



ASK FOR
ANDREA

NOELLE W. IHLI

ASK FOR ANDREA

NOELLE W. IHLI

Published 2022 by Dynamite Books

www.dynamitebookspublishing.com

© Noelle West Ihli

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of

Dynamite Books, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at info@dynamitebookspublishing.com
ASIN: B09QLPG1SY

Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author’s imagination.

Cover design by Elizabeth Mackey

First printing, April 2022.

Dynamite Books, LLC

CONTENTS

1. MEGHAN
2. BRECIA
3. SKYE
4. MEGHAN
5. BRECIA
6. SKYE
7. MEGHAN
8. BRECIA
9. SKYE
10. MEGHAN
11. BRECIA
12. SKYE
13. MEGHAN
14. BRECIA
15. SKYE
16. MEGHAN
17. BRECIA
18. SKYE
19. MEGHAN
20. BRECIA
21. SKYE

22. MEGHAN

23. BRECIA

24. SKYE

25. MEGHAN

26. BRECIA

27. SKYE

28. MEGHAN

29. BRECIA

30. SKYE

31. MEGHAN

32. BRECIA

33. MEGHAN

34. SKYE

35. MEGHAN

36. BRECIA

37. SKYE

38. MEGHAN

39. BRECIA

40. SKYE

41. MEGHAN

42. BRECIA

43. SKYE

44. MEGHAN

45. BRECIA

46. SKYE

47. MEGHAN

48. BRECIA

49. SKYE

50. MEGHAN

51. BRECIA

52. SKYE

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For Nate.
I'll haunt you (but only because I love you).

1. MEGHAN

OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS, UTAH

1 YEAR BEFORE

Despite the crushing weight of him, my brain screamed at me to run.

Run, it demanded as he grunted and pulled the scarf—my scarf—tighter around my neck.

Instead I lay frozen, like a mouse under a cat's paw, until the vise of pressure and pain suddenly released.

He looked at me for a few seconds as he got to his feet, his mouth turned down in disgust. He was breathing hard. His pale face hovered above me in the darkness, the distinctive mole on his cheek a stark punctuation mark.

He let the limp, pink-and-green scarf fall to the ground beside me.

Run, my brain roared again. *RUN!*

I still didn't move. I didn't even blink.

He turned toward the car he'd precariously parked on the shoulder of the rutted dirt road.

I could only imagine what he'd left in the trunk. But if I didn't move, I knew I'd find out.

So that's when I finally ran, bolting into the shadows of the pines that beckoned with hiding places, if not safety.

I scrambled down a steep embankment toward a dry stream bed, pushing myself faster and willing myself not to fall, no longer even conscious of the pain in my throat.

I wasn't sure where I was going. All I knew was that I needed to put as much distance as I could between myself and the spotless blue Kia Sorento. And more importantly, I needed to get away from the soft-spoken, fine-as-hell man who drove it: *The needle*, I'd called him when I told Sharesa about our upcoming date. As in, the needle in a deep haystack of

bachelors on the MatchStrike app: divorced dads with kids, complicated custody agreements, and cringey gym-bathroom selfies.

Jimmy was different. With his dark amber eyes, a close-shaved beard along his angular jawline and a hard-part haircut, he was a dead ringer for Chris Hemsworth.

When I showed Sharesa his photo, she'd actually squealed.

I, on the other hand, had kept my expectations in check. I wasn't new to the online dating scene. I'd taken an Uber to Gracie's Spot in Salt Lake after my shift and braced to meet Chris Hemsworth's creepy cousin. I even texted Sharesa on my way. *Call me in an hour with an out?* I could see the text bubbles appear immediately after I hit send. *Whatever, you know you're thirsty.* I rolled my eyes. More bubbles. ... *I'll call <3.*

We talked in the back booth of Gracie's until last call at eleven. I texted Sharesa from the bathroom that there was no need to rescue me after all. She'd replied immediately, like always: *Thirrrrrsty.*

As I washed my hands, a paper sign taped to the bathroom mirror caught my attention. "On a date that isn't going well? Do you feel unsafe or just a little uneasy? Ask for Andrea at the bar. We'll make sure you get home safe." I smiled as I dried my hands, grateful I didn't need to ask. Not tonight. Not with him.

I stopped looking at the sign and studied myself in the mirror. I'd taken extra time with my hair, which I usually let fall in a blunt line across my shoulders. Earlier, I had coaxed it into waves that looked like spun gold in the restaurant lighting. I reapplied some of the deep pink lipstick that had become my signature accessory over the years and pressed my lips together, wondering if he'd kiss me later.

I had two beers over the course of the evening. Not enough to get me drunk or anything. Just enough to take the edge off my nerves. Because he did not in fact look like Chris Hemsworth's creepy cousin. He was thoughtful and funny. Even the large mole on his cheek somehow made him all the more attractive.

He drank ginger ale. It didn't faze me. I lived in Utah, after all.

The last thing I remember was feeling a little bit too warm. And really, really happy. The syrup-colored lights blazing in the trendy sputnik chandeliers suddenly had these little auras surrounding them. So when he suggested that I let him drive me home instead of waiting for an Uber in the

cold, I didn't even hesitate.

The car had those crinkly paper covers on the seats, like it had just been cleaned.

That's the last thing I remember. Until I woke up with his hands—and my scarf—around my neck. The warm lights of Gracie's were gone, replaced with the bite of pine needles and dirt under my hair and the swirling dark of the freezing night air.

For a few seconds, I couldn't understand what was happening. I couldn't scream. I couldn't move. I couldn't even tell where I was. All I knew was that everything hurt.

The memory of our date crashed through the haze when I saw his eyes glinting above me. They weren't warm or even amber-colored anymore like they had been in the booth at Gracie's. These eyes were cold. Wide. And full of rage.

I thought about the sign in the bathroom at Gracie's. *Ask for Andrea.*

Andrea couldn't help me now. No one could.

I moved faster than I'd ever moved in my life, the pounding in my head and my chest and the crushing pressure of the scarf forgotten.

I didn't care where I was going. All that mattered was putting as much distance between us as possible, even if it meant running headlong into the looming woods.

I thought I heard someone call out as I dove down the rocky slope of the shallow stream bed. It sounded like a woman.

I ignored it and kept running.

He didn't follow me.

He didn't need to.

Because when I finally stopped running, I realized to my amazement that I wasn't out of breath.

Just as quickly, the amazement turned to horror.

I wasn't breathing hard because I wasn't breathing at all.

2. BRECIA

BOULDER, COLORADO

2 YEARS BEFORE

I first realized I was dead the same way you realize you've been dreaming. Except backwards, I guess. Because the bad dream was real.

I didn't know it had happened at first. Not for a few seconds. Not until I stood up—while my own body stayed put. I looked at the soft chambray pajamas I'd changed into after getting home from work, now dirty and damp. One of my slippers was kicked off, so you could see the chipped peach polish on my bare toes. My long, dark hair was streaked with something darker and sticky. I couldn't feel the throbbing in my head or the awful pressure on my neck anymore.

He was looking at me, too. Not at *me*, me. At my body. At my unblinking, bloodshot hazel eyes. He was breathing hard, expressionless. He was still holding the extension cord.

He'd grown out a Joaquin Phoenix beard that nearly—but not quite—obscured the dark mole on his cheek. It made him look ten years older than the last time I'd seen him. If he'd been sporting the beard back then, we probably wouldn't have gone out in the first place. Don't get me wrong: I'll swoon for a good five-o'clock shadow, but this thing was fully bird-nest material. It took him from a comfortable nine to a very solid three.

A year earlier, we had dated for exactly one week. How do I know that? Because he was upset when I spent our “one-week anniversary” with my girlfriends. I couldn't understand why it bothered him so much. It was Lanelle's birthday. And like I said, we'd been dating for *one week*. Still, I talked about him the whole time. I hadn't dated much since my last breakup a couple years earlier, and it felt good to say the word “boyfriend” again. It felt good to answer all the juicy questions over watermelon margaritas about whether he was a good kisser (yes), good in bed (no idea, early days), and how we'd met. That one, I fudged a little. I wasn't proud I'd finally gotten

desperate enough to make a profile on MatchStrike. So I dodged the question. I decided that if we lasted, I'd fess up.

When I ran into him on my way out of the restaurant after Lanelle's party, I didn't know what to think at first. He smiled his pretty smile and acted like it was a wild coincidence. That's how I played it off to Lanelle and the rest of my friends. I could tell that they thought he was cute. That I'd done well. So I pushed aside the uncomfortable feeling in my gut as I tried to remember whether I'd mentioned the name of the restaurant to him earlier. I was pretty sure I hadn't.

I let him drive me home, even though that meant leaving my car in the Barbacoa parking lot. At first, he just seemed happy to see me. But when I asked who he'd met up with at Barbacoa, he sort of dodged the question. So I asked again. That was when he just kind of blew up.

He went on and on about me brushing him off to hang out with my friends. Then he ranted about me not even being glad to see him at the restaurant.

I texted him later that night to tell him I thought we should break up. He tried to call me immediately. When I didn't pick up, he called again. And again. And again. I put the phone in airplane mode and went to bed, still feeling the watermelon margs and wishing I hadn't told Lanelle or the girls about him yet.

When I woke up the next morning, I had twenty-two text messages waiting for me. They started out sort of sweet. He'd had a terrible day yesterday and just really wanted to see me. He understood why I was upset. Could he have another chance? By the last text message, I was a fat bitch. A fat bitch who had wasted his time. As soon as I had finished reading that one, another text came through. He could see that I had read his texts, so why wasn't I responding? I'd wasted his time, broken his heart, and now I wouldn't even write back.

The texts trickled in for the next three days, even though I didn't respond. I finally blocked his number and reported his profile on MatchStrike, figuring that maybe I'd save other girls the trouble.

When the texts stopped, I pretty much forgot about him.

I redecorated my duplex. I got a new job and a raise. I got bangs and highlights in my hair. I deleted MatchStrike after a handful of duds who didn't even make it past a second date. And I adopted a cat: a fire-point

named Frank.

So when I took the recycle bin out to the side yard in my pajamas that night, he was the last person I was expecting to see.

I didn't even recognize him at first with that awful beard. He was standing there almost casually, like maybe it was some kind of coincidence. Just like he had that night at Barbacoa. Except this time he was standing in my side yard. Behind my fence.

I almost screamed. I only caught myself when I recognized his eyes. Honestly, I was a little relieved that he wasn't a stranger.

Then I got mad. It had been an entire *year*. What the *fuck* was wrong with him, showing up like this? Scaring me like this? Did he think I was going to take him back now?

That was when he pulled out the extension cord. My extension cord. I recognized it in slow motion as he came toward me. I hadn't bothered to bring it inside yet after using it to plug in the Christmas lights I'd finally goaded myself into putting up.

If you want to know, it takes a long time to strangle somebody. I'd heard that on an episode of *Investigation Discovery* once. I can tell you it takes even longer when you're the one being strangled. My throat was on fire. My head was on fire. My chest was on fire. Even my eyes felt like they were burning. I couldn't make a sound. I couldn't even see, as the tears poured down my cheeks.

I guess it was taking too long for him, too. Because in the end, he smashed the side of my head against the pavement. After that, everything went dark. The unbearable fire was suddenly gone, along with the chill in the air and the feel of the wet, rough pavement.

When I caught my first glimpse of, well, I still didn't know what to call it—my soul? My spirit? My echo?—it was sort of like looking at my reflection in a mirror. I wasn't wafting in the breeze or anything. I wasn't see-through. I just wasn't alive anymore. I was still wearing my pajamas and slippers, but they looked clean, the way they had a couple minutes earlier.

As soon as he realized I was dead—which was a hot minute after *I* realized I was dead—he booked it through my back gate. I was left standing beside my own body and the recycling bin I'd just wheeled out of the garage.

I followed him, finding that I could keep pace with him easily—something I never could have said of myself while alive. I actually grabbed

his arm and watched as my own fingers rested lightly on top of his shoulder. I sort of expected them to slide right through.

He didn't react, exactly. However, he did walk faster, down the dark driveway, down the sidewalk, until he reached the blue Kia he'd left at the end of the street.

When he opened the driver's side door, I dove inside the car headlong with him. I wasn't going to risk letting him go if that car door slammed shut in my face.

As I watched him hurry into the car, I knew that I couldn't do anything for the girl who was lying on the pavement with blood in her hair. I couldn't do anything for Frank, who was probably still asleep on the big tufted chair in my bedroom.

Nobody else was looking out for me tonight. Nobody else was going to realize that I was missing, let alone dead, until I didn't show up for work tomorrow. Nobody could do anything to help me now.

Before he drove away, he used a packet of wipes to clean his hands. Carefully. Almost lovingly. Like he hadn't just used them to wrap a dirty extension cord around my neck by my recycle bins in my side yard until I finally stopped fighting.

In hindsight, that was when I decided I was going to haunt him.

I studied him from the passenger seat while he drove. His amber eyes, black in the darkness of the car, stayed fixed on the road while we made the twenty-minute drive back to his place.

It wasn't the apartment he'd told me about last year—down to the roommate who left his socks in the kitchen. Instead, it was a little brick 70s-style rambler in Broomfield with one porch light burned out.

I followed him up the front walkway of the house, past a Big Wheel bike tipped over into an overgrown flower bed and a tangle of half-naked Barbies on the steps.

The lone porch light flickered a little as he turned the knob and went inside the house, shutting the door behind him and leaving me standing on the porch for a little while longer, staring at the toys and the riot of azaleas in the flowerbeds I just knew he hadn't planted.

I found that I couldn't just walk through the front door, once he went inside. So I was glad I'd gotten into the car when I had the chance.

I stood outside on his porch for a while. Because despite all the scary

movies I'd watched, I had learned zero useful information about being dead. Could I make the doorknob move if I focused really hard? No. What would happen if I screamed? I tried it. I could hear myself just fine, but based on the reaction of the guy walking his dog across the street, nobody else could.

Well, that's not totally accurate. The dog—a little gray schnauzer—stopped walking and looked straight at the front porch.

I got my hopes up. "Hey, buddy! Hey!" The schnauzer growled a little. He sniffed. Then he kept walking. The owner didn't even look up from the blue glow of his smartphone.

I turned away from the useless dog and sat down on the porch. I studied my hands—the reflection of my hands. I watched the way they rested on the reflection of my knees. The way my feet rested on the cracked concrete. Barely touching, as if I were made of something just heavier than air.

I swiped hard at a leaf on the step and watched it move so imperceptibly it was impossible to tell whether it had been the night air.

You're dead, I told myself firmly. *Feel sad*.

When my favorite aunt had died in a car accident, the cushion of denial lasted a solid hour. It was too big. I couldn't take it in. When it finally hit me, I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. It felt like that. Only this time, the impossibly awful thing had happened to me.

I could see blurry shapes moving behind the pebbled glass of the kitchen window above the flowerbed. I stepped into the azaleas and watched my reflection scatter through the spaces between the leggy blooms. The plants didn't move. *I* did.

It would have been completely fascinating if I hadn't just been murdered; however, it did give me an idea. I couldn't walk through walls. Or grab anything. I seemed to have had all the power of the night air. Not the wind, even. *The air*.

I sat with this idea for a while, watching the azalea leaves shiver in the slight breeze. I lifted my hand toward the nearest flower and reached for a cluster of blooms. This time I watched more carefully as my hand slipped, sort of like smoke, between two large magenta blossoms.

I wasn't wind: I was air. But air could go places. And that gave me an idea.

I walked around the house until I got to the side gate, which was closed. I could see the side yard—and his recycle bins—through the slats. I focused

on the air between the slats and moved forward.

Easily enough, I scattered right through the fence.

My gaze settled on a cat door, slightly ajar, leading into the garage. I went through that too. No problem.

The light was on, illuminating a neat garage and a few rows of stacked boxes on one side, a minivan on the other. I gave the boxes a cursory glance. They were labeled with kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, etc. A stack of labels and a permanent marker sat on the topmost box.

He was moving.

I heard a clattering noise behind me and turned in time to see a little calico cat scurry into the garage through the cat door.

“Hi, kitty,” I said softly, and I swear he sat down and stared right at me for a few seconds—then settled in front of a bowl of cat food. I followed him and crouched beside him as he ate. I thought of Frank with his chirping meow. He was probably tearing up the carpet at the bottom of the stairs in protest that I hadn’t fed him yet.

I knew I couldn’t cry actual tears. Even so, I felt the familiar prickling feeling in the back of my eyes and sadness that spread through the center of me. I wouldn’t ever feel the downy fur underneath Frank’s chin or his rumble purr as he flopped down on the bed beside me with his eyes closed again.

As the feeling got bigger, I heard a quiet pop that plunged the garage into sudden darkness.

I froze, listening to the quiet tinkling of the filament in the bulb.

“I think I did that,” I whispered to the cat, who continued crunching away.

There were little pinpricks of light surrounding the door to his house. I moved toward them and the sound of the muffled voices inside.

An hour ago, he had taken everything I had.

I didn’t know how, but I planned to return the favor.

3. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

He came into the Daily Grind coffeehouse a lot when I was on shift that summer.

It didn't bother me. I looked forward to it, actually. He tipped. He was cute. He was one of the few white folks in Idaho who didn't try to make small talk about where I was *really* from or take the opportunity to test out their fledgling Spanish. (Much to my mom's disappointment, I had taken exactly one year of Spanish elective in middle school.)

He called me "Dolly," on account of me wearing a Dolly Parton shirt the day he first came in for a hot chocolate. Never coffee. Always hot chocolate. That was a little unusual, so I remembered his order. I started adding a little smiley face on the cup, next to his name. *James*.

"Thanks, Dolly," he always said with a grin that made me blush. So of course I mumbled something awkward and turned around to prep the next order. His amber eyes—I swear, they looked like dark, liquid gold—lingered on me while I pretended not to notice.

My manager, Ken, teased me about him once in a while. He told me I should write my number on his cup next time he came in. "The hot chocolate dude that looks like Chris Hemsworth is totally flirting with you," Ken said, wiggling his eyebrows. "Ball's in your court, honeybun."

I almost did. I rolled the idea around in my head sometimes while I was toasting somebody's bagel or adding exactly 5.5 pumps of caramel syrup to a Frappuccino. I was embarrassed to admit—even to myself—that I had never been on a real date, let alone made the first move. I told myself that's what college was for. When I got there in the fall, somehow I would shed my skin and lose my awkwardness when I crossed the threshold of campus at Idaho State.

It wasn't unusual for me to see him three or four times a week that

summer; however, a few weeks before I was set to drive to ISU, he suddenly stopped coming by. I felt weirdly sad about it. Like I had missed my chance or something. I pictured his face while I worked, feeling wistful that I'd probably never see him again. He was older than me by a lot—late twenties, if I had to guess. Honestly, he was so good-looking with those caramel eyes, dark hair, and dramatic celebrity-style beauty mark that I didn't really care.

It felt like fate when, on my last day at work before I left for ISU, he walked through the doors with a big smile and ordered his usual. I could feel my cheeks go red as I tried to bully myself into writing my number on his hot chocolate cup. I told myself it was practice, I guess. To prove I was ready for college (I wasn't). But I chickened out. I reasoned that I was leaving for school in two days, so what was the point?

I told him in a mumbled rush that today was my last day. He probably wouldn't see me at the Daily Grind again. He looked genuinely disappointed and then sort of shrugged. "Well, I'll miss you, Dolly."

My cheeks flared even hotter, and I pretended that the espresso machine was spilling over until he left. *Idiota*, I thought to myself. I remembered the curse words.

I finished my shift at four and turned in my apron and employee door tag. I gave Ken a hug, promising I'd text him. Then I walked to the bus stop. I was about to hit *send* on a text to my mom about dinner—pupusas at our favorite food truck? I had skipped lunch and was starving—when I saw a car slow down beside me in the shopping center.

It was him.

He gave me that smile, like he was as surprised as me. Like it was serendipity. Then he said, "Hey, Dolly. Want a ride?"

I didn't even hesitate. The universe had given me a second chance after I'd punted earlier—and all those other times. I easily batted aside the voice that quietly piped up to wonder why he was still in the sleepy shopping center two hours after I'd last seen him.

"Sure, why not?" I said, pleased that my voice sounded so easygoing, even when I could feel my heart pounding hard against my chest. *It's not a big deal*, I told myself. *It's not like he's a stranger*. I smoothed down my curls, which were a mess like they always were after work.

Then I got into the blue Kia and buckled my seatbelt.

"You maybe wanna grab something to eat first?" he asked. I felt my

heart calm down a little.

“Sure, I’m starving,” I replied, blushing and making eye contact with the dark mark on his cheek. This meant it was a date. I couldn’t wait to text Ken later. He’d be so proud of me.

He grinned. “Well, then I’m gonna take you to my favorite place, okay? It’s kind of out of the way, but it’s worth it.”

The voice in my head piped up again. I’d lived in Kuna all my life. There weren’t many places I’d never been. Especially when it came to food. “What’s it called?” I asked.

He shook his head. “You’ll see.”

As we drove, he asked me questions. Questions about my family. Whether I’d ever visited El Salvador (once, when I was a baby). What kind of music I liked. What I wanted to study. Whether I was a morning person or a night owl. Question after question. Like I was the most interesting person in the world. All with that smile. Stealing glances at me while he pulled onto the interstate toward Boise.

I told myself to relax. Boise was a thirty-minute drive, but it did have more restaurants.

I focused on what he was saying and tried to enjoy myself. He was telling a story about one of his roommates, who had gotten a growler instead of a pony keg for their last party. I laughed, not really sure what the difference was either but unwilling to reveal that. He seemed kind of old to still be partying, but what did I know?

Five minutes later, he signaled to leave the interstate. I looked up at the sign. Blacks Creek. Kuna-Mora Road. My stomach turned over. He didn’t miss a beat as he continued telling the story. I had been on Blacks Creek Road once, on a hike. As far as I knew, there weren’t any restaurants this way. Just hills and canyons.

My stomach started to hurt. “Is this the right exit?” I asked, as lightly as I could. I was still worried I would blow it. Hurt his feelings. Disappoint him. Reveal that I was a baby who had never even been on a real date or kissed a boy. That Ken—who himself had a boyfriend— was the only boy I ever spent any amount of time with.

“You haven’t been to Moe’s?” he asked, glancing at me with genuine surprise. “And you grew up here?” He shot me a sly smile, and I believed him.

Just in case, I decided to send a text to my mom. “Oh, Moe’s?” I bluffed. “Oh yeah, I’ve always wanted to try it.” I swallowed as I pulled my phone out of my jacket pocket. “I’m just going to text my mom, let her know. I told her I’d be home soon.”

As I said it, I looked at the screen and saw zero bars.

My thumbs hovered over the text message box as I read my mom’s last text message again and again. *Te quiero, mi’ja*.

The sick feeling came back. And when I looked up at him, I saw that he had been watching me. I plastered a fake smile on my face.

He took it in stride. “There’s no service for a couple miles—but just past that hill, you’ll get three bars. No problem. You want me to stop there so you can text her?”

The whiplash from dread to relief made me feel dizzy, and I mustered up a real smile. Maybe Moe’s *did* exist. Maybe everything was fine. I was getting worked up over nothing. Like I always did. “Sure,” I said, as casually as I could. “She’ll worry if I don’t.”

A few minutes later, we took a bend in the road. There was a “Ranch exit” sign just ahead, and he slowed the car and signaled onto what looked like little more than a dirt trail. I looked down at my phone as the tires crunched and rumbled along the uneven, rocky surface.

Still no service.

He spoke as if he had read my mind, pointing outside the car. “If you still aren’t getting bars, that spot down by the creek should do it.” He smiled. “Found it by accident when my friend Greg had to take a leak on the way out here.”

I laughed a little and got out of the car, my eyes on my phone as I walked toward the creek.

Still no bars.

I held the phone up and took a few steps forward and tried again.

Nothing.

And that’s when he grabbed me from behind. One hand roughly pulled my head back by my hair. The other closed around my throat as he pushed me to the ground. I landed hard on my stomach, but the only sound I could manage was a muffled grunt as his knees pinned me down.

I tried to scream. Tried to twist my body around to get him off me. Tried to fight.

All I could focus on was trying to get his hands off my throat.

When I was in fourth grade, the little boy next door—his name was Dewey—drowned in the hot tub on his back patio. He tried to get in it while his mom was making lunch, and the cover shut on him. After that, I sometimes had a hard time falling asleep at night. I couldn't stop thinking about what it must have been like for him.

Drowning was the worst way I could imagine dying.

Until now.

It couldn't have been more than a couple minutes before I lost consciousness, but the seconds seemed to expand as I tried—and failed—to find a way to make him stop.

When the darkness finally closed in, the pain and the pressure disappeared with the light.

When the light reappeared, I could still hear him grunting behind me. I could still see the dirt and gravel beneath my face. Everything else had gone numb.

To my amazement however, I rolled away from his grasp.

To my horror, he didn't even notice. Because the girl with the dark, messy curls lying face down in the dirt didn't move at all.

I'd seen those *Dateline* specials about people who had out-of-body experiences. Near-death experiences. I quickly decided that's what was happening.

"GET OFF ME," I screamed, launching myself at him.

My fists landed on his back with all the force of a butterfly wing.

"Stop, stop, stop," I cried. I knew he couldn't hear me. I wasn't sure I could even hear myself.

The girl on the ground—me—wasn't putting up a fight anymore. Her lips were a deep lavender. There was a long line of drool coming out of one corner of her mouth. Her eyes weren't closed, but they weren't open, either.

The distant sound of a vehicle on the interstate was what finally made him let go. It wasn't close, but there was no cover out here, aside from some scrubby sage and the shallow creek.

I watched as he finally stood up and inspected his hands then walked back toward the blue Kia.

He didn't look back at the body on the ground.

As I heard his tires crunch along the road, I waited for it to happen. For

my soul to reunite with the lifeless, dusty body in the dirt.

I sat down and got as close as I could to my body. “He’s gone,” I whispered. “You can wake up now.”

I imagined reuniting with my body, focusing as hard as I could on what it had felt like in the moments before everything went dark. I lay down next to myself, hoping that all of a sudden, I’d feel the pain again, the desperation to breathe. That was what happened in the *Dateline* episode. You saw yourself outside your body, and then wham, you came roaring back. Or some kind of loving being appeared to tell you it wasn’t your time to meet God yet.

“Come back,” I whispered. I thought about my mom, already home from work and wondering why I hadn’t beat her home. Why I hadn’t texted. Whether I wanted two or three pupusas.

My phone was lying in the dirt beneath me. I could see one corner, pinned underneath my thigh.

It was still and silent.

Just like me.

4. MEGHAN

OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS, UTAH

1 YEAR BEFORE

It took all night for me to find my way back to my body in the dark forest.

The thumbnail of a moon provided just enough light to get me back to the rocky gully. From there, it was an impossible guessing game of sagebrush, crumbling limestone, and hundreds of scrawny pine trees that looked exactly alike.

There were no stumbles or falls to slow me down as I moved through the darkness. But as it turned out, being a ghost didn't come with a maps app. And it didn't make me any less afraid of the dark. The night was full of snapping branches, and unearthly muttering noises. I screamed in terror and frustration every few minutes. The sound didn't echo.

Despite my best efforts to move like the spirits I'd seen on TV, my feet stayed on the ground, in the lace-up coral flats I'd been wearing earlier.

Above me, the stars were brighter than I'd ever seen them. Everything else surrounding me was swallowed up in inky blackness.

I'd always enjoyed camping—the few times I'd gone anyway. Still, I was quick as anyone to park myself around the campfire or zip myself up in my tent when the sun set. Nature was beautiful, at a distance. Up close, it was usually terrifying.

With every new twig snap or rustling branch, I froze. Or screamed.

From somewhere in the distance, I could hear the excited chorus of coyotes.

It wasn't that I was afraid something bad would happen to me. The worst thing had already happened. Fear felt different than it had while I was alive. My heartbeat didn't speed up. My breath didn't speed up. I just felt the terror of being alone, of being lost, of being dead, in every part of me that was left.

When I came around a bend and saw a huge pair of glinting eyes

staring back at me from a rocky outcropping, I shrieked.

The eyes didn't disappear. If anything, they moved a little closer before I ran. The pinpricks of stars swirled in front of me as I moved faster and faster, still screaming for help I knew would not be coming.

* * *

It was the coyotes that led me back to my body as the sky turned steel gray above the rocky horizon.

They had stopped calling to each other. But as I climbed up an embankment that looked vaguely familiar, I could hear growls and snarls coming from just beyond the ravine.

The first thing I saw was one of my coral shoes: the battered mortal twin to the pristine reflections on my feet. It was lying in the dirt, smears of something dark crusting the tongue.

There were five coyotes just past the shoe. They were skinny and small enough that I wouldn't have been afraid of any of them in the daylight. In the darkness, it was a different story. Backs hunched together, eyes flashing green as they snapped and chattered to one another, and jaws dark with what I knew was blood, they were something else entirely.

I felt the terror expand until it was too big for me to contain it. "Get away!" I screamed, taking a step toward them.

To my amazement, five heads swiveled toward me as the chattering snarls stopped.

The coyote nearest me, who had a dark patch on her head, drew back her lips to bare needle-like teeth.

"Get out of here," I screamed again, stepping toward them.

Their ears went back slightly, and they sniffed the air, taking a few shuffling steps away from my body.

I took a step forward, still screaming.

They didn't flinch, exactly. However, they didn't turn back to their meal, either.

The coyote with the dark patch made a muttering noise in her throat and moved to circle the rest of her companions—allowing me a glimpse behind her.

I'd never seen a dead body before, except on TV.

Let alone my own dead body.

The dread and disgust shot through me like a massive bolt of electricity, and I drew back from the mangled, bloody corpse on the ground. One of my legs from the knee down was in tatters, hanging on by dark threads. They'd ripped open my stomach, letting the glinting entrails spill partway out onto the ground.

My face had been spared. But the skin on my neck that was visible where the pink-and-green scarf lay open was a mass of bruises that could be seen even in the dim light.

The coyote with the dark patch on her head circled back around in a wide loop, sniffing the air. Her muzzle was wet with blood, and she was still making that muttering noise in the back of her throat.

In a daze, I reached out a hand to touch her, and she gave a sharp bark then loped toward the ravine with her ears pinned against her tawny head.

The others followed her into the steel-gray darkness.

I sat down in the dirt, a few feet away from where the ground turned black and slick, until the sun finally came up on my remains.

5. BRECIA

BOULDER, COLORADO

2 YEARS BEFORE

These were the things I had learned after three days of living in his house:

The naked Barbies in the front yard belonged to his two daughters, Emma and Kimmie. I had never been good at pinpointing exactly how old kids were. If I had to pick a number, I'd say that the two little girls with duck-down, white-blond hair were six and four. Still babies. For the most part, I kept my distance from them, wary of anything he'd touched.

The scraggly azaleas beneath the kitchen window had been planted by his wife, April, who was the opposite of everything I'd been while I was alive. She was quiet. Blond. Rail-thin. Endlessly patient and doting. When I wasn't following her husband from room to room, brimming with hatred, I watched her. She washed the dishes, folded laundry, picked up toys, fed the cat, read a book, and made breakfast. She snuggled up next to him at night and kissed him in the morning. At first, I was sure that if I looked hard enough I'd see that she was his match: rotten at the core. But the more I looked, the more confused I felt. To be honest, I hated her at first—maybe even more than I would have if she'd been awful. Because she seemed so blissfully, doggedly unaware. Just like I had been when I'd dated her husband a year ago. Except this woman had been married to him for years.

The cat in the garage was named Oscar. Out of everyone who lived in the little brick rambler in Boulder, he was the only one who seemed to have the sense to hate the man of the house as much as I did. When the garage door opened, he sat up in his kitty bed in the corner by the bikes, craning his neck to see who it was. If it was April or one of the girls, he made a chatty little noise in his throat and hurried over in hopes of being scooped up and taken inside the house. If it was him, Oscar stayed put. Or slunk out of the garage.

To be fair, Oscar didn't like *me* much, either. Whenever I approached,

the cat stopped what he was doing and stared for a few seconds. If I tried to touch him, he shrank back and moved the other way. I found this strangely reassuring. It seemed to mean that somebody knew I still existed. Even if it was just an orange tabby.

The boxes in the garage, stacked in neat rows and meticulously labeled with black sharpie, were destined for Herriman, Utah. The U-Haul had already been paid for.

I followed him like an invisible shadow that first day. While he ate breakfast at his mid-century-style kitchen table. While he shaved off the Joaquin Phoenix beard that I wondered if he'd grown for the sole purpose of making himself less recognizable. And while he tickled Kimmie and Emma on his way downstairs.

I tried everything I could think of to do the things ghosts were supposed to be able to do. And I'm here to tell you that either *Ghost Whisperer* was a bunch of BS, or there was a different brand of ghost involved. Because I couldn't slam any doors. I couldn't (as far as I could tell by his reaction, anyway) make the temperature in the room suddenly drop. I couldn't be heard.

I really couldn't do anything.

For a hot second, I thought about trying to find my way home. I quickly discarded the idea. I didn't know my way around Boulder. I couldn't have found my way, even if I'd wanted to.

Part of me felt homesick for Frank and my apartment. But I knew that the only thing waiting there for me was my dead body. Probably not even that. Robin, my manager, would have been the one to report me missing when I didn't show up for work. Knowing Robin, she had taken it upon herself to check on me before calling the police.

I hoped she took Frank.

* * *

He did normal stuff for most of the day. He had a home office in the basement, where he disappeared right after breakfast.

To my surprise, he hadn't lied about his job. He actually was a programmer—for a tech startup called TreeHaus. I couldn't tell exactly what he was working on. Code, and more code.

He was still on MatchStrike, with a new profile broadcasting the same alluring, blurry photo—and the same lies that had reeled me in:

That he was single.

That his name was Jamie Carver.

That he was looking for his soulmate.

By this point, I had pieced together that his real name was James Carson.

He compulsively opened up the MatchStrike app on an incognito browser to check on the messages he'd gotten since he'd last logged in.

He was chatting with four different girls.

Nicole. Allie. Tena. Danae.

Nicole was his clear favorite. She responded the quickest and the most often. He spent the most time crafting his messages to her—which he then copied and pasted into the other chats, when he came up with little tidbits he liked.

I thought about all of the messages he'd sent me on MatchStrike last year and wondered how many of them had been copied and pasted into other chats—or from other chats. How many other lines he'd had in the water when he decided to meet up with me for the first time.

I wondered what he'd told his wife, April, during the week we'd dated. He'd never stayed the night at my apartment or anything. But we'd spent hours across from each other in the dinette on the corner near my house. I'd been planning to invite him to my place.

Finally, he used the incognito browser to look for me. First, he typed "Brecia Collier." Then "Brecia Collier murder."

The first headline read, "Woman found murdered in backyard of her Denver home."

I read fast, not wanting to miss a word if he suddenly clicked out of the article.

When police arrived at the home of Brecia Collier, the Colorado woman who was reported missing on Friday afternoon, they found Collier strangled to death in her side yard.

According to court documents published online Saturday, Collier had been reported missing by coworkers when she failed to appear at work.

Chilling details reveal that forensics has confirmed that the murder weapon was an extension cord likely taken from Collier's trash. According to the court documents, the cause of death has been confirmed as asphyxiation by strangulation and blunt force trauma to the back of the head.

Police are asking for potential witnesses or anyone with information about Brechia Collier's murder to come forward immediately.

"There was no evidence of sexual assault. We believe that Brechia was surprised while taking her recycling bins out to the side yard at approximately 8:30 p.m. on Thursday evening," read the probable cause statement.

No one answered the door when police arrived at Collier's home Friday afternoon when a coworker notified police that Collier had not appeared at work. However, Collier's car was parked outside, and she didn't answer her cell phone.

Collier's sister, in a statement to the press made Saturday morning said, "Our family is devastated by this horrific and senseless tragedy. Brechia was so loved by her friends and family. We are desperate for any information. Please, if you know anything, come forward."

I had time to read my sister's statement twice before he closed the tab and went back to MatchStrike. They were desperate for any information, which meant they had no information.

They didn't know who had done this. Red-and-blue flashing lights would not be appearing at the window.

I tried to remember who I had even told about Jamie's/James's erratic texts after I broke things off with him. My sister. Lanelle. Robin. A couple other friends, maybe. Life went on. And by the time he showed up in my side yard, he was old news.

The disturbing truth was, James's texts were par for the course. I'd heard worse stories from plenty of friends. Online dating was a roulette of men who didn't like to hear the word "no." I never could have imagined any of them showing up in my side yard with an extension cord.

"What the fuck is wrong with you," I hissed in his ear. He didn't react. Instead, he crafted a new message to Nicole: *Saturday night? Meet at O'Michaels?*

Nicole responded almost instantly in the affirmative.

The piece of paper on the top of his neat office mail filer was a receipt for U-Haul. The truck was rented out for Sunday.

I studied the thumbnail photo of Nicole in the chat window. She had gorgeous auburn hair with perfectly blended highlights. Subtle makeup. Stunning smile. If I knew anything, I knew that right now she was hanging on every word “Jamie Carver” said.

Because he was beautiful, too. He was the kind of beautiful that drew you in before you even considered the fact that beautiful things can be poisonous.

As he read her response, his lips turned up in the barest smile—which disappeared as the sound of little footsteps clattered across the office ceiling, accompanied by shrieks of laughter.

The anger that had been simmering inside me for the past three days bubbled into something white-hot as I watched him close the incognito browser and put in headphones. If I still had a body, it would have been shaking. Since I didn’t, the whole world sort of turned fuzzy and charged.

That’s when I heard a quiet pop, and his computer screen went dark.

He pulled the headphones out of the computer jack and flung them onto the desk in annoyance, as if they were the source of the problem.

I stared at the dark computer screen as the fizzy feeling disappeared. It was replaced by something like hope.

Had I done that? Computers fritzed out all the time. So did light bulbs. It might have been a coincidence.

But I didn’t think so.

6. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

It was my useless phone that led them to my body in the foothills off Blacks Creek Road. Three days after I was supposed to be driving to college.

Even without service, the phone had pinged off cell towers in Boise and Kuna. Once the police finally started searching, I wasn't exceptionally hard to find.

I kept a vigil by my body for at least half an hour before giving up hope that I would wake up.

Obviously, I didn't. Because it wasn't a near-death experience. It was just death.

My skin was already turning ashy and a sort of sickly grayish brown. I reached out to touch the dusty black curls framing my half-closed eyes, then drew my hand back. That wasn't me anymore. That was just a dead girl.

Even after I admitted to myself that I was fully dead, I still waited a little longer. Would God beam me up? Where was the light everybody talked about?

Tonta, I berated myself for hoping.

Finally, I just started walking. Back the way we'd driven into the foothills on Blacks Creek Road. I knew the way.

Dead or alive, I just wanted to go home to my mom.

I stayed on the crumbling shoulder of the narrow, two-lane highway that wound through the barren hills. I was pretty sure I could walk right down the middle of the road if I felt like it. I wasn't confident what would happen to me if I were to get hit by one of the few cars that passed in the gathering dusk. Was there another level of death that I'd reach if I got squashed? Was death like a video game with different levels? If so, how many levels were there?

I wasn't interested in any more surprises related to my mortality. So I

stayed on the shoulder.

It was already late afternoon when I started out. Before long, the sun dipped down over the canyon walls. I kept walking.

At one point, a family of deer stepped out of the hills and into my path, in the semi-darkness. The big doe raised her head as I approached and stared through me, her long ears twisting forward and back as she listened. Her babies—a couple of yearlings with knobby knees—flanked her tightly on either side. I didn't move through them, exactly. Not the way I might have expected, anyway. I sort of scattered around them, into the pockets of air between their flanks and legs.

They watched me do it. I swear they did. Then they went right back to picking through the patches of tender green blades poking through the thistly brown stalks along the road.

I kept walking, as the sun completely disappeared and it got difficult to see anything except the road in front of me.

I thought about my body, lying in the dirt near the shallow ravine, and felt guilty for leaving it behind so easily.

I thought about him. The sounds he made. The way he brushed his hands on his jeans as he hurried back to his car, away from the girl on the ground.

I thought about what I would find when I finally made it through the silent, endless hills. Had my mom called the police yet? Would Ken tell them about the single guy who came in without fail for his hot chocolate—and to flirt with me?

I wasn't really sure how many miles I was from home. Maybe fifteen, if I had to guess. All I knew was that it would have taken me all night and probably into the next day to walk this far if I were alive.

Since I didn't have to stop, or rest, or worry about staying hydrated or picked off by any of the glowing eyes I saw farther back in the hills, I found my way back to the main street in Kuna after what I guessed was just a few hours.

The streets were quiet in a way I'd never seen them before. A stray cat darted out in front of me as I crossed the shopping center parking lot and stood looking at the Daily Grind's bay windows, dimly lit by the lights under the register. It didn't look up when I called out.

In a few hours, Ken would be arriving to open up the store for the early

risers, filling the quiet lobby with the sound of machines perking up and the smell of new espresso.

Part of me hadn't wanted to leave my safe corner of the world. Even if it meant a small life in a small town, where I'd managed to graduate from high school never having even kissed a boy.

And now I never would.

The house was still and quiet when I finally made it home. The sight of the familiar front door, with the only porchlight still on, filled me to the brim with a mix of longing and despair.

I wasn't sure how to get into the house at first. However, after a few minutes, I realized I could scatter through the cracked dryer vent, slipping through the narrow opening. It felt kind of like sneezing. Except I was the sneeze.

I found my mom asleep in my bedroom, in the same sweater she'd been wearing Thursday morning, the last time I saw her. Her ISU sweatshirt, a twin to the one she'd gotten me after I got my scholarship letter.

Her face was crumpled, like it was frozen on the verge of tears. Forehead furrowed. Eyes scrunched tightly shut. Mouth pressed into a thin line. But her breathing told me she was really and truly asleep.

I lay down beside her on my bed, wrapping one arm around her waist and burying my face in her hair. Then I closed my eyes and tried to recall the exact smell of her hair. The faint mix of spices from whatever dish she'd been cooking earlier. Ivory soap. And something I didn't know how to describe. Just her.

She made a quiet moaning sound, and I could hear her teeth grinding.

"It's okay, Mom," I whispered.

The noise stopped.

The idea that maybe some part of her could hear me made the despair well up until it was so big it felt like I was made of it. "Don't be sad. I'm still here. *Te quiero*," I tried again. "Can you hear me?"

She jolted upward in bed with a scream, knocking the glass of water off my nightstand as she fumbled for her phone. I leaped up off the bed and moved into the corner of the room, where I stood frozen.

She stared at the blue glow of her cell for a few seconds, her face still tightly crumpled. Then she set the phone carefully back on the nightstand and lay back down on my bed, mumbling something in Spanish.

I took a few steps closer to the bed. “Mom?”

She stared at the ceiling for a few minutes. Even when I leaned in close enough to see the freckles on her wet cheeks.

Then I sat down where I was, letting myself sink to the carpet as I listened to her snuffling sobs until she finally turned off the light.

Growing up, I didn’t get noticed much. To be honest I preferred it that way. I was the quiet Latina girl who never raised her hand in class. The one who avoided eye contact at all costs on the bus. I was pretty content to let people look right through me. She was the one exception.

Not anymore.

7. MEGHAN

OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS, UTAH

1 YEAR BEFORE

The scavengers with wings showed up after the coyotes. Crows, magpies, hornets, flies. Even a skinny eagle.

I stayed where I was because I didn't know where else to go. I wasn't eager to spend any more time weaving through the endless trees and rocks in the darkness. And I couldn't bring myself to risk getting lost in the woods again.

It didn't take as long as I would have imagined for the shock of seeing my mutilated body to wear off. I watched with interest as the scavengers did their job, jockeying for a corner of the spoils in their own way.

By the time the sun set on the second day, my body had mostly been reduced to bones. Not the white, bleached kind. More like soup bones. Red and raw and stripped clean of the skin and muscles. The animals left my clothing alone, except where it prevented them from accessing what they wanted. The gauzy pink-and-green scarf had blown into the base of a prickly bush, where it waved like a flag when the wind kicked up.

A glossy raven had taken a particular interest in one of my shoes. With some effort, she hopped and dragged it away from the rest of the mess, out of sight behind some rocks.

At first, I tried shooing the crows and the hornets away—like I had with the coyotes. But it only seemed to work when I was able to drum up a lot of feelings.

It worked when I thought about waking up in the dark, with his hands on my throat.

Or when I thought about my parents, who by now surely knew I wasn't okay.

Or when I thought about the fact that I was dead and lost in the woods while the coyotes and crows ate my body.

I tried to keep my big feelings bright for a while. There was something comforting about the idea that I could still influence the world around me. Even if it was just bees, or a bird who was interested in stripping my leg clean.

I wore myself out after a while. It was impossible to feel very angry or sad or disgusted for long—just like when I was alive. So as the days passed, I settled into a weird acceptance.

I tried flying.

It's a little embarrassing to admit, but I just assumed ghosts could fly. This was a given in every movie I'd ever seen. First, I just sort of willed myself to float. Nope. Then I leapt up and flapped my arms around like I had in dreams. Nothing. I even climbed up onto a fallen log—and then a scraggly pine—to see if a little extra height would help with liftoff. I just floated back down to the ground like a balloon that had lost all of its helium.

For some reason, this made me feel an especially strong current of despair. Which I used to scatter a couple of ravens who were picking at my arm.

When I got too bored and restless (and tired of jumping off logs and trees), I made a loop around the clearing in the opposite direction I had run before. I found the narrow dirt road he must have driven on. There were still faint tire tracks in the dust.

I tried walking down the road for what I guessed was a few miles. The path forked—and forked—and forked again until I was sure that if I kept going I might not be able to find my way back.

The one sign I came across, a wood, unofficial-looking waypost, stated “Ophir Canyon—10.” The name didn't ring any bells. And I didn't hear the sound of a single car all that day.

So I stayed where I was.

The ants made their big debut after the bigger winged animals had lost interest in my remains. I watched them for days, finally willing to get closer to my bones in order to see them better as they scurried in organized chaos from their tunnels. There was something hypnotizing about them as individuals. Even at close range, I could barely tell what they were doing. Their little jaws were so tiny, they appeared to be scurrying back and forth without accomplishing anything at all; however, over the next few days, the soup bones were picked clean. It was a relief to see my remains that way. Just

dingy gray and white. No more blood.

I appreciated the ants for that.

The nights still scared me. Once the sun set, I left my perch near the ants and backed myself into a rocky overhang where the ravine dipped down into the dry creek bed. A wide rock shelf hung over a couple of larger boulders, and when I lay back I could look at the stars, while knowing that nothing could sneak up behind me.

I thought about him a lot. About how warm and kind his eyes had been while we were talking at Gracie's. About how cold and angry they looked, flashing in the moonlight as I regained consciousness in the dark, in the woods, in the spot I had never gotten up from.

He'd either carried or dragged me quite a way from the car. The spot where my body lay was at least 100 yards from the edge of the dirt road. It would have been impossible to park in the rocky, tree-tied terrain. Even if another car did come up the dirt road, they weren't going to see anything unless they wandered to the right spot and noticed the bones that were becoming just another part of the landscape, more and more every day.

* * *

I didn't sleep, exactly; however, after a few days, I learned that I could zone out. And it was a little like falling asleep.

When I cleared my mind and relaxed, I could drift. It reminded me of dreaming, except I could choose what I saw. I discovered that I could call my memories up at will more easily than I ever had been able to while I was alive, in vivid detail. Everything I had ever done or seen was all there waiting for me to re-experience in a dream.

I spent a lot of time in the backyard of the house I'd grown up in. In an effort to avoid homework and bedtime, I had sometimes grabbed a blanket from the couch and slipped out the back door to the trampoline where I lay on my back, wrapped myself up, and watched the porch lights come on while the first stars twinkled to life. I could almost hear the crickets and the shuffle of our neighbor next door as he cleaned his grill, the smell of char still drifting through the air.

I thought about my last birthday, when Sharesa and I had rented an Airbnb and jet skis at Bear Lake. The way the wind felt on my face while we

raced across the lake, laughing and then screaming when I stopped too quickly and the jet ski rocked then tipped us both into the freezing cold lake. We laughed so hard I was worried we weren't going to be able to pull ourselves back up onto the jet ski.

I thought about my parents, who I hadn't really been in touch with since I'd moved out on my own. I drifted through Christmas mornings, family dinners, movie nights, bike rides, and even some of the times I'd gotten lectured about my grades or getting home late. Even those memories felt comforting.

It was a good way to pass the time.

But once in a while, I felt myself drifting so far into a memory that it took a few seconds to reorient myself to the stark rocks and the blood-soaked ground at my feet, where my bones were scattered across the clearing.

I wasn't sure what would happen if I wandered too far or let myself go into those memories too long or too completely. So I explored carefully.

On day five—I think it was day five anyway, there was really no way for me to tell aside from my own memory—I heard the first car. Distantly. But definitely a car.

I ran as fast as I could. In other words, I would have impressed the crap out of myself running at that kind of speed while I was alive, but it was still sort of disappointing when compared with flying. Which I still really felt like I should be able to do.

I made it to the dirt road in time to watch it crest the switchback a little farther down the hillside. The car was headed in my direction.

I stayed where I was, right in the middle of the road. Against any kind of logic I hoped that maybe they would see me, I guess. Or that I would stop the car. Or at the very least, that I would feel some kind of sensation when the car drove through me.

None of the above happened. The car kept driving—a little too fast for the bumpy dirt road. I didn't stop the car. And it didn't drive through me. Instead, when the car hit me, the force sort of flipped me to the side of the road. Gently. Like I was a tumbleweed or a plastic bag.

I caught a glimpse of the car's passengers before the forest-green RAV4 disappeared into its cloud of dust. A woman and a man. Not *him*, thankfully. The couple were about my age. Mid-twenties. They were listening to their music turned up loud, their laughter even louder on top of it. I saw the

way she looked at him as the car bounced over a rut in the dirt. Adoring. Safe. Happy to be alive and together.

The sadness filled me up. That feeling, that connection was what I had been chasing at Gracie's. It had gotten me here. This was where my life had ended. This was what I had left. A well full of memories that stopped at twenty-three.

And that was when I saw it.

The shoe, on the side of the road.

My shoe: the one the raven had taken.

It was half propped up in a bush, the coral color already turned a dirty tan streaked with a little bit of rust that I knew was blood.

It was lying in the dip that counted as a shoulder for the road. It wasn't exactly in plain sight. But it wasn't hidden, either. Not like the rest of me.

Which meant that if someone looked at just the right time, they could see it too.

8. BRECIA

BOULDER, COLORADO

2 YEARS BEFORE

I fucked up his computer twelve times over the next few days.

He spent an hour on the phone with Apple support and ultimately got a new computer overnighted because of it.

When that didn't fix the problem, he brought out an electrician, who poked through the wiring in the basement and the garage, fixed a couple of loose connections, then told him it would be another \$600 to dig any further.

He declined. He was moving soon. Let the next owners deal with it.

The popping sound and black screen happened when I channeled the anger, the hate, the disgust until it felt like the wave was crashing over me. It wasn't hard to do. Not at first, with the piece of human garbage right in front of me, holed up in his basement with a Diet Coke, pretending to be buried in his job with a browser in MatchStrike open at all times. All while the little blond girls played upstairs and their mother made him food and took his empty dishes away.

Kimmie came to the basement door after the screen had gone dark for the twelfth time. Dinner time had already passed. He'd stayed in the basement, insisting he needed to catch up on work because of his "stupid computer."

She knocked. Then she jiggled the door handle. "Daddy, will you read? Mommy says you will."

When he didn't respond, she tried again. Louder. "Daddyyyyyy! Mommy said to come get you—"

He stood up and flung the door open while her little hand was still on the handle. She fell into the room and banged her elbow on the doorframe.

"Tell *Mommy* she knows I'm busy," he replied between his teeth, ignoring her wide blue eyes filled with tears and the way she pulled her lower lip in hard.

“Okay,” she whispered, then hurried back up the stairs.

I stopped for a while after that, filled with guilt instead of anger.

Maybe it wasn’t fair for me to poke the bear, when the bear couldn’t hurt me anymore.

He messaged Nicole back just once while I was messing with him, muttering under his breath and raking a hand through his short, freshly cut hair about the “frickin’ computer.”

I tried to bring the emotion back. To stop him. But the harder I tried to summon the rage and horror, the more I felt like a wrung-out rag. The way you feel after you’ve been sobbing for hours and suddenly hit a wall and you just stop. I couldn’t feel anything anymore. I just felt worn out and empty.

I watched long enough to see that he was writing to tell her that they were still on for Saturday—and that he was sorry he hadn’t been in touch because he’d been having computer trouble.

Then I went upstairs to be with April and the girls.

April and Emma were doing a puzzle in the empty living room, while Kimmie skipped in circles on the carpet in the spaces where the couches had been the day before. The moving truck would be here Sunday. Nearly everything was packed.

Oscar the cat was sprawled across April’s lap, watching her hand move pieces of the puzzle into place. When I entered the room, Oscar turned his head and looked in my direction but stayed where he was.

“Fifteen,” Kimmie proclaimed as she completed another circuit. “Sixteen.” She stopped to catch her breath. “Mommy, do you think I can get to a hundred?”

April smiled. She looked tired but happy. She’d been up late packing, while James “worked.”

I realized she was younger than I’d thought when I saw her that first night. Like the girls, she had soft, wispy white-blond hair that fell in light waves around her shoulders. Her hazel eyes narrowed as she studied the pile of puzzle pieces on the floor. I watched her pick out the edge pieces and nudge them over to Emma, who squealed, “Mom! I found another piece.”

April nodded and continued sifting through the puzzle pieces, giving Oscar a pat on the head with her other hand. “I think we’re going to be finished with this one before we leave.”

I closed my eyes and tried to shut out the rage and foreboding that filled

me every time I saw his wife and his two babies.

He didn't deserve this. They sure as hell didn't deserve this. They just didn't know it yet.

I watched Oscar stiffen and raise his head as the feelings welled up and then crashed over me like a wave. He had stopped purring and looked ready to leap out of April's arms.

I backed away and stood at the top of the basement steps for a few minutes before going back downstairs. I couldn't help myself.

* * *

Nicole took a while to respond. I was starting to hope that maybe she'd lost interest—or gotten the message that he was flaky, if not a murderer.

Then on Friday morning, he refreshed his MatchStrike web app for the 100th time, and there it was: a new unread message from Nicole.

I shut down his computer again as soon as the screen popped up. Then again when he rebooted the computer. I already felt worn out by the third time he restarted the computer. So I let it happen, hoping that the message would be a brush-off.

It wasn't.

Sorry about the technical issues. I was starting to think it was me!! Hah. Meet at Twiggs tomorrow? 7 still good? I swear if you are 4'10" and 600 pounds in person though ...

I saw his smile. He wouldn't disappoint her. With the weird beard shaved, he was as good-looking as the day I'd first met him.

He spent a few minutes composing his reply to Nicole. He finally went with,

Starting to sweat a little. Is 5'2" and 590 ok? If so, 7:00 is great.

She responded almost immediately with a bunch of laughing-face emojis.

His smile got wider.

She was back in.

When he went upstairs for lunch, he told April that he had to meet with a contractor who would be taking on some of his workload while they moved. He didn't want to be too distracted.

April, who was wrapping cups in bubble wrap and placing them into a

box alongside the rest of the dishes in the kitchen while the girls skipped around the finished puzzle, nodded. “Thanks, babe. You want to watch a movie or something afterward? If it’s not too late? I can’t believe it’s our last night here.” Her face fell a little as she looked past him and down the hallway. “I’m going to miss it. I keep remembering bringing Emma and Kimmie home from the hospital.”

He squeezed her arm and took one of the unwrapped cups from the cupboard to pour himself a glass of water. “Yeah, lots of memories. But we’ll make new ones.”

I felt sick. April just smiled wistfully and kept packing while he took his glass of water downstairs, whistling a little to himself. Probably thinking about his date with Nicole.

The lightbulb in the kitchen flickered above April’s head.

I decided then that I was going on his date too.

I wasn’t sure what I could do. As far as I could tell, I wasn’t very powerful. A flickering light and a messed-up computer weren’t going to stop him from hurting someone.

But I had to try.

9. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

Before it was light outside, my mom was awake and making calls at the kitchen table with a cup of plain black coffee. I sat next to her at the table, watching the wisps of gray light build over the horizon through the patio windows.

I hadn't really started drinking coffee until I'd gotten the job at the Daily Grind a year ago. To my mom's delight, I'd started recreating the drinks at home. In the mornings before I left for school, we'd drink soy lattes or caramel macchiatos together until I had to leave.

The despair washed over me in a wave, and I wondered how long it would last. Mourning every detail of the life I would never experience again.

There were so many little, beautiful things. The feel of the late-afternoon sun filtering through the windows after school as I did my homework. Fresh coffee to my lips. The smell of my mom's hair when she gave me a hug. Things I'd taken in stride as part of my day. Let alone the things I'd never get to experience now. The things I'd been telling myself I dreaded about going to college but was really just nerves.

My mom called the police station first.

I could hear both sides of the conversation as well as if I were on the phone myself, when I squeezed in close to her.

I quickly gathered that they weren't looking for me. Not really.

I was eighteen. I wasn't legally required to come home to anyone.

The fact that my phone was going straight to voicemail wasn't enough of a reason to pull in the resources that would be necessary to track me down.

"The paperwork for the missing persons report has been filed," the woman on the other end of the line replied patiently. "That's all I can tell you for sure right now. I know how difficult this is, but an officer will be in touch as soon as possible. If you learn anything else, please keep me updated."

I watched as my mom's fingers curled into a fist. She gritted her teeth. "She's never done anything like this. Ever. She was supposed to be driving to ISU with me today. Her first year of college. Something is really, really wrong."

There was a brief silence on the other end of the phone. "I understand. An officer should be in touch shortly, you should be hearing from someone today. This morning."

My mom's hands shook as she ended the call and then dialed my dad.

My parents had split up when I was in fifth grade. My dad moved to Oregon with his girlfriend, Sandy. I saw him maybe twice a year after that. We weren't especially close. Still, when he answered his phone on the first ring, I felt almost dizzy with the clash of joy and sadness that filled me to the brim.

"Marisa? Are the police looking for her? Has she come home," he started before she could speak.

The bulb above the kitchen table flickered wildly, and my mom looked up and frowned. She turned the light switch off and stood to dump her coffee down the sink in the semi-darkness of the kitchen.

"They aren't doing much of anything." Her voice wavered. "I'm going over to her work as soon as it opens at six. I couldn't get a hold of anybody last night."

My dad swore under his breath then cleared his throat and said, "I'm booked for the 10:00 flight. I should be there by noon. We'll find her, Mari. We'll find her. Have you been able to log into her computer? See if she was getting cold feet about college or something."

I could hear the desperation in his voice. The hope that maybe there was some kind of non-awful explanation. That maybe I was somewhere safe—if not especially responsible.

They both knew me better than that, even if the police didn't. I'd never not come home.

My mom shook her head. "I tried and tried. I can't figure out her password."

"There's nothing to find there," I told her. "Don't bother." But even as I said the words, she was grabbing a scrap of paper to jot down "1025" and "Mickey." Mickey was the name of the dachshund we'd had when I was five. And 1025 was the pin I'd chosen for a joint bank account I'd had with my

mom when I was in elementary school. My actual password was a combination of letters and numbers I'd created from the chorus of a Britney Spears song. She'd never guess it.

When she hung up with my dad, my mom sat at the kitchen table staring at her phone. I sat and stared too, willing it to ring.

It wasn't like finding out what had happened would bring me back.

Even so, I wanted to be found as much as she wanted to find me.

And I wanted the police to hunt James down more than I had ever wanted anything.

"Ask Ken about the hot chocolate guy. His name is James," I told her, knowing she couldn't hear me but unable to stop myself. I was pretty sure nobody had seen me get into James's car; however, he'd been in that coffee shop at least three or four times a week all that summer.

Ken thought he was a nice guy. He wanted you to ask him out, I reminded myself as the despair settled over me in the dark kitchen like a lead blanket.

My mom's eyes slowly filled with tears. I wondered if we were wrapped up in that blanket together.

* * *

We pulled into the Daily Grind parking lot at exactly 5:58 a.m.

I sat shotgun on top of a flattened breakfast sandwich wrapper that had been there for at least a month. My mom got teary-eyed to a country song about family and God while she drove. And as she parked the car and swiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her hoodie, I suddenly realized that I was haunting her.

There was hardly anybody on the sidewalks or roads yet. One lone jogger. Someone standing in front of the cookie shop across the strip mall in the dim street light. A dark figure scurrying across the intersection near the bus stop. I wondered whether all of them were alive. Or if I could see dead people now that I was one. Did everyone turn into a ghost when they died, or was I an anomaly? Would I disappear after a while? Did I have a choice in the matter? Or was this my personal eternity? Was it limbo, or was this hell? What would happen when they caught James? What would happen if they didn't? Was I still around because I had unfinished business?

I shut down that train of thought and focused on following my mom up to the front door.

Like I'd hoped, Ken was on shift to open up. When he heard the knock on the still-locked door, he walked to the counter and glanced into the lobby. He looked puzzled when he saw my mom's beat-up red Buick Century—which I had sometimes borrowed on weekends if she wasn't working at the hospice center—but he hurried to open the lobby door.

Before he had even finished with, "Hey, are you Skye's mom?" she was in tears and telling him that I hadn't come home.

Ken didn't make her stand in the doorway. He flipped the front-door sign to open and called back to whoever was in the employee area. "Hey! You're on lobby, okay? I need a few minutes." Then he ushered her toward the comfy green chair in the corner of the room where they couldn't be seen from the front counter. It was where the really serious freelancers came to snag a spot to work—and where we sometimes found kids making out after school.

He sat down in front of her and laced his hands together carefully the way he had when I forgot to clean the espresso machine over the weekend and it clogged. "Tell me what happened."

* * *

When my mom told Ken what she knew—which wasn't much—he looked increasingly worried. I hadn't come home, I wasn't answering my texts or calls, and the police weren't exactly racing to find me. Ken pulled out his phone to show her that I hadn't answered his text the night before either. I looked at his screen.

Drive SAFE. If hot chocolate guy ever asks about u, I'm gonna send him to your dorm.

It felt like I'd been turned into ice water.

My mom's expression darkened. "Who's hot chocolate guy?"

"Yes," I prompted, standing up. The can lights in the lobby flickered, and the espresso machine blinked erratically. "That's right. That's him."

Ken side-eyed the flickering lights. "Just one of our regulars. Inside joke. I teased her that she should ask him out all the time, write her phone number on his cup, but she never did."

My mom's face fell. "You don't think he has something to do with it?"

Ken shook his head. "He was a really nice guy. She never asked him out though."

The lights were flickering so much now that Ken turned to squint at them. "Sorry. I think we have a bulb about to go out. I can fix it—" he stood up, and my mom shook her head.

"No, it doesn't matter. Please, do you have any ideas about where she might have gone after she got off work? Anywhere she talked about?"

I forced myself to focus on the little packets of sugar and the newly appointed coffee stirrers that Ken had set out for the day before they were destroyed by the first customers. I was pretty sure that I was the one making the lights flicker. I needed to calm down if I was going to let them talk. Because if I got any more upset, I was worried I might blow up something in the kitchen or at the register. Then Ken really would have to pause this conversation.

I forced myself to count the Stevia packets, then the Sweet n' Lows while I half-listened. Ken was telling her that for all he knew, I was headed to the bus stop to go home like I always did.

Then I heard him say the words, "But we can check the security footage."

The lights flickered again as I felt the excitement fizz through me. "Yes!" I shouted, and the light bulb above us made a popping sound, then went dark.

Ken frowned apologetically. "The wiring is fucked." He glanced up sharply at my mom. "Uh, I mean it's messed up."

My mom didn't even acknowledge it or the fact that the lobby had been plunged into semi-darkness. "Can we look at the footage on the security cams now? Please, I know you have to work. But you know she wouldn't disappear like this."

The tears started to well up in her eyes again, and Ken's jaw tightened. He put a hand on my mom's shoulder. "I know she wouldn't. And it's no problem. I can have Amy cover me." He gestured toward the back room. "Let's go."

10. MEGHAN

OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS, UTAH

1 YEAR BEFORE

My clothes were changing.

I realized it when I saw the shoe on the side of the road. When I looked down at my feet, I was no longer wearing the coral shoes I'd worn to Gracie's. Instead, I had on my old gray-striped slip-on flats. The comfy ones I wore while padding around the apartment before bed.

I wasn't sporting the gray culottes or the navy crop hoodie that were a dirty mess beside my bones anymore, either.

They had been swapped for sweats and my John Lennon t-shirt. The clothes I wore when it was just me, bumming around the house.

I couldn't say why. Only that I didn't really want to be wearing the coral shoes or the outfit I'd carefully chosen for my date at Gracie's anymore.

When I imagined myself in my fuzzy bathrobe, I could suddenly see it.

Changing clothes was fun for a few minutes. I tried on my old prom dress from high school. The high heels I'd bought but never worn last year. Even my swimming suit. But without a mirror or anyone else to see my outfit, I kept the sweats and the Lennon shirt.

I thought about going fully nude for a hot second. But even dead, I wasn't quite comfortable with the idea of being a nudist ghost. Not to mention, my actual body had been stripped bare in a way I'd never in my wildest dreams imagined I'd see. So the idea of clothes was comforting, and I kept them.

While I might not have been wearing the coral shoes anymore, they did become the new epicenter of my existence.

I spent most of my time on the dirt road, where the fading side of the shoe could be seen sticking out behind a small collection of pebbles and sticks on the dusty shoulder.

I drifted in and out of memories while I kept vigil, listening for any sound that might be an approaching car.

At first, I worried I would reach the end of the memories. That I would run out. But the more I drifted the more I realized that the memories I had at my fingertips were like an enormous library had been unlocked. The book of my life, every word and image perfectly clear. It felt like the one beautiful gift I still had left.

On day two of my vigil, a flurry of movement nearby took me out of a memory I'd been savoring from when I was two and saw my first caterpillar. I hadn't known I could go back that far. I quickly learned that even those memories were available in crystal clarity if I reached for them. I watched the little black speckles on the caterpillar's back and the way its sucker-cup feet moved rhythmically across the twig in the grass. I could still feel the perfect awe I'd felt then, as clearly as anything. My chubby little fingers, dirty from the crackers I'd just shoved into my mouth, eagerly reached for the caterpillar. "Gentle, Meghan," my mom said beside me. The sunlight that filtered through our big catalpa tree leaves turned her hair into ribbons of gold as she picked up the twig that the caterpillar was climbing and carefully placed it in my outstretched fingers.

Back on the dirt road with the coral shoe, a shiny black raven landed right beside me with a little gray rock in her beak. I tucked the memory of the caterpillar aside as the raven hopped closer to the pile of pebbles and sticks, then set it down on top of the shoe.

"Thank you," I told her. She cocked her head and studied her treasures, then spread her wings with a little mutter of satisfaction. She landed in one of the taller pines a few yards away, in what appeared to be a sizable tangle of sticks but must have been a nest.

Three days later, the same raven visited her treasure box again with a shiny red berry. If I hadn't seen her gently lay her treasures down near one another, I wouldn't have seen anything other than debris. But knowing it had all been carefully arranged by the bright-eyed, glossy black bird made me feel good.

At first, I was worried that she might move my shoe again. Each time she visited, she fussed over her little collection, moving a twig a few inches or taking one of the pebbles into her beak again before carefully placing it atop the little mound. But more days passed and more pebbles, and then what

appeared to be part of a dried fish tail appeared, I accepted that this was simply where she had chosen to keep her treasure box.

I started to look forward to what she would bring next while I waited and drifted.

* * *

On the seventh day of waiting, I heard the sound of a car in the distance.

When it passed me—and my shoe—I mustered all the emotion I could, hoping it would be like the coyotes and the eagle. That the driver—a hunter, by his faded tan-and-olive camo—would sense something and at least stop.

He didn't even slow down.

The tailgate of his beat-up tan Suburban hit the ruts hard, and I watched as he popped a piece of gum into his mouth during the few seconds I could see his face, peppered with black-and-white stubble and etched with craggy lines.

So I waited and drifted further, through slumber parties I'd attended and books I had read. Conversations I'd had. The feeling of being tucked into bed and even the dreams I'd had while I slept at night. My first kiss. Learning to tie my shoes. Journal entries. Breaking my arm at summer camp in the sixth grade. Sneaking out of my second-story bedroom to meet up with Nolan, my first boyfriend, in tenth grade. The week my grandma Rosie—or "Bubbie Rosie"—had come to stay for a week when my mom was in the hospital for back surgery.

She'd taught me how to make braided challah bread one day while we listened to the radio and she told me stories about my mother as a child that I'd half-listened to at the time but now I hung on every word.

It was the last time I'd seen her alive. Grandma Rosie had died three months later when an aneurism she'd known about since she was in her twenties burst.

"When your mama was a little girl, she begged me not to kill the spiders even though she was terrified of them," Grandma Rosie was saying. There was a thin streak of flour powdered along her jawline. Her eyes were just like mine, only set deeper in lines that nearly hid them from view when she laughed. "She'd stand there with a cup in one hand and a sheet of paper in the other, just shaking like a leaf as she gently, gently scooted that spider

onto the paper and into the cup.”

I watched myself laugh, finally listening fully to this story. I hated spiders too. My mom still scooped them up instead of smashing them into a wad of tissue, and I loved her for it.

Grandma Rosie chuckled louder. “One time, she’d trapped this big old wolf. Big as a quarter. It was too heavy for the paper, and as she was carrying it to the door it fell right off onto the front of her shirt. I’d never heard a child make a noise like that before. She stayed there frozen and screaming her head off until I managed to get it off her.”

I watched myself fidget on the barstool while Grandma turned the dough out of the bowl and started to tell me about the importance of putting the flour on your hands instead of the dough. I saw her smile falter a little as I asked if I could watch TV while she kneaded the dough. But then the corners of her eyes crinkled and she nodded. “Yes of course, *Bubbelah.*” *Little doll.* “Go and watch your show. We’ll finish later.”

As ten-year-old me hurried upstairs to watch *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, I wondered where Grandma Rosie was. She had died more than ten years ago. If death for her had been like death for me. “I miss you, Bubbie,” I whispered.

I heard her reply as my ten-year-old self reached the top of the stairs.

“I’ll be right here when you’re ready.”

I abruptly stopped drifting and blinked at the quiet, dusty road in front of me. Had that always been part of the memory? Something I hadn’t paid attention to when I was ten? There were plenty of details I’d missed in the moment.

Still, it sounded as if she was speaking to *me*.

Not the ten-year-old me.

Me, Meghan on the side of the road by a dusty, bloodstained shoe.

A jolt of excitement—followed by a wave of terror—ran through me.

What would it mean if she *was*?

Part of me wanted to drift back then and there. To find out. To see if I could talk to Bubbie. To know whether she would talk back.

But the part that had been sitting by the side of the road in the middle of the woods wasn’t ready to find out. Because the part of me that thought just maybe she was speaking to me couldn’t quite process the disappointment if she wasn’t.

I wanted to hug the possibility for a while before I tested it.

And that was when I heard the sound of another car.

Distantly droning. Smacking the potholes with muted, faraway thunks.

As the sound got closer, I reached deep for the emotions bubbling at the surface. The surprise and hope at hearing Bubbie and wondering if maybe she wasn't gone, just like I wasn't gone. The terror that had brought me here. The rage I felt when I remembered falling asleep in his car and waking up to his black eyes above me in the darkness.

The mix of happy and sad and anger and terror felt effervescent and tight. Like a pop bottle that's been shaken up.

I couldn't feel the dead brown pine needles and dirt along the bank where I stood anymore.

I couldn't feel the temperature drop as the sun set in the hills around me.

But I could feel this, and as the soda bottle burst I watched the car come around the curve in the road, toward me.

The driver was a woman in her twenties. Hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun. A "coexist" bumper sticker was peeling off the front of her beat-up Jeep. Her lips were moving, like she was singing. But her eyes were sad.

"Stop," I screamed as I watched her eyes flick to the barely noticeable fork in the road ahead, where the shoulder of the road dipped then branched into the sorry excuse for a road. Where my bones were slowly becoming part of the earth.

The girl with the messy bun drove through me and my tidal wave of feelings, crashing invisibly around us both.

"Please stop," I whispered as the despair crashed harder.

And then, even though I couldn't quite believe it was happening, she did.

11. BRECIA

BOULDER, COLORADO

2 YEARS BEFORE

He got ready for his date while April took the girls to McDonald's for dinner.

"Bye, Daddy!" Kimmie called as she and Emma skipped down the hall toward the garage door.

He popped his head out of the bathroom, where he'd been shaving. Then he lifted his hands above his head and growled. "You'd better get in your booster seats before the tickle monster can catch you!"

Kimmie and Emma squealed with delight, and April laughed as he chased the girls out the door and caught them in his arms when the wall of labeled boxes blocked their path, tickling them both until they begged him to stop and promised to eat all of their Happy Meals.

I watched in disbelief.

Grudgingly, I admitted to myself that I understood a little better why April didn't know.

Because if *I* didn't know what he had done—100% for sure, because well, here I was—I never really would have believed he was capable of hurting someone.

It made it worse, somehow. That he could be the tickle monster *and* the monster waiting with an extension cord in my side yard at the same time.

I wanted him to be one or the other. Not both.

When the garage door had shut and the house was silent, he opened his phone and turned his music up loud. A playlist called "60s party."

Neil Sedaka.

Roy Orbison.

Paul Anka.

Again, not what I would have expected. Metallica, yes. Korn, definitely. But peppy 60s hits? I watched his eyes as he tapped a razor on the

side of the sink and ran a hand over his freshly shaven face, then practiced his smile in the mirror.

Satisfied, he checked his in-app messages—nothing new from Nicole—and grabbed the keys to the blue Kia in the garage.

But as his fingers closed around the doorknob, he suddenly shook his head and turned around.

I followed him downstairs and into his basement office, where he opened the latched top drawer of his desk and pulled out two containers of Tic Tacs.

He opened one of the containers and tapped a few white capsules into the mostly full second container.

I took a few steps closer to get a better look. He whistled “Pretty Woman” as he closed the Tic Tac container, gave it a little shake, and inspected it from the side.

That’s when I realized that the capsules he had added weren’t shaped like the others. They were round and white instead of oblong and white. And they were scored down the middle.

Rohypnol. I’d seen enough episodes of *SVU* to know the name by heart.

It was one of the most common date rape drugs.

I felt a sort of fuzzy numbness as he tucked the Tic Tac container into his corduroy jacket. Whistling to himself, he hurried back upstairs and into the garage.

When he opened the driver’s side to the Kia, I brushed past him and sat in the passenger side. From atop the neatly stacked boxes in the semi-darkness of the garage, Oscar sat perched, flicking his tail back and forth.

James/Jamie connected his phone to the car’s bluetooth and joined in with the last chorus of “Sweet Sixteen” by Neil Sedaka as we pulled away from the house, east toward Denver.

I studied his face, looking for any indication of a red flag. Anything that would tell Nicole not to leave her drink alone. Not to take her eyes off it for a second. Not to trust the chiseled, clean-cut jawline or the warm smile.

There was nothing. Not right now.

It had been exactly one week since he’d slipped through my side gate and waited for me to appear. And it had been almost one year since I had screened his last call.

I never could have imagined the price I'd pay for rejecting him.

That little bottle of Tic Tacs was apparently the price she would pay for inviting him into her life. The price for hoping that maybe he would be the one.

Were there more people like me who had paid that price? More women who didn't want him? Or who didn't realize they wanted nothing to do with him until it was too late?

I forced myself to focus on the road in front of us and kept the rage bubbling inside me at a simmer.

I couldn't afford to waste it.

12. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

There were seventy-two hours of security footage saved on the camera.

Ken removed the memory stick and popped it into a thumb drive on his keychain. “It’s good you came today. The camera loops over itself after seventy-two hours. So there’s a lot. If we don’t get through all of it, I’ll make you a copy.” He glanced at the door to the small office, and I knew he was thinking about what Don, the owner, would say about giving out a copy of the security footage. Don said no to everything. Thankfully, Don was almost never around.

Ken hit the “backup” button on the camera, which resulted in a ping to his phone. I wished I could give him a hug.

A few minutes later he pressed play at 8:00 a.m. on Friday, when I’d first arrived for my shift. He and my mom watched in silence as I moved into frame at the east edge of the parking lot, walking quickly but glued to the screen of my phone. I was smiling, watching some video or meme I couldn’t remember now. It was just a normal day. A happy day. The last time I’d have to work a morning shift before my first weekend at college.

After I went inside and out of frame, Ken scanned forward in the security footage. Each time a car entered the parking lot or an employee exited the building, he hit play.

“That’s him,” I screamed when a blue Kia appeared on the screen, in the far side of the lot. The footage stopped zooming forward and froze momentarily, and I tried to tamp down my nervous excitement. “That’s him,” I whispered again as the video resumed at normal speed.

“That’s him,” Ken said as if repeating me. “That’s the regular I was telling you about.”

James walked into the Daily Grind then re-emerged a few minutes later with his hot chocolate. My mom frowned when he got back into the car and

drove away. It was slow-going. “I can go through this later, I don’t want to take up any more of your time. I know you need to work. I just thought maybe you’d recognize something out of the ordinary better than I would. Will you go forward to the end of her shift? She was supposed to get off around four.”

Ken nodded and kept scanning the footage in fast-forward. Cars zipped in and out of frame. The mail arrived. A couple of high schoolers made out in front of their car. A flock of seagulls descended to eat someone’s discarded bagel remains.

The blue Kia appeared a second time, pulling into the lot at the very edge of the video frame. Nobody got out of the car this time.

When I saw it, the jolt of emotion shut down Ken’s phone. My mom panicked. “Did you lose it? Where did it go?”

Ken shook his head in frustration and pressed his phone’s home button. “No, the backup is saved. I think it’s just a big file.” He frowned at the black screen.

Just as the phone rebooted, someone knocked at the office door and a petite brunette who had started the week before—Allison?— poked her head into the room. “Hey, uh. It’s getting kind of busy out there—should I call Don about getting someone else on shift or ...” She smiled sweetly, and Ken blanched.

“Um, no. I’ll be out in just a second, okay?” he said, throwing my mom an apologetic look. I didn’t blame him. It was almost eight. But I tried my darndest to slam the door on Allison as she left. I did not succeed.

“You’ve been really, really helpful,” my mom said. “You get to work, and I’ll watch it at home.” She stood up and turned her head before he could see her get teary-eyed again, but her voice couldn’t hide it. “I just feel so helpless. Like there’s nothing I can do. This gives me something at least.”

Ken awkwardly patted her shoulder. “Let me know if you need anything else. And please let me know when you find her. I’ll ask around to anyone else who was on shift yesterday to see if they noticed anything.” I wished again that I could hug him as I followed my mom back to her car.

She kept it together as she drove out of the parking lot then pulled over on a side street that turned into the strip mall to cry.

Her phone pinged once, announcing the incoming email from Ken with the footage. Then again, with a text from my dad. His flight had just taken

off. He'd be there in two hours.

* * *

The blue Kia cruised through the footage five times before my shift ended, on the hour. Each time, he pulled into the back corner of the lot, facing the front of the building. Stayed parked for a while. Then drove away.

He had been waiting for me to get off shift.

Each time I saw the blue car, the video briefly froze as my excitement and horror bubbled up.

At first I was hopeful that the freeze-frame would make it easier for my mom to recognize the car as the same one that kept appearing in the parking lot. But of the hundreds of cars that moved into the lot in fast-forward, she didn't notice the Kia. She just got panicky that the video was doing something trippy and started muttering a prayer that it wouldn't crash.

Every few minutes, she checked her phone and felt for the ringer to make sure that it was turned on and that she hadn't missed a call.

She hadn't.

* * *

My dad looked like he hadn't slept.

When he saw my mom's puffy face, his own eyes got red but he grimaced and waved her off. "It's gonna be okay, Mari. Let's not waste time getting emotional."

My mom bit her lip but said nothing as he dragged the suitcase through the front door, intentionally not looking at the photos of me lining the hallway.

I suddenly remembered in stunning clarity the time we had to put my cat Snickers to sleep. It was right before he moved away. When I was in third grade. I hadn't understood what "putting Snickers out of her misery" meant, even though I was old enough that I should have. Especially given that Snickers had just gotten caught in the garage door. I guess I thought they were going to help her. Put her out of her misery and make her better again.

She cried pitiful frail mewls while my dad wrapped her in an old beach towel and my mom hurried to call the vet to see if they were still open. I stroked her black-and-white head, careful not to touch the line of dark red

coming from one ear.

When my dad came home from the vet without the cat an hour later, I couldn't stop crying. I had told her it would be okay. And I hadn't said goodbye. Not really.

My dad had taken me by the shoulders, looked me in the eye and said, "I'm sorry, Skyebird. But what's done is done."

The words echoed in my memory as I watched my parents—who hadn't seen each other for at least a year now—sit side by side, scrutinizing the rest of the security footage.

What's done is done.

* * *

When the footage showed a timestamp of 4:00—the end of my shift—the blue Kia reappeared at the far edge of the parking lot.

Then at 4:09, as I walked into frame after gathering my things, the car pulled through the open space and into the long, narrow strip mall.

I studied my parent's faces, waiting for them to connect the dots.

But a gray Honda pulled out at the same time. Just as a blue Ford sailed past. I knew I wouldn't have noticed the Kia either except for the fact that I was looking for *him*.

A sinking sense of panic took me like a riptide as I saw myself walk toward the other edge of the video frame. Toward the second entrance from the parking lot to the strip mall. The blue Kia wasn't visible anymore. He'd pulled out of the other parking lot entrance.

I was about to walk out of the camera view.

Which meant that they wouldn't see me get into his car or even talk to him. I'd gotten into the Kia when I passed the FroYo, at least twenty yards away. I remembered wondering if that's where he'd been.

But right before I stepped out of frame in the security footage, my hand went up.

My mom saw it too. "Did you see that?" She leaned forward and nearly toppled the computer off the kitchen table.

My dad shook his head and righted the computer. "What? What was it?"

"She waved. She was waving to someone. Or starting to wave, anyway."

Her hand went up and—” My mom quickly rewound the footage back a few seconds and they both watched in silence as I stepped to the edge of the security footage and started to raise my right arm. My mom hit pause.

It was hard to see my expression in the footage. It wasn’t crystal clear. But even from a distance, you could tell that I was smiling at someone.

The panic receded, replaced by a fizz of excitement. “Yes, I was waving. At him, at the blue Kia,” I exclaimed to zero reaction.

My dad leaned in closer and studied the screen for a few seconds. Then he pulled out his phone. “She’s definitely waving at someone. What’s the number the police gave you? They should know.”

My mom unlocked her phone to pull up the number, rubbing her forefinger and thumb together like she always did when she was nervous. “They’ll just say it’s one of her friends.” She paused then added hopefully, “Maybe it was?”

My dad nodded slowly but wouldn’t meet her eyes as he dialed the police. My mom rewound the footage one more time before pressing play to keep watching the rest. Just in case I showed up back at work, I guess. I knew I wouldn’t. Not alive, anyway. So I listened to my dad’s conversation with the police instead.

To my surprise, the woman who picked up—the same one my mom had spoken to earlier—told him that she had passed on my mom’s comments from earlier. Officer Willis was the name of the officer who would be looking into what had happened to me. There was no official investigation yet. But Officer Willis would look at the video they had—and anything else my parents felt like was important—to determine next steps and evaluate the level of likelihood that I was indeed missing.

My dad thanked the dispatcher and hung up. “An officer will be here this afternoon. They’re gonna ‘evaluate’ the case. Which means we need to figure out whatever we can before he gets here. She’s in trouble, Mari. I know she is.” His voice broke a little, and he cleared his throat. “I know I haven’t seen her every day like you have, and I know it’s been a while and I feel like shit about that, but she’s my daughter and I know her. She wouldn’t disappear like this for no good reason. She wouldn’t. What else can we do before that officer gets here?”

My mom shook her head and wiped at her cheeks. “I was really hoping we’d see something on the video. I guess—I guess we could go back to the

coffee shop and see if anyone else saw anything? A regular? Maybe that hot chocolate guy who came in every day will be there?”

I perked up at this. Maybe he *would* be back. I felt sick at the idea of my parents running into him. But maybe, just maybe he'd come in. Maybe he'd let something slip. Or maybe someone else who had been on shift or on a smoke break noticed me getting into his car.

There were only so many threads to follow when someone disappeared into thin air.

I thought about my body, lying still and broken off Blacks Creek Road. I both longed for and dreaded being found. It would snuff the light right out of my parents' eyes. But seeing the flickers of hope was worse, when I knew without a shred of doubt that there was no chance I was coming back.

13. MEGHAN

OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS, UTAH

1 YEAR BEFORE

I watched in amazement as the woman with the blond messy bun abruptly pulled onto the sloping shoulder of the dirt road, her front bumper just a few feet away from the shoe.

As I watched her through the windshield, I could see that she was crying. Crying hard. Her shoulders shook a little as she lay her head against the steering wheel.

I didn't know why she was crying. Or whether I had anything to do with it—like what had happened with the coyotes and the eagle. But regardless of why, she had stopped.

I couldn't cry with her, but I let the waves of grief flow through me while she cried, letting them crash over me. I mourned my parents. I mourned Sharesa. They knew by now that I probably wasn't coming back. I was dependable to a fault. I never left voicemails or texts unreturned. Unless there was something very wrong.

I called up the faces of the people I loved and felt the sadness settle around me like a heavy blanket. I'd never considered the fact that mourning might go both ways. Instead of mourning one person, I was mourning everyone I had ever cared about. They were all gone now.

Inside the vehicle, the girl cried harder. Loud, ugly sobs that I could hear as well as if she were standing next to me.

I tucked away my memories and just watched her for a few minutes. In the passenger seat was a purple-and-blue backpack with a water bottle strapped onto the side. As I peered into the window, I could see that she was wearing hiking boots. There wasn't any camping gear that I could see anyway, which pointed to a day of hiking. Perhaps a day away from whatever was behind the tears coursing down her cheeks onto the steering wheel.

I watched anxiously as she finally sat upright with a shuddering breath.

She studied her reflection in the rearview mirror and wiped her eyes.

“Please don’t go. Please get out,” I coaxed.

She didn’t react.

But a few minutes later, she took the car keys in one hand and stepped out of the car.

She closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun that was streaming through the branches and took a deep breath.

I watched, mesmerized.

The shoe was right in front of her.

She sniffed and wiped at her eyes again, gazing at the scraggly trees, her eyes landing on the mostly hidden fork in the road that led to my body.

She took a few steps forward and I urged her on. “Yes. Keep going, okay? Please.”

She put her car keys in her pocket and walked far enough to see that the sorry excuse for a road did indeed continue in that direction, rutted and mostly overgrown.

The raven’s dark form circled overhead, and she made a sort of muttering cackle.

The girl stopped and watched, then looked back at her car. Somewhere over the hill, in the brush, a twig snapped.

She frowned and wrinkled her nose. “Nah,” she muttered, then turned on her heel, heading back toward her car.

I reached out for her retreating shoulder. My hand rested lightly on top of her kelly-green tank top. “No, don’t go. Please. Nobody else will stop.”

She kept going.

When she reached the driver’s side of the car, she pulled her keys out of her pocket and looked behind her, as if someone were following her.

Technically, she was correct.

I backed up a few steps, wondering if it was my fault. Had I scared her?

The despair came back, and I felt myself sinking under it as she turned the key in the door.

I closed my eyes.

But the door didn’t slam shut. And the car didn’t pull away.

When I opened my eyes, she was still standing by the open driver’s side door, looking right at me.

I really thought she could see me for a second by the confused look that slowly spread across her face.

She took a few steps toward me then crouched in the dirt.

That was when I realized she had seen the shoe—and the little altar the raven had built.

The girl with the messy bun frowned as she studied the bleached coral shoe with the dark stain. She didn't touch it.

After a few minutes, she shook her head again and returned to the car.

This time, she rummaged in her backpack and pulled out a cell phone. She took two photos. One up close, and one a little way back that showed the sign for Big Eddy Campground in the distance.

I told myself that it didn't mean anything. That the photos couldn't possibly mean anyone would ever find me. For all I knew, she was planning to post the images to her Instagram account with the hashtags #pickupyourtrash and #protectourplanet.

But as the engine turned over and she drove away I still whispered, "Thank you," before I could no longer hear the sound of her engine.

14. BRECIA

BOULDER, COLORADO

2 YEARS BEFORE

He pulled into the parking lot at 6:50. Enough time to request a “private” corner booth from the hostess at Twiggs before Nicole—all smiles and nervous energy, but playing it cool—arrived, scanning around the upscale bar for the person she hoped was waiting for her.

Her bright red hair was longer than it was in her photos on MatchStrike. It cascaded down her back in beachy waves that looked effortless but, I knew from firsthand experience, had probably taken a long time to get just right. She was wearing a seafoam green sundress and a cropped jacket with a little fringe along the bottom. She’d managed the perfect subtle cat-eye. She was beautiful.

A smile played across her lips when he spotted her and waved from the booth, then hurried over to meet her. The smile widened as he placed his hand on the small of her back to walk her back to the booth. He smiled too. He knew exactly what he was doing.

They talked until nearly closing. He told her all about his ridiculous roommate—“Steve.” About his job, which he sort of alluded might be related to government security. I scoffed unheard in the booth beside her, studying his hands. Waiting for him to reach for the Tic Tac container. I wasn’t a technical person, but after watching him work in his basement for the last week I could confidently tell you that he was managing the website of a multi-level marketing company selling energy drinks.

I thought about April and Kimmie and Emma, who were probably finishing the puzzle before bedtime. Or playing with whatever magical plastic surprise they’d gotten in their McDonald’s Happy Meals. The anger began to percolate, a white-hot slow drip. I pushed it down. Not yet.

He told Nicole stories he’d told me while she listened and nodded and laughed and stroked his ego. Just like I had. Because he was charming and

handsome and he asked her about her life, too. And when she told him about it, he listened with a kind of intensity I'd mistaken for generous attention.

I knew now that it was the kind of rapt attention that a cat paid a mouse before it struck. I'd seen that look before, in Frank's eyes before he pounced on the feather toy. In Oscar's eyes when he stalked a fly through the house a few days earlier while April and the girls watched in delight.

Nicole's first drink was almost empty. It was a Moscow Mule, in one of those pretty copper cups. She kept one hand lightly on the handle, taking a tiny sip every few minutes. She'd been nursing that drink for more than an hour now; from the sign on the door, the bar would be closing soon. "You're doing amazing," I told her. "Don't get another drink."

When the waitress appeared at the table to ask about refills, he quickly said, "I'll have another. I'm not ready to go quite yet, are you?" He turned to Nicole with a 1,000-watt smile.

She faltered a little and glanced at her drink. I wondered if maybe she was a lightweight, like I had been. If maybe she was feeling tipsy enough already and didn't want to risk looking silly on a first date.

Whatever it took.

I leaned in close to her ear. As close as I could get. "Do not get another drink." I repeated it again. And again.

I heard her say, "Um, sure. I'll have another too, I guess."

While the waitress disappeared with the drink order, Nicole excused herself to the restroom.

I watched her walk away. So did he. When he saw the restroom door close, he pulled the Tic Tacs from his pocket. Casually. He didn't look around the room. Or try to hide the container. He just popped it open and shook it until three capsules fell into his hand. There were two oblong Tic Tacs—and one round pill.

The panic and rage bubbled up, and I frantically grabbed at the emotion. I focused all of it on him and on the objects in his hand. The way I had with the computer.

The light above us flickered wildly.

He glanced at it, unworried. Then closed the lid, popped the two real Tic Tacs into his mouth, and palmed the Rohypnol.

I watched in horror as the waitress appeared, striding across the bar with the two drinks in her hand.

Nicole wasn't back yet.

The waitress placed both drinks in the middle of the table. "Enjoy!" Her smile faded as she squinted at the light, which was still flickering. "Sorry about that. I can get another bulb."

He returned her smile and waved her off. "It's no big deal."

As the waitress walked away, he reached first for his drink, then Nicole's, deftly slipping the white pill over the edge of the copper cup as he slid it toward her side of the table.

I watched numbly as the little white circle dissolved. I hadn't been able to do anything. It was done. When Nicole returned to the table a few minutes later, she was wearing fresh lipstick. The pill had dissolved. All that remained was a tiny white speck.

The clock on the wall showed 10:15. The bar would close in forty-five minutes. He took a long pull of his drink and flashed her a smile. "You know, I think you have the prettiest eyes I've ever seen. When I first saw you on MatchStrike, I thought maybe it was a fake account. Nobody has eyes like that in real life."

Her pale skin turned a deep shade of pink, and she sipped at the drink. "I kind of wondered the same thing about you."

"You should," I muttered angrily, scooting closer to her in the booth. "He just roofied your drink."

He laughed and shook his head. "Online dating is such a mess. I bet you've got some stories to share."

She giggled, but didn't take another sip of the copper mug. In fact, she nudged the drink back just a little and moved her water glass forward. His eyes flicked between the drinks. She didn't notice, and instead started telling a story about the last guy she'd gone out with on MatchStrike, who wasn't even divorced yet despite listing himself as single. He'd even brought one of his kids on the date as a "chaperone" when he couldn't find a sitter.

He laughed at the story in all the right places. But his eyes kept flicking to her drink, which sat mostly full on the table in front of her. Then over to the clock on the wall. Closing in twenty minutes.

"Okay, that was a doozy, but I know you have more," he teased. "Maybe the kind of stories that unlock when you take a few more sips of that Moscow Mule?" He nodded toward her drink while taking a sip of his own. "I'm dying to hear them, so you'd better drink up. The night's young, pretty

girl.”

Nicole’s cheeks flared red once again, and she leaned forward to take another sip of her drink.

I leaned in with her, pressing my ghost lips closer and closer until I was pretty sure I was actually inside her ear canal. “Listen to me, okay? Do not keep drinking. You’re not safe. This drink isn’t safe. He isn’t safe.”

I watched her take a small sip of her drink, her freshly lipsticked mouth puckering around the bright pink straw. Then another tiny sip. She looked up at him as she did, and I could see in her eyes how much she wanted him to like her.

I scooted closer to her and tried again, as loud as I could, desperately grabbing at the feelings of powerlessness and inevitability. Trying to somehow make the message go through.

“Stop. You don’t have to drink it. I know you don’t understand why, but stop. Stop drinking. Something is wrong. Something is very wrong.”

Above us, the lights flickered again, almost imperceptibly this time. Nicole wrinkled up her nose. “Are you trying to get me drunk?” she teased. “I’m a lightweight. I’m already kind of buzzed.” She reached for her water glass and drained nearly half of it.

“Yes, drink all the water!” I cheered. He chuckled in reply, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

I draped myself over the table until I was right in front of his face. “Fuck you.”

He shifted his body closer to me as if in response and nudged Nicole’s drink back in front of her. “I kind of want to see what ‘fully buzzed’ Nicole is like. Because ‘kind of buzzed’ Nicole is seriously adorable.”

Her smile stayed put, but she didn’t reach for the copper mug again. “So is sober Nicole,” she replied playfully, but I could see that he’d struck a nerve.

So could he.

He tried to backpedal. “Oh yeah, definitely.”

The change in the air was palpable.

At least, to me it was.

As a ghost—or whatever I was—I had lost the majority of my senses. I couldn’t feel the smooth surface of the table where my arms were resting lightly, I couldn’t smell the half-eaten plate of fries on the table, and I

certainly couldn't taste them. I could see. And I could hear. But what I had lost in physical senses I seemed to have gained in metaphysical ones. It was like a current, circling the table. And it had turned heavy and tense.

He didn't try to push her into finishing her drink again.

And she didn't take another sip.

He tried to coax back the flirtatious, eager energy. He tried asking her about her favorite movies, her family, her friends, even the sundress she was wearing. She smiled and answered. But when she didn't giggle and lean into him like she had before, he stopped trying and started to pout. As if she was the one who had ruined this date.

I was ecstatic.

When the waitress brought the check, Nicole took a long drink of water then pulled out her phone. "Hey, I'm actually not feeling great. I'm going to get an Uber headed my way, okay? It was nice meeting you."

No hug. No "let's do this again." No "do you want to come back to my place."

I cheered. Loudly.

His jaw clenched slightly, and he shrugged. "Cool. I'll just get the check, I guess."

She smiled and stood up from the table. "Thanks. Looks like there's somebody right outside, so I'd better hurry out there. Sorry to run!" I looked at her phone. She hadn't even opened the Uber app; however, she had typed out a text to someone named Jen. "It was going really well, but I'm getting bad vibes. Headed home. Want to watch *Criminal Minds*?"

And then she left, while he waited impatiently for the waitress to return his card, then snapped at her for waiting until closing time to bring the check.

The waitress's face crumpled. "Oh, I just—it looked like you guys were on a date, and I didn't want to rush you—"

He gave her a withering look. "She was a bitch." Then he signed the receipt, no tip, and walked to the parking lot.

15. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

Nobody saw anything.

And the blue Kia didn't show up.

My parents stood near the lobby entrance for two hours, watching for anyone they thought they recognized in the parking lot while my mom sent texts and Facebook messages to anyone who appeared in my "friends" list. Asking if anyone had seen me. If I'd said anything that might offer any kind of clue as to where I was now.

Nobody knew anything.

My parents asked every single person who walked through the door to get coffee if they had seen me yesterday, while my dad flashed them my senior photo on his phone.

Everyone shook their heads sadly and told my parents that they hoped I showed up soon. One woman, who looked familiar, said she remembered me but hadn't seen me leave work yesterday. A couple of college kids who I had definitely kicked out of the lobby for making out nodded and said they remembered me too. But nobody had seen me leave work.

As the afternoon wore on, I could see that even Ken was getting antsy inside the lobby. He brought my parents a couple of iced lattes and asked if they'd seen anything on the video footage. But he quickly added that he wouldn't be able to give them any additional security footage, glancing back inside the store as he said it. Someone had clearly narked to the owner about the security tape this morning. Even I could feel the desperate, frenetic energy in front of the store. It wasn't good for business. People just wanted their Americanos.

Officer Willis finally called around 2:00 p.m., and my parents agreed to meet him back at the house, in case he needed any of my things. The unspoken understanding being if search dogs were needed.

We piled back into the car. My dad driving, my mom still glued to her phone, copying and pasting the same message to my 541 “friends” on Facebook. “I’m sorry to bother you, I’m Skye’s mom. She didn’t come home last night, and we’re so worried. Please message me if you can think of anything that might help us find her, even if it doesn’t seem very important.”

I sat watching over her shoulder as the replies poured in, some of them almost instantly. Mostly people whose names I only vaguely recognized responding with some variation of, “Oh no! I’m so sorry. I can’t think of anything.” I cringed as I saw David Hauser’s name pop up. We’d had classes together all through high school. He was an entirely different level of popular, aka people knew who he was. But he was also funny and genuinely nice. I’d heard he was going to ISU in the fall too. Sometimes I thought about what might happen if I, you know, stopped being a social caterpillar and transformed into a social butterfly.

Instead I was dead and my mom was messaging him on Facebook, her tired eyes flicking back and forth between the new message she was typing and the replies coming into her Messenger app.

I didn’t realize the car had stopped—and that my dad was saying something—for a few seconds. “Mari, hello? MARISA. Do you see that?”

I tracked where he was pointing and saw the entrance to the FroYo. It was mostly empty, with one older guy hunched over at a patio table, concentrating on eating his frozen yogurt.

My mom frowned. “No, what? I think we need to hurry so we don’t miss Officer—” She stopped talking.

I leaned forward over the jockey box in the car and finally saw what my dad was pointing at.

Above the door of the FroYo was a security camera.

Angled out, toward the parking lot.

If that footage still existed, I was on it.

And so was the freak in the blue Kia.

16. MEGHAN

OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS, UTAH

1 YEAR BEFORE

For several days after the girl with the messy blond bun drove away, I stayed where I was, sitting shiva by the shoe. Waiting. Hoping that the photos she took would lead someone to this place. To find me. To take my body—and what was left of my soul—home.

I still couldn't have explained why. I didn't know what good that would do. I would still be dead. I would still be invisible to everyone I loved. But at least maybe I could be near them. For reasons I couldn't really articulate, every part of me wanted to be found.

A few more cars passed me on the rutted dirt road on the way to Ophir Canyon. None of them stopped. The raven returned every few days with new tiny treasures to add to the collection by the shoe. A piece of glass. A little white slice of quartz. A black pebble.

I drifted carefully while I waited, treading lightly through memories of my first job, some of the lectures I'd attended in college, a campout with my church group in high school. I re-read my favorite book, *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver. I got drunk with Sharesa in San Diego during spring break.

The sun rose and set in the dusty hills, and rose and set again. The darkness still scared me when the shadows finally overtook my corner of the woods each night. I saw the coyotes every once in a while, their eyes flashing green and white when the moon caught them right. They gave my little shrine by the side of the dirt road a wide berth. I didn't approach them again, either.

When the sun had risen and set at least five times, I ran my hands—which I had given an intricate rainbow manicure—over the raven's altar. The shoe had bleached even further and was covered with a new layer of dust from a windstorm two nights earlier. It was getting hard to recognize as a shoe at all, unless you saw it from just the right angle.

As the days wore on into weeks, I couldn't bear to be alone with the shoe any longer. And I couldn't bear to leave it.

So finally, I drifted back to the memory of Bubbie Rosie.

If this was all I had left—this dusty road and the raven and the coyotes and the bleached shoe and the precious memories I turned over and over in my mind like a worry stone—I needed to know.

I started at the beginning of the memory. To the challah dough, to the sound of my grandmother's delicate laughter and the way the bowl clinked against the counter as Bubbie tipped it out onto the countertops and dipped her hands into a little hill of flour.

I watched Grandma Rosie's eyes as ten-year-old-me asked if I could watch TV while we waited for the dough to rise.

I watched her mouth form the words, "Yes of course, *Bubbelah*."

And then, while the younger version of myself hurried up the stairs, I tried to hold onto Bubbie.

"I'm sorry I left you to make the bread," I told her.

I felt myself grasping at the edges of the memory. Ten-year-old me didn't have any more memories of Bubbie here. She just had memories of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Specifically, the episode where Sabrina tells her friends she's a witch.

The threads were unraveling quickly. "I wish I had more memories with you," I whispered before I lost them.

Bubbie's soft, rosy cheeks turned up in a slight smile. "Ah, but here you are *Bubbelah*."

I felt a jolt of electricity as the threads stopped unraveling, the focus suddenly clear again.

I wasn't drifting anymore.

Instead of watching myself sprawl out on the bed and watch Sabrina tell her friends the truth about being a witch, I was still in the kitchen with Bubbie.

It was more than that, though. Before, I had been a fly on the kitchen wall—a voyeur, I guess—watching the interaction. It had been kind of like a movie.

Now I was *in* the kitchen. And Bubbie Rosie was looking at me intently, her hands still covered in flour.

The feeling spread through me like sunlight, and for the first time since

I'd disappeared into the hills, I felt a spark of joy.

"Bubbie? You can hear me?" I'd expected the words to sound choked, like they would if I were trying to squeeze them out through all my feelings if I were alive. Instead, they seemed to drift into the memory with me, perfectly clear, caught by the current that surrounded me and Grandma Rosie.

"I can hear you, *Bubbelah*. I've been waiting for you." Her eyes crinkled with joy and then softened with sadness. "I had not expected to see you so soon."

"You're alive? I mean, not alive, but—I don't understand any of this. Is this heaven or something?"

Bubbie Rosie's face broke into a smile. I wasn't sure whether we could hug. I doubted it. Not like before, anyway. Physical sensation had died when I died. But the joy that filled me to the brim and the love that radiated from Grandma Rosie's voice was as warm and as comforting as any hug I'd ever had while I was alive. "I don't know the answer to that question, *Bubbelah*." She looked down at her hands, covered in flour. "All I know is that we are here together, in this memory. That somehow it still connects us."

"How ..." I struggled to put the pieces together. "Is there like, a god or something? What have you been doing all this time? What happens now?"

Bubbie's smile softened. "I don't know the answer to those questions either, *Bubbelah*. What I know is that the people we loved on the other side are gone. I mourned you, like you mourned me when I died. But I have learned, as you know now, that the people we love are not gone forever. That everything we ever loved, ever did, ever said, ever read, ever experienced, comes back to us. See, here we are together." She gestured around the sunlit kitchen.

"So, you live here now, in this memory?" I asked. "And some of my other memories?"

Bubbie nodded. "In a way, yes. Like you live in mine. It's the tapestry we wove together. The threads still bind us."

I felt a shadow of despair creep into the joy. "We can't make any more memories together, though. It's just ... like a movie?"

She shook her head. "Ah, that is what I wondered at first too. But *Bubbelah*, there are so many movies you have not seen."

I stared at her in confusion. She continued, "Those threads, they branch out forever, if you know the way to go. Lifetimes of threads. Mine, yours."

She gestured around us. “So many threads. *Ima* is here. *Satva* is here. I will show you.”

Ima. Mother. Her mother, my great grandmother who I had never met. *Satva*. Son. Ben, my uncle who had died of an overdose when I was a baby.

I stared at her in amazement. “I don’t have any memories of *Ima*, though. She died before I was born. And I really only met Uncle Ben once, right after I was born.”

Grandma Rosie nodded. “That doesn’t matter anymore, *Bubbelah*. We couldn’t see so many of the threads that tied us together while we were alive. Those threads are visible now.” She paused, then added, “If you know the way.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

Grandma Rosie brushed off her hands, and a cloud of flour sifted through the air in front of her. She looked thoughtful for a moment. “We can follow the threads together. The story I told you about your mother, when she was a little girl carrying spiders from the house under paper cups? We can visit that memory together. I can show it to you. Because I was there. Even though you were not.”

I suddenly understood what she meant, and the shadow of despair disappeared. So many memories. An eternity of memories stretching backward forever. “Show me,” I told her excitedly. This meant I could meet my uncle Ben. I could meet *Ima*. I hadn’t lost my family forever. Yes, I’d lost some of them—for now. But in a strange way, I’d also just found the ones I’d lost.

Grandma Rosie nodded and her smile softened. “When you are ready, *Bubbelah*. I can’t show you until you are ready.”

I shook my head, confused all over again. “I’m ready, though. What do you mean?”

Bubbie gestured around the kitchen. “Even now, this memory is changing. You are following my thread—instead of yours. In this kitchen, where you never were but I was. It will be hard to go back, after. If you continue, if you follow my threads, it will be impossible.”

“Go back?” I let her words sink in. I thought of the coral shoe. The forest road. My body moldering in the rocky ground, disappearing into bleached bones as the ants and the hornets did their work. “You mean, I won’t be able to get back to the other side. The side where my body is.”

Grandma Rosie nodded. “Yes, *Bubbelah*. And where your mother is. And your friends.”

“But I’m lost out there,” I told her, the despair sweeping back in. “I’m alone. I don’t think anyone is coming for me. He dumped me in the woods.”

The joy that had filled the air suddenly went flat. Grandma Rosie’s expression crumpled. “Oh, *Bubbelah*. Oh no.”

“I thought you knew,” I whispered.

She shook her head. “I can’t see the other side anymore. I stayed for a long time in the ‘real’ world. With you. With your mother. But when Ben died, it was time. Time to be here. To find each other in a way we could not while we were alive. Because this is real too, *Bubbelah*.”

I no longer felt like I was drifting. I just felt like I was here. All of me, here. I wanted to tell Bubbie about Jimmy Carlson. For someone to know what had happened to me in the woods. To meet my great grandparents. To see, through Bubbie’s eyes, my mother carefully and fearfully carrying spiders safely outside.

Part of me wasn’t ready though. Not yet.

“I think I need to go back for a while,” I said softly, trying to soak in all the love in the room, buoying me up. “I can find you again, here?”

Grandma Rosie nodded. “Yes, *Bubbelah*. You can always find me. Here or anywhere our lives touched. I love you, little doll.”

“I love you too, Bubbie.” The threads I’d tried to grasp so tightly earlier now felt like they were pulling snug. Falling into place.

For a moment, I panicked. Grandma Rosie and the sunlit kitchen with the challah bread rising on the countertop didn’t disappear like they had before. I thought of the shoe. I thought of the little shrine the raven had assembled. I thought of the Ophir Canyon campground signage, trying to piece together the place that suddenly felt far away. As if it were now the dream.

Then I found myself back on the shoulder of the rutted dirt road, beside the pebble and the little shard of glass, the coins, and the shoe.

I was reminded of the feeling of waking up from a too-late nap in the afternoon, when you sleep until dinnertime and aren’t sure, for a few moments, what happened.

The sound of crunching footsteps hit me before I recognized there was someone there with me.

Someone standing over me, looking directly at me.

Looking at the shoe.

The man had a thick auburn beard. He was in his fifties, and wearing a tan shirt and pants.

In one hand, he held a radio.

My gaze drifted in slow motion to the lapel of his shirt.

Forest Service.

17. BRECIA

SALT LAKE VALLEY, UTAH

18 MONTHS BEFORE

I took great delight in watching his face when he saw that Nicole had blocked him on MatchStrike. And not only blocked him, but reported him to the website's admins who suspended his account.

He got the notifications in the moving van around the time we crossed the border into Utah. He pulled into the next rest area, April right behind him in the car with the girls. Then he opened the MatchStrike app.

An error message appeared. *This account has been suspended and banned for violating our terms of service agreement. Please contact admin@MatchStrike.com or call 1-800-MatchStrike for support.*

"Bitch," he hissed through his teeth then slammed the car door and walked to the bathroom, ignoring Emma and Kimmie waving from the car.

He called the number for customer service when we got back on the road. He was down-to-earth and charming at first. It had all been a big misunderstanding, you see. He hadn't pressured Nicole to do anything. They'd had a great time. But he'd declined a second date, and she'd seemed upset. This was apparently her way of sending a pointed message.

The customer service rep—her name was Donna—sounded like she'd heard this line before a few times. She patiently explained that if he would like to appeal the decision, she could escalate his request. It would require a phone interview with both him and Nicole—as a first step.

His tone changed abruptly and he hit the gas a little too hard, making the big van lurch forward. "Are you serious? This is ridiculous. You'll cancel my account just like that, but you'll make me jump through hoops just for the privilege of being part of the worst dating site I've ever been on? What about 'innocent until proven guilty?'"

"I'm sorry, sir, but we are not a court of law. Our user agreement laid all this out, I'd be happy to send you a copy," Donna replied.

I wanted to hug Donna.

He hung up and stared straight ahead at the road.

I studied the set of his jaw and the white of his knuckles on the steering wheel. Remembering how they'd held the extension cord around my neck so tight, not letting up for even a second.

I wished I'd reported him too.

* * *

For the first few months in Utah, he was a normal dad and husband. He unpacked. He took Kimmie and Emma out for ice cream at the adorable little shop around the corner from the new house with the big yard at the base of Lone Peak. He divided his time between a new home office and a tech startup twenty minutes from the new house in Salt Lake. He went for a walk around the block with April and chatted with the neighbors who emerged from the rows of beautiful brick homes lining the streets. He went to church and raised his hand in Sunday school to offer a thought about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount while April beamed.

He didn't appeal the decision from MatchStrike.

He didn't even try to find Nicole online.

But after three months, on a slow Thursday afternoon while he was supposed to be starting a new project for work, he created a new gmail account—and then a new MatchStrike profile.

Jimmy Carlson.

This time, he was a widower. He didn't mention kids. I guessed he was getting to the age where women got suspicious about why he'd never been married.

I shut down the computer three times in a row. Each time, he clenched his jaw and restarted it.

Finally, I left the room and sat down in the hall, across from Oscar. I imagined myself going on more dates with "Jimmy" and felt a crushing sadness and dread.

Oscar stared at me intently. Then cautiously took a few steps toward me until he was right at my feet.

He closed his eyes and flicked his tail a little. "Good kitty," I whispered. He very quietly began to purr.

* * *

I went on every date with James/Jamie/Jimmy for nine months.

I followed him while he worked. While he ate. While he mowed the lawn. While he cleaned his car. While he watched TV—*Chicago PD* and *Chicago Fire*.

Sometimes, he spent hours on the MatchStrike app, flirting and arranging new dates—always a little ways out of town. Other times, he abruptly stopped and turned into a real dad to Emma and Kimmie for a few days, weeks, or even a month. Sometimes, he was cold and dismissive with April. Other times, he could be scarily thoughtful and even funny. Even as his shadow, it was all too easy to believe he was a normal person.

Even on some of his dates.

Sometimes, he eagerly planned to meet the women who responded to his messages. Other times, he ignored them.

Sometimes, he brought the Tic Tac bottle on his dates. Other times, he didn't.

When he did, I could feel it in the way the air churned with sparks and sickness that something was building, the way you feel the barometer start to drop before a storm. The only question was when it would hit.

On those nights I spent the evening whispering—or screaming—into her ear.

Sometimes, it seemed to work.

Other times, it didn't.

When it didn't, no amount of flickering lights or hunches helped. Not once he managed to convince her to go on a second date somewhere out of the way. To finish her drink. To let him drive her home instead of calling an Uber. To trust him just enough that he could draw her beyond the reach of potential help. Mine or anyone else's.

He went out with Kelly, who insisted on calling an Uber when she started to feel lightheaded at the end of the night. As she got into the black Honda Civic that pulled into the parking lot of the tiny restaurant, he put on a concerned expression and told her to feel better. But while the car pulled away, he swore under his breath then blocked her on MatchStrike with the reason from the dropdown menu, "made me uncomfortable."

He'd spent a fair amount of time combing through Reddit on an INCEL

forum that offered advice to men “navigating the cesspool of dating apps.” It advised blocking women who weren’t receptive to advances quickly or who had “misinterpreted advances.” Not only did this “teach them a lesson,” but on certain apps (including MatchStrike) it made it virtually impossible for that woman to block or report his account in return.

He met Liz at an outdoor concert in Deer Valley, about half an hour outside of Salt Lake. I relaxed when he didn’t bring the Tic Tac container with him. But between the good music and the string lights flickering like hundreds of fireflies in the cool mountain air, both of them downed four beers a piece no matter how much I screamed and the stage lights flickered. After the show, he walked her to her car and kissed her in the parking lot. She let him—until his hand started wandering up the front of her shirt. When she tried to pull away, he grabbed her by her ponytail and pulled her roughly against him.

I couldn’t watch. I also couldn’t leave her.

I focused on the dark gravel underneath my feet, imagining I was somewhere else. I chose to be back with Frank, in my apartment, petting his downy head while he purred. The memory was so real that I wrapped it around me like a thick cloak to block out what was happening a few feet away.

Because I couldn’t do anything to stop him. Not really. Not enough.

When a car a few rows away chirped and its lights flashed in the dark, I dragged myself back from the memory of Frank to see Liz push him hard, fumbling with her purse while she loudly told him it was time for him to go.

He stared at her, then in the direction of the crunching footsteps approaching from the direction of the car with its headlights blazing.

As he slunk into the darkness, he pulled up the app on his phone to block and report her before he’d gotten back to his own car.

* * *

He chatted with Elle on the MatchStrike app for two months. They exchanged photos and even a video chat one night while April was out to dinner with a new friend and the girls were asleep.

Elle told him about her brother’s overdose. Opiates. She’d blamed herself. He shared his grief over his late wife’s death. Cancer. It had been

really awful. He showed her the photos of Emma and Kimmie hanging on the office walls and cleared his throat like he was regaining his composure. The girls were his world, he said. Everyone was in a good place now. They'd healed. He was a little shy about dating again, but he was feeling strong.

I shut down his phone. Then his computer. Again and again. He patiently waited for them to restart each time, until I went numb.

Elle let him pick her up at her house for their date.

Earlier, in addition to placing the Tic Tac container in his front pocket, he had tucked a long phone charger into the back pocket of his jeans. First, he had wrapped it around the basement banister. Tighter and tighter, to see if it would break.

It didn't.

As the car slowed in front of the address Elle had given him, I dove through the cracked window and made it to the front door before he could get out of the car.

I pleaded. I screamed. I even tried to shove her—which did absolutely nothing. Elle tucked her short blond hair behind one ear and gave him a long hug. Then she got into the car with him, chattering excitedly about the new bar they were going to.

I focused all my fear and horror at the car itself, hoping the engine would die the way the computer had. It didn't work.

He was the perfect date—aside from the little white pill that he tipped into her second drink before they left the bar. When he placed his hand on her back as she stumbled in the parking lot, she looked up at him with a grateful smile and reached out for his hand.

She invited him into her house for a drink when he arrived. Her eyes looked bleary but happy as she shrugged off her jacket.

He followed her inside. They made out in the dark room on her expensive-looking cognac leather couch.

I waited for him to pull the phone charger from his back pocket. To turn into the person who had hidden in my side yard in the dark.

Instead, he waited until her kisses grew sloppy and she mumbled, "I might call it a night, I'm feeling pretty tired." He ignored her. And she didn't protest when he pulled out a condom.

I made myself stay. Because I couldn't bear to leave her alone with him. Because I felt responsible. Because I couldn't find a way to stop him.

The air in the room churned dark and electric. In the kitchen, I heard the microwave make a beeping notification, like mine did when the power turned off then on.

When he was finished, he looked down at her in disgust. Then he zipped up his jeans and reached for his back pocket.

In the dim light from the hallway skylight, he trailed the long phone charger across Elle's neck. Back and forth. She didn't move.

I watched in horror. The microwave beeped again, and my horror shifted to anger. After the first few dates, I'd felt sure I could find a way to stop him every time. That maybe this was the entire reason I had been left in limbo. My unfinished business. He had taken my life. And now I was entitled to haunt him, to thwart him.

I'd been wrong, though. The only thing I could actually do now was restart the damn microwave.

Elle's eyes were closed. She was breathing softly, almost peacefully, one arm flung across her partially clothed chest while the other arm hung over the edge of the couch.

He watched her intently for a few minutes until the sound of a muted text notification broke the silence in the room.

It was April. "Sorry to bug you. I know it's a big deadline. But will you be back soon? Emma is sick. She threw up."

He sighed. Then he rolled the phone charger around his hand and traced a thumb slowly over Elle's neck before pulling her skirt back into place and arranging her comfortably on the couch with an afghan.

Before he let himself out of the house and into the dark summer night, he opened the MatchStrike app. He looked at her profile, then scrutinized her sleeping form on the couch in the dark.

He was clearly trying to make a decision. About what, I didn't know. But finally, he sent her a message. "Hope your headache went away. Would love to see you again sometime. I haven't had this much fun since ... well, it's been a long time."

The microwave beeped a third time in the dark room as he sent the message. He rolled his eyes, but his teeth glinted in the dim light as he smiled.

* * *

He went out with Elle one more time.

She didn't invite him into her house again. And when he offered to pick her up at her place, she demurred, saying that she was planning to swing by her dad's place afterward: He was sick.

When they met at the bar, the look in her eyes told me she was studying him. That she knew—but didn't know—that something was wrong. That something had happened the last time they went out.

I pushed on that feeling as hard as I could, leaning close to her ear when she studied him during dinner. When she finished her drink before visiting the ladies' room. When she told the waitress she just wanted a glass of water instead of a second drink. And when she, almost shyly, asked him about what they'd done at her place the night he dropped her off. Because—it was weird—she couldn't remember much.

He smiled in response, but his eyes shifted sideways. *He's lying*, I told her. *He did something really bad to you. He's not a good person.*

"You don't remember?" he asked in response, looking hurt. "I guess we really did have too much to drink." Then he grinned, like he'd said something funny.

Elle laughed and didn't press any further. But when she left the restaurant—long before closing time—she stopped responding to messages.

I expected him to block her, like he had the other women as soon as things started to go tits up. Instead, he sent her message after message. He pretended to be worried at first. Then a little annoyed. Then a little irritated. Like he'd done with me when I told him we were over. He refreshed the app constantly while he worked in the basement at home. He even called customer service at one point, certain that something in the messaging feature was broken. Because Elle wasn't writing back. Why wouldn't she write back?

On the third day with no response, he told April he'd been called into another last-minute work project, despite the fact that there was a church activity that night he'd been talking up to the girls.

I had sort of been looking forward to the church activity myself. They were going to have a bonfire at the base of the mountains, and Kimmie and Emma were dying of excitement. April looked hurt but didn't say anything. She never did.

He brought the phone charger with him in his back pocket and drove to

Elle's house.

I studied the expression on his face, eager and agitated as he sat in the car a few houses away, just beyond the glow of a street light. He opened up the app and typed and retyped another message to Elle. In this one, he stopped with the pretenses.

At least tell me what I did? You SLEEP with me and then pretend like it never happened and ghost? What kind of person does that? No wonder your brother needed those drugs.

He hovered over the send button for a few seconds, then shook his head and erased the message, peering toward the house. There was a light on in the kitchen. A few minutes passed before Elle appeared at the kitchen sink. She appeared to be rinsing dishes and turned to say something over her shoulder with a smile on her face.

She wasn't alone. He saw it too.

He opened the car door and shut it carefully, quietly—but not before he'd grabbed the seatbelt cutter tool tucked into the dash. I could feel myself panicking, the fear and terror turning the air charged and heavy as I scrambled after him. What could I do?

The street light a few yards away blinked rapidly then went out, if anything making it easier for him to approach the house unseen. I screamed after him, unheard and unnoticed.

He glanced around the empty street then continued toward Elle's driveway.

I rushed to the window, where I could see Elle inside with an older man. Maybe her dad. They were sitting down at the table, watching a basketball game while they ate pizza. "Don't answer the door, don't go outside," I shrieked, knowing they wouldn't hear. As far as I could tell, the only time anyone stood a chance of listening was when I was closer than humanly possible. Basically inside their ear canal. Even then, it only seemed to work if they were open to the suggestion. Screaming never did a thing.

I screamed anyway.

As I turned around, I saw his dark form standing in the driveway at the edges of the porch lights.

He glanced around one more time, then knelt down and pressed the blade of the seatbelt cutter into all four of her tires.

"Bitch," he whispered softly.

Then he turned back around and walked toward his parked car down the road.

I followed him. Because I didn't know what else to do. Because I had chosen this path and wasn't ready to give up yet.

Before he drove away, he blocked Elle on the dating app. *Made me uncomfortable.*

When he got home, he went straight downstairs and started sending out new messages on MatchStrike before even saying hello to April, who must have just gotten home from the bonfire with the girls since their bedroom light was on.

When the first woman responded, he eagerly opened up the app to read the full message.

She had shoulder-length light-brown hair and was wearing bright pink lipstick. Her lips were quirked in the kind of grin that told me she had a sarcastic side.

Her name was Meghan.

18. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

My dad spent so long in the FroYo first asking, then demanding the security camera footage, that they nearly missed Officer Willis—despite almost getting the police called on to the FroYo.

The kid working at the counter reminded me of a boy I'd had to partner with in science one year. Rail-thin, expressionless, and uptight to the point of total unreasonableness. He just kept repeating, in monotone, that he would have to speak to a manager—who wasn't in right now—about the security footage. At one point, when my dad finally thundered, "We're going to meet with the police right now, goddammit, can you please just help us out?" the kid calmly plucked his cell phone from his apron pocket and threatened to call 9-1-1.

At that point my mom dragged my dad out of the FroYo, promising that Officer Willis would help.

"What if it's only twenty-four hours of footage, Mari?" my dad kept repeating, looking at the clock on the dash and then dragging his hands through his thinning brown hair. "That gives us less than two hours."

My mom stared straight ahead but drove ten over the speed limit back to the house, where Officer Willis was standing in the driveway. Across the street, I could see Mr. and Mrs. Schmalz sitting on their porch, trying not to appear too interested in what was going on.

My dad was out of the car before my mom put it in park. "David, be calm," she whispered, hurrying to unbuckle her seatbelt.

I watched the officer's eyes while my dad frantically explained about the footage they'd seen from the Daily Grind. And the FroYo next door. And the fact that the kid behind the counter had threatened to call the police. The officer didn't look skeptical, exactly. Definitely wary though. I imagined he heard a lot of things on any given day.

When my dad was finished, Officer Willis turned to my mom, who was tearing up again.

She repeated what she'd told the dispatcher earlier, about how I didn't come home like I was supposed to yesterday even though we had plans. Even though I always came home. How I was a good girl and not involved with anything dangerous. I was supposed to be leaving for college today. She swiped at the tears. "I know you're trying to figure out whether this is worth the resources to investigate. I know she's eighteen. I *know*. But she did *not* disappear. Not on purpose. Someone or something kept her from coming home. I know that in my gut." My mom looked at the clock on the microwave. "Please, can you get the footage from the yogurt place?" Her voice broke. "I think it might show what happened."

The officer nodded, and I watched his eyes soften. "Yes, ma'am. We don't usually devote a lot of resources when a non-minor goes missing. Not unless there's some strong evidence of foul play. Still, it sounds like there's reason to believe we should check out that security footage to find out how concerned we need to be as a place to get started, at the very least."

My dad's face crumpled in relief, and my mom bit her cheek and nodded while the tears continued to drip down her cheeks. Then my parents followed the police cruiser back to the FroYo, where my dad was instructed in no uncertain terms to wait outside while the officer talked to the employee.

While he waited, my dad watched the clock. It was 3:39. When he cracked the window, I climbed into the front seat with him and pressed myself against it, finding to my surprise that I could easily move through the small space. Impressed with myself, I hurried over to the door of the FroYo and eyed the hairline space between the door and the doorframe. I moved through it just as easily.

The FroYo employee was on the phone with his manager. He didn't look nearly as smug as he had earlier while talking to my parents. While the officer watched, he said, "Okay, yeah, I got it. Sorry, yeah. Sorry. I know how to do it. It's all okay. Yeah I know. Okay, bye."

Then, calling over his shoulder to the officer, the kid rushed to the back of the shop. "Um, I'm getting it now, okay?"

The officer waited patiently for the kid to return with a thumb drive. He was out of breath. "Okay, you said you wanted to look at around 4:00, right?"

I've got since 3:42 yesterday onward."

The kid's triumphant expression crumbled when the officer looked less than impressed. "If you ever get a request like this again, which I really hope you don't, I want you to back up the footage *before* I show up. If we'd gotten here twenty minutes later, these poor people would've been out of luck. And that would have been your fault."

"But my manager doesn't—"

The cop took the thumb drive and walked back out to the parking lot, where my parents were waiting. I followed on his heels.

* * *

"Is he going to let us watch it?" My mom fretted while she drove from the strip mall back to the house for the third time that day. She looked utterly exhausted.

Before my dad could answer, she shook her head. "I don't want to step on his toes, but we have a right to know, don't we? If you hadn't seen the camera, it would be too late. We'll know if there's something weird going on better than he will, right?"

I could see the relief on both their faces when the officer asked for a laptop as soon as he got out of his car.

This time, there was no needle-in-a-haystack search.

Clear as day, at 4:07 p.m., they watched me wave at the driver in the car—it wasn't possible to tell the vehicle color, since the security footage was in black-and-white—and get inside of my own free will.

I felt disgusted with myself. I had voluntarily gotten into a stranger's car. Because he didn't feel like a stranger.

My mom turned pale while she watched me talk to the dark figure inside the vehicle. "No, baby," she said as I took a step closer and he flung open the door.

The cop paused the footage, and my parents panicked. "Keep going," my dad growled.

"Do you recognize that man?" the cop asked firmly, pointing at the man's shadowy face in the poor-quality camera footage. "And do you recognize this car?"

My mom shook her head frantically. "No. I mean, I don't think so. I

can't tell. Why would she go with him, why was she talking to him at all?"

The officer made a note in his phone then asked, "Is it possible she was seeing someone you didn't know about?"

My dad made that growling sound again. "I don't think Skye had ever been on a real date." He looked at my mom. "Right, Mari? She was shy."

This statement stung, somehow, even though it was true. The officer nodded again slowly. "Can I see the other security footage?"

* * *

It was the officer who noticed the same Kia Sorento cruising through the parking lot every couple of hours that afternoon.

He zoomed in on the plate. 2C 3405. I felt a fizz of excitement that I wrestled under control as I watched the computer screen blink erratically.

There was no license plate visible in the FroYo video. The officer shook his head in frustration. "I'm ninety percent sure that's the same car. But since we can't see the color in either video, and we can barely see the driver in the Daily Grind footage, I can't say for certain."

I waited for the blow that would follow. The bad news. There was nothing he could do here.

Instead, he said, "I do think we have something, though. Your daughter doesn't sound like the type to disappear. And I'm pretty sure that is the same car. I'm going to need both of you to come with me into the station so we can get a written statement about any details that might be relevant. I'm going to update the status on Skye's case to a 'missing person, possibly endangered.' We'll start by pulling her phone records and finding that car."

The relief on my parents' faces was tainted with a pallor of fear. And my excitement was tempered with a sense of dread.

I wanted them to find him.

I wanted them to find *me*.

But there would be no relief in revealing what had happened.

19. MEGHAN

OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS, UTAH

9 MONTHS BEFORE

I stared in disbelief when I saw the police car slowly crest the dirt road.

The man wearing the Forest Service uniform hadn't stayed longer than it took him to snap a few photos of the shoe, make a note in his tablet with the coordinates, and trudge back to his dusty white truck bearing the Forest Service decal. He didn't look around. He didn't follow the nearly invisible fork in the road through the overgrown sagebrush and bent pines. He was doing his job, and nothing more.

Still, I stayed by the shoe like a sentinel after he left. I missed Grandma Rosie. I wanted to meet my uncle. To meet my great grandparents. To see my friend Kiley who had died in a car accident in the fourth grade. To be seen by people who could see me. But I was afraid to drift. Afraid I wouldn't be able to get back again, like Bubbie had warned.

For now, I wanted to be here. I wasn't ready to leave without the option of returning. I knew my resolve wouldn't last forever. I wasn't even sure what I was waiting to feel when someone finally found me. *If*, I reminded myself. *If* someone found me. All I knew was that I wanted to be found.

It was four, maybe five days after the Forest Service employee left that I heard the sound of the police cruiser's motor in the distance.

As it came to a stop in front of the shoe and the raven's stash, I braced myself for a cursory check.

The officer, a woman with a tight, graying brunette bun at the nape of her neck, pulled on gloves and grabbed a clear bag from the front seat of the car as she matter-of-factly opened the door and walked toward the shoulder of the road, scanning until she spotted the bleached-out shoe.

I watched her face closely. She hunched to get a better look and then carefully bagged the shoe before standing up and looking around her. Some of the leaves had already begun to turn brown and gold. The scarce vehicle

traffic that ventured this far into the hills had all but disappeared, and in the mornings the edges of the scrubby brush and grass were tinged with a bite of frost. Summer was over. Soon fall would follow, and everything at this altitude would be covered by a blanket of snow.

The woman—whose name was Officer Domanska from her badge—placed the bagged shoe in the cruiser and made a note on her phone. Then she reached into the car’s dash and extracted what appeared to be the report the Forest Service had filed.

Brenda Maxwell, 28. Reported a shoe and what looked like old blood at 38°01'18.5"N 105°41'18.5"W near Ophir Canyon, on the shoulder of the road. Says she thinks something might have happened here. Four-wheel-drive needed, big ruts this far out.

I thought of the girl with the messy blond bun and silently thanked her. I hoped that whatever she’d been crying about wasn’t making her cry anymore. That she was smiling. I felt something like relief well up in me. If I could, I would have been crying.

Detective Domanska read the report then scanned the shoulder of the road and farther ahead, where it continued toward Ophir Canyon.

“It’s the other way,” I told her. “Please don’t drive away.” I moved until I was close enough to hug her. I reached for her hand, and I felt a little spark as she reflexively moved the hand to place it on the gun in her holster. Encouraged, I reached up to put my hand on her shoulder. “Please look around. It’s not dangerous. Not anymore.”

Keeping her hand on the gun, Detective Domanska took a few steps away from me in the direction of Ophir Canyon. The spark of hope faded to dull disappointment as I watched her walk farther down the road, scanning the brush and the rocky shoulder, using a long branch to prod into deeper thickets of sagebrush so she could see better.

My numbness gave way to despair as she reached the bend in the road, stopped, then strode back to the car. If she couldn’t find me, who would? I remembered episodes of *Cold Case* I had watched where bodies were unearthed years or decades later. *By accident*. By sheer coincidence. Or sometimes never. That was going to be me, I told myself. I wasn’t going to be found.

I let the hurt and the sadness wash over me. If she left with the shoe, would they test it? Did she know my name? Was my disappearance even on

her radar? It's not like I was a minor child. How much did anyone care, aside from my parents and friends, that I hadn't come home. Was Detective Domanska thinking about me now and wondering whether this shoe might be mine? Would this be some kind of macabre Cinderella story? Or was I just a name among so many other names of people who never came home? For all I knew she was a junior detective who had been given the unsavory assignment of driving all the way out here to retrieve a shoe.

The despair coalesced into something sharp and black as Detective Domanska sat down in her cruiser and retrieved the keys from her pocket.

I glanced inside the cruiser at my shoe for a few seconds, feeling the sting of loss that it was leaving. It had become my Wilson. It had kept me company here as a castaway for God-knew how long. I was surprised about how upset I felt to see it go.

The only thing left here with me was my bones.

As Detective Domanska put her keys into the ignition and shut the door, I headed toward the hidden fork in the dirt road.

I would say goodbye to my bones. To the last thing that tied me to this place. To this life.

And then I would find Grandma Rosie and the others.

The despair softened into something tender and deep. I heard the cruiser start up behind me.

I studied the skinny, clumped trees reaching toward the cloud-filled sky overhead. They weren't particularly beautiful. The elevation wasn't high enough for the kind of dense forest I remembered camping in when I was younger. Still, they were the last trees I'd see on this side of consciousness. I tried to take in everything I passed for the last time. The sunlight filtering across the branches I couldn't feel but would miss anyway. The hazy blue peaks in the distance that I knew were the Rockies. The sound of the slight breeze in the aspen leaves.

The muffled crunch of footfalls on the carpet of dry pine needles behind me.

I froze and turned around.

To my disbelief, I saw Detective Domanska at the fork in the road. She peered through the weedy brush that nearly obscured the dirt road from view. Then she stood scanning the path of the overgrown road until she was looking directly at me.

If she kept walking, she'd run right into my body. Or what was left of it. I hadn't been to visit my remains in weeks.

I raced ahead, wanting to see what she would see. As I approached the place where it happened, the place where the blue Kia had pulled away while I ran toward the ravine, I panicked. The rusty blood that had been visible while the animals picked apart my bones was gone. And the bones that had once prominently lay on the surface of the rocky ground were covered with a thin layer of pine needles. Weeds were growing in and among my scattered, dirty remains. A section of my ribcage jutted up through the pine needles, and the dull gray of my skull appeared as an unusually smooth rock, an island in the pine needles and debris.

Unless she knew what she was looking for, it was highly unlikely that the officer would see me.

I braced myself for her to turn around again. To get back in the cruiser and report that she had retrieved the shoe. Instead, she moved toward me, closer and closer, peering into the sagebrush and at one point kneeling beside a larger pine to probe at a thin stand of mushrooms growing in the shade.

"Are you here, Meghan?" she said so quietly I might have imagined it.

Even so, the equivalent of a bucket of ice water crashed over me. She wasn't looking at me. Or my body. In fact, she was looking in the opposite direction, toward the ravine that led down to the dry creek bed.

But it didn't matter. She was looking for me. She thought the shoe might be mine. Someone knew that something bad happened. Which meant that for the first time, I wasn't alone.

"I'm here," I screamed. I knelt next to the skull and ribcage in the dirt as if I could dig them free, to show her where to look.

She moved to a crouch and turned in a slow circle, ducking her head to see the small clearing from a different angle.

As her gaze crossed my pathetic pile of bones, I cried out again. "Look, please look at me."

She stopped scanning and stood up. Stopped again, squinting her eyes a little. Then walked with purpose to where I lay prone across my own bones.

I watched her expression harden into one of recognition and then determination as she bent to see the top of my skull.

20. BRECIA

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

1 YEAR BEFORE

They stayed in the back booth of the cozy pub until last call at eleven.

By that time, her eyes were getting glassy. She made a comment about the room being too warm as she fumbled with her jacket and took a sip to drain her tainted glass of red wine.

“Can I take you home? Or do you want to come to my place to get sobered up?” he asked her, managing to look concerned instead of eager. “We can leave your car here. I’m sure it happens all the time.”

“I took an Uber,” Meghan replied, slurring slightly.

He made his eyes wide. “Okay, then I am *definitely* going to help you get home. Don’t you listen to any true-crime podcasts? You’re never supposed to get into a car with a stranger if you’re tipsy.”

No, I said firmly in her ear. No. He’s the stranger you need to worry about. You don’t really know him. He put shit in your drink. Do not leave with him.

Meghan’s eyes widened as well, and he laughed. “I’m sure you’d be fine. I also just want to spend a few more minutes with you, and we can’t stay here.” He smiled shyly.

She took the bait and smiled back, her whole face lighting up at the compliment. She tugged at the scarf around her neck and leaned closer to him. “Okay, but can you take me home? I think I just need to get some sleep. I’m such a lightweight.”

I leaned as close as I could, knowing from too many other dates that she was lost to me now. She’d made up her mind to go with him. And I couldn’t stop her, even if I turned off the power to the entire restaurant (not that I was strong enough to do that).

Meghan leaned against his shoulder as they walked out of the bar to the parking lot. He gently stroked her shiny chestnut hair. He winked at the

waitress closing the place down and said, “I can’t believe eleven feels so late! This means I’m old, right?”

The waitress smiled at him and shook her head. “Nah, I’m about to crash, too. You two have a good night.”

I tried with the waitress, too. “It’s not what it looks like,” I cried in her ear before hurrying to follow him into the night. I looked back to see the waitress still watching through the glass door for a moment. Then she went back to wiping down countertops.

Meghan mumbled something about her phone as she reached the car. As she unzipped her purse and opened the bag wide, the phone tipped out along with a tin of mints. The phone landed with a quiet thud on the ground by the car. She didn’t notice.

He glanced at the phone for a moment then reassured her it was in her purse as he guided her into the passenger seat.

“Do you need my address, yeah?” Meghan mumbled. “Oh my god I’m so tired.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got it, you texted it to me when we were leaving a second ago,” he soothed.

I felt heavy and numb as I climbed past her into the backseat and he turned on the car.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, I stared out the window at the dark rectangle just visible on the blacktop under the street light.

She’d been texting her friend Sharesa about the date earlier.

Someone knew she’d been here. Here with “Jimmy Carlson”—who would disappear like a ghost as soon as he blocked her on MatchStrike and created a new profile.

What he planned to do in the app likely depended on what he planned to do tonight.

He didn’t actually have her home address. So I braced for him to pull into a dark parking lot or alley or park. Anywhere without street lights.

I steeled myself to stay with her. I promised myself, like always, that at the very least I wouldn’t leave her alone.

This time was different.

As Meghan’s head lolled back in the passenger seat of the Sorento and she curled against the plasticky seat cover, he just kept driving through the dark streets.

When he turned onto the highway, headed south, I was mildly puzzled, but as far as I was concerned, it didn't matter where he was taking her. The only thing that mattered was that I kept looking for a way to stop him.

When he signaled to exit in Toole, I stared at him in surprise.

He couldn't be taking her home. Surely April and the girls were there, preparing for bedtime.

My puzzlement dissolved back into dread when he turned toward Cedar Fort.

I managed to make one of his headlights go out as we drove through the small town.

As the beam of light disappeared, he swore softly and cut his eyes to Meghan in the passenger seat.

She didn't stir.

Try as I might, I couldn't make the other headlight budge.

I watched through the windows for any sign of a patrol car. My mom had been pulled over once for a broken headlight. It was a long shot, but there was nothing else I could do.

I tried to wake Meghan up. I snatched at every thread of fear and disgust and anger I could find, directing them at the car's engine. I screamed in his ear.

I had no idea what I was doing. There was no instruction manual. No one to ask for advice. So I imagined myself as the Dark Phoenix, invisible sparks coming from whatever electricity and consciousness still held me together until I was numb.

No matter what I tried, the car kept running. The lone headlight remained. And no blue-and-red lights appeared behind us.

We kept driving farther into the darkness as the towns disappeared and signs for the Oquirrh Mountain pass appeared.

The paved road turned into a dirt road as we climbed. Meghan mumbled something about her phone once as the car hit a deep rut, and he glanced at her then turned his eyes back to the dark road.

When he finally stopped the car along a fork in the road that was barely more than a trail meant for vehicles far more capable than the Kia, I should have known what would happen.

After all, he had killed me.

But that was different, I told myself. He was furious with me. I had

rejected him. I had dumped him. He liked this girl, in his own disgusting, duplicitous way.

He turned off the headlights then opened the driver's side door and listened. For the sound of a car's engine, maybe. But aside from the crickets, it was utterly quiet.

Then he walked around to the passenger side and unbuckled Meghan's seatbelt.

He said her name once. Then again, louder. This time, she blinked at him, her eyes bleary and glassy. "Jimmy?"

Before she could say anything else, he was dragging her out of the car.

Down the trail. Away from the car. She didn't put up a fight. She mostly tried to keep up, lifting her head to look at him, her face a mask of confusion and glazed terror.

I followed at a distance.

Because I wouldn't leave her.

But there was nothing else I could do.

She screamed just once, as his hand moved to her throat and snatched at the scarf she was wearing.

Then the sound went quiet, replaced by frantic thrashing.

I carried on screaming for both of us, the night air swirling with dark electricity that had nowhere to go.

I screamed until suddenly I heard her voice again, screaming with me.

He was standing up, from where he'd been kneeling over her on the black, scrubby ground.

When I saw her stand up and run, I almost cheered.

I know. You'd think I would have understood.

I called her name again, not expecting her to turn around—until she did. She heard me. I could see it in the twist of her body as she heard her own name but kept running anyway, toward the inky treeline.

He brushed past me on his way to the car. When I looked down at the spot where he had been kneeling, I could see the dark shape of Meghan's body, her scarf still tight around her neck, her eyes half-closed and bloodshot.

I nearly went after her into the woods.

I wanted to. I wanted to tell her I was sorry. That she wasn't alone. That she wasn't invisible—not to me, anyway. I didn't want to haunt him

anymore. What was the point if I couldn't stop this from happening. Maybe there was no rhyme or reason to why I was still here in limbo, following him around like a puppy.

A darker thought crept in: Maybe I just hadn't figured out how to stop him in time. I had failed her.

I called Meghan's name again as I heard the car's engine start behind me.

The fact was that I couldn't help her. Not anymore. That much I knew for certain. She was dead. Like me.

I had nothing to offer her.

And I couldn't face her.

The only thing I could do was follow him back to the car before he disappeared again.

21. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

It was my useless phone that led them to the foothills off Blacks Creek Road. Three days after I was supposed to be driving to ISU.

Once the officer ordered the phone records, things moved quickly. And once the police started searching in the right area, I wasn't exceptionally hard to find.

My phone had pinged off cell towers in Kuna, South Boise, Robie Creek, and then Prairie, Idaho, where the signal pinged until it disappeared. Together, along with a GPS signal that had briefly connected along Blacks Creek Road, the little dots created something like a Bermuda triangle, where I'd been swallowed up.

My parents didn't see the constellation of cell phone pings or the GPS data. I drove with them to the police station. But then I followed Officer Willis while a different officer took my parents' detailed statement in separate rooms.

I couldn't be with my parents and their hope. Not when it was about to be shattered.

While my parents were being questioned, Officer Willis requested cell phone records from Verizon. Before he called the customer service number and pressed 8 for law enforcement requests, he printed and faxed a signed affidavit on letterhead stating that the Kuna Police required the records as soon as possible as part of an endangered missing persons investigation.

I waited with him until the cell phone records were emailed half an hour later. When the cell data report came, I studied the map of tower pings and the long GPS timestamp along Blacks Creek Road over his shoulder. His brow furrowed as he traced a finger along the list of final pings coming from Prairie, Idaho. There was nothing but foothills and canyons anywhere near the area.

The license plate number on the Kia Sorento wasn't immediately useful. It was a Utah plate with a Utah address, registered to James and April Carson. There was no record of either April or James in Idaho yet.

The fact that he was married surprised me less than the fact that he had a living, breathing wife. I tried to imagine her. What did she look like? Beautiful, probably. Did she have any idea who she had married? I wasn't sure whether I should be terrified of her or for her.

Officer Willis barked at someone to create an ALPR report, which I gathered was some kind of license plate monitoring database. Then he pulled up a map of Blacks Creek canyon and left the station in his patrol car.

* * *

I sat shotgun as we drove up Blacks Creek Road. The radio spit codes and meaningless snippets of information as we turned off the highway exit.

I watched the sagebrush and rocky hills fly past outside the car window. The last time I'd seen them this way, I'd been alive. But not for long.

Officer Willis turned onto an unmarked dirt road, a camping site with two cars and a tent visible along the creek bed. He spent a few minutes questioning the man and woman who emerged from the tent then spent some time studying the area. I followed him. And even though I knew he couldn't hear me, I talked to him. "It's farther. Not here. It's farther up the canyon." I glanced at the sun, hanging heavy in the sky. There were only a few hours of daylight left. If he spent this long searching every dirt road that branched off Blacks Creek, this was going to take a long time.

He pulled off the road several more times, each of them the wrong exit. He was drawn most to the pull-offs with camping sites. I tried to gauge how far we were from the spot he'd left my body. Would I recognize the pull-off? I hadn't realized how many dirt paths snaked off the main road. I focused on the memory and found, with surprising clarity, that I could see the horizon and the pull-off as if it were a photo in my mind.

I wasn't sure exactly how far away we were.

But I'd know it as soon as I saw it.

* * *

The horizon was just turning pink when I saw the pull-off.

The officer had skipped the last two dirt roads, marking each on his paper map to check later. I couldn't tell if that decision was influenced by the fact that it was getting late or if he was following some kind of hunch I'd contributed to. Either way, I felt like we were getting close.

Then suddenly, there it was. The scrubby weeds and tall grass covering the little rise at the shoulder in the road stood out in relief against the darker treeline beyond the road. The shape of that rise was burned into my mind.

"There it is," I called frantically, willing him to stop.

His eyes flicked to the exit. The area past the rise wasn't easily visible. In fact, it sort of looked like the turnoff dead-ended before it snaked deeper into the hills.

"Stop," I called again desperately, sliding over until I was nearly on his lap, my hands resting uselessly on the steering wheel as if maybe I could turn it myself.

He wasn't slowing down.

"Stop there," I said again, louder.

Nothing.

His ears weren't picking up what I was saying. I needed to tap into his brain somehow.

I thought about how I'd been able to slip through the crack in the FroYo shop earlier. That's when I had the idea to get as close to Officer Willis's brain as possible.

So I leaned into that hairy ear canal and thought about hitting the brakes hard and pulling off that little dirt road while I looked at the inside of his eardrum.

To my amazement, the car slowed down.

His eyes flicked over to the dirt road. Then he hit the brakes harder and exited.

I felt like cheering. I couldn't say for certain whether he'd heard me, but I was confident he hadn't planned to stop. And yet here we were.

My excitement evaporated as he got out of the car and started poking through the brush.

It took him less than two minutes to find my body, unhidden by the dry creek bed.

The animals had found me over the past three days. One of my arms had been separated from my torso, the gray skin torn from muscle and bone

in raw strips.

The rest of me wasn't much better. It was the kind of scene that would have kept me awake at night if I'd seen it in a movie. But this time I couldn't look away. Because this wasn't a movie. This was me.

Officer Willis didn't waste any time in calling for backup.

At first, he hurried to secure the area, pulling caution tape from the trunk of the cruiser and putting on gloves.

There were no other headlights on the road. Everything was still and quiet. We were going to be here for a minute before anyone else arrived. And I wasn't going anywhere.

So after a few minutes, he paused and sat down in the driver's seat of the police cruiser, staring toward the spot where the ground sloped toward the creek bed and my body.

I sat next to him while we waited. After a few seconds passed, he cleared his throat and started to sing softly.

I'd only been to church a few times, but I recognized the hymn immediately. They'd sung it at my granddad's funeral two years earlier.

Abide with me; 'tis eventide.

The day is past and gone;

The shadows of the evening fall;

The night is coming on.

* * *

I wasn't there when they told my parents.

By the time Officer Willis drove back down Blacks Creek, it was well after midnight.

My body had been photographed. Evidence—including my cell phone, a cigarette butt, some candy wrappers, and a partial tire track—had been cataloged and tucked into plastic bags.

A tech wearing booties, a mask, and a hair net had carefully pulled down my jeans and underwear to insert a long swab between my legs.

That was the part that finally made me look away. It had to be done. But I didn't want to remember seeing any of it.

I felt weirdly grateful when he pulled my purple-striped underwear

back up, careful to re-button my jeans, afterward.

My parents weren't at the station anymore when Officer Willis let us inside the still-humming office. A couple of men were being hauled through the reception area in handcuffs, and a woman was standing at the counter, holding her head in her hands while she sobbed incoherently.

Officer Willis, who looked bone-tired, still took the time to write a report of what had happened. A female officer entered the room at one point to tell him that the missing persons report had been canceled and that a press conference had been scheduled for first thing in the morning. A detective from homicide, someone named Kittleson, would take over from here. He needed to be brought up to speed as soon as possible. The license plate was still a dead end.

Officer Willis nodded. A few minutes later he emailed the report for Detective Kittleson, printed off a copy to be filed, and turned off the light to his office.

When he got into his patrol car, I didn't follow him. Instead, I headed down the main road, then the side streets, until I got home. Miles no longer meant anything. And at this point I knew the way.

As I passed through an overgrown lot at the edge of my neighborhood, a large fox appeared from the brush, carrying some small rodent in her mouth.

She froze.

"Hey," I said, crouching.

She flattened her ears against her head and sniffed the air. Still holding onto the rodent, she crept forward with her head turned toward me, giving me a wide berth. When I stood up, she made a little muffled yip then scurried into the cover of a lilac bush.

* * *

My parents were asleep when I finally slipped into the house through the crack in the back door.

My dad was sitting on the couch, his head leaning at an uncomfortable-looking angle against the wall on account of the too-short backrest. My mom slept with her legs curled up against her chest on the cushion beside him, her head against his leg.

Like most kids of divorced parents, I'd secretly fantasized about all kinds of scenarios that would bring them back together. Or at least bring my dad back to Idaho. I'd never been very good at it. It was easier to imagine them apart than together. Both of them were happier. And my dad's girlfriend was actually pretty nice.

Apparently this was what it took.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, feeling the sadness and love expand in my chest.

My mom whimpered in her sleep, then sat upright on the couch in the dark room. "I can find her," she cried, her eyes still shut. "I'll find her."

My dad reached for her hand. "It's okay, Mari," he murmured and readjusted his head against the back of the couch. "Just sleep. Keep sleeping."

She obediently lay back down on the couch, still holding onto his fingers tightly.

22. MEGHAN

SALT LAKE VALLEY, UTAH

6 MONTHS BEFORE

As strange as it sounds, I missed the mountains: my burial grounds.

I didn't think twice about jumping into the front seat of Detective Domanska's police cruiser. But as the rutted, narrow road finally spit us out onto a paved road with signs directing us toward Cedar Fort, I wished I had at least said goodbye to the raven. She wouldn't have known. I knew that. I missed her anyway, though.

Grandma Rosie's words echoed in my memory as we drove. *I'll be here when you're ready.* I wasn't sure what I would learn at the police station, exactly, but I no longer felt a gnawing desperation.

I wanted to be found. I wanted to see him arrested—maybe he already had been? I wanted to say goodbye to my family—surely there would be a funeral now. And then I wanted to pass on.

* * *

Detective Domanska hadn't drawn the short-straw to answer the Forest Service's request to check out the suspicious shoe by the side of the road. I quickly learned that she was the detective assigned to my missing persons case—which was rapidly recategorized as a murder case. She'd been hoping to find me when she got the tip from the Forest Service.

She'd been looking for me for four months, ever since Sharesa had reported me missing the morning after my "date."

I read the call transcripts in my missing persons report as Detective Domanska flipped back through her notes and records. Sharesa had been described as "hysterical." I smiled. It faded when I read the transcript of my parents' calls and interviews.

My mom's first phone transcript was marked "unintelligible" every other line. They'd been on a rafting trip on the Salmon River in Idaho when it

happened. Which meant that they hadn't learned of my disappearance for a full five days. They'd been talking about that trip all year. My mom had gifted it to my dad for Christmas.

The waitress at Gracie's had remembered me. She'd remembered Jimmy, too: how handsome he was, mainly. And the fact that we'd stayed until last call. She remembered me being off-my-face drunk as he helped me to the parking lot. "I thought they were a couple," she'd said in her interview.

They'd found my phone in the parking lot. Which was the main reason—in addition to Sharesa's hysteria—that they had escalated my search so quickly.

There were dozens of newspaper articles printed and filed among Detective Domanska's notes. I read all of them. Each article used the recent headshots I'd taken when I got my last work promotion. I'd been so proud of those headshots. They looked like a professional, kickass modern woman who knew what life owed her. But in black-and-white, splashed across the front page of local papers, I had a hard time looking at them. I didn't know her anymore. She looked naive instead of badass. Like she had no idea what was coming for her.

I learned that Jimmy Carlson was a ghost.

He'd never actually existed.

It didn't matter that Sharesa knew his name. Or that she had provided Detective Domanska with a link to his—now defunct—profile on MatchStrike, which I'd sent her before the date to get her approval. He'd registered the account with a fake name, a fake email address—and a VPN. The best MatchStrike could do, even with his messages in my defunct account, was to confirm that his bogus account had been created a year earlier, on July 15th. The last time it had been accessed was the day I disappeared. He'd deleted the account soon after.

They did recover his profile photo—which was zoomed out far enough that it was hard to see a lot of detail, especially in the low-res web upload. I remembered the feeling of relief when I met him at Gracie's: He wasn't a Neanderthal. His photo didn't do him justice. Not even a little bit. Usually it was the opposite situation with MatchStrike. But not Jimmy. Jimmy was handsome. I'd said as much to him on our date. He really needed a better photo. Secretly, I'd been thrilled by this. I'd found a diamond. So what if his

photo skills were subpar? It was better than the up-close gym selfies on every other profile.

Domanska ran the photo through facial recognition software, but even enhanced, the photo was too low-res and zoomed out to deliver any matches.

My phone had been bagged as evidence. A partial print from his car—not mine—had been recovered. It wasn't in the database. Detective Domanska's file included my call logs going back six months, as well as transcripts of all my chats.

There was nothing from "Jimmy." We'd only ever communicated through the MatchStrike app. The detectives had combed through those messages, which weren't any more telling than his photo. When I re-read them I wondered how I'd ever found them so sparkling and charming. Now, they just sounded like the opening lines of a horror story.

* * *

During the day, I followed Detective Domanska around like a puppy. I wasn't her only case. But, as a commenter in one article stated bluntly, I was a pretty white girl. And now that I'd been found, the missing persons case turned into a manhunt.

After some debate, Detective Domanska turned his photo over to the press, asking for anyone with information about his identity to come forward.

The next morning, his photo appeared next to mine in the articles. I learned from Detective Domanska's reports, they received more than 500 tips by phone, email, and even the police department's Facebook page that day. The tips continued to pour in the following day from a woman who had been out with a creep from MatchStrike who fit his description. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Tall. Handsome.

There were so many calls.

Some of the women were in tears on the phone. One woman in Wyoming had been assaulted on her date. Another had narrowly escaped.

I rode along on every follow-up that Detective Domanska made personally.

I didn't expect to actually find him.

When I'd told Sharesa he was a needle in a haystack, I hadn't known

how fitting that expression would become.

23. BRECIA

SALT LAKE VALLEY, UTAH

1 YEAR BEFORE

After Meghan, he deleted his MatchStrike account.

He erased his browser history. Cleared his cache. Deleted the messages he'd sent her and anyone else. Scrubbed every trace of Jimmy Carlson from the Internet that he could.

I knew it wasn't that easy to erase yourself. Nothing on the web was ever really gone. But only if someone was looking for it.

A few weeks later, he announced to April that he was quitting his job at the IT company in Salt Lake. They'd treated him like dirt, he said. Underpaid him. Underutilized him. It was time to move on. Plus, the office manager and most of his coworkers were worthless.

April stared at him in shock. Her eyes welled up with tears as she gestured to the house around them and the living room she'd just finished decorating. I'd been there when she opened a package containing new fuzzy throw pillows a few days earlier. Emma had insisted on building a fort with them immediately.

"What are you talking about?" April asked in disbelief. "We're finally settled in. We finally have a nice house. We have friends. The girls have friends. We talked about staying here until they graduated from high school. Why is it always like this?"

His eyes flashed with annoyance. "I've thought about this a lot, and I don't expect you to understand. But since you're not exactly paying the mortgage, I do expect you to support me." He snorted then pointed at the throw-pillow fort Emma and Kimmie had constructed the day before. "I don't criticize *you* for how you do your 'job.'" He lifted his fingers in air quotes. "When you do it, anyway. This place looks like a mess."

April stiffened like she'd been slapped. She quickly swiped at the tears that had escaped down her cheeks and knelt to pick up the pillows and

blankets on the floor. The light in the dining room flickered once, then twice as the rage trickled through me. April, however, looked like she'd just been unplugged. He stood over her in the living room for a few minutes in silence as she cleaned up the fort, muttering something under his breath about realtor fees. Then he left the room.

I didn't follow him.

I knew exactly why we were moving. And I knew why we would move again. And again. And again.

To be honest, I sort of felt like I'd been unplugged too. Since that night in the mountains—the night he killed her—I had stopped following him. Instead, I spent my days watching the girls play. Watching April make their lunch and give them baths and tell them stories about fairy queens and pony pals. I was too numb to do anything else.

For all my efforts, I was powerless. Powerless to stop him. Powerless to leave (I had nowhere else to go. How the hell was I going to find my way home now?). Powerless to bring Meghan back.

So I shut down and just existed, wrapping my focus around the bright spots in the void: April and the girls.

April was extra quiet for a few days after he told her he was quitting. But when he didn't mention it again, she gradually softened and carried on like normal. I understood that she'd heard this before.

Three months later, when he abruptly announced that he'd found a new job in Idaho, she smiled weakly then went into the bedroom to lie down with the girls and Oscar for story time.

I lay down on the bed next to Emma. I savored this nightly tradition, when we shut the door and April read to the girls. Oscar glanced at me then settled down beside April and continued purring.

April told the girls the story of the fox and the hound, reading from a bent paperback Disney book tucked into the shelf by the door.

Unlike the pony pals and the fairies, this was a bittersweet book. Two friends from different worlds. You knew right from the start that it wasn't going to end particularly well. But you kept hoping anyway.

When April got to the part about the old dog—Chief—breaking his leg during a hunt for the fox, Kimmie chimed in. “The fox didn't want that old dog to get hurt, Mama.”

April nodded. They'd clearly had this conversation before. “That's

right, baby. The fox was just trying to get away. He was scared.”

Emma sat up in bed. “But that dog *wanted* to hurt the fox. *He* meant it.”

April hesitated. Then she nodded again. “Yes. That’s just his nature, though. He can’t help it, honey.”

I stayed at the foot of Emma’s bed as April turned off the lights and closed the girls’ bedroom door.

There were foxes, and there were hounds.

And then there were the animals who didn’t fit into the natural order of things at all. Who meant the hurt they caused every time.

24. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

It took three days for the police to release my remains to my parents. During those three days, the coroner confirmed my official cause of death as strangulation. The lab results came back. I hadn't been sexually assaulted. And there was no organic matter under my fingernails. In other words, I hadn't fought back.

"I wanted to," I told the coroner as she carefully studied my purple fingers. "I couldn't do anything."

My parents decided to hold my funeral at Hulls Gulch Park, at the base of the foothills in Boise beside the lake where we'd caught tadpoles every spring when I was little. That was back before my parents split up. It was still one of my favorite places. I was glad they'd chosen it.

It was a short funeral. My mom gave a eulogy but had to stop part way through when the words started coming out as little gasps through her tears. My dad took the piece of paper she'd been clutching tightly in her hand and finished, clearing his throat again and again.

There wasn't much talk of God or heaven. My mom and I had stopped going to church a long time ago, and neither of my parents wanted to cold-contact a local church now. Several priests and pastors had offered anyway when the story hit the news the day after my body was found.

After the eulogy, my parents, a few of my friends from high school, and some of my coworkers from the Daily Grind took turns saying nice things about me and scattering wildflower seeds around the scrubby lakeshore. Ken gave my mom a long hug after he scattered his seed packet. He'd been watching for the hot chocolate guy every day, he said.

My mom pressed her lips tightly together and then thanked him for everything. She didn't tell him that the police knew that hot chocolate guy's real name was James Carson. Or that she called the police station every day,

asking if they'd found him yet. Detective Kittleson couldn't tell her much. And she'd been given strict orders not to reveal any details that could compromise the investigation. But there had been no arrests.

The news of my kidnapping and murder had blazed hot and bright throughout Idaho for a few days. My senior photo stared back at me from the front page of the Idaho Report, which my mom had neatly folded and tucked beside the computer in her office. In the short amount of time it took for our funeral procession to make its way to Hulls Gulch, a story about a local murder-suicide had taken over the front-page news. I wasn't surprised. I was a brown girl from a poor neighborhood in Kuna.

Sometimes, when I sat beside my mom in the car as she drove to work or picked up dinner for herself, I watched the faces of the people on the street, wondering if there were other ghosts like me. If there were, would I even know it? Or were they tucked into houses and cars like I was, haunting the people they loved most?

Daily Grind corporate had sent my parents a check for \$1,000 and a surprisingly touching letter of condolence. My dad fumed that they didn't want to get sued. This was blood money. But my mom tucked the letter into her desk drawer.

Before we left Hulls Gulch to drive to the cemetery, my dad closed the funeral by reading the words to a Celtic funeral blessing. I remembered it from the book he'd sent me a few summers ago for my birthday. He'd left a note inside saying that it was the only book that had ever made him cry.

*Thou goest home to thine eternal slumber.
Thou goest home to thine eternal bed.
Thou goest back to thy home of winter,
Thy home of autumn, of spring, and of summer;*

*Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy sorrow,
Sleep thou, sleep in the calm of all calm,
Sleep now, beloved in the shade of high branches
Sleep, O sleep in the love of all loves;*

Sleep this night in the breast of thy mother,

*Sleep, thou beloved, while she herself soothes thee;
Thy face is turned to thine old home, beloved
Thou goest back to the womb whence thou sprang*

*The sleep of the seven lights be thine, beloved,
The sleep of the seven joys be thine, beloved,
The shadow of death enfolds thee, beloved,
But in nearness thy father stands by and by*

*Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy sorrow,
Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy pain.
Sleep, O sleep in the guidance of guidance,
Sleep, O beloved, the rest of all rest.*

25. MEGHAN

SALT LAKE VALLEY, UTAH

6 MONTHS BEFORE

I decided not to attend my own funeral.

My parents both made the drive from Wyoming to retrieve what little remained of me. Detective Domanska had already interviewed both of them over video chat. When they arrived at the morgue, she met them there and stood vigil while my mom signed the release forms with shaking hands.

It hurt to see my parents. Almost as much as it hurt them to see me.

I wanted to tell them that I was okay. That I loved them. That it wasn't their fault it had happened while they were on their trip. That I'd found Grandma Rosie. That someday they'd find me again, too.

But for now, I couldn't tell them anything.

And I couldn't stay with them.

There was no going back. I was still here for one reason and one reason only.

* * *

Ninety-five percent of the tips that trickled in through the tip line were obvious duds.

Detective Domanska followed up on the remaining five percent herself.

Some were simple cases of mistaken identity. Just guys who looked really similar to the low-res profile photo on MatchStrike. I felt sorry for them.

Others gave me a distinctly sick feeling. One, a line cook who lived about three blocks away from Gracie's, agreed to meet us at his home. I watched Detective Domanska's hand go to her hip, a few inches from the holster of her gun, as he welcomed us inside with a smile. A girl from MatchStrike had called into the tip line. He'd gotten way too aggressive at

the end of the date, grabbing her arm when she told him she was leaving early.

He wasn't the guy we were looking for, though. His alibi was solid: He'd been at a party with at least a dozen witnesses for the entire night. But there was a flicker of something familiar in his eye as Detective Domanska interviewed him. Like he wasn't really surprised that he was being interviewed—but didn't anticipate anything to come of it.

* * *

Three days after the tip line went live, we got a message from a woman who spoke so quickly that it was hard to tell what she was saying at first. Detective Domanska listened to the message twice. The woman rattled off an address just outside Salt Lake. Her friend's husband worked there, she said. He looked just like the photo she'd seen in the newspaper.

"His name is James," she said, then hung up without giving her own name.

Detective Domanska looked up the address. It was one of those enormous shared-suite buildings that housed dozens of offices. "Dromo" was the name of the company in the suite number the woman had given. She drummed her fingers on the keyboard as she stared at the screen. Then she headed for the patrol car. It wasn't a great tip, but there was something about the woman's voice.

When we walked into the office suite, an older receptionist with kind eyes and a tight gray bun greeted Domanska. "How can I help you?" she asked, smiling. She glanced at the detective's badge. "Everything okay?"

"I'd like to speak with one of your employees," Detective Domanska began.

In my peripheral vision, I saw someone come around the corner, toward the reception desk.

"James Carson," Domanska finished as the receptionist laughed and called out to the man who had almost disappeared into the office.

"Speak of the devil, he's right here."

The shock and disgust rippled through me. The computer on the receptionist's desk suddenly froze as the lights flickered once, then twice.

Nobody seemed to notice.

James smiled and stuck out his hand. He looked puzzled. Slightly concerned. And as handsome as ever.

Detective Domanska took his hand. “Is there an office where I can ask you a few questions?” she asked. “It’ll just take a few minutes.”

He winked at the receptionist then waved Domanska toward a conference room a few yards away. “No problem, am I in trouble or something?”

I flew at him, knowing I couldn’t hurt him any more than the gentle breeze coming from the air conditioning vent above our heads. I couldn’t just stand there, though.

I clawed and hit and fought like I wanted to before.

And, like before, I accomplished nothing—aside from the erratic flickering of the fluorescent lights in the conference room.

I still couldn’t believe it was him.

We’d found the needle, after all.

But he didn’t look worried.

Detective Domanska started out with the easy questions. Where had he been on the night of Friday, June 14th?

He furrowed his brow and pretended to think. “I really don’t know.” He had the balls to chuckle. “That’s so long ago, I’m sorry—did something happen? I’d have to check back through my phone or ask my wife. She’d know.”

He had a wife. It didn’t surprise me, exactly. I had no illusions about the kind of human being he was. It just added a new layer of horror. I tried to imagine her. What she looked like. How she had married this monster. Whether she had any kind of inkling of who he was. Whether she was the woman who had called with the anonymous tip.

Detective Domanska nodded. Then she showed him the profile photo the newspaper had run. His profile photo. “Is this you?” she asked him casually.

He took the paper and studied the image. “I can definitely see the resemblance, but no, that’s not me. But I saw this in the news yesterday, isn’t that the guy they’re looking for?”

The detective studied his eyes. I studied her eyes. Could she tell he was lying? Would *I* have been able to tell he was lying if I were in her shoes? I remembered the taped-up sign I’d seen in the bathroom at Gracie’s Spot. *On*

a date that isn't going well? Ask for Andrea at the bar. I thought of the confidence with which I had ignored that sign and walked back out to my tainted drink and my soon-be-murderer, imagining that this was the start of something beautiful.

Then I remembered the girl with the messy bun. The one who had stopped to take a photo of my bleached shoe on the side of the dirt road. I remembered the forest ranger who had called Detective Domanska.

I leaned in as close as I could to her ear, watching the fluorescent lights continue to flicker as my frustration built. "He's lying," I told her. "It's him. He's the one who killed me. Don't believe him."

Domanska's expression didn't change. I'd learned that her poker face was something to be reckoned with. It might mean that she believed him. Or it might mean that she was playing it cool. There was really no way to tell. She ignored his question and asked, "Have you ever been to Gracie's Spot?"

He looked thoughtful again. Then he finally said, "Yeah. I think I have. It's not too far from here."

Domanska nodded. "Were you there on the night of June 14th?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. But like I said, I'd have to ask my wife. My brain is like a sieve, I can't even remember what I ate for lunch yesterday." He laughed. "I'm getting ready to move in a couple weeks. This is actually my last day here. You're lucky you caught me."

His eyes crinkled up at the corners. *Lucky you caught me.* He was making a joke.

Domanska's expression stayed impassive. "Good to know. I'll need your new address, then. In case I have more questions." Her jaw tightened just a little. She wasn't buying it. I cheered. The lights overhead continued to flicker like candles.

Domanska placed the newspaper article on the table. "To answer your question, yes. I'm investigating this case." She tapped on my photo. "Do you recognize her?"

He made that stupid, pretend-thoughtful face again. "No, but I recognize the photo from the article I read. Scary stuff."

I leaned in closer to her ear again. "Keep going. Ask him about the waitress. She'd remember him."

To my shock and delight, she did.

"There was a waitress at Gracie's who remembers a man with Meghan

that night. She gave us a pretty good description of him. What would happen if I put you in a lineup in front of her?”

The air in the room suddenly felt tense and charged. Something in his eyes went dark. “Excuse me?” He made a show of shaking his head like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “That photo is blurry as crap. I don’t want to be rude, and I hope you find the jerk who did this, but do I need a lawyer or something here? I don’t want to end up like that guy on the Netflix documentary.”

Domanska didn’t budge. “Could you answer the question, please?”

“No. The waitress wouldn’t recognize me. Am I free to go now?”

“No!” I told Domanska. “It’s him. You can’t let him leave. Keep asking him questions.”

It didn’t happen.

“You’re free to go,” the detective told him slowly. “But like I said, I’m going to need your new address and your contact information. I may have more questions for you.”

I lagged behind Domanska by a few seconds. When the door to the conference room shut and the sound of her footsteps disappeared down the hallway, he lifted his middle finger.

“Incompetent bitch wolf,” he murmured.

* * *

I felt like I was floating away as I followed Detective Domanska back to her car.

We had found him. But nothing had happened.

The detective turned the key in the ignition and picked up her cell phone.

Keep going, Bubbelah. I pictured Grandma Rosie standing across the floury countertop and the bread dough. The wrinkles around the detective’s eyes disappeared as I pictured the smile lines in Grandma Rosie’s.

Domanska’s voice drifted through the memory with me, like background music, getting softer.

“... but something about him ...”

The sun-soaked kitchen disappeared as I snapped back into the car.

Domanska was driving now, her phone on speaker in its cradle. “Maybe I’m wrong, but I got the feeling that he was expecting someone to show up and ask him those questions. He wasn’t nearly as surprised as someone in his shoes should’ve been. And he’s a dead ringer for that photo.”

The person on the other end of the line cleared their throat. “Want me to circle back with the woman who called in the tip? It was anonymous, but we have her number.”

“Yes, call her back. Push hard. Then find this James Carson guy online. See if you can find a good photo so we can send a lineup to that waitress. If she identifies him, that’s enough to get a warrant to search his car.”

Domanska paused. Finally she said, “He’s leaving the state in two weeks. We need to lock this down before then. I don’t want to deal with extradition.”

My heart—or whatever still held me together—soared. It was impossible to know how much I had contributed to Domanska’s hunch. But I decided to believe that this gut feeling she had was partly my doing.

Grandma Rosie would still be waiting for me in two weeks.

I could stay in limbo a little longer.

Because I really wanted to see this bastard go down.

26. BRECIA

KUNA, IDAHO

6 MONTHS BEFORE

I didn't find out that the police had questioned him about Meghan's murder until we were settled into a sprawling 70s rambler in Kuna, Idaho, that he'd managed to rent for cash under the name "James Carlson."

April and I had just gotten back from a "Mommy Meetup" group she'd found on Facebook. I didn't love the idea of leaving Emma and Kimmie home alone—even tucked into their beds. But I couldn't stand to be near him anymore. There wasn't anything I could do to help the girls anyway.

So I followed April to a trendy restaurant in Nampa and listened halfheartedly to the small talk about "gifted and talented" preschoolers, leggings with pockets, and organic snacks. April smiled the whole time and chimed in when she could. But when we got back to the car, she swiped at a tear that escaped down her cheek. She was starting over. Again.

So was he. I just didn't want to know anything about it.

He was hardly ever home anymore, which was a significant change from the days we spent together in his basement computer room in Colorado.

When April pulled into the garage and turned off the car, we could already hear him through the wall.

He was raging at someone.

April froze, then scrambled out of the car. I flew past her, thinking he was screaming at the girls. The bulb in the garage popped, and April yelped as the room went black.

I slipped through the crack in the door and stood facing him.

He'd heard the garage door and was already halfway down the stairs.

The girls' bedroom door, a little ways down the hall, was closed. He wasn't yelling at them. He was talking to somebody on the phone.

He lowered his voice as he disappeared down the stairs, but I caught up to him easily. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer. Don't call me again. I

already told you everything I know, which is nothing,” he hissed.

I moved closer to him, so I could hear the response on the other end of the line.

“So to be totally clear, you have never met Meghan—”

He hung up the phone and threw it.

The phone cracked hard against the wall and landed face up on the carpet. *Salt Lake City Police* was still displayed on the screen.

Someone in Salt Lake suspected him. Enough that they were pursuing the lead to Idaho.

I backed away from him and stood in the doorway, glancing around the basement den. It was the first time I’d set foot inside since we’d moved three weeks ago.

The room was more man-cave than office. There was a PlayStation hooked up to a TV on one wall and a desk at the other, with a plush brown recliner in one corner. He picked up the phone from where he’d thrown it and shoved it into his hoodie pocket. Then he sat down in the chair and turned on the PlayStation.

My eyes settled on a Daily Grind coffee cup poking out of the trash can next to the chair. “Hot chocolate” and the name “James” were written in careful cursive with a little smiley face at the bottom of the cup.

I’d never seen him—or April—drink coffee before. I’d sort of been under the impression that it was against their religion.

I stood in the hallway, still staring at the smiley face. It wasn’t one of the scribbled, hastily drawn ones. It was a whole, cute little face. With eyelashes and everything.

I told myself it meant nothing. It was a coffee cup.

I moved my gaze to the computer. Its screen was black. If the police were questioning him, maybe he was lying low. Staying off MatchStrike. Maybe they’d even catch him for what he did to Meghan. And to me.

There was a creak from the basement stairs. April was coming down. He made an exasperated noise and scanned the room. Then he plucked the empty coffee cup from the trash can and shoved it into a desk drawer, out of sight.

I backed into the hallway. April was hovering at the bottom of the stairs. She appeared to be trying to decide whether to ask him about the yelling. She must have heard the phone hit the wall.

Instead, she padded back upstairs and peeked inside the girls' room. When she saw that they were sleeping soundly, she closed her eyes and let out a sigh of relief.

Then she scooped Oscar up from the floor, made her way to the master bedroom, and tucked the covers around herself.

I generally didn't pay much attention to what April did with her phone. The few times I'd looked, she was arranging playdates for Kimmie or Emma, playing KandyKlash, or scrolling through her endless Instagram feed. But tonight, the look on her face—as she glanced toward the bedroom door, then peered at her screen with a furrowed brow, made me slide over to see what she was looking at.

She'd pulled up a news article about Meghan's murder.

With her thumb and forefinger, she was zooming in and out on a grainy, black-and-white image of her husband.

I watched in disbelief as she opened a new browsing window and typed in, "Can childhood trauma lead to violence."

She stared at the search results without clicking on any of them. A quote from a research article was displayed at the top of the results:

It is widely accepted that childhood trauma increases the likelihood of violent behavior.

After a few seconds, April opened up a text thread from three weeks earlier—right before they'd moved. It was a message from someone named Nina that had been left unread. The message was long: it filled up almost the entire screen. It was an apology. Nina thought that the man in the newspaper article looked just like James. She'd "mentioned it" to the Salt Lake Police. It was probably nothing. She should have told April first before contacting the police. She was so sorry. But she couldn't stop thinking about how similar they looked. Maybe he had a brother?

I had no idea who Nina was. At the end of the text she mentioned seeing the girls on Sunday, so I assumed she was a fellow church member.

April read and re-read the text message.

She finally closed the messaging app, erased her browsing history, and placed her phone carefully on the nightstand, burying her face into Oscar's furry, rumbling side.

27. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

They found him a month after my funeral.

An officer pulled him over on a traffic stop in Meridian. He had a tail light out. When the officer ran his plates—flagged in the database in connection to my murder—she brought him into the station for questioning.

I wasn't there when they questioned him about me. He was in and out of the police station in twenty minutes. Detective Kittleson called my mom later the following day.

James had refused to answer any questions without a lawyer present. Then he'd calmly asked if he was free to go.

And he was. They wrote him a ticket for driving without a valid vehicle registration and plates. Since it was a first-time offense, he left with a \$50 ticket.

Detective Kittleson told my parents that the district attorney had significant reservations about pursuing him as a suspect at this time. The Daily Grind security footage that showed the license plate on the dark-colored Kia didn't show me anywhere near the vehicle. And the FroYo video that showed me actually getting into a dark-colored sedan didn't show the license plate. Not to mention that the driver was hardly more than a dark blur. A positive ID was almost impossible.

All they could say for certain was that James Carson had been at the Daily Grind that day. So had hundreds of other dark sedans. James worked nearby: Why wouldn't he grab something to drink on his breaks? His lawyer had communicated this. There was no way to prove that I had gotten in the car with him.

James said he'd never seen me before—outside of my photo in the papers, anyway.

When my mom learned they'd found him—without arresting him—she

was getting ready for work, carefully applying eyeliner in the bathroom. I was sitting on the countertop next to her. I'd become her shadow. And I'd realized over the past month how little I actually knew about my mom while I was alive. I had always called her my "best friend." I knew her favorite Salvadoran dish—sopa de res—and her favorite TV series—*El Número Uno*. I loved her. There was no question about that. But I hardly knew anything about her as a person. The focus had always been on me: What I liked, who my friends were, how work was going, what I wanted to do after college, what I was thinking about, what I was reading.

In some ways, I felt like I was seeing her for the first time. The way I might have after a few years at college, or maybe after having a baby of my own. As I listened to her talk to her best friend Lucrecia on the couch, I pretended that she was talking to me sometimes. Especially when the conversation drifted into topics that didn't relate to my kidnapping and murder.

I learned that she'd tried pot when she was fifteen. That part of the reason she'd been so excited about me going to college was that she had dropped out her senior year. That when I was six days old, she'd shown up at a pediatrician's appointment without a bra on, because she hadn't gotten any sleep since I'd been born. That she secretly prayed at night, despite telling Lucrecia that she still didn't believe in God. That she wanted to move away from Idaho. That she still thought about my dad a lot. That she wished she'd had more kids.

I listened and watched and wished I could tell her that I was still here. That in some ways, despite the chasm that I'd fallen into, I felt closer to her now than I ever had.

I didn't try to whisper in her ear at night anymore while she slept. Not after what had happened that first night. But sometimes, while she was applying her eyeliner with shaky hands in the mornings and the bathroom was silent except for the ceiling fan ticking, I talked to her. About what foods I missed the most. About my favorite memories of her and my dad. Every once in a while, she talked back. To her reflection in the mirror—but also to me.

"Skyebird, remember when you learned to crawl and I found you camped out behind the toilet in the bathroom with a toilet cap in your mouth?"

I laughed. She laughed. And to my surprise, I found that I could remember exactly what she was talking about if I picked my way back through the memories. They were all there, as clear as crystal. “Do you remember the little fish drawing you taped to my bathroom mirror when I was two, when you were trying to get me to go number two? So it would ‘feed the fishes?’” I said.

She lifted the eyeliner pen to complete a stroke. Then she put her hand down as her eyes crinkled up in laughter. “I remember when you were teeny and terrified to poop in the potty. I told you it would feed *los pescaditos*, and you got right on board after that. I even made you a little drawing to help you visualize it. Lucrecia told me about that one.”

* * *

A few days after they found James, Detective Kittleson finally managed to get a search warrant for the blue Kia. I was sure it would have taken him even longer, if not for my mom’s repeated phone calls.

They were looking for blood, fingerprints, hair, and fibers. Any evidence that I’d ever been in that car.

My mom was ecstatic. I was hopeful, too. I’d touched the door handle and the inside of the car. Surely, he couldn’t have scrubbed every trace of me from it.

The warrant was served on a Tuesday morning, after he’d left for work.

I fully intended to watch. I wasn’t sure what I’d see or if there was anything that I could do, but where else did I have to be?

The part where they actually served the warrant wasn’t anything like what I’d seen on movies or TV. Detective Kittleson—and a scrubbed-up tech—stood on the porch and knocked politely.

A woman answered the door, flanked by two of the most adorable blond girls I’d ever seen.

When she saw the officers standing on her doorstep, she looked like she had seen a ghost. Which she had. Because I was standing right there. She didn’t know that though.

As Detective Kittleson announced the warrant’s scope: the keys to the

Kia and the Kia itself, I shifted my gaze to the two little girls. Unlike April, they were totally oblivious to the magnitude of what was happening on their front porch. The taller of the two, whose blond bangs stuck up at an angle that made me think she'd just gotten out of bed, hopped from one foot to the other while she tapped on her mom's leg, pointing at the police car in the driveway. The younger girl looked between her mother and older sister, patiently waiting for someone to tell her what was going on.

I was so busy looking at the three of them, that I didn't even notice the fourth person standing a few feet behind them in the hallway until she stepped forward.

She had straight brown hair and wide hazel eyes with the thickest set of eyelashes I'd ever seen. She was wearing a comfy-looking burgundy velvet tracksuit. She appeared to be about the same age as April. Was this a sister? A nanny? From the expression on her face, my first thought was that she looked like she'd seen a ghost too.

And she had.

Because she looked right at me and whispered, "Are you dead?"

28. MEGHAN

SALT LAKE VALLEY, UTAH

NOW

Domanska listened to her hunches.

Which was good. Because that's all I could contribute—aside from making her Weimaraner Joey uneasy when I got too close.

So when the nervous waitress from Gracie's couldn't conclusively identify James Carson in the photo lineup of dark-haired, handsome men in their late twenties, Domanska didn't give up.

She watched patiently while the skinny, blue-eyed woman scanned each photo, then nodded her head vigorously. "That one could be him. I think that one, maybe? I remember he was cute. He also had brown hair. So that guy fits the bill." Then she moved on to the next photo, frowned, and said the same thing.

I yelled at her. I sat on top of the desk with the photos and got right up in her eardrum when she scanned the actual photo of James—which had been plucked from his LinkedIn profile. "That's him. You *talked* to him! Look at it harder. That's the one. Remember."

All it seemed to do was increase her anxiety. By the time she left the police station, she was visibly shaking. There was no way that a judge was going to grant Domanska a warrant based on that ID.

Domanska, however, was unfazed. She thanked the waitress for her time, placed the photos back into a folder, and asked her assistant to find out whether the traffic cameras in Salt Lake and Cedar Fort still had backup footage stored in the system.

When James Carson had moved to Idaho, he'd gotten himself a bus-bench lawyer who ripped Domanska a new one and made a blistering call to her supervisor about harassing his client. She had patiently made a note on his file—but kept it open on her desk.

She wasn't going to let this go.

Which encouraged me to hold on a little longer, too.

When I wasn't peering over Domanska's shoulder at the computer or riding along on calls, I drifted. I spent more and more time with my memories as the days turned into weeks and Domanska worked on other cases. Twenty-six years holds a lot of memories. So there were still plenty of static worlds to explore that allowed me to come back to the land of the living. I savored each one like a rerun of a beloved TV show. But binge-watching memories or TV by yourself gets lonely. I thought about Grandma Rosie—and the others who had passed on—almost constantly.

At first, I stayed at the police station when Domanska went home at night. It never really closed down. There was always something happening. Always somebody waiting for the next bad thing to happen. It was interesting for a while. I saw a lot of things up close that I'd never seen—or wanted to see. A lot of screaming. A lot of crying. A little blood. A lot of phone calls. And a lot of questions with unsettling answers.

I went home with Domanska for the first time the night they got a call from West Valley about an endangered child—and arrested her parents. I didn't want to be in the same building as the quiet, bespeckled man with salt-and-pepper hair who had raped his ten-year-old daughter. Or the mother who knew about it. So when Domanska left for the night in her unmarked cruiser, I got into the passenger seat with her.

I wasn't comfortable staying at her house when she wasn't there. In large part because Joey, the Weimaraner, peed on the carpet then barked until I went outside the one time I tried.

The comfort of going home—to any home—at the end of the day was just enough to keep me going. At the end of every day, we microwaved one of those frozen meal subscription dinners. Then we took Joey for a walk (he tolerated me if Domanska was nearby), came back home, and watched an episode of *Parks and Recreation*. Sometimes Domanska's daughter dropped by with dinner, and we all went for a walk and ate dinner together.

I thought about my parents a lot. About whether I should have spent my last days haunting them, instead of Domanska and the Salt Lake City police department. I missed my mom and dad, but knowing that I'd see them again—that they would find me in their memories someday—kept me where I was. Grandma Rosie had made it clear that once I made the decision to cross over into that universe of untapped memories, I couldn't come back.

My unfinished business was here. And after months of being alone with my own bones in the mountain, Domanska's place felt like a home of sorts.

* * *

After a few months had passed, I finally won Joey over. When I sat down next to Domanska to watch *Parks and Rec*, he sometimes sat on my side of the couch, snuggling against the pillow and wedging me into the crack between the cushions. I loved it. It was the only thing that still made me feel like I still existed on this side.

The traffic cams had proven useless. And the woman who had called in the tip about James Carson the previous year didn't have anything more than a hunch to offer, either. She knew James's wife from church. She got a bad feeling about him and thought he looked like the photo that had run in the stories about my murder. But that was all. April Carson—James's wife—wasn't talking either. When Domanska called, she said she'd been advised not to answer any questions by her husband's lawyer. So that was the end of that.

All we had left were hunches. But hunches could only take us so far. Domanska kept my file on her desk. She followed every single new tip that trickled in periodically. She didn't know what I knew, though. And I couldn't tell her.

* * *

We were leaving the station for the night when the call came through on the tip line.

I knew it was different when Domanska's assistant Carly ran outside to the parking lot. With all of the previous tips, she'd sent an email with the information to be filed. The caller was still on the line, Carly said, raising an eyebrow and tilting her head toward the station. "I think you should talk to him if you have a second. He's calling about the KTVD article he saw."

I was out of the cruiser and back inside the station before I saw whether Domanska had decided to follow. Carly didn't get excited easily. And the KTVD article, which had been published a couple of days earlier, had already brought in a new trickle of dead-end tips. It happened any time something new was published about my case.

I watched the blinking red light on the phone in the empty room, waiting for Carly and Domanska to catch up to me and take the held call.

It was a 208 number: Idaho.

Domanska got there before Carly. Her expression was impassive, but I knew her well enough by now that she wouldn't have taken the call if she didn't sense the same electricity in Carly's voice that I had.

"Detective Domanska," she said evenly as she picked up the call. I leaned next to the phone and her ear.

The person on the other end of the line cleared his throat. "Um, hi. I'm really sorry to bother you. It's probably nothing. But I figured you're following up on everything. It might be a waste of your time . . ."

"Spit it out, man!" I yelled into the receiver.

Domanska patiently allowed him to finish then prodded, "You're not bothering anyone, and we are definitely following up on all tips. I appreciate the call. Can you tell me what prompted you to call in?"

The caller let out a rush of air. "Oh, okay. Cool. We got KTVD here a couple months ago—you know the buy-and-sell site? You probably know that. But they have articles in the sidebar, and most of them are total clickbait, but the rest are mostly about Utah—I swear I'm getting to the point —" He cleared his throat again nervously, and I imagined myself banging the phone receiver on the desk in frustration.

"Yes, I'm familiar with KTVD," Domanska responded. "You said you saw the article about Meghan?"

"Yes," he replied, sounding relieved. "And I think I've seen that guy before. I—I think maybe he murdered my friend."

I saw Domanska glance at Carly, who was listening in and recording the call on the other side of the room with a headset. She frowned. He was starting to sound crazy.

"Okay. Can you tell me your friend's name? And your name also, if you don't mind?"

There was another sharp intake of breath on the phone.

"Yeah, my name is Ken. And my friend Skye was murdered three months ago."

29. BRECIA

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

Are you dead?

I asked her the question in the same way I sometimes asked Oscar if he was going to kill the mouse or play with it all day: I didn't really expect a response.

I didn't pay much attention to her at first. I was focused on the fact that there was a detective on the front porch. With an actual search warrant for James's car.

Then the young woman standing next to the detective stepped forward and poked her head into the house.

April didn't even glance at her. Neither did the girls.

Oscar did, though. He made that soft, scary noise in the back of his throat that he sometimes made when he saw the neighbor's cat in the front yard. Then he slunk into the kitchen.

I'd thought she was a tech or an assistant. She was young: couldn't be older than twenty. She had chestnut brown skin and curly black hair that dipped past her shoulder blades. She didn't smile at anyone. Instead she darted her wide, hazel eyes around the room as she stepped forward and peered past April at Kimmie and Emma.

For a split second, I bristled. Who did this girl think she was?

Then I watched as she brushed past April's arm.

She scattered. Like I did.

When I spoke to her, she snapped her gaze toward me.

The lights in the living room flickered as the cocktail of shock, excitement, and horror hit me at once.

"Oh my god," she whispered as she looked at me with an intensity I hadn't experienced while dead or alive. "You're ..." She trailed off. There was no question anymore.

I almost missed the fact that April was leading the male detective into the living room to retrieve the keys to the Kia.

“Come on,” I told the girl with the black hair. “I’m not missing this.”

* * *

Skye and I sat in the backseat of the Kia while the detectives towed the car to the station.

We discovered we had a lot to talk about.

April stood in the driveway with Kimmie and Emma as we pulled away, her face a mask of dread and fear. Maybe I was imagining it, but I thought I saw a trace of something else: doubt.

After the detective from Utah had called a couple of months earlier, James had less-than-patiently explained to April that he was the target of a witch hunt. And it was April’s fault. The woman in their old congregation in Utah—the one who had sent April those texts and called the police when she saw the similarity between James and the photo in the news—had opened this can of worms. April hadn’t done shit about it. She hadn’t even shown him the text messages until he “stumbled” across them while looking for a photo on her phone.

So they had to hire a lawyer they couldn’t really afford.

I knew they could afford it. Easily. April didn’t, though. She had almost nothing to do with the finances. He transferred a few hundred dollars into a checking account she used for groceries and the occasional outfit when the girls needed new clothes. That was it. So when the detective from Utah had called her cell a few days after she called James, April stayed on the phone for less than thirty seconds. Just long enough to repeat the line she’d been instructed to deliver about all questions going through their lawyer. But afterward, while Emma was at school and Kimmie was taking a nap, she opened an incognito browser and searched for “Meghan Campbell murder.” She read every article. She scrutinized the photo of him up close. She shook her head as if exasperated with herself for even entertaining the idea that her husband—her James—could be involved in anything like that. Then she shut the browser and went to pick Emma up from school.

I told Skye all of this as we sat in the towed Kia at the impound lot, waiting for it to be processed that evening. I told her what he had done to me

two years earlier. And she told me what he had done to her two months earlier.

He had killed her while I was at home with his wife and kids, pretending that maybe he had stopped because he wasn't using MatchStrike anymore. Pretending like April was.

"I'm so sorry," I told her in the dark car. There were no tears. I didn't have those anymore, and neither did she. But the electric weight of the sadness in the car reached even the lone streetlight at the corner of the impound lot that had just blinked on in the storm rolling over the hills. "I tried so hard to stop him. I followed him everywhere. Like his shadow. In the end, I couldn't do anything to stop it from happening. There was another woman: Meghan. Before you. I was there when he did it ... I stopped following him after that."

Her eyes looked like deep pools in the dark Kia. She nodded. "It's not your fault, you know. It's nobody's fault. Just his."

* * *

The car was pretty clean. There was no blood. No hair. No fibers of significant interest.

There was, however, a fingerprint. Just one that didn't match with April, the girls, or James himself. It was on the front passenger side of the vehicle, where the seat connected to the base of the car.

Skye and I looked at each other. Both of us knew that it could mean anything. That justice wasn't guaranteed. That sometimes bad people got away with doing bad things and never paid the price. After all, he'd gotten away with my murder for years now. He'd gotten away with Skye's murder for months. He'd gotten away with all of it.

There was a very small chance that the fingerprint was hers. Zero chance it was mine. The only time I'd been in his car was as a ghost. Most likely, it was from one of the many other women he'd met up with on MatchStrike. The ones he had wowed and terrified and annoyed—but not murdered.

So we didn't grin at each other the way I might have before. Skye just followed the tech to the lab while I stayed with Detective Kittleson.

Because a small chance was still a chance. And small chances were all

we had left.

30. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

The tech said it would take about two hours to run the fingerprint they'd found in his car.

I sort of expected them to be able to pop it into a computer. That we'd know immediately whether or not it was a match. But as I watched the tech carefully prepare and clean up the image she had digitized, I was impressed it was only going to take two hours. The fingerprint card, up close, was a dense maze of ridges, furrows, and channels. And on the other side of that maze was—maybe—the key to an arrest.

The tech was young—not much older than me. Probably just a few years out of college. Her dark hair was tucked into a neat braid, and her brown eyes darted back and forth across the print slide with a focused determination. When someone knocked on the lab door, she ignored it.

She was amazing.

When my mom gently asked about what I might major in, I'd said “maybe science?” But I'd actually given the idea quite a bit of thought. I had loved my chemistry and biology classes. The idea of spending my days in a lab with samples and slides— instead of trying to make sales or manage people or participate in “team-building” activities—appealed to every part of my introverted brain. Maybe, if things had turned out differently, this could have been me.

As I watched the tech work, my mind drifted back to everything Brecia had told me. She'd been living with him for two years.

When the tech was finished digitizing and cleaning the print, she quickly uploaded it to something called AFIS—a fingerprinting database.

She frowned and tucked a piece of hair back into her braid as the algorithm scanned through millions of prints and the little blinking bar at the top of the screen announced its progress.

I expected this part to take a while too; however, once the print was in the system, the progress bar speedily moved from zero to one hundred percent in a matter of minutes. The search was over before I knew it.

There was no match.

The tech made a note of the results and strode out of the room. I knew where she was going. Because there was still a chance it was my fingerprint.

My fingerprints hadn't been on file before I died. And the one's they'd taken from my body had to be cleaned up substantially to account for decomposition.

Another tech was cleaning up my post-mortem fingerprints, accounting for the decay and degradation. If it was my fingerprint on the car, we weren't going to get a perfect match. But we'd get close.

I tried not to hope as I watched the analyst compare the two prints an hour later.

But when she overlaid the images, even I could see that they weren't the same.

The light flickered in the office as the disappointment hit hard.

It wasn't my fingerprint. It could be anybody's fingerprint, since whoever it belonged to wasn't in the system.

I walked down the hall toward Kittleson's office in a numb haze. I'd been there with my mom enough times that I knew the way. I wasn't particularly fond of him as a detective. He made a lot of big promises and reassurances then took a long time to follow through. He should have had my post-mortem prints finished long before now. But even I could tell that he didn't really think he had a case against James Carson. Or anyone else.

So I was pretty sure that this was the dead end that would turn the case truly cold for him. It had never been all that hot.

Brecia was sitting in the office chair, talking to Detective Kittleson when I walked in. He wasn't responding, of course. He was on the phone with my mom, letting her know that the fingerprint wasn't a match to me. He sounded curt and annoyed.

"Watch your tone," Brecia growled as Kittleson sighed loudly then told my mom that he would—like he had already promised—tell her if there were any new developments. The car had already been processed. This had been their best lead. It would be released from impound tomorrow.

I sat down next to Brecia. She clearly already knew about the print

results. “He’s kind of a prick,” she told me, then flashed Kittleson the finger. “What do you want to do now? Are you ... are you going to go back to your mom’s house?”

She said it like it was a casual question. But there was no way to hide the undercurrent of sadness that accompanied the words. She’d been alone for a long time.

I hadn’t been a ghost for nearly as long as Brecia had, but I couldn’t imagine walking away from the one person who could see me. The first person in months who could hear me talk—and talk back to me. The one other person who really understood what had happened to me.

No matter how much I loved my mom and wanted to stay near her, she couldn’t see me anymore. And that was the loneliest thing I’d ever felt, alive or dead.

“No,” I whispered. “Can I stay with you?”

Brecia smiled and nodded, and the current shifted to relief. She pointed at Kittleson, who was scowling at an email he’d just received. “Should we shut it down?” she asked.

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

Her eyes went wide. “Watch.” She closed her eyes, and suddenly the air was electric with rage.

Kittleson’s computer screen went black. He swore under his breath and rapidly pressed the on/off button.

Brecia smiled, and the angry electricity fizzled. “Cool, right?”

By the time he managed to get the computer booted back up, his face was red with frustration. “Piece of crap,” he muttered under his breath.

As the password lock screen finally flickered back to life, the phone on the desk rang.

He glanced between the computer and the phone.

“Answer it!” Brecia instructed, sliding across the desk until she was right in his face. Then burying her face in his ear.

I flinched. I knew he couldn’t see her, but it looked awkward as all hell. “Does that really work?”

“Sometimes.” Brecia sat back on the desk as Kittleson walked out of the office without answering the phone. Her expression darkened. “Not always.”

I scooted in with her, to listen to the message in the empty room.

The blinking red light flashed as a woman's voice responded to the recorded prompt.

“Detective Kittleson? I hear you have James Carson's car impounded. This is Detective Domanska, in Salt Lake City, Utah. I need you to call me back as soon as possible.”

31. MEGHAN

SALT LAKE VALLEY, UTAH

NOW

By the time the detective from Idaho called Domanska back, it was nearly dinner time. She'd given him her cell—which rang right as we were about to walk out the door with Joey.

I'd never seen Domanska lose her cool before. Not with the eggheaded waitress from Gracie's. Not even with James Carson himself when she'd questioned him face to face.

But when she heard that Detective Kittleson had released James Carson's car out of impound—before even calling her back to report on the fingerprint he'd found—she ripped him a new one.

He tersely agreed to make sure my fingerprint was run in the lab that night.

When he muttered something about overtime and staff shortages, Domanska blew up at him again.

Kittleson hung up without saying goodbye, and all of us—including Joey—made a beeline back to the office to send over the file with my fingerprints.

32. BRECIA

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

When James picked the car up from impound, the air felt like a powder keg.

Kittleson still hadn't returned Domanska's message. He was busy with two new cases: the suspicious death of a blue-eyed, blond-haired toddler that had been making front-page headlines for a week straight, and an officer-involved shooting that was sending shockwaves through the community.

When he saw the blinking red light on his phone, he listened to it—and made a note to call her back—then busied himself with another case that had been assigned to him that morning.

We shut down his computer twice that afternoon. It only made him take an early lunch. And then, because neither of us could stand to look at him anymore, Skye and I caught a ride with an officer and waited at the impound lot.

When James arrived at the impound lot to pick up the car, he looked different since I'd last seen him. Less at ease. Less interested in pretenses. On high alert.

April had driven him there. Kimmie and Emma were with her. None of them got out of the car.

James didn't know what detectives knew—or rather what they *didn't* know—but he knew the net was closing.

Skye and I looked at each other as James put the keys in the ignition. We both felt the pull to follow the officer back to the station. But there was something in James's eyes that told me I should jump into the back of his car.

Skye wavered at the threshold of the police station. She saw it too. "I'm going with James, okay?" she said hesitantly. "If somebody needs to mess with Kittleson's computer, I'm not sure I can do it."

I didn't want to leave her. Not now. She was right: Someone needed to

follow James. I nodded. “If anything happens, get back to the station as fast as you can, okay? You know the way back there?”

She nodded. Then she jumped into the back of the Kia as he pulled out of the parking lot, behind April and the girls.

33. MEGHAN

SALT LAKE VALLEY, UTAH

NOW

My fingerprint was a ninety-eight percent match.

When we got the news, Domanska's office turned into a hive of activity.

The warrant for his arrest by the state of Utah was secured in less than two hours. Domanska's assistant arranged for an agency assist from Officer Kittleson in Idaho to make the arrest.

Early the next morning, I was riding shotgun on the way to Idaho to find him—which wasn't going to be as easy as it should have been, since the car had already been released out of impound.

Detective Kittleson insisted they'd let him walk out of the impound lot because they had nothing concrete to hold him in Idaho. No evidence to connect him to the murder that had prompted Ken to call in after seeing that KTVD article.

Not yet.

But now that we had physical evidence that I'd been in his car, we could get a warrant to search his house. His computer. His online activities.

Which meant they were finally going to find not just James Carson but Jimmy Carlson—and whoever else he had been over the years.

34. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

NOW

He tailgated his own wife and kids all the way home, cursing under his breath about how stupid April was. How this was her fault.

I stared at him in disbelief, wondering how I'd ever gotten into the car with him all those months ago. How I'd ever thought he was handsome, or worth two seconds of my thoughts. He darted his eyes back and forth from the tail lights of the minivan to the rearview mirror, and I wondered if he was waiting for the police to suddenly show up behind him with flashing lights.

I hoped they would. But I wasn't holding my breath—so to speak—anymore.

The clock in the car showed that it was almost 10:00 a.m. I wasn't sure how old his girls were, but it seemed like they should be in school.

Suddenly, he grabbed a cell phone that had been lying next to me in the passenger seat. I flinched as his hand fumbled around on the seat. The car radio made a little blip, and I wondered if I'd done it.

He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket then dialed the phone number, slamming on the brakes to keep from plowing into the back of his own minivan. I watched April's wide eyes flick to the rearview mirror. I could only imagine what she was thinking right now. Part of me sympathized with her. She was married to a murderer. And she had no idea.

Another part of me was angry with her. And still another part hated her. Because how could she not know? From what Brecia had told me, she'd looked up the article that had run in Utah about the murder he'd committed there.

I thought back to the months before my parents' divorce. The screaming. The crying. The bad vibes. The pre-emptive, "You know that when Daddy and I fight, it's not your fault, right, Skyebird?" heart-to-hearts. But even after all that, when they finally sat my third-grade self down at the

table and told me my dad was moving away, I refused to believe it was real. I didn't want it to happen. So it wasn't happening.

Still, I'd been in third grade.

I leaned closer as the call picked up and a woman answered the phone. "This is Marjorie."

Her voice sounded old—and suspicious.

"It's James," he said flatly.

Her suspicion melted into surprise. "James? My goodness, I didn't recognize your number. It's wonderful to hear from you. It's been such a long time. I didn't think I'd hear—"

He didn't match her tone when he cut her off. "We need to come stay at the cabin."

The radio blipped again as what he had said hit me. I missed Marjorie's response as I frantically looked back at the city behind us, where the police station—and Brecia—had long since disappeared from view.

He was going to run.

I couldn't panic. I had to focus. I had to listen. Marjorie sounded slightly confused but mostly pleased when she responded. "The cabin? Oh yes. Yes, wonderful memories there. It's been so long. When do you want to visit? I'll check my calendar."

He rolled his eyes and hit the brakes hard again as April stopped for a red light. "Wonderful memories?" He laughed bitterly but didn't elaborate. "April and I need to get out of town. I don't have time to explain, but I need you to keep quiet about it—and this phone call—if anyone asks. Can you do that? I damn well kept quiet all those years. Now it's your turn to return the favor."

Marjorie was silent on the other end of the line. I could feel the disgust and irritation coming off him in waves. Who was this woman? And what did he mean about keeping quiet?

James floored the gas as the light changed and April continued through the intersection. The neighborhoods were starting to look familiar. If I remembered correctly, we were almost back to his house.

"All right," Marjorie finally responded flatly. She didn't sound happy anymore. "It's dusty out there, though. Do you remember where we kept the key?"

"I remember," he replied in a clipped voice. "It was my cabin before it

was yours.”

There was a long pause. Then, “All right then. Glad you remember.”

“I remember everything,” he spat.

As he ended the call, I slipped through the car’s air vents and hightailed it back toward the station as fast as I could go.

35. MEGHAN

BOISE, IDAHO

NOW

Domanska didn't even stop for a bathroom break. We left just before the sun had broken the horizon and made the drive from Salt Lake to Boise in five hours flat.

When we pulled into the station, I expected to be met by a flurry of momentum that matched the no-pee-breaks-energy in the car. But even after Domanska had returned from the bathroom in the station, Kittleson kept us waiting.

I did what Domanska couldn't and wandered through the building until I found him—talking with another detective outside his open office door about another case.

“Get out here, and let's go arrest his ass!” I called. Today was finally the day we brought him in. The day he finally faced the music for what he'd done to me and god-knew how many other women.

That was the moment a woman poked her head around the corner of the office door.

She was wearing fuzzy pink slippers and the comfiest-looking purple pajamas I'd ever seen.

She looked right at me.

But my surprise that she could obviously see—and hear—me turned to total shock when she whispered, “Oh my god. Meghan.”

I took a step back, and the expression on her face crumpled. “I'm so sorry,” she said, and the fluorescent lights in the hallway outside of Kittleson's office flickered wildly.

I shook my head, trying to take it all in. “What? Hold on, you can see me?” Was she some kind of psychic? Did that also explain the pajamas somehow?

She nodded. “I'm Brecia. And I'm so sorry. I tried to stop him that

night. I wanted to come after you, but you were moving so fast, and I didn't want to let him go . . .”

The lights flickered around us again, and suddenly I understood. I remembered the sound of the woman's voice as I ran through the trees and down the embankment, thinking I was escaping.

She'd been there that night too. Because he'd gotten to her first.

I stared at her in disbelief. She flinched at my gaze, as if I might be gearing up to scream at her.

Instead, without really thinking about it, I brushed past Kittleson—who was still yammering on about something that didn't sound very important at all—and leaned in to give her a hug.

When I did, I learned the answer to every question that had crossed my mind in the past thirty seconds—and every question I might possibly ask in the future about Breca. As our arms touched and we embraced, I saw with crystal clarity everything she so badly wanted me to know about her own murder. About what she'd tried to do the night I died. And about what she'd done afterward. Everything words couldn't ever have summed up no matter how hard we'd tried.

When we stepped apart, I could see that the same had happened for her. That she understood what I desperately wanted her to know, too. Where I'd been all this time. What it meant that I knew she'd tried to save me, even if it hadn't worked out. Everything I wanted to say.

The fluorescent light overhead finally popped, and Kittleson cursed. “Damn it,” he muttered. His phone was ringing yet again—like it had been ever since Domanska arrived. He finally hurried into his office to answer it.

That was when another voice—frantic and shrill—became audible above the sound of the phone.

Breca and I turned at the same time to see a young Latina woman with curly black hair flying down the hall toward us.

“He's running!” she cried.

And from the way she brushed past desks and around doorways, I knew that she was dead too.

36. BRECIA

KUNA, IDAHO

Meghan, Skye, and I left the police station just as Domanska had—finally—begun to coordinate with Kittleson’s Boise agents, who would be assisting with the arrest.

Meghan hung back at first, not wanting to leave Domanska—and clearly not wanting to see him again.

But there was no time to debate. In the end, Meghan came with us. Domanska had things covered. She’d be right behind us. And if we were somehow going to stall him, we needed all hands on deck.

We couldn’t fly. Not in the way I would have imagined, anyway. But we ran like champions, the city a blur of color around us as we cut across busy streets without stopping for traffic and through the slats in fenced yards. If I had to guess, we ran about five miles. There was no real way for me to measure time anymore, of course, but before I knew it, we were standing in his front yard.

As if on cue, the garage door opened when we reached the driveway.

The minivan was already running, with April and the girls buckled inside. James Carson was putting a suitcase into a trunk that was already full of loose belongings.

I knew by now this wasn’t his usual style. James was neat. He was organized. He was methodical. If the van looked like this, he was leaving sooner rather than later.

The three of us looked at one another. We were so close.

I could feel it in every part of me. And so, apparently, could he.

“Maybe we can stop him,” I tried. I’d never had much luck messing with cars. But maybe with Meghan and Skye here, we’d be able to blow something.

It was worth a shot.

I let the panic expand, scrambling to find the cumulative fury and fear of the past two years. Sometimes it felt like the well was running dry. It was

getting harder and harder to harness that raw emotion that had been so easy to access in the first weeks and months.

But I could feel the energy coming off Skye—and Meghan too—in waves that made the air around us crackle with electricity.

Skye's eyes were shut tight, her dark curls falling forward as she held her hands out in front of her.

Meghan stared straight ahead, hugging herself hard as she stood at the bumper of the van, turning herself into a mini transformer.

It was all weirdly beautiful. I focused my attention back on him, so I wouldn't dilute the weak current I'd managed to tap into.

James hopped into the driver's seat, oblivious to the fact that both of his tail lights—and probably the headlights too—had suddenly just popped.

Since I wasn't much help, I dove into the minivan, sandwiching myself into the gap between the front seats. April's face was pale. She was looking at the black screen of her phone, pressing the home button again and again to show the time.

I pulled myself to her in a sort of desperate hug. "Get out of the car, April! Call the police. Get the girls away from him. You *know* what he did. He's not running because he's been wrongly accused. He's running because he's guilty."

April turned the phone over on her lap as James got in the driver's side. He looked at the phone sharply. "You can't fucking bring that. Did you not hear anything I told you? Leave it in the house. They'll trace it."

When April didn't move, he snatched it out of her hands and jumped out of the car again. Emma started to whimper in the backseat, and April snapped out of her daze, turning around to comfort the girls. "Everything's okay. Daddy is just having a hard day. We're going to sort everything out and have a fun adventure too."

When James got back into the van, he shifted into reverse and started backing down the driveway.

The lights were shot. But the engine was fine. The car was drivable.

I looked back helplessly at Meghan and Skye, still standing outside the van.

There was nothing left we could do.

As James backed the van down the driveway, first Meghan then Skye slipped through the passenger side door.

Domanska wasn't going to get here in time.

37. SKYE

CASCADE, IDAHO

Aside from the *Sesame Street* soundtrack that April put on for the girls, the van stayed mostly silent for the first half hour on the road.

Brecia, Meghan, and I hadn't said much either. From what he'd said on the phone earlier, we were headed to Cascade—about a two-hour drive. But we didn't talk about that much. Instead, we stayed quiet, waiting for the moment we'd finally hear sirens in the background.

By now, they had to know he'd made a run for it.

James was clearly thinking the same thing, by the number of times he glanced in the rearview mirror. He drove exactly the speed limit, keeping a white-knuckled grip on ten-and-two.

It was only after Kimmie and Emma nodded off to the sound of Cookie Monster jamming out about healthy food that April finally spoke up.

She turned to look back at the car seats, where the girls were sleeping—and where Meghan sat between them, looking out the window at the hills that were giving way to tall lodgepole pines.

April's eyes wandered over the boxes of canned food, camping supplies, and suitcases that had been tucked into every bit of floorspace in the van. Then she whispered, "Will you at least tell me what the detective said to you when you picked up the Kia? If you're innocent—" She caught herself, then started again. "Since you're innocent, why can't we just talk to them? Make them understand you never even met that girl. Why do we have to—" She gestured behind her at the packed minivan. "I feel like I'm in *The Fugitive* right now." She cracked a tentative smile, but it faltered when he didn't smile back.

I heard Brecia sigh in frustration from the back of the van, where she had tucked herself against a pile of sleeping bags. "He's not Richard Kimball, April. He's the one-armed man."

James—I still thought of him as James, even though I knew that person had never existed—narrowed his eyes slightly and didn't respond.

April shook her head. “I mean, they gave us the Kia back. They wouldn’t have done that if they’d found something, right?” It was impossible to hide the desperation in her voice.

He pursed his lips and kept his eyes on the road. “That lady detective in Utah has wanted to pin this on me ever since your BFF *Nina*,”—he spat out the name like it was a bad word—“got so bored with her life she decided to ruin mine.” He cut his eyes toward April. “And now yours, too,” he added in a tight-lipped singsong.

April clutched the seatbelt with one hand as he braked for a tree branch that had fallen into the one-lane road. We’d turned off the paved highway a few miles back and onto a narrow dirt road. We hadn’t passed another car since. The treeline around us was getting thicker as we climbed in elevation. I’d been through Cascade once when I was ten, when my mom took me camping in Ponderosa. I had no idea there were cabins on this part of the mountain.

April tried again. “Did you tell your lawyer we were leaving town? How long are we going to be staying? If Emma misses more than a few days of kindergarten, I’m going to have to give the school a doctor’s note, or she’ll be truant.”

He glared at the road. “Can you shut up, please?”

April looked like she’d been slapped. She was quiet for a few seconds. Then she softly asked, “Is there anything you’re not telling me?”

He ignored her. After a few minutes, she took a deep breath and tried again. “The last time Marjorie tried to get in touch—after your dad died—you told her that if she ever called the house again, you’d get a restraining order. You didn’t even go to the funeral. And now we’re going to stay at her cabin?”

His jaw twitched, but he stayed silent. April kept going in a halting voice. “I’ve never pushed you to talk about her, because I know how you get when her name comes up, but I always wondered if she might have ...” She trailed off and studied him apprehensively. Finally she whispered, “... had something to do with your scars.”

He stared straight ahead, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

“Please talk to me,” April choked out. “I’m scared.”

He took one hand off the steering wheel. For a second, I thought he was going to hit her. She must have wondered the same thing, because she

recoiled against the passenger seat.

He sent her a withering look, as if he couldn't believe how dramatic she was being, then snatched a bottle of water from the cupholder, letting go of the wheel with both hands to open it.

"Is he going to hurt them?" Meghan suddenly asked in a small voice from behind me. She had turned away from the window and was watching Kimmie while she slept, fuzzy purple blankie in hand.

Brecia slid down from the pile of sleeping bags and squeezed into the space on the other side of Emma's car seat. "I don't think so. He brought all their stuff."

"So April would go with him," Meghan responded listlessly. "He didn't buy me drinks because he wanted me to enjoy them." She closed her eyes, and I noticed the same reflective shimmer I sometimes saw in myself when I looked in the mirror. "We shouldn't have come," she whispered. "Whatever's going to happen, I don't want to see it."

* * *

The sun was shining brightly, blazing noon by the time we reached the overgrown dirt driveway that led to the cabin.

There had been no sirens. There had been no other cars on the road.

He'd made it.

The girls woke up when the minivan came to a stop, and April put on her happy mommy mask. While James searched for the key then dragged suitcases and bags into the old cabin, she played pinecone soccer with the girls under the big pines in the front yard.

I followed him inside the cabin while Brecia and Meghan hung back. It was a tiny two-bedroom log structure that looked like it had been furnished in the 70s. Orange shag carpet, dusty yellow lamps, and lime green Formica countertops. It was pretty clear that nobody had been to visit for a very long time. When James turned on the tap, the water was rust red at first.

It looked a little like blood.

38. MEGHAN

CASCADE, IDAHO

When Domanska had finally brought me back to civilization after months on that damn mountain where he'd dumped my body, I never would have imagined that fate would lead me back into the wilderness—with him and his wife and kids, no less.

It was a real trip, let me tell you.

Even in the hours and days after my own murder, as I watched my bones get picked apart by the birds and the coyotes, I didn't feel anxiety like this.

I already knew I wasn't going to stick around if he did something to them. If things went south—more south than they already had, that is—I didn't want to watch. I was going to find Bubbie and disappear for good.

I sat down beside Brecia on a fallen log. "I can't believe you've been following him this long. I feel so helpless. How did you stand it?"

A few feet away, Emma brandished a moss-covered stick at a hornet then ran squealing back to April when it gave chase. Kimmie shrieked and burst into tears as the hornet approached, still clutching her purple blankie.

Brecia shook her head as Skye walked out of the cabin toward us. "I didn't. I gave up."

"So why didn't you leave?" I asked. "Like, for good."

Brecia gave me a look. "I didn't know that was an option."

I glanced between her and Skye, who looked equally confused. They didn't know.

Skye lay down on the carpet of pine needles then closed her eyes. "Tell us your magic, Meghan."

So I told them about the challah and the memory of Bubbie that promised to blossom into a million more memories as soon as I was ready. People I'd never met, places I'd never seen, an expanding universe of connected consciousnesses. I felt a little like a preacher extolling heaven as I watched Brecia's expression shift from disbelief to astonishment.

“I had no idea,” she whispered. “If I did, I don’t think I would have stayed.”

“I almost didn’t, a few times.”

Skye sat up. “I don’t really know anybody else who’s died. I doubt anyone’s anxiously waiting to show me around the other side. My grandparents are all still alive. I can’t think of anyone.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Except maybe my gym teacher from middle school. He died of cancer last summer. I doubt he’s all that excited to see me. I always pretended to have my period to get out of whatever we were doing.”

I felt her sadness seep into the air around us. With her skinny frame and big, dark eyes she looked even younger than eighteen. She’d be the one waiting to greet her loved ones when they found her in their memories. “You said you were headed to college at Idaho State, right? Where you didn’t know anybody?”

Skye shrugged. “Yeah. Maybe it’ll be like that.”

I reached for her hand and felt her sadness like it was my own. “Except you’ll be meeting your family. The people who raised your grandparents. And the people who raised them, all the way back. Even though you don’t know them yet, they’re gonna claim you.”

She looked thoughtful. “I always meant to do one of those 23andMe kits. My mom tried to get into family history once. Just once, after she saw a commercial. She got all excited and wanted to know if we had, like, Aztec royalty in our blood. It didn’t last very long. The line stopped hard at my great, great grandparents in El Salvador during the civil war.” She closed her eyes and lay back in the pine boughs again.

Brecia and I lay down beside her. “They’re going to be so happy to meet you,” I said. “And when your mom gets there and finds you waiting, I bet you’re going to introduce her to royalty after all.”

Skye smiled. “Yeah. I bet you’re right.”

The delicate leaves of hope pushing up through the thick sadness curled back in an instant as James suddenly came barreling out of the house.

“Where’s the black backpack?” he barked. “I swear to god if you didn’t bring it—”

Kimmie went silent, and Emma instinctively reached for April’s hand. April tilted her head a little and marched over to the van, where she grabbed a big black backpack that had been shoved under the passenger seats. As she

handed it to him, she hissed, “It’s right here. Don’t talk to me like that in front of the girls. You’re scaring them.”

“She’s all bite when it comes to them,” Brecia mumbled. “Come on, let’s go see what’s in the damn backpack.”

39. BRECIA

CASCADE, IDAHO

The backpack was loaded with survival tools—and wads of cash. The exterior looked familiar, and when I searched my memories I found it on the top shelf of the hall closet, next to a pile of random-looking camping supplies and an enormous bucket packed full of Mountain Meals.

I hadn't paid much attention to it until one of April's church friends—a "visiting teacher" who was assigned to deliver a monthly inspiring message—brought over a plate of blondies and read a passage about "food storage." April had proudly showed her the closet with the backpack, camping supplies, and Mountain Meals. "I'm not perfect at anything else, but I'm pretty darn perfect at emergency preparedness," April had said with a grin.

The visiting teacher had oohed and ahed while April told her all about the wide variety of survival tools and shelter items in her collection. They had six months' worth of food in those buckets, she said. Supplemented with a few fresh items, they could last a year in any number of emergencies.

The three of us watched as he counted the bundles of cash and laid out a knife, a small ax, a handful of lighters, several types of rope, matches, rain ponchos, mess kits, batteries, flashlights, a crank radio, can opener, water purifier, and a few other things I didn't even recognize. The backpack was like a clown car of survival supplies.

"Holy shit," Skye whispered. "Why does he have all this stuff ready to go?"

I sighed. "This was all April. I don't think this is what she imagined it being used for. I think it's part of their religion. Emergency preparedness."

"Looks like he's got the prepping down," Meghan said drily. "Just needs a little work on 'thou shalt not kill.'"

* * *

When April finally brought the girls inside the cabin as the sun started to dip below the horizon, the cabin felt almost cozy. The girls helped her light a fire

in the creaky potbelly stove, and they took turns tossing twigs into the open door as the flames licked at the big chunks of firewood they'd taken from the impressive pile under a tarp outside.

With no sirens and no indication that anyone had a clue where he'd gone, James had finally relaxed. He'd apologized to April for the blowup over the backpack—and the car ride. And the chaos that morning. He even took the initiative to make up one of the Mountain Meals for dinner on the ancient electric stove. Beef Stroganoff.

The apologies didn't faze me. I'd been watching him do this dance for two years now. But Meghan and Skye both retreated outside, disgusted. How could April believe him? Why couldn't she see through him? How was she going along with this plan?

I stayed at the table next to the girls, while they ate their dinner, got ready for bed, and said their prayers. *Please bless Mommy and Daddy and Oscar and the bee on the pinecone even though he scared Kimmie.*

April recited the story of *The Fox and the Hound* from memory as they snuggled into a sagging full bed, covered with a shoddily constructed quilt. The teddy bears on the quilt squares hadn't been matched up, so they had been sewn into Frankenstein versions of themselves at the edges. Arms and legs poking out of heads, four pairs of legs, and so on. The girls didn't seem to notice.

"Mommy, Oscar misses us," Emma said matter-of-factly as April finished telling the story and leaned in for hugs.

April turned on her "Everything is okay" smile and smoothed down Emma's hair. "I bet he does, sweetie. Kitties aren't like people, though. He'll be happy to see us when we get back. For now he'll stay busy and happy hunting mice. We left him lots of food, and he can always drink from the creek in the neighbor's yard."

The girl's hadn't asked about Oscar's survival situation. It seemed like April was trying to soothe her own worries as much as Emma's. Emma seemed satisfied though, and I was glad to know that Oscar was okay too.

* * *

I sort of hoped April would try for another conversation with James after the girls went to bed. But I could see on her face that she didn't have much left. I

understood.

Skye and Meghan wandered in as she washed her face, brushed her teeth, and crawled into the queen bed in the other tiny bedroom. The checked blue quilt wasn't as bad as the teddy bear monstrosity, but the bed was just as old and creaky.

April lay in bed for a few minutes, staring at the ceiling. Then she got out from under the covers to kneel by her bedside. I knew this routine well and knelt beside her. Sometimes I tried to talk to her while she said her prayers. I had this theory that maybe, while she was trying hard to clear her head and listen, she'd hear me too.

"You need to get the girls out of here," I told her, leaning in close to repeat everything I'd said earlier in the car.

Meghan and Skye watched silently. April closed her eyes harder, focusing.

Skye suddenly asked, "Have you tried talking to her while she's asleep?"

I frowned. "No, why?"

Skye shrugged. "When I made it home—the first night—my mom was already asleep. I talked to her. Got right next to her in bed. She woke up screaming. I wasn't sure if I did it or not, but I didn't try again. It was intense."

Meghan looked at her in awe. "That's brilliant. Let's try."

* * *

While we waited for April to fall solidly asleep, we stayed up with James. In the dark, in the glow of the potbelly stove in the corner of the room, the room felt almost cozy.

Almost.

He took inventory of the survival tools, freeze-dried meals, and firewood yet again. He wrote the numbers down on the back of a receipt that he'd found in the black backpack.

There were one hundred and eighty meals. Each of them served two people. He wrote down 180 days. Then he frowned, tapping his pen on the receipt in front of him.

He turned over the receipt to look at the date. It was from eight years

earlier. He swore softly. "You had one job," he muttered, cutting his eyes toward the closed bedroom door where April was sleeping.

"What's wrong?" Meghan asked anxiously. "Why is he suddenly upset again?"

I shook my head. "It's not actually that much food. I think they made the emergency kit before the girls were born. If they all ate three meals a day, it would only last ..." I did a quick calculation. "Thirty days. Not six months."

He flicked the pen back and forth in his hand, staring at the bedroom door.

"Talk, you piece of shit," Skye spat, right in his ear.

He didn't flinch. And he didn't talk. Instead, he walked over to the pile of camping supplies on the floor near the door and picked up one of the two tarps next to the sleeping bags. He opened it, spreading the tarp wide between his hands, then holding it up to his own body. It reached his chin, and was wider than his arms could stretch. He studied the surface, holding it up to the light. Looking for holes.

"No," Meghan cried. "No. What is he doing?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "It could be anything. Maybe he's going to cover the firewood."

"He's going to kill them," Meghan cried, and the lights in the kitchen flickered wildly.

James looked back at the kitchen light in irritation then turned around to fold up the first tarp and place it back on the pile. We all watched in horror as he picked up the second, larger tarp. He did the same thing he'd done with the first.

"You said he's never hurt them before, right?" Skye asked as she and Meghan turned toward me, as if I could reassure them.

I nodded slowly. "Yes. I mean . . ." I trailed off, remembering the times he'd screamed at April and the girls and thrown his phone against the wall. The time Kimmie had hurt her elbow when he'd flung the door open into her as she tried to enter his office. He'd sent her back upstairs without so much as an apology. There were times April cringed away from him so hard that I knew she was bracing for the verbal blows to land on her skin at some point. Maybe they already had. I hadn't seen everything.

He walked out the cabin door, and we scrambled to follow.

He didn't go far. Just the side of the house, where a shovel leaned against the woodpile. He picked it up and tested the heft of it. Then, seemingly satisfied, he set it back against the woodpile and went back inside.

Meghan sank to the living room floor. In front of us James was brushing his teeth in the kitchen sink. "He's going to kill them," she repeated again.

Skye sat down beside her. "Maybe. But he hasn't yet. So come on. We're going to talk to April." She grabbed Meghan by the hand, and I watched as first surprise then a flood of other emotions—compassion, sadness, horror—played across her features. "Come on, sis. I feel that. And I'm with you. Stay with us, okay?"

Meghan shook her head but followed Skye to the back bedroom, still holding her hand.

40. SKYE

CASCADE, IDAHO

I didn't expect it to work—even though it was my idea.

Brecia did the talking. She knew April and the girls best. And neither Meghan nor I were going to fight her for the pleasure. She had to lie right between April and James—who had stripped off his jeans and crawled into bed twenty minutes earlier.

I knew Meghan was right. He might have dragged his wife and kids here in a panic; after all, they were his family. Even psychopaths held some things dear, right? Even so, my cynicism reminded me that leaving them behind at the house in Boise would have been a liability. April knew him better than anybody else. Which wasn't saying much.

If I was judging the way he was calculating the balance of resources and risks, April and the girls were quickly becoming liabilities here, too. I didn't know how soon he planned to act. Or what he planned to do. All three of us had seen what he was capable of, even when he wasn't cornered; however, unlike Brecia, I'd never imagined myself capable of stopping him. He'd done what he did to me. And he'd keep on doing it.

All we had were whispers and flickering lights.

Or that was what I thought, anyway.

Brecia didn't mince her words as she curled up next to April on the quilted, sagging bed and got right up next to her ear.

"When you wake up, you need to find a way to take the girls and get the hell out of here. You can't wait. He's going to kill them. He's going to kill you, too. Just like he killed me." She paused for a second then said, "I'm Brecia, by the way. And I've been following him—and you—for the past two years. Do you remember the nights he came home late from 'work?' The story you read about the girl who was murdered right by your hometown in Utah. The girl police are asking him about. Remember the photo Nina sent you. Do you remember—"

That was as far as she got. April's eyes had been twitching back and

forth the whole time she talked, in the dim light from the little bedroom window. Then, suddenly, she was sitting upright in bed, crying and stumbling out of the covers, flailing to find her phone on the nightstand.

The phone wasn't there. She backed into the corner of the room, staring at James's still form, breathing hard and swiping at her eyes.

"Damn," Meghan whispered, turning toward Brecia and me. "That worked fast."

Brecia was still staring at April. "I can't believe I could have been doing that the whole time. I never thought ..."

I stepped forward and took her hand, just like I'd done with Meghan a few minutes earlier. I knew, even before I touched her hand, that she was headed down a rabbit hole of what ifs. That if she'd somehow figured this out earlier, she could have stopped him.

"No," I told her. "No. Don't carry that. It won't do her any good." I nodded at April, who was carefully shutting the bedroom door behind her and padding into the hallway. "Come on, let's go."

I'd hoped that April would be wrapping the girls up into blankets. That she'd tuck their sleepy little bodies into the minivan, find the keys, and drive until she found the police. That they'd all arrive back here before it was even light outside. Before he knew what was happening.

Instead, she sank to the floor next to their bed, staring at the creepy-ass teddy bears on the quilt in the darkness. Tears were still streaming down her cheeks, glinting silver in the wash of moonlight through the window. She sat on the floor with her hands clasped tight in her lap, shaking her head.

The three of us sat down next to her on the floor. It was impossible to know what she was thinking or how Brecia's words had made their way into her dreams.

I was glad it had been enough to get her out of bed.

I just hoped it was enough to finally wake her up.

41. MEGHAN

CASCADE, IDAHO

Around 4:00 a.m., April finally wiped her eyes, tucked the creepy bear quilt around the girls' shoulders, then climbed back into bed.

I felt my last bright inklings of hope slip away from me, into the darkness beyond the closed bedroom door.

It was just a waiting game now.

Even so, we tried again the next night. And the next night. With about the same results.

Once, after the "dream talking" as Skye had started calling it, April wound up thrashing and screaming so loudly it woke the girls in the other room. James rolled over and shook her roughly to wake her. When she kept whimpering, he pushed her hard enough that she tumbled off the bed in a tangle of sheets and quilt.

As the covers came off the bed in a pile, he swore loudly and stretched out across the bed to snatch them back, ignoring the girls' thin wails from the other room until April slowly picked herself up off the floor, gingerly touching her head.

"You woke them up, you deal with it," he muttered. Then he rolled over and went back to sleep.

As his breathing turned slow and deep, Skye spoke up. "Let's do it to him."

I stared at her, not quite following. "Do what to him?"

"The dream talking thing. The worst nightmare we can come up with."

Brecia shook her head. "*He's* the worst nightmare I can come up with. What scares a fucking narcissist who gets his kicks from killing women?"

Her question hung in the darkness between us for a long moment.

"April," I finally whispered. "And the kids. That they'll see through him and turn him in. That they'll eat all his food and mess up his insane fugitive-on-the-run game."

Skye closed her eyes and nodded. We couldn't send him those

nightmares.

He smiled and murmured something in his sleep, as if being rocked to sleep by the waves of simmering rage building and crashing around him.

* * *

The days ticked by even more slowly than they had when I was alone in the mountains. There wasn't a lot to do. No TVs or tablets to distract the girls. Just a few books and toys that were already in the minivan. And the Mountain Meals, which had been a novelty at first, were getting old fast—even at two meals a day. Everyone had the runs, which meant that the one tiny bathroom with the door that didn't fully close was in constant use.

It would have been sort of funny if it weren't so awful.

James stayed in the cabin most of the time, increasingly irritable. He snapped at the girls whenever they asked about mealtimes or said they needed to use the bathroom. He paced the floors back and forth, eyeing the backpack and the neat rows of survival gear and meals he'd arranged into rations and days.

Even at two meals a day, the food was going fast. So was his patience.

April managed to keep the girls occupied with what she dubbed "nature school." Little hikes and lessons about birds and fauna. Stories and art projects made from fallen leaves and rose hips. Kimmie managed to turn a long, skinny pinecone into a doll and named it Pippa. Emma coaxed a chipmunk into eating a little granola from her hand. April smiled brightly and praised the girls' ingenuity. She hadn't asked about school or truancy again. And she hadn't asked about the plan. Or the police. Or when they were going back.

On the third night after April went to sleep, James sat at the kitchen table, staring at the supplies. He stood to look at the food and touch the tarps. Then he walked to the bedroom where April was asleep. But instead of getting undressed for bed, he turned off the hall light and stood in the semi-darkness, listening to the cadence of her breath.

"He's done. He's getting rid of them," I said matter-of-factly like the dread wasn't pooling around me. "Look at his face."

Brecia and Skye were already staring at him. His eyes were different. Calculating. He didn't appear to be anxious, though. Just resolved.

April rolled over in her sleep, but her breathing was even and deep.

He closed the door softly and walked back to the living room, where he extracted a headlamp from the backpack, put on his jacket, and slipped out the front door.

“Where is he going? Is he leaving?” Skye asked hopefully. “Maybe he’ll take the van and go.”

But the beam of the headlamp had stopped on the shovel near the woodpile.

I watched in horrified silence as he picked it up and started walking into the forest.

* * *

He chose a spot about a quarter mile from the cabin, along a deer path. The ground was soft and mulchy enough beneath the cover of the pines that it didn’t take long for him to complete the first hole to his liking.

The three of us stood along the deer path, trying to make it make sense.

The hole was about three feet wide, six feet long, and three feet deep.

He dug in silence, looking up only when the crackle of twigs from some creature broke through the still night and the soft *thunk* of a shovel hitting dirt over and over again.

We stayed long enough to let the reality of what he was doing sink in. Long enough to see that the hole was, unmistakably, a grave—and that he was starting on a second.

Then we fled back to the cabin.

42. BRECIA

CASCADE, IDAHO

It didn't take long to wake April.

Waking her wasn't the problem. Getting her to listen was. And we were running out of time fast.

I had no idea exactly what happened when I spoke to her while she slept. Could she see the images of the shallow graves as I described them urgently in her ear? Could she hear me talking, distantly? Did she even remember what had happened when she woke up, or was I just a night terror, delivering a shot of pure and nameless adrenaline in the dark?

As she awoke with a jolt to an empty bed, I turned to see Skye and Meghan hovering behind me.

I already knew that these might be our last moments together. Meghan wasn't staying. And now that I knew I had a choice, I wouldn't be either. It was too much. And the window to do anything at all was closing. If it came down to it, I couldn't watch. I'd already decided who I was going to find in my memories when the time came: my Aunt Nelly. She'd taken care of me when I was a little girl, and I loved her fiercely. Fresh out of college, she'd moved in with us when I was five and took care of me after preschool until she found a real job a year later. We splashed in the kiddie pool at the YMCA, made necklaces out of cereal and macaroni, brushed the manes and tails of my plastic horses, and watched cartoons together. She'd died in a car crash when I was six. Right after she moved out.

I dragged myself back to the present, in the dark room with April. If there had been any lights left blazing in the little cabin, I had no doubt they would be flickering wildly. The dark room was full of invisible sparks with nowhere else to go. I no longer had any doubts. He was going to murder his own family. He was going to leave them in the woods.

April was breathing hard, blinking to get her bearings in the dark room and rickety bed. I could see that she was biting her lip, trying not to make a sound, until she cautiously felt beside her in the bed and realized that James

wasn't even there.

She sagged forward, clutching the quilt in her hands to stop them from shaking and trying to calm her breathing.

And then she listened.

We listened with her.

There was the quiet, steady hum of the old fridge in the kitchen. The chorus of crickets that swelled then faded. The soft, papery flutter of aspens. The slight squeak of the bed frame as she pulled the quilt up farther around her knees.

Then, there it was: the distant, repetitive thunk of something hitting the ground. Even I hadn't realized that the sound would carry this far. If we hadn't been nestled deep in the forest, it probably wouldn't have.

The sound came again: that quiet clank of metal on dirt.

April didn't move for a long time.

She stayed sitting where she was in bed, no longer shaking. Not moving at all. Just listening. Then she wrapped the quilt around herself and padded to the kitchen, where she stared outside into the blackness.

The sound continued, erratic and ominous.

"Does she know what he's doing? Do you think she understands?" Skye whispered, glancing back at the girls' bedroom door.

None of us answered. There were no answers yet. We watched, transfixed, as April walked to the entryway, picked up her shoes, put them on. She ran her fingers over the girls' shoes. James's tennis shoes conspicuously weren't there.

She stood motionless with her hand on the doorknob for at least a minute. The invisible sparks surrounding all of us swirled faster.

"She can't go out there. If he knows that she knows, he'll do it right now," Meghan blurted. In the darkness of the cabin, I could see her hugging her arms around her waist.

Heedless of the warning, April carefully opened the front door and stepped onto the porch.

She stared into the thick bramble of trees surrounding her for a moment. And then, so slowly I knew she was bracing for what she might see, she looked over at the woodpile.

The shovel wasn't there.

Distantly, we could all hear the soft *thunk*, pause, *thunk*.

April walked to the other side of the woodpile, scanning every inch, as if she might have missed the bulky shovel the first time. Her face was expressionless, but her fingers were clutching the quilt so hard that the tips glowed faintly white in the darkness against the embroidered pattern.

Thunk, pause. Thunk, pause.

Pause. Pause. Pause. The muffled crack of a twig came from somewhere in the distance. April took a step back toward the open cabin door.

“Oh shit,” Meghan gasped. “He’s coming. He’s coming back for them now. I can’t—”

Skye quickly reached out and grasped her hand as she went to follow April, who was hurrying back inside the cabin. “Come on. She finally gets it. Stay with me, sis.”

While Meghan and Skye followed April inside, I raced down the deer path to meet him.

He had the shovel tipped over his shoulder, as if he were returning from an honest day’s work—instead of picking his way through the woods in the dark like a wolf.

I couldn’t stop myself. I knew it wouldn’t help, but I leapt at him anyway. I tore at his ugly plaid jacket and tried to gouge the golden-brown eyes I’d been so entranced by when we first met in person. I screamed like I’d wanted to scream in my backyard, the night my voice was cut off with the extension cord in his hands. I thrashed and kicked and pummeled him with my fists the way I’d imagined doing all these years but never had. Because what was the point?

His shirt and hair whipped wildly in the sudden gust of wind that blew through the deer path but left the aspen leaves above us fluttering peacefully in the mild breeze. I knew it was me. I had done that. But, of course, it hadn’t stopped him. It was just a random burst of wind.

He shook himself a little and readjusted the shovel.

Then he kept walking.

When he reached the cabin, the front door was closed. April was nowhere in sight. Neither were Meghan or Skye. He carefully brushed a few flecks of dirt off the plaid jacket, gently leaned the shovel against the woodpile, and quietly opened the front door.

I brushed past him into the room as he sat down and took off his shoes.

From the dark hallway, I saw Meghan and Skye appear, standing like sentinels as all three of us watched him. Meghan backed up slowly into the kitchen as he stood up and surveyed the tiny living room, his eyes resting on the collection of survival tools. Skye held her ground, glaring at him with a fury I could feel from across the room.

He stood where he was in the living room for a few seconds, clearly weighing his options.

“Where’s April?” I called to Meghan softly, hoping she wasn’t gone yet. I couldn’t see her anymore.

“She’s in the bedroom,” came the quiet reply from the kitchen. “She’s pretending to be asleep.”

A wave of despair pulled at me like a riptide. “What about the girls? Did she at least grab a knife or something?”

Skye shook her head miserably. “No.”

James was on the move again, but he was walking toward the kitchen and Meghan—not toward the bedrooms.

He stopped in front of the wall clock, squinting at the cracked plastic in the darkness. It was 3:00 a.m.

He was standing just a few feet away from Meghan. She stood facing him, her arms still wrapped tightly around her middle as if to keep from flinging herself at him.

“If you want to jump him, do it,” I told her. “I couldn’t stop myself. It felt good for a second, even though it didn’t do anything.”

She nodded tightly but didn’t look at me—or move to attack him the way I had on the trail. “We heard you out there.”

He rubbed a hand along the back of his neck and stretched. Then he yawned and sighed heavily. Skye made a disgusted noise. “Poor baby. Tired after staying up late digging holes.”

It was true: He looked exhausted. “Maybe he’ll wait,” I said hesitantly, still feeling the despair threaten to pull me under. If he didn’t do it tonight, he would do it tomorrow. Or the next day. There was still no indication as to what his plans were long-term, but those plans clearly no longer included his family.

It made me think of the hamster I’d had as a little girl who, when I forgot to feed her for a couple of days, ate her three babies. All that was left when I looked into the cage was a few droplets of dark blood.

I shook my head. No. He wasn't like an animal at all. At least with the hamster, there was survival on the line. He killed because he wanted to. Because he felt like it. Because he liked it. No animal I knew of did that.

He hesitated in the hallway, looking from the stash of survival objects to the bedroom door. I tried not to imagine what he was thinking about but couldn't stop the mental image of the different deadly objects at his disposal. The knives. The rope. The shovel out by the woodpile. If he wanted to do it tonight, he had plenty of tools available.

He yawned again and rolled his neck, turning to look at the neat piles of meals. He hadn't counted them for a couple of days. But the buckets still looked relatively full. Nobody was eating with the vigor they had a few days ago, given the effects on everyone's digestive system.

He sighed heavily then padded down the hallway to April's room. Skye and I followed, while Meghan hung back. Neither of us prodded her to follow.

He quietly opened the bedroom door, casting a dim square of light across the bed where April lay on her side, turned away from him. I watched her chest rise and fall. Deep breaths like clockwork. If I had to guess, she was counting with each inhale and exhale.

He stared at her for a few seconds. Then he carefully shut the door, pulled off his jeans and plaid shirt, and got into bed on the other side.

43. SKYE

CASCADE, IDAHO

I really missed sleeping. The ability to just turn your brain off for a while was something I'd really taken for granted while I was alive. Without a body that needed sleep to physically recharge, my thoughts never turned off. Except for the times when I got caught up in a memory.

Meghan called it "drifting." That was how she'd found her grandmother, the one who was waiting to welcome her at the end of this horror show.

The three of us gathered around April, speaking the truth about her husband in turn.

April's eyes, wide in the darkness, gave no indication that she sensed any of it. She was finally awake to the gravity of her situation. But only time would tell if that awakening would be enough.

I knew that look in her eyes. It was that same wild-animal feeling I'd gotten when I realized I might have made a terrible mistake getting into his car. And that my choices were now limited to whatever mercy the universe would grant me. In my case, there had been none. But maybe things would be different for April and the girls. I hoped so.

Once James's breathing grew deep and measured, April scooted to the far edge of the bed, clutching the quilt and no longer trying to feign sleep.

The seconds ticked by like hours as we waited for her to move. To do something. To run.

"Move, girl," I kept telling her. "He's asleep. Move."

Brecia shook her head. "The girls are too heavy to carry. And if she wakes them up, they'll wake him up too. They're too little to listen when they're tired and cranky. It's too risky."

So we all just sat there, gathered around April, listening to the whistling sound of his breath, in and out, in and out.

I pulled my thoughts back toward me again and again, like a puppy on a leash, refusing to allow myself to drift. It was excruciating to stay present.

And from the feeling in the room, I knew I wasn't alone.

Suddenly, I had an idea. "Brecia, you know that thing that happened in the impound lot when we were talking?"

Brecia nodded. "The same thing happened with Meghan when I hugged her." She looked at Meghan, whose confused expression dissolved into understanding.

"Could we try that again?" I asked, feeling weirdly shy. I was asking for a literal glimpse into their souls. "It wasn't the same as drifting in my own memories. I didn't feel all deep and dreamy. I just kind of, I don't know, got a really clear picture of the story you were telling me. Like you'd shown it to me."

"It was like a movie," Meghan said. "A super high-def movie with a D-BOX. I could actually sort of feel it."

Brecia burst out laughing. "A D-BOX. If my dad knew that you got your own personal D-BOX theater when you died . . ." She stopped herself. "Sorry, Meg. I'm not making fun of you. I know what you mean. It's the perfect way to describe it."

"Can I show you my cat?" Brecia asked softly. "I know that's weird. But I miss him. He's really cute. His name is Frank."

"Please baby Jesus, yes," I told her. "Show us."

We shuffled closer together on the floor, on April's side of the bed. Then we held hands. It was like a seance in reverse, all of us making contact with the land of the living.

As soon as we touched hands, I saw the memories like a living movie in stunning detail. I could almost feel that sweet little furball with the downy white fur and orange ears purring on Brecia's lap. And when I whispered, "Oh, he's a doll," the Brecia inside the memory looked up at me, her eyes full of joy at the cat sleeping on her lap while she watched Netflix before bed.

It was just a cat. But in that moment, it was everything.

We drifted together like that all night, trading memories. Some sweet, some shallow, some heartbreaking, some that filled up the room with a sadness so thick we swam in it. I wasn't sure how it was happening, but I understood now what Meghan had been saying about her Bubbie: The memory wasn't static anymore, but rather a little secret doorway.

All the while, April stayed where she was, frozen, her breaths shallow and fast until the first rays of sunlight finally hit the window in the little

bedroom.

At that first clear sign of morning, she carefully swung her legs over the side of the bed and padded to the kitchen. The girls were still asleep, and she didn't wake them.

Meghan, Brecia, and I watched eagerly as she scanned the countertops, felt in his coat pockets, and quietly opened drawers in the tiny kitchen.

"She's looking for the keys," Brecia said in disbelief. "She's going to do it. Oh my god."

"But where are they?" Meghan fretted. "I didn't see where he put them down. Did any of you?"

None of us had. And as April's search grew more creative—under the dusty pot holders by the stove, beneath the tattered rug, in the back of cupboards—all while pausing at the slightest noise from the bedrooms, the hope that the keys were here to be found seemed increasingly unlikely.

He'd tucked them away somewhere he knew she wouldn't look. Because, like all three of the ghosts standing in this kitchen, she might have gotten into the car willingly at one point. But once she did, the chances she'd get out alive went down astronomically.

The lid to the coffee maker slid onto the floor with a loud clatter as April tilted it to see behind the ancient plastic pot.

She froze as the sound was followed by a muffled creak—then heavy footfalls—from down the hallway. She grabbed the coffee pot and ran to the sink to fill it with water.

"What the hell is she doing?" Meghan cried. "They don't even drink coffee."

When he appeared around the corner from the hallway with a sour expression on his face, rubbing sleep from his eyes, he looked at her in irritation. "Are you serious right now? It's barely morning. Why are you banging around in here?" His eyes focused on the coffee pot in her hand, and he scowled. "What are you doing?"

She looked up at him with a thousand-watt smile, turning off the sink as the water reached the brim of the pot. "Babe, I'm so sorry. I remembered we had a couple of hot chocolate packets, and I was trying to do something fun for breakfast. Surprise the girls before they woke up." She made a face at the coffee pot. "I thought this might heat the water up faster than the stove. I'm so sorry I woke you!"

“Damn, April,” Brecia said. “Good save.”

I was impressed too. I almost believed her myself. But did he?

I studied his face as the scowl softened into irritation. He was mad. He clearly thought she was a moron. But not enough to fly off the handle. April latched onto it and laid her hand on his arm. “I’m really sorry, hon. Go back to sleep, okay?”

He didn’t move. “Just use one packet,” he muttered, eyeing the lines of food.

She followed his gaze. Then I saw something light up in her eyes. “What would you think about me making a quick trip into town today? I could get us some canned food and maybe some fresh stuff that will last a while? Apples, beans—”

“Yes,” Meghan encouraged her. “Yes, girl. Get out of here.”

I didn’t have time to cheer. The scowl was back on his face. “Are you kidding me right now, April? How stupid can you be? You think you’re just going to go *shopping* and then toddle back here? Someone will recognize you. Someone will recognize the van. Unless maybe that’s what you want?” The scowl deepened into something even uglier. It was the first time I’d seen him seriously consider the idea that she might run. Despite berating her at every turn since they’d gotten to this miserable little prison, he’d clearly never really thought she’d turn on him. She wasn’t real to him. She and the girls had never been more than accessories to his life. Worth keeping around when they were useful. No reason not to discard them when they became inconvenient.

April tried again, raking her hand through the back of her thin, blond hair to fluff it up in a nervous tell I’d started to recognize. I could hear the desperation bleeding into her voice now. “They’re looking for you, not me, and I’ll park way before town and walk in. Nobody would see the license plate or anything. I could wear a hat, and without makeup I really don’t look like myself—”

He cut her off, snatching the coffee maker out of her hand and splashing water down the front of her shirt. “You have to plug it in, you moron. And no, we are not taking the risk for apples and beans. I’m sorry we aren’t eating high on the hog, but you’re the one who packed all these meals. Maybe if you’d done the math right, or figured out that they all tasted disgusting and would give everybody the runs, things might be a little nicer.”

She stared at him in stunned silence, and I prayed to God that he couldn't tell as well as I could that his wife was hearing every word he said with a new filter. No more rationalizing. No more pretending. He was a ticking time bomb about to blow up in her face.

He stared back, as if daring her to try again. From down the hallway, there was the sound of a door opening and little-girl voices.

April snapped her mask back in place, grabbing a threadbare towel from above the stove to press against her soaked shirt. "You're right," she told him apologetically. "I'm sorry. It was a stupid idea. I'll clean all this up and have the girls help me with breakfast. I'm sorry," she repeated, reaching out for his arm again.

He shrugged her away and turned toward the hall, not bothering to respond to the excited chorus of "Hi, Daddy!" as he walked back to the bedroom.

The long fluorescent bulbs in the kitchen light overhead blinked erratically for a few seconds. They seemed to be less susceptible to our emotions than the halogen variety. I knew the halogen variety would have popped a long time ago.

April glanced at the light then turned on a smile as the girls burst into the kitchen. "Is Daddy angry again?" Emma pouted.

Kimmie's eyes landed on April's wet shirt. "You have an accident, Mommy?"

"God, find a way to get these babies out of here," I mumbled, watching Kimmie pat April's hip comfortingly. I still didn't know what I thought about God. I'd really expected to have some answers by now. I prayed anyway, though. Because there wasn't much else to do.

"It's okay, Mommy," Kimmie assured her, echoing the words I'd heard April say when Kimmie herself really did have an accident once in a while.

For a split second, it looked like April's mask might come down. Her lip trembled slightly as she looked at the girls and around the small kitchen, her gaze resting on the hallway where he'd disappeared a few seconds ago. The babies were awake. There were no car keys to be found. They were trapped.

She pursed her lips and grabbed Kimmie's hand, directing her to the meals along the living room wall. "Oh, I just spilled, baby! I was trying to surprise you guys with hot cocoa. Will you help me find the packet? We'll

share it and drink little tea party cups.”

The girls eagerly helped search through the buckets while April took steadying breaths and quickly swiped at a tear that had managed to escape down one of her cheeks.

44. MEGHAN

CASCADE, IDAHO

She actually brought him a little cup of the damn hot chocolate.

I wasn't sure I could have done it myself. But she did, and he looked grudgingly grateful and didn't try to stop her when she told him that she was going to play out front with the girls to build more "pinecone people."

The three of us followed her into the clearing by the cabin, where the girls always played. Kimmie and Emma, still riding the hot chocolate high, were so engaged in a conversation about whether the pinecone people would eat pine needles or moss that they didn't realize April had led them past the clearing and onto a trail until she took the two girls by the hand and pulled them behind a tall pine with boughs that dipped thick and low enough to obscure the view of the cabin a hundred yards away.

"Mommy!" Kimmie started to argue, her rosebud lips already headed for a frown. This wasn't the right spot.

"Listen to your mama," Skye hissed in her ear, and she went silent before April could hush her.

Kimmie paused mid-word and frowned.

April looked momentarily startled by Kimmie's seeming mind-reading but didn't stop to ask questions. Skye and I looked at each other. "Whoa," I whispered.

April reached out to stroke both girls' cheeks. Her expression was serious, but with a little conspiratorial smile. "You guys know how Daddy has been kind of grumpy and we've all been feeling kind of yucky in our tummies?" She held one finger to her lips to cut short any overly loud replies.

The girls nodded.

"Well, you know how I surprised you with the hot chocolate this morning? I want us to surprise Daddy again."

Everyone leaned closer to April, dying to know the plan.

"Well, we're going to find a whole bunch of berries to bring back to

Daddy for dinner.”

Emma looked skeptical. “Berries?”

Kimmie, on the other hand, was gleeful. Nobody had eaten anything fresh for way too long now. “Oh, Mommy, good idea,” she whispered. “Where are they?”

“They’re really far, and we have to be really quiet so we don’t give away the surprise,” April whispered back.

“Oh shit,” Skye said, her voice barely a whisper too. “Yes, girl. Yes. Go now.”

Brecia moved to the edge of the tree to look back at the cabin. “He’s still inside,” she called. “Go! Hurry!”

As if they could hear her, both Kimmie and Emma took April’s outstretched hands.

“We don’t want Daddy to see us leave, or he’ll know we’re up to something,” April told the girls, showing them how to duck down slightly beneath the brush level along the deer path. Her smile was looking manic to me, but the girls didn’t seem to notice. “Step quietly, until we’re a little farther away, okay? We won’t have to be quiet anymore after a bit.”

The girls followed her directions exactly, and the three started moving down the deer path with Skye and me right behind.

Brecia stayed where she was, in view of the cabin. “I’ll catch up with you, okay? I know it won’t change anything, but I need to know how far behind he is. I’ll head downhill until I find you when he realizes something is up.”

The sound of birds among the trees had dropped to a quiet chatter. The air felt charged with danger and uncertainty and the barest sliver of hope.

I lagged behind just a little too, taking one last look at the cabin. *Be there soon, Bubbie*, I thought to myself, feeling for the first time like maybe I’d get to leave this limbo on my own terms. Like maybe I’d be able to finish this business after all. I could just see the top of April’s blond ponytail bobbing in the distance above the brushline, when the trail curved around the bend and downward. The sound of snapping twigs was getting fainter, and Brecia’s back was still turned as she kept vigil on the cabin. I hurried to catch up with Skye and April.

April was walking the opposite way from the three graves waiting with open mouths farther up the trail. I was glad she wouldn’t see them. I knew

what it felt like to look into your own grave. And the farther she moved away from them, the better her chances of not ending up in one.

I examined the memory of the drive here as we moved through the forest, scrambling over logs and through brush as the deer trail turned more narrow. I could remember every detail in crystal clarity, but I hadn't looked at the clock on the car after we'd turned onto the main road. It was difficult to tell exactly how fast we'd driven and how far. It had felt like forever at the time. I didn't even know how far the little town of Cascade actually was from the dirt road turnoff. Was it five miles? Ten? Twenty? I felt the flicker of hope start to fade. With two little girls in tow, even my most optimistic estimate was impossibly far.

Skye searched her memory, too, grabbing my hand so I could see. "I looked at the clock in the car when we parked at the cabin," she said. "We got there just before lunch. At 11:58. When was the last time you looked at the car clock?"

I sorted through the memories from before we'd turned off onto the dirt road. "The last time I looked before we made the turn, it was 10:32. We drove another ten minutes, maybe, before we made the turn."

"Hold on, we can figure this out," Skye replied. "He was going the speed limit, because he was worried about cops. It was fifty until we hit the dirt road. So, it would have been about 10:45 when he made the turn. So, about an hour."

We were both silent for a moment, thinking the same thing. It had taken us an hour *in the car* to travel from the turnoff to the cabin. It was going to take forever on foot, with kids.

Skye kept going. "We were going pretty slow along the road. It was curvy and bumpy. I remember thinking I could run next to the car if I'd wanted to. How fast is that?"

I laughed. "I'm a lot faster now than I was before. Maybe ten or fifteen miles an hour?"

Skye nodded. "That sounds right. So, if it took us forty-five-ish minutes to get to the cabin, that means it was about six miles."

I decided to take Skye's calculation as gospel. In part because it sounded better than what I'd imagined. And in part because math wasn't among the limited powers I seemed to have inherited in death. "Can they make it before it starts to get dark?" I asked, not really expecting an answer.

Skye nodded firmly. “Even if they go really slow, one mile per hour, they’ll make it. They just have to keep going.”

As she said it, Emma let out a shriek as a hornet landed on her arm. She batted at it hysterically and stumbled over a root in the ground while April frantically turned around to calm her down.

“Shit,” I whispered, looking behind us. There was no sign of Brechia. Not yet. But I remembered the way the sound of the shovel had carried from the night before. If we could all hear the *thunk* of that shovel hitting the ground in the cabin, the sound of a shriek like that was going to carry far enough.

Like she’d done before, Skye reached out to put a hand on Emma’s shoulder. “Honey, stop crying,” she said over the sound of April’s pleading and shushing.

Whether from April’s efforts or Skye’s, Emma tearfully bit her lip and stopped wailing.

At first, I thought maybe we’d gotten away with it. Maybe he hadn’t heard. Maybe we were far enough away. We’d been walking for at least an hour. But it wasn’t five minutes later that Brechia caught up with us.

“He’s coming,” she said simply. “He’s in the van.”

Skye and I looked at each other helplessly. “He’s in the van?” I’d imagined him chasing us down through the trees.

As if on cue, we heard a distant rumbling sound that had to be tires on the dirt road, somewhere through the trees. I’d wondered how close we might be to the road we’d driven in on, but April didn’t seem to be in a hurry to find it. Not yet.

“I think he’s trying to get ahead of them,” Brechia replied. The even kilter of her voice did nothing to make the forest feel like less of a tinderbox.

We all looked at April, who clearly heard the distant sound too. The girls hadn’t noticed yet. She scanned the tangle of tree trunks and scattered clearings and then called softly to the girls. “I think the berries are a little farther that way!” She motioned to a fork in the deer path that led farther away from the road and the sound of the vehicle in the distance.

Kimmie and Emma followed her, but I knew it would be just a matter of time until they started to ask about going home for lunchtime. Before someone slipped on the carpet of pine needles or tripped over a fallen branch

littering the trail, or before the three of them drifted far enough from the road that April lost her bearings of how to get back to the road at all. She kept squinting up at the sun, trying, I imagine, to stay on track. But between shepherding the girls around obstacles, tracking the ominous sound of the tires on the road, and offering one long pep talk to keep going, it couldn't be easy.

They hadn't even brought water with them. Or jackets. It was pleasant enough outside right now, but it wouldn't be once nightfall fell. I remembered every detail of that first night I'd spent alone in the mountains. The glowing eyes of the coyotes. The sounds of twigs snapping in the darkness. The feeling that I was completely and utterly alone. And I'd been *dead*. Nothing could touch me anymore. I kept my eyes on the sun too, willing it to stay high in the sky. Willing them onward.

April's smile was already showing the strain of stress. And we still had hours to go before there was any hope of finding our way out. That is, if he didn't find us first.

The sound of the tires got closer, although it was impossible to know just how close with the way sound carried.

Then, suddenly, the sound stopped.

April ushered the girls along yet another branch in the scraggly trail, in the opposite direction of the road.

We weren't making any progress toward town, but suddenly that didn't matter. I could imagine the ugly set of his jaw and the rage in his eyes. I didn't know what he'd thrown into the trunk with him, but I knew that he was moving toward us with single-minded, deadly intent. And he wasn't towing two little girls along with him as he ran.

April closed her eyes and set her jaw. She let the mask fall for a moment as she stared at the little blond heads in front of her, still moving diligently—if slowly—along the path.

There wasn't time. They needed to move faster, somehow.

"Girls," she called to them seriously, and they stopped dead in their tracks and turned around. It was clear, even to me, that April didn't use this voice with them.

"Mommy?" Kimmie started, and April cut her off.

April shook her head. "I need you to do something for me, and we don't have time to be scared. Because that will slow us down."

Both Kimmie and Emma were staring at her with wide, fearful eyes now. Brecia and Skye wore about the same expression as we tried to guess what she was about to tell them.

April took a deep breath. “There’s a bear behind us. So we need to run as quickly and as quietly as we can, okay?”

Instinctively, Skye moved beside Kimmie while Brecia stepped next to Emma. “Listen to your mama,” Brecia told her, and Skye murmured the same words.

To their credit, neither little girl stopped to cry or ask questions. They knew about bears from the songs they sometimes sang while they played with the pinecone people and the stories April told them in their beds.

So if April said run, they would run.

45. BRECIA

CASCADE, IDAHO

I was honestly impressed by how quickly the girls moved after that.

If I knew anything about April, she was beating herself up right now for lying to the girls. For scaring them into running. For not running before. For inventing a bear.

But I wanted to hug her. She'd done exactly the right thing.

There was no time to explain to two little girls that something far worse than a bear really was hunting them along the trails as they scrambled farther into the forest, panting and gasping but not stopping.

I looked back every few seconds, just waiting to see him behind us. Waiting for the snap of the branch that would mean the end of the chase. But little by little, the treeline became less dense and the slope of the mountain mellowed into a rolling terrain. More daylight filtered down through the treetops, and it was easier to move without fear of tripping on fallen logs.

April finally grabbed the girls' hands and told them to stop. They had to rest. Their faces were red, and streaky wet trails cut lines through the dust on their cheeks.

"Is the bear still behind us, Mommy?" Emma asked fearfully, glancing back and forth through the trees behind them.

April squeezed her hand and took a ragged breath. "We're outrunning him, baby. I'm so proud of you. We're going to get help from somebody, okay?"

"And then go back for Daddy?" Kimmie asked tearfully, clearly distraught that they'd left the bastard behind to fend for himself.

Skye shook her head and turned around, scanning for any sign of the road in the distance. I had no idea how far we'd run, but I told myself we had to be getting close. The sun was dipping farther toward the horizon, and the girls had been running off and on for more than an hour now, after walking plenty before that.

April nodded confidently and raked her sweaty hair back with one

hand. “You don’t need to worry about him, sweetheart. Rest a few more seconds, and then we’ll keep going.”

* * *

It was Skye who finally, jubilantly, announced that we were almost to the main road. The turnoff to the paved Highway 55 was still at least a mile away—she’d run ahead—but it was just within reach. Another half an hour, if we kept up this pace. We were going to make it. The girls were exhausted and soaked in sweat. Every time they took another short rest, April’s hands shook while she scanned the trail they’d traveled. I knew she was practicing her speech for if he found them. But I knew as well as she did that there was nothing she could say. James wouldn’t buy the bear line. He knew he was the bear.

“I kept going to see how close we are to town, and it’s not far at all,” Skye said. “Maybe another five miles along the road? She’s a white lady with kids. Someone will stop and give them a ride. She’ll flag someone down, right? Then call the police?”

I smiled, ready to celebrate. And that was when April suddenly fell, landing flat against the dirt while Kimmie and Emma turned to her in shock.

At first, I thought she had passed out. It would have made sense. She hadn’t had anything to drink—while running for her life—for hours now.

She wasn’t lying still, though. She motioned for the girls to lie next to her, hissing for them to be quiet in the same voice she’d used to tell them about the bear. In a tone that I imagined mothers have used in dire moments for as long as they have gathered their children under their wings when death approached. A tone that said, *There is no room for questions. The worst is coming, and these words combined with your exact obedience are your only hope for safety.*

I stopped listening to April and the girls and turned my attention to the danger. The sound of cracking branches and heavy footfalls was approaching fast. It would have been futile to run when he was this close. If he stopped and listened, even for a second, he was close enough to hear them now. Maybe he’d already heard them.

I went out to meet him, while Meghan and Skye stayed with April and the girls. When I glanced back over my shoulder, the only person I could see

was Meghan, her arms wrapped around her stomach as she watched me go. The others were completely hidden from this vantage, next to a toppled tree trunk that butted up to a couple of mossy boulders.

He was coming from the direction of the road. When I caught sight of him, I could still see the minivan perched precariously along the narrow dirt shoulder at the top of the steep graded slope. In our scramble through the woods, we'd moved closer to the road than I'd thought.

Oblivious to the noise he was making, James growled as his shirt got caught on a dead tree branch, ripping part of it. His eyes scanned the diverging deer paths in front of him, looking for any sign of April or the girls. As he crashed toward me, I could see that he was clutching something in his hand. It was the multitool from the survival kit: half ax blade, half hammer.

There was no more pretense. The jig was up. There was no trace of the collected, methodical planning in this person moving toward me. His hair, sweaty against his forehead, was matted and wild. His eyes were hard and full of rage. There were no more games to be played or time to bide. April had betrayed him. She'd run away before he was ready to finish her off. And he was going to kill all three of them as soon as he found them.

I didn't know what he was thinking at this moment. I didn't want to. But I could feel the desperation and rage coming off of him in thick waves through the air between us as he passed me, whipping his head from side to side and scrutinizing the terrain.

That desperation was the only comfort I could find. He'd been up and down this dirt road in that damn minivan all these hours without success. Maybe, just maybe, he'd turn around and drive a little farther when he didn't find them near the road.

But he barreled forward, letting out another grunt of rage. I followed him, powerless as ever to do anything to stop him if he found them.

46. SKYE

CASCADE, IDAHO

At first, I stayed hidden with April and the girls, terror squeezing me like a tube of toothpaste as I heard him get closer. I knew he couldn't see me, but part of me was certain that if I poked my head up over the fallen log, I'd see those dark eyes lock with mine.

Meghan didn't seem to share my irrational fears. She stood where she was next to us, arms wrapped around herself like a desperate hug as if trying to hold herself together.

April had been right to tell the girls a bear was chasing us. Because that's exactly what he sounded like, thumping his way down the deer paths, cracking branches and making that angry, awful noise in his throat. He sounded just like an animal: an animal hell-bent on tearing someone apart.

The girls stayed completely still and silent, the only movement the quaking of their little bodies and the heaving of their chests.

Kimmie had her face turned toward the dirt, her body tucked most of the way under April's arms. Emma was huddled at the edge, her blue Elsa shirt clutched tight in April's grasp as her chest rose and fell in fast, shaky gasps.

He drifted a little farther, then a little closer. He was sweeping the area.

When he stopped, a stone's throw away, I finally couldn't help myself. I looked in the direction Meghan was facing, eyes wide, and saw him standing just like I'd feared, staring back at us.

He was breathing hard, his mouth open in a gaping scowl as he caught his breath and looked down the deer path that forked in front of him. Did he see us? Did he hear the girls? It might not matter. Because if he went any farther in this direction, he would walk right past us. And he would see them.

In his right hand, he held the multitool, gripped tight. His gaze traveled down the narrow paths in front of him, and I tried to see what he saw.

There were no footprints in that direction. No disturbed ground. We'd come from the other side of the path. I was almost positive he couldn't see

any sign of us. Not yet.

He made a noise low in his throat and took a step forward.

Emma let out the barest whimper, and April clutched the Elsa shirt harder, giving it a little shake.

He stopped and listened, scanning again.

That's when Meghan leapt forward.

At first I thought she was going to attack him, like Brecia had the night before after he dug the graves. But then she was next to his ear.

"They couldn't have made it this far. They're way, way back. You went too far," she screamed at him, matching the wildness I could see in his eyes.

He continued staring straight ahead. Emma was quiet. The woods around us were quiet. I willed the birds to start back up, willed a real bear to walk down the path toward all of us. Of course they did not. There was something far more dangerous here.

There was only silence and the sound of his heavy breathing.

I curled back up next to Emma, hoping somehow she felt the invisible buffer on her other side. She didn't make another noise, but I could tell by the way her chest was trembling that she was silently crying.

Kimmie was so still, tucked under April's shoulder, that I could barely see her shallow breaths. I put my mouth close to Emma's ear, whispering assurances I didn't believe.

"The bear won't get you, baby," I told her. *The bear got me.* "Your mama is here, and she's gonna protect you." *Sometimes, nobody can stop the bad thing.* "Just hang on for a little longer, okay? Don't make a sound." *He's coming this way.*

The sound of footfalls on pine needles started again. I braced and tried to get closer to Emma, whispering the same words I half-believed over and over again, beneath the sound of Meghan—and now Brecia, who had joined her—still screaming at him to turn around. Insisting that this part of the woods was empty. Insisting he'd find them if he just turned around and went back the way he'd come.

Then I heard the most glorious noise. "MOTHER-FU—," he screamed in frustration, the word barely intelligible and cutting out as it ripped through him and turned into a howl.

The sound of crashing footsteps moved away from us as he barreled back toward the road and the minivan.

April waited until she heard the distant sound of the engine turning over and the whisper of the tires on the dirt road until she released her grip on the girls and shakily stood up, turning her tear-filled eyes toward her two terrified babies.

“The . . . bear . . . is gone?” Kimmie whimpered.

“It sounded like he was saying words,” Emma managed in a tremulous voice, looking at April with the widest hazel eyes I’d ever seen.

April blinked back the tears and grabbed their hands. “What matters is that he went away. And that we’re almost safe. You’re both so brave. Brave girls,” she whispered again as the words caught in her throat. “Can you run with me one more time?”

The two blond heads bobbed.

I looked up at Brecia and Meghan, who were still standing where he’d been just moments earlier—a stone’s throw away from where we’d all been crouching beside the big log.

There was a new, steely determination in the air. Meghan wasn’t hugging herself anymore. In fact, she looked like she’d just caught fire. From the half-smile on Brecia’s face, she could feel it too.

The scales were tipping. They hadn’t landed yet. But they were tipping, with a little pressure from invisible hands.

47. MEGHAN

CASCADE, IDAHO

As we approached the turnoff to Highway 55, the sun was just dipping beneath the ridge to the west, sending the valley into a sort of murky, pre-sunset gloom.

April had been carrying Kimmie for the past few minutes. Emma was holding on to the back of April's shirt, stumbling forward on sheer adrenaline. All three of them were ready to crash.

But we'd finally made it. April would flag someone down, who would take pity on the exhausted young mother with two little girls caked in dust and gasping for breath. The police would be called. The girls would be safe. It would be over.

We could all hear the sound of a vehicle approaching from somewhere down the asphalt, its tires zipping on the smooth surface along Highway 55.

As the sound got closer, April set Kimmie next to Emma. "I'll be right back, okay? Just stay here."

Both Emma and Kimmie looked like they might panic. I understood. Being left alone was not an appealing option right now.

April pointed at the shoulder of the road, up a steep rise. "I'll be a few feet away. You can see me. But I need to hurry." Before they could protest, she turned and scrambled up the side of the steep shoulder to peer over the edge.

Brecia and Skye stayed with the girls, whispering comfort. I climbed the crumbling shoulder with April, staring down the road in the deepening shadows.

As the vehicle came around the bend, April squinted hard.

I felt my heart sink as the nebulous shape moved toward us. With its headlights on, it was going to be difficult to tell what kind of vehicle it was until it was right next to the shoulder of the road. Was it an SUV? A truck? A minivan?

There was no way to know for certain.

Brecia, Skye, and I had popped the minivan's headlights and tail lights back in the garage. But that had been in the daytime. No one had even noticed, as far as I could tell. And no one had driven the minivan since arriving at the cabin.

It was too much to hope that James would drive off the edge of the road in the dark. And given the Carsons' propensity for emergency preparedness, they probably had spare bulbs somewhere in the van itself.

For all any of us knew, any set of headlights might be him. And if it *was* the minivan—and James—he would see April before she had time to dart back out of sight.

So she stayed hidden, closing her eyes as a spray of dust and small pebbles trickled down the shoulder embankment and onto her hair.

The only real option was to keep moving.

The girls didn't ask questions as April scooted back down the embankment and took their hands. She began leading them along the bottom of the embankment, moving onto the road itself for an easier path when the steep rise leveled out and there were no tires to be heard or headlights to be seen.

In some ways, the cover of darkness was comforting. Unless we got caught in the glare of someone's headlights, April and the girls were now invisible. But as another set of tires whirred closer and April pulled the girls back into the meager cover of the narrow shoulder ledge, pressing everyone into the sparse brush, I heard both Kimmie and Emma start to cry in earnest.

"Are we always going to be lost?" Emma hiccupped. "Are we going to have to sleep in the woods?"

"That was scratchy. Where is the bear?" Kimmie sobbed as she swiped at her face, which was now lightly crisscrossed with a patch of angry welts from the brush. Her words dissolved into little shrieks as a branch snapped somewhere out of sight in the darkness of the trees.

April picked her up and stumbled forward without responding as Emma latched back onto her shirt, nearly toppling both April and Kimmie as she tripped over a rock.

I really wasn't sure how long April could keep going like this. There was no clear end in sight. She was still in the crosshairs of a predator. And she was still the sole protector of two little girls on the brink of total meltdown. It was agony to even watch.

Somehow, our posse trudged onward, excruciatingly slowly along the crumbling, narrow shoulder of the road that dipped and fell, weaving through the towering pines overhead. We moved forward in silence broken only by the sound of April and Emma's softly crunching footsteps, the whir of the occasional approaching vehicle, the snapping of branches in the darkness, and the whispers of encouragement from Skye, me, or Brecia when Kimmie or Emma started to whimper again.

I thought about the stories I'd heard about mothers lifting cars off their babies or fighting off a pack of wolves on the Oregon Trail. I'd always sort of thought they were tall tales or at least uncommon. But now I thought that maybe it was just the wolf pack at your door or the car on top of your child that was the rare thing. Maybe this strength, this superhuman power was always there, latent. I thought about my own mom, and how I would show her this moment someday when we found each other again. How I'd tell her that I knew she'd carry me this impossible distance too.

It must have been an hour before Brecia suddenly said, "Look! Do you see that?"

I looked down the stretch of road that had straightened out into a long runway. The shoulder had widened, flanked by tall grasses in a sort of meadow. In the distance, beyond the pines that bookended the narrow highway, the horizon was faintly glowing.

"I think that's Cascade," Skye said, scanning the meadow and the treeline ahead. "Those aren't headlights. And the sun hasn't been down for that long. Those are city lights."

April saw them too, her grim expression suddenly melting just a little into relief. She picked up the pace, letting go of Kimmie with one hand to squeeze Emma's shoulder. "Babies, we're almost there. Do you see those lights in the distance? We're going to be safe soon. We're so close. Just stay with me, okay? Just for a little longer."

48. BRECIA

CASCADE, IDAHO

The little lodgepole building on the outskirts of Cascade—The Big Cat Mountain Lodge—was lit up in neon, advertising “The Best Prime Rib in Idaho” on its glowing letterboard. Beyond it, through the thick pines, there were more speckled lights promising civilization farther down the highway. But the rustic bar and grill blazing with light and surrounded by a few vehicles was the closest by a longshot.

The closer we got, the more April scrutinized each shadow and shape in the darkness. As we approached the trees at the edge of the dirt parking lot, she stood for a few minutes squinting through the night at each of the ten or so vehicles in the parking lot for the shape of the minivan.

We were so close. But if he had any suspicion that she’d somehow made it into town, this was the place she’d end up.

Skye moved ahead into the parking lot to verify what all of us tentatively saw: The minivan was nowhere in sight, and a phone and help were mere steps away.

Kimmie perked up and looked over her shoulder at the bright lights and sound of music coming from the doorway to the Big Cat Lodge. “We made it?” she asked in a small voice.

“We made it,” April said in a shaky voice, still not moving from where she stood in the shadows at the edge of the parking lot.

“I really don’t think he’s here,” Skye called from the small collection of vehicles in the parking lot. “She actually made it.” The relief in the air felt like helium, lifting all of us as we flanked April and the girls and hurried inside.

The exhilaration I felt as she grasped the door and slipped into the orange glow of the bar with the girls was headier and richer and somehow deeper than almost anything I could remember feeling in my life.

I fully expected the porch lights on the outside of the building to pop. Instead, they blazed brighter with a sudden surge that illuminated the entire

parking lot.

I looked at Skye and Meghan in pure bliss.

There was no question they'd made it. And there was no question, in my mind at least, that in some small way we'd tipped the scales to get them here.

There was no changing the past or righting the violence that had led to this dark night. April and the girls didn't have any inkling we were even here. But just knowing that they wouldn't be able to see any of us tonight was the happiest I'd felt for as long as I could remember. I imagined that, decades from now, maybe we'd all meet. But only after they lived long lives far away from the monster that had connected all of us.

Caught up in my reverie, I didn't even notice that April had stopped in her tracks, just inside the doorway.

Because just a few yards away, sitting at the bar, was James.

49. SKYE

CASCADE, IDAHO

He was parked right at the end of the bar, his body facing toward the door. For the moment, his face was turned in a scowl toward the bartender, who had been about to clear his empty beer glass from the bar in front of him.

I'd imagined him out there searching in the darkness. Instead, he'd come here, and he'd been waiting for exactly this moment.

He'd done his best to alter his appearance on short notice. He was wearing a giant, puffy coat that made him look much larger than he actually was. His wet-looking hair was raked backward, slick against his scalp. And he was wearing a pair of April's glasses, which she left in the car for driving. I hoped like hell that they hurt his eyes. He looked like an old-timey shady car salesman. It would have been hilarious if it wasn't terrifying.

If April hadn't noticed him at the exact moment she did—and scooped up both Kimmie and Emma to dart around the corner and inside the restaurant—he would have seen her. It couldn't have been more than a couple of seconds' worth of argument with the bartender, who rolled his eyes and left the empty glass where it was on the counter.

I stayed where I was and watched his eyes lock on the swinging door, then drift toward the restaurant.

"He's coming!" I screamed at Brecia and Meghan, who had followed April and the girls.

But by the time he strode around the corner to poke his head into the restaurant—April and the girls had disappeared into the bathroom.

He sat back down at the bar as I glowered at him, training his eyes on the door again, waiting.

We were trapped. Again. I wasn't sure what he was prepared to do in this public setting if he caught sight of her. Did he have a weapon with him, tucked inside that big-ass coat? Would he pull April and the girls out the door and into the night, playing the "crazy wife" card? He'd been backed into a corner so far that he'd been willing to take the risk in leaving the cabin. He

wasn't going to leave without them, no matter what it took.

I knew what he was capable of. But nobody else in the sleepy bar and grill did. Sure, he might attract some attention and concern. He might have to turn on the charm to excuse the domestic kerfuffle. Would anyone see through it? Would anyone try to stop him?

I wanted to believe that the young couple at the bar would call the police. That the gruff bartender with salt-and-pepper whiskers would tackle him to the ground the moment he grabbed April's arm. Would the camo-clad hunters gathered around the table in back reach for the backpack on the floor that—just maybe—contained some type of weapon?

I already knew it wouldn't happen like that. The girls were afraid of a bear—not their dad. As soon as they saw him, they would rush to him in relief, throwing their little arms around his waist and cowering away from April as she screamed for them to stop. I could already imagine the customers' anxious looks of concern fading as James disappeared out the door with all three of them into the parking lot, apologizing for April's seemingly insane behavior while the girls clung to him in fear and April thrashed. The bartender, and the young couple and the hunters would exchange wary looks that said "What the hell was that?" and then hesitantly turn back to their beer or their burger. Later, when they were interviewed for the news, they'd say, "I knew something was off about him." For now though, they would give him the benefit of the doubt. The burden of proof was high to get involved with a stranger's business. I probably wouldn't have done anything different if I were still alive.

50. MEGHAN

CASCADE, IDAHO

April locked the deadbolt to the entire bathroom then pulled the girls into the large disability stall at the far end of the room. The dull exhaustion was gone, replaced with a frantic, wild-eyed desperation.

The girls were looking at her in confusion. To them, this day had been one nonsensical, grueling tour de force that had ended in being rushed into the bathroom. “Mommy, why are we all in here together?” Kimmie started to ask, looking around the dingy stall in bewilderment. She looked like she was about to burst into tears again. Her red cheeks were covered in streaky brown trails. “I need a drink of water. I’m hungry.”

April’s whole body shook as she set both girls down on the dirty floor. Emma didn’t say anything. She looked stunned that she’d been carried as much as anything. I still wasn’t totally sure how old she was—maybe seven?—but I could imagine that she hadn’t been picked up like that in quite some time.

Skye slipped through the crack in the bathroom door, scattering underneath the hinge. “I’m positive he didn’t see them. He’s just sitting there, watching the door.”

April reached down to smooth Kimmie’s hair, mumbling something about everyone needing to use the bathroom first. Kimmie and Emma exchanged a look but obediently moved to the toilet while April walked out of the stall and closed the door behind her, eyes roaming over the bathroom walls as if there might be a back exit in here that she somehow hadn’t noticed on the way in.

As the sound of tinkling filled the silence in the bathroom, April moved to the sink and stared at her own reflection in the mirror.

When someone knocked on the door a few seconds later, she winced and shook her head, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes. It was a woman’s voice. “Everything okay in there?”

April hesitated, her eyes still darting wildly across the mirrors and

around the room. “Um, hold on, okay? One sec.”

There was a cork board near the mirrors, covered in advertisements for a local fireworks show, dog walking, boat rentals, ATV sales, babysitters. The usual small-town debris. Some of it was water stained, as if it had been used to dry somebody’s hands in a pinch when the paper towels ran out.

“Why doesn’t she just let them in? Ask them to call the police?” Brecia asked in frustration.

Skye shook her head. “I don’t think it’s that simple. What if he walks back here and sees that lady calling the police and standing in the bathroom door? He’s not stupid.”

Brecia considered this as April stepped to the side of the mirror and scrutinized the cork board up close. The sound of tinkling was still steady in the background. “Okay, but if she keeps the door locked, it’s going to cause a scene when that lady goes back? Can’t she just pull her in here and then lock the door? She’ll have a phone, right?”

I frowned. “What if she screams? She doesn’t know anything. I’d scream if somebody yanked me into a bathroom and locked the door. He’ll hear.”

As we argued, I watched as the panic in April’s eyes turned steely. She looked away from the corkboard, and quickly strode to the bathroom door, unlocking it and then opening it just a crack to reveal an older woman on the other side.

I studied the spot on the corkboard where April had been looking and gasped. Brecia and Skye saw the water-stained paper sign at the same time I did.

On a date that isn’t going well? Ask for Andrea at the bar. We’ll make sure you get home safe.

I could feel Skye and Brecia’s eyes on me. They knew where I’d seen this sign before, because I had shown them the memory of that night at Gracie’s.

The fluorescent bulb in the bathroom flickered as April smiled tremulously and beckoned to the woman, her eyes darting around the strip of bar that the doorway revealed.

I looked at the woman hesitating outside the door. She appeared to be in her mid-forties. Her box-red hair was swept up in a messy ponytail, and she was wearing an oversized black Idaho State University sweatshirt with

gray sweatpants. She peered over to study April—who had backed behind the door, mostly out of sight.

April glanced to her right as the big bathroom stall swung open and Kimmie and Emma emerged. “One sec, babies.” She turned back to the woman. “Please, can you help me? It’s really important. Just tell the bartender that Andrea is needed in the bathroom. Please say just that. Nothing else, okay? You don’t have to do anything else.” April’s eyes moved back and forth across the woman’s face, waiting for her to react. Waiting for the puzzled look on her face to harden into skepticism. Waiting for her to slowly back away and loudly tell a waiter that there was a crazy woman in the bathroom.

The woman in the Idaho State sweatshirt looked between Kimmie and Emma, who looked like they’d just rolled down the mountain. And basically, they had. April looked wild and crazy too. The whole situation screamed that something was very wrong. And I assumed the lady had to use the bathroom on top of parsing out what was going on here. She slowly nodded and backed away. “Okay, hon. Hang on.”

“Thank you,” April whispered, then shut and re-locked the door.

* * *

It was only a minute or two before we heard a soft knock on the door.

Even though April had been listening at the hinge, waiting for it, she still tensed, her eyes moving to the door handle. Kimmie and Emma had stopped asking questions and were scooping handfuls of water out of the bathroom sink into their mouths.

It was a young woman’s voice. “Andrea? Are you there?”

As she said the words and April cracked open the door to let her in, I looked at Skye and Brecia in triumph. If I could have cried, I definitely would have.

The waitress couldn’t have been more than eighteen years old. About the same age as Skye. But while April whispered the critical parts of her story, trying to keep Kimmie and Emma from hearing, she listened with a seriousness and knowing that told me she’d seen some things too.

The waitress squeezed April’s arm reassuringly and told her to re-lock the bathroom door. Then she disappeared back into the restaurant.

Brecia, Skye, and I followed her. She snuck a peek at James, who was still parked near the front of the restaurant, staring at the door and sipping a glass of water. He stretched impatiently and briefly made eye contact with the waitress.

She didn't let her eyes linger on him or stop walking. Instead, she walked to the back of the restaurant, opened a cabinet to reveal her purse and cell phone, and called the police.

* * *

When the red-and-blue flashing lights appeared through the windows of the bar and grill, James stayed composed. He didn't stand up. He didn't crane his neck to look at the police officers as they walked through the dark parking lot and through the front door of the restaurant.

Even when he saw that they were walking toward him, he didn't react. I guess maybe he still thought there was a chance they hadn't come for him. That they were here for someone else. After all, chances were slim that someone in this podunk town had recognized him, or had seen the minivan, wherever he'd stashed it.

He had no idea that April had slipped by him. And the look on his face when a lanky officer with a full beard ordered him to stand and put his hands above his head was the best thing I'd ever seen.

His eyes widened in shock and then rage as he started spitting out bullshit about how he was waiting for his wife. Why was he being harassed? What was going on?

"James Carson, you are under arrest for the murder of Meghan Campbell," the officer told him. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney ..."

I felt Brecia and Skye slide next to me, wrapping their arms through mine as he was perp-walked to the door. The decorative string of Edison lights above the bar glowed brighter. The bar, which had moments earlier been filled with a low rumble of voices and clatter, had suddenly gone still enough that the rustle of the officers and their footsteps across the wood floor were the only sounds for a few seconds. The hunters smirked at him in pity and amusement. The young couple at the bar stared at him in horror. The

waitress, who had called the police, watched in grim satisfaction from the back of the restaurant near the kitchen.

James clamped his mouth shut, whipping his head around as the officers led him outside, searching the night in vain for April, who was still safely locked in the bathroom.

I felt something in me unclench, as if I'd been holding my breath for a very, very long time. I didn't feel like jumping up and down or screaming for joy. It wasn't that kind of happy. The only way I can describe it is the way I felt when I told Bubbie goodbye at her bedside when she died. Relieved that I'd made it in time. Grateful I was in that room at that moment with people I loved. And devastated about nearly everything else.

51. BRECIA

CASCADE, IDAHO

I watched as Emma helped Kimmie squirt a line of ketchup and mustard onto her hot dog at the empty bar. Impossibly, both girls were smiling again. They still didn't know anything about their dad. Still didn't know that he was the real monster they'd been running from all day, who had forced them through the forest and night and into a dirty bathroom stall, just to escape becoming victims to the same violence he'd been committing right under their noses for their entire lives.

Someday April would have to tell them. There was no getting around it. But I suspected I wouldn't be there for that conversation. And as I looked at Kimmie and Emma's little-girl faces and downy hair, I was glad. I didn't want to see their hearts shatter. It was difficult enough to see April, in the staff room, as she sat with the police, her eyes red and her whole body shaking.

The police were taking her initial statement in the staff room of the bar and grill, while they waited for Detective Domanska, who was driving from Boise, to arrive on the scene. The statewide manhunt was over, and James was being booked into the county jail.

They told April they'd gotten a search warrant for her and James's entire house, including computer, social media accounts, and his phone records. The puzzle pieces were coming together. If they hadn't already, they would find MatchStrike.com. Which meant that, if they dug deep enough through the aliases and ghost accounts, they would find my name in his inbox too.

I could tell that the officers questioning April were hoping to learn just how much she knew. They wondered, like I had in the beginning, whether she was naive. Or stupid. Or both. Whether, in the worst-case scenario, she might have even been an accomplice. But April just cried, apologizing for what she knew too late. Apologizing for what she'd suspected but denied, even to herself. She told the officers about Nina and the text messages she'd

gotten in Utah. She admitted to looking up Meghan's name after Domanska called. She cried harder when Domanska asked about Skye.

As more officers arrived and the waitstaff was questioned and released, we learned that the mysterious Marjorie had been located in Caldwell, Idaho, where she had been arrested for helping James elude authorities.

As April fumbled through the sequence of events that had led to the cabin escape, she told police that Marjorie was James's stepmother. James's mother had died when he was six, and his father had remarried Marjorie the same year. They'd divorced by the time James was ten. He'd hinted at but never directly admitted that the constellation of faint scars on his arms, back, and legs—anywhere a t-shirt or shorts would hide—came from her.

Marjorie had tried calling the house in the early years of their marriage, asking to meet April and then the girls. But James had made it clear that he had no desire to see her again. Until he called about the cabin.

When Domanska arrived in Cascade, she drove April and the girls—and me and Skye and Meghan—to a nearby motel for the night. It was nearly eleven at night, by that point. April wasn't under arrest. And the girls were falling asleep at the bar.

When they got to the little log-cabin motel, Domanska led a sleepy Emma by the hand while April carried Kimmie in her arms. Skye and I stayed as April climbed into the king bed next to the girls, not bothering to undress. Meghan followed Domanska down the hall to her room.

"She won't leave without saying goodbye, will she?" Skye asked me quietly as April turned off the bedside lamp, blanketing the room in velvety darkness. The sadness in her voice settled over me, cold and heavy, like fog.

I knew that of the three of us, Skye was the least interested in moving on. She wasn't sure what was waiting for her or how to get there. Not like Meghan, with her grandmother. And even though I hadn't yet allowed myself to drift in the same way, I was ready. Ready to find my Aunt Nelly. To tell her how much she'd meant to me when I was a little girl, and to learn who she was on a deeper level than macaroni necklaces and playdates. The idea of finding her again filled me with a warm glow. I was ready to move toward that light.

"She'll be back," I assured Skye, my own relief and hope filtering through the dewy mist of her sadness like sunlight.

* * *

When Meghan slipped into the dark room an hour later, she came bearing case developments from the past week. Ken—Skye’s manager at the Daily Grind—had picked James out of a photo lineup, as the one who had sometimes flirted with her at the counter.

But the video that showed James’s license plate in the parking lot didn’t show Skye getting into his car. And the Froyo shop’s security footage that did show her getting into a vehicle didn’t show James’s face. When Domanska called Kittleson—who was in bed back in Boise—he made it clear that unless there was some evidence beyond the circumstantial evidence they already had—to connect him to Skye’s murder, the DA was not planning to move forward with charges at this time. The car had been clean. They already had him for Meghan’s murder in Utah. And they’d learned that he met Meghan—and plenty of other women—on a site called MatchStrike.com.

When Meghan told me that Domanska had said my name—the *Brecia Collier* cold case—I felt a shiver of electricity run through me. A detective from Colorado was on his way to Idaho. My parents and sister would finally learn what had happened to me. Maybe other women he’d crossed paths with through the app would come forward. Nicole. Elle. They’d find answers too.

I knew it wasn’t over, exactly. For so many people, the heartache and the horror were just ramping up; however, I knew that my role in this story was finally over. And I was ready to move forward without James Carson.

Then I felt Skye next to me, her sadness curdling into despair.

In an instant, the relief I’d felt curdled too.

The answers her family needed seemed to be right there for the taking. They knew who had killed their baby. But the way things were headed, Skye’s name wouldn’t be heard in his trial. They wouldn’t find her name on MatchStrike.com. Her case would go cold.

I pictured Skye’s mother—the one she had shown us in her memories. The lithe, dark-haired woman with the same curls and golden-brown skin. I imagined her watching the news coverage of the grieving families connected to the MatchStrike case. Reading the details in article after article as lawyers battled to put him behind bars for two murders, not three. Knowing her daughter had been allowed to slip through the cracks because it was “too difficult to prove,” despite the seemingly smoking gun.

Skye's despair hardened into resignation as she turned away to look at April, who was finally breathing softly and deeply in sleep. "It's okay. I knew this might happen." She closed her eyes and added in a low voice, "I still mattered."

Meghan frowned. "You still do." She looked thoughtful, turning her face toward the slivers of moonlight at the corners of the motel blinds. "Maybe there's something they missed. Maybe they'll still be able to charge him for what he did to you."

Skye snorted. "Kittleson probably missed a shitload. He was ready to move on before they even found me."

Meghan scooted next to her, reaching out her hands for both Skye and me. "Then let's look together to see what he missed."

* * *

We spent the rest of the night sifting through Skye's memories.

We watched every painful detail of "James" flirting with her in the Daily Grind.

Every excruciating moment as shy, hesitant Skye got into his car in the parking lot after work that day.

Every unspeakable moment that came afterward.

We could only see what she saw, remember what she remembered, of course.

But as we watched Skye's memory from the coffee shop, the last time he'd come in, I suddenly yelped.

The disposable coffee cup he was holding in his hands. The one with the little smiley face and the eyelashes and the word "James" and "hot chocolate" in loopy letters.

I had seen it before in my own memories, at his house.

He'd shoved it into the desk drawer.

I let go of Skye and Meghan, frantic to tell them. "Skye, was he holding a coffee cup in any of the security footage?"

Skye shook her head. "I don't know. I haven't seen all of it. Just the parts my mom watched over and over. I know he's on camera, though, from when he was in the coffee shop that morning."

I grabbed her hand and showed her the memory of the coffee cup in his

desk drawer. There was no way to know whether it was still there or not. Even if it was, would the detectives executing the search warrant know what they were looking at?

“We have to tell Domanska,” Meghan insisted, already moving toward the motel door. “She’ll listen.”

52. SKYE

KUNA, IDAHO

I just knew Domanska wouldn't find the coffee cup where Brecia remembered.

Who knew if it was still there, anyway? I couldn't imagine him keeping something like that lying around.

While we whispered through the detective's dreams that night, I prepared myself to be disappointed.

My murder would remain unsolved. Lots of murders did. I stayed dead either way, of course. So what did it matter?

But it was harder to lie to yourself without the distractions I'd had while I was alive. No phone. No TV. Just my own thoughts, and the prickles of disappointment that crawled across my body as I stared at the detective—who had fought so hard for Meghan—while she slept.

"She won't find it," I told Meghan and Brecia matter-of-factly.

They didn't correct me. But they didn't stop whispering, either.

I knew she wouldn't find it.

Right up until the moment she did.

* * *

It wasn't tucked into the desk drawer anymore. In fact, it was at the bottom of the recycling bin in the garage, hidden underneath Amazon boxes and food packaging, set to be picked up earlier that week—if he hadn't taken April and the girls and run.

Domanska found it on the Daily Grind security footage—a still frame of James, holding the cup as he walked outside on the morning he'd murdered me—before she found the cup itself.

From the way she lingered on the still frame, zooming in until the little smiley face I'd drawn on the cup, right down to the eyelashes, was visible, I knew she'd listened.

My mom cried when she learned that Detective Andrews, who would

be replacing Detective Kittleson on all cases for the foreseeable future, told her that my murder would be added to the charges against the “MatchStrike Killer.”

All of us—Brecia, Meghan, and I—were there when he told her. We’d been staying with my mom instead of with April or Domanska.

I hoped the best for April and the girls, but I didn’t feel quite the same way about them as Brecia did. I was glad we’d helped her, of course. But I didn’t want to see her horror or her tears as she learned the details of what her husband had done.

I didn’t blame her for what he’d done; however, I was pretty sure I’d still be alive if she’d looked at her husband just a little bit harder, instead of looking away.

* * *

We visited James, who was being held without bond on three murder charges, in jail.

It was my idea.

I wanted to say a proper goodbye. All of us did.

He looked truly pathetic. His beard had already begun its descent into a nasty bird’s nest, and he was wearing a dirty orange jumpsuit that was too short at the ankles.

Confined to a tiny cell with a rangy giant of a man coming down off meth, while awaiting a possible death sentence, he was finally as fearful and powerless as he deserved to be.

We spent a full three days with him.

Each time he fell asleep, we drew close and composed our magnum opus of nightmares.

April, telling the police everything she knew. The steel in her eyes when she told a reporter that the death penalty did not seem excessive.

Women, contacting the news in Idaho and Utah and Colorado to say that they, too, had brushed paths with him.

Elle’s eyes flashing as she talked about what he’d done to her and how disgusting he actually was.

Nicole’s relieved, mirthless laughter as she shared the texts she’d sent to a friend to get out of her date, leaving him alone in the restaurant with the

bill.

Marjorie, selling her side of the story to a tabloid. “My Step-Son the Serial Killer.”

His coworkers from Colorado and Utah and Idaho telling the press that he wasn’t nearly as smart as he pretended to be at work.

The nightmares had exactly the desired effect.

He awoke screaming and panting after a few minutes every time, babbling about “bitches” and “lies.”

He started trying to stay awake, just to avoid the nightmares he knew were waiting for him anytime he drifted off. It made him increasingly touchy, mean, and delirious as the days wore on.

His cellmate, the meth head, didn’t appreciate any of this.

On day three, at two in the morning, Meth Head had finally had enough. As James awoke with a pathetic howl, he threw off his bedding on the lower bunk and hauled James off the top bunk in one swift motion.

James hit the floor with a sick thud and scrambled to the corner of the cell, darting his eyes around and trying to orient himself to what was happening. He favored his right arm, which hung at an odd angle.

Meth Head advanced.

James screamed for help.

The lights in the jail stayed off.

As his frantic screams echoed through the cell block, the three of us walked down the hallway and into the moonlight beyond the barbed wire and bars. We didn’t look back. He’d taken enough from us in life—and in death, too.

There was no pleasure to be found in whatever happened next. Only justice.

* * *

We stayed with my mom for a week after that, soaking in the sunlight of the little kitchen and the home that, unlike the police station or the cabin, felt like a safe haven.

I didn’t linger on goodbyes. And neither Meghan nor Brecia talked about making their way back to Colorado and Utah to see their parents one more time. Knowing there would be reunions with our loved ones in the

future made those final farewells feel less dire.

The three of us spent those last moments searching my memories for a link. Looking for someone who would welcome me into the matrix that held my grandparents and great grandparents and everyone who had come before them.

We finally found it in El Salvador. I'd only been there once—when I was just a baby. We'd visited my mom's sister and her two daughters, Rocio and Erica. Both were close to my age—and still very much alive. But on that short trip, we'd met dozens of others, some friends and some relatives. As I replayed the memories from that trip to San Salvador for Brecia and Meghan, I saw introductions to second-cousins and half-brothers and one great aunt.

I felt silly as I called out to the people in my memories as they greeted my mom with big hugs and reached for my rosy cheeks. What was I supposed to say? "Hello, are you dead too?"

The memories stayed the same until my chubby one-year-old self was hoisted into the arms of my great aunt—Marcia.

"Can you hear me?" I asked her softly as I watched my baby hands grab at her graying hair.

As I said the words, I instantly felt the memory change. Meghan and Brecia suddenly faded away, and I knew that Marcia was looking right at *me* when her eyes opened wide in surprise and she said my name. Not Skye—the anglo-sounding name I'd insisted on when I got to middle school—but my birth name: Estela. *Stars in the sky*. "Ah, mija, Estelita. ¿Cómo puede ser?"

"Go," I heard distantly from the edges of the memory. And for just a moment I lingered in the feeling of being loved from so many different places in time.

I imagined Meghan, finally wrapping herself into the memory of her grandmother like a warm blanket.

I thought of Brecia and her Aunt Nelly.

Then I let myself be folded into the memory, into the arms that were waiting for me.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

If you enjoyed this book, a positive review would mean the world to me. Like other small-press authors, I rely heavily on word-of-mouth recommendations to reach new readers.

I can promise you that I read every single review. Because each one is a new window into this story. And because if you loved this book, *you're* the one I wrote it for—which is why I'm placing this note *before* the acknowledgments.

You can leave a review [right here](#).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere gratitude to everyone who gave their time, talents, and support to this book.

Thank you to Brett Stanfill. Your encouragement, enthusiasm, and feedback have been such gifts.

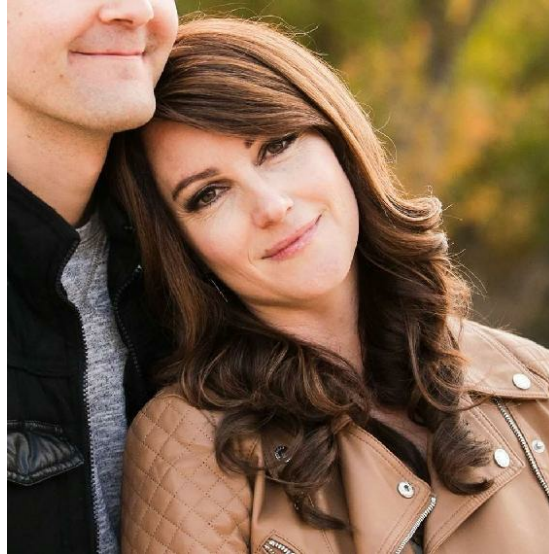
Thank you to Bryan and Jeanne Allen for your friendship, your beautiful brains, and your support with this project. It's better because of you.

Thank you to Stephanie Nelson. I'm so grateful for your generosity and insights. You're a true kindred spirit.

Thank you to my editor, Patti Geesey: You're a true gem, and I deeply appreciate your care with this book.

Last but not least, thank you to Nate for being my first reader, my home, and my best friend.

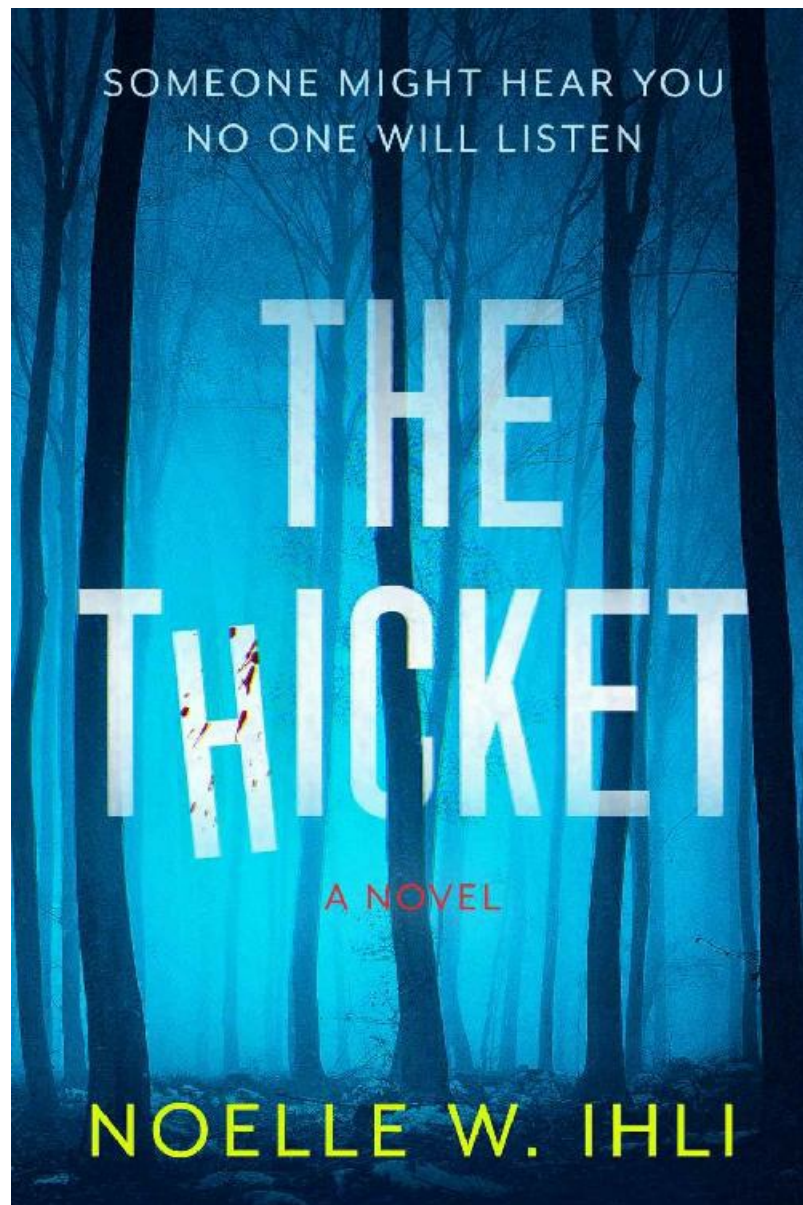
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Noelle's two great passions are murder and horses (separately, never together).

Noelle is a boy-mom to Luke and Max, and a cat-mom to Michelle. When she's willing to wear pants (which is less often than she aspires to wear them), she can be found in mom jeans. Her husband Nate is the best person she knows.

*Read on for a thrilling excerpt
from Noelle W. Ihli's novel [The Thicket](#)*



September 17th

The blond news anchor reveals hardly anything about the two victims except their ages.

But that's all it takes to keep Taylor's phone chirping out text notifications from Maren and Jamie, who are sure that one of the victims went to Minico Middle School. Braden. Or possibly Brandon. Nobody can remember his name.

His sister, Norah, was briefly part of their friend group in middle school. According to Maren, Norah deleted her Facebook profile an hour ago when someone tagged her in the comments section of the breaking story on KQRZ.

Already, 605 people in Rupert, Idaho, have marked themselves "safe" from the incident at the Thicket. The news story has 1,000 shares and nearly as many comments. There are the kids who almost went to the Thicket tonight but had too much homework. There are the frantic parents whose teenager was supposed to be at the Thicket tonight and now isn't responding to texts. There are the wanna-be sleuths posting close-ups of still-frame news footage. There are the creeps who are already insisting that the tragedy is fake news. And there are several people who insist they saw the bodies on the floor of the cabin before anyone realized the blood was real.

Taylor sets her phone to silent and turns on the TV in her room. The news is replaying the same grainy footage of a body bag being loaded into an ambulance. At one point as the camera pans, the flashing lights from the ambulance collide with the strobing light show of the DJ booth at the center of the plaza. For a moment, Taylor's bedroom is bathed in a spray of rainbow beams.

As the blond news anchor—Caroline—repeats the same information about the "horrific tragedy" and "no new information yet," the camera cuts to the facade of a dark cabin. The open door yawns like a mouth. First responders duck beneath the crime scene tape then disappear inside.

Caroline reassures viewers that the glinting blood on the exterior walls of the cabin isn't real, but rather part of the decor at the Thicket.

Taylor wonders how Caroline can tell the difference.

Her stomach clenches a little tighter as she pulls her bedspread closer around her shoulders and imagines what the real blood—on the inside of the cabin—must look like. She glances at the lock screen of her phone and reads the latest text from Jamie. *Does this mean they're gonna close the whole thing down?* It's followed by a frowny emoji.

Taylor frowns too and reaches for the remote to turn off the TV. She'll text Maren and Jamie back in the morning. But before she climbs into bed, she logs into Facebook and marks herself safe — then double-checks the lock on her bedroom window. She's being silly, she chides herself. The person who brought a knife into the Thicket is almost certainly not outside her bedroom window right now. She's just feeling anxious after watching the news.

But then again, he's somewhere.

1

5 hours earlier

“Whatcha been sneaking down to the boiler room, Freddy?” Norah’s brother Brandon points a finger in the direction of the short and slightly overweight Freddy Krueger who is standing directly in his path with an unreadable expression.

Brandon puffs out his stomach and pats it. “Love those Twinkies, huh?”

Norah puts her head down in embarrassment and keeps walking, hoping Brandon will follow. “He’s not really Freddy Krueger,” she hisses in Brandon’s ear as she passes. “Stop being a jerk.”

A group of kids just ahead of them have stopped to watch the standoff. One boy snickers as Norah trips over a crack in the floor, and one of the girls sends a withering glance at Norah, then shifts her glare to Brandon. “Asshole,” she mutters to the two girls beside her, zipping her pink bomber jacket tighter and smacking her thickly glossed lips. “Come on, let’s walk faster.”

A blast of steam shoots out of the wall beside Norah with a high-pitched whistle, and she screams, feeling her face burn red. She hears another ripple of laughter from the group ahead.

For the hundredth time, Norah regrets agreeing to take her brother to the Thicket tonight. Not that she’d had much of a choice. Brandon somehow knew that Norah had not only skipped last period on Friday but that she’d also spent the stolen hour smoking weed with a couple of juniors from Raft River.

So basically he’s blackmailing her.

“Bitch,” Brandon calls after the group ahead of them as he finally gives up on getting a reaction out of Freddy. He says it quietly enough that the girl and her friends probably won’t hear the insult above the other screams and a new blast of steam from the wall.

Norah turns around and tries to set a faster pace, leading the way through the big, red-lit cabin that has been modeled after a boiler room.

More rapid-fire blasts of warm steam shoot through the cool air that smells like pavement after a storm. More bogeymen from *Freddy’s Nightmare*—these ones robotic—pop out from dark corners. Norah bites back a scream each time, and she finally looks behind her to see what’s taking Brandon so long.

He’s meandering slower than ever.

“Can you please hurry up?” she shouts back to him, exasperated and on edge. Haunted houses have never been her cup of tea, but Brandon is obsessed. She stands where she is in the dark room, gritting her teeth at the chaos, waiting until Brandon is finally within earshot.

“Wasn’t Jace’s mom supposed to drive you here tonight? What happened to your actual friends?” she explodes when he is a few steps away.

She feels the sting of the words before they are even out of her mouth. She knows they will dig at her obnoxious but sensitive little brother. Part of her wants to apologize. To ruffle his hair like she used to and try to enjoy their time together. And the other part—the bigger part—just feels mean and annoyed.

Brandon’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t look at her. Instead, he studies the metal pipes that snake up the concrete walls, dripping tiny rivulets of water onto the floor below. Just ahead, there is a glowing furnace. It belches out what looks like hot coals—and bone fragments.

Norah clenches her jaw. “Can we at least move faster? It’s gross in here.”

If anything, Brandon just walks slower. “How long do you think Mom and Dad would ground you for if I told them about *your* friends?” he says.

Someone wearing a black coat and mask brushes past Norah in the dark, and she involuntarily yelps yet again. She’s had enough. “I said I would *bring* you here. I didn’t say I’d walk through this freak show all night.”

She points to a dimly glowing exit sign a few yards to their right. “I’m waiting in the plaza.”

Norah stomps toward the exit sign without looking back at him, so she

won't see whether he has a sneer or a wounded look on his baby face.

She can already feel the anger evaporating as she pushes her way through a wooden exit door and proceeds along the wooded trail that promises to lead her back to the plaza.

Ten minutes later, the volume of the thumping music from the DJ booth tells her she's almost there. It's still mostly light out. The monsters roaming through the plaza aren't nearly as scary as they are in the wooded trails and cabins. The smell of mini donuts makes her mouth water.

Norah decides she will get the largest pack of donuts they have. The kind with cinnamon and sugar. She'll save some for Brandon.

2

Brandon pretends to study the pipes, the furnace, anything until he's sure Norah is gone. For the hundredth time, he wishes he hadn't come here at all.

Andrew had sent out a group text fifteen minutes before Brandon was supposed to leave for the Thicket.

Sorry, bros. 2 much homework.

Five minutes later, Brandon's phone had pinged again. Cole. Then Jace, whose mom was supposed to chauffeur.

So he'd blackmailed Norah into taking him. If his mom knew that Jace and the others had ditched him, she'd make him go to that stupid "Buddies" workshop during lunch again. The one he'd been forced to attend last year when he cried like a dumb baby after some kids wrote "skid mark" in permanent marker on his locker two days into the school year.

Screw Andrew and Jace and Cole. Tomorrow at school he'd tell everyone in first period how he'd walked through the Thicket alone and wasn't even scared. He'd leave out the fact that it was still mostly light out and that he'd conned his sister into taking him. The Thicket made the list of 10 "Scariest Haunted Houses in the United States" on SocialBuzz every year. People would be impressed.

As Brandon reaches the exit to Cabin Nine, the boiler room, he hears a piercing chorus of screams coming from somewhere down the trail. The sun has dipped down a little more, and the shadows from the thick trees are getting longer. He hadn't anticipated how massive the Thicket would be, despite his classmates' assertions. The marked trail connecting the network of haunted cabins cuts a path through thick underbrush, pine trees, and dense

stands of aspens. In the summer, when the elaborate props are dismantled and the generators are gone, the Thicket is a popular hiking spot.

A few feet off the trail, a branch snaps with a quiet pop.

Brandon stops walking but keeps his face neutral in case it's Norah returning with a change of heart.

When he doesn't hear anything else—except a cacophony of screams coming from somewhere in the distance—he feels his stomach clench. Why couldn't Andrew have texted earlier? Why was everyone else suddenly busy at the last minute too?

The knot in his stomach clenches harder. Did any of them actually like him? Was this year different? He had homeroom with all three boys. They'd laughed last week when Brandon stuck the peanut-butter-and-jam side of his sandwich to the whiteboard while Ms. Leavitt had her back turned. And the day after that, Cole had dared him to take down a few of the magnetic letters on the classroom door to turn "Welcome to Our Class" to "Welcome to ur ass." He'd done it.

"They like me," he mutters quietly under his breath and forces himself to keep walking along the trail littered with fallen leaves. But he can't help but wonder if Jace, Andrew, and Cole are together right now. Playing video games at Andrew's house while they eat pizza. Laughing at the fact that Brandon is at the Thicket alone.

Brandon pushes the thoughts away and peers through the thick trees lining the trail to his right. He decides he'll be nicer to Norah when he finally reaches the exit to the plaza. Do the corn maze with her like she wanted. Stop being a jerk. He suddenly remembers the \$20 his mom gave him—to buy treats for himself and the other boys. He feels around in his pocket for the wrinkled bill and decides he will buy one of everything in the plaza. *Then* find Norah.

As Brandon comes around the next bend in the trail, he finally sees the next looming structure—a decrepit barn with one side nearly caved in. The planks of wood holding the structure together are bowing and splintering under the strain.

When Brandon pushes aside the rickety door, the acrid smell makes his nostrils flare. He covers his nose with his jacket. Does fake blood smell that way?

The room is suspiciously quiet. And dark.

As he takes another step forward, the lights suddenly flash on, and the room erupts into motion.

Half of a cow carcass, spotted skin still attached to its body, is jerking violently against the side of the inner wall, making a wet thumping sound. Hanging from the ceiling from enormous meat hooks are more carcasses, glistening red, swinging as they're pulled back and forth by a series of metal wires.

Brandon jumps and swears under his breath, then he quickly looks behind him.

When nothing else leaps out at him, he walks past the swinging carcasses and leans forward to study the half-butchered cow hanging against the wall. The detail is pretty awesome. Gnarled, black-and-white whorls of hair are streaked with smears of manure. And there are actual flies swarming across the jagged, bloody slashes near the head. He can hear them buzzing.

He squints closer, wondering how they get the flies to stay. He's maybe a foot away when he realizes that the "flies" are coming from a tiny projector in the corner of the room, its beam of light masked by the strobing of the spotlights on the carcasses.

In the distance, Brandon hears a long, rattling scream, followed by a loud thumping noise.

He looks behind him, then ahead. Still nobody.

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he snaps a photo of the cow's half-closed, swollen eye covered in flies. Then he sends it to Jace without a caption. *There.*

Pocketing the phone, Brandon moves toward a swath of dirty sheets hanging from the ceiling of the barn, midway through the slaughterhouse. When he pushes the sheets aside, he sees that the strobing lights are gone, replaced by a dim, flickering bulb in the center of the dark room. Lining the walls and the cement pathway are cages full of twitching chickens. Some are missing beaks. Some legs. Some, their entire heads. The floor is covered in a thick layer of white feathers and stained red with blood.

A big guy wearing overalls and a burlap sack covering his face is standing in the corner of the room. He's positioned just behind the furthest row of cages, and he is holding a glinting ax.

The guy takes a step toward Brandon. The front of his overalls is covered with more of the white feathers—and dark splotches of blood. Two eyeholes

and a ragged mouth have been cut into the burlap sack.

He smiles, revealing jagged, haphazard teeth. Then he bellows like an ox and rushes toward Brandon, holding the ax over his head.

Brandon exhales hard and forces himself to stay where he is. “You can’t touch me,” he scoffs loudly, relieved when his voice doesn’t crack.

The guy stops just short of where Brandon is standing, the bellowing scream tapering into a wheedling moan. With one gloved hand, soaked through with red liquid, he points to the twitching chickens on the floor then back at Brandon. He waves the ax back and forth with his free hand.

Brandon lifts both middle fingers and stares back at the actor, adrenaline prickling its way down his back. *It’s all fake.* All he has to do is remember that. A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth as the guy slowly lowers the ax then turns and walks back to the corner of the room, pointing to the exit.

“That’s right,” Brandon calls behind him and walks through another swath of sheets into the next room.

This room is smaller and more brightly lit. In front of him is a sawhorse dining table set with tin cups and plates as well as a red-checked tablecloth. Facing away from him, a woman sits slumped in her chair, face down. There is an ax handle buried between the loose apron strings on her back.

Brandon takes a wary step forward.

When the woman doesn’t jump up, he takes a quick photo of the ax head wedged into her spine. He sends this photo to Cole. Then, pocketing the phone again, he walks through the exit door and back into the gathering twilight.

This night hasn’t been so bad after all.

Available on [Amazon](#).