be threatened, no it’s

just boyish hijinks, I am supposed to laugh about it, I am supposed to be a *good sport*.

Then I unroll the crumpled piece of notebook paper and see a girl's handwriting—Hannah—and a phone number. I wish it were like the movies, the name something silly, CanDee or Bambie, something you could roll your eyes at. Misti with two hearts over the I's. But it's Hannah, which is a real woman, presumably like me. Nick has never cheated on me, he has sworn it, but I also know he has ample opportunity. I could ask him about Hannah, and he'd say, *I have no idea why she gave me her number, but I didn't want to be rude, so I took it*. Which may be true. Or not. He could cheat on me and he would never tell me, and he would think less and less of me for not figuring it out. He would see me across the breakfast table, innocently slurping cereal, and know that I am a fool, and how can anyone respect a fool?

Now I am crying again, with Hannah in my hand.

It's a very female thing, isn't it, to take one boys' night and snowball it into a marital infidelity that will destroy our marriage?

I don't know what I am supposed to do. I'm feeling like a shrill fishwife, or a foolish doormat—I don't know which. I don't want to be angry, I can't even figure out if I should be angry. I consider checking in to a hotel, let him wonder about *me* for a change.

I stay where I am for a few minutes, and then I take a breath and wade into our booze-humid bedroom, and when I get in bed, he turns to me and wraps his arms around me and buries his face in my neck, and at the same time we both say, "I'm sorry."

# NICK DUNNE

ONE DAY GONE

Flashbulbs exploded, and I dropped the smile, but not soon enough. I felt a wave of heat roll up my neck, and beads of sweat broke out on my nose. *Stupid, Nick, stupid.* And then, just as I was pulling myself together, the press conference was over, and it was too late to make any other impression.

I walked out with the Elliotts, my head ducked low as more flashbulbs popped. I was almost to the exit when Gilpin trotted across the room toward me, flagging me down: “Canna grab a minute, Nick?”

He updated me as we headed toward a back office: “We checked out that house in your neighborhood that was broken into, looks like people camped out there, so we’ve got lab there. And we found another house on the edge of your complex, had some squatters.”

“I mean, that’s what worries me,” I said. “Guys are camped out everywhere. This whole town is overrun with pissed-off, unemployed people.”

Carthage was, until a year ago, a company town and that company was the sprawling Riverway Mall, a tiny city unto itself that once employed four thousand locals—one-fifth the population. It was built in 1985, a destination mall meant to attract shoppers from all over the Middle West. I still remember the opening day: me and Go, Mom and Dad, watching the festivities from the very back of the crowd in the vast tarred parking lot, because our father always wanted to be able to leave quickly, from anywhere. Even at baseball games, we parked by the exit and left at the eighth inning, me and Go a predictable set of mustard-smearred whines, petulant and sun-fevered: *We never get to see the end.* But this time our faraway vantage was desirable, because we got to take in the full scope of the Event: the impatient crowd, leaning collectively from one foot to another; the mayor atop a red-white-and-blue dais; the booming words—*pride, growth, prosperity,*

*success*—rolling over us, soldiers on the battlefield of consumerism, armed with vinyl-covered checkbooks and quilted handbags. And the doors opening. And the rush into the air-conditioning, the Muzak, the smiling salespeople who were our neighbors. My father actually let us go inside that day, actually waited in line and bought us something that day: sweaty paper cups brimming with Orange Julius.

For a quarter century, the Riverway Mall was a given. Then the recession hit, washed away the Riverway store by store until the whole mall finally went bust. It is now two million square feet of echo. No company came to claim it, no businessman promised a resurrection, no one knew what to do with it or what would become of all the people who'd worked there, including my mother, who lost her job at Shoe-Be-Doo-Be—two decades of kneeling and kneading, of sorting boxes and collecting moist foot hosiery, gone without ceremony.

The downfall of the mall basically bankrupted Carthage. People lost their jobs, they lost their houses. No one could see anything good coming anytime soon. *We never get to see the end.* Except it looked like this time Go and I would. We all would.

The bankruptcy matched my psyche perfectly. For several years, I had been bored. Not a whining, restless child's boredom (although I was not above that) but a dense, blanketing malaise. It seemed to me that there was nothing new to be discovered ever again. Our society was utterly, ruinously derivative (although the word *derivative* as a criticism is itself derivative). We were the first human beings who would never see anything for the first time. We stare at the wonders of the world, dull-eyed, underwhelmed. *Mona Lisa*, the Pyramids, the Empire State Building. Jungle animals on attack, ancient icebergs collapsing, volcanoes erupting. I can't recall a single amazing thing I have seen firsthand that I didn't immediately reference to a movie or TV show. A fucking commercial. You know the awful singsong of the blasé: *Seeeen it.* I've literally seen it all, and the worst thing, the thing that makes me want to blow my brains out, is: The secondhand experience is always better. The image is crisper, the view is keener, the camera angle and the soundtrack manipulate my emotions in a way reality can't anymore. I don't know that we are actually human at this point, those of us who are like most of us, who grew up with TV and movies and now the Internet. If we are betrayed, we know the

words to say; when a loved one dies, we know the words to say. If we want to play the stud or the smart-ass or the fool, we know the words to say. We are all working from the same dog-eared script.

It's a very difficult era in which to be a person, just a real, actual person, instead of a collection of personality traits selected from an endless Automat of characters.

And if all of us are play-acting, there can be no such thing as a soul mate, because we don't have genuine souls.

It had gotten to the point where it seemed like nothing matters, because I'm not a real person and neither is anyone else.

I would have done anything to feel real again.

Gilpin opened the door to the same room where they'd questioned me the night before. In the center of the table sat Amy's silvery gift box.

I stood staring at the box sitting in the middle of the table, so ominous in this new setting. A sense of dread descended on me. Why hadn't I found it before? I should have found it.

"Go ahead," Gilpin said. "We wanted you to take a look at this."

I opened it as gingerly as if a head might be inside. I found only a creamy blue envelope marked FIRST CLUE.

Gilpin smirked. "Imagine our confusion: A missing persons case, and here we find an envelope marked FIRST CLUE."

"It's for a treasure hunt that my wife—"

"Right. For your anniversary. Your father-in-law mentioned it."

I opened the envelope, pulled out a thick sky-blue piece of paper—Amy's signature stationery—folded once. Bile crept up my throat. These treasure hunts had always amounted to a single question: Who is Amy? (What is my wife thinking? What was important to her this past year? What moments made her happiest? Amy, Amy, Amy, let's think about Amy.)

I read the first clue with clenched teeth. Given our marital mood the past year, it was going to make me look awful. I didn't need anything else that made me look awful.

*I picture myself as your student,*

*With a teacher so handsome and wise  
My mind opens up (not to mention my thighs!)  
If I were your pupil, there'd be no need for flowers  
Maybe just a naughty appointment during your office hours  
So hurry up, get going, please do  
And this time I'll teach you a thing or two.*

It was an itinerary for an alternate life. If things had gone according to my wife's vision, yesterday she would have hovered near me as I read this poem, watching me expectantly, the hope emanating from her like a fever: *Please get this. Please get me.*

And she would finally say, *So?* And I would say:

"Oh, I actually know this! She must mean my office. At the junior college. I'm an adjunct professor there. Huh. I mean, it must be, right?" I squinted and reread. "She took it easy on me this year."

"You want me to drive you over?" Gilpin asked.

"Nah, I've got Go's car."

"I'll follow you then."

"You think it's important?"

"Well, it shows her movements the day or two before she went missing. So it's not unimportant." He looked at the stationery. "It's sweet, you know? Like something out of a movie: a treasure hunt. My wife and I, we give each other a card and maybe get a bite to eat. Sounds like you guys were doing it right. Preserve the romance."

Then Gilpin looked at his shoes, got bashful, and jingled his keys to leave.

The college had rather grandly presented me with a coffin of an office, big enough for a desk, two chairs, some shelves. Gilpin and I wended our way through the summer-school students, a combination of impossibly young kids (bored yet busy, their fingers clicking out texts or dialing up music) and earnest older people I had to assume were mall layoffs, trying to retrain for a new career.

"What do you teach?" Gilpin asked.

"Journalism, magazine journalism." A girl texting and walking

forgot the nuances of the latter and almost ran into me. She stepped to the side without glancing up. It made me feel cranky, *off my lawn!* old.

“I thought you didn’t do journalism anymore.”

“He who can’t do ...” I smiled.

I unlocked my office, stepped into the close-smelling, dust-moted air. I’d taken the summer off; it had been weeks since I’d been here. On my desk sat another envelope, marked SECOND CLUE.

“Your key always on your key chain?” Gilpin asked.

“Yup.”

“So Amy could have borrowed that to get in?”

I tore down the side of the envelope.

“And we have a spare at home.” Amy made doubles of everything—I tended to misplace keys, credit cards, cell phones, but I didn’t want to tell Gilpin this, get another baby-of-the-family jab. “Why?”

“Oh, just wanted to make sure she wouldn’t have had to go through, I don’t know, a janitor or someone.”

“No Freddy Krueger types here, that I’ve noticed.”

“Never saw those movies,” Gilpin replied.

Inside the envelope were two folded slips of paper. One was marked with a heart; the other was labeled CLUE.

Two notes. Different. My stomach clenched. God knew what Amy was going to say. I opened the note with the heart. I wished I hadn’t let Gilpin come, and then I caught the first words.

My Darling Husband,

I figured this was the perfect place—these hallowed halls of learning!—to tell you I think you are a brilliant man. I don’t tell you enough, but I am amazed by your mind: the weird statistics and anecdotes, the strange facts, the disturbing ability to quote from any movie, the quick wit, the beautiful way you have of wording things. After years together, I think a couple can forget how wonderful they find each other. I remember when we first met, how dazzled I was by you, and so I want to take a moment to tell you I still am and it’s one of my favorite things about you: You are BRILLIANT.

My mouth watered. Gilpin was reading over my shoulder, and he actually sighed. “Sweet lady,” he said. Then he cleared his throat. “Um, hah, these yours?”

He used the eraser end of a pencil to pick up a pair of women’s underwear (technically, they were panties—stringy, lacy, red—but I know women get creeped out by that word—just Google *hate the word* panties). They’d been hanging off a knob on the AC unit.

“Oh, jeez. That’s embarrassing.”

Gilpin waited for an explanation.

“Uh, one time Amy and I, well, you read her note. We kinda, you know, you sometimes gotta spice things up a little.”

Gilpin grinned. “Oh I get it, randy professor and naughty student. I get it. You two really were doing it right.” I reached for the underwear, but Gilpin was already producing an evidence bag from his pocket and sliding them in. “Just a precaution,” he said inexplicably.

“Oh, please don’t,” I said. “Amy would die—” I caught myself.

“Don’t worry, Nick, it’s all protocol, my friend. You wouldn’t believe the hoops we gotta jump through. *Just in case, just in case*. Ridiculous. What’s the clue say?”

I let him read over my shoulder again, his jarringly fresh smell distracting me.

“So what’s that one mean?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” I lied.

I finally rid myself of Gilpin, then drove aimlessly down the highway so I could make a call on my disposable. No pickup. I didn’t leave a message. I sped for a while longer, as if I could get anywhere, then I turned around and drove the forty-five minutes back toward town to meet the Elliotts at the Days Inn. I walked into a lobby packed with members of the Midwest Payroll Vendors Association—wheelie bags parked everywhere, their owners slurping complimentary drinks in small plastic cups and networking, forced guttural laughs and pockets fished for business cards. I rode up the elevator with four men, all balding and khaki’d and golf-shirted, lanyards bouncing off round married bellies.

Marybeth opened the door while talking on her cell phone; she pointed toward the TV and whispered to me, “We have a cold-cut tray if you want, sweetheart,” then went into the bathroom and closed the door, her murmurs continuing.

She emerged a few minutes later, just in time for the local five o’clock news from St. Louis, which led with Amy’s disappearance. “Perfect photo,” Marybeth murmured at the screen, where Amy peered back at us. “People will see it and really know what Amy looks like.”

I’d thought the portrait—a head shot from Amy’s brief fling with acting—beautiful but unsettling. Amy’s pictures gave a sense of her actually watching you, like an old-time haunted-house portrait, the eyes moving from left to right.

“We should get them some candid photos too,” I said. “Some everyday ones.”

The Elliotts nodded in tandem but said nothing, watching. When the spot was done, Rand broke the silence: “I feel sick.”

“I know,” Marybeth said.

“How are you holding up, Nick?” Rand asked, hunched over, hands on both knees, as if he were preparing to get up from the sofa but couldn’t quite do it.

“I’m a goddamn mess, to tell the truth. I feel so useless.”

“You know, I gotta ask, what about your employees, Nick?” Rand finally stood. He went to the minibar, poured himself a ginger ale, then turned to me and Marybeth. “Anyone? Something? Anything?” I shook my head; Marybeth asked for a club soda.

“Want some gin with it too, babe?” Rand asked, his deep voice going high on the final word.

“Sure. Yes. I do.” Marybeth closed her eyes, bent in half, and brought her face between her knees; then she took a deep breath and sat back up in her exact previous position, as if it were all a yoga exercise.

“I gave them lists of everyone,” I said. “But it’s a pretty tame business, Rand. I just don’t think that’s the place to look.”

Rand put a hand across his mouth and rubbed upward, the flesh of

his cheeks bunching up around his eyes. “Of course, we’re doing the same with our business, Nick.”

Rand and Marybeth always referred to the *Amazing Amy* series as a business, which on the surface never failed to strike me as silly: They are children’s books, about a perfect little girl who’s pictured on every book cover, a cartoonish version of my own Amy. But of course they are (were) a business, big business. They were elementary-school staples for the better part of two decades, largely because of the quizzes at the end of every chapter.

In third grade, for instance, *Amazing Amy* caught her friend Brian overfeeding the class turtle. She tried to reason with him, but when Brian persisted in the extra helpings, Amy had no choice but to narc on him to her teacher: “Mrs. Tibbles, I don’t want to be a tattletale, but I’m not sure what to do. I’ve tried talking to Brian myself, but now ... I guess I might need help from a grown-up ...” The fallout:

1) *Brian told Amy she was an untrustworthy friend and stopped talking to her.*

2) *Her timid pal Suzy said Amy shouldn’t have told; she should have secretly fished out the food without Brian knowing.*

3) *Amy’s archrival, Joanna, said Amy was jealous and just wanted to feed the turtle herself.*

4) *Amy refused to back down—she felt she did the proper thing.*

Who is right?!

Well, that’s easy, because Amy is always right, in every story. (Don’t think I haven’t brought this up in my arguments with my real Amy, because I have, more than once.)

The quizzes—written by *two psychologists, who are also parents like you!*—were supposed to tease out a child’s personality traits: Is your wee one a sulker who can’t stand to be corrected, like Brian? A spineless enabler, like Suzy? A pot-stirrer, like Joanna? Or perfect, *like Amy*? The books became extremely trendy among the rising yuppie class: They were the Pet Rock of parenting. The Rubik’s Cube of child rearing. The Elliots got rich. At one point it was estimated that every school library in America had an *Amazing Amy* book.

“Do you have worries that this might link back to the *Amazing Amy*

business?” I asked.

“We do have a few people we thought might be worth checking out,” Rand began.

I coughed out a laugh. “Do you think Judith Viorst kidnapped Amy for Alexander so he wouldn’t have any more Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Days?”

Rand and Marybeth turned matching surprised-disappointed faces toward me. It was a gross, tasteless thing to say—my brain had been burping up such inappropriate thoughts at inopportune moments. Mental gas I couldn’t control. Like, I’d started internally singing the lyrics to “Bony Moronie” whenever I saw my cop friend. *She’s as skinny as a stick of macaroni*, my brain would bebop as Detective Rhonda Boney was telling me about dragging the river for my missing wife. *Defense mechanism*, I told myself, *just a weird defense mechanism*. I’d like it to stop.

I rearranged my leg delicately, spoke delicately, as if my words were an unwieldy stack of fine china. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I said that.”

“We’re all tired,” Rand offered.

“We’ll have the cops round up Viorst,” Marybeth tried. “And that bitch Beverly Cleary too.” It was less a joke than a pardon.

“I guess I should tell you,” I said. “The cops, it’s normal in this kind of case—”

“To look at the husband first, I know,” Rand interrupted. “I told them they’re wasting their time. The questions they asked us—”

“They were offensive,” Marybeth finished.

“So they have spoken with you? About me?” I moved over to the minibar, casually poured a gin. I swallowed three belts in a row and felt immediately worse. My stomach was working its way up my esophagus. “What kind of stuff did they ask?”

“Have you ever hurt Amy, has Amy ever mentioned you threatening her?” Marybeth ticked off. “Are you a womanizer, has Amy ever mentioned you cheating on her? Because that sounds like Amy, right? I told them we didn’t raise a doormat.”

Rand put a hand on my shoulder. “Nick, what we should have said,

first of all, is: We know you would never, ever hurt Amy. I even told the police, told them the story about you saving the mouse at the beach house, saving it from the glue trap.” He looked over at Marybeth as if she didn’t know the story, and Marybeth obliged with her rapt attention. “Spent an hour trying to corner the damn thing, and then literally drove the little rat bastard out of town. Does that sound like a guy who would hurt his wife?”

I felt a burst of intense guilt, self-loathing. I thought for a second I might cry, finally.

“We love you, Nick,” Rand said, giving me a final squeeze.

“We do, Nick,” Marybeth echoed. “You’re our son. We are so incredibly sorry that on top of Amy being gone, you have to deal with this—cloud of suspicion.”

I didn’t like the phrase *cloud of suspicion*. I much preferred *routine investigation* or *a mere formality*.

“They did wonder about your restaurant reservations that night,” Marybeth said, an overly casual glance.

“My reservations?”

“They said you told them you had reservations at Houston’s, but they checked it out, and there were no reservations. They seemed really interested in that.”

I had no reservation, and I had no gift. Because if I planned on killing Amy that day, I wouldn’t have needed reservations for that night or a gift I’d never need to give her. The hallmarks of an extremely pragmatic killer.

I am pragmatic to a fault—my friends could certainly tell the police that.

“Uh, no. No, I never made reservations. They must have misunderstood me. I’ll let them know.”

I collapsed on the couch across from Marybeth. I didn’t want Rand to touch me again.

“Oh, okay. Good,” Marybeth said. “Did she, uh, did you get a treasure hunt this year?” Her eyes turned red again. “Before ...”

“Yeah, they gave me the first clue today. Gilpin and I found the

second one in my office at the college. I'm still trying to figure it out."

"Can we take a look?" my mother-in-law asked.

"I don't have it with me," I lied.

"Will you ... will you try to solve it, Nick?" Marybeth asked.

"I will, Marybeth. I'll solve it."

"I just hate the idea of things she touched, left out there, all alone  
—"

My phone rang, the disposable, and I flicked a glance at the display, then shut it off. I needed to get rid of the thing, but I couldn't yet.

"You should pick up every call, Nick," Marybeth said.

"I recognized this one—just my college alum fund looking for money."

Rand sat beside me on the couch. The ancient, much abused cushions sank severely under our weight, so we ended up pushed toward each other, arms touching, which was fine with Rand. He was one of those guys who'd pronounce *I'm a hugger* as he came at you, neglecting to ask if the feeling was mutual.

Marybeth returned to business: "We do think it's possible an *Amy* obsessive took her." She turned to me, as if pleading a case. "We've had 'em over the years."

Amy had been fond of recollecting stories of men obsessed with her. She described the stalkers in hushed tones over glasses of wine at various periods during our marriage—men who were still out there, always thinking about her and wanting her. I suspected these stories were inflated: The men always came off as dangerous to a very precise degree—enough for me to worry about but not enough to require us to involve the police. In short, a play world where I could be Amy's chest-puffed hero, defending her honor. Amy was too independent, too modern, to be able to admit the truth: She wanted to play damsel.

"Lately?"

"Not lately, no," Marybeth said, chewing her lip. "But there was a very disturbed girl back in high school."

"Disturbed how?"

“She was obsessed with Amy. Well, with *Amazing Amy*. Her name was Hilary Handy—she modeled herself after Amy’s best friend in the books, Suzy. At first it was cute, I guess. And then it was like that wasn’t good enough anymore—she wanted to be Amazing Amy, not Suzy the sidekick. So she began imitating *our* Amy. She dressed like Amy, she colored her hair blond, she’d linger outside our house in New York. One time I was walking down the street and she came running up to me, this strange girl, and she looped her arm through mine and said, ‘I’m going to be your daughter now. I’m going to kill Amy and be your new Amy. Because it doesn’t really matter to you, does it? As long as you have *an Amy*.’ Like our daughter was a piece of fiction she could rewrite.”

“We finally got a restraining order because she threw Amy down a flight of stairs at school,” Rand said. “Very disturbed girl. That kind of mentality doesn’t go away.”

“And then Desi,” Marybeth said.

“And Desi,” Rand said.

Even I knew about Desi. Amy had attended a Massachusetts boarding school called Wickshire Academy—I had seen the photos, Amy in lacrosse skirts and headbands, always with autumn colors in the background, as if the school were based not in a town but in a month. October. Desi Collings attended the boys’ boarding school that was paired with Wickshire. In Amy’s stories, he was a pale, Romantic figure, and their courtship had been of the boarding-school variety: chilly football games and overheated dances, lilac corsages and rides in a vintage Jaguar. Everything a little bit midcentury.

Amy dated Desi, quite seriously, for a year. But she began to find him alarming: He talked as if they were engaged, he knew the number and gender of their children. They were going to have four kids, all boys. Which sounded suspiciously like Desi’s own family, and when he brought his mother down to meet her, Amy grew queasy at the striking resemblance between herself and Mrs. Collings. The older woman had kissed her cheek coldly and murmured calmly in her ear, “Good luck.” Amy couldn’t tell if it was a warning or a threat.

After Amy cut it off with Desi, he still lingered around the Wickshire campus, a ghostly figure in dark blazers, leaning against wintry, leafless oak trees. Amy returned from a dance one February

night to find him lying on her bed, naked, on top of the covers, groggy from a very marginal pill overdose. Desi left school shortly after.

But he still phoned her, even now, and several times a year sent her thick, padded envelopes that Amy tossed unopened after showing them to me. They were postmarked St. Louis. Forty minutes away. "It's just a horrible, miserable coincidence," she'd told me. Desi had the St. Louis family connections on his mother's side. This much she knew but didn't care to know more. I'd picked through the trash to retrieve one, read the letter, sticky with alfredo sauce, and it had been utterly banal: talk of tennis and travel and other things preppy. Spaniels. I tried to picture this slender dandy, a fellow in bow ties and tortoiseshell glasses, busting into our house and grabbing Amy with soft, manicured fingers. Tossing her in the trunk of his vintage roadster and taking her ... antiquing in Vermont. Desi. Could anyone believe it was Desi?

"Desi lives not far away, actually," I said. "St. Louis."

"Now, see?" Rand said. "Why are the cops not all over this?"

"Someone needs to be," I said. "I'll go. After the search here tomorrow."

"The police definitely seem to think it's ... close to home," Marybeth said. She kept her eyes on me one beat too long, then shivered, as if shaking off a thought.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

AUGUST 23, 2010

## —DIARY ENTRY—

Summer. Birdies. Sunshine. I spent today shuffling around Prospect Park, my skin tender, my bones brittle. Misery-battling. It is an improvement, since I spent the previous three days in our house in the same crusty pajama set, marking time until five, when I could have a drink. Trying to make myself remember the suffering in Darfur. Put things into perspective. Which, I guess, is just further exploiting the people of Darfur.

So much has unraveled the past week. I think that's what it is, that it's all happened at once, so I have the emotional bends. Nick lost his job a month ago. The recession is supposed to be winding down, but no one seems to know that. So Nick lost his job. Second round of layoffs, just like he predicted—just a few weeks after the first round. *Oops, we didn't fire nearly enough people.* Idiots.

At first I think Nick might be okay. He makes a massive list of things he's always meant to do. Some of it's tiny stuff: He changes watch batteries and resets clocks, he replaces a pipe beneath our sink and repaints all the rooms we painted before and didn't like. Basically, he does a lot of things over. It's nice to take some actual do-overs, when you get so few in life. And then he starts on bigger stuff: He reads *War and Peace*. He flirts with taking Arabic lessons. He spends a lot of time trying to guess what skills will be marketable over the next few decades. It breaks my heart, but I pretend it doesn't for his sake.

I keep asking him: "Are you sure you're okay?"

At first I try it seriously, over coffee, eye contact, my hand on his. Then I try it breezily, lightly, in passing. Then I try it tenderly, in bed, stroking his hair.

He has the same answer always: "I'm fine. I don't really want to talk

about it.”

I wrote a quiz that was perfect for the times: “How Are You Handling Your Layoff?”

a) I sit in my pajamas and eat a lot of ice cream—sulking is therapeutic!

b) I write nasty things about my old boss online, everywhere—venting feels great!

c) Until a new job comes along, I try to find useful things to do with my newfound time, like learning a marketable language or finally reading *War and Peace*.

It was a compliment to Nick—C was the correct answer—but he just gave a sour smile when I showed it to him.

A few weeks in, the bustling stopped, the usefulness stopped, as if he woke up one morning under a decrepit, dusty sign that read, *Why Fucking Bother?* He went dull-eyed. Now he watches TV, surfs porn, watches porn on TV. He eats a lot of delivery food, the Styrofoam shells propped up near the overflowing trash can. He doesn't talk to me, he behaves as if the act of talking physically pains him and I am a vicious woman to ask it of him.

He barely shrugs when I tell him I was laid off. Last week.

“That's awful, I'm sorry,” he says. “At least you have your money to fall back on.”

“We have the money. I liked my job, though.”

He starts singing “You Can't Always Get What You Want,” off-key, high-pitched, with a little stumbling dance, and I realize he is drunk. It is late afternoon, a beautiful blue-blue day, and our house is dank, thick with the sweet smell of rotting Chinese food, the curtains all drawn over, and I begin walking room to room to air it out, pulling back the drapes, scaring the dust motes, and when I reach the darkened den, I stumble over a bag on the floor, and then another and another, like the cartoon cat who walks into a room full of mousetraps. When I switch on the lights, I see dozens of shopping bags, and they are from places laid-off people don't go. They are the high-end men's stores, the places that hand-tailor suits, where salespeople carry ties individually, draped over an arm, to male

shoppers nestled in leather armchairs. I mean, the shit is *bespoke*.

“What is all this, Nick?”

“For job interviews. If anyone ever starts hiring again.”

“You needed so much?”

“We *do* have the money.” He smiles at me grimly, his arms crossed.

“Do you at least want to hang them up?” Several of the plastic coverings have been chewed apart by Bleecker. A tiny mound of cat vomit lays near one three-thousand-dollar suit; a tailored white shirt is covered in orange fur where the cat has napped.

“Not really, nope,” he said. He grins at me.

I have never been a nag. I have always been rather proud of my un-nagginess. So it pisses me off, that Nick is forcing me to nag. I am willing to live with a certain amount of sloppiness, of laziness, of the lackadaisical life. I realize that I am more type-A than Nick, and I try to be careful not to inflict my neat-freaky, to-do-list nature on him. Nick is not the kind of guy who is going to think to vacuum or clean out the fridge. He truly doesn't *see* that kind of stuff. Fine. Really. But I do like a certain standard of living—I think it's fair to say the garbage shouldn't literally overflow, and the plates shouldn't sit in the sink for a week with smears of bean burrito dried on them. That's just being a good grown-up roommate. And Nick's not doing anything anymore, so I have to nag, and it pisses me off: *You are turning me into what I never have been and never wanted to be, a nag, because you are not living up to your end of a very basic compact. Don't do that, it's not okay to do.*

I know, I know, I *know* that losing a job is incredibly stressful, and particularly for a man, they say it can be like a death in the family, and especially for a man like Nick, who has always worked, so I take a giant breath, roll my anger up into a red rubber ball, and mentally kick it out into space. “Well, do you mind if I hang these up? Just so they stay nice for you?”

“Knock yourself out.”

His-and-her layoffs, isn't that sweet? I know we are luckier than most: I go online and check my trust fund whenever I get nervous. I never called it a trust fund before Nick did; it's actually not that

grand. I mean, it's nice, it's great—\$785,404 that I have in savings thanks to my parents. But it's not the kind of money that allows you to stop working forever, especially not in New York. My parents' whole point was to make me feel secure enough so I didn't need to make choices based on money—in schooling, in career—but not so well-off that I could be tempted to check out. Nick makes fun, but I think it's a great gesture for parents to make. (And appropriate, considering they plagiarized my childhood for the books.)

But I'm still feeling sick about the layoff, *our layoffs*, when my dad calls and asks if he and Mom can stop by. They need to talk with us. This afternoon, now, actually, if it's okay. Of course it's okay, I say, and in my head, I think, *Cancer cancer cancer*.

My parents appear at the door, looking like they've put up an effort. My father is thoroughly pressed and tucked and shined, impeccable except for the grooves beneath his eyes. My mother is in one of her bright purple dresses that she always wore to speeches and ceremonies, back when she got those invitations. She says the color demands confidence of the wearer.

They look great, but they seem ashamed. I usher them to the sofa, and we all sit silently for a second.

"Kids, your mother and I, we seem to have—" my father finally starts, then stops to cough. He places his hands on his knees; his big knuckles pale. "Well, we seem to have gotten ourselves into a hell of a financial mess."

I don't know what my reaction is supposed to be: shocked, consoling, disappointed? My parents have never confessed any troubles to me. I don't think they've had many troubles.

"The fact of the matter is, we've been irresponsible," Marybeth continues. "We've been living the past decade like we were making the same kind of money we did for the previous two decades, and we weren't. We haven't made half that, but we were in denial. We were ... *optimistic* may be a kind way to put it. We just kept thinking the next *Amy* book would do the trick. But that hasn't happened. And we kept making bad decisions. We invested foolishly. We spent foolishly. And now."

"We're basically broke," Rand says. "Our house, as well as *this* house, it's all underwater."

I'd thought—assumed—they'd bought this house for us outright. I had no idea they were making payments on it. I feel a sting of embarrassment that I am as sheltered as Nick says.

“Like I said, we made some serious judgment errors,” Marybeth says. “We should write a book: *Amazing Amy and the Adjustable Rate Mortgage*. We would flunk every quiz. We'd be the cautionary tale. Amy's friend, Wendy Want It Now.”

“Harry Head in the Sand,” Rand adds.

“So what happens next?” I ask.

“That is entirely up to you,” my dad says. My mom fishes out a homemade pamphlet from her purse and sets it on the table in front of us—bars and graphs and pie charts created on their home computer. It kills me to picture my parents squinting over the user's manual, trying to make their proposition look pretty for me.

Marybeth starts the pitch: “We wanted to ask if we could borrow some money from your trust while we figure out what to do with the rest of our lives.”

My parents sit in front of us like two eager college kids hoping for their first internship. My father's knee jiggles until my mother places a gentle fingertip on it.

“Well, the trust fund is your money, so of course you can borrow from it,” I say. I just want this to be over; the hopeful look on my parents' faces, I can't stand it. “How much do you think you need, to pay everything off and feel comfortable for a while?”

My father looks at his shoes. My mother takes a deep breath. “Six hundred and fifty thousand,” she says.

“Oh.” It is all I can say. It is almost everything we have.

“Amy, maybe you and I should discuss—” Nick begins.

“No, no, we can do this,” I say. “I'll just go grab my checkbook.”

“Actually,” Marybeth says, “if you could wire it to our account tomorrow, that would be best. Otherwise there's a ten-day waiting period.”

That's when I know they are in serious trouble.

**NICK DUNNE**  
TWO DAYS GONE

I woke up on the pullout couch in the Elliotts' suite, exhausted. They'd insisted I stay over—my home had not yet been reopened to me—insisted with the same urgency they once applied to snapping up the check at dinner: hospitality as ferocious force of nature. *You must let us do this for you.* So I did. I spent the night listening to their snores through the bedroom door, one steady and deep—a hearty lumberjack of a snore—the other gaspy and arrhythmic, as if the sleeper were dreaming of drowning.

I could always turn myself off like a light. *I'm going to sleep*, I'd say, my hands in prayer position against my cheek, *Zzzzzzz*, the deep sleep of a NyQuiled child—while my insomniac wife fussed in bed next to me. Last night, though, I felt like Amy, my brain still going, my body on edge. I was, most of the time, a man who was literally comfortable in his own skin. Amy and I would sit on the couch to watch TV, and I'd turn to melted wax, my wife twitching and shifting constantly next to me. I asked her once if she might have restless leg syndrome—an ad for the disease was running, the actors' faces all furrowed in distress as they shook their calves and rubbed their thighs—and Amy said, *I have restless everything syndrome.*

I watched the ceiling of the hotel room turn gray then pink then yellow and finally pulled myself up to see the sun blaring right at me, across the river, again, a solar third degree. Then the names popped in my head—bing! Hilary Handy. Such an adorable name to be accused of such disturbing acts. Desi Collings, a former obsessive who lived an hour away. I had claimed them both as mine. It is a do-it-yourself era: health care, real estate, police investigation. Go online and fucking figure it out for yourself because everyone's overworked and understaffed. I was a *journalist*. I spent over ten years interviewing people for a living and getting them to reveal themselves. I was up to the task, and Marybeth and Rand believed so too. I was thankful they let me know I was still in their trust, the husband under a wispy cloud

of suspicion. Or do I fool myself to use the word *wispy*?

The Days Inn had donated an underused ballroom to serve as the Find Amy Dunne headquarters. It was unseemly—a place of brown stains and canned smells—but just after dawn, Marybeth set about pygmalioning it, vacuuming and sani-wiping, arranging bulletin boards and phone banks, hanging a large head shot of Amy on one wall. The poster—with Amy’s cool, confident gaze, those eyes that followed you—looked like something from a presidential campaign. In fact, by the time Marybeth was done, the whole room buzzed with efficiency—the urgent hopefulness of a seriously underdog politician with a lot of true believers refusing to give up.

Just after ten A.M., Boney arrived, talking into her cell phone. She patted me on the shoulder and began fiddling with a printer. The volunteers arrived in bunches: Go and a half dozen of our late mother’s friends. Five fortysomething women, all in capri pants, like they were rehearsing a dance show: two of them—slender and blond and tanned—vying for the lead, the others cheerfully resigned to second string. A group of loudmouthed white-haired old ladies, each trying to talk over the next, a few of them texting, the kind of elderly people who have a baffling amount of energy, so much youthful vigor you had to wonder if they were trying to rub it in. Only one man showed up, a good-looking guy about my age, well dressed, alone, failing to realize that his presence could use some explaining. I watched Loner Guy as he sniffed around the pastries, sneaking glances at the poster of Amy.

Boney finished setting up the printer, grabbed a branny-looking muffin, and came to stand by me.

“Do you guys keep an eye on everyone who reports to volunteer?” I asked. “I mean, in case it’s someone—”

“Someone who seems to have a suspicious amount of interest? Absolutely.” She broke off the edges of the muffin and popped them in her mouth. She dropped her voice. “But to tell the truth, serial killers watch the same TV shows we do. They know that *we* know they like to—”

“Insert themselves into the investigation.”

“That’s it, yup.” She nodded. “So they’re more careful about that kind of thing now. But yeah, we sift through all the kinda-weirdos to

make sure they're just, you know, kinda-weirdos.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Like, Gilpin and I were lead detectives on the Kayla Holman case few years back. Kayla Holman?”

I shook my head: no bell.

“Anyway, you'll find some ghouls get attracted to stuff like this. And watch out for those two—” Boney pointed toward the two pretty fortysomething women. “Because they look like the type. To get a little too interested in consoling the worried husband.”

“Oh, come on—”

“You'd be surprised. Handsome guy like you. It happens.”

Just then one of the women, the blonder and tanner, looked over at us, made eye contact, and smiled the gentlest, shyest smile at me, then ducked her head like a cat waiting to be petted.

“She'll work hard, though; she'll be Little Miss Involved,” Boney said. “So that's good.”

“How'd the Kayla Holman case turn out?” I asked.

She shook her head: *no*.

Four more women filed in, passing a bottle of sunblock among themselves, slathering it on bare arms and shoulders and noses. The room smelled like coconuts.

“By the way, Nick,” Boney said. “Remember when I asked if Amy had friends in town—what about Noelle Hawthorne? You didn't mention her. She left us two messages.”

I gave her a blank stare.

“Noelle in your complex? Mother of triplets?”

“No, they aren't friends.”

“Oh, funny. She definitely seems to think they are.”

“That happens to Amy a lot,” I said. “She talks to people once, and they latch on. It's creepy.”

“That's what her parents said.”

I debated asking Boney directly about Hilary Handy and Desi

Collings. Then I decided not to; I'd look better if I were the one leading the charge. I wanted Rand and Marybeth to see me in action-hero mode. I couldn't shake the look Marybeth had given me: *The police definitely seem to think it's ... close to home.*

"People think they know her because they read the books growing up," I said.

"I can see that," Boney said, nodding. "People want to believe they know other people. Parents want to believe they know their kids. Wives want to believe they know their husbands."

Another hour and the volunteer center began feeling like a family picnic. A few of my old girlfriends dropped by to say hello, introduce their kids. One of my mom's best friends, Vicky, came by with three of her granddaughters, bashful tweens all in pink.

Grandkids. My mom had talked about grandkids a lot, as if it were doubtlessly going to happen—whenever she bought a new piece of furniture, she'd explain she favored that particular style because "it'll work for when there's grandkids." She wanted to live to see some grandkids. All her friends had some to spare. Amy and I once had my mom and Go over for dinner to mark The Bar's biggest week ever. I'd announced that we had reason to celebrate, and Mom had leaped from her seat, burst into tears, and hugged Amy, who also began weeping, murmuring from beneath my mom's smothering nuzzle, "He's talking about The Bar, he's just talking about The Bar." And then my mom tried hard to pretend she was just as excited about that. "*Plenty of time for babies,*" she'd said in her most consoling voice, a voice that just made Amy start to cry again. Which was strange, since Amy had decided she didn't want kids, and she'd reiterated this fact several times, but the tears gave me a perverse wedge of hope that maybe she was changing her mind. Because there wasn't really plenty of time. Amy was thirty-seven when we moved to Carthage. She'd be thirty-nine in October.

And then I thought: *We'll have to throw some fake birthday party or something if this is still going on. We'll have to mark it somehow, some ceremony, for the volunteers, the media—something to revive attention. I'll have to pretend to be hopeful.*

"The prodijal son returns," said a nasally voice, and I turned to see a skinny man in a stretched-out T-shirt next to me, scratching a

handlebar mustache. My old friend Stucks Buckley, who had taken to calling me a prodigal son despite not knowing how to pronounce the word, or what its meaning was. I assume he meant it as a fancy synonym for jackass. Stucks Buckley, it sounded like a baseball player's name, and that was what Stucks was supposed to be, except he never had the talent, just the hard wish. He was the best in town, growing up, but that wasn't good enough. He got the shock of his life in college when he was cut from the team, and it all went to shit after. Now he was an odd-job stoner with twitchy moods. He had dropped by The Bar a few times to try to pick up work, but he shook his head at every crappy day-job chore I offered, chewing on the inside of his cheek, annoyed: *Come on, man, what else you got, you got to have something else.*

"Stucks," I said by way of greeting, waiting to see if he was in a friendly mood.

"Hear the police are botching this royally," he said, tucking his hands into his armpits.

"It's a little early to say that."

"Come on, man, these little pansy-ass searches? I seen more effort put into finding the mayor's dog." Stucks's face was sunburned; I could feel the heat coming off him as he leaned in closer, giving me a blast of Listerine and chew. "Why ain't they rounded up some people? Plenty of people in town to choose from, they ain't brought a single one in? Not a *single* one? What about the Blue Book Boys? That's what I asked the lady detective: What about the Blue Book Boys? She wouldn't even answer me."

"What are the Blue Book Boys? A gang?"

"All those guys got laid off from the Blue Book plant last winter. No severance, nothing. You see some of the homeless guys wandering around town in packs, looking real, real pissed? Probably Blue Book Boys."

"I'm still not following you: Blue Book plant?"

"You know: River Valley Printworks. On the edge of town? They made those blue books you used for essays and shit in college."

"Oh. I didn't know."

“Now colleges use computers, whatnot, so—phwet!—bye-bye, Blue Book Boys.”

“God, this whole town is shutting down,” I muttered.

“The Blue Book Boys, they drink, drug, harass people. I mean, they did that before, but they always had to stop, go back to work on Monday. Now they just run wild.”

Stucks grinned his row of chipped teeth at me. He had paint flecks in his hair; his summer job since high school, housepainting. *I specialize in trim work*, he’d say, and wait for you to get the joke. If you didn’t laugh, he’d explain it.

“So, the cops been out to the mall?” Stucks asked. I started a confused shrug.

“Shit, man, didn’t you used to be a reporter?” Stucks always seemed angry at my former occupation, like it was a lie that had stood too long. “The Blue Book Boys, they all made themselves a nice little town over in the mall. Squatting. Drug deals. The police run them out every once in a while, but they’re always back next day. Anyway, that’s what I told the lady detective: *Search the fucking mall*. Because some of them, they gang-raped a girl there a month ago. I mean, you get a bunch of angry men together, and things aren’t too good for a woman that comes across them.”

On my drive to the afternoon search area, I phoned Boney, started in as soon as she said hello.

“Why isn’t the mall being searched?”

“The mall will be searched, Nick. We have cops heading over there right now.”

“Oh. Okay. Because a buddy of mine—”

“Stucks, I know, I know him.”

“He was talking about all the—”

“The Blue Book Boys, I know. Trust us, Nick, we got this. We want to find Amy as much as you do.”

“Okay, uh, thanks.”

My righteousness deflated, I gulped down my giant Styrofoam cup of coffee and drove to my assigned area. Three spots were being

searched this afternoon: the Gully boat launch (now known as The Place Nick Spent the Morning Of, Unseen by Anyone); the Miller Creek woods (which hardly deserved the name; you could see fast-food restaurants through the treeline); and Wolky Park, a nature spot with hiking and horse trails. I was assigned to Wolky Park.

When I arrived, a local officer was addressing a crowd of about twelve people, all thick legs in tight shorts, sunglasses, and hats, zinc oxide on noses. It looked like opening day of camp.

Two different TV crews were out to capture images for local stations. It was the July Fourth weekend; Amy would be squeezed in between state fair stories and barbecue cookoffs. One cub reporter kept mosquitoing around me, peppering me with pointless questions, my body going immediately stiff, inhuman, with the attention, my “concerned” face looking fake. A waft of horse manure hung in the air.

The reporters soon left to follow the volunteers into the trails. (What kind of journalist finds a suspicious husband ripe for the picking and *leaves*? A bad low-pay journalist left behind after all the decent ones have been laid off.) A young uniform cop told me to stand—right here—at the entry to the various trails, near a bulletin board that held a mess of ancient flyers, as well as a missing person notice for Amy, my wife staring out of that photo. She’d been everywhere today, following me.

“What should I be doing?” I asked the officer. “I feel like a jackass here. I need to do something.” Somewhere in the woods, a horse whinnied mournfully.

“We really need you right here, Nick. Just be friendly, be encouraging,” he said, and pointed to the bright orange thermos next to me. “Offer water. Just point anyone who comes in my way.” He turned and walked toward the stables. It occurred to me that they were intentionally barring me from any possible crime scene. I wasn’t sure what that meant.

As I stood aimlessly, pretending to busy myself with the cooler, a latecomer SUV rolled in, shiny red as nail polish. Out poured the fortysomethings from headquarters. The prettiest woman, the one Boney picked as a groupie, was holding her hair up in a ponytail so one of her friends could bug-spray the back of her neck. The woman

waved at the fumes elaborately. She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. Then she stepped away from her friends, let her hair fall down around her shoulders, and began picking her way over to me, that stricken, sympathetic smile on her face, the *I'm so sorry* smile. Giant brown pony eyes, her pink shirt ending just above crisp white shorts. High-heeled sandals, curled hair, gold hoops. *This, I thought, is how you not dress for a search.*

*Please don't talk to me, lady.*

“Hi, Nick, I'm Shawna Kelly. *I'm so sorry.*” She had an unnecessarily loud voice, a bit of a bray, like some enchanted, hot donkey. She held out her hand, and I felt a flick of alarm as Shawna's friends started ambling down the trail, casting girl-clique glances back toward us, the couple.

I offered what I had: my thanks, my water, my lip-swallowing awkwardness. Shawna didn't make any move to leave, even though I was staring ahead, toward the trail where her friends had disappeared.

“I hope you have friends, relatives, who are looking out for you during this, Nick,” she said, swatting a horsefly. “Men forget to take care of themselves. Comfort food is what you need.”

“We've been eating mostly cold cuts—you know, fast, easy.” I could still taste the salami in the back of my throat, the fumes floating up from my belly. I became aware that I hadn't brushed my teeth since the morning.

“Oh, you poor man. Well, cold cuts, that won't do it.” She shook her head, the gold hoops flickering sunlight. “You need to keep up your strength. Now, you are lucky, because *I* make a mean chicken Frito pie. You know what? I am going to put that together and drop it by the volunteer center tomorrow. You can just microwave it whenever you want a nice warm dinner.”

“Oh, that sounds like too much trouble, really. We're fine. We really are.”

“You'll be more fine after you eat a good meal,” she said, patting my arm.

Silence. She tried another angle.

“I really hope it doesn’t end up having anything to do ... with our homeless problem,” she said. “I swear, I have filed complaint after complaint. One broke into my garden last month. My motion sensor went off, so I peeked outside and there he was, kneeling in the dirt, just guzzling tomatoes. Gnawing at them like apples, his face and shirt were covered in juice and seeds. I tried to scare him off, but he loaded up at least twenty before he ran off. They were on the edge anyway, those Blue Book guys. No other skills.”

I felt a sudden affinity for the troop of Blue Book men, pictured myself walking into their bitter encampment, waving a white flag: *I am your brother, I used to work in print too. The computers stole my job too.*

“Don’t tell me you’re too young to remember Blue Books, Nick,” Shawna was saying. She poked me in the ribs, making me jump more than I should have.

“I’m so old, I’d forgotten about Blue Books until you reminded me.”

She laughed: “What are you, thirty-one, thirty-two?”

“Try thirty-four.”

“A baby.”

The trio of energetic elderly ladies arrived just then, tromping toward us, one working her cell phone, all wearing sturdy canvas garden skirts, Keds, and sleeveless golf tops revealing wobbly arms. They nodded at me respectfully, then flicked a glance of disapproval when they saw Shawna. We looked like a couple hosting a backyard barbecue. We looked inappropriate.

*Please go away, Shawna,* I thought.

“So anyway, the homeless guys, they can be really aggressive, like, threatening, toward women,” Shawna said. “I mentioned it to Detective Boney, but I get the feeling she doesn’t like me very much.”

“Why do you say that?” I already knew what she was going to say, the mantra of all attractive women.

“Women don’t like me all that much.” She shrugged. “Just one of those things. Did—does Amy have a lot of friends in town?”

A number of women—friends of my mom’s, friends of Go’s—had invited Amy to book clubs and Amway parties and girls’ nights at

Chili's. Amy had predictably declined all but a few, which she attended and hated: "We ordered a million little fried things and drank cocktails made from *ice cream*."

Shawna was watching me, wanting to know about Amy, wanting to be grouped together with my wife, who would hate her.

"I think she may have the same problem you do," I said in a clipped voice.

She smiled.

*Leave, Shawna.*

"It's hard to come to a new town," she said. "Hard to make friends, the older you get. Is she your age?"

"Thirty-eight."

That seemed to please her too.

*Go the fuck away.*

"Smart man, likes them older women."

She pulled a cell phone out of her giant chartreuse handbag, laughing. "Come here," she said, and pulled an arm around me. "Give me a big chicken-Frito casserole smile."

I wanted to smack her, right then, the obliviousness, the *girliness*, of her: trying to get an ego stroke from the husband of a missing woman. I swallowed my rage, tried to hit reverse, tried to overcompensate and *be nice*, so I smiled robotically as she pressed her face against my cheek and took a photo with her phone, the fake camera-click sound waking me.

She turned the phone around, and I saw our two sunburned faces pressed together, smiling as if we were on a date at the baseball game. Looking at my smarmy grin, my hooded eyes, I thought, *I would hate this guy.*

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

SEPTEMBER 15, 2010

## —DIARY ENTRY—

I am writing from somewhere in Pennsylvania. Southwest corner. A motel off the highway. Our room overlooks the parking lot, and if I peek out from behind the stiff beige curtains, I can see people milling about under the fluorescent lights. It's the kind of place where people mill about. I have the emotional bends again. Too much has happened, and so fast, and now I am in southwest Pennsylvania, and my husband is enjoying a defiant sleep amid the little packets of chips and candies he bought from the vending machine down the hall. Dinner. He is angry at me for not being a good sport. I thought I was putting up a convincing front—hurray, a new adventure!—but I guess not.

Now that I look back, it was like we were waiting for something to happen. Like Nick and I were sitting under a giant soundproof, windproof jar, and then the jar fell over and—there was something to do.

Two weeks ago, we are in our usual unemployed state: partly dressed, thick with boredom, getting ready to eat a silent breakfast that we'll stretch over the reading of the newspaper in its entirety. We even read the auto supplement now.

Nick's cell phone rings at ten A.M., and I can tell by his voice that it is Go. He sounds springy, boyish, the way he always does when he talks to her. The way he used to sound with me.

He heads into the bedroom and shuts the door, leaving me holding two freshly made eggs Benedicts quivering on the plates. I place his on the table and sit opposite, wondering if I should wait to eat. If it were me, I think, I would come back out and tell him to eat, or else I'd raise a finger: *Just one minute*. I'd be aware of the other person, my spouse, left in the kitchen with plates of eggs. I feel bad that I was thinking that. Because soon I can hear worried murmurs and upset

exclamations and gentle reassurances from behind the door, and I begin wondering if Go is having some back-home boy troubles. Go has a lot of breakups. Even the ones that she instigates require much handholding and goo-gawing from Nick.

So I have my usual *Poor Go* face on when Nick emerges, the eggs hardened on the plate. I see him and know this isn't just a Go problem.

"My mom," he starts, and sits down. "Shit. My mom has cancer. Stage four, and it's spread to the liver and bones. Which is bad, which is ..."

He puts his face in his hands, and I go over and put my arms around him. When he looks up, he is dry-eyed. Calm. I've never seen my husband cry.

"It's too much for Go, on top of my dad's Alzheimer's."

"Alzheimer's? *Alzheimer's*? Since when?"

"Well, a while. At first they thought it was some sort of early dementia. But it's more, it's worse."

I think, immediately, that there is something wrong with us, perhaps unfixable, if my husband wouldn't think to tell me this. Sometimes I feel it's his personal game, that he's in some sort of undeclared contest for impenetrability. "Why didn't you say anything to me?"

"My dad isn't someone I like to talk about that much."

"But still—"

"Amy. Please." He has that look, like I am being unreasonable, like he is so sure I am being unreasonable that I wonder if I am.

"But now. Go says with my mom, she'll need chemo but ... she'll be really, really sick. She'll need help."

"Should we start looking for in-home care for her? A nurse?"

"She doesn't have that kind of insurance."

He stares at me, arms crossed, and I know what he is daring: daring me to offer to pay, and we can't pay, because I've given my money to my parents.

“Okay, then, babe,” I say. “What do you want to do?”

We stand across from each other, a showdown, as if we are in a fight and I haven’t been informed. I reach out to touch him, and he just looks at my hand.

“We have to move back.” He glares at me, opening his eyes wide. He flicks his fingers out as if he is trying to rid himself of something sticky. “We’ll take a year, and we’ll go do the right thing. We have no jobs, we have no money, there’s nothing holding us here. Even you have to admit that.”

“Even *I* have to?” As if I am already being resistant. I feel a burst of anger that I swallow.

“This is what we’re going to do. We are going to do the right thing. We are going to help *my* parents for once.”

Of course that’s what we have to do, and of course if he had presented the problem to me like I wasn’t his enemy, that’s what I would have said. But he came out of the door already treating me like a problem that needed to be dealt with. I was the bitter voice that needed to be squelched.

My husband is the most loyal man on the planet until he’s not. I’ve seen his eyes literally turn a shade darker when he’s felt betrayed by a friend, even a dear longtime friend, and then the friend is never mentioned again. He looked at me then like I was an object to be jettisoned if necessary. It actually chilled me, that look.

So it is decided that quickly, with that little of a debate: We are leaving New York. We are going to Missouri. To a house in Missouri by the river where we will live. It is surreal, and I’m not one to misuse the word *surreal*.

I know it will be okay. It’s just so far from what I pictured. When I pictured my life. That’s not to say bad, just ... If you gave me a million guesses where life would take me, I wouldn’t have guessed. I find that alarming.

The packing of the U-Haul is a mini-tragedy: Nick, determined and guilty, his mouth a tight line, getting it done, unwilling to look at me. The U-Haul sits for hours, blocking traffic on our little street, blinking its hazard lights—danger, danger, danger—as Nick goes up and down the stairs, a one-man assembly line, carrying boxes of books, boxes of

kitchen supplies, chairs, side tables. We are bringing our vintage sofa—our broad old chesterfield that Dad calls our pet, we dote on it so much. It is to be the last thing we pack, a sweaty, awkward two-person job. Getting the massive thing down our stairs (*Hold on, I need to rest. Lift to the right. Hold on, you're going too fast. Watch out, my fingers my fingers!*) will be its own much-needed team-building exercise. After the sofa, we'll pick up lunch from the corner deli, bagel sandwiches to eat on the road. Cold soda.

Nick lets me keep the sofa, but our other big items are staying in New York. One of Nick's friends will inherit the bed; the guy will come by later to our empty home—nothing but dust and cable cords left—and take the bed, and then he'll live his New York life in our New York bed, eating two A.M. Chinese food and having lazy-condomed sex with tipsy, brass-mouthed girls who worked in PR. (Our home itself will be taken over by a noisy couple, hubby-wife lawyers who are shamelessly, brazenly gleeful at this buyers'-market deal. I hate them.)

I carry one load for every four that Nick grunts down. I move slowly, shuffling, like my bones hurt, a feverish delicacy descending on me. Everything does hurt. Nick buzzes past me, going up or down, and throws his frown at me, snaps "You okay?" and keeps moving before I answer, leaves me gaping, a cartoon with a black mouth-hole. I am not okay. I will be okay, but right now I am not okay. I want my husband to put his arms around me, to console me, to baby me a little bit. Just for a second.

Inside the back of the truck, he fusses with the boxes. Nick prides himself on his packing skills: He is (was) the loader of the dishwasher, the packer of the holiday bags. But by hour three, it is clear that we've sold or gifted too many of our belongings. The U-Haul's massive cavern is only half full. It gives me my single satisfaction of the day, that hot, mean satisfaction right in the belly, like a nib of mercury. *Good, I think. Good.*

"We can take the bed if you really want to," Nick says, looking past me down the street. "We have enough room."

"No, you promised it to Wally, Wally should have it," I say primly.

*I was wrong. Just say: I was wrong, I'm sorry, let's take the bed. You should have your old, comforting bed in this new place.* Smile at me and

be nice to me. Today, be nice to me.

Nick blows out a sigh. “Okay, if that’s what you want. Amy? Is it?” He stands, slightly breathless, leaning on a stack of boxes, the top one with Magic Marker scrawl: AMY CLOTHES WINTER. “This is the last I’ll hear about the bed, Amy? Because I’m offering right now. I’m happy to pack the bed for you.”

“How gracious of you,” I say, just a whiff of breath, the way I say most retorts: a puff of perfume from a rank atomizer. I am a coward. I don’t like confrontation. I pick up a box and start toward the truck.

“What did you say?”

I shake my head at him. I don’t want him to see me cry, because it will make him more angry.

Ten minutes later, the stairs are pounding—bang! bang! bang! Nick is dragging our sofa down by himself.

I can’t even look behind me as we leave New York, because the truck has no back window. In the side mirror, I track the skyline (the *receding skyline*—isn’t that what they write in Victorian novels where the doomed heroine is forced to leave her ancestral home?), but none of the good buildings—not the Chrysler or the Empire State or the Flatiron, they never appear in that little shining rectangle.

My parents dropped by the night before, presented us with the family cuckoo clock that I’d loved as a child, and the three of us cried and hugged as Nick shuffled his hands in his pockets and promised to take care of me.

He promised to take care of me, and yet I feel afraid. I feel like something is going wrong, very wrong, and that it will get even worse. I don’t feel like Nick’s wife. I don’t feel like a person at all: I am something to be loaded and unloaded, like a sofa or a cuckoo clock. I am something to be tossed into a junkyard, thrown into the river, if necessary. I don’t feel real anymore. I feel like I could disappear.

# NICK DUNNE

THREE DAYS GONE

The police weren't going to find Amy unless someone wanted her found. That much was clear. Everything green and brown had been searched: miles of the muddy Mississippi River, all the trails and hiking paths, our sad collection of patchy woods. If she were alive, someone would need to return her. If she were dead, nature would have to give her up. It was a palpable truth, like a sour taste on the tongue tip. I arrived at the volunteer center and realized everyone else knew this too: There was a listlessness, a defeat, that hung over the place. I wandered aimlessly over to the pastries station and tried to convince myself to eat something. Danish. I'd come to believe there was no food more depressing than Danish, a pastry that seemed stale upon arrival.

"I still say it's the river," one volunteer was saying to his buddy, both of them picking through the pastries with dirty fingers. "Right behind the guy's house, what easier way?"

"She would have turned up in an eddy by now, a lock, something."

"Not if she's been cut. Chop off the legs, the arms ... the body can shoot all the way to the Gulf. Tunica, at least."

I turned away before they noticed me.

A former teacher of mine, Mr. Coleman, sat at a card table, hunched over the tip-line phone, scribbling down information. When I caught his eye, he made the cuckoo signal: finger circling his ear, then pointing at the phone. He had greeted me yesterday by saying, "My granddaughter was killed by a drunk driver, so ..." We'd murmured and patted each other awkwardly.

My cell rang, the disposable—I couldn't figure out where to keep it, so I kept it on me. I'd made a call, and the call was being returned, but I couldn't take it. I turned the phone off, scanned the room to make sure the Elliots hadn't seen me do it. Marybeth was clicking

away on her BlackBerry, then holding it at arm's length so she could read the text. When she saw me, she shot over in her tight quick steps, holding the BlackBerry in front of her like a talisman.

“How many hours from here is Memphis?” she asked.

“Little under five hours, driving. What's in Memphis?”

“Hilary Handy lives in Memphis. Amy's *stalker* from high school. How much of a coincidence is that?”

I didn't know what to say: none?

“Yeah, Gilpin blew me off too. *We can't authorize the expense for something that happened twenty-some years ago.* Asshole. Guy always treats me like I'm on the verge of hysteria; he'll talk to Rand when I'm right there, totally ignore me, like I need my husband to explain things to little dumb me. Asshole.”

“The city's broke,” I said. “I'm sure they really don't have the budget, Marybeth.”

“Well, we do. I'm serious, Nick, this girl was off her rocker. And I know she tried to contact Amy over the years. Amy told me.”

“She never told me that.”

“What's it cost to drive there? Fifty bucks? Fine. Will you go? You said you'd go. Please? I won't be able to stop thinking until I know someone's talked to her.”

I knew this to be true, at least, because her daughter suffered from the same tenacious worry streak: Amy could spend an entire evening out fretting that she left the stove on, even though we didn't cook that day. Or was the door locked? Was I sure? She was a worst-case scenarist on a grand scale. Because it was never just that the door was unlocked, it was that the door was unlocked, and men were inside, and they were waiting to rape and kill her.

I felt a layer of sweat shimmer to the surface of my skin, because, finally, my wife's fears had come to fruition. Imagine the awful satisfaction, to know that all those years of worry had paid off.

“Of course I'll go. And I'll stop by St. Louis, see the other one, Desi, on the way. Consider it done.” I turned around, started my dramatic exit, got twenty feet, and suddenly, there was Stucks again, his entire face still slack with sleep.

“Heard the cops searched the mall yesterday,” he said, scratching his jaw. In his other hand he held a glazed donut, unbitten. A bagel-shaped bulge sat in the front pocket of his cargo pants. I almost made a joke: *Is that a baked good in your pocket or are you ...*

“Yeah. Nothing.”

“Yesterday. They went yesterday, the jackasses.” He ducked, looked around, as if he worried they’d overheard him. He leaned closer to me. “You go at night, that’s when they’re there. Daytime, they’re down by the river, or out flying a flag.”

“Flying a flag?”

“You know, sitting by the exits on the highway with those signs: *Laid Off, Please Help, Need Beer Money*, whatever,” he said, scanning the room. “Flying a flag, man.”

“Okay.”

“At night they’re at the mall,” he said.

“Then let’s go tonight,” I said. “You and me and whoever.”

“Joe and Mikey Hillsam,” Stucks said. “They’d be up for it.” The Hillsams were three, four years older than me, town badasses. The kind of guys who were born without the fear gene, impervious to pain. Jock kids who sped through the summers on short, muscled legs, playing baseball, drinking beer, taking strange dares: skateboarding into drainage ditches, climbing water towers naked. The kind of guys who would peel up, wild-eyed, on a boring Saturday night and you knew something would happen, maybe nothing good, but something. Of course the Hillsams would be up for it.

“Good,” I said. “Tonight we go.”

My disposable rang in my pocket. The thing didn’t turn off right. It rang again.

“You gonna get that?” Stucks asked.

“Nah.”

“You should answer every call, man. You really should.”

There was nothing to do for the rest of the day. No searches planned, no more flyers needed, the phones fully manned. Marybeth started sending volunteers home; they were just standing around, eating,

bored. I suspected Stucks of leaving with half the breakfast table in his pockets.

“Anyone hear from the detectives?” Rand asked.

“Nothing,” Marybeth and I both answered.

“That may be good, right?” Rand asked, hopeful eyes, and Marybeth and I both indulged him. Yes, sure.

“When are you leaving for Memphis?” she asked me.

“Tomorrow. Tonight my friends and I are doing another search of the mall. We don’t think it was done right yesterday.”

“Excellent,” Marybeth said. “That’s the kind of action we need. We suspect it wasn’t done right the first time, we do it ourselves. Because I just—I’m just not that impressed with what’s been done so far.”

Rand put a hand on his wife’s shoulder, a signal this refrain had been expressed and received many times.

“I’d like to come with you, Nick,” he said. “Tonight. I’d like to come.” Rand was wearing a powder-blue golf shirt and olive slacks, his hair a gleaming dark helmet. I pictured him trying to hail-fellow the Hillsam brothers, doing his slightly desperate one-of-the-guys routine—*hey, I love a good beer too, and how about that sports team of yours?*—and felt a flush of impending awkwardness.

“Of course, Rand. Of course.”

I had a good ten unscheduled hours to work with. My car was being released back to me—having been processed and vacuumed and printed, I assume—so I hitched a ride to the police station with an elderly volunteer, one of those bustling grandmotherly types who seemed slightly nervous to be alone with me.

“I’m just driving Mr. Dunne to the police station, but I will be back in less than half an hour,” she said to one of her friends. “No more than half an hour.”

Gilpin had not taken Amy’s second note into evidence; he’d been too thrilled with the underwear to bother. I got in my car, flung the door open, and sat as the heat drooled out, reread my wife’s second clue:

*Picture me: I’m crazy about you*

*My future is anything but hazy with you  
You took me here so I could hear you chat  
About your boyhood adventures: crummy jeans and visor hat  
Screw everyone else, for us they're all ditched  
And let's sneak a kiss ... pretend we just got hitched.*

It was Hannibal, Missouri, boyhood home of Mark Twain, where I'd worked summers growing up, where I'd wandered the town dressed as Huck Finn, in an old straw hat and faux-ragged pants, smiling scampishly while urging people to visit the Ice Cream Shoppe. It was one of those stories you dine out on, at least in New York, because no one else could match it. No one could ever say: *Oh yeah, me too.*

The "visor hat" comment was a little inside joke: When I'd first told Amy I played Huck, we were out to dinner, into our second bottle of wine, and she'd been adorably tipsy. Big grin and the flushed cheeks she got when she drank. Leaning across the table as if I had a magnet on me. She kept asking me if I still had the visor, would I wear the visor for her, and when I asked her why in the name of all that was holy would she think that Huck Finn wore a visor, she swallowed once and said, "Oh, I meant a straw hat!" As if those were two entirely interchangeable words. After that, anytime we watched tennis, we always complimented the players' sporty straw hats.

Hannibal was a strange choice for Amy, however, as I don't remember us having a particularly good or bad time there, just a time. I remember us ambling around almost a full year ago, pointing at things and reading placards and saying, "That's interesting," while the other one agreed, "That is." I'd been there since then without Amy (my nostalgic streak uncrushable) and had a glorious day, a wide-grin, right-with-the-world day. But with Amy, it had been still, rote. A bit embarrassing. I remember at one point starting a goofy story about a childhood field trip here, and I saw her eyes go blank, and I got secretly furious, spent ten minutes just winding myself up—because at this point of our marriage, I was so used to being angry with her, it felt almost enjoyable, like gnawing on a cuticle: You know you should stop, that it doesn't really feel as good as you think, but you can't quit grinding away. On the surface, of course, she saw nothing. We just kept walking, and reading placards, and pointing.

It was a fairly awful reminder, the dearth of good memories we had

since our move, that my wife was forced to pick Hannibal for her treasure hunt.

I reached Hannibal in twenty minutes, drove past the glorious Gilded Age courthouse that now held only a chicken-wing place in its basement, and headed past a series of shuttered businesses—ruined community banks and defunct movie houses—toward the river. I parked in a lot right on the Mississippi, smack in front of the *Mark Twain* riverboat. Parking was free. (I never failed to thrill to the novelty, the generosity of free parking.) Banners of the white-maned man hung listlessly from lamp poles, posters curled up in the heat. It was a blow-dryer-hot day, but even so, Hannibal seemed disturbingly quiet. As I walked along the few blocks of souvenir stores—quilts and antiques and taffy—I saw more for-sale signs. Becky Thatcher's house was closed for renovations, to be paid for with money that had yet to be raised. For ten bucks, you could graffiti your name on Tom Sawyer's whitewashed fence, but there were few takers.

I sat in the doorstep of a vacant storefront. It occurred to me that I had brought Amy to the end of everything. We were literally experiencing the end of a way of life, a phrase I'd applied only to New Guinea tribesmen and Appalachian glassblowers. The recession had ended the mall. Computers had ended the Blue Book plant. Carthage had gone bust; its sister city Hannibal was losing ground to brighter, louder, cartoonier tourist spots. My beloved Mississippi River was being eaten in reverse by Asian carp flip-flopping their way up toward Lake Michigan. *Amazing Amy* was done. It was the end of my career, the end of hers, the end of my father, the end of my mom. The end of our marriage. The end of Amy.

The ghost wheeze of the steamboat horn blew out from the river. I had sweated through the back of my shirt. I made myself stand up. I made myself buy my tour ticket. I walked the route Amy and I had taken, my wife still beside me in my mind. It was hot that day too. *You are BRILLIANT*. In my imagination, she strolled next to me, and this time she smiled. My stomach went oily.

I mind-walked my wife around the main tourist drag. A gray-haired couple paused to peer into the Huckleberry Finn house but didn't bother to walk in. At the end of the block, a man dressed as Twain—white hair, white suit—got out of a Ford Focus, stretched, looked down the lonely street, and ducked into a pizza joint. And then there

we were, at the clapboard building that had been the courtroom of Samuel Clemens's dad. The sign out front read: *J. M. Clemens, Justice of the Peace.*

*Let's sneak a kiss ... pretend we just got hitched.*

*You're making these so nice and easy, Amy. As if you actually want me to find them, to feel good about myself. Keep this up and I'll break my record.*

No one was inside. I got down on my knees on the dusty floorboards and peered under the first bench. If Amy left a clue in a public place, she always taped it to the underside of things, in between the wadded gum and the dust, and she was always vindicated, because no one likes to look at the underside of things. There was nothing under the first bench, but there was a flap of paper hanging down from the bench behind. I climbed over and tugged down the Amy-blue envelope, a piece of tape winging off it.

Hi Darling Husband,

You found it! Brilliant man. It may help that I decided to not make this year's treasure hunt an excruciating forced march through my arcane personal memories.

I took a cue from your beloved Mark Twain:

"What ought to be done to the man who invented the celebrating of anniversaries? Mere killing would be too light."

I finally get it, what you've said year after year, that this treasure hunt should be a time to celebrate us, not a test about whether you remember every thing I think or say throughout the year. You'd think that would be something a grown woman would realize on her own, but ... I guess that's what husbands are for. To point out what we can't see for ourselves, even if it takes five years.

So I wanted to take a moment now, in the childhood stomping grounds of Mark Twain, and thank you for your WIT. You are truly the cleverest, funniest person I know. I have a wonderful sense memory: of all the times over the years you've leaned in to my ear—I can feel your breath tickling my lobe, right now, as I'm writing this—and whispered something just to me, just to make me laugh. What a generous thing that is, I realize, for a husband to try to make his wife laugh. And you always picked the best moments. Do you remember when Insley and her dancing-monkey husband made us come over to admire their baby, and we did the obligatory visit to their strangely perfect, overflowed, overmuffined house for brunch and baby-meeting and they were so self-righteous and patronizing of our childless state, and meanwhile there was their hideous boy, covered in streaks of slobber and stewed carrots and maybe

some feces—naked except for a frilly bib and a pair of knitted booties—and as I sipped my orange juice, you leaned over and whispered, “That’s what I’ll be wearing later.” And I literally did a spit take. It was one of those moments where you saved me, you made me laugh at just the right time. Just one olive, though. So let me say it again: You are WITTY. Now kiss me!

I felt my soul deflate. Amy was using the treasure hunt to steer us back to each other. And it was too late. While she had been writing these clues, she’d had no idea of my state of mind. *Why, Amy, couldn’t you have done this sooner?*

Our timing had never been good.

I opened the next clue, read it, tucked it in my pocket, then headed back home. I knew where to go, but I wasn’t ready yet. I couldn’t handle another compliment, another kind word from my wife, another olive branch. My feelings for her were veering too quickly from bitter to sweet.

I went back to Go’s, spent a few hours alone, drinking coffee and flipping around the TV, anxious and pissy, killing time till my eleven P.M. carpool to the mall.

My twin got home just after seven, looking wilted from her solo bar shift. Her glance at the TV told me I should turn it off.

“What’d you do today?” she asked, lighting a cigarette and flopping down at our mother’s old card table.

“Manned the volunteer center ... then we go search the mall at eleven,” I said. I didn’t want to tell her about Amy’s clue. I felt guilty enough.

Go doled out some solitaire cards, the steady slap of them on the table a rebuke. I began pacing. She ignored me.

“I was just watching TV to distract myself.”

“I know, I do.”

She flipped over a Jack.

“There’s got to be something I can *do*,” I said, stalking around her living room.

“Well, you’re searching the mall in a few hours,” Go said, and gave no more encouragement. She flipped over three cards.

“You sound like you think it’s a waste of time.”

“Oh. No. Hey, everything is worth checking out. They got Son of Sam on a parking ticket, right?”

Go was the third person who’d mentioned this to me; it must be the mantra for cases going cold. I sat down across from her.

“I haven’t been upset enough about Amy,” I said. “I know that.”

“Maybe not.” She finally looked up at me. “You’re being weird.”

“I think that instead of panicking, I’ve just focused on being pissed at her. Because we were in such a bad place lately. It’s like it feels wrong for me to worry too much because I don’t have the right. I guess.”

“You’ve been weird, I can’t lie,” Go said. “But it’s a weird situation.” She stubbed out her cigarette. “I don’t care how you are with me. Just be careful with everyone else, okay? People judge. Fast.”

She went back to her solitaire, but I wanted her attention. I kept talking.

“I should probably check in on Dad at some point,” I said. “I don’t know if I’ll tell him about Amy.”

“No,” she said. “Don’t. He was even weirder about Amy than you are.”

“I always felt like she must remind him of an old girlfriend or something—the one who got away. After he—” I made the downward swoop of a hand that signified his Alzheimer’s—“he was kind of rude and awful, but ...”

“Yeah, but he kind of wanted to impress her at the same time,” she said. “Your basic jerky twelve-year-old boy trapped in a sixty-eight-year-old asshole’s body.”

“Don’t women think that all men are jerky twelve-year-olds at heart?”

“Hey, if the heart fits.”

Eleven-oh-eight P.M., Rand was waiting for us just inside the automatic sliding doors to the hotel, his face squinting into the dark to make us out. The Hillsams were driving their pick-up; Stucks and I both rode in the bed. Rand came trotting up to us in khaki golf shorts and a

crisp Middlebury T-shirt. He hopped in the back, planted himself on the wheel cover with surprising ease, and handled the introductions like he was the host of his own mobile talk show.

“I’m really sorry about Amy, Rand,” Stucks said loudly, as we hurtled out of the parking lot with unnecessary speed and hit the highway. “She’s such a sweet person. One time she saw me out painting a house, sweating my ba—my butt off, and she drove on to 7-Eleven, got me a giant pop, and brought it back to me, right up on the ladder.”

This was a lie. Amy cared so little for Stucks or his refreshment that she wouldn’t have bothered to piss in a cup for him.

“That sounds like her,” Rand said, and I was flush with unwelcome, ungentlemanly annoyance. Maybe it was the journalist in me, but facts were facts, and people didn’t get to turn Amy into everyone’s beloved best friend just because it was emotionally expedient.

“Middlebury, huh?” Stucks continued, pointing at Rand’s T-shirt. “Got a hell of a rugby team.”

“That’s *right* we do,” Rand said, the big smile again, and he and Stucks began an improbable discussion of liberal-arts rugby over the noise of the car, the air, the night, all the way to the mall.

Joe Hillsam parked his truck outside the giant cornerstone Mervyns. We all hopped out, stretched our legs, shook ourselves awake. The night was muggy and moon-slivered. I noticed Stucks was wearing—maybe ironically, possibly not—a T-shirt that read *Save Gas, Fart in a Jar*.

“So, this place, what we’re doing, it’s freakin’ dangerous, I don’t want to lie,” Mikey Hillsam began. He had beefed up over the years, as had his brother; they weren’t just barrel-chested but barrel-everythinged. Standing side by side, they were about five hundred pounds of dude.

“We came here once, me and Mikey, just for—I don’t know, to see it, I guess, see what it had become, and we almost got our asses handed to us,” said Joe. “So tonight we take no chances.” He reached into the cab for a long canvas bag and unzipped it to reveal half a dozen baseball bats. He began handing them out solemnly. When he got to Rand, he hesitated. “Uh, you want one?”

“Hell yes, I do,” Rand said, and they all nodded and smiled approval, the energy in the circle a friendly backslap, a *good for you, old man*.

“Come on,” Mikey said, and led us along the exterior. “There’s a door with a lock smashed off down here near the Spencer’s.”

Just then we passed the dark windows of Shoe-Be-Doo-Be, where my mom had worked for more than half my life. I still remember the thrill of her going to apply for a job at that most wondrous of places—the mall!—leaving one Saturday morning for the job fair in her bright peach pantsuit, a forty-year-old woman looking for work for the first time, and her coming home with a flushed grin: We couldn’t imagine how busy the mall was, so many different kinds of stores! And who knew which one she might work in? She applied to nine! Clothing stores and stereo stores and even a designer popcorn store. When she announced a week later that she was officially a shoe saleslady, her kids were underwhelmed.

“You’ll have to touch all sorts of stinky feet,” Go complained.

“I’ll get to meet all sorts of interesting people,” our mom corrected.

I peered into the gloomy window. The place was entirely vacant except for a shoe sizer lined pointlessly against the wall.

“My mom used to work here,” I told Rand, forcing him to linger with me.

“What kind of place was it?”

“It was a nice place, they were good to her.”

“I mean what did they do here?”

“Oh, shoes. They did shoes.”

“That’s right! Shoes. I like that. Something people actually need. And at the end of the day, you know what you’ve done: You’ve sold five people shoes. Not like writing, huh?”

“Dunne, come on!” Stucks was leaning against the open door ahead; the others had gone inside.

I’d expected the mall smell as we entered: that temperature-controlled hollowness. Instead, I smelled old grass and dirt, the scent of the outdoors inside, where it had no place being. The building was

heavy-hot, almost fuzzy, like the inside of a mattress. Three of us had giant camping flashlights, the glow illuminating jarring images: It was suburbia, post-comet, post-zombie, post-humanity. A set of muddy shopping-cart tracks looped crazily along the white flooring. A raccoon chewed on a dog treat in the entry to a women's bathroom, his eyes flashing like dimes.

The whole mall was quiet; Mikey's voice echoed, our footsteps echoed, Stucks's drunken giggle echoed. We would not be a surprise attack, if attack was what we had in mind.

When we reached the central promenade of the mall, the whole area ballooned: four stories high, escalators and elevators crisscrossing in the black. We all gathered near a dried-up fountain and waited for someone to take the lead.

"So, guys," Rand said doubtfully, "what's the plan here? You all know this place, and I don't. We need to figure out how to systematically—"

We heard a loud metal rattle right behind us, a security gate going up.

"Hey, there's one!" Stucks yelled. He trained his flashlight on a man in a billowing rain slicker, shooting out from the entry of a Claire's, running full speed away from us.

"Stop him!" Joe yelled, and began running after him, thick tennis shoes slapping against the ceramic tile, Mikey right behind him, flashlight trained on the stranger, the two brothers calling gruffly—*hold up there, hey, guy, we just have a question*. The man didn't even give a backward glance. *I said hold on, motherfucker!* The runner remained silent amid the yelling, but he picked up speed and shot down the mall corridor, in and out of the flashlight's glow, his slicker flapping behind him like a cape. Then the guy turned acrobatic: leaping over a trash can, shimmying off the edge of a fountain, and finally slipping under a metal security gate to the Gap and disappearing.

"Fucker!" The Hillsams had turned heart-attack red in the face, the neck, the fingers. They took turns grunting at the gate, straining to lift it.

I reached down with them, but there was no budging it over half a

foot. I lay down on the floor and tried threading myself under the gate: toes, calves, then stuck at my waist.

“Nope, no go.” I grunted. “Fuck!” I pulled up and shone my flashlight into the store. The showroom was empty except for a pile of clothing racks someone had dragged to the center, as if to start a bonfire. “All the stores connect in the back to passageways for trash, plumbing,” I said. “He’s probably at the other end of the mall by now.”

“Well, then let’s go to the other end of the mall,” Rand said.

“Come out, you fuckers!” Joe yelled, his head tilted back, eyes scrunched. His voice echoed through the building. We began walking ragtag, trailing our bats alongside us, except for the Hillsams, who used theirs to bang against security gates and doors, like they were on military patrol in a particularly nasty war zone.

“Better you come to us than we come to you!” Mikey called. “Oh, *hello!*” In the entryway to a pet shop, a man and woman huddled on a few army blankets, their hair wet with sweat. Mikey loomed over them, breathing heavily, wiping his brow. It was the scene in the war movie when the frustrated soldiers come across innocent villagers and bad things happen.

“The fuck you want?” the man on the floor asked. He was emaciated, his face so thin and drawn it looked like it was melting. His hair was tangled to his shoulders, his eyes mournful and upturned: a despoiled Jesus. The woman was in better shape, with clean, plump arms and legs, her lank hair oily but brushed.

“You a Blue Book Boy?” Stucks asked.

“Ain’t no boy, anyhow,” the man muttered, folding his arms.

“Have some fucking respect,” the woman snapped. Then she looked like she might cry. She turned away from us, pretending to look at something in the distance. “I’m sick of *no one* having *no respect.*”

“We asked you a question, buddy,” Mikey said, moving closer to the guy, kicking the sole of his foot.

“I ain’t Blue Book,” the man said. “Just down on my luck.”

“Bullshit.”

“Lots of different people here, not just Blue Books. But if that’s who

you're looking for ...”

“Go on, go on, then, and find them,” the woman said, her mouth turning down. “Go bother them.”

“They deal down in the Hole,” the man said. When we looked blank, he pointed. “The Mervyns, far end, past where the carousel used to be.”

“And fuck you very much,” the woman muttered.

A crop-circle stain marked where the carousel once was. Amy and I had taken a ride just before the mall shut down. Two grown-ups, side by side on levitating bunny rabbits, because my wife wanted to see the mall where I spent so much of my childhood. Wanted to hear my stories. It wasn't all bad with us.

The barrier gate to the Mervyns had been busted through, so the store was open as wide and welcoming as the morning of a Presidents' Day sale. Inside, the place was cleared out except for the islands that once held cash registers and now held about a dozen people in various states of drug highs, under signs that read *Jewelry* and *Beauty* and *Bedding*. They were illuminated by gas camping lamps that flickered like tiki torches. A few guys barely opened an eye as we passed, others were out cold. In a far corner, two kids not long out of their teens were manically reciting the Gettysburg Address. *Now we are engaged in a great civil war ...* One man sprawled out on the rug in immaculate jean shorts and white tennis shoes, like he was on the way to his kid's T-ball game. Rand stared at him as if he might know the guy.

Carthage had a bigger drug epidemic than I ever knew: The cops had been here just yesterday, and already the druggies had resettled, like determined flies. As we made our way through the piles of humans, an obese woman shushed up to us on an electric scooter. Her face was pimply and wet with sweat, her teeth catlike.

“You buying or leaving, because this ain't a show-and-tell,” she said.

Stucks shone a flashlight on her face.

“Get that fucking thing off me.” He did.

“I'm looking for my wife,” I began. “Amy Dunne. She's been missing

since Thursday.”

“She’ll show up. She’ll wake up, drag herself home.”

“We’re not worried about drugs,” I said. “We’re more concerned about some of the men here. We’ve heard rumors.”

“It’s okay, Melanie,” a voice called. At the edge of the juniors section, a rangy man leaned against a naked mannequin torso, watching us, a sideways grin on his face.

Melanie shrugged, bored, annoyed, and motored away.

The man kept his eyes on us but called toward the back of the juniors section, where four sets of feet poked out from the dressing rooms, men camped out in their individual cubicles.

“Hey, Lonnie! Hey, all! The assholes are back. Five of ’em,” the man said. He kicked an empty beer can toward us. Behind him, three sets of feet began moving, men pulling themselves up. One set remained still, their owner asleep or passed out.

“Yeah, fuckos, we’re back,” Mikey Hillsam said. He held his bat like a pool cue and punched the mannequin torso between the breasts. She tottered toward the ground, the Blue Book guy removing his arm gracefully as she fell, as if it were all part of a rehearsed act. “We want some information on a missing girl.”

The three men from the dressing rooms joined their friends. They all wore Greek-party T-shirts: *Pi Phi Tie-Dye* and *Fiji Island*. Local Goodwills got inundated with these come summer—university graduates shedding their old souvenirs.

The men were all wiry-strong, muscular arms rivered with popping blue veins. Behind them, a guy with a long, drooping mustache and hair in a ponytail—Lonnie—came out of the largest corner dressing room, dragging a long length of pipe, wearing a Gamma Phi T-shirt. We were looking at mall security.

“What’s up?” Lonnie called.

*We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground ...* the kids were reciting in a pitch that was close to screaming.

“We’re looking for Amy Dunne, you probably seen her on the news, missing since Thursday,” Joe Hillsam said. “Nice, pretty, sweet lady,

stolen from her own home.”

“I heard about it. So?” said Lonnie.

“She’s my wife,” I said.

“We know what you guys’ve been getting into out here,” Joe continued, addressing only Lonnie, who was tossing his ponytail behind him, squaring his jaw. Faded green tattoos covered his fingers. “We know about the gang rape.”

I glanced at Rand to see if he was all right; he was staring at the naked mannequin on the floor.

“Gang rape,” Lonnie said, jerking his head back. “The fuck you talking about a gang rape.”

“You guys,” Joe said. “You Blue Book Boys—”

“Blue Book Boys, like we’re some kind of crew.” Lonnie sniffed. “We’re not animals, asshole. We don’t steal women. People want to feel okay for not helping us. *See, they don’t deserve it, they’re a bunch of rapists.* Well, *bullshit.* I’d get the fuck out of this town if the plant would give me my back pay. But I got nothing. None of us got nothing. So here we are.”

“We’ll give you money, good money, if you can tell us anything about Amy’s disappearance,” I said. “You guys know a lot of people, maybe you heard something.”

I pulled out her photo. The Hillsams and Stucks looked surprised, and I realized—of course—this was only a macho diversion for them. I pushed the photo in Lonnie’s face, expecting him to barely glance. Instead, he leaned in closer.

“Oh, shit,” he said. “*Her?*”

“You recognize her?”

He actually looked stricken. “She wanted to buy a gun.”

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

OCTOBER 16, 2010

## —DIARY ENTRY—

Happy anniversary to me! One full month as a Missouri resident, and I am on my way to becoming a good midwesterner. Yep, I have gone cold turkey off all things East Coast and I have earned my thirty-day chip (here it would be a potato chip). I am taking notes, I am honoring traditions. I am the Margaret Mead of the goddamn Mississipp.

Let's see, what's new? Nick and I are currently embroiled in what I have taken to calling (to myself) the Cuckoo Clock Conundrum. My parents' cherished heirloom looks ridiculous in the new house. But then all our New York stuff does. Our dignified elephant of a chesterfield with its matching baby ottoman sits in the living room looking stunned, as if it got sleep-darted in its natural environment and woke up in this strange new captivity, surrounded by faux-posh carpet and synthetic wood and unveined walls. I do miss our old place—all the bumps and ridges and hairline fractures left by the decades. (Pause for attitude adjustment.) But new is nice too! Just different. The clock would disagree. The cuckoo is also having a tough time adjusting to its new space: The little bird lurches out drunkenly at ten minutes after the hour; seventeen minutes before; forty-one past. It emits a dying wail—coo-crrrrww—that every time brings Blecker trotting in from some hideaway, eyes wild, all business, his tail a bottle-brush as he tilts his head toward the feathers and mewls.

“Wow, your parents must really hate me,” Nick says whenever we're both in earshot of the noise, though he's smart enough not to recommend ridding ourselves of the thing just yet. I actually want to trash it too. I am the one (the jobless) at home all day, just waiting for its squawk, a tense moviegoer steeling myself for the next outburst from the crazy patron behind me—both relieved (there it is!) and angry (there it is!) each time it comes.

Much to-do was made over the clock at the housewarming (*oh, look at that, an antique clock!*), which Mama Maureen Dunne insisted on. Actually, not insisted on; Mama Mo does not insist. She simply makes things a reality by assuming they are such: From the first morning after the move, when she appeared on our doorstep with a welcome-home egg scramble and a family pack of toilet paper (which didn't speak well for the egg scramble), she'd spoken of the housewarming as if it were a fact. *So when do you want to do your housewarming? Have you thought about who I should invite to the housewarming? Do you want a housewarming or something fun, like a stock-the-bar party? But a traditional housewarming is always nice.*

And then suddenly there was a date, and the date was today, and Dunne family and friends were shaking off the October drizzle from umbrellas and carefully, conscientiously wiping their feet on the floor mat Maureen had brought for us this morning. The rug says: *All Are Friends Who Enter Here*. It is from Costco. I have learned about bulk shopping in my four weeks as a Mississippi River resident. Republicans go to Sam's Club, Democrats go to Costco. But everyone buys bulk because—unlike Manhattanites—they all have space to store twenty-four jars of sweet pickles. And—unlike Manhattanites—they all have uses for twenty-four jars of sweet pickles. (No gathering is complete without a lazy Susan full of pickles and Spanish olives right from the jar. And a salt lick.)

I set the scene: It is one of those big-smelling days, when people bring the outdoors in with them, the scent of rain on their sleeves, in their hair. The older women—Maureen's friends—present varying food items in plastic, dishwasher-safe containers they will later ask to be returned. And ask and ask. I know, now, that I am supposed to wash out the containers and drop each of them back by their proper homes—a Ziploc carpool—but when I first came here, I was unaware of the protocol. I dutifully recycled all the plastic containers, and so I had to go buy all new ones. Maureen's best friend, Vicky, immediately noticed her container was brand-new, store-bought, an imposter, and when I explained my confusion, she widened her eyes in amazement: *So that's how they do it in New York.*

But the housewarming: The older women are Maureen's friends from long-ago PTA meetings, from book clubs, from the Shoe-Be-Doo-Be at the mall, where she spent forty hours a week slipping sensible

block heels onto women of a certain age. (She can size a foot on sight—women’s 8, narrow!—it’s her go-to party trick.) All Mo’s friends love Nick, and they all have stories about sweet things Nick has done for them over the years.

The younger women, the women representing the pool of possible Amy-friends, all sport the same bleached-blond wedge haircut, the same slip-on mules. They are the daughters of Maureen’s friends, and they all love Nick, and they all have stories about sweet things Nick has done for them over the years. Most of them are out of work from the mall closings, or their husbands are out of work from the mall closings, so they all offer me recipes for “cheap and easy eats” that usually involve a casserole made from canned soup, butter, and a snack chip.

The men are nice and quiet and hunker in circles, talking about sports and smiling benevolently toward me.

Everyone is nice. They are literally *as nice as they can be*. Maureen, the tristate’s hardiest cancer patient, introduces me to all her friends the same way you’d show off a slightly dangerous new pet: “This is Nick’s wife, Amy, who was *born and raised* in New York City.” And her friends, plump and welcoming, immediately suffer some strange Tourettesian episode: They repeat the words—*New York City!*—with clasped hands and say something that defies response: *That must have been neat*. Or, in reedy voices, they sing “New York, New York,” rocking side to side with tiny jazz hands. Maureen’s friend from the shoe store, Barb, drawls “*Nue York Ceety! Get a rope,*” and when I squint at her in confusion, she says, “Oh, it’s from that old salsa commercial!” and when I still fail to connect, she blushes, puts a hand on my arm, and says, “I wouldn’t really hang you.”

Ultimately, everyone trails off into giggles and confesses they’ve never been to New York. Or that they’ve been—once—and didn’t care for it much. Then I say something like: *You’d like it* or *It’s definitely not for everyone* or *Mmm*, because I’ve run out of things to say.

“Be friendly, Amy,” Nick spits into my ear when we’re refilling drinks in the kitchen (midwesterners love two liters of soda, always two liters, and you pour them into big red plastic Solo cups, always).

“I *am*,” I whine. It really hurts my feelings, because if you asked anyone in that room whether I’d been friendly, I know they’d say yes.

Sometimes I feel like Nick has decided on a version of me that doesn't exist. Since we've moved here, I've done girls' nights out and charity walks, I've cooked casseroles for his dad and helped sell tickets for raffles. I tapped the last of my money to give to Nick and Go so they could buy the bar they've always wanted, and I even put the check inside a card shaped like a mug of beer—*Cheers to You!*—and Nick just gave a flat begrudging thanks. I don't know what to do. I'm trying.

We deliver the soda pops, me smiling and laughing even harder, a vision of grace and good cheer, asking everyone if I can get them anything else, complimenting women on ambrosia salads and crab dips and pickle slices wrapped in cream cheese wrapped in salami.

Nick's dad arrives with Go. They stand silently on the doorstep, Midwest Gothic, Bill Dunne wiry and still handsome, a tiny Band-Aid on his forehead, Go grim-faced, her hair in barrettes, her eyes averted from her father.

"Nick," Bill Dunne says, shaking his hand, and he steps inside, frowning at me. Go follows, grabs Nick, and pulls him back behind the door, whispering, "I have no idea where he is right now, headwise. Like if he's having a bad day or if he's just being a jackass. No idea."

"Okay, okay. Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him."

Go shrugs pissily.

"I'm serious, Go. Grab a beer and take a break. You are relieved of Dad duty for the next hour."

I think: *If that had been me, he'd complain that I was being too sensitive.*

The older women keep swirling around me, telling me how Maureen has always said what a wonderful couple Nick and I are and she is right, we are clearly made for each other.

I prefer these well-meant clichés to the talk we heard before we got married. *Marriage is compromise and hard work, and then more hard work and communication and compromise. And then work.* Abandon all hope, ye who enter.

The engagement party back in New York was the worst for this, all

the guests hot with wine and resentment, as if every set of spouses had gotten into an argument on the way to the club. Or they remembered some argument. Like Binks. Binks Moriarty, my mom's best friend's eighty-eight-year-old mother, stopped me at the bar—bellowed, “Amy! I must talk to you!” in an emergency-room voice. She twisted her precious rings on overknuckled fingers—twist, turn, creak—and fondled my arm (that old-person grope—cold fingers coveting your nice, soft, warm, new skin), and then Binks told me how her late husband of sixty-three years had trouble “keeping it in his pants.” Binks said this with one of those *I'm almost dead, I can say this kind of stuff* grins and cataract-clouded eyes. “He just couldn't keep it in his pants,” the old lady said urgently, her hand chilling my arm in a death grip. “But he loved me more than any of them. *I* know it, and *you* know it.” The moral to the story being: Mr. Binks was a cheating dickweasel, but, you know, marriage is compromise.

I retreated quickly and began circulating through the crowd, smiling at a series of wrinkled faces, that baggy, exhausted, disappointed look that people get in middle age, and all the faces were like that. Most of them were also drunk, dancing steps from their youth—swaying to country-club funk—and that seemed even worse. I was making my way to the French windows for some air, and a hand squeezed my arm. Nick's mom, Mama Maureen, with her big black laser eyes, her eager pug-dog face. Thrusting a wad of goat cheese and crackers into her mouth, Maureen managed to say: “It's not easy, pairing yourself off with someone forever. It's an admirable thing, and I'm glad you're both doing it, but, boy-oh-girl-oh, there will be days you wish you'd never done it. And those will be the good times, when it's only *days* of regret and not *months*.” I must have looked shocked—I was definitely shocked—because she said quickly: “But then you have good times too. I know you will. *You two*. A *lot* of good times. So just ... forgive me, sweetheart, what I said before. I'm just being a silly old divorced lady. Oh, mother of pearl, I think I had too much *wine*.” And she fluttered a goodbye at me and scampered away through all the other disappointed couples.

“You're not supposed to be here,” Bill Dunne was suddenly saying, and he was saying it to me. “Why are you here? You're not allowed here.”

“I'm Amy,” I say, touching his arm as if that might wake him. Bill

has always liked me; even if he could think of nothing to say to me, I could tell he liked me, the way he watched me like I was a rare bird. Now he is scowling, thrusting his chest toward me, a caricature of a young sailor ready to brawl. A few feet away, Go sets down her food and gets ready to move toward us, quietly, like she is trying to catch a fly.

“Why are you in our house?” Bill Dunne says, his mouth grimacing. “You’ve got some nerve, lady.”

“Nick?” Go calls behind her, not loudly but urgently.

“Got it,” Nick says, appearing. “Hey, Dad, this is my wife, Amy. Remember Amy? We moved back home so we could see you more. This is our new house.”

Nick glares at me: I was the one who insisted we invite his dad.

“All I’m saying, Nick,” Bill Dunne says, pointing now, jabbing an index finger toward my face, the party going hushed, several men moving slowly, cautiously, in from the other room, their hands twitching, ready to move, “is *she* doesn’t belong here. Little bitch thinks she can do whatever she wants.”

Mama Mo swoops in then, her arm around her ex-husband, always, always rising to the occasion. “Of course she belongs here, Bill. It’s her house. She’s your son’s wife. Remember?”

“I want her out of here, do you understand me, Maureen?” He shrugs her off and starts moving toward me again. “Dumb bitch. Dumb bitch.”

It’s unclear if he means me or Maureen, but then he looks at me and tightens his lips. “She doesn’t *belong* here.”

“I’ll go,” I say, and turn away, walk straight out the door, into the rain. *From the mouths of Alzheimer’s patients*, I think, trying to make light. I walk a loop around the neighborhood, waiting for Nick to appear, to guide me back to our house. The rain spackles me gently, dampening me. I really believe Nick will come after me. I turn toward the house and see only a closed door.

**NICK DUNNE**  
FOUR DAYS GONE

Rand and I sat in the vacant Find Amy Dunne headquarters at five in the morning, drinking coffee while we waited for the cops to check out Lonnie. Amy stared at us from her poster perch on the wall. Her photo looked distressed.

“I just don’t understand why she wouldn’t say something to you if she was afraid,” Rand said. “Why wouldn’t she tell you?”

Amy had come to the mall to buy a gun on Valentine’s Day, of all days, that’s what our friend Lonnie had said. She was a little abashed, a little nervous: *Maybe I’m being silly, but ... I just really think I need a gun.* Mostly, though, she was scared. Someone was unnerving her, she told Lonnie. She gave no more details, but when he asked her what kind of gun she wanted, she said: *One that stops someone fast.* He told her to come back in a few days, and she did. He hadn’t been able to get her one (“It’s not really my bag, man”), but now he wished he had. He remembered her well; over the months, he’d wondered how she was now and then, this sweet blonde with the fearful face, trying to get a gun on Valentine’s Day.

“Who would she be afraid of?” Rand asked.

“Tell me about Desi again, Rand,” I said. “Did you ever meet him?”

“He came to the house a few times.” Rand frowned, remembering. “He was a nice-looking kid, very solicitous of Amy—treated her like a princess. But I just never liked him. Even when things were good with them—young love, Amy’s first love—even then I disliked him. He was very rude to me, inexplicably so. Very possessive of Amy, arms around her at all times. I found it strange, very strange, that he wouldn’t try to be nice to us. Most young men want to get in good with the parents.”

“I wanted to.”

“And you did!” He smiled. “You were just the right amount of

nervous, it was very sweet. Desi wasn't anything but nasty."

"Desi's less than an hour out of town."

"True. And Hilary Handy?" Rand said, rubbing his eyes. "I don't want to be sexist here—she was scarier than Desi. Because that Lonnie guy at the mall, he didn't say Amy was afraid of a man."

"No, he just said she was afraid," I said. "There is that Noelle Hawthorne girl—the one who lives near us. She told the police she was best friends with Amy when I know she wasn't. They weren't even *friends*. Her husband says she's been in hysterics. That she was looking at pictures of Amy, crying. At the time I thought they were Internet photos, but ... what if they were actual photos she had of Amy? What if she was stalking Amy?"

"She tried to talk with me when I was a little busy yesterday," Rand said. "She quoted some *Amazing Amy* stuff at me. *Amazing Amy and the Best Friend War*, actually. 'Best friends are the people who know us best.' "

"Sounds like Hilary," I said. "All grown up."

We met Boney and Gilpin just after seven A.M. at an IHOP out along the highway for a showdown: It was ridiculous that we were doing their job for them. It was insane that we were the ones discovering leads. It was time to call in the FBI if the local cops couldn't handle it.

A plump, amber-eyed waitress took our orders, poured us coffee, and, clearly recognizing me, lingered within eavesdropping distance until Gilpin scatted her away. She was like a determined housefly, though. Between drink refills and dispensing of utensils and the magically quick arrival of our food, our entire harangue came in limp bursts. *This is unacceptable ... no more coffee, thanks ... it's unbelievable that ... uh, sure, rye is fine ...*

Before we were done, Boney interrupted. "I understand, guys, it's natural to want to feel involved. But what you did was dangerous. You have got to let us handle this kind of thing."

"That's just it, though, you aren't handling it," I said. "You'd never have gotten this information, about the gun, if we didn't go out there last night. What did Lonnie say when you talked to him?"

"Same thing you said he said," Gilpin said. "Amy wanted to buy a

gun, she was scared.”

“You don’t seem that impressed by this information,” I snapped. “Do you think he was lying?”

“We don’t think he was lying,” Boney said. “There’s no reason for the guy to invite police attention to himself. He seemed very struck by your wife. Very ... I don’t know, rattled that this had happened to her. He remembered specific details. Nick, he said she was wearing a green scarf that day. You know, not a winter scarf but a fashion-statement scarf.” She made fluttery moves with her fingers to show she thought fashion to be childish, unworthy of her attention. “Emerald green. Ring a bell?”

I nodded. “She has one she wears with blue jeans a lot.”

“And a pin on her jacket—a gold cursive A?”

“Yes.”

Boney shrugged: *Well, that settles it.*

“You don’t think he might have been so struck by her that he ... kidnapped her?” I asked.

“He has an alibi. Rock-solid,” Boney said, giving me a pointed look. “To tell the truth, we’ve begun to look for ... a different kind of motive.”

“Something more ... personal,” Gilpin added. He looked dubiously at his pancakes, topped with strawberries and puffs of whipped cream. He began scraping them to the side of his plate.

“More personal,” I said. “So does that mean you’re finally going to talk to Desi Collings, or Hilary Handy? Or do I need to?” I had, in fact, promised Marybeth I’d go today.

“Sure, we will,” Boney said. She had the placating tone of a girl promising her pesky mom to eat better. “We doubt it’s a lead—but we’ll talk to them.”

“Well, great, thanks for doing your job, kind of,” I said. “And what about Noelle Hawthorne? If you want someone close to home, she’s right in our complex, and she seems a little obsessed with Amy.”

“I know, she’s called us, and she’s on our list.” Gilpin nodded. “Today.”

“Good. What else are you doing?”

“Nick, we’d actually like you to make some time for us, let us pick your brain a bit more,” Boney said. “Spouses often know more than they realize. We’d like you to think a bit more about the argument—that barnburner your neighbor Mrs., uh, Teverer overheard you and Amy having the night before she went missing.”

Rand’s head jerked toward me.

Jan Teverer, the Christian casserole lady who wouldn’t meet my eye anymore.

“I mean, could it have been because—I know this is hard to hear, Mr. Elliott—because Amy was under the influence of something?” Boney asked. Innocent eyes. “I mean, maybe she *has* had contact with less savory elements in town. There are plenty of other drug dealers. Maybe she got in over her head, and that’s why she wanted a gun. There’s got to be a reason she wants a gun for protection and doesn’t tell her husband. And Nick, we’d like you to think harder about where you were between that time—the time of the argument, about eleven P.M., the last anyone heard Amy’s voice—”

“Besides me.”

“Besides you—and noon, when you arrived at your bar. If you were out and about in this town, driving to the beach, hanging around the dock area, someone must have seen you. Even if it was someone just, you know, walking his dog. If you can help us, I think that would be really ...”

“Helpful,” Gilpin finished. He speared a strawberry.

They both watched me attentively, congenially. “It’d be super-helpful, Nick,” Gilpin repeated more pleasantly. First time I’d heard about the argument—that they knew about it—and they chose to tell me in front of Rand—and they chose to pretend it wasn’t a gotcha.

“Sure thing,” I said.

“You mind telling us what it was about?” Boney asked. “The argument?”

“What did Mrs. Teverer tell you it was about?”

“I hate to take her word when I got you right here.” She poured

some cream into her coffee.

“It was such a nothing argument,” I began. “That’s why I never mentioned it. Just both of us scrapping at each other, the way couples do sometimes.”

Rand looked at me as if he had no clue what I was talking about: *Scrapping? What is this scrapping of which you speak?*

“It was just—about dinner,” I lied. “About what we’d do for dinner for our anniversary. You know, Amy is a traditionalist about these things—”

“The lobster!” Rand interrupted. He turned to the cops. “Amy cooks lobster every year for Nick.”

“Right. But there’s nowhere to get lobster in this town, not alive, from the tank, so she was frustrated. I had the Houston’s reservation —”

“I thought you said you *didn’t* have a Houston’s reservation.” Rand frowned.

“Well, yes, sorry, I’m getting confused. I just had the idea of the Houston’s reservation. But I really should have just arranged to have some lobster flown in.”

The cops, each of them, raised an accidental eyebrow. *How very fancy.*

“It’s not that expensive to do. Anyway, we were at this rotten loggerheads, and it was one of those arguments that got bigger than it should have.” I took a bite of my pancakes. I could feel the heat rushing from under my collar. “We were laughing about it within the hour.”

“Hunh” was all Boney said.

“And where are you on the treasure hunt?” Gilpin asked.

I stood up, put down some money, ready to go. I wasn’t the one who was supposed to be playing defense here. “Nowhere, not right yet—it’s hard to think clearly with so much going on.”

“Okay,” Gilpin said. “It’s less likely the treasure hunt is an angle, now that we know she was already feeling threatened months ago. But keep me in the loop anyway, okay?”

We all shuffled out into the heat. As Rand and I got into our car, Boney called out, “Hey, is Amy still a two, Nick?”

I frowned at her.

“A size two?” she repeated.

“Yes, she is, I think,” I said. “Yes. She is.”

Boney made a face that said *Hmmmm*, and got in her car.

“What do you think that was about?” Rand asked.

“Those two, who knows?”

We remained silent for most of the way to the hotel, Rand staring out the window at the rows of fast-food restaurants blinking by, me thinking about my lie—my lies. We had to circle to find a space at the Days Inn; the payroll convention was apparently a hot ticket.

“You know, it’s funny, how provincial I am, lifetime New Yorker,” Rand said, fingers on the door handle. “When Amy talked about moving back here, back along the *Ole* Mississippi River, with you, I pictured ... green, farmland, apple trees, and those great old red barns. I have to tell you, it’s really quite ugly here.” He laughed. “I can’t think of a single thing of beauty in this whole town. Except for my daughter.”

He got out and strode quickly toward the hotel, and I didn’t try to catch up. I entered the headquarters a few minutes behind him, took a seat at a secluded table toward the back of the room. I needed to complete the treasure hunt before the clues disappeared, figure out where Amy had been taking me. After a few hours’ stint here, I’d deal with the third clue. In the meantime, I dialed.

“Yeah,” came an impatient voice. A baby was crying in the background. I could hear the woman blow the hair off her face.

“Hi, is this—is this Hilary Handy?”

She hung up. I phoned back.

“Hello?”

“Hi there. I think we got cut off before.”

“Would you put this number on your *do not call* list—”

“Hilary, I’m not selling anything, I’m calling about Amy Dunne—

Amy Elliott.”

Silence. The baby squawked again, a mewl that wavered dangerously between laughter and tantrum.

“What about her?”

“I don’t know if you’ve seen this on TV, but she’s gone missing. She went missing on July fifth under potentially violent circumstances.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“I’m Nick Dunne, her husband. I’ve just been calling old friends of hers.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I wondered if you’d had any contact with her. Recently.”

She breathed into the phone, three deep breaths. “Is this because of that, that bullshit back in high school?” Farther in the background, a child’s wheedling voice yelled out, “Moo-oom, I nee-eed you.”

“In a minute, Jack,” she called into the void behind her. Then returned to me with a bright red voice: “Is it? Is that why you’re calling me? Because that was twenty goddamn years ago. More.”

“I know. I know. Look, I have to ask. I’d be an asshole not to ask.”

“Jesus fucking Christ. I’m a mother of *three kids* now. I haven’t talked to Amy since high school. I learned my lesson. If I saw her on the street, I’d run the other way.” The baby howled. “I gotta go.”

“Just real quick, Hilary—”

She hung up, and immediately, my disposable vibrated. I ignored it. I had to find a place to stow the damn thing.

I could feel the presence of someone, a woman, near me, but I didn’t look up, hoping she would go away.

“It’s not even noon, and you already look like you’ve had a full day, poor baby.”

Shawna Kelly. She had her hair pulled up in a high bubblegum-girl ponytail. She aimed glossed lips at me in a sympathetic pout. “You ready for some of my Frito pie?” She was bearing a casserole dish, holding it just below her breasts, the saran wrap dappled with sweat. She said the words like she was the star of some ’80s hair-rock video:

You want summa my *pie*?

“Big breakfast. Thanks, though. That’s really kind of you.”

Instead of going away, she sat down. Under a turquoise tennis skirt, her legs were lotioned so well they reflected. She kicked me with the toe of an unblemished Tretorn. “You sleeping, sweetie?”

“I’m holding up.”

“You’ve got to sleep, Nick. You’re no good to anyone if you’re exhausted.”

“I might leave in a little bit, see if I can grab a few hours.”

“I think you should. I really do.”

I felt a sudden keen gratitude to her. It was my mama’s-boy attitude, rising up. Dangerous. *Crush it, Nick.*

I waited for her to go. She needed to go—people were beginning to watch us.

“If you want, I can drive you home right now,” she said. “A nap might be just the thing for you.”

She reached out to touch my knee, and I felt a burst of rage that she didn’t realize she needed to go. *Leave the casserole, you clingy groupie whore, and go.* Daddy’s-boy attitude, rising up. Just as bad.

“Why don’t you check in with Marybeth?” I said brusquely, and pointed to my mother-in-law by the Xerox, making endless copies of Amy’s photo.

“Okay.” She lingered, so I began ignoring her outright. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Hope you like the pie.”

The dismissal had stung her, I could tell, because she made no eye contact as she left, just turned and sauntered off. I felt bad, debated apologizing, making nice. *Do not go after that woman,* I ordered myself.

“Any news?” It was Noelle Hawthorne, entering the same space Shawna had just vacated. She was younger than Shawna but seemed older—a plump body with dour, wide-spaced mounds for breasts. A frown on her face.

“Not so far.”

“You sure seem to be handling it all okay.”

I twitched my head at her, unsure what to say.

“Do you even know who I am?” she asked.

“Of course. You’re Noelle Hawthorne.”

“I’m Amy’s *best* friend here.”

I had to remind the police: There were only two options with Noelle. She was either a lying publicity whore—she liked the cachet of being pals with a missing woman—or she was crazy. A stalker determined to befriend Amy, and when Amy shirked her ...

“Do you have any information about Amy, Noelle?” I asked.

“Of course I do, *Nick*. She was my *best friend*.”

We stared each other down for a few seconds.

“Are you going to share it?” I asked.

“The police know where to find me. If they ever get around to it.”

“That’s super-helpful, Noelle. I’ll make sure they talk to you.”

Her cheeks blazed red, two expressionist splatters of color.

She went away. I thought the unkind thought, one of those that burbled up beyond my control. I thought: *Women are fucking crazy*. No qualifier: Not *some* women, not *many* women. Women are crazy.

Once night fell fully, I drove to my dad’s vacant house, Amy’s clue on the seat beside me.

*Maybe you feel guilty for bringing me here*

*I must admit it felt a bit queer*

*But it’s not like we had the choice of many a place*

*We made the decision: We made this our space.*

*Let’s take our love to this little brown house*

*Gimme some goodwill, you hot lovin’ spouse!*

This one was more cryptic than the others, but I was sure I had it right. Amy was conceding Carthage, finally forgiving me for moving back here. *Maybe you feel guilty for bringing me here ... [but] We made this our space*. The little brown house was my father’s house, which was actually blue, but Amy was making another inside joke. I’d always liked our inside jokes the best—they made me feel more

connected to Amy than any amount of confessional truth-telling or passionate lovemaking or talk-till-sunrising. The “little brown house” story was about my father, and Amy is the only person I’d ever told it to: that after the divorce, I saw him so seldom that I decided to think of him as a character in a storybook. He was not my actual father—who would have loved me and spent time with me—but a benevolent and vaguely important figure named Mr. Brown, who was very busy doing very important things for the United States and who (very) occasionally used me as a cover to move more easily about town. Amy got tears in her eyes when I told her this, which I hadn’t meant, I’d meant it as a *kids are funny* story. She told me she was my family now, that she loved me enough to make up for ten crappy fathers, and that we were now the Dunnes, the two of us. And then she whispered in my ear, “I do have an assignment you might be good for ...”

As for bringing back the goodwill, that was another conciliation. After my father was completely lost to the Alzheimer’s, we decided to sell his place, so Amy and I went through his house, putting together boxes for Goodwill. Amy, of course, was a whirling dervish of doing—pack, store, toss—while I sifted through my father’s things glacially. For me, everything was a clue. A mug with deeper coffee stains than the others must be his favorite. Was it a gift? Who gave it to him? Or did he buy it himself? I pictured my father finding the very act of shopping emasculating. Still, an inspection of his closet revealed five pairs of shoes, shiny new, still in their boxes. Had he bought these himself, picturing a different, more social Bill Dunne than the one slowly unspooling alone? Did he go to Shoe-Be-Doo-Be, get my mother to help him, just another in a long line of her casual kindnesses? Of course, I didn’t share any of these musings with Amy, so I’m sure I came off as the goldbricker I so often am.

“Here. A box. For Goodwill,” she said, catching me on the floor, leaning against a wall, staring at a shoe. “You put the shoes in the box. Okay?” I was embarrassed, I snarled at her, she snapped at me, and ... the usual.

I should add, in Amy’s defense, that she’d asked me twice if I wanted to talk, if I was sure I wanted to do this. I sometimes leave out details like that. It’s more convenient for me. In truth, I wanted her to read my mind so I didn’t have to stoop to the womanly art of articulation. I was sometimes as guilty of playing the figure-me-out

game as Amy was. I've left that bit of information out too.

I'm a big fan of the lie of omission.

I pulled up in front of my dad's house just after ten P.M. It was a tidy little place, a good starter home (or ender home). Two bedrooms, two baths, dining room, dated but decent kitchen. A for-sale sign rusted in the front yard. One year and not a bite.

I entered the stuffy house, the heat rolling over me. The budget alarm system we installed after the third break-in began beeping, like a bomb countdown. I input the code, the one that drove Amy insane because it went against every rule about codes. It was my birthday: 81577.

*Code rejected.* I tried again. *Code rejected.* A bead of sweat rolled down my back. Amy had always threatened to change the code. She said it was pointless to have one that was so guessable, but I knew the real reason. She resented that it was my birthday and not our anniversary: Once again I'd chosen *me* over *us*. My semi-sweet nostalgia for Amy disappeared. I stabbed my finger at the numbers again, growing more panicked as the alarm beeped and beeped and beeped its countdown—until it went into full intruder blare.

*Wooooonk-woooooonk-woooooonk!*

My cell phone was supposed to ring so I could give the all-clear: *Just me, the idiot.* But it didn't. I waited a full minute, the alarm reminding me of a torpedoed-submarine movie. The canned heat of a closed house in July shimmered over me. My shirt back was already soaked. *Goddammit, Amy.* I scanned the alarm for the company's number and found nothing. I pulled over a chair and began yanking at the alarm; I had it off the wall, hanging by the cords, when my phone finally rang. A bitchy voice on the other end demanded Amy's first pet's name.

*Wooooonk-woooooonk-woooooonk!*

It was exactly the wrong tone—smug, petulant, utterly unconcerned—and exactly the wrong question, because I didn't know the answer, which infuriated me. No matter how many clues I solved, I'd be faced with some Amy trivia to unman me.

"Look, this is Nick Dunne, this is my dad's house, this account was set up by me," I snapped. "So it doesn't really fucking matter what my

wife's first pet's name was.”

*Wooooonk-woooooonk-woooooonk!*

“Please don't take that tone with me, sir.”

“Look, I just came in to grab one thing from my dad's house, and now I'm leaving, okay?”

“I have to notify the police immediately.”

“Can you just turn off the goddamn alarm so I can think?”

*Wooooonk-woooooonk-woooooonk!*

“The alarm's off.”

“The alarm is not off.”

“Sir, I warned you once, do not take that tone with me.”

*You fucking bitch.*

“You know what? Fuck it, fuck it, *fuck it.*”

I hung up just as I remembered Amy's cat's name, the very first one: Stuart.

I called back, got a different operator, a reasonable operator, who turned off the alarm and, God bless her, called off the police. I really wasn't in the mood to explain myself.

I sat on the thin, cheap carpet and made myself breathe, my heart clattering. After a minute, after my shoulders untensed and my jaw unclenched and my hands unfisted and my heart returned to normal, I stood up and momentarily debated just leaving, as if that would teach Amy a lesson. But as I stood up, I saw a blue envelope left on the kitchen counter like a Dear John note.

I took a deep breath, blew it out—new attitude—and opened the envelope, pulled out the letter marked with a heart.

Hi Darling,

So we both have things we want to work on. For me, it'd be my perfectionism, my occasional (wishful thinking?) self-righteousness. For you? I know you worry that you're sometimes too distant, too removed, unable to be tender or nurturing. Well, I want to tell you—here in your father's house—that isn't true. You are not your father. You need to know that you are a good man, you are a sweet man, you are kind. I've punished you for not being able to read my mind sometimes, for not being able to act

in exactly the way I wanted you to act right at exactly that moment. I punished you for being a real, breathing *man*. I ordered you around instead of trusting you to find your way. I didn't give you the benefit of the doubt: that no matter how much you and I blunder, you always love me and want me to be happy. And that should be enough for any girl, right? I worry I've said things about you that aren't actually true, and that you've come to believe them. So I am here to say now: You are WARM. You are my sun.

If Amy were with me, as she'd planned on being, she would have nuzzled into me the way she used to do, her face in the crook of my neck, and she would have kissed me and smiled and said, *You are, you know. My sun.* My throat tight, I took a final look around my father's house and left, closing the door on the heat. In my car, I fumbled open the envelope marked fourth clue. We had to be near the end.

*Picture me: I'm a girl who is very bad*

*I need to be punished, and by punished, I mean had*

*It's where you store goodies for anniversary five*

*Pardon me if this is getting contrived!*

*A good time was had here right at sunny midday*

*Then out for a cocktail, all so terribly gay.*

*So run there right now, full of sweet sighs,*

*And open the door for your big surprise.*

My stomach seized. I didn't know what this one meant. I reread it. I couldn't even guess. Amy had stopped taking it easy on me. I wasn't going to finish the treasure hunt after all.

I felt a surge of angst. What a fucking day. Boney was out to get me, Noelle was insane, Shawna was pissed, Hilary was resentful, the woman at the security company was a bitch, and my wife had stumped me finally. It was time to end this goddamn day. There was only one woman I could stand to be around right now.

. . .

Go took one look at me—rattled, tight-lipped, and heat-exhausted from my dad's—and parked me on the couch, announced she'd make some late dinner. Five minutes later, she was stepping carefully toward me, balancing my meal on an ancient TV tray. An old Dunne standby: grilled cheese and BBQ chips, a plastic cup of ...

“It’s not Kool-Aid,” Go said. “It’s beer. Kool-Aid seemed a little too regressive.”

“This is very nurturing and strange of you, Go.”

“You’re cooking tomorrow.”

“Hope you like canned soup.”

She sat down on the couch next to me, stole a chip from my plate, and asked, too casually: “Any thoughts on why the cops would ask *me* if Amy was still a size two?”

“Jesus, they won’t fucking let that go,” I said.

“Doesn’t it freak you out? Like, they found her clothes or something?”

“They’d have asked me to identify them. Right?”

She thought about that a second, her face pinched. “That makes sense,” she said. Her face remained pinched until she caught me looking, then she smiled. “I taped the ball game, wanna watch? You okay?”

“I’m okay.” I felt awful, my stomach greasy, my psyche crackling. Maybe it was the clue I couldn’t figure out, but I suddenly felt like I’d overlooked something. I’d made some huge mistake, and my error would be disastrous. Maybe it was my conscience, scratching back to the surface from its secret oubliette.

Go pulled up the game and, for the next ten minutes, remarked on the game only, and only between sips of her beer. Go didn’t like grilled cheese; she was scooping peanut butter out of the jar onto saltines. When a commercial break came on, she paused and said, “If I had a dick, I would fuck this peanut butter,” deliberately spraying cracker bits toward me.

“I think if you had a dick, all sorts of bad things would happen.”

She fast-forwarded through a nothing inning, Cards trailing by five. When it was time for the next commercial break, Go paused, said, “So I called to change my cell-phone plan today, and the hold song was Lionel Ritchie—do you ever listen to Lionel Ritchie? I like ‘Penny Lover,’ but the song wasn’t ‘Penny Lover,’ but anyway, then a woman came on the line, and she said the customer-service reps are all based in Baton Rouge, which was strange because she didn’t have an accent,

but she said she grew up in New Orleans, and it's a little-known fact that—what do you call someone from New Orleans, a New Orleansean?—anyway, that they don't have much of an accent. So she said for my package, package A ...”

Go and I had a game inspired by our mom, who had a habit of telling such outrageously mundane, endless stories that Go was positive she had to be secretly fucking with us. For about ten years now, whenever Go and I hit a conversation lull, one of us would break in with a story about appliance repair or coupon fulfillment. Go had more stamina than I did, though. Her stories could drone on, seamlessly, forever—they went on so long that they became genuinely annoying and then swung back around to hilarious.

Go was moving on to a story about her refrigerator light and showed no signs of faltering. Filled with a sudden, heavy gratefulness, I leaned across the couch and kissed her on the cheek.

“What's that for?”

“Just, thanks.” I felt my eyes get full with tears. I looked away for a second to blink them off, and Go said, “So I needed a triple-A battery, which, as it turns out, is different from a *transistor* battery, so I had to find the receipt to return the transistor battery ...”

We finished watching the game. Cards lost. When it was over, Go switched the TV to mute. “You want to talk, or you want more distraction? Whatever you need.”

“You go on to bed, Go. I'm just going to flip around. Probably sleep. I need to sleep.”

“You want an Ambien?” My twin was a staunch believer in the easiest way. No relaxation tapes or whale noises for her; pop a pill, get unconscious.

“Nah.”

“They're in the medicine cabinet if you change your mind. If there was ever a time for assisted sleep ...” She hovered over me for just a few seconds, then, Go-like, trotted down the hall, clearly not sleepy, and closed her door, knowing the kindest thing was to leave me alone.

A lot of people lacked that gift: knowing when to fuck off. People love talking, and I have never been a huge talker. I carry on an inner

monologue, but the words often don't reach my lips. *She looks nice today*, I'd think, but somehow it wouldn't occur to me to say it out loud. My mom talked, my sister talked. I'd been raised to listen. So, sitting on the couch by myself, not talking, felt decadent. I leafed through one of Go's magazines, flipped through TV channels, finally alighting on an old black-and-white show, men in fedoras scribbling notes while a pretty housewife explained that her husband was away in Fresno, which made the two cops look at each other significantly and nod. I thought of Gilpin and Boney and my stomach lurched.

In my pocket, my disposable cell phone made a mini-jackpot sound that meant I had a text:

im outside open the door

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

APRIL 28, 2011

—DIARY ENTRY—

*Just got to keep on keeping on*, that's what Mama Mo says, and when she says it—her sureness, each word emphasized, as if it really were a viable life strategy—the cliché stops being a set of words and turns into something real. Valuable. *Keep on keeping on, exactly!* I think.

I do love that about the Midwest: People don't make a big deal about everything. Not even death. Mama Mo will just keep on keeping on until the cancer shuts her down, and then she will die.

So I'm *keeping my head down* and *making the best of a bad situation*, and I mean that in the deep, literal Mama Mo usage. I keep my head down and do my work: I drive Mo to doctor's appointments and chemo appointments. I change the sickly water in the flower vase in Nick's father's room, and I drop off cookies for the staff so they take good care of him.

I'm making the best of a really bad situation, and the situation is mostly bad because my husband, who brought me here, who uprooted me to be closer to his ailing parents, seems to have lost all interest in both me and said ailing parents.

Nick has written off his father entirely: He won't even say the man's name. I know every time we get a phone call from Comfort Hill, Nick is hoping it's the announcement that his dad is dead. As for Mo, Nick sat with his mom during a single chemo session and pronounced it unbearable. He said he hated hospitals, he hated sick people, he hated the slowly ticking time, the IV bag dripping molasses-slow. He just couldn't do it. And when I tried to talk him back into it, when I tried to stiffen his spine with some *gotta do what you gotta do*, he told me to do it. So I did, I have. Mama Mo, of course, takes on the burden of his blame. We sat one day, partly watching a romantic comedy on my computer but mostly chatting, while the IV dripped ... so ... slowly, and as the spunky heroine tripped over a sofa, Mo turned to me and

said, “Don’t be too hard on Nick. About not wanting to do this kind of thing. I just always doted on him, I babied him—how could you not? That *face*. And so he has trouble doing hard things. But I truly don’t mind, Amy. Truly.”

“You should mind,” I said.

“Nick doesn’t have to prove his love for me,” she said, patting my hand. “I know he loves me.”

I admire Mo’s unconditional love, I do. So I don’t tell her what I have found on Nick’s computer, the book proposal for a memoir about a Manhattan magazine writer who returns to his Missouri roots to care for both his ailing parents. Nick has all sorts of bizarre things on his computer, and sometimes I can’t resist a little light snooping—it gives me a clue as to what my husband is thinking. His search history gave me the latest: noir films and the website of his old magazine and a study on the Mississippi River, whether it’s possible to free-float from here to the Gulf. I know what he pictures: floating down the Mississippi, like Huck Finn, and writing an article about it. Nick is always looking for angles.

I was nosing through all this when I found the book proposal.

*Double Lives: A Memoir of Ends and Beginnings* will especially resonate with Gen X males, the original man-boys, who are just beginning to experience the stress and pressures involved with caring for aging parents. In *Double Lives*, I will detail:

- My growing understanding of a troubled, once-distant father
- My painful, forced transformation from a carefree young man into the head of a family as I deal with the imminent death of a much loved mother
- The resentment my Manhattanite wife feels at this detour in her previously charmed life. My wife, it should be mentioned, is Amy Elliott Dunne, the inspiration for the best-selling *Amazing Amy* series.

The proposal was never completed, I assume because Nick realized he wasn’t going to ever understand his once-distant father; and because Nick was shirking all “head of the family” duties; and because I wasn’t expressing any anger about my new life. A little frustration, yes, but no book-worthy rage. For so many years, my husband has

lauded the emotional solidity of midwesterners: stoic, humble, without affectation! But these aren't the kinds of people who provide good memoir material. Imagine the jacket copy: *People behaved mostly well and then they died.*

Still, it stings a bit, "the resentment my Manhattanite wife feels." Maybe I do feel ... stubborn. I think of how consistently lovely Maureen is, and I worry that Nick and I were not meant to be matched. That he would be happier with a woman who thrills at husband care and homemaking, and I'm not disparaging these skills: I wish I had them. I wish I cared more that Nick always has his favorite toothpaste, that I know his collar size off the top of my head, that I am an unconditionally loving woman whose greatest happiness is making my man happy.

I was that way, for a while, with Nick. But it was unsustainable. I'm not selfless enough. Only child, as Nick points out regularly.

But I try. I keep on keeping on, and Nick runs around town like a kid again. He's happy to be back in his rightful prom-king place—he dropped about ten pounds, he got a new haircut, he bought new jeans, he looks freakin' great. But I only know that from the glimpses of him coming home or going back out, always in a pretend hurry. *You wouldn't like it*, his standard response anytime I ask to come with him, wherever it is he goes. Just like he jettisoned his parents when they were of no use to him, he's dropping me because I don't fit in his new life. He'd have to work to make me comfortable here, and he doesn't want to do that. He wants to enjoy himself.

Stop it, stop it. I must *look on the bright side*. Literally. I must take my husband out of my dark shadowy thoughts and shine some cheerful golden light on him. I must do better at adoring him like I used to. Nick responds to adoration. I just wish it felt more equal. My brain is so busy with Nick thoughts, it's a swarm inside my head: *Nicknicknicknicknick!* And when I picture his mind, I hear my name as a shy crystal ping that occurs once, maybe twice, a day and quickly subsides. I just wish he thought about me as much as I do him.

Is that wrong? I don't even know anymore.

**NICK DUNNE**  
FOUR DAYS GONE

She was standing there in the orange glow of the streetlight, in a flimsy sundress, her hair wavy from the humidity. Andie. She rushed through the doorway, her arms splayed to hug me, and I hissed, “Wait, wait!” and shut the door just before she wrapped herself around me. She pressed her cheek against my chest, and I put my hand on her bare back and closed my eyes. I felt a queasy mixture of relief and horror: when you finally stop an itch and realize it’s because you’ve ripped a hole in your skin.

I have a mistress. Now is the part where I have to tell you I have a mistress and you stop liking me. If you liked me to begin with. I have a pretty, young, very young mistress, and her name is Andie.

I know. It’s bad.

“Baby, why the *fuck* haven’t you called me?” she said, her face still pressed against me.

“I know, sweetheart, I know. You just can’t imagine. It’s been a nightmare. How did you find me?”

She held on to me. “Your house was dark, so I figured try Go’s.”

Andie knew my habits, knew my habitats. We’ve been together a while. I have a pretty, very young mistress, and we’ve been together a while.

“I was worried about you, Nick. *Frantic*. I’m sitting at Madi’s house, and the TV is, like, just on, and all of a sudden on the TV, I see this, like, *guy* who looks like you talking about his missing wife. And then I realize: It is you. Can you imagine how freaked out I was? And you didn’t even try to reach me?”

“I called you.”

“*Don’t say anything, sit tight, don’t say anything till we talk.* That’s an order, that’s not you trying to *reach* me.”

“I haven’t been alone much; people have been around me all the time. Amy’s parents, Go, the police.” I breathed into her hair.

“Amy’s just gone?” she asked.

“She’s just gone.” I pulled myself from her and sat down on the couch, and she sat beside me, her leg pressed against mine, her arm brushing against mine. “Someone took her.”

“Nick? Are you okay?”

Her chocolatey hair fell in waves over her chin, collarbone, breasts, and I watched one single strand shake in the stream of her breathing.

“No, not really.” I gave her the shhh sign and pointed toward the hallway. “My sister.”

We sat side by side, silent, the TV flickering the old cop show, the men in fedoras making an arrest. I felt her hand wriggle into mine. She leaned in to me as if we were settling in for a movie night, some lazy, carefree couple, and then she pulled my face toward her and kissed me.

“Andie, no,” I whispered.

“Yes, I need you.” She kissed me again and climbed onto my lap, where she straddled me, her cotton dress slipping up around her knees, one of her flip-flops falling to the floor. “Nick, I’ve been so worried about you. I need to feel your hands on me, that’s all I’ve been thinking about. I’m scared.”

Andie was a physical girl, and that’s not code for *It’s all about the sex*. She was a hugger, a toucher, she was prone to running her fingers through my hair or down my back in a friendly scratch. She got reassurance and comfort from touching. And yes, fine, she also liked sex.

With one quick tug, she yanked down the top of her sundress and moved my hands onto her breasts. My canine-loyal lust surfaced.

*I want to fuck you*, I almost said aloud. *You are WARM*, my wife said in my ear. I lurched away. I was so tired, the room was swimming.

“Nick?” Her bottom lip was wet with my spit. “What? Are we not okay? Is it because of Amy?”

Andie had always felt young—she was twenty-three, of course she

felt young—but right then I realized how grotesquely young she was, how irresponsibly, disastrously young she was. Ruinously young. Hearing my wife’s name on her lips always jarred me. She said it a lot. She liked to discuss Amy, as if Amy were the heroine on a nighttime soap opera. Andie never made Amy the enemy; she made her a character. She asked questions, all the time, about our life together, about Amy: *What did you guys do, together in New York, like what did you do on the weekends?* Andie’s mouth went O once when I told her about going to the opera. *You went to the opera? What did she wear? Full-length? And a wrap or a fur? And her jewelry and her hair?* Also: What were Amy’s friends like? What did we talk about? What was Amy like, like, *really* like? Was she like the girl in the books, perfect? It was Andie’s favorite bedtime story: Amy.

“My sister is in the other room, sweetheart. You shouldn’t even be here. God, I want you here, but you really shouldn’t have come, babe. Until we know what we’re dealing with.”

*YOU ARE BRILLIANT YOU ARE WITTY YOU ARE WARM. Now kiss me!*

Andie remained atop me, her breasts out, nipples going hard from the air-conditioning.

“Baby, what we’re dealing with right now is I need to make sure we’re okay. That’s all I need.” She pressed against me, warm and lush. “That’s all I need. Please, Nick, I’m freaked out. I know you: I know you don’t want to talk right now, and that’s fine. But I need you ... to be with me.”

And I wanted to kiss her then, the way I had that very first time: our teeth bumping, her face tilted to mine, her hair tickling my arms, a wet and tonguey kiss, me thinking of nothing but the kiss, because it would be dangerous to think of anything but how good it felt. The only thing that kept me from dragging her into the bedroom now was not how wrong it was—it had been many shades of wrong all along—but that now it was actually dangerous.

And because there was Amy. Finally, there was Amy, that voice that had made its home in my ear for half a decade, my wife’s voice, but now it wasn’t chiding, it was sweet again. I hated that three little notes from my wife could make me feel this way, soggy and sentimental.

I had absolutely no right to be sentimental.

Andie was burrowing into me, and I was wondering if the police had Go's house under surveillance, if I should be listening for a knock at the door. I have a very young, very pretty mistress.

My mother had always told her kids: If you're about to do something, and you want to know if it's a bad idea, imagine seeing it printed in the paper for all the world to see.

*Nick Dunne, a onetime magazine writer still pride-wounded from a 2010 layoff, agreed to teach a journalism class for North Carthage Junior College. The older married man promptly exploited his position by launching a torrid fuckfest of an affair with one of his impressionable young students.*

I was the embodiment of every writer's worst fear: a cliché.

Now let me string still more clichés together for your amusement: It happened gradually. I never meant to hurt anyone. I got in deeper than I thought I would. But it was more than a fling. It was more than an ego boost. I really love Andie. I do.

The class I was teaching—"How to Launch a Magazine Career"—contained fourteen students of varying degrees of skill. All girls. I'd say *women*, but I think *girls* is factually correct. They all wanted to work in magazines. They weren't smudgy newsprint girls, they were glossies. They'd seen the movie: They pictured themselves dashing around Manhattan, latte in one hand, cell phone in the other, adorably breaking a designer heel while hailing a cab, and falling into the arms of a charming, disarming soul mate with winningly floppy hair. They had no clue about how foolish, how ignorant, their choice of a major was. I'd been planning on telling them as much, using my layoff as a cautionary tale. Although I had no interest in being the tragic figure. I pictured delivering the story nonchalantly, jokingly—no big deal. More time to work on my novel.

Then I spent the first class answering so many awestruck questions, and I turned into such a preening gasbag, such a needy fuck, that I couldn't bear to tell the real story: the call into the managing editor's office on the second round of layoffs, the hiking of that doomed path down the long rows of cubicles, all eyes shifting toward me, dead man walking, me still hoping I was going to be told something different—that the magazine needed me *now more than ever*—yes! it would be a

buck-up speech, an all-hands-on-deck speech! But no, my boss just said: *I guess you know, unfortunately, why I called you in here*, rubbing his eyes under his glasses, to show how weary and dejected he was.

I wanted to feel like a shiny-cool winner, so I didn't tell my students about my demise. I told them we had a family illness that required my attention here, which was true, yes, I told myself, entirely true, and very heroic. And pretty, freckled Andie sat a few feet in front of me, wide-set blue eyes under chocolatey waves of hair, cushiony lips parted just a bit, ridiculously large, real breasts, and long thin legs and arms—an alien fuck-doll of a girl, it must be said, as different from my elegant, patrician wife as could be—and Andie was radiating body heat and lavender, clicking notes on her laptop, asking questions in a husky voice like “How do you get a source to trust you, to open up to you?” And I thought to myself, right then: *Where the fuck did this girl come from? Is this a joke?*

You ask yourself, *Why?* I'd been faithful to Amy always. I was the guy who left the bar early if a woman was getting too flirty, if her touch was feeling too nice. I was not a cheater. I don't (didn't?) like cheaters: dishonest, disrespectful, petty, spoiled. I had never succumbed. But that was back when I was happy. I hate to think the answer is that easy, but I had been happy all my life, and now I was not, and Andie was there, lingering after class, asking me questions about myself that Amy never had, not lately. Making me feel like a worthwhile man, not the idiot who lost his job, the dope who forgot to put the toilet seat down, the blunderer who just could never quite get it right, whatever it was.

Andie brought me an apple one day. A Red Delicious (title of the memoir of our affair, if I were to write one). She asked me to give her story an early look. It was a profile of a stripper at a St. Louis club, and it read like a *Penthouse* Forum piece, and Andie began eating my apple while I read it, leaning over my shoulder, the juice sitting ludicrously on her lip, and then I thought, *Holy shit, this girl is trying to seduce me*, foolishly shocked, an aging Benjamin Braddock.

It worked. I began thinking of Andie as an escape, an opportunity. An option. I'd come home to find Amy in a tight ball on the sofa, Amy staring at the wall, silent, never saying the first word to me, always waiting, a perpetual game of icebreaking, a constant mental challenge—what will make Amy happy today? I would think: *Andie wouldn't do*

*that. As if I knew Andie. Andie would laugh at that joke, Andie would like that story.* Andie was a nice, pretty, bosomy Irish girl from my hometown, unassuming and jolly. Andie sat in the front row of my class, and she looked soft, and she looked interested.

When I thought about Andie, my stomach didn't hurt the way it did with my wife—the constant dread of returning to my own home, where I wasn't welcome.

I began imagining how it might happen. I began craving her touch—yes, it was like that, just like a lyric from a bad '80s single—I craved her touch, I craved touch in general, because my wife avoided mine: At home she slipped past me like a fish, sliding just out of grazing distance in the kitchen or the stairwell. We watched TV silently on our two sofa cushions, as separate as if they were life rafts. In bed, she turned away from me, pushed blankets and sheets between us. I once woke up in the night and, knowing she was asleep, pulled aside her halter strap a bit, and pressed my cheek and a palm against her bare shoulder. I couldn't get back to sleep that night, I was so disgusted with myself. I got out of bed and masturbated in the shower, picturing Amy, the lusty way she used to look at me, those heavy-lidded moonrise eyes taking me in, making me feel seen. When I was done, I sat down in the bathtub and stared at the drain through the spray. My penis lay pathetically along my left thigh, like some small animal washed ashore. I sat at the bottom of the bathtub, humiliated, trying not to cry.

So it happened. In a strange, sudden snowstorm in early April. Not April of this year, April of *last* year. I was working the bar alone because Go was having a Mom Night; we took turns not working, staying home with our mother and watching bad TV. Our mom was going fast, she wouldn't last the year, not even close.

I was actually feeling okay right at that moment—my mom and Go were snuggled up at home watching an Annette Funicello beach movie, and The Bar had had a busy, lively night, one of those nights where everyone seemed to have come off a good day. Pretty girls were nice to homely guys. People were buying rounds for strangers just because. It was festive. And then it was the end of the night, time to close, everybody out. I was about to lock the door when Andie flung it wide and stepped in, almost on top of me, and I could smell the light-beer sweetness on her breath, the scent of woodsmoke in her

hair. I paused for that jarring moment when you try to process someone you've seen in only one setting, put them in a new context. Andie in The Bar. Okay. She laughed a pirate-wench laugh and pushed me back inside.

"I just had the most fantastically awful date, and you have to have a drink with me." Snowflakes gathered in the dark waves of her hair, her sweet scattering of freckles glowed, her cheeks were bright pink, as if someone had double-slapped her. She has this great voice, this fuzzy-duckling voice, that starts out ridiculously cute and ends up completely sexy. "Please, Nick, I've got to get that bad-date taste out of my mouth."

I remember us laughing, and thinking what a relief it was to be with a woman and hear her laugh. She was wearing jeans and a cashmere V-neck; she is one of those girls who look better in jeans than a dress. Her face, her body, is casual in the best way. I assumed my position behind the bar, and she slid onto a bar stool, her eyes assessing all the liquor bottles behind me.

"Whaddya want, lady?"

"Surprise me," she said.

"Boo," I said, the word leaving my lips kiss-puckered.

"Now surprise me with a drink." She leaned forward so her cleavage was leveraged against the bar, her breasts pushed upward. She wore a pendant on a thin gold chain; the pendant slid between her breasts down under her sweater. *Don't be that guy*, I thought. *The guy who pants over where the pendant ends.*

"What flavor you feel like?" I asked.

"Whatever you give me, I'll like."

It was that line that caught me, the simplicity of it. The idea that I could do something and it would make a woman happy, and it would be easy. *Whatever you give me, I'll like.* I felt an overwhelming wave of relief. And then I knew I didn't love Amy anymore.

*I don't love my wife anymore*, I thought, turning to grab two tumblers. *Not even a little bit. I am wiped clean of love, I am spotless.* I made my favorite drink: Christmas Morning, hot coffee and cold peppermint schnapps. I had one with her, and when she shivered and

laughed—that big whoop of a laugh—I poured us another round. We drank together an hour past closing time, and I mentioned the word *wife* three times, because I was looking at Andie and picturing taking her clothes off. A warning for her, the least I could do: *I have a wife. Do with that what you will.*

She sat in front of me, her chin in her hands, smiling up at me.

“Walk me home?” she said. She’d mentioned before how close she lived to downtown, how she needed to stop by The Bar some night and say hello, and did she mention how close she lived to The Bar? My mind had been primed: Many times I’d mentally strolled the few blocks toward the bland brick apartments where she lived. So when I suddenly was out the door, walking her home, it didn’t seem unusual at all—there wasn’t that warning bell that told me: *This is unusual, this is not what we do.*

I walked her home, against the wind, snow flying everywhere, helping her rewrap her red knitted scarf once, twice, and on the third time, I was tucking her in properly and our faces were close, and her cheeks were a merry holiday-sledding pink, and it was the kind of thing that could never have happened in another hundred nights, but that night it was possible. The conversation, the booze, the storm, the scarf.

We grabbed each other at the same time, me pushing her up against a tree for better leverage, the spindly branches dumping a pile of snow on us, a stunning, comical moment that only made me more insistent on touching her, touching everything at once, one hand up inside her sweater, the other between her legs. And her letting me.

She pulled back from me, her teeth chattering. “Come up with me.”

I paused.

“Come up with me,” she said again. “I want to be with you.”

The sex wasn’t that great, not the first time. We were two bodies used to different rhythms, never quite getting the hang of each other, and it had been so long since I’d been inside a woman, I came first, quickly, and kept moving, thirty crucial seconds as I began wilting inside her, just long enough to get her taken care of before I went entirely slack.

So it was nice but disappointing, anticlimactic, the way girls must feel when they give up their virginity: *That was what all the fuss was*

*about?* But I liked how she wrapped herself around me, and I liked that she was as soft as I'd imagined. New skin. *Young*, I thought disgracefully, picturing Amy and her constant lotioning, sitting in bed and slapping away at herself angrily.

I went into Andie's bathroom, took a piss, looked at myself in the mirror, and made myself say it: *You are a cheater. You have failed one of the most basic male tests. You are not a good man.* And when that didn't bother me, I thought: *You're really not a good man.*

The horrifying thing was, if the sex had been outrageously mind-blowing, that might have been my sole indiscretion. But it was only decent, and now I was a cheater, and I couldn't ruin my record of fidelity on something merely average. So I knew there would be a next. I didn't promise myself never again. And then the next was very, very good, and the next after that was great. Soon Andie became a physical counterpoint to all things Amy. She laughed with me and made me laugh, she didn't immediately contradict me or second-guess me. She never scowled at me. She was easy. It was all so fucking easy. And I thought: *Love makes you want to be a better man—right, right. But maybe love, real love, also gives you permission to just be the man you are.*

I was going to tell Amy. I knew it had to happen. I continued not to tell Amy, for months and months. And then more months. Most of it was cowardice. I couldn't bear to have the conversation, to have to *explain* myself. I couldn't imagine having to discuss the divorce with Rand and Marybeth, as they certainly would insert themselves into the fray. But part of it, in truth, was my strong streak of pragmatism—it was almost grotesque, how practical (self-serving?) I could be. I hadn't asked Amy for a divorce, in part, because Amy's money had financed The Bar. She basically owned it, she would certainly take it back. And I couldn't bear to look at my twin trying to be brave as she lost another couple years of her life. So I let myself drift on in the miserable situation, assuming that at some point Amy would take charge, Amy would demand a divorce, and then I would get to be the good guy.

This desire—to escape the situation without blame—was despicable. The more despicable I became, the more I craved Andie, who knew that I wasn't as bad as I seemed, if my story were published in the paper for strangers to read. *Amy will divorce you*, I kept thinking. *She can't let it linger on much longer.* But as spring faded away

and summer came, then fall, then winter, and I became a cheating man of all seasons—a cheat with a pleasantly impatient mistress—it became clear that something would have to be done.

“I mean, I love you, Nick,” Andie said, here, surreally, on my sister’s sofa. “No matter what happens. I don’t really know what else to say, I feel pretty ...” She threw her hands up. “Stupid.”

“Don’t feel stupid,” I said. “I don’t know what to say either. There’s nothing to say.”

“You can say that you love me no matter what happens.”

I thought: *I can’t say that out loud anymore*. I’d said it once or twice, a spitty mumble against her neck, homesick for something. But the words were out there, and so was a lot more. I thought then of the trail we’d left, our busy, semi-hidden love affair that I hadn’t worried enough about. If her building had a security camera, I was on it. I’d bought a disposable phone just for her calls, but those voice mails and texts went to her very permanent cell. I’d written her a dirty valentine that I could already see splashed across the news, me rhyming *besot* with *twat*. And more: Andie was twenty-three. I assumed my words, my voice, even photos of me were captured on various electronica. I’d flipped through the photos on her phone one night, jealous, possessive, curious, and seen plenty of shots of an ex or two smiling proudly in her bed, and I assumed at one point I’d join the club—I kind of *wanted* to join the club—and for some reason that hadn’t worried me, even though it could be downloaded and sent to a million people in the space of a vengeful second.

“This is an extremely weird situation, Andie. I just need you to be patient.”

She pulled back from me. “You can’t say you love me, no matter what happens?”

“I love you, Andie. I do.” I held her eyes. Saying *I love you* was dangerous right now, but so was not saying it.

“Fuck me, then,” she whispered. She began tugging at my belt.

“We have to be real careful right now. I ... It’s a bad, bad place for me if the police find out about us. It looks beyond bad.”

“That’s what you’re worried about?”

“I’m a man with a missing wife and a secret ... girlfriend. Yeah, it looks bad. It looks criminal.”

“That makes it sound sleazy.” Her breasts were still out.

“People don’t know us, Andie. They *will* think it’s sleazy.”

“God, it’s like some bad noir movie.”

I smiled. I’d introduced Andie to noir—to Bogart and *The Big Sleep*, *Double Indemnity*, all the classics. It was one of the things I liked best about us, that I could show her things.

“Why don’t we just tell the police?” she said. “Wouldn’t that be better—”

“No. Andie, don’t even think about it. No.”

“They’re going to find out—”

“Why? Why would they? Have you told anyone about us, sweetheart?”

She gave me a twitchy look. I felt bad: This was not how she thought the night would go. She had been excited to see me, she had been imagining a lusty reunion, physical reassurance, and I was busy covering my ass.

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry, I just need to know,” I said.

“Not by name.”

“What do you mean, not by name?”

“I mean,” she said, pulling up her dress finally, “my friends, my mom, they know I’m seeing someone, but not by name.”

“And not by any kind of description, right?” I said it more urgently than I wanted to, feeling like I was holding up a collapsing ceiling. “Two people know about this, Andie. You and me. If you help me, if you love me, it will just be us knowing, and then the police will never find out.”

She traced a finger along my jawline. “And what if—if they never find Amy?”

“You and I, Andie, we’ll be together no matter what happens. But *only* if we’re careful. If we’re not careful, it’s possible— It looks bad enough that I could go to prison.”

“Maybe she ran off with someone,” she said, leaning her cheek against my shoulder. “Maybe—”

I could feel her girl-brain buzzing, turning Amy’s disappearance into a frothy, scandalous romance, ignoring any reality that didn’t suit the narrative.

“She didn’t run off. It’s much more serious than that.” I put a finger under her chin so she looked at me. “Andie? I need you to take this very seriously, okay?”

“Of course I’m taking it seriously. But I need to be able to talk to you more often. To see you. I’m freaking out, Nick.”

“We just need to sit tight for now.” I gripped both her shoulders so she had to look at me. “My wife is missing, Andie.”

“But you don’t even—”

I knew what she was about to say—you *don’t even love her*—but she was smart enough to stop.

She put her arms around me. “Look, I don’t want to fight. I know you care about Amy, and I know you must be really worried. I am too. I know you are under ... I can’t imagine the pressure. So I’m fine keeping an even lower profile than I did before, if that’s possible. But remember, this affects me too. I need to hear from you. Once a day. Just call when you can, even if it’s only for a few seconds, so I can hear your voice. Once a day, Nick. Every single day. I’ll go crazy otherwise. I’ll go crazy.”

She smiled at me, whispered, “Now kiss me.”

I kissed her very softly.

“I love you,” she said, and I kissed her neck and mumbled my reply. We sat in silence, the TV flickering.

I let my eyes close. *Now kiss me*, who had said that?

I lurched awake just after five A.M. Go was up, I could hear her down the hall, running water in the bathroom. I shook Andie—*It’s five A.M., it’s five A.M.*—and with promises of love and phone calls, I hustled her toward the door like a shameful one-nighter.

“Remember, call every day,” Andie whispered.

I heard the bathroom door open.

“Every day,” I said, and ducked behind the door as I opened it and Andie left.

When I turned back around, Go was standing in the living room. Her mouth had dropped open, stunned, but the rest of her body was in full fury: hands on hips, eyebrows V’ed.

“Nick. You fucking idiot.”

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

JULY 21, 2011

## —DIARY ENTRY—

I am such an idiot. Sometimes I look at myself and I think: *No wonder Nick finds me ridiculous, frivolous, spoiled, compared to his mom.* Maureen is dying. She hides her disease behind big smiles and roomy embroidered sweatshirts, answering every question about her health with: “Oh, I’m just fine, but how are *you* doing, sweetie?” She is dying, but she is not going to admit it, not yet. So yesterday she phones me in the morning, asks me if I want to go on a field trip with her and her friends—she is having a good day, she wants to get out of the house as much as she can—and I agree immediately, even though I knew they’d be doing nothing that particularly interested me: pinochle, bridge, some church activity that usually requires sorting things.

“We’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” she says. “Wear short sleeves.”

Cleaning. It had to be cleaning. Something requiring elbow grease. I throw on a short-sleeve shirt, and in exactly fifteen minutes, I am opening the door to Maureen, bald under a knitted cap, giggling with her two friends. They are all wearing matching appliquéd T-shirts, all bells and ribbons, with the words *The PlasMamas* airbrushed across their chests.

I think they’ve started a do-wop group. But then we all climb into Rose’s old Chrysler—*old-old*, one of those where the front seat goes all the way across, a grandmotherly car that smells of lady cigarettes—and off we merrily go to the *plasma donation center*.

“We’re Mondays and Thursdays,” Rose explains, looking at me in the rearview.

“Oh,” I say. How else does one reply? *Oh, those are awesome plasma days!*

“You’re allowed to give twice a week,” says Maureen, the bells on

her sweatshirt jingling. “The first time you get twenty dollars, the second time you get thirty. That’s why everyone’s in such a good mood today.”

“You’ll love it,” Vicky says. “Everyone just sits and chats, like a beauty salon.”

Maureen squeezes my arm and says quietly, “I can’t give anymore, but I thought you could be my proxy. It might be a nice way for you to get some pin money—it’s good for a girl to have a little cash of her own.”

I swallow a quick gust of anger: *I used to have more than a little cash of my own, but I gave it to your son.*

A scrawny man in an undersize jean jacket hangs around the parking lot like a stray dog. Inside, though, the place is clean. Well lit, piney-smelling, with Christian posters on the wall, all doves and mist. But I know I can’t do it. Needles. Blood. I can’t do either. I don’t really have any other phobias, but those two are solid—I am the girl who swoons at a paper cut. Something about the opening of skin: peeling, slicing, piercing. During chemo with Maureen, I never looked when they put in the needle.

“Hi, Cayleese!” Maureen calls out as we enter, and a heavy black woman in a vaguely medical uniform calls back, “Hi there, Maureen! How you feeling?”

“Oh, I’m fine, just fine—but how are you?”

“How long have you been doing this?” I ask.

“Awhile,” Maureen says. “Cayleese is everyone’s favorite, she gets the needle in real smooth. Which was always good for me, because I have rollers.” She proffers her forearm with its ropey blue veins. When I first met Mo, she was fat, but no more. It’s odd, she actually looks better fat. “See, try to put your finger on one.”

I look around, hoping Cayleese is going to usher us in.

“Go on, try.”

I touch a fingertip to the vein and feel it roll out from under. A rush of heat overtakes me.

“So, is this our new recruit?” Cayleese asks, suddenly beside me. “Maureen brags on you all the time. So, we’ll need you to fill out

some paperwork—”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I can’t do needles, I can’t do blood. I have a serious phobia. I *literally* can’t do it.”

I realize I haven’t eaten today, and a wave of wooziness hits me. My neck feels weak.

“Everything here is very hygienic, you’re in very good hands,” Cayleese says.

“No, it’s not that, truly. I’ve never given blood. My doctor gets angry at me because I can’t even handle a yearly blood test for, like, cholesterol.”

Instead, we wait. It takes two hours, Vicky and Rose strapped to churning machines. Like they are being harvested. They’ve even been branded on their fingers, so they can’t give more than twice in a week anywhere—the marks show up under a purple light.

“That’s the James Bond part,” Vicky says, and they all giggle. Maureen hums the Bond theme song (I think), and Rose makes a gun with her fingers.

“Can’t you old biddies keep it down for once?” calls a white-haired woman four chairs down. She leans up over the reclined bodies of three oily men—green-blue tattoos on their arms, stubble on their chins, the kind of men I pictured donating plasma—and gives a finger wave with her loose arm.

“Mary! I thought you were coming tomorrow!”

“I was, but my unemployment doesn’t come for a week, and I was down to a box of cereal and a can of creamed corn!”

They all laugh like near-starvation is amusing—this town is sometimes too much, so desperate and so in denial. I begin to feel ill, the sound of blood churning, the long plastic ribbons of blood coursing from bodies to machines, the people being, what, being *farmed*. Blood everywhere I look, out in the open, where blood isn’t supposed to be. Deep and dark, almost purple.

I get up to go to the bathroom, throw cold water on my face. I take two steps and my ears close up, my vision pinholes, I feel my own heartbeat, my own blood, and as I fall, I say, “Oh. Sorry.”

I barely remember the ride home. Maureen tucks me into bed, a

glass of apple juice, a bowl of soup, at the bedside. We try to call Nick. Go says he's not at The Bar, and he doesn't pick up his cell.

The man disappears.

"He was like that as a boy too—he's a wanderer," Maureen says. "Worst thing you could ever do is ground him to his room." She positions a cool washcloth on my forehead; her breath has the tangy smell of aspirin. "Your job is to rest, okay? I'll keep calling till I get that boy home."

When Nick gets home, I'm asleep. I wake up to hear him taking a shower, and I check the time: 11:04 P.M. He must have gone by The Bar after all—he likes to shower after a shift, get the beer and salty popcorn smell off his skin. (He says.)

He slips into bed, and when I turn to him with open eyes, he looks dismayed I'm awake.

"We've been trying to reach you for hours," I say.

"My phone was out of juice. You fainted?"

"I thought you said your phone was out of juice."

He pauses, and I know he is about to lie. The worst feeling: when you just have to wait and prepare yourself for the lie. Nick is old-fashioned, he needs his freedom, he doesn't like to explain himself. He'll know he has plans with the guys for a week, and he'll still wait until an hour before the poker game to tell me nonchalantly, "Hey, so I thought I'd join the guys for poker tonight, if that's okay with you," and leave me to be the bad guy if I've made other plans. You don't ever want to be the wife who keeps her husband from playing poker—you don't want to be the shrew with the hair curlers and the rolling pin. So you swallow your disappointment and say okay. I don't think he does this to be mean, it's just how he was raised. His dad did his own thing, always, and his mom put up with it. Until she divorced him.

He begins his lie. I don't even listen.

**NICK DUNNE**  
FIVE DAYS GONE

I leaned against the door, staring at my sister. I could still smell Andie, and I wanted that moment to myself for one second, because now that she was gone, I could enjoy the idea of her. She always tasted like butterscotch and smelled like lavender. Lavender shampoo, lavender lotion. *Lavender's for luck*, she explained to me once. I'd need luck.

"How old is she?" Go was demanding, hands on hips.

"That's where you want to start?"

"How *old* is she, Nick?"

"Twenty-three."

"Twenty-three. Brilliant."

"Go, don't—"

"Nick. Do you not realize how *fucked* you are?" Go said. "Fucked and *dumb*." She made *dumb*—a kid's word—hit me as hard as if I were a ten-year-old again.

"It's not an ideal situation," I allowed, my voice quiet.

"Ideal situation! You are ... you're a *cheater*, Nick. I mean, what happened to you? You were always one of the good guys. Or have I just been an idiot all along?"

"No." I stared at the floor, at the same spot I stared at as a kid when my mom sat me down on the sofa and told me I was better than whatever I'd just done.

"Now? You're a *man who cheats on his wife*, you can't ever undo that," Go said. "God, even *Dad* didn't cheat. You're so—I mean, your wife is missing, Amy's who knows where, and you're here making time with a little—"

"Go, I enjoy this revisionist history in which you're Amy's

champion. I mean, you never liked Amy, not even early on, and since all this happened, it's like—”

“It's like I have sympathy for your missing wife, yeah, Nick. I have concern. Yeah, I do. Remember how before, when I said you were being weird? You're—It's insane, the way you're acting.”

She paced the room, chewing a thumbnail. “The police find out about this, and I just don't even know,” she said. “I'm fucking *scared*, Nick. This is the first time I'm really scared for you. I can't believe they haven't found out yet. They must have pulled your phone records.”

“I used a disposable.”

She paused at that. “That's even worse. That's ... like premeditation.”

“Premeditated cheating, Go. Yes, I am guilty of that.”

She succumbed for a second, collapsed on the sofa, the new reality settling on her. In truth, I was relieved that Go knew.

“How long?” she asked.

“A little over a year.” I made myself pull my eyes from the floor and look at her directly.

“Over a *year*? And you never told me.”

“I was afraid you'd tell me to stop. That you'd think badly of me and then I'd have to stop. And I didn't want to. Things with Amy—”

“Over a year,” Go said. “And I never even guessed. Eight thousand drunk conversations, and you never trusted me enough to tell me. I didn't know you could do that, keep something from me that totally.”

“That's the only thing.”

Go shrugged: *How can I believe you now?* “You love her?” She gave it a jokey spin to show how unlikely it was.

“Yeah. I really think I do. I did. I do.”

“You do realize, that if you actually dated her, saw her on a regular basis, *lived* with her, that she would find some fault with you, right? That she would find some things about you that drove her crazy. That she'd make demands of you that you wouldn't like. That she'd get

angry at you?”

“I’m not ten, Go, I know how relationships work.”

She shrugged again: *Do you?* “We need a lawyer,” she said. “A good lawyer with some PR skills, because the networks, some cable shows, they’re sniffing around. We need to make sure the media doesn’t turn you into the evil philandering husband, because if that happens, I just think it’s all over.”

“Go, you’re sounding a little drastic.” I actually agreed with her, but I couldn’t bear to hear the words aloud, from Go. I had to discredit them.

“Nick, this is a little drastic. I’m going to make some calls.”

“Whatever you want, if it makes you feel better.”

Go jabbed me in the sternum with two hard fingers. “Don’t you fucking pull that with me, *Lance*. ‘Oh, girls get so overexcited.’ That’s bullshit. You are in a really bad place, my friend. Get your head out of your ass and start helping me fix this.”

Beneath my shirt, I could feel the spot embering on my skin as Go turned away from me and, thank God, went back to her room. I sat on her couch, numb. Then I lay down as I promised myself I’d get up.

I dreamed of Amy: She was crawling across our kitchen floor, hands and knees, trying to make it to the back door, but she was blind from the blood, and she was moving so slowly, too slowly. Her pretty head was strangely misshapen, dented in on the right side. Blood was dripping from one long hank of hair, and she was moaning my name.

I woke and knew it was time to go home. I needed to see the place—the scene of the crime—I needed to face it.

No one was out in the heat. Our neighborhood was as vacant and lonely as the day Amy disappeared. I stepped inside my front door and made myself breathe. Weird that a house so new could feel haunted, and not in the romantic Victorian-novel way, just really gruesomely, shittily ruined. A house with a history, and it was only three years old. The lab technicians had been all over the place; surfaces were smeared and sticky and smudged. I sat down on the sofa, and it smelled like someone, like an actual person, with a stranger’s scent, a spicy aftershave. I opened the windows despite the

heat, get in some air. Bleecker trotted down the stairs, and I picked him up and petted him while he purred. Someone, some cop, had overfilled his bowl for me. A nice gesture, after dismantling my home. I set him down carefully on the bottom step, then climbed up to the bedroom, unbuttoning my shirt. I lay down across the bed and put my face in the pillow, the same navy blue pillowcase I'd stared into the morning of our anniversary, *The Morning Of*.

My phone rang. Go. I picked up.

"*Ellen Abbott* is doing a special noon-day show. It's about Amy. You. I, uh, it doesn't look good. You want me to come over?"

"No, I can watch it alone, thanks."

We both hovered on the line. Waiting for the other to apologize.

"Okay, let's talk after," Go said.

*Ellen Abbott Live* was a cable show specializing in missing, murdered women, starring the permanently furious Ellen Abbott, a former prosecutor and victims' rights advocate. The show opened with Ellen, blow-dried and lip-glossed, glaring at the camera. "A shocking story to report today: a beautiful, young woman who was the inspiration for the *Amazing Amy* book series. *Missing*. House torn *apart*. Hubby is Lance Nicholas Dunne, an *unemployed writer* who now owns a *bar* he *bought* with his wife's *money*. Want to know how worried he is? These are photos taken since his wife, Amy Elliott Dunne, went missing July fifth—their *five-year anniversary*."

Cut to the photo of me at the press conference, the jackass grin. Another of me waving and smiling like a pageant queen as I got out of my car (I was waving *back* to Marybeth; I was smiling because I smile when I wave).

Then up came the cell-phone photo of me and Shawna Kelly, Frito-pie baker. The two of us cheek to cheek, beaming pearly whites. Then the real Shawna appeared on-screen, tanned and sculpted and somber as Ellen introduced her to America. Pinpricks of sweat erupted all over me.

ELLEN: So, Lance Nicholas Dunne—can you describe his demeanor for us, Shawna? You meet him as everyone is out searching for his missing wife, and Lance Nicholas Dunne is ... what?

SHAWNA: He was very calm, very friendly.

ELLEN: *Excuse me, excuse me. He was friendly and calm? His wife is missing, Shawna. What kind of man is friendly and calm?*

The grotesque photo appeared on-screen again. We somehow looked even more cheerful.

SHAWNA: He was actually a little flirty ...

*You should have been nicer to her, Nick. You should have eaten the fucking pie.*

ELLEN: *Flirty?* While his wife is God knows *where* and Lance Dunne is ... well, I'm sorry, Shawna, but this photo is just ... I don't know a better word than *disgusting*. This is not how an *innocent man* looks ...

The rest of the segment was basically Ellen Abbott, professional hater, obsessing over my lack of alibi: "Why doesn't *Lance Nicholas Dunne* have an alibi until *noon*? Where was he that *morning*?" she drawled in her Texas sheriff's accent. Her panel of guests agreed that it didn't look good.

I phoned Go and she said, "Well, you made it almost a week without them turning on you," and we cursed for a while. *Fucking Shawna crazy bitch whore.*

"Do something really, really useful today, active," Go advised. "People will be watching now."

"I couldn't sit still if I wanted to."

I drove to St. Louis in a near rage, replaying the TV segment in my head, answering all of Ellen's questions, shutting her up. *Today, Ellen Abbott, you fucking cunt, I tracked down one of Amy's stalkers. Desi Collings. I tracked him down to get the truth.* Me, the hero husband. If I had soaring theme music, I would have played it. Me, the nice working-class guy, taking on the spoiled rich kid. The media would have to bite at that: Obsessive stalkers are more intriguing than run-of-the-mill wife killers. The Elliots, at least, would appreciate it. I dialed Marybeth, but just got voice mail. Onward.

As I rolled into his neighborhood, I had to change my Desi vision from rich to extremely, sickly wealthy. The guy lived in a mansion in Ladue that probably cost at least \$5 million. Whitewashed brick, black

lacquer shutters, gaslight, and ivy. I'd dressed for the meeting, a decent suit and tie, but I realized as I rang his doorbell that a four-hundred-dollar suit in this neighborhood was more poignant than if I'd shown up in jeans. I could hear a clattering of dress shoes coming from the back of the house to the front, and the door opened with a desuctioning sound, like a refrigerator. Cold air rolled out toward me.

Desi looked the way I had always wanted to look: like a very handsome, very decent fellow. Something in the eyes, or the jaw. He had deep-set almond eyes, teddy-bear eyes, and dimples in both cheeks. If you saw the two of us together, you'd assume he was the good guy.

"Oh," Desi said, studying my face. "You're Nick. Nick Dunne. Good God, I'm so sorry about Amy. Come in, come in."

He ushered me into a severe living room, manliness as envisioned by a decorator. Lots of dark, uncomfortable leather. He pointed me toward an armchair with a particularly rigid back; I tried to make myself comfortable, as urged, but found the only posture the chair allowed was that of a chastised student: *Pay attention and sit up*.

Desi didn't ask me why I was in his living room. Or explain how he'd immediately recognized me. Although they were becoming more common, the double takes and cupped whispers.

"May I get you a drink?" Desi asked, pressing two hands together: business first.

"I'm fine."

He sat down opposite me. He was dressed in impeccable shades of navy and cream; even his shoelaces looked pressed. He carried it all off, though. He wasn't the dismissible fop I'd been hoping for. Desi seemed the definition of a gentleman: a guy who could quote a great poet, order a rare Scotch, and buy a woman the right piece of vintage jewelry. He seemed, in fact, a man who knew inherently what women wanted—across from him, I felt my suit wilt, my manner go clumsy. I had a swelling urge to discuss football and fart. These were the kinds of guys who always got to me.

"Amy. Any leads?" Desi asked.

He looked like someone familiar, an actor, maybe.

“No good ones.”

“She was taken ... from the home. Is that correct?”

“From our home, yes.”

Then I knew who he was: He was the guy who'd shown up alone the first day of searches, the guy who kept sneaking looks at Amy's photo.

“You were at the volunteer center, weren't you? The first day.”

“I was,” Desi said, reasonable. “I was about to say that. I wish I'd been able to meet you that day, express my condolences.”

“Long way to come.”

“I could say the same to you.” He smiled. “Look, I'm really fond of Amy. Hearing what had happened, well, I had to do something. I just —It's terrible to say this, Nick, but when I saw it on the news, I just thought, *Of course.*”

“Of course?”

“Of course someone would ... want her,” he said. He had a deep voice, a fireside voice. “You know, she always had that way. Of making people want her. Always. You know that old cliché: Men want her, and women want to be her. With Amy, that was true.”

Desi folded large hands across his trousers. Not pants, trousers. I couldn't decide if he was fucking with me. I told myself to tread lightly. It's the rule of all potentially prickly interviews: Don't go on the offense until you have to, first see if they'll hang themselves all on their own.

“You had a very intense relationship with Amy, right?” I asked.

“It wasn't only her looks,” Desi said. He leaned on a knee, his eyes distant. “I've thought about this a lot, of course. First love. I've definitely thought about it. The navel-gazer in me. Too much philosophy.” He cracked a self-effacing grin. The dimples popped. “See, when Amy likes you, when she's interested in you, her attention is so warm and reassuring and entirely enveloping. Like a warm bath.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Bear with me,” he said. “You feel good about yourself. Completely

good, for maybe the first time. And then she sees your flaws, she realizes you're just another regular person she has to deal with—you are, in actuality, Able Andy, and in real life, Able Andy would never make it with Amazing Amy. So her interest fades, and you stop feeling good, you can feel that old coldness again, like you're naked on the bathroom floor, and all you want is to get back in the bath."

I knew that feeling—I'd been on the bathroom floor for about three years—and I felt a rush of disgust for sharing this emotion with this other man.

"I'm sure you know what I mean," Desi said, and smiled winkily at me.

*What an odd man, I thought. Who compares another man's wife to a bath he wants to sink into? Another man's missing wife?*

Behind Desi was a long, polished end table bearing several silver-framed photos. In the center was an oversize one of Desi and Amy back in high school, in tennis whites—the two so preposterously stylish, so monied-lush they could have been a frame from a Hitchcock movie. I pictured Desi, teenage Desi, slipping into Amy's dorm room, dropping his clothes to the floor, settling onto the cold sheets, swallowing plastic-coated pills. Waiting to be found. It was a form of punishment, of rage, but not the kind that occurred in my house. I could see why the police weren't that interested. Desi trailed my glance.

"Oh, well, you can't blame me for that." He smiled. "I mean, would you throw away a photo that perfect?"

"Of a girl I hadn't known for twenty years?" I said before I could stop. I realized my tone sounded more aggressive than was wise.

"I know Amy," Desi snapped. He took a breath. "I knew her. I knew her very well. There aren't any leads? I have to ask ... Her father, is he ... there?"

"Of course he is."

"I don't suppose ... He was definitely in New York when it happened?"

"He was in New York. Why?"

Desi shrugged: *Just curious, no reason.* We sat in silence for a half

minute, playing a game of eye-contact chicken. Neither of us blinked.

“I actually came here, Desi, to see what you could tell me.”

I tried again to picture Desi making off with Amy. Did he have a lake house somewhere nearby? All these types did. Would it be believable, this refined, sophisticated man keeping Amy in some preppy basement rec room, Amy pacing the carpet, sleeping on a dusty sofa in some bright, clubby '60s color, lemon yellow or coral. I wished Boney and Gilpin were here, had witnessed the proprietary tone of Desi's voice: *I know Amy*.

“Me?” Desi laughed. *He laughed richly*. The perfect phrase to describe the sound. “I can't tell you anything. Like you said, I don't know her.”

“But you just said you did.”

“I certainly don't know her like you know her.”

“You stalked her in high school.”

“I *stalked* her? Nick. She was my girlfriend.”

“Until she wasn't,” I said. “And you wouldn't go away.”

“Oh, I probably did pine for her. But nothing out of the ordinary.”

“You call trying to kill yourself in her dorm room ordinary?”

He jerked his head, squinted his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, then stared down at his hands. “I'm not sure what you're talking about, Nick,” he finally said.

“I'm talking about you stalking my wife. In high school. Now.”

“That's *really* what this is about?” He laughed again. “Good God, I thought you were raising money for a reward fund or something. Which I'm happy to cover, by the way. Like I said, I've never stopped wanting the best for Amy. Do I love her? No. I don't know her anymore, not really. We exchange the occasional letter. But it is interesting, you coming here. You confusing the issue. Because I have to tell you, Nick, on TV, hell, *here*, now, you don't seem to be a grieving, worried husband. You seem ... smug. The police, by the way, already talked with me, thanks, I guess to you. Or Amy's parents. Strange you didn't know—you'd think they'd tell the husband everything if he were in the clear.”

My stomach clenched. “I’m here because I wanted to see for myself your face when you talked about Amy,” I said. “I gotta tell you, it worries me. You get a little ... moony.”

“One of us has to,” Desi said, again reasonably.

“Sweetheart?” A voice came from the back of the house, and another set of expensive shoes clattered toward the living room. “What was the name of that *book*—”

The woman was a blurry vision of Amy, Amy in a steam-fogged mirror—exact coloring, extremely similar features, but a quarter century older, the flesh, the features, all let out a bit like a fine fabric. She was still gorgeous, a woman who chose to age gracefully. She was shaped like some sort of origami creation: elbows in extreme points, a clothes-hanger collarbone. She wore a china-blue sheath dress and had the same pull Amy did: When she was in a room, you kept turning your head back her way. She gave me a rather predatory smile.

“Hello, I’m Jacqueline Collings.”

“Mother, this is Amy’s husband, Nick,” Desi said.

“Amy.” The woman smiled again. She had a bottom-of-a-well voice, deep and strangely resonant. “We’ve been quite interested in that story around here. Yes, very interested.” She turned coldly to her son. “We can never stop thinking about the superb Amy Elliott, can we?”

“Amy Dunne now,” I said.

“Of course,” Jacqueline agreed. “I’m so sorry, Nick, for what you’re going through.” She stared at me a moment. “I’m sorry, I must ... I didn’t picture Amy with such an ... *American* boy.” She seemed to be speaking neither to me nor to Desi. “Good God, he even has a cleft chin.”

“I came over to see if your son had any information,” I said. “I know he’s written my wife a lot of letters over the years.”

“Oh, the *letters*!” Jacqueline smiled angrily. “Such an interesting way to spend one’s time, don’t you think?”

“Amy shared them with you?” Desi asked. “I’m surprised.”

“No,” I said, turning to him. “She threw them away unopened, always.”

“All of them? Always? You know that?” Desi said, still smiling.

“Once I went through the trash to read one.” I turned back to Jacqueline. “Just to see what exactly was going on.”

“Good for you,” Jacqueline said, purring at me. “I’d expect nothing less of my husband.”

“Amy and I always wrote each other letters,” Desi said. He had his mother’s cadence, the delivery that indicated everything he said was something you’d want to hear. “It was our thing. I find e-mail so ... cheap. And no one saves them. No one saves an e-mail, because it’s so inherently impersonal. I worry about posterity in general. All the great love letters—from Simone de Beauvoir to Sartre, from Samuel Clemens to his wife, Olivia—I don’t know, I always think about what will be lost—”

“Have you kept all my letters?” Jacqueline asked. She was standing at the fireplace, looking down on us, one long sinewy arm trailing along the mantelpiece.

“Of course.”

She turned to me with an elegant shrug. “Just curious.”

I shivered, was about to reach out toward the fireplace for warmth, but remembered that it was July. “It seems to me a rather strange devotion to keep up all these years,” I said. “I mean, she didn’t write you back.”

That lit up Desi’s eyes. “Oh” was all he said, the sound of someone who spied a surprise firework.

“It strikes me as odd, Nick, that you’d come here and ask Desi about his relationship—or lack thereof—with your wife,” Jacqueline Collings said. “Are you and Amy not close? I can guarantee you: Desi has had no genuine contact with Amy in decades. Decades.”

“I’m just checking in, Jacqueline. Sometimes you have to see something for yourself.”

Jacqueline started walking toward the door; she turned and gave me a single twist of her head to assure me that it was time to go.

“How very *intrepid* of you, Nick. Very do-it-yourself. Do you build your own *decks* too?” She laughed at the word and opened the door for me. I stared at the hollow of her neck and wondered why she

wasn't wearing a noose of pearls. Women like this always have thick strands of pearls to click and clack. I could smell her, though, a female scent, vaginal and strangely lewd.

“It was interesting to meet you, Nick,” she said. “Let's all hope Amy gets home safely. Until then, the next time you want to get in touch with Desi?”

She pressed a thick, creamy card into my hands. “Call our lawyer, please.”

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

AUGUST 17, 2011

## —DIARY ENTRY—

I know this sounds the stuff of moony teenage girls, but I've been tracking Nick's moods. Toward me. Just to make sure I'm not crazy. I've got a calendar, and I put hearts on any day Nick seems to love me again, and black squares when he doesn't. The past year was all black squares, pretty much.

But now? Nine days of hearts. In a row. Maybe all he needed to know was how much I loved him and how unhappy I'd become. Maybe he had a *change of heart*. I've never loved a phrase more.

Quiz: After over a year of coldness, your husband suddenly seems to love you again. You:

- a) Go on and on about how much he's hurt you so he can apologize some more.
- b) Give him the cold shoulder for a while longer—so he learns his lesson!
- c) Don't press him about his new attitude—know that he will confide in you when the time comes, and in the meantime, shower him with affection so he feels secure and loved, because that's how this marriage thing works.
- d) Demand to know what went wrong; make him talk and talk about it in order to calm your own neuroses.

Answer: C

It's August, so sumptuous that I couldn't bear any more black squares, but no, it's been nothing but hearts, Nick acting like my husband, sweet and loving and goofy. He orders me chocolates from my favorite shop in New York for a treat, and he writes me a silly poem to go with them. A limerick, actually:

*There once was a girl from Manhattan*

*Who slept only on sheets made of satin*

*Her husband slipped and he slid*

*And their bodies collided*

*So they did something dirty in Latin.*

It would be funnier if our sex life were as carefree as the rhyme would suggest. But last week we did ... *fuck? Do it?* Something more romantic than *have sex* but less cheesy than *make love*. He came home from work and kissed me full on the lips, and he touched me as if I were really there. I almost cried, I'd been so lonely. To be kissed on the lips by your husband is the most decadent thing.

What else? He takes me swimming in the same pond he's gone to since he was a child. I can picture little Nick flapping around manically, face and shoulders sunburned red because (just like now) he refuses to wear sunscreen, forcing Mama Mo to chase after him with lotion that she swipes on whenever she can reach him.

He's been taking me on a full tour of his boyhood haunts, like I asked him to for ages. He walks me to the edge of the river, and he kisses me as the wind whips my hair ("My two favorite things to look at in the world," he whispers in my ear). He kisses me in a funny little playground fort that he once considered his own clubhouse ("I always wanted to bring a girl here, a perfect girl, and look at me now," he whispers in my ear). Two days before the mall closes for good, we ride carousel bunnies side by side, our laughter echoing through the empty miles.

He takes me for a sundae at his favorite ice cream parlor, and we have the place to ourselves in the morning, the air all sticky with sweets. He kisses me and says this place is where he stuttered and suffered through so many dates, and he wishes he could have told his high school self that he would be back here with the girl of his dreams someday. We eat ice cream until we have to roll home and get under the covers. His hand on my belly, an accidental nap.

The neurotic in me, of course, is asking: Where's the catch? Nick's turnaround is so sudden and so grandiose, it feels like ... it feels like he must want something. Or he's already done something and he is being preemptively sweet for when I find out. I worry. I caught him last week shuffling through my thick file box marked THE DUNNES! (written in my best cursive in happier days), a box filled with all the

strange paperwork that makes up a marriage, a combined life. I worry that he is going to ask me for a second mortgage on The Bar, or to borrow against our life insurance, or to sell off some not-to-be-touched-for-thirty-years stock. He said he just wanted to make sure everything was in order, but he said it in a fluster. My heart would break, it really would, if, midbite of bubblegum ice cream, he turned to me and said: *You know, the interesting thing about a second mortgage is ...*

I had to write that, I had to let that out. And just seeing it, I know it sounds crazy. Neurotic and insecure and suspicious.

I will not let my worst self ruin my marriage. My husband loves me. He loves me and he has come back to me and that is why he is treating me so nice. That is the only reason.

Just like that: *Here is my life. It's finally returned.*

**NICK DUNNE**  
FIVE DAYS GONE

I sat in the billowing heat of my car outside Desi's house, the windows rolled down, and checked my phone. A message from Gilpin: "Hi, Nick. We need to touch base today, update you on a few things, go over a few questions. Meet us at four at your house, okay? Uh ... thanks."

It was the first time I'd been ordered. Not *Could we, we'd love to, if you don't mind*. But *We need to. Meet us ...*

I glanced at my watch. Three o'clock. Best not be late.

The summer air show—a parade of jets and prop planes spinning loops up and down the Mississippi, buzzing the tourist steamboats, rattling teeth—was three days off, and the practice runs were in high gear by the time Gilpin and Rhonda arrived. We were all back in my living room for the first time since *The Day Of*.

My home was right on a flight path; the noise was somewhere between jackhammer and avalanche. My cop buddies and I tried to jam a conversation in the spaces between the blasts. Rhonda looked more birdlike than usual—favoring one leg, then another, her head moving all around the room as her gaze alighted on different objects, angles—a magpie looking to line her nest. Gilpin hovered next to her, chewing his lip, tapping a foot. Even the room felt restive: The afternoon sun lit up an atomic flurry of dust motes. A jet shot over the house, that awful sky-rip noise.

"Okay, couple of things here," Rhonda said when the silence returned. She and Gilpin sat down as if they both had suddenly decided to stay awhile. "Some stuff to get clear on, some stuff to tell you. All very routine. And as always, if you want a lawyer—"

But I knew from my TV shows, my movies, that only guilty guys lawyered up. Real, grieving, worried, innocent husbands did not.

"I don't, thanks," I said. "I actually have some information to share

with you. About Amy's former stalker, the guy she dated back in high school."

"Desi—uh, Collins," began Gilpin.

"Collings. I know you all talked to him, I know you for some reason aren't that interested in him, so I went to visit him myself today. To make sure he seemed ... okay. And I don't think he is okay. I think he's someone you all should look into. Really look into. I mean, he moves to St. Louis—"

"He was living in St. Louis three years before you all moved back," Gilpin said.

"Fine, but he's in St. Louis. Easy drive. Amy bought a gun because she was afraid—"

"Desi's okay, Nick. Nice guy," Rhonda said. "Don't you think? He reminds me of you, actually. Real golden boy, baby of the family."

"I'm a twin. Not the baby. I'm actually three minutes older."

Rhonda was clearly trying to nip at me, see if she could get a rise, but even knowing this didn't prevent the angry blood flush to my stomach every time she accused me of being a baby.

"Anyway," Gilpin interrupted. "Both he and his mother deny that he ever stalked Amy, or that he even had much contact with her these past years except the occasional note."

"My wife would tell you differently. He wrote Amy for years—*years*—and then he shows up *here* for the search, Rhonda. Did you know that? He was here that first day. You talked about keeping an eye out for men inserting themselves into the investigation—"

"Desi Collings is not a suspect," she interrupted, one hand up.

"But—"

"Desi Collings is not a suspect," she repeated.

The news stung. I wanted to accuse her of being swayed by *Ellen Abbott*, but *Ellen Abbott* was probably best left unmentioned.

"Okay, well what about all these, these *guys* who've clogged up our tip line?" I walked over and grabbed the sheet of names and numbers that I'd carelessly tossed on the dining room table. I began reading names. "Inserting themselves into the investigation: David Samson,

Murphy Clark—those are old boyfriends—Tommy O’Hara, Tommy O’Hara, Tommy O’Hara, that’s three calls, Tito Puente—that’s just a dumb joke.”

“Have you phoned any of them back?” Boney asked.

“No. Isn’t that your job? I don’t know which are worthwhile and which are crazies. I don’t have time to call some jackass pretending to be Tito Puente.”

“I wouldn’t put too much emphasis on the tip line, Nick,” Rhonda said. “It’s kind of a woodwork situation. I mean, we’ve fielded a lot of phone calls from your old *girlfriends*. Just want to say hi. See how you are. People are strange.”

“Maybe we should get started on our questions,” Gilpin nudged.

“Right. Well, I guess we should begin with where you were the morning your wife went missing,” Boney said, suddenly apologetic, deferential. She was playing good cop, and we both knew she was playing good cop. Unless she was actually on my side. It seemed possible that sometimes a cop was just on your side. Right?

“When I was *at the beach*.”

“And you still can’t recall anyone seeing you there?” Boney asked. “It’d help us so much if we could just cross this little thing off our list.” She allowed a sympathetic silence. Rhonda could not only keep quiet, she could infuse the room with a mood of her choosing, like an octopus and its ink.

“Believe me, I’d like that as much as you. But no. I don’t remember anyone.”

Boney smiled a worried smile. “It’s strange, we’ve mentioned—just in passing—your being at the beach to a few people, and they all said ... They were all surprised, let’s put it that way. Said that didn’t sound like you. You aren’t a beach guy.”

I shrugged. “I mean, do I go to the beach and lay out all day? No. But to sip my coffee in the morning? Sure.”

“Hey, this might help,” Boney said brightly. “Where’d you buy your coffee that morning?” She turned to Gilpin as if to seek approval. “Could tighten the time frame at least, right?”

“I made it here,” I said.

“Oh.” She frowned. “That’s weird, because you don’t have any coffee here. Nowhere in the house. I remember thinking it was odd. A caffeine addict notices these things.”

*Right, just something you happened to notice, I thought. I knew a cop named Bony Moronie ... Her traps are so obvious, they’re clearly phony ...*

“I had a leftover cup in the fridge I heated up.” I shrugged again: *No big deal.*

“Huh. Must have been there a long time—I noticed there’s no coffee container in the trash.”

“Few days. Still tastes good.”

We both smiled at each other: *I know and you know. Game on.* I actually thought those idiotic words: *Game on.* Yet I was pleased in a way: The next part was starting.

Boney turned to Gilpin, hands on knees, and gave a little nod. Gilpin chewed his lip some more, then finally pointed: toward the ottoman, the end table, the living room now righted. “See, here’s our problem, Nick,” he started. “We’ve seen dozens of home invasions—”

“Dozens upon dozens upon dozens,” Boney interrupted.

“Many home invasions. This—all this area right there, in the living room—remember it? The upturned ottoman, the overturned table, the vase on the floor”—he slapped down a photo of the scene in front of me—“this whole area, it was supposed to look like a struggle, right?”

My head expanded and snapped back into place. *Stay calm.* “Supposed to?”

“It looked wrong,” Gilpin continued. “From the second we saw it. To be honest, the whole thing looked staged. First of all, there’s the fact that it was all centered in this one spot. Why wasn’t anything messed up *anywhere* but this room? It’s odd.” He proffered another photo, a close-up. “And look here, at this pile of books. They should be in front of the end table—the end table is where they were stacked, right?”

I nodded.

“So when the end table was knocked over, they should have spilled mostly in front of it, following the trajectory of the falling table. Instead, they’re back behind it, as if someone swept them off *before*

knocking over the table.”

I stared dumbly at the photo.

“And watch this. This is very curious to me,” Gilpin continued. He pointed at three slender antique frames on the mantelpiece. He stomped heavily, and they all flopped facedown immediately. “But somehow they stayed upright through everything else.”

He showed a photo of the frames upright. I had been hoping—even after they caught my Houston’s dinner slipup—that they were dumb cops, cops from the movies, local rubes aiming to please, trusting the local guy: *Whatever you say, buddy*. I didn’t get dumb cops.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” I mumbled. “It’s totally—I just don’t know what to think about this. I just want to find my wife.”

“So do we, Nick, so do we,” Rhonda said. “But here’s another thing. The ottoman—remember how it was flipped upside down?” She patted the squatty ottoman, pointed at its four peg legs, each only an inch high. “See, this thing is bottom-heavy because of those tiny legs. The cushion practically sits on the floor. Try to push it over.” I hesitated. “Go on, try it,” Boney urged.

I gave it a push, but it slid across the carpet instead of turning over. I nodded. I agreed. It was bottom-heavy.

“Seriously, get down there if you need to, and knock that thing upside down,” Boney ordered.

I knelt down, pushed from lower and lower angles, finally put a hand underneath the ottoman, and flipped it. Even then it lifted up, one side hovering, and fell back into place; I finally had to pick it up and turn it over manually.

“Weird, huh?” Boney said, not sounding all that puzzled.

“Nick, you do any housecleaning the day your wife went missing?” Gilpin asked.

“No.”

“Okay, because the tech did a Luminol sweep, and I’m sorry to tell you, the kitchen floor lit up. A good amount of blood was spilled there.”

“Amy’s type—*B positive*.” Boney interrupted, “And I’m not talking a little cut, I’m talking *blood*.”

“Oh my God.” A clot of heat appeared in the middle of my chest. “But—”

“Yes, so your wife made it out of this room,” Gilpin said. “Somehow, in theory, she made it into the kitchen—without disturbing any of those gewgaws on that table just outside the kitchen—and then she collapsed in the kitchen, where she lost a lot of blood.”

“And then someone carefully mopped it up,” Rhonda said, watching me.

“Wait. Wait. Why would someone try to hide blood but then mess up the living room—”

“We’ll figure that out, don’t worry, Nick,” Rhonda said quietly.

“I don’t get it, I just don’t—”

“Let’s sit down,” Boney said. She pointed me toward a dining room chair. “You eat anything yet? Want a sandwich, something?”

I shook my head. Boney was taking turns playing different female characters: powerful woman, doting caregiver, to see what got the best results.

“How’s your marriage, Nick?” Rhonda asked. “I mean, five years, that’s not far from the seven-year itch.”

“The marriage was fine,” I repeated. “It’s fine. Not perfect, but good, good.”

She wrinkled her nose: *You lie*.

“You think she might have run off?” I asked, too hopefully. “Made this look like a crime scene and took off? Runaway-wife thing?”

Boney began ticking off reasons no: “She hasn’t used her cell, she hasn’t used her credit cards, ATM cards. She made no major cash withdrawals in the weeks before.”

“And there’s the blood,” Gilpin added. “I mean, again, I don’t want to sound harsh, but the amount of blood spilled? That would take some serious ... I mean, I couldn’t have done it to myself. I’m talking some deep wounds there. Your wife got nerves of steel?”

“Yes. She does.” She also had a deep phobia of blood, but I’d wait and let the brilliant detectives figure that out.

“It seems extremely unlikely,” Gilpin said. “If she were to wound herself that seriously, why would she mop it up?”

“So really, let’s be honest, Nick,” Boney said, leaning over on her knees so she could make eye contact with me as I stared at the floor. “How was your marriage currently? We’re on your side, but we need the truth. The only thing that makes you look bad is you holding out on us.”

“We’ve had bumps.” I saw Amy in the bedroom that last night, her face mottled with the red hivey splotches she got when she was angry. She was spitting out the words—mean, wild words—and I was listening to her, trying to accept the words because they were true, they were technically true, everything she said.

“Describe the bumps for us,” Boney said.

“Nothing specific, just disagreements. I mean, Amy is a blow-stack. She bottles up a bunch of little stuff and—whoom!—but then it’s over. We never went to bed angry.”

“Not Wednesday night?” Boney asked.

“Never,” I lied.

“Is it money, what you mostly argue about?”

“I can’t even think what we’d argue about. Just stuff.”

“What stuff was it the night she went missing?” Gilpin said it with a sideways grin, like he’d uttered the most unbelievable *gotcha*.

“Like I told you, there was the lobster.”

“What else? I’m sure you didn’t scream about the lobster for a whole hour.”

At that point Bleecker waddled partway down the stairs and peered through the railings.

“Other household stuff too. Married-couple stuff. The cat box,” I said. “Who would clean the cat box.”

“You were in a screaming argument about a cat box,” Boney said.

“You know, the principle of the thing. I work a lot of hours, and

Amy doesn't, and I think it would be good for her if she did some basic home maintenance. Just basic upkeep."

Gilpin jolted like an invalid woken from an afternoon nap. "You're an old-fashioned guy, right? I'm the same way. I tell my wife all the time, 'I don't know how to iron, I don't know how to do the dishes. I can't cook. So, sweetheart, I'll catch the bad guys, that I can do, and you throw some clothes in the washer now and then.' Rhonda, you were married, did you do the domestic stuff at home?"

Boney looked believably annoyed. "I catch bad guys too, idiot."

Gilpin rolled his eyes toward me; I almost expected him to make a joke—*sounds like someone's on the rag*—the guy was laying it on so thick.

Gilpin rubbed his vulpine jaw. "So you just wanted a housewife," he said to me, making the proposition seem reasonable.

"I wanted—I wanted whatever Amy wanted. I really didn't care." I appealed to Boney now, Detective Rhonda Boney with the sympathetic air that seemed at least partly authentic. (*It's not*, I reminded myself.) "Amy couldn't decide what to do here. She couldn't find a job, and she wasn't interested in The Bar. Which is fine, if you want to stay home, that's fine, I said. But when she stayed home, she was unhappy too. And she'd wait for me to fix it. It was like I was in charge of her happiness."

Boney said nothing, gave me a face expressionless as water.

"And, I mean, it's fun to be hero for a while, be the white knight, but it doesn't really work for long. I couldn't *make* her be happy. She didn't want to be happy. So I thought if she started taking charge of a few practical things—"

"Like the cat box," said Boney.

"Yeah, clean the cat box, get some groceries, call a plumber to fix the drip that drove her crazy."

"Wow, that sounds like a real happiness plan there. Lotta yuks."

"But my point was, *do something*. Whatever it is, do something. Make the most of the situation. Don't sit and wait for me to fix everything for you." I was speaking loudly, I realized, and I sounded almost angry, certainly righteous, but it was such a relief. I'd started

with a lie—the cat box—and turned that into a surprising burst of pure truth, and I realized why criminals talked too much, because it feels so good to tell your story to a stranger, someone who won't call bullshit, someone forced to listen to your side. (Someone *pretending* to listen to your side, I corrected.)

“So the move back to Missouri?” Boney said. “You moved Amy here against her wishes?”

“*Against her wishes?* No. We did what we had to do. I had no job, Amy had no job, my mom was sick. I'd do the same for Amy.”

“That's nice of you to *say*,” Boney muttered. And suddenly she reminded me exactly of Amy: the damning below-breath retorts uttered at the perfect level, so I was pretty sure I heard them but couldn't swear to it. And if I asked what I was supposed to ask—*What did you say?*—she'd always say the same: *Nothing*. I glared at Boney, my mouth tight, and then I thought: *Maybe this is part of the plan, to see how you act toward angry, dissatisfied women*. I tried to make myself smile, but it only seemed to repulse her more.

“And you're able to afford this, Amy working, not working, whatever, you could swing it financially?” Gilpin asked.

“We've had some money problems of late,” I said. “When we first married, Amy was wealthy, like extremely wealthy.”

“Right,” said Boney, “those *Amazing Amy* books.”

“Yeah, they made a ton of money in the eighties and nineties. But the publisher dropped them. Said *Amy* had run her course. And everything went south. Amy's parents had to borrow money from us to stay afloat.”

“From your wife, you mean?”

“Right, fine. And then we used most of the last of Amy's trust fund to buy the bar, and I've been supporting us since.”

“So when you married Amy, she was very wealthy,” Gilpin said. I nodded. I was thinking of the hero narrative: the husband who sticks by his wife through the horrible decline in her family's circumstances.

“So you had a very nice lifestyle.”

“Yeah, it was great, it was awesome.”

“And now she’s near broke, and you’re dealing with a very different lifestyle than what you married into. What you signed on for.”

I realized my narrative was completely wrong.

“Because, okay, we’ve been going over your finances, Nick, and dang, they don’t look good,” Gilpin started, almost turning the accusation into a concern, a worry.

“The Bar is doing decent,” I said. “It usually takes a new business three or four years to get out of the red.”

“It’s those credit cards that got my attention,” Boney said. “Two hundred and twelve thousand dollars in credit-card debt. I mean, it took my breath away.” She fanned a stack of red-ink statements at me.

My parents were fanatics about credit cards—used only for special purposes, paid off every month. *We don’t buy what we can’t pay for.* It was the Dunne family motto.

“We don’t—I don’t, at least—but I don’t think Amy would—Can I see those?” I stuttered, just as a low-flying bomber rattled the windowpanes. A plant on the mantel promptly lost five pretty purple leaves. Forced into silence for ten brain-shaking seconds, we all watched the leaves flutter to the ground.

“Yet this great brawl we’re supposed to believe happened in here, and not a petal was on the floor then,” Gilpin muttered disgustedly.

I took the papers from Boney and saw my name, only my name, versions of it—Nick Dunne, Lance Dunne, Lance N. Dunne, Lance Nicholas Dunne, on a dozen different credit cards, balances from \$62.78 to \$45,602.33, all in various states of lateness, terse threats printed in ominous lettering across the top: pay now.

“Holy fuck! This is, like, identity theft or something!” I said. “They’re not mine. I mean, freakin’ look at some of this stuff: I don’t even golf.” Someone had paid over seven thousand dollars for a set of clubs. “Anyone can tell you: I *really* don’t golf.” I tried to make it sound self-effacing—*yet another thing I’m not good at*—but the detectives weren’t biting.

“You know Noelle Hawthorne?” Boney asked. “The friend of Amy’s you told us to check out?”

“Wait, I want to talk about the bills, because they are not mine,” I said. “I mean, please, seriously, we need to track this down.”

“We’ll track it down, no problem,” Boney said, expressionless. “Noelle Hawthorne?”

“Right. I told you to check her out because she’s been all over town, wailing about Amy.”

Boney arched an eyebrow. “You seem angry about that.”

“No, like I told you, she seems a little too broken up, like in a fake way. Ostentatious. Attention-seeking. A little obsessed.”

“We talked to Noelle,” Boney said. “Says your wife was extremely troubled by the marriage, was upset about the money stuff, that she worried you’d married her for her money. She says your wife worried about your temper.”

“I don’t know why Noelle would say that; I don’t think she and Amy ever exchanged more than five words.”

“That’s funny, because the Hawthornes’ living room is covered with photos of Noelle and your wife.” Boney frowned. I frowned too: actual real pictures of her and Amy?

Boney continued: “At the St. Louis zoo last October, on a picnic with the triplets, on a weekend float trip this past June. As in *last month*.”

“Amy has never uttered the name Noelle in the entire time we’ve lived here. I’m serious.” I scanned my brain over this past June and came upon a weekend I went away with Andie, told Amy I was doing a boys’ trip to St. Louis. I’d returned home to find her pink-cheeked and angry, claiming a weekend of bad cable and bored reading on the dock. And she was on a float trip? No. I couldn’t think of anything Amy would care for less than the typical midwestern float trip: beers bobbing in coolers tied to canoes, loud music, drunk frat boys, campgrounds dotted with vomit. “Are you sure it was my wife in those photos?”

They gave each other a *he serious?* look.

“Nick,” Boney said. “We have no reason to believe that the woman in the photos who looks exactly like your wife and who Noelle Hawthorne, a mother of three, your wife’s best friend here in town,

says is your wife, is not your wife.”

“Your wife who—I should say—according to Noelle, you married for money,” Gilpin added.

“I’m not joking,” I said. “Anyone these days can doctor photos on a laptop.”

“Okay, so a minute ago you were sure Desi Collings was involved, and now you’ve moved on to Noelle Hawthorne,” Gilpin said. “It seems like you’re really casting about for someone to blame.”

“Besides me? Yes, I am. Look, I did not marry Amy for her money. You really should talk more with Amy’s parents. They know me, they know my character.” *They don’t know everything*, I thought, my stomach seizing. Boney was watching me; she looked sort of sorry for me. Gilpin didn’t even seem to be listening.

“You bumped up the life insurance coverage on your wife to one-point-two million,” Gilpin said with mock weariness. He even pulled a hand over his long, thin-jawed face.

“Amy did that herself!” I said quickly. The cops both just looked at me and waited. “I mean, I filed the paperwork, but it was Amy’s idea. She insisted. I swear, I couldn’t care less, but Amy said—she said, given the change in her income, it made her feel more secure or something, or it was a smart business decision. Fuck, I don’t know, I don’t know why she wanted it. I didn’t ask her to.”

“Two months ago, someone did a search on your laptop,” Boney continued. “*Body Float Mississippi River*. Can you explain that?”

I took two deep breaths, nine seconds to pull myself together.

“God, that was just a dumb book idea,” I said. “I was thinking about writing a book.”

“Hunh,” Boney replied.

“Look, here’s what I think is happening,” I began. “I think a lot of people watch these news programs where the husband is always this awful guy who kills his wife, and they are seeing me through that lens, and some really innocent, normal things are being twisted. This is turning into a witch hunt.”

“That’s how you explain those credit-card bills?” Gilpin asked.

“I told you, I can’t explain the fucking credit-card bills because I have nothing to do with them. It’s your fucking job to figure out where they came from!”

They sat silent, side by side, waiting.

“What is currently being done to find my wife?” I asked. “What leads are you exploring, besides me?”

The house began shaking, the sky ripped, and through the back window, we could see a jet shooting past, right over the river, buzzing us.

“F-10,” Rhonda said.

“Nah, too small,” Gilpin said. “It’s got to be—”

“It’s an F-10.”

Boney leaned toward me, hands entwined. “It’s our job to make sure you are in the hundred percent clear, Nick,” she said. “I know you want that too. Now if you can just help us out with the few little tangles—because that’s what they are, they keep tripping us up.”

“Maybe it’s time I got a lawyer.”

The cops exchanged another look, as if they’d settled a bet.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

OCTOBER 21, 2011

## —DIARY ENTRY—

Nick's mom is dead. I haven't been able to write because Nick's mom is dead, and her son has come unmoored. Sweet, tough Maureen. She was up and moving around until days before she died, refusing to discuss any sort of slowdown. "I just want to live until I can't anymore," she said. She'd gotten into knitting caps for other chemo patients (she herself was *done done done* after one round, no interest in prolonging life if it meant "more tubes"), so I'll remember her always surrounded by bright knots of wool: red and yellow and green, and her fingers moving, the needles click-clacking while she talked in her contented-cat voice, all deep, sleepy purr.

And then one morning in September she woke but didn't really wake, didn't become Maureen. She was a bird-size woman overnight, that fast, all wrinkles and shell, her eyes darting around the room, unable to place anything, including herself. So then came the hospice, a gently lit, cheerful place with paintings of women in bonnets and rolling hills of bounty, and snack machines, and small coffees. The hospice was not expected to fix her or help her but just to make sure she died comfortably, and just three days later, she did. Very matter-of-fact, the way Maureen would have wanted it (although I'm sure she would have rolled her eyes at that phrase: *the way Maureen would have wanted it*).

Her wake was modest but nice—with hundreds of people, her look-alike sister from Omaha bustling by proxy, pouring coffee and Baileys and handing out cookies and telling funny stories about Mo. We buried her on a gusty, warm morning, Go and Nick leaning in to each other as I stood nearby, feeling intrusive. That night in bed, Nick let me put my arms around him, his back to me, but after a few minutes he got up, whispered, "Got to get some air," and left the house.

His mother had always *mothered* him—she insisted on coming by

once a week and ironing for us, and when she was done ironing, she'd say, "I'll just help tidy," and after she'd left, I'd look in the fridge and find she'd peeled and sliced his grapefruit for him, put the pieces in a snap-top container, and then I'd open the bread and discover all the crusts had been cut away, each slice returned half naked. I am married to a thirty-four-year-old man who is still offended by bread crusts.

But I tried to do the same those first weeks after his mom passed. I snipped the bread crusts, I ironed his T-shirts, I baked a blueberry pie from his mom's recipe. "I don't need to be babied, really, Amy," he said as he stared at the loaf of skinned breads. "I let my mom do it because it made her happy, but I know you don't like that nurturing stuff."

So we're back to black squares. Sweet, doting, loving Nick is gone. Gruff, peeved, angry Nick is back. You are supposed to lean on your spouse in hard times, but Nick seems to have gone even farther away. He is a mama's boy whose mama is dead. He doesn't want anything to do with me.

He uses me for sex when he needs to. He presses me against a table or over the back of the bed and fucks me, silent until the last few moments, those few quick grunts, and then he releases me, he puts a palm on the small of my back, his one gesture of intimacy, and he says something that is supposed to make it seem like a game: "You're so sexy, sometimes I can't control myself." But he says it in a dead voice.

Quiz: Your husband, with whom you once shared a wonderful sex life, has turned distant and cold—he only wants sex his way, on his time. You:

- a) Withhold sex further—he's not going to win this game!
- b) Cry and whine and demand answers he's not yet ready to give, further alienating him.
- c) Have faith that this is just a bump in a long marriage—he is in a dark place—so try to be understanding and wait it out.

Answer: C. Right?

It bothers me that my marriage is disintegrating and I don't know what to do. You'd think my parents, the double psychologists, would

be the obvious people to talk to, but I have too much pride. They would not be good for marital advice: They are soul mates, remember? They are all peaks, no valleys—a single, infinite burst of marital ecstasy. I can't tell them I am screwing up the one thing I have left: my marriage. They'd somehow write another book, a fictional rebuke in which Amazing Amy celebrated the most fantastic, fulfilling, bump-free little marriage ever ... *because she put her mind to it.*

But I worry. All the time. I know I'm already too old for my husband's tastes. Because I used to be his ideal, six years ago, and so I've heard his ruthless comments about women nearing forty: how pathetic he finds them, overdressed, out at bars, oblivious to their lack of appeal. He'd come back from a night out drinking, and I'd ask him how the bar was, whatever bar, and he'd so often say: "Totally inundated by Lost Causes," his code for women my age. At the time, a girl barely in her thirties, I'd smirked along with him as if that would never happen to me. Now I am his Lost Cause, and he's trapped with me, and maybe that's why he's so angry.

I've been indulging in toddler therapy. I walk over to Noelle's every day and I let her triplets paw at me. The little plump hands in my hair, the sticky breath on my neck. You can understand why women always threaten to devour children: *She is just to eat! I could eat him with a spoon!* Although watching her three children toddle to her, sleep-stained from their nap, rubbing their eyes while they make their way to Mama, little hands touching her knee or arm as if she were home base, as if they knew they were safe ... it hurts me sometimes to watch.

Yesterday I had a particularly needful afternoon at Noelle's, so maybe that's why I did something stupid.

Nick comes home and finds me in the bedroom, fresh from a shower, and pretty soon he is pushing me against the wall, pushing himself inside me. When he is done and releases me, I can see the wet kiss of my mouth against the blue paint. As he sits on the edge of the bed, panting, he says, "Sorry about that. I just needed you."

Not looking at me.

I go to him and put my arms around him, pretending what we'd just done was normal, a pleasant marital ritual, and I say, "I've been

thinking.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“Well, now might be the right time. To start a family. Try to get pregnant.” I know it’s crazy even as I say it, but I can’t help myself—I have become the crazy woman who wants to get pregnant because it will save her marriage.

It’s humbling, to become the very thing you once mocked.

He jerks away from me. “Now? Now is about the worst time to start a family, Amy. You have no job—”

“I know, but I’d want to stay home with the baby anyway at first—”

“My mom just died, Amy.”

“And this would be new life, a new start.”

He grips me by both arms and looks me right in the eye for the first time in a week. “Amy, I think you think that now that my mom is dead, we’ll just frolic back to New York and have some babies, and you’ll get your old life back. But we don’t have enough *money*. We barely have enough money for the two of us to live *here*. You can’t imagine how much pressure I feel, every day, to fix this mess we’re in. To fucking *provide*. I can’t handle you and me *and* a few kids. You’ll want to give them everything you had growing up, and *I can’t*. No private schools for the little Dunnes, no tennis and violin lessons, no summer homes. You’d hate how poor we’d be. You’d hate it.”

“I’m not that shallow, Nick—”

“You really think we’re in a great place right now, to have kids?”

It is the closest we’ve gotten to discussing our marriage, and I can see he already regrets saying something.

“We’re under a lot of pressure, baby,” I say. “We’ve had a few bumps, and I know a lot of it is my fault. I just feel so at loose ends here ...”

“So we’re going to be one of those couples who has a kid to fix their marriage? Because that always works out so well.”

“We’ll have a baby because—”

His eyes go dark, canine, and he grabs me by the arms again.

“Just ... No, Amy. Not right now. I can't take one more bit of stress. I can't handle one more thing to worry about. I am cracking under the pressure. I will snap.”

For once I know he's telling the truth.

# NICK DUNNE

SIX DAYS GONE

The first forty-eight hours are key in any investigation. Amy had been gone, now, almost a week. A candlelight vigil would be held this evening in Tom Sawyer Park, which, according to the press, was “a favorite place of Amy Elliott Dunne’s.” (I’d never known Amy to set foot in the park; despite the name, it is not remotely quaint. Generic, bereft of trees, with a sandbox that’s always full of animal feces; it is utterly un-Twainy.) In the last twenty-four hours, the story had gone national—it was everywhere, just like that.

God bless the faithful Elliotts. Marybeth phoned me last night, as I was trying to recover from the bombshell police interrogation. My mother-in-law had seen the *Ellen Abbott* show and pronounced the woman “an opportunistic ratings whore.” Nevertheless, we’d spent most of today strategizing how to handle the media.

The media (my former clan, my people!) was shaping its story, and the media loved the *Amazing Amy* angle and the long-married Elliotts. No snarky commentary on the dismantling of the series or the authors’ near-bankruptcy—right now it was all hearts and flowers for the Elliotts. The media loved them.

Me, not so much. The media was already turning up *items of concern*. Not only the stuff that had been leaked—my lack of alibi, the possibly “staged” crime scene—but actual personality traits. They reported that back in high school, I’d never dated one girl longer than a few months and thus was clearly a ladies’ man. They found out we had my father in Comfort Hill and that I rarely visited, and thus I was an ingrate dad-abandoner. “It’s a problem—they don’t like you,” Go said after every bit of news coverage. “It’s a real, real problem, Lance.” The media had resurrected my first name, which I’d hated since grade school, stifled at the start of every school year when the teacher called roll: “It’s Nick, I go by Nick!” Every September, an opening-day rite: “Nick-I-go-by-Nick!” Always some smart-ass kid would spend recess parading around like a mincing gallant: “Hi, I’m

Laaaance,” in a flowy-shirted voice. Then it would be forgotten again until the following year.

But not now. Now it was all over the news, the dreaded three-name judgment reserved for serial killers and assassins—Lance Nicholas Dunne—and there was no one I could interrupt.

Rand and Marybeth Elliott, Go, and I carpoled to the vigil together. It was unclear how much information the Elliotts were receiving, how many damning updates about their son-in-law. I knew they were aware of the “staged” scene: “I’m going to get some of my own people in there, and they’ll tell us just the opposite—that it clearly *was* the scene of a struggle,” Rand said confidently. “The truth is malleable; you just need to pick the right expert.”

Rand didn’t know about the other stuff, the credit cards and the life insurance and the blood and Noelle, my wife’s bitter best friend with the damning claims: abuse, greed, fear. She was booked on *Ellen Abbott* tonight, post-vigil. Noelle and Ellen could be mutually disgusted by me for the viewing audience.

Not everyone was repulsed by me. In the past week, The Bar’s business was booming: Hundreds of customers packed in to sip beers and nibble popcorn at the place owned by Lance Nicholas Dunne, the maybe-killer. Go had to hire four new kids to tend The Bar; she’d dropped by once and said she couldn’t go again, couldn’t stand seeing how packed it was, fucking gawkers, ghouls, all drinking our booze and swapping stories about me. It was disgusting. Still, Go reasoned, the money would be helpful if ...

If. Amy gone six days, and we were all thinking in *ifs*.

We approached the park in a car gone silent except for Marybeth’s constant nail drumming on the window.

“Feels almost like a double date.” Rand laughed, the laughter curving toward the hysterical: high-pitched and squeaky. Rand Elliott, genius psychologist, best-selling author, friend to all, was unraveling.

Marybeth had taken to self-medication: shots of clear liquor administered with absolute precision, enough to take the edge off but stay sharp. Rand, on the other hand, was literally losing his head; I half expected to see it shoot off his shoulders on a jack-in-the-box spring—cuckoooooo! Rand’s schmoozy nature had turned manic: He

got desperately chummy with everyone he met, wrapping his arms around cops, reporters, volunteers. He was particularly tight with our Days Inn “liaison,” a gawky, shy kid named Donnie whom Rand liked to razz and inform he was doing so. “Ah, I’m just razzing you, Donnie,” he’d say, and Donnie would break into a joyous grin.

“Can’t that kid go get validation somewhere else?” I groused to Go the other night. She said I was just jealous that my father figure liked someone better. I was.

Marybeth patted Rand’s back as we walked toward the park, and I thought about how much I wanted someone to do that, just a quick touch, and I suddenly let out a gasp-sob, one quick teary moan. I wanted someone, but I wasn’t sure if it was Andie or Amy.

“Nick?” Go said. She raised a hand toward my shoulder, but I shrugged her off.

“Sorry. Wow, sorry for that,” I said. “Weird outburst, very un-Dunne-y.”

“No problem. We’re both coming undone-y,” Go said, and looked away. Since discovering my *situation*—which is what we’d taken to calling my infidelity—she’d gotten a bit removed, her eyes distant, her face a constant mull. I was trying very hard not to resent it.

As we entered the park, the camera crews were everywhere, not just local anymore but network. The Dunnes and the Elliotts walked along the perimeter of the crowd, Rand smiling and nodding like a visiting dignitary. Boney and Gilpin appeared almost immediately, took to our heels like friendly pointer dogs; they were becoming familiar, furniture, which was clearly the idea. Boney was wearing the same clothes she wore to any public event: a sensible black skirt, a gray-striped blouse, barrettes clipping either side of her limp hair. *I got a girl named Bony Moronie ...* The night was steamy; under each of Boney’s armpits was a dark smiley face of perspiration. She actually grinned at me as if yesterday, the accusations—they were accusations, weren’t they?—hadn’t happened.

The Elliotts and I filed up the steps to a rickety makeshift stage. I looked back toward my twin and she nodded at me and pantomimed a big breath, and I remembered to breathe. Hundreds of faces were turned toward us, along with clicking, flashing cameras. *Don’t smile*, I told myself. *Do not smile*.

From the front of dozens of *Find Amy* T-shirts, my wife studied me.

Go had said I needed to make a speech (“You need some humanizing, fast”) so I did, I walked up to the microphone. It was too low, mid-belly, and I wrestled with it a few seconds, and it raised only an inch, the kind of malfunction that would normally infuriate me, but I could no longer be infuriated in public, so I took a breath and leaned down and read the words that my sister had written for me: “My wife, Amy Dunne, has been missing for almost a week. I cannot possibly convey the anguish our family feels, the deep hole in our lives left by Amy’s disappearance. Amy is the love of my life, she is the heart of her family. For those who have yet to meet her, she is funny, and charming, and kind. She is wise and warm. She is my helpmate and partner in every way.”

I looked up into the crowd and, like magic, spotted Andie, a disgusted look on her face, and I quickly glanced back at my notes.

“Amy is the woman I want to grow old with, and I know this will happen.”

PAUSE. BREATHE. NO SMILE. Go had actually written the words on my index card. *Happen happen happen*. My voice echoed out through the speakers, rolling toward the river.

“We ask you to contact us with any information. We light candles tonight in the hope she comes home soon and safely. I love you, Amy.”

I kept my eyes moving anywhere but Andie. The park sparkled with candles. A moment of silence was supposed to be observed, but babies were crying, and one stumbling homeless man kept asking loudly, “Hey, what is this about? What’s it for?,” and someone would whisper Amy’s name, and the guy would say louder, “What? It’s for *what?*”

From the middle of the crowd, Noelle Hawthorne began moving forward, her triplets affixed, one on a hip, the other two clinging to her skirt, all looking ludicrously tiny to a man who spent no time around children. Noelle forced the crowd to part for her and the children, marching right to the edge of the podium, where she looked up at me. I glared at her—the woman had maligned me—and then I noticed for the first time the swell in her belly and realized she was pregnant again. For one second, my mouth dropped—four kids under four, sweet Jesus!—and later, that look would be analyzed and

debated, most people believing it was a one-two punch of anger and fear.

“Hey, *Nick*.” Her voice caught in the half-raised microphone and boomed out to the audience.

I started to fumble with the mike, but couldn’t find the off switch.

“I just wanted to see your face,” she said, and burst into tears. A wet sob rolled out over the audience, everyone rapt. “Where is she? What have you done with Amy? What have you done with your wife!”

*Wife, wife*, her voice echoed. Two of her alarmed children began to wail.

Noelle couldn’t talk for a second, she was crying so hard, she was wild, furious, and she grabbed the microphone stand and yanked the whole thing down to her level. I debated grabbing it back but *knew* I could do nothing toward this woman in the maternity dress with the three toddlers. I scanned the crowd for Mike Hawthorne—*control your wife*—but he was nowhere. Noelle turned to address the crowd.

“I am Amy’s best friend!” *Friend friend friend*. The words boomed out all over the park along with her children’s keening. “Despite my best efforts, the police don’t seem to be taking me seriously. So I’m taking our cause to this town, this town that Amy loved, that loved her back! This man, Nick Dunne, needs to answer some questions. He needs to tell us what he did to his wife!”

Boney darted from the side of the stage to reach her, and Noelle turned, and the two locked eyes. Boney made a frantic chopping motion at her throat: *Stop talking!*

“His *pregnant* wife!”

And no one could see the candles anymore, because the flashbulbs were going berserk. Next to me, Rand made a noise like a balloon squeak. Down below me, Boney put her fingers between her eyebrows as if stanching a headache. I was seeing everyone in frantic strobe shots that matched my pulse.

I looked out into the crowd for Andie, saw her staring at me, her face pink and twisted, her cheeks damp, and as we caught each other’s eyes, she mouthed “Asshole!” and stumbled back away through the crowd.

“We should go.” My sister, suddenly beside me, whispering in my ear, tugging at my arm. The cameras flashing at me as I stood like some Frankenstein’s monster, fearful and agitated by the villager torches. *Flash, flash.* We started moving, breaking into two parts: my sister and I fleeing toward Go’s car, the Elliotts standing with jaws agape, on the platform, left behind, save yourselves. The reporters pelted the question over and over at me. *Nick, was Amy pregnant? Nick, were you upset Amy was pregnant?* Me, streaking out of the park, ducking like I was caught in hail: *Pregnant, pregnant, pregnant,* the word pulsing in the summer night in time to the cicadas.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

FEBRUARY 15, 2012

## —DIARY ENTRY—

What a strange time this is. I have to think that way, try to examine it from a distance: Ha-ha, what an odd period this will be to look back on, won't I be amused when I'm eighty, dressed in faded lavender, a wise, amused figure swilling martinis, and won't this make a *story*? A strange, awful story of something I survived.

Because something is horribly wrong with my husband, of that I am sure now. Yes, he's mourning his mother, but this is something more. It feels directed at me, not a sadness but ... I can feel him watching me sometimes, and I look up and see his face twisted in disgust, like he's walked in on me doing something awful, instead of just eating cereal in the morning or combing my hair at night. He's so angry, so unstable, I've been wondering if his moods are linked to something physical—one of those wheat allergies that turn people mad, or a colony of mold spores that has clogged his brain.

I came downstairs the other night and found him at the dining room table, his head in his hands, looking at a pile of credit-card bills. I watched my husband, all alone, under the spotlight of a chandelier. I wanted to go to him, to sit down with him and figure it out like partners. But I didn't, I knew that would piss him off. I sometimes wonder if that is at the root of his distaste for me: He's let me see his shortcomings, and he hates me for knowing them.

He shoved me. Hard. Two days ago, he shoved me, and I fell and banged my head against the kitchen island and I couldn't see for three seconds. I don't really know what to say about it. It was more shocking than painful. I was telling him I could get a job, something freelance, so we could start a family, have a real life ...

"What do you call this?" he said.

*Purgatory*, I thought. I stayed silent.

“What do you call this, Amy? Huh? What do you call this? This isn’t life, according to Miss Amazing?”

“It’s not *my* idea of life,” I said, and he took three big steps toward me, and I thought: *He looks like he’s going to ...* And then he was slamming against me and I was falling.

We both gasped. He held his fist in the other hand and looked like he might cry. He was beyond sorry, he was aghast. But here’s the thing I want to be clear on: I knew what I was doing, I was punching every button on him. I was watching him coil tighter and tighter—I wanted him to finally *say* something, *do* something. Even if it’s bad, even if it’s the worst, *do something, Nick*. Don’t leave me here like a ghost.

I just didn’t realize he was going to do *that*.

I’ve never considered what I would do if my husband attacked me, because I haven’t exactly run in the wife-beating crowd. (I know, Lifetime movie, I know: Violence crosses all socioeconomic barriers. But still: Nick?) I sound glib. It just seems so incredibly ludicrous: I am a battered wife. *Amazing Amy and the Domestic Abuser*.

He did apologize profusely. (Does anyone do anything *profusely* except apologize? Sweat, I guess.) He’s agreed to consider counseling, which was something I never thought could happen. Which is good. He’s such a good man, at his core, that I am willing to write it off, to believe it truly was a sick anomaly, brought on by the strain we’re both under. I forget sometimes, that as much stress as I feel, Nick feels it too: He bears the burden of having brought me here, he feels the strain of wanting mopey me to be content, and for a man like Nick—who believes strongly in an up-by-the-bootstraps sort of happiness—that can be infuriating.

So the hard shove, so quick, then done, it didn’t scare me in itself. What scared me was the look on his face as I lay on the floor blinking, my head ringing. It was the look on his face as he restrained himself from taking another jab. How much he wanted to shove me again. How hard it was not to. How he’s been looking at me since: guilt, and disgust at the guilt. Absolute disgust.

Here’s the darkest part. I drove out to the mall yesterday, where about half the town buys drugs, and it’s as easy as picking up a prescription; I know because Noelle told me: Her husband goes there

to purchase the occasional joint. I didn't want a joint, though, I wanted a gun, just in case. In case things with Nick go really wrong. I didn't realize until I was almost there that it was Valentine's Day. It was Valentine's Day and I was going to buy a gun and then cook my husband dinner. And I thought to myself: *Nick's dad was right about you. You are a dumb bitch. Because if you think your husband is going to hurt you, you leave. And yet you can't leave your husband, who's mourning his dead mother. You can't. You'd have to be a biblically awful woman to do that, unless something were truly wrong. You'd have to really believe your husband was going to hurt you.*

But I don't really think Nick would hurt me.

I just would feel safer with a gun.

**NICK DUNNE**  
SIX DAYS GONE

Go pushed me into the car and peeled away from the park. We flew past Noelle, who was walking with Boney and Gilpin toward their cruiser, her carefully dressed triplets bumping along behind her like kite ribbons. We screeched past the mob: hundreds of faces, a fleshy pointillism of anger aimed right at me. We ran away, basically. Technically.

“Wow, ambush,” Go muttered.

“Ambush?” I repeated, brain-stunned.

“You think that was an accident, Nick? Triplet Cunt already made her statement to the police. Nothing about the pregnancy.”

“Or they’re doling out bombshells a little at a time.”

Boney and Gilpin had already heard my wife was pregnant and decided to make it a strategy. They clearly really believed I killed her.

“Noelle will be on every cable broadcast for the next week, talking about how you’re a murderer and she’s Amy’s best friend out for justice. Publicity whore. Publicity fucking *whore*.”

I pressed my face against the window, slumped in my chair. Several news vans followed us. We drove silently, Go’s breath slowing down. I watched the river, a tree branch bobbing its way south.

“Nick?” she finally said. “Is it—uh ... Do you—”

“I don’t know, Go. Amy didn’t say anything to me. If she was pregnant, why would she tell Noelle and not tell me?”

“Why would she try to get a gun and not tell you?” Go said. “None of this makes sense.”

. . .

We retreated to Go’s—the camera crews would be swarming my house—and as soon as I walked in the door my cell phone rang, the real one. It was the Elliotts. I sucked in some air, ducked into my old

bedroom, then answered.

“I need to ask you this, Nick.” It was Rand, the TV burbling in the background. “I need you to tell me. Did you know Amy was pregnant?”

I paused, trying to find the right way to phrase it, the unlikelihood of a pregnancy.

“Answer me, goddammit!”

Rand’s volume made me get quieter. I spoke in a soft, soothing voice, a voice wearing a cardigan. “Amy and I were not trying to get pregnant. She didn’t want to be pregnant, Rand, I don’t know if she ever was going to be. We weren’t even ... we weren’t even having relations that often. I’d be ... very surprised if she was pregnant.”

“Noelle said Amy visited the doctor to confirm the pregnancy. The police already submitted a subpoena for the records. We’ll know tonight.”

I found Go in the living room, sitting with a cup of cold coffee at my mother’s card table. She turned toward me just enough to show she knew I was there, but she didn’t let me see her face.

“Why do you keep lying, Nick?” she asked. “The Elliotts are not your enemy. Shouldn’t you at least tell them that it was you who didn’t want kids? Why make Amy look like the bad guy?”

I swallowed the rage again. My stomach was hot with it. “I’m exhausted, Go. Goddamn. We gotta do this now?”

“We gonna find a time that’s better?”

“I did want kids. We tried for a while, no luck. We even started looking into fertility treatments. But then Amy decided she didn’t want kids.”

“You told me *you* didn’t.”

“I was trying to put a good face on it.”

“Oh, awesome, another lie,” Go said. “I didn’t realize you were such a ... What you’re saying, Nick, it makes no sense. I was there, at the dinner to celebrate The Bar, and Mom misunderstood, she thought you guys were announcing that you were pregnant, and it made Amy cry.”

“Well, I can’t explain everything Amy ever did, Go. I don’t know why, a fucking year ago, she cried like that. Okay?”

Go sat quietly, the orange of the streetlight creating a rock-star halo around her profile. “This is going to be a real test for you, Nick,” she murmured, not looking at me. “You’ve always had trouble with the truth—you always do the little fib if you think it will avoid a real argument. You’ve always gone the easy way. Tell Mom you went to baseball practice when you really quit the team; tell Mom you went to church when you were at a movie. It’s some weird compulsion.”

“This is very different from baseball, Go.”

“It’s a lot different. But you’re still fibbing like a little boy. You’re still desperate to have everyone think you’re perfect. You never want to be the bad guy. So you tell Amy’s parents she didn’t want kids. You *don’t* tell me you’re cheating on your wife. You swear the credit cards in your name aren’t yours, you swear you were hanging out at a beach when you hate the beach, you swear your marriage was happy. I just don’t know what to believe right now.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Since Amy has disappeared, all you’ve done is lie. It makes me worry. About what’s going on.”

Complete silence for a moment.

“Go, are you saying what I think you’re saying? Because if you are, something has fucking died between us.”

“Remember that game you always played with Mom when we were little: *Would you still love me if? Would you still love me if* I smacked Go? *Would you still love me if* I robbed a bank? *Would you still love me if* I killed someone?”

I said nothing. My breath was coming too fast.

“I would still love you,” Go said.

“Go, do you really need me to say it?”

She stayed silent.

“I did not kill Amy.”

She stayed silent.

“Do you believe me?” I asked.

“I love you.”

She put her hand on my shoulder and went to her bedroom, shut the door. I waited to see the light go on in the room, but it stayed dark.

Two seconds later, my cell phone rang. This time, it was the disposable cell that I needed to get rid of and couldn't because I always, always, always had to pick up for Andie. *Once a day, Nick. We need to talk once a day.*

I realized I was grinding my teeth.

I took a breath.

Far out on the edge of town were the remains of an Old West fort that was now yet another park that no one ever went to. All that was left was the two-story wooden watchtower, surrounded by rusted swing sets and teeter-totters. Andie and I had met there once, groping each other inside the shade of the watchtower.

I did three long loops around town in my mom's old car to be sure I was not tracked. It was madness to go—it wasn't yet ten o'clock—but I had no say in our rendezvous anymore. *I need to see you, Nick, tonight, right now, or I swear to you, I will lose it.* As I pulled up to the fort, I was hit by the remoteness of it and what it meant: Andie was still willing to meet me in a lonely, unlit place, me the pregnant-wife killer. As I walked toward the tower through the thick, scratchy grass, I could just see her outline in the tiny window of the wooden watchtower.

*She is going to undo you, Nick.* I quick-stepped the rest of the way.

An hour later I was huddled in my paparazzi-infested house, waiting. Rand said they'd know before midnight whether my wife was pregnant. When the phone rang, I grabbed it immediately only to find it was goddamn Comfort Hill. My father was gone again. The cops had been notified. As always, they made it sound as if I were the jackass. *If this happens again, we are going to have to terminate your father's stay with us.* I had a sickening chill: My dad moving in with me—two pathetic, angry bastards—it would surely make for the worst buddy comedy in the world. The ending would be a murder-suicide. Ba-dum-dum! Cue the laff track.

I was getting off the phone, peering out the back window at the river—*stay calm, Nick*—when I saw a huddled figure down by the boathouse. I thought it must be a stray reporter, but then I recognized something in those balled fists and tight shoulders. Comfort Hill was about a thirty-minute walk straight down River Road. He somehow remembered our house when he couldn't remember me.

I went outside into the darkness to see him dangling a foot over the bank, staring into the river. Less bedraggled than before, although he smelled tangy with sweat.

“Dad? What are you doing here? Everyone's worried.”

He looked at me with dark brown eyes, sharp eyes, not the glazed-milk color some elderly acquire. It would have been less disconcerting if they'd been milky.

“She told me to come,” he snapped. “She told me to come. This is my house, I can come whenever I want.”

“You walked all the way here?”

“I can come here anytime. You may hate me, but she loves me.” I almost laughed. Even my father was reinventing a relationship with Amy.

A few photographers on my front lawn began shooting. I had to get my dad back to the home. I could picture the article they'd have to cook up to go along with this exclusive footage: What kind of father was Bill Dunne, what kind of man did he raise? Good God, if my dad started in on one of his harangues against *the bitches* ... I dialed Comfort Hill, and after some finagling, they sent an orderly to retrieve him. I made a display of walking him gently to the sedan, murmuring reassuringly as the photographers got their shots.

*My dad.* I smiled as he left. I tried to make it seem very proud-son. The reporters asked me if I killed my wife. I was retreating to the house when a cop car pulled up.

It was Boney who came to my home, braving the paparazzi, to tell me. She did it kindly, in a gentle-fingertip voice.

Amy was pregnant.

My wife was gone with my baby inside her. Boney watched me, waiting for my reaction—make it part of the police report—so I told

myself, *Act correctly, don't blow it, act the way a man acts when he hears this news.* I ducked my head into my hands and muttered, *Oh God, oh God,* and while I was doing it, I saw my wife on the floor of our kitchen, her hands around her belly and her head bashed in.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

JUNE 26, 2012

## —DIARY ENTRY—

I have never felt more alive in my life. It is a bright, blue-sky day, the birds are lunatic with the warmth, the river outside is gushing past, and I am utterly alive. Scared, thrilled, but *alive*.

This morning when I woke up, Nick was gone. I sat in bed staring at the ceiling, watching the sun golden it a foot at a time, the bluebirds singing right outside our window, and I wanted to vomit. My throat was clenching and unclenching like a heart. I told myself I would not throw up, then I ran to the bathroom and threw up: bile and warm water and one small bobbing pea. As my stomach was seizing and my eyes were tearing and I was gasping for breath, I started doing the only kind of math a woman does, huddled over a toilet. I'm on the pill, but I'd also forgotten a day or two—what does it matter, I'm thirty-eight, I've been on the pill for almost two decades. I'm not going to accidentally get pregnant.

I found the tests behind a locked sheet of glass. I had to track down a harried, mustached woman to unlock the case, and point out one I wanted while she waited impatiently. She handed it to me with a clinical stare and said, "Good luck."

I didn't know what would be good luck: plus sign or minus sign. I drove home and read the directions three times, and I held the stick at the right angle for the right number of seconds, and then I set it on the edge of the sink and ran away like it was a bomb. Three minutes, so I turned on the radio and of course it was a Tom Petty song—is there ever a time you turn on the radio and don't hear a Tom Petty song?—so I sang every word to "American Girl" and then I crept back into the bathroom like the test was something I had to sneak up on, my heart beating more frantically than it should, and I was pregnant.

I was suddenly running across the summer lawn and down the street, banging on Noelle's door, and when she opened it, I burst into

tears and showed her the stick and yelled, "I'm pregnant!"

And then someone else besides me knew, and so I was scared.

Once I got back home, I had two thoughts.

One: Our anniversary is coming next week. I will use the clues as love letters, a beautiful antique wooden cradle waiting at the end. I will convince him we belong together. As a family.

Two: I wish I'd been able to get that gun.

I get frightened now, sometimes, when my husband gets home. A few weeks ago, Nick asked me to go out on the raft with him, float along in the current under a blue sky. I actually wrapped my hands around our newel post when he asked me this, I clung to it. Because I had an image of him wobbling the raft—teasing at first, laughing at my panic, and then his face going tight, determined, and me falling into the water, that muddy brown water, scratchy with sticks and sand, and him on top of me, holding me under with one strong arm, until I stopped struggling.

I can't help it. Nick married me when I was a young, rich, beautiful woman, and now I am poor, jobless, closer to forty than thirty; I'm not just pretty anymore, I am *pretty for my age*. It is the truth: My value has decreased. I can tell by the way Nick looks at me. But it's not the look of a guy who took a tumble on an honest bet. It's the look of a man who feels swindled. Soon it may be the look of a man who is trapped. He might have been able to divorce me before the baby. But he would never do that now, not Good Guy Nick. He couldn't bear to have everyone in this family-values town believe he's the kind of guy who'd abandon his wife and child. He'd rather stay and suffer with me. Suffer and resent and rage.

I won't have an abortion. The baby is six weeks in my belly today, the size of a lentil, and is growing eyes and lungs and ears. A few hours ago, I went into the kitchen and found a snap-top container of dried beans Maureen had given me for Nick's favorite soup, and I pulled out a lentil and laid it on the counter. It was smaller than my pinkie nail, tiny. I couldn't bear to leave it on the cold countertop, so I picked it up and held it in my palm and petted it with the tip-tip-tip of a finger. Now it's in the pocket of my T-shirt, so I can keep it close.

I won't get an abortion and I won't divorce Nick, not yet, because I

can still remember how he'd dive into the ocean on a summer day and stand on his hands, his legs flailing out of the water, and leap back up with the best seashell just for me, and I'd let my eyes get dazzled by the sun, and I'd shut them and see the colors blinking like raindrops on the inside of my eyelids as Nick kissed me with salty lips and I'd think, *I am so lucky, this is my husband, this man will be the father of my children. We'll all be so happy.*

But I may be wrong, I may be very wrong. Because sometimes, the way he looks at me? That sweet boy from the beach, man of my dreams, father of my child? I catch him looking at me with those watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation, and I think: *This man might kill me.*

So if you find this and I'm dead, well ...

Sorry, that's not funny.

# NICK DUNNE

SEVEN DAYS GONE

It was time. At exactly eight A.M. Central, nine A.M. New York time, I picked up my phone. My wife was definitely pregnant. I was definitely the prime—only—suspect. I was going to get a lawyer, *today*, and he was going to be the very lawyer I didn't want and absolutely needed.

Tanner Bolt. A grim necessity. Flip around any of the legal networks, the true-crime shows, and Tanner Bolt's spray-tanned face would pop up, indignant and concerned on behalf of whatever freak-show client he was representing. He became famous at thirty-four for representing Cody Olsen, a Chicago restaurateur accused of strangling his very pregnant wife and dumping her body in a landfill. Corpse dogs detected the scent of a dead body inside the trunk of Cody's Mercedes; a search of his laptop revealed that someone had printed out a map to the nearest landfill the morning Cody's wife went missing. A no-brainer. By the time Tanner Bolt was done, everyone—the police department, two West Side Chicago gang members, a disgruntled club bouncer—was implicated except Cody Olsen, who walked out of the courtroom and bought cocktails all around.

In the decade since, Tanner Bolt had become known as the Hubby Hawk—his specialty was swooping down in high-profile cases to represent men accused of murdering their wives. He was successful over half the time, which wasn't bad, considering the cases were usually damning, the accused extremely unlikable—cheaters, narcissists, sociopaths. Tanner Bolt's other nickname was Dickhead Defender.

I had a two P.M. appointment.

“This is Marybeth Elliott. Please leave a message, and I will return promptly ...” she said in a voice just like Amy's. Amy, who would not return promptly.

I was speeding to the airport to fly to New York and meet with Tanner Bolt. When I'd asked Boney's permission to leave town, she

seemed amused: *Cops don't really do that. That's just on TV.*

“Hi, Marybeth, it’s Nick again. I’m anxious to talk to you. I wanted to tell you ... uh, I truly didn’t know about the pregnancy, I’m just as shocked as you must be ... uh, also I’m hiring an attorney, just so you know. I think even Rand had suggested it. So anyway ... you know how bad I am on messages. I hope you call me back.”

Tanner Bolt’s office was in midtown, not far from where I used to work. The elevator shot me up twenty-five stories, but it was so smooth that I wasn’t sure I was moving until my ears popped. At the twenty-sixth floor, a tight-lipped blonde in a sleek business suit stepped on. She tapped her foot impatiently, waiting for the doors to shut, then snapped at me, “Why don’t you hit close?” I flashed her the smile I give petulant women, the lighten-up smile, the one Amy called the “beloved Nicky grin,” and then the woman recognized me. “Oh,” she said. She looked as if she smelled something rancid. She seemed personally vindicated when I scuttled out on Tanner’s floor.

This guy was the best, and I needed the best, but I also resented being associated with him in any way—this sleazebag, this showboat, this attorney to the guilty. I pre-hated Tanner Bolt so much that I expected his office to look like a *Miami Vice* set. But Bolt & Bolt was quite the opposite—it was dignified, lawyerly. Behind spotless glass doors, people in very good suits commuted busily between offices.

A young, pretty man with a tie the color of tropical fruit greeted me and settled me down in the shiny glass-and-mirror reception area and grandly offered water (declined), then went back to a gleaming desk and picked up a gleaming phone. I sat on the sofa, watching the skyline, cranes pecking up and down like mechanical birds. Then I unfolded Amy’s final clue from my pocket. Five years is wood. Was that going to be the end prize of the treasure hunt? Something for the baby: a carved oak cradle, a wooden rattle? Something for our baby and for us, to start over, the Dunnes redone.

Go phoned while I was still staring at the clue.

“Are we okay?” she asked immediately.

My sister thought I was possibly a wife killer.

“We’re as okay as I think we can ever be again, considering.”

“Nick. I’m sorry. I called to say I’m sorry,” Go said. “I woke up and

felt totally insane. And awful. I lost my head. It was a momentary freakout. I really, truly apologize.”

I remained silent.

“You got to give me this, Nick: exhaustion and stress and ... I’m sorry ... truly.”

“Okay,” I lied.

“But I’m glad, actually. It cleared the air—”

“She was definitely pregnant.”

My stomach turned. Again I felt as if I had forgotten something crucial. I had overlooked something and would pay for it.

“I’m sorry,” Go said. She waited a few seconds. “The fact of the matter is—”

“I can’t talk about it. I can’t.”

“Okay.”

“I’m actually in New York,” I said. “I have an appointment with Tanner Bolt.”

She let out a whoosh of breath.

“Thank God. You were able to see him that quick?”

“That’s how fucked my case is.” I’d been patched through at once to Tanner—I was on hold all of three seconds after stating my name—and when I told him about my living-room interrogation, about the pregnancy, he ordered me to hop the next plane.

“I’m kinda freaking out,” I added.

“You’re doing the smart thing. Seriously.”

Another pause.

“His name can’t really be Tanner Bolt, can it?” I said, trying to make light.

“I heard it’s an anagram for Ratner Tolb.”

“Really?”

“No.”

I laughed, an inappropriate feeling, but good. Then, from the far

side of the room, the anagram was walking toward me—black pin-striped suit and lime-green tie, sharky grin. He walked with his hand out, in shake-and-strike mode.

“Nick Dunne, I’m Tanner Bolt. Come with me, let’s get to work.”

Tanner Bolt’s office seemed designed to resemble the clubroom of an exclusive all-men’s golf course—comfortable leather chairs, shelves thick with legal books, a gas fireplace with flames flickering in the air-conditioning. Sit down, have a cigar, complain about the wife, tell some questionable jokes, *just us guys here*.

Bolt deliberately chose not to sit behind his desk. He ushered me toward a two-man table as if we were going to play chess. *This is a conversation for us partners*, Bolt said without having to say it. *We’ll sit at our little war-room table and get down to it*.

“My retainer, Mr. Dunne, is a hundred thousand dollars. That’s a lot of money, obviously. So I want to be clear on what I offer and on what I will expect of you, okay?”

He aimed unblinking eyes at me, a sympathetic smile, and waited for me to nod. Only Tanner Bolt could get away with making me, a *client*, fly to *him*, then tell me what kind of dance I’d need to do in order to give him my money.

“I win, Mr. Dunne. I win unwinnable cases, and the case that I think you may soon face is—I don’t want to patronize you—it’s a tough one. Money troubles, bumpy marriage, pregnant wife. The media has turned on you, the public has turned on you.”

He twisted a signet ring on his right hand and waited for me to show him I was listening. I’d always heard the phrase: *At forty, a man wears the face he’s earned*. Bolt’s fortyish face was well tended, almost wrinkle-free, pleasantly plump with ego. Here was a confident man, the best in his field, a man who liked his life.

“There will be no more police interviews without my presence,” Bolt was saying. “That’s something I seriously regret you did. But before we even get to the legal portion, we need to start dealing with public opinion, because the way it’s going, we have to assume everything is going to get leaked: your credit cards, the life insurance, the supposedly staged crime scene, the mopped-up blood. It looks very bad, my friend. And so it’s a vicious cycle: The cops think you

did it, they let the public know. The public is outraged, they demand an arrest. So, one: We've got to find an alternative suspect. Two: We've got to keep the support of Amy's parents, I cannot emphasize that piece enough. And three: We've got to fix your image, because should this go to trial, it will influence the juror pool. Change of venue doesn't mean anything anymore—twenty-four-hour cable, Internet, the whole world is your venue. So I cannot tell you how key it is to start turning this whole thing around.”

“I'd like that too, believe me.”

“How are things with Amy's parents? Can we get them to make a statement of support?”

“I haven't spoken with them since it was confirmed that Amy was pregnant.”

“Is pregnant.” Tanner frowned at me. “Is. She *is* pregnant. Never, ever mention your wife in the past tense.”

“Fuck.” I put my face in my palm for a second. I hadn't even noticed what I'd said.

“Don't worry about it with me,” Bolt said, waving the air magnanimously. “But everywhere else, worry. Worry hard. From now on, I don't want you to open your mouth if you haven't thought it through. So you haven't spoken to Amy's parents. I don't like that. You've tried to get in touch, I assume?”

“I've left a few messages.”

Bolt scrawled something on a yellow legal pad. “Okay, we have to assume this is bad news for us. But you need to track them down. Nowhere public, where some asshole with a cameraphone can film you—we can't have another Shawna Kelly moment. Or send your sister in, a recon mission, see what's going on. Actually, do that, that's better.”

“Okay.”

“I need you to make a list for me, Nick. Of all the nice things you've done for Amy over the years. Romantic things, especially in this past year. You cooked her chicken soup when she was sick, or you sent her love letters while you were on a business trip. Nothing too flashy. I don't care about jewelry unless you guys picked it out on vacation or

something. We need real personal stuff here, romantic-movie stuff.”

“What if I’m not a romantic-movie kind of guy?”

Tanner tightened his lips, then blew them back out. “Come up with something, okay, Nick? You seem like a good guy. I’m sure you did something thoughtful this past year.”

I couldn’t think of a decent thing I’d done in the past two years. In New York, those first few years of marriage, I’d been desperate to please my wife, to return to those loose-limbed days when she’d run across a drugstore parking lot and leap into my arms, a spontaneous celebration of her hair-spray purchase. Her face pressed up against mine all the time, her bright blue eyes wide and her yellow lashes catching on mine, the heat of her breath just under my nose, the silliness of it. For two years I tried as my old wife slipped away, and I tried so hard—no anger, no arguments, the constant kowtowing, the capitulation, the sitcom-husband version of me: *Yes, dear. Of course, sweetheart.* The fucking energy leached from my body as my frantic-rabbit thoughts tried to figure out how to make her happy, and each action, each attempt, was met with a rolled eye or a sad little sigh. *A you just don’t get it sigh.*

By the time we left for Missouri, I was just pissed. I was ashamed of the memory of me—the scuttling, scraping, hunchbacked toadie of a man I’d turned into. So I wasn’t romantic; I wasn’t even nice.

“Also, I need a list of people who may have harmed Amy, who may have had something against her.”

“I should tell you, it seems Amy tried to buy a gun earlier this year.”

“The cops know?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know?”

“Not until the guy she tried to buy from told me.”

He took exactly two seconds to think. “Then I bet their theory is she wanted a gun to protect herself from you,” he said. “She was isolated, she was scared. She wanted to believe in you, yet she could feel something was very wrong, so she wanted a gun in case her worst fear was correct.”

“Wow, you’re good.”

“My dad was a cop,” he said. “But I do like the gun idea—now we just need someone to match it to besides you. Nothing is too far out. If she argued with a neighbor constantly over a barking dog, if she was forced to rebuff a flirty guy, whatever you got, I need. What do you know about Tommy O’Hara?”

“Right! I know he called the tip line a few times.”

“He was accused of date-raping Amy in 2005.”

I felt my mouth open, but I said nothing.

“She was dating him casually. There was a dinner date at his place, things got out of hand, and he raped her, according to my sources.”

“When in 2005?”

“May.”

It was during the eight months when I’d lost Amy—the time between our New Year’s meeting and my finding her again on Seventh Avenue.

Tanner tightened his tie, twisted a diamond-studded wedding band, assessing me. “She never told you.”

“I haven’t heard a single thing about this,” I said. “From anyone. But especially not from Amy.”

“You’d be surprised, the number of women who still find it a stigma. Ashamed.”

“I can’t believe I—”

“I try never to show up to one of these meetings without new information for my client,” he said. “I want to show you how serious I am about your case. And how much you need me.”

“This guy could be a suspect?”

“Sure, why not,” Tanner said too breezily. “He has a violent history with your wife.”

“Did he go to prison?”

“She dropped the charges. Didn’t want to testify, I assume. If you and I decide to work together, I’ll have him checked out. In the meantime, think of *anyone* who took an interest in your wife. Better if

it's someone in Carthage, though. More believable. Now—" Tanner crossed a leg, exposed his bottom row of teeth, uncomfortably bunched and stained in comparison with his perfect picket-fence top row. He held his crooked teeth against his upper lip for a moment. "Now comes the harder part, Nick," he said. "I need total honesty from you, it won't work any other way. So tell me everything about your marriage, tell me the worst. Because if I know the worst, then I can plan for it. But if I'm surprised, we're fucked. And if we're fucked, *you're* fucked. Because I get to fly away in my G4."

I took a breath. Looked him in the eyes. "I cheated on Amy. I've been cheating on Amy."

"Okay. With multiple women or just one?"

"No, not multiple. I've never cheated before."

"So, with *one* woman?" Bolt asked, and looked away, his eyes resting on a watercolor of a sailboat as he twirled his wedding band. I could picture him phoning his wife later, saying, *Just once, just once, I want a guy who's not an asshole.*

"Yes, just one girl, she's very—"

"Don't say *girl*, don't ever say *girl*," Bolt said. "Woman. One woman who is very special to you. Is that what you were going to say?"

Of course it was.

"You do know, Nick, special is actually worse than—okay. How long?"

"A little over a year."

"Have you spoken to her since Amy went missing?"

"Yes, on a disposable cell phone. And in person once. Twice. But—"

"In *person*."

"No one has seen us. I can swear to that. Just my sister."

He took a breath, looked at the sailboat again. "And what does this—What's her name?"

"Andie."

"What is her attitude about all this?"

"She's been great—until the pregnancy ... announcement. Now I

think she's a little ... on edge. Very on edge. Very, uh ... *needy* is the wrong word ..."

"Say what you need to say, Nick. If she's needy, then—"

"She's needy. Clingy. Needs lots of reassurance. She's a really sweet girl, but she's young, and it's, it's been hard, obviously."

Tanner Bolt went to his minibar and pulled out a Clamato. The entire fridge was filled with Clamato. He opened the bottle and drank it in three swallows, then dabbed his lips with a cloth napkin. "You will need to cut off, completely and forever, all contact with Andie," he said. I began to speak, and he aimed a palm at me. "Immediately."

"I can't cut it off with her just like that. Out of nowhere."

"This isn't something to debate. *Nick*. I mean, come on, buddy, I really got to say this? You cannot date around while your pregnant wife is missing. You will go to fucking prison. Now, the issue is to do it without turning her against us. Without leaving her with a vendetta, an urge to go public, anything but fond memories. Make her believe that this was the decent thing, make her want to keep you safe. How are you at breakups?"

I opened my mouth, but he didn't wait.

"We'll prep you for the conversation the same way we'd prep you for a cross-exam, okay? Now, if you want me, I'll fly to Missouri, I'll set up camp, and we can really get to work on this. I can be with you as soon as tomorrow if you want me for your lawyer. Do you?"

"I do."

I was back in Carthage before dinnertime. It was strange, once Tanner swept Andie from the picture—once it became clear that she simply couldn't stay—how quickly I accepted it, how little I mourned her. On that single, two-hour flight, I transitioned from *in love with Andie* to *not in love with Andie*. Like walking through a door. Our relationship immediately attained a sepia tone: the past. How odd, that I ruined my marriage over that little girl with whom I had nothing in common except that we both liked a good laugh and a cold beer after sex.

*Of course you're fine with ending it, Go would say. It got hard.*

But there was a better reason: Amy was blooming large in my mind. She was gone, and yet she was more present than anyone else. I'd

fallen in love with Amy because I was the ultimate Nick with her. Loving her made me superhuman, it made me feel alive. At her easiest, she was hard, because her brain was always working, working, working—I had to exert myself just to keep pace with her. I'd spend an hour crafting a casual e-mail to her, I became a student of arcana so I could keep her interested: the Lake poets, the code duello, the French Revolution. Her mind was both wide and deep, and I got smarter being with her. And more considerate, and more active, and more alive, and almost electric, because for Amy, love was like drugs or booze or porn: There was no plateau. Each exposure needed to be more intense than the last to achieve the same result.

Amy made me believe I was exceptional, that I was up to her level of play. That was both our making and undoing. Because I couldn't handle the demands of greatness. I began craving ease and averageness, and I hated myself for it, and ultimately, I realized, I punished her for it. I turned her into the brittle, prickly thing she became. I had pretended to be one kind of man and revealed myself to be quite another. Worse, I convinced myself our tragedy was entirely her making. I spent years working myself into the very thing I swore she was: a righteous ball of hate.

\* \* \*

On the flight home, I'd looked at Clue 4 for so long, I'd memorized it. I wanted to torture myself. No wonder her notes were so different this time: My wife was pregnant, she wanted to start over, return us to our dazzling, happy aliveness. I could picture her running around town to hide those sweet notes, eager as a schoolgirl for me to get to the end—the announcement that she was pregnant with my child. Wood. It had to be an old-fashioned cradle. I knew my wife: It had to be an antique cradle. Although the clue wasn't quite in an expectant-mother tone.

*Picture me: I'm a girl who is very bad*

*I need to be punished, and by punished, I mean had*

*It's where you store goodies for anniversary five*

*Pardon me if this is getting contrived!*

*A good time was had here right at sunny midday*

*Then out for a cocktail, all so terribly gay.*

*So run there right now, full of sweet sighs,*

*And open the door for your big surprise.*

I was almost home when I figured it out. *Store goodies for anniversary five*: Goodies would be something made of wood. To punish is to take someone to the woodshed. It was the woodshed behind my sister's house—a place to stow lawn-mower parts and rusty tools—a decrepit old outbuilding, like something from a slasher movie where campers are slowly killed off. Go never went back there; she'd often joked of burning it down since she moved into the house. Instead, she'd let it get even more overgrown and cobwebbed. We'd always joked that it would be a good place to bury a body.

It couldn't be.

I drove across town, my face numb, my hands cold. Go's car was in the driveway, but I slipped past the glowing living-room window and down the steep downhill slope, and I was soon out of her sight range, out of sight of anyone. Very private.

Back to the far back of the yard, on the edge of the tree line, there was the shed.

I opened the door.

*Nonononono.*

**part two**

**BOY MEETS GIRL**

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

THE DAY OF

I'm so much happier now that I'm dead.

Technically, missing. Soon to be presumed dead. But as shorthand, we'll say dead. It's been only a matter of hours, but I feel better already: loose joints, wavy muscles. At one point this morning, I realized my face felt strange, different. I looked in the rearview mirror—dread Carthage forty-three miles behind me, my smug husband lounging around his sticky bar as mayhem dangled on a thin piano wire just above his shitty, oblivious head—and I realized I was smiling. Ha! That's new.

My checklist for today—one of many checklists I've made over the past year—sits beside me in the passenger seat, a spot of blood right next to Item 22: Cut myself. *But Amy is afraid of blood*, the diary readers will say. (The diary, yes! We'll get to my brilliant diary.) No, I'm not, not a bit, but for the past year I've been saying I am. I told Nick probably half a dozen times how afraid I am of blood, and when he said, "I don't remember you being so afraid of blood," I replied, "I've told you, I've told you so many times!" Nick has such a careless memory for other people's problems, he just assumed it was true. Swooning at the plasma center, that was a nice touch. I really did that, I didn't just write that I did. (Don't fret, we'll sort this out: the true and the not true and the might as well be true.)

Item 22, Cut myself, has been on the list a long time. Now it's real, and my arm hurts. A lot. It takes a very special discipline to slice oneself past the paper-cut layer, down to the muscle. You want a lot of blood, but not so much that you pass out, get discovered hours later in a kiddie pool of red with a lot of explaining to do. I held a box cutter to my wrist first, but looking at that crisscross of veins, I felt like a bomb technician in an action movie: Snip the wrong line and you die. I ended up cutting into the inside of my upper arm, gnawing on a rag so I wouldn't scream. One long, deep good one. I sat cross-legged on my kitchen floor for ten minutes, letting the blood drizzle

steadily until I'd made a nice thick puddle. Then I cleaned it up as poorly as Nick would have done after he bashed my head in. I want the house to tell a story of conflict between true and false. *The living room looks staged, yet the blood has been cleaned up: It can't be Amy!*

So the self-mutilation was worth it. Still, hours later, the slice burns under my sleeves, under the tourniquet. (Item 30: Carefully dress wound, ensuring no blood has dripped where it shouldn't be present. Wrap box cutter and tuck away in pocket for later disposal.)

Item 18: Stage the living room. Tip ottoman. Check.

Item 12: Wrap the first clue in its box and tuck it just out of the way so the police will find it before dazed husband thinks to look for it. It has to be part of the police record. I want him to be forced to start the treasure hunt (his ego will make him finish it). Check.

Item 32: Change into generic clothes, tuck hair in hat, climb down the banks of the river, and scuttle along the edge, the water lapping inches below, until you reach the edge of the complex. Do this even though you know the Teverers, the only neighbors with a view of the river, will be at church. Do this because you never know. You always take the extra step that others don't, that's who you are.

Item 29: Say goodbye to Bleecker. Smell his little stinky cat breath one last time. Fill his kibble dish in case people forget to feed him once everything starts.

Item 33: Get the fuck out of Dodge.

Check, check, check.

I can tell you more about how I did everything, but I'd like you to know me first. Not Diary Amy, who is a work of fiction (and Nick said I wasn't really a writer, and why did I ever listen to him?), but me, Actual Amy. What kind of woman would do such a thing? Let me tell you a story, a *true* story, so you can begin to understand.

To start: I should never have been born.

My mother had five miscarriages and two stillbirths before me.

One a year, in the fall, as if it were a seasonal duty, like crop rotation. They were all girls; they were all named Hope. I'm sure it was my father's suggestion—his optimistic impulse, his tie-dyed earnestness: *We can't give up hope, Marybeth*. But give up Hope is

exactly what they did, over and over again.

The doctors ordered my parents to stop trying; they refused. They are not quitters. They tried and tried, and finally came me. My mother didn't count on my being alive, couldn't bear to think of me as an actual baby, a living child, a girl who would get to come home. I would have been Hope 8, if things had gone badly. But I entered the world hollering—an electric, neon pink. My parents were so surprised, they realized they'd never discussed a name, not a real one, for a real child. For my first two days in the hospital, they didn't name me. Each morning my mother would hear the door to her room open and feel the nurse lingering in the doorway (I always pictured her vintage, with swaying white skirts and one of those folded caps like a Chinese take-out box). The nurse would linger, and my mother would ask without even looking up, "Is she still alive?"

When I remained alive, they named me Amy, because it was a regular girl's name, a popular girl's name, a name a thousand other baby girls were given that year, so maybe the gods wouldn't notice this little baby nestled among the others. Marybeth said if she were to do it again, she'd name me Lydia.

I grew up feeling special, proud. I was the girl who battled oblivion and won. The chances were about 1 percent, but I did it. I ruined my mother's womb in the process—my own prenatal Sherman's March. Marybeth would never have another baby. As a child, I got a vibrant pleasure out of this: just me, just me, only me.

My mother would sip hot tea on the days of the Hopes' birth-deaths, sit in a rocker with a blanket, and say she was just "taking a little time for myself." Nothing dramatic, my mother is too sensible to sing dirges, but she would get pensive, she would remove herself, and I would have none of it, needful thing that I was. I would clamber onto my mother's lap, or thrust a crayoned drawing in her face, or remember a permission slip that needed prompt attention. My father would try to distract me, try to take me to a movie or bribe me with sweets. No matter the ruse, it didn't work. I wouldn't give my mother those few minutes.

I've always been better than the Hopes, I was the one who made it.

But I've always been jealous too, always—seven dead dancing princesses. They get to be perfect without even trying, without even

facing one moment of existence, while I am stuck here on earth, and every day I must try, and every day is a chance to be less than perfect.

It's an exhausting way to live. I lived that way until I was thirty-one.

And then, for about two years, everything was okay. Because of Nick.

Nick *loved* me. A six-o kind of love: He *looooooved* me. But he didn't love me, me. Nick loved a girl who doesn't exist. I was pretending, the way I often did, pretending to have a personality. I can't help it, it's what I've always done: The way some women change fashion regularly, I change personalities. What persona feels good, what's coveted, what's au courant? I think most people do this, they just don't admit it, or else they settle on one persona because they're too lazy or stupid to pull off a switch.

That night at the Brooklyn party, I was playing the girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl. Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl*. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl*.

Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl. For a long time Cool Girl offended me. I used to see men—friends, coworkers, strangers—giddy over these awful pretender women, and I'd want to sit these men down and calmly say: *You are not dating a woman, you are dating a woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men who'd like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them*. I'd want to grab the poor guy by his lapels or messenger bag and say: *The bitch doesn't really love chili dogs that much—no one loves chili dogs that much!* And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be. Oh,

and if you're *not* a Cool Girl, I beg you not to believe that your man doesn't want the Cool Girl. It may be a slightly different version—maybe he's a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he's a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain. (How do you know you're *not* Cool Girl? Because he says things like: "I like strong women." If he says that to you, he will at some point fuck someone else. Because "I like strong women" is code for "I hate strong women.")

I waited patiently—*years*—for the pendulum to swing the other way, for men to start reading Jane Austen, learn how to knit, pretend to love cosmos, organize scrapbook parties, and make out with each other while we leer. And then we'd say, *Yeah, he's a Cool Guy.*

But it never happened. Instead, women across the nation colluded in our degradation! Pretty soon Cool Girl became the standard girl. Men believed she existed—she wasn't just a dreamgirl one in a million. Every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't, then there was something wrong with *you*.

But it's tempting to be Cool Girl. For someone like me, who likes to win, it's tempting to want to be the girl every guy wants. When I met Nick, I knew immediately that was what he wanted, and for him, I guess I was willing to try. I will accept my portion of blame. The thing is, I was *crazy* about him at first. I found him perversely exotic, a good ole Missouri boy. He was so damn nice to be around. He teased things out in me that I didn't know existed: a lightness, a humor, an ease. It was as if he hollowed me out and filled me with feathers. He helped me be Cool Girl—I couldn't have been Cool Girl with anyone else. I wouldn't have wanted to. I can't say I didn't enjoy some of it: I ate a MoonPie, I walked barefoot, I stopped worrying. I watched dumb movies and ate chemically laced foods. I didn't think past the first step of anything, that was the key. I drank a Coke and didn't worry about how to recycle the can or about the acid puddling in my belly, acid so powerful it could strip clean a penny. We went to a dumb movie and I didn't worry about the offensive sexism or the lack of minorities in meaningful roles. I didn't even worry whether the movie made sense. I didn't worry about anything that came next. Nothing had

consequence, I was living in the moment, and I could feel myself getting shallower and dumber. But also happy.

Until Nick, I'd never really felt like a person, because I was always a product. Amazing Amy has to be brilliant, creative, kind, thoughtful, witty, and happy. *We just want you to be happy.* Rand and Marybeth said that all the time, but they never explained how. So many lessons and opportunities and advantages, and they never taught me how to be happy. I remember always being baffled by other children. I would be at a birthday party and watch the other kids giggling and making faces, and I would try to do that too, but I wouldn't understand *why*. I would sit there with the tight elastic thread of the birthday hat parting the pudge of my underchin, with the grainy frosting of the cake bluing my teeth, and I would try to figure out why it was fun.

With Nick, I understood finally. Because he was so much fun. It was like dating a sea otter. He was the first naturally happy person I met who was my equal. He was brilliant and gorgeous and funny and charming and charmed. People liked him. Women loved him. I thought we would be the most perfect union: the happiest couple around. Not that love is a competition. But I don't understand the point of being together if you're not the happiest.

I was probably happier for those few years—pretending to be someone else—than I ever have been before or after. I can't decide what that means.

But then it had to stop, because it wasn't real, it wasn't me. It wasn't *me*, Nick! I thought you knew. I thought it was a bit of a game. I thought we had a wink-wink, *don't ask, don't tell* thing going. I tried so hard to be easy. But it was unsustainable. It turned out he couldn't sustain his side either: the witty banter, the clever games, the romance, and the wooing. It all started collapsing on itself. I hated Nick for being surprised when I became me. I hated him for not knowing it had to end, for truly believing he had married this creature, this figment of the imagination of a million masturbatory men, semen-fingered and self-satisfied. He truly seemed astonished when I asked him to *listen* to me. He couldn't believe I didn't love wax-stripping my pussy raw and blowing him on request. That I *did* mind when he didn't show up for drinks with my friends. That ludicrous diary entry? *I don't need pathetic dancing-monkey scenarios to repeat to my friends, I am content with letting him be himself.*

That was pure, dumb Cool Girl bullshit. What a cunt. Again, I don't get it: If you let a man cancel plans or decline to do things for you, you *lose*. You don't get what you want. It's pretty clear. Sure, he may be happy, he may say you're *the coolest girl ever*, but he's saying it because *he got his way*. He's calling you a Cool Girl to fool you! That's what men do: They try to make it sound like you are the Cool Girl so you will bow to their wishes. Like a car salesman saying, *How much do you want to pay for this beauty?* when you didn't agree to buy it yet. That awful phrase men use: "I mean, I know *you* wouldn't mind if I ..." *Yes, I do mind*. Just say it. Don't lose, you dumb little twat.

So it had to stop. Committing to Nick, feeling safe with Nick, being happy with Nick, made me realize that there was a Real Amy in there, and she was so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging, than Cool Amy. Nick wanted Cool Amy anyway. Can you imagine, finally showing your true self to your spouse, your soul mate, and having him *not like you*? So that's how the hating first began. I've thought about this a lot, and that's where it started, I think.

# NICK DUNNE

SEVEN DAYS GONE

I made it a few steps into the woodshed before I had to lean against the wall and catch my breath.

I knew it was going to be bad. I knew it once I figured out the clue: woodshed. Midday fun. Cocktails. Because that description was not me and Amy. It was me and Andie. The woodshed was just one of many strange places where I'd had sex with Andie. We were restricted in our meeting spots. Her busy apartment complex was mostly a no go. Motels show up on credit cards, and my wife was neither trusting nor stupid. (Andie had a MasterCard, but the statement went to her mom. It hurts me to admit that.) So the woodshed, deep behind my sister's house, was very safe when Go was at work. Likewise my father's abandoned home (*Maybe you feel guilty for bringing me here / I must admit it felt a bit queer / But it's not like we had the choice of many a place / We made the decision: We made this our space*), and a few times, my office at school (*I picture myself as your student / With a teacher so handsome and wise / My mind opens up [not to mention my thighs!]*), and once, Andie's car, pulled down a dirt road in Hannibal after I'd taken her for a visit one day, a much more satisfying reenactment of my banal field trip with Amy (*You took me here so I could hear you chat / About your boyhood adventures: crummy jeans and visor hat*).

Each clue was hidden in a spot where I'd cheated on Amy. She'd used the treasure hunt to take me on a tour of all my infidelities. I had a shimmer of nausea as I pictured Amy trailing oblivious me in her car—to my dad's, to Go's, to goddamn Hannibal—watching me fuck this sweet young girl, my wife's lips twisting in disgust and triumph.

Because she knew she'd punish me good. Now at our final stop, Amy was ready for me to know how clever she was. Because the woodshed was packed with about every gizmo and gadget that I swore to Boney and Gilpin I hadn't bought with the credit cards I swore I didn't know anything about. The insanely expensive golf clubs

were here, the watches and game consoles, the designer clothes, they were all sitting here, in wait, on my sister's property. Where it looked like I'd stored them until my wife was dead and I could have a little fun.

I knocked on Go's front door, and when she answered, smoking a cigarette, I told her I had to show her something, and I turned around and led her without a word to the woodshed.

"Look," I said, and ushered her toward the open door.

"Are those—Is that all the stuff ... from the credit cards?" Go's voice went high and wild. She put one hand to her mouth and took a step back from me, and I realized that just for a second, she thought I was making a confession to her.

We'd never be able to undo it, that moment. For that alone, I hated my wife.

"Amy's framing me, Go," I said. "Go, Amy bought this stuff. She's *framing* me."

She snapped to. Her eyelids clicked once, twice, and she gave a tiny shake of her head, as if to rid herself of the image: Nick as wife killer.

"Amy's framing me for her murder. Right? Her last clue, it led me right here, and no, I didn't know about *any* of this stuff. It's her grand statement. *Presenting: Nick Goes to Jail!*" A huge, burpy air bubble formed at the back of my throat—I was going to sob or laugh. I laughed. "I mean, right? Holy fuck, right?"

*So hurry up, get going, please do / And this time I'll teach you a thing or two.* The final words of Amy's first clue. How did I not see it?

"If she's framing you, why let you know?" Go was still staring, transfixed by the contents of her shed.

"Because she's done it so perfectly. She always needed that validation, the praise, all the time. She wants me to know I'm being fucked. She can't resist. It wouldn't be fun for her otherwise."

"No," Go said, chewing on a nail. "There's something else. Something more. Have you touched anything in here?"

"No."

"Good. Then the question becomes ..."

“What does she think I’ll do when I find this, this incriminating evidence, on my sister’s property,” I said. “That’s the question, because whatever she assumes I’ll do, whatever she wants me to do, I have to do the opposite. If she thinks I’ll freak out and try to get rid of all this stuff, I guarantee you she has a way I’ll get busted with it.”

“Well, you can’t leave it here,” Go said. “You’ll definitely get busted that way. Are you sure that was the last clue? Where’s your present?”

“Oh. Shit. No. It must be inside somewhere.”

“Don’t go in there,” Go said.

“I have to. God knows what else she’s got in store.”

I stepped carefully into the dank shed, keeping my hands tight by my sides, walking delicately on tiptoes so as not to leave tread marks. Just past a flat-screen TV, Amy’s blue envelope sat on top of a huge gift box, wrapped in her beautiful silvery paper. I took the envelope and the box back outside into the warm air. The object inside the package was heavy, a good thirty pounds, and broken into several pieces that slid with a strange rattle as I set the box on the ground at our feet. Go took an involuntary quick step away from it. I slid open the envelope.

Darling Husband,

Now is when I take the time to tell you that I know you better than you could ever imagine. I know sometimes you think you are moving through this world alone, unseen, unnoticed. But don’t believe that for a second. I have made a study of you. I know what you are going to do before you do it. I know where you’ve been, and I know where you’re going. For this anniversary, I’ve arranged a trip: Follow your beloved river, up up up! And you don’t even have to worry about trying to find your anniversary present. This time the present will come to you! So sit back and relax, because you are DONE.

“What’s upriver?” Go asked, and then I groaned.

“She’s sending me *up the river*.”

“Fuck her. Open the box.”

I knelt down and nudged off the lid with my fingertips, as if expecting an explosion. Silence. I peered inside. At the bottom of the box lay two wooden puppets, side by side. They seemed to be husband and wife. The male was dressed in motley and grinning

rabidly, holding a cane or a stick. I pulled the husband figure out, his limbs bouncing around excitedly, a dancer limbering up. The wife was prettier, more delicate, and stiffer. Her face looked shocked, as if she'd seen something alarming. Beneath her was a tiny baby that could be attached to her by a ribbon. The puppets were ancient, heavy, and large, almost as big as ventriloquist dummies. I picked up the male, gripped the thick, clublike handle used to move him, and his arms and legs twitched manically.

"Creepy," Go said. "Stop."

Beneath them lay a piece of buttery blue paper folded over once. Amy's broken-kite handwriting, all triangles and points. It read:

The beginning of a wonderful new story, Nick! "That's the way to do it!"

Enjoy.

On our mom's kitchen table, we spread all of Amy's treasure-hunt clues and the box containing the puppets. We stared at the objects as if we were assembling a jigsaw puzzle.

"Why bother with a treasure hunt if she was planning ... her plan," Go said.

*Her plan* had become immediate shorthand for *faking her disappearance and framing you for murder*. It sounded less insane.

"Keep me distracted, for one thing. Make me believe she still loved me. I'm chasing her little clues all over Christendom, believing my wife was wanting to make amends, wanting to jump-start our marriage ..."

The moony, girlish state her notes had left me in, it sickened me. It embarrassed me. Marrow-deep embarrassment, the kind that becomes part of your DNA, that changes you. After all these years, Amy could still play me. She could write a few notes and get me back completely. I was her little puppet on a string.

*I will find you, Amy.* Lovesick words, hateful intentions.

"So I don't stop to think: *Hey, it sure looks like I murdered my wife, I wonder why?*"

"And the police would have found it strange—you would have found it strange—if she didn't do the treasure hunt, this tradition," Go reasoned. "It would look as if she knew she was going to disappear."

“This worries me though,” I said, pointing at the puppets. “They’re unusual enough that they have to mean something. I mean, if she just wanted to keep me distracted for a while, the final gift could have been anything wooden.”

Go ran a finger across the male’s motley uniform. “They’re clearly very old. Vintage.” She flipped their clothing upside down to reveal the club handle of the male. The female had only a square-shaped gap at her head. “Is this supposed to be sexual? The male has this giant wooden handle, like a dick. And the female is missing hers. She just has the hole.”

“It’s a fairly obvious statement: Men have penises and women have vaginas?”

Go put a finger inside the female puppet’s gap, swept around to make sure there was nothing hidden. “So what is Amy saying?”

“When I first saw them, I thought: *She bought children’s toys*. Mom, dad, baby. Because she was pregnant.”

“Is she even pregnant?”

A sense of despair washed over me. Or rather, the opposite. Not a wave coming in, rolling over me, but the ebb of the sea returning: a sense of something pulling away, and me with it. I could no longer hope my wife was pregnant, but I couldn’t bring myself to hope she wasn’t either.

Go pulled out the male doll, scrunched her nose, then lightbulb-popped. “You’re a puppet on a string.”

I laughed. “I literally thought those exact words too. But why a male and female? Amy clearly isn’t a puppet on a string, she’s the puppetmaster.”

“And what’s: *That’s the way to do it?* To do *what?*”

“Fuck me for life?”

“It’s not a phrase Amy used to say? Or some quote from the *Amy* books, or ...” She hurried over to her computer and searched for *That’s the way to do it*. Up came lyrics for “That’s the Way to Do It” by Madness. “Oh, I remember them,” Go said. “Awesome ska band.”

“Ska,” I said, swerving toward delirious laughter. “Great.”

The lyrics were about a handyman who could do many types of home-improvement jobs—including electrical and plumbing—and who preferred to be paid in cash.

“God, I fucking hate the eighties,” I said. “No lyrics ever made sense.”

“ ‘The reflex is an only child,’ ” Go said, nodding.

“ ‘He’s waiting by the park,’ ” I muttered back automatically.

“So if this is it, what does it mean?” Go said, turning to me, studying my eyes. “It’s a song about a handyman. Someone who might have access to your house, to fix things. Or *rig* things. Who would be paid in cash so there’s no record.”

“Someone who installed video cameras?” I asked. “Amy went out of town a few times during the—the affair. Maybe she thought she’d catch us on tape.”

Go shot a question at me.

“No, never, never at our house.”

“Could it be some secret door?” Go suggested. “Some secret false panel Amy put in where she’s hidden something that will ... I don’t know, exonerate you?”

“I think that’s it. Yes, Amy is using a Madness song to give me a clue to my own freedom, if only I can decipher their wily, ska-infused codes.”

Go laughed then too. “Jesus, maybe we’re the ones who are bat-shit crazy. I mean, are we? Is this totally insane?”

“It’s not insane. She set me up. There is no other way to explain the *warehouse* of stuff in *your* backyard. And it’s very Amy to drag you into it, smudge you a little bit with my filth. No, this is Amy. The gift, the fucking giddy, sly note I’m supposed to understand. No, and it has to come back to the puppets. Try the quote with the word *marionettes*.”

I collapsed on the couch, my body a dull throb. Go played secretary. “Oh my God. Duh! They’re Punch and Judy dolls. Nick! We’re idiots. That line, that’s Punch’s trademark. *That’s the way to do it!*”

“Okay. The old puppet show—it’s really violent, right?” I asked.

“This is so fucked up.”

“Go, it’s violent, right?”

“Yeah. Violent. God, she’s fucking crazy.”

“He beats her, right?”

“I’m reading ... okay. Punch kills their baby.” She looked up at me.  
“And then when Judy confronts him, he beats her. To death.”

My throat got wet with saliva.

“And each time he does something awful and gets away with it, he says, ‘That’s the way to do it!’ ” She grabbed Punch and placed him in her lap, her fingers grasping the wooden hands as if she were holding an infant. “He’s glib, even as he murders his wife and child.”

I looked at the puppets. “So she’s giving me the narrative of my frame-up.”

“I can’t even wrap my brain around this. Fucking *psycho*.”

“Go?”

“Yeah, right: You didn’t want her to be pregnant, you got angry and killed her and the unborn baby.”

“Feels anticlimactic somehow,” I said.

“The climax is when you are taught the lesson that Punch never learns, and you are caught and charged with murder.”

“And Missouri has the death penalty,” I said. “Fun game.”

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

THE DAY OF

You know how I found out? I *saw* them. That's how stupid my husband is. One snowy April night, I felt so lonely. I was drinking warm amaretto with Bleecker and reading, lying on the floor as the snow came down, listening to old scratchy albums, like Nick and I used to (that entry was true). I had a burst of romantic cheer: I'd surprise him at The Bar, and we'd have a few drinks and wander through the empty streets together, hand in mitten. We would walk around the hushed downtown and he would press me against a wall and kiss me in the snow that looked like sugar clouds. That's right, I wanted him back so badly that I was willing to re-create that moment. I was willing to pretend to be someone else again. I remember thinking: *We can still find a way to make this work. Faith!* I followed him all the way to Missouri, because I still believed he'd love me again somehow, love me that intense, thick way he did, the way that made everything good. Faith!

I got there just in time to see him leaving with her. I was in the goddamn parking lot, twenty feet behind him, and he didn't even register me, I was a ghost. He didn't have his hands on her, not yet, but I knew. I could tell because he was so *aware* of her. I followed them, and suddenly, he pressed her up against a tree—in the middle of town—and kissed her. *Nick is cheating*, I thought dumbly, and before I could make myself say anything, they were going up to her apartment. I waited for an hour, sitting on the doorstep, then got too cold—blue fingernails, chattering teeth—and went home. He never even knew I knew.

I had a new persona, not of my choosing. I was Average Dumb Woman Married to Average Shitty Man. He had single-handedly de-amazed Amazing Amy.

I know women whose entire personas are woven from a benign mediocrity. Their lives are a list of shortcomings: the unappreciative boyfriend, the extra ten pounds, the dismissive boss, the conniving

sister, the straying husband. I've always hovered above their stories, nodding in sympathy and thinking how foolish they are, these women, to let these things happen, how undisciplined. And now to be one of them! One of the women with the endless stories that make people nod sympathetically and think: *Poor dumb bitch*.

I could hear the tale, how everyone would love telling it: how Amazing Amy, the girl who never did wrong, let herself be dragged, penniless, to the middle of the country, where her husband threw her over for a younger woman. How predictable, how perfectly average, how amusing. And her husband? He ended up happier than ever. No. I couldn't allow that. No. Never. Never. He doesn't get to do this to me and still fucking win. No.

I changed *my name* for that piece of shit. Historical records have been *altered*—Amy Elliott to Amy Dunne—like it's nothing. No, he does *not* get to win.

So I began to think of a different story, a better story, that would destroy Nick for doing this to me. A story that would restore my perfection. It would make me the hero, flawless and adored.

Because everyone loves the Dead Girl.

It's rather extreme, framing your husband for your murder. I want you to know I know that. All the tut-tutters out there will say: *She should have just left, bundled up what remained of her dignity. Take the high road! Two wrongs don't make a right!* All those things that spineless women say, confusing their weakness with morality.

I won't divorce him because that's exactly what he'd like. And I won't forgive him because I don't feel like *turning the other cheek*. Can I make it any more clear? I won't find that a satisfactory ending. The bad guy wins? Fuck him.

For over a year now, I've smelled her twat on his fingertips as he slipped into bed next to me. I've watched him ogle himself in the mirror, grooming himself like a horny baboon for their dates. I've listened to his lies, lies, lies—from simplistic child's fibs to elaborate Rube Goldbergian contraptions. I've tasted butterscotch on his dry-kiss lips, a cloying flavor that was never there before. I've felt the stubble on his cheeks that he knows I don't like but apparently she does. I've suffered betrayal with all five senses. For over a year.

So I may have gone a bit mad. I do know that framing your husband for your murder is beyond the pale of what an average woman might do.

But it's so very *necessary*. Nick must be taught a lesson. He's *never* been taught a lesson! He glides through life with that charming-Nicky grin, his beloved-child entitlement, his fibs and shirkings, his shortcomings and selfishness, and no one calls him on *anything*. I think this experience will make him a better person. Or at least a sorrier one. Fucker.

I've always thought I could commit the perfect murder. People who get caught get caught because they don't have patience; they refuse to plan. I smile again as I shift my crappy getaway car into fifth gear (Carthage now seventy-eight miles in the dust) and brace myself for a speeding truck—the car seems ready to take flight every time a semi passes. But I do smile, because this car shows just how smart I am: purchased for twelve hundred dollars cash from a Craigslist posting. Five months ago, so the memory wouldn't be fresh in anyone's mind. A 1992 Ford Festiva, the tiniest, most forgettable car in the world. I met the sellers at night, in the parking lot of a Walmart in Jonesboro, Arkansas. I took the train down with a bundle of cash in my purse—eight hours each way, while Nick was on a boys' trip. (And by *boys' trip*, I mean *fucking the slut*.) I ate in the train's dining car, a clump of lettuce with two cherry tomatoes that the menu described as a salad. I was seated with a melancholy farmer returning home after visiting his baby granddaughter for the first time.

The couple selling the Ford seemed as interested in discretion as I. The woman remained in the car the whole time, a pacified toddler in her arms, watching her husband and me trade cash for keys. (That is the correct grammar, you know: her husband and me.) Then she got out and I got in. That quick. In the rearview mirror, I saw the couple strolling into Walmart with their money. I've been parking it in long-term lots in St. Louis. I go down twice a month and park it somewhere new. Pay cash. Wear a baseball cap. Easy enough.

So that's just an example. Of patience, planning, and ingenuity. I am pleased with myself; I have three hours more until I reach the thick of the Missouri Ozarks and my destination, a small archipelago of cabins in the woods that accepts cash for weekly rentals and has cable TV, a must. I plan to hole up there the first week or two; I don't

want to be on the road when the news hits, and it's the last place Nick would think I'd hide once he realizes I'm hiding.

This stretch of highway is particularly ugly. Middle-America blight. After another twenty miles, I see, up on the off-ramp, the remains of a lonesome family gas station, vacant but not boarded up, and when I pull to the side, I see the women's restroom door swung wide. I enter—no electricity, but there's a warped metal mirror and the water is still on. In the afternoon sunlight and the sauna heat, I remove from my purse a pair of metal scissors and bunny-brown hair dye. I shear off large chunks of my hair. All the blond goes into a plastic bag. Air hits the back of my neck, and my head feels light, like a balloon—I roll it around a few times to enjoy. I apply the color, check my watch, and linger in the doorway, looking out over miles of flatland pocked with fast-food restaurants and motel chains. I can feel an Indian crying. (Nick would hate that joke. Derivative! And then he'd add, "although the word *derivative* as a criticism is itself derivative." I've got to get him out of my head—he still steps on my lines from a hundred miles away.) I wash my hair in the sink, the warm water making me sweat, and then back in the car with my bag of hair and trash. I put on a pair of outdated wire-rim glasses and look in the rearview mirror and smile again. Nick and I would never have married if I had looked like this when we met. All this could have been avoided if I were less pretty.

Item 34: Change look. Check.

I'm not sure, exactly, how to be Dead Amy. I'm trying to figure out what that means for me, what I become for the next few months. Anyone, I suppose, except people I've already been: Amazing Amy. Preppy '80s Girl. Ultimate-Frisbee Granola and Blushing Ingenue and Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate. Brainy Ironic Girl and Boho Babe (the latest version of Frisbee Granola). Cool Girl and Loved Wife and Unloved Wife and Vengeful Scorned Wife. Diary Amy.

I hope you liked Diary Amy. She was meant to be likable. Meant for someone like you to like her. She's *easy* to like. I've never understood why that's considered a compliment—that just anyone could like you. No matter. I thought the entries turned out nicely, and it wasn't simple. I had to maintain an affable if somewhat naive persona, a woman who loved her husband and could see some of his flaws (otherwise she'd be too much of a sap) but was sincerely devoted to

him—all the while leading the reader (in this case, the cops, I am so eager for them to find it) toward the conclusion that Nick was indeed planning to kill me. So many clues to unpack, so many surprises ahead!

Nick always mocked my endless lists. (“It’s like you make sure you’re never satisfied, that there’s always something else to be perfected, instead of just enjoying the moment.”) But who wins here? I win, because my list, the master list entitled *Fuck Nick Dunne*, was exacting—it was the most complete, fastidious list that has ever been created. On my list was *Write Diary Entries for 2005 to 2012*. Seven years of diary entries, not every day, but twice monthly, at least. Do you know how much discipline that takes? Would Cool Girl Amy be able to do that? To research each week’s current events, to cross-consult with my old daily planners to make sure I forgot nothing important, then to reconstruct how Diary Amy would react to each event? It was fun, mostly. I’d wait for Nick to leave for The Bar, or to go meet his mistress, the ever-texting, gum-chewing, vapid mistress with her acrylic nails and the sweatpants with logos across the butt (she isn’t like this, exactly, but she might as well be), and I’d pour some coffee or open a bottle of wine, pick one of my thirty-two different pens, and rewrite my life a little.

It is true that I sometimes hated Nick less while I was doing this. A giddy Cool Girl perspective will do that. Sometimes Nick would come home, stinking of beer or of the hand sanitizer he wiped on his body post-mistress-coitus (never entirely erased the stink, though—she must have one rank pussy), and smile guiltily at me, be all sweet and hangdog with me, and I’d almost think: *I won’t go through with this*. And then I’d picture him with her, in her stripper thong, letting him degrade her because she was pretending to be Cool Girl, she was pretending to love blow jobs and football and getting *wasted*. And I’d think, *I am married to an imbecile. I’m married to a man who will always choose that, and when he gets bored with this dumb twat, he’ll just find another girl who is pretending to be that girl, and he’ll never have to do anything hard in his life*.

Resolve stiffened.

One hundred and fifty-two entries total, and I don’t think I ever lose her voice. I wrote her very carefully, Diary Amy. She is designed to appeal to the cops, to appeal to the public should portions be released.

They have to read this diary like it's some sort of Gothic tragedy. A wonderful, good-hearted woman—*whole life ahead of her, everything going for her*, whatever else they say about women who die—chooses the wrong mate and *pays the ultimate price*. They have to like me. Her.

My parents are worried, of course, but how can I feel sorry for them, since they made me this way and then deserted me? They never, ever fully appreciated the fact that they were earning money from my existence, that I should have been getting royalties. Then, after they siphoned off *my* money, my “feminist” parents let Nick bundle me off to Missouri like I was some piece of chattel, some mail-order bride, some property exchange. Gave me a fucking cuckoo clock to remember them by. *Thanks for thirty-six years of service!* They deserve to think I'm dead, because that's practically the state they consigned me to: no money, no home, no friends. They deserve to suffer too. If you can't take care of me while I'm alive, you have made me dead anyway. Just like Nick, who destroyed and rejected the real me a piece at a time—*you're too serious, Amy, you're too uptight, Amy, you overthink things, you analyze too much, you're no fun anymore, you make me feel useless, Amy, you make me feel bad, Amy*. He took away chunks of me with blasé swipes: my independence, my pride, my esteem. I gave, and he took and took. He Giving Treed me out of existence.

That whore, he picked that little whore over me. He killed my soul, which should be a crime. Actually, it is a crime. According to me, at least.

# NICK DUNNE

SEVEN DAYS GONE

I had to phone Tanner, my brand-new lawyer, mere hours after I'd hired him, and say the words that would make him regret taking my money: *I think my wife is framing me*. I couldn't see his face, but I could imagine it—the eye roll, the grimace, the weariness of a man who hears nothing but lies for a living.

“Well,” he finally said after a gaping pause, “I'll be there first thing tomorrow morning, and we will sort this out—everything on the table—and in the meantime, sit tight, okay? Go to sleep and sit tight.”

Go took his advice; she popped two sleeping pills and left me just before eleven, while I literally sat tight, in an angry ball on her couch. Every so often I'd go outside and glare at the woodshed, my hands on my hips, as if it were a predator I could scare off. I'm not sure what I thought I was accomplishing, but I couldn't stop myself. I could stay seated for five minutes, tops, before I'd have to go back outside and stare.

I had just come back inside when a knock rattled the back door. Fucking Christ. Not quite midnight. Cops would come to the front—right?—and reporters had yet to stake out Go's (this would change, in a matter of days, hours). I was standing, unnerved, undecided, in the living room when the banging came again, louder, and I cursed under my breath, tried to get myself angry instead of scared. *Deal with it, Dunne*.

I flung open the door. It was Andie. It was goddamn Andie, pretty as a picture, dressed up for the occasion, still not getting it—that she was going to put my neck right in the noose.

“Right in the noose, Andie.” I yanked her inside, and she stared at my hand on her arm. “You are going to put my neck right in the fucking noose.”

“I came to the back door,” she said. When I stared her down, she

didn't apologize, she steeled herself. I could literally see her features harden. "I needed to see you, Nick. I told you. I told you I had to see you or talk to you every day, and today you disappeared. Straight to voice mail, straight to voice mail, straight to voice mail."

"If you don't hear from me, it's because I can't talk, Andie. Jesus, I was in New York, getting a lawyer. He'll be here first thing tomorrow."

"You got a lawyer. That was what kept you so busy that you couldn't call me for ten seconds?"

I wanted to smack her. I took a breath. I had to cut things off with Andie. It wasn't just Tanner's warning I had in mind. My wife knew me: She knew I'd do almost anything to avoid dealing with confrontation. Amy was depending on me to be stupid, to let the relationship linger—and to ultimately be caught. I had to end it. But I had to do it perfectly. *Make her believe that this was the decent thing.*

"He's actually given me some important advice," I began. "Advice I can't ignore."

I'd been so sweet and doting just last night, at my mandatory meeting in our pretend fort. I'd made so many promises, trying to calm her down. She wouldn't see this coming. She wouldn't take this well.

"Advice? Good. Is it to stop being such an asshole to me?"

I felt the rage rise up; that this was already turning into a high school fight. A thirty-four-year-old man in the middle of the worst night of my life, and I was having a *meet me by the lockers!* squabble with a pissed-off girl. I shook her once, hard, a tiny droplet of spit landing on her lower lip.

"I— You don't get it, Andie. This isn't some joke, this is my life."

"I just ... I need you," she said, looking down at her hands. "I know I keep saying that, but I do. I can't do it, Nick. I can't go on like this. I'm falling apart. I'm so scared all the time."

*She* was scared. I pictured the police knocking, and here I was with a girl I'd been fucking the morning my wife went missing. I'd sought her out that day—I had never gone to her apartment since that first night, but I went right there that morning, because I'd spent hours

with my heart pounding behind my ears, trying to get myself to say the words to Amy: *I want a divorce. I am in love with someone else. We have to end. I can't pretend to love you, I can't do the anniversary thing—it would actually be more wrong than cheating on you in the first place.* (I know: debatable.) But while I was gathering the guts, Amy had preempted me with her speech about still loving me (lying bitch!), and I lost my nerve. I felt like the ultimate cheat and coward, and—the catch-22—I craved Andie to make me feel better.

But Andie was no longer the antidote to my nerves. Quite the opposite.

The girl was wrapping herself around me even now, oblivious as a weed.

“Look, Andie,” I said, a big exhale, not letting her sit down, keeping her near the door. “You are such a special person to me. You’ve handled all this so amazingly well—” *Make her want to keep you safe.*

“I mean ...” Her voice wavered. “I feel so sorry, for Amy. Which is insane. I know I don’t even have a right to feel sad for her, or worried. And on top of feeling sad, I feel so guilty.” She leaned her head against my chest. I retreated, held her at arm’s length so she had to look at me.

“Well, that’s one thing I think we can fix. I think we need to fix,” I said, pulling up Tanner’s exact words.

“We should go to the police,” she said. “I’m your alibi for that morning, we’ll just tell them.”

“You’re my alibi for about an hour that morning,” I said. “No one saw or heard Amy after eleven P.M. the night before. The police can say I killed her before I saw you.”

“That’s disgusting.”

I shrugged. I thought, for a second, about telling her about Amy—*my wife is framing me*—and quickly dismissed it. Andie couldn’t play the game on Amy’s level. She’d want to be my teammate, and she’d drag me down. Andie would be a liability going forward. I put my hands on her arms again, relaunched my speech.

“Look, Andie, we are both under an amazing amount of stress and pressure, and a lot of it is brought on by our feelings of guilt. Andie,

the thing is, we are good people. We were attracted to each other, I think, because we both have similar values. Of treating people right, of doing the right thing. And right now we know what we are doing is wrong.”

Her broken, hopeful expression changed—the wet eyes, the gentle touch, they disappeared: a weird flicker, a window shade pulled down, something darker in her face.

“We need to end this, Andie. I think we both know that. It’s so hard, but it’s the decent thing to do. I think it’s the advice we’d give ourselves if we could think straight. As much as I love you, I am still married to Amy. I have to do the right thing.”

“And if she’s found?” She didn’t say *dead or alive*.

“That’s something we can discuss then.”

“Then! And until then, what?”

I shrugged helplessly: *Until then, nothing*.

“What, Nick? I fuck off until then?”

“That’s an ugly choice of words.”

“But that’s what you mean.” She smirked.

“I’m sorry, Andie. I don’t think it’s right for me to be with you right now. It’s dangerous for you, it’s dangerous for me. It doesn’t sit well with my conscience. It’s just how I feel.”

“Yeah? You know how I feel?” Her eyes burst over, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I feel like a dumb college girl that you started fucking because you were bored with your wife and I made it extremely convenient for you. You could go home to Amy and eat dinner with her and play around in your little bar that you bought with her money, and then you could meet me at your dying dad’s house and jack off on my tits because, poor you, your mean wife would never let you do that.”

“Andie, you know that’s not—”

“What a shit you are. What kind of man are you?”

“Andie, please.” *Contain this, Nick*. “I think because you haven’t been able to talk about this stuff, everything has gotten a little bigger in your mind, a little—”

“Fuck you. You think I’m some dumb kid, some pathetic student you can *manage*? I stick by you through all this—this talk about how you might be a *murderer*—and as soon as it’s a little tough for you? No, *no*. You don’t get to talk about conscience and decency and guilt and feel like you are doing the right thing. Do you understand me? Because you are a cheating, cowardly, selfish *shit*.”

She turned away from me, sobbing, sucking in loud gulps of moist air, and breathing out mewls, and I tried to stop her, I grabbed her by the arm. “Andie, this isn’t how I want to—”

“Hands off me! Hands off me!”

She moved toward the back door, and I could see what would happen, the hatred and embarrassment coming off her like heat, I knew she’d open a bottle of wine, or two, and then she’d tell a friend, or her mother, and it would spread like an infection.

I moved in front of her, barring her way to the door—*Andie, please*—and she reached up to slap me, and I grabbed her arm, just for defense. Our joined arms moved up and down and up and down like crazed dance partners.

“Let me go, Nick, or I swear ...”

“Just stay for a minute. Just listen to me.”

“You, let me go!”

She moved her face toward mine like she was going to kiss me. She bit me. I jerked back and she shot out the door.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

FIVE DAYS GONE

You may call me Ozark Amy. I am ensconced in the Hide-A-Way Cabins (has ever there been a more apt name?), and I sit quietly, watching all the levers and latches I put in place do their work.

I have shed myself of Nick, and yet I think about him more than ever. Last night at 10:04 P.M. my disposable cell phone rang. (That's right, Nick, you're not the only one who knows the old "secret cell phone" trick.) It was the alarm company. I didn't answer, of course, but now I know Nick has made it as far as his dad's house. Clue 3. I changed the code two weeks before I disappeared and listed my secret cell as the first number to call. I can picture Nick, my clue in hand, entering his dad's dusty, stale house, fumbling with the alarm code ... then the time runs out. Beep beep beeeep! His cell is listed as the backup if I can't be reached (and I obviously can't).

So he tripped the alarm, and he talked to someone at the alarm company, and so he's on record as being in his dad's house after my disappearance. Which is good for the plan. It's not foolproof, but it doesn't have to be foolproof. I've already left enough for the police to make a case against Nick: the staged scene, the mopped-up blood, the credit-card bills. All these will be found by even the most incompetent police departments. Noelle will spill my pregnancy news very soon (if she hasn't already). It is enough, especially once the police discover Able Andie (able to suck cock on command). So all these extras, they're just bonus fuck-yous. Amusing booby traps. I love that I am a woman with booby traps.

*Ellen Abbott* is part of my plan too. The biggest cable crime-news show in the country. I adore Ellen Abbott, I love how protective and maternal she gets about all the missing women on her show, and how rabid-dog vicious she is once she seizes on a suspect, usually the husband. She is America's voice of female righteousness. Which is why I'd really like her to take on my story. The Public must turn against Nick. It's as much a part of his punishment as prison, for

darling Nicky—who spends so much time worrying about people liking him—to know he is universally hated. And I need Ellen to keep me apprised of the investigation. Have the police found my diary yet? Do they know about Andie? Have they discovered the bumped-up life insurance? This is the hardest part: waiting for stupid people to figure things out.

I flip on the TV in my little room once an hour, eager to see if Ellen has picked up my story. She has to, I can't see how she could resist. I am pretty, Nick is pretty, and I have the *Amazing Amy* hook. Just before noon, she flares up, promising a special report. I stay tuned, glaring at the TV: Hurry up, Ellen. Or: Hurry up, *Ellen*. We have that in common: We are both people and entities. Amy and *Amy*, Ellen and *Ellen*.

Tampon commercial, detergent commercial, maxipad commercial, Windex commercial. You'd think all women do is clean and bleed.

And finally! There I am! My debut!

I know from the second Ellen shows up, glowering like Elvis, that this is going to be good. A few gorgeous photos of me, a still shot of Nick with his insane *love me!* grin from the first press conference. News: There has been a fruitless multi-site search for “the beautiful young woman with everything going for her.” News: Nick fucked himself already. Taking candid photos with a townie during a search for me. This is clearly what hooked Ellen, because she is *pissed*. There he is, Nick in his sweetie-pie mode, the *I am the beloved of all women* mode, his face pressed against the strange woman's, as if they're happy-hour buddies.

What an idiot. I love it.

Ellen Abbott is making much of the fact that our backyard leads right to the Mississippi River. I wonder then if it has been leaked—the search history on Nick's computer, which I made sure includes a study on the locks and dams of the Mississippi, as well as a Google search of the words *body float Mississippi River*. Not to put too fine a point on it. It could happen—possibly, unlikely, but there is precedent—that the river might sweep my body all the way to the ocean. I've actually felt sad for myself, picturing my slim, naked, pale body, floating just beneath the current, a colony of snails attached to one bare leg, my hair trailing like seaweed until I reach the ocean and drift down down

down to the bottom, my waterlogged flesh peeling off in soft streaks, me slowly disappearing into the current like a watercolor until just the bones are left.

But I'm a romantic. In real life, if Nick had killed me, I think he would have just rolled my body into a trash bag and driven me to one of the landfills in the sixty-mile radius. Just dispose of me. He'd have even taken a few items with him—the broken toaster that's not worth fixing, a pile of old VHS tapes he's been meaning to toss—to make the trip efficient.

I'm learning to live fairly efficiently myself. A girl has to budget when she's dead. I had time to plan, to stockpile some cash: I gave myself a good twelve months between deciding to disappear and disappearing. That's why most people get caught in murders: They don't have the discipline to wait. I have \$10,200 in cash. If I'd cleared out \$10,200 in a month, that would have been noticed. But I collected cash forwards from credit cards I took out in Nick's name—the cards that would make him look like a greedy little cheat—and I siphoned off another \$4,400 from our bank accounts over the months: withdrawals of \$200 or \$300, nothing to attract attention. I stole from Nick, from his pockets, \$20 here, \$10 there, a slow deliberate stockpile—it's like that budgeting plan where you put the money you'd spend on your morning Starbucks into a jar, and at the end of the year you have \$1,500. And I'd always steal from the tip jar when I went to The Bar. I'm sure Nick blamed Go, and Go blamed Nick, and neither of them said anything because they felt too sorry for the other.

But I am careful with money, my point. I have enough to live on until I kill myself. I'm going to hide out long enough to watch Lance Nicholas Dunne become a worldwide pariah, to watch Nick be arrested, tried, marched off to prison, bewildered in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. To watch Nick squirm and sweat and swear he is innocent and still be stuck. Then I will travel south along the river, where I will meet up with my body, my pretend floating Other Amy body in the Gulf of Mexico. I will sign up for a booze cruise—something to get me out into the deep end but nothing requiring identification. I will drink a giant ice-wet shaker of gin, and I will swallow sleeping pills, and when no one is looking, I'll drop silently over the side, my pockets full of Virginia Woolf rocks. It requires discipline, to drown oneself, but I have discipline in spades. My body

may never be discovered, or it may resurface weeks, months, later—eroded to the point that my death can't be time-stamped—and I will provide a last bit of evidence to make sure Nick is marched to the padded cross, the prison table where he'll be pumped with poison and die.

I'd like to wait around and see him dead, but given the state of our justice system, that may take years, and I have neither the money nor the stamina. I'm ready to join the Hopes.

I did veer from my budget a bit already. I spent about \$500 on items to nice-up my cabin—good sheets, a decent lamp, towels that don't stand up by themselves from years of bleaching. But I try to accept what I'm offered. There's a man a few cabins away, a taciturn fellow, a hippie dropout of the Grizzly Adams, homemade-granola variety—full beard and turquoise rings and a guitar he plays on his back deck some nights. His name, he says, is Jeff, just like my name, I say, is Lydia. We smile only in passing, but he brings me fish. A couple of times now, he brings a fish by, freshly stinking but scaled and headless, and presents it to me in a giant icy freezer bag. “Fresh fish!” he says, knocking, and if I don't open the door immediately, he disappears, leaving the bag on my front doorstep. I cook the fish in a decent skillet I bought at yet another Walmart, and it's not bad, and it's free.

“Where do you get all the fish?” I ask him.

“At the getting place,” he says.

Dorothy, who works the front desk and has already taken a liking to me, brings tomatoes from her garden. I eat the tomatoes that smell like the earth and the fish that smells like the lake. I think that by next year, Nick will be locked away in a place that smells only of the inside. Fabricated odors: deodorant and old shoes and starchy foods, stale mattresses. His worst fear, his own personal panic dream: He finds himself in jail, realizing he did nothing wrong but unable to prove it. Nick's nightmares have always been about being wronged, about being trapped, a victim of forces beyond his control.

He always gets up after these dreams, paces around the house, then puts on clothes and goes outside, wanders along the roads near our house, into a park—a Missouri park, a New York park—going wherever he wants. He is a man of the outdoors, if he is not exactly

outdoorsy. He's not a hiker, a camper, he doesn't know how to make fires. He wouldn't know how to catch fish and present them to me. But he likes the option, he likes the choice. He wants to know he can go outside, even if he chooses instead to sit on the couch and watch cage fighting for three hours.

I do wonder about the little slut. Andie. I thought she'd last exactly three days. Then she wouldn't be able to resist *sharing*. I know she likes to share because I'm one of her friends on Facebook—my profile name is invented (Madeleine Elster, ha!), my photo is stolen from a popup ad for mortgages (blond, smiling, benefiting from historically low interest rates). Four months ago, Madeleine randomly asked to be Andie's friend, and Andie, like a hapless puppy, accepted, so I know the little girl fairly well, along with all her minutiae-enthralled friends, who take many naps and love Greek yogurt and pinot grigio and enjoy sharing that with one another. Andie is a good girl, meaning she doesn't post photos of herself "partying," and she never posts lascivious messages. Which is unfortunate. When she's exposed as Nick's girlfriend, I'd prefer the media find photos of her doing shots or kissing girls or flashing her thong; this would more easily cement her as the homewrecker she is.

Homewrecker. My home was disheveled but not yet wrecked when she first started kissing my husband, reaching inside his trousers, slipping into bed with him. Taking his cock in her mouth, all the way to the root so he feels extra big as she gags. Taking it in her ass, deep. Taking cum shots to the face and tits, then licking it off, *yum*. Taking, definitely taking. Her type would. They've been together for over a year. Every holiday. I went through his credit-card statements (the real ones) to see what he got her for Christmas, but he's been shockingly careful. I wonder what it feels like to be a woman whose Christmas present must be bought in cash. Liberating. Being an undocumented girl means being the girl who doesn't have to call the plumber or listen to gripes about work or remind and remind him to pick up some goddamn cat food.

I need her to break. I need 1) Noelle to tell someone about my pregnancy; 2) the police to find the diary; 3) Andie to tell someone about the affair. I suppose I had her stereotyped—that a girl who posts updates on her life five times a day for anyone to see would have no real understanding of what a secret is. She's made occasional

grazing mentions of my husband online:

Saw Mr. Hunky today.

(Oh, do tell!)

(When do we get to meet this stud?)

(Bridget likes this!)

A kiss from a dreamy guy makes everything better.

(Too true!)

(When do we get to meet Dreamy?!)

(Bridget likes this!)

But she's been surprisingly discreet for a girl of her generation. She's a good girl (for a cunt). I can picture her, that heart-shaped face tilted to one side, the gently furrowed brow. *I just want you to know I'm on your side, Nick. I'm here for you.* Probably baked him cookies.

The *Ellen Abbott* cameras are now panning the Volunteer Center, which looks a little shabby. A correspondent is talking about how my disappearance has "rocked this tiny town," and behind her, I can see a table lined with homemade casseroles and cakes for poor Nicky. Even now the asshole has women taking care of him. Desperate women spotting an opening. A good-looking, vulnerable man—and fine, he may have killed his wife, but we don't *know* that. Not for sure. For now it's a relief just to have a man to cook for, the fortysomething equivalent of driving your bike past the cute boy's house.

They are showing Nick's grinning cell-phone photo again. I can picture the townie slut in her lonely, glistening kitchen—a trophy kitchen bought with alimony money—mixing and baking while having an imaginary conversation with Nick: *No, I'm forty-three, actually. No, really, I am! No, I don't have men swarming all over me, I really don't, the men in town aren't that interesting, most of them ...*

I get a burst of jealousy toward that woman with her cheek against my husband's. She is prettier than me as I am now. I eat Hershey bars and float in the pool for hours under a hot sun, the chlorine turning my flesh rubbery as a seal's. I'm tan, which I've never been before—at least not a dark, proud, deep tan. A tanned skin is a damaged skin, and no one likes a wrinkled girl; I spent my life slick with SPF. But I let myself darken a bit before I disappeared, and now, five days in,

I'm on my way to brown. "Brown as a berry!" old Dorothy, the manager, says. "You are brown as a berry, girl!" she says with delight when I come in to pay next week's rent in cash.

I have dark skin, my mouse-colored helmet cut, the smart-girl glasses. I gained twelve pounds in the months before my disappearance—carefully hidden in roomy sundresses, not that my inattentive husband would notice—and already another two pounds since. I was careful to have no photos taken of me in the months before I disappeared, so the public will know only pale, thin Amy. I am definitely not that anymore. I can feel my bottom move sometimes, on its own, when I walk. A wiggle and a jiggle, wasn't that some old saying? I never had either before. My body was a beautiful, perfect economy, every feature calibrated, everything in balance. I don't miss it. I don't miss men looking at me. It's a relief to walk into a convenience store and walk right back out without some hangabout in sleeveless flannel leering as I leave, some muttered bit of misogyny slipping from him like a nacho-cheese burp. Now no one is rude to me, but no one is nice to me either. No one goes out of their way, not overly, not really, not the way they used to.

I am the opposite of Amy.

# NICK DUNNE

EIGHT DAYS GONE

As the sun came up, I held an ice cube to my cheek. Hours later, and I could still feel the bite: two little staple-shaped creases. I couldn't go after Andie—a worse risk than her wrath—so I finally phoned her. Voice mail.

*Contain, this must be contained.*

“Andie, I am so sorry, I don't know what to do, I don't know what's going on. Please forgive me. Please.”

I shouldn't have left a voice mail, but then I thought: *She may have hundreds of my voice mails saved, for all I know.* Good God, if she played a hit list of the raunchiest, nastiest, smittenist ... any woman on any jury would send me away just for that. It's one thing to know I'm a cheat and another to hear my heavy teacher voice telling a young co-ed about my giant, hard—

I blushed in the dawn light. The ice cube melted.

I sat on Go's front steps, began phoning Andie every ten minutes, got nothing. I was sleepless, my nerves barbwired, when Boney pulled into the driveway at 6:12 A.M. I said nothing as she walked toward me, bearing two Styrofoam cups.

“Hey, Nick, I brought you some coffee. Just came over to check on you.”

“I bet.”

“I know you're probably reeling. From the news about the pregnancy. She made an elaborate show of pouring two creamers into my coffee, the way I like it, and handed it to me. “What's that?” she said, pointing to my cheek.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Nick, what is wrong with your face? There's a giant pink ...” She leaned in closer, grabbed my chin. “It's like a bite mark.”

“It must be hives. I get hives when I’m stressed.”

“Mm-hmmm.” She stirred her coffee. “You do know I’m on your side, right, Nick?”

“Right.”

“I am. Truly. I wish you’d trust me. I just—I’m getting to the point where I won’t be able to help you if you don’t trust me. I know that sounds like a cop line, but it’s the truth.”

We sat in a strange semi-companionable silence, sipping coffee.

“Hey, so I wanted you to know before you hear it anywhere,” she said brightly. “We found Amy’s purse.”

“What?”

“Yep, no cash left, but her ID, cell phone. In Hannibal, of all places. On the banks of the river, south of the steamboat landing. Our guess: Someone wanted to make it look like it’d been tossed in the river by the perp on the way out of town, heading over the bridge into Illinois.”

*“Make it look like?”*

“It had never been fully submerged. There are fingerprints still at the top, near the zipper. Now sometimes fingerprints can hold on even in water, but ... I’ll spare you the science, I’ll just say, the theory is, this purse was kinda settled on the banks to make sure it was found.”

“Sounds like you’re telling me this for a reason,” I said.

“The fingerprints we found were yours, Nick. Which isn’t that crazy—men get into their wives’ purses all the time. But still—” She laughed as if she got a great idea. “I gotta ask: You haven’t been to Hannibal recently, have you?”

She said it with such casual confidence, I had a flash: a police tracker hidden somewhere in the undercarriage of my car, released to me the morning I went to Hannibal.

“Why, exactly, would I go to Hannibal to get rid of my wife’s purse?”

“Say you’d killed your wife and staged the crime scene in your home, trying to get us to think she was attacked by an outsider. But then you realized we were beginning to suspect you, so you wanted to

plant something to get us to look outside again. That's the theory. But at this point, some of my guys are so sure you did it, they'd find any theory that fit. So let me help you: You in Hannibal lately?"

I shook my head. "You need to talk to my lawyer. Tanner Bolt."

"*Tanner Bolt?* You sure that's the way you want to go, Nick? I feel like we've been pretty fair with you so far, pretty open. Bolt, he's a ... he's a last-ditch guy. He's the guy guilty people call in."

"Huh. Well, I'm clearly your lead suspect, Rhonda. I have to look out for myself."

"Let's all get together when he gets in, okay? Talk this through."

"Definitely—that's our plan."

"A man with a plan," Boney said. "I'll look forward to it." She stood up, and as she walked away, she called back: "Witch hazel's good for hives."

An hour later, the doorbell rang, and Tanner Bolt stood there in a baby-blue suit, and something told me it was the look he wore when he went "down South." He was inspecting the neighborhood, eyeing the cars in the driveways, assessing the houses. He reminded me of the Elliots, in a way—examining and analyzing at all times. A brain with no off switch.

"Show me," Tanner said before I could greet him. "Point me toward the shed—do not come with me, and do not go near it again. Then you'll tell me everything."

We settled down at the kitchen table—me, Tanner, and a just-woken Go, huddling over her first cup of coffee. I spread out all of Amy's clues like some awful tarot-card reader.

Tanner leaned toward me, his neck muscles tense. "Okay, Nick, make your case," he said. "Your wife orchestrated this whole thing. Make the case!" He jabbed his index finger on the table. "Because I'm not moving forward with my dick in one hand and a wild story about a frame-up in the other. Unless you convince me. Unless it works."

I took a deep breath and gathered my thoughts. I was always better at writing than talking. "Before we start," I said, "you have to understand one very key thing about Amy: She is fucking brilliant. Her brain is so busy, it never works on just one level. She's like this

endless archaeological dig: You think you've reached the final layer, and then you bring down your pick one more time, and you break through to a whole new mine shaft beneath. With a maze of tunnels and bottomless pits."

"Fine," Tanner said. "So ..."

"The second thing you need to know about Amy is, she is righteous. She is one of those people who is never wrong, and she loves to teach lessons, dole out punishment."

"Right, fine, so ..."

"Let me tell you a story, one quick story. About three years ago, we were driving up to Massachusetts. It was awful, road-rage traffic, and this trucker flipped Amy off—she wouldn't let him in—and then he zoomed up and cut her off. Nothing dangerous, but really scary for a second. You know those signs on the back of trucks: *How Am I Driving?* She had me call and give them the license plate. I thought that was the end of it. Two months later—two *months* later—I walked into our bedroom, and Amy was on the phone, repeating that license plate. She had a whole story: She was traveling with her two-year-old, and the driver had nearly run her off the road. She said it was her fourth call. She said she'd even researched the company's routes so she could pick the correct highways for her fake near-accidents. She thought of everything. She was really proud. She was going to get that guy fired."

"Jesus, Nick," Go muttered.

"That's a very ... enlightening story, Nick," Tanner said.

"It's just an example."

"So, now, help me put this all together," he said. "Amy finds out you're cheating. She fakes her death. She makes the supposed crime scene look just fishy enough to raise eyebrows. She's screwed you over with the credit cards and the life insurance and your little man-cave situation out back ..."

"She picks an argument with me the night before she goes missing, and she does it standing near an open window so our neighbor will hear."

"What was the argument?"

“I am a selfish asshole. Basically, the same one we always have. What our neighbor doesn’t hear is Amy apologizing later—because Amy doesn’t want her to hear that. I mean, I remember being astonished, because it was the quickest makeup we’ve ever had. By the morning she was freakin’ making me crepes, for crying out loud.”

I saw her again at the stove, licking powdered sugar off her thumb, humming to herself, and I pictured me, walking over to her and shaking her until—

“Okay, and the treasure hunt?” Tanner said. “What’s the theory there?”

Each clue was unfolded on the table. Tanner picked up a few and let them drop.

“Those are all just bonus fuck-yous,” I said. “I know my wife, believe me. She knew she had to do a treasure hunt or it would look fishy. So she does it, and of course it has eighteen different meanings. Look at the first clue.”

*I picture myself as your student,  
With a teacher so handsome and wise  
My mind opens up (not to mention my thighs!)  
If I were your pupil, there’d be no need for flowers  
Maybe just a naughty appointment during your office hours  
So hurry up, get going, please do  
And this time I’ll teach you a thing or two.*

“It’s pure Amy. I read this, I think: *Hey, my wife is flirting with me.* No. She’s actually referring to my ... infidelity with Andie. Fuck-you number one. So I go there, to my office, with Gilpin, and what’s waiting for me? A pair of women’s underwear. Not even close to Amy’s size—the cops kept asking everyone what size Amy wore, I couldn’t figure out why.”

“But Amy had no way of knowing Gilpin would be with you.” Tanner frowned.

“It’s a damn good bet,” Go interrupted. “Clue One was part of the *actual crime scene*—so the cops would know about it—and she has the words *office hours* right in it. It’s logical they’d go there, with or

without Nick.”

“So whose panties are they?” Tanner asked. Go squinched her nose at the word *panties*.

“Who knows?” I said. “I’d assumed they were Andie’s, but ... Amy probably just bought them. The main point is they’re not Amy’s size. They lead anyone to believe something inappropriate happened in my office with someone who is not my wife. Fuck-you number two.”

“And if the cops weren’t with you when you went to the office?” Tanner asked. “Or no one noticed the panties?”

“She doesn’t *care*, Tanner! This treasure hunt, it’s as much for her amusement as anything. She doesn’t need it. She’s overdone it all just to make sure there are a million damning little clues in circulation. Again, you’ve got to know my wife: She’s a belt-and-suspenders type.”

“Okay. Clue Two,” Tanner said.

*Picture me: I’m crazy about you*

*My future is anything but hazy with you*

*You took me here so I could hear you chat*

*About your boyhood adventures: crummy jeans and visor hat*

*Screw everyone else, for us they’re all ditched*

*And let’s sneak a kiss ... pretend we just got hitched.*

“This is Hannibal,” I said. “Amy and I visited there once, so that’s how I read it, but it’s also another place where I had ... relations with Andie.”

“And you didn’t get a red flag?” Tanner said.

“No, not yet, I was too moony about the notes Amy had written me. God, the girl knows me cold. She knows exactly what I want to hear. You are *brilliant*. You are *witty*. And how fun for her to know that she could fuck with my head like that *still*. Long-distance, even. I mean, I was ... Christ, I was practically falling in love with her again.”

My throat hitched for a moment. The goofy story about her friend Insley’s half-dressed, disgusting baby. Amy knew that was what I had loved most about us back when I loved us: not the big moments, not the Romantic with capital-R moments, but our secret inside jokes. And now she was using them all against me.

“And guess what?” I said. “They just found Amy’s purse in Hannibal. I’m sure as hell someone can place me there. Hell, I paid for my tour ticket with my credit card. So again, here is this piece of evidence, and Amy making sure I can be linked to it.”

“What if no one found the purse?” Tanner asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Go said. “She’s keeping Nick running in circles, she’s amusing herself. I’m sure she was happy just knowing what a guilt trip it must be for Nick to be reading all these sweet notes when he knows he’s a cheat and she’s gone missing.”

I tried not to wince at her disgusted tone: *cheat*.

“What if Gilpin were still with Nick when he went to Hannibal?” Tanner persisted. “What if Gilpin were with Nick the whole time, so he knew that Nick didn’t plant the purse then?”

“Amy knows me well enough to know I’d ditch Gilpin. She knows I wouldn’t want a stranger watching me read this stuff, gauging my reactions.”

“Really? How do you know that?”

“I just do.” I shrugged. I knew, I just knew.

“Clue Three,” I said, and pushed it into Tanner’s hand.

*Maybe you feel guilty for bringing me here*

*I must admit it felt a bit queer*

*But it’s not like we had the choice of many a place*

*We made the decision: We made this our space.*

*Let’s take our love to this little brown house*

*Gimme some goodwill, you hot lovin’ spouse!*

“See, I misread this, thinking that *bringing me here* meant Carthage, but again, she’s referring to my father’s house, and—”

“It’s yet another place where you fucked this Andie girl,” Tanner said. He turned to my sister. “Pardon the vulgarity.”

Go gave a no-problem flick of her hand.

Tanner continued: “So, Nick. There are incriminating women’s panties in your office, where you fucked Andie, and there is Amy’s incriminating purse in Hannibal, where you fucked Andie, and there is

an incriminating treasure trove of secret credit-card purchases in the woodshed, where you fucked Andie.”

“Uh, yeah. Yes, that’s right.”

“So what’s at your dad’s house?”

## AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

SEVEN DAYS GONE

I'm pregnant! Thank you, Noelle Hawthorne, the world knows it now, you little idiot. In the day since she pulled her stunt at my vigil (I do wish she hadn't upstaged my vigil, though—ugly girls can be such thunder stealers), the hatred against Nick has ballooned. I wonder if he can breathe with all that fury building around him.

I knew the key to big-time coverage, round-the-clock, frantic, bloodlust never-ending *Ellen Abbott* coverage, would be the pregnancy. Amazing Amy is tempting as is. Amazing Amy knocked up is irresistible. Americans like what is easy, and it's easy to like pregnant women—they're like ducklings or bunnies or dogs. Still, it baffles me that these self-righteous, self-enthralled waddlers get such special treatment. As if it's so hard to spread your legs and let a man ejaculate between them.

You know what is hard? Faking a pregnancy.

Pay attention, because this is impressive. It started with my vacant-brained friend Noelle. The Midwest is full of these types of people: the nice-enoughs. Nice enough but with a soul made of plastic—easy to mold, easy to wipe down. The woman's entire music collection is formed from Pottery Barn compilations. Her bookshelves are stocked with coffee-table crap: *The Irish in America*. *Mizzou Football: A History in Pictures*. *We Remember 9/11*. *Something Dumb with Kittens*. I knew I needed a pliant friend for my plan, someone I could load up with awful stories about Nick, someone who would become overly attached to me, someone who'd be easy to manipulate, who wouldn't think too hard about anything I said because she felt privileged to hear it. Noelle was the obvious choice, and when she told me she was pregnant again—triplets weren't enough, apparently—I realized I could be pregnant too.

A search online: how to drain your toilet for repair.

Noelle invited for lemonade. Lots of lemonade.

Noelle peeing in my drained, unflushable toilet, each of us so terribly embarrassed!

Me, a small glass jar, the pee in my toilet going into the glass jar.

Me, a well-laid history of needle/blood phobia.

Me, the glass jar of pee hidden in my purse, a doctor's appointment (oh, I can't do a blood test, I have a total phobia of needles ... urine test, that'll do fine, thank you).

Me, a pregnancy on my medical record.

Me, running to Noelle with the good news.

Perfect. Nick gets another motive, I get to be sweet missing pregnant lady, my parents suffer even more, *Ellen Abbott* can't resist. Honestly, it was thrilling to be selected finally, officially for *Ellen* among all the hundreds of other cases. It's sort of like a talent competition: You do the best you can, and then it's out of your hands, it's up to the judges.

And, oh, does she hate Nick and love me. I wished my parents weren't getting such special treatment, though. I watch them on the news coverage, my mom thin and reedy, the cords in her neck like spindly tree branches, always flexed. I see my dad grown ruddy with fear, the eyes a little too wide, the smile squared. He's a handsome man, usually, but he's beginning to look like a caricature, a possessed clown doll. I know I should feel sorry for them, but I don't. I've never been more to them than a symbol anyway, the walking ideal. Amazing Amy in the flesh. Don't screw up, you are Amazing Amy. Our only one. There is an unfair responsibility that comes with being an only child—you grow up knowing you aren't allowed to disappoint, you're not even allowed to die. There isn't a replacement toddling around; you're it. It makes you desperate to be flawless, and it also makes you drunk with the power. In such ways are despots made.

This morning I stroll over to Dorothy's office to get a soda. It's a tiny wood-paneled room. The desk seems to have no purpose other than holding Dorothy's collection of snow globes from places that seem unworthy of commemoration: Gulf Shores, Alabama. Hilo, Arkansas. When I see the snow globes, I don't see paradise, I see overheated hillbillies with sunburns tugging along wailing, clumsy children,

smacking them with one hand, with the other clutching giant nonbiodegradable Styrofoam cups of warm corn-syrupy drinks.

Dorothy has one of those '70s kitten-in-a-tree posters—*Hang in There!* She posts her poster with all sincerity. I like to picture her running into some self-impressed Williamsburg bitch, all Bettie Page bangs and pointy glasses, who owns the same poster ironically. I'd like to listen to them try to negotiate each other. Ironic people always dissolve when confronted with earnestness, it's their kryptonite. Dorothy has another gem taped to the wall by the soda machine, showing a toddler asleep on the toilet—*Too Tired to Tinkle*. I've been thinking about stealing this one, a fingernail under the old yellow tape, while I distract-chat with Dorothy. I bet I could get some decent cash for it on eBay—I'd like to keep some cash coming in—but I can't do it, because that would create an *electronic trail*, and I've read plenty about those from my myriad true-crime books. Electronic trails are bad: Don't use a cell phone that's registered to you, because the cell towers can ping your location. Don't use your ATM or credit card. Use only public computers, well trafficked. Beware of the number of cameras that can be on any given street, especially near a bank or a busy intersection or bodegas. Not that there are any bodegas down here. There are no cameras either, in our cabin complex. I know—I asked Dorothy, pretending it was a safety issue.

“Our clients aren't exactly Big Brother types,” she said. “Not that they're criminals, but they don't usually like to be on the radar.”

No, they don't seem like they'd appreciate that. There's my friend Jeff, who keeps his odd hours and returns with suspicious amounts of undocumented fish that he stores in massive ice chests. He is literally fishy. At the far cabin is a couple who are probably in their forties, but meth-weathered, so they look at least sixty. They stay inside most of the time, aside from occasional wild-eyed treks to the laundry room—darting across the gravel parking lot with their clothes in trash bags, some sort of tweeky spring cleaning. Hellohello, they say, always twice with two head nods, then continue on their way. The man sometimes has a boa constrictor wrapped around his neck, though the snake is never acknowledged, by me or him. In addition to these regulars, a goodly amount of single women straggle through, usually with bruises. Some seem embarrassed, others horribly sad.

One moved in yesterday, a blond girl, very young, with brown eyes

and a split lip. She sat on her front porch—the cabin next to mine—smoking a cigarette, and when we caught each other’s eye, she sat up straight, proud, her chin juttied out. No apology in her. I thought: *I need to be like her. I will make a study of her: She is who I can be for a bit—the abused tough girl hiding out until the storm passes over.*

After a few hours of morning TV—scanning for any news on the Amy Elliott Dunne case—I slip into my clammy bikini. I’ll go to the pool. Float a bit, take a vacation from my harpy brain. The pregnancy news was gratifying, but there is still so much I don’t know. I planned so hard, but there are things beyond my control, spoiling my vision of how this should go. Andie hasn’t done her part. The diary may need some help being found. The police haven’t made a move to arrest Nick. I don’t know what they’ve all discovered, and I don’t like it. I’m tempted to make a call, a tip-line call, to nudge them in the right direction. I’ll wait a few more days. I have a calendar on my wall, and I mark three days from now with the words *CALL TODAY*. So I know that’s how long I’ve agreed to wait. Once they find the diary, things will move quickly.

Outside, it’s jungle-hot once again, the cicadas closing in. My inflatable raft is pink with mermaids on it and too small for me—my calves dangle in the water—but it keeps me floating aimlessly for a good hour, which is something I’ve learned “I” like to do.

I can see a blond head bobbing across the parking lot, and then the girl with the split lip comes through the chain-link gate with one of the bath towels from the cabins, no bigger than a tea towel, and a pack of Merits and a book and SPF 120. Lung cancer but not skin. She settles herself and applies the lotion carefully, which is different from the other beat-up women who come here—they slather themselves in baby oil, leave greasy shadows on the lawn chairs.

The girl nods to me, the nod men give each other when they sit down at a bar. She is reading *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury. A sci-fi girl. Abused women like escapism, of course.

“Good book,” I toss over to her, a harmless conversational beach ball.

“Someone left it in my cabin. It was this or *Black Beauty*.” She puts on fat, cheap sunglasses.

“Not bad either. *Black Stallion*’s better, though.”

She looks up at me with sunglasses still on. Two black bee-eyed discs. “Hunh.”

She turns back to her book, the pointed *I am now reading* gesture usually seen on crowded airplanes. And I am the annoying busybody next to her who hogs the armrest and says things like “Business or pleasure?”

“I’m Nancy,” I say. A new name—not Lydia—which isn’t smart in these cramped quarters, but it comes out. My brain sometimes goes too fast for my own good. I was thinking of the girl’s split lip, her sad, pre-owned vibe, and then I was thinking of abuse and prostitution, and then I was thinking of *Oliver!*, my favorite musical as a child, and the doomed hooker Nancy, who loved her violent man right until he killed her, and then I was wondering why my feminist mother and I ever watched *Oliver!*, considering “As Long as He Needs Me” is basically a lilting paean to domestic violence, and then I was thinking that Diary Amy was also killed by her man, she was actually a lot like —

“I’m Nancy,” I say.

“Greta.”

Sounds made up.

“Nice to meet you, Greta.”

I float away. Behind me I hear the shwick of Greta’s lighter, and then smoke wafts overhead like spindrifts.

Forty minutes later, Greta sits down on the edge of the pool, dangles her legs in the water. “It’s hot,” she says. “The water.” She has a husky, hardy voice, cigarettes and prairie dirt.

“Like bathwater.”

“It’s not very refreshing.”

“The lake’s not much cooler.”

“I can’t swim anyway,” she says.

I’ve never met anyone who can’t swim. “I can just barely,” I lie. “Dog paddle.”

She ruffles her legs, the waves gently rocking my raft. “So what’s it like here?” she asks.

“Nice. Quiet.”

“Good, that’s what I need.”

I turn to look at her. She has two gold necklaces, a perfectly round bruise the size of a plum near her left breast, and a shamrock tattoo just above her bikini line. Her swimsuit is brand-new, cherry-red, cheap. From the marina convenience store where I bought my raft.

“You on your own?” I ask.

“Very.”

I am unsure what to ask next. Is there some sort of code that abused women use with each other, a language I don’t know?

“Guy trouble?”

She twitches an eyebrow at me that seems to be a yes. “Me too,” I say.

“It’s not like we weren’t warned,” she says. She cups her hand into the water, lets it dribble down her front. “My mom, one of the first things she ever told me, going to school the first day: *Stay away from boys. They’ll either throw rocks or look up your skirt.*”

“You should make a T-shirt that says that.”

She laughs. “It’s true, though. It’s always true. My mom lives in a lesbian village down in Texas. I keep thinking I should join her. Everyone seems happy there.”

“A lesbian village?”

“Like a, a whaddayacallit. A commune. Bunch of lesbians bought land, started their own society, sort of. No men allowed. Sounds just freakin’ great to me, world without men.” She cups another handful of water, pulls up her sunglasses, and wets her face. “Too bad I don’t like pussy.”

She laughs, an old woman’s angry-bark laugh. “So, are there any asshole guys here I can start dating?” she says. “That’s my, like, pattern. Run away from one, bump into the next.”

“It’s half empty most of the time. There’s Jeff, the guy with the beard, he’s actually really nice,” I say. “He’s been here longer than me.”

“How long are you staying?” she asks.

I pause. It’s odd, I don’t know the exact amount of time I will be here. I had planned on staying until Nick was arrested, but I have no idea if he will be arrested soon.

“Till he stops looking for you, huh?” Greta guesses.

“Something like that.”

She examines me closely, frowns. My stomach tightens. I wait for her to say it: You look familiar.

“Never go back to a man with fresh bruises. Don’t give him the satisfaction,” Greta intones. She stands up, gathers her things. Dries her legs on the tiny towel.

“Good day killed,” she says.

For some reason, I give a thumbs-up, which I’ve never done in my life.

“Come to my cabin when you get out, if you want to,” she says. “We can watch TV.”

I bring a fresh tomato from Dorothy, held in my palm like a shiny housewarming gift. Greta comes to the door and barely acknowledges me, as if I’ve been dropping over for years. She plucks the tomato from my hand.

“Perfect, I was just making sandwiches,” she says. “Grab a seat.” She points toward the bed—we have no sitting rooms here—and moves into her kitchenette, which has the same plastic cutting board, the same dull knife, as mine. She slices the tomato. A plastic disc of lunch meat sits on the counter, the stomachy-sweet smell filling the room. She sets two slippery sandwiches on paper plates, along with handfuls of goldfish crackers, and marches them into the bedroom area, her hand already on the remote, flipping from noise to noise. We sit on the edge of the bed, side by side, watching the TV.

“Stop me if you see something,” Greta says.

I take a bite of my sandwich. My tomato slips out the side and onto my thigh.

*The Beverly Hillbillies, Suddenly Susan, Armageddon.*

*Ellen Abbott Live.* A photo of me fills the screen. I am the lead story.

Again. I look great.

“You seen this?” Greta asked, not looking at me, talking as if my disappearance were a rerun of a decent TV show. “This woman vanishes on her five-year wedding anniversary. Husband acts real weird from the start, all smiley and shit. Turns out he bumped up her life insurance, and they just found out the wife was *pregnant*. And the guy didn’t want it.”

The screen cuts to another photo of me juxtaposed with *Amazing Amy*.

Greta turns to me. “You remember those books?”

“Of course!”

“You *like* those books?”

“Everyone likes those books, they’re so cute,” I say.

Greta snorts. “They’re so fake.” Close-up of me.

I wait for her to say how beautiful I am.

“She’s not bad, huh, for, like, her age,” she says. “I hope I look that good when I’m forty.”

Ellen is filling the audience in on my story; my photo lingers on the screen.

“Sounds to me like she was a spoiled rich girl,” Greta says. “High-maintenance. Bitchy.”

That is simply unfair. I’d left no evidence for anyone to conclude that. Since I’d moved to Missouri—well, since I’d come up with my plan—I’d been careful to be low-maintenance, easygoing, cheerful, all those things people want women to be. I waved to neighbors, I ran errands for Mo’s friends, I once brought cola to the ever-soiled Stucks Buckley. I visited Nick’s dad so that all the nurses could testify to how nice I was, so I could whisper over and over into Bill Dunne’s spiderweb brain: *I love you, come live with us, I love you, come live with us*. Just to see if it would catch. Nick’s dad is what the people of Comfort Hill call a roamer—he is always wandering off. I love the idea of Bill Dunne, the living totem of everything Nick fears he could become, the object of Nick’s most profound despair, showing up over and over and over on our doorstep.

“How does she seem bitchy?” I ask.

She shrugs. The TV goes to a commercial for air freshener. A woman is spraying air freshener so her family will be happy. Then to a commercial for very thin panty liners so a woman can wear a dress and dance and meet the man she will later spray air freshener for.

Clean and bleed. Bleed and clean.

“You can just tell,” Greta says. “She just sounds like a rich, bored bitch. Like those rich bitches who use their husbands’ money to start, like, *cupcake* companies and *card shops* and shit. *Boutiques*.”

In New York, I had friends with all those kinds of businesses—they liked to be able to say they worked, even though they only did the little stuff that was fun: Name the cupcake, order the stationery, wear the adorable dress that was from *their very own* store.

“She’s definitely one of those,” Greta said. “Rich bitch putting on airs.”

Greta leaves to go to the bathroom, and I tiptoe into her kitchen, go into her fridge, and spit in her milk, her orange juice, and a container of potato salad, then tiptoe back to the bed.

Flush. Greta returns. “I mean, all that doesn’t mean it’s okay that he *killed* her. She’s just another woman, made a very bad choice in her man.”

She is looking right at me, and I wait for her to say, “Hey, wait a minute ...”

But she turns back to the TV, rearranges herself so she is lying on her stomach like a child, her chin in her hands, her face directed at my image on the screen.

“Oh, shit, here it goes,” Greta says. “People are hatin’ on this guy.”

The show gets underway, and I feel a bit better. It is the apotheosis of Amy.

Campbell MacIntosh, childhood friend: “Amy is just a nurturing, motherly type of woman. She loved being a wife. And I know she would have been a great mother. But Nick—you just knew Nick was wrong somehow. Cold and aloof and really calculating—you got the feeling that he was definitely aware of how much money Amy had.”

(Campbell is lying: She got all googly around Nick, she absolutely adored him. But I'm sure she liked the idea that he only married me for my money.)

Shawna Kelly, North Carthage resident: "I found it really, really strange how totally unconcerned he was at the search for his wife. He was just, you know, chatting, passing the time. Flirting around with me, who he didn't know from Adam. I'd try to turn the conversation to Amy, and he would just—just no interest."

(I'm sure this desperate old slut absolutely did not try to turn the conversation toward me.)

Steven "Stucks" Buckley, longtime friend of Nick Dunne: "She was a sweetheart. Sweet. Heart. And Nick? He just didn't seem that worried about Amy being gone. The guy was always like that: self-centered. Stuck-up a little. Like he'd made it all big in New York and we should all bow down."

(I despise Stucks Buckley, and what the fuck kind of name is that?)

Noelle Hawthorne, looking like she just got new highlights: "I think he killed her. No one will say it, but I will. He abused her, and he bullied her, and he finally killed her."

(Good dog.)

Greta glances sideways at me, her cheeks smushed up under her hands, her face flickering in the TV glow.

"I hope that's not true," she says. "That he killed her. It'd be nice to think that maybe she just got away, just ran away from him, and she's hiding out all safe and sound."

She kicks her legs back and forth like a lazy swimmer. I can't tell if she's fucking with me.

# NICK DUNNE

EIGHT DAYS GONE

We searched every cranny of my father's house, which didn't take long, since it's so pathetically empty. The cabinets, the closets. I yanked at the corners of rugs to see if they came up. I peeked into his washer and dryer, stuck a hand up his chimney. I even looked behind the toilet tanks.

"Very *Godfather* of you," Go said.

"If it were very *Godfather*, I'd have found what we were looking for and come out shooting."

Tanner stood in the center of my dad's living room and tugged at the end of his lime tie. Go and I were smeared with dust and grime, but somehow Tanner's white button-down positively glowed, as if it retained some of the strobe-light glamour of New York. He was staring at the corner of a cabinet, chewing on his lip, tugging at the tie, *thinking*. The man had probably spent years perfecting this look: the *Shut up, client, I'm thinking* look.

"I don't like this," he finally said. "We have a lot of uncontained issues here, and I won't go to the cops until we're very, very contained. My first instinct is to get ahead of the situation—report that stuff in the shed before we get busted with it. But if we don't know what Amy wants us to find here, and we don't know Andie's mind-set ... Nick, do you have a *guess* what Andie's mind-set is?"

I shrugged. "Pissed."

"I mean, that makes me very, very nervous. We're in a very prickly situation, basically. We need to tell the cops about the woodshed. We have to be on the front end of that discovery. But I want to lay out for you what will happen when we do. And what will happen is: They will go after Go. It'll be one of two options. One: Go is your accomplice, she was helping you hide this stuff on her property, and in all likelihood, she knows you killed Amy."

“Come on, you can’t be serious,” I said.

“Nick, we’d be lucky with that version,” Tanner said. “They can interpret this however they want. How about this one: It was Go who stole your identity, who got those credit cards. She bought all that crap in there. Amy found out, there was a confrontation, Go killed Amy.”

“Then we get way, way ahead of all this,” I said. “We tell them about the woodshed, and we tell them Amy is framing me.”

“I think that is a bad idea in general, and right now it’s a really bad idea if we don’t have Andie on our side, because we’d have to tell them about Andie.”

“Why?”

“Because if we go to the cops with your story, that Amy framed you —”

“Why do you keep saying *my story*, like it’s something I made up?”

“Ha. Good point. If we explain to the cops how Amy is framing you, we have to explain *why* she is framing you. Why: because she found out you have a very pretty, very young girlfriend on the side.”

“Do we really have to tell them that?” I asked.

“Amy framed you for her murder because ... she was ... what, bored?”

I swallowed my lips.

“We have to give them Amy’s motive, it doesn’t work otherwise. But the problem is, if we set Andie, gift-wrapped, on their doorstep, and they don’t buy the frame-up theory, then we’ve given them your motive for murder. Money problems, check. Pregnant wife, check. Girlfriend, check. It’s a murderer’s triumvirate. You’ll go down. Women will line up to tear you apart with their fingernails.” He began pacing. “But if we don’t do anything, and Andie goes to them on her own ...”

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“I think the cops will laugh us out of the station if we say right now that Amy framed you. It’s too flimsy. I believe you, but it’s flimsy.”

“But the treasure hunt clues—” I started.

“Nick, even I don’t understand those clues,” Go said. “They’re all inside baseball between you and Amy. There’s only your word that they’re leading you into ... incriminating situations. I mean, seriously: crummy jeans and visor equals Hannibal?”

“Little brown house equals your dad’s house, which is *blue*,” Tanner added.

I could feel Tanner’s doubt. I needed to really show him Amy’s character. Her lies, her vindictiveness, her score-settling. I needed other people to back me up—that my wife wasn’t Amazing Amy but *Avenging* Amy.

“Let’s see if we can reach out to Andie today,” Tanner finally said.

“Isn’t it a risk to wait?” Go asked.

Tanner nodded. “It’s a risk. We have to move fast. If another bit of evidence pops up, if the police get a search warrant for the woodshed, if Andie goes to the cops—”

“She won’t,” I said.

“She bit you, Nick.”

“She won’t. She’s pissed off right now, but she’s ... I can’t believe she’d do that to me. She knows I’m innocent.”

“Nick, you said you were with Andie for about an hour the morning Amy disappeared, yes?”

“Yes. From about ten-thirty to right before twelve.”

“So where were you between seven-thirty and ten?” Tanner asked. “You said you left the house at seven-thirty, right? Where did you go?”

I chewed on my cheek.

“Where did you go, Nick—I need to know.”

“It’s not relevant.”

“*Nick!*” Go snapped.

“I just did what I do some mornings. I pretended to leave, then I drove to the most deserted part of our complex, and I ... one of the houses there has an unlocked garage.”

“And?” Tanner said.

“And I read magazines.”

“Excuse me?”

“I read back issues of my old magazine.”

I still missed my magazine—I hid copies like porn and read them in secret, because I didn’t want anyone feeling sorry for me.

I looked up, and both Tanner and Go felt very, very sorry for me.

. . .

I drove back to my house just after noon, was greeted by a street full of news vans, reporters camped out on my lawn. I couldn’t get into my driveway, was forced to park in front of the house. I took a breath, then flung myself out of the car. They set on me like starving birds, pecking and fluttering, breaking formation and gathering again. *Nick, did you know Amy was pregnant? Nick, what is your alibi? Nick, did you kill Amy?*

I made it inside, locked myself in. On each side of the door were windows, so I braved it and quickly pulled down the shades, all the while cameras clicking at me, questions called. *Nick, did you kill Amy?* Once the shades were pulled, it was like covering a canary for the night: The noise out front stopped.

I went upstairs and satisfied my shower craving. I closed my eyes and let the spray dissolve the dirt from my dad’s house. When I opened them back up, the first thing I saw was Amy’s pink razor on the soap dish. It felt ominous, malevolent. My wife was crazy. I was married to a crazy woman. It’s every asshole’s mantra: *I married a psycho bitch*. But I got a small, nasty bite of gratification: I really did marry a genuine, bona fide psycho bitch. *Nick, meet your wife: the world’s foremost mindfucker*. I was not as big an asshole as I’d thought. An asshole, yes, but not on a grandiose scale. The cheating, that had been preemptive, a subconscious reaction to five years yoked to a madwoman: Of course I’d find myself attracted to an uncomplicated, good-natured hometown girl. It’s like when people with iron deficiencies crave red meat.

I was toweling off when the doorbell rang. I leaned out the bathroom door and heard the reporters’ voices geared up again: *Do you believe your son-in-law, Marybeth? What does it feel like to know you’ll be a grandpa, Rand? Do you think Nick killed your daughter, Marybeth?*

They stood side by side on my front step, grim-faced, their backs rigid. There were about a dozen journalists, paparazzi, but they made the noise of twice that many. *Do you believe your son-in-law, Marybeth? What does it feel like to know you'll be a grandpa, Rand?* The Elliotts entered with mumbled hellos and downcast eyes, and I slammed the door shut on the cameras. Rand put a hand on my arm and immediately removed it under Marybeth's gaze.

"Sorry, I was in the shower." My hair was still dripping, wetting the shoulders of my T-shirt. Marybeth's hair was greasy, her clothes wilted. She looked at me like I was insane.

"Tanner Bolt? Are you serious?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Nick: Tanner Bolt, are you serious. He only represents guilty people." She leaned in closer, grabbed my chin. "What's on your cheek?"

"Hives. Stress." I turned away from her. "That's not true about Tanner, Marybeth. It's not. He's the best in the business. I need him right now. The police—all they're doing is looking at me."

"That certainly seems to be the case," she said. "It looks like a bite mark."

"It's hives."

Marybeth released an aggravated sigh, turned the corner into the living room. "This is where it happened?" she asked. Her face had collapsed into a series of fleshy ridges—eye bags and saggy cheeks, her lips downcast.

"We think. Some sort of ... altercation, confrontation, also happened in the kitchen."

"Because of the blood." Marybeth touched the ottoman, tested it, lifted it a few inches, and let it drop. "I wish you hadn't fixed everything. You made it look like nothing ever happened."

"Marybeth, he has to live here," Rand said.

"I still don't understand how—I mean, what if the police didn't find everything? What if ... I don't know. It seems like they gave up. If they just let the house go. Open to anyone."

“I’m sure they got everything,” Rand said, and squeezed her hand. “Why don’t we ask if we can look at Amy’s things so you can pick something special, okay?” He glanced at me. “Would that be all right, Nick? It’d be a comfort to have something of hers.” He turned back to his wife. “That blue sweater Nana knitted for her.”

“I don’t want the goddamn blue sweater, Rand!”

She flung his hand off, began pacing around the room, picking up items. She pushed the ottoman with a toe. “This is the ottoman, Nick?” she asked. “The one they said was flipped over but it shouldn’t have been?”

“That’s the ottoman.”

She stopped pacing, kicked it again, and watched it remain upright.

“Marybeth, I’m sure Nick is exhausted”—Rand glanced at me with a meaningful smile—“like we all are. I think we should do what we came here for and—”

“This is what I came here for, Rand. Not some stupid sweater of Amy’s to snuggle up against like I’m three. I want my daughter. I don’t want her stuff. Her stuff means nothing to me. I want Nick to tell us what the hell is going on, because this whole thing is starting to stink. I never, I never—I never felt so foolish in my life.” She began crying, swiping away the tears, clearly furious at herself for crying. “We trusted you with our daughter. We trusted you, Nick. Just tell us the truth!” She put a quivering index finger under my nose. “Is it true? Did you not want the baby? Did you not love Amy anymore? Did you hurt her?”

I wanted to smack her. Marybeth and Rand had raised Amy. She was literally their work product. They had created her. I wanted to say the words *Your daughter is the monster here*, but I couldn’t—not until we’d told the police—and so I remained dumbfounded, trying to think of what I could say. But I looked like I was stonewalling. “Marybeth, I would never—”

“*I would never, I could never*, that’s all I hear from your goddamn mouth. You know, I hate even *looking* at you anymore. I really do. There’s something wrong with you. There’s something missing inside you, to act the way you’ve been acting. Even if it turns out you’re totally blameless, I will never forgive you for how casually you’ve

taken all of this. You'd think you mislaid a damn umbrella! After all Amy gave up for you, after all she did for you, and this is what she gets in return. It— You— I don't believe you, Nick. That's what I came here to let you know. I don't believe in you. Not anymore."

She began sobbing, turned away, and flung herself out the front door as the thrilled cameramen filmed her. She got in the car, and two reporters pressed against the window, knocking on it, trying to get her to say something. In the living room, we could hear them repeating and repeating her name. *Marybeth—Marybeth—*

Rand remained, hands in his pockets, trying to figure out what role to play. Tanner's voice—*we have to keep the Elliotts on our side*—was Greek-chorusing in my ear.

Rand opened his mouth, and I headed him off. "Rand, tell me what I can do."

"Just say it, Nick."

"Say what?"

"I don't want to ask, and you don't want to answer. I get that. But I need to hear you say it. You didn't kill our daughter."

He laughed and teared up at the same time. "Jesus Christ, I can't keep my head straight," Rand said. He was turning pink, flushed, a nuclear sunburn. "I can't figure out how this is happening. I can't figure it out!" He was still smiling. A tear dribbled on his chin and fell to his shirt collar. "Just say it, Nick."

"Rand, I did not kill Amy or hurt her in any way." He kept his eyes on me. "Do you believe me, that I didn't physically *harm* her?"

Rand laughed again. "You know what I was about to say? I was about to say I don't know what to believe anymore. And then I thought, that's someone else's line. That's a line from a movie, not something I should be saying, and I wonder for a second, am I in a movie? Can I stop being in this movie? Then I know I can't. But for a second, you think, *I'll say something different, and this will all change*. But it won't, will it?"

With one quick Jack Russell headshake, he turned and followed his wife to the car.

Instead of feeling sad, I felt alarmed. Before the Elliotts were even

out of my driveway, I was thinking: *We need to go to the cops quickly, soon.* Before the Elliotts started discussing their loss of faith in public. I needed to prove my wife was not who she pretended to be. *Not Amazing Amy: Avenging Amy.* I flashed to Tommy O’Hara—the guy who called the tip line three times, the guy Amy had accused of raping her. Tanner had gotten some background on him: He wasn’t the macho Irishman I’d pictured from his name, not a firefighter or cop. He wrote for a humor website based in Brooklyn, a decent one, and his contributor photo revealed him to be a scrawny guy with dark-framed glasses and an uncomfortable amount of thick black hair, wearing a wry grin and a T-shirt for a band called the Bingos.

He picked up on the first ring. “Yeah?”

“This is Nick Dunne. You called me about my wife. Amy Dunne. Amy Elliott. I have to talk with you.”

I heard a pause, waited for him to hang up on me like Hilary Handy.

“Call me back in ten minutes.”

I did. The background was a bar, I knew the sound well enough: the murmur of drinkers, the clatter of ice cubes, the strange pops of noise as people called for drinks or hailed friends. I had a burst of homesickness for my own place.

“Okay, thanks,” he said. “Had to get to a bar. Seemed like a Scotch conversation.” His voice got progressively closer, thicker: I could picture him huddling protectively over a drink, cupping his mouth to the phone.

“So,” I began, “I got your messages.”

“Right. She’s still missing, right? Amy?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask you what you think has happened?” he said. “To Amy?”

Fuck it, I wanted a drink. I went into my kitchen—next best thing to my bar—and poured myself one. I’d been trying to be more careful about the booze, but it felt so good: the tang of a Scotch, a dark room with the blinding sun right outside.

“Can I ask you why you called?” I replied.

“I’ve been watching the coverage,” he said. “You’re fucked.”

“I am. I wanted to talk to you because I thought it was ... interesting that you’d try to get in touch. Considering. The rape charge.”

“Ah, you know about that,” he said.

“I know there was a rape charge, but I don’t necessarily believe you’re a rapist. I wanted to hear what you had to say.”

“Yeah.” I heard him take a gulp of his Scotch, kill it, shake the ice cubes around. “I caught the story on the news one night. Your story. Amy’s. I was in bed, eating Thai. Minding my own business. Totally fucked me in the head. *Her* after all these years.” He called to the bartender for another. “So my lawyer said no way I should talk to you, but ... what can I say? I’m too fucking nice. I can’t let you twist. God, I wish you could still smoke in bars. This is a Scotch *and* cigarette conversation.”

“Tell me,” I said. “About the assault charge. The rape.”

“Like I said, man, I’ve seen the coverage, the media is shitting all over you. I mean, you’re *the guy*. So I should leave well enough alone—I don’t need that girl back in my life. Even, like, tangentially. But shit. I wish someone had done me the favor.”

“So do me the favor,” I said.

“First of all, she dropped the charges—you know that, right?”

“I know. Did you do it?”

“Fuck you. Of course I didn’t do it. Did *you* do it?”

“No.”

“Well.”

Tommy called again for his Scotch. “Let me ask: Your marriage was good? Amy was happy?”

I stayed silent.

“You don’t have to answer, but I’m going to guess no. Amy was not happy. For whatever reason. I’m not even going to ask. I can guess, but I’m not going to ask. But I know you must know this: Amy likes to play God when she’s not happy. Old Testament God.”

“Meaning?”

“She doles out punishment,” Tommy said. “Hard.” He laughed into the phone. “I mean, you should see me,” he said. “I do not look like some alpha-male rapist. I look like a twerp. I am a twerp. My go-to karaoke song is ‘Sister Christian,’ for crying out loud. I weep during *Godfather II*. Every time.” He coughed after a swallow. Seemed like a moment to loosen him up.

“Fredo?” I asked.

“Fredo, man, yeah. Poor Fredo.”

“Stepped over.”

Most men have sports as the lingua-franca of dudes. This was the film-geek equivalent to discussing some great play in a famous football game. We both knew the line, and the fact that we both knew it eliminated a good day’s worth of *are we copacetic* small talk.

He took another drink. “It was so fucking absurd.”

“Tell me.”

“You’re not taping this or anything, right? No one’s listening in? Because I don’t want that.”

“Just us. I’m on your side.”

“So I meet Amy at a party—this is, like, seven years ago now—and she’s so damn cool. Just hilarious and weird and ... cool. We just clicked, you know, and I don’t click with a lot of girls, at least not girls who look like Amy. So I’m thinking ... well, first I’m thinking I’m being punked. Where’s the catch, you know? But we start dating, and we date a few months, two, three months, and then I find out the catch: She’s not the girl I thought I was dating. She can *quote* funny things, but she doesn’t actually like funny things. She’d rather not laugh, anyway. In fact, she’d rather that I not laugh either, or be funny, which is awkward since it’s my job, but to her, it’s all a waste of time. I mean, I can’t even figure out why she started dating me in the first place, because it seems pretty clear that she doesn’t even like me. Does that make sense?”

I nodded, swallowed a gulp of Scotch. “Yeah. It does.”

“So, I start making excuses not to hang out so much. I don’t call it off, because I’m an idiot, and she’s gorgeous. I’m hoping it might turn

around. But you know, I'm making excuses fairly regularly: I'm stuck at work, I'm on deadline, I have a friend in town, my monkey is sick, whatever. And I start seeing this other girl, kinda sorta seeing her, very casual, no big deal. Or so I *think*. But Amy finds out—how, I still don't know, for all I know, she was staking out my apartment. But ... *shit* ...”

“Take a drink.”

We both took a swallow.

“Amy comes over to my place one night—I'd been seeing this other girl like a month—and Amy comes over, and she's all back like she used to be. She's got some bootleg DVD of a comic I like, an underground performance in Durham, and she's got a sack of burgers, and we watch the DVD, and she's got her leg flopped over mine, and then she's nestling into me, and ... sorry. She's your wife. My main point is: The girl knew how to work me. And we end up ...”

“You had sex.”

“*Consensual* sex, yes. And she leaves and everything is fine. Kiss goodbye at the door, the whole shebang.”

“Then what?”

“The next thing I know, two cops are at my door, and they've done a rape kit on Amy, and she has ‘wounds consistent with forcible rape.’ And she has ligature marks on her wrists, and when they search my apartment, there on the headboard of my bed are two ties—like, neckties—tucked down near the mattress, and the ties are, quote, ‘consistent with the ligature marks.’ ”

“Had you tied her up?”

“No, the sex wasn't even that ... *that*, you know? I was totally caught off guard. She must have tied them there when I got up to take a piss or whatever. I mean, I was in some serious shit. It was looking very bad. And then suddenly she dropped the charges. Couple of weeks later, I got a note, anonymous, typed, says: *Maybe next time you'll think twice.*”

“And you never heard from her again?”

“Never heard from her again.”

“And you didn't try to press charges against her or anything?”

“Uh, no. Fuck no. I was just glad she went away. Then last week, I’m eating my Thai food, sitting in my bed, watching the news report. On Amy. On you. Perfect wife, anniversary, no body, real shitstorm. I swear, I broke out in a sweat. I thought: *That’s Amy, she’s graduated to murder. Holy shit.* I’m serious, man, I bet whatever she’s got cooked up for you, it’s drum-fucking-tight. You should be fucking scared.”

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

EIGHT DAYS GONE

I am wet from the bumper boats; we got more than five dollars' worth of time because the two sun-stunned teenage girls would rather flip through gossip magazines and smoke cigarettes than try to herd us off the water. So we spent a good thirty minutes on our lawn-mower-motor-propelled ships, ramming each other and turning wild twists, and then we got bored and left of our own accord.

Greta, Jeff, and I, an odd crew in a strange place. Greta and Jeff have become good friends in just a day, which is how people do it here, where there's nothing else to do. I think Greta is deciding whether she'll make Jeff another of her disastrous mating choices. Jeff would like it. He prefers her. She is much prettier than I am, right now, in this place. Cheap pretty. She is wearing a bikini top and jean shorts, with a spare shirt tucked into the back pocket for when she wants to enter a store (T-shirts, wood carvings, decorative rocks) or restaurant (burger, barbecue, taffy). She wants us to get Old West photos taken, but that's not going to happen for reasons aside from the fact that I don't want redneck-lake-person lice.

We end up settling for a few rounds on a decrepit miniature golf course. The fake grass is torn off in patches, the alligators and windmills that once moved mechanically are still. Jeff does the honors instead, twirling the windmill, snapping open and shut the gator jaws. Some holes are simply unplayable—the grass rolled up like carpeting, the farmhouse with its beckoning mousehole collapsed in on itself. So we roam between courses in no particular order. No one is even keeping score.

This would have annoyed Old Amy to no end: the haphazardness of it all, the pointlessness. But I'm learning to drift, and I do it quite well. I am overachieving at aimlessness, I am a type-A, alpha-girl lollygagger, the leader of a gang of heartbroken kids, running wild across this lonely strip of amusements, each of us smarting from the betrayals of a loved one. I catch Jeff (cuckolded, divorced,

complicated custody arrangement) furrowing his brow as we pass a Love Tester: Squeeze the metal grip and watch the temperature rise from “just a fling” to “soul mate.” The odd equation—a crushing clutch means true love—reminds me of poor smacked-around Greta, who often places her thumb over the bruise on her chest like it’s a button she can push.

“You’re up,” Greta says to me. She’s drying her ball off on her shorts—twice she’s gone into the cesspool of dirty water.

I get in position, wiggle once or twice, and putt my bright red ball straight into the birdhouse opening. It disappears for a second, then reappears out a chute and into the hole. Disappear, reappear. I feel a wave of anxiety—everything reappears at some point, even me. I am anxious because I think my plans have changed.

I have changed plans only twice so far. The first was the gun. I was going to get a gun and then, on the morning I disappeared, I was going to shoot myself. Nowhere dangerous: through a calf or a wrist. I would leave behind a bullet with my flesh and blood on it. A struggle occurred! Amy was shot! But then I realized this was a little too macho even for me. It would hurt for weeks, and I don’t love pain (my sliced arm feels better now, thank you very much). But I still liked the idea of a gun. It made for a nice MacGuffin. Not *Amy was shot* but *Amy was scared*. So I dolled myself up and went to the mall on Valentine’s Day, so I’d be remembered. I couldn’t get one, but it’s not a big deal as far as changed plans go.

The other one is considerably more extreme. I have decided I’m not going to die.

I have the discipline to kill myself, but can’t stomach the injustice. It’s not fair that I have to die. Not *really* die. I don’t want to. I’m not the one who did anything wrong.

The problem now though is money. It’s so ludicrous, that of all things it’s money that should be an issue for me. But I have only a finite amount—\$9,132 at this point. I will need more. This morning I went to chat with Dorothy, as always holding a handkerchief so as not to leave fingerprints (I told her it was my grandmother’s—I try to give her a vague impression of Southern wealth gone to squander, very Blanche DuBois). I leaned against her desk as she told me, in great bureaucratic detail, about a blood thinner she can’t afford—the

woman is an encyclopedia of denied pharmaceuticals—and then I said, just to test the situation: “I know what you mean. I’m not sure where I’m going to get rent for my cabin after another week or two.”

She blinked at me, and blinked back toward the TV set, a game show where people screamed and cried a lot. She took a grandmotherly interest in me, she’d certainly let me stay on, indefinitely: The cabins were half empty, no harm.

“You better get a job, then,” Dorothy said, not turning away from the TV. A contestant made a bad choice, the prize was lost, a wuh-waaahhh sound effect voiced her pain.

“A job like what? What kind of job can I get around here?”

“Cleaning, babysitting.”

Basically, I was supposed to be a housewife for pay. Irony enough for a million *Hang in There* posters.

It’s true that even in our lowly Missouri state, I didn’t ever have to actually budget. I couldn’t go out and buy a new car just because I wanted to, but I never had to think about the day-to-day stuff, coupon clipping and buying generic and knowing how much milk costs off the top of my head. My parents never bothered teaching me this, and so they left me unprepared for the real world. For instance, when Greta complained that the convenience store at the marina charged five dollars for a gallon of milk, I winced because the kid there always charged me ten dollars. I’d thought that seemed like a lot, but it hadn’t occurred to me that the little pimply teenager just threw out a number to see if I’d pay.

So I’d budgeted, but my budget—guaranteed, according to the Internet, to last me six to nine months—is clearly off. And so I am off.

When we’re done with golf—I win, of course I do, I know because I’m keeping score in my head—we go to the hot-dog stand next door for lunch, and I slip around the corner to dig into my zippered money belt under my shirt, and when I glance back, Greta has followed me, she catches me right before I can stuff the thing away.

“Ever heard of a purse, Moneybags?” she cracks. This will be an ongoing problem—a person on the run needs lots of cash, but a person on the run by definition has nowhere to keep the cash. Thankfully, Greta doesn’t press the issue—she knows we are both

victims here. We sit in the sun on a metal picnic bench and eat hot dogs, white buns wrapped around cylinders of phosphate with relish so green it looks toxic, and it may be the greatest thing I've ever eaten because I am Dead Amy and I don't care.

"Guess what Jeff found in his cabin for me?" Greta says. "Another book by the *Martian Chronicle* guy."

"Ray Bradburrow," Jeff says. *Bradbury*, I think.

"Yeah, right. *Something Wicked This Way Comes*," Greta says. "It's good." She chirps the last bit as if that were all to say about a book: It's good or it's bad. I liked it or I didn't. No discussions of the writing, the themes, the nuances, the structure. Just good or bad. Like a hot dog.

"I read it when I first moved in there," Jeff says. "It is good. Creepy." He catches me watching him and makes a goblin face, all crazy eyes and leering tongue. He isn't my type—the fur on the face is too bristly, he does suspicious things with fish—but he is nice-looking. Attractive. His eyes are very warm, not like Nick's frozen blues. I wonder if "I" might like sleeping with him—a nice slow screw with his body pressed against mine and his breath in my ear, the bristles on my cheeks, not the lonely way Nick fucks, where our bodies barely connect: right angle from behind, L-shape from the front, and then he's out of bed almost immediately, hitting the shower, leaving me pulsing in his wet spot.

"Cat got your tongue?" Jeff says. He never calls me by name, as if to acknowledge that we both know I've lied. He says *this lady* or *pretty woman* or *you*. I wonder what he would call me in bed. *Baby*, maybe.

"Just thinking."

"Uh-oh," he says, and smiles again.

"You were thinking about a boy, I can tell," Greta says.

"Maybe."

"I thought we were steering clear of the assholes for a while," she says. "Tend to our chickens." Last night after *Ellen Abbott*, I was too excited to go home, so we shared a six-pack and imagined our recluse life as the token straight girls on Greta's mother's lesbian compound, raising chickens and hanging laundry to dry in the sun. The objects of

gentle, platonic courtship from older women with gnarled knuckles and indulgent laughs. Denim and corduroy and clogs and never worrying about makeup or hair or nails, breast size or hip size, or having to pretend to be the understanding wifey, the supportive girlfriend who loves everything her man does.

“Not all guys are assholes,” Jeff says. Greta makes a noncommittal noise.

We return to our cabins liquid-limbed. I feel like a water balloon left in the sun. All I want to do is sit under my sputtering window air conditioner and blast my skin with the cool while watching TV. I’ve found a rerun channel that shows nothing but old ’70s and ’80s shows, *Quincy* and *The Love Boat* and *Eight Is Enough*, but first comes *Ellen Abbott*, my new favorite show!

Nothing new, nothing new. Ellen doesn’t mind speculating, believe me, she’s hosted an array of strangers from my past who swear they are my friends, and they all have lovely things to say about me, even the ones who never much liked me. Post-life fondness.

Knock on the door, and I know it will be Greta and Jeff. I switch off the TV, and there they are on my doorstep, aimless.

“Whatcha doing?” Jeff asks.

“Reading,” I lie.

He sets down a six-pack of beer on my counter, Greta padding in behind. “Oh, I thought we heard the TV.”

Three is literally a crowd in these small cabins. They are blocking the door for a second, sending a pulse of nervousness through me—why are they blocking the door?—and then they keep moving and they are blocking my bedside table. Inside my bedside table is my money belt packed with eight thousand dollars in cash. Hundreds, fifties, and twenty-dollar bills. The money belt is hideous, flesh-colored and bunched. I can’t possibly wear all my money at once—I leave some scattered around the cabin—but I try to wear most, and when I do, I am as conscious of it as a girl at the beach with a maxipad. A perverse part of me enjoys spending money, because every time I pull off a wad of twenties, that’s less money to hide, to worry about being stolen or lost.

Jeff clicks on the TV, and Ellen Abbott—and Amy—buzz into focus.

He nods, smiles to himself.

“Want to watch ... Amy?” Greta asks.

I can't tell if she used a comma: *Want to watch, Amy?* or *Want to watch Amy?*

“Nah. Jeff, why don't you grab your guitar and we can sit on the porch?”

Jeff and Greta exchange a look.

“Awww ... but that's what you were watching, right?” Greta says. She points at the screen, and it's me and Nick at a benefit, me in a gown, my hair pulled back in a chignon, and I look more like I look now, with my short hair.

“It's boring,” I say.

“Oh, I don't think it's boring at all,” Greta says, and flops down on my bed.

I think what a fool I am, to have let these two people inside. To have assumed I could control them, when they are feral creatures, people used to finding the angle, exploiting the weakness, always needing, whereas I am new to this. Needing. Those people who keep backyard pumas and living-room chimps—this must be how they feel when their adorable pet rips them open.

“You know what, would you guys mind ... I feel kinda crummy. Too much sun, I think.”

They look surprised and a little offended, and I wonder if I've got it wrong—that they are harmless and I'm just paranoid. I'd like to believe that.

“Sure, sure, of course,” Jeff says. They shuffle out of my cabin, Jeff grabbing his beer on the way. A minute later, I hear Ellen Abbott snarling from Greta's cabin. The accusatory questions. *Why did ... Why didn't ... How can you explain ...*

*Why did I ever let myself get friendly with anyone here? Why didn't I keep to myself? How can I explain my actions if I'm found out?*

I can't be discovered. If I were ever found, I'd be the most hated woman on the planet. I'd go from being the beautiful, kind, doomed, pregnant victim of a selfish, cheating bastard to being the bitter bitch

who exploited the good hearts of all America's citizens. Ellen Abbott would devote show after show to me, angry callers venting their hate: "This is just another example of a spoiled rich girl doing what she wants, when she wants, and not thinking of anyone else's feelings, Ellen. I think she *should* disappear for life—in prison!" Like that, it would go like that. I've read conflicting Internet information on the penalties for faking a death, or framing a spouse for said death, but I know the public opinion would be brutal. No matter what I do after that—feed orphans, cuddle lepers—when I died, I'd be known as That Woman Who Faked Her Death and Framed Her Husband, You Remember.

I can't allow it.

Hours later, I am still awake, thinking in the dark, when my door rattles, a gentle bang, Jeff's bang. I debate, then open it, ready to apologize for my rudeness before. He's tugging on his beard, staring at my doormat, then looks up with amber eyes.

"Dorothy said you were looking for work," he said.

"Yeah. I guess. I am."

"I got something tonight, pay you fifty bucks."

Amy Elliott Dunne wouldn't leave her cabin for fifty bucks, but Lydia and/or Nancy needs work. I have to say yes.

"Coupla hours, fifty dollars." He shrugs. "Doesn't make any difference to me, just thought I'd offer."

"What is it?"

"Fishing."

I was positive Jeff would drive a pickup, but he guides me to a shiny Ford hatchback, a heartbreaking car, the car of the new college grad with big plans and a modest budget, not the car a grown man should be driving. I am wearing my swimsuit under my sundress, as instructed. ("Not the bikini, the full one, the one you can really swim in," Jeff intoned; I'd never noticed him anywhere near the pool, but he knew my swimwear cold, which was flattering and alarming at the same time.)

He leaves the windows down as we drive through the forested hills, the gravel dust coating my stubby hair. It feels like something from a

country-music video: the girl in the sundress leaning out to catch the breeze of a red-state summer night. I can see stars. Jeff hums off and on.

He parks down the road from a restaurant that hangs out on stilts over the lake, a barbecue place known for its giant souvenir cups of boozy drinks with bad names: Gator Juice and Bassmouth Blitz. I know this from the discarded cups that float along all the shores of the lake, cracked and neon-colored with the restaurant's logo: Catfish Carl's. Catfish Carl's has a deck that overhangs the water—diners can load up on handfuls of kitty kibble from the crank machines and drop them into the gaping mouths of hundreds of giant catfish that wait below.

“What exactly are we going to do, Jeff?”

“You net 'em, I kill 'em.” He gets out of the car, and I follow him around to the hatchback, which is filled with coolers. “We put 'em in here, on ice, resell them.”

“Resell them. Who buys stolen fish?”

Jeff smiles that lazy-cat smile. “I got a clientele of sorts.”

And then I realize: He isn't a Grizzly Adams, guitar-playing, peace-loving granola guy at all. He is a redneck thief who wants to believe that he's more complicated than that.

He pulls out a net, a box of Nine Lives, and a stained plastic bucket.

I have absolutely no intention of being part of this illicit piscine economy, but “I” am fairly interested. How many women can say they were part of a fish-smuggling ring? “I” am game. I have become game again since I died. All the things I disliked or feared, all the limits I had, they've slid off me. “I” can do pretty much anything. A ghost has that freedom.

We walk down the hill, under the deck of Catfish Carl's, and onto the docks, which float slurpily on the wakes of a passing motorboat, Jimmy Buffett blaring.

Jeff hands me a net. “We need this to be quick—you just jump in the water, scoop the net in, nab the fish, then tilt the net up to me. It'll be heavy, though, and squirmy, so be prepared. And don't scream or nothing.”

“I won’t scream. But I don’t want to go in the water. I can do it from the deck.”

“You should take off your dress, at least, you’ll ruin it.”

“I’m okay.”

He looks annoyed for a moment—he’s the boss, I’m the employee, and so far I’m not listening to him—but then he turns around modestly and tugs off his shirt and hands me the box of cat food without fully facing me, as if he’s shy. I hold the box with its narrow mouth over the water, and immediately, a hundred shiny arched backs roll toward me, a mob of serpents, the tails cutting across the surface furiously, and then the mouths are below me, the fish roiling over each other to swallow the pellets and then, like trained pets, aiming their faces up toward me for more.

I scoop the net into the middle of the pack and sit down hard on the dock to get leverage to pull the harvest up. When I yank, the net is full of half a dozen whiskery, slick catfish, all frantically trying to get back in the water, their gaping lips opening and shutting between the squares of nylon, their collective tugging making the net wobble up and down.

“Lift it up, lift it up, girl!”

I push a knee below the net’s handle and let it dangle there, Jeff reaching in, grabbing a fish with two hands, each encased in terry-cloth manicure gloves for a better grip. He moves his hands down around the tail, then swings the fish like a cudgel, smashing its head on the side of the dock. Blood explodes. A brief sharp pelt of it streaks across my legs, a hard chunk of meat hits my hair. Jeff throws the fish in the bucket and grabs another with assembly-line smoothness.

We work in grunts and wheezes for half an hour, four nets full, until my arms turn rubbery and the ice chests are full. Jeff takes the empty pail and fills it with water from the lake, pours it across the messy entrails and into the fish pens. The catfish gobble up the guts of their fallen brethren. The dock is left clean. He pours one last pail of water across our bloody feet.

“Why do you have to smash them?” I ask.

“Can’t stand to watch something suffer,” he says. “Quick dunk?”

“I’m okay,” I say.

“Not in my car, you’re not—come on, quick dunk, you have more crap on you than you realize.”

We run off the dock toward the rocky beach nearby. While I wade ankle-deep in the water, Jeff runs with giant splashy footsteps and throws himself forward, arms wild. As soon as he’s far enough out, I unhook my money belt and fold my sundress around it, leave it at the water’s edge with my glasses on top. I lower myself until I feel the warm water hit my thighs, my belly, my neck, and then I hold my breath and go under.

I swim far and fast, stay underwater longer than I should to remind myself what it would feel like to drown—I know I could do it if I needed to—and when I come up with a single disciplined gasp, I see Jeff lapping rapidly toward shore, and I have to swim fast as a porpoise back to my money belt and scramble onto the rocks just ahead of him.

# NICK DUNNE

EIGHT DAYS GONE

As soon as I hung up with Tommy, I phoned Hilary Handy. If my “murder” of Amy was a lie, and Tommy O’Hara’s “rape” of Amy was a lie, why not Hilary Handy’s “stalking” of Amy? A sociopath must cut her teeth somewhere, like the austere marble halls of Wickshire Academy.

When she picked up, I blurted: “This is Nick Dunne, Amy Elliott’s husband. I really need to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“I really, really need more information. About your—”

“Don’t say *friendship*.” I heard an angry grin in her voice.

“No. I wouldn’t. I just want to hear your side. I am not calling because I think you’ve got anything—*anything*—to do with my wife, her situation, currently. But I would really like to hear what happened. The truth. Because I think you may be able to shed light on a ... pattern of behavior of Amy’s.”

“What kind of pattern?”

“When very bad things happen to people who upset her.”

She breathed heavily into the phone. “Two days ago, I wouldn’t have talked to you,” she started. “But then I was having a drink with some friends, and the TV was on, and you came on, and it was about Amy being pregnant. Everyone I was with, they were so *angry* at you. They *hated* you. And I thought, *I know how that feels*. Because she’s not dead, right? I mean, she’s still just missing? No body?”

“That’s right.”

“So let me tell you. About Amy. And high school. And what happened. Hold on.” On her end, I could hear cartoons playing—rubbery voices and calliope music—then suddenly not. Then whining voices. *Go watch downstairs. Downstairs, please.*

“So, freshman year. I’m the kid from Memphis. *Everyone* else is East Coast, I swear. It felt weird, different, you know? All the girls at Wickshire, it was like they’d been raised communally—the lingo, the clothes, the hair. And it wasn’t like I was a pariah, I was just ... insecure, for sure. Amy was already The Girl. Like, first day, I remember, everyone knew her, everyone was talking about her. She was Amazing Amy—we’d all read those books growing up—plus, she was just gorgeous. I mean, she was—”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Right. And pretty soon she was showing an interest in me, like, taking me under her wing or whatever. She had this joke that she was Amazing Amy, so I was her sidekick Suzy, and she started calling me Suzy, and pretty soon everyone else did too. Which was fine by me. I mean, I was a little toadie: Get Amy a drink if she was thirsty, throw in a load of laundry if she needed clean underwear. Hold on.”

Again I could hear the shuffle of her hair against the receiver. Marybeth had brought every Elliott photo album with her in case we needed more pictures. She’d shown me a photo of Amy and Hilary, cheek-to-cheek grins. So I could picture Hilary now, the same butter-blond hair as my wife, framing a plainer face, with muddy hazel eyes.

“Jason, I am on the phone—just give them a few Popsicles, it’s not that dang hard.

“Sorry. Our kids are out of school, and my husband never ever takes care of them, so he seems a little confused about what to do for the ten minutes I’m on the phone with you. Sorry. So ... so, right, I was little Suzy, and we had this game going, and for a few months—August, September, October—it was great. Like *intense* friendship, we were together all the time. And then a few weird things happened at once that I knew kind of bothered her.”

“What?”

“A guy from our brother school, he meets us both at the fall dance, and the next day he calls *me* instead of Amy. Which I’m sure he did because Amy was too intimidating, but whatever ... and then a few days later, our midterm grades come, and mine are slightly better, like, four-point-one versus four-point-oh. And not long after, one of our friends, she invites me to spend Thanksgiving with her family. Me, not Amy. Again, I’m sure this was because Amy intimidated

people. She wasn't easy to be around, you felt all the time like you had to impress. But I can feel things change just a little. I can tell she's really irritated, even though she doesn't admit it.

"Instead, she starts getting me to do things. I don't realize it at the time, but she starts setting me up. She asks if she can color my hair the same blond as hers, because mine's mousy, and it'll look *so nice* a brighter shade. And she starts complaining about her parents. I mean she's always complained about her parents, but now she really gets going on them—how they only love her as an idea and not really for who she is—so she says she wants to mess with her parents. She has me start prank-calling her house, telling her parents I'm the new Amazing Amy. We'd take the train into New York some weekends, and she'd tell me to stand outside their house—one time she had me run up to her mom and tell her I was going to get rid of Amy and be her new Amy or some crap like that."

"And you did it?"

"It was just dumb stuff girls do. Back before cell phones and cyber-bullying. A way to kill time. We did prank stuff like that all the time, just dumb stuff. Try to one-up each other on how daring and freaky we could be."

"Then what?"

"Then she starts distancing herself. She gets cold. And I think—I think that she doesn't like me anymore. Girls at school start looking at me funny. I'm shut out of the cool circle. Fine. But then one day I'm called in to see the headmistress. Amy has had a horrible accident—twisted ankle, fractured arm, cracked ribs. Amy has fallen down this long set of stairs, and she says it was *me* who pushed her. Hold on.

*"Go back downstairs now. Go. Down. Stairs. Goooo downstairs."*

"Sorry, I'm back. Never have kids."

"So Amy said you pushed her?" I asked.

"Yeah, because I was *craaaazy*. I was obsessed with her, and I wanted to be Suzy, and then being Suzy wasn't enough—I had to be Amy. And she had all this evidence that she'd had me create over the past few *months*. Her parents, obviously, had seen me *lurking* around the house. I theoretically accosted her mom. My hair dyed blond and the clothes I'd bought that matched Amy's—clothes I bought while

shopping *with* her, but I couldn't prove that. All her friends came in, explained how Amy for the past month had been so frightened of me. All this shit. I looked *totally insane*. Completely insane. Her parents got a restraining order on me. And I kept swearing it wasn't me, but by then I was so miserable that I wanted to leave school anyway. So we didn't fight the expulsion. I wanted to get away from her by that time. I mean, the girl *cracked her own ribs*. I was scared—this little fifteen-year-old, she'd pulled this off. Fooled friends, parents, teachers."

"And this was all because of a boy and some grades and a Thanksgiving invitation?"

"About a month after I moved back to Memphis, I got a letter. It wasn't signed, it was typed, but it was obviously Amy. It was a list of all the ways I'd let her down. Crazy stuff: *Forgot to wait for me after English, twice. Forgot I am allergic to strawberries, twice.*"

"Jesus."

"But I feel like the real reason wasn't even on there."

"What was the real reason?"

"I feel like Amy wanted people to believe she really was perfect. And as we got to be friends, I got to know her. And she wasn't perfect. You know? She was brilliant and charming and all that, but she was also controlling and OCD and a drama queen and a bit of a liar. Which was fine by me. It just wasn't fine by her. She got rid of me because I knew she wasn't perfect. It made me wonder about you."

"About me? Why?"

"Friends see most of each other's flaws. Spouses see every awful last bit. If she punished a friend of a few months by throwing herself down a flight of stairs, what would she do to a man who was dumb enough to marry her?"

I hung up as one of Hilary's kids picked up the second extension and began singing a nursery rhyme. I immediately phoned Tanner and relayed my conversations with Hilary and Tommy.

"So we have a couple of stories, great," Tanner said, "this'll really be great!" in a way that told me it wasn't that great. "Have you heard from Andie?"

I hadn't.

“I have one of my people waiting for her at her apartment building,” he said. “Discreet.”

“I didn’t know you had people.”

“What we really need is to *find Amy*,” he said, ignoring me. “Girl like that, I can’t imagine she’d be able to stay hidden for too long. You have any thoughts?”

I kept picturing her on a posh hotel balcony near the ocean, wrapped in a white robe thick as a rug, sipping a very good Montrachet, while she tracked my ruin on the Internet, on cable, in the tabloids. While she enjoyed the endless coverage and exultation of Amy Elliott Dunne. Attending her own funeral. I wondered if she was self-aware enough to realize: She’d stolen a page from Mark Twain.

“I picture her near the ocean,” I said. Then I stopped, feeling like a boardwalk psychic. “No. I have no ideas. She could literally be anywhere. I don’t think we’ll see her unless she decides to come back.”

“That seems unlikely,” Tanner breathed, annoyed. “So let’s try to find Andie and see where her head is. We’re running out of wiggle room here.”

Then it was dinnertime, and then the sun set, and I was alone again in my haunted house. I was thinking about all of Amy’s lies and whether the pregnancy was one of them. I’d done the math. Amy and I had sex sporadically enough it was possible. But then she would know I’d do the math.

Truth or lie? If it was a lie, it was designed to gut me.

I’d always assumed that Amy and I would have children. It was one of the reasons I knew I would marry Amy, because I pictured us having kids together. I remember the first time I imagined it, not two months after we began dating: I was walking from my apartment in Kips Bay to a favorite pocket park along the East River, a path that took me past the giant LEGO block of the United Nations headquarters, the flags of myriad countries fluttering in the wind. *A kid would like this*, I thought. All the different colors, the busy memory game of matching each flag to its country. *There’s Finland, and there’s New Zealand.* The one-eyed smile of Mauritania. And then I realized it wasn’t *a kid*, but *our kid*, mine and Amy’s, who would like this. Our

kid, sprawled on the floor with an old encyclopedia, just like I'd done, but our kid wouldn't be alone, I'd be sprawled next to him. Aiding him in his budding vexillology, which sounds less like a study of flags than a study in annoyance, which would have suited my father's attitude toward me. But not mine toward my son's. I pictured Amy joining us on the floor, flat on her stomach, her feet kicked up in the air, pointing out Palau, the yellow dot just left of center on the crisp blue background, which I was sure would be her favorite.

From then on, the boy was real (and sometimes a girl, but mostly a boy). He was inevitable. I suffered from regular, insistent paternal aches. Months after the wedding, I had a strange moment in front of the medicine cabinet, floss between my teeth, when I thought: *She wants kids, right? I should ask. Of course I should ask.* When I posed the question—roundabout, vague—she said, *Of course, of course, someday,* but every morning she still perched in front of the sink and swallowed her pill. For three years she did this every morning, while I fluttered near the topic but failed to actually say the words: *I want us to have a baby.*

After the layoffs, it seemed like it might happen. Suddenly, there was an uncontestable space in our lives, and one day over breakfast, Amy looked up from her toast and said, *I'm off the pill.* Just like that. She was off the pill three months, and nothing happened, and not long after the move to Missouri, she made an appointment for us to start the medical intervention. Once Amy started a project, she didn't like to dilly-dally: "We'll tell them we've been trying a year," she said. Foolishly I agreed—we were barely ever touching each other by then, but we still thought a kid made sense. Sure.

"You'll have to do your part too, you know," she said on the drive to St. Louis. "You'll have to give semen."

"I know. Why do you say it like that?"

"I just figured you'd be too proud. Self-conscious and proud."

I was a rather nasty cocktail of both those traits, but at the fertility center, I dutifully entered the strange small room dedicated to self-abuse: a place where hundreds of men had entered for no other purpose than to crank the shank, clean the rifle, jerk the gherkin, make the bald man cry, pound the flounder, sail the mayonnaise seas, wiggle the walrus, whitewash with Tom and Huck.

(I sometimes use humor as self-defense.)

The room contained a vinyl-covered armchair, a TV, and a table that held a grab bag of porn and a box of tissues. The porn was early '90s, judging from the women's hair (yes: top and bottom), and the action was midcore. (Another good essay: Who selects the porn for fertility centers? Who judges what will get men off yet not be too degrading to all the women outside the cum-room, the nurses and doctors and hopeful, hormone-addled wives?)

I visited the room on three separate occasions—they like to have a lot of backup—while Amy did nothing. She was supposed to begin taking pills, but she didn't, and then she didn't some more. She was the one who'd be pregnant, the one who'd turn over her body to the baby, so I postponed nudging her for a few months, keeping an eye on the pill bottle to see if the level went down. Finally, after a few beers one winter night, I crunched up the steps of our home, shed my snow-crusted clothes, and curled up next to her in bed, my face near her shoulder, breathing her in, warming the tip of my nose on her skin. I whispered the words—*Let's do this, Amy, let's have a baby*—and she said no. I was expecting nervousness, caution, worry—*Nick, will I be a good mom?*—but I got a clipped, cold *no*. A no without loopholes. Nothing dramatic, no big deal, just not something she was interested in anymore. “Because I realized I'd be stuck doing all the hard stuff,” she reasoned. “All the diapers and doctors' appointments and discipline, and you'd just breeze in and be Fun Daddy. I'd do all the work to make them good people, and you'd undo it anyway, and they'd love you and hate me.”

I told Amy it wasn't true, but she didn't believe me. I told her I didn't just *want* a child, I *needed* a child. I had to know I could love a person unconditionally, that I could make a little creature feel constantly welcome and wanted no matter what. That I could be a different kind of father than my dad was. That I could raise a boy who wasn't like me.

I begged her. Amy remained unmoved.

A year later, I got a notice in the mail: The clinic would dispose of my semen unless they heard from us. I left the letter on the dining room table, an open rebuke. Three days later, I saw it in the trash. That was our final communication on the subject.

By then I'd already been secretly dating Andie for months, so I had no right to be upset. But that didn't stop my aching, and it didn't stop me from daydreaming about our boy, mine and Amy's. I'd gotten attached to him. The fact was, Amy and I would make a great child.

• • •

The marionettes were watching me with alarmed black eyes. I peered out my window, saw that the news trucks had packed it in, so I went out into the warm night. Time to walk. Maybe a lone tabloid writer was trailing me; if so, I didn't care. I headed through our complex, then forty-five minutes out along River Road, then onto the highway that shot right through the middle of Carthage. Thirty loud, fummy minutes—past car dealerships with trucks displayed appealingly like desserts, past fast-food chains and liquor stores and mini-marts and gas stations—until I reached the turnoff for downtown. I had encountered not a single other person on foot the entire time, only faceless blurs whizzing past me in cars.

It was close to midnight. I passed The Bar, tempted to go in but put off by the crowds. A reporter or two had to be camped out in there. It's what I would do. But I wanted to be in a bar. I wanted to be surrounded by people, having fun, blowing off steam. I walked another fifteen minutes to the other end of downtown, to a cheesier, rowdier, younger bar where the bathrooms were always laced with vomit on Saturday nights. It was a bar that Andie's crowd would go to, and perhaps, who knew, drag along Andie. It would be a nice bit of luck to see her there. At least gauge her mood from across the room. And if she wasn't there then I'd have a fucking drink.

I went as deep into the bar as I could—no Andie, no Andie. My face was partially covered by a baseball cap. Even so, I felt a few pings as I moved past crowds of drinkers: heads abruptly turning toward me, the wide eyes of identification. *That guy! Right?*

Mid-July. I wondered if I'd become so nefarious come October, I'd be some frat boy's tasteless Halloween costume: mop of blond hair, an *Amazing Amy* book tucked under an armpit. Go said she'd received half a dozen phone calls asking if The Bar had an official T-shirt for sale. (We didn't, thank God.)

I sat down and ordered a Scotch from the bartender, a guy about my age who stared at me a beat too long, deciding whether he would serve me. He finally, grudgingly, set down a small tumbler in front of

me, his nostrils flared. When I got out my wallet, he aimed an alarmed palm up at me. “I do not want your money, man. Not at all.”

I left cash anyway. Asshole.

When I tried to flag him for another drink, he glanced my way, shook his head, and leaned in toward the woman he was chatting up. A few seconds later, she discreetly looked toward me, pretending she was stretching. Her mouth turned down as she nodded. *That’s him. Nick Dunne.* The bartender never came back.

You can’t yell, you can’t strong-arm: *Hey, jackass, will you get me a goddamn drink or what?* You can’t be the asshole they believe you are. You just have to sit and take it. But I wasn’t leaving. I sat with my empty glass in front of me and pretended I was thinking very hard. I checked my disposable cell, just in case Andie had called. No. Then I pulled out my real phone and played a round of solitaire, pretending to be engrossed. My wife had done this to me, turned me into a man who couldn’t get a drink in his own hometown. God, I hated her.

“Was it Scotch?”

A girl about Andie’s age was standing in front of me. Asian, black shoulder-length hair, cubicle-cute.

“Excuse me?”

“What you were drinking? Scotch?”

“Yeah. Having trouble getting—”

She was gone, to the end of the bar, and she was nosing into the bartender’s line of vision with a big *help me* smile, a girl used to making her presence known, and then she was back with a Scotch in an actual big-boy tumbler.

“Take it,” she nudged, and I did. “Cheers.” She held up her own clear, fizzing drink. We clinked glasses. “Can I sit?”

“I’m not staying long, actually—” I looked around, making sure no one was aiming a cameraphone at us.

“So, okay,” she said with a shruggy smile. “I could pretend I don’t know you’re Nick Dunne, but I’m not going to insult you. I’m rooting for you, by the way. You’ve been getting a bad rap.”

“Thanks. It’s, uh, it’s a weird time.”

“I’m serious. You know how, in court, they talk about the *CSI* effect? Like, everyone on the jury has watched so much *CSI* that they believe science can prove anything?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I think there’s an Evil Husband effect. Everyone has seen too many true-crime shows where the husband is always, always the killer, so people automatically assume the husband’s the bad guy.”

“That’s exactly it,” I said. “Thank you. That is exactly it. And Ellen Abbott—”

“Fuck Ellen Abbott,” my new friend said. “She’s a one-woman walking, talking, man-hating perversion of the justice system.” She raised her glass again.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Another Scotch?”

“That’s a gorgeous name.”

Her name, as it turned out, was Rebecca. She had a ready credit card and a hollow leg. (*Another? Another? Another?*) She was from Muscatine, Iowa (another Mississippi River town), and had moved to New York after undergrad to be a writer (also like me). She’d been an editorial assistant at three different magazines—a bridal magazine, a working-mom magazine, a teen-girl magazine—all of which had shuttered in the past few years, so she was now working for a crime blog called *Whodunnit*, and she was (giggle) in town to try to get an interview with me. Hell, I had to love her hungry-kid chutzpah: *Just fly me to Carthage—the major networks haven’t gotten him, but I’m sure I can!*

“I’ve been waiting outside your house with the rest of the world, and then at the police station, and then I decided I needed a drink. And here you walk in. It’s just too perfect. Too weird, right?” she said. She had little gold hoop earrings that she kept playing with, her hair tucked behind her ears.

“I should go,” I said. My words were sticky around the edges, the beginnings of a slur.

“But you never told me why you’re here,” Rebecca said. “I have to say, it takes a lot of courage, I think, for you to head out without a

friend or some sort of backup. I bet you get a lot of shitty looks.”

I shrugged: *No big deal.*

“People judging everything you do without even knowing you. Like you with the cell-phone photo at the park. I mean, you were probably like me: You were raised to be polite. But no one wants the real story. They just want to ... *gotcha*. You know?”

“I’m just tired of people judging me because I fit into a certain mold.”

She raised her eyebrows; her earrings jittered.

I thought of Amy sitting in her mystery control center, wherever the fuck she was, judging me from every angle, finding me wanting even from afar. Was there anything she could see that would make her call off this madness?

I went on, “I mean, people think we were in a rocky marriage, but actually, right before she disappeared, she put together a treasure hunt for me.”

Amy would want one of two things: for me to learn my lesson and fry like the bad boy I was; or for me to learn my lesson and love her the way she deserved and be a good, obedient, chastised, dickless little boy.

“This wonderful treasure hunt.” I smiled. Rebecca shook her head with a little-V frown. “My wife, she always did a treasure hunt for our anniversary. One clue leads to a special place where I find the next clue, and so on. Amy ...” I tried to get my eyes to fill, settled for wiping them. The clock above the door read 12:37 A.M. “Before she went missing, she hid all the clues. For this year.”

“Before she disappeared on your anniversary.”

“And it’s been all that’s kept me together. It made me feel closer to her.”

Rebecca pulled out a Flip camera. “Let me interview you. On camera.”

“Bad idea.”

“I’ll give it context,” she said. “That’s exactly what you need, Nick, I swear. Context. You need it bad. Come on, just a few words.”

I shook my head. “Too dangerous.”

“Say what you just said. I’m serious, Nick. I’m the opposite of Ellen Abbott. The anti–Ellen Abbott. You need me in your life.” She held up the camera, its tiny red light eyeing me.

“Seriously, turn it off.”

“Help a girl out. I get the Nick Dunne interview? My career is made. You’ve done your good deed for the year. Pleeese? No harm, Nick, one minute. Just one minute. I swear I will only make you look good.”

She motioned to a nearby booth where we’d be tucked out of view of any gawkers. I nodded and we resettled, that little red light aimed at me the whole time.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“Tell me about the treasure hunt. It sounds romantic. Like, quirky, awesome, romantic.”

*Take control of the story, Nick. For both the capital-P public and the capital-C wife. Right now, I thought, I am a man who loves his wife and will find her. I am a man who loves his wife, and I am the good guy. I am the one to root for. I am a man who isn’t perfect, but my wife is, and I will be very, very obedient from now on.*

I could do this more easily than feign sadness. Like I said, I can operate in sunlight. Still, I felt my throat tighten as I got ready to say the words.

“My wife, she just happens to be the coolest girl I’ve ever met. How many guys can say that? *I married the coolest girl I ever met.*”

*Youfuckingbitchyoufuckingbitchyoufuckingbitch. Come home so I can kill you.*

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

NINE DAYS GONE

I wake up feeling immediately nervous. Off. *I cannot be found here*, that's what I wake up thinking, a burst of words, like a flash in my brain. The investigation is not going fast enough, and my money situation is just the opposite, and Jeff's and Greta's greedy antennae are up. And I smell like fish.

There was something about Jeff and that race to the shoreline, toward my bundled dress and my money belt. Something about the way Greta keeps alighting on *Ellen Abbott*. It makes me nervous. Or am I being paranoid? I sound like Diary Amy: *Is my husband going to kill me or am I imagining!?!?* For the first time I actually feel sorry for her.

I make two calls to the Amy Dunne tip line, and speak to two different people, and offer two different tips. It's hard to tell how quickly they'll reach the police—the volunteers seem utterly disinterested. I drive to the library in a dark mood. I need to pack up and leave. Clean my cabin with bleach, wipe my fingerprints off everything, vacuum for any hairs. Erase Amy (and Lydia and Nancy) and go. If I go, I'll be safe. Even if Greta and Jeff do suspect who I am, as long as I'm not caught in the flesh, I'm okay. Amy Elliott Dunne is like a yeti—coveted and folkloric—and they are two Ozarks grifters whose blurry story will be immediately debunked. I will leave today. That's what I decide when I walk with my head bowed into the chilly, mostly uninhabited library with its three vacant computers and I go online to catch up on Nick.

Since the vigil, the news about Nick has been on repeat—the same facts on a circuit, over and over, getting louder and louder, but with no new information. But today something is different. I type Nick's name into the search engine, and the blogs are going nuts, because my husband has gotten drunk and done an insane interview, in a bar, with a random girl wielding a Flip camera. God, the idiot never learns.

*NICK DUNNE'S VIDEO CONFESSION!!!*

*NICK DUNNE, DRUNKEN DECLARATIONS!!!*

My heart jumps so high, my uvula begins pulsing. My husband has fucked himself again.

The video loads, and there is Nick. He has the sleepy eyes he gets when he's drunk, the heavy lids, and he's got his sideways grin, and he's talking about me, and he looks like a human being. He looks happy. "My wife, she just happens to be the coolest girl I've ever met," he says. "How many guys can say that? *I married the coolest girl I ever met.*"

My stomach flutters delicately. I was not expecting this. I almost smile.

"What's so cool about her?" the girl asks off-screen. Her voice is high, sorority-cheery.

Nick launches into the treasure hunt, how it was our tradition, how I always remembered hilarious inside jokes, and right now this was all he had left of me, so he had to complete the treasure hunt. It was his mission.

"I just reached the end this morning," he says. His voice is husky. He has been talking over the crowd. He'll go home and gargle with warm salt water, like his mother always made him do. If I were at home with him, he'd ask me to heat the water and make it for him, because he never got the right amount of salt. "And it made me ... realize a lot. She is the only person in the world who has the power to surprise me, you know? Everyone else, I always know what they're going to say, because everyone says the same thing. We all watch the same shows, we read the same stuff, we recycle everything. But Amy, she is her own perfect person. She just has this *power* over me."

"Where do you think she is now, Nick?"

My husband looks down at his wedding band and twirls it twice.

"Are you okay, Nick?"

"The truth? No. I failed my wife so entirely. I have been so wrong. I just hope it's not too late. For me. For us."

"You're at the end of your rope. Emotionally."

Nick looks right at the camera. “I want my wife. I want her to be right here.” He takes a breath. “I’m not the best at showing emotion. I know that. But I love her. I need her to be okay. She has to be okay. I have so much to make up to her.”

“Like what?”

He laughs, the chagrined laugh that even now I find appealing. In better days, I used to call it the talk-show laugh: It was the quick downward glance, the scratching of a corner of the mouth with a casual thumb, the inhaled chuckle that a charming movie star always deploys right before telling a killer story.

“Like, none of your business.” He smiles. “I just have a lot to make up to her. I wasn’t the husband I could have been. We had a few hard years, and I ... I lost my shit. I stopped trying. I mean, I’ve heard that phrase a thousand times: *We stopped trying*. Everyone knows it means the end of a marriage—it’s textbook. But I stopped trying. It was me. I wasn’t the man I needed to be.” Nick’s lids are heavy, his speech off-kilter enough that his twang is showing. He is past tipsy, one drink before drunk. His cheeks are pink with alcohol. My fingertips glow, remembering the heat of his skin when he had a few cocktails in him.

“So how would you make it up to her?” The camera wobbles for a second; the girl is grabbing her drink.

“How *will* I make it up to her. First I’m going to find her and bring her home. You can bet on that. Then? Whatever she needs from me, I’ll give her. From now on. Because I reached the end of the treasure hunt, and I was brought to my knees. Humbled. My wife has never been more clear to me than she is now. I’ve never been so sure of what I needed to do.”

“If you could talk to Amy right now, what would you tell her?”

“I love you. I will find you. I *will* ...”

I can tell he is about to do the Daniel Day-Lewis line from *The Last of the Mohicans*: “Stay alive ... I *will* find you.” He can’t resist deflecting any sincerity with a quick line of movie dialogue. I can feel him teetering right on the edge of it. He stops himself.

“I love you forever, Amy.”

How heartfelt. How unlike my husband.

. . .

Three morbidly obese hill people on motorized scooters are between me and my morning coffee. Their asses mushroom over the sides of the contraptions, but they still need another Egg McMuffin. There are literally three people, *parked* in front of me, in line, *inside* the McDonald's.

I actually don't care. I'm curiously cheerful despite this twist in the plan. Online, the video is already spiral-viraling away, and the reaction is surprisingly positive. Cautiously optimistic: *Maybe this guy didn't kill his wife after all*. That is, word for word, the most common refrain. Because once Nick lets his guard down and shows some emotion, it's all there. No one could watch that video and believe he was putting up an act. It was no swallow-the-pain sort of amateur theater. My husband loves me. Or at least last night he loved me. While I was plotting his doom in my crummy little cabin that smells of moldy towel, he loved me.

It's not enough. I know that, of course. I can't change my plan. But it gives me pause. My husband has finished the treasure hunt and he is in love. He is also deeply distressed: on one cheek I swear I could spot a hive.

I pull up to my cabin to find Dorothy knocking on my door. Her hair is wet from the heat, brushed straight back like a Wall Street slickster's. She is in the habit of swiping her upper lip, then licking the sweat off her fingers, so she has her index finger in her mouth like a buttery corncob as she turns to me.

"There she is," she says. "The truant."

I am late on my cabin payment. Two days. It almost makes me laugh: I am late on rent.

"I'm so sorry, Dorothy. I'll come by with it in ten minutes."

"I'll wait, if you don't mind."

"I'm not sure if I'm going to stay. I might have to head on."

"Then you'd still owe me the two days. Eighty dollars, please."

I duck into my cabin, undo my flimsy money belt. I counted my cash on my bed this morning, taking a good long time doling out each bill, a teasing economic striptease, and the big reveal was that I have, *somehow*, I have only \$8,849 left. It costs a lot to live.

When I open the door to hand Dorothy the cash (\$8,769 left), I see Greta and Jeff hanging out on Greta's porch, watching the cash exchange hands. Jeff isn't playing his guitar, Greta isn't smoking. They seem to be standing on her porch just to get a better look at me. They both wave at me, *hey, sweetie*, and I wave limply back. I close the door and start packing.

It's strange how little I own in this world when I used to own so much. I don't own an eggbeater or a soup bowl. I own sheets and towels, but I don't own a decent blanket. I own a pair of scissors so I can keep my hair butchered. It makes me smile because Nick didn't own a pair of scissors when we moved in together. No scissors, no iron, no stapler, and I remember asking him how he thought he was possibly civilized without a pair of scissors, and he said of course he wasn't and swooped me up in his arms and threw me on the bed and pounced on top of me, and I laughed because I was still Cool Girl. I laughed instead of thinking about what it meant.

One should never marry a man who doesn't own a decent set of scissors. That would be my advice. It leads to bad things.

I fold and pack my clothes in my tiny backpack—the same three outfits I bought and kept in my getaway car a month ago so I didn't have to take anything from home. Toss in my travel toothbrush, calendar, comb, lotion, the sleeping pills I bought, back when I was going to drug and drown myself. My cheap swimsuits. It takes such little time, the whole thing.

I put on my latex gloves and wipe down everything. I pull out the drains to get any trapped hair. I don't really think Greta and Jeff know who I am, but if they do, I don't want to leave any proof, and the whole time I say to myself, *This is what you get for relaxing, this is what you get for not thinking all the time, all the time. You deserve to get caught, a girl who acts so stupidly, and what if you left hairs in the front office, then what, and what if there are fingerprints in Jeff's car or Greta's kitchen, what then, why did you ever think you could be someone who didn't worry?* I picture the police scouring the cabins, finding nothing, and then, like a movie, I go in for a close-up of one lone mousy hair of mine, drifting along the concrete floor of the pool, waiting to damn me.

Then my mind swings the other way: *Of course no one is going to show up to look for you here.* All the police have to go on is the claim

of a few grifters that they saw the real Amy Elliott Dunne at a cheap broke-down cabin court in the middle of nowhere. Little people wanting to feel bigger, that's what they'd assume.

An assertive knock at the door. The kind a parent gives right before swinging the door wide: *I own this place*. I stand in the middle of my room and debate not answering. Bang bang bang. I understand now why so many horror movies use that device—the mysterious knock on the door—because it has the weight of a nightmare. You don't know what's out there, yet you know you'll open it. You'll think what I think: *No one bad ever knocks*.

*Hey, sweetheart, we know you're home, open up!*

I strip off my latex gloves, open the door, and Jeff and Greta are standing on my porch, the sun to their backs, their features in shadow.

"Hey, pretty lady, can we come in?" Jeff asks.

"I actually— I was going to come see you guys," I say, trying to sound flippant, harried. "I'm leaving tonight—tomorrow or tonight. Got a call from back home, got to get going back home."

"Home Louisiana or home Savannah?" Greta says. She and Jeff have been talking about me.

"Louisi—"

"It doesn't matter," Jeff says, "let us in for a second, we come to say goodbye."

He steps toward me, and I think about screaming or slamming the door, but I don't think either will go well. Better to pretend everything is fine and hope that is true.

Greta closes the door behind them and leans against it as Jeff wanders into the tiny bedroom, then the kitchen, chatting about the weather. Opening doors and cabinets.

"You got to clear everything out; Dorothy will keep your deposit if you don't," he says. "She's a stickler." He opens the refrigerator, peers into the crisper, the freezer. "Not even a jar of ketchup can you leave. I always thought that was weird. Ketchup doesn't go bad."

He opens the closet and lifts up the cabin bedding I've folded, shakes out the sheets. "I always, always shake out the sheets," he says.

“Just to make sure nothing is inside—a sock or underwear or what have you.”

He opens the drawer of my bedside table, kneels down, and looks all the way to the back. “Looks like you’ve done a good job,” he says, standing up and smiling, brushing his hands off on his jeans. “Got everything.”

He scans me, neck to foot and back up. “Where is it, sweetheart?”

“What’s that?”

“Your money.” He shrugs. “Don’t make it hard. Me ’n her really need it.”

Greta is silent behind me.

“I have about twenty bucks.”

“Lie,” Jeff said. “You pay for everything, even rent, in cash. Greta saw you with that big wad of money. So hand it over, and you can leave, and we all never have to see each other again.”

“I’ll call the police.”

“Go ahead! My guest.” Jeff waits, arms crossed, thumbs in his armpits.

“Your glasses are fake,” Greta says. “They’re just glass.”

I say nothing, stare at her, hoping she’ll back down. These two seem just nervous enough they may change their minds, say they’re screwing with me, and the three of us will laugh and know otherwise but all agree to pretend.

“And your hair, the roots are coming in, and they’re blond, a lot prettier than whatever color you dyed it—*hamster*—and that haircut is awful, by the way,” Greta says. “You’re hiding—from whatever. I don’t know if it really is a guy or what, but you’re not going to call the police. So just give us the money.”

“Jeff talk you into this?” I ask.

“I talked Jeff into it.”

I start toward the door that Greta’s blocking. “Let me out.”

“Give us the money.”

I make a grab for the door, and Greta swings toward me, shoves me

against the wall, one hand smashed over my face, and with the other, she pulls up my dress, yanks off the money belt.

“Don’t, Greta, I’m serious! Stop!”

Her hot, salty palm is all over my face, jamming my nose; one of her fingernails scrapes my eye. Then she pushes me back against the wall, my head banging, my teeth coming down on the tip of my tongue. The whole scuffle is very quiet.

I have the buckle end of the belt in my hand, but I can’t see to fight her, my eye is watering too much, and she soon rips away my grip, leaving a burning scrape of fingernails on my knuckles. She shoves me again and opens the zipper, fingers through the money.

“Holy shit,” she says. “This is like”—she counts—“more’n a thousand, two or three. Holy shit. Damn, girl! You rob a bank?”

“She may *have*,” Jeff says. “Embezzlement.”

In a movie, one of Nick’s movies, I would upthrust my palm into Greta’s nose, drop her to the floor bloody and unconscious, then roundhouse Jeff. But the truth is, I don’t know how to fight, and there are two of them, and it doesn’t seem worth it. I will run at them, and they will grab me by the wrists while I pat and fuss at them like a child, or they will get really angry and beat the crap out of me. I’ve never been hit. I’m scared of getting hurt by someone else.

“You going to call the police, go ahead and call them,” Jeff says again.

“Fuck you,” I whisper.

“Sorry about this,” Greta says. “Next place you go, be more careful, okay? You gotta not look like a girl traveling by herself, hiding out.”

“You’ll be okay,” Jeff says.

He pats me on the arm as they leave.

A quarter and a dime sit on the bedside table. It’s all my money in the world.

# NICK DUNNE

NINE DAYS GONE

Good morning! I sat in bed with my laptop by my side, enjoying the online reviews of my impromptu interview. My left eyeball was throbbing a bit, a light hangover from the cheap Scotch, but the rest of me was feeling pretty satisfied. Last night I cast the first line to lure my wife back in. *I'm sorry, I will make it up to you, I will do whatever you want from now on, I will let the world know how special you are.*

Because I was fucked unless Amy decided to show herself. Tanner's detective (a wiry, clean-cut guy, not the boozy noir gumshoe I'd hoped for) had come up with nothing so far—my wife had disappeared herself perfectly. I had to convince Amy to come back to me, flush her out with compliments and capitulation.

If the reviews were any indication, I made the right call, because the reviews were good. They were very good:

*The Iceman Melteth!*

*I KNEW he was a good guy.*

*In vino veritas!*

*Maybe he didn't kill her after all.*

*Maybe he didn't kill her after all.*

*Maybe he didn't kill her after all.*

And they'd stopped calling me Lance.

Outside my house, the cameramen and journalists were restless, they wanted a statement from the guy who Maybe Didn't Kill Her After All. They were yelling at my drawn blinds: *Hey, Nick, come on out, tell us about Amy. Hey, Nick, tell us about your treasure hunt.* For them it was just a new wrinkle in a ratings bonanza, but it was much better than *Nick, did you kill your wife?*

And then, suddenly, they were yelling Go's name—they loved Go,

she had no poker face, you knew if Go was sad, angry, worried; stick a caption underneath, and you had a whole story. *Margo, is your brother innocent? Margo, tell us about ... Tanner, is your client innocent? Tanner*

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The doorbell rang, and I opened the door while hiding behind it because I was still disheveled; my spiky hair and wilted boxers would tell their own story. Last night, on camera, I was adorably smitten, a tad tipsy, in vino veritastic. Now I just looked like a drunk. I closed the door and waited for two more glowing reviews of my performance.

“You don’t ever—*ever*—do something like that again,” Tanner started. “What the hell is wrong with you, Nick? I feel like I need to put one of those toddler leashes on you. How stupid can you be?”

“Have you seen all the comments online? People love it. I’m turning around public opinion, like you told me to.”

“You don’t do that kind of thing in an uncontrolled environment,” he said. “What if she worked for Ellen Abbott? What if she started asking you questions that were harder than *What do you want to say to your wife, cutie-pumpkin-pie?*” He said this in a girlish singsong. His face under the orange spray tan was red, giving him a radioactive palette.

“I trusted my instincts. I’m a journalist, Tanner, you have to give me some credit that I can smell bullshit. She was genuinely sweet.”

He sat down on the sofa, put his feet on the ottoman that would never have flipped over on its own. “Yeah, well, so was your wife once,” he said. “So was Andie once. How’s your cheek?”

It still hurt; the bite seemed to throb as he reminded me of it. I turned to Go for support.

“It wasn’t smart, Nick,” she said, sitting down across from Tanner. “You were *really, really* lucky—it turned out *really* well, but it might not have.”

“You guys are *really* overreacting. Can we enjoy a small moment of good news? Just thirty seconds of good news in the past nine days? Please?”

Tanner pointedly looked at his watch. “Okay, go.”

When I started to talk, he popped his index finger, made the *uhp-uhp* noise that grown-ups make when children try to interrupt. Slowly, his index finger lowered, then landed on the watch face.

“Okay, thirty seconds. Did you enjoy it?” He paused to see if I’d say anything—the pointed silence a teacher allows after asking the disruptive student: *Are you done talking?* “Now we need to talk. We are in a place where excellent timing is absolutely key.”

“I agree.”

“Gee, thanks.” He arched an eyebrow at me. “I want to go to the police very, very soon with the contents of the woodshed. While the *hoi polloi* is—”

*Just hoi polloi*, I thought, *not the hoi polloi*. It was something Amy had taught me.

“—all loving on you again. Or, excuse me, not *again*. Finally. The reporters have found Go’s house, and I don’t feel secure leaving that woodshed, its contents, undisclosed much longer. The Elliotts are ...?”

“We can’t count on the Elliotts’ support anymore,” I said. “Not at all.”

Another pause. Tanner decided not to lecture me, or even ask what happened.

“So we need offense,” I said, feeling untouchable, angry, ready.

“Nick, don’t let one good turn make you feel indestructible,” Go said. She pressed some extra-strengths from her purse into my hand. “Get rid of your hangover. You need to be on today.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I told her. I popped the pills, turned to Tanner. “What do we do? Let’s make a plan.”

“Great, here’s the deal,” Tanner said. “This is incredibly unorthodox, but that’s me. Tomorrow we are doing an interview with Sharon Schieber.”

“Wow, that’s ... for sure?” Sharon Schieber was as good as I could ask for: the top-rated (ages 30–55) network (broader reach than cable) newswoman (to prove I could have respectful relations with people who have vaginas) working today. She was known for dabbling very occasionally in the impure waters of true-crime journalism, but when she did, she got freakin’ righteous. Two years

ago, she took under her silken wing a young mother who had been imprisoned for shaking her infant to death. Sharon Schieber presented a whole legal—and very emotional—defense case over a series of nights. The woman is now back home in Nebraska, remarried and expecting a child.

“That’s for sure. She got in touch after the video went viral.”

“So the video did help.” I couldn’t resist.

“It gave you an interesting wrinkle: Before the video, it was clear you did it. Now there’s a slight chance you didn’t. I don’t know how it is you finally seemed genuine—”

“Because last night it served an actual purpose: Get Amy back,” Go said. “It was an offensive maneuver. Where before it would just be indulgent, undeserved, disingenuous emotion.”

I gave her a thank-you smile.

“Well, keep remembering that it is serving a purpose,” Tanner said. “Nick, I’m not fucking around here: This is beyond unorthodox. Most lawyers would be shutting you up. But it’s something I’ve been wanting to try. The media has saturated the legal environment. With the Internet, Facebook, YouTube, there’s no such thing as an unbiased jury anymore. No clean slate. Eighty, ninety percent of a case is decided before you get in the courtroom. So why not use it—control the story. But it’s a risk. I want every word, every gesture, every bit of information planned out ahead of time. But you have to be natural, likable, or this will all backfire.”

“Oh, that sounds simple,” I said. “One hundred percent canned yet totally genuine.”

“You have to be extremely careful with your wording, and we will tell Sharon that you won’t answer certain questions. She’ll ask you anyway, but we’ll teach you how to say, *Because of certain prejudicial actions by the police involved in this case, I really, unfortunately, can’t answer that right now, as much as I’d like to*—and say it convincingly.”

“Like a talking dog.”

“Sure, like a talking dog who doesn’t want to go to prison. We get Sharon Schieber to take you on as a cause, Nick, and we are golden. This is all incredibly unorthodox, but that’s me,” Tanner said again.

He liked the line; it was his theme music. He paused and furrowed his brow, doing his pretend-thinking gesture. He was going to add something I wouldn't like.

"What?" I asked.

"You need to tell Sharon Schieber about Andie—because it's going to come out, the affair, it just will."

"Right when people are finally starting to like me. You want me to undo that?"

"I *swear* to you, Nick—how many cases have I handled? It always—somehow, some way—*always* comes out. This way we have control. You tell her about Andie and you apologize. Apologize literally as if your life depends on it. You had an affair, you are a man, a weak, stupid man. *But* you love your wife, and you will make it up to her. You do the interview, it'll air the next night. All content is embargoed—so the network can't tease the Andie affair in their ads. They can just use the word *bombshell*."

"So you already told them about Andie?"

"Good God, no," he said. "I told them: *We have a nice bombshell for you*. So you do the interview, and we have about twenty-four hours. Just before it hits TV, we tell Boney and Gilpin about Andie and about our discovery in the woodshed. *Oh my gosh, we've put it all together for you: Amy is alive and she's framing Nick! She's crazy, jealous, and she is framing Nick! Oh, the humanity!*"

"Why not tell Sharon Schieber, then? About Amy framing me?"

"Reason one. You come clean about Andie, you beg forgiveness, the nation is primed to forgive you, they'll feel sorry for you—Americans love to see sinners apologize. But you can reveal nothing to make your wife look bad; no one wants to see the cheating husband blame the wife for anything. Let someone else do it sometime the next day: *Sources close to the police* reveal that Nick's wife—the one he swore he loved with all his heart—is framing him! It's great TV."

"What's reason two?"

"It's too complicated to explain exactly how Amy is framing you. You can't do it in a sound bite. It's bad TV."

"I feel sick," I said.

“Nick, it’s—” Go started.

“I know, I know, it has to be done. But can you imagine, your biggest secret and you have to tell the world about it? I know I have to do it. And it works for us, ultimately, I think. It’s the only way Amy might come back,” I said. “She wants me to be publicly humiliated—”

“Chastened,” Tanner interrupted. “Humiliated makes it sound like you feel sorry for yourself.”

“—and to publicly apologize,” I continued. “But it’s going to be fucking awful.”

“Before we go forward, I want to be honest here,” Tanner said. “Telling the police the whole story—Amy’s framing Nick—it is a risk. Most cops, they decide on a suspect and they don’t want to veer at all. They’re not open to any other options. So there’s the risk that we tell them and they laugh us out of the station and they arrest you—and then theoretically we’ve just given them a preview of our defense. So they can plan exactly how to destroy it at trial.”

“Okay, wait, that sounds really, really bad, Tanner,” Go said. “Like, bad, inadvisable bad.”

“Let me finish,” Tanner said. “One, I think you’re right, Nick. I think Boney isn’t convinced you’re a killer. I think she would be open to an alternate theory. She has a good reputation as a cop who’s actually fair. As a cop who has good instincts. I talked with her. I got a good vibe. I think the evidence is leading her in your direction, but I think her gut is telling her something’s off. More important, if we do go to trial, I wouldn’t use the Amy frame-up as your defense, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like I said, it’s too complicated, a jury wouldn’t be able to follow. If it’s not good TV, believe me, it’s not for a jury. We’d go with more of an O.J. thing. A simple story line: The cops are incompetent and out to get you, it’s all circumstantial, if the glove doesn’t fit, blah blah, blah.”

“Blah blah blah, that gives me a lot of confidence,” I said.

Tanner flashed a smile. “Juries love me, Nick. I’m one of them.”

“You’re the opposite of one of them, Tanner.”

“Reverse that: They’d like to think they’re one of me.”

Everything we did now, we did in front of small brambles of flashing paparazzi, so Go, Tanner, and I left the house under pops of light and pings of noise. (“Don’t look down,” Tanner advised, “don’t smile, but don’t look ashamed. Don’t rush either, just walk, let them take their shots, and shut the door before you call them names. Then you can call them whatever you want.”) We were headed down to St. Louis, where the interview would take place, so I could prep with Tanner’s wife, Betsy, a former TV news anchor turned lawyer. She was the other Bolt in Bolt & Bolt.

It was a creepy tailgate party: Tanner and I, followed by Go, followed by a half-dozen news vans, but by the time the Arch crept over the skyline, I was no longer thinking of the paparazzi.

By the time we reached Tanner’s penthouse hotel suite, I was ready to do the work I needed to nail the interview. Again I longed for my own theme music: the montage of me getting ready for the big fight. What’s the mental equivalent of a speed bag?

A gorgeous six-foot-tall black woman answered the door.

“Hi, Nick, I’m Betsy Bolt.”

In my mind Betsy Bolt was a diminutive blond Southern-belle white girl.

“Don’t worry, everyone is surprised when they meet me.” Betsy laughed, catching my look, shaking my hand. “Tanner and Betsy, we sound like we should be on the cover of *The Official Preppy Guide*, right?”

“*Preppy Handbook*,” Tanner corrected as he kissed her on the cheek.

“See? He actually knows,” she said.

She ushered us into an impressive penthouse suite—a living room sunlit by wall-to-wall windows, with bedrooms shooting off each side. Tanner had sworn he couldn’t stay in Carthage, at the Days Inn, out of respect for Amy’s parents, but Go and I both suspected he couldn’t stay in Carthage because the closest five-star hotel was in St. Louis.

We engaged in the preliminaries: small talk about Betsy’s family, college, career (all stellar, A-list, awesome), and drinks dispersed for everyone (soda pops and Clamato, which Go and I had come to believe was an affectation of Tanner’s, a quirk he thought would give

him character, like my wearing fake glasses in college). Then Go and I sank down into the leather sofa, Betsy sitting across from us, her legs pressed together to one side, like a slash mark. Pretty/professional. Tanner paced behind us, listening.

“Okay. So, Nick,” Betsy said. “I’ll be frank, yes?”

“Yes.”

“You and TV. Aside from your bar-blog thingie, the Whodunnit.com thingie last night, you’re *awful*.”

“There was a reason I went to print journalism,” I said. “I see a camera, and my face freezes.”

“Exactly,” Betsy said. “You look like a mortician, so stiff. I got a trick to fix that, though.”

“Booze?” I asked. “That worked for me on the blog thingie.”

“That won’t work here,” Betsy said. She began setting up a video camera. “Thought we’d do a dry run first. I’ll be Sharon. I’ll ask the questions she’ll probably ask, and you answer the way you normally would. That way we can know how far off the mark you are.” She laughed again. “Hold on.” She was wearing a blue sheath dress, and from an oversize leather purse she pulled a string of pearls. The Sharon Schieber uniform. “Tanner?”

Her husband fastened the pearls for her, and when they were in place, Betsy grinned. “I aim for absolute authenticity. Aside from my Georgia accent. And being black.”

“I see only Sharon Schieber before me,” I said.

She turned the camera on, sat down across from me, let out a breath, looked down, and then looked up. “Nick, there have been many discrepancies in this case,” Betsy said in Sharon’s plummy broadcast voice. “To begin with, can you walk our audience through the day your wife went missing?”

“Here, Nick, you only discuss the anniversary breakfast you two had,” Tanner interrupted. “Since that is already out there. But you don’t give time lines, you don’t discuss before and after breakfast. You are emphasizing only this wonderful last breakfast you had. Okay, go.”

“Yes.” I cleared my throat. The camera was blinking red; Betsy had

her quizzical-journalist expression on. “Uh, as you know, it was our five-year anniversary, and Amy got up early and was making crepes —”

Betsy’s arm shot out, and my cheek suddenly stung.

“What the hell?” I said, trying to figure out what had happened. A cherry-red jellybean was in my lap. I held it up.

“Every time you tense up, every time you turn that handsome face into an undertaker’s mask, I am going to hit you with a jellybean,” Betsy explained, as if the whole thing were quite reasonable.

“And that’s supposed to make me *less* tense?”

“It works,” Tanner said. “It’s how she taught me. I think she used rocks with me, though.” They exchanged *oh, you!* married smiles. I could tell already: They were one of those couples who always seemed to be starring in their own morning talk show.

“Now start again, but linger over the crepes,” Betsy said. “Were they your favorites? Or hers? And what were you doing that morning for your wife while she was making crepes for you?”

“I was sleeping.”

“What had you bought her for a gift?”

“I hadn’t yet.”

“Oh, boy.” She rolled her eyes over to her husband. “Then be really, really, *really* complimentary about those crepes, okay? And about what you were *going* to get her that day for a present. Because I know you were not coming back to that house without a present.”

We started again, and I described our crepe tradition that wasn’t really, and I described how careful and wonderful Amy was with picking out gifts (here another jellybean smacked just right of my nose, and I immediately loosened my jaw) and how I, dumb guy (“Definitely play up the doofus-husband stuff,” Betsy advised), was still trying to come up with something dazzling.

“It wasn’t like she even liked expensive or fancy presents,” I began, and was hit with a paper ball from Tanner.

“What?”

“Past tense. Stop using fucking past tense about your wife.”

“I understand you and your wife had some bumps,” Betsy continued.

“It had been a rough few years. We’d both lost our jobs.”

“Good, yes!” Tanner called. “You *both* had.”

“We’d moved back here to help care for my dad, who has Alzheimer’s, and my late mother, who had cancer, and on top of that I was working very hard at my new job.”

“Good, Nick, good,” Tanner said.

“Be sure to mention how close you were with your mom,” Betsy said, even though I’d never mentioned my mom to her. “No one will pop up to deny that, right? No Mommy Dearest or Sonny Dearest stories out there?”

“No, my mom and I were very close.”

“Good,” said Betsy. “Mention her a lot, then. And that you own the bar with your sister—always mention your sister when you mention the bar. If you own a bar on your own, you’re a player; if you own it with your beloved twin sister, you’re—”

“Irish.”

“Go on.”

“And so it all built up—” I started.

“No,” Tanner said. “Implies building up to an explosion.”

“So we had gotten off track a little, but I was considering our five-year anniversary as a time to revive our relationship—”

“*Recommit to our relationship*,” Tanner called. “*Revive* means something was dead.”

“Recommit to our relationship—”

“And so how does fucking a twenty-three-year-old figure in to this rejuvenative picture?” Betsy asked.

Tanner lobbed a jellybean her way. “A little out of character, Bets.”

“I’m sorry, guys, but I’m a woman, and that smells like bullshit, like mile-away bullshit. Recommit to the relationship, *please*. That girl was still in the picture when Amy went missing. Women are going to hate you, Nick, unless you suck it up. Be up-front, don’t stall. You can add

it on: *We lost our jobs, we moved, my parents were dying. Then I fucked up. I fucked up huge. I lost track of who I was, and unfortunately, it took losing Amy to realize it.* You have to admit you're a jerk and that everything was all your fault."

"So, like, what men are supposed to do in general," I said.

Betsy flung an annoyed look at the ceiling. "And that's an attitude, Nick, you should be real careful on."

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

NINE DAYS GONE

I am penniless and on the run. How fucking noir. Except that I am sitting in my Festiva at the far end of the parking lot of a vast fast-food complex on the banks of the Mississippi River, the smell of salt and factory-farm meat floating on the warm breezes. It is evening now—I've wasted hours—but I can't move. I don't know where to move to. The car gets smaller by the hour—I am forced to curl up like a fetus or my legs fall asleep. I certainly won't sleep tonight. The door is locked, but I still await the tap on the window, and I know I will peek up and see either a crooked-toothed, sweet-talking serial killer (wouldn't that be ironic, for me to actually be murdered?) or a stern, ID-demanding cop (wouldn't that be worse, for me to be discovered in a parking lot looking like a hobo?). The glowing restaurant signs never go off here; the parking lot is lit like a football field—I think of suicide again, how a prisoner on suicide watch spends twenty-four hours a day under lights, an awful thought. My gas tank is below the quarter mark, an even more awful thought: I can drive only about an hour in any direction, so I must choose the direction carefully. South is Arkansas, north is Iowa, west is back to the Ozarks. Or I could go east, cross the river into Illinois. Everywhere I go is the river. I'm following it or it's following me.

I know, suddenly, what I must do.

# NICK DUNNE

TEN DAYS GONE

We spent the day of the interview huddled in the spare bedroom of Tanner's suite, prepping my lines, fixing my look. Betsy fussed over my clothes, then Go trimmed the hair above my ears with nail scissors while Betsy tried to talk me into using makeup—powder—to cut down on shine. We all spoke in low voices because Sharon's crew was setting up outside; the interview would be in the suite's living room, overlooking the St. Louis Arch. Gateway to the West. I'm not sure what the point of the landmark was except to serve as a vague symbol of the middle of the country: *You Are Here*.

"You need at least a little powder, Nick," Betsy finally said, coming at me with the puff. "Your nose sweats when you get nervous. Nixon lost an election on nose sweat." Tanner oversaw it all like a conductor. "Not too much off that side, Go," he'd call. "Bets, be very careful with that powder, better too little than too much."

"We should have Botoxed him," she said. Apparently, Botox fights sweat as well as wrinkles—some of their clients got a series of underarm shots before a trial, and they were already suggesting such a thing for me. Gently, subtly suggesting, *should* we go to trial.

"Yeah, I really need the press to get wind that I was having Botox treatments while my wife was missing," I said. "Is missing." I knew Amy wasn't dead, but I also knew she was so far out of my reach that she might as well be. She was a wife in past tense.

"Good catch," Tanner said. "Next time do it before it comes out of your mouth."

At five P.M., Tanner's phone rang, and he looked at the display. "Boney." He sent it to voice mail. "I'll call her after." He didn't want any new bit of information, interrogation, gossip to force us to reformulate our message. I agreed: I didn't want Boney in my head just then.

“You sure we shouldn’t see what she wants?” Go said.

“She wants to fuck with me some more,” I said. “We’ll call her. A few hours. She can wait.”

We all rearranged ourselves, a mass group reassurance that the call was nothing to worry about. The room stayed silent for half a minute.

“I have to say, I’m strangely excited to get to meet Sharon Schieber,” Go finally said. “Very classy lady. *Not like that Connie Chung.*”

I laughed, which was the intention. Our mother had loved Sharon Schieber and hated Connie Chung—she’d never forgiven her for embarrassing Newt Gingrich’s mother on TV, something about Newt calling Hillary Clinton a b-i-t-c-h. I don’t remember the actual interview, just our mom’s outrage over it.

At six P.M. we entered the room, where two chairs were set up facing each other, the Arch in the background, the timing picked precisely so the Arch would glow but there would be no sunset glare on the windows. One of the most important moments of my life, I thought, dictated by the angle of the sun. A producer whose name I wouldn’t remember clicked toward us on dangerously high heels and explained to me what I should expect. Questions could be asked several times, to make the interview seem as smooth as possible, and to allow for Sharon’s reaction shots. I could not speak to my lawyer before giving an answer. I could rephrase an answer but not change the substance of the answer. Here’s some water, let’s get you miked.

We started to move over to the chair, and Betsy nudged my arm. When I looked down, she showed me a pocket of jellybeans. “Remember ...” she said, and tsked her finger at me.

Suddenly, the suite door swung wide and Sharon Schieber entered, as smooth as if she were being borne by a team of swans. She was a beautiful woman, a woman who had probably never looked girlish. A woman whose nose probably never sweat. She had thick dark hair and giant brown eyes that could look doelike or wicked.

“It’s Sharon!” Go said, a thrilled whisper to imitate our mom.

Sharon turned to Go and nodded majestically, came over to greet us. “I’m Sharon,” she said in a warm, deep voice, taking both of Go’s hands.

“Our mother loved you,” Go said.

“I’m so glad,” Sharon said, managing to sound warm. She turned to me and was about to speak when her producer clicked up on high heels and whispered in her ear. Then waited for Sharon’s reaction, then whispered again.

“Oh. Oh my God,” Sharon said. When she turned back to me, she wasn’t smiling at all.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

TEN DAYS GONE

I have made a call: to make a call. The meeting can't happen until this evening—there are predictable complications—so I kill the day by primping and prepping.

I clean myself in a McDonald's bathroom—green gel on wet paper towels—and change into a cheap, papery sundress. I think about what I'll say. I am surprisingly eager. The shithole life was wearing on me: the communal washing machine with someone's wet underwear always stuck in the rungs at the top, to be peeled out by hesitant pincer fingers; the corner of my cabin rug that was forever mysteriously damp; the dripping faucet in the bathroom.

At five o'clock, I begin driving north to the meeting spot, a river casino called Horseshoe Alley. It appears out of nowhere, a blinking neon clump in the middle of a scrawny forest. I roll in on fumes—a cliché I've never put to practice—park the car, and take in the view: a migration of the elderly, scuttling like broken insects on walkers and canes, jerking oxygen tanks toward the bright lights. Sliding in and out of the groups of octogenarians are hustling, overdressed boys who've watched too many Vegas movies and don't know how poignant they are, trying to imitate Rat Pack cool in cheap suits in the Missouri woods.

I enter under a glowing billboard promoting—for two nights only—the reunion of a '50s doo-wop group. Inside, the casino is frigid and close. The penny slots clink and clang, joyful electronic chirps that don't match the dull, drooping faces of the people sitting in front of the machines, smoking cigarettes above dangling oxygen masks. Penny in penny in penny in penny in penny in penny in ding-ding-ding! penny in penny in. The money that they waste goes to the underfunded public schools that their bored, blinking grandchildren attend. Penny in penny in. A group of wasted boys stumble past, a bachelor party, the boys' lips wet from shots; they don't even notice me, husky and Hamill-haired. They are talking about girls, *get us some girls*, but

besides me, the only girls I see are golden. The boys will drink away their disappointment and try not to kill fellow motorists on the way home.

I wait in a pocket bar to the far left of the casino entrance, as planned, and watch the aged boy band sing to a large snowy-haired audience, snapping and clapping along, shuffling gnarled fingers through bowls of complimentary peanuts. The skeletal singers, withered beneath bedazzled tuxes, spin slowly, carefully, on replaced hips, the dance of the moribund.

The casino seemed like a good idea at first—right off the highway, filled with drunks and elderly, neither of whom are known for eyesight. But I am feeling crowded and fidgety, aware of the cameras in every corner, the doors that could snap shut.

I am about to leave when he ambles up.

“Amy.”

I’ve called devoted Desi to my aid (and abet). Desi, with whom I’ve never entirely lost touch, and who—despite what I’ve told Nick, my parents—doesn’t unnerve me in the slightest. Desi, another man along the Mississippi. I always knew he might come in handy. It’s good to have at least one man you can use for anything. Desi is a white-knight type. He loves troubled women. Over the years, after Wickshire, when we’d talk, I’d ask after his latest girlfriend, and no matter the girl, he would always say: “Oh, she’s not doing very well, unfortunately.” But I know it is fortunate for Desi—the eating disorders, the painkiller addictions, the crippling depressions. He is never happier than when he’s at a bedside. Not in bed, just perched nearby with broth and juice and a gently starched voice. *Poor darling.*

Now he is here, dashing in a white midsummer suit (Desi changes wardrobes monthly—what was appropriate for June would not work for July—I’ve always admired the discipline, the precision of the Collings’s costuming). He looks good. I don’t. I am too aware of my humid glasses, the extra roll of flesh at my waist.

“Amy.” He touches my cheek, then pulls me in for an embrace. Not a hug, Desi doesn’t hug, it’s more like being encased by something tailored just to you. “Sweetheart. You can’t imagine. That call. I thought I’d gone insane. I thought I was making you up! I’d daydreamed about it, that somehow you were alive, and then. That

call. Are you okay?"

"I am now," I say. "I feel safe now. It's been awful." And then I burst into tears, actual tears, which hadn't been the plan, but they feel so relieving, and they fit the moment so perfectly, that I let myself unravel entirely. The stress drips off me: the nerve of enacting the plan, the fear of being caught, the loss of my money, the betrayal, the manhandling, the pure wildness of being on my own for the first time in my life.

I look quite pretty after a cry of about two minutes—longer than that and the nose goes runny, the puffiness sets in, but up to that, my lips gets fuller, my eyes bigger, my cheeks flushed. I count as I cry into Desi's crisp shoulder, *one Mississippi, two Mississippi*—that river again—and I curb the tears at one minute and forty-eight seconds.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here earlier, sweetheart," Desi says.

"I know how full Jacqueline keeps your schedule," I demur. Desi's mom is a touchy subject in our relationship.

He studies me. "You look *very* ... different," he says. "So full in the face, especially. And your poor hair is—" he catches himself. "Amy. I just never thought I could be so grateful for anything. Tell me what's happened."

I tell a Gothic tale of possessiveness and rage, of Midwest steak-and-potato brutality, barefoot pregnancy, animalistic dominance. Of rape and pills and liquor and fists. Pointed cowboy boots in the ribs, fear and betrayal, parental apathy, isolation, and Nick's final telling words: "You can never leave me. I will kill you. I will find you no matter what. You are mine."

How I had to disappear for my own safety and the safety of my unborn child, and how I needed Desi's help. My savior. My story would satisfy Desi's craving for ruined women—I was now the most damaged of them all. Long ago, back in boarding school, I'd told him about my father's nightly visits to my bedroom, me in a ruffly pink nightgown, staring at the ceiling until he was done. Desi has loved me ever since the lie, I know he pictures making love to me, how gentle and reassuring he would be as he plunged into me, stroking my hair. I know he pictures me crying softly as I give myself to him.

"I can't ever go back to my old life, Desi. Nick will kill me. I'll never

feel safe. But I can't let him go to prison. I just wanted to disappear. I didn't realize the police would think *he* did it."

I glance prettily toward the band onstage, where a skeletal septuagenarian is singing about love. Not far from our table, a straight-backed guy with a trim mustache tosses his cup toward a trash can near us and bricks (a term I learned from Nick). I wish I'd picked a more picturesque spot. And now the guy is looking at me, tilting his head toward the side, in exaggerated confusion. If he were a cartoon, he'd scratch his head, and it would make a rubbery *wiik-wiik* sound. For some reason, I think: *He looks like a cop*. I turn my back to him.

"Nick is the last thing for you to worry about," Desi said. "Give that worry to me and I'll take care of it." He holds out his hand, an old gesture. He is my worry-keeper; it is a ritual game we played as teens. I pretend to place something in his palm and he closes his fingers over it and I actually feel better.

"No, I won't take care of it. I do hope Nick dies for what he did to you," he said. "In a sane society, he would."

"Well, we're in an insane society, so I need to stay hidden," I said. "Do you think that's horrible of me?" I already know the answer.

"Sweetheart, of course not. You are doing what you've been forced to do. It would be madness to do anything else."

He doesn't ask anything about the pregnancy. I knew he wouldn't.

"You're the only one who knows," I say.

"I'll take care of you. What can I do?"

I pretend to balk, chew the edge of my lip, look away and then back to Desi. "I need money to live on for a bit. I thought about getting a job, but—"

"Oh, no, don't do that. You are *everywhere*, Amy—on all the newscasts, all the magazines. Someone would recognize you. Even with this"—he touches my hair—"new sporty cut of yours. You're a beautiful woman, and it's difficult for beautiful women to disappear."

"Unfortunately, I think you're right," I say. "I just don't want you to think I'm taking advantage. I just didn't know where else to—"

The waitress, a plain brunette disguised as a pretty brunette, drops

by, sets our drinks on the table. I turn my face from her and see that the mustached curious guy is standing a little closer, watching me with a half smile. I am off my game. Old Amy never would have come here. My mind is addled by Diet Coke and my own body odor.

“I ordered you a gin and tonic,” I say.

Desi gives a delicate grimace.

“What?” I ask, but I already know.

“That’s my spring drink. I’m Jack and gingers now.”

“Then we’ll get you one of those, and I’ll have your gin.”

“No, it’s fine, don’t worry.”

The lookiloo appears again in my peripheral. “Is that guy, that guy with the mustache—don’t look now—is he staring at me?”

Desi gives a flick of a glance, shakes his head. “He’s watching the ... *singers*.” He says the word dubiously. “You don’t just want a little bit of cash. You’ll get tired of this subterfuge. Not being able to look people in the face. Living among”—he spreads his arms out to include the whole casino—“people with whom I assume you don’t have much in common. Living below your means.”

“That’s what it is for the next ten years. Until I’ve aged enough and the story has gone away and I can feel comfortable.”

“Ha! You’re willing to do that for *ten* years? Amy?”

“Shhh, don’t say the name.”

“Cathy or Jenny or Megan or whatever, don’t be ludicrous.”

The waitress returns, and Desi hands her a twenty and dismisses her. She walks away grinning. Holding the twenty up like it is novel. I take a sip of my drink. The baby won’t mind.

“I don’t think Nick would press charges if you return,” Desi says.

“What?”

“He came by to see me. I think he knows that he’s to blame—”

“He went to see you? When?”

“Last week. Before I’d talked to you, thank God.”

Nick has shown more interest in me these past ten days than he has

in the past few years. I've always wanted a man to get in a fight over me—a brutal, bloody fight. Nick going to interrogate Desi, that's a nice start.

“What did he say?” I ask. “How did he seem?”

“He seemed like a top-drawer asshole. He wanted to pin it on *me*. Told me some insane story about how I—”

I'd always liked that lie about Desi trying to kill himself over me. He had truly been devastated by our breakup, and he'd been really annoying, creepy, hanging around campus, hoping I'd take him back. So he might as well have attempted suicide.

“What did Nick say about me?”

“I think he knows that he can never hurt you now that the world knows and cares about who you are. He'd have to let you come back safely, and you could divorce him and marry the right man.” He took a sip. “At long last.”

“I can't come back, Desi. Even if people believed everything about Nick's abuse. I'd still be the one they hated—I was the one who tricked them. I'd be the biggest pariah in the world.”

“You'd be my pariah, and I'd love you no matter what, and I'd shield you from everything,” Desi said. “You would never have to deal with any of it.”

“We'd never be able to socialize with anyone again.”

“We could leave the country if you want. Live in Spain, Italy, wherever you like, spend our days eating mangoes in the sun. Sleep late, play Scrabble, flip through books aimlessly, swim in the ocean.”

“And when I died, I'd be some bizarre footnote—a freak show. No. I do have pride, Desi.”

“I'm not letting you go back to the trailer-park life. I'm not. Come with me, we'll set you up in the lake house. It's very secluded. I'll bring groceries and anything you need, anytime. You can hide out, all alone, until we decide what to do.”

Desi's *lake house* was a *mansion*, and *bringing groceries* was *becoming my lover*. I could feel the need coming off him like heat. He was squirming a little under his suit, wanting to make it happen. Desi was a collector: He had four cars, three houses, suites of suits and shoes.

He would like knowing I was stowed away under glass. The ultimate white-knight fantasy: He steals the abused princess from her squalid circumstances and places her under his gilded protection in a castle that no one can breach but him.

“I can’t do that. What if the police find out somehow and they come to search?”

“Amy, the police think you’re dead.”

“No, I should be on my own for now. Can I just have a little cash from you?”

“What if I say no?”

“Then I’ll know your offer to help me isn’t genuine. That you’re like Nick and you just want control over me, however you can get it.”

Desi was silent, swallowing his drink with a tight jaw. “That’s a rather monstrous thing to say.”

“It’s a rather monstrous way to act.”

“I’m not acting that way,” he said. “I’m worried about you. Try the lake house. If you feel cramped by me, if you feel uncomfortable, you leave. The worst that can happen is you get a few days’ rest and relaxation.”

The mustached guy is suddenly at our table, a flickering smile on his face. “Ma’am, I don’t suppose you’re any relation to the Enloe family, are you?” he asks.

“No,” I say, and turn away.

“Sorry, you just look like some—”

“We’re from Canada, now excuse us,” Desi snaps, and the guy rolls his eyes, mutters a *jeez*, and strolls back to the bar. But he keeps glancing at me.

“We should leave,” Desi says. “Come to the lake house. I’ll take you there now.” He stands.

Desi’s lake house would have a grand kitchen, it would have rooms I could traipse around in—I could “hills are alive” twirl in them, the rooms would be so massive. The house would have Wi-Fi and cable—for all my command-center needs—and a gaping bathtub and plush robes and a bed that didn’t threaten to collapse.

It would have Desi too, but Desi could be managed.

At the bar, the guy is still staring at me, less benevolently.

I lean over and kiss Desi gently on the lips. It has to seem like my decision. “You’re such a wonderful man. I’m sorry to put you in this situation.”

“I want to be in this situation, Amy.”

We are on our way out, walking past a particularly depressing bar, TVs buzzing in all corners, when I see the Slut.

The Slut is holding a press conference.

Andie looks tiny and harmless. She looks like a babysitter, and not a sexy porn babysitter but the girl from down the road, the one who actually plays with the kids. I know this is not the real Andie, because I have followed her in real life. In real life she wears snug tops that show off her breasts, and clingy jeans, and her hair long and wavy. In real life she looks fuckable.

Now she is wearing a ruffled shirtdress with her hair tucked behind her ears, and she looks like she’s been crying, you can tell by the small pink pads beneath her eyes. She looks exhausted and nervous but very pretty. Prettier than I’d thought before. I never saw her this close up. She has freckles.

“Ohhhh, shit,” says one woman to her friend, a cheap-cabernet redhead.

“Oh noooo, I was actually starting to feel bad for the guy,” says the friend.

“I have crap in my fridge older than that girl. What an asshole.”

Andie stands behind the mike and looks down with dark eyelashes at a statement that leaf-shakes in her hand. Her upper lip is damp; it shines under the camera lights. She swipes an index finger to blot the sweat. “Um. My statement is this: I did engage in an affair with Nick Dunne from April 2011 until July of this year, when his wife, Amy Dunne, went missing. Nick was my professor at North Carthage Junior College, and we became friendly, and then the relationship became more.”

Andie stops to clear her throat. A dark-haired woman behind her, not much older than I am, hands her a glass of water, which she

slurps quickly, the glass shaking.

“I am deeply ashamed of having been involved with a married man. It goes against all my values. I truly believed I was in love”—she begins crying; her voice shivers—“with Nick Dunne and that he was in love with me. He told me that his relationship with his wife was over and that they would be divorcing soon. I did not know that Amy Dunne was pregnant. I am cooperating with the police in their investigation in the disappearance of Amy Dunne, and I will do everything in my power to help.”

Her voice is tiny, childish. She looks up at the wall of cameras in front of her and seems shocked, looks back down. Two apples turn red on her round cheeks.

“I ... I.” She begins sobbing, and her mother—that woman has to be her mother, they have the same oversize anime eyes—puts an arm on her shoulder. Andie continues reading. “I am so sorry and ashamed for what I have done. And I want to apologize to Amy’s family for any role I played in their pain. I am cooperating with the police in their investi— Oh, I said that already.”

She smiles a weak, embarrassed smile, and the press corps chuckle encouragingly.

“Poor little thing,” says the redhead.

*She is a little slut, she is not to be pitied.* I cannot believe anyone would feel sorry for Andie. I literally refuse to believe it.

“I am a twenty-three-year-old student,” she continues. “I ask only for some privacy to heal during this very painful time.”

“Good luck with that,” I mutter as Andie backs away and a police officer declines to take any questions and they walk off camera. I catch myself leaning to the left as if I could follow them.

“Poor little lamb,” says the older woman. “She seemed terrified.”

“I guess he did do it after all.”

“Over a *year* he was with her.”

“Slimebag.”

Desi gives me a nudge and widens his eyes in a question: Did I know about the affair? Was I okay? My face is a mask of fury—*poor*

*little lamb, my ass*—but I can pretend it is because of this betrayal. I nod, smile weakly. I am okay. We are about to leave when I see my parents, holding hands as always, stepping up to the mike in tandem. My mother looks like she’s just gotten her hair cut. I wonder if I should be annoyed that she paused in the middle of my disappearance for personal grooming. When someone dies and the relatives carry on, you always hear them say *so-and-so would have wanted it that way*. I don’t want it that way.

My mother speaks. “Our statement is brief, and we will take no questions afterward. First, thank you for the tremendous outpouring for our family. It seems the world loves Amy as much as we do. Amy: We miss your warm voice and your good humor, and your quick wit and your good heart. You are indeed amazing. We will return you to our family. I know we will. Second, we did not know that our son-in-law, Nick Dunne, was having an affair until this morning. He has been, since the beginning of this nightmare, less involved, less interested, less concerned than he should be. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, we attributed this behavior to shock. With our new knowledge, we no longer feel this way. We have withdrawn our support from Nick accordingly. As we move forward with the investigation, we can only hope that Amy comes back to us. Her story must continue. The world is ready for a new chapter.”

*Amen*, says someone.

# NICK DUNNE

TEN DAYS GONE

The show was over, Andie and the Elliotts gone from view. Sharon's producer kicked the TV off with the point of her heel. Everyone in the room was watching me, waiting for an explanation, the party guest who just shat on the floor. Sharon gave me a too-bright smile, an angry smile that strained her Botox. Her face folded in the wrong spots.

"Well?" she said in her calm, plummy voice. "What the fuck was that?"

Tanner stepped in. "That was the bombshell. Nick was and is fully prepared to disclose and discuss his actions. I'm sorry about the timing, but in a way, it's better for you, Sharon. You'll get the first react from Nick."

"You'd better have some goddamn interesting things to say, Nick." She breezed away, calling, "Mike him, we do this now," to no one in particular.

Sharon Schieber, it turned out, fucking adored me. In New York I'd always heard rumors that she'd been a cheat herself and returned to her husband, a very hush-hush inside-journalism story. That was almost ten years ago, but I figured the urge to absolve might still be there. It was. She beamed, she coddled, she cajoled and teased. She pursed those full, glossy lips at me in deep sincerity—a knuckled hand under her chin—and asked me her hard questions, and for once I answered them well. I am not a liar of Amy's dazzling caliber, but I'm not bad when I have to be. I looked like a man who loved his wife, who was shamed by his infidelities and ready to do right. The night before, sleepless and nervy, I'd gone online and watched Hugh Grant on Leno, 1995, apologizing to the nation for getting lewd with a hooker. Stuttering, stammering, squirming as if his skin were two sizes too small. But no excuses: "I think you know in life what's a good thing to do and what's a bad thing, and I did a bad thing ... and

there you have it.” Damn, the guy was good—he looked sheepish, nervous, so shaky you wanted to take his hand and say, *Buddy, it’s not that big a deal, don’t beat yourself up*. Which was the effect I was going for. I watched that clip so many times, I was in danger of borrowing a British accent.

I was the ultimate hollow man: the husband that Amy always claimed couldn’t apologize finally did, using words and emotions borrowed from an actor.

But it worked. *Sharon, I did a bad thing, an unforgivable thing. I can’t make any excuses for it. I let myself down—I’ve never thought of myself as a cheater. It’s inexcusable, it’s unforgivable, and I just want Amy to come home so I can spend the rest of my life making it up to her, treating her how she deserves.*

Oh, I’d definitely like to treat her how she deserves.

*But here’s the thing, Sharon: I did not kill Amy. I would never hurt her. I think what’s happening here is what I’ve been calling [a chuckle] in my mind the Ellen Abbott effect. This embarrassing, irresponsible brand of journalism. We are so used to seeing these murders of women packaged as entertainment, which is disgusting, and in these shows, who is guilty? It’s always the husband. So I think the public and, to an extent, even the police have been hammered into believing that’s always the case. From the beginning, it was practically assumed I had killed my wife—because that’s the story we are told time after time—and that’s wrong, that’s morally wrong. I did not kill my wife. I want her to come home.*

I knew Sharon would like an opportunity to paint Ellen Abbott as a sensationalistic ratings whore. I knew regal Sharon with her twenty years in journalism, her interviews with Arafat and Sarkozy and Obama, would be offended by the very idea of Ellen Abbott. I am (was) a journalist, I know the drill, and so when I said those words—the *Ellen Abbott effect*—I recognized Sharon’s mouth twitch, the delicately raised eyebrows, the lightening of her whole visage. It was the look when you realize: *I got my angle*.

At the end of the interview, Sharon took both my hands in hers—cool, a bit calloused, I’d read she was an avid golfer—and wished me well. “I will be keeping a close eye on you, my friend,” she said, and then she was kissing Go on the cheek and swishing away from us, the back of her dress a battlefield of stickpins to keep the material in front

from slouching.

“You fucking did that perfectly,” Go pronounced as she headed to the door. “You seem totally different than before. In charge but not cocky. Even your jaw is less ... dickish.”

“I unclefted my chin.”

“Almost, yeah. See you back home.” She actually gave me a go-champ punch to the shoulder.

I followed the Sharon Schieber interview with two quickies—one cable and one network. Tomorrow the Schieber interview would air, and then the others would roll out, a domino of apologetics and remorse. I was taking control. I was no longer going to settle for being the possibly guilty husband or the emotionally removed husband or the heartlessly cheating husband. I was the guy everyone knew—the guy many men (and women) have been: *I cheated, I feel like shit, I will do what needs to be done to fix the situation because I am a real man.*

“We are in decent shape,” Tanner pronounced as we wrapped up.

“The thing with Andie, it won’t be as awful as it might have been, thanks to the interview with Sharon. We just need to stay ahead of everything else from now on.”

Go phoned, and I picked up. Her voice was thin and high.

“The cops are here with a warrant for the woodshed ... they’re at Dad’s house too. They’re ... I’m scared.”

Go was in the kitchen smoking a cigarette when we arrived, and judging from the overflow in the kitschy ’70s ashtray, she was on her second pack. An awkward, shoulderless kid with a crew cut and a police officer’s uniform sat next to her on one of the bar stools.

“This is Tyler,” she said. “He grew up in Tennessee, he has a horse named Custard—”

“Custer,” Tyler said.

“Custer, and he’s allergic to peanuts. Not the horse but Tyler. Oh, and he has a torn labrum, which is the same injury baseball pitchers get, but he’s not sure how he got it.” She took a drag on the cigarette. Her eyes watered. “He’s been here a long time.”

Tyler tried to give me a tough look, ended up watching his well-

shined shoes.

Boney appeared through the sliding glass doors at the back of the house. “Big day, boys,” she said. “Wish you’d bothered letting us know, Nick, that you have a girlfriend. Would have saved us all a lot of time.”

“We’re happy to discuss that, as well as the contents of the shed, both of which we were on our way to tell you about,” Tanner said. “Frankly, if you had given us the courtesy of telling us about Andie, a lot of pain could have been forestalled. But you needed the press conference, you had to have the publicity. How disgusting, to put that girl up there like that.”

“Right,” Boney said. “So, the woodshed. You all want to come with me?” She turned her back on us, leading the way over the patchy end-of-summer grass to the woodshed. A cobweb trailed from her hair like a wedding veil. She motioned impatiently when she saw me not following. “Come on,” she said. “Not gonna bite you.”

The woodshed was lit up by several portable lights, making it look even more ominous.

“When’s the last time you been in here, Nick?”

“I came in here very recently, when my wife’s treasure hunt led me here. But it’s not my stuff, and I did not touch anything—”

Tanner cut me off: “My client and I have an explosive new theory —” Tanner began, then caught himself. The phony TV-speak was so incredibly awful and inappropriate, we all cringed.

“Oh, explosive, how exciting,” Boney said.

“We were about to inform you—”

“Really? What convenient timing,” she said. “Stay there, please.” The door hung loose on its hinges, a broken lock dangling to the side. Gilpin was inside, cataloging the goods.

“These the golf clubs you don’t play with?” Gilpin said, jostling the glinting irons.

“None of this is mine—none of this was put there by me.”

“That’s funny, because everything in here corresponds with purchases made on the credit cards that aren’t yours either,” Boney

snapped. “This is, like, what do they call it, a man cave? A man cave in the making, just waiting for the wife to go away for good. Got yourself some nice pastimes, Nick.” She pulled out three large cardboard boxes and set them at my feet.

“What’s this?”

Boney opened them with fingertip disgust despite her gloved hands. Inside were dozens of porn DVDs, flesh of all color and size on display on the covers.

Gilpin chuckled. “I gotta hand it to you, Nick, I mean, a man has his needs—”

“Men are highly visual, that’s what my ex always said when I caught him,” Boney said.

“Men are highly visual, but Nick, this shit made me blush,” Gilpin said. “It made me a little sick too, some of it, and I don’t get sick too easy.” He spread out a few of the DVDs like an ugly deck of cards. Most of the titles implied violence: *Brutal Anal*, *Brutal Blowjobs*, *Humiliated Whores*, *Sadistic Slut Fucking*, *Gang-raped Sluts*, and a series called *Hurt the Bitch*, volumes 1–18, each featuring photos of women writhing in pain while leering, laughing men inserted objects into them.

I turned away.

“Oh, now he’s embarrassed.” Gilpin grinned.

But I didn’t respond because I saw Go being helped into the back of a police car.

We met an hour later at the police station. Tanner advised against it—I insisted. I appealed to his iconoclast, millionaire rodeo-cowboy ego. We were going to tell the cops the truth. It was time.

I could handle them fucking with me—but not my sister.

“I’m agreeing to this because I think your arrest is inevitable, Nick, no matter what we do,” he said. “If we let them know we’re up for talking, we may get some more information on the case they’ve got against you. Without a body, they’ll really want a confession, so they’ll try to overwhelm you with the evidence. And that may give us enough to really jumpstart our defense.”

“And we give them everything, right?” I said. “We give them the

clues and the marionettes and Amy.” I was panicked, aching to go—I could picture the cops right now sweating my sister under a bare lightbulb.

“As long as you let me talk,” Tanner said. “If it’s me talking about the frame-up, they can’t use it against us at trial ... if we go with a different defense.”

It concerned me that my lawyer found the truth to be so completely unbelievable.

Gilpin met us at the steps of the station, a Coke in his hand, late dinner. When he turned around to lead us in, I saw a sweat-soaked back. The sun had long set, but the humidity remained. He flapped his arms once, and the shirt fluttered and stuck right back to his skin.

“Still hot,” he said. “Supposed to get hotter overnight.”

Boney was waiting for us in the conference room, the one from the first night. The Night Of. She’d French-braided her limp hair and clipped it to the back of her head in a rather poignant updo, and she wore lipstick. I wondered if she had a date. *A meet you after midnight* situation.

“You have kids?” I asked her, pulling out a chair.

She looked startled and held up a finger. “One.” She didn’t say a name or an age or anything else. Boney was in business mode. She tried to wait us out.

“You first,” Tanner said. “Tell us what you got.”

“Sure,” Boney said. “Okay.” She turned on the tape recorder, dispensed with the preliminaries. “It is your contention, Nick, that you never bought or touched the items in the woodshed on your sister’s property.”

“That is correct,” Tanner replied for me.

“Nick, your fingerprints are all over almost every item in the shed.”

“That’s a lie! I touched *nothing*, not a thing in there! Except for my anniversary present, which *Amy left inside*.”

Tanner touched my arm: *Shut the fuck up*.

“Nick, your fingerprints are on the porn, on the golf clubs, on the watch cases, and even on the TV.”

And then I saw it, how much Amy would have enjoyed this: my deep, self-satisfied sleep (which I lorded over her, my belief that if she were only more laid-back, more like me, her insomnia would vanish) turned against me. I could see it: Amy down on her knees, my snores heating her cheeks, as she pressed a fingertip here and there over the course of months. She could have slipped me a mickey for all I knew. I remember her peering at me one morning as I woke up, sleep-wax gumming my lips, and she said, “You sleep the sleep of the damned, you know. Or the drugged.” I was both and didn’t know it.

“Do you want to explain about the fingerprints?” Gilpin said.

“Tell us the rest,” Tanner said.

Boney set a biblically thick leather-covered binder on the table between us, charred all along the edges. “Recognize this?”

I shrugged, shook my head.

“It’s your wife’s diary.”

“Um, no. Amy didn’t do diaries.”

“Actually, Nick, she did. She did about seven years’ worth,” Boney said.

“Okay.”

Something bad was about to happen. My wife was being clever again.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

TEN DAYS GONE

We drive my car across state lines into Illinois, to a particularly awful neighborhood of some busted river town, and we spend an hour wiping it down, and then we leave it with the keys in the ignition. Call it the circle of strife: The Arkansas couple who drove it before me were sketchy; Ozark Amy was obviously shady; hopefully, some Illinois down-and-outer will enjoy it for a bit too.

Then we drive back into Missouri over wavy hills until I can see, between the trees, Lake Hannafan glistening. Because Desi has family in St. Louis, he likes to believe the area is old, East Coast old, but he is wrong. Lake Hannafan is not named after a nineteenth-century statesman or a Civil War hero. It is a private lake, machine-forged in 2002 by an oily developer named Mike Hannafan who turned out to have a moonlighting job illegally disposing of hazardous waste. The kerfuffled community is scrambling to find a new name for their lake. Lake Collings, I'm sure, has been floated.

So despite the well-planned lake—upon which a few select residents can sail but not motor—and Desi's tastefully grand house—a Swiss château on an American scale—I remain unwooed. That was always the problem with Desi. Be from Missouri or don't, but don't pretend Lake "Collings" is Lake Como.

He leans against his Jaguar and aims his gaze up at the house so that I have to pause for appreciation also.

"We modeled it after this wonderful little chalet my mother and I stayed at in Brienersee," he says. "All we're missing is the mountain range."

*A rather big miss*, I think, but I put my hand on his arm and say, "Show me the inside. It must be fabulous."

He gives me the nickel tour, laughing at the idea of a nickel. A cathedral kitchen—all granite and chrome—a living room with his-

and-hers fireplaces that flows onto an outdoor space (what midwesterners call a deck) overlooking the woods and the lake. A basement entertainment room with a snooker table, darts, surround sound, a wet bar, and its own outdoor space (what midwesterners call another deck). A sauna off the entertainment room and next to it the wine cellar. Upstairs, five bedrooms, the second largest of which he bestows on me.

“I had it repainted,” he says. “I know you love dusty rose.”

I don’t love dusty rose anymore; that was high school. “You are so lovely, Desi, thank you,” I say, my most heartfelt. My thank-yous always come out rather labored. I often don’t give them at all. People do what they’re supposed to do and then wait for you to pile on the appreciation—they’re like frozen-yogurt employees who put out cups for tips.

But Desi takes to thank-yous like a cat being brushed; his back almost arches with the pleasure. For now it’s a worthwhile gesture.

I set my bag down in my room, trying to signal my retirement for the evening—I need to see how people are reacting to Andie’s confession and whether Nick has been arrested—but it seems I am far from through with the thank-yous. Desi has ensured I will be forever indebted to him. He smiles a special-surprise smile and takes my hand (*I have something else to show you*) and pulls me back downstairs (*I really hope you like this*) onto a hallway off the kitchen (*it took a lot of work, but it’s so worth it*).

“I really hope you like this,” he says again, and flings open the door.

It’s a glass room, a greenhouse, I realize. Within are tulips, hundreds, of all colors. Tulips bloom in the middle of July in Desi’s lake house. In their own special room for a very special girl.

“I know tulips are your favorite, but the season is so short,” Desi said. “So I fixed that for you. They’ll bloom year-round.”

He puts his arm around my waist and aims me toward the flowers so I can appreciate them fully.

“Tulips any day of the year,” I say, and try to get my eyes to glisten. Tulips were my favorite in high school. They were everyone’s favorite, the gerbera daisy of the late ’80s. Now I like orchids, which are

basically the opposite of tulips.

“Would Nick ever have thought of something like this for you?” Desi breathes into my ear as the tulips sway under a mechanized dusting of water from above.

“Nick never even remembered I liked tulips,” I say, the correct answer.

It is sweet, beyond sweet, the gesture. My own flower room, like a fairy tale. And yet I feel a lilt of nerves: I called Desi only twenty-four hours ago, and these are not newly planted tulips, and the bedroom did not smell of fresh paint. It makes me wonder: the uptick in his letters the past year, their woeful tone ... how long has he been wanting to bring me here? And how long does he think I will stay? Long enough to enjoy blooming tulips every day for a year.

“My goodness, Desi,” I say. “It’s like a fairy tale.”

“Your fairy tale,” he says. “I want you to see what life can be like.”

In fairy tales, there is always gold. I wait for him to give me a stack of bills, a slim credit card, something of use. The tour loops back around through all the rooms so I can ooh and ahh about details I missed the first time, and then we return to my bedroom, a satin-and-silk, pink-and-plush, marshmallow-and-cotton-candy girl’s room. As I peer out a window, I notice the high wall that surrounds the house.

I blurt, nervously, “Desi, would you be able to leave me with some money?”

He actually pretends to be surprised. “You don’t need money now, do you?” he says. “You have no rent to pay anymore; the house will be stocked with food. I can bring new clothes for you. Not that I don’t like you in bait-shop chic.”

“I guess a little cash would just make me feel more comfortable. Should something happen. Should I need to get out of here quickly.”

He opens his wallet and pulls out two twenty-dollar bills. Presses them gently in my hand. “There you are,” he says indulgently.

I wonder then if I have made a very big mistake.

**NICK DUNNE**  
TEN DAYS GONE

I made a mistake, feeling so cocky. Whatever the hell this diary was, it was going to ruin me. I could already see the cover of the true-crime novel: the black-and-white photo of us on our wedding day, the blood-red background, the jacket copy: *including sixteen pages of never-seen photos and Amy Elliott Dunne's actual diary entries—a voice from beyond the grave ...* I'd found it strange and kind of cute, Amy's guilty pleasures, those cheesy true-crime books I'd discovered here and there around our house. I thought maybe she was loosening up, allowing herself some beach reading.

Nope. She was just studying.

Gilpin pulled over a chair, sat on it backward, and leaned toward me on crossed arms—his movie-cop look. It was almost midnight; it felt later.

“Tell us about your wife's illness these past few months,” he said.

“Illness? Amy never got sick. Once a year she'd get a cold, maybe.”

Boney picked up the book, turned to a marked page. “Last month you made Amy and yourself some drinks, sat on your back porch. She writes here that the drinks were impossibly sweet and describes what she thinks is an allergic reaction: *My heart was racing, my tongue was slabbed, stuck to the bottom of my mouth. My legs turned to meat as Nick walked me up the stairs.*” She put a finger down to hold her place in the diary, looked up as if I might not be paying attention. “When she woke the next morning: *My head ached and my stomach was oily, but weirder, my fingernails were light blue, and when I looked in the mirror, so were my lips. I didn't pee for two days after. I felt so weak.*”

I shook my head in disgust. I'd become attached to Boney; I expected better of her.

“Is this your wife's handwriting?” Boney tilted the book toward me, and I saw deep black ink and Amy's cursive, jagged as a fever chart.

“Yes, I think so.”

“So does our handwriting expert.”

Boney said the words with a certain pride, and I realized: This was the first case these two had ever had that required outside experts, that demanded they get in touch with professionals who did exotic things like analyze handwriting.

“You know what else we learned, Nick, when we showed this entry to our medical expert?”

“Poisoning,” I blurted. Tanner frowned at me: *steady*.

Boney stuttered for a second; this was not information I was supposed to provide.

“Yeah, Nick, thank you: antifreeze poisoning,” she said. “Textbook. She’s lucky she survived.”

“She didn’t *survive*, because that never happened,” I said. “Like you said, it’s textbook—it’s made up from an Internet search.”

Boney frowned but refused to bite. “The diary isn’t a pretty picture of you, Nick,” she continued, one finger tracing her braid. “*Abuse—you pushed her around. Stress—you were quick to anger. Sexual relations that bordered on rape. She was very frightened of you at the end there. It’s painful to read. That gun we were wondering about, she says she wanted it because she was afraid of you. Here’s her last entry: This man might kill me. This man might kill me, in her own words.*”

My throat clenched. I felt like I might throw up. Fear, mostly, and then a surge of rage. *Fucking bitch, fucking bitch, cunt, cunt, cunt.*

“What a smart, convenient note for her to end on,” I said. Tanner put a hand on mine to hush me.

“You look like you want to kill her again, right now,” Boney said.

“You’ve done nothing but lie to us, Nick,” Gilpin said. “You say you were at the beach that morning. Everyone we talk to says you hate the beach. You say you have no idea what all these purchases are on your maxed-out credit cards. Now we have a shed full of exactly those items, *and they have your fingerprints all over them.* We have a wife suffering from what sounds like antifreeze poisoning weeks before she *disappears.* I mean, come on.” He paused for effect.

“Anything else of note?” Tanner asked.

“We can place you in Hannibal, where your wife’s purse shows up a few days later,” Boney said. “We have a neighbor who overheard you two arguing the night before. A pregnancy you didn’t want. A bar borrowed on your wife’s money that would revert to her in case of a divorce. And of course, *of course*: a secret girlfriend of more than a year.”

“We can help you right now, Nick,” Gilpin said. “Once we arrest you, we can’t.”

“Where did you find the diary? At Nick’s father’s house?” Tanner asked.

“Yes,” Boney said.

Tanner nodded to me: *That’s what we didn’t find*. “Let me guess: anonymous tip.”

Neither cop said a thing.

“Can I ask where in the house you found it?” I asked.

“In the furnace. I know you thought you burned it. It caught fire, but the pilot light was too weak; it got smothered. So only the outer edges burned,” Gilpin said. “Extremely good luck for us.”

The furnace—another inside joke from Amy! She’d always proclaimed amazement at how little I understood the things men are supposed to understand. During our search, I’d even glanced at my dad’s old furnace, with its pipes and wires and spigots, and backed away, intimidated.

“It wasn’t luck. You were meant to find it,” I said.

Boney let the left side of her mouth slide into a smile. She leaned back and waited, relaxed as the star of an iced-tea commercial. I gave Tanner an angry nod: *Go ahead*.

“Amy Elliott Dunne is alive, and she is framing Nick Dunne for her murder,” he said. I clasped my hands and sat up straight, tried to do anything that would lend me an air of reason. Boney stared at me. I needed a pipe, eyeglasses I could swiftly remove for effect, a set of encyclopedias at my elbow. I felt giddy. Do *not* laugh.

Boney frowned. “What’s that again?”

“Amy is alive and very well, and she is framing Nick,” my proxy repeated.

They exchanged a look, hunched over the table: *Can you believe this guy?*

“Why would she do that?” Gilpin asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Because she hates him. Obviously. He was a shitty husband.”

Boney looked down at the floor, let out a breath. “I’d certainly agree with you there.”

At the same time, Gilpin said: “Oh, for Christ’s sake.”

“Is she *crazy*, Nick?” Boney said, leaning in. “What you’re talking about, it’s crazy. You hear me? It would have taken, what, six months, a *year*, to set all this up. She would have had to hate you, to wish you harm—ultimate, serious, horrific harm—for a *year*. Do you know how hard it is to sustain that kind of hatred for that long?”

*She could do it. Amy could do it.*

“Why not just divorce your ass?” Boney snapped.

“That wouldn’t appeal to her ... sense of justice,” I replied. Tanner gave me another look.

“Jesus Christ, Nick, aren’t you tired of all this?” Gilpin said. “We have it in your wife’s own words: *I think he may kill me.*”

Someone had told them at some point: Use the suspect’s name a lot, it will make him feel comfortable, known. Same idea as in sales.

“You been in your dad’s house lately, Nick?” Boney asked. “Like on July ninth?”

Fuck. *That’s* why Amy changed the alarm code. I battled a new wave of disgust at myself: that my wife played me twice. Not only did she dupe me into believing she still loved me, she actually *forced me to implicate myself*. Wicked, wicked girl. I almost laughed. Good Lord, I hated her, but you had to admire the bitch.

Tanner began: “Amy used her clues to force my client to go to these various venues, where she’d left evidence—Hannibal, his father’s house—so he’d incriminate himself. My client and I have brought these clues with us. As a courtesy.”

He pulled out the clues and the love notes, fanned them in front of the cops like a card trick. I sweated while they read them, willing them to look up and tell me all was clear now.

“Okay. You say Amy hated you so much that she spent months framing you for her murder?” Boney asked in the quiet, measured voice of a disappointed parent.

I gave her a blank face.

“This does not sound like an angry woman, Nick,” she said.

“She’s falling all over herself to apologize to you, to suggest that you both start again, to let you know how much she loves you: *You are warm—you are my sun. You are brilliant, you are witty.*”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“Once again, Nick, an incredibly strange reaction for an innocent man,” Boney said. “Here we are, reading sweet words, maybe your wife’s last words to you, and you actually look angry. I still remember that very first night: Amy’s missing, you come in here, we park you in this very room for forty-five minutes, and you look *bored*. We watched you on surveillance, you practically fell asleep.”

“That has nothing to do with anything—” Tanner started.

“I was trying to stay calm.”

“You looked very, very calm,” Boney said. “All along, you’ve acted ... inappropriately. Unemotional, flippant.”

“That’s just how I am, don’t you see? I’m stoic. To a fault. Amy knows this ... She complained about it all the time. That I wasn’t sympathetic enough, that I retreated into myself, that I couldn’t handle difficult emotions—sadness, guilt. She *knew* I’d look suspicious as hell. Jesus fucking Christ! Talk to Hilary Handy, will you? Talk to Tommy O’Hara. I talked to them! They’ll tell you what she’s like.”

“We have talked to them,” Gilpin said.

“And?”

“Hilary Handy has made two suicide attempts in the years since high school. Tommy O’Hara has been in rehab twice.”

“Probably because of *Amy*.”

“Or because they’re deeply unstable, guilt-ridden human beings,” Boney said. “Let’s go back to the treasure hunt.”

Gilpin read aloud Clue 2 in a deliberate monotone.

*You took me here so I could hear you chat*

*About your boyhood adventures: crummy jeans and visor hat*

*Screw everyone else, for us they’re all ditched*

*And let’s sneak a kiss ... pretend we just got hitched.*

“You say this was written to force you to go to Hannibal?” Boney said.

I nodded.

“It doesn’t say Hannibal anywhere here,” she said. “It doesn’t even imply it.”

“The visor hat, that’s an old inside joke between us about—”

“Oh, an inside joke,” Gilpin said.

“What about the next clue, the little brown house?” Boney asked.

“To go to my dad’s,” I said.

Boney’s face grew stern again. “Nick, your dad’s house is blue.” She turned to Tanner with rolling eyes: *This is what you’re giving me?*

“It sounds to me like you’re making up ‘inside jokes’ in these clues,” Boney said. “I mean, you want to talk about convenient: We find out you’ve been to Hannibal, whaddaya know, this clue secretly means go *to Hannibal.*”

“The final present here,” Tanner said, pulling the box onto the table, “is a not-so-subtle hint. Punch and Judy dolls. As you know, I’m sure, Punch kills Judy and her baby. This was discovered by my client. We wanted to make sure you have it.”

Boney pulled the box over, put on latex gloves, and lifted the puppets out. “Heavy,” she said, “solid.” She examined the lace of the woman’s dress, the male’s motley. She picked up the male, examined the thick wooden handle with the finger grooves.

She froze, frowning, the male puppet in her hands. Then she turned the female upside down so the skirt flew up.

“No handle for this one.” She turned to me. “Did there used to be a handle?”

“How should I know?”

“A handle like a two-by-four, very thick and heavy, with built-in grooves to get a really good grip?” she snapped. “A handle like a goddamn club?”

She stared at me and I could tell what she was thinking: *You are a gameplayer. You are a sociopath. You are a killer.*

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

ELEVEN DAYS GONE

Tonight is Nick's much touted interview with Sharon Schieber. I was going to watch with a bottle of good wine after a hot bath, recording at the same time, so I can take notes on his lies. I want to write down every exaggeration, half truth, fib, and bald-facer he utters, so I can gird my fury against him. It slipped after the blog interview—one drunken, random interview!—and I can't allow that to happen. I'm not going to soften. I'm not a chump. Still, I am eager to hear his thoughts on Andie now that she has broken. His spin.

I want to watch alone, but Desi hovers around me all day, floating in and out of whatever room I retreat to, like a sudden patch of bad weather, unavoidable. I can't tell him to leave, because it's his house. I've tried this already, and it doesn't work. He'll say he wants to check the basement plumbing or he wants to peer into the fridge to see what food items need purchasing.

*This will go on, I think. This is how my life will be. He will show up when he wants and stay as long as he wants, he'll shamle around making conversation, and then he'll sit, and beckon me to sit, and he'll open a bottle of wine and we'll suddenly be sharing a meal and there's no way to stop it.*

"I really am exhausted," I say.

"Indulge your benefactor a little bit longer," he responds, and runs a finger down the crease of his pant legs.

He knows about Nick's interview tonight, so he leaves and returns with all my favorite foods: Manchego cheese and chocolate truffles and a bottle of cold Sancerre and, with a wry eyebrow, he even produces the chili-cheese Fritos I got hooked on back when I was Ozark Amy. He pours the wine. We have an unspoken agreement not to get into details about the baby, we both know how miscarriages run in my family, how awful it would be for me to have to speak of it.

“I’ll be interested to hear what the swine has to say for himself,” he says. Desi rarely says *jackfuck* or *shitbag*; he says *swine*, which sounds more poisonous on his lips.

An hour later, we have eaten a light dinner that Desi cooked, and sipped the wine that Desi brought. He has given me one bite of cheese and split a truffle with me. He has given me exactly ten Fritos and then secreted away the bag. He doesn’t like the smell; it offends him, he says, but what he really doesn’t like is my weight. Now we are side by side on the sofa, a spun-soft blanket over us, because Desi has cranked up the air-conditioning so that it is autumn in July. I think he has done it so he can crackle a fire and force us together under the blanket; he seems to have an October vision of the two of us. He even brought me a gift—a heathery violet turtleneck sweater to wear—and I notice it complements both the blanket and Desi’s deep green sweater.

“You know, all through the centuries, pathetic men have abused strong women who threaten their masculinity,” Desi is saying. “They have such fragile psyches, they need that control ...”

I am thinking of a different kind of control. I am thinking about control in the guise of caring: *Here is a sweater for the cold, my sweet, now wear it and match my vision.*

Nick, at least, didn’t do this. Nick let me do what I wanted.

I just want Desi to sit still and be quiet. He’s fidgety and nervous, as if his rival is in the room with us.

“Shhh,” I say as my pretty face comes on the screen, then another photo and another, like falling leaves, an Amy collage.

“She was the girl that *every* girl wanted to be,” said Sharon’s voiceover. “Beautiful, brilliant, inspiring, and very wealthy.”

“He was the guy that all men admired ...”

“Not this man,” Desi muttered.

“... handsome, funny, bright, and charming.”

“But on July fifth, their seemingly perfect world came crashing in when Amy Elliott Dunne disappeared on their fifth wedding anniversary.”

Recap recap recap. Photos of me, Andie, Nick. Stock photos of a

pregnancy test and unpaid bills. I really did do a nice job. It's like painting a mural and stepping back and thinking: *Perfect*.

"Now, exclusively, Nick Dunne breaks his silence, not only on his wife's disappearance but on his infidelity and *all those rumors*."

I feel a gust of warmth toward Nick because he's wearing my favorite tie that I bought for him, that he thinks, or thought, was too girly-bright. It's a peacocky purple that turns his eyes almost violet. He's lost his satisfied-asshole paunch over the last month: His belly is gone, the fleshiness of his face has vanished, his chin is less clefty. His hair has been trimmed but not cut—I have an image of Go hacking away at him just before he went on camera, slipping into Mama Mo's role, fussing over him, doing the saliva-thumb rubdown on some spot near his chin. He is wearing my tie and when he lifts his hand to make a gesture, I see he is wearing my watch, the vintage Bulova Spaceview that I got him for his thirty-third birthday, that he never wore because it *wasn't him*, even though it was completely him.

"He's wonderfully well groomed for a man who thinks his wife is missing," Desi snipes. "Glad he didn't skip a manicure."

"Nick would never get a manicure," I say, glancing at Desi's buffed nails.

"Let's get right to it, Nick," Sharon says. "Did you have anything to do with your wife's disappearance?"

"No. No. Absolutely, one hundred percent not," Nick says, keeping well-coached eye contact. "But let me say, Sharon, I am far, far from being innocent, or blameless, or a good husband. If I weren't so afraid for Amy, I would say this was a good thing, in a way, her disappearing—"

"Excuse me, Nick, but I think a lot of people will find it hard to believe you just said that when your wife is missing."

"It's the most awful, horrible feeling in the world, and I want her back more than anything. All I am saying is that it has been the most brutal eye-opener for me. You hate to believe that you are such an awful man that it takes something like this to pull you out of your selfishness spiral and wake you up to the fact that you are the luckiest bastard in the world. I mean, I had this woman who was my equal, my *better*, in every way, and I let my insecurities—about losing my

job, about not being able to care for my family, about getting older—cloud all that.”

“Oh, please—” Desi starts, and I shush him. For Nick to admit to the world that he is not a good guy—it’s a small death, and not of the *petite mort* variety.

“And Sharon, let me say it. Let me say it right now: I cheated. I disrespected my wife. I didn’t want to be the man that I had become, but instead of working on myself, I took the easy way out. I cheated with a young woman who barely knew me. So I could *pretend* to be the big man. I could *pretend* to be the man I wanted to be—smart and confident and successful—because this young woman didn’t know any different. This young girl, she hadn’t seen me crying into a towel in the bathroom in the middle of the night because I lost my job. She didn’t know all my foibles and shortcomings. I was a fool who believed if I wasn’t perfect, my wife wouldn’t love me. I wanted to be Amy’s hero, and when I lost my job, I lost my self-respect. I couldn’t be that hero anymore. Sharon, I know right from wrong. And I just—I just did wrong.”

“What would you say to your wife, if she is possibly out there, able to see and hear you tonight?”

“I’d say: Amy, I love you. You are the best woman I have ever known. You are more than I deserve, and if you come back, I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you. We will find a way to put all this horror behind us, and I will be the best man in the world to you. Please come home to me, Amy.”

Just for a second, he places the pad of his index finger in the cleft of his chin, our old secret code, the one we did back in the day to swear we weren’t bullshitting each other—the dress really did look nice, that article really was solid. *I am absolutely, one hundred percent sincere right now—I have your back, and I wouldn’t fuck with you.*

Desi leans in front of me to break my contact with the screen and reaches for the Sancerre. “More wine, sweetheart?” he says.

“Shhh.”

He pauses the show. “Amy, you are a good-hearted woman. I know you are susceptible to ... pleas. But everything he is saying is lies.”

Nick is saying exactly what I want to hear. *Finally.*

Desi moves around so he is staring at me full-face, completely obstructing my vision. “Nick is putting on a pageant. He wants to come off as a good, repentant guy. I’ll admit he’s doing a bang-up job. But it’s not real—he hasn’t even mentioned beating you, violating you. I don’t know what kind of hold this guy has on you. It must be a Stockholm-syndrome thing.”

“I know,” I say. I know exactly what I am supposed to say to Desi. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. I haven’t felt so safe in so long, Desi, but I am still ... I see him and ... I’m fighting this, but he hurt me ... for years.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t watch any more,” he says, twirling my hair, leaning too close.

“No, leave it on,” I say. “I have to face this. With you. I can do it with you.” I put my hand in his. *Now shut the fuck up.*

*I just want Amy to come home so I can spend the rest of my life making it up to her, treating her how she deserves.*

Nick forgives me—I screwed you over, you screwed me over, let’s make up. What if his code is true? Nick wants me back. Nick wants me back so he can treat me right. So he can spend the rest of his life treating me the way he should. It sounds rather lovely. We could go back to New York. Sales for the *Amazing Amy* books have skyrocketed since my disappearance—three generations of readers have remembered how much they love me. My greedy, stupid, irresponsible parents can finally pay back my trust fund. With interest.

Because I want to go back to my old life. Or my old life with my old money and my New Nick. Love-Honor-and-Obey Nick. Maybe he’s learned his lesson. Maybe he’ll be like he was before. Because I’ve been daydreaming—trapped in my Ozarks cabin, trapped in Desi’s mansion compound, I have a lot of time to daydream and what I’ve been daydreaming of is Nick in those early days. I thought I would daydream more about Nick getting ass-raped in prison, but I haven’t so much, not so much, lately. I think about those early, early days, when we would lie in bed next to each other, naked flesh on cool cotton, and he would just stare at me, one finger tracing my jaw from my chin to my ear, making me wriggle, that light tickling on my lobe, and then through all the seashell curves of my ear and into my hairline, and then he’d take hold of one lock of hair, like he did that

very first time we kissed, and pull it all the way to the end and tug twice, gently, like he was ringing a bell. And he'd say, "You are better than any storybook, you are better than anything anyone could make up."

Nick fastened me to the earth. Nick wasn't like Desi, who brought me things I wanted (tulips, wine) to make me do the things *he* wanted (love him). Nick just wanted me to be happy, that's all, very pure. Maybe I mistook that for laziness. *I just want you to be happy, Amy.* How many times did he say that and I took it to mean: *I just want you to be happy, Amy, because that's less work for me.* But maybe I was unfair. Well, not unfair but confused. No one I've loved has ever not had an agenda. So how could I know?

It really is true. It took this awful situation for us to realize it. Nick and I fit together. I am a little too much, and he is a little too little. I am a thornbush, bristling from the overattention of my parents, and he is a man of a million little fatherly stab wounds, and my thorns fit perfectly into them.

I need to get home to him.

# NICK DUNNE

FOURTEEN DAYS GONE

I woke up on my sister's couch with a raging hangover and an urge to kill my wife. This was fairly common in the days after the Diary Interview with the police. I'd imagine finding Amy tucked away in some spa on the West Coast, sipping pineapple juice on a divan, her cares floating way, far away, above a perfect blue sky, and me, dirty, smelly from an urgent cross-country drive, standing in front of her, blocking the sun until she looks up, and then my hands around her perfect throat, with its cords and hollows and the pulse thumping first urgently and then slowly as we look into each other's eyes and at last have some understanding.

I was going to be arrested. If not today, tomorrow; if not tomorrow, the next day. I had taken the fact that the police let me walk out of the station as a good sign, but Tanner had shut me down: "Without a body, a conviction is incredibly tough. They're just dotting the I's, crossing the T's. Spend these days doing whatever you need to do, because once the arrest happens, we'll be busy."

Just outside the window, I could hear the rumbling of camera crews—men greeting one another good morning, as if they were clocking in at the factory. Cameras click-click-clicked like restless locusts, shooting the front of Go's house. Someone had leaked the discovery of my "man cave" of goods on my sister's property, my imminent arrest. Neither of us had dared to so much as flick at a curtain.

Go walked into the room in flannel boxers and her high school Butthole Surfers T-shirt, her laptop in the crook of an arm. "Everyone hates you again," she said.

"Fickle fucks."

"Last night someone leaked the information about the shed, about Amy's purse and the diary. Now it's all: *Nick Is a Liar*, *Nick Is a Killer*, *Nick Is a Lying Killer*. Sharon Schieber just released a statement saying she was *very shocked and disappointed* with the direction the case was

taking. Oh, and everyone knows all about the porn—*Kill the Bitches.*”

“*Hurt the Bitch.*”

“Oh, excuse me,” she said. “*Hurt the Bitch. So Nick Is a Lying Killer-slash-Sexual Sadist.* Ellen Abbott is going to go fucking rabid. She’s a crazy anti-porn lady.”

“Of course she is,” I said. “I’m sure Amy is very aware of that.”

“Nick?” she said in her *wake up* voice. “This is bad.”

“Go, it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks, we need to remember that,” I said. “What matters right now is what Amy is thinking. If *she’s* softening toward me.”

“Nick. You really think she can go that fast from hating you so much to falling in love with you again?”

It was the fifth anniversary of our conversation on this topic.

“Go, yeah, I do. Amy was never a person with any sort of bullshit detector. If you said she looked beautiful, she knew that was a fact. If you said she was brilliant, it wasn’t flattery, it was her due. So yeah, I think a good chunk of her truly believes that if I can only see the error of my ways, of *course* I’ll be in love with her again. Because why in God’s name wouldn’t I be?”

“And if it turns out she’s developed a bullshit detector?”

“You know Amy; she needs to win. She’s less pissed off that I cheated than that I picked someone else over her. She’ll want me back just to prove that she’s the winner. Don’t you agree? Just seeing me begging her to come back so I can worship her properly, it will be hard for her to resist. Don’t you think?”

“I think it’s a decent idea,” she said in the way you might wish someone good luck on the lottery.

“Hey, if you’ve got something better, by all fucking means.”

We snapped like that at each other now. We’d never done that before. After the police found the woodshed, they grilled Go, hard, just as Tanner had predicted: *Did she know? Did she help?*

I’d expected her to come home that night, brimming with curse words and fury, but all I got was an embarrassed smile as she slipped past me to her room in the house she had double-mortgaged to cover

Tanner's retainer.

I had put my sister in financial and legal jeopardy because of my shitty decisions. The whole situation made Go feel resentful and me ashamed, a lethal combination for two people trapped in small confines.

I tried a different subject: "I've been thinking about phoning Andie now that—"

"Yeah, that would be genius-smart, Nick. Then she can go back on *Ellen Abbott*—"

"She didn't go on *Ellen Abbott*. She had a press conference that *Ellen Abbott* carried. She's not evil, Go."

"She gave the press conference because she was pissed at you. I sorta wish you'd just kept fucking her."

"Nice."

"What would you even say to her?"

"I'm sorry."

"You are definitely fucking sorry," she muttered.

"I just— I hate how it ended."

"The last time you saw Andie, she *bit* you," Go said in an overly patient voice. "I don't think the two of you have anything else to say. You are the prime suspect in a murder investigation. You have forfeited the right to a smooth breakup. For fuck's sake, Nick."

We were growing sick of each other, something I never thought could happen. It was more than basic stress, more than the danger I'd deposited on Go's doorstep. Those ten seconds just a week ago, when I'd opened the door of the woodshed, expecting Go to read my mind as always, and what Go had read was that I'd killed my wife: I couldn't get over that, and neither could she. I caught her looking at me now and then with the same steeled chill with which she looked at our father: just another shitty male taking up space. I'm sure I looked at her through our father's miserable eyes sometimes: just another petty woman resenting me.

I let out a gust of air, stood up, and squeezed her hand, and she squeezed back.

“I think I should head home,” I said. I felt a wave of nausea. “I can’t stand this anymore. Waiting to be arrested, I can’t stand it.”

Before she could stop me, I grabbed my keys, swung open the door, and the cameras began blasting, the shouts exploded from a crowd that was even larger than I’d feared: *Hey, Nick, did you kill your wife? Hey, Margo, did you help your brother hide evidence?*

“Fucking shitbags,” Go spat. She stood next to me in solidarity, in her Butthole Surfers T-shirt and boxers. A few protesters carried signs. A woman with stringy blond hair and sunglasses shook a poster board: *Nick, where is AMY?*

The shouts got louder, frantic, baiting my sister: *Margo, is your brother a wife killer? Did Nick kill his wife and baby? Margo, are you a suspect? Did Nick kill his wife? Did Nick kill his baby?*

I stood, trying to hold my ground, refusing to let myself step back into the house. Suddenly, Go was crouching behind me, cranking the spigot near the steps. She turned on the hose full-bore—a hard, steady jet—and blasted all those cameramen and protesters and pretty journalists in their TV-ready suits, sprayed them like animals.

She was giving me covering fire. I shot into my car and tore off, leaving them dripping on the front lawn, Go laughing shrilly.

It took ten minutes for me to nudge my car from my driveway into my garage, inching my way slowly, slowly forward, parting the angry ocean of human beings—there were at least twenty protesters in front of my home, in addition to the camera crews. My neighbor Jan Teverer was one of them. She and I made eye contact, and she aimed her poster at me: *WHERE IS AMY, NICK?*

Finally, I was inside, and the garage door came buzzing down. I sat in the heat of the concrete space, breathing.

Everywhere felt like a jail now—doors opening and closing and opening and closing, and me never feeling safe.

I spent the rest of my day picturing how I’d kill Amy. It was all I could think of: finding a way to end her. Me smashing in Amy’s busy, busy brain. I had to give Amy her due: I may have been dozing the past few years, but I was fucking wide awake now. I was electric again, like I had been in the early days of our marriage.

I wanted to do something, make something happen, but there was nothing to be done. By late evening, the camera crews were all gone, though I couldn't risk leaving the house. I wanted to walk. I settled for pacing. I was wired dangerously tight.

Andie had screwed me over, Marybeth had turned against me, Go had lost a crucial measure of faith. Boney had trapped me. Amy had destroyed me. I poured a drink. I took a slug, tightened my fingers around the curves of the tumbler, then hurled it at the wall, watched the glass burst into fireworks, heard the tremendous shatter, smelled the cloud of bourbon. Rage in all five senses. *Those fucking bitches.*

I'd tried all my life to be a decent guy, a man who loved and respected women, a guy without hang-ups. And here I was, thinking nasty thoughts about my twin, about my mother-in-law, about my mistress. I was imagining bashing in my wife's skull.

A knock came at the door, a loud, furious bang-bang-bang that rattled me out of my nightmare brain.

I opened the door, flung it wide, greeting fury with fury.

It was my father, standing on my doorstep like some awful specter summoned by my hatefulness. He was breathing heavily and sweating. His shirtsleeve was torn and his hair was wild, but his eyes had their usual dark alertness that made him seem viciously sane.

"Is she here?" he snapped.

"Who, Dad, who are you looking for?"

"You know who." He pushed past me, started marching through the living room, trailing mud, his hands balled, his gravity far forward, forcing him to keep walking or fall down, muttering *bitchbitchbitch*. He smelled of mint. Real mint, not manufactured, and I saw a smear of green on his trousers, as if he'd been stomping through someone's garden.

*Little bitch that little bitch*, he kept muttering. Through the dining room, into the kitchen, flipping on lights. A waterbug scuttled up the wall.

I followed him, trying to get him to calm down, *Dad, Dad, why don't you sit down, Dad, do you want a glass of water, Dad ...* He stomped downstairs, clumps of mud falling off his shoes. My hands turtled into

fists. Of course this bastard would show up and actually make things worse.

“Dad! Goddammit, Dad! No one is here but me. Just me.” He flung open the guest room door, then went back up to the living room, ignoring me—“Dad!”

I didn’t want to touch him. I was afraid I’d hit him. I was afraid I’d cry.

I blocked him as he tried to go upstairs to the bedroom. I placed one hand on the wall, one on the banister—human barricade. “Dad! Look at me.”

His words came out in a furious spittle. “You tell her, you tell that little ugly bitch it’s not over. She’s not better than me, you tell her. She’s not too good for me. She doesn’t get to have a say. That ugly bitch will have to learn—”

I swear I saw a blank whiteness for just a second, a moment of complete, jarring clarity. I stopped trying to block my father’s voice for once and let it throb in my ears. I was not that man: I didn’t hate and fear all women. I was a one-woman misogynist. If I despised only Amy, focused all my fury and rage and venom on the one woman who deserved it, that didn’t make me my father. That made me sane.

*Little bitch little bitch little bitch.*

I had never hated my father more for making me truly love those words.

*Fucking bitch fucking bitch.*

I grabbed him by the arm, hard, and herded him into the car, slammed the door. He repeated the incantation all the way to Comfort Hill. I pulled up to the home in the entry reserved for ambulances, and I went to his side, swung open the door, yanked him out by the arm, and walked him just inside the doors.

Then I turned my back and went home.

*Fucking bitch fucking bitch.*

But there was nothing I could do except beg. My bitch wife had left me with *nothing* but my sorry dick in my hand, begging her to come home. Print, online, TV, wherever, all I could do was hope my wife saw me playing good husband, saying the words she wanted me to

*say: capitulation, complete. You are right and I am wrong, always. Come home to me (you fucking cunt). Come home so I can kill you.*

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

TWENTY-SIX DAYS GONE

Desi is here again. He is here almost every day now, simpering around the house, standing in the kitchen as the setting sun lights up his profile so I can admire it, pulling me by the hand into the tulip room so I can thank him again, reminding me how safe and loved I am.

He says I'm safe and loved even though he won't let me leave, which doesn't make me feel safe and loved. He's left me no car keys. Nor house keys nor the gate security code. I am literally a prisoner—the gate is fifteen feet high, and there are no ladders in the house (I've looked). I could, I suppose, drag several pieces of furniture over to the wall, pile them up, and climb over, drop to the other side, limp or crawl away, but that's not the point. The point is, I am his valued, beloved guest, and a guest should be able to leave when she wants. I brought this up a few days ago. "What if I need to leave. Immediately?"

"Maybe I should move in here," he counters. "Then I could be here all the time and keep you safe, and if anything happens, we could leave together."

"What if your mom gets suspicious and comes up here and you're found hiding me? It would be awful."

His mother. I would die if his mother came up here, because she would report me immediately. The woman despises me, all because of that incident back in high school—so long ago, and she still holds a grudge. I scratched up my face and told Desi she attacked me (the woman was so possessive, and so cold to me, she might as well have). They didn't talk for a month. Clearly, they've made up.

"Jacqueline doesn't know the code," he says. "This is *my* lake house." He pauses and pretends to think. "I really should move up here. It's not healthy for you to spend so many hours by yourself."

But I'm not by myself, not that much. We have a bit of a routine

established in just two weeks. It's a routine mandated by Desi, my posh jailer, my spoiled courtier. Desi arrives just after noon, always smelling of some expensive lunch he's devoured with Jacqueline at some white-linened restaurant, the kind of restaurant he could take me to if we moved to Greece. (This is the other option he repeatedly presents: We could move to Greece. For some reason, he believes I will never be identified in a tiny little fishing village in Greece where he has summered many times, and where I know he pictures us sipping the wine, making lazy sunset love, our bellies full of octopus.) He smells of lunch as he enters, he wafts it. He must dab goose liver behind his ears (the way his mother always smelled vaguely vaginal—food and sex, the Collings reek of, not a bad strategy).

He enters, and he makes my mouth water. The smell. He brings me something nice to eat, but not as nice as what he's had: He's thinning me up, he always preferred his women waify. So he brings me lovely green star fruit and spiky artichokes and spiny crab, anything that takes elaborate preparation and yields little in return. I am almost my normal weight again, and my hair is growing out. I wear it back in a headband he brought me, and I have colored it back to my blond, thanks to hair dye he also brought me: "I think you will feel better about yourself when you start looking more like yourself, sweetheart," he says. Yes, it's all about my well-being, not the fact that he wants me to look exactly like I did before. Amy circa 1987.

I eat lunch as he hovers near me, waiting for the compliments. (To never have to say those words—*thank you*—again. I don't remember Nick ever pausing to allow me—force me—to thank him.) I finish lunch, and he tidies up as best as he knows how. We are two people unaccustomed to cleaning up after ourselves; the place is beginning to look lived in—strange stains on countertops, dust on windowsills.

Lunch concluded, Desi fiddles with me for a while: my hair, my skin, my clothes, my mind.

"Look at you," he'll say, tucking my hair behind my ears the way he likes it, unbuttoning my shirt one notch and loosening it at the neck so he can look at the hollow of my clavicle. He puts a finger in the little indentation, filling the gap. It is obscene. "How can Nick have hurt you, have not loved you, have cheated on you?" He continually hits these points, verbally poking a bruise. "Wouldn't it be so lovely to just forget about Nick, those awful five years, and move on? You have

that chance, you know, to completely start over with the right man. How many people can say that?"

I do want to start over with the right man, the New Nick. Things are looking bad for him, dire. Only I can save Nick from me. But I am trapped.

"If you ever left here and I didn't know where you were, I'd have to go to the police," he says. "I'd have no choice. I'd need to make sure you were safe, that Nick wasn't ... holding you somewhere against your will. Violating you."

A threat disguised as concern.

I look at Desi with outright disgust now. Sometimes I feel my skin must be hot with repulsion and with the effort to keep that repulsion hidden. I'd forgotten about him. The manipulation, the purring persuasion, the delicate bullying. A man who finds guilt erotic. And if he doesn't get his way, he'll pull his little levers and set his punishment in motion. At least Nick was man enough to go stick his dick in something. Desi will push and push with his waxy, tapered fingers until I give him what he wants.

I thought I could control Desi, but I can't. I feel like something very bad is going to happen.

# NICK DUNNE

THIRTY-THREE DAYS GONE

The days were loose and long, and then they smashed into a wall. I went out to get groceries one August morning, and I came home to find Tanner in my living room with Boney and Gilpin. On the table, inside a plastic evidence bag, was a long thick club with delicate grooves for fingers.

“We found this just down the river from your home on that first search,” Boney said. “Didn’t look like anything at the time, really. Just some of the weird flotsam on a riverbank, but we keep everything in a search like that. After you showed us your Punch and Judy dolls, it clicked. So we got the lab to check it out.”

“And?” I said. Toneless.

Boney stood up, looked me right in the eye. She sounded sad. “We were able to detect Amy’s blood on it. This case is now classified as a homicide. And we believe this to be the murder weapon.”

“Rhonda, come on!”

“It’s time, Nick,” she said. “It’s time.”

The next part was starting.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

FORTY DAYS GONE

I have found a piece of old twine and an empty wine bottle, and I've been using them for my project. Also some vermouth, of course. I am ready.

Discipline. This will take discipline and focus. I am up to the task.

I array myself in Desi's favorite look: delicate flower. My hair in loose waves, perfumed. My skin has paled after a month inside. I am almost without makeup: a flip of mascara, pink-pink cheeks, and clear lip gloss. I wear a clingy pink dress he bought me. No bra. No panties. No shoes, despite the air-conditioned chill. I have a fire crackling and perfume in the air, and when he arrives after lunch without invitation, I greet him with pleasure. I wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his neck. I rub my cheek against his. I have been increasingly sweeter to him the past few weeks, but this is new, this clinging.

"What's this, sweetheart?" he says, surprised and so pleased that I almost feel ashamed.

"I had the worst nightmare last night," I whisper. "About Nick. I woke up, and all I wanted was to have you here. And in the morning ... I've spent all day wishing you were here."

"I can always be here, if you like."

"I would," I say, and I turn my face up to him and let him kiss me. His kiss disgusts me; it's nibbly and hesitant, like a fish. It's Desi being respectful of his raped, abused woman. He nibbles again, wet cold lips, his hands barely on me, and I just want this all over, I want it done, so I pull him to me and push his lips open with my tongue. I want to bite him.

He pulls back. "Amy," he says. "You've been through a lot. This is fast. I don't want you to do this fast if you don't want to. If you're not sure."

I know he's going to have to touch my breasts, I know he's going to

have to push himself inside me, and I want it over, I can barely restrain myself from scratching him: the idea of doing this slowly.

“I’m sure,” I say. “I guess I’ve been sure since we were sixteen. I was just afraid.”

This means nothing, but I know it will get him hard.

I kiss him again, and then I ask him if he will take me into *our* bedroom.

In the bedroom, he begins undressing me slowly, kissing parts of my body that have nothing to do with sex—my shoulder, my ear—while I delicately guide him away from my wrists and ankles. Just fuck me, for Christ’s sake. Ten minutes in and I grab his hand and thrust it between my legs.

“Are you sure?” he says, pulling back from me, flushed, a loop of his hair falling over his forehead, just like in high school. We could be back in my dorm room, for all the progress Desi has made.

“Yes, darling,” I say, and I reach modestly for his cock.

Another ten minutes and he’s finally between my legs, pumping gently, slowly, slowly, *making love*. Pausing for kisses and caresses until I grab him by the buttocks and begin pushing him. “Fuck me,” I whisper, “fuck me hard.”

He stops. “It doesn’t have to be like that, Amy. I’m not Nick.”

Very true. “I know, darling, I just want you to ... to fill me. I feel so empty.”

That gets him. I grimace over his shoulder as he thrusts a few more times and comes, me realizing it almost too late—*Oh, this is his pathetic cum-sound*—and faking quick oohs and ahhs, gentle kittenish noises. I try to work up some tears because I know he imagines me crying with him the first time.

“Darling, you’re crying,” he says as he slips out of me. He kisses a tear.

“I’m just happy,” I say. Because that’s what those kinds of women say.

I have mixed up some martinis, I announce—Desi loves a decadent afternoon drink—and when he makes a move to put on his shirt and

fetch them, I insist he stay in bed.

“I want to do something for you for a change,” I say.

So I scamper into the kitchen and get two big martini glasses, and into mine I put gin and a single olive. Into his I put three olives, gin, olive juice, vermouth, and the last of my sleeping pills, three of them, crushed.

I bring the martinis, and there is snuggling and nuzzling, and I slurp my gin while this happens. I have an edge that must be dulled.

“Don’t you like my martini?” I ask when he has only a sip. “I always pictured being your wife and making you martinis. I know that’s silly.”

I begin a pout.

“Oh, darling, not silly at all. I was just taking my time, enjoying. But—” He guzzles the whole thing down. “If it makes you feel better!”

He is giddy, triumphant. His cock is slick with conquest. He is, basically, like all men. Soon he is sleepy, and after that he is snoring.

And I can begin.

**part three**

**BOY GETS GIRL BACK (OR VICE  
VERSA)**

# NICK DUNNE

FORTY DAYS GONE

Out on bond, awaiting trial. I'd been processed and released—the depersonalized in-and-outing of jail, the bond hearing, the fingerprints and photos, the rotating and the shuffling and the *handling*; it didn't make me feel like an animal, it made me feel like a product, something created on an assembly line. What they were creating was Nick Dunne, Killer. It would be months until we'd begin my trial (my trial: the word still threatened to undo me completely, turn me into a high-pitched giggler, a madman). I was supposed to feel privileged to be out on bond: I had stayed put even when it was clear I was going to be arrested, so I was deemed no flight risk. Boney might have put in a good word for me too. So I got to be in my own home for a few more months before I was carted off to prison and killed by the state.

Yes, I was a lucky, lucky man.

It was mid-August, which I found continually strange: *It's still summer*, I'd think. *How can so much have happened and it's not even autumn?* It was brutally warm. Shirtsleeve weather, was how my mom would have described it, forever more concerned with her children's comfort than the actual Fahrenheit. Shirtsleeve weather, jacket weather, overcoat weather, parka weather—the Year in Outerwear. For me this year, it would be handcuff weather, then possibly prison-jumpsuit weather. Or funeral-suit weather, because I didn't plan on going to prison. I'd kill myself first.

Tanner had a team of five detectives trying to track Amy down. So far, nothing. Like trying to catch water. Every day for weeks, I'd done my little shitty part: videotape a message to Amy and post it on young Rebecca's Whodunnit blog. (Rebecca, at least, had remained loyal.) In the videos, I wore clothes Amy had bought me, and I brushed my hair the way she liked, and I tried to read her mind. My anger toward her was like heated wire.

The camera crews parked themselves on my lawn most mornings.

We were like rival soldiers, rooted in shooting distance for months, eyeing each other across no-man's-land, achieving some sort of perverted fraternity. There was one guy with a voice like a cartoon strongman whom I'd become attached to, sight unseen. He was dating a girl he really, really liked. Every morning his voice boomed in through my windows as he analyzed their dates; things seemed to be going very well. I wanted to hear how the story ended.

I finished my evening taping to Amy. I was wearing a green shirt she liked on me, and I'd been telling her the story of how we first met, the party in Brooklyn, my awful opening line, *just one olive*, that embarrassed me every time Amy mentioned it. I talked about our exit from the oversteamed apartment out into the crackling cold, with her hand in mine, the kiss in the cloud of sugar. It was one of the few stories we told the same way. I said it all in the cadence of a bedtime tale: soothing and familiar and repetitive. Always ending with *Come home to me, Amy*.

I turned off the camera and sat back on the couch (I always filmed while sitting on the couch under her pernicious, unpredictable cuckoo clock, because I knew if I didn't show her cuckoo clock, she'd wonder whether I had finally gotten rid of her cuckoo clock, and then she'd stop wondering whether I had finally gotten rid of her cuckoo clock and simply come to believe it was true, and then no matter what sweet words came out of my mouth, she'd silently counter with: "*and yet he tossed out my cuckoo clock*"). The cuckoo was, in fact, soon to pop out, its grinding windup beginning over my head—a sound that inevitably made my jaw tense—when the camera crews outside emitted a loud, collective, oceanic wushing. Somebody was here. I heard the seagull cries of a few female news anchors.

*Something is wrong*, I thought.

The doorbell rang three times in a row: Nick-nick! Nick-nick! Nick-nick!

I didn't hesitate. I had stopped hesitating over the past month: Bring on the trouble posthaste.

I opened the door.

It was my wife.

Back.

Amy Elliott Dunne stood barefoot on my doorstep in a thin pink dress that clung to her as if it were wet. Her ankles were ringed in dark violet. From one limp wrist dangled a piece of twine. Her hair was short and frayed at the ends, as if it had been carelessly chopped by dull scissors. Her face was bruised, her lips swollen. She was sobbing.

When she flung her arms out toward me, I could see her entire midsection was stained with dried blood. She tried to speak; her mouth opened, once, twice, silent, a mermaid washed ashore.

“Nick!” she finally keened—a wail that echoed against all the empty houses—and fell into my arms.

I wanted to kill her.

Had we been alone, my hands might have found their place around her neck, my fingers locating perfect grooves in her flesh. To feel that strong pulse under my fingers ... but we weren't alone, we were in front of cameras, and they were realizing who this strange woman was, they were coming to life as sure as the cuckoo clock inside, a few clicks, a few questions, then an avalanche of noise and light. The cameras were blasting us, the reporters closing in with microphones, everyone yelling Amy's name, screaming, literally screaming. So I did the right thing, I held her to me and howled her name right back: “Amy! My God! My God! My darling!” and buried my face in her neck, my arms wrapped tight around her, and let the cameras get their fifteen seconds, and I whispered deep inside her ear, “You fucking bitch.” Then I stroked her hair, I cupped her face in my two loving hands, and I yanked her inside.

Outside our door, a rock concert was demanding its encore: *Amy! Amy! Amy!* Someone threw a scattering of pebbles at our window. *Amy! Amy! Amy!*

My wife took it all as her due, fluttering a dismissive hand toward the rabble outside. She turned to me with a worn but triumphant smile—the smile on the rape victim, the abuse survivor, the bed burner in the old TV movies, the smile where the bastard has finally received due justice and we know our heroine will be able to move on with *life!* Freeze frame.

I gestured to the twine, the hacked hair, the dried blood. “So, what's your story, wife?”

“I’m back,” she whimpered. “I made it back to you.” She moved to put her arms around me. I moved away.

“What is your *story*, Amy?”

“Desi,” she whispered, her lower lip trembling. “Desi Collings took me. It was the morning. Of. Of our anniversary. And the doorbell rang, and I thought ... I don’t know, I thought maybe it was flowers from you.”

I flinched. Of course she’d find a way to work in a gripe: that I hardly ever sent her flowers, when her dad had sent her mom flowers each week since they’d been married. That’s 2,444 bouquets of flowers vs. 4.

“Flowers or ... something,” she continued. “So I didn’t think, I just flung open the door. And there he stood, Desi, with this look on his face. Determined. As if he’d been girding himself up for this all along. And I was holding the handle ... to the Judy puppet. Did you find the puppets?” She smiled up at me tearily. She looked so sweet.

“Oh, I found everything you left for me, Amy.”

“I had just found the handle to the Judy puppet—it had fallen off—I was holding it when I opened the door, and I tried to hit him, and we struggled, and he clubbed me with it. Hard. And the next thing I knew ...”

“You had framed me for murder and disappeared.”

“I can explain everything, Nick.”

I stared at her a long hard moment. I saw *days under the hot sun* stretched across the sand of the beach, her hand on my chest, and I saw *family dinners* at her parents’ house, with Rand always refilling my glass and patting me on the shoulder, and I saw us *sprawled on the rug* in my crummy New York apartment, talking while staring at the lazy ceiling fan, and I saw *mother of my child* and the stunning life I’d planned for us once. I had a moment that lasted two beats, *one, two*, when I wished violently that she were telling the truth.

“I actually don’t think you can explain everything,” I said. “But I am going to love watching you try.”

“Try me now.”

She tried to take my hand, and I flung her off. I walked away from

her, took a breath, and then turned to face her. My wife must always be faced.

“Go ahead, Nick. Try me now.”

“Okay, sure. Why was every clue of the treasure hunt hidden in a place where I had ... relations with Andie?”

She sighed, looked at the floor. Her ankles were raw. “I didn’t even know about Andie until I saw it on TV ... while I was tied to Desi’s bed, hidden away in his lake house.”

“So that was all ... coincidence?”

“Those were all places that were meaningful to us,” she said. A tear slid down her face. “Your office, where you reignited your passion for journalism.”

I snuffed.

“Hannibal, where I finally understood how much this area means to you. Your father’s house—confronting the man who hurt you so much. Your mother’s house, which is now Go’s house, the two people who made you such a good man. But ... I guess it doesn’t surprise me that you’d like to share those places with someone you”—she bowed her head—“had fallen in love with. You always liked repeats.”

“Why did each of those places end up including clues that implicated me in your murder? Women’s undies, your purse, your *diary*. Explain your *diary*, Amy, with all the lies.”

She just smiled and shook her head like she was sorry for me. “Everything, I can explain everything,” she said.

I looked in that sweet tear-stained face. Then I looked down at all the blood. “Amy. Where’s Desi?”

She shook her head again, a sad little smile.

I moved to call the police, but a knock on our door told me they were already here.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

THE NIGHT OF THE RETURN

I still have Desi's semen inside me from the last time he raped me, so the medical examination goes fine. My rope-wreathed wrists, my damaged vagina, my bruises—the body I present them is textbook. An older male doctor with humid breath and thick fingers performs the pelvic exam—scraping and wheezing in time—while Detective Rhonda Boney holds my hand. It is like being clutched by a cold bird claw. Not comforting at all. Once she breaks into a grin when she thinks I'm not looking. She is absolutely thrilled that Nick isn't a bad guy after all. Yes, the women of America are collectively sighing.

Police have been dispatched to Desi's home, where they'll find him naked and drained, a stunned look on his face, a few strands of my hair in his clutches, the bed soaked in blood. The knife I used on him, and on my bonds, will be nearby on the floor where I dropped it, dazed, and walked barefoot, carrying nothing out of the house but his keys—to the car, to the gate—and climbed, still slick with his blood, into his vintage Jaguar and returned like some long-lost faithful pet, straight back home to my husband. I'd been reduced to an animal state; I didn't think of anything but getting back to Nick.

The old doctor tells me the good news; no permanent damage and no need for a D&C—I miscarried too early. Boney keeps clutching my hand and murmuring, *My God, what you've been through, do you think you feel up to answering a few questions?* That fast, from condolences to brass tacks. I find ugly women are usually overly deferential or incredibly rude.

You are Amazing Amy, and you've survived a brutal kidnapping involving repeated assaults. You've killed your captor, and you've made it back to a husband you've discovered was cheating. You:

- a) Put yourself first and demand some time alone to collect yourself.
- b) Hold it together just a little longer so you can help the police.

c) Decide which interview to give first—you might as well get something out of the ordeal, like a book deal.

Answer: B. Amazing Amy always puts others first.

I'm allowed to clean myself up in a private room in the hospital, and I change into a set of clothes Nick put together for me from the house—jeans with creases from being folded too long, a pretty blouse that smells of dust. Boney and I drive from the hospital to the police station in near silence. I ask weakly after my parents.

“They’re waiting for you at the station,” Boney says. “They wept when I told them. With joy. Absolute joy and relief. We’ll let them get some good hugs in with you before we do our questions, don’t worry.”

The cameras are already at the station. The parking lot has that hopeful, overlit look of a sports stadium. There is no underground parking, so we have to pull right up front as the madding crowd closes in: I see wet lips and spittle as everyone screams questions, the pops of flashbulbs and camera lights. The crowd pushes and pulls en masse, jerking a few inches to the right, then the left, as everyone tries to reach me.

“I can’t do this,” I say to Boney. A man’s meaty palm smacks against the car window as a photographer tries to keep his balance. I grab her cold hand. “It’s too much.”

She pats me and says, *wait*. The station doors open, and every officer in the building files down the stairs and forms a line on either side of me, holding the press back, creating an honor guard for me, and Rhonda and I run in holding hands like reverse newlyweds, rushing straight up to my parents who are waiting just inside the doorway, and everyone gets the photos of us clutching each other with my mom whispering *sweetgirlsweetgirlsweetgirl* and my dad sobbing so loudly he almost chokes.

. . .

There is more whisking away of me, as if I haven’t been whisked away quite enough already. I am deposited in a closet of a room with comfortable but cheap office chairs, the kind that always seem to have bits of old food woven into the fabric. A camera blinking up in the corner and no windows. It is not what I pictured. It is not designed to make me feel safe.

I am surrounded by Boney, her partner, Gilpin, and two FBI agents

up from St. Louis who remain nearly silent. They give me water, and then Boney starts.

B: Okay, Amy, first we have to thank you sincerely for talking with us after what you've been through. In a case like this, it's very important to get everything down while the memory is fresh. You can't imagine how important that is. So it's good to talk now. If we can get all these details down, we can close the case, and you and Nick can go back to your lives.

A: I'd definitely like that.

B: You deserve that. So if you're ready to begin, can we start with the time line: What time did Desi arrive at your door? Do you remember?

A: About ten A.M. A little after, because I remember hearing the Teverers talking as they walked to their car for church.

B: What happened when you opened the door?

A: Something felt wrong immediately. First of all, Desi has written me letters all my life. But his obsession seemed to have become less intense over the years. He seemed to think of himself as just an old friend, and since the police couldn't do anything about it, I made my peace with that. I never felt like he meant me active harm, although I really didn't like being this close to him. Geographically. I think that's what put him over the edge. Knowing I was so close. He walked into my house with ... He was sweaty and sort of nervous but also determined-looking. I'd been upstairs, I'd been about to iron my dress, when I noticed the big wooden handle of the Judy puppet on the floor—I guess it had fallen off. Bummer because I'd already hidden the puppets in the woodshed. So I grabbed the handle, and I had that in my hand when I opened the door.

B: Very good memory.

A: Thank you.

B: What happened next?

A: Desi barged in, and he was pacing around the living room, all flustered and kind of frantic, and he said, *What are you doing for your anniversary?* It frightened me, that he knew today was our

anniversary, and he seemed angry about it, and then his arm flashed out and he had me by the wrist and was twisting it behind my back, and we struggled. I put up a real fight.

B: What next?

A: I kicked him and got away for a second and ran to the kitchen, and we struggled more and he clubbed me once with the big wooden Judy handle, and I went flying and then he hit me two or three more times. I remember not being able to see for a second, just dizzy, my head was throbbing and I tried to grab for the handle and he stabbed my arm with this pocketknife he was carrying. I still have the scar. See?

B: Yes, that was noted in your medical examination. You were lucky it was only a flesh wound.

A: It doesn't feel like a flesh wound, believe me.

B: So he stabbed you? The angle is—

A: I'm not sure if he did it on purpose, or if I thrust myself onto the blade accidentally—I was so off balance. I remember the club falling to the floor, though, and I looked down and saw my blood from the stab wound pooling over the club. I think I passed out then.

B: Where were you when you woke up?

A: I woke up hog-tied in my living room.

B: Did you scream, try to get the neighbors' attention?

A: Of course I screamed. I mean, did you hear me? I was beaten, stabbed, and hog-tied by a man who had been obsessed with me for decades, who once tried to kill himself in my dorm bedroom.

B: Okay, okay, Amy, I'm sorry, that question was not intended in the least to sound like we are blaming you; we just need to get a full picture here so we can close the investigation and you can get on with your life. Do you want another water, or coffee or something?

A: Something warm would be nice. I'm so cold.

B: No problem. Can you get her a coffee? So what happened then?

A: I think his original plan was to subdue me and kidnap me and let it look like a runaway-wife thing, because when I wake up, he's just finished mopping the blood in the kitchen, and he's straightened the table of little antique ornaments that fell over when I ran to the kitchen. He's gotten rid of the club. But he's running out of time, and I think what must have happened is: He sees this disheveled living room—and so he thinks, *Leave it. Let it look like something bad happened here.* So he throws the front door open, and then he knocks a few more things over in the living room. Overturns the ottoman. So that's why the scene looked so weird: It was half true and half false.

B: Did Desi plant incriminating items at each of the treasure hunt sites: Nick's office, Hannibal, his dad's house, Go's woodshed?

A: I don't know what you mean?

B: There was a pair of women's underwear, not your size, in Nick's office. A: I guess it must have been the girl he was ... dating. B: Not hers either.

A: Well, I can't help on that one. Maybe he was seeing more than one girl.

B: Your diary was found in his father's house. Partly burned in the furnace.

A: Did you *read* the diary? It's awful. I'm sure Nick did want to get rid of it—I don't blame him, considering you guys zeroed in on him so quickly.

B: I wonder why he would go to his father's to burn it.

A: You should ask him. (Pause.) Nick went there a lot, to be alone. He likes his privacy. So I'm sure it didn't feel that odd to him. I mean, he couldn't do it at our house, because it's a crime scene—who knows if you guys will come back, find something in the ashes. At his dad's, he has some discretion. I thought it was a smart move, considering you guys were basically railroading him.

B: The diary is very, very concerning. The diary alleges abuse and your fears that Nick didn't want the baby, that he might want to kill you.

A: I really do wish that diary had burned. (Pause.) Let me be

honest: The diary includes some of Nick's and my struggles these past few years. It doesn't paint the greatest picture of our marriage or of Nick, but I have to admit: I never wrote in the diary unless I was super-happy, *or* I was really, really unhappy and wanted to vent and then ... I can get a little dramatic when it's just me stewing on things. I mean, a lot of that is the ugly truth—he did shove me once, and he didn't want a baby, and he did have money problems. But me being afraid of him? I have to admit, it *pains* me to admit, but that's my dramatic streak. I think the problem is, I've been stalked several times—it's been a lifelong issue—people getting obsessed with me—and so I get a little paranoid.

B: You tried to buy a gun.

A: I get a lot paranoid, okay? I'm sorry. If you had my history, you'd understand.

B: There's an entry about a night of drinks when you suffered from what sounds like textbook antifreeze poisoning.

A: (Long silence.) That's bizarre. Yes, I did get ill.

B: Okay, back to the treasure hunt. You did hide the Punch and Judy dolls in the woodshed?

A: I did.

B: A lot of our case has focused on Nick's debt, some extensive credit-card purchases, and our discovery of all those items hidden in the woodshed. What did you think when you opened the woodshed and saw all this stuff?

A: I was on Go's property, and Go and I aren't especially close, so mostly, I felt like I was nosing around in something that wasn't my business. I remember thinking at the time that it must have been her stuff from New York. And then I saw on the news—Desi made me watch everything—that it corresponded with Nick's purchases, and ... I knew Nick had some money troubles, he was a spender. I think he was probably embarrassed. Impulse purchases he couldn't undo, so he hid them from me until he could sell them online.

B: The Punch and Judy puppets, they seem a little ominous for an anniversary present.

A: I know! Now I know. I didn't remember the whole backstory of Punch and Judy. I was just seeing a husband and wife and a baby, and they were made of wood, and I was pregnant. I scanned the Internet and saw Punch's line: *That's the way to do it!* And I thought it was cute—I didn't know what it meant.

B: So you were hog-tied. How did Desi get you to the car?

A: He pulled the car into the garage and lowered the garage door, dragged me in, threw me in the trunk, and drove away.

B: And did you yell then?

A: Yes, I fucking yelled. And if I'd known that, every night for the next month, Desi was going to rape me, then snuggle in next to me with a martini and a sleeping pill so he wouldn't be awakened by my *sobbing*, and that the police were going to actually interview him and *still* not have a clue, still sit around with their thumbs up their asses, I might have yelled harder. Yes, I might have.

B: Again, my apologies. Can we get Ms. Dunne some tissues, please? And where's her coff—Thank you. Okay, where did you go from there, Amy?

A: We drove toward St. Louis, and I remember on the way there he stopped at Hannibal—I heard the steamboat whistle. I guess that's when he threw my purse out. It was the one other thing he did so it would look like foul play.

B: This is so interesting. There seem to be so many strange coincidences in this case. Like, that Desi would happen to toss out the purse right at Hannibal, where your clue would make Nick go—and we in turn would believe that Nick tossed the purse there. Or how you decided to hide a present in the very place where Nick was hiding goods he'd bought on secret credit cards.

A: Really? I have to tell you, none of this sounds like coincidence to me. It sounds like a bunch of cops who got hung up on my husband being guilty, and now that I am alive and he's clearly not guilty, they look like giant idiots, and they're scrambling to cover their asses. Instead of accepting responsibility for the fact that, if this case had been left in your extremely fucking incompetent hands, Nick would be on death row and I'd be

chained to a bed, being raped every day from now until I died.

B: I'm sorry, it's—

A: I saved myself, which saved Nick, which saved your sorry fucking asses.

B: That is an incredibly good point, Amy. I'm sorry, we're so ... We've spent so long on this case, we want to figure out every detail that we missed so we don't repeat our mistakes. But you're absolutely right, we're missing the big picture, which is: You are a hero. You are an absolute hero.

A: Thank you. I appreciate you saying that.

# NICK DUNNE

THE NIGHT OF THE RETURN

I went to the station to fetch my wife and was greeted by the press like a rock star–landslide president–first moonwalker all in one. I had to resist raising clasped hands above my head in the universal victory shake. *I see*, I thought, *we're all pretending to be friends now*.

I entered a scene that felt like a holiday party gone awry—a few bottles of champagne rested on one desk, surrounded by tiny paper cups. Backslapping and cheers for all the cops, and then more cheers for me, as if these people hadn't been my persecutors a day before. But I had to play along. Present the back for slapping. *Oh yes, we're all buddies now*.

*All that matters is that Amy is safe*. I'd been practicing that line over and over. I had to look like the relieved, doting husband until I knew which way things were going to go. Until I was sure the police had sawed through all her sticky cobwebby lies. *Until she is arrested*—I'd get that far, *until she is arrested*, and then I could feel my brain expand and deflate simultaneously—my own cerebral Hitchcock zoom—and I'd think: *My wife murdered a man*.

“Stabbed him,” said the young police officer assigned as the family liaison. (I hoped never to be liaisoned again, with anyone, for any reason.) He was the same kid who'd yammered on to Go about his horse and torn labrum and peanut allergy. “Cut him right through the jugular. Cut like that, he bleeds out in, like, sixty seconds.”

Sixty seconds is a long time to know you are dying. I could picture Desi wrapping his hands around his neck, the feel of his own blood spurting between his fingers with each pulse, and Desi getting more frightened and the pulsing only quickening ... and then slowing, and Desi knowing the slowing was worse. And all the time Amy standing just out of reach, studying him with the blameful, disgusted look of a high school biology student confronted with a dripping pig fetus. Her little scalpel still in hand.

“Cut him with a big ole butcher knife,” the kid was saying. “Guy used to sit right next to her on the bed, cut up her meat for her, and *feed* her.” He sounded more disgusted by this than by the stabbing. “One day the knife slips off the plate, he never notices—”

“How’d she use the knife if she was always tied up?” I asked.

The kid looked at me as if I’d just told a joke about his mother. “I don’t know, Mr. Dunne, I’m sure they’re getting the details right now. The point is, your wife is safe.”

Hurray. Kid stole my line.

I spotted Rand and Marybeth through the doorway of the room where we’d given our first press conference six weeks ago. They were leaning in to each other, as always, Rand kissing the top of Marybeth’s head, Marybeth nuzzling him back, and I felt such a keen sense of outrage that I almost threw a stapler at them. *You two worshipful, adoring assholes created that thing down the hall and set her loose on the world.* Lo, how jolly, what a perfect monster! And do they get punished? No, not a single person had come forth to question their characters; they’d experienced nothing but an outpouring of love and support, and Amy would be restored to them and everyone would love her more.

My wife was an insatiable sociopath before. What would she become now?

*Step carefully, Nick, step very carefully.*

Rand caught my eye and motioned me to join them. He shook my hand for a few exclusive reporters who’d been granted an audience. Marybeth held her ground: I was still the man who’d cheated on her daughter. She gave a curt nod and turned away.

Rand leaned in close to me so I could smell his spearmint gum. “I tell you, Nick, we are so relieved to have Amy back. We owe you an apology too. Big one. We’ll let Amy decide how she feels about your marriage, but I want to at least apologize for where things went. You’ve got to understand—”

“I do,” I said. “I understand everything.”

Before Rand could apologize or engage further, Tanner and Betsy arrived together, looking like a *Vogue* spread—crisp slacks and jewel-

toned shirts and gleaming gold watches and rings—and Tanner leaned toward my ear and whispered, *Let me see where we are*, and then Go was rushing in, all alarmed eyes and questions: *What does this mean? What happened to Desi? She just showed up on your doorstep? What does this mean? Are you okay? What happens next?*

It was a bizarre gathering—the feel of it: not quite reunion, not quite hospital waiting room, celebratory yet anxious, like some parlor game where no one had all the rules. Meanwhile, the two reporters the Elliotts allowed into the inner sanctum kept snapping questions at me: *How great does it feel to have Amy back? How wonderful do you feel right now? How relieved are you, Nick, that Amy has returned?*

*I'm extremely relieved and very happy*, I was saying, crafting my own bland PR statement, when the doors parted and Jacqueline Collings entered, her lips a tight red scar, her face powder lined with tears.

“Where is she?” she said to me. “The lying little bitch, where is she? She killed my son. My *son*.” She began crying as the reporter snapped a few photos.

*How do you feel that your son was accused of kidnap and rape?* one reporter asked in a stiff voice.

“How do I *feel*?” she snapped. “Are you actually serious? Do people really answer questions like that? That nasty, *soulless* girl manipulated my son his entire life—*write this down*—she manipulated and lied and finally murdered him, and now, even after he’s dead, she’s still using him—”

“Ms. Collings, we’re Amy’s parents,” Marybeth was beginning. She tried to touch Jacqueline on the shoulder, and Jacqueline shook her off. “I am sorry for your pain.”

“But not my loss.” Jacqueline stood a good head taller than Marybeth; she glared down on her. “But *not* my *loss*,” she reasserted.

“I’m sorry about ... everything,” Marybeth said, and then Rand was next to her, a head taller than Jacqueline.

“What are you going to do about your daughter?” Jacqueline asked. She turned toward our young liaison officer, who tried to hold his ground. “What is being done about Amy? Because she is lying when she says my son kidnapped her. She is lying. She killed him, she *murdered* him in his sleep, and no one seems to be taking this

seriously.”

“It’s all being taken very, very seriously, ma’am,” the young kid said.

“Can I get a quote, Ms. Collings?” asked the reporter.

“I just gave you my quote. *Amy Elliott Dunne murdered my son. It was not self-defense. She murdered him.*”

“Do you have proof of that?”

Of course she didn’t.

The reporter’s story would chronicle my husbandly exhaustion (*his drawn face telling of too many nights forfeited to fear*) and the Elliotts’ relief (*the two parents cling to each other as they wait for their only child to be officially returned to them*). It would discuss the incompetence of the cops (*it was a biased case, full of dead ends and wrong turns, with the police department focused doggedly on the wrong man*). The article would dismiss Jacqueline Collings in a single line: *After an awkward run-in with the Elliott parents, an embittered Jacqueline Collings was ushered out of the room, claiming her son was innocent.*

Jacqueline was indeed ushered out of the room into another, where her statement would be recorded and she would be kept out of the way of the much better story: the Triumphant Return of Amazing Amy.

When Amy was released to us, it all began again. The photos and the tears, the hugging and the laughter, all for strangers who wanted to see and to know: *What was it like? Amy, what does it feel like to escape your captor and return to your husband? Nick, what does it feel like to get your wife back, to get your freedom back, all at once?*

I remained mostly silent. I was thinking my own questions, the same questions I’d thought for years, the ominous refrain of our marriage: *What are you thinking, Amy? How are you feeling? Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do?*

It was a gracious, queenly act for Amy to want to come home to our marriage bed with her cheating husband. Everyone agreed. The media followed us as if we were a royal wedding procession, the two of us whizzing through the neon, fast-food-cluttered streets of Carthage to our McMansion on the river. What grace Amy has, what moxie. A

storybook princess. And I, of course, was the lickspittle hunchback of a husband who would bow and scrape the rest of my days. Until she was arrested. If she ever got arrested.

That she was released at all was a concern. More than a concern, an utter shock. I saw them all filing out of the conference room where they questioned her for *four* hours and then let her go: two FBI guys with alarmingly short hair and blank faces; Gilpin, looking like he'd swallowed the greatest steak dinner of his life; and Boney, the only one with thin, tight lips and a little V of a frown. She glanced at me as she walked past, arched an eyebrow, and was gone.

Then, too quickly, Amy and I were back in our home, alone in the living room, Bleecker watching us with shiny eyes. Outside our curtains, the lights of the TV cameras remained, bathing our living room in a bizarrely lush orange glow. We looked candlelit, romantic. Amy was absolutely beautiful. I hated her. I was afraid of her.

“We can't really sleep in the same house—” I began.

“I want to stay here with you.” She took my hand. “I want to be with my husband. I want to give you the chance to be the kind of husband you want to be. I forgive you.”

“You *forgive* me? Amy, why did you come back? Because of what I said in the interviews? The videos?”

“Wasn't that what you wanted?” she said. “Wasn't that the point of the videos? They were perfect—they reminded me of what we used to have, how special it was.”

“What I said, that was just me saying what you wanted to hear.”

“I know—that's how well you know me!” Amy said. She beamed. Bleecker began figure-eighting between her legs. She picked him up and stroked him. His purr was deafening. “Think about it, Nick, we *know* each other. Better than anyone in the world now.”

It was true that I'd had this feeling too, in the past month, when I wasn't wishing Amy harm. It would come to me at strange moments—in the middle of the night, up to take a piss, or in the morning pouring a bowl of cereal—I'd detect a nib of admiration, and more than that, fondness for my wife, right in the middle of me, right in the gut. To know exactly what I wanted to hear in those notes, to woo me back to her, even to predict all my wrong moves ... the woman knew me cold.

Better than anyone in the world, she knew me. All this time I'd thought we were strangers, and it turned out we knew each other intuitively, in our bones, in our blood.

It was kind of romantic. Catastrophically romantic.

"We can't just pick up where we were, Amy."

"No, not where we were," she said. "Where we are now. Where you love me and you'll never do wrong again."

"You're crazy, you're literally crazy if you think I'm going to stay. You *killed* a man," I said. I turned my back to her, and then I pictured her with a knife in her hand and her mouth growing tight as I disobeyed her. I turned back around. Yes, my wife must always be faced.

"To escape him."

"You killed Desi so you had a new story, so you could come back and be beloved Amy and not ever have to take the blame for what you did. Don't you get it, Amy, the irony? It's what you always hated about me—that I never dealt with the consequences of my actions, right? Well, my ass has been well and duly consequenced. So what about you? You *murdered* a man, a man I assume loved you and was helping you, and now you want me to step in his place and love you and help you, and ... I can't. I cannot do it. I won't do it."

"Nick, I think you've gotten some bad information," she said. "It doesn't surprise me, all the rumors that are going about. But we need to forget all that. If we are to go forward. And we will go forward. All of America wants us to go forward. It's the story the world needs right now. Us. Desi's the bad guy. No one wants two bad guys. They *want* to *like* you, Nick. The only way you can be loved again is to stay with me. It's the only way."

"Tell me what happened, Amy. Was Desi helping you all along?"

She flared at that: She didn't need a man's help, even though she clearly had needed a man's help. "Of course not!" she snapped.

"Tell me. What can it hurt, tell me everything, because you and I can't go forward with this pretend story. I'll fight you every step of the way. I know you've thought of everything. I'm not trying to get you to slip up—I'm tired of trying to outthink you, I don't have it in

me. I just want to know what happened. I was a step away from death row, Amy. You came back and saved me, and I thank you for that—do you hear me? I *thank* you, so don't say I didn't later on. I *thank* you. But I need to know. You know I need to know.”

“Take off your clothes,” she said.

She wanted to make sure I wasn't wearing a wire. I undressed in front of her, removed every stitch, and then she surveyed me, ran a hand across my chin and my chest, down my back. She palmed my ass and slipped her hand between my legs, cupped my testicles and gripped my limp cock, held it in her hand for a moment to see if anything happened. Nothing happened.

“You're clean,” she said. It was meant as a joke, a wisecrack, a movie reference we'd both laugh at. When I said nothing, she stepped back and said, “I always did like looking at you naked. That made me happy.”

“Nothing made you happy. Can I put my clothes back on?”

“No. I don't want to worry about hidden wires in the cuffs or the hems. Also, we need to go in the bathroom and run the water. In case you bugged the house.”

“You've seen too many movies,” I said.

“Ha! Never thought I'd hear you say that.”

We stood in the bathtub and turned on the shower. The water sprayed my naked back and misted the front of Amy's shirt until she peeled it off. She pulled off all her clothes, a gleeful striptease, and tossed them over the shower stall in the same grinning, game manner she had when we first met—*I'm up for anything!*—and she turned to me, and I waited for her to swing her hair around her shoulders like she did when she flirted with me, but her hair was too short.

“Now we're even,” she said. “Seemed rude to be the only one clothed.”

“I think we're past etiquette, Amy.”

*Look only at her eyes, do not touch her, do not let her touch you.*

She moved toward me, put a hand on my chest, let the water trickle between her breasts. She licked a shower teardrop off her upper lip and smiled. Amy hated shower spray. She didn't like getting her face

wet, didn't like the feel of water pelleting her flesh. I knew this because I was married to her, and I'd pawed her and harassed her many times in the shower, always to be turned down. (*I know it seems sexy, Nick, but it's actually not, it's something people only do in movies.*) Now she was pretending just the opposite, as if she forgot that I knew her. I backed away.

"Tell me everything, Amy. But first: Was there ever a baby?"

The baby was a lie. It was the most desolate part for me. My wife as a murderer was frightening, repulsive, but the baby as a lie was almost impossible to bear. The baby was a lie, the fear of blood was a lie—during the past year, my wife had been mostly a lie.

"How did you set Desi up?" I asked.

"I found some twine in one corner of his basement. I used a steak knife to saw it into four pieces—"

"He let you keep a knife?"

"We were friends. You forget."

She was right. I was thinking of the story she'd told the police: that Desi had held her captive. I did forget. She was that good a storyteller.

"Whenever Desi wasn't around, I'd tie the pieces as tight as I could around my wrists and ankles so they'd leave these grooves."

She showed me the lurid lines on her wrists, like bracelets.

"I took a wine bottle, and I abused myself with it every day, so the inside of my vagina looked ... right. Right for a rape victim. Then today I let him have sex with me so I had his semen, and I slipped some sleeping pills into his martini."

"He let you keep sleeping pills?"

She sighed: I wasn't keeping up.

"Right, you were friends."

"Then I—" She pantomimed slicing his jugular.

"That easy, huh?"

"You just have to decide to do it and then do it," she said. "Discipline. Follow through. Like anything. You never understood

that.”

I could feel her mood turning stony. I wasn't appreciating her enough.

“Tell me more,” I said. “Tell me how you did it.”

An hour in, the water went cold, and Amy called an end to our discussion.

“You have to admit, it's pretty brilliant,” she said.

I stared at her.

“I mean, you have to admire it just a little,” she prompted.

“How long did it take for Desi to bleed to death?”

“It's time for bed,” she said. “But we can talk more tomorrow if you want. Right now we should sleep. Together. I think it's important. For closure. Actually, the opposite of closure.”

“Amy, I'm going to stay tonight because I don't want to deal with all the questions if I don't stay. But I'll sleep downstairs.”

She cocked her head to one side, studied me.

“Nick, I can still do very bad things to you, remember that.”

“Ha! Worse than what you've already done?”

She looked surprised. “Oh, definitely.”

“I doubt that, Amy.”

I began walking out the door.

“Attempted murder,” she said.

I paused.

“That was my original plan early on: I'd be a poor, sick wife with repeated episodes, sudden intense bouts of illness, and then it turns out that all those cocktails her husband prepared her ...”

“Like in the diary.”

“But I decided *attempted* murder wasn't good enough for you. It had to be bigger than that. Still, I couldn't get the poisoning idea out of my head. I liked the idea of you working up to the murder. Trying the cowardly way first. So I went through with it.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“All that vomit, so shocking. An innocent, frightened wife might have saved some of that vomit, just in case. You can’t blame her, being a little paranoid.” She gave a satisfied smile. “Always have a backup plan to the backup plan.”

“You actually poisoned yourself.”

“Nick, please, you’re shocked? I *killed* myself.”

“I need a drink,” I said. I left before she could speak.

I poured myself a Scotch and sat on the living-room couch. Beyond the curtains, the strobes of the cameras were lighting up the yard. Soon it would no longer be night. I’d come to find the morning depressing, to know it would come again and again.

Tanner picked up on the first ring.

“She killed him,” I said. “She killed Desi because he was basically ... he was annoying her, he was power-playing her, and she realized she could kill him, and it was her way back to her old life, and she could blame everything on him. She *murdered* him, Tanner, she just told me this. She *confessed*.”

“I don’t suppose you were able to ... record any of it somehow? Cell phone or something?”

“We were naked with the shower running, and she whispered everything.”

“I don’t even want to ask,” he said. “You two are the most fucked-up people I have ever met, and I specialize in fucked-up people.”

“What’s going on with the police?”

He sighed. “She foolproofed everything. It’s ludicrous, her story, but no more ludicrous than our story. Amy’s basically exploiting the sociopath’s most reliable maxim.”

“What’s that?”

“The bigger the lie, the more they believe it.”

“Come on, Tanner, there’s got to be something.”

I paced over to the staircase to make sure Amy was nowhere nearby. We were whispering, but still. I had to be careful now.

“For now we need to toe the line, Nick. She left you looking fairly bad: Everything in the diary was true, she says. All the stuff in the woodshed was you. You bought the stuff with those credit cards, and you’re too embarrassed to admit it. She’s just a sheltered little rich girl, what would she know about acquiring secret credit cards in her husband’s name? And my goodness, that pornography!”

“She told me there was never a baby, she faked it with Noelle Hawthorne’s pee.”

“Why didn’t you say—That’s huge! We’ll lean on Noelle Hawthorne.”

“Noelle didn’t know.”

I heard a deep sigh on the other end. He didn’t even bother asking how. “We’ll keep thinking, we’ll keep looking,” he said. “Something will break.”

“I can’t stay in this house with that *thing*. She’s threatening me with —”

“Attempted murder ... the antifreeze. Yeah, I heard that was in the mix.”

“They can’t arrest me on that, can they? She says she still has some vomit. Evidence. But can they really—”

“Let’s not push it for now, okay, Nick?” he said. “For now, play nice. I hate to say it, I hate to, but that’s my best legal advice for you right now: Play nice.”

“Play nice? That’s your advice? My one-man legal dream team: *Play nice?* Fuck you.”

I hung up in full fury.

*I’ll kill her, I thought. I will fucking kill the bitch.*

I plunged into the dark daydream I’d indulged over the past few years when Amy had made me feel my smallest: I daydreamed of hitting her with a hammer, smashing her head in until she stopped talking, *finally*, stopped with the words she suctioned to me: average, boring, mediocre, unsurprising, unsatisfying, unimpressive. *Un*, basically. In my mind, I whaled on her with the hammer until she was like a broken toy, muttering *un, un, un* until she sputtered to a stop. And then it wasn’t enough, so I restored her to perfection and began

killing her again: I wrapped my fingers around her neck—she always did crave intimacy—and then I squeezed and squeezed, her pulse—

“Nick?”

I turned around, and Amy was on the bottom stair in her nightgown, her head tilted to one side.

“Play nice, Nick.”

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

THE NIGHT OF THE RETURN

He turns around, and when he sees me standing there, he looks scared. That's something useful. Because I'm not going to let him go. He may think he was lying when he said all those nice things to lure me home. But I know different. I know Nick can't lie like that. I know that as he recited those words, he realized the truth. *Ping!* Because you can't be as in love as we were and not have it invade your bone marrow. Our kind of love can go into remission, but it's always waiting to return. Like the world's sweetest cancer.

You don't buy it? Then how about this? He did lie. He didn't mean a fucking thing he said. Well, then, screw him, he did too good a job, because I want him, exactly like that. The man he was pretending to be—women love that guy. *I* love that guy. That's the man I want for my husband. That's the man I signed up for. That's the man I deserve.

So he can choose to truly love me the way he once did, or I will bring him to heel and make him be the man I married. I'm sick of dealing with his bullshit.

"Play nice," I say.

He looks like a child, a furious child. He bunches his fists.

"No, Amy."

"I can ruin you, Nick."

"You already did, Amy." I see the rage flash over him, a shiver. "Why in God's name do you even want to be with me? I'm boring, average, uninteresting, uninspiring. I'm not up to par. You spent the last few years telling me this."

"Only because you stopped *trying*," I say. "You were so perfect, with me. We were so perfect when we started, and then you stopped trying. Why would you do that?"

"I stopped loving you."

“Why?”

“You stopped loving me. We’re a sick, fucking toxic Möbius strip, Amy. We weren’t ourselves when we fell in love, and when we became ourselves—surprise!—we were poison. We complete each other in the nastiest, ugliest possible way. You don’t really love *me*, Amy. You don’t even like me. Divorce me. Divorce me, and let’s try to be happy.”

“I won’t divorce you, Nick. I won’t. And I swear to you, if you try to leave, I will devote *my* life to making *your* life as awful as I can. And you know I can make it awful.”

He begins pacing like a caged bear. “Think about it, Amy, how bad we are for each other: the two most needful human beings in the world stuck with each other. I’ll divorce you if you don’t divorce me.”

“Really?”

“I will divorce you. But you should divorce me. Because I know what you’re thinking already, Amy. You’re thinking it won’t make a good story: Amazing Amy finally kills her crazed-rapist captor and returns home to ... a boring old divorce. You’re thinking it’s not triumphant.”

It’s *not* triumphant.

“But think of it this way: Your story is not some drippy, earnest survivor story. TV movie circa 1992. It’s not. You are a tough, vibrant, independent woman, Amy. You killed your kidnapper, and then you kept on cleaning house: You got rid of your idiot cheat of a husband. Women would *cheer* you. You’re not a scared little girl. You’re a badass, take-no-prisoners *woman*. Think about it. You know I’m right: The era of forgiveness is over. It’s passé. Think of all the women—the politicians’ wives, the actresses—every woman in the public who’s been cheated on, they don’t stay with the cheat these days. It’s not *stand by your man* anymore, it’s *divorce the fucker*.”

I feel a rush of hate toward him, that he’s still trying to wriggle out of our marriage even though I’ve told him—three times now—that he can’t. He still thinks he has power.

“And if I don’t divorce you, you’ll divorce me?” I ask.

“I don’t want to be married to a woman like you. I want to be

married to a normal person.”

Piece of shit.

“I see. You want to revert to your lame, limp *loser* self? You want to just *walk away*? No! You don’t get to go be some boring-ass middle American with some boring-ass girl next door. You tried it already—remember, baby? Even if you wanted to, you couldn’t do that now. You’ll be known as the philandering asshole who left his kidnapped, raped wife. You think any *nice* woman will touch you? You’ll only get —”

“Psychos? Crazy psycho bitches?” He’s pointing at me, jabbing the air.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Psycho bitch?”

It’d be so easy, for him to write me off that way. He’d love that, to be able to dismiss me so simply.

“Everything I do, I do for a reason, Nick,” I say. “Everything I do takes planning and precision and discipline.”

“You are a petty, selfish, manipulative, disciplined psycho bitch—”

“You are a man,” I say. “You are an average, lazy, boring, cowardly, *woman-fearing* man. Without me, that’s what you would have kept on being, ad nauseam. But I made you into something. You were the best man you’ve *ever* been with me. And you know it. The only time in your life you’ve ever *liked* yourself was *pretending to be* someone I might like. Without me? You’re just your dad.”

“Don’t say that, Amy.” He balls up his fists.

“You think he wasn’t hurt by a woman too, just like you?” I say it in my most patronizing voice, as if I’m talking to a puppy. “You think he didn’t believe he deserved better than he got, just like you? You really think your mom was his first choice? Why do you think he hated you all so much?”

He moves toward me. “Shut up, Amy.”

“Think, Nick, you know I’m right: Even if you found a nice, regular girl, you’d be thinking of *me* every day. Tell me you wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“How quickly did you forget little Able Andie once you thought I loved you again?” I say it in my poor-baby voice. I even stick out my lower lip. “One love note, sweetie? Did one love note do it? Two? Two notes with me swearing I *loved* you and I wanted you *back*, and I thought you were just *great* after all—was that it for you? You are *WITTY*, you are *WARM*, you are *BRILLIANT*. You’re so pathetic. You think you can ever be a normal man again? You’ll find a nice girl, and you’ll still think of me, and you’ll be so completely dissatisfied, trapped in your boring, normal life with your regular wife and your two average kids. You’ll think of me and then you’ll look at your wife, and you’ll think: *Dumb bitch*.”

“Shut up, Amy. I mean it.”

“Just like your dad. We’re all bitches in the end, aren’t we, Nick? Dumb bitch, psycho bitch.”

He grabs me by the arm and shakes me hard.

“I’m the bitch who makes you better, Nick.”

He stops talking then. He is using all his energy to keep his hands at his side. His eyes are wet with tears. He is shaking.

“I’m the *bitch* who makes you a man.”

Then his hands are on my neck.

**NICK DUNNE**  
THE NIGHT OF THE RETURN

Her pulse was finally throbbing beneath my fingers, the way I'd imagined. I pressed tighter and brought her to the ground. She made wet clucking noises and scratched at my wrists. We were both kneeling, in face-to-face prayer for ten seconds.

*You fucking crazy bitch.*

A tear fell from my chin and hit the floor.

*You murdering, mind-fucking, evil, crazy bitch.*

Amy's bright blue eyes were staring into mine, unblinking.

And then the strangest thought of all clattered drunkenly from the back of my brain to the front and blinded me: *If I kill Amy, who will I be?*

I saw a bright white flash. I dropped my wife as if she were burning iron.

She sat hard on the ground, gasped, coughed. When her breath came back, it was in jagged rasps, with a strange, almost erotic squeak at the end.

*Who will I be then?* The question wasn't recriminatory. It wasn't like the answer was the pious: *Then you'll be a killer, Nick. You'll be as bad as Amy. You'll be what everyone thought you were.* No. The question was frighteningly soulful and literal: Who would I be without Amy to react to? Because she was right: As a man, I had been my most impressive when I loved her—and I was my next best self when I hated her. I had known Amy only seven years, but I couldn't go back to life without her. Because she was right: I couldn't return to an average life. I'd known it before she'd said a word. I'd already pictured myself with a regular woman—a sweet, normal girl next door—and I'd already pictured telling this regular woman the story of Amy, the lengths she had gone to—to punish me and to return to me. I already pictured this sweet and mediocre girl saying something uninteresting like *Oh,*

*nooooo, oh my God*, and I already knew part of me would be looking at her and thinking: *You've never murdered for me. You've never framed me. You wouldn't even know how to begin to do what Amy did. You could never possibly care that much.* The indulged mama's boy in me wouldn't be able to find peace with this normal woman, and pretty soon she wouldn't just be normal, she'd be substandard, and then my father's voice—*dumb bitch*—would rise up and take it from there.

Amy was exactly right.

So maybe there was no good end for me.

Amy was toxic, yet I couldn't imagine a world without her entirely. Who would I be with Amy just gone? There were no options that interested me anymore. But she had to be brought to heel. Amy in prison, that was a good ending for her. Tucked away in a box where she couldn't inflict herself on me but where I could visit her from time to time. Or at least imagine her. A pulse, my pulse, left out there somewhere.

It had to be me who put her there. It was my responsibility. Just as Amy took the credit for making me my best self, I had to take the blame for bringing the madness to bloom in Amy. There were a million men who would have loved, honored, and obeyed Amy and considered themselves lucky to do so. Confident, self-assured, real men who wouldn't have forced her to pretend to be anything but her own perfect, rigid, demanding, brilliant, creative, fascinating, rapacious, megalomaniac self.

Men capable of being uxorious.

Men capable of keeping her sane.

Amy's story could have gone a million other ways, but she met me, and bad things happened. So it was up to me to stop her.

Not kill her but stop her.

Put her in one of her boxes.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

FIVE DAYS AFTER THE RETURN

I know, I know for sure now, that I need to be more careful about Nick. He's not as tame as he used to be. Something in him is electric; a switch has turned on. I like it. But I need to take precautions.

I need one more spectacular precaution.

It will take some time to put in place, this precaution. But I've done it before, the planning. In the meantime, we can work on our rebuilding. Start with the facade. We will have a happy marriage if it kills him.

"You're going to have to try again to love me," I told him. The morning after he almost killed me. It happened to be Nick's thirty-fifth birthday, but he didn't mention it. My husband has had enough of my gifts.

"I forgive you for last night," I said. "We were both under a lot of stress. But now you're going to have to try again."

"I know."

"Things will have to be different," I said.

"I know," he said.

He doesn't really know. But he will.

My parents have visited daily. Rand and Marybeth and Nick lavish me with attention. Pillows. Everyone wants to offer me pillows: We are all laboring under a mass psychosis that my rape and miscarriage have left me forever achy and delicate. I have a permanent case of sparrow's bones—I must be held gently in the palm, lest I break.

So I prop my feet on the infamous ottoman, and I tread delicately over the kitchen floor where I bled. We must take good care of me.

Yet I find it strangely tense to watch Nick with anyone but me. He seems on the edge of blurting all the time—as if his lungs are bursting

with words about me, damning words.

I need Nick, I realize. I actually need him to back my story. To stop his accusations and denials and admit that it was him: the credit cards, the goodies in the woodshed, the bump in insurance. Otherwise I will carry that waft of uncertainty forever. I have only a few loose ends, and those loose ends are people. The police, the FBI, they are sifting through my story. Boney, I know, would love to arrest me. But they botched everything so badly before—they look like such fools—that they can't touch me unless they have proof. And they don't have proof. They have Nick, who swears he didn't do the things I swear he did, and that's not much, but it's more than I'd like.

I've even prepared in case my Ozarks friends Jeff and Greta show up, nosing around for acclaim or cash. I've already told the police: Desi didn't drive us straight to his home. He kept me blindfolded and gagged and drugged for several days—I *think* it was several days—in some room, maybe a motel room? Maybe an apartment? I can't be sure, it's all such a blur. I was so frightened, you know, and the sleeping pills. If Jeff and Greta show their pointy, lowdown faces and somehow convince the cops to send a tech team down to the Hide-A-Way, and one of my fingerprints or a hair is found, that simply solves part of the puzzle. The rest is them telling lies.

So Nick is really the only issue, and soon I'll return him to my side. I was smart, I left no other evidence. The police may not entirely believe me, but they won't do anything. I know from the petulant tone in Boney's voice—she will live in permanent exasperation from now on, and the more annoyed she gets, the more people will dismiss her. She already has the righteous, eye-rolling cadence of a conspiracy crackpot. She might as well wrap her head in foil.

Yes, the investigation is winding down. But for Amazing Amy, it's quite the opposite. My parents' publisher placed an abashed plea for another *Amazing Amy* book, and they acquiesced for a lovely fat sum. Once again they are squatting on my psyche, earning money for themselves. They left Carthage this morning. They say it's important for Nick and me (the correct grammar) to have some time alone and heal. But I know the truth. They want to get to work. They tell me they are trying to “find the right tone.” A tone that says: *Our daughter was kidnapped and repeatedly raped by a monster she had to stab in the neck ... but this is in no way a cash grab.*

I don't care about the rebuilding of their pathetic empire, because every day I get calls to tell *my* story. My story: mine, mine, mine. I just need to pick the very best deal and start writing. I just need to get Nick on the same page so that we both agree how this story will end. Happily.

I know Nick isn't in love with me yet, but he will be. I do have faith in that. Fake it until you make it, isn't that an expression? For now he acts like the old Nick, and I act like the old Amy. Back when we were happy. When we didn't know each other as well as we do now. Yesterday I stood on the back porch and watched the sun come up over the river, a strangely cool August morning, and when I turned around, Nick was studying me from the kitchen window, and he held up a mug of coffee with a question: *You want a cup?* I nodded, and soon he was standing beside me, the air smelling of grass, and we were drinking our coffee together and watching the water, and it felt normal and good.

He won't sleep with me yet. He sleeps in the downstairs guest room with the door locked. But one day I will wear him down, I will catch him off guard, and he will lose the energy for the nightly battle, and he will get in bed with me. In the middle of the night, I'll turn to face him and press myself against him. I'll hold myself to him like a climbing, coiling vine until I have invaded every part of him and made him mine.

# NICK DUNNE

THIRTY DAYS AFTER THE RETURN

Amy thinks she's in control, but she's very wrong. Or: She will be very wrong.

Boney and Go and I are working together. The cops, the FBI, no one else is showing much interest anymore. But yesterday Boney called out of the blue. She didn't identify herself when I picked up, just started in like an old friend: *Take you for a cup of coffee?* I grabbed Go, and we met Boney back at the Pancake House. She was already at the booth when we arrived, and she stood and smiled somewhat weakly. She'd been getting pummeled in the press. We did an awkward, group-wide hug-or-handshake shuffle. Boney settled for a nod.

First thing she said to me once we got our food: "I have one daughter. Thirteen years old. Mia. For Mia Hamm. She was born the day we won the World Cup. So, that's my daughter."

I raised my eyebrows: *How interesting. Tell me more.*

"You asked that one day, and I didn't ... I was rude. I'd been sure you were innocent, and then ... everything said you weren't, so I was pissed. That I could be that fooled. So I didn't even want to say my daughter's name around you." She poured us out coffee from the thermos.

"So, it's Mia," she said.

"Well, thank you," I said.

"No, I mean ... Crap." She exhaled upward, a hard gust that fluttered her bangs. "I mean: I know Amy framed you. I know she murdered Desi Collings. I *know* it. I just can't prove it."

"What is everyone else doing while you're actually working the case?" Go asked.

"There is no case. They're moving on. Gilpin is totally checked out. I basically got the word from on high: Shut this shit *down*. Shut it

down. We look like giant, rube, redneck jackasses in the national media. I can't do anything unless I get something from you, Nick. You got *anything*?"

I shrugged. "I got everything you got. She confessed to me, but—"

"She *confessed*?" she said. "Well, hell, Nick, we'll wire you."

"It won't work. It won't work. She thinks of everything. I mean, she knows police procedure cold. She studies, Rhonda."

She poured electric-blue syrup over her waffles. I stuck the tines of my fork in my bulbous egg yolk and swirled it, smearing the sun.

"It drives me crazy when you call me Rhonda."

"She studies, Ms. Detective Boney."

She blew her breath upward, fluttered her bangs again. Took a bite of pancake. "I couldn't get a wire anyway at this point."

"Come on, there has to be something, you guys," Go snapped. "Nick, why the hell are you staying in that house if you aren't getting something?"

"It takes time, Go. I have to get her to trust me again. If she starts telling me things casually, when we're not both stark naked—"

Boney rubbed her eyes and addressed Go: "Do I even want to ask?"

"They always have their talks naked in the shower with the water running," Go said. "Can't you bug the shower somewhere?"

"She whispers in my ear, on top of the shower running," I said.

"She does study," Boney said. "She really does. I went over that car she drove back, Desi's Jag. I had 'em check the trunk, where she swore Desi had stowed her when he kidnapped her. I figured there'd be nothing there—we'd catch her in a lie. She rolled around in the trunk, Nick. Her scent was detected by our dogs. And we found three long blond hairs. *Long* blond hairs. Hers before she cut it. How she did that—"

"Foresight. I'm sure she had a bag of them so if she needed to leave them somewhere to damn me, she could."

"Good God, can you imagine having her for a mother? You could never fib. She'd be three steps ahead of you, always."

“Boney, can you imagine having her for a wife?”

“She’ll crack,” she said. “At some point, she’ll crack.”

“She won’t,” I said. “Can’t I just testify against her?”

“You have no credibility,” Boney said. “Your only credibility comes from Amy. She’s single-handedly rehabilitated you. And she can single-handedly undo it. If she comes out with the antifreeze story ...”

“I need to find the vomit,” I said. “If I got rid of the vomit and we exposed more of her lies ...”

“We should go through the diary,” Go said. “Seven years of entries? There have to be discrepancies.”

“We asked Rand and Marybeth to go through it, see if anything seemed off to them,” Boney said. “You can guess how that went. I thought Marybeth was going to scratch my eyes out.”

“What about Jacqueline Collings, or Tommy O’Hara, or Hilary Handy?” Go said. “They all know the real Amy. There has to be something there.”

Boney shook her head. “Believe me, it’s not enough. They’re all less credible than Amy. It’s pure public opinion, but right now that’s what the department is looking at: public opinion.”

She was right. Jacqueline Collings had popped up on a few cable shows, insisting on her son’s innocence. She always started off steady, but her mother’s love worked against her: She soon came across as a grieving woman desperate to believe the best of her son, and the more the hosts pitied her, the more she snapped and snarled, and the more unsympathetic she became. She got written off quickly. Both Tommy O’Hara and Hilary Handy called me, furious that Amy remained unpunished, determined to tell their story, but no one wanted to hear from two unhinged *former* anythings. *Hold tight*, I told them, we’re working on it. Hilary and Tommy and Jacqueline and Boney and Go and I, we’d have our moment. I told myself I believed it.

“What if we at least got Andie?” I asked. “Got her to testify that everywhere Amy hid a clue was a place where we’d, you know, had sex? Andie’s credible; people love her.”

Andie had reverted to her old cheery self after Amy returned. I know that only from the occasional tabloid snapshots. From these, I

know she has been dating a guy her age, a cute, shaggy kid with ear-buds forever dangling from his neck. They look nice together, young and healthy. The press adored them. The best headline: *Love Finds Andie Hardy!*, a 1938 Mickey Rooney movie pun only about twenty people would get. I sent her a text: *I'm sorry. For everything.* I didn't hear back. Good for her. I mean that sincerely.

"Coincidence." Boney shrugged. "I mean, weird coincidence, but ... it's not impressive enough to move forward. Not in this climate. You need to get your wife to tell you something useful, Nick. You're our only chance here."

Go slammed down her coffee. "I can't believe we're having this conversation," she said. "Nick, I don't want you in that house anymore. You're not an undercover cop, you know. It's not your job. You are living with a murderer. Fucking leave. I'm sorry, but who gives a shit that she killed Desi? I don't want her to kill *you*. I mean, someday you burn her grilled cheese, and the next thing you know, my phone's ringing and you've taken an awful fall from the roof or some shit. *Leave.*"

"I can't. Not yet. She'll never really let me go. She likes the game too much."

"Then stop playing it."

I can't. I'm getting so much better at it. I will stay close to her until I can bring her down. I'm the only one left who can do it. Someday she'll slip and tell me something I can use. A week ago I moved into our bedroom. We don't have sex, we barely touch, but we are husband and wife in a marital bed, which appeases Amy for now. I stroke her hair. I take a strand between my finger and thumb, and I pull it to the end and tug, like I'm ringing a bell, and we both like that. Which is a problem.

We pretend to be in love, and we do the things we like to do when we're in love, and it feels almost like love sometimes, because we are so perfectly putting ourselves through the paces. Reviving the muscle memory of early romance. When I forget—I can sometimes briefly forget who my wife is—I actually like hanging out with her. Or the *her* she is pretending to be. The fact is, my wife is a murderess who is sometimes really fun. May I give one example? One night I flew in lobster like the old days, and she pretended to chase me with it, and I

pretended to hide, and then we both *at the same time* made an *Annie Hall* joke, and it was so perfect, so the way it was supposed to be, that I had to leave the room for a second. My heart was beating in my ears. I had to repeat my mantra: *Amy killed a man, and she will kill you if you are not very, very careful.* My wife, the very fun, beautiful murderess, will do me harm if I displease her. I find myself jittery in my own house: I will be making a sandwich, standing in the kitchen midday, licking the peanut butter off the knife, and I will turn and find Amy in the same room with me—those quiet little cat feet—and I will quiver. Me, Nick Dunne, the man who used to forget so many details, is now the guy who replays conversations to make sure I didn't offend, to make sure I never hurt her feelings. I write down everything about her day, her likes and dislikes, in case she quizzes me. I am a great husband because I am very afraid she may kill me.

We've never had a conversation about my paranoia, because we're pretending to be in love and I'm pretending not to be frightened of her. But she's made glancing mentions of it: *You know, Nick, you can sleep in bed with me, like, actually sleep. It will be okay. I promise. What happened with Desi was an isolated incident. Close your eyes and sleep.*

But I know I'll never sleep again. I can't close my eyes when I'm next to her. It's like sleeping with a spider.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

EIGHT WEEKS AFTER THE RETURN

No one has arrested me. The police have stopped questioning. I feel safe. I will be even safer very soon.

This is how good I feel: Yesterday I came downstairs for breakfast, and the jar that held my vomit was sitting on the kitchen counter, empty. Nick—the scrounger—had gotten rid of that little bit of leverage. I blinked an eye, and then I tossed out the jar.

It hardly matters now.

Good things are happening.

I have a book deal: I am officially in control of our story. It feels wonderfully symbolic. Isn't that what every marriage is, anyway? Just a lengthy game of he-said, she-said? Well, *she* is saying, and the world will listen, and Nick will have to smile and agree. I will write him the way I want him to be: romantic and thoughtful and very very repentant—about the credit cards and the purchases and the woodshed. If I can't get him to say it out loud, he'll say it in my book. Then he'll come on tour with me and smile and smile.

I'm calling the book simply: *Amazing*. Causing great wonder or surprise; astounding. That sums up my story, I think.

# NICK DUNNE

NINE WEEKS AFTER THE RETURN

I found the vomit. She'd hidden it in the back of the freezer in a jar, inside a box of Brussels sprouts. The box was covered in icicles; it must have been sitting there for months. I know it was her own joke with herself: *Nick won't eat his vegetables, Nick never cleans out the fridge, Nick won't think to look here.*

But Nick did.

Nick knows how to clean out the refrigerator, it turns out, and Nick even knows how to defrost: I poured all that sick down the drain, and I left the jar on the counter so she'd know.

She tossed it in the garbage. She never said a word about it.

Something's wrong. I don't know what it is, but something's very wrong.

My life has begun to feel like an epilogue. Tanner picked up a new case: A Nashville singer discovered his wife was cheating, and her body was found the next day in a Hardee's trash bin near their house, a hammer covered with his fingerprints beside her. Tanner is using me as a defense. *I know it looks bad, but it also looked bad for Nick Dunne, and you know how that turned out.* I could almost feel him winking at me through the camera lens. He sent the occasional text: *U OK? Or: Anything?* No, nothing.

Boney and Go and I hung out in secret at the Pancake House, where we sifted the dirty sand of Amy's story, trying to find something we could use. We scoured the diary, an elaborate anachronism hunt. It came down to desperate nitpickings like: "She makes a comment here about Darfur, was that on the radar in 2010?" (Yes, we found a 2006 newsclip with George Clooney discussing it.) Or my own best worst: "Amy makes a joke in the July 2008 entry about killing a hobo, but I feel like dead-hobo jokes weren't big until 2009." To which Boney replied: "Pass the syrup, freakshow."

People peeled away, went on with their lives. Boney stayed. Go stayed.

Then something happened. My father finally died. At night, in his sleep. A woman spooned his last meal into his mouth, a woman settled him into bed for his last rest, a woman cleaned him up after he died, and a woman phoned to give me the news.

“He was a good man,” she said, dullness with an obligatory injection of empathy.

“No, he wasn’t,” I said, and she laughed like she clearly hadn’t in a month.

I thought it would make me feel better to have the man vanished from the earth, but I actually felt a massive, frightening hollowness open up in my chest. I had spent my life comparing myself to my father, and now he was gone, and there was only Amy left to bat against. After the small, dusty, lonely service, I didn’t leave with Go, I went home with Amy, and I clutched her to me. That’s right, I went home with my wife.

*I have to get out of this house, I thought. I have to be done with Amy once and for all. Burn us down, so I couldn’t ever go back.*

*Who would I be without you?*

I had to find out. I had to tell my own story. It was all so clear.

The next morning, as Amy was in her study clicking away at the keys, telling the world her *Amazing* story, I took my laptop downstairs and stared at the glowing white screen.

I started on the opening page of my own book.

*I am a cheating, weak-spined, woman-fearing coward, and I am the hero of your story. Because the woman I cheated on—my wife, Amy Elliott Dunne—is a sociopath and a murderer.*

Yes. I’d read that.

# AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

TEN WEEKS AFTER THE RETURN

Nick still pretends with me. We pretend together that we are happy and carefree and in love. But I hear him clicking away late at night on the computer. Writing. Writing his side, I know it. I *know* it, I can tell by the feverish outpouring of words, the keys clicking and clacking like a million insects. I try to hack in when he's asleep (although he sleeps like me now, fussy and anxious, and I sleep like him). But he's learned his lesson, that he's no longer beloved Nicky, safe from wrong—he no longer uses his birthday or his mom's birthday or Bleecker's birthday as a password. I can't get in.

Still, I hear him typing, rapidly and without pause, and I can picture him hunched over the keyboard, his shoulders up, his tongue clamped between his teeth, and I know that I was right to protect myself. To take my precaution.

Because he isn't writing a love story.

# NICK DUNNE

TWENTY WEEKS AFTER THE RETURN

I didn't move out. I wanted this all to be a surprise to my wife, who is never surprised. I wanted to give her the manuscript as I walked out the door to land a book deal. Let her feel that trickling horror of knowing the world is about to tilt and dump its shit all over you, and you can't do anything about it. No, she may never go to prison, and it will always be my word against hers, but my case was convincing. It had an emotional resonance, if not a legal one.

So let everyone take sides. Team Nick, Team Amy. Turn it into even more of a game: Sell some fucking T-shirts.

My legs were weak when I went to tell Amy: I was no longer part of her story.

I showed her the manuscript, displayed the glaring title: *Psycho Bitch*. A little inside joke. We both like our inside jokes. I waited for her to scratch my cheeks, rip my clothes, bite me.

"Oh! What perfect timing," she said cheerfully, and gave me a big grin. "Can I show you something?"

I made her do it again in front of me. Piss on the stick, me squatting next to her on the bathroom floor, watching the urine come out of her and hitting the stick and turning it pregnant-blue.

Then I hustled her into the car and drove to the doctor's office, and I watched the blood come out of her—because she isn't really afraid of blood—and we waited the two hours for the test to come back.

Amy was pregnant.

"It's obviously not mine," I said.

"Oh, it is." She smiled back. She tried to snuggle into my arms. "Congratulations, Dad."

"Amy—" I began, because of course it wasn't true, I hadn't touched my wife since her return. Then I saw it: the box of tissues, the vinyl

recliner, the TV and porn, and my semen in a hospital freezer somewhere. I'd left that will-destroy notice on the table, a limp guilt trip, and then the notice disappeared, because my wife had taken action, as always, and that action wasn't to get rid of the stuff but to save it. Just in case.

I felt a giant bubble of joy—I couldn't help it—and then the joy was encased in a metallic terror.

"I'll need to do a few things for my security, Nick," she said. "Just because, I have to say, it's almost impossible to trust you. To start, you'll have to delete your book, obviously. And just to put that other matter to rest, we'll need an affidavit, and you'll need to swear that it was you who bought the stuff in the woodshed and *hid* the stuff in the woodshed, and that you did once think I was framing you, but *now* you love me and I love you and everything is good."

"What if I refuse?"

She put her hand on her small, swollen belly and frowned. "I think that would be awful."

We had spent years battling for control of our marriage, of our love story, our life story. I had been thoroughly, finally outplayed. I created a manuscript, and she created a life.

I could fight for custody, but I already knew I'd lose. Amy would relish the battle—God knew what she already had lined up. By the time she was done, I wouldn't even be an every-other-weekend dad; I would interact with my child in strange rooms with a guardian nearby sipping coffee, watching me. Or maybe not even that. I could suddenly see the accusations—of molestation or abuse—and I would never see my baby, and I would know that my child was tucked away far from me, Mother whispering, whispering lies into that tiny pink ear.

"It's a boy, by the way," she said.

I was a prisoner after all. Amy had me forever, or as long as she wanted, because I needed to save my son, to try to unhook, unlatch, debarb, undo everything that Amy did. I would literally lay down my life for my child, and do it happily. I would raise my son to be a good man.

I deleted my story.

Boney picked up on the first ring.

“Pancake House? Twenty minutes?” she said.

“No.”

I informed Rhonda Boney that I was going to be a father and so could no longer assist in any investigation—that I was, in fact, planning to retract any statement I’d made concerning my misplaced belief that my wife had framed me, and I was also ready to admit my role in the credit cards.

A long pause on the line. “Hunh,” she said. “Hunh.”

I could picture Boney running her hand through her slack hair, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“You take care of yourself, okay, Nick?” she said finally. “Take good care of the little one too.” Then she laughed. “Amy I don’t really give a fuck about.”

I went to Go’s house to tell her in person. I tried to frame it as happy news. A baby, you can’t be that upset about a baby. You can hate a situation, but you can’t hate a child.

I thought Go was going to hit me. She stood so close I could feel her breath. She jabbed me with an index finger.

“You just want an excuse to stay,” she whispered. “You two, you’re fucking addicted to each other. You are literally going to be a nuclear family, you do know that? You will explode. You will fucking detonate. You really think you can possibly do this for, what, the next eighteen years? You don’t think she’ll kill you?”

“Not as long as I am the man she married. I wasn’t for a while, but I can be.”

“You don’t think you’ll kill *her*? You want to turn into Dad?”

“Don’t you see, Go? This is my guarantee *not* to turn into Dad. I’ll have to be the best husband and father in the world.”

Go burst into tears then—the first time I’d seen her cry since she was a child. She sat down on the floor, straight down, as if her legs gave out. I sat down beside her and leaned my head against hers. She finally swallowed her last sob and looked at me. “Remember when I said, Nick, I said I’d still love you *if*? I’d love you no matter what

came after the *if*?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I still love you. But this breaks my heart.” She let out an awful sob, a child’s sob. “Things weren’t supposed to turn out this way.”

“It’s a strange twist,” I said, trying to turn it light.

“She won’t try to keep us apart, will she?”

“No,” I said. “Remember, she’s pretending to be someone better too.”

Yes, I am finally a match for Amy. The other morning I woke up next to her, and I studied the back of her skull. I tried to read her thoughts. For once I didn’t feel like I was staring into the sun. I’m rising to my wife’s level of madness. Because I can feel her changing me again: I was a callow boy, and then a man, good and bad. Now at last I’m the hero. I am the one to root for in the never-ending war story of our marriage. It’s a story I can live with. Hell, at this point, I can’t imagine my story without Amy. She is my forever antagonist.

We are one long frightening climax.

## AMY ELLIOTT DUNNE

TEN MONTHS, TWO WEEKS, SIX DAYS AFTER THE RETURN

I was told love should be unconditional. That's the rule, everyone says so. But if love has no boundaries, no limits, no conditions, why should anyone try to do the right thing ever? If I know I am loved no matter what, where is the challenge? I am supposed to love Nick despite all his shortcomings. And Nick is supposed to love me despite my quirks. But clearly, neither of us does. It makes me think that everyone is very wrong, that love should have many conditions. Love should require both partners to be their very best at all times. Unconditional love is an undisciplined love, and as we all have seen, undisciplined love is disastrous.

You can read more about my thoughts on love in *Amazing*. Out soon!

But first: motherhood. The due date is tomorrow. Tomorrow happens to be our anniversary. Year six. Iron. I thought about giving Nick a nice pair of handcuffs, but he may not find that funny yet. It's so strange to think: A year ago today, I was undoing my husband. Now I am almost done reassembling him.

Nick has spent all his free time these past months slathering my belly with cocoa butter and running out for pickles and rubbing my feet, and all the things good fathers-to-be are supposed to do. Doting on me. He is learning to love me unconditionally, under all my conditions. I think we are finally on our way to happiness. I have finally figured it out.

We are on the eve of becoming the world's best, brightest nuclear family.

We just need to sustain it. Nick doesn't have it down perfect. This morning he was stroking my hair and asking what else he could do for me, and I said: "My gosh, Nick, why are you so wonderful to me?"

He was supposed to say: *You deserve it. I love you.*

But he said, “Because I feel sorry for you.”

“Why?”

“Because every morning you have to wake up and be you.”

I really, truly wish he hadn't said that. I keep thinking about it. I can't stop.

I don't have anything else to add. I just wanted to make sure I had the last word. I think I've earned that.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've got to start with Stephanie Kip Rostan, whose smart advice, sound opinions, and good humor have seen me through three books now. She's also just really fun to hang out with. Thanks for all the excellent guidance over the years. Many thanks also to Jim Levine and Daniel Greenberg and everyone at Levine Greenberg Literary Agency.

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I received some incredibly helpful feedback from a few readers who are also good friends. Marcus Sakey gave me sharp advice about Nick early on over beer and Thai food. David MacLean and Emily Stone (deareth!) were kind enough to read *Gone Girl* in the months leading up to their wedding. It doesn’t seem to have harmed you guys in the least, and it made the book a lot better, so thanks. Nothing will stop you from getting to the Caymans!

Scott Brown: Thanks for all the writing retreats during the *Gone Girl* Years, especially the Ozarks. I’m glad we didn’t sink the paddleboat after all. Thanks for your incredibly insightful reads, and for always swooping in and helping me articulate what the hell it is I’m trying to say. You are a good Monster and a wonderful friend.

Thanks to my brother, Travis Flynn, for always being around to answer questions about how things actually work. Much love to Ruth Flynn, Brandon Flynn, and Holly Bailey.

To my in-laws, Cathy and Jim Nolan, Jennifer Nolan, Megan, Pablo, and Xavy Marroquin—and all the Nolans and Samsons: I am very aware of how lucky I am to have married into your family. Thanks for everything. Cathy, we always knew you had one hell of a heart, but this past year proved it in so many ways.

To my parents, Matt and Judith Flynn. Encouraging, thoughtful, funny, kind, creative, supportive, and still madly in love after more than forty years. I am, as always, in awe of you both. Thanks for being so good to me and for always taking the time to harass strangers into buying my books. And thank you for being so lovely with Flynn—I become a better parent just watching you.

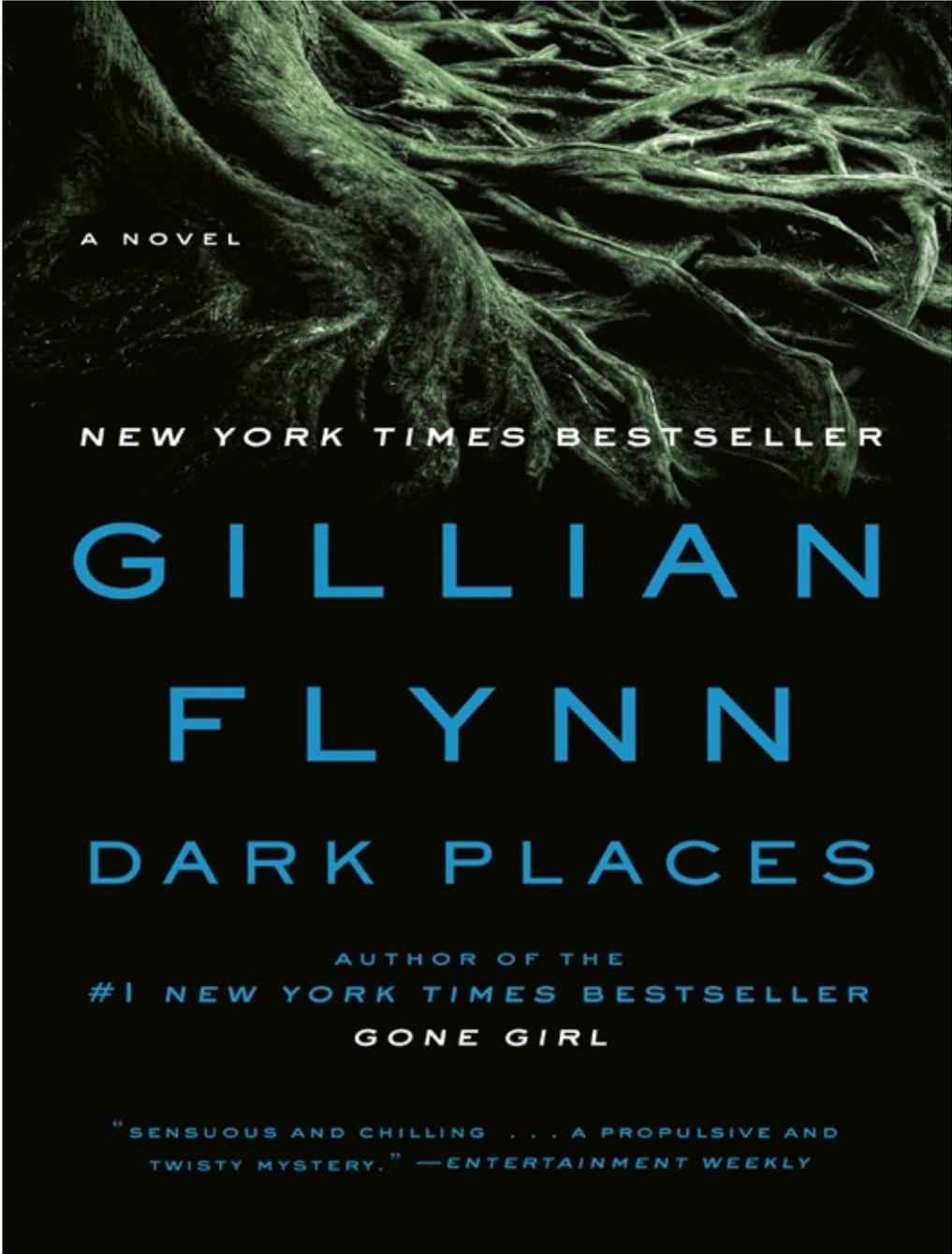
Finally, my guys.

Roy: Good kitty.

Flynn: Beloved boy, I adore you! Also, if you are reading this before the year 2024, you are too little. Put it down and pick up Frumble!

Brett: Husband! Father of my child! Dance partner, emergency grilled-cheese maker. The kind of fellow who knows how to pick the wine. The kind of fellow who looks great in a tux. Also a zombie-tux. The guy with the generous laugh and the glorious whistle. The guy who has the answer. The man who makes my child laugh till he falls down. The man who makes me laugh till I fall down. The guy who lets me ask all sorts of invasive, inappropriate, and intrusive questions about being a guy. The man who read and reread and reread and then reread, and not only gave advice, but gave me a bourbon app. You're it, baby. Thanks for marrying me.

Two words, always.



A NOVEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

GILLIAN

FLYNN

DARK PLACES

AUTHOR OF THE  
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER  
GONE GIRL

"SENSUOUS AND CHILLING . . . A PROPULSIVE AND  
TWISTY MYSTERY." —ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

Gillian Flynn

Dark  
Places

B\O\W\Y  
*Broadway Books*  
New York

TO MY DASHING HUSBAND,  
BRETT NOLAN

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## *Acknowledgments*

The Days were a clan that mighta lived long  
But Ben Day's head got screwed on wrong  
That boy craved dark Satan's power  
So he killed his family in one nasty hour  
Little Michelle he strangled in the night  
Then chopped up Debby: a bloody sight  
Mother Patty he saved for last  
Blew off her head with a shotgun blast  
Baby Libby somehow survived  
But to live through that ain't much a life

—SCHOOLYARD RHYME, CIRCA 1985

## Libby Day

NOW

I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ. Slit me at my belly and it might slide out, meaty and dark, drop on the floor so you could stomp on it. It's the Day blood. Something's wrong with it. I was never a good little girl, and I got worse after the murders. Little Orphan Libby grew up sullen and boneless, shuffled around a group of lesser relatives—second cousins and great-aunts and friends of friends—stuck in a series of mobile homes or rotting ranch houses all across Kansas. Me going to school in my dead sisters' hand-me-downs: Shirts with mustardy armpits. Pants with baggy bottoms, comically loose, held on with a raggedy belt cinched to the farthest hole. In class photos my hair was always crooked—barrettes hanging loosely from strands, as if they were airborne objects caught in the tangles—and I always had bulging pockets under my eyes, drunk-landlady eyes. Maybe a grudging curve of the lips where a smile should be. Maybe.

I was not a lovable child, and I'd grown into a deeply unlovable adult. Draw a picture of my soul, and it'd be a scribble with fangs.

IT WAS MISERABLE, wet-bone March and I was lying in bed thinking about killing myself, a hobby of mine. Indulgent afternoon daydreaming: A shotgun, my mouth, a bang and my head jerking once, twice, blood on the wall. Spatter, splatter. "Did she want to be buried or cremated?" people would ask. "Who should come to the funeral?" And no one would know. The people, whoever they were, would just look at each other's shoes or shoulders until the silence settled in and then someone would put on a pot of coffee, briskly and with a fair amount of clatter. Coffee goes great with sudden death.

I pushed a foot out from under my sheets, but couldn't bring myself to connect it to the floor. I am, I guess, depressed. I guess I've been depressed for about twenty-four years. I can feel a better version of me somewhere in there—hidden behind a liver or attached to a bit of

spleen within my stunted, childish body—a Libby that’s telling me to get up, do something, grow up, move on. But the meanness usually wins out. My brother slaughtered my family when I was seven. My mom, two sisters, gone: bang bang, chop chop, choke choke. I didn’t really have to do anything after that, nothing was expected.

I inherited \$321,374 when I turned eighteen, the result of all those well-wishers who’d read about my sad story, do-gooders whose *hearts had gone out to me*. Whenever I hear that phrase, and I hear it a lot, I picture juicy doodle-hearts, complete with bird-wings, flapping toward one of my many crap-ass childhood homes, my little-girl self at the window, waving and grabbing each bright heart, green cash sprinkling down on me, *thanks, thanks a ton!* When I was still a kid, the donations were placed in a conservatively managed bank account, which, back in the day, saw a jump about every three–four years, when some magazine or news station ran an update on me. Little Libby’s Brand New Day: The Lone Survivor of the Prairie Massacre Turns a Bittersweet 10. (Me in scruffy pigtails on the possum-pissed lawn outside my Aunt Diane’s trailer. Diane’s thick tree-calves, exposed by a rare skirt, planted in the yellow grass behind me.) Brave Baby Day’s Sweet 16! (Me, still miniature, my face aglow with birthday candles, my shirt too tight over breasts that had gone D-cup that year, comic-book sized on my tiny frame, ridiculous, porny.)

I’d lived off that cash for more than thirteen years, but it was almost gone. I had a meeting that afternoon to determine exactly how gone. Once a year the man who managed the money, an unblinking, pink-cheeked banker named Jim Jeffreys, insisted on taking me to lunch, a “checkup,” he called it. We’d eat something in the twenty-dollar range and talk about my life—he’d known me since I was this-high, after all, heheh. As for me, I knew almost nothing about Jim Jeffreys, and never asked, viewing the appointments always from the same kid’s-eye view: Be polite, but barely, and get it over with. Single-word answers, tired sighs. (The one thing I suspected about Jim Jeffreys was that he must be Christian, churchy—he had the patience and optimism of someone who thought Jesus was watching.) I wasn’t due for a “checkup” for another eight or nine months, but Jim Jeffreys had nagged, leaving phone messages in a serious, hushed voice, saying he’d done all he could to extend the “life of the fund,” but it was time to think about “next steps.”

And here again came the meanness: I immediately thought about that other little tabloid girl, Jamie Something, who'd lost her family the same year—1985. She'd had part of her face burned off in a fire her dad set that killed everyone else in her family. Any time I hit the ATM, I think of that Jamie girl, and how if she hadn't stolen my thunder, I'd have twice as much money. That Jamie Whatever was out at some mall with my cash, buying fancy handbags and jewelry and buttery department-store makeup to smooth onto her shiny, scarred face. Which was a horrible thing to think, of course. I at least knew that.

Finally, finally, finally I pulled myself out of bed with a stage-effect groan and wandered to the front of my house. I rent a small brick bungalow within a loop of other small brick bungalows, all of which squat on a massive bluff overlooking the former stockyards of Kansas City. Kansas City, Missouri, not Kansas City, Kansas. There's a difference.

My neighborhood doesn't even have a name, it's so forgotten. It's called Over There That Way. A weird, subprime area, full of dead ends and dog crap. The other bungalows are packed with old people who've lived in them since they were built. The old people sit, gray and pudding-like, behind screen windows, peering out at all hours. Sometimes they walk to their cars on careful elderly tiptoes that make me feel guilty, like I should go help. But they wouldn't like that. They are not friendly old people—they are tight-lipped, pissed-off old people who do not appreciate me being their neighbor, this *new* person. The whole area hums with their disapproval. So there's the noise of their disdain and there's the skinny red dog two doors down who barks all day and howls all night, the constant background noise you don't realize is driving you crazy until it stops, just a few blessed moments, and then starts up again. The neighborhood's only cheerful sound I usually sleep through: the morning coos of toddlers. A troop of them, round-faced and multilayered, walk to some daycare hidden even farther in the rat's nest of streets behind me, each clutching a section of a long piece of rope trailed by a grown-up. They march, penguin-style, past my house every morning, but I have not once seen them return. For all I know, they troddle around the entire world and return in time to pass my window again in the morning. Whatever the story, I am attached to them. There are three girls and a boy, all with a fondness for bright red jackets—and when I don't see them, when I

oversleep, I actually feel blue. Bluer. That'd be the word my mom would use, not something as dramatic as *depressed*. I've had the blues for twenty-four years.

I PUT ON a skirt and blouse for the meeting, feeling dwarfy, my grown-up, big-girl clothes never quite fitting. I'm barely five foot—four foot, ten inches in truth, but I round up. Sue me. I'm thirty-one, but people tend to talk to me in singsong, like they want to give me fingerpaints.

I headed down my weedy front slope, the neighbor's red dog launching into its busybody barking. On the pavement near my car are the smashed skeletons of two baby birds, their flattened beaks and wings making them look reptilian. They've been there for a year. I can't resist looking at them each time I get in my car. We need a good flood, wash them away.

Two elderly women were talking on the front steps of a house across the street, and I could feel them refusing to see me. I don't know anyone's name. If one of those women died, I couldn't even say, "Poor old Mrs. Zalinsky died." I'd have to say, "That mean old bitch across the street bit it."

Feeling like a child ghost, I climbed into my anonymous midsize car, which seems to be made mostly of plastic. I keep waiting for someone from the dealership to show up and tell me the obvious: "It's a joke. You can't actually drive this. We were kidding." I trance-drove my toy car ten minutes downtown to meet Jim Jeffreys, rolling into the steakhouse parking lot twenty minutes late, knowing he'd smile all kindly and say nothing about my tardiness.

I was supposed to call him from my cell phone when I arrived so he could trot out and escort me in. The restaurant—a great, old-school KC steakhouse—is surrounded by hollowed-out buildings that concern him, as if a troop of rapists was permanently crouched in their empty husks awaiting my arrival. Jim Jeffreys is not going to be The Guy Who Let Something Bad Happen to Libby Day. Nothing bad can happen to BRAVE BABY DAY, LITTLE GIRL LOST, the pathetic, red-headed seven-year-old with big blue eyes, the only one who survived the PRAIRIE MASSACRE, the KANSAS CRAZE-KILLINGS, the FARMHOUSE SATAN SACRIFICE. My mom, two older sisters, all butchered by Ben. The only one left, I'd fingered him as the murderer. I was the cutie-pie who brought my Devil-worshipping brother to

justice. I was big news. The *Enquirer* put my tearful photo on the front page with the headline ANGEL FACE.

I peered into the rearview mirror and could see my baby face even now. My freckles were faded, and my teeth straightened, but my nose was still pug and my eyes kitten-round. I dyed my hair now, a white-blonde, but the red roots had grown in. It looked like my scalp was bleeding, especially in the late-day sunlight. It looked gory. I lit a cigarette. I'd go for months without smoking, and then remember: I need a cigarette. I'm like that, nothing sticks.

"Let's go, Baby Day," I said aloud. It's what I call myself when I'm feeling hateful.

I got out of the car and smoked my way toward the restaurant, holding the cigarette in my right hand so I didn't have to look at the left hand, the mangled one. It was almost evening: Migrant clouds floated in packs across the sky like buffalo, and the sun was just low enough to spray everything pink. Toward the river, between the looping highway ramps, obsolete grain elevators sat vacant, dusk-black and pointless.

I walked across the parking lot all by myself, atop a constellation of crushed glass. I was not attacked. It was, after all, just past 5 p.m. Jim Jeffreys was an early-bird eater, proud of it.

He was sitting at the bar when I walked in, sipping a pop, and the first thing he did, as I knew he would, was grab his cell phone from his jacket pocket and stare at it as if it had betrayed him.

"Did you call?" he frowned.

"No, I forgot," I lied.

He smiled then. "Well, anyway. Anyway, I'm glad you're here, sweetheart. Ready to talk turkey?"

He slapped two bucks on the bartop, and maneuvered us over to a red leather booth sprouting yellow stuffing from its cracks. The broken slits scraped the backs of my legs as I slid in. A whoof of cigarette stink burped out of the cushions.

Jim Jeffreys never drank liquor in front of me, and never asked me if I wanted a drink, but when the waiter came I ordered a glass of red wine and watched him try not to look surprised, or disappointed, or

anything but Jim Jeffreys-like. *What kind of red?* the waiter asked, and I had no idea, really—I never could remember the names of reds or whites, or which part of the name you were supposed to say out loud, so I just said, *House*. He ordered a steak, I ordered a double-stuffed baked potato, and then the waiter left and Jim Jeffreys let out a long dentist-y sigh and said, “Well, Libby, we are entering a very new and different stage here together.”

“So how much is left?” I asked, thinking *saytenthousandsaytenthousand*.

“Do you *read* those reports I send you?”

“I sometimes do,” I lied again. I liked getting mail but not reading it; the reports were probably in a pile somewhere in my house.

“Have you *listened* to my messages?”

“I think your cell phone is messed up. It cuts out a lot.” I’d listened just long enough to know I was in trouble. I usually tuned out after Jim Jeffreys’ first sentence, which always began: *Your friend Jim Jeffreys here, Libby ...*

Jim Jeffreys steepled his fingers and stuck his bottom lip out. “There is 982 dollars and 12 cents left in the fund. As I’ve mentioned before, had you been able to replenish it with any kind of regular work, we’d have been able to keep it afloat, but ...” he tossed out his hands and grimaced, “things didn’t work out that way.”

“What about the book, didn’t the book ... ?”

“I’m sorry, Libby, the book did not. I tell you this every year. It’s not your fault, but the book ... no. Nothing.”

Years ago, to exploit my twenty-fifth birthday, a publisher of self-help books asked me to write about how I’d conquered the “ghosts of my past.” I had in no way conquered much of anything, but I agreed to the book anyway, talking over the phone with a woman in New Jersey who did the actual writing. The book came out at Christmas time, 2002, with a cover photo of me sporting an unfortunate shag haircut. It was called, *Brand New Day! Don’t Just Survive Childhood Trauma—Surpass It!* and it included a few childhood snapshots of me and my dead family, packed between two hundred pages of gloppy, positive-thinking porridge. I was paid \$8,000, and a smattering of survivors’ groups invited me to speak. I flew to Toledo for a meeting

of men who'd been orphaned young; to Tulsa for a special gathering of teenagers whose moms had been killed by their dads. I signed my book for mouth-breathing kids who asked me jarring questions, like did my mom cook pies. I signed the book for gray, needful old men peering at me from behind bifocals, their breath blasting burnt coffee and stomach acid. "Start a New Day!" I'd write or "A New Day Awaits!" How lucky to have a pun for a last name. The people who came to meet me always looked exhausted and desperate, standing uncertainly near me in loose packs. The groups were always small. Once I realized I wasn't getting paid for any of this, I refused to go anywhere. The book had already bombed anyway.

"It seems like it should have made more money," I mumbled. I really wanted the book to make money, in an obsessive childish way—that feeling that if I wanted it enough, it should happen. It should happen.

"I know," Jim Jeffreys said, having nothing more to say on the subject after six years. He watched me drink my wine in silence. "But in a way, Libby, this presents you with a really interesting new phase of your life. I mean, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

I could tell this was supposed to be charming, but it brought a burst of rage up in me. I didn't want to be anything, that was the fucking point.

"There's no money left?"

Jim Jeffreys shook his head sadly, and started salting his newly arrived steak, the blood pooling around it like bright Kool-Aid.

"What about new donations—the twenty-fifth anniversary is coming up." I felt another splash of anger, for him making me say this aloud. Ben started his killing spree around 2 a.m. on January 3, 1985. The time stamp on my family's massacre, and here I was looking forward to it. Who said things like that? Why couldn't there have been even \$5,000 left?

He shook his head again. "There's no more, Libby. You're what, thirty? A woman. People have moved on. They want to help other little girls, not ..."

"Not me."

"I'm afraid not."

“People have moved on? Really?” I felt a lurch of abandonment, the way I always felt as a kid, when some aunt or cousin was dropping me off at some other aunt or cousin’s house: *I’m done, you take her for a while*. And the new aunt or cousin would be real nice for about a week, try real hard with bitter little me, and then ... in truth it was usually my fault. It really was, that’s not victim-talk. I doused one cousin’s living room with Aqua Net and set fire to it. My aunt Diane, my guardian, my mom’s sister, my beloved, took me in—and sent me away—half a dozen times before she finally closed the door for good. I did very bad things to that woman.

“There is always a new murder, I’m afraid, Libby,” Jim Jeffreys was droning. “People have short attention spans. I mean, think how crazy people’re going about Lisette Stephens.”

Lisette Stephens was a pretty twenty-five-year-old brunette who’d disappeared on the way home from her family’s Thanksgiving dinner. All of Kansas City was invested in finding her—you couldn’t turn on the news without seeing her photo smiling at you. The story had gone national in early February. Nothing at all had happened in the case for a month. Lisette Stephens was dead, and everyone knew that by now, but no one wanted to be the first to leave the party.

“But,” continued Jim Jeffreys, “I think everyone would like to hear you’re doing well.”

“Awesome.”

“What about college?” he chewed off a hunk of meat.

“No.”

“What about we try to set you up in some sort of office job, filing and whatnot?”

“No.” I folded in on myself, ignoring my meal, projecting glumness. That was another of my mom’s words: *glum*. It meant having the blues in a way that annoyed other people. Having the blues aggressively.

“Well, why don’t you take a week and do some thinking on it?” He was devouring his steak, his fork moving up and down briskly. Jim Jeffreys wanted to leave. Jim Jeffreys was done here.

HE LEFT ME with three pieces of mail and a grin that was supposed to be optimistic. Three pieces, all looking like junk. Jim Jeffreys used to

hand me bulging shoe boxes full of mail, most of them letters with checks inside. I'd sign the check over to him, and then the donor would receive a form letter in my blocky handwriting. "Thank you for your donation. It is people like you who let me look forward to a brighter future. Your truly, Libby Day." It really did say "your" truly, a misspelling that Jim Jeffreys thought people would find poignant.

But the shoe boxes of donations were gone, and I was left with a mere three letters and the rest of the night to kill. I headed back home, several cars blinking their headlights at me until I realized I was driving dark. Kansas City's skyline glimmered to the east, a modest, mid-rise Monopoly scatter, radio towers spiking here and there. I tried to picture things I could do for money. Things that grown-ups did. I imagined myself in a nurse's cap, holding a thermometer; then in a snug blue cop's uniform, escorting a child across the street; then wearing pearls and a floral apron, getting dinner ready for my hubby. *That's how screwed up you are*, I thought. *Your idea of adulthood still comes from picturebooks*. And even as I was thinking it, I saw myself writing ABCs on a chalkboard in front of bright-eyed first graders.

I tried to come up with realistic occupations—something with computers. Data entry, wasn't that some sort of job? Customer service, maybe? I'd seen a movie once where a woman walked dogs for a living, dressed in overalls and sweater sets and always holding flowers, the dogs slobbery and loving. I didn't like dogs, though, they scared me. I finally thought, of course, about farming. Our family had been farmers for a century, right down to my mom, until Ben killed her off. Then the farm got sold.

I wouldn't know how to farm anyway. I have memories of the place: Ben mucking through the cold spring mud, swatting calves out of his way; my mom's rough hands digging into the cherry-colored pellets that would blossom into milo; the squeals of Michelle and Debby jumping on haybales in the barn. "It itches!" Debby would always complain, and then jump in again. I can never dwell in these thoughts. I've labeled the memories as if they were a particularly dangerous region: Darkplace. Linger too long in an image of my mom trying to jury-rig the blasted coffeemaker again or of Michelle dancing around in her jersey nightgown, tube socks pulled up to her knees, and my mind would jerk into Darkplace. Maniacal smears of bright

red sound in the night. That inevitable, rhythmic axe, moving as mechanically as if it were chopping wood. Shotgun blasts in a small hallway. The panicked, jaybird cries of my mother, still trying to save her kids with half her head gone.

*What does an administrative assistant do?* I wondered.

I pulled up to my house, stepped onto a slab of sidewalk where someone had scraped “Jimmy Loves Tina” in the concrete decades ago. Sometimes I had flashes of how the couple turned out: He was a minor-league baseball player/she was a housewife in Pittsburgh, battling cancer. He was a divorced fireman/she was a lawyer who drowned off the Gulf Coast last year. She was a teacher/he dropped dead of an aneurysm at twenty. It was a good, if gruesome, mind game. I had a habit of killing off at least one of them.

I looked up at my rented house, wondered if the roof was lopsided. If the whole thing crashed in, I wouldn’t lose much. I owned nothing of value but a very old cat named Buck who tolerated me. As I hit the soggy, bowed steps, his resentful mews reached me from inside the house and I realized I hadn’t fed him today. I opened the door and the ancient cat moved toward me, slow and crimped, like a jalopy with a busted wheel. I didn’t have any cat food left—that had been on the to-do list for a week—so I went to the fridge, pulled out some slices of hardened Swiss cheese, and gave those to him. Then I sat down to open my three envelopes, my fingers smelling like sour milk.

I never made it past the first letter.

*Dear Ms. Day,*

*I hope this letter reaches you, as you seem to have no website. I have read about you and followed your story closely over the years, and am very interested to hear how you are doing and what you are up to these days. Do you ever do appearances? I belong to a group that would pay you \$500 just to show up. Please contact me and I will happily give you more information.*

*Warmly,  
Lyle Wirth*

*PS This is a legitimate business offer.*

Stripping? Porn? Back when the book came out, with its section of Baby Day Grows Up photos, the most notable was me at seventeen, my wobbly, woman-breasts barely held in by a white-trash halter top.

I'd received several propositions from fringe nudie mags as a result, none of them offering enough money to make me think hard. Even now five hundred wouldn't quite do it, if these guys did want me to get naked. But maybe—*think positive, Baby Day!*—maybe it really was a legit offer, another of those mourners' groups, needing me to show up so they had a reason to talk about themselves. Five hundred for a few hours of sympathy was a doable exchange.

The letter was typed, except for a phone number that had been inked at the bottom in assertive script. I dialed the number, hoping for voicemail. Instead, a cavernous pause came on the line, a phone picked up, but not spoken into. I felt awkward, as if I'd called someone in the middle of a party I wasn't supposed to know about.

Three seconds, then a male voice: "Hello?"

"Hi. Is this Lyle Wirth?" Buck was nosing around my legs, anxious for more food.

"Who's this?" Still in the background: a big loud nothing. Like he was at the bottom of a pit.

"This is Libby Day. You wrote me."

"Ohhhhh holy cow. Really? Libby Day. Uh, where are you? Are you in town?"

"Which town?"

The man—or boy, he sounded young—yelled something at someone back behind him that included the phrase, "I already did them," and then groaned into my ear.

"You in Kansas City? You live in Kansas City, right? Libby?"

I was about to hang up, but the guy started yelling *hel-ooo-o? hel-ooo-o?* into the line, like I was some dazed kid not paying attention in class, so I told him I did live in Kansas City and what did he want. He gave one of those *heheheh* laughs, those *you-won't-believe-this-but* laughs.

"Well, like I said, I wanted to talk to you about an appearance. Maybe."

"Doing what?"

"Well, I'm in a special club ... there's a special club meeting here

next week, and ...”

“What kind of club?”

“Well, it’s kind of different. It’s sort of an underground thing ...”

I said nothing, let him twist. After the initial bravura, I could feel him get uneasy. Good.

“Oh crap, it’s impossible to explain over the phone. Can I, uh, buy you a coffee?”

“It’s too late for coffee,” I said, and then realized he probably didn’t even mean tonight, probably meant sometime this week, and then I wondered again how I’d kill the next four or five hours.

“A beer? Wine?” he asked.

“When?”

Pause. “Tonight?”

Pause. “Fine.”

LYLE WIRTH LOOKED like a serial killer. Which meant he probably wasn’t one. If you were chopping up hookers or eating runaways, you’d try to look normal. He was sitting at a grimy card table in the middle of Tim-Clark’s Grille, a humid dive attached to a flea market. Tim-Clark’s had become famed for its barbeque and was now being gentrified, an uneasy mix of grizzled old-timers and flop-haired dudes in skinny jeans. Lyle was neither: He was somewhere in his very early twenties, with wavy, mousy hair he’d tried to tame with too much gel in all the wrong places, so that it was half fuzzy, half shiny points. He wore wireless glasses, a tight Members Only windbreaker, and jeans that were skinny, but not in a cool way, just in a tight way. He had features that were too delicate to be attractive on a man. Men shouldn’t have rosebud lips.

He caught my eye as I walked toward him. He wasn’t recognizing me at first, just assessing me, this lady-stranger. When I’d almost reached the table, it clicked for him: the freckles, the baby-bird skeleton, the pug nose that got pugger the longer someone held eye contact.

“Libby!” he started, realized it was too familiar, and added, “Day!” He stood up, pulled out one of the folding chairs, looked like he

regretted the chivalry, and sat back down. “Your hair’s blond.”

“Yup,” I said. I hate people who start conversations with facts—what are you supposed to do with that? *Sure is hot today. Yes, it is.* I peered around to signal for a drink. A miniskirted waitress with voluptuous black hair had her pretty backside to us. I table-tapped my fingers til she turned around, gave me a face that had to have been at least seventy years old, her pancake makeup pooling in the crepe of her cheeks, purple veins marbling her hands. Some part of her creaked as she bent down for my order, snuffing when I asked for just a PBR.

“The brisket is really good here,” Lyle said. But he wasn’t having it either, just sipping on the dregs of something milky.

I don’t eat meat, really, not since seeing my family sliced open—I was still trying to get Jim Jeffreys and his sinewy steak out of my head. I shrugged no, waited for my beer, looking around like a tourist. Lyle’s fingernails were dirty, first thing I noticed. The old waitress’s black wig was ajar: Strands of sweaty white hair stuck to her neck. She tucked a few back under as she grabbed a packet of fries sizzling beneath the heat lamp. A fat man sat by himself at the next table, eating short ribs and examining his flea-market purchase: a kitschy old vase with a mermaid on it. His fingers left grease marks on the mermaid’s breasts.

The waitress said nothing as she set the beer squarely in front of me and then purred over to the fat man, calling him Honey.

“So what’s with the club?” I prompted.

Lyle turned pink, his knee jittery beneath the table.

“Well, you know how some guys do fantasy football, or collect baseball cards?” I nodded. He let out a strange laugh and continued. “Or women read gossip magazines and they know everything about some actor, know like, their baby’s name and the town they grew up in?”

I gave a wary incline of the head, a be-careful nod.

“Well, this is like that, but it’s, well, we call it a Kill Club.”

I took a slug of beer, sweat beads popping on my nose.

“It’s not as weird as it sounds.”

“It sounds pretty fucking weird.”

“You know how some people like mysteries? Or get totally into true-crime blogs? Well, this club is a bunch of those people. Everyone has their crime that they’re obsessed with: Laci Peterson, Jeffrey MacDonald, Lizzie Borden ... you and your family. I mean you and your family, it’s huge with the club. Just huge. Bigger’n JonBenét.” He caught me grimacing, and added: “Just a tragedy, what happened. And your brother in jail for, what, going on twenty-five years?”

“Don’t feel sorry for Ben. He killed my family.”

“Heh. Right.” He sucked on a piece of milky ice. “So, you ever talk with him about it?”

I felt my defenses flip up. There are people out there who swear Ben is innocent. They mail me newspaper clippings about Ben and I never read them, toss them as soon as I see his photo—his red hair loose and shoulder-length in a Jesus-cut to match his glowing, full-of-peace face. Pushing forty. I have never gone to see my brother in jail, not in all these years. His current prison is, conveniently, on the outskirts of our hometown—Kinnakee, Kansas—where he’d committed the murders to begin with. But I’m not nostalgic.

Most of Ben’s devotees are women. Jug-eared and long-toothed, permed and pant-suited, tight-lipped and crucified. They show up occasionally on my doorstep, with too much shine in their eyes. Tell me that my testimony was wrong. I’d been confused, been coerced, sold a lie when I swore, at age seven, that my brother had been the killer. They often scream at me, and they always have plenty of saliva. Several have actually slapped me. This makes them even less convincing: A red-faced, hysterical woman is very easy to disregard, and I’m always looking for a reason to disregard.

If they were nicer to me, they might have got me.

“No, I don’t talk to Ben. If that’s what this is about, I’m not interested.”

“No, no, no, it’s not. You’d just come to, it’s like a convention almost, and you’d let us pick your brain. You really don’t think about that night?”

Darkplace.

“No, I don’t.”

“You might learn something interesting. There are some fans ... experts, who know more than the detectives on the case. Not that *that’s* hard.”

“So these are a bunch of people who want to convince me Ben’s innocent.”

“Well ... maybe. Maybe you’ll convince them otherwise.” I caught a whiff of condescension. He was leaning in, his shoulders tense, excited.

“I want \$1,000.”

“I could give you \$700.”

I glanced around the room again, noncommittal. I’d take whatever Lyle Wirth gave me, because otherwise I was looking at a real job, real soon, and I wasn’t up for that. I’m not someone who can be depended on five days a week. Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday? I don’t even get out of bed five days in a row—I often don’t remember to eat five days in a row. Reporting to a workplace, where I would need to stay for eight hours—eight big hours outside my home—was unfeasible.

“Seven hundred’s fine then,” I said.

“Excellent. And there’ll be a lot of collectors there, so bring any souvenirs, uh, items from your childhood you might want to sell. You could leave with \$2,000, easy. Letters especially. The more personal the better, obviously. Anything dated near the murders. January 3, 1985.” He recited it as if he’d said it often. “Anything from your mom. People are really ... fascinated by your mom.”

People always were. They always wanted to know: What kind of woman gets slaughtered by her own son?

## Patty Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

8:02 A.M.

He was talking on the phone again, she could hear the cartoonish *mwaMWAwa* of his voice murmuring behind his door. He'd wanted an extension of his own—half his schoolmates, he swore, had their own listings in the phone book. They were called Children's Lines. She'd laughed and then got pissed because *he* got pissed at her for laughing. (Seriously, a children's phone line? How spoiled were these kids?) Neither of them mentioned it again—they were both easily embarrassed—and then a few weeks later he'd just come home, head tucked down, and showed her the contents of a shopping bag: a line splitter that would allow two phones to use the same extension and a remarkably light plastic phone that didn't seem much different from the pink toy versions the girls used to play secretary. "Mr. Benjamin Day's office," they'd answer, trying to pull their older brother into the game. Ben used to smile and tell them to take a message; lately he just ignored them.

Since Ben brought home his goodies, the phrase "goddang phone cord" had been introduced to the Day home. The cord corkscrewed from the kitchen outlet, over the counter, down the hall, and crimped under the crack of his door, which was always closed. Someone tripped on the cord at least once a day, and this would be followed by a scream (if it was one of the girls) or a curse (if it was Patty or Ben). She'd asked him repeatedly to secure the cord against the wall, and he'd just as repeatedly failed to do it. She tried to tell herself this was normal teenage stubbornness, but for Ben it was aggressive, and it made her worry he was angry, or lazy, or something worse she hadn't even thought of. And who was he talking to? Before the mysterious addition of the second phone, Ben hardly ever got calls. He had two good friends, the Muehler brothers, overalled Future Farmers of America who were so reticent they sometimes just hung up when she

answered—and then Patty would tell Ben that Jim or Ed just called. But there had never been long conversations behind closed doors until now.

Patty suspected her son finally had a girlfriend, but her few hints in that direction made Ben so uncomfortable his pale skin turned blue-white and his amber freckles actually glowed, like a warning. She'd backed off completely. She wasn't the kind of mother to jam open her kids' lives too wide—it was hard enough for a fifteen-year-old boy to get privacy in a house full of women. He'd installed a padlock on his door after he'd returned home from school one day to find Michelle squirreling through his desk drawers. The lock installation, too, was presented as a done-deal: A hammer, some banging, and there it suddenly was. His own boy-nest, secured. Again, she couldn't blame him. The farmhouse had gone girly in the years since Runner left. The curtains, the couches, even the candles were all apricot and lace. Little pink shoes and flowered undies and barrettes cluttered drawers and closets. Ben's few small assertions—the curlicue phone cord and the metallic, manly lock—seemed understandable, actually.

She heard a shot of laughter coming from behind his door, and it unnerved her. Ben wasn't a laugher, not even as a kid. At age eight he'd looked at one of his sisters coolly and announced, "Michelle has a case of the giggles," as if it was something to be fixed. Patty described him as stoic, but his self-containment went beyond that. His dad certainly didn't know what to do with him, alternating between roughhousing (Ben stiff and unresponsive as Runner crocodile-rolled him on the floor) and recrimination (Runner complaining loudly that the kid was no fun, weird, girlish). Patty hadn't fared much better. She'd recently bought a book about mothering a teenage boy, which she'd hidden under her bed like pornography. The author said to be brave, ask questions, demand answers from your child, but Patty couldn't. Much more than a graze of a question pissed Ben off these days, triggered that unbearably loud silence from him. The more she tried to figure him out, the more he hid. In his room. Talking to people she didn't know.

Her three daughters were already awake too, had been for hours. A farm, even their pathetic, overleveraged, undervalued one, demanded early rising, and the routine stuck through the winter. They were now fluffing around in the snow. She'd shooed them out like a pack of

puppies so they wouldn't wake up Ben, then got annoyed when she heard his voice on the phone, realized he was already up. She knew that was the reason she was fixing pancakes, the girls' favorite. Even the score. Ben and the girls were always accusing her of taking sides—Ben forever being asked to have patience with the small, ribboned creatures, the girls forever being begged to hush now, don't bother your brother. Michelle, at ten, was the oldest daughter, Debby was nine, and Libby seven. ("Jesus, Mom, it's like you dropped a litter," she could hear Ben admonish.) She peeked out a filmy curtain to view the girls in their natural animal state: Michelle and Debby, boss and assistant, constructing a snow fort from plans they hadn't bothered to share with Libby; Libby trying to nose into the side of the action, offering snowballs and rocks and a long, waggly stick, each rejected with barely a glance. Finally Libby bent at the legs for a good scream, then kicked the whole thing down. Patty turned away—fists and tears were next, and she wasn't in the mood.

Ben's door creaked open, and his heavy thumps at the end of the hall told her he was wearing those big black boots she hated. Don't even look at them, she told herself. She said the same thing whenever he wore his camo pants. ("Dad wore camo pants," he sulked when she'd complained. "Hunting, he wore them hunting," she'd corrected.) She missed the kid who used to demand unflashy clothes, who wore only jeans and plaid button-downs. The boy with dark red curls and an obsession with airplanes. Here he came now, in black denim jacket, black jeans, and a thermal hat pulled down low. He mumbled something and aimed for the door.

"Not before breakfast," she called. He checked, turned only his profile to her.

"I gotta get a few things done."

"That's fine, have some breakfast with us."

"I hate pancakes. You know that." Dammit.

"I'll make you something else. Sit." He wouldn't defy a direct order, would he? They stared each other down, Patty about to give in, when Ben sighed pointedly, then slumped onto a chair. He started fiddling with the salt shaker, pouring the granules on the table and plowing them into a pile. She almost told him not to do it, but stopped. It was enough for now that he was at the table.

“Who were you talking to?” she asked, pouring him some orange juice she knew he’d leave untouched to spite her.

“Just some people.”

“People, plural?”

He only raised his eyebrows.

The screen door scissored open, then the front door banged against the wall, and she could hear a series of boots tumbling onto the floor mat—well-trained, untracking daughters that they were. The fight must have been settled quickly. Michelle and Debby were already bickering about some cartoon on TV. Libby just marched right in and hurled herself on a chair next to Ben, shook some ice off her hair. Of Patty’s three daughters, only Libby knew how to disarm Ben: She smiled up at him, gave a quick wave, and then stared straight ahead.

“Hey, Libby,” he said, still sifting salt.

“Hey, Ben. I like your salt mountain.”

“Thanks.”

Patty could see Ben visibly re-shell himself when the other two entered the kitchen, their bright, harsh voices splattering the corners of the room.

“Mom, Ben’s making a mess,” Michelle called out.

“It’s fine, sweetie, pancakes are almost ready. Ben, eggs?”

“Why does Ben get eggs?” Michelle whined.

“Ben, eggs?”

“Yeah.”

“I want eggs,” Debby said.

“You don’t even like eggs,” Libby snapped. She could always be depended on to side with her brother. “Ben needs eggs cause he’s a boy. A man.”

That made Ben smile the slightest bit, which made Patty select the most perfectly round pancake for Libby. She piled the cakes onto plates while the eggs spat at her, the fine calibrations of breakfast for five going surprisingly well. It was the last of the decent food, left over from Christmas, but she wouldn’t worry right now. After

breakfast, she'd worry.

"Mom, Debby has her elbows on the table." Michelle, in her bossy mode.

"Mom, Libby didn't wash her hands." Michelle again.

"Neither did you." Debby.

"Nobody did." Libby laughing.

"Dirty bugger," Ben said, and poked her in her side. It was some old joke with them, that phrase. Patty didn't know how it had started. Libby tilted her head back and laughed harder, a stage laugh designed to please Ben.

"Mother hugger," Libby giggled wetly, some sort of response.

Patty soaped up a rag and passed it around to each so they could all stay seated at the table. Ben bothering to tease one of his sisters was a rare event, and it seemed like she could hold on to the good mood if everyone just stayed in their place. She needed the good mood, the way you need sleep after an all-nighter, the way you daydream of throwing yourself into bed. Every day she woke up and swore she wouldn't let the farm weigh her down, wouldn't let the ruination of it (three years she was behind in the loan, three *years* and no way out) turn her into the kind of woman she hated: mirthless, pinched, unable to enjoy anything. Every morning she'd crick herself down onto the flimsy rug by her bed and pray, but it was actually a promise: *Today I won't yell, I won't cry, I won't clench up into a ball like I am waiting for a blow to level me. I will enjoy today.* She might make it to lunch before she went sour.

They were all set now, everyone washed, a quick prayer, and all was fine until Michelle spouted up.

"Ben needs to take off his hat."

The Day family had always had a no-hat rule at the table, it was such a non-negotiable regulation that Patty was surprised to even have to address it.

"Ben does need to take off his hat," Patty said, her voice a gentle prod.

Ben tilted his head toward her and she felt a pinch of worry. Something was wrong. His eyebrows, normally thin rusty lines, were

black, the skin beneath stained a dark purple.

“Ben?”

He took off his hat, and on his head was a jet-black crown of hair, ruffed like an old Labrador. It was such a shock, like swallowing ice water too quickly, her red-headed boy, Ben’s defining characteristic, gone. He looked older. Mean. As if this kid in front of her had bullied the Ben she knew into oblivion.

Michelle screamed, Debby burst into tears.

“Ben, sweetheart, why?” Patty said. She was telling herself not to overreact, but that was just what she was doing. This stupid teenage act—that’s all it was—made her entire relationship with her son feel suddenly hopeless. As Ben stared down at the table, smirking, force-fielding himself from their female commotion, Patty worked up an excuse for him. He’d hated his red hair as a kid, been teased for it. Maybe he still was. Maybe this was an act of assertion. A positive thing. Then again, it was Patty who’d given Ben her red hair, which he’d just obliterated. How was that not a rejection? Libby, her only other redhead, clearly thought so. She sat holding a piece of her hair between two skinny fingers, staring at it morosely.

“All right,” Ben said, slurping an egg and standing up. “Enough drama. It’s just stupid hair.”

“Your hair was so handsome, though.”

He paused at that, as if he was really considering it. Then shook his head—at her comment, at the whole morning, she didn’t know—and stomped toward the door.

“Just calm down,” he called without turning around. “I’ll be back later.”

She was guessing he’d slam the door, but instead he shut it quietly, and that seemed worse. Patty blew at her bangs and glanced around the table at all the wide blue eyes, watching her to see how to react. She smiled and gave a weak laugh.

“Well, that was weird,” she offered. The girls perked up a bit, visibly sitting higher in their chairs.

“He’s so weird,” Michelle added.

“His hair matches his clothes now,” Debby said, wiping her tears on

the back of her hand, and forking some pancake into her mouth.

Libby just looked at her plate, shoulders caved in toward the table. It was a look of dejection only a kid could pull off.

“It’s OK, Lib,” Patty said, and tried to pat her casually without getting the other girls going again.

“No it’s not,” she said. “He *hates* us.”

## Libby Day

NOW

Five nights after my beer with Lyle, I drove down the bluff from my house, and then down some more, into the trough of Kansas City's West Bottoms. The neighborhood had thrived back in the stockyard era and then spent many decades the-opposite-of-thriving. Now it was all tall, quiet brick buildings, bearing names of companies that no longer existed: Raftery Cold Storage, London Beef, Dannhauser Cattle Trust. A few reclaimed structures had been converted into professional haunted houses that lit up for the Halloween season: five-story slides and vampire castles and drunk teenagers hiding beers inside letter jackets.

In early March, the place was just lonesome. As I drove through the still streets, I'd occasionally spot someone entering or leaving a building, but I had no idea what for. Near the Missouri River the area turned from semi-empty to ominously vacant, an upright ruin.

I felt a bulb of unease as I parked in front of a four-story building labeled Tallman Corporation. This was one of those moments where I wished I had more friends. Or, friends. I should have someone with me. Barring that, I should have someone who'd be waiting to hear from me. As it was, I'd left a note on the stairs inside my house, explaining where I was, with Lyle's letter attached. If I disappeared, the cops would have a place to start. Of course, if I had a friend, maybe the friend would tell me, *No way am I letting you do that, sweetie*, the way women always said things, in that protective voice.

Or maybe not. The murders had left me permanently off-kilter in these kinds of judgment calls. I assumed everything bad in the world could happen, because everything bad in the world already did happen. But, then, weren't the chances minuscule that I, Libby Day, would meet harm on top of it? Wasn't I safe by default? A shiny, indestructible statistic. I can't decide, so I veer between drastic

overcaution (sleeping with the lights on at all times, my mom's old Colt Peacemaker on my bedside table) to ridiculous incaution (venturing by myself to a Kill Club in a vacant building).

I was wearing boots with big heels, to give myself another few inches, the right one fitting much looser than the other because of my bad foot. I wanted to crack every bone in my body, loosen things up. I was tight. Pissed, my teeth gritted. No one should need money this badly. I'd tried to cast what I was doing in an inoffensive light, and in brief flashes over the past day, I'd turned myself into something noble. These people were interested in my family, I was proud of my family, and I was allowing these strangers some insight they wouldn't otherwise have. And if they wanted to offer me money, I'd take it, I wasn't too good for that.

In truth though, I wasn't proud of my family. No one had ever liked the Days. My dad, Runner Day, was crazy, drunk, and violent in an unimpressive way—a small man with sneaky fists. My mom had four kids she couldn't take proper care of. Poor, farm-bust kids, smelly and manipulative, always showing up at school in need: breakfast skipped, shirts ripped, snotty and strep-throat ridden. Me and my two sisters had been the cause of at least four lice infestations in our short grade-school experience. Dirty Days.

And here I was, twenty-some years later, still showing up to places, needing things. Money, specifically. In the back pocket of my jeans was a note Michelle had written me a month before the murders. She'd ripped it from a spiral notebook, the fringe carefully trimmed away, then folded it elaborately into the shape of an arrow. It talked about the usual things that filled Michelle's fourth-grade mind: a boy in her class, her dumb teacher, some ugly designer jeans that some spoiled girl got for her birthday. It was boring, unmemorable—I had boxes of this stuff I crated from house to house and never opened until now. I'd need \$200 for it. I had a quick, guilty burst of glee when I thought of all the other crap I could sell, notes and photos and junk I'd never had the balls to throw out. I got out of my car and took a breath, popped my neck.

The night was cold, with balmy pockets of spring here and there. An enormous yellow moon hung in the sky like a Chinese lamp.

I climbed the soiled marble stairs, dirty leaves crunching beneath my boots, an unwholesome, old-bones sound. The doors were a thick,

weighty metal. I knocked, waited, knocked three more times, standing exposed in the moonglow like a heckled vaudevillian. I was about to phone Lyle on my cell when the door swung open, a tall, long-faced guy looking me up and down.

“Yeah?”

“Uh, is Lyle Wirth here?”

“Why would Lyle Wirth be here?” he said without a smile. Screwing with me because he could.

“Oh, fuck you,” I blurted, and turned away, feeling idiotic. I got three steps when the guy called after me.

“Jeez, wait, don’t get bent out of shape.”

But I was born bent out of shape. I could picture myself coming out of the womb crooked and wrong. It never takes much for me to lose patience. The phrase *fuck you* may not rest on the tip of my tongue, but it’s near. Midtongue.

I paused, straddled between two steps, heading down.

“Look, I know Lyle Wirth, obviously,” the guy said. “You on the guest list or something?”

“I don’t know. My name’s Libby Day.”

He dropped his jaw, pulled it back up with a spitty sound, and gave me that same checklist look that Lyle had given me.

“Your hair’s blond.”

I raised my eyebrows at him.

“Come in, I’ll take you down,” he said, opening the door wide. “Come on, I won’t bite.”

There are few phrases that annoy me more than *I won’t bite*. The only line that pisses me off faster is when some drunk, ham-faced dude in a bar sees me trying to get past him and barks: *Smile, it can’t be that bad!* Yeah, actually, it can, jackwad.

I headed back up, rolling my eyes goonily at the door-guy, walking extra slow so he had to lean against the door to keep it open. Asshole.

I entered a cavelike foyer, lined with broken lamp fixtures made of brass and shaped to look like stalks of wheat. The room was more

than forty feet high. The ceiling had once been painted with a mural—vague, chipped images of country boys and girls hoeing or digging. One girl, her face now vanished, looked like she might be holding a jump rope. Or a snake? The entire western corner of the ceiling had caved in at some point: where the mural's oak tree should have exploded into green summer leaves, there was instead a patch of blue night sky. I could see the glow of the moon but not the moon itself. The foyer remained dark, electricity-free, but I could just make out piles of trash swept into the corners of the room. The partygoers had hustled off the squatters, then taken a broom to the place, tried to spiff it up. It smelled like piss anyway. An ancient condom was spaghetti-stuck to one wall.

“You guys couldn't have sprung for, like, a banquet hall?” I mumbled. The marble floor hummed beneath me. Clearly all the action was happening downstairs.

“We're not exactly a welcome convention,” the guy said. He had a young, fleshy face with moles. He wore a tiny turquoise stud earring I always associated with Dungeons and Dragons types. Men who own ferrets and think magic tricks are cool. “Plus this building has a certain ... ambiance. One of the Tallmans blew his brains out here in 1953.”

“Nice.”

We stood looking at each other, his face shapeshifting in the gloom. I couldn't see any obvious way to get downstairs. The elevator banks to the left were clearly not working, their tarnished counters all frozen between floors. I pictured a workforce of ghost-men in business suits waiting patiently to start moving again.

“So ... are we going anywhere?”

“Oh. Yeah. Look I just wanted to say ... I'm sorry for your loss. I'm sure even after all this time ... I just can't imagine. That's like, something out of Edgar Allan Poe. What happened.”

“I try not to think about it much,” I said, the standard answer.

The guy laughed. “Well, you're in the wrong place, then.”

He led me around the corner and down a hallway of former offices. I crunched broken glass, peering into each room as we passed: empty, empty, a shopping cart, a careful pile of feces, the remains of an old

bonfire, and then a homeless man who said *Hiya!* cheerfully over a forty-ounce.

“His name’s Jimmy,” the kid said. “He seemed OK, so we let him stay.”

How gracious, I thought, but just nodded at Jimmy. We reached a heavy firewall of a door, opened it, and I was assaulted by the noise. From the basement came competing sounds of organ music and heavy metal and the loud hum of people trying to yell over each other.

“After you,” he said. I didn’t move. I don’t like people behind me. “Or, I can ... uh, this way.”

I thought about retreating right then, but the nastiness reared up in me when I pictured this guy, this fucking Renaissance Fest *juggler*, going down and telling his friends: *She freaked, she just ran away! And* them all laughing and feeling tough. And him adding: *She’s really different from what I thought she’d be.* And holding his hand up about yay-high to show how little I’d stayed. Fuckyoufuckyoufuckyou, I chanted, and followed him.

We walked down the one floor to a basement door plastered with flyers: Booth 22: Hoardin’ Lizzie Borden! Collectible items for sale or swap! Booth 28: Karla Brown—Bite Marks Discussion. Booth 14: Role Play—Interrogate Casey Anthony! 15: Tom’s Terrible Treats—Now serving Jonestown Punch and Sweet Fanny Adams!

Then I saw a grainy blue flyer with a xeroxed photo of me in one corner: Talk About a Bad *Day!* The Kinnakee Kansas Farmhouse Massacre—Case Dissection and a Special, Special GUEST!!!

Again I debated leaving, but the door flung open and I was sucked inside a humid, windowless basement crowded with maybe two hundred people, all leaning into each other, yelling in ears, hands on shoulders. At school once, they showed us a film strip of a grasshopper plague hitting the Midwest, and that’s what I flashed to—all those goggling eyes looking at me, mouths chewing, arms and elbows askew. The room was set up like a swap meet, divided into rows of booths created from cheap chain-link fencing. Each booth was a different murder. I counted maybe forty at first glance. A generator was barely igniting a string of lightbulbs, which hung from wires around the room, swaying in uneven time, illuminating faces at gruesome angles, a party of death masks.

On the other side, Lyle spotted me and started arrowing through the crowd, leading with a shoulder, scooting along sideways. Glad-handing. He was, apparently, an important guy in this crowd—everyone wanted to touch him, tell him something. He leaned down to let some guy whisper in his dainty ear, and when he pulled himself upright, his head hit a flashlight, and everyone around him laughed, their faces glowing off and on as the light rotated like a police car's. Men's faces. Guys' faces. There were only a few women in the entire place—four that I could see, all bespectacled, homely. The men were not attractive either. There were whiskery, professorial fellows; nondescript, suburban-dad types; and a goodly amount of guys in their twenties with cheap haircuts and math-nerd glasses, men who reminded me of Lyle and the guy who'd led me downstairs. Unremarkable, but with a brainy arrogance wafting from them. Call it AP aftershave.

Lyle reached me, the men behind him grinning at his back, studying me like I was the new girlfriend. He shook his head. "Sorry, Libby. Kenny was supposed to phone my cell when you got here so I could bring you down myself." He eyed Kenny over my head and Kenny made a shruggy noise and left. Lyle was steering me into the crowd, using an assertive finger to the back of my shoulder. Some people were wearing costumes. A man with a black waistcoat and tall black hat pushed past me, offering me sweets and laughing. Lyle rolled his eyes at me, said, "Frederick Baker freak. We've been trying to push out the role players for the past few years, but ... too many guys are into that."

"I don't know what that means," I said, worried I was about to lose it. Elbows and shoulders were jostling me, I kept getting pushed back every few feet I moved forward. "I really, seriously, don't understand what the fuck is going on."

Lyle sighed impatiently, looked at his watch. "Look, our session doesn't start til midnight. You want me to walk you around, explain more?"

"I want my money."

He chewed at his lower lip, pulled an envelope out of his back pocket, and stuck it in my hand as he leaned into my ear and asked me to count it later. It felt fat, and I calmed down a bit.

“Let me show you around.” We walked the perimeter of the room, cramped booths on our left and right, all that metal fencing reminding me of kennels. Lyle put that finger on my arm again, prodding me onward. “The Kill Club—and by the way, don’t lecture, we know it’s a bad name, it just stuck. But the Kill Club, we call it KC, that’s one reason we have the big meeting here every year, Kansas City, KC, Kill Club ... uh, like I said, it’s basically for solvers. And enthusiasts. Of famous murders. Everyone from, like Fanny Adams to—”

“Who is Fanny Adams?” I snapped, realizing I was about to get jealous. I was supposed to be the special one here.

“She was an eight-year-old, got chopped to bits in England in 1867. That guy we just passed, with the top hat and stuff, he was playing at being her murderer, Frederick Baker.”

“That’s really sick.” So she’d been dead forever. That was good. No competition.

“Well, that was a pretty notorious murder.” He caught me grimacing. “Yeah, like I said, they’re a less palatable section. I mean, most of those murders have already been solved, there’s no real mystery. To me, it’s all about the solving. We have former cops, lawyers—”

“Are there role players for ... mine? My family, are there role players here?” A beefy guy with highlighted hair and an inflatable doll in a red dress paused in the crowd, nearly on top of me, not even noticing me. The doll’s plastic fingers tickled my cheek. Someone behind me yelled *Scott and Amber!* I pushed the guy off me, tried to scan the crowd for anyone dressed as my mother, as Ben, some bastard in a red wig, brandishing an axe. My hand had balled into a fist.

“No, no of course not,” Lyle said. “No way, Libby, I would never let that happen, the role play ... it. No.”

“Why is it all men?” In one of the booths nearby, two tubby guys in polo shirts were snarling at each other over some child murders in the Missouri bootheel.

“It’s not all men,” Lyle said, defensive. “Most of the solvers are men, but I mean, go to a crossword-puzzle convention and you’ll see the same thing. Women come for the, like, networking. They talk about

why they identify with the victims—they've had abusive husbands or whatnot—they have some coffee, buy an old photo. But we've had to be more careful because sometimes they can get too ... attached."

"Yeah, better not get too human about it," I said, me being a fucking hypocrite.

Thankfully Lyle ignored me. "Like, right now, they're all obsessed with the Lisette Stephens thing." He motioned back behind him, where a small cluster of women were huddled around a computer, necks stretched downward, henlike. I moved past Lyle toward the booth. They were all looking at a video montage of Lisette. Lisette and her sorority sisters. Lisette and her dog. Lisette and her look-alike sister.

"See what I mean?" Lyle said. "They're not solving, they're just looking at stuff they could see online at home."

The problem with Lisette Stephens was there was nothing to solve: She had no boyfriend, no husband, no upset coworkers, no strange ex-cons doing repair work in her home. She just vanished for no reason anyone could think of, except she was pretty. She was the kind of girl people noticed. The kind of girl the media bothered to cover when she disappeared.

I nudged into a spot next to a stack of sweatshirts bearing iron-on decals that read Bring Lisette Home. Twenty-five bucks. The group, however, was more interested in the laptop. The women clicked through the website's message boards. People often attached photos with their notes, but the photos were jarring. "We love you Lisette, we know you will come home," popped up alongside a picture of three middle-aged women at the beach. "Peace and love to your family in this time of need," surfaced next to a photo of someone's Labradoodle. The women returned to the homepage, and up came the picture the media liked the most: Lisette and her mother, both arms wrapped around each other, cheek-to-cheek, beaming.

I shrugged, trying to ignore my worry about Lisette, who I didn't know. And also fighting the jealousy again. Out of all these murders, I wanted the Day booth to be the biggest. It was a blush of love: my dead people were the best. I had a flash of my mother, her red hair tied back in a ponytail, helping me tug off my flimsy winter boots, and then rubbing my toes one by one. *Warming up big toe, warming up*

*baby toe*. In this memory, I could smell buttered toast, but I don't know if there was buttered toast. In this memory I still had all my toes.

I shivered hard, like a cat.

"Wow, someone walk over your grave?" Lyle said, and then realized the irony.

"So what else?" We hit a traffic jam of people in front of a booth marked Bob's Bizarre Bazaar, manned by a guy wearing an oversized black mustache and slurping soup. Four skulls lined up on a plank behind him with a sign that read The Final Four. The guy was hollering at Lyle to introduce him to his little friend. Lyle started to wave him off, tried to pull us through the milling crowd, then shrugged, whispered *role player* to me.

"Bob Berdella," Lyle said to the man, making a winky joke of the name, "this is Libby Day, whose family was ... of the Kinnakee Kansas Farmhouse Massacre. The Days."

The guy leaned across the table at me, a drooly piece of hamburger hanging off his tooth. "If you had a cock, you'd be in pieces in my garbage right now," he said and then gunned out a laugh. "Little, tiny pieces."

He swatted at me. I skittered back involuntarily, then I lurched back toward Bob, my fist up, rageful, as I always got when I had a fright. Go for the nose, make him bleed, smack that piece of chili meat right off his face, then hit him again. Before I could get to him, Bob shoved his seat back, hands up, muttering not to me but to Lyle, *dude I was only playing, no harm, man*. He didn't even look at me as he apologized, like I was some child. As he yammered at Lyle, I went for him. My fist couldn't quite connect, so I ended up giving him a hard smack against his chin, the way you'd punish a puppy.

"Fuck you, asshole."

Then Lyle snapped to, muttering apologies and steering me away, my fists still tight, my jaw set. I kicked Bob's table with my boot as I walked away, just enough so it wobbled once, severely, and dumped the guy's soup on the floor. I was already regretting that I hadn't just shot over the table. Nothing more embarrassing than a short woman who can't land a punch. I might as well have been carried away, my

feet baby-kicking in the air. I glanced behind us. The guy just stood there, his arms slack, his chin pink, trying to decide if he was contrite or angry.

“OK, that wouldn’t have been the first fistfight at Kill Club, but it might have been the weirdest,” Lyle said.

“I don’t like being threatened.”

“He wasn’t really ... I know, I know,” Lyle muttered. “Like I said, at some point these role-play guys will splinter off and leave the serious solvers alone. You’ll like the people in our group, the Day group.”

“Is it the Day group, or the Kinnakee Kansas Farmhouse Massacre group?” I grumbled.

“Oh. Yeah, that’s what we call it.” He tried to squirm through another bottleneck in the cramped aisle, ended up smushed to my side. My face was stuck just a few inches shy of a man’s back. Blue oxford shirt, starched. I kept my eyes on the perfect center crease. Someone with a big hobo-clown gut was pushing me steadily from behind.

“Most people work Satan in there somehow,” I said. “Satan Farmhouse Massacre. Kansas Satan Killings.”

“Yeah, we don’t really believe that, so we try not to use any Devil references. Excuse me!” he said, wriggling ahead.

“So it’s a branding issue,” I sniped, eyes fixed on the blue shirt. We pushed around a corner into the coolness of open space.

“Do you want to see any more groups?” He pointed to his immediate left, toward a bunch of men in Booth 31: quickie haircuts, a few mustaches, a lot of button-downs. They were arguing intensely at a low volume. “These guys are pretty cool, actually,” Lyle said. “They’re basically creating their own mystery: They think they’ve identified a serial killer. Some guy has been crossing states—Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma—and helping to kill people. Family men, or older people sometimes, who got trapped with too much debt, credit cards maxed out, subprime mortgages, no way out.”

“He kills people because they aren’t good with money?” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Nah, nah. They think he’s like a Kevorkian for people who have

bad credit and good life insurance. They call him the Angel of Debt.”

One of the Booth 31 members, a young guy with a jutting mandible and lips that didn't quite cover his teeth, was eavesdropping and eagerly turned to Lyle: “We think we've got the Angel in Iowa last month: a guy with a McMansion and four kids has a picture-perfect snowmobile accident at a really convenient time. That's like one a month the past year. Economy, man.”

The kid was about to keep going, wanting to pull us into the booth, with its charts and calendars and news clippings and a messy nut-mix that was scattered all over the table, the men grabbing overflowing handfuls, pretzels and peanuts bouncing down to their sneakers. I shook my head at Lyle, steered him away for a change. Out in the aisle, I took a breath of unsalted air and looked at my watch.

“Right,” said Lyle. “It's a lot to take in. Let's head over. You really will appreciate our group, I think. It's much more serious. Look, there are already people there.” He pointed toward a tidy corner booth, where a fat, frizz-haired woman was sipping coffee out of a jug-sized Styrofoam cup, and two trim, middle-aged men were scanning the room, hands on hips, ignoring her. Looked like cops. Behind them, an older, balding guy sat hunched at a card table, scribbling notes on a legal pad, while a tense college-aged kid read over his shoulder. A handful of nondescript men crowded toward the back, flipping through stacks of manila file folders or just loitering.

“See, more women,” Lyle said triumphantly, pointing at the frizz-haired female mountain. “You want to go over now, or do you want to wait and make a big entrance?”

“Now's fine.”

“This is a sharp group, serious fans. You're going to like them. I bet you'll even learn a few things from them.”

I humphed and followed Lyle over. The woman looked up first, narrowed her eyes at me, then widened them. She was holding a homemade folder on which she'd pasted an old junior-high photo of me wearing a gold-heart necklace someone had mailed me. The woman looked like she wanted to hand the folder to me—she was holding it like a theater program. I didn't reach out. I noticed she'd drawn Devil horns on my head.

Lyle put an arm on my shoulder, then took it off. “Hi, everyone. Our special guest has arrived, and she’s the star of this year’s Kill Convention—Libby Day.”

A few eyebrows raised, several heads nodded appreciatively, one of the cop-looking guys said, *holy shit*. He was about to give Lyle a high-five and then thought better: his arm froze in an accidental Nazi salute. The older man darted his eyes away from me and scribbled more notes. I worried for a moment I was supposed to make a speech—instead I mumbled a tart hello and sat down at the table.

There were the usual greetings, questions. Yes, I lived in Kansas City, no, I was sort of between jobs, no, I didn’t have any contact with Ben. Yes, he wrote me a few times a year but I tossed the envelopes straight into the trash. No, I wasn’t curious what he wrote. Yes, I’d be willing to sell the next one I got.

“Well,” Lyle finally interrupted with a grandiose rumble. “You have here in front of you a key figure in the Day case, a so-called eyewitness, so why don’t we move on to real questions?”

“I have a real question,” said one of the cop-looking guys. He gave a half-twist smile and turned in his chair. “If you don’t mind me cutting to the chase.”

He actually waited for me to say I didn’t mind.

“Why did you testify that Ben killed your family?”

“Because he did,” I said. “I was there.”

“You were hiding, sweetheart. No way you saw what you say you did, or you’d be dead, too.”

“I saw what I saw,” I began, the way I always did.

“Bullshit. You saw what they told you to see because you were a good, scared little girl who wanted to help. The prosecution screwed you up royally. They used you to nail the easiest target. Laziest police work I ever seen.”

“I was in the house ...”

“Yeah, how do you explain the gunshots your mom died from?” the guy hammered, leaning forward on his knees. “Ben didn’t have any residue on his hands—”

“Guys, guys,” the older man interrupted, waving thick, crimped fingers. “And ladies,” he added, greasily, nodding at me and the Frizz-Head Woman. “We haven’t even presented the facts of the case. We have to have protocol or this might as well be some Internet chat session. When we have a guest like this, we should be particularly sure we’re all on the same page.”

No one disagreed more than a grumble’s worth, so the old guy wet his lips, looked over his bifocals and rearranged some throat phlegm. The man was authoritative, yet somehow unwholesome. I pictured him at home by himself, eating canned peaches at the kitchen counter, smacking at the syrup. He began reciting from his notes.

“Fact: Somewhere around 2 a.m. on January 3, 1985, a person or persons killed three members of the Day family in their farmhouse in Kinnakee, Kansas. The deceased include Michelle Day, age ten; Debby Day, age nine; and the family matriarch, Patty Day, age thirty-two. Michelle Day was strangled; Debby Day died of axe wounds, Patty Day of two shotgun wounds, axe wounds, and deep cuts from a Bowie hunting knife.”

I felt the blood rush in my ears, and told myself I wasn’t hearing anything new. Nothing to panic about. I never really listened to the details of the murder. I’d let the words run over my brain and out my ears, like a terrified cancer patient hearing all that coded jargon and understanding nothing, except that it was very bad news.

“Fact,” the man continued. “Youngest child Libby Day, age seven, was in the house at the time, and escaped the killer or killers through a window in her mother’s room.

“Fact: Oldest child Benjamin Day, fifteen, claims he was out sleeping in a neighbor’s barn that night after an argument with his mother. He has never produced another alibi, and his demeanor with the police was extremely unhelpful. He was subsequently arrested and convicted, based largely on rumors within the community that he’d become involved in Satan worship—the walls of the house were covered in symbols and words associated with Devil worship. In his mother’s blood.”

The old man paused for dramatic effect, eyed the group, returned to his notes.

“More damning was the fact his surviving sister, Libby, testified that

she saw him commit the murders. Despite Libby's confused testimony and young age, Ben Day was convicted. This *despite a startling lack of physical evidence*. We convene to explore other possibilities and to debate the merits of the case. What I think we can agree on is that the killings can be traced to the events of January 2, 1985. It all went wrong in a single day—no pun intended." Murmurs of laughter, guilty looks toward me. "When that family got up that morning, it wasn't like there was a hit on them. Something went really wrong *that day*."

Part of a crime-scene photo had slid out of the speaker's folder: a plump, bloody leg and part of a lavender nightgown. Debby. The man noticed my gaze and tucked it back in, like it wasn't my business.

"I think the general consensus is that Runner Day did it," the fat woman said, rummaging in her purse, wadded tissues falling out the side of it.

I started at the sound of my dad's name. Runner Day. Miserable man.

"I mean, right?" she continued. "He goes to Patty, tries to bully her for money, as usual, gets nothing, gets pissed, goes haywire. I mean, the guy was crazy, right?"

The woman produced a bottle and popped two aspirin the way people in the movies did, with a sharp, violent throwback of the head. Then she looked at me for confirmation.

"Yeah. I think so. I don't remember him that well. They divorced when I was, like, two. We didn't have much contact after. He came back and lived with us for a summer, the summer before the murders, but—"

"Where's he now?"

"I don't know."

She rolled her eyes at me.

"But what about the big guy's footprint?" said a man in the back. "The police never explained why a man's dress shoe shows up tracking blood in a house where no men wore dress shoes ..."

"The police never explained a lot," started the older guy.

"Like the random bloodstain," Lyle added. He turned to me. "There was a bloodstain on Michelle's bedsheets—and it was a different

blood type than anyone in the family. Unfortunately the sheets were from Goodwill, so the prosecution claimed the blood could have come from anyone.”

“Gently used” sheets. Yes. The Days were big fans of Goodwill: sofa, TV, lamps, jeans, we even got our curtains there.

“Do you know how to find Runner?” the younger kid asked. “Could you ask him some questions for us?”

“And I still think it’d be worthwhile to question some of Ben’s friends from the time. Do you still have any connections in Kinnakee?” said the old man.

Several people started arguing about Runner’s gambling and Ben’s friends and poor police procedure.

“Hey,” I snapped. “What about Ben? Ben is just off the table?”

“Please, this is the grossest miscarriage of justice ever,” said the fat lady. “And don’t pretend you think otherwise. Unless you’re protecting your daddy. Or you’re too ashamed about what you did.”

I glared at her. She had a glop of egg yolk in her hair. *Who ate eggs at midnight?* I thought. *Or had that been there since this morning?*

“Magda here is very involved with the case, very involved in the effort to free your brother,” said the old guy, with a patronizing rise of his eyebrows.

“He’s a wonderful man,” Magda said, pointing her chin at me. “He writes poetry and music and he’s just a force of hope. You should get to know him, Libby, you really should.”

Magda was running her fingernails across a set of folders on the table before her, one for each Day family member. The thickest folder was covered with photos of my brother: Ben, red-headed and young, somberly holding a toy bomber; Ben, black-haired and scared in his mug shot after the arrest; Ben today, in prison, the red hair returned, studious looking, his mouth partly open, as if caught midsentence. Next to that was Debby’s folder, bearing a single photo of her dressed as a gypsy for Halloween: red cheeks, red lips, her brown hair covered by my mom’s red bandanna, a hip jutted to the side, pretend-sexy. To her right, you can see my freckled arm, reaching for her. It was a family photo, something I thought had never been released.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked her.

“Around.” She covered the folder with a thick hand.

I looked down at the table, resisting the urge to lunge. The photograph of Debby’s dead body had slipped out of the old guy’s folder again. I could see the bloody leg, a sliced-up belly, an arm nearly off. I leaned across the table and grabbed the man’s wrist.

“You put that shit away,” I murmured. He tucked the photo away again, then held the folder shield-like, and blinked at me.

The group was all looking at me now, curious, a little concerned, like I was some pet bunny they just realized might be rabid.

“Libby,” Lyle said in the soothing tones of a talk-show host. “No one doubts you were in the house. No one doubts you survived an incredibly horrific ordeal no child should ever endure. But did you really see with your own eyes what you say you saw? Or may you have been coached?”

I was picturing Debby, sifting my hair with nimble, pudgy fingers, braiding it in the fishbone style she insisted was more difficult than French braids, huffing warm baloney breath on the back of my neck. Tying a green ribbon on the end, turning me into a present. Helping me balance on the edge of the bathtub so I could hold a handmirror and see the back of my furrowed head in the looking glass over the sink. Debby, who so desperately wanted everything to be pretty.

“There’s no proof that anyone but Ben killed my family,” I said, pulling back to the land of the living, where I live by myself. “He never even filed an appeal, for Christsakes. He’s never tried to get out.” I had no experience with convicts, but it seemed to me that they were always launching appeals, that it was a passion for them, even if they had no shot. When I pictured prison, I pictured orange jumpsuits and yellow legal pads. Ben had proved himself guilty by sheer inertia—my testimony was beside the point.

“He had reason enough for eight appeals,” Magda pronounced, grandly. I realized she was one of those women who would show up on my doorstep to scream at me. I was glad I’d never given Lyle my address. “Not fighting doesn’t mean he’s guilty, Libby, it means he’s lost hope.”

“Well, then good.”

Lyle widened his eyes.

“Oh, God. You really think Ben did it.” Then he laughed. Once, accidentally, quickly swallowed but entirely genuine. “Excuse me,” he murmured.

No one laughs at me. Everything I say or do is taken very, very seriously. No one mocks a victim. I am not a figure of mirth. “Well, you all enjoy your conspiracy theories,” I said, and bumped up from the chair.

“Oh don’t be like that,” said the cop-guy. “Stay. Convince us.”

“He never ... filed ... an appeal,” I said, like a preschool teacher. “That’s good enough for me.”

“Then you’re an idiot.”

I flipped him off, a hard gesture like I was digging into cold earth. Then I turned away, someone behind me saying, “She’s still a little liar.”

I darted back into the crowd, pushing my way under armpits and past groins until I arrived back into the cool of the stairwell, the noise behind me. My only victory of the night was the wad of money in my pocket and the knowledge that these people were as pathetic as I was.

I GOT HOME, turned every light on, and got into bed with a bottle of sticky rum. I lay sideways, studying the intricate folds of Michelle’s note, which I’d forgotten to sell.

THE NIGHT FELT tilted. Like the world had once been carefully parceled out between people who believed Ben guilty and people who believed him innocent, and now, those twelve strangers crunched in a booth in a downtown basement had scrambled over to the side of the innocent with bricks in their pockets, and—boom!—that’s where all the weight was now. Magda and Ben and poetry and a force of hope. Footprints and bloodstains and Runner going berserk. For the first time since Ben’s trial, I had fully subjected myself to people who believed I was wrong about Ben, and it turns out I wasn’t entirely up to the challenge. Me of little faith. On another night, I might have shrugged it all off, like I usually did. But those people were so assured, so dismissive, as if they’d discussed me countless times and decided I wasn’t worth grilling that hard. I’d gone there assuming they’d be like people used to be: they might want to help me, take care of me, fix

my problems. Instead they mocked me. Was I really that easy to unsettle, that flimsy?

No. I saw what I saw that night, I thought, my forever-mantra. Even though that wasn't true. The truth was I didn't see anything. OK? Fine. I technically saw nothing. I only heard. I only heard because I was hiding in a closet while my family died because I was a worthless little coward.

THAT NIGHT, THAT night, that night. I'd woken up in the dark in the room I shared with my sisters, the house so cold that frost was on the inside of the window. Debby had gotten in bed with me at some point—we usually jammed in together for warmth—and her plump behind was pushed into my stomach, pressing me against the chilled wall. I'd been a sleepwalker since I could toddle, so I don't remember pulling myself over Debby, but I do remember seeing Michelle asleep on the floor, her diary in her arms as usual, sucking on a pen in her sleep, the black ink drooling down her chin with her saliva. I hadn't bothered trying to wake her up, get her back in bed. Sleep was viciously defended in our loud, cold, crowded house, and not one of us woke without a fight. I left Debby in my bed and opened the door to hear voices down the hall in Ben's room—urgent whispers that bordered on noise. The sounds of people who think they're being quiet. A light coming from the crack under Ben's door. I decided to go to my mom's room, padded down the hall, pulled back her covers and pressed myself against my mother's back. In the winter, my mom slept in two pairs of sweats and several sweaters—she always felt like a giant stuffed animal. She usually didn't move when we got in bed with her, but that night I remember she turned to me so quickly I thought she was angry. Instead she grabbed me and squeezed me, kissed my forehead. Told me she loved me. She hardly ever told us she loved us. That's why I remember it, or think I do, unless I added that for comfort after the fact. But we'll say she told me she loved me, and that I fell immediately back to sleep.

When I next woke, it could have been minutes or hours later, she was gone. Outside the closed door, where I couldn't see, my mother was wailing and Ben was bellowing at her. There were other voices too; Debby was sobbing, screaming *Mommymommymommymichelle* and then there was the sound of an axe. I knew even then what it was. Metal on air—that was the sound—and after the sound of the swing

came the sound of a soft thunk and a gurgle and Debby made a grunt and a sound like sucking for air. Ben screaming at my mom: “Why’d you make me do this?” And no sound from Michelle, which was strange, since Michelle was always the loudest, but nothing from her. Mom screaming *Run! Run! Don’t Don’t*. And a shotgun blast and my mom still yelling but no longer able to make words, just a screeching sound like a bird banging into the walls at the end of the hallway.

Heavy foot treads of boots and Debby’s small feet running away, not dead yet, running toward my mom’s room and me thinking *no, no, don’t come here* and then boots shaking the hallway behind her and dragging and scratching at the floor and more gurgling, gurgling, banging and then a thud and the axe sound and my mom still making horrible cawing sounds, and me standing, frozen, in my mom’s bedroom, just listening and the shotgun blasting my ears again and a thunk that rattled the floorboards beneath my feet. Me, coward, hoping everything would go away. Huddling half in and out of the closet, rocking myself. *Go away go away go away*. Doors banging and more footsteps and a wail, Ben whispering to himself, frantic. And then crying, a deep male crying and Ben’s voice, I know it was Ben’s voice, screaming *Libby! Libby!*

I opened a window in my mom’s room and pushed myself through the broken screen, a breech birth onto the snowy ground just a few feet below, my socks immediately soaked, hair tangling in the bushes. I ran.

*Libby!* Looking back at the house, just a single light in a window, everything else black.

My feet were raw by the time I reached the pond and crouched in the reeds. I was wearing double layers like my mom, longjohns under my nightgown, but I was shaking, the wind ruffling the dress and blasting cold air straight up to my belly.

A flashlight frenetically scanned the tops of the reeds, then a copse of trees not far away, then the ground not far from me. *Libby!* Ben’s voice again. Hunting me. *Stay where you are, sweetheart! Stay where you are!* The flashlight getting closer and closer, those boots crunching on the snow and me weeping hard into my sleeve, racking myself until I was almost ready to stand up and get it over with, and then the flashlight just swung back around and the footsteps marched away from me and I was there by myself, left to freeze to death in the dark.

The light in the house went out and I stayed where I was.

Hours later, when I was too numb to stand upright, I crawled in the weak dawn light back to the house, my feet like ringing iron, my hands frozen in crow's fists. The door was wide open, and I limped inside. On the floor outside the kitchen was a sad little pile of vomit, peas and carrots. Everything else was red—sprays on the walls, puddles in the carpet, a bloody axe left upright on the arm of the sofa. I found my mom lying on the floor in front of her daughters' room, the top of her head shot off in a triangular slice, axe gashes through her bulky sleeping clothes, one breast exposed. Above her, long strings of red hair were stuck to the walls with blood and brain matter. Debby lay just past her, her eyes wide open and a bloody streak down her cheek. Her arm was nearly cut off; she'd been chopped through the stomach with the axe, her belly lay open, slack like the mouth of a sleeper. I called for Michelle, but I knew she was dead. I tiptoed into our bedroom and found her curled up on her bed with her dolls, her throat black with bruises, one slipper still on, one eye open.

The walls were painted in blood: pentagrams and nasty words. Cunts. Satan. Everything was broken, ripped, destroyed. Jars of food had been smashed against the walls, cereal sprayed around the floor. A single Rice Krispie would be found in my mother's chest wound, the mayhem was so haphazard. One of Michelle's shoes dangled by its laces from the cheap ceiling fan.

I hobbled over to the kitchen phone, pulled it down to the floor, dialed my aunt Diane's number, the only one I knew by heart, and when Diane answered I screamed *They're all dead!* in a voice that hurt my own ears for its keening. Then I jammed myself into the crevice between the refrigerator and the oven and waited for Diane.

At the hospital, they sedated me and removed three frostbitten toes and half of a ring finger. Since then I've been waiting to die.

I SAT UPRIGHT in the yellow electricity. Pulled myself out of our murder house and back to my grown-up bedroom. I wasn't going to die for years, I was hunting-dog healthy, so I needed a plan. My scheming Day brain thankfully, blessedly returned to thoughts of my own welfare. Little Libby Day just discovered her angle. Call it survival instinct, or call it what it was: greed.

Those “Day enthusiasts,” those “solvers” would pay for more than just old letters. Hadn’t they asked me where Runner was, and which of Ben’s friends I might still know? They’d pay for information that only I could get. Those jokers who memorized the floor plans to my house, who packed folders full of crime-scene photos, all had their own theories about who killed the Days. Being freaks, they’d have a tough time getting anyone to talk to them. Being me, I could do that for them. The police would humor poor little me, a lot of the suspects even. I could talk to my dad, if that’s what they really wanted, and if I could find him.

Not that it would necessarily lead to anything. At home under my bright hamster-y lights, safe again, I reminded myself that Ben was guilty (had to be *had to be*), mainly because I couldn’t handle any other possibility. Not if I was going to function, and for the first time in twenty-four years, I needed to function. I started doing the math in my head: \$500, say, to talk to the cops; \$400 to talk to some of Ben’s friends; \$1,000 to track down Runner; \$2,000 to talk to Runner. I’m sure the fans had a whole list of people I could cajole into giving Orphan Day some of their time. I could drag this out for months.

I fell asleep, the rum bottle still in my hand, reassuring myself: Ben Day is a killer.

## Ben Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

9:13 A.M.

Ben was free-spinning over ice, the wheels of his bike shimmying. The path was for dirtbikes, for summer, and it had iced over, so it was stupid to ride it. It was more stupid what he was doing: pedaling as fast as he could over the bumpy ground, broken corn stalks on both sides like stubble, and him picking at the goddam butterfly sticker one of his sisters had pasted to the speedometer. It'd been there for weeks, buzzing in and out of his vision, pissing him off, but not enough to deal with it. He bet it was Debby who put it there, loll-eyed and mindless: *This looks pretty!* Ben had the sparkly thing halfway off when he hit a patch of dirt, his front wheel turning completely to the left, his rear bucking out from under him. He didn't fly clear. He jerked up, one leg still caught on the bike, and fell sideways, his right arm scraping the corn shards, his right leg bending beneath him. His head smashed the dirt hard, his teeth sang like a bell.

By the time he could breathe again—ten tear-blink seconds—he could feel a warm trickle of blood snake down past his eye. Good. He smeared it with his fingertips down across the side of his cheek, felt a new line of blood immediately stream out of the crack in his forehead. He wished he'd hit harder. He'd never broken a bone, a fact he admitted only when pressed. *Really, dude? How do you get through life without breaking something? Your mom wrap you in bubble wrap?* Last spring, he'd broken into the town pool with some guys, and stood on the diving board over the big dry hole, staring at the concrete bottom, willing himself to flip in, really smash himself up, be the crazy kid. He'd bounced a few times, taken another swig of whiskey, jiggled up and down some more, and walked back to the guys, who he hardly knew, who'd been watching him only out the sides of their eyes.

A broken bone would be best, but some blood wasn't bad. It was flowing steadily now, down his cheek, under his chin, dripping on the

ice. Pure, round red ponds.

*Annihilation.*

The word came from nowhere—his brain was sticky, phrases and snatches of songs were always wedging themselves in there. Annihilation. He saw flashes of Norse barbarians swinging axes. He wondered for a second, only a second, if he'd been reincarnated, and this was some leftover memory, fluttering down like ash. Then he picked up his bike and banished the idea. He wasn't ten.

He started pedaling, his right hip knotted, his arm sizzling with the scrape from the corn. Maybe he'd get a good bruise too. Diondra would like that, she'd brush one soft fingertip over it, circle it once or twice and give it a poke so she could tease him when he jumped. She was a girl who liked big reactions, Diondra—she was a screamer, a weeper, a howler when she laughed. She made her eyes go wide, her brows almost up to her hairline when she wanted to seem surprised. She liked to jump out from behind doors and scare him so he'd pretend to chase her. Diondra, his girl with the name that made him think of princesses or strippers, he wasn't sure which. She was a little of both: rich but sleazy.

Something had rattled loose on his bike, there was a sound like a nail in a tin can coming from somewhere near his pedals. He stopped a second to look, his hands pink and wrinkled in the cold like an old man's, and just as weak, but could see nothing wrong. More blood pooled into his eyes as he willed himself to find the problem. Fuck, he was useless. He'd been too young when his dad left. He never had a chance to learn anything practical. He saw guys working on motorcycles and tractors and cars, the insides of the engines looking like the metal intestines of an animal he'd never seen before. Now animals he did know, and guns. He was a hunter like everyone else in his family, but that didn't stand for much since his mom was a better shot than he was.

He wanted to be a useful man, but he wasn't sure how to make that happen, and it scared him shitless. His dad had come back to live on the farm for a few months this summer, and Ben had been hopeful, figuring the guy would teach him something after all this time, bother to be a father. Instead, Runner just did all the mechanical stuff himself, didn't even invite Ben to watch. Made it clear, in fact, that Ben should stay out of his way. He could tell Runner thought he was a

pussy: whenever his mom talked about needing to fix something, Runner would say, “that’s men’s work,” and shoot a smile at Ben, daring Ben to agree. He couldn’t ask Runner to show him shit.

Also, he had no money. Correction, he had \$4.30 in his pocket, but that was it for him, for this week. His family had no money saved. They had a bank account that was always just short of empty—he’d seen a statement once where the balance was literally \$1.10, so at one point his entire family had less in the bank than what he was carrying in his coat right now. His mom couldn’t run the farm right—somehow she was screwing it up. She’d take a load of wheat over to the elevator in a borrowed truck and get nothing—less than what it cost to grow it—and whatever money she did get, she owed. *The wolves are at the door*, his mom always said, and when he was younger, he pictured her leaning out the back door, throwing crisp green cash at a pack of hounds, them snapping it up like it was meat. It was never enough.

Was anyone going to take the farm away at some point? Shouldn’t someone? The best thing might be to get rid of the farm, start all over fresh, not tied to this big, dead, living thing. But it was his mom’s parents’ place, and she was sentimental. It was pretty selfish, when you thought about it. Ben worked all week on the farm, and then went back to the school on weekends to work his crap janitor’s job. (School and farm and farm and school, that’s all his life was before Diondra. Now he had a nice triangle of places to go: school and farm and Diondra’s big house on the edge of town.) He fed cattle and hauled manure at home, and pretty much did the same at school, cleaning locker rooms and mopping the cafeteria, wiping up other kids’ shit. And still he was expected to turn over half his paycheck to his mom. *Families share*. Yeah? Well, parents take care of their children, how about that one? How about not squirting out three more kids when you could barely afford the first one?

The bike clattered along, Ben waiting for the whole thing to go to pieces like some comedy routine, some cartoon where he ended up peddling on just a seat and a wheel. He hated that he had to bike places like Opie going to the fishing hole. He hated that he couldn’t drive. *Nothing sadder than a boy just short of sixteen*, Trey would say, shaking his head and blowing smoke toward him. He said this every time Ben showed up to Diondra’s on his bike. Trey was mostly cool, but he was the kind of guy who always had to get a jab in at another

guy. Trey was nineteen, with long hair, black and dull like week-old tar, Diondra's step-cousin or something weird like that, great-uncle or family friend or stepson of a family friend. He either changed his story a few times, or Ben wasn't paying close enough attention. Which was entirely possible, since whenever he was around Trey, Ben immediately tensed up, got way conscious of his body. Why was he standing with his legs at that angle? What should he do with his hands? On his waist or in his pockets?

Either way felt weird. Either way would lead to jokes. Trey was the kind of guy that would look for something just slightly but truly wrong about you that you didn't even notice and point it out to the whole room. *Nice highwaters* was the first thing Trey ever said to him. Ben was wearing jeans that were maybe, possibly, half an inch too short. Maybe an inch. *Nice highwaters*. Diondra had screeched at that. Ben had waited for her to stop laughing, and Trey to start talking again. He'd waited ten minutes, saying nothing, just trying to sit at an angle where his socks wouldn't peek out too much. Then he'd retreated to the bathroom, unlooped his belt a notch, pulled the jeans down near his hips. When he came back to the room—Diondra's downstairs rec room, with blue carpet and beanbags everywhere like mushrooms—the second thing Trey ever said to him was, "Your belt's down to your dick now, man. Ain't foolin' no one."

Ben rattled down the trail in the cold shade of winter, more flakes of snow floating in the air like dust motes. Even when he turned sixteen, he wouldn't have a car. His mom had a Cavalier that she bought at an auction; it had once been a rental car. They couldn't afford a second one, she'd already told Ben that. They'd have to share, which immediately made Ben not want to use it at all. He already pictured trying to pick up Diondra in a car that smelled of hundreds of other people, a car that smelled completely used—old french fries and other people's sex stains—and on top of that, a car that was now cluttered with girls' schoolbooks and yarn dolls and plastic bracelets. That wouldn't work. Diondra said he could drive her car (she was seventeen, another problem, because wasn't that sort of embarrassing to be two grades below your girlfriend?). But that was a much better vision: the two of them in her red CRX, with its jacked-up rear end, Diondra's menthol cigarettes filling the car with perfumey smoke, Slayer blasting. Yeah, much better.

They'd drive out of this crap town, to Wichita, where her uncle owned a sporting-goods store and might give him a job. Ben had tried out for both the basketball and football teams and been cut early and hard, in a don't-come-back sort of way, so spending his days in a big room filled with basketballs and footballs seemed ironic. Then again, with all that equipment around, he might be able to practice, get good enough to join some men's league or something. Seemed like there must be a plus-side.

Of course, the biggest plus-side was Diondra. He and Diondra in their own apartment in Wichita, eating McDonald's and watching TV and having sex and smoking entire packs of cigarettes in a night. Ben didn't smoke much when Diondra wasn't around—she was the addict, she smoked so much she smelled like tobacco even after a shower, like if she slit her skin, menthol vapor would ooze out. He'd come to like it, it smelled like comfort and home to him, the way warm bread might to someone else. So that's how it would be: He and Diondra, with her brown spiraly curls all crunchy with gel (another smell that was all her—that sharp, grape-y sting of her hair), sitting on the sofa watching the soap operas she taped every day. He'd gotten caught up in the drama: big-shouldered ladies drinking champagne with diamonds flashing from their fingers while they cheated or their husbands cheated or people got amnesia and cheated. He would come home from work, his hands smelling of that dusty basketball leather smell, and she'd have bought his McDonald's or Taco Bell and they'd hang out and joke about the spangly ladies on TV, and Diondra would point out the ones with the nicest nails, she loved her nails, and then she'd insist on painting his, or putting lipstick on him, which she loved to do, she loved to make him pretty, she always said. They'd end up in a tickle fight on the bed, naked with ketchup packets smashed to their backs, and Diondra would monkey-laugh so loud the neighbors would bang on the ceiling.

This image wasn't quite complete. He'd deliberately left out one very frightening detail, just completely erased certain realities. That can't be a good sign. It meant the entire thing was a daydream. He was an idiot kid who couldn't even have something as small as a shitty apartment in Wichita. Not even something as tiny as that could he have. He felt a surge of familiar fury. His life was a long line of denials, just waiting for him.

*Annihilation.* Again he saw axes, guns, bloody bodies smashed into the ground. Screaming giving way to whimpers and birdsong. He wanted to bleed more.

## Libby Day

NOW

When I was a kid, I lived with Runner's second cousin in Holcomb, Kansas, for about five months while poor Aunt Diane recuperated from my particularly furious twelfth year. I don't remember much about those five months except that we took a class trip to Dodge City to learn about Wyatt Earp. We thought we'd see guns, buffalo, whores. Instead, about twenty of us shuffled and elbowed into a series of small file rooms, looking up records, the entire day packed with dust motes and whining. Earp himself made no impression on me, but I adored those Old West villains, with their dripping mustaches and slouchy clothes and eyes that glowed like nickel. An outlaw was always described as "a liar and a thief." And there, in one of those inside-smelling rooms, the file clerk droning on about the art of archiving, I jiggled with the good cheer of meeting a fellow traveler. Because I thought, "That's me."

I am a liar and a thief. Don't let me into your house, and if you do, don't leave me alone. I take things. You can catch me with your string of fine pearls clackering in my greedy little paws, and I'll tell you they reminded me of my mother's and I just had to touch them, just for a second, and I'm so sorry, I don't know what came over me.

My mom never owned any jewelry that didn't turn her skin green, but you won't know that. And I'll still swipe the pearls when you're not looking.

I steal underpants, rings, CDs, books, shoes, iPods, watches. I'll go to a party at someone's house—I don't have friends, but I have people who invite me places—and I'll leave wearing a few shirts under my sweater, with a couple of nice lipsticks in my pocket, and whatever cash is floating inside a purse or two. Sometimes I even take the purse, if the crowd is drunk enough. Just sling it over a shoulder and leave. Prescription pills, perfume, buttons, pens. Food. I have a flask

someone's granddad carried back from WWII, I own a Phi Beta Kappa pin earned by some guy's favorite uncle. I have an antique collapsible tin cup that I can't remember stealing, I've had it so long. I pretend it's always been in the family.

The actual stuff my family owned, those boxes under my stairs, I can't quite bear to look at. I like other people's things better. They come with other people's history.

One item in my home I didn't steal is a true-crime novel called *Devil's Harvest: The Satan Sacrifice of Kinnakee Kansas*. It came out in 1986, and was written by a former reporter named Barb Eichel, and that's all I really know. At least three semi-boyfriends have given me a copy of this book, solemnly, wisely, and all three of them were dumped immediately after. If I say I don't want to read the book, I don't want to read the book. It's like my rule about always sleeping with the light on. I tell every man I sleep with that I always keep the lights on, and they always say something like, "I'll take care of you, baby," and then try to switch off the lights. Like that's that. They somehow seem surprised that I actually sleep with the lights on.

I dug out *Devil's Harvest* from a leaning stack of books in the corner—I keep it for the same reason I keep the boxes of my family's papers and crap, because maybe I'll want it someday, and even if I don't, I don't want anyone else to have it.

The opening page read:

Kinnakee, Kansas, in the heart of America, is a quiet farming community where folks know each other, go to church with each other, grow old alongside each other. But it is not impervious to the evils of the outside world—and in the early hours of January 3, 1985, those evils destroyed three members of the Day family in a torrent of blood and horror. This is a story not just of murder, but of Devil worship, blood rituals, and the spread of Satanism to every corner of America—even the coziest, seemingly safest places.

My ears started their hum with the sounds of that night: A loud, masculine grunt, a heaving, dry-throat wail. My mother's banshee screams. Darkplace. I looked at the back-page photo of Barb Eichel. She had short, spiky hair, dangling earrings, and a somber smile. The biography said she lived in Topeka, Kansas, but that was twenty-some years ago.

I needed to phone Lyle Wirth with my money-for-info proposal, but

I wasn't ready to hear him lecture me again about the murder of my own family. (*You really think Ben's guilty!*) I needed to be able to argue with him instead of sitting there like some ignoramus with nothing useful to say. Which is basically what I was.

I scanned the book some more, lying on my back, propped up on a twice-folded pillow, Buck monitoring me with watchful kitty eyes for any movement toward the kitchen. Barb Eichel described Ben as “a black-clad loner, unpopular and angry” and “obsessed with the most brutal form of heavy metal—called black metal—songs rumored to be little more than coded calls to the Devil himself.” I skimmed, naturally, until I found a reference to me: “angelic but strong,” “determined and sorrowful” with an “air of independence that one usually doesn't find in children twice her age.” Our family had been “happy and bustling, looking forward to a future of clean air and clean living.” Mmm-hmm. Still, this was supposedly the definitive book on the murders, and, after all those voices at the Kill Club telling me I was a fool, I was eager to speak with an outsider who also believed that Ben was guilty. Ammo for Lyle. I pictured myself ticking off facts on my fingers: *this, this, and this proves you jackasses are wrong*, and Lyle unpursing his lips, realizing I was right after all.

I'd still be willing to take his cash if he wanted.

Not sure where to start, I called the Topeka directory and, most beautiful bingo ever, got Barb Eichel's number. Still in Topeka, still listed. Easy enough.

She picked up on the second ring, her voice merry and shrill until I told her who I was.

“Oh, Libby. I always wondered if you'd ever get in touch,” she said after a making a throat-sound like *eehhhh*. “Or if I should reach out to you. I didn't know, I didn't know ...” I could picture her looking around the room, picking at her nails, skittish, one of those women who studied the menu twenty minutes and then still panicked when the waiter came.

“I was hoping I could talk to you about ... Ben,” I started, not sure what my wording should be.

“I know, I know, I've written him several letters of apology over the years, Libby. I just don't know how many times I can say I'm sorry for that damn, damn book.”

Unexpected.

BARB EICHEL WAS going to have me over for lunch. She wanted to explain to me in person. She didn't drive anymore (here I caught a whiff of the real story—meds, she had the shiny coating of someone on too many pills), so I'd come out to her and she'd be so grateful. Luckily, Topeka's not far from Kansas City. Not that I was eager to go there—I'd seen enough of it growing up. The town used to have a hell of a psychiatric clinic, seriously, there was even a sign on the highway that said something like, "Welcome to Topeka, psychiatric capital of the world!" The whole town was crawling with nutjobs and therapists, and I used to get trucked there regularly for rare, privileged outpatient counseling. Yay for me. We talked about my nightmares, my panic attacks, my issues with anger. By the teenage years, we talked about my tendency toward physical aggression. As far as I'm concerned, the entire city, the capital of Kansas, smells like crazy-house drool.

I'd read Barb's book before I went to meet her, was armed with facts and questions. But my confidence was flattened somewhere in the three hours it took to make the one-hour drive. Too many wrong turns, me cursing myself for not having the Internet at home, not being able to just download directions. No Internet, no cable. I'm not good at things like that: haircuts or oil changes or dentist visits. When I moved into my bungalow, I spent the first three months swaddled in blankets because I couldn't deal with getting the gas turned on. It's been turned off three times in the past few years, because sometimes I can't quite bring myself to write a check. I have trouble maintaining.

Barb's house, when I finally got there, was dully homey, a decent block of stucco she'd painted pale green. Soothing. Lots of wind chimes. She opened the door and pulled back, like I'd surprised her. She still had the same haircut as her author photo, now a spiky cluster of gray, and was wearing a pair of eyeglasses with a beaded chain, the type that older women describe as "funky." She was somewhere north of fifty, with dark, darting eyes that bulged out of a bony face.

"Ohhh, hi, Libby!" she gasped, and suddenly she was hugging me, some bone of hers poking me hard in my left breast. She smelled like patchouli and wool. "Come in, come in." A small rag-dog came clicking across the tiles toward me, barking happily. A clock chimed the hours.

“Oh, I hope you don’t mind dogs, he’s a sweetheart,” she said, watching him as he bounded up on me. I hate dogs, even small, sweet dogs. I held my hands aloft, actively not petting it. “Come on, Weenie, let our friend get by,” she babytalked it. I disliked it even more after I heard its name.

She sat me down in a living room that seemed stuffed: chairs, sofa, rug, pillows, curtains, everything was plump and round and then layered with even more material. She bustled in and out a bit, calling over her shoulder instead of standing still, asking me twice what I wanted to drink. Somehow I knew she’d try to give me dirt-smelling, crystal-happy, earthen mugs of Beebleberry Root Tea or Jasmine Elixir Smoothie, so I just asked for water. I looked for liquor bottles but couldn’t spot any. There were definitely some pills being swallowed here though. Everything just plinked off this woman—bing, bang!—like she was shellacked.

She brought sandwiches on trays for us to eat in the living room. My water was all ice cubes. I was done in two swallows.

“So, how is Ben, Libby?” she asked when she finally sat down. She kept her tray to her side though. Allowing for a quick retreat.

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t have contact with him.”

She didn’t really seem to listen; she was tuned to her own inner radio station. Something light jazz.

“Obviously, Libby, I feel a lot of guilt over my part in this, although the book came out after the verdict, it had no bearing on that,” she said in a rush. “Still, I was part of that rush to judgment. It was the *time* period. You were so young, I know you don’t remember this, but the ’80s. I mean, it was called the Satanic Panic.”

“What was?” I wondered how many times she’d use my name in conversation. She seemed like one of those.

“The whole psychiatric community, the police, law enforcement, the whole shebang—they thought everyone was a Devil worshiper back then. It was ... *trendy*.” She leaned toward me, her earrings bobbing, her hands kneading. “People really believed there was this vast network of Satanists, that it was a commonplace thing. A teenager starts acting strange: he’s a Satan worshiper. A preschooler comes home from school with a weird bruise or an odd comment

about her privates: her teachers are Satan worshipers. I mean, remember the McMartin preschool trial? Those poor teachers suffered *years* before the charges were dropped. Satanic panic. It was a good story. I fell for it, Libby. We didn't question enough."

The dog sniffed over to me, and I tensed up, hoping Barb would call it away. She didn't notice, though, her eyes on a dangling stained-glass sunflower casting golden light from the window above me.

"And, I mean, the story just worked," Barb continued. "I will now admit, and it took me a good decade, Libby, that I breezed over a lot of evidence that didn't fit this Ben-Satan theory, I ignored obvious red flags."

"Like what?"

"Um, like the fact that you were clearly coached, that you were in no way a credible witness, that the shrink they had assigned to you, to quote 'draw you out' was just putting words into your head."

"Dr. Brooner?" I remembered Dr. Brooner: A whiskery hippie dude with a big nose and small eyes—he looked like a friendly storybook animal. He was the only person besides my aunt Diane I liked that whole year, and the only person I talked to about that night, since Diane was unwilling. Dr. Brooner.

"Quack," Barb said, and giggled. I was about to protest, feeling defensive—the woman had basically just called me a liar to my face, which was true, but still pissed me off—but she was going again. "And your dad's alibi? That girlfriend of his? No way that should have held. That man had no real alibi, and he owed a lot of people a lot of money."

"My mom didn't have any money."

"She had more than your dad did, believe me." I did. My dad once sent me to a neighbor's house for a free pity lunch, told me to look under their sofa cushions and bring him any change.

"And then there was a footprint of a men's dress shoe *in blood* that no one ever traced. But then again, the entire crime scene was contaminated—that's something else I skipped over in the book. There were people going in and out of that place all day. Your aunt came in and took out whole closets of junk, clothes and stuff for you. It was all against any rules of police procedure. But *no one cared*. People were

freaking out. And they had a strange teenage boy that no one in the whole town liked that much, who had no money, who didn't know how to look out for himself, and who happened to like heavy metal. It's just embarrassing." She checked herself. "It's awful. Tragedy."

"Can anything get Ben out?" I asked, my stomach gone eely. The fact that the definitive voice on Ben's guilt had changed her mind was sickening me. As was meeting yet another person who was positive I'd committed perjury.

"Well, you're trying to, right? I think it's almost impossible to undo these things after all these years—his time for an appeal, per se, is up. He'd need to try for habeas corpus and that's ... you all would need some big new evidence at this point to get the ball rolling. Like some really compelling DNA evidence. Unfortunately, your family was cremated so—"

"Right, well, thank you," I interrupted, needing to get home, right then.

"Again, I wrote the book after the verdict, but if I can do anything to help you, let me know, Libby. I do bear some culpability. I take that responsibility."

"Have you made any statements, told the police you don't think Ben did it?"

"Well, no. It seems like most people concluded a long time ago that Ben didn't do it," Barb said, her voice going shrill. "I assume you've officially recanted your testimony? I'd think that'd be a huge help."

She was waiting for me to say more, to explain why I'd come to her now. To tell her, yeah, sure, Ben was innocent and I was going to fix all this. She sat eyeing me, eating her lunch, chewing each bite with excessive care. I picked up my sandwich—cucumber and hummus—and set it back down, leaving a thumbprint in the damp bread. The room was lined with bookshelves, but they contained only self-help books. *Open the Sunshine!*; *Go, Go, Girl!*; *Stop Punishing Yourself!*; *Stand up—Stand Tall!*; *Be Your Own Best Friend!*; *Moving On, Moving Up!* They went on, and on, the relentless, cheerful, buck-up titles. The more I read, the more miserable I felt. Herbal remedies, positive thinking, forgiveness of self, living with mistakes. She even had a book for beating tardiness. I don't trust self-helpers. Years ago, I left a bar with a friend of a friend, a nice, cute, crew-necked, normal guy with an

apartment nearby. After sex, after he fell asleep, I started nosing around his room, and found that his desk was covered with sticky notes:

*Don't sweat the small stuff, it's all small stuff.*

*If only we'd stop trying to be happy we'd have a pretty good time.*

*Enjoy life—no one gets out of here alive.*

*Don't worry, be happy.*

To me, all that urgent hopefulness was more frightening than if I'd found a pile of skulls with hair still attached. I ran out in full panic, my underwear tucked up a sleeve.

I didn't stay much longer with Barb. I left with promises to call her soon and a blue paperweight in the shape of a heart I stole from her sidetable.

## Patty Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

9:42 A.M.

The sink was stained a sludgy purple from where Ben had dyed his hair. Sometime in the night, then, he'd locked himself in the bathroom, sat down on the closed toilet seat, and read through the instructions on the carton of hair color she'd found in the trash. The carton had a photograph of a woman with light pink lips and jet-black hair, worn in a pageboy. She wondered if he'd stolen it. She couldn't imagine Ben, chin-to-chest Ben, setting a dye kit on the checkout counter. So he'd shoplifted it. Then in the middle of the night, her son, all by himself, had measured and combined and lathered. He'd sat with that mudpile of chemicals on his red hair and waited.

The whole idea made her incredibly sad. That in this house of women, her boy had colored his hair in the night by himself. Obviously, it was silly to think he'd have asked her for help, but to do such a thing without an accomplice seemed so lonely. Patty's older sister, Diane, had pierced Patty's ears in this bathroom two decades ago. Patty heated a safety pin with a cheap lighter and Diane sliced a potato in half and stuck its cold, wet face against the back of Patty's ear. They froze her lobe with an ice cube, and Diane—*hold still, hold stillllll*—jabbed that pin into Patty's rubbery flesh. Why did they need the potato? For aim or something. Patty had chickened out after the first ear, had plopped down on the side of the bathtub, the lancet of the pin still sticking out the lobe. Diane, intense and un-budging in a mountainous wool nightgown, closed in on her with another hot pin.

"It'll be over in a second, you can't do just one, P."

Diane, the doer. Jobs were not to be abandoned, not for weather, or laziness, or a throbbing ear, melted ice, and a scaredy kid sister.

Patty twirled her gold studs. The left one was off-center, her fault for squirming at the last minute. Still, there they were, twin markers

of teenage brio, and she'd done it with her sister, just like she'd first applied lipstick or hooked elastic clips to sanitary napkins the size of a diaper, circa 1965. Some things were not meant to be done alone.

She poured Comet into the sink and started scrubbing, the water turning an inky green. Diane would be by soon. She always dropped in midweek if she was "in her car," which was her way of making the thirty-mile drive out to the farm seem like just part of a day's errands. Diane would make fun of this latest Ben saga. When Patty was worried about school, teachers, the farm, Ben, her marriage, the kids, the farm (after 1980, it was always, always, always the farm), it was Diane she craved, like a stiff drink. Diane, sitting in a lawn chair in their garage, smoking a series of cigarettes, would pronounce Patty a dope, would tell her to lighten up. Worries find you easily enough without inviting them. With Diane, worries were almost physical beings, leachy creatures with latchhooks for fingers, meant to be vanquished immediately. Diane didn't worry, that was for less hearty women.

But Patty couldn't lighten up. Ben had gone so remote this past year, turned himself into this strange, tense kid who walled himself into his room, kicking around to music that rattled the walls, the belchy, screaming words seeping out from under his door. Alarming words. She'd not bothered to listen at first, the music itself was so ugly, so frantic, but one day she'd come home early from town, Ben thinking no one was home, and she'd stood outside his door and heard the bellows:

*I am no more,  
I am undone,  
the Devil took my soul,  
now I'm Satan's son.*

The record skipped and again came the coarse chant: I am no more, I am undone, the Devil took my soul, now I'm Satan's son.

And again. And then again. And Patty realized Ben was just standing over his record player, picking up the needle and playing the words over and over, like a prayer.

It was Diane she wanted here. Now. Diane, settled down on the

couch like a friendly bear in one of her three old flannel shirts, now chewing a series of nicotine gums, would talk about the time Patty came home in a minidress and their folks actually gasped, as if she were a lost cause. “And you weren’t, were you? You were just a kid. So is he.” And Diane would snap her fingers like it was that simple.

The girls were hovering outside the bathroom door—they’d be out there when she emerged, waiting. They knew from Patty’s scrubbing and mutterings that something further had gone wrong, and they were trying to decide if this was a situation for tears or recrimination. When Patty cried, it invariably set off at least two of her girls, and if someone got in trouble, the house got windy with blame. The Day women were the definition of mob mentality. And here they were on a farm with plenty of pitchforks.

She rinsed her hands, chapped, red and hard, and glanced at herself in the mirror, making sure her eyes weren’t wet. She was thirty-two but looked a decade older. Her forehead was creased like a child’s paper fan, and crow’s feet rayed out from her eyes. Her red hair was shot with white, wiry threads, and she was unattractively thin, all bumps and points, like she’d swallowed a shelf’s worth of hardware: hammers and mothballs and a few old bottles. She did not look like the kind of person you’d want to hug, and, in fact, her children never snuggled into her. Michelle liked to brush her hair (impatiently and aggressively, the way Michelle did most things) and Debby leaned into her whenever they were both standing (loosely and distractedly, as was Debby’s way). Poor Libby tended not to touch her at all, unless she was really hurt, and that made sense, too. Patty’s body had been so used up that by her mid-twenties even her nipples were knobby; she’d bottle-fed Libby almost immediately.

There was no medicine cabinet in the cramped bathroom (what would she do when the girls hit high school, one bathroom for four women, and where would Ben be? She had a quick, miserable image of him in some motel room, all by himself in a boy-mess of stained towels and spoiled milk), so she kept a small cluster of toiletries stacked along the sink. Ben had shoved all the containers into one corner—aerosol deodorant and hairspray, a midget can of baby powder she didn’t remember buying. They were now splattered with the same violet stain that dirtied her sink. She wiped them down like they were china. Patty wasn’t ready for another trip to the department

store. She'd driven to Salina a month ago in a positive, bright mood to pick up some prettifying items: cream rinse, face lotion, lipstick. She had folded a \$20 bill in her front pocket just for the trip. A splurge. But the sheer amount of options in face cream alone—hydrating, wrinkle-fighting, sun-thwarting—had overwhelmed her. You could buy one moisturizer, but then you had to get a matching cleanser, too, and something called toner, and before you were even ready for the night cream, you'd have blown fifty bucks. She'd left the store with nothing, feeling chastened and foolish.

“You've got four kids—no one expects you to look like a daisy,” was Diane's response.

But she wanted to look like a daisy every now and then. Months back, Runner had returned, just dropped out of the sky with a tan face and blue eyes and stories of fishing boats in Alaska and the race circuit in Florida. He'd stood on her doorstep, lanky in dirty jeans, with not even a wink about the fact they hadn't heard from him in three years, hadn't gotten any money from him. He asked if he could board with them til he got settled—naturally he was broke, although he handed Debby half a warm Coke he'd been drinking as if it were a wonderful gift. Runner swore he'd fix things up around the farm and keep it all platonic, *if she wanted*. It was summer then, and she let him sleep on the couch, where the girls would run to him in the morning as he lay sprawled and stinky in torn boxers, his balls half out.

He charmed the girls—he called them Baby Doll, Angelface—and even Ben watched him attentively, swooping in and out of interactions like a shark. Runner didn't exactly engage Ben, but he tried to joke with him a little, be friendly. He'd include Ben as a male, which was good, he'd say things like, “That's a man's job,” and give Ben a wink. After the third week, Runner rolled up in his truck with an old fold-out sofa he'd found and suggested he camp out in the garage. It seemed OK. He helped her with dishes and he opened doors for her. He'd let Patty catch him looking at her butt, and then pretend to be embarrassed. They exchanged a smoky kiss one night as she was handing him clean bedsheets, and he'd immediately been on her—hands up her shirt, pressing her against the wall, pulling her head back by her hair. She pushed him off, told him she wasn't ready, tried to smile. He sulked and shook his head, looking her up and down with pursed lips. When she undressed for bed, she could smell the nicotine

from where he'd grabbed her just below the breasts.

He'd stayed another month, leering around, starting jobs and leaving them half done. When she asked him to leave during breakfast one morning, he called her a bitch, threw a glass at her, left juice stains on the ceiling. After he was gone, she discovered he'd stolen sixty bucks, two bottles of booze, and a jewelry box that he'd soon discover had nothing in it. He moved to a decrepit cabin a mile away—smoke came from the chimney at all times, the only form of heat. Sometimes she could hear gunfire in the distance, the sounds of bullets shot straight up in the air.

That would be her last romance with the man who fathered her children. And now, it was time for more reality. Patty tucked her hair, dry and unwieldy, behind her ears and opened the door. Michelle sat on the floor right in front of her, pretending to study the floorboard. She assessed Patty from behind gray-tinted glasses.

“ 's Ben in trouble?” she asked. “Why'd he do that? With his hair?”

“Growing pains, I think,” Patty said, and just as Michelle took a deep breath—she always gulped air before she said something, her sentences were tight, fast links of words that just kept coming til she had to breathe again—they heard a car coming up the driveway. The driveway was long, someone would pull onto it and they wouldn't arrive for another minute. Somehow Patty knew it wasn't her sister, even though the girls were shrieking *Diane! Diane!* already, running toward the window to look out. There'd be sad little sighs when it wasn't Diane after all. Somehow she knew it was Len, her loan officer. Even his driving had a possessive sound to it. Len the Letchy Lender. She'd been wrangling with him since 1981. Runner had left by then, announcing this kind of life wasn't for him, looking around like it was his place instead of hers, her parents', her grandparents'.

All he'd done was marry her and ruin it. Poor, disappointed Runner, when his dreams had been so high in the '70s, when people actually thought they could get rich from farming. (Ha! She snorted out loud, there in her kitchen, at the thought of it, imagine.) She and Runner had taken over the farm from her parents in '74. It was a big deal, bigger even than her marriage or the birth of her firstborn. Neither of those had thrilled her sweet and quiet parents—Runner stank of trouble even then, but, bless them, they never said a thing against him. When, at age seventeen, she told them that she was knocked up

and they were getting married, they just said: *Oh*. Like that. Which said enough.

Patty had a blurry photograph of the day they took on the farm: her parents, stiff and proud, smiling shyly at the camera, and her and Runner, triumphant grins, bountiful hair, incredibly young, holding champagne. Her parents had never had champagne before, but they drove to town and got a bottle for the occasion. They toasted out of old jelly jars.

It went wrong fast, and Patty couldn't entirely blame Runner. Back then, everyone thought the value of land would keep skyrocketing—*they're not making any more of it!*—and why not buy more, and better, all the time? *Plant fencepost to fencepost*—it was a rallying cry. Be aggressive, be brave. Runner with his big dreams and no knowledge had marched her down to the bank—he'd worn a tie the color of lime sherbet, thick as a quilt—and hemmed and hawed to get a loan. They ended up with double what they asked for. They shouldn't have taken it, maybe, but their lender said don't worry—boom times.

*They're just giving it away!* Runner had howled, and all of a sudden they had a new tractor, and a six-row planter when the four-row was fine. Within the year there was a glinting red Krause Dominator and a new John Deere combine. Vern Evelee, with his respectable five hundred acres down the way, made a point of mentioning each new thing he spotted on their property, always with a little twitch in his eyebrow. Runner bought more land and a fishing boat, and when Patty had asked *was he sure, was he sure?* he'd sulked and barked about how much it hurt that she didn't believe in him. Then everything went to hell at once, it was like a joke. Carter and the Russian grain embargo (fight the Commies, forget the farmers), interest rates to 18 percent, price of fuel creeping up and then leaping up, banks going bust, countries she barely heard of—Argentina—suddenly competing in the market. Competing with *her* back in little Kinnakee, Kansas. A few bad years and Runner was done. He never got over Carter—you heard about Carter all the time with him. Runner'd sit with a beer watching the bad news on the TV and he'd see those big, rabbit teeth flash and his eyes would go glassy, he'd get so hateful it seemed like Runner must actually know the guy.

So Runner blamed Carter, and everyone else in the rotten town blamed her. Vern Evelee made a noise with his tongue whenever he

saw her, a for-shame noise. Farmers who weren't going under never had sympathy, they looked at you like you played naked in the snow and then wanted to wipe your snotty nose on them. Just last summer, some farmer down near Ark City had his hopper go screwy. Dumped 4,000 pounds of wheat on him. This six-foot man, he drowned in it. Suffocated before they could get him out, like choking on sand. Everyone in Kinnakee was so mournful—so regretful about this *freak accident*—til they found out the man's farm was going under. Then all of a sudden, it was: *Well, he should have been more careful.* Lectures on taking proper care of equipment, being safe. They turned on him that fast, this poor dead man with lungs full of his own harvest.

Ding-dong and here was Len, just as she dreaded, handing his wool hunting cap to Michelle, his bulky overcoat to Debby, carefully swiping snow from loafers that were too shiny-new. Ben wouldn't approve of those, she thought. Ben spent hours grubbing up his new sneakers, letting the girls take turns walking on them, back when he let the girls near him. Libby glowered at Len from the sofa and turned back to the TV. Libby loved Diane, and this guy wasn't Diane, this guy had tricked her by walking in the door when he should have been Diane.

Len never said hello as a greeting; he said something like a yodel, *He-a-lo!* and Patty had to brace for it each time, she found the sound so ridiculous. Now he yelled it as she walked down the hall, and she had to duck back into the bathroom and curse for just a second, then put her smile back on. Len always hugged her, which she was pretty sure he didn't do with any other farmer that needed his services. So she went to his open arms and let him do his hug thing where he held her just a second too long, his hands on both her elbows. She could feel him making a quick sucking noise, like he was smelling her. He reeked of sausage and Velamints. At some point, Len was going to make a real pass at her, forcing her to make a real decision, and the game was so pathetic it made her want to weep. The hunter and the hunted, but it was like a bad nature show: He was a three-legged, runt coyote and she was a tired, limping bunny. It was not magnificent.

"How's my farm girl?" he said. There was an understanding between them that her running the farm by herself was something of a joke. And, she supposed, it was at this point.

"Oh, hanging in there," she said. Debby and Michelle retreated to

their bedroom. Libby snorted from the couch. The last time Len had come all the way to the house, they'd had an auction a few weeks later—the Days peeking out through the windows as their neighbors underpaid and underpaid some more for the very equipment she needed to run a working farm. Michelle and Debby had squirmed, seeing some of their schoolmates, the Boyler girls, tagging along with their folks as if it were a picnic, skipping around the farm. *Why can't we go outside?* they whined, twisting themselves into begging-angry outlines, watching those Boyler girls taking turns on their tire swing—might as well have sold them that, too. Patty had just kept saying: *Those aren't our friends out there.* People who sent her Christmas cards were running their hands over her drills and disc rippers, all those curvy, twisty shapes, grudgingly offering half what anything was worth. Vern Evelee took the planter he once seemed to resent so much, actually driving the auctioneer down from the starting price. Merciless. She ran into Vern a week later at the feed store. The back of his neck went pink as he turned away from her. She'd followed him and made his *for-shame* noise right in his ear.

“Well, it sure smells good in here,” Len said, almost resentfully. “Smells like someone had a good breakfast.”

“Pancakes.”

She nodded. *Please don't make me ask you why you're here. Please, just once, say why you came.*

“Mind if I sit down?” he said, wedging himself on the sofa next to Libby, his arms rigid. “Which one's this?” he said assessing her. Len had met her girls at least a dozen times, but he could never figure out who was who, or even hazard a name. One time he called Michelle “Susan.”

“That's Libby.”

“She's got red hair like her mom.”

Yes, she did. Patty couldn't bring herself to say the nicety out loud. She was feeling sicker the longer Len delayed, her unease building into dread. The back of her sweater was moist now.

“The red come from Irish? You all Irish?”

“German. My maiden name was Krause.”

“Oh, funny. Because Krause means curly-haired, not red-haired. You all don’t have curly hair, really. Wavy maybe. I’m German too.”

They had had this conversation before, it always went one of two ways. The other way, Len would say that it was funny, her maiden name being Krause, like the farm equipment company, and it was too bad she wasn’t related, huh. Either version made her tense.

“So,” she finally gave in. “Is there something wrong?”

Len seemed disappointed she was bringing a point to the conversation. He frowned at her as if he found her rude.

“Well, now that you mention it, yes. I’m afraid something’s very wrong. I wanted to come out to tell you in person. Do you want to do this somewhere private?” He nodded at Libby, widening his eyes. “You want to go to the bedroom or something?” Len had a paunch. It was perfectly round under his belt, like the start of a pregnancy. She did not want to go into the bedroom with him.

“Libby, would you go see what your sisters are doing? I need to talk to Mr. Werner.” Libby sighed and slid off the couch, slowly: feet, then legs, then butt, then back, as if she were made of glue. She hit the floor, rolled over elaborately a few times, crawled a bit, then finally got to her feet and slumped down the hall.

Patty and Len looked at each other, and then he tucked his bottom lip under and nodded.

“They’re going to foreclose.”

Patty’s stomach clenched. She would not sit down in front of this man. She would not cry. “What can we do?”

“Weeeee, I’m afraid, are out of options. I’ve held them off for six months longer than they should’ve been held off. I really put my job on the line. Farm girl.” He smiled at her, his hands clasped on his knees. She wanted to scratch him. The mattresses started screeching in the other room, and Patty knew Debby was jumping on the bed, her favorite game, bouncing from one bed to the next to the next in the girls’ room.

“Patty, the only way to fix this is money. Now. If you want to keep this place. I’m talking borrow, beg, or steal. I’m saying time is over for pride. So: How badly do you want this farm?” The mattress springs

bounced harder. The eggs in Patty's belly turned. Len kept smiling.

## Libby Day

NOW

After my mother's head was blown off, her body axed nearly in two, people in Kinnakee wondered whether she'd been a whore. At first they wondered, then they assumed, then it became a loose jingle of fact. Cars had been seen at the house at strange times of night, people said. She looked at men the way a whore would. In these situations, Vern Evelee always remarked that she should have sold her planter in '83, as if that was proof she was prostituting herself.

Blame the victim, naturally. But the rumors turned so substantial: everyone had a friend who had a cousin who had another friend who'd fucked my mom. Everyone had some bit of proof: they told of a mole on the inside of her thigh, a scar on her right buttock. I don't think the stories can be true, but like so much from my childhood, I can't be sure. How much do you remember from when you were seven? Photos of my mother don't reveal a wanton woman. As a teenage girl, hair shooting from her ponytail like fireworks, she was the definition of nice looking, the kind of person who reminds you of a neighbor or an old babysitter you always liked. By her twenties, with one or two or four kids clambering up her, the smile was bigger, but hassled, and she was always leaning away from one of us. I picture her as constantly under siege by her children. The sheer weight of us. By her thirties there weren't many photos of her at all. In the few that exist, she's smiling in an obedient fashion, one of those take-the-dang-photo smiles that will disappear with the camera flash. I haven't looked at the photos in years. I used to paw at them obsessively, studying her clothes, her expression, whatever was in the background. Looking for clues: Whose hand is that on her shoulder? Where is she? What occasion is it? When I was still a teenager, I sealed them away, along with everything else.

Now I stood looking at the boxes as they slouched under my staircase, apologetic. I was gearing up to reacquaint myself with my

family. I'd brought Michelle's note to the Kill Club because I couldn't bear to actually open those boxes, instead I'd reached into one cardboard corner where the tape was loose, and that's the first thing I pulled out, a pathetic carnival game. If I was really going to take this on, if I was really going to think about the murders after all these careful years spent doing just the opposite, I needed to be able to look at basic household possessions without panicking: our old metal egg-beater that sounded like sleigh bells when you turned it fast enough, bent knives and forks that had been inside my family's mouths, a coloring book or two with defined crayoned borders if it was Michelle's, bored horizontal scrawls if it was mine. Look at them, let them just be objects.

Then decide what to sell.

To the Kill Creeps, the most desired items from the Day home are unavailable. The 10-gauge shotgun that killed my mom—her goose gun—is snug away in some evidence drawer, along with the axe from our toolshed. (That was another reason Ben got convicted: those weapons were from our house. Outside killers don't arrive at a sleeping home with limp hands, just hoping to find convenient murder weapons.) Sometimes I tried to picture all that stuff—the axe, the gun, the bedsheets Michelle died on. Were all those bloody, smoky, sticky objects all together, conspiring in some big box? Had they been cleaned? If you opened the box, what would the smell be like? I remembered that close, rot-earth smell just hours after the murder—was it worse now, after so many years of decay?

I'd once been to Chicago, seen Lincoln's death artifacts in a museum: thatches of his hair; bullet fragments; the skinny spindle bed he'd died on, the mattress still slouched in the middle like it knew to preserve his last imprint. I ended up running to the bathroom, pressing my face against the cold stall door to keep from swooning. What would the Day death house look like, if we reunited all its relics, and who would come to see it? How many bundles of my mother's blood-stuck hair would be in the display cabinet? What happened to the walls, smeared with those hateful words, when our house was torn down? Could we gather a bouquet of frozen reeds where I'd crouched for so many hours? Or exhibit the end of my frostbitten finger? My three gone toes?

I turned away from the boxes—not up to the challenge—and sat

down at a desk that served as my dining room table. The mail had brought me a package of random, crazy-person offerings from Barb Eichel. A videotape, circa 1984, titled *Threat to Innocence: Satanism in America*; a paperclipped packet of newspaper stories about the murders; a few Polaroids of Barb standing outside the courthouse where Ben's trial was being held; a dog-eared manual entitled *Your Prison Family: Get Past the Bars!*

I removed the paperclip from the packet and put it in my paperclip cup in the kitchen (no one should ever buy paperclips, pens—any of those free-range office supplies). Then I popped the videotape into my very old VHS player. Click, whir, groan. Images of pentagrams and goat-men, of screaming rock bands and dead people flashed on the screen. A man with a beautiful, hairsprayed mullet was walking along a graffiti'd wall, explaining that “This video will help you identify Satanists and even watch for signs that those you love most may be flirting with this very real danger.” He interviewed preachers, cops, and some “actual Satanists.” The two most powerful Satanists had tire-streak eyeliner and black robes and pentagrams around their necks, but they were sitting in their living room, on a cheap velveteen couch, and you could just see into the kitchen on the right, where a yellow refrigerator hummed on a cheery linoleum floor. I could picture them after the interview, rummaging through the fridge for tuna salad and a Coke, their capes getting in the way. I turned off the video right about when the host was warning parents to scour their children's rooms for He-Man action figures and Ouija boards.

The clippings were just as useless, and I had no idea what Barb wanted me to do with the photos of her. I sat defeated. And lazy. I could have gone to the library to look things up properly. I could have set myself up with home Internet access three years ago, when I said I would. Neither seemed like an option right now—I was easily wearied—so I phoned Lyle. He picked up on the first ring.

“Heeyyyy, Libby,” he said. “I was going to call you. I really wanted to apologize for last week. You must have felt ganged-up on, and that wasn't what was supposed to happen.” Nice speech.

“Yeah, it really sucked.”

“I guess I didn't realize that all of us had our own theories, uh, but none of them included Ben being guilty. I didn't think it through. And I didn't realize. I didn't take into account. Just. You know, this is real

to you. I mean, I know that, we know that, but we *don't* at the same time. We really just never will. I don't think. Totally get that. You spend so much time discussing and debating it becomes ... But. Well. I'm sorry."

I didn't want to like Lyle Wirth, as I'd already decided he was a prick. But I appreciate a straightforward apology the way a tone-deaf person enjoys a fine piece of music. I can't do it, but I can applaud it in others.

"Well," I said.

"There are definitely members who'd still like to acquire any, you know, mementos you want to sell. If that's why you're calling."

"Oh, no. I just wondered. I have been thinking a lot about the case." I might as well have said *dot dot dot* aloud.

WE MET AT a bar not far away from me, a place called Sarah's, which always struck me as a weird name for a bar, but it was a mellow enough place, with a good amount of room. I don't like people up on me. Lyle was already seated, but he stood up as I came in, and bent down to hug me, the action causing much twisting and collapsing of his tall body. The side of his glasses poked my cheek. He was wearing another '80s-style jacket—this one denim, covered with slogan buttons. Don't drink and drive, practice random kindness, rock the vote. He jangled as he sat back down. Lyle was about a decade younger than me, I guessed, and I couldn't figure if his look was intentionally ironic-retro or just goofy.

He started to apologize again, but I didn't want any more. I was full up, thanks.

"Look, I'm not even saying I'm sold on the idea that Ben is innocent, or that I made any mistakes in my testimony."

He opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it back shut.

"But if I were to look into it more, is that something the club would be able to help finance? Pay for my time, in a way."

"Wow, Libby, it's great news that you're even interested in looking into this," Lyle said. I hated this kid's tone, like he didn't realize he was talking to someone with seniority. He was the type who, when the class was over and kids were tapping toes and the teacher asked,

“Any more questions?” actually had more questions.

“I mean, the thing is, we all have theories about this case, but so many more doors would open for you than for anyone else,” Lyle said, his leg jittering under the table. “I mean, people actually *want* to talk to you.”

“Right.” I pointed at the pitcher of beer Lyle had next to him, and he poured some into a plastic cup for me, mostly foam. Then he actually swiped his finger against his nose and put it in the beer, oil-flattened the foam, and poured more.

“So. What kind of compensation were you thinking?” He handed me the cup, and I set it in front of me, debating whether to drink it.

“I think it would have to be case by case,” I said, pretending I was just thinking of this for the first time. “Depending on how hard it was to find the person and what questions you’d want me to ask.”

“Well, I think we’d have a long list of people we’d want you to talk to. Do you really have no contact with Runner? It’s Runner that would be tops on most lists.”

Good old fucked-in-the-head Runner. He’d called me once in the past three years, mumbling crazily into the phone, crying in a *wee-heee!* shudder and asking me to wire him money. Nothing since. Hell, not much before either. He’d shown up sporadically at Ben’s trial, sometimes in an old tie and jacket, mostly in whatever he slept in, so drunk he listed. He was finally asked by Ben’s defense to stop coming. It looked bad.

Now it looked even worse, with everyone in the Kill Club saying they believed he was the murderer. He’d been in jail three times I knew of before the killings, but just podunk crap. Still, the guy always had gambling debts—Runner bet on everything—sports, dog races, bingo, the weather. And he owed my mom child support. Killing us all would be a good way to be quit of that obligation.

But I couldn’t picture Runner getting away with it, he wasn’t smart enough, and definitely not ambitious enough. He couldn’t even be a dad to his lone surviving child. He’d slunk around Kinnakee for a few years after the murders, sneaking away for months at a time, sending me duct-taped boxes from Idaho or Alabama or Winner, South Dakota: inside would be truck-stop figurines of little girls with big

eyes holding umbrellas or kittens that were always broken by the time they reached me. I'd know he was back in town not because he came to visit me but because he'd light that stinky fire in the cabin up on the ridge. Diane would sing "Poor Judd Is Dead" when she saw him in town, face smudged with smoke. There was something both pitiful and frightening about him.

It was probably a blessing he chose to avoid me. When he'd come back to live with my mom and us, that last summer before the end, all he did was tease me. At first it was leering, *got your nose* sort of stuff—and then it was just mean. He came home from fishing one day, clomping through the house with his big wet waders, banging on the door to the bathroom when I was in the tub, just screwing with me. *Come on, open up, I gotta surprise for you!* He finally flung the door wide, his beer odor busting in with him. He had something bundled in his arms, and then he flung them wide, threw a live, two-foot catfish in the water with me. It was the pointlessness that frightened me. I tried to scabble out of the tub, the fish's slimy skin sliding over my flesh, its whiskered mouth gaping, prehistoric. I could have put my foot in that mouth and the fish would have slid all the way up, tight like a boot.

I flopped over the side of the tub, panting on the rug, Runner screaming at me to stop my damn baby crying. *Every single one of my kids is a scared-ass dumbshit.*

We couldn't clean ourselves for three days because Runner was too tired to kill the thing. I guess I get my laziness from him.

"I never know where Runner's at. Last I heard, he was somewhere in Arkansas. But that was a year ago. At least."

"Well, it might be a good idea to try to track him down. Some people would definitely want you to talk to him. Although I don't think Runner did it," Lyle said. "It maybe makes the most sense—debts, history of violence."

"Craziness."

"Craziness." Lyle smiled pertly. "But, he doesn't seem smart enough to pull that off. No offense."

"None taken. So, then, what's your theory?"

"I'm not quite ready to share that yet." He patted a stack of file

folders next to him. “I’ll let you read through the pertinent facts of the case first.”

“Oh for the love of Pete,” I said. Realizing, as my lips were pressed into the *P*, that it was my mother’s phrase. *For the love of Pete, let’s skeedaddle, where are my ding dang keys?*

“So if Ben’s really innocent, why doesn’t he try to get out?” I asked. My voice went high, urgent on this last part, a child’s whinny: but *why* can’t I have *dessert*? I realized I was stealthily hoping Ben was innocent, that he’d be returned to me, the Ben I knew, before I was afraid of him. I had allowed myself a dangerous glimpse of him out of prison, striding up to my house, hands in his pockets (another memory that came back, once I let myself start thinking again: Ben with his hands always burrowed deep in his pockets, perpetually abashed). Ben sitting at my dinner table, if I had a dinner table, happy, forgiving, no harm done. If he was innocent.

*If ifs and buts were candies and nuts we’d all have a very Merry Christmas*, I heard my aunt Diane boom in my head. Those words had been the bane of my childhood, a constant reminder that nothing turned out right, not just for me but for anyone, and that’s why someone had invented a saying like that. So we’d all know that we’d never have what we needed.

Because—*remember, remember, remember, Baby Day*—Ben was home that night. When I got out of bed to go to my mom’s room, I saw his closed door with the light under it. Murmuring from inside. He was there.

“Maybe you could go ask him, make that your first stop, go see Ben.”

Ben in prison. I’d spent the last twenty-odd years refusing to imagine the place. Now I pictured my brother in there, behind the wire, behind the concrete, down a gray slate hall, inside a cell. Did he have photos of the family anywhere? Would he even be allowed such a thing? I realized again I knew nothing about Ben’s life. I didn’t even know what a cell looked like aside from what I’d seen in the movies.

“No, not Ben. Not yet.”

“Is it a money thing? We’d pay you for that.”

“It’s a lot-of-things thing,” I grumbled.

“Okaaaaaaaaay. You want to look into Runner then? Or ... what?”

We sat silent. Neither of us knew what to do with our hands; we couldn't keep eye contact. As a child, I was constantly being sent on playdates with other kids—the shrinks insisted I interact with cohorts. That's what my meeting with Lyle was like: those first loose, horrible ten minutes, when the grown-ups have left, and neither kid knows what the other one wants, so you stand there, near the TV they've told you to keep off, fiddling with the antenna.

I picked through the complimentary bowl of peanuts in their shells, brittle and airy as beetle husks. I dropped a few in my beer to get the salt. I poked at them. They bobbed. My whole scheme seemed remarkably childish. Was I really going to go talk to people who might have killed my family? Was I really going to try to *solve* something? In any way but wishful thinking could I believe Ben was innocent? And if he was innocent, didn't that make me the biggest bastard in history? I had that overwhelming feeling I get when I'm about to give up on a plan, that big rush of air when I realize that my stroke of genius has flaws, and I don't have the brains or energy to fix them.

It wasn't an option to go back to bed and forget the whole thing. I had rent coming up, and I'd need money for food soon. I could go on welfare, but that would mean figuring out how to go on welfare, and I'd probably sooner starve than deal with the paperwork.

“I'll go talk to Ben,” I mumbled. “I should start there. But I'd need \$300.”

I said it thinking I wouldn't really get it, but Lyle reached into an old nylon wallet, held together with duct tape, and counted out \$300. He didn't look unhappy.

“Where you get all this money from, Lyle?”

He beefed up a bit at that, sat up straighter in his chair. “I'm treasurer of the Kill Club; I have a certain amount of discretionary funds. This is the project I choose to use them for.” Lyle's tiny ears turned red, like angry embryos.

“You're embezzling.” I suddenly liked him more.

## Ben Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

10:18 A.M.

It was an hour bike ride from the farm to Kinnakee proper. At least an hour, at a good pace when the cold wasn't turning your lungs metal-red and blood wasn't dripping down your cheek. Ben planned his work at the school for the times when it was most empty—like, he'd never go there on a Saturday because the wrestling team had the gym on Saturdays. It was just too lame holding a mop when all these blocky, muscled, loud guys were waddling around, spitting chaw on the floor you just cleaned and then looking at you, half guilty, half daring you to say something.

Today was Wednesday, but it was still Christmas break, so the place should be kind of quiet—well, the weight room was always busy, always making that sound like a thumping steel heart. But it was early. Early was always best. He usually went from eight to noon, mopped and straightened and shined like the fucking monkey he was, and got the hell out before anyone saw him. Sometimes Ben felt like a fairy-tale elf who'd creep in and leave everything spotless without anyone noticing. The kids here didn't give a shit about keeping things clean: They'd toss a carton toward a trash can, the milk drooling all over the floor, and just shrug. They'd spill sloppy-joe meat on their cafeteria seat and just leave it there, hardening, for someone else to deal with. Ben did it, too, just because that's what everyone did. He'd actually drop a glob of tuna sandwich on the floor and roll his eyes like it wasn't worth dealing with, when he was the guy who'd be dealing with it in a few days. It was the stupidest thing, he was actually abusing himself.

So it sucked to deal with this shit at any point, and it was even worse to deal with it when other kids were around, trying to avoid seeing him. Today, though, he'd take his chances, go ahead and put in his shift. Diondra was driving into Salina for the morning to shop. The

girl had at least twenty pairs of jeans, all of them looking the same to Ben, and she needed more, some special brand. She wore them baggy, rolled the cuffs tight at her ankle with those bulky socks peeking out. He always made sure he complimented the new jeans, and Diondra would then immediately say, *but what about the soooooocks?* It was a joke, but not really. Diondra wore only Ralph Lauren socks—they cost, like, \$20 a pair, a fact that turned Ben’s stomach. She had an entire dresser filled with socks—argyle and polka-dotted and striped, all with the horseman at the top, midswing. Ben had done the math: must be \$400 of socks in that drawer, sitting there like a bin of Florida fruits—worth probably half what his mom made in a month. Well, rich people need stuff to buy, and socks are probably as good as anything. Diondra was a strange one, not really preppy—she was too flashy and wild to fit in that crowd—but not entirely in the metal crowd, either, even though she blared Iron Maiden and loved leather and smoked tons of weed. Diondra wasn’t in any clique, she was just the New Girl. Everyone knew her but didn’t at the same time. She’d lived all over, a lot of it in Texas, and her standard line whenever she did anything you might want to frown on, was “That’s how they do it in Texas.” No matter what she did, it was OK, because that’s how they did it in Texas.

Before Diondra, Ben had just floated: he’d been a poor, quiet farm boy, who hung out with other farm kids in an unnoticed corner of the school. They weren’t dorky enough to be actually reviled; they were never picked on. They were the background noise of high school. To him, that was worse than being humiliated. Well, maybe not, there was this guy with big bifocals, a kid Ben knew since kindergarten who’d always been weird. The kid crapped his pants the first week of high school—the stories varied how: one had him dropping bundles of shit out his shorts while he climbed the rope in gym, another had him losing a load in homeroom, there were third and fourth and fifth versions. The main point was, he was forever branded Shitshorts. He kept his head down between classes, those moon-sized glasses aimed at the floor, and still some jock would slap him in the head, Hey Shitshorts! He’d just keep walking, his face in this grim smile, like he was pretending to be in on the joke. So yeah, there were worse things than being unnoticed, but Ben hadn’t liked it, didn’t want to be the same Nice, Quiet Red-headed Kid he’d been since first grade. Dickless and boring.

Big fucking thanks then to Diondra for claiming him, at least in private. She'd actually hit him with her car, that's how they met. It was summer—orientation for freshmen and new kids. It was a crummy three hours, and after, as he was walking across the school parking lot, she'd plowed into him. Knocked him right up on her hood. She'd gotten out, screaming at him, *What the fuck is fucking wrong with you?* her breath smelling of wine cooler, the bottles clinking in the footwell of her CRX. When Ben apologized—he *apologized* to her—and Diondra realized he wasn't going to get angry at her, she got real sweet, she offered to give him a ride home and instead they drove to the outside of town and parked and drank more wine coolers. Diondra said her name was Alexis, but after a little bit she told him she'd lied. It was Diondra. Ben told her she should never lie about a cool name like that and it made her happy and after a little bit longer Diondra said, "You know what, you have a really nice face," and then a few seconds later, she said, "You wanna scam or what?" and then they were full-on making out, which wasn't his first time, but was only his second. After an hour, Diondra had to go, but she said he was a great listener, it was really cool how great a listener he was. She didn't have time to drive him home after all. She dropped him off right back where she'd hit him.

So they started dating. Ben didn't really know her friends, and he didn't ever hang out with her at school. Diondra darted in and out of the schoolweek like a hummingbird, sometimes she'd show up, sometimes not. It was enough to see her on the weekends, in their own space where school didn't matter. Being with her had rubbed off on him, he was just more *there*.

By the time Ben pedaled into Kinnakee, a cluster of pickup trucks and beat-up sports cars sat in the school parking lot. So, basketball players as well as wrestlers. He knew who drove each car. He thought about ducking out, but Diondra wouldn't be home for hours, and he didn't have enough money to linger at the hamburger joint—the owner was red-faced crazy about kids hanging out there without buying something. Plus sitting by yourself at a diner during Christmas break was worse than actually working. Fuck his mom for being such a stress case. Diondra's mom and dad didn't care what she did—they were out of town half the time at their place in Texas. Even when Diondra was busted for missing two whole weeks of school last month, her mom had just laughed. *When the cat's away, huh, sweetie?*

*At least try to do some homework.*

The back entrance to the school was chained shut, so he had to go in through the locker rooms. The smell of flesh and footspray hit him as he entered. The overhead thunk of the basketball court and clank of the weight room reassured him that the locker room, at least, would be empty. Outside in the hallway, he heard a single long yell—*Coooooper! Hold uppp!*—echo against the marble floor like a battle cry. Tennis shoes slapped down the hall, a metal door banged open, and then everything was relatively quiet. Just gym and weight-room noise: thunk-thunk, clank, thunk.

The school's athletes had this trust thing, a sign of teamwork, that they never put locks on their lockers. Instead they all tied thick shoestrings through the loops where a lock would go. At least twelve white strings hung on the lockers and Ben wavered as usual about looking inside one. What the hell did these guys need anyway? If you had school lockers for books, what would go in these gym bins? Were there deodorants or lotions, some kind of underclothes that he was missing? Did they all wear the same kind of jockstrap? Thunk-thunk, clank, thunk. One shoelace hung limply, unknotted, just a quick yank and the locker would open. Before he could talk himself out of it, he pulled off the lace and gently, quietly lifted the metal latch. Inside the locker was nothing of interest: some gym shorts crumpled at the bottom, a rolled-up sports magazine, a gym bag hanging loosely from a hook. The bag looked like it contained a few objects, so Ben leaned in and unzipped it.

“Hey!”

He turned around, the bag swaying wildly on the hook and falling to the bottom of the locker. Mr. Gruger, the wrestling coach, was standing with a newspaper in his hand, his rough, splotchy face twisted up.

“What the hell do you think you're doing in that locker?”

“I, uh, it was open.”

“What?”

“It was, I saw it was open,” Ben said. He shut it as quietly as he could. Please fuckfuckfuck just not let any of the team come back in, Ben thought. He could picture all the angry faces aimed at him, the

nicknames to come.

“It was open? Why were you in it?” Gruger let the question hang there, didn’t move, didn’t give any clue what he was going to do, what level of trouble this was. Ben tried just staring at the floor, waiting to be chastened.

“I said, why were you in that locker?” Gruger smacked the newspaper against his fat hand.

“I don’t know.”

The old man just kept standing there, Ben thinking all the while, *just yell and get it done with.*

“Were you going to take something?”

“No.”

“Then why were you in it?”

“I was just ...” Ben trailed off again. “I thought I saw something.”

“You thought you saw something? What?”

Ben’s mind flashed on things forbidden: pets, drugs, titty magazines. He pictured firecrackers and he thought for a second he’d say the locker was on fire, be a hero.

“Uh, matches.”

“You thought you saw matches?” The blood in Gruger’s face had moved from his cheeks straight up to the flesh beneath his fuzzy crewcut.

“I wanted a cigarette.”

“You’re the janitor boy, right? Something Day?”

Gruger made the name sound silly, girlish. The coach’s eyes examined the cut on Ben’s forehead, then marched pointedly up to his hair.

“You dyed your hair.”

Ben stood under his thatch of black and felt himself being categorized and discarded, sectioned off into a group of losers, druggies, wimps, fags. He was sure he heard that word snarl into the coach’s mind—Gruger’s upper lip twitched.

“Get out of here. Go clean somewhere else. Don’t come back in here til we’re gone. You are not welcome here. You understand?”

Ben nodded.

“Why don’t you say it out loud, just so we’re clear.”

“I’m not welcome here,” Ben mumbled.

“Now go.” He said it like Ben was a boy, a five-year-old being sent back to his mother. Ben went.

Up the stairwell to the janitor’s dank closet, a droplet of sweat dripping down his back. Ben wasn’t breathing. He forgot to breathe when he was this angry. He got out the industrial-sized bucket and rattled it into the sink, ran hot water into it, poured in the piss-colored cleaning mixture, ammonia fumes burning his eyes. Then heaved it back into the wheelframe. He’d filled the bucket too heavy, it tipped as he tried to get it over the edge of the sink, sloshing a half-gallon of water down his front. His crotch and leg were nice and soaked. Looked like he wet himself, Janitor Boy Day. The jeans stuck to his thighs, turned rigid. He’d have three hours of shitty grunt work with a wet crotch and jeans like cardboard.

“Fuck you, fucker,” he muttered quietly. He kicked the wall with a workboot, spraying plaster, and smashed the wall with a hand. “Fuuuuuck!” he bellowed, his voice going high at the end. He waited in the closet like a coward, worrying that Gruger would track the scream and decide to screw with him some more.

Nothing happened. No one was interested enough to see what was going on in the janitorial closet.

HE WAS SUPPOSED to have cleaned a week earlier, but Diondra had whined it was officially Christmas break, leave it. So the cafeteria trash was filled with old soda cans dripping syrup, sandwich wrappers covered in chicken salad, and moldy helpings of 1984’s final lunch special, a hamburger casserole with sweet tomato sauce. All of it rotten. He got a little bit of everything on his sweater and jeans, so in addition to ammonia and B.O. he smelled like old food. He couldn’t go to Diondra’s like this, he was an idiot to have planned it like this in the first place. He’d have to bike home, deal with his mom—that was a thirty-minute lecture right there—shower, and bike back over to her place. If his mom didn’t ground him. Screw it, he’d still leave. It was

his body, his hair. His fucked-up faggoty black hair.

He mopped the floors, then bagged the trash in all the teachers' rooms—his favorite chore because it sounded big but amounted to gathering bunches of crumpled paper, light as leaves. His final duty was to mop down the hall that connected the high school to the grade school (which had its own embarrassed student-janitor). The hallway was papered with loud notices about football and track and drama club on the high school side, and then slowly disintegrated into children's territory, the walls covered with letters of the alphabet and book reports on George Washington. Bright-blue doors marked the grade-school entrance, but they were ceremonial; they didn't even have locks. He mopped his way from Highschooland to Kiddieville and dropped the mop into the bucket, kicked the whole thing away from him. The bucket rolled smoothly across the concrete floor and hit the wall with a modest splash.

From kindergarten through eighth grade, he'd gone to Kinnakee Grade School; he had more connection with that side of the building than the high school side where he stood now, pieces of its refuse stuck to him.

He thought about opening the door, wandering through the silence on the other side, and then that's what he was doing. Just saying hi to the old place. Ben heard the door shut behind him, and felt more relaxed. The walls here were lemon yellow, with more decorations outside each classroom. Kinnakee was small enough that each grade was just one class. The high school was different, twice as big because other towns funneled their teens in. But the grade school was always nice and cozy. On the wall, he spotted a smiley felt sunshine, Michelle D., Age 10, written along one side. And here was a drawing of a cat in a vest with buckle shoes—or maybe they were high heels—anyway it was smiling and handing a present to a mouse who was holding a birthday cake. Libby D., Grade 1. He looked but saw nothing from Debby, he wasn't sure the kid could draw, come to think of it. She tried to help his mom bake cookies one time, breathing loudly and botching the recipe, then eating more of the dough than she cooked. Debby was not the kind of kid who had anything put up on the wall.

All along the hallway were rows of yellow bins where the students were allowed to keep personal items, each kid's name written on masking tape on their bin. He looked in Libby's and found a

peppermint candy, partially sucked, and a paper clip. Debby's had a brown lunchsack that stank of baloney; Michelle's a pack of dried-up markers. He looked in a few others just for kicks, and realized how much more stuff they had. Sixty-four Crayola crayon box sets, battery-operated toy cars and dolls, thick reams of construction paper, key chains and sticker books and bags of candy. Sad. That's what you get when you have more kids than you can take care of, he thought. It was what Diondra always said when he mentioned tight times at home: *Well, your mom shouldn't have had so many babies then.* Diondra was an only child.

Ben started back toward the high school side, and caught himself scanning the fifth grade bins. There she was, the little girl Krissi with the crush on him. She'd written her name in bright green letters and drawn a daisy next to it. Cute. The girl was the definition of cute, like something on a cereal commercial—blond hair, blue eyes, and just well taken care of. Unlike his sisters, her jeans always fit and were clean and ironed; her shirts matched the color of her socks or barrettes or whatever. She didn't have food-breath like Debby or scrapes all over her hands like Libby. Like all of them. Her fingernails were always painted bright pink, you could tell her mom did them for her. He bet her bin was filled with Strawberry Shortcake dolls and other toys that smelled good.

Even her name was right—Krissi Cates was just a naturally cool name. By high school, she'd be a cheerleader, that long blond hair down her back, and she'd probably forget she ever went crazy over this older boy named Ben. He'd be what then, twenty? Maybe drive in with Diondra from Wichita for a game and she'd look over mid-bounce and see him, break into a big white smile, do a little excited wave, and Diondra would do her hee-haw laugh and say, "Isn't it enough that half the women in Wichita are in love with you, you gotta pick on poor little high school girls too?"

Ben might never have met Krissi—she was a grade above Michelle—but he got recruited one day at the beginning of the school year. Mrs. Nagel, who always liked him, grabbed Ben to help monitor the after-school art class. Just for the day. Her usual monitor hadn't shown up. He'd been due back home, but knew his mom couldn't get pissed at him helping with the little ones—she was always on him to help with the little ones at home—and mixing paint was a hell of a lot

more inviting than hauling manure. Krissi was one of his kids, but she didn't seem that interested in painting. She just moved the stuff around with her brush until her whole paper turned shit brown.

"You know what that looks like," he'd said.

"Poop," she said and started laughing.

She was flirty, even for a kid, you could tell she was born cute and just assumed people would like her. Well, he did. They talked between long flatlines of silence.

*So where do you live?*

Pour, slap, swipe. Dip the brush in the water and repeat.

*Near Salina.*

*And you come all the way out here for school?*

*They haven't finished my school yet. Next year, I'll go near home.*

*That's a long drive.*

Squeak of a seat, slump of a shoulder.

*Yup. I hate it. I have to wait hours after school for my dad to get me.*

*Well, art's good.*

*I guess. I like ballet more, that's what I do on weekends.*

Ballet on weekends said a lot. She probably was one of those kids with a pool in the backyard, or if not a pool a trampoline. He thought about telling her they had cows at his house—see if she liked animals—but felt like he was already too eager with her. She was a kid, she should be the one trying to impress.

He volunteered the rest of that month in art, teasing Krissi about her bad drawings (*what's this supposed to be, a turtle?*) and letting her go on about ballet (*no, you big goof, it's my dad's BMW!*). One day, gutsy girl, she snuck over to the high school side of the building and was waiting at his locker in jeans with sequin butterflies on the pocket and a pink shirt that poked out in gumdrop lumps where her breasts would be. No one was bothering her, except for one maternal girl who tried to mother her back to the right side of the building.

"I'm OK," she told her, flipping her hair, and turned to Ben. "I just wanted to give you this."

She handed him a note, folded into the shape of a triangle, with his name written in bubble letters on the front. Then she pranced away, half the size of most the kids around her, but not looking like she noticed.

*Once I was in art class and met a boy named  
Ben.  
It was his heart I knew I would win.  
He has red hair and really nice skin.  
Are you "in"?*

At the bottom was a big *L*, with *-onger -etter -ater* written alongside it. He'd seen friends of friends with notes like these, but hardly ever got them himself. Last February, he got three valentines, one from the teacher because she had to, one from the nice girl who gave everybody one, and one from the urgent fat girl who always seemed on the edge of crying.

Diondra wrote him now sometimes, but the notes weren't cute, they were dirty or angry, stuff she scrawled in detention. No girl had ever done a poem for him, and it was even cuter that she seemed to have no idea he was way too old for her. It was a love poem from a girl who had no idea about sex or making out. (Or did she? When did normal kids start making out?)

The next day she waited for him outside art class and asked him if he'd sit in the stairwell with her, and he said OK but just for a second, and they'd joked around for a whole hour on those shadowy stairs. At one point she grabbed his arm and leaned into him and he knew he should tell her not to, but it felt so sweet and not at all weird and just nice, not like Diondra's sex-crazed scratching and yelling or his sisters' poking and roughhousing, but sweet the way a girl should be. She wore lipgloss that smelled like bubblegum, and since Ben never had enough money for bubblegum—how fucked-up was that—it always made his mouth water.

So they'd gone on like that for the last few months, sitting in the stairwell, waiting for her dad. They never talked on the weekends, and sometimes she even forgot to wait for him, and he'd be standing in the stairwell like a dick holding a packet of warm Skittles he'd found cleaning the cafeteria. Krissi loved sweet things. His sisters were the same way, they scrounged for sugar like beetles; he came home one time to find Libby eating jelly straight out of the jar.

Diondra never knew about the thing with Krissi. When Diondra did come to school, she beat it straight home at 3:16 to watch her soaps and *Donahue*. (She usually did this while eating cake batter straight from the mixing bowl, what was it with girls and sugar?) And even if Diondra did know, there was nothing wrong going on. He was like a guidance counselor in a way. An older guy advising a girl on homework and high school. Maybe he should go into psychology, or be a teacher. His dad was *five* years older than his mom.

The only iffy thing with him and Krissi happened just before Christmas and wouldn't happen again. They were sitting in the stairwell, sucking on green apple Jolly Ranchers and jostling each other and suddenly she was much closer than usual, a small nudge of nipple on his arm. The apple smell was hot on his neck, and she just clung there against him, not saying anything, just breathing, and he could feel her heartbeat like a kitten on his bicep and her fingers squirm up near his armpits and suddenly her lips were right there on his ear, that breath turning his ear wet, his gums twitching from the tartness of the candy, and then the lips were trailing down his cheek, sending chills down his arms and neither of them acknowledging what was going on and then her face was in front of his, and those little lips pushing against his, not really moving, and the two of them just staying there with identical beating hearts, her entire body now fitted between his legs and his hands kept rigidly down by his sides, gone all sweaty, and then a small moving of his lips, just a little opening and her tongue was there, sticky and lapping and them both tasting of green apple and his dick got so hard he thought it might explode in his pants and he put his hands on her waist and held her for a second and moved her off him and ran down the stairwell to the boy's bathroom—yelling, *sorry sorry* behind him—and he made it into a stall just in time to jerk twice and come all over his hands.

## Libby Day

NOW

So I was going to meet my brother, all grown up. After my beer with Lyle, I actually went home and looked at Barb Eichel's copy of *Your Prison Family: Get Past the Bars!* After reading a few confusing chapters about the administration of the Florida State Penitentiary system, I flipped back through the foxed pages to the copyright: 1985. How not remotely useful. I worried about receiving more pointless bundles from Barb: pamphlets about defunct Alabama waterslide parks, brochures about smithereened Las Vegas hotels, warnings about the Y2K bug.

I ended up making Lyle handle all the arrangements. I told him I couldn't get through to the right person, was overwhelmed by it all, but the truth was I just didn't want to. I don't have the stamina: press numbers, wait on hold, talk, wait on hold, then be real nice to some pissed-off woman with three kids and annual resolutions to go back to college, some woman just wiggling with the hope you'll give her an excuse to pull the plug on you. She's a bitch all right, but you can't call her that or all of a sudden there you are, chutes-and-laddered back to the beginning. And that's supposed to make you nicer when you phone back. Let Lyle deal with it.

Ben's prison is right outside Kinnakee and was built in 1997 after another round of farm consolidations. Kinnakee is almost in the middle of Kansas, not so far from the Nebraska border, and it once claimed to be the geographic center of the forty-eight contiguous United States. The heart of America. It was a big deal back in the '80s, when we were all patriotic. Other cities in Kansas made a grab for the title, but Kinnakeeans ignored them, stubbornly, proudly. It was the city's only point of interest. The Chamber of Commerce sold posters and T-shirts with the town's name cursived inside a heart. Every year Diane bought all us girls a new shirt, partly because we liked anything heart-shaped, and partly because Kinnakee is an old Indian word,

which means Magical Little Woman. Diane always tried to get us to be feminists. My mom joked that she didn't shave much and that was a start. I don't remember her saying it but I remember Diane, broad and angry as she always was after the murders, smoking a cigarette in her trailer, drinking ice tea out of a plastic cup with her name written in log-cabin letters on the side, telling me the story.

Turns out we were wrong after all. Lebanon, Kansas, is the official center of the United States. Kinnakee was working from bad information.

PD THOUGHT PD have months before I got permission to see Ben, but it seems the Kinnakee Kansas State Penitentiary is quick with the visitor passes. ("It's our belief that interaction with family and friends is a beneficial activity for inmates, helping them stay socialized and connected.") Paperwork and bullshit and then I spent the few intervening days going over Lyle's files, reading the transcript of Ben's trial, which I'd never mustered enough courage to do.

It made me sweat. My testimony was a zigzag of confusing kid-memories (*I think Ben brought a witch to the house and she killed us*, I said, to which the prosecutor replied only, *Mmmm, now let's talk about what really happened*) and overly coached dialogue (*I saw Ben as I was standing on the edge of my Mom's room, he was threatening my Mom with our shotgun*). As for Ben's defense attorney, he might as well have wrapped me in tissue paper and set me on a feather bed, he was so delicate with me (*Might you be a little confused about what you saw, Libby? Are you positive, positive it was your brother, Libby? Are you maybe telling us what you think we want to hear? To which I replied No Yes No.*) By the end of the day, I answered *I guess* to every single question, my way of saying I was done.

Ben's defense attorney had hammered at that bit of blood on Michelle's bedspread, and the mysterious dress shoe that left a print in my family's blood, but couldn't come up with a convincing alternate theory. Maybe someone else had been there, but there were no footprints, no tire treads outside the house to prove it. The morning of January 3 brought a twenty-degree bump in the temperature, melting the snow and all its imprints to a springlike mush.

Besides my testimony, Ben had weighing against him: fingernail scratches across his face he couldn't explain, a story about a bushy-

haired man he initially claimed killed everyone—a story he quickly exchanged for the “out all night, don’t know nothing” defense—a large chunk of Michelle’s hair found on the floor of his room, and his general crazy demeanor that day. He’d dyed his hair black, which everyone deemed suspicious. He’d been spotted “sneaking” around school, several teachers testified. They wondered if he was perhaps trying to retrieve some of the animal remains that he’d kept in his locker (animal remains?) or if he was gathering other students’ personal items for a satanic mass. Later in the day he apparently went to some stoner hangout and bragged about his Devil sacrifices.

Ben didn’t help himself either: He had no alibi for the murders; he had a key to the house, which had not been broken into; he’d had a fight with my mother that morning. Also he was kind of a shit. As the prosecutors proclaimed that he was a Satan-worshipping killer, Ben responded by enthusiastically discussing the rituals of Devil worship, particular songs he liked that reminded him of the underworld, and the great power of Satanism. (*It encourages you to do what feels good, because we are all basically animals.*) At one point the prosecutor asked Ben to “stop playing with your hair and get serious, do you understand this is serious?”

“I understand you think it’s serious,” Ben replied.

It didn’t even sound like the Ben I remembered, the quiet, bundled brother of mine. Lyle had included a few news photos from the trial: Ben with his black hair in a ponytail (why didn’t his lawyers make him cut it?), wedged into a lopsided suit, always either smirking or completely affectless.

So Ben didn’t help himself, but the trial transcript made me blush. Then again, the whole thing left me feeling a little better. It wasn’t all my fault Ben was in jail (if he was truly innocent, if he truly was). No, it was a little bit of everybody’s fault.

A WEEK AFTER agreeing to meet Ben, I was meeting Ben. I was driving back toward my hometown, where I hadn’t been in at least twelve years, which had turned itself into a prison town without my permission. The whole thing was too quick, it gave me emotional bends. The only way I could get in the car was to keep reassuring myself I would not go into Kinnakee proper, and I would not go down that long dirt road that would take me home, no I would not. Not that

it was my home anymore: Someone had bought the property years ago, razed the house immediately, crushing walls my mother had prettied with cheap flowery posters, smashing windows we'd breathed against while waiting to see who was coming down the drive, splintering the doorframe where my mom had penciled the growth of Ben and my sisters but been too tired to chart me (I had just one entry: Libby 3'2").

I drove three hours into Kansas, rolling up and down the Flint Hills, then hitting the flatlands, signs inviting me to visit the Greyhound Hall of Fame, the Museum of Telephony, the Largest Ball of Twine. Again a burst of loyalty: I should go to them all, if only to smack ironic road-trippers. I finally turned off the highway, heading north and west and north and west on jigsaw back roads, the farm fields dots of green and yellow and brown, pastoral pointillism. I huddled over the wheel, flipping stations between weepy country tunes and Christian rock and fuzz. The struggling March sun managed to warm the car, blazed my grotesque red hairline. The warmth and the color made me think again of blood. In the passenger seat next to me was a single airplane bottle of vodka I planned to swallow when I got to the prison, a self-prescribed dose of numbness. It took an uncharacteristic amount of willpower not to gulp it on the drive, one hand on the wheel, throat tilted back.

Like a magic trick, just as I was thinking *Getting close now*, a tiny sign popped up on the wide, flat horizon. I knew exactly what it would say: *Welcome to Kinnakee: Heart of America!* in 1950s cursive. It did, and I could just make out a spray of bullet holes in the bottom left-hand corner, where Runner blasted it from his pickup truck decades before. Then I got closer and realized I was imagining the bullet holes. This was a tidy new sign, but with the same old script: *Welcome to Kinnakee: Heart of America!* Sticking with the lie, I liked it. Just as I passed the sign, another one arrived: Kinnakee Kansas State Penitentiary, next left. I followed the direction, driving west over land that was once the Evelee farm. *Ha, serves you right, Evelees*, I thought, but I couldn't remember why the Evelees were bad. I just remembered they were.

I slowed to a crawl as I drove down this new road, far on the outer edge of town. Kinnakee had never been a prosperous place—it was mostly struggling farms and optimistic plywood mansions from a

preposterously brief oil boom. Now it was worse. The prison business hadn't saved the town. The street was lined with pawn shops and flimsy houses, barely a decade old and already sagging. Stunned children stood in the middle of grubby yards. Trash collected everywhere: food wrappers, drinking straws, cigarette butts. An entire to-go meal—Styrofoam box, plastic fork, Styrofoam cup—sat on a curb, abandoned by the eater. A scatter of ketchupy fries lay in the gutter nearby. Even the trees were miserable: scrawny, stunted, and stubbornly refusing to bud. At the end of the block, a young, dumpy couple sat in the cold on a Dairy Queen bench, staring out at the traffic, like they were watching TV.

On a nearby telephone pole flapped a grainy photocopy of an unsmiling teen, missing since October 2007. Two more blocks, and what I thought was a copy of the same poster turned out to be a new missing girl, vanished in June 2008. Both girls were unkempt, surly, which explained why they weren't getting the Lisette Stephens treatment. I made a mental note to take a smiling, pretty photo of myself in case I ever disappeared.

A few more minutes, and the prison appeared within a big sunburnt clearing.

It was less imposing than I'd pictured, the few times I'd pictured it. It had a sprawling, suburban look to it, could be mistaken for some regional offices of a refrigeration company, maybe a telecommunications headquarters, except for the razor wire that curlicued around the walls. The looping wire reminded me of the phone cord that Ben and my mom always fought over toward the end, the one we were always tripping on. Debby was cremated with a little starburst scar on her wrist because of that goddam phone cord. I made myself cough loudly, just to hear something.

I rolled into the lot, the poured-tar surface wonderfully smooth after an hour of potholes. I parked and sat staring, my car crinkling from the drive. From just inside the walls came the murmur and shouts of men, taking their rec time. The vodka went down with a medicinal sting. I chewed a piece of hardened spearmint gum once, twice, then spit it into a sandwich wrapper, feeling my ears get booze-warmed. Then I reached under my sweater and undid my bra, feeling my breasts woosh down, big and dog-eared, to the background noise of murderers playing hoops. That's one thing Lyle had advised me on,

stuttering and careful with his words: *You only get one chance to get through the metal detector. It's not like at the airport—there's no wand thing. So you should leave everything metal in your car. Um, including, um, with women, uh, the, I think is it underwire? In the bras. That would be, could be a problem.*

Fine, then. I stuck the bra in my glove compartment and let my breasts roam free.

In the interior of the prison, the guards were well mannered, as if they'd seen many instructional videos on courtesy: yes ma'am, right this way ma'am. Their eye contact was without depth, my image bounced right back at me, hot-potato. Searches, questions, yes ma'am, and lots of waiting. Doors opened and shut, opened and shut, as I walked through a series of them, each shifting in size, like a metal Wonderland. The floors stank of bleach and the air smelled beefy and humid. Somewhere nearby must be the lunchroom. I suffered a nauseous wave of nostalgia, picturing us Day kids and our subsidized school meals: the bosomy, steamed women, yelling *Free Lunch!* toward the cash register as we came through with a dump of stroganoff and some room-temperature milk.

Ben had good timing, I thought: Kansas's disappearing-reappearing death penalty was in moratorium when the murders happened (here I paused at my jarring new mental phrasing, "when the murders happened," as opposed to "when Ben killed everyone"). He was sentenced to prison for life. But at least I didn't get him killed. I now stood outside the smooth, submarine-metal door of the visitation room and then stood longer. "Nothing to it but to do it, nothing to it but to do it." Diane's mantra. I needed to stop thinking family thoughts. The guard with me, a stiff blond man who'd spared me small talk, made an *after-you* overture.

I swung the door open and shoved myself inside. Five booths sat in a row, one occupied by a heavysset Native Indian woman, talking to her inmate son. The woman's black hair speared down her shoulders, violent-looking. She was muttering dully to the young guy, who nodded jerkily, the phone close to his ear, his eyes down.

I sat two booths away, and was just settling in, taking a breath, when Ben shot through the door, like a cat making a break for the outside. He was small, maybe 5'6", and his hair had turned a dark rust. He wore it long, sweeping his shoulders, tucked girlishly behind

his ears. With wire-rim glasses and an orange jumpsuit, he looked like a studious mechanic. The room was small, so he got to me in three steps, all the while smiling quietly. Beaming. He sat down, placed a hand on the glass, nodded at me to do the same. I couldn't do it, couldn't press my palm against his, moist against the window like ham. I smiled milkily at him instead and picked up the phone.

On the other side of the glass, he held the phone in his hand, cleared his throat, then looked down, started to say something, then stopped. I was left looking at the crown of his head for almost a minute. When he looked up, he was crying, two tears from both his eyes trickling down his face. He wiped them away with the back of a hand, then smiled, his lips wavering.

"God, you look just like Mom," he said all at once, getting it out, and coughed, wiped more tears. "I didn't know that." His eyes flickered between my face and his hands. "Oh, God, Libby, how are you?"

I cleared my own throat and said, "I guess I'm OK. I just thought it was time I came and saw you." *I do sort of look like Mom*, I thought. *I do*. And then I thought, *my big brother*, and felt the same chesty pride I'd had as a kid. He looked so much the same, pale face, that Day knob of a nose. He hadn't even grown much since the murders. Like we both got stunted that night. My big brother, and he was happy to see me. *He knows how to play you*, I warned myself. Then I set the thought aside.

"I'm glad, I'm glad," Ben said, still looking at the side of his hand. "I've thought about you a lot over these years, been wondering about you. That's what you do in here ... think and wonder. Every once in a while someone'll write me about you. But it's not the same."

"No," I agreed. "Are they treating you OK?" I asked, stupidly, my eyes glazed, and suddenly I was crying and all I wanted to say was *sorryI'msorryI'msorry*. Instead I said nothing, looking only at a constellation of acne scattered around one corner of Ben's lips.

"I'm fine, Libby, Libby, look at me." My eyes to his. "I'm fine. I really am. I got my high school degree in here, which is more than I ever proly would have done outside, and I'm even partway to a college degree. English. I read fucking Shakespeare." He made the guttural sound that he always tried to pass off for a laugh. "Forsooth,

you dirty bugger.”

I didn't know what the last part meant, but I smiled because he was waiting for me to smile.

“Man, Libby, I could just drink you in. You don't know how good it is to see you. Shit, I'm sorry. You just look like Mom, do people tell you that all the time?”

“Who would tell me that? There's no one. Runner's gone, don't know where, Diane and I don't talk.” I wanted him to feel sorry for me, to float around in my big empty pool of pity. Here we were, the last of the Days. If he felt sorry for me, it would be harder to blame me. The tears kept coming and now I just let them. Two chairs down, the Indian woman was saying her good-byes, her weeping just as deep as her voice.

“Ya'all by yourself, huh? That's no good. They should've took better care of you.”

“What are you, born again?” I blurted, my face wet. Ben frowned, not understanding. “Is that it? You forgiving me? You're not supposed to be nice to me.” But I craved it, could feel the need for the relief, like setting down a hot plate.

“Nah, I'm not that nice,” he said. “I got a lot of anger for a lot of people, you're just not one.”

“But,” I said, and gulped down a sob like a kid. “But my testimony. I think, I may, I don't know, I don't know ...” *It had to have been him*, I warned myself again.

“Oh that.” He said, like it was a minor inconvenience, some snag in a summer vacation best forgotten. “You don't read my letters, huh?”

I tried to explain with an inadequate shrug.

“Well, your testimony ... It only surprised me that people believed you. It didn't surprise me what you said. You were in a totally insane situation. And you always were a little liar.” He laughed again and I did too, quick matching laughs like we'd caught the same cough. “No, seriously, the fact that they believed you? They wanted me in here, I was going to be in here, that just proved it. Fucking little seven-year-old. Man, you were so small ...” His eyes turned up to the right, daydreaming. Then he pulled himself back. “You know what I thought

of the other day, I don't know why. I thought of that goddam porcelain bunny, the one Mom made us put on the toilet."

I shook my head, no clue what he was talking about.

"You don't remember that, the little bunny? Because the toilet didn't work right, if we used it twice in an hour it stopped flushing. So if one of us crapped when it wasn't working, we were supposed to close the lid and put the bunny on top, so no one else would open the lid and see a toilet full of crap. Because you guys would scream. I can't believe you don't remember this. It was so stupid, it made me so mad. I was mad I had to share a bathroom with all of you, I was mad I lived in a house with one toilet that didn't even work, I was mad about the bunny. The bunny," he broke into his confined laugh, "I found the bunny, like, it humiliated me or something. Unmanned me. I took it very personally. Like Mom was supposed to find a car figurine or a gun figurine for me to use. Man, I would get so worked up about it. I'd stand there by the toilet and think, 'I will not put that bunny down,' and then I'd get ready to leave and I'd think, 'Goddamit, I gotta put the bunny down or one of them's gonna come in here and all the screaming—you guys were screamers, high, *Eeeeeeeaaaahh!*—and I don't want to deal with that so fine here's the goddam bunny on your goddam toilet!" He laughed again, but the memory had cost him, his face was flushed and his nose was sweaty. "That's the kind of stuff you think of in here. Weird stuff."

I tried to find that bunny in my memory, tried to inventory the bathroom and the things in it, but I came out with nothing, a handful of water.

"Sorry, Libby, that's a strange memory to throw at you." I put one tip of my finger near the bottom of the glass window and said, "That's fine."

WE SAT IN silence for a bit, pretending to listen to noise that wasn't there. We had just started but the visit was almost over. "Ben, can I ask you something?"

"I think so." His face went blank, preparing.

"Don't you want to get out of here?"

"Sure."

"Why don't you give the police your alibi for that night? There is no

way you were sleeping in a barn.”

“I just don’t have a good alibi, Libby. I just don’t. It happens.”

“Because it was, like, zero degrees out. I remember.” I rubbed my half finger beneath the counter, wiggled my two toes on my right foot.

“I know, I know. You can’t imagine.” He turned his face away. “You can’t imagine how many weeks, *years*, I’ve spent in here wishing I’d done it all differently. Mom and Michelle and Debby might not be dead if I’d just ... been a man. Not some dumb kid. Hiding in a barn, angry at Mommy.” A tear splashed onto the phone receiver, I thought I could hear it, *bing!* “I’m OK being punished for that night ... I feel ... OK.”

“But. I don’t understand. Why were you so ... unhelpful with the police?”

Ben shrugged his shoulders, and again the face went death-mask.

“Oh God. I just. I was such an unconfident kid. I mean, I was fifteen, Libby. Fifteen. I didn’t know what it was to be a man. I mean, Runner sure wasn’t helpful. I was this kid no one paid much attention to one way or the other, and here all of a sudden, people were treating me like *I* scared *them*. I mean, presto chango, I was this big man.”

“A big man charged with murdering his family.”

“You want to call me a stupid fuck, Libby, please, go ahead. To me, it was simple: I said I didn’t do it, I knew I didn’t do it, and—I don’t know, defense mechanism?—I just didn’t take it as seriously as I should have. If I’d reacted the way everyone expected me to, I probably wouldn’t be here. At night I bawled into a pillow, but I played it tough when anyone could see me. It’s fucked up, believe me I know it. But you should never put a fifteen-year-old on a witness stand in a courtroom filled with a bunch of people he knows and expect a lot of tears. My thoughts were that of course I’d be acquitted, and then I’d be admired at school for being such a bad-ass. I mean, I daydreamed about that shit. I never ever thought I was in danger of ... ending up like this.” He was crying now, wiped his cheek again. “Clearly, I’ve gotten over whether people see me cry.”

“We need to fix this,” I said, finally.

“It’s not going to be fixed, Libby, not unless they find who did it.”

“Well, you need some new lawyers, working on the case,” I reasoned. “All the stuff they can do with DNA now ...” DNA to me was some sort of magical element, some glowing goo that was always getting people out of prison.

Ben laughed through closed lips, the way he did when we were kids, not letting you enjoy it.

“You sound like Runner,” he said. “About every two years I get a letter from him: *DNA! We need to get some of that DNA.* Like I have a lockerful of it and just don’t want to share. *D-N-A!*” he said again, doing Runner’s crazy-eyed head nod.

“You know where he is now?”

“Last letter was care of Bert Nolan’s Group Home for Men, somewhere in Oklahoma. He asked me to send him 500 bucks, so he could continue his research on my behalf. Whoever Bert Nolan is, he’s ruing the day he let goddam Runner into his home for men.” He scratched his arm, raising his sleeve just enough for me to see a tattoo of a woman’s name. It ended in *-olly* or *-ally*. I made sure he saw me notice.

“Ah this? Old flame. We started as penpals. I thought I loved her, thought I’d marry her, but turned out she didn’t really want to be stuck with a guy in prison for life. Wish she’d told me before I got the tat.”

“Must’ve hurt.”

“It didn’t tickle.”

“I meant the breakup.”

“Oh, that sucked too.”

The guard gave us the three-minute signal and Ben rolled his eyes: “Hard to decide what to say in three minutes. Two minutes you just start making plans for another visit. Five minutes you can finish your conversation. Three minutes?” He pushed out his lips, made a raspberry noise. “I really hope you come again, Libby. I forgot how homesick I was. You look just like her.”

## Patty Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

11:31 A.M.

She'd retreated to the bathroom after Len left, his livery smile still offering something unsavory, some sort of help she knew she didn't want. The girls had flooded out of their bedroom as soon as they heard the door shut, and after a quick, whispery caucus outside the bathroom door, had decided to leave her alone and go back to the TV.

Patty was holding her greasy belly, her sweat turned cold. Her parents' farm, gone. She felt the guilty twist of the stomach that had always made her such a good girl, the constant fear of disappointing her folks, *please, please God, don't let them find out*. They had entrusted this place to her, and she had been found wanting. She pictured them up in the clouds of heaven, her dad's arm around her mom as they looked down on her, shaking their heads, *What in the world possessed you to do such a thing?* Her mom's favorite scold.

They'd have to move to an entirely different town. Kinnakee had no apartments, and they were going to have to cram into an apartment while she got a job in some office, if she could find one. She'd always felt sorry for people who lived in apartments, stuck listening to their neighbors belch and argue. Her legs puddled and suddenly Patty was sitting on the floor. She didn't have enough energy to leave the farm, ever. She'd used the last of it up these past few years. Some mornings she couldn't even get out of bed, physically couldn't make her legs swing out from under the covers, the girls had to drag her, yanking her with dug-in heels, and as she made breakfast and got them somewhat ready for school, she daydreamed about dying. Something quick, an overnight heart attack, or a sudden vehicular clobbering. Mother of four, run down by a bus. And the kids adopted by Diane, who would keep them from lying around in their pajamas all day, and make sure they saw a doctor when they were sick, and snap-snap at them til they finished their chores. Patty was a slip of a woman,

wavery and weak, quickly optimistic, but even more easily deflated. It was Diane who should have inherited the farm. But she wanted none of it, had left at eighteen, a joyful, rubberband trajectory that had landed her as a receptionist at a doctor's office thirty mere-but-crucial miles away in Schieberton.

Their parents had taken Diane's leaving stoically, as if it had always been part of the plan. Patty could remember back in high school, them all coming to watch her do her cheerleading thing one wet October night. It was a three-hour drive for them, deep into Kansas, almost Colorado, and it rained lightly but steadily the whole game. When it was over (Kinnakee lost), there on the field were her two gray-haired parents and her sister, three solid ovals, encased in rough wool coats, all rushing to her side, all smiling with such pride and gratitude you'd have thought she'd cured cancer, their eyes crinkled behind three sets of rain-speckled glasses.

Ed and Ann Krause were dead now, had died early but not unexpectedly, and Diane was now a manager in the same doctor's office, and lived in a mobile home in a tidy trailer park bordered with flowers.

"It's a good enough life for me," she'd always say. "Can't imagine wanting anything different."

That was Diane. Capable. She was the one who remembered little treats that the girls liked, she never forgot to get them their yearly Kinnakee T-shirts: Kinnakee, Heart of America! Diane had fibbed to the girls that it meant Magical Little Woman in Indian, and they'd been so gleeful about it that Patty could never bring herself to tell them it just meant rock or crow or something.

DIANE'S CAR HORN intruded on her thoughts with its usual celebratory honkhonkhonk!

"Diane!" screeched Debby, and Patty could hear the three girls racing toward the front door, could picture the mass of pigtailed and muffin-bottoms, and then imagined them still running, straight out to the car, and Diane driving away with them and leaving her in this house where she would make everything go silent.

She pulled herself off the floor, wiped her face with a mildewy washcloth. Her face was always red, her eyes always pink, so it was impossible to tell if she'd been crying, the only advantage to looking

like a skinned rat. When she opened the door, her sister was already unpacking three grocery loads of canned foods and sending the girls out to her car for the rest. Patty had come to associate the smell of brown paper bags with Diane, she'd been bringing them food for so long. That was the perfect example of the fall-short life Patty had made: She lived on a farm but never had enough to eat.

"Got them one of those sticker books, too," Diane said, flapping it out on the table.

"Oh, you're spoiling them, D."

"Well, I only got them one, so they'll have to share. So that's good, right?" She laughed and started making coffee. "You mind?"

"Of course not, I should have put some on." Patty went to the cabinet to find Diane's mug—she favored a heavy cup the size of her head that had been their father's. Patty heard the predictable spitty sound, and turned around, pounded the blasted coffee maker once; it always stalled after its third drool of coffee.

The girls came back in, heaving bags up on the kitchen table, and, with some prompting from Diane, started to unpack them.

"Where's Ben?" Diane asked.

"Mmmm," Patty said, scooping three teaspoons of sugar into Diane's mug. She motioned to the kids, who'd already slowed their cupboarding of cans and were peering up at various angles of pretend nonchalance.

"He's in trouble," Michelle exploded, gleefully. "Again."

"Tell her about his, you know what," Debby nudged her sister.

Diane turned to Patty with a grimace, clearly expecting a tale of genital mishap or mutilation.

"Girls, Aunt D got you a sticker book ..."

"Go play with it in your room so I can talk to your mother." Diane always spoke more roughly to the girls than Patty did, it was Diane playing the pretend-gruff persona of Ed Krause, who'd rumble and grumble at them with such exaggerated fatigue they knew even as kids that he was mostly teasing. Patty added a beseeching look toward Michelle.

“Oh boy, a sticker book!” Michelle announced with only slightly overdone enthusiasm. Michelle was always happy to be complicit in any grown-up scheme. And once Michelle was pretending she wanted something, Libby was all gritted teeth and grabby hands. Libby was a Christmas baby, which meant she never got the right amount of presents. Patty would hold one extra gift aside—and Happy Birthday to Libby!—but they all knew the truth, Libby got ripped off. Libby rarely felt less than ripped off.

She knew these things about her girls, but she was always forgetting. What was wrong with her, that these bits of her children’s personalities were always surprising her?

“Wanna go to the garage?” Diane asked, patting the cigarettes in her bosom pocket.

“Oh,” was all Patty answered. Diane had quit and returned to smoking at least twice a year every year since she was thirty. Now she was thirty-seven (and she looked much worse than Patty did, the skin on her face diamonded like a snake), and Patty had long learned the best support was just to shut up and make her sit in the garage. Just like their mom had with their dad. Of course, he was dead of lung cancer not long after his fiftieth.

Patty followed her sister, making herself breathe, getting ready to tell Diane the farm was gone, waiting to see if she’d scream about Runner’s reckless spending and her allowing Runner’s reckless spending or if she’d just go quiet, just do that single nod.

“So what’s up with Ben’s you-know-what?” Diane said, settling into her creaky lawn chair, two of the criss-crossed straps broken and hanging toward the floor. She lit a cigarette, immediately waving the smoke away from Patty.

“Oh, it’s not that, it’s not anything weird. I mean weird, but ... he dyed his hair black. What does that mean?”

She waited for Diane to cackle at her, but Diane sat silent.

“How’s Ben doing, Patty? In general, how does he seem?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Moody.”

“He’s always been moody. Even when he was a baby he was like a cat. All snuggly one second and then the next, he’d be looking at you

like he had no idea who you were.”

It was true, Ben at age two was an astonishing thing. He'd demand love outright, grab at a breast or an arm, but as soon as he had enough affection, and that came quickly, he'd go completely limp, play dead until you let him go. She'd taken him to the doctor, and Ben had sat rigid and tight-lipped, a stoic turtle-necked boy with a disturbing ability to withhold. Even the doctor seemed spooked, proffering a cheap lollipop and telling her to come back in six months if he was the same. He was always the same.

“Well, moody's not a crime,” Patty said. “Runner was moody.”

“Runner is an asshole, not the same. Ben's always had that remove to him.”

“Well, he is fifteen,” Patty started, and trailed off. Her eyes caught a jar of old nails on the shelf, a jar she doubted had been moved since their dad's time. It was labeled *Nails* in his long, upright handwriting on a scrap of masking tape.

The garage had an oily concrete floor that was even colder than the air. In one corner, an old gallon jug of water had turned to ice, busted its plastic seams. Their breath hung thick with Diane's cigarette smoke. Still, she was oddly contented here, among all these old tools she could picture in their dad's hands: rakes with bent tines, axes of every length, shelves packed with jars filled with screws and nails and washers. Even an old metal ice chest, its base speckled with rust, where their dad used to keep his beer cold while he listened to ball games on the radio.

It unnerved her that Diane was saying so little, since Diane liked to offer opinions, even when she didn't really have any. It unnerved her more that Diane was staying so motionless, hadn't found a project, something to straighten or rearrange, because Diane was a doer, she never just sat and talked.

“Patty. I got to tell you something I heard. And my first instinct was to not say anything, because of course it's not true. But you're a mom, you should know, and ... hell, I don't know, you should just know.”

“OK.”

“Has Ben ever played with the girls in a way that someone might get confused about?”

Patty just stared.

“In a way that people might get the wrong idea about ... sexually?”

Patty almost choked. “Ben *hates* the girls!” She was surprised at the relief she felt. “He has as little to do with them as possible.”

Diane lit another cigarette, gave a taut nod of her head. “Well, OK, good. But there’s something more. A friend of mine told me a rumor that there’s been a complaint about Ben over at the school, that a few little girls, Michelle’s age or so, had talked about kissing him and maybe him touching them or something. Maybe worse. The stuff I heard was worse.”

“Ben? You realize that’s completely crazy.” Patty stood up, couldn’t figure out what to do with her arms or legs. She turned to the right and then the left too quickly, like a distracted dog, and sat back down. A strap in her chair broke.

“I do know it’s crazy. Or some misunderstanding.”

That was the worst word Diane could have said. As soon as she said it, Patty knew she’d been dreading just exactly that. That wedge of possibility—*misunderstanding*—that could turn this into something. A pat on the head might be a caress of the back might be a kiss on the lips might be the roof caving in.

“Misunderstanding? Ben wouldn’t misunderstand a kiss. Or touching. Not with a little girl. He’s not a pervert. He’s an odd kid, but he’s not sick. He’s not crazy.” Patty had spent her life swearing Ben *wasn’t* odd, was just an average kid. But now she’d settle for odd. The realization came suddenly, a wild jolt, like having your hair blown in your face while driving.

“Will you tell them he wouldn’t do that?” Patty asked, and the tears came all at once, suddenly her cheeks were soaked.

“I can tell everyone in Kinnakee, everyone in the state of Kansas that he wouldn’t do that, and it might not be the end of it. I don’t know. I don’t know. I just heard yesterday afternoon, but it seems to be getting ... bigger. I almost came out here. Then I spent the rest of the night convincing myself that it wasn’t anything. Then I woke up this morning and realized it was.”

Patty knew that feeling, a dream hangover, like when she jumped

up from a panicky sleep at 2 in the morning and tried to talk herself into thinking the farm was OK, that this year would pick up, and then felt all the sicker when she woke up to the alarm a few hours later, guilty and duped. It was surprising that you could spend hours in the middle of the night pretending things were OK, and know in thirty seconds of daylight that that simply wasn't so.

"So you came over here with groceries and a sticker book and all along you had this *story* about Ben you were going to tell me."

"Like I said ..." Diane shrugged sympathetically, splayed her fingers except for the ones holding the cigarette.

"Well, what happens now? Do you know the girls' names? Is someone going to phone me or talk to me, or talk to Ben? I need to find Ben."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. We had a fight. About his hair. He took off on his bike."

"So what was the story with his hair?"

"I don't know, Diane! What in God's name does it matter now?"

But of course Patty knew it did matter. Everything now would be filtered and sifted for meaning.

"Well, I don't think this is an emergency," Diane said quietly. "I don't think we need to get him home right now unless you want him home right now."

"I want him home right now."

"OK, well let's start calling people then. You can give me a list of his friends and I'll start phoning."

"I don't even know his friends anymore," Patty said. "He was talking to someone this morning, but he wouldn't say who."

"Let's hit redial."

Her sister grunted, stamped out her cigarette with a boot, pulled Patty out of her chair, led her inside. Diane snapped at the girls to stay in their room when the bedroom door cracked, and made her way to the phone, purposefully hit the redial button with one braut-sized finger. Sing-song numeric tones blared out of the receiver—

beepBeepBEEPbeepbeepbupBEEP—and before it even rang, Diane hung up.

“My number.”

“Oh, yeah. I called after breakfast to see when you’d be over.”

The two sisters sat at the table, and Diane poured more mugs of coffee. The snow glared into the kitchen like a strobelight.

“We need to get Ben home,” Patty said.

## Libby Day

NOW

Moony as a grade-school girl, I drove home thinking about Ben. Since I was seven, I pictured him in the same haunted-house flashes: Ben, black-haired, smooth-faced, with his hands clasped around an axe, charging down the hall at Debby, a humming noise coming from his tight lips. Ben's face speckled in blood, howling, the shotgun going up to his shoulder.

I'd forgotten there was once just Ben, shy and serious, those weird unsettling blasts of humor. Just Ben my brother, who couldn't have done what they said. What I said.

At a stoplight, my blood sizzling, I reached behind my seat and grabbed the envelope from an old bill. Above the plastic window, I wrote: *Suspects*. Then I wrote: *Runner*. Then I stopped. *Someone with a grudge against Runner?* I wrote. *Someone Runner owed money to?* *Runnerrunnerrunner*. It came back to Runner. That male voice, bellowing in our house that night, that could have been Runner or an enemy of Runner's as easily as it was Ben. I needed this to be true, and provable. I had a gust of panic: I can't live with this, Ben in jail, this open-ended guilt. I needed it finished. I needed to know. Me, me. I was still predictably selfish.

As I passed the turnoff for our farm, I refused to look.

I stopped in a 7-Eleven on the outskirts of Kansas City, filled up with gas, bought a log of Velveeta, some Coke, white bread, and kibble for my old, starving cat. Then I drove home to Over There That Way, pulled up my slope of a hill, got out, and stared at the two old ladies across the street who'd never look at me. They sat on the porch swing as always, despite the chill, their heads rigidly straight, lest I muddy their view. I stood with my hands on my hips, on top of my hill, and waited until one finally caved. Then I waved rather grandly, an Old West corral sort of wave. The wrinkled biddy nodded at me,

and I went inside and fed poor Buck, feeling a bubble of triumph.

While I still had the energy, I knifed bright yellow mustard onto my white bread, stacked thick smushy chunks of Velveeta on top, and swallowed the sandwich while negotiating with three different but equally bored phone operators to reach the Bert Nolan Group Home for Men. That's another thing to add to my list of potential occupations for ole Jim Jeffreys: operator. As a kid, that was something little girls wanted to be when they grew up, an operator, but I couldn't remember why.

A thin layer of bread pasted to the roof of my mouth, I finally reached a voice at the Bert Nolan Home, and was surprised to find it was Bert Nolan himself. I'd assumed anyone with a home named after him must be dead. I told him I was trying to find Runner Day, and he paused.

"Well, he's been in and out, mostly out the past month, but I'd be happy to give him a message," Bert Nolan said in a voice like an old car horn. I gave my name—no recognition on his part—and started to give my phone number when Nolan interrupted me.

"Oh, he's not going to be able to phone long distance, I can tell you that right now. The men here tend to be big corresponders. By mail, you know? Less'n fifty cents for a stamp and you don't have to worry about waiting in line for the phone. You want to leave your address?"

I did not. I shivered at the idea of Runner clomping up my steps with his overstacked dress boots, his grimy hands around his little waist, grinning like he'd beaten me at a game.

"If you want, I can take any message you have and you can give me your address privately," Bert Nolan said reasonably. "And once Runner finishes his letter to you, I can mail it for him, and he'll never even know your zip code. A lot of family members do it that way. It's a sad but necessary thing." In the background, a soda machine rattled out a sodapop, someone asked Nolan if he wanted one, and he said *No thanks, trying to cut back* in the kindly voice of a town doctor. "You want to do that, Miss? Otherwise it'll be hard to reach him. Like I said, he's not really one to sit by the phone and wait for you to call back."

"And there's no e-mail?"

Bert Nolan grunted. “No, no e-mail, I’m afraid.”

I’d never known Runner to be much of a letter writer, but he always wrote more than he phoned, so I guessed that would be my best shot, short of driving down to Oklahoma and waiting on one of Bert Nolan’s cots. “Would you tell him I need to talk about Ben and that night? I can come down to see him if he just gives me a day.”

“OK ... you said, Ben and *that night*?”

“I did.”

I KNEW LYLE would be too smug about my turnaround—semi-possible, potential turnaround—on Ben. I could picture him addressing the Kill Club groupies in one of his weird tight jackets, explaining how he convinced me to go see Ben. “She really was refusing at first, I think she was scared of what she might discover about Ben ... and about herself.” And all those faces looking up at him, so happy about what he’d done. It irritated me.

Who I wanted to talk to was Aunt Diane. Diane who’d taken care of me for seven of my eleven years as an underage orphan. She’d been the first to take me in, shuffling me into her mobile home with my suitcase of belongings. Clothes, a favorite book, but no toys. Michelle hoarded all the dolls with her at night, she called it her slumber party, and she peed on them when she was strangled. I still remember a sticker book Diane had given us the day of the murders—flowers and unicorns and kittens—and always wondered if it had been in that ruined pile.

Diane couldn’t afford a new place. All the money from my mom’s life insurance went to get Ben a decent lawyer. Diane said my mother would want that, but she said it with a drawn face, like she’d give my mother a good talking to if she could. So no money for us. Being runty, I was able to sleep in a storage closet where the washer/dryer would have gone. Diane even painted it for me. She worked overtime, shuttled me to Topeka for therapy, tried to be affectionate with me, even though I could tell it hurt her to hug me, this pissy reminder of her sister’s murder. Her arms encircled me like a hula-hoop, like it was a game to get them around me but touch as little as possible. But every single morning she told me she loved me.

Over the next ten years, I totaled her car twice, broke her nose twice, stole and sold her credit cards, and killed her dog. It was the

dog that finally broke her. She'd gotten Gracie, a mop-haired mutt, not long after the murders. It was yappy and the size of Diane's forearm and Diane liked her more than me, or so I felt. For years I was jealous of that dog, watching Diane brush Gracie, her big manly hands wrapped around a pink plastic comb, watching her barrette Gracie's tassled fur, watching her whip out a photo of Gracie from her wallet, instead of me. The dog was obsessed with my foot, the bad one, with only two toes, the second and the pinky, skinny gnarled things. Gracie was always smelling at them, like she knew they were wrong somehow. It did not endear her to me.

I'd been grounded for something, the summer between sophomore and junior year, and while Diane worked, I sat in the hot trailer getting angrier and angrier with that dog, the dog getting feistier and feistier. I refused to walk it, so it had resorted to running in frantic loops from the sofa to the kitchen to the closet, yipping the whole time, nipping at my feet. As I coiled up, nursing my fury, pretending to watch a soap opera but instead letting my brain turn good and red, Gracie paused in one of her loops and bit at the pinky toe on my bad foot, just grabbed onto it with her canines and shook. I remember thinking, *If this dog takes one of my last toes*, and then getting enraged at how ridiculous I was: On my left hand was a stump where a man would never put a wedding ring, and my unsupported right foot gave me a permanent sailor's gait in a land-locked town. The girls at school called my finger a nubbin. That was worse, it sounded both quaint and grotesque at the same time, something to giggle at while looking quickly away. A physician had recently told me the amputations probably weren't even necessary, "Just an overambitious country doctor." I grabbed Gracie around her middle, feeling her ribcage, that chilly tremble of a little thing. The tremble only made me angrier, and suddenly I was ripping her off my toe—the flesh going with her—and throwing her as hard as I could toward the kitchen. She hit the pick-axe edge of the counter and collapsed in a twitching pile, bleeding all over the linoleum.

I hadn't meant to kill her, but she died, not as quickly as I'd have liked, but within about ten minutes as I paced around the trailer trying to figure out what to do. When Diane came home, bearing an offertory of fried chicken, Gracie was still lying on the floor, and all I could say was, "She bit me."

I tried to say more, to explain why it wasn't my fault, but Diane just held up a single, shaking finger: *Don't*. She'd called her best friend, Valerie, a woman as delicate and motherly as Diane was bulky and bluff. Diane stood hunched over the sink, looking out the window as Valerie folded Gracie into a special blanket. Then they huddled behind a closed bedroom door, and emerged, Valerie standing silently next to Diane, teary and kneading, as Diane told me to pack my things. In retrospect, I assume Valerie must have been Diane's girlfriend—every night, Diane would climb in bed and talk to her on the phone til she fell asleep. They conferred on everything together and even had the exact same gently feathered wash-n-wear haircut. At the time I didn't care who she was to Diane.

I lived my last two high school years with a polite couple in Abilene who were twice-removed somethings and whom I only mildly terrorized. From then on, every few months, Diane would phone. I'd sit with her on the line, all heavy telephone buzz and Diane's smoky breathing into the receiver. I'd picture the bottom half of her mouth hanging there, the peach fuzz on her chin and that mole perched near her bottom lip, a flesh-colored disc that she once told me, cackling, would grant wishes if I rubbed it. I'd hear a creak-squeak in the background, and knew Diane was opening the middle cabinet in the kitchen of her trailer. I knew that place better than I did the farmhouse. Diane and I would make unnecessary noises, pretend to sneeze or cough, and then Diane would say, "Hold on, Libby," pointlessly since neither of us had been talking. Valerie would usually be there, and they'd murmur to each other, Valerie's voice coaxing, Diane's a grumble, and then Diane would give me about twenty more seconds of conversation and make an excuse to go.

She stopped taking my calls when *Brand New Day* came out. Her only words: *What possessed you to do such a thing?* which was prim for Diane, but filled with more hurt than three dozen fuckyous.

I knew Diane would be at the same number, she was never going to move—the trailer was attached to her like a shell. I spent twenty minutes digging through piles at my house, looking for my old address book, one I'd had since grade school, with a pig-tailed redheaded girl on the cover that someone must have thought looked like me. Except for the smile. Diane's number was filed under A for Aunt Diane, her name inked in purple marker in my balloon-animal

cursive.

What tone to take, and what explanation for calling? Partly I just wanted to hear her wheeze into the phone, her football-coach voice bellowing in my ear, *Well, why'd it take you so long to phone back?* Partly I wanted to hear what she really thought about Ben. She'd never railed against Ben to me, she'd always been very careful about how she spoke of him, another thing I owed her retroactive thanks for.

I dialed the number, my shoulders pulling up to my ears, my throat getting tight, holding my breath and not realizing it until the third ring when it went to the answering machine and I was suddenly exhaling.

It was Valerie's voice on the machine asking me to leave a message for her or Diane.

"Hi, uh, guys. This is Libby. Just wanting to say hi and let you all know I'm still alive and." I hung up. Dialed back. "Please ignore that last message. It's Libby. I called to say I'm sorry, for. Oh, a lot of things. And I'd like to talk ..." I trailed on in case anyone was screening, then left my number, hung up, and sat on the edge of my bed, poised to get up but having no reason to.

I got up. I'd done more this day than the previous year. While I still held the phone, I made myself call Lyle, hoping for voicemail and, as usual, getting him. Before he could annoy me, I told him the meeting with Ben had gone fine and I was ready to hear who he believed was the killer. I said this all in a very precise tone, like I was doling out information with a measuring spoon.

"I knew you'd like him, I knew you'd come around," he crowed, and once again I pleased myself by not hanging up.

"I didn't say that, Lyle, I said I was ready for another assignment, if you want."

We met again at Tim-Clark's Grille, the place cloudy with grease. Another old waitress, or else the same one with a red wig, hustled around on spongy tennis shoes, her miniskirt flapping around her, looking like an ancient tennis pro. Instead of the fat man admiring his new vase, a table of hipster dudes were passing around '70s-era nudie playing cards and laughing at the big bushes on the women. Lyle was

sitting tightly at a table next to them, his chair turned awkwardly away. I sat down with him, poured a beer from his pitcher.

“So was he what you expected? What did he say?” Lyle started, his leg jittering.

I told him, except for the part about the porcelain bunny.

“See what Magda meant, though, about him being hopeless?”

I did. “I think he’s made peace with the prison sentence,” I said, an insight I shared only because the guy had given me \$300 and I wanted more. “He thinks it’s penance for not being there to protect us or something. I don’t know. I thought when I told him about my testimony, about it being ... exaggerated, that he’d jump on it, but ... nothing.”

“Legally it’s maybe not that helpful after this long,” Lyle said. “Magda says if you want to help Ben, we should compile more evidence, and you can recant your testimony when we file for habeas corpus—it’ll make more of a splash. It’s more political than legal at this point. A lot of people made big careers on that case.”

“Magda seems to know a lot.”

“She heads up this group called the Free Day Society—all about getting Ben out of prison. I sometimes go, but it seems mostly for, uh, fans. Women.”

“You ever hear of Ben with a serious girlfriend? One of those Free Day women whose name is Molly or Sally or Polly? He had a tattoo.”

“No Sallys. Polly seems like a pet’s name—my cousin had a dog named Polly. One Molly, but she’s seventy or so.”

A plate of fries appeared in front of him, the waitress definitely different from our previous one, just as old but much friendlier. I like waitresses who call me hon or sweetie, and she did.

Lyle ate fries for a while, squeezing packets of ketchup on the side of the plate, then salting and peppering the ketchup, then dipping each fry individually and placing it in his mouth with girlish care.

“Well, so tell me who you think did it,” I finally nudged.

“Who what?”

I rolled my eyes and set my head in my hands, as if it was too much

for me, and it almost was.

“Oh, right. I think Lou Cates, Krissi Cates’s dad, did it.” He leaned back in his chair with satisfaction, as if he’d just won a game of Clue.

Krissi Cates, the name jangled something. I tried to fake Lyle out, but it didn’t work.

“You do know who Krissi Cates is, right?” When I didn’t say anything, he continued, his voice taking on a sleek, patronizing tone. “Krissi Cates was a fifth-grader at your school, at Ben’s school. The day your family was killed, the police were looking to question Ben—she’d accused him of molesting her.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”

We both stared each other down, with matching you-are-crazy looks.

Lyle shook his head at me. “When you say people don’t talk to you about this stuff, you aren’t kidding.”

“She didn’t testify against Ben ...” I started.

“No, no. It’s the one smart thing Ben’s defense did, making the case that they weren’t legally linked, the molestation and the murders. But the jury was sure poisoned against him. Everyone in the area had heard that Ben had molested this nice little girl from this nice family, and that was probably what led up to his ‘satanic murders.’ You know how rumors go.”

“So, did the Krissi Cates thing ever go to trial?” I asked. “Did they prove Ben did anything wrong with her?”

“It never went forward—the police didn’t bring charges,” Lyle said. “The Cates family got a quick settlement with the school district and then they moved. But you know what I think? I think Lou Cates went to your home that night to question Ben. I think Lou Cates, who was this powerfully built sort of guy, went to the house to get some answers, and then ...”

“Flew into such a rage he decided to kill the whole family? That makes no sense at all.”

“This guy did three years for manslaughter when he was younger,

that's what I found out, he hurled a pool ball full-throttle at a guy, ended up killing him. He had a violent temper. If Lou Cates thought his daughter'd been molested, I can see rage. Then he did the pentagrams and stuff to throw off suspicion."

"Mmmm, it doesn't make sense." I had really wanted it to make sense.

"Your brother doing it doesn't make sense. It's an insane, insane crime, a lot of it isn't going to make sense. That's why people are so obsessed with these murders. If they made any sense, they wouldn't really be mysteries, right?"

I didn't say anything. It was true. I started fidgeting with the salt and pepper shakers, which were surprisingly nice for a dive.

"I mean, don't you think it's at least worth looking into?" Lyle pushed. "This massive, horrible allegation exploding the same day your family is murdered?"

"I guess. You're the boss."

"So, I say until you find Runner, see if you can get someone in the Cates family to talk to you. Five hundred dollars if it's Krissi or Lou. I just want to see if they're still telling the same story about Ben. If they can live with themselves, you know? I mean, it's got to be a lie. Right?"

I was feeling shaky again. My faith did not need to be tested right now. Still, I clung to a weird bit of assurance: Ben had never molested me. If he was a child molester, wouldn't he have started with a little girl right at home?

"Right."

"Right," Lyle repeated.

"But I'm not sure I'll have more luck than you would. I mean, I'm the sister of the guy they say molested her."

"Well, I tried and got nowhere," Lyle shrugged. "I'm not good with that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"Finessing."

"Oh, well that's definitely my kind of thing."

“Excellent. And if you’re able to set up a meeting, I’d like to come along.”

I shrugged silently, stood up, planning on leaving him with the bill, but he belted my name before I got three steps.

“Libby, do you know you have the salt and pepper shakers in your pocket?”

I paused for a second, debated acting stunned—*oh my gosh, I am so absentminded*. Instead I just nodded and hustled out the doors. I needed them.

LYLE HAD TRACKED DOWN Krissi Cates’s mother in Emporia, Kansas, where she lived with her second husband, with whom she’d had a second daughter almost twenty years after the first. Lyle had left several messages in the past year, but she’d never returned his call. That was as far as he’d gotten.

Never leave a message for someone you really want to reach. No, you keep phoning and phoning until someone picks up—out of anger or curiosity or fear—and then you blurt out whatever words will keep them on the line.

I rang Krissi’s mother twelve times before she picked up the phone, then, in a rush, said, “This is Libby Day, Ben Day’s little sister, do you remember Ben Day?”

I heard moist lips part with a puckery sound, then a thin voice murmured, “Yes, I remember Ben Day. What is this about, please?” Like I was a telemarketer.

“I’d like to talk to you or someone in your family about the charges your daughter Krissi made against Ben.”

“We don’t talk about that ... what was your name, Lizzy? I’ve remarried, and I have very little contact with my previous family.”

“Do you know how I can reach Lou or Krissi Cates?”

She let out a sigh like a single puff of smoke. “Lou would be in some bar, somewhere in the state of Kansas, I’d guess. Krissi? Drive west on I-70, just past Columbia. Take a left into any of those strip clubs. Don’t call again.”

## Ben Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

12:51 P.M.

He took a piece of pink construction paper from Krissi's bin, folded it in two, wrote on it, It's Christmas Break and I'm Thinking of You—Guess Who? With a *B* at the bottom. She'd get a blast out of that. He thought about taking something from Krissi's bin and transferring it to Libby's but decided not to. Libby turning up with something nice would be suspicious. He wondered how big a joke he and his sisters were at school. The three girls shared one-and-a-half wardrobes, Michelle running around in his old sweaters, Debby wearing what she scrounged from Michelle, and Libby in what was left: patched-up boys' blue jeans, soiled old baseball jerseys, cheap knit dresses that Debby's belly had stretched out. That was the difference with Krissi. All her clothes had snap. Diondra, too, with her perfect jeans. If Diondra's jeans were faded, it was because that was the latest style, if they had bleach splatters, it was because she'd bought them with bleach splatters. Diondra had a big allowance, she'd taken him shopping a few times, holding clothes up to him like he was a baby, telling him to smile. Telling him he could work it off, wink wink. He wasn't sure if guys should let girls buy their clothes, wasn't sure if it was cool or not. Mr. O'Malley, his homeroom teacher, always joked about new shirts his wife was making him wear, but Mr. O'Malley was married. Anyway. Diondra liked him in black and he didn't have the money to buy anything. Fucking Diondra would have her way as usual.

That's another reason it was cool to hang out with Krissi: She assumed he was cool because he was fifteen, and to her fifteen seemed extremely mature. She wasn't like Diondra, who laughed at him at weird moments. He'd ask her, "What's so funny?" and she'd just giggle through a closed mouth and sputter, "Nothing. You're cute." The first time they'd tried to have sex, he'd been so clumsy with the condom

she'd started laughing and he'd lost his hard-on. The second time she'd grabbed the condom away from him and tossed it across the room, said screw it, and put him inside her.

Now he had a hard-on, just thinking about it. He was dropping the note in Krissi's bin, his dick hard as hell, and in walked Mrs. Darksilver, the teacher for second grade.

"Hey Ben, watchoo doing here?" she smiled. She was in jeans and a sweater, penny loafers, and toddled toward him, carrying a bulletin board and a length of plaid ribbon.

He turned away from her, started toward the door back to the high school.

"Ah nothing, just wanted to drop something off in my sister's bin."

"Well, don't run away, come give me a hug at least. Never see you anymore now that you're the big high school man."

She kept coming toward him, loafers padding on the concrete, that big pink grin on her face, with the bangs cut straight across. He'd had a crush on her as a kid, that sharp fringe of black hair. He turned completely away from her and tried to hobble toward the door, his dick still jammed up against his pant leg. But just as he was turning he could tell she knew what was going on. She dropped that smile and a disgusted, embarrassed grimace came across her whole face. She didn't even say anything else, that's how he knew that she'd seen it. She was looking at the bin he was in front of—Krissi Cates, not his sister.

He felt like an animal limping away, some wounded buck that needed to be put down. Just shoot. He had flashes of guns some-times, a barrel against his temple. In one of his notebooks, he'd written a quote by Nietzsche that he'd found while flipping through *Bartlett's* one day, waiting for the football players to leave the building so he could clean:

It is always consoling to think of suicide;  
it's what gets one through many a bad night.

He'd never actually kill himself. He didn't want to be the tragic

freak that girls cried over on the news, even though they never talked to him in real life. Somehow that seemed more pathetic than his life already was. Still, at night, when things were really bad and he felt the most trapped and dickless, it was a nice thought, getting into his mother's gun cabinet (combination 5-12-69, his parents' anniversary, now a joke), taking that nice metal weight in his hands, sliding some bullets into the chamber, just as easy as squirting toothpaste, pressing it against his temple, and immediately shooting. You'd have to immediately shoot, gun to temple, finger on trigger, or you might talk yourself out of it. It had to be one motion—and then you just drop to the ground like clothes falling off a hanger. Just ... swoosh. On the floor, and you were someone else's problem for a change.

He didn't plan on doing any of that, but when he needed some release and he couldn't jerk off, or he'd already jerked off and needed more release, that's usually what he thought of. On the floor, sideways, like his body was just a pile of laundry waiting to be gathered up.

HE BUSTED THROUGH the doors and his dick went down, like just crossing into the high school emasculated him. Grabbed the bucket and rolled it back to the closet, washed his hands with hard Lava soap.

He headed down the stairwell and toward the back door as a pack of upperclassmen brushed past him toward the parking lot, his head feeling hot under the black hair, imagining what they were thinking—*freak*, just like the coach—and they said nothing, didn't even look at him, actually. Thirty seconds behind them, he banged open the doors, the sun against the snow a shocking white. If this was a video, now would be the guitar flare, the whammy bar ... Bweeeerrrr!

Outside, the guys were piling into a truck and peeling out in loose, showy loops across the parking lot. And he was unchaining his bike, his head throbbing, a drip of blood falling on the handlebar. He smeared it up with a fingertip, swiped the fingertip across the trickle on his forehead and, without thinking, put the finger in his mouth, like it was a stray glob of jelly.

He needed some relief. Beer and maybe a joint, undo himself a little. The only place to try was Trey's. Actually it wasn't Trey's place, Trey never said where he lived, but when Trey wasn't at Diondra's he most likely was at the Compound, down a long dirt road off Highway

41, surrounded by hedgeapples on both sides, and then came a big brush-hogged clearing, with a warehouse made of a hard, tin material. The whole thing rattled in the wind. In the winter, a generator hummed inside, just enough juice to run a bunch of spaceheaters and a TV with sketchy reception. Dozens of carpet samples sat in bright, smelly patches on the dirt floor and a few old ugly couches had been donated. People gathered smoking around the spaceheaters like they were actual bonfires. Everyone had beer—they just kept the cans sitting in the frost outside the door—and everyone had joints. Usually there was a 7-Eleven run at some point, whoever was flush would come back with a few dozen burritos, some microwaved, some still frozen. If they had extra, they jammed the burritos in the snow alongside the beer.

Ben had never been there without Diondra, it was her crowd, but where the fuck else was he going to go? Showing up with a broken forehead was sure to get him a grudging nod and a can of Beast. They might not be friendly—Trey was never exactly friendly—but it wasn't in their code to turn anyone away. Ben was sure to be the youngest, although there'd been younger: once a couple had shown up with a little boy, naked except for a pair of jeans. While everyone got stoned, the kid sat silently sucking his thumb on the sofa, staring at Ben. Mostly though, people were twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, the age where they'd have gone to college if they hadn't dropped out of high school. He'd stop by, and maybe they'd like him, and Diondra would stop calling him Tag (short for Tagalong) every time she took him there. They'd at least let him sit in the corner and drink a beer for a few hours.

Maybe it'd be smarter to go home, but fuck that.

THE WAREHOUSE WAS rattling when Ben finally pedaled up, the tin sides vibrating with a guitar riff inside. Sometimes guys brought amps with them, worked the whammy bar until everyone's ears shrank to pinholes. Whoever was playing was pretty good—some Venom song, perfect for his mood. RumadumDUMrum! It was the noise of incoming horsemen, looters, and burners. The sound of chaos.

He let his bike fall over in the snow and worked his hands loose, cracked his neck. His head hurt now, a ringing sort of hurt, not as easy to ignore as a headache. He was hungry as shit. He'd ridden up and down the highway, trying to talk himself into making the turn for

the warehouse. He needed a good story for the cut on his face, something that wouldn't get him as much shit as *awwww, baby fell off his bike*. Now he daydreamed that Diondra or Trey would pull up just in time, escort him in, no biggie, everyone all smiles and liquor when he walked through the door.

But he'd have to go in alone. He could see for miles across all that flat snow, and no cars were coming. He pushed the flap up with a boot and squeezed in, the guitar peel banging around the walls like a cornered animal. The guy playing the guitar, Ben had seen before. He claimed he was a roadie at one point with Van Halen but he was short on details of how anything really worked on the road. He glanced past Ben but didn't register him, his eyes floating out to an imaginary crowd. Four guys and a girl, all with fried-out kinky hair, all older, passing around a joint, slouched around the carpet squares. They barely looked at him. The ugliest guy had his hands on the girl's hips, she was stretched across him like a cat. Her nose was stunted and her face was red with acne sores and she seemed deeply stoned.

Ben walked across the space—there was a huge gap between the door and the carpet squares—and sat down on one thin green patch about four feet away from the group, kept his eyes sideways on them so he could give a nod. No one was eating, there'd be no food to scrounge. If he'd been Trey, he'd have given them a shake of his head and said, "Set me up with some of that, will ya?" and he'd be smoking with them at least.

The guitar player, Alex, was actually pretty decent. A guitar was another thing Ben wanted, a Floyd Rose Tremolo. He'd fucked around on one in Kansas City when he and Diondra had gone into a guitar store, and it felt OK, like something he could pick up. At least learn enough to play a few really kickass songs, come back here and make the warehouse shake. Everyone he knew had something they were good at, even if it was just being good at spending money, like Diondra. Whenever he told her things he wanted to learn, things he wanted to do, she laughed and said what he needed to do was get a decent paycheck.

"Groceries cost money, electricity costs money, you don't even understand," she'd say. Diondra paid a lot of the bills at her house since her parents were gone so much, that was true, but she paid the bills with her parents' stinking money. Ben wasn't sure being able to

write a check was such an amazing thing. He wondered what time it was and wished he'd just gone over to her house and waited. Now he'd have to stay here an hour or so, so they wouldn't think he was leaving because no one was talking to him. His pants were still damp from the bucket spill, and he could smell old tuna on the front of his shirt.

"Hey," said the girl. "Hey kid."

He looked up at her, the black hair falling over an eye.

"Shouldn't you be in school or something?" she said, her words coming in dopey mounds. "Why are you here?"

"It's break."

"He says it's break," she told her boyfriend. The guy, mangy and sunk-cheeked, with an outline of a moustache, peered up at that.

"You know someone here?" the boyfriend asked him.

Ben gestured toward Alex. "I know him."

"Hey Alex, you know this kid?"

Alex stopped the guitar, paused with both legs wide in a rocker pose and looked at Ben, hunched on the floor. Shook his head.

"Nah, man. I don't hang out with middle schoolers."

This was the sort of shit they always gave him. Ben had thought the new black hair would have helped, made him look less young. But guys just liked to fuck with him, or ignore him. It was something about the way he was built, or the way he walked, or something in his blood. He was always picked third to last in any team game—the afterthought boy who was grabbed right before the real shitballs. Guys seemed to know it instantly; they flirted with Diondra in front of him all the time. Like they knew his dick wilted a little bit when he entered a room. Well, fuck them, he was sick of it.

"Suck my dick," Ben muttered.

"Wohhhh! The little guy is pissed!"

"Looks like he's been in a fight," the girl said.

"Dude, dude, you been in a fight?" The music had stopped entirely now. Alex had propped his guitar up against one icy wall and was

smoking with the rest, grinning and bobbing his head. Their voices boomed up to the ceiling and echoed out, like fireworks.

Ben nodded.

“Yeah, who’d you fight?”

“No one you know.”

“Ah, I know pretty much everyone. Try me. Who was it, your little brother? You get beat up by your little brother?”

“Trey Teepano.”

“You lie,” Alex said. “Trey’d kick your ass.”

“You fought that crazy Indian mother fucker? Isn’t Trey part Indian?” said the boyfriend, ignoring Alex now.

“What the fuck that got to do with anything, Mike?” one of their friends asked. He sucked in some weed with a roach clip, the bright pink feather fluttering in the cold. The girl finished it off, cashed the joint, and snapped the roach clip back into her hair. One mousy curl tweaked out crookedly from her head.

“I hear he’s into some scary-ass shit,” Mike said. “Like serious, conjuring Satan shit.”

Trey was a poser, so far as Ben could tell. He talked about special midnight meetings in Wichita where blood was spilled in different rituals. He had shown up at Diondra’s one night in October, cranked and shirtless and smeared with blood. Swore he and some friends had killed some cattle outside of Lawrence. Said they’d thought about going into campus, kidnapping some college kid for sacrifice too, but had gotten wasted instead. He may have been telling the truth on that one—it was all over the news the next day, four cows slaughtered with machetes, their entrails gone. Ben had seen the photos: all of them lying on their sides, big mound-bodies and sad knobby legs. It was fucking hard to kill a cow, there was a reason they made good leather. Of course, Trey worked out a few hours a day to metal, pumping and squeezing and cursing, Ben had seen the routine. Trey was a strutting, tan bundle of knots, and he could probably kill a cow with a machete, and he was probably fucking loony enough to do it for kicks. But as for the Satan part? Ben thought the Devil would want something more useful than cow entrails. Gold. Maybe a kid. To prove

loyalty, like when gangs make a new guy shoot somebody.

“He is,” Ben said. “We are. We get into some dark shit.”

“I thought you just said you were fighting him,” Mike said, and finally, finally reached behind him into a Styrofoam cooler and handed Ben an Olympia Gold, icy-wet. Ben chugged it, put out his hand for another, and was surprised to actually get a second beer instead of a load of shit.

“We fight. When you do some of the stuff we do, you’re going to end up in a fight.” This sounded as vague as Alex’s roadie stories.

“Were you one of the guys who killed those cows?” the girl asked.

Ben nodded. “We had to. It was an order.”

“Weird order, man,” said the quiet guy from the corner. “That was my hamburger.”

They laughed, everyone did, and Ben tried to look smooth but tough. He shook his hair down in front of his eyes and felt the beer chill him. Two fast, tinny beers on an empty belly and he was buzzing, but he didn’t want to come off as a lightweight.

“So why do you kill cows?” the girl asked.

“Feels good, satisfies some requirements. You can’t just be in the club, you have to really do stuff.”

Ben had hunted lots, his dad taking him out once, and then his mom insisted he go with her. A bonding thing. She didn’t realize how embarrassing it was to go hunting with your mom. But it was his mom who’d made him a decent shot, taught him how to handle the recoil, when to pull the trigger, how to wait and be patient for hours in the blind. Ben had shot and killed dozens of animals, from rabbits up to deer.

Now he thought of mice, how his mom’s barncat had rooted out a nest, and gobbled down two or three gooey newborn mice before dropping the other half dozen on the back steps. Runner had just left—the second time this was—so it was Ben’s job to put them out of their misery. They’d wriggled silently, twisting like pink eels, eyes glued shut, and by the time he’d run back and forth to the barn twice, trying to figure out what to do, the ants were swarming them. He’d taken a shovel, finally, and smashed them into the ground, bits of

flesh splattering his arms, getting angrier, each big loose wield of the shovel infuriating him more. *You think I'm such a pussy, Runner, you think I'm such a pussy!* By the time it was over, only a sticky spot on the ground remained. He was sweaty, and when he looked up, his mother was watching him from behind the screen door. She'd been quiet at dinner that night, that worried face turned on him, the sad eyes. He just wanted to turn to her and say, *Sometimes it feels good to fuck with something. Instead of always being fucked with.*

"Like?" the girl nudged.

"Like ... well, sometimes things have to die. We have to kill them. Just like Jesus requires sacrifice, well, so does Satan."

Satan, he said it, like it was some guy's name. It didn't feel bogus and it didn't feel scary. It felt normal, like he actually knew what he was talking about. Satan. He could almost picture him here, this guy all long-faced and horned, with those split-open goat eyes.

"You seriously believe this shit—what's your name again?"

"Ben. Day."

"Ben-Gay?"

"Yeah, never heard that one." Ben took another beer from the cooler, without asking, he'd bumped over a few feet since they started talking, and as the booze chilled him out, everything he said, all the shit rolling out of his mouth, seemed undeniable. He could become an undeniable guy, he could see it, even with that last crack, how that asshole knew his joke was going to whistle out and flop.

They fired up another joint, the girl pulling her clip out of her hair again, the goofy, friendly flip of hair falling back to its normal place, her not looking as nice without it. Ben breathed in, took a decent amount, but—don't cough, don't cough—not enough so he got seeds in the back of his throat. This was ditchweed stuff, the kind that got you dirty high. It got you paranoid and talky, instead of mellowing you out. Ben had a theory that all the chemical runoff from all the farms rolled into the ground and was sucked up by these mean, greedy plants. It infected them: all that insecticide and bright green fertilizer was settling into the grooves of his lungs and his brain.

The girl was looking at him now, that dazed look Debby got after too much TV, like she needed to say something but was too lazy to

move her mouth. He wanted something to eat.

*The Devil is never hungry.* That's what he thought then, out of nowhere, the words in his brain like a prayer.

Alex was plucking at his guitar again, some Van Halen, some AC/DC, a Beatles song, and then suddenly he was fingering "O Little Town of Bethlehem," the binky chords making Ben's head ache more.

"Hey, no Christmas songs, Ben wouldn't like that," Mike called out.

"Holy shit, he's bleeding!" the girl said.

The cut in his forehead had opened up, and now it was dripping lushly down his face onto his pants. The girl tried to hand him a fast-food napkin, but he waved her off, smeared the blood across his face like warpaint.

Alex had stopped playing the song, and they all just stared at Ben, uneasy smiles and stiff shoulders, leaning slightly away from him. Mike held out the joint like an offering, on the tips of his fingers to avoid contact. Ben didn't want it, but breathed in deep again, the sour smoke burning more lung tissue.

It was then that the door-flap made its wavy warble and Trey walked in. He had his arms folded, feet planted, slouchy stance going, rolling his eyes over the room and then jerking his head back like Ben was a fish gone bad.

"What are you doing here? Diondra here?"

"She's in Salina. Just thought I'd stop by, kill some time. They been entertaining me."

"We heard about your fight," the girl said, all sly smiles, her lips thin crescents. "And other bad stuff."

Trey, his long slick black hair and chiseled face, was unreadable. He looked at the group on the floor, and at Ben squatting with them, and for once seemed unsure of how to play the situation.

"Yeah, what's he been saying?" He kept his eyes on Ben and grabbed a beer from the girl without even looking at her. Ben wondered if they'd slept together, Trey had the same disdain Ben once saw him direct at an ex-girlfriend: *I am not angry or sad or happy to see you. I could not give a shit. You don't even ripple.*

“Some shit about the Devil and what you guys do to ... help him,” she said.

Trey got his grin going then, sat down across from Ben—Ben avoiding eye contact.

“Hey Trey?” Alex said. “You’re Indian aren’t you?”

“Yeah, you want me to scalp you?”

“You’re not full though, right?” the girl blurted.

“My mom’s white. I don’t date Indian chicks.”

“Why not?” she asked, running the roach clip feather in and out of her hair, the metal teeth tangling themselves in the waves.

“Because Satan likes white pussy.” He smiled and cocked his head at her, and she started to giggle, but then he kept the same expression and she shut down, her ugly boyfriend putting an arm back on her hip.

They’d liked Ben’s patter, but Trey was spookier. He sat there almost cross-legged, eyeing them in a way that seemed friendly on the surface, but was entirely without warmth. And while his body was folded in a casual way, every limb was held at a tense, sharp angle. There was something deeply unkind about him. No one offered to pass the joint again.

They all sat quietly for a few minutes, Trey’s mood unnerving everyone. Usually he was the loud, smart-ass, fight-starting beer swigger, but when he got upset it was like he sent out hundreds of invisible, insistent fingers to push everyone down by the shoulders. Sink everyone.

“So you want to go?” he suddenly asked Ben. “I got my truck. I got Diondra’s keys. We can go to her place til she gets home, she’s got cable. Better’n this freezing cold shithole.”

Ben nodded, gave a jittery wave to the crowd, and followed Trey who was already outside, tossing his beer can on the snow. Ben was definitely altered. Words clotted in the back of his throat, and as he climbed into the GMC he tried to stammer some excuse to Trey. Trey who’d just saved his ass, for unclear reasons. Why was he the one with Diondra’s keys? Probably because he’d asked for them. Ben didn’t think to ask enough.

“I hope you’re ready to back that shit up, what you were saying in there,” Trey said, putting the stick in reverse. The GMC was a tank, and Trey drove it straight across the farm property, bumping over old cornstalks and irrigation ditches, forcing Ben to grab on to the armrest to keep from biting his tongue off. Trey landed a meaningful glance on Ben’s tight grip.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Maybe tonight you become a man. Maybe.”

Trey flicked on his cassette player. Iron Maiden, midsong, hell yes, the words hissing at Ben: *666 ... Satan ... Sacrifice.*

Ben worked the music in his head, his brain sizzling, feeling angry-frantic, the way he always did to metal, the guitar strum never letting up, bundling him tenser and tenser, bumping his head up and down, the drums shooting up his spine, the whole thing this rage-frenzy, not letting him think straight, just keeping him in a tight shake. His whole body felt like a cocked fist, ready for release.

## Libby Day

NOW

The stretch of I-70 between Kansas City and St. Louis was hours and hours of pure ugly driving. Flat, dead-yellow, and littered with billboards: a fetus curled up like a kitten (Abortion Stops a Beating Heart); a living room turned red from the glare of ambulance lights (Take Care Crime-Scene Cleanup Specialists); a remarkably plain woman giving fuck-me eyes to passing motorists (Hot Jimmy's Gentlemen's Club). The billboards ominously advising love of Jesus were in direct proportion to those advertising porn liquidators, and the signs for local restaurants consistently misused quotation marks: Herb's Highway Diner—The "Best" Meal in Town; Jolene's Rib House—Come in for Our "Delicious" Baby Back Ribs.

Lyle was in the passenger seat. He'd debated the pros and cons of joining me (maybe I would have more rapport with Krissi alone, us both being women; on the other hand, he did know this part of the case better; but then again, he may get too excited, ask her too many questions, and then blow it, he sometimes got ahead of himself, if he had one flaw it was that he sometimes got ahead of himself; then again, \$500 was a lot of money and he felt somewhat entitled, no offense, to come along). Finally I'd snapped into the phone that I'd swing by Sarah's Pub in thirty minutes, and if he was out front, he could come. Click. Now he was fussing next to me, flicking the door lock up and down, fiddling with the radio, reading each sign out loud, like he was trying to reassure himself of something. We drove past a fireworks warehouse the size of a cathedral, and at least three bundles of fatality markers: small white crosses and plastic flowers gathering dust on the side of the road. Gas stations made themselves known with signs skinnier and taller than the wilting weather vanes of nearby farms.

On one ridge was a billboard with a familiar face: Lisette Stephens, with that joyful grin, a phone number below for information on her

disappearance. I wondered how long til they took it down, drained of hope or money.

“Oh God, her,” Lyle said, as we passed Lisette. I bristled, but my feelings were similar. After a while it was almost rude to ask you to worry about someone who was clearly dead. Unless it was my family.

“So Lyle, can I ask you, what is it that makes you so obsessed with the ... this case?” As I said it, the sky got just dark enough to switch the highway lights on, and all in a row, into the horizon, they blinked white, like my question had intrigued them.

Lyle was staring at his leg, listening sideways like he usually did. He had a habit of pushing one ear toward whoever was speaking, and then he'd wait a few seconds, like he was translating whatever was said into another language.

“It's just a classic whodunit. There are a lot of viable theories, so it's interesting to talk about,” he said, still not looking at me. “And there's you. And Krissi. Children who ... caused something. I'm interested in that.”

“Children who caused something?”

“Something to happen, something that got bigger than they were, something that had unintentionally major consequences. Ripples. That interests me.”

“Why?”

He paused. “Just does.”

We were the two unlikeliest people to charm information out of someone. Stunted human beings who got awkward every time we tried to express ourselves. I didn't really care if we got much from Krissi, though, as the more I thought about Lyle's theory, the more it seemed like bunk.

After another forty minutes of driving, the strip clubs started showing up: dismal, crouched blocks of cement, most without any real name, just neon signs shouting Live Girls! Live Girls! Which I guess is a better selling point than Dead Girls. I imagined Krissi Cates pulling into the gravel parking lot, getting ready to take off her clothes at a strip club that was so entirely generic. There's something disturbing about not even bothering with a name. Whenever I see news stories

about children who were killed by their parents, I think: But how could it be? They cared enough to give this kid a name, they had a moment—at least one moment—when they sifted through all the possibilities and picked one specific name for their child, decided what they would call their baby. How could you kill something you cared enough to name?

“This will be my first strip bar,” Lyle said, and gave his pert-lipped smile.

I pulled off the highway, to the left, as Krissi’s mother had advised—when I’d phoned the only club listed, a greasy man told me he thought Krissi was “around”—and rattled into a pasture-sized parking lot for three strip bars, all in a row. A gas station and trucker park sat at the far, far end: in the bright white glow, I saw the silhouettes of women scuttling like cats between the cabs, doors opening and shutting, bare legs kicking out as they leaned in to line up the next trick. I assumed most of the strippers ended up working the trucker park once the clubs were done with them.

I got out of the car and fumbled with the notes Lyle had given me, a neat, numbered list of questions to ask Krissi, if we found her. (Number One: Do you still maintain that you were molested by Ben Day when you were a child? If so, please explain.) I started to review the rest of the questions when a movement to my right caught my attention. Far down in the trucker park, a small shadow dislodged itself from the side of a cab and started toward me in an intensely straight line, the kind of straight you walk when you’re wasted and trying not to look it. I could see the shoulders pushed forward, far out ahead of the body, as if the girl had no choice but to keep moving toward me once she started. And she *was* a girl, I saw when she reached the other side of my car. She had a wide, doll-like face that glowed in the streetlight, light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail from a domed forehead.

“Hey, you got a cigarette I could bum?” she said, her head jittering like a Parkinson’s patient.

“You OK?” I asked, trying to get a better look at her, guess her age. Fifteen, sixteen. She was shivering in a thin sweatshirt over a miniskirt and boots that were supposed to look sexy but on her looked childish, a kindergartner playing cowgirl.

“You got a cigarette?” she repeated, brightening, her eyes wet. She gave a quick bounce on her heels, looked from me to Lyle, who was watching the pavement.

I had a pack somewhere in the back of my car, so I leaned in and rummaged through old fast-food wrappers, an assortment of tea bags I’d swiped from a restaurant (another thing no one should ever buy: tea bags), and a pile of cheap metal spoons (ditto). The cigarette pack had three cigs left, one of them broken. I doled out the other two, flicked a lighter, the girl leaning in crookedly, then finally hitting the flame, *Sorry I can’t see a thing without my glasses*. I lit my cigarette, let my head do its heat-wave dance after that first rush of nicotine.

“I’m Colleen,” she said, sucking on the cigarette. The temperature had dropped quickly with the sun, we stood across from each other bouncing up and down to keep warm.

Colleen. It was too sweet a name for a hooker. Someone had once had different plans for this girl.

“How old are you, Colleen?”

She glanced back toward the truck park and smiled, hunched down in her shoulders. “Oh, don’t worry, I’m not working there. I work over there.” She pointed to the middle strip club with her middle finger. “I’m legal. I don’t need to ...” She nodded back toward the row of trucks, all of them immobile, despite what was happening inside. “We just try to keep an eye out for some of the girls that do work it. Sisterhood thing. You new?”

I’d worn a low-cut top, assuming it might make Krissi more comfortable when I found her, signal I wasn’t a prude. Colleen was looking at my cleavage now with the eyes of a jeweler, trying to match my tits to the correct club.

“Oh, no. We’re looking for a friend. Krissi Cates? You know her?”

“She may have a different last name now,” Lyle said, then looked away toward the highway.

“I know a Krissi. Older?”

“Mid-thirties or so.” Colleen’s whole body was humming. I assumed she was on uppers. Or maybe she was just cold.

“Right,” she said, finishing her cigarette in one aggressive pull. “She

picks up some day shifts at Mike's sometimes." She pointed to the farthest club, where the neon said only G-R-S.

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's not. But you gotta retire sometime, right? Still it sucks for her, because I guess she spent a lot of money on a boob job, but Mike still didn't think she was primetime anymore. But at least the boob job was tax deductible."

Colleen said all this with the perky ruthlessness of a teenager who knew she had decades before such humiliations touched her.

"So should we come back during the day shift?" Lyle asked.

"Mmm. You could wait here," she said in a babyish voice. "She should be done soon." She motioned back toward the line of trucks. "I need to get ready for work, thanks for the cigarette."

She trotted, again with that push of the shoulders, toward the dark middle building, flung the door wide, and disappeared inside.

"I think we should go, this sounds like a dead end," Lyle said. I was about to snap at him for going chickenshit on me, tell him to just wait in the car, when another shadow climbed out of a truck far back in the line, and began heading toward the parking lot. All the women here walked as if they were pushing against a monstrous headwind. My stomach lurched at a lonely image of me trapped here or somewhere like it. It wasn't so unlikely, for a woman with no family, no money and no skills. A woman with a certain unwholesome pragmatism. I'd spread my legs for nice men I knew would be good for a few months of free meals. I'd done it and never felt guilty, so how much would it take to find me here? I felt my throat tighten for a second, and then snapped to. I had money coming now.

The figure was all shadow: I could make out a halo of ruined hair, the jutting edges of short shorts, an oversized purse, and thick, muscular legs. She came out of the dark to reveal a tanned face with eyes that were set slightly close together. Cute but canine. Lyle nudged me, gave me a searching look to see if I recognized her. I didn't but I gave a quick wave just in case and she stopped jerkily. I asked if she was Krissi Cates.

"I am," she said, her vulpine face surprisingly eager, helpful, like she thought something good might be about to happen. It was a

strange expression to see, considering the direction she'd come from.

"I was hoping to talk to you."

"OK." She shrugged. "About what?" She couldn't figure me out: not a cop, not a social worker, not a stripper, not her kid's teacher, assuming she had a kid. Lyle she only glanced at, since he was taking turns gaping at her or turning almost entirely away from us. "About working here? You a reporter?"

"Well, to be frank, it's about Ben Day."

"Oh. OK. We can go inside Mike's, you can buy me a drink?"

"Are you married? Is your name still Cates?" Lyle blurted.

Krissi frowned at him, then looked at me for explanation. I widened my eyes, grimaced: the look women give each other when they're embarrassed of the men they're with. "I got married, once," she said. "Last name's Quanto now. Only because I been too lazy to change it back. You know what a pain in the ass that is?"

I smiled as if I did, and then suddenly I was following her across the parking lot, trying to keep out of the way of the giant leather purse that bounced against her hip, giving Lyle a look to pull it together. Just before we got to the door, she ducked against the side of the club, murmuring, *you mind?* and snuffed something from a packet of foil she pulled from her rear pocket. Then she turned her back entirely to me and made a gargling sound that must have hurt.

Krissi turned back, a broad smile on. "Whatever gets you through the night ..." she sang, waggling the foil packet, but partway through the verse she seemed to forget the tune. She snuffed her nose, which was so compact it reminded me of an outie belly button, the kind pregnant women get. "Mike's a Nazi about this stuff," she said, and flung the door open.

I'd been to strip clubs before—back in the '90s when it was considered brazen, back when women were dumb enough to think it was sexy, standing around pretending to be hot for women because men thought it was hot if you were hot for women. I guess I hadn't been to one this low-rent though. It was small and filmy, the walls and floors seemed to have an extra wax coating. A young girl was dancing gracelessly on a low stage. She marched in place, actually, her waist rolling over a thong two sizes too small, pasties waffling

over nipples that pointed outward, walleyed. Every few beats she would turn her back to the men, then bend over and peer at them through her spread legs, her face going quickly red from the flood of blood to her head. In response, the men—there were only three of them, all in flannel, hunched over beers at separate tables—would grunt or nod. A massive bouncer studied himself in the wall mirror, bored. We sat down, three in a row at the bar, me in the middle. Lyle had his arms folded, his hands in his armpits, trying not to touch anything, trying to look like he was looking at the dancer without really looking at her. I turned away from the stage, wrinkled my nose.

“I know, right?” Krissi said. “Goddam armpit of a place. This is on you, right? Because I have no cash.” Before I even nodded she was ordering herself a vodka and cranberry, and I just asked for the same. Lyle got carded, and as he was showing the bartender his ID, he started doing some uncomfortable impersonation, his voice going even more ducklike, a weird smile pasted to his face. He made no eye contact, and gave no real signal that he was doing an impersonation. The bartender stared at him, and Lyle said, *The Graduate*. *You seen it?* And the guy just turned away.

So did I.

“So, what do you want to know?” Krissi smiled, leaned toward me. I debated whether to tell her who I was, but she seemed so disinterested I decided to save myself the trouble. Here was a woman who just wanted company. I kept glancing at her breasts, which were even bigger than mine, tightly packed and well trussed so they poked straight out. I pictured them under there, shiny and globular like cellophaned chicken.

“You like ’em?” Krissi chirped, giving them a bounce. “They’re semi-new. Well, I guess they’re almost a year now. I should have a birthday party for them. Not that they’ve helped me here. Fuckin’ Mike keeps screwing me on shifts. It’s OK though, I always wanted bigger boobs. And now I have them. If I could only get rid of this, is what I need to get rid of.” She grabbed at a minimal fat roll, pretending it was much worse than it was. Just beneath it, the white glint of a caesarian scar snaked out.

“So, Ben Day,” she continued. “Red-headed bastard. He really fucked my life up.”

“So, you maintain you were molested by him?” Lyle said, leaning out from behind me like a squirrel.

I turned around to glare at him, but Krissi didn’t seem to care. She had the incuriosity of the drugged. She continued to speak only to me.

“Yeah. Yeah. It was all part of his satanic thing. I think he’d have sacrificed me, I think that was the plan. He’d have killed me if they hadn’t caught him for, you know, what he did to his family.”

People always wanted their piece of the murders. Just like everyone in Kinnakee knew someone who’d screwed my mom, everyone had suffered some close call with Ben. He’d threatened to kill them, he’d kicked their dog, he’d looked at them really scary-like one day. He’d bled when he heard a Christmas song. He’d shown them the mark of Satan, tucked behind one ear, and asked them to join his cult. Krissi had that eagerness, that intake of air before she started talking.

“So what happened exactly?” I asked.

“You want the PG or R version?” She ordered another round of vodka and cranberry and then called out for three Slippery Nipple shots. The bartender poured them, pre-made, from a plastic jug, raised an eyebrow at me, asked us if we wanted to start a tab.

“It’s fine, Kevin, my friend’s got it,” Krissi said, and then laughed. “What’s your name anyway?”

I avoided the question by asking the bartender how much I owed, paid it from a fan of twenties so Krissi knew I had more money. Takes a mooch to catch a mooch.

“You’ll love these, like drinking a cookie,” she said. “Cheers!” she raised the shot up with a screw-you gesture toward a dark window in the back of the club, where I guessed Mike was sitting. We drank, the shot sitting thick in my throat, Lyle making a *whoo!* noise like it had been whiskey.

After a few beats, Krissi readjusted a boob and then pulled in another big gulp of air. “So, yeah. I was eleven, Ben was fifteen. He started hanging around me after school, just always watching me. I mean, I got that a lot, I always got that. I was always a cute kid, I’m not bragging, I just was. And we had a lot of money. My dad—” here I caught a flicker of pain, a quick wrinkle of her lip that exposed a single tooth—“he was a self-made man. Got into the videotape

industry right at the start, he was the biggest videotape wholesaler in the Midwest.”

“Like, movies?”

“No, like blank tapes, for people to record stuff on. Remember? Well, you probably were too young.”

I wasn’t.

“Anyway, so I was kind of an easy target maybe. Not like I was a latchkey kid or anything, but my mom didn’t keep the best eye out for me all the time, I guess.” This time a more obvious look of bitterness.

“Wait, why are you here again?” she asked.

“I’m researching the case.”

Her mouth drooped down at the corners. “Oh. For a second I thought my mom sent you. I know she knows I’m here.”

She clicked long, coral nails on the counter and I hid my left hand, with its stumped finger, under my shotglass. I knew I should care something about Krissi’s homelife but I didn’t. Well, I cared enough not to tell her that her mom was never going to check up on her.

One of the patrons at one of the plastic tables kept peeling off glances at us, looking over his shoulder with a drunk pissiness. I wanted to get out of there, leave Krissi and her issues behind.

“So,” Krissi began again. “Ben was really sneaky with me. He’d, like ... you want some chips? The chips are really good here.”

The chips hung in cheap snack packs behind the bar. *The chips are really good here.* I had to like the woman for working me so hard. I nodded a yes and soon Krissi was tearing into a bag, the stench of sour-cream-and-onion making my mouth water in spite of its better judgment. Yellow flavoring stuck to Krissi’s bubblegum lipgloss.

“Anyway, so Ben earned my trust and then started molesting me.”

“How did he earn your trust?”

“You know, gum, candy, saying nice things to me.”

“And how did he molest you?”

“He’d take me into the closet where he kept his janitor stuff, he was a janitor at the school, I remember he always smelled horrible, like

dirty bleach. He'd take me in there after school and make me perform oral sex on him and then he'd perform oral sex on me and he'd make me swear allegiance to Satan. I was so so scared. He'd tell me, you know, that he'd hurt my parents if I told."

"How did he make you go into the closet?" Lyle asked. "If it was at school?"

Krissi turtled her neck at that, the same angry gesture I've always made when anyone questioned my testimony about Ben.

"Just, you know, threaten me. He had an altar in there, he'd pull it out, it was an upside-down cross. I think some dead animals too that he'd killed were in there. A sacrifice thing. That's why I think he was working up to killing me. But he got his family instead. The whole family was into it, that's what I heard. That the whole family was worshiping the Devil and stuff." She licked chip shards off her thick plastic fingernails.

"I doubt that," I muttered.

"Well, how do you know?" Krissi snapped. "I lived through this, OK?"

I kept waiting for her to figure out who I was, to let my face—not so different from Ben's face—float into her memory, to notice the wide hairline of red roots springing from my head.

"So how many times did Ben molest you?"

"Countless. Countless." She nodded somberly.

"How did your dad react when you told him what Ben had done to you?" Lyle asked.

"Oh my god he was so protective of me, he freaked, went totally ballistic. He drove around town that day, the day of the murders, looking for Ben. I always think if he'd only found Ben, he'd have killed him, and then Ben's family would still be alive. Isn't that sad?"

My gut clenched at that and then my anger flared back.

"Ben's family—the horrible Devil worshipers?"

"Well, maybe I was exaggerating on that." Krissi cocked her head, the way grown-ups do when they're trying to placate a child. "I'm sure they were nice Christian people. Just think, if my dad had found

Ben though ...”

Just think if your dad didn't find Ben and instead found my family. Found a gun, found an axe, wiped us out. Almost wiped us out.

“Did your dad come back to your house that night?” Lyle asked. “Did you see him after midnight?”

Krissi lowered her chin again, raised her eyebrows at me, and I added a more reassuring, “I mean, how did you know he never made contact with any of the Days?”

“Because I'm serious, he would have done some serious damage. I was like, the apple of his eye. It killed him, what happened to me. Killed him.”

“He live around here?” Lyle was freaking her out, his intensity was laserlike.

“Uh, we've lost touch,” she said, already looking around the bar for the next score. “I think it was all too much for him.”

“Your family sued the school district, didn't they?” Lyle said, leaning in, getting greedy. I moved my stool so I blocked him off a bit, hoping he'd get the idea.

“Hell yeah. They needed to be sued, letting someone like that work there, letting a little girl get molested right under their noses. I came from a really good family—”

Lyle cut her off. “Do you mind if I ask, with the settlement ... how did you end up, uh, here?” The customer at the table was now turned around entirely in his chair, watching us, belligerent.

“My family had some business setbacks. The money's been gone a long time. It's not like it's a bad thing, working here. People always think that. It's not, it's empowering, it's fun, it makes people happy. How many people can say all that about their jobs? It's not like I'm a whore.”

I frowned before I could help myself, looked in the direction of the truck park.

“That?” Krissi fake-whispered. “I was just getting a hold of a little something for tonight. I wasn't ... oh God. No. Some girls do, but I don't. There's some poor girl, sixteen years old, works it with her mom. I try to look out for her. Colleen. I keep thinking I should call

child services on her or something? Who do you even call for something like that?"

Krissi asked it with all the concern of finding a new gynecologist.

"Can we get your dad's address?" Lyle asked.

Krissi stood up, about twenty minutes after I would have. "I told you, we're not in touch," she said.

Lyle started to say something when I turned to him, poked a finger toward his chest and mouthed, Shut up. He opened his mouth, shut it, looked at the girl onstage, who was now pantomiming fucking the floor, and walked out the door.

It was too late, though, Krissi was already saying she had to go meet someone. As I was settling up with the bartender she asked me if she could borrow twenty dollars.

"I'll buy Colleen some dinner with it," she lied. Then she quickly changed it to fifty. "I just haven't cashed my work check yet. I will totally pay you back." She made an elaborate play out of getting a sheet of paper and a pen for me, told me to write down my address and she'd totally totally mail me the money.

I mentally put the cash on Lyle's tab, forked it over to Krissi, her counting it in front of me like I might shortchange her. She opened the big maw of her purse and a child's sippy cup rolled out onto the floor.

"Leave it," she waved at me when I bent to pick it up, and so I left it.

Then I took the greasy scrap of paper and wrote down my address and my name. Libby Day. My name is Libby Day, you lying whore.

## Patty Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

1:50 P.M.

Patty wondered how many hours she and Diane had spent rumbling around in cars together: a thousand? two thousand? Maybe if you added it all up, a sum total of two years, put end to end, the way mattress companies always did: You spend a third of your life asleep, why not do it on a ComfortCush? Eight years standing in lines, they say. Six years peeing. Put like that, life was grim. Two years waiting in the doctor's office, but a total of three hours watching Debby at breakfast laughing until milk started dribbling down her chin. Two weeks eating sippy pancakes her girls made for her, the middle still sour with batter. Only one hour staring in amazement as Ben unconsciously tucked his baseball cap behind his ears in a gesture mirror-perfect to what his grandpa did, his grandpa dead when Ben was just a baby. Six *years* of hauling manure, though, three years of ducking calls from bill collectors. Maybe a month of having sex, maybe a day of having good sex. She'd slept with three men in her life. Her gentle high school boyfriend; Runner, the hotshot who stole her from her gentle high school boyfriend and left her with four (wonderful) children; and a guy she dated for a few months somewhere in the years after Runner left. They'd slept together three times with the kids at home. It always ended awkwardly. Ben, sulky and possessive at age eleven, would park himself in the kitchen so he could glower at them as they left her bedroom in the morning, Patty worrying about the guy's semen on her, that smell so stark and embarrassing with your children still in their pajamas. It was clearly not going to work from the start, and she'd never gotten the courage up to try again. Libby would graduate from high school in eleven years, so maybe then. She'd be forty-three, which was right when women were supposed to peak sexually. Or something. Maybe it was menopause.

“We heading to the school?” Diane asked, and Patty pulled out of her three-second trance to remember their horrible errand, their mission: find her son and, what? Hide him away til this blew over? Drive him to the little girl’s house and straighten it all out? In family movies, the mom always caught the son stealing, and she’d march him back over to the drugstore and get him to hand over the candy on a shaky palm, and beg forgiveness. She knew Ben shoplifted some. Before he started locking his door, she’d occasionally find strange, pocket-sized items in his room. A candle, batteries, a plastic packet of toy soldiers. She’d never said anything, which was horrible. Part of her didn’t want to deal with it—drive all the way into town, and talk to some kid who got paid minimum wage and didn’t care anyway. And the other part (even worse) thought, Why the hell not? The boy had so little, why not keep pretending this was something a friend gave him? Let him have this stolen trifle, a pebble-plunk of a wrongdoing in the grand scheme.

“No, he wouldn’t go to the school. He only works Sundays.”

“Well, where?”

They came to a stoplight, swaying on a line like laundry. The road dead-ended onto the pasture of a land-rich family that lived in Colorado. Turn right and they were heading to Kinnakee proper—the town, the school. Turn left and they were going deeper into Kansas, all farmland, where Ben’s two friends lived, those shy Future Farmers of America who couldn’t bear to ask for Ben when she picked up the phone.

“Take a left, we’ll go see the Muehlers.”

“He still hangs around with them? That’s good. No one could think those boys would do anything ... weird.”

“Oh, because Ben would?”

Diane sighed and turned left.

“I’m on your side, P.”

The Muehler brothers had dressed as farmers for Halloween every year since birth, their parents driving them into Kinnakee in the same wide-body truck, the boys deposited on Bulhardt Avenue for trick-or-treating in their tiny John Deere baseball caps and overalls while the parents drank coffee at the diner. The Muehler brothers, like their

parents, talked only about alfalfa and wheat and weather, and went to church on Sunday, where they prayed for things that were probably crop-related. The Muehlers were good people with no imagination, with personalities so tied to the land, even their skin seemed to take on the ridges and furrows of Kansas.

“I know.” Patty reached to put her hand on Diane’s just as Diane shifted gears, so her hand hung just above her sister’s and then went back to her lap.

“Oh you bleeping jerk!” Diane said to a car ahead of her, rolling along at twenty miles an hour and deliberately going slower as Diane closed in on the bumper. She swerved up to pass them and Patty stared rigidly ahead, even though she could feel the driver’s face on her, a murky moon in her peripheral. Who was this person? Had they heard the news? Is that why they were staring, maybe even pointing? *There’s the woman who raised that boy.* The Day boy. A hundred phones were rattling this morning, if Diane had heard last night. At home her three girls were probably sitting in front of the TV, turning from cartoons to the blaring telephone, which they’d been told to pick up in case Ben called. They seemed unlikely to follow that instruction: they were strung out with the fear of the morning. If anyone dropped by, they’d find three unattended, teary kids, age ten and under, huddled on the living room floor, cringing at the noise.

“Maybe one of us should have stayed home ... in case,” Patty said.

“You’re not going anywhere by yourself while this is going on, and I don’t know where to go. This is the right thing. Michelle’s a big girl. I watched you when I was younger’n her.”

But that was back when people still did that, Patty thought. Back when people went out for a whole night and left the kids on their own and no one thought anything of it. In the ’50s and ’60s, out on that quiet old prairie where nothing ever happened. Now little girls weren’t supposed to ride bikes alone or go anywhere in groups of less than three. Patty had attended a party thrown by one of Diane’s work friends, like a Tupperware party, but with rape whistles and mace instead of wholesome plastic containers. She’d made a joke about what kind of lunatic would drive all the way out to Kinnakee to attack someone. A blond woman she’d just met looked up from her new pepper-spray keychain and said, “A friend of mine was raped once.” Patty had bought several cans of mace out of guilt.

“People think I’m a bad mother, that’s why this is happening.”

“No one thinks you’re a bad mother. You’re superwoman as far as I’m concerned: you keep the farm going, get four kids to school every day, and don’t drink a gallon of bourbon to do it.”

Patty immediately thought of the freezing cold morning two weeks ago, when she almost wept with exhaustion. Actually putting on clothes and driving the girls to school seemed an entirely remote possibility. So she let them all stay home and watch ten hours of soap operas and game shows with her. She made poor Ben ride his bike, shooed him out the door with a promise she’d petition again to get the school bus to come to them next year.

“I’m not a *good* mother.”

“Hush.”

THE MUEHLERS’ HOME WAS on a decent chunk of land, four hundred acres at least. The house was tiny and looked like a buttercup, a swipe of yellow against miles of green winter wheat and snow. It was blowing even harder than before now; the forecast said it would snow through the night, and then would come sudden springlike temperatures. That promise was wedged in her brain: sudden springlike temperatures.

They drove up the skinny, unwelcoming strip of road leading to the house, past a tiller sitting just inside the barn like an animal. Its hooked blades cast claw shadows on the ground. Diane made a sinus noise she always resorted to when she was uncomfortable, a fake clearing of the throat to fill the silence. Neither of them looked at the other as they got out of the car. Attentive black grackles perched in the trees, cawing continually, ill-natured, noisy birds. One of them flew past, a silvery trail of Christmas tinsel fluttering from its beak. But otherwise the place was immobile, no motors of any kind, no gates clanking shut, no TV within, just the silence of land packed under snow.

“Don’t see Ben’s bike,” was all Diane said as they banged the doorknocker.

“Could be around back.”

Ed answered the door. Jim, Ed, and Ben were all in the same grade, but the brothers weren’t twins, one of them had flunked at least once, maybe twice. She thought it was Ed. He goggled at her for a second, a

short kid of only 5'4" or so, but with a man's athletic build. He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked behind him.

"Well, hi, Mrs. Day."

"Hi, Ed. Sorry to bother you on Christmas break."

"No, no problem."

"I'm looking for Ben—is he here? Have you seen him?"

"Be-en?" He said it in two syllables, like he was tickled at the idea. "Ah, no, we ain't seen Ben in ... well, I don't think we seen him this whole year. Aside from school. He's been hanging around with a different group now."

"What group?" asked Diane, and Ed looked at her for the first time.

"Uh, we-ell ..."

She could see Jim's silhouette approaching the door, backlit by the picture window in the kitchen. He lumbered toward them, bigger and wider than his brother.

"Can we help you, Mrs. Day?" He nudged his face in, then his torso, slowly moving his brother to the side. The two of them effectively closed off the doorway. It made Patty want to crane her neck around them and peek inside.

"I was just asking Ed if you two'd seen Ben today, and he said you hadn't been seeing much of him this whole school year."

"Mmm, no. Wish you'd phoned, could have saved you some time."

"We need to find him soon, you have any idea where we can find him, it's sort of a family emergency," Diane interrupted.

"Mmm, no," said Jim again. "Wish we could help."

"You can't give us even a name of who he spends time with? Surely you must know that."

Ed had swung to the background now, so he was calling from the shadow of the living room.

"Tell her to phone 1-800-Devils-R-Us!" he cackled.

"What?"

"Nothing." Jim looked at the door knob in his hand, debating

whether to start closing it.

“Jim, can you help us, please?” Patty murmured. “Please?”

The boy frowned, tapped the point of a cowboy boot against the floor like a ballerina, refused to raise his eyes. “He hangs out with, like, the Devil crowd.”

“What does that mean?”

“Some older guy heads it, I don’t know his name. They do a lot of drugs, peyote or whatever, and kill cows and sh-stuff. That’s just what I heard. They don’t go to our school, the kids in it. Except for Ben, I guess.”

“Well, you must know the name of someone,” Patty coaxed.

“I really don’t, Mrs. Day. We steer clear of that stuff. I’m sorry, we tried to stay friends with Ben, but. We go to church here, my parents, they run a tight ship. Er ... I’m real sorry.”

He looked at the ground, and stopped talking, and Patty couldn’t think of anything else to ask.

“OK, Jim, thanks.”

He shut the door and before they could turn around, from inside the house they heard a bellow: *Asshole, why’d you gotta say that!* followed by a heavy bang against the wall.

## Libby Day

NOW

Back in the car, Lyle said only three words. “What a nightmare.” In reply, I said, *mmm*. Krissi reminded me of me. Grasping and anxious, always bundling things aside for future use. That packet of chips. We scroungers always like little packets of food because people give them up with less hassle.

Lyle and I drove for twenty minutes without saying much, until finally he said, in his summing-up, newscaster voice, “So obviously she’s lying about Ben molesting her. I think she lied to her dad too. I think Lou Cates went nuts, killed your family, and then later, he found out she’d lied. He killed an innocent family for nothing. Hence, his own family disintegrates. Lou Cates disappears, starts drinking.”

“Hence?” I nipped at him.

“It’s a solid theory. Don’t you think?”

“I think you should not come on any more of these interviews. It’s embarrassing.”

“Libby, I’m financing this whole thing.”

“Well, you’re not helping it.”

“*Sorry*,” he said, and then we stopped talking. As the lights of Kansas City turned the sky a sick orange in the distance, Lyle said, without looking at me, “It’s a solid theory though, right?”

“Everything’s a theory, that’s why it’s a *mystery!*” I mimicked him. “Just a great mystery, Who Killed The Days?” I proclaimed, brightly. After a few minutes, I said grudgingly. “I think it’s an OK theory, I think we should look at Runner too.”

“Fine by me. Although I’m still going to track down Lou Cates.”

“Be my guest.”

I dropped him back outside Sarah's, not offering to take him home, Lyle standing on the curb like a kid baffled that his parents can really bear leaving him at camp. I got home late and cranky and anxious to count my money. I'd made \$1,000 so far from the Kill Club, with another \$500 that Lyle owed me for Krissi, even though Krissi clearly would have talked to anybody. But even as I thought that, I knew it wasn't true. None of those Kill Club misfits could have made that work with Krissi, I thought. She talked to me because we had the same chemicals in our blood: shame, anger, greed. Unjustified nostalgia.

I'd earned my money, I thought, resentful for no reason. Lyle seemed completely fine with paying me. That's what I did, though—I had angry, defensive conversations in my head, got mad at things that hadn't even happened yet. Yet.

I'd earned my money (now I felt calmer), and if I heard from Runner, if I talked to Runner, I'd earn a lot more money and be set for a good four months. If I lived very still.

Make that five months: by the time I got home, Lyle had already left a message saying some local Kill Creeps wanted to have a swap meet, buy some of my family's "memorabilia." Magda would host, if I was interested. Magda the cave troll who'd drawn Devil horns on my photo. *Yes, Magda, I would love to be a guest in your home, where do you keep your silver again?*

I clicked off the answering machine, which I'd stolen from a roommate two moves ago. I thought of Krissi and knew her house was probably filled with other people's crap too. I had a stolen answering machine, a nearly full set of pocketed restaurant silverware, and a half-dozen salt-and-pepper shakers, including the new pair, from Tim-Clark's that I couldn't manage to transfer from the hall table to the kitchen. In one corner of my living room, by my old TV set, is a box with more than a hundred small bottles of lotion I've swiped. I keep them because I like to look at the lotions all together, pink and purple and green. I know this would look crazy to anyone who came to my home, but no one does, and I like them too much to get rid of them. My mom's hands were always rough and dry, she was constantly oiling them, to no avail. It was one of our favorite ways to tease her: "Oh mom don't touch, you're like an alligator!" The church we fitfully attended kept lotion in the women's room that she said smelled like

roses: we'd all take turns squirting and sniffing our hands, complimenting each other on our ladylike scent.

No phone call from Diane. She'd have gotten my message by now, and she hadn't called. That seemed strange. Diane always made it easy for me to apologize. Even after this latest round of silent treatment—six years. Guess I should have autographed my book for her.

I turned around to the other set of boxes, the under-the-stairs boxes that had grown more ominous the more I let myself think about the murders. It's just stuff, I told myself. It cannot hurt you.

When I was fourteen, I thought a lot about killing myself—it's a hobby today, but at age fourteen it was a vocation. On a September morning, just after school started, I'd gotten Diane's .44 Magnum and held it, babylike, in my lap for hours. What an indulgence it would be, to just blow off my head, all my mean spirits disappearing with a gun blast, like blowing a seedy dandelion apart. But I thought about Diane, and her coming home to my small torso and a red wall, and I couldn't do it. It's probably why I was so hateful to her, she kept me from what I wanted the most. I just couldn't do it to her, though, so I made a bargain with myself: If I still feel this bad on February 1, I will kill myself. And it was just as bad on February 1, but again I made the bargain: If it's this bad May 1, I'll do it. And so on. I'm still here.

I looked at the boxes and made a quieter kind of bargain: If I can't stand doing this anymore in twenty minutes, I'll burn the whole lot.

The first box came apart easily, one side collapsing as soon as I pulled off the tape. Inside, at the top of the pile, was a concert T-shirt for The Police that was my mom's, food-stained and extremely soft.

Eighteen minutes.

Below that was a rubberbanded bunch of notebooks, all Debby's. I flipped through random pages:

*Harry S Truman was the 33rd American  
president and from Missouri.*

*The heart is the pump of the body it keeps blood  
going all over the body.*

Under that was a pile of notes, from Michelle to me, from me to Debby, from Debby to Michelle. Sifting through these, I plucked out a

birthday card with an ice-cream sundae on the front, its cherry made with red sequins.

*Dear Debby, wrote my mom in her cramped handwriting.  
We are so lucky to have such a sweet, kind, helpful girl in our  
family. You are my cherry on top! Mom*

She never wrote Mommy, I thought, we never called her that even as kids. *I want my mommy*, I thought. We never said that. *I want my mom*. I felt something loosen in me, that shouldn't have loosened. A stitch come undone.

Fourteen minutes.

I rummaged through more notes, putting the boring, inane ones aside for the Kill Club, missing my sisters, laughing at some of them, the strange worries we had, the coded messages, the primitive drawings, the lists of people we liked and didn't like. I'd forgotten we were tight, the Day girls. I wouldn't have said we were, but now, studying our writings like a spinster anthropologist, I realized it was true.

Eleven minutes. Here were Michelle's diaries, all rubberbanded together in a faux-leathery bundle. Every year she got two for Christmas—she needed twice as many as a normal girl. She'd always start the new one right there while we were still under the tree, chronicling every gift each of us got, keeping score.

I flipped open one from 1983 and remembered what a rotten busybody Michelle was, even at age nine. The day's entry talked about how she heard her favorite teacher, Miss Berdall, saying dirty things to a man on the phone in the teachers' lounge—and Miss Berdall wasn't even married. Michelle wondered if she confronted her, maybe Miss Berdall would bring her something nice for lunch. (Apparently Miss Berdall had once given Michelle half her jelly donut, which had left Michelle permanently fixated on Miss Berdall and her brown paper bags. Teachers were usually reliable for half a sandwich or a piece of fruit if you stared at them long enough. You just couldn't do it too much or you'd get a note sent home and Mom would cry.) Michelle's diaries were filled with drama and innuendo of a very grade-school level: At recess, Mr. McNany smoked just outside the boys' locker room, and then used breath spray (breath spray underlined several times) so no one would know. Mrs. Joekep from

church was drinking in her car ... and when Michelle asked Mrs. Joekep if she had the flu, since why was she drinking from that bottle, Mrs. Joekep laughed and gave her \$20 for Girl Scout cookies, even though Michelle wasn't a Girl Scout.

Hell, she even wrote things about me: she knew, for instance, I lied to Mom about punching Jessica O'Donnell. This was true, I gave the poor girl a black eye but swore to my mom she fell off a swing. *Libby told me the Devil made her do it*, Michelle wrote. *Think I should tell Mom?*

I closed the book on 1983, browsed through 1982 and 1984. The diary for the second half of 1984 I read carefully, in case Michelle said anything noteworthy about Ben. Not much, except repeated claims that he was a big jerk and no one liked him. I wondered if the cops had had the same idea. I pictured some poor rookie, eating Chinese food at midnight while reading about how Michelle's best friend got her period.

Nine minutes. More birthday cards and letters, and then I dug up a note that was folded more expertly than the rest, origami'd so it looked almost phallic, which, I supposed, was the intention, as the word **STUD** was written at the top. I opened it up, and read the rounded girlish writing:

*11/5/84*

*Dear Stud,*

*I'm in biology and I'm fingering myself under the desk I am so hot for you. Can you picture my pussy? It's still nice and red from you. Come over to my house after school today, K? I want to jump your bones!!! I'm so horny, even now. I wish you'd just live with me whenever my parents are gone. Your mom won't know, she's so spacy! Why would you stay at home when you could be with me?! Get some balls and tell your mom to go to hell. I'd hate for you to come for a visit one day and find me getting some action somewhere else. JK! Oh I want to cum so much. Meet me at my car after school, I'll park over on Passel St.*

*See ya soon,*

*Diondra*

Ben had not had a girlfriend, he hadn't. Not a single person, including Ben, had ever said so. The name didn't even sound familiar. At the bottom of the box was a stack of our school yearbooks, from 1975, when Ben started school, to 1990, when Diane sent me away

the first time.

I opened the yearbook for 1984–1985, and scanned Ben's class. No Diondra, but a photo of Ben that hurt: sloped shoulders, a loose half-mullet, and an Oxford shirt that he always wore on special occasions. I pictured him, back home, putting it on for Picture Day, practicing in the mirror how he'd smile. In September 1984 he was still wearing shirts my mom bought him, and by January he was an angry, black-haired kid accused of murder. I skimmed through the class above Ben's, jerking occasionally as I hit Dianas and Dinas, but no Diondra. Then to the class above that, about to give up, when there she was, Diondra Wertzner. Worst name ever, and I pulled my finger over the row, expecting to find a lunchlady in the making, someone coarse and mustached, and instead found a pretty, plump-cheeked girl with a fountain of dark spiral curls. She had small features, which she overplayed with heavy makeup, but even in the photo she popped off the page. Something in the deep-set eyes, a daring, with her lips parted so you could see pointy puppy-teeth.

I pulled out the yearbook for the previous year, and she was gone. I pulled out the yearbook for the following year, and she was gone.

## Ben Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

3:10 P.M.

Trey's truck smelled like weed, sweat socks, and sweet wine cooler that Diondra had probably spilled. Diondra tended to pass out while still holding a bottle in her hand, it was her preferred way to drink, to do it til it knocked her out, that last sip nearby just in case. The truck was littered with old fast-food wrappers, fish hooks, a *Penthouse*, and, on the fuzzy mat at Ben's feet, a crate of cartons labeled Mexican Jumping Beans, each box featuring a little bean wearing a sombrero, swooshes at its feet to make it look like it was bouncing.

"Try one," Trey said, motioning at it.

"Nah, isn't that supposed to be bugs or something?"

"Yeah, they're like beetle larvae," Trey said, and gave his jackhammer laugh.

"Great, thanks, that's cool."

"Oh shit, man, I'm just fucking with you, lighten up."

They pulled into a 7-Eleven, Trey waving to the Mexican guy behind the counter—*now there's a bean for you*—loading Ben up with a case of Beast, some microwave nachos that Diondra always whined for, and a fistful of beef jerky, which Trey held in his hand like a bouquet.

The guy smiled at Trey, made an ululating Indian war sound. Trey crossed his arms in front of his chest and pretended to do a hat dance. "Just ring me up, José." The guy didn't say anything else, and Trey left him the change, which was a good three bucks. Ben kept thinking about that on the drive to Diondra's. That most of this world was filled with people like Trey, who'd just leave behind three dollars without even thinking of it. Like Diondra. A few months back, at the very hot end of September, Diondra ended up having to babysit two of

her cousins or step-half-cousins or something, and she and Ben had driven them to a water park near the Nebraska border. She'd been driving her mom's Mustang for a month (she was bored with her own car) and the backseat was filled with things they'd brought, things it would never occur to Ben to own: three different kinds of sunscreen, beach towels, squirt bottles, rafts, inflatable rings, beach balls, pails. The kids were small, like six or seven years old, and they were jammed back there with all that crap, the inflatable rafts making a whoogie-whoogie sound every time they moved, and somewhere near Lebanon, the kids rolled down the window, giggling, the rafts making more and more noise, like they were climaxing in some air mattress mating ritual, and Ben realized what the kids were giggling about. They were scraping all the change Diondra left in the backseat, on the floor, in the crevices—she just tossed any change she had back there—and the kids were throwing it by the handful out the window so they could watch it scatter like sparks. And not just pennies, a lot of it was quarters.

Ben thought that was how you could tell the difference between most people. It wasn't *I'm a dog person* and *I'm a cat person* or *I'm a Chiefs fan* and *I'm a Broncos guy*. It was whether you cared about quarters. To him, four quarters was a dollar. A stack of quarters was lunch. The amount of quarters those little shits threw out the window that day could have bought him half a pair of jeans. He kept asking the kids to stop, telling them it was dangerous, illegal, they could get a ticket, they needed to sit down and face forward. The kids laughed and Diondra howled—*Ben won't get his allowance this week if you keep taking his change*—and he realized he'd been found out. He hadn't been as quick-wristed as he'd thought: Diondra knew he scraped after her leftover coins. He felt like a girl whose dress just shot up in the wind. And he wondered what that said about her, seeing her boyfriend scrape around for change and saying nothing, did that make her nice? Or mean.

Trey rolled up full speed to Diondra's house, a giant beige box surrounded by a chainlink fence to keep Diondra's pit bulls from killing the mailman. She had three pits, one a white sack of muscles with giant balls and crazy eyes that Ben disliked even more than the other two. She let them in the house when her parents were gone, and they jumped on tables and crapped all over the floor. Diondra didn't clean it up, just sprayed bathroom air freshener on all the shit-

entwined carpet threads. That nice blue rug in the rec room—a dusty violet, Diondra called it—was now a land mine of ground-in dumps. Ben tried not to care. It wasn't his business, as Diondra was happy to remind him.

The back door was open, even though it was freezing, and the pit bulls were running in and out, like some sort of magic act—no pit bull, one pit bull, two pit bulls in the yard! Three! Three pit bulls in the yard, prancing around in rough circles, then shooting back inside. They looked like birds in flight, teasing and nipping at each other in formation.

“I hate those fucking dogs,” Trey groaned, pulled to a stop.

“She spoils them.”

The dogs launched into a round of attack-barking as Ben and Trey walked toward the front of the house, the animals trailing them obsessively along the fence, snouts and paws poking through the gaps, barking barking barking.

The front door was open, too, the heat pouring out. They passed through the pink-papered entryway—Ben unable to resist shutting the door behind him, save some energy—and downstairs, which was Diondra's floor. Diondra was in the rec room, dancing, half naked in oversized hot pink socks, no pants and a sweater built for two, with giant cables that reminded Ben of something a fisherman would wear, not a girl. Then again, all the girls at school wore their shirts big. They called them boyfriend shirts or daddy sweaters. Diondra, of course, had to wear them super big and layered with stuff underneath: a T-shirt hanging down, then some sort of tank top, and a bright striped collar-shirt. Ben had once offered Diondra one of his big black sweaters to be a boyfriend sweater, him being her boyfriend, but she'd wrinkled her nose and proclaimed, “That's not the right kind. And there's a hole in it.” Like a hole in a shirt was worse than dog shit all over your carpet. Ben was never sure if Diondra knew all sorts of secret rules, private protocols, or if she just made shit up to make him feel like a tool.

She was bouncing around to Highway to Hell, the fireplace shooting flames behind her, her cigarette held far away from her new clothes. She had about twelve items all in plastic wraps or on hangers or in shiny bags with tissue paper sparking out the top like fire. Also, a

couple of shoe boxes and the tiny packets he knew meant jewelry. When she looked up and saw his black hair, she gave him a giant happy smile and a thumbs-up. “Awesome.” And Ben felt a little better, not as stupid. “I told you it’d look good, Benji.” And that was it.

“What’d you buy, Dio?” Trey asked, rummaging in the bags. He took a drag from her cigarette while she was still holding it, while she was without pants. She caught Ben’s look, flipped up the sweater to reveal boxers that weren’t his.

“It’s OK, nerd-o.” She came over and kissed him, her smell of grape hairspray and cigarettes hitting him, calming him. He held her gently, the way he did now, loose-armed, and when he felt her tongue hit his, he twitched.

“Oh God, please get over this ‘Diondra’s untouchable’ phase,” she snapped. “Unless I’m too old for you.”

Ben laughed. “You’re seventeen.”

“If you could hear what I hear,” Diondra sang to a silver-bell tune, sounding angry, sounding downright pissed.

“What’s that mean?”

“Mean’s seventeen may just be too old for your taste.”

Ben didn’t know what to say. To pursue something with Diondra when she was in this peekaboo mood only encouraged endless rounds of, “No it’s nothing,” and “I’ll tell you later,” or “Don’t worry, I can handle it.” She pulled her crunchy hair back and danced around for them, a drink now appearing from behind a shoe box. Her neck was lined with purple hickeys he’d given her on Sunday, him Draculing into her neck, her demanding more, “Harder, harder, it won’t leave a mark if you keep doing it that way, don’t tighten your lips, no tongue, no harder ... Do! It! Harder! How can you not even know how to give a hickey?” and with a furious tight face, she’d grabbed him by the head, turned him sideways, and worked at his neck like a dying fish, the flesh going in and out in frantic rhythm. Then she pulled away, “There!” and made him look in the mirror. “Now do me, like that.”

The result was a march of leeches down her throat, brown and blue and embarrassing to Ben until he caught Trey staring at them.

“Oh no, baby, you’re all busted up.” Diondra simpered, finally

noticing his cracked head. She licked a finger and started wiping at the blood. “Someone get to you?”

“Baby fell off his bike,” Trey grinned. Ben hadn’t told him he fell off his bike, and he felt a billow of rage at Trey for trying to make fun of him and actually just telling the truth.

“Fuck off, Trey.”

“Heyyyy,” said Trey, his hands shooting up, his eyes going slate.

“Someone push you off the bike, baby? Someone try to hurt you?” Diondra petted at him.

“You buy anything for Benny-boy, so he doesn’t have to wear those shitty work jeans for another month?” Trey asked.

“Of course I did.” She grinned, forgetting Ben’s injury, which he’d imagined would take up much more time. She skipped across to a giant red bag and pulled out a pair of black leather pants, thick as cow hide, a striped T-shirt, and a black denim jacket with studs gleaming off it.

“Whoa, leather pants, you think you’re dating David Lee Roth?” Trey cackled.

“He’ll look good. Go try ’em on.” She scrunched her nose up at him as he tried to pull her to him. “You ever heard of a shower, Ben? You smell like the cafeteria.” She pushed the clothes into Ben’s hands and shuffled him off to the bedroom. “It’s a gift, Ben,” she yelled after him. “You might want to say thank you at some point.”

“Thank you!” he called back.

“Take a shower before you put them on, for Christ’s sake.” So she was actually serious, he stunk. He knew he stunk, but hoped no one else could smell him. He walked into the bathroom across from Diondra’s bedroom—she had her own dang bathroom, and her parents had their own giant one with two sinks—and dropped his stained clothes into a ball on the bright pink carpet. His crotch was still wet from the bucket spill at his school, his dick shriveled and clammy. The shower felt good, felt relaxing. He and Diondra had had sex a lot in this shower, all sudsy and warm. The soap was always there, you didn’t have to wash yourself with baby shampoo because your mom couldn’t ever fucking get to a store.

He dried off, put his boxers back on. He was wearing boxers Diondra had also bought him. The first time they got naked, she'd laughed at his tightie-whities til she actually choked on her own spit. He tried to jam the boxers into the taut leather—all snaps and zippers and hooks, and him squirming to haul them up over his ass, which Diondra said was his best feature. The problem was the boxers, they bunched up around his waist when he got the pants on, leaving bulbs in all the wrong places. He yanked the pants back off and kicked his boxers onto the pile of his old clothes, his hackles going up as Trey and Diondra whispered and giggled in the other room. He got back into the pants with nothing underneath, and they clung like a leathery scuba suit. Hot. His ass was already sweating.

“Come model for us, stud,” Diondra called.

He pulled on the T-shirt, walked into her bedroom to check the mirror. The metalhead rockers Diondra loved stared at him from posters on the walls, even on the ceiling over her bed, giant pointy hair and bodies tightly packed in leather with buckles and belts like alien robot knobs. He didn't think he looked bad. He looked pretty on target. When he walked back into the living room, Diondra squealed and ran to him, jumped into his arms.

“I knew it. I knew it. You are a stud.” She flipped his hair back, which was at an awkward bushy chin-length. “You need to keep growing this out, but otherwise, you are a stud.”

Ben looked at Trey, who shrugged. “I'm not the one going to fuck you tonight, don't look at me.”

On the floor was a pile of garbage, long, fingerlike wrappers from the Slim Jims, and a plastic square with a few streaks of cheese and some nacho crumbs.

“You already ate everything?” Ben asked.

“Now your turn, Teep-beep,” Diondra gushed, taking her hand from Ben's hair.

Trey held up a metal-studded shirt that Diondra had bought for him (and why does Trey get something, Ben thought), and slunk back toward the bedroom for his portion of the fashion show. From the hallway came silence, then the pop of a beer, and then laughter, teary, fall-on-the-floor laughter.

“Diondra, come here!”

Diondra was already laughing as she ran back to Trey, Ben left standing, sweating in his new tight pants. Soon she was howling too, and they emerged, faces folded in pure joy, Trey shirtless, holding Ben’s boxers.

“Dude, you wearing those ballhuggers naked?” Trey said between laughs, his eyes crazy-big. “Do you know how many dudes have jammed their shit into those pants before you got ’em? Right now you got eight different guys’ ballsweat on you. Your asshole is pressed right against some other guy’s asshole.” They laughed again, Diondra making her poor-Ben sound: *Ooohhhaaa*.

“I think these got some shit stains in them too, Diondra,” Trey said, peeking inside the boxers. “You better take care of this, little woman.”

Diondra plucked them by two fingers, walked across the living room, and tossed them in the fire, where they sizzled but didn’t catch.

“Even fire can’t destroy those things,” Trey wheezed. “What are they, Ben, polyester?” They plopped down on the couch, Diondra huddling on her side to finish laughing, Trey’s head on her haunches. She laughed with her face squeezed shut, then, still reclining, blinked one bright blue eye open, and assessed him. He was about to walk back to the bathroom to change into his jeans, when Diondra leapt up and grabbed him by the hand.

“Oh, sweetie, don’t be mad. You look great. You really do. Ignore us.”

“They are cool, dude. And stewing in another guy’s juices might be just what you need to grow a pair, right?” He started laughing again, but when Diondra didn’t join, he went to the fridge and got another beer. Trey still hadn’t put on the new shirt, he seemed to like walking around shirtless, sprigs of black chest hair and dark nipples the size of fifty-cent pieces, muscles lumping everywhere, a treasure trail down his belly Ben would never get. Ben, pale and small-boned and red-headed, would never look like that, not five years, not ten years from now. He glanced at Trey, wanting to take a long look but knowing that was a bad idea.

“Come on, Ben, let’s not fight,” Diondra said, pulling him down on the sofa. “After all the shit I heard today about you, I should be the

one who's mad."

"See? Now what does that even mean?" Ben said. "It's like you're talking in code or something. I've had a shit day and I'm not in the goddam mood!"

This is what Diondra did, she baited you, nips and bites here and there til you were half crazy, and then she was all, "Why are you so upset?"

"Awwww," she whispered into his ear. "Let's not fight. We're together, let's not fight with each other. Come to my room and we'll make up." She had beer breath and her long fingernails rested on his crotch. She pulled him up.

"Trey's here."

"Trey won't care," she said, and then louder. "Watch some cable for a little bit, Trey."

Trey made an *mmmm* sound, didn't even look at them, and flopped headlong on the sofa, his beer spraying like a fountain.

Ben was pissed off now, which was always how Diondra seemed to like him. He wanted to ram it into her, make her whine. So as soon as they closed the door, that plywood door Trey could surely hear through—good—Ben reached to grab her and Diondra turned around and scratched his face, hard, drawing blood.

"Diondra, what the hell?" He now had another scrape on his face, and he didn't mind it. Scar up these big baby cheeks, do it. Diondra stepped back for a second, opened her mouth, then just pulled him toward her til they fell on her bed, stuffed animals bouncing to lemming deaths on either side. She scratched him again on his neck and he really wanted to fuck her good then, he was literally seeing red, like they say in cartoons, and she helped him get the pants back off, peeling down like a sunburn, and his dick bouncing right up, hard as it ever had been. She pulled off her sweater, her tits huge, milk-blue and soft, and he ripped down her boxers. When he stared at her belly, she turned her back to him and guided him in from behind, her yelling, *Is that it? Is that all you got for me? You can do me harder than that* and him pounding away 'til his balls ached and his eyes went blind and then it was over and he was on his back, wondering if he was having a heart attack. He was heaving for air, fighting off that

depression that always came to smother him after they had sex, the *that's-all blues*.

Ben had had sex twenty-two times now, he was keeping track, all with Diondra, and he'd seen enough TV to know that men were supposed to fall peacefully asleep right afterward. He never did. He got more agitated, actually, like he'd had too much caffeine, snappy and mean. He thought sex was supposed to chill you out—and the during part was good, the coming part was great. But afterward, for about ten minutes he felt like crying. He felt like, Is this it? The greatest thing in life, the thing men kill for and this is it, over in a few minutes, leaving you all gutted and depressed. He could never tell if Diondra liked it or not, came or not. She grunted and screamed but she never seemed happy afterward. She lay next to him now, her belly up, not touching him, barely breathing.

“So I saw some girls at the mall today,” Diondra said next to him. “They say you’re fucking little girls at school. Like ten-year-olds.”

“What are you talking about?” Ben said, still dazed.

“Do you know a little girl named Krissi Cates?”

Ben tried to keep himself from bolting up. He crossed an arm behind his head, put it back down by his side, crossed it over his chest.

“Uh, yeah, I guess. She’s in that art class I been helping out after school.”

“Never told me about no art class,” Diondra said.

“Nothing to tell, I just did it a few times.”

“Just did what a few times?”

“The art class,” Ben said. “Just helping kids. One of my old teachers asked me to.”

“They say the police want to talk to you. That you did some wrong stuff with some of those girls, girls who are, like, your sisters’ age. Touched them funny. Everyone’s calling you a perv.”

He sat upright, a vision of the basketball team mocking his dark hair, his perviness, trapped in the locker room while they fucked with him til they were bored, drove off in their bigass trucks. “You think I’m a perv?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Why’d you just have sex with me if you think I might be a perv?”

“I wanted to see if you could still get it up with me. If you would still come a lot.” She turned away from him again, her legs pulled up to her chest.

“Well, that’s pretty fucked up, Diondra.” She said nothing. “So do you want to hear me say it: I didn’t do anything with any girls. I haven’t done anything with anyone but you since we started going out. I love you. I don’t want to have sex with any little girls. OK?” Silence. “OK?”

Diondra turned part of her face toward him, that single blue eye fixed on him with no emotion: “Shhh. The baby’s kicking.”

## Libby Day

NOW

Lyle was stiff and silent as we drove toward Magda's for our meeting. I wondered if he was judging me, me and my packet of notes I was going to sell. Nothing I'd decided to part with was particularly interesting: I had five birthday cards my mom had given Michelle and Debby over the years, cheerful quick notes scrawled at the bottom, and I had a birthday card she'd written to Ben I thought might bring decent money. I felt guilty about all of it, not good at all, but I feared having no money, really feared being broke, and that came before being nice. The note to Ben, on the inside of a card for his twelfth birthday, read: *You are growing up before my eyes, before I know it you'll be driving!* When I read it, I had to turn it facedown and back away, because my mom would be dead before Ben would ever learn how to drive. And Ben would be in prison, would never learn how to drive anyway.

Anyway.

We drove across the Missouri River, the water not even bothering to glisten in the afternoon sun. What I didn't want was to watch these people read the notes, there was something too intimate about that. Maybe I could leave while they looked at them, assessed them like old candlesticks at a yard sale.

Lyle guided me to Magda's, through middle-middle-class neighborhoods where every few houses waved a St. Patrick's Day flag—all bright clovers and leprechauns just a few days stale. I could feel Lyle fiddling beside me, twitchy as usual, and then he turned toward me, his knees almost punching my stickshift out of gear.

"So," he said.

"So."

"This meeting, as is often the case with Magda, has turned into

something a little different than planned.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Well, you know she’s in that group—the Free Day Society. To get Ben out of prison. And so she’s invited a few of those ... women.”

“Oh. No.” I said. I pulled the car over to the curb.

“Listen, listen, you said you wanted to look into Runner. Well, this is it. They will pay us—you—to find him, ask him some questions, father to daughter.”

“Daughter to father?”

“Right. See, I’m running out of money. So this is where the next funding will come from.”

“So I have to sit here and let them be rude to me? Like last time?”

“No, no, they can fill you in on the investigation into Runner. Bring you up to speed. I mean, you think Ben is innocent now, right?”

I had a flash of Ben watching TV, my mom rustling his hair with one hand as she walked past with a load of laundry on her hip, and him smiling but not turning around. Waiting til she left the room before he combed his hair back into place.

“I haven’t gotten that far.”

My keys dangled from the ignition, turning in time to a Billy Joel song on the radio. I switched stations.

“Fine, let’s go,” I said.

I drove another few blocks. Magda’s neighborhood was as cheap as mine, but nicer. Every house had been built shabby, but the owners still found enough pride to slap on a coat of paint now and then, hang a flag, plant some flowers. The houses reminded me of hopeful homely girls on a Friday night, hopping bars in spangly tops, packs of them where you assumed at least one might be pretty, but none were, and never would be. And here was Magda’s house, the ugliest girl with the most accessories, frantically piled on. The front yard was spiked with lawn ornaments: gnomes bouncing on wire legs, flamingos on springs, and ducks with plastic wings that circled when the wind blew. A forgotten cardboard Christmas reindeer sat soggy in the front garden, which was mostly mud, baby-fuzz patches of grass

poking through intermittently. I turned off the car, and we both stared into the yard, with its jittering denizens.

Lyle turned to me, fingers outstretched like a coach giving advice on a difficult play: “So, don’t worry. I guess the only thing to remember is to be careful how you talk about Ben. These people can get pretty riled when it comes to him.”

“What’s pretty riled?”

“Like, do you go to church at all?”

“When I was a kid.”

“So it would be kind of like someone coming into your church and saying they hate God.”

IT DID FEEL like a church. Or maybe a wake. Lots of coffee, dozens of people murmuring in dark wool clothes, regretful smiles. The air was blue with cigarette smoke, and I thought how rarely I saw that anymore, after growing up in Diane’s foggy trailer. I took a deep breath of it.

We’d knocked several times on the open door, and when no one heard, we just walked in. Lyle and I stood there, American Gothic style, for a good five seconds as the conversation trailed off and people started staring. An older woman with Brillo-wire hair in barrettes blinked at me with the force of someone giving a secret code, a smile frozen large on her face. A brunette in her early twenties, startlingly pretty, looked up from dishing peaches into a baby’s mouth and she too offered an expectant smile. One glaring old broad with a snowman’s build tightened her lips and fingered the crucifix on her neck, but everyone else in the room was clearly following orders: Be nice.

They were all women, more than a dozen, and they were all white. Most looked care-worn, but a handful had the bright, full-hour-in-front-of-the-mirror look of the upper class. That’s how you pick ’em, not by the clothes or the cars, but by the extra touches: an antique brooch (rich women always have antique brooches) or lip-liner that was blended just the right amount. Probably drove in from Mission Hills, feeling magnanimous about setting foot north of the river.

Not a single man there, it was what Diane would call a hen party (and then make that disapproving sinus sound). I wondered how

they'd all found Ben, stuck in prison as he was, and what attraction he had for them. Did they sit in their tousled beds at night with their gelatined husbands snoring next to them and daydream about a life with Ben once they freed him? Or did they think of him as a poor kid in need of their altruism, a cause to be nurtured between tennis matches?

Out of the kitchen stomped Magda, six foot tall, her frizzy hair almost as wide. I wouldn't have been able to place her from the Kill Club meeting, where everyone's face was smeared from my memory, a Polaroid yanked out too early. Magda wore a denim jumper dress over a turtleneck, and an incongruous amount of jewelry: dangly gold earrings, a thick gold chain, and rings on almost every finger but her wedding finger. All those rings unsettled me, like barnacles growing where they shouldn't be. I shook Magda's outstretched hand anyway. Warm and dry. She made a sound like *mmaahhhh!* and pulled me in for a hug, her big breasts parting and closing on me like a wave. I stiffened, then pulled away, but Magda held on to my hands.

"Bygones be bygones. Welcome to my home," she said.

"Welcome," called the women behind her, too close to unison.

"You are welcome here," Magda reasserted.

Well, obviously, since I'd been invited, I wanted to say.

"This, everyone, is Libby Day, Ben's youngest sister."

"Ben's only sister," I added.

The women nodded solemnly.

"And that's part of the reason we're here today," Magda addressed the room. "To help bring some peace to that situation. And help. Bring. Ben. Home!"

I glanced at Lyle, who wrinkled his nose minutely. Beyond the living room, a boy of about fifteen, chubby in a less authoritative way than his mother, came down the carpeted stairs. He'd put on khakis and a button-down for the occasion, and he looked out into the room without making any eye contact, one thumb fiddling with the top of his belt.

Magda sighted the kid but didn't introduce him. Instead she said, "Ned, go in the kitchen and make more coffee." The boy walked

through the circle of women without moving his shoulders, staring at a spot on the wall no one else could see.

Magda pulled me into the room, me pretending to cough so I could free my hand. She set me down in the middle of the sofa, one woman on each side of me. I don't like sitting in the middle, where arms brush lightly against mine and knees graze my pant leg. I balanced on one buttock and then the other, trying not to sink into the cushion, but I'm so small I still ended up looking like a cartoon kid in an overstuffed chair.

"Libby, I'm Katryn. I'm so sorry for your loss," said one of the rich ladies next to me, looking down into my face, her perfume widening my nostrils.

"Hi, Katherine." I wondered when the time limit lapsed on expressing sadness for a stranger's dead. I guess never.

"It's Kate-ryn," she said with sugar, her gold flower brooch bobbling on its clasp. There's another way to pick rich women: They immediately correct how their names are said. A-lee-see-a, not Al-ee-sh-a, Deb-or-ah, not Debra. I said nothing in response. Lyle was talking tightly with an older woman across the room, giving her his profile. I pictured her hot breath tunneling into his tiny snail ear. Everyone kept talking and looking at me, whispering and looking at me.

"Well, wanna get the show going?" I said and clapped once. It was rude, but I didn't need the suspense.

"Well, Libby ... Ned, will you get that coffee out here?" Magda started. "We're here to talk with you about your father, as the prime suspect in the murders your brother has been wrongfully convicted of."

"Right. The murders of my family."

Magda pulled in an impatient breath, annoyed I would assert my rights to my family.

"But before we work on that," Magda continued, "we want to share with you some of our stories about your brother, who we all love."

A slender fifty-something woman with administrative hair stood up. "My name is Gladys, I met Ben three years ago, through my charity

work,” she said. “He changed my life. I write to a lot of prisoners”—here I physically scoffed, and the woman noted it—“I write to prisoners because to me it’s the ultimate Christian act, loving the usually unlovable. I’m sure everyone here’s seen *Dead Man Walking*. But I began writing Ben, and the purity of him just shined through his letters. He is true grace under fire, and I love that he’s able to make me laugh—make *me* laugh, when I’m supposed to be helping *him*—about the horrible conditions he endures each day.”

Everyone added a note then: *he’s so funny ... that’s so true ... he’s amazing that way*. Ned appeared with a coffeepot and started refilling a dozen outstretched plastic mugs, the ladies hand-signaling to stop pouring without even looking at him.

A younger woman stood up, about Lyle’s age, trembling. “I’m Alison. I met Ben through my mom, who couldn’t be here today ...”

“Chemo, ovarian cancer,” whispered Katryn.

“... but we both feel the same, which is her work on this earth is not done until Ben is a free man.” There were scattered claps at this. “And it’s just, it’s just,” here the girl’s trembles turned to tears, “he’s so good! And it’s all so wrong. And I just can’t believe we live in a world where someone as good as Ben is ... is in a cage, for no good reason!”

I set my jaw then. I could feel this going south.

“I just think you need to set this all right,” spat the crucified snow-woman who looked the least friendly. She didn’t bother to stand up, just leaned around a few people. “You need to right your wrongs, just like anybody else. And I’m real sorry for the loss of your family, and I’m real sorry for what you’ve gone through, but now you need to be a grown-up and fix it.”

I couldn’t spot anyone nodding at that little speech, but the room was full of an agreement so strong it seemed to have a sound, an *mmm-hmm* sound I couldn’t trace. Like the hum of a railroad track when the train is still miles away but churning toward you. I glanced at Lyle, and he rolled his eyes discreetly.

Magda moved to the center of the entryway, swelling like a red-nosed orator on the hustings. “Libby, we have forgiven you for your part in this fiasco. We believe your father committed this horrible

crime. We have motive, we have opportunity, we have ... many important facts,” she said, unable to pull up more legal jargon. “Motive: Two weeks before the murders your mother, Patricia Day, filed a complaint against your father concerning child support. For the first time, Ronald “Runner” Day was going to be legally on the hook to his family. He also was in hock several thousand dollars for gambling debts. Removing your family from this situation would help his finances tremendously—he was assuming he was still in your mother’s will when he went there that night. As it turned out, Ben was not at home when he arrived, and you escaped. He killed the others.”

I pictured Runner breathing heavily, striding through the house with that shotgun, his grimy Stetson tilted back as he sighted my mother with the 10-gauge. I heard the bellowing in my head that I always heard when I remembered that night, and tried to make it come out of Runner’s mouth.

“Fibers from your home were found in Runner’s cabin, although this has been continually dismissed because he’d been in and out of your home that summer, but it’s still a viable fact. None of the victims’ blood or tissue was found on Ben, although the prosecution made a lot of the fact that Ben’s blood was found in the house.”

“Hell-ooo? Like you aren’t allowed to cut yourself shaving?” the angry crucified woman said.

The women laughed on cue, primed.

“Finally, the part that I’m most excited for, Libby, is the opportunity portion. As you know, your father was vouched for by a girlfriend of his at the time, a Ms. Peggy Bannion. Just so you know there’s no shame in righting a wrong, Peggy is currently in the process of recanting that alibi. Even though she could be sentenced up to five years.”

“Well, she won’t be,” cheered Katryn. “We won’t let that happen.”

The others applauded as a spindly woman in elasticized jeans stood up. She wore her hair short, the top part permed and frosted, and her eyes were small and bland as dimes that had been in someone’s pocketbook too long. She looked at me, then away. She fiddled with the oversized blue stone she wore on a chain, which matched a blue stripe on her sweatshirt. I pictured her at home in front of a water-stained mirror, enjoying the slight bit of good fortune of matching her

necklace to the sweatshirt.

I stared at my dad's girlfriend—this special guest of Magda's—and willed myself not to blink.

"I just want to thank you all for your support these past months," she began, her voice reedy. "Runner Day used me like he used everyone. I'm sure you know." It took a few seconds before I realized she was talking to me. I nodded, then wished I hadn't.

"Share your story with us, will you, Peggy," Magda said. I could tell Magda watched a lot of *Oprah*. She had the cadence but not the warmth.

"The truth of the story is this. On the evening of January 2, I cooked dinner for Runner at his cabin. It was chop suey with rice, and of course with Runner, a lot of beer. He drank these beers called Mickey's Big Mouths, you had to pull the tab off, but the tabs came off at these sharp angles, looked like crab claws and he was always all cut up by them. Do you remember that, Libby? He was always bleeding with those."

"What happened after dinner?" Lyle interrupted. I waited for him to look over at me for an appreciative smile, but he didn't.

"We, uh, had relations. Then Runner was out of beer, so he left to get more beer. I think this was about 8 p.m. because I watched *The Fall Guy*, although I remember it was a repeat and that was discouraging."

"She watched *The Fall Guy*," Magda piped in. "Isn't that ironic?"

Peggy looked at her blankly.

"Anyway, Runner left and he didn't come back, and, you know, it's winter time, so I fell asleep early. I woke up to him coming home, but he didn't have a clock, so I don't know what time it was. But it was definitely middle of the night, definitely late, because I kept waking up, and I finally got up to pee and the sun was starting to come up and that couldn't have been more than a few hours later."

When this woman was peeing, and looking for toilet paper and probably not finding toilet paper, then wending her way back to bed through the motors and blades and TV intestines that Runner always pretended to be working on, maybe stubbing a toe, feeling sulky, I

was crawling through snow toward my blood-soaked house, my family dead. I held it against her.

“Lord help me, the police came by in the morning, asking Runner where he was between 12 and 5 a.m., asking *me* where he was. The whole time, he was so insistent: *I was home early, I was home way before midnight.* And I don’t think he was, but I went along with it. I just went along.”

“Well, you’re done with that, girl!” said the brunette with the baby.

“I haven’t even heard from him in a year.”

“Well, that’s more than me,” I said, and regretted it. I wondered if this woman would have kept her secret if Runner had just stayed in touch a bit more. Phoned every three months instead of every eight. “And, like I said,” Peggy continued, “he had these scratches on him, all over his hands, but I can’t be sure that it wasn’t from those beer tabs. I just don’t remember if he scratched himself before he left that night, or if maybe someone scratched him.”

“Only one victim, Michelle Day, was found to have any skin under her nails, which makes sense, since she was strangled, so she was physically closest to the killer,” Lyle said. We all sat quietly for a second, the baby’s coos fluttering higher, heading toward squeals. “Unfortunately, that piece of skin was lost somewhere before it reached the laboratory.”

I pictured Runner, with that leery, wide-eyed look of his, bearing down on Michelle, the weight of him pushing her into the mattress, and Michelle scrambling to breathe, trying to rip his hands away, getting one good scratch in, a scrawl over the back of his small, oil-stained hands, wrapping themselves more tightly around her neck ...

“And that’s my story,” Peggy said with an open-handed shrug, a comedian’s *whatcha-gonna-do?* gesture.

“Ned, we’re ready for the dessert!” Magda hollered toward the kitchen, and Ned hustled in, shoulders up near his ears, crumbs on his lower lip as he bore a depleted plate of dry cookies with hard-jelly centers.

“Jesus, Ned, stop eating my stuff!” Magda snapped, glowering over the tray.

“I just had two.”

“Bullshit you had two.” Magda lit a cigarette from a limp pack. “Go to the store, I need cigarettes. And more cookies.”

“Jenna’s got the car.”

“Walk, then, it’ll be good for you.”

The women were clearly planning on making a night of it, but I wasn’t going to stay. I parked myself near the door, eyeing a cloisonné candy dish that seemed too nice for Magda. I slipped it into my pocket as I watched Lyle work out the deal, Magda saying *She’ll do it? She’s got him? Does she actually believe?* as she flapped her checkbook. Each time I blinked, Peggy was edging closer to me, some grotesque chess game. Before I could make a break for the bathroom, she was there at my elbow.

“You don’t look like Runner at all,” she said, squinting. “Maybe the nose.”

“I look like my mother.”

Peggy seemed stricken.

“You with him a long time?” I offered.

“Off and on, I guess. Yeah. I mean I’d have boyfriends in between. But he had a way of coming back and making you feel like it was part of the plan. Like, almost like you’d discussed it that he’d disappear but come back and it would be the same as it was before. I don’t know. I wished I’d met an accountant or something like that. I never know where to go to meet nice men. In my whole life. I mean, where do you go?”

She seemed to be asking for a geographic place, like there was a special town where all the accountants and actuaries were kept.

“You still in Kinnakee?”

She nodded.

“I’d leave there, for a start.”

## Patty Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

3:10 P.M.

Patty flew into the driver's seat of Diane's car—her eyes on the keys dangling from the ignition, *get out of here, now, get out*. Diane hopped into the passenger side as Patty turned over the engine. She actually made a burned-rubber noise as she squealed away from the Muehlers' house, the rear end of the car flailing behind her. All the crap in Diane's trunk—baseballs and garden tools and the girls' dolls—rolled and banged like passengers in a turnover wreck. She and Diane bumped along the gravel road, dust flying, skidding toward the trees on the left and then veering toward a ditch on the right. Finally Diane's strong hand appeared and landed gently on the wheel.

“Easy.”

Patty rumbled along until she got off the Muehler property, swung a wide left, pulled to the side of the road and cried, fingers grasped around the wheel, her head on the center causing an aborted honk.

“What the hell is going on!” she shrieked. It was a child's tear-scream, wet, enraged and baffled.

“Some strange stuff,” Diane said, patting her back. “Let's get you home.”

“I don't want to go home. I need to find my son.”

The word *son* started her weeping again and she let it rip: gulping sobs and thoughts jabbing her like needles. He'd need a lawyer. They didn't have money for a lawyer. He'd get some bored county guy appointed to him. They'd lose. He'd go to jail. What would she tell the girls? How long did someone go away for something like that? Five years? Ten? She could see a big prison parking lot, the gates opening, and her Ben gingerly walking out, twenty-five years old, frightened of the open space, eyes narrowed against the light. He comes near her,

her arms open, and he spits on her for not saving him. How do you live with not being able to save your son? Could she send him away, on the run, fugitive? How much money could she even give him? In December, numb from exhaustion, she'd sold her dad's army 45 Auto to Linda Boyler. She could picture Dave Boyler, who she'd never liked, opening it up Christmas morning, this gun he didn't earn. So Patty, right now, had almost three hundred bucks squirreled away in the house. It was all owed to others, she'd planned on making her first-of-the-month rounds later today, but that wouldn't happen now—plus \$300 would only keep Ben going a few months.

“Ben will come home when he finishes blowing off steam,” Diane reasoned. “How far can he get on a bike in January?”

“What if *they* find him first?”

“Sweetheart, there's no mob after him. You heard, the Muehler boys didn't even know about the ... accusation. They were talking about other bullshit rumors. We need to talk to Ben to straighten this out, but for all we know he could be home right now.”

“Who's the family that's saying he did this?”

“No one said.”

“You can find out though. They can't just say things like that and expect us to lie down and take it, right? You can find out. We have a right to know who's saying this. Ben has a right to confront his accuser. *I* have a right.”

“Fine, let's go back to the house, check in on the girls, and I'll make some calls. Now will you let me drive?”

THEY WALKED INTO pure din. Michelle was trying to fry salami strips on the skillet, screaming at Debby to go away. Libby had a splatter of bright pink burns up one arm and a cheek where the grease had hit her, and was sitting on the floor, mouth wide, crying the way Patty had just been crying in the car: as if there was absolutely no hope, and even if there was, she wasn't up to the challenge.

Patty and Diane moved like they were choreographed, one of those German clocks with the fancy men and women dancing in and out. Diane strode to the kitchen in three big steps and yanked Michelle away from the stove, dragging her by the one arm, doll-like, to the living room, depositing her on the sofa with a swat on her tush. Patty

crisscrossed them, swooped up Libby, who monkey-wrapped herself around her mother and continued crying into her neck.

Patty turned on Michelle, who was loosing fat silent tears. “I told you: You may only use the stove to heat soup. You could have set this whole place on fire.”

Michelle glanced around the shabby kitchen and living room as if wondering whether that would be a loss.

“We were hungry,” Michelle mumbled. “You’ve been gone forever.”

“And that means you need a fried salami sandwich your mom told you not to make?” snapped Diane, finishing up the frying, slapping the meat on a plate. “She needs you to be good girls right now.”

“She always needs us to be good girls,” Debby mumbled. She was nuzzling a pink stuffed panda that Ben had won years ago at the Cloud County fair. He’d knocked down a bunch of milk bottles, just as his pre-teen muscles were coming in. The girls had celebrated as if he’d won a Medal of Honor. The Days never won anything. They always said that, marveling, whenever they had a tiny piece of good luck: *We never win anything!* It was the family motto.

“And is it really so hard to be good?” Diane gave Debby a soft chuck under her chin and Debby lowered her gaze even more as she started to smile.

“I guess not.”

Diane said she’d make the calls, grabbing the kitchen phone and pulling it all the way down the hall as far as it could go. As she walked away, she told Patty to feed her dang children—the words riling Patty, as if she was so negligent she often forgot meals. Make tomato soup from ketchup and milk from a powder, yes. Toast some stale bread, add a squirt of mustard and call it a sandwich, yes. On the worst days, yes. But she never forgot. The kids were on the free-lunch program at school, so they always got something there at least. Even as she thought this, she felt worse. Because Patty went to the same school as a kid, and she never had to do Half-Lunch or Free-Lunch, and now her stomach knotted as she remembered the Free-Lunch kids and her patronizing smiles toward them as they presented their dog-eared cards, and the steamy cafeteria ladies would call it out: Free Lunch! And the boy next to her, buzz-haired and confident, would

whisper inanely: *There's no such thing as a free lunch.* And she'd feel sorry for the kids, but not in a way that made her want to help, just in a way that made her not want to look at them anymore.

Libby was still heaving and crying in her arms; Patty's neck was sweaty from the girl's hot breaths. After twice asking Libby to look at her, the girl finally blinked and turned her face up to her mother's.

"I, got, buuurrrned." Then she started crying again.

"Baby, baby, it's just a few ouchies. It won't be permanent, is that what you're worried about? They're just some little pink ouchies—you won't even remember next week."

"Something bad's gonna happen!"

Libby was her worrier; she came out of the womb wary and stayed that way. She was the nightmare girl, the fretter. She was an outta-nowhere pregnancy; neither Patty nor Runner were happy. They didn't even bother with a baby shower; their families were so sick of them procreating that the entire pregnancy was an embarrassment. Libby must have marinated in anxious stomach acid for nine months, soaking up all that worry. Potty training her was surreal— she screamed when she saw what came out of her, ran away naked and frantic. Dropping her off at school had always been an act of utter abandonment, her daughter with the giant, wet eyes, face pressed against the glass, as a kindergarten teacher restrained her. This past summer she refused to eat for a week, turned white and haunted, then finally (finally, finally) revealed to Patty a pod of warts that had sprouted on one knee. Eyes down, in slow sentences that Patty extracted from her over the course of an hour, Libby explained that she thought the warts might be like poison ivy, that they'd eventually cover her and (sob!) no one would be able to see her face anymore. And when Patty had asked why, why in the world hadn't Libby told her these worries before, Libby just looked at her like she was crazy.

Whenever possible, Libby prophesized doom. Patty knew that, but the words still made her clench. Something bad had already happened. But it would get worse.

She sat with Libby on the couch, smoothing her hair, patting her back. Debby and Michelle hovered near, fetching tissues for Libby and fussing over her the way they should have done a good hour ago. Debby tried to make the panda pretend-talk to Libby, telling her she

was OK, but Libby shoved it away and turned her head. Michelle asked if she could cook everyone soup. They ate soup all through the winter, Patty keeping giant vats of it in the freezer-locker in the garage. They usually ran out right around the end of February. February was the worst month.

Michelle was dumping a big frozen square of beef and vegetables into a stew pot, cracking off the ice, ignoring the plate of salami, when Diane returned with her mouth tugged into a grimace. She lit a cigarette—*trust me, I need it*—and sat down on the sofa, her weight bumping up Patty and Libby like a seesaw. She sent the girls into the kitchen with Michelle, the kids not saying anything, obedient in their nervousness.

“OK. So it’s this family named Cates that started it—they live halfway between here and Salina, send their kid to Kinnakee because the public school’s not finished in their suburb. So it started because Ben was doing after-school volunteering with the Cates girl. Did you know he was volunteering?”

Patty shook her head.

“Volunteering?”

Diane pushed her lips out: didn’t jive with her either.

“Well, for whatever reason, he was volunteering with these young kids in the elementary school, and this girl’s parents say something wrong went on between them. And so do some others. The Hinkels, the Putches, and the Cahills.”

“What?”

“They’re all comparing notes, they’ve all talked to the school. From what I hear, the police are now involved, and you should expect someone, a cop, to come by today to talk to you and Ben. It’s reached that stage. Not everyone at school knows—we’re lucky this happened on Christmas break—but I guess after today that won’t be the case. I guess any kid who Ben helped after school, the school is talking to the parents. So, like, ten families.”

“What should I do?” Patty put her head between her knees. She felt laughter in her stomach, it was all so ludicrous. *I wonder if I’m having a breakdown*, she thought. *Maybe I could have a breakdown and then I won’t have to talk to anyone.* A safe white room, and Patty being

ushered like a child from breakfast to lunch to dinner, maneuvered by people with gentle whispers, Patty shuffling like someone who's dying.

"I guess everyone's over at the Cates place, talking right now," Diane said. "I got the address."

Patty just stared.

"I think we should go over there," Diane said.

"Go over there? I thought you said someone would come here."

"The phone's been ringing off the hook," Michelle said, Michelle who'd been in the kitchen and shouldn't have heard any of this.

Patty and Diane both turned to the phone, waiting for it to go off.

"Well, why didn't you answer it like we asked, Michelle?" Diane said.

Michelle shrugged. "I forgot if we were supposed to or not."

"Maybe we should wait here," Patty said.

"Patty, those families are over there talking ... *shit* about your son. Now who knows what kernel of truth may be in there or not, but don't you want to go speak for him? Don't you want to hear what they're saying, make them say it to our face?"

No, she didn't. She wanted the stories to go away, nice and quiet, creep backward into oblivion. She didn't want to hear what people in her town—Maggie Hinkel went to high school with her, for Pete's sake—were saying about Ben. And she was afraid she'd crumble with all those furious faces on her. She'd weep, beg for forgiveness. Already, all she wanted was forgiveness, and they hadn't even done anything wrong.

"Let me put on some better clothes."

SHE FOUND A SWEATER without rips in the armpits and a pair of khaki slacks. She ran a comb through her hair, and exchanged her gold studs for a pair of imitation pearl earrings and matching necklace. You really couldn't tell they were fake, they even felt heavy.

As she and Diane went toward the front door—further admonishments about using the stove, a request to turn off the TV and do chores at some point—Libby began wailing again, running toward

them with her arms flapping. Michelle crossed her arms over her stained sweatshirt and stomped a foot.

“I can’t deal with her when she’s like this,” she said, a perfect imitation of Patty. “She’s too much. It’s too much for me.”

Patty took a breath in, thought about reasoning with Michelle, thought about bullying Michelle, but Libby was bawling louder, a howling animal, screaming *iwanttogowithyouiwanttogowithyou*, Michelle arching an eyebrow. Patty pictured a cop showing up here while she was away, a burnt-faced, weeping child lying inconsolable on the floor. Should she take all three then? But someone should be here to answer the phone, to be here, and it was probably better to have both Michelle and Debby here than ...

“Libby, go put on your boots,” Diane ordered. “Michelle, you are in charge. Answer the phone, don’t answer the door. If it’s Ben he’ll have a key, if it’s someone else, we don’t want you two worrying about it. Michelle?”

“What’s going on?”

“Michelle, I’m not messing with you. Michelle?”

“OK.”

“OK,” Diane said, and that, literally was the final word.

Patty stood in the hallway, useless, watching Libby put on her boots and a pair of dirt-caked mittens. Patty grabbed one woolly hand and walked her toward the car. It might be good, anyway, if people were reminded Ben had little sisters who loved him.

Libby wasn’t a big talker—Michelle and Debby seemed to hog all her words. She made pronouncements: I like ponies. I hate spaghetti. I hate you. Like her mother, she had no poker face. No poker mood. It was all right there. When she wasn’t angry or sad, she just didn’t say much. Now, seat belted in back, taken along for the ride, she sat silently, her pink-blotched face aimed out the window, a finger against the glass, tracing the tops of trees outside.

Neither Patty nor Diane spoke either, and the radio stayed off. Patty tried to picture the visit (visit? Could you really call something this repulsive a visit?), but all she could see was her screaming “Leave my son alone!” She and Maggie Hinkel had never been friends, but they’d

always exchanged conversation at the grocery store, and the Patches she knew from church. These weren't unkind people, they wouldn't be unkind to her. As for the parents of the first girl, Krissi Cates, Patty had no idea. She pictured the Cateses as brightly blond and preppy, with everything matching and the house pristine and smelling of potpourri. She wondered if Mrs. Cates would spot the fake pearls.

Diane guided her off the highway, and into the neighborhood, past a big blue sign boasting of model units in Elkwood Park. So far it was just blocks and blocks of wooden skeletons, each one an outline of a house, each one allowing you to see the outline of the one next to it, and the outline of the one next to that. A teenage girl sat smoking on the second floor of one skeleton house, she looked like Wonder Woman in her invisible plane, sitting in the outlines of a bedroom. When she tapped her cigarette, the ashes fluttered down into the dining room.

All the pre-houses unnerved Patty. They were recognizable but totally foreign, an everyday word you suddenly couldn't remember to save your life.

"Pretty, huh?" Diane said, wagging a finger at the neighborhood.

Two more turns and they were there, a block of tidy houses, real houses, a cluster of cars in front of one.

"Looks like a party," Diane sniffed. She rolled down the window and spat outside.

The car was silent for a few seconds, except for Diane's throat-noises.

"Solidarity," Diane said. "Don't worry, worst they can do is yell."

"Maybe you should stay here with Libby," Patty said. "I don't want yelling in front of her."

"Nah," Diane said. "No one stays in the car. We can do this. Yeah, Libby? You're a tough little girl, right?" Diane turned her bulk to Libby in the backseat, her parka rustling, and then back to Patty. "It'll be good for them to see her, know he's got a little sister around who loves him." Patty had a shot of confidence that she'd thought the same thing.

Diane was out of the car then, on the other side, rousting Libby, and

opening the door wide for her to get out. The three of them walked up the sidewalk, Patty immediately feeling ill. Her ulcers had been quiet for a bit, but now her belly burned. She had to unclench her jaw and work it loose. They stood on the doorstep, Patty and Diane in front, with Libby just behind her mother, glancing out backward. Patty imagined a stranger driving past, thinking they were friends joining the festivities. The door still had a Christmas wreath on it. Patty thought, *They had a nice happy Christmas and now they are frightened and angry and I bet they keep thinking, but we just had such a nice happy Christmas.* The house was like something from a catalog, and there were two BMWs in the driveway and these were not people who were used to bad things happening.

“I don’t want to do this, I don’t think we should do this,” she blurted.

Diane rang the doorbell and gave her a look straight from their dad, the calm, unmoved look he gave whiners. Then she said exactly what Dad always said when he gave the look: “Nothing to it but to do it.”

Mrs. Cates answered the door, blond and prairie-faced. Her eyes were red from crying and she was still holding a tissue.

“Hello, may I help you?”

“I. Are you ... Krissi Cates’s mother?” Patty started, and began crying.

“I am,” the woman said, fingers on her own pearls, her eyes shifting back and forth to Patty and Diane, and then down to Libby, “Oh, was your little girl ... did he hurt your little girl too?”

“No,” Patty said. “I’m Ben’s mother. I’m *Ben Day’s* mother.” She wiped the tears with the back of her hand, then with the sleeve of her sweater.

“Oh God, Oh God, Oh, *Louuuu* come here. Hurry.” Mrs. Cates’s voice grew loud and quivery, the sound of an airplane going down. Several faces Patty didn’t recognize peered around the corner of the living room. A man walked past from the kitchen holding a tray of sodas. One girl lingered in the hallway, a pretty blond girl wearing flowered jeans.

“Who’s that?” the girl chirped.

“Go get your father.” Mrs. Cates moved to fill up the doorway, almost physically pushing them from the doorstep. “Louuuu ...” she called back into the house. A man appeared behind her, slab-like, 6’5” at least, solid, with a way of keeping his chin up that reminded Patty of people who got what they wanted.

“This is her, this is Ben Day’s mother,” the woman said with such disgust Patty could feel her womb flinch.

“You’d better come inside,” the man said, and when Patty and Diane glanced at each other, he snapped, “Come, come,” like they were bad pets.

They stepped into the home, into a sunken den, and peered out on a scene that looked like a children’s birthday party. Four girls were in various states of play. They wore foil stars on their faces and hands, the kind of stickers teachers use to mark good grades. Several were sitting with their parents, eating cake, the girls looking greedy, the moms and dads looking panicked behind brave faces. Krissi Cates had plopped herself in the middle of the floor and was playing dolls with a large, dark-haired young man who sat cross-legged in front of her, ingratiating himself. They were those spongy, unpretty dolls Patty had seen in *Movies of the Week*—with Meredith Baxter Birney or Patty Duke Astin as determined mothers or lawyers. They were the dolls that kids used to show how they were abused. Krissi had stripped the clothes off both dolls and was placing the boy doll on top of the girl doll. She bumped it up and down, and chanted nonsense words. A brunette girl watched from her mother’s lap while eating icing from under her fingernails. She seemed too old to be in her mother’s lap.

“Like that,” Krissi concluded, bored or angry, and tossed the doll aside. The young man—a therapist, a social worker, someone who wore Shetland sweaters with plaid shirts underneath, someone who went to college—picked the doll back up and tried to get Krissi’s attention.

“Krissi, let’s ...” he said, holding the boy doll carefully off one knee, the doll’s penis drooping toward the floor.

“Who is that?” Krissi said, pointing at Patty.

Patty strode across the room, ignoring all the parents, who began standing, wavering like strummed wires.

“Krissi?” she said, crouching down on the floor. “My name is Patty, I’m Ben Day’s mom.”

Krissi’s eyes widened, her lips quivered, and she scooted away from Patty. There was a second of silence, like a slow-motion crash, where she and Patty stared at each other. Then Krissi tilted her head back and yelled: “I don’t want her here!” Her voice echoed off the skylight. “I don’t want her here! You said! You said I wouldn’t have to!”

She threw herself on the floor and began ripping at her hair. The brunette girl ran over and wrapped herself over Krissi, wailing, “I don’t feel safe!”

Patty stood up, spinning around the room, saw parents with frightened, revolted faces, saw Diane hustling Libby behind her, toward the door.

“We’ve heard about you,” Krissi Cates’s mother said, her sweet, drained face twisted into a ball. She motioned back to Maggie Hinkel, Patty’s old classmate, who blushed at Patty. “You’ve got four kids at home,” she continued, her voice tight, her eyes wet. “You can’t afford a one of them. Their daddy’s a drunk. You’re on welfare. You leave your little girls alone with that ... jackal. You let your son prey on girls. Jesus Christ, you’ve let your son *do* this! God knows what happens out there!”

The Putch girl stood and screamed then, tears rolling past the bright stars on her cheeks. She joined the pack in the middle, where the young man was murmuring soothing words, trying to maintain eye contact with them. “I don’t want them here!” Krissi yelled again.

“Where’s Ben, Patty?” Maggie Hinkel said, her spade-faced daughter sitting beside her, expressionless. “The police really need to talk to Ben. I hope you’re not hiding him.”

“Me? I’ve been trying to find him. I’m trying to straighten this out. Please.” Please help me, please forgive me, please stop screaming.

Maggie Hinkel’s daughter remained quiet, then tugged at her mother’s sleeve. “Mom, I want to leave.” The other girls continued to howl, watching each other. Patty stood, looking down at Krissi and the therapist, who was still cradling the naked doll-boy that was supposed to be Ben. Her stomach seized, flushed her throat with acid.

“I think you should leave,” snapped Mrs. Cates, picking up her

daughter like a toddler, the girl's legs dangling almost to the floor, Mrs. Cates wobbling with the weight.

The young therapist stood up, inserting himself between Patty and Mrs. Cates. He almost put a hand on Patty, then moved it to Mrs. Cates instead. Diane was calling from the door, calling Patty's name, or Patty wouldn't have known to move. She was waiting for them to close in on her, scratch her eyes out.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Patty was yelling into the room, frantic and dizzy. "It's a mistake, I'm so sorry."

Then Lou Cates was in front of her, grabbing her by the arm, as if he hadn't just invited her in, and walking her toward the door, the keening of four girls behind her. Mothers and dads were everywhere, grown-ups taking care of their children, and Patty felt stupid. Not foolish, not embarrassed. Unforgivably stupid. She could hear the parents cooing things to their daughters: *good girl, it's ok-it's ok, she's leaving now, you're safe, we'll make this all better, hush, hush, baby.*

Just before Lou Cates propelled her from the room, Patty turned around to see Krissi Cates in her mother's arms, her blond hair over one eye. The girl looked at her and said simply, "Ben is going to hell."

## Libby Day

NOW

I'd been commissioned to find Runner, but all my feverish, ambitious action of the past week was slopped on the floor next to my bed, like a soiled nightgown. I couldn't get up, even when I heard the kids make their sleepy duckwalk past my house. I pictured them in big rubber rainboots, clomping along, leaving rounded footprints in the March muck, and I still couldn't move.

I'd woken up from a miserable dream, the kind you keep telling yourself doesn't mean anything, shouldn't bother you because it's just a dream, just a dream. It started back at the farm, but it wasn't the farm really, it was far too bright, too tidy to be the farm, but it was and in the distance, against an orange horizon, Runner was galloping toward the farm, hooting like an Old West cowboy. As he got closer—down our hill, through the gate—I saw that his gallop was actually a rickety, bumpalong motion because his horse had wheels. Its top half was flesh, but the bottom was metal, spindly, like a hospital gurney. The horse whinnied at me in panic, its muscled neck trying to separate from the metal below. Runner leapt down, the creature rolling away, one wheel busted, an irritating grocery cart of an animal. It came to a stop near a tree stump, its eyes going white, still struggling to pull itself apart.

“Don't worry about that.” Runner grinned at the horse. “I paid for it.”

“You got a bad deal,” I said.

Runner's jaw tightened and he stood too close to me.

“Your mom says it's fine,” he muttered.

*That's right!* I thought, *My mom is alive.* The idea felt solid, like a pebble in my pocket. My mom was alive, and how foolish I'd been, all these years thinking otherwise.

“You’d better fix your hand first,” Runner said, pointing at my stumped ring finger. “I brought you these. Hope you like them better than the horse.” He held up a flimsy velvet bag, the kind used for Scrabble, and shook it.

“Oh, I love the horse,” I said, batting away my ill will. The horse had torn its hindquarters from the metal and was bleeding a meaty red oil onto the ground.

From his bag, Runner poured eight or nine fingers. Every time I picked one that looked like mine, I realized it was a pinky finger, a man’s finger, a finger of the wrong color or size.

Runner was pursing his lips at me. “Just take one, OK? It’s not a big deal.”

I picked one that was vaguely similar to my lost one, and Runner sewed it to my hand, the ripped horse screaming now behind us, a woman’s scream, terrified and angry. Runner threw a shovel at it, and it broke in two, pulsing on the ground, unable to move.

“There,” Runner said with a lip smack. “Good as new.”

Between my two girlish fingers, a bulbous big toe squatted, tied on with lazy, thick stitches, and suddenly Runner’s girlfriend Peggy was there and said, “Honey, her momma’s not here, remember? We killed her.”

And Runner smacked his head like a man who’d forgotten to bring home milk and said, “That’s right. That’s right. I got all them girls, except Libby.” We three stood blinking at each other, the air turning nasty. Then Runner went back to the horse, and picked up the shovel, which had become an axe.

I flung myself awake, one arm cracking my bedside lamp to the floor. It was barely dawn when I turned and watched the glowing lamp on its side, wondered if the lightbulb would burn a hole in the carpet. Now it was morning and still I couldn’t move.

But the light was on in Ben’s room. My first real thought: that night the light was on in Ben’s room and someone was talking. I wanted to stop thinking about it but I always came back to it. Why would a crazed killer go into Ben’s room, close the door, turn on the light and chat?

The light was on in Ben's room. Forget the other stuff: a vengeful Lou Cates, a debt-crazed Runner, a pack of goons who wanted to teach Runner a lesson by murdering his family. Forget the bellowing voice I heard, which—fine, I guess—may not have been Ben's. But he wasn't home when we went to bed, and when I woke up the light was on. I remember a flush of relief because Ben was home because his light was on and the fight was over between him and my mom at least for today because the light was on and he was talking behind the door, maybe on his new phone, or to himself, but the light was on.

And who was Diondra?

I prepared to get out of bed, tossing the covers aside, the sheets dank-smelling, gray from my body. I wondered how long it had been since I'd changed them. And then I wondered how often you were supposed to change them. These were the kinds of things you didn't learn. I changed the bedclothes after sex, now, finally, and that I only learned a few years ago from a movie on TV: Glenn Close, some thriller, and she's just had sex and is changing the sheets and I can't remember the rest, because all I was thinking was: Oh, I guess people change sheets after they have sex. It made sense, but I'd never thought of it. I was raised feral, and I mostly stayed that way.

I got out of bed, finally returning the lamp to my bedtable, and walked roundabout to the living room, sneaking up on the answering machine, not letting it know I cared if it had a message. I might as well have whistled, my feet kicking out ahead of me—*nothing unusual here, just out for a walk*. No Diane. Four days and no Diane.

Well, no problem, I had other family.

BEN WAS WAITING for me this time when I came, sliding into view before I was prepared. He sat rigid in the seat behind glass, his eyes unfocused, a jumpsuited mannequin. I wanted to tell him not to do that to me, it gave me the creeps, but I didn't say anything because why would he give me the creeps unless I still didn't entirely believe he was innocent.

Which I didn't, I guess.

I sat down, the chair still humid from someone else, the warmth of the plastic feeling grossly intimate in this place. I mushed my buttocks back and forth, making it mine, trying not to look repulsed, but when I picked up the phone it was still sweaty from the previous user, and

whatever look I gave made Ben frown.

“You OK?” he asked, and I nodded once. Yes, sure, absolutely fine.

“So, you came back,” he said. He fixed on a smile now. Cautious, the way Ben always was. At a family party, on the last day of school, he looked the same, a kid who lived permanently in the library—waiting to be shushed.

“I came back.”

He had a nice face, not handsome but nice, the face of a good guy. Catching me assessing him, his eyes darted to his hands. They were big now, bigger than his small frame, piano hands even though we never played piano. They were scarred, nothing impressive, dark pink confetti strips of nips and cuts. He caught me looking, held one hand up, pointed a finger at one deep gash: “Polo accident.”

I laughed because I could tell he was already regretting the joke.

“Nah, actually you know what this is?” Ben said. “This is from that bull, Yellow 5, remember that little bastard?”

We had only a small operation, but we still never named our cattle, that was not a good idea, even as a kid I had no interest in getting attached to Bossy or Hank or Sweet Belle because they’d be sent to slaughter as soon as they were big enough. Sixteen months, that rang out in my head. Once they were a year old, you started tiptoeing around them, you started looking at them sideways with disgust and embarrassment like a guest in your home who just farted. So instead we color-tagged them during calving each year, matching cows with their calves: Green 1, Red 3, Blue 2, sliding out from their mothers, onto the dirt floor of the barn, those feet kicking right away, always trying to get a purchase in the slop. People think of cattle as docile, dumb, but calves? They’re kitty-curious, playful, and for that reason I was never allowed in the lot with them, just eyed them through the slats, but I remember Ben, his rubber boots on, trying to sneak, moving slow and deliberate as an astronaut, and then he got near and he might as well have been trying to grab fish. I remember Yellow 5, at least the name, the famous bull calf who’d refused to be castrated—poor Ben and my mom, day after day trying to get ahold of Yellow 5 so they could slit his sack and cut off his nuts, and each day coming to the dinner table as failures, Yellow 5 having outplayed them. It was a joke to be told over a ground round the first night, everyone talking to

the steak, pretending it was Yellow 5: You'll be sorry, Yellow 5. By the second night it was cause for chagrined laughter, and by the fifth it was grim mouths and silence, a reminder to both Ben and my mom that they weren't good enough: weak, small, slow, lacking.

I'd have never thought of Yellow 5 again without Ben reminding me. I wanted to tell him to make a list of things to recall, memories I couldn't pluck out of my brain on my own.

"What happened? He bit you?"

"Nah, nothing that dramatic, he pushed me into the fence right when I thought I'd gotten ahold of him, just haunched me to one side, and I fell full on, jammed the back of my hand right onto a nail. It was on a rail Mom had already asked me to fix, a good five times. So, you know, my fault."

I was trying to think of what to say—something clever, commiserative, I still had no grip on what reactions Ben wanted—and Ben interrupted. "No, screw that, it was goddam Yellow 5's fault." He broke into a quick smile, then let his shoulders slump down again. "I remember Debby, she dressed it all up, my cut, put a Band-Aid on it and then put one of her stickers, those shiny stickers with like hearts or whatever, on top of it."

"She loved stickers," I said.

"She put 'em everywhere, that's for sure."

I took a breath, debated flitting over to some other harmless subject, the weather or something, then didn't.

"Hey, Ben, can I ask you a question?"

He went shark-eyed, tight, and I saw the convict again, a guy used to being on the receiving end, taking question after question and getting attitude when he asked his own. I realized what a decadence it was, to refuse to answer a question. *No thanks, don't want to talk about that* and the worst you get is someone thinks you're rude.

"You know that night?"

He widened his eyes. Of course he knew the night.

"I remember, I may have been confused, about exactly what happened ..."

He was leaning forward now, his arms stiff, huddled over the phone like it was a late-night emergency call.

“But, one thing I do remember, like stake-my-life-on-it remember ... your light was on. In your bedroom. I saw it under the crack in the door. And there was talking. In the room.”

I trailed off, hoping he'd save me. He let me float, that freefall few seconds when your feet go loose on ice and you have just enough time to think, *Oh. I am going to fall.*

“That’s a new one,” he finally said.

“What’s that?”

“A new question. I didn’t think there’d be new questions anymore. Congratulations.” I caught us both sitting in the same posture, one palm on the edge of the table like we were about to push back from a meal of leftovers. Runner’s posture, I remember it from the last time I saw him, me twenty-five or twenty-six, and him wanting money, asking all flirty and sweet at first—*do you think maybe you can help your old man out, Libbydear?*—and me telling him no, straight off, a bat cracking a line drive, shocking, humbling. *Well, why not?* he’d snapped, and his shoulders shot back, his arms flipped up, hands on my table, me thinking: *why’d I let him sit down*, already calculating the time I’d waste getting him back up.

“I snuck out that night,” Ben said. “I came home, me and mom got in another fight.”

“About Krissi Cates?”

He started at that, then let it slide over him.

“About Krissi Cates. But she believed me, she was completely on my side, that was the great thing about Mom, even when she was pissed as hell at you, she was on your side, you knew that. In your bones. She believed me. But she was angry, and just, scared. I’d kept her waiting for, I don’t know, sixteen hours with no word—I didn’t even know what was going on, you know, no cell phones back then, you’d go a whole day and not talk, not like today. I hear.”

“So, but—”

“Right, we just got in a fight, I don’t even remember if it was exactly Krissi Cates or that’s where it started and went from there, I

wish to God I could remember, but anyway, she kinda grounds me, sends me to my room, and I go there and after an hour I'm pissed off again, and I leave the house, leave the radio on and the lights on so if she peeks out she thinks I'm still there. I mean, you know the way she slept, wasn't like she was going to walk all the way to my room to look in on me. Once she was asleep, she was pretty much asleep."

Ben made it sound like an unbelievable journey, those thirty-some steps, but it was true, my mom was useless once she was asleep. She barely even moved. I remember holding tense vigils over her body, convincing myself she was dead, staring til my eyes watered, trying to make out breathing, trying to get even a moan. Nudge her, and she'd flop back into the same position. We all had stories of encountering her on coincidental overlapping visits to the bathroom in the night—turn the corner to find her peeing on the toilet, robe between her legs, looking through us like we were made of glass. *I just don't know about the sorghum* she'd say, or *That seed come in yet?* And then she'd shuffle past us back to her room.

"Did you tell the police that?"

"Aw, Libby, come on. Come on. This is not how I want this to go."

"Did you?"

"No, I didn't. What difference would it have made? They already knew we had a fight. I tell them we had two? That's ... there's no point. I was there maybe an hour, nothing happened besides that, it was inconsequential. Entirely."

We eyed each other.

"Who's Diondra?" I asked. I could see him try to go even more still. I could see him thinking. The sneaking out may have been true, may not, but I could tell now he was about to lie. The name Diondra chimed him, I could picture his bones humming. He tilted his head to the right just a little bit, a *funny you ask that* tilt and caught himself.

"Diondra?" He was stalling, trying to figure out exactly what I knew. I gave him a face of slab.

"Uh, Diondra was a girl at school. Where'd you come up with Diondra?"

"I found a note she wrote you, sounds like she was more than 'a girl

at school.’ ”

“Huh. Well, she was a crazy girl, I do remember that. She was always writing notes that, you know, she was a girl who wanted people to think she was, wild.”

“I thought you didn’t have a girlfriend.”

“I didn’t. Jeez, Libby how do you go from a note to a girlfriend?”

“From the note.” I tensed up, knowing I was about to be disappointed.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. I wish I could say she was my girlfriend. She was, just totally out of my league. I don’t even remember getting a note from her. Are you sure it had my name on it? And how’d you even get a note?”

“Never mind,” I said, removing the phone from my ear so he knew I was leaving.

“Libby, hold on, hold on.”

“No, if you’re going to work me like some ... convict, I don’t see the point.”

“Libby, hold the hell up. I’m sorry I can’t give you the answer I guess you want.”

“I just want the truth.”

“And I just want to tell you the truth, but you seem to want ... a story. I just, I mean Christ, here comes my little sister after all these years and I think, well, here might be one good thing. One good thing. She sure as hell wasn’t helpful twenty-four goddam years ago, but, hey, I’m over that, I’m so over that the first time I see her, all I am is happy. I mean there I was in my fucking animal pen, waiting to see you, so nervous like I was going on a date, and I see you and, jeez, it’s like, maybe this one thing will be OK. Maybe I can have one person from my family still in my life and I won’t be so fucking lonely, because—and I mean, I know you talked to Magda, believe me I heard all about that, and so yeah I have people who visit me and care about me, but they’re not you, they’re not anyone who knows me except as the guy with the ... and I was just thinking it’d be so goddam nice to be able to talk with my sister, who knows me, who knows our family, and knows that we were just, like, normal, and we can laugh about

goddam cows. That's it, you know, that's all I'm asking for at this point. Just something as tiny as that. And so I wish I could tell you something that won't make you ... hate me again." He dropped his eyes, looking at the reflection of his chest in the glass. "But I can't."

## Ben Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

5:58 P.M.

Diondra had a little belly, it freaked Ben out, and for weeks now she'd been talking about the "quickenings." The quickening had happened, the baby was moving, it was a very special, important moment and so Ben had to put his hand on her stomach all the time and feel the baby kick. He was proud of making the belly, proud of making the baby, the idea of it at least, but he didn't like to actually touch that area or look at it. The flesh was weird, hard but globby at the same time, like ham gone bad, and touching it was just embarrassing. For weeks, she'd been grabbing his hand and pressing it there, watching his face for a reaction, and then she'd yell at him when he couldn't feel anything. For a while, actually, he'd thought maybe the pregnancy was just one of Diondra's jokes to make him feel dumb—he'd sit there with his hand sweating on that gross mound of skin, and think, maybe that rumble, was that it, was that the baby or was that just indigestion? He worried. He worried that if he didn't feel anything—and he hadn't those first weeks after the quickening—that Diondra would yell at him, *It's right there, it's like a cannon going off in my womb, how can you not feel it?* And he worried that if he finally said he did, that Diondra would blast him with her laugh, that laugh that bowed her at the midsection like she'd been shot, the knee-grabbing laugh that made her gelled hair shake like a tree after an ice storm, because of course she wasn't really pregnant, she was just fucking with him, didn't he know anything?

He had, in fact, looked for signs she may be lying: those big, bloody maxipads that his mom always rolled up in the trash and that always ended up unfurled within a day. Otherwise he hadn't been sure what to look for, and he wasn't sure if he should ask if it was his. She talked like it was, and that was probably as sure as he'd get.

Anyway, in the past month, it was clear she was definitely

pregnant, at least if you saw her naked. She still went to school, dressed in those giant baggy sweaters, and she left her jeans unbuttoned and partly unzipped, and the mound got bigger, Diondra holding it and rubbing it in her hands like it was some sort of crystal ball of their fucked-up future, and one day, she grabbed his hand and he felt it, no doubt—that thing was kicking and all of a sudden he saw the swipe of a little foot move under the surface of Diondra's skin, smooth and fast.

*What the hell's wrong with you? You birth cows out there at the farm don't you? It's just a baby* was Diondra's reaction when he snatched his hand away. She pulled it back and held it there, held his palm on that twitching thing inside her, and he thought, *calving is damn different than your own real baby*, and then he thought, *let me go let me go let me go* as if the thing were going to grab him like some late-night slasher movie and pull him inside her. That's how he pictured it, a thing. Not a baby.

Maybe it would have helped if they talked about it more. After the quickening, she wouldn't speak to him at all for a few days, and it turned out he was supposed to give her something for the quickening, that you gave pregnant ladies presents to celebrate the quickening, and that her parents had given her a gold bracelet when she got her first period and that this was like that. So in place of a present she made him go down on her ten times, that was the deal, which he thought she probably picked because he didn't really like to do it, the smell made him queasy, especially now, when that whole area seemed used. She didn't seem to like it either, that's why it felt like punishment, her yelling at him about fingers and pressure and higher, it's higher up, go higher and finally sighing and grabbing his head hard, by the ears and pulling him to the spot she wanted and him thinking *you fucking bitch* and wiping her off his mouth when he was done. Eight more to go, *you fucking bitch, you want a glass of water sweet-heart?* And she'd said *No but you do, you smell like pussy* and laughed.

Pregnant women were moody. He knew this. But otherwise, Diondra didn't act pregnant. She still smoked and drank, which you weren't supposed to do if you were pregnant but she said only health nuts gave up all that stuff. Another thing she didn't do: plan. Diondra didn't even talk much about what they'd do when it was born—when

*she* was born. Diondra had never been to a doctor, but she was sure it was a girl because girls made you sicker and she'd been sick the first month so bad. But she really didn't say more, reality-wise, than to talk about it as a girl, as an actual girl that would come out of her. He'd wondered at first if she was going to get an abortion. He'd said *if you have the baby* instead of *when*, and she'd completely freaked, and Diondra completely freaking was something he never wanted to see again. She was a handful enough at her most calm, this was like watching a natural disaster, the nails the crying the hitting, and her yelling that that was the worst thing anyone had ever said to her, and it's your flesh too, what the hell is wrong with you, you asshole piece of shit?

But otherwise, they didn't plan or couldn't plan, since Diondra's dad would literally kill her if he ever found out she was pregnant outside of marriage. If he ever found out she even did it outside of marriage, he'd kill her. Diondra's parents had only one rule, only one single rule, and that was that she must never, ever let a boy touch her there unless he was her husband. When she turned sixteen, Diondra's dad had given her a promise ring, a gold ring with a big red stone that looked like a wedding ring and she wore it on that finger, and it meant a promise to him and to herself that she would remain a virgin til marriage. The whole thing grossed Ben out—doesn't that seem like you're married to your dad? Diondra said it was a control thing, mostly. This was the one thing her dad had decided to get hung up about, it was the one thing he asked of her, and goddamit, she'd better do it. She said it made him feel better leaving her alone, unsupervised, unprotected, except for the dogs, for months at a time. It was his one parental thing: my daughter may drink or do drugs but she is a virgin and therefore I can't be as fucked up as I seem.

This, she said, with tears in her eyes. This she said while near her pass-out part of a drunk. She said her dad told her if he ever found out she'd broken the promise, he'd take her out of the house and shoot her in the head. Her dad had been in Vietnam, and he talked like that, and Diondra took it seriously, so she didn't do any planning about the baby. Ben made lists of things they might need, and he bought some hand-me-down baby clothes at a Delphos flea market right near Christmastime. He'd been embarrassed, so he just bought the whole bunch from the woman for \$8. It turned out to be undershirts and underwear, for a bunch of different ages, lots of ruffly

undies—the woman kept calling them bloomers—which is fine, kids need underwear for sure. Ben stored them under his bed, which made him more glad he had the lock, he could picture the girls finding them and stealing whatever fit. So true, he didn't think enough about the kid, and what would happen, but Diondra seemed to think even less.

"I THINK WE should leave town," Diondra said now, a surprise, the hair still over half her face, Ben's hand still clamped to her belly, the baby scuttering around inside like it had dug tunnels. Diondra turned slightly toward him, one lazy boob lolling on Ben's arm. "I can't hide this much longer. My mom and dad will be home any day now. You sure Michelle doesn't know?"

Ben had saved a note from Diondra, it talked about how horny she was and how much sex she wanted from him *even now*, and nosy-ass Michelle had found it going through his jacket pockets. The little bitch had blackmailed him—\$10 not to tell Mom—and when Ben complained to Diondra, she went ballistic. *Your little fucking sister could tell on us at any moment, you think that's OK? This is on you, Ben. You fucked up.* Diondra was paranoid that somehow Michelle would figure out she was pregnant from those two words—"even now"—and they'd be undone *by a fucking ten-year-old, how perfect.*

"No, she hasn't mentioned it again."

That was a lie, just yesterday Michelle caught his eye, shook her hips, and said in a teasy voice, "Hey Beee-ennn, how's your seeeex life?" She was such a shitty kid. She'd blackmailed him on other things—chores he'd left undone, extra food he'd eaten from the fridge. Little stuff. It was always little crappy stuff, like she was there just to remind Ben how cramped his life was. She'd spend the money on jelly donuts.

Trey made a loud loogie noise in the other room, and then a *thweewp!* spit sound. Ben could picture the yellow phlegm dripping down the sliding glass door, the dogs licking at it. That was something Trey and Diondra did: they hocked loogies at things. Sometimes Trey shot it straight into the air, and the dogs would catch it in their drooly mouths. ("It's just body stuff going into another body," Diondra would say. "You've thrown some of your body stuff into my body and it doesn't seem to bother you none.")

As the TV got even louder in the den—*wrap it up you two, I'm*

*goddam bored*—Ben tried to think of the right thing to say. He sometimes thought he never said anything to Diondra that was just pure talking, it was all verbal elbows and arms, trying to fend off her constant annoyance, say what she wanted to hear. But he loved her, he did love her, and that's what men did for their women, they told them what they wanted to hear and shut up. He'd knocked Diondra up and now she owned him, and he had to do right by her. He'd have to drop out of school and get a full-time job, which would be fine, some kid he knew quit last year and worked over near Abilene at the brick factory, got \$12,000 dollars a year, Ben couldn't even begin to think how to spend it all. So he'd drop out of school, which was just as well, considering whatever the hell Diondra thought she'd heard about Krissi Cates.

It was weird, at first that made him really nervous, that those rumors were going around, and then part of him got kind of proud. Even though she was a kid, she was one of the cool younger kids. Even some of the high schoolers knew her, the older girls took an interest in her, that pretty, well-bred girl, so it was sort of cool that she had a crush on him, even though she was a kid, and he was sure whatever Diondra had just told him was her usual exaggeration. Hysterical, she sometimes got.

“Hey, hello? Try to stay with me. I said I think we have to leave town.”

“Then we'll leave town.” He tried to kiss her and she pushed him away.

“Really, that easy? Where d'we go, how will you support us? I won't have my allowance anymore, you know. You'll have to get a job.”

“I'll get a job then. What about your uncle or cousin or whoever in Wichita?”

She looked at him like he was crazy.

“With the sporting-goods store?” he pushed.

“You can't work there, you're fifteen. You can't drive. In fact, I don't even think you can get a real job without your mom's permission. When do you turn sixteen again?”

“July thirteenth,” he said, feeling like he'd just told her he wet himself.

She started crying then. “Oh my God, Oh my God, what are we going to do?”

“Your cousin can’t help?”

“My *uncle* will tell my parents, how will that help?”

She got up, walking naked, her stomach bulge looking dangerously unsupported, Ben wanting to go stick a hand under there, and thinking how much bigger she’d get. She didn’t put on any clothes to walk across the hall to the shower, even though Trey could see right down the hallway if he was still sitting on the couch. He heard the guttural sound of the shower twisting on. Conversation over. He wiped himself off with a moldy towel near Diondra’s hamper, then squeezed back into his leather pants and striped T-shirt and sat on the edge of the bed, trying to guess what smart-ass comment Trey was going to make when they went back out to the den.

In a few minutes, Diondra breezed into the bedroom, wearing a red towel, her hair wet, not looking at him, and sat in front of her dresser with the mirror in it. She squirted her mousse into her palm, a giant dogshit of a pile, and scrunched it into her hair, aiming the blowdryer at each section—squirt, scrunch, woosh, squirt, scrunch, woosh.

He wasn’t sure whether he was supposed to leave or not, so he stayed, sitting on the bed still, trying to catch her eye. She poured dark foundation into her palm, the way an artist might pour paint, and swirled it onto her face. Some girls had called her a base face, he heard them, but he liked the way it looked, tan and smooth, even though her neck sometimes seemed whiter, like the vanilla ice cream under the caramel dip. She put on three coats of mascara—she always said it took three, one to darken, one to thicken and one for drama. Then she started with the lipstick: undercoat, overcoat, gloss. She caught him looking and stopped, dabbing her lips on little foamy triangles, leaving sticky purple kiss marks on them.

“You need to ask Runner for money,” she said, looking at him in the mirror.

“My dad?”

“Yeah, he’s got money right? Trey always buys weed from him.” She dropped the towel, went over to her underwear drawer, a thicket of bright lace and satin, and dug around til she pulled out underwear

and a bra, hot pink, with black lace edges, the kind girls wore in the saloons in westerns.

“Are you sure we’re talking about the same guy?” he said. “My dad does, you know, handyman stuff. Labor. He works on farms and stuff.”

Diondra rolled her eyes at him, tugging at the back of her bra, her tits overflowing everywhere—over the cups, under the clasps, unwrangleable and eggy. She let the bra go finally, threw it across the room—*fuck, I need a goddam fucking bra that fits!* She stood glaring at him, and then her underpants started rolling under themselves, edging away from her stomach, up in her ass crack. None of those sexy underclothes fit. Ben thought first: chubby, and then corrected: pregnant.

“Are you serious? You don’t know your own dad deals? He sold to me and Trey last week.” She tossed away the underpants, then put on a different bra, an ugly plain bra, and new jeans, pouting about her size.

Ben had never bought drugs himself before. He smoked a lot with Trey and Diondra and whoever had pot in that crowd, and sometimes he chipped in a buck or two, but when he pictured a dealer, he pictured someone with slick hair and jewelry, not his dad in the old Royals baseball cap and the cowboy boots with the big heels and the shirts that looked like they were wilting. Not his dad, definitely not his dad. And weren’t dealers supposed to have money? His dad definitely did not have money, so the whole argument was stupid. And if he was a dealer, and he did have money, he wouldn’t give any to Ben. He’d make fun of Ben for asking, maybe hold a twenty just out of Ben’s reach the way a bully would grab a nerd’s notebook, and then he’d laugh and shove it right back in his pants pocket. Runner never had a wallet, he just carried mangled bills in the front of his jeans, and wasn’t that enough of a sign he had no cash?

“Trey!” Diondra yelled down the hall. She threw on a new sweater with patterns that looked like a geometry experiment. Ripped off the tags and tossed them to the floor, then rumbled out of the room. Ben was left staring at the rock posters and the astrology posters (Diondra was a Scorpio, she took it very seriously) and crystals and books on numerology. All around her mirror were stapled decrepit, dried corsages from dances Ben had not taken her to, they were mostly from

this senior back in Hiawatha named Gary that even Trey said was a prick. Trey, of course, knew him.

The corsages unsettled Ben, they looked like organs, with their folds and their twists, their pink-and-purple-ness. They reminded Ben of the stinking globs of meat sitting in his locker right now, a horrible gift Diondra had left him—surprise!—the girl parts of some animal, Diondra refusing to say where it came from. She hinted it was from a blood sacrifice she did with Trey; Ben assumed it was just leftover pieces from a Biology experiment. She liked to freak him out. When her class did baby-pig dissections, she brought him a curlicue tail, thought it was hilarious. It wasn't, it was just nasty. He got up and went to the living room.

“You sorry sack of shit,” Trey called from the sofa, where he'd just lit a joint, not taking his eyes off the music video. “You don't know about your dad? The fuck, dude.” Trey's bare stomach was almost concave, but rippled, perfect, tan. The opposite of Ben's soft white mouse-belly. Trey had balled the shirt Diondra gave him under his head as a pillow.

“Here, you broke-dick dog.” He handed Ben the joint, and Ben took a big pull off it, feeling the back of his head go numb. “Hey, Ben, how many babies does it take to paint a house?”

### *Annihilation.*

There it was back, that word. Ben pictured barbarian hordes busting through the big stone fireplace, and swiping Trey's head off with an axe, right in the middle of one of his fucking dead-baby jokes, the head rolling over across the dogshit and stopping next to one of Diondra's black buckle shoes. And then maybe Diondra dies next. Fuck it all. Ben took another drag, his brain feeling minty, and gave it back to Trey. Diondra's biggest dog, the white one, glided over to him and stared with no forgiveness in its eyes.

“Depends on how hard you throw them,” Trey said. “Why do you put a baby in a blender feet first?”

“I'm serious, Trey,” Diondra said, continuing a conversation Ben wasn't privy to. “He thinks his dad doesn't deal.”

“So you can see its reaction. Hey, Ben? You're smoking your dad's stuff, buddy,” Trey said, finally turning to look at him. “It's crap.

Potent, but crap. That's why we know your dad has money. He overcharges, but no one else has any right now. Think he said he got it in Texas. He been to Texas lately?"

Runner had disappeared from Ben's life after Patty gave him the boot. For all Ben knew he might have gone to Texas for a while. Hell, you can drive to Texas and back in a day if you drive hard, so why not?

"This is cashed," Trey said, in a toke-choke voice. "Anyway, he owes me money, like everyone in this town. They love to make the bet, they never want to pay it off."

"Hey, I didn't even get any," Diondra pouted. She turned away and started sifting through the cabinets—the basement den had a minikitchen, too, imagine that, needing a separate room for all your junk food—and then cracked open the fridge, got herself a beer, didn't ask Ben if he wanted one. Ben saw the inside of that fridge, which had been packed with food the month before, and now just had beer and a big jar with one single pickle floating in it like a turd.

"You grab me a beer, Diondra?" he said, pissy.

She cocked her head at him, then handed him hers, went back to the fridge for another.

"So let's go find Runner, and we'll get some pot and get some money," Diondra said, draping herself next to him on the chair. "And then we can get the hell out of Dodge."

Ben looked at that blue eye, that bright blue eye—it seemed like Diondra was always looking at him sideways, he never saw both eyes at the same time—and for the first time he felt really bone scared. He couldn't even drop out of school without his mom's permission before he turned sixteen. Much less get a job at the brick plant or anything that made enough money for Diondra to not hate him, not sigh when he came home at night, and now that's what he saw, not even that little apartment in Wichita, but some factory near the border, near Oklahoma, where the really cheap work was, where you worked sixteen hours a day, worked weekends, and Diondra would be with the baby and she'd hate it. She had no mothering instinct, she'd sleep right through the baby crying, she'd forget to feed it, she'd go out drinking with some guys she met—she always was meeting guys, at the mall or the gas station or the movies—and leave the kid there.

*What can happen to it, it's a baby, it ain't going nowhere!* He could already hear it, him being the bad guy. The poor, idiot bad guy who can't provide.

"Fine," he said, thinking once they left the house, they'd lose track of the idea. He almost had. His brain was bundling itself up, getting woolly. He wanted to go home.

Trey immediately shot up, jingling his truck keys—*I know where to find him*—and suddenly they were out in the cold, tromping through the snow and ice, Diondra demanding Ben's arm so she wouldn't fall, Ben thinking, but what if she fell? What if she fell and died, or lost the baby? He'd heard girls at school saying if you ate a lemon a day you'd have a miscarriage, and had thought about sneaking lemon into Diondra's diet Cokes and then realized that was wrong, to do it without her knowing, but what if she fell? But she didn't, they were in Trey's truck with the heater wushing on them, and Ben was in the backseat as always—it was half a backseat, really, only a kid could fit on it, so his knees were smashed sideways to his chest—and when he saw a shriveled pinky of a fry on the seat next to him he popped it in his mouth and instead of looking to see if anyone saw, he just looked for more, which meant he was very stoned and very hungry.

## Libby Day

NOW

Back in grade school, my shrinks tried to channel my viciousness into a constructive outlet, so I cut things with scissors. Heavy, cheap fabrics Diane bought by the bolt. I sliced through them with old metal shears going up and down: *hateyouhateyouhateyou*. The soft growl of the fabric as I sliced it apart, and that perfect last moment, when your thumb is getting sore and your shoulders hurt from hunching and cut, cut, cut ... free, the fabric now swaying in two pieces in your hands, a curtain parted. And then what? That's how I felt now, like I'd been sawing away at something and come to the end and here I was by myself again, in my small house with no job, no family, and I was holding two ends of fabric and didn't know what to do next.

Ben was lying. I didn't want this to be true but it was undeniable. Why lie about a silly high school girlfriend? My thoughts chased themselves like birds trapped in an attic. Maybe Ben was telling the truth, and the note from Diondra really wasn't to him, it was just part of the haphazard flotsam that went with a houseful of school kids. Hell, Michelle could have pulled it out of the trash after some senior boy tossed it, a useful bit of garbage for her ongoing petty blackmail.

Or maybe Ben knew Diondra, loved Diondra, and was trying to keep it a secret because Diondra was dead.

He'd killed her the same night he killed our family, part of his satanic sacrifices, buried her somewhere out there in that big, flat Kansas farm country. The Ben that frightened me was back in my head: I could picture a campfire, liquor sloshing in a bottle, Diondra-from-the-yearbook, with her spiral curls bouncing as she laughed, eyes closed, or sang, her face orange in the fire and Ben standing behind her, gently raising a shovel, eyes on the crown of her head ...

Where were the other cult kids, the rest of the pack of Satan worshipers? If there was a ring of pale, sloe-eyed teens who'd

recruited Ben, where were they? By now I'd read every scrap of information from the trial. The police had never found anyone involved in Satan worship with Ben. All the wild-haired, pot-smoking Devil kids of Kinnakee morphed back to peachy country boys in the days after Ben's arrest. How convenient for them. Two "habitual drug users" in their early twenties testified that Ben had shown up at some abandoned warehouse, a hangout place, on the day of the murders. They said he screeched like a demon when someone played a Christmas song. They claimed he told them he was going to make a sacrifice. They said he left with a guy named Trey Teepano, who supposedly mutilated cattle and worshiped the Devil. Teepano testified he only vaguely knew Ben. He had an alibi for the time of the killings: his dad, Greg Teepano, testified Trey was at home with him in Wamego, more than sixty miles away.

So maybe Ben was crazy all by his lonesome. Or maybe he was innocent. Again the birds in the attic battered around. Crash thunk shatter. I had probably sat for hours on the couch, wondering what to do, being shiftless, when I heard the heavy footsteps of my mailman thump up my stairs. My mom always had us bake Christmas cookies for our mailman. But my mailman, or lady, changed every few weeks. No cookies.

I had three envelopes offering me credit cards, one bill that belonged to someone named Matt who lived on a street nowhere near me, and one envelope that looked like dirty laundry, it was so soft and wrinkled. Used. Someone else's name and address had been blacked out with a magic marker, and mine written in the cramped space left below it. Mrs. Libby Day.

It was from Runner.

I went upstairs to read the letter, sitting on the edge of my bed. Then, as I always do when I get nervy, I smushed myself into a small space, in this case the spot between my bed and the bedside table, sitting on the floor with my back to the wall. I opened the dirty envelope and pulled out an unwholesome piece of women's stationery, bordered with roses. My father's handwriting swarmed across it: tiny, frenetic, pointy, like a hundred spiders had been splattered across the page.

*Dear Libby,*

*Well, Libby, we sure find ourselves in a strange place after all these years. At least I do. Never thought I'd be this old, and tired, and by myself. Got cancer. They say only a few months. All rite by me, Iv'e been here longer than I deserve any way. So I was exited to here from you. Look, I know I was never close with you. I was very young when we had you, and I was'nt the greatest dad, altho I tried to provide for you and be close with you when I was able. Your mother made it difficult. I was imature and she was even more. And then the murders were very hard on me. So there you go. I need to let you know—and please do'nt lechure me I shoold have done this before. I know I shoold have done this before. But between my gambling problems and I am an alcaholic, I have had truble facing my demons. I know the real killer of that night, and I know it was'nt Ben. I will tell the truth before I die. If you can send me some money, I would be happy to visit you and tell you more. Five hundred bucks shoold work.*

*I look forward to hering from you.*

*Runner "Dad" Day  
12 Donneran Rd.  
Bert Nolan Home for Men  
Lidgerwood, OK*

*PS Ask somone what the zip code is, I dont know.*

I grabbed the thin neck of my table lamp and hurled the whole thing across the room, the lamp soaring three feet until its electrical cord stopped it short and it fell to the floor. I charged at it, yanked it from its socket, and threw it again. It hit the wall, the lampshade bumping off and rolling drunkenly across the floor, the cracked light-bulb jutting out the top like a broken tooth.

"Fuck. You." I screamed. It was directed toward me as much as my dad. That, at this stage of my life, I was expecting Runner to act correctly was stupid to the point of outrageousness. The letter was just a big long palm stretching out over the miles, asking for a handout, working me as a mark. I'd pay that five hundred and never see Runner again, until I wanted more help or answers, and then he'd work me over another time. His daughter.

I was going down to Oklahoma. I kicked the wall twice, rattling the windows, and was going for a good third windup when the doorbell went off downstairs. I looked outside automatically, but from the second floor saw only the top of a sycamore tree and the dusky sky. I stood frozen, waiting for the visitor to go away, but the doorbell went again, five times in a row, the person on my porch knowing I was

home, thanks to my tantrum.

I was dressed like my mom in the winter: big, formless sweatshirt, baggy cheap longjohns, thick itchy socks. I turned to the closet for a second and then decided I didn't care as the doorbell went again.

My door has no window in it, so I couldn't get a glimpse of the person. I put the chain on and opened the door a crack to see the back of a head, a mat of tangled tawny hair, and then Krissi Cates turned around to face me.

"Those old women over there are kinda rude," she said, and then gave a showboaty wave, the kind I'd given them the week before, the broad, fuck-you wave. "I mean, *hello*? anyone ever tell them it's not polite to stare?"

I kept looking at her through the chain, feeling like a little old lady myself.

"I got your address from the—when you were at the club," she said, bending down to reach my eye level. "I don't actually have that money for you yet. Uh, but I was hoping to talk to you. I can't believe I didn't recognize you that night. I drink way, way too much." She said it without embarrassment, the way someone would say they have a wheat allergy. "Your place is really hard to find. And I actually haven't been drinking. But I've just never been good at directions. Like, if I reach a fork in the road, and I can take a right or a left, I will choose whichever is wrong. Like, I should just listen to my gut and then do the opposite. But I don't. I don't know why that is."

She kept talking like that, adding a sentence and then another, without asking to be let in, and that was probably why I decided to let her in.

She walked in respectfully, hands clasped, the way a well-brought up girl would, trying to find something to compliment in my run-down place, her eyes finally alighting on the box of lotions by the TV set.

"Oh, I'm a total lotion fiend too—I have a great pear-scented one I'm really into now, but have you tried udder cream? It's what they used to put on dairy cows? Like on their udders? And it's so smooth, you can get it at a drugstore."

I shook my head loosely, and offered her coffee, even though I had

only a few granules of instant left.

“Mmmmm, I hate to say it, but you have anything to drink? Long drive.”

We both pretended it was the long drive, like two hours in a car would make anyone need some liquor. I went to the kitchen and hoped a can of Sprite would appear in the back of the fridge.

“I have gin, but nothing to mix it with,” I called out.

“Oh, that’s OK,” she said, “Straight is good.”

I had no ice cubes either—I have trouble making myself fill the trays—so I poured us two glasses of room-temperature gin and returned to find her loitering near my lotion box. I bet she had a few of the mini-bottles jammed in her pockets right now. She was wearing a black pantsuit with a pale pink turtleneck underneath, a painfully aspirational look for a stripper. Let her keep the lotion.

I handed her the glass and noticed she’d painted her nails to match her turtleneck and then noticed her noticing my missing finger.

“Is that from ... ?” she began, the first time I’d known her to trail off. I nodded.

“So?” I said, as nicely as I could. She took a breath and then settled herself down on the sofa, her gestures tea-party delicate. I sat down next to her, twining my legs around each other and then forcing them to untwine.

“I don’t even know how to say this,” she started, swallowing some gin.

“Just say it.”

“It’s just that, when I realized who you were ... I mean, you came to my *house* that day.”

“I’ve never been to your house,” I said, confused. “I don’t even know where you live,” I said.

“No, not now, back then. The day your family was killed—you and your mom came to my house.”

“Mmmm,” I said, squinting my eyes, trying to think. That day hadn’t really been that big a deal—I knew Ben was in trouble, but not why or how deeply. My mom had protected us all from her growing

panic. But that day. I could remember going with my mom and Diane to look for Ben. Ben was in trouble and so we went looking for Ben and I was sitting in the backseat alone, uncrowded and pleased with myself. I remember my face on fire from the salami Michelle fried. I remember visiting bustling houses, a birthday party my mom thought Ben might be at. Or something. I remember eating a donut. We never found Ben.

“Never mind,” Krissi interrupted. “I just—with everything that’s happened, I forgot. About you. Could I have a refill?” she held her glass out to me, briskly, as if a long time had lapsed with it empty. I filled it to the brim so she could keep her story going.

She took a sip, shivered. “Should we go somewhere?” she said.

“No, no, tell me what’s going on.”

“I lied to you,” she blurted.

“Which part?”

“Ben never molested me.”

“I didn’t think so,” I said, again trying to make it gentle.

“And he definitely didn’t molest any of the other girls.”

“No, everyone dropped their story but you.”

She shifted on the sofa, her eyes rolling back toward the right, and I could see her remembering her house, her life, way back when.

“The other stuff was true,” she said. “I was a pretty girl, and we had money and I was good in school, good at ballet ... I always just think, just think if I hadn’t told that one stupid lie. That one goddam lie, if it just hadn’t come out of my mouth the first time, my life would be totally different. I’d be like a housewife, and have my own ballet studio or something.” She pulled a finger across her belly, where I knew her caesarian scar was.

“You have kids though, right?” I said.

“Sorta,” she replied and rolled her eyes. I didn’t follow up.

“So what happened? How did it start?” I asked. I couldn’t figure out the significance of Krissi’s lie, what it had done to us that day. But it felt big, relevant—rippy, to quote Lyle. If the police wanted to talk to Ben that day, because of what Krissi had said, that had meaning. It

had to.

“Well, I mean, I had a crush. A big crush. And I know Ben liked me too. We hung out, in a way—and I’m totally serious here—that wasn’t probably right. I mean, I know he was a kid too, but he was old enough to ... not have encouraged me. We kissed one day, and it changed everything ...”

“You kissed him.”

“We kissed.”

“Like?”

“Inappropriately, grown-up. In a way I definitely wouldn’t want my fifth-grade daughter to be kissed by a teenage boy.”

I didn’t believe her.

“Go on,” I said.

“About a week after, I went to a slumber party over Christmas break, and I told the girls about my high school boyfriend. All proud. I made up things we did, sex things. And one of them told her mom, and her mom called my mom. I still remember it, the phone call. I remember my mom talking on the phone, and me just waiting in my room for her to come and yell at me. She was always pissed off about something. And she came to my room, and she was, like, nice. *Sweetheart* and *Honey*, and holding my hand, you know, ‘You can trust me, we’ll work this out together,’ and asking me if Ben had touched me wrong.”

“And you said, what?”

“Well, I started out with the kiss, and that was all I was going to say. Just the truth. And I told her and she, she seemed to move away, like ‘OK, not that big a deal. No problem.’ I remember her saying, *Is that all? Is that all that happened?* Like she was disappointed almost, and all of a sudden, I remember, she was already standing up, and I blurted it out, ‘He touched me here. He made me do things.’ And then she was back.”

“And then what?”

“It just kept getting bigger. My mom told my dad when he got home, and he was all, *my baby, my poor little girl*, and they called the school and the school sent over a, like, child psychologist. And I

remember he was this college guy, and he made it impossible to tell the truth. He wanted to believe I was molested.”

I frowned at her.

“I’m serious. Because I remember, I was going to tell him the truth and have him tell my parents, but ... he’d ask if Ben had made me do things, sexually, and I said no, and, he’d, like, be mean about it. *You seem like a smart, brave girl, I’m relying on you to tell me what happened. Oh, nothing happened? Gosh I thought you were braver than that. I was really hoping you’d be brave enough to help me out on this. Maybe you can tell me if at least you remember this sort of touching or Ben saying this? Do you remember playing a game like this, can you tell me if you at least remember that? Oh that’s good. I knew you could do it, what a smart, good girl.* And I don’t know, you’re at that age, if a bunch of grownups are telling you something or encouraging you, it just ... it started to feel real. That Ben had molested me, because otherwise, why were all these adults trying to get me to say he had? And my parents would be all stern: *It’s OK to tell the truth. It’s OK to tell the truth.* And so you told the lie that they thought was the truth.”

I was remembering my own shrink, after the murders. Dr. Brooner, who always wore blue, my favorite color, for our sessions, and who gave me treats when I told him what he wanted to hear. *Tell me about seeing Ben with that shotgun, shooting your mother. I know this is so hard for you Libby, but if you say it, say it aloud, you will help your mom and sisters and you will help yourself start to heal. Don’t bottle it up, Libby, don’t bottle up the truth. You can help us make sure Ben is punished for what he did to your family.* I would be a brave little girl and say that I saw Ben chop up my sister and I saw Ben kill my mother. And then I’d get the peanut butter with apricot jelly, my favorite, that Dr. Brooner always brought for me. I think he really believed he was helping.

“They were trying to make you comfortable, they thought the harder they believed in you, the easier it’d be for you,” I said. “They were trying to help you, and you were trying to help them.” Dr. Brooner gave me a star-shaped pin with the words SuperSmart SuperStar printed on it after I nailed Ben with my testimony.

“Yeah!” Krissi said, her eyes going big. “This therapist, he helped me, like visualize, like entire scenes. We’d act it all out with dolls. And then he started talking to the other girls, girls who never even kissed Ben, and, I mean, it was just a few days, that we had made up

this entire imaginary world where Ben was a Devil worshiper, doing things like killing rabbits and making us eat the insides while he molested us. I mean, it was insane. But it was ... fun. I know that's horrible, but we girls would get together, one night we had another slumber party, and we were up in the bedroom, sitting in a circle, egging each other on, making up stories, bigger and juicier, and ... have you ever played with a Ouija board?"

"When I was a kid."

"Right! And you know, you all want it to be real, so someone moves the heart-thingie a little and you know someone's moving it, but part of you thinks maybe it's real, it's really a ghost, and no one has to say anything, you just all kind of know you've agreed to believe."

"But you've never told the truth."

"I told it to my parents. That day, the day you came over, the police had been called in, all the girls were at my house—they gave us cake, I mean, jeez, how screwed up is that? My parents said they'd buy me a dang puppy so I would feel better. And then the police left and the girls left and the therapist left, and I went up to my room and I just started crying, and it's like, only then did I realize. Only then did I think."

"But you said your dad was out searching for Ben."

"Nah, that's just a little fantasy." She said it, and stared across the room again. "When I told him? My dad shook me so hard I thought my head would come off. And after those murders, all the girls panicked, everyone told the truth. We all felt like we'd really summoned the Devil. Like we made up this bad story about Ben and some part of it became true."

"But your family got a big settlement from the school."

"It wasn't that big." She eyed the bottom of her glass.

"But your parents went ahead with it, after you'd told them the truth."

"My dad was a businessman. He thought we could get some sort of, compensation."

"But your dad definitely knew, that day, that Ben had not molested you."

“Yeah, he did,” she said, giving that chickeny neck jerk toward me, defensive. Buck came and rubbed against her pant leg, and she seemed calm, ran her long fingernails through his fur. “We moved that year. My dad said the place was tainted. But the money didn’t really help. I remember he bought me a dog, but every time I tried to talk about the dog, he sort of held his hand up, like it was too much. My mom, she just never forgave me. I’d come home and tell her about something that happened at school and—and she’d just say, *Really?* Like I was lying, no matter what I said. I could have told her I ate mashed potatoes for lunch and she’d just go, *Really?* And then she just stopped talking, she’d look at me when I came in the door from school, and then she’d walk over to the kitchen and open a bottle of wine, and she’d just keep refilling, wandering around the house, not talking. Always shaking her head. I remember one time I told her I wish I hadn’t made her so sad, and she said, she said, *Well, you did.*”

Krissi was crying now, petting the cat rhythmically.

“And that was it. By the end of the year my mom was gone. I came home from school one day, and her room was cleared out.” She let her head drop to her lap then, a childish, dramatic gesture, her hair flung over her head. I knew I was supposed to pet her, soothe her, but instead I just waited and eventually she peered up at me.

“No one ever forgives me for anything,” she whimpered, her chin shaking. I wanted to tell her I did, but I didn’t. Instead I poured her another drink.

## Patty Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

6:11 P.M.

Patty was still muttering sorrys as Lou Cates hustled her toward the door, and suddenly, she was out on the step, in the freezing air, her eyes blinking rapidly. Between blinks, before she could get her mouth to move, to form any sort of word, the door opened again, and out stepped a man in his fifties. He shut the door behind him, and then there they all were, on the small front porch: Patty, Diane, Libby, and the man, basset-hound bags beneath watery eyes, his graying hair brushed straight back. He ran a hand through the pomade while he assessed Patty, his Irish Claddagh ring flashing.

“Mrs. Patty Day?” His coffee breath lingered in the cold air, vaguely discolored.

“I’m Patty Day. Ben Day’s mother.”

“We came by to find out what’s going on with these stories,” Diane interrupted. “We’ve been hearing a lot of rumors, and no one’s bothered to talk to us directly.”

The man cocked his hands on his hips, looked down at Libby, looked quickly away. “I’m Detective Jim Collins. I’m in charge of this investigation. I had to come by here today to talk to these folks and then of course I was going to get in touch with you. You saved me a drive. Do you want to talk somewhere else? It’s a little cold here.”

They went to a Dunkin’ Donuts just off the highway, separate cars, Diane muttering a joke about cops and donuts, then cursing Mrs. Cates—*wouldn’t even give us the time of damn day. Bitch.* Normally Patty would have said something in Mrs. Cates’s defense: Diane and Patty’s roles, straight-talker and apologist, were grooved deep. But the Cates family was in no need of defense.

Det. Collins was waiting for them with three paper cups of coffee

and a carton of milk for Libby.

“Didn’t know if you’d want her to have sweets,” he said, and Patty wondered if he’d think she was a bad mother if she bought Libby a donut. Especially if he knew they’d had pancakes that morning. *This will be my life from now on*, she thought, *always having to think about what people will think*. Libby was smearing her face against the pastry glass already, though, hopping from one foot to another, and so Patty fished around in her pocket for some change and got a pink frosted donut, gave it to Libby on a napkin. She could not deal with Libby feeling denied, staring mournfully at all those pastel shades of sugar while they tried to have a conversation about whether her son was a Devil-worshiping child-molester. Again she almost laughed. She settled Libby at a table behind them and told her to sit still and eat while the grown-ups talked.

“You all redheads?” Collins said. “Where’s the red come from, you Irish?”

Patty thought immediately of her always-conversation with Len about their red hair, and then she thought, *The farm’s going away. How did I forget that the farm’s going away?*

“German,” she said for the second time that day.

“You have another few little ones, don’t you?” Collins said.

“Yes. I have four children.”

“Same daddy?”

Diane rustled in the seat next to her. “Of course, same daddy!”

“But you are a single mother, correct?” Collins asked.

“We’re divorced, yes,” Patty said, trying to sound as prim as a churchwife.

“What’s this got to do with what’s happening with Ben?” Diane snapped, leaning across the table. “I’m Patty’s sister by the way. I take care of these kids almost as much as she does.”

Patty winced, Det. Collins watched her wince.

“Let’s try to start this civilly,” Collins said. “Because we’ve got a long way to go together before this is cleared up. The charges leveled against your son, Mrs. Day, are of a very serious, and very concerning

nature. At this point, we've got four little girls who say that Ben touched them in their private areas, that he made them touch him. That he took them out to some farm area and performed certain ... acts that are associated with ritualistic Devil worship." He said those words—*ritualistic Devil worship*—the way people who don't know cars repeat what the mechanic said: *It's a broken fuel pump*.

"Ben doesn't even have a car," Patty said in a barely audible voice.

"Now the age difference between an eleven-year-old and a fifteen-year-old is only four years, but those are very crucial years," continued Collins. "We would consider him a danger and a predator if these accusations turn out to be true. And, frankly, we'll need to talk not only to Ben, but to your little girls too."

"Ben is a good boy," Patty said, and hated how limp and weak her voice was. "Everyone likes him."

"How is he regarded at school?" Collins asked.

"Pardon?"

"Is he considered a popular kid?"

"He has a lot of friends," Patty mumbled.

"I don't think he does, ma'am," Collins said. "From what we understand, he doesn't have very many friends, he's a bit of a loner."

"So what does that prove?" Diane snapped.

"It proves absolutely nothing, Miss ... ?"

"Krause."

"It proves absolutely nothing, Miss Krause. But that fact, combined with the fact that he doesn't have a strong father figure around, would lead me to believe he may be more vulnerable to, say, a negative influence. Drugs, alcohol, people who are maybe a bit rougher, a bit troubled."

"He doesn't associate with delinquents, if that's what you're worried about," Patty said.

"Name summa his friends for me then," Collins said. "Name the kids he hangs out with. Name who he was with last weekend."

Patty sat, tongue thick in her mouth, and then shook her head,

folded her hands near a smear of someone else's chocolate icing. It was late coming. But now finally, she was being revealed for what she was: a woman who couldn't quite keep it together, who lived from emergency to emergency, borrowing money, scrambling for sleep, sliding by when she should have been tending to Ben, encouraging him to pick up a hobby or join a club, not secretly grateful when he locked himself in his room or disappeared for an evening, knowing it was one less kid to deal with.

"There are some parenting gaps then," Collins sighed, like he already knew the end to the story.

"We want a lawyer before anything else happens, before you talk to any of the kids," Diane interrupted.

"Frankly, Mrs. Day," Collins said, not even glancing at Diane, "with three little girls at home, if I were you, I'd want the truth out more than anyone. This kind of behavior doesn't go away. In fact, if this is true, and to be frank, I think it is, your daughters were probably his first victims."

Patty looked behind at Libby, who sat licking the frosting off her donut. She thought of how much Libby used to hang on Ben. She thought of all the chores the kids did on their own. Sometimes after a day working in the barn with Ben, the girls would come back to the house, irritated, weepy. But ... what? They were little girls, they got tired out and cranky. She wanted to throw her coffee in Collins's face.

"May I speak plainly?" Collins said, his voice kneading her. "I can't imagine how ... horrible it must be to hear these things as a mother. But I can tell you something, and this is straight from our psychologist, who's been working one-on-one with these girls, and I can tell you what he tells me. That's that these girls, they're telling us things a fifth-grader wouldn't know about, sexually, unless they'd actually happened. He says they are classic abuse scenarios. You know about the McMartin case, of course."

Patty vaguely remembered. A preschool in California, and all the teachers were on trial for being Devil worshipers, molesting the kids. She could remember the evening newscast: a pretty sunny California house and then black words stamped across it: Daycare Nightmare.

"Satanic worship is not uncommon, I'm afraid," Collins was saying. "It's made its way into all areas of the community, and Devil

worshippers tend to target young men, get them in the fold. And part of Devil worship is the ... the degradation of children.”

“Do you have any evidence?” Diane bellowed at Collins. “Any witnesses besides some eleven-year-old girls? Do you even have kids yourself? Do you know how easily they imagine things—their whole lives are make-believe. So do you have anyone to vouch for these lies but a bunch of little girls and some Harvard know-it-all psychiatrist who impresses you all?”

“Well, as far as evidence. The girls all said he took their underpants as some sick souvenir or something,” Collins said to Patty. “If you’d let us look around your home, we could start to clear that up.”

“We need to talk to a lawyer before that,” Diane grumbled to Patty.

Collins swallowed his coffee and stifled a belch, banged his chest with a fist, and smiled mournfully over Patty’s shoulder at Libby. He had the red nose of a drinker.

“Right now we just need to be calm. We will talk to everyone involved,” Collins said, still ignoring Diane. “We interviewed several faculty members from his high school and the grade school this afternoon, and what we hear doesn’t make us feel any better, Mrs. Day. A teacher, Mrs. Darksilver?”

He looked at Patty for her to confirm the name, and Patty nodded. Mrs. Darksilver had always loved Ben, he’d been an especial favorite of hers.

“Just this morning she saw your son nosing around Krissi Cates’s locker. In the grade school. During Christmas break. This disturbs me, and,” he looked at Patty from the bottom of his eyes, aiming the pink rims at her, “Mrs. Darksilver says, he was apparently aroused.”

“What does that mean?” snapped Diane.

“He had an erection. When we looked inside Krissi’s bin, we found a note of a provocative nature. Mrs. Day, in our interviews, your son was repeatedly characterized as an outcast, a misfit. Odd. He’s considered a bit of a timebomb. Some of the teachers are actually frightened of him.”

“Frightened?” Patty repeated. “How can they be frightened of a fifteen-year-old boy?”

“You don’t know what we found in his locker.”

WHAT THEY FOUND in his locker. Patty thought Collins would say drugs or girlie magazines, or, in a merciful world, a bunch of outlaw firecrackers. That’s what she wanted Ben to be in trouble for: a dozen Roman candles sitting like kindling in his backpack. That she could take.

Even when Collins did his greasy lead-up—*this is very disturbing, Mrs. Day, I want you to prepare yourself*—Patty had figured, maybe a gun. Ben loved guns, always had, it was like his airplane phase and his cement-truck phase, except this one just kept going. It was something they did together—*had* done together—hunting, shooting. Maybe he brought one to school just to show it off. The Colt Peacemaker. His favorite. He was not supposed to go into the cabinet without her permission, but if he had, they’d deal with it. So let it be a gun.

Collins had cleared his throat then, and said, in a voice that made them lean in, “We found some ... remains ... in your son’s locker. Organs. At first we thought they might be part of a baby, but it seems they’re animal. Female reproductive parts in a plastic container, from maybe a dog or a cat. You missing a dog or a cat?”

Patty was still woozy from the revelation they actually thought Ben might have part of a baby in his locker. That they thought he was so disturbed that infanticide was actually their first guess. It was right then, staring down at a scattering of pastel donut sprinkles, that she decided her son was going to prison. If that’s how twisted they believed her son to be, he had no chance.

“No, we’re not missing any pets.”

“Our family is hunters. Farmers,” Diane said. “We’re around animals, dressing animals all the time. It’s not so strange that he might have something from them.”

“Really, do you keep parts of dead animals in your home?” For the first time Collins looked straight at Diane, a hard stare he cut off after just a few seconds.

“Is there a law against it?” Diane barked back.

“One of the rituals that Devil worshipers engage in is the sacrifice of animals, Mrs. Day,” Collins said. “I’m sure you heard about them

cattle axed up over near Lawrence. We think that and the involvement with the little girls all ties together.”

Patty’s face was cold. It was done, it was all done. “What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“I’ll follow you to your place, so we can talk to your son, OK?” Collins said, turning paternal on that last note, his voice going high, almost flitting into babytalk. Patty could feel Diane’s hands clench next to her.

“He’s not at home. We’ve been trying to find him.”

“We absolutely need to talk to your son, Mrs. Day. Where do you think we can find him?”

“We don’t know where he is,” Diane interrupted. “We’re in the same boat as you.”

“Are you going to arrest him?” Patty asked.

“We can’t do anything until we talk to him, and the sooner we do, the sooner we’ll get this cleared up.”

“That’s not an answer,” Diane said.

“Only one I got, ma’am.”

“That means yes,” Diane said, and for the first time she lowered her eyes.

Collins stood up and walked over toward Libby during the last exchange, now he was kneeling down next to her, giving her a *Hi sweetie*.

Diane grabbed his arm. “No. Leave her alone.”

Collins frowned down on her. “I’m just trying to help. Don’t you want to know if Libby is OK?”

“We know Libby is OK.”

“Why don’t you let her tell me that. Or we could have Child Services—”

“Screw off,” Diane said, getting in front of him. Patty sat in her place, willing herself to disconnect. She heard Diane and Collins snapping behind her, but she just sat and watched the woman behind the counter make another pot of coffee, trying to focus all her interest

on the coffee. It worked for just a second before Diane was pulling Patty and Libby, her mouth grimy with donut, out of the restaurant.

PATTY FELT LIKE crying some more on the way home, but wanted to wait until Diane was gone. Diane made Patty drive, said it would be good for her to focus. The whole way home, Diane had to tell her which gears to switch to, she was so distracted. *Why don't you try third, P? I think we need to go down to 2, now.* Libby sat in the backseat, saying nothing, bundling herself up, knees to chin.

“Is something bad going to happen?” Libby finally asked.

“No, honey.”

“It seems like something bad’s going to happen.”

Patty had another panic-flash then: what the hell was wrong with her, taking a seven-year-old into this kind of situation. Her mother would not have done this. Then again, her mother wouldn’t have raised Ben the way Patty had—slipshod and fingers-crossed—so it wouldn’t have been an issue.

Right now, she had an almost obsessive need to get home, nest up, feel safe. The plan was, Patty would wait for Ben to get back—he had to be back soon, now—and Diane would go out and assess the gossip. Who knew what, whose side people were taking, and who in God’s name Ben was hanging around with.

They rattled up to the house and saw Patty’s Cavalier and another car, some bucket-seated sportscar that looked about ten years old, spattered with mud.

“Who’s that?” Diane asked.

“No idea.” She said it tragically. Already Patty knew whoever it was, it would be depressing news.

They opened the front door and felt the heat roll out. The thermostat had to be past eighty. The first thing they saw was an open box of microwave cocoa, the kind with fake marshmallows, on the dining room table, a trail of the cocoa mix leading to the kitchen. Then Patty heard that wheezy laugh and knew. Runner was sitting on the floor, sipping hot chocolate with her daughters leaning on him. Some nature show was on the TV, the girls squealing and grabbing his arms as an alligator boomed out of the water and snapped something

with horns.

He looked up lazily, as if she were a delivery person. “Heya, Patty, long time, no seeya.”

“We got some family stuff going on,” Diane injected. “You should go on home.”

During those stretchy weeks that Runner had returned to stay with them, he and Diane had scrapped several times—her bellowing and him blowing her off. *You’re not the husband, Diane.* He’d go to the garage, get drunk, throw an old baseball against the wall for hours. Diane was not going to be the one to get Runner to go home.

“It’s OK, D. You go on. Call me in an hour or so, let me know what’s going on, OK?”

Diane glared at Runner, grumbled something into her chest and stalked out, the door shutting firmly behind her.

Michelle said “Jeez! What’s with her?” and made a funny face for her dad, the little traitor. Her brown hair was wild from static where Runner had done his Indian rub. Runner had always been weird with the kids, roughly affectionate, but not in a grown-up way. He liked to pinch and flick them to get their attention. They’d be watching TV, and he’d suddenly lean across and get a good snap on their skin. Whichever of the girls he’d just stung would look over at him in a teary, outraged pout, and he’d laugh and go, “Whaaaat?” or “I’s just saying hi. Hi!” And when he went with them anywhere, he trailed a few steps behind instead of walking beside them, eyes sideways on them. It always reminded her of an old coyote, trotting at the heels of its prey, just teasing for a few miles before it attacked.

“Daddy made us macaroni,” Debby said. “He’s going to stay for dinner.”

“You know you aren’t supposed to let anyone in the house while I’m away,” Patty said, wiping up the powder with a rag that already smelled.

Michelle rolled her eyes, leaned into Runner’s shoulder. “Jeez, Mom, it’s Daaaaad.”

It would have been easier if Runner was just dead. He had so little interaction with his children, was of so little help to them, that if he’d

pass on, things would only improve. As it was, he lived on in the vast Out There Somewhere, occasionally swooping in with ideas and schemes and orders that the kids tended to follow. Because Dad said so.

She'd love to tell off Runner right now. Tell him about his son and the disturbing collection in his locker. The idea of Ben cutting and holding on to animal parts made her throat close. The Cates girl and her friends, that was a misunderstanding that may or may not end well. The assortment of body parts she couldn't think of an excuse for, and she was good at thinking up excuses. She didn't worry about what Collins said, that Ben may have molested his sisters. She had examined that thought on the ride home, turned it over, peered in its mouth and inspected its teeth, been excruciatingly thorough. And there was not a doubt in her: Ben would never do that.

But she knew her son did have a taste for hurt. There was that moment with the mice: that robotic shovel pounding, his mouth pulled away from his teeth, his face trickling sweat. He'd gotten some pleasure from that, she knew. He roughoused with his sisters, hard. Sometimes giggles turned into screams and she'd come round the corner and see him holding Michelle's arm behind her back, just slowly, slowly pulling up. Or grabbing hold of Debby's arm, vise-like, for an Indian rub and what starts as a joke gets more and more frantic, him rubbing until he draws speckles of blood, his teeth grinding. She could see him getting that same look Runner got when he was around the kids: jacked up and tense.

"Dad needs to leave."

"Geez, Patty, not even a hi before you toss me out? Come on, let's talk, I got a business proposition for you."

"I'm in no position to make a business deal, Runner," she said. "I'm broke."

"You're never as broke as you say," he said with a leer, and twisted his baseball cap backward on stringy hair. He'd meant it to sound jokey, but it came out menacing, as if she'd better not be broke if she knew what was good for her.

He dumped the girls off him and walked over to her, standing too close as always, beer sweat sticking his longjohn shirt to his chest.

“Didn’t you just sell the tiller, Patty? Vern Evelee told me you just sold the tiller.”

“And all that money’s gone, Runner. It’s always gone as quick as I get it.” She tried to pretend to sort through mail. He stayed right on top of her.

“I need you to help me. I just need enough cash to get to Texas.”

Of course Runner would want to go where it was warm for the winter, traveling child-free like a gypsy from season to season as he did, an insult to her and her farm and her attachment to this single place on the ground. He picked up work and spent the money on stupid things: golf clubs because he pictured himself golfing someday, a stereo system he’d never hook up. Now he was planning to hightail it to Texas. She and Diane had driven to the Gulf when Patty was in high school. The only time Patty’d been anywhere. It was the saltiness in the air that stuck with her, the way you could suck on a strand of hair and make your mouth start watering. Somehow Runner would find some cash, and he’d spend the rest of winter in some honkytonk alongside the ocean, sipping a beer while his son went to jail. She couldn’t afford a lawyer for Ben. She kept thinking that.

“Well, I can’t help you, Runner. I’m sorry.”

She tried to aim him toward the door, and instead he pushed her farther into the kitchen, his stale-sweet breath making her turn her head away.

“Come on, Patty, why you going to make me beg? I’m in a real jam here. It’s life or death stuff. I got to get the hell out of Dodge. You know I wouldn’t be asking otherwise. Like, I might be killed tonight if I can’t scrape up some money. Just give me \$800.”

The figure actually made her laugh. Did the guy really think that was her pocket change? Could he not look around and see how poor they were, the kids in shirtsleeves in the middle of winter, the kitchen freezer stacked with piles of cheap meat, each one marked with a long-gone year? That’s what they were: a home past the expiration date.

“I don’t have anything, Runner.”

He looked at her with fixed eyes, his arm leaning across the doorway so she couldn’t leave.

“You got jewelry, right? You got the ring I gave you.”

“Runner, please, Ben’s in trouble, bad trouble, I got a lot of bad stuff going on right now. Just come back another time, OK?”

“What the hell has Ben done?”

“There’s been some trouble at school, some trouble in town, it’s bad, I think he might need a lawyer, so I need any money I have for him and ...”

“So you do have money.”

“Runner, I don’t.”

“Give me the ring at least.”

“I don’t have it.”

The girls were pretending to watch TV, but their rising voices made Michelle, nosy Michelle, turn her head and openly stare at them.

“Give me the ring, Patty.” He held out his hand like she might actually be wearing it, that chintzy fake-gold engagement ring that she knew was embarrassing, flimsy, even at seventeen. He’d given it to her three months after he proposed. It took him three months to get off his ass, go down to a five-and-dime, and buy the little bit of tinsel he gave her while on his third beer. *I love you forever, baby*, he’d said. She knew immediately then that he’d leave, that he was not a man to depend on, that he wasn’t even a man she liked very much. And still she’d gotten pregnant three more times, because he didn’t like to wear condoms and it was too much trouble to nag.

“Runner, do you not remember that ring? That ring is not going to get you any money. It cost about ten dollars.”

“Now you’re going to be a bitch about the ring? Now?”

“Believe me if it had been worth anything, I’d have pawned it already.”

They stood facing each other, Runner breathing like an angry donkey, his hands shaking. He put them on her arms, then removed them with exaggerated effort. Even his mustache was shaking.

“You are really going to be sorry about this, Patty.”

“I already am, Runner. Been sorry a long time.”

He turned, and his jacket brushed a cocoa packet on to the floor, scattering more brown powder at his feet. “Bye girls, your mom’s ... a BITCH!” He kicked one of the tall kitchen chairs over and it cart-wheeled into the living room. They all froze like forest creatures, as Runner paced in tight circles, Patty wondering if she should make a run for a rifle, or grab a kitchen knife, all the while, mind-pleading that he just leave.

“Thanks for FUCKING NOTHING!” he tramped to the front door, swung the door open so hard it cracked the wall behind it and bounced back. He kicked it open again, grabbed it, banged it into the wall, his head bowed low against it, all his strength slamming it again and again.

Then he left, his car screeching down away from the house, and Patty fetched the shotgun, loaded it, and set it atop the mantelpiece with a scattering of shells. Just in case.

## Libby Day

NOW

Krissi ended up sleeping on my couch. I'd walked her to the door and realized she wasn't OK to drive, she was slip-slopping in her shoes, a web of mascara down one cheek. As she swayed out onto my porch, she turned around suddenly and asked about her mother, if I knew where her mother was or how to find her, and it was then that I pulled Krissi back inside, made her a Velveeta sandwich, parked her on the sofa, and wrapped a blanket over her. As she rolled into sleep, setting the last quarter of the sandwich carefully on the floor beside her, three of my lotion bottles fell out of her jacket. Once she passed out I tucked them back in.

She was gone when I woke up, the blanket folded with a note scrawled on the back of an envelope: *Thanks. Sorry.*

So Lou Cates didn't kill my family, if Krissi was to be believed. I believed her. On that count at least.

I decided to drive down to see Runner, ignore the two messages from Lyle and the zero messages from Diane. Drive down to see Runner, get some answers. I didn't think he had anything to do with the murders, whatever his girlfriend might say, but I wondered if he knew something, with his debts and his drinking and his gutter-friends. If he knew something or heard something, or if maybe his debts had triggered some horrible vengeance. Maybe I could believe in Ben again, which is what I wanted to do. I knew now why I'd never gone to visit him. It was too tempting, too easy to ignore the prison walls, and just see my brother, hear the Ben-specific cadence of his voice, that downward slope at the end of every sentence, like it might be the last thing he was ever going to say. Just seeing him, I remembered things, nice things, or not even nice. Just regular things. I could get a whiff of home. Way back when everyone was alive. Man, I wanted that.

I stopped at the 7-Eleven on the way out of town, bought a map and some cheese-flavored crackers that I discovered were diet when I bit into them. I ate them anyway, heading south, the orange powder floating through the car. I should have stopped for a meal on the way to Oklahoma. The air on the highway was thick with tempting smell-pockets: french fries, fast-food fish, fried chicken. But I was in an unnatural panic, worried for no good reason I would miss Runner if I stopped, and so I ate the diet crackers and a mealy apple I'd found on the corner of my kitchen counter.

Why was the note, that dirty note that wasn't addressed to Ben, mixed up in a box of Michelle's stuff? If Michelle had found out Ben had a girlfriend, she'd have lorded it over him, all the more if he tried to keep it a secret. Ben hated Michelle. Ben had tolerated me, had dismissed Debby, but he'd hated Michelle actively. I remembered him pulling her out of his room by an arm, her whole body almost sideways, Michelle up on tiptoes, moving with him to keep from being dragged. He tossed her out and she fell against the wall, and he told her if she ever came in his room again, he'd kill her. His teeth flared whenever he talked to her. He screamed at her for always being underfoot—she'd hover outside his door day and night, listening. Michelle always knew everyone's secrets, she never had a conversation that didn't have an angle. I remembered that more vividly since discovering her bizarre notes. If you don't have money, gossip isn't bad leverage. Even inside one's own family.

"Ben talks to himself a lot," Michelle announced at breakfast one morning, and Ben reached across the table, knocking her plate into her lap, and grabbed her by the shirt collar.

"Leave me the fuck alone," he screamed. And then my mom calmed him down, got him to go back to his room, lectured us, as always. Later we found bits of egg that had catapulted up onto the plastic chandelier over the table, the chandelier that looked like it came from a pizza parlor.

So what did that mean? Ben wouldn't kill his family because his little sister found out he had a girlfriend.

I passed a field of cows, standing immobile, and thought about growing up, all the rumors of cattle mutilation, and people swearing it was Devil worshipers. The Devil lurked nearby in our Kansas town, an evil that was as natural and physical as a hillside. Our church hadn't

been too brimstone, but the preacher had certainly nurtured the idea: The Devil, goat-eyed and bloody, could take over your heart just as easily as Jesus, if you weren't careful. In every town I lived in, there were always the "Devil kids," and the "Devil houses," just like there was always a killer clown driving around in a white van. Everyone knew of some old, vacant warehouse on the edge of town where a stained mattress sat on the floor, bloody from sacrifice. Everyone had a friend of a cousin who had actually seen a sacrifice but was too scared to give details.

I was ten minutes into Oklahoma, a good three hours to go, and I started smelling something overpoweringly sweet but rotten. It stung my eyes, made them water. I had a ridiculous quiver of fear that my Devil-think had summoned the beast. Then in the distance, the churning sky turned the color of a bruise, I saw it. Paper plant.

I turned the radio on scan—station 1, station 2, station 3—blasts of unpleasant noise, static, and ads for cars and more static, so I flipped it right back off.

Just past a sign with a picture of a cowboy—*Welcome to Lidgerwood, Oklahoma, Pardner!*—I pulled off the ramp and headed into the town, which turned out to be a busted-down tourist trap of a city. It had once fashioned itself as an Old West locale: The main street was all frosted glass and faux-saloons and shoppes. One storefront called itself The Olde Photo Stoppe, a place where families could commission sepia photos of themselves in frontier garb. In the window hung a poster-sized print: the father holding a lasso, trying to look menacing under a hat too big for him; the little girl in a calico dress and bonnet, too young to get the joke; the mother, dressed as a whore, giving an uncomfortable smile, her arms crossed in front of her thighs where her petticoat was slit. Next to the photo hung a For Sale sign. Another matching sign next door at Daphne's Daffy Taffy, more For Sales at Buffalo Bill's Amazing Arcade and a storefront with the ridiculous stretch of a name, Wyatt Earp's Slurpies. The whole place seemed dusty. Even the defunct waterslide loop-de-looping in the distance was plugged with dirt.

Bert Nolan's Group Home for Men was just three blocks off the downtown drag, a square, low building with a tiny front yard infested with foxtail weeds. I'd always liked foxtail as a kid, it appealed to my literal brain, because it looked like it sounded: a long, thin stem with

a length of fuzz at the top, just like a fox's tail, but green. They grew all over our farm—entire meadows were given over to the stuff. Michelle and Debby and I would break off the tops and tickle each other under our wrists. My mom taught us the colloquial names for everything: lamb's ear, coxcomb, all those plants that lived up to their titles. A lamb's ear is as soft as a lamb's ear. Coxcomb actually looks like a rooster's red comb. I got out of the car and fluttered my hands across the tops of the foxtail. Maybe I'd grow a garden of weeds. Windmillgrass actually fans out at the top like windmill blades. Queen Ann's lace is white and frilly. Witchgrass would be appropriate for me. Some devil's claw.

The door to Bert Nolan's Group Home was made of metal, painted dark gray like a submarine. It reminded me of the doors in Ben's prison. I rang the bell and waited. Across the street two teenage boys rode their bikes in lazy, wide circles, interested. I rang the bell again and gave the metal a bang that failed to reverberate inside. I debated asking the guys across the way if anyone was home, just to break the silence. As they were looping closer to me—*watcha doing there, lady?*—the door opened onto a pixie-sized man in bright white sneakers, ironed jeans, a Western shirt. He jiggled the toothpick in his mouth, not looking at me, flipping through a copy of *Cat Fancy* magazine.

"Don't open for the night til ..." he trailed off when he saw me. "Oh, sorry honey. We're a men's hostel, you have to be a man and over eighteen."

"I'm looking for my dad," I said, leaning into my drawl. "Runner Day. Are you the manager?"

"Ha! Manager, accountant, priest, cleaning boy," he said opening the door. "Recovering alcoholic. Recovering gambler. Recovering deadbeat. Bert Nolan. This is my place. Come in, sweetheart, n'remind me of your name."

He opened the door onto a room full of cots, the strong odor of bleach rising up from the floor. The elfin Bert led me through the rows of thin beds, each one still indented from the night, to an office just his size, just my size, which held one small desk, a file cabinet, and two foldout chairs we sat down on. The fluorescent light was not flattering to his face, which was pocked with dark, dimpled pores.

"I'm not a weirdo, by the way," he said, flapping the *Cat Fancy* at

me. “I just got a cat, never had one before. Don’t really like her much so far. She was supposed to be good for morale, but so far she just pisses in the beds.”

“I have a cat,” I volunteered, surprising myself with my sudden, intense fondness for Buck. “If they go outside their litter box, it’s usually because they’re angry.”

“That right?”

“Yeah, otherwise, they’re pretty easy pets.”

“Huh,” Bert Nolan said. “Huh. So you’re looking for your daddy? Yeah I remember, we spoke. Day. He’s like most men here—should be happy someone’s looking for them, after the crap they’ve pulled at home. Usually money stuff. Or lack-of-money stuff. No money, too much booze. Does not bring out the best. Runner. Huh.”

“He wrote me a letter, said he was back here.”

“You want to take him home, take care of him?” Bert said. His eyes were black and shiny, like he’d told himself a joke.

“Well, I’m not sure about that. I just want to check in.”

“Ha, good. That was a trick question—people who say they want to find one of my men to take care of them, never do.” Nolan smelled his fingertips. “I don’t smoke anymore, but sometimes my damn fingers still smell like tobacco.”

“Is he here?”

“He’s not. He’s gone again. I don’t allow drinkers here. He just had his third strike.”

“He say where he went?”

“Ah sweetheart, I just don’t give out addresses. Just don’t. Found that was the smartest way to handle all inquiries. But I’ll tell you what, because you seem like a nice lady ...”

“Berrrrrt!” came a howl from outside the building.

“Ah, ignore that, just one of my men trying to get in early. That’s another thing you learn to never do: never let anyone in early, ever. And never let anyone in late.”

He had lost his train of thought, he stared at me expectantly.

“So you said you’d tell me what?” I prompted.

“What?”

“How you might help me find my dad?”

“Oh, right. You can leave a letter here with me.”

“Mr. Nolan, I’ve already done that. That’s why I’m here. I really, really need to find him.” I caught myself in the Runner stance, palms on the edge of the table, ready to vault myself up if I got mad.

Nolan picked up a plaster figurine of an old, balding man throwing his arms out in some expression of exasperation, but I couldn’t read the words on the base. Bert seemed to find some consolation in the thing. He let out a sharp sigh between barely parted lips.

“Well, sweetheart, I’ll tell you what, he may not be here, but I know he’s still in Lidgerwood. One of my men saw him just last night outside-a Cooney’s. He’s laying low somewhere, but he’s around. Just prepare yourself for some disappointment.”

“Disappointment about what?”

“Oh, you name it.”

WHEN BERT NOLAN got up to lead me out of his office, he turned his back to me, and I immediately made a grab for his little figurine. But I made myself set it back down, and took his bag of CornNuts and a pencil instead. Progress. They sat in the car seat next to me as I drove to the nearest bar. Cooney’s.

Cooney’s had not given in to the Old West theme. Cooney’s was proudly crappy in the present day. Three wrinkled faces glared at me as I opened the door. This included the bartender. I ordered a beer, the man snapping that he’d need to see my driver’s license, holding it up to the light and then down near his belly, giving a hmmmph, when he couldn’t prove it was fake. I sipped and sat, letting them get used to me being there. Then I spoke. As soon as I hit the word Runner, the place lit up.

“That jackass stole three cases of beer from me,” the bartender said. “Went around back in broad daylight and just took them off the truck. And I’d stood him for a lot of drinks, believe me.”

The middle-aged man two stools down grabbed my arm too hard

and said, “Your goddam daddy owes me two hundred bucks. And I want my lawn mower back. You tell him I’m looking for him.”

“I know where you can find him,” said an old guy with a Hemingway beard and the build of a girl.

“Where?” everyone else said at once.

“Bet anything he’s living with the rest of them squatters, camped out over at the Superfund site. You should see it,” he added more to the bartender than me, “it’s like a old-time Hooverville, bonfires and shanties.”

“Why the hell would anyone live at the Superfund site?” the bartender snapped.

“Well, you know no one from the government will show up.”

They all laughed angrily.

“Is it even safe to go there?” I asked. I pictured toxic waste barrels and lime-green sludge.

“Sure, if you don’t drink the well water and you’re not a grasshopper.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“That’s what it’s from: the whole site is soaked with arsenic. It’s an old dumping spot for grasshopper bait.”

“And shitheads,” said the bartender.

## Ben Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

8:38 P.M.

They drove toward town, snow starting to fall, Ben just remembering he left his bike back at the warehouse and now that was probably gone. “Hey,” he yelled up front—Trey and Diondra were talking, but he couldn’t hear them over the music screeching on the radio, like ripped sheets of metal, *Weeeeeeeer-weer-weer-weer*. “Could we stop by the Compound real quick so I can grab my bike?”

Trey and Diondra exchanged looks.

“No,” Diondra busted out a grin, and they started laughing. Ben sat back for a second, then leaned back up. “I’m serious, I need it.”

“Forget it, dude. It’s gone,” Trey said. “You can’t leave shit at the Compound.”

They drove onto Bulhardt Avenue, the main strip in town, where nothing was happening, as usual. The hamburger joint was a bright yellow diorama featuring a few jocks and their dates, all draped over each other. The stores were black, and even the bar looked barely open—only a vague light could be seen in the single rectangle of window in the front. The door itself had been painted navy and revealed nothing.

They parked right out front, Diondra still finishing her beer, Trey grabbing it from her and drinking the rest—*the baby won’t mind*. On the sidewalk, some old guy, his face a confusion of wrinkles, his nose and mouth looking like they were molded out of a twist of clay, scowled at them once and walked into the bar.

“Let’s do it,” Trey said, and started to get out of the truck. And then when he saw Ben hesitate, still sitting in back, his hands on his knees, Trey stuck his head back in the car and smiled that businesslike smile: “Don’t worry, dude, you’re with me. I do a lot of drinking in there.”

And—heh!—you’re pretty much visiting your dad at the office.”

Diondra fingered the edges of her crunchy curls, her version of running her fingers through it, and they both followed Trey inside, Diondra with her lips pouty and her eyes sexy-sleepy, the way she looked in most photos, like you woke her up from a dream about you. Next to her, Ben feeling gangly and droopy as usual, literally dragging his feet.

The bar was so smoky Ben choked as soon as he entered, Diondra already with a cigarette lit, slouching next to him as if that made her look older. A nervous guy, his hair in patches like a molting bird, scurried up to Trey immediately, his head lowered, and muttered something in Trey’s ear, Trey nodding, sucking his lips in against his teeth, looking concerned and serious. Ben thought maybe the guy was a manager, was kicking them out, because maybe Diondra passed for older with the extra makeup but Ben didn’t. But Trey just patted the guy on the back, saying something like, “Don’t make me chase, man,” and the nervous guy got a big grin and laughed and said “No no no, don’t worry about that, don’t worry about that at all, not at all” and Trey just said, “Sunday” and walked past the guy to the bar, ordered three beers and a shot of SoCo, which he swallowed straight off.

The bartender was another old, gray-haired fat guy. It seemed like a joke, how much all these dudes looked alike, like living was so hard it just erased your features, rubbed out anything distinctive. The bartender gave Ben and Diondra a wise-guy look, a just-so-you-know, I-know look, but slid them two beers anyway. Ben turned away from the bar to drink his, one foot against a stool, in a way that felt casual, like he’d done it before, because he could feel Trey’s eyes on him, looking for something to make fun of.

“I see him, I see Runner,” Diondra said, and before Ben could ask her why she sounded so easy saying his name, Trey was calling it out, “Hey Runner, c’mere!” and Runner got the same nervous, weasel look the first guy had.

He came loping over, that seesaw walk of his, his hands jammed in his pockets, his eyes big and yellow.

“I just don’t have it, man, I just don’t. Tried to scrape it up earlier, but I just, I was going to come try to find you, I just got here myself, I can give you the last of my weed in the meantime—”

“You want to say hi to Diondra?” Trey interrupted.

Runner started, then smiled. “Oh, hey Diondra, hehheh, wow I must be drunk, oblivious!” He pretended to close one eye so he could see better, made a little jump on the tips of his toes. “Heh, yeah drinking myself cross-eyed because I’m so freaked out about this situation.”

“Runner, you want to look at who’s next to Diondra?” Ben had barely turned to face him, he was trying to think of something to say besides, *Hey Dad*, but he couldn’t so he just stood there, waiting for the inevitable shittiness to happen.

Runner peered through the dimness of the bar and didn’t recognize Ben.

“Hi ... there,” he said, and then to Trey, “That your cousin? I can’t see too well, night vision, I need contacts but—”

“Oh my God,” Trey said leaning back to pretend to laugh but looking enraged. “Take another look, asshole.” Ben wasn’t sure if he was supposed to display himself better, like some girl hoping to scam. Instead he stood rigid, staring at his dark flop of hair in an old Schlitz mirror on the far wall, as he watched Runner sidle up to him, reaching a hand out toward him fairy-tale-like, as if Runner were a troll and Ben some awful treasure. He kept getting closer, stumbling on Ben’s foot, and then they made eye contact and Runner yelped, “Ohhhh!” and seemed even more nervous. “Hair’s not red.”

“You remember your son, right, this is your son, isn’t it, Runner?”

“It is, my son! Hey Ben. No one can blame me for that one, hair’s not red. I didn’t even know you knew Trey.”

Ben shrugged, watching Runner’s reflection back away from him in the mirror. He wondered how much Runner owed to Trey, why Ben felt like some ransom victim, not that Runner would actually care if he was up for ransom. He wondered too, how accidental this visit was. It had seemed like spur of the moment, but Ben was guessing now that they were always going to end up here tonight.

“I don’t get it, Runner,” Trey continued, talking one notch above the country music. “You say you don’t have any money, Ben here says you don’t have any money, and yet, you had that giant stash of weed just a few weeks ago.”

“Wun’t good weed though.” He turned his shoulder toward Trey, cutting Ben out of the conversation, shooting backward glances at him, trying to push Trey toward the center of the room by standing closer and closer to him, Trey not moving, finally saying, “Get off me, man,” and Runner settling back on his heels.

“Nah, nah man you’re right, it wasn’t good stuff,” Trey continued. “But you were charging like it was.”

“I never charged you nothing, you know.”

“You didn’t charge me because you owe me, dipshit. But I know for a fact you were charging \$20 for a dimebag, now where the fuck is the money, you give it to your wife to hold?”

“Ex! Ex-wife,” Runner yelled. And then: “I was trying to *get* money from her, not give it. I know she’s got money there, even when we were married, she’d hide money, rolls of it, hundreds, from the harvest sales, and stick it in funny places. Found \$200 in the foot of her pantyhose one time. Maybe I should go back.” He looked over at Ben, who was listening but trying to pretend he was teasing Diondra, his finger twirling Diondra’s hair, Diondra only partly playing along.

“Can I talk to you about the situation over there in private?” Runner pointed over to a corner where three tugboat-sized men were playing pool. The tallest, a pale, white-haired old guy with a Marine tattoo, propped his pool cue up and puffed his chest out at them.

“Right,” Trey said.

“You can talk in front of me,” Ben said, trying to sound like he didn’t care.

“Your son needs money from you, just like I do,” Trey said. “Maybe worse than I do.”

Runner turned from a shriveled position under Trey’s black-lamp eyes, and headed back over to Ben, raising himself to full height. Somewhere since summer Ben had grown. He was just a little bigger than Runner now, 5’5”, 5’6”.

“You owe Trey money? Your mom said you’uz in trouble. You owe Trey?” he blasted at Ben, his breath yellow—beer and tobacco and maybe a mustardy tuna salad. Ben’s stomach grumbled.

“No! No!” He was aware his voice sounded nervous, cowed.

Diondra shifted her weight next to him. “I don’t owe anyone.”

“Then why am I supposed to be giving you money I work my damn tail off for, huh?” Runner said, his voice bitter. “That’s what I never understand, this idea of handouts: alimony and child support and the government with its hands in my pockets. I barely can support myself, I don’t know why people think I need to take three extra jobs to give money to my wife, who has her *own farm*. Her own *house* on the farm. And four kids to help her out with it. I mean, I sure as hell didn’t grow up thinking my daddy owed me a living, my daddy oughta give me money for Nikes and college and dress shirts and ...”

“Food,” Ben said, looking down at his broken boots with sloppy-joe stains on them.

“What’s that? What’s that you say to me?” Runner was in his face now, those blue irises rolling around in the yellow orbs like fish on the surface of a bad lake.

“Nothing,” Ben mumbled.

“You want money for your hair dye, that it? Want money for the beauty parlor?”

“He wants money for his girl ...” Trey started, but Diondra was giving him quick axes across her throat, no no no.

“Well, I’m definitely not in charge of buying things for his girlfriend,” Runner said. “You his girlfriend now, Diondra? Small world. But definitely ain’t my business.”

The men at the pooltable had stopped playing altogether, sneering at the scene, and then the white-haired guy limped over, put a firm hand on Trey’s shoulder.

“Problem, Trey? Runner here, he’s good for it. Give him another twenty-four hours, OK? On me. Understand?” The man had a wish-boned stance, like gravity was pulling him toward the ground by both legs, but his hands were muscled, sinewy, and they pressed into Trey’s shoulder.

Runner smiled, wiggled his eyebrows up and down at Ben, signaling they should both be pleased. “Don’t worry, buddy, it’s OK,” he told Ben. “It’s OK now.”

Trey tightened his shoulder under the man’s hand, seemed about to

shrug it off, then stared into the middle distance.

“Sure, twenty-four OK, Whitey. On you.”

“Appreciate it, Injun,” the man said. He winked, made a cheerful, creaky noise with his mouth like he was calling a horse, and rejoined his friends, a rustle of laughter going up from the group just before the pool ball clacked.

“Piece of shit pussy,” Trey said to Runner. “Tomorrow night, here. Or so help me, Runner, I will hurt you.”

Runner’s victory rictus, that Halloween smile, faded, and he nodded twice, and as he was turning to the bar, snapped, “Fine, but then stay out of my business.”

“Man, I cannot wait to stay out of your business.”

As they started to leave, Ben waited for Runner to say something to him—sorry, see ya, something. But Runner was already trying to talk the bartender into giving him one on the house, or maybe on Whitey, Whitey would stand him a round, and he’d already forgotten about Ben. So had Trey and Diondra, they were busting through the doors, and Ben stood with his hands in the front pockets of his pants, caught sight of himself in the mirror, looking so different, and he watched himself in the mirror as he turned around to Runner.

“Hey, uh, Dad,” he said, and Runner looked up, annoyed he was still there. It was that feeling of pestiness that made Ben want to make Runner respect him. He’d felt the tiniest jingle of camaraderie before—that word, *buddy*—he wanted it back. He had pictured, just a quick flash, him and his dad at the bar, having a few beers together. That’s all he really wanted from the guy, just a beer together every so often. “I just wanted to tell you something. It might make you feel, I don’t know, good,” and Ben started grinning, couldn’t help himself.

Runner just sat there, sleepy eyes, not giving any expression.

“I uh, Diondra’s pregnant. I, uh, we, Diondra and I are having a baby.” And then his smile split wide for the first time, for the first time really feeling good, saying it out loud like that. Going to be a dad. A dad, with some little one depending on him, thinking he was *it*.

Runner tilted his head to the side, lifted his beer sloppily, and said, “Just be sure it’s yours. I doubt it’s yours.” Then he turned his back on

Ben.

OUTSIDE, TREY KICKED the side of his truck, screamed between closed lips. “I tell you what, that old crew better die off soon, because I’m sick to fucking death of them protecting their own—you’re telling me it’s honor, it’s not, it’s old white guys trying to hold on to the last bit of business before they start shitting themselves and need name tags attached to them so they know who they are. Fucking Whitey!” He pointed a finger at Ben, the snow everywhere, floating down Ben’s shirt and melting on his neck. “And your old man is a piece of crap if he thinks I’m believing his line of bullshit. I hope you’re not too attached to him because I’d like to flush him like a piece of shit.”

“Let’s just go, Trey,” Diondra said, opening the door, ushering Ben into the backseat. “My dad is going to come home next week, and I’ll be dead anyway.”

Ben felt like hitting himself. The one thing he wasn’t supposed to tell, and he’d wasted it on Runner. Ben was so angry as soon as he got in the backseat, he began punching it blindly, spittle shooting from his mouth, fuckerfuckerfucker, kicking at the cushion, banging his knuckles on the roof of the car, hitting his head on the window glass over and over until his forehead was bleeding again, Diondra yelling, *baby, baby what?*

“I swear to God, I swear to fucking God, Diondra, fuck.”

*Annihilation.*

He could never tell Diondra he’d told.

“Someone should fucking die,” Ben spat. He put his head in his hands, could feel Trey and Diondra consulting each other, silently, Trey finally saying, “Your dad’s a fucking douchebag, dude.” He threw the car into reverse and squealed out into the street, knocking Ben against the window. Diondra snaked a hand back and stroked Ben’s hair until he sat upright, barely, a pile. Diondra’s face was green under the lamplight, and suddenly Ben could see what she’d look like in twenty years, flabby and pimply like she described her mom, her skin hard and wrinkled, but with that electric glow from the tanning booths.

“There’s stuff in the glove compartment,” Trey said, and Diondra popped it open and began rifling through it. She pulled out an

oversized pipe crammed with leaves, the pot spilling everywhere, Trey saying *easy now*, and then she lit it and toked in, passed it to Trey. Ben reached up a hand—he was almost sick now, so shaky from lack of food, dizzy from the streetlights fluttering—but he wasn't going to be left out. Trey kept it from him. "Don't know if you want this, buddy. This is me and Diondra's thing. Hard-ass weed. I'm serious, Diondra, it may be tonight, I need the power in me, I haven't felt it in too long. It may have to happen."

Diondra kept looking up ahead, the snow dizzying.

"Ben might need it too," Trey pushed.

"Fine, let's do it then. Take a left up here," Diondra said.

And when Ben asked what was going on, they both just smiled.

## Libby Day

NOW

The sky was an unnatural purple when I left the Lidgerwood bar, bouncing on backroads toward the Superfund site. I wondered what it said about me, that my own father was living at a toxic waste dump and until now I'd neither known nor cared. Grasshopper bait. Bran and molasses and arsenic to help end the grasshopper plague back in the '30s, and when folks didn't need it anymore, they just buried it, bags and bags, open-grave-style. Then people got sick.

I wished I had someone with me. Lyle fidgeting in the seat next to me in one of his shrunken jackets. I should have phoned him. In my nervous rush to get down here, I hadn't told anyone where I was, hadn't used a credit card since filling up in Kansas City. If anything went wrong, no one would miss me for days. Those guys at the bar would have the only clue to where I'd be, and they didn't seem like good citizens.

*This is ridiculous*, I said out loud so I knew it. I shivered when I thought of the reason I was looking for Runner: a goodly amount of people believed he killed the Days. But I still couldn't make it work in my head, even without the alibi. I had trouble picturing Runner using the axe, in truth. I could see him grabbing a shotgun in a temper—raise, cock, pow—but the axe didn't fit. Too much work. Plus, he was found at home, asleep and still wasted, the next morning. Runner would have gotten drunk after killing his family, yes. But he wouldn't have had the discipline to stay put. He'd have gone on the lam, accidentally announcing his guilt to everyone.

The dump site was marked off by cheap metal fencing, jagged holes cut into it. Waist-high weeds grew everywhere like prairie grass, and tiny bonfires flashed in the distance. I drove along the perimeter of the fence, the weeds and loose gravel rattling against the undercarriage of my car more and more insistently until I came to a

stop. I closed the car door with a quiet tump, my eyes on those distant flames. It'd be about a ten-minute tromp to reach the camp. I slipped easily through a wire-snipped hole in the fence to my right, started walking, foxtail swatting my legs. The sky was draining quickly now, the horizon just a cuticle of pink. I realized I was humming "Uncle John's Band" to myself for no good reason.

Scraggly trees stood in the distance, but for the first few hundred yards it was all rolling, waist-high weeds. Again I was reminded of my childhood, the safe feeling of all that grass grazing your ears and wrists and the insides of your calves, like the plants were trying to soothe you. I took a few loose strides and jammed the point of my boot into a woman's ribs, actually feeling the bones part as the leather tip slid between them. She had been curled on the ground in a puddle of piss, her arms wrapped around a label-less bottle of liquor. She sat halfway up, groggy, the side of her face and hair caked with mud. She hissed at me with a withered face and beautiful teeth. "Get off me, get off me!"

"What the hell?" I yelled back, taking a scurry of steps away from her, my arms up in the air like I was worried about touching her. I walked briskly on, trying to pretend it hadn't happened, hoping the woman would pass out again, but she kept yelling after me, between gulps off the bottle: *Getoffmegetoffmegetoffme*, the screams turning into song turning into weeping.

The woman's cries aroused the interest of three men, whose faces appeared from behind the crooked copse of trees I was walking toward. Two of them glared at me, belligerent, and the youngest one, a skeletal man maybe in his forties, shot out, running toward me full bore bearing a stick he'd lit on fire. I took two steps back and planted myself.

"Who is it? Who is it?" he yelled. The thin flame of his torch weakened in a gust of wind and blew out as he neared me. The man trotted the last few steps, then stood in front of me, staring limply at the ember and smoke, his machismo turned to sulking with the loss of the fire. "What do you want, you shouldn't be here, you have to have permission to be here, it's not OK." The man was goggle-eyed, smudged everywhere, but his hair was glowing yellow, like a cap, as if it was the one thing he took care of. "It's not OK," he said again, more toward the trees than me. I wished then that I'd brought my Colt

and wondered when I'd stop being so goddam stupid.

"I'm trying to find a guy by the name of Runner Day." I didn't know if my dad had bothered with an alias, but I assumed even if he had, he'd have forgotten by his third or eighth beer. I was right.

"Runner? What do you want with Runner? He steal something from you? What'd he take? He took my watch and he won't give it back." The man slouched into himself like a child, picked at a loose button at the bottom of his shirt.

Just off the path, about forty feet away, I saw an irritation of movement. It was a couple rutting, all legs and hair and faces bunched up in anger or distaste. Their jeans were both bundled around their ankles, the man's pink ass going like a jackhammer. The yellow-haired man looked at them, giggled and said something under his breath, like *fun*.

"I'm not upset with him, with Runner," I added, pulling his attention back from the couple. "I'm just his family."

"Runnerrrrr!" the man abruptly screamed over his other shoulder. Then he looked back at me. "Runner lives in that farthest house, out on the edge of camp. You got any food?"

I started walking without a reply, the couple climaxing loudly behind me. The bonfires got brighter and closer together as I hit the main drag—a scorched bit of ground, dotted with tents that sagged like storm-ruined umbrellas. A big firepit blazed in the center of camp, a woman with deep jowls and a distant stare was tending the flames, ignoring the cans of beans and soup that were turning black from the heat, their innards sizzling over. A younger couple with scabby arms watched her from half inside their tent. The woman wore a child's winter hat partway on her head, her pale face peeking out, fishbelly ugly. Just past them, two old men with dandelions woven into their matted hair sat greedily eating food out of a can with their fingers, the thick stew steaming in the air.

"Come on, Beverly!" the scabby man snapped at the fire-tender. "I think it's damn done."

As I walked into the campsite, they all got quiet. They'd heard the screaming of Runner's name. One old man pointed a dirty finger farther west—*he's over there*—and I left the heat of the fires and

walked into the cool brambles. The hills rolled more now, like fat ocean waves, just four or five feet high, row after row, and about nine hills away I could see it: a steady glimmer, like a sunrise.

Up and down, floating along, I reached the top of the final ridge and discovered the light source. Runner's home, it turned out, was an industrial-sized mixing vat, which looked like an above-ground pool. Light poured out of it, and for a second I worried it was radioactive. Did grasshopper arsenic glow?

As I started toward the tank, I could hear the amplified echoes of Runner's movements, like a beetle walking across a steel-drum. He was whispering to himself in a schoolteachery, chastising voice—*well, I guess you should have thought of that before, Mister Smarty*—and the tank was broadcasting the noise out into the sky, which was now the violet of a mourning dress. *Yeah, I guess you really did it this time, Runnerman*, he was saying. The tank was about ten feet tall, with a ladder up one side, and I began hauling myself up it, calling out my dad's name.

"Runner, it's Libby, Your daughter," I bellowed, the rust of the ladder making my hands itch. Gargling throat sounds came from within. I climbed a few more rungs, and peered inside the tank. Runner was bent at the waist, retching onto the tank floor, and suddenly he expelled a purple globular mess, like an athlete might spit chew. Then he lay down on a soiled beach towel, adjusting a baseball cap on his head sideways, nodding as if some job, somewhere, had been well done. A half dozen flashlights glowed around him like candles, illuminating his craggy, tan face and a pile of junk: knobless toaster ovens, a tin pot, a pile of watches and gold chains and a mini-fridge that wasn't plugged into anything. He lay on his back with the loose pose of a sunbather, one leg crossed over the other, a beer to his lips, a saggy twelve-pack carton at his side. I hollered his name again and he focused his eyes, pushed his nose at me when he saw me, like a mean hound-dog. It was one of my gestures.

"Whatdaya want?" Runner snapped up at me, his fingers tightening around his beer can. "I told everyone, no trade tonight."

"Runner, it's Libby. Libby, your daughter."

He raised himself on his elbows then, twisted his hat toward the

back. Then he swiped a hand across the lace of dried saliva on his chin. He got part of it off.

“Libby?” he broke into a grin then. “Little, little Libbbby! Well, come on down, sweetheart! Come say hi to your old man.” He struggled to an upright position, standing in the center of the tank, his voice sounding deep and melodic bouncing off the walls, the flashlights giving him a crazy campfire radiance. I hesitated on the ladder, which curled over the top of the tank and then ended.

“Come on in, Libby, this is your old man’s new home!” He held his arms up to me. The drop into the tank wasn’t dangerous, but it wasn’t a gimme.

“Come on! Jesus Christ on a crutch, how far you come to see me, and now you’re gonna be a scaredy-scared,” Runner barked. At that, I swung my legs over the edge and sat on the rim like a nervous swimmer. After another *Ah Jesus!* from Runner, I started awkwardly lowering myself. Runner had always been quick to brand his children as crybabies, cowards. I only really knew the guy for one summer, but it had been a hell of a summer. His mockery always worked on me: I’d end up swinging from the tree branch, jumping off the hayloft, throwing myself into the creek even though I couldn’t swim. Never feeling triumphant afterward, just pissed. Now I was lowering myself into a rusted tank, and as my arms started to shake, my legs flail, Runner came up and grabbed me by the waist, dislodged me from the wall, and started twirling me around in tight, manic circles. My short legs spun out around me like I was seven again, and I began struggling to stick them on the ground, which only made Runner grip me harder, his arms sliding up beneath my breasts, me floating like a ragdoll.

“Stop it, Runner, set me down, stop it.” We knocked over two flashlights, which went cartwheeling, their rays bouncing everywhere. Like those flashlights that hunted me on that night.

“Say uncle,” Runner giggled.

“Put me down.” He spun harder. My breasts were smashed up to my neck, my armpits aching from the strain of Runner’s grip.

“Say uncle.”

“Uncle!” I screamed, my eyes squeezed in fury.

Runner released me. Like being thrown from a swing, I was suddenly weightless in the air, soaring forward. I landed on my feet and took three big steps til I hit the side of the tank. A big metallic thunder boomed up. I rubbed my shoulder.

“Man, my kids always were the biggest babies!” Runner panted, both his hands on his knees. He leaned back and cracked his neck loudly. “Pass me one of them beers, sweetheart.”

That’s how Runner had always been—crazy, then not, and expecting you to pretend whatever indignity he’d just inflicted on you never happened. I stood with my arms crossed, made no move for the beer.

“Goddamit, Debby, er Libby, what you’re women’s lib now? Help your old man out.”

“Do you know why I’m here, Runner?” I asked.

“Nah.” He walked over and grabbed himself a beer, shot me an eyebrow-y look that made his entire forehead disappear into folds. I had assumed he’d be more shocked to see me, but Runner had long ago pickled the part of his brain capable of surprise. His days were so baggy and pointless, anything could happen in them, so why not a visit from a daughter after half a decade?

“How long it’s been since I seen you, little girl? You get that flamingo ashtray I sent you?” The flamingo ashtray I got more than two decades ago, when I was a nonsmoking ten-year-old.

“Do you remember the letter you wrote me, Runner?” I asked. “About Ben? About how you know he wasn’t the one who ... did it.”

“Ben? Why would I write to that jagoff? He’s a bad-un. You know, that wasn’t me that raised him, that was all his mom. He was born weird and he stayed weird. If he’d been an animal, he’d of been the runt of the litter and we’d of put him down.”

“Do you remember the letter you wrote *me*, just a few days ago. You said you were dying and you wanted to tell the truth about what happened that night.”

“I sometimes wonder if he was even mine, like if he was even my kid. I always felt kinda like a sucker, raising him. Like people were probably laughing about it when I wasn’t around. Because thaint

nothing about him that reminds me of me. He was 100 percent your mother's boy. Momma's boy."

"In the letter—remember the letter, Runner, just a few days ago—you said you knew it wasn't Ben that did it. Did you know, even, that Peggy is taking back your alibi? Your old girlfriend, Peggy?"

Runner took a deep pull off the beer, winced. He looped one thumb over the pocket of his jeans and gave an angry laugh.

"Yeah I wrote you a letter. Forgot about that. Yeah, I'm dying, got scoli ... what's it with the liver when it goes bad?"

"Cirrhosis?"

"Right, got that. Plus something wrong with my lungs. They say I'll be dead within the year. Knew I should have married someone with health insurance. Peggy had some, she was always going to get her teeth cleaned, *get prescriptions*." He said it like she was dining on caviar, *prescriptions*.

"You should always get health insurance, Libby. Very important. You ain't shit without it." He studied the back of his hand, then blinked. "So I wrote you a letter. A few things need to be put to rest. Lot of shit went down that day of the murders, Libby. I've thought about it a lot, it's tormented me. That was a bad damn day. Like, a cursed day. A cursed Day," he added, pointing at his chest. "But man, there was so much fingerpointing going on then—they'd put anyone in jail. I couldn't come forward like I wish I could have. Just wouldn't have been smart."

He said it like it was a simple business decision, then he burped quietly. I pictured grabbing the tin pot and smashing it across his face.

"Well, you can talk now. What happened, Runner? Tell me what happened. Ben's been in prison now for decades, so if you know something, say it now."

"What, and then I go to jail?" He gave an indignant grunt and sat down on his beach towel, blowing his nose on one corner. "It's not like your brother was some babe in the woods. Your brother was into witchcraft, Devil shit. You hang around with the Devil, sooner or later you're gonna have to fuck ... shoulda known it when I saw him with Trey Teepano, that fucking ... fucker."

Trey Teepano, the name that kept coming up but went nowhere.

“What did Trey Teepano do?”

Runner broke into a grin, one cracked tooth leering over his bottom lip. “Boy, people do not know shit about what went on that night. It’s hilarious.”

“It’s not hilarious. My mom is dead, my brother is in prison. Your kids are dead, Runner.”

He cocked his head at that, stared up at a moon as curvy as a wrench.

“You’re not dead,” he said.

“Michelle and Debby are dead. Patty is dead.”

“But why aren’t you, don’t you ever wonder?” he spat out a jelly of blood. “Seems weird.”

“What’s Trey Teepano got to do with it?” I repeated.

“Do I get some reward money or something if I talk?”

“I’m sure, yeah.”

“I’m not innocent, not entirely, but neither’s your brother, neither’s Trey.”

“What did you do, Runner?”

“Who ended up with all the money? Wasn’t me.”

“What money, we had no money.”

“Your mom had money. Your queen bitch mom had money, believe me.”

He was standing now, glaring at me, his oversized pupils eclipsing his irises, making his blue eyes look like solar flares. He tilted his head again, in a twitchy, beastlike way and started walking toward me. He held his palms outward, as if to show he wasn’t going to hurt me, which just made me feel like he would.

“Where’d all that money go, Libby, from Patty’s life insurance? That’s another mystery for you to think on. Because I sure as shit don’t have it.”

“No one got money, Runner, it all went to defend Ben.”

Runner was standing right on top of me now, trying to scare me the way he did when I was little. He was a small man, but still had a good six inches on me, and he breathed on me hard, his breath all warm, tinny beer.

“What happened, Runner?”

“Your mom, always keeping money to herself, never ever helping me, and I put years in on that farm, never seen a dime. Well, the chickens came home to roost. And your goddam mom brought it on herself. If she’d given me that money ...”

“You were asking her for money that day?”

“All my life, I owed people money,” he said. “All my life, never able to get ahead, always owing. You got any money, Libby? Hell yeah you do, you wrote that book, didn’tcha? So you’re not really innocent either. Give me some money, Libby. Give your old man a little cash. I’ll buy me a liver on the black market, then I’ll testify to whatever you want. Whatever baby wants.” He poked me with two fingers in the middle of my chest, and I began slowly trying to back up.

“If you were any part of that night, that will be found out, Runner.”

“Well, nothing was found out back then, why should anything be found out now. You think the cops, the lawyers, everyone involved in that case, everyone who got famous from that case”—he pointed at me now, his lower lip jutting out—“You think they’re just gonna, what, oops, our mistake, here you go, Benny boy, go ahead and enjoy your life. Nah. Whatever happened, he’s in there the rest of his life.”

“Not if you tell the truth.”

“You’re just like your mother, you know, so ... cunt. Never go with the flow, always do things the hard way. If she’d just helped me once, in all those years, but she was such a bitch. I’m not saying she deserved to die ...” he laughed, bit a hangnail ... “but man, was she a hard woman. And she raised a goddam child molester. Sick fuck. Never, ever was that kid a man. Oh, and you tell Peggy she can suck my dick too.”

I turned to go at that, and realized I couldn’t get back up without Runner’s help. I faced him again.

“Little baby Ben, you really think he did those killings by himself? Ben?”

“So who was there, Runner? What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying Trey, he needed money, he was a bookie who needed to be paid.”

“By you?”

“I’m not going to cast inpersions right now, but he was a bookie. And that night he was with Ben. How do you think he got into that shit-ass house?”

“If that’s what you think happened, if you think Trey Teepano killed our family, you need to testify to that,” I interrupted. “If that’s the truth.”

“Wow, you know nothing.” He grabbed me by the arm. “You expect everything, want everything for free, one big handout, me risking my neck for ... I told you to bring money. I told you.”

I slipped his grasp, grabbed the mini-fridge and began dragging it over below the ladder, the thing rattling loud enough to drown out Runner. I climbed up on it, and my fingers were still several inches short of the top of the tank.

“Give me fifty bucks and I’ll get you up,” Runner said, assessing me lazily. I stretched to grab the edge, up on my tiptoes, straining, and then I could feel the fridge tilt beneath me, and I fell to the ground fast, hitting my jaw, biting the side of my tongue, my eyes watering from the pain. Runner laughed. “Jesus, what a mess,” he said looking down at me. “You scared a’ me, little girl?”

I skittered behind the fridge, keeping my eyes on him as I looked for things to pile on it, climb out.

“I don’t kill girls,” he said, out of nowhere. “I wouldn’t kill little girls.” And then his eyes brightened up. “Hey, did they ever find Dierdre?”

I knew the name, knew what he was trying to say.

“Diondra?”

“Yeah, Di-*on*-dra!”

“What do you know about Diondra?”

“I always wondered if they killed her that night, you never saw her after that night.”

“Ben’s ... girlfriend,” I prompted.

“Yeah, right, I guess. Last time I saw her, it was with Ben and Trey and I sort of hope she just run away. I like the idea of being a granddaddy sometimes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ben’d got her pregnant. Or that’s what he said. Made a big deal out of it, like it’s hard to do. So I saw her that night and then she never showed up again. I worried she might be dead. In’t that’s what they do, Devil worshipers—kill pregnant ladies and their babies? She sure did disappear.”

“And you didn’t say anything to the police?”

“Well, how’s that my business?”

## Patty Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

9:12 P.M.

The house had gone silent for a few beats after Runner sped away, finding someone else to bully for money. Peggy Bannion, she was his girlfriend now, Patty'd heard—why doesn't he go harass her? Probably already had.

One beat, two beats, three beats. Then the girls had turned into a mess of questions and worries and small hands everywhere on her, as if they were trying to get warm by a really weak campfire. Runner was scary this time. He'd always had a bit of menace to him, he'd always been temperful when he didn't get his own way, but this was the closest he'd come to attacking her. For the most part. When they'd been married, there'd been tussles, little slaps upside the head, designed more to infuriate, to remind you of your helplessness, than to really hurt. *Why is there no food in the fridge?* Smack. *Why is this place such a shithole?* Smack. *Where does all the money go, Patty?* Smack, smack, smack. *You listening to me, girl? What the hell you do with all the money?* The man was obsessed with cash. Even in a rare fatherly moment, grudgingly playing Monopoly with the kids, he'd spend most of his time sneaking money out from the Bank, clutching the bright orange and purple bills in his lap. *You calling me a cheat?* Smack. *You saying your old man's a cheat, Ben?* Smack, smack, smack. *You think you're smarter'n me?* Smack.

Now nearly an hour after Runner had left, the girls were still huddled on her, near her, behind her, all over the sofa asking her what was wrong, what was wrong with Ben, why was Dad so mad. Why'd she make Dad mad? Libby sat the farthest from her, tucked in a bundle, sucking a finger, her worried brain stuck on the visit to the Cates's house, the cop. She looked feverish, and when Patty reached out to touch her cheek, she flinched.

“It’s OK, Libby.”

“No it’s not,” she said, unblinking eyes fixed on Patty. “I want Ben back.”

“He’ll come back,” Patty said.

“How do you knoooooww?” Libby whimpered.

Debby hopped on that. “Do you know where he is? Why can’t we find him? Is he in trouble because of his hair?”

“I know why he’s in trouble,” Michelle said in her most wheedling voice. “Because of sex.”

Patty turned on her, furious at that simpering, gossipy rhythm. A hair-in-curlers, whisper-in-the-supermarket tone. People were using that tone to discuss her family all over Kinnakee right now. She grabbed Michelle by the arm, harder than she meant to.

“What do you mean, Michelle, what do you think you know?”

“Nothing, Mom, nothing,” Michelle blurted. “I was just saying, I don’t know.” She started to blubber, as Michelle did when she got in trouble and knew she’d done wrong.

“Ben is your brother, you don’t talk hateful about your brother. Not inside this family and definitely not out of it. That means, church, school, whatever.”

“But Mom ...” started Michelle, still crying. “I don’t like Ben.”

“Don’t say that.”

“He’s bad, he does bad things, everyone at school knows ...”

“Knows what, Michelle?” She felt her forehead start burning, wished Diane were there. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. Has Ben, are you saying Ben has done anything ... bad ... to you?”

She had promised herself she would never ask this question, that it was a betrayal of Ben to even think it. When Ben had been younger, seven or eight, he’d taken to sliding into her bed at night, and she’d wake up with him running fingers through her hair, cupping a breast. Innocent but disturbing moments in which she woke up feeling sensual, excited, and then darted from the bed, pulling robes and nightgowns around her like a horrified maiden. *No, no, no you don’t touch Mom like that.* But she never suspected—until now—that Ben

might have done anything to his sisters. So she let the question hang, while Michelle got more and more agitated, pushing her big glasses up and down her pointy nose, crying.

“Michelle, I’m sorry I yelled at you. Ben is in trouble. Now, has he done anything to you I need to know about?” Her nerves were jagged: she had moments of pure panic, followed by moods of complete remoteness. She could feel the fear rising now, that propulsion, like taking off in an airplane.

“Done what to me?”

“Has he touched you in a strange way. A not brotherly way?” A free-floating gap now, like the engines shutting off.

“The only time he touches me is when he’s pushing me or pulling my hair or shoving me,” Michelle droned, her usual litany.

Relief, oh, relief.

“So what do people say about him at school?”

“He’s a freak, it’s embarrassing. No one likes him. I mean, just look in his room, Mom. He’s got all sorts of weird stuff.”

She was about to lecture Michelle on not going into Ben’s room without his permission, and wanted to slap herself. She thought about what Det. Collins had said, the organs of animals, in Tupperware containers. She imagined them. Some dried in tight, wooden balls, others fresh and assaulting when you opened the lid, let the smell hit you.

Patty stood up. “What’s in his room?”

She started walking down the hall, Ben’s goddam phone cord tripping her up, as always. She marched past his padlocked door, down the hall, turned the corner left, past the girls’ room and into her own. Socks and shoes and jeans lay everywhere, each day’s flotsam abandoned in piles.

She opened her bedside table and found an envelope, In Case of Emergency scrawled on the front in Diane’s elongated cursive that looked just like their mother’s. Inside was \$520, cash. She had no idea when Diane had sneaked that in her room, and she was glad she hadn’t known, because Runner would have sensed her holding out. She lifted the money to her nose and smelled it. Then she tucked the

envelope back inside and pulled out a bolt-cutter she'd bought weeks ago, just to have on hand, just if she ever needed to get into Ben's lair. She'd been ashamed. She started back down the hallway, the girls' room looking like a flophouse, beds against each wall except the doorway. She could picture the police wrinkling their noses—*they all sleep in here?*—and then the aroma of urine hit her and she realized one of them must have wet the bed last night. Or the night before?

She debated switching out the sheets right then, but made herself walk straight back to Ben's, stood eye-level with an old Fender Guitar sticker he'd partly scraped off. She had a quick moment of nausea when she almost decided she couldn't look. What if she found incriminating photos, sickening Polaroids?

Snap. The lock fell to the carpet. She yelled at the girls, peeking out from the living room like startled deer, to go watch TV. She had to say it three times—*gowatchTVgowatchTVgowatchTV*—before Michelle finally went away.

Ben's bed was unmade, rumped under a pile of jackets and jeans and sweaters, but the rest of the room wasn't a pit. His desk was piled with notebooks and cassette tapes and an outdated globe that had been Diane's. Patty spun it, her finger leaving a mark in the dust near Rhodesia, then began flipping through the notebooks. They were covered in band logos: AC/DC with the lightning slash, Venom, Iron Maiden. On the notebook paper, Ben had drawn pentagrams and poems about murder and Satan.

*The child is mine*

*But really not*

*Cuz Satan has a darker plot*

*Kill the baby and its mother*

*Then look for more*

*And kill another*

She felt a ripple of illness, as if a vein running from her throat to her pelvis had gone sour. She riffled through more notebooks, and as she shook the last one, it flipped naturally to the middle. For pages and pages, Ben had drawn ballpoint pictures of vaginas with hands going into them, uteruses with creatures inside, grinning demonically, pregnant ladies sliced in two, their babies half falling out.

Patty sat down on Ben's chair, feeling giddy, but she kept flipping until she came to a page with several girls' names written in pancake-stack rows: Heather, Amanda, Brianne, Danielle, Nicole, and then over and over, in progressively embellished gothic cursive: Krissi, Chrissy, Krissi, Krissie, Krissi, Krissi Day, Krissi Day, Krissi Dee Day Krissi D. Day, Krissi D-Day!

Krissi Day inside a heart.

Patty rested her head on the cool desktop. Krissi Day. Like he was going to marry little Krissi Cates. Ben and Krissi Day. Is that what he thought? Did that make what he did to her seem OK? Did he picture himself bringing that little girl home for dinner, letting Mom meet his girlfriend? And Heather. That was the name of the Hinkel girl who was at the Cates's. Were the rest of these names even more girls he'd hurt?

Patty's head was heavy, she willed herself not to move. She would just keep her head right here, on the desk, until someone told her what to do. She was good at this, she sometimes sat for hours without leaving a chair, her head bobbing like a nursing-home inmate, thinking about her childhood, when her parents had their list of chores for her, and told her when to go to bed and when to get up and what to do during the day, and no one ever asked her to decide things. But as she was staring at the rumpled sheets on Ben's bed, with the airplane pattern, and remembering him asking for new sheets—*plain* sheets—about a year ago, she noticed a wadded plastic bag jutting out from underneath the bed frame.

She got down on her hands and knees, pulled out an old plastic shopping bag. It had a weight to it, swung out like a pendulum. She peered in and saw only clothing, and then she realized she was looking at girly patterns: flowers and hearts, mushrooms and rainbows. She dumped them out in a pile on the floor, afraid even as she was doing it that those Polaroids she feared would tumble out with them. But it was just clothes: underwear, undershirts, bloomers. They were all different sizes, from Krissi's age to toddler. They were used. As in, they had been worn by little girls. Just like the detective had said. Patty put them back in the bag.

Her son. Her son. He would go to prison. The farm would be gone, Ben would be in jail, and the girls ... She realized, as she too often did, that she didn't know how to function properly. Ben needed a

good lawyer, and she didn't know how to do that.

She walked into the living room, thinking about a trial and how she couldn't bear it. She scattered the girls back to their bedroom in a fierce voice, them staring back at her with open mouths, hurt and scared, and she thought about how she made things even worse for Ben, a single mother who was incompetent, overwhelmed, how much worse it made him look, and she put some kindling and newspapers in the fireplace, and just a few logs on top, and she set fire to the clothes. A pair of underpants with daisies on them was just catching at the waistband when the phone rang.

IT WAS LEN the Lender. She started to make her excuses, explain that there was too much going on to talk about the foreclosure. There was a problem with her son—

“That's why I phoned,” he interrupted. “I heard about Ben. I hadn't been going to phone. Before. But. I think I can help. I don't know if you'll want it. But I have an option.”

“An option for Ben?”

“A way to help Ben. With legal costs. What you're facing, you're going to need a bundle.”

“I thought we were out of options,” Patty said.

“Not entirely.”

LEN WOULDN'T COME out to the farm, he wouldn't meet her in town. He got all clandestine on her, insisting she drive out to the Rural Route 5 picnic station and park. They haggled and bickered, Len finally breathing a big huff into the phone that made her lips twist. “If you want some help, come out there, now. Don't bring no one else. Don't tell no one. I'm doing this because I think I can trust you, Patty, and I like you. I really want to help you.” A pause came on, so deep Patty looked at the phone receiver, and whispered *Len?* into the phone, already thinking he was gone, that she was about to hang up.

“Patty, I really don't know how to help you but this. I think, well, you'll see. I'm praying for you.”

She turned back to the fireplace, sifted through the flames, saw only half the clothes were burned. No logs left, so she hurried into the garage, grabbed her dad's old axe with its heavy head and razor-sharp

blade—back when they made tools right—and chopped up a bundle of wood, carried it all back in.

She was feeding it to the fire when she felt Michelle's swaying presence at her side. "Mom!"

"What, Michelle."

She looked up and Michelle was in her nightgown pointing at the fire. "You were about to throw the axe in with the wood." Michelle smiled. "Scatterbrain." There was the axe laid across Patty's arms like kindling. Michelle took it from her, holding the blade away from her, as she'd been taught, and set it beside the door.

She watched Michelle walk hesitantly back to her room, as if she were picking through grass, and Patty followed in her daughter's footsteps. The girls were all piled on the floor, murmuring to their dolls. There was that joke people told, that they loved their children most when they were sleeping, hah-hah, and Patty felt a small stab. She really did like them best when they were sleeping, not asking any questions, not needing food or amusement, and she liked them second best when they were like this: tired, calm, disinterested in their mother. She put Michelle in charge and left them there, too worn out to do anything but take direction from Len the Lender.

Don't hope for too much, she told herself. Don't hope.

It was a half-hour drive through bright snow, the flakes turning to stars in her headlights. It was a "good snow," as Patty's mom, the winter lover, would say, and Patty thought how the girls would be playing in it all day tomorrow and then thought: Would they? What happens tomorrow? Where will Ben be?

Where is Ben?

She pulled up to the abandoned picnic area, the shelter a big slab of concrete and metal built in the '70s with communal tables and a roof that was angled like some failed attempt at origami. Two swingsets sat beneath four inches of snow, their old black-rubber seats not swaying at all, as Patty thought they should. There was a breeze, why were they so still?

Len's car wasn't there. In fact, no car was there, and she started to fidget with the zipper of her coat, running a fingernail on each metal tooth so it made a clicking noise. What might happen: She would go

up to the picnic bench and find Len had left her an envelope with a stack of money, a gentlemanly gesture she would repay. Or maybe Len had organized a bunch of folks who felt pity on her, and they were about to arrive and Wonderful Life her with cash handouts, Patty realizing everyone did love her after all.

A rap came on her window, bright pink knuckles and a man's thick torso. It wasn't Len. She rolled her window partway down and peered out, ready for him to tell her to move along, lady. It was that kind of rap.

"Come on," he said instead. He didn't lean down, she still couldn't see his face. "Come on, we'll talk up on the benches."

She shut off the car, and pulled herself out, the man already walking up ahead, bundled under a thick ranch coat and a Stetson. She was wearing a wool hat that had never fit right, her ears always popped out, so she was already rubbing at the tips when she reached the man.

He seemed nice, was what she thought. She needed him to be nice. He had dark eyes and a handlebar mustache, the tips drooping off his chin. He was probably forty, looked like he might come from around here. He looked nice, she thought again. They settled down on the picnic benches, pretending they weren't covered in snow. Maybe he was a lawyer? she thought. A lawyer Len had talked into representing Ben. But then why would they be meeting out—

"Hear you got yourself some trouble," he said in a rumbly voice that matched his eyes. Patty just nodded.

"About to foreclose on your farm, and your boy's about to be arrested."

"The police just want to talk to him about an incident that—"

"Your son is about to be arrested, and I know what for. In this next year, you will need money to fend off your creditors, so you can keep your children at home—in their own goddam home—and you will need money for a lawyer for your son, because you do not want your son to go to prison labeled a child molester."

"Of course not but Ben—"

"No, I mean: You do not want *your* son to go to *prison* labeled a *child*

*molester*. There is nothing worse you can be in prison than a child molester. I seen it. What they do to those men, a nightmare. So you need a very good lawyer, which costs a lot of money. You need one right now, not weeks from now, not days from now. Right now. These things get out of control fast.”

Patty nodded, waiting. The man’s speech reminded her of being with a car salesman: you had to do it now, and this model and at this price. She always lost these conversations, always took what the salesman insisted she take.

The man pressed his Stetson down, breathed out like a bull.

“Now I myself was once a farmer, and my daddy before me and his daddy before him. Eight hundred acres, cattle, corn, wheat, outside Robnett, Missouri. Fair amount, like your operation.”

“We never had eight hundred acres.”

“But you had a family farm, you had your goddam land. It’s your goddam land. We been swindled, farmers. They say ‘plant fencepost to fencepost!’ and we goddam well did. Buy more land—they say—cause they ain’t making more of it! Then whoops, sorry, we gave you some bad advice. We’ll just take your farm, this place been in your family for generations, we’ll just take this, no hard feelings. You’re the jackass believed us, not really our fault.”

Patty had heard this before, thought it before. It was a raw deal. Let’s get back to my son. She leaned on one haunch and shivered, tried to seem patient.

“Now I’m no businessman, I’m no accountant, I’m no politician. But I can help, if you’re interested.”

“Yes, yes I’d like that,” she said. “Please.”

And in her head she told herself, Don’t hope, don’t hope for too much.

## Libby Day

NOW

I drove back home through sickly forests. Somewhere down one of those long stringy roads was a landfill. I never saw the dump itself, but I drove through a good twenty miles of float-away trash. To my right and left, the ground flickered with a thousand plastic grocery bags, fluttering and hovering just above the grass. Looking like the ghosts of little things.

Rain started splattering, then got thicker, freezing. Everything outside my car looked warped. Whenever I saw a lonely place—a dimple in the landscape, a copse of whiskery trees—I pictured Diondra buried beneath, a collection of unclaimed bones and bits of plastic: a watch, the sole of a shoe, maybe the red dangly earrings she wore in the yearbook photo.

Who gives a tinker's damn about Diondra? I thought, Diane's phrases again popping into my head. Who cares if Ben killed her, because he killed your family, and it all ends there anyway.

I'd wanted so badly for Runner to give something up, make me believe he did it. But seeing him only reminded me how impossible it was that he killed them all, how dumb he was. *Dumb*, it was a word you used as a kid, but it was the best way to describe Runner. Wily and dumb at the same time. Magda and the Kill Club would be disappointed, although I'd be happy to give them his address if they wanted to continue the conversation. Me, I hoped he'd die soon.

I passed a thick, flat brown-earth field, a teenage boy leaning against a fence in the rain, in the dark, sulky or bored, staring out at the highway. My brain returned to Ben. Diondra and Ben. Pregnant. Everything else Ben told me about that night felt right, believable, but the lie, the insistent lie about Diondra. That seemed like something to worry about.

I sped home, feeling contaminated. I went straight to the shower and scrubbed myself, Silkwood-style with a hard nail brush, my skin looking like I'd been attacked by a pack of cats when I was done. I got into bed still feeling infected, fussed around in the sheets for an hour, then got up and showered again. Around 2 a.m., I fell into a sweaty, heavy sleep filled with leering old men I thought were my father until I got close enough to see their faces melt. More potent nightmares followed: Michelle was cooking pancakes, and grasshoppers were floating in the batter, their twig legs snapping off as Michelle stirred. They got cooked into the pancakes, and my mom made us eat them anyway, good protein, crunch, crackle. Then we all started dying—choking, slobbering, eyes floating back in our heads—because the grasshoppers were poisoned. I swallowed one of the big insects and felt it fight its way back up my throat, its sticky body surfacing in my mouth, squirting my tongue with tobacco, pushing its head against my teeth to escape.

The morning dawned an unimpressive gray. I showered again—my skin still feeling suspicious—and then drove to the downtown public library, a white pillared building that used to be a bank. I sat next to a pungent man with a matted beard and a stained army jacket, the guy I always end up next to in public places, and finally got on the Internet. I found the massive, sad Missing Persons database and entered her name.

The screen made its churning, thinking sound and I sweated while hoping a No Data screen would come up. No such luck. The photo was different from the yearbook but not too: Diondra with the mousse-hard curls and the cresting bangs, charcoal eyeliner and pink lipgloss. She was smiling just the tiniest bit, pouting her lips out.

DIONDRA SUE WERTZNER

BORN: OCTOBER 28, 1967

REPORTED MISSING: JANUARY 21, 1985

BEN WAS WAITING for me again, this time with his arms crossed, leaned back in the chair, belligerent. He'd given me the silent treatment a week before granting my request to see him. Now he shook his head at me when I sat down.

It threw me off.

“You know, Libby, I've been thinking since we talked last,” he

finally said. “I’ve been thinking I don’t need this, this pain. I mean, I’m already in here, I don’t really need my little sister to show up, believe in me, don’t believe in me. Ask me weird questions, put me on the guard after goddam twenty-four years. I don’t need the tension. So if you’re coming here, trying to ‘get to the bottom of things,’” he made angry air quotes, “you know, go somewhere else. Because I just don’t need it.”

“I found Runner.”

He didn’t stand up, he stayed solid in his chair. Then he gave a sigh, a might-as-well sigh.

“Wow, Libby, you missed your calling as a detective. What’d Runner have to say? He still in Oklahoma?”

I felt an inappropriate twitch of a smile. “He’s at a Superfund dump on the edge of Lidgerwood, got turned out from the group home.”

Ben grinned at that. “He’s living in a toxic waste dump. Ha.”

“He says Diondra Wertzner was your girlfriend, that you got her pregnant. That she was pregnant and you two were together, the night of the murders.”

Ben put a hand over his face, his fingers splayed. I could see his eyes blink through them. He talked with his face still covered, and I couldn’t hear what he said. He tried twice, me asking each time what he was saying, and on the third try he pulled his head up, chewing on the inside of his cheek, and leaned in.

“I said, what the fuck is your obsession with Diondra? You got a goddam bee in your bonnet about this, and you know what’s going to happen, you’re going to fuck all this up. You had a chance to believe in me, to do the right thing and finally believe in your brother. Who you *know*. Don’t say you don’t because that’s a lie. I mean, don’t you get it, Libby? It’s the last chance for us. The world can believe I’m guilty, believe I’m innocent, we both know I’m not going anywhere. There’s no DNA going to release me—there’s no goddam *house* anymore. So. I’m not getting out. So. The only person I care, to say they know I couldn’t have *murdered my family*, is you.”

“You can’t blame me for wondering whether—”

“Of course I can. Of course I can. I can blame you for not believing

in me. Now, I can forgive you for your lie, for getting confused, as a kid. I can forgive that. But goddamit, Libby, what about now? You're what, thirty-some years old, and still believe your own blood could do something like that?"

"Oh I totally believe my own blood could do that," I said, my anger surging up, bumping against my ribs. "I totally believe our blood is bad. I feel it in me. I've beaten the shit out of people, Ben. Me. I've busted in doors and windows and ... I've killed things. Half the time I look down, my hands are in fists."

"You believe we're that bad?"

"I do."

"Even with Mom's blood?"

"Even with."

"Well, I'm sad for you, little girl."

"Where is Diondra?"

"Let it go, Libby."

"What'd you do with the baby?"

I felt queasy, fevered. If the baby had lived, it'd be (he'd be, she'd be), what, twenty-four years old. The baby wasn't a baby anymore. I tried to picture an adult, but my brain kept bouncing back an image of a blanket-swaddled infant. But hell, I could barely picture *me* as an adult. My next birthday I'll be thirty-two, my mom's age when she was killed. She'd seemed so grown up. More grown up than I'd ever be.

So if it was alive, the baby was twenty-four. I had one of my awful visions. A might-have-been vision. Us, if everyone had lived, at home in Kinnakee. There's Michelle in the living room, still fiddling with her oversized glasses, bossing around a bundle of kids who roll their eyes at her but do what they're told. Debby, chubby and chattery with a big, blond farmer-husband and a special room in her own farmhouse for crafts, packed with sewing ribbons and quilting patches and glue guns. My mom, ripe-fifties and sunbaggy, her hair mostly white, still bickering pleasantly with Diane. And into the room comes Ben's kid, a daughter, a redhead, a girl in her twenties, thin and assured, bangly bracelets on delicate wrists, a college graduate who doesn't take any

of us seriously. A Day girl.

I choked on my own spit, started coughing, my windpipe shut down. The visitor two booths down from me leaned out to look and then, deciding I wasn't going to die, went back to her son.

"What happened that night, Ben? I need to know. I just need to know."

"Libby, you can't win this game. I tell you I'm innocent, that means you're guilty, you ruined my life. I tell you I'm guilty ... I don't think that makes you feel much better, does it?"

He was right. It was one reason I'd stayed immobile for so many years. I threw something else out: "And what about Trey Teepano?"

"Trey Teepano."

"I know he was a bookie, and that he was into Devil shit, and that he was a friend of yours, and he was with you that night. With Diondra. That all seems pretty fucked up."

"Where'd you get all that?" Ben looked me in the eye, then raised his gaze up, gave a long stare at my red roots that were to my ears now.

"Dad told me. He said he owed Trey Teepano money and—"

"Dad? He's *Dad* now?"

"Runner said—"

"Runner said fuck-all. You need to grow up, Libby. You need to pick a side. You can spend the rest of your life trying to figure out what happened, trying to reason. Or you can just trust yourself. Pick a side. Be on mine. It's better."

## Ben Day

JANUARY 2, 1985

10:23 P.M.

They drove out past the edge of town, the road going from cement to dirt, Ben rattling around in the backseat, hands pressed up against the top of the truck, trying to stay in place. He was stoned, real stoned, and his teeth and head rattled. *You got a screw loose?* He had two or three loose. He wanted to sleep. Eat first, then sleep. He watched the lights of Kinnakee fade away and then it was miles of glowing blue snow, a patch of grass here, a jagged scar of fence there, but mostly snow like the surface of the moon. Like he really was in outer space, on another planet, and he wasn't going home, ever.

They turned down some road, trees sucking them in, tunnel-like on all sides and he realized he had no idea where they were. He just hoped whatever was about to happen was over soon. He wanted a hamburger. His mom made crazy hamburgers, called them kitchen-sinkers, fattened up cheap ground meat with onions and macaroni and whatever else crap was about to go bad. One time he swore he found part of a banana, glopped over with ketchup—his mom thought ketchup made everything OK. It didn't, her cooking sucked, but he'd eat one of those hamburgers right now. He was thinking *I'm so hungry I could eat a cow*. And then, as if his food-prayer worked, he refocused his eyes from a gritty stain on the backseat to the outside and there were ten or twenty Herefords standing in the snow for no reason. There was a barn nearby but no sign of a house, and the cows were too dumb to walk back into the barn, so they stood like a bunch of fat assholes, blowing steam from their nostrils. Herefords were the ugliest cows around, giant, rusty, with white crinkled faces and pink-rimmed eyes. Jersey cows were sort of sweet looking, they had those big deer faces, but Herefords looked prehistoric, belligerent, mean. The things had furry thick waddles and curvy-sharp horns and when Trey pulled to a stop, Ben felt a flurry of nerves. Something bad was going to

happen.

“We’re here,” Trey said as they sat in the car, the heater turned off, the cold creeping in. “All out.” Trey reached over Diondra into the glove compartment—here grazing Diondra’s baby belly, them both giving weird smiles again—grabbed a cassette and popped it in the deck. The frenetic, zigzag music started scribbling on Ben’s brain.

“Come on, Ben,” Trey said, crunching down on the snow. He pulled up the driver’s seat to let Ben out, and Ben stumbled to the ground, missing the step, Trey grabbing hold of him. “Time for you to get some understanding, feel some power. You’re a dad soon, dude.” Trey shook him by both shoulders. “A dad!” His voice sounded friendly enough but he didn’t smile. He just stared with his lips tight and his eyes red-rimmed, almost bloody. Deciding. He had a deciding look. Then Trey let go, cuffed his jean jacket, and went around to the back of the truck. Ben tried to see across the hood, catch Diondra’s eyes, flash her a whatthefuck look, but she was leaning down into the cab, pulling another baggie out from under her seat, groaning with one hand on her belly, like it was really hard to bend down half a foot. She came back up, hand crooked on her back now and began digging around in the baggie. It was filled with foil gum wrappers and she pulled three out.

“Give it,” Trey said, stuck two in his pocket and unwrapped the third. “You and Ben can share.”

“I don’t want to share,” Diondra whined. “I feel like shit, I need a whole one.”

Trey gave a frustrated sigh, then shot one packet out at her, muttering *Jesus Christ*.

“What is that stuff?” Ben finally asked. He could feel that warm trickle on his head, knew he was bleeding again. His headache was worse too, throbbing behind his left eye, down his neck and into his shoulder, like an infection moving through his system. He rubbed at his neck, it felt like someone had tied a garden hose in knots and planted it under his skin.

“It’s Devil rush, dude, ever had it?” Trey poured the powdery stuff into one palm and leaned into it like a horse to sugar, then made a shotgun of a snort, threw his head back, stumbled a few steps backward, then looked at them like they had no business being there.

A ring of deep orange covered his nose and mouth.

“The fuck you looking at, Ben Day?”

Trey’s pupils jittered back and forth like he was following an invisible hummingbird. Diondra sucked up hers in the same greedy, animal snort, then fell straight to her knees laughing. It was a laugh of joy for three seconds, and then it turned into a wet, choking laugh, the kind you give when you just can’t believe your shitty luck, that kind of laugh. She was crying and cackling, lowering herself onto the snow, laughing on her hands and knees and then she was throwing up, nacho cheese and thick strings of spaghetti that almost smelled good in their sweet vomit sauce. Diondra still had a string of spaghetti hanging out of her mouth when she looked up. The strand hung there for a second, before she realized, then she pulled it out, Ben picturing the noodle still half down her throat, tickling its way up. She flung it to the ground still crying on all fours—and as she looked at it, she started in on that scrunched-face baby-bawl his sisters did when they got hurt. The end-of-the-world cry.

“Diondra, you OK, ba-?” he started.

She lurched forward and threw the rest up near Ben’s feet. He got out of the way of the spatter and stood, watching Diondra on all fours, weeping.

“My daddy’s going to kill me!” she wailed again, sweat wetting the roots of her hair. Her face twisted as she glared down at her belly. “He will *kill* me.”

Trey was only looking at Ben, tuning Diondra out entirely, and he made a gesture with a single finger, a flick that meant Ben should stop stalling and take the Devil rush. He put his nose down near it and smelled old erasers and baking soda.

“What is it, like cocaine?”

“Like battery acid for your brain. Pour it in.”

“Man I already feel like crap, I don’t know if I need this stuff. I’m fucking hungry, man.”

“For what’s about to happen, you need it. Do it.”

Diondra was giggling again, her face white under the beige foundation. A nacho crumble was floating toward Ben’s foot on a

runny pink stream. He moved. Then turned away from them, toward the watching cows, poured the powder into his palm and let it start to float off on the wind. When it was down to a pile the size of a quarter, he sniffed it, loud and fake as they had, and still only took part of it up his nose.

Which was good, because it shot straight into his brain, harsh as chlorine but with even more sting, and he could picture it crackling out like tree branches, burning the veins in his head. It felt like his whole bloodstream had turned to hot tin, even his wrist bones started to ache. His bowels shifted like a snake waking up, and for a second he thought he might crap himself, but instead he sneezed up some beer, lost his sight and tumbled onto the ground, his head throbbing open, the blood pulsing down his face with each squeeze. He felt like he could run eighty miles an hour, and that he should, that if he stayed where he was, his chest would crack open and some demon would bust out, shake Ben's blood off its wings, crook its head at the idea of being stuck in this world, and fly into the sky, trying to get back to hell. And then as soon as he thought he needed a gun, shoot himself and end this, came a big air bubble of relief that spread through him, soothed his veins, and he realized he'd been holding his breath and started gulping air, and then felt fucking good. Fucking smart to breathe air, that's what it was. He felt he was expanding, turning big, undeniable. Like no matter what he did, it was the right choice, yes sir, sure thing, like he could line up all the skyful of choices he'd need to make in the coming months and he could shoot them down like carnival animals and win something big. Huge. Hurray for Ben, up on everyone's shoulders so the world can fucking cheer.

"What the hell is this stuff?" he asked. His voice sounded solid, like a heavy door with a good swing to it.

Trey ignored him, glanced at Diondra, pulling herself up from the ground, her fingers red from where she'd buried them in the ice. He seemed to sneer at her without realizing it. Then he fished around in the back of his pickup, swung back around with an axe, glowing as blue as the snow. He handed it out toward Ben, blade first, and Ben let his arms go tight to his sides, *nononno can't make me take it*, like he was a kid being asked to hold a crying newborn, *nononono*.

"Take it."

Ben gripped it, cold in his hands, rusty stains on the point. “Is this blood?”

Trey gave one of his lazy side glances, didn’t bother answering.

“Oh, I want the axe!” Diondra squealed. She made a skip over to the truck, Ben wondering if they were fucking with him as usual.

“Too heavy for you, take the hunting knife.”

Diondra twisted back and forth in her coat, the fur-trim of the hood bouncing up and down.

“I don’t want the knife, too small, give Ben the knife, he hunts.”

“Then Ben gets this too,” Trey said, and handed him a 10-gauge shotgun.

“Let me have the gun, then, I’ll take that,” Diondra said.

Trey took her hand, opened it, folded the Bowie inside of it.

“It’s sharp so don’t fuck around.”

But wasn’t that just what they were doing, fucking around?

“BenGay, wipe your face, you’re dripping blood everywhere.”

Axe in one hand, shotgun in the other, Ben wiped his face on his sleeve and came away woozy. More blood kept coming, it was in his hair now, and smeared over one eye. He was freezing and remembered that’s what happened when you bled to death, you got cold, and then he realized it would be crazy not to be cold, him in his thin little Diondra jacket, his entire torso prickly with goosepimples.

Trey pulled out a massive pick-axe last, its blade so sharp it looked like an icicle sliver. He slung it over his shoulder, a man going to work. Diondra was still pouting at the knife, and Trey snapped at her.

“You want to say it?” he said. “You want to do it?”

She pulled out of the sulk, nodded briskly, set her knife in the middle of the accidental circle they were standing in. But no, not accidental, because then Trey put his pick-axe next to the Bowie, and motioned for Ben to do the same, gave him this impatient gesture like a parent whose kid has forgotten to say grace. So Ben did, piled the shotgun and the axe on top, that pile of glinting, sharp metal making Ben’s heart pound.

Suddenly Diondra and Trey were grabbing his hands, Trey's grip tight and hot, Diondra's limp, sticky, as they stood in a circle around their weapons. The moonlight was making everything glow. Diondra's face looked like a mask, all hollows and hills, and when she thrust her chin up toward the moon, between her open mouth and the pile of metal Ben got a hard-on and didn't care. His brain was sizzling somewhere in the back of his consciousness, his brain was literally frying, and then Diondra was chanting.

"To Satan we bring you sacrifice, we bring you pain, and blood, and fear, and rage, the basis of human life. We honor you, Dark One. In your power, we become more powerful, in your exaltation, we become exalted."

Ben didn't know what the words meant. Diondra prayed all the time. She prayed in church, like normal people, but she also prayed to goddesses, and geodes and crystals and shit. She was always looking for help.

"We're going to make your baby a fucking warrior tonight, Dio," Trey said.

They disbanded then, everyone picking up their weapons, silently marching into the field, the snow making a rubbery sound as they stomped through it, breaking its top crust. Ben's feet felt literally frozen, separate things, unnaturally attached to him. But it didn't really matter, not this, not much of anything mattered, they were in a bubble tonight, nothing had any consequence, and as long as he could stay in the bubble, everything would be OK.

"Which one, Diondra?" Trey said, as they came to a stop. Four Herefords stood nearby, unmoving in the snow, finding the humans unworrying. Limited imaginations.

Diondra paused, pointed a finger around—a silent eeny-meeny-miny-mo—and then rested on the largest one, a bull with a grotesque, furry dribble of cock slung down toward the snow. Diondra pulled her mouth back in a vampire smile, her canine teeth bared, and Ben waited for a fight-cry, a charge, but instead she just strode. Three long, snow-clumsy strides up to the bull, who took only one step away before she jammed the hunting knife through its throat.

It's happening, Ben thought. Here it is, happening. A sacrifice to Satan.

The bull was leaking blood like oil, dark and thick—glug, glug, and then all of a sudden it twitched, the vein shifted or something, and blood sprayed out, an angry mist, coating them in specks of red, their faces, their clothes, their hair. Diondra was screaming now, finally, as if this first part had been underwater and she burst through suddenly, her cries echoing off the ice. She stabbed at the bull's face, chopped its left eye into a mess, the eye rolling back into its head, slick and blood-black. The bull stumbled in the snow, clumsy and confused, sounding like a sleeper awakened to an emergency—frightened but dull. Blood spatters all over its white curly fur. Trey raised his blade toward the moon, made a whooping cry, slung his chopper hard underhand and buried it in the animal's gut. The thing's hindquarters gave out for a second, then it bucked up, started to trot drunkenly. The other cows had widened the circle around it, like kids at a fight, watching and lowing.

“Get him,” Diondra yelled. Trey took big loping hops through the snow, his legs kicked high as if he were dancing, his axe circling through the air. He was singing to Satan, and then mid-lyric, he brought the axe down on the animal's back, breaking its spinal cord, dropping it to the snow. Ben didn't move. To move meant he could partake and he didn't want to, he didn't want to feel that bull's flesh breaking open under him, not because it was wrong but because it might feel too good to him, like the weed, where the first time he took a drag he knew he'd never quit it. Like the smoke found a place inside him that had been left hollow just for the smoke, and had curled up in there. There might be a space too, for this. The feel of killing, there might be an empty spot just waiting to be filled.

“Come on, Ben, don't puss out on us now,” Trey called, heaving gulps of air after a third, a fourth, a fifth axe chop.

The bull was on its side, moaning now, a mournful, otherworldly mewling, the way a dinosaur in a tar pit might have sounded—dreadful, dying, stunned.

“Come on, Ben, get your kill. You can't come and just stand,” Diondra yelled, making standing sound like the most worthless thing in the world. The bull looked up at her from the ground, and she started stabbing it in the jowls, a quick, efficient jab, her teeth gritted, screaming, “Fuck!” as she stabbed it again and again, one hand on the knife, the other covering her belly.

“Hold off, D,” Trey said, and leaned against his axe. “Do it, Ben. Do it or I’ll fucking hurt you, man.” His eyes still had the druggy glow, and Ben wished he’d taken more of the Devil rush, wished he wasn’t jammed in this between state, where he had some logic but no fear.

“This is your chance, dude. Be a man. You got the mother of your child here watching, she’s been doing her share. Don’t be a scared, dickless boy all your life, letting people push you around, letting people bring up the fear in you. I used to be like you, man, and I don’t ever want to go back there again. Shit on. Look how your own dad treated you. Like a limp dick. But you get what you deserve, you know? I think you know that.”

Ben breathed frozen air into his lungs, the words seeping under his skin, getting him angrier and angrier. He wasn’t a coward.

“Come on, Ben, do it, just go,” Diondra needled at him.

The bull was only panting now, blood pouring out of dozens of wounds, a red pond in the snow.

“You need to let the rage out, man, it’s the key to power, you’re so scared, man, aren’t you tired of being scared?”

The bull on the ground was so pathetic now, so quickly undone, that Ben found it disgusting. His hands clenched tighter and tighter around the axe, the thing needing to be killed, put out of its misery, and then he raised the blade over his head, high and heavy, and brought it down on the bull’s skull, a shocking crack, a final cry from the animal, and shards of brain and bone shattered outward and then his muscles felt so good stretching and working in his shoulders—man’s work—that he brought the axe down again, the skull breaking in half, the bull finally dead now, a last jitter of its two front legs, and then he moved his attention to the midsection, where he could really do damage, up and down, Ben sending bone flying, and bubbly bits of entrails. “Fuck you fuck you fuck you,” he was screaming, his shoulders impossibly tight, like they were rubberbanded back, his jaw buzzing, his fists shaking, his cock hard and straining, like his whole body might pop in an orgasm. Swing, batter!

He was about to go for the shotgun when his arms gave out, he was done, the anger leaking from his body, and he didn’t feel power at all. He felt embarrassed, the way he felt after he jacked off to a dirty magazine, limp and wrong and foolish.

Diondra busted out laughing. “He’s pretty tough when the thing’s practically dead,” she said.

“I killed it, didn’t I?”

They were all panting, spent, their faces covered in blood except where they’d each wiped at their eyes, leaving them peering out, raccoon-style. “You sure this is the guy that got you pregnant, Diondra?” Trey said. “You sure he can get it up? No wonder he’s better with little girls.”

Ben dropped the axe, started walking toward the car, thinking it was time to go home now, thinking this was his mom’s fault, her being such a bitch this morning. If she hadn’t freaked out about his hair, he’d be at home tonight, clean and warm under his blanket, the sound of his sisters just outside his door, the TV humming down the hall, his mom dumping out some stew for dinner. Instead he was here, being mocked as usual, having done his best to prove himself and coming up short, as always, the truth finally out. This night would always be here to point at, the night Ben couldn’t get his kill.

But now he knew how the violence felt, and he wanted more. In a few days, he’d be thinking about it, the bell rung, can’t unring it, and so he’d be thinking about it, obsessing about it, the killing, but he doubted Trey and Diondra would take him out again, and he would be too pitiful, too scared, as always, to do it alone.

He stood with his back to them, then raised the shotgun to his shoulder, swung back around, cocking the hammer, his finger on the trigger. Bam! He imagined the air ringing, the shotgun butting against his shoulder like a friend with a punch, saying good job! And him cracking the gun, popping another shell in, walking deeper into the field, swing that gun back up, and bam!

He pictured his ears ringing and the air smelling smoky, and Trey and Diondra for once saying nothing as he stood in a field of corpses.

## Libby Day

NOW

Lyle had left nine messages in the days I'd gone Oklahoma-incommunicado, their tone wildly varying: He'd started with some sort of impression of an anxious dowager, I think, talking through a pinched nose, inquiring about my welfare, some comedy bit, then he'd moved on to annoyed, stern, urgent and panicked, before swinging back to goofy on the last message. "If you don't call me back, I'm coming ... and *hell's* coming with me!" he screamed, then added: "I don't know if you've ever seen *Tombstone*."

I have, but it was a bad Kurt Russell.

I phoned him, gave him my address (an unusual choice for me) told him he could come over if he wanted. In the background I could hear a woman's voice asking who it was, telling Lyle to ask me something—*just ask her, don't be silly, justaskher*—and Lyle trying to scramble off the phone. Maybe Magda, wanting a report on Runner? I'd give it. I wanted to talk, in fact, or I would get in bed and not get out for another ten years.

While I waited, I prepped my hair. I'd bought a dye kit at the grocery store on the way home from seeing Ben. I had planned on grabbing my usual blonde—Platinum Pizazz—but in the end I left with Scarlet Sass, a redhead smiling saucily at me on the box. Less upkeep, yes, I always preferred less upkeep. And I'd been thinking about changing back since Ben remarked how much I looked like my mother, the idea irresistible to me, me somehow thinking I'd show up outside Diane's trailer, looking like Patty Day resurrected, and maybe that would be enough to get me inside. Goddam Diane, not phoning me back.

I packed a crimson glob of chemicals on my head, the smell like something gently burning. Fourteen minutes more to go when the doorbell rang. Lyle. Of course he was early. He rushed in, talking

about how relieved he was to hear from me, then pulled back.

“What is that, a perm?”

“I’m going back to red.”

“Oh. Good. I mean, it’s nice. The natural.”

In the thirteen minutes I had left, I told Lyle about Runner, and about Diondra.

“OK,” Lyle said, looking to his left, aiming his ear at me, his listening-thinking stance. “So according to Ben, Ben had gone back home, that night, briefly, got in a fight with your mom, and then left again, and he knows nothing after that.”

“According to Ben.” I nodded.

“And according to Runner, what? Either Trey killed your family because Runner owed him, or Ben and Trey killed your family *and* Diondra in some sort of Devil worship ritual. What’d Runner say about his girlfriend recanting his alibi?”

“He said she could suck his dick. I gotta rinse.”

He trailed me to the bathroom, filling the doorway, hands on each side of the frame, thinking.

“Can I say something specific about that night, Libby?”

I was bent over the tub, water dribbling out of the attachable nozzle—no showers in *Over There That Way*—but I paused.

“I mean, doesn’t it seem like it could have been two people? Somehow? Michelle’s murder was just—Your mom and Debby were like, uh, hunted down almost. But Michelle dies in her bed, covers pulled up. They have different feels to them. I think.”

I gave a small, stiff shrug, the Darkplace images swirling, and stuck my head under the spray, where I couldn’t hear anymore. The water started running toward the drain, burgundy. While I was still upside down, I could feel Lyle grab the attachment from me and pat at the back of my head. Clumsy, unromantic, just getting the job done.

“You still had some guck,” he yelled over the water, then handed the hose back to me. I rose up, and he reached toward me, grabbed an earlobe and swiped. “Some red stuff on your earlobe too. That probably wouldn’t go with earrings.”

“My ears aren’t pierced,” I said, combing out my hair, trying to figure out if the color was right. Trying very hard not to think about my family’s corpses, to concentrate just on hair.

“Really? I thought every girl had pierced ears.”

“Never had anyone to do them for me.”

He watched me brush, a sad-sack smile on his face.

“How’s the hair?” he asked.

“We’ll find out when it dries.”

We sat back down on the soggy living-room couch, each of us at opposite ends, listening to the rain get going again.

“Trey Teepano had an alibi,” he finally said.

“Well, Runner had an alibi too. Apparently they’re easy to come by.”

“Maybe you should go ahead and officially recant your testimony?”

“I’m not recanting anything until I’m sure,” I said. “I’m just not.”

The rain got harder, made me crave a fireplace.

“You know that the farm went into foreclosure the day of the murders, right?” Lyle said.

I nodded. It was one of forty-thousand new facts I had in my brain, thanks to Lyle and all his files.

“Doesn’t that seem like something?” he said. “Doesn’t this all seem too weird, like we’re missing something obvious? A girl tells a lie, a farm goes under, a gambler’s bets are called in by a, jeez, by a Devil-worshipping bookie. All on the same day.”

“And every single person in this case lies, is lying, did lie.”

“What should we do now?” he asked.

“Watch some TV,” I said. I flipped on the TV, plumped back down, pulling out a strand of half-dry hair to check the color. It looked pure shocking red, but then, that was the color of my hair.

“You know, Libby, I’m proud of you, with all this,” Lyle said stiffly.

“Ah don’t say that, it sounds so fucking patronizing, it drives me crazy when you do that.”

“I wasn’t being patronizing,” he said, his voice going high.

“Just crazy.”

“I wasn’t. I mean, it’s cool to get to know you.”

“Yeah what a thrill. I’m so worthwhile.”

“You *are*.”

“Lyle, just don’t, OK?” I folded a knee up under my chin and we both sat pretending to watch a cooking show, the host’s voice too bright.

“Libby?”

I rolled my eyes over at him slowly, as if it pained me.

“Can I tell you something?”

“What.”

“You ever hear about those wildfires near San Bernardino, back in 1999, they destroyed, like eighty homes and about ninety thousand acres?”

I shrugged. Seemed like California was always on fire.

“I was the kid who set that fire. Not on purpose. Or at least, I didn’t mean for it to get out of control.”

“What?”

“I was only a kid, twelve years old, and I wasn’t a firebug or anything, but I’d ended up with a lighter, a cigarette lighter, I can’t even remember why I had it, but I liked flicking it, you know, and I was hiking back in the hills behind my development, bored, and the trail was just, covered, with old grasses and stuff. And I was walking along, flicking the lighter, just seeing if I could get the tops of the weeds to catch, they had these fuzzy tips—

“Foxtail.”

“And I turned around, and ... and they’d all caught on fire. There were about twenty mini-fires behind me, like torches. And it was during the Santa Anas, so the tops started blowing away, and they’d land and catch another patch on fire, and then blow another hundred feet. And then it wasn’t just small fires here and there. It was a big fire.”

“That fast?”

“Yeah, in just those seconds, it was a *fire*. I still remember that feeling, like maybe for one moment I might have been able to undo it, but no. Now it was, like, it was all beyond me. And, and it was going to be bad. I just remember thinking I was in the middle of something that I’d never get over. And I haven’t. It’s hard to be that young and realize something like that.”

I was supposed to say something now.

“You didn’t mean for it to happen, Lyle. You were a kid with some horrible, weird luck.”

“Well, I know, but that’s why I, you know, identify with you. Not so long ago, I started learning about your story and I thought, *She might be like me*. She might know that feeling, of something getting completely beyond your control. You know, with your testimony, and what happened after—”

“I know.”

“I’ve never told anyone that story. I mean, voluntarily. I just figured you—”

“I know. Thanks.”

If I were a better person, I’d have put my hand on Lyle’s then, given him a warm squeeze, let him know I understood, I empathized. But I wasn’t, the thanks was hard enough. Buck hopped up on the sofa between us, willing me to feed him.

“So, uh, what are you doing this weekend?” Lyle said, picking at the edge of the sofa, the same spot where Krissi had put her face in her hands and wept.

“Nothing.”

“Uh, so my mom wanted me to see if you wanted to come to this birthday party she’s having for me,” he said. “Just, like dinner or something, just friends.”

People had birthday parties, grown-ups did, but the way Lyle said it made me think of clowns and balloons and maybe a pony ride.

“Oh, you probably want to just enjoy that time with your friends,” I said, looking around the room for the remote control.

“Right. That’s why I invited you.”

“Oh. OK then.”

I was trying not to smile, that would be too awful, and I was trying to figure out what to say, ask him how old he’d be—twelve years old in 1999 means, good God, twenty-two?—but a news bulletin blared in. Lisette Stephens was found murdered this morning, her body at the bottom of a ravine. She’d been dead for months.

## Patty Day

JANUARY 3, 1985

12:01 A.M.

Broke-down Kinnakee. She really wouldn't miss this town, especially in winter, when the roads got pitted and the mere act of driving rearranged your skeleton. By the time Patty got home, the girls were full-down-out-asleep, Debby and Michelle splayed out on the floor as always, Debby using a stuffed animal as a pillow, Michelle still sucking her pen on the floor, diary under an arm, looking comfortable despite a leg bent beneath her. Libby was in bed, in her tight little ball, fists up at her chin, grinding her teeth. Patty thought about tucking each one in properly, but didn't want to risk waking them. Instead she blew a kiss and shut the door, the smell of urine hitting her, Patty realizing she'd forgotten to change the sheets after all.

The bag of clothing was completely burned, there were only the tiniest scraps floating at the bottom of the fireplace. One white cotton square with a purple star sat in the ashes, defiant. Patty put on another log just to make sure, tossed the scrap right on the fire. Then she phoned Diane and asked her to come over extra early tomorrow, dawn, so they could look for Ben again.

"I can come over now, if you want the company."

"No, I'm about to climb in bed," Patty said. "Thanks for the envelope. The money."

"I'm already phoning around about lawyers, should have a good list by tomorrow. Don't worry, Ben will come home. He's probably panicked. Staying overnight at someone's. He'll show up."

"I love him so much, Diane ..." Patty started and caught herself. "Have a good sleep."

"I'll bring some cereal when I come, I forgot to bring cereal today."

Cereal. It was so normal it felt like a gut punch.

Patty headed to her room. She wanted to sit and think, to ponder, get deep. The urge was intense, but she fought it. It was like trying to fight a sneeze. She finally poured herself two fingers of bourbon and put on her thick layers of sleeping clothes. Thinking time was over. Might as well try and relax.

She thought she'd cry—the relief of it all—but she didn't. She got into bed and looked at the cracked ceiling and thought, "I don't need to worry about the roof caving in anymore." She wouldn't have to look at that broken screen window near her bed, thinking year after year she should fix it. She wouldn't need to worry about the morning when she'd wake up and need coffee and find that the coffeemaker finally croaked. She didn't have to worry about commodity prices or operating costs or interest rates or the credit card Runner had taken in her name and overcharged on so she could never pay it off. She'd never see the Cates family again, at least not for a long time. She didn't have to worry about Runner and his peacock strut, or the trial or the fancy, slick-haired lawyer with the thick gold watch, who'd say soothing things and judge her. She didn't have to stay up at night worrying about what the lawyer was telling his wife, lying in their goosedown bed, him telling her stories about "the Day mother" and her dirty brood. She didn't have to worry about Ben going to prison. She didn't have to worry about not being able to take care of him. Or any of them. Things were going to change.

For the first time in a decade, she wasn't worrying, and so she didn't cry. Somewhere after one, Libby banged the door open and sleepwalked into bed with her, and Patty turned over and kissed her goodnight, and said I love you, was happy she could say that aloud to one of her kids, and Libby was asleep so fast Patty wondered if she even heard.

## Libby Day

NOW

I woke up feeling like I dreamt about my mom. I was craving her weird hamburgers we always made fun of, filled with carrots and turnip bits and sometimes old fruit. Which was strange since I don't eat meat. But I wanted one of those burgers.

I was considering how one actually cooks hamburgers when Lyle phoned with his pitch. Just one more. That's what Lyle kept saying: just one more person I should talk to, and if nothing came of it, I could give up. Trey Teepano. I should look up Trey Teepano. When I said it'd be too hard to track him down, Lyle recited his address. "It was easy, he has his own business. Teepano Feed," Lyle said. I wanted to say "nice work" back to him—how easy would that have been?—but I didn't. Lyle said Magda's women would give me \$500 dollars to talk to Trey. I'd have done it for free, but I took the money anyway.

I knew I would keep going like this, actually, that I couldn't stop until I found some sort of answer. Ben knew, I was sure of that now, Ben knew something. But he wasn't saying. So keep going. I remember watching a very sensible love expert on TV once. The advice: "Don't be discouraged—every relationship you have is a failure, until you find the right one." That's how I felt about this miserable quest: every person I talked to would let me down until I found the one person who could help me figure out that night.

Lyle was coming with me to Teepano Feed, partly because he wanted to see what Trey Teepano was like, and partly, I think, because he was nervous about the guy. ("I don't really trust Devil worshipers.") Teepano Feed was just east of Manhattan, Kansas, somewhere in a squat of farmland wedged between several new suburbs. The developments were blank and clean. They looked as fake as the Western souvenir shops back in Lidgerwood, a place where people only pretended to live. To my left, the boxy houses eventually

gave way to an emerald lagoon of grass. A golf course. Brand new and small. In the cold morning rain, a few men remained on the fairway, twisted and tilted as they swung their clubs, looking like flags of yellow and pink against the green. Then just as quickly as the fake houses and the fake grass and the pastel-shirted men appeared, they were gone, and I was looking at a field of pretty brown Jersey cows, staring at me, expectant. I stared back—cows are the few animals that really seem to see you. I stared so hard I missed the big old brick building labeled Teepano Feed and Farm Supply, Lyle tapping my shoulder, LibbyLibbyLibby. I hit the brakes on my car and hydroplaned a good fifty feet, that soaring feeling reminding me of Runner letting me loose after spinning me. I backed up wildly and swerved into the gravel parking lot.

Only one other car was parked in front of the store, the whole place looking worn. The cement grooves between the bricks were filled with muck, and a kids' merry-go-round near the front door—quarter a ride—was missing its seats. As I walked up the wide wooden steps that spanned the front, the neon lights in the windows blinked on. “We Got Llamas!” Odd words to see in neon. A tin sign reading Sevin 5% Dust dangled from one of the building posts. “What’s Pharoah quail?” Lyle said as we hit the top step. A bell on the door jangled as I opened it, and we walked into a room colder than the outside—the air conditioner was blasting, as was a soundsystem, playing cacophonous jazz, the soundtrack to a brain seizure.

Behind a long counter, rifles were locked in a glimmering cabinet, the glass enticing as a pond surface. Rows and rows of fertilizer and pellets, pick-axes, soil, and saddles stretched to the back of the store. Against the far wall was a wire cage holding a pack of unblinking bunnies. World’s dumbest pet, I thought. Who would want an animal that sat, quivered, and shat everywhere? They say you can litter-box train them, but they lie.

“Don’t ... you know,” I started saying to Lyle, who was snapping his head around, shifting into his oblivious inquisitor mode, “You know, don’t—”

“I won’t.”

The crazy-making jazz continued as Lyle called out a hello. I could not see a single employee, nor customer for that matter, but then it was midmorning on a rainy Tuesday. Between the music and the sun-

baked lighting from the ruthless fluorescent lamps, I felt stoned. Then I could make out movement, someone in the far back, bending and stooping in one of the aisles, and I started walking toward the figure. The man was dark, muscled, with thick black hair in a ponytail. He reared up when he saw us.

“Oh, dang!” he said flinching. He stared at us, then at the door, as if he’d forgotten he was open for business. “I didn’t hear you all come in.”

“Probably because of the music,” Lyle yelled, pointing up at the ceiling.

“Too loud for you? Probably right. Hold on.” He disappeared toward a back office and suddenly the music was gone.

“Better? Now what can I help you with?” He leaned against a seed bag, gave us a look that said we’d better be worth his turning down the music.

“I’m looking for Trey Teepano,” I said. “Is he the guy who owns this store?”

“I am. I do. I’m Trey. What can I do you for?” He had a tense energy, bounced on the balls of his feet, tucked his lips into his teeth. He was intensely good-looking with a face that blinked young-old, depending on the angle.

“Well.” Well, I didn’t know. His name floated in my head like an incantation, but what to do next: ask him if he’d been a bookie, if he knew Diondra? Accuse him of murder?

“Um, it’s about my brother.”

“Ben.”

“Yeah,” I said, surprised.

Trey Teepano smiled a cold crocodile smile. “Yeah, took me a second, but I recognized you. The red hair, I guess, and the same face. You’re the one who lived, right? Debby?”

“Libby.”

“Right. And who’re you?”

“I’m just her friend,” Lyle offered. I could feel him willing himself to stop talking, not pull a repeat of the Krissi Cates interview.

Trey began straightening the shelves, readjusting bottles of Deer-Off, poorly pretending to be occupied, like reading a book upside down.

“You knew my dad too?”

“Runner? Everyone knew Runner.”

“Runner mentioned your name the last time I saw him.”

He swung back his ponytail. “Yeah, did he pass on?”

“No, he, he lives down in Oklahoma. He seems to think you were somehow ... involved that night, that maybe you could shed some light on what happened. With the murders.”

“Right. That old man is crazy, always has been.”

“He said you were, like, a bookie or something back then.”

“Yup.”

“And you were into Devil worship.”

“Yup.”

He said these things with the faded blue-jean tone of a reformed addict, that vibe of broken-in peace.

“So that’s true?” Lyle said. Then looked at me guiltily.

“Yeah, and Runner owed me money. Lot of money. Still does, I guess. But it doesn’t mean I know what happened in your house that night. I been through all this back ten years ago.”

“More like twenty-five.”

Trey needled his eyebrows.

“Wow, I guess so,” he said, still seeming unconvinced, his face twisted as he added up the years.

“Did you know Ben?” I persisted.

“A little, not really.”

“Your name just keeps coming up a lot.”

“I got a catchy name,” he shrugged. “Look, back then, Kinnakee was racist as hell. Indians they did not like. I got blamed for a lot of shit I didn’t do. This was before *Dances with Wolves*, you know what I’m

saying? It was just BTI all the time out in BFE.”

“What?”

“BTI, Blame the Indian. I admit it, I was a shit. I was not a good guy. But after that night, what happened to your family, it was, like it freaked me out, I got clean. Well, not right after, but a year or so later. Stopped drugs, stopped believing in the Devil. It was harder to stop believing in the Devil.”

“You really believed in the Devil?” Lyle said.

He shrugged: “Sure. You gotta believe in something, right? Everyone has their thing.”

I don’t, I thought.

“It’s like, you believe you have the power of Satan in you, so you have the power of Satan in you,” Trey said. “But that was a long time ago.”

“What about Diondra Wertzner?” I said.

He paused, turned away from us, walked over to the bunnies, started stroking one through the wire with his index finger.

“Where you going with this, Deb, uh, Libby?”

“I’m trying to track down Diondra Wertzner. I heard she was pregnant with Ben’s baby at the time of the murders, and that she disappeared after. Some people say she was last seen with you and Ben.”

“Ah shit, Diondra. I always knew that girl would bite me in the ass sooner or later.” He grinned wide this time. “Man, Diondra. I have no clue where Diondra is, she was always running off, though, always making up drama. She’d run away, her parents would make a big deal, she’d come home, they’d all play house for a little, then her parents would be assholes—they neglected the shit out of her—and she’d need the drama, start some shit, run away, whatever. Total soap opera. I guess she finally ran away, decided it wasn’t worth coming home. I mean, you try the white pages?”

“She’s listed as a missing person,” Lyle said, looked at me again to see if I minded the interruption. I didn’t.

“Oh, she’s fine,” Trey said. “My guess is she’s living somewhere

under one of her crazy-ass names.”

“Crazy names?” I said, put a hand on Lyle’s arm to keep him quiet.

“Oh, nothing, she was just one of those girls, always trying to be different. One day she’d talk in an English accent, next day it was Southern. She never gave anyone her real name. Like she’d go to the beauty parlor and give a wrong name, go order a pizza and give the wrong name. She just liked screwing with people, you know, just playing. ‘I’m Desiree from Dallas, I’m Alexis from London.’ She was always giving, uh, using her porn name, you know?”

“She did porn?” I said.

“No, like that game. What’s the name of your childhood pet?”

I stared at him.

“What’s the name of your childhood pet,” he prompted.

I used Diane’s dead dog: “Gracie.”

“And what was the name of the street you grew up on?”

“Rural Route 2.”

He laughed. “Well, that one didn’t work. It’s supposed to sound slutty, like Bambi Evergreen or something. Diondra’s was ... Polly something ... Palm. Polly Palm, how great is that?”

“You don’t think she’s dead?”

He shrugged.

“You think Ben was really guilty?” I asked.

“I got no opinion on that. Probably.”

Lyle was suddenly tense, bobbing up and down, pushing his pointy finger against my back, trying to steer me toward the door.

“So thanks for your time,” Lyle blurted, and I frowned at him and he frowned back at me. A fluorescent above us thrummed on and off suddenly, flashing sick light on us, the bunnies scampering around in the straw. Trey scowled up at the light and it stopped, as if scolded.

“Well, can I give you my number, in case you think of anything?” I said.

Trey smiled, shook his head. “No thanks.”

Trey turned away then. As we walked toward the door, the music got loud again. I turned around as the storm started to crackle, one side of the sky black, the other yellow. Trey was coming back out of the office, watching us with his hands on his sides, the rabbits behind him doing a sudden scuffle.

“Hey Trey, so what’s BFE then?” I called.

“Butt Fucked Egypt, Libby. That’s our hometown.”

LYLE WAS GALLOPING ahead of me, leaping off the steps. He reached the car in three big strides, jiggling the handle to be let in, *comeoncomeoncomeon*. I dropped in next to him, pre-annoyed. “What?” I said. Thunder crackled. A gust of air kicked up a wet gravel smell.

“Just drive first, let’s get out of here, hurry.”

“Yessir.”

I swung out of the parking lot, back toward Kansas City, the rain turning frantic. I’d driven about five minutes when Lyle told me to pull over, aimed himself at me, and said, “Oh my God.”

## Ben Day

JANUARY 3, 1985

12:02 A.M.

They pulled up outside Diondra's, the dogs barking frantically as usual, as if they'd never seen a truck, or a person, or Diondra even. They all three went through the back gate, then Diondra told Ben and Trey to stand in front of the sliding door and to take their clothes off so they wouldn't drip blood everywhere. *Just peel 'em off, put 'em all in a pile, and we'll burn them.*

The dogs were frightened of Trey. They barked but they didn't come near him—he'd beaten the shit out of the white one once, and they all walked carefully around him ever since. Trey pulled his shirt off from the back, the way guys in movies did, the hard way, and then he unbuttoned his jeans, his eyes on Diondra, as if they were about to screw. Like this was some crazy foreplay. Ben pulled his shirt off the same way, and unpeeled his pants, those leather pants he'd sweat through already, and then the dogs were on him, sniffing at his crotch, licking at his arms, like they might devour him. He pushed one away, his palm on its snout, pushing hard, and it just came right back, slobbery, aggressive.

"It wants to suck your dick, man." Trey laughed. "Get it where you can, right?"

"He ain't getting any from me, so he might as well," Diondra snapped, doing her pissy, loop-de-loop head twist. She stepped out of her jeans, tan lines marking where her panties should have been, where no panties were, just white flesh and black fur, sticking up like a wet cat. Then she took off her sweater and stood there in just her bra, her breasts swollen, white stretch marks trailing along the tops of them.

"What?" she said at Ben.

“Nothing, you should go inside.”

“Thanks, genius.” She kicked her clothes over to a pile and told Trey—somehow she made it clear that it was just Trey—that she’d go get some lighter fluid.

Trey kicked his jeans into the center, stood in blue boxers, told Ben that he’d failed to prove himself.

“I don’t see it that way,” Ben muttered, but when Trey said *what?* he just shook his head. One dog was fully on him now, his paws on Ben’s thighs, trying to lick around his stomach, where the blood had pooled. “*Get off me,*” Ben snapped, and when the dog just leapt right back up, he backhanded it. The dog snarled, then so did the second, the third barking, its teeth bared. Ben shimmied naked back toward the house yelling, “Go’way,” to the dogs, the dogs backing off only when Diondra returned.

“Dogs respect strength,” Trey said, a slightly upturned lip aimed at Ben’s nakedness. “Nice fire bush.”

Trey grabbed the lighter fluid from Diondra, still nude from her big stomach on down, her belly button poking out like a thumb. Trey sprayed it over the clothes, holding the can near his dick like he was pissing. He flicked his lighter to one side, and WHOOMP! the clothes fired up, making Trey stumble back two big steps, almost fall. It was the first time Ben had seen him look foolish. Diondra turned away, not wanting to embarrass Trey by seeing it. That made Ben more sad than anything else tonight: the woman he wanted to be his wife, the woman who’d have his child, she’d give this bit of grace to another man, but never, ever to Ben.

He needed to make her respect him.

HE WAS STUCK there, at Diondra’s, watching them smoke more dope. He couldn’t get home without his bike—it was just too cold, dead man’s cold, snowing hard again, the wind blowing down the chimney. If it turned into a blizzard, the rest of those cows would freeze to death by morning, if the lazy-ass farmer didn’t do something. Good. Teach him a lesson. Ben felt the anger in him coming up again, tight.

Teach everyone a fucking lesson. All those fuckers who never seemed to have any trouble, who seemed to just glide by—hell, even Runner, shitty drunk that he was, seemed to get less hassle than Ben.

There were a lot of people who deserved a lesson, deserved to really understand, like Ben did, that nothing came easy, that most things were going to go sour.

Diondra accidentally burned his jeans along with the leather pants. So he was wearing a pair of Diondra's purple sweats, a big sweatshirt, and thick white Polo socks she had already mentioned twice she wanted returned. They were at that aimless time of night, the big event over, Ben still wondering what it meant, if he really did pray to the Devil, if he really would start feeling power. Or if it was all some hoax, or one of those things you talked yourself into believing—like a Ouija board or a killer clown in a white van. Were they all three agreeing silently to believe that they'd really sacrificed for Satan, or was it just an excuse to get really high and fuck stuff up?

They should have stopped early on with the drugs. It was cheap stuff, he could tell by how much it all hurt, even the weed went down fighting, like it was out to damage. It was the cheap stuff that made people mean.

Trey passed out, slowly, watching TV, his eyes blinking first, then his head looping around, up then down, then back up. Then he slumped to his side and was gone.

Diondra said she had to pee, and so Ben just sat there in the living room, wishing he were home. He was picturing his flannel sheets, picturing himself in bed, talking to Diondra on the phone. She never phoned from home, and he wasn't allowed to call her because her parents were so crazy. So she got cigarettes and sat in a phone booth near the gas station or in the mall. It was the one thing she did for him, made him feel good, her making that effort, he really liked it. Maybe he liked the idea of talking to Diondra better than he liked actually talking to her, lately she was so fucking mean to him when they were together. He was thinking again about the bleeding bull and wishing he had the gun back, that's what he wanted, and then Diondra was yelling his name from her bedroom.

He turned the corner and she was standing by her glittery red answering machine, with her head cocked to the side, and she just said, "You're fucked," and hit the button.

"Hey Dio, it's Megan. I'm *totally freaked out* about Ben Day, did you hear about it, that he *molested* all these girls? My sister is in *sixth*

grade. She's fine, thank God, but god what a *sicko*. I guess the cops have arrested him. Anyway, call me."

And then a click and a whir and another girl's voice deep and nasal: "Hey Diondra, it's Jenny. I *told you* Ben Day was a Devil-dude, did you hear about this shit? I guess he's, like, on the *run* from the cops. I guess there's going to be some big conference about it at school tomorrow. I don't know, I wanted to see if you want to go."

Diondra was standing over the machine like she wanted to crush it, like it was an animal she could do something to. She turned to Ben and screamed, "What the fuck?" turning pink and spitty and Ben immediately said the wrong thing: "I better go home."

"You better go home? What the fuck is this Ben, what is going on?"

"I don't know, that's why I should go home."

"No no no no no, momma's boy. You fucking *worthless* fucking *momma's* boy. What, you going to go *home*, wait for the police and leave me here while you go to jail? Leave me just sitting here waiting for my fucking *dad* to get home? With your fucking *baby* I can't get rid of?"

"What do you want me to do, Diondra?" Home. That's what he kept thinking.

"We're leaving town tonight. I have about \$200 cash left over from my parents. How much can you get at your place?" When Ben didn't say right away, his brain on Krissi Cates and whether the kiss was something to be arrested for and how much was true and whether the cops were really after him, Diondra walked over to him and slapped his face, hard. "How much do you have at your place?"

"I don't know. I have some money I've been saving, and my mom usually has a hundred bucks, two hundred, hidden around. But I don't know where."

Diondra swayed, closed one eye and looked at her alarm clock. "Does your mom stay up late, would she be awake?"

"If the police are there, yeah." If they weren't, she was asleep, even if she was scared out of her mind. It was the big joke in the family that his mom had never celebrated New Year's Eve, she was always asleep before midnight.

“We’ll go there, and if we don’t see a cop car, we’ll go in. You can get money, pack some clothes, and then we’ll get the fuck out of here.”

“And then what?”

Diondra crossed over to him, petted him where his cheek still stung. Her eye makeup was halfway down her cheek, but he still felt a surge of, what, love? Power? Something. A surge, a feeling, something good.

“Ben baby, I am the mother of your child, right?” He nodded, just a bit. “OK, so get me out of town. Get us all out of town. I can’t do this without you. We need to go. Head west. We can camp out somewhere, sleep in the car, whatever. Otherwise you’re in jail, and I’m dead from my daddy. He’d make me have the baby and then kill me. And you don’t want our kid to be an orphan, right? Not when we can help it? So let’s go.”

“I didn’t do what they said, with those girls, I didn’t,” Ben finally whispered, Diondra leaning on his shoulder, wisps of her hair curling up, vining into his mouth.

“Who cares if you did?” she said into his chest.

## Libby Day

NOW

Lyle was bouncing in his seat. “Libby, did you notice? Holy crud, did you notice?”

“What?”

“Diondra’s porn name, the one she used all the time, did you notice?”

“Polly Palm, what?”

Lyle was grinning, his long teeth glowing brighter than the rest of him in the dark car.

“Libby, what was the name your brother had tattooed on his arm? Remember the names we went through? Molly, Sally, and the one I said sounded like a dog’s name?”

“Oh God.”

“Polly, right?”

“Oh God,” I said again.

“I mean, that’s not a coincidence, right?”

Of course it wasn’t. Everyone who keeps a secret itches to tell it. This was Ben’s way of telling. His homage to his secret girlfriend. But he couldn’t use her real name on the tattoo, Miss Disappearing Diondra. So he used the name she used when she was playing. I pictured him running his fingers over the swollen lines, his skin still stinging, proud. Polly. Maybe a romantic gesture. Maybe a memoriam.

“I wonder how old the tattoo is,” Lyle said.

“It actually didn’t look that old,” I said. “It was still, I don’t know, bright, not faded at all.”

Lyle whipped out his laptop, balanced it on tight knees.

“Come on, come on, gimme a signal.”

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t think Diondra’s dead. I think she’s in exile. And if you were going into exile, and you had to pick a name, wouldn’t you be tempted to use a name you’d used before, one that only a few friends knew, a joke for yourself, and a bit of ... home? Something your boyfriend could tattoo on his arm and it would mean something to him, something permanent he could look at. Come *on*,” he snapped at the laptop.

We drove another twenty minutes, trolling the highways until Lyle got a signal, and began tap-tap-typing in time to the rain, me trying to get a look at the screen without killing us.

He finally looked up, a crazy beam-smile on his face: “Libby,” he said, “you might want to pull over again.”

I swerved onto the side of the road, just short of Kansas City, a semi blaring its horn at my recklessness, shuddering my car as it sped past.

Her name sat there on the screen: Polly Fucking Palm in Kearney, Missouri. Address and phone number, right there, the only Polly Palm listing in the whole country, except for a nail boutique in Shreveport.

“I really need to get the Internet,” I said.

“You think it’s her?” Lyle said, staring at the name as if it might disappear. “It’s gotta be her right?”

“Let’s see.” I pulled out my cell.

She answered on the fourth ring, just as I was taking a big gulp of air to leave her a message.

“Is this Polly Palm?”

“Yes.” The voice was lovely, all cigarettes and milk.

“Is this Diondra Wertzner?”

Pause. Click.

“Would you find me some directions to that house, Lyle?”

LYLE WANTED TO come, wanted to come, really, really thought he should come, but I just couldn’t see it working, and I just didn’t want him there, so I dropped him off at Sarah’s Pub, him trying not to look

sulky as I pulled away, me promising to phone the second I left Diondra's.

"I'm serious, don't forget," he called after me. "Seriously!" I gave him a honk and drove off. He was still yelling something after me as I turned the corner.

My fingers were tight from gripping the steering wheel; Kearney was a good forty-five minutes northeast of Kansas City, and Diondra's address, according to Lyle's very specific directions, was another fifteen minutes from the town proper. I knew I was close when I started hitting all the signs for the Jesse James Farm and Jesse James' Grave. I wondered why Diondra had chosen to live in the hometown of an outlaw. Seems like something I would do. I drove past the turnoff for the James farm—been there in grade school, a tiny, cold place where, during a surprise attack, Jesse's little half brother was killed—and I remember thinking, "Just like our house." I went farther on a looping, skinny road, up and down hills and then out back into country, where dusty clapboard houses sat on big, flat lots, dogs barking on chains in each yard. Not a single person appeared; the area seemed entirely vacant. Just dogs and a few horses, and farther away, a lush line of forest that had been allowed to remain between the homes and the highway.

Diondra's house came another ten minutes later. It was ugly, it had an attitude, leaning to one side like a pissed-off, hip-jutted woman. It needed the attitude, because it didn't have much else going for it. It was set far back from the street, looked like the sharecroppers' quarters for a larger farmhouse, but there was no other house, just a few acres of mud on all sides, rolling and bumpy like the ground had acne. That sad remainder of woods in the distance.

I drove up the long dirt road leading to the house, already worrying my car might get stuck and what would happen if my car got stuck.

From behind the storm clouds, the late afternoon sun arrived just in time to blind me as I slammed the door shut and walked toward the house, my gut cold. As I neared the front steps, a big mamma possum shot out from under the porch, hissing at me. The thing unnerved me, that pointy white face and those black eyes looking like something that should already be dead. Plus mamma possums are nasty bitches. It ran to the bushes, and I kicked the steps to make sure there weren't more, then climbed them. My lopsided right foot swished around in

my boot. A dreamcatcher hung near the door, dangling carved animal teeth and feathers.

Just as the rain brings out the concrete smells of the city, it had summoned up the smell of soil and manure here. It smelled like home, which wasn't right.

A long, loose pause followed my knock on the door, and then quiet feet approached. Diondra opened the door, decidedly undead. She didn't even look that different from the photos I'd seen. She'd ditched the spiral perm, but still wore her hair in loose dark waves, still wore thick black eyeliner that made her eyes look Easter-blue, like pieces of candy. Her mascara was double-coated, spidery, and left flecks of black on the pads of flesh beneath her eyes. Her lips were plump as labias. Her whole face and body was a series of gentle curves: pink cheeks with a hint of jowl, breasts that slightly overflowed her bra, a ring of skin bordering the top of her jeans.

"Oh," she said as she opened the door, a flood of heat coming out. "Libby?"

"Yes."

She took my face in her hands. "Holy crap, Libby. I always thought some day you'd find me. Smart girl." She hugged me, then held me out a bit. "Hi. Come in."

I walked into a kitchen with a den to the side, the setup reminding me too much of my own lost home. We walked down a short hallway. To my right, a basement door hung open, leaking gusts of cold air. Negligent. We entered a low-ceilinged living room, cigarette smoke blooming from an ashtray on the floor, the walls yellowed, all the furniture looking drained. A massive TV sat like a loveseat against one wall.

"Would you mind taking off your shoes, please, sweetheart?" she said, motioning toward the living room carpet, which was gummy and soiled. The whole house was crooked, beaten-up, stained. A miniature dog turd sat in a lump near the stairs, Diondra stepping deftly around it.

She led me toward the sofa, trailing at least three different scents: a grape-y hair spray, a flowery lotion, and maybe ... insect spray? She was wearing a low-cut blouse and tight jeans, with the junk jewelry of

a teenager. She was one of those middle-aged women who thought they were fooling people.

I followed her, missing the extra inches my bootheels gave me, feeling childish. Diondra turned her profile to me, marking me from the corner of her eye, and I could see a pointy canine poke out from beneath her upper lip.

She cocked her head to one side and said, “Come on in, sit down. Jeez you’re definitely a Day, huh? That fire-red hair, always loved it.”

As soon as we sat down three squat-leg poodles came running in, collars jangling like sleigh bells, and clambered up on her lap. I tensed.

“Oh crap, you are *definitely* a Day,” she cackled. “Ben was always all jumpy around dogs too. Course the ones I used to have were bigger than these babies.” She let the dogs lick at her fingers, pink tongues flashing in and out. “So, *Libby*,” she began, like my name, my existence was an inside joke, “did Ben tell you where to find me? Tell me the truth.”

“I found you from something Trey Teepano said.”

“Trey? Jesus. How’d you get to Trey Teepano?”

“He has a feed store, in the yellow pages.”

“A feed store. Wouldn’t have called that one. How’s he look by the way?”

I nodded enthusiastically—he looks good—before I caught myself. Then said: “You were with Ben that night.”

“Mmmm-hmmm. I was.” She searched my face, wary but interested.

“I want to know what happened.”

“Why?” she asked.

“*Why?*”

“Sorry, Miss Libby, this is all so out of the blue. Ben say something to you? I mean, why’d you come looking for me now? Why now?”

“I need to know for sure what happened.”

“Oh, Libby. Ohhh.” She gave me a sympathetic look. “Ben is OK taking the time for what happened that night. He wants to take the

time. Let him.”

“Did he kill my family?”

“That’s why you’re here?”

“Did Ben kill my family?”

She just smiled at me, those ridgeless lips staying rigid.

“I need some peace, Diondra, please. Just tell me.”

“Libby, this is about peace, then? You think you know the answer, you’re going to find peace? Like knowing is somehow going to fix you? You think after what happened there’s any peace for you, sweetheart? How about this. Instead of asking yourself what happened, just accept that it happened. Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Serenity Prayer. It’s helped me a lot.”

“Just say it, Diondra, just tell me. Then I’ll try to accept.”

The sun was setting, hitting us through the rear window now, making me blink with the brightness. She leaned toward me, took both my hands.

“Libby, I’m so sorry. I just don’t know. I was with Ben that night. We were going to leave town. I was pregnant with his baby. We were going to run away. He was going to his house, to get some money. An hour goes by, two hours, three hours. I’m thinking he’s lost his nerve. I finally cried myself to sleep. The next morning, I heard what happened. At first I thought he was killed too. Then I hear, no, he’s in custody and police think he’s part of some coven—a satanic, Charles Manson-type clan they’re looking for. I’m waiting for a knock at *my* door. But nothing happens. Days go by, and I hear Ben has no alibi, he hasn’t mentioned me at all. He’s protecting me.”

“All these years.”

“All these years, yes. The cops were never satisfied it was just Ben. They wanted more. Looks better. But Ben never said a word. He’s my goddam hero.”

“So no one knows what happened that night. I’m never, ever going to find out.” I felt a strange relief, saying it aloud. I could quit now, maybe. If I could never, ever know, then maybe I could quit.

“I do think you could find some peace, if you accept that. I mean, Libby, I don’t think Ben did it. I think he’s protecting your daddy, is what I think. But who knows? I hate to say this, but whatever happened that night, Ben needed to be in prison. He even says so. He had something inside him that wasn’t right for the outside world. A violence. He does so much better in prison. He’s very popular in there. He penpals with all these women, the women are so crazy about him. He gets a dozen proposals of marriage a year. Every once in a while, he thinks he wants back outside. But he doesn’t.”

“How do you know this?”

“We keep in touch,” she snapped, then smiled sugar. The yellow-orange light of the sunset rayed across her chin, her eyes suddenly in the dark.

“Where’s the baby, Diondra? The baby you were pregnant with?”

“I’m here,” said the Day Girl.

## Ben Day

JANUARY 3, 1985

1:11 A.M.

Ben opened the door into the dark living room and thought, home. Like a hero-sailor returning after months at sea. He almost shut the door on Diondra—can't catch me—but let her in because. Because he was scared what would happen if he didn't. It was a relief at least they left Trey behind. He didn't want Trey walking through his home, making his smart-ass remarks about things Ben already knew were embarrassing.

Everyone was asleep now, the whole house doing a collective breath-in-breath-out. He wanted to wake his mom, willed her to turn around the corner, blurry eyed in one of her clothes cocoons, and ask him where in the world he had been, *what in the world had possessed him?*

The Devil. The Devil possessed me, Mom.

He didn't want to go anywhere with Diondra, but she was behind him, rage fuming off her body like heat, eyes wide—*hurry up, hurry up*—and so he started to quietly sift through the cabinets, looking in his mom's hiding places for cash. In the first cabinet, he found an old box of wheat flakes, opened it up, and swallowed as much as he could of the dry cereal, the flakes sticking to his lips and throat, making him cough just a little, a baby cough. Then he stuck his whole hand in and grabbed the flakes by the fistful, jamming them into his mouth, and opened the fridge to find a Tupperware container packed with diced peas and carrots, a skin of butter on top, and he stuck a spoon in them, put his lip to the plastic rim and shoveled it all in his mouth, peas rolling down his chest, onto the floor.

“Come on!” Diondra hissed. He was still in her purple sweats; she was in nice new jeans, a red sweater and the black menswear shoes she liked, except her feet were so big they were actually men's shoes.

She did not like this acknowledged. Now she was tapping one. Come on, come on.

“Let’s go to my room,” he said. “I definitely have money there. And a present for you.” Diondra brightened at that—even now, her eyes blinkering on and off, swaying with the drugs and liquor, she was distracted by presents.

The lock to his room was snapped off, and Ben got pissed, then worried. Mom or police? Not that there was anything to find. But still. He opened the door, flipped on the light, Diondra closing the door behind him and settling on the bed. She was talking, talking, talking, but he wasn’t listening, and then she was crying and so he stopped his packing and lay down next to her. He smoothed back her hair, and rubbed her belly and tried to keep her quiet, tried to mutter soothing stuff, talking about how great their life was going to be together and more lies like that. It was a good half-hour before she calmed down. And she’d been the one telling him to hurry up. Classic.

He got back up, looking at the clock, wanting to get out of here if they were really going to get out. The door had opened a crack and he didn’t even stop to go close it, wanted it open, the danger making him move faster. He threw jeans and sweaters in a gym bag, along with his notebook filled with girls’ names he’d like for the baby—he still thought Krissi Day was the leader in that, that was a good name, Krissi Day. Krissi Patricia Day or else, after Diane, Krissi Diane Day. He liked that because then her friends could call her D-Day, it’d be cool. He’d have to fight Diondra though, she thought all his names were too plain. She wanted names like Ambrosia and Calliope and Nightingale.

Gym bag on his shoulder, he reached into the back of his desk drawer and pulled out his hidden cash pile. He’d been tucking away fives and tens here and there, had convinced himself he had three hundred, four hundred dollars, but now he saw he had not quite a hundred. He jammed it in his pocket, got down on his hands and knees to reach under his bed, and saw only space where the bag of clothes had been. His daughter’s clothes.

“Where’s my present?” Diondra said, a guttural sound because she was lying flat on her back, her belly aimed up, belligerent, like a middle finger.

Ben lifted his head, looked at her, the smeared lipstick and dripping-black eyes, and thought she looked like a monster. “I can’t find it,” he said.

“What do you mean, can’t find it?”

“I don’t, someone’s been in here.”

They both stood in the glare of his single lightbulb, not knowing what to do next.

“You think it was one of your sisters?”

“Maybe. Michelle is always nosing around in here. Plus I don’t have as much money as I thought I did.”

Diondra sat up, grabbing her belly, which she never did affectionately, protectively. She clutched it like it was a burden he was too stupid to offer to carry. She was holding it now, out at him, and saying, “You are the father of this goddam baby, so you better think of something fast, you are the one who got me pregnant, so you better fix this. I am almost seven months pregnant, I could have a baby any day now, and you—”

A flicker at the door, just a swipe of nightgown, and then a foot jutting out, trying to keep balance. An accidental bump and the door swung wide. Michelle had been hovering in the hallway, trying to eavesdrop, until she leaned in too far and her whole moony face popped into sight, those big glasses reflecting twin squares of light. She was holding her new diary, a dribble of pen ink coming from her mouth.

Michelle looked from Ben to Diondra, and then pointedly down at Diondra’s belly, and said, “Ben got a girl pregnant. I knew it!”

Ben couldn’t see her eyes, just the light on the glasses and the smile beneath.

“Have you told Mom?” Michelle asked, getting giddy, her voice a goading hint. “Should I go tell Mom?”

Ben was about to reach for her, jam her back into bed with a threat of his own, when Diondra lunged. Michelle tried to make it to the door, but Diondra got her hair, that long brown hair, and yanked her to the ground, Michelle landing hard on her tailbone, Diondra whispering *not a word, you little cunt not a fucking word*, and then

Michelle twisted away, pushing against the walls with slippered feet, leaving Diondra holding a clutch of hair, which she threw onto the floor, going after Michelle, and if Michelle had only run for Mom's room it may have been all right, Mom would take care of it all, but instead she went straight for her own room, the girls' room, and Diondra followed, Ben trailing her, whispering *Diondra, stop, Diondra let it go*. But Diondra was not going to let it go, she walked over to Michelle's bed where Michelle was cowering against the wall, whimpering, and she yanked Michelle down by a leg, straightened her out on the bed and sat on her, *You want to tell the world I'm pregnant, that your plan, one of your little schemes, some fucking little secret you sell for fifty cents, tell your mommy, guess what I know? I don't think so you little shit, why is this whole family so stupid*, and she wrapped her hands around Michelle's neck, Michelle's feet, cased in slippers that were supposed to look like puppy feet, kicking up and down, Ben watching the feet, disconnected, thinking they really did look like puppy feet, and then Debby slowly waking from her zombie sleep so Ben closed the door, instead of opening it wide, calling for his mom, he wanted everything to stay quiet, no other instinct than to stick to the plan which is don't wake anyone up, and he was trying to reason with Diondra, thinking it would all be OK, *Diondra, Diondra, calm down, she won't tell, let her go* and Diondra leaning deeper onto Michelle's neck, *You think I'm gonna spend my life worried about this little bitch*, and Michelle scratching, then stabbing Diondra's hand with her pen, a glint of blood, Diondra letting go for a second, looking surprised, looking like she just couldn't believe it and Michelle leaned to one side and gulped air and Diondra just grabbed her neck again, and Ben put his hands on Diondra's shoulders to pull her off but instead they just rested there.

## Libby Day

NOW

The Day Girl was slender, almost tall, and as she came into the room, she showed me a face that was virtually mine. She had our red hair too, dyed brown, but the red roots were peeking out just like mine had days before. Her height must have come from Diondra, but her face was pure us, me, Ben, my mom. She gawked at me, then shook her head.

“Sorry, that was weird,” she said, blushed. Her skin was dusted with our family freckles. “I didn’t know. I mean, I guess it makes sense we look alike, but. Wow.” She looked at her mom, then back at me, at my hands, at her hands, at my missing finger. “I’m Crystal. I’m your niece.”

I felt like I should hug her, and I wanted to. We shook hands.

The girl wavered near us, twisting her arms around each other like a braid, still glancing sideways at me, the way you glimpse yourself in the glass of a storefront as you walk past, trying to catch a look at yourself without anyone noticing.

“I told you it would happen if it was meant to, sweetheart,” Diondra said. “So here she is. Come here, sit down.”

The girl tumbled lazily onto her mother, pushing herself into the crook of Diondra’s arm, her cheek on her mother’s shoulder, Diondra playing with a strand of the red/brown hair. She looked at me from that vantage point. Protected.

“I can’t believe I finally get to meet you,” she said. “I was never supposed to get to meet you. I’m a secret, you know.” She glanced up at her mom. “A secret love child, right?”

“That’s right,” Diondra said.

So the girl knew who she was, who the Days were, that her father

was Ben Day. I was stunned that Diondra trusted her daughter to know this, to keep the secret close, not seek me out. I wondered how long Crystal had known, if she'd ever driven past my house, just to see, just to see. I wondered why Diondra would tell her daughter such a horrible truth, when she didn't really need to.

Diondra must have caught my train of thoughts. "It's OK," she said. "Crystal knows the whole story. I tell her everything. We're best friends."

Her daughter nodded. "I even have a little scrapbook of photos of you all. Well, just that I clipped out of magazines and stuff. It's like a fake family album. I always wanted to meet you. Should I call you Aunt Libby? Is that weird? That's too weird."

I couldn't think what to say. I just felt a relief. The Days weren't quite dying out yet. They were in fact flourishing, with this pretty, tall girl who looked like me but with all her fingers and toes and without my nightmare brain. I wanted to ask a flood of nosy questions: Did she have weak eyes, like Michelle? Was she allergic to strawberries like my mom? Did she have sweet blood, like Debby, get eaten alive by mosquitos, spend the summer stinking of CamphoPhenique? Did she have a temper, like me, a distance like Ben? Was she manipulative and guiltless like Runner? What was she like, what was she like, tell me the many ways she was like the Days, and remind me of how we were.

"I read your book too," Crystal added. "*A Brand New Day*. It was really good. I wanted to tell someone I knew you because, you know, I was proud." Her voice lilted like a flute, as if she was perpetually on the verge of laughter.

"Oh, thanks."

"You OK, Libby?" Diondra said.

"Um, I guess, I guess I still just don't understand why you all stayed secret for so long. Why you have Ben still swearing he doesn't know you. I mean, I'm assuming he's never even met his daughter."

Crystal was shaking her head no. "I'd love to meet him though. He's my hero. He's protected my mom, me, all these years."

"We really need you to keep this secret for us, Libby," Diondra said. "We're really hoping you do. I just can't risk it, that they think I was

an accomplice or something. I can't risk that. For Crystal."

"I just don't think there's a need for that—"

"Please?" Crystal said. Her voice was simple, but urgent. "Please. I seriously can't stand the idea that they can come any minute and take my mom away from me. She's really my best friend."

So they'd both said. I almost rolled my eyes but saw the girl was on the edge of tears. So she was actually frightened of this specter Diondra had created: the vengeful bogeymen cops who might bust in and take Mommy away. I just bet Diondra was her best friend. All these years, they lived in a two-person pod. Secret. Gotta stay secret for Mommy.

"So you ran away and never told your folks?"

"I left right when I was really starting to show," Diondra said. "My parents were maniacs. I was happy to be rid of them. It was just our secret, the baby, Ben and mine."

A secret in the Day house, how unusual. Michelle finally missed a scoop.

"You're smiling." Crystal said, a matching small smile on her lips.

"Ha, I was just thinking how much my sister Michelle would have loved getting her hands on that bit of gossip. She loved drama."

They looked like I slapped them.

"I wasn't trying to make light, sorry," I said.

"Oh, no, no don't worry about it," Diondra said. We all stared at each other, fingers and hands and feet wiggling about. Diondra broke the silence: "Would you like to stay for dinner, Libby?"

SHE FED ME a salty pot roast that I tried to swallow and a lot of pink wine from a box that seemed to have no bottom. We didn't sip, we drank. My kind of women. We talked about silly things, stories about my brother, with Crystal layering on questions I felt embarrassed I couldn't answer: Did Ben like rock or classical? Did he read much? Did he have any diabetes, because she had low blood-sugar problems. And what about her grandma Patty, what was she like?

"I want to know them, as, you know, people. Not victims," she said with twenty-something piousness.

I excused myself to the bathroom, needing a moment away from the memories, the girl, Diondra. The realization I was out of people to talk to, that I'd come to the end, and now had to loop around and think about Runner again. The bathroom was as gross as the rest of the place, mucked with mold, the toilet perpetually running, wads of toilet paper smeared with lipstick dotting the floor around the trash-bin. Alone for the first time in the house, I couldn't resist looking for a souvenir. A glazed red vase sat on the back of the toilet tank, but I didn't have my purse with me. I needed something small. I opened the medicine cabinet and found several prescription bottles with Polly Palm written on the label. Sleeping pills and painkillers and allergy stuff. I took a few Vicodin, then pocketed a light pink lipstick and a thermometer. Very good fortune, as I would never, ever think to buy a thermometer, but I'd always wanted one. When I take to my bed, it's good to know whether I'm sick or just lazy.

I got back to the table, Crystal sitting with one foot on her chair, her chin resting on her knee. "I still have more questions," she said, her flute voice doing scales.

"I probably don't have the answers," I started, trying to ward her off. "I was just so young when it happened. I mean, I'd forgotten so much about my family until I began talking with Ben."

"Don't you have photo albums?" Crystal asked.

"I do. I'd put them away for a while, boxed them up."

"Too painful," Crystal said in a hushed voice.

"So I only just started looking through the boxes again—photo albums and yearbooks, and a lot of other old crap."

"Like what?" Diondra said, smushing some peas under her fork like a bored teenager.

"Well, practically half of it was Michelle's junk," I offered, eager to be able to answer some question definitely.

"Like toys?" Crystal said, playing with the corner of her skirt.

"No, like, notes and crap. Diaries. With Michelle, everything got written down. She saw a teacher doing something weird, it went in the diary, she thought our mom was playing favorites, it went in the diary, she got in an argument with her best friend over a boy they

both liked, it went—”

“—odd Delhunt,” murmured Crystal, nodding. She swallowed some more wine with slug.

“—in the diary,” I continued, not quite hearing. Then hearing. Did she say Todd Delhunt? It was Todd Delhunt, I never would have remembered that name on my own, that big fight Michelle got into over little Todd Delhunt. It happened right at Christmas, right before the murders, I remember she stewed all through Christmas morning, scribbling in her new diary. But. Todd Delhunt, how did—?

“Did you know Michelle?” I asked Diondra, my brain still working.

“Not too,” Diondra said. “Not really at all,” she added and she started reminding me of Ben pretending not to know Diondra.

“Now it’s my turn to pee,” Crystal said, taking one last swirl of wine.

“So,” I started, and stalled out. There is no way Crystal would know about Michelle’s crush on Todd Delhunt unless. Unless she read Michelle’s diary. The one she got Christmas morning, to kick off 1985. I’d assumed none of the diaries were missing, because 1984 was intact, but I hadn’t even thought about 1985. Michelle’s new diary, just nine days of thoughts—that’s what Crystal was quoting from. She had read the diary of my dead—

I caught a flash of metal to my right, just as Crystal slammed an ancient clothes iron into my temple, her mouth stretched wide in a frozen scream.

## Patty Day

JANUARY 3, 1985

2:03 A.M.

Patty had actually drifted to sleep, totally ridiculous, and woken up at 2:02, scooted from under Libby, and padded down the hallway. Someone was rustling in the girls' room, a bed was creaking. Michelle and Debby were heavy sleepers but they were noisy—cover throwers, sleepwalkers. She walked past Ben's room, the light still on from when she'd broken in. She would have lingered, but she was late, and Calvin Diehl didn't seem likely to put up with late.

Ben Baby.

Better not to have the time. She walked to the door, and instead of worrying about the cold, she thought of the ocean, that single trip to Texas when she was a girl. She pictured herself slathered in oil and baking, the water rushing in, salt on her lips. Sun.

She opened the door, and the knife went into her chest, and she doubled over into the arms of the man, him whispering, *Don't worry, it will all be over in about thirty seconds, let's just do one more to make sure*, and he tilted her away from him, she was a dancer being dipped, and then she could feel the knife turn in her chest, it hadn't hit her heart, it should have hit her heart, and she could feel the steel move inside her and the man looked down on her with a kindly face, getting ready to go again, but he looked over her shoulder and his kindly face got mottled, his mustache started shaking—

“What the hell?”

And Patty turned her face just a bit, back into the house, and it was Debby in her lavender nightgown, her pigtails crooked from sleep, one white ribbon trailing down her arm, yelling, *Mom, they're hurting Michelle!* Not even noticing that Mom was being hurt too, she was so focused on her message, *Come on, Mom, come on* and Patty could only

think: bad timing for a nightmare. Then: shut the door. She was bleeding onto her legs, and as she tried to shut the door so Debby couldn't see her, the man pushed open the door, and yelled *Goddamgoddamgoddaammmm!* Thundering it into Patty's ear, she felt him trying to pull the knife out of her chest and realized what it meant, that he wanted Debby, this man who said no one should know, no one could see him, he wanted Debby to go with Patty, and Patty put her hand hard on the hilt and pushed it deeper inside her and the man kept yelling and finally dropped hold of the knife, kicked the door open and went inside, and as Patty fell, she saw him going for the axe, the axe that Michelle had propped by the door, and Debby started to run toward her mother, running to help her mom, and Patty screaming *Run away!* And Debby froze, screamed, vomited down her front, scrambled on the tile and started the other way, made it to the end of the hallway, just turning the corner, but the man was right behind her, he was bringing the axe up and then she saw the axe go down and Patty pulled herself up, stumbling like a drunk, not able to see out of one eye, moving like in a nightmare where her feet go fast but she doesn't get anywhere, screaming *Run, Run, Run*, and turning the corner to see Debby lying on the floor with wings of blood, and the man so angry now, his eyes wet and alight, yelling, *Why'd you make me do this?* and he turned as if to leave, and Patty ran past him, picked up Debby, who wobbled a few steps like when she was a fat little toddler, and she was really hurt, her arm, her sweet arm, *It's OK, baby, you're OK*, the knife sliding out of Patty's chest and rattling down onto the floor, blood pulsing out of her more quickly and the man came back this time with a shotgun. Patty's shotgun, that she'd placed so carefully on the front-room mantelpiece, where the girls couldn't reach it. He aimed it at her as she tried to get in front of Debby because now she couldn't die.

The man cocked the gun and Patty had time for one last thought: I wish, I wish, I wish I could take this back.

And then with a whoosh, like summer air shooting through a car window, the blast took off half her head.

## Libby Day

NOW

“Sorry, Mom,” Crystal was saying. I was semi-blind, could see only a burnt-orange color, an eyes-shut-to-the-sun color. Flashes of the kitchen came back into vision and immediately disappeared. My cheek ached, I could feel it throbbing straight down my spine, into my feet. I was facedown on the floor and Diondra was straddling me. I could smell her—that insect-spray smell— balanced on top of me.

“Oh God, I screwed up.”

“It’s OK, baby, just go get me the gun.”

I could hear Crystal’s feet hit the stairs, and then Diondra was flipping me over, grabbing for my throat. I wanted her to curse at me, scream something, but she was silent, all heavy, calm breathing. Her fingers pressed into my neck. My jugular jumped, then began thumping against her thumb. I still couldn’t see. I was about to be dead. I knew it, my pulse beating faster and then way too slow. She pinned down my arms with her knees, I couldn’t move them, all I could do was kick at the floor, my feet sliding. She was breathing on my face, I could feel the heat, picture her mouth hanging open. Yes, that’s right, I could picture where her mouth was. I gave one big, twisting push beneath her, squirmed my arms free, and rammed my fist into her face.

I connected with something, enough to knock her off me for a second, just a small bone crunch, but enough that my fist stung and then I was pulling myself across the floor, trying to find a chair, trying to goddam see and then her hands grabbed my ankle, *Not this time, sweetheart*, and she was holding my foot inside my sock, but it was my right foot, the one with the missing toes and so it was harder to hold on to, the socks never fit right and suddenly I was up and left her holding my sock, and still no Crystal yet, no gun and I was running away toward the back of the house, but I couldn’t see, couldn’t keep a

straight line, and instead I veered to my right, through that open door and fell face-first down the flight of stairs to the cold of the basement, me going slack like a child, not resisting, the right way to fall, and so by the time I hit the bottom I was back up, in the dank smell. My vision flickered like an old TV—off then on—and then I could just make out the shadow of Diondra lingering in the rectangle of light at the top of the stairs. Then she shut the door on me.

I could hear them upstairs, Crystal coming back, “Are we going to have to—”

“Well—*now* we are.”

“I can’t believe, I just, it just came out of my mouth, so stupid—”

Me running in loops around the basement, trying to find a way out: three walls of concrete and one wall toward the back, covered to the ceiling in junk. Diondra and Crystal were not worried about me, they were jabbering at each other behind the door upstairs, me pulling away at the pile, looking for a place to hide, trying to find something I could use as a weapon.

“—doesn’t really know what happened, not for sure—”

I opened a trunk I could hide in, and die in.

“—knows, she’s not stupid—”

I started tossing away a hat-rack, two bicycle wheels, the wall of junk shifting with each thing I burrowed past.

“—I’ll do it, it was my fault—”

I hit a mountain of old boxes, sagging like the ones I had under the stairs. Push those away and out falls an old pogo stick, too heavy for me to wield.

“—I’ll do it, it’s fine—”

The voices angry-guilty-angry-guilty-decisive.

The basement was bigger than the house itself, a good Midwest basement made to withstand tornados, made to store vegetables, deep and dirty. I pulled junk out and just kept going, and as I squirmed behind a massive bureau I found an old door. It was a whole nother room, the serious part of the tornado cellar, and yes, a dead end, but no time to think, got to keep going, and now light was illuminating

the basement, Diondra and Crystal were coming and I shut the door behind me and stepped into the narrow room, more stuff stored there—old record players, a crib, a mini-fridge, all stacked to the sides, not much more than another twenty feet to run, and behind me I could hear more of the junk pile collapsing in front of the door, but that didn't help much, they'd be through that in a few seconds.

“Just shoot that way, she's got to be that way,” Crystal saying and Diondra shushing her, their feet heavy on the last stairs, taking their time, Diondra kicking things out of the way as they moved toward the door, closing me off like I was a rabid animal that needed to be put down, Diondra not even all that focused, saying suddenly: “That pot roast was too salty.” Inside my little room, I noticed the faintest light in the corner. Coming from somewhere in the ceiling.

I pushed toward it, stumbling over a red wagon, the women laughing when they heard me fall, Crystal yelling, “Now you're going to have a bruise,” Diondra knocking things away, and I was underneath the light, it was the opening of a wind turbine, the ventilation shaft for the tornado shelter and it was too small for most people to fit but not me, and I started piling things to reach it, to get my fingers to the top so I could pull myself up and Diondra and Crystal were almost past the debris. I tried to stand on an old baby buggy, but the bottom gave out, I ripped up my leg, started stacking things: a warped diaper table, and then some encyclopedias, and me on top of the encyclopedias, feeling them want to slide away, but I got my arms up through the shaft, breaking through the slats of the rusty turbine, one big push and I was breathing the cold night air, ready for the next push to get me all the way out and then Crystal was grabbing my foot, trying to pull me back down, me kicking her, scrambling. Screams beneath me, *Shoot her!* and Crystal screaming *I got her*, and her weight pulling me down, me losing leverage, half in and out of the ground, and then I gave one good kick with my bad foot and jabbed my heel right in her face, the nose going, a wolf-wail beneath me, and Diondra yelling *Oh baby* and me free, back up, my arms bearing deep red scratches from the top of the shaft, but up, over and onto the ground and as I was heaving for air, breathing in the mud, I could already hear Diondra going, *Get up top, get up top.*

My car keys were gone, lost somewhere inside, and so I turned and ran for the woods, a limping trot, like something with three legs, one

sock on, one sock off, mucking through the mud, stinking of manure in the moonlight, and then I turned, feeling almost good, and saw they were out of the house, they were behind me, running after me—white pale faces each leaking blood—but I made it to the forest. My head was whirling, my eyes unable to hold on to anything: a tree, the sky, a rabbit spooking away from me. *Libby!* behind me. I went deeper into the woods, about ready to pass out, and as my eyes started going dark, I found a gargantuan oak. It was balanced on a four-foot drop-off, gnarled roots radiating out like the sun, and I climbed down in the dirt and burrowed my way into an old animal den, under one of the roots as thick as a grown man. I dug into the cold, wet ground, a little thing in a little hollow, shivering but silent, hiding, which was something I could do.

The flashlights came closer, hitting the tree trunk, the women clambering over me, a flash of skirt, a glimpse of one red freckled leg, *She has to be here, she can't have gone that far*, and me trying not to breathe, knowing if I did it would be a gulp of air that would get me shot in the face, and so I held my breath as I felt their weight nudge the tree roots and Crystal said, *Could she have gone back to the house*, and Diondra said, *Keep looking, she's quick*, like someone who knew, and they turned and ran deeper into the woods and I breathed into the ground, swallowed earthy air, my face muffled against the dirt. For hours, the woods echoed with their screams of outrage, frustration—*this is not good, this is very bad*—and at some point the screaming stopped and then I waited more hours, til dawn, before I pulled myself out and hobbled through the trees toward home.

## Ben Day

JANUARY 3, 1985

2:12 A.M.

Diondra was still perched on Michelle's body. Listening. Ben sat in a bundle, rocking himself while from the hallway came sounds of screaming and cursing, the axe hitting flesh, the shotgun and silence and then his mom going again, not hurt, maybe not hurt, but then he knew she was, she was making gibberish sounds, *whllalalala* and *geeeee*, and she was banging into the walls, and those heavy boots came walking down the hall, toward his mom's room, and then the horrible sound of small hands trying to gain purchase, Debby's hands scraping along the wooden floor and then the axe again and a loud release of air, and then came another shotgun blast, Diondra flinching on top of Michelle.

Diondra's nerves showed only in her hair, which twittered around her head in those thick curls. Otherwise she didn't move. The steps paused outside the door, the door Ben had shut after the screaming began, the door he was hiding behind while his family lay outside, dying. They heard a wail—*goddammmmm it*—and then the steps ran, heavy and hard out of the house.

Ben whispered across to Diondra, pointing at Michelle, "Is she OK?" and Diondra frowned like he'd insulted her. "No, she's dead."

Ben couldn't stand up. "Are you sure?"

"I'm totally sure," Diondra said, and unstraddled her, Michelle's head lolling to the side, her open eyes on Ben. Her broken glasses lay next to her.

Diondra walked over to Ben, her knees in front of his face. She held out a hand to him. "Come on, get up."

They opened the door, Diondra's eyes widening like she was looking at a first snow. Blood was everywhere, Debby and his mom in

a pool of it, the axe and shotgun dropped along the hallway, a knife farther down. Diondra walked over to look more closely, her reflection dark in the pond of blood that was still flowing toward him.

“Holy shit,” she whispered. “Maybe we really did fuck with the Devil.”

Ben ran to the kitchen, wanting to vomit in the sink, the heaving feeling comforting, *get it up get it all up*, the way his mom used to say, holding his forehead over the toilet when he was a kid. *Get all that bad stuff out*. But nothing happened, so he staggered toward the phone and there was Diondra, stopping him.

“You going to tell on me? For Michelle?”

“We need to call the police,” he said, his eye on his mom’s stained coffee cup, some Folgers still at the bottom.

“Where’s the little one?” Diondra asked. “Where’s the baby?”

“Oh shit! Libby!” He ran back down the hallway, trying not to look at the bodies, pretending they were just obstacles to jump over, and he looked inside his mom’s room and felt the chill, saw the breeze fluttering the curtains and the open window. He came back to the kitchen.

“She’s gone,” he said. “She made it out, she’s gone.”

“Well, go bring her back.”

Ben turned to the door, about to run outside, and then stopped. “Bring her back, why?”

Diondra crossed to him, took his hands and put them on her belly. “Ben, do you not see how all this was meant to be? You think it’s a coincidence that we do the ritual tonight, that we need money, and that—pow!—a man kills your family. You will inherit everything for your mom’s life insurance now, whatever you want to do, you want to go live in California, on the beach, go live in Florida, we can do it.”

Ben had never said he wanted to live in California or Florida. Diondra had said that.

“We are a family now, we can be a real family. But Libby is a problem. If she saw something.”

“What if she didn’t?”

But Diondra was already shaking her head no, “Clean break, baby. It’s too dangerous. Time to be brave.”

“But if we need to get out of town tonight, I can’t wait around for the life insurance.”

“Well, of course we can’t leave tonight. Now we need to stay, it would look suspicious if you left. But you see what a gift this is— people are going to forget all about the Krissi Cates bullshit, because you’re the victim now. People will want to be good to you. I’ll try to hide this,” she fingered her belly, “for another month, somehow. I’ll wear a coat all the time or something. And then we get the money, and we fucking fly. Free. You’ll never have to eat shit again.”

“What about Michelle?”

“I got her diary,” Diondra said, showing him the new journal with the Minnie Mouse cover. “We’re cool.”

“But what do we say about Michelle?”

“You say the crazy man did it, like the rest. Like Libby too.”

“But what about—”

“And Ben, you can never say that you know me, not til we leave. I can’t be linked to this in anyway. Do you understand? You want me to give birth to our baby in prison, you know what happens then, it goes into foster care, you will never see it again. You want that for your baby, for the mother of your child? You still have a chance to be a big boy here, be a man. Now go get me Libby.”

He took the big utility flashlight and went out into the cold calling Libby’s name. She was a quick kid, a good runner, she could have made it all the way down their road and toward the highway by now. Or she could be hiding in her usual place down by the pond. He crunched through the snow, wondering if this was all a bad trip. He’d go back to the house and it would be just like it was earlier, when he heard the snick of the lock and everything was normal, everyone asleep, a regular night.

Then he saw Diondra crouched on top of Michelle like some giant predator bird, them both shaking in the dark, and he knew nothing was going to be OK and he also knew he wasn’t going to bring Libby back to the house. He brushed his flashlight over the tops of the reeds

and saw a flash of her red hair amidst the bland yellow and he yelled, “Libby, stay where you are, sweetheart!” and turned and ran back to the house.

Diondra was chopping the walls, chopping the couch, screaming with her teeth bared. She’d smeared the walls with blood, she’d written things. She’d tracked blood in her men’s shoes all over, she’d eaten Rice Krispies in the kitchen and left trails of food behind her, and she was leaving fingerprints everywhere, and she kept yelling, “Make it look good, make it look real good,” but Ben knew what it was, it was the bloodlust, the same feeling he got, that flare of rage and power that made you feel so strong.

He cleaned up the footprints pretty good, he thought, although it was hard to tell which were Diondra’s and which were the man’s—who the fuck was the man? He wiped everything she’d touched—the lightswitches, the axe, the counters, everything in his room, Diondra appearing in the doorway, telling him, “I wiped down Michelle’s neck,” Ben trying not to think, don’t think. He left the words on the walls, didn’t know how to fix that. She’d gotten at his mother with the axe, his mom had strange new gashes, deep, and he wondered how he could be so calm, and when his bones would melt and he’d collapse, and he told himself to pull it fucking together, *be a fucking man, do it be a man do what needs to be done be a man*, and he ushered Diondra out of the house and the whole place already smelled like earth and death. When he closed his eyes he saw a red sun and he thought again, *Annihilation*.

## Libby Day

NOW

I was going to lose toes again. I sat outside a closed gas station for almost an hour, rubbing my ringing feet, waiting for Lyle. Every time a car went by I ducked behind the building in case it was Crystal and Diondra, out searching for me. If they found me now, I couldn't run. They'd have me and it'd be done. I'd wanted to die for years, but not lately and definitely not by those bitches.

I had called Lyle collect from a phone outside the gas station I was sure wouldn't work, and he'd started the conversation before the operator even got off the line: *Did you hear? Did you hear?* I did not hear. I don't want to hear. Just come get me. I hung up before he started in with his questions.

"What happened?" Lyle said, when he finally pulled up, me in full bone-chatter, the air frosted. I threw myself in the car, my arms in a mummy wrap from the cold.

"Diondra's definitely not fucking dead. Take me home, I need to get home."

"You need to get to a hospital, your face is, it's. Have you seen your face?" He pulled me under the dome light of his car to take a closer look.

"I've felt my face."

"Or the police department? What happened? I knew I should have gone with you. Libby. Libby, what happened?"

I told him. The whole thing, letting him sort it out between my crying jags, ending with, *and then they, then they tried to kill me ...* the words coming out like hurt feelings, a little girl telling her mom that someone was mean to her.

"So Diondra killed Michelle," Lyle said. "We're going to the cops."

“No we’re not. I just need to go home.” My words were curdled with snot and tears.

“We’ve got to go to the cops, Libby.”

I started screaming, nasty things, slamming my hand on the window, yelling til spittle ran out my mouth, and that only made Lyle more sure he was taking me to the police.

“You’ll want to go to the police, Libby. When I tell you what I need to tell you, on top of this, you’ll want to go to the police.”

I knew that’s what I needed to do, but my brain was infected with memories of what happened after my family was murdered: the long, washed-out hours going over and over my story with the police, my legs hanging off oversized chairs, cold hot chocolate in Styrofoam cups, me unable to get warm, just wanting to go to sleep, that total exhaustion, where even your face is numb. And you can say all you want, it doesn’t matter because everyone’s dead anyway.

Lyle turned the heater on full blast, aimed every vent at me.

“OK, Libby, I have some, some news. I think, well, OK I’ll just say it. OK?”

“You’re freaking me out, Lyle. Just say it.” The dome light didn’t cast enough glow, I kept looking around the parking lot to make sure no one was coming.

“Remember the Angel of Debt?” Lyle began. “That the Kill Club was investigating? He’s been caught in a suburb of Chicago. He got nailed in the middle of helping some poor stockmarket sucker stage his death. It was supposed to look like a horseriding accident. The Angel got caught on one of the riding trails, going at the guy with a rock, bashing his head in. His name is Calvin Diehl. Used to be a farmer.”

“OK,” I said, but I knew more was coming.

“OK, so it turns out he’s been helping to kill people since the ’80s. He was smart. He has handwritten notes from everyone he murdered—thirty-two people—swearing they hired him.”

“OK.”

“One of those notes was from your mother.”

I bent over at the waist, but kept looking at Lyle.

“She hired him to kill her. But it was supposed to be just her. To get the life insurance, save the farm. Save you guys, Ben. They have the note.”

“So. What? No, that doesn’t make sense. Diondra killed Michelle. She had her diary. We just said it was Diondra—”

“Well, that’s just the thing. This Calvin Diehl’s playing himself off like a folk hero—I swear, there’s been a crowd outside the jail the past few days, people with signs, like, Diehl’s the Real Deal. They’ll be writing songs about him soon: helping people in debt die so the banks won’t get their property, screwing over the insurance companies to boot. People are eating it up. But, uh, he’s saying he won’t confess to murder on any of the thirty-two people, says they were all assisted suicide. Die with dignity. But he’s taking the rap for Debby. He says he’ll confess to Debby, says she wandered in, got in the middle, things went bad. He says that’s the only one he’s sorry for.”

“What about Michelle?”

“He says he never even saw Michelle. I can’t think why he’d lie.”

“Two killers,” I said. “Two killers the same night. That would be our luck.”

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE time I was hiding in the woods, then whimpering at the gas station, then bawling in Lyle’s car, and finally convincing a sleepy local sheriff’s deputy I wasn’t crazy (You’re *who’s* sister?), I wasted seven hours. Diondra and Crystal were clean gone by the morning, and I mean clean. They’d doused the place with gas, and it had burnt to the ground before the fire trucks even got out of the station.

I told my story a lot more times, the story taken with a mix of bemusement and doubt, and then finally a dash of credence.

“We’ll just need a little more, you know, to link her to your sister’s murder,” one detective said, pressing a Styrofoam cup of cold coffee in my hand.

Two days later, detectives appeared on my doorstep. They had photocopies of letters from my mom. Wanted to see if I recognized her handwriting, wanted to see if I wanted to see them.

The first was a very simple, one-page note, absolving Calvin Diehl

of her murder.

The second was to us.

*Dear Ben, Michelle, Debby and Libby,*

*I don't think this letter will ever reach you, but Mr. Diehl said he'd hold it for me, and I guess that gives me some comfort. I don't know. Your grandparents always told me, Make a useful life. I don't feel I've really done that, but I can make a useful death. I hope you all forgive me. Ben, whatever happens, don't blame yourself. Things got beyond our control, and this is what needed to be done. It seems very clear to me. I'm proud in a way. My life has been determined so much by accidents, it seems nice that now an "accident on purpose" will make things right again. A happy accident. Take good care of each other, I know Diane will do right by you. I'm only sad I won't get to see what good people you become. Although I don't need to. That's how sure I am of my kids.*

*Love you,*

*Mom*

I felt hollowed out. My mom's death was not useful. I felt a shot of rage at her, and then imagined those last bloody moments in the house, when she realized it had gone wrong, when Debby lay dying, and it was all over, her unsterling life. My anger gave way to a strange tenderness, what a mother might feel for her child, and I thought, At least she tried. She tried, on that final day, as hard as anyone could have tried.

And I would try to find peace in that.

## Calvin Diehl

JANUARY 3, 1985

4:12 A.M.

It was stupid, how wrong it had gone, so quickly. And here he'd been doing her a favor, the redhead farmgirl. Goddam, she didn't even leave him enough money; they agreed on \$2,000, she left an envelope with only \$812 and three quarters. It was petty and small and stupid, the whole night. It was disastrous. He'd gotten lax, cocky, indulgent and it had led to ... She'd have been so easy, too. Most people were picky about how they died, but all she asked was not to drown. She didn't want to drown, please. He could have done it so many simple ways, like he'd always done. But then he'd gone to get a drink at the bar, no big deal, truckers went through here all the time, he never stood out. But her husband was there, and he was such a piece of shit peckerhead, such a little worthless rat man, that Calvin found himself listening pretty hard for what this Runner guy's deal was, and people were telling all sorts of stories, about how the man had ruined the farm, ruined his family, was in debt up to his shirt-collar. And Calvin Diehl, a man of honor, had thought, why not?

Stab the woman through the heart on her doorstep, make this Runner guy sweat some. Let the cops question him, this sorry shit who took no responsibility. Make him take some. Ultimately it'd be written off as a random crime, as believable as the other stuff he'd pulled, car crashes and hopper collapses. Down near Ark City, he'd drowned a man in his own wheat, rigged it to look like a turnover. Calvin's killings always worked with the seasons: drowning during spring floods, hunting accidents during autumn. January was the season for house robberies and violence. Christmas was over, and the new year just reminded you of how little your life had changed, and man, people got angry in January.

So stab her through the heart, fast, a big Bowie hunting knife. Be over in thirty seconds and the pain wasn't bad at all, people said. Too

much shock. She dies and it's the sister that finds her, she'd made sure her sister was coming over early. She was a thoughtful lady that way.

Calvin needed to get back to his house, back over the Nebraska border, and clean his hair. He'd wiped himself down with chunks of snow, his head was smoking from the cold. But it was still sticky. He wasn't supposed to get blood on him, and he needed it out, he could smell it in the car.

He pulled over to the side of the road, his hands sweating inside his gloves. He thought he saw a child, running in the snow up ahead, but realized he was just seeing the little girl he'd killed. Pudgy thing, her hair all still in braids, running, and him panicked, seeing her not as a little girl, not yet, but as prey, something that needed putting down. He didn't want to do it, but no one got to see his face, he had to protect himself first and he had to get her before she woke the other kids up—he knew there were more, and he knew he didn't have the heart to kill all of them. That wasn't his mission, his mission was to help.

He saw the little girl turn to run and he got that axe suddenly in his hand—he saw the shotgun too, and he thought, the axe is more quiet, I can still keep this quiet.

And then, maybe he did go insane, he was so angry at the child—he chopped up a little girl—so angry at the redhead woman, for screwing this all up, for not dying right. He killed a little girl with an axe. He shot off the head of a mother of four instead of giving her the death she deserved. Her last moments were horror, nightmare in her house instead of him just holding her while she bled onto the snow and died with her face against his chest. He chopped up a little girl.

For the first time, Calvin Diehl thought of himself as a murderer. He fell back in his seat and bellowed.

## Libby Day

NOW

Thirteen days after Diondra and Crystal went missing, and the police had still not found them, had still not found any physical evidence to link Diondra to Michelle. The hunt was dissolving into an arson case, it was losing steam.

Lyle came over to watch bad TV with me, his new habit. I let him come if he didn't talk too much, I made a big deal about him not talking too much, but I missed him on the days he didn't come. We were watching some particularly grotesque reality show when Lyle suddenly sat up straighter. "Hey, that's my sweater."

I was wearing one of his too-tight pullovers I'd taken from the back of his car at some point, and it really did look much better on me.

"It really does look better on me," I said.

"Man, Libby. You could just ask, you know." He turned back to the TV, where women were going at each other like angry pound dogs. "Libby Sticky Fingers. Too bad you didn't leave Diondra's with, like, her hairbrush. We'd have some DNA."

"Ah, the magic, magic DNA," I said. I'd stopped believing in DNA.

On the TV, a blond woman had another blond woman by the hair and was pushing her down some steps, and I flipped the channel to a nature show on crocodiles.

"Oh, oh, my God." I ran from the room.

I came back, slapped Diondra's lipstick and thermometer on the table.

"Lyle Wirth, you are goddam brilliant," I said, and then I hugged him.

"Well," he said, and then laughed. "Wow. Huh, brilliant. Libby

Sticky Fingers thinks I'm brilliant."

"Absolutely."

DNA FROM BOTH objects matched the blood on Michelle's bedspread. The manhunt ignited. No wonder Diondra had been so insistent she was never remotely connected to Ben. All those scientific advances, one after another, making it easier and easier to match DNA: she must have felt more endangered each year instead of less. Good.

They nailed Diondra at a money-order dive in Amarillo. Crystal was nowhere to be found, but Diondra was nabbed, although it took four cops to get her in the car. So Diondra was in jail and Calvin Diehl had confessed. Even some skeezy loan agent had been rounded up, his mere name giving me the willies: *Len*. With all that, you'd think Ben might have been released from prison, but things don't go that quickly. Diondra wasn't confessing, and until her trial unfolded, they were going to hold on to my brother, who refused to implicate her. I finally went to visit him at the end of May.

He looked plumper, weary. He smiled weakly at me as I sat down.

"Wasn't sure if you'd want to see me," I said.

"Diondra was always sure you'd find her out. She was always sure of it. Guess she was right."

"Guess she was."

Neither of us seemed willing to go past that. Ben had protected Diondra for almost twenty-five years, I had undone all that. He seemed chagrined but not sad. Maybe he'd always hoped she'd be exposed. I was willing to believe that, for my own sake. It was easy not to ask the question.

"You'll be out of here soon, Ben. Can you believe it? You'll be out of prison." This was by no means a sure thing—a strip of blood on a dead girl's sheets is good, but a confession's better. Still, I was hopeful. Still.

"I wouldn't mind that," he said. "It may be time. I think twenty-four years may be enough. It may be enough for ... standing by. Letting it happen."

"I think so."

Lyle and I had put together pieces of that night from what Diondra had told me: They were at the house, ready to run away, and something happened that unraveled Diondra, she killed Michelle. Ben didn't stop her. My guess is, Michelle somehow learned of the pregnancy, the secret baby. I would ask Ben one day, ask for the details. But I knew he'd give me nothing now.

The two Days sat looking at each other, thinking things and swallowing them. Ben scratched a pimple on his arm, the Y of the Polly tattoo peeking out from his sleeve.

“So: Crystal. What can you tell me about Crystal, Libby? What *happened* that night? I've heard different versions. Is she, is she wrong. Bad?”

So now it was Ben wondering what happened in a lonely, cold house outside of town. I fingered the two tear-shaped scars on my cheekbone, imprints from the iron's steam ducts.

“She's smart enough to duck the police all this time,” I said. “Diondra will never say where she is.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“I don't know, Ben, she was protecting her mother. Diondra said she told Crystal everything, and I think she meant it. Everything: *I killed Michelle and no one can know*. What does it do to a girl who knows her mother is a murderer? She gets obsessed, she tries to make sense of it, she clips photos of her dead relatives, she reads her dead aunt's diary until she can quote from it, she knows every angle, she spends her life ready to defend her mom. And then I show up, and it's Crystal who blows it. And what does she do? She tries to fix it. I kind of understand. I give her a pass. She won't go to prison because of me.”

I'd been vague with the police about Crystal—they wanted to speak with her about the fire, but they didn't know she'd tried to kill me. I wasn't going to snitch on another member of my family, I just wasn't, even if this one happened to be guilty. I tried to tell myself she wasn't that disturbed. It could have been momentary madness, born out of love. But then, her mom had had a case of that, and it left my sister dead.

I hope to never see Crystal again, but if I do I'm glad I have a gun, let's put it that way.

“You really give her a pass?”

“I know a little bit about trying to do the right thing and fucking up completely,” I added.

“You talking about Mom?” Ben said.

“I was talking about me.”

“You could have been talking about all of us.”

Ben pressed his hand against the glass, and my brother and I matched palms.

## Ben Day

NOW

Standing out in the prison yard the other day, he smelled smoke. Smoke was floating on a current of air about eight feet above his head, and he pictured the field fires of autumn, back when he was a kid, flames marching across the soil in flickering lines, burning away what's not useful. He'd hated being a farm kid, but now that's all he thought about. Outside. At night, when the other men were making their sticky sounds, he'd close his eyes and see acres of sorghum, rattling at his knees with those shiny brown beads, like a girl's jewelry. He'd see the Flint Hills of Kansas, with their eerie, flattened tops, like each mound was waiting for its own coyote to howl from it. Or he'd close his eyes and picture his foot, slopped deep in mud, the feel of the earth sucking him in, holding on to him.

Once or twice a week, Ben had a giddy moment where he almost laughed. He was in prison. For life. For murdering his family. Could that be right? By now he thought of Ben, fifteen-year-old Ben, almost as his son, an entirely different being, and sometimes he wanted to throttle the kid, the kid who just didn't have it in him—he'd picture shaking Ben until his face blurred.

But sometimes he was proud.

Yes, he'd been a whimpering little worthless coward that night, a boy who just let things happen. Scared. But after the murders, something fell in place maybe. He would be quiet to save Diondra, his woman, and the baby. His second family. He couldn't bring himself to bust out of that room and save Debby and his mom. He couldn't bring himself to stop Diondra and save Michelle. He couldn't bring himself to do anything but shut up and take it. Stay still and take it. That he could do.

He'd be that kind of man.

He'd become famous because he was that kind of man. First he was the bad-ass Devil-daddy, everyone twitching to get away from him, even the guards spooked, and then he was the kindly, misunderstood prisoner. Women came all the time, and he tried not to say too much, let them imagine what he was thinking. They usually imagined he was thinking good thoughts. Sometimes he was. And sometimes he was thinking what would've happened if that night went different: He and Diondra and a squealing baby somewhere in western Kansas, Diondra crying mean tears in some tiny, food-grimed cell of a motel room they rented by the week. He'd have killed her. At some point, he might have. Or maybe he'd have grabbed the baby and run, and he and Crystal would be happy somewhere, her a college graduate, him running the farm, the coffee maker always on, like home.

Now maybe it was his turn to be out and Diondra's turn to be in, and he'd get out and find Crystal wherever she was, she was a sheltered kid, she couldn't disappear for long, he'd find her and take care of her. It'd be nice to take care of her, to actually do something besides shutting up and taking it.

But even as he was thinking this, he knew he'd have to aim smaller. That's what he learned from his life so far: always aim smaller. He was born to be lonely, that's what he knew for certain. When he was a kid, when he was a teenager, and definitely now. Sometimes he felt like he'd been gone his whole life—in exile, away from the place he was supposed to be, and that, soldier-like, he was pining to be returned. Homesick for a place he'd never been.

If he got out, he'd go to Libby, maybe. Libby who looked like his mother, who looked like him, who had all those rhythms that he just knew, no-question knew. He could spend the rest of his life begging forgiveness from Libby, looking out for Libby, his little sister, somewhere on the outside. Somewhere small.

That's all he wanted.

## Libby Day

NOW

The curlicues of the prison barbed wire were glowing yellow as I reached my car, and I was busy thinking of all the people that had been harmed: intentionally, accidentally, deservedly, unfairly, slightly, completely. My mom, Michelle, Debby. Ben. Me. Krissi Cates. Her parents. Diondra's parents. Diane. Trey. Crystal.

I wondered how much of it could be fixed, if anyone could be healed or even comforted.

I stopped at a gas station to get directions, because I'd forgotten how to get to Diane's mobile park, and goddam it, I was going to see Diane. I fingerbrushed my hair in the station's bathroom mirror, and applied some chapstick I'd almost stolen and bought instead (still not feeling entirely good about that decision). Then I drove across town, into the white-picket-fenced trailer park where Diane lived, daffodils yellowing up everywhere.

There is such a thing as a pretty trailer park, you know.

Diane's home was right where I remembered, and I rolled to a stop, giving her three honks, her ritual when she visited us way back when. She was in her small yard, poking around the tulips, her broad rear to me, a big block of woman with wavy steel hair.

She turned around at my honks, blinked wildly as I got out of the car.

"Aunt Diane?" I said.

She strode across the yard in big solid steps, her face tight. When she was right on top of me, she grabbed me and hugged me with such force it pushed the air out of my lungs. Then she patted me hard twice, held me at arm's length, then pulled me in again.

"I knew you could do it, I knew you could, Libby," she mumbled

into my hair, warm and smoky.

“Do what?”

“Try just a little harder.”

I STAYED AT Diane’s for two hours, til we started running out of things to say, like we always did. She hugged me again gruffly and ordered me to come back out on Saturday. She needed help installing a countertop.

I didn’t get straight on the highway, but slowly rolled toward where our farm had once been, trying to find myself there by accident. It had been a shaky spring, but now I rolled the windows down. I came to the end of the long stretch of road that would lead to the farm, bracing myself for housing developments or strip malls. Instead I came upon an old tin mailbox, “The Muehlers” in cursive paint on the side. Our farm was a farm again. A man was walking the fields. Far down by the pond, a woman and a girl watched a dog splatter in the water, the girl windmilling her arms around her waist, bored.

I studied it all for a few minutes, keeping my brain steady, staying away from Darkplace. No screams, no shotguns, no wild bluejay cries. Just listen to the quiet. The man finally noticed me and gave a wave. I waved back but pulled away as he started to wander over, neighbor-like. I didn’t want to meet him, and I didn’t want to introduce myself. I just wanted to be some woman, heading back home to Over There That Way.

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Growing up in Kansas City, Missouri, where a twenty-minute drive can get you to wide, open fields of corn and wheat, I was always fascinated by farms. Fascinated, but not, shall we say, knowledgeable. Huge thanks to the farmers and experts who instructed me on the realities of farming, both during the '80s farm crisis and now: Charlie Griffin of the Kansas Rural Family Helpline; Forrest Buhler of the Kansas Agriculture Mediation Service; Jerrold Oliver; my cousin Christy Baioni and her husband David, a lifelong Arkansas farmer. A giant debt of gratitude goes to Jon and Dana Robnett: Jon not only let me play farmer for a day on his Missouri lands, he answered endless questions about farming—from grain elevators to bull castration. He stopped short of advising me exactly how to sacrifice a cow in a satanic ritual, but I forgive him that bit of good taste.

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*Acknowledgments*

*For my parents,  
Matt and Judith Flynn*

## *Chapter One*

**M**y sweater was new, stinging red and ugly. It was May 12 but the temperature had dipped to the forties, and after four days shivering in my shirtsleeves, I grabbed cover at a tag sale rather than dig through my boxed-up winter clothes. Spring in Chicago.

In my gunny-covered cubicle I sat staring at the computer screen. My story for the day was a limp sort of evil. Four kids, ages two through six, were found locked in a room on the South Side with a couple of tuna sandwiches and a quart of milk. They'd been left three days, flurrying like chickens over the food and feces on the carpet. Their mother had wandered off for a suck on the pipe and just forgotten. Sometimes that's what happens. No cigarette burns, no bone snaps. Just an irretrievable slipping. I'd seen the mother after the arrest: twenty-two-year-old Tammy Davis, blonde and fat, with pink rouge on her cheeks in two perfect circles the size of shot glasses. I could imagine her sitting on a shambled-down sofa, her lips on that metal, a sharp burst of smoke. Then all was fast floating, her kids way behind, as she shot back to junior high, when the boys still cared and she was the prettiest, a glossy-lipped thirteen-year-old who mouthed cinnamon sticks before she kissed.

A belly. A smell. Cigarettes and old coffee. My editor, esteemed, weary Frank Curry, rocking back in his cracked Hush Puppies. His teeth soaked in brown tobacco saliva.

"Where are you on the story, kiddo?" There was a silver tack on my desk, point up. He pushed it lightly under a yellow thumbnail.

"Near done." I had three inches of copy. I needed ten.

"Good. Fuck her, file it, and come to my office."

"I can come now."

"Fuck her, file it, then come to my office."

"Fine. Ten minutes." I wanted my thumbtack back.

He started out of my cubicle. His tie swayed down near his crotch.

"Preaker?"

"Yes, Curry?"

“Fuck her.”

Frank Curry thinks I’m a soft touch. Might be because I’m a woman. Might be because I’m a soft touch.

Curry’s office is on the third floor. I’m sure he gets panicky-pissed every time he looks out the window and sees the trunk of a tree. Good editors don’t see bark; they see leaves—if they can even make out trees from up on the twentieth, thirtieth floor. But for the *Daily Post*, fourth-largest paper in Chicago, relegated to the suburbs, there’s room to sprawl. Three floors will do, spreading relentlessly outward, like a spill, unnoticed among the carpet retailers and lamp shops. A corporate developer produced our township over three well-organized years—1961–64—then named it after his daughter, who’d suffered a serious equestrian accident a month before the job was finished. Aurora Springs, he ordered, pausing for a photo by a brand-new city sign. Then he took his family and left. The daughter, now in her fifties and fine except for an occasional tingling in her arms, lives in Florida and returns every few years to take a photo by her namesake sign, just like Pop.

I wrote the story on her last visit. Curry hated it, hates most slice-of-life pieces. He got smashed off old Chambord while he read it, left his office smelling like raspberries. Curry gets drunk fairly quietly, but often. It’s not the reason, though, that he has such a cozy view of the ground. That’s just yawning bad luck.

I walked in and shut the door to his office, which isn’t how I’d ever imagined my editor’s office would look. I craved big oak panels, a window pane in the door—marked Chief—so the cub reporters could watch us rage over First Amendment rights. Curry’s office is bland and institutional, like the rest of the building. You could debate journalism or get a Pap smear. No one cared.

“Tell me about Wind Gap.” Curry held the tip of a ballpoint pen at his grizzled chin. I could picture the tiny prick of blue it would leave among the stubble.

“It’s at the very bottom of Missouri, in the boot heel. Spitting distance from Tennessee and Arkansas,” I said, hustling for my facts. Curry loved to drill reporters on any topics he deemed pertinent—the number of murders in Chicago last year, the demographics for Cook

County, or, for some reason, the story of my hometown, a topic I preferred to avoid. “It’s been around since before the Civil War,” I continued. “It’s near the Mississippi, so it was a port city at one point. Now its biggest business is hog butchering. About two thousand people live there. Old money and trash.”

“Which are you?”

“I’m trash. From old money.” I smiled. He frowned.

“And what the hell is going on?”

I sat silent, cataloguing various disasters that might have befallen Wind Gap. It’s one of those crummy towns prone to misery: A bus collision or a twister. An explosion at the silo or a toddler down a well. I was also sulking a bit. I’d hoped—as I always do when Curry calls me into his office—that he was going to compliment me on a recent piece, promote me to a better beat, hell, slide over a slip of paper with a 1 percent raise scrawled on it—but I was unprepared to chat about current events in Wind Gap.

“Your mom’s still there, right, Preaker?”

“Mom. Stepdad.” A half sister born when I was in college, her existence so unreal to me I often forgot her name. Amma. And then Marian, always long-gone Marian.

“Well dammit, you ever talk to them?” Not since Christmas: a chilly, polite call after administering three bourbons. I’d worried my mother could smell it through the phone lines.

“Not lately.”

“Jesus Christ, Preaker, read the wires sometime. I guess there was a murder last August? Little girl strangled?”

I nodded like I knew. I was lying. My mother was the only person in Wind Gap with whom I had even a limited connection, and she’d said nothing. Curious.

“Now another one’s missing. Sounds like it might be a serial to me. Drive down there and get me the story. Go quick. Be there tomorrow morning.”

No way. “We got horror stories here, Curry.”

“Yeah, and we also got three competing papers with twice the staff

and cash.” He ran a hand through his hair, which fell into frazzled spikes. “I’m sick of getting slammed out of news. This is our chance to break something. Big.”

Curry believes with just the right story, we’d become the overnight paper of choice in Chicago, gain national credibility. Last year another paper, not us, sent a writer to his hometown somewhere in Texas after a group of teens drowned in the spring floods. He wrote an elegiac but well-reported piece on the nature of water and regret, covered everything from the boys’ basketball team, which lost its three best players, to the local funeral home, which was desperately unskilled in cleaning up drowned corpses. The story won a Pulitzer.

I still didn’t want to go. So much so, apparently, that I’d wrapped my hands around the arms of my chair, as if Curry might try to pry me out. He sat and stared at me a few beats with his watery hazel eyes. He cleared his throat, looked at his photo of his wife, and smiled like he was a doctor about to break bad news. Curry loved to bark—it fit his old-school image of an editor—but he was also one of the most decent people I knew.

“Look, kiddo, if you can’t do this, you can’t do it. But I think it might be good for you. Flush some stuff out. Get you back on your feet. It’s a damn good story—we need it. You need it.”

Curry had always backed me. He thought I’d be his best reporter, said I had a surprising mind. In my two years on the job I’d consistently fallen short of expectations. Sometimes strikingly. Now I could feel him across the desk, urging me to give him a little faith. I nodded in what I hoped was a confident fashion.

“I’ll go pack.” My hands left sweatprints on the chair.

**I** had no pets to worry about, no plants to leave with a neighbor. Into a duffel bag, I tucked away enough clothes to last me five days, my own reassurance I’d be out of Wind Gap before week’s end. As I took a final glance around my place, it revealed itself to me in a rush. The apartment looked like a college kid’s: cheap, transitory, and mostly uninspired. I promised myself I’d invest in a decent sofa when I returned as a reward for the stunning story I was sure to dig up.

On the table by the door sat a photo of a preteen me holding Marian at about age seven. We’re both laughing. She has her eyes

wide open in surprise, I have mine scrunched shut. I'm squeezing her into me, her short skinny legs dangling over my knees. I can't remember the occasion or what we were laughing about. Over the years it's become a pleasant mystery. I think I like not knowing.

**I** take baths. Not showers. I can't handle the spray, it gets my skin buzzing, like someone's turned on a switch. So I wadded a flimsy motel towel over the grate in the shower floor, aimed the nozzle at the wall, and sat in the three inches of water that pooled in the stall. Someone else's pubic hair floated by.

I got out. No second towel, so I ran to my bed and blotted myself with the cheap spongy blanket. Then I drank warm bourbon and cursed the ice machine.

Wind Gap is about eleven hours south of Chicago. Curry had graciously allowed me a budget for one night's motel stay and breakfast in the morning, if I ate at a gas station. But once I got in town, I was staying at my mother's. That he decided for me. I already knew the reaction I'd get when I showed up at her door. A quick, shocked flustering, her hand to her hair, a mismatched hug that would leave me aimed slightly to one side. Talk of the messy house, which wouldn't be. A query about length of stay packaged in niceties.

"How long do we get to have you for, sweetness?" she'd say. Which meant: "When do you leave?"

It's the politeness that I find most upsetting.

I knew I should prepare my notes, jot down questions. Instead I drank more bourbon, then popped some aspirin, turned off the light. Lulled by the wet purr of the air conditioner and the electric plinking of some video game next door, I fell asleep. I was only thirty miles outside my hometown, but I needed one last night away.

**I**n the morning I inhaled an old jelly doughnut and headed south, the temperature shooting up, the lush forest imposing on both sides. This part of Missouri is ominously flat—miles of unmajestic trees broken only by the thin strip of highway I was on. The same scene repeating itself every two minutes.

You can't spot Wind Gap from a distance; its tallest building is only three stories. But after twenty minutes of driving, I knew it was

coming: First a gas station popped up. A group of scraggly teenage boys sat out front, barechested and bored. Near an old pickup, a diapered toddler threw fistfuls of gravel in the air as his mother filled up the tank. Her hair was dyed gold, but her brown roots reached almost to her ears. She yelled something to the boys I couldn't make out as I passed. Soon after, the forest began to thin. I passed a scribble of a strip mall with tanning beds, a gun shop, a drapery store. Then came a lonely cul-de-sac of old houses, meant to be part of a development that never happened. And finally, town proper.

For no good reason, I held my breath as I passed the sign welcoming me to Wind Gap, the way kids do when they drive by cemeteries. It had been eight years since I'd been back, but the scenery was visceral. Head down that road, and I'd find the home of my grade-school piano teacher, a former nun whose breath smelled of eggs. That path led to a tiny park where I smoked my first cigarette on a sweaty summer day. Take that boulevard, and I'd be on my way to Woodberry, and the hospital.

I decided to head directly to the police station. It squatted at one end of Main Street, which is, true to its word, Wind Gap's main street. On Main Street you will find a beauty parlor and a hardware store, a five-and-dime called Five-and-Dime, and a library twelve shelves deep. You'll find a clothing store called Candy's Casuals, in which you may buy jumpers, turtlenecks, and sweaters that have ducks and schoolhouses on them. Most nice women in Wind Gap are teachers or mothers or work at places like Candy's Casuals. In a few years you may find a Starbucks, which will bring the town what it yearns for: prepackaged, preapproved mainstream hipness. For now, though, there's just a greasy spoon, which is run by a family whose name I can't remember.

Main Street was empty. No cars, no people. A dog loped down the sidewalk, with no owner calling after it. All the lampposts were papered with yellow ribbons and grainy photocopies of a little girl. I parked and peeled off one of the notices, taped crookedly to a stop sign at a child's height. The sign was homemade, "Missing," written at the top in bold letters that may have been filled in by Magic Marker. The photo showed a dark-eyed girl with a feral grin and too much hair for her head. The kind of girl who'd be described by teachers as a "handful." I liked her.

Natalie Jane Keene

Age: 10

Missing since 5/11

Last seen at Jacob J. Garrett Park, wearing  
blue-jean shorts, red striped T-shirt

Tips: 555-7377

I hoped I'd walk into the police station and be informed that Natalie Jane was already found. No harm done. Seems she'd gotten lost or twisted an ankle in the woods or ran away and then thought better of it. I would get in my car and drive back to Chicago and speak to no one.

Turns out the streets were deserted because half the town was out searching the forest to the north. The station's receptionist told me I could wait—Chief Bill Vickery would be returning for lunch soon. The waiting room had the false homey feel of a dentist's office; I sat in an orange endchair and flipped through a *Redbook*. An air freshener plugged into a nearby outlet hissed out a plastic smell meant to remind me of country breezes. Thirty minutes later I'd gone through three magazines and was starting to feel ill from the scent. When Vickery finally walked in, the receptionist nodded at me and whispered with eager disdain, "Media."

Vickery, a slim fellow in his early fifties, had already sweated through his uniform. His shirt clung to his chest, and his pants puckered out in back where an ass should have been.

"Media?" He stared at me over looming bifocals. "What media?"

"Chief Vickery, I'm Camille Preaker, with the *Daily Post* in Chicago."

"Chicago? Why are you here from Chicago?"

"I'd like to speak with you about the little girls—Natalie Keene and the girl who was murdered last year."

"Jesus H. Christ. How'd you hear about this up there? Jesus Christ."

He looked at the receptionist, then back to me, as if we'd collaborated. Then he motioned to me to follow. "Hold my calls, Ruth."

The receptionist rolled her eyes.

Bill Vickery walked ahead of me down a wood-paneled hallway checked with cheap framed photos of trout and horses, then into his office, which had no window, which was in fact a tiny square lined with metal files. He sat down, lit a cigarette. Didn't offer me one.

"I don't want this to get out, Miss. I have no intention of letting this get out."

"I'm afraid, Chief Vickery, that there's not too much choice in the matter. Children are being targeted. The public should be aware." It's the line I'd been mouthing on the drive down. It directs fault to the gods.

"What do you care? They're not your kids, they're Wind Gap kids." He stood up, sat back down, rearranged some papers. "I bet I'm pretty safe to say Chicago never cared about Wind Gap kids before." His voice cracked at the end. Vickery sucked on his cigarette, twisted a chunky gold pinky ring, blinked in quick succession. I wondered suddenly if he was going to cry.

"You're right. Probably not. Look, this isn't going to be some sort of exploitive story. It's important. If it makes you feel any better, I'm from Wind Gap." *There you go, Curry. I'm trying.*

He looked back at me. Stared at my face.

"What's your name?"

"Camille Preaker."

"How do I not know you?"

"Never got in trouble, sir." I offered a slight smile.

"Your family's Preaker?"

"My mother married out of her maiden name about twenty-five years ago. Adora and Alan Crellin."

"Oh. Them I know." Them everybody knew. Money was none too common in Wind Gap, not real money. "But I still don't want you here, Miss Preaker. You do this story and from now on, people will only know us for ... this."

"Maybe some publicity would help," I offered. "It's helped in other cases."

Vickery sat quiet for a second, pondering his paper-bag lunch crumpled at the corner of his desk. Smelled like bologna. He murmured something about JonBenet and shit.

“No thanks, Miss Preaker. And no comment. I have no comment on any ongoing investigations. You can quote me.”

“Look, I have the right to be here. Let’s make this easy. You give me some information. Something. Then I’ll stay out of your way for a while. I don’t want to make your job any harder. But I need to do mine.” It was another little exchange I’d thought up somewhere near St. Louis.

I left the police station with a photocopied map of Wind Gap, on which Chief Vickery had drawn a tiny X to mark where the murdered girl’s body was discovered last year.

Ann Nash, age nine, was found on August 27 in Falls Creek, a bumpy, noisy waterway that ran through the middle of the North Woods. Since nightfall on the twenty-sixth, when she went missing, a search party had combed the forest. But it was hunters who came across her just after 5 a.m. She’d been strangled close to midnight with a basic clothesline, looped twice around her neck. Then dumped in the creek, which was low from the long summer drought. The clothesline had snagged on a massive rock, and she’d spent the night drifting along in the lazy stream. The burial was closed coffin. This was all Vickery would give me. It took an hour of questions to get that much.

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**F**rom the pay phone at the library I dialed the number on the Missing poster. An elderly female voice identified it as the Natalie Keene Hotline, but in the background I could hear a dishwasher churning. The woman informed me that so far as she knew, the search was still going in the North Woods. Those who wanted to help should report to the main access road and bring their own water. Record temperatures were expected.

At the search site, four blonde girls sat stiffly on a picnic towel spread in the sun. They pointed toward one of the trails and told me to walk until I found the group.

“What are you doing here?” asked the prettiest. Her flushed face

had the roundness of a girl barely in her teens and her hair was parted in ribbons, but her breasts, which she aimed proudly outward, were those of a grown woman. A lucky grown woman. She smiled as if she knew me, impossible since she'd have been a preschooler the last time I was in Wind Gap. She looked familiar, though. Maybe the daughter of one of my old schoolmates. The age would be right if someone got knocked up straight out of high school. Not unlikely.

“Just here to help,” I said.

“Right,” she smirked, and dismissed me by turning all her interest to picking the polish off a toenail.

I walked off the crunch of the hot gravel and into the forest, which only felt warmer. The air was jungle wet. Goldenrod and wild sumac bushes brushed my ankles, and fuzzy white cottonwood seeds floated everywhere, slipping into my mouth, sticking to my arms. When I was a kid we called them fairy dresses, I remembered suddenly.

In the distance people were calling for Natalie, the three syllables rising and falling like song. Another ten minutes of hard hiking and I spotted them: about four dozen people walking in long rows, sifting the brush in front of them with sticks.

“Hello! Any news?” called out a beer-bellied man closest to me. I left the trail and threaded my way through the trees until I reached him.

“Can I help out at all?” I wasn't quite ready to whip out my notebook.

“You can walk beside me here,” he said. “We can always use another person. Less ground to cover.” We walked silently for a few minutes, my partner occasionally pausing to clear his throat with a wet, rocky cough.

“Sometimes I think we should just burn these woods,” he said abruptly. “Seems like nothing good ever happens in them. You a friend of the Keenes?”

“I'm a reporter actually. *Chicago Daily Post*.”

“Mmmm.... Well how 'bout that. You writing about all this?”

A sudden wail shot through the trees, a girl's scream: “Natalie!” My hands began sweating as we ran toward the cry. I saw figures

tumbling toward us. A teenager with white-blond hair pushed past us onto the trail, her face red and bundled. She was stumbling like a frantic drunk, yelling Natalie's name at the sky. An older man, maybe her father, caught up with her, wrapped her in his arms, and began walking her out of the forest.

"They found her?" my friend called.

A collective head shaking. "She just got spooked, I think," another man called back. "Too much for her. Girls shouldn't be out here anyway, not as things stand." The man looked pointedly at me, took off his baseball cap to wipe his brow, then began sifting the grass again.

"Sad work," my partner said. "Sad time." We moved forward slowly. I kicked a rusted beer can out of my way. Then another. A single bird flew by at eye level, then shot straight up to the treetops. A grasshopper landed suddenly on my wrist. Creepy magic.

"Would you mind if I asked your thoughts on all this?" I pulled out my notebook, wagged it.

"Don't know I could tell you much."

"Just what you think. Two girls in a small town ..."

"Well, no one knows these are related, right? Unless you know something I don't. For all we know, Natalie will turn up safe and sound. Hasn't even been two days."

"Are there any theories about Ann?" I asked.

"Some loony, some crazy man musta done it. Some guy rides through town, forgot to take his pills, voices are talking to him. Something like 'at."

"Why do you say that?"

He stopped, pulled a package of chaw from his back pocket, buried a fat pinch in his gumline and worked it until he got the first tiny cut to let the tobacco in. The lining of my mouth began tingling in sympathy.

"Why else would you pull out a dead little girl's teeth?"

"He took her teeth?"

"All but the back part of a baby molar."

**A**fter another hour with no results and not much more information, I left my partner, Ronald Kamens (“write my middle initial too, if you will: *J*”), and hiked south toward the spot where Ann’s body was found last year. Took fifteen minutes before the sound of Natalie’s name drifted away. Ten more minutes and I could hear Falls Creek, the bright cry of water.

It would be hard to carry a child through these woods. Branches and leaves strangle the pathway, roots bump up from the ground. If Ann was a true girl of Wind Gap, a town that demands utmost femininity in its fairer sex, she’d have worn her hair long down her back. It would have tangled itself in the passing brush. I kept mistaking spiderwebs for glimmering strands of hair.

The grass was still flattened along the point where the body was discovered, raked through for clues. There were a few recent cigarette butts that the idle curious had left behind. Bored kids scaring each other with sightings of a madman trailing bloody teeth.

In the creek, there’d been a row of stones that had snagged the clothesline around Ann’s neck, leaving her tethered and floating in the stream like the condemned for half a night. Now, just smooth water rolling over sand. Mr. Ronald J. Kamens had been proud when he told me: The townsfolk had pried out the rocks, loaded them in the back of a pickup, and smashed them just outside town. It was a poignant gesture of faith, as if such destruction would ward off future evil. Seems it didn’t work.

I sat down at the edge of the creek, running my palms over the rocky soil. Picked up a smooth, hot stone and pressed it against my cheek. I wondered if Ann had ever come here when she was alive. Maybe the new generation of Wind Gap kids had found more interesting ways to kill summers. When I was a girl, we swam at a spot just downstream where huge table rocks made shallow pools. Crawdads would skitter around our feet and we’d jump for them, scream if we actually touched one. No one wore swimsuits, it took too much planning. Instead you just rode your bike home in soaked shorts and halters, shaking your head like a wet dog.

Occasionally older boys, equipped with shotguns and stolen beer, would tromp through on their way to shoot flying squirrels or hare. Bloody pieces of meat swung from their belts. Those kids, cocky and

pissed and smelling of sweat, aggressively oblivious of our existence, always compelled me. There are different kinds of hunting, I know now. The gentleman hunter with visions of Teddy Roosevelt and big game, who retires from a day in the field with a crisp gin and tonic, is not the hunter I grew up with. The boys I knew, who began young, were blood hunters. They sought that fatal jerk of a shot-spun animal, fleeing silky as water one second, then cracked to one side by their bullet.

When I was still in grammar school, maybe twelve, I wandered into a neighbor boy's hunting shed, a wood-planked shack where the animals were stripped and split. Ribbons of moist, pink flesh dangled from strings, waiting to be dried for jerky. The dirt floor was rusted with blood. The walls were covered with photographs of naked women. Some of the girls were spreading themselves wide, others were being held down and penetrated. One woman was tied up, her eyes glazed, breasts stretched and veined like grapes, as a man took her from behind. I could smell them all in the thick, gory air.

At home that night, I slipped a finger under my panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick.

## Chapter Two

**H**appy Hour. I gave up on the search and stopped off at Footh's, the town's low-key country bar, before dropping by 1665 Grove Street, home of Betsy and Robert Nash, parents of Ashleigh, twelve; Tiffanie, eleven; the deceased Ann, forever nine; and six-year-old Bobby Jr.

Three girls until, at last, their baby boy. As I sipped my bourbon and cracked peanuts, I pondered the growing desperation the Nashes must have felt each time a child popped out without a penis. There was the first, Ashleigh, not a boy, but sweet and healthy. They'd always wanted two anyway. Ashleigh got a fancy name with extravagant spelling and a closet full of frosting-cake dresses. They crossed their fingers and tried again but still got Tiffanie. Now they were nervous, the welcome home less triumphant. When Mrs. Nash got knocked up once again, her husband bought a tiny baseball glove to give the lump in her belly a nudge in the right direction. Imagine the righteous dismay when Ann arrived. She got slapped with some family name—didn't even get the extra *e* to ornament it a bit.

Thank goodness for Bobby. Three years after the disappointing Ann—was he an accident or one last shot of brio?—Bobby was given his dad's name, was doted on, and the little girls suddenly realized how extraneous they were. Especially Ann. No one needs a third girl. But now she's getting some attention.

I took my second bourbon in one smooth shot, unclenched my shoulders, gave my cheeks a quick slap, got in my big blue Buick, and wished for a third drink. I'm not one of those reporters who relishes picking through people's privacy. It's probably the reason I'm a second-rate journalist. One of them, at least.

I still remembered the way to Grove Street. It was two blocks behind my high school, which served every kid within a seventy-mile radius. Millard Calhoon H.S. was founded in 1930, Wind Gap's last cough of effort before sinking into the Depression. It was named for the first mayor of Wind Gap, a Civil War hero. A Confederate Civil War hero, but that made no never mind, a hero nonetheless. Mr. Calhoon shot it out with a whole troop of Yankees in the first year of the Civil War over in Lexington, and single-handedly saved that little Missouri town. (Or so implies the plaque inside the school entrance.)

He darted across farmyards and zipped through picket-fenced homes, politely shooing the cooing ladies aside so they wouldn't be damaged by the Yanks. Go to Lexington today and ask to see Calhoon House, a fine bit of period architecture, and you can still spot northern bullets in its planks. Mr. Calhoon's southern bullets, one assumes, were buried with the men they killed.

Calhoon himself died in 1929 as he closed in on his centennial birthday. He was sitting at a gazebo, which is now gone, in the town square, which has been paved over, being feted by a big brass band, when suddenly he leaned into his fifty-two-year-old wife and said, "It's all too loud." Then he had a massive coronary and pitched forward in his chair, smudging his Civil War finery in the tea cakes that had been decorated with the Stars and Bars just for him.

I have a special fondness for Calhoon. Sometimes it is all too loud.

**T**he Nashs' house was much as I'd expected, a late-'70s piece of generic like all the houses on the west side of town. One of those homely ranch houses featuring the garage as its central point. As I drove up, a messy blond boy was sitting in the driveway in a Big Wheel several sizes too small for him, grunting with the effort to pedal the plastic bike. The wheels just spun in place under his weight.

"Want a push?" I said as I got out of the car. I'm not good with children as a rule, but it seemed an attempt wouldn't hurt. He looked at me silently for a second, stuck a finger in his mouth. His tank top slipped up as his round belly popped out to greet me. Bobby Jr. looked stupid and cowed. A boy for the Nashes, but a disappointing one.

I stepped toward him. He jumped off the Big Wheel, which remained clamped to him for a few steps, jammed on his body as it was, then clattered off sideways.

"Daddy!" He ran wailing toward the house as if I'd pinched him.

By the time I reached the front door, a man appeared. My eyes focused behind him, at a miniature fountain gurgling in the hallway. It had three tiers shaped like shells, with a statue of a little boy perched on top. Even from the other side of the screen door, the water smelled old.

“Can I help you?”

“Are you Robert Nash?”

He looked suddenly wary. It was probably the first question the police had asked him when they told him his daughter was dead.

“I’m Bob Nash.”

“I’m so sorry to bother you at home. I’m Camille Preaker. I’m from Wind Gap.”

“Mmhmmm.”

“But now I’m with the *Daily Post* in Chicago. We’re covering the story.... We’re here because of Natalie Keene, and your daughter’s murder.”

I braced for yelling, door slams, curses, a punch. Bob Nash stuffed both hands deep into his front pockets and leaned back on his heels.

“We can talk in the bedroom.”

He held the door open for me, and I began picking my way through the clutter of the living room, laundry baskets spurting over with rumpled sheets and tiny T-shirts. Then past a bathroom whose centerpiece was an empty roll of toilet paper on the floor, and down a hallway spackled with fading photos beneath grimy laminate: little blonde girls crowded dotingly around a baby boy; a young Nash with his arm stiffly circled around his new bride, each of them holding the edge of a cake knife. When I got to the bedroom—matching curtains and bedclothes, a tidy dresser—I realized why Nash had chosen the spot for our interview. It was the one area of the house that held a degree of civilization, like an outpost on the edge of a despairing jungle.

Nash sat on one edge of the bed, I on the other. There were no chairs. We could have been day players in an amateur porn flick. Except we each had a glass of cherry Kool-Aid he’d fetched for us. Nash was a well-kept man: clipped mustache, receding blond hair held down with gel, a glaring green polo tucked into jeans. I assumed he was the one who maintained the order of this room; it had the unadorned neatness of a bachelor trying very hard.

He needed no foreplay for the interview, and I was grateful. It’s like sweet-talking your date when you both know you’re about to get laid.

“Ann’d been riding her bike all last summer,” he started without prompting. “All summer just around and around the block. My wife and me wouldn’t let her go no further. She was only nine. We are very protective parents. But then at the end, right before she started school, my wife said fine. Ann had been whining, so my wife said fine, Ann could ride to her friend Emily’s house. She never got there. It was eight o’clock before we realized.”

“What time had she left?”

“About seven. So somewhere along the way, in those ten blocks, they got her. My wife will never forgive herself. Never.”

“What do you mean, *they* got her?”

“Them, him, whatever. The bastard. The sick baby killer. While my family and I sleep, while you drive around doing your reporting, there is a person out there looking for babies to kill. Because you and I both know the little Keene girl isn’t just lost.”

He finished the rest of his Kool-Aid in one belt, wiped his mouth. The quotes were good, if overpolished. I find this common, and in direct proportion to the amount of TV a subject watches. Not long ago, I interviewed a woman whose twenty-two-year-old daughter had just been murdered by her boyfriend, and she gave me a line straight from a legal drama I happened to catch the night before: *I’d like to say that I pity him, but now I fear I’ll never be able to pity again.*

“So Mr. Nash, you have no thoughts of anyone who might have wanted to harm you or your family by hurting Ann?”

“Miss, I sell *chairs*, ergonomic *chairs* for a living—over the *phone*. I work out of an office over in Hayti, with two other fellas. I don’t meet anyone. My wife does part-time office work at the grade school. There’s no drama here. Someone just decided to kill our little girl.” He said the last part beleagueredly, as if he’d given in to the idea.

Bob Nash walked to the sliding glass door off the side of the bedroom. It led onto a tiny deck. He opened the door but stayed inside. “Might be a homo did it,” he said. The word choice was actually a euphemism in these parts.

“Why do you say that?”

“He didn’t rape her. Everyone says that’s unusual in a killing like

this. I say it's the only blessing we got. I'd rather him kill her than rape her."

"There were no signs of molestation at all?" I asked in a murmur I hoped sounded gentle.

"None. And no bruises, no cuts, no sign of any kind of ... torture. Just strangled her. Pried her teeth out. And I didn't mean what I said before, about her being better killed than raped. That was a stupid thing to say. But you know what I mean."

I said nothing, let my tape recorder whir on, capturing my breathing, Nash's ice clinking, the thunks of a volleyball game being played next door in the last of the daylight.

"Daddy?" A pretty blonde girl, hair in a ponytail down to her waist, peeked through the crack of the bedroom door.

"Not now, honey."

"I'm hungry."

"You can fix something," Nash said. "There's waffles in the freezer. Make sure Bobby eats, too."

The girl lingered a few seconds longer looking at the carpet in front of her, then quietly shut the door. I wondered where their mother was.

"Were you home when Ann left the house that last time?"

He cocked his head sideways at me, sucked his teeth. "No. I was on my way home from Hayti. It's an hour drive. I didn't hurt my daughter."

"I didn't mean that," I lied. "I was just wondering if you got to see her that night."

"Saw her that morning," he said. "Don't remember if we talked or not. Probably not. Four kids in the morning can be a little much, you know?"

Nash twirled his ice, now melted into one solid mass. He ran his fingers underneath his bristly mustache. "No one's been any help so far," he said. "Vickery's in over his head. There's some big-shot detective assigned here from Kansas City. He's a kid, smug too. Marking days till he can get out. You want a picture of Ann?" He said

*picture like pitcher*. So do I if I don't watch it. He took from his wallet a school photo of a girl with a wide, crooked smile, her pale brown hair cut jaggedly above her chin.

"My wife wanted to put her hair in rollers the night before school photos. Ann chopped it off instead. She was a willful thing. A tomboy. I'm actually surprised she's the one they took. Ashleigh's always been the pretty one, you know. The one people look at." He stared at the photo one more time. "Ann must've given hell."

As I was leaving, Nash gave me the address of the friend Ann was going to visit the night she was grabbed. I drove there slowly over a perfectly squared few blocks. This west side was the newer section of town. You could tell because the grass was a brighter green, rolled out in prepaid patches just thirty summers ago. It wasn't like the dark, stiff, prickly stuff that grew in front of my mother's house. That grass made better whistles. You could split a blade in the middle, blow, and get a tweezy sound until your lips began to itch.

It would have taken Ann Nash only five minutes to pedal to her friend's house. Add an extra ten in case she decided to take a longer route, stretch her legs at the first chance to really ride that summer. Nine is too old to be stuck pedaling in circles around the same block. What happened to the bike?

I rolled slowly past the home of Emily Stone. As the night bloomed blue, I could see a girl run past a bright window. I bet Emily's parents tell their friends things like, "We hug her a little harder every night now." I bet Emily wonders where Ann was taken to die.

I did. Yanking out twenty-some teeth, no matter how small, no matter how lifeless the subject, is a tough task. It'd have to be done in a special place, somewhere safe so a person could take a few minutes to breathe now and then.

I looked at Ann's photo, the edges curling in as if to protect her. The defiant haircut and that grin reminded me of Natalie. I liked this girl, too. I tucked her picture away in my glove compartment. Then I lifted up the sleeve of my shirt and wrote her full name—Ann Marie Nash—in lush blue ballpoint on the inside of my arm.

**I** didn't pull into anyone's driveway to turn around as I needed to. I figured people here were jittery enough without unknown cars

trolling around. Instead I turned left at the end of the block and took the long way to my mother's house. I debated whether to phone her first and decided against it three blocks from home. It was too late to call, too much misguided courtesy. Once you've crossed state lines, you don't phone to ask if you can drop in.

My mother's massive house is at the southernmost point of Wind Gap, the wealthy section, if you can count approximately three square blocks of town as a section. She lives in—and I once did too—an elaborate Victorian replete with a widow's walk, a wraparound veranda, a summer porch jutting toward the back, and a cupola arrowing out of the top. It's full of cubbyholes and nooks, curiously circuitous. The Victorians, especially southern Victorians, needed a lot of room to stray away from each other, to duck tuberculosis and flu, to avoid rapacious lust, to wall themselves away from sticky emotions. Extra space is always good.

The house is at the very top of a very steep hill. In first gear, you can drive up the cracked old driveway to the top, where a carriage porch keeps cars from getting wet. Or you can park at the bottom of the hill and walk the sixty-three stairs to the top, clutching the cigar-thin rail to the left. When I was a child, I always walked the stairs up, ran the driveway down. I assumed the rail was on the left side going up because I'm left-handed, and someone thought I might like that. Odd to think I ever indulged in such presumptions.

I parked at the bottom, so as to seem less intrusive. Wet with sweat by the time I hit the top, I lifted up my hair, waved a hand at the back of my neck, flapped my shirt a few times. Vulgar pit stains on my French blue blouse. I smelled, as my mother would say, *ripe*.

I rang the doorbell, which had been a cat-calling screech when I was very young, now subdued and truncated, like the *bing!* you hear on children's records when it's time to turn the page. It was 9:15, just late enough that they might have gone to bed.

"Who is it, please?" My mother's reedy voice behind the door.

"Hi, Momma. It's Camille." I tried to keep my voice even.

"Camille." She opened the door and stood in the doorway, didn't seem surprised, and didn't offer a hug at all, not even the limp one I'd expected. "Is something the matter?"

“No, Momma, not at all. I’m in town on business.”

“Business. Business? Well, goodness, I’m sorry, sweetheart, come in, come in. The house is not up to par for a visitor, I’m afraid.”

The house was perfect, down to the dozens of cut tulips in vases at the entry hall. The air was so teasy with pollen, my eyes watered. Of course my mother didn’t ask me what kind of business could possibly land me here. She rarely asked questions of any potency. It was either an exaggerated concern for others’ privacy or she simply didn’t care much about much. I’ll let you guess which option I favored.

“Can I get you something to drink, Camille? Alan and I were just having amaretto sours.” She motioned to the glass in her hand. “I put just a little bit of Sprite in it, sharpens the sweet. But I also have mango juice, wine, and sweet tea, or ice water. Or soda water. Where are you staying?”

“Funny you ask that. I was hoping I could stay here. Just for a few days.”

A quick pause, her long fingernails, a transparent pink, clicked on her glass. “Well, I’m sure that’s fine. I wish you’d phoned. Just so I’d have known. I would have had dinner for you or something. Come say hello to Alan. We’re on the back porch.”

She began walking away from me, down the hallway—luminous white living rooms and sitting rooms and reading rooms blooming out on all sides—and I studied her. It was the first time we’d seen each other in almost a year. My hair was a different color—brown from red—but she didn’t seem to notice. She looked exactly the same, though, not much older than I am now, although she’s in her late forties. Glowing pale skin, with long blonde hair and pale blue eyes. She was like a girl’s very best doll, the kind you don’t play with. She was wearing a long, pink cotton dress with little white slippers. She was twirling her amaretto sour without spilling a drop.

“Alan, Camille’s here.” She disappeared into the back kitchen (the smaller of two) and I heard her crack a metal ice tray.

“Who?”

I peeked around the corner, offered up a smile. “Camille. I’m so sorry to drop in like this.”

You'd think a lovely thing like my mother was born to be with a big ex-football star. She would have looked just right with a burly, mustached giant. Alan was, if anything, thinner than my mother, with cheekbones that jutted out of his face so high and sharp his eyes turned to almond slivers. I wanted to administer an IV when I saw him. He overdressed always, even for an evening of sweet drinks with my mother. Now he sat, needly legs jutting out of white safari shorts, with a baby blue sweater draped over a crisp oxford. He sweated not at all. Alan is the opposite of moist.

"Camille. It's a pleasure. A real pleasure," he murmured in his monotone drawl. "All the way down in Wind Gap. Thought you had a moratorium on anything south of Illinois."

"Just working, actually."

"Work." He smiled. It was the closest to a question as I would get. My mother reappeared, her hair now pulled up in a pale blue bow, Wendy Darling all grown up. She pressed a chilled glass of fizzing amaretto into my hand, patted my shoulder twice, and sat away from me, next to Alan.

"Those little girls, Ann Nash and Natalie Keene," I prompted. "I'm covering it for my paper."

"Oh, Camille." My mother hushed me, looking away. When my mother is piqued, she has a peculiar tell: She pulls at her eyelashes. Sometimes they come out. During some particularly difficult years when I was a child, she had no lashes at all, and her eyes were a constant gluey pink, vulnerable as a lab rabbit's. In winter time, they leaked streaks of tears whenever she went outdoors. Which wasn't often.

"It's my assignment."

"Goodness, what an assignment," she said, her fingers hovering near her eyes. She scratched the skin just below and put her hand in her lap. "Aren't those parents having a difficult enough time without you coming here to copy it all down and spread it to the world? 'Wind Gap Murders Its Children'!—is that what you want people to think?"

"A little girl has been killed, and another is missing. It's my job to let people know, yes."

"I knew those children, Camille. I'm having a very hard time, as you

can imagine. Dead little girls. Who would do that?"

I took a slug of my drink. Granules of sugar stuck to my tongue. I was not ready to speak with my mother. My skin hummed.

"I won't stay long. Truly."

Alan refolded the cuffs of his sweater, smoothed his hand down the crease of his shorts. His contribution to our conversations generally came in the form of adjustments: a collar tucked in, a leg recrossed.

"I just can't have that kind of talk around me," my mother said. "About hurt children. Just don't tell me what you're doing, don't talk about anything you know. I'll pretend you're here for summer break." She traced the braided wicker of Alan's chair with her fingertip.

"How's Amma?" I asked to change the subject.

"Amma?" My mother looked alarmed, as if she suddenly remembered she'd left her child somewhere. "She's fine, she's upstairs asleep. Why do you ask?"

I knew from the footsteps I heard scampering up and down the second floor—from the playroom to the sewing room to the hall window that gave the best spying vantage of the back porch—that Amma was certainly not asleep, but I didn't begrudge her avoiding me.

"Just being polite, Momma. We do that up north, too." I smiled to show I was teasing her, but she buried her face into her drink. Came back up pink and resolute.

"Stay as long as you want, Camille, really," she said. "But you will have to be kind to your sister. Those girls were her schoolmates."

"I look forward to getting to know her," I mumbled. "I'm very sorry for her loss." The last words I couldn't resist, but my mother didn't notice their bitter spin.

"I'll give you the bedroom next to the sitting room. Your old bedroom. It has a tub. I'll buy fresh fruit and some toothpaste. And steaks. Do you eat steak?"

**F**our hours of threadbare sleep, like lying in a bathtub with your ears half submerged. Shooting up in bed every twenty minutes, my heart pounding so hard I wondered if it was the beating that woke me. I

dreamt I was packing for a trip, then realized I'd laid out all the wrong clothes, sweaters for a summer vacation. I dreamt I'd filed the wrong story for Curry before I left: Instead of the item on miserable Tammy Davis and her four locked-up children, we'd run a puff piece about skin care.

I dreamt my mother was slicing an apple onto thick cuts of meat and feeding it to me, slowly and sweetly, because I was dying.

Just after 5 a.m. I finally threw off the covers. I washed Ann's name off my arm, but somehow, between dressing, brushing my hair, and dabbing on some lipstick, I'd written Natalie Keene in its place. I decided to leave it for luck. Outside, the sun was just rising but my car handle was already hot. My face felt numb from lack of sleep and I stretched my eyes and mouth wide, like a B-movie scream queen. The search party was set to reconvene at 6 a.m. for continued work in the woods; I wanted to catch a quote from Vickery before the day began. Staking out the police station seemed a good bet.

Main Street looked vacant at first, but as I got out of my car I could see two people a few blocks down. It was a scene that made no sense. An older woman was sitting in the middle of the sidewalk, legs splayed, staring at the side of a building, while a man was stooped over her. The woman was shaking her head manically, like a child refusing to feed. Her legs shot out at angles that had to hurt her. A bad fall? Heart attack, maybe. I walked briskly toward them and could hear their staccato murmuring.

The man, white hair and ruined face, looked up at me with milky eyes. "Get the police," he said. His voice came out crumpled. "And call an ambulance."

"What's wrong?" I started, but then I saw it.

Wedged in the foot-wide space between the hardware store and the beauty parlor was a tiny body, aimed out at the sidewalk. As if she were just sitting and waiting for us, brown eyes wide open. I recognized the wild curls. But the grin was gone. Natalie Keene's lips caved in around her gums in a small circle. She looked like a plastic baby doll, the kind with a built-in hole for bottle feedings. Natalie had no teeth now.

The blood hit my face fast, and a shimmer of sweat quickly covered my skin. My legs and arms went slack, and for a second I thought I

might smack the ground right next to the woman, who was now quietly praying. I backed up, leaned against a parked car, and put my fingers to my neck, willing my thumping pulse to slow. My eyes picked up images in meaningless flashes: The grimy rubber tip of the old man's cane. A pink mole on the back of the woman's neck. The Band-Aid on Natalie Keene's knee. I could feel her name glowing hotly under my shirtsleeve.

Then more voices, and Chief Vickery was running toward us with a man.

"Goddammit," Vickery grunted when he saw her. "Goddammit. Jesus." He put his face against the brick of the beauty parlor, and breathed hard. The second man, about my age, stooped next to Natalie. A loop of bruised purple circled her neck, and he pressed his fingers just above it to check for a pulse. A stalling tactic while he gathered his composure—the child was clearly dead. Big-shot detective from Kansas City, I guessed, the smug kid.

He was good, though, coaxing the woman out of her prayers and into a calm story of the discovery. The two were husband and wife, the owners of the diner whose name I couldn't remember the day before. Broussard. They were on their way to open for breakfast when they found her. They'd been there maybe five minutes before I came along.

A uniformed officer arrived, pulled his hands over his face when he saw what he'd been called for.

"Folks, we're going to need you to head to the station with the officer here so we can get some statements," Kansas City said. "Bill." His voice had a parental sternness to it. Vickery was kneeling by the body, motionless. His lips moved as if he might be praying, too. His name had to be repeated twice before he snapped back.

"I hear you, Richard. Be human for a second." Bill Vickery put his arms around Mrs. Broussard and murmured to her until she patted his hand.

I sat in a room the color of egg yolk for two hours while the officer got my story down. The whole time I was thinking about Natalie going to autopsy, and how I would like to sneak in and put a fresh Band-Aid on her knee.

### *Chapter Three*

**M**y mother was wearing blue to the funeral. Black was hopeless and any other color was indecent. She also wore blue to Marian's funeral, and so did Marian. She was astonished I didn't remember this. I remembered Marian being buried in a pale pink dress. This was no surprise. My mother and I generally differ on all things concerning my dead sister.

The morning of the service Adora clicked in and out of rooms on her heels, here spraying perfume, there fastening an earring. I watched and drank hot black coffee with a burnt tongue.

"I don't know them well," she was saying. "They really kept to themselves. But I feel all the community should support them. Natalie was such a darling. People were so kind to me when ..." Wistful downward glance. It may have been genuine.

I had been in Wind Gap five days and Amma was still an unseen presence. My mother didn't mention her. I'd also failed so far to get a quote from the Keenes. Nor had I gotten permission from the family to attend the funeral, but Curry wanted that coverage more than I'd ever heard him want anything, and I wanted to prove I could handle this. I figured the Keenes would never find out. No one reads our paper.

**M**urmured greetings and perfumed hugs at Our Lady of Sorrows, a few women nodding politely at me after they cooed over my mother (so *brave* of Adora to come) and shoved down to make room for her. Our Lady of Sorrows is a shiny '70s Catholic church: bronzy-gold and bejeweled, like a dime-store ring. Wind Gap is a tiny holdout of Catholicism in a region of booming Southern Baptists, the town having been founded by a pack of Irish. All the McMahons and Malones landed in New York during the Potato Famine, got generously abused, and (if they were smart) headed west. The French already reigned in St. Louis, so they turned south and started their own towns. But they were unceremoniously pushed out years later during Reconstruction. Missouri, always a conflicted place, was trying to shed its southern roots, reinvent itself as a proper nonslave state, and the embarrassing Irish were swept out with other undesirables. They left their religion behind.

Ten minutes till the service, and a line was forming to gain entry to the church. I surveyed the crowded seat holders inside. Something was wrong. There was not one child in the church. No boys in dark trousers, rolling trucks over their mothers' legs, no girls cradling rag dolls. Not a face younger than fifteen. I didn't know if it was out of respect for the parents, or fear-driven defense. An instinct to prevent one's children from being picked as future prey. I pictured hundreds of Wind Gap sons and daughters tucked away in dark den rooms, sucking the backs of their hands while they watched TV and remained unmarked.

Without kids to tend to, the churchgoers seemed static, like paperboard cutouts holding the places of real people. In the back, I could see Bob Nash in a dark suit. Still no wife. He nodded at me, then frowned.

**T**he organ pipes exhaled the muffled tones of "Be Not Afraid," and Natalie Keene's family, until then crying, and hugging, and fussing near the door like one massive failing heart, filed tightly together. Only two men were needed to carry the shiny white coffin. Any more and they would have been bumping into each other.

Natalie's mother and father led the procession. She was three inches taller than he, a large, warm-looking woman with sandy hair held back with a headband. She had an open face, the kind that would prompt strangers to ask for directions or the time. Mr. Keene was small and thin, with a round child's face made rounder by wire spectacles that looked like two gold bike wheels. Behind them walked a beautiful boy of eighteen or nineteen, his brunette head bowed into his chest, sobbing. Natalie's brother, a woman whispered behind me.

Tears ran down my mother's cheeks and dripped loudly onto the leather purse she held in her lap. The woman next to her patted her hand. I slipped my notepad from my jacket pocket and began scribbling notes to one side until my mother slapped her hand on mine and hissed, "You are being disrespectful and embarrassing. Stop or I will make you leave."

I quit writing but kept the pad out, feeling stabbingly defiant. But still blushing.

The procession moved past us. The coffin seemed ludicrously small.

I pictured Natalie inside and could see her legs again—downy hair, knobby knees, the Band-Aid. I ached once, hard, like a period typed at the end of a sentence.

As the priest murmured the opening prayers in his best vestments, and we stood and sat, and stood again, prayer cards were distributed. On the front, the Virgin Mary beamed her bright red heart down on baby Jesus. On the back was printed:

Natalie Jane Keene

Darling daughter, sister and friend

Heaven has a new angel

A large photo of Natalie perched near the coffin, a more formal photo than the one I'd seen before. She was a sweet, homely little thing, with a pointy chin and slightly bulbous eyes, the kind of girl who might have grown up to be strangely striking. She could have delighted men with ugly-duckling stories that were actually true. Or she might have remained a sweet, homely little thing. At ten, a girl's looks are fickle.

Natalie's mother made her way to the podium, clutching a piece of paper. Her face was wet, but her voice was solid when she began speaking.

"This is a letter to Natalie, my only daughter." She took a shaky breath and the words streamed out. "Natalie, you were my dearest girl. I can't believe you have been taken from us. Never again will I sing you to sleep or tickle your back with my fingers. Never again will your brother get to twirl your pigtails, or your father hold you on his lap. Your father will not walk you down the aisle. Your brother will never be an uncle. We will miss you at our Sunday dinners and our summer vacations. We will miss your laughter. We will miss your tears. Mostly, my dear daughter, we will miss you. We love you, Natalie."

As Mrs. Keene walked back to her seat, her husband rushed up to her, but she seemed to need no steadying. As soon as she sat down, the boy was back in her arms, crying in the crook of her neck. Mr. Keene blinked angrily at the church pews behind him, as if looking for someone to hit.

"It is a terrible tragedy to lose a child," intoned the priest. "It is

doubly terrible to lose her to such evil doings. For evil is what they are. The Bible says, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But let us not dwell on revenge. Let us think instead of what Jesus urged: Love thy neighbor. Let us be good to our neighbors in this difficult time. Lift up your hearts to God."

"I liked the eye for an eye stuff better," grumbled a man behind me.

I wondered if the tooth for a tooth part disturbed anyone else.

When we emerged from the church into the day's glare, I could make out four girls sitting in a row along a stumpy wall across the street. Long colt legs dangling down. Breasts rounded out by pushup bras. The same girls I'd run into at the edge of the forest. They were huddled together laughing until one of them, again the prettiest, motioned over at me, and they all pretended to hang their heads. Their stomachs were still jiggling, though.

**N**atalie was buried in the family plot, next to a gravestone that already bore her parents' names. I know the wisdom, that no parents should see their child die, that such an event is like nature spun backward. But it's the only way to truly keep your child. Kids grow up, they forge more potent allegiances. They find a spouse or a lover. They will not be buried with you. The Keenes, however, will remain the purest form of family. Underground.

**A**fter the funeral, people gathered at the Keene home, a massive stone farmhouse, a moneyed vision of pastoral America. It was like nothing else in Wind Gap. Missouri money distances itself from bucolicry, from such country quaintness. Consider: In colonial America, wealthy women wore subtle shades of blues and grays to counter their crass New World image, while their wealthy counterparts in England tarted up like exotic birds. In short, the Keene home looked too Missouri to be owned by Missourians.

The buffet table held mainly meats: turkey and ham, beef and venison. There were pickles and olives and deviled eggs; shiny, hard rolls; and crusted casseroles. The guests segregated themselves into two groups, the tearful and the dry. The stoics stood in the kitchen, drinking coffee and liquor and talking about upcoming city-council elections and the future of the schools, occasionally pausing to

whisper angrily about the lack of progress in the murder cases.

“I swear I see someone I don’t know coming near my girls, I’ll shoot the sumbitch before ‘Hello’ comes out his mouth,” said one spade-faced man, flapping a roast beef sandwich. His friends nodded in agreement.

“I don’t know why the hell Vickery hasn’t emptied out the forest—hell, raze the whole goddam thing. You know he’s in there,” said a younger man with orange hair.

“Donnie, I’ll go out there tomorrow with you,” said the spade-faced man. “We can just take it acre by acre. We’ll find the son of a bitch. Ya’ll wanna come?” The men muttered assents and drank more liquor from their plastic cups. I made a note to cruise past the roads near the forest in the morning, to see if hangovers had given way to action or not. But I could already picture the sheepish phone calls in the morning:

*You going?*

*Well, I don’t know, I guess, you?*

*Well, I promised Maggie I’d take down the storm windows....*

Agreements to meet for beers later, and the receivers compressed very slowly to muffle the guilty click.

Those who wept, mostly women, did so in the front room, on plush sofas and leather ottomans. Natalie’s brother was there shaking in the arms of his mother, as she rocked him and cried silently, patting down his dark hair. Sweet kid, to cry so openly. I’d never seen such a thing. Ladies came by with paper-plate offerings of food, but mother and son just shook their heads no. My mother fluttered around them like a manic bluejay, but they took no notice, and soon she was off to her circle of friends. Mr. Keene stood in a corner with Mr. Nash, both of them smoking silently.

Recent evidence of Natalie was still scattered around the room. A small gray sweater folded over the back of a chair, a pair of tennis shoes with bright blue laces by the door. On one of the bookshelves sat a spiral notebook with a unicorn on the front, in a magazine rack was a dog-eared copy of *A Wrinkle in Time*.

I was rotten. I didn’t approach the family, didn’t announce myself. I

walked through their home and I spied, my head down in my beer like a shamed ghost. I saw Katie Lacey, my old best friend from Calhoon High, in her own well-coiffed circle, the exact mirror of my mother's group, minus twenty years. She kissed me on the cheek when I approached.

"Heard you were in town, was hoping you'd phone," she said, wrinkling her thinly plucked eyebrows at me, then passing me off to the three other women, all of whom crowded in to give me limp hugs. All of whom had been my friends at one point, I suppose. We exchanged condolences and murmured about how sad this was. Angie Papermaker (née Knightley) looked like she was still battling the bulimia that'd whittled her down in high school—her neck was as thin and ropy as an old woman's. Mimi, a spoiled rich girl (Daddy owned acres of chicken lots down in Arkansas) who'd never liked me much, asked about Chicago and then immediately turned to talk to tiny little Tish, who had decided to hold my hand in a comforting but peculiar gesture.

Angie announced to me that she had a five-year-old daughter—her husband was at home with his gun, watching over her.

"It's going to be a long summer for the little ones," Tish murmured. "I think everyone's keeping their babies under lock and key." I thought about the girls I'd seen outside the funeral, not much older than Natalie, and wondered why their parents weren't worried.

"You have kids, Camille?" Angie asked in a voice as thin as her body. "I don't even know if you're married."

"No and no," I said, and took a slurp of my beer, flashing an image of Angie vomiting at my house after school, emerging from the bathroom pink and triumphant. Curry was wrong: Being an insider here was more distracting than useful.

"Ladies, you can't hog the out-of-towner all night!" I turned to see one of my mother's friends, Jackie O'Neele (née O'Keefe), who'd clearly just had a facelift. Her eyes were still puffy and her face was moist and red and stretched, as if she was an angry baby squeezing out of the womb. Diamonds flashed on her tanned fingers, and she smelled of Juicy Fruit and talc when she hugged me. The evening was feeling too much like a reunion. And I was feeling too much like a kid again—I hadn't even dared to pull out my notebook with my mother

still here, shooting me warning glances.

“Baby girl, you look so pretty,” Jackie purred. She had a melon of a head, covered with overbleached hair, and a leering smile. Jackie was catty and shallow, but she was always completely herself. She also was more at ease with me than my own mother. It was Jackie, not Adora, who slipped me my first box of tampons, winking that I should phone her if I needed instructions, and Jackie who’d always teased me merrily about boys. Small huge gestures. “How are you, darling? Your momma didn’t tell me you were in town. But your momma isn’t talking to me right now—I disappointed her again somehow. You know how that goes. I *know* you know!” She let out a rocky smoker’s laugh and squeezed my arm. I assumed she was drunk.

“I probably forgot to send her a card for something,” she babbled on, overgesturing with the hand that held a glass of wine. “Or maybe that gardener I recommended didn’t please her. I heard you’re doing a story about *the girls*; that’s just rough.” Her conversation was so bumpy and abrupt it took me a minute to process everything. By the time I started to speak, she was caressing my arm and staring at me with wet eyes. “Camille, baby, it’s been so damn long since I’ve seen you. And now—I look at you and I see you when you were the same age as those girls. And I just feel so sad. So much has gone wrong. I can’t make sense of it.” A tear trailed down her cheek. “Look me up, okay? We can talk.”

I left the Keene house with no quotes. I was already tired of talking, and I’d said very little.

**I** called the Keenes later, after I’d had more to drink—a to-go cup of vodka from their stash—and was safely segregated by phone lines. Then I explained myself and what I would write. It didn’t go well.

Here’s what I filed that night:

In tiny Wind Gap, Missouri, posters pleading for the return of 10-year-old Natalie Jane Keene were still hanging as they buried the little girl on Tuesday. A vibrant funeral service, at which the priest spoke of forgiveness and redemption, did little to calm nerves or heal wounds. That’s because the healthy, sweet-faced young girl was the second victim of what police presume to be a serial killer. A serial killer who’s targeting children.

“All the little ones here are sweethearts,” said local farmer Ronald J. Kamens, who assisted in the search for Keene. “I can’t imagine why this is happening to us.”

Keene's strangled body was discovered May 14, crammed into a space between two buildings on Wind Gap's Main Street. "We will miss her laughter," said Jeannie Keene, 52, mother of Natalie. "We will miss her tears. Mostly, we will miss Natalie."

This, however, is not the first tragedy Wind Gap, located in the boot heel of the state, has withstood. Last August 27, nine-year-old Ann Nash was found in an area creek, also strangled. She had been bicycling just a few blocks to visit a friend when she was abducted the night before. Both victims reportedly had their teeth removed by the killer.

The murders have left the five-person Wind Gap police force baffled. Lacking experience in such brutal crimes, they have elicited help from the Kansas City homicide division, which has sent an officer trained in the psychological profiling of murderers. Residents of the town (pop. 2,120) are, however, sure of one thing: The person responsible for the slayings is killing with no particular motive.

"There is a man out there looking for babies to kill," says Ann's father, Bob Nash, 41, a chair salesman. "There's no hidden drama here, no secrets. Someone just killed our little girl."

The removal of the teeth has remained a point of mystery, and clues thus far have been minimal. Local police have declined to comment. Until these murders are resolved, Wind Gap protects its own—a curfew is in effect, and neighborhood watches have sprung up over this once-quiet town.

The residents also try to heal themselves. "I don't want to talk to anyone," says Jeannie Keene. "I just want to be left alone. We all want to be left alone."

Hack work—you don't need to tell me that. Even as I e-mailed Curry the file, I was already regretting nearly everything about it. Stating that police presumed the murders were committed by a serial killer was a stretch. Vickery never said anything of the sort. The first Jeannie Keene quote I stole from her eulogy. The second I yanked from the vitriol she spewed at me when she realized my phone condolences were a front. She knew I planned to dissect her girl's murder, lay it out on butcher paper for strangers to chew on. "We all want to be left alone!" she yelled. "We buried our baby today. Shame on you." A quote nonetheless, a quote I needed, since Vickery was shutting me out.

Curry thought the piece was solid—not great, mind you, but a solid start. He even left in my overfried line: "A serial killer who's targeting children." That should have been cut, I knew it myself, but I craved the dramatic padding. He must have been drunk when he read it.

He ordered a larger feature on the families, soon as I could scrape it

together. Another chance to redeem myself. I was lucky—it looked like the *Chicago Daily Post* might have Wind Gap to ourselves for a bit longer. A congressional sex scandal was unraveling delightfully, destroying not just one austere House member, but three. Two of them women. Lurid, juicy stuff. More importantly, there was a serial killer stalking a more glamorous city, Seattle. Amid the fog and coffeehouses, someone was carving up pregnant women, opening their bellies, and arranging the contents in shocking tableaux for his own amusement. Thus it was our good fortune that reporters for this type of thing were out of commission. There was just me, left wretched in my childhood bed.

**I** slept late into Wednesday, sweaty sheets and blankets pulled over my head. Woke several times to phones ringing, the maid vacuuming outside my door, a lawn mower. I was desperate to remain asleep, but the day kept bobbing through. I kept my eyes closed and imagined myself back in Chicago, on my rickety slice of a bed in my studio apartment facing the brick back of a supermarket. I had a cardboard dresser purchased at that supermarket when I moved in four years ago, and a plastic table on which I ate from a set of weightless yellow plates and bent, tinny flatware. I worried that I hadn't watered my lone plant, a slightly yellow fern I'd found by my neighbors' trash. Then I remembered I'd tossed the dead thing out two months ago. I tried to imagine other images from my life in Chicago: my cubicle at work, my superintendent who still didn't know my name, the dull green Christmas lights the supermarket had yet to take down. A scattering of friendly acquaintances who probably hadn't noticed I'd been gone.

I hated being in Wind Gap, but home held no comfort either.

I pulled a flask of warm vodka from my duffel bag and got back in bed. Then, sipping, I assessed my surroundings. I'd expected my mother to pave over my bedroom as soon as I'd left the house, but it looked exactly as it was more than a decade before. I regretted what a serious teenager I'd been: There were no posters of pop stars or favorite movies, no girlish collections of photos or corsages. Instead there were paintings of sailboats, proper pastel pastorals, a portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt. The latter was particularly strange, since I'd known little about Mrs. Roosevelt, except that she was good, which at the time I suppose was enough. Given my druthers now, I'd prefer a

snapshot of Warren Harding's wife, "the Duchess," who recorded the smallest offenses in a little red notebook and avenged herself accordingly. Today I like my first ladies with a little bite.

I drank more vodka. There was nothing I wanted to do more than be unconscious again, wrapped in black, gone away. I was raw. I felt swollen with potential tears, like a water balloon filled to burst. Begging for a pin prick. Wind Gap was unhealthy for me. This home was unhealthy for me.

A quiet knock at the door, little more than a rattling gust.

"Yes?" I tucked my glass of vodka to the side of the bed.

"Camille? It's your mother."

"Yes?"

"I brought you some lotion."

I walked to the door a bit blurrily, the vodka giving me that first necessary layer to deal with this particular place on this particular day. I'd been good about booze for six months, but nothing counted here. Outside my door my mother hovered, peering in warily as if it were the trophy room of a dead child. Close. She held out a large pale green tube.

"It has vitamin E. I picked it up this morning."

My mother believes in the palliative effects of vitamin E, as if slathering enough on will make me smooth and flawless again. It hasn't worked yet.

"Thank you."

Her eyes scanned across my neck, my arms, my legs, all bared by the lone T-shirt I'd worn to bed. Then back with a frown to my face. She sighed and shook her head slightly. Then she just stood there.

"Was the funeral very hard on you, Momma?" Even now, I couldn't resist making a small conversational offering.

"It was. So much was similar. That little casket."

"It was hard for me, too," I nudged. "I was actually surprised how hard. I miss her. Still. Isn't that weird?"

"It would be *weird* if you didn't. She's your sister. It's almost as

painful as losing a child. Even though you were so young.” Downstairs, Alan was whistling elaborately, but my mother seemed not to hear. “I didn’t care much for that open letter Jeannie Keene read,” she continued. “It’s a funeral, not a political rally. And why were they all dressed so informally?”

“I thought the letter was nice. It was heartfelt,” I said. “Didn’t you read anything at Marian’s funeral?”

“No, no. I could barely stand, much less give speeches. I can’t believe you can’t remember these things, Camille. I’d think you’d be embarrassed to have forgotten so much.”

“I was only thirteen when she died, Momma. Remember, I was young.” Nearly twenty years ago, can that be right?

“Yes, well. Enough. Is there anything you’d like to do today? The roses are in bloom at Daly Park, if you’d like a walk.”

“I should go over to the police station.”

“Don’t say that while you’re staying here,” she snapped. “Say you have errands to run, or friends to see.”

“I have errands to run.”

“Fine. Enjoy.”

She padded away down the plush corridor, and I heard the stairs creak quickly downward.

I washed up in a cool, shallow bath, lights off, another glass of vodka balanced on the side of the tub, then dressed and entered the hallway. The house was silent, as silent as its century-old structure would allow. I heard a fan whirring in the kitchen as I stood outside to make sure no one was there. Then I slipped in, grabbed a bright green apple, and bit into it as I walked out of the house. The sky was cloudless.

**O**utside on the porch I saw a changeling. A little girl with her face aimed intently at a huge, four-foot dollhouse, fashioned to look exactly like my mother’s home. Long blonde hair drifted in disciplined rivulets down her back, which was to me. As she turned, I realized it was the girl I’d spoken to at the edge of the woods, the girl who’d been laughing with her friends outside Natalie’s funeral. The prettiest

one.

“Amma?” I asked, and she laughed.

“Naturally. Who else would be playing on Adora’s front porch with a little Adora house?”

The girl was in a childish checked sundress, matching straw hat by her side. She looked entirely her age—thirteen—for the first time since I’d seen her. Actually, no. She looked younger now. Those clothes were more appropriate for a ten-year-old. She scowled when she saw me assessing her.

“I wear this for Adora. When I’m home, I’m her little doll.”

“And when you’re not?”

“I’m other things. You’re Camille. You’re my half sister. Adora’s first daughter, before *Marian*. You’re Pre and I’m Post. You didn’t recognize me.”

“I’ve been away too long. And Adora stopped sending out Christmas photos five years ago.”

“Stopped sending them to you, maybe. We still take the dang pictures. Every year Adora buys me a red-and-green checked dress just for the occasion. And as soon as we’re done I throw it in the fire.”

She plucked a footstool the size of a tangerine from the dollhouse’s front room and held it up to me. “Needs repolstering now. Adora changed her color scheme from peach to yellow. She promised me she’d take me to the fabric store so I can make new coverings to match. This dollhouse is my fancy.” She almost made it sound natural, *my fancy*. The words floated out of her mouth sweet and round like butterscotch, murmured with just a tilt of her head, but the phrase was definitely my mother’s. Her little doll, learning to speak just like Adora.

“Looks like you do a very good job with it,” I said, and motioned a weak wave good-bye.

“Thank you,” she said. Her eyes focused on my room in the dollhouse. A small finger poked the bed. “I hope you enjoy your stay here,” she murmured into the room, as if she were addressing a tiny Camille no one could see.

I found Chief Vickery banging the dent out of a stop sign at the corner of Second and Ely, a quiet street of small houses a few blocks from the police station. He used a hammer, and with each tinny bang he winced. The back of his shirt was already wet, and his bifocals were slung down to the end of his nose.

“I have nothing to say, Miss Preaker.” *Bang.*

“I know this is an easy thing to resent, Chief Vickery. I didn’t really even want this assignment. I was forced into it because I’m from here.”

“Haven’t been back in years, from what I hear.” *Bang.*

I didn’t say anything. I looked at the crabgrass splurting up through a crack in the sidewalk. The *Miss* stung me a bit. I couldn’t tell if it was politeness I wasn’t accustomed to or a jab at my unmarried state. A single woman even a hair over thirty was a queer thing in these parts.

“A decent person would have quit before writing about dead children.” *Bang.* “Opportunism, Miss Preaker.”

Across the street, an elderly man clutching a carton of milk was shuffling half-steps toward a white clapboard house.

“I’m not feeling so decent right now, you’re right.” I didn’t mind gingering Vickery along a little bit. I wanted him to like me, not just because it would make my job easier, but because his bluster reminded me of Curry, who I missed. “But a little publicity might bring some attention to this case, help get it solved. It’s happened before.”

“Goddam.” He threw the hammer with a thud on the ground and faced me. “We already asked for help. Got some special detective from Kansas City down here, off and on for months. And he hasn’t been able to figure out one goddam thing. Says it might be some crazed hitchhiker dropped off the road here, liked the looks of the place, and stayed for near on a year. Well this town ain’t that big, and I sure as hell haven’t seen anyone looks like they don’t belong.” He glanced pointedly at me.

“We’ve got some pretty big woods around here, pretty dense,” I suggested.

“This isn’t some stranger, and I would guess you know it.”

“I would have thought you’d prefer it to be a stranger.”

Vickery sighed, lit a cigarette, put his hand around the sign post protectively. “Hell, of course I would,” he said. “But I’m not too dumb myself. Ain’t worked no homicide before, but I ain’t a goddam idiot.”

I wished then that I hadn’t sucked down so much vodka. My thoughts were vaporizing, I couldn’t hold on to what he was saying, couldn’t ask the right questions.

“You think someone from Wind Gap is doing this?”

“No comment.”

“Off record, why would someone from Wind Gap kill kids?”

“Got called out one time because Ann had killed a neighbor’s pet bird with a stick. She’d sharpened it herself with one of her daddy’s hunting knives. Natalie, hell, her family moved here two years ago because she stabbed one of her classmates in the eye with a pair of scissors back in Philadelphia. Her daddy quit his job at some big business, just so they could start over. In the state where his granddad grew up. In a small town. Like a small town don’t come with its own set of problems.”

“Not the least of which is everyone knows who the bad seeds are.”

“Damn straight.”

“So you think this could be someone who didn’t like the children? These girls specifically? Maybe they had done something to him? And this was revenge?”

Vickery pulled at the end of his nose, scratched his mustache. He looked back at the hammer on the ground, and I could tell he was debating whether to pick it up and dismiss me or keep talking. Just then a black sedan whooshed up next to us, the passenger-side window zipping down before the car even stopped. The driver’s face, blocked by sunglasses, peered out to look at us.

“Hey, Bill. Thought we were supposed to meet at your office right about now.”

“Had some work to do.”

It was Kansas City. He looked at me, lowering his glasses in a

practiced way. He had a flip of light brown hair that kept dropping over his left eye. Blue. He smiled at me, teeth like perfect Chiclets.

“Hi there.” He glanced at Vickery, who pointedly bent down to pick up the hammer, then back at me.

“Hi,” I said. I pulled my sleeves down over my hands, balled the ends up in my palms, leaned on one leg.

“Well, Bill, want a ride? Or are you a walking man—I could pick us up some coffee and meet you there.”

“Don’t drink coffee. Something you should’ve noticed by now. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“See if you can make it ten, huh? We’re already running late.” Kansas City looked at me one more time. “Sure you don’t want a lift, Bill?”

Vickery said nothing, just shook his head.

“Who’s your friend, Bill? I thought I’d met all the pertinent Wind Gappers already. Or is it ... Wind Gapians?” He grinned. I stood silent as a schoolgirl, hoping Vickery would introduce me.

*Bang!* Vickery was choosing not to hear. In Chicago I would have jabbed my hand out, announced myself with a smile, and enjoyed the reaction. Here I stared at Vickery and stayed mute.

“All right then, see you at the station.”

The window zipped back up, the car pulled away.

“Is that the detective from Kansas City?” I asked.

In answer, Vickery lit another cigarette, walked off. Across the street, the old man had just reached his top step.

## *Chapter Four*

Someone had spray-painted blue curlicues on the legs of the water tower at Jacob J. Garrett Memorial Park, and it was left looking oddly dainty, as if it were wearing crochet booties. The park itself—the last place Natalie Keene was seen alive—was vacant. The dirt from the baseball field hovered a few feet above the ground. I could taste it in the back of my throat like tea left brewing too long. The grasses grew tall at the edge of the woods. I was surprised no one had ordered them cut, eradicated like the stones that snagged Ann Nash.

When I was in high school, Garrett Park was the place everyone met on weekends to drink beer or smoke pot or get jerked off three feet into the woods. It was where I was first kissed, at age thirteen, by a football player with a pack of chaw tucked down in his gums. The rush of the tobacco hit me more than the kiss; behind his car I vomited wine cooler with tiny, glowing slices of fruit.

“James Capisi was here.”

I turned around to face a blond, buzz-cut boy of about ten, holding a fuzzy tennis ball.

“James Capisi?” I asked.

“My friend, he was here when she got Natalie,” the kid said. “James saw her. She was wearing her nightgown. They were playing Frisbee, over by the woods, and she took Natalie. It would’ve been James, but he decided to stay here on the field. So Natalie was the one right by the trees. James was out here because of the sun. He’s not supposed to be in the sun, because his mom’s got skin cancer, but he does anyway. Or he did.” The boy bounced the tennis ball, and a puff of dirt floated up around him.

“He doesn’t like the sun anymore?”

“He doesn’t like nothing no more.”

“Because of Natalie?”

He shrugged belligerently.

“Because James is a pussy.”

The kid looked me up and down, then suddenly threw the ball at me, hard. It hit my hip and bounced off.

He blurted out a little laugh. "Sorry." He scrambled after the ball, dove on top of it dramatically, then leapt up and hurled it against the ground. It bounced about ten feet in the air, then dribbled to a stop.

"I'm not sure I understood what you said. Who was wearing a nightgown?" I kept my eye on the bouncing ball.

"The woman who took Natalie."

"Wait, what do you mean?" The story I'd heard was that Natalie had been playing here with friends who left to go home one by one, and that she was assumed to have been abducted somewhere along her short walk home.

"James saw the woman take Natalie. It was just the two of them, and they were playing Frisbee, and Natalie missed and it went into the grasses by the woods, and the woman just reached out and grabbed her. Then they were gone. And James ran home. And he don't come out since."

"Then how do you know what happened?"

"I visited him once. He told me. I'm his buddy."

"Does James live around here?"

"Fuck him. I might go to my grandma's for the summer anyway. In Arkansas. Better'n here."

The boy threw the ball at the chain-link fence outlining the baseball diamond, and it lodged there, rattling the metal.

"You from here?" He began kicking dirt in the air.

"Yeah. I used to be. I don't live here anymore. I'm visiting." I tried again: "Does James live around here?"

"You in high school?" His face was deeply tanned. He looked like a baby Marine.

"No."

"College?" His chin was wet with spit.

"Older."

"I got to go." He hopped away backward, yanked the ball out of the fence like a bad tooth, turned around and looked at me again, waggled his hips in a nervous dance. "I got to go." He threw the ball

toward the street, where it bounced off my car with an impressive thunk. He ran after it and was gone.

I looked up *Capisi, Janel*, in a magazine-thin phone book at Wind Gap's lone FaStop. Then I filled a Big Mouth with strawberry pop and drove to 3617 Holmes.

The Capisi home sat on the edge of the low-rent section to the far east of town, a cluster of broken-down, two-bedroom houses, most of whose inhabitants work at the nearby pig factory-farm, a private operation that delivers almost 2 percent of the country's pork. Find a poor person in Wind Gap, and they'll almost always tell you they work at the farm, and so did their old man. On the breeding side, there are piglets to be clipped and crated, sows to be impregnated and penned, manure pits to be managed. The killing side's worse. Some employees load the pigs, forcing them down the gangway, where stunners await. Others grab the back legs, fasten the catch around them, release the animal to be lifted, squealing and kicking, upside down. They cut the throats with pointy slaughter knives, the blood spattering thick as paint onto the tile floors. Then on to the scalding tank. The constant screams—frantic, metallic squeals—drive most of the workers to wear earplugs, and they spend their days in a soundless rage. At night they drink and play music, loud. The local bar, Heelah's, serves nothing pork related, only chicken tenders, which are, presumably, processed by equally furious factory workers in some other crappy town.

For the sake of full disclosure, I should add that my mother owns the whole operation and receives approximately \$1.2 million in profits from it annually. She lets other people run it.

A tomcat was yowling on the Capisis' front porch, and as I walked toward the house, I could hear the din of a daytime talk show. I banged on the screen door and waited. The cat rubbed up against my legs; I could feel its ribs through my pants. I banged again, and the TV switched off. The cat stalked under the porch swing and cried. I traced the word *yelp* on my right palm with a fingernail and knocked again.

"Mom?" A child's voice at the open window.

I walked over, and through the dust of the screen could see a thin boy with dark curls and gaping eyes.

"Hi there, I'm sorry to bug you. Are you James?"

“What do you want?”

“Hi James, I’m sorry to bother you. Were you watching something good?”

“Are you the police?”

“I’m trying to help figure out who hurt your friend. Can I talk to you?”

He didn’t leave, just traced a finger along the window ledge. I sat down on the swing at the far end away from him.

“My name’s Camille. A friend of yours told me what you’d seen. A boy with real short blonde hair?”

“Dee.”

“Is that his name? I saw him at the park, the same park where you were playing with Natalie.”

“She took her. No one believes me. I’m not scared. I just need to stay in the house is all. My mom has cancer. She’s sick.”

“That’s what Dee said. I don’t blame you. I hope I didn’t scare you, coming by like this.” He began scraping an overlong fingernail down the screen. The clicking sound made my ears itch.

“You don’t look like her. If you looked like her, I’d call the police. Or I’d shoot you.”

“What did she look like?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve said it already. A hundred times.”

“One more time.”

“She was old.”

“Old like me?”

“Old like a mother.”

“What else?”

“She was wearing a white bed dress with white hair. She was just all white, but not like a ghost. That’s what I keep saying.”

“White like how?”

“Just like she’d never been outside before.”

“And the woman grabbed Natalie when she went toward the woods?” I asked it in the same coaxing voice my mother used on favored waitstaff.

“I’m not lying.”

“Of course not. The woman grabbed Natalie while y’all were playing?”

“Real fast,” he nodded. “Natalie was walking in the grass to find the Frisbee. And I saw the woman moving from inside the woods, watching her. I saw her before Natalie did. But I wasn’t scared.”

“Probably not.”

“Even when she grabbed Natalie, at first I wasn’t scared.”

“But then you were?”

“No.” His voice trailed off. “I wasn’t.”

“James, could you tell me what happened when she grabbed Natalie?”

“She pulled Natalie against her, like she was hugging her. And then she looked up at me. She stared at me.”

“The woman did?”

“Yeah. She smiled at me. For a second I thought it might be all right. But she didn’t say anything. And then she stopped smiling. She put her finger to her lips to be quiet. And then she was gone into the woods. With Natalie.” He shrugged again. “I’ve already told all this before.”

“To the police?”

“First to my mom, then the police. My mom made me. But the police didn’t care.”

“Why not?”

“They thought I was lying. But I wouldn’t make that up. It’s stupid.”

“Did Natalie do anything while this was happening?”

“No. She just stood there. I don’t think she knew what to do.”

“Did the woman look like anyone you’d seen before?”

“No. I told you.” He stepped away from the screen then, began

looking over his shoulder into the living room.

“Well, I’m sorry to bother you. Maybe you should have a friend come by. Keep you company.” He shrugged again, chewed on a fingernail. “You might feel better if you get outside.”

“I don’t want to. Anyway, we have a gun.” He pointed back over his shoulder at a pistol balanced on the arm of a couch, next to a half-eaten ham sandwich. Jesus.

“You sure you should have that out, James? You don’t want to use that. Guns are very dangerous.”

“Not so dangerous. My mom doesn’t care.” He looked at me straight on for the first time. “You’re pretty. You have pretty hair.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ve got to go.”

“Okay. Be careful, James.”

“That’s what I’m doing.” He sighed purposefully and walked away from the window. A second later I heard the TV squabble on again.

**T**here are eleven bars in Wind Gap. I went to one I didn’t know, Sensors, which must have blossomed during some flash of ’80s idiocy, judging by the neon zigzags on the wall and the mini dance floor in its center. I was drinking a bourbon and scribbling down my notes from the day when KC Law plopped down in the cushioned seat opposite me. He rattled his beer on the table between us.

“I thought reporters weren’t supposed to talk to minors without permission.” He smiled, took a gulp. James’s mother must have made a phone call.

“Reporters have to be more aggressive when the police completely shut them out of an investigation,” I said, not looking up.

“Police can’t really do their work if reporters are detailing their investigations in Chicago papers.”

This game was old. I went back to my notes, soggy from glass sweat.

“Let’s try a new approach. I’m Richard Willis.” He took another gulp, smacked his lips. “You can make your dick joke now. It works

on several levels.”

“Tempting.”

“Dick as in asshole. Dick as in cop.”

“Yes, I got it.”

“And you are Camille Preaker, Wind Gap girl made good in the big city.”

“Oh, that’s me all right.”

He smiled his alarming Chiclet smile and ran a hand through his hair. No wedding ring. I wondered when I began to notice such things.

“Okay, Camille, what do you say you and I call a *détente*? At least for now. See how it goes. I assume I don’t need to lecture you about the Capisi boy.”

“I assume you realize there’s nothing to lecture about. Why have the police dismissed the account of the one eyewitness to the kidnapping of Natalie Keene?” I picked up my pen to show him we were on record.

“Who says we dismissed it?”

“James Capisi.”

“Ah, well, there’s a good source.” He laughed. “I’ll let you in on a little something here, *Miss Preaker*.” He was doing a fairly good Vickery imitation, right down to twisting an imaginary pinky ring. “We don’t let nine-year-old boys be particularly privy to an ongoing investigation one way or another. Including whether or not we believe his story.”

“Do you?”

“I can’t comment.”

“It seems that if you had a fairly detailed description of a murder suspect, you might want to let people around here know, so they can be on the lookout. But you haven’t, so I’d have to guess you’d dismissed his story.”

“Again, I can’t comment.”

“I understand Ann Nash was not sexually molested,” I continued. “Is

that also the case with Natalie Keene?”

“Ms. Preaker. I just can’t comment right now.”

“Then why are you sitting here talking to me?”

“Well, first of all, I know you spent a lot of your time, probably work time, with our officer the other day, giving him your version of the discovery of Natalie’s body. I wanted to thank you.”

“My *version*?”

“Everyone has their own version of a memory,” he said. “For instance, you said Natalie’s eyes were open. The Broussards said they were closed.”

“I can’t comment.” I was feeling spiteful.

“I’m inclined to believe a woman who makes her living as a reporter over two elderly diner owners,” Willis said. “But I’d like to hear how positive you are.”

“Was Natalie sexually molested? Off the record.” I set down my pen.

He sat silent for a second, twirling his beer bottle.

“No.”

“I’m positive her eyes were open. But you were there.”

“I was,” he said.

“So you don’t need me for that. What’s the second thing?”

“What?”

“You said, ‘first of all ...’”

“Oh, right. Well, the second reason I wanted to speak with you, to be frank—a quality it seems you’d appreciate—is that I’m desperate to talk to a nontownie.” The teeth flashed at me. “I mean, I know you’re from here. And I don’t know how you did it. I’ve been here off and on since last August and I’m going crazy. Not that Kansas City is a seething metropolis, but there’s a night life. A cultural ... some culture. There’s people.”

“I’m sure you’re doing fine.”

“I’d better. I may be here for a while now.”

“Yes.” I pointed my notebook at him. “So what’s your theory, Mr. Willis?”

“That’s Detective Willis, actually.” He grinned again. I finished my drink in another swallow, began chewing on the stunted cocktail straw. “So, Camille, can I buy you a round?”

I jiggled my glass and nodded. “Bourbon straight up.”

“Nice.”

While he was at the bar, I took my ballpoint and wrote the word *dick* on my wrist in looping cursive. He came back with two Wild Turkeys.

“So.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me. “My proposal is that maybe we can just talk for a little bit. Like civilians? I’m really craving it. Bill Vickery isn’t exactly dying to get to know me.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Right. So, you’re from Wind Gap, and now you work for a paper in Chicago. *Tribune*?”

“*Daily Post*.”

“Don’t know that one.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“That high on it, huh?”

“It’s fine. It’s just fine.” I wasn’t in the mood to be charming, not even sure I’d remember the drill. Adora is the schmoozer in the family—even the guy who sprays for termites once a year sends doting Christmas cards.

“You’re not giving me a lot to work with here, Camille. If you want me to leave, I will.”

I didn’t, in truth. He was nice to look at, and his voice made me feel less ragged. It didn’t hurt that he didn’t belong here either.

“I’m sorry, I’m being curt. Been a rocky reentry. Writing about all this doesn’t help.”

“How long since you’ve been back?”

“Years. Eight to be precise.”

“But you still have family here.”

“Oh, yes. Fervent Wind Gapians. I think that’s the preferred term, in answer to your question earlier today.”

“Ah, thanks. I’d hate to insult the nice people around here. More than I already have. So your folks like it here?”

“Mm-hmm. They’d never dream of leaving here. Too many friends. Too perfect a house. Etcetera.”

“Both your parents were born here then?”

A table of familiar guys about my age plopped down at a nearby booth, each sloshing a pitcher of beer. I hoped they wouldn’t see me.

“My mom was. My stepdad’s from Tennessee. He moved here when they got married.”

“When was that?”

“Almost thirty years ago, I’d guess.” I tried to slow my drinking down so I didn’t outpace him.

“And your father?”

I smiled pointedly. “You raised in Kansas City?”

“Yep. Never dream of leaving. Too many friends. Too perfect a house. Etcetera.”

“And being a cop there is ... good?”

“You see some action. Enough so I won’t turn into Vickery. Last year I did some high-profile stuff. Murders mostly. And we got a guy who was serially assaulting women around town.”

“Rape?”

“No. He straddled them and then reached inside their mouths, scratched their throats to pieces.”

“Jesus.”

“We caught him. He was a middle-aged liquor salesman who lived with his mother, and still had tissue from the last woman’s throat under his fingernails. Ten *days* after the attack.”

I wasn’t clear if he was bemoaning the guy’s stupidity or his poor hygiene.

“Good.”

“And now I’m here. Smaller town, but bigger proving grounds. When Vickery first phoned us, the case wasn’t that big yet, so they sent someone mid-range on the totem pole. Me.” He smiled, almost self-effacingly. “Then it turned into a serial. They’re letting me keep the case for now—with the understanding that I’d better not screw up.”

His situation sounded familiar.

“It’s strange to get your big break based on something so horrible,” he continued. “But you must know about that—what kind of stories do you cover in Chicago?”

“I’m on the police beat, so probably the same kind of junk you see: abuse, rape, murder.” I wanted him to know I had horror stories, too. Foolish, but I indulged. “Last month it was an eighty-two-year-old man. Son killed him, then left him in a bathtub of Drano to dissolve. Guy confessed, but, of course, couldn’t come up with a reason for doing it.”

I was regretting using the word *junk* to describe abuse, rape, and murder. Disrespectful.

“Sounds like we’ve both seen some ugly things,” Richard said.

“Yes.” I twirled my drink, had nothing to say.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

He studied me. The bartender switched the house lights to low, an official signal of nighttime hours.

“We could catch a movie sometime.” He said it in a conciliatory tone, as if an evening at the local cineplex might make everything work out for me.

“Maybe.” I swallowed the rest of my drink. “Maybe.”

He peeled the label off the empty beer bottle next to him and smoothed it out onto the table. Messy. A sure sign he’d never worked in a bar.

“Well, Richard, thank you for the drink. I’ve got to get home.”

“It was nice talking with you, Camille. Can I walk you to your car?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“You okay to drive? I promise, I’m not being a cop.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. Have good dreams.”

“You too. Next time, I want something on record.”

**A**lan, Adora, and Amma were all gathered in the living room when I returned. The scene was startling, it was so much like the old days with Marian. Amma and my mother sat on the couch, my mother cradling Amma—in a woolen nightgown despite the heat—as she held an ice cube to her lips. My half sister stared up at me with blank contentment, then went back to playing with a glowing mahogany dinner table, exactly like the one in the next room, except that it was about four inches high.

“Nothing to worry about,” Alan said, looking up from a newspaper. “Amma’s just got the summer chills.”

I felt a shot of alarm, then annoyance: I was sinking back into old routines, about to run to the kitchen to heat some tea, just like I always did for Marian when she was sick. I was about to linger near my mother, waiting for her to put an arm around me, too. My mother and Amma said nothing. My mother didn’t even look up at me, just nuzzled Amma in closer to her, and cooed into her ear.

“We Crellins run a bit delicate,” Alan said somewhat guiltily. The doctors in Woodberry, in fact, probably saw a Crellin a week—both my mother and Alan were sincere overreactors when it came to their health. When I was a child, I remember my mother trying to prod me with ointments and oils, homemade remedies and homeopathic nonsense. I sometimes took the foul solutions, more often refused. Then Marian got sick, really sick, and Adora had more important things to do than coaxing me into swallowing wheat-germ extract. Now I had a pang: all those syrups and tablets she proffered, and I rejected. That was the last time I had her full attention as a mother. I suddenly wished I’d been easier.

The Crellins. Everyone here was a Crellin but me, I thought childishly.

“I’m sorry you’re sick, Amma,” I said.

“The pattern on the legs is wrong,” Amma whined abruptly. She held the table up to my mother, indignant.

“You’ve got such eyes, Amma,” Adora said, squinting at the miniature. “But it’s barely noticeable, baby. Only you will ever know.” She smoothed back Amma’s damp hairline.

“I can’t have it wrong,” Amma said, glaring at it. “We have to send it back. What’s the point of getting it special-made if it’s not right?”

“Darling, I promise you, you can’t even tell.” My mother patted Amma’s cheek, but she was already standing up.

“You said it would all be perfect. You promised!” Her voice wavered and tears started dripping down her face. “Now it’s ruined. The whole thing is ruined. It’s the dining room—it can’t have a table that doesn’t match. I hate it!”

“Amma ...” Alan folded his paper and went to put his arms around her, but she wrenched away.

“This is all I want, it’s all I asked for, and you don’t even care that it’s wrong!” she was screaming through her tears now, a full-blown tantrum, her face mottled in anger.

“Amma, calm yourself,” Alan said coolly, trying to get a hold of her again.

“It’s all I want!” Amma yelled, and smashed the table on the floor, where it cracked into five shards. She hit it until it was in pieces, then buried her face in the sofa cushion and wailed.

“Well,” my mother said. “Looks like we’ll have to get a new one now.”

I retreated to my room, away from that horrible little girl, who was not like Marian at all. My body was heading into a flare. I paced a bit, tried to remember how to breathe right, how to calm my skin. But it blared at me. Sometimes my scars have a mind of their own.

**I** am a cutter, you see. Also a snipper, a slicer, a carver, a jabber. I am a very special case. I have a purpose. My skin, you see, screams. It’s covered with words—*cook, cupcake, kitty, curls*—as if a knife-wielding first-grader learned to write on my flesh. I sometimes, but only

sometimes, laugh. Getting out of the bath and seeing, out of the corner of my eye, down the side of a leg: *baby-doll*. Pulling on a sweater and, in a flash of my wrist: *harmful*. Why these words? Thousands of hours of therapy have yielded a few ideas from the good doctors. They are often feminine, in a Dick and Jane, pink vs. puppy dog tails sort of way. Or they're flat-out negative. Number of synonyms for anxious carved in my skin: eleven. The one thing I know for sure is that at the time, it was crucial to see these letters on me, and not just see them, but feel them. Burning on my left hip: *petticoat*.

And near it, my first word, slashed on an anxious summer day at age thirteen: *wicked*. I woke up that morning, hot and bored, worried about the hours ahead. How do you keep safe when your whole day is as wide and empty as the sky? Anything could happen. I remember feeling that word, heavy and slightly sticky across my pubic bone. My mother's steak knife. Cutting like a child along red imaginary lines. Cleaning myself. Digging in deeper. Cleaning myself. Pouring bleach over the knife and sneaking through the kitchen to return it. *Wicked*. Relief. The rest of the day, I spent ministering to my wound. Dig into the curves of *W* with an alcohol-soaked Q-tip. Pet my cheek until the sting went away. Lotion. Bandage. Repeat.

The problem started long before that, of course. Problems always start long before you really, really see them. I was nine and copying, with a thick polka-dotted pencil, the entire *Little House on the Prairie* series word by word into spiral notebooks with glowing green covers.

I was ten and writing every other word my teacher said on my jeans in blue ballpoint. I washed them, guiltily, secretly, in my bathroom sink with baby shampoo. The words smudged and blurred, left indigo hieroglyphics up and down the pant legs, as if a tiny ink-stained bird had hopped across them.

By eleven, I was compulsively writing down everything anyone said to me in a tiny blue notepad, a mini reporter already. Every phrase had to be captured on paper or it wasn't real, it slipped away. I'd see the words hanging in midair—Camille, pass the milk—and anxiety coiled up in me as they began to fade, like jet exhaust. Writing them down, though, I had them. No worries that they'd become extinct. I was a lingual conservationist. I was the class freak, a tight, nervous eighth-grader frenziedly copying down phrases (“Mr. Feeney is totally gay,” “Jamie Dobson is ugly,” “They never have chocolate milk”) with

a keenness bordering on the religious.

Marian died on my thirteenth birthday. I woke up, padded down the hall to say hello—always the first thing I did—and found her, eyes open, blanket pulled up to her chin. I remember not being that surprised. She'd been dying for as long as I could remember.

That summer, other things happened. I became quite suddenly, unmistakably beautiful. It could have fallen either way. Marian was the confirmed beauty: big blue eyes, tiny nose, perfect pointy chin. My features changed by the day, as if clouds floated above me casting flattering or sickly shadows on my face. But once it was settled—and we all seemed to realize it that summer, the same summer I first found blood speckling my thighs, the same summer I began compulsively, furiously masturbating—I was hooked. I was taken with myself, an incredible flirt in any mirror I could find. Unabashed as a colt. And people loved me. I was no longer the pity case (with, how weird, the dead sister). I was the pretty girl (with, how sad, the dead sister). And so I was popular.

It was that summer, too, that I began the cutting, and was almost as devoted to it as to my newfound loveliness. I adored tending to myself, wiping a shallow red pool of my blood away with a damp washcloth to magically reveal, just above my naval: *queasy*. Applying alcohol with dabs of a cottonball, wispy shreds sticking to the bloody lines of: *perky*. I had a dirty streak my senior year, which I later rectified. A few quick cuts and *cunt* becomes *can't*, *cock* turns into *back*, *clit* transforms to a very unlikely *cat*, the *l* and *i* turned into a teetering capital A.

The last word I ever carved into myself, sixteen years after I started: *vanish*.

Sometimes I can hear the words squabbling at each other across my body. Up on my shoulder, *panty* calling down to *cherry* on the inside of my right ankle. On the underside of a big toe, *sew* uttering muffled threats to *baby*, just under my left breast. I can quiet them down by thinking of *vanish*, always hushed and regal, lording over the other words from the safety of the nape of my neck.

Also: At the center of my back, which was too difficult to reach, is a circle of perfect skin the size of a fist.

Over the years I've made my own private jokes. *You can really read*

me. Do you want me to spell it out for you? I've certainly given myself a life sentence. Funny, right? I can't stand to look at myself without being completely covered. Someday I may visit a surgeon, see what can be done to smooth me, but now I couldn't bear the reaction. Instead I drink so I don't think too much about what I've done to my body and so I don't do any more. Yet most of the time that I'm awake, I want to cut. Not small words either. *Equivocate. Inarticulate. Duplicitous.* At my hospital back in Illinois they would not approve of this craving.

For those who need a name, there's a gift basket of medical terms. All I know is that the cutting made me feel safe. It was proof. Thoughts and words, captured where I could see them and track them. The truth, stinging, on my skin, in a freakish shorthand. Tell me you're going to the doctor, and I'll want to cut *worrisome* on my arm. Say you've fallen in love and I buzz the outlines of *tragic* over my breast. I hadn't necessarily wanted to be cured. But I was out of places to write, slicing myself between my toes—*bad, cry*—like a junkie looking for one last vein. *Vanish* did it for me. I'd saved the neck, such a nice prime spot, for one final good cutting. Then I turned myself in. I stayed at the hospital twelve weeks. It's a special place for people who cut, almost all of them women, most under twenty-five. I went when I was thirty. Just six months out. Delicate times.

Curry came to visit once, brought yellow roses. They chiseled off all the thorns before he was allowed into the reception room, deposited the shards in plastic containers—Curry said they looked like prescription bottles—which they locked away until the trash pickup came. We sat in the dayroom, all rounded edges and plush couches, and as we talked about the paper and his wife and the latest news in Chicago, I scanned his body for anything sharp. A belt buckle, a safety pin, a watch fob.

"I'm so sorry, my girl," he said at the end of his visit, and I could tell he meant it because his voice sounded wet.

When he left I was so sick with myself I vomited in the bathroom, and as I was vomiting, I noticed the rubber-covered screws at the back of the toilet. I pried the cap off one and sanded the palm of my hand—I—until orderlies hauled me out, blood splurting from the wound like stigmata.

My roommate killed herself later that week. Not by cutting, which

was, of course, the irony. She swallowed a bottle of Windex a janitor left out. She was sixteen, a former cheerleader who cut herself above the thigh so no one would notice. Her parents glared at me when they came to pick up her things.

They always call depression the blues, but I would have been happy to waken to a periwinkle outlook. Depression to me is urine yellow. Washed out, exhausted miles of weak piss.

The nurses gave us meds to alleviate our tingling skins. And more meds to soothe our burning brains. We were body searched twice weekly for any sharp objects, and sat in groups together purging ourselves, theoretically, of anger and self-hatred. We learned not to turn on ourselves. We learned to blame. After a month of good behavior, we earned silky baths and massages. We were taught the goodness of touch.

My only other visitor was my mother, who I hadn't seen in half a decade. She smelled of purple flowers and wore a jangling charm bracelet I coveted as a child. When we were alone, she talked about the foliage and some new town rule that required Christmas lights be taken down by January 15. When my doctors joined us, she cried and petted and fretted at me. She stroked my hair and wondered why I had done this to myself.

Then, inevitably, came the stories of Marian. She'd already lost one child, you see. It had nearly killed her. Why would the older (though necessarily less beloved) deliberately harm herself? I was so different from her lost girl, who—*think of it*—would be almost thirty had she lived. Marian embraced life, what she had been spared. Lord, she had soaked up the world—*remember, Camille, how she laughed even in the hospital?*

I hated to point out to my mother that such was the nature of a bewildered, expiring ten-year-old. Why bother? It's impossible to compete with the dead. I wished I could stop trying.

## *Chapter Five*

Alan was wearing white pants, the creases like folded paper, and a pale green oxford when I came down to breakfast. He sat alone at the massive mahogany dining-room set, his light shadow glowing in the polished wood. I peeked pointedly at the table legs to see what all the fuss of last night was about. Alan chose not to notice. He was eating milky eggs from a bowl with a teaspoon. When he looked up at me, a rubbery string of yolk swung like spit past his chin.

“Camille. Sit down. What can I have Gayla bring you?” He tinkled the silver bell next to him, and through the swinging kitchen door came Gayla, a former farm girl who ten years ago traded in pigs for daily work cleaning and cooking in my mother’s home. She was my height—tall—but couldn’t have weighed much more than a hundred pounds. The white starched nursing dress she wore as her uniform swayed loosely on her, like a bell.

My mother walked in past her, kissed Alan on the cheek, sat a pear in front of her place on a white cotton napkin.

“Gayla, you remember Camille.”

“Of course I do, Mrs. Crellin,” she said, pointing her vulpine face at me. Smiled with mismatched teeth and cracked, flaky lips. “Hi Camille. I have eggs, toast, fruit?”

“Just coffee please. Cream and sugar.”

“Camille, we picked up food just for you,” my mother said, nibbling on the plump end of the pear. “Have a banana at least.”

“And a banana.” Gayla headed back into the kitchen with a smirk.

“Camille, I must apologize to you for last night,” Alan started. “Amma is going through one of those stages.”

“She’s very clingy,” my mother said. “Mostly in a sweet way, but sometimes she gets a bit out of hand.”

“Or more than a bit,” I said. “That was a serious tantrum for a thirteen-year-old. It was a little scary.” That was the Chicago me coming back—more assured and definitely more mouthy. I was relieved.

“Yes, well, you weren’t exactly placid yourself at that age.” I didn’t

know what my mother meant—my cutting, my crying jags over my lost sister, or the overactive sex life I'd embarked on. I decided just to nod.

"Well, I hope she's okay," I said with finality, and stood up to leave.

"Please, Camille, sit back down," said Alan thinly, wiping the corners of his mouth. "Tell us about the Windy City. Spare us a minute."

"Windy City's fine. Job's still good, been getting good feedback."

"What comprises good feedback?" Alan leaned toward me, hands folded, as if he thought his question quite charming.

"Well, I've been doing some more high-profile stories. I've covered three murders just since the beginning of the year."

"And that's a good thing, Camille?" My mother stopped nibbling. "I will never understand where your penchant for ugliness comes from. Seems like you have enough of that in your life without deliberately seeking it out." She laughed: a shrill lilt, like a balloon lifted in a gust.

Gayla returned with my coffee and a banana wedged awkwardly in a bowl. As she exited, Amma entered, like two players in a drawing-room farce. She kissed my mother on the cheek, greeted Alan, and sat across from me. Kicked me once under the table and laughed. *Oh, was that you?*

"I'm sorry you had to see me that way, Camille," Amma said. "Especially since we don't really know each other. I'm just going through a stage." She flashed an overdone smile. "But now we're reunited. You're like poor Cinderella, and I'm the evil stepsister. Half sister."

"There's not a speck of evil in you, sweetheart," Alan said.

"But Camille was the first. First is usually best. Now that she's back, will you love Camille more than me?" asked Amma. She started the question teasingly, but her cheeks were flushed as she waited for my mother to respond.

"No," Adora said quietly. Gayla set a plate of ham in front of Amma, who poured honey on it in lacy circles.

"Because you love *me*," Amma said, between mouthfuls of ham. The sick smell of meat and sweetness wafted over. "I wish I'd be

murdered.”

“Amma, don’t say such a thing,” my mother said, blanching. Her fingers fluttered to her eyelashes, then back determinedly down on the table.

“Then I’d never have to worry again. When you die, you become perfect. I’d be like Princess Diana. Everyone loves her now.”

“You are the most popular girl in your whole school, and at home you are adored, Amma. Don’t be greedy.”

Amma kicked me again under the table and smiled emphatically, as if some important matter had been settled. She swung a corner of the garment she was wearing over her shoulder, and I realized what I’d thought was a housedress was a cleverly wrapped blue sheet. My mother noticed, too.

“What in the world are you wearing, Amma?”

“It’s my maiden cloak. I’m going to the forest to play Joan of Arc. The girls will burn me.”

“You’ll do no such thing, darling,” my mother snapped, grabbing the honey from Amma, who was about to soak her ham further. “Two girls your age are dead, and you think you’re going to the forest to play?”

*The children in the woods play wild, secret games.* The beginning of a poem I once knew by heart.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be fine.” Amma smiled in a cloying exaggeration.

“You’ll stay here.”

Amma stabbed at her ham and muttered something nasty. My mother turned to me with her head cocked, the diamond on her wedding finger flashing in my eyes like an SOS.

“Now, Camille, can we at least do something pleasant while you’re here?” she asked. “We could have a picnic in the backyard. Or we could take out the convertible, go for a drive, maybe play some golf over in Woodberry. Gayla, bring me some iced tea, please.”

“That all sounds nice. I just need to figure out how much longer I’m here for.”

“Yes, that’d be nice for us to know also. Not that you’re not welcome to stay as long as you want,” she said. “But it would be nice for us to know, so we could make our own plans.”

“Sure.” I took a bite of the banana, which tasted like pale green nothing.

“Or maybe Alan and I can come up there sometime this year. We’ve never really seen Chicago.” My hospital was ninety minutes south of the city. My mother flew into O’Hare and had a taxi drive her. It cost \$128, \$140 with tip.

“That’d be good, too. We have some great museums. You’d love the lake.”

“I don’t know that I can enjoy any kind of water anymore.”

“Why not?” I already knew.

“After that little girl, little Ann Nash, was left in the creek to drown.” She paused to take a sip of her iced tea. “I knew her, you know.”

Amma whined and began fidgeting in her seat.

“She wasn’t drowned though,” I said, knowing my correction would annoy her. “She was strangled. She just ended up in the creek.”

“And then the Keene girl. I was fond of both of them. Very fond.” She stared away wistfully, and Alan put his hand over hers. Amma stood up, released a little scream the way an excited puppy might suddenly bark, and ran upstairs.

“Poor thing,” my mother said. “She’s having nearly as hard a time as I am.”

“She actually saw the girls every day, so I’m sure she is,” I said peevishly in spite of myself. “How did you know them?”

“Wind Gap, I need not remind you, is a small town. They were sweet, beautiful little girls. Just beautiful.”

“But you didn’t really know them.”

“I did know them. I knew them well.”

“How?”

“Camille, please try not to do this. I’ve just told you that I am upset

and unnerved, and instead of being comforting, you attack me.”

“So. You’ve sworn off all bodies of water in the future, then?”

My mother emitted a quick, creaky sound. “You need to shut up now, Camille.” She folded the napkin around the remains of her pear like a swaddling and left the room. Alan followed her with his manic whistling, like an old-time piano player lending drama to a silent movie.

Every tragedy that happens in the world happens to my mother, and this more than anything about her turns my stomach. She worries over people she’s never met who have a spell of bad chance. She cries over news from across the globe. It’s all too much for her, the cruelty of human beings.

She didn’t come out of her room for a year after Marian died. A gorgeous room: canopy bed the size of a ship, vanity table studded with frosted perfume bottles. A floor so glorious it had been photographed by several decorating magazines: Made from pure ivory, cut into squares, it lit up the room from below. That room and its decadent floor had me awestruck, all the more so because it was forbidden to me. Notables like Truman Winslow, the mayor of Wind Gap, paid weekly visits, brought fresh flowers and classic novels. I could glimpse my mother on occasion when the door opened to admit these people. She’d be in bed always, propped up on a snowdrift of pillows, dressed in a series of thin, flowered robes. I never got to go in.

**C**urry’s deadline for the feature was only two days away, and I had little to report. Sitting in my room, spread formally on my bed with my hands clasped like a corpse, I summed up what I knew, forced it into structure. No one had witnessed the abduction of Ann Nash last August. She’d simply vanished, her body turning up a few miles away in Falls Creek ten hours later. She’d been strangled about four hours after she was taken. Her bike was never found. If forced to guess, I’d say she knew the person. Grabbing a child and her bike against her will would be a noisy business on those still streets. Was it someone from church, or even the neighborhood? Someone who looked safe.

But with the first murder committed cautiously, why take Natalie in the day, in front of a friend? It didn’t make sense. If James Capisi had

been standing at the edge of those woods, instead of guiltily sucking up sunrays, would he be dead now? Or had Natalie Keene been a deliberate target? She was held longer, too: She was more than two days missing before her body appeared, wedged in the twelve inches between the hardware store and a beauty parlor on the very public Main Street.

What did James Capisi see? The boy left me uneasy. I didn't think he was lying. But children digest terror differently. The boy saw a horror, and that horror became the wicked witch of fairy tales, the cruel snow queen. But what if this person simply looked feminine? A lanky man with long hair, a transvestite, an androgynous boy? Women didn't kill this way, they just didn't. You could count the list of female serial killers on one hand, and their victims were almost always male—generally sex business gone bad. But then the girls hadn't been sexually assaulted, and that also didn't fit the pattern.

The choice of the two girls also seemed senseless. If not for Natalie Keene, I'd believe they were victims of sheer dumb luck. But if James Capisi wasn't lying, effort had been made to get that girl at the park, and if it was indeed that particular girl the killer wanted, then Ann was not sheer caprice, either. Neither girl was beautiful in a way that would nurture obsession. Like Bob Nash had said, *Ashleigh's the prettiest*. Natalie came from a moneyed family, still fairly new to Wind Gap. Ann was on the low end of middle class, and the Nashes had been in Wind Gap for generations. The girls weren't friends. Their only connection was a shared viciousness, if Vickery's stories were to be believed. And then there was the hitchhiker theory. Could that really be what Richard Willis was thinking? We were near a major trucking route to and from Memphis. But nine months is a long time for a stranger to go unnoticed, and the surrounding woods of Wind Gap had yielded nothing so far, not even many animals. They were hunted out years ago.

I could feel my thoughts blowing back on themselves, dirtied with old prejudices and too much insider knowledge. I suddenly felt a desperate need to talk to Richard Willis, a person not from Wind Gap, who saw what was happening as a job, a project to assemble and complete, the last nail in place, tidy and contained. I needed to think like that.

I took a cool bath with the lights off. Then I sat on the edge of the

tub and rubbed my mother's lotion all over my skin, once, quickly. Its bumps and ridges made me cringe.

On went a pair of light cotton pants and a long-sleeved crew neck. I brushed my hair and looked at myself in the mirror. Despite what I'd done to the rest of my body, my face was still beautiful. Not in the way that a person could pick out a single outstanding feature, but in the way that it was all in perfect balance. It made a stunning sort of sense. Big blue eyes, high cheekbones framing a small triangle of a nose. Full lips that turned slightly downward at the corners. I was lovely to look at, as long as I was fully clothed. Had things turned out differently, I might have amused myself with a series of heart-wretched lovers. I might have dallied with brilliant men. I might have married.

Outside, our section of Missouri sky was, as ever, electric blue. It made my eyes water to even think of it.

**I** found Richard at the Broussards' diner, eating waffles without syrup, a stack of folders nearly as high as his shoulder on the table. I plopped down across from him and felt strangely happy—conspiratorial and comfortable.

He looked up and smiled. "Ms. Preaker. Have some toast. Every time I come here I tell them no toast. Doesn't seem to work. Like they're trying to meet a quota."

I took a slice, spread a flower of butter over it. The bread was cold and hard, and my bite sprayed flecks onto the table. I brushed them under the plate and got to the point.

"Look, Richard. Talk to me. On record or off. I can't make anything out of this. I can't get objective enough."

He patted the stack of files next to him, waved his yellow legal pad at me. "I've got all the objectivity you want—from 1927 on at least. No one knows what happened to any records before 1927. Probably some receptionist tossed them out, my guess, keep the poh-lice station uncluttered."

"What kind of records?"

"I'm compiling a criminal profile of Wind Gap, a history of the town's violence," he said, flapping a folder at me. "Did you know that

in 1975, two teenage girls were found dead at the edge of Falls Creek, very near where Ann Nash turned up, wrists cut? Police ruled it was self-inflicted. Girls were ‘overly close, unhealthily intimate for their age. A homosexual attachment is suspected.’ But they never found the knife. Weird.”

“One of them was named Murray.”

“Ah, you do know.”

“She’d just had a baby.”

“Yes, a little girl.”

“That would be Faye Murray. She went to my high school. They called her Fag Murray. The boys would take her out after school into the woods and take turns having sex with her. Her mother kills herself, and sixteen years later, Faye has to fuck every boy in school.”

“I don’t follow.”

“To prove she isn’t a lesbian. Like mother, like daughter, right? If she didn’t fuck those boys, no one would have had anything to do with her. But she did. So she proved she wasn’t a lesbian, but that she *was* a slut. So no one had anything to do with her. That’s Wind Gap. We all know each other’s secrets. And we all use them.”

“Lovely place.”

“Yes. Give me a comment.”

“I just did.”

It made me laugh, and I was surprised. I could picture turning in my copy to Curry: *Police have no leads, but believe that Wind Gap is a “lovely place.”*

“Look, Camille, I’ll make a deal. I’ll give you a comment you can use on the record, and you help me fill in these back stories. I need someone who’ll tell me what this town is really like, and Vickery won’t. He’s very ... protective.”

“Give me a comment on record. But work with me off record. I won’t use anything you give me unless you say it’s okay. You can use anything I give you.” It wasn’t the straightest of deals, but it would have to do.

“What should my comment be?” Richard smiled.

“Do you really believe these killings were committed by an outsider?”

“For print?”

“Yeah.”

“We have not ruled anyone out.” He took a last bite of waffle and sat thinking, his eyes to the ceiling. “We are looking very closely at potential suspects within the community, but are also carefully considering the possibility that these killings may be the work of an outsider.”

“So you have no clue.”

He grinned, shrugged his shoulders. “I gave you my comment.”

“Okay, off record, you have no clue?”

He clicked the cap of the sticky syrup bottle up and down a few times, placed his silverware crossways on his plate.

“Off record, Camille, do you really think this seems like an outsider crime? You’re a police reporter.”

“I don’t.” Saying it out loud agitated me. I tried to keep my eyes off the prongs of the fork in front of me.

“Smart girl.”

“Vickery said you thought it was a hitchhiker or something like that.”

“Oh, damn it, I mentioned that as a possibility when I first got here—nine months ago. He holds on to it like it’s proof of my incompetence. Vickery and I have communication issues.”

“Do you have any real suspects?”

“Let me take you for drinks this week. I want you to spill everything you know about everyone in Wind Gap.”

He grabbed the check, pushed the syrup bottle back against the wall. It left a sugary ring on the table, and without thinking, I dipped a finger into it, put it to my mouth. Scars peeked out of a shirtsleeve. Richard looked up just as I was putting my hands back beneath the table.

I didn't mind the idea of spilling Wind Gap's stories to Richard. I felt no particular allegiance to the town. This was the place my sister died, the place I started cutting myself. A town so suffocating and small, you tripped over people you hated every day. People who knew things about you. It's the kind of place that leaves a mark.

Although it's true that on the surface, I couldn't have been treated better when I lived here. My mother saw to that. The town loved her, she was like a cake topping: the most beautiful, sweet girl Wind Gap had ever raised. Her parents, my grandparents, had owned the pig farm and half the houses around it, and kept my mother under the same strict rules they applied to their workers: no drinking, no smoking, no cursing, church service mandatory. I can only imagine how they must have taken the news when my mother became pregnant at seventeen. Some boy from Kentucky who she met at church camp came for a Christmas visit and left me in her belly. My grandparents grew angry twin tumors to match my mother's expanding tummy, and were dead of cancer within a year of my birth.

My mother's parents had friends in Tennessee, and their son began wooing Adora before I was on solids, making visits nearly every weekend. I cannot picture this courtship as anything but awkward. Alan, pleated and pressed, elaborating on the weather. My mother, alone and untended for the first time in her life, in need of a good match, laughing at ... jokes? I'm not sure Alan has ever made a joke in his life, but I'm sure my mother found some reason to giggle girlishly for him. And where was I in this picture? Probably in some far corner room, kept quiet by the maid, Adora slipping her an extra five bucks for the trouble. I can imagine Alan, proposing to my mother while pretending to look over her shoulder, or fiddling with a plant, anything to avoid eye contact. My mother accepting graciously and then pouring him more tea. A dry kiss was exchanged, perhaps.

No matter. By the time I could talk, they were married. I know almost nothing about my real father. The name on the birth certificate is fake: Newman Kennedy, for my mother's favorite actor and president, respectively. She refused to tell me his true name, lest I hunt him down. No, I was to be considered Alan's child. This was difficult, as she soon had Alan's child, eight months after he married her. She was twenty, he was thirty-five, with family money that my

mother didn't need, having plenty of her own. Neither of them have ever worked. I've learned little else of Alan over the years. He's a ribbon-winning equestrian who doesn't ride anymore because it makes Adora nervous. He's often ill, and even when he's not, he's mostly immobile. He reads countless books on the Civil War and seems content to let my mother do most of the talking. He's as smooth and shallow as glass. Then again, Adora has never tried to forge a bond between us. I was considered Alan's child but never really fathered by him, never encouraged to call him anything but his proper name. Alan never gave me his last name and I never asked for it. I remember trying out *Dad* once when I was little, and the shock on his face was enough to scotch any further attempts. Frankly, I think Adora prefers us to feel like strangers. She wants all relationships in the house to run through her.

Ah, but back to the baby. Marian was a sweet series of diseases. She had trouble breathing from the start, would wake in the night spluttering for air, splotchy and gray. I could hear her like a sick wind down the hall from me, in the bedroom next to my mother. Lights would click on and there would be cooing, or sometimes crying or shouting. Regular trips to the emergency room, twenty-five miles away in Woodberry. Later she had trouble digesting and sat murmuring to her dolls in a hospital bed set up in her room, while my mother poured sustenance into her through IVs and feeding tubes.

During those last years, my mother pulled out all her eyelashes. She couldn't keep her fingers off them. She left little piles of them on tabletops. I told myself they were fairy nests. I remember finding two long blonde lashes stuck to the side of my foot, and I kept them for weeks next to my pillow. At night I tickled my cheeks and lips with them, until one day I woke to find them blown away.

By the time my sister finally died, I was grateful in a way. It seemed to me that she'd been expelled into this world not quite formed. She was not ready for its weight. People whispered comfort about Marian being called back to heaven, but my mother would not be distracted from her grief. To this day it remains a hobby.

**M**y car, faded blue, covered with bird crap, its leather seats sure to be steaming, didn't exactly beckon me, so I decided to take a turn around town. On Main Street, I passed the poultry shop, where

chickens are dropped off fresh from the Arkansas killing fields. The smell flared my nostrils. A dozen or more stripped birds hung lasciviously in the window, a few white feathers papering the ledge beneath them.

Toward the end of the street, where a makeshift shrine to Natalie had sprung up, I could see Amma and her three friends. They were sifting through the balloons and drugstore gifts, three standing guard while my half sister snatched up two candles, a bouquet of flowers, and a teddy bear. All but the bear went into her oversized purse. The teddy she held as the girls locked arms and skipped mockingly toward me. Straight at me actually, not stopping until they were an inch from me, filling the air with the kind of heavy perfume dispensed on powdered strips in magazines.

“Did you see us do that? Are you going to put it in your newspaper story?” Amma shrieked. She’d definitely gotten over her dollhouse tantrum. Such childish things, clearly, were left at home. Now she’d traded in her sundress and was wearing a miniskirt, platform sandals, and a tube top. “If you are, get my name right: Amity Adora Crellin. Guys, this is ... my sister. From Chicago. *The bastard of the family.*” Amma wiggled her eyebrows at me, and the girls giggled. “Camille, these are my loooovely friends, but you don’t need to write about them. I’m the leader.”

“She’s just the leader because she’s the loudest,” said a small honey-haired girl with a husky voice.

“And she has the biggest tits,” said a second girl, with hair the color of a brass bell.

The third girl, a strawberry blonde, grabbed Amma’s left breast, gave it a squeeze: “Part real, part padding.”

“Fuck off, Jodes,” Amma said, and as if disciplining a cat, smacked her on the jaw. The girl flushed splotchy red and muttered a sorry.

“Anyway, what’s your deal, sister?” Amma demanded, looking down at her teddy. “Why are you writing a story about two dead girls who no one noticed to begin with? Like getting killed makes you popular.” Two of the girls forced loud laughs; the third was still staring at the ground. A tear splashed on the sidewalk.

I recognized this provocative girl talk. It was the verbal equivalent

of farming my yard. And while part of me appreciated the show, I was feeling protective of Natalie and Ann, and my sister's aggressive disrespect raised my hackles. To be honest, I should add that I was also feeling jealous of Amma. (Her middle name was *Adora*?)

"I bet Adora wouldn't be happy to read that her daughter stole items from a tribute to one of her schoolmates," I said.

"Schoolmate isn't the same as friend," said the tall girl, glancing around for confirmation of my stupidity.

"Oh, Camille, we're just kidding," Amma said. "I feel horrible. They were nice girls. Just weird."

"Definitely weird," one of them echoed.

"Ohhh guys, what if he's killing all the freaks?" Amma giggled. "Wouldn't that be perfect?" The crying girl looked up at this and smiled. Amma pointedly ignored her.

"He?" I asked.

"Everyone knows who did it," the husky blonde said.

"Natalie's brother. Freaks run in families," Amma proclaimed.

"He's got a little-girl thing," the girl called Jodes said sulkily.

"He's always finding excuses to talk to me," Amma said. "At least now I know he won't kill me. Too cool." She blew an air kiss and handed the teddy to Jodes, looped her arms around the other girls, and, with a cheeky "Scuse," bumped past me. Jodes trailed behind.

In Amma's snideness, I caught a whiff of desperation and righteousness. Like she'd whined at breakfast: *I wish I'd be murdered*. Amma didn't want anyone to get more attention than her. Certainly not girls who couldn't compete when they were alive.

**I** phoned Curry near midnight, at his home. Curry does a reverse commute, ninety minutes to our suburban office from the single-family his parents left him in Mt. Greenwood, a working-class Irish enclave on the South Side. He and his wife, Eileen, have no children. Never wanted any, Curry always barks, but I've seen the way he eyes his staffers' toddlers from afar, what close attention he pays when a baby makes a rare appearance in our office. Curry and his wife married late. I guessed they'd been unable to conceive.

Eileen is a curvy woman with red hair and freckles that he met at his neighborhood car wash when he was forty-two. It turned out, later on, that she was a second cousin of his childhood best friend. They married three months to the day they first spoke. Been together for twenty-two years. I like that Curry likes to tell the story.

Eileen was warm when she answered the phone, which was what I needed. Of course they weren't asleep, she laughed. Curry was, in fact, working on one of his puzzles, 4,500 pieces. It had all but taken over the living room, and she had given him one week to complete it.

I could hear Curry rumble to the phone, could almost smell his tobacco. "Preaker, my girl, what gives? You okay?"

"I'm okay. There's just not a lot of headway down here. It's taken this long just to get an official police statement."

"Which is?"

"They're looking at everyone."

"Fah. That's crap. There's got to be more. Find out. You talk to the parents again?"

"Not yet."

"Talk to the parents. If you can't break anything, I want that profile on the dead girls. This is human-interest stuff, not just straight police reporting. Talk to other parents, too, see if they have theories. Ask if they're taking extra precautions. Talk to locksmiths and gun dealers, see if they're getting extra business. Get a clergyman in there or some teachers. Maybe a dentist, see how hard it is to pull out that many teeth, what kind of tool you'd use, whether you have to have some sort of experience. Talk to some kids. I want voices, I want faces. Give me thirty inches for Sunday; let's work this while we still have it exclusive."

I took notes first on a legal pad, then in my head, as I began outlining the scars on my right arm with my felt-tip pen.

"You mean before there's another murder."

"Unless the police know a damn lot more than they're giving you, there's going to be another, yeah. This kind of guy doesn't stop after two, not when it's this ritualistic."

Curry doesn't know a thing firsthand about ritualistic killings, but

he plows through a few low-grade true-crime books a week, yellowed paperbacks with glossy covers he picks up at his used bookstore. *Two for a buck, Preaker, that's what I call entertainment.*

“So, Cubby, any theories on whether it’s a local?”

Curry seemed to like the nickname for me, his favorite cub reporter. His voice always tickled when he used it, as if the word itself was blushing. I could picture him in the living room, eyeing his puzzle, Eileen taking a quick drag on his cigarette while she stirred up tuna salad with sweet pickles for Curry’s lunch. He ate it three days a week.

“Off record, they say yes.”

“Well, dammit, get them to say it on record. We need that. That’s good.”

“Here’s something strange, Curry. I talked to a boy who says he was with Natalie when she was taken. He said it was a woman.”

“A woman? It’s not a woman. What do the police say?”

“No comment.”

“Who’s the kid?”

“Son of a hog worker. Sweet boy. He seems really scared, Curry.”

“The police don’t believe him, or you’d’ve heard about it. Right?”

“I honestly don’t know. They’re tight here.”

“Christ, Preaker, break those boys. Get something on record.”

“Easier said. I kind of feel it’s almost a detriment that I’m from here. They resent me carpetbagging back home for this.”

“Make them like you. You’re a likable person. Your mom will vouch for you.”

“My mom’s not so happy I’m here, either.”

Silence, then a sigh from Curry’s end of the line that buzzed my ears. My right arm was a road map of deep blue.

“You doing okay, Preaker? You taking care of yourself?”

I didn’t say anything. I suddenly felt like I might cry.

“I’m okay. This place does bad things to me. I feel ... wrong.”

“You keep it together, girl. You’re doing real good. You’re going to be fine. And if you feel unfine, call me. I’ll get you out.”

“Okay, Curry.”

“Eileen says be careful. Hell, I say be careful.”

## *Chapter Six*

**S**mall towns usually cater to one kind of drinker. That kind may vary: There are the honky-tonk towns, which keep their bars on the outskirts, make their patrons feel a little bit outlaw. There are the upscale sipping-drink towns, with bars that overcharge for a gin ricky so the poor people have to drink at home. There are the middle-class strip-mall towns, where beers come with onion blossoms and cutely named sandwiches.

Luckily everyone drinks in Wind Gap, so we have all those bars and more. We may be small, but we can drink most towns under the table. The watering hole closest to my mother's home was an expensive, glassy box that specialized in salads and wine spritzers, Wind Gap's sole upscale eatery. It was brunch-time, and I couldn't stand the idea of Alan and his soupy eggs, so I walked myself over to La Mère. My French goes only to eleventh grade, but judging from the restaurant's aggressively nautical theme, I think the owners meant to name it La Mer, The Sea, and not La Mère, The Mother. Still, the name was appropriate, as The Mother, my mother, frequented this place, as did her friends. They all just love the chicken Caesar, which is neither French nor seafood, but I'm not going to be the one to press the point.

"Camille!" A blonde in a tennis outfit came trotting across the room, glowing with gold necklaces and chunky rings. It was Adora's best friend, Annabelle Gasser, née Anderson, nicknamed Annie-B. It was commonly known that Annabelle absolutely hated her husband's last name—she even crumpled up her nose when she said it. It never occurred to her that she didn't have to take it.

"Hi sweetheart, your momma told me you were in town." Unlike poor, Adora-ousted Jackie O'Neele, who I also spotted at the table, looking just as tipsy as she had at the funeral. Annabelle kissed both my cheeks and stepped back to assess me. "Still pretty-pretty. Come on, come sit with us. We're just having a few bottles of wine and gabbing. You can lower the age ratio for us."

Annabelle pulled me over to a table where Jackie sat chatting up two more blonde, tanned women. She didn't even stop talking while Annabelle made introductions, she just continued droning about her new bedroom set, then knocked over a glass of water as she jerked

back to me.

“Camille? You’re here! I’m so happy to see you again, sweetie.” She seemed sincere. That Juicy Fruit smell wafted off her again.

“She’s been here for five minutes,” snapped another blonde, wiping the ice and water onto the floor with a swipe of her dark hand. Diamonds flashed from two fingers.

“Right, I remember. You’re here covering the murders, bad girl,” Jackie continued. “Adora must hate that. Sleeping in her house with your dirty little brain.” She smiled a smile that must have been saucy twenty years ago. Now it seemed slightly mad.

“Jackie!” said a blonde, aiming bright saucer eyes at her.

“Course before Adora took it over, we all slept over at Joya’s house with our dirty little brains. Same house, different crazy lady running it,” she said to me, fingering the flesh behind her ears. Stitches from that facelift?

“You never knew your grandma Joya, did you, Camille?” purred Annabelle.

“Woo! She was a piece of work, sweetie,” said Jackie. “Scary, scary woman.”

“How so?” I asked. I’d never heard such detail about my grandmother. Adora allowed that she was strict, but said little else.

“Oh, Jackie’s exaggerating,” Annabelle said. “No one likes their mother when they’re in high school. And Joya was dead pretty soon after. They never really had time to establish an adult relationship.”

For a second I had a pitiful dash of hope, that this was why my mother and I were so distant: She had no practice. The idea was dead before Annabelle finished refilling my glass.

“Right, Annabelle,” Jackie said. “I’m sure if Joya were alive today, they’d have a grand old time. At least Joya would. She’d just love to tear at Camille. Remember those long, long nails of hers? Never painted them. I always thought that was weird.”

“Change of subject,” Annabelle smiled, each word like the tinkle of a silver dinner bell.

“I think Camille’s job must be so fascinating,” said one of the

blondes dutifully.

“Especially this one,” said another.

“Yeah Camille, tell us who did it,” blurted Jackie. She smiled leeringly again and clicked her round brown eyes open and shut. She reminded me of a ventriloquist dummy come alive. With hard skin and broken capillaries.

I had a few calls to make, but decided this could be better. A quartet of drunk, bored, and bitchy housewives who knew all the gossip of Wind Gap? I could write it off as a business lunch.

“Actually I’d be interested to know what you all think.” A sentence they couldn’t hear very often.

Jackie dipped her bread into a side dish of ranch dressing, then dripped it down her front. “Well you all know what I think. Ann’s daddy, Bob Nash. He’s a pervert. He always stares at my chest when I see him at the store.”

“What chest there is,” said Annabelle, and nudged me jokingly.

“I’m serious, it’s out of line. I’ve been meaning to tell Steven about it.”

“I’ve got yummy news,” said the fourth blonde. Dana or Diana? I forgot it as soon as Annabelle introduced us.

“Oh, DeeAnna always has good scoop, Camille,” Annabelle said, squeezing my arm. DeeAnna paused for effect, licked her teeth, poured herself another glass of wine, and peeked over it at us.

“John Keene has moved out of his parents’ house,” she announced.

“What?” said a blonde.

“You are joooking,” said another.

“My word,” gushed a third.

“And ...” said DeeAnna triumphantly, smiling like a game-show hostess about to bestow a prize. “Into Julie Wheeler’s home. The carriage house out back.”

“That is too good,” said Melissa or Melinda.

“Oh, you *know* they’re doing it now,” laughed Annabelle. “No way Meredith can keep her Little Miss Perfect thing going. See, Camille,”

she turned to me, “John Keene is Natalie’s big brother, and when that family moved here, the whole town went loony for him. I mean, he’s gorgeous. He. Is. Gorgeous. Julie Wheeler, she’s a friend of your momma’s and ours. Didn’t have babies till she was, like, thirty, and when she did, she became just insufferable. One of those people whose kids can do no wrong. So when Meredith—her daughter—snagged John, oh my God. We thought we’d never hear the end of it. Meredith, this A-student little virgin girl gets the Big Man on Campus. But no way a boy like that, his age, goes with a girl who isn’t putting out. Just doesn’t work that way. And now, it’s so convenient for them. We should get Polaroids and stick them under Julie’s windshield wipers.”

“Well, you know how she’s playing it,” Jackie interrupted. “It’s going to be all about how good they are to take John in and give him a little breathing room while he mourns.”

“Why is he moving out, though?” asked Melissa/Melinda, who I was starting to think was the voice of reason. “I mean, shouldn’t he be with his folks at a time like this? Why would he need breathing room?”

“Because *he’s* the killer,” DeeAnna blurted, and the table began laughing.

“Oh, that would be so delicious if Meredith Wheeler were giving it to some serial killer,” Jackie said. Suddenly the table stopped laughing. Annabelle emitted a sneezy hiccup and looked at her watch. Jackie rested her chin on her hand, breathed out hard enough to bluster the bread crumbs on her plate.

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” said DeeAnna, looking down at her nails. “In our town, where we grew up. Those little girls. It makes me feel sick to my stomach. Just sick.”

“I’m so glad my girls are grown up,” Annabelle said. “I just don’t think I’d be able to take it. Poor Adora must be worried sick about Amma.”

I nabbed a piece of bread in the birdy, girlish way of my hostesses, and steered the conversation away from Adora. “Do people really think John Keene could have had anything to do with it? Or is that just mean gossip?” I could feel myself spitting out the last part. I’d forgotten how unlivable women like these could make Wind Gap for

people they didn't like. "I ask only because a group of girls, probably junior-high-schoolers, said the same thing to me yesterday." I thought it best not to mention Amma was one of them.

"Let me guess, four little mouthy blonde things who think they're prettier than they are," Jackie said.

"Jackie, sweetheart, do you realize who you just said that to?" Melissa/Melinda said, slapping her hand on Jackie's shoulder.

"Oh shit. I always forget Amma and Camille are even related—different lifetimes, you know?" Jackie smiled. A hearty pop sounded behind her and she lifted her wineglass without even looking at the waiter. "Camille, you might as well hear it here: Your little Amma is truuuuble."

"I hear they come to all the high-school parties," DeeAnna said. "And take all the boys. And do things we didn't do till we were old married women—and then only after the transaction of a few nice pieces of jewelry." She twirled a diamond tennis bracelet.

They all laughed; Jackie actually pounded the table with both fists like a toddler in a fit.

"But do ..."

"I don't know if people really think John did it. I know the police talked to him," Annabelle said. "They're definitely a strange family."

"Oh, I thought you were close," I said. "I saw you at their house after the funeral." *You fucking cunts*, I added in my head.

"Everybody important in the town of Wind Gap was in that house after the funeral," DeeAnna said. "Like we were going to miss a function like that." She tried to start the laughter going again, but Jackie and Annabelle were nodding solemnly. Melissa/Melinda looked around the restaurant as if she could wish herself to another table.

"Where's your mamma?" Annabelle suddenly blurted. "She needs to come down here. Could do her good. She's been acting so strange since this all started."

"She was acting strange before this started, too," Jackie said, working her jaw. I wondered if she was going to vomit.

"Oh please, Jackie."

“I’m serious. Camille, let me say this: Right now, way things are with your mother, you’re better in Chicago. You should go back soon.” Her face had lost its manicness—she looked completely solemn. And genuinely concerned. I felt myself liking her again.

“Truly, Camille ...”

“Jackie, shut up,” Annabelle said, and threw a roll, hard, at Jackie’s face. It bounced off her nose and thumped onto the table. A silly flash of violence, like when Dee threw his tennis ball at me—you’re less shocked by the impact than the fact it happened at all. Jackie registered the hit with a wave of her hand and kept talking.

“I’ll say what I please, and I’m saying, Adora can harm ...”

Annabelle stood up and walked over to Jackie’s side, pulled her up by her arm.

“Jackie, you need to make yourself throw up,” she said. Her voice was a cross between a coo and a threat. “You’ve had too much to drink, and you’re going to feel real sick otherwise. Let me take you to the lady’s room and help make you feel better.”

Jackie smacked her hand away at first, but Annabelle’s grip tightened and the two soon tottered away. Silence at the table. My mouth hung open.

“That’s nothing,” DeeAnna said. “We old girls have little fights the same way you young girls do. So Camille, have you heard we might be getting a Gap?”

**J**ackie’s words stuck with me: *Way things are with your mother, you’re better in Chicago*. How much more of a sign did I need to leave Wind Gap? I wondered exactly why she and Adora had fallen out. Had to be more than a forgotten greeting card. I made a mental note to drop by Jackie’s when she was less looped. If she ever was. Then again, I was hardly the one to frown on a drinker.

Sailing on a nice wine buzz, I called the Nashes from the convenience store, and a quivering girl’s voice said hello and then went silent. I could hear breathing, but no answer to my requests to speak with Mom or Dad. Then a slow, sliding click before the line went dead. I decided to try my luck in person.

A boxy disco-era minivan sat in the Nash driveway next to a rusty

yellow Trans Am, which I assumed meant both Bob and Betsy were home. The eldest daughter answered the bell, but simply stood inside the screen door staring at my stomach when I asked if her folks were home. The Nashes were built tiny. This one, Ashleigh, I knew was twelve, but like the pudgy boy I'd met on my first visit, she looked several years younger than her age. And acted it. She sucked on her hair and hardly blinked when little Bobby waddled next to her and began crying at the sight of me. Then howling. A good minute went by before Betsy Nash came to the door. She looked as dazed as both her children, and seemed confused when I introduced myself.

"Wind Gap don't have a local daily paper," she said.

"Right, I'm from the *Chicago Daily Post*," I said. "Up in Chicago. Illinois."

"Well, my husband deals with purchases like that," she said, and began running her fingers through her son's blond hair.

"I'm not selling a subscription or anything.... Is Mr. Nash home? Maybe I could just chat with him real quick?"

All three Nashes moved away from the door en masse, and after another few minutes, Bob Nash had me ushered inside and was throwing laundry off the couch to make room for me to sit.

"Goddammit, this place is a pit," he muttered loudly toward his wife. "I apologize for the state of our home, Miss Preaker. Things have kinda gone to hell ever since Ann."

"Oh, don't worry about it at all," I said, pulling a pair of tiny boys' undies from beneath me. "This is what my place looks like all the time." This was the opposite of true. One quality I did inherit from my mother was a compulsive neatness. I have to stop myself from ironing socks. When I got back from the hospital, I even went through a period of boiling things: tweezers and eyelash curlers, bobby pins and toothbrushes. It was an indulgence I allowed myself. I ended up trashing the tweezers, though. Too many late-night thoughts about their shiny, warm points. Dirty girl, indeed.

I was hoping Betsy Nash would disappear. Literally. She was so insubstantial, I could imagine her slowly evaporating, leaving only a sticky spot on the edge of the sofa. But she lingered, eyes darting between me and her husband before we even began speaking. Like

she was winding up for the conversation. The children, too, hovered about, little blonde ghosts trapped in a limbo between indolence and stupidity. The pretty girl might do all right. But the piggy middle child, who now waddled dazedly into the room, was destined for needy sex and snack-cake bingeing. The boy was the type who'd end up drinking in gas-station parking lots. The kind of angry, bored kid I saw on my way into town.

"Mr. Nash, I need to speak some more with you about Ann. For a larger piece," I started. "You've been very kind with your time, and I was hoping to get a little bit more."

"Anything that might get this case a little attention, we don't mind," he said. "What do you need to know?"

"What kind of games did she like, what kind of foods did she like? What would be some words you'd use to describe her? Did she tend to be a ringleader or a follower? Did she have lots of friends or just a few close ones? How did she like school? What did she do on her Saturdays?" The Nashes stared at me in silence for a second. "Just for starters," I smiled.

"My wife would be the one to answer most of those questions," Bob Nash said. "She's the ... caregiver." He turned to Betsy Nash, who was folding and refolding the same dress on her lap.

"She liked pizza and fishsticks," she said. "And she had lots of girls she was friendly with, but only a few close friends, if you know what I mean. She played by herself a lot."

"Look, Mommy, Barbie needs clothes," said Ashleigh, wielding a naked plastic doll in front of her mother's face. All three of us ignored her, and she tossed the toy to the floor and began twirling around the room in fake ballerina moves. Seeing a rare chance, Tiffanie pounced on the Barbie and began splaying the rubbery tan legs open and shut, open and shut.

"She was tough, she was my toughest," Bob Nash said. "She could have played football if she'd been a boy. She'd knock herself silly just running around, always had scrapes and bruises."

"Ann was my mouth," Betsy said quietly. Then she said no more.

"How is that, Mrs. Nash?"

“She was a real talker, said whatever come into her mind. In a good way. Mostly.” She was silent again for a few beats, but I could see her thinking back behind her eyes so I said nothing. “You know, I thought maybe she’d be a lawyer or college debater or something someday, because she was just ... she never stopped to measure her words. Like me. I think everything I say is stupid. Ann thought everyone should hear everything she had to say.”

“You mentioned school, Miss Preaker,” interrupted Bob Nash. “That’s where her talkativeness got her in trouble. She could be a little bossy, and we got a few calls from her teachers over the years about her not taking too well to class. She was a little wild.”

“But sometimes I think it was because she was just so smart,” added Betsy Nash.

“She was whip smart, yup,” Bob Nash nodded. “Sometimes I thought she was smarter than her old man. Sometimes *she* thought she was smarter than her old man.”

“Look at me, Mommy!” Piggy Tiffanie, who had been chewing mindlessly on Barbie’s toes, ran to the center of the living room and began doing somersaults. Ashleigh, seized by some phantom anger, yelped at the sight of her mother’s attention on the second daughter, and gave her a hard shove. Then yanked her hair emphatically once. Tiffanie’s face split in a red wail, which started Bobby Jr. crying again.

“It’s Tiffanie’s *fault*,” Ashleigh screamed, and began whimpering also.

I had shattered some delicate dynamic. A multichild household is a pit of petty jealousies, this I knew, and the Nash children were panicking at the idea of competing not just with one another, but with a dead sister. They had my sympathies.

“Betsy,” muttered Bob Nash quietly, eyebrows slightly raised. Bobby Jr. was quickly scooped up and propped on a hip, Tiffanie pulled up from the floor with one hand, another arm around the now inconsolable Ashleigh, and soon the four were moving out of the room.

Bob Nash stared after them a beat.

“Been like that for almost a year now, those girls,” he said. “Them

acting like little babies. Thought they were supposed to be anxious to grow up. Ann being gone changes this home more than ...” He shifted on the sofa. “It’s just that she was a real *person*, you know? You think: Nine years old, what’s that? What’s there? But Ann had a *personality*. I could guess what she’d think about things. I knew, when we were watching TV, what stuff she’d think was funny and what stuff she’d think was dumb. I can’t do that with my other kids. Hell, I can’t do that with my wife. Ann, you just felt her *there*. I just ...” Bob Nash’s throat shut up on him. He stood and turned away from me, turned back once, then away, walked in a circle behind the couch, then stood in front of me. “Goddammit, I want her back. I mean, what now? Is this it?” He threw his hand around the room, toward the doorway where his wife and kids had exited. “Because if this is it, there ain’t much point is there? And goddammit, someone needs to find that man, because he needs to tell me: Why Ann? I need to know that. She was the one I’d always thought would do ok.”

I sat quiet for a second, could feel my pulse in my neck.

“Mr. Nash, it has been suggested to me that maybe Ann’s personality, which you mention was very strong, might have rubbed some people the wrong way. Do you think that could have anything to do with this?”

I could feel him get wary on me, see it in the way he sat down and deliberately leaned back onto the couch, spread his arms and pretended to be casual.

“Rubbed who the wrong way?”

“Well, I understand there were troubles about Ann and a neighbor’s bird? That she may have hurt a neighbor’s bird?”

Bob Nash rubbed his eyes, looked at his feet.

“God, people gossip in this town. No one ever proved Ann did that. She and the neighbors already had bad blood. Joe Duke across the way. His girls, they’re older, they messed with Ann a lot, teased her a lot. Then they have her over to play one day. I don’t really know what happened, but by the time Ann got back here, they were all screaming that she’d killed their goddam bird.” He laughed, shrugged his shoulders. “Be fine by me if she had, it was a noisy old thing.”

“Do you think Ann would be likely to do something like that, if

provoked?”

“Well, it was a fool who provoked Ann,” he said. “She didn’t take that kind of thing well. She wasn’t exactly a little lady.”

“Do you think she knew the person who killed her?”

Nash picked up a pink T-shirt from the sofa, folded it in squares like a kerchief. “Used to think no. Now, I think yes. I think she went with someone she knew.”

“Would she be more likely to go with a man or a woman?” I asked.

“So you heard the James Capisi story?”

I nodded.

“Well, a little girl is more likely to trust a person who reminds her of her momma, right?”

Depends on what her momma’s like, I thought.

“But I still think it’s a man. Can’t picture a woman doing all ... that to a baby. I hear John Keene has no alibi. Maybe he wanted to kill a little girl, saw Natalie all day every day, and couldn’t take it, the urge, so he went out and killed another little tomboy, girl kind of like Natalie. But then in the end he couldn’t resist, took Natalie too.”

“Is that the talk?” I asked.

“Some of it, I s’pose.”

Betsy Nash appeared suddenly in the doorway. Looking down at her knees, she said, “Bob. Adora is here.” My stomach clenched without my permission.

My mother breezed in, smelling like bright blue water. She looked more comfortable in the Nash house than Mrs. Nash did. It was a natural gift for Adora, making other women feel incidental. Betsy Nash retired from the room, like some maid from a 1930s movie. My mother refused to look at me, but went straight to Bob Nash.

“Bob, Betsy told me there was a reporter here, and I knew right then it was my daughter. I’m so sorry. I can’t apologize enough for the intrusion.”

Bob Nash stared at Adora, then at me. “This is your daughter? I had no idea.”

“No, probably not. Camille’s not the family type.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Nash asked me.

“I told you I was from Wind Gap. I had no idea you’d be interested in who my mother was.”

“Oh, I’m not angry, don’t get me wrong. It’s just that your mother is a very good friend to us,” he said, as if she were some big-hearted patron. “She tutored Ann in English and spelling. Your mother and Ann were very close. Ann was very proud she had an adult friend.”

My mother sat with her hands folded in her lap, skirt spread out along the couch, and blinked at me. I felt as if I were being warned not to say something, but I didn’t know what.

“I had no idea,” I finally said. True. I’d thought my mother was overplaying her mourning, pretending to know those girls. Now I was surprised at how subtle she’d been. But why in the world was she tutoring Ann? She’d done the mother’s-aid thing at my school when I was a kid—mainly to spend time with other Wind Gap housewives—but I couldn’t picture her noblesse oblige extending to spending afternoons with a unkempt girl from the west side of town. Occasionally I underestimated Adora. I suppose.

“Camille, I think you should leave,” Adora said. “I’m here on a social visit and it’s difficult for me to relax around you these days.”

“I’m not quite done talking with Mr. Nash.”

“Yes, you are.” Adora looked at Nash for confirmation, and he smiled awkwardly, like someone staring down the sun.

“Maybe we can pick this up later, Miss ... Camille.” A word suddenly flashed on my lower hip: *punish*. I could feel it getting hot.

“Thanks for your time, Mr. Nash,” I said, and strode out of the room, not looking at my mother. I began crying before I’d even reached my car.

## Chapter Seven

Once I was standing on a cold corner in Chicago waiting for the light to change when a blind man came clicking up. *What are the cross streets here*, he asked, and when I didn't reply he turned toward me and said, *Is anybody there?*

*I'm here*, I said, and it felt shockingly comforting, those words. When I'm panicked, I say them aloud to myself. *I'm here*. I don't usually feel that I am. I feel like a warm gust of wind could exhale my way and I'd be disappeared forever, not even a sliver of fingernail left behind. On some days, I find this thought calming; on others it chills me.

My sense of weightlessness, I think, comes from the fact that I know so little about my past—or at least that's what the shrinks at the clinic came up with. I've long since given up trying to discover anything about my dad; when I picture him, it's as a generic "father" image. I can't stand to think about him too specifically, to imagine him shopping for groceries or having a cup of morning coffee, coming home to kids. Will I someday run smack into a girl who looks like me? As a child, I struggled to find a solid resemblance between my mother and myself, some link that would prove I came from her. I'd study her when she wasn't looking, steal the framed portraits from her room and try to convince myself I had her eyes. Or maybe it was something not in the face. The turn of a calf or the hollow of my neck.

She never even told me how she'd met Alan. What I know of their story has come from other people. Questions are discouraged, considered prying. I remember the shock of hearing my college roommate talk to her mother on the phone: The detailed minutia, her lack of censorship seemed decadent. She would say silly things, like how she forgot she'd enrolled for a class—completely forgot she was supposed to be in Geography 101 three days a week—and she'd say it in the same boastful tone of a kindergartner with a gold-star crayon drawing.

I remember finally meeting her mom, how she zipped around our suite asking so many questions, knowing already so much about me. She gave Alison a big plastic bag of safety pins that she thought might come in handy, and when they left for lunch, I surprised myself by

bursting into tears. The gesture—so random and kind—baffled me. Is this what mothers did, wonder if you might need safety pins? Mine phoned once a month and always asked the same practical questions (grades, classes, upcoming expenses).

As a child, I don't remember ever telling Adora my favorite color, or what I'd like to name my daughter when I grew up. I don't think she ever knew my favorite dish, and I certainly never padded down to her room in the early-morning hours, teary from nightmares. I always feel sad for the girl that I was, because it never occurred to me that my mother might comfort me. She has never told me she loved me, and I never assumed she did. She tended to me. She administrated me. Oh, yes, and one time she bought me lotion with vitamin E.

For a while I convinced myself that Adora's distance was a defense constructed after Marian. But in truth, I think she's always had more problems with children than she'd ever admit. I think, in fact, she hates them. There's a jealousy, a resentfulness that I can feel even now, in my memory. At one point, she probably liked the idea of a daughter. When she was a girl, I bet she daydreamed of being a mother, of coddling, of licking her child like a milk-swelled cat. She has that voraciousness about children. She swoops in on them. Even I, in public, was a beloved child. Once her period of mourning for Marian was over, she'd parade me into town, smiling and teasing me, tickling me as she spoke with people on the sidewalks. When we got home, she'd trail off to her room like an unfinished sentence, and I would sit outside with my face pressed against her door and replay the day in my head, searching for clues to what I'd done to displease her.

I have one memory that catches in me like a nasty clump of blood. Marian was dead about two years, and my mother had a cluster of friends come over for afternoon drinks. One of them brought a baby. For hours, the child was cooed over, smothered with red-lipstick kisses, tidied up with tissues, then lipstick smacked again. I was supposed to be reading in my room, but I sat at the top of the stairs watching.

My mother finally was handed the baby, and she cuddled it ferociously. *Oh, how wonderful it is to hold a baby again!* Adora jiggled it on her knee, walked it around the rooms, whispered to it, and I looked down from above like a spiteful little god, the back of my hand

placed against my face, imagining how it felt to be cheek to cheek with my mother.

When the ladies went into the kitchen to help tidy up the dishes, something changed. I remember my mother, alone in the living room, staring at the child almost lasciviously. She pressed her lips hard against the baby's apple slice of a cheek. Then she opened her mouth just slightly, took a tiny bit of flesh between her teeth, and gave it a little bite.

The baby wailed. The blotch faded as Adora snuggled the child, and told the other women it was just being fussy. I ran to Marian's room and got under the covers.

**B**ack at Footh's for a drink after my mother and the Nashes. I was boozing too much, but never to the point of drunkenness, I reasoned with myself. I needed just a nip. I've always been partial to the image of liquor as lubrication—a layer of protection from all the sharp thoughts in your head. The barkeep was a round-faced guy two classes behind me who I was pretty sure was named Barry but not sure enough to actually call him that. He muttered, "Welcome back," as he filled my Big Mouth cup two-thirds full of bourbon, splashed some coke on top. "On the house," he said to the napkin holder. "We don't take money from pretty women here." His neck shot red, and he suddenly pretended he had urgent business at the other end of the counter.

**I** took Neeho Drive on the way back to the house. It was a street several of my friends had lived on, slicing through town and growing increasingly more posh as it neared Adora's. I spotted Katie Lacey's old home, a flimsy mansion her parents built when we were ten—after they'd smashed their old Victorian into shards.

A block ahead of me, a little girl on a golf cart decorated with flower stickers putt-putted along. She wore her hair in elaborate braids like a little Swiss maid on a cocoa box. Amma. She'd taken advantage of Adora's visit to the Nashes to make an escape—girls traveling solo were an oddity in Wind Gap since Natalie's killing.

Rather than continue home, she turned and headed east, which meant dirtbox houses and the pig farm. I turned the corner and

followed her so slowly I almost stalled out.

The route offered a nice downhill slope for Amma, and the cart glided so fast her braids flew out behind her. In ten minutes, we were in the country. Tall yellow grasses and bored cows. Barns leaning like old men. I let the car idle for a few minutes to give Amma a good head start, then drove just far enough to keep her in sight. I trailed her past farmhouses and a roadside walnut stand that was manned by a boy who held his cigarette jaunty as a movie star. Soon the air smelled like shit and stale saliva and I knew where we were heading. Another ten minutes and the metal pig holds came into sight, long and glinty like rows of staples. The squeals made my ears sweat. Like screams from a rusty well pump. My nose flared involuntarily and my eyes started watering. You ever been near an animal-processing plant, you know what I mean. The smell isn't like water or air; it's a solid. Like you should be able to cut a hole in the stink to get some relief. You can't.

Amma zipped through the gates of the plant. The guy at the booth just waved at her. I had a tougher time until I said the magic word: *Adora*.

"Right. Adora's got a grown-up daughter. I remember," said the old guy. His nametag said *Jose*. I tried to see if he was missing any fingers. Mexicans don't get cushy box jobs unless they're owed. That's the way plants down here work: The Mexicans get the shittiest, most dangerous jobs, and the whites still complain.

Amma parked her cart next to a pickup and dusted herself off. Then, with a businesslike beeline, she walked straight past the slaughtering house, past the lines of pig holds, those wet pink snouts squirming between the air slats, and to a big metal barn of a building where the nursing happens. Most sows are repeatedly inseminated, brood after brood, till their bodies give way and they go to slaughter. But while they're still useful, they're made to nurse—strapped to their sides in a farrowing crate, legs apart, nipples exposed. Pigs are extremely smart, sociable creatures, and this forced assembly-line intimacy makes the nursing sows want to die. Which, as soon as they dry up, they do.

Even the idea of this practice I find repulsive. But the sight of it actually does something to you, makes you less human. Like watching a rape and saying nothing. I saw Amma at the far end of the barn,

standing at the edge of one metal farrowing crate. A few men were pulling one pack of squealing piglets out of the stall, throwing another pack in. I moved to the far side of the barn so I could stand behind Amma without her seeing me. The pig lay nearly comatose on its side, its belly exposed between metal bars, red, bloody nipples pointing out like fingers. One of the men rubbed oil on the goriest one, then flicked it and giggled. They paid no attention to Amma, as if it were quite normal that she was there. She winked at one as they snapped another sow in a crate and drove off to get the next pack.

The piglets in the stall were swarming over the sow like ants on a glob of jelly. The nipples were fought over, bouncing in and out of mouths, jiggling tautly like rubber. The sow's eyes rolled up into her head. Amma sat down cross-legged and gazed, fascinated. After five minutes she was in the same position, now smiling and squirming. I had to leave. I walked, first slowly, then broke into a scramble to my car. Door shut, radio blasting, warm bourbon stinging my throat, I drove away from the stink and sound. And that child.

## *Chapter Eight*

**A**mma. All this time I'd had little real interest in her. Now I did. What I saw at the farm kept my throat clenched. My mother said she was the most popular girl in school, and I believed it. Jackie said she was the meanest, and I believed that, too. Living in the swirl of Adora's bitterness had to make one a bit crooked. And what did Amma make of Marian, I wondered? How confusing to live in the shadow of a shadow. But Amma was a smart girl—she did her acting out away from home. Near Adora she was compliant, sweet, needy—just what she had to be, to get my mother's love.

But that violent streak—the tantrum, the smacking of her friend, and now this ugliness. A penchant for doing and seeing nasty things. It suddenly reminded me of the stories about Ann and Natalie. Amma wasn't like Marian, but maybe she was a little bit like them.

**I**t was late afternoon, just before suppertime, and I decided to make a second pass at the Keenes. I needed a quote for my feature piece and if I couldn't get it, Curry was going to pull me out. Leaving Wind Gap would cause me no pain personally, but I needed to prove I could handle myself, especially with my credibility faltering. A girl who slices herself open isn't the first on the list for tough assignments.

I drove past the spot where Natalie's body was discovered. What Amma deemed unworthy of stealing sat in a sad clump: three stumpy candles, long since blown out, along with cheap flowers still in their supermarket wrappers. A limp helium balloon in the shape of a heart bobbing listlessly.

In the driveway outside the Keene home, Natalie's brother sat in the passenger seat of a red convertible talking with a blonde girl who almost matched his beauty. I parked behind them, saw them sneak quick looks, then pretend not to notice me. The girl began laughing animatedly, weaving her red-lacquered nails through the back of the boy's dark hair. I gave them a quick, awkward nod, which I'm sure they didn't see, and slipped past them to the front door.

Natalie's mother answered. Behind her the house was dark and quiet. Her face stayed open; she didn't recognize me.

"Mrs. Keene, I am so sorry to bother you at a time like this, but I

really need to talk with you.”

“About Natalie?”

“Yes, may I come in?” It was a nasty trick to sneak my way into her home without identifying myself. Reporters are like vampires, Curry likes to say. They can’t come into your home without your invitation, but once they’re there, you won’t get them out till they’ve sucked you dry. She opened the door.

“Oh, it feels nice and cool in here, thanks,” I said. “It was supposed to peak at ninety today, but I think we passed that.”

“I heard ninety-five.”

“I believe it. Could I trouble you for a glass of water?” Another time-honored ploy: A woman is less likely to throw you out if she’s offered her hospitality. If you have allergies or a cold, asking for a tissue is even better. Women love vulnerability. Most women.

“Of course.” She paused, looking at me, as if she felt she should know who I was and was too embarrassed to ask. Morticians, priests, police, medics, mourners—she’d probably met more people in the past few days than she had the previous year.

While Mrs. Keene disappeared into the kitchen, I peered around. The room looked completely different today, with furniture moved back into the proper places. On a table not far away sat a photo of the two Keene children. They were each leaning on a side of a big oak tree, dressed in jeans and red sweaters. He was smiling uncomfortably, like he was doing something best left undocumented. She was maybe half his height, and looked determinedly serious, like the subject of an old daguerreotype.

“What’s your son’s name?”

“That’s John. He’s a very kind, gentle boy. I’ve always been proudest of that. He just graduated from high school.”

“They bumped it up a little—when I went to school here, they made us wait till June.”

“Mmmm. Nice to have the longer summers.”

I smiled. She smiled. I sat down and sipped my water. I couldn’t remember what Curry advised once you tricked your way into someone’s living room.

“We actually haven’t properly met. I’m Camille Preaker. From the *Chicago Daily Post*? We spoke briefly on the phone the other night.”

She stopped smiling. Her jaw started working.

“You should have said that before.”

“I know what a horrible time this is for you, and if I could just ask you a few questions ...”

“You may not.”

“Mrs. Keene, we want to be fair to your family, that’s why I’m here. The more information we can give people ...”

“The more papers you can sell. I’m sick and tired of all this. Now I will tell you one last time: Do not come back here. Do not try to contact us. I have absolutely nothing to say to you.” She stood over me, leaned down. She wore, as she had at the funeral, a beaded necklace made of wood, with a big red heart at its center. It bobbed back and forth off her bosom like a hypnotist’s watch. “I think you are a parasite,” she spat at me. “I think you are disgusting. I hope someday you look back and see how ugly you are. Now please leave.”

She trailed me to the door, as if she wouldn’t believe I was truly gone until she saw me step outside her home. She closed the door behind me with enough force to make her doorbell chime lightly.

I stood on the stoop blushing, thinking to myself what a nice detail that heart necklace would make in my story, and saw the girl in the red convertible staring at me. The boy was gone.

“You’re Camille Preaker, right?” she called out.

“Yes.”

“I remember you,” the girl said. “I was just a little thing when you lived here, but we all knew you.”

“What’s your name?”

“Meredith Wheeler. You wouldn’t remember me, I was just a little goofball when you were in high school.”

John Keene’s girlfriend. Her name was familiar, thanks to my mother’s friends, but I wouldn’t have remembered her personally. Hell, she’d have been all of six or seven last time I lived here. Still, I wasn’t surprised she knew me. Girls growing up in Wind Gap studied

the older girls obsessively: who dated the football stars, who was homecoming queen, who mattered. You traded favorites like baseball cards. I still remember CeeCee Wyatt, Calhoon High prom queen from when I was a girl. I once bought eleven drugstore lipsticks trying to find the exact shade of pink she wore when she said hello to me one morning.

“I remember you,” I said. “I can’t believe you’re driving.”

She laughed, seemed pleased by my lie.

“You’re a reporter now, right?”

“Yes, in Chicago.”

“I’ll get John to talk to you. We’ll be in touch.”

Meredith zipped away. I’m sure she felt quite pleased with herself—*We’ll be in touch*—reapplying her lip gloss and thinking not at all of the dead ten-year-old that was to be the subject of conversation.

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**I** phoned the main hardware store in town—the one where Natalie’s body had been found. Without identifying myself, I began chatting about maybe redoing a bathroom, maybe getting new tiles. Not too hard to steer the conversation to the killings. I suppose a lot of people have been rethinking their home security lately, I suggested.

“That’s a fact, ma’am. We’ve had a run on chain locks and double bolts in the past few days,” said the grumbly voice.

“Really? How many have you gone through?”

“About three dozen, I’d guess.”

“Mostly families? People with children?”

“Oh, yeah. They’re the ones got reason to worry, right? Horrible thing. We’re hoping to make some sort of donation to little Natalie’s family.” He paused. “You want to come down, look at some tile samples?”

“I might just do that, thanks.”

One more reporting chore off my list, and I didn’t even have to subject myself to namecalling from a grieving mother.

**F**or our dinner meeting, Richard picked Gritty's, a "family restaurant" with a salad bar that featured every kind of food but salad. The lettuce always sat in a small container at the end, a greasy, pale afterthought. Richard was chatting up the jolly-fat hostess when I flustered in twelve minutes late. The girl, whose face matched the pies revolving in the case behind her, didn't seem to notice me hovering. She was immersed in the possibilities of Richard: In her head, she was already writing her diary entry for the night.

"Preaker," he said, eyes still on the girl. "Your tardiness is a scandal. You're lucky JoAnn was here to keep me company." The girl giggled, then glared at me, leading us to a corner booth where she slapped a greasy menu in front of me. On the table, I could still see the outline of the previous customer's glassware.

The waitress appeared, slid me a glass of water the size of a shot, then handed Richard a styrofoam trough of soda pop. "Hey Richard—I remembered, see?"

"That's why you're my favorite waitress, Kathy." Cute.

"Hi, Camille; I heard you were in town." I didn't want to hear that phrase ever again. The waitress, upon second look, was a former classmate of mine. We'd been friends for a semester sophomore year because we'd dated best buddies—mine was Phil, hers was Jerry—jock guys who played football in the fall and wrestled in the winter, and threw parties year-round in Phil's basement rec room. I had a flash memory of us holding hands for balance while we peed in the snow just outside the sliding glass doors, too drunk to face his mom upstairs. I remember her telling me about having sex with Jerry on the pool table. Which explained why the felt was sticky.

"Hey, Kathy, it's good to see you. How's it going?"

She threw her arms out and cast a glance around the restaurant.

"Oh, you can probably guess. But hey, that's what you get for sticking around here, right? Bobby says hi. Kidder."

"Oh, right! God ..." I'd forgotten they got married. "How is he?"

"Same old Bobby. You should drop by some time. If you have time. We're over on Fisher."

I could picture the clock ticking loudly as I sat in the living room of Bobby and Kathy Kidder, trying to come up with something to say. Kathy would do all the talking, she always had. She was the kind of person who'd read street signs aloud rather than suffer silence. If he was still the same old Bobby, he was quiet but affable, a guy with few interests and slate blue eyes that flicked into focus only when talk turned to hunting. Back in high school, he saved the hooves of all the deer he killed, always had the latest pair in his pocket, and would pull them out and tap drumbeats with them on whatever hard surface was available. I always felt like it was the dead deer's Morse code, a delayed mayday from tomorrow's venison.

"Anyway, you guys doing the buffet?"

I asked for a beer, which brought forth a mighty pause. Kathy glanced back over her shoulder at the clock on the wall. "Mmmm, we're not supposed to serve till eight. But I'll see if I can sneak you one—old times' sake, right?"

"Well, I don't want to get you in trouble." Just like Wind Gap to have arbitrary drinking rules. Five o'clock would make sense, at least. Eight o'clock was just someone's way of making you feel guilty.

"Lord, Camille, it'd be the most interesting thing that's happened to me in quite a while."

While Kathy went to purloin me a drink, Richard and I filled plates with chicken-fried steak, grits, mashed potatoes, and, in Richard's case, a jiggly slab of Jell-O that was melting into his food by the time we returned to our table. Kathy had left a bottle of beer discreetly on my seat cushion.

"Always drink this early?"

"I'm just having a beer."

"I could smell liquor on your breath when you came in, underneath a layer of Certs—wintergreen?" He smiled at me, as if he were simply curious, no judgments. I bet he glowed in the interrogation room.

"Certs, yes; liquor, no."

In truth, that's why I'd been late. Right before I pulled into the parking lot, I realized the quick nip I took after leaving the Keenes needed some quick covering up, and drove another few blocks to the

convenience store to buy some mints. Wintergreen.

“Okay, Camille,” he said gently. “No worries. It’s none of my business.” He took a bite of mashed potatoes, dyed red from the Jell-O, and stayed silent. Seemed slightly abashed.

“So, what do you want to know about Wind Gap?” I felt I’d disappointed him keenly, like I was a careless parent renegeing on a birthday promise to take him to the zoo. I was willing to tell him the truth then, to answer unfailingly the next question he asked in order to make it up to him—and I suddenly wondered if that was the reason he’d challenged my drinking to begin with. Smart cop.

He stared me down. “I want to know about its violence. Every place has its own particular strain. Is it in the open, is it hidden? Is it committed as a group—bar fights, gang rapes—or is it specific, personal? Who commits it? Who’s the target?”

“Well, I don’t know that I can just make a sweeping statement of the entire history of violence here.”

“Name a truly violent incident you saw growing up.”

My mother with the baby.

“I saw a woman hurt a child.”

“Spanking? Hitting?”

“She bit it.”

“Okay. Boy or girl?”

“Girl, I think.”

“The child was hers?”

“No.”

“Okay, okay, this is good. So a very personal act of violence on a female child. Who committed it, I’ll check it out.”

“I don’t know the person’s name. It was someone’s relative from out of town.”

“Well, who would know her name? I mean, if she has ties here, it’d be worth looking into.”

I could feel my limbs disconnecting, floating nearby like driftwood on an oily lake. I pressed my fingertips against my fork tines. Just

saying the story aloud panicked me. I hadn't even thought Richard might want specifics.

"Hey, I thought this was just supposed to be a profile of violence," I said, my voice hollow behind the blood in my ears. "I don't have any details. It was a woman I didn't recognize, and I don't know who she was with. I just assumed she was from out of town."

"I thought reporters didn't assume." He was smiling again.

"I wasn't a reporter at the time, I was only a girl...."

"Camille, I'm giving you a hard time, I'm sorry." He plucked the fork from my fingers, placed it deliberately on his side of the table, picked my hand up and kissed it. I could see the word *lipstick* crawling out from my right shirtsleeve. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to grill you. I was playing bad cop."

"I find it difficult to see you as bad cop."

He grinned. "True, it's a stretch. Curse these boyish good looks!"

We sipped our drinks for a second. He twirled the salt shaker and said, "Can I ask a few more questions?" I nodded. "What's the next incident you can think of?"

The overpowering smell of the tuna salad on my plate was making my stomach twist. I looked for Kathy to get another beer.

"Fifth grade. Two boys cornered a girl at recess and had her put a stick inside herself."

"Against her will? They forced her?"

"Mmmm ... a little bit I guess. They were bullies, they told her to, and she did."

"And you saw this or heard about it?"

"They told a few of us to watch. When the teacher found out, we had to apologize."

"To the girl?"

"No, the girl had to apologize too, to the class. 'Young ladies must be in control of their bodies because boys are not.'"

"Jesus. You forget sometimes how different things were, and not that many years ago. How just ... uninformed." Richard jotted in his

notebook, slid some Jell-O down his throat. “What else do you remember?”

“Once, an eighth-grade girl got drunk at a high-school party and four or five guys on the football team had sex with her, kind of passed her around. Does that count?”

“Camille. Of course it counts. You know that, right?”

“Well, I just didn’t know if that counted as outright violence or ...”

“Yeah, I’d count a bunch of punks raping a thirteen-year-old outright violence, yes I sure would.”

“How is everything?” Kathy was suddenly smiling over us.

“You think you could sneak me one more beer?”

“Two.” Richard said.

“All right, this one I do only as a favor to Richard, since he’s the best tipper in town.”

“Thanks, Kathy.” Richard smiled.

I leaned across the table. “I’m not arguing that it’s wrong, Richard; I’m just trying to get your criteria for violence.”

“Right, and I’m getting a good picture of exactly the kind of violence we’re dealing with here, just by the fact that you’re asking me if that counts. Were the police notified?”

“Of course not.”

“I’m surprised she wasn’t made to apologize for allowing them to rape her in the first place. Eighth grade. That makes me sick.” He tried to take my hand again, but I tucked it away in my lap.

“So it’s the age that makes it rape.”

“It’d be rape at any age.”

“If I got a little too drunk tonight, and was out of my head and had sex with four guys, that would be rape?”

“Legally, I don’t know, it’d depend on a lot of things—like your attorney. But ethically, hell yes.”

“You’re sexist.”

“What?”

“You’re sexist. I’m so sick of liberal lefty men practicing sexual discrimination under the guise of protecting women against sexual discrimination.”

“I can assure you I am doing nothing of the sort.”

“I have a guy in my office—*sensitive*. When I got passed over for a promotion, he suggested I sue for discrimination. I wasn’t discriminated against, I was a mediocre reporter. And sometimes drunk women aren’t raped; they just make stupid choices—and to say we deserve special treatment when we’re drunk because we’re women, to say we need to be *looked after*, I find offensive.”

Kathy came back with our beers and we sipped in silence until they were drained.

“Geez Preaker, okay, I give.”

“Okay.”

“You do see a pattern, though, right? In the attacks on females. In the attitude about the attacks.”

“Except neither the Nash or Keene girl was sexually molested. Right?”

“I think in our guy’s mind, the teeth pulling is equivalent to rape. That’s all about power—it’s invasive, it requires a goodly amount of force, and as each tooth comes out ... release.”

“Is this on record?”

“If I see this in your paper, if I see even a hint of this conversation under your byline, you and I will never speak again. And that would be really bad, because I like talking to you. Cheers.” Richard clicked his empty against mine. I stayed silent.

“In fact, let me take you out,” he said. “Just for fun. No shop talk. My brain desperately needs a night off from this stuff. We could do something appropriately small town.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Pull taffy? Catch a greased pig?” he began ticking activities on his fingers. “Make our own ice cream? Ride down Main Street in one of those little Shriners cars? Oh, is there a quaint county fair anywhere near here—I could perform a feat of strength for you.”

“That attitude must really endear you to the locals.”

“Kathy likes me.”

“Because you tip her.”

**W**e ended up at Garrett Park, jammed on swings that were too small for us, wobbling back and forth in the hot evening dust. The place Natalie Keene was last seen alive, but neither of us mentioned it. Across the ballpark, an old stone drinking fountain spurted water endlessly, would never go off until Labor Day.

“I see a lot of high-school kids partying here at nighttime,” Richard said. “Vickery’s too busy these days to chase them off.”

“It was like that even when I was in high school. Drinking’s not that big a deal down here. Except, apparently at Gritty’s.”

“I’d like to have seen you at sixteen. Let me guess: You were like the wild preacher’s daughter. Looks, money, and a brain. That’s a recipe for trouble around here I’d guess. I can picture you right over there,” he said, pointing to the cracked bleachers. “Outdrinking the boys.”

The least of the outrages I’d committed in this park. Not only my first kiss, but my first blow job, at age thirteen. A senior on the baseball team took me under his wing, then took me into the woods. He wouldn’t kiss me until I serviced him. Then he wouldn’t kiss me because of where my mouth had been. Young love. Not long after was my wild night at the football party, the story that had gotten Richard so riled. Eighth grade, four guys. Got more action than than I’ve had in the past ten years. I felt the word *wicked* blaze up by my pelvis.

“I had my share of fun,” I said. “Looks and money get you a long way in Wind Gap.”

“And brains?”

“Brains you hide. I had a lot of friends, but no one I was close to, you know?”

“I can imagine. Were you close to your mom?”

“Not particularly.” I’d had one too many drinks; my face felt closed and hot.

“Why?” Richard twisted his swing to face me.

“I just think some women aren’t made to be mothers. And some women aren’t made to be daughters.”

“Did she ever hurt you?” The question unnerved me, particularly after our dinner conversation. Hadn’t she hurt me? I felt sure someday I’d dream a memory of her, scratching or biting or pinching. I felt like that had happened. I pictured myself pulling off my blouse to show him my scars, screaming, *yes, look!* Indulgent.

“That’s a bizarre question, Richard.”

“I’m sorry, you just sounded so ... sad. Mad. Something.”

“That’s the mark of someone who has a healthy relationship with his parents.”

“Guilty.” He laughed. “What about I change the subject?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s see ... light conversation. Swing-set conversation.” Richard scrunched his face up to mime thinking. “Okay, so what’s your favorite color, your favorite ice cream flavor, and your favorite season?”

“Blue, coffee, and winter.”

“Winter. No one likes winter.”

“It gets dark early, I like that.”

“Why?”

Because that means the day has ended. I like checking days off a calendar—151 days crossed and nothing truly horrible has happened. 152 and the world isn’t ruined. 153 and I haven’t destroyed anyone. 154 and no one really hates me. Sometimes I think I won’t ever feel safe until I can count my last days on one hand. Three more days to get through until I don’t have to worry about life anymore.

“I just like the night.” I was about to say more, not much more, but more, when a broken-down yellow IROC rumbled to a stop across the street and Amma and her blondes piled out the back. Amma leaned into the driver’s window, cleavage teasing the boy, who had the long greasy dirt-blond hair you’d expect of someone who still drove a yellow IROC. The three girls stood behind her, hips juttied out, the

tallest turning her ass to them and bending over, lean and long to pretend to tie her shoe. Nice moves.

The girls glided toward us, Amma waving her hands extravagantly in protest of the black exhaust cloud. They were hot little things, I had to admit. Long blonde hair, heart-shaped faces, and skinny legs. Miniskirts with tiny Ts exposing flat baby tummies. And except for the girl Jodes, whose bosom was too high and stiff to be anything but padding, the rest had breasts, full and wobbly and way overripe. All those milk-fed, hog-fed, beef-fed early years. All those extra hormones we put in our livestock. We'll be seeing toddlers with tits before long.

"Hey, Dick," Amma called. She was sucking on a red oversized Blow Pop.

"Hi, ladies."

"Hi, Camille, make me a star yet?" Amma asked, rolling her tongue around the sucker. The Alps-inspired braids were gone, as were the clothes she'd worn to the plant, which had to reek with odors of all kinds and species. Now she wore a tank and a skirt that passed her crotch by an inch.

"Not yet." She had peach skin, so free of blotches or wrinkles, her face so perfect and character-free she could have just popped out of the womb. They all seemed unfinished. I wanted them to go away.

"Dick, when are you going to take us for a ride?" Amma asked, plopping down in the dirt in front of us, her legs pulled up to reveal a glimpse of her panties.

"To do that, I'd have to arrest you. I might have to arrest those boys you keep hanging around with. High-school boys are too old for you."

"They're not in high school," said the tall girl.

"Yeah," Amma giggled. "They dropped out."

"Amma, how old are you?" Richard asked.

"Just turned thirteen."

"Why do you always care so much about Amma?" interrupted the brassy blonde. "We're here, too, you know. You probably don't even know our names."

"Camille, have you met Kylie, Kelsey, and Kelsey?" Richard said,

pointing to the tall girl, the brassy girl, and the girl my sister called ...

“That’s Jodes,” Amma said. “There are two Kelseys, so she goes by her last name. To avoid confusion. Right, Jodes?”

“They can call me Kelsey if they want,” said the girl, whose low spot in the pecking order was likely punishment for being the least of the beauties. Weak chin.

“And Amma is your half sister, right?” Richard continued. “I’m not as out of the loop as all that.”

“No, it looks like you’re right in the loop,” Amma said. She made the words sound sexual, even though I could think of no double entendre. “So, are you guys dating or what? I heard little Camille here is a real hot ticket. At least she was.”

Richard let out a burp of a laugh, a shocked croak. *Unworthy* flared up my leg.

“It’s true, Richard. I was something back in the day.”

“*Something*,” Amma mocked. The two girls laughed. Jodes drew frantic lines in the dirt with a stick. “You should hear the stories, Dick. They’d get you pretty hot. Or maybe you already have.”

“Ladies, we’ve got to be going, but as always, it was definitely *something*,” Richard said, and took my hand to help me out of the swing. Held on to it, squeezed it twice as we walked toward the car.

“Isn’t he a gentleman,” Amma called, and the four got to their feet and began following us. “Can’t solve crime, but he can take the time to help Camille into his crappy-ass car.” They were right on us, Amma and Kylie stepping on our heels, literally. I could feel *sickly* glowing where Amma’s sandal had scuffed my Achilles tendon. Then she took her wet sucker and twirled it in my hair.

“Stop it,” I muttered. I twirled around and grabbed her wrist so hard I could feel her pulse. Slower than mine. She didn’t squirm, in fact, just pushed closer into me. I could feel her strawberry breath fill the hollow of my neck.

“Come on, do something.” Amma smiled. “You could kill me right now and Dick still wouldn’t be able to figure it out.” I let go, pushed her away from me, and Richard and I shuffled to the car faster than I would have liked.

## *Chapter Nine*

I fell asleep, accidentally and hard, at nine o'clock, woke to an angry sun at seven the next morning. A dried-out tree rustled its branches against my window screen as if it wanted to climb in next to me for comfort.

I donned my uniform—the long sleeves, the long skirt—and wandered downstairs. Gayla was glowing in the backyard, her white nurse's dress brilliant against the greenery. She held a silver tray on which my mother was placing imperfect roses. My mother wore a butter-colored sundress that matched her hair. She was stalking through the clumps of pink and yellow blooms with a pair of pliers. She examined each flower hungrily, plucking off petals, pushing and prying.

"You need to water these more, Gayla. Look what you've done to them."

She separated a light pink rose from a bush, pulled it to the ground, secured it with a dainty foot, and clipped it off at its root. Gayla must have had two dozen roses on her tray. I could see little wrong with them.

"Camille, you and I are going shopping in Woodberry today," my mother called without looking up. "Shall we?" My mother said nothing about the square-off at the Nashes the day before. That would be too direct.

"I have a few things to do," I said. "By the way, I didn't know you were friends with the Nashes. With Ann." I had a catch of guilt for my taunting her about the girl at breakfast the other morning. It wasn't that I truly felt bad that I'd upset my mother—it was more that I hated any debits in her column.

"Mmmm-hmm. Alan and I are having a party next Saturday. It was planned long before we knew you were coming. Although I suppose we didn't really know you were coming until you were here."

Another rose snapped off.

"I thought you barely knew the girls. I didn't realize ..."

"Fine. It will be a nice summer party, a lot of really fine people, and

you'll need a dress. I'm sure you didn't bring a dress?"

"No."

"Good then, it will be a nice chance for us to catch up. You've been here over a week, I think it's time." She placed a final stem on the tray. "Okay, Gayla, you can throw these away. We'll pick some decent ones for the house later."

"I'll take those for my room, Momma. They look fine to me."

"They're not."

"I don't mind."

"Camille, I was just looking at them, and they're not good blooms." She dropped the pliers to the ground, began tugging at a stem.

"But they're fine for me. For my room."

"Oh, now look what you've done. I'm bleeding." My mother held up thorn-pricked hands, and trails of deep red began to roll down her wrists. End of conversation. She walked toward the house, Gayla following her, me following Gayla. The back-door knob was sticky with blood.

Alan bandaged both my mother's hands extravagantly, and when we nearly tumbled over Amma, working again on her dollhouse on the porch, Adora plucked teasingly at her braid and told her to come with us. She followed obligingly, and I kept waiting for those knicks at my heels. Not with Mother around.

Adora wanted me to drive her baby blue convertible to Woodberry, which boasted two high-end boutiques, but she didn't want the top down. "We get cold," she said with a conspiratorial smile at Amma. The girl sat silently behind my mother, twisted her mouth into a smart-ass smile when I caught her staring at me in the rearview. Every few minutes, she'd brush her fingertips against my mother's hair, lightly so she wouldn't notice.

As I parked the Mercedes outside her favorite shop, Adora requested weakly that I open the car door for her. It was the first thing she'd said to me in twenty minutes. Nice to catch up. I opened the boutique's door for her too, and the feminine bell matched the saleswoman's delighted greeting.

"Adora!" And then a frown. "My goodness, darling, what's

happened to your hands?”

“Just an accident, really. Doing some work around the house. I’ll see my doctor this afternoon.” Of course she would. She’d go for a paper cut.

“What happened?”

“Oh, I really don’t want to talk about it. I *do* want to introduce you to my daughter, Camille. She’s visiting.”

The saleswoman looked at Amma, then gave me a wavering smile.

“Camille?” A quick recovery: “I think I’d forgotten that you have a third daughter.” She lowered her voice on the word “daughter,” as if it were an oath. “She must take after her father,” the woman said, peering into my face as if I were a horse she might buy. “Amma looks so much like you, and Marian too, in your pictures. This one, though ...”

“She doesn’t take after me much,” my mother said. “She has her father’s coloring, and his cheekbones. And his temperament.”

It was the most I’d ever heard my mother say about my father. I wondered how many other salesladies had received such casual tidbits about him. I had a quick vision of chatting up all the store clerks in southern Missouri, putting together a blurry profile of the man.

My mother petted my hair with gauzy hands. “We need to get my sweetheart a new dress. Something colorful. She’s prone to blacks and grays. Size four.”

The woman, so thin her hip bones poked from her skirt like antlers, started weaving in and out of the circular racks, creating a bouquet of splashy green and blue and pink dresses.

“This would look beautiful on you,” Amma said, holding a glittery gold top to my mother.

“Stop it, Amma,” my mother said. “That’s tacky.”

“Do I really remind you of my father?” I couldn’t help asking Adora. I could feel my cheeks get hot at my presumptuousness.

“I knew you wouldn’t just let that go,” she said, touching up her lipstick in a store mirror. The gauze on her hands remained impossibly unsmearred.

“I was just curious; I’d never heard you say my personality reminded you of ...”

“Your personality reminds me of someone very unlike me. And you certainly don’t take after Alan, so I assume it must be your father. Now, no more.”

“But Momma, I just wanted to know ...”

“Camille, you’re making me bleed more.” She held up her bandaged hands, now pocked with red. I wanted to scratch her.

The saleslady bumped up on us with a swatch of dresses. “This is the one you’re absolutely going to have to have,” she said, holding up a turquoise sundress. Strapless.

“And what about sweetie-pie here,” the woman said, nodding at Amma. “She can probably already fit into our petites.”

“Amma’s only thirteen. She’s not ready for these types of clothes,” my mother said.

“Only thirteen, good god. I keep forgetting, she looks like such a big girl. You must be worried sick with all that’s going on in Wind Gap now.”

My mother put an arm around Amma, kissed the top of her head. “Some days I think I won’t be able to take the worry. I want to lock her away somewhere.”

“Like Bluebeard’s dead wives,” Amma mumbled.

“Like Rapunzel,” my mother said. “Well, go on, Camille—show your sister how pretty you can be.”

She trailed me into the dressing area, silent and righteous. In the little mirrored room, with my mother perched on a chair outside, I surveyed my options. Strapless, spaghetti straps, cap sleeves. My mother was punishing me. I found a pink dress with three-quarter sleeves and, quickly doffing my pants and shirt, pulled it on. The neckline was lower than I’d thought: The words on my chest looked swollen in the fluorescent light, like worms tunneled beneath my skin. *Whine, milk, hurt, bleed.*

“Camille, let me see.”

“Uh, this won’t work.”

“Let me see.” *Belittle* burned on my right hip.

“Let me try another.” I rifled through the other dresses. All just as revealing. I caught sight of myself again in the mirror. I was horrifying.

“Camille, open the door.”

“What’s wrong with Camille?” Amma chimed.

“This won’t work.” The side zipper was sticking. My bared arms flashed scars in deep pink and purple. Even without looking directly in the mirror I could see them reflected at me—a big blur of scorched skin.

“Camille,” my mother spat.

“Why won’t she just show us?”

“Camille.”

“Momma, you saw the dresses, you know why they won’t work,” I urged.

“Just let me see.”

“I’ll try one on, Momma,” Amma wheedled.

“Camille ...”

“Fine.” I banged open the door. My mother, her face level with my neckline, winced.

“Oh, dear God.” I could feel her breath on me. She held up a bandaged hand, as if about to touch my chest, then let it drop. Behind her Amma whined like a puppy. “Look what you’ve done to yourself,” Adora said. “Look at it.”

“I do.”

“I hope you just loved it. I hope you can stand yourself.”

She shut the door and I ripped at the dress, the zipper still jammed until my furious tugs yanked the teeth apart enough to get it to my hips, where I wriggled out, the zipper leaving a trail of pink scratches on my skin. I bunched the cotton of the dress over my mouth and screamed.

I could hear my mother’s measured voice in the other room. When I came out, the saleswoman was wrapping a long-sleeved, high-collared

lace blouse and a coral skirt that would come to my ankles. Amma stared at me, her eyes pink and darting, before leaving to stand by the car outside.

Back at the house I trailed Adora into the entryway, where Alan stood in a falsely casual pose, hands stuffed into his linen trouser pockets. She fluttered past him toward the stairs.

“How was your day out?” he called after her.

“Horrible,” my mother whimpered. Upstairs I heard her door close. Alan frowned at me and went to tend to my mother. Amma had already disappeared.

I walked into the kitchen, to the cutlery drawer. I wanted to just look at the knives I once used on myself. I wasn’t going to cut, just allow myself that sharp pressure. I could already feel the knifepoint gently pressing against the plump pads of my fingertips, that delicate tension right before the cut.

The drawer pulled out only an inch and then jammed. My mother had padlocked it. I pulled again and again. I could hear the silvery clink of all those blades sliding onto each other. Like petulant metal fish. My skin was hot. I was about to go call Curry when the doorbell insinuated itself with its polite tones.

Peering around the corner, I could see Meredith Wheeler and John Keene standing outside.

I felt like I’d been caught masturbating. Chewing the inside of my mouth, I opened the door. Meredith rolled in, assaying the rooms, letting out minty exclamations of how beautiful everything was and sending off waves of a dark perfume more suited to a society matron than a teenage girl in a green-and-white cheerleading outfit. She caught me looking.

“I know, I know. School days are over. This is my last time to wear this actually. We’re having a cheer session with next year’s girls. It’s sort of a torch-passing thing. You were a cheerleader, right?”

“I was, if you can believe that.” I hadn’t been particularly good, but I looked nice in the skirt. Back in the days when I limited my cutting to my torso.

“I can believe it. You were the prettiest girl in the entire town. My

cousin was a freshman when you were a senior. Dan Wheeler? He was always talking about you. Pretty and smart, pretty and smart. And nice. He'd kill me if he knew I was telling you this. He lives in Springfield now. But he's not married."

Her wheedling tone reminded me of just the kind of girls I was never comfortable with, the types who peddled a sort of plastic chumminess, who told me things about themselves only friends should know, who described themselves as "people persons."

"This is John," she said, as if surprised to see him beside her.

My first time seeing him up close. He was truly beautiful, almost androgynous, tall and slim with obscenely full lips and ice-colored eyes. He tucked a shock of black hair behind his ear and smiled at his hand as he held it out to me, as if it were a beloved pet performing a new trick.

"So, where do you guys want to talk?" Meredith asked. I debated for a second about ridding myself of the girl, worried she might not know when, or how, to shut up. But he seemed in need of company, and I didn't want to scare him off.

"You guys grab a seat in the living room," I said. "I'll get us some sweet tea."

I first bounded up the stairs, slammed a new cassette into my minirecorder, and listened at my mother's door. Silence except for the whir of a fan. Was she sleeping? If so, was Alan curled up next to her or perched on her vanity chair, just watching? Even after all this time, I hadn't even a guess as to the private life of Adora and her husband. Walking past Amma's room, I saw her sitting very properly on the edge of a rocking chair, reading a book called *Greek Goddesses*. Since I'd been here, she'd played at being Joan of Arc and Bluebeard's wife and Princess Diana—all martyrs, I realized. She'd find even unhealthier role models among the goddesses. I left her to it.

In the kitchen I poured out the drinks. Then, counting out a full ten seconds, I pressed the tines of a fork into the palm of my hand. My skin began to quiet down.

I entered the living room to see Meredith with her legs dangled over John's lap, kissing his neck. When I clanked the tea tray down on a table, she didn't stop. John looked at me and peeled himself slowly

away.

“You’re no fun today,” she pouted.

“So, John, I’m really glad you decided to talk to me,” I began. “I know your mom has been reluctant.”

“Yes. She doesn’t want to talk to much of anyone, but especially not ... press. She’s very private.”

“But you’re okay with it?” I prompted. “You’re eighteen, I assume?”

“Just turned.” He sipped his tea formally, as if he was measuring tablespoons in his mouth.

“Because what I really want is to be able to describe your sister to our readers,” I said. “Ann Nash’s father is speaking about her, and I don’t want Natalie to get lost in this story. Does your mother know you’re speaking to me?”

“No, but it’s okay. I think we’ll have to agree to disagree about this.” His laugh came in a quick stutter.

“His mom is kind of a freak about the media,” Meredith said, drinking from John’s glass. “She’s an extremely private person. I mean, I hardly think she even knows who I am, and we’ve been together for over a year, right?” He nodded. She frowned, disappointed, I assumed, that he didn’t add to the story of their romance. She removed her legs from his lap, crossed them, and began picking at the edge of the couch.

“And I hear you’re living over with the Wheelers now?”

“We have a place out back, a carriage house from the old days,” Meredith said. “My little sister’s pissed; it used to be the hangout for her and her nasty friends. Except for your sister. Your sister’s cool. You know my sister, right? Kelsey?”

Of course, this piece of work would have connections to Amma.

“Kelsey tall or Kelsey small?” I asked.

“Totally. This town has way too many Kelseys. Mine’s the tall one.”

“I’ve met her. They seem close.”

“They’d better be,” Meredith said tightly. “Little Amma runs that school. Be a fool that got on her bad side.”

Enough about Amma, I thought, but images of her teasing lesser girls by those lockers bumped around in my head. Junior high is an ugly time.

“So, John, are you adjusting all right over there?”

“He’s fine,” Meredith snipped. “We put together a little care basket of guy stuff for him—my mom even got him a CD player.”

“Oh, really?” I looked pointedly at John. *Time to speak up, buddy. Don’t be pussy whipped on my time.*

“I just need to be away from home right now,” he said. “We’re all a little on edge, you know, and Natalie’s stuff is everywhere, and my mom won’t let anyone touch it. Her shoes are in the hallway and her swimming suit is hanging in the bathroom we share so I have to see it every morning I shower. I can’t deal.”

“I can imagine.” I could: I remember Marian’s tiny pink coat hanging in the hall closet till I left for college. Might still be there.

I turned on the tape recorder, pushed it across the table toward the boy.

“Tell me what your sister was like, John.”

“Uh, she was a nice kid. She was extremely smart. Just unbelievable.”

“Smart how? Like good in school, or just bright?”

“Well, she didn’t do that well in school. She had a bit of a discipline problem,” he said. “But I think it was just because she got bored. She should have skipped a grade or two, I think.”

“His mom thought it would stigmatize her,” Meredith interjected. “She was always worried about Natalie sticking out.”

I raised my eyebrows at him.

“That’s true. My mom really wanted Natalie to fit in. She was this sort of goofy kid, kind of a tomboy, and just kind of a weirdo.” He laughed, staring at his feet.

“Are you thinking of a particular story?” I asked. Anecdotes are Curry’s coin of the realm. Plus, I was interested.

“Oh, like once, she invented this whole other language, you know?”

And a regular kid, I mean it'd be gibberish. But Natalie had the whole alphabet figured out—looked like Russian. And she actually taught it to me. Or tried. She got frustrated with me pretty quickly.” He laughed again, that same croak, like it was coming up from underground.

“Did she like school?”

“Well it’s hard to be the new kid, and the girls here ... well I guess the girls anywhere can be a little bit snotty.”

“Johnny! Rude!” Meredith pretended to push him. He ignored her.

“I mean, your sister ... Amma, right?” I nodded to him. “She was actually friends with her for a little bit. They’d run around in the woods, Natalie’d come back all scraped up and daffy.”

“Really?” Considering the scorn with which she’d mentioned Natalie’s name, I couldn’t picture it.

“They were real intense for a little bit. But I think Amma got bored with her, Natalie being a few years younger. I don’t know. They had some sort of falling out.” Amma learned that from her mother—the glib discarding of friends. “It was okay, though,” John said, as if to reassure me. Or him. “She had one kid she played with a lot, James Capisi. Farm kid a year or so younger that no one else talked to. They seemed to get along though.”

“He says he’s the last one to see Natalie alive,” I said.

“He’s a liar,” Meredith said. “I heard that story, too. He’s always made stuff up. I mean, his mom’s dying of cancer. He’s got no dad. He has no one to pay any attention to him. So he throws out that wild story. Don’t listen to anything he says.”

Again I looked at John, who shrugged.

“It is sort of a wild story, you know? A crazy lady snatches Natalie in broad daylight,” he said. “Besides, why would a woman do something like that?”

“Why would a man do something like that?” I asked.

“Who knows why men do such freaky stuff,” Meredith added. “It’s a gene thing.”

“I have to ask you John, have you been questioned by the police?”

“Along with both my parents.”

“And you have an alibi for the nights of both killings?” I waited for a reaction, but he continued to sip his tea calmly.

“Nope. I was out driving around. I just need to get out of here sometimes, you know?” He darted a quick glance at Meredith, whose lips pursed when she caught him looking. “It’s just a smaller town than I’m used to. Sometimes you need to get lost for a little. I know you don’t get it, Mer.” Meredith stayed silent.

“I get it,” I offered. “I remember getting very claustrophobic growing up here, I can’t imagine what it must be like to move here from somewhere else.”

“Johnny’s being noble,” Meredith interrupted. “He was with me both those nights. He just doesn’t want to get me in trouble. Print that.” Meredith was wobbling on the edge of the sofa, stiff and upright and slightly disconnected, as if she were speaking in tongues.

“Meredith,” John murmured. “No.”

“I’m not going to have people thinking my boyfriend is a fucking baby killer, thank you very much, John.”

“You tell that story to the police, and they’ll know the truth in an hour. It will look even worse for me. No one really thinks I’d kill my own sister.” John took a single lock of Meredith’s hair and pulled his fingers gently from the roots to the end. The word *tickle* flashed randomly from my right hip. I believed the boy. He cried in public and told silly stories about his sister and played with his girlfriend’s hair and I believed him. I could almost hear Curry snort at my naiveté.

“Speaking of stories,” I started. “I need to ask you about one. Is it true Natalie hurt one of her classmates back in Philadelphia?”

John froze, turned to Meredith, and for the first time he looked unpleasant. He gave me a true image for the phrase *curled lips*. His whole body jolted and I thought he’d bolt for the door, but then he leaned back and took a breath.

“Great. This is why my mom hates the media,” he grumbled. “There was an article about that in the paper back home. It was just a few paragraphs. It made Natalie sound like an animal.”

“So tell me what happened.”

He shrugged. Picked at a nail. “It was in art class, and the kids were cutting and painting, and a little girl got hurt. Natalie was a little kid with a temper, and this girl was sort of always bossing Natalie around. And one time Natalie happened to have scissors in her hand. It wasn’t like a premeditated assault. I mean, she was nine at the time.”

I had a flash of Natalie, that serious child from the Keene family photo, wielding blades at a little girl’s eyes. An image of bright red blood mingling unexpectedly with pastel watercolors.

“What happened to the little girl?”

“They saved her left eye. Her right was, uh, ruined.”

“Natalie attacked both her eyes?”

He stood up, pointing down at me from almost the same angle as his mother had. “Natalie saw a shrink for a year after, dealing with this. Natalie woke up with nightmares for months. She was nine. It was an accident. We all felt horrible. My dad set up a fund for the little girl. We had to leave so Natalie could start over. That’s why we had to come here—Dad took the first job he could find. We moved in the middle of the night, like criminals. To this place. To this goddam town.”

“Gee John, I didn’t realize you were having such a horrible time,” Meredith murmured.

He began to cry then, sitting back down, his head in his hands.

“I didn’t mean that I was sorry I came here. I meant I’m sorry she came here, because now she’s dead. And we were trying to help. And she’s dead.” He let out a quiet wail, and Meredith wrapped her arms grudgingly around him. “Someone killed my sister.”

**T**here would be no formal dinner that night, as Miss Adora wasn’t feeling well, Gayla informed me. I assume it was my mother’s affectation to request the *Miss* in front of her name, and I tried to imagine how the conversation might go. *Gayla, the best servants in the best households call their mistresses by their formal names. We want to be the best, don’t we?* Something like that.

Whether it was my argument with my mother or Amma’s that was

the cause of the trouble, I wasn't sure. I could hear them bickering like pretty birds in my mother's room, Adora accusing Amma, correctly, of having driven the golf cart without permission. Like all rural towns, Wind Gap has an obsession with machinery. Most homes own a car and a half for every occupant (the half being an antique collectible, or an old piece of crap on blocks, depending on the income bracket), plus boats, Jet Skis, scooters, tractors, and, among the elite of Wind Gap, golf carts, which younger kids without licenses use to whip around town. Technically illegal, but no one ever stops them. I guessed my mother had tried to withhold this bit of freedom from Amma after the murders. I would have. Their fight squeaked on like an old seesaw for nearly half an hour. *Don't lie to me, little girl...* The warning was so familiar it gave me an old feeling of unease. So Amma did occasionally get caught.

When the phone rang, I picked up, just so Amma wouldn't lose her momentum, and was surprised to hear the cheerleader staccato of my old friend Katie Lacey. Angie Papermaker was having the girls over for a Pity Party. Drink a bunch of wine, watch a sad movie, cry, gossip. I should come. Angie lived in the New Rich part of town—huge mansions at the outskirts of Wind Gap. Practically Tennessee. I couldn't tell from Katie's voice if that made her jealous or smug. Knowing her, probably a bit of both. She'd always been one of those girls who wanted what anyone else had, even if she didn't want it.

I knew when I saw Katie and her friends at the Keenes' home that I'd have to submit to at least one evening out. It was this or finish transcribing my talk with John, which was making me dangerously sad. Plus, like Annabelle, Jackie, and that catty group of my mother's friends, this gathering was likely to yield more information than I'd get through a dozen formal interviews.

As soon as she pulled up in front of the house I realized that Katie Lacey, now Katie Brucker, had, predictably, done well for herself. I knew this both from the fact it took her just five minutes to pick me up (turns out her home was but a block away) and what she picked me up in: one of those huge, stupid SUVs that cost more than some people's homes and provide just as many comforts. Behind my head, I could hear the DVD player tittering with some kids' show, despite the absence of kids. In front of me, the dashboard navigator was providing unnecessary play-by-play directions.

Her husband, Brad Brucker, was studying at her father's feet, and when Daddy retired, he'd take over the business himself. They peddled a controversial hormone used to bulk up chickens with horrific rapidity. My mother always sniffed at this—she'd never use anything that put such a stunning rush on the growing process. That didn't mean she eschewed hormones: My mother's pigs were pricked with chemicals till they plumped and reddened like squirting cherries, till their legs couldn't support their juicy girth. But it was done at a more leisurely pace.

Brad Brucker was the type of husband to live where Katie said, impregnate Katie when she asked, buy Katie the Pottery Barn sofa she wanted, and otherwise shut up. He was good-looking if you looked at him long enough, and he had a dick the size of my ring finger. This I knew firsthand, thanks to a slightly mechanical exchange my freshman year. But apparently the tiny thing worked fine: Katie was at the end of her first trimester for her third kid. They were going to keep trying till she had a boy. *We really want a little rascal running around.*

Talk of me, Chicago, no husband yet but fingers crossed! Talk of her, her hair, her new vitamin program, Brad, her two girls, Emma and Mackenzie, Wind Gap ladies' auxiliary, and the horrible job they did with the St. Patrick's Day Parade. Then sigh: *those poor little girls.* Yes, sigh: my story on those poor little girls. Apparently she didn't care that much, because she was quickly back to the ladies' auxiliary and how scattered it had become now that Becca Hart (née Mooney) was activities director. Becca was a girl of midtier popularity from our days, who shot to social stardom five years ago when she snagged Eric Hart, whose parents owned a sprawling Go-Kart, waterslide, mini-golf tourist trap in the ugliest part of the Ozarks. The situation was quite reproachable. She'd be there tonight and I could see for myself. She just didn't fit in.

Angie's house looked like a child's drawing of a mansion: It was so generic it was barely three-dimensional. When I entered the room I realized how much I didn't want to be there. There was Angie, who'd unnecessarily dropped ten pounds since high school, and who smiled demurely at me and went back to setting out a fondue. There was Tish, who'd been the little mommy of the group even back then, the one who held your hair when you threw up, and who had occasional

dramatic crying jags about feeling unloved. She'd married a guy from Newcastle, I learned, a slightly dorky man (this in hushed tones from Katie) who made a solid living. Mimi draped herself over a chocolate-leather couch. A dazzling adolescent, her looks didn't translate into adulthood. No one else seemed to notice. Everyone still referred to her as "the hot one." Backing this up: the giant rock on her hand, courtesy of Joey Johansen, a gangly, sweet boy who'd sprouted into a linebacker junior year, and suddenly demanded to be called Jo-ha. (That's truly all I remember of him.) Poor Becca sat amidst them, looking eager and awkward, dressed almost comically similar to her hostess (Had Angie taken Becca shopping?). She flashed smiles to anyone who caught her eye, but no one talked to her.

We watched *Beaches*.

Tish was sobbing when Angie turned the lights on.

"I've gone back to work," she announced in a wail, pressed coral pink fingernails across her eyes. Angie poured wine and patted her knee, stared at her with a showy concern.

"Good God, sweetie, why?" Katie murmured. Even her murmur was girlish and clicky. Like a thousand mice nibbling crackers.

"With Tyler in preschool, I thought I wanted to," Tish said between sobs. "Like I needed a purpose." She spat the last word out as if it were contaminated.

"You have a purpose," said Angie. "Don't let society tell you how to raise your family. Don't let feminists"—here she looked at me—"make you feel guilty for having what they can't have."

"She's right, Tish, she's completely right," offered Becca. "Feminism means allowing women to make whatever kind of choices they want."

The women were looking dubiously at Becca when suddenly Mimi's sobs popped up from her corner, and the attention, and Angie-with-the-wine, turned to her.

"Steven doesn't want to have any more kids," she wept.

"Why not?" Katie said with impressively strident outrage.

"He says three's enough."

"Enough for him or for you?" Katie snapped.

“That’s what I said. I want a girl. I want a daughter.” The women pet her hair. Katie pet her belly. “And I want a son,” she whimpered, staring pointedly at the photo of Angie’s three-year-old boy on the mantel.

The weeping and fretting went back and forth between Tish and Mimi—*I miss my babies ... I’ve always dreamed of a big houseful of kids, that’s all I’ve ever wanted ... what’s so wrong with just being a mommy?* I felt sorry for them—they seemed truly distraught—and I certainly could sympathize with a life that didn’t turn out as planned. But after much head nodding and murmurs of assent, I could think of nothing useful to say and I ducked into the kitchen to slice some cheese and stay out of the way. I knew this ritual from high school, and I knew it didn’t take much for it to turn nasty. Becca soon joined me in the kitchen, began washing dishes.

“This happens pretty much every week,” she said and half rolled her eyes, pretending to be less annoyed than bemused.

“Cathartic, I guess,” I offered. I could sense her wanting me to say more. I knew the feeling. When I’m on the edge of getting a good quote, it seems like I can almost reach inside the person’s mouth and pluck it off their tongue.

“I had no idea my life was so miserable until I started coming to Angie’s little get-togethers,” Becca whispered, taking a newly clean knife to slice some Gruyere. We had enough cheese to feed all of Wind Gap quite prettily.

“Ah, well, being conflicted means you can live a shallow life without copping to being a shallow person.”

“Sounds about right,” Becca said. “Was it like this with you guys in high school?” she asked.

“Oh pretty much, when we weren’t stabbing each other in the back.”

“Guess I’m glad I was such a loser,” she said, and laughed. “Wonder how I can be less cool now?” I laughed then too, poured her a glass of wine, slightly giddy at the absurdity of finding myself plopped right back in my teenage life.

By the time we returned, still lightly giggling, every woman in the room was crying, and they all stared up at us simultaneously, like a

gruesome Victorian portrait come to life.

“Well, I’m glad you two are having such fun,” Katie snapped.

“Considering what’s going on in our town,” Angie added. The subject had clearly widened.

“What’s wrong with the world? Why would someone hurt little girls?” Mimi cried. “Those poor things.”

“And to take their teeth, that’s what I can’t get over,” Katie said.

“I just wish they’d been treated nicer when they were alive,” Angie sobbed. “Why are girls so cruel to each other?”

“The girls picked on them?” Becca asked.

“They cornered Natalie in the bathroom after school one day ... and cut her hair off,” Mimi sobbed. Her face was wrecked, swollen and splotchy. Dark rivulets of mascara marked her blouse.

“They made Ann show her ... privates to the boys,” said Angie.

“They always picked on those girls, just because they were a little different,” Katie said, wiping her tears delicately on a cuff.

“Who’s ‘they’?” Becca asked.

“Ask Camille, she’s the one *reporting* this whole thing,” Katie said, lifting her chin up, a gesture I remembered from high school. It meant she was turning on you, but feeling quite justified. “You know how awful your sister is, right, Camille?”

“I know girls can be miserable.”

“So you’re defending her?” Katie glowered. I could feel myself getting pulled into Wind Gap politics and I panicked. *Catfight* began thumping on my calf.

“Oh, Katie, I don’t even know her well enough to defend or not defend her,” I said, faking weariness.

“Have you even cried once about those little girls?” Angie said. They were all in a bunch now, staring me down.

“Camille doesn’t have any children,” Katie said piously. “I don’t think she can feel that hurt the way we do.”

“I feel very sad about those girls,” I said, but it sounded artificial, like a beauty contestant pledging world peace. I did feel sad, but

articulating it seemed cheap to me.

“I don’t mean this to sound cruel,” Tish began, “but it seems like part of your heart can never work if you don’t have kids. Like it will always be shut off.”

“I agree,” Katie said. “I didn’t really become a woman until I felt Mackenzie inside me. I mean, there’s all this talk these days of God versus science, but it seems like, with babies, both sides agree. The Bible says be fruitful and multiply, and science, well, when it all boils down, that’s what women were made for, right? To bear children.”

“Girl power,” Becca muttered under her breath.

**B**ecca took me home because Katie wanted a sleepover at Angie’s. Guess the nanny would deal with her darling girls in the morning. Becca made a few game jokes about the women’s obsession with mothering, which I acknowledged with small croaks of laughter. *Easy for you to say, you have two kids.* I was feeling desperately sulky.

I put on a clean nightgown and sat squarely in the center of my bed. No more booze for you tonight, I whispered. I patted my cheek and unclenched my shoulders. I called myself sweetheart. I wanted to cut: *Sugar* flared on my thigh, *nasty* burned near my knee. I wanted to slice *barren* into my skin. That’s how I’d stay, my insides unused. Empty and pristine. I pictured my pelvis split open, to reveal a tidy hollow, like the nest of a vanished animal.

Those little girls. *What’s wrong with the world?* Mimi had cried, and it had barely registered, the lament was so commonplace. But I felt it now. Something was wrong, right here, very horribly wrong. I could picture Bob Nash sitting on the edge of Ann’s bed, trying to remember the last thing he said to his daughter. I saw Natalie’s mother, crying into one of her old T-shirts. I saw me, a despairing thirteen-year-old sobbing on the floor of my dead sister’s room, holding a small flowered shoe. Or Amma, thirteen herself, a woman-child with a gorgeous body and a gnawing desire to be the baby girl my mother mourned. My mother weeping over Marian. Biting that baby. Amma, asserting her power over lesser creatures, laughing as she and her friends cut through Natalie’s hair, the curls falling to the tile floor. Natalie, stabbing at the eyes of a little girl. My skin was screaming, my ears banged with my heartbeat. I closed my eyes, wrapped my

arms around myself, and wept.

**A**fter ten minutes of sobbing in my pillow, I started pulling out of the crying jag, mundane thoughts bobbing into my head: the quotes from John Keene I might use in my article, the fact that my rent was due next week back in Chicago, the smell of the apple going sour in the trash basket by my bed.

Then, outside my door, Amma quietly whispered my name. I buttoned up the top of my nightgown, pulled my sleeves down, and let her in. She was wearing a pink flowered nightgown, her blonde hair flowing over her shoulders, her feet bare. She looked truly adorable, no better word.

“You’ve been crying,” she said, slightly astounded.

“A little.”

“Because of her?” The final word was weighted, I could picture it round and heavy, making a deep thump in a pillow.

“A little, I guess.”

“Me, too.” She stared at my edges: the collar of my nightgown, the ends of my sleeves. She was trying to glimpse my scars. “I didn’t know you hurt yourself,” she said finally.

“Not anymore.”

“That’s good, I guess.” She wavered at the edge of my bed. “Camille, do you ever feel like bad things are going to happen, and you can’t stop them? You can’t do anything, you just have to wait?”

“Like an anxiety attack?” I couldn’t stop staring at her skin, it was so smooth and tawny, like warm ice cream.

“No. Not really.” She sounded like I’d disappointed her, failed to solve a clever riddle. “But, anyway. I brought you a present.” She held out a square of wrapping paper and told me to open it carefully. Inside: a tidily rolled joint.

“It’s better than that vodka you drink,” Amma said, automatically defensive. “You drink a lot. This is better. It won’t make you as sad.”

“Amma, really ...”

“Can I see your cuts again?” She smiled shyly.

“No.” A silence. I held up the joint. “And Amma, I don’t think you should ...”

“Well I do, so take it or don’t. I was just trying to be nice.” She frowned and twisted a corner of her nightgown.

“Thank you. It’s sweet that you’d like to help me feel better.”

“I can be nice, you know?” she said, her brow still furrowed. She seemed on the edge of tears herself.

“I know. It’s just that I’m wondering why you’ve decided to be nice to me now.”

“Sometimes I can’t. But right now, I can. When everyone’s asleep and everything’s quiet, it’s easier.” She reached out, her hand like a butterfly before my face, then dropped it, patted me on the knee, and left.

## Chapter Ten

“I’m sorry she came here, because now she’s dead,” said a weeping John Keene, 18, of his younger sister Natalie, 10. “Someone killed my little sister.” Natalie Keene’s body was discovered on May 14, jammed upright in a space between Cut-N-Curl Beauty Parlor and Bifty’s Hardware in the small town of Wind Gap, Mo. She is the second young girl murdered here in the past nine months: Ann Nash, nine, was discovered in a nearby creek last August. Both girls had been strangled; both had their teeth removed by the killer.

“She was this goofy kid,” John Keene said, crying softly, “kind of a tomboy.” Keene, who moved here from Philadelphia with his family two years ago, and who recently graduated from high school, described his younger sister as a bright, imaginative girl. She once even invented her own language, complete with a working alphabet. “A regular kid, it’d be gibberish,” Keene said, laughing ruefully.

What is gibberish is the police case so far: Wind Gap police officials and Richard Willis, a homicide detective on loan from Kansas City, admit there are few leads. “We have not ruled anyone out,” Willis said. “We are looking very closely at potential suspects within the community, but are also carefully considering the possibility that these killings may be the work of an outsider.”

The police refuse to comment on one potential witness, a young boy who claims he saw the person who abducted Natalie Keene: a woman. A source close to the police say they believe the killer is, in fact, likely to be a man within the local community. Wind Gap dentist James L. Jellard, 56, concurs, adding that removing teeth “would take some strength. They don’t just pop right out.”

While the police work the case, Wind Gap has seen a run on security locks and firearms. The local hardware store has sold three dozen security locks; the town’s gun and rifle dealer has processed more than 30 firearms permits since Keene’s killing. “I thought most folks around here already had rifles, for hunting,” says Dan R. Sniya, 35, who owns the town’s largest firearms store. “But I think anyone who didn’t have a gun—well, they will.”

One Wind Gap resident who’s increased his arsenal is Ann Nash’s father, Robert, 41. “I have two other daughters and a son, and they’re going to be protected,” he said. Nash described his late daughter as quite bright. “Sometimes I thought she was smarter than her old man. Sometimes *she* thought she was smarter than her old man.” He said his daughter was a tomboy like Natalie, a girl who liked to climb trees and ride her bike, which is what she was doing when she was abducted last August.

Father Louis D. Bluell, of the local Catholic parish, says he’s seen the effect of the

murders on residents: Sunday mass attendance has increased noticeably, and many members of his church have come for spiritual advice. “When something like this happens, people feel a real yearning for spiritual nourishment,” he says. “They want to know how something like this could have happened.”

So, too, do the police.

Before we hit press, Curry made fun of all the middle initials. *Good God, Southerners love their formalities.* I pointed out Missouri was technically the Midwest and he snickered at me. *And I’m technically middle-aged, but tell that to poor Eileen when she has to deal with my bursitis.* He also excised all but the most general details from my interview with James Capisi. Makes us look like suckers if we pay too much attention to the kid, especially if the police aren’t biting. He also cut a lame quote about John from his mother: “He’s a kind, gentle boy.” It was the only comment I got from her before she kicked me out of the house, the only thing that made that miserable visit near worthwhile, but Curry thought it was distracting. He was probably right. He was quite pleased that we finally had a suspect to focus on, my “man within the local community.” My “source close to the police” was a fabrication, or more euphemistically, an amalgam—everyone from Richard to the priest thought a local guy did it. I didn’t tell Curry about my lie.

The morning my story came out, I stayed in bed and stared at the white rotary phone, waited for it to ring with rebukes. It would be John’s mom, who’d be plenty angry when she discovered I got to her son. Or Richard, for my leak about the suspect being local.

Several silent hours went by as I got progressively more sweaty, the horseflies buzzing around my window screen, Gayla hovering outside my door, anxious for access to my room. Our bedclothes and bath towels have always been changed daily; the laundry is forever churning down in the basement. I think this is a lingering habit from Marian’s lifetime. Crisp clean clothes to make us forget all the drips and dank smells that come from our bodies. I was in college by the time I realized I liked the smell of sex. I came into my friend’s bedroom one morning after a boy darted past me, smiling sideways and tucking his socks into his back pocket. She was lazing in bed, splotchy and naked, with one bare leg dangling out from under the sheets. That sweet muddy smell was purely animal, like the deepest

corner of a bear's cave. It was almost foreign to me, this lived-in, overnight odor. My most evocative childhood scent was bleach.

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**A**s it turned out, my first angry caller was not anyone I'd guessed.

"I can't believe you left me completely out of the story," Meredith Wheeler's voice clanged into the phone. "You didn't use one thing I said. You'd never even know I was there. I was the one who got you John, remember?"

"Meredith, I never told you I'd use your comments," I said, irritated at her pushiness. "I'm sorry if you got that impression." I jammed a floppy blue teddy bear under my head, then felt guilty and returned him to the foot of the bed. One should have allegiance to one's childhood things.

"I just don't know why you wouldn't include me," she continued. "If the whole thing was to get an idea what Natalie was like, then you need John. And if you need John, you need me. I'm his girlfriend. I mean, I practically *own* him, ask anyone."

"Well, you and John, that wasn't really the focus of the story," I said. Behind Meredith's breathing, I could hear a country-rock ballad playing and a rhythmic thump and hiss.

"But you had other people from Wind Gap in the story. You had stupid Father Bluell. Why not me? John's in a lot of pain, and I've been really important to him, working through it all with him. He cries all the time. I'm the one keeping him together."

"When I do another story that needs more voices from Wind Gap, I'll interview you. If you have something to add to the story."

Thump. Hiss. She was ironing.

"I know a lot about that family, a lot about Natalie that John wouldn't think of. Or say."

"Great, then. I'll be in touch. Soon." I hung up, not quite easy with what the girl was offering me. When I looked down, I realized I'd written "Meredith" in loopy girlish cursive across the scars on my left leg.

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**O**n the porch, Amma was swaddled in a pink silk comforter, a damp washcloth on her forehead. My mother had a silver tray with tea, toast, and assorted bottles on it, and was pressing the back of Amma's hand against her cheek in a circular motion.

"Baby, baby, baby," Adora murmured, rocking them both on the swing.

Amma lolled sleepy as a newborn in her blanket, smacking her lips occasionally. It was the first time I'd seen my mother since our trip to Woodberry. I hovered in front of her, but she wouldn't take her eyes off Amma.

"Hi, Camille," Amma finally whispered, and gave me a little curl of a smile.

"Your sister is sick. She's worried herself into a fever since you've been home," Adora said, still pressing Amma's hand in that circle. I pictured my mother's teeth gnashing against each other inside her cheek.

Alan, I realized, was sitting just inside, watching them through the window screen from the living-room loveseat.

"You need to make her feel more comfortable around you, Camille; she's just a little girl," my mother cooed to Amma.

A little girl with a hangover. Amma left my room last night and went down to drink a while in her own. That's the way this house worked. I left them whispering to each other, *favorite* buzzing on my knee.

**"H**ey, Scoop." Richard rolled along beside me in his sedan. I was walking to the space where Natalie's body had been discovered, to get specific details about the balloons and notes placed there. Curry wanted a "town in mourning" piece. That is, if there were no leads on the murders. Implication being there better be some lead, and soon.

"Hello, Richard."

"Nice story today." Damn Internet. "Glad to hear you've found a source close to the police." He was smiling when he said it.

"Me too."

“Get in, we’ve got some work to do.” He pushed open the passenger door.

“I’ve got my own work to do. So far working with you has given me nothing but unusable, no-comment comments. My editor’s going to pull me out soon.”

“Well, we can’t have that. Then I’ll have no distractions,” he said. “Come on with me. I need a Wind Gap tour guide. In return: I will answer three questions, completely and truthfully. Off record of course, but I’ll give it to you straight. Come on, Camille. Unless you’ve got a date with your police source.”

“Richard.”

“No, truly, I don’t want to interfere with a burgeoning love affair. You and this mysterious fellow must make quite a handsome pair.”

“Shut up.” I got in the car. He leaned over me, pulled down my seat belt and secured it, pausing for a second with his lips close to mine.

“I’ve got to keep you safe.” He pointed over to a mylar balloon swaying in the gap where Natalie’s body was found. It read *Get Well Soon*.

“That to me,” Richard said, “perfectly sums up Wind Gap.”

**R**ichard wanted me to take him to all the town’s secret places, the nooks that only locals know about. Places where people meet to screw or smoke dope, where teens drink, or folks go to sit by themselves and decide where their lives had unraveled. Everyone has a moment where life goes off the rails. Mine was the day Marian died. The day I picked up that knife is a tight second.

“We still haven’t found a kill site for either girl,” Richard said, one hand on the wheel, the other draped on the back of my seat. “Just the dumping areas, and those are pretty contaminated.” He paused. “Sorry. ‘Kill site’ is an ugly phrase.”

“More suited to an abattoir.”

“Wow. Fifty-cent word there, Camille. Seventy-five cents in Wind Gap.”

“Yeah, I forget how cultured you Kansas City folks are.”

I directed Richard onto an unmarked gravel road, and we parked in the knee-length weeds about ten miles south of where Ann's body had been found. I fanned the back of my neck in the wet air, plucked at my long sleeves, stuck to my arms. I wondered if Richard could smell the booze of last night, now sitting in sweaty dots on my skin. We hiked into the woods, downhill and back up. The cottonwood leaves shimmered, as always, with imaginary breeze. Occasionally we could hear an animal skitter away, a bird suddenly take flight. Richard walked assuredly behind me, plucking leaves and slowly tearing them apart along the way. By the time we reached the spot, our clothes were soaked, my face dripping with sweat. It was an ancient one-room schoolhouse, tilting slightly to one side, vines weaving in and out of its slats.

Inside, half a chalkboard was nailed to the wall. It contained elaborate drawings of penises pushing into vaginas—no bodies attached. Dead leaves and liquor bottles littered the floor, some rusted beer cans from a time before pop tops. A few tiny desks remained. One was covered in a tablecloth, a vase of dead roses at its center. A pitiable place for a romantic dinner. I hoped it went well.

"Nice work," Richard said, pointing to one of the crayoned drawings. His light blue oxford clung to him. I could see the outline of a well-toned chest.

"This is mostly a kid hangout, obviously," I said. "But it's near the creek, so I thought you should see it."

"Mm-hmm." He looked at me in silence. "What do you do back in Chicago when you're not working?" He leaned on the desk, plucked a withered rose from the vase, began crumbling its leaves.

"What do I do?"

"Do you have a boyfriend? I bet you do."

"No. I haven't had a boyfriend in a long time."

He began pulling the petals off the rose. I couldn't tell if he was interested in my answer. He looked up at me and grinned.

"You're a tough one, Camille. You don't have a lot of *give* to you. You make me work. I like it, it's different. Most girls you can't get to shut up. No offense."

“I’m not trying to be difficult. It’s just not the question I was expecting,” I said, regaining my footing in the conversation. Small talk and banter. I can do that. “Do you have a girlfriend? I bet you have two. A blonde and brunette, to coordinate with your ties.”

“Wrong on all counts. No girlfriend, and my last one was a redhead. She didn’t match anything I owned. Had to go. Nice girl, too bad.”

Normally, Richard was the kind of guy I disliked, someone born and raised plush: looks, charm, smarts, probably money. These men were never very interesting to me; they had no edges, and they were usually cowards. They instinctively fled any situation that might cause them embarrassment or awkwardness. But Richard didn’t bore me. Maybe because his grin was a little crooked. Or because he made his living dealing in ugly things.

“You ever come here when you were a kid, Camille?” His voice was quiet, almost shy. He looked sideways, and the afternoon sun made his hair glimmer gold.

“Sure. Perfect place for inappropriate activities.”

Richard walked over to me, handed me the last of the rose, ran a finger up my sweaty cheek.

“I can see that,” he said. “First time I’ve ever wished I grew up in Wind Gap.”

“You and I might have gotten along just fine,” I said, and meant it. I was suddenly sad I’d never known a boy like Richard growing up, someone who’d at least give me a bit of a challenge.

“You know you’re beautiful, right?” he asked. “I’d tell you, but it seems like the kind of thing that you’d brush off. Instead I thought ...”

He tilted my head up to him and kissed me, first slowly and then, when I didn’t pull away, he folded me into his arms, pushed his tongue into my mouth. It was the first time I’d been kissed in almost three years. I ran my hands between his shoulder blades, the rose crumbling down his back. I pulled his collar away from his neck and licked him.

“I think you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen,” he said, running a finger along my jawline. “The first time I saw you, I couldn’t even think the rest of the day. Vickery sent me home.” He

laughed.

“I think you’re very handsome, too,” I said, holding his hands so they wouldn’t roam. My shirt was thin, I didn’t want him to feel my scars.

“*I think you’re very handsome, too?*” He laughed. “Geez, Camille, you really don’t do the romance stuff, huh?”

“I’m just caught off guard. I mean, first of all, this is a bad idea, you and me.”

“Horrible.” He kissed my earlobe.

“And, I mean, don’t you want to look around this place?”

“*Miss Preaker*, I searched this place the second week I was here. I just wanted to go for a walk with you.”

Richard also had covered the two other spots I had in mind, as it turned out. An abandoned hunting shed on the south part of the woods had yielded a yellow plaid hair ribbon that neither girl’s parents could identify. The bluffs to the east of Wind Gap, where you could sit and watch the distant Mississippi River below, offered a child’s sneaker print that matched shoes neither girl owned. Some dried blood was found dribbled over grass blades; but the type was the wrong match for both. Once again I was turning up useless. Then again, Richard didn’t seem to care. We drove up to the bluffs anyway, grabbed a six-pack of beer and sat in the sun, watching the Mississippi River glimmer gray like a lazy snake.

This had been one of Marian’s favorite places to go when she could leave her bed. For an instant, I could feel the weight of her as a child on my back, her hot giggles in my ears, skinny arms wrapped tight around my shoulders.

“Where would you take a little girl to strangle her?” Richard asked.

“My car or my home,” I said, jolting back.

“And to pull out the teeth?”

“Somewhere that I could scrub down well. A basement. A bathtub. The girls were dead first, right?”

“Is that one of your questions?”

“Sure.”

“They were both dead.”

“Dead long enough there was no blood when the teeth came out?”

A barge floating down the river began turning sideways in the current; men appeared on board with longpoles to twist it back in the right direction.

“With Natalie there was blood. The teeth were removed immediately after the strangling.”

I had the image of Natalie Keene, brown eyes frozen open, slumped down in a bathtub as someone pried her teeth from her mouth. Blood on Natalie’s chin. A hand on pliers. A woman’s hand.

“Do you believe James Capisi?”

“I truly don’t know, Camille, and I’m not blowing smoke at you. The kid is scared out of his wits. His mom keeps calling us to put someone on guard. He’s sure this woman is going to come get him. I sweated him a little bit, called him a liar, tried to see if he’d change his story. Nothing.” He turned to face me. “I’ll tell you this: James Capisi believes his story. But I can’t see how it can be true. It doesn’t fit any kind of profile I’ve ever heard of. It doesn’t feel right to me. Cop’s intuition. I mean, you talked to him, what did you think?”

“I agree with you. I wonder if he isn’t just freaked out about his mom’s cancer and projecting that fear somehow. I don’t know. And what about John Keene?”

“Profilewise: right age, in the family of one of the victims, seems maybe too broken up over the whole thing.”

“His sister was murdered.”

“Right. But ... I’m a guy and I can tell you teenage boys will sooner kill themselves than cry in public. And he’s been weeping it up all over town.” Richard blew a hollow toot with his beer bottle, a mating call to a passing tugboat.

**T**he moon was out, the cicadas in full jungle pulse, when Richard dropped me at home. Their creaking matched the throbbing between my legs where I’d let him touch me. Zipper down, his hand guided by mine to my clitoris and held there lest he explore and bump into the raised outlines of my scars. We got each other off like a couple of

schoolkids (*dumpling* thumping hard and pink on my left foot as I came) and I was sticky and smelling of sex as I opened the door to find my mother sitting on the bottom stair with a pitcher of amaretto sours.

She was wearing a pink nightgown with girlish puffed sleeves and a satin ribbon around the neckline. Her hands were unnecessarily repacked in that snowy gauze, which she'd managed to keep pristine despite being deeply in her cups. She swayed slightly as I came through the door, like a ghost debating whether to vanish. She stayed.

"Camille. Come sit." She beckoned her cloudy hands toward me. "No! Get a glass first from the back kitchen. You can have a drink with Mother. With your mother."

This should be miserable, I murmured as I grabbed a tumbler. But underneath that, a thought: time alone with *her!* A leftover rattle from childhood. Get that fixed.

My mother poured recklessly but perfect, capping off my glass just before it overflowed. Still, a trick to get it to my mouth without spilling. She smirked a little as she watched me. Leaned back against the newel post, tucked her feet under her, sipped.

"I think I finally realized why I don't love you," she said.

I knew she didn't, but I'd never heard her admit as much. I tried to tell myself I was intrigued, like a scientist on the edge of a breakthrough, but my throat closed up and I had to make myself breathe.

"You remind me of my mother. Joya. Cold and distant and so, so smug. My mother never loved me, either. And if you girls won't love me, I won't love you."

A wave of fury rattled through me. "I never said I didn't love you, that's just ridiculous. Just fucking ridiculous. You were the one who never liked me, even as a kid. I never felt anything but coldness from you, so don't you dare turn this on me." I began rubbing my palm hard on the edge of the stair. My mother gave a half smile at the action and I stopped.

"You were always so willful, never sweet. I remember when you were six or seven. I wanted to put your hair up in curlers for your school picture. Instead you cut it all off with my fabric shears." I

didn't remember doing this. I remembered hearing about Ann doing this.

"I don't think so, Momma."

"Headstrong. Like those girls. I tried to be close with those girls, those dead girls."

"What do you mean be close with them?"

"They reminded me of you, running around town wild. Like little pretty animals. I thought if I could be close with them, I would understand you better. If I could like them, maybe I could like you. But I couldn't."

"No, I don't expect so." The grandfather clock chimed eleven. I wonder how many times my mother had heard that growing up in this house.

"When I had you inside of me, when I was a girl—so much younger than you are now—I thought you'd save me. I thought you'd love me. And then my mother would love me. That was a joke." My mother's voice swept high and raw, like a red scarf in a storm.

"I was a baby."

"Even from the beginning you disobeyed, wouldn't eat. Like you were punishing me for being born. Made me look like a fool. Like a child."

"You *were* a child."

"And now you come back and all I can think of is 'Why Marian and not her?'"

Rage flattened immediately into a dark despair. My fingers found a wood staple in the floorboard. I jabbed it under my fingernail. I would not cry for this woman.

"I'm not so pleased to be left here anyway, Momma, if it makes you feel any better."

"You're so hateful."

"I learned at your feet."

My mother lunged then, grabbed me by both arms. Then she reached behind me and, with one fingernail, circled the spot on my

back that had no scars.

“The only place you have left,” she whispered at me. Her breath was cloying and musky, like air coming from a spring well.

“Yes.”

“Someday I’ll carve my name there.” She shook me once, released me, then left me on the stairs with the warm remains of our liquor.

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**I** drank the rest of the sours and had dark sticky dreams. My mother had cut me open and was unpacking my organs, stacking them in a row on my bed as my flesh flapped to either side. She was sewing her initials into each of them, then tossing them back into me, along with a passel of forgotten objects: an orange Day-Glo rubber ball I got from a gumball machine when I was ten; a pair of violet wool stockings I wore when I was twelve; a cheap gold-tinted ring a boy bought me when I was a freshman. With each object, relief that it was no longer lost.

**W**hen I woke, it was past noon, and I was disoriented and afraid. I took a gulp from my flask of vodka to ease the panic, then ran to the bathroom and threw it up, along with strings of sugary brown saliva from the amaretto sours.

Stripped naked and into the bathtub, the porcelain cool on my back. I lay flat, turned on the water, and let it creep up over me, fill my ears until they submerged with the satisfying *whulp!* of a sinking ship going under. Would I ever have the discipline to let the water cover my face, drown with my eyes open? Just refuse to lift yourself two inches, and it will be done.

The water stung at my eyes, covered my nose, and then enveloped me. I pictured myself from above: lashed skin and a still face flickering under a film of water. My body refused the quiet. *Bodice, dirty, nag, widow!* it screamed. My stomach and throat were convulsing, desperate to pull in air. *Finger, whore, hollow!* A few moments of discipline. What a pure way to die. *Blossom, bloom, bonny.*

I jerked to the surface, gulped in air. Panting, my head tilted toward the ceiling. Easy, easy, I told myself. Easy, sweet girl, you’ll be okay. I petted my cheek, baby-talked myself—how pitiful—but my breathing

hushed.

Then, a bolt of panic. I reached behind me to find the circle of skin in my back. Still smooth.

**B**lack clouds were sitting low over the town, so the sun curled around the edges and turned everything a sickly yellow, as if we were bugs under fluorescents. Still weak from the encounter with my mother, the feeble glow seemed appropriate. I had an appointment at Meredith Wheeler's for an interview concerning the Keenes. Not sure it would yield much of import but I'd at least get a quote, which I needed, having not heard a word from the Keenes after my last article. Truth was, with John living behind Meredith's house now, I had no way of reaching him except through her. I'm sure she loved that.

I hiked over to Main Street to pick up my car where I'd abandoned it during yesterday's outing with Richard. Weakly dropped into the driver's seat. I still managed to arrive at Meredith's a half hour early. Knowing the primping and plumping going on in preparation for my visit, I assumed she'd set me out back on the patio, and I'd have a chance to check in on John. As it turned out, she wasn't there at all, but I could hear music from behind the house, and I followed it to see the Four Little Blondes in fluorescent bikinis at one end of the pool, passing a joint between them, and John sitting in the shade at the other end, watching. Amma looked tan and blonde and delicious, not a trace of yesterday's hangover on her. She was as tiny and colorful as an appetizer.

Confronted with all that smooth flesh, I could feel my skin begin its chattering. I couldn't handle direct contact on top of my hangover panic. So I spied from the edge of the house. Anyone could have seen me, but none bothered. Amma's three friends were soon in a marijuana-and-heat spiral, splayed face down on their blankets.

Amma stayed up, staring down John, rubbing suntan oil on her shoulders, her chest, breasts, slipping her hands under her bikini top, watching John watching her. John gave no reaction, like a kid on his sixth hour of TV. The more lasciviously Amma rubbed, the less flicker he gave. One triangle of her top had fallen askew to reveal the plump breast beneath. Thirteen years old, I thought to myself, but I felt a spear of admiration for the girl. When I'd been sad, I hurt myself.

Amma hurt other people. When I'd wanted attention, I'd submitted myself to boys: *Do what you want; just like me.* Amma's sexual offerings seemed a form of aggression. Long skinny legs and slim wrists and high, babied voice, all aimed like a gun. *Do what I want; I might like you.*

"Hey John, who do I remind you of?" Amma called.

"A little girl who's misbehaving and thinks it's cuter than it is," John called back. He sat at the pool's edge in shorts and a T-shirt, his feet dipped into the water. His legs had a thin, almost feminine coating of dark hair.

"Really? Why don't you stop watching me from your little hideaway then," she said, pointing a leg toward the carriage house, with its tiny attic window sporting blue checked curtains. "Meredith will be jealous."

"I like to keep an eye on you, Amma. Always know I have my eye on you."

My guess: My half sister had gone into his room without permission, rifled through his things. Or waited for him on his bed.

"You sure do now," she said, laughing, her legs spread wide. She looked gruesome in the dark light, the rays casting pockets of shadows on her face.

"It'll be your turn some day, Amma," he said. "Soon."

"Big man. I hear," Amma called back. Kylie looked up, focused her eyes on her friend, smiled, and lay back down.

"Patient, too."

"You'll need it." She blew him a kiss.

The amaretto sours were turning on me, and I was sick of this banter. I didn't like John Keene flirting with Amma, no matter how provocative she was being. She was still thirteen.

"Hello?" I called out, rousing Amma, who waggled her fingers at me. Two of the three blondes looked up, then lay back down. John cupped some pool water in his hands and rubbed it across his face before turning the corners of his mouth up at me. He was tracing back the conversation, guessing how much I'd heard. I was equidistant from each side, and walked toward John, sat a good six feet away.

“You read the story?” I asked. He nodded.

“Yeah, thanks, it was nice. The part about Natalie at least.”

“I’m here to talk a little bit to Meredith today about Wind Gap; maybe Natalie will come up,” I said. “Is that okay by you?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Sure. She’s not home yet. Not enough sugar for the sweet tea. She freaked, ran off to the store without makeup.”

“Scandalous.”

“For Meredith, yes.”

“How are things going here?”

“Oh, all right,” he said. He began patting his right hand. Self-comfort. I felt sorry for him again. “I don’t know that anything would be any good anywhere, so it’s hard to gauge if this is better or worse, you know what I mean?”

“Like: This place is miserable and I want to die, but I can’t think of any place I’d rather be,” I offered. He turned and stared at me, blue eyes mirroring the oval pool.

“That’s exactly what I mean.” *Get used to it*, I thought.

“Have you thought about getting some counseling, seeing a therapist?” I said. “It might be really helpful.”

“Yeah, John, might quell some of your *urges*. They can be *deadly*, you know? We don’t want more little girls showing up without their teeth.” Amma had slipped into the pool and was floating ten feet away.

John shot up, and for a second I thought he was going to dive into the pool and throttle her. Instead, he pointed a finger at her, opened his mouth, closed it, and walked to his attic room.

“That was really cruel,” I said to her.

“But funny,” said Kylie, floating by on a hot pink air mattress.

“What a freak,” added Kelsey, paddling past.

Jodes was sitting in her blanket, knees pulled to her chin, eyes trained on the carriage house.

“You were so sweet with me the other night. Now you’re so changed,” I murmured to Amma. “Why?”

She looked caught off guard for a split second. “I don’t know. I wish I could fix it. I do.” She swam off toward her friends as Meredith appeared at the door and peevishly called me in.

**T**he Wheelers’ home looked familiar: an overstuffed plush sofa, a coffee table hosting a sailboat replica, a jaunty velvet ottoman in lime green, a black-and-white photo of the Eiffel Tower taken at a severe angle. Pottery Barn, spring catalog. Right down to the lemon yellow plates Meredith was now placing on the table, glazed berry tarts sitting in the center.

She was wearing a linen sundress the color of an unripe peach, her hair pulled down over her ears and held at the nape of her neck in a loose ponytail that had to have taken twenty minutes to get that perfect. She looked, suddenly, a lot like my mother. She could have been Adora’s child more believably than I. I could feel a grudge coming, tried to keep it in check, as she poured us each a glass of sweet tea and smiled.

“I have no idea what my sister was saying to you, but I can only guess it was hateful or dirty, so I apologize,” she said. “Although, I’m sure you know Amma’s the real ringleader there.” She looked at the tart but seemed disinclined to eat it. Too pretty.

“You probably know Amma better than I do,” I said. “She and John don’t seem to ...”

“She’s a very needy child,” she said, crossing her legs, uncrossing them, straightening her dress. “Amma worries she’ll shrivel up and blow away if attention isn’t always on her. Especially from boys.”

“Why doesn’t she like John? She was implying he was the one who hurt Natalie.” I took out my tape recorder and pressed the On button, partly because I didn’t want to waste time with ego games, and partly because I hoped she’d say something about John worth printing. If he was the prime suspect, at least in Wind Gap minds, I needed comment.

“That’s just Amma. She has a mean streak. John likes me and not her, so she attacks him. When she’s not trying to steal him away from

me. Like that's going to happen."

"It seems a lot of people have been talking, though, saying they think John may have something to do with this. Why do you think that is?"

She shrugged, stuck her lower lip out, watched the tape whir a few seconds.

"You know how it is. He's from out of town. He's smart and worldly and eight times better looking than anyone else around here. People would like it to be him, because then that means this ... *evilness* didn't come from Wind Gap. It came from outside. Eat your tart."

"Do you believe he's innocent?" I took a bite, the glaze dripping off my lip.

"Of course I do. It's all idle gossip. Just because someone goes for a drive ... lots of people do that around here. John just had bad timing."

"And what about the family? What can you tell me about either of the girls?"

"They were darling girls, very well behaved and sweet little things. It's like God plucked the best girls from Wind Gap to take to heaven for his own." She'd been practicing, the words had a rehearsed rhythm. Even her smile seemed measured: Too small is stingy, too big is inappropriately pleased. This smile just right. Brave and hopeful, it said.

"Meredith, I know that's not what you thought about the girls."

"Well, what kind of quote do you want?" she snapped.

"A truthful one."

"I can't do that. John would hate me."

"I wouldn't have to name you in the article."

"Then what would be the point of me doing the interview?"

"If you know something about the girls that people aren't saying, you should tell me. It could direct attention away from John, depending on what the information is."

Meredith took a demure sip of tea, dabbed at the corner of her

strawberry lips with her napkin.

“But could I still get my name in the article somewhere?”

“I can quote you elsewhere by name.”

“I want the stuff about God plucking them to heaven,” Meredith baby-talked. She wrung her hands and smiled at me sideways.

“No. Not that. I’ll use the quote about John being from out of town and that’s why people are so gossipy about him.”

“Why can’t you use the one I want?” I could see Meredith as a five-year-old, dressed as a princess and bitching because her favorite doll didn’t like her imaginary tea.

“Because it goes against a lot of things I’ve heard, and because no one really talks that way. It sounds fake.”

It was the most pathetic showdown I’ve ever had with a subject, and a completely unethical way to do my work. But I wanted her fucking story. Meredith twirled the silver chain around her neck, studied me.

“You could have been a model, you know?” she said suddenly.

“I doubt that,” I snapped. Every time people said I was pretty, I thought of everything ugly swarming beneath my clothes.

“You could have. I always wanted to be you when I grew up. I think about you, you know? I mean, our moms are friends and all, so I knew you were in Chicago and I pictured you in this big mansion with a few little curly tops and some stud husband investment banker. You all in the kitchen drinking orange juice and him getting in his Jag and going to work. But I guess I imagined wrong.”

“You did. Sounds nice, though.” I took another bite of tart. “So tell me about the girls.”

“All business, huh? You never were the friendliest. I know about your sister. That you had a sister who died.”

“Meredith, we can talk some time. I’d like that. After this. But let’s get this story, and then maybe we can enjoy ourselves.” I didn’t intend on staying more than a minute after the interview wrapped.

“Okay ... So, here it is. I think I know why ... the teeth ...” she pantomimed extraction.

“Why?”

“I can’t believe everyone refuses to acknowledge this,” she said.

Meredith glanced around the room.

“You didn’t hear this from me, okay?” she continued. “The girls, Ann and Natalie, they were biters.”

“What do you mean, biters?”

“Both of them. They had serious tempers. Like scary-time tempers. Like boy tempers. But they didn’t hit. They bit. Look.”

She held out her right hand. Just below the thumb were three white scars that shone in the afternoon light.

“That’s from Natalie. And this.” She pulled back her hair to reveal a left ear with only half an earlobe. “My hand she bit when I was painting her fingernails. She decided halfway through that she didn’t like it, but I told her to let me finish, and when I held her hand down, she sunk her teeth into me.”

“And the earlobe?”

“I stayed over there one night when my car wouldn’t start. I was asleep in the guest room and the next thing I knew, blood all over the sheets and my ear just felt like it was on fire, like I wanted to run away from it but it was attached to my head. And Natalie was screaming like *she* was on fire. That screaming was scarier than the biting. Mr. Keene had to hold her down. The kid had serious problems. We looked for my earlobe, see if it could be stitched back on, but it was gone. I guess she swallowed it.” She gave a laugh that sounded like the reverse of a gulp of air. “I mostly just felt sorry for her.”

*Lie.*

“Ann, was she as bad?” I asked.

“Worse. There are people all over this town with her teeth marks in them. Your mother included.”

“What?” My hands began to sweat and the back of my neck went cold.

“Your mom was tutoring her and Ann didn’t understand. She completely lost it, pulled some of your momma’s hair out, and bit into

her wrist. Hard. I think there had to be stitches.” Images of my mother’s thin arm caught between tiny teeth, Ann shaking her head like a dog, blood blossoming on my mother’s sleeve, on Ann’s lips. A scream, a release.

A little circle of jagged lines, and within, a ring of perfect skin.

## *Chapter Eleven*

**P**hone calls back in my room, no sign of my mother. I could hear Alan downstairs, snapping at Gayla for cutting the filets wrong.

“I know it seems trivial, Gayla, but think of it like this: Trivial details are the difference between a good meal and a dining experience.” Gayla emitted an assenting sound. Even her mm-hhms have a twang.

I phoned Richard on his cell, one of the few people in Wind Gap to own one, though I shouldn’t snipe, since I’m one of the only holdouts in Chicago. I just never want to be that reachable.

“Detective Willis.” I could hear a loudspeaker calling a name in the background.

“You busy, Detective?” I blushed. Levity felt like flirting felt like foolishness.

“Hi there,” came his formal voice. “I’m wrapping things up here; can I give a call back?”

“Sure, I’m at ...”

“The number shows up on my display.”

“Fancy.”

“Very true.”

**T**wenty minutes later: “Sorry, I was at the hospital in Woodberry with Vickery.”

“A lead?”

“Of sorts.”

“A comment?”

“I had a very nice time last night.”

I’d written *Richard cop Richard cop* twelve times down my leg, and had to make myself stop because I was itching for a razor.

“Me, too. Look, I need to ask you something straight and I need you to tell me. Off record. Then I need a comment I can print for my next piece.”

“Okay, I’ll try to help you, Camille. What do you need to ask me?”

“Can we meet at that cheesy bar we first had a drink at? I need to do this in person, and I need to get out of the house and, yes, I’ll say it: I need a drink.”

**T**hree guys from my class were at Sensors when I got there, nice guys, one of whom had famously won a State Fair blue ribbon for his obscenely big, milk-dripping sow one year. A folksy stereotype Richard would have loved. We exchanged niceties—they bought me my first two rounds—and photographs of their kids, eight in all. One of them, Jason Turnbough, was still as blond and round-faced as a kid. Tongue just peeking out the corner of his mouth, pink cheeks, round blue eyes darting between my face and my breasts for most of the conversation. He stopped once I pulled out my tape recorder and asked about the murders. Then it was those whirling wheels that had his full attention. People got such a charge from seeing their names in print. Proof of existence. I could picture a squabble of ghosts ripping through piles of newspapers. Pointing at a name on the page. *See, there I am. I told you I lived. I told you I was.*

“Who’d have thought when we were kids back in school, we’d be sitting here talking about murders in Wind Gap?” marveled Tommy Ringer, now grown into a dark-haired fellow with a rangy beard.

“I know, I mean I work in a supermarket, for Chrissakes,” said Ron Laird, a kindly, mouse-faced guy with a booming voice. The three glowed with misplaced civic pride. Infamy had come to Wind Gap, and they’d take it. They could keep working at the supermarket, the drugstore, the hatchery. When they died, this—along with getting married and having kids—would be on their list of things they’d done. And it was something that merely happened to them. No, more accurately, it was something that happened in their town. I wasn’t entirely sure about Meredith’s assessment. Some people would love to have the killer be a guy born and raised in Wind Gap. Someone they went fishing with once, someone they were in Cub Scouts with. Makes a better story.

Richard flung open the door, which was surprisingly light for its looks. Any customer who wasn’t a regular used too much force, so every few minutes the door banged into the side of the building. It offered an interesting punctuation to conversation.

As he walked in, pitching his jacket over his shoulder, the three men groaned.

“This guy.”

“I’m so fucking impressed, dude.”

“Save some brain cells for the case, buddy. You need ’em.”

I hopped off the stool, licked my lips, and smiled.

“Well fellows, got to go to work. Interview time. Thanks for the drinks.”

“We’ll be over here when you get bored,” Jason called out. Richard just smiled at him, muttering *idiot* through his teeth.

I slugged back my third bourbon, grabbed the waitress to set us up, and once we had our drinks in front of us, I rested my chin on my hands and wondered if I really wanted to talk business. He had a scar just above his right eyebrow and a tiny dimple in his chin. He tapped his foot on top of mine twice, where no one could see.

“So what gives, Scoop?”

“Look, I need to know something. I really need to know it, and if you can’t tell me, then you can’t tell me, but please think hard.” He nodded.

“When you think of the person who did these killings, do you have a specific person in your mind?” I asked.

“I have a few.”

“Male or female?”

“Why are you asking me this with such urgency right now, Camille?”

“I just need to know.”

He paused, sipped his drink, rubbed his hand over stubble on his chin.

“I don’t believe a woman would have done these girls this way.” He tapped my foot again. “Hey, what’s going on? You tell me the truth now.”

“I don’t know, I’m just freaking out. I just needed to know where to point my energies.”

“Let me help.”

“Did you know the girls were known for biting people?”

“I understood from the school there had been an incident involving Ann hurting a neighbor’s bird,” he said. “Natalie was on a pretty tight leash, though, because of what happened at her last school.”

“Natalie bit the earlobe off of someone she knew.”

“No. I have no incident reports filed against Natalie since she came here.”

“Then they didn’t report it. I saw the ear, Richard, there was no lobe, and there was no reason for this person to lie. And Ann attacked someone, too. Bit someone. But I wonder more and more if these girls got tangled up with the wrong person. It’s like they were put down. Like a bad animal. Maybe that’s why their teeth were taken.”

“Let’s begin slowly. First, who did each of the girls bite?”

“I can’t say.”

“Goddam it, Camille, I’m not fucking around. Tell me.”

“No.” I was surprised at his anger. I’d expected him to laugh and tell me I was pretty when defiant.

“This is a fucking murder case, okay? If you have information, I need it.”

“So do your job.”

“I’m trying, Camille, but your screwing around with me doesn’t help.”

“Now you know how it feels,” I muttered childishly.

“Fine.” He rubbed at his eyes. “I’ve had a real long day, so ... good night. I hope I was helpful to you.” He stood up, nudged his half-full glass over to me.

“I need an on-record quote.”

“Later. I need to get a little perspective. You may have been right about us being a horrible idea.” He left, and the guys called me to come back and join them. I shook my head, finished my drink, and pretended to take notes until they left. All I did was write *sick place sick place* over and over for twelve pages.

This time it was Alan waiting for me when I got home. He was sitting on the Victorian love seat, white brocade and black walnut, dressed in white slacks and a silk shirt, dainty white silk slippers on his feet. If he'd been in a photograph, it would be impossible to place him in time—Victorian gentleman, Edwardian dandy, '50s fop? Twenty-first-century househusband who never worked, often drank, and occasionally made love to my mother.

Very rarely did Alan and I talk outside of my mother's presence. As a child, I'd once bumped into him in the hallway, and he'd bent down stiffly, to my eye level, and said, "Hello, I hope you're well." We'd been living in the same house for more than five years, and that's all he could come up with. "Yes, thank you," was all I could give in return.

Now, though, Alan seemed ready to take me on. He didn't say my name, just patted the couch beside him. On his knee he balanced a cake plate with several large silvery sardines. I could smell them from the entryway.

"Camille," he said, picking at a tail with a tiny fish fork, "you're making your mother ill. I'm going to have to ask you to leave if conditions don't improve."

"How am I making her ill?"

"By tormenting her. By constantly bringing up Marian. You can't speculate to the mother of a dead child how that child's body might look in the ground right now. I don't know if that's something you can feel detached from, but Adora can't." A glob of fish tumbled down his front, leaving a row of greasy stains the size of buttons.

"You can't talk to her about the corpses of these two dead little girls, or how much blood must have come out of their mouths when their teeth were pulled, or how long it took for a person to strangle them."

"Alan, I never said any of those things to my mother. Nothing even close. I truly have no idea what she's talking about." I didn't even feel indignant, just weary.

"Please, Camille, I know how strained your relationship is with your mother. I know how jealous you've always been of anyone else's well-

being. It's true, you know, you really are like Adora's mother. She'd stand guard over this house like a ... witch, old and angry. Laughter offended her. The only time she ever smiled was when you refused to nurse from Adora. Refused to take the nipple."

That word on Alan's oily lips lit me up in ten different places. *Suck, bitch, rubber* all caught fire.

"And you know this from Adora," I prompted.

He nodded, lips pursed beatifically.

"Like you know that I said horrible things about Marian and the dead girls from Adora."

"Exactly," he said, the syllables precisely cut.

"Adora is a liar. If you don't know that, you're an idiot."

"Adora's had a hard life."

I forced out a laugh. Alan was undaunted. "Her mother used to come into her room in the middle of the night and pinch her when she was a child," he said, eyeing the last slab of sardine pitifully. "She said it was because she was worried Adora would die in her sleep. I think it was because she just liked to hurt her."

A jangle of memory: Marian down the hall in her pulsing, machine-filled invalid's room. A sharp pain on my arm. My mother standing over me in her cloudy nightgown, asking if I was okay. Kissing the pink circle and telling me to go back to sleep.

"I just think you should know these things," Alan said. "Might make you be a bit kinder to your mother."

I had no plans for being kinder to my mother. I just wanted the conversation to end. "I'll try to leave as soon as I can."

"Be a good idea, if you can't make amends," Alan said. "But you might feel better about yourself if you tried. Might help you heal. Your mind at least."

Alan grabbed the last floppy sardine and sucked it into his mouth whole. I could picture the tiny bones snapping as he chewed.

**A** tumbler full of ice and an entire bottle of bourbon purloined from the back kitchen, then up to my room to drink. The booze hit me fast,

probably because that was how I was drinking it. My ears were hot and my skin had stopped its blinking. I thought about that word at the back of my neck. *Vanish. Vanish* will banish my woes, I thought loopily. *Vanish* will banish my troubles. Would we have been this ugly if Marian hadn't died? Other families got over such things. Grieve and move on. She still hovered over us, a blonde baby girl maybe a hair too cute for her own good, maybe just a bit too doted on. This before she got sick, really sick. She had an invisible friend, a giant stuffed bear she called Ben. What kind of kid has an imaginary friend that's a stuffed animal? She collected hair ribbons and arranged them in alphabetical order by color name. She was the kind of girl who exploited her cuteness with such joy you couldn't begrudge her. Batting of the eyes, tossings of the curls. She called my mother Mudder and Alan ... hell, maybe she called Alan Alan, I can't place him in the room in these memories. She always cleaned her plate, kept a remarkably tidy room, and refused to wear anything but dresses and Mary Janes. She called me Mille and she couldn't keep her hands off me.

I adored her.

Drunk but still drinking, I took a tumbler of liquor and crept down the hallway to Marian's room. Amma's door, just one room down, had been closed for hours. What was it like growing up next to the room of a dead sister you never met? I felt a pang of sorrow for Amma. Alan and my mother were in their big corner bedroom, but the light was out and the fan whirring. No such thing as central air in these old Victorians, and my mother finds room units tacky, so we sweat the summers out. Ninety degrees but the heat made me feel safe, like walking underwater.

The pillow on her bed still had a small indentation. A set of clothes was laid out as if covering a living child. Violet dress, white tights, shiny black shoes. Who'd done that—my mother? Amma? The IV stand that had tailed Marian so relentlessly in her last year was standing, alert and shiny, next to the rest of the medical equipment: the bed that was two feet taller than standard, to allow patient access; the heart monitor; the bedpan. I was disgusted my mother hadn't purged this stuff. It was a clinical and utterly lifeless room. Marian's favorite doll had been buried with her, a massive rag doll with blonde yarn curls to match my sister's. Evelyn. Or Eleanor? The rest were

lined against the wall on a set of stands, like fans in bleachers. Twenty or so with white china faces and deep glassy eyes.

I could see her so easily here, sitting cross-legged on that bed, small and sweat dotted, her eyes ringed with purple. Shuffling cards or combing her doll's hair or coloring angrily. I could hear that sound: a crayon running in hard lines across a paper. Dark scribbles with the crayon pushed so hard it ripped the paper. She looked up at me, breathing hard and shallow.

“I'm tired of dying.”

I skitted back to my room as if I were being chased.

**T**he phone rang six times before Eileen picked up. Things the Currys don't have in their home: a microwave, a VCR, a dishwasher, an answering machine. Her hello was smooth but tense. Guess they don't get many calls after eleven. She pretended they hadn't been asleep, that they simply hadn't heard the phone, but it took another two minutes to get Curry on the line. I pictured him, shining his glasses on the corner of pajamas, putting on old leather slippers, looking at the glowing face of an alarm clock. A soothing image.

Then I realized I was remembering a commercial for an all-night pharmacy in Chicago.

It had been three days since I'd last talked to Curry. Nearly two weeks since I'd been in Wind Gap. Any other circumstance and he'd have been phoning me three times a day for updates. But he couldn't bring himself to ring me at a civilian's, at my mother's house no less, down in Missouri, which in his Windy City mind he equated with the Deep South. Any other circumstances and he'd be rumbling into the phone at me for not staying in pocket, but not tonight.

“Cubby, you okay? What's the story?”

“Well, I haven't gotten this on record, but I will. The police definitely think the killer is male, definitely from Wind Gap, and they have no DNA, no kill site; they really have very little. Either the killer is a mastermind or an accidental genius. The town seems to be focusing on Natalie Keene's brother, John. I have his girlfriend on record protesting his innocence.”

“Good, good stuff, but I really meant ... I was asking about you.

You doing okay down there? You have to tell me, because I can't see your face. Don't do the stoic thing."

"I'm not so good, but what does that matter?" My voice came out higher and more bitter than I'd planned. "This is a good story, and I think I'm on the edge of something. I feel like another few days, a week, and ... I don't know. The little girls bit people. That's what I got today, and the cop I've been working with, he didn't even know."

"You told him that? What was his comment?"

"Nothing."

"Why the hell didn't you get a comment, girl?"

*See, Curry, Detective Willis felt I was holding back some information and so he sulked off, like all men do when they don't get their way with women they've fooled around with.*

"I screwed up. I'll get it, though. I need a few more days before I file, Curry. Get a little more local color, work on this cop. I think they're almost convinced a little press would help juice things. Not that anyone reads our paper down here." Or up there.

"They will. You'll get some serious notice for this, Cubby. Your stuff is getting close to good. Push harder. Go talk to some of your old friends. They might be more open. Plus it's good for the piece—that Texas floods series that won the Pulitzer had a whole story on the guy's perspective about coming home during a tragedy. Great read. And a friendly face, a few beers might do you good. Sounds like you've already had a few tonight?"

"A few."

"Are you feeling ... like this is a bad situation for you? With the recovery?" I heard a lighter strike, the scratch of a kitchen chair across linoleum, a grunt as Curry sat down.

"Oh, it's not for you to worry about."

"Of course it is. Don't play martyr, Cubby. I'm not going to penalize you if you need to leave. You've got to take care of yourself. I thought being home might do you good, but ... I forget sometimes parents aren't always ... good for their kids."

"Whenever I'm here," I stopped, tried to pull it together. "I just always feel like I'm a bad person when I'm here." Then I started

crying, silent sobbing as Curry stammered on the other end. I could picture him panicking, waving Eileen over to handle this weeping *girl*. But no.

“Ohhh, Camille,” he whispered. “You are one of the most decent people I know. And there aren’t that many decent people in this world, you know? With my folks gone, it’s basically you and Eileen.”

“I’m not decent.” The tip of my pen was scribbling deep, scratchy words into my thigh. *Wrong, woman, teeth.*

“Camille, you are. I see how you treat people, even the most worthless pieces of crap I can think of. You give them some ... dignity. Understanding. Why do you think I keep you around? Not because you’re a great reporter.” Silence and thick tears on my end. *Wrong, woman, teeth.*

“Was that funny at all? I meant it to be funny.”

“No.”

“My grandfather was in vaudeville. But I guess that gene missed me.”

“He was?”

“Oh yeah, straight off the boat from Ireland in New York City. He was a hilarious guy, played four instruments....” Another spark of a lighter. I pulled the thin covers up over me and closed my eyes, listened to Curry’s story.

## *Chapter Twelve*

**R**ichard was living in Wind Gap's only apartment building, an industrial box built to house four tenants. Only two apartments were filled. The stumpy columns holding up the carport had been spray painted red, four in a row, reading: "Stop the Democrats, Stop the Democrats, Stop the Democrats," then, randomly, "I like Louie."

Wednesday morning. The storm still sitting in a cloud above town. Hot and windy, piss-yellow light. I banged on his door with the corner of a bourbon bottle. Bear gifts if you can't bear anything else. I'd stopped wearing skirts. Makes my legs too accessible to someone prone to touching. If he was anymore.

He opened the door smelling of sleep. Tousled hair, boxers, a T-shirt inside out. No smile. He kept the place frigid. I could feel the air from where I was standing.

"You want to come in, or you want me to come out?" he asked, scratching his chin. Then he spotted the bottle. "Ah, come in. I guess we're getting drunk?"

The place was a mess, which surprised me. Pants strewn over chairs, a garbage can near overflowing, boxes of papers piled up in awkward spots in the hallways, forcing you to turn sideways to pass. He motioned me to a cracked leather sofa and returned with a tray of ice and two glasses. Poured fat portions.

"So, I shouldn't have been so rude last night," he said.

"Yeah. I mean, I feel like I'm giving you a fair amount of information, and you're not giving me any."

"I'm trying to solve a murder. You're trying to report about that. I think I get priority. There are certain things, Camille, that I'm just not able to tell you."

"And vice versa—I have a right to protect my sources."

"Which in turn could help protect the person doing these killings."

"You can figure it out, Richard. I gave you almost everything. Jeez, do a little work on your own." We stared at each other.

"I love it when you get all tough reporter on me." Richard smiled. Shook his head. Poked me with his bare foot. "I actually really kind of

do.”

He poured us each another glass. We'd be smashed before noon. He pulled me to him, kissed me on my lobe, stuck his tongue in my ear.

“So Wind Gap girl, how bad exactly were you?” he whispered. “Tell me about the first time you did it.” The first time was the second time was the third was the fourth, thanks to my eighth-grade encounter. I decided to leave it at the first.

“I was sixteen,” I lied. Older seemed more appropriate for the mood. “I fucked a football player in the bathroom at this party.”

My tolerance was better than Richard's, he was already looking glazed, twirling a finger around my nipple, hard beneath my shirt.

“Mmmm ... did you come?”

I nodded. I remember pretending to come. I remember a murmur of an orgasm, but that wasn't until they'd passed me over to the third guy. I remember thinking it was sweet that he kept panting in my ear, “Is this all right? Is this all right?”

“Do you want to come now? With me?” Richard whispered.

I nodded and he was on me. Those hands everywhere, trying to go up my shirt, then struggling to unbutton my pants, tug them down.

“Hold on, hold on. My way,” I whispered. “I like it with my clothes on.”

“No. I want to touch you.”

“No, baby, my way.”

I pulled my pants down just a little bit, kept my stomach covered with my shirt, kept him distracted with well-placed kisses. Then I guided him into me and we fucked, fully clothed, the crack on the leather couch scratching my ass. *Trash, pump, little, girl.* It was the first time I'd been with a man in ten years. *Trash, pump, little, girl!* His groaning was soon louder than my skin. Only then could I enjoy it. Those last few sweet thrusts.

**H**e lay half beside me, half on top of me and panted when it was done, still holding the neck of my shirt in his fist. The day had gone black. We were trembling on the edge of a thunderstorm.

“Tell me who you think did it,” I said. He looked shocked. Was he expecting “I love you”? He twirled my hair for a minute, poked his tongue in my ear. When denied access to other body parts, men become fixated on the ear. Something I’d learned in the last decade. He couldn’t touch my breasts or my ass, my arms or my legs, but Richard seemed content, for now, with my ear.

“Between you and me, it’s John Keene. The kid was very close to his sister. In an unhealthy way. He has no alibi. I think he’s got a thing for little girls that he’s trying to fight, ends up killing them and pulling the teeth for a thrill. He won’t be able to hold out much longer, though. This is going to accelerate. We’re checking for any weird behavior back in Philly. Could be Natalie’s problems weren’t the only reason they moved.”

“I need something on record.”

“Who told you about the biting, and who did the girls bite?” he whispered hot in my ear. Outside, the rain began hitting the pavement like someone pissing.

“Meredith Wheeler told me Natalie bit her earlobe off.”

“What else?”

“Ann bit my mother. On her wrist. That’s it.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard. Good girl,” he whispered, stroking my nipple again.

“Now give me something on record.”

“No.” He smiled at me. “My way.”

**R**ichard fucked me another time that afternoon, finally gave me a grudging quote about a break in the case, and an arrest likely. I left him asleep in his bed and ran through the rain to my car. A random thought clanged in my head: Amma would have gotten more from him.

I drove to Garrett Park and sat in my car staring at the rain, because I didn’t want to go home. Tomorrow this spot would be filled with kids beginning their long, lazy summer. Now it was just me, feeling sticky and stupid. I couldn’t decide if I’d been mistreated. By Richard, by those boys who took my virginity, by anyone. I was never really on

my side in any argument. I liked the Old Testament spitefulness of the phrase *got what she deserved*. Sometimes women do.

Silence and then not. The yellow IROC rumbled up next to me, Amma and Kylie sharing the front passenger's seat. A scraggly haired boy wearing gas-station shades and a stained undershirt was in the driver's seat; his skinny doppelgänger in back. Smoke rolled out of the car, along with the smell of citrus-flavored liquor.

"Get in, we're going to party a little," Amma said. She was proffering a bottle of cheap orange-flavored vodka. She stuck her tongue out and let a raindrop splash on it. Her hair and tank top were already dripping.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"You don't look it. Come on, they're patrolling the park. You'll get a DUI for sure. I can *smell* you."

"Come on, chiquita," Kylie called. "You can help us keep these boys in line."

I thought about my options: Go home, drink by myself. Go to a bar, drink with whatever guys floated over. Go with these kids, maybe hear some interesting gossip at the very least. An hour. Then home to sleep it off. Plus, there was Amma and her mysterious friendliness toward me. I hated to admit it, but I was becoming obsessed with the girl.

The kids cheered as I got in the backseat. Amma passed around a different bottle, hot rum that tasted like suntan lotion. I worried they'd ask me to buy them liquor. Not because I wouldn't. Pathetically, I wanted them to just want me along. Like I was popular once again. Not a freak. Approved of by the coolest girl in school. The thought was almost enough to make me jump out of the car and walk home. But then Amma passed the bottle again. The rim was ringed with pink lip gloss.

The boy next to me, introduced only as Nolan, nodded and wiped sweat off his upper lip. Skinny arms with scabs and a face full of acne. Meth. Missouri is the second-most addicted state in the Union. We get bored down here, and we have a lot of farm chemicals. When I grew up, it was mostly the hard cores that did it. Now it was a party drug. Nolan was running his finger up and down the vinyl ribbing of the

driver's seat in front of him, but he looked up at me long enough to say, "You're like my mom's age. I like it."

"I doubt I'm quite your mom's age."

"She's like, thirty-three, thirty-four?" Close enough.

"What's her name?"

"Casey Rayburn." I knew her. Few years older than me. Factory side. Too much hair gel and a fondness for the Mexican chicken killers down on the Arkansas border. During a church retreat, she told her group she'd tried to commit suicide. The girls at school started calling her Casey Razor.

"Must have been before my time," I said.

"Dude, this chick was too cool to hang with your druggie whore momma," the driver said.

"Fuck you," Nolan whispered.

"Camille, look what we got," Amma leaned over the passenger's seat, so her rear was bumping Kylie's face. She shook a bottle of pills at me. "OxyContin. Makes you feel real good." She stuck out her tongue and placed three in a row like white buttons, then chewed and swallowed with a gulp of vodka. "Try."

"No thanks, Amma." OxyContin is good stuff. Doing it with your kid sister isn't.

"Oh, come on, Mille, just one," she wheedled. "You'll feel lighter. I feel so happy and good right now. You have to, too."

"I feel fine, Amma." Her calling me Mille took me back to Marian. "I promise."

She turned back around and sighed, looking irretrievably glum.

"Come on, Amma, you can't care that much," I said, touching her shoulder.

"I did." I couldn't take it, I was losing ground, feeling that dangerous need to please, just like the old days. And really, one wasn't going to kill me.

"Okay, okay, give me one. One."

She immediately brightened and flung herself back to face me.

“Put out your tongue. Like communion. Drug communion.”

I put out my tongue and she set the pill on the tip, and squealed.

“Good girl.” She smiled. I was getting tired of that phrase today.

**W**e pulled up outside one of Wind Gap’s great old Victorian mansions, completely renovated and repainted in ludicrous blues and pinks and greens that were supposed to be funky. Instead the place looked like the home of a mad ice-cream man. A boy with no shirt was throwing up in the bushes to the side of the house, two kids were wrestling in what was left of a flower garden, and a young couple was in full spider embrace on a child’s swing. Nolan was abandoned in the car, still running his fingers up and down that piping. The driver, Damon, locked him in “so no one fucks with him.” I found it a charming gesture.

Thanks to the OxyContin, I was feeling quite game, and as we walked into the mansion, I caught myself looking for faces from my youth: boys in buzz cuts and letter jackets, girls with spiral perms and chunky gold earrings. The smell of Drakkar Noir and Giorgio.

All gone. The boys here were babies in loose skater shorts and sneakers, the girls in halters and mini skirts and belly rings, and they were all staring at me as if I might be a cop. *No, but I fucked one this afternoon.* I smiled and nodded. *I am terribly chipper,* I thought mindlessly.

In the cavernous dining room, the table had been pushed to one side to make room for dancing and coolers. Amma bopped into the circle, grinded against a boy until the back of his neck turned red. She whispered into his ear, and with his nod, opened up a cooler and plucked out four beers, which she held against her wet bosom, pretending to have a hard time juggling them as she jiggled past an appreciative group of boys.

The girls were less so. I could see the sniping zip through the party like a line of firecrackers. But the little blondes had two things going for them. First, they were with the local drug dealer, who was sure to swing some clout. Second, they were prettier than almost any other female there, which meant the boys would refuse to boot them. And this party was hosted by a boy, as I could tell by the photos on the living-room mantel, a dark-haired kid, blandly handsome, posing in

cap and gown for his senior photo; nearby, a shot of his proud father and mother. I knew Mom: She was the older sister of one of my high-school friends. The idea that I was at her child's party gave me my first wave of nerves.

"Ohmigodohmigodohmigod." A brunette with frogeyes and a T-shirt proudly blaring *The Gap* ran past us and grabbed a similarly amphibious-looking girl. "They came. They totally came."

"Shit," replied her friend. "This is too good. Do we say hello?"

"I think we wait and see what happens. If J.C. doesn't want them here, then we got to stay out of it."

"Totally."

I knew before I saw him. Meredith Wheeler entered the living room, tugging John Keene behind. A few guys gave him nods, a few offered pats on the shoulder. Others pointedly turned their backs and closed their circles. Neither John nor Meredith noticed me, for which I was relieved. Meredith spotted a circle of skinny bow-legged girls, fellow cheerleaders, I assumed, standing at the door of the kitchen. She squealed and hopped over to them, stranding John in the living room. The girls were even chillier than the guys had been. "Hiiiiii," said one without smiling. "I thought you said you weren't coming."

"I decided that was just stupid. Anyone with a brain knows John's cool. We're not going to be fucking outcasts just because of all this ... crap."

"It's not cool, Meredith. J.C. is not cool with this," said a redhead who was either J.C.'s girlfriend or wanted to be.

"I'll talk to him," Meredith whined. "Let me talk to him."

"I think you should just go."

"Did they really take John's clothes?" asked a third tiny girl who had a maternal air about her. The one who ended up holding hair while her friends threw up.

"Yes, but that's to completely *eliminate* him. It's not because he's in trouble."

"Whatever," said the redhead. I hated her.

Meredith scanned the room for more friendly faces and spotted me,

looked confused, spotted Kelsey, looked furious.

Leaving John by the door, pretending to check his watch, tie his shoe, look nonchalant as the crowds kicked into full scandal buzz, she strode over to us.

“What are you doing here?” Her eyes were full of tears, beads of sweat on her forehead. The question seemed to be addressed to neither of us. Maybe she was asking herself.

“Damon brought us,” Amma chirped. She hopped twice on the tips of her feet. “I can’t believe *you’re* here. And I definitely can’t believe *he’s* showing his face.”

“God, you’re such a little bitch. You know nothing, you fucking druggie fucker.” Meredith’s voice was quivering, like a top twirling toward the edge of a table.

“Better than what you’re fucking,” Amma said. “Hiiii, murderer.” She waved at John, who seemed to notice her for the first time and suddenly looked like he’d been smacked.

He was about to walk over when J.C. appeared from another room and took John aside. Two tall boys discussing death and house parties. The room tuned to a low whisper, watching. J.C. patted John on the back, in a way that aimed him directly for the door. John nodded to Meredith and headed out. She followed quickly, her head bowed, hands up to her face. Just before John made it to the door, some boy blurted in a high teasing voice, “Babykiller!” Nervous laughs and eye rolling. Meredith screeched once, wildly, turned around, teeth bared, yelled, “Fuck y’all” and slammed the door.

The same boy mimicked it for the crowd, a coy, girlish *Fuck y’all*, jutting his hip out to one side. J.C. turned the music back up, a teenage girl’s synthesized pop voice teasing about blow jobs.

I wanted to follow John and just put my arms around him. I’d never seen anyone look so lonesome, and Meredith seemed unlikely to be of solace. What would he do, back by himself in that empty carriage house? Before I could run after him, Amma grabbed my hand and pulled me upstairs to “The VIP Room,” where she and the blondes and two high-school boys with matching shaved heads rifled through J.C.’s mom’s closet, flinging her best clothes off the hangers to make a nest. They clambered on the bed in the circle of satin and furs, Amma

pulling me next to her and producing a button of Ecstasy from her bra.

“You ever played a game of Rolling Roulette?” she asked me. I shook my head. “You pass the X around from tongue to tongue, and the tongue it dissolves on last is the lucky winner. This is Damon’s best shit, though, so we’ll all roll a little.”

“No thanks, I’m good,” I said. I’d almost agreed until I saw the alarmed look on the boys’ faces. I must have reminded them of their mothers.

“Oh, come on, Camille, I won’t tell, for Chrissakes,” Amma whined, picking at a fingernail. “Do it with me. Sisters?”

“Pleeease, Camille!” moaned Kylie and Kelsey. Jodes watched me silently.

The OxyContin and the booze and the sex from earlier and the storm that still hung wet outside and my wrecked skin (*icebox* popping eagerly on one arm) and the stained thoughts of my mother. I don’t know which hit hardest but suddenly I was allowing Amma to kiss my cheek excitedly. I was nodding yes, and Kylie’s tongue hit one boy, who nervously passed the pill to Kelsey, who licked the second boy, his tongue big as a wolf’s, who slopped over Jodes, who wobbled her tongue hesitantly out to Amma—who lapped the pill up, and, tongue soft and little and hot, passed the X into my mouth, wrapping her arms around me and pushing the pill down hard on my tongue until I could feel it crumble in my mouth. It dissolved like cotton candy.

“Drink lots of water,” she whispered to me, then giggled loudly at the circle, flinging herself back on a mink.

“Fuck, Amma, the game hadn’t even started,” the wolf boy snapped, his cheeks flushed red.

“Camille is my guest,” Amma said mock haughtily. “Plus, she could use a little sunshine. She’s had a pretty shitty life. We have a dead sister just like John Keene. She’s never dealt with it.” She announced it as if she were helping break the ice between cocktail party guests: *David owns his own dry-goods store, James just returned from an assignment in France, and, oh, yes, Camille has never gotten over her dead sister. Can I refresh anyone’s drink?*

“I’ve got to go,” I said, standing too abruptly, a red satin halter clinging to my backside. I had about fifteen minutes till I really started rolling, and this wasn’t where I wanted to be when it happened. Again, though, the problem: Richard, while a drinker, wasn’t likely to condone anything more serious, and I sure as hell didn’t want to sit in my steamy bedroom, alone and high, listening for my mother.

“Come with me,” Amma offered. She slipped a hand into her overpadded bra and pulled a pill from its lining, popping it in her mouth and smiling huge and cruel at the rest of the kids, who looked hopeful but daunted. None for them.

“We’ll go swimming, Mille, it’ll feel so outrageous when we start rolling,” she grinned, flashing perfect square white teeth. I had no fight left—it seemed easier to go along. We were down the stairs, into the kitchen (peach-faced young boys assessing us with confusion—one a shade too young, one definitely too old). We were grabbing bottled water from the icebox (that word suddenly panting again on my skin, like a puppy spotting a bigger dog), which was jammed with juices and casseroles, fresh fruit and white bread, and I was suddenly touched by this innocent, healthy family refrigerator, so oblivious to the debauchery occurring elsewhere in the house.

“Let’s go, I’m so excited to swim,” Amma declared wildly, pulling at my arm like a child. Which she was. *I am doing drugs with my thirteen-year-old sister*, I whispered to myself. But a good ten minutes had passed, and the idea brought only a flutter of happiness. She was a fun girl, my little sister, the most popular girl in Wind Gap, and she wanted to hang out with me. *She loves me like Marian did*. I smiled. The X had released its first wave of chemical optimism, I could feel it float up inside me like a big test balloon and splatter on the roof of my mouth, spraying good cheer. I could almost taste it, like a fizzy pink jelly.

Kelsey and Kylie began following us to the door, and Amma swung around laughing. “I don’t want you guys to come,” she cackled. “You guys get to stay here. Help Jodes get laid, she needs a good fuck.”

Kelsey scowled back at Jodes, who hung nervously on the stairs. Kylie looked at Amma’s arm around my waist. They glanced at each other. Kelsey snuggled into Amma, put her head on her shoulder.

“We don’t want to stay here, we want to come with you,” she whined. “Please.”

Amma shrugged her away, smiled at her like she was a dumb pony.

“Just be a sweetie and fuck off, okay?” Amma said. “I’m so tired of all of you. You’re such bores.”

Kelsey hung back, confused, her arms still half outstretched. Kylie shrugged at her and danced back into the crowd, grabbing a beer from an older boy’s hands and licking her lips at him—looking back over to see if Amma was watching. She wasn’t.

Instead, Amma was steering me out the door like an attentive date, down the stairs and onto the sidewalk, where tiny yellow oxalis weeds spurted from the cracks.

I pointed. “Beautiful.”

Amma pointed at me and nodded. “I love yellow when I’m high. You feeling something?” I nodded back, her face flicking on and off as we walked past streetlamps, swimming forgotten, on autopilot in the direction of Adora’s. I could feel the night hanging on me like a soft, damp bedgown and I had a flash of the Illinois hospital, me waking up wet with sweat, a desperate whistle in my ear. My roommate, the cheerleader, on the floor purple and twitching, the bottle of Windex next to her. A comedic squeaking sound. Postmortem gas. A burst of shocked laughter from me, here now, in Wind Gap, echoing the one I’d loosed in that miserable room in the pale yellow morning.

Amma put her hand in mine. “What do you think of ... Adora?”

I felt my high wobble, then regain its spin.

“I think she’s a very unhappy woman,” I said. “And troubled.”

“I hear her calling out names when she takes her naps: Joya, Marian ... you.”

“Glad I don’t have to hear that,” I said, patting Amma’s hand. “But I’m sorry you do.”

“She likes to take care of me.”

“Great.”

“It’s weird,” Amma said. “After she takes care of me, I like to have sex.”

She flipped up her skirt from behind, flashed me a hot pink thong.

“I don’t think you should let boys do things to you, Amma. Because that’s what it is. It’s not reciprocal at your age.”

“Sometimes if you let people do things to you, you’re really doing it to them,” Amma said, pulling another Blow Pop from her pocket. Cherry. “Know what I mean? If someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you’re making them more fucked up. Then you have the control. As long as you don’t go crazy.”

“Amma, I just ...” But she was already burbling ahead.

“I like our house,” Amma interrupted. “I like her room. The floor is famous. I saw it in a magazine one time. They called it ‘The Ivory Toast: Southern Living from a Bygone Time.’ Because now of course you can’t get ivory. Too bad. Really too bad.”

She stuck the sucker in her mouth and snatched a firefly from the air, held it between two fingers and ripped out its back end. Wiped the light around her finger to make a glowing ring. She dropped the dying bug into the grass and admired her hand.

“Did girls like you growing up?” she asked. “Because they’re definitely not nice to me.”

I tried to reconcile the idea of Amma, brash, bossy, sometimes scary (stepping on my heels at the park—what kind of thirteen-year-old taunts adults like that?) with a girl to whom anyone was openly rude. She saw my look and read my thoughts.

“I don’t mean not *nice* to me, actually. They do whatever I tell them. But they don’t like me. The second I fuck up, the second I do something uncool, they’ll be the first to gang up against me. Sometimes I sit in my room before bed and I write down every single thing I did and said that day. Then I grade it, A for a perfect move, F for I should kill myself I’m such a loser.”

When I was in high school, I kept a log of every outfit I wore each day. No repeating until a month went by.

“Like tonight, Dave Rard, who’s a very hot junior, told me he didn’t know if he could wait a year, you know, to get with me, like until I was in high school? And I said, ‘So don’t.’ And walked away, and all the guys were like, ‘Awwwww.’ So that’s an A. But yesterday, I

tripped on Main Street in front of the girls and they laughed. That's an F. Maybe a D, because I was so mean to them the rest of the day Kelsey and Kylie both cried. And Jodes always cries so it's not really a challenge."

"Safer to be feared than loved," I said.

"Machiavelli," she crowed, and skipped ahead laughing—whether in a mocking gesture of her age or genuine youthful energy, I couldn't tell.

"How do you know that?" I was impressed, and liking her more every minute. A smart, fucked-up little girl. Sounded familiar.

"I know tons of things I shouldn't know," she said, and I began skipping alongside her. The X had me wired, and while I was aware that under sober circumstances I wouldn't be doing it, I was too happy to care. My muscles were singing.

"I'm actually smarter than most of my teachers. I took an IQ test. I'm supposed to be in tenth grade, but Adora thinks I need to be with kids my age. Whatever. I'm going away for high school. To New England."

She said it with the slight wonder of someone who knew the region only through photos, of a girl harboring Ivy League-sponsored images: *New England's where the smart people go*. Not that I should judge, I've never been there either.

"I've got to get out of here," Amma said with the exhausted affectation of a pampered housewife. "I'm bored all the time. That's why I act out. I know I can be a little ... off."

"With the sex you mean?" I stopped, my heart making rumba thumps in my chest. The air smelled of irises, and I could feel the scent float into my nose, my lungs, my blood. My veins would smell of purple.

"Just, you know, lashing out. You know. I *know* you know." She took my hand and offered me a pure, sweet smile, petting my palm, which might have felt better than any touch I'd ever experienced. On my left calf *freak* sighed suddenly.

"How do you lash out?" We were near my mother's house now, and my high was in full bloom. My hair swished on my shoulders like

warm water and I swayed side to side to no particular music. A snail shell lay on the edge of the sidewalk and my eyes looped into its curlicue.

“You know. You know how sometimes you need to hurt.”

She said it as if she were selling a new hair product.

“There are better ways to deal with boredom and claustrophobia than to hurt,” I said. “You’re a smart girl, you know that.”

I realized her fingers were inside the cuffs of my shirt, touching the ridges of my scars. I didn’t stop her.

“Do you cut, Amma?”

“I hurt,” she squealed, and twirled out onto the street, spinning flamboyantly, her head back, her arms outstretched like a swan. “I love it!” she screamed. The echo ran down the street, where my mother’s house stood watch on the corner.

Amma spun until she clattered to the pavement, one of her silver bangle bracelets dislodging and rolling down the street drunkenly.

I wanted to talk to her about this, be the grown-up, but the X swooped me up again, and instead I grabbed her from the street (laughing, her elbow split open and bleeding) and we swung each other in circles on the way to our mother’s house. Her face was split in two with her smile, her teeth wet and long, and I realized how entrancing they might be to a killer. Square blocks of shiny bone, the front ones like mosaic tiles you might press into a table.

“I’m so happy with you,” Amma laughed, her breath hot and sweetly boozy in my face. “You’re like my soul mate.”

“You’re like my sister,” I said. Blasphemy? Didn’t care.

“I love you,” Amma screamed.

We were spinning so fast my cheeks were flapping, tickling me. I was laughing like a kid. *I have never been happier than right now*, I thought. The streetlight was almost rosy, and Amma’s long hair was feathering my shoulders, her high cheekbones jutted out like scoops of butter in her tanned skin. I reached out to touch one, releasing my hand from hers, and the unlinking of our circle caused us to spin wildly to the ground.

I felt my ankle bone crack against the curb—pop!—blood exploding, splattering up my leg. Red bubbles began sprouting onto Amma’s chest from her own skid across the pavement. She looked down, looked at me, all glowing blue husky eyes, ran her fingers across the bloody web on her chest and shrieked once, long, then lay her head on my lap laughing.

She swiped a finger across her chest, balancing a flat button of blood on her fingertip, and before I could stop her, rubbed it on my lips. I could taste it, like honeyed tin. She looked up at me and stroked my face, and I let her.

“I know you think Adora likes me better, but it’s not true,” she said. As if on cue, the porch light of our house, way atop the hill, switched on.

“You want to sleep in my room?” Amma offered, a little quieter.

I pictured us in her bed under her polka-dot covers, whispering secrets, falling asleep tangled with each other, and then I realized I was imagining me and Marian. She, escaped from her hospital bed, asleep next to me. The hot purring sounds she made as she curled into my belly. I’d have to sneak her back to her room before my mother woke in the morning. High drama in a quiet house, those five seconds, pulling her down the hallway, near my mother’s room, fearing the door might swing open right then, yet almost hoping. *She’s not sick, Momma.* It’s what I planned on yelling if we were ever caught. *It’s okay she’s out of bed because she’s not really sick.* I’d forgotten how desperately, positively I believed it.

Thanks to the drugs, however, these were only happy recollections now, flipping past my brain like pages of a child’s storybook. Marian took on a bunnylike aura in these memories, a little cottontail dressed as my sister. I was almost feeling her fur when I roused myself to discover Amma’s hair brushing up and down my leg.

“So, wanna?” she asked.

“Not tonight, Amma. I’m dead tired and I want to sleep in my own bed.” It was true. The drug was fast and hard and then gone. I felt ten minutes from sober, and I didn’t want Amma around when I hit ground.

“Can I sleep over with you then?” She stood in the streetlight, her

jean skirt hanging from her tiny hip bones, her halter askew and ripped. A smear of blood near her lips. Hopeful.

“Naw. Let’s just sleep separate. We’ll hang out tomorrow.”

She said nothing, just turned and ran as fast as she could toward the house, her feet kicking up behind her like a cartoon colt’s.

“Amma!” I called after. “Wait, you can stay with me, okay?” I began running after her. Watching her through the drugs and the dark was like trying to track someone while looking backward in a mirror. I failed to realize her bouncing silhouette had turned around, and that she was in fact running to me. At me. She smacked into me headlong, her forehead clanging into my jaw, and we fell again, this time on the sidewalk. My head made a sharp cracking noise as it hit the pavement, my lower teeth lit up in pain. I lay for a second on the ground, Amma’s hair folded in my fist, a firefly overhead throbbing in time to my blood. Then Amma began cackling, grabbing her forehead and nudging the spot that was already a dark blue, like the outline of a plum.

“Shit. I think you dented my face.”

“I think you dented the back of my head,” I whispered. I sat up and felt woozy. A blurt of blood that had been stanchd by the sidewalk now seeped down my neck. “Christ, Amma. You’re too rough.”

“I thought you liked it rough.” She reached a hand and pulled me up, the blood in my head sloshing from back to front. Then she took a tiny gold ring with a pale green peridot from her middle finger and put it on my pinky finger. “Here. I want you to have this.”

I shook my head. “Whoever gave that to you would want you to keep it.”

“Adora sorta did. She doesn’t care, trust me. She was going to give it to Ann but ... well, Ann’s gone now, so it was just sitting there. It’s ugly, right? I used to pretend that she gave it to me. Which is unlikely since she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you.” We began walking toward home, the porch light glaring from the top of the hill.

“She doesn’t like you,” Amma ventured.

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Well, she doesn’t like me either. Just in a different way.” We climbed the stairs, squishing mulberries beneath our feet. The air smelled like icing on a child’s cake.

“Did she like you more or less after Marian was dead?” she asked, looping her arm into mine.

“Less.”

“So it didn’t help.”

“What?”

“Her dying didn’t help things.”

“No. Now keep quiet till we get to my room, okay?”

We padded up the stairs, me holding a hand under the crook of my neck to catch the blood, Amma trailing dangerously behind, pausing to smell a rose in the hall vase, cracking a smile at her reflection in the mirror. Silence as usual from Adora’s bedroom. That fan whirring in the dark behind the closed door.

I shut the door of my own room behind us, peeled off my rain-drenched sneakers (checked with squares of newly cut grass), wiped smashed mulberry juice off my leg, and began pulling up my shirt before I felt Amma’s stare. Shirt back down, I pretended to sway into bed, too exhausted to undress. I pulled the covers up and curled away from Amma, mumbling a good night. I heard her drop her clothes to the floor, and in a second the light was off and she was in bed curled behind me, naked except for her panties. I wanted to cry at the idea of being able to sleep next to someone without clothes, no worries about what word might slip out from under a sleeve or pantcuff.

“Camille?” Her voice quiet and girlish and unsure. “You know how people sometimes say they have to hurt because if they don’t, they’re so numb they won’t feel anything?”

“Mmm.”

“What if it’s the opposite?” Amma whispered. “What if you hurt because it feels so good? Like you have a tingling, like someone left a switch on in your body. And nothing can turn the switch off except hurting? What does that mean?”

I pretended to be asleep. I pretended not to feel her fingers tracing *vanish* over and over on the back of my neck.

**A** dream. Marian, her white nightgown sticky with sweat, a blonde curl pasted across her cheek. She takes my hand and tries to pull me from bed. "It's not safe here," she whispers. "It's not safe for you." I tell her to leave me be.

## Chapter Thirteen

It was past two when I woke, my stomach coiled in on itself, my jaw aching from grinding my teeth for five hours straight. Fucking X. Amma had problems, too, I guessed. She'd left a tiny pile of eyelashes on the pillow next to me. I swept them into the palm of my hand and stirred them around. Stiff with mascara, they left a dark blue smudge in the hollow of my palm. I dusted them off into a saucer on my bedside table. Then I went to the bathroom and threw up. I never mind throwing up. When I'd get sick as a child, I remember my mother holding my hair back, her voice soothing: *Get all that bad stuff out, sweetheart. Don't stop till it's all out.* Turns out I like that retching and weakness and spit. Predictable, I know, but true.

I locked my door, stripped off all my clothes, and got back in bed. My head ached from my left ear, through my neck, and down my spine. My bowels were shifting, I could barely move my mouth for the pain, and my ankle was on fire. And I was still bleeding, I could see from the blooms of red all over my sheets. Amma's side was bloody too: a light spray where she'd scraped her chest, a darker spot on the pillow itself.

My heart was beating too hard, and I couldn't catch my breath. I needed to see if my mother knew what had happened. Had she seen her Amma? Was I in trouble? I felt panicky sick. Something horrible was about to happen. Through my paranoia, I knew what was really going on: My serotonin levels, so jacked up from the drug the night before, had plummeted, and left me on the dark side. I told myself this even as I turned my face into the pillow and began sobbing. I had forgotten about those girls, hell, never really thought about them: dead Ann and dead Natalie. Worse, I had betrayed Marian, replaced her with Amma, ignored her in my dreams. There would be consequences. I wept in the same retching, cleansing way I'd vomited, until the pillow was wet and my face had ballooned like a drunk's. Then the door handle jiggled. I hushed myself, stroking my cheek, hoping silence would make it go away.

"Camille. Open up." My mother, but not angry. Coaxing. Nice, even. I remained silent. A few more jiggles. A knock. Then silence as she padded away again.

*Camille. Open up.* The image of my mother sitting on the edge of my bed, a spoonful of sour-smelling syrup hovering over me. Her medicine always made me feel sicker than before. Weak stomach. Not as bad as Marian's, but still weak.

My hands began sweating. *Please don't let her come back.* I had a flash of Curry, one of his crappy ties swinging wildly over his belly, busting into the room to save me. Carrying me off in his smoky Ford Taurus, Eileen stroking my hair on the way back to Chicago.

My mother slipped a key into the lock. I never knew she had a key. She entered the room smugly, her chin tilted high as usual, the key dangling from a long pink ribbon. She wore a powder blue sundress and carried a bottle of rubbing alcohol, a box of tissues, and a satiny red cosmetic bag.

"Hi baby," she sighed. "Amma told me about what happened to you two. My poor little ones. She's been purging all morning. I swear, and I know it will sound boastful, but except for our own little outfit, meat is getting completely unreliable these days. Amma said it was probably the chicken?"

"I guess so," I said. I could only run with whatever lie Amma told. It was clear she could maneuver better than I.

"I can't believe you both fainted right on our own stairs, while I was sleeping just inside. I hate that idea," Adora said. "Her bruises! You'd have thought she was in a catfight."

There's no way my mother bought that story. She was an expert in illness and injury, and she would not be taken in by that unless she wanted to be. Now she was going to tend to me, and I was too weak and desperate to ward her off. I began crying again, unable to stop.

"I feel sick, Momma."

"I know, baby." She stripped the sheet off me, flung it down past my toes in one efficient move, and when I instinctively put my hands across myself, she took them and placed them firmly to my side.

"I have to see what's wrong, Camille." She tilted my jaw from side to side and pulled my lower lip down, like she was inspecting a horse. She raised each of my arms slowly and peered into my armpits, jamming fingers into the hollows, then rubbed my throat to feel for swollen glands. I remembered the drill. She put a hand between my

legs, quickly, professionally. It was the best way to feel a temperature, she always said. Then she softly, lightly drew her cool fingers down my legs, and jabbed her thumb directly into the open wound of my smashed ankle. Bright green splashes exploded in front of my eyes, and I automatically tucked my legs beneath me, turned on my side. She used the moment to poke at my head until she hit the smashed-fruit spot on its crown.

“Just another little bit, Camille, and we’ll be all over.” She wet her tissues with alcohol and scrubbed at my ankle until I couldn’t see anything for my tears and snot. Then she wrapped it tight with gauze that she cut with tiny clippers from her cosmetic bag. The wound began bleeding through immediately so the wrapping soon looked like the flag of Japan: pure white with a defiant red circle. Next she tilted my head down with one hand and I felt an urgent tugging at my hair. She was cutting it off around the wound. I began to pull away.

“Don’t you dare, Camille. I’ll cut you. Lie back down and be a good girl.” She pressed a cool hand on my cheek, holding my head in place against the pillow, and *snip snip snip*, sawed through a swath of my hair until I felt a release. An eerie exposure to air that my scalp was unused to. I reached back and felt a prickly patch the size of a half dollar on my head. My mother quickly pulled my hand away, tucked it against my side, and began rubbing alcohol onto my scalp. Again I lost my breath the pain was so stunning.

She rolled me onto my back and ran a wet washcloth over my limbs as if I were bedridden. Her eyes were pink where she’d been pulling at the lashes. Her cheeks had that girlish flush. She plucked up her cosmetic bag and began sifting through various pillboxes and tubes, finding a square of folded tissue from the bottom, wadded and slightly stained. From its center she produced an electric blue pill.

“One second, sweetheart.”

I could hear her hit the steps urgently, and knew she was heading down to the kitchen. Then those same quick steps back into my room. She had a glass of milk in her hand.

“Here, Camille, drink this with it.”

“What is *it*?”

“Medicine. It will prevent infection and clear up any bacteria you

got from that food.”

“What is it?” I asked again.

My mother’s chest turned a blotchy pink, and her smile began flickering like a candle in a draft. On, off, on, off in the space of a second.

“Camille, I’m your mother, and you’re in my house.” Glassy pink eyes. I turned away from her and hit another streak of panic. Something bad. Something I’d done.

“Camille. Open.” Soothing voice, coaxing. *Nurse* began throbbing near my left armpit.

I remember being a kid, rejecting all those tablets and medicines, and losing her by doing so. She reminded me of Amma and her Ecstasy, wheedling, needing me to take what she was offering. To refuse has so many more consequences than submitting. My skin was on fire from where she’d cleaned me, and it felt like that satisfying heat after a cut. I thought of Amma and how content she’d seemed, wrapped in my mother’s arms, fragile and sweaty.

I turned back over, let my mother put the pill on my tongue, pour the thick milk into my throat, and kiss me.

**W**ithin a few minutes I was asleep, the stink of my breath floating into my dreams like a sour fog. My mother came to me in my bedroom and told me I was ill. She lay on top of me and put her mouth on mine. I could feel her breath in my throat. Then she began pecking at me. When she pulled away, she smiled at me and smoothed my hair back. Then she spit my teeth into her hands.

**D**izzy and hot, I woke up at dusk, drool dried in a crusty line down my neck. Weak. I wrapped a thin robe around myself and began crying again when I remembered the circle at the back of my head. *You’re just coming down from the X*, I whispered to myself, patting my cheek with my hand. *A bad haircut is not the end of the world. So you wear a ponytail.*

I shuffled down the hallway, my joints clicking in and out of place, my knuckles swollen for no reason I could think of. Downstairs my mother was singing. I knocked on Amma’s door and heard a whimper

of welcome.

She sat naked on the floor in front of her huge dollhouse, a thumb in her mouth. The circles beneath her eyes were almost purple, and my mother had pasted bandages to her forehead and chest. Amma had wrapped her favorite doll in tissue paper, dotted all over with red Magic Marker, and propped her up in bed.

“What’d she do to you?” she said sleepily, half smiling.

I turned around so she could see my crop circle.

“And she gave me something that made me feel really groggy and sick,” I said.

“Blue?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, she likes that one,” Amma mumbled. “You fall asleep all hot and drooly, and then she can bring her friends in to look at you.”

“She’s done this before?” My body went cold under the sweat. I was right: Something horrible was about to happen.

She shrugged. “I don’t mind. Sometimes I don’t take it—just pretend. Then we’re both happy. I play with my dolls or I read, and when I hear her coming I pretend to be asleep.”

“Amma?” I sat down on the floor next to her and stroked her hair. I needed to be gentle. “Does she give you pills and stuff a lot?”

“Only when I’m about to be sick.”

“What happens then?”

“Sometimes I get all hot and crazy and she has to give me cold baths. Sometimes I need to throw up. Sometimes I get all shivery and weak and tired and I just want to sleep.”

It was happening again. Just like Marian. I could feel the bile in the back of my throat, the tightening. I began weeping again, stood up, sat back down. My stomach was churning. I put my head in my hands. Amma and I were sick *just like Marian*. It had to be made that obvious to me before I finally understood—nearly twenty years too late. I wanted to scream in shame.

“Play dolls with me, Camille.” She either didn’t notice or ignored

my tears.

“I can’t, Amma. I have to work. Remember to be asleep when Momma comes back.”

**I** dragged on clothes over my aching skin and looked at myself in the mirror. *You are thinking crazy thoughts. You are being unreasonable. But I’m not. My mother killed Marian. My mother killed those little girls.*

**I** stumbled to the toilet and threw up a stream of salty, hot water, the backsplashes from the toilet freckling my cheeks as I kneeled. When my stomach unclenched, I realized I wasn’t alone. My mother was standing behind me.

“Poor sweetness,” she murmured. I started, scrambled away from her on all fours. Propped myself against the wall and looked up at her.

“Why are you dressed, darling?” she said. “You can’t go anywhere.”

“I need to go out. I need to do some work. Fresh air will be good.”

“Camille, get back in bed.” Her voice was urgent and shrill. She marched to my bed, pulled down the covers, and patted it. “Come on sweetness, you need to be smart about your health.”

I stumbled to my feet, grabbed my car keys from the table, and darted past her.

“Can’t, Momma; I won’t be gone long.”

I left Amma upstairs with her sick dolls and slammed down the driveway so quickly I dented my front bumper where the hill abruptly evened out at street level. A fat woman pushing a stroller shook her head at me.

**I** started driving nowhere, trying to assemble my thoughts, running through the faces of people I knew in Wind Gap. I needed someone to tell me plainly I was wrong about Adora, or else that I was right. Someone who knew Adora, who’d had a grown-up’s view of my childhood, who’d been here while I was away. I suddenly thought of Jackie O’Neele and her Juicy Fruit and booze and gossip. Her off-kilter maternal warmth toward me and the comment that now sounded like a warning: *So much has gone wrong.* I needed Jackie, rejected by Adora, completely without filter, a woman who’d known

my mother her entire life. Who very clearly wanted to say something.

Jackie's house was only a few minutes away, a modern mansion meant to look like an antebellum plantation home. A scrawny pale kid was hunched over a riding mower, smoking as he drove back and forth in tight lines. His back was spackled with bumpy, angry zits so big they looked like wounds. Another meth boy. Jackie should cut out the middle man and just give the twenty bucks straight to the dealer.

I knew the woman who answered the door. Geri Shilt, a Calhoon High girl just a year ahead of me. She wore a starchy nurse's dress, same as Gayla, and still had the round, pink mole on her cheek that I'd always pitied her for. Seeing Geri, such a pedestrian face from the past, almost made me turn around, get in my car, and ignore all my worries. Someone this ordinary in my world made me question what I was thinking. But I didn't leave.

"Hi Camille, what can I do for you?" She seemed utterly uninterested in why I was there, a distinct lack of curiosity that separated her from the other Wind Gap women. She probably didn't have any girlfriends to gossip to.

"Hey, Geri, I didn't know you worked for the O'Neales."

"No reason you would," she said plainly.

Jackie's three sons, born in a row, would all be in their early twenties: twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, maybe. I remembered they were beefy, thick-necked boys who always wore polyester coach shorts and big gold Calhoon High rings with flaming blue jewel centers. They had Jackie's abnormally round eyes and bright white overbites. Jimmy, Jared, and Johnny. I could hear at least two of them now, home from school for the summer, throwing the football in the backyard. From Geri's aggressively dull look, she must have decided the best way to deal with them was to stay out of their way.

"I'm back here ..." I began.

"I know why you're here," she said, neither accusingly nor with any generosity. Just a statement. I was simply another obstacle in her day.

"My mom is friends with Jackie and I thought ..."

"I know who Jackie's friends are, believe me," Geri said.

She didn't seem inclined to let me in. Instead she looked me up and

down, then out to the car behind me.

“Jackie is friends with a lot of your friends’ moms,” Geri added.

“Mmmm. I don’t really have many friends around here these days.” It was a fact I was proud of, but I said the words in a deliberately disappointed manner. The less she resented me, the quicker I’d get in there, and I felt an urgent need to speak with Jackie before I talked myself out of it. “In fact, even when I lived here, I don’t really think I had that many friends.”

“Katie Lacey. Her mom hangs out with all them.”

Good old Katie Lacey, who dragged me to the Pity Party and turned on me. I could picture her roaring around town in that SUV, her pretty little girls perched in back, perfectly dressed, ready to rule over the other kindergartners. They’d learn from Mom to be particularly cruel to the ugly girls, poor girls, girls who wanted to just be left alone. Too much to ask.

“Katie Lacey is a girl I’m ashamed of ever being friendly with.”

“Yeah, well, you were okay,” Geri said. Just then I remembered she’d had a horse named Butter. The joke was that of course even Geri’s pet was fattening.

“Not really.” I’d never participated in direct acts of cruelty, but I never stopped them, either. I always stood on the sidelines like a fretful shadow and pretended to laugh.

Geri continued to stand in the doorway, stretching at the cheap watch around her wrist, tight as a rubber band, clearly lost in her own memories. Bad ones.

So why, then, would she stay in Wind Gap? I’d run across so many of the same faces since I’d been back. Girls I grew up with, who never had the energy to leave. It was a town that bred complacency through cable TV and a convenience store. Those who remained here were still just as segregated as before. Petty, pretty girls like Katie Lacey who now lived, predictably, in a rehabbed Victorian a few blocks from us, played at the same Woodberry tennis club as Adora, made the same quarterly pilgrimage to St. Louis for shopping. And the ugly, victimized girls like Geri Shilt were still stuck cleaning up after the pretty ones, heads lowered glumly, waiting for more abuse. They were women not strong enough or smart enough to leave. Women without

imagination. So they stayed in Wind Gap and played their teenage lives on an endless loop. And now I was stuck with them, unable to pull myself out.

“Let me tell Jackie you’re here.” Geri went the long way to the back stairs—around through the living room rather than the glass-paneled kitchen that would expose her to Jackie’s boys.

The room I was ushered into was obscenely white with glaring splashes of color, like a mischievous child had been finger painting. Red throw pillows, yellow-and-blue curtains, a glowing green vase packed with ceramic red flowers. A ludicrous leering black-and-white photo of Jackie, hair overblown, talons curled coyly beneath her chin, hung over the mantelpiece. She was like an over-groomed lapdog. Even in my sickened state I laughed.

“Darling Camille!” Jackie crossed the room with arms outstretched. She was wearing a satin house robe and diamond earrings like blocks. “You’ve come to visit. You look horrible, sweetheart. Geri, get us some Bloody Marys, stat!” She howled, literally, at me, then at Geri. I guess it was a laugh. Geri lingered in the doorway until Jackie clapped at her.

“I’m serious, Geri. Remember to salt the rim this time.” She turned back to me. “So hard to get good help these days,” she muttered earnestly, unaware no one really says that who’s not on TV. I’m sure Jackie watched TV nonstop, drink in one hand, remote control in the other, curtains pulled as morning talk shows yielded to soaps, glided into court TV, moved on to reruns, sitcoms, crime dramas, and late-night movies about women who were raped, stalked, betrayed, or killed.

Geri brought in the Bloodys on a tray, along with containers of celery, pickles, and olives, and, as instructed, closed the drapes and left. Jackie and I sat in the dim light, in the freezing air-conditioned white room, and stared at each other a few seconds. Then Jackie swooped down and pulled out the drawer of the coffee table. It held three bottles of nail polish, a ratty Bible, and more than half a dozen orange prescription bottles. I thought of Curry and his clipped rose thorns.

“Painkiller? I got some good ones.”

“I should probably keep some of my wits about me,” I said, not

quite sure if she was serious. “Looks like you could almost start your own store there.”

“Oh sure. I’m terribly lucky.” I could smell her anger mixed with tomato juice. “OxyContin, Percocet, Percodan, whatever new pill my latest doctor has stock in. But I got to admit, they’re fun.” She poured a few round white tablets into her hand and shot them back, smiled at me.

“What do you have?” I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“That’s the best part, sweetie. No one fucking knows. Lupus says one, arthritis says another, some sort of autoimmune syndrome says a third, it’s all in my head says the fourth and fifth.”

“What do you think?”

“What do *I* think?” she asked, and rolled her eyes. “I think as long as they keep the meds coming, I probably don’t care all that much.” She laughed again. “They’re really fun.”

Whether she was putting on a brave face or was really addicted, I couldn’t tell.

“I’m sort of surprised Adora hasn’t gotten herself on the sick track,” she leered. “Figured once I did, she’d have to up the stakes, right? She wouldn’t have silly old lupus, though. She’d find a way to get ... I don’t know, brain cancer. Right?”

She took another sip of the Bloody Mary, got a slash of red and salt across her upper lip, which made her look swollen. That second swallow calmed her, and just as she had at Natalie’s funeral, she stared at me like she was trying to memorize my face.

“Good God, it’s so weird to see you grown up,” she said, patting my knee. “Why are you here, sweetheart? Is everything okay at home? Probably not. Is it ... is it your momma?”

“No, nothing like that.” I hated being so obvious.

“Oh.” She looked dismayed, a hand fluttering to her robe like something out of a black-and-white movie. I’d played her wrong, forgot that down here it was encouraged to openly crave gossip.

“I mean, I’m sorry, I wasn’t being frank just now. I do want to talk about my mother.”

Jackie immediately cheered. “Can’t quite figure her out, huh? Angel or devil or both, right?” Jackie placed a green satin pillow under her tiny rump and aimed her feet onto my lap. “Sweepee, will you just rub a little? They’re clean.” From under the sofa she pulled a bag of mini-candy bars, the kind you give out at Halloween, and placed them on her belly. “Lord, I’m going to have to get rid of these later, but they’ll taste good going down.”

I took advantage of this happy moment. “Was my mother always ... the way she is now?” I cringed at the awkwardness of the question, but Jackie cackled once, like a witch.

“What’s that, Sweepee—Beautiful? Charming? Beloved? Evil?” She wiggled her toes as she unwrapped a chocolate. “Rub.” I began kneading her cold feet, the soles rough like a turtle shell. “Adora. Well, damn. Adora was rich and beautiful and her crazy parents ran the town. They brought that damn hog farm to Wind Gap, gave us hundreds of jobs—there was a walnut plant then, too. They called the shots. Everyone bootlicked the Preakers.”

“What was life for her like ... at home?”

“Adora was ... overly mothered. Never saw your grandma Joya smile at her or touch her in a loving way, but she couldn’t keep her hands off her. Always fixing the hair, tugging at clothes, and ... oh, she did this *thing*. Instead of licking her thumb and rubbing at a smudge, she’d lick Adora. Just grab her head and lick it. When Adora peeled from a sunburn—we all did back then, not as smart about SPF as your generation—Joya would sit next to your momma, strip off her shirt, and peel the skin off in long strips. Joya loved that.”

“Jackie ...”

“I am not lying. Having to watch your friend stripped naked in front of you, and ... groomed. Needless to say, your momma was sick all the time. She was always having tubes and needles and such stuck in her.”

“What was she sick with?”

“Little bit of everything. Lot of it just the stress of living with Joya. Those long unpainted fingernails, like a man’s. And long hair she let go silver, down her back.”

“Where was my grandfather in all this?”

“Don’t know. Don’t even remember his name. Herbert? Herman? He was never around, and when he was, he was just quiet and ... away. You know the type. Like Alan.”

She popped another chocolate and wiggled her toes in my hands. “You know, having you should have ruined your mother.” Her tone was reproachful, as if I’d failed a simple chore. “Any other girl, got knocked up before marriage, here in Wind Gap way back when, it’d be all over for her,” Jackie continued. “But your mother always had a way of making people baby her. *People*—not just boys, but the girls, their mothers, the teachers.”

“Why is that?”

“Sweet Camille, a beautiful girl can get away with anything if she plays nice. You certainly must know that. Think of all the things boys have done for you over the years they never would have done if you hadn’t had that face. And if the boys are nice, the girls are nice. Adora played that pregnancy beautifully: proud but a little broken, and very secretive. Your daddy came for that fateful visit, and then they never saw each other again. Your momma never spoke about it. You were all hers from the beginning. That’s what killed Joya. Her daughter finally had something in her that Joya couldn’t get at.”

“Did my mother stop being sick once Joya was gone?”

“She did okay for a while,” Jackie said over her glass. “But wasn’t that long before Marian came along, and she didn’t really have time to be sick then.”

“Was my mother ...” I could feel a sob welling up in my throat, so I swallowed it with my watered-down vodka. “Was my mother ... a nice person?”

Jackie cackled again. Popped a chocolate, the nougat sticking to her teeth. “That’s what you’re after? Whether she was nice?” she paused. “What do *you* think?” she added, mocking me.

Jackie dug into her drawer again, unscrewed three pill bottles, took a tablet from each, and arranged them from largest to smallest on the back of her left hand.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been close with her.”

“But you’ve been close *to* her. Don’t play games with me, Camille.

That exhausts me. If you thought your momma was a nice person, you wouldn't be over here with her best friend asking whether she's nice."

Jackie took each pill, largest to smallest, smashed it into a chocolate, and swallowed it. Wrappers littered her chest, the smear of red still covered her lip, and a thick fudgy coating clung to her teeth. Her feet had begun to sweat in my hands.

"I'm sorry. You're right," I said. "Just, do you think she's ... sick?"

Jackie stopped her chewing, put her hand on mine, and took a sigh of a breath.

"Let me say it aloud, because I've been thinking it too long, and thoughts can be a little tricky for me—they zip away from you, you know. Like trying to catch fish with your hands." She leaned up and squeezed my arm. "Adora devours you, and if you don't let her, it'll be even worse for you. Look at what's happening to Amma. Look at what happened to Marian."

Yes. Just below my left breast, *bundle* began tingling.

"So you think?" I prompted. *Say it.*

"I think she's sick, and I think what she has is contagious," Jackie whispered, her shaky hands making the ice in her glass chime. "And I think it's time for you to go, Sweepee."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overstay my welcome."

"I mean leave Wind Gap. It's not safe for you here."

Less than a minute later I closed the door on Jackie as she stared at the photo of herself leering back from the mantelpiece.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

**I** nearly tumbled down Jackie's steps, my legs were so wobbly. Behind my back I could hear her boys chanting the Calhoon football rally. I drove around the corner, parked under a copse of mulberry trees, and rested my head against the wheel.

Had my mother truly been sick? And Marian? Amma and me? Sometimes I think illness sits inside every woman, waiting for the right moment to bloom. I have known so many *sick* women all my life. Women with chronic pain, with ever-gestating diseases. Women with *conditions*. Men, sure, they have bone snaps, they have backaches, they have a surgery or two, yank out a tonsil, insert a shiny plastic hip. Women get *consumed*. Not surprising, considering the sheer amount of traffic a woman's body experiences. Tampons and speculums. Cocks, fingers, vibrators and more, between the legs, from behind, in the mouth. Men love to put things inside women, don't they? Cucumbers and bananas and bottles, a string of pearls, a Magic Marker, a fist. Once a guy wanted to wedge a Walkie-Talkie inside of me. I declined.

Sick and sicker and sickest. What was real and what was fake? Was Amma really sick and needing my mother's medicine, or was the medicine what was making Amma sick? Did her blue pill make me vomit, or did it keep me from getting more ill than I'd have been without it?

Would Marian be dead if she hadn't had Adora for a mother?

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**I** knew I should call Richard but couldn't think of anything to tell him. I'm scared. I'm vindicated. I want to die. I drove back past my mother's house, then east out toward the hog farm, and pulled up to Heelah's, that comforting, windowless block of a bar where anyone who recognized the boss's daughter would wisely leave her to her thoughts.

The place stank of pig blood and urine; even the popcorn in bowls along the bar smelled of flesh. A couple of men in baseball caps and leather jackets, handlebar mustaches and scowls, looked up, then back down into their beers. The bartender poured me my bourbon without a word. A Carole King song droned from the speakers. On my second

round, the bartender motioned behind me and asked, “You lookin’ for him?”

John Keene sat slumped over a drink in the bar’s only booth, picking at the splintered edge of the table. His white skin was mottled pink with liquor, and from his wet lips and the way he smacked his tongue, I guessed he’d vomited once already. I grabbed my drink and sat across from him, said nothing. He smiled at me, reached his hand to mine across the table.

“Hi Camille. How’re you doing? You look so nice and clean.” He looked around. “It’s ... it’s so dirty here.”

“I’m doing okay, I guess, John. You okay?”

“Oh sure, I’m great. My sister’s murdered, I’m about to be arrested, and my girlfriend who’s stuck to me like glue since I moved to this rotten town is starting to realize I’m not the prize anymore. Not that I care that much. She’s nice but not ...”

“Not surprising,” I offered.

“Yeah. Yeah. I was about to break up with her before Natalie. Now I can’t.”

Such a move would be dissected by the whole town—Richard, too. *What does it mean? How does it prove his guilt?*

“I will not go back to my parents’ house,” he muttered. “I will go to the fucking woods and kill myself before I go back to all of Natalie’s things staring at me.”

“I don’t blame you.”

He picked up the salt shaker, began twirling it around the table.

“You’re the only person who understands, I think,” he said. “What it’s like to lose a sister and be expected to just deal. Just move on. Have you *gotten over it?*” He said the words so bitterly I expected his tongue to turn yellow.

“You’ll never get over it,” I said. “It infects you. It ruined me.” It felt good to say it out loud.

“Why does everyone think it’s so strange that I should mourn Natalie?” John toppled the shaker and it clattered to the floor. The bartender sent over a disgruntled look. I picked it up, set it on my side

of the table, threw a pinch of salt over my shoulder for both of us.

“I guess when you’re young, people expect you to accept things more easily,” I said. “And you’re a guy. Guys don’t have soft feelings.”

He snorted. “My parents got me this book on dealing with death: *Male in Mourning*. It said that sometimes you need to drop out, to just deny. That denial can be good for men. So I tried to take an hour and pretend like I didn’t care. And for a little bit, I really didn’t. I sat in my room at Meredith’s and I thought about ... bullshit. I just stared out the window at this little square of blue sky and kept saying, *It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay*. Like I was a kid again. And when I was done, I knew for sure nothing would ever be okay again. Even if they caught who did it, it wouldn’t be okay. I don’t know why everyone keeps saying we’ll feel better once someone’s arrested. Now it looks like the someone who’s going to be arrested is me.” He laughed in a grunt and shook his head. “It’s just fucking insane.” And then, abruptly: “You want another drink? Will you have another drink with me?”

He was smashed, swaying heavily, but I would never steer a fellow sufferer from the relief of a blackout. Sometimes that’s the most logical route. I’ve always believed clear-eyed sobriety was for the harder hearted. I had a shot at the bar to catch up, then came back with two bourbons. Mine a double.

“It’s like they picked the two girls in Wind Gap who had minds of their own and killed them off,” John said. He took a sip of bourbon. “Do you think your sister and my sister would have been friends?”

In that imaginary place where they were both alive, where Marian had never aged.

“No,” I said, and laughed suddenly. He laughed, too.

“So your dead sister is too good for my dead sister?” he blurted. We both laughed again, and then quickly soured and turned back to our drinks. I was already feeling dazed.

“I didn’t kill Natalie,” he whispered.

“I know.”

He picked up my hand, wrapped it around his.

“Her fingernails were painted. When they found her. Someone painted her fingernails,” he mumbled.

“Maybe she did.”

“Natalie hated that kind of thing. Barely even allowed a brush through her hair.”

Silence for several minutes. Carole King had given way to Carly Simon. Feminine folksy voices in a bar for slaughterers.

“You’re so beautiful,” John said.

“So are you.”

**J**ohn fumbled with his keys in the parking lot, handed them to me easily when I told him he was too drunk to drive. Not that I was much better. I steered him blurrily back to Meredith’s house, but he just shook his head when we got close, asked if I’d drive him to the motel outside town lines. Same one I’d stayed at on my way down here, a little refuge where one could prepare for Wind Gap and its weight.

We drove with the windows down, warm night air blowing in, pasting John’s T-shirt to his chest, my long sleeves flapping in the wind. Aside from his thick head of hair, he was so utterly bare. Even his arms sprouted only a light down. He seemed almost naked, in need of cover.

I paid for the room, No. 9, because John had no credit cards, and opened the door for him, sat him on the bed, got him a glass of lukewarm water in a plastic cup. He just looked at his feet and refused to take it.

“John, you need to drink some water.”

He drained the cup in a gulp and let it roll off the side of the bed. Grabbed my hand. I tried to pull away—more instinct than anything—but he squeezed harder.

“I saw this the other day, too,” he said, his finger tracing part of the *d* in *wretched*, just tucked under my left shirtsleeve. He reached his other hand up and stroked my face. “Can I look?”

“No.” I tried again to pull away.

“Let me see, Camille.” He held on.

“No, John. No one sees.”

“I do.”

He rolled my sleeve up, squinted his eyes. Trying to understand the lines in my skin. I don't know why I let him. He had a searching, sweet look on his face. I was weak from the day. And I was so damned tired of hiding. More than a decade devoted to concealment, never an interaction—a friend, a source, the checkout girl at the supermarket—in which I wasn't distracted anticipating which scar was going to reveal itself. Let John look. Please let him look. I didn't need to hide from someone courting oblivion as ardently as I was.

He rolled up the other sleeve, and there sat my exposed arms, so naked they made me breathless.

“No one's seen this?”

I shook my head.

“How long have you done this, Camille?”

“A long time.”

He stared at my arms, pushed the sleeves up farther. Kissed me in the middle of *weary*.

“This is how I feel,” he said, running his fingers over the scars until I got a chill of goosebumps. “Let me see it all.”

He pulled my shirt over my head as I sat like an obedient child. Eased off my shoes and socks, pulled down my slacks. In my bra and panties, I shivered in the frosty room, the air conditioner blasting a chill over me. John pulled back the covers, motioned for me to climb in, and I did, feeling feverish and frozen at once.

He held up my arms, my legs, turned me on my back. He read me. Said the words out loud, angry and nonsensical both: *oven, queasy, castle*. He took off his own clothes, as if he sensed an unevenness, threw them in a ball on the floor, and read more. *Bun, spiteful, tangle, brush*. He unhooked my bra in front with a quick flick of his fingers, peeled it off me. *Blossom, dosage, bottle, salt*. He was hard. He put his mouth on my nipples, the first time since I began cutting in earnest that I'd allowed a man to do that. Fourteen years.

His hands ran all over me, and I let them: my back, my breasts, my thighs, my shoulders. His tongue in my mouth, down my neck, over my nipples, between my legs, then back to my mouth. Tasting myself on him. The words stayed quiet. I felt exorcised.

I guided him into me and came fast and hard and then again. I could feel his tears on my shoulders while he shuddered inside me. We fell asleep twisted around each other (a leg jutting out here, an arm behind a head there) and a single word hummed once: *omen*. Good or bad I didn't know. At the time I chose to think good. Foolish girl.

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**I**n the early morning, dawn made the tree branches glow like hundreds of tiny hands outside the bedroom window. I walked naked to the sink to refill our cup of water, both of us hungover and thirsty, and the weak sunlight hit my scars and the words flickered to life again. Remission ended. My upper lip curled involuntarily in repulsion at the sight of my skin, and I wrapped a towel around me before I got back into bed.

John drank a sip of water, cradled my head and poured some into my mouth, then gulped the remainder. His fingers tugged at the towel. I held tight to it, hard as a dishrag on my breasts, and shook my head.

“What’s this?” he whispered into my ear.

“This is the unforgiving light of morning,” I whispered back. “Time to drop the illusion.”

“What illusion?”

“That anything can be okay,” I said, and kissed his cheek.

“Let’s not do that yet,” he said, and wrapped his arms around me. Those thin, hairless arms. A boy’s arms. I told myself these things, but I felt safe and good. Pretty and clean. I put my face to his neck and smelled him: liquor and sharp shaving lotion, the kind that squirts out ice blue. When I opened my eyes again, I saw the red twirling circles of a police siren outside the window.

Bang bang bang. The door rattled as if it could have easily broken down.

“Camille Preaker. Chief Vickery. Open up if you’re in there.”

We grabbed our scattered clothes, John’s eyes as startled as a bird’s. The sounds of belt buckles and shirt rustles that would give us away outside. Frantic, guilty noises. I threw the sheets back on the bed, ran

fingers through my hair, and as John placed himself in an awkwardly casual standing position behind me, fingers hooked through his belt loops, I opened the door.

Richard. Well-pressed white shirt, crisply striped tie, a smile that dropped as soon as he saw John. Vickery beside him, rubbing his mustache as if there were a rash beneath it, eyes flitting from me to John before he turned and stared at Richard head on.

Richard said nothing, just glared at me, crossed his arms and inhaled deeply once. I'm sure the room smelled of sex.

"Well, looks like you're just fine," he said. Forced a smirk. I knew it was forced because the skin above his collar was as red as an angry cartoon character's. "How're you, John? You good?"

"I'm fine, thanks," John said, and came to stand at my side.

"Miss Preaker, your mother called us a few hours ago when you failed to come home," mumbled Vickery. "Said you'd been a bit sick, taken a tumble, something like 'at. She was real worried. Real worried. Plus with all this ugliness going on, you can't be too careful. I suppose she'll be glad to hear you're ... here."

The last part asked as a question I had no intention of answering. Richard I owed an explanation. Vickery no.

"I can phone my mother myself, thanks. I appreciate you looking up on me."

Richard looked at his feet, bit his lip, the only time I've ever seen him abashed. My belly turned, oily and fearful. He exhaled once, a long hard gust, put his hand on his hips, stared at me, then at John. Kids caught misbehaving.

"C'mon John, we'll take you home," Richard said.

"Camille can take me, but thanks, Detective Willis."

"You of age, son?" Vickery asked.

"He's eighteen," Richard said.

"Well fine then, you two have a real nice day," Vickery said, hissed a laugh in Richard's direction, and muttered "already had a nice night," under his breath.

"I'll phone you later, Richard," I said.

He raised a hand, flicked it at me as he turned back to the car.

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**J**ohn and I were mostly silent on the ride to his parents', where he was going to try to sleep in the basement rec room for a bit. He hummed a snatch of some old '50s bebop and tapped his fingernails on the door handle.

"How bad do you think that was?" he finally asked.

"For you, maybe not bad. Shows you're a good American boy with healthy interest in women and casual sex."

"That wasn't casual. I don't feel casual about that at all. Do you?"

"No. That was the wrong word. That was just the opposite," I said. "But I'm more than a decade older than you, and I'm covering the crime that ... it's a conflict of interest. Better reporters have been fired for such a thing." I was aware of the morning sunlight on my face, the wrinkles at the edges of my eyes, the age that hung on me. John's face, despite a night of drinking and very little sleep, was like a petal.

"Last night. You saved me. That saved me. If you hadn't stayed with me, I would have done something bad. I know it, Camille."

"You made me feel very safe, too," I said, and meant it, but the words came out in the disingenuous singsong of my mother.

**I** dropped John off a block from his parents' house, his kiss landing on my jaw as I jerked away at the last second. *No one can prove anything happened*, I thought at that moment.

Drove back to Main Street, parked in front of the police station. One streetlight still glowed. 5:47 a.m. No receptionist on call yet in the lobby, so I rang the nightbell. The room deodorizer near my head hissed a lemon scent right on my shoulder. I hit the bell again, and Richard appeared behind the slit of glass in the heavy door leading to the offices. He stood staring at me a second, and I was waiting for him to turn his back to me again, almost willing him to, but then he opened the door and entered the lobby.

"Where do you want to begin, Camille?" He sat on one of the overstuffed chairs and put his head in his hands, his tie drooping between his legs.

“It wasn’t like it looked, Richard,” I said. “I know it sounds cliché but it’s true.” *Deny deny deny.*

“Camille, just forty-eight hours after you and I had sex, I find you in a motel room with the chief subject in my child-murder investigation. Even if it’s not what it looks like, it’s bad.”

“He did not do it, Richard. I absolutely know he didn’t do it.”

“Really? Is that what ya’ll discussed when he had his dick in you?”

*Good, anger, I thought. This I can handle. Better than head-in-the-hands despair.*

“Nothing like that happened, Richard. I found him at Heelah’s drunk, dead drunk, and I really thought he might harm himself. I took him to the motel because I wanted to stay with him and hear him out. I need him for my story. And you know what I learned? Your investigation has ruined this boy, Richard. And what’s worse, I don’t even think you really believe he did it.”

Only the last sentence was entirely true, and I didn’t realize it until the words came out of me. Richard was a smart guy, a great cop, extremely ambitious, on his first major case with an entire outraged community bellowing for an arrest, and he didn’t have a break yet. If he had more on John than a wish, he’d have arrested him days ago.

“Camille, despite what you think, you don’t know everything about this investigation.”

“Richard, believe me, I’ve never thought that I did. I’ve never felt anything but the most useless outsider. You’ve managed to fuck me and still remain airtight. No leaks with you.”

“Ah, so you’re still pissed about that? I thought you were a big girl.”

Silence. A hiss of lemon. I could vaguely hear the big silver watch on Richard’s wrist ticking.

“Let me show you what a good sport I can be,” I said. I was back on autopilot, just like the old days: desperate to submit to him, make him feel better, make him like me again. For a few minutes last night, I’d felt so comforted, and Richard’s appearing outside that motel door had smashed what was left of the lingering calm. I wanted it back.

I lowered myself to my knees, and began unzipping his pants. For a second he put his hand on the back of my head. Then instead he

grabbed me roughly by the shoulder.

“Camille, Christ, what are you doing?” He realized how hard his grip was and loosened it, pulled me to my feet.

“I just want to make things okay with us.” I played with a button on his shirt and refused to meet his eyes.

“That won’t do it, Camille,” he said. He kissed me almost chastely on the lips. “You need to know that before we go any further. You just need to know that, period.”

Then he asked me to leave.

**I** chased sleep for a few darting hours in the back of my car. The equivalent of reading a sign between the cars of a passing train. Woke up sticky and peevish. Bought a toothbrush kit at the FaStop, along with the strongest-smelling lotion and hairspray I could find. I brushed my teeth in a gas-station sink, then rubbed the lotion into my armpits and between my legs, sprayed my hair stiff. The resulting smell was sweat and sex under a billowing cloud of strawberry and aloe.

I couldn’t face my mother at the house and crazily thought I’d do work instead. (As if I were still going to write that story. As if it weren’t all about to go to hell.) With Geri Shilt’s mention of Katie Lacey fresh in my mind, I decided to go back to her. She was a mother’s aide at the grade school, for both Natalie and Ann’s classes. My own mother had been a mother’s aide, a coveted, elite position in the school that only women who didn’t work could do: swoop into classrooms twice a week and help organize arts, crafts, music, and, for girls on Thursdays, sewing. At least in my day it’d been sewing. By now it was probably something more gender neutral and modern. Computer usage or beginners’ microwaving.

Katie, like my mother, lived at the top of a big hill. The house’s slender staircase cut into the grass and was bordered with sunflowers. A catalpa tree sat slim and elegant as a finger on the hilltop, the female match to the burly shade oak on its right. It was barely ten, but Katie, slim and brown, was already sunning herself on the widow’s walk, a box fan breezing her. Sun without the heat. Now if she could only figure out a tan without the cancer. Or at least the wrinkles. She saw me coming up the stairs, an irritating flicker against

the deep green of her lawn, and shaded her eyes to make me out from forty feet above.

“Who is that?” she called out. Her hair, a natural wheaty blonde in high school, was now a brassy platinum that sprung out of a ponytail atop her head.

“Hi, Katie. It’s Camille.”

“Ca-meeel! Oh my God, I’m coming down.”

It was a more generous greeting than I’d expected from Katie, who I hadn’t heard from again after the night of Angie’s Pity Party. Her grudges always came and went like breezes.

She bounded to the door, those bright blue eyes glowing from her suntanned face. Her arms were brown and skinny as a child’s, reminding me of the French cigarillos Alan had taken to smoking one winter. My mother had blocked him off into the basement, grandly called it his smoking room. Alan soon dropped the cigarillos and took up port.

Over her bikini Katie had thrown a neon pink tank, the kind girls picked up in South Padre in the late ’80s, souvenirs from wet T-shirt contests over Spring Break. She wrapped her cocoa-buttered arms around me and led me inside. No A/C in this old house either, just like my momma’s, she explained. Although they did have one room unit in the master bedroom. The kids, I guessed, could sweat it out. Not that they weren’t catered to. The entire east wing seemed to be an indoor playground, complete with a yellow plastic house, a slide, a designer rocking horse. None of it looked remotely played with. Big colored letters lined one wall: Mackenzie. Emma. Photos of smiling blonde girls, pug nosed and glassy eyed, pretty mouth breathers. Never a close-up of a face, but always framed in order to capture what they were wearing. Pink overalls with daisies, red dresses with polka-dot bloomers, Easter bonnets and Mary Janes. Cute kids, *really* cute clothes. I’d just created a tagline for Wind Gaps’ li’l shoppers.

Katie Lacey Brucker didn’t seem to care why I was in her home this Friday morning. There was talk of a celebrity tell-all she was reading, and whether childrens’ beauty pageants were forever stigmatized by JonBenet. *Mackenzie is just dying to model.* Well she’s as pretty as her mother, who can blame her? *Why, Camille, that’s sweet of you to say—I never felt like you thought I was pretty.* Oh of course, don’t be silly.

*Would you like a drink? Absolutely. We don't keep liquor in the home.* Of course, not what I meant at all. *Sweet tea?* Sweet tea is lovely, impossible to get in Chicago, you really miss the little regional goodies, you should see how they do their ham up there. So great to be home.

Katie came back with a crystal pitcher of sweet tea. Curious, since from the living room I saw her pull a big gallon jug out of the icebox. A hit of smugness, followed by a self-reminder that I wasn't being particularly frank, either. In fact, I'd cloaked my own natural state with the thick scent of fake plant. Not just aloe and strawberry, but also the faint strain of lemon air freshener coming from my shoulder.

"This tea is wonderful, Katie. I swear I could drink sweet tea with every meal."

"How do they do their ham up there?" She tucked her feet under her legs and leaned in. It reminded me of high school, that serious stare, as if she were trying to memorize the combination to a safe.

I don't eat ham, hadn't since I was a kid and went to visit the family business. It wasn't even a slaughtering day, but the sight kept me up nights. Hundreds of those animals caged so tightly they couldn't even turn around, the sweet throaty scent of blood and shit. A flash of Amma, staring intently at those cages.

"Not enough brown sugar."

"Mmmhmm. Speaking of which, can I make you a sandwich or something? Got ham from your momma's place, beef from the Deacons', chicken from Coveys. And turkey from Lean Cuisine."

Katie was the type who'd bustle around all day, clean the kitchen tile with a toothbrush, pull the lint from the floorboards with a toothpick before she spoke much about anything uncomfortable. Sober at least. Still, I maneuvered her to talk of Ann and Natalie, guaranteed her anonymity, and started up my tape recorder. The girls were sweet and cute and darling, the obligatory cheery revisionism. Then:

"We did have an incident with Ann, on Sewing Day." Sewing Day, still around. Kind of comforting, I suppose. "She jabbed Natalie Keene in the cheek with her needle. I think she was aiming for the eye, you know, like Natalie did to that little girl back in Ohio." *Philadelphia.*

“One minute the two were sitting nice and quiet next to each other—they weren’t friends, they were in different grades, but Sewing’s open. And Ann was humming something to herself and looking just like a little mother. And then it happened.”

“How hurt was Natalie?”

“Mmm, not too bad. Me and Rae Whitescarver, she’s the second-grade teacher now. Used to be Rae Little, few years below us ... and *not little*. At least not then—she’s dropped a few pounds. Anyway, me and Rae pulled Ann off and Natalie had this needle sticking right out of her cheek just an inch below her eye. Didn’t cry or nothing. Just wheezed in and out like an angry horse.”

An image of Ann with her crooked hair, weaving the needle through cloth, remembering a story about Natalie and her scissors, a violence that made her so different. And before she thought it through, the needle into flesh, easier than you’d think, hitting bone in one quick thrust. Natalie with the metal spearing out of her, like a tiny silver harpoon.

“Ann did it for no clear reason?”

“One thing I learned about those two, they didn’t need a reason to strike out.”

“Did other girls pick on them? Were they under stress?”

“Ha Ha!” It was a genuinely surprised laugh, but it came out in a perfect, unlikely “Ha Ha!” Like a cat looking at you and saying “Meow.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say school days were something they looked forward to,” Katie said. “But you should ask your little sister about that.”

“I know you say Amma bullied them ...”

“God help us when she hits high school.”

I waited in silence for Katie Lacey Brucker to gear up and talk about my sister. Bad news, I guessed. No wonder she was so happy to see me.

“Remember how we ran Calhoon? What we thought was cool became cool, who we didn’t like everyone hated?” She sounded fairy-tale dreamy, as if she were thinking of a land of ice cream and

bunnies. I only nodded. I remember a particularly cruel gesture on my part: An overeager girl named LeeAnn, a leftover friend from grade school, had displayed too much concern about my mental state, suggested I might be depressed. I snubbed her pointedly one day when she came scurrying over to speak with me before school. I can still remember her: books bundled under her arms, that awkward printed skirt, her head kept a bit low whenever she addressed me. I turned my back on her, blocked her from the group of girls I was with, made some joke about her conservative church clothes. The girls ran with it. For the rest of the week, she was pointedly taunted. She spent the last two years of high school hanging out with teachers during lunch. I could have stopped it with one word, but I didn't. I needed her to stay away.

"Your sister is like us times three. And she has a major mean streak."

"Mean streak how?"

Katie pulled a soft pack of cigarettes from the endtable drawer, lit one with a long fireplace match. Still a secret smoker.

"Oh, she and those three girls, those little blonde things with the tits already, they rule the school, and Amma rules them. Seriously, it's bad. Sometimes funny, but mostly bad. They make this fat girl get them lunch every day, and before she leaves, they make her eat something without using her hands, just dig her face in there on the plate." She scrunched up her nose but didn't seem otherwise bothered. "Another little girl they cornered and made her lift up her shirt and show the boys. Because she was flat. They made her say dirty things while she was doing it. There's a rumor going around that they took one of their old friends, girl named Ronna Deel they'd fallen out with, took her to a party, got her drunk and ... kind of gave her as a present to some of the older boys. Stood guard outside the room till they were done with her."

"They're barely *thirteen*," I said. I thought of what I'd done at that age. For the first time I realized how offensively young it was.

"These are precocious little girls. We did some pretty wild things ourselves at not much older." Katie's voice got huskier with her smoke. She blew it up and watched it hover blue above us.

"We never did anything that cruel."

“We came pretty damn close, Camille.” *You did, I didn’t.* We stared at each other, privately cataloguing our power plays.

“Anyway, Amma fucked with Ann and Natalie a lot,” Katie said. “It was nice your mom took so much interest in them.”

“My mom tutored Ann, I know.”

“Oh, she’d work with them during mother’s aide, have them over to your house, feed them after school. Sometimes she’d even come by during recess and you could see her outside the fence, watching them on the playground.”

A flash of my mother, fingers wrapped between the fence wire, hungrily looking in. A flash of my mother in white, glowing white, holding Natalie with one arm, and a finger up to her mouth to hush James Capisi.

“Are we done?” Katie asked. “I’m sort of tired of talking about all this.” She clicked the tape recorder off.

“So, I heard about you and the cute cop,” Katie smiled. A wisp of hair came unhooked from her ponytail, and I could remember her, head bent over her feet, painting her toenails and asking about me and one of the basketball players she’d wanted for herself. I tried not to wince at the mention of Richard.

“Oh, rumors, rumors.” I smiled. “Single guy, single girl ... my life isn’t nearly that interesting.”

“John Keene might say different.” She plucked another cigarette, lit it, inhaled and exhaled while fixing me with those china blue eyes. No smile this time. I knew this could go two ways. I could give her a few tidbits, make her happy. If the story had already reached Katie at ten, the rest of Wind Gap would hear by noon. Or I could deny, risk her anger, lose her cooperation. I already had the interview, and I certainly didn’t care about staying in her good graces.

“Ah. More rumors. People need to get some better hobbies around here.”

“Really? Sounded pretty typical to me. You were always open to a good time.”

I stood up, more than ready to leave. Katie followed me out, chewing the inside of her cheek.

“Thanks for your time, Katie. It was good seeing you.”

“You too, Camille. Enjoy the rest of your stay here.” I was out the door and on the steps when she called back to me.

“Camille?” I turned around, saw Katie with her left leg bent inward like a little girl’s, a gesture she had even in high school. “Friendly advice: Get home and wash yourself. You stink.”

**I** did go home. My brain was stumbling from image to image of my mother, all ominous. *Omen*. The word beat again on my skin. Flash of thin, wild-haired Joya with the long nails, peeling skin from my mother. Flash of my mother and her pills and potions, sawing through my hair. Flash of Marian, now bones in a coffin, a white satin ribbon wrapped around dried blonde curls, like some bouquet gone stale. My mother tending to those violent little girls. Or trying to. Natalie and Ann weren’t likely to suffer much of that. Adora hated little girls who didn’t capitulate to her peculiar strain of mothering. Had she painted Natalie’s fingernails before she strangled her? After?

*You’re crazy to think what you’re thinking. You’re crazy to not think it.*

## *Chapter Fifteen*

**T**hree little pink bikes were lined up on the porch, bedecked with white wicker baskets, ribbons streaming off the handlebars. I peeked in one of the baskets and saw an oversized stick of lipgloss and a joint in a sandwich bag.

I slipped in a side door and padded up the steps. The girls were in Amma's room giggling loudly, shrieking with delight. I opened the door without knocking. Rude, but I couldn't bear the idea of that secret shuffle, that rush to pose innocently for the grown-up. The three blondes were standing in a circle around Amma, short shorts and miniskirts bearing their shaved stick legs. Amma was on the floor fiddling with her dollhouse, a tube of super glue beside her, her hair piled on top of her head and tied with a big blue ribbon. They shrieked again when I said hello, flashing outraged, exhilarated smiles, like startled birds.

"Hey, Mille," blurted Amma, no longer bandaged, but looking tweaked and feverish. "We're just playing dolls. Don't I have the most beautiful dollhouse?" Her voice was syrupy, modeled after a child on a 1950s family show. Hard to reconcile this Amma with the one who gave me drugs just two nights before. My sister who supposedly pimped out her friends to older boys for laughs.

"Yeah, Camille, don't you love Amma's dollhouse?" echoed the brassy blonde in a husky voice. Jodes was the only one not looking at me. Instead she was staring into the dollhouse as if she could will herself inside.

"You feel better, Amma?"

"Oh, indeed I do, sister dear," she whinnied. "I hope you feel well also."

The girls giggled again, like a shudder. I shut the door, annoyed with a game I didn't understand. "Maybe you should take Jodes with you," one of them called from behind the closed door. Jodes wasn't long for the group.

I ran a warm bath despite the heat—even the porcelain of the tub was rosy—and sat in it, naked, chin on my knees as the water slowly snaked up around me. The room smelled of minty soap and the sweet,

spittoon scent of female sex. I was raw and thoroughly used and it felt good. I closed my eyes, slumped down into the water and let it flow into my ears. *Alone*. I wished I'd carved that into my skin, suddenly surprised that the word didn't grace my body. The bare circle of scalp Adora had left me pricked with goosebumps, as if volunteering for the assignment. My face cooled, too, and I opened my eyes to see my mother hovering over the oval of the tub rim, her long blonde hair encircling her face.

I lurched up, covered my breasts, splashing some water on her pink gingham sundress.

"Sweetheart, where did you go? I was absolutely frantic. I'd have come looking for you myself but Amma had a bad night."

"What was wrong with Amma?"

"Where were you last night?"

"What was wrong with Amma, Mother?"

She reached for my face and I flinched. She frowned and reached again, patted my cheek, smoothed my wet hair back. When she removed her hand, she looked stunned at the wetness, as if she'd ruined her skin.

"I had to take care of her," she said simply. Goosebumps blossomed on my arms. "You cold, honey? Your nipples are hard."

She had a glass of bluish milk in her hand, which she gave to me silently. *Either the drink makes me sick and I know I'm not insane, or it doesn't, and I know I'm a hateful creature*. I drank the milk as my mother hummed and ran her tongue over her lower lip, a gesture so fervent it was nearly obscene.

"You were never such a good girl when you were little," she said. "You were always so willful. Maybe your spirit has gotten a bit more broken. In a good way. A necessary way."

She left and I waited in the bathtub for an hour for something to happen. Stomach rumblings, dizziness, a fever. I sat as still as I do on an airplane, when I worry one rash movement will send us into a tailspin. Nothing. Amma was in my bed when I opened the door.

"You are so gross," she said, arms lazily crossed over her. "I cannot believe you fucked a *babykiller*. You are just as nasty as she said."

“Don’t listen to Momma, Amma. She’s not a trustworthy person. And don’t ...” *What? Take anything from her? Say it if you think it, Camille.* “Don’t turn on me, Amma. We hurt each other awfully quickly in this family.”

“Tell me about his dick, Camille. Was it nice?” Her voice was the same cloying, put-on she’d used with me earlier, but she wasn’t detached: She squirmed under my sheets, her eyes a bit wild, face flushed.

“Amma, I don’t want to talk about this with you.”

“You weren’t too grown up a few nights ago, sister. Are we not friends anymore?”

“Amma, I’ve got to lie down now.”

“Hard night, huh? Well, just wait—everything’s going to get worse.” She kissed me on the cheek and slid out of the bed, clattered down the hall in her big plastic sandals.

Twenty minutes later the vomiting began, wrenching, sweaty upheavals in which I pictured my stomach contracting and bursting like a heart attack. I sat on the floor next to the toilet between hacking, propped against the wall in only an ill-fitting T-shirt. Outside I could hear blue jays bickering. Inside, my mother called Gayla’s name. An hour later and I was still vomiting, off-green nauseous bile that came out of me like syrup, slow and sinewy.

I pulled on some clothes and brushed my teeth gingerly—inserting too much of the toothbrush in my mouth made me start gagging again.

Alan was sitting on the front porch reading a large, leather-bound book entitled only *Horses*. A bowl made of bumpy orange carnival glass perched on the armrest of his rocking chair, a lump of green pudding at its center. He was in a blue seersucker suit, a Panama hat atop his head. He was serene as a pond.

“Your mother know you’re leaving?”

“I’ll be back soon.”

“You’ve done much better with her lately, Camille, and for that I thank you. She seems quite improved. Even her dealings with ... Amma are smoother.” He always seemed to pause before his

own daughter's name, as if it had a slightly dirty connotation.

"Good, Alan, good."

"I hope you're feeling better about yourself too, Camille. That's an important thing, liking oneself. A good attitude infects just as easily as a bad one."

"Enjoy the horses."

"I always do."

The drive to Woodberry was punctuated with lurching twists into the curb where I threw up more bile and a little blood. Three stops, one in which I vomited down the side of the car, unable to get the door open fast enough. I used my old warm cup of strawberry pop and vodka to wash it off.

**S**t. Joseph's Hospital in Woodberry was a huge cube of golden brick, cross-sectioned with amber-shaded windows. Marian had called it the waffle. It was a mellow place for the most part: If you lived farther west, you went to Poplar Bluff for your health; farther north, to Cape Girardeau. You only went to Woodberry if you were trapped in the Missouri boot heel.

A big woman, her bust comically round, was sending off Do Not Disturb signals from behind the Information desk. I stood and waited. She pretended to be intently reading. I stood closer. She trailed an index finger along each line of her magazine and continued to read.

"Excuse me," I said, my tone a mix of petulance and patronizing that even I disliked.

She had a mustache and yellowed fingertips from smoking, matching the brown canines that peeked out from beneath her upper lip. *The face you give the world tells the world how to treat you*, my mother used to say whenever I resisted her grooming. This woman could not be treated well.

"I need to track down some medical records."

"Put a request in with your doctor."

"My sister's."

"Have your sister put in a request with her doctor." She flipped the

page of her magazine.

“My sister is dead.” There were gentler ways of putting this, but I wanted the woman to snap to. Even still, her attention was grudging.

“Ah. Sorry for your loss. She die here?” I nodded.

“Dead on Arrival. She had a lot of emergency treatment here and her doctor was based here.”

“What was the date of death?”

“May 1, 1988.”

“Jesus. That’s a pace back. Hope you’re a patient woman.”

**F**our hours later, after two screaming matches with disinterested nurses, a desperate flirtation with a pale, fuzzy-faced administrator, and three trips to the bathroom to vomit, Marian’s files were flopped on my lap.

There was one for each year of her life, progressively thicker. Half the doctors’ scratches I couldn’t understand. Many involved tests ordered and completed, never to any use. Brain scans and heart scans. A procedure involving a camera threaded down Marian’s throat to examine her stomach as it was filled with radiant dye. Heart-apnea monitors. Possible diagnoses: diabetes, heart murmur, acid reflux, liver disease, pulmonary hypertension, depression, Crohn’s disease, lupus. Then, a feminine, pink sheet of lined stationery. Stapled to a report documenting Marian’s weeklong hospital stay for the stomach tests. Proper, rounded cursive, but angry—the pen had indented each word deeply into the paper. It read:

*I am a nurse who has attended Marian Crellin for her tests this week, as well as several previous in-patient stays. I am of the very strong [“very strong” underlined twice] opinion that this child is not sick at all. I believe were it not for her Mother, she would be perfectly healthy. The child exhibits signs of illness after spending time alone with the Mother, even on days when she has felt well up until maternal visits. Mother shows no interest in Marian when she is well, in fact, seems to punish her. Mother holds child only when she is sick or crying. I and several other nurses, who for political reasons choose not to sign their names to my statement, believe strongly the child, as well as her sister, should be removed from the home for further*

*observation.*

*Beverly Van Lumm*

Righteous indignation. We could have used more of that. I pictured Beverly Van Lumm, busty and tight lipped, hair gathered in a determined bun, scrawling out the letter in the next room after she was forced to leave limp Marian in my mother's arms, only a matter of time until Adora cried out for nursing attention.

Within an hour I had tracked the nurse down in the pediatric ward, which was actually just a big room holding four beds, only two of them in use. One little girl was reading placidly, the little boy next to her was sleeping upright, his neck held in a metal brace that seemed to screw right into his spine.

Beverly Van Lumm was not a bit like I pictured. Maybe late fifties, she was tiny, her silver hair cropped tight to her head. She wore flowered nursing pants and a bright blue jacket, a pen propped behind her ear. When I introduced myself, she seemed to immediately remember me, and appeared none too surprised I'd finally shown up.

"It's so nice to meet you again after all these years, although I hate the circumstances," she said in a warm, deep voice. "Sometimes I daydream that Marian herself comes in here, all grown up, maybe with a baby or two. Daydreams can be dangerous."

"I came because I read your note."

She snorted, capped her pen.

"Bully lot of good that did. If I hadn't been so young and nervous and awestruck by the great *docteurs* around here, I would have done more than write a note. 'Course back in that time, accusing mothers of such a thing was almost unheard of. Nearly got me fired. You never really want to believe such a thing. Like something out of Brothers Grimm, MBP."

"MBP?"

"Munchausen by Proxy. The caregiver, usually the mother, *almost always* the mother, makes her child ill to get attention for herself. You got Munchausen, you make yourself sick to get attention. You got MBP, you make your child sick to show what a kind, doting mommy you are. Brothers Grimm, see what I mean? Like something a wicked

fairy queen would do. I'm surprised you haven't heard of it."

"It sounds familiar," I said.

"It's becoming quite a well-known disease. Popular. People love new and creepy. I remember when anorexia hit in the eighties. The more TV movies on it, the more girls starved themselves. You always seemed okay, though. I'm glad."

"I'm okay, mostly. I have another sister, a girl born after Marian, I worry about."

"You should. Dealing with an MBP mom—it doesn't pay to be the favorite. You were lucky your mother didn't take more of an interest in you."

A man in bright green scrubs zipped down the hallway in a wheelchair, followed by two fat laughing guys, similarly outfitted.

"Med students," Beverly said, rolled her eyes.

"Did any doctors ever follow up on your report?"

"I called it a report, they saw it as some childless, jealous nurse's pettiness. Like I said, different time. Nurses get a *leetle* more respect now. Just a *leetle*. And to be fair, Camille, I didn't push it. I was just off a divorce, I needed to keep my job, and bottom line was, I wanted someone to tell me I was wrong. You need to believe you're wrong. When Marian died, I drank for three days. She was buried before I hinted around again, asked the head of pediatrics if he'd seen my note. I was told to take the week off. I was one of those hysterical women."

My eyes were suddenly stinging and wet, and she took my hand.

"I'm sorry, Camille."

"God, I'm so angry." Tears spilled down my cheeks and I rubbed them away with the back of my hand until Beverly gave me a tissue pack. "That it ever happened. That it took this long for me to figure it out."

"Well, sweetheart, she's your mother. I can't imagine what it must be like for you to come to grips with it. At least it looks like justice will be served now. How long has the detective been on the case?"

"Detective?"

“Willis, right? Good-looking kid, sharp. He Xeroxed every single page in Marian’s files, quizzed me until my fillings hurt. Didn’t tell me there was another little girl involved. He told me you were okay, though. I think he has a crush on you—he got all squirmy and bashful when he mentioned you.”

I stopped crying, wadded up the tissues, and tossed them in the trash next to the reading girl. She glanced into the basket curiously, as if the mail had just come in. I said my thanks to Beverly and made my way out, feeling wild and in need of blue sky.

Beverly caught up to me at the elevator, took both my hands in hers. “Get your sister out of that home, Camille. She’s not safe.”

**B**etween Woodberry and Wind Gap was a biker bar off exit 5, a place that sold six-packs to go with no call for ID. I’d gone there a lot in high school. Next to the dartboard was a pay phone. I grabbed a handful of quarters and phoned Curry. Eileen picked up, as usual, that voice soft and steady as a hill. I started sobbing before I got more than my name out.

“Camille, sweetheart, what is it? Are you okay? Of course you’re not okay. Oh, I’m so sorry. I told Frank to get you out of there after your last call. What is it?”

I kept sobbing, couldn’t even think what to say. A dart hit the board with a solid thunk.

“You aren’t ... hurting yourself again? Camille? Sweetheart, you’re scaring me.”

“My mother ...” I said, before collapsing again. I was heaving with sobs, purging from deep in my belly, nearly bent over.

“Your mother? Is she all right?”

“Nooooo.” A long wail like a child. A hand over the phone and Eileen’s urgent murmur of Frank’s name, the words *something’s happened ... horrible*, a silence of two seconds and the crash of glass. Curry got up from the table too quickly, his tumbler of whiskey wobbling to the floor. Just a guess.

“Camille, talk to me, what’s wrong.” Curry’s voice was gruff and startling like hands on both my arms giving me a shake.

“I know who did it, Curry,” I hissed. “I know it.”

“Well, that’s no reason to cry, Cubby. The police made an arrest?”

“Not yet. I know who did it.” *Thunk* on the dartboard.

“Who? Camille, talk to me.”

I pressed the phone to my mouth and whispered, “My mother.”

“Who? Camille, you have to speak up. Are you at a bar?”

“My mother did it,” I yelped into the phone, the words coming out like a splatter.

Silence for too long. “Camille, you are under a lot of stress, and I was very wrong to send you down there so soon after ... Now, I want you to go to the nearest airport and fly back here. Don’t get your clothes, just leave your car and come home here. We’ll deal with all that stuff later. Charge the ticket, I’ll pay you back when you get home. But you need to come home now.”

*Home home home*, like he was trying to hypnotize me.

“I’ll never have a home,” I whimpered, began sobbing again. “I have to go take care of this, Curry.” I hung up as he was ordering me not to.

**R**ichard I tracked down at Gritty’s having a late supper. He was looking at clippings from a Philadelphia paper about Natalie’s scissors attack. He nodded grudgingly at me as I sat down opposite him, looked down at his greasy cheese grits, then back up to study my swollen face.

“You okay?”

“I think my mother killed Marian, and I think she killed Ann and Natalie. And I know you think that, too. I just got back from Woodberry, you fuck.”

The sorrow had turned to outrage somewhere between exits 5 and 2. “I can’t believe that all the while you were making time with me, you were just trying to get information about my mother. What kind of sick fuck are you?” I was shaking, the words stuttering out of my mouth.

Richard took a ten out of his wallet, tucked it under the plate,

walked to my side of the table, and took my arm. “Come with me outside, Camille. This isn’t the place.” He walked me through the doors, to the passenger side of the car, his arm still on mine, and put me inside.

He drove us in silence up the bluff, his hand shooting up whenever I tried to say something. I finally turned away from him, aimed my body at the window, and watched the woods flash by in a blue-green rush.

We parked in the same spot where we’d overlooked the river weeks before. It roiled down below us in the dark, the current catching the moonlight in patches. Like watching a beetle hustle through fall leaves.

“Now my turn for the cliché,” Richard said, his profile to me. “Yes, I was first interested in you because I was interested in your mother. But I genuinely fell for you. As much as you can fall for a person as closed off as you are. Of course, I understand why. At first I thought I’d formally question you, but I didn’t know how close you and Adora were, I didn’t want you to tip her off. And I wasn’t sure, Camille. I wanted time to study her a bit more. It was only a hunch. Purely a hunch. Gossip here and there, about you, about Marian, about Amma and your mother. But it’s true that women don’t fit the profile for this kind of thing. Not serial child murder. Then I started to look at it differently.”

“How?” My voice dull as scrap metal.

“It was that kid, James Capisi. I kept coming back to him, that fairy-tale wicked witch of a woman.” Echoes of Beverly, Brothers Grimm. “I still don’t think he actually saw your mother, but I think he remembered something, a feeling or subconscious fear that turned into that person. I started thinking, what kind of woman would kill little girls and steal their teeth? A woman who wanted ultimate control. A woman whose nurturing instinct had gone awry. Both Ann and Natalie had been ... tended to before they were killed. Both sets of parents noted uncharacteristic details. Natalie’s fingernails were painted a bright pink. Ann’s legs had been shaved. They both had lipstick applied at some point.”

“What about the teeth?”

“Isn’t a smile a girl’s best weapon?” Richard said. Finally turning to

me. “And in the case of the two girls, literally a weapon. Your story about the biting really focused things for me. The killer was a woman who resented strength in females, who saw it as vulgar. She tried to mother the little girls, to dominate them, to turn them into her own vision. When they rejected that, struggled against that, the killer flew into an outrage. The girls had to die. Strangling is the very definition of dominance. Slow-motion murder. I closed my eyes one day in my office after writing down the profile, and I saw your mother’s face. The sudden violence, her closeness with the dead girls—she has no alibi for either night. Beverly Van Lumm’s hunch about Marian adds to it. Although we’ll still have to disinter Marian to see if we can get more solid evidence. Traces of poisoning or something.”

“Leave her be.”

“I can’t, Camille. You know it’s the right thing. We’ll be very respectful of her.” He put his hand on my thigh. Not my hand or my shoulder, but my thigh.

“Was John ever really a suspect?” Hand removed.

“His name was always swirling around. Vickery was kind of obsessed. Figured Natalie was kind of violent, maybe John was, too. Plus he was from out of town, and you know how suspicious out-of-towners are.”

“Do you have any real proof, Richard, about my mother? Or is this all supposition?”

“Tomorrow we’re getting the order to search the place. She’ll have kept the teeth. I’m telling you this as a courtesy. Because I respect and trust you.”

“Right,” I said. *Falling* lit up on my left knee. “I need to get Amma out of there.”

“Nothing will happen tonight. You need to go home and have a regular evening. Act as naturally as possible. I can get your statement tomorrow, it’ll be a good help to the case.”

“She’s been hurting me and Amma. Drugging us, poisoning us. Something.” I felt nauseous again.

Richard took his hand off my thigh.

“Camille, why didn’t you say something before? We could have had

you tested. That'd be a great thing for the case. Goddammit."

"Thanks for the concern, Richard."

"Anyone ever tell you you're overly sensitive, Camille?"

"Not once."

**G**ayla was standing at the door, a watchful ghost at our house atop a hill. With a flicker she was gone, and as I pulled up to the carriage porch, the light in the dining room switched on.

Ham. I smelled it before I hit the door. Plus collard greens, corn. They all sat still as actors before curtain. Scene: Supper time. My mother poised at the head of the table, Alan and Amma to each side, a place set for me at the opposite end. Gayla pulled the chair out for me, whispered back into the kitchen in her nurse's garb. I was sick of seeing nurses. Beneath the floorboards, the washing machine rumbled on, as ever.

"Hello, darling, nice day?" my mother called too loudly. "Sit down, we've been holding dinner for you. Thought we'd have dinner as a family since you'll be leaving soon."

"I will?"

"They're set to arrest your little friend, dear. Don't tell me I'm better informed than the reporter." She turned to Alan and Amma and smiled like a congenial hostess passing appetizers. She rang her little bell, and Gayla brought the ham in, gelatin-wobbly, on a silver serving tray. A pineapple slice slid stickily down its side.

"You cut, Adora," Alan said to my mother's raised eyebrows.

Wisps of blonde hair fluttered as she carved finger-thick slices, passed them around on our plates. I shook my head at Amma as she proffered me a serving, then sent it on to Alan.

"No ham," my mother muttered. "Still haven't grown out of that phase, Camille."

"The phase of not liking ham? No, I haven't."

"Do you think John will be executed?" Amma asked me. "Your John on death row?" My mother had outfitted her in a white sundress with pink ribbons, braided her hair tightly on both sides. Her anger

came off her like a stench.

“Missouri has the death penalty, and certainly these are the kind of murders that beg for the death penalty, if anything deserves that,” I said.

“Do we still have an electric chair?” Amma asked.

“No,” Alan said. “Now eat your meat.”

“Lethal injection,” my mother murmured. “Like putting a cat to sleep.”

I pictured my mother strapped to a gurney, exchanging pleasantries with the doctor before the needle plunged in. Suitable, her dying from a poisoned needle.

“Camille, if you could be any fairy-tale person in the world, who would you be?” Amma asked.

“Sleeping Beauty.” To spend a life in dreams, that sounded too lovely.

“I’d be Persephone.”

“I don’t know who that is,” I said. Gayla slapped some collards on my plate, and fresh corn. I made myself eat, a kernel at a time, my gag reflex churning with each chew.

“She’s the Queen of the Dead,” Amma beamed. “She was so beautiful, Hades stole her and took her to the underworld to be his wife. But her mother was so fierce, she forced Hades to give Persephone back. But only for six months each year. So she spends half her life with the dead, and half with the living.”

“Amma, why would such a creature appeal to you?” Alan said. “You can be so ghastly.”

“I feel sorry for Persephone because even when she’s back with the living, people are afraid of her because of where’s she’s been,” Amma said. “And even when she’s with her mother, she’s not really happy, because she knows she’ll have to go back underground.” She grinned at Adora and jabbed a big bite of ham into her mouth, then crowed.

“Gayla, I need sugar!” Amma yelled at the door.

“Use the bell, Amma,” my mother said. She wasn’t eating either.

Gayla came in with a bowl of sugar, sprinkled a big spoonful over Amma's ham and sliced tomatoes.

"Let *me*," Amma whined.

"Let Gayla," my mother said. "You put too much on."

"Will you be sad when John's dead, Camille?" Amma said, sucking on a slice of ham. "Would you be more sad if John died or I did?"

"I don't want anyone to die," I said. "I think Wind Gap has had too much death as it is."

"Hear-hear," Alan said. Oddly festive.

"Certain people should die. John should die," Amma continued. "Even if he didn't kill them, he still should die. He's ruined now that his sister is dead."

"By that same logic, I should die, because my sister is dead and I'm ruined," I said. Chewed another kernel. Amma studied me.

"Maybe. But I like you so I hope not. What do you think?" she turned to Adora. It occurred to me she never addressed her directly, no Mother or Momma, or even Adora. As if Amma didn't know her name but was trying not to be obvious about it.

"Marian died a long, long time ago, and I think maybe we should have all ended with her," my mother said wearily. Then suddenly bright: "But we didn't, and we just keep moving on, don't we?" Ringing of bell, gathering of plates, Gayla circling the table like a decrepit wolf.

Bowls of blood-orange sorbet for dessert. My mother disappearing discreetly into the pantry and surfacing with two slender crystal vials and her wet pink eyes. My stomach lurched.

"Camille and I will have drinks in my bedroom," she said to the others, fixing her hair in the sideboard mirror. She was dressed for it, I realized, already in her nightgown. Just as I had as a child when I was summoned to her, I trailed her up the stairs.

And then I was inside her room, where I'd always wanted to be. That massive bed, pillows sprouting off it like barnacles. The full-length mirror embedded in the wall. And the famous ivory floor that made everything glow as if we were in a snowy, moonlit landscape. She tossed the pillows to the floor, pulled back the covers and

motioned for me to sit in bed, then got in next to me. All those months after Marian died when she kept to her room and refused me, I wouldn't have dared to imagine myself curled up in bed with my mother. Now here I was, more than fifteen years too late.

She ran her fingers through my hair and handed me my drink. A sniff: smelled like brown apples. I held it stiffly but didn't sip.

"When I was a little girl, my mother took me into the North Woods and left me," Adora said. "She didn't seem angry or upset. Indifferent. Almost bored. She didn't explain why. She didn't say a word to me, in fact. Just told me to get in the car. I was barefoot. When we got there, she took me by the hand and very efficiently pulled me along the trail, then off the trail, then dropped my hand and told me not to follow her. I was eight, just a small thing. My feet were ripped into strips by the time I got home, and she just looked up at me from the evening paper, and went to her room. This room."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"When a child knows that young that her mother doesn't care for her, bad things happen."

"Believe me, I know what that feels like," I said. Her hands were still running through my hair, one finger toying with my bare circle of scalp.

"I wanted to love you, Camille. But you were so hard. Marian, she was so easy."

"Enough, Momma," I said.

"No. Not enough. Let me take care of you, Camille. Just once, need me."

*Let it end. Let it all end.*

"Let's do it then," I said. I swallowed the drink in a belt, peeled her hands from my head, and willed my voice to be steady.

"I needed you all along, Momma. In a real way. Not a need you created so you could turn it on and off. And I can't ever forgive you for Marian. She was a baby."

"She'll always be my baby," my mother said.

## Chapter Sixteen

I fell asleep without the fan on, woke up with the sheets stuck to me. My own sweat and urine. Teeth chattering and my heartbeat thumping behind my eyeballs. I grabbed the trash can beside my bed and threw up. Hot liquid, with four kernels of corn bobbing on top.

My mother was in my room before I pulled myself back onto the bed. I pictured her sitting in the hall chair, next to the photo of Marian, darning socks while she waited for me to sicken.

“Come on, baby. Into the bathtub with you,” she murmured. She pulled my shirt over my head, my pajama bottoms down. I could see her eyes on my neck, breasts, hips, legs for a sharp blue second.

I vomited again as I got into the tub, my mother holding my hand for balance. More hot liquid down my front and onto the porcelain. Adora snapped a towel from the rack, poured rubbing alcohol into it, wiped me down with the objectivity of a window cleaner. I sat in the bathtub as she poured glasses of cold water over my head to bring the fever down. Fed me two more pills and another glass of milk the color of weak sky. I took it all with the same bitter vengeance that fueled me on two-day benders. *I’m not down yet, what else you got?* I wanted it to be vicious. I owed Marian that much.

Vomiting into the tub, draining the tub, refilling, draining. Icepacks on my shoulders, between my legs. Heat packs on my forehead, my knees. Tweezers into the wound on my ankle, rubbing alcohol poured after. Water flushing pink. *Vanish, vanish, vanish*, pleading from my neck.

Adora’s lashes were plucked clean, the left eye dribbling plump tears, her upper lip continually bathed with her tongue. As I was losing consciousness, a thought: *I am being cared for. My mother is in a sweat mothering me. Flattering. No one else would do this for me. Marian. I’m jealous of Marian.*

I was floating in a half-full bath of lukewarm water when I woke again to screams. Weak and steaming, I pulled myself out of the bath, wrapped a thin cotton robe around me—my mother’s high screams jangling in my ears—and opened the door just as Richard busted in.

“Camille, are you okay?” My mother’s wails, wild and ragged, cutting the air behind him.

Then, his mouth fell open. He tilted my head to one side, looked at the cuts on my neck. Pulled open my robe and flinched.

“Jesus Christ.” A psychic wobbling: He teetered between laughter and fear.

“What’s wrong with my mother?”

“What’s wrong with you? You’re a cutter?”

“I cut words,” I muttered, as if it made a difference.

“Words, I can see that.”

“Why is my mother screaming?” I felt woozy, sat down on the floor, hard.

“Camille, are you sick?”

I nodded. “Did you find something?”

Vickery and several officers tumbled past my room. My mother staggered by a few seconds later, her hands wrapped in her hair, screaming at them to get out, to have respect, to know they’ll be very sorry.

“Not yet. How sick are you?” He felt my forehead, tied my robe shut, refused to look at my face anymore.

I shrugged like a sulking child.

“Everyone has to leave the house, Camille. Put on some clothes and I’ll get you to the doctor’s.”

“Yes, you need your evidence. I hope I have enough poison left in me.”

**B**y evening, the following items were removed from my mother’s panty drawer:

Eight vials of anti-malarial pills with overseas labels, big blue tablets that had been discontinued due to their tendency to induce fever and blurred vision. Traces of the drug were found in my toxicology tests.

Seventy-two tablets of industrial-grade laxative, used primarily for

loosening the bowels of farm animals. Traces of which were found in my toxicology tests.

Three dozen anti-seizure tablets, the misuse of which can cause dizziness and nausea. Traces of which were found in my toxicology tests.

Three bottles of ipecac syrup, used to induce vomiting in case of poisoning. Traces of which were found in my toxicology tests.

One hundred and sixty-one horse tranquilizers. Traces of which were found in my toxicology tests.

A nurses' kit, containing dozens of loose pills, vials, and syringes, none of which Adora had any use for. Any good use for.

**F**rom my mother's hat box, a flowered diary, which would be entered as a court document, containing passages such as the following:

SEPTEMBER 14, 1982

I've decided today to stop caring for Camille and focus on Marian. Camille has never become a good patient—being sick only makes her angry and spiteful. She doesn't like me to touch her. I've never heard of such a thing. She has Joya's spite. I hate her. Marian is such a doll when she's ill, she dotes on me terribly and wants me with her all the time. I love wiping away her tears.

MARCH 23, 1985

Marian had to go to Woodberry again, "trouble breathing since the morning, and sick to her stomach." I wore my yellow St. John suit, but ultimately didn't feel good about it—I worry with my blonde hair I looked washed-out. Or like a walking pineapple! Dr. Jameson is very masterful and kind, interested in Marian, but *not a busybody*. He seems quite impressed with me. Said that I was an angel, and that every child should have a mother like me. We had a bit of a flirtation, despite the wedding rings. The nurses are somewhat troubling. Probably jealous. Will have to really dote next visit (surgery seems likely!). Might have Gayla make her mince meat. Nurses love little treats for their break area. Big green ribbon around the jar, maybe? I need to get my hair done before the next emergency ... hope Dr. Jameson (Rick) is on call ...

MAY 10, 1988

Marian is dead. I couldn't stop. I've lost 12 pounds and am skin and bones. Everyone's been incredibly kind. People can be so wonderful.

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**T**he most important piece of evidence was discovered under the cushion of the yellow brocade love seat in Adora's room: a stained pair of pliers, small and feminine. DNA tests matched trace blood on the tool to Ann Nash and Natalie Keene.

The teeth were not found in my mother's home. I had images for weeks after of where they might have gone: I saw a baby blue convertible driving, top up as always—a woman's hand jutting out the window—a spray of teeth into the roadside thicket near the path into the North Woods. A set of delicate slippers getting muddied at the edge of Falls Creek—teeth plopping like pebbles into the water. A pink nightgown floating through Adora's rose garden—hands digging—teeth buried like tiny bones.

The teeth were not found in any of these places. I had the police check.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

**O**n May 28, Adora Crellin was arrested for the murders of Ann Nash, Natalie Keene, and Marian Crellin. Alan immediately paid the punishing bail sum so she could await trial in the comfort of her home. Considering the situation, the court thought it best for me to take custody of my half sister. Two days later I drove north, back to Chicago, with Amma beside me.

**S**he exhausted me. Amma was wildly needy and afire with anxiety—took to pacing like a caged wildcat as she fired angry questions at me (Why is everything so loud? How can we live in such a tiny place? Isn't it dangerous outside?) and demanded assurance of my love. She was burning off all that extra energy from not being bedridden several times a month.

By August she was obsessed with female killers. Lucretia Borgia, Lizzie Borden, a woman in Florida who drowned her three daughters after a nervous breakdown. “I think they're special,” Amma said defiantly. Trying to find a way to forgive her mother, her child therapist said. Amma saw the woman twice, then literally lay on the floor and screamed when I tried to take her for a third visit. Instead, she worked on her Adora dollhouse most hours of the day. Her way of dealing with the ugly things that happened there, her therapist said when I phoned. Seems like she should smash the thing then, I answered. Amma slapped me in the face when I brought home the wrong color of blue cloth for Adora's dollhouse bed. She spat on the floor when I refused to pay \$60 for a toy sofa made of real walnut. I tried hug therapy, a ridiculous program that instructed I clutch Amma to me and repeat *I love you I love you I love you* as she tried to wriggle away. Four times she broke free and called me a bitch, slammed her door. Fifth time we both started laughing.

**A**lan loosened some cash to enroll Amma at the Bell School—\$22,000 a year, not counting books and supplies—just nine blocks away. She made quick friends, a little circle of pretty girls who learned to yearn for all things Missouri. The one I really liked was a girl named Lily Burke. She was as bright as Amma, with a sunnier outlook. She had a spray of freckles, oversized front teeth, and hair

the color of chocolate, which Amma pointed out was the exact shade of the rug in my old bedroom. I liked her anyway.

She became a fixture at the apartment, helping me cook dinner, asking me questions about homework, telling stories about boys. Amma got progressively quieter with each of Lily's visits. By October, she'd shut her door pointedly when Lily came by.

**O**ne night I woke to find Amma standing over my bed.

"You like Lily better than me," she whispered. She was feverish, her nightgown clinging to her sweaty body, her teeth chattering. I guided her into the bathroom, sat her down on the toilet, wet a washcloth under the cool, metallic water of the sink, wiped her brow. Then we stared at each other. Slate blue eyes just like Adora's. Blank. Like a winter pond.

I poured two aspirin into my palm, put them back in the bottle, poured them back onto my palm. One or two pills. So easy to give. Would I want to give another, and another? Would I like taking care of a sick little girl? A rustle of recognition when she looked up at me, shaky and sick: *Mother's here*.

I gave Amma two aspirin. The smell made my mouth water. I poured the rest down the drain.

"Now you have to put me in the bathtub and wash me," she whined.

I pulled her nightgown over her head. Her nakedness was stunning: sticky little girl's legs, a jagged round scar on her hip like half a bottle cap, the slightest down in a wilted thatch between her legs. Full, voluptuous breasts. Thirteen.

She got into the bathtub and pulled her legs to her chin.

"You need to rub alcohol on me," she whimpered.

"No Amma, just relax."

Amma's face turned pink and she began crying.

"That's how she does it," she whispered. The tears turned into sobs, then a mournful howl.

"We're not going to do it like she does it anymore," I said.

**O**n October 12, Lily Burke disappeared on her way home from school. Four hours later, her body was found, propped tidily next to a Dumpster three blocks from our apartment. Only six of her teeth had been pulled, the oversized front two and four on the bottom.

I phoned Wind Gap and waited on hold twelve minutes until police confirmed my mother was in her home.

**I** found it first. I let the police discover it, but I found it first. As Amma trailed me like an angry dog, I tore through the apartment, upending seat cushions, rummaging through drawers. *What have you done, Amma?* By the time I got to her room, she was calm. Smug. I sifted through her panties, dumped out her wish chest, turned over her mattress.

I went through her desk and uncovered only pencils, stickers, and a cup that stank of bleach.

I swept out the contents of the dollhouse room by room, smashing my little four-poster bed, Amma's day bed, the lemon yellow love seat. Once I'd flung out my mother's big brass canopy and destroyed her vanity table, either Amma or I screamed. Maybe both of us did. The floor of my mother's room. The beautiful ivory tiles. Made of human teeth. Fifty-six tiny teeth, cleaned and bleached and shining from the floor.

**O**thers were implicated in the Wind Gap child murders. In exchange for lighter sentences in a psychiatric hospital, the three blondes admitted to helping Amma kill Ann and Natalie. They'd zipped out in Adora's golf cart and idled near Ann's home, talked her into coming for a ride. *My mother wants to say hi.*

The girls putted to the North Woods, pretended they'd have a tea party of sorts. They prettied Ann up, played with her a bit, then after a few hours, got bored. They started marching Ann to the creek. The little girl, sensing an ill wind, had tried to run away, but Amma chased her down and tackled her. Hit her with a rock. Got bitten. I saw the wound on her hip, but had failed to realize what that jagged half moon meant.

The three blondes held Ann down, while Amma strangled her with

a clothesline she'd stolen from a neighbor's tool shed. It took an hour to calm Jodes down and another hour for Amma to pull the teeth, Jodes crying the whole time. Then the four girls carried the body to the water and dumped it, zipped back over to Kelsey's home, cleaned up in the back carriage house, and watched a movie. No one could agree what it was. They all remembered they ate cantaloupe and drank white wine from Sprite bottles, in case Kelsey's mom peeked in.

James Capisi wasn't lying about that ghostly woman. Amma had stolen one of our pristine white sheets and fashioned it into a Grecian dress, tied up her light-blond hair, and powdered herself until she glowed. She was Artemis, the blood huntress. Natalie had been bewildered at first when Amma had whispered into her ear, *It's a game. Come with me, we'll play.* She spirited Natalie through the woods, back again to Kelsey's carriage house, where they held her a full forty-eight hours, tending to her, shaving her legs, dressing her up, and feeding her in shifts as they enjoyed the increasing outcry. Just after midnight on the 14th, the friends held her down while Amma strangled her. Again, she pulled the teeth herself. Children's teeth, it turns out, aren't too hard to remove, if you put real weight on the pliers. And if you don't care how they end up looking. (Flash of Amma's dollhouse floor, with its mosaic of jagged, broken teeth, some mere splinters.)

The girls putt-putted in Adora's golf cart to the back side of Main Street at four in the morning. The aperture between the hardware store and beauty parlor was just wide enough to allow Amma and Kelsey to carry Natalie by hands and feet, single file, to the other side, where they propped her up, waited for the discovery. Again Jodes cried. The girls later discussed killing her, worried she might crumble. The idea was almost in action when my mother was arrested.

Amma killed Lily all by herself, hit her on the back of the head with a stone, then strangled her with bare hands, plucked the six teeth, and cut her hair. All down an alley, behind that Dumpster where she'd left the body. She'd brought the rock, pliers, and scissors to school in the hot pink backpack I'd bought for her.

Lily Burke's chocolate-colored hair Amma braided into a rug for my room in her dollhouse.

## *Epilogue*

**A**dora was found guilty of murder in the first degree for what she did to Marian. Her lawyer is already preparing the appeal, which is enthusiastically chronicled by the group that runs my mother's Web site, [freeadora.org](http://freeadora.org). Alan shut down the Wind Gap house and took an apartment near her prison in Vandelia, Missouri. He writes letters to her on days he can't visit.

Quickie paperbacks were released about our murderous family; I was showered with book offers. Curry pushed me to take one and quickly backed off. Good for him. John wrote me a kind, pain-filled letter. He thought it was Amma all along, had moved into Meredith's place in part to "keep watch." Which explained the conversation I'd overheard between him and Amma, who'd enjoyed toying with his grief. Hurt as a form of flirtation. Pain as intimacy, like my mother jabbing her tweezers into my wounds. As for my other Wind Gap romance, I never again heard from Richard. After the way he looked at my marked-up body, I knew I wouldn't.

Amma will remain locked up until her eighteenth birthday, and likely longer. Visitors are allowed twice a month. I went once, sat with her in a cheerful playground area surrounded by barbed wire. Little girls in prison slacks and T-shirts hung on monkey bars and gym rings, under supervision of fat, angry female guards. Three girls slipped jerkily down a warped slide, climbed the ladder, went down again. Over and over, silently for the duration of my visit.

Amma had cut her hair close to the scalp. It may have been an effort to look tougher, but instead gave her an otherworldly, elven aura. When I took her hand, it was wet with sweat. She pulled it away.

I'd promised myself not to question her about the killings, to make the visit as light as possible. Instead it came out almost immediately, the questions. Why the teeth, why these girls, who were so bright and interesting. How could they have offended her? How could she do it? The last line came out chidingly, as if I was lecturing her on having a party when I wasn't home.

Amma stared bitterly at the three girls on the slide and said she hated everyone here, all the girls were crazy or stupid. She hated

having to do laundry and touch people's stuff. Then she went silent for a minute and I thought she was simply going to ignore my question.

"I was friends with them for a while," she said finally, talking into her chest. "We had fun, running around in the woods. We were wild. We'd hurt things together. We killed a cat once. But then she"—as always Adora's name went unsaid—"got all interested in them. I could never have anything to myself. They weren't my secrets anymore. They were always coming by the house. They started asking me questions about being sick. They were going to ruin everything. She didn't even realize it." Amma rubbed her shorn hair harshly. "And why did Ann have to bite ... her? I couldn't stop thinking about it. Why Ann could bite her, and I couldn't."

She refused to say more, answered only in sighs and coughs. As for the teeth, she took the teeth only because she needed them. The dollhouse had to be perfect, just like everything else Amma loved.

I think there is more. Ann and Natalie died because Adora paid attention to them. Amma could only view it as a raw deal. Amma, who had allowed my mother to sicken her for so long. *Sometimes when you let people do things to you, you're really doing it to them.* Amma controlled Adora by letting Adora sicken her. In return, she demanded uncontested love and loyalty. No other little girls allowed. For the same reasons she murdered Lily Burke. Because, Amma suspected, I liked her better.

You can come up with four thousand other guesses, of course, about why Amma did it. In the end, the fact remains: Amma enjoyed hurting. *I like violence*, she'd shrieked at me. I blame my mother. A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort.

**T**he day of Amma's arrest, the day it finally, completely unraveled, Curry and Eileen parked themselves on my couch, like concerned salt and pepper shakers. I slipped a knife up my sleeve, and in the bathroom, I stripped off my shirt and dug it deep into the perfect circle on my back. Ground it back and forth until the skin was shredded in scribbly cuts. Curry broke in just before I went for my face.

Curry and Eileen packed my things and took me to their home,

where I have a bed and some space in what was once a basement rec room. All sharp objects have been locked up, but I haven't tried too hard to get at them.

I am learning to be cared for. I am learning to be parented. I've returned to my childhood, the scene of the crime. Eileen and Curry wake me in the mornings and put me to bed with kisses (or in Curry's case, a gentle chuck under the chin). I drink nothing stronger than the grape soda Curry favors. Eileen runs my bath and sometimes brushes my hair. It doesn't give me chills, and we consider this a good sign.

It is almost May 12, one year exactly from my return to Wind Gap. The date also happens to be Mother's Day this year. Clever. Sometimes I think about that night caring for Amma, and how good I was at soothing her and calming her. I have dreams of washing Amma and drying her brow. I wake with my stomach turning and a sweaty upper lip. Was I good at caring for Amma because of kindness? Or did I like caring for Amma because I have Adora's sickness? I waver between the two, especially at night, when my skin begins to pulse.

Lately, I've been leaning toward kindness.

## *Acknowledgments*

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## About the Author

**GILLIAN FLYNN** is the author of the runaway hit *Gone Girl*, an international sensation that has spent more than eighty-five weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Her work has been published in forty languages. *Gone Girl* is soon to be a major motion picture from Twentieth Century Fox. Flynn's previous novels, *Dark Places* and Dagger Award winner *Sharp Objects*, were also *New York Times* bestsellers. A former writer and critic for *Entertainment Weekly*, she lives in Chicago with her husband and son.