

A silhouette of a person running on a hill against a sunset sky. The person is in the foreground, running towards the right. The background is a bright, hazy sky with a sun low on the horizon, creating a silhouette effect on the person and the hill. The overall mood is one of determination and achievement.

Capability

What are you capable of?

Leigh M. Hall

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A Novel

Written by: Leigh M. Hall

"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, "I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along." You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

Prologue

Richard

This house is so loud! My children Kaylee and Korbin are fighting over video games or movies. I can't be sure what it is somewhere in the house. The dog is going off at the front window like someone is trying to break in, but it's probably just a squirrel taunting him in the front yard. I'm in the kitchen, failing at trying to clean up the mess from dinner. I don't know why I bother; Melany will only do it again behind me when she returns from her run. I've already broken a dish, and there is water all over the floor. It's the thought that counts, right? I know she will appreciate my efforts, but she will still put on a show by giving out a billion little growls in an overly dramatic way as she fixes everything on her own. She will make it seem like we are a nuisance, but I know she truly loves it because she will do it with the hint of a loving smile on her face. Deciding to give up, I turn and throw the broken plate into the trash, then switch off the kitchen light as I exit. I head to the living room in search of my wild minions.

It's getting late, already well after 9 pm; Mel usually is back by now to send the kids off to bed. Long gone are the days we would tuck them in, read a story, and give several kisses before switching on the night light. With two teenagers in the house, we basically yell "Brush your teeth" and "lights out" around 10 pm. I know these kids stay up way past that playing online; at least the boy does. Melany told me a long time ago that it was important that they are allowed their privacy. We try not to snoop in their personal belongings, including phones and computers.

We've talked with them both about the dangers involved with online predators and how not to release your personal information. Mel reiterates this often with them, and she is always aware of where they are at all times. However, I did install some spyware that she is unaware of, and no, I don't use it to snoop on my wife. I just decided not to divulge this information to her. It allows me to see everything anyone is doing as long as they are connected to our home WIFI. The boy, Korbin, he looks like me; he's going to be tall. I am 6'2", and at fourteen, he is already 5'9". He also has my dark hair, with just a hint of auburn in it, which comes out under the right light. I work outside a lot; my skin has a soft bronze tone to it. That's where we differ because Korbin is an indoor kid. He might have a bit of an obsession

with lesbian porn. I've talked to him about it. He was embarrassed after our talk, the one where I told him porn is unrealistic, and that is not how it is going to happen in real life. His viewings slowed tremendously after that. They didn't stop; oh no, he is fourteen, that will probably never end, not now that he's discovered the possibilities of what can be explored for free online. I don't think this will harm his young mind too much. My friends and I got into our parents' old VHS's at that age, and we turned out fine. Other than that, he has very little interest. If anything at all, he is a middle-of-the-road student. He brings home passing grades but sometimes gets himself in trouble because he likes to crack corny jokes all the time, but because of that, he is pretty fun to be around. He is not very active, but he hasn't gotten too old not to play outside for hours with his neighborhood friends. I worry about him and his lack of ambitions. Mel said to cut him some slack; at least he's not out doing drugs or having unprotected sex. That statement from my wife threw me off, but remembering how she was raised, it made sense. I knew she witnessed first-hand what kids might do to occupy their time if left to their own devices.

Kaylee is a little different; at seventeen, she is two and a half years older than Korbin and has almost an identical personality to her mother. Kaylee looks a lot like Mel. Even though she keeps her hair shorter than her mother does, it has the same milk chocolate appearance and shine. They are both short. I call it pint-size; Mel calls it a disability. They have big brown eyes and plump lips that open for a toothy smile. Sometimes, I compare them to Disney princesses. For the most part, Kaylee is a quiet, occasionally shy girl, but when she's not, oh boy, is she loud. She keeps to herself and has very few friends; the friends she does have are pretty great, though. I noticed her friends are always the ones calling her, and coming by our house, instead of her reaching out to them. Others like her, but I believe she really likes herself the most. She enjoys her own company and a young adult read or paranormal fiction book. Most of the time, you will find her sketching in this tattered old art notebook that she carries everywhere. I think the fact that she is so comfortable with herself at such a young age is a beautiful thing. From what I see, most teen girls have no self-worth and try too hard to make it look like they do. Kaylee, like Melany, has an old soul. They do not seem to care what others think about them; they just do what makes them happy. I loved that the most about Melany when we first

started dating. I know my little girl is going to do great things with her life, just like her mother has done with hers.

I met Melany at a Bar-B-Q held at the home of my old pal David and his wife Stacy twenty-one years ago. Wow, has it honestly been that long? I was a regular over at David's house even before Stacy came along two years prior. Melany was there with her then short-term boyfriend. I can't remember his name, Dipshit, or something like that. Throughout the day, I tried watching her from afar without looking too much like a creeper. She would sip on a beer, walk around and conversate, take shots with her girls. Wherever she floated off to, there was this force pulling me to her. She was vibrant; everyone around her would immediately try to mimic her smile; her energy was contagious. She drank a lot during the party but so did Dipshit. Back then, we were all too stupid and young to think about how we were getting home, and Uber hadn't been invented yet.

As the party came to an end, both Melany and Dipshit were pretty trashed. I have never been a heavy drinker; therefore, I am always nominated as DD when out with the guys, considering I'm the only sober one left standing most nights. Being the last to go, I was saying goodnight to David at his front door. We stood there on his porch, not yet ready to call it a night. I noticed Dipshit asleep at the wheel of his beat-up Dodge Neon by the curb.

"We gonna just leave him there?" I asked David.

"I don't know that dude; he came with Stacy's friend. If he's still there in the morning, I'll shoo him away, or most likely, I'll have Stacy do it."

David was my best friend, loyal, honest, and always had my back, but man, he was a dick when it came to women. I don't understand why they put up with him, but since we first met in junior high, he has always had a steady stream of long-term girlfriends. I blame it on that John Travolta dimple he has in his chin. As I headed to my car, I wondered where the woman, whose smile could bring the Pope down onto his knees to beg for something other than God's good graces, had gone. Figuring it wasn't any of my business, they had probably driven separately, or maybe she was asleep in the car where I couldn't see her. I was secretly hoping she found another way home. I shook it off and got in my own car to leave.

After exiting my friend's secluded neighborhood and driving about a mile down the main road, I spotted a woman walking (well, more like stumbling) down the middle of the street. There were no other cars out, and

the streetlamps kept the area well-lit; she didn't look to be in danger of getting run over anytime soon. Her gaze stayed focused up at the night sky that was littered with stars. Coming to a stop, I saw that it was her, the girl from the party, the girl that was with that drooling-on-his-steering-wheel Dipshit dude, Melany. She was no longer smiling. She had one shoe on, and she was wearing a hot pink fanny pack, which limply hung off her left hip. It was 1999. Who in the hell still wore fanny packs?

I stopped and announced my arrival, but she did not seem interested in acknowledging me. I parked on the side of the road, a little ahead of her, exited my car, and walked over, meeting her strides. Without stopping her stumble or looking my way, she spoke into the air.

"What's up, Doc? Do I know you? I feel like I know you," she asked.

"We met today at your friend Stacy's. I'm Dave's friend, Richard."

She gave me a sideways sneer, and mime gagged, "Yuck, David. You anything like his chauvinistic ass?" I wasn't aware she knew David that well. He was behaving himself that day. I guess she had met him before.

"Umm, well, no, we have just been friends for a long time, but we aren't much alike," I said. She paused her walk/stumble to give me a head-on thumbs up, then continued forward.

"What happened to your other shoe?" Now that I had gotten closer to her, I noticed her barefoot was covered in mud.

"Oh, you know the gophers needed it more. They just stole it right off my damn foot. Can you believe that? Somomofbetches!"

I had no clue what she was talking about at that moment. Steering her toward my parked car, I offered her a ride home, but she couldn't seem to remember how to get there. She said it was her first time going to Stacy's house, and she wasn't familiar with the area.

As I headed to my apartment, I did learn, after informing her of where we were going and that I would drive her home in the morning, that Melany and Stacy worked together at a family dental practice. I've been friends with David for over ten years; I had met every single one of his girlfriends. Stacy was apparently the one for my best friend. I was the best man at their wedding, and I had no idea what his wife did for a living. Wow, I should make an effort to pay more attention in the future. Stacy worked reception, and Melany was a Dental Hygienist. That sounded sexy at first, but then I realized she had her hands in people's mouths all day. That made me

internally cringe. I started to tell her that I was just made supervising foreman for a huge construction company. The company was well known all over Texas. Considering I was only twenty-six at the time, that was at least impressive to me. I was planning on moving up higher using the business degree I earned from Texas A&M; for now, I was on the right track. Figuring that she wasn't going to remember any of the conversations we were having the next day and I probably would never see her again, I decided to be creative.

“Dental Hygienist, that's cool. I'm a songwriter.”

“What?” She perked up at that. “Would I have heard anything you've written?” She asked.

“Maybe, it depends on what you're into. Have you heard of Semisonic?” She gave me a skeptical look like she was thinking but couldn't remember what she was supposed to be thinking about.

“Um, I don't know. I don't think so, maybe, hmm. I listen to all kinds of stuff, but I don't think I know that one. Is Sonic the Hedgehog the lead singer?” She made herself crack up and actually slapped her knee at her own cleverness. However, as she spoke, her head swayed, and she started slurring her words heavily.

“Well, the most recent song I wrote was for them; it's called Closing Time.”

“No fucking way!” She was in my face and screamed this at me.

“You wrote that? I know that song.” She started belting out the lyrics. “Closing time one last call for alcohol go home or stay here.” She was butchering the song, and it was the most adorable thing I have ever witnessed.

As we pulled into my assigned parking spot right outside my front door, Melany got out of the car and hollered back to me.

“Well, here it is. Thanks for the ride, Rolland.” She pulled a set of keys out of her stylish fanny pack and was about to try and open the door next to mine. I gently swayed her to the left about twenty feet.

“It's this way, and the name is Richard.”

Her eyes were barely opened, and she was a little slumped as she could no longer hold up her own weight. She looked me over and said, “Uh-huh, yep, that's what I said.” With a little hiccup at the end to top it off. I was going to offer her my bed, but before I could even turn a light on, she threw

herself onto my sofa. Within the minute, she was snoring softly, her head hanging over the armrest, her mouth wide open.

I set a large burger king cup full of tap water on the coffee table after adjusting her a little so that she wouldn't wake up with a stiff neck. I covered her with what I hoped was a semi-clean blanket. Giving it a sniff, I realized it might not have been, but it would have to do.

I woke that morning to the most fantastic scent I have ever smelled! Well, maybe not ever, but at least not since I moved out of my parents' house and stopped having my mom cook for me. Looking at the clock on my nightstand, I saw it was only 7:13 in the morning. No way, go back to bed. I told myself; it was Sunday. No one should be up that early on a Sunday. Besides, I had only been asleep for four and a half hours.

"Hey there, sleepyhead, you up yet?" Sitting up, I saw Melany leaning on my door frame. Wow, how was she not suffering from alcohol poisoning right then? She was wearing different clothes than the night before, and her hair was slightly damp, she looked as if she had just taken a shower.

"Sorry, did I wake you? I wanted to come and see if you were up because breakfast is ready." Breakfast? I was pretty sure the only thing in my fridge was old sticky packets of taco bell hot sauce.

"No, that's okay. I mean, yeah, I'm up." I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and stumbled out of bed and into what the apartment complex described as a kitchen but was more like a utility closet. She had pancakes, eggs, and bacon on bright blue plates sitting atop my bar. There were even matching cloth napkins next to them rolled up with silverware, just like you would see at fancy restaurants. Looking down, I noticed she had on shoes, two of them, and they matched.

"So where did you get the clothes and the shoes and the food? It's only seven in the morning on a Sunday. There isn't anywhere close to here that's open early enough for you to have done this. Also, why are you up? You went to bed only a few hours ago. Wait, are you still drunk? Are you hungover? Do you feel okay? Is this even happening right now?" I finished my little freak-out and noticed that she was just staring at me.

There it was, that smile. Melany's face lit up, and her eyes sparkled in a certain way that you became momentarily paralyzed. Oh man, what I would have given to make sure I could see that smile every day for the rest of my life.

“Well, good morning to you too. I went to your neighbor’s; she was cooking, I could smell it through the walls. So, I broke in, tied her up. She’s a feisty little spitfire, but she is also the same size as me, so I stole her shoes, her clothes, and her breakfast.” She said all of this in one breath, and with a straight face, I had to admit I was a little intimidated. I had only lived there for about two months, and I had no idea who my neighbor was. I did figure it was a woman because she had a cute little table and chair set on her patio, only girls have shit like that. She also listens to her music extremely loud, but it didn’t bother me because it was excellent music. I didn’t have any intention of going over there and introducing myself. I figured I would eventually run into her, and we could exchange pleasantries then return to our separate boxes. That had not happened at this point.

“Okay, well, thanks. I like the tableware. You think you can go back and get me the rest of the set?” I ask, trying to mimic her smile.

She started laughing; she couldn’t seem to control herself, folding at the middle she was hunched over holding her gut, her long brown hair hanging in clumps around her. When she straightened back up, she had tears coming out of her eyes. She finally calmed down and gave me her hand to shake, then said, “Hi, I’m Melany Farrar; you must be Richard Polk, my next-door neighbor?”

We shook, and I said, “Nice to finally meet you.”

“The feeling is mutual,” she replied. As I took her hand, I could feel a buzzing shoot through my body. I had this deep calmness rushing into my mind. Her palm in mine, those eyes were twinkling up at me, that bright smile that radiated warmth. I thought to myself, *I wasn’t looking for you, but I found you, and now I plan on keeping you.*

Okay, it is 9:30, and the kids need to get ready for bed. Where is she?

Chapter One



Melany

Oh my God, it hurts! I must be dying, I know I'm not dead yet because there surely wouldn't be this much pain if I were dead. Maybe it's a nightmare. This is a pretty vivid nightmare that I can literally feel every ache, every break, every tear slide down my face, then pool into my ears.

Did this really just happen? I can't think. I don't understand. I must be in shock. I am having trouble breathing, but that's the least of my problems. I can't seem to move, and something is wrong with my face. I'm wet, almost all over, but it's not raining. Did it rain? Was I unconscious, and it rained while I lay here passed out in the grass? I must have peed myself; now that I start to get a slight resemblance of a grip on reality, I understand that must be it. I feel the air all over my skin; this must mean I am naked and lying in a puddle of my own urine or maybe even other bodily fluids.

It all happened so quickly, yet it felt like slow motion. This is real; this is happening. I was just brutally raped in my own neighborhood. I am lying on the ground close by a playground that belongs to the elementary school one block from my house. The same elementary school my children attended not too long ago. I've played on that very playground hundreds of times. I walk my dog down this path every morning, and I cross this same path on my way home from a two-mile run every night. I probably have dozens of photos of my kids running around with Spud, our family dog, in the very spot where I lay right now.

I try to look around; my head moves a little to the left "AAAHHHHHH!" not a good idea, don't do that again. What is wrong with my face? If it wasn't for the pain shooting down my throat and through my skull, I don't think I would be able to feel anything. There are lights on around the school and at the basketball court close by. I am not directly in the light, but I am not in complete darkness because of the illumination the

lights give. I don't know how late they stay on, I have a feeling they shut off at some point before midnight, but I could be wrong; it could be way later than I think it is.

The last time I looked at my watch before I was attacked, it had read 9:12 pm .At that point, I remember thinking, "I'll be home in about five minutes." I have no idea what time it is now. How long was it happening? How long has it been since he left me here like this? I feel myself start to panic, and as my breathing speeds up, there is a gurgling in my throat. I start choking on my own saliva, and that only makes me even more frantic. As I flail about trying to gain composure, I am silently praying that someone will please find me soon; I don't think I am going to make it.

A little more time has gone by as I try to gain some patience to at least think. My brain doesn't want to cooperate, I am trying to figure a way out of this, but my mind just thinks, "PAIN!" The lights are still on; I'm thankful for that; being left in complete darkness could push me over the mental edge. I see the glowing halo, and that gives me hope that I might be discovered soon. I'm thankful for the lights, but I also loath them; they allowed me to see him. I never took my eyes off of his face, the entire time I watched him. He never once looked me in the eyes. He just decided what he wanted as if it belonged to him like I was a piece of property and not a person. As I begin to work myself up again, I find that I'm panting, and I sound strange. Not only am I gasping, but there is something seriously wrong with my mouth, saliva is just pooling up, and it's hard to swallow. However, I have managed to mentally start talking myself down as soon as the panic sets in; my breathing is somewhat under control within minutes. I just try focusing on taking tiny breaths; then, in between every five breaths, I slowly swallow the pool of saliva that is collecting in my mouth. Without the function of my jaw, it is difficult. I just push it back with my tongue as much as I can. I do not seem to have much control over that either, and then I work my throat to painfully drink it down.

"Haae," as I try screaming for help, a realization hits me that I can't seem to speak at all. Every time I gain enough courage to yell for help, I fail, and that just sends me into another deep panic. I think he broke me. Am I dying? No, please, some little kid walking to school tomorrow is going to find me, laying here naked and dead! My watch! I was listening to music through earbuds that were connected to my smartwatch. I never bring my phone with me because it's too bulky, and I like getting away from it

sometimes. I can use my watch to make calls and send messages. I do not feel my earbuds in my ears, but then again, all I feel is this radiating pain all through my body. Every time I try to move, another body part screams out with a newfound pain. The earbuds must have fallen out, but I don't believe they are needed to use the watch.

"Heaaa," regardless of how many times I fail at it, I can't seem to stop attempting to call for help. I'm not going to be able to use voice command; I need to try and reach it with my right hand. FUCK, that hurts!!! Nope, okay, right hand, along with my face, are no longer functional. I lay here for several minutes staring into the sky, stars blur in my vision. The twinkle of the light they give silently signaling me to move on. Gaining composure, trying to bring myself to move again, I attempt to recall what happened to my hand. Did he break it? Slowly, after several minutes, I am able to lift my left arm up and into my view.

I have to shake it a little to make the screen come to life. There is a crack in it that was not there before; 10:42 pm is what it reads. I've been here for a long time. I'm surprised no one has discovered me yet. Oh wow, I have been lying here for more than an hour and a half. The little bubble in the corner indicates I have four unread text messages. Bringing my arm down, I try hitting the spot on my watch with my nose to open the texts. After several painful attempts, I see that the most recent one is from my husband. It looks like there is also one from my son, but my vision is getting a little blurry. I don't know if it's from the pain radiating through my body that is causing the tears or if it's fear. I open the text from Richard with my now aching nose, and it says something like, "Where are you?" I just start poking, trying to send anything as a response.

I have to believe, since I am out this late and have taken this long to respond when he gets something crazy that makes no sense, he will know something is wrong.

You have got to be kidding me!! It sends a freaking kissing emoji! I managed to get to the write-in screen and, with my nose, type out "Plump." Pretty sure Siri just put that in there on her own, not funny Siri. My frustration is starting to rise, tears have coated my eyes, and my vision is now completely obscured. After that, I manage to send numerous variations of Help. Hi, Holler, Hello and finally Help. This has taken me so long that my husband has sent several responses, but I'm out of gas before I can read them. The watch screen is now covered in blood that has started coming out

of my nose. My arm drops back down beside me, and everything goes black.

I hear something in the distance that jolts me awake for a moment. Oh no, he's coming back for me. I try moving; I can slither away, hide in some bushes. Movement only seems to cause more pain. I can't even open my eyes anymore; I have nothing left in me. This is it; I can't take it any longer. I hear someone say my name as I slip back into unconsciousness. I manage to crack open one eye lid and the last thing I see are the little stars sparkling above before a death rattling scream pierces the air all around me.

Chapter Two



Melany

I wake up in a blinding, bright room with lots of noise and even more pain. I try to moan; barely any sound comes out of me. Slowly and carefully, I lift my left hand; I see several tubes sticking out of it. Reaching up, I gently touch my face. What is this? Oh no, where am I? There is some kind of cage or metal mask on my teeth, and I cannot open my mouth.

Further inspection, with my hand softly dancing across my face, I get the feeling of several bandages around my jaw and right ear. As this realization hits me, the noise around me gets even louder. Beeping is going off like crazy. I hear someone approaching; more sound comes from my right. Maybe that same someone is running around me, or perhaps there are two people here. I wish they would make themselves known. I now hear multiple voices. People are talking, but I can't make out what they are saying over this excessive beeping.

A woman leans over me, coming into my view. "Melany Polk? Oh, thank Jesus, you are awake. Hi, I'm Pat, your nurse. I know you might be experiencing some discomfort, and you probably have some questions. I am going to alert your husband and your doctor and let them know that you are awake, and then we can get you taken care of." The nurse says all of this as she frantically moves around me, messing with stuff I cannot see. Finally, she quiets that annoying machine. "How does that sound to you? That sound okay, honey?" She is just staring at me now. I am not sure what she is waiting for, lady, I have a freaking cage on my face, and you expect me to respond to you? "I'll be right back; just give me a sec now, and we'll get ya taken care of real nice," she says all of this as she lightly pats my shoulder and rushes off.

Tears well up in my eyes as I realize I am in a hospital. I must have been brought here after being attacked basically in front of my home. I didn't die; I am alive. From the feel of it, I am in pretty bad shape, but I am

still alive! Slowly a numb feeling starts to travel through my body. Oh, I know what this is. That nurse must have pushed a morphine pump while she was over here shutting up that machine. I start to calm down a little, and my breathing becomes less erratic.

I hear chatty Patty walking back toward me several moments later. She is speaking to someone in a hushed tone. “We really need to wait for the doctor so he can assess her.”

“She’s awake?” Richard! Oh, my God! My husband, he’s here. No, he can’t see me like this. NOOO! I don’t even want to know what I look like; this isn’t fair to him. He shouldn’t have to be put through this. I am strong; I can handle this. He can’t! He is fragile; this will destroy him, I am his rock, and without his rock, his foundation, he will crumble.

“Honey, Mel baby, I’m here.” He is hovering over me with his hands, cradling my face so lightly that he almost doesn’t even touch me. Am I really in that bad of shape that my own husband can’t bring himself to touch me? I must be tainted now, someone has ruined me, and Richard will never love me again. He is probably disgusted by me. Lord knows I probably would be, after being used up, tossed around, and discarded the way I was. I’m sure the appeal has lessened at least a small percentage, if not completely.

“Oh, Mel, thank goodness you are awake, I love you so much, and we are going to get through this.” His tears splash onto my face as they fall off the tip of his nose. My husband isn’t a crier; I’ve only ever seen him cry twice in the twenty-odd years that I’ve known him. Once was when our daughter was born. The second time was when he had front row tickets to see Sound Garden, and the show got canceled because Chris Cornell decided to kill himself in the middle of a tour. Don’t judge him for not crying at Korbin’s birth; it wasn’t the first time he had witnessed something like that; it’s not the same. I’m trying to respond, but I grow frustrated at the fact that I am not able to move or speak.

Someone enters the room and grabs my husband’s attention away from me. “Mr. Polk, I see our patient has finally woken up.” Richard, all of a sudden, has moved entirely out of my view. As I stare up at the white, over lit ceiling, I listen to my husband and who I can only guess is my doctor or maybe even a random doctor, not necessarily mine. Still, he did just say “our patient.” They discuss me as if I am not here.

“Yes, Dr. Strattis, she only just woke up a few moments ago; nothing has been explained to her yet. I am glad you got here as quickly as you did. Can we get her up to speed before she freaks out?” Before I freak out? He has to know I am at a level ten freak out already. I hear papers flipping and a stool being rolled across the floor.

“First, let’s get you a little more comfortable so we can go over everything; I want you to visually and verbally understand what I am telling you.” Is he talking to me? I still have not seen this doctor. Everyone else so far has made it to where I can see them right away. Very considerate on their part, seeing as I can’t move my freaking caged in head! But this guy has already gotten put on my shit list due to his rude lack of an introduction. A motor starts to quietly moan behind me, and without warning, my upper body slowly starts to lift.

“Is she going to be okay being moved like that?” Richard asks.

“We can only slightly sit her up, given the fact that she has the brace around her midsection. However, I would like to give her a chance to see us and the x-rays as we discuss them.”

As I am moved into the sitting, or somewhat sitting position, maybe more of a semi-bendy straw position, the room starts to come into view. I can see a portion of what surrounds me, and I get a little peek at myself. I now see that I’m lying in a hospital bed and that my right leg is elevated up in the air at an angle like I’m giving a little kick. It is the only part of me that is exposed on my lower half. The first thing I notice is my toenails. Good, God! How long have I been here?

I am not a materialistic person, and I do not go to salons to get my hair and nails done, but I do keep up pretty well with my own personal hygiene. Hell, I was a dental hygienist for eight years before I became a stay-at-home mom. I know the importance of clean hands and nails. My toenails are all discolored; the large toe is just black and doesn’t even seem to have a nail on it. The rest of them are gnarly and chipped. They have dried up blood all over them, not to mention the entire foot looks to be so swollen that the flesh seems about ready to start breaking out of the skin. The skin all over my foot and ankle is dry, crusty, and cracking. I can see almost all the way to my knee, but I don’t want to. My leg has a series of stitches and bruises. It is set in some kind of vice with screws running all the way down both sides. As I stare at this contraption containing my body part, I remember that I am not alone.

The doctor starts by introducing himself finally. Dr. Strattis is old, maybe in his seventies. He is a short and stocky man. He has a lot of wild, untamed gray and black facial hair. He almost looks like a Muppet; his face screams Fraggle Rock with its orange-tinged skin tone and the large bulbous nose that is covered in pock-like scars. He gets to business immediately and tells me that my right fibula is completely shattered, but my tibia only suffered a small clean break at the base, so that was good. I didn't see any good in this, but okay. His delivery is so very clinical, with no emotion in his tone. He proceeds to tell me that my femur bone on the right side only suffered a hairline fracture, but my right hip is partly shattered. That will cause some long-term problems and may even need to be replaced in the future. As he proceeded going up my body, I noticed that he was only addressing my right side as if a line had been drawn through the middle of me. Now I am like some female version of Two-Face or a before and after comparison. He said that my right wrist was fractured, and my right shoulder had been dislocated.

Once he got to my face, he paused; an inkling of sympathy runs across his features. I look at him. He seems helpless as if he needs a push to allow him to continue.

“Now, your neck seems fine so far on all the scans. We have kept you immobile, in a neck brace as a precaution because of the jaw fracture.” That explains the cage mouth mask thing.

“Mrs. Polk, you have been in a medically induced coma for the last four days while we successfully conducted several surgeries on your injuries. The most crucial and the first one we tackled was your jaw. We had to reattach the jaw, and in doing so, as you may have noticed, it is now wired shut. During the procedure, we did discover a little nerve damage. This could mean a number of things that only time will tell,” the doctor pauses and looks over at my husband. Richard has been mindlessly rubbing the same spot on my left leg. I give it a little shake to alert him that it's annoying and he can stop. Good to know that leg works fine. My husband looks up at me with a small smile then nods for the doctor to continue.

“In about a week, we will be able to remove the elastics in your mouth, but the wires will stay in place for up to five weeks. Once we remove the elastics, you will be able to take some liquids orally through a thin straw with assistance. For now, we will just keep you hooked up to the IV. If we notice any significant weight loss that indicates malnourishment, we will

have to set you up with a feeding tube, but I do not see the need for that at this time.”

Dr. Strattis gets up and motions to a screen on the wall. With the push of a remote, a picture of what I assume is my skull appears. I immediately notice the added hardware in the form of screws on the sides of my mouth and what looks like brackets or hinges on the right jawline.

“After a few months, you should regain full oral function. None of the tissue was damaged, so it will require minimal occupational therapy. However, due to the nerve damage, you might notice a loss of sensation, possibly lack of taste, or even a change in how something tastes to you. Your smile might be a little different than before. Whatever caused your jaw to break split your bottom lip pretty badly, and it required twelve stitches to close up. The scar will be noticeable, but not as much as it is now. Once it starts to heal, it will fade quite a bit. There are more sutures behind your right ear. That is from the point of entry we used to reassemble your jaw, which will heal within a few days.” At this, Richard clears his throat, which causes the doctor to pause. I know he’s having a hard time digesting this. I sure am.

“Now, Mr. and Mrs. Polk, I need you to realize these are minor changes that in time you will get used to. However, there could be more. Some results could lead to tooth decay. In the next year, you might notice your lower teeth start to change color, showing a grayish tinge and maybe even fall out. If this starts to happen, the best action would be to go ahead and have an oral surgeon remove and replace them with a false set or even veneers if you would prefer. If you don’t notice any problems with your teeth in the next year, then you are probably in the clear, and that won’t be a problem for you at all. A more serious issue could be facial paralysis. This is uncommon, and even if it does occur, it most likely will only affect a small portion of your face. There is no correction for the nerve damage at this time, but if paralysis sets in and does not resolve with some therapy, you could see a plastic surgeon to correct any cosmetic changes or damages.” Cosmetic changes? Like the smile he mentioned or more? My face could be paralyzed?

Dr. Strattis continues to go over all the surgeries as he flips through my x rays on the screen. A fog settles over me, and everything around me slowly starts to tune out as I think about where I am, what’s happening to me, where are my kids? Is someone taking care of my dog? Have I really

been here for almost a week? Has Richard been here the entire time? I have this vague memory of lying in a warm puddle as Richard calls my name.

Richard and Dr. Strattis seem to be having their own conversation as I drift in and out of consciousness. I am not paying them any attention until I hear the word “police” and “statement.” Dr. Strattis sees me perk up at this and informs me that we are going to work on a way for me to communicate for the next few weeks. He says that they usually would provide me with a pen and paper. Since my dominant hand is not functional at the time, they will have to find something else for me to answer questions or make requests until my jaw heals. Richard walks over to my bedside and cradles my left hand in his massive calloused palms. I love his hands; he has hard-working man hands. I have always loved the way the roughness felt on my smooth skin. He never failed to make me feel so feminine and delicate with those hands. I do not like the way they feel right now; all I feel is damaged and disposable under his touch. He did not do this to me, and he does not deserve this reaction. Still, I can’t seem to control it. Right now, all I see is a different massive, calloused hand covering my face, keeping me from breathing, reeking me, destroying me, leaving me battered and helpless, and finally putting me here.

“Mel hon, the police have already come by to ask questions. They know you will not be able to say anything right away, but we need to give them somewhere to start. I have already given them all the information I can; you will need to fill in the gaps so they might be able to find who did this to you.” He frantically pleads to me with his eyes like he is trying to see through me, almost as if he looks hard enough, the memory will jump out of my head and into his. Right now, I don’t even know what to think. I must be in some kind of shock because I have no idea what he’s asking of me. How am I supposed to respond? I can’t tell the police because that means Richard will hear, and he will know all the vile things that the monster did to his wife. I know I will have to divulge the information at some point. The bastard needs to be caught; he needs to pay for what he has done, what he has taken away from me.

Dr. Strattis gathers our attention by clearing his throat and standing from his chair. “I think that is enough for now. Mrs. Polk, nurse Pat is going to come in and check your vitals, then give you something to help you rest. I need you to rest as much as possible, and we will discuss more in the morning. By then, we will hopefully have found you a way to

communicate, and you might even have a little energy to ask all the questions I am sure you have.” Dr. Strattis turns to exit the room then looks back at Richard, “Mr. Polk, please come and speak to me before you leave tonight.” Richard assures him he will, and I guess that answers my question about if he’s been here the whole time or not. Good, now I know the kids weren’t just set free into the wild.

“Melany, I am going to let them do what they need and get out of their way. I’ll go home, check on the kids, and take a shower while you rest. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.” He bends to kiss my fingers then reaches up to give me a kiss on the forehead. Nurse Pat is already standing behind him, waiting, but he lingers just a little. He moves slowly as if his feet are glued to the ground, and he has to forcefully pick them up one at a time. He stares at me from the doorway, then slowly sinks out of my view as the bed is lowered. Pat then gets to work with the poking and prodding of my useless body.

Chapter Three



Melany

I grew up dirt poor in a run-down trailer park in Denton, Texas. I still wonder to this day how my mother procured that trailer in the first place. I was the fourth born child of Margaret Fiona Waller; she was born in 1952. My mother had her first child, my oldest brother Kyle, at the age of seventeen. By the time I came around in 1977, you would have thought she was a pro at the mom thing but not Margaret, no, she was what some call a slow learner.

After me, my mother had three more children giving a total of seven. I have three brothers and three sisters, and I am right smack dab in the middle. This meant absolutely nothing. Well, only that I got to take care of the three under me, and somehow no one was responsible for making sure I was cared for at all. My mother was never married, and besides the two siblings above me, Tara and Thomas, we all had different fathers. I never met my father, and if he is still breathing, I don't ever care to either. I do not suffer from "daddy issues." With that in mind, I actually turned out pretty great. Tara threw it in my face once that she had met my father before I was born. She didn't know his name, but she said he used to come around at night to see our mom. He stopped coming once her belly filled with me. Tara may not have been able to recall his name, but I knew what it was; it was on my birth certificate. Talbert E. Farrar, born May 19th, 1949. I did vaguely wonder what the E stood for.

My youngest sister was born when I was fourteen. Although I wanted to stay around to make sure she was safe, cared for, and at the very least loved like I did the other two under me: at that age, I started to become a little bit selfish, putting myself first for once. I was not going to live the rest of my life in poverty, and only I was going to be able to do something about it. Despite all the arrows indicating so, my mother was not a druggie or an alcoholic; she just lacked motivation. She grew up deprived and

uneducated. That was the only life she ever knew. She was content with that and never aspired for anything different. From what I understand, she only went to school through fifth grade before she had to quit to help her own mother at home. Living in squalor and letting your kids suffer was perfectly acceptable in her skewed way of thinking.

By the time my generation came around, we had ventured out a little more. My siblings and I all went to public school and were given daily free meals. The local church gave us clothes from donations. We would get toys delivered in a big black trash bag from the local toy drive at Christmas time. They would even take us off to summer camps every couple of years. Despite the help I received as a child, I never got deep into religion. I believe in the higher power, and my family and I attend Second Baptist on holidays, but we are not members.

When I was fourteen, my mom came home with the pink little fuss ball she called Ella and tried handing it to me. I just turned around and walked straight out the door. I decided then and there that if I was old enough to take care of these kids 24/7 for free, I was old enough to go out and get a paid babysitting job. Hell, I had plenty of experience. It wasn't easy finding people in my area who had enough money to pay someone to watch their kids; I managed to locate a few. By the end of that first summer, I was sitting for seven different families, all within walking distance of the trailer, and I had over \$400 saved up. I knew once school started and I headed into my sophomore year at Denton High, I wouldn't be able to make that much money.

Given that I could only sit for them on evenings and weekends. I would have done it every evening if they had let me. I wouldn't be able to get a legal job till I turned sixteen; babysitting had to do. It turns out no one needed me every night, so I was stuck at home trying to study in a two-bedroom trailer full of screaming kids and a woman who "just couldn't deal."

Once I did turn sixteen, I picked up an additional job at the local Dairy Queen. There wasn't much around us, and any kid looking for a job tried the DQ first. There was a lot of competition for a spot on that schedule. I was lucky to get it. Between flipping burgers and wiping little butts, I had over \$5,000 in savings and a plan to go to school and hopefully become a Dental Hygienist by the time I graduated. I've done my research, and this field seemed to have the potential for lots of new openings in the coming

years, and it paid reasonably well. It was affordable, and there was a trade school offering the courses in Dallas. I could be finished and working in less time than it would take to go off to college. I graduated from high school two weeks after my seventeenth birthday. I am not some kind of an overachiever; I spent most of my life skating by with low B's and C's. Somehow, I was able to start kindergarten before I reached the allowed age, and that always set me a little younger than my peers. Because of this, I still lived at home; I wasn't of legal age to move out, not that that mattered. I'm sure I could have left without repercussions, but I had nowhere to go, so I powered through it.

Commuting back and forth from Dallas to Denton was a challenge. I had used all the money I'd saved to pay for school and could not afford even the clunkiest of vehicles. My older sister Tara was pregnant with her second kid and had moved back into the trailer after her baby daddy hit her for what she said: "is the last time." I was not close to any of my siblings. I avoided all the ones younger than me because I didn't want them thinking I was their momma, and the older ones, meaning Tara and Thomas, were just mean.

My brother Kyle was my only ally in the house. Kyle was eight years older than me, and at twenty-six, he had become a professional pothead. He made his money by playing drums in a local rock band. They called themselves "Eva Braun's Aborted Fetus." I didn't get it at first, but by the time I did, I figured my brother was the one to come up with that. The band was pretty good and had shows almost every weekend lined up all around Dallas. According to Kyle, by the time the band members split up the cash they made, he was left with about eighty bucks in his pocket every week. This was enough for him to stay stocked up with weed and Doritos; guess that's all he needed in life. Kyle owned a run-down old van that he bought when he was nineteen. I think the van was the reason he and his friends started a band in the first place. Since he supplied the wheels, everyone else had to provide the gas. Kyle let me use his van during the week in exchange for bringing him home Whataburger every Wednesday; we didn't have one of those around us.

Occasionally, the band would have an out of town gig that would require them to leave early on a Friday or a Thursday. On these days, I would try and use mom's or Tara's car. At first, this worked out okay; they would just ask for small favors like getting diapers for Tara's boys or

picking up a carton of smokes. I always had to bring it back with a full tank even though when I got in it, the thing was almost always on E, and I wasn't using even a quarter of a tank for my trip. After my first year, Tara started complaining and saying I needed to start paying her insurance. She got into mom's head, and mom started nagging about the same thing. Neither of these women worked; they sat around chain-smoking, leaving their kids in a playpen to cry and soil the same diaper all day. They both collected food stamps, and I am pretty sure my mom got child support for at least one of us.

I was still only doing evening and weekend babysitting jobs. There was no way paying for their insurance was going to happen, plus I rarely even used their cars. A lack of transportation caused me to start missing class and eventually fall behind. I ended up graduating but just by a hair. Still didn't matter, I was done, and I did it all by myself. I was proud of my accomplishments. Kyle was the only one I invited to come to the small graduation ceremony, mainly because I knew he would be the only one that would show.

After the ceremony, we arrived home to find a big commotion going on all around the trailer. Apparently, I had been so busy wrapped in my own life, I didn't even know my brother Thomas had been in jail for the last eight months. He had gotten out that night, and a party was being thrown in his honor. Wow, now that's an accomplishment to be proud of alright! Kyle and I decided to leave and have a celebration of our own. We went and got Blizzards from my old stomping grounds at DQ and sat in his van, getting stoned and listening to Stevie Nicks for hours. We talked and contemplated and argued over theories about everything from ice-cream flavors to the new global warming issue everyone was freaking out about at the time, with the back doors open and the night's stars in our view.

My brother is a genius. He graduated with a 4.0 and speaks fluent French after just taking it in high school. Sadly, he suffers from my moms' lack of motivation, and he is super lazy. I love him, though; he has never treated me with anything but respect. He has a giant heart, a bigger brain, and we have the same smile. Since we have different dads, I assume that we get it from our mother, but I don't think either of us had ever seen her smile.

Kyle told me that night in the van that he actually remembers his dad. Kyle has an eidetic memory; I am not surprised. He can recite verbatim a conversation you had with him ten years ago. My brother can also describe

what you were wearing and what the weather was like that day. I think he smokes so much weed to slow his brain down. It must go nonstop, and at some point, he has to get overloaded holding in all that information. He said he met his dad once when he was three years old. Mom was pregnant with Tara and had a steady boyfriend living with them. I assume he meant Frank, Tara and Thomas's dad. Frank is the only one who ever came around to see his kids, who we sometimes would call the "Terrible T Twins." They aren't twins though, Tara is five years older than me, and Thomas is two years behind her. They like to rub it in our faces that they got to go to their dads on the weekends and that they had a Nintendo at their dad's house that we never got to play. He even took them to Disney Land one summer; we had to listen to that story a million times.

As I got older, I realized that Frank couldn't have loved those brats too much; otherwise, why would he return them to that hell hole of a trailer every other Sunday.

Kyle said that his dad came to pick him up one day. He had a blue truck, covered in mud, and it only had two seats in the front. His dad was wearing a black shirt with holes in it, blue jeans, and old worn-out tennis shoes. Kyle said he remembered thinking that his dad might give him those shoes one day and he could practice running. At the time, he only ever had a pair of flip-flops. Oh, the things a three-year-old's mind comes up with can be strangely beautiful. His dad said he was going to take him to McDonald's to get a happy meal, and at that, Kyle's stomach gave a loud growl in delight. He had only ever had a happy meal once, but it came with a little toy car that he still had even months later and played with every day. However, they never went to McDonald's. His dad drove until it was dark out, then pulled into an apartment complex. He told Kyle to go play at the playground across the street while he went and visited a friend.

After what Kyle said was "a million years," he was freezing, starving, and had already wet himself a couple of times. Walking back over to where his dad parked the muddy truck, he found that it was gone. That was it. That's the only time Kyle ever met his dad, and the waste of space only said two lines to him. Kyle stayed the night on the hard, cold slide in that playground until a resident of the complex discovered him. Then he was eventually returned to my mom. He said she didn't even seem surprised by that man's actions, and even at the age of three, that didn't surprise him at all either.

My mother passed away when I was twenty-one; she had cervical cancer and didn't even know it. She just started getting sick, never went to a doctor, and never got any better. Her entire life, the only thing she managed to do was reproduce, suck off the government's tit, then rot away. Ella was the one to find her after she wouldn't wake up. My seven-year-old little sister ran to find help from a neighbor because the trailer never had a working phone line.

I had already started working at a dental practice and had moved into a little one-bedroom townhome in Addison, Texas. Tara and Thomas had also moved on; the only adult left in the house was Kyle. After our mother was dead and in the ground, he stayed and took on raising Racheal, my little sister, who was then fifteen, Brian, who was rowdy as hell, had just turned twelve, and of course, he had planned on also raising Ella.

It turned out Ella had a family none of us even knew about. A few weeks after my mother's funeral, a caseworker showed up at the trailer with an older couple. This older couple were the parents of Ella's father. Her father was serving time in Huntsville, but they managed to get guardianship through the courts after my mom passed away.

They agreed to stay in communications with Kyle, and that summer Kyle and the remaining two kids he then cared for went to visit Ella on the massive forty-acre ranch. To this day, she still calls that ranch home. When he told me all of this, I couldn't believe those people didn't fight for her sooner. Kyle said it turns out they had been, but because she had an able-bodied mother, the court wouldn't take her away from that. He did well by them, but I expected nothing less from the most exceptional person I had ever met.

I do not keep in contact with any of my siblings except Kyle. None of us had a happy childhood, and I think we secretly decided to stay away from each other so we wouldn't have to talk about it or even think about it. Kyle is still my best friend, though.

He still lives in that nasty trailer in Denton, but he keeps up with it now, or at least that's what he tells me. He says, "Hey, it's all paid for, so why not?" He spends every holiday with us; he is the only uncle my kids know, and I wouldn't have it any other way. He also stays in touch with Racheal, Brandon, and Ella and sometimes updates me on their lives even though I never ask.

Richard's childhood was a lot different. He grew up in a loving Christian home; he was the only child the good lord blessed upon Phillip and Barbara Polk. His life as a child, and the stories he and his family tell, are so unbelievably different from my own that it used to sound fictional. When we got engaged, I was a little ashamed that he had this loving community of family members, and I was basically an orphan with only an overweight pothead sibling to call my own. I mentioned doing a small, private ceremony on a beach somewhere during our early wedding planning; he was on board immediately. His mother, not so much, of course. She can never seem to get on board with anything that was my idea. She was not happy with the fact that I was taking away her right to invite whoever she wanted and basically control my wedding.

Richard didn't care, though. We had our private beach ceremony; his parents were invited, and they decided to attend, but that was it. My brother Kyle understood and was happy for me no matter what. I don't know if it's because I despise Richard's mother to a certain extent or because she is always trying to manage my husband. I felt sorry for his dad.

Mr. Phillip Polk reminded me of a sad, abused puppy. He just followed his wife around and did everything she told him to do. She was kind of mean to him and would reprimand him in front of people like he was a child. He always looked so dour and never had much to contribute to any conversations going on around him. He worked for the City of Arlington his entire life and passed away from a heart attack just two months after he retired. I have a feeling it was being stuck with his wife's nagging all day that did it to him.

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I have been in the hospital for two weeks now, which includes the four days I was unconscious. I was set up with a tablet so I can type in with my left hand; this is how I have been communicating for the last several days. The first thing I ask about is the kids. I learn that Kyle has come down and is staying at the house, and my husband has taken a leave of absence from work. Between the two of them, the kids should at least survive. I got the elastics out of my mouth last week; after doing well on a Barium Swallow Study, I've proven my skills with the straw enough that I am allowed to have a smoothie today. Dr. Strattis states that I might be able to go home as early as next week, given my progress. He then asks about our home situation; when he learns that I am a housewife and do everything for

everyone, he quickly changes his tune. I guess he realizes that either no one is going to help me, or I will get frustrated, causing me to get up and do everything on my own. He is right on both counts.

I also have no desire to see my house right now. I love my brother and my kids, but they are like a pack of wild hogs just rolling around in their own filth. I am sure my husband is trying, but he also spends most days up here with me. He asked if I wanted to see the kids. If I did, he would be glad to bring them up, and they have been asking to come. However, I said absolutely not, not until I am able to speak to them. They do not need to see their mother in a muzzle.

Unfortunately, the first visitor I get is a set of police officers hounding me with questions; I cannot answer all that well. I know they are doing their jobs, and I thank them for that, but do they have to do it so harshly? It's like they don't have a compassionate bone in their body.

After the sedation fog lifted, the memory of what happened to me came flooding in. I have nightmares every night; I can't get that bastard's face out of my head. I do not know him. I had never met him before, I have searched every nook and cranny of my brain, and he just isn't there. Where did he come from? Why me? Was I just a victim of opportunity? Did I just happen to catch his eye while I was running, and he took a chance? Or was I targeted? Did he know me, stalk me, was he lying in wait? These are the questions jumping around in my mind. They are also being fired at me by Detective Hendrix every time she comes to "check-in."

Once I was given my communication tablet, a nurse came in to describe what they found on my rape kit. She was very gentle in explaining what the reports tell her had happened to me. It didn't help. No matter how compassionate a person is, no one could have delivered that information and it not sting. She said that there was both vaginal and rectal tearing. They also did find a large amount of semen, and skin follicles were scraped from under my nails. He didn't even bother to use a condom, which tells me he doesn't even care about himself; for all he knew, I could have had a disease and infected him. She informed me that all of this evidence had been sent over to the Plano Police Department, and Detective Shawna Hendrix was assigned to lead my case. They did a pregnancy test, which came back negative. I am on birth control: that wasn't a big concern anyway. They did labs for STD's that will have to be repeated in six months, but so far, everything is clear.

Detective Hendrix informed me that they had run the samples, and no matches in the system have come up.

“That only means he hasn’t been caught doing anything before. This does not mean we won’t catch him,” she says. I like her a lot better than the uniformed officers from the first visit. Her dark chocolate skin makes me want to lick her. That’s probably because I am suffering from chocolate withdrawals and a little delusional from the pain medications they keep me pumped full of every day.

Without being able to use my voice, I give the best description I can. He was tall with a heavy build but not fat. Dark eyes, tan complexion, but I can’t be for sure. It might have just looked that way in the shadows—long, dark hair, almost to his shoulders. It looked like his hair was pulled back into a ponytail and broke loose during the struggle; strands were hanging in his face. I didn’t see what he was wearing other than a tee-shirt with some kind of car logo. I couldn’t tell what nationality he was; maybe white, maybe Hispanic. He was clean shaved, and had a slender pointy nose. He never said a word, and I have no clue if he had an accent or what he even sounds like when he speaks. Nope, he never spoke to me, never looked at me, just destroyed me, and went about his life as if nothing had happened.

He was inside me; he forced himself into me and even possibly felt pleasure from it. I had never had anal sex before. I always thought of that opening as an exit-only kind of area. He invaded my body and released his fluids into me like he had a right to do so.

I told Detective Hendrix that I had never seen him before, but he seemed to have grabbed me at the perfect spot. Because I was not in view of the street and far enough from the school that if someone were to have walked by, they might not have noticed us. I do not believe anyone walked by. I run that path every night, and I never see anyone out by the school after 9 pm. Well, no one but my ignorant ass. Maybe they all knew about him. Why didn’t I get the memo that there was a rapist that stalked runners by the elementary school at night? No, I know this hadn’t happened before. Even the police said that an assault of that magnitude hadn’t happened in some time, at least not in my area. She didn’t elaborate on what “some time” meant, and I didn’t ask, but I’ve lived in my home for many years, and I’m sure I would have heard something about an assault like this happening around me.

Detective Hendrix told me that my neighborhood had been alerted to the incident, and my name had not been released to the press. I'm sure once all the neighborhood moms see who's not showing up to anything, they will figure it out. I am not a social person; I have few friends, and I do not care to go out much. I enjoy spending time with my family; we attend most of the neighborhood events at the local club and park. I have made a few close mom friends through my kids. Most of them I picked up when Kaylee was in soccer. We were a tight group for years.

We do not hang out or talk often, as we are all busy with our own lives, but when we are at the same social events, we tend to seek each other out. I am sure once they put the pieces together, a meal train or something will get started, and our house will become invaded with do-gooders trying to help. I am also sure Kyle will appreciate all the attention; Richard, not so much.

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Richard and I purchased our home in 2003 after finding out I was pregnant with Kaylee. It took so long to build and close on the property that we almost didn't make it in time. Kaylee was born four days after we had finished unpacking. When we got married in 2001, we had joined forces, and Richard left his one bedroom to move in with me and share mine. Once we knew our little family was growing, we bought a brand new house in a brand new development in the beautiful city of Plano, Texas.

At the time, it was a prominent place, and people were tripping over each other trying to get a lot in the new up-and-coming subdivision, with its master plan community center and water park like pool. When we first moved in, the majority of our neighbors seemed to be arrogant white people. We did not fall into that category. Well, I mean, yeah, we are white, and maybe I used to be a little pretentious. Why wouldn't I be snooty? I went through hell to get where I am in life; I had a right to lift my nose up just a little.

Over the years, the demographics have changed a bit, and our community seems to be a lot more diverse than it was at first. All those pretentious people got bored with their homes once the shine wore off and chose to build newer, bigger ones to prove to no one at all how fabulous their lives are.

If you are raising kids right, not the way society tells you to raise them, but raising them to be decent, happy adults, then being a parent will cure any snobbish ailments you may have. So, I may have been put in that

snobby category at one point, but I sure as hell didn't come from that, and I am not there now.

Detective Hendrix assured me that they had patrols circling my neighborhood throughout the day and night in search of any suspicious activity or characters. Every officer on patrol had a copy of the perpetrator's description. My assault and rape happened on March 4th. It had already been over a month, and they have come up with nothing so far. The detective was continuously reassuring me that they were still actively on the lookout and had a good feeling that something would break in the case soon. This did not give me a good impression at all; I'd seen cop shows on TV. I knew the whole forty-eight-hour rule. The odds were definitely not in my favor.

Chapter Four



Richard

As long as I've known my wife, she has always been a very positive and happy person. At least around the people she loves. Meeting her for the first time, some might find her a little off-putting. She can sometimes show little interest in new people, and when the dark humor (she mostly only ever shows me) comes out, it can push people away. However, to me, she radiates good vibes; it just seeps out of her pores.

I couldn't understand it at first; it's like she never had a bad day, never got angry, or came across anything that would just make her snap. Don't get me wrong, she can throw a fit with the best of them, but they never last long, they are never directed at anyone, and she always laughs it off when it's over.

I know she didn't have a happy childhood; life was hard for her, and I am sure there were very few moments when she could bring herself to laugh off anything as a kid. I know this is why she is the way she is, and it breaks my heart a little for the child I didn't know, but I am grateful for the wife I got out of it. She is just happy to have escaped that life. She is a survivor, and as a survivor, she knows how bad things can get. She is going to enjoy every second of the good.

The last month has been heartbreaking, seeing her like this, battered and bruised. She will hardly make eye contact with anyone. I know she is ashamed, but I wish there were a way I could make her understand that she has absolutely nothing to be ashamed about. Raising our kids and taking care of our home has always been my wife's main priority.

She didn't have any hobbies or close friends. She never seemed to tire of the kids being around her all the time, and I believed she truly missed me when I spent too much time away from the house. Mel told me she was married to her best friend, and that was all she needed in life. As the kids grew older and needed her less, she knew she had to start doing something

for herself. If she waited until the kids were gone, everything would hit her at once, and she would just fall apart with a crater-size-hole left in their wake. That's when she started working out. She joined a neighborhood cross-fit class that some of the other moms did during the day while the kids were off at school. After a few months, she started adding in little jogs around the neighborhood.

Mel was never anywhere close to overweight. She was and still is cute, petite, maybe a little thin with gentle curves. But let me tell you, after a few months of her doing that cross-fit stuff, she was smokin! Her body was all tight and sinewy; I just wanted to bite her because she looked like a juicy piece of meat right off the grill. I used to work out religiously as a teenager; you have to do that if you want the girls to notice you. Now I spend a lot of time on job sites, and with all the physical labor I am always helping out with, a workout is no longer necessary. After that first year, she started running in 5ks and then 10ks. Before long, she was running almost every night and sometimes during the day if it was nice outside.

That first Christmas after she picked up her new hobby, thinking I was the most brilliant husband on earth, I got her a treadmill. I had it boxed up in the bed of my truck, and I knew sneaking it in past her was going to be a challenge. Despite how Melany and I met, my wife was not a heavy drinker. I mean, yeah, when we went out, she would throw them down until I had to carry her out of the bar before she started dancing on the tables, but she didn't drink on a daily basis, only socially. That night on Christmas Eve, once everything had calmed down and the gifts from Santa had been laid out by the in-house elves, meaning us, I talked my wife into having a couple of nightcaps on the porch with me. She sometimes likes to sip on whiskey straight. She said it makes her feel "grown-up." That was hilarious to me because the first time I heard her say this, she was thirty-six years old. I knew a few of those would knock her out pretty quickly. Once she was snoring, I set out to put that thing together right in front of our half-dead, fire-hazardous Christmas tree that was covered in construction paper ornaments the kids had made over the years.

She woke up the next morning and was a little speechless, I asked her if she liked it, and she assured me that she did. Not long after that, I noticed it always seemed to stay folded up. I was starting to think she never used it. I asked her about this, and her response was: "You see, Richard when I started working out, it was supposed to be a hobby. Something to not only

keep me healthy for the grandkids we will have one day but to keep me busy. I liked working out because when I'm doing it, my mind kind of goes on hold. I don't seem to think about anything. I just focus on my body or listen to the music that's playing. No other task that I do clears my mind as much as working out or running does. I prefer running because it seems like the only thing I do just for me and all by myself. Having this treadmill makes me think of it as a chore more than a hobby now, and that just takes all the fun out of it."

I understood; man was I an idiot. If she wanted a damn treadmill, she would have just gotten herself one. After that fiasco, I asked her what she wanted for Valentine's day, so I wouldn't totally screw up again. She sent me a link to her Amazon wish list, and every holiday is now perfect.

We had started going out again now that the kids didn't need sitters. We would meet up with friends and associates every couple of months. Old co-workers of Mel's still invited her to happy hours on some occasions, and she would always drag me along if I were in town. Just like old times, if Semisonic ever came on, my wife would shout, "Oh, guess what, guys, my husband wrote this song!" Most people would just roll their eyes, but the friends of ours that knew the story would shout out, "No, he just tells that to chicks so he can get laid!" For some reason, Mel never tired of that charade.

You could not be in a bad mood when out with Melany. She would just bounce around you like a fairy with her long shiny brown hair that always has a slight curl to it. She didn't wear much makeup, but her brown eyes would always pop when that bright smile was on her face. When I would find her slender frame nuzzled up next to me, and her big brown eyes gazed up, sending all the power of the universe through that stare, there was never anything I wouldn't give her.

Now looking at my wife, it's hard to picture that happy woman surrounded in a cloud of joy. She looks like the life had been sucked out of her, and she is just a shell waiting to be finished off. It hurts so bad; I cannot even imagine the pain she is going through. The pain I feel is unbearable. She can't move; she has multiple broken bones that still have a while to heal. Her wrist and shoulder are doing much better, and she is even using her right hand to type now. Her leg is out of the metal splint and in a regular cast.

Mel ended up having to go back into surgery for her hip after a fall from the bed. She had woken up from a nightmare and just went crazy one

day when I wasn't with her. She pulled out her IV and tried getting up from the bed. Then she landed on her already battered side. It took several staff members to calm her and get her back in the bed. They sedated her after that and didn't discover the rebreak until the next day.

Dr. Strattis says once they get her up and mobile, it wouldn't be long for that to heal. 'Minor-setback' was the words he used. She has been drinking from a straw for a couple of weeks now. Dr. Strattis mentioned that Mel should get the wires taken out of her mouth within a week, or even sooner; it was really up to the Facial surgeon on that one. I have yet to meet that doctor. I hope we can get through this. My wife is the strongest woman I know, but even Wonder Woman can only handle so much.

~

I haven't confided in many people about what happened. Even the few friends and family members I did inform only got a brief description of what was going on with Mel. I didn't tell anyone what had actually happened to her; I have left out the rape part. Melany is a very private person; I will leave that up to her. She can decide who she wants having this information. However, word got out somehow because several of Melany's friends have come by the house in the last month. Most of the women try to clean, cook, and I even had one hit on me. I am not sure if I should tell Melany about it. I really do not want to see that woman again. I know if Melany knew what happened, I wouldn't have to. She does not need to deal with drama right now, I dealt with it, and if it happens again in the future; I'll just tell the hag's husband.

Some of her friends have asked if they could visit her. Melany has been adamant that no one other than myself and Kyle are to visit.

My mother, who moved up to Nebraska after my father passed away three years ago to be close to her sister, keeps calling to check up on Mel. She wants to fly in. I told her to wait until Melany gets home, but I am sure we could use her help then. Another type of visitor we had was some reporters, three of them so far. I don't know how they got our information or found out the woman from the school was my wife. Melany's name was never mentioned. I asked the police, but they were adamant that the leak didn't come from their end. Detective Hendrix said sometimes it comes from an employee of the hospital. According to her, these reporters are like vultures; they would hound the janitorial staff for any information, going as far as paying for it.

The police interviewed me along with our neighbor Maureen. They needed to know if anyone in her life might have been capable of doing this to her. Did someone have a vendetta towards her? Had she made any enemies lately? We could not come up with any possible suspects. I was asked about my life, at work, and home. Did someone possibly hold a grudge against me and took it out on my wife? I couldn't think of anything recent; they said it didn't have to be recent. I did have a falling out with a previous employee, but he never tried contacting me after I let him go, so I didn't think to mention him at the time. I couldn't even remember his name, and I am sure he doesn't hold what happened to him against me. He had a family of his own. No way would he do something like what happened to Melany to anyone.

Three different outlets contacted me, all of them calling several times. I was so wrapped up in being at the hospital for Melany, I didn't answer the initial calls. They left messages that remain unanswered. I came by the house one afternoon after Mel woke up. I was accosted by a woman coming out of a news van in front of my house. I was frazzled and just told her, "not now." After that, Detective Hendrix told me not to talk to them; if I was to say anything at all, just say they had the wrong person. If I confirmed that the woman attacked at the school was, in fact, Melany, the press would most likely release her name. We would never get any peace after that. Three days after the run-in at my home, that same woman reporter stopped me in the hospital parking lot.

I did just as the Detective told me, but I could tell by the look on her face she didn't believe me. She continued to stalk the house for another week. Melany has been in the hospital for so long now; I hope these reporters just give up. I thought it would be better if I didn't share this information with my wife.

After finding out her face was about to get freed, my wife agreed to have the kids come up first. After that, her closest friend Maureen (Maureen was the seventy-something-year-old pothead that lived across the street, my wife loves her, Mel seems to have a soft spot for that type) could come up. I guess Mel informed Maureen via text about what happened because she seemed to know a little bit of the details last I talked to her. I couldn't gauge Mel's reaction to the news about my mom coming to stay with us. If I had to guess, she was grimacing under that wiring on her mouth. My mother and my wife got along just fine, but they never could seem to become

friends. I asked Melany about this shortly after our wedding, and she went on a tangent about how my mother judges her and thinks she isn't good enough. How she will never accept her as my wife and secretly wishes I would leave her. I had no idea where this was coming from. Melany says, "Of course, you don't. You're a man. You don't know anything unless it's spelled out and given to you in a pop-up picture book!" She was not wrong about that one.

After having Korbin, my wife confessed that little boys are special to their mommas, and no woman will ever be good enough for hers. I figured that now she might realize where my mom was coming from all along. That didn't make her immediately call her up and invite her to brunch, but she understood her a little better.

I had this conversation with Kyle because he is a good judge of character, and he seems to remember everything that's happened, ever. He told me he had seen it in my mom as well.

"It was in her facial expressions and her body language. Bruh, you don't have to say a fucking word to offend someone." I didn't know how to take that. Was I going around offending people with my face alone or something? I really wish someone would hurry up and make that popup book I so desperately need.

Chapter Five



Melany

I got the wires taken off of my jaw two days ago, and my occupational therapist Lori has come in at least five times to do oral exercises with me since then. She is really freaking bubbly, but she's cute. I don't mind her over-eagerness. She is about fifty pounds overweight and wears her scrubs two sizes too small, but she walks around like she is perfect, and that's all that matters, girl. Good for you, Lori!

I am guessing she is about twenty-five, and she has confessed that she is newly single with no kids. Lori tends to have a constant stream of guys she dates but can never find one she wants to hang onto. She also admitted that she secretly does not like kids, so she never plans to have any. I do not blame you, Lori. She apologized if she seems a little pushy and for stopping by more than scheduled. I have been on her TBD schedule for a while, and she couldn't wait to get started. I like talking to her; I would probably like talking to anyone at this point, considering I haven't been able to talk in a while. Lori is good company; it is helping me deal with my current situation when she is around.

Late in the afternoon, Lori and I are on our third visit of the day. She only spends about ten minutes at a time on me because anything longer than that becomes painful. We are interrupted by a knock on the door. I look up and see Richard peeking his beautiful yet tired-looking head in and appearing bashful.

"Is now a good time, or should we go to the waiting room for a bit?"

I rasp out, "Yes, now is great. If I wait any longer to see them, I am going to forget what they look like." Opening the door all the way, Richard steps aside, letting Korbin shuffle in first, followed by Kaylee. They just kind of pause there at the entrance with their arms hanging at their sides like they are awaiting instructions on what to do next.

“Well, come on in, I can’t promise I won’t bite. I did just get the use of my teeth back, so that actually might happen.” Kaylee lets out a long sigh and is at my side in two steps; her brother is not far behind.

“I am going to check on some other patients before my shift is over, so I will be around for a bit. If you need me, just let me know; otherwise, I will see you in the morning,” at that, Lori lets herself out and shuts the door behind her.

“Mom, what hurts? Can I hug you without hurting you?” Kaylee looks eager like she is going to explode if she can’t touch me. Korbin seems a little more hesitant. I give her a slight nod and reach my arms out.

As she leans into me, peeking over at my son, I say, “Korbin, you better get your butt in here right now.” He immediately joins us in our group hug surrounding my hospital bed. The emotions are overwhelming, and I cannot hold back the tears that come bolting out of me. All three of us are shaking and doing an identical ugly cry thing as I hold my babies close to me; we are currently the definition of a hot mess.

I have never spent more than one night away from my children, and even then, it had never been both of them at the same time. During summer or on weekends, the kids sometimes would stay the night at a friend’s house. I would always get rewarded for my selfless sacrifice by having a house full of kids the following weekend. Richard and I have never even gone on a vacation without these two. Every time we have tried to plan a getaway with just the two of us, I always say, “Oh, the kids would love this,” and we end up booking a package for four or five. Every few years, my brother Kyle would tag along on our family vacations. We were his family, after all, and the kids love him. When Korbin turned six, we all went to Disney World in Orlando for his birthday.

During that trip, Kyle asked me as we sat on the patio of the condo that we had rented for the week. We were enjoying the evening air and a cold one after the kids had gone to sleep.

“Why did you wait so long to bring the kids here? Kaylee is already eight. You guys have plenty of money. Why wait so long for Disney?” Kyle asked. My response was, “Kyle, my kids do not have photographic memories like you. If I am going to spend a few grand on a vacation, they better freaking remember it.” He gave me a soft smile and said, “It’s an eidetic memory, and Disney World is so much better than Disney Land; eat

your hearts out, Thomas and Tara!” We laughed so loud Richard had to come out and quiet us.

We couldn't help it; for those seven days, we were little kids given the greatest gift a child could ever imagine. I got into a bit of trouble because I lost myself for a minute when I saw Winnie the Pooh; I just started running toward him, screaming. On my way there, I accidentally knocked into a toddler. I only paused for a second, saying I was so sorry, before I continued making my way to my best friend. Little did I know there was a line to see my oldest and dearest companion, and I was expected to get in it? Oh, the audacity! Of course, I had already run up and hugged him as Kyle stood a few feet away, snapping a photo before they could pull me away from my Pooh Bear.

Nothing happened to me; apparently, that type of behavior occurs all the time. While Kaylee and I were having breakfast with Beauty, she told me she once saw an old lady in a walker push a four-year-old off to the side so she could get next to Minnie. Saying, “Out of my way short stack, you have all the time in the world to see her, I'm almost out.” Well, that made me feel a little better for my temporary insanity. I was also mentally reminding myself to ask Maureen if she ever met Minnie at Disney World; that sounded like something she would do.

Richard clears his throat from where he stands behind the kids. We all slowly peel ourselves away from each other. Looking up at my beautiful family as they stare down at me in pity, something comes over me. I could see the fear in them, they were lost, and they needed me to find them.

Patting the bed by my left leg, I tell them to hop on, they do, and we spend the next hour catching me up on what was happening in their worlds. Apparently, dad made nothing but chicken nuggets in the air fryer if he wasn't getting take-out or a neighbor wasn't dropping off a dish. Korbin said he didn't mind the nuggets, but if he had to eat one more casserole, he was going on a hunger strike. I already knew that was a gigantic load of bull because this kid didn't pass up food, no matter what it was.

Kaylee is finishing up her junior year at Plano East High, and she was a little stressed but told me not to worry because of her English teacher. She had been helping her almost daily after school. I was incredibly touched by all the hands that have reached out to help my family in my absence, but I was also a little hurt that life seemed to just go on without me.

Richard seemed to sense my distress and piped in with a soft squeeze of my shoulder, and said, “We need you, Mel, we love you, and the house is in utter chaos without you.”

I release the breath I had been holding, “That’s good to know. I can’t have y’all thinking you can survive without me.” Richard and I share a little chuckle, but the kids don’t seem to find our form of humor at all entertaining.

“That’s not even funny, Mom!” Korbin is spitting out his words as new tears glaze over his eyes, threatening to spill down.

“Oh, honey, I am sorry, I don’t mean to joke about it, but I am okay. I will be coming home soon, and all will be back to normal, I promise,” I feel horrible about that promise. I lay helpless in a hospital bed, and I should not be making promises to my family that I may not be able to keep. Korbin has to take a couple of deep breaths to calm down as his head bobs up and down in acceptance.

“Would now be a good time to tell her Dad?” Kaylee peeks over at her father as she asks him this question.

“Well, I guess so. She’s not going to let us leave without telling her now that you mentioned something,” he didn’t seem very confident in his response.

“What is it that you have to tell me?” I ask.

“Okay, mom, you can’t get mad; it’s actually a really good thing. Dad enrolled me in Drivers ED, and I went and got my permit yesterday. Can you believe it, me driving?” She says all of this with excitement and a grin from ear to ear, plastered on her traitorous face. I know they had practiced this; they sounded like D list actors in an after school special on Lifetime with that skit they just threw at me.

“When are you finding time to do Drivers ED with her, Richard, if you are always up here with me? Don’t tell me Kyle is doing it; I don’t think it’s a good idea to have the child learning how to steer with her knee and roll a doobie at the same time.”

“What’s a doobie?” Korbin feigns ignorance. Oh, please, you are fourteen Korbin, don’t act like an idiot; you have heard of a doobie before, I’m sure. I think this to myself but secretly hope I am wrong.

Richard immediately pipes in with, “I enrolled her in a course at The Road to Success Driving School by the house. She has already finished the written part, and now that she has her permit, she can start lessons behind

the wheel.” He says all of this in a rush, so I can’t interrupt him; meanwhile, Kaylee still has that fake ass grin on her face.

“I thought you weren’t ready to drive yet, Kaylee?” I ask, giving a pointed look at my daughter. Not ready is an understatement; she downright refused to go and start Drivers Education. I started pestering her about it when she had turned fifteen, and she straight out told me she had no intention of ever driving.

She had this idea in her head that she was just going to get chauffeured around for the rest of her life. I quote her on this, “Driving is such a waste of time. Why would anyone ever want to spend hours basically doing nothing while they stare at concrete and taillights when they could just nap or read in the back seat while someone else drove?”

My response was, “I hate to burst your little bubble, princess, but you are not an heiress living in Manhattan. You are eventually going to have to get yourself somewhere that will involve a motor vehicle.” We went back and forth with this. I gave up, but I tried several times over the last two years to convince her that she should at least get her license before she graduates. I am a stay-at-home mom; I really wanted to teach her with the Parent Taught Course. I thought it would be fun and something we could share just the two of us. Richard knew this; he knew what he was taking away from me. I guess technically; it wasn’t him that took it from me. He’s just doing what he can, trying to help and fill my shoes at the same time.

“Mom, it was my idea. I just thought that if I could get my license, I would be able to help out a lot more around the house while you recover,” Kaylee says. Well, she sure knew how to rub it in, didn’t she?

“I am not upset. If this is what you want to do, then I guess I have no say in the matter.”

Richard scoots Kaylee over so he could come in close to me, “Mel, it’s actually great. Now Kaylee can run errands, and once I have to go back to work, she can even take you to appointments that I may not be available for. Mel, you know it’s going to be months before your hip and leg are back to normal, and she was only trying to help,” he says the last part in a whisper like he is pleading with me to understand. I understand; I just don’t like it. This is only another part of me that freaking bastard of a monster has taken. The damn list just keeps getting longer. It’s going to be a massive freaking scroll before I get home.

I take in a deep breath and plaster on an identical smile (well, what used to be identical, but from the feel of it now it must look completely different) to Kaylee's and say, "I'm not upset, that's great, honey I am so glad you finally found the courage to take this step." The kids hang out until way past their bedtime, and by the time they leave, I can barely keep my eyes open.

Chapter Six



Melany

It's Thursday and Richard is home for the weekend. I think we are going to try and get in a date night without the kids at some point. Oh man, I love this time of year, the weather is perfect. In a few months, it's going to become annoyingly hot, almost unbearable.

I am running past the park trying to see the stars through the city smog when one of my earbuds starts to slip out of my ear. At that exact moment, I hear a noise behind me. Before I can turn around, I am being grabbed from behind. My right shoulder gets jerked back, and as I bring my hand up to defend myself, I get hauled to the ground. A meaty palm covers my face. It's so big that both my mouth and nose are now smothered, and I am having a hard time taking a breath.

Korn's Johnathan Davis voice screams into my left ear as I am flipped over onto my stomach. My vision starts to blur as I struggle and fight for any form of air to enter my lungs. My attacker brings his hand down off of my nose just a bit; I suck in a breath so hard my nostrils collapse.

He presses his body against my back, pinning me to the ground, and his free hand rips at my leggings. He fumbles a little, and I use the opportunity to try biting down on the hand that covers my face. As my teeth scrape against his palm, he jabs his knee into my right side from behind with what must be all his force because the pain is so blinding, I actually forget what's happening for a moment. Before I know it, he has my leggings completely off, and he is trying to force himself into me from behind.

I try crawling away, I am not making any progress, but I must try. My arms are pinned to my sides, and he has one arm wrapped around me while his other hand stays glued to my mouth. I know what he is doing, I can feel

it, but it almost doesn't register compared to the pain I feel in my hip. It feels like pieces of me are blowing away.

I try clenching my cheeks and fold into myself as much as possible to prevent his entry. This can't be happening to me. I was almost there, almost home. Now I can't move. I can't even call for help. My efforts to try and block him are fruitless as he gains access and stabs himself in and out of me several times.

Everything is happening so fast, yet it feels like slow motion. He pulls out of me, then abruptly turns me over. During the process, his hand moves away from my mouth for just a moment, and I try taking advantage of that brief reprieve. I gasp loudly as I fill my lungs through my mouth. He lifts himself up, off of me. I feel so much lighter now that his weight isn't pressing down on my body. I jump at this opportunity; as soon as my lungs are full, my mouth is ready to belt out. Just as I start to scream, a large boot comes at me and slams down like a hammer onto the side of my face. Everything stops.

I open my eyes, it's all a blur, but I feel him. He is still here. After a minute, I start gaining some focus, and there he is right above me. He is looking down at my breasts. I feel the night's air on my bare skin; he must have ripped open my top. His breath is coming out in fast gusts as it blows hot onto my chest. He has dark hair. There are pieces of it falling into his face; it almost looks short on top, just slicked back, but I see that it is long, and he has it in a ponytail at the nape of his neck. His hand is no longer on my mouth.

I can see that he has one palm flush flat on the ground beside me, and one is now violently grabbing my right breast, pinching and pulling. Realizing that I have an opportunity, I try to scream again, but I no longer seem to have access to my lips, and only a small, gurgling whimper comes out.

He glances up at me, not meeting my eyes, and I see he has dark, maybe brown but almost black eyes, thick brows, and a long slender nose. One might find him attractive in a different situation, but right now, he just looks sinister, not even human. He is wearing a light blue or similar color tee-shirt with an old-fashioned-car on the breast pocket, but that's as far as I can see.

He has all of his weight on me, but I realize my right leg is just lying there, so I try kicking it. It's the only option I have; I have to try and fight.

As soon as I try, he stops the assault he is issuing onto my body. I do not get far with my plan of kicking him off because the pain from my hip bolts through my entire body like lightning as soon as I go to move the leg. He gives a little grunt, reaches down, and bends my leg using both his hands and his foot in a direction it is not supposed to go. I hear it snap, and what I think is a bit of a crackle, then I let out another gurgling sound. In doing this, he has lifted off of me, and my hands are now free. I reach out and grab the first thing I can, digging my nails in hard. I hear another grunt, but he is quicker than me. He's also not injured. Immediately he grabs me by the wrists and slams my arms back down beside my body. I feel the pain, but it has completely consumed me now. I can't even tell where it's coming from on my body.

He returns to his assault just as before, as if my leg isn't now broken in two underneath him. He enters me with extreme force. There is so much pain; this doesn't even seem real. A human shouldn't be capable of feeling this kind of torment. Shouldn't I have some sort of internal defense mechanism that won't allow me to go past a certain pain level?

Muscles are twitching under my skin; it feels like I'm getting sliced open, all over, inch by inch. As I fade in and out, trying my best to stay aware and awake, my body is trying its best to shut down. The pain is overloading my senses, and my body's defense mechanism is now in the flight stage, realizing there is no fight left.

Everyone is different, and we all react to similar situations in various ways. I have heard that some rape victims say numbness takes over them during the act of an intrusion, during a forceful rape like this. They put their mind in a different setting and don't actually focus on what's happening. Well, I didn't have numbness, I was fully there and entirely aware, but I didn't fully feel what was happening. I guess I can thank the torment that he put upon my body, for all I felt was the pain. The pain pounding in my skull from my jaw, pain aching in my right hand, pain shooting up through my torso from my hip, pain radiating in my lower extremities because of the break that just happened in my leg. On some level, I guess you could say the pain was there to help me, help me not focus on what was actually happening to me at the moment but what had just happened in the moments before.

At this point, almost every part of my body is screaming for my full attention. Eventually, darkness takes over. To me, it is welcoming. I grab

onto it and let it take me under.

Chapter Seven



Melany

I wake in a panic, but calm as soon as I realize where I am and that the monster is not here with me. A light knock on the door grabs my attention; that must have been what roused me out of my slumber. “Come in,” I can barely get the words out.

“Good morning, beautiful,” I hear Maureen’s voice before I see her.

“Maureen, thank God you are here. Did you bring the kit?”

“Of course, I did. I’m old but not senile.” She pauses after entering my room and getting a good look at me. Richard must not have prepared her as he did with the kids. Either that or she’s going for dramatics.

“Holy Shit, Mel, has nobody taken care of you while you’ve been in here? Fuckin A, this is some bullshit!” Maureen is known for her loud, unfiltered mouth, so this is not unusual behavior for her.

“I mean, you have a full-grown mustache; have you even looked in a mirror?”

“No, Maureen, I was saving that for after you transform me into a swan,” the sarcasm is just pouring out of me. At that, she sets down her stuff—by the looks of it, she is planning on moving in—then comes over for a proper greeting.

“Oh, dear, I have missed you so much. I am so happy that you are coming home soon. That family of yours is not holding up so well. It’s a good thing Kyle is there; otherwise, the house would have caved in by now.”

“HA! You should be a comedian,” I say. Maureen has a soft spot for my brother; they are thick as thieves when he is in town. They only have the one thing in common, but considering it was a favorite thing for both of them, I could see why she favors him the way she does. Also, he is pretty incredible.

“Mel, seriously, I love you, and I know how strong you are, but this,” she gestures to me with wide eyes, “is a lot to deal with.” She reaches for my hand as she sits in the seat my husband typically occupies.

“I could not believe you texted me that info. I understand you could not speak at the time but to read that in a text was, wow, it knocked me off kilter a little there. Richard has kept me up to speed on how you are doing physically, but how are you doing in here?” She points to her head.

“You know I haven’t processed it yet. All day, I am being prodded and poked. I feel like Luke in that crazy rejuvenation tank after they found him half dead in the snow during *The Empire Strikes Back*. It’s almost like my mind hasn’t caught up with my body. Hell, I’m almost healed physically. I’m getting my catheter and colostomy bag removed today, so I can start walking. Look,” I point over to the corner of the room, “I even got a walker yesterday. Isn’t that cool? I’m going to get one of those old lady bags with the flowers on it to carry around my paperbacks and coupons. You can have it once I’m done using it. By then, you’ll be about ready for one.”

“Child, please! Mine’s going to be way fancier than that junk. But seriously, have you talked to anyone yet? I already know you haven’t said much to Richard.”

Releasing a breath, I prepare myself to stay strong as I confide in my close friend. “The hospital sent in a staffed psychiatrist, but it was a male, and he was short of time. I didn’t get anywhere with him. I can’t blame the hospital, though. If that’s all they have, I understand. I did tell them not to send him again as he just made me uncomfortable.”

She looks a little stunned as she says, “A man? They sent a man? What were they thinking?” She shakes her head a few times before moving on. “Do you plan on talking to Richard at all? Mel, I know you are struggling and hurting, but so is he; you have to give him something. He feels useless; he doesn’t even know what happened, well, not everything. I mean, I don’t know all the details of what happened to you, but that’s really none of my business. He’s your partner Mel, and you will eventually have to open up.” Maureen’s concern hits me hard. I know what needs to be done, but I can only do one thing at a time. Getting out of this hospital is first on my list.

“I just need time; maybe after I get home, things will seem to calm down a bit, and I won’t feel so wound up. I just want my normal life back.”

We go back and forth with our usual banter as she fills me in on all the gossip from the neighborhood. Nothing worth mentioning ever happens where we live, well besides what recently happened to me. So when Mr. Curtis from around the block went to check his mail in his underwear, the entire subdivision went wild.

“He did not!” I say. I knew the Curtis couple were old but not that old.

“He did, and no one would have even noticed him if it wasn’t for his annoying wife. She came running out after him all hootin and hollerin. That’s what caught everyone’s attention.” Maureen also informed me that she now has Korbin coming over every weekend to mow her yard for twenty bucks.

“Just make sure he is doing a good job, don’t pay him if he half-asses it,” I remind her.

“Have you ever known me to let someone slide on shoddy work?” Comes her response, as she gives me a little scoff with narrowed eyes.

“No, but this is Korbin. In your eyes, he can do no wrong,” I reply.

“True, but he really is doing a great job. He seems proud too. I like that. Young people don’t seem to have enough pride anymore. Everyone is going around looking for handouts or wanting the government to do everything for them. Don’t people realize how good it feels to struggle then be able to come out, in the end, saying ‘I did that, that was all me’?” Here we go. She was about to heat things up in here. I had to bring her back down just a smidge.

“Oh, let’s not get started on that; we will be here all damn summer. Also, you never struggled a day in your life.” I knew that was a lie, but the majority of her life was pretty damn comfortable, so she really hasn’t got any reason to complain.

“Yes, I did, it might not have been very many days out of my life, and they might have been so long ago most people have forgotten, but I haven’t.” It was time to come back to the reason she was here.

“Get started on me, woman. I’m going to have to go into that bathroom tonight, and I can’t walk by a mirror thinking I came in here, and they gave me a sex change or something! Now, get to plucking!”

Maureen and I spent the next hour playing with her bag of tricks. She plucked what she considered a beard and mustache off my face, but she didn’t spend enough time in that area for the comment to ring true; she also

shaped my eyebrows. I was able to sit up a bit so she could get to my hair. In all honesty, I don't think anyone has touched it. I have long brown hair that almost reaches my butt. I keep it up most of the time, so I just assumed a top knot was sitting on my head growing stuff since it hasn't been washed. Maureen took one look at my head and gasped.

"What the hell, Mel? I was exaggerating about the facial hair, but what's going on up here? Has no one brushed or washed your hair?" She practically screams at me.

"I think they have other priorities that trump being a hairstylist."

"You don't understand; we can't fix this." Her hands drop to her sides, and she looks defeated. Finally, she starts digging around in what feels like a rat's nest, giving little tugs here and there without pulling anything free.

"I had brought some waterless shampoo and detangler, but I don't know if that's going to work. It's just a clump on your head; everything is stuck together with what I am guessing is blood. It's all dry and crusty, but that's not the worse part. I am not going to be able to get a comb through this, not unless we remove it from your head first." She gets to work using her shampoo, sprays, and a bottle of water. We are at it for a while with little progress when Nurse Pat comes in to check my vitals. I am sitting up in the bed, a towel draped over my shoulders with my elderly BFF standing behind me when I look up and see Pat's eyes wide with concern.

"Wow, what are we doing here, ladies?" She asks. She gives us a curious look, but the mean mug Maureen shoots her has her peddling back and wishing she never entered.

"I'm just going to check on a couple of things, don't mind me." She goes about doing her job and then makes her leave with a rushed, "I'll be back later to bring you lunch."

"You didn't have to give her that death glare Mo," I say and give her what I believe in my head to be my own death glare.

"Is she the one responsible for this?" Maureen asks accusingly.

"As I said, they have a job, and my hair is not it; it's no one's fault. Well no one that's here anyway."

We are silent for a bit. I know she understands what I mean by that and is wondering how to respond. Maureen has never been good at the touchy, feely, sensitive stuff, but then again, neither have I.

"I hate to say it, but the hair has to go," she finally admits.

"I don't think so! My hair, all of it is staying on my head."

“Look, I can cut it off now. I’ll try to keep a little length to it, but you cannot keep this. It’s disgusting, it smells, and there is no way a million washes and a trillion bottles of conditioner is going to help this. This is almost worse than the time Kaylee got an entire chewed up pack of bubble-yum stuck in her bangs.”

“That was bad. She had a bald spot on the top of her head for months,” I agree.

She gives me a stern look, and I return it with sad eyes. Maureen says, “When you get home, we will make you an appointment with my guy, and you can get a cute pixie cut; you’ll look like Alice.”

I furrow my brow in confusion, “In what wonderland does Alice not have long blond hair?” She busted out laughing so hard spit flies out of her mouth and sprays me in the face.

“HA, no woman, the vampire Alice, from twilight!” Maureen exclaims.

“Yeah, you really think I can pull that off?” I ask, actually considering doing this.

“If anyone can pull it off, it would be you,” she confirms with a wink.

~

The week after I went through my transformation of a new (hospital-made) cut, followed by being able to use the bathroom on my own and actually going outside to walk around the hospital courtyard, I was released to go home. I was excited to see what awaited me after close to two months away. I was also extremely happy that I was getting to come home before school ended for the year. I use the word happy very mildly these days; at this point, I have yet to feel actual happiness, but I’m trying to stay positive. I think it’s working about as much as my right leg.

All my positive thoughts seem to vanish from my mind as soon as we approach our subdivision entrance. Anxiety starts kicking in full force, and I am having a hard time taking a breath. We are all piled in my old beat-up Jeep Cherokee. I love this car and refuse to get rid of it. My hope is to pass it on to Kaylee and get myself an upgrade, but I am not in any hurry to get rid of my old, trusty, rusty girl just yet. Everyone had to come on today’s adventure; it is tight with the five of us in here. Kyle is squished in the back with the kids, but he looks as comfortable as can be. I am trying to keep my panic attack under control, so no one notices, but that is hard to do since I

have been the focus of everyone's attention for the entire ride. Kyle reaches up and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Sis, you okay? Richard roll down her window so she can get some air." Kyle says.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Korbin's concern knocks a little sense in me, and I am now able to spit out a response.

"All good, just having a hard time controlling my emotions, but I'll be okay," I say.

"We are almost there, Mel, but do you need me to pull over?" Richard is giving me a worried look, but I just shake my head. A couple of turns later, we are pulling into the driveway. I keep my eyes closed—I didn't want to see the school as we passed by it. Richard pulls into the garage and closes the door before we can even exit the Jeep. I know he did that to keep me out of view of nosy neighbors; I want to tell him we aren't famous, and they are not the paparazzi. In truth, I am actually a little grateful; not sure if I could handle someone trying to talk to me right now.

The house is spotless; I knew right away that Richard had hired a service to clean. Given the pine smell that lingers all around, they were just here this morning. Didn't want to take chances with a mess, so you went with taking a chance on having strangers clean my home? I am too exhausted to say anything, plus he has been dealing with a lot lately. He surprises me with his ability to take control. Most days, he doesn't even know how to work the toothpaste dispenser without my help. I know he is a capable man. Hell, he builds shopping centers and office buildings for a living. It's just when he's home, he likes being taken care of, and I love being the one to take care of him.

This switching of roles has been hard on us both physically, emotionally, and mentally. I just hope now that we are all home together, I can start getting back to my life and make things a little easier for him.

Our home came with two master bedrooms, and I didn't want to be a flight of stairs away from my babies when they were little, so we picked the one upstairs as our own. The downstairs bedroom has always been a guest room or otherwise known as Kyle's room. He basically just keeps a set of belongings in there since he found out Richard's mother stays at a hotel when she visits. If that doesn't tell Richard how she feels about me, nothing will make him see it. The men have made the switch, and we now occupy the downstairs master bedroom since I will not be able to climb stairs for

the foreseeable future. I immediately set out for my bed. Upon entry, I see that Richard didn't bother changing a thing. The room looks exactly as it did upstairs—good job Richard. I turn, noticing that the crew is just following me around like I'm pulling them with a string.

“Um, I'm just going to take a nap. I'll come join you guys when I get up, and we can make dinner together. Oh, wait, do we have groceries?” I ask.

Richard jumps with his quick response, “Yes, but let me know what you feel like, and I can run up to the store and get what we do not have.” My husband looks so eager; it's like he wants me to come up with anything he can do just so he can please me.

“No, that's okay, just something simple. Maybe BLT's if we have it, or grilled cheese.”

“I think we can manage that. Go ahead and take your nap. We will unload your stuff and try to stay quiet so you can rest,” Richard says.

Shutting the door behind my family, I head to my bathroom first to take a proper shower. I no longer have any tubes or stitches; every inch of me can get wet. Glancing at my reflection, I quickly remove my gaze from my face and pay attention to my hair. Pulling out my phone, I shoot a text to Maureen.

Me: I'm home. When is my appt?????

Maureen: ... (nothing)

Me: Hello, WOMAN!! Do not ignore me!

Maureen: Look here. I do have a life, give me a sec

Me: I can't find a GIF that matches my mood of annoyance, and that is making me even more annoyed!

Maureen: K

Maureen: So, Tom has an opening next Wednesday at 11 am???

Me: What day is today?

Maureen: Today is Tuesday, May 4th

You know may the fourth be with you, hahahaha! I crack me up. Mother's Day is this weekend. He is all booked up this week.

Me: Mother's Day? Oh, wow I need to remind Richard to send something to his mom.

May 4th? Two months, two months of my life stolen by that monster.

Maureen: Focus, little one! Do you want the appt before someone else takes it?

Me: YES

Maureen: K, I will book it, and I will take you. Be ready by 10:15, so we can get there on time.

Me: I love you

Maureen: New phone who dis?

This woman! Turning on the shower, I gather some PJs out of a drawer while the water heats up. Stepping back into the bathroom, I am grateful that the steam has fogged up the mirror so I can no longer see my hideous reflection. That face is going to take some getting used to; until then, I will just avoid mirrors altogether.

Chapter Eight



Richard

Having Melany home now has made things so much smoother around the house although, she still isn't able to help much. I was shocked when she didn't say anything about me having hired a housekeeper, but I almost dropped dead when she came up to me the next week and asked when they would be coming back. I played dumb and told her I had no idea what she was talking about, but she just gave me a little smirk and said, "Richard, it's okay, you did what you had to do. It's just that I still can't go up the stairs, and I can't seem to stand longer than twenty minutes at a time. I think having someone come in once a week to do the heavy stuff would help, at least for a little while."

Walking into the living room, I find my brother-in-law sitting on the couch staring at the TV with a giant plastic barrel of cheese balls in his lap.

"I'm a Sagittarius, which probably tells you way more than you need to know about me."

"Yes, it tells us that you participate in the mass cultural delusion that the sun's apparent position relative to arbitrarily defined constellations at the time of your birth somehow affects your personality."

"Participate-in-the-what?"

"Why are you narrating The Big Bang Theory?"

Without taking his eyes off the screen, he shoves a few cheese balls in his mouth and explains as he chews. "You have all the seasons on DVD; these are pure gold. I watched this the other day, but I didn't feel like getting up and changing the disk. To make it interesting, I decided just to watch disc one of season one again and see how much I remember."

"Alright, *Rain Man*, scoot over and turn the volume on, will ya? I haven't seen this one in a while." We watch a couple of episodes and have

made a massive dent in the barrel of cheese balls when he starts sucking the caked-up powder off of his fingers and hits pause on the remote.

He then turns to me and says, “I think I’m gonna head home this weekend.” At this point, Mel had been back for a couple of weeks and had already started a few different home therapy services; I had the feeling Kyle thought he was just in the way now. It was quite a struggle getting accustomed to all the new in-home therapists that were setting up shop in our living room almost daily. Mel had just gotten used to the ones in the hospital, and now she had to start over again.

“You know you are always welcome to stay as long as you want and don’t feel obligated to pitch in around here; your company is all we ask for.”

“Nah, man, it’s not that. I do have a job, and I have put a few clients off for as long as I can. I need to go make my rounds and pay them visits before they cut me loose. Also, if I stay any longer, I may never be able to go back to the reggie man, not after toking on the good stuff for so long with Maureen.” I think I know what he meant by that, but I was still a little confused.

After he left, I realized how much of a help he actually was. I mean, he ate everything, left a mess in his wake wherever he went. Kyle also stayed up all night, which made the kids want to stay up all night with him. But for the last week, since he’s been gone, I have been running in circles trying to make sure everything is done, so Mel doesn’t catch on that I am having a hard time. I went back to work and leaving her at home has been a great effort. Maureen assures me she will bug the hell out of her during the day until school lets out next week. Once the kids are home, I won’t worry so much. Right now, I am scared she is going to try and do something she shouldn’t, and end up hurting herself. I tried talking her into getting one of those life alert things, but she gave me a look that told me if I didn’t find a rewind button and take that back now, I was going to be murdered in my sleep. I just quickly walked away.

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My wife is no longer my wife. Yes, she is Melany Polk, and we are, in every sense of the way, married. What I mean is she is an entirely different person. The light has burned out in her. The glow that used to follow her around has vacated the premises. She still shows excitement around the kids, but I have a feeling it is all a façade. We haven’t talked about it. We

just seem to be focused on acclimating to our new way of life. ‘Life after the incident’ is how I am referring to it in my mind; I’ve heard the kids talk about “Moms’ accident,” but not around her. No one has brought it up around her; no one would dare.

She has not left the house, not even to check the mail. She goes into the backyard with Spud, and I’ve seen her lazily throwing the ball around, but she has yet to exit the front door. It seems like we have people coming in and out every day. Between the occupational therapist, the physical therapist, and the massage therapist, it’s a revolving door of therapists in here.

Of course, she was set up with a psychological therapist at discharge, and an appointment was made for her. She was supposed to go last week, and this would have been someone she could talk to about “the incident,” but when it came time to go, she claimed that she wasn’t feeling well and needed to reschedule.

Dr. Nguyen’s assistant informed me that a fifty-dollar cancellation fee would usually apply but that the good doctor would waive it just this once due to my wife’s circumstances. The cancellation fee wasn’t a concern to me; what was an issue is that she wouldn’t be able to work Mel in for another month. I had to take what I could get and pray to God that she is willing to make that one. She has also canceled several follow-up appointments with her orthopedic surgeon. She finally gave up and didn’t even bother rescheduling. We got into a little fight about that one.

“So, what now? Are you all better, or are you just going to give up?” I asked her after she canceled her appointment with Dr. Strattis for the fourth time.

“I am not giving up, Richard,” she enunciated my name as if I was a child and didn’t know how the adult world worked. “I simply do not feel that it is necessary to go. If I have any problems, I will call and make an appointment. What’s the point in going now? I am doing fine. I’m going to go in there, and he’s going to say everything looks good and send me on my way.”

“The point is, Melany,” I decided to act like the child she thought I was and throw the enunciation right back at her, “you are being non-compliant in your follow-up care. You rely on this doctor to order your therapy services and call in your refills. If you do not go see him, these services will stop.”

“Oh, look at you, using big boy words. Where did you learn to talk like that, Richard? Have you been secretly conversing with my private physician behind my back?” She stands up and gets in my face to show me she means business. “You better not be. If I find out you are, I’ll take my consent away that allows them to discuss my medical records with you.”

“Melany,” I try to calm her down at this point because the last thing I need is her getting riled up and hurting herself. “I love you, and I care about you. We are worried that you are not taking this seriously. You need to understand that staying in this house and not seeking treatment is not an option.”

She crumbles into me. “You don’t understand, Richard; I can’t go out there.” She buries her face into my chest; her shoulders start to shake as she cries into my shirt.

“Mel, babe, what do you mean you can’t go out there?”

“I can’t go out there because he’s out there, Richard. He’s out there somewhere. I’m safe in here, but if I go out there...” she is at the point of losing it. Tears are threatening to break free as they fill her eyes. “You just don’t understand. I keep reliving that night over and over again. Every time I go to sleep, I dream about it. Every time someone touches me, I feel his hands tearing me apart. What if he’s waiting for me out there? What if he meant to kill me, and he needs to finish the job he started?” She can’t talk anymore; she looks as if she has more to let out but can’t find the words. Heavy sobs have taken over.

There it is. She finally spits her fears out into the open. All it took was about three months and me giving her a little push, and it pours out of her.

“Mel, I am so sorry. I know he’s still out there somewhere; they will catch him! You need to know that I am not going to make you go out there alone. I will be with you at all times. I will even go into the damn women’s bathroom with you; no one will get near you with me around. I will not let anything happen to you, I promise. I know what happened was horrible; you did not deserve what that bastard did to you. Nobody does. I still can’t believe everything he did to the most amazing woman who ever lived, but guess what, you survived it. You are a survivor; you always have been. You are so strong I can’t even imagine going through what you went through, what you are still going through.”

Her shaking has slowed, and she now has her head turned to the side and is making little sniffling noises as she listens to me speak.

“Now, I need you to let me take care of you. I need to be able to do my job as your husband. I need to make sure you are getting the proper mental and medical treatment. I know you have a hard time talking about it, but you have to. You can’t stay in this house for the rest of your life, do not let him have that control over you. He has taken so much from you and you, you,” I stop speaking because I am having trouble getting the words out and kiss the top of my wife's head. After a minute, I gather my composure to continue.

“You need to take some things back, Mel.” I have no idea where all this is coming from, but I impress the hell out of myself.

I lift her chin up so that she is looking at me; her eyes are bloodshot and glossy; she has snot coming out of her nose. She has a deep scar that hasn’t healed, and it still looks angry, starting on the right side of her lower lip and ending at her chin. The tissue on the left side of her face is fuller than her right; the right also has started to droop a little, so little that I don’t think she has noticed yet. I have her face ingrained in my brain. Every line, every freckle. I have spent endless nights lying up in bed, just staring at her face. I would watch her sleep. I know how her eyes move when she’s dreaming and how sometimes she skips a breath, and her mouth will pop open just a little. I couldn’t believe my luck; what had I done in my previous life to earn myself such a reward like this. She was always unreal to me. I couldn’t sleep for the first couple of years because I was scared, scared that I would wake up and she would be gone as if I had just dreamt her. Of course, after Kaylee was born, that all stopped. I had no problem falling and staying asleep. I could sleep anywhere and anytime; that child was an insomniac till she was three.

Melany and I sit on the couch, and I just hold her for a long time. Eventually, she lifts her head and says, “Okay.” That’s it. She just looks me in the eyes and says, “Okay,” and I know she means it. I know from this point forward that I am going to start seeing bits of my wife again. I am being real with myself because I know it’s going to take time, and I will allow her that—I will not push her. When my wife says she’s going to do something, she does it. I have never witnessed Melany break a promise to anyone. She means it when she commits to something, and you will not find her volunteering for just anything. My wife does not do school functions or PTA meetings. You won’t find her signing up for anything in advance because she never wants to find herself in a position where she has to back

out on someone. She always says, “Look, if I feel like doing it that day, then I will just show up and do it. If they don’t need me, then I will leave, but I’d rather just show up unannounced like a surprise than flake out on someone who’s expecting me.” This was always a pain trying to plan a night out with her when we first started dating. Our friends would say, “Hey, you guys want to meet up this weekend?” I would ask Mel, and of course, she would not commit, so I was always a yes, and she was always a maybe. Many times, I went solo. The day would come, and if she felt like it, she would go.

The first time she told me no, that she wasn’t going, I was bummed because a band was playing that I really wanted to see. I started getting undressed when she asked what I was doing.

“If we aren’t going, I might as well get comfortable again,” I said.

She laughed at that, “You are so cute. Let me guess; you have only ever dated controlling chicks that would never let you out of their sight? Richard, listen to me, we are not going, I am not going, but that does not mean you cannot go by yourself.” Huh? I hadn’t dated much before Mel. Mostly short-term hook-ups, but yeah, that’s how it works, right? I can’t just go to a bar looking all single and shit. I knew what that was—it was a trap or a test of some kind. She was baiting me to see how I would respond.

“I don’t want to go if you aren’t there.” I wasn’t going to fall for that setup.

She gave me a dramatic eye roll. “Look, I didn’t want to say anything, but ever since we started dating, you have been clinging to me like a dryer sheet.” *Yeah, because you are going to disappear!* “Go! Stay out all night and have fun; I trust you. Also, I could really use a break from you, I kind of just want to lay in bed, watch *The Sopranos*, and overdose on chocolate without there being any witnesses.”

I knew before that night that I was going to marry her, but after that night is when I bought the ring.

Still, I had this nagging feeling in my gut. I called Detective Hendrix. I needed to let her know about Melany’s progress, and about the suspicions that I had. I needed to know if there were any developments in her case. Those calls went unanswered for a few days. Once she did call me back, it was with little news.

It left a rage bubbling up inside of me. It was getting harder and harder to keep it in check and at bay. For the sake of my wife and kids, I needed to

remain calm and composed. I was angry at this situation Melany was put in. I was livid at the police department and Detective Hendrix for not being more vigilant in finding the man responsible for this. I was furious with the man, the sick, criminal bastard that did this to my wife. I wanted to skin him alive and have his parents' watch, just for creating him, for giving him life, for putting him on this planet so that he could harm my wonderful Melany. These are some of the thoughts that go through my head; I can't even imagine what type of dark places Mel's thoughts wander.

Chapter Nine



Melany

After having an utterly humiliating breakdown, and then having my husband finally convince me that I have to try, I finally leave the house. He is right—I have to do this. I can't let that monster win; I need to take some things back. A week after my breakdown, I called and scheduled-well rescheduled-the hair appointment that I never attended. I figure if I have to leave the house on the regular now, I will have to do something with this shit show on my head.

I get an appointment with Tom that week, and even though I went with Maureen—because he is her stylist—Richard drives us. True to his promise, he hasn't left me alone, at least not outside of the house. He sits in his truck for the two hours it took to cut, color, and style my new pixie hairdo. I can see him from my chair through the salon window. Once it is revealed to me, I feel like I let Maureen and Tom down with my reaction. I certainly do not resemble a pale, pretty vampire like I was promised.

“Sweetie, you were made for this cut; your sharp features and thin frame are gonna work it. You just need to style it every morning, or it's just gonna flop there on your little head, all lifeless. You don't want dead hair, do you? Trust me, NO, you do not!” Tom exclaims as he twirls me around, pulling at little pieces of hair sticking up off my head. Tom is something all right; he must have to massage his jaw every night after never shutting up.

As Tom was gathering up some products for me to purchase, Maureen leaned in to whisper in my ear, “It really is great, but I know what you're thinking, and stop it now. If you just put a little makeup on, it will make all the difference in the world. Have you been using the Vitamin E oil I gave you on that scar?” I replied to her with a little nod of my head.

“Good. I also think some false lashes will help. We should run over to Target while we are still out and pick up some cheap ones to see how they look.”

I pay the receptionist at the front desk, leave Tom a generous tip, collect my purchases, and head outside to my awaiting husband. When we get back into the truck, Richard greets me with a big smile.

“You know I loved your hair long, but this is pretty rad, and I could definitely get used to it,” he says as I clumsily hop into the passenger’s seat. I tell them I have had enough adventure for one day, and I just want to go home and lay down. Maureen promises to pick me up some lashes the next time she is out; I know what that means. She is just going to order some online as soon as she gets home if she isn’t already doing so from her phone in the back seat. Maureen does not leave her house unless she absolutely has to. Of course, if I had her house, I wouldn’t leave either. The furthest she typically ventures off to is across the street on the occasions that she visits me, but it is usually the other way around. Going to her house is like taking a mini-vacation from the chaos that is happening over at mine sometimes. She has everything delivered: from her groceries to her pot.

Maureen is a divorcee and a widower. After her first marriage fell apart, her second marriage left her a widow when she was still in her twenties. She married her high school sweetie right after graduating. He was the love of her life; well, at least that’s what she thought. We all have a false idea of what love is at such a young age. They had planned on having a house full of children.

Not long after they had their small wedding ceremony, Maureen found out she was barren and would not be cooking any children in her broken womb. She actually thought this was a blessing considering she and her new husband didn’t even have two dimes to rub together, and with no college degrees, that wasn’t going to change any time soon.

She tried telling her husband, the supposed love of her life, that they could possibly try and adopt through the state or even foster children in need. There were some other options back then, but she said if you didn’t have money, forget about it, you were out of luck. Her husband didn’t want to hear it. He came from a large family, all of his siblings had a house full of little ones, and he was going to have that too. You can see where some of our overpopulation problems come from. I will never understand people's need to have so many kids. My mom, for example, had no business reproducing the way she did; just because you can, does not mean you should.

He filed for a divorce the day after their first wedding anniversary. Now, that just seems hateful. She was so unbelievably heartbroken that she ran back home and cried until her dad walked in and said: “Unless someone is payin ya for them there tears, I reckon you better sop 'em up and get ya a job cause ya is a grown-ass woman and round here grown asses pay rent, don't matter how pretty ya is.”

When she told me that, I balked, thinking of how heartless that sounded. Maureen assured me that her father was a wonderful man, and what he did was exactly what she needed at the time. She got right up, dried her eyes, and replied with, “Yes sir, I'm right on it, Daddy.”

Maureen is a beautiful woman. I've seen pictures of her when she was younger, and I got to say, WOW! The first time I went into her home and saw her old photos hanging on the wall, I almost had to pick my tongue up off the floor and put my eyes back in my sockets. Maureen was nineteen, stunning, and got herself a job at the local country club. Her duty was to pass out clean towels and pick up dirty ones for the members as they entered and exited the golf course. She said that women were not allowed on the greens or really even around the course back then. The men liked to tease the ladies with the meaning of GOLF (Gentleman Only Ladies Forbidden).

Since she presented such a beautiful view for the people around her, the club thought she would bring in new members, so she was given the job. Her first husband had really done a number on her mental state; she had hardened up since the divorce. After only a few months, she found out that he had already married this hussy that they had went to school with and that she was already expecting their first child. She figured they had started an affair before the divorce was even final, and this just made her heart grow colder. She did not give two shits about any man that wasn't her daddy!

Her first week on the job, she had already been propositioned by a dozen married men. She said most of them would hit on her while their wives were having brunch or lunch in the country club café next door. Seeing them being so blatantly disrespectful to their wives only seemed to justify her decision to destroy the male species. She wasn't interested in married men, though; she wasn't going to be that girl, the one that caused the pain she knew all too well.

When Mr. John Henry Fitzgibbons III (a regular at the club) arrived at her station one afternoon with his father in tow, she hatched up a plan.

These men were notorious in Dallas; old money, big Texas oil tycoons. Now, son Fitzgibbons was in his forties, happily married with a couple of little ones. Daddy Warbucks, however, was up for grabs. When she told me this, the look of horror that came across my face made her stop in her tracks and keel over in hysterics.

“What is that look for?” She asked.

“No, please do not tell me you pulled an Anna Nicole?” I was appalled.

“You bet your ass I did, but I was before her, so she actually pulled a Maureen Fitzgibbons, formally known as Maureen Davis, formally known as Maureen Townsend,” she says all of this with a massive smile on her face like she is a preschooler who just tied their shoes for the first time. Oh so proud of herself.

“Don’t tell me you wouldn’t blow a golden oldie for a couple of million.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that because I was never given a choice. Richard made good money, and we lived comfortably without me having to work, but I know what it is like being poor. I had gone to bed many nights in a dark, cold, dirty trailer with an empty belly. I know what people will do to get out of poverty, and I don’t blame her, not one bit.

Maureen was twenty years old when she married an eighty-two-year-old multi-millionaire. She wasn’t even old enough to drink.

“And I did it all with my charm and my pretty face. I didn’t need big fake titties or lip injections,” Maureen fluttered her lashes at me and giggled to herself. She said they were married for four years before he passed away, and yes, he could still get it up.

John Henry was a widower; his wife had passed away the year before Maureen came into his life. She said there was some heavy competition for him, but she acted fast enough that no one even saw her coming. John Henry had four children, one son John Henry III, and three daughters. The youngest daughter was only five years older than Maureen. She was surprised when she acquired this information about her new husband.

“Can you believe it? He was still making babies in his late fifties.”

“Impressive,” I replied. The daughters were appalled by Maureen and even took her to court after their father’s death. They fought for what was left to her in the will. His son was actually happy for his dad and glad he was enjoying his final years. He even thanked Maureen for her sacrifice.

HA! She's a rich bitch now. Four short years of juggling wrinkled balls was not much of a sacrifice. Maureen ended up getting what had been left to her after all. The girls didn't stand a chance; eight million dollars is what she walked away with. Maureen invested four years of her life so that she could live comfortably and never have to work. She said since she had no one to leave it to, she was trying her damndest to make sure she spent every penny.

I asked her why she chose the house she now lives in; she should have enough money on the interest alone to afford her something much grander. She responded with: "Oh yeah, I did." She had a million-dollar mansion before. She reminded me that she was only twenty-five when she received all this mullah, so her decision-making wasn't that great at the time. She lived in that glorious home for forty years after coming to terms with the fact that people live well into their nineties these days. She then sold the mansion for over four million dollars. She didn't have much of a choice because of her partying when she was younger. She had blown through most of the money and could barely afford the upkeep, much less the taxes on the monstrosity she thought she needed. It was just her, after all; what did she need that massive house for?

She never remarried, but she said not to worry because she has sampled more men than a fat lady had sampled desserts at Costco. She had no qualms at admitting she was a bit of a trollop in her day.

"And why wouldn't I be? I had access to some of the most gorgeous men Dallas had to offer. But not only Dallas. I've also traveled all over the world. Most of that was at a man's expense." Her lifelong best friend had moved in and lived with her after her own husband had left her for another woman. Who gets divorced in their sixties? That information was a little unsettling. Maureen said those few years were the best of her life, spending every day with her favorite person on the planet, not a care in the world.

Her friend had passed away thirteen years ago after a long battle with bone cancer—that Maureen had helped her through. That's where I come in. Maureen had moved in, and I hadn't even noticed, too busy wrapped up in my own life. I was walking the dog one evening and almost home when a familiar smell wafted across my path. Glancing around, I see a little old wisp of a lady sitting in the dark of her patio, a flaming cherry lighting up her face. I continued on my way when she hollered out, "Hey there,

neighbor, wanna hit?” I shook my head and rolled my eyes, turning back toward my house.

“Oh, you are one of those. Never mind then, move along,” she said. At that, I turned around and walked right up to her porch, Spud in tow.

“Well, I don’t want a hit. I just haven’t ever been able to handle that crap. Guess it just affects me in a different way than it does others. But you got any whiskey?” We were instant friends; we sat on that porch for an hour or so till I saw Richard poke his head out. I hollered for him to come get Spud and to meet our new neighbor.

That night we started a tradition; almost every night after my walk, I stopped and had a drink while she had a smoke. That continued until I started walking Spud earlier and running at night. I had also, in my attempt to get healthy, given up the nightly whiskey. We still see each other on almost a daily basis; she comes over, and we cook together. She attends functions with me that involve the kids, acting as a fill-in grandmother. We make an odd pair, but it works.

I do miss our nightly talks. We never ran out of things to say; of course, all I ever had to talk about was the short list I had going on in my life, and that revolved around my kids. She had endless stories to tell, and man, they were spectacular. Some of them were a little hard to believe, but she didn’t strike me as the type of person to lie; exaggerate yes, but not lie. She had partied with famous people that had passed away, politicians, and even a president once that shall remain nameless even to me. Of course, I managed to figure out who it was based on the details. She would not confirm, nor did she deny, so I will just keep it to myself and assume I am right.

I asked her once, when I had had a couple and was feeling brave, if talking about my family life bothered her. I thought it might, considering how her first marriage went. She assured me that she loved hearing about my children. She had spent some time with them at this point; they were little then. She said she had come to terms with the fact that the family life just wasn’t in the stars for her.

“Whoever said money couldn’t buy happiness obviously never had any because that money made up for a lot of things others might have missed. I would have never had the life I have lived, and continue living, if I was tied down with kids. Also, kids cost too damn much; they would have spent all my damn money long before I had a chance to, thinking I was

going to send them to college with it or some shit. Hell, I didn't go to college! Gonna have to get on your knees and work for it like I did. HA!"

She got jokes.

Maureen wasn't big on working out, but she did hot yoga a couple of times a week. She had converted one of her bedrooms into a sauna. I would go lay in there after a night of drinking and let all the poison seep out of my pores, greatest thing ever. I tried joining her for hot yoga once and almost died. She laughed at me and called me a pussy when I walked out ten minutes after we had begun. She came out after she completed her full hour to find me lounging in her pool.

"What the hell happened to you?" She asked.

"I can't do that nonsense. How are you even able to breathe in there?" I hadn't considered yoga an actual workout until then. I had gone to a couple of classes before, but it was always just relaxing to me, always gave me a good stretch, but never made my muscles sore. Maybe I was doing it wrong but add a little steam, and it's like struggling to get out of a locked car that's been sitting in the Texas summer heat all day—scary stuff.

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Once I get home from the salon, I take a short nap. Shortly after, I am awakened by loud voices that seem to be arguing. Coming out of my sleep fog and getting up, I hear the word 'mom' getting thrown around a couple of times, and that spikes my interest. Moving over to the bedroom door, I crack it open and try my best to listen.

Apparently, Korbin wants his friends to come spend the night on the last day of school like he does every year. Richard is insisting he drop the subject, that mom (meaning me) can't handle it.

"Look, it's just not a good idea; your Mom is not ready for that kind of crowd right now."

Korbin, being a fourteen-year-old male and not understanding that the world does not, in fact, revolve around him, keeps at it. "It's never a good time! You keep saying that! When will it be a good time, Dad? It's been like, three months already. Why can't they spend one night?" Korbin's voice is steadily rising, and I hear a loud bang that shuts him up. I can picture it: Richard just slammed his hands on the counter to grab his attention because he is afraid Korbin is going to wake me up. Too late.

Richard grinds out, "Korbin, that's enough!"

“You won’t let me go anywhere or spend the night out. I don’t understand why. It’s the first night of summer. We do this every year.” This is news to me; Korbin hasn’t asked me anything about wanting to go anywhere. Deciding to make my presence known, I step out and round the corner, coming into their view. They both look up at the same time and immediately stop talking. Well, if I hadn’t heard them for myself, that right there would be a definite sign that they were talking about me.

“What’s going on here?” I demand.

Richard releases a sigh and responds, “Nothing, sweetie, did we wake you?”

“Hi, Mom, sorry I was being loud. I didn’t realize you were sleeping.”

“Yeah, you woke me, but that’s not what I am referring to. Are y’all discussing the last day of school sleepover without me?”

“No, Mel, there isn’t going to be any last day of school sleepover. That’s what I was reminding our son about just now.”

“And why would we not be doing that this year?” I ask.

“You know why, Mel. Come on, a bunch of kids running around, staying up all night, making a big mess. We cannot deal with that right now. Korbin, I promise you we will have a sleepover party toward the end of summer, then might be a better time.” Richard says.

“Sure, whatever,” Korbin replies and starts to walk past me, and I put a hand out to stop him.

“I don’t see why we can’t have it. It’s not like they are a bunch of toddlers we have to watch constantly. They are teenagers who can feed themselves, entertain themselves, and clean up after themselves.”

“Mel,” Richard is getting frustrated with the conversation and is now pleading for me to just give up.

“No, Richard, the kids do this every year, we don’t have many of them left, and we are not skipping this one. Hell, Kaylee will be a senior next year; she might not even be here. She might be in the back of a pickup truck chugging forties and listening to crappy, incoherent hip-hop.” My husband looks defeated, and at this, I know the decision is made. Korbin sees it too and gives me a big hug.

“Thank you, Mom! We will not bother you, and we will clean up after ourselves.”

“I know you will. So who all should I expect and what day is it again?” I ask.

“The last day of school is this Thursday, Mel; today is Tuesday. Also, I don’t think the kids these days chug forties anymore,” Richard robotically replies. Oh snap, I need to start marking off a calendar; I thought today was Saturday.

“It’s just going to be Josh and Rowland. Deshawn is leaving for a family vacation as soon as school lets out. His parents want to drive up and go camping at some Indian reservation in Oklahoma, so he can’t come.”

“That sounds pretty cool, never thought about doing that. What about Kaylee? Will Sarah or Piper be coming over?”

“I’ll go let her know it’s on so she can call Sarah. Just so you know, Piper and her family moved during spring break.” At that, Korbin runs upstairs to locate his sister. Oh wow, Kaylee lost one of her oldest friends. I wonder where they moved to? I am sure they will keep in touch; technology now allows kids to do that. Not like when I was growing up, and if you moved to the next city over, you had to say goodbye to everyone, forever. Turning to face my husband, I place my hands on my hips and try to relax my face. I know it’s not very attractive these days, so my angry glare probably doesn’t look too great anymore. I will have to find the courage to practice my facial expressions in the mirror without making myself throw up.

“Please, do not do that again, Richard.”

“Mel, I’m just trying to keep a calm house so you can rest and have as little stress as possible during your recovery.”

“By taking away my pleasures?”

He immediately rounds the bar and heads my way. Taking my face in his palms, he brings my face up so my gaze meets his. “Never.” He leans down and gently presses his lips against mine. The touch is so soft; it’s almost not there at all. I want to scream at him; I want to tell him not to treat me like I’m fragile. *You can’t break me, Richard. I’m already broken.* But I wouldn’t dare interrupt this moment; this is the first time I have felt his lips since before my attack.

I hear people talking; they act like I lost my hearing along with everything else. I hear the comments, “you know, before the accident or the incident,” I was attacked! This was no accident; someone intentionally did this to me, someone purposely destroyed me. He lingers there with his lips

lightly pressed against mine, my face in his hands, our breath mingling together in the air around us as it builds up intensity. I think he just realized the significance of this exchange.

He comes in a little deeper and presses a little harder. A warm drop slides down my nose, and I don't know if the tear came from him or me. I reach up and wrap my hands around his, giving them a tight squeeze, and he releases a quiet whimper. His eyes are pressed shut so tightly he almost looks as if he is having an internal struggle with himself. Several minutes go by before he removes his lips from mine; we slowly separate. He doesn't back away; just leans his forehead against mine and looks me in the eyes.

“I miss this; I miss us, I miss you, Mel.”

Giving a little snuffle, I bring my hand around and swipe at my nose on my sleeve. “I'm right here,” it comes out in a soft whisper.

“I know that, but I feel so helpless, Mel, almost useless. I don't know what to do. I don't know if what I do is the right thing to do or not. I feel like I am failing you, and I can't afford to fail you, Mel. I need you like I need air. My entire body inside and out, every organ, every skin cell, every molecule of my being is in excruciating pain seeing you hurt like this, I just want to make it go away, and I can't.” He pulls me in and wraps his arms around me.

“Richard, you are the most incredible man in the world. Please do not doubt yourself; you are perfect. I wouldn't have survived without you.”

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Two nights later, we have a house full of seven teenagers. Deshawn was able to talk his parents into leaving the next morning, and not only did Sarah come, but Kaylee's new friend Tabitha came as well. Looks like she didn't have much trouble finding a replacement for Piper. Tabitha is adorable; she has the cutest bleach-blond bob with pink tips and these giant brilliant blue eyes. Her skin is so white you can see her veins through it, making her basically transparent. As soon as she arrives, she seems to be glued to my side, asking me a million questions about what it was like being a dental hygienist. Kaylee must notice my confused stare because she jumps in to alert me that Tabitha is a senior, and she is starting a dental hygiene program in the fall; ah, okay, this makes sense.

I refuse to leave everything up to Richard, and I forbid Maureen entrance to the house. I love her to death, but these kids do not want a skunk smelling grandma hanging around. We have a smorgasbord of food

set up all along the kitchen counters. Veggies, chips and dips, sandwiches, and the kitchen island has every topping you can imagine for the kids to make ice cream Sundays.

I station myself on the recliner for the night while the kids rotate from room to room. In the living room, I have an X-Men marathon happening, being played in the chronological order that they are meant to be seen and not by release order. Richard had dominos set up in the study and is teaching them how to play. By them, I mean the boys. The girls do not seem to have much interest in learning that game. Upstairs in the game room, they have moved the bedroom TV's in there, and now they have three different game consoles going all at once. Whatever happened to multiplayer games?

It's incredible, it's exhausting, it's loud, and I love it.

For a little while, my life feels normal again, but I know it won't last.

Chapter Ten



Melany

That summer came and went in a flash. Well, for me, it did; not sure if my family feels the same way since it was my schedule that was keeping everyone so busy. Everything that goes on in this house now seems to just revolve around me. Richard's mother, Barbara, came to visit for a few days. I didn't see much of her; she mainly took the kids out every day and kept them busy and entertained. I finally met with the psychologist the hospital recommended, Dr. Tracy Nguyen. I had no expectations going in. I had never even seen any type of professional for my mental health before besides that one guy in the hospital, but I don't think that can be counted. Growing up, my family wasn't known for openly expressing their feelings. You did what you were told to do, stayed out of the way, and never cried about anything.

I am different with my kids. Every chance I get, I start random conversations so that they know it is okay to talk to me about anything at all. Well, anything until Korbin decided to describe a "massive dump" he had dropped. I told him that's not my department, and he could go compare notes with his dad if he ever felt the need to share stories from the toilet again.

Dr. Nguyen was this little bitty Asian woman with an excellent sense of style and a loud welcoming voice. I was sure someone was punking me when she made her introduction. *This can't be real? Did that sound just come out of that little body?* I thought. Dr. Nguyen was born and raised in Oklahoma, and by her voice and mannerism, there was no denying where she came from. It took me a couple of sessions to open up. She tried getting me to talk about my childhood, but I told her that wasn't what I was there for, and I had no hang-ups about my past. I had dealt with my upbringing better than some could imagine. I didn't feel it was causing me any

underlying issues, and there was nothing profound or dark festering in the back of my mind that I needed to bring out into the open.

During our fourth session, I finally gave her the clipped version of what happened to me. I am sure she already knew all the gory details of what had been done to my body from my medical records. I know she was more interested in what had been done to my mind, but I couldn't help spitting it all out like I was reading a script or playing a role. By the way I sounded, you would think it hadn't actually happened to me.

She had asked about my communications with Richard. When I told her that we hadn't really talked about it, she insisted that he join us at the following week's session. Of course, it ultimately was up to me; if I didn't want him there, then he wouldn't be there. I told Dr. Nguyen that I thought it was a good idea. I had been trying and failing at finding the right time to ask him some questions of my own about that night. At this point, Richard had gone back to work but was taking off to join me at every appointment I had outside of the home. He would sit patiently in the waiting room, so it wasn't a problem getting him there. When I asked him about joining in with us, he seemed relieved, like he had been waiting for the invitation.

That next week Dr. Nguyen got us started by asking about that day—the day that caused it all. She wanted us to give as much detail as we could remember about March 4th. I honestly couldn't recall every detail; I can assure anyone inquiring that it was most likely a typical boring day. I didn't have any appointments or meetings, which I rarely do. The kids had school; spring break was the following week, but we had no travel plans as Richard was working on a big project in Fort Worth and couldn't get away. We also hadn't made any summer plans because of the project since we had no idea how long it would go on. Richard was leaving the house at four in the morning every day to arrive on the site before the crew. He was home by seven most nights, but there had been a few in the past month that caused him to arrive well after ten at night. I didn't mind; I would wait up for him. It's not like I had a job to be at the next day or anything. I was just glad the site was close enough that he got to come home every night. Sometimes he would get contracted for new developments that would last up to four months, and they would be out of state or still in Texas, but might as well be out of state given the distance. Those were hard months for me. He would come home on weekends but not every weekend, considering they

would get supplies in and couldn't stop working just because it was a Saturday. They had deadlines to meet after all.

Sitting there in Dr. Nguyen's office, contemplating how that day had gone, trying to remember details so I could retail it. I realized that was the first time I had thought about that Fort Worth project Richard had been working on. I remember how excited Richard was when his bid was picked, and he landed that deal. He said his entire crew could finish it in maybe six months and all make a year's salary off of it. I loved how fair my husband was; he always took care of his workers and actually took the time to get to know them. In return, they worked hard, but he didn't put up with any crap if you made a mistake. He knew stuff happens, we are all human, and you always got another chance, but if it happened again, you were out. He doesn't really talk about the people he works with, but he came home one night a few years ago visibly distraught.

When I asked him that night over our pillow talk, he confided in me that he had to let someone go that day. It was eating him up; he hated having to do that. He said the guy was his age and had a young wife and new kid at home, but after showing up to the site several times drunk, he had to cut him loose before someone got hurt because of it. Richard had sent everyone off to start their assigned tasks, and he called this guy into his temporary trailer office to inform him of the termination decision. He knew right away that he had a problem on his hands. The guy blew up, started wrecking the office, even came after my husband, but Richard was able to avoid the blow of his fist and restrained him while he called for help. The police had to escort the man off the job site, but Richard said he didn't press charges. He just wanted him gone; he didn't want to cause him even more problems on top of losing his job.

What happened with the recent Fort Worth project anyway? He took a leave of absence because of me. I decided now wasn't the time to ask; we only had an hour to describe a day that happened over three months ago.

This was the first time I had to vocally describe what had happened that night to anyone. I had been asked several times by the doctors, nurses, and police that first couple of weeks in the hospital, but my mind was still a little foggy from all of the medication, and I only had an electronic means to communicate with. The retelling Dr. Nguyen got the first time around was brief, not descriptive. Now, with Richard there to witness it, emotions

were pouring out of me. I didn't want to have to do this again, so I made sure not to leave anything out.

I was having a hard time getting words to pass my lips once I got to the part of my day that took a wrong turn. I couldn't seem to look at anyone. With my chin tucked into my chest and my fist clenched on my lap, I try my best to get everything out. I don't want Richard to picture it in his mind; I don't want him to see me in that light. With another man on me, in me, taking me as if I belonged to him. I am Richard's, I have been from that first time I passed out on his couch, and I knew as I went about the telling of that night, I was killing a little bit of his soul. I couldn't look at him, but I could feel him. He was all around me as I described the pain from all the blows the monster put upon me.

Having him here somehow gave me the strength to let it all out; he deserves to know. I shouldn't keep anything from him; we never have before, so why start now. He had been given the medical description just as Dr. Nguyen had but coming from my mouth, hearing the gruesome details of how the monster sodomized me in a public place just a block away from the home that I was raising my children.

Something changed in the atmosphere when I was done; I had taken the entire hour and then some. I heard the beep signaling that our time was up, but no one dared to interrupt me. I still had not looked up, the air was thick, and I could hear the rustling of a tissue being pulled from a box. They had given me their undivided attention, and they were just letting it all sink in. A few moments passed before I could lift my head. Opening my eyes, I saw Dr. Nguyen first. She is young, maybe in her late twenties or early thirties. You can tell she has had a good life so far, but being in the mental health profession, she has probably seen first-hand her fair share of the suffering and injustice that goes on in the world. She was staring at me with wide eyes that were glazed over, her mouth slightly agape. I felt Richard reach over from my left. He took my hand, and I turned my head to look at him. I thought that he would be upset or have a look of pity, but all I saw was anger. He looked as if he was going to war with his emotion and losing painfully. The anger was not directed at me but at a monster lurking on this planet somewhere, a monster that stole something from the person he loves most. I hate that I put that look there, and I know he is beating himself up, thinking he should have been able to prevent this.

The truth is no one could have prevented this. I have come to terms with the fact that some people in this world are just sick. That monster is a sick man; he knew what he was doing every step of the way. He intentionally broke my jaw to shut me up; he deliberately shattered my bones to keep me still. I was a rag doll lying in a puddle of bodily fluids on a dirty ground after he had used me up. He just left me there to die or rot or to be discovered by some poor soul that didn't deserve that image to haunt them for the rest of their lives. But that didn't happen, I didn't die, and a random person didn't find me. It was Richard, he found me. I remember hearing him call my name and scream for help. I had never heard my husband scream before that night, and I just then realized that it was indeed him.

"You found me," I said.

"I was too late; I should have started looking for you sooner; I could have prevented this."

"No, Richard, no one could have prevented this. It happened, and we can't think like that. How did you find me?" I asked.

"It was so late, at first I didn't think anything of it. You probably just got stopped by Maureen or something. After I sent the kids off to get ready for bed, I headed across the street to let you know in case you wanted to smell Korbin's breath or his head to make sure he had washed himself properly. When I walked outside, I noticed it had gotten a little cold out since the sun had gone down. No one was on the porch across the street, and all her lights were off. After knocking a couple of times, I figured y'all might be out back sitting by the heater. When I started to head around to the gate Maureen came out her front door and stopped me. She was wrapped up in a robe, but I still asked her if you were there; she said she hadn't seen you all night but that she had gone to bed early. She didn't even catch you leaving the house that evening." Richard stopped to catch his breath and gave me a sad smile.

"I went back home and tried calling you and texting you a couple of times. I went to check upstairs again to make sure you hadn't snuck in and I just missed you. After confirming with the kids that they had not seen you, I found your iPad. You had the Find My iPhone app on there, so I pulled it up. At first, it looked like all your devices were in the house, but zooming in, I noticed that your iPad and phone were at home, but it looked like your watch was in another house a block over."

Richard took another deep breath and cleared his throat before continuing. He was seething at this point and having a hard time getting words out. “I hesitated, Mel. I never in a million years would have thought what happened actually would happen. This shit happens in horror movies and in fucking New York. Not here, not to us, not like this. I didn’t go right away, I thought you were visiting someone, or I don’t know. Maybe it was something you didn’t want me to know about. I feel so ashamed for thinking it, but I’m gone a lot, and I honestly thought you know, if you were with someone, I almost didn’t blame you, but I also didn’t want to know about it. I didn’t want to know because if I knew about it, I would have to address it, and then that might open a door for you to leave, and I can’t lose you. Mel, I can’t live a life without you in it.”

“You thought I was having an affair?” I asked.

“No! Mel, no, I didn’t think that. It was just a blip of a possibility that crossed my mind for a fraction of a second. I just need you to understand that I saw the little dot on the iPad screen that showed me where you were, and I hesitated. I waited almost twenty minutes before I went out to find you. I have no idea how long you had been there. I might not have ever gone if I didn’t start getting really weird, random texts from you. I didn’t get it at first, but after getting the texts, I went back to look at your watch dot, and it was still in the same place, and that’s what made me get off my ass and go look for you. I knew where you were for twenty fucking minutes, Mel, and I did nothing!” It took a little while for his words to sink in, almost like I was on a delay. I just stared off in space, thinking about how my husband thought I might be capable of cheating on him.

Dr. Nguyen chose to use the break in our confessions to chime in, “Mr. Polk, do not blame yourself; there are endless possibilities of what-ifs. You could spin it around your head over and over again for the rest of your life, but that is only going to make you go crazy. The fact is that it happened, and everyone reacted the way they reacted; you can’t change that. You know, Mr. Polk, there are other ways you could have reacted, like maybe just assuming she wasn’t coming home anytime soon and then heading off to bed. Think about what would have happened then, be glad you found her when you did and that you two still have each other.” Dr. Nguyen paused and scooted the tissue box closer to me. I leaned over and plucked one out.

“Melany has a long journey ahead of her, and she needs you by her side every step of the way. You have gotten through a lot already, but you will find yourself facing more hurdles in the days to come, and you two need to work as a team so you can jump them together. I have got to say I have a very positive feeling about you guys. I know you have a strong bond, and this is not going to break it. I don’t think anything can.”

Dr. Nguyen let out a breath as she stood, brushing invisible lint off of her pencil skirt. She said, “Our time is up for today, but Mr. Polk, if it is okay with your wife, I would like to invite you to join us again. I feel that we might need to dig a little deeper and make sure everyone is on the same page. We made some real progress today. Melany, I cannot thank you enough for sharing this with me. There are evil things in this world, and some people go their entire lives without coming across any of it, while others are born into it and have to fight demons every day. Melany, I want you to remember that this was an evil act put upon you, but it does not define you, and it will not pollute the rest of your life. You are strong, and the three of us together will not allow that to happen.”

As she walked us out, we thanked her and confirmed the next appointment with the receptionist.

Richard only joined me for two more sessions after that, but I think we had dug as far as we could. We are going to be okay; we will get past this. By the time summer was at an end, I had decided I didn’t need Dr. Nguyen anymore. I do not feel like my old self, but I think she has done all she could for me. For the rest of this journey, I am going to have to take it on my own.

At my last session, I brought her a Nothing Bundt Cake and assured her that I would keep her in mind if I ever needed anything in the future.

Chapter Eleven



Melany

Kaylee is a week into her senior year when she frantically storms into the house, spewing incoherent nonsense about her driver's license.

"Kaylee, please use your words, and if you could do it in English, that would be great."

"Mom, we have to make an appointment to take the driven test and to get my license. Did you know this?"

"Um, no, as far as I know, you just walk in during business hours and wait your turn."

"Mom, this is not a Podunk town with two hundred people in it. There are like hundreds of people a day trying to get their license. Tabitha said when she went to make her appointment, it was a five-month wait just to get in, then she failed the driving part and couldn't get back to retake it for another month. Can you imagine, Mom? Being so ready and having to wait that long. Mom, we have to make my appointment now!" She sure seems to be freaking out about this on a way different level for someone who didn't even want to drive just six months ago.

"Kay, you have to have your permit for six months before you can even go take the driving test."

"Yes, but that's next month, Mom, then I'll have to wait even longer. We should have made this appointment months ago!" Kaylee cries out.

"How could we have? We just found out that we needed an appointment. How do we make one anyway?" I say, trying to calm my daughter down.

"The website, I'll go grab your laptop," Kaylee says as she rushes out of the room. Sure enough, she is right, we have to schedule the test online, and we can't get in until November. That's almost a three-month wait. This is insane, are there really that many people in the world that a kid

can't just go up on his sixteenth birthday and get his damn license anymore? I'm glad I found out about this before Korbin's turn came around. I know for a fact he won't want to wait a day past sixteen. This entire ordeal is annoying, but I need a distraction from my internal thoughts. It also feels nice to be needed as a mom again.

Kaylee gets her license right before Thanksgiving, and she doesn't have to take a retest; she passes on the first try. The timing couldn't have been more perfect, as Richard is taking on his first out of town assignment since my attack and will be gone for days at a time. I still am not driving, or going anywhere alone for that matter, so I am going to need Kaylee from time to time. My, how the tables have turned. Now I can sit in the back seat taking naps and checking email or whatever it was she said. I am still having difficulty getting around, and according to Dr. Strattis, that may never improve. Given the multiple breaks on my lower extremities, my body can only be pushed so far and do so much at my age. I balk at that, I thought I was a cool young mom, and he basically just called me old. I have managed to walk the stairs up and down without complaint, but because I sometimes have uncontrollable muscle spasms, I can't drive just yet.

I have met with the Cranial Facial Maxillary Surgeon, Dr. Ashvin Ali, the same one that had wired my jaw in the hospital at what was supposed to be a six-month follow-up from my recovery. I had fallen behind and went a few months past six, plus it is tough trying to get afternoon appointments with these specialists. He is concerned about my teeth and the nerves that have suffered possible damage. He said if anything was going to happen, we would have noticed by now; I am most likely in the clear.

After following his instructions and doing a series of facial expressions he had requested, Dr. Ali states that my teeth seem fine. He notices no problems there and says I am okay to go ahead and make a dental appointment. I wasn't aware that I needed his release to see a dentist, but thanks for reminding me that I am past due on a cleaning. He gives me a recommendation to a plastic surgeon, so I can have him look not only at my scar but also the loose skin that seems to have detached itself from the muscle on the right side of my face. It is hard listening to him talk about it.

Every day I avoid looking at myself—it's hideous. It's true what they say; you really don't appreciate something till it's gone. I never thought much about my looks; I considered myself pretty, and I knew I was. Maybe not drop-dead gorgeous or model-worthy, but I would definitely use the

word cute. Cute is not a word that would be used for the face I now have. Every time I see it, I think, “Throw Momma From The Train.” Not quite Momma Lift, but close, half of my face resembles a Shar-Pei.

He asks about pain, and my only complaint is not being able to open my mouth fully and it continually popping when I chew. His answer is that TMJ is common, but I am not a candidate to get that corrected at this time. I will need to fully recover first. Then, if it’s still a problem, we can revisit it in a year or so.

~

I am sitting in the passenger seat of my jeep shifting my focus from my visor mirror to the card Dr. Ali had given me. I hadn’t given plastic surgery any thought. I know it was mentioned while I was in the hospital, but that seemed like ages ago. The driver door opens, pulling me out of my daze. Kaylee jumps in and hands me a smoothie.

“The old guy was working today; he makes the best ones. I got you an Angel’s Food.” We are on our way home from my appointment. I am lazily sipping my smoothie, looking out the window, contemplating my options when the soft sound of bagpipes slowly fills the car and slithers into my ears. The music is so beautiful, almost magical; it goes on for a moment as I lean back into my seat, close my eyes, and let it tickle my soul. All of a sudden, the calming music is interrupted by the beating of drums, then joined by the riff of an electric guitar. I bolt upright in my seat, my eyes pop open, and my smoothie flies out of my lap and splatters all over the floorboard. I reach over and promptly turn the radio off.

“What was that, Mom? Are you okay?” Kaylee asks. Taking in my surroundings, I see the pink sludge melting out of the styrofoam cup and puddle up around my feet. Sunbeams come in through the windshield, and Kaylee is taking worried glances at me as she tries to stay focused on the road.

“Mom, what happened? Do you need me to pull over?” As she says this, I notice that she has already turned on the blinker and is trying to pull off the road. We turn into a gas station parking lot. Kaylee runs in, and a few seconds later, she runs back out with a stack of napkins. Kaylee opens my door and starts cleaning up the mess on the floorboard.

“Mom, you wanna step out so we can get this up?” I’m frozen. What was that? For a brief tranquil moment, I was somewhere far off. It was such a peaceful moment. Then out of nowhere, it was like someone had punched

me in the gut. All the air rushed out of my lungs, and pain took over. You know how people talk about sleep paralysis? Some have said they know someone is there, but they can't seem to react because they have no control over their voice or their body. They can't move or scream but feel the danger lurking around them, almost like a poltergeist is holding them captive. I reacted so quickly; something in me needed that music to stop immediately. After that, everything slowed down. Some people describe the sleep paralysis as if they know they are awake; they can see the room around them and even sometimes rasps out soft whispers calling for help. Others say it feels like a dream but way too real to be one. That's how it felt to me in that moment. Only I wasn't dreaming in my bed; I was wide awake, and it was a sunny afternoon while I rode in my vehicle with my daughter. Still, I felt it. I felt the danger, the evil, the presence of harm around me.

It has been almost nine months since my attack. I was so unbelievably scared after; it took me a long time to gather enough courage to finally just leave my house. Even with eventually leaving, even spending hours staring at photos in the police station of people that looked like him, even seeing the school where it happened almost every day, none of those things ever did this to me. The panic, the fear, all of the torture I endured came rushing back in an instant. By the time I can shake it loose, Kaylee has my smoothie mess all cleaned up. She has swiveled me so that my feet are hanging out the door, and she is cleaning off my shoes. She is so much like me; sometimes, it's scary. She is going to make a lovely woman soon—I can't wait to see it.

"Mom," Kaylee stops what she is doing and squats down, resting her arm on her thighs. Her left hand is full of soiled paper towels, and her right hand is now squeezing my calve.

When she realizes she has my attention, she continues, "What was that? Did you see something back there?" I give my head a little shake. That's all I seem able to do at the moment.

"Something happened back there that made you freak out. I think I need to call Dad."

"It's okay, Kay, don't call your father. He's working; we can't call him every time I need to be managed." My voice doesn't even sound like my own right now. Kaylee is looking up at me, really looking. Like she is going to find some advice on what to do written on my face, or maybe she is

trying to convince herself that I am okay. Letting out a huff, she stands, gently pushes my legs back into the Jeep, buckles me back up, shuts the door, and is walking over to the trash can by the gas pumps to throw out my mess.

When she gets back in the Jeep, she buckles up, puts the keys back in the ignition, but doesn't start the car. She doesn't make any move that indicates we will be on our way now. She just sits there staring out the window while I stare at her.

Finally, she says, "Was it the music?"

"What?" I ask, still in a daze.

"You freaked out right at the start of Shoots And Ladders; you love that song. That's the song you introduced me to Korn with. It had to be the music. You couldn't have seen anything because right before you jumped up, I looked at you, and your eyes were closed. Unless you had fallen asleep and had a bad dream, but that doesn't make sense either because you had this nice little serene smile on your lips. So, it was the music." At that, she gives me a sad look, starts the car, and we head home. I didn't confirm her theory at the time because I didn't know. I was so shaken up that it took her explaining it to me to see what had happened. Once I realized that she was right, I mentally folded. He's done it again; he has managed even nine months later to take away something I love because that was the song that was playing when it happened. He's still out there. Laughing at me, taunting me, maybe even destroying other women's lives along the way.

I can't run anymore. I walk with a limp, and after short distances, I have to rest. I have not made love to my husband since before the attack, and I do not see that happening again anytime soon. I have chronic pain; I no longer sleep for more than three hours at a time. I lost all of my hair; my face looks like it's melting. My husband had to miss out on months of work, causing him a loss of income while at the same time having to pay our outrageous deductible for my care. My entire family is hanging on by a thread because of this monster, because of one act that lasted maybe, what fifteen, twenty minutes for him? It will haunt all of us for the rest of our lives. And now he has taken my music! This may have been the first time this has happened, and yeah, I might be able to get past it just like I got past seeing the school, but this feeling is going to stay with me. I just know it.

Chapter Twelve



Richard

I was right at the core of a big project in Phoenix. I was only able to come home for three days at Christmas. Even that was pushing it, considering I really couldn't afford to fall behind, not after losing the contract in Fort Worth mid-build this past year. Melany acted like she was okay with it, but I could tell she was biting her tongue, especially since my mother had arrived a day before me. Melany did not like dealing with Momma Polk on her own. She also doesn't know about our current financial situation. She has access to all the accounts, and I've been waiting for her to speak up, but when it never happened, I realized she hadn't looked. She didn't even know. That shocked me a bit; Melany used to stay on top of it. I've always paid all the bills, but she is in charge of passing out money to the kids, the schools and of course, she does all the shopping.

Shortly after the incident, I gave Kaylee and Korbin debit cards with a small monthly limit. Several times they had come up to me saying they were out of lunch money on their school account or that something was overdue for school or another activity. This way they can take care of it themselves. They are teenagers now, they can deal with a little responsibility. I wonder if Mel even knows about the cards. Has she even thought about it? She doesn't go anywhere anymore, so she no longer buys stuff or spends money. Well, she doesn't buy stuff, but plenty of money is still being spent. After Thanksgiving, she started aqua therapy. She was already getting occupational therapy and physical therapy twice a week at the house, but her doctor said aqua therapy on top of those could help increase mobility in her hip. She now has to go once a week to a facility with an indoor pool. I didn't have the heart to tell her that the facility had called me the day before her first appointment and informed me that Aqua Therapy is not a covered benefit with our health plan. They told me we could still go, but they would need to collect \$120.00 at each visit.

“Look, that’s fine, but let me just give you a credit card number to keep on file. If it’s okay with you, please do not try collecting anything from my wife. Just charge that card every week.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Polk. Would you like me to email you the receipt at the time of service?” The receptionist asked.

“That would be great, thank you.” They agreed, and she has now had about eight visits. These things are adding up. Not to mention at the beginning of next year, our insane deductible will start all over again.

Kaylee graduates this year, and she approached me about her senior pictures, her graduation announcements, and her cap with gown when I was home for Christmas.

“Dad, all of these things need to be bought in advance. Tabitha said she got her pictures over the summer before she graduated. We are starting the second semester, and I need to do my pictures so I can submit one for the yearbook. Also, I have a couple more college applications to send in, and I have to send a \$50 application fee with each one.” I told her to go ahead and make an appointment for the pictures, and I’ll up her limit on her card so that she can pay for them.

“Make sure you take your Mom with you; she will want to be there.” Kaylee gave me a funny look at the mention of her mother.

“What, you don’t want her to be there?” I asked.

“No, Dad, it’s not that, It’s just every time we leave the house together; mom has me stop at a liquor store and comes out with several bottles. I wouldn’t think anything of it; it’s just that it happens like every week. I don’t ever see her drink it. What is she doing with four or five bottles of vodka every week?” This was news to me.

Kaylee promised to hold off on sending the rest of her applications until I came home for a weekend after the New Year so that I could go over them with her. This would typically fall into Mel’s department, but that department has been “closed till further notice” for a while now. I didn’t bring up what Kaylee had said to me. I didn’t want to ruin the short time we had together. Once this job was done, I’d be home more, and the completion check would help even things out.

After Christmas, I was back at the trailer assigned to me on the job site in Phoenix; I kept thinking about what Kaylee had said. I wasn’t worried about her college; both kids had funds for that. I wasn’t concerned with the amounts in our current accounts that were steadily declining. It’s just

money; I'll make more, and besides, it's not like we have tapped into credit cards and started accumulating debt yet. What kept coming back to me was the liquor store purchases. I hadn't even noticed if my wife might have started drinking heavily, or maybe she was donating the bottles to a homeless alcoholic. Hey, stranger things have happened.

The thing was, I couldn't find any charges on any accounts. We have two checking accounts that are linked to two savings accounts, then we each have an AMEX and a Discover that get automatically paid every month from my checking account. All of these are in both of our names; we both have a primary account, with the other person's account being set as a secondary. Every time I get paid (twice a month), \$300.00 gets direct-deposited into Melany's account, and the rest goes into mine. I pay all the bills, the credit card payments come out of my account, and the kids' new debit cards are linked to mine as well. Mel has it set up that for every purchase she makes, the change gets rounded up to the next dollar, and that is what goes into her savings. We have been doing it this way for thirteen years, ever since Mel quit working. Mel's change jar of a savings account has racked up over \$15,000.00. That may not seem like a lot for a grown woman to have in her savings account, but you have to realize this is just her side stash. She still has access to everything I have.

So, after looking through the accounts, I cannot help but wonder how in the hell she is paying for all these liquor store purchases. Going back to donating them to homeless people, I think about how maybe she is buying it for underage kids; she collects the cash from them then used it to get the booze? I just can't see Mel doing that; also, she still isn't driving herself, so someone would have seen her passing it out if she was, in fact, contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

The next day I call Kaylee around the time she gets out of school.

"Hey, Dad, what up?"

"Hi, Pumpkin, how was your day?" I ask.

"Long! And it's not even over yet. I have a major test in calculus tomorrow, so I'll be studying all night."

"Eww, math, don't ask your Mom for help; she can barely make change for a dollar."

"This is known, Dad."

"So, how is your Mom doing anyway?"

“I don’t know; it’s hard to tell sometimes. She does seem to keep to herself a little more lately. Why, is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong. I was just thinking about what you had said during Christmas. You know about the vodka.”

“Yeah,” she sounds hesitant.

“Does she drink them?” I ask.

“I think so, I mean, I don’t see her drinking, but then again, I’m not home that often, just a few hours every night before I go to bed. But I see the bottles in the recycle bins, and sometimes she smells like she’s been drinking when I get home from school.”

“But she’s not drunk?” I felt weird asking my daughter this.

“Dad, how would I even know? I’ve never seen Mom drunk. She’s not falling over or throwing up, if that’s what you mean. She’s just her normal self, well, her new normal self.”

Ouch!

“When she goes to the stores, how does she pay for it? Is she using cash?”

“Dad, I do not know. I wait in the car.” I can tell she is getting irritated by my inquisition.

“Okay, okay, I was just curious. Did you get your pictures done?”

“Not yet. I’m going next week. I ordered this outfit from Dress Lilly that I want to use, so I hope it arrives in time. The studio said they will deliver my yearbook shot directly to the school, so it won’t be late.”

“Dress Lilly, is that a dress store?” I ask.

“Not really, Dad. They sell all kinds of stuff at a discount online.”

“Well, I can see by the tone of your voice how much you miss me and just how much you are enjoying this conversation. We should do it more often.” She lets out a soft giggle at that, and I can hear the engine in the jeep starting up in the background.

“I love you, Dad. Bye.” With that, the line goes dead, and I can’t help but smile. My little pumpkin isn’t so little anymore.

~

We complete the job in record time, and I am able to return home earlier than first expected. I decide not to tell anyone and surprise my family by just showing up around dinner time one evening in late January. I walk into my home, I’m quiet, but I’m not trying to sneak up on anyone. My wife doesn’t need to be startled because her husband can’t keep from

acting like a creeper. The house itself seems to be eerily silent. Every small sound I do make just gives off an echo all around me. Rounding the corner from the entryway to the living room, I'm immediately assaulted. Water, or what I hope is water, comes from nowhere and everywhere at once, spraying me in my face, also soaking through my shirt. Before I can even regain my balance, a ninety-pound German shepherd, also known as Spud, pounces on me. I'm brought down, hard and fast as his weight, along with the now wet floor, causes me to slip.

Instantly my family surrounds me, seeing if I've survived this invasion. As they hover over where I lay on the wet ground, I see they're all holding super soakers.

"Did I interrupt something here?" I ask skeptically. They all laugh like me being completely clueless is the funniest thing in the world.

"No, hon, this was premeditated. You thought you could surprise us, but we had a surprise of our own," my wife replies.

"How in the..." I trail off as a lopsided mischievous semi smile works its way up my wife's face.

"Oh, I followed your dot," she casually says as she strolls back into the kitchen, not even giving me a formal hello. Was she tracking me now? How? I didn't leave any devices at home, did I? I give her a quizzical look, and she just giggles and sprays me right between the eyes.

Later that night, we are lying in bed. Mel and I have not had sex in forever and a day, but I try not to think about this. I know it will take time, and I will not pressure her or even bring up the subject, not until she is ready. I see her eat, and by the looks of it, I'm never getting a blow job again. That's a shame because our sex life was always one for the books. You know the smutty porn type books middle-aged women love so much. Mel reads that stuff, too, mixing them in with what she calls age-appropriate literature, and she always liked acting out recently discovered stories. We are intimate in other ways still, or at least we were before I went out of town a few months ago. We stay up late staring at each other in the dark; our pillow talk is always so much better when I've been out of town because we have lots of new material. I give her foot massages, and she rubs my head while I lay on her chest, listening to her heartbeat.

Tonight is different, she is always so happy when I get home, but now she almost seems disappointed. I'm lying in the dark, staring at the ceiling.

“Why didn’t you just let me surprise you and the kids?” Is the first thing I can think of to ask.

“Why are you the only one that gets to have any fun?” Came her flat reply.

“Do you want to go have a drink?” I ask. I thought of how to approach this subject, or if I should even say anything, but since she’s being so snide, I wanted to reciprocate the gesture.

“No, I just want to go to bed,” she says. At that, she turns on her side, giving me the back treatment. I didn’t see her drink anything during or after dinner, and I can’t smell anything on her, but she seems different, even looks different. I know she won’t sleep. I know she only takes little naps here and there. She will lay here for an hour or so; then she will get up and go do god knows what. I’m guessing she has started filling all this extra time with drinking. I don’t care if she thinks I would judge her; she is wrong. I wouldn’t blame her. Hell, after what she went through, I’m surprised she’s not a raging alcoholic with an opiate addiction by now. I can’t take any more away jobs until summer starts. I won’t risk missing Kaylee’s graduation in June. That means I am home now for a while, at least. I can keep an eye on her and see what the hell is going on with my wife. I should have never left in the first place.

I know everything there is to know about my wife. I have spent the last two decades obsessing over her every move. I know what her favorite song is from every genre of music. I know that she can’t stand any female actress that portrays the lead character from one of her books in a movie because they always ruin the damn book for her. I know that she sometimes would go to Cajun restaurants by herself so that she can consume three dozen oysters without having to share. I know that she wouldn’t mind being a part of her siblings’ life, but they need to be the ones to reach out to her first. She cheats at every card game, she loathes getting her toes done by a stranger, she doesn’t care for other people’s kids, well, the little ones at least. If she could take Spud everywhere with her, she would. I know that even though she was a dental hygienist, she only flosses her teeth after she eats popcorn. In her defense, though, she does eat a lot of popcorn. If she could be any creature on the planet, it would be a seahorse. If she could spend the day with any famous person, it would be Jennifer Aniston. I know that she secretly resents my Southern Baptist upbringing, being an only child and having a mother and a father all to myself catering to my every

need, but she would never admit to that. Just like she would never admit to wanting to know about her siblings. She was born to be a mother; she would do anything for these kids we created together. Her life has revolved around them ever since she stopped working and decided to give them everything she had to offer and never had herself.

I know everything about my wife, Melany Ann (Farrar) Polk, but I don't seem to know much about the woman lying next to me right now.

I wake to the sun peeking in from a slit in the curtains, and the stench in here is so overpowering I almost gag. It reminds me of days in the Frat house at Texas A&M. Good God, the alcohol seeping out of Melany's pours as she snores heavily beside me is so thick—you can taste it. Getting out of bed, I quietly open the window to start airing out the room before I step into the shower. I am not going to confront her on this. I know she waited for me to fall asleep before she went about her ritual, the one she is probably doing nightly now. I will not take offense to this, this is just one of the stages, a coping mechanism, and it will pass. Mel does not have an addictive personality; she is strong, and she will regain control before it's too late. However, in the meantime, I am going to stick a little closer to her; she has my full attention.

Chapter Thirteen



Melany

I make Richard drop me off at Aqua Therapy after he insists on taking me even though I schedule it after school so that Kaylee could drive me here every week.

“I’ll be in here for at least an hour. You should go find something to do,” I tell him as I exit his truck.

“I can’t come in and just wait in the lobby?” He’s already removing the keys from the ignition.

“No, they don’t let anyone back with the patients, so there is no point in you coming in.” This isn’t a full lie; he can’t come back to the pool area because there are other patients there, but he can sit in the waiting room. I just don’t want him here, and I also don’t want to risk the chance of him seeing me in a swimsuit. He looks a little hesitant but concedes and agrees to be back here in an hour.

I am not hiding anything right now, just going to my appointment like I do every week, but for some reason, I feel the need to push Richard away. I love my husband, but lately, I just want to be left alone. I’ve been getting through my life day to day now; living is a hazy fog brought to you by Grey Goose. I had stumbled on this escape through the clear liquid a couple of months back.

One night during Thanksgiving break, we had already had our family dinner. Kyle was the last to leave; as he said goodbye and headed out the door, I looked at the bottle on the counter. We all had made ourselves a screwdriver that afternoon. Richard, Kyle, Maureen, and myself. Barbara decided not to join us in the festivities with her son. I thought to myself, *lighten up, lady*.

We were just hanging out like any other time, only having one drink each. I hadn’t put the bottle away and decided to make myself another. The kids were in bed, and Richard was taking himself and his mom to the

airport, both heading in separate directions. Before I knew it, the sun was coming up. I had long since run out of orange juice and moved onto cans of ginger ale I found in the garage.

The sun gave me a little jolt as it tried blinding me through the back sliding glass door. I had been sitting on the couch all night looking through old photo albums and slowly sipping my cocktail, refilling it every half hour or so.

Stumbling, I tried to gain my balance. I finally managed to peel myself from the couch, collecting my empty glass, cans, and an almost empty vodka bottle. I disposed of the evidence from my shameful solo adventure in the outdoor recycling bins.

That following Monday, when the kids returned to school and I was left alone in my house, I decided to have a couple of Lone Stars for breakfast. Rachelle, my at-home Occupational therapist, was due to come in at noon for my biweekly session. She was alright; we never spoke about anything besides my therapy and my progress. Rachelle was adamant about me doing exercises when she wasn't there, which I never did. She has been coming to me the longest, and all I knew about her was her name and that she liked chewing Big Red gum. The other therapists I had were talkers and sometimes a little unprofessional. It was kind of a relief working with Rachelle. Realizing it was 11 am and coming to the conclusion that I was not ready to stop drinking, I sent her a text letting her know I didn't feel well and needed to cancel.

I had a discovery that day, as I consumed all the beer we had in the fridge, which accumulated to about a twelve-pack of combined Lone Stars, Bud Light Limes, and Shock Tops. I felt good. Sure I felt a little lethargic as the afternoon came in, and I was having trouble seeing the TV. I could gain focus just fine if I closed one eye, but my mind was clear. I didn't have this nagging in the back of my head that everything around me was wrong, that my family would be better off without me, that at any minute, the monster could come finish what he started. The rest of that week, I refrained from drinking. Not only because I was practically out of everything except the really good, expensive stuff that sat high up on the shelves and was hard to replace but also because it took me a little while to recover from the hangover I woke up with on Tuesday.

I had been getting our groceries delivered weekly from the local Tom Thumb. Opening up their website to create my list, I learned that I could not

have alcoholic beverages delivered; that was something I was going to have to pick up in person. I decided that Friday to ask Maureen if she could take me up to the store, not wanting to bother Kaylee and also wanting to get this done during the day. Richard could come visit at any time, and he might notice the missing beer, so I needed to replace those soon. Not that it mattered, I am a grown woman, and if I want to drink, I will. I just would prefer to keep this to myself for now.

I purchased my regular weekly items along with a few bottles of wine, a couple cases of beer, and a twenty-four-pack of ginger ale. I might need them if I was going to continue the beer route, the morning afters were not fun, but the ride there was worth it. If Maureen noticed, she didn't say anything. She just helped me unload, then popped a squat on my couch, complaining about how tired she was for being forced to leave her house, and carried on chatting about trivial things as I put groceries away.

I need a better routine; after a couple of weeks, I am starting to have a hard time getting out of bed every morning. The headaches I get from the beer and wine seem to have become immune to Tylenol. Not to mention the calories I am consuming. I had to have put on at least ten pounds since Thanksgiving. I have never been one to follow current fashion trends. I just kind of purchase and wear what I like and what feels right to me.

I guess at some point in the early 2000's, I had purchased one of those velour jumpsuits that were so popular back then. I was rummaging through my closet looking for something that would fit other than yoga pants when I came across it, shoved way in the back. It didn't have any ridiculous writing on the butt. *Oh good, I at least had a little sense back then.* It is just a solid light gray color. Before my attack, I am wearing a size small in all my loungewear and a size four in jeans and dresses. This particular suit was a medium, so I knew it was from my pre-workout days. I decided to try it on, and it fit perfectly. I actually love it! Now I will typically wear it for two to three days in a row, just swapping out my tee-shirt and sometimes my underwear. After a few days, I've sweated and probably spilled a variety of things on it, leaving it in dire need of a wash. I'll wash it, make the change to yoga pants for a day or two, and repeat the process all over again.

I find myself getting snapped out of a trance by whoever I am with multiple times a day as I sit there mindlessly rubbing my leg or my arm covered in the long-sleeved top. It's so soft. I don't understand why these ever went out of style, these are way better than leggings, and they hide all

your imperfections, unlike leggings that put them on freaking display. Really some people should automatically have their leggings swapped out for sweatpants at check out to help humanity's eyesight as a whole.

When I started going to Aqua Therapy, I noticed that we passed one of the few liquor stores in Plano, Total Wine and More. I wanted some more Grey Goose, and I wanted it bad. After my appointment, I had Kaylee stop at an ATM so I could get some cash out. They always charge you more at these stores if you use a card, and I also didn't want a paper trail of my purchases.

Then I had her stop at Total Wine; she didn't ask any questions, just did as she was told. I purchased three large bottles of Sky Vodka. After seeing the price difference, I figured it would have to do. That next week I had Kaylee stop at the bank so I could go in and withdrawal \$1,000.00 from my savings account. I wasn't going to be able to explain a weekly cash need to Richard if he asked. I was a horrible liar, especially to him, and he never checked my savings account.

That's when I started my current habit of nightly and or daily—depending on who I expected to drop by that day—vodka and ginger ale binges. The vodka was so much better. Mixed with the ginger ale, it never made me sick. You could hardly tell I had been drinking if you came across me, and the cloud I floated in was so much sweeter. I know the Grey Goose cloud was even better, but I was set on staying content with what I had. I looked at it as kind of like the house. While others could afford the upgrade to bigger and flashier yet might not need it, I had no desire to prove my value to anyone. I know I am comparing a home to a brand of vodka. I realize how pathetic I have become, but I am in a cloud, so I really do not care.

When Richard picks me up, he asks about my session and tells me how he ran into David's ex-wife Stacy at Home depot.

"When was this?" I ask.

"Just now, I went to get light bulbs since you said I couldn't join you. She was picking out paint samples. I saw her from the side, and when I told her hello, she turned, and that's when I noticed she was about to pop. Did you know she is pregnant?" Stacy is a few years younger than me, still in her late thirties; it's a little late in life to be procreating, I think. I didn't know she was pregnant. In fact, I haven't spoken to Stacy since she and David got divorced. That had to have been almost twelve years now. It was

well after I quit working, but she did come to Korbin's baby shower. When was the last time I had seen her? We were never close, but we did eat lunch together every day for the almost six years that we worked together. You would think that would be enough to at least keep in touch. I haven't even thought about her. David had remarried, and it is true what they say. You have to pick a side. Even though Stacy was the reason Richard and I had met, he and David had been friends longer; therefore, he got both of us in the divorce.

"Stacy? No, I had no idea; you know I don't talk to her anymore. Did she recognize you?"

"Yeah, it hasn't been that long, Mel." I couldn't help but think, yeah, but she wouldn't have recognized me, not with this face.

"Well, that's good. Is this her first one?" I ask.

"I only said hello and that it was nice seeing her and congratulations, then I moved on. She wasn't really my friend. She was just in my life as a product of association." I gave him a skeptical look, and he laughed at my expression. He could be so odd sometimes.

"I was thinking since it's already close to dinner, and I am pretty hungry, we could just go scoop up the kids and eat out. I have been craving Adriano's for ages," Richard says.

"That's fine with me, I had taken some chicken out, but it will keep till tomorrow night," I say.

"Great, will you send the kids a text as a heads up that we are on our way?" I typed out that we were on our way to pick them up and to be ready to go in ten minutes. I sent it in a group message. I included Richard; his phone chimed from the center console with an alert, but he ignored it. I didn't know what he was up to, but he was acting funny, or maybe it was just me, or perhaps I just needed a drink.

For the last week since Richard has been home, he has been up my ass, and I am about sick of him. Everywhere I turn, there he is.

Even though my husband's best friend David was basically the reason why Richard and I had met, I couldn't stand the guy. From the beginning I knew, to a certain extent, how he treated Stacy. It's not that he was physically abusive; she didn't show up to work covering black eyes with sunglasses or telling unbelievable stories about how she ran into a door. No,

his abuse cut even deeper than that sometimes. Richard and I were just starting out, so everything was new, and we were still the pre-dating people; you know, the first six months you, the one who is eager to please because you are just so damn horny that your true self hasn't even come out yet. Well, that being said, I know he saw it too. I was with him on one occasion.

Happy hour once a week with my coworkers at the dental practice was legendary. Well, not quite legendary because it was on a Thursday at five o'clock and would be over before seven since we all had to be back at the office the next day, so legendary might not be the right word. But anyway, that's not the point. Sometimes Dr. Jameson, the dentist, would join us, and if our spouses and or partner in crime for that time were available, they could tag along. Richard had joined in for his first time, and his friend David had been there that night as well.

Now I've met David plenty of times at this point, and he has come along to several happy hours with Stacy. I knew him enough, I knew his type anyway, I knew his shitty attitude toward women, and I didn't really care for him much. As I said, Stacy was not being abused physically; I tried bringing it up to her, and she blew me off, saying that's just how he talks and that it didn't bother her. She was used to it. I was young; we weren't best friends or anything, and if it didn't bother her, why should it bother me? I just looked the other way; it was her life and her choices that she had to live with. Well, this particular night, David had decided to get a little tipsy and started openly belittling Stacy in front of everyone. Richard jumped in right away, told David he was being an ass, apologized to me because he was going to have to leave and escort David home. Oh, be-still my heart. I almost fainted from swoon overload right then and there. I don't think I had ever seen such mature, manly behavior. Of course, looking at my upbringing, that doesn't surprise me. I think that was the night that I knew. It's all hard to tell. It's such a whirlwind at first, and everything just mixes together, but I believe that's the night I knew I loved Richard Polk. However, that's also the night that Richard learned how much I hated David.

This is my husband's best friend since before puberty, so I will not ask Richard to kick him to the curb. I just try to refrain from being around him if at all possible. Richard's run-in with Stacy gives me an idea. So, when I was desperate to get Richard out of my hair, I decided to bring it up.

“How’s David doing? Haven’t seen him in a while. You should go hang out with him, relax for a bit, get away from all my drama.” He knew something was up. I would never purposefully ask about that asshat.

After several of my attempts to try and deter my husband’s attention had failed, I started to give up. We might as well get surgically joined together at this point. Then my savior came into the light in the form of Dr. Strattis. He gave me the go-ahead to start driving again, and I jumped at the opportunity. Richard was a little skeptical, but I didn’t give him the option to object.

Despite all my fears of being anywhere alone, I needed to get away from him more than anything. If it didn’t happen soon, someone was going to get hurt. At that particular appointment, Dr. Strattis’s nurse had decided it was time to weigh me. I don’t know why they never did that before. I mean, it’s an orthopedics office, not my OB/GYN. I feel like she did this on purpose not only because Richard had accompanied me but because the velour pants I once loved so much were barely covering my gigantic ass. I had gained some weight, so what? I knew this; she knew this, I didn’t care. She was just rubbing it in since I had become a fat, sloppy invalid who had shown up with my hunk of a husband, the nerve, that bitch. Richard had to of noticed the change. I mean, he’s not blind. He never said anything, you know, because he’s smart. Sneaking a glance over my shoulder at my husband as I step off the scale, I see him giving nurse Fuck Off a measuring look. Oh, wow, my husband was on to her, how very intuitive of him. He wasn’t normally this noticeably perceptive.

That week as I try and fail to leave the house on my own, I broach the subject that Kaylee has a big birthday coming up, and we should really be shopping for a third vehicle, especially since Korbin turned fifteen over the fall and has been hounding me to death about starting Drivers ED. Of course, in my vodka induced state, I hadn’t even bothered to begin that process.

The course Kaylee took is looking much better than suffering through the parent taught plan. Richard does not seem keen on this idea, but I manage to rally the kids to my side, and we gang up on him. He just doesn’t want me to have the ability to run away from his obsessive need to be right next to me. I have very little interest in anything these days, and car shopping with my family does not even fall into the radar of things I might want to do.

Somehow, I feign interest enough so that I can get a car of my own and find a moment's peace. I haven't been able to make it to a liquor store since Richard has been back, and my supply is dwindling. After looking at all of three vehicles, apparently, the best used Camrys Toyota of Plano has to offer. I settle for the third one just because I am tired of looking and ready to get the hell out of there. Richard comes behind me and does his own little inspection.

"Mel, are you sure you want this one? It's only two years old, and it already has over 60,000 miles on it. Plus, did you see all these stains in the back seat. They are showing us this with the stains. That means they have already tried cleaning it, and this is as good as it's gonna get." Really, Richard, today will probably be the only time you will even poke your pretty little head into this damn car. What do you care? I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to storm off and say screw it; none of this crap was even worth it. In the back of my mind, I could already taste the vodka hitting my throat, I could feel the fog taking over, enveloping me in its soft cocoon, and I bit my damn tongue.

"Richard, I don't know, I've had that jeep for over a decade; it was used when I got it. Who cares about the stains? I will just contribute to them, and it's not like I drive all that much to add even more miles to it."

He stands there with his hands on his hips for what seems like an eternity when he finally releases a long breath and says. "You're right." Well, of course I am, moving along.

"We should get a new vehicle. You've never had a brand-new car, and I think it's time you get one." I give up; I live here now; I am never getting out of this dealership.

Several hours later, we drive out of the parking lot, separately; Richard in his truck and me in a Brand-new 2021 Toyota Rav 4 with 0% interest, a reward adult gets for paying all their bills on time. Remember when you were in grade school, and you had good behavior all week? You got something like extra recess time or ice cream on Fridays? Well, that's kind of how I feel about credit; if you're bad, you get punished, and if you're good, you get stuff like 0% interest. Of course, I get to have the kids with me because they wanted to ride in the new car. Driving home, trying to figure out a way to shake these fleas, my mind starts to wander, and I guess with that, so did my attention. All of a sudden, Kaylee is pulling the wheel to the right and yelling at me.

“Mom! What the hell? You almost went into oncoming traffic!”

“Do not talk to me in that tone.” She just stares at me with a lost look on her face as I focus my eyes back onto the road. These kids are used to the soft me, the one that talks to them as if they are my equal. Well, that bitch is dead. A monster killed her off last year, didn’t you hear? I am tired of their mouths, and I am putting an end to it. Okay, even I can admit that I am a little on edge. Kaylee did just save us from a head-on collision, and maybe I really don’t even know if there was a car coming our way. We pull up in front of the house. I notice Richard's truck in the driveway; he managed to beat us home. *And I am considered the reckless driver.* Pulling up, I put the car in park but make no move to exit. “Mom, aren’t you going to pull into the driveway?” Korbin asks.

“No, you kids, go on inside; I have to run to the store. I’ll be back in a bit.” Pulling away and seeing my kids stare at me as I watch their figures get smaller and smaller in my rearview, I know that they know I just lied to them.

I make it to Total Wine and More without any further incidents. Getting a wad of cash out of the side pocket in my purse. I go in, purchase my usual but also add a couple of cold sodas from the cooler and a few pocket shots they keep in the baskets by the register. Getting back in my car, I have no desire to return home. It’s almost 6:30, so I pick up my phone to shoot Richard a text. Opening it, I see that I already have two missed calls from him and one text message. Damn Gina, I’ve only been gone for like twenty minutes. Jump off a bit.

Reading his text, it says exactly what I thought it would.

Hubby: The kids just walked in without you. I tried calling, but you didn’t pick up. I really hope you are just taking your new wheels out for a cruise and don’t wander too far. (Heart emoji)

ME: I just need some time alone, yes, going to take her on the freeway. Order dinner, I might be out late.

I don’t bother waiting for a reply. Powering my phone off, I throw it into my purse and head to Bob Woodruff Park. I still have a little daylight left, and that place is always full of families and joggers. Pulling into the park, I mix myself a couple of drinks with my soda bottles and my pocket shots. I find a bench to sit on. As I down my tailgate-style drinks, I watch the dog walkers around me and wonder when the last time was that I had taken Spud out.

The familiar warmth starts to take over as I filled my belly with the delicious beverage. I am aware of everyone around me but also feel as if I am looking at them through a screen. It's almost like I don't belong here, but I am the only one that's real. These people with their perfect lives. The woman running the trail without a care in the world because the monster didn't find her and make it to where she can't run anymore. The couples with their little babbling babies, laughing as they push them in their expensive jogging strollers. Stupid people and their stupid dogs on their stupid leashes. Whose idea was it anyway to start bagging up dog poop? That is so ridiculously dumb. It's freaking dog poop!

When did I become so cynical? When did I start dissecting everything around me and ripping it apart? Before I know it, I'm slumped over the bench reaching for another soda bottle, and they are all empty.

"Hey, who drank my drinks?" The older woman walking her pug in front of me gives me a curious look and then speeds up her strides. I realize I've said this out loud and also that the sun is starting to set, and most of the park has cleared of pedestrians.

"Okay, guess it's time to go." Making my way to my new car, I suddenly remember that I left all my trash at the bench. I don't know if the scouts "Leave No Trace" is just embedded in my brain from Korbin's younger days or if I was secretly scared, someone would find it, smell it, and know it was mine and that I had been secretly drinking in the park, but I just couldn't leave them there. I turned to head back and retrieve my litter when suddenly the overhead path lights turned on.

The panic didn't slowly creep in; it hit me at full force, bringing me to my knees, sobering me up instantly. I dropped to the ground, clutching the empty bottles to my chest, and frantically try to catch my breath. I can't do it; I can't breathe. This is all a façade, the trimmed grass, the well-lit path, all of it is a farce. I know that evil lurks everywhere, even in a place like this. A place where just moments ago, the sun was shining down on families as they played on the grounds. I was suddenly aware of how exposed I was, and some unknown force made me get up and run to my car. Even over my heavy panting, I could hear my hip pop with every weighted, uneven step. I pushed through it and got to my car; the lot was void of anyone else.

Fumbling for my keys, the plastic bottles fell from my hands and rolled under my vehicle, out of my sight. At that moment, everything seemed to slow down, how easily the bottles disappeared into the darkness. That could be me, tonight could be the night he finishes the job, and I have served myself up to him on a nice shiny platter.

Snapping out of it, I manage to unlock the car and crawl into the back seat. Clicking the lock button on my key fob several times, I realize it won't work with the keys in the car, and the ignition not started. Reaching over, I manually lock each door then fold myself into a ball on the back floorboard. Crouched there in the dark, I try to even out my breathing so that the windows don't fog and alert a predator that someone is indeed in here. After several minutes, without even realizing it, I drift off to sleep.

I'm pulled out of a deep, dreamless sleep and see that I am sprawled across my new back seat. Drool hanging from my bottom lip—a rap on the window catches my attention. I angle my head to have a look, and immediately I am blinded by a flashlight being shown into my face from the other side of the window.

“Mrs. Polk, could you step out of the vehicle, please?” It's the police, how does he know my name? The car has dealer plates on it; there is no way he could have linked me to it so soon. Stepping out of the car and into the dark night, I realize that the temperature has dropped, and it is now a little chilly out. Hugging myself to keep from shivering, I give the young officer my attention.

“Hi. Do I know you? Was I doing something wrong?”

“Ma'am, the park closed a few hours ago. You can't be here. And no, we have not officially met. I'm Officer Glasco; your husband called the station in a frantic state because you had not come home tonight. Now, normally we would not have responded to his request for assistance since you have only been gone a short time. We do not consider you a missing person. But given your past incident, a decision was made to alert patrol to have us stay on the lookout for you. Someone actually had reported a vehicle as being left in the park after hours, and I came to take a look. I didn't expect to find you here, but here we are. Ma'am, you really shouldn't put a scare in your husband like that.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry to cause trouble. I had come to the park earlier. After I had a little walk around the path, I went to head home and was just admiring my new car. Guess I must have dozed off. I get tired so easily

nowadays.” I seem to be getting better at this lying thing. I see him run the flashlight over the front seat. He eyes the empty shot bottles, but I know it’s hard to tell what they are from here.

“Mrs. Polk, is everything okay? Is there anything you would like to tell me, maybe a reason you do not want to go home?” He thinks I’m in danger; maybe I am hiding from Richard. How absurd.

“Yes, officer, everything is okay. As I said, I just fell asleep. I should head home now and put my husband at ease.”

“Yes, ma’am, you should. Are you okay to drive?”

“I’m fine, just tired, but my home isn’t too far,” I say as I enter the car and take my place behind the wheel.

“Okay, then go ahead. I’m going to follow you and check in with your husband when we get there.”

Great!

When I step into my house, Officer Glasco in tow, Richard’s concerned expression turns furious instantly.

Oh no, Richard, I wouldn’t do that in front of Captain Rescue here. He already has his suspicions about you. We don’t speak. I walk straight into the living room, set my purse on the coffee table, and as I head to my room, passing my husband, I whisper, “Thanks for sending a fucking escort.” Only loud enough for him to hear.

Settling into bed, I hear him and the officer talking. I tune them out, though. The only thing I can think about is the bag of Sky bottles on the floorboard in my front seat. It’s already after one in the morning. I hope Richard doesn’t plan on watching over me all night.

Chapter Fourteen



Melany

Kaylee's birthday is February 15th and this year it just happens to fall on a weekend. It also just so happens that one of her favorite bands is in Dallas on that exact same night. I surprised her with four tickets to see Five Finger Death Punch at the American Airlines Center the night before while we were having a family Valentine's dinner at Olive Garden. I knew she wanted to go, and this would typically be something I would join her for, but lately, going anywhere to do anything nauseates me.

Given the fact that everyone seems to walk on eggshells around me, she didn't even bother asking if she could go when she heard about the concert. When she opens the envelope and pulls out the tickets, the excitement that radiates from her is palpable. Kaylee jumps up and down then runs around the table to give Richard and me a hug.

"There are four, that means I can bring Sarah and Tabitha!" She exclaims.

"So, I can have the fourth one?" Korbin butters up next to his sister.

"In your dreams, dust rag. The fourth one is for Mom."

"Actually, I think I'm going to sit this one out, I've seen them a few times, and I think y'all would have more fun without me." Before, she would have refused to accept that excuse from me, but her lack of a rebuttal shows me, I have indeed changed. Not only have I changed, but the way my children see me has changed as well. I wish I still had it in me to join her. Physically and mentally. The truth is I have no desire to even listen to music anymore, and the idea of being in that crowd scares me.

"Guess I should dust myself off?" My son says with a toothy grin, Korbin, forever hopeful.

"I have someone way more appealing in mind," Kaylee responds, rolling her eyes at her little brother.

“Really, who?” I ask. This spikes my interest just a bit. Kaylee has always had a tight-knit group; even though they don’t hang out too often, she rarely brings new people into it. Between this mystery person and Tabitha, that will be two newbs in less than a year. Richard and Kaylee share a look over the table, and I have a feeling my husband is privy to this information. This means I have intentionally been left out of the loop.

“Well, Mom, let me see if he can even go first, then you can meet him before the show.”

“Him?” I ask. I peek over at my silent husband, trying to gauge his reaction, but his focus is solely on his plate of chicken fettuccini.

“Yes, Mom, it’s a him, but don’t make a big deal about it because it’s not like that, yet.” She adds the yet shyly, then hides her face behind her glass of Dr. Pepper. That’s so cute. She turns eighteen tomorrow and yet still holds onto so much innocence.

That next night the girls are all at the house getting ready when the doorbell rings. I start to get up from the sofa to answer it when Kaylee zooms past me, yelling, “I got it!” Okay, never mind. Making my way into the foyer, I see that she has let in a very tall, very skinny, very punk rock wannabe looking, young man. I say young man because even though his size would indicate that he is indeed full-grown, his baby face accompanied by the teenage sprinkle of acne would state otherwise. He has on a massive pair of Doc Martins that are not laced all the way up and also look like they have been passed down through generations of cults. The faded jeans he wears are about two sizes too big. There is a belt loop/wallet chain draped on his left side. Did those make their way around again already? Oh, and would you look at that a brand new FFDP tee that just screams, “The only song of theirs I know is Wrong Side Of Heaven.”

“Mom, this is Landon. He goes to my school,” Kaylee says, introducing her new friend.

“Hello Landon, are you also graduating this year?” He reaches his hand out to me, and I shake it. Okay, nice, most kids these days don’t offer a hand when meeting someone. I like it, going to have to make sure I inform Korbin of this gesture.

“Hello, Mrs. Polk, it is nice to meet you. To answer your question, no, I am a junior this year, so I still have one more to go before I can graduate.” Kaylee likes them younger than her? This is news to me, guess you can learn something new every day, even at my age.

“Kaylee, will you be driving tonight?” I ask.

“Yes, Mom,” she promptly answers.

Landon pipes in with, “I haven’t had my license long enough to have this many people in the car with me, or at least not teenagers. They don’t allow you to do that until you gain more experience or till you are eighteen or something like that. Is it okay if I leave my truck on your curb while we are out?” Wow! He is smooth, throwing me all this polite charm.

“I don’t see that as being a problem,” I answer.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he says, giving me a little head bow. Richard chooses that moment to come up and say his hellos. By the look of it, they have met before. He offers Kaylee some money for the merch booth, but she declines, and with that, they make their leave. Samantha and Tabitha rush past me on their way out to the jeep, and I catch a glimpse of what Tabitha is wearing. It's not much. Fishnets, shorts that look more like underwear, and a see-through lace top with a red bra underneath. I am not judging; she's in college. She can wear whatever she wants. Also, she looks pretty damn hot; flaunt it while you got it. She just makes Kaylee look like a nun in her loose fit jeans and tee-shirt. I watch them all pile into the vehicle and drive away. Korbin is staying the night at Deshawn’s house, which means this is the first night my husband and I have been alone in this house, in longer than I can remember.

Ever since the night Richard decided to call the damn police on me, we haven’t done more than exchange a few words with each other. It’s almost like he gave up trying, and I am eternally grateful for it. After shutting the door behind the kids, I turn to find him still standing there. The look he gives me screams a thousand words. His eyes are asking me, “Why?” and “How do we move on from here?” but before I can even read any more into it, he casts his view toward the hall and walks away.

It’s only half-past six in the evening. I know I have a few hours to kill before he will go pass out, and I can drink in peace. I’ve given up hiding my drinking just like Richard has given up trying to care. I stopped going to bed with him. What’s the point? After he turns in every night, I stay up and get started on my nightly euphoria. Tonight, I decide to pack up my damn eggshells and pay a visit to Maureen. I haven’t spoken to her all week; she texted me the other day asking what she should get Kaylee for her birthday, I didn’t even bother to reply. Grabbing my coat, I try heading out the door, but before I can, I find a sad-looking German Sheppard blocking my path.

Oh God, not you too. Everyone seems to give me this look, and now I'm getting it from my dog. I grab his leash and take him with me; he perks up immediately.

I am not sure what to expect going over to Maureen's. We have kind of drifted apart over the last few months, just like I have with everyone else in my life. When she answers the door, she greets me with the same smile and embrace that she has always offered. She is either the one person on the planet I haven't managed to piss off yet, or she is one hell of an actress. I don't care either way; I just need to get the hell out of that house. We go around back and spend the next couple of hours in her screened patio next to an outdoor heater, just talking about nothing at all. Well, she is the one talking. I really don't have anything to say. I sip on the Jim Beam that she has offered up while she loads a bowl beside me.

"That's not going to mess with my dog, is it?" I ask.

"Not unless you want it to," she says with a mischievous smile on her face.

"No thanks, I like him just the way he is. Keep your distance."

Around midnight, Maureen announces that she is turning in, and I have to wake Spud up, who is now asleep on an outdoor sofa. Crossing the street to head back home, I am glad I had brought him with me. I hadn't planned on staying so late; actually, I never really had a plan to begin with. Still, I am a little spooked being out here at night, alone. As quickly as I can, I rush us into the door. Spud goes straight to his water bowl, empties it then conks out on his dog bed.

"You know he's getting old; you can't keep him out so late anymore."

Jumping out of my skin, I almost fall over, not realizing that Richard is there. Looking up, I see him sitting in the dark corner at the kitchen table. It seems like I didn't stay gone long enough.

"I knew you were at Maureen's, so don't worry, there isn't an APB out on you."

"I wasn't worried, but could you please not scare the piss out of me like that?" Without a word more, I make my way upstairs and pass out in the guest room, fully clothed.

Chapter Fifteen



Richard

I feel like my wife and I broke up, but we still hang out in the same place (our house) and have the same friends (our kids). We continue to see each other but also avoid each other at all costs. I've decided to ignore her behavior, something that Mel and I picked up raising the kids, especially with the stubborn Kaylee. If you ignore the bad behavior, then the bad behavior will go away. Yes, I am treating my wife like a child, but in my defense, she is acting like a bratty, defiant toddler most days. If I do not show her the attention she seeks, she will try adjusting the means of which she is using to grab said attention.

However, it's been over a month since I've been back home full time, and I don't think my theory is panning out. I now realize that my attention was not what she was seeking. She doesn't even acknowledge me. She just walks right past me without a word, every day, all day. She stopped sleeping in our bed after she was brought home by the police. The first couple of nights, I was still pissed, and going to bed without her seemed perfectly fine by me. Then the withdrawals started sinking in.

Yes, I am an addict. I am addicted to my wife. It's bad enough that I have to work away from the house so much, but to have her just feet away and not be able to touch her, to smell her, to hear her voice. This is hell, I am trying to punish her for her despicable behavior, and I seem to be the only one suffering.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I got up in the middle of the night to find her. I didn't have to go far. I found her just a few feet from the bedroom door; she was in the living room. She didn't notice me, so I was able to observe her freely. Her back was to me as she sat on the floor in front of the coffee table. On the table was a blue liquor bottle and a glass half-filled with a clear liquid. There is not a mixer in sight; she must be drinking it straight.

Her head hung between her shoulders, and she hummed softly to herself. I couldn't tell the tune, but I stood there leaning on the door frame, listening for at least twenty minutes. I watched her empty and refill her glass three times. That's it, that's all she did, she never got up, she never turned around. She only lifted her head to drink and fill and continued her soft solo in between. I went back to bed and gave up wondering what she was up to because, clearly, it was nothing but self-destruction.

As we get closer to the one-year anniversary of my wife's incident, I can't help but physically see the dark cloud that follows her everywhere. I know that night changed her. I saw it then, but not long after, I thought there might actually be some hope in getting my wife back. She was a willing participant in her life for a fraction of a moment. She followed doctors' instructions; she was attending her appointments; she would even chat on the phone with a couple of friends a few nights a week. That was very short-lived. It faded so fast I'm starting to think I imagined it.

I thought getting her freedom back and being able to drive would help open her up a bit, but she hasn't taken her new car anywhere but to the liquor store since we got it. Korbin noticed this and asked if he could have it when he turns sixteen, considering Mom doesn't seem to like it.

"You should have just gotten her the stained-up Camry, Dad." He might be right, but I don't think that's it. I've put so much energy into avoiding her. I don't know how to switch it off now. There is a distance between us, and it grows wider every day. She completely stopped all of her therapy appointments shortly after the New Year. It was gradual, or at least to me. I didn't notice at first, but once I was home full time, I caught on. I spent most of my days at the office; I wasn't aware right away that no one was coming to the house until I decided to only work half days one week in February.

I would come home around lunch every day and find my wife either on the couch watching TV or sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the wall. It didn't matter where she was; she was always in either PJs or those matted up grey pants she wears all the time. Her hair is now down to her shoulders; she only ever pulls it back into what Kaylee referred to as a blush brush looking ponytail. Of course, it is always greasy, and she looks as if she thinks showering is just optional.

I finally asked her about the Therapy, and she said straight out that they didn't come anymore. When I tried questioning her on the subject a

little more, she would just get up and move to another room in the house, ignoring me altogether.

I thought now might be a good time to revisit Dr. Nguyen, but when I called her office, the receptionist informed me that if the appointment is for Melany, then Melany must be the one to schedule it. I reminded her that I had scheduled her first appointment without any problems, and she in turn reminded me that, in fact, I did not schedule the original appointment, the hospital did; I had just rescheduled it. Well, seeing Dr. Nguyen wasn't going to happen then because I am one hundred percent positive Melany is not going to call and make an appointment on her own. She advised me that if I thought my wife was a danger to herself or someone else, then I should take her into Carrolton Springs. There she could be triaged and treated if needed. I thanked her and took down the hospital's information just in case I felt like it might be necessary in the future, but I really hoped it wouldn't.

I know my wife isn't suicidal; if she were ever going to be depressed, it would have been when she was a kid growing up with that pathetic excuse for a mother. If she could survive that as a little kid, then I know she will get through this, it just doesn't seem to be going in the direction I think it should.

Chapter Sixteen



Melany

Yesterday marked the one-year anniversary of my attack, and I survived the day a little better than I did last year. I didn't bother leaving my bed, but I still managed to make it through the day, and I'm somehow still breathing. I stayed locked in the upstairs guest room, curled up in bed, snuggling a bottle of Grey Goose. I thought this was a case that called for the good stuff, and I ignored everyone outside of my locked, sheet rocked box all day. Now that I think about it, yesterday wasn't much different than most days seem to go now. Except I decided to day drink and I didn't speak one word to my children. Richard even tried several times to talk to me even though I thought he had given up completely. After multiple unanswered attempts, he picked the lock and busted in on me in a frenzy.

"God damn it, Melany, if you want to rot away in here, that's fine, but please answer me when I ask you to speak!" He was seething, that vein throbbing in his neck, muscles locked, and face boiled lobster red. He had a thick layer of sweat coating his forehead.

"Fine, speak," is the only response I blandly threw at him. He stood there at the door for what felt like forever as he tried to calm himself down. Raking his hand through his perfect copper hair, he let out a huff, and his posture sagged a little.

"Mel, please, I am begging you to get up. At least try and eat something. You can't live off that shit; you are killing yourself." I know I'm a bitch, I know what I'm doing, and despite how hurtful I continue to be, I just can't help it. I took a long pull from the bottle; kept eye contact with my husband, swallowed down the burning, warm liquid, then used the sheet I was wrapped in to wipe my mouth.

"Are we done here?" I asked. He stormed out, slamming the door behind him, and I heard him cursing me as he stomped down the stairs.

Waking up today, I feel like death, and I am pretty sure that death tastes exactly like the inside of my mouth. Falling out of bed, I manage to untangle myself from soiled sheets and start crawling to the bathroom. Halfway there, something stabs into my palm, lifting my hand. I see that there is a large piece of glass sticking out of it, and it's quickly being swallowed by blood. Taking in my surroundings, I have to wait a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. The room is eerily dark, and the air is stale. As blood pools onto the carpet below me, I see where the glass came from, and I vaguely remember how it got there. At some point yesterday, I had had enough of the pesky sun that wouldn't stop beaming in through the blinds.

I decided to create a makeshift curtain out of Richard's grandmother's quilt. The heavy quilt had sat folded on the end of the bed, mainly as décor ever since we moved in. I was having a hard time tucking it into the blinds without it falling down. I removed several pictures off the wall and pulled the nails that held them up out with my fingernails. Having a peek now, I see several of those fingernails are, in fact, torn to shit. Using the borrowed nails and the heel of a snow boot I found stored in the closet as a hammer, I successfully hung my shade.

I see that during my task, I also carelessly discarded the pictures. Now several of them lay around the room, some with broken frames and broken glass, some of which are now embedded in my palm, causing a bloodstain on my cream carpet. Getting to my feet, I stuff my hand into my pocket and press it against my hip in an attempt to stop the bleeding. Then I remember that you are supposed to elevate hand and finger bleeds to stop the flow of blood. Raising my hand above my head, I continue my journey to the bathroom. My head is pounding, I can feel the dry heaves about to start, and my eyes are so utterly void of moisture that I wonder if this is how Sponge Bob felt under that heat lamp.

Entering the dimly lit bathroom that I used to frequent in happier days, I spend a few moments taking in my reflection. I never do that anymore. At some point, the hair tie I had tied in my hair yesterday fell out, and what used to be hair any woman would envy is now a soggy nest of slop on top of my disfigured, unattractive head. My eyes are so red and sluggish you would think I had just spent the night in my brother's old van. The only thing this disaster of a face is missing is the remnants of yesterday's

makeup smeared across it just like the old days. However, that could possibly make an improvement to what I see now.

My hand is still raised, glass and all, blood trickles down my arm. The perfect line interrupts and disbursts when it reaches the patch of hair growing wildly in my armpit. I'm not wearing a bra, and you can faintly see the outline of my nipples through my thinning white shirt. There is some red, crusty stuff gathered at the collar, and since I know I didn't eat anything yesterday, I'm guessing that is regurgitated food from the day before.

My breasts seem to be the only thing familiar about me anymore, they have gotten a little bigger with the weight I've put on, but they are one of the rare things you will find on me that is not deformed or disturbing. My once loved velour pants sit low under my protruding belly; they stick to my thighs and are stained with my urine. Just as I notice it, the smell slaps me in the face, and I start to gag. There it is; it just needed a little push to start the climb back up.

Hovering over the toilet seat, I empty all the stomach acid my body has to offer, then lean over to switch on the shower.

Peeling my clothes off, I slowly climb in the tub, shower combo. Sitting in the tub, I lean my head gently onto the cold tiles; closing my eyes, I just let the water hit me. I manage to pull the glass out of my hand. Taking a look, I see the water pooling around my limp body, slowly turning a light shade of pink. I stay in the shower for what feels like hours, the water turned cold long ago, but my body is as numb as my mind. I am a pathetic waste of space; the monster should have just finished me off because I have done nothing but wither away and cause my family even more pain this past year.

Thinking about my children, I start to regret my actions. This is a crucial time for them, the teen years. They will remember these days. One day they will probably even think back to this time in their young lives as the dark days. That's how I sometimes remember my own childhood. My children don't know this, this is not how I have been with them, and they must be confused or concerned, maybe even scared. I don't want to feel this way or act this way, but I also don't know what else to do. Despite what it may look like from the outside, I am not depressed. In order to be depressed, you would have to feel something, and I feel nothing. I'm not really sad, but I'm not anywhere close to happy. My life used to be so

fulfilling and joyful. I was so happy, and now I don't know what I am. I am nothing. I was discarded, stripped of all my happiness, and left this, what? I don't know what this is.

I just want my life back, I want to be me again, but I feel like that monster has the old me. He is holding her hostage, and until he releases her, I will never find my way back to her again.

Leaning over to grab the bottle of liquid soap on the tub's ledge, my eyes catch on what used to be my only tattoo. No, I haven't gotten more since then, but considering that you can't even tell what it is anymore, it hardly qualifies as a tattoo. On the inside of my right ankle used to sit a gold ball sporting a set of serrated wings. It was meant to represent the golden snitch pausing in place during a game of quidditch from the Harry Potter books. Of course, it's so old that the gold has dimmed, and it has looked more like a tarnished bronze for a while now.

After my attack, my leg fractures, and my surgeries, the skin on my leg had been stretched to the max. There's a scar running directly through the middle of the ball, making it unrecognizable—yet another thing he has taken from me. I wash my hair using the same body wash. I poured a generous amount in my hand, then scrub it into my scalp. The shampoo sits on a rack up by the showerhead, and I do not have the energy to stand at the moment—anything will do at this point.

As I sit under the cold spray of water and watch the suds enter the drain, I try and talk myself into being productive today. It's one thing to make a plan, and it's another to follow through with it. I am aware of this struggle, and there is a little cheerleader in my head. She looks like a young version of my old self, rooting me on in my mind. She has pigtails and pompoms, jumping up and down, she chants. "Let's go, Mel! You can do it if you set your mind to it." I kind of hate her.

After my shower, I wrap myself into a towel and make my way down to my bedroom. I need something clean to wear; I'm not ready to face Richard, but what choice do I have? I can't put on the soiled clothes I left spoiling on the bathroom floor. Descending the stairs and rounding the corner to enter the living room, I am greeted by Spud. He wags his tail and silently asks for attention; at least he still loves me.

I glance at the wall clock above the fireplace and see that it is already past eleven in the morning. That explains the empty house; despite my actions yesterday, life does go on. The kids are at school, and I have no idea

what Richard is working on these days. I dress, brush my hair, and actually put on deodorant. In the kitchen, I make myself some toast and orange juice. I know my stomach can only handle so much right now, and I don't want to piss it off. Standing at the kitchen island, brushing bread crumbs onto the floor, I am reminded of the mess I had left upstairs. We have had a weekly housekeeper coming in for almost a year now. Wow, it's really been that long? I can't believe I have let this go on for so long. At first, she was supposed to come in once a week just to do major stuff, like dusting, bathrooms, mop the floors, those kind of things.

As time went on and I continued to fold into myself, ignoring everything around me, she started picking up all the other chores on my regular daily to-do list. However, I am always too ashamed to face her, so I just hole myself up in the spare room while she spends several hours a week doing my job. That means she does not get to clean the spare room that I have claimed as my own. Finishing up my minuscule breakfast, I head upstairs to assess the damages.

Oh wow, the smell in here is overpowering my senses and threatening to bring that toast back up. I just want to lay back down, but that little cheerleader bitch is back, yelling at me to move my ass. Heading over to the window, I carefully remove the nails from the wall that hold my husband's cherished quilt and set them on the nightstand. I fold the quilt and lay it on the back of the armchair in the corner of the room. Giving it a sniff, I see my destruction hasn't caused the delicate fabric much harm.

Heading back to the window to open it and air this room out, I hear a crunch of glass from under the checkered Van on my foot. After opening the window, I retrieve the small trash can from the bathroom, the one I had disposed the piece of glass from my palm into, and start collecting debris from the carpet. After about an hour, I have filled the trash can. There is a pile of ruined frames by the door, along with my emptied vodka bottle that needs to be taken out.

Once I have thrown out all the trash, I collect the sheets off the bed along with the mattress cover. Making my way down the stairs with the linens balled up, my arms wrapped around them, I contemplate just taking those out to the waste bins as well. Still, I come to my senses and load them into the washer, adding an extra rinse to the cycle.

I'm back upstairs spraying resolve over all the spots in the carpet, I decide to take a break and catch my breath while it sets in. As I sit in the

armchair mindlessly fingering a hole I made in the quilt, I try to think about the last time I saw my cell phone. I have no idea where it might be and don't have a clue as to when the last time I used it was. I decide to go ahead and get the steam cleaner ready before that cheerleader shows up again while trying to locate my missing phone.

I fill the Hoover with water and cleaning solution and leave it at the foot of the stairs. Going into the bedroom that I used to share with my husband, I start digging through my nightstand. I am about to give up because I realize that I've used it since I had last spent a night in here when I come across my old Apple watch tucked in the back. I do not remember putting it in there, but I must have because this is the drawer where I discard jewelry and other things that might be found in my pockets. Letting the plastic band slip between my fingers, I catch it with my other hand and push the button on the side. It's long dead; no life lights up on its cracked screen. This was given to me at the hospital along with my wedding ring, my earbuds, and an ankle bracelet that I never took off but now has a broken clasp.

Tossing the watch onto the bed, I continue my search in the drawer, my watch no longer the focus. My wedding ring sits on my left ring finger just as it always has. When the little bag of personal belongings was handed to me, I immediately had Richard fish it out and slide it on. I find the silver ankle bracelet chain; it used to have a small pink butterfly charm that hung from it, but I lost that years ago. It's a little chipped in places, and taking a closer look, I see that the clasp isn't only broken but is missing entirely. This was the only relic I kept from my childhood. Long forgotten are my days in the filthy, overcrowded trailer. I never had many belongings that were only mine. With so many siblings and little money, material possessions were not a top priority to us. This was a rare gift that I got from my mom on my eleventh birthday. Most of the time, our birthdays went by with little fuss. We rarely got gifts, not that our mother didn't remember; she just never made a big deal out of it. As I got older, I realized how cheap the little trinket was; it's costume jewelry, not even the nice costume stuff. Most of that is better quality than this; this is something you would get out of those little plastic bubbles from a gumball machine, not even made of metal, just some kind of hard plastic painted to look silver. But to my eleven-year-old eyes, it was beautiful and priceless. The butterfly fell off at some point while I was in high school. The silver chain hung low enough

on my ankle that it did not get in the way when I shaved my legs. I kept it there as a kid because I loved it; it was the only thing that I could remember my mother giving to only me, and it wasn't passed down from anyone. I wasn't forced to share it. As I got older, I left it on to remind me of what? Just simply remind me where I came from, in case I ever got a big head, it brought me back down to level ground. It's a reminder to stay humble and that the material things in life do not matter.

At twenty-one, instead of going out and getting shit-faced with friends, I got my Snitch tattoo. J.K. Rowling had released her first Harry Potter book the year before that, and I was instantly obsessed with the magical world she created. The tattoo sat right above the chain to remind me that we pave our own paths in life and to treat every day as a magical adventure. Oh, to be so young and full of hope.

Discarding all the crap that meant something in another life, I close the drawer and continue my search. Sometime in the two o'clock hour, I find the now outdated and completely dead iPhone between the seats in my neglected new car. I plug it into the kitchen charger, grab a granola bar, and continue my upstairs cleaning. By the time I'm done with the carpets, I am starving. Surveying my work, I see the light brown stain where I let the blood sit too long. I'll have to pick up a rug to cover that. Changing out the laundry, I hear the front door open. No one announces themselves, that's new. Or has this been happening, and I just failed to notice? No "I'm home" or "Is anybody out there?" (that was always Korbin's favorite.)

I start the dryer, then a few minutes later, I hear, "Mom?" Kaylee is calling me from the other side of the closed laundry room door.

"I'm in here." Peeking her head into the cramped space, she gives me a once-over and smiles. She has a perfect smile; I used to look like that.

"Hi, Mom, do you need some help?"

"No, just getting these into the dryer. How was your day?"

"Amazing! I found out today that I am exempt from second term calculus finals as long as I keep my grade where it is now."

"Sweet, honestly, I can't relate. I was so mathtarded in school—I never even made it to calculus. You definitely got that from your father."

"This is known," she says. She pauses for a minute as if she doesn't know what to say or if she should say anything at all. Finally, she pushes out, "Are you hungry?" Looking up at her, I hit start on the washing machine, starting a new load, and nod my head vigorously.

We venture over to Grub Burger Bar and clog up our arteries with greasy goodness. My body needed this after the trials I put it through yesterday. Kaylee and I eat our meals as she fills me in on her life.

Apparently, that Landon dude ended up being a complete and utter dud. She liked him, but he kissed her once in the parking lot after school and almost ate half her face off. I agree that there is no coming back from that. I mainly sit in silence, chewing my food as I listen to my daughter. She seems so excited and yet also very eager to talk to me. I feel a little tug in my chest. I have been ignoring my children, along with everything else in life. I am aware of this but seeing it on my daughter's face stings a little more than I think I deserve. When we get back home, Korbin is doing homework at the kitchen table and eating a hot pocket.

Sometimes the kids arrive home together, considering they are attending the same school, but on most days, Korbin prefers to take the bus so he can goof around with his friends on there for half an hour before having to do more work at home. After finding out we got burgers without him, Kaylee and I are given the silent treatment. He must get that from me. That doesn't last long. Kaylee sits the to-go container that holds his disgusting Thai Peanut Burger on the table in front of him. I haven't tried it, but I knock it every time because peanuts do not go on a burger. Seeing the offering, he forgets all about the hot pocket and digs in.

My phone has fully charged, and the screen is littered with notifications. I take my time going through emails and deleting them one by one. Kyle has sent me no less than fifty memes, all related to Regina George. Yes, Kyle, I am aware that I am being a bitch. A few missed calls and messages from the kids, Maureen, and a couple of other mom friends, nothing from Richard. I don't blame him. I make the bed, mumble a goodnight over my shoulder and turn in around 6 pm before the sun has even gone down, before Richard has gotten home, and before I have a chance to drink anything. The cheerleader congratulates me.

Chapter Seventeen



Richard

I've had meetings all day, work is picking up, and I am currently bidding on three jobs for my crew to split up over spring and summer. When I left the house this morning, Melany still had herself locked away, but I could hear her snores coming out from under the guest room door, so I left and haven't bothered checking on her since.

After yesterday my plan was to drag her butt out of the house and have her committed, kicking and screaming if need be. The sad thing is, it wouldn't be just for her benefit—well, a little for her but mainly for my kids. Watching them slink and sulk around the house reminds me of how her downfall started, and I am not going to sit by and let her drag them in the dark hole with her. Looking into the hospital, Dr. Nguyen had suggested; If they decide that an intervention is needed, they might keep her as an inpatient for at least two weeks.

If they take her, I was going to load up the truck with the kids, the dog, and some camping gear. The four of us would spend a few days at Grapevine Lake. Spring break is next week, and that is just what they need; a break from life, from the house, from their mother, who isn't really their mother anymore but an alien that is inhabiting her body. That was the plan anyway, but around 4:30 today, I was coming out of a meeting at the office. I checked my phone, and Kaylee informed me that she found her mother showered and fully dressed when she arrived home from school. She had even cleaned up the guest room, and the house didn't smell like the entrance of the Austin Street Center anymore. I was thrown back for a minute and almost thought this couldn't be real. I even had the idea that maybe Mel got ahold of Kaylee's phone and sent this herself. Was she on to me? Did she know what I had planned?

As if she was reading my mind a little before 5 pm, a text alert came in, followed by a picture of Melany sitting at a table taking a bite of a

hamburger with a fork. She did that now; her mouth won't open wide enough to get around the burger.

Me: Where are you?

Kaylee Bug: Grub

Me: Does this happen often???

Kaylee Bug: No, dad, that's why I messaged you. Mom scared all of us yesterday. I wanted you to know right away that she was up, moving around, eating, and actually saying a few words.

Me: Thank you, honey. I still have one more meeting tonight. Grab your brother a burger to go. Love ya

Putting the plan of forcing my wife into psychiatric help on the back burner for now, I finish my day up with success and arrive home a little after 7 pm. After Kaylee's messages came in earlier, I thought I might walk in the house, and my wife would be an active member of our household.

My hopes were too high. She had already crashed out; the kids said she did stick around for a bit but went upstairs really early without even saying goodnight. I guess all that 'having to live' for the first time in a while really wore her out. Still lots of work to do, but since she made an effort today, I'm not locking her up just yet.

~

Sailing into spring break, I decide we do need to get away, at least before I start one of these jobs that might keep me out of the house most days.

Everyone is sitting at the dinner table on Friday night—yes, my wife included—when I announce that we are going camping. I had already booked the spot in anticipation of going without Melany, so no sense in letting it go to waste. The kids were ecstatic; Korbin mentions that he needs new water shoes. Of course, he does. The kids' feet grow a half size every couple of months. They ask when we are going and when I say we will head over to the lake on Sunday and come back on Wednesday, I hear a little sound of protest coming from my wife's throat, but she doesn't say anything at first. The kids go on for a few minutes about what they want to do at the lake, then noticing Mel is still just entirely focused on her chicken breast, my son decides to make her a part of the discussion.

"Mom, I can't wait. Last time we went there, you said I was too young to jump off the cliffs like the other guys were doing, but now I'm fifteen. I can't wait to jump some cliffs." Korbin says all of this with

conviction, like no one can dispute him on the decision that has been made. Yeah, he sounds exactly like me.

This grabs Mel's attention. Lifting her head, she looks our son straight in the eye and deadpans, "I never said you were too young. I said you were too smart, and that will always stand." Korbin crosses his arms over his chest with a pout but does not push the issue any further. Kaylee giggles in between bites at her brother's defeat.

"We should check the weather before we go, make sure it's suitable for camping. March is unpredictable." I can't tell if she is giving input or trying to get out of going.

"Already checked, weather will be perfect, and I booked a cabin this time, a little upgrade from the old tent, figured it's probably about time we replaced that thing anyway," I say.

After dinner, Mel does not stick around to help clean up. She disappears upstairs until the kids go into their separate corners of the house. A couple of hours later, all is quiet, I am sitting on the couch when I hear her in the kitchen; she grabs one of the new blue bottles she had stashed in the pantry and heads out the sliding glass door. Well, she went a few days, guess she had had enough and couldn't wait any longer. I turn out the lights, leaving my wife outside with her new best friend, and once again head to bed alone.

~

The few days that we had left leading up to the camping trip dragged on. I tried talking Mel into coming shopping with us to get new swimsuits and other things we would need for the lake. She just kept saying she didn't feel like it and would then retreat back into herself. She did seem to be putting a little more effort into being an active human being but was still struggling a bit. Arriving at the lake goes so much smoother when you didn't have to set up a three-room tent before the sun went down. The cabin is small and accurate in the advertisement—it was bare. We had to bring our own linens, they provided no towels, and the twin bunk mattresses along with the full-size bed in the corner are stripped of sheets and pillows. That's okay; we came prepared. We all have our sleeping bags and the pillows from our beds at home, reminding us of the old scout camping days.

This is going to be good for all of us, no escape, the entire family trapped in one room for three and a half days. Well, at least during the night, we would spend our days by the lake. Everyone in our house loves

the water. We would have put a pool in years ago if our yard wasn't already so small. Somehow, Melany still finds a way to be on her own most of the time.

Every summer since we have been together, we have spent long weekends at this lake. Melany loves it out here; she can't get enough of the sun. She spends her afternoon sunbathing and people watching. When she needs to stretch her legs, she will throw a frisbee around and watch as Spud dives in the water after it. She has always been confident in her skin, and every year she would buy a new bikini to sport her perfect body while I ogle her by the water. Before we had the kids, I couldn't wait to get her back to our little tent and free her of the small pieces of fabric. We loved spending the nights lying outside staring at the stars and talking. Once the little ones came along, we were too exhausted at the end of the day. We sometimes fell asleep still in our wet swimwear.

So far, on this trip, she has been joining us during the day in body, but I can tell her mind is elsewhere. She displays mild interest as she looks up every few minutes from the book that sits open in her lap, giving the kids a wave. I've noticed that she isn't actually reading. I watch her for a full twenty minutes, and she has yet to turn a page. I know she has put on a bit of weight, I might not get to touch her anymore, but I'm not blind. She refused to go shopping with me even though I knew she was going to need a new swimsuit. Now she is just sitting by the lake in a tee shirt and a pair of baggy shorts that I believe belong to me. She hasn't paid much attention to Spud, but the kids are keeping him occupied, so I hope his feelings aren't hurt too badly.

The kids and I play most of the day in the water. I make us sandwiches for lunch and then remember that we need to reapply sunscreen. This is something Mel would have jumped on in better days, but when I start passing the bottle around, she just walks off as if she isn't even with us. I spend most of my time cooking, cleaning, blowing up floats, and basically doing everything that Mel and I would typically share. Since she is now a freaking zombie, it's all left to me. After we collectively decide to turn in for the night, Melany stays out for another couple of hours; she huddles up next to the dying fire in a folding chair with her travel bottles on her lap. She isn't drinking as much as she does at home. I think it has something to do with the lights out at midnight rule here on the campgrounds. She just sits there by herself for a bit, then instead of joining me on the full bed, she

curls up and sleeps on the small sofa. She still manages to wake before anyone else; in the morning, I find her kicking dirt outside the cabin door with Spud running circles around her. Despite Melany's melancholy behavior throughout our stay, we all have a good time and agree that it was a refreshing few days. Korbin makes me promise that we will come back and get a cabin again over the summer. I've spoiled them, and they are never going back to the tent now, are they?

Chapter Eighteen



Melany

After spring break, I decided to keep up with my being productive on a daily basis goal. It was easier to get up and get going at my own pace if the house was empty. I would wait until everyone had left for the day before sticking my head out of my shell. With productivity comes exhaustion, and I was finding that after months of doing basically nothing, just getting out of bed and making myself something to eat was a chore. Every day I showered, put on actual clothes, including underwear (which have not seemed necessary for a while now), then made myself a list of three things I needed to do that day. The goal was to cross off at least two items from the list before I could start drinking as a reward. This might sound like I was a little easy on myself, but trust me, I wasn't. Most days, I hardly made it through one item before I was hitting the bottle, looking for that sweet escape I have learned to love so much.

Today, I am staring at my list that simply reads 'shower and dress' (every list I make has this listed as number one,) and this is the one thing I can manage to mark off almost every day. My phone rings, jolting me out of my daydream of better times. Looking at the screen, it reads Texas Orthopedic Associates. Deciding to let it go to voicemail, I return to my oh-so-busy schedule. A couple of minutes later, a chime sounds, alerting me that I have a new voicemail. Listening to it, I learn that it is Dr. Strattis's office, and he wants me to schedule my annual follow-up. The perky chick leaving the message makes it sound like I've been going there for years, and this is nothing new—so impersonal. Does she not realize what that one-year appointment is a follow-up too? I decide to call back and set up the appointment. Let's get this out of the way before my buzz sets in. As I dial the number and listen to it ring, I write number two on my list, 'make an orthopedic appointment,' check.

I have now officially been productive. It may not have been on today's list to begin with, but it is still a great accomplishment, and I was having a hard time coming up with something to do. I have an appointment scheduled in the North Dallas office for next Thursday at 1:15 pm. This will be good; this also means that I will be productive next Thursday. Of course, with that, it means I will have to stay sober until after the appointment. I make a note to sleep in next Thursday; if I shorten up the day, maybe it won't seem like I am waiting so long for my reward.

The following week I arrive at my visit fifteen minutes early, which I believe is the customary "on time." I internally congratulate myself for functioning so well today. Regardless of my prompt arrival, I am still left to wait for over forty minutes before I get called back, then another twenty minutes for the doctor to arrive and greet me. So far, I've been here an hour, and all I've accomplished is spending \$50 for my copay. Dr. Strattis walks into the room, holding a laptop; he positions himself on the rolling stool before ever offering me a glance.

"Ah, hello, Mrs. Polk, so glad to see you. No Mr. Polk today?" *He's not your patient; why would he be here?*

I bite my tongue at that and offer him a reply, "No, he's at work, just me." Sorry to disappoint you. We go over how I'm feeling, yadda yadda yadda. I'm reprimanded for not completing my therapy sessions. I'm told that if I don't have any concerns, than a repeat x-ray is not needed at the moment, but if anything were to occur or if I feel it is necessary, I will need to come back in to have that done on another day. He also asks me if I need a refill on the pain pill prescription he had given me last year. I decline his offer and tell him that I had stopped using those a while back. The truth is I didn't want to take them because they affected my vodka-induced cloud, and also, once I was in my cloud, the pain wasn't a problem. Within just a few moments, I'm sent to the checkout desk, given a copy of my notes, and back in my car. This is why I didn't want to come. That was pointless, and the only thing accomplished today was wasting hours on nothing. The receptionist wasn't even going to give me the printed notes from the visit. Telling me, I can view them online through the portal. Um, no, I gave you money; therefore, I need to leave here with something in my hand. When did I become so bitter? I never used to think like this; tedious stuff never bothered me this much. Oh, wait, I know when it started.

I pass several children riding bikes as I enter the neighborhood, and then I internally groan, realizing it's almost 3 pm and school just let out. I try avoiding coming or going from my home during school zone hours due to the frustrating, frenzied traffic that gathers around my house at drop off and pick up times. Coming up to the busy intersection where the children tend to disperse in all directions, I slow to a stop at the end of a line of cars that have already grown seven deep. As I continually stop and go making my way to the street sign, my mind wanders. Thinking about the days when it was I walking these sidewalks with my little ones, holding empty lunch boxes or finished artwork ready to get hung on the fridge. We would get home, Korbin always beating Kaylee and myself in a race we had never agreed to enter. He would be waiting at the door, asking, "What took you so long?" The cutest smile on his face, a dimple peeking out as he hunches over, trying to catch his breath.

Arriving at the stop sign, I feel lighter, that happy thought floating in my head, leaving a grin in its wake. Just as I am about to make the turn at the stop sign, the gray-haired crossing guard holds up a sign of her own, announcing that everyone needs to stop. Blowing her whistle, she begins to usher a crowd of pedestrians, and they start their cross. The action grabs my attention, and I look over, observing the miniatures and their full-grown counterparts.

A gasp escapes me on its own accord. I'm frozen; my mind must be playing a trick on me. How many times in the last year have I thought it was him? That's a big part of why I don't leave the house. Every tall brunette male that crossed my path was him. At first, his face would appear in all the mug shot photos Detective Hendrix had shown me, but then they would come into focus, and I would see that they looked nothing like him at all. Not this time. No, this is real. My mind is clear, I'm not on any medication, I haven't had a drop to drink, and I got a full night's sleep.

All of a sudden, I can smell him through the windows of my car. I can hear him grunting as he forcefully penetrates my unwilling body. The hard ground is beneath me, cold and damp. The night air hits my bare skin; his hard boot hits my fragile face knocking me back to the here and now.

There he is, live and in person, the sun is shining on his dark hair; now that I see it in the light, I notice that it's a lot darker than I remember, almost black. His eyes are squinting yet alert; a small smile plays on his lips. He looks down as if something has grabbed his attention, and I follow to see

what it is. A little hand is tucked into his big one. A girl, maybe five or six, looks up at him admirably as her mouth moves. She has his complete attention; he is listening to her tales and nodding his head, all the while keeping that deceptive smile on his demonic face. They are directly in front of my car now. He is less than ten feet away from me. If he would just glance up, he would see me, mouth agape, pupils probably dilated due to the shock. Would he recognize me with the face I now wear—the face he left me with?

In the seventy or so seconds that it has taken for the hoard of children and their parents to cross the street, I have been failing to convince myself that this is indeed a hallucination. Then at the very moment his foot steps up onto the curb, his head turns, and he looks dead at me. His smile instantly drops, and his brow furrows. For a fleeting moment, I see it, the monster behind the façade of doting father. I recognize the evil in those eyes. Before I have time to react, the moment is over, his attention is back on the little girl, and they have continued their descent down the street. I watch them through the rearview, their backs to me. The girl has long hair that matches the color of her father's; she has a Doc McStuffins backpack secured to her back. He is wearing boat shoes, maybe Sperry's, khaki slacks, and a dark blue button-up dress shirt.

A car horn jars me back into reality. Looking around, the children are gone; the crossing guard taps her sign against her leg as she converses with a couple out walking their dog. The horn must grab her attention as well because she looks over at me and waves me along. Motioning to make my turn, I see now that I have held up traffic.

I move out of the way, but before I can make it home, my vision becomes blurry, and I can't seem to catch my breath. Pulling over, I push my car door open, lean out, and regurgitate everything my stomach has to offer. I still have my seat belt on, and once I'm done, I see that my lean out the door didn't get me very far, and there is now vomit all over the inside of my car. Closing the door, I sit back and roll down my window for some air. As my breath returns to normal and my mind starts to clear a little, I play the last few minutes back over and over again, analyzing every detail.

He lives here? He is actually a member of my community and wasn't an invader looking for prey? Did he recognize me? I thought so, but thinking back now, I believe his facial expression was just a reaction to mine. Even if I was targeted and he knew what kind of car I drove, I am in a

new one now. My hair is short, stringy, and dull from lack of maintenance; my skin is pale and pasty from spending all my time indoors. I resemble nothing of my former self with my disfigured, scarred up face that's always puffy from the alcohol abuse. I look more like a crack head than a spoiled suburban housewife. I was gawking at him and his child in a school zone. The look he gave me might have been him trying to figure out why I was staring at them, all bugged out like some kind of psycho. Then once no recognition hit, he went about his life and has probably already forgotten about the ugly stranger lady who must have thought he was hot, and that's why she couldn't keep her eyes off him. A shiver runs through my body as I physically revolt against my conclusion.

It's warm out, and the smell of settling vomit reaches me as I sit here idly in my car, processing my discovery. He's here; he lives right freaking here. Does he know what became of me, or does he think he left me for dead? If he has been here this entire time, he would know that a body was not discovered at his child's elementary school. He would know at least that I survived, maybe not that I'm still here but that I am somewhere, alive. I never go out anymore —one might think that I had vanished. I went from constantly working in my front yard, walking my dog, running at night... to nothing, no signs that I am anywhere in the vicinity. Up ahead, I watch as a mailman loads up the small metal boxes with envelopes and flyers. Turning to my right, I see an old lady step out of her front door and light a cigarette. The lady reminds me of Maureen, and I instantly regret ignoring my friend for so long. I could talk to her; she has dealt with a lot in her life. Maybe not the same thing I did, but she could be helpful. I shouldn't ignore people and push them away; I just don't know how to stop at this point.

All around me, the day moves on as if nothing is astray. Parents and grandparents all over the neighborhood welcome their energetic, sweaty afternoon arrivals and offer snacks, get started on homework, and continue on with their plans. They have no idea that their children were just in the presence of a monster.

Chapter Nineteen



Melany

After I spotted him walking with the small girl during elementary school dismissal, I decided that I needed to do something. I had been sitting with my head in the sand for so long. I need to catch up on what was going on in the world around me. How could I have let this happen? How did I allow an entire year of my life to just go by? He was right under my nose the whole time.

I have a new obsession, and no, it is not coffee. Coffee just allows me to stay up and spend more time focusing on said obsession. My mind has never been clearer, not when I was trying to survive as a neglected youth, not when I was putting myself through school, not even, and I hate to admit this, when I was responsible for the care of newborn babies. I need information; it had been months since I had spoken to Detective Hendrix. She is the first one I call. I make the call with the intention of reporting him to let her know he has been discovered, and they can go arrest him now. However, she isn't available when I call, and after a few hours and several unanswered messages, I start to understand how little I matter. After so long, not only had I been forgotten about by the police, my friends, and the monster, but I also don't even matter to myself. I stay up all night trying to locate old articles or news reports that might have mentioned my assault. I was just a blip in an archived story on Fox 4, and a small detail was listed in the Plano courier a week after it had happened. There were no follow up articles, and my name was never mentioned.

I had a Facebook page once, long ago, when the social media site had started; everyone was making the switch from Myspace. I created an account, loaded a picture, and added a few friends. I even played Farmville. To me, that seemed to be the only interesting thing about it at the time. Busy with everyday mom life, I let my farm wither away, and eventually, I forgot my login and got locked out. I need back in now, and it has nothing

to do with farming. Attempting to log in, I go to reset my password; good thing I never changed my email. I get in, and I'm immediately greeted with a decade-old picture of my former self. Oddly enough, this is how I still see myself in my mind. The reflection in the mirror is the impostor, a stranger. I get an alert that there are several messages in my mailbox, and there is a long feed showing me other profile's suggestions of "People I May Know." I pause, trying to figure out how I am going to play this. I need to find groups; that's all anyone ever talks about are the groups on Facebook. I find Maureen on my friend's list. Then following the list of groups she is a part of, I request entry to three that I see are connected to my subdivision. Some of them ask questions to make sure I am a resident, but they are so vague, and I don't even have to offer any proof that I actually live here. I realize anyone could get access to these pages. As I wait for my acceptance, I move onto other endeavors.

Before I know it, the sun is coming up. I am starting to fade, and my ass has fallen asleep in the desk chair. I make a run before the kids wake and grab breakfast. My main goal is more coffee, but I am also aware that my body requires more than that to keep going; donuts will have to do for now. The kids and Richard eye me wearily in the morning, but I see the tinge of hope in their stares. They are confusing my alertness as something other than determination for justice; at least that's what I think it is anyway.

I manage to get granted entrance into the groups on Facebook that I had requested to join, including the elementary school page, even though I do not have a child that attends the school. See, as I said, anyone can get on these things. Once I see how many members are on this one page, I get a little overwhelmed and decide that I have to get some rest if I am going to retain any of this information.

I decide the best thing to do is get a full night's sleep and then start executing my plan the following day. I had spent all day in front of this computer with little accomplishments. Putting everything on hold for the night, I head to bed in the guest room. Once I am fully rested, dressed, and seeing my kids off to school, I realize that I do not need a cup of that caffeine deliciousness, but I want one anyway. When I went to Target in search of a coffee pot, I had no idea what I was looking at. The variety of gizmos on the shelves was overwhelming. Pulling out my phone, I started googling the different brands and decided a Keurig would be simplest. Not knowing what I would like, I grabbed a variety of pods and creamer. So

now, I am working my way through the different flavors trying to find my coffee soul mate. However, I should really try and find an alternative to these coffee pods; pretty soon, humanity is going to be swimming in a sea of them if we keep this up. On the menu, today is salted caramel, okay sounds lovely. I add a touch of the caramel creamer, not wanting to mix too many flavors. My initial plan was to try and time my arrival home from Target to coincide with the school dismissal; I wanted to see if he was there again. However, on my way home, I figured I would have to wait. What if he saw me again? What if he started to suspect I was up to something and confronted me? What if he did recognize me and then followed me home? No, I would need to stay off his radar for a few days, let him forget about the ugly old lady gawking at him. That's when I decided to further my search for him online.

When the house is empty, and my mug is full, I get comfortable at my spot in the study and start going down the line. I begin with the school's page. Once you are allowed access, you can see everyone else that is a member. My goal is to find his evil ass! There are over six thousand members on this page. I sit there staring at that number for a moment, thinking to myself, wow, this is going to take forever; I hope the Wi-Fi doesn't go down and make me lose my place. There is no way to filter people on here, and also, not everyone has a picture of themselves. Without knowing a name, this is becoming extremely difficult. I make a mental note to go back and change my profile name and photo; that way, I, too, could be hard to find if anyone decides to start looking. I'm maybe three percent through this list after a grueling five hours of searching. I started clicking on every man's profile at first, then add women as well to look at family photos, when there is a knock at the door. My body creaks in protest as I stand. That's what I get for staying in one position for so long. Peeking out, I see it's Maureen; I'm still just staring at her through the little hole in the door when she knocks a second time. She's not giving up, is she? I open the door a crack and just give her a blank look without greeting.

"Well, hello to you too. I just wanted to shoot over here real quick and let you know that if you are trying to stay anonymous, you might want to close your blinds. I can see you sitting at that desk through your bay window. Also, there is an option in the setting section on Facebook where you can turn off your online status. That way, no one will know you are, in fact, online; otherwise, your name has this little green dot next to it. I don't

know what is keeping you on there all day. I'm sure it's not one of your forty-two friends, but I am guessing you might want to stay in the shadows and hide the fact that you are there." With that, she turns and crosses the street heading back into her house, not even waiting for a response from me. I find it odd that she is referring to a web page as an actual physical place. As I watch her retreating form, I think about asking for her help. Then I decide against it; this is my mess to clean up. I shouldn't get her involved.

Right as Kaylee and Korbin walk in the front door, I stumble on something. I have been at it all day. I feel like a blind person who dropped a sewing needle onto shag carpet and has spent the last eight hours on her hands and knees just waiting to feel the prick.

"Mom, did you already check the mail?" Kaylee rushes in to ask. After Maureen stopped by with her creepy observation and random advice, I shut the blinds and found that status button. I've only gotten up once to refill my coffee and unload my bladder. Now my kids are standing in front of me, my stomach is grumbling for attention, and all I can think about is the profile picture I just clicked on. Not wanting my kids, or anyone else for that matter, knowing what I'm doing, I reluctantly minimize my window and look up at Kaylee.

"No, honey, I don't even know if it's here yet," I say.

"My pictures came today! I got an alert on my phone. I've already picked out the one for the yearbook and sent the digital image to the school, but I have been waiting forever for the prints. I'm going to go check; will you look at them with me?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm going to get a snack. Y'all want something?" I cannot believe how hard that was to spit out. This is my only daughter's graduation pictures, and I can't seem to drag myself away from the computer long enough to look at them!

We sit around the table; Korbin and I are eating out of a veggie tray; Kaylee is holding up photographs, refusing to allow our dirty hands to touch them. Richard walks in on us carrying bags of take-out; my chest tightens a little in guilt. When was the last time I cooked a meal for these people?

"Mel, Detective Hendrix called me today, she said she had tried to return a message you left her, but you weren't answering. I tried calling you as well; it went straight to voicemail. Did you lose your phone again?"

Richard rushes this all out before he even looks our way. Oh shoot, I keep forgetting about the stupid cell phone and how it needs to be charged.

“Thanks, I don’t know where my phone is, but I’ll find it and call her back tomorrow. It’s already late now.”

“What were you calling her for?” He asks.

“Nothing, it’s not important, just touching base,” I reply as I wave a celery stick in his direction. He gives me a big smile as he sets the bags down. I have the feeling that he is getting the wrong idea. Richard then comes over to the table and leans over to see what we are all looking at just as Korbin drops a half-eaten carrot back into the tray, jumps up from his seat, and starts digging into the take out bags.

“Alright, Chinese!” Korbin shouts.

Kaylee boxes her pictures back up, and I sit with my family; we eat as Kaylee fills us in on the senior gossip with a full mouth. She is so enthusiastic that no one seems to correct her poor manners. By the time I make it back to the study, it’s already dark outside, and I am kicking myself for the lost time.

Opening the browser screen back up, I sit there and stare for maybe thirty minutes. I think about calling Detective Hendrix again and reporting this. I know I should, but something is holding me back. I feel like if I say something and he remains free, it’s like I played my hand too soon.

For now, I am comparing every hair, every blemish. It has to be her; it’s the little girl. I didn’t pay much attention to her on the street that day, but I am now. I need to make sure this is her. It is a profile picture from one of the accounts on the school page. A little girl, decorated Christmas tree in the background, she is holding up a Moana stocking. She has long black hair and a big gummy smile; there are at least four empty spaces where teeth have fallen out. This is an old picture; it’s already almost May. This tells me the owner of the account does not frequent it often. I’m still not entirely sure; she could be any little girl. Closing that picture, I move to open up all photos; the account is set to private. I see nothing on its wall, and no friends are listed. However, I can see any past profile pictures, and as I open the next one, I am rewarded with a confirmation. It’s a First-day of First-grade photo. She is holding one of those chalkboards making the announcement, and right there, sitting on the ground next to her, leaning up against the wall, is a Doc McStuffins backpack.

JACKPOT!

The name on the profile is Rosalinda Sterling, the first name combined with an even older profile picture of a dark, young, but somewhat pretty, or at least decent looking woman, tells me Rosalinda is Hispanic, but the last name and her lighter complected child tells me that whoever she chose to procreate with isn't. I have spent the entire day on this one site, but it has proven to be fruitful. I may not have found the monster, but it looks like I found his spawn.

Chapter Twenty



Richard

Something has happened in the last couple of days. I don't know what it was that initiated it, but it woke my wife up, and she is now wired. It happened so suddenly that the kids and I almost got whiplash by her dramatic behavior adjustment. I came home from work one day, and Mel had stationed herself in the study. She frantically typed away on the keys of the house PC, made random yet short phone calls to who knows and sipped on coffee. Yes, you heard me right; my wife was drinking coffee—we don't even own a coffee pot. She had one of those extra-large, venti or whatever you call them Starbucks cups sitting on the desk and would take a pull from it every few minutes.

Our study is on the first floor and was meant to be a formal dining room; we don't do any formal dining, so a study it became. Of course, no one in the house ever seems to find the need for a study since each person has their own personal laptops. Needless to say, this room stays neglected; it's been seeing a little action lately since Hilda, our now steady housekeeper, started dusting it once a week, but that's about it. If you sit at the center bar stool in the kitchen, you can see directly into the study through its doorless opening. My view consists of Mel's profile. I cannot see what she's doing on the computer; she's too far away, also she is discreet. I am unable to hear what she is saying during these calls. Sitting here for hours, I take a peek at the oven clock and see it is well after midnight—I'm mesmerized. I can't take my focus off of my wife. What is she doing? Where is her trusty bottle tonight?

I lie in bed and pull out my laptop. Looking at the spy wear recordings I have installed, I see that she has just been googling herself. She has visited several local news sites in the last couple of hours; she also keeps coming back to the Plano police site and Facebook. It all looks pretty innocent to me, but I'll need to remember to keep checking. This reminds me of that

reporter from last year, McAfee, or something like that. I wonder if she ever reported anything. I suppose she might have asked other people or just made something up. I was so tied up with Mel at the time I stopped paying attention to the world around me. Should I tell her about it? Would Mel want to know that people were snooping around, showing interest in her story? Is that why she is digging up info on herself? To see what kind of effect she had on our community.

Giving up around one in the morning, I put the laptop away and hope that with this newfound energy, she might return to our room and join me in our bed. I am disappointed to learn this was not the case when I wake alone in the morning. My wife did not join me—she just went back upstairs by herself. I do, however, find her in the kitchen this morning. She is staring out the back door, mindlessly rubbing Spud's head with one hand and shoving a donut in her mouth with the other.

“Good morning Melany,” I greet my wife. Breaking her dazed look without moving her head, she fixes her eyes on me. Around a mouth full of fried dough, she coughs out, “Mornin.” I got a ‘morning’ from my wife; how special I do feel.

Swallowing, she takes a sip of chocolate milk and then returns her attention to me. “You slept in this morning. The kids are already gone. I picked up a dozen from Mr. Donut. The kids got the first pick, so they already scavenged the box; I’m not sure what’s left.” That was the most my wife has said to me in months, and I got it with actual eye contact. She looks like shit though, she has massive bags under her eyes, and her hands are noticeably shaking.

“I turned in late, decided to reset my alarm, and give myself an extra hour. I didn’t have anything scheduled till ten this morning; I’m in no rush,” I say.

I’m trying not to spook her. I don’t want whatever this is to end, but I have a feeling, given the look of panic and sleep deprivation she is sporting, that she hasn’t been to sleep yet and might not even plan on trying it out today. It’s my duty to try and persuade her to get some rest.

“I also had the best sleep last night. The sheets needed to be changed, and I found an unopened pack of some Zen Bamboo sheets in the bathroom closet. I know you are supposed to wash them first, but oh well, I’m not dead from it or anything. You have to go lay on them, Mel; they are like sleeping on water. Did you buy those?” She is back to staring out the

door and just gives me a little shrug of her shoulders. And I lost her already, that didn't take long.

"Thank you for the donuts. Are there any more of those little chocolate milks?" I ask.

"Uh yeah, I had gotten enough for all of us. Yours is in the fridge," she replies. Grabbing a glaze, I wrap it in a napkin so that I can eat it on the way to the office.

"Okay, well, I'm off, won't be home late. Do you have any plans today?" I ask, trying to keep my wife's interest a little longer.

"Yeah, I'm just gonna do a Target run. Let me know if you need anything." Okay, she may not look like her, but she now sounds like my Melany again.

"I can't think of anything right now, but if I do think of something, I'll text you. What time are you going?"

"Maybe in an hour or so," she says. I really hope she is going to be asleep in an hour or so and not driving a motor vehicle. I'll make sure and not text her; maybe she will pass out and forget all about Target. Getting out of the house should be a major accomplishment on her part but not in her condition. She might have a better shot going during one of her blue bottle benders.

Walking to my truck, I spot Maureen checking her mail. The collection of metal boxes sits in front of her house.

"Hey there, handsome, you're getting a late start, did someone keep you up last night?" This stops me in my tracks; I give her a skeptical look.

"What, why are you looking at me like that?" She asks.

"No, why would you ask that? What do you know?" Shaking her head and throwing up the hands that hold her mail, she responds with, "Look, you can just call me John Snow because I know nothing. All I am saying is you came strolling out that door looking like a pleased man." Melany has my mind spinning this morning, and something other than confusion must show on my face.

"Oh, I am sorry for snapping. I'm running late. I'll see you later." Heading to the office, I realize I left my neighbor standing there in the street, mail in hand, staring at my retreating truck with a confused look of her own. Maureen used to be a regular figure in our household, but her absence over the last few months has left me unaccustomed to her banter.

When I get home that evening, Mel is back at her station in the study, legs tucked under her as she stares into the bright screen. I enter the kitchen and set the takeout down. I see a shiny new Keurig is occupying the counter accompanied by several boxes of those little coffee pod things in a variety of flavors. Well, this should be interesting, trading one beverage for another, are we Mel?

Chapter Twenty-One



Melany

I have learned everything I am going to learn from the internet, or at least that's how I feel because I am getting a little sick of it. After dissecting every post about the woman found at the school, I decide to deactivate my Facebook account but not before changing the name and deleting my photo, just in case. I never found him; Rosalinda was on other pages, but I never came across any posts she had made. In search of news about myself, I was directed to several old articles and attachments that would lead me to the stories I had already read from the original sites. Lots of inquisitive posts from over a year ago that were made by residents I don't even know, and most of the information is inaccurate.

People are absolutely pathetic. I now hate my neighborhood, the people that live here are mean, hurtful, and I wish never to encounter any of them in the future. You would think that discretion would be taken into consideration, given what had happened to me. Also, you might be disturbed by what people pull out of the creases of their small minds. The shit some people come up with, how it was my fault? Oh yeah, and I was probably meeting him there because I was having an affair with a monster who almost killed me. My name was even mentioned several times; one lady said she knew me because my kids hang out with hers. She is full of crap; I know all my kid's friends, and I have no idea who she is. I couldn't read anymore after that and decided to log out. You people can have that social media hoopla; obviously, they have nothing better to do with their time. I never called Detective Hendrix back; she also seemed to have given up on me. I'm sure she has more important things to worry about. After all, it had been a year. Shouldn't I have gotten over it by now, moved on? Right! I only had a couple of weeks before school let out for summer. It was time to act. I have left a big enough gap so that I should be able to tail him without suspicion.

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A week before school is scheduled to end for the summer break, I park a little way down from the crosswalk one afternoon. My car is facing the way they were walking the day I spotted them. I have an old Aggie hat of Richards and a pair of sunglasses on. The bikers are always released first. I know once they pass me, it will be only a few minutes before he arrives. I am getting nervous. All of a sudden, I needed to pee, and I started to break out into a cold sweat despite the high Texas temperature outside.

I hear them before I see them. I sit in my car, engine turned off, facing forward, but I can see the sidewalk on the other side perfectly from my car's driver side mirror. The rumble of laughter reaches me, then a group of boys whizz by on the right. Shortly after the cycling traffic clears up, kids start passing on foot. Cars start to line up in the lane next to me as they are stopped by the crossing guard; the cars are deep enough now that they block my view. This is a main street in the neighborhood, so it is wide enough for traffic to get by on both sides and still have cars parked on the curb. That's a good thing. It means I won't cause unwanted attention by making a traffic jam in the middle of the street. In fact, I am not the only person sitting in an idle car. Ahead of me is a Ford pickup that currently has two students climbing into the back seat.

Glancing over, I see that the line of cars starts to move; the line is getting shorter. A new crowd of pedestrians will soon appear, having just been sent across the street. There he is. I cannot fully see him yet as it's only the top of his head peeking up over an SUV. As soon as I notice the black hair bobbing up and down over the red tin roof, it starts to move forward, and he is fully revealed to me. He's dressed similarly as before; I can tell he has broken a bit of a sweat in this heat, as his white collared button-up shirt sticks to his frame. The little girl grips onto his hand, and just as before, she beams up at him brightly, just chatting away.

Before they line up with me, I start my engine and lean back in my seat a little as not to be noticed. Putting the shifter into drive, I can now see them in my peripheral. Peeking in the mirror, I wait as a couple of cars pass, then pull back into the line of traffic. They are about twenty feet ahead of me, and as I come to the next stop sign, I see them off to my left. They make a turn on to that street. It's too late for me to make the change from straight to left; I go up a bit, then when I am given an opening, I make a quick U-turn. Calculating my curve wrong, I do not give myself enough

space, and I have to back up and adjust the car. This earns me a honk and an ugly face from an oncoming driver; man, people around here are so testy.

Turning right on the street they had headed down—I start off slow. I was only separated for maybe a minute or two, but they could have entered their house by now. I don't want to pass them, but I don't want to come up on them too fast and have to backtrack either. I don't even have to worry because I spot him right there in the street as soon as I turn. He is standing at the metal mailbox kiosk; the little girl is bouncing around in the grass close by him. I slowly pull over and stop in front of a random house, about fifty feet away from them. I try to make it look like I belong there and pray that it's not his house. I begin to wonder if the house they are in front of is theirs; I hope so; I really don't want him coming back my way. The little girl is now picking up rocks out of the flower bed and throwing them into the street. The monster collects his mail and continues forward. The street has a slight curve in it, and he is far enough ahead that he starts to disappear out of my view.

I have a strange thought as I watch this monster walk the streets of my neighborhood like he belongs here. My husband, being ever so wise, he decided many years ago that we needed a gun. You know, for protection, well, a lot of good it's done so far. Of course, it has been locked away in a small gun safe in a hidden place that isn't even easy to access, just collecting dust or rust or whatever it is that guns do when they are uncared for and unused. We had actually talked about it not long after my attack. I was already home from the hospital, and we were lying in bed; he was the one to bring it up. "Remember that 357 we bought years ago?" he asked. I didn't respond right away; it took me a minute to recall or even figure out what he was talking about.

"The handgun?" I finally said.

"Yeah, we got it in case we needed protection. We made a date day out of it, going to the gun show, then to the range to try out our new purchase. That was a fun day, but we never got any more practice in, and I think that might be a reason why we never pull that thing out." I laid there in our bed, staring off into the darkness, wondering what would make him think of this now. What happened to me can't be changed. I can't go to the gun range now, get in more practice time, then hop in my Tardis, and change the outcome of events from that night.

"What are you trying to say?" I asked; it came out more defensively than

I meant. I could hear his gears shifting in that beautiful head of his.

“Well, we live in Texas, and we can technically carry a gun on us almost anywhere. I was thinking, we take one of those classes, and get our carry license, learn the way to use a gun properly, and then get the perfect one for you. The kids are older, so don’t even think about how dangerous it is for the little ones. They really aren’t that little; it wouldn’t be a bad idea for them to learn this stuff as well. Anyway, I’m just throwing it out there to see what you think.” I didn’t think it was a bad idea either, but at the time, I was in no condition to leave the house and shoot a gun. Now I wish I would have made time because all I want to do is aim and fire, right here, right now, in the middle of the street, surrounded by children, straight into the back of his sadistic head. Okay, maybe it’s a good thing I never got that license or that perfect palm-sized gun.

I am on a side street that does not seem to get much traffic; because of this, I am allowed to go at a slower than average pace. I catch up with him, making another left on to a dead-end cul-de-sac street. Slowly passing it by, I watch as the monster who stole everything from me enters his beautiful home with his admiring daughter. I circle around, giving them time to retreat inside. When I come back, I turn on his street and mentally note his house number. Realizing that my car is stalled a little too long in front of his house, I move on but not before I notice the big black work truck in his driveway. I recognize it as a work truck because of the racks in the back that hold ladders. I am gone before I can read if there are any logos or company decals on it, but I remind myself to drive back by tonight and pay more attention.

Instead of heading home, I choose to drive over to Tom Thumb and pick up some stuff to actually cook dinner for my family. I know the monster is at home, so there is no chance of having a run-in with him right now. Making it simple, I pick up a whole chicken and red potatoes to roast. I shoot Richard a text letting him know I will have dinner ready, so he doesn't need to pick something up. That seems to be a new daily chore for him now.

Me: Getting dinner

Hubby: Okay hon, I was going for pizza tonight, we had that once already on Monday so something different will be nice.

Me: Oh shoot I was going to make pizza :)

Hubby: But it will be your pizza, so that’s okay.

Every task takes me so much longer to complete now; with my hobble, I use an excessive amount of energy. Not to mention the fact that I no longer exert myself and the extra weight I've put on. I have to stop and take breaks regularly. I manage to make it home right around five, the kids are upstairs, and I holler up to them, asking if they completed their homework. Korbin leans over the banister railing to inform me that school is almost over, and homework is no longer happening. Well, okay then.

Dinner is ready by the time Richard walks in the door, and I have succeeded in overcooking the potatoes. I get no complaints from my crew; they seemed happy enough to have me doing something that they don't even care that it is burnt. I have contributed nothing to the mealtime conversation. Kaylee volunteers to clean up the kitchen. I collect the dishes, and as I throw them in the water-filled sink, exhaustion takes over. I can barely keep my eyes open. I head upstairs to turn in—yes, I am still claiming the guest room as my own—when I remember I have one more thing on the agenda for tonight. I must stay up to complete it. As I sit at the end of the bed, waiting for the noise of my family to quiet, I go over the plan in my head. I need to leave without anyone noticing me; I cannot be linked with loitering around his property. I do not want anyone to know I have found him just yet, and most of all, I cannot let him spot me. Having no idea what I am going to do with this information, I feel better keeping it to myself for now.

It's a little past midnight when I roll out of my driveway with the headlights turned off; no, this doesn't look suspicious at all. I find his street right away. Before today, I had never been down this section of my neighborhood, but it is now ingrained in my memory forever, even after one time. I slowly turn onto his little circle of a street, no one is out. Everyone is resting, secured in their safe little homes. He has those popular solar lights that illuminate the path, which leads from the curb to his door. His porch light is on, and there is a colorful wreath hanging on his front door. No other lights shine through the screened front windows. The truck is gone, his driveway sits bare. Panic starts to take over as I frantically look around. There are only five other houses on this alcove. The center of the cul-de-sac is just a bare yard that sports a fence separating this street from the one next to it. I exit his street, still only going about ten miles per hour. I'm aware of everything going on around me; I'm observing, looking for what I do not know.

I hear a dog barking off in the distance, and that makes me increase my speed to the reasonable limit. Circling around for a bit, I finally locate the street that shares a fence with his. It, too, has a bare yard; these little areas were not big enough to sell as a full lot and build a house on. They were just left here, and this may work to my advantage.

I pull into the circle and get out of my car. Walking over to the fence, I find a gap where I can see through, and I spot his house. Taking a look around, no one is out over here—I have not been noticed. This is normal; my area is full of families; during the day, there are people everywhere, jogging, walking dogs, gathered around mailboxes as if it were a water cooler at an office. Children play outside so carelessly that you have to make sure one doesn't dart in front of your car when you drive through. Then when the sun goes down, everyone retreats into their little boxes, and the street becomes unnervingly quiet. It's what I loved most about my nightly runs: no one to witness me, no one to judge. I could sing aloud to my music, and no one would hear. I could do little dances, and no one would see. Sometimes when it would begin to rain, I could stand in the middle of the street, let the water beat down on me, one drop at a time from above, the street light glowing in the distance; it almost felt magical. At times I would imagine I was the only one on earth and could do anything I wanted, swirling around, center of the road, not a car in sight. During the spring, the crickets would sing a symphony just for me, the frogs adding in with their baritone croaks. When the sky was clear, the stars would twinkle above me like flashes of hope and approval. At night these streets were my own little oasis until he stole that from me. The list goes on and on with all the things that the monster has taken away from my former self.

Standing here, peeking through the fence, I feel my face start to heat up. The rage is taking over. My body is becoming consumed with the need to retaliate. How dare he get to have this house and that little girl. How dare he get the privilege of walking her from school every day, listening to her retell adventures and discoveries. How dare he have a job that requires his physical strength when it was that same strength that ripped everything I had away, everything I had built for myself. All the years I spent on my body, all the workouts, all the runs, he just wiped it all out in one night, and he gets to just go on living his life the same way he did before he ruined mine.

At that moment, as I stand there fuming, my nostrils flaring, the lights from his path and his porch shut off abruptly. I stop everything, I just stop, I don't even dare breathe. Headlights then turn on to his street as his garage door begins to open. Inside the garage, I see a small coupe like red sports car. Hanging above it are two adult bikes and one little pink and blue one. The headlights illuminate my face for a brief moment as they turn into his driveway. It's him!

He gets out from the opposite side; his face is caught by the overhead light in his truck for a second. I can see his profile perfectly, and he is wearing a slight scowl. He walks directly into the garage, and just like that. He's gone—the garage door begins to close. I take a look at the passenger door, trying to read it before the door closes all the way and the small amount of light I am given extinguishes. The only thing I can make out is the word concrete, and I can see that underneath the lettering, there may be a number, but by then, the door is fully closed, and the darkness has taken over. Looking up, I see new light coming through the front window of his house, and a shadow passes just before it, too, is turned off. Retreating back to my car, I see that the time is 2:33 am. I pull my phone out of the center console and power it on, opening up the notes I type in,

Concrete

2 am

Red sports car

2 adult bikes

I know that in my current exhausted state, I may forget some details in the morning. I need to remember everything; I'll delete this after I read it tomorrow.

Once I am back home and tucked into the guest bed, I just lay there, my body has shut down, but my mind is racing. I can't help but wonder where he was. Does he always stay out this late? I don't know any concrete workers that work till two in the morning yet are home at three in the afternoon. Well, maybe the people that work on the roads, I think they work a lot of nights. It's Thursday night, or better yet, it's Friday morning now.

Was he at a bar? The time does line up; it's weird how the lights shut off at his house right before he pulled up. He attacked me around nine at night. Was he not working that night, or was he on his way out? Was he attacking another woman tonight? Everything keeps spinning around and

around in my head, it almost makes me dizzy, and I start to get a little nauseous. Getting up, I make my way to the bathroom. Since this room is meant for guests, I keep a stocked medicine cabinet in here. Opening it up, I find what I am after right away. I pour two over-the-counter sleeping pills in my palm and pop them into my mouth. Turning on the faucet, I scoop up some water to wash them down. Back in the bed, it takes a while, but pretty soon, I doze off and finally get the rest I so desperately needed.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Melany

Today my baby girl graduates from High School. Kaylee got accepted into Texas A&M, her dad's alma mater and her first choice. She will be studying botany. I was extremely confused when I heard this; not one time has she ever helped me in the yard. When I asked her why botany, I thought she would go for art, her reply was. "I will enjoy art for my entire life, but I will probably die early if I try making a living off of it as I will most likely starve." What happened to you can be anything you want and all that jazz? This girl was super smart for her age but maybe a little too serious as well.

Even though the ceremony does not start until one this afternoon, we have to get Kaylee to the Ford Center over in Frisco by ten that morning. We weren't going to drop her off then come back, so we just kind of hang out around there till it is time to go in. Kaylee is not allowed to take anything with her; she will not have a phone the entire time.

Everyone is coming today; well, not to the ceremony itself but to the dinner afterward. We were only able to get five tickets. Included at the ceremony today will be me, Korbin, Richard, and then, of course, Richard's mother Barbara and my brother Kyle will be joining us. The five of us are ushered in along with everyone else's family right at noon. There are two other high schools having graduations here today, and we got the one smack dab in the middle. Since everyone had the same idea we did, there is a thick foul odor permeating around the crowd. We were stuck in that Dallas heat; as a collective group, we are all guilty of the assault that's happening to our nasal senses right now.

After we get past the entrance, Korbin needs to find a restroom. As we wait for the men to come out, Richard's mom decides to fill the silent void with mindless chatter. Great! Barbara begins with pleasantries; she hasn't said much more than hello to me since arriving at our house this morning. Richard picked her up from the airport yesterday and got her settled into her

hotel; well, I am assuming he did. Retreating to the study, I kept to myself all night until I finally fell asleep on the couch. Since Kyle is here, my temporary bed is occupied, and I still haven't found the strength to face my husband alone. At least not in the confines of our intimate marital bed. I honestly feel like I'm doing him a favor this way. He can watch porn and pleasure himself in peace; lord knows it's been a while since he's seen any action. He has been less overbearing; lately, we talk some but not at all like we did before my attack.

"I understand we will be dining at the Uptown Perry's steak house today. Richard tells me we will be eating at five this evening, such a strange hour for dinner," Barbara says. Is she asking me a question or making a statement? The woman doesn't even bother to look at me when she speaks.

"We are meeting everyone there at five, as that is when our reservation is, but I assume we won't eat right when we walk in the door." She gives me a snide side-eye and clears her throat.

"I just meant it's a little early for dinner." I know what you meant!

"Considering we had brunch right before we came here and that we are trapped here during the lunch hour, and we most likely won't get out of here until at least three, I figured it would be ideal to dine early. I'm sure the kids will be famished by then," I throw her condescending tone right back at her. Huh, I wonder why she doesn't like me? I know this is her only granddaughter's graduation, but it's my daughter, and I will not let her spoil the day for me.

Once the men rejoin us, we head to find our seats. When Barbara discovers we have to sit on one of the lower levels because I am not able to climb the steep stairs, she gives off a little huff of disappointment. Really lady, are you actually doing this?

"Barbara, feel free to sit wherever you'd like, do not feel obligated to sit with us on my account," I say over my shoulder as I keep walking in search of a decent seat. She looks momentarily stunned. Oh wow, did I finally manage to shut her up? Richard gently grabs his mother's elbow and steers her down an aisle of seats.

"Mother, it will be perfect if you can't see over people's heads; they will have everything viewable from the screens above."

"I was really hoping to record the entire event today. The ladies at Bunko might want to see it," she says this like she's a defiant child not getting her way.

“Don’t worry; I have that covered. We pre-ordered copies from the school; they have a professional videographer taking care of that.” The way he talks to his mother makes me want to gag.

“How nice, things sure have changed since I went through this with you,” Barbara replies. Oh please, she acts like that was a hundred years ago—it was only the nineties—Barbara; things are not that different.

The graduation was so unbelievably long. I know my kids go to one of the largest and most populated school districts in the country, and the graduating class seems to top the charts most years, but with almost fifteen hundred students here today, this is ridiculous! Korbin got up no less than six times to use the restroom, I was starting to think he had a bladder problem, but when I stumble upon him playing on his phone in the hall, as I went to relieve myself, I discover that is not the case.

“What are you doing?” I asked through my teeth as I walk up to my son.

“Hey, Mom. Oh, I didn’t want to be rude and pull out my phone in there. I’m just answering some text messages,” he replies with a shrug of his shoulders like he’s some vital businessman or something.

“I call bullshit; you are playing a game. Your sister is going to have to sit through your long boring ceremony in a couple of years, get in there, and show her the same respect she will give you.”

“Aw man, Mom, okay, but she better show up to mine.” I watch him sulk his way back to the seats as I continue to the restrooms.

After collecting my child, which took forever in that damn chaos, given the fact that none of the children had phones, everyone was just jumping around, waving, and screaming for their kids. I will have to remember that when it’s Korbin’s turn and come up with a better plan, maybe we can build a bat signal or something. We arrive at the restaurant with only about fifteen minutes to spare. Kaylee had initially wanted to stop back at the house first; it’s a good thing I talked her into wearing her dress under her gown because we did not have time for that. I had ordered her cake to be delivered to the restaurant at 4:30 with the impression that I would have arrived by then. I really hope they haven’t come and gone already. Walking up to the hostess station, I find the delivery guy there still waiting for assistance.

“Hi, are you from Meringue?” I ask him.

“Yes, ma’am, are you Mrs. Melany Polk?” He turns my way; the large bakery box fills his arms.

“Oh, thank goodness I didn’t miss you; sorry I am a little late,” I say in a rush.

“It’s fine; the girl was just looking for someone to sign.” I inspect the cake, sign for it, then as the hostess arrives back to her station with the manager, we are seated at our reserved table.

Maureen is already here waiting for us. Kaylee sits at one head of the table, sandwiched with Richard and me on each side. Korbin is next to me. Then we have Maureen and Kyle; there is one empty seat next to him. At the opposite head sits her cake; it is three tiers of books stacked upon each other and topped with a graduation cap. Next to Richard is his mother, and she has the rest of the row to herself. Of course, we are still waiting on Richard’s younger cousin Clark to arrive with his wife Tiffany and their daughter Arrabelle. One of the extra chairs at the end is filled with neatly wrapped gifts. Clark and his family are driving in from Arlington; he has already sent a text to Richard apologizing for his tardiness.

At 5:30, we are settled in at the table, and my husband proceeds to order a variety of appetizers for everyone without consulting anyone about what they would like. Oh, Richard, you better watch out your mother is rubbing off on you. Clark and his crew arrive before the appetizers, and I finally get to meet Arrabelle. She is three now, and the last time I saw Tiffany was at her baby shower almost four years ago. Now that’s sad; they don’t even live that far, shame on me. Richard had gone in to visit after she was born, but I must have been busy that day. A couple of hours in, we have finished our meals, and that spunky little gremlin at the end of the table is giving me a migraine. If someone does not get her away from that cake and those presents, I am going to scream. Am I the only one bothered by her? Why am I so bothered by other people’s kids? Richard must recognize my distress because he moves to start cutting into the cake and passes out pieces to everyone. Oh yeah, I have a mini orgasm in my mouth. That’s some good cake! I thought the price of this thing was a bit much; it was more than I had spent on my wedding cake. Of course, that was almost twenty years ago. Even though there were only four of us eating it, I was adamant about having the cake I wanted, but God damn, this is the best thing I have ever eaten in my entire life.

After we all finish our cake, I take a glance around the table, and the look on their faces tells me everyone is full and satisfied. Kyle leans over, grabbing my attention; he wants to make sure the rest of the cake is going to be at the house tonight. When I confirm this, Maureen pipes in, saying she will be coming over later. Kaylee opens up her gifts and has received many items that will help her start off in the dorms come fall. She also has collected a pretty hefty stack of cash and checks; these will be added to the others that have already arrived in the mail. All of which will be deposited in her new, very own adult checking account. Richard and I had gotten her new bedding for her soon to be twin bed, but we do have another surprise in store for her. Once all the trash and plates are collected, I hand her the little white box wrapped in the silver ribbon.

“What’s this? You guys already gave me a gift?” Kaylee says.

“Just open it,” Richard eagerly replies. Peeking inside, she gives us a look of confusion then pulls out a set of keys.

“Did you guys get her a car?” This from Korbin, whose face fills with hope. I know he’s thinking that if she is getting a new car, then the Jeep must be coming to him.

“No, these are the keys to the Rav 4,” I reply

“You are giving me your brand-new car?” Kaylee says as her mouth drops open.

“Well, kind of, at least for now,” Richard says this as he ruffles her carefully styled hair and adds, “We know you are going to want to come home a lot since you are going to be so close—it’s only a few hours drive from College Station, and we wanted to make sure you had something safe and reliable, plus the gas mileage is a lot better in the Toyota. We also already purchased your parking pass for the first year.”

“Thank you, guys, this is awesome!” Kaylee exclaims. It’s okay, I don’t really need the car, and my daily trips are mostly in walking distance now.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Melany

After Kaylee's graduation, I make sure to get a few minutes alone with my brother before he heads back to Denton. Once my little siblings had grown up, the social security checks stopped coming in, and his band never hit it big. My brother became a self-employed IT consultant. He does contract work for a few individuals and small businesses; he could do basically anything in the world, but this way, he says he gets to work where and when he wants. Also, he is able to charge an outrageous amount of money for the one on one services he offers. I needed some help, and I knew I could trust him. He wouldn't ask many questions, and I don't have to worry about anyone finding out about what he might do for me. I gave him a brief synopsis of what I was looking to do and what I was thinking of getting without revealing any particular details. He told me to pay him a visit that next week and he would have something ready for me.

~

I haven't been back here to this trailer since I moved out almost twenty-four years ago. Pulling into the dilapidated trailer park, I almost stop. I am taken back for a minute. A time long ago and so far removed from my current life that I almost forgot all about it—walking home from school every day on the cracked sidewalks, stepping over broken beer bottles and discarded trash, trash that could never seem to find its way to the dumpster. That's what I thought of this place—it was kind of like a dumpster. No one had any respect for their surroundings. There weren't any cute flags or signs on people's front walks. No decorative wreaths hung on doors or lights that glowed during Christmas. No plants or really much greenery at all. Just dirt and the occasional weed here and there. Going home to filth and an empty fridge, listening to my siblings cry all night

because they were hungry, and my mom getting nailed by whoever happened to stop by that night was my life.

It hasn't changed a bit, or at least this is how I remember it. As I pull up and park behind my brother's Buick, I see the busted-up old van half-covered with a tarp and actual weeds growing out of the rims that seem to be missing tires. It looks like he uses it as some kind of wild planter now. The outside of the old tin box, I guess one could call it my childhood home, is as ramshackled as ever. I'm pretty sure something can only wither and rot to a certain point before it reached its max and can't go any further. Eventually, it has to come to an end. No more spots left to rust or corrode—it just gives up. I see my brother has tried instilling some of his handy work onto the old place. There are several spots covered in aluminum foil and duct tape. Most of the windows are just cardboard boxes, the glass long gone. The window, or should I say the rectangular hole in the wall that is supporting an air conditioning unit, is actually filled the rest of the way with an old pizza box. The entry or front porch area now sports a cover in the form of one of those colored pop up tents, no telling what color it had been initially; it is kind of a greenish brown now. Half of the top is missing. Maybe that's supposed to represent a sunroof. I am giving everything a positive outlook today. I am trying to radiate some of my old self, some pre-attack Melany. Not really sure how well it is working at the moment.

I knock a few times but then think better of it. Knowing my brother, he had duplicated a South Park episode and is currently reenacting a scene where Cartman is sitting at a computer, surrounded by discarded food containers and has a headset covering his ears. At the same time, he screams at some kid halfway across the world for shooting his character in whatever video game he has invested his time in this week. I pull my phone out and send him a text alerting him of my arrival. I immediately hear shuffling coming from inside the sardine can.

“Coming!” Kyle yells out to me. He opens the door wide, and his big frame fills it up. “Little sis, ya made it,” he greets me with a big smile on his face.

“Did you think I'd get lost?” I ask him.

“No, but I'm aware that you don't get out much anymore. I thought you would chicken out and not wanna come up,” he replies as he starts moving back into the trailer.

“Trust me; I need this. If you weren’t going to bring it to me, I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Come on in!” He waves to me once he notices I haven’t moved from my spot under the tent.

“Yeah, that’s how you sounded, like not getting this wasn’t an option. So, I figured I would use it to my advantage and finally get your little butt up here for once. You want something to drink?” He asks.

Stepping into the dark main room, the smell of old bong water is so strong. I almost feel the need to start paddling and try to swim out. It’s dark in here. He doesn’t seem to have any lights on, but the sun shines in enough for me to get a look at his setup with the door open. It’s some kind of makeshift messy office area. He has a large L shape desk against the far wall. On the desk, there are several monitors lined up and more sticking out above them. A massive gaming chair takes up the majority of space in the middle of the room. I’m concerned about the physics of this place. The concrete blocks under the trailer have been holding all of this along with my brother’s large frame—maybe adding me is going to make it crumble—this has me hesitant to enter any further.

“No thanks, I don’t think I’m up to date on my tetanus shot,” I mumble as I stay rooted to my spot by the door.

“Funny! I take it this is an in-and-out stop, so I’ll get right to it.” Flopping down on his throne, he rolls over and grabs a tablet out of a box on the floor.

“You can search for anything on this, and it will not be traced back to you. It has a private VPN address. You have unlimited data, and the signal will just constantly bounce around, hitting different servers, never linking back to your location. So, if whatever you are trying to search has the possibility of raising any flags, and someone out in spy land does look into it, they are just going to be sent on a wild goose chase that will never end,” he informs me as he powers up the tablet and hands it over.

“Can I use it to make calls?” I ask.

“First, you will need to create a new anonymous email address. Do it from the tablet and create false information, utterly different from your own. Once you’ve done that, you can log into the text app I’ve already uploaded to the device with your new email. The text app will automatically generate a random spoof number for you. When you call or text someone from the app, the generated number will show, but whoever is on the other

end will not be able to look up the owner as it's not a real phone account. Never use the fake email information on any of your own devices or computer. Never turn on the Wi-Fi. If you do this, it will shut off access to the data network I have linked it to and connect to whatever Wi-Fi you are within connection range of. In doing that, you risk being located by anyone who may be looking within minutes."

"Okay, that's a lot of information, but I think I got it, pretty simple. You got a charger for this thing?" I ask, still standing in the doorway with the sun hitting my back.

"Around here somewhere, give me a sec." A sec turned into an afternoon crawl through a tangle of cords he had thrown into a corner under his massive desk. I have a hard time focusing on the drive home; all I want to do was play with my new toy. It is calling out to me, ready for me to utilize.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Melany

I have another new obsession. I know this is unhealthy, but I can't stop. Over the last month, I have visited his house every day. I've picked different times to monitor the actions going on around his little box. I need to know what he's doing at all times, and I just about have his schedule figured out. Not only have I seen him several times in the light of day, but I've also managed to do it without being noticed. I've found a short route between our two houses. If I cut through a few side streets, I can make it to the connecting cul-de-sac that shares the fence with his in about twenty-two minutes on foot. It's sad; he's only a little over a mile away, and that's how long it takes me to hobble the distance.

My new routine consists of walking Spud three times a day, each time we take that same route. Getting there and back consumes a large part of our schedule. I think my dog is starting to hate me, especially because it is now summer and getting hotter every day. He's not as young and spry as he used to be, and although I know he missed our daily walks over the last year, I don't think he likes me trying to make up for it by struggling to fit the missed walks all into one month. Yesterday I called for him several times, and he never came. I got a little worried and started searching for him all over the house. I found him under Korbin's bed. He had drug a pillow down with him to try and block himself out of my view. Today his leash was missing from its hook, and I found it in the kitchen trash can. Coming to the conclusion that this had been done after our early morning walk, everyone has been gone from the house since before we got back. Richard took the kids to College Station for the day to tour the dorms. He tried getting me to go with them. I insisted that he spend some alone time with the kids. He was leaving later in the week to visit a job site in Tulsa. He almost didn't leave without me. In the end, they had to go, and I didn't. I realize it had to have been the dog that threw the leash away. Damn, he's a

smart pup, but he's still not getting out of this. I've made a habit of stopping at my snooping point with Spud. We make it look like he's merely dropping a load as I stand there with a bag wrapped around my hand, ready to collect his offering. Even if someone happens by, I would only look suspicious if they lingered and saw that I stayed planted in the same spot for at least fifteen minutes. Spud is lucky I'm only taking him on my day trips and not the one I do in the middle of the night.

I know his name—it's Chase Sterling. I learned this information by looking up his address through the Collin County Central Appraisal website. I've also discovered that the home he lives in is co-owned by him, Mr. Chase Sterling, and by whom I now see must be his wife, Mrs. Rosalinda Sterling. They purchased the home six years ago. I'm guessing that's about the time the little girl entered his life. The house was actually a spec home for that section of the neighborhood; those homes are a little harder to sell. Once all the buyers pick a floor plan and add all the extras they want, the spec home is just left there with a bunch of mismatched floors and counters. The original owners got it for a steal in 2010 but were foreclosed on only two years later. That's when he snagged it up. Not immediately—it sat there empty for almost three years. He ended up paying even less than the original owners. Looking at the last sold price, I am amazed. The houses around here resale for more than double that. If you weren't lucky enough to be an original owner in this neighborhood, you are going to pay quite a bit more to become a part of this established community. You would think someone would question the price tag that they ended up paying. If a realtor showed me that house then followed it up with that price, I would think 'Amityville Horror'. Not sure if I would take the chance.

The decal on his truck reads:

Concrete Solutions
Residential and Commercial
DFWconcretespecials.com

It stays parked in the driveway most days.

With my trusty tablet, I've been able to find out all kinds of information on Mr. Sterling, AKA, Mr. Monster. His webpage is minimal, and it looks thrown together; it also looks like someone created it and forgot about it almost instantly. It's short, only giving a brief description of the services he offers, a phone number, and only his name is listed as a contact.

There are no pictures, references, or testimonials of any kind. I think he doesn't get much business from this endeavor.

His household schedule goes something like this. At 5 am, Rosalinda is picked up from her home by a woman driving a blue Molly Maid car. They leave and are gone most of the day until she gets dropped off by the same car sometime between 3:30 and 4:30. Rosalinda is a short, slightly heavysset woman who has little resemblance to the photo she had on her Facebook page. She always seems to have a disappointed look on her face. As if her life took a wrong turn, and she is just barely getting through the motions day by day. She also looks a lot younger than her husband, maybe late twenties or early thirties. This may just all be in my head; I mean, how much can I actually tell about a person only from watching them through a fence as they enter and exit their home? She does come home every day looking tired and disheveled, so there has to be some truth in that. While she is gone, all is quiet for most of the day. It's summer now, but I'm guessing that Mr. Monster would regularly escort his daughter to and from school during the school year. Instead, they spend most of their time inside. On the rare occasion, I have seen them leave in the red sports car; not sure of the make, but it's an older model with some chipped spots in the paint on the rear end. I've yet to make it to my car in time to follow them, and I'm still too scared to park close by and keep watch during the day.

He leaves his house in what appears to be work attire at 5 pm sharp every day—Sunday through Saturday without fail. The earliest I have seen him return was a few minutes after 12 am, but this is rare. He must have caught me on one of his rare, early nights because almost every time I stroll by between midnight to three in the morning, his truck is still gone. I was starting to wonder why they had those bikes; I never saw them get pulled down. Then, two weeks into June, I see them. It was an evening walk, but the sun was still out. I had Spud with me, we were heading their way, but before we could get to our spot, I saw them. Rosalinda and the kid were across the street from me, on the sidewalk. The girls' bike was on the ground. She was screaming and kicking at it. Her helmet was discarded into a nearby flower bed. I tried listening, but it was hard to understand her. Rosalinda stood by her feet on the ground, bike in between her legs. She was quiet, I could tell she was pissed, but she wasn't trying to add to the scene. Then that little girl storms over to her mother and starts punching her in the gut. I wasn't trying to bring awareness to myself, but that made me

stop and stare dead-on—it was a little hard not to. Even a car that was driving by slowed as it passed them. Spud let out a few barks of concern, the little girl looked over at him and yelled, “Shut up you stupid Dog, shut up!” Her mother didn’t look my way, obviously embarrassed. Rosalinda finally grabbed her by the arm and said something to her, close up and in her face. That little shit pulled her arm away, then screamed at the top of her lungs, “Shut up, stupid!” Then she stormed off, hopped on her bike, and sped away. Slowly Rosalinda sat her bike down and walked over to retrieve the helmet. Then she followed suit after her demon child.

It’s been a month, and I’ve followed him six times now. It’s hard for me to get away right before dinner time without questions from my family; otherwise, it would be more. I was able to get some nights in while Richard was out of town. I pegged it right; he is part of a night time road crew. He always goes and parks at a set of temporary buildings in West Dallas, then loads up in a truck with other crew members. The black Dodge truck must be for his thriving personal business. They set off to their job site, but I always lose him at roadblocks. I’ve circled around a couple of times and spotted him at work. He just looks to be one of the worker bees and not a supervisor of any sort. I have figured out that they cut work on an average day between 2 am and 5 am. I have followed him on two nights that would be considered “rare,” both nights, he pulled up to the temporary building. Instead of loading up with the other guys, he gets back in his truck and leaves.

Night one, he drove all the way over to East Dallas and entered a bar in Deep Ellum. I sat outside in my street parking spot with an obscured view of the door he had entered and waited four hours for him to come out. When he arose, it didn’t appear to me that he had been drinking, but there was no way I would ever enter into any place behind him.

The following week was the second rare night. He presented similar behavior but chose a bar in Carrollton instead. He didn’t stay long, and he arrived home a little after midnight. I parked close to my peeping spot and set up at my post. Shortly after he entered his home, I thought I heard faint yelling and banging coming from inside his house. I couldn’t be sure if that is where it was coming from, and I couldn’t make anything that was being said out.

A few of the things I now know:
He does not work on Thursday nights.

He still tries to go to work on those nights, driving the almost forty minutes to get there but is turned away.

He either does not want to return home and decides to hit up a bar, or is he pretending to his family that he was, in fact, at work?

All I know is that both rare nights were a Thursday, and that's the same night of the week that he attacked me.

The Sterling's never have any guests. The woman that picks up Rosalinda never comes inside. They seem to have a very secluded life.

Today my family will be gone; I have the house to myself. The kids both have plans with friends, and Richard is back in Tulsa for a few days. I have a long list to complete before they return. Using the silence around me, I decide to call the number listed on the concrete site. He's not home. I watched him leave with his daughter during my lunchtime stroll. It rings three times before going to voicemail.

"You have reached Chase Sterling with Concrete Solutions. I'm currently with a client. Please leave me a detailed message, and I will return your call in a timely manner." I'm thrown off a little by the sternness in his voice. The chill it gives me is spine-tingling. I pause for a minute after the tone and almost forget to leave the message I had rehearsed, in the off chance that I would get his voicemail box.

"Yes, I'm um hi, my name is Cassandra St. James, and I wanted to inquire about getting a quote to repair the cracks in my driveway." I'm interrupted by the recorded voice giving me my options on delivering my message. I took too long; I wasted my time in the beginning and ended up running out. I didn't even leave my number. I hang up before choosing an option.

Moving along with my to-do list, I visit an Academy store on the other side of town in search of a flaying knife. With help from an employee, I end up purchasing two. He recommended I have different sizes for different fish and also threw in a knife sharpener. I paid using leftover vodka cash. On the way home, I stop and pick up half a dozen whole frozen chickens. At home, with a few hours to spare, I get to work.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Richard

So far this summer, the kids and I have been doing a lot of activities without my wife. I thought she was doing better; she has been much more active lately, just not with us. She's been walking daily; I see her leaving the house on her own or with Spud several times throughout the week. She has lost a lot of the weight she put on over the last year and doesn't seem to struggle too much with physical activities anymore. I joined her once, jumping into my shoes quickly, trying to catch up to her. That walk seemed to have been shorter than the ones she usually takes alone. I actually thought she put on a good show out in public and around other people until my cousin Clark called me. After Kaylee's graduation dinner last month, I received the call late one evening. He started with small talk and then got to the point.

"I just want to apologize for not being around last year when all that stuff was going on with Melany. I didn't even think about it, and I feel horrible. We are just so busy now with Arrabelle and work and the new house that everyone outside of it just kind of fades into the background."

I cut him off, "Don't worry about it, trust me. I know what it's like starting a family, and I know exactly what you mean."

He lets out a breath he must have been holding, "It's just, is she okay, Richard? She looks so different, and not just her physical looks, but she seemed very on edge."

"We are still working on stuff, she is actually doing a little better almost every day, but still, she has setbacks here and there; it's to be expected after what happened to her. We are going to be okay. Thanks for checking in."

"Anytime, I love you guys." We hung up, and that really made me think that maybe I wasn't seeing the whole picture my wife was displaying. Clark and I grew up together. He is five years younger than me, but I

remember the day my aunt Beth announced she was pregnant. I had wanted a little brother for what seemed like my entire life. When he was born, I spent every moment I could over at my aunt and uncle's house. They were only a few streets away at the time, and I wasn't allowed to go over there on my own until I was around eight. I would beg my mom every day after school to take me to see Clark. She didn't mind most of the time. My mother was best friends with her twin sister.

When Clark was twelve, and I was a senior in high school, my uncle Marty got relocated to Nebraska. I was devastated. I looked after Clark and was looking forward to watching him go through the same high school I did. It all worked out in the end. After he finished school and met Tiffany, they settled down not far from me in Arlington, Texas. The distance wasn't so vast anymore. We are still really close; I trust him with everything, and I value his opinion. I was starting to regret taking on this job in Tulsa. I know I wasn't required to be there full time, but even the couple of nights here and there was too much time spent away from the house. I should have made Mel come with us to College Station; I need to be more persistent with her. It's hard after everything she has been through; I guess some days, I'm just happy she is still here with us.

Melany has been cooking for us again, even though it mostly consists of some sort of chicken dish. The other day I bit straight into a bone and cracked a tooth. Most of the time, Mel is off in space while we eat dinner. She always looks as if she has something occupying her mind, and we are entirely off her radar. This particular night she was alert. I know it sounds crazy, but it's almost as if she was anticipating something to happen. As soon as it did, she jumped at the opportunity to assist me.

"Ouch, oh, shoot!" I ground out with a mouth full of chicken and rice. Mel dropped her fork and leaned in over me.

"What is it?" She asked, real concern in her voice.

"I just crunched into something hard." I opened my napkin and spat into it. There was a hint of blood mixed in with the chewed-up mush, and right there, sticking out was a small broken chicken bone.

I didn't think about it at the time, but the way she reacted was almost like she orchestrated the incident. I know I keep pushing it out of my brain because she would never try to hurt anyone intentionally. I mean, it could have been one of the kids that got that bite. They could have swallowed it and possibly choked. After cleaning up and rinsing with peroxide, she said,

that I in fact, did crack a molar. Mel informed me that it's a common one, I probably use it more than any other tooth in my mouth, and most people crack that one around my age. I'll most likely need to get a crown.

She takes control of everything. For a moment, I had my wife back, but I was wary of her just the same. That night she sent me to bed with one of the old pain pills she had leftover even though it really didn't hurt much. My suspicions were high, but of what I didn't know. Mel was acting very standoffish.

The next morning, I went off to work but cut the day short for an urgent dental appointment that Mel had set up for me. Mel said our regular dentist couldn't get me in soon enough, but she managed to get me a same-day appointment with Dr. Jameson, the family dentist she used to work for. She said he was happy to see me that afternoon. At the appointment, my wife was her old self; Mel had makeup on. I can't recall the last time I saw my wife's face painted. She insisted that she come with me, saying she wanted to say hello to her old crew. Despite her physical changes, Melany walked in there, greeted everyone, and even showed some of her former wit and charm. She came back with me, even helped the dentist out a bit while he repaired my tooth. They chatted over me as I am unable to join the conversation at that moment. I lost track of her for a short time when she disappeared off somewhere, I assume to offer more hellos or try to see what new gossip is floating around these days. Even though Dr. Jameson has a small practice, he has a decent size staff. Stacy had, of course, moved on, and someone new sat at the front desk, but Mel seemed enthusiastic about catching up with Latisha and other old coworkers she had lost touch with.

Latisha was a vibrant woman, and her husband was equally entertaining. It was almost overwhelming hanging out with the two of them. We had actually seen them a few times since Mel stopped working. They had kids the same age as ours and used to come to birthday parties when the kids were little. I haven't seen them in a while, but I make a point of asking Latisha for her husband's current number so that I could give him a call. Dr. Jameson is the same as always. He used to join us during happy hour when I would meet up with Mel and her friends before we had kids. I was pleased to hear that his wife has recently had their first child, and they weren't making it to many happy hours these days—I can relate to that.

After my appointment, Mel was eager to get back home, it was still early, and I wanted to stop and grab some froyo, but Mel told me I couldn't

have anything to eat for at least another hour. I literally pouted at that. I tried making small talk with my wife on the way home, asking her how it was seeing her old pals again, but she simply shrugged me off and gave me short answers till I gave up. Okay, so we're back to this again. Now I was even more suspicious of that damn chicken bone.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Melany

I got two picket boards out. I am incredibly proud of myself and my hard work because you can hardly tell they are even loose. I have spent so much time at that fence that I managed to pull out two boards slowly and yet keep them fully intact, and no one even knows. They still have nails in them. I'm able to put them in and out of place now with little effort. I have a little spot to squeeze through and get a closer look without actually going down his street. I've done this twice now, only at night. I've circled his property while he's at work. They do not have a dog; neither does his neighbor. I find that odd—what kind of people don't have a dog? I'll tell you what kind: monstrous soul-stealing people, that's who. However, it leaves me in the clear of being able to come and go without the threat of getting caught. The gate to their backyard does not have a lock on it. This surprised me at first, but then I realized that he's the boogie man around here; he probably believes he has nothing to worry about.

Rosalinda and that little shit turn in early; lights are already out by the time I get there, and the earliest that has been is a little before nine at night. I try not to leave my house until it gets dark. Mrs. Sterling does leave the house at the crack of dawn, so it makes sense that they would turn in so early. I am curious about her; I want to know more. I even thought about calling the local Molly Maids and setting up an appointment for them to come out. Then I realized how insane that was. I might not even get her. Even using my tablet to make the call, there will still be a record showing that she serviced my home. That's really not an option. I told myself that if I saw them out on their bikes again, I would approach them. Just to say hi, as a friendly neighbor, it never happened, though. I've carefully tried to open their back door, and it, of course, was locked, but there doesn't seem to be an alarm system of any kind. The only lights around the house are the pathway ones in front, with no motion sensor in the back.

Today I'm going to wait it out. I arrive at his house at two in the morning, I have no idea what time he will be home, but I am going to wait until at least then. I've spotted him coming home many times before, but I've never stayed around this long. The previous times were intentional walk-ups at certain times of the night, and I just happen to catch him coming in. I'm tucked in a dark corner of the backyard. In a spot where I will both be alerted of anyone coming out the back door or through the side gate. I will also be able to tell if headlights turn into the circle. I have nothing on me besides my trusty, yet illegal, tablet. It's fitting, considering the trespassing I am currently committing. I've been crouched down for so long; I have to adjust myself several times as my legs start to ache. As I change my position for the hundredth time, I pull out the tablet from my waistband. Bringing the screen to life, I see it is a quarter to four in the morning. It doesn't hit me until just this moment that I could get caught. I am in the back yard of the monster that destroyed me, and I didn't even bring anything to protect myself in case he sees me. I can't believe I felt this brave. I mean, I don't feel it now; fear is creeping its way into my brain at an alarming speed. I suddenly feel the need to get out of here, but as soon as I go to take my leave, headlights appear through the fence slats. I place the tablet back into my pants, lowering myself to all fours; I crawl over for a better view. It's him. I can't see, but I know all his movements by now. The garage door begins to open, and I hear him exit his truck. He shuffles around a bit before the door starts to close. An interior door slams shut, and the light from the main living area illuminates the large back window. Moving over to the back of the house, I am right next to his back door, leaning against the brick. I see his silhouette in the kitchen; his floor plan is ingrained in my head from the Collin County registry. Ten minutes go by before a light comes on upstairs, and I hear murmuring from inside the house, but I can't make out what is being said. There is a loud thump that catches me off guard, followed by silence.

I hear more shuffling; someone is walking my way. I scoot over as quickly as I can and get behind a chair, hoping that it, combined with the darkness, that my presence will not be discovered. As soon as I secure my position, Rosalinda stomps out of the back door. She is silently crying, shutting the door behind her. She holds her head in her hands and sobs. For several minutes, it's just me frozen in time watching as a woman associated with my destruction tries to calm herself from an apparent fight with her

husband before the sun can even rise for the day. She lifts her head and takes several deep breaths, then returns to whatever awaits her inside the house. Nothing happens after that; all is quiet around me. Pulling my tablet out, I note that it's almost five in the morning. The sun will be out soon. I need to get back home. I need to get out of here before I am noticed, and my cover is blown. I crawl over to exit the yard as I hear a car pulling up and coming to a stop. I have to wait it out as Rosalinda leaves for a day of house cleaning. By the time I make it to the other side of the fence, I am almost busted putting the boards back as a large man exits his front door directly in front of me. I am frozen in my spot. Lord All Mighty! Someone must be on my side because he does not even look my way as he drags his houseshoe-covered feet down the stone path leading from his door to the sidewalk, collects his paper, then returns to his house through his front door.

At first, I start in a rush, hurrying to get home before I am spotted. Realizing that most people are already up, starting their day, waking, or getting in their cars to head off to work, I set myself at a regular pace. I do not want to stand out. I keep my head down on the pavement. Mr. Monster resides precisely 1.4 miles from me. I used to be able to run that in less than seven minutes. Now, after several visits, I have brought my time down to nineteen minutes. I find that to be a bit of an improvement compared to what it was just a few weeks ago. That might seem pathetic to some people, but to me, it is a brisk, struggling walk that requires several minutes to recuperate.

Making it home before six in the morning, I find my husband sitting by the front door waiting for me. He has his arms folded over his chest and a judgmental scowl on his face. Neither one of us says a word as I pass him; I make my way upstairs and avoid everyone around me that day. The next day Richard approaches me in the kitchen. I have just woken up, but it is already late into the afternoon.

“Good morning,” he says, a little too cheerfully for my taste.

“I thought you were in Tulsa,” I say.

“I was, decided to come home and see my wife. Check on my house. It looks like all is well here. What were you doing out so late or so early?” He asks.

“Just taking a walk,” I respond as I exit the kitchen and try to escape his stare.

I repeat this same routine all week, not caring if Richard sees. I have pinpointed my night. Thursday, it has to be a Thursday. So far, every Thursday that I have observed, he comes home early. Most of the time, it's between one and three in the morning. Only once did he come back as soon as nine, but the whole family then got in the truck and left together. I can only assume that they had somewhere to be, or something had happened. I didn't stick around to watch their return. However, I see it, Thursday is the night. If it's any other night, I risk being there past sunrise and getting seen by someone because every other night that he leaves, he doesn't return home till at least four in the morning or later. It's hard trying to locate some sleep. Sleep has eluded me for so long. I am used to functioning without it, but I know I need it now. I try telling myself this, but for some reason, I fail to listen. After taking more sleeping pills and getting maybe a little too much sleep, I am awakened by commotion coming from downstairs. I try to ignore it, but it doesn't stop. Heading down to take a peek, I find my husband grilling our teenage son.

"You should ask your mom to take you some time," Richard says.

"Why, Dad? She's like a zombie; she barely even talks to any of us anymore." Korbin shoots back in a whiny voice.

"I think if you guys went to her for more stuff, it might help her open up a little. I know it's not your responsibility, but I also know you worry about her. If you want to help, then that would be the perfect way to do it."

"Okay, I get it. I really would like to get it done before school starts. I'll be the first of my friends that can legally drive." Korbin has lost the whine and now sounds excited.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, drive yes, do it with your friends, no."

"I am aware, Dad."

"Today would be a good day to run it past her; she's been asleep for hours. She should be

well-rested if and when she emerges." Oh god, they are volunteering me for something. Richard

is trying to keep me occupied. I wonder if he has ever followed me.

For the rest of the day, I stay put, not leaving my room. Deciding to search more, I power up the tablet and see that the little text app has a notification alert on it. I have not opened this since making the call to Concrete Solutions. I had never planned on following through with it. I just

wanted to confirm that this was a self-employed side business of his and that I did. I click on it, and there are two unchecked voicemails. I know that when he called, he just got a generic recording because I did not personalize it. He must have gotten the number off of his caller ID because I specifically remember not leaving one. That's why I forgot about the app. I just assumed I would never hear from him. The first message was left the same afternoon that I had called him. The second was left two days later. I have the ringer and vibration turned off on this tablet. I do not want to be in the presence of someone and have its existence become acknowledged. Clicking the first one, I decided to get it over with and listen.

“Hello, this is Mr. Chase Sterling with Concrete Solutions of Dallas. I am returning your message in regards to your driveway needs. I would be more than happy to offer you a free estimate. Please let me know what time and day would work for you.” He ends the call with his number even though he must be aware that I already have it. He sounds tense yet in complete control.

Clicking on the second message, he seems a little less in control here. I note the time he left it, 10:49 pm. That's pretty late to be calling a potential client.

“Miss. St. James, this is Mr. Sterling again. I was checking back with you in regards to the message you left me. Please call me so that we can set up a time to meet, and I can help you get the driveway you desire.” The first time I heard his voice, I remember being shocked, maybe even a little frightened. Now I am just pissed. How dare he leave a message for this woman like that? Who the hell does he think he is? He was so abrasive and controlling. I just want to smash his fucking head in and end him here and now!

~

Continuing a cyber search, I think of more places to look. I found Rosalinda on Instagram and Pinterest, but by the looks of it, she is not very active on either. Altogether, she is proving not to have much of a life. Mr. Monster does not seem to be anywhere so far, or at least not on any social media sites. I have created several fake accounts so that I can continue to peruse the web without being noticed. Still, considering that all my accounts are new, I have limited access to some things. I also have no idea how Twitter works.

Then by some off-chance, I stumble upon him in Tinder. I was running out of places to look and started trolling online dating sites. I got this idea because of Maureen. We used to sit around and scroll through all the dating apps she was on, picking apart each guy. Some of those were impossible to navigate; they just spit people at you. I came across his picture; it looked just like him, not filtered up like a girl would do. It was a clear picture, and he had on a come-hither grin. I debate back and forth on messaging him, then decide that if my plan for this week fell flat or if I am unable to stomach it, I would pursue that as a next step.

It's getting dark outside, and as the sun comes down, my stomach just keeps getting louder and louder. Thinking I might be in the clear, I march downstairs to grab a snack before I head out on my first stroll today. I am accosted before I can even make it to the kitchen. Korbin is sitting in the living room watching TV. I forget that it is summer, and this kid stays up all night. He usually keeps to his room. I seldom see him.

"Mom, you okay? Are you feeling sick? You've been in bed all day," he asks this as he gets up and accompanies me to the kitchen. I know he is just asking this to be compassionate, considering I spend most days in bed; I have raised him well despite this past year.

"I'm fine son, what did y'all have for dinner, is there anything left?" I ask.

"Um, I don't know. We had leftovers from last night, so who knows what's still in there." I start to make a sandwich and ask if he wants one, but Korbin declines my offer. That's when he gets up the nerve to ask his question.

"Mom, I was talking to Dad about my driving class. I'm all done with the written part, and Dad says that you should take me up to take the test for my permit. Kaylee helped me, and I already made an appointment, it's for next Wednesday. Can you take me, Mom?"

"I don't see that to be a problem. I took Kaylee; all you will be doing is the written test. Don't be so nervous. The driving part of the test comes later," I say as I slather mayonnaise on bread for my turkey and cheese.

"Really? Why didn't anyone tell me that? I've been freaking out because I have only driven like three times, and that was basically out of the driveway."

"Did you bother to ask anyone?" I give him a pointed look then return the packages back to the fridge.

“Um, good point, Mom,” he says with a mortified look.

“Ask more questions about the stuff you are unsure of.” I give this little piece of advice as I bite into my sandwich and head back upstairs. I’ve made this promise to my son, so it looks like my plans will have to wait until next week, just in case.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Melany

This past week has been successful. I have visited his house every day; I know Richard is suspicious. He thinks I'm up to something. Well, I guess I should say he knows that I am up to something because, well, I am. He stopped asking me endless questions. I guess he realized they were all going to go unanswered. Now he just gives me these pointed, knowing looks at every turn.

I have found my point of entry, and if that fails, I even have a backup. Although my back up plan does not seem promising, I might need to come up with another or just pray that Plan A pans out. I really do not want to set up a fake date with this monster on Tinder. Lurking around his house during daylight hours, then rolling into his garage before the door closes just seems insane, even to me. I genuinely don't want to have to put this off for another week. I'm getting antsy. My skin craws with anticipation, and I feel that if I don't follow through with my plan soon, something will happen to mess it all up. I can't have that. I've worked too hard, done too much research, to let this opportunity slip out of my hands.

It's Wednesday, and I have kept to my promise to take Korbin to get his permit. He is scheduled to be there at 11 am, but if it's anything like when Kaylee went, that's just a check-in time, then you get to wait in those uncomfortable chairs for at least an hour. We stop at Starbucks on the way, getting high calorie, high sugar, high priced drinks to take with us. After a couple of hours, during which Korbin spends his time showing me cars he wants on Carmax.com. We finally leave there with a newly, permission to practice driving teen. Once we arrive home, I am eager to take my first stroll of the day, but Korbin wants to circle the streets, to get his first bit of practice in. Using all the control I have to hold in my frustration, I concede, and we slowly creep through a few less congested streets.

I can't get Spud on his leash fast enough; we head over to our spot. It is Wednesday afternoon, which means tomorrow is the night, and I don't have time to waste. I need to triple-check everything tonight. Make sure no unexpected hiccups bubble their way into my carefully mapped out agenda. It's a little after two in the afternoon when I make it over to my circle. You can even see a small spot in the grass that has been worn down from me standing there. His truck is there, whew! Okay had a little mini freak out for just a sec. I don't know why nothing ever changes. The garage is closed, and I can see that the front blinds are open, but he does this some days. He will close them before he leaves the house. That's okay; it does not mess with my entryway. As far as I know, the unlocked window I have secured does not get messed with often. It is a small window on the side of the house, slightly obscured by a hedge in his backyard. I can tell no one goes near it because the night that I popped the screen off and got it opened, there were old dusty cobwebs covering the inside glass and built-up debris on the seal. I had a vision of Rosalinda coming home after cleaning houses all day and having no desire to clean her own. Last week, when I first discovered the unlocked window, I just made sure I could get back in, closing it and securing the screen back in place. The window only has a light blue covering hanging from a rod, no blinds. On my second visit, I was brave enough to push the cloth aside and take a peek. It was dark, but my eyes were already adjusted to the night. I could tell it was the utility/laundry room. There was an old-style washer and dryer and one of those small flat, open from the top deep freezers in there. He probably keeps dead bodies in there or something, possibly from the women he did manage to finish off.

The window sits at a reasonable level, but I have a hard time hoisting myself up because of my short stature and deformed frame. I would just kind of dangle there, the bottom half of my body outside, the top half inside. The air in there is stuffy as if it does not contain a vent for circulation, and after a couple of minutes of holding myself up, I start to struggle for a breath, and the exterior brick begins digging into my abdomen. Slowly bringing myself back to the ground, I replaced everything as I found it and headed home. I never try to stay long enough that I might be noticed. I head back before people start emerging from their boxes and long before the sun comes up. It's not just about someone outside of my home noticing me; I am also worried about the people in it. Too many

times, I've walked back in after being gone for hours in the middle of the night to find Richard waiting up. Sometimes, he played like it was a game to him, asking how my nightly stroll was or how many squirrels were out this evening. I always ignore him. Sometimes he makes it known that he is spying; he will be sitting on the porch at three in the morning or even at the bottom of the stairs, making it so that I have to walk around him to get to my room. Other times he sits in the dark just watching. I know he's there; I feel his presence. My body is accustomed to his energy.

Even though we haven't had sex in over a year, and I barely give him the time of day or acknowledge his existence or say two words to him at family dinners—my body still craves him. It yearns for him; every time it's in the same vicinity. Yes, my broken, abused, and battered body still has needs and desires even after what it went through. I do love my husband; regardless of what he and everyone that may witness my actions towards him may think, he is my world. My mind just can't seem to allow it right now. He reminds me so much of before. The before me was so different, so optimistic and fun; she was also beautiful. She wasn't full of fear and regret mixed with hatred and a need for revenge like I am now. He doesn't deserve this version of me, and until I can try and get some of the old Melany back, I am keeping my distance.

Richard is fantastic. Not only is he, now and has always been, hot as hell, but he also loves me more than I think anyone has ever loved anyone ever! Before meeting my husband, I used to think I knew when a guy was interested in me. Well, compared to the attention I receive from Richard, they probably didn't even know my eye color or maybe even my hair color. I had never been fawned over like that. At first, I was a little turned off by it, but when I realized that it wasn't coming from a place of need and insecurity but a place of love and admiration, I couldn't get enough. I did not need anything or anyone else in my life once I knew I had, and then accepted Richard's love. I started mirroring his behavior and putting him first in my every action; before I knew it, we were in this beautiful little bubble, just our family. It was the most amazing life; so much happiness poured out of me. I would pinch myself some days; even after years of living this life, I couldn't believe I had all this. We are not rich, but we have a beautiful home, and I don't have to work. Do you know how many people in this world deserve my life and will never even get a taste? Then just like that, my bubble was popped. I feel that as long as that monster's lungs fill

with oxygen, I won't be able to repair the bubble. I need to fix this. Richard does everything for this family. He already has to deal with this new warped face on his wife. It is up to me, and I need to make this right.

I decide to get my adrenaline pumping; I needed a particular mindset for the task I have laid out before me. I head into the garage after Spud, and I return from our afternoon surveillance walk. I have a little section set up. Well, my previous self has a section. It contains several sizes of hand weights, a Pilates ball, and a punching bag. When your goal is fitness, you really only need determination and discipline, but these other little luxuries helped. I set my phone up to my Storm Trooper shaped Bluetooth speaker and decid to go one-on-one with my forgotten punching bag. My right wrist has long since healed and is one of the only damaged parts of my body that doesn't seem to cause me lasting problems.

Drowning Pools, "Bodies," starts blaring out the speaker, and that's all I need. I have broken into an even layer of sweat and am winded before the song even ends. I picture his sharp cocky face the entire time, and my fists are sore from repeated impact. Catching my breath, I roll a mat on the ground with the intention of doing some sit-ups. I am fully in the zone now, and it feels good. After a couple of tired, weak attempts, the crippling ache from my hip makes me give up, and I just lay here waiting for the sensation to dull. As I lay here, Kaylee pokes her head in the garage to let me know dinner is ready, she has taken it upon herself to cook a tuna helper meal, and after all the exertion I had instilled on my body, it is delicious. I scarf down my bowl then head upstairs to shower.

Looking in the mirror, I note that my hair is now grown out past my shoulders, and given that I provide myself with actual nutrients now and not just fermented potatoes, it has a little shine to it. I take a long shower, scrubbing every inch of my body with the loofah, then just for good measure, I do it again. I will repeat this process tomorrow afternoon. Stepping out into the steam-filled room, I swipe my hand across the mirror to clear away some fog. I'm as red as a damn beat, and a small burning sensation covers every surface of my skin. I look as if I have sat in the sun a little too long without applying any sunscreen. I love it. It actually feels good, the pain I inflicted on myself that wasn't brought to me against my will by someone else.

Getting dressed, I have one more walk to do tonight, sort of a practice run. I make my way over to his circle, confirm everything is a go. The

boards are loose, and I am able to slip through easily. The window is unlocked, and I hoist myself up, this time entering the home, almost falling into a hamper of dirty laundry. I am taking a risk, but it is one I must do. I have to locate the family's sleeping arrangements. I know the layout of the home but not where chosen bedrooms are. I can't wait and see tomorrow. This is a mission I must complete tonight.

Creeping through the house, I am startled when the air conditioner kicks on, noting the time 10:02 pm, if it is set on a timer and if the temperature outside remains the same tomorrow as it did today. Then I can be sure that it will kick on again around ten tomorrow night and remind myself not to freak out about it; any sudden movements could cause attention to myself and blow everything. Coming to the master bedroom, the door is slightly ajar. I push it open enough to peek in and see Rosalinda sleeping on her side in a queen-size bed, her profile illuminated by a large bright alarm clock with glowing green numbers announcing the time on her bedside table.

I make my way upstairs and note that the third step creaks. The stairs are lined with carpet, so the noise is minimal. I find the mini monster in one of the two bedrooms upstairs. She has a Disney Frozen night light that blankets the room in a soft yellow hue; it's a neat room but minimal for a girl her age. Judging from the behavior I have seen, she probably dismembers or destroys everything like that kid from Toy Story. There is no dollhouse or play tent, no pretend vanity, just a bookshelf with a few books and a small toy box containing a couple of dolls, far from resembling my daughter's room when she was that age but still a vast improvement on the one I shared with my many siblings. I decided to peruse the rest of the house to complete my investigation. The spare room upstairs seems to be used for storage of some sort; it just has a few boxes and full trash bags in it. Maybe that's where he keeps the belongings he picks off the bodies that he has stored in the freezer downstairs. The game room is set up as an office, but the desk part doesn't seem to get much use. There is a sofa in the middle of the room facing a large TV screen. The sofa looks worn, and there are a couple of empty beer bottles on the coffee table sitting next to an empty ashtray. The faint odor of cigar smoke lingers in the air. I make sure not to rub against anything; even though I am wearing gloves, I try my best not to touch anything if I don't have to.

Before I exit, I go to the window that faces the back of the house, it's low lying, and a four-person kitchen table sits a few feet in front of it. This will be my Plan B. I unlock the window and make sure it can be opened from the outside. Once I've completed my observation, I leave out the way I came and replace everything as it was when I found it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Melany

Tonight's the night! Yesterday after, I returned home a little before midnight. I made myself a large bowl of leftover tuna helper, took it to bed with me, and followed it with a couple of sleeping pills. I need as much rest as I can get. I fell asleep a little after three in the morning and did not wake again till way past noon the next day. I only have one thing on the agenda, and I cannot afford any distractions. I have no idea what my family is up to today. Last night at dinner, they were talking about our upcoming camping trip for Fourth of July weekend, but for the life of me, I can't remember this ever being mentioned before. Looking at the calendar on my tablet, I see we are still in June, so I put that to the back of my mind and try avoiding everyone for at least today. This shouldn't be hard since I seem to succeed at this same task on most days already.

When my husband and I bought our home, we were both working full time and making decent money, but we were also just starting out and having kids. Those two things don't leave you with a lot left over after the bills get paid. Needless to say, our house is nothing fancy. Sure it's big, and it's in a great area, but it also has a hefty mortgage and requires a lot of upkeep. Our home is what one would call comfortable or lived in or, my favorite, filled with love. Over the past eighteen years, Richard and I have slowly filled this house with all kinds of crap. Each room is a cluster of random furniture and decorations we have picked up here and there. Don't get me wrong; it's beautiful, and I love it, but it's probably something an interior decorator would cringe at. A few years ago, I decided I wanted to spruce it up a bit, and I was going to do it myself, one room at a time. I hit up my local Sherman Williams and bought paints in various colors that I wanted for all the downstairs rooms. I also got all the accessories, brushes, rollers, buckets, drop cloths, plastic booties, coveralls. Everything one

would need, and I bought it all in bulk because hey, I was going to do the entire house.

That following week, I started painting the downstairs powder room. This is a room that consists of a toilet and a stand-alone sink with no room for a second person to stand in if one was already sitting their butt on the toilet seat. In other words, it is the smallest room in the house. It took me almost two weeks to complete. Meanwhile, every time anyone had to use the restroom, you would have to run upstairs or risk using the downstairs master bathroom; that one still clogs up from one of Kyle's visits to this day. My family wasn't too happy about my lack of motivation to finish that project. No one enjoyed tripping over paint cans and getting the plastic floor covers stuck to their bare feet. I did, however, manage to finish it finally. My new pale yellow and pastel blue bathroom looks fantastic, but that was as far as I got. The rest of these supplies have just been sitting in the garage collecting dust. Well, I think I've found a purpose for some of it.

I make my way downstairs a little after two and take Spud out for our first afternoon adventure.

"Don't worry, little guy; if tonight goes well, you will get a little break from these long walks, and maybe after today, we can even find a new route." I try reassuring my resistant dog as I pull him out the door. When we arrive at our spot, Mr. Monster is pulling out of the garage in the red car right as I walk up. *This is okay. This is normal, don't freak out.* I constantly find that I need to keep reminding myself that over and over again. He is just going on a day trip with his kid. He'll be back and will head out at the same time, just like he does every Thursday night. I want so badly to go over and access the house while no one is there, make sure my points of entry are still a-go, but I have Spud, and it's broad daylight. Someone will see me, and I can't exactly leave my dog in a yard I am committing a felony in.

When I get home, I go back over the list I made on my tablet and I start double-checking the items that I need to get done.

*Sharpen knives, **check.***

*Pack a disposable bag with the supplies and have them ready by the garage. **check.***

*Thoroughly scrub off any loose skin cells and hair follicles no more than an hour before leaving, **check.***

*Leave all devices of technology that can be traced behind, including this tablet, **check.***

*Do not eat after 4 pm, **check.***

*Void bladder and bowels, **check.***

*Run a lint roller over clothes to makes sure none of Spud's hair comes with me, **check***

At 9 pm, I am ready. My family is still stirring around in the house, so I wait it out for about half an hour for them to retreat to their secluded corners. I am prepared, there is a weird vibration sizzling through my veins, and I'm not sure if it's fear or determination. It doesn't matter. I'm not backing out, this has to be done, and it has to be done tonight. I almost feel rushed as I grab my bag and start walking to my destination, which could either make or break me. I am hoping for the first option, but if the latter is what comes out of tonight, it won't make much of a difference, considering how broken I already am. I'm wearing all black, but I do this most nights to help blend into the night. I have on a long black Henley top, dark black jeggings, tight enough to stay secure and not snag on anything yet loose enough to not inhibit movement. A pair of black and grey Vans that I've only worn one other time, but sadly will not be keeping after tonight.

My hair is pulled back tight enough to catch any loose strands in the elastic band should they fall free, and it's tucked under a black Adidas cap that belongs to one of my son's friends. He left it at the house, but, unfortunately, he won't be getting it back. I have no makeup on, as usual, and my skin is free of lotions and oils. I make it to his house and see that the driveway is void of his truck; I knew this would be the case, but in the back of my mind, I was worried, just a little. Going to the backyard, I pause before I enter the window. Once in, I get prepared. As quietly as I can, I secure a plastic hair cover going completely over the hat. I pull a large, yet thin rain poncho over me that stops right above my knees. Finally, I slip on little plastic booties that wrap around my feet. I am still in the utility room, slowly and quietly placing my bag on top of the basket of clothes. I have a pair of fitted, leather Isotoner gloves on, the same ones I wore last night when I entered his house, and they are also covered with a pair of latex gloves. As I move from the small room, I pause and listen. All is quiet. I peek over to the kitchen and note the time from the glow of the microwave clock; it is 10:32 pm. I am running behind. I don't have much time. He

could already be on his way heading home now. I know this is rare, but I can't take any chances.

Laying my plastic painters drop cloths throughout the living room, I move three chairs in from the kitchen table. Once I have my stage set, I get to work on my side actors. Going to Rosalinda first. If a commotion occurs with the little one, I can handle her. I won't be able to handle a 160-pound angry Mexican lady coming after me once she realizes I've got her child. Knowing I have the light from her alarm clock to help me locate a vein, I inject one of the syringes I have prepared from the vile of Ketamine and Dexmedetomidine I managed to acquire during my husband's visit with Dr. Jameson. I was counting on the fact that his office never changes; if he likes something, he sticks with it. This turned out to be the case as I found the sedation medication right where it had always been—getting to it without being caught proved to be a difficult task. I had to make sure everyone was occupied at once. I almost failed, but in the end, I got what I was after.

Let me just say, regardless of what it looks like, I did not purposely leave a chicken bone in the dish that broke my husband's tooth. It just happened, and I managed to use the opportunity to my advantage. I thought about practicing this on Spud just to make sure I had calculated the amount and the sedation time right, but I believe my memory has yet to fail me, and I've got it covered. I hope.

I inject the prepared syringe into Rosalinda's neck. She stirs at the initial prick but does not wake. Giving it a minute to set in, I remove her covers; she is in a simple white tee-shirt and sleep shorts. I grab her by the shoulders and pull her from the bed, managing to bang her head on the side table in the process. It's okay, Rosalinda. Whatever lasting effects that might have caused it won't be a problem for you. I drag her into the living room, pulling up some of my plastic drop with her heavy body. It takes some effort to get her into the wooden chair, and I have to catch my breath once I am done. Moving to swipe my arm along my head to remove the sweat, I remember that I have a plastic rain poncho on, and I'm not supposed to be leaving a trace. Because of the asshole I'm here to target, I had to get a rape kit done, and I'm pretty sure if any of my DNA is found at the scene, it can be traced back to me. I tape all four of her limbs to the chair with the roll of silver duct tape from my bag, then add a piece to cover her mouth.

Completing subject one, I move upstairs and repeat the process on the little one. She's easy; I thought she might wake, considering demons are night creatures, but I guess even demonic kids sleep through anything. Once I've injected her, I scoop her up from the bed. She is light enough that even I can carry her down the stairs. She is now secured to the chair, sitting across from her mother. Her head lulls to the left, and her eyes move frantically beneath the lids. A little of her long black hair is caught up in the tape covering her face, but I'm not going to risk fixing it. It seems secure enough to me.

Assessing my handy work, I go back into the kitchen. I spotted a cast iron skillet on the stove that will possibly come in handy. The easy part is over; now, I wait for the hard part to begin.

It's 12:06 am. I might not have much longer—the sedative will start to wear off on these two pretty soon. I have enough syringes to dose them up again, but that will only leave me with two to use on the lead star of this show. I wait by the door that leads from the garage to the house; I know this is the one he will enter in. Standing there for I don't know how long; I hear plastic tussle from the living room. Before I can even investigate, the large garage door opens, announcing Mr. Monster's arrival home. I leave it; I don't have time to check on them, but I know I still have a little time before they fully come to. I am positioned by the door, skillet raised in hand. The door opens abruptly, the light from the garage illuminates the space around him as he enters. He's not even looking; his eyes are downcast as he focuses on the screen of his phone. Taking a chance, I pounce before the large door has even fully closed. I hit my mark on the first try, smashing the pan into his skull. He falls to the ground, his phone reaching the destination before his body does. He doesn't even make a sound, just as he didn't make a sound during his assault on me all those months ago. Quickly I pull a syringe from the leg pocket of my jeggings and jam it into his neck. He's a lot bigger than Rosalinda, and I know I might need another dose on him, but I don't want him out for too long. His big scene is coming up. I can't have him missing it.

It takes me twice as long to drag him to the chair as it did for his wife. Even though it's a much shorter distance, he weighs at least thirty pounds more than she does. I lifted Rosalinda up using mostly adrenaline, but I am quickly running out of gas. I lay the chair down on its back, roll Mr. Monster into it, strap him in and set it back up. As I place a strip of tape on

his mouth, using most of what's left on the roll, I see that Rosalinda is fully alert. Eyes bugged out, she is breathing frantically through her nostrils.

Completing my mission with her husband, I lean over and whisper, "Don't worry, this will all be over soon. After all, I have a life to get back to." She just stares at me, and I see the trickle of urine drip down her leg and pool at her feet. Glancing over my shoulder, I see the little one is still out; that dose might have been a bit strong for her. Standing, I straighten myself out and go to collect my final prop in this production. Pulling out the smaller of my knives, Rosalinda must see this, and her chair gives a little squeak with her protests.

"Don't take this personally. Well, I guess that's impossible; you really should take this personally as I am here because of your husband. Since you chose to marry him and also reproduce with him, I, unfortunately, have to include the two of you in this mess that he initially created." I take a deep breath and go over to check on the man of the hour. Giving him a couple of slaps across the face, his eyes slowly flutter open. The room is too dark; I go to turn on the kitchen light. I need him to see me, but I don't want any light peeking out of the front windows, alerting a possible passerby that there is life or movement inside the house. The kitchen gives enough of a glow that they can now see me, yet no shadows are cast on the front wall.

Returning my attention to him, I see that he is dazed. The sedation is still trying to pull him under; either that or I hit him on the head a little harder than I thought.

"Mr. Sterling, your attention is required at the moment; I am going to need you to wake the hell up!" I say a little loudly, getting into his face. After a few minutes, he is almost fully alert, and he has a fierce look in his eyes like he's going to get out of this. No recognition yet, though. Looks like I'm going to have to fill him in.

"I'm not removing the tape from your mouth, but I am going to ask you some questions. You will need to nod and shake your head in response; let's practice and see how well you follow instructions. Do you know who I am?" Nothing. He is just giving me that same threatening gaze.

"Okay, so you aren't very bright. Let's try a little behavior modification technique that might help you catch on." With the small blade in my hand, I swipe it across his left thigh. Not deep enough to cause any damage but enough to gather his full and undivided attention. His pant leg slices open as blood slowly starts to absorb into it. He jerks back and winces but

quickly brings himself back to the murderous scowl, trying to prove I have no effect on him.

“Do. You. Know. Who. I. Am?” I enunciate each word and stare into his eyes. Giving him a moment to respond, I slowly lift the blade over his other thigh, and he immediately and vigorously shakes his head.

“Good boy, now that we have that out of the way, I’ll fill you in on my identity in a moment, but I would also like to ask. Do you have any idea why this might be happening to you and your family right now?” Another pause, but this one is different. It’s not defiance; he has an inkling as to why, but it looks like there might be more than one reason. Eventually, he gives me a slow shake, it’s light, and I see Rosalinda peering at him—she is scared but curious.

“My name is Melany Polk; you might not recognize me given the fact that I had an extreme yet unwanted and unwarranted makeover last year.” There it is—the click. So, he does know my name. His eyes are bugged out of his skull so far. He could almost be mistaken for Rodney Dangerfield; I can practically smell the fear coming out of his pores. He jostles a little causing his chair to rattle.

“Tisk tisk, Mr. Sterling, you are just going to cause a premature injury to yourself if you struggle. I would recommend that you remain still until this production has come to a close.” I reprimand him with a shake of my knife in his face.

“Do you know who conducted that makeover?” I don’t even give him a second. When he does not respond right away, I slash his other thigh without warning. I get the same winching reaction, but this time he gives out a little sob from behind the tape and can’t seem to compose himself as quickly as before.

“You! You are the sick bastard who did this to me. Should we fill your lovely wife and child in on your late-night escapades?” He is frantically shaking his head, but I’ve already turned and put my focus on his little shit daughter.

I grab a handful of her hair and give it a few tugs; then, when that doesn’t work, I pull on it hard, bringing her head up and stretching her neck. I do this so roughly that the chair lifts from the ground then drops down with a thud. I don’t have time to waste. I need her awake, and I need to move on with my plan.

“I was able to find out who you and your wife were due to various online

searches, but the identity of this little thing continued to remain a mystery. Until last night when I was in your home and saw a drawing on the refrigerator that has you guys all posed up as stick figures, the yellow Crayola sun shining brightly behind you. It is labeled mom, dad, and emma rose. How sweet, all lowercase. I'm guessing she had just learned how to spell her name." Little Emma's eyes open sleepily. She gazes around the room then starts to shake in her chair. The puddle of piss forming around her mimics her mother's earlier actions.

"Time to wake up, Emma. You're missing the show."

Standing, I swirl around, arms out, ready to give a grand production. "Now, you two will be interested to know what your beloved man of the house was up to on the night of March 4th of last year. During the nine o'clock hour, he proceeded to issue a violent rape and assault on one of your fellow neighbors. During this event, he penetrated her both vaginally and anally; he broke several of her bones, including her jaw, rendering her unable to call for help. Now, I can only assume he thought he was leaving her for dead, but he failed at that part as the woman was me, and I am her." Pausing, I see that Emma looks lost, and Rosalinda looks stunned. But there is recognition there; she has heard my story before. She believes me. This sounds like something her husband would do. Mr. Monster, on the other hand, looks manic.

I go on, "He destroyed me; he has taken everything from me—both my mental and physical abilities to carry out a normal and fulfilling life. I have a husband, children, and goals. All that just faded in the background once he was done with me. I am literally unable to function!" Setting down my small blade, I pick up a larger one.

"Now, Mr. Sterling, there are so many ways I could go about this, you know, what some might call revenge. Trust me; I've gone over all of them during my failed recovery. I just don't see any other way. After observing you for the past several weeks, I realize you live kind of a sad and pathetic life. So, in order to completely destroy you as you have done me, I have decided that this is the only way." What I plan on doing next was going to be the hardest part, possibly the hardest thing I will ever do for the rest of my life. I had gone over this in my head so many times, and this was the only way it could happen. It might haunt me in the future, but I was going to have to learn how to deal with that if I wanted my life back, I had to take it.

“Mr. Sterling, you don’t seem to care for much. You work, and that’s about it, but you have this little girl. You love her; you care for her. You walk her home from school, her little hand in yours as you listen to her young hopeful voice fill you in on the details of her day. If I had to guess, I would say she is your proudest accomplishment. She is probably the thing that gets you out of bed in the morning.”

As swiftly as I can with my slowed gait, I move to stand behind Emma’s chair, giving myself a little internal pep talk. I lift her head, once again by her hair, and with a quick swipe, never taking my eyes off of her father as he sits across the room facing us, I lash the blade across her neck.

Blood squirts out, some hitting her mother in the eye. Emma gives a few jerking movements before she slumps over and goes still, blood pooling all around her on the plastic drop, mixing in with the urine. Her parents are visibly and audibly distraught as they bounce around and struggle to breathe. Tears are filling their eyes and dripping over the tape on their mouths. Wow, that was actually pretty easy. Nothing like cutting into a frozen chicken.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Sterling. You will see your darling girl again soon. I’m sure you think you don’t deserve this. I must be a fucking loon, right? Well, wrong. The way I see it, you might not be guilty of actions created by your husband’s hands, but you are guilty of turning a blind eye. You have sat by for over six years, allowing his behavior to progress. You saw the demons that lurk within him, and you still decided it was a good idea to let him fertilize your egg. He abuses you, and you do nothing. He stays out all night when he’s not at work, preying on innocent women, and you iron his fucking shirts. He keeps you locked up in here, only allowing you to leave and clean other people’s homes, probably taking all of your earnings, and you cook his damn meals. Don’t worry; you don’t have to hold onto that guilt for much longer. I am here to liberate you from all of this.”

I move to stand behind her; her husband’s head twists in my direction, his eyes void of emotion. Using the same bloodied blade, I repeat the actions I performed just moments ago on his daughter, but it does not cause the same reaction. He slumps over defeated once his wife’s body goes still. Seeing I have plenty of time to follow through with this as scheduled, I squat in front of him, blood collecting around my plastic covered Vans.

“Now, I’m going to give you the chance to speak. I need to know. Why me? I’m going to give you a little room to move your lips, and let words

come out, make them count. Don't bother screaming for help. This house is well insulated, has double pane windows, and given the fact that your hand full of neighbors have a generous amount of space between houses, no one is going to hear you." I take my knife and carefully make a slit in the tape covering his mouth. A little blood drips out.

"Oops, looks like my calculations were a little off, snagged your lip a bit there. Please forgive me." He works his jaw and his lips a little, ripping the opening some more, he now has enough room to speak.

"You stupid fucking bitch! You will pay for this!" There is a small amount of pain mixed with his accusing voice.

Jamming my blade into his right side, I never lose eye contact as I respond. "Nice choice of last words, not smart, though. You see, I've already paid for this. I've been making fucking payments for the last fifteen fucking months. Now I'm cashing in on my fucking investment. You took from me, now I take from you." If he keeps this up, he'll be dead before I can get anything out of him.

"You want to know why you?" He takes a ragged breath then coughs up a little blood through the tape opening. I can't tell if the blood is from his lip or internal bleeding from the stab, but I really don't care.

"That was the question," I say, trying my best to keep eye contact without ending him now.

"It was your husband, you dumb cunt. I wanted to take what he loved most." Pausing to cough some more, I patiently wait for him to continue, now regretting the stab.

"That bastard fired me just for a couple of mishaps. I had just bought this damn house, just had a damn baby, and he up and fires me on the spot. I knew you, but you didn't know me. I followed you." He stops, letting out a painful cough. "You were supposed to die. He ruined me, and I wanted to ruin him." His head sways: his shirt is now entirely red, soaked in his blood. I can't believe what I'm hearing. He worked for my husband, and I was payback over a stupid job.

"Really, you wanted to kill me over a job?" I ask.

"I just wanted the happy," he gasps and closes his eyes, "happy life like him. I got stuck with this lazy bitch and a house I couldn't afford, and he took away my means to pay for them." I let this all absorb in but then notice I'm losing him. Standing up, I grab his chin in my gloved palm and squeeze.

“You will not take this from me too. Wake up!” His eyes lazily roll open, and he spits out more blood; it sprays over the front of my poncho.

“Well, we know what you were capable of, and now you get to see my capability. You didn’t deserve the life you wanted; that’s why it was taken from you. It had nothing to do with me or my husband or your bitch of a wife, who you chose, by the way. You should have finished the job, but just like all your failures in life, you failed at killing me. Let me enlighten you on a little information about myself. You say you knew me, but no, you couldn’t have, because if you did, then you would have known this. I am not a failure, I have succeeded in all my endeavors, and I will succeed in collecting this debt and getting my perfect life back.”

With his face in my hands, I lift my blade and stab it up, through his neck, and into his skull; he’s gone in an instant. Right before me, life disappears out of eyes that stare up at me. A gust of breath pushes out of him, emptying his lungs. I can see the blade shine a little through his slightly opened mouth.

I slowly start collecting my belongings, not wanting to slip on the blood I was now splashing through over the plastic covering the floor. I try not to look at the slumped over, lifeless bodies around me. This had to be done; I keep reminding myself of this fact. I was never going to be able to move on with him, lurking in the shadows. I had no choice; this was required to get my strength back. Moving into the kitchen, I turn off the light and strip off all the plastic wrap. I stuff it into their kitchen sink; then, with my gloved hand, I turn on the water. Exiting this house for the last time the way I came in—I proceed to head home. Trash pick-up is on Friday. Some people already have cans on the curbs. Staying in the shadows, I remove my hat and Vans and bury them in a random bin. I make sure to choose one that is hidden by a large truck parked on the curb. Just in case there are cameras around, this will obscure their view. I had carefully collected my knives and wrapped them in the bag with my now discarded gloves. These will be the only things I take home with me besides the clothes on my back.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Melany

As I walk (let's be honest, hobble) the close to two miles back toward my home, making sure I stayed out of sight, just in case any late-night peeps see me, I contemplated what I have just done. Am I now part of this evil? Had I let it consume me to the point that I had joined forces? But no! I was not! If anything, I was a vigilante in this scenario. I took justice with my own hands. He got what he had coming to him. I don't know if he had done this to women before or after me, but I know for a fact that he won't be doing it to anyone else's. Neither would his devil offspring.

His wife had to have known what he was capable of. I know everything my husband does, and I'm only half paying attention. The male mind is not that complex; we can figure each one of them out in a matter of minutes. She knew and chose to turn a blind eye, and in doing so, that made her a guilty participant in his behavior. She deserved it just as much as he did, if not more. She was the one he came to before and after the act, she was also the one not meeting his sadistic needs, and in doing that, it caused him to seek something elsewhere. He said I was a part of revenge for actions Richard had done, but this has nothing to do with Richard. Chase Sterling got fired, plain and simple. That was a result of his actions, and he was the one who decided to include me in his sick revenge plot. My husband was just doing his job correctly, unlike Chase; Richard remains innocent in all this. That little brat would have been just like him; if not a brutal killer of souls, she would have been a creator or enabler of one. There is no way she would have left his upbringing unscathed. Also, what was going to happen if I hadn't taken care of her now, if I would have left her alive, a sole survivor?

I couldn't spare Emma Rose, not after seeing my face and hearing my story. She would have ended up in the hands of the state, being tossed around in the system till she was old enough to be thrown out to the street.

That would have only intensified the evil inside her. I don't dwell on that very long, though. It feels as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders; I feel lighter. I walk a little easier, if not physically, but mentally. It's almost freeing, the release that has just happened, that I have just created. Almost like my old self has returned. She was in hiding, hiding behind this façade I've cased myself in for the last year. I accomplished what I set out to do tonight. I actually did it. It's strange, this realization, this awakening that comes over me as I head back to *my* house, *my* family, *my* husband. That's what they are; that's what they have always been. I just forgot that for a while. Well, I remember now, I remember who I am, and what my purpose is, what I am supposed to do with the life that was spared for me. I won't let another minute go to waste. I will reclaim my life; I can finally let go of what's been holding me back because it's gone now, it can no longer harm me, it can no longer haunt me. I won't let it.

Turning on the block before mine, I pass the Curtis' home, with their perfect landscaping and their timed lighting. Staring at their lovely one-story brick house, I feel good about what I have done. I have protected my neighbors. I have rid this community of a pest that might have destroyed more lives if allowed to continue on any longer. The night is clear, and the stars dazzle above me, this is a sign, the first sign of a new beginning.

Now, as I head down my street, I'm interrupted in my internal praise by Maureen.

"Hey there, stranger, just out for a nightly stroll?" She asks from where she stands on her front porch.

"I'm headed home now, goodnight Maureen." I quietly respond, not wanting to sound suspicious but also not wanting to be noticed by anyone else.

"Uhhuh, I can see that you get inside, rest easy now sweet thing, it was nice seeing you tonight, and we should do it more often." I can read between the lines, and I know what she is saying. She has no idea what I have been up to, but that's not what matters, and she is letting me know it.

With that, I enter my home, leaving any regret behind me.

Epilogue



Richard

I watch her through the window as she has a short exchange with Maureen. They haven't spoken much lately, and I wonder if that was Mel's choice or the neighbor's. Melany is such an alien to us all now, in a way that we don't even know how to act around her. I hear the front door close. I'm standing in the darkness of our downstairs bedroom. Over the last few months, Mel has seemed to have forgotten that we now occupy that bedroom. She goes to bed so late, and then some mornings waking before the sun rises, but I still hear her. She crawls up the stairs and passes out in the guest bed sometime between two and five in the morning. Exhausted after her early morning walks, to the same dead-end street. Yeah, I've followed her. I haven't even slept in the same bed as my wife for what seems like a decade, and I'm starting to wonder if we are ever going to return to normal.

I move over to peek out of the door frame and see that she has made her way to the laundry room. She opens up the washing machine and strips as she stands there naked and starts the load containing only the items she was wearing. I wonder what could possibly be going through her mind. Reaching over to a linen cabinet above the dryer, she pulls out a beach towel and wraps herself in it. The lights are all turned off in the house, but my eyes have adjusted enough to the dark, and the moon beams in through the glass back door. I can make out most of what she is doing. Grabbing a bottle of bleach, she heads over to the kitchen sink. Her back is to me, but I see she is frantically scrubbing her hands and washing her face. I hear a rattle of plastic and clinging as if she is also washing dishes.

After a beat, she pauses, dries off, and makes her way to the living room. She is still wrapped in the towel and carrying a small bag. Coming to a stop in front of the mantel, she crouches down then sits on the floor with her legs curled under her. Reaching over to her left, she starts up the gas on

the side of the fireplace. For a moment, she just sits there staring, then she grabs the stick lighter from the wood basket, and she is suddenly illuminated by the glow of flames. Her face looks calm, relaxed, even peaceful. She tosses the bag into the fire, and suddenly I smell burning plastic and hear the faint crackle as it dies down to nothing. She waits a few moments, then shuts off the gas. Pushing herself up, she stands and reenters the kitchen. Reaching up to a high shelf, she grabs a liquor bottle and then pulls a high ball glass out of the cupboard and makes herself a shot of delicious brown liquid from one of the rare bottles of whiskey.

We have only opened those bottles a hand full of times; they are expensive and hard to come by. We both had an initiation shot after we bought them, and sometimes we will have a finger to celebrate an accomplishment or goal. Now that I see her so nonchalantly drinking from it, I wonder how much is left or what it is that she might be celebrating right now? She takes her time drinking the rare whiskey. When she is done, she starts to saunter over toward our bedroom. Oh, shit, she's coming here! I jump into the bed and pretend I'm asleep and have been all night. I saw nothing; whatever she's doing, just please let her continue coming this way.

Melany slowly pushes open the bedroom door and then quietly closes it behind her; she makes her way to our bed. Her gait is still a little slow, and she has a slight limp, but watching her through slitted eyes, she looks magnificent. Even though she refused the plastic surgery, her aura still screams at me.

"I know you're still awake. I'm here, and I'm ready to be your Melany again." I twist over onto my back and fully open my eyes. She climbs up onto the bed, discarding the towel on the floor. As she moves up the bed, she pulls down my pajama bottoms just enough so that I spring free. As she straddles me, her legs tightly pressed against my hips. She settles in, her heavy breast bounce, then calm and bare in front of me, inviting, welcoming, lined up perfectly with my mouth, and I can see the moonlight upon them.

"Have you been waiting up for me, Richard?" She asks, her voice husky from the warm whiskey.

"Always and forever, Mel, where have you been? It's almost three in the morning; where have you been all night? You don't have to tell me right now. I just need to know that you are safe. Sometimes you scare me." I'm trying to shut up, but this all comes rushing out of me. She answers by

adjusting herself, wiggling her hips, and inserting my shaft inside her. I lean up, taking a nipple in my mouth, and reach around to cup her bottom. She's completely bare as she rides me. I notice her right side is a little off. It tends to go higher and quicker than the rest of her body, just as it does when she's walking.

She continues to ride me, and I just enjoy the moment. I enjoy my wife. I enjoy having her as mine; is she back? Is she here? I don't know, but I really don't care because, at this moment, I feel like the woman I fell in love with twenty-two years ago is right here, right in front of me. I never want to let her go. Whatever happened tonight, whatever she did, I don't want to reflect on it. I don't even want to question her about it; I don't want any answers at all. I just want it! I just want her; I want the way it is right now. I want us to be an us again, and I want our life back. If that's all I get, I'll be happy for the rest of my days. I know my wife has changed; she is not the same woman I married. I will adapt; I will be what she needs me to be so that I can be with her. My hands roam all over her, taking in every inch of her silky skin. I grip into her soft hair and bring her mouth to mine, the taste of her mixed with the whiskey. I can't get enough. Even after all this time, our bodies know each other; they are still so flawlessly in sync. She quickens her slow pace and leans forward, letting me suck the other nipple into my mouth. We are both panting now, so close to release. Pleasure shoots through me as my core tightens, and I cum inside her sweet body.

Within seconds, she grinds into me, her body convulsing as an orgasm takes over. She lies on top of me; her breathing starts to slow and returns to normal. I'm about to say something, what? I don't know, but I feel like I need to address what just happened. I need to express my appreciation for her. I need to tell her how much that means to me when she clears her throat and says.

"I'm here now. I know I was gone for a while, but I'm back, and I'm not going anywhere again." She's not referring to tonight. She's referring to the last year, and I know she means it; I could see it in her eyes while she was on top of me. The light that used to always be there was back.

I don't know what she did to get it there, but I'll do anything in my power to keep it.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people I would like to give a tribute to, but I will keep it short. I wrote this book at the start of the Covid-19 break out shortly after the world shut down, and we were trapped inside with our families. I had a lot of time on my hands, so I finally sat down and wrote the book I had wanted to write for quite some time. Once I started, I couldn't stop; Melany was loud and precise, her story was one I fell in love with from the start.

I want to thank my husband, who provided me with everything I needed to become a writer. He built me a computer, let me take over areas of the house, ordered take out when I couldn't stop typing and encouraged me to do my best. He was the first one to read my shit of a first draft, and I watched him as he did. Yes, I hovered over his shoulder and dissected every facial expression, every sigh, and every swear word that fell from his lips as he read it. Thank you, my love; this book would not have been born without you.

Besides my husband, the only other person on the planet that knew I was writing this book was my ride or die, Mandy Farrar. I gave her a printed copy then left town for the weekend. She read it within a couple of days, then face timed me so I could see her expression, and it was priceless. She gave me the look I was shooting for; it made me cry, it made me smile, the feeling I got from watching her made me want to write a million more stories just like this one so I could get that reaction from her over and over again for the rest of my life. I love you, girl; you are stuck with me forever!

To my beta readers Amy, Eryn, and Carol, your insights mean everything to me. I planted a seed, but you helped it grow. Thank you so much; I am forever grateful for every bit of feedback you gave me.

To the members of my fan group, Hall's Hellions. Your support and encouragement mean everything. Sometimes the people closest to me give biased feedback just to keep me happy. It is always nice to open up the world wide web and conversate with you brilliant ladies.

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Leigh is a believer in fairytales, the kind that keep some people up at night.

Graduating from the school of hard knocks, she is a realist and always looks for multiple sides to everyone she encounters.

She lives in Texas with her family of gremlins and their amazing dogs. Not only does she love the heat, but she is preparing herself just in case there, in fact, will be a hell at the end of all this.

Because she hates people so much, she spends all her time in the land of fictional characters and keeps her head buried in a book. With ideas continually running around in her strange mind, she decided to dip her toes into writing.

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