MYSTERY EXCERPT SAMPLER

SPRING 2016

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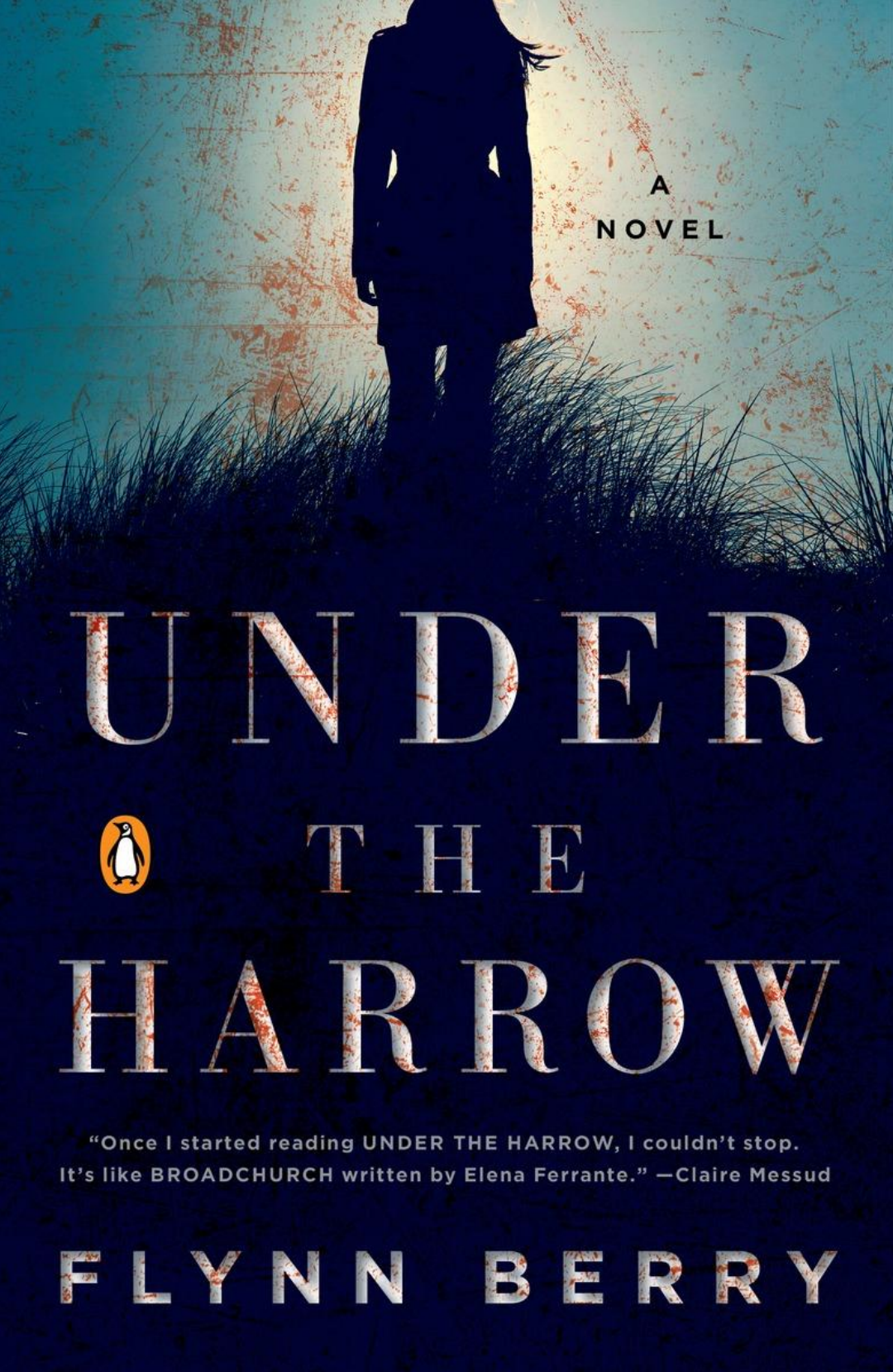

A
NOVEL
UNDER
THE
HARROW
"Once I started reading UNDER THE HARROW, I couldn't stop.
It's like BROADCHURCH written by Elena Ferrante." —Claire Messud
FLYNN BERRY

To
J. A. B.

Come, what do we gain by evasions?
We are under the harrow and can't escape.
—C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

CONTENTS

PART ONE

HUNTERS

1

A WOMAN IS MISSING in the East Riding. She vanished from Hedon, near where we grew up. When Rachel learns of the disappearance, she will think it's him.

The hanging sign for the Surprise, a painting of a clipper ship on a green sea, creaks in the wind. The pub stands on a quiet road in Chelsea. After finishing the job on Phene Street, I came for lunch and a glass of white wine. I work as an assistant to a landscaper. Her specialty is in meadows. They look like they haven't been landscaped at all.

On-screen, a reporter moves through the park where the woman was last seen. Police and dogs fan out across the hills behind the town. I could tell Rachel about her tonight, though it would ruin our visit. It might not have anything to do with what happened to her. The woman might not have even come to harm.

The builders at the house across the road have finished eating, the white paper bags balled at their feet, and are leaning back against the steps in the cold sunshine. I should have already left for the train to Oxford, but I wait at the bar in my coat and scarf while a detective from the station in Hull asks the public for any information about the disappearance.

When the broadcast moves to the storm in the north, I leave under the hanging sign and turn on the next corner toward Royal Hospital Road. I walk past the trimmed squares of Burton Court. Past the estate agent's. Sunny homes in Chelsea and Kensington. I still live in a tower block in Kilburn. The stairwell forever smelling of fresh paint, seagulls diving at the balconies.

I don't have a garden, obviously. The cobbler's children have no shoes, etc.

Black cabs drive down Sloane Street. Blurry orbs of light glow on the sides of buildings, reflected from the facing windows. The bookshop displays a pile of new translations of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

In one of the stories, a magician drank a potion made from an herb that kept him young. The problem was that the herb grew only at the top of a mountain, and so every year the magician tricked a youth into climbing the mountain. Throw down the herb, said the magician. Then I'll come get you. The youth threw down the herb. I can't remember the end. That may have been it. I've forgotten the ending for most of the stories, except the important one, that Scheherazade lives.

A few minutes on the tube, and then I am back out again, hiking up the stairs to Paddington station. I buy my ticket and a bottle of red wine at the Whistlestop.

On the platform, the train engines hum. I wish Rachel would move to London. "But then you wouldn't get to come here," she says, and I do love her house, an old farmhouse on a shallow hill, with two ancient elms on either side of it. The sound of the elms soughing in the wind fills the upstairs bedrooms. And she likes living there, living alone. Two years ago she almost got married. "Close brush," she said.

On the train, I press my head against the seat and watch the winter fields pass by the window. My carriage is empty except for a few commuters who have left work early for the weekend. The sky is gray with a ribbon of purple at the horizon. It's colder here, outside the city. You can see it on the faces of people waiting at the local stations. A thin stream of air whistles through a crack at the bottom of the pane. The train is a lighted capsule traveling through the charcoal landscape.

Two boys in hoods run alongside my carriage. Before I draw level with them, they jump a low wall and disappear down the berm. The train plunges through a tight hedge. In summer, it turns the light in the carriage green and flickering, like being underwater. Now, the hedge is bare enough that the light doesn't

change at all. I can see small birds in the gaps of the branches, framed by vines.

A few weeks ago Rachel mentioned that she plans to raise goats. She said the hawthorn tree at the bottom of her garden is perfect for them to climb on. She already has a dog, a large German shepherd. "How will Fenno feel about the goats?" I asked.

"Demented with happiness, probably," she said.

I wonder if all goats climb trees, or only certain types. I didn't believe her until she showed me pictures of a goat balanced at the edge of a fan of cedar, a group of them in a white mulberry. None of the pictures showed how the goats climbed the tree, though. "They use their hooves, Nora," said Rachel, which doesn't make any sense.

A woman comes down the aisle with a trolley and I buy a Twix bar for myself and an Aero for Rachel. Our father called us greedy little girls. "Too right," said Rachel.

I watch the fields trundle by. Tonight I'll tell her about my artist's residency, to start two months from now in the middle of January. Twelve weeks in France, with lodging and a tiny bursary. I applied with a play that I wrote at university called *The Robber Bridegroom*. It's embarrassing that I haven't done anything better since then, but that no longer matters because in France I will write something new. Rachel will be pleased for me. She will pour us a celebratory drink. Later, over dinner, she will tell me stories from her week at work, and I won't tell her about the missing woman in Yorkshire.

The train sounds its horn, a long, low call, as it passes through the chalk hills. I try to remember what Rachel said she would cook tonight. I see her moving around in her kitchen, shifting the massive slate bowl of chestnuts to the edge of the counter. Coq au vin and polenta, I think.

She likes to cook, partly because of her job. She says her patients talk all the time about food, now that they can't eat what they want. They often ask what she makes, and she likes to give them a good answer.

Clay roofs and chimney pots rise above a high brick wall

alongside me, and then it wraps around, enclosing the village. Past the wall is a field of dry shrubs and hedges with a few paths tunneling through it. At its edge, a man in a green hat tends a trash fire. Charred leaves rise on the drafts and spin into the white sky, floating over the field.

From my bag, I take out the folder of properties to let in Cornwall. Over the summer, Rachel and I rented a house in Polperro. Both of us have time off at Christmas and plan to book a house this weekend.

Polperro is built into the folds of a coastal ravine. Whitewashed houses with slate roofs nestle in the green rivulets. Between the two cliffs is a harbor and, past a seawall, an inner harbor, large enough for maybe a dozen small sailing boats, with houses and pubs built to the water's edge on the quay. When the tide is out, the boats in the inner harbor rest on their hulls in the mud. On the western hook of the ravine are two square merchant's houses—one a tweed-brown brick, the other white. Above them, umbrella pines stand outlined against the sky. Past the merchant's houses, on the point, a fisherman's croft is built into the rocks. The croft is made of rough granite, so on foggy days it blurs into the stones around it. The house we rented was on a headland ten minutes' walk along the coast path from Polperro and included a private staircase with seventy-one steps built up the cliff from the beach.

I loved Cornwall with a mad, jealous ardor. I was twenty-nine and had only just discovered it, but it belonged to me. The list of things I loved about Cornwall was long but not complete.

It included our house, of course, and the town, the Lizard Peninsula, and the legend of King Arthur, whose seat was a few miles up the coast at Tintagel. The town of Mousehole, pronounced "mouzall." Daphne du Maurier and *Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again*, and of course you did, anyone who left here would. The widow's walks. The photographs in pubs of wrecks, and of townspeople in long brown skirts and jackets, dwarfed by the ruined hulls.

Every day the list had to be rewritten. I added the umbrella pines and the Crumplehorn Inn. Cornish pasties and Cornish

ale. Swimming, both in open water and in the quiet, dripping caves. Every minute, really, even the ones when we were asleep.

"Everything's better here," I said.

And Rachel said, "Well."

"What's your favorite thing about Cornwall?" I asked, and she groaned. "Or I can tell you mine."

But then she said, "Well, to start, there's the ocean."

If anything, she loved it more than I did, and she is even more excited than I am to go back. She hasn't been herself lately. She seems frayed by her work, and always tired.

At the next station, the conductor warns the riders of possible delays tomorrow from the storm. Excellent, I think, so it is going to snow.

We pass through another town, where the cars now have their headlights switched on, pale yellow marbles in the weak afternoon light, and then the train curves around a poplar hedge and straightens as it pulls into Marlow.

Rachel isn't at the station. This isn't unusual. Her shifts at the hospital often run late. I leave the platform under a light so dull that the roofs of the town already seem to be dusted with snow. I walk away from the village toward her house, and soon I am on the open stretch of the road, a narrow tarmac ribbon between farms.

I wonder if she is walking to meet me with Fenno. The bottle of red wine thumps against my back. I picture Rachel's kitchen. The bowl of chestnuts, the polenta bubbling on the hob. A car drives toward me, and I step onto the verge. It slows to a crawl as it approaches, and the woman behind the wheel nods at me before accelerating down the road.

I walk faster, my breath warming my chest, my cold fingers curled in my pockets. Heavy clouds mass overhead, and in the quiet the air takes on a tinnitus ring.

And then her house is in sight. I climb the hill, and the gravel crunches under my feet. Her car is parked in the drive, she must have just gotten home. I open her door.

I stumble back before I know what is wrong with the house, like something has flown at me.

The first thing I see is the dog. The dog is hanging by his lead from the top of the stairs. The rope creaks as the dog slowly rotates. I know this is bad, but it is also amazing. How did you do that, I wonder.

His lead is wrapped around a post on the banister. He must have tangled it and fallen, strangling himself. But there is blood on the floor and the walls.

I am hyperventilating, though everything around me is calm and still. It is urgent that I do something, but I don't know what. I don't call for Rachel.

I climb the stairs. There is a stripe of blood on the wall just below my shoulder, like someone sagged against it while climbing. When the stripe ends, there are red handprints on the step above it, and the next step, and then on the landing.

In the upstairs hallway, the stains turn messy. I don't see any handprints. It looks as though someone crawled or was dragged. I stare at the stains and then, after some time, I look down the hall.

I can hear myself keening as I crawl toward her. The front of her shirt is black and wet, and I gently lift her onto my lap. I put my hand to her neck, trying to feel her pulse, then lower my ear to her face to hear her breathing. My cheek brushes her nose and chills sweep down my neck. I blow air into her mouth and pump on her chest, then stop. It might cause more damage.

I bend my forehead to Rachel's and the hallway goes dark. My breath rolls on her skin and into her hair. The hall closes around us.

My phone never has service in her house. I'll have to go outside to call an ambulance. I can't leave her, but then I am stumbling down the stairs and through the door.

As soon as the call ends, I can't remember what I said. There is no one in either direction, just her neighbors' houses and the ridge behind them, and in the humming quiet I think I can hear the sea. The sky roils above me. I look up. Put my hands to my head. My ears ring as if someone is shouting very loudly.

I wait for Rachel to appear in the doorway. Her face confused and exhausted, her eyes fixing on mine. I am listening for the soft pad of her footsteps when I hear the sirens.

She has to come downstairs before the ambulance arrives. It will be finished when someone else sees her. I beg her to come down. The sirens grow louder, and my ears lift away from my jaw like I am grinning. I watch the door for her.

And then the ambulance is in view, racing down the road between the farms. It comes up her drive, gravel spraying from its tires, and when the doors open and the paramedics run to me, I can't speak. The first paramedic enters the house and the second asks if I am wounded. I look down, and my shirt is stained with blood. When I don't answer, he begins to examine me.

I pull away from him and run up the stairs behind the first paramedic. Rachel's face is turned to the ceiling, her dark hair pooling on the floor, her arms at her sides. I can see her feet, in thick woolen socks. I want to crawl around the woman and squeeze them between my hands.

The paramedic points at a place on Rachel's neck, then touches the same place on herself, under her jaw. I can't hear her over the sounds I am making. She helps me down the steps. She opens the ambulance doors and settles me on its ledge and puts a foil wrapper around my shoulders. The wet on my shirt turns cold and plasters the fabric to my stomach. My teeth chatter. The paramedic switches on a fan so heat pours from the ambulance behind me, warming my back, escaping in vapors into the cold air.

Soon patrol cars arrive, the police in black uniforms gathering on the road and coming up the lawn. I stare at them, my eyes streaking from one face to the next. Static crackles from someone's belt. I wait for one of them to smile and give the game away. A constable lowers a stake into the dirt and runs tape across the door, the ribbon bobbing up and down as it unspools behind him.

The edges of my vision go soft, then disappear entirely. I am so tired. I try to watch the police so I can tell Rachel what this was like.

The sky foams, like the spindrift of a huge unseen wave is bearing down on us. Who did this to you, I wonder, but that isn't the important thing, the important thing is that you come back. At the house across the road, the open barn where they

usually park is empty. An Oxford professor lives there. "The gentleman farmer," Rachel calls him. Beyond the professor's house, the ridge is an almost vertical cliff face, with steep paths cut into the stone. I stare at the ridge until it seems to come loose and start to drift closer.

No one goes into the house. They are all waiting for someone. The constable who ran the tape stands in front, guarding the entrance. In the paddock next door to the professor's house, a woman rides a horse. Her cottage stands behind the paddock, near the foot of the ridge. The horse and rider gallop in a great circle under the darkening sky.

As the woman leans forward into the wind, I wonder if she can see us. The house, the ambulance, the uniformed police standing on the lawn.

A door slams at the bottom of the driveway and a man and woman step onto the gravel. Everyone watches the pair advance up the hill. They both wear tan coats, their hands in their pockets, their coattails blowing behind them. Their gaze is trained on the house, then the woman looks in my direction and our eyes catch. I am buffeted by wind, cold air. The woman lifts the tape and enters the house. I close my eyes. I hear footsteps approaching on the gravel. The man kneels down next to me. He waits.

Color sweeps over my eyelids. It will settle soon to black, and then I will hear the elm trees soughing overhead. If I go down the stairs, I'll see our dishes in the sink and on the hob. The scrapings of polenta dried to the bottom of the pot. The chestnut skins on the counter, dropped where we pulled them off, burning our fingers.

If I go to her room, I'll see the shadows of the southern-planted elm flickering on the boards. The dog asleep, sprawled below the bed, near enough that Rachel can drop her arm over the edge of the mattress and pet him. And Rachel, asleep.

I open my eyes.

2

The man kneeling next to me says hello. He is holding his tie against his stomach. Behind him, the wind flattens the grass on the hill.

"Hello, Nora," he says, and I wonder if we have met before. I don't remember telling anyone my name. He must know Rachel. He has a large, square face and hooded eyes, and I try to place him at an event in town, bonfire night or the fire brigade fund-raiser. "DI Moretti. I'm from the station in Abingdon."

It is a blow. He has never met her, her town doesn't have murder detectives. To file any serious complaint you probably have to go to Oxford or Abingdon. As we walk down the drive, two women in white forensic suits pass us on their way to the house.

As we drive away I can't breathe. I look out the window at the line of plane trees flashing past. I would have thought it would feel like a dream but it doesn't. The man driving next to me is real, the landscape outside the window is real, and the wet sticking my shirt to my stomach, and the thoughts coiling through my head.

I want the shock to buy me a little more time, but the grief is already here, it came down like a guillotine when the woman put her finger to Rachel's neck. I keep thinking how I am never going to see my sister again, how I was about to see her. As we drive through Marlow, I realize that I am talking to myself in my head. No one else is there. Usually when I have the uncanny sensation of watching myself think, I shape my thoughts into things to tell Rachel.

I shrink against the seat. Cars rush past us on the motorway. I wonder if the detective is always such a slow driver, or only when he has someone else in the car. I realize I haven't been watching the road signs to check where he is taking me. Part of me hopes he will take me to a dark, wet field, far from the lights of the town. It would be symmetrical. One sister murdered and then the other, in the space of a few hours.

He did it. Then circled around the house and came up the drive, and convinced me to leave with him while everyone else was distracted. It isn't hard to persuade myself. The fear is already here, pressing under the surface. I take a pen from my bag and grip it under my thigh.

I wait for him to ease onto one of the turnings, for an abandoned factory, or an empty orchard. Dead space surrounds the motorway, he has a lot of options. I ready myself to stab the pen into his eye, and then run back to her house. Rachel will be sitting in her living room. She will look up, frowning. "Did it work?"

But the sign for Abingdon appears, and the detective turns off the motorway, slowing to a stop at the end of the slip road. His face is slack, his eyes trained up through the windscreen at the signal.

"Who did it?" I ask.

He doesn't look at me. The indicator ticks in the quiet car. "We don't know yet."

The signal changes and he pulls the car into gear. The light box sign of the Thames Valley Police revolves on a post at the entrance to the building.

In an open-plan room upstairs, a fair man with a dark suit hanging from his shoulders stands in front of a whiteboard. When he hears us enter, he shifts away from the board, where he has just taped up a picture of Rachel.

I groan. It is the picture from the hospital website, her oval face framed by dark hair. Her face is so familiar it is like looking at myself. She is paler and has stronger bones in her face. I can disappear in a room, she can't. Both of us have high cheekbones, but hers turn out like knobs. She smiles in the photograph with her mouth closed, her lips pressed a little to the side.

In the interview room, Moretti sits down across from me, unhooking the button of his suit jacket with one hand.

"Are you tired?" he asks.

"Yes."

"It's the shock."

I nod. It's strange to be so tired, and also so scared, as if my body is asleep but receiving electric jolts.

"Can I get you anything?" he asks. I don't know what he means, and when I don't answer he brings me a tea that I don't drink. He hands me a navy sweatshirt and tracksuit bottoms. "If you'd like to change."

"No, thank you."

He talks for a few minutes about nothing. He has a cabin at Whitstable. It is beautiful, he says, at low tide. He makes me nervous, even while talking about the sea.

He asks me to tell him what I saw when I first entered the house. I can hear my tongue lift from the bottom of my mouth with a click before every answer. He rubs at the back of his neck, the weight of his hand pushing his head down.

"Do you live with her?"

"No, I live in London."

"Is it common for you to be there on a Friday afternoon?"

"Yes. I often come up to visit."

"When was the last time you spoke to your sister?"

"Last night, around ten."

The sky has darkened, so I can see the pale citrine squares of office lights across the road.

"And how did she sound?"

"Like herself."

Above his shoulder, one of the yellow tiles clicks off. I wonder if he thinks I did it. It doesn't seem likely, though, and my fear of it is distant, another depth charge but one that barely reaches me. For a moment, I wish I were being framed. Then, what I felt now would be something else—worry, outrage, righteousness—other than this. Which is nothing, like waking in a field with no memory of how you got there.

"How long will this last?" I ask.

"What?"

"The shock."

"It depends. Maybe a few days."

In an office across the street, a cleaning woman lifts the cord of a vacuum and shifts chairs out of her path.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I know you must want to go home. Have you noticed anything weighing on Rachel recently?"

"No. Her work, a little."

"Is there anyone you can think of who might want to harm Rachel?"

"No."

"If she felt threatened, would she tell you?"

"Yes."

None of this is like her. I can just as easily see the other outcome. I can see Rachel, drenched in blood, sitting in this chair and patiently explaining to the inspector how she killed the man who attacked her.

"Did it take a long time?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says, and I bow my head against the ringing. The woman who came up the drive with him opens the door. She has a soft, pouchy face and curling hair pulled back into a knot. "Alistair," she says. "A word."

When he returns, Moretti says, "Did Rachel have a boyfriend?"

"No."

He asks me to write down the names of the men she dated in the last year or so. I print each letter neatly, starting with the most recent and going back sixteen years, to her first boyfriend in Snaith, where we grew up. When I finish the list, I sit with my hands curled on the table in front of me, and Moretti stands near the door with his heavy square head bent to the paper. I watch to see if he recognizes any of the names from other cases, but his expression doesn't change.

"The first name," I say. "Stephen Bailey. They almost got married two years ago. She still saw him sometimes. He lives in West Bay, Dorset."

"Was he ever violent toward her?"

"No."

Moretti nods. Stephen will still be the first person to eliminate. The detective leaves the room, and when he returns his hands are empty. I think of the pub this afternoon, and the missing woman in Yorkshire.

"There's something else," I say. "Rachel was attacked when she was seventeen."

"Attacked?"

"Yes. The charge would have been grievous bodily harm."

"Did she know the assailant?"

"No."

"Was anyone arrested?"

"No. The police didn't believe her." They would allow that she had been assaulted, but not in the way she described. They suspected that she had tried to rob or solicit someone and been violently rebuffed. They were the last of the old wave of policemen, preoccupied with the amount she'd had to drink, and that she didn't cry. "It was in Snaith, Yorkshire. I don't know if they still have a record of it. It was fifteen years ago."

Moretti thanks me. "We need you to stay in the area. Do you have anywhere to sleep tonight?" he asks.

"Rachel's house."

"You can't stay there. Is there someone who can come pick you up?"

I am so tired. I don't want to try to explain this to anybody, or to wait in the station for one of my friends to arrive from London. When the interview ends, a constable drives me to the only inn in Marlow.

I hope we crash. A lorry holding metal poles drives in front of us on the Abingdon Road, and I imagine the nylon ribbon snapping, the metal poles falling out, dancing on the road, one of them pinioning me to the seat.

The Marlow high street is curved like a sickle, with the common at one end and the train station at the other. The Hunters is at the bottom of the sickle, next to the train station. It is a square,

cream stone building with black shutters. When the constable drops me at the inn, there are a few people waiting on the train platform, and they all turn to look at the police car.

At the Hunters, I lock the door and put on the chain. I run my hand along the papered wall, then press my ear to it and hold my breath. I want to hear a woman's voice. A mother talking to her daughter, maybe, as they get ready for bed. No sounds come through the wall. Everyone's probably sleeping, I tell myself.

I turn off the lights and crawl under the blanket. I know what's happening is real, but I do keep expecting her to call.

3

We are supposed to drive to Broadwell today for lingonberry crêpes and the museum, I think when I wake, angry that our plans have been postponed.

Halfway between the bed and the bathroom, my knees crumple. I collapse, but it's like being yanked upright. The dog rotates from the ceiling. Rachel lies curled against the wall. There are red handprints on the stairs. There are three clean posts on the banister and a dirty one with the dog's lead tied around it.

I don't know how long I stayed like that. At some point I decide to wash myself. I can't shower, because I think I can smell her house in my hair. Instead I strip and run a damp flannel over my body, watching its fabric turn pink and brown.

I dress, put my clothes from yesterday into a plastic bag, and carry them to the skip behind the inn. This feels strange, like I am disposing of evidence, but the police didn't ask me to keep them. They should have advised me more carefully. I walk past a painting of a fox hunt in the hall, with some of the red riders hidden behind the trees.

As I climb the stairs, Moretti calls to say he has a few more questions for me. "I'm doing a press statement in an hour. My statement won't include anything about the dog."

"Why not?"

"People fixate on that sort of thing. I can't prepare you," he says, "for what it will be like if this becomes a national story. We can't tell you not to talk to the press, but I can say it won't

help the case. They will get in the way, and then when they get bored they will look for what makes Rachel interesting."

"What makes her interesting?"

"The worst things about her."

A constable will collect me from the Hunters at five. I decide to wait in my room. I have six hours on my own until he arrives, and I wonder if I will make it until then.

A few hours later, there is a knock at the door. "I've had some complaints from the other guests," says the manager of the inn. Behind her, the lamps are switched on in the hall. She wears a scarf of Black Watch tartan, and I want to tell her that I used to live in Scotland. My sister came to visit me there.

"The noise is disturbing them."

"I'm sorry." I have to lean on the door frame. I haven't had anything to eat or drink today. Food is going to be a problem.

"Let me know if there's anything you need," she says. "I'm so sorry. It's been such a difficult time. First Callum and now your sister."

"Callum?"

"The young man from town, killed in an accident on the Bristol Road. He was only twenty-seven."

I remember now. Rachel was one of his nurses. I consider sharing with the woman what Rachel told me about him, but decide against it.

At five, a constable collects me and we drive to Abingdon. In the interview room, Moretti says, "We haven't been able to find your father. Are you in touch with him?"

"No."

"Was Rachel in touch with him?"

"No."

The heating pipes click in the ceiling above us. Outside the night is heavy with clouds. It is already snowing in Lancashire and Cumbria. The detective hasn't asked about our mother. He must already know that she died a long time ago, soon after I was born.

"When did you last speak to your father?"

"Three years ago."

"Does he have a history of violence?"

"No," I say, though I'm not sure that's entirely true. "He's also frail. Rachel was much stronger than him. Do you have to tell him about her?"

"Yes."

They will have a hard time finding him. He stopped collecting benefits after becoming suspicious of the government. Rachel had a postcard from him a few months ago saying he was in Blackpool, which I decide not to tell the detective.

"Have you spoken to Stephen yet?" I ask.

"He was at his restaurant all day."

The news comes as a relief, and I feel disloyal for suspecting him. He adored her.

Moretti says, "What type of vehicle does your father drive?"

"He doesn't drive anymore," I say, and start to explain. He's an alcoholic, though the word has always sounded too polished to describe him. Moretti must already know some of this. He has a record. Disorderly behavior, trespassing, burglary.

A constable knocks on the door, and Moretti excuses himself. I look into the incident room. One of the detectives is eating chips from a packet of foil and paper, and the air smells of vinegar.

I wish Fenno were with me, sitting on his haunches beside my chair. I want to rest my hand on his soft head. I gave him a bath on my last visit, cupping my hand over his eyes while rinsing the soap from his fur. When I wrapped him in a towel he leaned against me, and we stayed like that for a long time, the warm damp soaking through my shirt.

When Moretti returns, he says, "What we need from you now is an account of anything unusual in Rachel's routine. It could be as small as a change in her route to work. Any new friends, a new activity."

"I don't know. She talked about joining a gym in Oxford so she could swim in the winter, but she hadn't yet."

"Anything else? Any changes at the hospital?"

"No."

"Did she enjoy her work?"

"Yes, mostly." She had a difficult time early in her career, when she was studying to become a nurse practitioner while already working as a registered nurse. She told me that she would bicycle home hoping someone would hit her so she could lie down. "She said it was demanding, but it satisfied her."

Moretti studies me, and I wonder if I am trying his patience. Soon our interview will end, and I will have to leave. I can't imagine what I will do next.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asks, and I nod. While he fixes us tea, I try to think of something to tell him, but I can't remember any changes in her habits. I read the brochure from Victim Support. "Life can fall apart after a murder," it says. "Simple things like paying bills and answering the phone can become difficult."

I want to ask Moretti what he does in Whitstable, and how often he goes there. I expect to tell Rachel about all of this, and it is something she will want to know. We drink our tea in silence.

"On Sunday Rachel said she was off to meet someone named Martin."

Moretti turns to me. "And where did they go?"

"She didn't say. It was the evening, so dinner somewhere, I think. I asked if it was a date and she said no. She said he was a friend from the hospital."

"His surname?"

"She didn't tell me."

Moretti says, "When did Rachel decide to move?"

"She wasn't moving."

"She visited an estate agent two weeks ago."

"Where was she going?"

"St. Ives." The north coast of Cornwall. I have a pulse of excitement. I love St. Ives. I'll get to visit her there. "Rachel planned to move, and she didn't sleep at her house this week. We think it's likely she was being threatened."

"Where was she staying?"

"With Helen Thompson."

Moretti stands and I follow him from the room, too baffled to protest. He says, "Sergeant Lewis is on his way to Marlow. He's offered to drop you at the hotel."

A tall black man with a South London accent meets me in the corridor. In the lift on the way down, he says, "I'm sorry about your sister."

When the doors open, I follow him outside to his car. Rain begins to drum the windscreen as we work our way through the traffic.

"Where do people go afterward?" I ask.

"They go home," he says. The wipers sluice water from the glass.

"How long have you been a policeman?"

"Eight years," he says, leaning forward at a crossing to check the oncoming traffic. "I give myself two more."

4

Rachel bought her house in Marlow five years ago. Her town is perfect. There are painted-wood buildings on the high street. There is the common. There are the yews on the long end of the common. There is the yellow clock in the village hall. There are the two pubs. There is the church and the church graveyard. There is the rill. There is the petrol station.

The Duck and Cover is the tradesmen's pub. It used to be called something different, the Duck and Clover, until someone painted out one of the letters. The Miller's Arms is the commuters' pub. It serves Pimm's and shows sports only during the World Cup and Wimbledon. Rachel thought there was going to be an explosive showdown between the two sides eventually. She hoped for one. She sided firmly with the Duck and Cover. She said, "We don't want it to turn into Chipping Norton." She said, "It's important that the people who work here can afford to live here."

With the exception of the Miller's Arms, the town hasn't changed much, or not yet. There are no clothing or housewares shops on the high street. The village has a spring fête, and a pasta dinner to raise money for the firehouse.

"Why weren't there as many commuters before?" I asked her.

"The trains got faster."

There is another, larger town with the same name near London, with a famous pub, but Rachel never corrected people when they confused the two, or when they told her they had been to the Hand and Flowers.

Rachel said there was something wrong with the town. I can't remember exactly when this happened. It was recent, sometime after we got back from Cornwall. I didn't let her finish. We were eating breakfast at her house. I had just woken up, and I didn't want to hear it. I knew from her tone of voice that what she was about to tell me was horrible. I knew I had to stop her. I had a raspberry croissant and an espresso and I had her town.

There is the wine shop. There is the building society. There is the gold rooster on top of the Hunters. There is the library. There are the twins who work for the town. There is the yellow awning of the Miller's Arms. There are the poplars in front of the repair garage.

I thought the twins were one person until I saw them both at once washing a bin lorry. They both wore mirrored sunglasses and they both kept their hair long and they both had rottweilers.

"Do they have identical dogs?" I asked.

"No, there's just one dog," said Rachel.

The Hunters isn't doing very well. There are twelve rooms and only two other guests. It's November, but according to Rachel no one stayed there in the summer either. She said it only stayed open because of the bar below the rooms. This is good news for me, since I am not planning to leave.

When I return from the police station, I steal a carving knife from the kitchen. I put it under my bed, so if I drop my arm over the edge I can reach it. Then I sink down on the bed, wondering what she wanted to tell me, and let the darkness swarm my face.

5

The first passengers are already waiting in the darkness on the train platform when I go out to buy the papers at the newsagent's shop across the road the next morning and carry them back to the empty front room at the inn. The room has green wallpaper with gold lilies of the valley. It's where the riders used to eat breakfast before a hunt.

Rachel isn't in the *Telegraph*. She isn't in the *Independent*, the *Sun*, the *Guardian*, or the *Daily Mail*. If none of the national papers reported it, maybe it didn't happen.

But she is on the cover of the *Oxford Mail*. The reporter must have had a copy of the postmortem. She died from arterial bleeding, I learn. The time of death was between three and four in the afternoon. She was stabbed eleven times in the stomach, chest, and neck. She had defensive wounds on her hands and arms.

I am at the table reading the article and then I am on all fours on the carpet. The pattern in the wallpaper starts to move. My mouth gapes.

When the worst of the pain recedes, I am washed against the corner of the room. I put the newspapers in the empty fireplace. I want to burn them, but I don't have any matches.

I call the landscaper. I tell her there has been a death in the family and that I don't know when I will come back to London. The phrasing pleases me, like it wasn't Rachel who died, but someone else in the family, an aunt, our dad. She tells me

to take all the time I need, but she doesn't offer paid bereavement leave. I don't really blame her. It isn't that sort of job.

I call my best friend, Martha. She wants to come stay with me but I say I need to be alone at the moment.

"When are you coming home?" she asks.

"I don't know. The detective asked me to stay in the area."

"Why?"

"They need information about her, I think."

I ask Martha to tell our other friends, and I give her the numbers for Rachel's as well. Alice lives in Guatemala. I don't have her number, and I hope Martha can't find it either. It comforts me that to her Rachel is alive and well, like that makes it partially true.

After the calls, I walk to her house. It is a Sunday afternoon in late November, and a few people drive past me, going about their errands. I can't believe that I plan to survive her, to go on into life without her. The road to her house, a stripe of black tarmac, stretches in front of me.

The newspaper article didn't mention the dog. The police must be pleased. I still see him, hanging from the top of the stairs. A large German shepherd. I'm surprised the banister post could hold his weight.

In the early dusk, uniformed figures move in the long grass at the edge of Rachel's lawn. I leave the road in front of her neighbor's property and walk around the horse paddock. Behind it, a path climbs the ridge.

I walk slowly, stopping sometimes to use my hand for balance on the rocks, until I am across the valley from Rachel's house. All the lights are on, and figures move in the upstairs windows. I count eighteen people searching in the grass, under the roiling sky. The blue tape is still stretched across the door and a man in uniform stands beside it.

Snow starts to fall. A gust of white smoke billows up over the cliff edge. Someone is in the professor's house below the ridge. I lean over until I can see its roof and chimneys. Twists of steam

rise, melting into the snow. The professor is walking up the drive, throwing handfuls of yellow sand and salt. At the edge of his property he looks across the road to Rachel's house. His shoulders slump, and the empty paper bag hangs at his side.

He stands there, waiting, I think, for someone to come down the hill so he can ask if there is any news. They will have interviewed him already. I imagine there are tears in his eyes. He liked Rachel. And I think he must have been scared last night, maybe unable to sleep.

I look up, my chest raw and aching. The snow stops, hovers, swirls in fast horizontal gyres. I walk toward the spine of the ridge, away from the cliff edge, through a band of low, twisting trees. They are barely taller than my head, stunted by the wind. A branch jabs out from one with a piece of stiff yellow fabric hanging over it. I step onto a flat rock, and when I come down its other side, I land in a mess of beer cans and cigarette ends. The back of my neck prickles and heat rushes over my skin. I look up slowly and there, framed in a gap between the trees, is Rachel's house.

The branches form a portrait oval around it. In the dusk I can see people moving through the rooms of her house. As night falls, the pictures in the windows will grow sharper and clearer. She didn't have any curtains, except for one in the bathroom. I can see its white gauze, but even that reaches only to the sash. You would be able to see the top of her head when she stood at the sink to brush her teeth, when she came out of the shower.

Someone drank Tennent's Light Ale and smoked Dunhills and watched her. I search the ridge behind me. I pick up a sharp rock and turn in a circle, so the litter and dry leaves crackle under my boots. I wait for a man to appear. I'm not frightened, I want to see who did this to her. As the minutes pass, the chance that someone else is here sags, then collapses.

Through the gap in the branches, I watch the snow fall on her house. The ridge is so quiet I think I can hear the snow as it lands on the frozen ground. An absolute bleakness takes hold of me. The men searching the grounds move deeper into

the woods. I notice the snow melting on the cigarette ends, so they soften and expand.

I call Lewis, whose car is parked at the bottom of her lawn. I watch him duck under the tape and come out of the house. He stands on the drive in a dark overcoat. In the silence, I watch him take the phone from his pocket and check the screen.

"Hello, Nora."

"I found something."

"Where are you?"

I scramble out onto the path, in front of the thorn trees, and start to wave. "Here."

He rotates his head, then sees me. He stops. His face is a distant blur, his tie twisting in the wind, his trousers bagging above his shoes.

By the time I hear him on the path, I am frozen. As he steps into the gap in the trees, I know from his expression that I look absurd.

Lewis stares at me, his face slackened and sad, through the portrait oval of the branches. Two more years, he said in the car, but I can see he wishes it were none. The thorn branches arch above him.

He ducks under them and kneels to look at the ground. I wonder if he expects to find nothing, that I have been guarding nothing. As he stands, he turns and sees the house, framed by the gap in the trees, in a perfect oval, as though someone cut back the branches. His shoulders drop.

"Someone was watching her," I say.

"Nora," says Lewis, "why did you come here?" He stands a head taller than me, and he addresses the question into the space above me.

"I wanted to see the house."

He nods, staring over the cliff. "Did you think someone was watching Rachel?"

"No."

We look at the valley, and the stands of trees forming dark pools in the white snow. In daylight, a man would be invisible

up here, and at night he could move closer. I imagine him circling the house, putting his hands on the windows.

A man in a forensic suit—the thin fabric stretched over his shoes and pulled taut over his head—comes up the path. Lewis asks him to bag the material, and we start down the ridge. Ahead of me Lewis leaves a trail of footprints on the snow. Off the far side of the ridge, the forest below is a series of crosshatches.

We scramble down the rock and emerge behind the paddock. I follow Lewis to the road, my legs growing heavy as we trudge through the snow.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

The Emerald Gate has plastic tables and photographs of the dishes backlit above the till. A young man in chef's whites lifts a metal basket from a fryer and shakes it before letting it submerge again, and the smell of oil makes my mouth water. My last full meal was two days ago, at the pub in London.

I watch the pearls of jasmine open in my tea, groggy and fascinated. My fists push my cheeks up to my eyes. Lewis slides his knees under the table, looking too large for his chair. I rub my thumb over my cheek, which was scratched by the thorn trees.

Our food arrives on the counter. Lewis ordered moo shu pancakes, and I'm having the same, since I couldn't face making a decision. The rhythm of it calms me, spooning the mixture onto a thin flour pancake, folding it into a triangle, dipping it into the plum sauce. We assemble and eat in silence as the snow drifts under the streetlamps.

"Nora," he says, "why did you go to the ridge?"

"I told you, I wanted to see the house."

Behind the counter, the cook ladles wonton soup into a plastic container, and the salty smell of the broth drifts over to us.

"Did Rachel ever say anything to make you think to look there?"

"No." I fold the edges of the pancake. Lewis has stopped eating and is watching me.

"When did she get her dog?" he asks.

"Five years ago, when she moved to Marlow. She was twenty-seven." I dip the pancake into plum sauce.

"Did anything else important happen that year?"

"No."

"But she got a German shepherd."

"Lots of people do," I say.

"We found papers in her house. The dog was bred and trained by a security firm in Bristol."

I stop with a spoon halfway to my plate. "What?"

"They sell dogs for protection."

I remember Rachel on the lawn, calling commands while Fenno raced around her. She said she had to train him so he wouldn't be bored. "She told me she adopted him."

"Maybe she was scared," says Lewis, "because of what happened in Snaith."

By the time he finished, she couldn't walk. Every one of her fingernails was split from fighting him.

"Do you think it was him?" I ask.

"I don't know."

"Why would he wait fifteen years?"

"Maybe he was looking for her."

6

We went to a party the night she was attacked. It was the first week in July and I had a job at the town pool as assistant junior lifeguard, which meant that if three people were drowning at opposite ends of the pool I could rescue the smallest one.

The morning of the party was "a scorcher," according to Radio Humberside. "Be careful out there," the announcer said, which I thought was stretching it. The toast popped up, the electric kettle whistled. I wedged open the sliding door with my foot and ate my breakfast with my back against the glass.

My feet were stretched on the patio stones, and our dad was at work on a building site in Sunderland, the driveway empty of his AMC Gremlin, the world's smallest and ugliest car. Rachel said we were "latchkey children," though technically we weren't since the door was never locked. When I said that, she said, "Stop being stupid."

Rachel was still asleep when I left for the pool. The blind in her room was snagged in one corner and light glowed on her pale arm and dark hair. I closed her door and clattered down the stairs. My dad once asked if I walked down the stairs that way on purpose, to make the maximum possible noise. The screen door slammed behind me and I turned onto the hot, empty street. Half of the houses had been repossessed, and I ambled along the center of the road, brushing the hair back from my face.

After my shift at the pool, I went to Alice's. Rachel met me at the door and I watched her figure take shape beyond the screen.

"How was work, Nora?" asked Alice.

"No drownings."

We left for the party at nine. Rachel walked in front, and Alice and I followed with our arms linked. My sister wore denim shorts and a loose navy shirt. She had sandals that tied at the ankle and a rope bracelet around her wrist, her hair loose down her back. We had poured vodka into a Coke can and walked sipping from it, and all the alcohol floated to the top so by the time we reached the house we were drunk.

When we arrived at the party, everyone began hugging everyone else, including some of the people who had already been there together when we arrived. Rafe pulled me under his arm into the kitchen and I drank another vodka Coke, then another.

I lost Rachel. We played Nevers but no one could remember the rules, and then Rachel came in from the kitchen and squeezed beside me on the sofa. I tipped my head against her shoulder and smelled that she had just smoked a cigarette. I lifted her hair and held it across my nose, breathing through it like a screen.

It gets fuzzy after that.

I remember emptying an ice tray into a cup, then knocking it to the floor, and being on my knees, one hand scrabbling under the fridge.

More people coming.

Another vodka Coke.

Rachel in the kitchen, her hair tied up in a high knot, drinking a glass of water and talking with Rafe. Her knobby cheekbones, her pink lips.

I was swampy with tiredness, and knocking into things. I climbed the stairs, which was interesting because I couldn't see below my knees.

I closed my eyes. And then someone was leaning over me in the earliest light of morning, when it's uncanny, almost neon. I was in a single bed, sleeping on my side next to Alice.

"Nora, I'm going to walk home. Do you want to come with me or stay?" Rachel's hand on my arm.

"Stay." And I nestled against Alice's shoulder and fell back asleep.

The thing was—that morning—I hadn't even turned over to look at her. I imagined it afterward, over and over. Pushing back on my shoulder, twisting around to see her. Her face would be pale in the neon blue light from outside, her hair swinging forward in two long sheets.

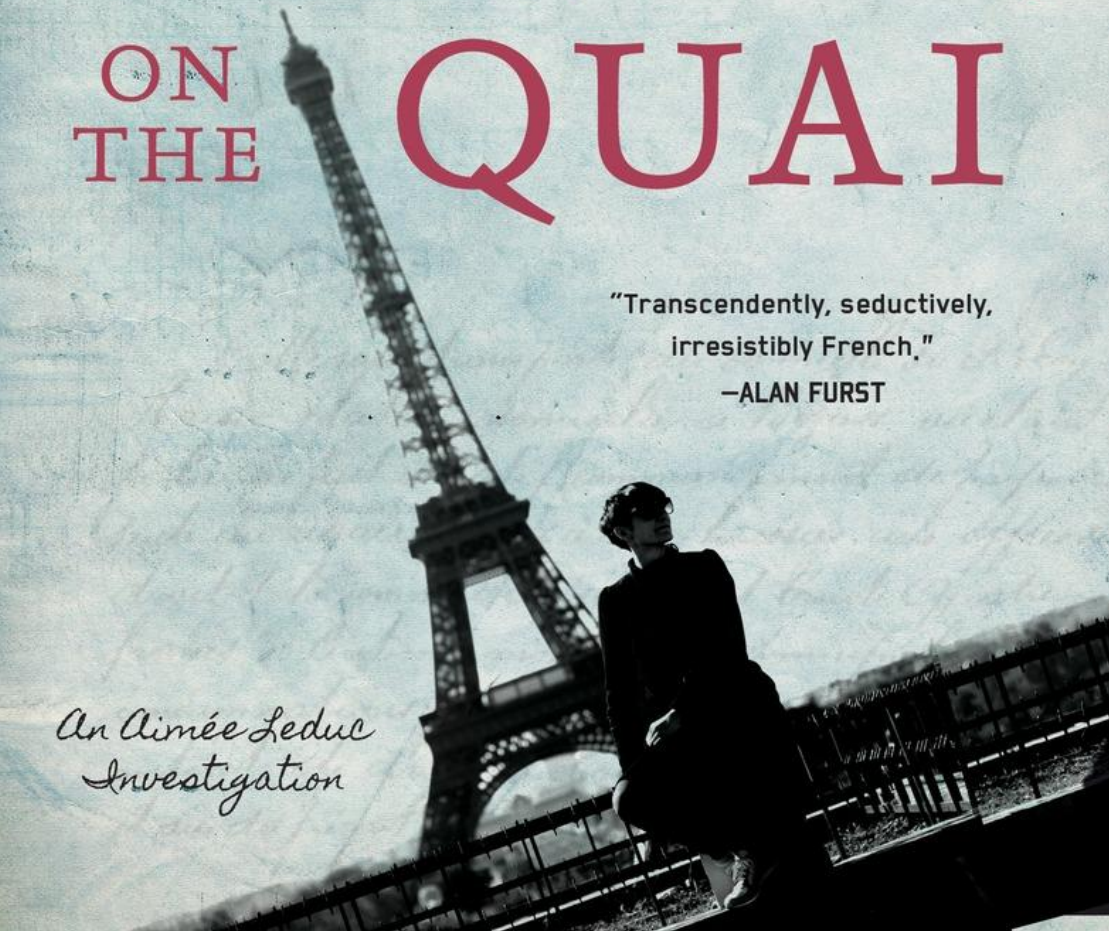
"Never mind. I'll come with you."

A PREQUEL TO THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES

CARA BLACK

MURDER ON THE QUAI

"Transcendently, seductively, irresistibly French."
—ALAN FURST



An Aimée Leduc Investigation

MURDER ON THE QUAI

CARA BLACK

Paris · November 9, 1989 · Thursday Night

STANDING OUTSIDE THE Michelin-starred restaurant, a stone's throw from the Champs-Élysées, the old man patted his stomach. The dark glass dome of the Grand Palais loomed ahead over the bare-branched trees. To his right, the circular nineteenth-century Théâtre Marigny.

"*Non, non*, if I don't walk home I'll regret it tomorrow." He waved off his two drunken friends, men he'd known since his childhood in the village, as they laughingly fell into a taxi. Course had followed course; remembering the caviar-dotted lobster in a rich velouté sauce topped off by Courvoisier brandy, he rubbed his stomach again as he waved goodnight to the departing taxi. His belly was taut with discomfort; he needed to stretch it out before bed. Besides, he always enjoyed the walk home to his place on Place François Premier. Even now, after all these years, pride swelled in his chest that he had secured himself an address in *le triangle d'or*, the golden triangle, the most exclusive quartier in Paris. The thrill of living among the mansions and *hôtels de luxe* between avenues Montaigne, George V, and the Champs-Élysées never got old to him.

He looped his silk scarf tight, took a deep breath of the piercing chill November night. Belched. The born farmer in him sensed tonight would bring frost—a crinkled frost that would melt on the grey cobbles like tears. In the village, it would have been a hoarfrost blanketing the earth like lace.

He looked over his shoulder—force of habit—with vigilance that hadn't diminished in forty years. They were always so careful, so scrupulous about the details, took precautions—yet Bruno's murder had scared them all. Made them wonder at the implications. Could it be . . . ? But a month passed and nothing. Were they safe?

Not totally safe, not until the final trust document was rubber-stamped tomorrow. But that was only a formality. Nothing would go wrong this late in the game. He knew that—they all did.

Yet why had he woken up shouting in his sleep last night? Why did Philbert's dentures grind so at dinner, and why did Alain drink a whole bottle of wine himself?

Brown leaves gusted against his ankles. On his right a blurred Arc de Triomphe glowed like a painting on a postage stamp farther down the Champs-Élysées. He kept a brisk pace, got his blood flowing, warmed up. He was fit as a fiddle, his doctor said, his heart like that of a man twenty years younger. A couple passed, huddling together in the cold.

Walking under the barren trees by the Grand Palais, he became aware of footsteps behind him. The footsteps stopped when he did. But as he turned at the intersection in front of the zebra crossing, he saw no one.

Nerves. The light turned green. He crossed. Midway down the next block he heard the footsteps again. Turned.

"Who's there?"

Only a dark hedgerow, shadows cast from trees. Unease prickled the hairs on his neck. He walked faster now, looking for a taxi. Silly, he lived two blocks away, but he never ignored a feeling like this. Each taxi passed with a red light crowning the roof: occupied.

Stupid—why hadn't he taken the taxi with the others? Kept to their protocol of precautions? His meal, rich in cream, sat in his stomach like a dead weight.

Every time he heard the footsteps, he turned and saw no one.

Paranoid, or was he losing his mind? Or was the brandy heightening sensations and dulling his reflexes?

Then a taxi with a green light slowed. He waved it down. Thank God.

"*Merci*," he said, shutting the taxi's door, breathing heavily.

"I'm only supposed to stop at the taxi stand, monsieur."

"Then I'll make it worth your while in appreciation."

He gave the address.

"But that's only two blocks from here."

"Consider your fare doubled, monsieur."

The taxi pulled away from the curb. He asked the driver to close his window.

But the driver ignored him. And turned toward the river. Not the way home at all.

Ahead, streetlamps rimmed the quai, their globes of light reflecting yellow shimmers on the moving Seine. His heavy insides curdled.

"You're going the wrong way."

The taxi accelerated, throwing him against the back of the seat.

"Stop." He tried the handle. Locked.

Afraid now, he pounded the plastic partition and tried reaching for the driver's shoulder. The wheels rumbled down a cobblestoned ramp.

"Let me out."

He didn't even realize where they were until the taxi

stopped. The taxi had lurched to a halt below the Pont des Invalides, nestled in the shadow of its arch support. Mist floated over the Seine, the gurgling water swollen by early November rain.

And then the door opened and before he could defend himself, his arms were pulled behind him. "Take my money, just take what you want."

"You know what's going to happen, don't you?" said a voice.

He gasped. "Please, let me go."

"Don't you remember the river?"

Panic flooded him. "*Non, non*. You must understand—it wasn't supposed to happen . . . We can make it right."

"Liar. Payback time."

A rag was stuffed into his screaming mouth. His bile rose and all the rich food lodged in his gullet, choking him.

"You remember, don't you? It's your turn now."

He was shoved to the edge of the quai and down into a squat. Through his blinding terror he saw one of his shoes fall into the water below. The lapping waves from a receding barge and the faint rhythm of faraway car horns masked his cry of pain. Even the lit globes of the sodium lamps faded into the mist on the cloud-blanketed night.

"How does it feel?" a voice hissed.

But he couldn't answer as the sour-tasting gag tightened across his mouth. His tied hands gripped and flailed. He couldn't breathe.

It wasn't supposed to happen that way.

The shot to the back of his head was muffled by the plastic Vichy bottle used as a silencer and the rumble of the traffic overhead.

Paris · November 10, 1989 · Friday Afternoon

Aimée Leduc gazed in horror at the mess in her test tube in the *école de médecine* lab. Her experiment ruined. Again.

She held the tube to her nose and sniffed. Bleach. Someone had sabotaged her work. Probably one of her twelve fellow premed lab mates—all of them under twenty, like Aimée; all of them male.

The professor was heading her way.

"This is the second time this month, Serge," she said, panicked.

"Didn't I warn you?" said Serge, an upper-class lab assistant, lowering his voice. "Around here you have to guard your tubes and petri dishes with your life. It happens."

Yes, but that didn't make it fair. She wanted to shout, to accuse someone. It was well known that only 15 percent of students would be allowed back for the second year. The cutthroat competition led some students to sabotage others just to stay in the running.

"Don't forget this assignment goes toward your semester grade," Dr. Fabre, their instructor, was saying as the lab emptied.

What could she do?

She liked Dr. Fabre, an older man with tortoiseshell glasses and a slight stoop. His lectures had a strange but appealing energy. Now he asked, "A problem, Mademoiselle Leduc?"

"Someone poured bleach in my test tube . . ." *Merde*. She didn't want him to think she was the type to whine.

Dr. Fabre shook his head. "No other students had this issue. Do you expect special treatment? Instead of blaming your errors on others, check your notes."

"But Dr. Fabre, you can smell it . . ."

"So you say, Mademoiselle Leduc. But if it means so much, you should have watched your work more carefully. Perhaps slept here. I did in my premed days."

No sympathy here. They wanted to be doctors and help people—why not start with themselves?

She could cope with grueling exams, reports, and all-night studying. But this? She bit her lip, determined not to cry. "Professor, would you please let me redo the experiment? I'll have the results by tomorrow morning."

"I've got four classes to grade and my schedule's full. It's not fair to the others, mademoiselle."

Or to her, but it seemed that didn't matter.

"Let me warn you," he said. "We expect the best. Despite the promise you've shown, you're a candidate for the suspension list. Consider this a formal warning."

Her heart dropped. "There must be a mistake." She riffled through her bag and pulled out her notebook, where she kept duplicates of her assignments and grades. The same notebook with the surveillance case notes she'd been transcribing for her father. "Sir, I scored in the top ten percentile, and I turned in all my assignments."

Dr. Fabre shook his head. "As so have many others. I can't make exceptions."

She managed a nod before she humiliated herself further, and to refrain from kicking the door as he exited.

She rolled up her lab coat sleeves and cleaned the lab in

the coffee-colored light of the dank November afternoon. It was her turn to be the first-year grunt. At the faucet she scrubbed her hands with carbolic soap, trying to figure out what to do. The formaldehyde smell permeated everything. Her shoes, her clothes. She couldn't even shampoo the smell out of her hair at night. Another thing she'd chalked up to life in med school.

Serge came in, handed her a paper towel, then leaned against the counter where the surgical instruments dried.

"First year's the toughest. You'll get over it. Everyone does, Aimée." Serge had the beginnings of a beard, thick black hair and myopic eyes behind black-frame glasses. "I was a *carabin*, too." A stupid archaic term still used for med students, because their lab uniforms resembled those of *les carabines*, riflemen in Napoléon's army.

"I expected a grind, but backstabbing?" She wanted to spit. "You heard Dr. Fabre. I'm going to fail."

"Pah, you'll make it. It's all about the exam, no matter what he says. You work hard," Serge said. "Be patient."

Patient, her? It was all she could do to focus. From day one, the competitiveness, that feeling of never measuring up, had dogged her. Every morning she told herself she could do it—couldn't she? After all, she'd made it into med school.

Her gaze out the narrow lab window took in the gunmetal sky over the medieval wet courtyard of *l'école de médecine*. Students bent into the November wind. Nine more years of this if she passed. Maybe ten.

"You'll see it's worth it when you find your calling. I hated my first autopsy, threw up," said Serge. "Almost left medicine. But the next involved a homicide victim. The policeman asked the attending examiner questions. How he looked at the body for clues to solve the murder fascinated

me." Serge shrugged. "That's when I learned that the dead talk. I'm learning how to listen."

"But it's the living I'd rather figure out," she said.

Serge took off his glasses, wiped them with the hem of his lab coat. "I've been accepted into Pathology after my rotation."

She smiled, happy for him. "Congrats, Serge."

Serge shrugged. "Take a walk. It will clear your head."

She hung up her lab coat with LEDUC stitched on the lapel. The old-style thirties script reminded her of the Leduc Detective sign hanging over her father's office on rue du Louvre. She kicked off her scuffed clogs and stepped into her worn Texan cowboy boots, put on her leather jacket, and shouldered her bag.

"Aimée, what about your late lunch? We're heating up the *croque-madame*."

"All yours. Knock yourself out."

She waved at Serge. She'd lost her appetite.

NEAR THE STUDY lounge where everyone hung out between lectures, she looked for tall, blond Florent. They'd met at the study group, almost two months now. She wanted to lean on his shoulder. No, face it—she wanted to do a lot more than that. Crawl under the duvet with him, like the other night. The morning after, brioches in bed, skipping study group to lick off the buttery crumbs. Murmurs of a weekend in Brittany at his aristocratic family's country home.

She didn't see Florent among the loitering undergraduates. Time for a pee.

After checking the whole row of bathroom stalls, at last she found one with toilet paper and latched the door.

The hall door opened—voices, footsteps. The squeal of the faucet.

"Why didn't you tell me before? I love clubbing at Queen," said the nasal voice she recognized as Mimi's. Florent's sister was a third year. Tall and big toothed, Mimi reminded her of a horse. Water gushed from the faucet and she heard snickers.

Aimée flushed, pulled up her agent provocateur tights and headed toward the sinks.

"I want to go with you, but Florent's engagement party is this weekend," said Mimi.

Aimée blinked. Florent's engagement party? She and Florent were supposed to be going to Brittany.

"I thought I recognized those cowboy boots," said Mimi, turning toward her. Her voice lowered as if in confidence. "I just felt it was right to tell you that I don't think your weekend plans with my brother are going to happen."

At the soap-splashed mirror Aimée finger-combed her spiky hair and dotted Chanel red on her trembling lips. Her mouth was dry. Mimi's friend, the Queen clubber, eyed Aimée with a predatory gaze.

"Why's that, Mimi?" Aimée said finally.

"He's getting engaged this weekend."

Breathe, she had to keep breathing. "Florent didn't tell me . . ."

"I'm telling you, *compris*? No idea what he was thinking leading you on, but this engagement has been in the works for eons." Mimi laughed. "Florent's inheriting a title. You think my family would let him get serious about . . . ?"

A knife twisted in her gut. Could it be true? He'd never mentioned an engagement.

"Don't take it hard. You'll get over it. Just don't kid yourself."

"And you're his messenger service?"

Mimi sighed as she drew in brows with an eyebrow pencil. "*Désolée*. He didn't want to hurt your feelings."

Was it that Mimi and her crowd hated her and were just being nasty? Or was Florent a gutless wonder who couldn't tell her face-to-face? Maybe both.

"*Non*, I need to see him." She turned and stared at Mimi. "He needs to tell me himself."

"Don't say you weren't warned." Mimi snapped her makeup case shut. Noises echoed in the corridor as she opened the bathroom door and left, followed by her friend. "Seriously, let's go clubbing," she was saying as the door closed behind her.

Out in the corridor Aimée had to pass by Mimi and her group of laughing sycophants, who were blocking her way and shooting her looks. Her face reddened. She wanted the creaking wood floor to open up and swallow her. A loser. She'd die if her friends heard, and they would—Florent was supposed to come to her best friend Martine's birthday party.

Waves of humiliation washed over her. She should have known that Florent, an aristo from the posh Neuilly suburb with *de* in his family name, had been slumming with her. She'd been naïve to trust him, the spoiled bastard. For God's sake, she'd slept with him. His feelings for her had probably been bogus like everything else about him. Except for his prospective title.

Furious and blinking back tears, she ran down the stairs and through the twisting medieval maze of the seventeenth-century building. The hallways were glacially cold, with dust

in the corners. A dead quiet clung to the tall glass anatomy displays of skeletons and bones. She hated the whole damn place.

Coming into the chilly cobbled courtyard, she zipped up her leather jacket, looped her scarf, and pulled on her gloves. Her pager erupted in her pocket. Florent with a kiss-off?

But it was from her father at Leduc Detective.

Strange, he never paged her.

His office was ten minutes away and she could use the walk. She passed the pillars enclosing the garden sculptures of École des Beaux-Arts, continued along the quai Malaquais, its misty banks burnished gold in the light of the streetlamps, and crossed the Pont des Arts, pushing aside the memory of sharing midnight Champagne here with Florent. The Seine swirled below, green, black, and turgid. The *bateaux-mouches* slid, twinkling, into the dusk. She hurried now, pulling her collar up against the chill, through the Louvre's shadowed Cour Carré.

By her father's office, she stepped into the warm corner café, whose windows were clouded with moisture, and nodded at Virginie, the proprietress. The staticky radio news channel blared, mixing with a whooshing of the milk steamer.

The local butcher, a rotund man wearing a white apron smeared with blood, set his *demi-pression de bière* on the counter. "Tell *le vieux* I've got that lamb shank he ordered." His *boucherie* was around the corner, its storefront crowned with the traditional horse busts.

"*Merci*," she said.

Le vieux, her *grand-père*, had founded Leduc Detective

after years at the *Sûreté*. His private detective agency made use of his contacts and connections to specialize in missing persons. "One of the top five agencies," he'd always say. "I'm discreet and get results."

The butcher liked to talk. "He's quite the *gourmand* these days, eh, your *grand-père*?" He drew on his beer. "Semi-retirement? One like him never retires."

He'd got that right, according to her father, who'd taken over Leduc Detective after he left the Paris Police. *Grand-père* had run a one-man show at the detective agency until then. He had officially retired to make room for his son, but kept many fingers in the pie. Too many, Aimée's father often said.

"Tell him I'll save some beef cheeks. I know he likes them."

Sounded like the butcher missed her *grand-père* and his business.

"In the continuing historic news from Berlin," said the announcer's voice coming from the radio behind the chipped melamine counter, "on this cold afternoon, for the first time in twenty-eight years, crowds pass beyond Checkpoint Charlie after the Berlin Wall fell last night . . ." The rest was lost in crowd noises.

"Can you believe it?" said the butcher, rubbing his hands on his apron. "That's the end of Communism and I just paid my Party dues."

THE WIRE BIRDCAGE of an elevator in her father's building on rue du Louvre sported an OUT OF SERVICE sign. When was it ever in service? She picked up the mail from the concierge—bills. The winding stairs were redolent of beeswax polish. She was still trudging

up to her father's office on the third floor when the timed light switched off, plunging the staircase in darkness, and she almost stumbled. Feeling her way up the smooth banister, she managed to reach the landing and hit the light. Leduc Detective's frosted-glass door was open. Odd.

"Papa?"

Stepping inside, she heard his muffled voice. Drawers closing. The old wood-paneled partition blocked her view.

She hung up her leather jacket but kept her scarf on. Her father's nineteenth-century office, with its high ceilings, carved wood *boiseries*, and nonfunctional marble fireplace, enjoyed nineteenth-century heating. She rubbed the goosebumps on her arms, then gave the radiator a good kick. Sputter, sputter . . . *et voilà.*

On the wall were old underground sewer maps that had fascinated her as a child. Still did. She set the bills below the old sepia photo of her grandfather during his *Sûreté* days, waxed mustache and all. Next to it on the wall was Leduc Detective's original business license.

"I kept my distance, as requested, Jean-Claude," a woman was saying. "I asked for nothing. But we're still family, and now I need your help."

Family?

Curious, Aimée peered around the screen. She saw a woman sitting across from her father at his mahogany desk. She was in her mid-forties, with broad cheekbones and short, brown hair. A mink-collared coat rested in her lap. Wide-set eyes blinking with unease, she reminded Aimée of a deer. A frightened deer.

Who was this woman?

Her father looked up at Aimée, his reading glasses riding

down his nose, his dark brown hair curling over his suit jacket collar. His expression was both irritated and quizzical.

"You paged me, Papa. Something come up?"

Her father sighed. "My daughter, Aimée, Mademoiselle Peltier."

"No need for the formality, Jean-Claude." The woman reached out to shake Aimée's hand. "I'm Elise, your father's second cousin. We met but you were small."

"We did?" Who knew she had this distant relative?

"You were a toddler." Elise gave a small smile.

Aimée's heart dropped. "Then you must have known my mother." Her American mother, who had disappeared when Aimée was only eight years old, leaving Jean-Claude to raise their daughter alone.

"That's not why Mademoiselle Peltier's here, Aimée," said her father. His mouth was tight with anger. "Elise, I'm packing," he said. "My train's in an hour. I know someone very good who can help you."

"*Mais* you're family," Elise said, insistent. "You're a former policeman. Without your help I'll never discover the truth."

Aimée shot her father a what-in-the-world look. He averted his gaze. Was he hiding something? She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her father so uncomfortable.

Elise turned back to her. "As I was telling your father, my papa was murdered. He was found tied and bound, a bullet in the back of his head, under Pont des Invalides." Elise twisted her Hermès scarf between her fingers.

Aimée tried not to betray her shock. She'd followed the story in *Le Parisien*, every lurid detail. She knew the spot, the dock for the *bateaux-mouches*—a busy place. "Wasn't that a few weeks ago? Did the case get solved?"

Elise's lip quivered. "It's been a month and the police have discovered nothing. My mother's gone into a shell, won't speak or eat."

Aimée tried to catch her father's eye.

"Again, I'm sorry, but my field's missing persons, Elise." Her father slid files in his briefcase.

How could he act so cold—so businesslike—with his cousin?

"Papa still had money in his wallet, his keys."

"That's right, the article said nothing was missing," said Aimée. She remembered reading that a fisherman had found the body early the morning after. "He wasn't a robbery victim."

Elise nodded. "Why? That's what I want to know. Who'd do this?" Her voice cracked. "The police say they have explored all avenues. Even after I showed them this. I found it in Papa's coat pocket."

Curious, Aimée glanced over as Elise set an open matchbook on the desk. In it was written *SUZY* and a phone number.

"Can you find her, Jean-Claude?"

"Why do you want to find her?" her father asked. Aimée recognized that question he used to divert spouses from pursuing *un amour* best left alone.

"Who is Suzy?" said Aimée.

Elise rubbed her eyes. "You remember Papa, *non*, Jean-Claude? He's not the type to have a mistress, but now I've got my doubts. What if he got mixed up in shady business at a club, you know?"

Aimée picked up the matchbook. Le Gogo was emblazoned in gold on the cover.

"Le Gogo's off the Champs-Élysées on rue de Ponthieu, *non*?" said Aimée.

Elise nodded. "You know it?"

Aimée shrugged. "Know of it, *oui*."

A quartier of *boîtes de nuit*, discos and clubs like Queen, Rasputin, and Régine's for *la jet-set*, at least until a few years ago. Places Florent's sister, Mimi, clubbed at.

"Jean-Claude, I'll hire you to investigate. Do this for me, please? Find this Suzy and see if she had anything to do with his murder."

"Haven't you called this number yourself?"

Of course she had, Aimée thought, catching her father's eye.

"A man answered and I hung up." Elise looked beseechingly at Aimée's father. "The police have gotten nowhere. But one of the inspectors, a Morbier, told me you would help. Then I realized he was referring me to you, Jean-Claude. My own family."

Morbier was her father's first colleague on the beat, and Aimée's godfather. He must have felt sorry for Elise. What she didn't understand was why her father appeared so reluctant to help.

She opened her mouth to speak but caught her father's *be quiet* look and the slight shake of his head.

"Elise, pursuing this could lead to discovering something that might hurt your mother," said her father. "An indiscretion you wish you didn't know about."

Elise's eyes welled. "That's what the police say, what everyone says. But it's not right." She erupted into sobs. "Papa wasn't like that. Maybe everyone says that, but he really wasn't the type to go to these clubs."

But she was ignoring the evidence in her hand, Aimée thought. The man must have led a secret life.

"He was murdered in cold blood. Shot on the quai." Her

lip quivered. "But no one cares, they're indifferent, no one wants to help—not even you. It's like it never happened."

"The police have their procedures, Elise. They're not indifferent; they follow clues. Check evidence. This murder may have been random, the most difficult kind to solve. Morbier must have told you that." Jean-Claude passed her a box of tissues. "I'm sorry. Truly sorry."

"The *certificat de décès* came today." She blew her nose. "I don't know what's worse: seeing it in black and white and not being able to do anything, or seeing my mother wasting away to nothing."

Elise set the report on the pile on Aimée's father's desk.

The radiator sputtered.

"Jean-Claude, I've written down everything I can remember. Plus there's a copy of the police statement. Please. It's all here."

Her father nodded. Scanned the statement.

"I'll do it the minute I get back," he said. "But only to find clues to turn over to the police, you understand?"

In answer Elise pulled out her checkbook.

"Will that do for a retainer?"

Five thousand francs. Aimée's eyes bulged.

Elise blew her nose, wiped her eyes, a mascaraed mess.

"Elise, there's a WC down the hall," said Aimée, shooting her father a look.

Her father slapped a report into his briefcase, buckled it closed. "Aimée, I know you go back to the lab on Friday nights," he said. "But Sylvie's still out with *la grippe*."

He gestured to his secretary's desk. Reports piled high around a wilting dahlia plant. Poor Sylvie, sick like *tout le monde*.

"Hate to ask, but could you put in an hour and organize things? Handle calls from the answering machine while I'm gone?"

This was the last thing she wanted to do. She had so much on her mind—she had her place in the premed program to save.

"That's why you paged me?"

Again he nodded. "Two clients haven't settled their accounts," he said with a sigh. "It's tight this month. That's why I'll take her case."

The curse of the business. As a private contractor, he was always the last to get paid. But how could she refuse to help?

"*Bien sûr.*" She tapped her boot heel, surveying his secretary's cluttered desk. But now there was something she needed to ask *him.* She swallowed hard. "Papa, Elise remembered me from when I was little. Did she know *Maman?*"

For a moment, pain shone in his eyes. "It's been fifteen years. Elise and I were never close."

And where her mother was concerned he ignored the question. As usual.

But she wouldn't let him off this time. "What about my mother?"

"We don't talk about the past, Aimée."

She steeled her nerves, aware this was painful for him, too. "It's time we do. I want to know if my mother's alive. I want to know about my relatives."

"Not now, Aimée. Leave it alone. Trust me on this."

"She's still family, Papa. A blood relation."

He glanced at his watch.

"Something come up all of a sudden?" she asked.

"You could say that. If I don't leave I'll miss my train."

"Train to where?"

He had packed an overnight bag, she saw.

"*Alors*, Gerhard called from Berlin."

Now Aimée remembered his contact there and the news bulletin on the radio. "Berlin? But the Wall's just come down. Why now? You think it's safe?"

"Safer than ever. I need to get hold of those Berlin files in person . . ."

Hadn't she transcribed his investigative notes on a German couple last week? "You mean the missing husband?"

"*Exactement.* Before the Stasi destroy all the records." He rubbed his forehead.

Elise would be back from the bathroom any moment. Aimée didn't want to let the woman get away without hearing what she had to say about Aimée's mother. On impulse she said, "Let me follow up on this Suzy. I read all about the case, Papa."

"Aren't you a first-year med student with exams coming up?"

Aimée pointed to the mink-collared coat draped over the back of the chair. "Didn't you say it's tight this month?"

His mouth pursed. "Not a good idea, Aimée."

Now he thought it wasn't a good idea for her to help—now that it was something interesting. He'd been happy to ask her to organize his files and answer his phone messages. "A piece of cake, Papa. Not even an evening's work. You always tell me to follow my instinct. I can do this in my sleep."

She'd been raised by two police detectives, her father and her grandfather. She'd spent her childhood dozing in the backseat of the car while her papa was running surveillance, and her teen years keeping the pot warm on the stove for him when he was out on all-night stakeouts.

"Remember last year when I helped you track down that *fille* at the disco because you were too old to go in?"

An aristo's underage daughter who'd run off with a Corsican gangster.

"This is different, Aimée."

"How? You're just saying that. Look, it's a simple job of asking around at this club and giving Elise some closure, *c'est tout*." As she said it out loud, she wondered why the police hadn't just done the same thing—it sounded straightforward enough. "Did Morbier refer her because his hands are tied?"

"Something like that." He'd bent down to pick up his case and she couldn't see his expression. "Don't you have a lab write-up to do, Aimée?"

Changing the subject, as usual. "Not exactly," she said.

She felt like a six-year-old again—getting in trouble on the playground. How could she tell her father when he was running to catch a train? Face his disappointment?

Her papa cupped her chin in his warm hands. "What's up, *ma princesse*?"

Why did she always forget how well her father knew her? "My lab experiment was sabotaged, Papa. It's so cutthroat. I might get suspended even though I've done the work."

Her father snorted. "That's going to stop you? Nothing worth doing comes easy." He winked. "You'd let them intimidate you? Where's my fighter?"

That's all he could say? On top of it, her boyfriend was getting engaged. Her life had fallen apart.

"Don't disappoint me, Aimée," he said, his tone turned serious. "I want better things for you. To be a doctor—have a respected profession, meaningful work—that's so important."

Translation: It was important for him. He didn't want her to follow in his footsteps, and especially not those of her mother—an American free spirit who couldn't cope with being tied down to her family and who'd broken his heart. But Aimée's memories of her mother were warm and fuzzy—*chocolat chaud* and madeleines and stories at bedtime.

"How are we related to Elise and her family? Why didn't I know they existed?"

"We'll talk when I get back."

She let out a groan. "You mean I have to ask *Grand-père*, is that it?"

Her father shrugged.

Not again. "You're still not speaking to him?"

Her father reached for his wool scarf. "He's not speaking to me. But he's the one to ask about that side of the family."

Fine. She would. "Well, we can solve Elise's mystery for her and put the check in the bank. We both know her father had an affair—cut and dried. I'll check out this Suzy this weekend and then write up a report."

Simple. Then back to the grind of the textbooks.

"For once listen to me. You've got an exam coming up," said her father. "That's the priority. Concentrate on studying, that's your job."

"Papa . . ."

"Not now, Aimée." His expression was full of sadness, misgiving, and urgency, all at once. "There are some things you should know. We'll talk when I get back."

She hadn't seen that look on his face since that day when she was eight years old and she'd come home after school to find a note on the door in her mother's handwriting: *Stay with the neighbor.* It was the last she'd ever heard of her mother.

"What's wrong, Papa?"

He was about to speak, but the door's buzzer sounded and he glanced at his brown leather watch. "That's the taxi."

He gave Aimée a hug, enveloping her in the scent of his wool overcoat and pine cologne. Kissed her cheeks, leaving a warm imprint.

"I'll call you from Berlin."

She wished she'd had enough time to drag it out of him, whatever it was.

Halfway down the winding stairs, he called up. "Don't forget what I said. Hands off. And reserve the van for the Place Vendôme surveillance."

ELISE RETURNED FROM the bathroom, mascara and eyeliner carefully reapplied around her doe eyes.

"My father's left for Berlin," Aimée said. "He's sorry, he meant to say goodbye." She rushed on, "Elise, did you know my mother?"

Elise's eyes widened. "Yes, *l'Américaine*."

Aimée's pulse thumped.

"So you do remember her?"

"Yes, I think we have some photos."

Photos? Aimée didn't even have one—her father had burned them all. "I'd love to see them. Learn about my family."

The radiator sputtered.

"Of course. They're somewhere. I'll need to find them. Right now, I can't leave my mother. I'm afraid she'll hurt herself. She's talked of suicide, she hides her pills." Elise's mouth quivered. "My father's murder's taken over our life."

If Aimée found Suzy, distraught Elise would want to pay

her back by finding those photos. Give and take, do a favor and get one in return—didn't it work that way?

"I'll find Suzy, Elise."

Elise took her coat, then Aimée's hand. Her wide-set, red-rimmed eyes welled again. "*Merci* for your offer. So sweet. Your father's honorable and I'm sure that's true of you, too. But I need *his* help."

Aimée's heart fell. She smiled through the sting of her disappointment. "We're family, Elise. In case you need anything, here's my card."

She kicked the radiator until it sputtered to life. Then again for good measure.

She looked at Sylvie's desk—she should get started on that. It would take her mind off her looming academic suspension.

Her hand hovered over the phone as she debated whether to call Florent and ask him about this weekend. Maybe she'd misunderstood.

Fat chance.

No doubt his horse-faced sister had enjoyed following her into the bathroom and dropping the bad news—putting Aimée in her place. Meanwhile, Florent was taking the coward's way out.

Forget calling Florent. She'd make him deal with her face to face at next Tuesday's lab class. In the meantime, screw him.

In two hours she'd finished logging and sorting the inbox, followed up on the outbox, filed dossiers, and typed her father's notes. If only her father had let her computerize their system, she could have accomplished it all in under half an hour.

She wished she had time to go back to that computer course she'd taken over the summer.

Her eye caught on Elise's folder, the generous check. Could she tie that up tonight?

Didn't her father always say you can't make a goal unless you kick the ball?

She rooted around in the file cabinet until she found her father's notes from a similar case to Elise's—a widow who had been investigating her late husband's illicit affair. Aimée studied them. Simple.

She'd make a list of key points from Elise Peltier's notes—that was always the way her father built an investigation. Then add details from the police report to create a brief profile.

Bruno Peltier, aged sixty-seven, of 34 rue Lavoisier, retired, discovered in the early hours of October 10 on the quai under the Pont des Invalides. Gunshot wound to the back of his head. He'd last been seen leaving his residence on foot at 8 P.M. for a dinner with old friends at Laurent, a posh restaurant off the Champs-Élysées in the old Louis XIV hunting lodge.

When he hadn't returned home by 3 A.M., his wife called one of the friends he'd been dining with. The friend's name was not in the police report or in Elise's notes. Bruno Peltier had never shown up at the restaurant, the friend said to his wife: they'd figured he had the flu. The police were called to the quai after a fisherman found him at dawn with his wallet and ID.

Not much.

She called Suzy.

The number rang and rang.

"Oui?" said a man, breathing heavily as if he'd come up the stairs.

"Have I missed Suzy?"

"Who?"

Now what could she say? Think, she had to think. Come up with something plausible.

"*Excusez-moi*, monsieur, but Suzy gave me this number."

"*Et alors?*"

"I borrowed money from her on rue de Ponthieu a few weeks ago," said Aimée. "I want to return it."

"Ah, you mean . . ." Pause. "I see."

See what? "Is this a public phone?"

"What's that to you?"

Helpful, this man. "So where can I reach her?"

"Comes and goes. I don't monitor the tenants."

So Suzy rented. This was probably a public phone in the hallway. "What's her last name?"

"Don't you know it?"

She reached in the secretary's desk drawer for the petty cash box. She checked the amount—enough for a bribe? Her father would shoot her. She had no idea what he needed to pay his informers. Then again, she could replace the petty cash and then some with Elise's check.

She pulled a petty cash receipt off the pad and started filling it out. Eight hundred francs, more than a nice evening out with wine, should do the trick.

"Look, I'll just drop the money off, leave it with you. Give me the address . . ."

Money. According to her father, it worked most of the time. And saved a lot of standing around in the cold for hours. At least she hoped it would.

This could be fun, she thought, checking her mini surveillance tools, which she had fit into her makeup kit: lock-picking set (just in case), tweezers (always handy for

a stray eyebrow or a sliver-sized piece of evidence), waxed thread (useful for stitching a hem or tying slingshots), nail polish (to stop a run or to mark territory), and, for key impressions, putty she hid in her blush compact. From her father's collection, she chose the palm-sized light-weight camera and extra film.

Gauze-like evening clouds zigzagged over the Louvre as she ran to the Métro. Shouldering her secondhand Vuitton carryall—a summer score from the flea market—she hopped on the second-class car, pulled out her anatomy textbook and highlighter, and tried to read. Five stops later she noticed the woman next to her, a sophisticate in a black YSL trench and pearls, had fallen asleep. Aimée nearly had, too.

A short walk under the bare-branched trees on the brightly lit Champs-Élysées, then a right past the tiny art cinema, Le Balzac, one of her premed Friday night haunts; down narrow, winding rue Lord Byron, named for the poet who, according to her *grand-père*, had never set foot here. Off rue Washington, she found Suzy's address by walking through a tall carriage entrance that led to Cité Odiot, a grassy enclave bordered by towering plane trees. An island of calm. She breathed in the damp leaves, heard twittering birds in the hedge. Such an oasis, three blocks from the jammed, busy, yet seductive Champs-Élysées and the death-trap roundabout of the Arc de Triomphe.

This quiet, dimly lit green enclave, surrounded on both sides by rose and cream buildings, extended half a block. Exclusive and hidden. At odds, she thought, with the peeling stucco of the leprous gatekeeper's loge.

A quick scan of the names on the row of mailboxes and she spotted a label that read S. KIMMERLAIN/R. VEZY.

Could that be Suzy? She reached in with pincered fingertips and came back with a France Telecom ad flyer addressed to Suzy Kimmerlain, #402. She pulled out the camera from her leather jacket pocket and snapped. *Always document everything*—her father's dictum ran through her head.

She felt like a secret agent in those old spy movies.

The gatekeeper poked his head out of the loge. She didn't need his help now. To avoid him she slipped behind a column and then ducked into the stairwell. The climb to the fourth floor—narrow winding stairs, like in a medieval tower—would give anyone a workout.

Neither door on the landing held a nameplate. No one answered at the first. At the second, a woman with her head wrapped in a towel cracked the door. A green gel mask covered her face.

"*Oui?*"

"Suzy?"

"If you're selling something, I don't want any."

"Please, Suzy . . ."

"She's gone to work," the woman interrupted.

Great.

"But I owe her money," said Aimée, sticking with her earlier improvisation. "She told me to bring it here."

"*Vraiment?*" A shrug of the pink bathrobe-clad shoulders. "Leave it with me."

Did she look stupid? Aimée shook her head. "In person, she said."

The kettle whistled. Over the woman's shoulder Aimée could see a narrow *chambre de bonne*. A bare-bones accommodation, a former maid's room, in a *quartier luxe*, only a few blocks from where the wealthy Monsieur Bruno Peltier had lived.

"Wait a minute. You're the one she talked about, *non?* You used to work together?"

Aimée nodded. "That's right."

"Then go find her at work." The woman started to close the door.

Merde. "But I went and she's not there," she lied.

The woman expelled a rush of air as if Aimée were slow. "Try the Alibaba."

The door shut in her face.

IF PAPA HAD said it once, he'd said it a thousand times: "Ninety percent of surveillance consists of tedious plodding and persistence." Find a name, a location, and follow up. Keep following up until you find a thread, a path leading somewhere. As he once said after a long night's surveillance, "Investigating is just not going away."

He tried to make his work sound boring, but she carried boredom in her rucksack in a biology book.

So far she'd found Suzy's full name, her address, and gotten the name of her current employer, all in exactly forty minutes. Now she needed to record it all, write it into a report and log billable hours.

Totally manageable.

ALL THINGS CEASE TO APPEAR

A NOVEL

ELIZABETH BRUNDAGE

All Things Cease to Appear

The Hale Farm

THIS IS the Hale farm.

Here is the old milking barn, the dark opening that says, *Find me.*

This is the weathervane, the woodpile.

Here is the house, noisy with stories.

It is early. The hawk winds down through the open sky. A thin blue feather turns through the air. The air is cold, bright. The house is silent, the kitchen, the blue velvet couch, the small white teacup.

Always the farm sings for us, its lost families, its soldiers and wives. During the war, when they came with their bayonets, forcing their way in, their muddy boots on the stairs. Patriots. Gangsters. Husbands. Fathers. They slept in the cold beds. They raided the cellar for jars of canned peaches and sugar beets. They made great fires in the field, the flames twisting, snapping up to the heavens. Fires that laughed. Their warm faces glowing and their hands warm in their pockets. They roasted pig and pulled the sweet pink meat from the bone. After, they sucked the fat from their fingers, the taste familiar, strange.

Then there were others—there have been many—who have taken, who have stripped and pillaged. Even the copper pipes, the delft tiles. Whatever they could, they took. Leaving just the walls, the bare floors. The beating heart in the cellar.

We wait. We are patient. We wait for news. We wait to be told. The wind is trying to tell us. The trees shift. It is the end of something; we can sense it. Soon we will know.

Part 1

February 23, 1979

AGAIN, it was snowing. Half past five in the afternoon. Almost dark. She had just laid out their plates when the dogs started barking.

Her husband set down his fork and knife, none too pleased to have his supper interrupted. What's that now?

June Pratt pulled aside the curtain and saw their neighbor. He was standing there in the snow, holding the child, her feet bare, neither of them in coats. From the looks of it, the little girl was in her pajamas. It's George Clare, she said.

What's he selling?

I wonder. I don't see a car. They must've come on foot.

Awful cold out. You better see what he wants.

She let them in with the cold. He stood before her, holding the child out like an offering.

It's my wife. She's—

Momma hurt, the child cried.

June didn't have children of her own, but she had raised dogs her whole life and saw the same dark knowing in the child's eyes that confirmed what all animals understood, that the world was full of evil and beyond comprehension.

You'd better call the police, she told her husband. Something's happened to his wife.

Joe pulled off his napkin and went to the phone.

Let's go find you some socks, she said, and took the child from her

father and carried her down the hall to the bedroom where she set her on the bed. Earlier that afternoon, she had laid her freshly laundered socks over the radiator, and she took a pair now and pushed the warm wool over the child's feet, thinking that if the child were hers she'd love her better.

They were the Clares. They had bought the Hale place that summer, and now winter had come and there were just the two houses on the road and she hadn't seen them much. Sometimes in the morning she would. Either when he raced past in his little car to the college. Or when the wife took the child out of doors. Sometimes, at night, when June walked the dogs, you could see inside their house. She could see them having supper, the little girl between them at the table, the woman getting up and sitting down and getting up again.

With the snow, it took over a half-hour for the sheriff to arrive. June was vaguely aware, as women often are of men who desire them, that Travis Lawton, who had been her classmate in high school, found her attractive. That was of no consequence now, but you don't easily forget the people you grew up with, and she made a point of listening carefully to him, and acknowledged his kindness to George, even though there was the possibility, in her own mind at least, that the bad thing that had happened to his wife might have been his own doing.

HE WAS THINKING of Emerson, *the terrible aristocracy that is in Nature.* Because there were things in this world you couldn't control. And because even now he was thinking of her. Even now, with his wife lying dead in that house.

He could hear Joe Pratt on the phone.

George waited on the green couch, shaking a little. Their house smelled like dogs and he could hear them barking out back in their pens. He wondered how they could stand it. He stared at the wide boards, a funk of mildew coming up from the cellar. He could feel it in the back of his throat. He coughed.

They're on their way, Pratt said from the kitchen.

George nodded.

Down the hall, June Pratt was talking to his daughter with the sweet tone people use on children and he was grateful for it, so much so that his

eyes teared a little. She was known for taking in strays. He'd see her walking the road with the motley pack at her side, a middle-aged woman in a red kerchief, frowning at the ground.

After a while, he couldn't say how long, a car pulled up.

Here they are now, Pratt said.

It was Travis Lawton who came in. George, he said, but didn't shake his hand.

Hello, Travis.

Chosen was a small town and they were acquaintances of a sort. He knew Lawton had gone to RPI and had come back out here to be sheriff, and it always struck George that for an educated man he was pretty shallow. But then George wasn't the best judge of character and, as he was continually reminded by a coterie of concerned individuals, his opinion didn't amount to much. George and his wife were newcomers. The locals took at least a hundred years to accept the fact that somebody else was living in a house that had, for generations, belonged to a single family whose sob stories were now part of the local mythology. He didn't know these people and they certainly didn't know him, but in those few minutes, as he stood there in the Pratts' living room in his wrinkled khakis and crooked tie, with a distant, watery look in his eyes that could easily be construed as madness, all their suspicions were confirmed.

Let's go take a look, Lawton said.

They left Franny with the Pratts and went up the road, him and Lawton and Lawton's undersheriff, Wiley Burke. It was dark now. They walked with grave purpose, a brutal chill under their feet.

The house sat there grinning.

They stood a minute looking up at it and then went in through the screened porch, a clutter of snowshoes and tennis rackets and wayward leaves, to the kitchen door. He showed Lawton the broken glass. They climbed the stairs in their dirty boots. The door to their bedroom was shut; he couldn't remember shutting it. He guessed that he had.

I can't go in there, he told the sheriff.

All right. Lawton touched his shoulder in a fatherly way. You stay right here.

Lawton and his partner pushed through the door. Faintly, he heard sirens. Their shrill cries made him weak.

He waited in the hall, trying not to move. Then Lawton came out, bracing himself against the doorjamb. He looked at George warily. That your ax?

George nodded. From the barn.

In Lawton's unmarked car they drove into town on dark, slippery roads, the chains on the tires grinding through the snow. He sat with his daughter behind the mesh divider. It was a satellite office across from the old railroad depot, set up in a building that might have once been a school. The walls were a soiled yellow, framed out in mahogany trim, and the old iron radiators hissed with heat. A woman from the department brought Franny over to the snack machine and gave her some quarters from a plastic bag and lifted her up to put them in the slot, then put her down again. Now watch, the woman said. She pulled the lever and a package of cookies tumbled out. Go ahead, those are for you.

Franny looked up at George for approval. It's okay, honey. You can have the cookies.

The woman held open the plastic flap at the bottom of the machine. Go on and reach in there, it don't bite. Franny reached into the darkness of the machine to retrieve the cookies and smiled, proud of herself.

Lawton crouched down in front of her. Here, let me help you, sweetheart. He took the package and opened it and handed it back to her, and they all watched her fish out a cookie and eat it. Lawton said, I bet those are good.

Franny chewed.

I bet you're hungry, too.

She put another cookie in her mouth.

Did you get any breakfast this morning? I had a bowl of cornflakes. What'd you have?

Crackers.

Is that so?

With jelly.

What your momma have for breakfast, Franny?

She looked at Lawton with surprise. Momma sick.

What's wrong with your momma?

Momma *sick*.

It's hard when your momma's sick, isn't it?

She turned the cellophane package over, and a dusting of brown crumbs spilled out through her fingers.

Did anybody come to the house today?

Franny ignored him and crinkled the wrapper, occupied by the sound it made between her fingers.

Franny? The sheriff is talking to you.

She looked up at George.

Did Cole come?

She nodded.

Lawton said, Cole Hale?

He sits for us sometimes, George said.

Was it Cole? Are you sure?

Franny's lower lip began to tremble and tears ran down her cheeks.

She just told you it was, George said. He picked her up, annoyed, and held her tightly. I think that's enough questions for now.

Do you want to try this again, Franny? The woman held up the bag of quarters.

Franny blinked her wet eyes and wriggled out of his arms. I want to do it.

We'll be fine. I've got a whole lot of change here. And we've got a TV in there.

They let him call his parents. He used a pay phone in the hall and called collect. His mother made him repeat the news. He stood there under the green lights with the words marching out.

They're driving up, he told Lawton.

All right. We can go in here.

Lawton ushered him into a small room with tall black windows; he could see his reflection in the glass and noted his hunched posture, his wrinkled clothes. The room smelled of dirt and cigarettes and something else, maybe misery.

Take a seat, George, I'll be right back.

He sat down at the table. With the door shut he felt cut off from everything, waiting there with his own reflection. He could hear the train clattering through town, slow and loud. He looked at the clock; it was just after seven.

The door opened, and Lawton backed into the room with two cups of

coffee, a file pinched under his arm. Thought you could use some of this. He set the coffee down and tossed out some sugar packets. You take milk?

George shook his head. This is fine. Thanks.

The sheriff sat down, opened the file and took a sip of the hot coffee, holding the rim of the cup carefully between his fingers. He pulled a pair of bifocals out of his shirt pocket and wiped the lenses with a napkin, then held them up to the light and wiped them again and slipped them on. I want you to know how sorry I am about Catherine.

George only nodded.

The phone rang, and Lawton took the call and made some notes on his pad. George put his mind to just sitting there in the chair, resting one hand over the other in his lap. In a vague sort of reverie he thought of Rembrandt. Again, he looked at his reflection in the window and decided that, for someone in his situation, he didn't look too bad. He pushed the hair off his forehead and sat back in the chair and glanced around the small room. The walls were gray, the color of gruel. At one time he had prided himself on his instinct for color. One summer, back in college, he'd interned at the Clark with Walt Jennings, a color specialist. He'd rented a house on the Knolls and had fallen in love with a girl who lived in the old Victorian across the street, although they'd never once spoken. All that summer she was reading *Ulysses,* and he remembered now how she'd come out on her terrace in her bikini and lie on the chaise. She'd read for five minutes, then lay the fat book on her stomach and lift her face to the sun.

Lawton hung up. We don't get many robberies out there. Usually just bored teenagers looking for booze. You have any enemies, George?

None that I know of.

What about your wife?

No. Everyone loved my wife.

Somebody didn't.

He thought of the girl, her sad, dark eyes. I don't know anyone who would do this.

Lawton looked at him but said nothing, and a long minute passed.

I need to go soon. Franny needs her supper.

There's lots of stuff in that machine.

George picked up the paper cup and could feel the heat in his fingers. The coffee was bitter and still hot enough to burn his tongue. Lawton took out a pack of Chesterfields. You want one of these?

Quit.

So did I. He lit a cigarette with a brass lighter, dragged on it deeply and blew out the smoke. You still over at the college?

George nodded.

What time you get home this afternoon?

Around five, a few minutes before.

Lawton made another note. So you pull up to your house, and then what?

George described how he'd parked in the garage and gone into the house. I knew something was wrong when I saw the glass. Then I went upstairs and found her. She was—he coughed. Just lying there in her nightgown. With that—he stopped. He couldn't say it.

Lawton dropped the cigarette in his coffee cup and tossed it into the wastebasket. Let's go back a minute. Walk me through the kitchen to the stairs—did you notice anything? Anything unusual?

Her pocketbook was sort of dumped out, her wallet. I don't know what was in it. There were coins everywhere. They might've gotten some of it.

How much cash would she keep in her wallet?

It's hard to say. Grocery money, not much more.

Not enough, likely. That's what my wife tells me. But you know how women are. They never know what they have. He gazed at George over his bifocals.

Like I said, it was probably just grocery money.

All right. Then what?

I went upstairs. It was cold. There was a window open.

Did you shut it?

What?

The window.

No. No, I didn't want to—

Touch anything? The sheriff looked at him.

Right, George said.

Then what?

Then I found her and she—

A sound erupted from his belly, a kind of guttural hiccup, and he let the words gush out like puke. She had that . . . thing in her head . . . and there was all . . . the blood.

He grabbed the wastebasket and retched into it while Lawton sat there

and watched. Deputy Burke came in and took it away. It was one of those gray metal things they used in grammar schools.

You all right, George?

He was nothing close to all right. Burke came back into the room with another wastebasket and set it down. He stood there a minute looking at him, then went out again and shut the door.

What time did you leave the house this morning?

The question seemed impossible to answer. Six-thirty, he managed. He'd had an eight o'clock class. He could remember the sky, the thick clouds. The drive to work. The usual traffic. People in their cars behind fogged windows. My wife, he said. They were sleeping.

What time she usually get up?

I don't know. I guess around seven.

Your wife work?

He shook his head. Not up here. She'd worked in the city.

What as?

She was a painter—she did murals, restoration.

Lawton made another note. What you all do last night?

Nothing, he said.

Nothing?

We had dinner and went to bed.

Any alcohol with dinner?

A little wine.

What time you go to bed?

George tried to think. I guess around eleven.

Let me ask you this. Your wife—she a heavy sleeper?

No. Not especially.

How 'bout your daughter? She sleep pretty good?

George shrugged. I guess.

Lawton shook his head and smiled. We had a heck of a time with ours. I don't think even one of 'em slept through. Not the whole night. Then they're up again at the crack of dawn. Lawton looked at him evenly, and a whole minute seemed to pass before he went on. Small kids can be rough on a marriage, he said. I don't think people give themselves enough credit. But I think it's harder on the women, don't you?

George looked at him and waited.

Women got such a keen *sense,* don't they? The tiniest little whimper and they're *up.*

His brain was beginning to hurt. The overhead lights, buzzing tubes of fluorescence. He tried to look the sheriff in the eye.

See, that's the thing I can't get my head around here, George. You go to work, right? Your wife's sleeping, your daughter's sleeping. The house is quiet. And sometime after that—that's what you said, right?—when they're still asleep, this incident occurs. You agree with that?

I don't know what else to think.

Let's assume this happened sometime after you left the house, after six-thirty and before your wife and daughter woke up—say, between seven and eight. Would that be fair? We do need to narrow this down.

All right.

So let's say it's around quarter to seven. This individual's outside someplace, maybe he even sees you drive off. He finds the ax in your barn, right? He walks a hundred or so feet to the house and breaks in through the kitchen door. We don't know why. Maybe a robbery, that's possible, we don't understand the motive yet, but that's the setup, am I right?

George thought it through. He nodded.

By now it's around seven. You're still in your car, driving to work. You get to campus, park your car, go up to the office. Meanwhile, back at home, somebody's murdering your wife? Lawton waited a minute. Do you accept that scenario, George?

What choice do I have?

That's what you said, isn't it? It's what you told us.

George just looked at him.

Somebody broke that window. Somebody came up those stairs. Somebody came into your room. And your wife didn't wake up?

So?

That doesn't strike you as odd—a young mother like her?

She was sleeping, George said. The pain in his head sharpened. He feared it might make him blind.

Somebody brought an ax into your home, Lawton said, slowly rising from his chair. They carried it up the stairs. They entered your room. They stood over the bed, looking down at your dreaming wife. They raised the ax like this—he raised his arms over his head—then brought

it down, and *bam!* He slammed his hand down on the table. One blow. That's all it took.

George began to weep. Can't you see? I'm sick over this. Can't you see?

Just when he thought he'd secured Lawton's sympathy, the sheriff walked out.

It occurred to him that he needed a lawyer.

WHAT THE SHERIFF PROMISED would be a brief interview had turned into five hours. Lawton and Burke took turns asking him the same questions over and over again, hoping George would break down and confess to murdering his wife.

We'd like to interview your daughter, Burke said.

We've got people who know how to talk to kids in these sorts of situations, his partner added gently.

And get the answers they want, George thought. I don't think so, he said.

Burke scoffed. She was in the house. She might've seen something. I'd think you'd want to know.

George didn't like the look on his face. It's not happening, he said. I won't allow it.

The cops exchanged a look. Burke shook his head and got up and walked out. A moment later, the phone rang.

Yell-o, Lawton said a bit too happily. He listened and replaced the receiver. Your parents are here. Apparently, your daughter's tired. He looked at George carefully. She wants to go home.

Yeah, George said. Me, too. And he meant those words with all his heart. But neither of them had a home now. That was over.

Your folks got you all a room at the Garden Inn.

He nodded with relief. He couldn't imagine going back to that house tonight—or ever.

Lawton walked him out. In the anteroom, his parents were waiting on plastic chairs. At first glance, he hardly recognized them. They looked old. Franny was squatting on the floor, playing with a rubber stamp that declared *Official Business* across a piece of scrap paper.

She's getting ink all over her hands, his mother said, displeased, her

French accent more pronounced than usual. Frances, come up from that dirty floor.

She pulled Franny onto her lap. It was only then, with the child between them, that she looked at him directly.

Mother, he said, and bent to kiss her. Her face was cold. His father stood up, grim, and shook his hand. They looked at him; they would not look.

Daddy, Franny cried, reaching out, her little fingers straining, and he suddenly remembered who he was. He pulled her up into his arms, grateful for her affection, and when she clung to him it somehow gave him the strength to say good night to Lawton, to be a gentleman.

We'd like to see you here first thing in the morning, he said.

What for?

We need to finish this.

I don't have much else to say, Travis.

You could think of something else. We'll expect you at eight-thirty. If you want, I'll send a patrol car around to pick you up.

That's all right. I'll be here.

They crossed the parking lot in silence and got into his father's brown Mercedes, an older model that smelled of cigars. His mother had brought a bag for Franny, clementines and Lulu biscuits and a couple bottles of milk. Catherine had gotten her onto a cup, but she still took a bottle at night. Thinking about it now made his eyes water. He didn't think he had the courage to raise her alone.

As they drove to the hotel, Franny fell asleep. No one spoke. He put her on his shoulder when they walked into the silent lobby and rode up in the elevator. His mother had arranged for two rooms. Why don't you let Franny stay with us? she said. We'll be right next door. I'm sure you need the rest.

No, he said. She'll be with me.

His voice was cold, he knew, but he couldn't help it. Their faces bleached and cautious. Wanting to know. Wanting a reason this had happened *in their family*. The potential embarrassment. They wanted the facts. Intimate details that were nobody's business. They couldn't help being suspicious—he guessed it was only natural. Maybe he should even forgive them.

No. He hated them for it.

Suddenly his parents looked like strangers, refugees who'd been thrown together with him until whatever end awaited them all. They turned into their room and closed the door. Through the wall he could hear their muted conversation, though he couldn't imagine what they were saying to each other. When he was a boy, his bedroom had been next to theirs, and they often talked late into the night. George would fall asleep trying to decipher the conversation. His father would sit on the bench at the end of the bed, pulling off his shoes and socks, while his mother sat up in her nightgown, her face greasy with wrinkle cream, the newspaper open on her lap. As parents they'd been strict, rigorous. His father, the disciplinarian, occasionally used his belt. George could remember the shame of it.

The room was clean, innocuous, with two double beds. He set Franny down as gently as he could, but she woke, slightly alarmed. Daddy?

I'm right here.

For several minutes the room intrigued her, the paisley bedspread, the wine-colored drapes, the matching shag carpet. She stood up on the bed and started jumping. For a second, while she was suspended in midair, a smile lit her face; then she dropped to all fours like a puppy and rolled up in a ball. Come here, you big lump of sugar. He pulled her into his arms and held her.

You cry, Daddy?

He couldn't answer her. He cried raw, lonely tears.

She turned away from him, hugging her stuffed rabbit, and shuddered a little. Her eyes were open, fixed on some spot across the room, and it occurred to him that she hadn't asked for Catherine since they'd left the Pratts', not once. He found it strange. Maybe somewhere inside her little head she understood her mother wasn't coming back.

He pulled the blankets up and kissed her cheek. Mercifully, she fell asleep.

He sat down on the other bed, watching her. It was just the two of them now. He tried to think. The curtains swam, ghostlike, in some unexplained breeze. It was the heater beneath them, he realized, not without relief. He went to the window and adjusted the temperature and looked out into the night, the dim parking lot, the distant lights of the interstate. It had been a long, cruel winter. Again, it was beginning to snow. He pulled the heavy drapes across the cold glass, making the world out

there disappear, and turned on the TV, muting the volume. A commercial ended and the nightly news came on. He was both surprised and not that his wife's murder was their lead story: footage of the farm, the empty barns, an ominous shot of the unutilized milking contraptions, a dreary photograph of the house from the assessor's office with the word *Foreclosure* stretched across it like a police banner. Then a picture of his wife that had been in the local paper, taken at the Chosen Fair, an annual tradition in which everybody came together to eat corn dogs and fried dough—one of the few levelers in a town of extreme wealth and poverty with little in between. Catherine, in overalls, a moon and a star painted on her cheek, looking angelic, almost childlike. Finally, a photo of him—his ID picture from the college, which made him look like an inmate. He could see what they were doing; it didn't take much.

He switched it off and went into the bathroom. The light was overly bright, the fan roaring. He turned it off and peed in the dark. He washed his hands and face. Unwittingly, he looked at his new reflection—the whites of his eyes, the curve of his lips, his vague outline—and it occurred to him that he was beginning to disappear.

He removed his shoes and put them on the carpet and lay down on the bed fully clothed, pulling up the bedspread. What would they do next, arrest him? They wanted to question him again; what more could he tell them? He'd come home, found her, grabbed Franny and run out. Obviously, they were hoping for a confession. He had seen it happen often enough in movies, and the next thing he knew he'd be shipped off to some prison in chains. It could actually happen, he realized. Shockingly within the realm of possibility, it terrified the hell out of him. He didn't think he could bear it.

Just before six the next morning, he heard someone knocking. His mother stood in the doorway in her robe, drawn, withered. His father wanted to talk. He'd been up all night and had concluded that they should ignore Sheriff Lawton's request and return to Connecticut immediately. Since George knew nothing, his mother emphasized, another meeting with the sheriff's office would not be productive. Once they got to Stonington, they'd arrange for a lawyer. It was still early. They had time to stop at the farm to get a few things. George could take his own car and then they could drive in tandem to Connecticut. They'd be out of the state before Lawton even got to his office.

It was cold, the sky white, the landscape drained of color. Evergreens, distant fields and barns, unmoving cows, sunless horizon. The house on Old Farm Road seemed defiant, dressed in police tape. A notice had been pinned to the door. Look, he said to his parents. I'm sorry about all this. I'm really very sorry.

George's father nodded. We understand, son. It's a terrible thing that's happened. A terrible thing.

They waited in the car with Franny while George went in through the porch, just like he'd done the day before. He kept his gloves on. He knew not to touch anything. The surfaces had been dusted for prints, and a fine silt remained. This was a crime scene now, and even the most ordinary objects seemed to pulse with collusion: a plastic doll ruined with ink, candlesticks ornate with wax, one of his wife's blue pumps sticking out from under the couch. These things he saw in flashes as he crossed the floor to the stairs, trying not to make a sound, as if someone else were already here, as if he were the intruder. He stood for a moment, just listening. He could hear the trees blowing around in the wind, Catherine's wrangling chimes. He was sweating, his face, the back of his neck. Overcome with a sudden nausea, he wondered if he'd be sick.

Again, he looked up the staircase.

He had to go up. He had to.

Clutching the banister, he climbed to the second floor and briefly stopped in the hall. It was cold, the air practically shaking with it. His daughter's room was a bastion of innocence, the pink walls and stuffed animals flaunting their betrayal, and he could sense an awful strangeness, some lingering malevolence. He wanted very badly to leave. It was as if this house, this strange farm, wasn't even his. It belonged to those people, the Hales. He knew it always would.

In Franny's closet, he found a small suitcase and filled it with whatever he could—clothes, toys, stuffed animals—and stepped back into the hall. The door to the master bedroom was ajar, an invitation that he didn't think he could answer. Instead, he started for the stairs, hearing voices outside. On the landing, he saw they'd gotten out of the car. His mother was bouncing her granddaughter from hip to hip, singing a song. Franny had her head back, laughing. It didn't seem right, he thought, annoyed. It wasn't right for anyone to be happy, including his daughter, and he knew Catherine would admonish such behavior *at a time like this*.

When the phone rang, it seemed incredibly loud. Who could possibly be calling? He looked at his watch: ten to seven. The phone drilled through the empty rooms. After ten rings it stopped.

The silence seemed to be listening.

Then something stirred at the end of the hallway. Wind, sunlight, a vicious shimmering—and he thought, wildly, *It's her.* Yes, *yes,* it's *her*! Standing there in her nightgown by the bedroom door, her delicate hand on the knob, a halo of light around her head. *Let me show you,* he almost heard. Her hand reaching out. *Come.*

In that moment the world went silent. Again he looked out at his parents, his daughter, and saw them all fiercely animated, but could no longer hear them and knew they existed in separate worlds. And understood, too, what was required of him now, what she wanted, his dead wife, and he fumbled down to the room they had shared. He would end his own life, he thought, if she wanted him to. It was what he deserved. For not protecting her, for his misguided impression that she'd be happy here and for all of the other things he'd done to make sure she never would be. And then he felt something, like a cold hand on his chin, making him look. There it was, the bed. They'd taken the bloody sheets, the blanket. Now it was just the mattress, the outline of the stain, an uneven circle like a lake on a map. Again he heard the wind, the bare branches of the trees. Again that distraction of sunlight. *Cathy,* he whispered. *Is that you?*

THEY DROVE one car after the other. Franny lay across the back seat sleeping, breathing heavily. It was four hours through sleet. He had to concentrate, to focus. How could he go on? All that blood. Her pale, lovely arms, her delicate wrists.

They'd had dinner; she hadn't eaten. She'd been cold, distant. Shoving the plates into the sink. Her shoulders raised. I know about you, George.

What?

I know what you did.

Ruined, he thought. A wasted life.

I can't stay here, George. I can't stay here with you. I have to go.

He wanted to hit her but instead said, If that's what you want.

You don't have a fucking clue what I want.

He had washed his hands over and over.

He had pressed his ear to the door and opened it silently. She looked up in her white nightgown, her skin already so pale, and lowered her brush.

THE SOUND APPEARED, stretched long and black across the horizon. There was no sleet here at the shore. He pulled over at an overlook and stumbled out onto sand that nearly swallowed him. He got to his feet and ran across the cold beach like a man in the desert who has at last found water, vaguely aware that his parents were screaming at him. He felt almost as though it was the very end of the world, and there was nothing left, neither day nor night, heat nor cold, laughter nor joy. And he belonged here. He belonged in nothing.

He wanted to feel something, the water in his hands, the smell of it, of life, the salt, the cold sunlight. Distantly, he felt the water rising up his legs, his hips. Make me clean, he thought. Baptize me.

They had to coax him out. Blankets, then hot soup at some roadside place after he'd changed his clothes in the men's room.

What were you thinking, his mother said, going into the water like that? She's going to need you, George. Your own life comes second now. *You don't matter anymore,* she might've said. *You don't deserve to.*

They waited in the parking lot while his father bought an ice-cream cone for Franny. His mother's eyes were as watery and gray as the Sound. Looking shrunken in her outsized coat, she reached out to take his hand and he could feel something breaking inside of him.

They think I did it, he said.

Well, they won't get far with that.

The wind blew hard. He wondered what she was thinking. She looked up into the suddenly bright sun and closed her eyes.

They lived in an old saltbox on a cove, overlooking the water. As a boy, he'd owned a series of sailboats. When they got out of the car, he wondered vaguely if his old Vagabond was still in the shed. He had to remind himself that this was no ordinary visit.

They left him alone. He stayed in his childhood room, lying on the twin bed, and the afternoon brought the thick gloom of a winter storm. In the kitchen downstairs, the radio repeated its grinding emergency warning: more snow predicted, travel advisories, etc. He could hear Franny's staccato footsteps all over the house. At least she was all right, he thought.

Even though he couldn't begin to predict what she'd experienced; he doubted he could ever know.

He nodded off for a while and woke to the ringing telephone. He assumed that it was Catherine's mother, or perhaps her sister. Later, his father knocked and leaned into the room in his cardigan sweater, tentatively, as if George had some contagious illness he didn't want to catch.

They called here, looking for you.

Lawton?

His father nodded. They want to talk to Franny.

George shook his head. I won't allow it.

All right. That's your decision.

His father stood there, watching him.

She wasn't happy, George said. With me, I mean.

His father waited.

We were having problems.

This information made no difference, and his father was suddenly all business. I've been in touch with that lawyer you suggested. He's on retainer now and has already done some good. Nothing you said last night can be used against you in a criminal case. As it turns out, you didn't have to submit to an interview. Of course, they didn't tell you that. If the police want to talk to you again, your lawyer will have to be present. Those are the stipulations now.

I didn't know that was possible, George said.

Anything's possible with the right attorney. His father looked at him briefly, definitively, and closed the door.

THE HOURS slowly passed. He was like a tenant in their house. He sensed their uncertainty, their judgment. He thought of this time, this schism of abeyance, as his own realized version of hell.

Your in-laws are on their way, his mother told him, a warning. They've agreed to have the funeral here.

She was making pancakes and had burned a few—not a new tendency. The kitchen had the same smell he remembered from childhood, the ever-present salvages of burnt toast left on the Formica like fossils, evidence of her good motherly intentions. She poured him a cup of coffee.

How soon?

A couple hours.

Okay, he said, sipping the coffee, not tasting it, his mouth tasting of rubber or some other toxic residue, fear. Seeing Catherine's parents would be difficult, witnessing their grief. Suddenly ill, he pushed the cup away and got up.

I made these for you, his mother said, holding the plate of pancakes, standing there, her face pale, her hair as wiry and brittle as pine needles. It was nearly noon and she was still in her nightgown, and in a cluttered corner of the countertop he spotted her glass of gin. Don't you want to know where Franny is?

He asked her with his eyes.

Your father took her to the carwash. You used to love that.

Yes, he said—but that was a lie. He had always been a little terrified of the dark cement tunnel on Liberty Street, the long arcade of equipment, the vicious yellow tubes of the vacuums, the deep-black skin of the employees.

I need some air, he said.

Of course. His mother looked ravaged, there was no other word for it. Go for a walk.

He found one of his old jackets in the closet. Bracing himself for the cold, he walked down the narrow lane to the empty, desolate beach. All the neighbors were gone for winter, and the flat sand stretched down to water that was dark, almost black. Walking along the shore, he shoved his hands into his pockets and discovered a crushed pack of Camels, the unfiltered brand he'd smoked in graduate school. He lit one, dragged deeply. The tobacco was stale, but he didn't care. He wanted the burn in his chest; he'd smoke a whole pack if he could. He watched a low-flying gull surveying the water, the beach. It flew up into the white sky and disappeared.

AN HOUR LATER, maybe two, he heard a car and his mother-in-law's high-pitched voice: Frances Clare, look how you've grown!

He stood in front of the mirror and buttoned his collar, then tucked in his shirt, trying not to look at his face.

He went downstairs. His mother had Franny at the kitchen table, coloring. She was watching the child intently, as if some telling revelation

would appear on the paper, when in fact all Franny had drawn were flowers. He kissed the top of her head. That's a nice picture, Franny.

I'm making daisies. She was pressing hard, making thick waxy stripes of grass.

Isn't that nice, his mother said. She looked up at him, appraising or admiring him, he couldn't tell which, and he knew it didn't matter. His mother was on his side, no matter what. They're in there with your father, she said.

When he entered the living room, the room went quiet. Rose and Keith were sitting on the couch and looked up at him without recognition, like strangers waiting for a bus. Without a word, George leaned over and kissed his mother-in-law, then shook her husband's hand.

Rose stood to embrace him, shaking in his arms. What happened, George? What happened to our Cathy?

I wish I knew.

Her eyes filled with tears. Who could do such a thing?

Of course they're trying to pin it on me, George said.

Rose blinked, looked away. Her whole body seemed to contract, and he took his hands away as she sank back into the couch.

I don't know what happened, he told them. I don't know any more than you do.

It's just an awful thing, she said to the room. Just awful.

Can I get you anything?

No, thank you. I just want to sit here.

To his relief, Franny ran into the room with her picture. Look at my picture, Grandma Rose.

Well, now, you're quite the artist, aren't you? Come onto Grandma's lap. She pulled the child into her arms. Now, where'd my kiss go? Did you take my kiss?

Franny shook her head and held up her empty palms. I don't have it.

Is it in your pocket?

I don't have any pockets!

Is it in your shoe? I'll bet it is.

Franny scrambled onto the floor, pulled off a shoe and shook it hard. Here it is, she cried. It fell out like a little rock. She held out her hand for her grandmother to see.

Oh! I knew it.

You take it, Franny said.

Put it right here, Rose told her, leaning forward.

Franny touched her grandmother's cheek and Rose hugged her tight. Lord our God, that's the best darned kiss in the whole world.

THE SNOW TURNED to rain. They sat there together with the cold light pouring in through the picture window. His father was watching a game, college basketball. Intermittently, bursts of wild cheer filled the room. George drank a little gin. Just after halftime, a car pulled into the gravel driveway.

There's Agnes now, his mother-in-law said.

I'll go. George went to the door, glad for something to do, and watched his sister-in-law and her husband get out of the car. Agnes, newly pregnant, had already put on weight. Paul was carrying a platter of food wrapped in plastic and held his wife's arm as they came up the walk.

Agnes, George said, and kissed her cheek.

Her eyes seemed to prickle. How is this possible?

I don't have an answer for that.

He held her a minute, loosely, and without affection. She was shorter than Catherine, round-shouldered, substantial. She broke their embrace and wiped her eyes as her husband came inside.

Hello, Paul, he said, shaking his hand.

I'm sorry for your loss.

Here, let me take that. You all go inside.

They all drank too much. Now and again, Rose was overcome. Water and pills were fetched. They tried to remain composed for Franny's sake, but their stagy enthusiasm confused her, and she fussed and cried and twisted in their arms.

Time for a nap, little puppy. When he scooped her into his arms, she giggled and shrieked and kicked her legs.

No, Daddy, not yet.

He laid her down in the guest room, on one of the twin beds, and pulled the blankets up under her chin. Are you warm enough?

Where's Momma?

The question alarmed him, and he tried to mask it. She's up in heaven with God, sweetheart. Remember what Mommy told you?

God lives in the sky.

That's right.

But I want her, Daddy.

You can whisper to her. Just whisper and she'll hear you.

She looked up at the ceiling. Up there?

Yes, right up there. He kissed her forehead. She looked at him and he hugged her. She held him very tightly.

Mommy is with you, Franny. She's with you every minute. Okay?

Franny turned away and closed her eyes. He sat there a moment, watching her. He sensed someone in the doorway and turned and met his mother's eyes. At once he felt supervised, self-conscious. She was his warden now, he thought, joining her in the hall.

Has she said anything?

No.

She looked at him sharply. I just can't stop wondering. She was all day in that house.

I know.

Unsatisfied, she shook her head. She must have seen something.

We may never know.

That's not good enough. What about that boy? I wonder if he had something to do with it.

He's just a kid, Mother.

You never know. Kids these days. It's a different world.

He sighed. What could he possibly say? I'm sorry, Mother, he finally said.

She looked at him strangely, as if trying to determine his meaning. I know you are, son. I know.

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, Agnes wanted to walk. He took his mother's cigarettes and went with her, pushing an umbrella over their heads. Briefly, after college, she'd lived with them in the city. He'd gotten to know her, and the one thing he understood about Agnes was that she was prone to compromise. Easily accepted things just as they were, whether in

her work or in her relationships. Her husband, he thought, was a drip. He sensed that she'd admired Catherine, but never told her so, which maybe wasn't so unusual. Perhaps that was how sisters were.

Winter on the Sound offered a bleak dissolution of color. They stood looking out at the water. He lit a cigarette.

I want you to know, she said, that you can trust me.

Okay, he said. That's good. I appreciate that.

I mean with anything.

He nodded.

I know you had nothing to do with this.

I don't know what to say, Agnes.

I can't imagine what you must be going through.

It's very difficult.

She put her hand on his arm and kissed him on the cheek and he could smell the perfume she'd put on that morning, Chanel N° 5, the same scent his wife had been wearing since college, and he wondered if it had been deliberate. Agnes seemed, in that moment, a complete and total stranger. It came to him that he hardly knew these people. And they certainly didn't know him. They'd already come to their own conclusions about his wife's murder. And, like a good son-in-law, he'd acquiesced, assuming the stoic resignation of the accused.

ON MONDAY MORNING, hours before the funeral, the police came poking around. His father had seen them in town, blatant outsiders. A couple camera crews parked at the end of their road, waiting to get a shot of him. They were at the cemetery, too; George and the others watched it later that night on the local news, the two families standing over her grave. Their faces. The distortion of grief.

The next afternoon, two of Lawton's lackeys knocked on the door. George was up in his room, trying to rest. He could hear his mother letting them in, their voices filling the living room as if they wanted him to hear every word.

He won't be interviewed without his lawyer, his mother told them.

All right, one of them said. We understand that. But tell your son we've got an investigation to run. It would be helpful to talk to him. He knew his wife better than any of us. We could certainly use his help.

His mother said something he couldn't make out and they left. From the window in his bedroom George watched them walk down to the beach, their jackets filling with wind as they stood at the shore. One of them scooped some sand into his hand and jiggled it around like pocket change. The partner said something and he laughed, and they glanced up at his window. Caught, George backed away, letting the curtain fall into place over the glass.

A WEEK OR SO LATER, he drove back to Chosen to pick up some things—his bank book, checks, his wife's jewelry. The trick to hiding something, she'd told him once, is to put it right out in plain sight. His father had offered to go along, but he needed to do this on his own. He needed to be alone in that house, with her.

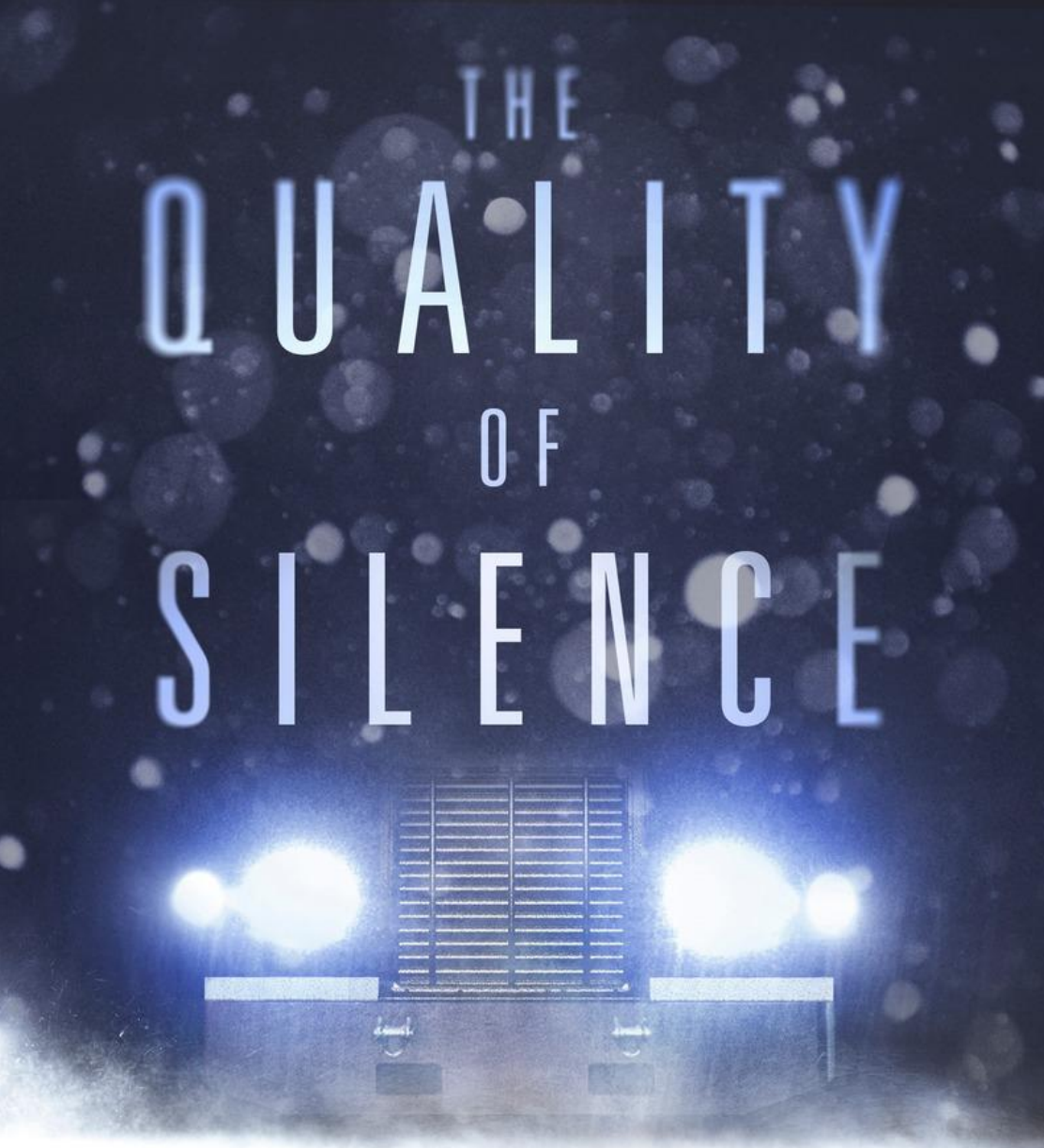
He took the three-hour drive in silence. In the freedom of his car he allowed himself to think of the girl, and how she'd looked at him that last time.

At last he turned down their road, where he feared some unseen surveyor might be watching him. He scanned the trees, the outlying fields, but saw no one. The house looked abandoned. As he stepped out of the car, it occurred to him that he was frightened. His mouth was dry and his head ached. He had history here, he reminded himself, and some of it had been good.

The police had come and gone. The house felt used, trampled by strangers. Their old room looked bare. Someone had come in to clean up the blood. You couldn't see any on the walls. He wondered who had done it, if it was a specialized job. He stood over the bed, looking down at the space his wife had filled. On impulse, he grabbed the mattress and jerked it upright and jostled it into the hallway and down the stairs and out the front door, sweating and cursing. He dragged it into the field over ice and snow and left it there on the hard ground. Then he went to the barn to look for gasoline. The can wasn't full, but there was enough, and he poured it out over the mattress. It only took one match.

And he stood there and watched it burn.

THE QUALITY OF SILENCE



A NOVEL

ROSAMUND LUPTON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SISTER*

The Quality of Silence

ALSO BY ROSAMUND LUPTON

AFTERWARDS

SISTER

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The Quality of Silence

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First American Edition

It is deep January. The sky is hard.
The stalks are firmly rooted in ice.

It is in this solitude, a syllable,
Out of these gawky flitterings,

Intones its single emptiness,
The savagest hollow of winter-sound.

WALLACE STEVENS

My name is a shape, not a sound. I am a thumb and fingers, not a tongue and lips. I am 10 fingers raised old—I am a girl made of letters

R - u - b - y

And this is my voice.

Words Without Sounds @Words_No_Sounds – 1h

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EXCITEMENT: Tastes like popping space dust; feels like the thud-bump as a plane lands; looks like the big furry hood of Dad's Inupiaq parka.

It's FREEZING cold; like the air is made of broken glass. Our English cold is all roly-poly snowmen and "woo-hoo! it's a snow day!"—a hey-there friendly kind of cold. But this cold is mean. Dad said there were two main things about Alaska:

For one, it's really really cold, and

For two, it's super-quiet because there's thousands of miles of snow and hardly any people. He must mean the north of Alaska, not here by Fairbanks Airport, with cars' tires vibrating on the road and people with suitcase wheels juddering along the pavement and a plane scissoring the sky. Dad is a big fan of quiet. He says it's not that I'm deaf but that I hear quietness.

Mum is keeping close to me, like she can wrap me up in another warm layer of her, and I lean right back into her. She thinks that Dad's snowmobile broke down so he missed his taxi plane. She says his sat phone must have run out of charge, otherwise he'd have definitely phoned us.

Dad was meant to meet us at the airport. Instead there was this policewoman who "Can't Tell You Anything Yet, I'm Sorry." Now she's striding off ahead of us like we're on a school trip and the museum's about to close with the girl gang calling after her, "Five minutes in the gift shop, miss!" but when a woman walks like that you know she's not going to slow down.

I'm wearing goggles and a face mask. Dad was super-bossy about what we had to bring with us—*proper Arctic gear, Puggle*—and now with the broken-glass air I'm glad. I never cry, least not when people can see me, because if you start down that slippery slope you could end up wearing a pink tutu. But crying in goggles doesn't count as public, because I don't think anyone can see. Dad says that up in the north of Alaska your tears can freeze.

Holding her daughter's hand, Yasmin stopped walking towards the airport's police building, causing the young police officer to frown, but for a short while she could pause what was happening. All around them snow had fallen, snow on snow, covering what had once been there in its monotone color and texture; a scene made of plaster of Paris. By her feet she saw the delicate markings of a bird's footprints in the snow and realized she was staring downward. She forced herself to look up, for Ruby's sake, and was startled by the clarity around her. The snow had stopped falling and the air was dazzling, bright and crystalline, the lucidity astonishing; one more turn of the dial to more clarity still and you'd see each atom of air defined around you. It was as if the scene hovered, too in focus to be real.

The policewoman just took a newspaper off the table, like I'm a little child who's not allowed to read newspapers, so I hold up all my fingers to show her I am ten but she doesn't understand.

"A senior police officer will shortly fill you in," she says to Mum.

"She thinks I'm a coloring book," Mum signs to me. People often miss Mum being funny, as if people who look like movie stars can't tell jokes too, which is really unfair. She hardly ever signs to me, she always wants me to read her lips, so I smile too, but our smiles are just carrier bags; inside we're not feeling smiley.

Mum says she'll be back soon and to come and get her if I need anything. I sign "OK," which is raising my thumbs. It's a sign hearing people use too, which is probably why Mum doesn't tell me to "USE YOUR WORDS, RUBY."

When I say "I said" I mean I signed, which is hand-talking, or I typed, which is another kind of hand-talking. Sometimes I use an American sign, which is like people using an American word when they speak with their mouth.

There's 3G in here but I've checked and I haven't got an email from Dad. It was stupid to even *hope* there would be as:

For one, his laptop broke two weeks ago, and

For two, even if he's borrowed a friend's there's no mobile signal or Wi-Fi in the north, which is where he must be because his snowmobile broke down, so he'll have to use his satellite terminal to send me an email and that's super-hard to do when it's freezing cold.

"Puggle" is the name for a baby platypus. Dad films wildlife programs and he loves platypuses. But a platypus, especially a baby one, wouldn't survive two minutes in Alaska. You need to have special fur that keeps you warm like an Arctic fox and feet that stop you sinking in snow like a snowshoe hare or be like a musk ox with big hooves that can break ice so you can get to food and water. And if you're a person, then you need goggles and Arctic mittens and special clothes and a polar sleeping bag, and Dad has all of those, so even if he has broken down in the north where your tears freeze he'll be all right, just like the Arctic fox and the musk ox and the snowshoe hare.

I completely believe that.

And he'll come and find us. I know he will.

On the plane from England, which took HOURS and HOURS,

I kept imagining what Dad was doing. I was thinking, *Dad will be leaving the village now; Dad will be on his snowmobile now; Dad will be getting to the landing strip.*

"In the middle of nowhere, Puggle, and the thing about the middle of nowhere is that it is very beautiful and empty because only very few people fi d it."

Dad will be waiting for the taxi plane now.

"Like a letter for the postman, you need to be there on time or you're not collected."

I fell asleep for ages and when I woke up I thought, *Daddy will be at Fairbanks Airport now, waiting for us!* And I wrote that tweet about Excitement being Dad's furry Inupiaq parka hood and the thud of the plane landing, although we hadn't actually landed yet but I thought that would be the most super-coolio feeling ever: bumping down and Dad being so close.

Then the flight attendant came busybodying towards me and I knew he was coming to tell me to switch off my laptop, which would've made Mum happy, because she hates thatbloodylaptop. I asked Mum to tell him that I'd put my laptop on flight-safe mode. I wasn't sure Mum would, because she'd have been super-happy if I'd had to turn it off; but the flight attendant saw me signing to Mum and realized I was deaf and did that thing people do, which is to go all mushy. Dad thinks it's the combo of beautiful Mum and little deaf girl (me!) that makes them like that—like we're in a movie on a Sunday afternoon. The mushy flight attendant didn't even bother to check I was on flight-safe mode after that, just got me a free Twix. I hope there aren't any terrorists who are ten-year-old deaf girls or they'll just be giving them free sweets.

I'm nothing like the little girls in those films, and Mum isn't like a movie star either, she's too funny and clever, but Dad is quite like Harrison Ford. You know, the kind of person who can disarm a terrorist if he has to but still reads the bedtime story? He finds that really funny when I tell him. And even though he's never actually had to

disarm a terrorist—well, duh—he always reads me a story when he's home, even now I'm ten and a half, and I love falling asleep with his fingers still making words in front of my eyelids.

Then we landed—thud-bump of the wheels and me super-coolio excited—and I linked up to the free Wi-Fi and posted my tweet and we got our luggage off that roundabout for cases, our legs a little funny after being on a plane for so long, and we hurried to Arrivals. But instead of Dad waiting for us there was a policewoman, who "Can't Tell You Anything Yet, I'm Sorry," and she brought us here.

The senior police officer had been delayed, so Yasmin went to check on Ruby. She and Ruby were coming out to spend Christmas with Matt in just four weeks' time, but after her phone call with him eight days ago she'd needed to see him face to face immediately—as immediately as is possible when you have a child at school and a dog and cat who need looking after and Arctic clothes to buy. She'd been worried about taking Ruby out of school, but since Matt's father had died there was no one who Ruby would stay with happily.

She looked at Ruby through the glass in the door, watching her shiny, erratically cut hair falling forward over her face as she bent over her laptop. Ruby had trimmed it herself last Wednesday evening in a Maggie Tulliver moment of hair-cutting independence. At home, Yasmin would ask her to turn off the laptop *and enter the real world,* but for now she'd let her be.

Sometimes when Yasmin looked at her daughter time seemed to hit an obstacle and stop, while everyone else's time moved on without her. She'd missed entire conversations before. It was as if the contractions, begun in labor as pain, continued afterwards as something else, equally strong, and she wondered if this labor had an end to it. Would she still feel this when Ruby was twenty? Middle-aged? Would her mother feel this for her now? She wondered how long you could go on missing being loved by your mother.

The young policewoman strode up to her—the woman never went anywhere slowly—and told her Lieutenant Reeve was waiting for her and that her suitcases were safely stored in an office, as if the logistics of luggage had equal weight with what Lieutenant Reeve would say to her.

She went with her to Lieutenant Reeve's office.

He stood up to greet her, holding out his hand.

"What's happened to Matt? Where is he?"

She sounded angry, as if she was blaming Matt for failing to turn up. She'd been so deeply angry with him that her voice had not yet attuned to this new situation, whatever this situation was.

"There are a few things I'd like to confirm with you," Lieutenant Reeve said. "We have records for foreign nationals working in Alaska."

Since Ruby had been diagnosed as totally deaf (very rare, they said, as if her baby's deafness was a type of orchid), Yasmin had seen sound as waves. As a physicist, she should have done that before, but it took Ruby to comprehend the truth that sound was physical. Sometimes, when she didn't want to hear what a person was saying—audiovestibular specialists, thoughtless friends—she imagined surfing over the top of their words, or diving through them, rather than letting the waves hit her eardrums and turn into decipherable words. But she had to listen. She knew that. Had to.

"According to these records," Lieutenant Reeve continued, "your husband has been staying at Anaktue. Although originally we had him staying at Kanati?"

"Yes, he was there for eight weeks in the summer, at an Arctic research station, making a wildlife film. He met two Anaktue villagers and they invited him to stay in their village. He returned to Alaska in October to stay with them."

An unnecessarily detailed, procrastinating answer, but Lieutenant Reeve didn't hurry with his response either, as if he too didn't want this conversation to go any further.

"I'm afraid that there has been a catastrophic fire at Anaktue," he said.

Catastrophic. A word for immense devastation, for volcanoes and earthquakes and meteorites striking the Earth, not for the tiny village of Anaktue, more of a hamlet even than a village. The stupid thing was that she'd been coming out here to row with him, to issue ultimatums that she'd intended to carry through. She'd traveled halfway round the globe to tell him that he had to come home, right now, that she didn't believe him that nothing more would happen with the Inupiaq woman and she wasn't going to stand by on the other side of the world as this woman destroyed their family. But that had made Matt seem so lily-livered weak, this other woman and herself determining his loyalties and future, that she had become angrier still so that not a single item in hers and Ruby's cases was folded but hurled and crammed inside, ready to burst out when they were unzipped in Alaska in a fury of down feathers and Gore-Tex.

"We think gas canisters for a heater or cooker exploded in one of the houses," Lieutenant Reeve said. "And the fire spread to a stockpile of snowmobile fuel and generator diesel, which caused another much larger explosion and a devastatingly intense fire. No one at Anaktue survived. I'm sorry."

She felt knifed by love, winded by the sharpness of it. The sensation was oddly familiar, a harsher version of the pain she'd felt in their early days, long before marriage and a child, before there was any tangible security that he'd still be with her tomorrow. And time was no longer stretched out and linear but bent back on itself and broken into fragments so that the young man she'd loved so passionately was as vividly recalled and equally present as the husband she'd argued with eight days ago.

She remembered the low winter sun slanting through the windows, the slow quiet voice of the philosophy professor, the thick walls of the lecture hall cushioning them from the cawing of birds outside. Later, he would tell her they were starlings and dunnocks. He was sitting a

few empty places away from her. She'd seen him twice before and had liked his angularity; his way of walking quickly and preoccupied, as if his mind was dictating his pace; the sharp planes of his face. When she clicked her knitting needles he'd glanced towards her, and their eyes had a jolt of irrational recognition. Then he'd looked away as if looking any longer would be a reproof for the clicking. When the lecture finished he came over to her as she put her knitting away, baffled.

"Is it a snood for a snake?"

"A railing."

Later he said he thought she was barmy but wanted to give her the chance of a defense.

"You're a fruitcake, right?"

That was your idea of giving me a defense?

"An astrophysicist," she'd said.

He'd thought she was joking, then he'd seen her face.

"A knitting astrophysicist in a philosophy lecture?"

"I'm learning about the metaphysics part of physics. In Oxford you can do a joint degree. And you?"

"Zoology."

"So what are you doing at a philosophy lecture? Apart from questioning my knitting?"

"Philosophy's important."

"To animals?"

"To how we think about animals. Ourselves. Our environment and our place in it." He caught himself and looked abashed. "Not normally so heavy. Not so quickly."

"I've come a long way to do heavy quickly."

Her school had been brutally underachieving. She'd survived it by becoming hidden and anonymous; fortunately, her high-cheekboned, small-breasted looks had no currency with teenage boys. She'd hugged the secret of being clever close to herself, deliberately underperforming in exams until A-levels, when she'd spectacularly pulled a glittering four As out of a bag everyone presumed contained a collection of

unshiny Cs and Ds. She'd had to hide her nerdiness for years; now she was celebrating it.

She put away her long thin piece of knitting.

"Eight o'clock. Outside the UL. I'll show you."

Lieutenant Reeve leaned towards her and she realized that they were both sitting at a table, opposite each other; she hadn't remembered sitting down. He was handing her something.

"A state trooper from Prudhoe found it at the scene. He brought it to us to show you. From the initials inside we think it may be Matthew's?"

She stroked the touch-warmed solid metal of his wedding ring. Inside were hers and Matt's initials; half of the first line of a vow. She felt the second half of the vow under her wedding ring imprinted on the soft underside of her finger.

"Yes, it's his," she said.

She took off her wedding ring and replaced it with Matt's, which was much too big for her finger. She put hers on again, hers now keeping Matt's safe, because maybe one day he might want to wear it again. It was impossible for him to be dead, not with that knife inside her; not with Ruby sitting next door. She could not—would not—believe it.

She noticed Lieutenant Reeve watching her hands.

"He takes off his wedding ring when he's working. Puts it somewhere safe."

The explanation Matt had given to her, weeks ago, when she'd spotted his bare ring finger in a photo he'd emailed to Ruby. Thankfully Ruby hadn't noticed.

She didn't tell Lieutenant Reeve that she hadn't believed Matt's excuse.

A few hours after the philosophy lecture, already dark, they'd walked away from the historic part of town, inhabited by students and tourists, to a retail park on the edge of a housing estate, the tarmac and concrete impersonal, the shadows forbidding. He saw that there were knitted tubes around signs and railings and a bike rack. He hadn't been beguiled solely by luminous eyes, long limbs, and generous smile, but by soft wool around hard metal, yarn coloring aluminium and steel in stripes and patterns.

She told him that she was part of a group of guerrilla gardeners, stealthily changing concrete roundabouts into small flower meadows in the middle of the night, but she hadn't done that for a little while.

"Only so many roundabouts?" he'd asked.

"The wrong time of year to plant," she'd replied. "And you can't garden in lectures."

"So is this your secret passion?" he asked.

"Knitting snoods for railings? Fortunately not."

"So?"

But she didn't trust him enough yet to show him.

Lieutenant Reeve was unsure whether to put a comforting hand on hers but felt awkward as he started the gesture. She was being so dignified, none of the fuss he was expecting. Unfair, fuss; he meant emotion he wouldn't know how to deal with—grief.

"A plane saw the blaze yesterday afternoon," he told her, thinking that she'd want details. He would in her place.

"The pilot flew over Anaktue just before a storm hit. The North Slope Borough state troopers and public safety officers mounted a search-and-rescue mission, despite the storm and terrible flying conditions. And they kept searching until the early hours of this morning, but tragically there weren't any survivors."

"Yesterday afternoon?" she said.

"Yes, I don't have any more details, I'm afraid. It was the state troopers and PSOs in the north who were on the scene."

"He phoned me yesterday. Matt phoned me. At five p.m. Alaskan time."

She'd known it all along, but now she had the proof. As the policeman made a phone call she remembered fragments of their conversation as they'd walked back towards their colleges together and how all the time another conversation was going on, in the way he leaned in closer to her, the way she subconsciously matched her pace to his; she noticed the faded checked collar of his shirt against his neck, with the protruding Adam's apple, as if he was still in the process of being formed, this man-boy.

He saw the harsh streetlights land on her brow and cheeks and mouth, and saw the woman she would be in ten years and it was just like that, he told her later. *Bam! A magic trick. A miracle. The woman I want to be with.*

She'd had less confidence in his imagined future. But as she walked with him she felt the solitariness of her old life, the one in which she was the oddity, the only person in her family and school and estate to go to university, recede a little behind her.

2

In the remote northern community of Prudhoe Bay, Captain David Grayling was alone in his office, bone-heavy tired. The electric lights were glaring down and he longed for the gentleness of daylight. Two more months till there'd be a morning here. It eroded a man's soul. He was thinking about Timothy. Was it because of Timothy that he'd become paternal towards the young officers in his charge, as he knew everyone thought? He'd always seen himself more as the musher of a team of enthusiastic young huskies, holding the lead lines to guide them in the right direction, a canvas dog bag on his sled in case any were injured and needed carrying to safety.

But at Anaktue, he had been neither father figure nor musher. The men had seen him vomit, over and over, each corpse appalling him anew. The storm had raged over the blackened village, their chopper only just able to land, the wind chill biting at their faces like a half-starved animal. *Blow winds and crack your cheeks.* They'd set up their blindingly bright arc lights, glaring into the wrecked houses, illuminating the barely recognizable remains of men, women, and children. To Captain Grayling, the darkness surrounding their lights had seemed infinite.

They'd worked in silence, a whole team of men, most of them still boys to Grayling, not talking or joking; no banter to shield them as they bagged and photographed and documented. *"You sulphurous and thought-executing fires."* Lear's words creeping into his mind, but a

blasted heath was a soft option compared with Anaktue, and thought-executing fire was only true for those who died; those who had to sift through the carnage would think far too much.

Years ago, a working lifetime, Grayling had wanted to go to university and study literature. But his father had wanted him *to do something,* not "namby about with poetry." It was a criticism that had hit home. He'd thought if he was going *to do something*, then it would be something that would benefit his beloved Alaska. For a little while, he'd hoped to do medicine but couldn't master the necessary chemistry, so he chose to be a state trooper. He was the only one on the training course for whom it was a second choice. He discovered three weeks in that he had the wrong kind of brain to be a state trooper, filled as it was with all sorts of irrelevant information and ideas. So he cleaned it out, ridding it of what he no longer needed (a moot point as to whether he'd ever needed it). So he hadn't thought of the blasted heath for years. But Anaktue was different. Anaktue delved into some deep part of him that couldn't be cleaned out.

When they'd seen the scale of the disaster, and when the storm had eased enough, more state troopers and PSOs had joined his team. Grayling himself had led the search party for survivors. Using a search beam on the chopper, they'd done a radius around the village, moving farther and farther out, but found no one. Grayling had been informed that there were twenty-three people in the village. He only stopped searching when the troopers at the village had counted the remains of twenty-four bodies. Grayling would have to find out the identity of the twenty-fourth victim.

Finally, the sickening business of it all was done. He was the last one out, taking the lights with him in the chopper. Behind him, Anaktue turned invisible in the blackness.

Later today he had to give more press interviews to journalists, in their heated, well-lit TV and radio studios, who would sleep without nightmares.

His phone rang and he was put through to Lieutenant Reeve from Fairbanks. It was about Matthew Alfredson, their twenty-fourth victim, whom they'd identified from computerized visa records: the wildlife filmmaker whose wedding ring Grayling had found glinting in the wreckage. Everything else had been destroyed, metal twisted into ugly shapes, but this one ring remained a perfect eternal circle. Grayling knew from his brief foray into chemistry that platinum could withstand intense heat, but this undamaged ring still seemed little short of miraculous. It hadn't been found near any of the bodies, so although the metal was an unbroken circle, Grayling surmised that the marriage itself was less enduring and he'd hoped he was right, because it might lessen the tally of grief.

But at five o'clock yesterday, while they were searching through the charred remains of Anaktue, this man had phoned his wife. How could this be possible? My God, was this man still out there somewhere, alive? He needed to talk to the wife.

To Yasmin, Captain Grayling sounded like an archetype of a state trooper, his voice self-assured and deep. She imagined him broad-shouldered and rugged-faced to match his voice.

"Did your husband tell you where he was?" Captain Grayling asked.

"No. But I think he was at the airstrip, waiting for a taxi plane. Lieutenant Reeve said there was a storm yesterday afternoon and terrible flying conditions, so the taxi plane wouldn't have come. He might still be there."

"We searched a wide area that included the airstrip."

"It was dark, though, surely, and stormy; you could have missed him?"

He heard the hope in her voice, this grasping at a different outcome, and felt sharp compassion for her.

"The airstrip is flat and pretty easily visible," he said. "We had powerful lights and we went over it thoroughly."

He didn't tell her that he'd flown over it himself, half a dozen times, checking and rechecking.

"Does he use a snowmobile?" he asked.

Anaktue was miles from anywhere, across virtually impassable terrain, so it was surely the only option, but he needed to be sure.

"Yes."

He had asked his team to piece together the heat-softened fragments of snowmobiles. Those fragments would now be frozen solid.

Yasmin remembered Matt telling her and Ruby that he'd bought a snowmobile from a villager who'd wanted to upgrade. She'd thought it strange that Inupiat men hunted caribou using snowmobiles, but Matt hadn't found it odd.

"Do you know how many snowmobiles were at the village?" Captain Grayling asked.

"Three," she replied. There was Matt's, the new upgraded one, and one that belonged to a villager working at the wells at Prudhoe Bay. She and Matt had spoken about it: a safely neutral subject in front of Ruby.

She waited for Captain Grayling to say something and in the silence knew that they'd found three—the remains of three—at the village. So he wasn't on his snowmobile, alive and well and at this very moment almost at Fairbanks, about to burst in, with hugs for Ruby and she could tell him she loved him. But it had been absurd to think he could get all the way to Fairbanks by snowmobile. She was just so impatient now to see him.

"He could have been traveling by dog sled," she said.

A few weeks ago, he'd emailed Ruby about going out with an Inupiaq man on a sled pulled by huskies. She'd doubted his enthusiasm, not understanding why anyone would want to travel by sled

in Arctic temperatures, but maybe his enthusiastic tone had been genuine.

"The kennels were also destroyed in the fire," Captain Grayling said.

"He could have been away on a filming trip when there was the fire and taken the dogs with him."

"Filming trips in midwinter?" Captain Grayling asked. "In the dark?"

"He's making a film about the wildlife in Alaska during winter. He was really just using Anaktue as a base."

She didn't say how skeptical she'd been about Matt's reason for staying at Anaktue, nor that she hadn't confronted him. But he could have been telling her the truth.

"Even if he was on a filming trip," Captain Grayling said, "surely he'd have come back to Anaktue, or the airstrip, in time to get to Fairbanks to meet you?"

"Something must have gone wrong with the sled or a dog," she said.

"You said your husband didn't tell you where he was when he called?"

"No."

"Any clues at all as to where he was?"

"No."

"Can I ask what he did say to you?"

"We didn't speak."

"I'm sorry?"

"We lost the connection before he could say anything."

"He didn't say anything at all?"

"No. As I said—"

"So how do you know it was him?"

"It was two in the morning in England and he's the only person who calls me at that time. We often lose the connection. He has a satellite phone and needs a clear line of sight to the sky. Or maybe his

phone just ran out of charge. As he hasn't called again, I think that's the most likely."

"Could it have been someone else calling you? Maybe a wrong number?"

"No. It was him."

She didn't tell Captain Grayling how surprised she'd been that Matt had called her. Apart from that terrible call eight days ago, he'd virtually stopped phoning her, though he steadfastly emailed Ruby. During a rare phone call between them a month ago, she'd accused him of not bothering anymore and he'd told her that he couldn't phone her from Anaktue, he had to trek for two miles and climb an icy ridge to get a satellite link. Oh, and it was also winter so pitch-black when he made the trip, and at that moment he was speaking to her in minus eighteen Fahrenheit. She hadn't pointed out that he did that trip every time he sent an email to Ruby, which was frequently; just glad that he did. There'd been a storm yesterday. It would have been an even harsher journey.

She wished she could believe in some rewind in their relationship, unknown about by her, that meant he'd walked for two miles in the Arctic cold and dark to speak to her, but knew that wasn't true. She didn't know why he had called her, especially when she'd been getting on a plane with Ruby in just a few hours' time and he'd see her face-to-face.

"Which satellite phone company does your husband use?" Captain Grayling asked.

So he intended to check out what she'd told him with Matt's phone company. She gave him the name of the company and hoped it wouldn't delay their search.

She waited to feel some kind of relief, but none came. Perhaps, after all that anxiety, she needed to actually touch him to feel relief.

She hadn't yet asked either Lieutenant Reeve or Captain Grayling if Corazon was a victim of the fire. She hadn't wanted to say her name.

Words Without Sounds @Words_No_Sounds – 12m
650 followers
ANXIETY: Looks like a chessboard with the squares quickly moving about; feels sweaty and shivery; tastes like prickly ice cream.

I usually don't do very well with speech therapists but there was one man, he was really young, I think he was still learning to be a doctor, and he asked me if I saw words, as clearly I couldn't hear them. Mum doesn't like me saying, "No shit, Sherlock," but Dad finds it funny. And the young sort-of-doctor did too. I hadn't told anyone this before him, but I do see words and touch them and taste them too. I know that's weird but this young sort-of-doctor didn't think so. He thought I should tweet about it and I said, "Great plan, Batman!" (as I knew he liked book characters brought into our chats). He was my first follower and now I've got hundreds, which is weird (WEIRD—Looks psychedelic; tastes dip-dab-sherbet-fizzy).

That tweet I did about "Excitement," the one when I thought Dad was waiting for us at Arrivals? It's funny because I said the word "Excitement" looked like the furry hood of his Inupiaq parka, but in October when he went out to Alaska I tweeted "Sadness," and Sadness looked like his furry parka hood too. So I think how you see a word, just like what it means in a sentence, is all about context and timing. At school I wouldn't use a word like "context" because people think me being in the "Gifted and Talented" program is as weird as being "Special Needs"; being both is super-weird and not in a dip-dab-sherbet-fizzy way.

Usually it helps to tweet a feelings word.

But it didn't help.

The policewoman was checking Yasmin's contact details when Lieutenant Reeve came in. He told her that Captain Grayling was waiting to speak to her on the phone in his office. She went with him and picked up the phone.

"I'm sorry," Captain Grayling said. "We've made a terrible mistake."

He sounded gentle. She made his face softer, his physique less bulky.

"A satellite phone was recovered near one of the burned-out houses by a junior member of the search team. He called the last number. He was hoping it would locate someone who might still be alive, a possible casualty."

"I don't understand."

"It was a public safety officer who made the call to you, not your husband. He managed to get a second or two's connection. I'm sorry. It was a confusing scene and he's young and inexperienced. He should have reported this to me straight away. He's being disciplined, of course; he should never have done it."

"Matt's alive," she said to Captain Grayling. "Whether he made the call to me or not."

"Mrs. Alfredson—"

"He must have dropped the phone when he got out of the fire."

"But he wasn't there when we searched."

"He must have gone to call for help. It's what Matt would do. He'd have tried himself and, if he couldn't, he'd go and get help. And he dropped his phone but didn't realize. He has to trek for miles to get a proper signal and—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Alfredson, but—"

"Or he was away on a filming trip," she said, "like I told you, and dropped the phone before he left and—"

Captain Grayling interrupted. God, how he hated doing this. "Twenty-four bodies were recovered from the scene. The village had twenty-three residents at the time of the fire. I was given this information yesterday and have checked it again today."

"You can't be totally certain about the number of people there," she said, and heard the fast desperation in her voice, the measured certainty in his.

"There were plans to install new generators at Anaktue, so a detailed survey was done on every household. There was also a survey carried out for a possible new Inupiaq school. It was very specific on the numbers of villagers living there and at what times of the year."

Captain Grayling sounded so reasonable and kind. She saw Lieutenant Reeve watching her; he must have spoken to Captain Grayling first. He had a glass of water ready for her. Captain Grayling was continuing, the sound waves relentlessly hitting her eardrums and turning into words.

"Of the twenty-seven villagers, four of the young Inupiat men are away working at the wells in Prudhoe Bay as they do every winter, which means there were twenty-three villagers remaining. And as I said, we recovered twenty-four bodies."

"You haven't identified Matt, though, have you?" she said.

"You told Lieutenant Reeve the wedding ring was his."

"But he wasn't wearing it, was he? And you haven't done proper forensic tests, you can't have done. You would have told me."

Grayling felt compassion for this woman coursing through him, threatening to dislodge the dead weight of grief always present inside him, so precariously balanced. He wished there were a way of telling her that wasn't brutal.

"The fire was very intense," he said. It had left some bodies barely identifiable as human, let alone as a person with a name and family. It was unlikely they'd even be able to get dental ID for some of them.

"I wish I hadn't been the person who had to tell you, but your husband is dead. I'm so sorry. I know that Lieutenant Reeve will look after you."

He hung up the phone.

The phone call from Matt had simply been tangible evidence of what Yasmin had already known, carried on the tip of a knife and now in the core of her: that he was alive.

In truth, she hadn't been surprised to learn the phone call wasn't from him; the surprise had been when she thought he'd called her. She wished he had, not because it would be a sign of reawakened love for her, but because then the police would have to believe her and she wouldn't be in an Alaskan police building next to an airport with no clue, really, as to what she should do.

Mum's just come in. She's crouching down, so her face is close to me and I can read her lips easily. She tells me that Dad is fine. There's been a mistake, but she will sort it all out. She looks too tight, like when you miss hitting a Swingball and the cord wraps itself round and round the post. I pretend not to notice and smile at her.

She tells me that Dad dropped his phone, which is why he hasn't been able to call or text us. An older policeman comes in and asks Mum to go with him. She says she'll be back soon. As they leave, the older policeman puts his arm out towards her, then drops it again without touching her. Lots of people don't know how to behave towards Mum—her looking so lovely puts them off—but it's completely clear she needs an arm around her.

In his office, Lieutenant Reeve tried to usher Yasmin Alfredson to a chair, but she wouldn't sit down.

"Matt's not dead," she said. "The state trooper in the north, Captain Grayling, has to search for him."

Lieutenant Reeve had read somewhere that there were four stages of grief, denial being the first.

"I'm sorry, he doesn't think there's any point."

"So he just gives up? How hard can it be to go and look for someone?"

He was afraid that her voice would break into a scream or a sob and kept his own voice calmly firm.

"If Captain Grayling thought there was the remotest chance, then he'd go. He flew a helicopter himself to Anaktue, despite the storm. Wasn't even on duty but came in anyway. And he was the last person to leave; spent nearly twelve hours in minus thirty, searching."

The man was a maverick in Fairbanks terms, running the show up in the north as if he owned the place, often with scant regard for rules. But he would always go the extra mile, never abandoning a search-and-rescue mission while there was any hope left. People said it was ever since his son had died in Iraq.

Yasmin had fallen silent. Still not saying anything, she got up and left the room.

My bracelet vibrates, which means there's a loud noise. It's like a James Bond gadget for deaf people so I know if someone's shooting at me (the man in the special shop said that and I thought it was pretty funny). It's meant to let you know if a car's coming, in case you forget to look both ways.

Mum comes in with our suitcases; it must have been the door banging shut behind her that made my bracelet vibrate. She doesn't smile at me. She always smiles at me when she sees me, even if I've only seen her five minutes before; like every time she sees me she smiles because she's super-pleased to see me again. Some people think she's aloof. I've lip-read them saying that. The mean words are easier to lip-read than the soft warm ones. I think if she didn't look so beautiful they'd see her better.

She tells me that Dad is OK but there's been a terrible fire at Anaktue. She says the police are being idiots and slowcoaches so we're going to have to go and *fi d him ourselves.*

They left the police station, dragging their suitcases across the compacted snow. The cold felt sharper now. She and Ruby were wearing liners inside their Arctic mittens, their face masks pulled up.

Where was he?

She had to think it through, calmly, rationally, as the scientist she'd once trained to be.

Captain Grayling had searched the airstrip thoroughly and it would presumably be a flat open area, so relatively easy to spot someone. Captain Grayling was probably right and Matt wasn't there.

So where was he? Think. Logically. Forget the cold and Ruby's face looking at her. Focus.

If Matt was at Anaktue when the fire started, what would he do? He'd try to help and, when he couldn't, he'd go to call for help. In his haste she imagined his phone dropping from his pocket and falling silently onto the snow. So, not noticing, he trekked on through the storm for two miles, then climbed the icy ridge to get a satellite connection. And then what happened? He felt in his pocket for his sat phone and it wasn't there. Maybe he started retracing his steps, looking for it, not knowing he'd dropped it right back at the village. How long did he search for it? Perhaps he then tried to walk to get help. He'd have been desperate. There were children in the village. Corazon. If he walked too fast he'd sweat and his sweat would freeze against his skin and he'd get hypothermia. But he understood the danger of hypothermia. It wouldn't help him for her to worry. Focus. But she saw his eyes as he realized that there was no town or village or house to go to, no help for a hundred miles, but he kept walking anyway as if he could make it different, before finally knowing it was futile. She wanted to put the warm palm of her hand against his face.

Focus. And all the time the police were searching Anaktue and the airstrip and it was dark, stormy, and their lights never spotted him because he wasn't there. How long till he returned to Anaktue, to find it deserted and the police gone?

Ruby was patting her arm; her suitcase had got caught in frozen slush at the edge of the pavement. Yasmin helped her to right it.

There was a better explanation. He'd gone on a filming trip, just like she'd told Captain Grayling. There were in fact all sorts of animals to film, the Alaskan winter wilderness teeming with them. She'd been wrong not to believe him. And then something had delayed him: a dog getting injured, or the sled breaking. It didn't matter. The point was he was nowhere near Anaktue when it was on fire. And, just as importantly, *he'd have his emergency kit with him*. And the phone? As he'd set off with the huskies he'd dropped it and didn't notice; silencing snow again, lost objects dropping into it and making no protest. If he was in a sled it must be difficult, leads to the dogs tangling maybe, lots to think about and distract you from a dropped phone. And then? He got back to the village after the fire, after the police had searched, last night perhaps, this morning even, to find it burned to the ground and deserted.

She had studied physics and astrophysics, not medicine, so she didn't know how long he could survive.

She wasn't going to allow Captain Grayling's body-count evidence; it was unproved, not verified. It was incorrect. It *must be* incorrect. And here was the base of illogic on which she built the rest of her cogent hypotheses—that he had to be alive because she loved him: an emotional truth so keenly felt and absolute that it couldn't be dented by rational argument.

Helping Ruby with her suitcase, they headed towards the airport building. She would get on a plane with Ruby to the north of Alaska and they would find him.

As they reached the terminal she saw that the light had dimmed dramatically since they'd first arrived, that spell of dazzling daylight

over. She knew that there were carefully calibrated words for dusk and nightfall here. She and Matt had spoken about it on the phone when he first came to Alaska—a good call, one of very few good calls. This light was called "nautical twilight," with the sun between six and twelve degrees below the horizon. Soon the sun would dip to twelve to eighteen degrees below the horizon, and it would be "astronomical twilight." And then it would be simply black.

3

Words Without Sounds @Words_No_Sounds – 1h

650 followers

NOISE: Looks like flashing signs, neon-bright; feels like rubble falling; tastes like other people's breathed-out air.

It's horrible here. There's loads and loads of people with suitcases and trolleys. I'm writing Mum's mobile and email address on little cards and keep getting jogged. On the back of the card there's a taxi company, but Mum says they're only open in the summer. She says we'll give our cards to anyone who might be able to help.

I was a bit worried about the police being slowcoaches, but now I think it's really good because it means Mum is going to get Dad, and so he'll see how much she loves him. He might not know that because she's hidden it under lots of crossness.

Yasmin asked the five people queuing at the North Airlines counter if she could queue-jump, and they must have seen her desperation because they kindly stood aside. She faced the scowling woman at the counter.

"Do you know how I get to Anaktue?"

"There's a line, ma'am."

"But—"

"You have to wait your turn, lady."

Yasmin stepped away. The hostility of the woman would clearly only be appeased by queuing. She signed to Ruby, asking how she was getting on with the cards, and Ruby signed that she'd finished, a silent conversation that crossed the noisy hall. She'd given Ruby the task to make her feel useful, but also in the long-shot chance that someone would take a card who knew something about Matt and Anaktue.

She noticed a sign up for tour parties to the Arctic Circle to see the aurora borealis. For a few seconds she was interested before remembering that Anaktue was hundreds of miles further north and, in any case, the tour didn't operate during the midwinter months.

To: Matthew.Alfredson@mac.com
Subject: We're coming!!
From: Ruby.Alfredson@hotmail.co.uk

Hi Dad, Mum is coming to find you and I'm coming too. We're at the airport and Mum's going to get us plane tickets. Mum really really wants to see you. I can't wait to see you too.

Love you megatonnes
Puggle

I know Dad's laptop is broken but his satellite terminal works so he'll just need to borrow someone else's laptop. If Dad's OK, then some of his friends in the village must be too and they'll have taken a laptop. Inupiat people aren't stuck in the past like some people think.

They hunt caribou and make aputiat, but they have snowmobiles and laptops too; it's not an either/or thing. And someone's bound to have taken their laptop when they got out of the fire. I would. After Bosley, who's our dog, and Tripod our cat, my laptop would be the next thing I'd take. So Dad'll be able to check his emails.

Dad and I think that when I go to secondary school I'll be too grown-up to be called Puggle, as it's a baby name. But he agrees that I can't become a grown-up Puggle and be called Platypus, so we're still working out what he'll call me.

When I emailed Dad I saw I'd got emails from people at school, but when I'm actually at school most of them don't talk to me. It's not coolio AT ALL to talk to "the-deaf-girl," which they say like it's one word, like that's my name.

Tanya, head of the girl gang, is the most nasty—"Oh look, here comes the-deaf-girl wanting a goss"—I can read her lips really clearly and she's started wearing pinky lip balm and that's what I look at while the girl gang laugh. And then I say, "Why would I want to goss with you? You have the personality of a toaster! And anyway gossiping is horrible."

They go on laughing because they don't understand sign and think it's funny I'm doing-weird-things-with-her-hands. But Jimmy understands signs and he laughed because "personality of a toaster" was funny.

(NASTY: Feels like barbed wire; looks like a rabbit with its leg in a trap; tastes like whispering glittery lip balm.)

When I email or Facebook, people who can't sign understand me straight away and get my jokes. Also they tell me jokes and I get them straight away too, which is important for a joke. (Not people like Tanya, but people who email or Facebook me.) And people tell me private things too. Max, who's been in my class since Reception, is upset we've only got two and a half terms left in Wycliff Primary. He's really worried about secondary school, like me. But at school we

don't ever talk to each other. It's like there's two worlds, the typed one (like emails and Facebook and Twitter and blogging) and then the "real" one. So there are two me's. And I'd like the real world to be the typed one because that's where I can properly be me.

Dad got me my laptop. Mum hates it and right away called it that-bloodylaptop. She always glares at it, like the laptop could glare back at her and she could win the glaring competition.

Mum thinks if I could mouth-talk, everything will be better. She tells me that almost every time we walk home from school. Instead of arguing, I hold her hand. But sometimes I do argue with my voice—my hand-voice so I can't hold her hand anymore—and I say, "No it won't," or "You don't understand!" Because

for one, I'll never sound like they do, and

for two, that'll be the other thing about me; I'll be the-deaf-girl-with-the-stupid-voice, and it's bad enough being the-deaf-girl without being the-anything-else-girl too.

I'd rather be the-showy-off-brat-girl, the-nerdy-know-it-all-girl, any of those sorts of things, because those sorts of things you can try to change, if you want to. Or not. Up to you.

Being deaf isn't something I can change. Mum doesn't understand this but I don't know if I even want to. It's my Ruby-world, a quiet world that I look at and touch and sometimes taste but don't hear. Dad says quietness is beautiful. So maybe my world is lovelier than other people's. And maybe making sounds I can't hear in my quiet world would spoil everything.

Max is really worried about changing schools, has an upset tummy about it and everything. I'm worried too, but my tummy's been OK.

Yasmin reached the front of the queue and the hostile woman.

"I need to get to Anaktue."

"I don't know where that is, ma'am."

"About five hundred miles north of here."

"We don't cover it."

"The nearest town then? Deadhorse, I think?"

She'd remembered it was the place Matt flew to when he came to Anaktue, that he'd get a taxi plane from there.

"I told you, lady, we don't cover that region."

"Can you tell me how to get there? Please?"

"I do North Airlines check-in; I'm not a travel agent."

A man came up to Yasmin. About forty, he was dressed in overalls, a peak cap with "Am-Fuels" on it, a 9/11 pin.

"You'll need Arctic Airways," he said. "But their last flight for the day left ten minutes ago."

She felt rising panic, and he must have noticed because he looked at her with kindness.

"I might be able to get you on a flight to Deadhorse," he said. "From Deadhorse, you can get a taxi plane to most places in the north." He paused a moment. "Aint Anaktue the place that's been on the news?"

"I imagine so."

She didn't volunteer anything more, and he didn't press her.

"Can you wait a little bit while I see my daughter onto her flight?" he said.

Behind him was a young woman, eighteen or nineteen, looking excited, eyes darting around, a smile reappearing every few moments, a rucksack on her back.

Mum's handing out the little cards I've written, asking people if they know anything about Anaktue, and she gets really funny looks. Some rude people just put theirs in the bin right in front of us. I'm writing some more now, on the back of a different taxi place. I'm a bit worried that people will phone or email Mum thinking she's the taxi.

I'm still thinking a bit about the nasty girl gang at school and gossiping.

Dad told me about this film where a preacher tells people why gossiping is so terrible. He says that when you say a bit of gossip, you're emptying a feather pillow out of a high window into the wind, and if you want to take the gossip back you'd have to find every single feather and you could never ever do that. But it would be good if that was true of Mum's cards and they go all over the place, and someone will know something that will help us find Dad really soon.

Fifteen minutes later, Yasmin saw the man in the peak cap threading his way through shoals of people towards them. She thought he looked anxious.

"Jack Williams," he said, holding out his hand. "Sorry to take a while but I wanted to see my daughter through the departure gate. She hasn't been away from home before. Not for more than a week anyway."

Yasmin liked him for being anxious.

"Freedman Barton Fuels are flyin' a load of us worker bees to the wells south of Prudhoe, via Deadhorse," Jack continued. "It's a charter. I know the pilot and gave him a call. If you want to hitch a ride it's fine with him. 'Course it probably ain't legal, but he's not goin' to tell anyone. There's a couple of spare seats."

"Thank you," Yasmin said.

He smiled at Ruby. "I wish all daughters could stay put at your age. Not get all grown-up and want to go off ravelin'."

Yasmin wasn't sure how much of that Ruby had understood, but Jack spoke clearly and didn't put his hand to his mouth, so she'd have got most of it.

"Come on, I'll show you the way. Those your cases?"

I don't like this man. Don't trust him for a second. He's all smiley-smarmy. He's got our cases and his sleeve has wrinkled up and you can see an Omega watch. Dad has one like it, quite like it, that Grandpa left him. He says it's much too precious to wear every day, so why's this man wearing it on just any old day? Now he's seen me staring.

Yasmin had seen Ruby looking at the watch, more like glowering at it. No wonder Jack noticed.

"I used to buy presents for my wife," he said. "When you work at the wells, it's ugly and dirty and you want somethin' nice at the end of it. I'd get her pretty things. Right before our twentieth anniversary, she took a heap of her jewelry back to the store. Swapped it with this. Gave it to me."

And his wife died, Yasmin thought, so he always wore her watch. She felt compassion for him in a way that before today she couldn't have imagined.

They followed Jack as he led them along a corridor and into a small departure lounge. There were fifteen to twenty men, most wearing F.B.F. caps and overalls, a few with Am-Fuels caps. Yasmin took hold of Ruby's hand. She feared the day men like these would no longer see Ruby as a child. To her relief, the men didn't notice their arrival; they were focused instead on a slight man wearing a suit, his back towards them, his blond hair shining in the artificial lights. Yasmin could sense their hostility towards the suited blond man, almost feel its abrasiveness against her skin.

"Fuckin' tree-hugger," one of them said to him.

"Ain't no trees up in North Alaska, no one told you that?" said another.

The blond man met their aggression with superiority. "Aren't you concerned, or at least interested in what you're working with? Carcinogens that cause cancers, radioactive chemicals—"

A man with a tattooed face interrupted, towering over the blond man. "Do we look sick?" He turned to the other workers. "Comes here and does his song and dance routine every fuckin' week."

Yasmin could see the blond man's face now and was surprised that he was in his fifties, his eyebrows gray, his skin pallid.

The man with tattoos continued, "Heard it all before, fella. Know what F.B.F. stands for? 'Frack Baby Frack.' Sarah Palin. The lady had vision."

The blond suited man's tone was still superior. "You've been taken over by American Fuels, so you can't make that joke anymore."

Yasmin saw that Ruby, lip-reading, was intimidated by these men and their language.

"He said 'frack baby frack,' " she told Ruby, finger-spelling "frack." She asked her not to lip-read anymore; she'd tell her if there was anything important.

The men were now staring at her. Jack came closer.

"This lady and her daughter are gettin' a ride with us to Deadhorse," he said.

One of the men laughed. "Got a mall now, has it?"

"We want to get to Anaktue," Yasmin said. "We're getting a taxi plane from Deadhorse."

"Ain't you seen the news?" a muscular man said to her. "It's burned to fuckin' toast, everyone and everythin'." He looked around at the others. "Said on the news, stupid fuckers stored fuel right by their houses."

"Hydraulic fracturing may have caused the fire," the blond man said, his pallid face animated as if this stimulated him. "Anaktue is only forty or so miles north of Am-Fuels' wells at Tukapak."

"Wouldn't know 'bout that," the muscular man said. "But I'd be guessin' it's forty or so miles of fuckin' *snow.*"

"People have set fire to the water coming out of their faucets," the blond man said.

"Yeah right," the muscular man said. "It ain't fuel explodin' like the news said, it's water burned everythin' down."

"The fumes could well have ignited," the blond man said. "That's always a risk."

"Oh, for cryin' out loud," Jack said, and Yasmin was sure he was moderating his language because of her and Ruby. "You're tellin' us fumes from a frackin' well went *forty miles* across northern Alaska, in minus thirty, in high winds without breakin' up, then got to Anaktue and exploded? *Spontaneously?*"

"It's possible," the blond man said.

"That's bullshit and you know it," Jack said. He stared at the blond man's face, as if reading him a line at a time. "Jesus. You'd *like* it to be a frackin' accident. You want somethin' like this to happen."

"OK, you're right," the blond man said. "Hydraulic fracturing is an accident waiting to happen; a disaster waiting to happen. Better a small village in Alaska has everyone die than a highly populated area. So yes, if wiping out a village is what it takes to permanently stop hydraulic fracturing, then yes."

Yasmin was repulsed, but she had to talk to him because he knew where Anaktue was—*"only forty or so miles north of Am-Fuels' wells at Tukapak."* Anaktue was a tiny place, so how did he know?

She went over to him, holding Ruby's hand. She found his unflinching eye contact with her invasive.

"Silesian Stennet," he said to her, holding out his right hand, plump and freckled with age spots. She didn't take it.

"I was finance director of a hydraulic fracturing company," Silesian continued, not breaking eye contact. "But I couldn't in all conscience continue, not with the knowledge I had of the risks. But some people just don't want to be warned."

"How do you know where Anaktue is?" Yasmin asked. "Do you know people there? Have you heard from someone?"

"Like I said, I worked for a hydraulic fracturing company. Anaktue

is sitting on hundreds of thousands of barrels of shale oil. It's only thirty-five miles from the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, so the infrastructure is almost in place to ship out the crude. All the hydraulic fracturing companies know where Anaktue is. They'll have source rock samples, 3D seismic data, and drilling data for Anaktue."

Jack watched Yasmin with Silesian Stennet and wondered if he should warn her about the son of a bitch; tell her that he'd been convicted of sabotage at a fracking site; that he was just lucky no one got hurt. Several inches taller than Silesian, Jack could see that his blond part had gray streaks running in a line on either side. He wanted to be a young man with a cause, but he was a middle-aged zealot embracing obsessions.

No one's mouth is open, no one is speaking, and Mum has gone like the Swingball again. She's forgotten she'd tell me if someone said something important or interesting.

The man with the blond hair says in sign, "Do you want me to tell you what's happening?"

It's super-coolio when someone knows sign language and they're not deaf. Like when President Obama signed "Thank you" straight back to someone who'd signed to him, like it wasn't a big thing. Mum hasn't even noticed because she's listening to whatever it is.

The blond man finger-spells "Announcement" and now he's signing something about a dead horse. He means the place; the place where we're going to so we can find Dad.

In American Sign Language the sign for a horse is putting your hand to your head and wiggling your pretend ear, like the puppet horse in *War Horse.* In British Sign Language you pretend you're holding the reins while you gallop, which is more fun to do. I think

about the story of the sign, not what it means, because I'm worried it means something bad.

The blond man is holding out his phone. He's typed something for me to read. I go closer to him, which isn't very far, so Mum won't mind. I read what he's typed:

> "There's been a crash at Deadhorse airport. A cargo plane has spilled its load. No flights landing till it's cleared up. Might be tomorrow or the day after."

I feel sick. Like in the plane when I walked down the aisle and thought that underneath the floor was miles of sky.

The blond man says, "Why are you going to Anaktue?" and he finger-spells "Anaktue."

"To find Dad," I tell him.

"At Anaktue?" he says, and his face is kind of smiling, like he thinks it's funny.

"Yes."

I don't like being close to him. When he put his phone near my face to read, his hands smelled like old fish.

You know how I said that Jack guy is creepy? Well, he isn't, not really. I was just annoyed with him for being with us, when it should be *Dad* with us. Was even annoyed with him helping us, which is stupid, because we need his help to get to Dad. So even though I find this blond man creepy, I'm not going to trust my creepy-monitor.

I go closer to Mum. A man's talking to her, but she's still forgotten she'd let me know anything important, so I'll lip-read him. I can't make out every word but quite a lot.

He says small taxi planes will still fly from Deadhorse because they don't need the main runway. We can still get to Dad!

There's another man, the one with lots of tattoos, saying something about getting to Deadhorse from here, but I can't read his lips

very well because he mumbles. And now another one is smiling like it's really funny.

"And how's she supposed to do that?" he says, and then he sees me and stops for a moment. "Get the effing bus?"

And now he's looking at Mum and he's saying something I can't lip-read, then he says, "You can't drive there. It's five hundred miles on an ice road."

I tug at Mum, making her look at me. "What will we do?" I say. "How will we get to Daddy?"

She tells me to wait a moment. The blond man comes closer to me again and shows me his phone:

"Why does your mother wear two wedding rings?"

I look at Mum's hand. She always has her wedding ring on and sometimes her engagement ring or the ring Dad gave her when I was born, which is made of a stone called peridot, which is green and means joy, and Mum says is the same color as my eyes so she can look at her ring when I'm not there and imagine my face really clearly, but Dad says it also means he was on a bit of a tight budget.

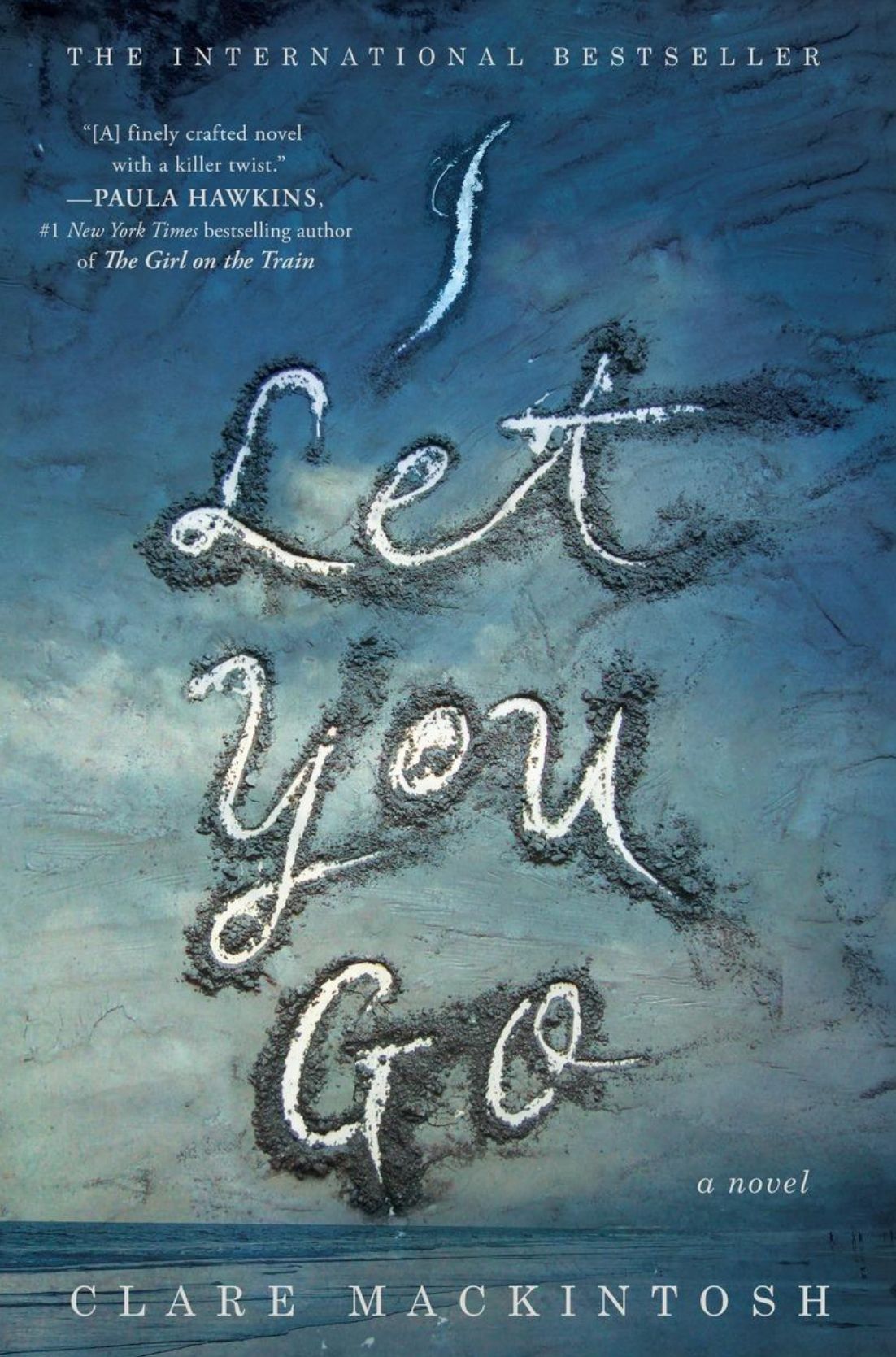
She doesn't wear Dad's wedding ring too because *he* wears his ring. I don't understand. It's like the floor of that plane is just soggy paper and I'm falling through it.

Mum is grabbing the man's phone and snapping it shut and shoving it back at him. She bends down so that her face is close to mine. "Daddy takes off his ring when he's working," she says. "Which is why a policeman found it. And now I'm keeping it safe for him." She's mouth-speaking and signing at the same time. "Daddy is OK."

The blond man is watching her sign and it's like he's stealing something from me.

Wheeling her suitcase with one hand and holding Ruby's hand with the other, Yasmin walked away from the departure lounge along a long corridor towards the exit. Ruby was struggling to keep up, her suitcase tipping over on its wheels.

She must think of a plan. There had to be a plan. Had to be. If she couldn't think of a plan, would that be the moment someone would tell her to face facts? And who would that someone be? A policeman? Someone from England? As long as she was on her way to find him, Matt was alive. And it wasn't some reactionary grief, fueled by a need in her, but because if she stopped believing he was alive, if she let people and their facts crowd around her, he'd be left alone in the northern Arctic wilderness and wouldn't survive.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I Let You Go
a novel
CLARE MACKINTOSH

PROLOGUE

The wind flicks wet hair across her face, and she screws up her eyes against the rain. Weather like this makes everyone hurry, scurrying past on slippery pavements with chins buried into collars. Passing cars send spray over their shoes, the noise from the traffic making it impossible for her to hear more than a few words of the chattering update that began the moment the school gates opened. The words burst from him without a break, mixed up and back to front in the excitement of this new world into which he is growing. She makes out something about a best friend, a project on space, a new teacher, and she looks down and smiles at his excitement, ignoring the cold that weaves its way through her scarf. The boy grins back and tips up his head to taste the rain, wet eyelashes forming dark clumps around his eyes.

"And I can write my name, Mummy!"

"You clever boy," she says, stopping to kiss him fiercely on his damp forehead. "Will you show me when you get home?"

They walk as quickly as five-year-old legs will allow, her free hand holding his bag, which bangs against her knees.

Nearly home.

Headlights glint on wet tarmac, the dazzle blinding them every few seconds. Waiting for a break in the traffic, they duck across the busy road, and she tightens her grip on the small hand inside the soft woolen glove, so he has to run to keep up. Sodden leaves cling to the railings, their bright colors darkening to a dull brown.

They reach the quiet street where home lies just around the corner, its seductive warmth a welcome thought. Secure in the environs of her own neighborhood, she lets go of his hand to push away the strands of wet hair from her eyes, laughing at the cascade of droplets it causes.

"There," she says, as they make the final turn. "I left the light on for us."

Across the street, a redbrick house. Two bedrooms, the tiniest kitchen, and a garden crammed with pots she always means to fill with flowers. Just the two of them.

"I'll race you, Mummy . . ."

He never stops moving; full of energy from the second he wakes until the moment his head hits the pillow. Always jumping, always running.

"Come on!"

It happens in a heartbeat; the feeling of space by her side as he runs toward home, seeking out the warmth of the hall, with its porch-light glow. Milk, biscuit, twenty minutes of television, fish fingers for tea. The routine they have fallen into so quickly, barely halfway through that first term at school.

The car comes from nowhere. The squeal of wet brakes, the thud of a five-year-old boy hitting the windshield and the spin of his body before it slams onto the road. Running after him, in front of the still-moving car. Slipping and falling heavily onto outstretched hands, the impact taking her breath away.

It's over in a heartbeat.

She crouches beside him, searching frantically for a pulse. Watches her breath form a solitary white cloud in the air. Sees the dark shadow form beneath his head and hears her own wail as though it comes from someone else. She looks up at the blurred windshield, its wipers sending arcs of water into the darkening night, and she screams at the unseen driver to help her.

Leaning forward to warm the boy with her body, she holds her coat open over them both, its hem drinking surface water from the road. And

as she kisses him and begs him to wake, the pool of yellow light that envelops them shrinks to a narrow beam; the car backs up the street. Engine whining in admonishment, the car makes two, three, four attempts to turn in the narrow street, scraping in its haste against one of the huge sycamore sentries lining the road.

And then it is dark.

PART ONE

1

Detective Inspector Ray Stevens stood next to the window and contemplated his office chair, on which an arm had been broken for at least a year. Until now he had simply taken the pragmatic approach of not leaning on the left side, but while he was at lunch someone had scrawled "Defective" in black marker pen across the back of it. Ray wondered if Business Support's newfound enthusiasm for equipment audits would extend to a replacement, or whether he was destined to run Bristol CID from a chair that cast serious doubts over his credibility.

Leaning forward to find a marker pen in his chaotic top drawer, Ray crouched down and changed the label to "Detective." The door to his office opened and he hastily stood up, replacing the lid on the pen.

"Ah, Kate, I was just . . ." He stopped, recognizing the look on her face almost before he saw the Command and Control printout in her hand. "What have you got?"

"A hit-and-run in Fishponds, guv. Five-year-old boy killed."

Ray stretched out a hand for the piece of paper and scanned it while Kate stood awkwardly in the doorway. Fresh from shift, she had been on CID for only a couple of months and was still finding her feet. She was good though: better than she knew.

"No registration number?"

"Not as far as we know. Shift have got the scene contained and the skipper's taking a statement from the child's mother as we speak. She's badly in shock, as you can imagine."

"Are you all right to stay late?" Ray asked, but Kate was nodding before he'd even finished the question. They exchanged half-smiles in mutual acknowledgment of the adrenaline rush it always felt so wrong to enjoy when something so horrific had happened.

"Right then, let's go."

They nodded a greeting to the throng of smokers clustered under cover by the back door.

"All right, Stumpy?" Ray said. "I'm taking Kate out to the Fishponds hit-and-run. Can you get on to Area Intelligence and see if anything's come in yet?"

"Will do." The older man took a final drag of his roll-up. Detective Sergeant Jake Owen had been called Stumpy for so much of his career that it was always a surprise to hear his full name read out in court. A man of few words, Stumpy had more war stories than he chose to share, and was without a shadow of a doubt Ray's best DS. The two men had been on shift together for several years, and with a strength that belied his small stature, Stumpy was a handy crewmate to have on your side.

In addition to Kate, Stumpy's team included the steady Malcolm Johnson and young Dave Hillsdon, an enthusiastic but maverick DC whose determined efforts to secure convictions sailed a little too close to the wind for Ray's liking. Together they made a good team, and Kate was learning fast from them. She had a fiery passion that made Ray nostalgic for his days as a hungry DC, before seventeen years of bureaucracy had ground him down.

Kate drove the unmarked Corsa through mounting rush-hour traffic to Fishponds. She was an impatient driver, tutting when a red light held them back, and craning her neck to see past a holdup. She was perpetually in motion: tapping fingers on the steering wheel, screw-

ing up her nose, shifting in her seat. As the traffic started moving again, she leaned forward as though the movement would propel them forward faster.

"Missing blues and twos?" Ray said.

Kate grinned. "Maybe a bit." There was eyeliner smudged around her eyes, but otherwise her face was clean of makeup. Dark brown curls fell messily about her face, despite the tortoiseshell clip presumably intended to hold them back.

Ray fished for his mobile to make the necessary calls, confirming that the Collision Investigation Unit was en route, the duty superintendent had been informed, and that someone had called out the Ops wagon—a lumbering vehicle stuffed to the gunnels with tenting, emergency lights, and hot drinks. Everything had been done. In all honesty, he thought, it always had been, but as duty DI the buck stopped with him. There was usually a bit of hackle-rising from shift when CID turned up and started going over old ground, but that was just the way it had to be. They'd all been through it; even Ray, who had spent as little time in uniform as possible before moving on.

He spoke to Control Room to let them know they were five minutes away, but didn't call home. Ray had taken to phoning Mags instead on the rare occasion when he was going to be on time, which seemed a much more practical approach to the long hours the job demanded of him.

As they rounded the corner Kate slowed the car to a crawl. Half a dozen police cars were strewn haphazardly down the street, lights throwing a blue glow across the scene every other second. Floodlights were mounted on metal tripods, their strong beams picking out the fine mist of rain, which had thankfully abated in the last hour.

Kate had stopped on their way out of the station to grab a coat and exchange her heels for wellies. "Practicality before style," she had laughed, throwing the shoes into her locker and pulling on the boots. Ray rarely gave much thought to either principle, but he wished now he'd at least brought a coat.

They parked the car a hundred meters away from a large white tent, erected in an attempt to protect from the rain whatever evidence might have been left. One side of the tent was open, and inside they could see a crime scene investigator on her hands and knees, swabbing at something unseen. Farther up the road a second paper-suited figure was examining one of the huge trees that lined the road.

As Ray and Kate drew near to the scene they were stopped by a young PC, his fluorescent jacket zipped so high Ray could barely make out a face between the peak of his hat and his collar.

"Evening, sir. Do you need to come in? I'll have to sign you in."

"No, thank you," said Ray. "Can you tell me where your sergeant is?"

"He's at the mother's house," the PC said. He pointed down the street to a row of small terraced houses before retreating into his collar. "Number four," came the muffled afterthought.

"God, that's a miserable job," said Ray, as he and Kate walked away. "I remember doing a twelve-hour scene watch in the pouring rain when I was a probationer, then getting told off by the DCI for not smiling when he turned up at eight o'clock the next morning."

Kate laughed. "Is that why you specialized?"

"Not entirely," Ray said, "but it was certainly part of the appeal. No, it was mainly because I was sick of passing all the big jobs over to the specialists and never seeing anything through to the end. How about you?"

"Sort of similar."

They reached the row of houses the PC had pointed toward. Kate carried on talking as they looked for number four.

"I like dealing with the more serious jobs. But mainly it's because I get bored easily. I like complicated investigations that make my head hurt to figure them out. Cryptic crosswords rather than simple ones. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense," said Ray. "Although I've always been useless at cryptic crosswords."

"There's a knack," said Kate. "I'll teach you sometime. Here we are, number four."

The front door was smartly painted and slightly ajar. Ray pushed it open and called inside. "CID. All right if we come in?"

"In the sitting room," came the response.

They wiped their feet and walked up the narrow hallway, pushing past an overloaded coat rack, beneath which sat a pair of child's red wellies, neatly placed beside an adult pair.

The child's mother was sitting on a small sofa, her eyes fixed on the blue drawstring school bag clutched on her lap.

"I'm Detective Inspector Ray Stevens. I'm so sorry to hear about your son."

She looked up at him, twisting the drawstring so tightly around her hands the cord gouged red grooves in her skin. "Jacob," she said, dry-eyed. "His name is Jacob."

Perched on a kitchen chair next to the sofa, a uniformed sergeant was balancing paperwork on his lap. Ray had seen him around the station but didn't know his name. He glanced at his badge.

"Brian, would you mind taking Kate into the kitchen and filling her in on what you've got so far? I'd like to ask the witness a few questions, if that's okay? It won't take long. Perhaps you could make her a cup of tea at the same time."

From the reaction on Brian's face, it was clear this was the last thing he wanted to do, but he stood up and left the room with Kate, no doubt to moan to her about CID pulling rank. Ray didn't dwell on it.

"I'm sorry to ask you even more questions, but it's vital we get as much information as we can, as early as possible."

Jacob's mother nodded but didn't look up.

"I understand you couldn't see the car's number plate?"

"It happened so quickly," she said, the words triggering a release of emotion. "He was talking about school, and then . . . I only let go for a second." She pulled the drawstring cord tighter around her hand, and Ray watched the color drain from her fingers. "It was so fast. The car came so fast."

She answered his questions quietly, giving no sign of the frustration

she must surely be feeling. Ray hated causing such intrusion, but he had no choice.

"What did the driver look like?"

"I couldn't see inside," she said.

"Were there passengers?"

"I couldn't see inside the car," she repeated, her voice dull and wooden.

"Right," said Ray. Where on earth were they going to start?

She looked at him. "Will you find him? The man who killed Jacob. Will you find him?" Her voice cracked and the words fell apart, morphing into a low moan. She bent forward, hugging the school bag into her stomach, and Ray felt a tightening in his chest. He took a deep breath, forcing the feeling away.

"We'll do everything we can," he said, despising himself for the cliché.

Kate came back from the kitchen with Brian behind her, carrying a mug of tea. "All right if I finish this statement now, guv?" he asked.

Stop upsetting my witness, you mean, Ray thought. "Yes, thank you—sorry for interrupting. Got everything we need, Kate?"

Kate nodded. She looked pale, and he wondered if Brian had said something to upset her. In a year or so he would know her as well as he knew the rest of the team, but he hadn't quite sussed her out yet. She was outspoken, he knew that much, not too nervous to put her point across at team meetings, and she learned fast.

They left the house and walked in silence back to the car.

"Are you okay?" he asked, although it was clear she wasn't. Her jaw was rigid; the color had completely drained from her face.

"Fine," Kate said, but her voice was thick and Ray realized she was trying not to cry.

"Hey," he said, reaching out and putting an awkward arm around her shoulders, "is it the job?" Over the years Ray had built a defensive mechanism against the fallout of cases like this one. Most police officers had one—it's why you had to turn a blind eye to some of the jokes bandied about the cafeteria—but perhaps Kate was different.

She nodded and took a deep, juddering breath. "I'm sorry, I'm not

normally like this, I promise. I've done dozens of death knocks, but . . . God, he was five years old! Apparently Jacob's father never wanted anything to do with him, so it's always been the two of them. I can't imagine what she's going through." Her voice cracked, and Ray felt the tightness in his chest return. His coping mechanism relied on focusing on the investigation—on the hard evidence before them—and not dwelling too deeply on the emotions of the people involved. If he thought too long about how it must feel to watch your child die in your arms, he would be no use to anyone, not least to Jacob and his mother. Ray's thoughts flicked involuntarily to his own children, and he had an irrational desire to call home and check they were both safe.

"Sorry." Kate swallowed and gave an embarrassed smile. "I promise I won't always be like this."

"Hey, it's okay," Ray said. "We've all been there."

She raised an eyebrow. "Even you? I didn't have you down as the sensitive type, boss."

"I have my moments." Ray squeezed her shoulder before taking his arm away. He didn't think he'd ever actually shed tears at a job, but he'd come pretty close. "You going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine. Thank you."

As they pulled away, Kate looked back at the scene, where the CSIs were still hard at work. "What sort of bastard kills a five-year-old boy, then drives off?"

Ray didn't hesitate. "That's exactly what we're going to find out."

2

I don't want a cup of tea, but I take it anyway. Cradling the mug in both hands, I press my face into the steam until it scalds me. Pain pricks my skin, deadening my cheeks and stinging my eyes. I fight the instinct to pull away; I need the numbness to blur the scenes that won't leave my head.

"Shall I get you something to eat?"

He towers over me and I know I should look up, but I can't bear to. How can he offer me food and drink as though nothing has happened? A wave of nausea wells up inside me and I swallow the acrid taste back down. He blames me for it. He hasn't said so, but he doesn't have to, it's there in his eyes. And he's right—it was my fault. We should have gone home a different way; I shouldn't have talked; I should have stopped him . . .

"No, thank you," I say quietly. "I'm not hungry."

The accident plays on a loop in my head. I want to press pause but the film is relentless: his body slamming against the windshield time after time after time. I raise the mug to my face again, but the tea has cooled and the warmth on my skin isn't enough to hurt. I can't feel the tears forming, but fat droplets burst as they hit my knees. I watch them soak into my jeans, and scratch my nail across a smear of clay on my thigh.

I look around the room at the home I have spent so many years creating. The curtains, bought to match the cushions; the artwork, some of my own, some I found in galleries and loved too much to leave

behind. I thought I was making a home, but I was only ever building a house.

My hand hurts. I can feel my pulse beating rapid and light in my wrist. I'm glad of the pain. I wish it were more. I wish it had been me the car hit.

He's talking again. *Police are out everywhere looking for the car . . . the papers will appeal for witnesses . . . it will be on the news . . .*

The room spins and I fix my gaze on the coffee table, nodding when it seems appropriate. He strides two paces to the window, then back again. I wish he would sit down—he's making me nervous. My hands are shaking and I put down my untouched tea before I drop it, but I clatter the china against the glass tabletop. He shoots me a look of frustration.

"Sorry," I say. There's a metallic taste in my mouth, and I realize I've bitten through the inside of my lip. I swallow the blood, not wanting to draw attention to myself by asking for a tissue.

Everything has changed. The instant the car slid across the wet tarmac, my whole life changed. I can see everything clearly, as though I am standing on the sidelines. I can't go on like this.

When I wake, for a second I'm not sure what this feeling is. Everything is the same, and yet everything has changed. Then, before I have even opened my eyes, there is a rush of noise in my head, like an underground train. And there it is: playing out in Technicolor scenes I can't pause or mute. I press the heels of my palms into my temples as though I can make the images subside through brute force alone, but still they come, thick and fast, as if without them I might forget.

On my bedside cabinet is the brass alarm clock Eve gave me when I went to university—"Because you'll never get to lectures, otherwise"—and I'm shocked to see it's ten thirty already. The pain in my hand has been overshadowed by a headache that blinds me if I move my head too fast, and as I peel myself from the bed, every muscle aches.

I pull on yesterday's clothes and go into the garden without stopping to make a coffee, even though my mouth is so dry it's an effort to swallow. I can't find my shoes, and the frost stings my feet as I make my way across the grass. The garden isn't large, but winter is on its way, and by the time I reach the other side I can't feel my toes.

My garden studio has been my sanctuary for the past five years. Little more than a shed to the casual observer, it is where I come to think, to work, and to escape. The wooden floor is stained from the lumps of clay that drop from my wheel, firmly placed in the center of the room, where I can move around it and stand back to view my work with a critical eye. Three sides of the shed are lined with shelves on which I place my sculptures, in an ordered chaos only I could understand. Works in progress, here; fired but not painted, here; waiting to go to customers, here. Hundreds of separate pieces, yet if I shut my eyes, I can still feel the shape of each one beneath my fingers, the wetness of the clay on my palms.

I take the key from its hiding place under the window ledge and open the door. It's worse than I thought. The floor lies unseen beneath a carpet of broken clay; rounded halves of pots ending abruptly in angry jagged peaks. The wooden shelves are all empty, my desk swept clear of work, and the tiny figurines on the window ledge are unrecognizable, crushed into shards that glisten in the sunlight.

By the door lies a small statuette of a woman. I made her last year, as part of a series of figures I produced for a shop in Clifton. I had wanted to produce something real, something as far from perfection as it was possible to get, and yet for it still to be beautiful. I made ten women, each with their own distinctive curves, their own bumps and scars and imperfections. I based them on my mother; my sister; girls I taught at pottery class; women I saw walking in the park. This one is me. Loosely, and not so anyone would recognize, but nevertheless me. Chest a little too flat; hips a little too narrow; feet a little too big. A tangle of hair twisted into a knot at the base of the neck. I bend down and pick her up. I had thought her intact, but as I touch her the clay moves

beneath my hands, and I'm left with two broken pieces. I look at them, then I hurl them with all my strength toward the wall, where they shatter into tiny pieces that shower down onto my desk.

I take a deep breath and let it slowly out.

I'm not sure how many days have passed since the accident, or how I have moved through the week when I feel as though I'm dragging my legs through molasses. I don't know what it is that makes me decide today is the day. But it is. I take only what will fit into my holdall, knowing that if I don't go right now, I might not be able to leave at all. I walk haphazardly about the house, trying to imagine never being here again. The thought is both terrifying and liberating. Can I do this? Is it possible to simply walk away from one life and start another? I have to try: it is my only chance of getting through this in one piece.

My laptop is in the kitchen. It holds photos, addresses, important information I might one day need and hadn't thought to save elsewhere. I don't have time to think about doing this now, and although it's heavy and awkward, I add it to my bag. I don't have much room left, but I can't leave without one final piece of my past. I discard a jumper and a fistful of T-shirts, making room instead for the wooden box in which my memories are hidden, crammed one on top of another beneath the cedar lid. I don't look inside—I don't need to. The assortment of teenage diaries, erratically kept and with regretted pages torn from their bindings; an elastic band full of concert tickets; my graduation certificate; clippings from my first exhibition. And the photos of the son I loved with an intensity that seemed impossible. Precious photographs. So few for someone so loved. Such a small impact on the world, yet the very center of my own.

Unable to resist, I open the box and pick up the uppermost photo: a Polaroid taken by a soft-spoken midwife on the day he was born. He is a tiny scrap of pink, barely visible beneath the white hospital blanket. In the photo my arms are fixed in the awkward pose of the

new mother, drowning in love and exhaustion. It had all been so rushed, so frightening, so unlike the books I had devoured during my pregnancy, but the love I had to offer never faltered. Suddenly unable to breathe, I place the photo back and push the box into my holdall.

Jacob's death is front-page news. It screams at me from the petrol station I pass, from the corner shop, and from the bus-stop queue where I stand as though I am no different from anyone else. As though I am not running away.

Everyone is talking about the accident. How could it have happened? Who could have done it? Each bus stop brings fresh news, and the snatches of gossip float back across our heads, impossible for me to avoid.

It was a black car.

It was a red car.

The police are close to an arrest.

The police have no leads.

A woman sits next to me. She opens her newspaper and suddenly it feels as though someone is pressing on my chest. Jacob's face stares at me, bruised eyes rebuking me for not protecting him, for letting him die. I force myself to look at him, and a hard knot tightens in my throat. My vision blurs and I can't read the words, but I don't need to—I've seen a version of this article in every paper I've passed today. The quotes from devastated teachers; the notes on flowers by the side of the road; the inquest—opened and then adjourned. A second photo shows a wreath of yellow chrysanthemums on an impossibly tiny coffin. The woman tuts and starts talking: half to herself, I think, but perhaps she feels I will have a view.

"Terrible, isn't it? And just before Christmas, too."

I say nothing.

"Driving off like that without stopping." She tuts again. "Mind you," she continues, "five years old. What kind of mother allows a child that age to cross a road on his own?"

I can't help it—I let out a sob. Without my realizing, hot tears stream down my cheeks and into the tissue pushed gently into my hand.

"Poor lamb," the woman says, as though soothing a small child. It's not clear if she means me, or Jacob. "You can't imagine, can you?"

But I can, and I want to tell her that, whatever she is imagining, it is a thousand times worse. She finds me another tissue, crumpled but clean, and turns the page of her newspaper to read about the Clifton Christmas lights switch-on.

I never thought I would run away. I never thought I would need to.

3

Ray made his way up to the third floor, where the frantic pace of twenty-four-seven policing gave way to the quiet carpeted offices of the nine-to-fivers and reactive CID. He liked it here best in the evening, when he could work through the ever-present stack of files on his desk without interruption. He walked through the open-plan area to where the DI's office had been created from a partitioned corner of the room.

"How did the briefing go?"

The voice made him jump. He turned to see Kate sitting at her desk. "Party Four's my old shift, you know. I hope they at least pretended to be interested." She yawned.

"It was fine," Ray said. "They're a good bunch, and if nothing else it keeps it fresh in their mind." Ray had managed to keep details of the hit-and-run on the briefing sheet for a week, but it had inevitably been pushed off as other jobs came in. He was trying his best to get around to all the shifts and remind them he still needed their help. He tapped his watch. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I'm trawling through the responses to the media appeals," she said, flicking her thumb across the edge of a pile of computer printouts. "Not that it's doing much good."

"Nothing worth following up?"

"Zilch," Kate said. "A few sightings of cars driving badly, the odd sanctimonious judgment on parental supervision, and the usual lineup

of crackpots and crazies, including some bloke predicting the Second Coming." She sighed. "We badly need a break—something to go on."

"I realize it's frustrating," Ray said, "but hang in there. It'll happen. It always does."

Kate groaned and pushed her chair away from the mound of paper. "I don't think I'm blessed with patience."

"I know the feeling." Ray sat on the edge of her desk. "This is the dull bit of investigating—the bit they don't show on TV." He grinned at her doleful expression. "But the payoff is worth it. Just think: in among all those pieces of paper could be the key to solving this case."

Kate eyed her desk dubiously and Ray laughed.

"Come on, I'll make us a cup of tea and give you a hand."

They sifted through each printed sheet, but didn't find the nugget of information Ray had hoped for.

"Ah well, at least that's another thing ticked off the list," he said. "Thanks for staying late to go through them all."

"Do you think we'll find the driver?"

Ray nodded firmly. "We have to believe we will, otherwise how can anyone have confidence in us? I've dealt with hundreds of jobs; I haven't solved them all—not by any means—but I've always been convinced the answer lies just around the corner."

"Stumpy said you've requested a *Crimewatch* appeal?"

"Yes. Standard practice with a hit-and-run—especially when there's a kid involved. It'll mean a lot more of this, I'm afraid." He gestured to the pile of paper, now fit for nothing but the shredder.

"That's okay," Kate said. "I could do with the overtime. I bought my first place last year and it's a bit of a stretch, to be honest."

"Do you live on your own?" He wondered if he was allowed to ask that sort of thing nowadays. In the time he'd been a copper, political correctness had reached a point where anything remotely personal

had to be skirted around. In a few years' time people wouldn't be able to talk at all.

"Mostly," Kate said. "I bought the place on my own, but my boyfriend stays over quite a lot. Best of both worlds, I reckon."

Ray picked up the empty mugs. "Right, well you'd better head off home," he said. "Your chap will be wondering where you are."

"It's okay. He's a chef," Kate said, but she stood up too. "He works worse shifts than I do. How about you? Doesn't your wife despair of the hours you do?"

"She's used to it," Ray said, raising his voice to continue the conversation as he went to get his jacket from his office. "She was a police officer too—we joined together."

The police training center in Ryton-on-Dunsmore had few redeeming features, but the cheap bar had definitely been one of them. During a particularly painful karaoke evening Ray had seen Mags sitting with her classmates. She was laughing, her head thrown back at something a friend was saying. When he saw her stand up to get a round in, he downed his almost-full pint so he could join her at the bar, only to stand there tongue-tied. Fortunately Mags was less reticent, and they were inseparable for the remainder of their sixteen-week course. Ray suppressed a grin as he remembered creeping from the female accommodation block to his own room at six in the morning.

"How long have you been married?" Kate said.

"Fifteen years. We got hitched once we were through our probation."

"But she's not in the job anymore?"

"Mags took a career break when Tom was born, and never went back after our youngest arrived," Ray said. "Lucy's nine now, and Tom's settling into his first year at secondary school, so Mags is starting to think about returning to work. She wants to retrain as a teacher."

"Why did she stop work for so long?" There was genuine curiosity in Kate's eyes and Ray remembered Mags being similarly incredulous in the days when they were both young in service. Mags's sergeant

had left to have children and Mags had told Ray she didn't see the point of a career if you were only going to give it all up.

"She wanted to be home for the kids," Ray said. He felt a stab of guilt. Had Mags wanted that? Or had she simply felt it was the right thing to do? Childcare was so expensive that Mags stopping work had seemed an obvious decision, and he knew she wanted to be there for the school runs, and for sports days and harvest festivals. But Mags was just as bright and as capable as he was—more so, if he was honest.

"I guess when you marry into the job you have to accept the crappy conditions with it." Kate switched off the desk lamp and they dropped into darkness for a second before Ray walked into the corridor and triggered the automatic light there.

"Occupational hazard," Ray agreed. "How long have you been with your chap?" They walked down toward the yard where their cars were parked.

"Only about six months," Kate said. "That's pretty good going for me, though—I normally dump them after a few weeks. My mother tells me I'm too fussy."

"What's wrong with them?"

"Oh, all sorts," she said cheerfully. "Too keen, not keen enough; no sense of humor, total buffoon . . ."

"Tough critic," said Ray.

"Maybe." Kate wrinkled her nose. "But it's important, isn't it—finding The One? I was thirty last month; I'm running out of time." She didn't look thirty, but then Ray had never been a great judge of age. He still looked in the mirror and saw the man he'd been in his twenties, even though the lines on his face told a different tale.

Ray reached into his pocket for his keys. "Well, don't be in too much of a hurry to settle down. It's not all roses round the door, you know."

"Thanks for the advice, Dad . . ."

"Hey, I'm not that old!"

Kate laughed. "Thanks for your help tonight. See you in the morning."

Ray chuckled to himself as he eased his car out from behind a marked Omega. *Dad*, indeed. The cheek of her.

When he arrived home Mags was in the sitting room with the television on. She wore pajama bottoms and one of his old sweatshirts, and her legs were curled up beneath her like a child. A newsreader was recapping on the events of the hit-and-run for the benefit of any local resident who had somehow missed the extensive coverage of the past week. Mags looked up at Ray and shook her head. "I can't stop watching it. That poor boy."

He sat down next to her and reached for the remote to mute the sound. The screen switched to old footage of the scene, and Ray saw the back of his own head as he and Kate walked from their car. "I know," he said, putting an arm around his wife. "But we'll get them."

The camera changed again, filling the screen with Ray's face as he delivered a piece to the camera, the interviewer out of shot.

"Do you think you will? Have you got any leads?"

"Not really." Ray sighed. "No one saw it happen—or if they did, they're not saying anything—so we're relying on forensics and intelligence."

"Could the driver have somehow not realized what they'd done?" Mags sat up and turned so she was facing him. She pushed her hair impatiently behind her ear. Mags had worn her hair the same way since Ray had known her: long and straight, with no fringe. It was as dark as Ray's, but unlike his it showed no sign of gray. Ray had tried to grow a beard shortly after Lucy had been born but had stopped after three days when it was clear there was more salt than pepper. Now he stayed clean-shaven, and tried to ignore the sprinkling of white at his temples that Mags told him was "distinguished."

"Not a chance," Ray said. "He went straight onto the hood."

Mags didn't flinch. The emotion on her face he had seen when he came home had been replaced by a look of concentration he remembered so well from their days on shift together.

"Besides," Ray continued, "the car stopped, then backed up and turned round. The driver might not have known Jacob had died, but they couldn't have missed the fact they'd hit him."

"Have you got someone on to the hospitals?" Mags said. "It's possible the driver sustained an injury too, and—"

Ray smiled. "We're on it, I promise." He stood up. "Look, don't take this the wrong way, but it's been a long day and I just want to have a beer, watch a bit of TV, and go to bed."

"Sure," Mags said tightly. "You know—old habits, and all that."

"I know, and I promise you we'll get the driver." He kissed her on the forehead. "We always do." Ray realized he had given Mags the very same promise he refused to give Jacob's mother because he couldn't possibly guarantee it. *We'll do our best,* he had told her. He only hoped their best was good enough.

He walked into the kitchen to find a drink. It was the involvement of a child that would have upset Mags. Perhaps telling her the details of the crash hadn't been such a good idea—after all, he was finding it hard enough to keep a lid on his own emotions, so it was understandable Mags would feel the same way. He would make an extra effort to keep things to himself.

Ray took his beer back into the sitting room and settled down next to her to watch the television, flicking away from the news on to one of the reality TV shows he knew she liked.

Arriving in his office with a clutch of files scooped up from the postroom, Ray dumped the paperwork on top of his already laden desk, causing the entire pile to slide to the floor.

"Bugger," he said, eyeing his desk dispassionately. The cleaner had been in, emptying the bin and making a vague attempt to dust around the mess, leaving a skirt of fluff around his in-tray. Two mugs of cold coffee flanked his keyboard and several Post-it notes stuck to his computer screen bore phone messages of varying degrees of importance.

Ray plucked them off and attached them to the outside of his diary, where there was already a neon pink Post-it reminding him to do his team's appraisals. As if they didn't all have enough to do. Ray fought an ongoing battle with himself about the bureaucracy of his day-to-day job. He couldn't quite bring himself to rail against it—not when the next rank was so tantalizingly within his grasp—but neither would he ever embrace it. An hour spent discussing his personal development was an hour wasted, as far as he was concerned, especially when there was a child's death to investigate.

As he waited for the computer to boot up, he tipped his chair onto its back legs and looked at the photo of Jacob pinned to the opposite wall. He had always kept out a photo of whoever was central to the investigation, ever since he started on CID, when his DS had reminded him gruffly that fingering a collar was all well and good, but Ray should never forget "what we're doing this shit for." The photos used to be on his desk, until Mags had come to the office one day, years ago. She'd brought him something—he couldn't remember what now; a forgotten file, maybe, or a packed lunch. He remembered feeling annoyed by the interruption when she called from the front desk to surprise him, and the annoyance turning to guilt when he realized she'd gone out of her way to see him. They had stopped en route to Ray's office so Mags could say hello to her old guv'nor, now a superintendent.

"Bet it feels odd, being here," Ray had said, when they reached his office.

Mags had laughed. "It's like I never left. You can take the girl out of the police, but you'll never take the police out of the girl." Her face was animated as she walked about the office, her fingers trailing lightly over his desk.

"Who's the other woman?" she had teased him, picking up the loose photograph propped up against the framed picture of her and the kids.

"A victim," Ray had replied, taking the photo gently from Mags and replacing it on his desk. "She was stabbed seventeen times by her boyfriend because she was late getting the tea on."

If Mags was shocked, she didn't show it. "You don't keep it in the file?"

"I like to have it where I can see it," Ray said. "Where I can't forget what I'm doing, why I'm working these hours, who it's all for." She had nodded at that. She understood him better than he realized sometimes.

"But not next to our photograph. Please, Ray." She had reached out a hand to take the photo again, looking around the office for somewhere more suitable. Her eyes settled on the redundant corkboard at the back of the room and, taking a drawing pin from the pot on his desk, she had fixed the picture of the smiling dead woman decisively in the middle of the board.

And there it stayed.

The smiling woman's boyfriend had long since been charged with murder, and a steady succession of victims had taken her place. The old man beaten black and blue by teenage muggers; the four women sexually assaulted by a taxi driver; and now Jacob, beaming in his school uniform. All of them relying on Ray. He scanned the notes he had made in his daybook the night before, preparing for this morning's briefing. They didn't have a lot to go on. As his computer beeped to tell him it had finally booted up, Ray mentally shook himself. They might not have a long list of leads, but there was still work to be done.

Shortly before ten o'clock, Stumpy and his team trooped through the door into Ray's office. Stumpy and Dave Hillsdon took up residence in two of the low chairs grouped around the coffee table, while the others stood at the back of the room or leaned against the wall. The third chair had been left empty in an unspoken nod to chivalry, and Ray was amused to see that Kate ignored the offering and joined Malcolm Johnson to stand at the back. Their numbers had been temporarily boosted by two officers on loan from shift, looking uncomfortable in hastily borrowed suits, and PC Phil Crocker from the Collision Investigation Unit.

"Good morning, everyone," Ray said. "I won't keep you long. I'd like

to introduce Brian Walton from Party One, and Pat Bryce from Party Three. It's good to have you lads, and there's plenty to do, so just muck in." Brian and Pat nodded in acknowledgment. "Okay," Ray continued. "The purpose of this briefing is to revisit what we know about the Fishponds hit-and-run, and where we go next. As you can imagine, the chief is all over this one like a rash." He looked at his notes, although he knew the contents by heart. "At 1628 on Monday, 26 November, 999 operators picked up a call from a woman living on Enfield Avenue. She had heard a loud bang, and then a scream. By the time she got outside, it was all over, and Jacob's mother was crouching over him in the road. The ambulance response time was six minutes, and Jacob was pronounced dead at the scene."

Ray paused for a moment, to let the gravity of the investigation sink in. He glanced at Kate, but her expression was neutral, and he didn't know if he was relieved or saddened that she had managed to build her defenses so successfully. She wasn't the only one apparently devoid of emotion. A stranger scanning the room might assume the police couldn't care less about the death of this little boy, when Ray knew it had touched them all. He continued with the briefing.

"Jacob turned five last month, soon after starting school at St. Mary's, on Beckett Street. On the day of the hit-and-run, Jacob had been at an after-school club while his mum was working. Her statement says they were walking home and chatting about the day, when she let go of Jacob's hand and he ran across the road toward their house. From what she's said it's something he'd done before—he didn't have good road sense and his mum always made sure she held on to him when they were near a road." *Except this one time*, he added silently. One tiny lapse of concentration, and she wouldn't ever be able to forgive herself for it. Ray shuddered involuntarily.

"What did she see of the car?" Brian Walton asked.

"Not a lot. She claims that, far from braking, the car was speeding up when it hit Jacob, and that she narrowly avoided being hit as well; in

fact she fell and hurt herself. The attending officers noticed she had injuries, but she refused treatment. Phil, can you talk us through the scene?"

The only uniformed officer in the room, Phil Crocker was a collision investigator, and with years of experience on the Roads Policing department he was Ray's go-to man for all traffic matters.

"There's not much to say." Phil shrugged. "The wet weather means no tire marks, so I can't give you an estimate on speed, or tell you if the vehicle was braking prior to impact. We seized a piece of plastic casing about twenty meters from the point of collision, and the vehicle examiner has confirmed it's from the fog light of a Volvo."

"That sounds encouraging," Ray said.

"I've given the details to Stumpy," Phil said. "Other than that, I'm afraid I've got nothing."

"Thanks, Phil." Ray picked up his notes again. "Jacob's post-mortem report shows he died from blunt force trauma. He had multiple fractures and a ruptured spleen." Ray had attended the autopsy himself, less because of the need for evidential continuity, and more because he couldn't bear to think of Jacob alone in the cold mortuary. He had looked without seeing, keeping his eyes away from Jacob's face, and focusing on the evidence the home office pathologist had issued in staccato sound bites. They were both glad when it was over.

"Judging from the point of impact, we're looking at a small vehicle, so we can rule out minivans or SUVs. The pathologist recovered fragments of glass from Jacob's body, but I understand there's nothing to tie it to a particular vehicle—isn't that right, Phil?" Ray glanced at the collision investigator, who nodded.

"The glass itself isn't vehicle-specific," Phil said. "If we had an offender they might have matching particles in their clothing—it's almost impossible to get rid of. But we didn't find any glass at the scene, which suggests the windshield cracked on impact but didn't shatter. Find me the car, and we'll match it to the pieces on the victim, but without that . . ."

"But it does at least help to confirm what damage might be on the car," Ray said, trying to put a positive spin on the few lines of enquiry they did actually have. "Stumpy, why don't you run through what's been done so far?"

The DS looked at the wall of Ray's office, where the investigation played out in a series of maps, charts, and flipchart sheets, each with a list of actions. "House-to-house was done on the night, and again the following day by shift. Several people heard what they've described as a 'loud bang,' followed by a scream, but no one saw the car. We've had PCSOs out on the school run talking to parents, and we've letter-dropped in the streets on either side of Enfield Avenue, appealing for witnesses. The roadside signs are still out, and Kate's following up on the few calls we've had as a result of those."

"Anything useful?"

Stumpy shook his head. "It's not looking good, boss."

Ray ignored his pessimism. "When does the *Crimewatch* appeal go out?"

"Tomorrow night. We've got a reconstruction of the accident, and they've put together some whizzy slides with what the car might look like, then they'll run the studio piece the DCI did with their presenter."

"I'll need someone to stay late to pick up any strong leads as soon as it airs, please," Ray said to the group. "The rest we can get to in slow-time." There was a pause and he looked around expectantly. "Someone's got to do it . . ."

"I don't mind." Kate waved a hand in the air and Ray gave her an appreciative glance.

"What about the fog light Phil mentioned?" Ray said.

"Volvo have given us the part number, and we've got a list of all the garages who have been sent one in the last ten days. I've tasked Malcolm with contacting them all—starting with the local ones—and getting the index numbers of cars they've been fitted to since the collision."

"Okay," Ray said. "Let's keep that in mind when we're making enqui-

ries, but remember it's just one piece of evidence—we can't be absolutely certain it's a Volvo we're looking for. Who's leading on CCTV?"

"We are, boss." Brian Walton raised his hand. "We've seized everything we could get our hands on: all the council CCTV, and anything from the businesses and petrol stations in the area. We've gone for just a half hour before the collision and half hour afterward, but even so there are several hundred hours to get through."

Ray winced at the thought of his overtime budget. "Let me see the list of cameras," he said. "We won't be able to watch all of it, so I'd like your thoughts on what to prioritize."

Brian nodded.

"Plenty to be getting on with, then," Ray said. He gave a confident smile, despite his misgivings. They were a fortnight on from the "golden hour" immediately following a crime, when chances of detection were highest, and although the team was working flat out, they were no further forward. He paused before breaking the bad news. "You won't be surprised to hear that all leave has been canceled until further notice. I'm sorry, and I'll do what I can to make sure you all get some time with your families over Christmas."

There was a murmur of dissent as everyone filed out of the office, but no one complained, and Ray knew they wouldn't. Although no one voiced it, they were all thinking of what Christmas would be like for Jacob's mother this year.

THE TRAVELERS

A NOVEL

CHRIS PAVONE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE EXPATS AND THE ACCIDENT

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First Edition

THE TRAVELERS

To know that one has a secret is to know half the secret itself.

—HENRY WARD BEECHER

PROLOGUE

MENDOZA, ARGENTINA

The door flies open. Bright light floods into the dark room, framing the silhouette of a large man who stands there, unmoving.

"What?" Will demands, raising himself onto his elbows, squinting into the harsh light. "What's going on?"

The man doesn't answer.

"What do you want?"

The man remains in the doorway, saying nothing, a mute looming hulk. He surveys the hotel room, the disheveled bed, discarded clothing, burned-down candles, wine bottle and glasses.

"¿Qué quieres?" Will tries.

Will had been lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, worrying. But not about this, not about an intruder. Now Will's mind is flooding with competing scenarios and their different levels of emergency: drunk hotel guest, confused night porter, hotel security, jealous boyfriend, burglar, murderer.

Will's panic is rising, and his eyes flicker toward escape, the French doors that he opened just a few minutes ago, doors facing the vineyard that falls away from the hacienda, with the snowcapped peaks of the Andes in the distance, under the big fat moon. He pulls himself to a sitting position, uncomfortably aware of his bare chest. "Who are you?" he asks assertively, trying to project confidence. "Why are you here?"

The man nods, takes a step forward, and pulls the door closed behind him.

The room falls into the semidarkness of flickering candlelight and the bright blue LED glow of the clock, 2:50 A.M. Will's eyes readjust while his heart races, his breath coming quick and shallow, fight or flight, or both. His imagination hops around the room, trying out different items as weapons, swinging the standing lamp, breaking the wine bottle. A

fireplace tool—the poker—would be the best, but that's on the far side of the room, on the other side of this trespasser, this indistinct peril.

"No," the man breaks his silence. "Why are *you* here?"

The man's hand finds a switch, a soft click and a harsh transformation, Will's pupils contracting a sliver of a second too slowly. In the light, Will realizes that he has seen this man before. He can't remember where, or when exactly, but it was sometime recent. This discovery feels more like a defeat than a victory, as if he has found out that he lost something.

"Who are *you*, Will Rhodes?"

The man's English doesn't have any trace of an accent, Argentine or otherwise. This is a big beefy American who's continuing to walk toward the bed, toward Will, slowly, menacing. It takes a while; it's a large room, luxuriously decorated and extravagantly linened, with superfluous furniture and wine-country knickknacks and signifiers of the Pampas—mounted horns, a cowhide rug. It's a room designed to remind well-off guests of where they are, and why they're here, when they could be anywhere. Will has stayed in many different versions of this room, all over the world, always on someone else's tab.

"Are you robbing me?" Will inventories the valuables he might lose here, and it doesn't amount to much.

"Kidnapping?" No one except the most ill-informed amateur would take the tremendous risk of kidnapping for the paltry rewards that could be traded for Will Rhodes. This guy doesn't look like an ill-informed amateur.

The intruder finally arrives at the bedside, and reaches into his jacket. Will scoots away from whatever potential threat is being withdrawn from this man's pocket, in the middle of the night, halfway across the globe from his home, from his wife, his life.

If Will had any doubts earlier, he doesn't anymore: he's now positive he made a terrible mistake tonight. The whole thing seemed too easy, too perfect. He'd been an idiot.

"Look," the man says, extending his arm, holding something, a little flick of the wrist—here, take this—and the smartphone falls into Will's palm. He glances at the screen, a still image, an indecipherable blur of faint light amid darkness, unrecognizable forms in an unidentifiable location.

"What's this?"

"Hit Play."

Will touches the touchscreen, and video-navigation buttons appear, the recently invented language we all now know. He hits the triangle.

A video begins to play: a naked woman straddling a man, her hips pistoning up and down, like an out-of-control oil derrick, a dangerous situation. Will watches for two seconds, just enough to figure out who it is in the poor-quality video, low light, an oblique angle, garbled audio. He touches his fingertip to the square button. The image is now frozen, the woman's back arched, head thrown back, mouth open in ecstasy. Apparent ecstasy.

Of course.

Will isn't entirely surprised that something bad is happening. But this particular end seems to be an excess of bad, disproportionate bad, unfair bad. Or maybe not. Maybe this—whatever this turns out to be—is exactly the appropriate level of bad.

His mind runs through a handful of options before he makes a decision that's by necessity hasty. He considers trying to get on more clothes—"Hey, how about you let me get dressed?"—but clothed, he might look like a threat; wearing only pajama bottoms, he's a victim, sympathetic to the guard he hopes to encounter. This new hotel takes security seriously, peace of mind for their intended mega-rich clientele, with round-the-clock rent-a-cops and a close relationship with the police.

Will extends his arm to return the phone, rolling his body toward the bedside.

Here we go.

When the man reaches to collect his device, Will hurls it across the room.

The intruder spins to watch the phone's flight—*crack*—while Will springs up, heaves his body into this man, knocking him over, landing atop him, pajama'd legs astride the guy's bulky torso, a punch to the face, and another, blood pouring from his nose.

Will hops up, barely feeling the engagement of his muscles, his bloodstream flooded with survival-preservation hormones. He flies through the parted curtains. He's out on the moonlit lawn, barefoot and shirtless, sprinting through the cool dewy grass toward the glowing lights of the

sprawling main house, toward the security guards and their weapons and their hotline to the *federales*, who at the very least will detain the intruder while Will has a chance to make a call or two, and now Will is feeling almost confident, halfway across—

The fist comes out of nowhere. Will stumbles backward a step before losing his feet entirely, his rear falling down and his feet flying up, and he thinks he can see a woman—*the* woman—standing over him, her arm finishing its follow-through of a right hook, just before the back of Will's head slams into the ground, and everything goes black.

PART

I

1

FIVE WEEKS EARLIER
NEW YORK CITY

A man is running along the sidewalk of a quiet leafy Brooklyn street, panting, sweat beaded on his face, quarter to six in the morning. He's wearing jeans, a dirty tee shirt, dingy white sneakers. This man is not exercising; he's working. He reaches into a canvas sling, cocks his arm, and tosses a newspaper, which flies across a fence, over a yard, landing on a townhouse stoop, skittering to a stop against the front door. A perfect toss.

In the street beside him, a battered old station wagon crawls at three miles per hour, the car's tailgate held partly open by a couple of jerry-rigged bungee cords. It's his sister behind the wheel of the Chevy, which they bought from a junkyard in Willets Point owned by another guy from Campeche. There are a lot of Mexicans in New York City, but not too many from the west-coast Yucatán city. Four hundred dollars was a good deal, a favor, a chit to be returned at some indefinite point, for some unspecified price.

The sling is empty. The man jogs into the street, and hauls a pile of papers from the way-back. He returns to the sidewalk, to the house with scaffolding over the portico, and a piece of plywood covering a parlor-floor window, and a stack of lumber plus a couple of sawhorses dominating the small front yard, whose sole greenery is a rosebush that's at least half-dead.

He tosses the newspaper, but this time his aim isn't perfect—he's been throwing papers for an hour—and he knocks over a contractor's plastic bucket, from which an empty beer bottle clatters onto the stone stoop before falling to the top step, crash, into pieces.

"Mierda."

The man jogs to the stoop, rights the bucket, picks up the broken glass,

sharp shards, lethal weapons, like what his cousin Alonso used to warn off that *coño*, that *narcotraficante* who was grabby with Estellita at the bar under the expressway. Violence has always been a part of Alonso's life; sometimes it's been one of his job responsibilities. For some people violence is woven into their fabric, like the bright blood-red thread that his grandmother would weave into the turquoise and indigo serapes on her loom that was tied to the lime tree in the backyard, before that type of work relocated to more picturesque villages within easier reach of the *turistas*, who paid a premium to travel dusty roads into tiny hamlets to buy their ethnic handicrafts directly from the barefoot sources.

The man runs out to the car, deposits the broken glass in the trunk, then back to the sidewalk, tossing another paper, racing to make up for lost time. You waste ten seconds here, twenty there, and by the end of the route you're a half-hour behind, and customers are angry—standing out there in bathrobes, hands on hips, looking around to see if neighbors got their papers—and you don't get your ten-dollar tips at Christmas, and you can't pay the rent, and next thing you know, you're begging that *coño* for a job as a lookout, just another *ilegal* on the corner, hiding from the NYPD and the DEA and the INS, until one night you get gut-shot for sixty dollars and a couple grams of *llelo*.

He tosses another paper.

The noise of the breaking bottle wakes Will Rhodes before he wants to be awake, in the middle of a dream, a good one. He reaches in the direction of his wife, her arm bare and soft and warm and peach-fuzzy, the thin silk of her nightie smooth and cool, the strap easily pushed aside, exposing her freckled shoulder, the hollow at the base of her neck, the rise of her . . .

Her nothing. Chloe isn't there.

Will's hand is resting on the old linen sheet that bears someone else's monogram, some long-dead Dutch merchant, a soft stack that Will purchased cheaply at a sparse flea market along a stagnant canal in Delft, refitted by an eccentric seamstress in Red Hook who repurposes odd-shaped old fabrics into the standardized dimensions of contemporary mattresses and pillows and mass-production dining tables. Will wrote an

article about it, just a couple hundred words, for an alternative weekly. He writes an article about everything.

Chloe's note is scrawled on a Post-it, stuck on her pillow:

Early meeting, went to office. Have good trip. —C

No *love*. No *miss you*. No-nonsense nothing.

Will had gotten out of the karaoke bar before falling into the clutches of that wine rep, back-seam stockings and hot pink bra straps, a propensity for leaning forward precipitously. She was waiting to pounce when he returned to the table after his heartfelt "Fake Plastic Trees," a restrained bow to the applause of his dozen inebriated companions, whose clapping seemed louder and more genuine than the measured clapping of the thousand pairs of hands that had congratulated Will hours earlier, in the ballroom, when he'd won an award.

"You look great in a tuxedo," she'd said, her hand suddenly on his thigh.

"Everybody looks great in a tuxedo," Will countered. "That's the point. Good night!"

But it was two in the morning when he got home, earliest. Maybe closer to three. He remembers fumbling with his keys. In the hall, he kicked off his patent-leather shoes, so he wouldn't clomp loudly up the wood stairs in leather soles. He thinks he stumbled—yes, he can feel a bruise on his shin. Then he probably stood in their door-less doorway, swaying, catching a glimpse of Chloe's uncovered thigh, eggshell satin in the streetlight . . .

She hates it when Will comes home in the middle of the night wearing inebriated sexual arousal like a game-day athletic uniform, sweaty and stained and reeking of physical exertion. So he probably stripped—yes, there's his tuxedo, half on the chair, bow tie on the floor—and passed out, snoring like a freight train, stinking like a saloon.

Will shades his eyes against the sunlight pouring through the large uncurtained six-over-six windows, with bubbles and chips and scratches and whorls in the glass, original to the house, 1884. Built back when there were no telephones, no laptops or Internet, no cars or airplanes or atomic bombs or world wars. But way back then, before his great-grandparents

were born, these same glass panes were here, in these windows, in Will and Chloe's new old house.

He hears noise from downstairs. Was that the front door closing?

"Chloe?" he calls out, croaky.

Then footsteps on the creaky stairs, but no answer. He clears his throat. "Chlo?"

The floorboards in the hall groan, the noise getting nearer, a bit creepy—

"Forgot my wallet," Chloe says. She looks across the room at the big battered bureau, locates the offending item, then turns to her husband. "You feeling okay?"

He understands the accusation. "Sorry I was so late. Did I wake you?"

Chloe doesn't answer.

"In fact I was getting ready to come home when . . ."

Chloe folds her arms across her chest. She doesn't want to hear this story. She simply wants him to come home earlier, having had less to drink; their time home together doesn't overlap all that much. But staying out till all hours is his job—it's not optional, it's not indulgent, it's required. And Chloe knows it. She too has done this job.

Plus Will doesn't think it's fair that once again Chloe left home before he awoke, depositing another loveless note on the pillow, on another day when he's flying.

Nevertheless, he knows he needs to defend himself, and to apologize. "I'm sorry. But you know how much I love karaoke." He pulls the sheet aside, pats the bed. "Why don't you come over here? Let me make it up to you."

"I have a meeting."

Chloe's new office is in a part of the city filled with government bureaucracies, law firms, jury duty. Will ran into her one lunchtime—he was leaving a building-department fiasco, she was picking up a sandwich. They were both surprised to see each other, both flustered, as if they'd been caught at something. But it was only the interruption of the expectation of privacy.

"Plus I'll be ovulating in, like, six days. So save it up, sailor."

"But in six days I'll still be in France."

"I thought you were back Friday."

"Malcolm extended the trip."

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot to tell you."

"Well that's shitty. There goes another month, wasted."

Wasted isn't exactly what Will would call the month. "Sorry."

"So you keep saying." She shakes her head. "Look, I have to go."

Chloe walks to the bed. The mattress is on the floor, no frame, no box spring. Will has a mental image of the perfect frame, but he hasn't yet been able to find it, and he'd rather have nothing than the wrong thing. Which is why the house is filled with doorways without doors, doors without doorknobs, sinks without faucets, bare bulbs without fixtures; to Will, all of these no-measures are preferable to half-measures.

This is one of the things that drives Chloe crazy about the renovation project, about her husband in general. She doesn't care if everything is perfect; she merely wants it to be good enough. And this is exactly why Will doesn't let her handle any of it. He knows that she will settle, will make compromises that he wouldn't. Not just about the house.

She bends down, gives him a closed-mouth kiss. Will reaches for her arm.

"Really, I'm running late," she says, but with little conviction—almost none—and a blush, a suppressed smile. "I gotta go." But there's no resistance in her arm, she's not trying to pull away, and she allows herself to fall forward, into bed, onto her husband.

Will sprawls amid the sheets while Chloe rearranges her hair, and replaces earrings, reties her scarf, all these tasks executed distractedly but deftly, the small competencies of being a woman, skills unknowable to him. The only thing men learn is how to shave.

"I love watching you," he says, making an effort.

"*Mmm*," she mutters, not wondering what the hell he's talking about.

Everybody says that the second year of marriage is the hardest. But their second year was fine, they were young and they were fun, both being paid to travel the world, not worrying about much. That year was terrific.

It's their fourth year that has been a drag. The year began when they moved into this decrepit house, a so-called investment property that

Chloe's father had left in his will, three apartments occupied by below-market and often deadbeat tenants, encumbered by serious code violations, impeded by unfindable electrical and plumbing plans—every conceivable problem, plus a few inconceivable ones.

The work on the house sputtered after demolition, then stalled completely due to the unsurprising problem of running out of money: everything has been wildly more expensive than expected. That is, more than Will expected; Chloe expected exactly what transpired.

So flooring is uninstalled, plumbing not entirely working, kitchen unfinished and windows unrepaired and blow-in insulation un-blown-in. Half of the second floor and all of the third are uninhabitable. The renovation is an unmitigated disaster, and they are broke, and Chloe is amassing a stockpile of resentment about Will's refusals to make the compromises that would allow this project to be finished.

Plus, after a year of what is now called "trying" on a regular basis—a militaristically regimented schedule—Chloe is still not pregnant. Will now understands that ovulation tests and calendars are the opposite of erotic aids.

When Chloe isn't busy penciling in slots for results-oriented, missionary-position intercourse, she has become increasingly moody. And most of her moods are some variation of bad: there's hostile bad and surly bad and resentful bad and today's, distracted bad.

"What do you think this is about?" she asks. "The extended trip?"

Will shrugs, but she can't see it, because she's not looking his way. "Malcolm hasn't fully explained yet." He doesn't want to tell Chloe anything specific until he has concrete details—what exactly the new assignment will be, any additional money, more frequent travel.

"How is Malcolm, anyway?"

As part of the big shake-up at *Travelers* a year ago, Will was hired despite Chloe's objections—both of them shouldn't work at the same struggling company in the same dying industry. So she quit. She left the full-time staff and took the title of contributing editor, shared with a few dozen people, some with only tenuous connections to the magazine accompanied by token paychecks, but still conferring a legitimacy—names on masthead, business cards in wallets—that could be leveraged while hunting for other opportunities.

Hunting for Other Opportunities: good job title for magazine writers.

Chloe came to her decision rationally, plotting out a pros-and-cons list. She is the methodical pragmatist in the couple; Will is the irrational emotional idealistic one.

"I think the takeover is stressing Malcolm out," Will says. "The negotiations are ending, both sides are doing due diligence. He seems to have a lot of presentations, reports, meetings."

"Is he worried for his job?"

"Not that he'll admit—you know how Malcolm is—but he has to be, right?"

Chloe grunts an assent; she knows more about Malcolm's office persona than Will does. Those two worked together a long time, and it was a difficult transition when Malcolm eventually became her boss. They both claimed that her departure was 100 percent amicable, but Will had his doubts. The closed-door I-quit meeting seemed to last a long time.

They also both claimed they'd never had a thing—no flirtation, no fling, no late-night make-out session in Mallorca or Malaysia. Will had doubts about that too.

"Okay then," she says, leaning down for another kiss, this one more generous than their previous good-bye. "Have a good trip."

People can spend hours packing for a weeklong overseas trip. They stand in their closets, desultorily flipping through hangers. They rummage through medicine cabinets, searching for the travel-sized toothpaste. They scour every drawer, box, and shelf for electrical adapters. They might have some of the foreign currency lying around somewhere, maybe in the desk . . . ? They double- and triple-check that their passports are in their pockets.

It's been a long time since Will was one of those amateurs. He collects his bright-blue roll-aboard—easy to describe to a bellhop, or to spot in a lost-and-found. It would also be easy to ID on a baggage carousel, but that will never happen. Will doesn't check luggage.

He mechanically fills the bag with piles from dresser drawers, the same exact items he packed for his previous trip, each in its preordained position in the bag's quadrants, which are delineated by rolled-up boxer

shorts and socks. It takes Will five minutes to pack, long-zip short-zip upright on the floor, the satisfying clunk of rubberized wheels on bare parquet.

He walks into his office. One bookshelf is lined with shoeboxes labeled in a meticulous hand: W. EUROPE, E. EUROPE, AFRICA & MIDEAST, ASIA & AUSTRALIA, LATIN AMERICA & CARIBBEAN, USA. From W. EUROPE Will chooses a small stack of euros from among other clipped-together clumps of paper money, and a packet of Paris Metro tickets, and a burgundy-covered street-map booklet. He grabs a plug adapter, refits his computer charger with the long cylindrical prongs, ready to be inserted into exotic European outlets.

Last but not least, his passport, thick with the extra pages from the State Department, filled with stamps and visas, exit and entry, coming and going. It's the rare immigration officer who fails to comment on the peripatetic paperwork. Will has been detained before, and no doubt will be again.

Will stands in the doorway, looking around, worried that he's forgetting something, what . . . ?

He remembers. Opens a drawer, and removes a box clad in wrapping paper and bound in silk ribbon, just small enough to fit into his jacket pocket, just large enough to be uncomfortable there.

Will clambers down the long flight of rickety stairs to the parlor floor, and out the front door. He picks up the newspaper, descends more dangerous steps, and exits their postage-stamp yard, where a surprisingly undead rose vine clings to the iron fence, a handful of perfect red blooms.

He sets off toward the subway, dragging his bag, just as he's done every few weeks for a decade.

The bag rolls over the remains of a single rose that seems to have met a violent end, petals strewn, stem broken. Will glances at the little red mess, wondering what could have happened, and when, why someone would murder one of his flowers right here in front of the house. He can't help but wonder if it was Chloe who did this.

Will has been increasingly worried that his bride is slipping away, that theirs may become another marriage that succumbs to financial pressures and work travel and the looming specter of infertility. Worried that love is

not always enough, or not permanent enough. Worried that all the non-fun parts will eclipse the fun parts.

Will bends over, looks closer. This decimated flower is not a rose, not from his yard, nothing to do with him. It's someone else's dead carnation, someone else's crime of passion.

Maybe he's worried about all the wrong things.

2

NEW YORK CITY

The door's plaque reads simply EDITOR, no name plate, as if the human being in there is interchangeable with the ones who came before, and the ones who will come after. An office that's occupied by a job, not by a person. There have been only four of them in the magazine's seventy-year history.

"Come!"

Malcolm Somers is sitting in his big executive chair behind his big executive desk, across from Gabriella Rivera, her profile framed by the floor-to-ceiling window onto Avenue of the Americas. Nothing is visible outside except other office buildings, up and down the avenue, thousands of windows into other lives, suits and ties, computers and coat racks, ergonomic chairs and solar-screen blinds and pressed-wood L-shaped desks exuding formaldehyde, and not even the barest glimpse of sky above nor street below, which can be seen only with face pressed against the glass, something no one except a child would do. Malcolm's kids do it.

Gabriella doesn't turn to see who's entering. She remains sitting perfectly still with her perfect legs crossed, one low heel dangling from the aloft foot, a sleek elegant figure, like an ad for something, a product, Sexy Professional Woman Sitting in Stylish Chair™. An ad for the product that is herself.

"Sorry to interrupt," Will says. "I've got a flight . . ."

Will stands in the doorway of the big room, waiting for permission to enter, for Malcolm to dismiss Gabriella.

"Gabs?" Malcolm asks.

The deputy editor waits a punitive beat before she nods. She stands and smooths her skirt, a garment that straddles the line of decency, depending on point of view. Most men would say it's just the right amount of tight and short; most women would disagree.

Gabriella turns, gives Will that dazzling smile. But beneath the veneer of those white teeth, those plush pillows of lips, Will can see the resentment at her interrupted meeting, maybe more. Will senses something in the air here, between these two. And not for the first time.

"Sorry," Will reiterates, apologizing to another woman who doesn't want to hear it.

She shrugs, not his fault, something else at play. "Have a good trip. France, is it? How long?"

"A week."

Gabriella cocks her head, considering something. "We should have a drink soon," she says, though Will doesn't think that's what she'd been considering. "It's been a while." On her way past, she squeezes Will's arm, and he feels a jolt from the strong current of sexual energy that flows from this woman.

Malcolm calls after her, "The door, please?"

She shuts it from the far side, perhaps a little too firmly, but still perfectly deniable, not a slam.

Malcolm's suit jacket is hanging on a wooden valet, his sleeves are rolled at the cuff. As always, the top button of his shirt is undone, the knot of his necktie loosened, like he just finished a long hard day, having a glass of scotch, neat. He looks exhausted, bags under his eyes, a hollowness to his cheeks. He's usually an extra-healthy-looking specimen, a natural athlete who spends his weekends outdoors, on boats and grass and sand, with little children and golf clubs, with the wholesome perks of his position.

But not now. Now he looks like crap.

"How are things, Rhodes?" Malcolm asks. "Sorry I couldn't stay for the after-party last night. Who was there? Did that hot wine rep of yours come along?"

"Come on, man, stop saying things like that. You know someday somebody is going to overhear you, and get me in a whole lot of trouble."

Malcolm holds up his hands, mea culpa, a smirk that's the tell that his baiting is mostly—or partially—an act. Malcolm is playing a role, a trope, a fictional misogynist, a guy's-guy buddy. Just as he plays the role of hypercritical boss and mercurial editor-in-chief, the role of lustful middle-

aged married man, one role after another that he inhabits with patent detachment. Malcolm is so consistently ironic about so much that he's even ironic about his irony, which makes it tough to know what Malcolm truly feels about anything.

"And the Luxembourg trip? You went to a formal thing at the—what was it?—palace? Castle? How was that?"

"Deadly. Though I did get to shake hands with the grand duke. The party was at his palace, a sprawling pile in the middle of the city. Diplomats and bankers and a smattering of Eurotrash nobility and, probably, no shortage of spies in black ties."

Malcolm stares at Will, one corner of his mouth curled, not quite committing to a smile. "So tell me, Rhodes"—he says, shifting gears—"are you *ever* going to turn in that sidebar on the Swiss Alps? How long does it take to write three hundred words? You think that just because you're not hideous to look at, you can get away with—"

"Not true."

"—anything, but if we have to hold the issue—"

"*Stop!* I'll finish today."

Malcolm stands, stretches, walks around his desk. His limp is always most pronounced when he's been sitting awhile. After two hours in a theater or airplane seat, he hobbles like an arthritic old man. But not on the tennis court.

"I just need to cross my i's and dot my t's. I'll hit Send before liftoff. And it's five hundred words, not three hundred, you ignorant bastard."

Malcolm plops into an armchair, next to the coffee table. "Listen, sit down, will you? I want to talk about that new column I mentioned. It is indeed for you. Congratulations, Rhodes, you're moving up in the world."

"I'm honored."

"Try to restrain your enthusiasm. It'll be called 'Americans Abroad,' and it'll be about—wait for it—Americans, who are living where?"

"I'll go out on a limb: *abroad*?"

"That's the sort of sharpness I expect from you East Coast media-elite types."

"I'm from Minnesota."

"With your Ivy League liberal-arts degrees."

"I majored in journalism at Northwestern. But didn't you go to school somewhere in the Northeast? Athletic uniforms a color called *crimson*?"

"It'll be the whole expat experience, Rhodes, the communities, the lifestyle. Why'd they move there? How'd they choose the locale? Did they integrate into the local culture, or not? We'll explore the reality behind the fantasy. But without digging too deep, without unearthing all the ugly sad lonely crap down there. You know . . ." Malcolm gestures in the vague direction of ugly sad lonely crap, which as it happens is toward Times Square.

Will is not sure that he understands. "What's the point, Malcolm? What's this about?"

"What's it ever about?" Malcolm extends his hand, opens it, explanation self-evident, voilà. "Escapist fantasy. Aspirational lifestyle. Ad sales. It's a pay bump, Rhodes, five K per annum. Plus feature bylines with big contributor-page photos guaranteed for four issues per year. That is, if you can deliver the four pieces, you lazy shiftless piece of shit."

Will turns this idea over in his mind. It's not exactly the career advancement he was hoping for, which is an elusive concept to begin with. Will doesn't have any concrete vision more rational than a movie deal for an article he hasn't written, a contract for a book he hasn't conceived.

He'd like to imagine he'll get what he deserves. He wants to believe that this is how the world—or at least his world, upper-middle-class, college-educated, white-collar white-people America—works: meritocracy. This is the promise.

But what does Will Rhodes merit? Does he have the right to be envious of what he doesn't have? Resentful? Or should he be extremely grateful for what he does have?

Will is on the cusp of the collapse of his idealism, alternating hope and despair day by day, sometimes minute by minute, wondering if his life can still turn out to be perfect. Like being twelve years old, toggling back and forth between little kid and teenager, crushes on girls but also clutching a teddy bear in the middle of the night.

Malcolm is on no such cusp. A decade separates the two men, and somewhere in there is the point at which idealism gave way to pragmatism, completely and irrevocably. Will doesn't know how this is supposed to happen, or when. Is it getting married? Having kids? Is it when one

parent dies, or both? Is it turning thirty, or forty, fifty? What's the thing that happens that makes people think: it's time to grow up, face reality, get my act together?

Whatever it is, it hasn't yet happened to Will. So he finds himself constantly disappointed in the world, in its failures to live up to his ideals.

"What are we looking for, Mal? Anything different?"

"We're *always* looking for something different, Rhodes, you know that. Different, in the same precise goddamned way. Plus, you know what this assignment means?"

Will shakes his head.

"Rampant opportunities. There are a lot of expat housewives out there. Bored, hot, *horny* expat housewives. A target-rich environment."

"Give me a break."

Malcolm smiles. "Start putting together notes. That's why we booked you for a few more days in southwest France. The Paris bureau has contacts for you."

"Really?"

"What? You have a problem with drinking wine in the South of France?"

"No, it's just that I've been going through the archives, and we've run dozens of full-length articles—no exaggeration, *dozens*—about southern France."

"The archives? You're shitting me. Why?"

"What can I tell you? I take my job seriously."

"And I appreciate it. But the *archives*? I don't even know where we *keep* the archives."

"Down on twenty-eight. Across from corporate accounting."

"You'll recall that I didn't ask."

"But I bet you're gratified I told you. You're welcome."

Malcolm mugs a dubious look.

"For a long time," Will continues, "there was a France piece every third issue or so. I think Jonathan overharvested that crop."

They let the ex-editor's name hang in the air. Jonathan Mongeleach was loved around here, the center of every party, women swirling around him along with lurid rumors, many of them about his extramarital love life, his acrimonious divorce, his varied vices.

Jonathan was missed. On the other hand, it was when Jonathan disappeared—truly disappeared, didn't come to work one day, no one ever saw or heard from him again—that Malcolm got promoted to the corner office, at first temporarily, then provisionally, then permanently. Which is when Malcolm hired Will. "I'll be honest," Malcolm had said, "I need an ally. A wingman, aide-de-camp, consigliere, and tennis partner. The list of qualified applicants is one. You up for it, Rhodes?"

They'd both gained something by Jonathan's departure, and they couldn't pretend otherwise. Will had gotten a more senior job at a more prestigious company. But Malcolm had gained far more: it's a huge jump to become editor of a major magazine, with car and driver, clothing allowance, an expense account that for all practical purposes is unlimited. And all this on top of the gorgeous wife and the adorable children, the beautiful apartment and the summer house, the everything. Malcolm already had everything, then he got more.

During the first days of Jonathan's disappearance, the assumption was that he'd been murdered. There were plenty of people who admired Jonathan, but also a few who loathed him. As time dragged on and no body was found, suspicion shifted toward the possibility that Jonathan had chosen to disappear himself. There were allegations of gambling debts and bankruptcy, a vindictive ex-wife and a predatory IRS. There was talk of suicide, and fake suicide, of a life insurance policy that named his estranged daughter as beneficiary. But so far, nothing concrete had been proven, and not much disproven.

Everyone moved on, these two men into these two chairs.

"Maybe he decided to go to France," Will says, "and never come back."

"Yes, maybe. But wherever Jonathan is, he certainly doesn't want to be found. If he's even alive."

"You think he's not?"

"That's possible. We all knew he was a strange guy, and he was definitely a cunning guy—a brilliant guy—and it looks like he was into some strange shit, some of it maybe dangerous. So who knows?" Malcolm opens a drawer, removes a padded envelope. "Speaking of France, this is for Inez. Drop it off whenever."

Will glances down, another hand-delivery to someone in a different country, a red PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL stamp.

A year ago, when Malcolm first handed him such an envelope, Will asked what it was.

"You see that stamp there?" Malcolm responded. "*Personal and confidential,* addressed to someone who's not you?"

"Yeah."

"That means it's *personal* and it's *confidential*, for someone who's *not you*."

"Gotcha."

"You remember the Sony hack, Rhodes? The Office of Personnel Management? JPMorgan Chase? *Snowden?* Digital information—digital communications—are as insecure as ever. So around here, we do things the old-fashioned way." Malcolm tapped the envelope. "We send each other shitloads of paper."

Since then Will had received plenty of these envelopes to tote overseas, as well as more than a few for himself: personnel memos and payroll forms and health-insurance paperwork and workplace-law notices and legal waivers.

"Listen, I need to jump on a call, so go." Malcolm makes the shooing motion. "Get the fuck out."

Will stands, strides across the big office, reaches for the doorknob.

"And hey, Rhodes?"

Will turns back.

"Let's be careful out there."

FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA

The room is the size of a basketball court but with the ceiling height of a coat closet, low and claustrophobic, fluorescent-lit and gray-carpeted, flimsy upholstered chest-high dividers separating the cubicles, nearly a hundred workspaces in here, all with laminate desktops and gooseneck lamps and plastic-and-mesh chairs on casters that glide across the pieces of hardened rubber that sit on the floor to make it easy to roll around, but no more than a foot or two in any direction, because these are small cubicles.

Every cheap desktop has a computer with a twenty-three-inch monitor. Every low-end plastic chair has an occupant. There are no vacancies, nor is there space to hire more personnel, even though more would be welcome—this is a round-the-clock operation with three shifts every day including weekends and holidays, never a moment when it's acceptable for the lights to be out.

The demographic is primarily South Asian, male, mid-twenties to late thirties, earning from eleven to nineteen dollars per hour. On the higher end, in a cubicle identical to all the others, Raji notices an incoming alert pop up, one of a dozen that he receives daily about the travel details of any of the fifteen hundred individuals on his segment of the watch list.

Raji copies the information into the relevant windows at the prompts:

U.S. PASSPORT NUMBER: 11331968
FLIGHT: 19 JFK TO CDG
TICKET CATEGORY: B11
SEAT: 12A
ALERT CODE: 4

He hits Post, then returns his attention to his bag of barbecue potato chips.

NEW YORK CITY

"*My* man," Reggie says, wearing the same ear-to-ear grin as ever. Will has never seen the old guy in a bad mood, and Reggie has been working curbside check-in for decades.

"Where you off to this time, 007?" Reggie likes to kid that Will isn't a writer, he's a spy; that his magazine byline is just a cover. Over the years, Reggie hasn't been the only person to have made this tongue-in-cheek accusation.

"It's France this time, Reggie."

"Ooh-la-la." The two men bump fists.

Will reaches into his pocket, removes the gift-wrapped box. "For Aisha. It's a few of those chocolates she loves."

"Oh, you shouldn't have."

"Happy to. Plus, I got them for free!" He didn't. "How's she doing this week?"

"Better, thank you."

Will nods. "Please tell her happy birthday for me."

"I will, Mr. Bond." Reggie winks. "You have a good trip."

Will doesn't understand how someone with such a crappy job can enjoy it so much, or can pretend so convincingly. But then again, there's a lot about normal forty-hour-per-week jobs that Will doesn't understand. He has barely ever had one.

In the terminal, Will examines himself in a mirror, surrounded by all this corporate signage, Kimberly-Clark and American Standard, Rubbermaid and Purell, a barrage of brands. He himself is a brand too, Will Rhodes, Travel Writer, with his little suede notebook, his canvas sport jacket over oxford shirt and knit tie, twill pants, rubber-soled brogues, sturdy comfortable clothes that won't wrinkle or crease or collect lint or stains, none that'll look any worse for wear after twenty hours hanging off his lanky frame, flying across the ocean.

After takeoff he washes down his sleeping pill with a whiskey. He reclines his seat, inserts the ear plugs, and stretches the mask over his eyes, a well-rehearsed routine. Almost immediately, he falls into an innocent sleep.

Will doesn't know how long he's been out—ten minutes? three hours?—when a loud rumble wakes him, the shuddering of the 747, the vibration traveling up his thighs and tailbone through his spine.

He pushes down his mask, unplugs his ears. Turns to the man-child next to him, a thirty-year-old wearing high-topped sneakers and a backward baseball cap who'd been preoccupied with a lollipop and a video game when Will last looked.

"What's happening?" Will asks.

The guy looks ashen, eyes wide, mouth agape. Shakes his head.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please ensure that your seatbelts are *securely* fastened, and all trays are in their upright position."

These are the same words Will has heard hundreds of times before. Sit

back relax and enjoy the flight. We know you have your choice of carriers. Our first priority is your safety. We'd like to extend a special welcome. We have reached cruising altitude and the captain has turned off the fasten-seatbelt sign . . .

A flight attendant hurries past, gripping each seatback tightly as she passes, banging her knee into the frontmost armrest, pausing to gather her balance and her wits before launching herself across the open purchase-less space to a jump seat, which she falls onto, buckles herself in, pulling the straps tight, taking a deep breath.

Oxygen masks fall from their overhead doors, and an audible wave of panic ripples down the fuselage. Will places the mask over his face, and tries as instructed to breathe normally, pinned under gathering terror to the soft leather of seat 12A.

The plane plummets.

People start to scream.

NEW YORK CITY

Malcolm walks the perimeter of the thirtieth floor, looking for any last stragglers who might interrupt him. Everyone still here is too junior, and none would have the nerve to barge in on the chief at seven-thirty, except the food editor, the guy everyone calls Veal Parmesan. Veal never seems to leave. But he also never visits Malcolm.

Malcolm closes his door, turns the knob to lock it. He takes a few steps along the wall that's decorated with framed *Travelers* covers, decades' worth of the magazine's best work, like a museum exhibit for the people who traipse through this office regularly.

He squats in the corner of the bookshelves, pushes aside a handful of old guidebooks, reaches his hand past the books, all the way to the back wall. He locates a button by touch, and presses it.

For a few decades, this was the only security mechanism. But during a wave of paranoia in the post-Nixon seventies, the new editor-in-chief Jonathan Mongeleach was convinced to add a second level of security. In the eighties this analog lock was replaced by an electronic device, then over the past two decades by ever more sophisticated digital models, with

increasing frequency of upgrades, as strongly advised by the consultants and developers who never fail to push each year's advance as an exponential technological leap, last year's security laughably outdated this year. Or so claimed by the people who profit from the technology, with no practical way for any of its consumers to assess the claim, least of all Malcolm. What a racket.

So now this mechanical button is merely a secondary system. Malcolm activates the primary system via a hidden panel at chest height, behind a big thick reference book, using his thumbprint and the input of a long access code.

With a nearly silent click, the entire section of bookcase is released. The wall swivels open a couple of inches of its own accord, on sturdy brass hinges; this is a heavy section of wall, hundreds of pounds. Malcolm pulls it open wide enough to walk through. Then he closes the door behind him, and disappears into the wall.

Try Not to Breathe

{a novel}

HOLLY SEDDON

"NOT SINCE *THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN*
HAVE I BEEN SO CAPTIVATED BY A WORK OF SUSPENSE."
—*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TESS GERRITSEN

Try Not to Breathe

A Novel

HOLLY SEDDON

BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

ONE

AMY, 18 JULY 1995

Music thudded through Amy's body and seized her heart. Music so loud that her eardrums pounded in frenzy and her baby-bird ribs rattled. Music was everything. Well, almost everything.

Later, the newspapers would call fifteen-year-old Amy Stevenson a "ray of sunshine," with "everything to live for." Her headphones buzzed with rock and pop as she trudged the long way home, rucksack sagging.

Amy had a boyfriend, Jake. He loved her and she loved him. They had been together for nearly eight months, walking the romance route around the "top field" at school during break time, hot hand in hot hand, fast hearts synchronized.

Amy had two best friends: Jenny and Becky. The trio danced in a perpetual whirlpool of backstories, competition and gossip. Dizzying trails of "she-said-he-said-she-said" preceded remorseful, sobbing hugs at the end of every drunken Saturday night.

Nights out meant lemon hooch in the memorial park or Archers and lemonade at the Sleeper Pub, where a five-year-old wouldn't have been ID'd. Nights in meant *My So-Called Life* and *Friends*. After school, time ticked down to 6 p.m. when phone calls hit the cheap rate. She would talk until her stepdad, Bob, came into the dining room and gave her *that* look: it's dinnertime, get off my phone.

Amy's Kickers bag grew heavier with every step. She shifted it awkwardly to the other shoulder, tangling her headphone wires so that one earphone fell from her ear, the sounds of the real world rushing in.

She had taken the long way home. The previous day she'd got back early and startled Bob in the kitchen as he stirred Coffee-mate into his favorite mug. At first he'd smiled, opening his arms for a hug before realizing that she'd made it back in record time and must have gone across the field.

She'd had to sit through half an hour of Bob's ranting and raving about walking the safe route home, along the roads: "I'm saying this because I love you, Ames, we both love you and we just want you to be safe."

Amy had listened, shuffled in her seat and stifled yawns. When he'd finally stopped, she'd stomped upstairs, flopped onto her bed and smacked CD cases around as she made an angry mix tape. Rage Against the Machine, Hole and Faith No More.

As she'd surprised Bob the day before, Amy knew he was likely to be home already. Waiting to catch her and have another go at her. It wasn't worth the hassle even though the longer walk was especially unwelcome on Tuesdays. Her bag was always really heavy, as she had French and History and both had stupid, massive textbooks.

Amy hated learning French with a passion, the teacher was a dick and who needs to give a window a gender? But she liked the idea of knowing the language. French was a sexy language. She imagined she could seduce someone a bit more sophisticated than Jake by whispering something French in his ear. She could seduce someone older. Someone a lot older.

She loved Jake, of course, she meant it when she said it. She had his name carefully stenciled onto her bag with a Tipp-Ex pen, and when she imagined the future, he was in it. But over the last few weeks she had begun to see the differences between them more and more.

Jake, with his wide smile and deep brown puppy-dog eyes, was so easy to spend time with, so gentle. But in the time they'd been going

out, he'd barely plucked up the courage to put his hand inside her school shirt. They spent whole lunch hours kissing in the top field, and one time he'd climbed on top of her but she'd got a dead leg and had to move and he was so flustered he barely spoke for the rest of the day.

It had been months and months and she was still a virgin. It was getting embarrassing. She hated the idea of being last, hated losing at anything.

Frustrations aside, Amy hoped Jake had skipped judo club so he could come and meet her. Jake and his younger brother, Tom, were driven home from school every day because his snooty mum worked as the school secretary. His family lived in the double-fronted houses of Royal Avenue. He was always back before Amy reached the two-bedroom terrace house on Warlingham Road, where she lived with Bob and her mum, Jo.

Jake's mum, Sue, didn't like Amy. It was like she saw her as someone who would corrupt her precious baby. Amy liked the idea that she was some kind of scarlet woman. She liked the idea of being any kind of woman.

Amy Stevenson had a secret. A secret that made her stomach lurch and her heart thump. None of Amy's friends knew about her secret, and Jake certainly didn't know. Jake could never know. Even Jake's mum, with her disapproving looks, would never have guessed.

Amy's secret was older. Absolutely, categorically a man. His shoulders were broader than Jake's, his voice lower, and when he made rude remarks, they came from a mouth that had earned the right to make them. He was tall and walked with confidence, never in a rush.

Her secret wore aftershave, not Lynx, and he drove a car, not a bike. Unlike Jake's sandy curtains, he had thick, dark hair. A man's cut. She had seen through his shirts that there was dark hair in the shallow dip at the center of his chest. Her secret had a tall, dark shadow.

When Amy thought about him, her nerves exploded and her head filled with a bright white sound that shut out any sense.

Her secret touched her waist like a man touches a woman. He opened doors for her, unlike the boys in her class, who bowled into corridors like silver balls in a pinball machine.

Her mum would call him "tall, dark and handsome." He didn't need to show off, didn't need to boast. Not even the prettiest girls at school would have thought they stood a chance. None of them knew that Amy stood more than a chance. Way more.

Amy knew that he would have to stay a secret, and a short-lived one at that. A comma in her story, nothing more. She knew that she should keep it all locked in a box; perfect, complete, private, totally separate from the rest of her soundtrack. It was already a memory, really. Months from now she would still be snogging Jake at lunchtime; bickering with her friends; coming up with excuses for late homework. She knew that. She told herself she was cool with that.

The feeling Amy got when he touched her hip or brushed her hair out of her face was like an electric bolt. Just the tips of his fingers made her flesh sing in a way that blocked out everything else in the world. She was both thrilled and terrified by thoughts of what he could do to her, what he would want her to do to him. Would they ever get the chance? Would she know what to do if they did?

That kiss in the kitchen, with the sounds of the others right outside. His hands on her face, a tickle of stubble that she'd never felt before. That one tiny kiss that kept her awake at night.

Amy turned onto Warlingham Road and the ritual began. She put her bag down on the crumbly concrete wall. She unrolled the waistband of her skirt so it was no longer hitched up. She decanted her things, finding her Charlie Red spray and cherry lip balm.

Amy shook the spray and let a short burst of sweet vapor fill the air. Then, after looking around self-consciously, she stepped into the perfumed cloud, like she'd seen her mum do before a night at the social club.

She ran the lip balm along her bottom lip, then the top, kissing them together and then dabbing them matte with her jumper. On the off chance that Jake was waiting, she wanted to be ready, but not make it obvious that she'd tried.

Amy's Walkman continued to flood her ears. "Do You Remember

the First Time?" by Pulp kicked in and Amy smiled. Lead singer Jarvis Cocker smirked and winked in her ears as she set everything back in the bag, shifted it to the other shoulder and continued down the road.

She saw Bob's van in the road. Amy was twelve doors away from home. As she squinted, she could make out a figure walking toward her.

She could tell from the way the figure walked—confident, upright, deliberate—that it wasn't Jake. Jake skirmished around like a startled crab, half running, half walking. Amy could tell from the figure's slim waist that it wasn't Bob, who was shaped like a little potato.

When Amy realized who it was she felt a rush of nausea.

Had anyone seen him?

Had Bob seen him?

How could he risk coming to the house?

Above everything, Amy felt a burst of exhilaration and adrenaline thrusting her toward him like iron filings to a magnet.

Jarvis Cocker was still talking dirty in her ears, she wanted to make him stop but didn't want to clumsily yank at her Walkman.

She held her secret's gaze, biting her lip as she clicked every button until she crunched the right one down and the music stopped. They were toe-to-toe. He smiled and slowly reached forward. He took one headphone, then the other from the side of her head. His fingers brushed her ears. Amy swallowed hard, unsure of the rules.

"Hello, Amy," he said, still smiling. His green eyes twinkled, the lashes so dark they looked wet. He reminded her of an old photo of John Travolta washing his face between takes on *Saturday Night Fever*. It had been printed in one of her music magazines, and while she thought John Travolta was a bit of a nobhead, it was a very cool picture. She'd stuck it in her hardback Art & Design sketchbook.

"Hello . . ." she replied, in a voice a shade above a whisper.

"I have a surprise for you . . . get in." He gestured to his car—a Ford Escort the color of a fox—and opened the door grandly, like a chauffeur.

Amy looked around. "I don't know if I should, my stepdad's probably watching."

As soon as her words were in the air, Amy heard a nearby front door, and ducked down behind the Escort.

A little way up the pavement, Bob set his tool bag down with a grunt. He exhaled heavily as he fumbled for his keys and opened his van. Unaware he was being watched, Bob lumped the tool bag into the passenger seat and slammed the door with his heavy, hairy hands. He waddled around to the driver's seat, heaved himself up and drove away with a crunch of gears, the back of his van shaking like a wagging tail.

As excited as Amy was, as ready as she was, a huge part of her wanted to sprint off up the road and jump into the van, safe and young again, asking Bob if she could do the gears.

"Was that your stepfather?"

As she stood up and dusted herself down, Amy nodded, wordless.

"Problem solved, then. Get in." He smiled an alligator smile. And that was that. Amy had no more excuses and she climbed into the car.

TWO

ALEX, 7 SEPTEMBER 2010

The hospital ward was trapped in a stillborn pause. Nine wordless, noiseless bodies sat rigidly under neat pastel blankets.

Alex Dale had written about premature babies, their seconds-long lives as fragile as a pile of gold dust.

She had written about degenerative diseases and machine-dependents whose futures lay in the idle flick of a button. She had even detailed every knife-twist of her own mother's demise, but these patients in front of her were experiencing a very different living death.

The slack faces in the Neuro-Disability ward at the Tunbridge Wells Royal Infirmary had known a life before. They were unlike the premature babies, who had known nothing but the womb, the intrusion of tubes and the warmth of their parents' anxious, desperate hands.

The patients weren't like the dementia sufferers whose childlike stases were punctuated by the terror of memories.

These rigid people on Bramble Ward were different. They had lived their lives with no slow decline, just an emergency stop. And they were still in there, somewhere.

Some blinked slowly, turning their heads slightly to the light and changing expression fluidly. Others were freeze-framed; mid-

celebration, at rest or in the eye of a trauma. All of them were now trapped in a silent scream.

"For years patients like this were all written off," said the auburn-haired ward manager with the deepest crow's-feet Alex had ever seen. "They used to be called vegetables." She paused and sighed. "A lot of people still call them that."

Alex nodded, using scrappy shorthand to record the conversation in her Moleskine pad.

The ward manager continued. "But the thing is, they're not all the same and they shouldn't be written off. They're individuals. Some of them are completely lacking awareness, but others are actually minimally conscious, and that's a world apart from being brain dead."

"How long do they tend to stay here before they recover?" Alex asked, poising her pen above the paper.

"Well, very few of them recover. This summer we had one lad go home for round-the-clock care from his parents and sister but that was the first one in years."

Alex raised her eyebrows.

"Most of them have been here for a long time," the manager added. "And most of them will die here too."

"Do they get many visitors?"

"Oh yes. Some of them have families that put themselves through it every single week for years and years." She stopped and surveyed the beds.

"I'm not sure I could do that. Can you imagine showing up week in, week out and getting nothing back?"

Alex tried to shake images of her own knotty-haired mother, staring blankly into her only daughter's face and asking for a bedtime story.

The ward manager had lowered her voice, there were visitors sitting at several beds.

"It's only recently that we've realized there are some signs of life below the surface. Some patients like these ones," she gestured to the beds behind Alex, "and I'm talking a handful across the world, have even started to communicate."

She stopped walking. Both women were standing in the center of the ward, curtains and beds surrounding them. Alex raised her eyebrows, encouraging her to continue.

"That's not quite right, actually. Those patients had been communicating all along, the doctors just didn't know how to hear them before. I don't know how much you've read, but after a year, the courts can end life support if they're being kept alive by machines. And now with the hospital funding cuts . . ." The nurse trailed off.

"How terrible to have no voice," said Alex, as she took scribbled notes and swayed, nauseated, amongst the electric hum of the hospital ward.

Alex was writing a profile piece for a weekend supplement on the work of Dr. Haynes, the elusive scientist researching brain scans that picked up signs of communication in patients like these. She hadn't met the doctor yet and was skidding toward her deadline. A far cry from her best work.

There was one empty bed in the ward, the other nine quietly filled. All ten had identical baby blue blankets within their lilac-curtained cubicles.

Inside those pastel walls, nurses and orderlies could hump and huff the patients into a seated position, wipe their wet mouths and dress them in the clothes brought in from home and donated by arms-length well-wishers.

A radio fizzed from behind the reception area, as chatter and "golden oldies" alternated with each other. The barely audible music jostled with the sighing breaths of patients and the beeps and whooshes of machinery.

A poster in the farthest corner of the ward caught Alex's eye. It was Jarvis Cocker from Pulp, limp-wristed and swathed in tweed. She strained to see the name of the magazine from which it had been carefully removed.

Select magazine. Long dead, long forgotten, it had been the magazine of choice throughout Alex's teens. She'd deluged the editor with unanswered letters begging for work experience, back when music seemed to be the only love anyone could possibly want to read or write about.

The dark blue uniformed manager who'd been showing Alex around had been snagged. Alex spotted her talking quietly and seriously with the watery-eyed male visitor of a patient in a stiff pink housecoat.

Alex soft-shoe shuffled closer to the corner cubicle. Her shins seared with pain from her morning run, and she winced as she quickened her steps. The thin soles of her ballet pumps ground into her blisters like grit.

Most of the patients were at least middle-aged but the cubicle in the corner had a queasy sense of youth.

The curtains had been half pulled across haphazardly and Alex stepped silently through the large gap. Even in the dark of the cubicle Alex could see that Jarvis Cocker was not alone. Next to him, a young Damon Albarn, the lead singer from Blur, mugged uncomfortably at the camera. Both had been carefully removed from *Select* some years ago, dust tickling their thumbtacks.

The scene was motionless. The bed's blanket covering a peak of knees. Two skinny arms lay still on top of the starched bedclothes, tinged purple, goose-pimpled, framed by a worn-in blue T-shirt.

Alex had avoided looking directly at any of the patients so far. It seemed too rude to just stare into the frozen faces like a Victorian at a freak show. Even now, Alex hovered slightly to the side of the Britpop bed like a nervous child. She gazed at the bright white equipment that loomed over the bed, and scribbled needlessly in her notepad for a bit, stalling until she could finally let her eyes fall on the top of the young woman's head.

Her hair was a deep, dark chestnut, but it had been cut roughly around the fringe and left long and tangled everywhere else. Her striking blue eyes were half-open and marble-bright. With Alex's long, ponytailed dark hair and seaside eyes, the two women almost mirrored each other.

As soon as Alex let her eyes fall on the full flesh of the woman's face, she recoiled.

Alex knew this woman.

She was sure of a connection, but it was a flicker of recollection with nothing concrete to call upon.

As her temples boomed with a panicked pulse, Alex built up the courage to look again, mentally peeping through her fingers. Yes, she knew this face, she knew this woman.

It wasn't that long ago that Alex's powers of recall would have been razor sharp, a name would have sparkled to light in a blink. A mental Rolodex gone to rust.

Alex heard thick flat soles and heavy legs coming toward her apace. The penny dropped.

"So sorry about that," the ward manager was saying as she puffed over. "Where were we?"

Alex spun to look at her guide. "Is this . . . ?"

"Yes, it is. I wondered if you'd recognize her. You must have been very young."

"I was the same age. I mean, I am the same age."

Alex's heart was thumping, she knew the woman in the bed couldn't touch her, but she felt haunted all the same.

"How long has she been in?"

The manager looked at the woman in the bed and sat down lightly on the sheets, near the crook of an elbow.

"Almost since," she said quietly.

"God, poor thing. Anyway . . ." Alex shook her head a little. "Yes, sorry, I have a couple more questions for you, if that's okay?"

"Of course." The nurse smiled.

Alex took a deep breath, gathered herself. "This might sound like a silly question, but is sleepwalking ever a problem?"

"No, it's not a problem. They're not capable of moving around."

"Oh of course," said Alex, pushing strands of hair away from her eyes with the dry end of her pen. "I guess I was surprised by the security on the ward—is that standard?"

"We don't sit guard on the door like that all the time, just when it's busy. Other than that, we tend to stay in the office as we have a lot of paperwork. We do take security very seriously though."

"Is that why I had to sign in?"

"Yes, we keep a record of all the visitors," said the manager. "When you think about it, anyone could do anything with this lot, if they were so inclined."

* * *

Alex drove slowly into orange sunlight, blinking heavily. Amy Stevenson. The woman in the bed. Still fifteen, with her Britpop posters, ragged hair and girlish eyes.

As Alex slowed for a zebra crossing, a canoodling teenage couple in dark blue uniforms almost stumbled onto the bonnet of her black Volkswagen Polo, intertwined like a three-legged race team.

Alex couldn't shake the thought of Amy. Amy Stevenson, who left school one day and never made it home. Missing Amy. TV-friendly tragic teen in her school uniform; smiling school photo beaming out from every national news program; Amy's sobbing mother and anxious father, or was it stepfather? Huddles of her school friends having a "special assembly" at school, captured for the evening news.

From what Alex could remember, Amy's body was found a few days later. The manhunt had dominated the news for months, or was it weeks? Alex had been the same age as Amy, and remembered the shock of realizing she wasn't invincible.

She'd grown up thirty minutes away from Amy. She could have been plucked from the street at any time, by anyone, in broad daylight.

Amy Stevenson: the biggest news story of 1995, lying in a human archive.

It was 12:01 p.m. The sun was past the yardstick, it was acceptable to begin.

In the quiet cool of her galley kitchen, Alex set down a tall glass beaker and a delicate wineglass. Carefully, she poured mineral water (room temperature) into the tall glass until it kissed the rim. She poured chilled white wine, a good Reisling, to the exact measure line of the wineglass and put the bottle back in the fridge door, where it clinked against five identical bottles.

Water was important. Anything stronger than a weak beer or lager would deplete the body of more moisture than the drink pro-

vided, and dehydration was dangerous. Alex started and finished every afternoon with a tall glass of room temperature water. For the last two years, she had wet the bed several times a week, but she had rarely suffered serious dehydration.

Two bottles, sometimes three. Mostly white, but red on chilly afternoons, at home. It had to be at home.

As Matt had stood in the doorway of their home for the last time, carrying his summer jacket and winter coat, with pitch-perfect finality, he had told Alex that she "managed" her drinking like a diabetic manages their condition.

Alex's rituals and routines had become all-encompassing. Staying in control and attempting to maintain a career took everything. There was nothing left for managing a marriage, much less enjoying it.

Alex hadn't expected to be divorced at twenty-eight. To most people that age, marriage itself was only just creeping onto the horizon.

She could see why Matt left her. He'd waited and waited for some inkling that she would get better, that she would choose him and a life together over booze, but it had never really crossed her mind to change. Even when she had "every reason" to stop. It was just who she was and what she did.

They had met during Freshers' Week at University of Southampton, though neither of them could tell the story. Their collective memory kicked in a few weeks into the first term, by which time they were firmly girlfriend and boyfriend and waking up in each other's hangovers every day.

Drinking had cemented their relationship, but it wasn't everything, and it became less important to Matt over time. They talked and laughed and did ferociously well throughout their courses (his Criminology, hers English Literature), partly through frenzied discussion, partly through competitiveness. From the very first month, it was *them*. Not he or she, always them.

It had been nearly two years since the divorce was finalized, and she still defaulted to "we," her phantom limb.

Every afternoon, before the first glass touched her lips, Alex turned off her phone. She had long closed her Facebook account,

cleaned the web of any digital footprints that could allow drunken messages to Matt, his brothers, his friends, her ex-colleagues, anyone.

Alex had a few rules come the afternoon: no phone calls, no emails, no purchases. In the dark space between serious drinker and functioning alcoholic, there had been no rules. Cheerful, wobbly pitches had been sent to bemused editors; sensitive telephone interviews had taken disastrous, offensive paths; Alex had evaporated friendships with capitalized, tell-all emails and blown whole overdrafts on spontaneous spending sprees. And far worse.

Things were better now. She was getting semi-regular work, she owned her home. She'd even taken up running.

At least once a week she planned her own death, and drafted an indulgent farewell letter to Matt and the child she'd never planned, the child they would now never have.

She sat down at her desk and opened her Moleskine notepad.

"Amy Stevenson."

Alex had a story, and it was far more interesting than the one she had been sent to write.

THREE

JACOB, 8 SEPTEMBER 2010

Jacob loved his wife, he was sure of that most of the time, but when she talked for forty-five unbroken minutes about an extension they didn't need and couldn't afford, the lies felt slightly softer on his conscience.

He watched Fiona's mouth moving, forming the words so resolutely. There were just so many of them, so many bloody words, that they blended into one, ceaseless noise.

Her pink mouth was now entirely for talking. How long had it been since those lips had softened for a kiss? Or whispered something sweet in his ear?

"Are you even listening to me?" Her fierce brown eyes filled with salt water, ready to burst their banks without notice. How long had it been since they'd made each other laugh until tears squeezed from the corners of their eyes?

"Of course I'm listening." Jacob pushed his half-finished cereal bowl away, trying desperately not to be outwardly aggressive, or passively aggressive, or break any other unwritten golden rule.

When Jacob and Fiona had first met, they talked about everything. Well, almost everything. She had fascinated him, she always had so much to say and he liked to hear it.

As boyfriend and girlfriend they had sparred, joked, talked into

the next morning. On their wedding night, they had failed to consummate the marriage, wrapped in each other's words until they realized it was the next day, Fiona's legs tangled in her ivory dress train, faces sore from smiling and laughing, sobering with the sun.

But Fiona had stopped asking about his work, stopped expecting to be told anything. Now they wrangled over inane household topics, and not much else.

When had it happened? At the start of the pregnancy? Before?

She had certainly been myopic about ovulation dates and optimum positions but she had still been Fiona, they had still laughed and talked.

It went beyond disinterest.

Fiona used to grill him, question the who, where, when of meetings and social activities, cross-referencing what she was told with diary dates, previous conversations, outfits he'd chosen, throwaway remarks.

"So exactly who is going to this Christmas party, then? How come it's not wives and girlfriends? It's normally wives and girlfriends . . . are any *wives and girlfriends going?"*

Maybe she didn't care now. Fiona had her little nugget growing in her belly, and nothing else mattered. If so, that flew in the face of the Fiona he had fallen in love with, the Fiona he had married. And for all the pressure that had led to it, he had been over the moon when the second blue line appeared on that fated stick many months ago. Terrified, but over the moon.

Now sitting at the tired breakfast bar, he watched his wife unsteady on her feet. Her sense of balance had been eroded over the last few weeks as her belly had ballooned with a new urgency.

Jacob sighed. Every conversation nowadays led to this topic: the small, hellish kitchen.

The new kitchen extension would fix everything: the storage problem, the tricky access to the garden, where to keep the pram, tension in the Middle East.

The new extension was everything. And if Fiona didn't get it, however impossible the sums were, the world would explode. He

couldn't be entirely sure that it was his baby in that cartoon belly, and not a ticking time bomb.

The 1930s semi in Wallington Grove, Tunbridge Wells, had seemed like a palace when they moved in, just two years ago. It had taken prudence, abstinence and overtime to save a deposit, and the newlyweds knew that work and salary had to be the main focus for at least three years; they had to feed the machine. Fiona had agreed wholeheartedly, absolutely, the mortgage was a stretch, it would take two full-time salaries to service it and they both must do their bit.

Some eighteen months later, after a concentrated campaign veering from the subtle to the tearful, they had started to try for a baby and conceived almost instantly. And now the baby needed an extension.

"Fi, look, I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be shitty but I really have to go. I've got some awful meetings today and my head's all over the place."

"Sure," she said, "whatever."

She didn't ask for more than that. Why didn't she ask for more than that now?

They both needed to leave. Fiona for work as a graphic designer, Jacob for the hospital, where he did not work.

ERIK AXL SUND

The Crow Girl

Erik Axl Sund

Translated by Neil Smith

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In memory of:

A sister, those of us who failed, and those of you

who forgave

Our lives are opaque. Great our innate disappointment—which is why so many stories blossom in the forests of Scandinavia—mournfully the fiery hunger in our hearts turns to embers. Many end up as charcoal-burners beside the stack of their own heart; in a crippled dreamlike state they set their ears to listen and hear the flames dying with a sigh.

—from *Flowering Nettles* by Harry Martinson

I

was over a hundred years old, and the solid stone walls were at least a meter thick, which meant that she probably didn't need to insulate them, but she wanted to be absolutely sure.

To the left of the living room was a small corner room that she had been using as a combination of workroom and guest bedroom.

Leading off of it were a small toilet and a fair-sized closet.

The room was perfect, with its single window and nothing but the unused attic above.

No more nonchalance, no more taking anything for granted.

Nothing would be left to chance. Fate was a dangerously unreliable accomplice. Sometimes your friend, but just as often an unpredictable enemy.

The dining table and chairs ended up shoved against one wall, which opened up a large space in the middle of the living room.

Then it was just a matter of waiting.

The first sheets of polystyrene arrived at ten o'clock, as arranged, carried in by four men. Three of them were in their fifties, but the fourth couldn't have been more than twenty. His head was shaved and he wore a black T-shirt with two crossed Swedish flags on the chest, under the words "My Fatherland." He had tattoos of spider webs on his elbows, and some sort of Stone Age design on his wrists.

When she was alone again she settled onto the sofa to plan her work. She decided to start with the floor, since that was the only thing that was likely to be a problem. The old couple downstairs may have been almost deaf, and she herself had

never heard a single sound from them over the years, but it still felt like an important detail.

She went into the bedroom.

The little boy was still sound asleep.

It had been so odd when she met him on the local train. He had simply taken her hand, stood up, and obediently gone with her, without her having to say a single word.

She had acquired the pupil she had been seeking, the child she had never been able to have.

She put her hand to his forehead; his temperature had gone down. Then she felt his pulse.

Everything was as it should be.

She had used the right dose of morphine.

The workroom had a thick, white, wall-to-wall carpet that she had always thought ugly and unhygienic, even if it was nice to walk on. But right now it was ideal for her purpose.

Using a sharp knife, she cut up the polystyrene and stuck the pieces together with a thick layer of flooring adhesive.

The strong smell soon made her feel dizzy, and she had to open the window onto the street. It was triple-glazed, and the outer pane had an extra layer of soundproofing.

Fate as a friend.

Work on the floor took all day. Every so often she would go and check on the boy.

When the whole floor was done she covered all the cracks with silver duct tape.

She spent the following three days dealing with the walls. By Friday there was just the ceiling left, and that took a bit longer because she had to glue the polystyrene first, and then wedge the blocks up against the ceiling with planks.

While the glue was drying she nailed up some old blankets in place of the doors she had removed earlier. She glued four layers of polystyrene onto the door to the living room.

She covered the only window with an old sheet. Just to be sure, she used a double layer of insulation to block the window alcove. When the room was ready, she covered the floor and walls with a waterproof tarpaulin.

There was something meditative about the work, and when at last she looked at what she had accomplished she felt a sense of pride.

The room was further refined during the following week. She bought four small rubber wheels, a hasp, ten meters of electric cable, several meters of wooden skirting, a basic light fitting, and a box of light bulbs. She also had a set of dumbbells, some weights, and an exercise bike delivered.

She took all the books out of one of the bookcases in the living room, tipped it onto its side, and screwed the wheels under each corner. She attached a length of skirting board to the front to conceal the fact that it could now be moved, then placed the bookcase in front of the door to the hidden room.

She screwed the bookcase to the door and tested it.

The door glided soundlessly open on its little rubber wheels. It all worked perfectly. She attached the hasp and shut the door, concealing the simple locking mechanism with a carefully positioned lamp.

Finally she put all the books back and fetched a thin mattress from one of the two beds in the bedroom.

That evening she carried the sleeping boy into his new home.

Gamla Enskede—Kihlberg House

The strangest thing about the young boy wasn't the fact that he was dead, but that he had stayed alive so long. Something had kept him alive where a normal human being would long since have given up.

Detective Superintendent Jeanette Kihlberg knew nothing of this as she backed her car out of the garage. And she was unaware that this case would be the first in a series of events that would change her life.

She saw Åke in the window and waved, but he was on the phone and didn't see her. He would spend the morning washing that week's accumulation of sweaty tops, muddy socks, and dirty underwear. With a wife and a son who were mad about soccer, it was a constant feature of daily life, this business of thrashing the old washing machine almost to the breaking point at least five times a week.

While he was waiting for the machine to finish, she knew he would go up into the little studio they'd set up in the attic, and continue with one of the many unfinished oil paintings he was always working on. He was a romantic, a dreamer who had trouble finishing what he started. Jeanette had nagged him several times about getting in touch with one of the gallery owners who had shown an interest in his work, but he always said the pictures weren't quite ready. Not yet, but soon.

And when they were, everything would change.

He would finally make his big breakthrough, and the money would start to pour in, and they could finally do everything they had dreamed of. Everything from fixing the house to traveling anywhere they liked.

After almost twenty years she was starting to doubt it was ever going to happen.

As she swung out onto the Nynäshamn road she heard a worrying rattle somewhere down by the left front wheel. Even though she was an imbecile when it came to cars, it was obvious that something was wrong with their old Audi and that she was going to have to get it fixed again soon. From past experience she knew it wouldn't be cheap, even if the Serbian mechanic she went to out at Bolidenplan was both reliable and competitively priced.

The day before, she had emptied their savings account to pay the latest installment of the mortgage, something that happened every three months with sadistic punctuality. She hoped she would be able to get the car fixed on credit. That had worked before.

Jeanette's jacket pocket started to vibrate violently, as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony almost drove her off the road and onto the sidewalk.

"Yep, Kihlberg here."

"Hi Jan, we've got something out at the Thorildsplan subway," replied the voice of her colleague Jens Hurtig. "We need to get there at once. Where are you?" There was a loud screech on the line, and she held the phone away from her ear to protect her hearing.

She hated being called Jan, and could feel herself getting annoyed. It had started off as a joke at a staff party three years earlier, but since then the nickname had spread through the whole of the police headquarters on Kungsholmen.

"I'm in Årsta, heading onto the Essinge highway. What's happened?"

“They’ve found a young dead male in some bushes by the subway station, near the teacher-training college, and Billing wants you there as soon as possible. He sounded pretty agitated. Everything points to murder.”

Jeanette Kihlberg could hear the rattle getting worse, and wondered if she ought to pull over and call a tow truck, then get a lift into town.

“If this bastard car holds together I’ll be there in five, ten minutes. I want you there as well.” The car lurched, and Jeanette pulled into the right-hand lane just in case.

“Okay, I’ll get going—I’ll probably be there before you.”

A dead man’s body found in some bushes sounded to Jeanette like a fight that had gotten out of hand. It would probably end up as a manslaughter charge.

Murder, she thought as the steering wheel juddered, is a woman killed in her own home by her jealous husband after she tells him she wants a divorce.

More often than not, anyway.

But the fact was that times had changed, and what she had once learned at police training college was now not only open to question, but just plain wrong. Working practices had changed, and policing was in many respects much harder today than it had been twenty years ago.

Jeanette remembered the first time she was out on the beat, around normal people. How the public would offer to help, even had confidence in the police. The only reason anyone reports a crime today, she thought, is that the insurance companies demand it. Not because people have any expectation of the crime being solved.

But what had she been expecting when she quit her social work course and decided to join the police? The opportunity to make a difference? To help people?

That was what she told her dad when she proudly showed him her letter of acceptance. Yes, that was it. She wanted to be the sort of person who stood between people who did bad things and people who had bad things done to them. She wanted to be a real person.

And that was what being in the police meant.

She had spent her whole childhood listening in awe as her father and grandfather talked about their work in the police. No matter whether it was Midsummer or Good Friday, conversation around the dining table would always revert to ruthless bank robbers, good-natured pickpockets, and clever con men. Anecdotes and memories from the darker side of life.

Just as the smell of the Christmas ham used to conjure up a whole roomful of expectation, the men's background talk in the living room provided a backdrop of security.

She smiled at the memory of her grandfather's lack of interest and skepticism about new technological tools. Nowadays handcuffs had been replaced by self-locking plastic ties, to make things easier. He had once told her that DNA analysis was just a passing fad.

Police work was about making a difference, she thought. Not about making things easier. And their work had to adapt to keep pace with changes in society.

Being in the police means that you want to help, that you care. It's not about sitting in an armored police van, staring out helplessly through tinted windows.

The airport

had been as gray and as cold as the winter's morning. He arrived with Air China to a country he had never heard of before. He knew that several hundred children before him had made the same journey, and like them he had a well-rehearsed story to tell the border police at passport control.

Without hesitating over a single syllable he delivered the story he had spent months repeating until he knew it by heart.

During the construction of one of the big Olympic venues he had gotten work carrying bricks and mortar. His uncle, a poor laborer, organized somewhere for him to live, but when his uncle was badly injured and ended up in the hospital he had no one to look after him. His parents were dead and he had no brothers or sisters or other relatives he could turn to.

In his interview with the border police he explained how he and his uncle had been treated like slaves, in circumstances that could only be compared to apartheid. He told them how he had spent five months working on the construction site, but had never dared hope he might ever become an equal citizen of the city.

According to the old *hukou* system, he was registered in his home village far away from the city, and therefore had almost no rights at all in the place where he lived and worked.

That was why he had been forced to make his way to Sweden, where his only remaining relative lived. He didn't know where, but according to his uncle they had promised to get in touch with him as soon as he arrived.

He came to this new country with nothing but the clothes he was wearing, a cell phone, and fifty American dollars. The cell's phone book was empty, and there were no texts or pictures that could reveal anything about him.

In actual fact, it was new and completely unused.

What he didn't reveal to the police was the telephone number he had written down on a scrap of paper hidden in his left shoe. A number he was going to call as soon as he had escaped from the camp.

The country he had come to wasn't like China at all. Everything was so clean and empty. When the interview was over and he was being led by two policemen through the deserted corridors of the airport, he wondered if this was what Europe looked like.

The man who had constructed his background, given him the phone number, and provided him with the money and phone had told him that over the past four years he had successfully sent more than seventy children to different parts of Europe.

He had said he had the most contacts in a country called Belgium, where you could earn big money. The work involved serving rich people, and if you were discreet and loyal, you could get rich yourself. But Belgium was risky, and you had to stay out of sight.

Never be seen outside.

Sweden was safer. There you would work mainly in restaurants and could move about more freely. It wasn't as well paid, but if you were lucky you could earn a lot of money there too, depending on which services were in particular demand.

There were people in Sweden who wanted the same thing as the people in Belgium.

The camp wasn't very far from the airport, and he was driven there in an unmarked police car. He stayed overnight, sharing a room with a black boy who could speak neither Chinese nor English.

The mattress he slept on was clean, but it smelled musty.

On only his second day there he called the number on the piece of paper, and a female voice explained how to get to the station in order to catch the train to Stockholm. Once he got there he was to call again for further instructions.

The train was warm and comfortable. It carried him quickly and almost soundlessly through a city where everything was white with snow. But by coincidence or fate, he never reached Central Station in Stockholm.

After a few stations a beautiful blond woman sat down on the seat opposite him. She looked at him for a long time, and he realized that she knew he was alone. Not just alone on the train, but alone in the whole world.

The next time the train stopped the blond woman stood up and took his hand. She nodded toward the door. He didn't protest, and went with her like he was in a trance.

They got a taxi and drove through the city. He saw that it was surrounded by water, and he thought it was beautiful. There wasn't as much traffic as there was at home. It was cleaner, and the air was easier to breathe.

He thought about fate and about coincidence, and wondered for a moment why he was sitting there with her. But when she turned to him and smiled, he stopped wondering.

At home they used to ask what he was good at, squeezing his arms to see if he was strong enough. Asking questions he pretended to understand.

They always had their doubts. Then sometimes they picked him.

But she had chosen him without him having done anything for her, and no one had ever done that before.

The room she led him into was white, and there was a big, wide bed. She put him in it and gave him something hot to drink. It tasted almost like the tea at home, and he fell asleep before the cup was empty.

When he woke up he didn't know how long he'd been asleep, but he saw that he was in a different room. The new room had no windows and was completely covered in plastic.

When he got up to go over to the door he discovered that the floor was soft and yielding. He tried the door handle, but the door was locked. His clothes were gone, as was the cell phone.

Naked, he lay back down on the mattress and went to sleep again.

This room was going to be his new world.

Thorildsplan Subway Station—

Crime Scene

Jeanette could feel the wheel pulling to the right, and the car seemed to be heading along the road at an odd angle. She crawled the last kilometer at sixty, and by the time she turned off onto the Drottningholm road toward the subway station, she was beginning to think the fifteen-year-old car was finished.

She parked and walked over to the cordon, where she caught sight of Hurtig. He was a head taller than all the others, Scandinavian blond, and thickset, without actually being fat.

After working with him for four years Jeanette had learned how to read his body language.

He looked worried. Almost pained.

But when he caught sight of her he brightened up, came over to meet her, and held the cordon tape up for her.

"I see the car made it." He grinned. "I don't know how you put up with driving around in that old crate."

"Me neither, and if you can get me a raise I'll go and get a little convertible Mercedes to cruise about in."

If only Åke would get a decent job with a decent wage, she could get herself a decent car, she thought as she followed Hurtig into the cordoned-off area.

"Any tire tracks?" she asked one of the two female forensics officers crouched over the path.

"Yes, several different ones," one of them replied, looking up at Jeanette. "I think some of them are from the city vans that come down here to empty the garbage cans. But there are some other tracks from narrower wheels."

Now that Jeanette had arrived at the scene she was the most senior officer present, and therefore in charge.

That evening she would report to her boss, Commissioner Dennis Billing, who in turn would inform Prosecutor von Kwist. Together the pair of them would decide what should be done, regardless of what she might think.

Jeanette turned to Hurtig.

"Okay, let's hear it. Who found him?"

Hurtig shrugged. "We don't know."

"What do you mean, don't know?"

"The emergency line got an anonymous phone call, about"—he looked at his watch—"about three hours ago, and the caller said there was a boy's body lying here, close to the entrance to the subway station. That's all."

"But the call was recorded?"

"Of course."

"So why did it take so long for us to be told?" Jeanette felt a pang of irritation.

"The dispatcher got the location wrong and sent a patrol to Bolidenplan instead of Thorildsplan."

"Have they traced the call?"

Hurtig raised his eyebrows. "Unregistered pay-as-you-go cell phone."

"Shit."

"But we'll soon know where the call was made from."

"Okay, good. We'll listen to the recording when we get back. What about witnesses, then? Did anyone see or hear anything?" She looked around hopefully, but her subordinates just shook their heads.

"Someone must have driven the boy here," Jeanette went on, with an increasing sense of desperation. She knew their work would be much harder if they couldn't identify any leads within the next few hours. "It's pretty unlikely that anyone moved a corpse on the subway, but I still want copies of the security camera recordings."

Hurtig came up beside her.

"I've already got someone on that, we'll have them by this evening."

"Good. Seeing as the body was probably brought here by road, I want lists of all vehicles that have passed through the road tolls in the last few days."

"Of course," Hurtig said, pulling out his cell phone and moving away. "I'll make sure we get them as soon as possible."

"Hold on a minute, I'm not done yet. Obviously, there's a chance the body was carried here, or brought on a bike or something like that. Check with the college to see if they have surveillance cameras."

Hurtig nodded and lumbered off.

Jeanette sighed and turned to one of the forensics officers who was examining the grass by the bushes.

"Anything useful?"

The woman shook her head. "Not yet. Obviously there are a lot of footprints; we'll take impressions of some of the best ones. But don't get your hopes up."

Jeanette slowly approached the bushes where the body had been found, wrapped in a black garbage bag. The boy, a young adolescent, was naked, and had

stiffened in a sitting position with his arms around his knees. His hands had been bound with duct tape. The skin on his face had turned a yellow-brown color, and looked almost leathery, like old parchment.

His hands, in contrast, were almost black.

"Any signs of sexual violence?" She turned to Ivo Andrić, who was crouched down in front of her.

Ivo Andrić was a specialist in unusual and extreme cases of death.

The Stockholm police had called him early that morning. Because they didn't want to cordon off the area around the subway station any longer than necessary, he had to work fast.

"I can't tell yet. But it can't be ruled out. I don't want to jump to any hasty conclusions, but from my experience you don't usually see this sort of extreme injury without there being evidence of sexual violence as well."

Jeanette nodded.

She leaned closer and noted that the dead boy looked foreign. Arabic, Palestinian, maybe even Indian or Pakistani.

The body was visible in some bushes just a few meters from the entrance to the Thorildsplan subway station on Kungsholmen, and Jeanette realized that it couldn't have remained unseen for very long.

The police had done their best to protect the site with screens and tarpaulins, but the terrain was hilly, which meant it was possible to look into the crime scene from above if you were standing some distance away. There were several photographers with telephoto lenses standing outside the cordon, and Jeanette almost felt sorry for them. They spent twenty-four hours a day listening to police band radio and waiting in case something spectacular happened.

But she couldn't see any actual journalists. The papers probably didn't have the staff to send these days.

"What the hell, Andrić," one of the police officers said, shaking his head at the sight. "How can something like this happen?"

The body was practically mummified, which told Ivo Andrić that it had been kept in a very dry place for a long time. Not outside in a wet Stockholm winter.

"Well, Schwarz," he said, looking up. "That's what we're going to try to find out."

"Yes, but the boy's been mummified, for fuck's sake. Like some damn pharaoh. That's not the sort of thing that happens during a coffee break, is it?"

Ivo Andrić nodded in agreement. He was a hardened man who was originally from Bosnia, and had been a doctor in Sarajevo during the almost four years of the Serbian siege. He had witnessed a great many unpleasant things throughout his long and eventful career, but he had never seen anything like this before.

There was no doubt at all that the victim had been severely abused, but the odd thing was that there were none of the usual self-defense injuries. All the bruises and hematomas looked more like the sort of thing you'd see on a boxer. A boxer who had gone twelve rounds and been so badly beaten that he eventually passed out.

On his arms and across his torso the boy had hundreds of marks, harder than the surrounding tissue, which, when taken as a whole, meant that he had been subjected to an astonishing number of blows while he was still alive. From the indentations on the boy's knuckles, it seemed likely that he had not only received but had also dealt out a fair number of punches.

But the most troubling thing was the fact that the boy's genitals were missing.

He noted that they had been removed with a very sharp knife.

A scalpel or razor blade, perhaps?

An examination of the mummified boy's back revealed a large number of deeper wounds, the sort a whip would make.

Ivo Andrić tried to picture in his mind's eye what had happened. A boy fighting for his life, and when he no longer wanted to fight someone had whipped him. He knew that illegal dogfights still happened in the immigrant communities. This might be something similar, but with the difference that it wasn't dogs fighting for their lives but young boys.

Well, one of them at least had been a young boy.

Who his opponent might have been was a matter of speculation.

Then there was the fact that the boy hadn't died when he really should have. Hopefully the postmortem would reveal information about any traces of drugs or chemicals, Rohypnol, maybe phencyclidine. Ivo Andrić realized that his real work would begin once the body was in the pathology lab back at the hospital in Solna.

At noon they were able to put the body in a gray plastic bag and lift it into the ambulance for transportation to Solna. Jeanette Kihlberg's work here was done, and she could go on to headquarters, at the other end of Kungsholmen. As she walked toward the parking lot a gentle rain started to fall.

"Fuck!" she swore loudly to herself, and Åhlund, one of her younger colleagues, turned and gave her a questioning look.

"My car. It had slipped my mind, but it broke down on the way here and now I'm stranded. I'll have to call a tow truck."

"Where is it?" her colleague asked.

“Over there.” She pointed at the red, rusty, filthy Audi twenty meters away from them. “Why? Do you know anything about cars?”

“It’s a hobby of mine. There isn’t a car on the planet that I couldn’t get going. Give me the keys and I’ll tell you what’s wrong with it.”

Åhlund started the car and pulled out onto the road. The creaking and screeching sounded even louder from outside, and she assumed she would have to call her dad and ask for a small loan. He would ask her if Åke had found a job yet, and she would explain that it wasn’t easy being an unemployed artist, but that all that would probably change soon.

The same routine every time. She had to eat humble pie and act as Åke’s safety net.

It could all be so easy, she thought. If he could just swallow his pride and take a temporary job. If for no other reason than to show that he cared about her and realized how worried she was. She sometimes had trouble sleeping at night before the bills were paid.

After a quick drive around the block the young police officer jumped out of the car and smiled triumphantly.

“The ball joint, the steering axle, or both. If I take it now I can start on it this evening. You can have it back in a few days, but you’ll have to pay for parts and a bottle of whiskey. How does that sound?”

“You’re an angel, Åhlund. Take it and do whatever the hell you like with it. If you can get it working, you can have two bottles and a decent reference when you go for promotion.”

Jeanette Kihlberg walked off toward the police van.

Esprit de corps, she thought.

Kronoberg—Police Headquarters

During the first meeting Jeanette delegated the preliminary steps in the investigation.

A group of recently graduated officers had spent the afternoon knocking on doors in the area, and Jeanette was hopeful that they'd come up with something.

Schwarz was given the thankless task of going through the lists of vehicles that had passed the road tolls, almost 800,000 in total, while Åhlund checked the surveillance footage they had secured from the teacher-training college and the subway station.

Jeanette certainly didn't miss the monotony of the sort of investigative work that usually got dumped on less experienced officers.

The main priority was getting the boy's identity confirmed, and Hurtig was given the job of contacting refugee centers around Stockholm. Jeanette herself was going to talk to Ivo Andrić.

After the meeting she went back to her office and called home. It was already after six o'clock, and it was her night to cook.

"Hi! How's your day been?" She made an effort to sound cheerful.

As a couple, Jeanette and Åke were fairly equal. They shared the everyday chores: Åke was responsible for the laundry and Jeanette for the vacuuming. Cooking was done according to a rotation that involved their son, Johan, as well. But she was the one who did all the heavy lifting when it came to the family finances.

"I finished the laundry an hour ago. Otherwise pretty good. Johan just got home. He said you promised to give him a lift to the match tonight. Are you going to make it in time?"

"No, I can't," Jeanette sighed. "The car broke down on the way into the city. Johan will have to take his bike, it's not that far." Jeanette glanced at the family photograph she'd pinned up on her bulletin board. Johan looked so young in the picture, and she could hardly bear to look at herself.

"I'm going to be here for a few more hours. I'll take the subway home if I can't get a lift from someone. You'll have to phone for a pizza. Have you got any money?"

"Yeah, yeah." Åke sighed. "If not, there's probably some in the jar."

Jeanette thought for a moment. "There should be. I put five hundred in yesterday. See you later."

Åke didn't reply, so she hung up and leaned back.

Five minutes of rest.

She closed her eyes.

Hurtig came into Jeanette's office with the recording of that morning's anonymous phone call to the emergency call room. He handed her the CD and sat down.

Jeanette rubbed her tired eyes. "Have you spoken to whoever found the boy?"

"Yep. Two of our officers—according to the report, they arrived on the scene a couple of hours after the call was received. Like I said, they took a while to respond because the emergency operator got the address wrong."

Jeanette took the CD out of its case and put it in her computer.

The call lasted twenty seconds.

"112, what's the nature of the emergency?"

There was a crackle, but no sound of a voice.

“Hello? 112, what’s the nature of the emergency?” The operator sounded more circumspect now, and there was the sound of labored breathing.

“I just wanted to let you know there’s a dead body in the bushes near Thorildsplan.”

The man was slurring his words, and Jeanette thought he sounded drunk. Drunk or on drugs.

“What’s your name?” the operator asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, I heard that you said there’s a dead body near Bolidenplan.”

The man sounded annoyed. “A dead body in the bushes near the entrance to the *Thorildsplan* subway station.”

Then silence.

Just the operator’s hesitant “Hello?”

Jeanette frowned. “You don’t have to be Einstein to assume that the call was made somewhere near the station, do you?”

“No, of course. But if—”

“If what?” She could hear how irritated she sounded, but she had been hoping that the recording of the call would answer at least some of her questions. Give her something to throw at the commissioner and the prosecutor.

“Sorry,” she said, but Hurtig just shrugged.

“Let’s continue tomorrow.” He stood up and headed for the door. “Go home to Johan and Åke instead.”

Jeanette smiled gratefully. “Good night, see you in the morning.”

Once Hurtig had shut the door she called her boss, Commissioner Dennis Billing.

The chief of the criminal investigation department answered after four rings.

Jeanette told him about the dead, mummified boy, the anonymous phone call, and the other things they'd found out during the afternoon and evening.

In other words, she didn't have much of any significance to tell him.

"We'll have to see what the door-to-door inquiries come up with, and I'm waiting to hear what Ivo Andrić has discovered. Hurtig's talking to Violent Crime, and, well—all the usual, really."

"Obviously it would best, as I'm sure you realize, if we could solve this as quickly as possible. As much for you as for me."

Jeanette had a problem with his arrogant attitude, which she knew was entirely due to the fact that she was a woman. He had been among those who didn't think Jeanette should have been promoted to detective superintendent. With the unofficial backing of Prosecutor von Kwist, he had suggested another name: a man, obviously.

In spite of his explicit disapproval she had been given the job, but his unfavorable attitude toward her had tainted their relationship ever since.

"Of course, we'll do all we can. I'll get back to you tomorrow when we know more."

Dennis Billing cleared his throat.

"Hmm. There's something else I'd like to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"Well, this is supposed to be confidential, but I daresay I can bend the rules slightly. I'm going to have to borrow your team."

"No, that's not possible. This is an important murder investigation."

"Twenty-four hours, starting tomorrow evening. Then you can have them back. In spite of the situation that's arisen, I'm afraid it can't be avoided."

Jeanette was too tired to protest further.

Dennis Billing went on. “Mikkelsen needs them. They’re mounting a series of raids against people suspected of child pornography offenses, and he needs reinforcements. I’ve already spoken to Hurtig, Åhlund, and Schwarz. They’ll do their usual work tomorrow, then join up with Mikkelsen. Just so you know.”

There was nothing more for her to say.

Mariatorget—Sofia Zetterlund's Office

Toward the end of the blood-soaked eighteenth century, King Adolf Fredrik lent his name to the square now known as Mariatorget, on the condition that it never be used for executions. Since then no fewer than one hundred and forty-eight people have lost their lives there in circumstances more or less comparable to an execution. In that respect it hasn't really made much difference whether the square was known as Adolf Fredriks torg or Mariatorget.

Numerous of these one hundred and forty-eight murders occurred less than twenty meters from the building in which Sofia Zetterlund had her private psychotherapy practice, on the top floor of an old building on Sankt Paulsgatan, next to Tvålpalatset. The three residential apartments on that floor had been rebuilt as offices, and were rented out to two dental offices, a plastic surgeon, a lawyer, and another psychotherapist.

The décor of the shared waiting room was cool and modern, and the interior designer had chosen to buy a couple of large paintings by Adam Diesel-Frank, in the same shade of gray as the sofa and two armchairs.

In one corner stood a bronze sculpture by the German-born artist Nadya Ushakova, of a large vase of roses that were on the point of wilting. Around one of the stems was a small engraved plaque bearing the inscription DIE MYTHEN SIND GREIFBAR.

At the opening ceremony people had discussed the meaning of the quote, but no one managed to come up with a plausible explanation.

Myths are material.

The pale walls, expensive carpet, and exclusive works of art, taken as a whole, breathed discretion and money.

After a series of interviews a former medical secretary, Ann-Britt Eriksson, had been employed to serve as the shared receptionist. She organized appointments and taking care of certain administrative duties.

“Has anything happened that I should know about?” Sofia Zetterlund asked when she arrived that morning, on the dot of eight o’clock as usual.

Ann-Britt looked up from the newspaper spread out in front of her.

“Yes, Huddinge Hospital called, they want to bring forward your appointment with Tyra Mäkelä to eleven o’clock. I told them you’d call back to confirm.”

“Okay, I’ll call them at once.” Sofia headed toward her office. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” Ann-Britt said. “Mikael just called to say he probably won’t make the afternoon flight, but should be at Arlanda first thing tomorrow morning. He asked me to say that he’d like it if you stayed at his apartment tonight. So you have time to see each other tomorrow.”

Sofia stopped with her hand on the doorframe.

“Hmm, when’s my first appointment today?” She felt annoyed at having to change her plans. She had been thinking of surprising Mikael with dinner at the Gondolen restaurant, but as usual he had upset her plans.

“Nine o’clock, then you’ve got two more this afternoon.”

“Who’s first?”

“Carolina Glanz. According to the papers she’s just got a job as a presenter, traveling around the world interviewing celebrities. Isn’t that funny?”

Ann-Britt shook her head and let out a deep sigh.

Carolina Glanz had crashed into the nation’s consciousness on one of the many talent shows that filled the television schedules. She may not have had much of a singing voice, but according to the jury she had the necessary star quality. She had spent the winter and spring traveling around small nightclubs, lip syncing to a song that a less beautiful girl with a stronger voice had recorded. Carolina had gotten a lot of exposure in the evening tabloids, and the scandals had followed, one after the other.

Now that the media’s interest was focused elsewhere she had started to question herself and her choice of career.

Sofia didn’t like coaching pseudo-celebrities, and had trouble motivating herself for the sessions, even if she needed the money. She felt she was wasting her time. Her talents were better employed seeing clients who were seriously in need of help.

She’d far much rather deal with real people.

Sofia sat down at her desk and called Huddinge straight away. Bringing forward the appointment would mean that Sofia only had an hour or so to prepare, and when she put the phone down she pulled out her files on Tyra Mäkelä.

All in all, almost five hundred pages, a bundle of paper that would at least double in size before the case was finished.

She had read everything twice from cover to cover, and now concentrated on the central aspects. Tyra Mäkelä’s mental state.

Expert opinion was divided. The psychiatrist in charge of the investigation, along with the counselors and one of the psychologists, was in favor of imprisonment. But two psychologists were opposed to this, and advocated secure psychiatric care.

Sofia's task was to get them to unite around a final verdict, and she realized it wasn't going to be easy.

Together with her husband, Tyra Mäkelä had been found guilty of the murder of their eleven-year-old adopted son. The boy had been diagnosed with fragile X syndrome, a disability that led to both physical and mental problems. The family had lived an isolated existence in a house out in the country. The forensic evidence was conclusive, and documented the cruelty the boy had been subjected to. Traces of excrement were found in his lungs and stomach, he had cigarette burns, and he had been beaten with the hose of a vacuum cleaner.

The body had been found in a patch of woodland not far from the house.

The case had gotten a lot of media coverage, not least because the boy's mother was involved. An almost unanimous general public, led by several vociferous and influential politicians and journalists, was demanding the harshest punishment available under the law. Tyra Mäkelä should be sent to Hinseberg Prison for as long as was legally possible.

But Sofia knew that secure psychiatric care often meant that the prisoner ended up being locked away for longer than if they served a prison sentence.

Could Tyra Mäkelä be regarded as mentally competent at the time of the abuse? The evidence suggested that the boy had suffered at least three years of torture.

Real people's problems.

Sofia wrote a list of questions that she wanted to discuss with the convicted murderer, but then was interrupted when Carolina Glanz swept into the office in a pair of thigh-high red boots, a short, red, vinyl skirt, and a black leather jacket.

Huddinge Hospital

Sofia arrived at Huddinge just after half past ten and parked in front of the vast complex.

The entire building was clad in gray and blue paneling, in sharp contrast to the surrounding houses, which were painted in a range of bright colors. She had heard that during the Second World War this was meant to confuse any potential bombing raid on the hospital. The intention had been to make it look from above as if the hospital were a lake, and the buildings around it were supposed to look like fields and meadows.

She stopped in the cafeteria and bought coffee, a sandwich, and the evening papers, before heading toward the main entrance.

She left her things in a locker, then went through the metal detector and on into the long corridor. She walked past Ward 113, and as usual heard shouting and fighting inside. That was where they kept the most difficult patients, under heavy medication, while they were waiting to go to one of the other care facilities around the country.

She walked along the corridor, then turned right into Ward 112 and made her way to the consulting room that the psychologists shared. She glanced at the time and noted that she was fifteen minutes early.

She closed the door, sat down at the desk, and compared the front pages of the two evening papers.

“MACABRE FIND IN CENTRAL STOCKHOLM,” and “MUMMY FOUND IN BUSHES!”

She took a bite of the sandwich and sipped the hot coffee. The mummified body of a young boy had been found out at Thorildsplan.

More dead children, she thought with a heavy heart.

The door was opened by a thickset psychiatric nurse. “I’ve got someone out here that I gather you’re supposed to talk to. Nasty piece of work, with a load of shit on her conscience.” He gestured over his shoulder.

She didn’t like the language the nurses used among themselves. Even if they were dealing with serious criminals, there was no reason to be offensive or condescending.

“Show her in, please, then you can leave us alone.”

Mariatorget—Sofia Zetterlund's office

At two o'clock Sofia Zetterlund was back in her office in the city. She still had two appointments left before the day's work was over, and she realized it was going to be hard to stay focused after her visit to Huddinge.

Sofia sat down at her desk to formulate a recommendation that Tyra Mäkelä be sentenced to secure psychiatric care. The meeting of the members of the consultative team had led to the lead psychiatrist moderating his position somewhat, and Sofia was hopeful that they would soon be able to make a final decision.

If nothing else, then for Tyra Mäkelä's sake.

The woman needed treatment.

Sofia had presented a summary of the woman's background and character. Tyra Mäkelä had two suicide attempts behind her: as a fourteen-year-old she had taken an intentional overdose of pills, and she was put on disability benefit at the age of twenty as a result of persistent depression. The fifteen years she had spent with the sadistic Harri Mäkelä had led to another suicide attempt, then the murder of their adopted son.

Sofia believed that the time she had spent with her husband, who had been deemed sufficiently sane to be sentenced to prison, had exacerbated the woman's condition.

Sofia's conclusion was that Tyra Mäkelä had in all likelihood suffered repeated psychotic episodes during the years in which the abuse took place. There

were two documented visits to a psychiatric clinic during the past year that supported her thesis. In both cases the woman had been found wandering the streets and had to be hospitalized for several days before she could be discharged.

Sofia also saw other mitigating factors regarding Tyra Mäkelä's culpability in the case. The woman's IQ was so low that it meant she could hardly be held responsible for murder, a fact that the court had more or less ignored. Sofia saw a woman who, under the ever-present influence of alcohol, idealized her man. Her passivity might mean that she could be regarded as complicit in the abuse, but at the same time she was incapable of intervention because of her mental state.

The verdict had been upheld at the highest level, and all that remained now was the sentence.

Tyra Mäkelä needed treatment. Her crimes could never be undone, but a prison sentence wouldn't help anyone.

The cruelty of the case mustn't be allowed to cloud their judgment.

During the afternoon Sofia completed her statement about Tyra Mäkelä, and got through her three and four o'clock appointments. A burned-out businessman and an aging actress who was no longer getting any parts and had fallen into a deep depression as a result.

When she was on her way out at five o'clock, Ann-Britt stopped her in reception.

"You haven't forgotten that you're going to Gothenburg next Saturday? I've got the train tickets here, and you're booked into the Hotel Scandic."

Ann-Britt put a folder on the counter.

"Of course not," Sofia said.

She was going to see a publisher who was planning to print a Swedish translation of the former child soldier Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*. The publisher was hoping that Sofia could use her experience with traumatized children to help them check some of the facts.

"What time am I going?"

"Early. The departure time's on the ticket."

"5:12?"

Sofia sighed and went back into her office to dig out the report she had written for UNICEF seven years before.

When she sat down at her desk again and opened the file, she couldn't help wondering if she was actually ready to return to her memories from that time. She still dreamed about the child soldiers in Port Loko. The two boys by the truck, one with no arms, the other with no legs. The UNICEF pediatrician, murdered by the same children it was his calling to help. Victims turned perpetrators. The sounds of singing, *"Mambaa manyani . . . Mamani manyimi."* Seven years, she thought.

Was it really that long ago?

Kronoberg—Police Headquarters

The following day Jeanette systematically worked her way through the documents Hurtig had given her. Interviews, reports from investigations and judgments, all of them dealing with abuse or murders involving an element of sadism. Jeanette noted that in every case but one the perpetrator was male.

The exception's name was Tyra Mäkelä, and she and her husband had recently been found guilty of the murder of their adopted son.

Nothing she had seen at the crime scene out at Thorildsplan reminded her of anything she had experienced before, and she felt she needed assistance.

She picked up the phone and called Lars Mikkelsen at National Crime: he was responsible for violent and sexual offenses against children. She decided to give as brief an outline of the case as possible. If Mikkelsen was in a position to help her, she could go into more detail later.

What a fucking awful job, she thought as she waited for him to answer.

Interviewing and investigating pedophiles. How strong did you have to be to cope with watching thousands of hours of filmed abuse and several million pictures of violated children?

Could you actually have children of your own?

After her conversation with Mikkelsen, Jeanette Kihlberg called another meeting of the investigating team, where they attempted to piece the facts together. They didn't have that many lines of inquiry to follow up at the moment.

"The call to the emergency operator was made from an area close to the DN Tower." Åhlund held a sheet of paper in the air. "We should know where, soon."

Jeanette nodded. She went over to the whiteboard, where a dozen photographs of the dead boy had been pinned up.

"So, what do we know?" She turned to Hurtig.

"On the grass and in the dirt where he was found we've secured tracks from a stroller, as well as others from a small vehicle. The tire tracks belong to a garbage truck, and we've already spoken to the garbage collector driving it, so we can write that off."

"So someone could have used a stroller or shopping cart to get the body there?"

"Yes, definitely."

"Could the boy have been carried there?" Åhlund asked.

"If you're strong enough it wouldn't be a problem. The boy didn't weigh more than forty-five kilos."

The room fell silent, and Jeanette presumed that like her the others were imagining someone walking around carrying a dead boy wrapped in a black garbage bag.

Åhlund broke the silence. "When I saw how badly abused the boy was, I immediately thought of Harri Mäkelä, and if it weren't for the fact that I know he's locked up in Kumla, well—"

"Well, what?" Schwarz interrupted with a grin.

"Well, I'd have said he was the man we are looking for."

"You reckon? And you don't think that thought's already occurred to the rest of us?"

"Stop squabbling!" Jeanette leafed through her papers. "Forget Mäkelä. I've got information from Lars Mikkelsen at National Crime about a Jimmie Furugård."

“So who’s this Furugård?” Hurtig asked.

“A former UN soldier. First two years in Kosovo, then one in Afghanistan. He last served with the UN three years ago, and left with decidedly mixed references.”

“What makes him of interest to us?” Hurtig opened his notebook and leafed through to a fresh page.

“Jimmie Furugård has several convictions for rape and violent assault. Most of the people he assaulted were either immigrants or homosexual men, but it looks as if Furugård also has a habit of beating up his girlfriends. Three rape charges. Found guilty twice, cleared once.”

Hurtig, Schwarz, and Åhlund looked at each other, nodding slowly.

They’re interested, Jeanette thought, but not really convinced.

“Okay, so why did our little hothead stop working for the UN?” Åhlund asked. Schwarz glared at him.

“From what I can see, it came shortly after he was reprimanded for using prostitutes in Kabul on several occasions. No other details.”

“And he’s not locked up at the moment?” Schwarz asked.

“No, he was released from Hall Prison at the end of September last year.”

“But are we really looking for a rapist?” Hurtig said. “Anyway, how come Mikkelsen mentioned him? I mean, he works with crimes against children, doesn’t he?”

“Calm down,” Jeanette said. “Any sort of sexual violence could be of interest to our investigation. This Jimmie Furugård seems to be a pretty unpleasant character who’s not above attacking children. On at least one occasion he was suspected of assaulting and attempting to rape a young boy.”

Hurtig turned to look at Jeanette. “Where is he now?”

"According to Mikkelsen he's disappeared without a trace, so I've emailed von Kwist about issuing an arrest warrant, but he hasn't replied yet. I imagine he wants more to go on."

"Unfortunately, we don't have much to go on from Thorildsplan, and von Kwist isn't the smartest prosecutor we've got . . ." Hurtig sighed.

"Well," Jeanette interrupted, "for the time being we go through the usual routine while forensics do their thing. We work methodically, and without any preconceptions. Any questions?"

They all shook their heads.

"Good. Okay, everyone back to work."

She thought for a moment, tapping her pen on the desk.

Jimmie Furugård, she thought. Evidently something of a split personality. Doesn't seem to regard himself as gay, and struggles with his desires. Full of self-loathing and guilt.

There was something that didn't make sense.

She opened one of the two evening papers she'd bought on the way to work but hadn't had time to read. She'd already noticed that they had pretty much the same front page, apart from the headlines.

She closed her eyes and sat completely still as she counted to one hundred, then picked up the phone and called Prosecutor von Kwist.

"Hello. Have you read my email?" she began.

"Yes, I'm afraid I have, and I'm still trying to work out your thinking."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that it looks like you've completely lost your mind!"

Jeanette could hear how upset he was.

“I don’t understand . . .”

“Jimmie Furugård isn’t your man. That’s all you need to know!”

“So . . . ?” Jeanette was starting to get angry.

“Jimmie Furugård is a dedicated and well-regarded UN soldier. He’s received a number of commendations, and—”

“I do know how to read,” Jeanette interrupted. “But he’s also a neo-Nazi and has several convictions for rape and violent assault. He used prostitutes in Afghanistan and . . .”

Jeanette stopped herself. She realized that the prosecutor wasn’t going to listen to her opinion. No matter how badly mistaken she thought he was.

“I have to go now.” Jeanette regained control of her voice. “We’ll have to pursue other lines of inquiry. Thanks for your time.”

She hung up, then put her hands down on the table and closed her eyes.

Over the years she had learned that people could be raped, abused, humiliated, and murdered in countless different ways. Clenching her hands in front of her, she realized that there were just as many ways to mismanage an investigation, and that a prosecutor could obstruct the work of an investigation for reasons that were anything but clear.

She got up and went out into the corridor, heading for Hurtig’s office. He was on the phone, and gestured to her to sit down. She looked around.

Hurtig’s office was the antithesis of her own. Numbered box files on the bookshelves, folders in neat piles on the desk. Even the plants in the window looked well cared for.

Hurtig ended the call and put the phone down.

“What did von Kwist say?”

“That Furugård isn’t our man.” Jeanette sat down.

“Maybe he’s right.”

Jeanette didn’t answer, and Hurtig pushed a pile of papers aside before he went on.

“You know we’re going to be a bit late starting tomorrow?”

Jeanette thought Hurtig looked rather embarrassed. “Don’t worry. You’re only going to help bring in a few computers full of child porn, then you’ll be back.”

Hurtig smiled.

Gamla Enskede—Kihlberg House

Jeanette Kihlberg left the police headquarters just after eight in the evening of the day after the body was found at Thorildsplan.

Hurtig had offered to give her a lift home, and she had thanked him but declined, on the pretext of wanting to walk down to Central Station before catching the train out to Enskede.

She needed to be alone for a while. Just let her mind float.

As she was heading down the steps to Kungsbro strand her cell phone buzzed to say she'd gotten a text. It was from her dad.

"Hi," he wrote. "Are you okay?"

By the time she approached Klarabergsviadukten her thoughts were back on the job again.

One family with three generations of police officers. Grandad, Dad, and now her. Grandma and Mum had been housewives.

And Åke, she thought. Artist, and housewife.

Once her dad had realized she was thinking of following in his footsteps, he had told her plenty of stories intended to put her off. About broken people. Drug addicts and alcoholics. Pointless violence. The idea that people never used to kick someone when they were down was a myth. People had always done that, and would go on doing it.

But there was one particular part of the job that he hated.

Stationed in a suburb south of Stockholm, close to both the subway and the commuter rail lines, at least once a year he would have to force himself to go down onto one of the tracks to pick up the remnants of a person.

A head. An arm. A leg. A torso.

It left him a complete wreck each time it happened.

He didn't want her to have to see everything he had had to see, and his message to her could be summarized in one sentence: "Whatever you do, don't join the police."

But nothing he said made her change her mind. On the contrary, his stories only made her feel more motivated.

The first hurdle to being accepted into the police academy had been a problem with the sight in her left eye. The operation had cost all her savings, and she had to work overtime pretty much every weekend for six months to be able to afford it.

The second hurdle was when she found out that she was too short.

A chiropractor provided the solution to that, and after twelve weeks of treatment on her back he had managed to stretch her height by the two missing centimeters.

She had lain flat in the car on the way to the medical evaluation, because she knew that the body could shrink if you sat down for any length of time.

What happens if I lose my motivation? she thought.

That simply mustn't happen, she thought. You just keep going. She walked through the bus station toward Central Station, down the escalator, and through the crowded passageway between the commuter trains and the subway.

She opened her purse. Two crumpled hundred-kronor bills left, thirty of which would go to her ticket home. She hoped Åke still had some of the money she had

given him for household expenses at the start of the week. Even if Åhlund was able to fix the car, she guessed it was still going to cost a couple of thousand.

Work and money, she thought.

How the hell do you escape from that?

Once Johan had gone to bed, Jeanette and Åke settled down with cups of tea in the living room. The European Championship in soccer was about to start, and this pre-game show was providing a detailed analysis of the Swedish national team's chances. As usual, there was talk of at least the quarterfinals, hopefully a semifinal, and maybe even gold.

"Your dad rang, by the way," Åke said, without looking away from the screen.

"Did he want anything special?"

"The usual. He asked how you were, then about Johan and school. Then he asked me if I'd managed to find a job yet."

Jeanette knew her dad had trouble with Åke. He had once called him a slacker. On another occasion, a dreamer. Lazy. A couch potato. The list of negative epithets was as varied as it was comprehensive. Occasionally he came out with them in front of Åke.

Usually when that happened she felt sorry for Åke and immediately sprang to his defense, but recently she had found herself agreeing more and more with the criticism.

He often said he was happy being her housewife, but in reality she was just as much of a housewife as he was. It would have been okay if he actually did something with his paintings, but to be honest there wasn't much sign of activity there.

"Åke . . ."

He didn't hear her. He was deeply absorbed in a report about Swedish team captains over the years.

"Our finances are completely fucked," she said. "I'm ashamed of having to call Dad again."

He didn't respond.

"Åke?" she said tentatively. "Are you listening?"

He sighed again. "Yeah, yeah," he said, still staring at the screen. "But at least you've got a good reason to call him."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, Bosse called here earlier." Åke sounded annoyed. "He's probably expecting you to call back, isn't he?"

Fucking incredible, Jeanette thought.

She wanted to avoid an argument, so she got up from the sofa and went out to the kitchen.

A mountain of washing up. Åke and Johan had made pancakes, and the evidence was still there.

No, she wasn't going to do the washing up. It could sit there until he dealt with it. She sat down at the kitchen table and dialed her parents' number.

This is the last time, I swear, she thought.

After the call Jeanette went back into the living room, sat down on the sofa again, and waited patiently for the program to end. She liked soccer a lot, probably more than Åke, but this type of program didn't interest her at all. Too much empty talk.

"I called Dad," she said when the credits started to roll. "He's putting five thousand in my account so we can get through the rest of the month."

Åke nodded distractedly.

“But it’s not going to happen again,” she went on. “I mean it this time. Do you understand?”

He squirmed. “Yeah, yeah. I understand.”

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