

A photograph of a person's arm and hand holding a child's hand. The person is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, skirt. They are standing on a sandy beach. In the background, the ocean waves are visible, and the sky is a warm, golden-orange color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is warm and protective.

things you won't say

How far would
you go to
save your family

SARAH
PEKKANEN

Things You Won't Say

a novel

SARAH PEKKANEN



WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*For all the book bloggers, librarians, and readers.
Thank you for spreading the joy of reading.*

Part One

Chapter One

AS SHE APPROACHED THE traffic light, Jamie Anderson prayed it would stay green. She pushed harder on the gas, edging the speedometer's needle as high as she dared—which wasn't very high, because she was a cop's wife and police headquarters was a dozen yards away. Just when she thought she'd make it through the intersection, a slow-moving Toyota cut in front of her, forcing her to hit her brakes. The stoplight blinked yellow, then red.

Jamie held her breath. *Don't look*, she warned herself, even as she felt her gaze being yanked to the right, toward the section of sidewalk that had recently been cordoned off with crime-scene tape. The sidewalk had been scrubbed clean, but she wondered if the dark stains still showed up close.

Her three-year-old daughter's high voice piped up from the backseat: "Pizza?"

"What? No, not today," Jamie said. She gripped the steering wheel tightly. Why was the light taking so long?

"Pizza, please!" Eloise said, her little-girl lisp turning the *i* into a *w*.

"Maybe later," Jamie said.

Her husband, Mike, would be returning to this exact spot tomorrow, wearing his dark blue uniform and Magnum boots and heavy patrolman's belt. For the first time, though, his silver badge would be crossed by a black ribbon.

A blaring horn jolted Jamie and she pressed the gas pedal again. Being here was wrenching for her. How much worse would it be for Mike to return to the spot where his longtime partner, Ritchie, and a young rookie officer had been shot two weeks ago by a lunatic with a grudge against cops?

But Mike would never quit. Early in their relationship, when they'd been trading stories about growing up, he'd told her that during recess

at his elementary school, the boys had split up into two groups: the good guys and the bad guys. The other kids switched between characters, but never Mike. Even back then, he'd wanted to be the one to round up the criminals. It was why he'd turned down a chance at a promotion that would mean more desk work years ago. He loved patrolling the streets, talking to citizens, giving high fives to little kids. Keeping everyone in his little strip of the city safe.

"I hungry! I want pizza!" Eloise's whining had crossed into wailing now.

"Okay, okay." Jamie sighed, knowing she was probably violating a half dozen parenting rules but not particularly caring. She had a little extra time before she needed to pick up her eight-year-old, Sam, and six-year-old, Emily, at their elementary school anyway.

She put on her signal to turn left and stifled a yawn. Mike had endured another nightmare last night, thrashing around before he sat bolt upright and yelled something incoherent, awakening with all the sudden violence of a thunderclap. He'd been sweating and trembling, and she'd gotten up to bring him a glass of water when he said he didn't feel like talking. Neither of them had been able to fall back asleep. Now it was barely two-thirty, and she was exhausted, her feet hot and sore from racing around after Eloise at the playground all morning. She had a trunkful of groceries to unpack before driving Sam to soccer practice, then there would be homework to supervise, lunch boxes to clean out and refill, a dishwasher to unload, the living room to reassemble before the tornado of kids struck again . . . plus her sister, Lou, had left two messages today. Something would have to give, and it might as well be a home-cooked dinner. She'd pick up a couple of pizzas now, give the kids a slice each for an after-school snack, and reheat the rest tonight.

Belatedly realizing she'd achieved victory, Eloise stopped mid-shriek. *A future actress*, Jamie thought. Or an opera singer, given the notes Eloise hit when she was upset.

Jamie found a parking spot near the entrance of their favorite carryout and unbuckled Eloise from her car seat. She ordered a salad for herself even though she knew she'd end up scarfing a few cheesy pieces from the two large pies she was buying, then she grabbed a

Diet Coke from the refrigerated case. She needed caffeine. She needed a housekeeper, a cook, and a part-time driver more, but her budget covered only the soda. She was stretching out her hand to accept her change from the cashier when she heard someone call her name.

She turned around to see a slim woman with chestnut-colored hair who was dressed in black spandex and expensive-looking running shoes. Jamie had on athletic gear, too, but her outfit was chosen only because all her Old Navy T-shirts and shorts—her warm-weather uniform—were entangled in an overflowing laundry basket.

It took Jamie a moment to place the face: another mom from the elementary school. She should know the woman's name; they'd met at a half dozen holiday performances and field trips through the years.

"Hi!" Jamie said, injecting enthusiasm into her tone to make up for her memory lapse.

"It's so good to see you," the woman said, moving closer and reaching out to grip Jamie's forearm. "How *are* you?"

The woman was wearing what Jamie had come to think of as a sympathy face: creased forehead, jutting chin, and wide, inquisitive eyes.

"Fine, thanks," Jamie said, pulling her arm away and ignoring the woman's unspoken questions. "Eloise, that's enough napkins. Stop pulling them out, honey."

"It was so terrifying to hear the news," the woman continued. She clutched her chest. "In the middle of the day! I mean, you'd think a police station would be the safest place in the world!"

"Yes, well . . . some people are crazy," Jamie said.

"How is Mike *doing*?" the woman asked.

"He's good," Jamie said, keeping her tone neutral. No way was she going to reveal any personal information. The details would ricochet around the school via an informal gossip tree before her pizza was even out of the oven.

"Oh," the woman said, seeming a little disappointed. "I mean, he was right there, wasn't he? It could've been him!"

Enough. Jamie smiled tightly and reached for Eloise's hand. "Come on, honey, we need to get Sam and Emily."

"My pizza!" Eloise protested, dropping the napkins on the floor.

"We're coming back for it," Jamie said. She left the napkins, grabbed a peppermint from the jar by the cash register to appease her daughter, and rushed them both to the car, feeling the woman's stare on her back.

Yes, Mike had been right there! Was that what the awful woman wanted, for Jamie to describe the scene she couldn't stop thinking about?

Her cell phone ringing as she was driving to pick up the kids from school—just as she was now. Her hand reaching to hit the speakerphone button and turn down the radio. Mike's voice gasping out terrible words: A man with a hunting rifle lying in wait outside headquarters. Two officers down. A rookie dead on the sidewalk. And Mike's partner and best friend, Ritchie, unconscious and bleeding profusely from a head wound.

Jamie's shaking hand took two tries to fit the key into the ignition.

"Ritchie was right ahead of me," Mike had kept repeating. "I didn't see the gun! The sun—it hit my eyes . . . Oh, God, I didn't see the gun in time . . ."

The deranged man had been taken down by another officer who was leaving the same 7:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. shift. Later, all the newspapers had reported that in the pocket of the killer's camouflage pants was a rambling note professing his hatred of police.

And now Mike hated himself.

Maybe he should talk to somebody, Jamie thought as she drove toward the school, knowing her husband would never do it. A police counselor had offered therapy sessions, and even suggested Mike start taking antidepressants right after the shooting.

"Crazy pills," Mike had scoffed, rolling his dark eyes. Instead he'd tried to lose himself in punishing runs and endless biceps curls and push-ups. He changed the oil in the minivan and added new insulation in the attic. He visited Ritchie in the hospital's ICU nearly every day. He drove Jamie and the kids to bring casseroles and salads to Ritchie's wife, Sandy, and their twins, but while the women talked and the kids played, he mowed the lawn and trimmed the hedges. No matter how hard he tried to exhaust himself, though, the nightmares

persisted, and with every passing day, Jamie felt as if her husband was withdrawing a bit more, an invisible casualty of the shooting.

Maybe *she* needed to talk to somebody, Jamie thought.

A housekeeper, a cook, a driver, and a therapist. She sighed. Who could afford any of it?

She pulled into the school pickup line and waited for Sam and Emily to emerge from the red-brick building. Tonight her teenage stepson, Henry, would be staying with them, too. Jamie adored Henry, but she hoped Mike's old girlfriend, Christie, would stay in her car rather than come to the door during the exchange of her son, especially since Jamie's dirty-blond hair was swept up in a messy ponytail and the swipes of mascara she'd put on this morning had long ago sweated off. Henry was the result of a brief fling between Christie and Mike a couple of years before Jamie met Mike. By the time Christie discovered she was pregnant, she and Mike had been on the verge of breaking up. They'd decided to have the baby anyway, and split custody. Against all odds, it had all worked out. Henry was a terrific boy, kindhearted and smart, and even though drama stuck to Christie like a shadow, everyone was on friendly terms. Friendly enough, anyway. At least most of the time.

"Hi, guys," Jamie said as her older two piled into the minivan. "How was school?"

"Boring," Emily answered, flouncing into her seat with a long-suffering sigh. Six years old going on Katy Perry was how Mike always described her.

"I'm starving," Sam said.

"We're picking up pizza in a minute," Jamie said as she pulled back onto the road. She hoped the nosy woman had left the carryout. She couldn't bear another round of questions, especially not in front of the kids, who'd spent so much time with Ritchie and his family. Sometimes Jamie had teased Mike about wanting to socialize with them on weekends. Didn't the two men see each other enough?

Mike and Ritchie were as close as twin brothers, although they looked nothing alike. Ritchie was tall and thin, with horn-rimmed glasses and a prematurely graying Afro; Mike was short and muscular, with wavy dark brown hair. Each knew how the other took his coffee,

what his opinion was on mayo versus mustard, and how he reacted in times of stress or boredom or crisis. They even teased each other about reading the sports page on the john. They'd been teasing moments before the shooting, too.

Mike had been about to walk out the building's heavy glass door. But instead, he'd pulled it open and nudged Ritchie in the shoulder.

"Ladies first," he'd joked.

And Ritchie had stepped onto the sidewalk, into the bright sunlight, just ahead of Mike.

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It was probably a safe bet that there weren't many people in the world whose dream job included cleaning up elephant dung, Lou reflected as she picked up a shovel and got to work.

But then again, how many people had the chance to walk through the tall metal gates of a zoo in the dawn of a lush summer day, listening to the calls and chatter of the tufted capuchin monkeys, or the bone-shaking roar of a Siberian tiger? Bearing witness as the zoo came alive was a transformative experience, one that became even more meaningful to Lou as she got to know the animals, to recognize their individual sounds and gauge their moods.

"Tabitha ate about a crate of sweet potatoes last night," another keeper called as he hosed down the adjoining pen. The four Asian elephants were out in the yard, rolling around in mud, which was their morning ritual. The early June day promised to be another hot, sticky one, and the mud would protect the mammals' skin—more evidence to Lou that when it came to common sense, elephants trumped humans any day. Take all the women who greased themselves up in search of a perfect tan and then, a few years later, injected chemicals into their faces in an effort to undo the damage. Which was the smarter species?

"I can tell Tabby binged," Lou said, scooping up the last of the impressive mess. "But she lost fifty pounds last week, so she needs to put a little back on." Especially since the great mammal was pregnant. Lou always watched her animals closely, but Tabby required extra

attention these days.

“Any big plans for the weekend?” the keeper asked.

“Nope,” Lou said. She knew she was supposed to lob back the question, but she let it drop. Lou didn’t like chatting while she was working at the zoo—it interfered with her time with the animals, and small talk felt draining to her. Besides, she had to make enough of it at the coffee shop where she worked part-time as a barista to supplement her salary. She spent her mornings and early afternoons wiping down enclosures and weighing out food and making sure the elephants were happy. She spent three evenings a week wiping down counters and measuring out coffee grounds and making sure her customers were happy. She supposed there was a kind of symmetry to the services she provided.

Lou finished cleaning the pen, rinsing her boots last. They’d still stink badly enough that she’d have to leave them on the balcony of her apartment tonight, she knew from experience. She was immune to the smell, but she’d learned from the looks she’d received when she popped into CVS one day directly after work that not everyone was. Now she kept a spare pair of flip-flops in her car.

She’d been a full-time animal keeper for a few years, but it had been a long road to achieve her dream, inconveniently realized shortly after she’d graduated from college with a degree in accounting. She’d gone to night school to get another degree—this time in zoology—and had started volunteering on the side, knowing practical experience could be a deciding factor when her résumé was in the middle of a tall stack. First she’d worked for a local vet, then the ASPCA, and finally, she’d begun helping at the zoo. She’d given up her accounting job because the hours weren’t compatible with her volunteer work. Turning in her notice made a twenty-pound boulder she hadn’t realized she’d been carrying around drop off her shoulders. Lou wasn’t cut out to sit in a sterile office, willing the clock to hit 6:00 so she could feel alive. She had school loans she wouldn’t be able to repay for a couple of decades, her muscles constantly ached from the hard labor that accompanied her job, and she’d been bitten by a zebra, peed on by a giraffe, and hit on by a horny llama, among other indignities.

She'd never been happier.

Lou leaned on the handle of her shovel, watching as Bailey filled his trunk with water from the pool. Lou preferred the company of animals to just about anyone else's, except maybe that of her sister, Jamie, and her family. Elephants were gorgeous, complex creatures with rich emotional lives. They cherished their young, communicated in rumbles that could be understood a mile away, and had personality quirks to rival any human's. Take Bailey—he acted like a tough guy, but he was terrified of squirrels and cowered in a corner while they snacked on his food. Sasha was a scamp who liked to squirt the others with water, and Martha would meticulously mix her meals together, like she was making a salad—a bit of hay, a carrot, a few apple slices. Then there was Lou's favorite: big, sweet Tabitha, the most utterly lovable creature on the planet. She hoped the baby had Tabby's temperament. Give that girl a few words of praise and she was in heaven.

In a little while, Lou would let the elephants out to explore the more than five miles of trails that constituted their habitat. Lou knew other keepers loved their elephants just as much as she did, but she couldn't bear to visit zoos that had inadequate spaces for elephants. The gentle, intelligent creatures needed plenty of room to roam. Here, she could place hay and vegetables in different locations every day, scattering meals throughout the exhibit and hiding the food, so the mammals could forage for it as they did in the wild. There were two pools—one for wading, and a deep one for swimming—and shady areas to rest. But the best spot was the back-scratching tree. The elephants loved to rub themselves against the low-hanging branches, and Lou could practically hear them sighing in relief.

Lou's cell phone buzzed in her pocket and she dug it out, belatedly realizing she'd smeared traces of elephant poop on her cargo pants. Not the first time; most of her clothes sported faint green and brown stains.

"Sorry to call so early," Jamie said. "But I knew you'd be up. Is it really only seven? I meant to phone you back yesterday but things got crazy. Emily ate too much pizza and had a stomachache, so I was up half the night, and I swear it feels like noon. At least I hope her

stomachache was from too much pizza. This is the last week of school before summer break and if she has to miss a day I'm going to cry."

"How much coffee have you had?" Lou asked when Jamie paused for breath.

"Don't ask." Jamie sighed. When she spoke again, Jamie's voice was tremulous. "Mike's going back to work today."

"Is he okay with that?" Lou asked.

"You know Mike," Jamie said. "If he isn't, he'll never let on."

That was true: Mike was hardly the type to engage in long, emotional talks. Sometimes Lou felt like she had more in common with her sister's husband than with her sister. Then again, she'd always felt more comfortable around guys. Maybe her father was the source of that. He'd insisted he didn't miss having a son, but he'd nicknamed his daughters Jamie and Lou. Who did he think he was kidding?

"So what's up with you?" Jamie asked.

"Donny has a new girlfriend," Lou said.

"Hmm," Jamie said. "What's she like?"

"Okay, I guess," Lou said. "I haven't talked to her much. But she seems nice."

"Does it feel weird?" Jamie asked. "I mean, you guys haven't been broken up that long."

"Long enough," Lou said. "I think they're getting serious. They've been together almost every night this week."

"Do you think he's going to ask her to move in?" Jamie asked.

Lou considered the possibility. She didn't love Donny any longer—in retrospect, she wasn't sure if she ever had or if she'd been swept up in his desire for a relationship, like a swimmer in a fast-moving current—but she sure loved renting the extra bedroom in his apartment. It was close enough to the zoo that she could walk here in the mornings. If the new girlfriend moved in, would that mean Lou would need to move out?

"Let me know if you want to find a new place," Jamie was saying. "I could help you look— Oh, honey, let me pour the syrup. No! Okay, fine, you can help. We'll pour it together. Shi— shoot. Can you grab a paper towel? No, not the whole roll, just one."

"Sure," Lou said. "In all your spare time." She didn't think she'd had

a conversation with Jamie in the past six years that hadn't been interrupted by a child. She'd wanted to ask for advice on how to act around the new girlfriend—sometimes it was a little hard for Lou to read the social cues that other people instinctively grasped—but it was clear this wasn't the time. "Is Sam around? Can I talk to him?"

"Sure, hang on."

Lou heard heavy breathing a second later. Sam still hadn't mastered the art of salutations.

"Do you know elephants are the only mammals that can't jump?" Lou asked.

"What do you call an elephant that never takes a bath?" he responded.

"You got me," Lou said.

"A smellephant."

Lou laughed. "Have a good day at school," she said. "Actually, forget I said that. That was just a stupid adult thing to say."

"You want me to have a bad day at school?" Sam asked.

Lou adored this kid. "I'll bring you to the zoo in a few weeks to see the cheetah babies," she said. "They're so fuzzy and cute."

"Really?" Sam asked.

"Pinkie swear," Lou said. She wished her conversations with Jamie could be like this—light and easy and fun. But Jamie was always fixing things—meals, messes, boo-boos—and sometimes Lou felt as if Jamie was eyeing her as another project. Little sister Lou, unmarried at thirty-one, with a bad haircut (even Lou had to admit it looked deliberately unflattering, but what could she expect when she'd paid \$12.99 for it?) and an extra twenty pounds and a fondness for fart jokes. Maybe she *should've* been born a boy—guys could get away with all that stuff a lot more easily.

Lou supposed it wasn't Jamie's fault, though. Their mother had died of a staph infection when Jamie was fifteen and Lou was twelve, and Jamie had stepped into the role of maternal figure, cooking meals and explaining what it would be like when Lou got her period and teaching Lou how to shave her legs (a practice Lou stopped a few years later. Why bother?).

It was strange, Lou thought as she began rinsing off the shovel

she'd used to clean Tabby's enclosure. She had lots of memories of being with Jamie while growing up but virtually none of her mother. Once, when Lou had been leaving work, she'd passed a group of tourists who were viewing the small mammal exhibit. Without realizing it, Lou had stopped and edged closer to one of the women. *That perfume*, she'd thought. The floral scent had tugged at the edges of Lou's consciousness, making her feel as if there was something she vitally needed, something just beyond her reach. Had her mother worn the same fragrance? She'd wanted to ask the woman the name of the brand so she could buy a bottle and uncork it and try to coax out the memories that had to be lingering in the recesses of her brain, but she hadn't known how to explain her request. While she was still fumbling for the right words, the woman had taken her two young daughters by their hands and headed off. Lou had stared after her, an ache forming in the center of her chest.

Now Lou began to make notes on the elephants' charts, then set the paperwork back down. Jamie's question hung in the air. Of course Lou couldn't stay with Donny and his new girlfriend. Come to think of it, he'd mentioned the other day that there was a woman in his office who was looking for a roommate. Now she realized he hadn't been making idle conversation. She wondered why he hadn't simply asked her to move out. Had he and his girlfriend been talking about it, hoping she'd take the hint? It was a little embarrassing.

This was why Lou loved kids and animals best. They told you what they thought, in the most direct terms possible. If kids were mad at you, they yelled. If elephants were mad at you, they charged and stomped you to death. Simple and straightforward.

Maybe she should see if another keeper needed a roommate—after all, they couldn't complain about the smell of her boots.

Lou walked over to the barrier that separated keepers from the elephants and pulled a red apple out of her pocket.

"Come, Tabitha," she called, and the elephant lifted her massive head and ambled over. Lou tossed her the apple and watched it disappear. The elephant caught her eye, and Lou held her gaze for a long moment.

Sometimes she wished that she could just live here, where life was

less complicated.

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Christie Simmons twirled the straw in her strawberry margarita, knowing without raising her eyes that the balding guy across the bar was staring at her. She fought the urge to check the time on her cell phone. Simon was late. Again.

"Excuse me."

Baldie had made his move and now leaned against the bar beside her. He'd been there for only two seconds, and already he was crowding her.

Christie glanced up, putting a question in her eyes.

"Buy you a drink?" he offered.

She deliberately looked back down at her full glass.

"After that one, I mean," he said.

He wore a nice suit—nothing custom-made, but a good-quality pinstripe—and his fingernails were clean. Those things were important to Christie. He took out his wallet and removed a gold AmEx card and waved it at the bartender. "I'll start a tab," he said.

Seven years ago—maybe five, on a good day—Christie would've drawn the eyes of the rowdy, younger guys playing pool in the corner. They would've put down their cue sticks and wandered over, loud and sloppy, flirting artlessly while she threw back her head and laughed, keeping her back perfectly straight so they could admire her curves.

But now she was thirty-seven, technically old enough to be their mother. So instead of being surrounded by muscles and hair flopping into eyes and offers of a slippery nipple shooter, she was left with this: a poseur trying to impress her with the color of his credit card. Which matched the color of his wedding ring.

"I'm meeting someone," Christie said.

Mr. Married leaned in closer. His breath smelled sour, as if he'd been drinking whiskey all day. Maybe he had.

"Well, it doesn't look like he's meeting you," Mr. Married said. His smile didn't reach his small, flinty eyes. "You've been sitting here for half an hour."

She hoped the stab of hurt she felt didn't reveal itself. She didn't want to give him that triumph. She knew this guy's type: She'd flirted with him, dated him, hell, she'd even *married* him once in a spectacularly bad decision that she'd reversed six months later. He'd never made it to the top tier of his profession, and it rankled him. Maybe he had a decent house, and a 401(k), but every day, he had to answer to someone who held the job he coveted, the lifestyle he'd been denied. His anger and frustration mounted, and he released it in passive-aggressive ways: Pretending he had to work late while his wife waited at home. Loudly joking with the barista who made his four-dollar latte to prove he was a good guy, then deliberately cutting off other drivers in traffic. Oh, yes, Christie knew his type intimately before he'd even spoken a word. In bed he'd be a little rough and a lot selfish.

Christie's cell phone rang, but she made herself wait a few beats before picking it up. She angled herself so Baldie couldn't see her face. If he shifted another step or two forward, they'd be spooning, she thought as she suppressed a shudder.

"Hey, gorgeous." With those words, she knew Simon wasn't going to show up. She'd gotten her hair highlighted—she'd been a little worried it was getting too blond, but her hairdresser had insisted no one could ever be too rich or too blond—and she'd splurged on a bikini wax. She'd applied her makeup carefully, using tricks she'd added to her arsenal over the past few years: a line of white on the inside of each eyelid, to make her eyes appear bigger and brighter, concealer that promised to hide fine lines as well as dark circles, a lip-plumping gloss that stung with the intensity of hot peppers but did seem to make her lips appear fuller. She'd even remade her bed with fresh linens.

"Hi there," she said. She could hear Mr. Married breathing behind her, so she blocked the pique from her voice.

"Something exploded at work," Simon said. "Rain check?"

She wondered if Mr. Married had given his wife the same excuse. But Christie wasn't even a wife. She was a girlfriend, and not a demanding, jealous one, either.

"Sure," she said.

“Love you,” Simon told her. It rankled her that he never added the *I*, but she let it go, like she always did.

She waited until she heard him hang up, then she added, “Oh! I thought you said the bar at the Ritz! Okay, I’ll meet you in a few.”

She put her phone in her purse and stood up. She didn’t meet Mr. Married’s eyes; she suspected he’d seen through her charade. She left the bar and entered the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, blinking hard as she assessed herself: long hair styled in beachy waves, tanned skin, false eyelashes applied individually so they looked really natural, and a body that tilted toward lush in all the right places, effectively highlighted in her short black skirt and black tank top. True, her nose was a sharp triangle and her chin was a little weak, but she was still the prettiest woman in the bar, she thought.

She exited the bathroom and stood in the hallway, wondering what to do next. Maybe she’d get a salad in the dining room, even though a woman eating alone seemed pathetic.

“Excuse me.”

She whirled around, expecting to see Mr. Married. But it was a different man, one who looked a little older and rougher around the edges. He wore a white button-down shirt and soft-looking tan blazer, cowboy boots, and one of those leather bolo ties with a big sterling silver and turquoise pendant. The outfit didn’t quite work here in D.C., unless he’d tied up his horse in the parking lot.

“I was hoping to talk to you about a business proposition,” the guy said.

“Are you kidding me?” She felt her heartbeat quicken in fury. “You think I’m a hooker?”

“No, no, not at all,” the guy said quickly. His brown eyes were a little watery-looking behind his glasses, and he had the beginnings of a gut. “I think you’re a businesswoman. I wanted to talk to you about a job—a real one.”

The guy held up a briefcase. Like him, it had seen better days. There were scuffs around the edges and the metal lock had dulled. “I can explain. I’ve got all the paperwork here. I’d offer to buy you a drink but I saw how you responded when the last guy did that.”

“A job,” Christie repeated. “Are you for real?”

The guy nodded vigorously. "It pays well and it isn't illegal or unethical. And you'd be doing a service for womankind."

He seemed sincere. Christie could usually sniff out a creep a mile away, but this guy didn't exude weird vibes.

She couldn't help blurting: "Why me?"

Later, when she found out what he wanted her to do, she'd think about his answer and wonder if it was the nicest compliment she'd ever received or a degrading insult.

"Because you're absolutely perfect for it," he said.

Chapter Two

JAMIE AWOKE SUDDENLY, FEELING as if the house had tilted off-balance.

She sat up, listening with a mother's ears. She hadn't slept deeply through the night since her children were born. She always awoke at the first cry—sometimes she even felt as if she'd been jerked out of sleep right *before* the cry, alerted by a subtle gathering change in the atmosphere signaling a sick or scared child.

She quickly realized what was amiss: Mike's side of the bed held only the rumpled comforter. He'd probably gone downstairs to click on ESPN, as he had so many nights recently, Jamie thought. Strange, though. She couldn't hear the sound of the television through their house's thin walls.

Suddenly, she was wide awake. She almost called out her husband's name, then stopped before the single syllable escaped her lips. Something told her not to speak. She slipped out of bed, still craning to hear whatever it was that had awoken her, an electric tension snapping through her body.

She walked along the hallway and crept down the stairs, moving quietly in the shadowy space. She almost tripped on a toy car one of the kids had left on the second-to-last step, but she caught herself on the banister.

There weren't any lights on in the main level of the house, either. Could Mike have taken his police cruiser and gone somewhere?

She crept toward the kitchen, her heart thudding so powerfully it almost hurt. When Mike stepped out of a corner and grabbed her arm, she nearly screamed, but instead released a tiny squeak.

Mike was naked except for his boxers, and he was holding his police-issue SIG Sauer. He raised a finger to his lips and pointed toward the sliding glass doors that led to their small wooden deck and,

one flight below it, the backyard. There was a gap of a foot or so between the two doors. Jamie could feel the gentle breeze against her cold skin.

Mike put his lips close to her ears. "I heard someone," he whispered.

The kids. Jamie's eyes darted toward the stairs, but Mike shook his head. "I think he's in the living room," he whispered. "Stay back."

He started moving slowly, his gleaming black gun leading the way. Jamie began to tremble. Why was Mike going after the intruder? They needed to barricade themselves upstairs! For one wild moment she wondered if the shooter from the police station had tracked Mike down, but that was impossible—the man had been killed instantly. But he could have a father or brother who was seeking revenge.

Mike took another slow step toward the living room. He was too far away for her to reach him now. She was torn between going after her husband, to try to protect him, and getting to the kids.

She chose her children.

She hurried back upstairs, stopping to grab the cordless phone and dial 911. "Intruder," she gasped, giving their address as she checked each of the bedrooms and strained to hear what was unfolding one floor below. Sam was sleeping soundly, his ragged stuffed bunny against his cheek, as were Eloise and Emily, who shared a room. Henry was sprawled on the top bunk bed in the tiny far bedroom, snoring softly. The moment she realized they were all safe, Jamie began shaking so profusely the phone banged against her cheek.

"How many are there?" the emergency operator was asking.

"I don't know," Jamie whispered. She was standing guard in the hallway, which gave her the best vantage point of all the bedrooms. "But my husband is a police officer. He has a gun. He's the one wearing boxers. Oh my God, please tell them not to shoot him."

"Officers are on their way," the operator said.

"Jamie?"

Mike's voice floated up the stairs, sounding normal now. She pressed the button to hang up the phone as she rushed to his side, no longer worried about making noise.

He was standing in the living room, the overhead lights blazing,

holding a fuzzy red Elmo doll that gave a bleat as it feebly lifted an arm above its head. "The batteries are dying in this," he said.

"Was that the noise?" she asked.

"I don't think so," he said. He tossed the Elmo doll back into a toy bin. "The door was open when I came down here. I checked the rest of the house. It's clear now."

"Did they take anything?" Jamie asked. She saw her iPad still sitting in plain view on the kitchen counter and the laptop Henry used for homework on the couch. "Mike? Can you put away your gun?"

The sight of it made her feel a little ill.

Mike stared down at it as if he hadn't realized it was in his hand. "Yeah," he said, and he started to go upstairs. Since having children, he always unloaded it and kept it in a small safe in their closet.

"Maybe you should put on some pants. I called nine-one-one," Jamie said, just as the flashing lights of an approaching cruiser spun swaths of blue and red through the house, illuminating Mike's face.

"You did what?" he asked. Something shifted in his expression. Was he angry with her?

"I thought someone broke in! We've got kids in the house, Mike!"

He hurried upstairs without a word, and Jamie went to open the front door for the responding officers. She could see the neighbor across the street come to stand on her front steps, and Jamie waved at her, wishing she'd had time to put on a bathrobe over her long T-shirt.

She didn't recognize the two young officers who stepped out of the patrol car, but when Mike came back downstairs, he seemed to.

"The sliding door was jimmied open," Mike said. "But I cleared the house."

"We'll do another check," said the officer with glasses, the one Mike had called Stu. He looked fresh out of the academy. No wonder he'd drawn the overnight shift.

"Our kids are sleeping upstairs," Jamie said. "Please try not to wake them . . . I think they'd be scared if they saw you."

"Of course, ma'am," Stu said.

"I'll go with them," Mike said. He was barefoot, wearing jeans and a red Washington Nationals T-shirt now, and his thick, dark hair was

unruly.

"Just stay behind us, please," Stu said.

Jamie could see Mike tense at that. He probably had ten times the experience of these guys. But he followed the men as they checked every room, closet, and cupboard. Their house had four bedrooms and two baths upstairs and a kitchen, dining room, and living room on the main level, but all of the spaces were small, and the search didn't take long. Remarkably, the kids never stirred. But then, Jamie had once burned cookies she was baking for a PTA fund-raiser (*baking* being a loose term—her effort involved slicing dough off a premade roll) and the smoke detector had blared for the better part of five minutes. That hadn't roused the kids, either.

"Let's take a look at that back door," Stu said.

"I didn't touch it," Mike said. "It's still like I found it."

Jamie followed the men through the living room and watched them kneel down to examine the door.

"No marks," Stu said. "Good solid lock, too. The intruder would've walked through the yard . . . hang on . . ." He bent down and pointed to a small clump of dirt on the mat just inside the door.

"That could be from our dog—" Jamie started to say, before cutting herself off. "Wait—where is she? Wouldn't Sadie have barked?"

Mike always let Sadie out in the backyard at night just before coming to bed. It was one of the rituals they'd fallen into by unspoken agreement: Jamie turned on the dishwasher and set up the coffeepot, Mike let Sadie out and locked up.

"Where does the dog sleep?" Stu asked.

"Upstairs, on the floor in one of the kids' rooms," Jamie said. Technically, Sadie usually climbed onto a bed at some point during the night—dog and kids coconspirators against Jamie's halfhearted rules—but Sadie never would've let the two officers go near the kids without putting up a protest.

Jamie ran back up the stairs and checked every bed, but their little tan-colored mutt was gone. She took a moment to grab her bathrobe before heading back downstairs.

"She isn't there," Jamie said.

"Could she have gotten out when the intruder came in?" Mike

asked.

"It still doesn't explain why she wouldn't bark," Jamie pointed out. "You know she always goes nuts when someone new comes into the house. I would've heard her."

Her head snapped up and she looked at Mike. "Are you sure you locked the sliding doors after you let her out?"

Mike's brow furrowed. "Yeah."

"Because if there's a crack, she can nudge them open with her nose."

"I locked them," Mike insisted.

Jamie leaned out through the opening. "Sadie!" she called loudly.

A moment later, the dog came bolting up the deck's stairs and back through the sliding doors into the house. She immediately began barking at the two officers. Stu knelt down and let Sadie sniff his hand. She gave two more yips before allowing herself to be petted.

"Hard to believe an intruder would get by this killer," Stu said. "For such a little thing, she makes a lot of noise."

Instead of responding, Mike rubbed his eyes. Jamie could see it happening: Mike, bone-weary and stressed, one eye on the television as he let Sadie in for the night, reaching to slide the doors shut but not locking them. Sometimes during the day, they let Sadie out in the backyard and didn't bother locking up, especially if the kids were running in and out to the play set. It was possible—natural, even—that he'd forgotten at a time like this, when their lives had been upended.

But why had Mike immediately grabbed his gun and assumed the worst?

"Anything missing?" Stu asked.

"Not that I can tell," Mike said.

"Our electronics are still here," Jamie added, gesturing to Henry's computer.

Stu cleared his throat and glanced at his partner, then looked down at his feet. "Probably some teenagers playing a prank," he said. "Summer vacation's just about here. They're getting antsy."

"One of them stole a street sign a few miles away this week," the other cop added.

Stu was a terrible liar. He'd come to the same conclusion she had:

Mike had forgotten to lock the doors, then overreacted. Jamie was just glad the officers hadn't seen Mike cutting through the house in his boxers, aiming his gun at the squeaky Elmo doll. He never would've lived it down at the station.

But the way the officers *weren't* looking at Mike was almost worse than teasing. Mike reached out and pulled the sliding doors closed, then locked them, the clicking sound echoing in the sudden stillness.

"Teenagers," Jamie said, nodding. "We've got a fourteen-year-old here tonight, so maybe they were planning a prank like you said."

She'd made it worse, Jamie realized. She'd been the one who'd suggested it was Sadie, and her sudden reversal was too obvious.

"Can I get you guys a cup of coffee?" she offered quickly and was relieved when they shook their heads and said they needed to get going.

"Let you two get some sleep," Stu said. Mike reached out and slapped his palm.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "Sorry my wife called you in. I figured it was nothing."

Jamie could feel her cheeks heat up, but she kept quiet. She knew Mike needed to save face. She closed the front door behind the officers and locked it, then turned to her husband. He looked a little dazed, as if he'd just awoken from a vivid dream and felt disoriented.

"Coming to bed?" she asked. She knew she probably wouldn't be able to get back to sleep tonight, but maybe Mike could. And she'd welcome the chance to lie beside him and feel his warmth, to try to get physically close to him to compensate for the emotional distance that had begun to creep between them, like a fog, since the shooting.

But he shook his head. "I'm going to get some cereal."

"Okay." Jamie waited until he'd turned and walked toward the kitchen, then she headed upstairs. She stopped in each of the children's rooms again, putting her face close to Eloise's head so she could inhale her daughter's sweet smell and picking up the doll on Emily's floor and placing it on top of her bureau. Sadie was curled up in the crook of Sam's knees, and Jamie gave both of their heads a stroke. She stopped in at Henry's room and pulled up the covers he'd kicked off.

Finally she went into her own room and climbed into bed. She lay there for a moment, then she got up to do something she never had before in all the years she'd known Mike.

She pulled on the safe's door to make sure he had locked it after putting away his gun.

...

Lou's weary body craved a long, hot soak in the tub. She'd worked at the zoo that morning, then hurried to the apartment for a quick shower and change, then she'd caught the Metro to the coffee shop, where she'd stood for a five-hour shift, steaming endless stainless-steel carafes of milk and dousing iced drinks with whipped cream and caramel sauce. After her bath, she'd make a thick sandwich, then collapse in front of the television. Maybe an old black-and-white movie, or the History Channel, she thought as she fit her key into the apartment's lock.

She inhaled the scent of roasted garlic as she opened the door.

"Yummy!" she called. Maybe Donny had gotten carryout. He always bought enough for two and insisted she dig in, pretending he'd overordered. He knew she didn't have much money, and it was one of the many kindnesses he'd shown her during their relationship and in its aftermath.

But the face that appeared around the hall corner belonged to Donny's new girlfriend. Mary Alice was holding a glass of red wine and wearing a pretty red top, as if she'd coordinated the two. Mary Alice was fifteen years older than Lou—as was Donny—which was all Lou knew about her. That and the fact that the two of them had met at a Forties and Fabulous! social group that gathered for things like nature hikes and hot-air balloon rides.

"Hi," Lou said. "What smells so good?"

"Donny's making chicken cacciatore," Mary Alice said.

"Wow," Lou said. "Impressive for a Thursday night."

Lou pulled off her clogs, sighing as she wriggled her toes, and tucked the shoes into a basket by the front door before walking further into the apartment. The dining room table was set with real china, and

there was a bouquet of red roses in a vase. Classical music soared from speakers.

“Hey,” Donny said, wiping his hands on the apron tied around his middle. Lou had bought it for him the previous Christmas, along with a new cookbook. “I thought you were doing the late shift.”

“I was,” Lou said, suddenly remembering how Donny had asked about her schedule earlier in the week. “But someone asked me to switch.”

Donny glanced at Mary Alice, then back at Lou. “Are you going out tonight, or, um . . .”

“Tonight?” Lou asked.

She looked at the two plates on the dining room table, the flowers, the glowing candles.

“Oh! Yes, I’m meeting a friend to—to see a movie,” she lied. “I just came home to change.”

The relief on Donny’s and Mary Alice’s faces was almost comical.

Lou hurried into her bedroom and pulled off her T-shirt, slipping on a clean one. She freed her honey-colored hair from its ponytail and ran a brush through it, then rubbed on a little lip balm. She never wore makeup, so she didn’t need to freshen her face. She sniffed her armpits and decided she’d have to make do with another swipe of deodorant instead of that bath. She gave her small, cozy bed a longing look, then opened the door. She half-expected to see Donny and Mary Alice waiting there, holding out her clogs, desperate to hurry her along.

Lou covered a yawn with her hand, then injected energy into her voice as she called out, “Good-bye!”

“Bye!” Donny called back.

Lou stepped out of the apartment building and felt a fat raindrop splatter onto her head.

“Perfect,” she said.

She hurried to the bagel place a block away, but it was closed. The rain came down harder, soaking her hair and streaming into her eyes. At least the night was warm, she thought. She walked a bit farther and found an open bar, its pink neon sign flickering in the dusky light. She stepped inside and saw one vacant stool. She collapsed onto it

gratefully and reached for the menu.

There wasn't much here she could eat; she'd become a vegetarian around the same time she'd started working with animals. She scanned through the offerings: buffalo wings, loaded potato skins, hamburgers . . .

"Help you?" the bartender asked. Maybe he was too busy to form a complete sentence; this place was packed.

"Do you have veggie burgers?" she asked, straining to make herself heard over the blaring music.

The bartender shook his head. He had a silver ring piercing the tip of his nose, and Lou idly wondered if it ever got caught on anything. She thought about asking, but he already looked impatient.

"Um, can I get the potato skins without bacon?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Dunno. I'll check. Drink?"

"A Sprite, please," she said.

She grabbed a cocktail napkin and wiped the dampness from her face, then glanced around. Almost everyone was dressed in black, tattoos abounded, and a few folks had facial piercings. It was a young, hip crowd. Lou was wearing shorts and a blue-and-white striped T-shirt that was a little big—tight-fitting clothes chafed her skin—but she wasn't uncomfortable. She'd long become inured to the sensation that she didn't fit in.

Donny and Mary Alice seemed like a good match, she thought as the bartender brought over her soda. They were both soft-spoken, with salt-and-pepper hair and silver-rimmed glasses, and Lou could picture them settling into the same easy routines she and Donny used to enjoy: walks after dinner on mild evenings, Sunday mornings on the couch with the newspapers spread out between them, the radio station in Donny's Acura tuned to NPR while they discussed the day's stories.

The apartment had two bedrooms, and Lou wouldn't have a problem with them all sharing the space, but she suspected Mary Alice might not like it. Most new girlfriends didn't relish having old ones around. Look at the issues Jamie had with Christie, even though Jamie and Mike had been together for more than a decade.

Lou polished off her Sprite, thirsty from her long day in the heat, and

tried to puzzle out the lyrics to the song blasting through the speakers. It seemed to involve betrayal, but ennui could also be the lead singer's main complaint. When her potato skins finally arrived, they were topped with bacon bits. Lou used another napkin to pick them off. The potato skins tasted as stale as if they'd been made the previous week and abandoned under a warming light, but she was too hungry to care.

Was the music getting louder? A pulse in the side of her head throbbed in time to the frantic drumbeat. She ate her meal quickly, then paid her bill (Four dollars for a soda? Really? Maybe hipsters were richer than they looked) and slid off her stool. It was raining harder when she walked back outside and took a look around. A movie theater was a few blocks away, but a quick check on her iPhone revealed she'd missed the beginnings of the two shows playing.

She couldn't go back to the apartment this soon, and there weren't any libraries or bookstores within walking distance. She didn't have a car, so her options were limited. She found herself heading toward the theater, her heavy clogs splashing through puddles. But when she tried to buy a ticket, she ran into trouble.

"One for whatever's showing now," she said.

"The next movie's at nine o'clock," the teenage attendant said.

"I know," Lou said. "But I want one for the movie that's playing now."

"It started forty minutes ago," the attendant protested. He frowned at her from behind the glass window of his booth.

"I don't care," Lou said.

"But you missed half of it," he said. "I can't give you a discounted price."

Lou leaned forward. "Look, I'm getting rained on and I can't go back to my apartment for at least two hours because my roommate has his new girlfriend there and I'm pretty sure they want to have sex. Two hours is enough time, right? I mean if they have dinner first."

The attendant reared back, and Lou realized she'd probably overshared again. Jamie had suggested, more than once, that Lou didn't always need to be brutally honest or say the first thing that popped into her head. "Most people don't mind if you tell them a few

white lies,” Jamie had said. “They expect it, even.” This particular conversation had come in their high school lunchroom, after one of Jamie’s best friends had asked if her new jeans made her look fat. “Yes,” Lou had said.

“Jeez, Lou,” Jamie had snapped after her friend had run off to the bathroom in tears. “Think before you speak sometimes, okay?”

“I figured she’d want to know,” Lou had protested. “Maybe she can return them.”

“But there’s a gentler way of telling people that stuff,” Jamie had said. “You can’t just blurt it out.”

“She asked,” Lou had pointed out, but Jamie had just sighed and gone to comfort her friend.

“The computer won’t sell you a ticket to this show,” the attendant was saying. “It will only sell you one for the nine o’clock show.”

“Okay,” Lou said. The solution was easy enough once she had a little more information. “I’ll take one ticket for the nine o’clock show.” By now she was completely drenched.

She walked through the double glass doors and handed her ticket to another attendant, who tore it in half without commenting. She found a seat near the back of the theater and sat down, shivering in the frosty blast of air-conditioning. She glanced around. Everyone seemed to be part of a couple. Even the pretty young star on the big screen was closing her eyes in anticipation of being kissed.

Lou could almost hear Jamie’s voice in her head, cajoling her to get out and meet someone new, to join a cooking class or a gym, to claim an empty spot in a book club. But Lou felt like she had enough filling in her life. Along with Jamie’s family, there was her family of animals at the zoo. Plus she talked to her father every couple of weeks and visited him and his new wife in New York once a year or so.

Sometimes she wondered if their dad still missed their mother. He didn’t talk about her at all anymore, but Jamie had told her they’d been deeply in love. “Don’t you remember them dancing in the living room?” Jamie had asked. “We’d tiptoe down and watch them when we were supposed to be in bed.” Lou strained as hard as she could, but the images refused to bloom for her. She’d been twelve when her mother died, not a toddler. Why couldn’t she remember? “And the parties they

had!” Jamie had once said. “Mom would always sneak onto the front porch to smoke with her friends.” Maybe that was why Lou had never minded the smell of cigarette smoke, even though the habit held no attraction for her.

Their father had remarried three years after their mother’s death, and Lou was glad her dad had found someone. His new wife, Kathy, was nice enough, but Lou had never felt particularly close to her, probably because she’d entered their lives just a few years before Lou had left for college.

She’d missed too much of the movie for it to make any sense, so Lou huddled lower in her chair and closed her eyes. The next thing she knew, someone was tapping her shoulder.

“You’re snoring really loudly,” the girl behind her whispered.

“Sorry,” Lou said. She could hear giggling and she sat up straighter. Her clothes were damp and she could feel goose bumps rising on her skin. She stole a glance at her watch and realized she couldn’t go home for at least an hour. She wrapped her arms around herself and wished more than ever for that hot bath.

She needed to find a new apartment, fast.

...

She, Christie Simmons, had a job!

A real job, too—not like the hostess and receptionist gigs she usually floated between, or the “modeling” assignments she’d taken in the past that required her to walk around in a bikini at car shows. This was regular, steady, *enviable* work. Elroy had even mentioned an expense account. Bolo-tie-wearing Elroy wasn’t a misplaced cowboy after all. He was a private detective who specialized in infidelity cases, and Christie was going to help him gather evidence. She’d be working undercover. The best part, though, the thing that made her lips curve into a secret smile, was that she’d be playing off the assumptions of people like Baldie with the wedding ring from the bar. Just because a woman was single and sexy, some guys assumed she was easy, a throwaway sort of girl. And during the past few years—the same stretch of time in which she’d begun to feel a slight ebb in her energy

and notice a slight sagging of the skin around her eyes and jawline—she'd realized it had begun to bother her deeply. Christie wanted a lot of things, including a nice house and car, but something else had edged its way to the top of her wish list, something that couldn't be bought.

Respect.

Only one man in her life had ever treated her with true dignity: Mike, the father of her beautiful, perfect son, Henry. Christie had met Mike at a bar—because let's face it, girls like her didn't hang out at the library or health food store or hiking trail—and he'd offered to buy her a drink. But then the familiar script had strayed from its usual path: he'd kept his eyes on hers instead of focusing them twelve inches lower, and he'd spoken her name when he handed her a glass of Chardonnay. Back then she thought wine tasted sour, but she'd been twenty-three and figured the drink sounded classy.

Mike had been so beautiful—intense brown eyes, a blunt nose, and broad shoulders. A triangle of springy black hair peeked out from the top of his polo shirt. He wasn't very tall, but he seemed to take up a lot of physical space.

"Can I take you out to dinner?" he'd asked, while her friends gave her the thumbs-up and made obscene gestures behind his back.

"Dinner?" she'd repeated. She'd licked her lips, glossed in a shade called Kitten Pink, and lowered her eyelashes, hoping he appreciated the four coats of mascara she'd painstakingly applied.

"Tomorrow night," Mike had said. "Italian sound good to you?"

"Are you telling me you're Italian?" Christie had asked.

It took Mike a moment, but he'd gotten the joke. "You're a firecracker," he'd said.

"And what are you?" she'd asked.

"A cop," he'd said. She'd seen the way he stood up a little straighter with the release of those words. She'd almost made a joke about his handcuffs, but she'd refrained. For some reason, she didn't feel like bantering with him the way she did with other guys.

"I do like Italian," she'd said instead. "In all its forms."

"So I'll pick you up at seven." That was Mike—confident, direct, steady. He'd shown up five minutes early, held open the car door for

her, and asked her what she liked to eat as she studied the menu at the restaurant.

“Nothing too heavy,” she’d said. She was a size eight, and wanted to stick to it for as long as possible. Which might be only until she turned forty, given that her mother now resembled a blowfish. But her mother subsisted on a steady diet of junk food and junkier television, and Christie was determined to avoid that path. Well, at least the fast-food part.

“The angel hair’s nice,” he’d said, in a voice so low and deep it was almost a growl. “Maybe with clams and a little red sauce.”

She’d nodded, and when the waiter arrived, Mike had ordered for her. It had made her feel taken care of, but not in a creepy, father-figure way—especially since she’d slept with Mike that night. Mike may have been a gentleman, but he wasn’t *that* much of a gentleman.

He was good in bed, if conventional, and eventually that was his downfall: being too traditional in other ways, as if he was rushing toward middle age, arms stretched out in a welcoming embrace. Mike wanted the white picket fence and Sunday afternoons helming the barbecue grill. Christie wanted nights out dancing and spontaneous trips to Vegas. She was far too young to settle down, and if she were being perfectly honest, Mike didn’t seem all that eager to settle down with *her*, either. His calls came less frequently after the first few weeks.

They probably would’ve drifted apart, their memories of each other fading with each passing year. Maybe after a decade or two, one of her friends might’ve said, “Remember that cop you used to date?” And Christie would’ve replied, “Oh, yeah, he was cute,” and struggled to conjure his name.

But she got pregnant.

It was her fault. She’d told Mike she was on the pill, which was the truth, but what she didn’t reveal was that sometimes she forgot to take it, especially after a night of drinking.

She’d broken the news to him because she wanted him to help pay for the abortion, but part of her also wanted to say the words because she didn’t have anyone else in whom to confide. Her mother would’ve erupted—she’d had Christie at eighteen and was vocal about

questioning the wisdom of that decision—and her father was nothing but a faded photograph Christie kept hidden in a dresser drawer. At least she thought the picture was of her father. The guy in it had an arm around Christie's mother's shoulders, and she could tell it was taken at about the time she'd become pregnant, because they were in the halls of their high school. Sometimes Christie thought she could see bits of herself in the shape of his eyebrows and the straight lines of his nose, but she'd never met him, so she couldn't be certain. Apparently he'd entered the military after graduation, and hadn't responded to the letters Christie's mother had sent. If Christie's mother had thought the news of a baby would lure him back, all handsome and official in his Navy whites, like a scene out of *An Officer and a Gentleman*, it had been the first of many disappointments in her life.

Christie didn't know what kind of reaction she'd expected from Mike when she told him about the two lines on the E.P.T. test, but he'd merely nodded without changing expression. Maybe that went hand-in-hand with being a cop—you couldn't freak out when someone confessed to something big, like a murder, or you'd blow the whole case.

After a moment, he'd quietly asked, "Do you want to get married?" She'd almost fallen off the couch. What twenty-three-year-old guy would ask that of a girl he'd been dating for less than four months?

By then Mike's steadiness had become boring, and the thought of being yoked to him for the rest of her life made her feel claustrophobic. He laughed too loudly when he watched television—which he was content to do most nights while he drank a Budweiser—and he owned only one suit, a blue number with a disturbing sheen.

"No," she'd said. "And I don't think I want to keep it."

He'd gone pale then, and had put a hand to his own stomach.

"I'm Catholic," he'd said.

That explains a lot, she'd thought.

"Just—wait, okay?" he'd said. He'd dropped his head into his hands for a long moment. They were in his condo, sitting side by side on the black leather couch, untouched cartons of Chinese food in front of them. Christie couldn't eat because morning sickness had struck with

a vengeance, except it was all-day sickness. That, along with her missed period, had been what prompted her to pick up a test at CVS.

"What if you kept it?" he'd said. "*We* kept it."

"I told you I'm not getting married," Christie had said. *Not to you, anyway*, she'd refrained from adding.

She didn't know why, but suddenly she'd felt angry with him. "I was going to break up with you," she'd said. "You bore me."

"Don't do anything yet, okay?" he'd said, and it had made her even more upset that he hadn't reacted to her declaration. "It probably has arms and legs by now. Hair, too."

"Of course it doesn't," she'd said, even though she had no idea who was right. She'd stood up, fury shaking through her. "It's a blob. A tiny little blob!"

She'd stormed out and driven home, where she'd poured a big rum and Diet Coke, which she vastly preferred to the stupid, cheap wine Mike always offered her. She wasn't keeping the baby, so what did it matter if she drank? But she couldn't swallow more than a sip. The alcohol felt metallic in her mouth and made her stomach heave. She'd poured it down the drain instead, and cursed Mike.

An hour later he'd knocked on her front door, breathing hard, as if he'd run the whole way there. "The baby's got fingers and toes. I checked. He or she is the size of a kidney bean about now."

And Christie had burst into tears.

She and Mike didn't last, of course. They'd already broken up by the time of her first ultrasound. But the arrangement Mike had suggested was surprisingly successful. He took the baby most of the time when he wasn't at work, and he paid for part-time day care. Christie had Henry only three nights a week and one weekend day. Mike also gave her five hundred dollars a month in child support. Christie had complained about having to drop out of hairdressing school, since her all-day sickness was so overpowering and the smell of chemicals made it worse, but she'd never regretted their decision. The truth was, Henry was an angel. He slept through the night the very first week, happily ate whatever was offered, and rarely got sick. She loved watching TV with him cuddled on her chest, smelling of soft, chalky talcum powder and feeling as cozy as a hot-water bottle. Henry was

good company right from the start.

Later she figured out why she couldn't go to the abortion clinic. It wasn't because of the haunted look that had come into Mike's eyes, or the thought of those tiny fingers and toes wiggling inside of her. It was because the moment she learned she was pregnant, the hollow, aching feeling Christie had grown accustomed to carrying around had finally disappeared. It was only after it had vanished that she'd been able to identify it as loneliness.

Now Christie pulled her Miata into the cul-de-sac where Mike and Jamie lived. Mike had built the white picket fence around their brick rancher himself. When he'd told Christie, she'd faked a coughing fit to hide her laughter. The front yard, as always, was littered with scooters and a tricycle and squirt guns. Even before Jamie opened the door, Christie knew what the interior would look like: sports equipment piled haphazardly by the front door, a beaten-up sectional sofa around a television that was too big for the space, a bunch of kids wandering around, including a neighbor or two . . . Strange how all the things she'd bristled against fifteen years ago didn't seem quite so terrible now.

She knocked on the door, and Jamie answered, pushing her bangs off her face with one hand while she pulled open the door with the other.

"Hey," Christie said. Mike's wife was only a few years younger than Christie, but Jamie looked about twenty-five, with her unlined, softly rounded face and baby-blue eyes. She probably still got carded.

"Hi, Christie." Jamie smiled without showing her teeth.

Christie may not have made the honor roll in school, but she had an unerring sense about people. Jamie tolerated her only because of Mike and Henry.

"Is that a new shirt?" Christie asked.

"This?" Jamie looked down like she'd forgotten she was wearing clothes. When she looked back up, she also wore a suspicious expression. "No, I've had it forever."

Christie didn't know why she'd said it. Obviously the shirt wasn't new; the neckline was a little frayed. She never knew how to act around Jamie, so she usually ended up saying or doing the wrong

thing.

“So is Henry around?” Christie asked.

“Yeah, hang on,” Jamie said. “Henry!” she called up the stairs. A minute later came the thudding of heavy footsteps and the sight of her son.

“Hey, Mom,” he said, moving easily and fluidly despite the fact that he seemed to be all knobby elbows and gangly limbs. Henry played three sports: baseball, basketball, and soccer. He got mostly As with a few Bs sprinkled in like seasoning. He said “please” and “thank you” without being prompted. He was a golden boy.

“Burgers sound good for dinner?” she asked.

“Actually, we had that last night,” Henry said, glancing sideways at Jamie. “But I don’t mind twice in a row.”

Christie pulled him close for a quick hug, noticing again the fine light-brown hairs that had begun to sprout above his upper lip. She was five foot five, but he’d officially passed her a year ago. She wasn’t a sentimental person, but tears had stung her eyes on the day she’d realized she had to look up at her son.

“Bye, Jamie,” Henry said. He gave his stepmother a hug, too—he was the human version of Switzerland—and stepped out the door, his huge backpack slung over one shoulder.

“Love you!” Jamie called after him, and Christie felt herself soften. No matter what she thought about Mike’s wife, she had to give her this: Jamie had never been anything but good to Henry. Once Christie had asked Henry about the time he spent with Jamie. “Does she ever say anything about me?” she’d asked, keeping her voice casual.

“Yeah,” Henry had said, and Christie had braced for it.

“At night, when we say our prayers”—this was something Christie hadn’t authorized, but she couldn’t control what Mike did with their son —“Jamie tells me to include you.”

“Oh,” Christie had said. For a moment she wasn’t sure how to take that revelation. Did Jamie think Christie needed saving? But Henry’s voice was sweetly innocent, and she’d decided it was a compliment of sorts. Even though Christie didn’t believe in God, she liked the idea that someone else was putting in a good word for her.

“I’ve got some cool news,” she said as they climbed into her Miata.

"I got a new job."

"Yeah?" Henry said. "Where?"

"It's undercover," Christie said. "A private detective hired me."

"Seriously?" His face brightened.

"I know, right? You've got a cop for a dad and an undercover investigator for a mom."

"So what are you gonna investigate?" Henry asked. "Drug deals?"

"No," Christie said, amending it when she saw Henry's disappointment. "At least not at first. I'm going to catch gross guys who cheat on their wives."

"Like with wiretaps?"

"Probably," Christie said, even though she had no idea. Elroy hadn't given her all the details; they were meeting in a few days to go over them. "I'll probably have a hidden microphone when I talk to the guys. Maybe a secret camera, too." And possibly a sexy trench coat, Christie decided. She might as well start breaking in her expense account.

"That is so awesome," Henry said.

"I know, right?" Christie said, and she experienced the same warm burst of pride Mike must have felt on that long-ago night when he'd told her he was a cop. Her new job paid sixty bucks an hour, which was a heck of a lot better than the fourteen she currently earned as the receptionist at a hair salon.

She felt as if the fates were finally turning in her favor, after all those bad relationships and overdue credit card bills and the sense that somehow, without her being able to pinpoint exactly when or how it had happened, the life she'd meant to live had slipped past her, carrying along a tide of people who were laughing and clinking champagne glasses and waving as she stood on the shore.

Screw her passive-aggressive scale, she thought, and she said, "Should we go get hot fudge sundaes to celebrate?"

Chapter Three

SUMMER WAS OFFICIALLY HERE. Hot, sticky, languid summer. It was 10:00 A.M. on June 22, and a flurry of teacher appreciation events and picnics and field days had ushered in the end of the school year. Now Jamie was wondering why teachers didn't earn million-dollar salaries. All they'd have to do was stage a strike, and after a few days, parents would be pulling money out of their wallets to make up the difference. Jamie could barely handle *three* little people—how did anyone control a pack of twenty-five or thirty without tranquilizer darts?

A shower, she thought longingly as she bent down to wipe up something brownish—best not to examine it closely—off the floor. Before kids, bathing used to be an uneventful part of her morning routine. Now ten minutes alone with sweet-smelling shampoo and hot water coursing over the knots in her shoulders felt as luxurious as a week in the Bahamas. But her plans to get up early and sneak one in had been thwarted when Eloise awoke at 5:45, having soaked through her nighttime diaper. Jamie had started to throw the wet pajamas and sheets into the wash, then she'd realized there was already a load in the machine. It smelled funky—it must have been moldering there for a few days—so Jamie had dumped in a little more detergent and pulled the dial to rewash it, then come upstairs to encounter the stain on the floor. By then Eloise was flopped on the couch, her hair sticking up and her eyes bleary, loudly asking for Barney on TV.

"Shhh, honey," Jamie said. Was she actually panting from the brief exertion of running up the stairs? She really had to figure out a way to exercise regularly. "No TV this morning."

Eloise started wailing. Her flair for drama always took a sharp uptick when she hadn't gotten enough sleep.

"You're going to wake up Sam and Emily!" Jamie chided. As if

Eloise cared; Jamie would have to turn to her arsenal of bribes and threats, another violation of parenting rules. The thing about the “experts” on TV, though, was that they were always rested and fresh—not to mention that most of the nannies on those parenting shows weren’t actually parents. They were like sportscasters who’d been cut from their high school teams, called in to nitpick the performance of professional athletes.

“Want some chocolate milk?” Jamie offered. Eloise considered it, then nodded. Jamie fixed the milk in a sippy cup, grabbed Eloise’s favorite chunky board book and a few toys, and set everything on the couch next to her daughter. That might buy her enough time to rinse off—she was pretty sure she smelled like pee now.

But then Sadie started barking at an invading squirrel in the backyard, and Jamie rushed to shush her, too, and seconds later Emily awoke and immediately began bickering with Eloise . . . seven pancakes and one mostly uneaten bowl of fruit later, the kitchen was a disaster, Jamie was limping from stubbing her toe on a chair’s leg, Sadie had managed to overturn her dish of water, and Mike had gone to work, wearing his shiny badge with the black ribbon that made Jamie feel as if someone was grabbing her heart and squeezing it whenever she looked at it. And her shower shimmered like an oasis, forever just beyond her reach.

Jamie stole a look at the clock. Had the hands stopped, or could it really be this early?

“Let’s go to the pool,” she suggested. Forget the dishes and laundry and all the other chores waiting for her attention. She’d combust if she stayed in the house for another minute. They all needed to be outside, in the fresh air, even if it was so muggy and thick it felt like a wet sheet wrapping around her every time she stepped out the door.

She gathered up sunscreen, towels, bathing suits, goggles, and some water toys and bundled everything into a giant beach bag. Then she filled a cooler with sandwiches and pretzels and drinks. The kids would beg for lunch from the overpriced snack bar, but if she didn’t set a precedent now, her bank account would be empty by the end of the summer. She’d allow them one Popsicle each, she decided.

“Are Finn and Daisy coming?” Emily asked.

“I was just going to call them,” Jamie said. A carefree day might be exactly what Ritchie’s wife and kids needed.

She reached for the phone and dialed the number she knew by heart. Sandy answered on the third ring.

“Hey, hon,” Jamie said. “Up for a day at the pool?”

She kept her tone light, not letting on that hearing Sandy’s high, crisp voice with the hint of a Boston accent, an inheritance from Sandy’s hometown, conjured so many turbulent feelings in her—relief that it hadn’t been Mike who’d walked out the door first, guilt for the same reason, dread that Mike could be next. When Jamie had rushed into the hospital after Mike’s call, the first thing she’d seen was a wall of blue. Dozens of officers lined the hallways outside the area where surgeons frantically fought to save Ritchie by removing the bullet from his skull and reducing the pressure around his brain. By then everyone knew the rookie nicknamed the Kid was dead. His eyes were open and unblinking as he lay on the sidewalk, Mike had told Jamie after he’d awoken from one of his nightmares, gasping and shuddering. That was before he’d stopped talking to her about the shootings.

Jamie had torn down the hallway, past the officers who were stoic and the ones who were crying, because she’d caught sight of her husband and in that desperate, blurry moment she’d thought Mike had been shot, too. But the blood darkening his shirt had belonged to Ritchie. Moments after Ritchie had fallen, Mike had leapt on top of his partner, covering him, trying to shield his best friend from a second bullet.

It wasn’t until the surgeon came out into the hallway to announce that Ritchie was still alive that Sandy had broken down in Mike’s arms, her husband’s blood leaching off Mike’s uniform to stain her face, sobs exploding from her thin frame. Jamie had patted her back, trying to whisper words of comfort through her own tears. Sandy had pulled herself together when the surgeon added, “But he’s not out of the woods. And there are going to be some complications if he makes it.”

Complications. Such an innocuous word. A complication was a traffic jam, a malfunctioning coffeemaker, two meetings scheduled for the same time. It didn’t begin to describe Ritchie learning to fasten the

Velcro on his new shoes and feed himself. It didn't encapsulate the brain trauma that revealed itself in his halting speech, or memory lapses.

Ritchie *had* died that day, a part of him anyway.

Jamie had tried to reassure Mike that his brief hesitation wouldn't have made a difference; that the shooter was already in position and the two rifle cracks had sounded within seconds of Ritchie exiting the building. But Mike felt as if he'd betrayed the sacred oath of his profession. He wore his guilt like a shroud, and Jamie was beginning to worry that it would always shadow him. At least Sandy put the blame squarely where it belonged: on the shoulders of the shooter.

Maybe Sandy cried at night, when she was alone in the bed she'd once shared with her husband, but Jamie had never again seen her break down. Sandy was a cop's wife, which meant uncertainty and worry had always been familiar companions. Everyone who married a police officer knew that the moment a certain call came over the radio—say a 10-33, code for an officer in trouble—their lives could irrevocably change. Sandy might have been mentally preparing for this ever since she'd said her wedding vows, or maybe, like Jamie, she'd tried to block out the fear that was an unwelcome adjunct to her husband's job. Jamie didn't know because they'd never discussed it. Doing so would have seemed like tempting fate.

"The pool sounds good," Sandy was saying.

"Just grab your bathing suits and I'll swing by and pick you up," Jamie said, pulling the jar of peanut butter back out of the cabinet and opening the refrigerator to find the bread. "I've got lunch for everyone, too."

"I made some chocolate chip cookies this morning," Sandy said. "I'll throw those into a Tupperware and bring them along."

"Perfect," Jamie said, marveling at Sandy's competence, especially now.

After hanging up and making more sandwiches and managing to shepherd everyone into the minivan, then immediately circling back home to pick up Eloise's sandals, despite the fact that Jamie argued they were just going to the pool and didn't need shoes (knowing, even as she spoke, that it was impossible for anyone to win arguments with

three-year-olds, who were as determined and illogical as drunks), they drove the two miles to Sandy and Ritchie's house.

Jamie could see a few off-duty officers working in the front yard, carrying planks of wood from a pile on the lawn to the side door. They were building a wheelchair ramp, she realized. Ritchie would be in one for a few months when he came home. Jamie had no doubt the officers would be back to tear down the ramp when it was time for Ritchie to graduate to a walker. Doctors were hopeful he would be able to stand on his own within six months or so, but they were less willing to predict how quickly he'd recover mentally—or if there would ever be a complete recovery.

Sandy came out the front door, a beach bag in her hand and Finn and Daisy by her side. One of the officers picked up Finn and flipped him over his shoulder. Finn squealed and laughed, especially when the officer pretended to put him on the hood instead of inside the minivan.

The brotherhood in blue, Jamie thought. Stories about police brutality and corruption always made headlines, but overlooked were these quieter truths: the fierce loyalty and unexpected kindnesses members of the force shared. Sure, they teased each other, often viciously: One pudgy detective was nicknamed Stay Puft in homage to a brand of marshmallows, and another officer, who'd tried to pull open a door marked PUSH during his first day, would forever be known as Einstein. Mike was jokingly called Rambo, because of his dark hair and muscles. Insults flew fast and furious around the building at morning roll call, yet whenever someone was hurt or suffering, the force appeared, steadily as the ocean tide coming in.

"Hey, girl," Jamie called, pressing a button to open the minivan's side door for the kids. That automatic function was the only upgrade she'd wanted when they purchased the vehicle from a used-car lot. Forget heated seats and sunroofs—when you were carrying one kid and holding the hand of another while juggling three grocery bags and dodging cars as you wove your way through a parking lot, that was the feature that won a mother's heart.

Sandy climbed into the passenger's seat and leaned over to give Jamie a hug. "Thanks for this," she said. Sandy's dark brown skin was

as fresh and unlined as ever, but her eyes looked tired.

She was drawing on a deep reservoir of courage and strength for Ritchie and the kids, Jamie thought. Would she be able to do the same, if their positions had been reversed? If Mike hadn't nudged Ritchie out the door first? Jamie pushed away the invading thought.

"I'm so glad you were free!" Jamie said. She waited until the kids strapped themselves in, then waved good-bye to the officers and put the van in gear. "How's Ritchie?"

"We're going to have dinner with him tonight," Sandy said. "He's getting pretty good with a spoon."

"That's great!" Jamie said. Tall, strong Ritchie, who did triathlons and baked his own kale chips before it was fashionable—his nickname was Tree Hugger—was learning to master a spoon. She wouldn't cry, Jamie told herself. If Sandy could power through this, everyone else should be able to as well.

"A fork's still a challenge, though," Sandy said.

"He'll get there," Jamie said. "I thought I'd go with Mike when he visits this weekend . . . so if you need a break to get things done around the house or whatever, let me know. I can time it to then so you'll know Ritchie has company. And you can drop off the kids on Sunday if you want to visit him alone."

"Thanks," Sandy said. "They usually like to go with me, but maybe I'll take you up on it sometime."

Jamie hesitated, not knowing if bringing up happier memories of Ritchie would be painful or welcome. Maybe Sandy just needed a day off from thinking . . . But in the end, she decided to risk it.

"Remember when the guys answered the call from the woman who was in the shower and had heard a man's voice in her room? And it turned out to be the woman's father on the answering machine?"

Sandy laughed and seemed to relax a little in her seat. "They were so mad. They thought it was going to be their first big arrest."

"And then the next day someone attached an old answering machine to their lockers with evidence tape," Jamie said.

As they traded memories about their husbands' early days on the force, Jamie thought about how she and Sandy had gravitated toward each other at softball games and annual picnics, knowing their

friendship was inevitable because of their husbands' bond. Some officers switched partners a few times before finding a good match, but as different as they were, Mike and Ritchie had hit it off immediately. Maybe that was *why* they'd hit it off. Ritchie was calm and placid, whereas Mike's temper could run hot. Ritchie liked classical music, Mike liked classic rock. Mike once lost a bet and had to eat a kale chip; he'd ended up spitting it out on his dashboard. But through the years, Mike had turned into a fan of NPR's *Morning Edition*, and Ritchie had recently declared the Kiss song "Beth" one of his top ten favorites.

"Is a bad guy going to shoot my daddy, too?"

The little voice cut through the air.

Jamie froze, but Sandy recovered quickly and answered Eloise, her voice warm and reassuring. For that, Jamie would forever be grateful.

"Of course not, honey," Sandy said, twisting around to look at the little girl. "Your daddy is very safe."

Jamie waited for Eloise to continue the conversation, but she didn't. Kids were remarkable that way; they often spoke truths that adults were too scared to address, then they moved on. At least Jamie thought Eloise had moved on. She and Mike had told the kids about Ritchie's injury in vague terms, assuring them the bad guy was in jail (the lie seeming less upsetting than the alternative). They'd promised that the doctors would help Ritchie get better. But Eloise's question seemed to pierce through Jamie like a sharp-ribbed arrow, deflating the sense of optimism she'd tried to conjure for the day.

Jamie pulled into the pool's crowded parking lot, finally finding a space near the back. "We're here!" she announced unnecessarily, wanting to fill the quiet.

Mike had never been shot—but he'd been stabbed once, by a junkie he and Ritchie had taken in after the woman lay down in the middle of the road for a nap. Mike had made the mistake of letting down his guard because she was young and female, but he'd spotted the knife arcing toward his chest in time to deflect it with his forearm. He'd needed twelve stitches, and a white scar still bisected the skin above his elbow. And now he was back at work, a weakened version of himself, patrolling the streets that seemed more unsafe than ever.

"It's so hot!" Jamie said as they paid the attendant at the front desk and pushed through the turnstiles that led to the public pool. "Let's get changed and then I'll lather you all up with sunscreen and you can jump in the water."

It was going to be a wonderful day, she told herself almost fiercely. Sandy deserved it. Jamie had tucked an old issue of *People* magazine in her bag at the last moment. She'd put it down on a chair and insist on watching the kids so her friend could have a break.

As they walked up the cement path that led to the pool, Jamie felt something: a gentle tug on her hand.

It was Sam, her anxious kid, the one who sometimes chewed the collar of his shirt. He'd listened to her and Mike talk about Ritchie and his injury and he'd seemed to be okay. He hadn't asked any questions, so they hadn't elaborated. But now she saw Sam hadn't taken the news in stride, not at all. None of them had. Mike with his workouts, she trying to stick to their usual routines, Sandy with her bright reports of Ritchie's progress, the kids with their laughter and arguments . . . normal life wasn't normal any longer. Maybe it would never be again.

Her son's hand was cool on this warm day, and that was what broke her heart.

"But what if it happens again?" Sam said. Jamie didn't have to ask him what he meant.

The question Eloise had unleashed was the same one echoing in Jamie's head.

...

Lou gave a quick knock on her sister's front door, then pushed it open. She saw Sadie charging toward her, and she raised her right knee so that her leg was at a ninety-degree angle. That blocking maneuver was all that was needed to keep Sadie from leaping up and jabbing her nails into Lou's thighs. Lou had tried to explain to Jamie that it was relatively simple to train a dog, but Jamie had waved away Lou's suggestions. "I can't even train my kids to put their dirty laundry in their hampers," Jamie had said. "Can we start with that and work our

way down the priority list?”

Lou gave Sadie a quick scratch behind the ears, then called out, “Who wants candy?” The sudden pounding of feet on the stairs sounded like a mini-avalanche. “Sorry, did I say candy?” she asked as the kids swarmed around her. “I meant Brussels sprouts.”

Lou fended off the mock attack from the children, laughing. She’d never felt a maternal longing or heard a biological clock ticking in her midriff or experienced whatever it was women were supposed to feel when they hit thirty. But oh, did she adore being an aunt—the kind who told silly jokes, threw the first snowball, and took the kids to see Pixar movies and let them load up on popcorn and tubs of soda. Lou didn’t do all that stuff to make the kids happy—she truly enjoyed it, too. Sitting around a dinner table discussing politics and home renovations with adults was the most boring experience she could imagine. Kids had so much more life in them, at least until life itself sucked it back out.

“After dinner!” Jamie was calling, confiscating the Hershey’s Kisses Lou was tossing into the air and letting the kids catch like raindrops. “Come on, guys, I just made you all hot dogs . . . Eloise, I saw you put that in your pocket. Give it back! Lou, can you stop that?”

Buzzkill, Lou thought. Jamie used to go nuts over her Halloween candy as a kid—endlessly sorting it and awarding each piece a number of stars and scheming about how to get maximum enjoyment from the bag of sugary snacks. How had her big sister forgotten about the simple magic contained in a square of crinkly foil?

“So what’s the plan for tonight?” Lou asked the kids. “A game of Hullabaloo? Or hide-’n’-seek? Or how about a massive pillow fight? I’ll take you all on!”

“Maybe a pillow fight isn’t such a great idea,” Jamie said, scooping the candy off the floor. “Remember a lamp got broken last time, Lou?”

“Oh, right,” Lou said. “Well, we can move the pillow fight outside.”

“Dinner first,” Jamie said. She led the way into the kitchen, and Lou hid a smile when she saw Eloise pull a Kiss from her other pocket and gobble it down.

“Thanks again, Lou,” Jamie said as she picked up a piece of paper off the counter and handed it to her sister. “I wrote everything down,

but it should be pretty simple. They just need to brush their teeth before bed, and make sure everyone goes to the bathroom, too.”

“What if they don’t have to pee?” Lou asked solemnly. She peered at the paper: “Oh, it says right here that I have to make them do push-ups until they obey!”

Sam began laughing so hard he practically fell out of his chair.

“Get down and give me twenty, child!” Lou ordered, pointing at him. Sam’s laughter turned into coughing and he spat something onto his plate.

“He’s gross,” Emily said, crinkling her nose. “Can I go eat in front of the TV?”

“Take it easy,” Jamie said to Sam. “Did a piece of hot dog go down the wrong way? Have a sip of water . . . there, that’s good . . . Emily, come back here. You need to eat at the table.”

Jamie turned to Lou. “She keeps trying to watch *Pitch Perfect* because it’s on HBO now, but it’s way too old for her.”

“Annabelle saw it,” Emily protested.

“Who’s Annabelle?” Lou asked.

“She’s in Emily’s grade,” Jamie said, before whispering to Lou, “Annabelle also wears shorts that barely cover her butt.”

“Why do they even make clothes like that for kids?” Lou asked, and Jamie shrugged. “You got me. But all it takes is one queen bee wearing them and you’ve got a trend.”

Lou watched as Jamie walked over to the refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of white wine, and poured a few inches into a glass.

Jamie glanced at the kids, then moved a few feet away and lowered her voice again. “I’m nervous,” she confided. “I don’t know why . . . I saw Ritchie a dozen times in the hospital . . . It’s not like rehab is going to be that different.”

“Auntie Lou, can I sit on your lap?” Eloise asked.

“Let me talk to your mom first, okay? You guys finish dinner and then we’ll play,” Lou said. “Go on, eat! But don’t choke like Sam. Chew your food, like elephants do.”

“I didn’t know elephants had teeth,” Sam said.

“Twenty-four pearly white chompers,” Lou said. “Actually they’re kind of yellow. Elephants don’t brush enough. Obviously your mom

didn't give them a bedtime list."

She winked at the kids, then turned back to her sister and, following Jamie's lead, kept her voice low. "He's still the same guy," Lou said.

"But he isn't, exactly," Jamie said.

Lou didn't know what else to say. She wasn't nearly as good as her sister at providing comfort. So she just tucked a handful of Kisses in Jamie's purse, which was stuffed almost to bursting, even though it was the size of the carry-on bag Lou took on airplanes. Lou found purses bizarre and unnecessary encumbrances. She kept her driver's license and a credit card tucked into her iPhone's case in one pocket, and her keys in another.

"Thanks," Jamie said. She unwrapped a Kiss and slipped it into her mouth, keeping her actions covert so the kids didn't see. That was the Jamie that Lou remembered. "I'm armed with wine and chocolate," Jamie said. "What more could I need?"

"How does Mike feel about it?" Lou asked. "Is he upstairs chugging a beer and smoking a cigar?"

Jamie smiled, which had been Lou's intention. "He's getting out of the shower. He went for a long run again today."

Lou nodded. Jamie didn't look so good, even though she was dressed up—well, dressed up for Jamie, which meant a simple khaki skirt and blue sleeveless top, but for Lou that would've been practically black tie. Jamie's face was strained, with smudges of purple beneath her eyes, and she was twirling a lock of her hair around her index finger. That was a nervous habit dating back to her childhood. Once Jamie's hair had gotten so ensnarled that their mother couldn't remove the knots and had to cut out a chunk. Jamie had cried, and her mother had done something to make her feel better. "What was it?" Lou had asked. "I can't remember," Jamie had said. "Did she make a face? Sing a silly song?" Lou had pressed, but Jamie had just shaken her head and shrugged. The memory seemed a fingertip beyond Lou's reach, and the more she strained, the faster it slipped away, like a dream that began to fade the instant one awoke. A few sharp fragments were all Lou could cling to: the smell of something sweet—fresh flowers in a vase? or that perfume?—and the pink headband Jamie had worn for weeks to disguise her missing

chunk of hair.

“Mike hasn’t been sleeping,” Jamie was saying. She took another big sip of wine. “And at work they tried to pair him with a new guy, who talks all the time and drives Mike crazy.”

“Can’t he switch?” Lou asked. She reached into a kitchen cupboard for a glass and filled it with water from the Brita pitcher on the counter; she was as familiar with Jamie’s kitchen as she was with her own.

“Yeah,” Jamie said. “But I’m not sure that will solve the problem. I think partnering with anyone who isn’t Ritchie is going to be difficult for Mike. It would be like having your beloved husband leave you, then having a new guy move into your house the next day. Can you imagine how strange that would feel?”

“Probably not the best analogy for me to relate to,” Lou joked.

“I’m sorry—” Jamie began, but Lou waved away the apology. Why did people, even her own sister, automatically assume she wanted to get married and have kids? Children didn’t sleep nearly as much as animals, and they were a lot louder.

“So how bad is Mike’s insomnia?” Lou asked.

“Awful. He watches TV most nights and dozes on the couch,” Jamie said. “Or if he starts out in our bed, he comes downstairs for a snack at three A.M. He’s just . . . I don’t know if it’s depression. Maybe the beginnings of it. The other day he was staring out the window and Emily was trying to get his attention and she had to call out, ‘Dad!’ three times.”

“Maybe he needs a little more time off,” Lou suggested.

“I don’t know,” Jamie said. “I’m thinking the opposite. That he needs to stay busy. And having other cops around who know what he’s going through might help.”

Lou started to say something, but she heard footsteps approaching. When she turned around, there was her brother-in-law, his broad shoulders filling the doorway to the kitchen.

He reached out and gave her a hug, like he always did. He smelled of soap and felt like a brick wall. Lou adored Mike. He was just easy; he put his feet up on tables and drank beer straight from the bottle and didn’t feel the need to make constant conversation—all traits Lou shared.

“Steroids, huh?” she joked, squeezing Mike’s huge biceps, and was rewarded with a grin.

“Kids, thanks for babysitting Lou for us tonight,” Mike said.

“We’re going to make you pee before bedtime!” Sam yelled.

“Don’t ask,” Lou told Mike.

“Not sure I want to know,” he joked as he reached into the refrigerator to grab a Red Bull.

“I’m finished,” Sam said. “Do I get my candy now?”

“Dishes in the sink first,” Jamie said. “Don’t forget your silverware . . . you, too, Emily. Lou, you’ve got my cell number if you need it, right?”

Lou furrowed her brow. “You mean that thing you call me on all the time?”

Jamie rolled her eyes and gave Lou a quick hug. “I love you, you know.”

Mike was reaching into his pocket and frowning. He checked his other pocket, then looked at the kitchen counter.

“What’re you missing?” Lou asked.

“My keys,” Mike said.

“Did you leave them on the hook by the door?” Jamie asked.

Mike shrugged and went to look. Lou followed him with her eyes, feeling a tinge of worry. When she’d first glimpsed Mike in the kitchen doorway, she’d noticed his sheen of good health—he was tan and fit, his hair still damp from the shower, his black thin-knit shirt straining across his chest. But then he’d moved closer, and she’d noticed the dull exhaustion in his eyes, and the lines in his forehead that seemed to be permanently etched. How many of those caffeinated beverages was he drinking a day? she suddenly wondered.

“I’ll go help Mike look,” Jamie said.

Lou turned her attention back to the kids, and eventually Jamie found a spare set of keys and they headed out. It wasn’t until the kids were asleep and Lou was reaching into the refrigerator to find a snack that she solved the mystery.

On the middle shelf, next to the eggs, were Mike’s keys.

...

“Say a wife suspects her husband is cheating,” Elroy said as he dipped a French fry into a pool of ketchup and ate it as daintily as a cat. The fries looked incredible—crisp and plump and golden brown. They’d probably been deep-fried in a hot bucket of fat. But Christie’s scale had betrayed her again this morning, inching up another pound for no good reason, so she’d just shaken her head when Elroy offered to share.

“She needs proof, right? Because if she confronts him he’s gonna say no. Or maybe she already has, and he’s got excuses. Too many excuses. His BlackBerry is for work and if she asks him for the password all of a sudden, he’ll know she’s onto him and he’ll delete all the messages. She can’t follow him around without being spotted. She’s picking something up, something she can’t quite prove but she knows is real. That’s when she comes to me. It’s like when birds sense a storm is coming and they suddenly strip a bush clean of its berries. Who knows how they know? Maybe an invisible change in the air. But they’re always right.”

Christie nodded as Elroy nibbled on another fry. She’d never seen a guy eat so slowly; most men she knew wolfed down their food. The combination of his soft voice with the hint of a southern accent and his deliberate movements was oddly hypnotic.

“Some of the time they’ll have another woman in mind. A co-worker, a neighbor, an old girlfriend—someone who gives off weird vibes. I tell you, bloodhounds got nothing on women when it comes to sniffing this stuff out. So they want us to follow hubby and see if he’s up to no good. But maybe he only sees the other woman once every week or two. That’s a whole lot of money to be paying for stakeouts; my rate’s a hundred an hour plus expenses. Most of them can’t afford it for too long, and their husbands would notice if thousands suddenly disappeared from the bank account.”

This was fascinating stuff, better than watching soap operas. Not that she did that. Regularly, anyway. Christie leaned in closer, which meant she got a mouthwatering whiff of the fries. She cursed the sadist who’d invented carbs and tried to breathe through her mouth.

“So what do they do next?” she asked. “The wives, I mean.”

“That’s where you come in,” Elroy said. He used his napkin to wipe

each of his fingertips in turn, then he took a small sip of water and pushed away his mostly full plate, which meant it was that much nearer to Christie.

"In my experience, a guy who's already cheating isn't going to turn down another opportunity, if you get my drift," he said, giving her a meaningful look.

"You're not that subtle," Christie said.

Elroy smiled. "The thing is, you gotta walk a careful line. A girl like you—if you throw yourself at a guy, he's going to say yes, unless he's the Pope."

A girl like you. Christie soaked in the compliment like a hot bath. Simon hadn't called last night, and when she'd called him at 10:00 P.M.—the three glasses of wine she'd drunk had been coconspirators, urging her to do it—her call had gone straight to voice mail. She'd waited up, but he hadn't phoned back. Then this morning, a bouquet of flowers had arrived with a note typed by the florist: *Sorry I missed you.*

It wasn't even an extravagant bouquet. There was baby's breath filling a lot of spaces. What was it Elroy had said? A change in the air.

"So what do I need to do?" Christie asked, shoving the fries back toward Elroy.

"We trail the guy," Elroy said. "Find a place for you to bump into him. An elevator, a sidewalk. Maybe you drop your purse to give him an excuse to help you pick it up. You send out signals—nothing too flashy, but you'll let him know you might be interested—and see if he responds."

"Isn't that entrapment?" Christie asked. She was proud of herself for remembering the word; she'd heard it on a recent episode of *CSI*.

"Nope," Elroy said. "We're not arresting anyone here."

"Okay," Christie said. "So if he responds, then what? Exactly how far do I take this?"

She fixed her eyes on Elroy and folded her arms over her chest. He'd better not expect her to actually fool around with a mark. She liked her new identity as a businesswoman, someone smart and strong and capable. Someone who didn't get screwed by men physically *or* emotionally.

“You say you’re in town for a few days on business. Maybe he wants to meet you at your hotel for a drink. You set a time for him to come by and I get to the hotel first to set up my camera and recording equipment. You meet him in the room, get him to talk about what he wants to do to you—”

At Christie’s expression he hurriedly continued, “Just talking, no touching—then I knock on the door and call out ‘Room service.’ You tell him to sit back and relax, that you ordered champagne. Then you open the door and boom! You’re gone.”

Christie turned the plan over in her mind. “How do you know when to knock?”

“I listen in on the recording equipment. I’ve got a good hotel in mind; there’s a coffee shop next door. After the job we wait there. Or I wait there, because you’re done, so you can take a cab home. When the dude’s gone I gather my stuff and write up a report for wifey.”

“Who pays for the cab?” Christie wanted to know.

“The client,” Elroy said. “All your expenses plus sixty an hour, like we talked about. Most jobs will probably take about four hours, start to finish, including your transport time.”

Christie drummed her nails on the linoleum table. “It sounds too easy,” she said.

“You’d be the third girl I’ve hired for this job, and none of the others complained.”

“Why did the other two quit?” she asked.

“The first one moved away,” he said. “She was with me for three years. The second one married one of the guys we’d set up when his wife divorced him.”

“You’re kidding.”

Elroy shook his head. “Wish I was. She was good at what she did. So, are you with me? We’ll probably work four, five jobs a week.”

“That many?” Christie asked. Five jobs a week, at four hours per job, and sixty dollars an hour would be . . . let’s see, about . . . Well, it would be a lot of money. Plus expenses!

“You wouldn’t believe how many more people are having affairs since Facebook,” Elroy said. “The number of folks who hook up with exes . . .”

Christie suddenly wondered if Simon had a Facebook account. “Do you ever trace people?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Like put a tracker on their car.”

Elroy shook his head. “Nah. But I did put up an ad on Facebook. My clients have doubled since then.”

He regarded her for a moment. “Any questions? Any moral objections we need to get out of the way?”

“Are you kidding?” Christie shook her head. “My mother cheated on my stepfather—or make that stepfathers, plural—the whole time I was growing up. Once she and one of the guys took me to the movies. They told me they were going to sit in the back row but I should sit up front, where I could see the screen really well.” She rolled her eyes. “Like that was what they were thinking about. They just didn’t want me to see *them* pawing each other. I finally told my stepfather when I was twelve.”

“What happened?” Elroy asked.

Christie looked down at her Diet Coke and swirled her straw around a few times. She cleared her throat before answering. “He left,” she said.

“Do you regret telling him?” Elroy asked.

“I regret not doing it earlier,” she said. He had been the nicest of the many men who’d shared her mother’s bed. He’d bought her a harmonica once after she’d seen a guy on the street playing one and thought it sounded pretty. It was just a cheap toy, but he hadn’t given it to her until her birthday, which was weeks after they’d watched the street performer. She didn’t know what had surprised her more: that he’d remembered how much she liked the sounds the tiny instrument made, or that he’d noticed her enjoyment in the first place.

Elroy opened his battered briefcase and pulled out a file. He withdrew a photograph and slid it toward Christie. It was of a nice-looking guy, maybe in his early forties, the sort you’d see tossing a baseball to his kid at the park on a Saturday morning. Christie didn’t know what she’d expected, but it wasn’t this sandy-haired, smiling guy with freckles on his nose.

“Say hello to your first client,” Elroy said.

Chapter Four

RITCHIE'S ROOM IN THE rehab facility wasn't as intimidating as Jamie had expected. She'd thought it would be white and sterile, with sharp edges and high-tech machines—similar to the hospital room where she'd visited him—but it seemed almost homey. This was a space for patients who were here for the long haul, she thought. There were curtains on the window, and family pictures atop the nightstand.

Ritchie was propped up by pillows in bed. He was holding one of those squishy stress balls and seemed to be struggling to make a fist around it.

Jamie paused in the doorway, tears rushing into her eyes, memories rushing into her mind: Ritchie racing around his backyard on the Fourth of July, holding a silver sparkler and being chased by all the kids; Ritchie putting his arm around Sandy and kissing the top of her head as she leaned into him one weekend when they'd all gone to the beach together; Ritchie and Mike, side by side, standing straight and proud as they received an official commendation for apprehending an armed robbery suspect.

"How are you, handsome?" Jamie asked. She walked over to Ritchie and kissed his cheek. Only his brown eyes were the same. His face was still swollen, and a worm-like scar curved around his right ear, cutting into his skin. His hair had been shaved for surgery and hadn't completely grown back in yet. He'd lost weight, too.

"Good," Ritchie said.

"Old buddy," Mike said, coming closer and giving his partner a fist bump. "We gotta bust you out of here!"

"The doctor . . . said . . . another few months," Ritchie said, his cadence much slower than usual, as if he were speaking a foreign language and first needed to translate the words in his head.

Another few months, Jamie thought. But then there would be

outpatient physical and speech therapy. And after that? Nothing was clear. Brain injuries were notoriously complicated, and it was hard to predict if Ritchie would ever be able to return to the force. Sandy had talked about it at the pool, and Jamie had been glad she couldn't see her friend's eyes behind her dark sunglasses. She knew they'd look shattered.

"Yeah, but you like a challenge," Mike was saying. "I'll give you two weeks before they're kicking you out."

Ritchie smiled but didn't say anything.

There was a small silence.

"I saw Sandy and the kids the other day," Jamie said, her voice too bright. "We all went to the pool. Daisy is such a terrific swimmer! She's a little fish."

"Yeah," Ritchie said. He frowned. "I was working with her . . . Last month? No, maybe last summer . . . I can't remember . . ."

"Well, we need you to give our kids swimming lessons!" Jamie said quickly. "Eloise is still afraid to put her face in the water."

"You need anything?" Mike asked. "Kale chips, maybe?"

Ritchie smiled and started to shake his head, but he immediately stilled the motion. Jamie wondered if the slight movement hurt.

"Did they give you . . . a new partner yet?" Ritchie asked.

"First of all, he isn't my partner," Mike said. "He's a stand-in until the real thing comes back. And he's a moron. My standards aren't all that high, given what I put up with for the past decade, but even I can't deal with the guy."

"You're used . . . to per-perfection," Ritchie said.

Jamie turned as an orderly came into the room, carrying a food tray. He set it on the edge of Ritchie's bed, checked the level of water in the giant plastic cup on Ritchie's nightstand, and exited quietly.

"Want some . . . pudding?" Ritchie asked Mike. "It's awful. That's why . . . I offered."

"Sounds tempting," Mike said. He reached for one of the containers, peeled back the foil lid, and used his fingers to scoop up a taste. "Christ. They're trying to kill you, aren't they? They give life, then they take it away."

Ritchie's laugh was weaker than usual, but it was one of the most

wonderful things Jamie had ever heard.

“Go ahead and eat,” Jamie said. “Get strong!”

“Gotta use this, ah . . .” Ritchie said, holding up a strange-looking fork. The handle was thick and there were two wide prongs instead of four.

“A spork?” Mike asked, quickly filling in the word when Ritchie stumbled over it.

In a moment, it became clear why he needed the special utensil: Ritchie’s movements were similar to those of a young child learning to eat on his own. He dropped more penne noodles than he managed to ferry to his mouth on his first bite.

“Crap,” he said, looking down at the mess he’d created. Luckily all of the noodles had landed on the extra-large tray; they must’ve made them big for a reason.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Mike said. “What the hell kind of hospital serves noodles to someone who just got shot and is getting his reflexes back?”

Mike was furious, Jamie saw. Or not exactly furious—his rage was on the surface, covering something fragile and turbulent underneath.

“Forget this,” Mike said. He pulled the tray away from Ritchie in a jerky movement. “I’m going to get you one of those cardboard veggie burgers you love, okay? Extra pickles and tomato. I’ll be right back.”

Jamie wondered if the pasta wasn’t precisely the point—if Ritchie were being given challenging foods so he could practice fine-motor control—but she remained silent. This wasn’t about Ritchie’s dinner.

“Do you want me to go pick it up?” Jamie asked.

Mike shook his head. “I’ll be fast.”

Jamie watched Mike exit the room and thought about Lou’s suggestion that Mike needed some more time off. Maybe her sister was right. She didn’t know anymore; she’d lost the ability to read her husband. She and Mike had had their ups and downs—what couple didn’t?—and during some periods, especially in the bone-wearying, endless stretch of time when Eloise was a baby and Sam and Emily were careening through toddlerhood, she’d felt a distance wedging itself between her and Mike. She’d been consumed with constant, draining caretaking, with feeding little mouths and cleaning hands and

bottoms and settling squabbles and soothing boo-boos and running endless loads of laundry and dishes. She knew Mike's job was stressful, but she couldn't help feeling resentful when he came home after sharing a pizza and a pitcher of beer with the guys from his shift when she couldn't even manage to drink a cup of coffee while it was hot.

Just last year they'd gone three days without speaking after a ridiculous fight sparked by whether Emily was old enough for a sleepover. They'd bickered over countless small things, and once Jamie had thrown one of her sneakers at Mike, incensed that he hadn't discouraged Christie from flirting with him. Mike had slept on the couch that night before climbing back into their bed the next morning as she showered. He'd still been wearing the Homer Simpson boxer shorts Henry had given him for Christmas, a memory that always made her smile.

So yes, they'd weathered anger and pain. But an invisible, powerful connection had always linked them. This time things felt different. It was as if a wall had sprouted up in front of Mike, too wide and tall for her to reach around and touch him.

In the six weeks since the shooting, she'd learned what it meant to miss her husband, Jamie thought as she sat down next to Ritchie and smiled to cover her sadness. She missed rolling over in the middle of the night and pressing up against Mike's warm body. She missed having him walk through the front door and effortlessly scoop up a kid in one arm and reach the other around her waist as he dropped a kiss on the back of her neck. She missed the way they'd try to stay up together to watch reruns of *Modern Family*, and she'd invariably fall asleep against his shoulder, and he'd tease her about her snoring.

"Sir? Can I help you?" Jamie heard someone ask loudly.

Jamie became aware of a rhythmic, thudding sound coming from the hallway. She felt a cold tingle work its way down her spine as she stood up and walked to the door and looked down the hall, toward the noise. Mike was still standing there, waiting for the elevator. His head was down, and his hands were clenched by his sides. He was ignoring the nurse frowning at him.

As she watched, Mike's foot drew back, then kicked the closed

doors of the elevator again.

...

“So,” Lou said, looking at Donny.

“So,” he repeated, looking back at her.

They were seated on the couch, a healthy distance separating them, like sitcom actors depicting a strained relationship.

“Did you want anything to eat or drink?” Donny asked, as if she was a guest. It made her think her instincts about the contents of this conversation were right. He was going to ask her to move out.

“No thanks,” Lou said. “I’m good.”

This was one of the problems in their relationship: they both hated conflict. So they never discussed problems. Lou hadn’t even known that Donny was unhappy with their relationship until he suggested a break. She hadn’t even known that *she* was unhappy until she felt relief at his suggestion.

Lou wondered if he’d ever really loved her, or if she’d loved him. Donny didn’t even like animals! Whenever he came with her to Jamie’s, he’d pet Sadie once or twice, then discreetly sniff his hands and hurry away to wash them.

“Mary Alice and I . . .” Donny cleared his throat.

“It’s okay,” Lou said. She might as well make this easier on both of them; Jamie probably wouldn’t mind her being blunt in this case. “Is she moving in? Do you want me to move out?”

“We’re getting married,” Donny said.

“Oh!” Lou said. Now, that she wasn’t expecting. What did you say to your ex-boyfriend and current roommate upon learning that he was engaged? Luckily she settled on the right word: “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Donny said.

Back when they’d first met, after Lou had handed him a latte and he’d asked for her number, she’d been flattered. Guys weren’t exactly lining up to sleep with her. She’d been with only two in her entire life. And Donny looked a little bit like the late actor Robin Williams, whom Lou had always liked. Now Lou waited for whatever feelings might come—regret, loss, relief—and realized she didn’t feel much of

anything.

"There's this woman who works in my office, Kelsey," Donny was saying. "She's looking for a roommate."

"Have I met her?" Lou asked. Donny was an actuary, someone who specialized in analyzing the financial risks of business decisions. She sometimes wondered if he did the same with emotional decisions.

"I don't think so," Donny said. "She's new."

"Okay," Lou said. "I'll call her."

Donny looked relieved. He stood up and pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. "You can probably see the room tonight, if you want," he said.

"In a hurry to get rid of me, huh?" Lou joked.

"No, no," Donny protested, a bit too fervently.

Lou swallowed hard. "I'll move out as soon as I can."

"So what are you thinking?" Donny asked. "A couple weeks?"

She blinked. "Um, yeah," she said. "A couple weeks probably."

Donny sighed, and his whole body seemed to deflate. He was a good man, Lou thought. But she already knew she wouldn't miss him. When she spent the weekend with Donny, she missed the elephants.

"You could call her now," Donny said.

"Who?"

"Kelsey. The woman with the apartment."

"Oh, right," Lou said.

Donny was looking at her expectantly, so Lou reached for the phone and dialed the number. It rang twice, then someone answered.

"Hi. I'm trying to reach Kelsey. This is Lou. I'm a . . . a friend of Donny's?"

"Oh, yes. Did you want to see the apartment tonight?"

"Um, sure," Lou said. Had Donny told Kelsey how desperate he was for Lou to move out? She felt a little hurt by the thought.

"You can come now."

"Now?" Lou said. She looked at Donny. "Okay."

She scribbled down the address, then hung up.

"So I'm going to check out the apartment," she said, unnecessarily. She looked down at the piece of paper in her hand. She recognized the name of the street and could visualize the route. "It's just a mile or

so away.”

“Great!” Donny said.

She stood up and put on her clogs, then headed out the door. What she’d like, ideally, would be a sunny little studio close to the zoo. She’d have a teakettle and toaster and microwave, and the apartment would allow pets (Donny’s didn’t). She’d get two cats, so they’d keep each other company while she was out. But D.C. real estate was exorbitant, and zookeepers didn’t make much money. A place of her own would have to remain a distant dream.

She strolled through the streets, passing a bakery and Thai and Ethiopian restaurants, enjoying the sounds and smells. She bought a veggie burrito and a bottle of water from a food truck and ate while she walked. A few minutes later, she reached Kelsey’s building and stood looking up at it. The building was old but seemed well maintained, with wide, gray stone steps curving to the main door. She climbed them and buzzed the number for the apartment.

A voice came over the intercom: “Who is it?”

“It’s me. Lou,” she said.

There was a pause. “I’m here to see about the room?” Lou added.

A buzzer sounded and she pulled the door open and took the stairs up to the third floor. She knocked and waited for what seemed like an abnormally long time before the apartment’s door was opened by a short, wiry woman who looked to be in her mid-thirties. The woman’s waist-length black hair was so straight that Lou wondered if she ironed it, like Jamie had once tried to do back in junior high school. The smell of singed hair had stunk up the house for days.

“Hi,” Lou said.

“Sorry, I was just straightening up,” Kelsey said.

“Well, I hope you didn’t do that on my account,” Lou said. “A little mess doesn’t bother me.”

“It doesn’t?” Kelsey frowned, then opened the door wider, the expression on her face indicating it might be against her better judgment. “Come in.”

Lou stepped into the narrow hallway. It was empty except for a wooden table with skinny legs that looked like an antique.

Kelsey was staring at her oddly. “Can you take off your shoes?” she

asked. "I'd rather you didn't track dirt and germs in here."

"Oh, sure," Lou said. She slipped out of them and followed Kelsey into the living area. Immediately she wondered what Kelsey could've been cleaning; the place was spotless. There was a gray couch with angles so sharp it looked as if it might cut the behind of anyone who sat on it, and a glass coffee table, and a little cube that could've been a chair but also could've been a footrest. Exactly two magazines were placed on the coffee table, so crisp and glossy they appeared untouched.

"Living room," Kelsey said unnecessarily. She gave a little wave of her hand. "Kitchen."

Lou peered into the galley kitchen. A lone gerbera daisy stood in a slender glass vase on one of the shining granite counters, and the fruit bowl held one orange and one red apple.

"Your room would be here," Kelsey said, walking down a short hallway and pointing into a doorway. She seemed to be checking Lou out in quick, sidelong glances. Lou wondered if her burrito breath was soiling the sanctity of the apartment. "I'm using it as a guest room now, but I don't have a lot of guests."

Lou followed Kelsey to the small, rectangular space. A four-poster bed dominated the room, and there was a matching bureau opposite. Lou opened a door and found a tiny bathroom, then she looked into the closet. It was probably a good thing she didn't have a lot of clothes.

"It's nice," she said.

"It's seven hundred a month plus utilities," Kelsey said. She handed Lou a piece of paper. "Here are some ground rules."

Lou began to read the typewritten words: *Rent will be paid on the first of the month. Quiet time will commence at 10:30 P.M. and continue until 5:45 A.M. All guests must be approved in advance. No sleepovers will be permitted. Food in the refrigerator should be clearly labeled and renter will only eat and drink his/her groceries. No dishes will be left in the sink; they must be immediately washed and put away in the appropriate space in the cupboard . . .*

Lou looked up. "Sleepovers?"

"Guests of the opposite sex," Kelsey said, then quickly clarified, "or

the same sex. I don't have a problem with that. Actually, I do—not the same-sex part. The sleepover part.”

She leaned closer and peered at Lou. “You’ve got a . . .” She made a brushing gesture against her own cheek.

Lou reached up and felt something slimy. “Guacamole,” she said, wiping her fingers off on her cargo pants. Kelsey looked ready to gag. She reached over and plucked a tissue from a box atop the dresser and let it flutter into Lou’s outstretched hand.

Lou could envision what her life would look like if she lived here. She’d have to tiptoe in after late shifts at the coffee shop, and wash her clothes before Kelsey caught the scent of the zoo. If she took an unauthorized swig of orange juice, she’d probably be Tasered.

But what other choice did she have? The apartment was reasonably priced—at least by D.C. standards—convenient, and available. She thought of heading back home and seeing Donny’s eager face as he asked how it went.

“Okay,” she said, handing back the list of rules. “When can I move in?”

“The first of next month. I’ll need a security deposit, too,” Kelsey said. “And I want to give your room a deep cleaning first.”

Lou said good-bye and trudged toward home, feeling her shoulders slump. She’d just avoid Kelsey as much as possible, and start looking for a new place after a few months. This would be temporary, she consoled herself.

On impulse, she turned down a side street. It was almost dusk now, but if she hurried, she’d arrive before closing. As she got closer to the zoo, she found herself running, her stress peeling away and being replaced by a sense of exuberance.

“Weren’t you here all day?” one of the volunteers asked as he drove by in one of the golf carts used by employees. Lou just gave him a wave and ran faster.

She reached the elephant enclosure area in time to see Tabitha enjoying her dinner. As if the elephant sensed her presence, Tabitha looked up and caught her eye. Lou waved to her but didn’t call her over. She didn’t want to interrupt Tabby’s meal. She was eating for two, after all.

The sinking sun suffused the sky with rose and violet streaks. Martha and Bailey ambled through the yard, their slow, steady gaits echoing Lou's heartbeats. When Lou looked at the creatures, she experienced the same overpowering sense of peace and awe that some people reported feeling when they viewed the ocean for the first time, or the Grand Canyon. Lou wasn't religious, but being around the elephants elevated her to a near-spiritual experience. The presence of their dignity and wisdom felt healing.

Tabitha wasn't finished eating, but she abandoned her dinner and walked closer to Lou. Lou felt tears form in her eyes.

"Good girl," she said softly, but loud enough for the elephant to hear. Tabby understood more than two dozen words, and these were the ones Lou made sure she heard the most.

She supposed she should get home and begin packing. But she didn't want to leave. She'd like nothing more than to curl up on a bale of hay and sleep here, out under the night stars, cocooned by familiar smells and sounds.

The thought of moving in with scary, bossy Kelsey was so daunting. She knew she'd do something wrong—be too loud or track in dung or walk around with more guacamole on her cheek. She imagined her new roommate's face tightening every time she walked into the apartment, just as Donny's did now.

"Hey there," another keeper said as he passed by. "Did you hear about Tabby's tail?"

Lou shook her head. "What?" she asked urgently.

"She broke off a few hairs when they got tangled in something. I think it just happened an hour or so ago."

Lou straightened up, trying to get a better look at Tabby's hind side. It wasn't as innocuous as it sounded; the tuft at the end of an elephant's tail, used to swat away insects, was composed of individual hairs that were as strong and wiry as guitar strings. If one broke off at the quick, it could lead to an abscess or infection.

"Did someone get antiseptic on it?" Lou asked.

"Yeah," the keeper said. "It's in her chart."

Lou was glad the charts were scrupulously kept, but she knew she'd never need a reminder to check on an animal's injury. In fact, she

wanted to take a look now, to make sure the tail wasn't too bad. She'd hang out at the zoo for a few hours and keep an eye on Tabby, just to be sure.

Lou didn't know much about Tabby's history—no one did, since she'd come to the zoo via an overcrowded sanctuary—but she sensed the elephant had been treated poorly at one time in her life. Maybe that was why Tabby seemed so grateful for the gentle care Lou provided now.

"Good girl," Lou told her favorite elephant again. In a few months, Tabby would give birth, and Lou knew the experience could be traumatic. She'd be here for every moment of it. She'd protect the elephant and her baby as best she could, for the rest of their lives.

It was the least she could do for the beautiful creature that had given her so much.

...

Christie assessed herself in the mirror, then dabbed on a little more lipstick and adjusted her new black wig. She slipped into her short trench coat and belted it tightly around her waist. Maybe the coat wasn't a necessary expense, but she was planning to ask Elroy to divide the cost among several clients. After all, she was a bona fide private detective now. She might not have a license, but she was at the center of real investigations, a vital player in uncovering deceit. She needed to look the part.

Elroy had shown her the photo of the man he'd called her first client, but Elroy had been wrong.

Simon was going to be her first client.

He'd texted that he was working late again and would meet her at her apartment around 10:00 P.M. In the early days of their relationship, he'd taken her to dinner or the theater. Now she was nothing but an occasional booty call. She'd typed back something flirty and brief, to avoid making him suspicious. Then she'd put on her disguise.

She slid her camera into her shoulder bag, put on her sunglasses, and headed to her Miata. She figured he wouldn't be leaving the office before 6:00 P.M., since he'd never ducked out early even during the

hot, heady days of their relationship. His office was on K Street in downtown D.C., a busy avenue where you couldn't park during rush hour. Her plan was to drive to the Metro, then take the train downtown and linger near the glass-walled lobby of Simon's building. That way she could observe him if he left on foot, but she could also keep an eye on the exit to the garage in case he drove somewhere.

She didn't know what she'd do if he took off in his car. D.C. had plenty of cabs, but it wasn't like New York, where ones sped by with the regularity of seconds ticking past on a clock. At least traffic would work in her favor; most streets were gridlocked during rush hour, which meant if she hurried, she could probably keep an eye on Simon's car until she managed to wave down a cab. It wasn't a foolproof plan, but it was the best she could come up with.

Forty-five minutes later, she was outside Simon's office, sweltering in the heat. Why hadn't she considered the fact that it was summertime before she'd put on the trench coat? She positioned herself so that she was out of the line of view of the security guard manning the desk in the lobby, took out her iPhone, and prepared to wait.

After an hour, though, her calves ached, her scalp was soaked with sweat under her wig, and she could feel blisters forming on her heels. She was certain Simon hadn't left yet. She'd seen dozens of men exit the building, all looking vaguely alike in their dark suits and wingtips, but Simon wasn't among them.

Was it possible he'd been telling the truth?

Simon wasn't anything like the men she'd dated in the past. She usually went for strong, silent types, bad boys who took her to pool halls or pressed up against her at bars. She'd been on the back of more than one motorcycle, and she'd had her name tattooed on two different biceps. Simon was different. She'd met him at a bookstore, of all places. She'd taken Henry there on a Saturday afternoon because he'd gotten a gift certificate for his birthday, and she'd gone to the little coffee shop to get a latte. Simon was sitting there, reading *The Wall Street Journal*, wearing jeans with ironed creases down the front (after their third date, she'd gently suggested he have his cleaning lady stop doing that). The café was busy, and when Christie got her drink, she'd

stood there for a moment, wondering where to sit. Simon had looked up, assessed the situation, and gestured for her to take the empty chair at his table.

“Thanks,” she’d said. As she put down her latte, a little liquid had sloshed over the rim of her cup, onto the table.

Simon had put down his newspaper and reached for his napkin, which was as crisp and fresh as the rest of him.

“Thank you,” she’d said, giving him a closer look as he cleaned up the spill. He wasn’t ugly; he was just bland. He was on the thin side and wore his straight, gingery hair combed from a side part. He had on wire-rimmed glasses, a watch that was so plain it had to be expensive, and a striped oxford shirt. His teeth were very white and had obviously been coached into a perfect arc by an orthodontist. She ran her tongue over her own top teeth—one of the front ones tilted in toward the other, but some men told her it was sexy—and decided she could use a little more politeness in her life. The last guy she’d dated had called her a bitch when they’d argued about what movie to see.

When Simon didn’t pick his newspaper back up, she’d known he was going to ask her out, and he had, after they’d chatted for a few minutes. After giving him her phone number, she’d excused herself and gone to look for Henry, before he could come to her. She wasn’t planning to hide her son forever, but there wasn’t any need to advertise the fact that she had a teenager just yet.

They’d gone to dinner a few nights later. She’d been waiting in the lobby of her apartment building when he pulled up, because she wasn’t ready to let him see her place, either. She’d walked outside as he stepped out of the car, and he’d hurried to open the passenger-side door of his Porsche before she reached it. Christie knew about cars; enough of the men she’d dated had been obsessed by them. One had even had a photograph of Simon’s exact vehicle pinned up in his garage.

He took her to a restaurant with gleaming wooden booths and dim lighting and hushed voices, and when the waiter handed him a thick wine list bound in leather, Simon didn’t need to look at it. “Do you like Argentinian reds?” he asked Christie. “The Casa Lapostolle is good, if

we want to go with a Cabernet. It's smoky, with hints of berry. Or we could try a Pinot Grigio if you're in the mood for a lighter meal . . ."

"You choose," she said, feeling unexpectedly shy. Were you supposed to put the napkin on your lap the moment you sat down, or were you supposed to wait until the food arrived?

When the waiter brought the wine, Simon went through the ritual of smelling the cork and tasting a sip before crisply nodding his approval. Something about his authority gave him a shot of sex appeal, Christie thought. The waiter poured her a glass and she raised it to her lips. It felt velvety against her tongue, and tasted so different from anything she'd had in the past. She didn't dislike wine; she'd just never had any worth drinking, she realized.

She took another swallow, a bigger one this time. Simon had chosen the red, and she hoped it wasn't staining her teeth.

Two glasses later, her confidence had come rushing back. She could tell Simon was a little intoxicated, and not because of the alcohol. He couldn't stop staring at her. She was wearing a patterned wrap dress from T. J. Maxx, cut low enough that every time she leaned forward—and she made sure to do that often—her creamy, lush breasts were on display. They were absolutely her best feature, even if they'd begun to droop a bit. But a lacy push-up bra took care of that issue.

She visualized the type of woman Simon had dated in the past: yardstick-thin with hair severely scraped into a bun; wearing pantsuits and frowning as she earnestly discussed her rose garden and blue-chip stocks.

Yawn, she thought, and she launched into a story of her co-worker at the hair salon, the woman who'd accidentally cut a customer's finger with scissors when the customer had put her cell phone to her ear.

"I mean, it wasn't her fault!" Christie said, giggling. Simon was laughing, too. "She whipped out that phone the second it rang. I bet the person on the other end was surprised to hear her scream instead of say hello."

Over tender filet and lemony asparagus, she asked him about his work. "Boring lobbying stuff," he said. "I'm a partner at a law firm."

“Oh, I doubt it’s boring,” she said. She’d already Googled him, and she knew he was a name partner at one of the biggest firms in town.

“No, trust me, it is. You’ll fall asleep in your plate if I tell you more. So about your job . . . What is it you do there?” he asked.

The lie slipped out quickly: “I’m the manager.”

What was the harm in one tiny fib? she wondered as the waiter refilled her glass again. She swirled it around, as she’d seen Simon do, and took another sip. He was right; she could distinguish the hint of berries, and the not-unpleasant taste of smoke.

The waiter cleared away their plates, and she protested that she couldn’t possibly eat another bite, but Simon ordered a slice of cheesecake and insisted she try it. It was impossibly tart and airy, the best she’d ever eaten, and she closed her eyes while she sucked the last bite off her fork. When she opened them, she saw Simon looking at her with the expression she imagined she’d worn when she glimpsed the decadent cheesecake. The bill came and Simon pulled out his wallet and put in a credit card without even checking it, but not before Christie had seen that the three-digit total started with the number two.

The valet brought around the Porsche and Simon handed him a folded bill, then tucked Christie into the passenger’s seat like she was a delicate present. She looked over at his profile as he navigated the dark streets, his hands steady on the wheel, the moonlight glinting off his glasses. His shoulders were sloped and his ears seemed a little too big for his head, but Christie knew she could get past that.

“Would you like to come up?” she suggested when he parked in front of her apartment building. She’d been in Simon’s world for the past few hours, where everything was posh and orderly. Now it was time to introduce him to hers, and shake him up a little.

She’d already set the stage earlier in the day, dimming the lights to hide the fact that her apartment was a little shabby, with a stain on the couch and cheap Formica kitchen counters. She’d gathered up all her crap—shoes, clothes, dirty dishes, old magazines—and returned everything to its proper place. She’d even set up a John Mayer CD that would play at the touch of her remote control’s button.

Simon looked a little surprised when she led him through the

apartment's lobby. She wondered what he'd expected—a butler and glossy marble floors instead of linoleum? She was a single mother who worked for not much above minimum wage. But of course, Simon didn't know that. He didn't know anything about her, and she was beginning to think it would be a good idea to keep it that way for a while.

She unlocked her front door and quickly turned on the music. She didn't want Simon to spend too much time examining her apartment. She stood in the middle of the room and held Simon's eyes with her own as she untied her dress, her hips swaying to the languorous beat of the music, the dress slipping to the floor. His gasp was her reward. She was wearing a black lace thong that matched her bra, and thigh-high stockings. She left on her heels as she beckoned to Simon, seeing his upturned face alight. He was like a little boy getting his first glimpse of the Ferris wheel at the county fair.

He hadn't stayed over that night, but she hadn't wanted him to. The sex was mediocre, and it was over far too quickly. She'd had better nights with her vibrator and a Showtime movie, which she planned to turn to after he left.

But the next day, flowers arrived. The arrangement was so big she couldn't see the deliveryman's face behind it. Simon called a few hours later and invited her to see a play that weekend. A play! She hadn't been to one since her high school's production of *Grease*. It was excruciating—a single actor put on different hats and prattled on for ninety minutes—but afterward there was a late dinner with a cheese course for dessert, another novelty for her.

Simon couldn't get enough of her, at least in the beginning. Once he'd dashed out of work for a quickie when she told him she was standing in front of his office building, wearing absolutely nothing beneath her dress, but now he took a while to return her calls. She knew each brought something fresh to their relationship, something that had been previously missing from the other's life. She offered excitement and passion to Simon, and in return, he gave her luxury and security. At least, early on that was their relationship's equation. But then one night, after a few drinks, they'd been in bed together and she'd told him about not knowing her father. Simon had stroked her

hair and murmured that he was sorry, and she'd found herself crying. He hadn't tried to have sex again with her that night, even though he usually wanted to a second time. He'd just held her until she fell asleep. Something within her had shifted during the course of those hours. She realized his ears were actually a fine size. She left a few things at his town house in Georgetown, hoping he might offer her a drawer or some closet space. She even bought a book about sex, thinking they could work together to improve things.

Why had Simon begun to slip away just as she'd started to truly care for him?

Stakeouts sucked, she decided as she sighed, slipped off her shoes, and rested her sore feet against the hot pavement. She was contemplating going home when she caught a glimpse of movement to her left and realized Simon's Porsche was exiting the garage. She almost couldn't believe it, even though she thought she'd been expecting the betrayal. She glanced around wildly for a cab, but the only one she spotted had a passenger in the backseat.

Luckily traffic was terrible, just as she'd anticipated. She pulled on her shoes again and broke into a jog, avoiding the subway grates that could snag her heels, and headed north. Then a traffic light that was holding Simon's Porsche back turned green and he cut into a faster lane, moving a block ahead. She was in danger of losing him. She felt her wig start to slip, and she anchored it with one hand. It must be close to ninety degrees, and sweat dripped down her face and stung her eyes. The edges of her shoes cut into the tender skin around her heels, but she forced herself to run harder, even when a passing bus exhaled a gray plume of sour-smelling exhaust into her face.

"Someone's in a hurry!" a guy called after her. She gave him the finger and kept scanning the area for cabs, finally spotting one going the wrong way. She flagged it down anyway and leapt inside, breathing hard.

"Make a right and go around the block!" she said. She craned her head out the window, trying to keep Simon's car in view for as long as possible. "I'm trying to follow someone."

She'd expected a reaction from the cabbie, but maybe he was used to this sort of thing, or had seen too many thrillers, because he just

nodded and continued arguing with someone over his headset.

For a few minutes she was certain they'd lost Simon. But the cabbie was adept at finding tiny, opportunistic pockets of space, and he managed to move ahead, weaving through the cars clogging the streets.

"There!" Christie shouted.

She could see Simon's car one lane over. He drove as unimaginatively as he made love, so it was easy for the cabbie to maneuver closer to him. What a waste of a Porsche, Christie thought.

Simon took a few more turns, heading toward Georgetown, then pulled up in front of the Four Seasons Hotel. He gave his car to the valet, and as he stepped out, Christie noticed he was carrying pink roses. The bouquet was enormous. Her throat tightened.

She gave the cabdriver a ten and climbed out, keeping a steady twenty yards behind Simon. He wasn't checking in to the hotel after all, she realized as he passed the reception area. He walked through the lobby toward the Bourbon Steak restaurant. He spoke briefly to the hostess—Christie couldn't overhear the exchange—then was led away. Christie waited until he'd disappeared from view, then she entered the restaurant.

"May I help you?" a passing waiter asked, but Christie batted her hand at the man. "I'm meeting someone," she said.

She glanced around and saw Simon leaning down to kiss a dark-haired woman on the cheek before handing her the roses and taking the seat next to her. She couldn't glimpse the woman's face; her back was to the door. Christie stalked toward them, feeling the glances of other diners. She stood next to the table, but Simon was engrossed in conversation and didn't notice her.

"How's work?" she asked sweetly.

Simon's head snapped up. He blinked a few times, then his brow creased. "Christie?" he asked.

She glanced at his date and was struck by the fact that the woman was at least twenty years older than Simon. There was a blue Tiffany box on the woman's plate. What was going on? Could he possibly be proposing to this old crone?

But no, the box was too big. It might've held a bracelet, but not a

ring.

And Simon and the woman weren't alone, Christie realized. They were at the end of a table filled with people of various ages. From her vantage point across the room, Christie hadn't noticed they were all together.

Simon stood up, his manners apparently so ingrained that they stuck with him even when he was unexpectedly confronted by a wig-wearing lover. "This is my mother, Eleanor. Mother, this is—this is Christie."

"Your mother?" Christie echoed.

Why hadn't Simon simply told her he was going to dinner with his mother?

"And my younger brother, David, and his girlfriend, Morgan," Simon said, gesturing around the table as everyone looked up, naked interest spreading across their faces. "Our dear friends the Griffins . . . the Simpsons, who are longtime neighbors . . ."

"Chrissy, was it?" Morgan asked. She was one of those too-thin women who seemed like they filled their leisure hours with horseback riding and bridge games, exactly the kind Christie had imagined Simon had previously fallen for.

"Christie," she corrected. Her name hung there for a moment as everyone looked up at her.

"Are you on your way to a costume party?" Simon finally asked.

Simon's mother appraised her coolly as Christie slowly became aware of how she must look: her makeup smudged, her wig askew, her armpits sweating so profusely they'd stained her trench coat with dark, sticky patches.

"Yes," she said.

"Oh! Well, have fun," Simon said. "We're celebrating my mother's birthday, so . . ."

He obviously expected her to walk away. But this wasn't an intimate dinner; there were ten people at the table. A few weeks earlier she'd introduced Simon to the most important person in her life—Henry. They'd watched *The Matrix* and had shared a giant bowl of popcorn. Yet obviously, Simon wanted to keep her removed from his family.

Everyone else had gotten a description when he'd introduced them,

she thought as she felt her cheeks burn. Dear friends. Longtime neighbors. *A girlfriend*. But she was just Christie, someone who could be an acquaintance—a secretary at his office, a waitress at one of his regular restaurants. Maybe he'd hoped everyone at the table would draw that conclusion.

The knowledge slammed into her: Dorky, premature-ejaculating Simon was ashamed of her.

She felt her fury gather as she wondered what transgressions had relegated her to outsider status. Had he seen her checking her iPhone during the play? Maybe she'd used a wrong fork, or had walked on the outside of the sidewalk instead of the inside.

"Let me escort you out," Simon said.

"Escort me out?" Christie's voice rose, and she could see people swiveling to watch. She picked up the nearest beverage and tossed it at Simon. He gave a little girly screech and reared back. "Screw you, Simon. Because you sure won't be screwing *me* again with your little dick."

A waiter hurried over. "Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to leave," he said. "You're disturbing our guests."

"Don't bother," Christie said. She pointed at Simon: "And don't ever call me again."

She'd meant to deliver her exit line in a chilly tone, the one the rich people on *Downton Abbey* used when they were upset.

But instead, her damned voice broke.

Chapter Five

THE CALL CAME IN at 2:05 P.M. on the hottest afternoon of the year.

Earlier that day, a thunderstorm had unleashed its power and temporarily washed the heat out of the air. But now the sun was blazing, seemingly furious that it had been blotted out by the storm clouds, acting as if it was trying to make up for lost time. Jamie was in the kitchen, reaching into a shopping bag for the milk she'd just picked up at the grocery store, when the phone rang.

Their air conditioner, which they'd used only sparingly until today, had been blasting away—until it suddenly stopped. Jamie had called the HVAC company and wasn't reassured by the receptionist's response: Everyone had started using their air conditioners full force today, meaning that all the electrical issues that had quietly developed over the past few months had exploded. A technician probably couldn't be there for two days, the receptionist had said.

"Two days?" Jamie had said. "We've got kids, and a dog . . . please, is there any way he can come sooner?"

"I'd go to a hotel," the receptionist had advised, unhelpfully. "One with a pool."

Jamie had begged a little longer, and the receptionist had promised to call back if there was an unexpected opening. So at the sound of the ring, she snatched up the receiver, hoping for a miracle.

"Mrs. Anderson?" The voice was male, unfamiliar, and official. "This is Officer McManus. Am I speaking to the wife of Mike Anderson?"

Her knees almost gave way before she remembered: If Mike had been killed in the line of duty, officers would've appeared at her door instead of calling. She'd know instantly when she glimpsed their faces; there would be no need for them to utter a single word.

She gasped for breath. "Yes," she said. "Mike. Is my husband okay?"

"He's safe, ma'am," the officer said.

Her head spun; the officer's voice wasn't reassuring. Was Mike hurt, then? She thought about the blood on his uniform at the hospital, that black band on his badge, his late-night drifting around the house. He shouldn't have gone back to work; he wasn't ready. Why had she let him? His reflexes were too slow. He didn't even hear his own children calling him. Suddenly she was certain he'd missed a threat, one he would've spotted just a few months ago. She thought of Ritchie in the rehab unit, struggling to eat, and she staggered forward and clutched the kitchen counter.

Please, she thought, her lips forming the word.

"What happened?" she asked, and she squeezed her eyes shut, as if that could cushion her from what would come next. Even when Mike had been stabbed by the junkie, there hadn't been an official call. Mike himself had phoned from the hospital just before he'd gotten stitched up.

When the words finally came, they bounced off her without penetrating. It was as if the officer was speaking underwater, or in a foreign language, or through a scrambled radio transmission. She could hear the sounds he was making, but comprehension eluded her.

"Mike shot someone in the line of duty. A teenage boy," the officer said. "He's at the station now."

Jamie gasped. "Did Mike get shot, too?"

"Mike wasn't injured," the officer said. His sentence seemed to dangle there, with the most important part unspoken.

"The boy," Jamie said. A teenager. Was he close to Henry's age? "You said he was at the station."

"No, ma'am," the officer said. "I meant Mike is at the station."

"Should I come there?" Jamie asked.

"No, that wouldn't be a good idea," the officer said. "There are still some . . . formalities to go through."

His tone was telling her something his words weren't. Jamie leaned forward, resting her head against the door of a cabinet, feeling her throat thicken. "Is the boy. . . ?"

She couldn't finish her sentence. But she didn't need to; she knew the answer before the officer spoke in a voice that seemed heavier

than it had been a moment before.

"He's dead, ma'am."

...

Lou was measuring out the elephants' evening meal when her cell buzzed in her pocket.

"Hey, Sis," she said, cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder while she threw another armful of leafy greens onto the industrial-size scale.

"Lou."

Jamie's voice sounded strangled. "Mike . . ." she began, then her voice trailed off into a high-pitched squeak. Lou's heart began to pound.

Nononononono, she thought, the words building like a scream in her mind. Not Mike. Please not Mike.

"He shot someone," Jamie whispered.

Lou's mind swam as she fought for clarity. "Mike. He wasn't hurt?" she finally asked.

"No," Jamie said. "They told me he was safe . . ."

"Good," Lou said. She tried to unknot her thoughts. "That's good, right?"

Jamie's breathing was ragged, as if she was running hard. "It was a teenage boy— Lou, I don't know what kind of state Mike is going to be in. He's never hurt anyone before."

Lou slumped down on the hard floor. Mike had shot a teenager?

"It's so hot . . . I can't breathe," Jamie said. "The air-conditioning. I thought they were calling about the air-conditioning."

Jamie didn't sound like herself. Could she be in shock?

"Do you want me to come over?" Lou asked. Her shift was ending soon, and she'd already treated Tabby's tail, which seemed to be healing.

"I—I don't know," Jamie said. "Mike might want to be alone . . . I don't know when he's going to get home. And I need to— The milk is spoiling. I was just putting everything away. Oh, God, Lou, he wasn't hurt. He's safe."

Lou listened to her sister sob and tried to think of the right thing to do. "I think I should come over," Lou finally said. "I can be there in twenty minutes."

She stood up and reached for a pad of paper and, with a shaking hand, scribbled a note detailing the rest of the work that needed to be done for the elephants. She found another keeper and gave him the piece of paper. She saw him read it and nod, then she ran for the exit, her phone pressed tightly to her ear.

"The kids," Jamie said. Lou could hear her blowing her nose. "I put *Finding Nemo* on after the call . . . What am I going to tell them, Lou?"

"I don't know," Lou said, wishing she could give her sister the right answers.

"Maybe I should wait for Mike to talk to them," Jamie said.

"That sounds like a good idea. I'm going to take a taxi," Lou said. "I'm on Connecticut Avenue, so I should be able to hail one pretty fast."

"Do you think Mike will need to stay a long time?" Jamie asked.

"I don't know," Lou said again. She spotted a taxi and waved it down.

Jamie's breathing still sounded jagged and she made a little whimpering sound. "I can't believe this happened. Mike's never going to get over this. And that boy . . . his family . . ."

"I'm coming as fast as I can. I love you," Lou said before she hung up. "Just take some deep breaths, okay?"

She climbed into the cab, leaned back against the vinyl seat, and closed her eyes, then opened them again when she felt a sudden rush of hot wind on her face from an open window. The cabbie was looking back at her and wrinkling his nose.

She closed her eyes again and tried to follow the advice she'd just given Jamie and breathe, but then a breaking announcement came over the radio.

Lou caught the first few words and leaned forward. "Can you turn that up?" she asked.

The radio announcer's voice filled the small, enclosed space: ". . . breaking up a gang fight when the shooting occurred. The deceased's name is currently being withheld pending notification of his

relatives, but he is described as a fifteen-year-old Hispanic male. Sources say the Metropolitan police officer who fired his weapon was the partner of Officer Ritchie Crawford, who was seriously injured in a shooting outside police headquarters just a few months ago.”

The taxi was still moving, but Lou felt as if it had slammed into a concrete wall.

The cabbie shook his head. “These police, they shoot too much. Out of control.”

Lou thought of Mike on the couch, his arm slung around Henry, ruffling the boy’s hair as Mike teased his son about liking a pretty girl in his class. She could see Mike charming Eloise out of a temper tantrum by quacking like Daffy Duck, and tossing Sam in the air and pretending to bobble him after he caught him. Then she remembered Mike with the dead eyes, leaving his car keys in the refrigerator.

Lou wrapped her arms around herself and bowed her head.

The report cut to a sound bite from someone—Lou didn’t catch the name: “How many times does a young man of color need to be murdered by police before we as a country demand that it stop? Police are there to protect all of our citizens, especially the vulnerable. Especially the young. Tonight a family is grieving for no reason other than the actions of a trigger-happy police officer who decided to be the judge, jury, and executioner when he saw a brown face.”

“Turn it off!” Lou shouted.

The cabdriver obeyed without a word. The silence pressed down around her.

Lou reached for her phone again and dialed Jamie’s number.

“Lou?” Jamie’s voice was thick with fresh tears.

“Did you hear it?” Lou blurted.

“Hear what?” Jamie asked.

“Nothing,” Lou said quickly. “Are the kids watching *Nemo* on TV or is it a DVD?”

“What?” Jamie asked. “I think— It’s a DVD. Why?”

“Just don’t turn on the TV or radio until I get there, okay? I’m in a cab now. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Okay,” Jamie said.

Lou could sense the cabdriver watching her. She looked up to see

his dark eyes with heavy brows in the rearview mirror.

Lou had offered to help, but the irony was, Lou needed Jamie to instruct her on what to do. Jamie would be good in this situation—she'd keep everybody calm, and figure out the next step. She'd fix something to eat and tuck in the kids and sit down and start making a plan. But Jamie was drowning now; Lou could hear it in her voice. For the first time, her big sister needed saving.

Lou would do anything for Jamie, but she wasn't sure if she could do this. She didn't know how.

The cabbie finally reached Jamie and Mike's modest brick home, and Lou swiped her credit card through the electronic payment device.

"You know him?" the cabbie asked as Lou opened the door. "The cop?"

Without even thinking about it, Lou blurted "No" and slammed the door.

Instantly she felt a crush of guilt. She wanted to call back the cab, to yell, "Yes, and he's the best guy I know! He didn't do it—not like they said on the radio!"

But the cab was turning the corner and disappearing, and Jamie was throwing open the door. She must have been standing by it, watching for Lou. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and she looked smaller somehow. Diminished.

Lou finally knew what to do—at least for now. She hurried toward her big sister, stretching out her arms.

...

Christie was giving herself a manicure when her cell phone rang, startling her and making her smudge her thumbnail. She swore softly, then answered, already irritated at whoever was calling. It had better not be Simon, although she was furious he'd taken her at her word and hadn't called. She'd never go out with him again, but a little groveling would be nice.

"Hi, is this Mrs. Anderson?"

Christie frowned. "No," she said. "It isn't."

"Oh—I'm sorry. This is Sara James. Henry gave me this number for

his mom. He's over here hanging out with my son Jake."

Christie poured a little polish remover onto a cotton ball and began to wipe her thumb clean. She'd have to redo it.

"This is Christie Simmons," she said. "Henry and I have different last names."

"Oh, me, too," Sara said. "I never took my husband's name, either."

And I never married Henry's father, Christie thought. Who cares?

"Anyway, I'm calling because Henry was supposed to be picked up an hour ago. It's no big deal, but Jake has swim team tonight, so . . ."

Perfect Jamie had forgotten to pick Henry up? Christie could hardly believe it.

"I'll swing by and get him," Christie said. "Sorry about that. Henry's stepmother must have forgotten."

She relished saying those words. Maybe Sara would repeat them to a few other mothers, let Jamie be the one to look bad for a change. Christie knew she was the subject of gossip among some of the other parents, who assumed Jamie was Henry's biological mother until she corrected them. Christie stood out—she brought cupcakes with nuts to one of Henry's classrooms, not realizing there was a kid with a potentially fatal allergy in the class, cheered too loudly when Henry shot a basket or caught a foul ball, and stood up to take pictures at the holiday pageant until a pinched-faced woman tapped her on the shoulder and asked her to sit down.

You just don't want your husband looking at my ass, Christie had thought. Maybe her black leather skirt was a touch tight, but she liked it that way and guys sure seemed to as well. No way was she going to turn into one of these Stepford mothers in a pastel sweater set and chinos. She'd unleashed a little shimmy as she sat down, just to piss off the wife. But later that night, when the pageant ended, she'd said good-bye to Henry, who was going home with Mike. Jamie was talking to the sour-faced woman, and Christie wondered if she was the topic of conversation. A lot of husbands were going to get the cars and warm them up and bring them back for their families. She overheard people making plans to go out for hot chocolate as she walked past parents posing for pictures with their kids. Her car was at the far end of the parking lot since she'd arrived a few minutes late, and by the

time she reached it, her toes felt like cubes of ice in her thin boots. She'd gone to a bar with a friend and had ended up sleeping with a guy. The next day, she'd awoken with a headache and no recollection of his name.

After Christie wrote down the address and promised to come pick up Henry, she took a moment to finish painting her nails (in Essie's Forever Young, and if Freud had anything to say about that, he could screw himself). A few minutes later she headed out, blasting her favorite Dave Matthews CD all the way Sara's house. She found Henry and his friend tossing around a football in the front yard. The front door of the expensive-looking Tudor was open, and Sara stepped out and locked it behind her, then hurried toward Christie.

"Thanks for coming so quickly," she said as Christie got out of her car. Christie felt herself standing up a little straighter. She was the good mother in this scenario, the responsible one.

"I just can't imagine why Jamie forgot," Christie said, shaking her head. She was thoroughly enjoying this role.

Henry came over and gave Christie a hug. She wondered if it would ever stop feeling strange to have her cheek brush against her son's jaw.

"You ready to go?" she asked. "I thought I'd grill some chicken if you're hungry." That line was for Sara's benefit, too.

"Jake, come on, we're late," Sara said, climbing into her car and turning on the engine. She waved as she pulled out of her driveway.

"Are you really making chicken?" Henry asked.

"Sure," Christie said. "We just need to swing by the store to get some." Thank goodness she hadn't gotten too deep into character and said she'd make coq au vin—which she'd eaten once with Simon, the pretentious jerk.

"I wonder what happened to Jamie," Henry said.

She probably forgot you, Christie wanted to say. But she couldn't. Any passive-aggressiveness she felt toward Mike's wife paled in comparison to the love she felt for her son. She couldn't put Jamie down if it meant hurting Henry. There weren't many lines she wouldn't cross in life, but this one was firm.

"Maybe there was some emergency," she said instead.

"I tried calling the house, but no one answered," Henry said. "Should we go by there first?"

Christie thought about it. "Sure," she finally said. She was curious, and she also wanted to see the look on Jamie's face when Jamie realized she'd messed up.

They drove to Jamie and Mike's, arriving a little before 5:00 P.M.

"Looks like they're home," Christie said. "Her minivan's here."

She rang the doorbell and heard the sounds of running feet. "I GOT IT!" Eloise shrieked.

"No, let me," someone was saying—a woman with a deep voice. There was the sound of a brief scuffle, then Jamie's sister, Lou, who quite frankly weirded Christie out, opened the door.

"Yes?" Lou said. Recognition dawned in Lou's eyes a second later. "Oh! It's you. Sorry, I thought— Never mind." She had the door open about six inches, and she looked like a bat peering out of its cave. Lou didn't make a move to let them in.

Seriously, there was something wrong with Jamie's sister.

Eloise was screaming, "I wanna get the door! I wanna get the door!"

"Sorry," Lou said again. "I'm going to shut the door. Can you ring the bell again so Eloise can open it?"

"For real?" Christie asked. The door swung shut. Christie stabbed the bell again.

"Herro?" Eloise said in her little-girl voice. "Henry! Henry! Henry's home!"

"Can we come in?" Christie asked. "It's really hot out here."

"It isn't much better in here," Lou said, but the door finally opened.

The first thing Christie noticed was the mess. Jamie wasn't one of those 1950s-style housekeepers, but her place was generally clean, if not tidy. Today, though, there was a bag with wet bathing suits on the wood floor just inside the entrance, leaking a widening pool of water, and another bag of groceries nearby, slumping over as if it had given up hope of ever being unpacked. Toys were everywhere, and the mail was scattered across the floor, where it must have fallen after being pushed through the slot, and was that. . . ? Christie squinted. Yes. A big old dog turd decorated the middle of the living room rug. She just hoped one of the kids didn't step in it.

“Everything okay?” Christie asked. The yippy little mutt was jumping all over her and barking—probably desperate for someone to take her for a walk, Christie thought. And Lou wasn’t kidding; it was stifling in here. Christie lifted her hair off her neck with one hand and fanned herself with the other. “Where’s Jamie?”

“I’m here,” Jamie said. She came around the corner, and Christie noticed her eyes were swollen and red-rimmed. “Hey, Henry.” Jamie reached for the boy and hugged him for a long time, then she let go and turned to Christie. “Thank you so much for coming, Christie,” she said. Then she did something remarkable—she hugged Christie, too.

For a moment, shock paralyzed Christie. She couldn’t remember if she and Jamie had ever even touched before and now here stood Mike’s wife, her arms wrapped around Christie’s neck, her face buried in Christie’s shoulder. Despite the heat Jamie felt cold. She was trembling, too, and Christie’s heart began to pound. Mike worked the seven-to-three shift—he had for years—and his cruiser wasn’t out front. He should have been home by now. Had something happened to him?

“What’s going on?” Christie asked. Jamie shook her head and held on to Christie tighter.

“Jamie?” Henry asked. “Where’s my dad?”

The quaver of fear in Henry’s voice was what finally seemed to break through to Jamie.

“Oh, honey,” she said. She finally pulled away from Christie and cupped Henry’s cheek in her hand. “I’m so glad you’re here. Your dad is going to want to see you as soon as he gets home. He’ll be here soon. He’s fine, everything’s going to be fine . . .”

Everything was not fine. The house was an oven and Eloise was wearing shorts but no shirt and holding on to Henry’s leg and there was poop on the floor and Jamie was babbling in that way that seemed a thin edge from hysteria.

“Can you go say hi to the other kids?” Lou asked Henry. “They were excited to see me, but you’re like a rock star to them.”

Lou inched up a bit in Christie’s estimation. Henry smiled modestly and went into the living room.

“We should sit down,” Jamie said, motioning toward the dining

room. Christie followed the sisters to the big wooden table, feeling anxiety gnaw at her.

“Where’s Mike?” she asked. “Did something happen to him?”

“No,” Jamie said at the exact same moment Lou replied, “Yes.”

“Someone tell me what the hell is going on!”

Before either woman could reply, Henry appeared in the doorway of the room, clutching his cell phone.

“Jamie?” he said. Just a little while ago, when she’d seen him at his friend Jake’s house, Christie had been struck by how big her boy was getting. The fuzz above his upper lip, that deepening voice, those broad shoulders—he was teetering on the brink of manhood. But now he looked like a little boy again, all gangly limbs and huge brown eyes.

“One of my friends just texted me,” Henry said in a wavering voice. “Did Dad really shoot someone?”

Chapter Six

MIKE DIDN'T COME HOME until nearly seven o'clock that night. Jamie watched as a cruiser pulled up in front of their house and Mike got out of the passenger's seat. She ran to the front door, flinging it open, as the police car pulled away. Her husband's gait dragged as he approached their house. His head was bowed, and he still wore his uniform.

Jamie closed the door behind her, so the kids couldn't hear, and leaned into him. After a moment, she felt his arms rise and encircle her body. They stayed locked together, wordlessly, for a long moment.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she whispered.

She felt his shoulders heave, just once, then he released a sigh. "A bunch of bangers were fighting. I don't know, maybe it was an initiation or something. It was too big to be spontaneous . . ."

She nodded when he paused. *Tell me*, she thought. *Please don't hold this in, too.*

"We were close by. A car had skidded through an intersection and wrapped around a streetlight. Anyway, no one was hurt, so when the call came in we got there first. Jay, the fucking idiot they paired me with, he just starts running into the scene. He doesn't wait for backup, he doesn't stay behind me, he just goes. Maybe he figured they were young-looking so they'd be scared of the cops. What the hell was he thinking?"

"I don't know," Jamie whispered.

"The rain's still pouring down, and Jay's heading straight for two guys fighting. He's screaming, 'Freeze!' like he's on a fucking TV show. And I'm trying to get to him, to cover him, but guys keep running in and out of my line of sight. Someone punches me in the head from behind, and I spin around but he's already gone. When I turn back, I see a guy reaching around behind him. Like to the back waistband of

his pants, and I know what he's doing. He's getting his piece. Jay's about twenty feet away and he's got out his pepper spray. How does he think a hot shot versus a gun is going to end?"

Mike's breathing was rougher now.

"The guy started to draw on Jay and I had a shot. I took it."

"You thought he was going to shoot Jay," Jamie said.

Mike nodded. "He was going to shoot Jay. Another two, three seconds . . . I see people looking up, like they think maybe the shot is another crack of thunder. Then the sirens come. Everyone's running around, yelling. Our backup arrives and they secure the scene while I call for an ambulance."

Jamie rubbed his back like she did the kids' when they were hurt or upset.

"I knew it the second I fired. Before I even got close to him and saw his eyes." Mike shook his head, like he was trying to deny his own words. "He was a year older than Henry."

"I know," Jamie said. She kept rubbing Mike's broad back because she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I play basketball around there sometimes. I might've played with him."

Mike hadn't done it in a few months, but on occasional weekend mornings when he was off duty he joined a pickup game in the community he patrolled. It was a way of showing young men another side to the police. They sweated together, argued over fouls real and imagined, and walked off the courts slapping each other's palms.

"You need to rest," Jamie said. "Come inside."

"Do the kids know?" Mike asked.

"Henry heard something about it from one of his friends," Jamie said. "I told him we'd talk about it when you got home."

Mike pulled away from her and scrubbed his hands over his face. "Yeah."

"Lou's here," Jamie said. "Christie, too."

Mike jerked back. "What's she doing here?"

"She wants to help," Jamie said. "But we can ask her to go if you want."

Mike shook his head again. "I keep seeing him, lying there. You

know how the kids like to make snow angels? That's what he looked like. A snow angel bleeding out on a piece of asphalt."

A tremor ran through Mike's body, and Jamie could see his throat working convulsively.

"Honey," Jamie said. "You didn't start the fight. You didn't put the gun in his hand. This wasn't your fault, Mike! You were just doing your job."

Mike nodded, but the expression on his face told Jamie her words hadn't penetrated.

"They didn't find a gun," he said in a low voice.

Jamie felt herself go ice-cold as Mike's words echoed in the space between them. "What do you mean?"

"The union rep came. He told me not to say anything, but that's bullshit. I didn't do anything wrong. I told them what I could tonight and I'm going in tomorrow for a formal statement." Mike shook his head. "Jay told them he didn't see a gun. He thought the guy was just drawing back his fist to punch the kid again. Jay couldn't even look at me."

"He was wrong!" Jamie cried. "He's an idiot. You said so—"

Mike cut her off: "A few of the bangers were questioned, the ones they could round up, at least. They all said the same thing: No gun."

Mike's voice was a monotone now.

"There wasn't a gun?" Jamie echoed, her throat closing around the words. "Did they look around? Maybe it fell out of his hand."

"They looked," Mike said. "I looked. I was the first one to reach the guy."

"No," Jamie said. She felt her insides collapse. "No, Mike."

"I swear to you," Mike said, staring at her, his eyes hard and intent. He gripped her shoulders, his fingers digging into her flesh. "I saw it, Jamie."

"We have to think," Jamie said. She was breathing hard now, her mind scrambling. "It was raining! It was hard to see! Anyone could've made that mistake! They can't blame you!"

She felt hysteria rise within her. She saw Mike leading with his SIG Sauer as he walked through their shadowy house, imagining a threat that had never existed. Her eyes went instinctively to the holster on his

hip. It was empty. They must've taken his gun as evidence.

Jamie turned to look at their house and the four innocent children who were depending on them. Then she spun back around at the sudden sound of an engine. A white news van was coming down their street.

Mike didn't appear to notice the approaching van. He was in his own world now. He had been for quite some time. Why had she ever thought he needed to go back to work? He hadn't been ready, not even close, and now a teenager was dead and his family was shattered and all of their lives were wrecked.

Jamie began to tremble. The news van stopped in front of their house.

This can't be happening, she thought.

Part Two

Chapter Seven

IT WAS THE FIRST time Lou had taken a sick day since she'd begun working at the zoo. The flu, a broken toe (incurred when she'd been assisting with an examination of a hippo who changed his mind about cooperating), a lingering sinus infection . . . none of it could keep Lou from her beloved animals. Being around them felt healing.

She craved the elephants' calming presence even more than usual today, because the scene at Jamie and Mike's was so alarming. By now there were three news vans with big antennas crowding the street, and Lou had glimpsed a reporter she recognized from television standing in front of the house, talking as a cameraman filmed her.

Inside, things were just as disorienting. After Mike had come home last night, he'd changed into shorts and a T-shirt, then slumped on the couch, staring at a Disney movie with the kids. Jamie had stationed herself in the kitchen, making spaghetti and a huge salad and garlic bread and, of all things, an apple pie. An apple pie! As if Jamie had time to be coring and slicing fruit. And the last thing they needed was for the oven to be on, adding a few more degrees of heat to the sweltering house.

"What are you doing?" Lou had asked. "Don't you think you should be with Mike?"

But Jamie's lips had trembled. "It's Mike's favorite."

Lou had understood then: Her sister was trying to find a way to give her husband some small measure of comfort. So Lou had picked up a knife and begun slicing Granny Smiths, too. No one had seemed to notice as the clock ticked later, so at around 9:00 P.M., Lou had cajoled the kids to bed with the promise of a special contest—whoever could pee the longest would win a lollipop.

Lou had realized belatedly that none of the kids had brushed their

teeth, and she was pretty sure she'd forgotten at least one other part of Jamie's nighttime routine, but at least they were asleep. She'd finally done one small thing to help her sister, something concrete. Jamie had asked her to spend the night, so she'd borrowed the minivan and hurried home to grab a quick shower and pack up her toothbrush and a nightshirt and change of clothes. Luckily no reporters had followed her. The relief on Donny's and Mary Alice's faces when she told them she'd be gone for a day or two had reminded her that she needed to move out soon, on top of everything else. When she'd returned, Jamie and Mike were talking quietly in the living room, so Lou had gone upstairs to lie down on their bed. Somehow she'd fallen asleep, still wearing her shoes. She'd forgotten to brush her teeth, too.

Lou figured she'd check in after work to see if Jamie needed her to run to the store or something, given that Jamie had used up just about everything in her pantry last night cooking a meal that easily could've served twelve. But this morning, when she'd crept downstairs in the grainy, gray light of dawn, she'd seen Jamie and Mike sitting side by side on the couch, in the same position as the night before. They weren't talking. Lou wondered if they'd even slept. She felt dazed and muddy; it must've been eighty-five degrees in there. It was hard to breathe, let alone think.

"Hi, Lou," Jamie said without turning around, and Lou started. She thought she'd been quiet, but Jamie seemed to have developed supersonic hearing since having children.

"Hi," Lou whispered. She didn't want to interrupt the intimate moment—it seemed like that was all she was doing lately—but Jamie motioned for her to join them. Lou brushed some Legos off a chair and sat down. She looked at her sister and brother-in-law carefully. Jamie was still wearing the same outfit as yesterday, and she was twirling her hair into knots again. Mike hadn't shaved, and his eyes were bleary. They both looked wilted, like flowers whose source of water had run out days earlier.

"Are you going into work today?" Lou asked Mike. She wondered if the question was too blunt, but Mike didn't seem to mind.

He shook his head. "They told me to stay home for now. Administrative leave."

He put his feet up on the coffee table and crossed his arms. When animals felt threatened, they usually tried to take up more space—puffing up their hair or extending their limbs, Lou thought. Mike was doing the opposite. Did that mean he was accepting defeat?

They sat together in silence, then Lou caught sight of the clock across the room and stood up. “I should probably get going,” she said.

Jamie looked at Mike, then back at Lou. “Actually,” she said, “would you mind staying today?”

“Yeah, sure,” Lou said. She could get someone else to take over her duties at the zoo. She certainly had enough vacation time coming.

“Maybe you could take the kids to a movie,” Jamie said. “I don’t have any camps or anything lined up this week.”

“Sounds good,” Lou said.

“Tell her the rest,” Mike said. There was a white line around his mouth.

It was only then that Lou noticed the morning’s paper spread out on the coffee table under Mike’s feet. She looked up to see Jamie’s lips trembling. “The press found out about Mike’s nickname.”

Lou furrowed her brow. She wasn’t aware that Mike had one.

“It’s Rambo,” Jamie said. “Because he’s got dark hair and muscles! But the press is turning it into something else . . .”

“How did they find out?” Lou asked.

“Does it matter?” Jamie asked. Tears slid down her cheeks. Mike put his arm around her, and Jamie pressed her face into his chest, her shoulders shaking.

“Mommy?”

They all turned at the sound of Eloise’s voice.

“I wet.”

That was what she’d forgotten last night—to put a Pull-Up on Eloise, Lou suddenly remembered. Eloise had managed to take off her pajamas, and she was holding a blanket.

“It’s okay, baby.” Jamie pushed away her tears with her hands and stood up. “I’ll clean you up and get you some dry PJs. Do you want to go sleep in my bed?”

Eloise just shook her head and walked around the couch and climbed into her dad’s lap. Mike wrapped the blanket more securely

around his daughter and rested his cheek against the top of her head. Lou swallowed hard as she watched them.

"I'll go change her sheets," Jamie said. Lou followed her out of the room and up the stairs.

"I can't stand this," Jamie whispered. Part of her hair was sticking up and her forehead was creased. "Do you think Mike will go to jail?"

Lou shook her head, even though she had no idea. "It's not like he just shot someone in cold blood."

"But I feel partly responsible," Jamie said. "I knew he wasn't himself."

Jamie began stripping the sheets off Eloise's toddler bed as she spoke, bundling them into the laundry hamper in a corner of the room. "He was just a boy, Lou." She dropped her face into her hands and her shoulders shook a few times, then she lifted her head and resumed moving.

"You don't realize how close you are to disaster until it happens," Jamie said, her voice growing shrill. "Do you know what happens to cops in jail? It's worse than you can imagine. And the kids"—her voice broke, but she managed to steady it—"they'll lose their dad if Mike is charged with a crime. Even if they don't charge him, if he ends up losing his job we'll lose the house; we can barely afford the mortgage as it is. I'll go back to work—God, who would even hire me now?—and Christie will probably still try to demand child support. Can you believe Mike pays her five hundred bucks a month? We take care of Henry most of the time!"

"You can't think about this stuff now," Lou blurted. Jamie had a little spittle in the corner of her mouth and her eyes looked as crazy as her hair. The cornerstone in Lou's life was self-destructing.

"I *have* to think about it," Jamie said. "I know you said not to watch the news, but I need to know what we're up against."

Jamie walked over to Eloise's window and pulled back the curtain. She jabbed her finger toward the photographers and news vans staked out in front of the house. "Look at this! Should I just keep the kids in all day? What if a reporter says something to one of them?"

"Um, maybe they should go out, like you said," Lou said. "I can take them to the movie. Keep things normal." Routines were important—at

the zoo, animals depended upon them.

"I also think you should take a shower," Lou said. Jamie looked a little surprised, and Lou wondered if she'd hurt her sister's feelings. She tried to soften her words with a joke: "I'm the one people usually say that to."

"I've got to start breakfast—" Jamie began, but Lou cut her off.

"Do you know that by this time I've fed forty thousand pounds of mammal? I think I can handle making some toast."

She'd said the right thing for once. Jamie actually smiled, but a moment later, her lips were curving down again. "I don't know how to do this, Lou. I don't think I can do it. Oh my God . . . that poor boy. His poor mother . . ."

"It's going to be okay," Lou said, and she gently pushed Jamie toward the shower so her sister wouldn't read the lie in her eyes.

...

Christie pulled her red Miata into the salon's parking lot and chose the most convenient spot. Employees weren't supposed to do that—they'd been instructed to leave their cars in the back, so customers could nab the prime spaces—but it was Christie's last day of work. She'd also begged the best stylist to give her a free cut in between customers. Who cared if the salon's owner objected to any of it? She wasn't ever coming back to this place.

Tonight Christie had her first paid undercover job. The freckle-faced man's wife had given them her husband's daily schedule: what time he usually got to work, what time he left the office, where he routinely ate lunch. Elroy had read through it before crafting a plan. He suggested the wife text her husband and ask him to stop at the Safeway on his way home to pick up diapers and milk. Christie would be in the store, her purse slipping off her shoulder, doing her best to cross paths with the guy. Her outfit was waiting on the passenger's seat: a black minidress with straps that crisscrossed over her back, and red high heels. If everything went as expected, she'd arrange to meet the mark at a hotel in the next day or two. Freckle-face wouldn't know what hit him until he heard the echo of the hotel room door

slamming behind her.

She should upgrade her car, Christie thought as she took the keys out of the ignition. Her Miata was cute, but it was seven years old, and now that she had a real job—something thrilling and well paying—she might need to invest in a Mercedes or at least an Audi. Maybe she'd go test-drive some at the dealership tomorrow. It would be a perfect way to celebrate her first case. To kick off her new life.

Christie locked her car, then slung her purse (fake, but a good Chanel copy) over her shoulder and walked toward the salon. It didn't officially open for fifteen minutes, but she could see employees inside, setting up the coffeepot to brew and stocking their stations with hair spray and brushes for the day ahead.

"Hey," she called as she pulled open the heavy glass door.

"Shhh!" someone chided. The flat-screen television toward the back of the room, which was usually turned to music videos, was showing the news. Two stylists stood in front of it, rapt.

"Well, excuse me," Christie said. She walked over to the receptionist's desk and tucked her purse in a lower drawer. Slowly she became aware of the topic of the news report, and without moving her head, she raised her eyes toward the television.

A woman with a helmet of auburn hair and an intense expression was standing outside what looked like—what *was*—Mike and Jamie's house. Christie blinked and took a step closer to the television. The newscaster was saying: ". . . killing an unarmed Hispanic teenager, just a few months after the fatal shooting of Officer Larry Prichard in front of police headquarters. Officer Richard Crawford was also injured in that same shooting and remains on indefinite leave. Officer Crawford was Anderson's longtime partner, and, sources say, Anderson was deeply upset after witnessing the shooting . . . Anderson is currently on paid administrative leave."

One of the stylists flipped the channel to a Christina Aguilera video and moved back to her station, but Christie felt rooted in place.

Mike had killed someone?

Last night, after Henry had come into the dining room with his cell phone containing the text from his friend, Jamie had leapt to her feet to reassure him. Jamie had woven what Christie now understood was

a truncated story—Mike had fired at a young man who was holding a gun, it was unclear exactly what had happened, but the details were all being sorted out. Mike was perfectly safe and hadn't done anything wrong, Jamie had repeated at least twice.

"Your dad will explain everything when he gets home," Jamie had said, reaching for the phone and tucking it into her pocket. "Can I hold it for you, honey? It's probably best if you don't talk to anyone until your dad gets here."

Christie had believed the story—and Jamie hadn't bothered to clarify anything to her privately. Did she think Christie was a child, too?

When she'd first arrived at the house, Christie had been shocked by Jamie's hug, but then she'd found her own arms winding back around Jamie's neck. Jamie had seemed so distraught and lost, and Christie had felt proud that she'd been the steady one in the crisis. She'd found a mostly full bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge and had poured them both generous glasses while Lou checked on the kids. They'd talked for a little while, but then Mike had come home, and Jamie had shooed her out of the house, saying she was sure Christie had things to do. Christie had taken the hint; Jamie didn't want her around Mike.

Jamie had also made the decision that Mike should be the one to tell Henry what had happened. But she, Christie, was Henry's mother! Shouldn't she have a say? True, maybe she wouldn't have done anything differently—she probably still would have left Henry in Mike and Jamie's care last night—but it irritated her not to have been given a choice. Not to be included in the family crisis.

Throughout the rest of the day, Christie checked in customers, collected tip envelopes for the stylists, and logged new appointments in the computer, keeping a smile affixed to her face and trying to hide the turmoil brewing within her. How was she supposed to know what to say to Henry, when she didn't even know what Mike had told their son? She was sure everything would blow over in a day or so—the media always tried to dramatize stories, and Mike was a great cop—but it rankled her to be shoved to the outside when all she'd wanted was to help.

At five o'clock, she was packing up her things to go when she heard

the sound of a gunshot. She spun around, her heart rate accelerating, but it was just the cork escaping from a bottle of champagne.

“Go get ‘em, Charlie’s newest angel,” said Rita, the stylist who’d given Christie a farewell haircut during her lunch break. Rita filled a bunch of Solo cups and handed them out as the other girls crowded around, touching their cups to Christie’s. Everyone seemed in awe of the job Christie had landed, which lifted her mood. She didn’t protest when someone upended the last of the champagne into her cup.

“Let me know if you need a sidekick!” Rita offered, and Christie hid a smile. Rita was in her early fifties, with a body that seemed to belong to two different people—a slender top affixed to a huge bottom and chunky legs. She was always complaining about being single. Did she really think she’d be catnip to men with wandering eyes?

But Christie just promised, “I will.”

She hugged everyone good-bye, promising to stay in touch, and headed out the door. The moment she climbed into her car and sat down, her worry came rushing back. She couldn’t stop hearing the sound of that champagne cork. She wondered what was happening with Mike. She called Henry, but he didn’t answer his phone.

She tried to push her unease out of her mind so she could focus on her new job, but instead her anxiety began to spread. What if she blew her first case? Maybe she should’ve waited to hand in her notice until she was sure the P.I. gig was working out. But planning ahead had never been her forte.

She rapped her fingertips against the dashboard a few times, then checked herself out in the rearview mirror. Her blue eyes were outlined by smudgy kohl liner and three coats of mascara, and her lips were painted a soft pink. She’d gone into the salon’s bathroom to change into the dress before leaving, and her tanned skin showed through the openings in the fabric. Everything was going to be fine, she told herself. She drained the champagne from the cup just as her phone rang.

“He told his wife he’s leaving within the hour,” Elroy said. “But he’s going to stop at the store for her to pick up milk and diapers on his way home.”

“Should I head there now?” Christie asked.

“Yep,” Elroy said. “Keep your phone close.”

“Okay,” Christie said. She’d already MapQuested directions—she had a terrible sense of direction and couldn’t risk getting lost—and despite the rush-hour traffic, she made it to the supermarket quickly. She parked by the entrance and waited, watching customers disappear through the electronic doors. She tried Henry twice more, leaving bright, upbeat messages, but he didn’t pick up the phone. She contemplated phoning Jamie and Mike’s house but didn’t want to have to end the call abruptly if her mark showed up. Her phone finally rang just as she was regretting drinking the second cup of champagne and debating whether to duck into the store and use the bathroom.

“He’s on the move,” Elroy said.

Christie felt a little thrill. Even the lingo of her new job was exciting.

“I’m here,” she said.

“He drives a 2010 blue Toyota Camry with a dent in the front bumper,” Elroy said.

“Sexy,” Christie said.

“Can you see the entrance of the parking lot from where you are?”

“Yep,” Christie said.

“When you see his car pull in, go into the store.”

“I’ll put a little extra wiggle in my walk,” Christie said.

“Are you sure you can fit any more in there?” Elroy asked.

It took a few seconds to realize that Elroy was making a joke.

She smiled. “I’ll call you as soon as I have a date.”

She kept vigil, trying to ignore her increasingly full bladder and her worry about Mike’s situation, and sure enough, Freckles rolled in exactly eighteen minutes later. Elroy hadn’t given her his real name, in case Freckles used an alias for his extracurricular activities, so she wouldn’t accidentally slip up.

Christie took a deep breath, doubled-checked that her handbag was unzipped, and strolled toward the supermarket entrance, swaying on her three-inch heels. Milk and diapers, she mused. The dairy section would be better for seduction.

She wondered what would happen if Freckles ignored her spilled purse, or simply handed her a runaway lipstick and went on with his manufactured errand. Sure, guys hit on her all the time—but what if at

the moment it mattered most, one didn't? She looked down at her dress. Would pulling the hem up a bit higher be overkill?

Either her heels slowed her down or Freckles was in a rush, because just before she stepped on the mat that signaled a trigger to open the supermarket's doors, Freckles came up behind her. She sensed his presence—she couldn't have said how she knew it was him—but she didn't turn around. Better if he made the first move, she thought.

She scanned the store's layout and moved toward the refrigerated section. She sensed Freckles was still directly behind her; the fine hairs on her arm were standing up. She found the milk and stood there for a moment, studying the selection in the glass case.

"Are you a one percent or a skim girl?"

Seriously? Freckles thought *that* qualified as a pickup line?

Christie made herself smile as if it was the wittiest comment she'd ever heard. She turned to face Freckles, keeping her chin low and looking up at him from under her fringe of eyelashes.

"Skim," she said.

Freckles was sliding his hand into his pocket. His *left* hand. Probably trying to hide a wedding ring, she thought.

"But only in the morning, in my coffee," she said. "At night I'm a champagne girl."

Freckles smiled, as she'd known he would.

"Champagne, huh?" he said. "A woman with classy tastes."

"Only the best," she said. She let her eyes linger as they moved down his body, then rose back up to his face.

"I know a place that serves champagne," Freckles said importantly. *Where, Mr. Man-About-Town—every bar in D.C.?* Christie wanted to ask. "I'm Doug, by the way."

"Christine," she said. It was close enough to her name that she wouldn't blow her cover, but it gave her a little layer of protection. Elroy had advised her to give a completely different last name, if asked. But she was counting on the fact that most men wouldn't care enough to ask. They usually didn't.

She grabbed a small carton of milk from the case. "I'm just in town on business for a few days, and there's nothing but powdered creamer

in my hotel room,” she said. Maybe her sentence was a little clunky, but she’d managed to work the mention of a hotel into the conversation, which might steer Doug in the right direction.

She gave him a final, lingering smile, then began moving toward the checkout aisle. Let him take up the chase, she thought.

“Christine?” He was frowning. “I thought you said you drank skim . . . you just got two percent.”

She looked back over her shoulder and gave him a mock angry look. “I blame you for distracting me.”

He guffawed then—actually guffawed—and she walked back to switch out the milk cartons. She hoped she didn’t have to spend long with him in the hotel room. She could expire from boredom.

“So maybe we should check it out, as long as you’re in town,” Doug was saying as he walked her to the cashier station. “The champagne bar.”

“Maybe,” Christie said, throwing him another flirty glance. She could do this in her sleep—and she might have to, if Doug kept up his corny lines. She put her milk on the conveyor belt.

“Any chance I could get your number?”

She smiled and pulled her phone out of her purse. “Give me yours,” she said. He rattled off the digits, and she programmed them into her phone, then hit the “Call” button. A second later, Doug’s cell phone rang.

“You’ve got my number,” she said. She’d left her real phone in the car. This was a cheap throwaway cell Elroy had given her. She’d get rid of it, and be given a new one, for the next job. An expense account was a wondrous thing. Maybe she should’ve picked up some Diet Coke and Lean Cuisines along with her milk, she thought.

“Two forty-nine,” the cashier said. Christie started to pull out her credit card, but Doug was faster.

“Allow me,” he said, swiping his through the machine with a grandiose gesture, as if he was paying for a diamond. “Next time I’ll buy you a real drink.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” she said. “But I’m only in town for a couple days.” Elroy wanted to close this deal quickly.

“Then I better call you soon,” he said, putting his gallon of milk on

the conveyor belt. He hadn't even picked up the diapers. What a jerk. He deserved everything that was coming to him, Christie thought as she walked away.

This job was almost too easy. Tomorrow or the day after, she'd suggest meeting Doug at the hotel. As soon as the job was done, she'd get paid—probably three or four hundred dollars, when all her hours were tallied up. It would be almost as much as she made in a full week at the salon.

Christie got into her car and turned up her radio, singing along with Adele as she sped toward the nearest public bathroom. There was a Starbucks on the next block; she'd stop there.

At the end of the song, just as Christie turned into the parking lot, the radio announcer began to speak, his voice deep and stern. "Sources say a special Metropolitan Police Department investigative team is collecting evidence in the shooting of a fifteen-year-old boy by veteran police officer Michael Anderson. Sources say several eyewitnesses report the teenager was unarmed when shot by Anderson. The MPD will bring the evidence to the U.S. Attorney's Office, which could decide to take the case to a grand jury for an indictment. We'll have another update on the hour."

Christie slammed on her brakes just in time to avoid hitting a car that was pulling out of a parking spot.

She picked up her phone and dialed Mike. The media loved to play stuff like this up. Surely once the facts were sorted out, it would blow over. Still, he might welcome a little support. But it was Jamie who answered. "Hey," Christie said. "I just heard the news . . . Wow, what a bummer."

Jamie released a sound that wasn't quite like a laugh. "Yeah," she said. "A bummer."

"Anyway, is Mike around?" Christie asked after a little pause.

"You know, I don't think now's such a good time," Jamie said. "He's resting."

Jamie did this sometimes—acted like the gatekeeper between her and Mike. It never failed to annoy Christie.

Christie felt her spine straighten. "Well, my kid is being affected by all of this, too. Am I allowed to talk to *him*?"

Jamie sighed then, and when she spoke again, she sounded so beaten down that Christie felt bad for snapping. “Of course you can talk to Henry. Let me go get him.”

After a minute Henry’s voice, which had deepened over the past few months, came on the line.

“Hey, honey,” she said. “How are you doing?”

“Okay, I guess,” Henry said. “Kind of a weird day.”

“Let me know if you want me to come get you,” Christie said. Her evenings seemed longer now that Simon was out of the picture. Chinese food and a movie at home wouldn’t be pathetic if Henry were there.

“No, I should hang with Dad,” Henry said. “Is that okay?”

“Sure,” she said. She was all dressed up, her makeup fresh. Surely she could find something to do. But her best friend, Robyn, wasn’t speaking to her because she thought Christie had flirted with her boyfriend. And most of the other women Christie knew would be with their husbands tonight.

“I love you,” Henry said.

Christie blew a kiss over the phone. She kept her voice light. “You, too, kiddo. See you soon.”

Christie wasn’t a perfect parent; she knew that. She’d never baked a muffin in her life, let alone hidden pureed vegetables in one. Whenever Henry asked for her help with homework, she told him to Google his questions. She let him fall asleep at night without brushing his teeth—she was pretty sure Jamie and Mike blamed her for Henry’s three cavities—and she’d let him watch an R-rated movie when he was seven, mostly because she wanted to see it, too. But somehow, Henry was as close to perfect as it was possible to get.

He wasn’t just the most important thing in her life, she thought. He was the only thing she’d ever done right.

...

Motherhood had steeped Jamie in stress endurance. She’d once had four kids down with a norovirus, all of them moaning and retching while she ricocheted from room to room with buckets and Pedialyte

and fresh towels. Another time—Jamie still shuddered at the memory—Mike had left an open bottle of Drāno on the bathroom sink as he bent over the shower drain, trying to unclog it. Eloise had tottered by, her little fingers reaching out and grazing the plastic bottle. Somehow, Jamie had swooped in and yanked her daughter to safety just as the bottle tumbled down toward her baby's face. (She and Mike had had an epic fight moments later, hurling accusations like spears: "I thought you were watching her!" "Why the hell didn't you take two seconds to put the cap back on!") After so many years of raising children, Jamie had grown accustomed to feeling her heartbeat explode with the intensity of a racehorse pulling away from the gate: a fall from a playground structure, a sudden high fever, a car speeding around the corner just as Sam's ball bounced into the street . . .

She worried every day when Mike left for his job, too. Watching him strap on his gun and baton and pepper spray was a constant reminder of the danger he faced. Jamie dreaded domestic disturbances—those were the scariest calls, the ones proven to be the most deadly—but she also feared the officer-needs-assistance signal, which indicated a situation was spinning out of control fast. She no longer read the police blotter in the newspaper, because it made the scenarios she tried to push out of her imagination even more vivid.

But she'd never experienced anything like the sustained, raw fear that pulsed through her now, as steadily as if it were being infused by IV.

Earlier this morning, Sandy had phoned. "I'm here for you," she'd said. "What can I do? Do you want to bring the kids over?"

An echo of the words she'd spoken to Sandy after Ritchie's shooting.

But Jamie couldn't see Sandy. Not today. Buried beneath the sorrow and anger and pain she'd felt over Ritchie's shooting had always been a kernel of horrible gratitude that Mike had chosen that precise moment to crack a joke and push Ritchie out the door first. She'd always been afraid that Sandy would sense it. But now it was Sandy who pitied *her*; Jamie could hear the emotion infusing Sandy's tone. Ritchie was being hailed as a hero; they were going to put up a plaque in his honor at police headquarters, along with one for the

fallen rookie. An entire elementary school had sent notes thanking Ritchie for his service. Ritchie was getting better, and now Mike might go to jail.

Sandy couldn't understand what she was going through. Their sorrows were different species.

"Lou's here," she'd told Sandy, ending the call quickly. "But thank you."

Then she and Mike had left the house to go to the police station so Mike could meet with the lawyer provided by his union and give a statement. Mike hadn't wanted her to come, but she'd insisted. Their minivan had been trailed by news vans as they traveled down their quiet street. Jamie stared out the window, at buildings and intersections that seemed familiar yet changed, as if she were viewing them through the prism of a dream.

After they'd parked at the police station, reporters had leapt out of their vehicles and crowded around her and Mike while they tried to make it into the building. A cameraman had bumped Jamie, and she'd released a little cry of surprise. Mike had whipped around, snarling a warning, as a dozen cameras whirled and snapped. The expression on his face, Jamie was certain, would be the one that appeared on the six o'clock news.

Now they were in the station, and Jamie was sitting on a hard wooden bench in the waiting area while Mike conferred in a private room with his lawyer. After the stifling heat of her home, Jamie felt chilled. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, wishing she'd put a sweater on top of her simple blue cotton dress. Would Mike actually be arrested? She imagined one of his colleagues rolling the tips of her husband's fingers into black ink before pressing them onto a card, then someone reading Mike the Miranda rights he'd recited to so many suspects.

It was impossible to believe it had been only thirty-six hours since Mike had left for work. She tried to grip on to the memory of that morning, her final taste of normalcy, but time had turned loose and hazy in her mind. She was pretty sure Mike had already been up and showered by the time she'd gotten out of bed around six. She didn't think she'd asked him how he'd slept, maybe because she knew the

answer wouldn't be reassuring.

He'd been leaning up against the counter, gulping coffee while she poured cereal into bowls for the kids. She remembered reaching around him to open the refrigerator, and noticing they were almost out of milk. She'd jotted a reminder on the running list she kept on the refrigerator door. Or had that happened the day before? No, it must have been that morning, because she'd been about to put away the milk she'd bought at the store when the phone had rung.

She was certain she recalled the thick, dark clouds hanging low in the sky, blotting out the sun as effectively as an eclipse. "It looks like rain," she'd probably said as she'd kissed Mike good-bye. Had she kissed Mike good-bye that morning? She hoped she had.

Jamie flinched at a sudden touch on her shoulder. She looked up to see an officer named Arun Brahma, a man she'd gotten to know through the years because he and Mike shared a passion for football and sometimes attended games together.

"We're all behind Mike," Brahma said softly. "Is there anything I can do?" Jamie nearly wept with gratitude; Brahma was dark-skinned, and his support meant he didn't believe the horrible accusation that race had played a part in Mike's decision to pull the trigger. If his brothers and sisters in blue had abandoned him, it would've been the end of her husband.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I'll let you know." Brahma nodded and walked away. Jamie wished she'd thought to ask him what was happening with Mike. She visualized her husband sitting across from the lawyer, giving an account of the day. Mike wouldn't break down, that much she knew. He could get emotional about small things, like Eloise learning to ride a two-wheeler, but when it came to a crisis, he never panicked. Sometimes Mike's steadfastness irritated her, like when their kids were babies and they cried in the night. "I let Henry cry it out, and he's a great sleeper now," Mike had said. But Jamie was physically incapable of letting her kids sob in their cribs, which meant she had to get up and rock them and soothe them while Mike rolled over and went back to sleep. She got anxious when their kids ran a fever; he simply reached for the Tylenol. She worried about germs on the handles of supermarket carts; Mike told her kids needed to build

up their immunity. Whenever her emotions ran high, he was the tonic that neutralized them. He was the steadiest man she knew.

The steadiest man she knew—but not lately, a traitorous voice whispered in her head.

How had a few seconds erased the thousands of days he'd spent risking his own life to do good? Mike had once talked down a guy who was threatening a woman with a gun. He'd arrested a man who was abusing his dog in public—and had personally taken the little mutt to a no-kill animal shelter so the man would never get it back. He always talked to kids on the street, urging them to avoid gangs, asking them about school and what books they were reading. This wasn't just a job for Mike, it was a calling, as strong as the priesthood.

She wrapped her arms around herself again and looked at her watch. They'd been in the station for only an hour, though it felt like much longer. She could hear the jangling of distant phones, and the front door kept swinging open as police officers walked in and out. A young woman came in and walked to the front desk, her pretty sundress swaying above her knees, saying she'd gotten a call that a Good Samaritan had turned in a wallet she'd lost. The desk sergeant looked at her, then checked her driver's license photo before handing over the wallet. The woman thanked him and turned around, her eyes meeting Jamie's before flickering away. But not before Jamie registered the surprise in them.

No, it doesn't make sense that I'm here, Jamie thought, answering the woman's unspoken question. *I should be driving a carpool, or attending a PTA meeting, or roasting a chicken.* The woman exited the building, and Jamie stared at the door as it shut behind her, wondering if the media were still gathered there, waiting to pounce.

She leaned her head against the hard wall behind the bench, forcing back tears. The door opened again, and an officer carried in a paper bag with the logo of a fast-food restaurant. Burgers, she thought, catching a whiff of grease and cooked meat.

She'd waitressed at a burger joint near Capitol Hill when she was twenty-one. It was how she'd met Mike. Jamie had just graduated from the University of Maryland and had accepted an entry-level job at a D.C. public relations firm. That wouldn't start until August; in the

meantime, she was hustling for tips six nights a week. She'd lived in a crowded town house with five other young women, and on weekend nights, the smell of hair spray and perfume and scented candles was overpowering.

That night she'd put on her usual uniform—a black skirt, black T-shirt with an embarrassing restaurant logo of a hamburger with a giant tongue trying to lick itself, red apron, and black sneakers—and headed to her job. The place was a little grimy and the food wasn't anything special, but twenty-somethings flocked there because the burgers and beer were cheap and there were long tables that could be pushed together. On Friday nights there was karaoke and on Saturdays Jell-O shots made with vodka instead of water. It was always rowdy.

It was ninety-nine-cent Jell-O shot night, which usually meant good tips. Capitol Hill staffers didn't earn much money, but drunken ones became more generous when filling in the tip lines on credit card receipts. Jamie was bouncing between five big tables in section three that evening, and she ran back and forth from the kitchen dozens of times, balancing metal trays on her upturned palms, clearing away empty beer pitchers and soiled paper napkins, refilling drinks. One of her tables was especially busy—a group of six or seven guys who cheered each other on as they sucked down shot after shot. At about eleven o'clock, a few of the guys peeled away from the long table, leaving just three. "Can we have another pitcher of Bud?" one of the guys asked. "Sure," Jamie said. She cleared the empty glasses and plates off the table as a new group claimed the unoccupied seats, then went to put in the order with the bartender.

Then she made a mistake. She went to the bathroom.

She was near the end of an eight-hour shift, and it was the first break she'd had. She used the toilet, washed her hands, and splashed cold water on her face. She smelled like grease and stale beer, her hair was coming loose from its ponytail, and her mascara was smeared. She took a moment to fix her hair and wipe away the flecks of black from underneath her eyes. She walked back out and grabbed the full pitcher off the bartop and headed into the dining area.

Almost immediately she spotted the problem. The table of guys, the

group responsible for her highest bill of the evening, had walked out.

She ran to it, hoping they'd left some money under a beer stein but knowing she wouldn't find any.

"Did you see where these guys went?" she asked the people seated nearby. They shook their heads.

It had never happened to her before, but it certainly occurred from time to time at the restaurant. It did at every restaurant. The real problem was the owner of the burger place—a middle-aged guy who'd designed the logo and had logged far too many nights hanging out at the bar, drinking steadily and arguing politics with the customers—was an ass. He'd instituted a rule that the waitstaff had to cover the cost of any walkouts, to prevent them from letting their friends escape without paying the check.

The bill was over a hundred dollars—more than Jamie would earn that night in tips.

"Miss?" someone was calling, but she ignored them. She ran out of the restaurant and looked down the street, then swiveled to check the other direction. She could see a big group of people in the distance. Were those the guys? She sprinted toward them, her breath coming faster, her speed increasing along with her anger. Those jerks thought they were so cool, sneaking away. Maybe they didn't realize she'd have to cover the cost of the bill, but that didn't make what they'd done any less infuriating.

They didn't hear her coming—probably because they were too drunk.

"Hey!" she bellowed when she was a few feet away, and one of the guys turned around.

"Oh, shit," he said, leaning against his friend. They exploded with laughter.

"You owe me a hundred and fifty bucks," Jamie said. She wasn't sure of the exact total, but that sounded right, if she gave herself a generous tip.

"Who, us?" one said. His tie was loose and he seemed to be struggling to focus his eyes.

Jamie put her hands on her hips. Most of them probably had trust funds, or good jobs. They had that look—prep school haircuts and

blue blazers.

“Pay up or I’m calling the cops,” Jamie said. She didn’t have a cell phone with her—back then they weren’t commonplace—but alcohol had dimmed the guys’ reflexes. “Come on, Alexander,” she said when the guys hesitated. She’d overheard the name when she’d been serving the guys.

“Shit, she knows you!” one of them said.

“I told you it was a dumb idea,” said another, punching his friend in the arm.

“Twenty bucks each,” Jamie said. She pointed at the guy who’d absorbed the punch: “Thirty for you.”

They still might’ve turned and run, but then Jamie caught sight of two police officers patrolling the street a half block away.

“Officers!” she called out, waving them over.

It was almost comical, how quickly the guys scrambled for their wallets as the policemen crossed the street. “Everything okay here?” the shorter cop asked. Jamie vaguely registered that he was gorgeous—dark hair, broad shoulders, olive skin—but she was focused on counting the money.

“Everything’s great now,” Jamie said. The guys had given her an extra twenty, but she decided not to point that out. They were already walking away.

“They try to run out on the bill?” the officer asked.

“It’s okay,” Jamie said. “I chased them down and got the money.”

The officers were grinning now. “I still think we should put a little fear into them. Maybe dissuade them from doing this again,” said the second cop.

The two officers turned and began walking briskly down the street. Jamie wanted to watch, but her customers had already waited too long, so she hurried back to the restaurant.

“What happened to you, girl?” another waitress asked. “Your tables kept bugging me for stuff. Now I’m in the weeds.”

“Sorry,” Jamie said. “Long story, but a table walked out on me.”

“That sucks. Bring two pitchers of Michelob to table eighteen, okay? And your corner table wants a jumbo onion rings.”

Jamie had just about gotten caught up when she saw a flash of blue

in the doorway of the restaurant. The two officers were back.

"Hello, *21 Jump Street*," said her waitress friend, nudging Jamie as they both stared. "Doesn't that cop on the right look a little like a young Johnny Depp?"

Jamie thought he was even more handsome. He was just four inches or so taller than her five foot three, but he seemed imposing. Maybe it was his broad shoulders, or the way he carried himself. As he stood there in the doorway to the restaurant, his hands by his sides, his eyes moving slowly across the room, he exuded calm confidence.

Then his eyes stopped moving. They'd landed on her.

Jamie found herself blushing as she walked over to him, suddenly grateful she'd taken that moment to rub away her mascara smears.

"Hi, Officer," she said. The last name on the brass plate pinned to his shirt read ANDERSON.

"Just wanted to let you know we had a little talk with those guys," he said. "I don't think they'll be back."

"Thank you," she said.

He smiled then, but his eyes stayed serious and watchful. "I don't think you needed our help," he said. "Looked like you were doing just fine on your own."

Jamie grinned. "I'm not sure about that. They were about to run off, and even in my Nikes, I probably wouldn't have caught them."

He glanced down at her sneakers, and she had the impression he was checking out her legs, but maybe she was just flattering herself. She could've stood there all day, but the clatter of the restaurant invaded the moment.

"Can I get you a beer?" she offered. "On the house."

"I can't drink when I'm on duty," he said, and she instantly felt foolish. Here she was, trying to corrupt a cop. "But maybe I'll come in and take you up on that another time." He extended his hand. "I'm Mike, by the way."

"Jamie," she said. His hand felt very warm.

He walked out, then she hurried to get the now-cold onion rings to her corner table.

He didn't come in the next night, or the one after that. Jamie had off

the following night, but the other waitresses knew to be on the lookout for Officer Anderson, and they said he hadn't appeared.

A week passed, and she resigned herself to the fact that he'd only been doing his duty. The electricity she'd felt had begun and ended with her, a closed circuit.

But then one evening she'd gone to hand a menu to a guy in jeans and a plain white T-shirt, sitting alone in a corner, and when he'd looked up, the menu had slipped between her fingers and landed on the table.

"Are the cheeseburgers here any good?" he asked.

She shook her head. "They're terrible," she said.

He laughed. "I'll take my chances."

"Brave of you, Officer," she said.

"Call me Mike," he said.

"So what can I get you?" *Me, me, me*, she thought.

"Could I get a Bud on tap and a medium-rare with Swiss?"

"Sure," she said. It was just five-thirty, before the real rush began, so she lingered by his table after delivering his drink. She learned that he'd grown up in New Jersey, that he was twenty-four, and that he knew how to use one of the restaurant's matchbooks to expertly balance the leg on his unsteady table.

But she didn't learn the most important—the defining—thing about him until the following week, when they'd gone out for dinner and he'd driven her home. She thought he was working up the nerve to kiss her good-bye, which was surprising; he didn't seem like the kind of guy who'd struggle with confidence issues. Then he told her about his young son, who was the reason he hadn't come into the restaurant sooner. He had custody of Henry during most of his time off.

When he'd finished talking, he looked straight ahead, instead of at her. Almost as if he expected her to open her front door and run away.

"What's his name?" Jamie asked.

Mike opened his wallet and pulled out a photo of a cute toddler with dark hair and eyes.

"He looks just like you," Jamie said.

"Yeah, except he got his dimples from his mother," Mike said.

"Ah," Jamie said. "And she is. . . ?" Her voice trailed off. She wasn't

sure what she'd intended to ask. But Mike seemed to know.

"Not in the picture," he said. "For me, anyway. We share custody of Henry."

"Ah," Jamie said again. She sat there for another moment, and then Mike leaned over to kiss her. His lips were soft, but the rough stubble around his mouth scratched her chin and she made a small, involuntary noise in the back of her throat as he wrapped a hand around the back of her head, pulling her even closer. She'd had only three real boyfriends, but kissing them hadn't made her feel like this. She felt as if she were dissolving into Mike. When he finally pulled away, she was dizzy.

Jamie had always known she wanted to be a mom. She'd imagined in a vague sort of way that it would happen in her late twenties, and that she'd have three or four kids. But she was fresh out of college, with more than a decade of school loans in front of her. She was barely able to legally drink, and she often slept until ten or eleven in the morning after a late shift at the restaurant. Mike had a real job, an important one, as well as his own town house. When he mowed the lawn, he put Henry in a backpack carrier—at least until Henry was old enough to stand in front of Mike and put his own hands on the handle and pretend to push the mower. Mike changed diapers expertly, hoisted Henry onto his shoulders whenever they had to walk more than a block or two, which always made Henry giggle, and repaired leaky pipes under the sink while Henry lay beside him, banging his plastic Fisher-Price tools against the floor.

How could she have avoided falling in love with both of them?

Summer seeped into fall, and she began working at the public relations firm, which meant her schedule became more aligned with Mike's. She fell into the habit of driving to Mike's place on Friday nights, and he'd cook for the three of them—lasagna or chicken Parmesan or shrimp fajitas. She'd read to Henry while Mike did the dishes, or vice versa. Within a few months, Jamie had memorized the words to *Green Eggs and Ham* and *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. After Henry fell asleep, she and Mike would go to the living room and cuddle on the couch. Sometimes he'd rub her feet while they watched a movie.

Her friends teased her for being hopelessly domestic. They were hitting happy hours and dance floors, thinking about joining the Peace Corps or working temp jobs, getting drunk and making out with crushes. But Jamie had always felt older than her peers. She'd been cooking meals for her dad and Lou since she was fifteen, and the day she got her driver's license, she'd begun to do all the grocery shopping and other household errands, too. She'd been an anchor for her family ever since her mother died. Her friends couldn't understand what a deep sense of relief she felt in finally being able to lean on someone else.

She and Mike fought over his propensity to shut down emotionally, over the fact that she got snappish when she was tired, over stupid things like whether to splurge on Thai or Indian food delivery. But they always found their way back to each other. Jamie would finish getting the kids to sleep and come downstairs to discover Mike had built a fire and opened a beer for her. Or Mike would fry up bacon on Sunday mornings and help the kids make a gigantic pancake that he'd cut into wedges for everyone to share.

But now, for the first time, she'd sensed a kind of emptiness in him. The emotional steel running through his core had been chipped away, leaving this gray-faced, slumped stranger. Watching her husband become unmoored was terrifying.

After they'd talked outside their home last night, they'd told the children a simplified version of what had happened. Mike hadn't wanted Christie around, so Jamie had gotten her out of the house quickly. It wasn't until Christie was gone and Jamie had tried to pour herself a second, desperately needed glass of Chardonnay that she'd realized there was only an inch left in the bottle. Christie must've consumed most of it, and that was their last bottle. Jamie had reached for a beer instead and uncapped one for Mike. But she'd ended up pouring his down the drain because he hadn't wanted to touch it.

Now, as the minutes and then hours ticked by and the bench seemed to grow harder beneath her, she realized nothing could have prepared them for this. No amount of stress or training or love.

"Mrs. Anderson?"

She looked up, expecting to see another cop with a sympathetic

expression, but a thin guy in a suit with a cowlick in his brown hair stood there instead.

"I'm Davis MacDonald, the attorney for your husband," he said, extending a hand. His wrist slipped out from beneath his jacket cuff and she noticed it was hairless, like a child's. Maybe he was even younger than she'd first thought.

"We're taking a break, so Mike asked me to check in with you and let you know it'll probably be another half hour or so," he said.

"You're from the union?" she asked, and he nodded.

"Do you need anything?" he asked.

Yes, Jamie thought. *I need you to save my husband.*

But she just shook her head, and he started to walk away.

"Wait," Jamie called, and he turned around, his briefcase bumping into his knee. She stood up and hurried close to him.

"Can you tell me anything?" she asked. "Do you think he's going to be indicted?"

The lawyer hesitated.

"Tell me!" she said, her voice too loud in the open space. She saw a few officers turn to look at her, then quickly avert their eyes.

"Look, we're still a long way from that. The FIT team isn't even done investigating," he said.

"FIT?" Jamie echoed.

"It's the Force Investigative Team," he explained. "They've got a special task force for shootings like this so cops aren't accused of tampering with evidence for their friends. Just sit tight for a while. I'll give you new information as soon as I have it."

Jamie slowly walked back to her bench, digging into her purse for her checkbook, wondering how much a more experienced attorney would cost. Their bank account balance was just over six thousand dollars, but they needed to pay the mortgage and credit card bill in a few days. How many mortgage payments could you skip before your house was repossessed? Jamie wondered.

Jamie went to church because it was important to Mike. But she hadn't truly prayed since she was a teenager and her mother had been in the hospital with the staph infection. God hadn't listened to her then.

Now, though, she bowed her head, and began to pray with everything she had.

...

On the bright side, the fire Lou had started in Jamie's kitchen was a small one. The vent over the stove was going full blast, and all the windows in the house were thrown open now, which didn't matter because the broken air-conditioning meant it was as hot inside as it was outside. Lou had found a can of air freshener in the bathroom and squirted it around, but the combination of floral-scented chemicals and burning plastic might have made things worse.

The day had started off smoothly enough. She'd missed Tabby and the other elephants, so she'd brought the kids to the zoo, and as a special treat, she'd let them sneak in apples and toss them over the fence. Lou had breathed in deeply, filling her nose and throat with the honest smell of hay and dirt and mammal. Being here grounded her, which she'd sorely needed after the tumult of the past few days.

Emily was wearing a pink dress and matching pink sunglasses with lenses shaped like stars. She'd rejected four outfits before settling on the ensemble this morning, and she'd asked Lou to paint her fingernails to match, but Lou had begged off, pretending to be allergic to the chemicals in the polish. She wasn't sure how Jamie felt about nail polish for six-year-olds, and she didn't want to mess up again.

"How can you tell she's pregnant?" Emily had asked as she looked at Tabitha and wrinkled her little nose. "I mean, wasn't she already pretty fat?" Lou had hoped Emily didn't think the same thing about her.

"What we do is take a blood sample from behind her ear," Lou had explained. "The skin is thin there, and when the blood tells us an elephant is ready to get pregnant, we put her with a male. You can kind of tell when the male is ready to . . . to, ah, make a baby."

"What happens?" Sam had asked.

"They get excited," Lou had said. That was generic enough, she'd decided. "Male elephants go through this period called musth, which gets their bodies ready for having a baby."

"Musth," Eloise had repeated, making it sound like "muss."

“Then what happens?” Emily had asked. Her sunglasses had slipped down on her nose and she’d peered over them at Lou, like the world’s most adorable librarian.

“Then the female elephant gets pregnant,” Lou had said, neatly skipping over the whole description of intercourse. Bad enough to try to describe how humans did it—no way was she talking about elephant sex to this crew. “She stays pregnant for about two years.”

“Wow,” Sam had said. “That sounds boring.”

“She’ll probably be happy when she gives birth,” Lou had said.

“When is she going to have the baby?” Emily had asked.

“Sometime this summer,” Lou had said. “Do you know the crazy part? We’ve got this thing called an ultrasound. It lets us take pictures of the baby as it grows inside Tabitha’s tummy.”

“You can see inside her tummy? How?” Sam had wanted to know.

“We have to put the ultrasound wand in her butt.”

The kids had exploded with laughter. “In her butt!” Sam had shouted repeatedly, drawing a horrified look from an apple-cheeked grandmother who was holding the hand of a toddler.

They’d stayed at the zoo for hours, visiting the baby cheetahs and eating popcorn and ice cream cones and mimicking the antics of the monkeys. Lou had checked her cell phone as they walked to the minivan in the employee parking lot. No calls from Jamie, which hadn’t seemed like a good sign. She’d noticed Sam watching, and she’d erased her frown and tousled his hair.

“Did my mom call?” he’d asked.

“Not yet,” she’d said.

He’d just nodded, but Lou thought he looked sad, so she’d stopped at a vending machine and gotten a few bags of M&M’s.

Lou wasn’t much of a cook, so when they got home, she’d decided to heat up a frozen pizza. She’d turned on the oven, and about five minutes later, the smoke detectors had erupted. That’s when she’d realized Jamie stored pots and pans in the oven, including one huge plastic Tupperware bin—probably because the kitchen was so small and cabinet space was at a premium. So much for the pizza.

Lou found a bag of baby carrots and some Granny Smith apples in the refrigerator’s bins and cut everything up and arranged it on a big

plate, reflecting that she'd made this exact same snack for the elephants countless times. She brought the platter into the living room, where the kids were watching TV.

"It still smells bad in here," Emily said.

"It'll air out soon," Lou promised. She filled Sadie's bowl with fresh water, then let the dog out back. She felt her cell phone buzzing in her pocket as she was calling for the dog to come in.

"We're on our way home," Jamie said in a voice so raw and gravelly Lou almost didn't recognize it.

"Is Mike okay?" Lou asked. Suddenly she had the wild hope that the whole thing had been cleared up. A misunderstanding—it could happen, couldn't it?

"Not really," Jamie said. "There's a DiGiorno pizza in the freezer," she continued. "Can you toss it the oven for the kids? Just take out all the stuff I store there before you preheat it."

"Um," Lou began, then she decided Jamie had enough to deal with. "Sure" was all she said.

"We'll be there in ten minutes."

Lou focused on airing out the house as much as possible, turning on ceiling fans and even opening the chimney flue. But the first thing Mike said when he walked in the house was "Is something burning?"

Then Eloise padded into the hallway and Lou turned to look at her, suddenly realizing her niece had something sticky-looking matting her hair—ice cream, probably—and her white T-shirt was covered with stains. Her face and hands weren't all that clean, either.

"I threw up," Eloise announced.

"Oh, baby," Jamie said, rushing toward her. She buried her head in Eloise's small shoulder, like she was the one seeking comfort. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here when you were sick."

"She seemed okay earlier," Lou offered.

"Her stomach wasn't upset?" Jamie asked.

"I don't know," Lou said. "She didn't mention it."

"Well, did she eat anything?" Jamie asked. She leaned back and brushed Eloise's hair away from her face, then she put the back of her hand against Eloise's forehead.

"Oh, yeah," Lou said. "She had popcorn and ice cream."

"M&M's, too," Sam added.

"Popcorn, ice cream, *and* M&M's?" Jamie said.

"Well, when you put it that way, it doesn't sound like as balanced a meal as I thought," Lou said. She was aiming for a joke, hoping to squeeze a laugh out of Jamie and Mike. She saw the corners of Mike's mouth lift up briefly, but it seemed to take an effort for him.

"It's okay, sweetie," Jamie said. "I'm going to put you in the bathtub and get you some crackers and juice."

Lou felt a flash of guilt. Jamie's skin was tinged with a violet-blue undertone. She seemed to have sprouted a few lines around her eyes, too.

"I'll check on the other kids," Mike said. He put a hand on Lou's shoulder and gave it a squeeze before walking out of the room.

"Sorry," Lou called after Jamie as she hustled Eloise up the stairs. Maybe she shouldn't have teased her sister about her detailed lists quite so much, she thought.

"Can you come up here a minute?" Jamie called.

Lou followed her into the bathroom, where Jamie was running water into the tub. Lou reached for a washcloth on the rack by the sink, but Jamie grabbed it first and began to clean Eloise's face.

"I should've gotten them a better lunch—" Lou began.

Jamie interrupted her. "Lou, it's fine," she said. But her voice still sounded irritated. Lou didn't blame her; Jamie hadn't asked for much, especially considering all she had done for Lou over the years, and Lou had made one of her children ill and caused the house to smell horrible.

"I can give her a bath," Lou offered.

Jamie shook her head. "Why don't you go talk to Mike? Keep him company."

"Okay," Lou said. She could do that. "Was it . . . pretty awful today?"

"He couldn't even talk about it," Jamie said. "His new partner threw him under the bus!"

Jamie was silent as she worked Eloise's stained shirt over her head, then removed the rest of the little girl's clothes and tested the bathwater with her wrist before helping Eloise climb into the tub.

"I'm worried sick about what's going to happen tomorrow," Jamie

said. She reached for the shampoo and squirted a bit in her palm.

“Why?” Lou asked. Jamie didn’t meet her eyes when she answered.

“The mother of the teenager who died? She’s holding a press conference.”

...

Christie bent over at the waist, reached into her push-up bra, and hefted her breasts another inch higher. They were in danger of spilling out of the top of her blouse now, which was precisely where she wanted them. She sat with her legs crossed on the edge of the bed, nibbling a hangnail. Doug was ten minutes late, and she hoped he was stuck in a terrible traffic jam. Every passing minute meant more money in her pocket.

Doug’s wife was paying for a video Elroy would deliver in a manila envelope. Elroy had promised to edit the evidence so that Christie would be unrecognizable, which was a smart strategy. God forbid she bump into the woman at the gynecologist’s office.

Christie imagined the scene. Maybe Elroy would meet Doug’s wife at a neutral spot, like a playground. While her kids sat in bucket swings, calling out to be pushed, Doug’s wife would reach for the envelope. Her fingers would probably tremble. She’d carry around the evidence until she got home. Maybe she’d wait until the kids were in bed, then she’d pour herself a big glass of wine and slip the DVD into the player. Even better, maybe she’d wait until Doug was home and suggest they watch a new movie together. Christie only hoped the house wasn’t just in Doug’s name—his wife deserved alimony, child support, and most of his assets. She’d overheard too many stories while working at the salon of women who’d lost everything, because they’d trusted their husbands to be fair. Christie always hid a snort when those sad tales spilled out. Who did these women expect to look after them, if they couldn’t even look after themselves?

Someone knocked on the hotel room door, three raps in quick succession. Christie ran her finger over her top teeth to sweep away any lipstick smudges, took a deep breath, and went to pull the door open.

Doug's eyes lit up as he got a glimpse of her: Ka-ching! He'd hit the jackpot, and he didn't even have to pay for the hotel room. That \$2.49 he'd spent for her milk was the best investment he'd ever made.

"Nice to see you again," she said, stepping back to let him in. He gave her a kiss—fortunately not a lingering one—and treated her to a whiff of what smelled like an entire container of Axe body spray.

He wore jeans and a black T-shirt with a blazer over it, and he seemed to be sucking in his gut. Infidelity chic, she thought. Macy's should create a new line.

"You look hot," he said.

She ran her tongue over her lips, slowly. "So do you," she lied.

He took a step toward her, then hesitated. "So, ah, should we . . . um . . ."

Christie smiled. He was making this too easy. She'd been worried he'd launch himself at her—she imagined he'd be all paws and sloppy kisses, a human golden retriever—and she'd have to slow him down. She wanted everything to look and sound good on tape. Plus she was making a rather generous hourly rate. Why not draw it out?

"Can I get you something from the minibar?" she asked.

He nodded. "A beer sounds good."

"Sure," she said. She took her time opening the bottle and pouring its contents into a glass, then handed it to him. He nearly dropped the glass, and she saw him wipe his hands on his pants. His palms must be sweating—she could see the droplets of perspiration on his upper lip, too.

"Sit down here," she directed, patting the cushion of a chair. That would put Doug's face directly in line with the video-recording device Elroy had attached to a light fixture. There was another chair opposite Doug's, and she took that one, crossing her legs and allowing the slit in her skirt to fall open, revealing a long expanse of thigh.

"Okay," he said. He sat down, his eyes ricocheting between her thighs and her cleavage.

"Do you know what gets me really hot?" she asked.

He shook his head mutely.

"Hearing you talk about what you want to do to me," Christie said. She leaned back her head and stared at him from under heavy-lidded

eyes.

She could see his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed.

"I, um, want to kiss you," he said. "Then lick your boobies."

Boobies? She struggled to keep a straight face. "Tell me more, big boy," she breathed.

"Then I want to take off, um, your clothes," he said.

Please don't ever try to get a job working on a phone sex call-in line, she thought.

"Then what?" she prompted.

He frowned, thinking hard.

"Maybe you could walk around for a little bit."

"I'm wearing a black lace G-string," she said. "Should I keep it on? And maybe keep on my high heels, too?"

"Yes! God, yes!" he said.

They were finally getting somewhere, but only because she was steering him, like he was a horse and she had a firm grip on his bridle.

She waited, but he didn't add anything to the scenario she was trying to help him paint.

She leaned forward. "Then what are you going to do with me?"

"Then I'm going to, I'm . . . then I'll take out my . . ."

"Yes?" she breathed.

He burst into tears.

"I can't do it," he sobbed. "I'm married."

"Oh, shit," Christie said.

"I'm sorry," he said, misunderstanding her disappointment. "You're really pretty and everything, it's just . . . I love my wife."

Maybe she could still salvage this.

"But I bet she doesn't understand you, does she?" Christie asked. She leaned forward. *Keep your eyes on the boobies, Doug.*

"No, she does!" Doug protested, wiping his eyes. "She's great. She takes care of the kids and she makes really good buffalo wings and she drives whenever we go on the Beltway because I hate doing it. I just . . . I'm turning thirty-five this year and I feel really old."

"Thirty-five isn't old!" Christie said quickly. "It's actually quite young!"

"I found a gray hair the other day," Doug confessed. "I had to pluck it. It hurt." He began to cry harder.

Jesus, Christie thought.

"Have you ever cheated on your wife before?" she asked.

Doug shook his head. "Never." He sniffed. "Do you have a tissue?"

She tossed him a box from the table by the minibar. Would they still get paid? she wondered. She'd better still get paid for this.

"I should go," Doug said. He stood up.

"Okay," Christie said.

"I'm sorry," Doug said. He walked toward her, clearly intent on giving her a consolation kiss, but Christie sidestepped him and stuck out her hand. When he was finally out of the room, she took a deep breath, inhaling a potentially dangerous amount of Axe, and collapsed onto the bed. A moment later she heard a knock and she sprang back up. Maybe Doug had changed his mind.

"Did someone order champagne?" Elroy asked when Christie opened the door. He was shaking with laughter. She gave him the finger and walked back to the chair Doug had just vacated. He hadn't even taken a sip of his beer, so she gulped some.

"Boobies?" Elroy echoed, and Christie began to laugh, too.

"I still get paid, right?" she asked.

"Of course," Elroy said. "Not the first time a guy has chickened out. His wife is going to be thrilled. She won't dispute the bill. Good thinking on asking if he'd ever cheated on her before, by the way."

"Thanks," Christie said. She began to feel a little better. The Heineken could be helping with that, too, she thought as she had another gulp. "So what now?"

"Now I prepare the file for the wife and you get ready for your next victim," Elroy said. He stood on a chair and peeled away his device from the light fixture.

"Good," Christie said. She tipped back the glass and swallowed the rest of the beer. "You know, I could juggle more than one at a time. I mean, if you've got that many clients."

Elroy appraised her.

"You wanted to see how I'd do on this job first, didn't you?" Christie asked. "Was this a trial run?"

Elroy nodded. "Yep."

Christie wondered, not for the first time, how it was that she could

be so cunning about some things and so dumb about others. In high school, she'd known during the first week which teachers were going to ride her ass, giving her Ds on homework assignments and suggesting she sign up for the free tutoring the geeks gave in the library after school, and she'd easily discerned which teachers didn't care if she copied off other kids. And take men—she could be so savvy about certain guys, knowing which ones would be good in the sack but bad about remembering her birthday. Yet when it came to Simon, she'd been a complete fool. It all boiled down to not caring, she thought. Emotions distorted your vision. Maybe those women at the hair salon who'd cried about their divorces hadn't thought about holding on to their assets because they were too busy trying to hold together the shards of their hearts, Christie thought.

"You might've told me this was a test before I quit my job," she said.

"I didn't know you quit your job," he said.

"Well, I did," Christie said. "So you'd better keep me busy."

"Okay," Elroy said. He tossed her two folders. "Take a look at these guys. We can set up meet-and-greets tomorrow if you're free."

"At sixty bucks an hour, you'd better bet I'm free," Christie said. She emptied her beer, then reached into the minibar and took out a few mini-bottles of alcohol. "Let's call these a signing bonus, shall we?" she said. She put them in her shoulder purse along with the two folders.

"I think Doug's wife would want to treat you to them," Elroy said.

Christie grinned, then walked out, her step light.

Chapter Eight

JOSE. THAT WAS THE name of the boy Mike had shot. The teenager had been in trouble a few times before, for fighting and truancy. He'd also gone to church with his mother every Sunday and had sung in the choir. He'd possessed a rich tenor, the newspapers reported. He'd lived with his mother and younger brother in a transitional area of D.C.—not far from the million-dollar row homes or from the run-down ones with cardboard covering broken windows. He was an in-between in other ways, too. Not quite a man, but at five feet, eight inches tall, no longer a boy. The brushes with the law and the church choir were balancing on opposite ends of a scale, too. Eventually Jose would've tipped one way or the other.

The press conference was scheduled for noon today, and Jamie had no idea what Jose's mother was planning to say.

The front page of the Metro section held a photograph of Jose looking off to one side and grinning, his eyes shaded by a sweep of long lashes. Jamie stared down at it, wondering if he had been smiling at his mom. She didn't realize she'd released a whimper until Sam, who was lying across her lap, asked what was wrong. Sam had been extra clingy lately, trailing after her as she worked around the house and waking up in the middle of the night to climb into bed with her and Mike. "Nothing," she said as she bent to kiss his head. Jamie caught a whiff of sweet shampoo and something else, a scent that was uniquely Sam. She wondered if Jose's mother was kneeling in her son's closet, breathing in, despairing at the thought that she might someday forget the sound of her boy's voice. Jamie closed her eyes against the sharp prick of tears and held Sam tighter.

"Are you going to watch?" Jamie asked Mike a few hours later.

Mike shrugged. He was sitting at the little table in the kitchen, an untouched turkey-and-cheese sandwich on a plate in front of him.

Three large electric fans had appeared and were blowing air around the house, giving them a little break from the stifling heat. Lou must've bought those, Jamie thought. She vaguely remembered hearing her sister go out last night.

By now the kids were in the living room, watching *Frozen* for the dozenth time. At this point they could probably recite all the dialogue. Jamie had started to set up the sprinkler on the front lawn, but then she'd spotted a guy with a big camera slung around his neck. She'd run back into the house and yanked the curtains shut, her rage swelling. They were trapped. How long were reporters going to be lurking? So far Eloise was mostly unaware of what was happening, but Jamie knew Sam and Emily had figured out some of the details. And Henry had probably read all of the news stories.

So had the neighbors, apparently. When Jamie had driven past an older woman who lived alone at the corner of their block, someone who'd always made a nice fuss over her kids, the woman had deliberately averted her head after Jamie called a hello out her van's window. Jamie's back had stiffened as she pressed harder on the gas.

At least most of their friends were being supportive. The family two doors down had put together a container of fried chicken and a green salad and dropped off the meal along with a kind note, and a number of other people had called or emailed, offering to help in any way possible. Sandy had brought by a giant box of brownies and she'd given Jamie a fast, hard hug.

"I know," Sandy had murmured. But she couldn't. Jamie had sensed Sandy wanted to come inside, but she made up an excuse about Mike being asleep on the couch. If Jamie sat down and looked into Sandy's soft brown eyes and felt Sandy's slim hand grip her own, she might fall apart, and then what would happen to her family?

"Reporters keep trying to interview me," Sandy had said just before she'd left. "They've been leaving messages."

Jamie's heart had skipped a beat. "Please don't talk to them!" she'd cried.

"Of course I won't," Sandy had said. "I deleted all the messages. I just wanted you to know."

Jamie had held the box of still-warm brownies in her hands as she

watched Sandy get into her car and drive off. The casualties kept mounting—Jose, Mike and his reputation, their family's happiness . . . Maybe her friendship with Sandy would be another.

Ritchie had also left a message on the answering machine that morning in his new broken cadence: "Be strong, man . . . this is going to . . . blow over soon. I've still . . . got your back." Jamie had watched Mike bend his head close to the machine. She wondered if he ever wanted to switch places with his best friend, to erase that quick, spontaneous nudge that had sent Ritchie walking through the doors of police headquarters, into the path of the shooter. She didn't know how to ask him, though. The words that had always flowed steadily between them had dried up like a shallow riverbed in the summer heat. All she could think about was the possibility of the looming indictment, and she knew it was the same for Mike.

Three months ago, the guys had been competing in one-armed push-up contests—Ritchie was the record holder with eight, but Mike had been gaining on him fast—and cruising the streets and giving talks at schools. Their lives had stretched out in two smooth, parallel lines. Now both men were deeply scarred in different ways. But at least Ritchie had a chance of getting better. Hope hadn't deserted him, the way it had Mike.

"Do you want to call Ritchie back?" Jamie had asked when Mike continued to stare at the machine after the message ended.

Mike had shaken his head. "I'll go visit him tomorrow," he'd said. "Drop off a freaking tofu dog." He'd tried for a light tone but couldn't pull it off.

"Good," Jamie had said. She'd reached for him at the same moment he'd turned to walk away. He never even saw her outstretched arms. After he left, she'd stood still for a long moment, feeling so hollow she ached to collapse to the floor.

The previous night she and Mike had been in bed, lying on top of the covers in their underwear because it was so hot, and Mike had suddenly rolled onto his side, kissing her deeply. She'd kissed him back, glad for the connection, and then he'd climbed on top of her and yanked down her underpants and abruptly plunged into her, before she was ready. She'd gasped, but had put her arms around his back,

feeling his body grow slick with sweat, grateful for the contact.

But it didn't feel like lovemaking. It felt like he needed to release something and she was a handy receptacle.

The sad memory fell away as Jamie looked at the clock. The news conference was scheduled to begin in less than half an hour. It would be held at a park near Jose's mother's apartment, where Jose had learned to ride a bike, a reporter had said. Jamie tried to focus on the image of Jose attacking another boy, punching him repeatedly, but the image of him as a little kid, a smile wreathing his face as he learned to pedal, kept intruding.

Jamie could hear the treadmill squeaking in the basement, and the sound of ESPN, and she hoped Mike would keep running and watching baseball instead of tuning in to the press conference. It wouldn't be good for Mike to see the boy's mother on television, to bear witness to her anger and pain.

Jamie went into the kitchen and saw the plate with Mike's sandwich still on the table. He hadn't eaten a single bite.

"I'm bored," Emily called from the living room, drawing the word out to three syllables. "And Eloise spilled her apple juice."

Jamie rushed to clean it up, grateful to have something to do, some small task with a clearly defined outcome. Jamie was just wiping up the last drops when the phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID to make sure it wasn't a reporter, sighed, and answered it.

"Honey?" It was Mike's mother. His parents still lived in New Jersey, in the house where Mike had grown up. Jamie liked them well enough, even though their conversations always circled the same familiar ground. Mike's mother talked about weight—who among her friends had gained or lost a few pounds, who was trying Paleo and who was cheating on the Zone—and Mike's father was obsessed with the weather. He'd spend ten minutes telling you about a storm front gathering over Ohio, then hand the phone to his wife as if you'd had an emotional conversation that had left him drained and unable to carry on.

"Hi, Gloria," Jamie said.

Gloria's voice was always high and anxious, but even more so now. Jamie pictured her pacing around her small living room. Gloria always

tried to burn calories while she talked on the phone.

In the week since the shooting, Mike had been checking in frequently with his parents. He'd wanted them to hear about it from him rather than on television, since the story had made the national news, but Jamie worried about how the conversations were affecting him. When he was a kid, his mother had tried to make Mike wear a knitted cap whenever the temperature dropped below sixty. A cold portended pneumonia in her mind, and a stomachache always meant appendicitis. Mike downplayed his job to her, saying he spent a lot of time at his desk doing paperwork and that he always wore a bulletproof vest. Sometimes Gloria's fretting annoyed Jamie. Other times, it made her mourn her own mother, and what might have been.

"I was thinking we should come down there and help," Mike's mother said.

"Oh, no," Jamie said without thinking. "I mean," she quickly qualified, "things are going just fine here, really. I bet this is all going to be cleared up in another couple weeks."

"Are you sure?" Gloria asked. "I've just been so worried."

"I know," Jamie said. She kept her voice light and steady. She had to dissuade Gloria. If she were here, fluttering around Mike and insisting he eat and ferreting out the problems in every situation, like a woodpecker boring into a tree to pull out insects, Mike might snap. He seemed so close to it anyway.

"Gloria, I promise you we're all doing fine," Jamie said. "How about we plan a trip up there later on this summer? We'd love to go to the shore with you."

"I'll make cannoli," Gloria said immediately.

"That sounds wonderful," Jamie said, reaching around with her free hand to rub the back of her neck, where knots seemed to have taken up permanent residence. It was exhausting to have to provide comfort and reassurance to someone when you so badly needed it yourself. Her father had called a few times, and had also offered to come stay with them, which she appreciated, but she knew he wouldn't be much help with the kids—and having more people crowding into the house would add to the stress level.

She eased off the phone a few minutes before the news conference

was to begin. She could still hear the sound of the treadmill and Mike's heavy, rhythmic footsteps. She went upstairs, to their bedroom, shutting the door in case one of the kids tried to come in and she had to change the channel quickly.

The news channel was already broadcasting footage of the scene. Dozens of people crowded onto a patch of concrete encircling the park. The playground equipment behind them was outdated—metal monkey bars and swings and a few slides. One lone, scraggly-looking tree decorated a corner.

In a hushed voice, a reporter holding a microphone was narrating what was about to happen: "In just a few minutes Lucia Torres, mother of the teenager shot to death by D.C. Police Officer Michael Anderson, will hold a press conference here at the park where her son loved to play. Gathered together are family, friends, fellow church members, and neighbors of the Torres family, including Roberto Sanchez, who lives next door."

The camera panned back to reveal a fiftyish man wearing dark glasses and a red T-shirt. He was holding a handmade sign that said: JUSTICE FOR JOSE.

"Mr. Sanchez, can you tell us a little bit about Jose?" the reporter asked.

"He was a good kid," Mr. Sanchez said.

"A good kid," the reporter repeatedly somberly.

Wasn't there going to be any mention of the fact that Jose was fighting? Jamie wondered if anyone had thought to check how bad the other boy's injuries were. Could they get a doctor to testify that the kid might've been killed in the assault? Would that justify Mike's using deadly force? She'd have to mention it to the lawyer.

"Ms. Lucia Torres is approaching the podium," the reporter said, and Jamie leaned forward to get a better look at the woman. She was tall and slim, and wore a simple black dress and sensible black heels. She walked quickly, with determination, flanked by several other women—maybe sisters, or friends. Ms. Torres's head was held high and her expression was restrained, but Jamie could tell turmoil raged within her. In a strange flash of recognition, Jamie saw something of herself in the woman.

Ms. Torres stood at the podium, her large brown eyes passing over the crowd. She nodded a few times to people, then leaned forward and began to speak. Her voice was strong and clear.

"When will it stop?" she asked.

She let the silence gather for a long moment. "Too many of our boys have been killed because of the color of their skin. I ask you this: If my son had been white, would the police officer have drawn his gun so quickly?"

A few people in the crowd shouted, "No!"

"My son liked to watch cartoons," she said. "Jose's favorite foods were pizza and chicken burritos with molé sauce. He went to the grocery store for me every week, because he didn't want me to have to carry the bags home. He watched after his younger brother when I had to work. He was a good boy. I love him."

Her voice broke on the second to last word of her speech, but she kept staring straight into the news camera.

"None of us mothers expect to be here, before news crews, talking about our kids whose only crime was to be brown or black," she said.

It's not like that! Jamie wanted to cry. Where was the mention of Mike's clean record of nearly two decades on the force, his award, the respect he had in the community? Mike had never discharged his weapon in the line of duty before. Mike had once given a boy a ride home late at night after he'd discovered the kid alone in an unsafe area.

"No one can bring my son back," Ms. Torres said, her voice swelling. It seemed to leap out of the television and fill the room. "So now all I can ask is for justice for Jose."

She stepped back from the podium and reporters began shouting questions.

A voice soared above the chorus: "Ms. Torres, the longtime partner of Michael Anderson was shot in front of police headquarters just a few months ago, an attack Anderson witnessed. Do you think emotional trauma could have played a part in the shooting of your son?"

Ms. Torres reached for the microphone. "Perhaps," she said. "But that won't bring back Jose."

Another reporter shouted: "Will you be filing a civil lawsuit?"

A woman who'd been standing just behind Ms. Torres leaned forward and gripped the microphone: "We have no announcement at this time about a civil suit."

At this time. Jamie felt nausea rise in her gut. She thought about their meager assets. The house, the old minivan, a tiny retirement account . . . Could they be held personally liable?

Her stomach heaved. She ran to the bathroom just in time to retch into the toilet.

By the time she made it back into the bedroom, the news conference was over, replaced by a daytime talk show. Fortunately the hosts had moved on to another subject: Fourth of July crafts. Jamie sat there dully, watching a woman demonstrate how to put a candle in a glass vase and layer red, white, and blue sand around it for a festive centerpiece.

At least their children were safe, she thought. She could endure anything, as long as she had Mike and the kids. She thought of Ms. Torres, walking through the park with her head held high, images of her son riding his bike swirling around her like ghosts, and she wiped away tears. No matter what pain she was in, no matter what she would have to endure, it shrank in comparison to Ms. Torres's.

Jamie had to hug her children, to hold them close and feel their soft little hands, to kiss their chubby cheeks. She opened the bedroom door and almost screamed. Mike was standing there.

"Did you see it?" he asked.

She put a hand over her racing heart and nodded. "It wasn't . . . that bad," she lied.

"Oh, come on," he said.

She reared back her head. "You watched?"

"I turned it on in the basement," he said. Their basement wasn't finished, but Mike kept a small television and old sofa down there along with his exercise equipment.

"I'm sorry," she said. She was sorry for lying, sorry for not urging Mike to see that police psychologist after all. Sorry for not recognizing her husband hadn't been ready to go back to work.

He shrugged, a small, defeated gesture. "I need to take a shower,"

he said.

The doorbell rang, and Jamie felt her pulse quicken. What now? She had the sudden, wild thought that Mike's parents had driven down from New Jersey. But no—it would be impossible for them to get here so quickly. Maybe it was a reporter, or someone serving a subpoena, or a friend of Ms. Torres's who'd been at the press conference today . . .

"I get it!" Eloise shouted, and Jamie began to run down the stairs.

"No! Eloise, please let me—"

It was too late. Eloise had pulled open the door, giving Jamie a clear view of their front stoop from her vantage point midway down the stairs.

Jamie sank down onto a step as men began filing into their house. Five of them, in total. All Mike's good friends from the police force. They weren't wearing their blue uniforms, which meant they'd all arranged to take the day off, which must've been quite a feat. Arun Brahma was with them, holding a huge bag from KFC. Another man carried a few liters of soda.

"Is Mike around?" asked a guy named Shawn. He and Mike had joined the force at the same time. Along with their partners, they sometimes met up for coffee in the morning on slow days. He'd had dinner at their house before.

Jamie nodded, as a tightness filled her chest. She heard Mike coming down the stairs, and she shifted aside to give him room to pass.

"Hey, man," Mike said. He reached out and slapped Shawn's palm, then Shawn pulled him in for a hug. Suddenly Mike was surrounded, swallowed up by the men.

It was, Jamie thought as she bent her head to hide her tears, as if Mike's fellow officers had heard a silent signal. An officer-needs-assistance call that they'd all rushed to answer.

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"Ma'am? Excuse me? Are you deaf?"

Lou blinked and looked up at the guy standing on the other side of

the counter. He was young, with a goatee and a Bluetooth phone bud in his ear. Those always confused Lou; she never knew if customers were talking to her or to someone on the line, and sometimes, like today, she guessed wrong.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"A skinny double latte, extra foam," he said.

When did the word *please* begin to disappear from our vocabulary? Lou wondered. Only about one in every ten people even bothered to thank her for making their coffee. She swallowed a yawn and decided to treat herself to a latte, too. Usually smelling coffee for so many hours put her off it, but today, she desperately needed a jolt. Jamie's house was so hot she hadn't caught more than a few hours' rest. She'd taken to dozing on the living room couch, next to one of the fans she'd bought at Home Depot, but even with the windows open, the air was stifling.

"Hello, miss?" Was the customer actually snapping his fingers at her? Maybe she was moving a little slowly, but come on, she thought.

"Your latte's coming right up, sir," the barista working next to Lou said. He took the cup out of her hand and poured in two shots of espresso before adding milk. "Let me get you a free scone to make up for the wait."

"No carbs," the man said.

"Our apologies, then," the barista said. "Enjoy!"

The customer walked out, and Lou turned to her colleague, a middle-aged guy who'd lost his job in finance a few years earlier and, after six months of filling out applications and with one kid on the cusp of college, had found himself on the other side of the counter. "Thanks," she said. "I'm moving a little slowly today."

"No worries," he said. He winked at Lou. "I gave him decaf and full-fat milk. Do you want to take your break now?"

Lou laughed. "Sure." Normally she walked around the block to soak in the fresh air, but today she felt too exhausted to do anything more than take her latte to a corner table. Unlike restaurants, where there was a clear ebb and flow of customers based around mealtimes, the coffee shop always seemed busy. It wasn't until Lou sat down heavily, releasing an involuntary sigh, that she realized the depth of her sleep

deprivation. Her vision was actually a little blurry. She rubbed her eyes and wondered if she could put down her head to steal a catnap.

"Excuse me." The woman standing in front of her was holding an iced tea and smiling. "I just wanted to say I thought that guy was really rude. You handled him well."

"Oh," Lou responded. "Thanks."

The table next to Lou's was empty, and the woman plopped down. "Is it really only five o'clock?" she asked, unwrapping the cellophane from a package of cookies. "I feel like it should already be tomorrow. Want one?"

Lou hadn't realized it, but a cookie was *exactly* what she wanted. Normally she didn't have much of a sweet tooth, but today she craved sugar.

"Thanks," she said again, reaching for the sweet in the woman's outstretched hand.

"Long day for you, too?" the woman asked. She smiled brightly at Lou and didn't wait for an answer. "Hey, are they hiring here?"

"I'm not sure," Lou said. She took a bite of cookie, tasting lemons and sugar. "I could check with the manager."

"Oh, don't get up. I know you probably don't get many breaks. This place is a madhouse," the woman said. "I can ask for myself. Do you mind, though . . . is the job okay?"

"Yeah, usually," Lou said. "The hours are flexible."

The woman nodded. "Oh, I'm Kaitlin by the way."

"Lou."

"Nice to meet you. Here, have another." She passed a second cookie to Lou. "I'm an artist," Kaitlin said. Lou blinked at the sudden turn in conversation, but Kaitlin didn't seem to need any encouragement to keep talking. "But not a real one, I guess. No one pays me for my paintings. I don't know, my older sister keeps nagging me to get a steady job. That's why I asked about this place."

Lou wasn't sure why the woman was revealing all of this, but she nodded to be polite.

"Do you have a sister?" Kaitlin asked.

"Yes," Lou said. She took a sip of her latte.

"Older or younger?"

"She's older," Lou said.

"Ah, so you know what I mean."

Actually, Lou wasn't quite sure. But she was so sleepy, and the woman seemed so certain, that it seemed easier to just sip her latte and nod again.

"Do you get along well with your sister?" Kaitlin asked.

"Sure," Lou said.

"You're lucky," Kaitlin said. "I used to see mine all the time, but she married this jerk of a guy." Kaitlin was ripping open a sugar packet and pouring its contents into her tea and swirling her straw around in her plastic cup, creating a mini-tornado. "He's got a real temper."

"That's too bad," Lou said.

"Is your sister married?" Kaitlin asked.

"Mmm-hmm," Lou said as she covered up another yawn. She only had fifteen minutes off, and she needed every one of them, but she couldn't be rude to a customer. The woman was only trying to be friendly. Besides, she'd given Lou half of her cookies.

"What's her husband like?" Kaitlin said.

"Whose?" Lou asked.

"Your sister's," Kaitlin said, laughing. But not in a mean way, like she thought Lou was dumb. It was more like they were in on the joke together.

"He's great," Lou said.

"You're so lucky," Kaitlin said. "So he's not a yeller, like Joey? That's my brother-in-law's name."

"What? No. I mean, sure, he can get mad sometimes. Once he threw a beer can at the TV when someone messed up a football play."

Kaitlin laughed again, as if it was one of the funniest things she'd ever heard, and Lou found herself sitting up a bit straighter. The sugar and caffeine were coursing through her body now, and her exhaustion was receding. Lou knew she didn't always make a great first impression. She could tell you ten different routes to the Washington Monument and she could multiply double-digit numbers in her head. But people, and the strange, subtle signals they gave off, could be confounding. They cried when they were happy. They smiled when they were angry, or spoke in especially calm voices instead of yelling.

They mixed together their feelings in such a busy way—Lou always thought of it as an emotional stew because it was like walking into a kitchen and inhaling the scent of a stew and being asked to list the ingredients. Who could puzzle out exactly what was cooking, when there were so many different things mingling together?

She looked more closely at Kaitlin, who wore expensive designer jeans and high-heeled shoes with openings at the toes revealing pink-painted nails. She had on a silky tank top and her hair was long and flowing. Her face looked open and friendly. Not the sort of woman who usually tried to befriend Lou, but maybe she was new to town, or lonely.

“Does your sister live nearby?” Lou asked Kaitlin. She was rewarded with a huge smile, as if Kaitlin had been worried Lou would end the conversation.

“Yeah, she’s in Virginia,” Kaitlin said.

“Mine, too!” Lou said.

“So we’ve both got older sisters who live in Virginia,” Kaitlin said. “But you like your brother-in-law and I don’t. Did you like him right away? Because my sister’s been married only a year, so I’m thinking maybe it’ll get better.”

Lou sipped her coffee, thinking back. “The first time I met him it was kind of weird, because his ex was supposed to have his son that day, and she didn’t show up. My sister thought it was because she and Mike—that’s her husband’s name—had tickets to a concert and the ex was trying to mess things up for them.”

“Wow!” Kaitlin said. She pulled her chair a bit closer to Lou’s, grimacing when it made a screeching noise against the floor. “So Mike was angry?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Lou said. “My sister sure was! But then they called me to come over and babysit Henry, and that’s how I met Mike.”

“So they went to the concert after all,” Kaitlin said.

“Yep,” Lou said.

“So your sister and Mike’s ex don’t get along,” Kaitlin said. “I guess that’s normal, though.”

Lou could almost hear Jamie’s voice in her ear, telling her to ask Kaitlin something about herself. *People like it when you show interest*

in them, Jamie had told Lou countless times. If you can't think of a question, try to compliment them.

"So what kind of art do you do?" Lou asked.

"Hmm? Oh, watercolors," Kaitlin said. Lou waited for her to go on, but she didn't.

"Sounds nice," Lou offered.

"Yeah," Kaitlin said flatly.

Lou wondered if she'd done something wrong. Maybe Kaitlin felt her art was private—but then, she'd been the one to bring it up. Her break was over, so Lou finished her latte and stood up. "I need to get back to work," she said.

"Oh, sure," Kaitlin said. She stood up, too.

"Thanks for the cookies," Lou said.

"Anytime," Kaitlin said.

"The manager's here, if you want to talk to him about a job," Lou said.

"What?" Kaitlin said. "Oh, maybe next time. But thanks."

Lou walked behind the counter and began filling a blender with ice to make Frappuccinos. It wasn't until a few minutes later when Lou glanced toward the glass doors that she spotted Kaitlin, still outside but now talking on her phone.

It was strange. Kaitlin was staring straight at her, but once Kaitlin caught Lou's eye, she spun around, as if she hadn't been looking at all.

...

Christie sat in the driver's seat of a sweet red Mercedes with a tobacco-colored interior and a Bose sound system. She reached for a lever and the sunroof rolled back soundlessly. Classic rock blared from the stereo and the smell of rich leather filled her nose.

It was as if this car had been custom-made for her. Even the seat seemed molded around her body, a perfect fit.

She turned the key in the ignition, feeling the vehicle leap to life. She could turn right and head toward the Eastern Shore, or drive straight and head to New York . . . this car could take her anywhere in

style.

“Have fun on your test drive. See you in a week?” the salesman joked.

Christie just revved the engine and drove off, feeling the warm rush of wind through her open window. There wasn't any comparison between this vehicle and her Miata. She loved her sporty little convertible, but the Mercedes was a woman's car, and Christie was turning over a new leaf. For the first time in her life, she had a real job, a sense of direction. She'd been thinking about buying an actual business suit to wear to her meetings with Elroy. Nothing boxy or in navy blue—she hadn't completely gone over to the dark side—but something that represented her new role. Maybe down the line she'd even purchase her own home.

Back in high school, no one had ever expected her to amount to much more than homecoming princess or head cheerleader. She could dance, draw on eyeliner without a single smudge, and expertly forge her mother's handwriting on notes to get her out of school—talents that didn't hold their value during the transition to the real world.

But now things were turning around. She'd pick up her first paycheck from Elroy this week, and she already knew what she wanted to do with some of it. She was going to add to the college account Mike had created for Henry. She didn't want Henry to end up saddled with debt, to have to work the kinds of crap jobs she'd started at sixteen. She imagined popping by Mike's house, a generous check in hand. Jamie would look like she'd swallowed a lemon.

The sleek, purring Mercedes would be her good-luck charm, she decided. She wondered what Simon would think if he saw her pull up to a nice restaurant in this number. Simon would probably be dining with a woman named Beatrice or Kip who had a braying laugh and talked about nothing but dressage. He'd remember what it felt like to be with a real woman when he saw Christie. She'd regard him coolly, thinking of how he'd reacted when she tied his wrists to her bedposts with silk scarves and tickled his bare chest with her hair. The wrist tying wasn't so much a sexual move as it was one born of desperation—Simon had no technique and he pressed her clitoris like he was a

teenager and it was a handheld gaming device. The next day a box containing four Hermès scarves had been delivered to her home. She'd never felt such glorious fabric.

She reluctantly turned back down the street to the car dealership. The salesman saw her pull in and was on her the moment she turned off the engine.

"So, do you love it, or do you love it?" he asked. His smile showed all his teeth.

"Not bad," she said.

"Why don't you come in and I'll get you a bottle of water or some coffee?" he offered.

"I have an appointment," she said.

She left quickly, without a backward glance. She'd never before noticed how loud her Miata sounded when it started up, or how low to the ground she felt. Her cell phone rang and she glanced down at the caller ID. Henry.

"Hey, baby," she said.

"Mom?"

ABBA was blaring "Dancing Queen" over the radio so she didn't catch the quaver in his voice until he said, "Can you come pick me up?"

"Where are you?" she asked.

"At Josh's," he said, naming one of his best friends. "I left a message for Dad but he wasn't there."

"Sure," Christie said. "Be there in fifteen."

She wondered if he and Josh had had a fight. Unlikely, since they'd been best friends forever, and Henry was the most even-tempered person on the planet. He didn't get that from her, she thought as an idiot in a Honda tried to cut in front of her and Christie laid on her horn. Still, she pressed her foot a little harder on the gas and made it to Josh's street in just over ten minutes.

She started to turn down the block, then she noticed a tall, thin figure standing on the corner, a good distance away from Josh's house. She pulled over. "Hey, kiddo," she said. "Need a ride?"

She was trying to make Henry smile. But he just climbed into the passenger's seat and slammed the door.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Just drive, okay?” he snapped.

She almost gave him a lecture about respecting one’s parents—which was pretty funny, considering that by the time she was Henry’s age she was sneaking out to meet boyfriends and smoking cigarettes and cursing back at her mother—but the look on his face stopped her.

“Do you want to go home?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I want to see Dad,” he said.

“I don’t know where he is,” Christie said. “Didn’t you say you tried to call him?”

“Let’s go to his house. I’ll wait.”

Christie felt the sting of rejection. She wondered why he could talk to Mike but not her. But Henry was acting so uncharacteristically that she decided not to press it. Jamie’s minivan was missing when they arrived at the house, but the red ball of sun was sinking low in the sky, pulling some of the heat of the day away with it, so Christie and Henry sat on the front steps. Henry didn’t check his phone, like he usually did during life’s lulls. When Christie asked if he wanted to use his key to go inside, he shook his head. “Stupid AC’s broken,” he said. “It’s too hot in there.”

For some reason, he looked especially like Mike tonight, Christie thought. She’d always been able to see bits of herself in her son—they had the same light skin tone, and his dimples were echoes of her own—but now she could see Mike’s features were the ones that would shape his adult face.

Mike had been the one to handle talking to Henry about sex, wet dreams, and drugs. Who better than a cop to drive home the dangers of marijuana use, or drunk driving? Christie had added to the conversation a bit—downplaying her own past flirtation with pot and mushrooms—but Mike was the one who took the reins when it came to hard conversations. She wasn’t good at this stuff. Still, she should try.

“Is this about a girl?” she asked.

“Can we just sit here?” Henry snapped.

“Sure,” Christie said. She turned away so he couldn’t see her face. She knew teenagers could be rough on their parents, but this was the

first time it had happened with Henry.

A half hour later, Jamie's minivan came down the street and pulled into the driveway. The side doors slid open, and kids piled out.

"Henry!" Eloise shouted, launching herself at her half brother. Henry picked her up and gave her a hug as the other kids swarmed around him. He was like Harry Styles in this house, Christie thought.

Jamie and Mike got out of the van and went around to the back to get bags of groceries out of the trunk. "Thanks for coming by," Mike said to Henry as he passed by. "Grab a bag on your way in."

Henry didn't respond. Mike didn't seem to notice the tension emanating from his son, but Christie watched as Jamie's eyes flitted between Henry and Mike before landing on Christie. Christie shrugged. "He said he wanted to talk to his dad."

"Okay," Jamie said.

Henry reached out and took the groceries from Jamie's arms and carried them inside without a word.

"What's up?" Jamie asked.

"I have no idea," Christie said. "But he's really upset."

"Is it something about the news conference?"

"What news conference?" Christie asked.

Jamie closed her eyes—actually shut her eyes, like she was dealing with an idiot and gathering her patience—before she spoke.

"How could you have missed it?" Jamie said, like everyone in the world was glued to the news constantly.

"If you'd told me, I would've watched it," Christie said.

"I had a few other things going on," Jamie said. She swallowed and continued in a softer voice. "The mother of the—the teenager held a news conference. She basically called Mike a racist. She said he shot Jose because her son was dark-skinned."

"Are you serious?" Christie asked. "I mean, isn't this all going to be dropped soon? Maybe she's just trying to keep it in the news."

She heard loud voices from inside the house. Jamie must've heard them, too, because she rushed inside. After a moment's hesitation, Christie followed.

Henry was standing in the middle of the living room, his posture rigid. The house was steaming hot, and Henry's face was red and

sweaty.

"I didn't know what she was going to say, okay?" Mike was saying. He wasn't yelling, but just barely.

"She said you shot him on purpose!" Henry shouted. "Josh played it back on YouTube."

Mike and Jamie had really screwed up, Christie thought. Henry shouldn't have heard about this secondhand. She knew the anger on her face reflected her son's.

"You think I did it on purpose? Because he was Hispanic?" Mike roared. He had a look on his face that Christie had never before seen.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Henry had never spoken that way before—to anyone.

Mike's face was a mottled red now, just like Henry's. For the first time, Christie wondered if Mike was going to hit their son. But before she could scream at them to stop, Jamie stepped forward. Christie thought Jamie would yell, or shove the guys apart. But instead Jamie put a gentle hand on Henry's shoulder and she looked up at Mike.

"I'm so sorry we didn't warn you, Henry," she said, her voice as soft as a caress. "It must've been horrible for you to learn about this from your friends."

"It was!" Henry's voice was still loud, but Jamie's words had drained away the venom from it.

"Your dad has been under so much stress, honey," Jamie said. She was blinking hard now, seeming on the verge of tears. "We all have. You, too. We should have dealt with this better as a family. I'm so sorry you found out this way."

Henry began to cry. "How could she say those things about you, Dad? And then people were writing stuff in the comments, saying they'd like to blow your head off." Henry had morphed into a young boy again, his lips trembling and his shoulders shaking. He'd been scared, not angry, Christie realized belatedly. Just like his dad.

Mike moved closer and folded Henry into his arms. "Don't read that stuff. Look, maybe you should stay at your mom's for a while. Until all this is resolved."

"I don't want to!" Henry said. "I want to be with you!" Christie felt herself flinch.

“They can’t just say that stuff about you!” Henry continued. “It’s so unfair! I want to just . . . *hit* them and make them stop.”

“Trust me, I know,” Mike said.

Jamie moved closer and stroked Henry’s hair. “It’s going to be okay, honey,” she said.

They were a circle of three, linked together physically and emotionally, and they’d all forgotten she was here. They were a family, like snooty Simon surrounded by his mother and brother at the birthday lunch, and she was on the outside again.

Christie didn’t even realize she’d walked out of the house until she’d pulled the door shut behind her.

Chapter Nine

IT WAS STRANGE HOW relentlessly life ticked along, demanding your participation without asking for your consent.

Eloise's three-year pediatrician appointment was scheduled for today, and Jamie wanted to cancel it. But the doctor's practice was so busy that she probably wouldn't be able to reschedule for weeks, and who was to say their lives would be any less stressful then? Things could actually be worse. Jamie tried to banish that thought, but it lingered like a dark shadow.

Keeping busy would be a good thing. The photographers and news vans had decamped from the front of her home, but Jamie knew any breaking tidbit would bring them rushing back. So maybe now was the time to get out.

She'd sensed a growing unease in the children. They'd watched way too much television lately, and had fought more often, and their meals hadn't been as regular or healthy. Last night, Eloise had freaked out because there was a tag in the back of her pajamas that itched, even though she'd worn those pajamas dozens of times. When Jamie couldn't find the scissors to cut it out, Eloise had started screaming. Emily had thrown a book at her sister and yelled, "Shut up," Eloise had screamed louder, and Sam had hidden under the covers, plugging his ears with his fingers. Jamie had wanted to join him.

She'd yelled at the girls, and they'd both cried, which had made Jamie feel awful.

She wanted her life back so desperately. She wanted her biggest worries to be about the electricity bill, or the fact that she couldn't button her favorite jeans, or the state of the kitchen floor. She wanted to be annoyed with Mike because he'd gone out with the guys after work and had lost forty bucks in a poker game.

She couldn't push back hard enough against the fear and despair pressing down over their house. In the end, all she could do was this: Take Eloise to the doctor. Make a mental note to pick up a new bathing suit for Emily, since the bottom of her old one had almost rubbed through. Put a load of dirty clothes into the washing machine. Hold together their shredded existence as best she could.

She gave the kids frozen waffles with Mrs. Butterworth's syrup for breakfast and added green grapes on the side to assuage her guilt. Then she piled them all into the minivan, because Mike had disappeared somewhere without telling her he was leaving. He'd probably just gone for a run, and she hadn't mentioned the doctor's appointment to him, but why didn't he consider the fact that she might welcome some help—not to mention his company—this morning?

"Am I going to get a shot?" Sam asked.

"Absolutely not," Jamie said. "You had your checkup a few months ago, remember?"

"Maybe they forgot to give me one then." Sam began biting his nails.

"Definitely not," Jamie said. She tried to keep her voice calm and steady, knowing her son just needed reassurance. They all did.

Her gas tank was almost empty, so she stopped to fill it up, sweating in the strong sun. Her cell phone rang and she pulled it out of her pocket and glanced down. Sandy. She hesitated, then hit the Ignore Call button, telling herself now wasn't a good time to talk.

She lifted her hair off the back of her neck and fanned herself with her other hand. There was a Starbucks next door to the gas station, and she was hit with a deep craving for a Frappuccino with whipped cream and caramel sauce. She could almost taste the icy sweetness. Her mouth watered as she watched a woman come out of the store, clutching a plastic cup with a domed lid, the precise object of Jamie's desire. It would be a bright point in a dismal day, a tiny treat to lift her spirits.

But then she thought about all that would be required: She'd have to find a parking spot and unstrap Eloise and usher all the kids into the coffee shop and negotiate their demands for snacks and drinks. She'd end up spending fifteen bucks and someone would be whining

because they got a pink cake pop instead of a yellow one. Eloise would probably have to go potty—she loved investigating new restrooms—and Jamie would have to drag the other kids into the bathroom, because how could she leave them standing in the middle of Starbucks alone? Eloise would insist on doing it “self!” and Jamie would cringe every time her little girl touched the toilet seat or the handle to flush, imagining viruses and plagues attaching themselves to her toddler’s fingertips. Jamie would scrub hands and get everyone back out of the restaurant and wrangle them into their car seats . . .

She paid for the gas and drove on to the pediatrician’s office. After they checked in, Jamie found a few empty seats in the waiting room. Sam sat down next to a kid who coughed, wetly, directly on him before Jamie gestured for her son to move to another spot.

“Mrs. Anderson?”

She blinked when she heard her name and looked up to see a nurse standing in front of her, holding a chart. Jamie wondered how many times the young woman had called her name.

“I’m sorry,” Jamie said. She stood up, took Eloise’s hand, and motioned for Emily and Sam to follow the nurse to the exam room, which contained a dog-eared copy of *Highlights* magazine and a few plastic trucks in a bucket under the table. The nurse tucked the chart into a plastic sleeve on the door and exited.

Jamie wanted the Frappuccino. She wanted her husband back. She wanted a Xanax.

“Can I have your phone?” Emily asked.

Jamie handed it over immediately. She didn’t have the strength for a battle.

“Can I?” Sam echoed.

“Me!” Eloise demanded.

“Five minutes each,” Jamie said, knowing the strategy wouldn’t prevent fighting. She knew she should try to engage the kids in a game of I Spy, or tell them a story, but she was too weary. She looked at her watch. Their appointment had been set for twenty minutes ago. If Jamie had showed up twenty minutes late, the receptionist might’ve told her to reschedule—there was a little engraved brass plate right by the sign-in sheet with that warning. Yet Jamie often waited that long to

be seen. She'd switch except for the fact that she liked her pediatrician, and things probably wouldn't be any different at a new practice. She'd read somewhere that doctors were perpetually overbooked, under pressure to hustle as many patients as possible in and out every day.

"My turn!" Eloise grabbed for the phone, and in the ensuing tussle it fell to the floor. Jamie heard a sharp crack, and when she picked it up, there was a spiderweb pattern in the glass.

"It was her fault!" Emily said as Eloise started to cry.

"It's fine," Jamie said. It was only a stupid phone. She handed it to Eloise, who looked suspicious about the lack of a lecture.

"Are you mad?" Sam asked.

She reached out and stroked his hair. "No," she said. He leaned into her and she curved an arm around him. Emily began helping Eloise play a game, being uncharacteristically patient. Jamie listened to their sweet, high voices mingling and she felt Sam's thin body huddling against her own, and a tremble of fear ran through her. Despite everything, the kids were happy. But if Mike was found guilty, they might have to move to another state to escape the backlash. The kids would leave the only home they'd ever known and say good-bye to their friends and school. They'd move to a crappy apartment and she'd have to get a job and she'd never be around. The thought that she might be unable to protect her children from a terrible future made her insides wrench.

Suddenly her fear transformed into anger toward Mike. Why hadn't he been more careful? Didn't he realize his actions would affect all of their lives? He'd obviously had post-traumatic stress disorder, and he'd refused to get help because of his macho stubborn pigheadedness. It was a good thing wives weren't permitted to testify on behalf of their husbands, because if she were called to the witness stand, she'd take the oath, then she'd remove her hand from the Bible and lies would tumble out of her mouth. She'd sell her soul to save her family.

The door to the exam room swung open, and Jamie looked up to see the pediatrician, a woman with gray hair who had a miniature teddy bear clipped to her stethoscope.

“Hi there,” she said, and for some reason Jamie’s eyes filled. The pediatrician made her think of her mother. It wasn’t that the doctor resembled her mom in any way. But being around a kind, older woman who cared about her children’s well-being made Jamie imagine how life might’ve been if her mother had lived. Sometimes Jamie wondered whether her mom might’ve embraced Jamie’s kids in a way she never had her own; she hadn’t been a bad mother, just a somewhat distant one. Her primary allegiance was to her husband, not her children, which Jamie now understood wasn’t an uncommon family dynamic a few decades ago. Jamie could almost see the ghost of her mother beside her now, looking at her grandchildren with a mixture of love and longing, saying, “Oh, honey, did you see that expression on Emily’s face? That’s just how you used to look when you were mad.” The mother who lived in Jamie’s heart made up for all of her past transgressions.

The pediatrician managed to get the iPhone away from Eloise—Sam triumphantly claimed it—and then she perched on a wheeled stool so she could be at the little girl’s eye level. She explained how her stethoscope worked and listened to Eloise’s heart before proclaiming it strong and healthy. Jamie was grateful for the chance to blink away the tears in her eyes.

The doctor completed the physical before turning to Jamie.

“So,” she said, smiling. “Your little girl is perfect. Do you have any questions for me?”

“I’m perfect,” Eloise informed Emily.

“As if,” Emily said absently as she watched Sam play Angry Birds.

“There’s just one thing,” Jamie said. She glanced at her older daughter. “I know we’re here for Eloise, but . . . Emily’s teacher mentioned something about her fine motor skills in her final report card. She recommended we look into occupational therapy this summer.”

The pediatrician nodded. “I can write you a prescription,” she said. “Will your insurance cover it?”

“I have no idea,” Jamie said.

“It’s expensive,” the doctor said. “Just so you know.”

“How expensive, generally?” Jamie asked.

“About a hundred bucks a session.”

Jamie let out her air in a whoosh. “Isn’t there something else I can do?”

“You could let her play with Play-Doh more to get her fingers strong, and let her draw as much as possible.”

“Okay,” Jamie said. “That sounds a lot better.”

“Get some scissors and have her practice cutting, too,” the doctor said. “I’m not too worried about it. She’s still young and some kids just take longer to develop than others. If she’s still struggling next year we can talk about OT.”

“My dad’s in jail,” Eloise announced.

“No he isn’t, dummy!” Sam yelled.

“He’s not! And Sam, don’t call her that,” Jamie said. “She just got confused . . . I don’t know why she said that . . .” She could feel her cheeks turn hot.

“Mrs. Anderson.” The doctor put a hand on her shoulder. “I know your family must be under tremendous stress.”

So she knew, too.

“How are you holding up?”

Jamie gave the only answer she could in front of her children: “We’re okay, thanks.”

The doctor reached for a pad and scribbled something down. “In case you need someone to talk to,” she said.

That was another hundred-dollar-an-hour extravagance they couldn’t afford, but Jamie nodded her appreciation and slipped the note into her pocket.

They left the office, and Jamie corralled the kids into the van and rolled down the windows, releasing the blistering air. She tried to think of what to do next. The house was a disaster, she had at least three loads of dirty laundry piling up, and breakfast dishes cluttered the sink. Mike would probably be home by now. But he’d be working out, or mowing the lawn, or watching television. Avoiding her again.

Last night he hadn’t even come to bed. When she’d crept down the basement stairs in the middle of the night to check on him, she’d seen him sprawled across the couch. He hadn’t accidentally fallen asleep there; he’d brought down a sheet and a pillow. The television was on,

washing a thin blue light across his face, but Mike was asleep. She'd started to shake his shoulder, then she'd withdrawn her hand. Why bother waking him up? It wouldn't be any less lonely if he was next to her in bed.

For the first time, Jamie was gripped with the feeling of not wanting to go home, despite the fact that it was her favorite place in the world. Their house had scuff marks on the baseboards and magnetic alphabet letters on the refrigerator (the *k* had long since gone missing) and the lower dishwasher rack had a malfunctioning wheel that always got stuck. There was a squeaky floorboard outside of Emily's and Eloise's room that Jamie had to tiptoe around so she didn't wake her daughters at night. The toilet in the kids' bathroom had just started to run—she had to remember to mention that to Mike—and pen marks decorated a kitchen wall, charting the growth of their children. But Jamie had never wanted to live in a showplace. She'd once gone to another family's home for a school function and was awed to see the couches were creamy white, and the tables were glass. On the center of the dining room table was a tall, thin glass vase containing precisely seven lemons (Jamie tried not to think about the jumble of old mail, car keys, notebooks, Happy Meal toys, and tubes of lip balm and sunscreen cluttering her scarred dining room table). Everything was lovely and elegant, but it didn't feel like a home. The marks and imperfections of Jamie's house bore testimony to all it had endured, forming its character. It was much like her marriage in that way—their old battle scars showed in the furrow that had formed between her eyebrows, and in the way either of them could say a single word and an entire history would unspool in both of their minds. She wouldn't want to wipe clean the evidence of all that living, either in her house or in her marriage.

"Mommy? Aren't you going to drive?" Sam asked.

She should put the van in gear and go buy child-size scissors and Play-Doh along with Eloise's bathing suit. But Jamie felt paralyzed, a now-familiar tightness spreading across her chest. Her breath came in shallow gasps.

"Mommy?" Sam asked.

She dropped her head onto the steering wheel. Maybe she should

just drive away! She had a credit card and a full tank of gas. They could head to the beach and stay in a cheap motel. They could escape the dishes and laundry and knowing looks. And she could have a break from Mike, because being around him right now felt worse than being apart.

The thought was so tantalizing she was reaching to put the car in drive when her phone rang, startling her. She glanced down and saw it was Lou calling. She snatched up the phone like a lifeline.

“Hi,” she whispered. What was she thinking? They couldn’t abandon Mike.

Lou didn’t seem to notice anything amiss in Jamie’s voice. She was packing in preparation for her move, she said. “I can’t touch my new roommate’s food,” Lou said. “Did I tell you that? I’m thinking I might stroke her bottle of orange juice in the morning, though.”

The words came out of Jamie’s mouth before she knew what she was going to say.

“Come live with us,” she said, her throat thick with unshed tears. “Please, Lou. I need help.”

...

Lou hadn’t been bullied in high school. She’d mostly been ignored, which she hadn’t minded. She’d been like a fourth stringer warming the bench at a football game; she’d never truly expected to get a chance to play.

She knew she could thank Jamie for the fact that she hadn’t been teased. Jamie wasn’t in the popularity stratosphere, but she was well liked, partly because she was pretty and nice and partly because she wasn’t intimidated by anyone. The goodwill surrounding Jamie flowed over to encompass Lou like a puffy cloud. Sometimes Jamie would motion for Lou to join her at her lunch table, if there were empty seats—an honor seniors never bestowed upon lowly sophomores. Jamie’s friends always said hi to Lou when they passed her in the hallways, too. Lou knew her high school experience might have been very different were it not for her sister, because Jamie had set the ground rules for how Lou was to be treated early on.

Once when Lou was in ninth grade, she'd stopped in the bathroom between classes. She heard a group of girls come in a moment later, and Lou recognized Jamie's voice. She was about to flush the toilet and come out to say hello; then she heard Jamie say, "Why do you care if my sister comes along?"

"I mean, we might meet some guys there," said another girl.

"So?" Jamie said. "It's just a stupid movie. If you don't want Lou to come, then maybe I'll just hang out at home with her and invite some other people over."

Lou imagined Jamie locking eyes with her opponent, like a wolf defending her territory. There were a few other people in the bathroom, too, but the room felt still, as if everyone was holding their breath.

"Sure, she can come," the other girl finally said. "No big deal."

"Thanks!" Jamie said, her voice gracious in victory. "I like your nail polish, by the way."

Yes, Jamie was sometimes frazzled and bossy and impatient. But Lou never doubted that her sister had her best interests at heart. Jamie invited her over at least once a week for dinner and always made broccoli because she knew it was Lou's favorite vegetable, and she encouraged Lou to attend all of the kids' school events. She was constantly enveloping Lou under their family umbrella, an extension of her inclusiveness in high school.

Jamie had never asked her for anything before, other than to occasionally babysit, which wasn't a real favor since Lou always enjoyed it as much as the kids did. So when Jamie asked her to move in, Lou didn't hesitate. She canceled her lease and forfeited her deposit that same day. Lou could take over Sam's room, Jamie said, and he was going to use the bottom bunk in Henry's room until things settled down.

Now Lou walked to the elephants' enclosure and called for Tabby. The day was already hot and humid, and Lou's khaki shirt was sticking to her back. Funny how she didn't mind the heat a bit when she was outside, but it felt suffocating indoors. Tabby came close enough for Lou to reach out and run a hand over the elephant's big, floppy ear.

"Hey, sweet girl," Lou said. She took out her equipment to draw

blood, and Tabby closed her eyes, like she always did when she saw a needle. “It’ll be over fast,” Lou promised. “Then I’ve got some apples for you.”

She was monitoring Tabitha even more closely these days, because once her progesterone level started to drop, birth would be imminent. When that happened, Lou planned to be here. She’d already set aside a sleeping bag and had packed a small satchel, just like a pregnant woman preparing for labor.

The zoo wanted to capture the birth on videotape and post it online in hopes of drawing more visitors. Lou was sure that marketing move would work, because there wasn’t anything cuter than a wrinkly baby elephant with long eyelashes and a curving trunk.

There was a lot that could go wrong during birth, though, and Lou was trying to prepare for any outcome. If the baby was trapped in the amniotic sac and Tabitha couldn’t free it so it could breathe, Lou would be ready to intervene. Veterinarians would also be on call in case Tabby fell ill after the birth or started to hemorrhage. There was only one variable that deeply worried Lou. She didn’t know if Tabitha had ever seen a baby elephant during the years she’d been in captivity, because Tabby had come to the zoo via a sanctuary and her prior history was unknown. Lou was doing what she could to prepare Tabitha for motherhood. Everything in the elephants’ enclosure was jumbo size, which meant the baby might seem even more alien, so Lou had begun introducing smaller objects to the enclosure. She’d put in a plastic ball yesterday, and Tabitha had approached it warily. She hadn’t stomped on it, which was a good sign, Lou thought.

Lou just prayed that the gentle elephant’s maternal instincts would kick in, trumping the vicious side nature sometimes exhibited. There had been one terrible case at another zoo where an elephant violently rejected her young while the baby cried actual tears. If the worst happened—if Tabby tried to hurt her baby—Lou and the other keepers would need to act instantly. Lou had the closest bond with Tabitha, which meant she was the least likely to be attacked. She hadn’t told anyone, but if danger arose, she was fully prepared to get into the enclosure and try to calm Tabby in order to save the baby.

“All over,” Lou said, withdrawing the needle. She gave Tabby a few

apples, then began her daily head-to-toe inspection. By now Tabby was a pro at the exam, but when she'd first arrived at the zoo, Lou had needed to teach her how to cooperate. The whole process had been broken down into steps. First, Lou let Tabitha use her trunk to investigate a long pole with a pool float attached at the end. When Tabitha was comfortable with the device, Lou tapped Tabitha's foot gently with the float and immediately fed her a yam. Lou repeated that exercise—gentle tap, yam—until Tabitha learned to associate the pole and float with her favorite treat. Like most elephants, she was incredibly smart, so she caught on within a day.

Once Tabby mastered that step, Lou reached the pole into the enclosure while keeping it a few feet in the air above Tabitha's foot. The elephant waited for the tap, but when it didn't come, she initiated contact with the pool float, raising her foot to touch it. "Good girl!" Lou cried, delighted, and she gave Tabby a few extra yams. Maybe this was what it felt like for parents when their kids made the honor roll, or got accepted to Harvard.

Lou began gradually moving the float closer and closer to the exam area, until all Tabby needed was the sight of Lou in a particular place to recognize that it was time for her checkup. The daily exams were critical: Carrying around ten thousand pounds took its toll on an elephant's extremities.

Tabby's feet looked good today. One of her toenails was cracked, but not too badly, and Lou cleaned it out before feeding the elephant more treats. Her tail was healing nicely, too. Some people might think Lou was in control of the situation—after all, she'd trained Tabitha to lift up her feet—but Lou knew better. The exam would take place only if Tabitha agreed. Otherwise, the massive mammal would simply walk away, leaving Lou pleading with her from behind the barrier.

After all of the elephants were examined, Lou let them out of the enclosure so they could explore. Lou packed up her equipment as Tabitha made her way to the pool and waded in. Lou had heard pregnant women loved to swim because their heavy bodies felt so lightweight in the water, and she sensed Tabs felt the same way. Lou leaned against the fence, smiling, as she settled in to watch.

How could humans do such terrible things to these gorgeous

creatures, like hunting them for their ivory? Lou wondered. Animals could be cruel to one another, but at least they had sound reasons for their actions most of the time. Young male elephants were clearly miserable when they were pushed out of their families by their mothers; Lou had seen video footage of them standing around the outskirts of their herds, yearning to be let back in. But only by being ostracized would males seek out new partners and mate. The elephant matriarchs were just ensuring the survival of their species, Lou thought. What excuse did humans have for their actions?

Lou spend the rest of her shift updating charts and feeding and observing the animals. She also led a group of schoolchildren on a tour. "Elephants can poop as much as three hundred pounds a day!" she told them. That was always a crowd-pleaser.

She was wrapping up her shift, mixing vitamins into the elephants' evening meal, when Jamie called.

"Hey, I was about to call to see if you could pick me up at the apartment tomorrow around eight so I can bring my stuff over," Lou said, cradling the phone between her shoulder and ear while she measured out the correct dose of vitamin E. "It should only take me one trip."

"What were you thinking?" Jamie screamed.

Lou fell back, as if Jamie's voice were a punch bursting out of the phone. The vitamin bottle slipped out of Lou's hand and shattered against the floor.

"I don't—what?" Lou asked.

"Mike has a temper? Christie and I don't get along? There's tension in our house? How could you say all that to a reporter? Damn it, Lou!"

"I didn't!" Lou finally managed to get in against the torrent of Jamie's words.

"Yes you did!" Jamie said. "You talked to some blogger at the coffee shop when you were taking a break! Really, Lou? That empty beer can Mike threw at the TV *five* years ago?"

"I didn't know she was a blogger!" Lou protested. "She said she was thinking about applying for a job! She gave me a cookie."

"A cookie? You sold out our family for a fucking cookie?" Other people had talked to her in this tone, the one that proclaimed they

thought Lou was obtuse. But Jamie never had, not until now.

Tears flooded Lou's eyes. She thought about Kaitlin's eager smile, and the way it had dimmed when Lou had turned the conversation away from Jamie's family. Jamie was right; she'd been stupid. She should've figured out what was going on.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Jamie exhaled loudly. "Just don't say *anything* to anyone ever again about my family, okay? If someone brings up Mike, you walk away. Do you understand, Lou?"

"I understand," Lou said. Her nose was running, and she wiped it with the edge of her sleeve.

"Okay," Jamie said. "I've got to go. Eloise is yelling for something."

Jamie hung up before Lou could ask whether she should still move in. This was the sort of situation that paralyzed her. How mad, exactly, was Jamie? Angry enough to cause a permanent shift in their relationship? Maybe Jamie was tired of all the trouble Lou caused, of the broken lamp and burned Tupperware and forgotten Pull-Up and day of junk food that had made Eloise sick. Lou thought about calling Jamie back to ask, but she worried it might make her sister even more upset.

Lou knelt down and began to pick up the shards of the vitamin bottle, putting the glass into a dustpan before reaching for a broom and sweeping up the smaller pieces. She couldn't stop hearing Jamie's words—*Don't say anything to anyone ever again about my family*.

She knew her sister hadn't meant to be cruel. Like the mama elephants who needed to reject their sons so that the species could flourish, Jamie had a good reason for lashing out, for pushing Lou away. But this was the first time Jamie had ever made a distinction that separated Lou from her family.

Lou was on the outside now, yearning to be let back in.

...

She needed to have a serious talk with Mike and Jamie, Christie decided as she held two shirts up against her black skirt and decided

on the gold button-down. First Jamie had forgotten to pick up Henry from a friend's, and while he hadn't been in any danger, what if he'd been waiting at a mall or something? Then, no one had bothered to tell Henry what was going on, so he'd had to learn the details of the shooting via YouTube. YouTube, for God's sakes!

Christie was meeting a new mark tonight at a hotel, then she was planning to go straight home and call Jamie and demand a meeting. Jamie was usually the one who summoned Christie for chats, suggesting they all "get on the same page" when it came to Henry's bedtime (fine, so Christie let him stay up late when something good was on TV) or keeping his study schedule up-to-date (she'd forgotten he had a Spanish final, but she could pretty much guarantee that in another ten years, he'd forget everything except how to say "hola").

But what Jamie and Mike had done was far worse than any of Christie's transgressions. Christie's ire mounted while she dressed for her appointment and freshened her makeup. She picked up her purse and checked to make sure she had the disposable cell phone in the outer pocket and her own zipped inside. She drove the now-familiar route to the hotel and parked in the hourly lot, since it was an expensable fee, then went to the room Elroy had rigged with a camera and audio-recording device. Elroy had kept the same room they'd used the previous night, and Christie expected the same scenario to unfold. She smiled as she remembered how her last client had shown up at the hotel, a CVS bag containing a box of condoms in hand. He'd torn off his pants almost before Christie shut the door behind him. Elroy had knocked a moment later, and Christie had slipped out. She wondered how long the cheating jerk had waited for her to return with the champagne. She hoped his wife had already changed the locks by the time he got home.

Christie stepped out of her Miata and smoothed her skirt, wondering if her mother's exes had known the extent of her cheating. They must've; her mother hadn't exactly been discreet. Once in high school, Christie was crammed in the backseat of a friend's car with a bunch of teenagers and someone had said, "Hey, isn't that your mom's car?" Christie's mother drove a distinctive ancient yellow VW Bug, which had been parked in front of a neighbor's house. The neighbor was a

creepy guy who always mowed his lawn shirtless. Rumor had it he'd hit on one of the cheerleaders the previous year after hiring her to babysit.

Christie had just tossed her head and laughed, as if her insides weren't being pierced, while the others in the car went suddenly silent. Funny how certain memories could smack back into you as crisply and powerfully as if they were occurring all over again. She could still feel the warm sun on her face, and hear the echo of the song that had been playing—Bon Jovi's "Always." To this day, she reflexively reached to switch off the radio whenever she heard his voice.

She'd told herself she'd never be like her mother, but had Christie fared any better in relationships? A lot of men had whispered they'd loved her, but none had loved her well. None had ever cupped her face in his hands, or stared deeply into her eyes, the way men in romantic movies did. No one had ever moved past her in the kitchen, putting one hand on her hip to gently steer her aside, the movements so practiced they seemed flawlessly choreographed, the way she'd seen Mike do with Jamie. Mike had good hands; Christie would give him that. They were as strong and well shaped as the rest of him.

Christie turned off her car and headed into the hotel, bypassing the check-in desk since she already had the key to the room. She stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the seventh floor, then stared at the numbers lighting up atop the doors. When she reached her floor, she walked down the long corridor, fit her key into the slot, and stepped in.

She paced the room, feeling unsettled. Something was off, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Maybe the bad energy from last night's cheater still lingered here. She tried to open a window, but they were fastened shut, probably to prevent suicides, she thought. Finally she opened the minibar and took out a small bottle of gin and another of tonic and mixed herself a drink, taking a big swallow. She flopped back on the bed and picked up the remote control and began flicking through channels. Half an hour passed. Her glass was empty, so she got up to make another drink.

Finally, just as she was reduced to reading the card listing the hotel's outrageously priced menu for M&M's and Oreos, she heard a

rap on the door.

She stood up, not bothering to put on her shoes, and went to look out the peephole. On the other side was a guy named Jim, whose face was already blending into those of the other losers she'd tricked. He was tall and thin, with graying hair and glasses and an overbite, and he probably didn't deserve his wife.

Scumbag, Christie thought as she pulled open the door.

"Hi there," she said. For some reason she couldn't summon her usual enthusiasm for her job. She tried to shake off her dark mood and smile seductively.

"Hey, baby," Jim said. Did he even remember her fake name?

He walked into the hotel room like he'd paid for it—like he owned it—and when the door shut behind him, he engaged the flip lock that would prevent it from opening, even if someone had a key. "Don't want a maid interrupting us," he said as he leered at her.

Christie tried to smile back, but she knew it looked forced. What was wrong with her today? It seemed impossible that the gloss had worn off her new job so quickly.

Jim strode to the minibar, shedding his coat. "I see you got started without me," he said back over his shoulder.

Something about this guy really chafed her. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, feeling goose bumps, and not the good kind.

"I couldn't wait," she purred.

He poured vodka into the other cut-crystal glass and didn't add a mixer. He took a healthy swig, sat down on the edge of the bed, and patted the spot next to him.

She walked over, feeling as if she were moving through mud. She had to get in the game. Elroy was watching and listening to everything, and she felt like she might still be on probation.

"So," she said. "Tell me what you like."

"I like you," Jim said. "Come here."

When she'd "bumped into" Jim at the coffee shop he frequented every morning before work, accidentally grabbing his red-eye latte instead of her own cappuccino, the word that came to mind was milquetoast. Why was this guy contemplating extramarital affairs rather than geeking out by playing video games? In high school, she

wouldn't have let him give her his lunch money.

Men had all the luck, she reflected. Just because this guy had a steady job and presumably wasn't wearing fishnet stockings under his Dockers, women were probably lining up to sleep with him. It was D.C.'s fault. All the pencil-necked policy wonks had warped the expectations of single women in the city. Jim clearly thought he was George Clooney's rival. Just look at him, patting the bed again, expecting her to heel like a dog.

She tried again. "Now that you have me here, whatever will you do with me?"

Jim just smiled. How many teeth did he have crammed into that mouth, anyway? It looked like more than the usual number.

He set down his drink on the nightstand, then stretched out a hand toward her. She danced backward. "Tell me," she said. She needed to get him to say it before he got too close.

But suddenly he stood up, reached for her, and crushed her against him. His hands were everywhere, fingers scrabbling up her skirt like roaches.

"Wait!" she yelled. She tried to pull away, but he was surprisingly strong for such a thin guy. His arms gripped her like a vise and he seemed to have sprouted four hands. They poked between her thighs, pulling at her thong and making the elastic cut into her legs. His tongue was wet and thick, jamming its way between her lips when she opened her mouth to yell, as effective as a gag.

He pushed her back onto the bed, her knees buckling as they crashed into the edge of the mattress, and then he was on top of her, reaching for his belt buckle. She couldn't breathe. He was pushing into her lungs and pinning her with his body. Where was Elroy?

The extra lock. He couldn't get in. She was vaguely aware of someone pounding on the door.

She tensed her neck muscles and jammed her head forward, banging Jim's forehead with her own. He cried out and lifted a hand to his forehead, and she wiggled out from beneath him. Her blouse was torn, and she clutched it, trying to cover herself.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she yelled.

"Jesus, I think you gave me a concussion!" he said.

"You had no right," she said. She was shuddering uncontrollably. "No right!"

"Oh, come on." His glasses were askew and there was an ugly red mark forming on his forehead. "You wanted this, you cocktease. You were practically begging for it in the coffee shop."

Christie was struggling to put on her shoes, her own head beginning to throb. She could still feel his insistent fingers running up her thighs and into her panties, taste his stale breath in her mouth.

"You loser," she spat out. She felt tears form in her eyes.

"Oh, I'm the loser," he said. He wasn't coming after her anymore, but his attack wasn't over. He'd just changed his weapons to words. "Listen, you fat bitch, keep loading on the makeup and dyeing your hair because you're probably a dog underneath it all. What's the problem, you want money or something? I'll pay you twenty bucks. That's what you're worth."

"Shut up," Christie said. "Just shut up!" Why wasn't her shoe going on? She twisted her ankle and jammed it on. She ran for the door and flipped the lock, and there was Elroy, his phone raised to his ear.

"Never mind, cancel security," he was saying as she fled down the hallway. He ran after her, calling for her to wait, but she just sprinted faster. She burst out the exit door and tore down seven flights of stairs, her vision blurring.

"Christie!" she could hear him yelling.

"Get away from me!" she yelled back as she ran through the lobby. People were turning to stare at her, well-dressed businessmen and women in nice suits. Respectable people, their mouths forming circles of surprise as they watched the spectacle that was Christie, with her smeared makeup and torn blouse. No one bothered to try to help her, to ask if she was okay. Fuck you, she thought. If she'd had enough breath she would've shouted it. *Fuck you all!*

She found her way to her car and took off instantly, blaring her horn at someone who was trying to reverse out of a parking spot. She ignored the attendant who was waiting for her ticket in his little booth, and since there wasn't a physical barrier, she sped out of the lot. Let the cops send her a ticket.

She wove through the streets until she pulled up in front of her

apartment building. She parked haphazardly and ran inside, shedding her clothes the minute she hit the bathroom. She blasted the hot water and stood under it, shivering, scrubbing at her body with handfuls of body wash. She stayed until the water turned icy, but she couldn't erase the marks the creep had left on her body. They were like tattoos, imprinting her shame and rage, forever staining her.

Christie wrapped herself in a fluffy robe and turbaned her hair into a towel, wincing as it rubbed against the tender spot on her forehead. The woman who looked back at her in the mirror had red-rimmed eyes with fine lines cobwebbing them. All her years of sunbathing, of taking her youth for granted and coating her body with baby oil and putting reflective tinfoil behind her head, were coming back to haunt her now. For the first time, she could see an unmistakable resemblance to her mother.

She turned away abruptly, went downstairs, opened the freezer, and took out a tub of Häagen-Dazs dulce de leche. She let a spoonful dissolve on her tongue, then she ate another, faster this time. She crammed more into her mouth, barely noticing when some dribbled down the front of her robe.

She heard a knock and froze with another spoonful halfway to her mouth. Her first thought was that the creep from the hotel had followed her home and that someone had buzzed him into the apartment building. She looked around wildly, her gaze brushing the knives in the butcher block on the counter. She *wanted* it to be him. She wanted to slice into him, to see the pain on his face, to hear him beg.

But then she recognized Elroy's voice calling her name. She stalked to the door and flung it open.

"Are you okay?" he said.

"I'm fine." She spat out the words.

"Look, I'm really sorry that happened to you," he said. "I've got it on video . . . if you want to go to the cops, I can show them."

"And tell them what?" Christie demanded. "That I lured a guy to a hotel room with the promise of sex and he tried to take me up on it? My ex is a cop. Trust me, no one's going to charge that asshole with anything."

"Hey," Elroy said. He moved closer and reached out. When she

shrank back, he withdrew his hand. He stood there, blinking in the sunlight, in his white shirt that stretched over his belly and his ridiculous bolo tie.

“Just go, okay?” Christie said. “Leave me alone.”

Elroy looked at her for another few seconds, then nodded. “If that’s what you want. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Don’t bother,” Christie said, in a voice so low she wasn’t sure he’d heard.

She pulled her robe tighter around herself, feeling cold again.

Chapter Ten

JAMIE SAT BESIDE MIKE in the second-floor walk-up office of attorney J. H. Brown, looking at surroundings that didn't inspire confidence. The small space was heaped with cardboard boxes that Jamie imagined contained paperwork from other trials. There wasn't a receptionist, and the nameplate on the door was one of those metal slide-in ones, which seemed to suggest J.H. could load his boxes into a truck and disappear tomorrow. The smell of Chinese food from the restaurant one floor below lingered in the air.

The lawyer himself was nondescript—average height and weight, brown hair, pale skin that looked as if it spent too much time under the fluorescent lights in his office. Jamie found herself studying her reaction to him, wondering how a jury might respond. Would his low voice inspire trust, or the opposite? The lawyer wasn't making good eye contact; he kept fiddling with a pen. Jurors might not like that.

But it wasn't as if they had a lot of choice in the matter. He'd called and offered to represent them for a reduced fee, no doubt because of the publicity involved in the case. Their other choice was the union-appointed attorney, the guy who looked barely older than Henry.

"What do you think?" Jamie had asked, covering the phone's mouthpiece with her hand when J.H. called. "Should we meet with him?"

Mike had shrugged. "Dunno."

As if she'd asked him to choose cereal or toast for breakfast. She'd wanted to slap his cheek and snap him out of the daze that seemed to be thickening around him. She needed her husband to be by her side, fighting along with her. Jamie had had a chilling thought: If a second-tier lawyer was offering to represent them for a reduced rate, what kinds of attorneys might be flocking to Jose's mother?

After they were seated and had declined an offer of coffee—Jamie's

nerves were stretched far too tight for caffeine—J.H. pulled a fresh legal pad out of his top desk drawer and reached for a pen. He'd said this consultation would be free. Afterward, they'd need to choose which lawyer would represent them if the case went to trial. J.H. had also let them know that if Mike were indicted, he'd lose his paycheck, which meant he would be eligible to be represented by a public defender at no cost.

"But you need me," J.H. had said, more cockily than Jamie thought was warranted.

The lawyer took them through a time line of what would happen. The Metropolitan Police Department's FIT team had already completed their investigation and given their findings to the U.S. Attorney's Office. That was standard procedure. The next move would be the pivotal one. The U.S. Attorney's Office would review all the evidence, do some investigating of their own, and decide whether to present the case to a grand jury and ask for an indictment.

If that happened and Mike was charged, he'd be arraigned and probably released on his own recognizance, J.H. said, his voice as bland as if he were reading a grocery list.

Jamie forced herself to listen hard as J.H. talked about what would happen when Mike was arraigned. She flinched at the word *when*. She wondered what the lawyer knew that they didn't.

"Do you think he's going to be indicted?" Jamie blurted, interrupting J.H. midsentence.

"Fact is, prosecutors don't need much to get an indictment. A grand jury would indict a ham sandwich for the U.S. Attorney's Office," J.H. said. He must've seen Jamie reach out to grip Mike's hand, because he added, "I mean, look, they're going to try to be fair. The folks in the U.S. Attorney's Office who handle this stuff actually have to go to Quantico and do a simulated training. They get a laser gun and they have to react as if they're a police officer in crisis situations. So they know it isn't easy. The key question for them is whether Mike acted in a reasonable manner in that moment."

J.H. seemed to know what he was talking about. But was he good enough? He'd asked for an eight-thousand-dollar retainer. Jamie had no idea how to amass that kind of cash. Sell her engagement ring,

maybe, and remortgage the house. Now she wondered if they shouldn't just sell the house and everything else they owned and use the money to hire the best lawyer possible.

"Do you know what kind of evidence they have?" Mike asked.

J.H. shrugged. "I hear the video surveillance sucks. There was a camera on a public housing unit a hundred yards away, but the angle isn't good. Plus the rain. Crappy visibility; everything's blurry and distorted. So that's a wash. They're going to want to reinterview anyone who was at the scene. They caught three or four guys before everyone scattered, but they all said no gun. So that's working against us. We could make the argument that the bangers don't want to rat out their dead homie, but your partner's the real issue. He was closer to the threat and he didn't even draw. He said the guy wasn't making a move that could indicate he had a gun. That's going to hurt us. I'll be honest with you. It's going to hurt a lot."

J.H. took a sip of coffee that must've been cold, since his cup had been sitting there when they arrived. He leaned back, putting his feet up on his desk. He looked far too relaxed, given the stakes, and Jamie felt the urge to smack his feet to the floor. For him this was routine, like a doctor who read biopsies every day and revealed whether tumors were benign or time bombs. Maybe he was inured to the emotions of his job, but couldn't he at least act as if this was important?

She'd sell the house. She'd sell her minivan and the opal earrings that had belonged to her mother, the ones she'd only ever worn on her wedding day. Nothing mattered but keeping Mike safe.

"We'll offset whatever they come up with at trial, of course," J.H. said. "Call character witnesses. Introduce reasonable doubt—show Mike thought he really did see something. Maybe it was a gun, maybe it was a cell phone. Maybe it was a set of keys."

"It wasn't a set of keys," Mike muttered.

"Look, I'm not saying there couldn't have been a piece, okay? We'll introduce that possibility. But you and your partner both testified that you barely took your eyes off the ki— off Jose. After you fired you were both at his side in maybe thirty seconds, right? For someone to have the presence of mind to assess what happened, get to him, get

his gun, and get away without anyone noticing . . . I mean, what's the motivation? Maybe the gun was a sweet piece; we can throw that in there. But this was a brawl. We're talking a lot of guys swarming around. People were busy protecting their own asses. You think someone's going to run *toward* a gunshot, not knowing if there's going to be another one?" J.H. shook his head. "I'm not saying it didn't happen. I'm saying it's going to be a hard sell."

"So that's what it's about?" Mike asked. "What we can sell to the jury instead of the truth?"

J.H. shrugged again, unoffended. "Hey, I didn't create the system," he said. "I just try to work it to your advantage."

"Can someone find the other guys who were at the scene and talk to them?" Mike asked.

"Like I said, they scattered," J.H. said. "I'll try to track down as many as I can, but I won't kid you: It's going to be tough. And hiring an outside investigator is expensive. The U.S. Attorney's Office is probably working on that now, too."

"We should get Ritchie to testify!" Jamie blurted. "Mike's old partner. He's black, you know. The jury needs to see that he believes in Mike, that Mike's no racist."

"I don't think Ritchie's in any shape to testify," Mike said.

"But he would, if we asked!" Jamie said. "We could get an ambulance to bring him to court and he could go right back to rehab after . . . He'd do it for you, Mike."

"Don't you think he's been through enough?" Mike asked. Creases appeared in his forehead, and his dark eyebrows inched lower.

"What about *you*?" she cried. "You're the one that could go to jail!"

"For doing my job?" Mike said. "This is so fucked up."

"Let's all take a deep breath here," J.H. interrupted them. "Okay? We good? Now, we can also explore the idea of PTSD as a defense. Everyone knows you saw your old partner and that young cop get shot a few months ago. Maybe the police department shouldn't have let you come back to work so quickly. How soon after the shooting did you return to work?"

"A couple weeks," Mike said in a clipped voice.

"Any therapy?" the lawyer asked. "Meds?"

Mike shook his head.

"The police counselor offered to put him on medication," Jamie said quietly. "Mike declined."

There was silence for a moment. Mike pulled his hand away from hers and folded his arms across his chest.

"One other thing I need to know," J.H. said. "Is there something in your file that's going to come out and bite us in the ass? Any charges of roughing up a suspect?"

"What? Of course not." Mike shook his head. "I've been late to work a few times. That's it."

J.H. nodded. "Ferguson. George Zimmerman. Too many high-profile cases lately."

Mike exhaled through his teeth and sat back, arms still folded.

"That's the one thing you don't want to do," the lawyer said, pointing at him.

"What?" Mike asked. "Breathe?"

"Show anger," J.H. said. "A jury's going to be looking for that. And you can bet if we go to trial and I put you on the stand, the prosecutor's going to try to provoke you."

Jamie squeezed her eyes shut, thinking of Mike snarling at the cameraman who'd bumped into her, and the way he always yelled at football players on the TV.

"Jay wasn't my partner," Mike said.

"What?" J.H. asked.

"You called him my partner. He isn't," Mike said. "And he's only been on the force for a year. Why are they taking his word over mine?"

J.H. finally put his feet down and leaned forward. "Look," he said. "We want to be very careful about attacking another police officer. We can re-create the scene, point out holes in his vision, get an expert to testify about compromised visibility . . . but you realize those exact same points are going to work against you."

"Are you going to put Mike on the stand?" Jamie asked.

J.H. shrugged. "Haven't decided yet," he said. "It'll depend which way the wind is blowing at the trial. I don't think we're going to look at jail time, if everything you've said checks out. Maybe a little

community service, some probation, in the worst case.”

Jamie swallowed hard. “The thing is,” she said quietly, “you mentioned PTSD . . . there might be something else that could come up.”

Mike whipped around to look at her, but she didn’t meet his gaze in case he was sending her a visual cue to stop talking. The lawyer had to know everything if he was going to have a chance of helping Mike. If making her husband angry with her could improve his chances, she’d absorb his ire.

“Things have been really difficult for Mike,” Jamie continued. “Ritchie is like his brother. Mike couldn’t sleep after the attack. He seemed kind of out of it. He blamed himself for not reacting quickly enough, even though of course it wasn’t his fault! And a few weeks ago he thought he heard someone breaking into our house. We called the police, but they didn’t find any evidence of a break-in.”

J.H. nodded slowly.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Mike asked. “You were the one who called nine-one-one, Jamie!”

“But you took out your gun!” she cried. “What if it had been Henry coming in after he’d snuck out to meet some friends or something?” The moment the words left her mouth she deeply regretted them.

When Mike was furious, his eyes were like knives. Now she felt them cutting into her. “So now you’re saying I would’ve shot my own son?”

“No, no!” she cried. “I didn’t mean it that way at all! I’m just saying there could have been other explanations for the back door being open, but maybe we can tell the jury PTSD made you assume the worst. I mean, if we can use it as a defense . . .”

She couldn’t tell Mike that it was obvious he had PTSD, or that she knew Jose hadn’t been holding a gun, or that the old Mike, the one who’d existed before the attack on Ritchie, would never have drawn his weapon and fired. In every marriage, there are lines you don’t cross. Things you won’t say. She knew she was perilously close to that dangerous place now.

“Sure, tell them I’m crazy,” Mike said.

“Mike, please,” Jamie said. Her voice sounded tight, a giveaway that

she was on the edge of tears. “I know you thought you saw a gun in Jose’s hand. I completely understand why you thought that—it was raining hard and everything happened so fast. It was an honest mistake! But you can’t keep fixating on that. We’ve got to start thinking of a way to save you. To save our family!”

Mike jerked up out of his seat, and for a moment Jamie worried he was going to stalk out of the room. But he stayed where he was standing, repeatedly curling his fists into balls and releasing them. Every time he made a fist, Jamie could see his knuckles turn white.

“That nine-one-one call is definitely going to come up at trial,” J.H. said. His voice was steady, and he seemed unaffected by the hot emotions coursing through the room. Maybe that was a plus, Jamie thought frantically. Maybe he *was* the right lawyer for them!

“There will be records,” J.H. continued. “The AG’s office may already have found out about it. I’m surprised a reporter hasn’t yet. And speaking of which, that interview your sister gave?”

“She didn’t mean to!” Jamie said. “She didn’t know it was a reporter. The woman tricked her! She won’t do it again.”

Mike had been okay with the idea of Lou moving in with them, but he’d gotten upset by the quotes, even though he knew Lou hadn’t meant any harm. So Jamie hadn’t asked Lou to babysit today. Instead, she’d dropped the kids at Sandy’s house, her children’s joy at seeing Finn and Daisy adding another layer to Jamie’s guilt.

Could her 911 call become the tipping point in a trial? Jamie wondered. Or maybe Lou’s quotes would be permitted as evidence, and they would sway the jurors. Out of the corner of her eye, Jamie saw Mike take a step away from her. She couldn’t look at his face.

“Let’s focus on something else for minute.” J.H. turned over a page in his pad. “I want a basic layout of the scene here,” he told Mike. “I know you already did it for the FIT squad, but sketch as much as you can remember. Just put an X for where each main player was standing.”

Mike took a deep breath, then walked over and took the pad and a pencil from the mug atop J.H.’s desk and began to draw. He roughed in a few blocky buildings around the perimeter, then a couple of cars.

“Here’s where I was standing,” Mike said. “And here’s Jay, the guy I

was partnered with that day.” Mike’s pencil hesitated, then he drew another X. “Jose was here.”

J.H. nodded and accepted the drawing, but not before Jamie saw that Jay was halfway between Mike and Jose. She hadn’t realized how much closer Jay had been. Would a jury really believe Mike had seen a gun but Jay had missed it?

“One more thing I want to ask you about,” J.H. said. “The papers said you were punched in the head moments before the incident. How hard?”

Mike shrugged. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Did your vision get blurry? Any dizziness?”

“No!” Mike almost shouted. “And I said all that in my statement.”

J.H. regarded him for a moment. “I think we’re done for today,” the lawyer finally said. “Let’s let everyone have a chance to cool off.”

He stood up and offered his hand for Mike to shake. After a moment, Mike did so.

“I’ll be in touch,” J.H. said.

It took Jamie two tries to get out of her chair. The first time, her legs buckled. As they left the office, Mike began walking rapidly. By the time they reached the street, he was half a dozen yards ahead of her.

“Do you want to go get something to eat?” Jamie called to him. They couldn’t go back to the house, not like this.

But Mike just reached into his pocket and tossed her the keys. Her hand automatically came up and caught them.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “Do you want me to drive?”

He was passing their minivan, which was parked at a meter on the street in front of J.H.’s office.

“Mike? Aren’t you coming with me?”

He shook his head. “I feel like walking home.”

Their house was at least five miles away, it was blazingly hot, and he was in a long-sleeved shirt and dress pants. “Mike, come on. Please!” she called.

She was sure he’d heard her, but he simply walked faster and disappeared around the corner.

...

Lou finished loading her clothes into a green Hefty bag and stacked it by the door, next to two she'd already filled.

She was leaving behind her IKEA bed, since Donny said he could use it for guests until Lou wanted to claim it, and the same for her dresser. She'd already taken her prints off the walls and layered her books into a cardboard box. She didn't see the point of knickknacks and shopping was torturous for her, which worked out well, since she didn't have much money. But now she realized how little she'd accumulated in life. She wasn't sure, but she thought she'd brought more than this with her when she'd gone to college. Of course, Jamie had organized things for her then, buying two new sets of sheets and a fluffy bright blue comforter, a bathrobe and plastic caddy for her toiletries, and stacks of notebooks with clean white pages waiting to be filled.

"You don't have to do all this," Lou had protested, but Jamie had continued to load a new pair of flip-flops ("You'll want these for the dorm showers, trust me," she'd said) and a small coffeemaker ("You'll need this during exams") into an old milk crate.

"I don't mind," Jamie had said, and Lou had suddenly wondered who, if anyone, had helped Jamie prepare for college. Lou had used the flip-flops every morning, and at night she'd snuggled gratefully under the warm comforter and sweet-smelling sheets.

Lou wondered what her sister was doing right now, and whether she was still furious at Lou for her indiscretion.

At the sound of a knock on her door, her head jerked up eagerly, but it was only Donny. He looked around, taking in the bare walls and uncovered mattress. Rooms always seemed lonely and vulnerable once you'd stripped away their decorations, Lou thought.

"Need any help?" Donny asked.

"Thanks, but I'm all done," Lou said.

Donny took a step forward, then paused. "Mind if I come in?" he asked.

"Of course not," Lou said. "It's your place."

Donny walked over and sat down beside her on the edge of the mattress. As she looked at him, Lou felt a wave of nostalgia. Donny was a kind, decent man, and she wondered why she hadn't loved him

enough. Was it because Donny wasn't the right man for her, or was it because something was broken within her? Maybe the part of her that sometimes missed or misread social cues was responsible for the limits she seemed to hit in her romantic relationships. Or maybe her issues were rooted in the loss of her mother. Baby monkeys who were separated from their mothers had trouble forming attachments later in life.

Of all the memories she was missing, the one that bothered her the most was her mother's funeral service. Lou knew that she and Jamie had worn matching navy-blue dresses, bought for the occasion, and she remembered hers had itched around the neckline and given her a rash. At the reception afterward, a woman Lou didn't know had squeezed her shoulder and whispered into her ear, "You need to be strong for your father." Lou had thought that meant she wasn't supposed to cry, so she didn't. But that didn't mean she didn't grieve.

Lou respected grief, and understood everyone experienced it in his or her own way. Some elephant mothers who gave birth to stillborn babies had frantic reactions and others seemed depressed after the loss. Just because grief didn't always look the same didn't mean its various colors didn't exist.

Lou did know, because Jamie had told her, that their father was the most wounded of the three of them by the loss. He and their mom had been such a pair. They'd met in college, where they'd sat side by side in classrooms, holding hands whenever they weren't taking notes. They'd gone out for dates together on Friday nights, and had slept in on Saturdays while Jamie and Lou rode their bikes to the library to take out stacks of Judy Blume and Nancy Drew books. Once the sisters had found an injured bird in the backyard and had spent the day trying to save it, fashioning a nest from a shoe box and placing a saucer of water and a few plump, wiggling worms inside. The bird hadn't lived, so Jamie had decided they needed to bury it in the backyard. She'd instructed Lou to gather small white stones to mark the grave with a cross, and then she'd led them in the Lord's Prayer, stumbling over a few words. It bothered Lou that she could remember that service so clearly while she'd retained almost nothing of her mother's.

After their mother died, their father ate the simple meals Jamie prepared, even the ones she burned, and he went to his job as an assistant manager of a department store every day, but at night he stared blankly at the television without bothering to change out of his suit. When he remarried, he explained to Jamie and Lou it was a kind of tribute to their mom: He'd had such a wonderful experience being wed that he wanted to re-create it. His new wife was a former college classmate, too, and she'd known their mother. "Was she the one Mom always said had a crush on you?" Jamie had asked their father once.

"Mom said that?" their father had asked, a smile breaking out over his face. In that moment, Lou had known he'd truly moved on. In the past, any mention of their mother had left him with a quivering chin and full eyes. Now his focus had shifted to his new love.

Their stepmother was perfectly fine. She didn't beat them like in the storybooks or try to dress like a teenager and become their best friend, like a character on a television show Lou had once seen. She was petite and talkative, with close-cropped auburn hair, a whirlwind of a woman who was always going for a run or reorganizing the kitchen cabinets. Maybe she would've liked to have been closer to them, but by then the family pattern was firmly established: The parents were one unit, the sisters another.

Right after Lou left for college, her dad and stepmother moved to New York, where her father found another job managing a clothing store and their stepmother taught tap-dancing classes. They lived in a small but conveniently located apartment, saw off-off-Broadway plays nearly every week, and jogged together in Central Park. "Our door is always open if you want to visit," their father had told them when they'd gone by his house before the moving trucks arrived to pick through the attic for the remnants of their childhood that they wanted to keep.

And Jamie and Lou *had* visited, at least until Jamie's kids were born and Lou began working two jobs. Their dad came into town once a year or so, usually just for a single night, and Lou spoke to him on the phone every couple of weeks, but that was the extent of their contact now. He was family, but not like Jamie, who knew all of Lou's flaws and secrets and loved her still.

Did Jamie still love her?

“So,” Donny was saying. “I guess this is it.”

“Thanks for letting me stay so long,” Lou said. “I know you and Mary Alice would’ve been happier if I’d moved out a while ago.”

Donny removed his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose in the same sort of absentminded way her father used to. His glasses had left two tiny dents on the sides of his nose. Her dad had sported those parentheses at the end of the day, too. “It’s okay,” Donny said. “You’re easy to have around.”

Suddenly she was missing her mother *and* her father—or maybe it was finally hitting her that she was losing one of the few people who truly cared for her.

“She seems nice. Mary Alice, I mean,” Lou ventured. They hadn’t talked much about Donny’s new relationship.

“Yeah,” he said. “She really is.”

“I’m glad you’re happy,” Lou said, and meant it.

“How about you?” Donny asked. “Are you going to be okay living at your sister’s? I know there’s a lot going on for them.”

Lou nodded. “Jamie’s never needed me before. I want to help her.”

Assuming she didn’t keep messing things up, Lou thought. She wondered if Donny had seen *The Washington Post*’s gossip column, which had picked up the blogger’s report. If so, he was sensitive enough not to mention it.

Instead of continuing their conversation, Donny did something surprising: He leaned over and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead. Lou closed her eyes, smelling Ivory soap and Crest toothpaste. Donny never used cologne, so those were his signature scents.

“I wish you well,” he said, his words oddly formal yet sweet. Lou found herself blinking away tears. When they were a couple, Donny had always driven to pick her up at the coffee shop at the ends of her shifts so she wouldn’t have to walk home in the dark, even though she told him she didn’t mind. He’d sat through half a dozen elephant documentaries without complaint, and once, when they were short on volunteers at the zoo, he’d helped Lou dole out wheelbarrows of food, despite the fact that he was secretly terrified of elephants. He’d tried to hide it, but he’d leapt a foot into the air when one of them had

trumpeted. Donny had a steady job, he loved to cook, and he always put away his clothes in the closet instead of leaving them strewn on the floor. He was a considerate man, which wasn't something you should underestimate.

But it was too late. Mary Alice was moving in, and Donny was moving on. Lou felt panic flood her veins. What if Jamie didn't want her around anymore? Who would she have, other than Tabitha?

"I—" Lou began, but then the buzzer sounded, breaking apart the moment.

"That must be your sister," Donny said, and he got up.

Lou blinked, feeling disoriented. She'd been on the brink of begging Donny to take her back, but she didn't love Donny. She was just scared. Somehow she'd muddled the two feelings.

Jamie had saved her again, Lou thought. She quickly wiped her eyes and stood up, feeling an intense rush of relief that her sister had shown up. She wondered how Jamie would act. Lou would try to follow her lead; if Jamie was still mad, Lou would keep quiet and out of her way.

But when Jamie came through the door, she hurried straight over to Lou, wrapping her arms around her sister.

"The AC is working! How did you do it?" Jamie asked.

"Oh!" Lou said. She'd momentarily forgotten. "It wasn't any big deal. I called the repair company this morning and asked if they had any cancellations. They did, so the guy was able to come over. You weren't home so I let him in."

"It's a big deal to us," Jamie said. "I just can't tell you what it felt like to walk into air-conditioning. To have something finally go right . . ."

Jamie began to cry, and she leaned her head against Lou's shoulder. Lou had sought comfort from her sister dozens of times when she was small, because of skinned knees or bruises sustained when she'd fallen out of trees, but she didn't think Jamie had ever cried in her arms before. Even on the day of their mother's funeral, Jamie hadn't broken down. But early the next morning, something had awoken Lou and she'd crept to the bathroom to see Jamie curled up on the cold tile floor, weeping. Lou had quietly shut the door and slipped back into the bedroom. Now Lou did what she wished she'd

done on that long-ago morning. She reached out and stroked tentative circles between Jamie's shoulder blades.

"I'm really sorry," Lou said. She needed to tell Jamie this, no matter how hard it was. "I don't know if you saw *The Washington Post* yet . . . but they published some of the things I said today. If you don't want me to move in—"

"Shh . . ." Jamie kept her arms around Lou, and Lou squeezed her eyes shut tight. "Let's not worry about that now, okay? I know you'd never talk to a reporter about us. I was just scared and overwhelmed yesterday. That's why I yelled at you."

"No!" Lou protested. "I'm the one who was wrong. I should have been more careful . . . I thought she was being friendly."

"It was just an accident," Jamie said. "Another accident." She sighed a warm breath of air across Lou's cheek. "Let's not let it become anything more, okay? Mike's angry with me. I can't stand to be fighting with you, too, Lou."

Lou nodded. "I promise I won't do anything like that again. I won't mess up anymore. And I tried to write out a list of the bedtime routine so I could help, but I wanted you to check it to make sure I remembered everything . . ."

"Oh, Lou," Jamie said. "You wrote a bedtime list?" Jamie began laughing and crying, creating an emotional stew.

But that was okay, because suddenly, Lou was doing the same thing.

...

Christie pulled open her front door and glimpsed the only face in the world she wanted to see: her son's. She pulled him into a hug, ending it long before she wanted to. She still remembered how her mother used to act after a bottle or two of cheap Chablis, all sloppy and overly affectionate. Sometimes her mother would drag Christie to the bathroom mirror and squish their faces so close together that Christie couldn't escape her sour-smelling exhales. "We could be sisters, right?" her mother would demand, pinching Christie's chin in her hand. Christie quickly learned that if she didn't say yes, her mother would

cry, then become furious a drink or two later.

Only after Christie released Henry did she realize that Mike was standing to one side of the door. Usually when Mike or Jamie dropped Henry off, they gave a quick wave and headed back to the elevator. Or, more often during the past year or two, they simply dropped Henry off in front of the building.

"Hi," Christie said. She was wearing spandex shorts and a purple tank top and she'd just finished doing a Jillian Michaels Shred workout video, which had her panting and sweating and yelling right back at the bossy woman on-screen within the first ten minutes. She'd finished it, though, and she'd vowed to do it every day, to offset the word *fat*, which had been knocking around in her mind ever since the jerk had attacked her.

"Hey, do you have a second?" Mike asked.

"Sure," Christie said. She stepped aside to let him come in. Mike was one of the few men she'd let see her in this state. He'd seen her in labor; anything else was an improvement.

Henry went up to his room, muttering something about a summer reading assignment that Christie translated to mean he wanted to be texting with his friends, while Mike followed Christie into the kitchen, where she opened a bottle of Budweiser and slid it down the counter toward him. He took a long sip. "Needed that," he said. "Thanks."

"So what's up?" Christie asked.

"I already talked to Henry," he said. "Thought you should know, too. I'm probably going to be indicted soon."

"What?" Christie gasped. Mike's affect was so calm she thought for a moment she'd misheard.

"Henry seems okay now," Mike said. He wasn't calm, after all. Christie could see the truth in the set of his jaw and his rigid posture. Mike reminded her of a wild animal who'd just been trapped in a net—disoriented and filled with a coiled-up energy. "But if he's upset tonight, will you call me? I can come over and talk to him."

"Yeah, sure," Christie said. She reached for Mike's beer and took a long sip herself. "I mean, what the hell, Mike? Why are they doing this?"

Before he could answer, her doorbell rang again. Christie hurried to

open it, and when she caught sight of the familiar Domino's box—dinner for her and Henry—she dug into her purse for a twenty and handed it to delivery guy, then shut the door without waiting for change.

As she walked back toward the kitchen, she saw Mike leaning against the counter. He was still one of the best-looking guys she knew, she thought as she approached the doorway. Mike would probably have that thick head of hair forever, and he was even more ripped than he'd been in his twenties. She felt a wave of gratitude for Mike, for giving her Henry, and for always being there for the two of them. Mike had attended every school conference and every sports event, and he was the one who'd taken Henry for his annual physical at the doctor's. Was it any wonder Henry was turning out so well, given his male role model?

"Whatever they're saying about you is bullshit," Christie blurted. She walked into the kitchen and set the pizza roughly down on the counter. "The guy tossed his gun to his friend or something. Or someone else took it and ran."

Mike exhaled and closed his eyes. "Thank you," he said. "You're the first person to—" He cut himself off, and Christie wondered what he'd been about to say. Hadn't Jamie told him she believed him? Was Christie really the first person to do so?

Christie took out a slice of pepperoni and put it on a paper towel, then handed it to Mike.

He took a bite, and she hoisted herself up to sit on the counter.

"I mean, this is going to blow over, isn't it?" she asked. "It's got to."

"I thought so at first," Mike said. "I figured I'd give my statement and that would be it. Maybe desk duty for a week or so, until things got straightened out. I thought—" He shook his head.

"What?" Christie asked.

"I thought I'd be commended for saving the other cop's life," Mike said quietly.

"You should have been," Christie said. She took another sip of beer and pushed the bottle back toward Mike, wondered what her life would have been like if she'd said yes when he proposed. Maybe they'd have had a lot of nights like this. She would've screwed it up

eventually, but they could've had a few good years together.

"You okay?" Mike asked. He took a step toward her, frowning.

She reached up and wiped away the wetness on her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Thanks," Mike said, and she realized he thought she was crying about the looming indictment. She felt a hot rush of shame for being so self-centered. But then suddenly she *was* crying about the indictment. Mike could go to jail. Henry could lose his father, just as she'd lost hers. At least Henry would know Mike wasn't going away voluntarily.

"Here." Mike handed over a clean paper towel, and Christie blew her nose.

"So what are you going to do?" she asked. "You've got to fight this, Mike! Do it for Henry."

"You're right," he said. "I just kept thinking there was a mistake. That the video would show a gun. That they'd come to me and apologize. I was waiting for that."

"The video didn't show anything?" Christie asked.

"Guess not," Mike said. "They wouldn't be trying to get an indictment otherwise."

Christie reached into the refrigerator and pulled out two more beers. "So what happens now?" she asked.

"The grand jury looks at all the evidence," he said. "Witnesses come in and give statements. It's like a real trial. My lawyer says it'll take maybe two weeks. Then they vote for an indictment."

"And if they get one?" Christie asked.

Mike shrugged, like it didn't matter, but the look on his face revealed the opposite. "Then I show up in superior court to be arraigned. They say I'll probably be released until trial."

"Jesus!" The word exploded from Christie's mouth. "Can I do anything? I'll testify if it'll help, Mike. I'll tell them anything you want."

"I appreciate it," Mike said. "But you weren't there. My lawyer told me that this never would've gone this far if it wasn't for the guy I was partnered with that day. He was closer, and he said there wasn't even any movement to pull out a gun. He just saw the guy gearing up for another punch. Apparently he told the investigators we were talking

about the shooting at headquarters right before . . . everything happened.”

“Aren’t cops supposed to stick together?” Christie demanded to know.

“Yeah,” Mike said. “But we’re also supposed to uphold the law. He can’t lie, Christie. And *he* was the one talking about the shooting, by the way. I was trying to tune him out.”

There was a lull in the conversation while Christie tried to think of a loophole, some way for Mike to slide through this mess. But she came up blank.

“Anyway,” Mike said. “I better not have this.” He slid the beer back over to her. “I’m driving.”

Christie felt a stab of disappointment, but she just put it back in the fridge.

“Hey,” Mike said. He frowned and reached for Christie’s arm, which was spotlighted by the glow from the refrigerator light. She looked down to see a few small bruises running down her biceps, like a tattoo. She hadn’t realized they were there.

“What’s this?” Mike asked. “Some guy do this to you?”

“Yeah,” Christie said. “But it’s not what you think.”

“Oh, come on, don’t give me that—”

“No, I mean, he’s not my boyfriend,” Christie interrupted. “It was for my job.”

“Your job? At the hair place?”

“Salon,” Christie corrected. “And no, I quit. I’m working undercover now. Or I was. I kind of quit, but I think I’m going to ask for the job back.”

Mike’s eyebrows lifted. “Undercover?”

Christie told him about Elroy, and how she’d successfully tricked her first few marks. She left out the details about her last case. She was still trying to erase them from her mind.

“An expense account?” Mike said. “Nice. You’re moving up in the world.”

Christie smiled. “I was thinking . . . I probably won’t need child support any longer.”

Mike gestured to her arm again. “And the guy who did this?”

She should have known he wouldn't be so easily distracted. "An overly excited mark," Christie said. Mike studied her face, his expression even.

"You need to get yourself a can of Mace," he said. "And if anyone does anything like that again, tell me."

"It's not like you could arrest him," Christie said. She worried Mike would think she meant it was because he was on administrative leave, so she hastened to clarify herself. "I mean, he didn't do anything illegal. And I'm never going to see him again."

"Doesn't mean a visit from a cop won't scare him," Mike said. "I've still got friends on the force."

Mike wanted to protect her. What a lovely feeling. Christie smiled, feeling a glow that was from more than just the alcohol.

"Hey!" she said suddenly. "The guy I work for—he's a private detective. Maybe he could help you?"

Mike leaned back against the counter and folded his arms. "Yeah?"

"Could the cop who testified against you have it in for you?" Christie asked. She saw something ignite in Mike's eyes, as if he was considering it.

"Maybe, but I don't think so," Mike said. "I mean, I didn't know him well before this."

"But what if he thinks you crossed him somehow?" Christie said. "Or what if the fight was over drugs and he's working with one of the gangs? You're the one who told me drugs sometimes go missing from the evidence room."

"Yeah, but that's different from abetting a gang," Mike said. "You wouldn't think it if you met this guy, Christie. He's practically got a pocket protector. He's the geekiest cop you've ever met."

"But those are the guys who always surprise you," Christie said. A fleeting image of Jim shoving her onto the hotel room bed, his eyes containing something dark and ugly, invaded her mind before she pushed it away.

"You really think your boss would help?" Mike asked.

"Worth a try," Christie said. "I'll call him tonight."

Henry came loping into the kitchen just then. "Do I smell pizza?" he asked.

“Try to get this kid out of bed on a school morning and he plays dead,” Mike said. “Set out some food and he comes running from a mile away.”

Christie handed Henry a slice. “We saved you most of it,” she said.

“He’s a growing boy,” Mike said. “I can’t believe his feet are bigger than mine.”

“Where do you think he got his height?” Christie asked.

“I had an uncle who was six three,” Mike said.

Christie nodded. “And my mom’s father was pretty tall. You can tell from photos.”

“Six three?” Henry said. “That’d be cool.”

“Do you remember the first time he tried pizza?” Christie asked Mike. The memory was returning to her, a little fuzzy but blooming quickly.

Mike shook his head.

“Oh, come on,” Christie said. “His first birthday party?”

“Right,” Mike said, and he laughed.

“What’d I do?” Henry asked.

“You grabbed a handful and threw it across the room,” Christie said.

“Some of it landed in my mother’s hair,” Mike said.

“Seriously?” Henry seemed delighted by this. “Grandma’s really into her hair.”

“I’ve got it on film somewhere,” Mike said. “I’ll dig out the videotape and show you.”

“But he liked the cake,” Christie said.

“What kind was it?” Henry asked.

“Chocolate,” Christie said.

“You sure?” Mike said. “I remember carrot cake.”

“That was when he turned two,” Christie said. “I made him a big chocolate cake for his first birthday.” It was from a mix, but still. “Remember, I put little Matchbox cars on top?”

“That’s right,” Mike said, nodding. “That was a good cake, once we wrestled it away from this pig and got a piece.”

“Hey,” Henry protested, giving his dad a push. Mike responded by putting Henry in a playful headlock and ruffling his hair.

Christie smiled as she watched them.

“I should get going,” Mike said. He released Henry and gave him a fist bump. “See you tomorrow.”

Christie walked Mike to the door, leaning against the frame after he walked out so she could watch him head down the hallway toward the elevator. She reached up and covered the bruises on her arm with her opposite hand, thinking of how Mike had offered to have Jim threatened. Maybe she’d take him up on it, after all.

“Thanks,” she called out.

Mike turned around to look at her.

“I was just going to say that to you,” he said.

Part Three

Chapter Eleven

FOR THE WIFE OF a cop, Jamie knew surprisingly little about how someone was indicted. During the long days when the evidence was being presented to the grand jury, Jamie wondered what would happen next. Would a police officer show up at the door with a warrant? Would a process server hand them an official piece of paper?

She kept the kids busy with crafts and videos and trips to the playground and community pool. She drank too much coffee in the morning and too much wine at night. She cleaned toilets and folded laundry and filled the refrigerator, sometimes forgetting bread but buying three cartons of juice when the shelves already contained two full ones. One evening, when the kids were asleep, she raced out to get a flea collar for Sadie, whose itching had kept her awake the previous night, and found herself pulling into a gas station to buy a pack of cigarettes. She sat in the darkness, smoking three Marlboro Lights in a row—something she hadn't done since a brief flirtation with cigarettes in college—then she crumpled up the box and hurled it into a trash can. That was all her kids needed, for her to get lung cancer.

The news cameras were gone for now. But she and Mike were barely speaking to each other. When he'd finally come home, hours after they'd finished the consultation with J.H., it was growing dark outside and his clothes were soaked with sweat. The kids were already asleep by then, and Jamie had asked Lou to go into Sam's room so she and Mike could talk privately.

"Are you angry with me?" she'd asked. He'd grimaced as he sat down on the couch and eased off his hard-soled dress shoes.

He'd leaned his head back against the cushion and she'd waited for a long moment. Then she'd realized his breathing had evened out. He'd fallen asleep, exhausted from his long walk.

He never returned to their bed after that. Instead he brought some clothes and magazines down into the basement, and took the spare quilt from the hall closet. Jamie wondered if he wanted to move out for good. Maybe the only reason he hadn't done so was because he couldn't afford an apartment. She didn't press him to talk anymore—he wasn't the only one who was upset—but every afternoon, J.H. called and updated Mike on the grand jury proceedings. Once after J.H. called, Jamie had sworn she'd heard a muffled barking sound. But when she'd gone down into the basement on the pretext of checking the laundry, Mike was dry-eyed, jumping rope in place. She'd watched him whip the rope around his body until she'd felt dizzy.

She lost nine pounds without even trying. A year ago, she would've been jubilant, hailing it as a mini-miracle. Now she just stared at the numbers on the scale as they blurred.

Jamie had seen footage of earthquakes that had left cars teetering on the ragged edges of bridges that had suddenly split apart. She'd wondered what it would feel like to be trapped inside a vehicle that could, at any moment, tilt toward safety or plummet into a crevasse. Now she knew.

When the moment finally arrived, though, their phone simply rang. This was how everything had started, Jamie remembered—with a call from the police letting her know Mike had been involved in a shooting and that he was safe. But the person on the other end of the line had been wrong. Mike wasn't safe.

"They voted to indict for involuntary manslaughter" was all J.H. said after Jamie saw his name on the caller ID and picked up on the second ring.

When she'd imagined this moment, Jamie had seen herself crying or collapsing, but all she did was nod. She'd done her crying in the shower during the preceding weeks, blasting the water to muffle the sounds. She'd allotted herself a few minutes every morning to lean against the tile and sob, her body heaving, her throat raw. Then she'd turn the water spray to icy cold, letting the physical shock dry up her tears and erase the red splotches from her face so she could get dressed and go downstairs to unload the dishwasher or scramble

eggs for the kids. She still marveled at the existence of ordinary chores, summoning her attention even in the midst of a crisis.

J.H.'s voice was as bland as ever as he explained they would need to wait a few more days until Mike was scheduled to appear in superior court. That surprised Jamie; she figured Mike would need to go immediately.

"It shouldn't take too long," J.H. said. "He'll be in and out in a couple hours."

Jamie tried to say something, but her voice made a strange cracking sound.

"Do you want me to tell him?" J.H. asked, his tone finally softening.

Handing over the phone would be easier. But Mike deserved better. She cleared her throat.

"I'll tell him," Jamie said.

But when she went to find Mike, she didn't have to say anything. He read the news in her face, just as she'd always imagined she'd be able to discern a tragedy in the expressions of police officers who would come to the door if Mike was killed in the line of duty.

Time seemed to speed up during the next few days. Mike came upstairs more often, to cuddle with the kids on the couch, read books to Eloise, play checkers with Emily, and do Mad Libs with Sam. He built a fort out of sofa cushions and brought in flashlights and sleeping bags and he spent the night there with Sam, who was thrilled to be "camping out" with his dad. Jamie was glad to have him rejoin the family—or at least the kids, since he wasn't seeking out her company—but she sensed a desperation underlying his actions. Once she reached for the video camera to capture him wrestling with the children, then she put it away without filming a single moment. Mike would probably know she was doing it to preserve a memory, in case it had to substitute for the real thing someday.

The day Mike was scheduled to be arraigned dawned sunny and bright. Maybe it was a good omen, Jamie thought as she laid out his only nice suit, the one he wore to weddings and funerals.

He came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist, water droplets rolling down his broad shoulders and disappearing into the dark hair covering his chest.

"You think?" he asked, gesturing to the suit. "I was going to wear my sport coat . . ."

"Hold your head high, Mike," Jamie said. "It was an accident."

She brought him a white button-down shirt and selected a blue-and-red striped tie, then took his dress shoes out of the closet. The shoes were scuffed from Mike's long walk home, so Jamie found a jar of polish and went to work on them until they gleamed. She straightened Mike's tie and smoothed an unruly section of his thick hair, her fingers lingering on him, grateful for an excuse to finally touch him.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come?" she asked. "Lou can watch the kids."

He shook his head. "That's the last thing I want." His rough tone and words stung her. She thought he'd meant that he didn't want her to witness his shame, not that he didn't want to be near her, but she didn't ask.

"I'll have my cell phone on," she said. "I may take the kids out, but if you need anything . . . Or if you change your mind, I can rush down there . . ."

Her words trailed off as she looked at him, remembering how he'd worn this same suit and tie when he and Ritchie were given the commendation for bringing down the armed robbery suspect. Maybe she'd chosen it subconsciously for that reason, to remind everyone else, too.

He'd also worn it when they'd gone to his brother's second wedding in New Jersey a few years ago. They'd brought the kids along but had hired a teenager who lived down the street from Mike's parents' house to watch them during the ceremony and reception. It was a spectacular evening. Jamie had bought a new dress for the first time in years, snapping up a bargain from a deeply discounted rack at Marshalls. It was a silky silver with a neckline that dipped down to skim the tops of her breasts, and she'd felt like a younger version of herself after she blow-dried and curled her hair, put on lip gloss and mascara, and slipped into high heels. The wedding was sweetly traditional, and as soon as it ended, everyone went to the reception at a nearby hotel. A band was playing and the air was soft and warm and drinks were flowing freely.

Mike had pulled her close for a slow dance, and they'd swayed together while Van Morrison sang "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You." Mike had sung along in her ear in his deep voice that was surprisingly on-key: "Fill my heart with gladness, take away my sadness, ease my troubles, that's what you do . . ."

But she couldn't ease his troubles any longer. The only thing she could do was reach for her husband and hold on, feeling desperate to connect with him again. After a long moment, his arms enfolded her. She tried to concentrate on Mike, on his warm skin and his smell, but the thought entered her mind that maybe Ms. Torres had done all these same things on the morning of her son's funeral. Maybe she'd picked out a suit for him to wear. Maybe she'd held what remained of him and had never wanted to let go.

Jamie would probably never meet Jose's mother, but she knew their lives were inexorably twined, like the double helix of a strand of DNA. On days like today, and on the anniversary of the shooting, they'd be brought closer together before spinning off, each into her own private agony.

Mike pulled back, and Jamie felt a desperate, panicky urge to do something else for him—make him a nourishing lunch to bring along, maybe—but she forced herself to let go. She walked him to the door, feeling as if he was heading to an executioner's. She wondered if the press would crowd around him as he entered the courthouse, or if any of his friends would show up.

Mike took his car keys from the hanging wall holder and slipped them into his pocket, then reached for his sunglasses. He patted his back pocket to make sure his wallet was in place, like he always did. She loved that habit of his. Sometimes she patted his behind for him and gave him a wink. "Just checking," she'd say. Those lighthearted moments seemed so long ago. It was like trying to remember your life before you had children, she thought—the experiences were so divergent they were difficult to reconcile.

"I'll see you tonight," Mike said, his posture ramrod-straight.

J.H. had predicted Mike would be released on his own recognizance, but there was a slim chance he'd have to wear an ankle monitor. Jamie wondered what it would feel like, if it would itch and

chafe and dig marks into his skin.

"I'll be here," Jamie said. Even though she couldn't see his eyes behind his dark lenses, she tried to let Mike know with hers that no matter what happened, she meant for always.

...

"I'm sorry I can't give you more notice," Lou said. "Things are just . . . you see, it's a family emergency."

"I understand," the manager of the coffee shop said. Lou could hear the metallic whirl of beans grinding in the background. "No hard feelings."

Lou thanked him and pressed the button on her cell phone to end the call. She'd spent the past few days finding co-workers to cover her shifts, so now all she needed to do was stop in to pick up her final paycheck. Jamie hadn't asked her to quit, but Lou had known it was the right thing to do as soon as she heard about the looming indictment. She'd slipped away during the chaos of breakfast to give her notice.

She'd also left a message for her boss at the zoo asking for a few weeks off. She had plenty of accumulated vacation time, so she didn't think it would be a problem. She was planning to stop by and visit Tabby and the other elephants every day or two, and she still wanted to be there to oversee the birth, but she was hoping the zoo could call in more volunteers and keepers to cover the feedings, exams, paperwork, and tours that Lou usually handled.

Now she went back into the kitchen, where Jamie stood at the sink, scrubbing the big cast-iron frying pan she'd used to cook eggs.

"Are you okay?" Lou asked. She'd heard Mike leave early this morning to meet with his lawyer before heading to superior court, but Lou had stayed upstairs, partly so he and Jamie could have privacy and partly because Eloise was draped across her legs, snoring. Lou had wanted to shift her off, but she knew from experience Eloise would be a terror if she didn't get enough sleep, so she lay still. By the time the other kids began to stir, Lou's back ached and her legs felt numb.

Jamie shook her head, and Lou could see her eyes fill. "It's going to kill him," Jamie said.

Lou put a hand on her shoulder.

"He doesn't want me there," Jamie said, scrubbing the pan harder even though it already looked clean. "I think it'll make him more embarrassed or ashamed or whatever he's feeling. It's like he's angry at me, like it's my fault he's getting indicted. I don't know what he's feeling! He won't talk to me about it! And last night I couldn't sleep, and I kept thinking about the stupid water bill. I forgot to pay it this month. So I got up at three A.M. and went online to pay it and then I made the mistake of doing a Google search about Mike."

"You shouldn't do that," Lou said.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Jamie said. "The comments section is the worst thing ever invented. A lot of people hate him, Lou. They really hate his guts." She pressed her hand against her stomach and leaned over for a moment. "Then I started looking at apartments in New Jersey."

"New Jersey?" Lou frowned.

"If the worst happens, we might have to move. Mike's parents drive me crazy, but his brothers and sisters are okay, and that way we'd be around a lot of family and maybe we could even live with his parents so we don't have to pay rent. I can't have the kids suffer because of this. Everyone in school is going to be talking about it when they go back. I mean, high school's tough enough without—"

Jamie stopped herself. "Henry," she said. "Of course we can't move. Christie is here. She'd never let us take him. What was I thinking?" She shook her head. "God! We can't leave Henry."

You can't leave me, either, Lou thought, feeling her muscles tense. What would she do without Jamie and Mike and the kids? She wondered if the story written by the blogger had played a role in the prosecutor's decision to try to indict Mike. It would be partly her fault if Jamie and the kids had to leave!

She felt like she was about to cry, so she changed the subject.

"Where is Henry?" she asked.

"Christie's, for now," Jamie said. "I thought it would be better for him to not be around today. And I found a baseball camp we're going to

send him to for a few days . . . it's expensive but I think he really needs to get away. I know he's absorbing a lot of stress."

"That's good," Lou said. She tried to think of something concrete she could do to help. "Do you want to take a nap or something?" she asked.

Jamie shook her head. "I can't," she said.

Lou wasn't sure why not—Jamie looked exhausted—but her sister seemed to need to keep moving. She was attacking the counters now, scrubbing them down like she was punishing them for something.

"I'm going to take the kids to the pool," Jamie said, using her wrist to push her bangs off her face. "If I stay in the house I'll go crazy."

"What can I do to help?" Lou asked.

"If you could gather up the bathing suits, that would be great. They might be hanging on the back of the bathroom door, or maybe they're on the floor by the washing machine . . . Shoot, Emily still needs a new suit. I meant to pick one up weeks ago. We'll have to run by the mall on the way."

"Okay," Lou said.

"And we should stop by CVS and get some shampoo, because we're almost out. There's one in the mall." She shook her head. "Mike's going to be arraigned and a boy is dead and I'm going shopping for shampoo. What's happening, Lou?"

Lou took in the rings of blue-black encircling her sister's eyes, and the way her hands trembled. Suddenly Jamie dropped the sponge and put her hand on her stomach again and bolted. A moment later Lou could hear the distant sounds of retching.

"Is Mommy okay?"

Lou looked down to see Emily standing there, her big eyes staring up at Lou.

"Her stomach's just upset," Lou said. She didn't know if Emily bought it; she was a bright kid.

"We should get her some ginger ale," Emily said.

"Yeah," Lou said. "That's a good idea. She mentioned something about going to the store, so we can get some then." She pulled Emily close for a hug, feeling her niece's small, soft arms wrap around her neck.

"C'mon," Lou said. "Let's get ready."

After she'd gathered up the bathing suits and towels, Lou tapped her knuckles gently on the bathroom door. "Meet you outside!" she said brightly. She managed to wrangle all the kids to the minivan and get them strapped in, keeping up a steady stream of chatter about baby cheetahs.

"Even when they grow up they don't roar like the other big cats," Lou said. "They'll just purr when they're bigger. And did you know they only need to drink water once every three or four days? They get liquid from their food."

"I want a baby cheetah," Emily said. "Can we buy one?"

"That's dumb," Sam said. "It would claw you to death."

"I don't want a cheetah to kill me!" Eloise wailed.

"Tell you what," Lou said. "The zoo sells stuffed cheetahs. How about we go visit this week and you can pick one out to sleep with?"

"Me, too?" Eloise asked.

"All of you," Lou promised.

Jamie came out of the house then, glancing around warily. Lou waved at her, hoping Jamie would know it meant there weren't any reporters lurking. Jamie walked toward the minivan before shaking her head and doubling back to lock the front door.

"I can drive," Lou offered. At Jamie's grateful nod, she slipped the minivan's keys out of her sister's purse and started the engine.

"Can we watch a movie?" Eloise asked as Lou backed out of the driveway. "I want *Nemo*."

"*Nemo's* for babies," Emily said.

Eloise began to cry and tried to hit her sister, but her car seat's restraints prevented her from stretching far enough to connect. Emily leaned closer but still just out of Eloise's reach and stuck out her tongue.

"Emily, that wasn't nice. Say you're sorry," Jamie instructed.

"Sorry," Emily said in a tone completely devoid of sincerity.

"You know we only watch movies on long car rides," Jamie said. "This is a short one. You can listen to music."

Lou reached for the radio dial.

"Just no news," Jamie warned.

“Right.” Lou nodded. She found a Josh Groban song, and against all odds, all three kids fell silent and seemed to be listening.

Jamie looked at her watch and sighed. She pulled her cell phone out of her purse and clutched it tightly in her hand.

“You okay?” Lou asked.

“Just . . . wondering,” Jamie said. “What’s happening now.”

Lou didn’t know what to say, so she focused on driving. When they reached the mall, the parking lot was crowded, so Lou had to circle up to the second level before finding a spot.

“A bathing suit and shampoo, right?” she asked as she set the parking brake. “Need anything else?”

“Probably,” Jamie said. “Let me think . . . Maybe we can get some juice boxes and pretzels at CVS, too—I forgot to pack a picnic for the pool.”

“Okay,” Lou said. She was going to keep a mental list so Jamie didn’t forget anything. And the next time they went out for the day, she’d pack the picnic. Lou was good at remembering things—she knew the exact amount of nutrients the elephants required every day and she never forgot a single feeding or vitamin. She’d just never had to worry about keeping track around Jamie before, because her sister had always been the one to stay on top of things for both of them.

They corralled the kids toward the entrance to one of the big department stores, with Lou holding Eloise’s hand as Jamie led the way through the aisles.

They were approaching the kids’ section when Lou noticed the man staring at them.

He was thirty or so, white and with a stocky build. He sported a goatee and a blue baseball cap with a logo Lou didn’t recognize. He stood next to a woman who was holding an infant in a chest carrier, and she was looking at them, too. The woman averted her eyes when Lou glanced back at them, but the man kept staring.

“Can we get ice cream?” Sam asked, tugging on Lou’s shirt. Clearly he had identified her as the soft touch.

Lou turned away from the couple and looked down at her nephew. “Why don’t we hold off for now, okay, little man?” she said, thinking of how the junk-food bonanza at the zoo had ended.

"I think we're in the boys' section," Lou said, pointing across the aisle. "The girls' stuff is over here."

As they turned to head that way, Lou noticed the guy again. She'd assumed he was with the woman with the baby, but now he seemed to be alone. And he wasn't staring at all of them—he was watching Jamie. Lou looked back as they passed the man. She felt the hair rise on the back of her neck, and she reached for Sam's hand. Physiological reactions were the body's way of alerting itself to danger. Lou knew her pupils were dilating to let in more light, her muscles were tightening, and her blood pressure was rising. That was what happened to some animals if they sensed a threat.

"Let's hurry," Lou said. "We want to get to the pool before it gets too crowded."

Her voice came out louder than she'd intended, and she saw the man shake his head. "The pool," he muttered, barely loudly enough for her to hear. "Must be nice."

Jamie hadn't heard the man's comment. She was flipping through a sale rack, holding bathing suits up for Emily's inspection. They all looked the same to Lou, but Emily kept shaking her head.

"How about this one?" Jamie was asking. "It has sparkles."

"Maybe," Emily allowed.

Lou was still holding Sam and Eloise by their hands, and Emily was right next to Jamie. Lou couldn't see the guy because he'd moved and clothing displays obscured her view. She kept scanning her surroundings, looking for that blue baseball cap.

"This one's pretty," Jamie said. "See the flowers?"

"Yuck," Emily said.

Lou spun around at the sound of a man's voice. She knew it was him before she saw the goatee and baseball cap. "Unbelievable. You're shopping and going to the pool while that kid rots in his grave," the man said.

Jamie froze for an instant, then slowly lifted her head.

For a fleeting moment, Lou wondered how he'd recognized Jamie. Then her instincts trumped her thought process. She stepped up next to her sister, positioning Sam and Eloise behind her and speaking in a calm, low voice, as she'd do if confronted with any other angry

mammal. "We have children here," she said.

"Yeah? The guy her husband shot was just a kid, too," the man said.

"Mommy?" Sam's voice was high and wavering.

"Can you get a manager?" Jamie called to a passing salesperson, her voice as desperate as Sam's. "Please?"

"Oh, sure, call a manager," the guy said. "Why don't you just call your husband to come shoot me?"

Emily began to cry, and then so did Sam, their wails high and thready. Before Lou could do anything, she detected movement out of the corner of her eye. Jamie was stalking toward the man. Hearing her children's cries must have ignited something in her sister.

"Listen to me!" Jamie hissed. She shook her finger in the guy's face. She seemed to have grown physically taller, and her body language was fierce. "You leave us alone!"

Gone was the exhausted woman who'd hunched over her sink this morning. Jamie had transformed into a warrior. Now her arms were outstretched to block the man from getting through her to her children, and her expression made her look like a stranger even to Lou.

Without thinking about it, Lou let go of Sam's and Eloise's hands and stepped forward, too. Jamie had always defended her while they were growing up. Now it was her turn.

"Get away from my sister!" Lou shouted.

She angled herself between Jamie and the man so that if he attacked, he'd have to go through her first. Lou would fight him off as best as she could while Jamie and the kids escaped. She remembered the self-defense course she'd taken years ago. She'd go for his eyes, knees, instep, or throat. Lou widened her stance, so he wouldn't be able to easily knock her down, and suddenly she felt grateful for every one of those twenty extra pounds.

The guy made a huffing sound, but he didn't say anything.

"Lou, call the police," Jamie said, without taking her narrowed eyes off him.

Lou pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. Before she could dial a single digit, the guy began to walk away, slowly, as if to convey to them that it was his choice to move on.

Lou poised her finger over the final 1 for the emergency number. “Still want me to call the police?” she asked. The man was twenty yards away by now.

Jamie shook her head. “Let’s get out of here,” she said. Jamie knelt down and put her arms around her children, drawing them in close, while Lou kept her eyes fixed on that blue baseball cap.

They walked toward the exit. Lou couldn’t see the guy any longer, but she checked behind them every few seconds. “You’re safe,” Jamie told the kids as they passed through the doors and made it to the minivan.

“Was he talking about Daddy?” Sam asked as Jamie unlocked the vehicle.

“Yes,” Jamie said. She knelt down to be at eye level with Sam again. “But he was a crazy person. He doesn’t know Daddy and he was wrong. That’s why he ran away before the police got here.”

Sam nodded and sniffled a few times. Jamie patted him on the back, then opened the sliding side door and helped Sam into the vehicle. Lou got Emily and Eloise settled, then shut the door and climbed into the front.

“How did he recognize you?” Lou asked after Jamie started up the engine. Uneasy energy still radiated from her sister, but Jamie’s voice was calmer.

Jamie shrugged. “Some of the news stations aired footage of Mike and me leaving the station after he gave his statement. There’ve been photos in the paper, too.”

“Do you want to go home?” Lou asked.

“No way,” Jamie said firmly. “We’re going to the pool. He is not going to ruin my children’s morning. I’ll grab a bathing suit out of the lost and found bin for Emily.”

“I’m hungry,” Sam said.

“How about I buy everyone lunch?” Lou offered.

“Yay!” Sam said. “Can we get Chipotle?”

Lou stole a look at Jamie. The tightness in her sister’s face was easing now. “Actually, that sounds kind of good to me, too,” she said.

“Chipotle it is,” Lou said. “Then the pool. We can get ice cream there, too—my treat.”

She didn't think Jamie would mind junk food just this once, especially because at the mention of it, all three kids cheered.

"So you don't have to work today?" Jamie asked.

"Actually, I quit my barista job," Lou said. She cleared her throat. "And I thought I could take a leave of absence from the zoo. I'll have to go back when Tabby gives birth, but other than that, I'll just stop in and visit the elephants."

Jamie pulled up to a red light. She turned to look at Lou.

"You quit?" she asked.

Lou couldn't tell from the expression on her sister's face if the news made her happy or not.

"I just thought . . . that way, I can be around whenever you need me," Lou explained.

Jamie still didn't say anything, so Lou added quickly, "And if you don't, I'll stay in my room or go out for a walk or something to give you privacy—"

She stopped talking when Jamie reached over to give her a brief, hard, one-armed hug.

"Lou, I don't know what I would do without you right now," Jamie said.

The best part was, Lou could tell her sister really meant it.

Chapter Twelve

CHRISTIE AWOKE TO BRIGHT sunlight streaming through her window. She'd forgotten to draw the blinds last night. She buried her face under a pillow, but it was too late. She was awake for good.

She stumbled out of bed and padded into her kitchen to make coffee. Maybe, she thought, she'd start leaving her blinds up deliberately. Her mother usually slept away half the day, and one thing was for sure: Christie was not going to turn into that woman. No way would she end up in a crappy low-rise apartment with water stains on the ceiling and game shows blaring in a continual loop on the television. She had a plan.

Christie poured herself a steaming mug of coffee, added Sweet 'n Low instead of the sugar and cream she really wanted, and leaned against the spot on the counter where Mike had so recently been. She'd made a decision after he left. She was going to keep working with Elroy, after all, but she'd never again let anyone double lock the door to the hotel room. She'd take as many jobs as possible and pay off her credit card debt fast, then she'd start saving for the down payment on a house. Maybe she'd even go back to beauty school, all these years later, and become the manager of a salon, like she'd pretended to be to Simon. And forget shimmying into dresses she bought at Forever 21. From now on, she was going to start purchasing quality pieces, skirts and tops and dresses from Nordstrom. Clothes that fit the woman she was becoming—or hoped to become, anyway.

But first, the car.

Christie took a sip of strong coffee, relishing the memory of how confident she'd felt inside the sleek vehicle. A Mercedes would help erase the feeling of Jim's insistent, scrabbling fingers on her thighs, and the memory of the looks Simon's family had given her at the restaurant.

She was nervous about the price tag, but she'd already called up a calculator on the Internet and figured out that, with interest, she'd owe \$620 per monthly payment. That was less than three jobs with Elroy. It didn't seem so bad when you broke it down that way.

She showered, got dressed, and drove to the dealership, arriving a few minutes after it opened. The same salesman saw her coming and met her at the door, holding it open and ushering her inside. "She's been waiting for you," he said, grinning.

Christie tried to make her eyes dull, to avoid letting him see how the car affected her, but she knew it was a lost cause. She ended up paying more than she wanted, but an hour later, she was driving off the lot in the cherry-red Mercedes.

She could have stayed in it all day, she thought as she idled at a stoplight, itching to press the gas again and feel the engine surge. She wanted to roar along the highway, the radio blasting and the wind streaming through her hair. She yearned to drive to the beach and feel the salty air against her cheeks. She heard the toot of a horn and looked over to see a silver-haired man in a BMW checking her out. Christie winked at him, then stepped on the gas pedal and left him behind.

She was born for this car.

She wasn't ready to go home, so she drove to Nordstrom. She parked carefully, in an out-of-the-way location so the Mercedes wouldn't get dinged. She walked purposefully into the store and began looking at dresses. The first few price tags made her blanch, but after a few moments, she began to notice how soft the fabrics felt between her fingers, and how smooth the seams were in comparison to those of the cheap items she usually bought. She selected a few things to try on: an emerald-colored sheath, a crimson sundress, a maxidress in bright blue.

"Can I start a room for you?" Christie looked up to see a bright-eyed young saleswoman stretching out her arm. Christie obligingly handed over the clothes. "Thanks," she said.

"Can I make a suggestion?" the saleswoman asked. "These bold colors will be nice on you, but have you ever thought about trying something in a neutral?"

“Like . . . beige?” Christie asked, her nose crinkling.

“I was thinking cream,” the saleswoman said. Christie refrained from asking what the difference was.

“How about this?” the salesgirl asked, pulling a dress from a rack. “I think the cut will suit you. Size eight, right?”

Maybe eight on a good day, and she hadn’t had one of those in a while, but Christie nodded.

“You’ve got such striking eyes, and hair,” the salesgirl said. She was young, maybe twenty or so, with close-cropped hair and flawless skin. “Your clothes shouldn’t compete with your best features. They should enhance them. With this dress, people will be looking at you—not your outfit.”

“Thanks,” Christie said. She looked down at her pink tank top and matching skirt. She wasn’t sure if she’d just been delivered a compliment or a backhanded insult (did the salesgirl think she was too flashy?), but the advice seemed spot-on. And when she went into the changing room and put on the dress, which was tight but not so tight she couldn’t zip it up, she realized the silk lining made the fabric skim her curves instead of bunching up around the middle. The hem fell to just above her knee, showing less of her leg than she was used to. She’d always dismissed clothes that hit so close to the knee as being frumpy. But as she twisted and turned in front of the mirror, she noticed that because the skirt was so fitted, it hinted at the shape of her thighs. It was sexy without being overtly so. And the salesgirl was right; the color set off not just her eyes, but her skin tone.

She looked at the price tag and blinked: \$360. It was more than Christie had ever spent on an item of clothing in her entire life, including her prom dress and the wedding gown she’d worn for her brief marriage to the guy whose name she’d vowed never to utter again.

“Doing all right in there?” the salesgirl chirped. “Need a smaller size?”

She really was earning her commission.

“Doing great,” Christie said. She tried on the dresses she’d selected, but they looked too loud next to the beige—no, the *cream*—one. She put the dress on a hanger and walked out.

“Do you need shoes to go with it?” the salesgirl asked.

“What would you suggest?” Christie asked.

The salesgirl held up the dress and narrowed her eyes. “Something in bone,” she said. “It’ll make your legs look longer. Nothing too structured; I’d go with a simple sandal.”

Within an hour, Christie had not only new shoes but a hammered-gold cuff bracelet. She popped into a few other stores, making an impulsive purchase at a Hallmark card shop and picking up a smoothie for lunch, then she returned to her car and checked her iPhone, which showed two missed calls. Both were from Elroy.

She pressed the Return Call button and waited to hear his gentle voice. He picked up on the first ring.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Christie said. “I’m fine.”

“Look, I don’t want you to quit, but if you need to take off a little time —” he began, but she cut him off. What she needed was to start making money before her first car payment arrived.

“I want a can of Mace,” she said. “Can you get me one?”

“Of course,” he said. “I should’ve thought of that sooner.”

“I’m ready to start again,” she said. “But first I have a favor to ask.”

She told him about Mike and the shooting—he’d heard about it already, but hadn’t known of her relationship to Mike—and Elroy promised to help. “Whatever I can do,” he said.

“Really?” Christie asked, a little suspicious. Most guys didn’t want to spend effort on you unless they were getting something in return.

“Sure,” Elroy said. “You know I used to be a cop, right?”

Christie hadn’t, actually.

“I’ve still got a few contacts in the department. Let me see what’s going on and I’ll call you back.”

After she hung up, Christie checked the dashboard clock. Even the numbers proclaiming it was a few minutes after noon looked elegant. She glanced down at the small Hallmark bag on the passenger’s seat and decided to head to Mike and Jamie’s house, so she could give it to them in person. It wasn’t much—just a hang-in-there card, but along with it she’d be delivering the news that Elroy was going to help Mike’s case. Henry was supposed to come over tonight, so maybe she’d

save them a trip by picking him up early, if he was home. She couldn't wait to see his face when he glimpsed the Mercedes. He'd be so proud of her.

She put the Mercedes in drive and set up the GPS, even though she knew the way, because she'd never had a GPS before. She preset the radio buttons to her favorite stations, too. She made it to Mike and Jamie's in record time—or maybe it just felt that way because the ride was so pleasant. She pulled up to the curb and listened to the end of John Legend's "All of Me."

She wondered how many times she'd waited in front of this house for Henry to come to her. Thousands, probably. When he'd been a baby, picking him up or dropping him off had also required handing off his diaper bag and ratty stuffed dog and stroller, which was a hassle. Then he'd gone through a phase as a toddler in which he hadn't wanted to leave Mike, which wasn't fun for anyone. Luckily it was short-lived. In a few years, she wouldn't have to pick him up at all. He'd just drive over to her place himself.

As the final, sweet notes of the song faded, Christie saw phantom Henrys running toward her—a little tyke in overalls with sticky hands; a self-conscious nine-year-old with a baseball glove; a tall, lanky teenager who was just a few years from running away from them for good. She shook her head, wondering how the time had evaporated as quickly as wet footprints on the hot pavement.

She picked up the car keys, opened the door, walked to the house, and rang the bell. One of Mike's kids flung it open and ran away without a word.

"Hello?" Christie called.

"Christie?" Jamie came from the direction of the living room, a frown on her face. "Weren't we supposed to drop off Henry tonight?"

"Yeah, but I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop by and save you the trouble," Christie said. "Hey, you got the AC fixed!"

"What? Oh, yeah," Jamie said. Had she gotten thinner all of a sudden?

"Is Mike here?" Christie asked. She reached into her purse for the card in the bright yellow envelope.

Jamie started to answer, then she caught sight of the Mercedes.

Christie smiled broadly and stepped aside so Jamie could get a better look. "Do you like it?"

"It's yours?" Jamie asked.

Christie nodded. "Come see," she urged. She tucked the card back into her purse and led the way down the walk.

Jamie followed her without shutting the front door, and the dog escaped and raced down the street.

"Is she going to run away?" Christie asked, but Jamie didn't answer.

"It has leather seats," Christie said. "And a sunroof! Here." Christie opened the door and pulled the Nordstrom bag off the passenger's seat. "You can get in if you want."

Jamie turned to look at her. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Christie blinked. "What?"

"Mike was just indicted and you bought a Mercedes? He might go to jail and we'll lose everything. And I'm driving a nine-year-old minivan and sitting up at night trying to figure out how to pay the grocery bill and you buy a goddamn Mercedes with the child support money we give you?"

"I didn't—" Christie began, but Jamie cut her off. Her face was turning bright red and her voice kept getting louder.

"You didn't what? Think? Maybe you're not that bright, Christie, but it shouldn't be hard to figure out!" Jamie said. "You are the most selfish person I've ever met."

Jamie hated her. She'd tried to mask it for years, but now it was so clear. The way she was looking at Christie, her face twisting . . .

Fury and hurt swelled inside of Christie. "Screw you!" she shouted. "You don't think I deserve this car? I'm paying for it! I got a new job, a good one . . ."

"Doing what? Another modeling job?" Scorn seeped into every word.

"No!" Christie bellowed. "Why don't you ask Mike? I told him about it when he came over the other night for pizza and beer."

That hit its mark. Apparently Mike hadn't told his perfect little wife about their visit. Jamie staggered back a step. "What?" she said.

"Oh, I guess he didn't want you to know," Christie said. "Oops!"

Jamie looked like she wanted to hit her. She actually raised her

hand, then she dropped it to her side. “Why don’t you go back to school, get a real job, and stop mooching off us. I’m sick of it,” she said. Her voice dropped, but Christie still caught her last words. “I’m sick of *you*.”

Christie got into her car and roared off, her body trembling. *Not that bright. Mooch. Selfish.* So that was what Jamie really thought of her, even though she pretended to pray for Christie.

She made it one block away before the tears came.

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Mike had gone to Christie’s for beer and pizza?

Jamie’s mind cast back over the previous days and nights, wondering when it had happened. The truth was, she and Mike were spending so little time together that she had no idea when he’d done it. What she’d give to have an easy, companionable night like that with her husband. But Christie was the one Mike had chosen to spend time with.

Jamie thought about how she and Mike had wanted to transfer Sam to private school, because he was so bright and anxious, and Jamie knew boys like him sometimes had a tough time in public school. But they couldn’t afford it. She’d resented Christie for that. She felt the burn every time she saw Christie in a new outfit. She’d thought she’d pushed it down, but it had just been tamped more tightly into a small space, like explosive powder awaiting a spark.

Jamie dropped her head into her hands. Maybe she’d been too hard on Christie just now—she’d seen pain flash across Christie’s face, and she wasn’t proud of causing it—but what was she thinking, driving up in that car so soon after Mike had been indicted?

Christie’s timing couldn’t have been worse. Just this morning, Jamie had had to phone her father to ask if she could borrow money, since Mike was no longer drawing a salary. “I don’t know when we can pay you back,” Jamie had said, her voice catching. “It might be a while.”

“Don’t even worry about that,” her father had said immediately, and two fat tears had squeezed out from her eyes. He’d probably take it out of his retirement account. “I’ll send a check today.”

At least they'd be able to pay the mortgage—for now. The indictment meant Mike could be represented for free by a public defender, but Jamie wasn't sure if it would be better to stick with J.H., who seemed to know what he was doing.

The Mercedes probably cost as much as J.H. would charge them. How could Christie be so thoughtless?

Jamie sighed and slumped down to sit on the curb, energy leaching out of her body. She'd felt so righteous and strong after the terrible experience at the mall the other day. After Lou had treated them to lunch, she'd driven to the pool and had searched through the lost and found bin until she'd found a bathing suit that looked newish and would fit Emily. She'd washed it out with hand soap in the bathroom sink, then convinced Emily to wear it, saying the pool kept extra suits on hand for kids who'd forgotten theirs. Lou had taken Eloise into the shallow end while Jamie had gone with Sam and Emily to the slide and diving board.

"Are you going to do it?" Sam had asked when Jamie began climbing the ladder to the slide.

"I sure am," she'd said. She'd forgotten how good it felt to whoosh down the slippery plastic and splash into deliciously cool water.

They'd stayed at the pool for two hours, and Jamie had only gotten out of the water to check her cell phone every fifteen minutes or so in case Mike called. But he didn't, and she found it was surprisingly easy to block out what was happening, to keep her world limited to the narrow confines of games of Marco Polo and diving contests.

Everyone had eaten a Choco Taco or Popsicle from the concession stand, then they'd driven home still in their bathing suits. ("Don't I have to give the suit back?" Emily had asked. "Not for two weeks," Jamie had said. "That's the pool's rule.")

She'd passed a farm stand and had picked up a half dozen ears of fresh corn and a few tomatoes, and she'd pulled out hamburger meat and hot dogs for dinner. She wanted Mike to come home to the smell of good food and the sound of happy children.

He'd walked through the door less than ten minutes after they arrived, as if they'd synchronized it. Jamie had approached him with a question in her eyes, but he'd lifted up a hand like a stop sign. He

hadn't said a word; he'd just gone upstairs, changed, and come back down. He'd put on shorts, and Jamie was relieved to see his ankles were bare.

"Smells good," he'd said, watching as Jamie flipped burgers on the small gas grill just outside their kitchen door. That's when she knew he was laying down the ground rules: They weren't to talk about what had happened to him today. Maybe they never would.

She'd thought that it was too painful for him to discuss, but hearing about Mike and Christie together made her wonder. Maybe he was letting other people in.

Maybe he just didn't want to talk to her.

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As she stepped out of the bathroom, Lou heard a woman yelling. She looked out the window and saw Jamie standing on the edge of the lawn as a shiny red car peeled away. Lou ran downstairs, through the open front door, calling her sister's name. She wondered if Jamie had had an altercation with a reporter. A few had followed Mike home from superior court after his arraignment the other day, but they'd left after an hour or so.

Jamie was sitting on the curb, her arms wrapped around her knees. "Sadie's gone," she said.

"Which way did she go?" Lou asked.

Jamie pointed.

"I'll go find her," Lou promised. "Was that who you were yelling at? Sadie?"

Jamie gave a half laugh. "No," she said. "Christie."

"She's here?" Lou asked.

Jamie shook her head. "Not any longer."

"I'll find Sadie," Lou promised. She ran to get her flip-flops and the keys to the minivan and her cell phone. "Call me if she comes back," she said, then she headed off in the direction Jamie had indicated, calling Sadie's name through the van's open windows.

She drove slowly, her eyes sweeping both sides of the street. As she pulled up to a stop sign a block away, she noticed a car parked to

her right. It was the same fancy car that had peeled away from Jamie's house. Lou saw a flash of familiar blond hair and she squinted, trying to get a better look. Christie was in the driver's seat, her face buried in her hands, her shoulders heaving.

"Are you okay?" Lou called out, and Christie looked up. Her cheeks were streaked with mascara and her eyes were swollen.

"Did you follow me?" Christie asked.

Lou shook her head. "I'm looking for Sadie," she said.

"Well, she's not here," Christie said. She picked up a yellow envelope and began shredding it, letting the pieces fall out her window.

"Littering is illegal," Lou said, in case Christie didn't know.

Christie's face screwed up and she began crying harder. "Just go away!"

Lou sat there, unsure of what to do. Then she caught sight of Sadie in the next yard over. She put the car in park, got out, and crept toward the dog. She grabbed Sadie's collar just as the dog tried to bolt and steered her into the minivan. As she walked around to the driver's side, she looked over at Christie again.

Lou hesitated. Jamie always talked about how important it was for her and Christie to be on friendly terms, for Henry's sake. That was why she invited Christie over for Thanksgiving dinner every year, even though Christie usually didn't come.

"Can I do anything?" Lou asked.

"No," Christie said, but some of the anger had disappeared from her voice and she began to hiccup. She had a funny-sounding hiccup—kind of a gulp followed by a little squeal.

Lou thought of the time a golden-headed lion tamarin monkey had been injured at the zoo—no one was quite sure how, but they suspected its leg had gotten ensnared when it tried to jump from tree limb to tree limb. At first the monkey had bared its teeth at anyone who came close to it, but then one of the keepers had approached it slowly, making soothing sounds, and the monkey had succumbed to treatment. The look in the monkey's eyes—half-threatening, half-wounded—reminded her of Christie's expression right now.

"I'm really sorry you're so sad," Lou said. Christie hiccuped twice

more.

"Whatever," Christie said. "I didn't get Henry and I'm not going back there."

"Do you want me to bring him to you?" Lou offered.

Christie looked as if she thought Lou was trying to trick her. "Fine," she finally said. "But he's not supposed to come over until tonight, and I need to get myself together anyway. Bring him around five."

"Okay," Lou said. Christie was being a little bossy, but Lou decided that was okay, because she'd stopped crying.

"And I already told Mike I don't need child support any longer," Christie said. "You can tell your sister!"

Lou nodded. She knew better than to get in the middle of *that* conversation.

Christie stared at her for a moment. "You desperately need a better haircut," she said.

The comment was so unexpected that Lou burst into laughter. "I know," she said. "But I only paid fifteen bucks for this one. Including tip."

"You tipped for that?" Christie said.

Lou laughed again. She wasn't insulted; it was refreshing to hear someone else say exactly what they thought.

"Look," she said. "I'm sure Jamie is sorry you fought."

"I doubt it," Christie said. "Considering she started it."

"She's under a lot of stress right now," Lou said. "I don't think she's sleeping much."

"Whatever," Christie said, her hand flapping away Lou's words. "Do you remember where I live?"

Lou had been there for a few of Henry's birthday parties. She nodded. "Once I go somewhere once, I can always drive there again. By the way, that's a gorgeous car."

Christie narrowed her eyes at Lou.

"So I'll see you soon," Lou said.

She got into the minivan, gave Sadie a pat, and headed back to Jamie's. She'd tell Jamie that Christie had been crying. Maybe that would make Jamie forgive Christie for whatever she'd done.

But she hadn't even finished leading Sadie through Jamie's front

door when a text came in on her phone: *Tabby's progesterone just dropped. Baby's coming!*

Chapter Thirteen

JAMIE HAD NEVER FLAT-OUT lied to Mike before.

After her fight with Christie, she'd felt an almost uncontrollable urge to put into place a plan she'd been secretly turning over in her mind. Lou had raced off to the zoo by then, so Jamie told Mike she'd forgotten she had a gynecologist's appointment that afternoon. "Can you watch the children? I'll be back in an hour and a half."

Then she'd gotten into her van and driven in the opposite direction from her doctor's office, to a large red-brick building she'd entered only once before. She parked in the visitors' lot and signed in at the security guard's desk, then took the elevator to the third floor and hurried down the long hallway, inhaling the ammonia smell of disinfectant.

She found the correct room and gently rapped her knuckles against the partly open door before stepping inside. Her palms felt sweaty and her heart throbbed in her chest. What would unfold in the next few minutes was vitally important.

Ritchie was in bed, looking through a photo album, Sandy by his side. Sandy was pointing at a picture and her tone was low and intimate. The twins were sitting on the floor, playing Connect Four.

"Surprise!" Jamie said.

Sandy glanced up, then quickly got to her feet and hurried over to hug Jamie.

"I'm so glad you came!" she said.

Ritchie's smile had always spread the width of his face—it was like a kid's grin, open and unguarded. At least that hadn't changed, Jamie thought as she leaned over to kiss his cheek, then bent down to greet the children.

"Hey," Ritchie said. "You here . . . with Mike?"

"Just me this time," Jamie said. "I was out running a few errands,

and I thought I'd stop by."

"I'm so glad you did. It's been a while," Sandy said, her voice containing no judgment. She perched on the edge of Ritchie's bed, by his feet, and gestured for Jamie to take the chair. "We were just looking at pictures from our trip to the beach."

Memories slammed into Jamie. They'd gone to the Delaware shore for a week two years ago. No, a lifetime ago. Ritchie and Mike had taught the older kids to boogie-board, and she and Sandy had brought along pails and shovels so everyone could compete in sand-castle-building contests. They'd eaten steamed crabs with hot melted butter at a restaurant with picnic tables set outside, and stayed in a hotel that gave guests marshmallows to roast by a giant fire pit at night. She and Sandy had woken up early one morning and taken a long sunrise walk on the beach, and she'd talked to Sandy about her mother's death, while Sandy had shared the story of the two miscarriages she'd had before getting pregnant with the twins. One night they'd all gone to a little tiki bar where she and Sandy had gotten tipsy on piña coladas and Mike and Ritchie had gotten tipsier on beer and sung karaoke, badly, with the little paper umbrellas from their wives' drinks tucked behind their ears. Jamie hadn't been able to clean the sand out of the cracks in her minivan for weeks, and her nose had gotten so sunburned it had peeled. It had been the singular vacation of her life.

"We should . . . do it again soon," Ritchie said.

Jamie saw sadness flicker in Sandy's eyes before she erased it. "Sure. Maybe at the end of the summer," Sandy said.

"How's . . . Mike?" Ritchie asked.

"He's, um, well, he's dealing with everything," Jamie said. She forced a smile. "Hanging in there." Another lie. She could tell Sandy saw straight through it, just as she'd known Ritchie wouldn't be in any shape to go to the beach this year. But they were cops' wives, so they were used to putting on a strong front, no matter how much they ached beneath it. For a moment, Jamie felt their old connection flicker.

"If you two need a date night, you can bring the kids over," Sandy offered.

"Thank you," Jamie said, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. How like Sandy to offer help, when she probably could use some

herself. Sandy and Ritchie thought she was here as a friend. She needed to let them know she'd come to ask them to save her husband. She hoped they wouldn't be angry when they realized it.

"I was wondering," Jamie began. "When the trial begins . . . would you testify on behalf of Mike?"

Ritchie began nodding even before she'd finished the sentence.

"Thank you," Jamie said. "I just think seeing you up on the stand, and having you tell everyone how close you and Mike are . . . They can't accuse him of being a racist if you're there!"

Sandy got up and moved closer to Jamie and put her hands on Jamie's shoulders. "If you need me, I'll testify, too," she said.

Jamie felt it then, the release of a great boulder of guilt that had been weighing her down. It coursed through her, weakening her knees, making her glad for the chair. She'd pushed Sandy away when the two women should've been supporting each other, and Sandy probably knew exactly why, because she was a smart woman, but somehow Sandy didn't blame her. Maybe Sandy had even experienced some of the same feelings when Ritchie was in the hospital and Mike was whole and healthy, but had been better at hiding them.

"We'll get an ambulance to take you," Jamie said. She'd find a way to pay for it. "And we can have a doctor there, too . . . Whatever you need. We can find out exactly when the lawyer wants you to testify and we can just zip you down there and back."

"Hey, girl, slow down," Sandy said gently. Her hands began to knead Jamie's shoulders. "Your muscles are all tied up."

"I win!" Finn cried triumphantly, sliding a red piece into the board. "Dad, next game?"

"Bring it . . . on," Ritchie said, with that smile again.

Jamie felt a painful knot in her shoulder succumb under Sandy's strong fingertips, and she watched as Finn climbed onto Ritchie's bed and began setting up the game. For the first time, she noticed that along with the family photographs on Ritchie's nightstand was one of him with Mike, the two men in matching uniforms, their arms slung around each other's shoulders. Each was making bunny ears behind the other's head.

I'm sorry, Jamie thought, her eyes filling. Sorry that Mike had nudged Ritchie out the door first, setting off this whole wretched series of events, sorry that neither of the men would probably ever wear those uniforms again, sorry that another mother was grieving, and sorry that she'd withdrawn from her friend.

I missed you, she thought, and her hand reached up to squeeze Sandy's.

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It could take hours, or days even, until Tabby gave birth. Lou's bag of supplies, including PowerBars and apples and bottles of water, was stashed under a nearby tree. She didn't want to leave the elephant's side for a moment.

The elephant exhibit had been closed to the public, even though the zoo would still be open for another two hours, and the other members of Tabby's herd were being kept away. A videographer was setting up his equipment, and the zoo's head veterinarian had texted that he was on his way in. A few other keepers and volunteers were milling around, too, clearly excited to watch.

But Lou was focused only on Tabby. Keeping her calm and comfortable was Lou's sole priority.

Tabby was walking around quite a bit, and she wasn't eating much. She wasn't just walking—she was pacing, Lou thought as she leaned against the fence, her eyes moving in tandem with the mammal. It was as if Tabby was searching for something perpetually beyond her reach.

Pacing . . . The word lodged in Lou's brain, forcing her to circle back and reconsider it. Something kept tugging at the corner of her mind, then vanishing, like a firefly that briefly glowed before being swallowed up by the night.

Lou shrugged and gave up on the memory. Her back was a little sore from standing so long, but she didn't feel the slightest bit tired. She'd bought caffeine pills at the drugstore and had packed them just in case, but she doubted she'd need them.

She slid to the ground and settled into a comfortable position,

wrapping her arms around her knees. In the wild, animals never showed signs of distress unless they were grievously ill, since doing so could invite attack by a predator. Tabby was camouflaging her discomfort well, but Lou knew it existed, and that it was going to worsen with the passing hours.

"It's okay, Tabby," Lou called out, her voice floating through the soft warm air. "Good girl."

She wanted to remind Tabby that she was here, in case her presence provided comfort. She watched as the elephant walked over to the deep pool and stepped inside. What a smart creature, Lou thought. Jamie had sworn a bath had eased her pain during early labor. Lou hoped it did for Tabby, too.

Dusk would fall in a few hours, but Lou had a flashlight and a sweatshirt in her bag in case it grew chilly. She could hear occasional grunts and screeches, and she smelled earth and sweet, fresh grass and, best of all, the scent of elephant.

"I'm here, Tabby," she called out again. "Don't worry, sweet girl. I won't leave you."

...

Mike knew going onto the force that he might have to kill people, Christie thought as she began to freshen her makeup. His job was like a soldier's in that way—violence was sometimes necessary to establish peace. Still, knowing you'd taken someone's life . . . She wondered how it felt. It would have to change you in some irrevocable way, wouldn't it?

And yes, she got it that Jamie was under an incredible amount of stress. If Mike went to jail, it would be horrible for Henry, but at least he was old enough to understand. The other kids might not. Did Jamie really think Christie would ask for child support if Mike was convicted? The thought made her seethe, so she tried to temper it with the memory of Jamie's thinness, and the dull look in her eyes—at least until she'd glimpsed the Mercedes.

But it didn't work.

Christie blasted her favorite Rihanna CD to chase away her bad

mood, but that didn't help, either. She'd had the Mercedes for less than a day, and somehow Jamie had managed to steal away every bit of its triumph.

It was five o'clock, so Christie poured herself a gin and tonic and took it with her into her bedroom. Her new dress was hanging on her closet door, and she tore away the plastic wrapper so she could admire it. But all she could think about was the fact that she'd spent more than five hundred dollars on an outfit she didn't have anyplace to wear.

She slipped into the dress and shoes, hoping to recapture the magic she'd felt in the store. As she clasped the gold bracelet around her wrist, her doorbell rang. *Perfect*, she thought. She'd wear the dress for Henry. Maybe she'd suggest that they go out for dinner. First, though, she'd slip Lou the card for her old salon and suggest she request an emergency appointment. But when she opened the door, Lou wasn't there.

Instead, it was Mike who'd brought Henry.

"Wow," he said, looking Christie up and down. She felt her skin tingling under his scrutiny.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"You look great, Mom," Henry said. He kicked off his giant shoes—puppy feet, she always thought when she saw them—and dropped a plastic Sports Authority bag by the closet, then headed straight for the refrigerator.

"I've got turkey and French bread if you want to make a sub," Christie called.

"A little predinner snack?" Mike asked, and she laughed. She was aware he hadn't answered her question, but his double take had revealed enough.

"I thought Lou was going to bring him over?" she asked.

"She had something come up at the zoo," Mike said. "She had to take off."

"Did you want to come in for a second?" she asked. "I actually need to talk to you."

"Yeah, okay," he said.

She led him into the living room, then went to the kitchen and fixed

another gin and tonic. Mike didn't like most hard liquors—he was a beer man—but she knew he enjoyed an occasional G and T on a hot summer day.

“That looks like a Dagwood sub,” she told Henry, who was piling turkey and cheese and something else—yuck, potato chips—on the French bread.

“Who?” Henry asked.

“This cartoon character who— Never mind, you're making me feel old.”

Henry shrugged, picked up his sandwich, seemed to eat a quarter of it in one bite, and headed toward his room.

Christie squeezed lime into Mike's drink, then went into the living room, handed him the glass, and sat down across from him.

“So what's up?” he asked.

“I talked to Elroy,” she said. “My boss. And he wants to help with the investigation.”

“Really?” Mike said. He leaned back with a sigh and took a sip of his drink. Christie could see his shoulders relax. “That's great.”

“He's going to check things out with his police sources and get back to me,” Christie said. “Maybe we can meet up with him to talk about a plan.”

“Yeah, sure,” Mike said. “Whatever he needs. So he's going to talk to the cops?”

“He wants to see what they have,” Christie said.

“Seems like all they've really got is the testimony of Jay—he's the idiot I was paired with that day,” Mike said. “Apparently that's the thing that could screw me.”

“So we've got to discredit him,” Christie said. “Maybe Elroy can dig into his past. Does he have a history of telling lies? If he does, you can be sure ex-girlfriends will be lining up to testify. I mean, maybe he's hoping to get a movie deal out of this or something.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Worth a shot.”

“Oh, I just thought of something!” Christie said. “Does he wear glasses?”

Mike nodded.

“Maybe his prescription changed and he didn't know it!” Christie

said. "I bet we could subpoena his optometrist."

At Mike's surprised look she confessed: "I watch a lot of *CSI*."

"No, this is good," he said. He leaned forward and put the drink on the table and rested his elbows on his knees. "You're on fire." For the second time that evening, she felt a little thrilled by his reaction to her.

She reached out and clinked her glass against his, then took a sip of her gin and tonic and let an ice cube swirl around in her mouth. It brought forth another memory: When she'd gone into labor (forget pacing and breathing and all the other crap the books said would manage the pain; her labor sent her rushing for the hospital after the first contraction, ready to sue the authors of her pregnancy book) Mike had shown up in his uniform. He'd looked so handsome and strong and solid that she'd almost changed her mind and told him she'd accept his proposal. Of course an hour later, as agony mounted in her body, he'd tried to give her an ice chip and she'd spat it back at him and cursed.

He'd hidden a smile—that had made her even more furious—and had gone to consult with the nurse about getting her epidural turned up.

"It's already pretty high," the nurse had said. She'd shrugged. "Sometimes they just don't take."

"Don't take?" Christie had felt like her head could do an *Exorcist*-style swivel.

"We'll give you a refund after the baby comes," the nurse had joked, and it was only another contraction that kept Christie from lunging out of bed at her.

But Mike had been wonderful. He'd rubbed her lower back with the perfect amount of firm pressure until she decided she couldn't stand to have him touching her, and then he'd distracted her with stupid criminal stories. He'd lied and told her she was almost ready to push a dozen times, and when the doctor had finally come into the room and snapped on gloves, Mike had leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

"Thank you," he'd said.

"Your fault," she'd muttered at him through clenched teeth. Her hair was sticking to her sweaty face, and the guttural groan that emerged

from her mouth seemed to have been loosened from her very soul.

Then the pain was gone, just like that.

"It's a boy!" Mike had shouted, and from the pride in his voice, she knew he'd secretly wanted one, even though he'd insisted he didn't have a preference. She'd heard a reedy, birdlike cry, and she'd fallen back against the pillows, tears of exhaustion streaming from her eyes. Never again, she'd thought.

They'd already decided on Henry for a boy. That was Christie's idea; the name sounded like it would belong to a smart, nice kid, someone who might play a musical instrument and do well in school and get a good job. She didn't have much to give her son, but at least she could give him the best possible start.

Mike had gone with the nurse to give Henry a bath, and Christie had fallen asleep. When she'd awoken, Mike was sitting in a chair next to her bed, staring down at the blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms.

At that moment, she knew she'd made the right decision in turning down his proposal. Mike had never once looked at her the way he was looking at Henry.

"Do you have any other ideas?" Mike asked. She blinked and focused on him again.

"Not yet, but I'll come up with some," she promised. She swallowed the ice chip and smiled. "I was just thinking about the day Henry was born."

"Or the night, since it was two A.M.," Mike said.

"Best and worst night of my life," she said.

"Yeah," Mike said. "You were a trouper."

Another compliment from him, she thought. The alcohol emboldened her to ask a question. "Did you ever resent giving me child support?" she asked.

Mike shook his head so quickly that she knew he was telling the truth. "Nope," he said. "It was our deal. And you had to get a two-bedroom so Henry would have space . . ."

"And I had to drop out of beauty school," she reminded him. "I couldn't stand the smell of the chemicals." She'd been on track to get her aesthetician's certificate two months before Henry would have been born. She would've been able to earn more money with it,

maybe even do freelance facials for rich women who tipped well. But once she'd left school and forfeited her tuition, she hadn't felt able to go back. Juggling work with partial custody of Henry and trying to have a life of her own consumed all her energy. There wasn't any room for school and studying.

Christie regarded Mike, knowing she might be about to cross a line. She'd complained about Jamie a few times, and Mike had put on his stoic cop face and nodded and said nothing, which had made the words dry up in her mouth. She'd always felt a little unclean afterward, denied the release she'd been seeking.

"It's just that Jamie said something today," Christie said.

Mike nodded impassively, as she'd expected him to.

"She called me a mooch, actually."

Mike frowned. "You sure about that?"

"Um, yeah," Christie said. "She was screaming at me. It was kind of hard to miss it."

"Huh," Mike said. He lifted his drink to his lips and took a sip.

"I just wanted to make sure you didn't feel that way," Christie said. "We've always had a good relationship"—well, *good* might be a stretch but the glow of the alcohol and their recent camaraderie softened the rough edges of the past—"and I don't want you to resent me."

"I don't," Mike said.

"Okay," Christie said. "And I know I told you I don't need any more child support. I mean it, Mike."

"Yeah," he said. He drained his drink before speaking again. "About that. I'm not getting paid any longer, because of the indictment."

"Assholes," Christie said. "They know how to kick a guy when he's down."

"So if you're sure, it would . . . help," he said.

She knew what it cost him to say those words. His pride was being stripped away in huge swaths, like sheets of old wallpaper.

"Hey," she said softly. She stood up and moved to sit next to him. "They're going to learn they were wrong. I bet you could even sue the city or something."

Mike nodded but didn't look convinced. "One thing I wanted to ask your guy Elroy is for some advice," he said. "I have to choose between

a public defender and the lawyer I've got now."

"Do you like the guy you already have?" Christie asked.

"*Like* is a little strong," Mike said. "But he seems like he knows what he's doing. And the public defender would be a crapshoot. Most of them are really good, but what if the one I get isn't? I mean, what do you think?"

"I'll ask Elroy right away," Christie said. "But I'd say if the guy you already have is good, you should stick with him." She was surprised that Mike was asking her advice, since people didn't usually come to her for it.

"He's expensive, though," Mike said. "Maybe it's not worth it."

"Hey!" she said. "You deserve the best, Mike, no matter what it costs!" She reached out and put a hand on his broad shoulder, feeling the hard muscles beneath her touch. He had a heavy five o'clock shadow, and she wondered if he still shaved twice a day, like he used to when they were together. He'd been too macho to use the Calvin Klein cologne she'd given him for his birthday long ago, but whatever drugstore body wash he was using now smelled really good.

"Anyway," he said, getting up, "I should get going."

"Okay," she said. She pushed herself to a standing position, noticing the couch under her hand still felt warm from Mike's body heat. He'd always seemed to run a degree or so hotter than other people. It used to drive her crazy when he slept over; she'd end up kicking off all the covers to compensate.

She walked him to the door, but before he opened it, she impulsively leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Get the best lawyer," she said. "Whatever it costs. You didn't do anything wrong. You're innocent!"

His eyes met hers, and she felt something arc between them. She held his gaze, leaning forward slightly, feeling her lips part.

"Mom?"

Mike turned away from her as Henry called out from his bedroom.

"Could you get me a glass of milk?" Henry asked.

"He's old enough to get it himself," Mike said. He cleared his throat. "Let me know when your boss wants to meet, okay?"

Christie nodded. She felt a little dazed. Had she really been about to

kiss Mike?

“And remember David’s mom is coming to pick Henry up tomorrow morning,” Mike said. “They’re going to baseball camp this week. You should remind him to pack tonight. Tell him not to forget his new cleats.”

“Right,” Christie said absently.

Mike gave her a little wave and stepped out, shutting the door behind him. Christie stayed in place for a moment. She couldn’t hear his footsteps going down the hallway and she wondered if he was standing just outside the door, gathering himself. She stayed very still, afraid of disturbing whatever thought process he was in the midst of.

She’d been too young and immature to appreciate him when they’d first met. But you sometimes heard stories about couples reuniting after years or decades apart. It could happen.

She could tell Mike’s marriage was in trouble. On the night that they’d shared pizza, Mike had indicated Jamie wasn’t supporting him—at least that’s what Christie had thought he’d been going to say before he cut himself off. Christie wondered if that was the only reason he’d begun to open up to her, or if there were deeper fault lines in his marriage, a hidden volcano on the verge of eruption. With so many kids running around, it would be tough to ever have sex. And Mike had always liked sex—when they were together, he’d wanted her every time he saw her.

She also suspected Jamie was a little jealous of her. She’d seen the way Jamie looked at her at one of Henry’s birthday parties several years back. They’d just cut the cake when one of the balloons tied to Henry’s chair popped. At the sudden noise, Christie had clutched Mike’s biceps and given a little shriek. Jamie had been pregnant with Eloise, and wearing one of those shapeless shift dresses, while Christie was in a tank top and tight jeans, and Jamie’s eyes had run over her from head to toe when Christie walked in.

Jamie had shot her a look, and Christie had let go of Mike’s biceps.

A moment later Jamie was fluttering around, cleaning up wrapping paper from the presents Henry had opened and serving ice cream. Jamie sure put on a sweet face in public, but now Christie knew what she was really like. Jamie had pushed her out of the house the night

Mike came home after the shooting, and when Mike and Henry had had their fight, Jamie had wrapped her arms around them, deliberately leaving Christie standing alone. And at the Christmas pageant when Christie had worn the leather skirt, Jamie had probably been gossiping about her with the other snooty wives.

Who knew what Jamie said to Mike when they were alone? Christie thought, feeling her face grow hot. Maybe Jamie was whispering in his ear, poisoning Mike's feelings toward her. Maybe that was why Mike had always kept her at arm's length. Until now.

Christie reached for the phone and called Elroy. He picked up on the first ring.

"Listen, about the case against Mike . . ." she began, but Elroy cut her off.

"I was about to call you," he said.

"Do you have something already?" she asked.

"Maybe," he said. "But first I want to go back to the scene with Mike and have him walk us through it."

"Is tomorrow good?" Christie suggested.

"Sure," Elroy said. "Three o'clock?"

Christie thought for a moment. "How about six?" she countered.

"We just need to wrap up before it gets dark," Elroy said. "But that's fine."

If they met at 6:00 it would be natural to suggest she and Mike grab a beer afterward. They could talk about the case. Henry would be at sleepover camp, so her apartment would be empty. Maybe she'd ask Elroy for a ride downtown and Mike could drive her home.

Jamie's angry, red face flashed in her mind, but Christie thought, *You don't deserve him.*

Chapter Fourteen

WHERE WAS MIKE? HE'D left two hours ago to take Henry out to buy new baseball cleats, since Henry had outgrown his old ones, before dropping him at Christie's. He should have been back by now.

The buzzer on the oven sounded, and Jamie grabbed a pot holder and pulled out the tray of sizzling pork chops, then left the pan to cool on the stovetop. The kids were busy at the kitchen table, pulling apart rolls that came out of a can and arranging them on a baking sheet. And miracle of miracles, they were working in harmony.

"Remember to leave a little space between them," Jamie said.

She put on a pot of water to boil for mac 'n' cheese and pulled a bag of salad out of the refrigerator. Tonight they'd have a real family dinner, their first in a while. A shrink would probably say she was acting like one of those women who compulsively cleaned or exercised as a way of creating a pleasing superficial picture and avoiding dealing with their inner turmoil. But she didn't care. One nice dinner with her family, that was all she wanted. Mike at the head of the table, bowing his head and saying grace in his deep voice. The children pink-cheeked from the sun, their hair combed and hands folded. A basket of hot rolls being passed. An hour of normalcy. Was that too much to ask?

She'd been overly ambitious today. After her fight with Christie and the visit with Ritchie and Sandy, she'd bundled the kids into the minivan and headed to the store. Jamie had always been a careful shopper, clipping coupons and substituting generic for name brands, but today she'd splurged on three perfect pork chops—one for Mike, one for her, and one for the kids to take turns rejecting—from the butcher. At the last minute she'd added a six-pack of Budweiser to the shopping cart, so she and Mike could have a beer or two together. She'd turn on the sprinklers for the kids to run through, and they could

catch fireflies. She and Mike could sit on the front steps, and she'd tell him how lonely she'd felt lately. She'd be the one to reach out, to try to break down whatever had arisen between them. Maybe they'd even make love for the first time in weeks, and he'd move out of the basement and back into their bed. She missed looking into Mike's eyes. She missed holding his hand, and dozing in his lap while he watched television.

Henry was leaving for a week of baseball camp tomorrow morning, and Sandy had offered to watch the other kids so Jamie and Mike could have a date. Maybe she'd suggest they do it tomorrow night. They didn't have to go anywhere special—they could even stay home together and watch a movie, like they used to back when they first met.

"Can I put on the frosting?" Eloise asked.

"These are biscuits, honey," Jamie said. "There is no frosting."

Without thinking, she reached to move the metal pan of pork chops with her bare hands. "Ouch!" She rushed to the sink to run her burned thumb and index finger under cold water.

Jamie heard a clatter and turned around to see the tray of biscuits bouncing off the floor. It landed dough side down, naturally.

"You broke it!" Eloise shouted at Sam.

"It's fine," Jamie said. She ran over and picked up the tray. She didn't look at the crumbs and bits of dirt sticking to the dough; she didn't want to think about how long it had been since she'd mopped her kitchen floor. "I'm going to show you a trick."

She took a sharp knife and sliced the very top layer of dough off each biscuit. "They'll be just as good," she promised as she popped the tray into the oven. "Emily, can you make the table look pretty? Maybe pick some flowers from the backyard so we can put them in a vase."

The backyard was a rectangle of grass bordered with a hodgepodge of flowers, since every year Jamie and the kids picked out an assorted packet, dumped it into a hole, and covered it back up—that was the extent of her gardening—but Jamie hoped Emily would be able to find a zinnia or something.

Mike's beer! She'd put it in the freezer to chill and had nearly

forgotten it. She pulled out the six-pack, glad to see no bottles had exploded, and set it in the refrigerator.

What next? She ran into the dining room and searched through the scarred old armoire she'd inherited from her parents' house for a tablecloth. She found a green one they usually used at Christmas and decided it would have to do. She swept the junk off the table and into an old grocery bag and set it in the corner. She laid out plates and silverware and plastic cups for the kids and glass beer steins for herself and Mike. She dumped the salad into a wooden bowl and took a bottle of Kraft ranch out of the refrigerator and put them side by side on the table. She filled a pitcher with ice water and brought it to the table, too. She didn't want to have to be jumping up and down during this meal, constantly fetching things.

She caught sight of the clock on the stove and frowned. It was after six o'clock. She reached for the cordless phone on the counter and dialed Mike's cell, but her call went straight to voice mail.

"It's me," she said, trying to keep her voice light and cheerful. "Dinner's almost ready, so . . . hopefully you're on your way home."

She felt a little light-headed and realized she hadn't eaten anything other than a quick bowl of cereal today. She opened the oven door and checked the biscuits. They looked golden brown and smelled out of this world. She pulled out the tray and took one off, biting into it and savoring the fluffy sweetness.

"I want one!" Eloise cried.

"You'll ruin your dinner," Jamie said, her full mouth taking away her authority.

"You had one!" Eloise protested.

"I just had a bite," Jamie said. "Just to test them and make sure they were good."

"But I'm hungry!" Eloise wailed. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I want one, too," Sam said, employing logic as his weapon. "It's not fair for you to try them and not give us any."

Emily came through the back door, her shoes tracking mud all over the mat and floor. She was holding an enormous branch from a hydrangea bush.

"I need a vase," she said.

"I want a cinnamon roll!" Eloise cried. She was gearing up for a full-on tantrum now, her little chest heaving.

"They're not cinnamon rolls, they're biscuits," Sam told her, sounding like a miniature professor.

"Just one bite each," Jamie said. She broke the rest of the roll into two pieces and gave one to Sam and one to Eloise.

"Hers is bigger," Sam pointed out.

"Why don't I get one?" Emily cried.

"We're just testing them," Eloise informed her, spitting crumbs across the table.

"She's gross," Emily said. "Don't talk with your mouth full!"

"Fine!" Jamie said. She broke another roll into thirds and gave a chunk to each child. "Everyone happy?"

She heard a sizzle and spun around to see the pot of water bubbling over. She reduced the heat, dumped in the macaroni noodles, and gave them a stir.

"I don't like mac 'n' cheese anymore," Eloise said.

Jamie muttered a curse under her breath. "Can we just have a nice dinner? Please?"

Where was Mike?

She called his cell phone again, but he didn't answer. She didn't leave a message this time.

He didn't show up for another hour. By then, the pork chops were cold, the salad was wilted, and the rolls were all gone. Jamie was on her second beer, her appetite having vanished. The kids were watching TV again; by this point she was beyond feeling guilty.

"Hey," Mike said as he walked through the door. She heard it slam heavily behind him. A moment later he came into the dining room.

"Did you guys already eat?" he asked.

Jamie let silence be her answer.

"I called you," she said. "A couple times."

He took his phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen. "It's dead."

"Where were you?" she asked.

"Driving around," he said.

Why didn't you want to come home to us? Jamie thought. True, he

hadn't known about the special dinner, but Mike seemed to be taking every excuse to be away from them lately. No—away from her.

She stood up and began stacking the dirty plates and carrying them to the sink.

"I went to see Ritchie today," she said. She didn't bother to bring up the subject gently, as she'd originally planned. She was too angry. "He wants to testify for you. He'll tell them you're not a racist, and when they see how badly he's hurt they'll get it—the jury will know you were suffering."

Mike didn't react immediately. Then he said, "I told you I didn't want to ask Ritchie to do it."

"We have no idea what's going to happen during the trial!" she cried. "We have to have a strong defense!"

"Did it ever occur to you I might be found not guilty?" he asked. "Did you ever think, hey, maybe we should get Ritchie to testify that my husband doesn't react unless there's a real threat, instead of trying to trot out my black friend to prove I'm not a racist?"

"I can't afford to think that way, Mike! I don't know what kind of people are going to be on the jury. We've got to save you any way we can!"

He shook his head. "Is that where you were today? Seeing Ritchie? Did you even have to go to the doctor?"

"Yes, I lied to you, okay? Because I knew you'd never ask him!" Why was he being so obtuse? She blasted the sink water, rinsing off the dishes and stacking them in the dishwasher. The wheel got stuck, and when she jerked it the whole rack came out and crashed down onto her bare foot.

"Ouch!" she said. "Why haven't you fixed that?"

"I did," he said. "Twice. You keep pulling it too hard."

He came over, bent down next to her, and picked up the rack, and that's when she saw the pink mark on his cheek. It was very close to the corner of his mouth.

"What is that?" she asked. She reached out a finger and touched it.

"What?" he asked.

"Oh my God," she said, staring down at the sticky smudge on her fingertip. "Christie kissed you." She jerked back, scrambling to her

feet. Mike jumped up and reached for her shoulders, forcing her to look at him.

"She kissed me good-bye on the cheek," he said. "After I dropped off Henry."

She could smell alcohol on his breath. "And you had a drink with her!" she cried. "That's why you were so late."

"Just one . . ." Mike said.

His voice was drowned out by the roaring in her head. She was shaking so hard she felt as if she'd implode. She'd done everything possible to hold their family together, while Mike was off with his ex-girlfriend. He'd lied to her, too, even if it was just a lie of omission. Christie had been overly flirtatious with Mike before. Even Mike had agreed that sometimes she tried to cross boundaries. Was that what had happened tonight?

Jamie began to cry and pushed him away.

"Fuck you," she said. "Our family is falling apart and you're out drinking with your ex." Her heart was pounding and her breath felt raggedy. She could still see a hint of pink on his cheek and she wanted to slap it off.

"Why are you so mad?" Mike looked incredulous. "Because of one drink?"

"It wasn't just one," Jamie said. "Was it?"

"What do you mean? I told you—"

"No," she said. "*Christie* told me. You had pizza and beer with her, too."

"Give me a break, Jamie. We talked, okay? That was all. We were talking about the case. Can't I even talk to her?"

Not when you don't talk to me, Jamie thought. A hurricane had swept through her body, leaving it bruised and battered. Her head was so muddled and heavy it was impossible for her to think about anything but the terrible smudge of pink on her finger.

"All you do is sit in the basement," Jamie said. "It's obvious you don't want to be around me. You won't even sleep with me anymore!"

"So everything's my fault," Mike said. His voice was so flat it was almost worse than if he were yelling. At least if he were yelling she'd know he still cared. "I'm guilty of everything, according to you. Good

thing you're not on the jury."

He stormed out of the room, and she heard his heavy footsteps going upstairs. Then there was silence until Mike retraced his path downstairs and into the kitchen, where Jamie had slumped onto the dirty floor, next to the stupid broken dishwasher.

He was holding a duffel bag in each hand.

"When did you stop believing in me?" he asked. She blinked and looked up at him. His gaze was steely, but it flickered away a second after she met his eyes. It was as if he could hardly bear to look at her.

"Nothing happened with Christie," he said. "Nothing ever has."

"This isn't just about her," Jamie said. "You're not the only one in trouble. You abandoned me, Mike!"

"You're right," he said. "This isn't about her at all."

Then he took his bags and left the room.

"Where are you going?" she called out, but the only answer she heard was the slamming of the front door.

Chapter Fifteen

THE SKY CYCLED THROUGH darkness, then began to turn light again as Tabby entered her second day of labor. Lou leaned against the fence, her mind drifting. She'd meant to check in with Jamie last night, but she'd been so focused on Tabby she'd forgotten to call. Jamie had probably been too busy to chat anyway. Lou hadn't realized until she'd moved in how exhausting it was to constantly care for small children, and she wondered how Jamie found the strength to do it day after day—to cook meals, clean up endless spills, and referee squabbles, to ease socks onto wiggling little feet and cajole reluctant kids to change into pajamas and brush their teeth and get into bed, to read storybooks and throw in a load of laundry before racing back upstairs to warn the kids to stop talking and go to sleep, to do the hundreds of other things Jamie did every single day, so reflexively she probably didn't even have to think about it. A mother's love could power you better than any race car's motor, Lou thought.

"Doesn't Mike help with this stuff?" Lou had asked Jamie right after she moved in.

"Usually, yeah," Jamie had said. She'd been trying to wash Eloise's hands, which had inspired a shrieking fit in Eloise, who'd had a temporary tattoo applied to her wrist and was worried it would wash off. Jamie had finally rubbed a wet washcloth against Eloise's palms, made a game out of counting her teeth while she brushed them, and picked up and carried Eloise to bed when the little girl thrashed.

"We generally divide and conquer," Jamie had said. "Mike reads to Emily and Sam, or he tidies up downstairs while I do the bedtime routine. I'm just trying to give him a little break now, because of . . . everything."

Now Lou wondered if that was the only reason. It hadn't escaped her notice that Mike had been sleeping in the basement, or that a few

days earlier, when Jamie had been entering the kitchen and Mike had been exiting it, he had pulled away abruptly, as if he didn't want to touch her even in passing.

It was obvious Mike was angry with her sister. But why? Lou wondered.

She puzzled over it for a few minutes, then gave up. She certainly was no relationship expert—just look at her history. The thought led her to wonder what Donny was doing at the moment. He and Mary Alice might be enjoying a late dinner, maybe pasta primavera or one of Donny's other specialties. They'd probably opened a nice bottle of Chardonnay, and were talking about the upcoming wedding. She needed to send Donny an email, to see if he wanted to have coffee. She hoped Mary Alice didn't mind if they stayed friends. Now that Lou was gone from the quiet, lovely apartment, she found herself reminiscing about all the things she'd liked most about Donny: the way he turned on classical music when he got ready in the morning and could always name the composer, the way he lined up his shoes when he came home from work, the left always touching the right, like they were a married couple settling in for the night.

She wondered again what had kept her from wanting to stay with him. He didn't have any glaring flaws, so it had to have been her fault. She'd hit a limit with her two previous boyfriends, as well—something that kept her from turning the corner to real commitment. She'd even seen a shrink after Jamie suggested it.

"There isn't anything wrong in talking to someone about things that you're struggling with," Jamie had said. "I think it's kind of heroic, actually. Not many people are willing to do hard work on themselves."

"Heroic?" Lou had said. "You're giving this the hard sell, aren't you?"

Because Lou had returned to college to study zoology, she was eligible for cheap on-campus counseling. It wasn't like she had any pressing social obligation tying up her Thursday nights anyway. She'd made an appointment through the student center and gone in for a session. Lou figured they'd chat for a bit and maybe she'd get some sort of prescription—she wasn't sure for what—but it hadn't happened that way. The shrink had merely smiled at her, taken out a new legal pad and a freshly sharpened pencil, and sat down across from Lou.

Uh-oh, Lou had thought, feeling as if she was in for more than she'd bargained for.

"Tell me about your family when you were growing up," the therapist had begun. She had close-cropped brown hair and slightly slanted brown eyes and perfectly manicured fingernails. She wore a chocolate brown wrap dress and matching heels, and despite her warm smile, she intimidated Lou.

"Growing up?" Lou had echoed.

"Yes," the therapist had said.

So Lou had talked a little bit about Jamie and how they'd shared a room. She'd mentioned how she'd walked to school and had swum the backstroke for the neighborhood pool's swim team for a few years.

"Were you close to your parents?" the shrink had asked.

"Sure," Lou had said.

"What sorts of things did you do together?"

"Oh, you know," Lou had said. "The usual."

The therapist had set her pencil down on her pad, folded her hands, and waited. That was the thing about shrinks, Lou thought. They got paid by the hour, so they were perfectly comfortable with long silences. Silences didn't bother Lou, either, but paying money for nothing did, so she tried to come up with something.

"Cereal," Lou had finally said. "Jamie and I each got to pick a new box of cereal every week. Whatever we wanted—Lucky Charms, Cocoa Puffs. That was breakfast every day."

"Mmm," the therapist had murmured, and Lou had hidden a laugh, wondering if they learned how to make that noise in shrink school or from watching television.

"When something upset you in school, did you talk to your mom or your dad about it?" the therapist had asked after a long pause.

"Um," Lou had said. "Well, I guess I mostly talked to Jamie. But I don't get upset all that easily."

The therapist had scribbled something on the pad. "Was your mother a stay-at-home mom?"

This Lou knew the answer to: "Yes."

"Do you think she enjoyed doing it?"

Lou had frowned. "It's hard to say." She'd realized she was

squirming and she tried to be still. The therapist was waiting for her to elaborate, so she might as well.

"I actually don't have a lot of memories of my mother," she'd said. "She died when I was twelve, so . . ."

The therapist had looked up suddenly. "What do you remember?" she'd asked.

"Almost nothing," Lou had said. The therapist had waited. "Nothing, really."

The therapist had just nodded and written something else in her pad.

"Is that strange?" Lou had asked. That was the thing about therapy; it made you curious about yourself. Which led to more sessions and more money for the therapists. Sneaky, that therapy.

"I wouldn't say strange," the shrink had said. "Sometimes we block out memories that can cause us pain. It's the mind's way of protecting ourselves."

"Like selective amnesia?" Lou had asked.

"In a way," the therapist had said. She seemed to have a Ph.D. in vague answers.

"Anyway, most of my memories are of Jamie," Lou had said. "I have lots of them."

"Your sister sounds special to you," the therapist had said.

"Yeah," Lou had said. "She is."

They'd talked awhile longer, and the therapist had suggested Lou come back next week, and Lou had nodded politely and canceled the appointment the following day. And that was that for her flirtation with therapy.

Tabby climbed out of the pool and came over to stand near Lou, her muscular trunk stretching through the fence. Lou reached out and stroked it. An elephant's trunk was magical—strong enough to uproot a small tree, and dexterous enough to pluck a single blade of grass. Lou thought Tabby might resume pacing, but instead, she stayed by Lou.

Lou looked into the beautiful creature's eyes, which seemed endlessly wise, and she kept a hand on Tabby's soft, rough trunk.

"Everything is going to be okay," Lou promised, hoping with her

whole heart it would be true.

Chapter Sixteen

CHRISTIE WONDERED IF A tiny piece of her had loved Mike all along. Years ago, she'd been having dinner with a friend who was divorced, and her friend had confessed she hated seeing parts of her ex in their children—she cringed when they talked about going to his alma mater for college, and she let her son grow his hair long, because her ex had always worn his in a military cut. But Christie had never minded seeing Mike's expressions cross Henry's face or watching his hair darken until it perfectly matched his father's. Had that been a clue her feelings for Mike had always been murkier than she'd believed? Sure, they'd had their share of arguments through the years, but those differences had tapered away until they'd stopped altogether a couple of years ago. Christie couldn't even remember the last time she'd had a disagreement with Mike.

Early on, of course, there had been many. Immediately after Henry was born, when Christie was still aching and dazed, Mike had infuriated her by asking if she'd breast-feed (his timing so exquisitely bad). When she'd said no, he'd tucked a pro-breast-feeding pamphlet into Henry's diaper bag with a Post-it that said, "Read me, please." Christie had torn the pamphlet in two and returned it to the diaper bag, and it had eventually disappeared. But Christie had conceded to some of Mike's wishes. She'd let Mike have Henry baptized, and she'd gone to the ceremony, even though she typically never set foot in churches except for weddings, and even then she sometimes skipped the ceremony and headed straight to the reception. The service was the first time she'd met Mike's parents and siblings, and she'd breathed a sigh of relief that she wouldn't have to sit around with them at holiday meals—his mother was a ninny, the brothers talked over one another in a nonstop game of one-upmanship, and the whole group seemed loud and larger than life, except for the father, who kept sneaking out

to his car to turn on the radio and listen to, inexplicably, weather updates.

Christie glanced at the kitchen clock. She'd texted Mike that morning to let him know Henry had gotten safely off to sleepaway camp and to confirm the meeting with Elroy. Mike had responded immediately, saying he'd be at the spot of the shooting at the appointed time.

Now only an hour remained until she'd see him again. She felt a tingle in her lower belly and she went to get dressed in the outfit she'd chosen after some deliberation—her most flattering jeans and a simple pink cotton top. She didn't go overboard with her makeup, either. She wanted to connect with Mike honestly. If he was having serious issues with Jamie, as she suspected, she'd be a friend for him. And, someday, maybe more. She wondered how Mike felt about her now. Maybe that was why Jamie had been so awful to her; maybe she felt threatened. Christie felt the ire rise inside her as she thought again about how Jamie had degraded her.

From now on, she was going to interact with Mike directly. That's how it should have been all along. How had Jamie managed to worm her way between them, with her tight-lipped, superior smiles?

Christie looked in the mirror as she applied a clear lip gloss. There definitely were lines around her eyes, spreading outward like cracks in a mirror, and her lips seemed a little thinner, too. Aging was like climbing aboard a train—it started gradually, the scenery outside your window changing so slowly you weren't sure if everything else around you was shifting or if it was you that was moving, then it accelerated suddenly, catching you off guard. Maybe that was part of the reason most of the things she'd wanted a decade ago had lost their luster. Trips to Vegas and Cancún were expensive, partying even more than two nights a week left her exhausted and haggard, and living in a crummy apartment no longer seemed as if it was a stepping-stone to something better; it was pathetic. The truth was, she'd been scarred by Simon and Jim, and by the guys before them, too, like the one she'd married who'd had a dozen texts from other women on his iPhone when she scrolled through it a week after their wedding. Then there were the guys who'd had sex with her, given a satisfied grunt,

rolled over, and gone to sleep without a word. Their faces blended together, all of the men who'd taken her for granted or used or mistreated her.

She applied a single squirt of Bobbi Brown's Beach perfume to the hollow of her throat and went downstairs to wait for Elroy in the lobby. He pulled up a few minutes later in his ancient Volvo, and she got in the passenger's side, brushing fast-food wrappers off the seat and hoping there weren't any lingering ketchup smears before sitting down.

"Mike meeting us there?" he asked.

Christie nodded.

"I got that Mace you wanted," Elroy said. He gestured to the glove compartment, and Christie opened it. Inside was a small canister with a nozzle. Christie took off the cap, and Elroy nearly drove off the road. "Mind not aiming that thing at me? I got you industrial strength."

"Sorry," Christie said, replacing the cap.

It would be intensely satisfying to wait in the darkness outside Jim's house, biding her time until he took out the trash. Bam! She'd squirt the entire canister into his face. She pictured him in his boxers and bare feet—they were probably stark white and hairy—writhing helplessly on the ground, tears streaming from his eyes. She'd never asked Elroy what happened to the video, but she hoped Jim's wife had seen it, and had run far away from him.

"Got a few new cases," Elroy said. "Up for starting again tomorrow?"

"Sure," Christie said. She ran her fingers over the cool metal of the can. It would never be out of her reach.

Elroy cut down a side street, then took a sharp right, following a path to downtown that Christie had never before taken. "Is this a shortcut?" she asked.

Elroy nodded. "At this time of day, with traffic, it's usually the quickest. If it wasn't rush hour, I'd take the bridge."

"Are you one of those people who can drive anywhere if you've been there once?" Christie asked, thinking of Lou.

"Guess you could say that," Elroy said.

Christie pulled down the passenger's-side visor to check herself in the mirror, suddenly feeling nervous about seeing Mike again, which

was equal parts silly and thrilling. A picture of a woman was clipped to the visor. She had curly blond hair and a big smile.

"Who's this?" Christie asked.

Elroy kept his eyes on the road. "My wife," he said.

"You're married?" Christie asked. Somehow it surprised her; would a married guy drive a car full of fast-food wrappers and dress like that?

"Ex-wife," Elroy mumbled.

"Sorry," Christie said. Something clicked into place; she thought she knew why Elroy had taken on this job. "Did she cheat on you?" Christie blurted.

"No." He shook his head.

Christie frowned; she would've bet money that she was right. They drove another mile, with Elroy expertly weaving in and out of traffic, then he broke the silence.

"I cheated on her," Elroy said. He cleared his throat. "And I lost her."

Christie sensed the pain contained in those simple words, and she reached out and touched his hand. Sweet Elroy, with his courtly manners and cowboy hat, had probably messed up the best thing that had ever happened to him.

"Anyway," Elroy said, his voice businesslike now, "this week we've got a wife who found a pair of panties in her husband's car. He tried to blame it on the parking lot attendant at his office, said he must've been having a little fun during his break, but she knows. He's in a bowling league on Thursday nights, so you can catch him there."

"Is she sure he really bowls?" Christie asked.

Elroy nodded. "She followed him once. She did as much as she could on her own before calling us. Then we've got a bride-to-be who's worried about what went on at the bachelor party. The wedding's in six days, so we need to move fast. In this case we'll need you to try to get the story out of the groom if he doesn't come on to you."

"I'm ready," Christie said. She closed the visor, sealing away the photo of Elroy's ex-wife. She wondered if he regretted telling her.

They rode in silence until they reached the scene of the shooting and she saw Mike. Elroy pulled into the parking lot and turned off the

ignition. Mike didn't seem to notice their arrival; he was standing with his hands in his pockets, staring at the ground, at a memorial of dying flowers, a teddy bear, and a spray-painted RIP JOSE across the pavement.

Christie opened the car door and hurried toward him. "Hi," she said. She turned around and waited for Elroy to approach. "This is Elroy. Elroy, this is Mike, my—" She paused. In the past, she'd introduced Mike as "my son's father." But today, something made her say "my good friend."

She saw Mike smile at her, as if he understood the shift in the relationship.

"Thanks for coming," Mike said. He reached out and shook Elroy's hand.

Elroy nodded. "Can you walk me through what happened?" he said. "Then maybe we can go talk."

Mike nodded. "Sure," he said, although Christie saw a white line form around his lips, vivid against his tan skin. She hadn't thought about how difficult this would be for him. She wondered whether Mike had returned to this spot since the shooting.

"We, ah, entered from this angle," Mike said. He took a few steps away from them and twisted to the right. "Jay was ahead of me." Mike pointed. "And the, ah, the teenager was over there. When it happened, I mean. About where the flowers are."

"Okay," Elroy said. "Just take me through it, nice and slow, from the beginning." He didn't write anything down or videotape it, but Christie saw how carefully he was watching. He was motionless, his eyes fixed on Mike.

"We got the call and pulled in. We left the cruiser there." Mike gestured to a spot near Elroy's battered Volvo. "Jay, the guy I was partnered with, he started running," Mike said. "He pulled out his pepper spray and held it up." Mike's hand went to his belt and he demonstrated. Mike seemed almost in a trance now, his words a soft monotone. "That's about when I got hit. I spun around. When I turned back, Jay was ahead of me. He's yelling for the guy to freeze, then I see the motion to grab a weapon. I see the gun come up and I draw and shoot."

Elroy nodded. Christie held her breath. Mike was staring straight ahead, to where Jose had fallen. She watched as Mike slowly approached that spot, then got down on his knees and touched a finger to one of the dying red roses. Christie thought she saw his lips move.

Elroy gave him a moment. "Let's go through it again," he said. "Christie, can you take Jay's spot?"

Elroy went over and stood next to the memorial. He looked around, and Christie saw him taking in the parked cars nearby, the building behind them, the road running parallel. Elroy was odd, but something in his expression told Christie he was brilliant.

While Christie walked over to where Jay had been standing, an old car that needed a new muffler slowed down as it cruised by the parking lot. The young guy at the wheel wore reflective sunglasses, but Christie thought he was staring at them. When she looked back, though, the car turned the corner and disappeared.

"Okay," Elroy said. "Let's do it."

He took them through the scene three more times, like they were actors preparing for a play.

"Why isn't he saying anything?" Mike asked Christie at one point while Elroy squatted down in the position Jose had held at the time of the shooting, shielding his eyes as he stared in the direction Mike and Jay had come from.

"He's busy thinking," Christie said.

Finally Elroy straightened up and came toward them, his gait in his old cowboy boots as unhurried as ever. "You guys know Jay worked in California before coming here, right?" Elroy asked.

"No," Mike said. "Actually I didn't. I barely talked to the guy. He couldn't shut up, so I always tried to tune him out."

"Well, it's not like the prosecutor is going to volunteer any information to you," Elroy said. "Anyway, he put in three years on the force. I talked to his old partner. He couldn't say enough good about the man."

Christie stared at Elroy. By now she knew him well enough to know more was coming.

"Then I talked to another guy on the force. Off the record, of

course,” Elroy said. “He wasn’t so keen on Jay.”

Mike’s expression transformed; his eyes turned bright and his face grew alert. “What’d he say? You’ve got something, don’t you?”

“They pulled over a car once and Jay missed seeing a bag of coke on the passenger’s floor,” Elroy said. “Guy had a piece in the glove compartment, too. He didn’t reach for it, but they never would’ve found it if the other officer hadn’t spotted the coke. Thing was, Jay was standing on that side of the car. He was closer.”

Christie felt a flush of excitement. “I’m telling you, there could be something wrong with his eyes!”

Elroy quashed that hope. “He would’ve undergone a vision test regularly to be a cop.”

“But he missed seeing something important,” Mike said.

“That he did,” Elroy agreed.

Mike closed his eyes for a second and swallowed hard. “You don’t know what this means to me.”

“Hey, it’s not going to win you the case,” Elroy said. “There’s still the issue of the missing gun.”

Christie caught motion out of the corner of her eye and saw the same old car driving past the parking lot again. She reached into her purse for her Mace and closed her fingers around the cool metal.

“Maybe we should go somewhere else to talk?” she suggested.

She saw Mike follow her eyes and take in the car. “Yeah,” he said. “Probably a good idea.”

“You want to follow us?” Elroy suggested.

“Actually,” Mike said, “I took the Metro here. I, ah, had to turn in my cruiser a while ago.”

“So hop in,” Elroy said. Christie felt as if she couldn’t get into Elroy’s Volvo quickly enough. The old car was still there, idling at the stop sign. There were three guys in it now. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought there had been only one previously.

Maybe the guys had known Jose. Maybe they’d recognized Mike.

She and Mike and Elroy all climbed into the car without another word, and Christie locked her door.

“So where to?” Elroy asked, starting the engine and pulling out the exit that would put them farthest away from the idling car.

“Why don’t we head back toward my place?” Christie said. “We can get a drink around there.”

Mike kept twisting around to look out the back window, and Elroy’s eyes flicked to the rearview mirror every minute or so. “Are they behind us?” Christie asked.

“Nope,” Elroy said, and she released the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding.

They were all quiet for the rest of the drive. They found a pub in Arlington and got a table for three. Elroy ordered a vanilla milk shake along with French fries—Christie didn’t want to think about his cholesterol—and Mike asked for a Coke.

“No beer?” Christie asked. She’d imagined them having a cocktail together, then maybe moving on to dinner. The table was a disappointment, too; she’d been hoping for a booth.

Mike shook his head. “I’m not drinking anymore.”

“Since when?” Christie asked.

“Since now,” he said. “I want my head to be clear.”

He turned to Elroy. “So what happens next?” Mike asked. “And man, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. I don’t know what your hourly rate is—”

Elroy held up a hand. “You’re not paying me anything,” he said. “Truth is, I kind of like being back on a real case. So, the next step is I want you to write everything down. I know you’ve done it already, but you were probably defensive before, right?”

“Yeah, but I told the truth,” Mike said.

“That’s not what I meant,” Elroy said. “You were probably just focusing on your actions related to the shooting—what you saw, what happened to you. I need you to look at things with a wider lens. Take time to really go through it all like a movie, frame by frame. Look at things in the corners of the picture. Write down every single detail, even things that don’t seem important.”

“Okay,” Mike said. “I can do that.” He hung his head, and Christie barely heard his next words: “I’ve been doing that every night, pretty much.”

Christie’s cell phone buzzed in her purse, but she ignored it.

“I’m going to do some more checking in the meantime,” Elroy said.

"Are you going to look more deeply into Jay's background?" Christie said.

"Yup," Elroy said. "That's top on the list."

Mike's cell phone rang a moment after Christie's stopped.

Jamie, Christie thought. Did she know they were together?

"I better get this," Mike said. He answered and listened for a moment. His forehead creased, and he looked up at Christie. Something in his expression made her heart drop.

"When did this happen? Can I talk to him?"

Not Jamie, Christie thought. It was worse. It was Henry.

"That's ridic— You know what? Fine. I'll be there as soon as I can," Mike said.

He hung up and got to his feet in one fluid motion. "Henry got in a fight at baseball camp," he said.

"Is he okay?" Christie cried. She'd kill anyone who'd hurt her baby.

"He's the one who started the fight," Mike said. He reached into his wallet, extracted a twenty, and put it down on the table. "He's getting thrown out of camp. We need to go pick him up."

"What? He's only been there a day. What could have happened?" Christie slung her purse over her shoulder. "We can take my car. It's in the lot at my apartment building."

Elroy stood up, reaching for his cowboy hat. "I'll drive you there."

"Thank you," Christie said. She impulsively reached out and gave him a hug. He was such an odd, dear man. The thought came to her that he was perhaps the only man in her life who could become a friend. Other than Mike, of course.

"Did they tell you anything else?" Christie asked.

Mike shook his head. "Henry wouldn't have done this unless someone provoked him. It had to have been about me," he said.

"Not necessarily," Christie said. "It could have been about a girl. It could have been about anything!"

Mike just shook his head again.

"Hey," Christie said. "We're going to get through this together, okay? We'll go help our son now, and then Elroy's going to get these stupid charges dropped."

"Okay," Mike said, looking at her with such gratitude that her heart

seemed to swell inside her chest.

...

Ever since the previous evening, when Mike had packed his bags and left, Jamie had felt numb, unable to eat or think clearly. Shock, she thought, looking down at the slim gold band on her left hand. When Mike had slipped it onto her finger all those years ago, staring at her with his intense eyes, so handsome her knees had gone rubbery, she'd decided she'd never remove it. And she hadn't, even when her fingers had swelled during pregnancy and it had bitten into her flesh.

Six months ago—no, three!—she would've said she had a great marriage. Not a perfect one, but a solid union, something that would endure through the years, weathering bumps, growing sweeter when one of their kids got married and she and Mike danced cheek to cheek at the wedding, and when they looked down at the face of their first grandchild.

Now she had no idea where Mike had gone, or if their marriage was shattered beyond repair.

Jamie walked over to the kitchen table and sat down, her eyes gritty and her limbs heavy. She should have fed the children dinner at least an hour ago, but instead she'd opened the snack drawer and told them to have at the granola bars and Pirate's Booty. On a normal evening, the kids would be taking baths now, or changing into pajamas. But Jamie no longer cared about bedtimes or nutrition. The routines that had given shape to their days had been blasted apart.

She wondered what Jose's mother was doing at this exact moment, if she was also fighting to stay upright when everything in her begged to collapse to the floor. Lucia had another son to care for, and maybe that was the only thing keeping her going. Jamie thought about what she'd read in the papers, that Lucia was a single mother who worked as a receptionist at a doctor's office. Church was a constant in her life.

Lucia Torres sounded like a good person, Jamie thought. Maybe she talked to patients who'd gotten scary diagnoses, promising to pray for them and bringing them glasses of water as they waited to be seen. She might give them a reassuring pat on the arm as she

murmured words of comfort.

Church was probably even more important to her now, Jamie thought. She wondered if Lucia was going to services every day, lighting candles and taking communion. Praying for her lost boy.

Maybe Jamie should start going to church more often, too. Wasn't it supposed to be a place filled with forgiveness and love? She could desperately use some of that.

Forgiveness.

Jamie was on her feet before she realized she'd had the intent to move, her fatigue falling away.

"Kids?" she called, and for once, they appeared in the kitchen on cue. All three of them.

"We have to get in the minivan, now," Jamie said. She couldn't believe she hadn't thought of this before. It was a way out, maybe the only way out. She grabbed her iPhone from the charger on the counter and Googled the Whitepages website. Luck was with her; she found the address she needed quickly.

She wondered briefly if driving was safe, since she still felt strange—outside of herself, almost, as if she was a bystander watching a Jamie clone in action—but a sudden surge of energy was overpowering her sleeplessness, more than compensating for her recent insomnia.

Eloise was struggling to strap on her sandals, so Jamie just scooped her up, shoes and all, and ran to the minivan and deposited her in her seat. When Sam and Emily came outside the dog followed them, so Jamie just motioned for everyone to get into the vehicle, even Sadie.

"Hurry!" she called, adrenaline thrumming through her veins. The sky was turning a dusky purple; she had to rush before it got too late. "Let's go!"

The kids were remarkably obedient; they climbed into the van, strapped themselves in, and sat without fighting or demanding the radio. In fact, they were quieter than Jamie could ever remember them being. Either they'd sensed the urgency brewing in their mother or too much television had left them in a semipermanent daze.

"Are we going to McDonald's?" Eloise asked.

"Maybe later," Jamie said. "We just have to do something first. Something really important."

Remarkably, everything went her way: traffic wasn't heavy, and lights turned green as she approached. The kids stayed quiet. No pedestrians cut in front of her car. Though she knew it wasn't possible, the whole city seemed poised, waiting for what would unfold. She reached her destination within twenty minutes. It was a minor miracle, a sign that her plan was the right one.

"You guys need to stay in the van while I go talk to someone," Jamie said. "It's really important. Maybe the most important thing I've ever asked you to do."

"Where are we?" Sam asked, looking out his window. They were parked by a curb in front of a three-story, industrial-looking, gray building.

"We're doing something to help Daddy," Jamie said. "Here." She handed her iPhone to Eloise to ward off any potential problems. "You guys watch her, okay? You'll be able to see me the whole time. I'm going to be standing right at that door. Just don't get out."

She stepped out of the minivan and hurried to the building's doorway. She ran her finger down the listing of apartment numbers behind Plexiglas and found the right one. She pushed the corresponding button. Her luck held: Someone answered, the voice coming through the intercom garbled and fuzzy, but Jamie could tell it belonged to a woman: "Hello?"

"This is Jamie Anderson," she said. "Michael Anderson's wife. Please, can you just come down here for a moment? I'd like to talk."

She waited, but there wasn't a reply. She stood in the twilight, wondering what would happen next. *Please*, she thought, clasping her hands together. There were some dents and scuff marks near the bottom of the door, as if someone had tried to kick their way in, and the lower windows were protected by metal bars. But someone had planted yellow petunias in a window box, and an American flag hung off a nearby balcony, billowing in the gentle breeze. An in-between place, she thought.

She turned around to check on the children, and when she glanced back, the door was opening to reveal a tall, thin woman.

"What is it?" asked Lucia Torres. The skin on her face looked haggard, and her eyes were puffy, as if she'd been crying recently.

"Thank you," Jamie said. She meant to say more—thank you for listening, maybe—but when she glimpsed the deep sorrow on Jose's mother's face, her throat turned dry and her eyes wet.

Ms. Torres wore a simple blue dress, not unlike one Jamie owned. Her expression was shifting, becoming more wary.

"I wanted to tell you how sorry I am," Jamie finally said. "I'm so sorry about Jose." The tears in her eyes spilled over, but she pushed on. "I know I'm asking for something I have no right to ask for."

Ms. Torres folded her arms. "*You* want something from *me*?"

"My husband . . . he's a good man. He has always looked out for kids from this neighborhood. He wouldn't have— He never would have hurt your son intentionally. It has ruined his life, too. He'll never be the same."

"Neither will me or my son," said Lucia evenly.

Jamie thought she meant Jose, but then she saw a head peeking around from Lucia's back and realized it must be Lucia's younger boy. A pair of big brown eyes stared up at her. Seeing that little face, so similar to his brother's, shredded Jamie. Jose had liked chicken with molé sauce. He'd carried home groceries for his mother. How could Lucia endure losing him?

Jamie forced herself to press on, knowing this would be her only chance. "I came to ask if you would just consider forgiveness," she said, her voice breaking. Tears were streaming down her cheeks now, her torrent of words matching their pace. "Maybe if the jury sees you don't want an eye for an eye, they won't punish Mike severely. There isn't anything more they could do to him—he's going to be in a kind of prison for the rest of his life no matter what. But my children"—Jamie's voice caught on a sob as she gestured toward the minivan just a dozen yards behind her, and she saw Lucia's eyes flick to the vehicle—"you see, they need their father. Please."

She thought she saw something soften in Lucia's face at the mention of the children, at the sight of her old minivan with the dented fender parked out front, Sam's small face peering out of one window, and Sadie in the passenger's seat with her furry head extended

through another.

Jamie reached out and touched Lucia's hand. "I'm begging you," she sobbed. "Mother to mother."

Lucia's face closed and she withdrew her hand. "Do you know my son was stopped and threatened by a cop when he was walking in his own neighborhood? Told to get home and stop causing trouble or the cop would give him real trouble? Tell me that didn't happen for any reason other than the color of his skin. Jose was ten years old. He cried that night and asked me why the policeman thought he was bad."

"I know those things still happen, and it's horrible," Jamie began. "But—"

Lucia cut her off. "You don't know. Not the way I do." She folded her arms. "Do you have a boy?"

"Yes," Jamie said.

"His experience growing up will be nothing like my son's. He won't be afraid of policemen, like Jose was. He won't have store clerks following him around, watching with angry eyes to see if he tries to slip something in his pocket when all he wants is to buy milk for our morning cereal. He won't have people cross to the other side of the street when they see him coming. You have no idea what life is like for our brown boys. Your son lives in a different world, one that doesn't automatically treat him with disrespect."

"You're right," Jamie said. "But my husband—I promise you—he isn't like that."

"There's nothing I can do," Lucia said in a flat voice. "Justice must be served."

She stepped back, and without looking at Jamie, she clicked the door shut.

"No!" Jamie cried. She wanted to bang on the door until her hands bled, to shout and beg and drop to her knees, but the children were watching. She gulped air as her body trembled compulsively. She'd hoped so desperately this would work. She'd imagined forging a connection with Jose's mother. She'd thought if Lucia could just see her as a woman, she would no longer view Mike as a villain. The prosecutor might even drop the charges. Mike would come home.

Maybe the three of them could work together on some sort of task force, a way to pair at-risk youth with police mentors. They could try to honor Jose's memory.

But now, in the sudden stillness of the evening, she had no hope left. She had never felt so empty and alone.

"Mom?" Sam called out the window.

She did the only thing left to her. She wiped away her tears and turned and began walking back to her children.

...

"Okay if I film here?" the videographer asked, coming over to stand next to Lou with his tripod.

"Sure," she said. "I'll get out of your way."

"It's okay," he said, but Lou moved anyway. He might want to chat, to while away the time, and she wanted to focus exclusively on Tabby. She made sure the elephant saw her new position in case she wanted to come over again for reassurance.

It was growing dark now, on the second night of Tabby's labor, and when the videographer turned on his camera, a piercing white light shone on Tabby. Lou was on her feet in an instant.

"Turn that off! Now!" she demanded, catching herself just before she yelled. Tabby might be scared if Lou raised her voice; she'd never before heard anger coming from her keeper.

"The quality won't be as good if we don't have light," the videographer protested. "I can barely see her."

Lou strode over and ripped the power cord from his camera.

"Hey!" he said. "Careful! That's expensive!"

"Listen to me," Lou said. "No lights. No loud sounds. If you do anything to disturb her, I'm throwing you out of here."

Now she had a sense of how Jamie had felt that day at the mall.

"Sheesh," the videographer said. "Sorry." He reattached the cord and turned off the light.

Lou settled back down, a little closer to the videographer this time. Her stomach growled and she realized she hadn't eaten in hours. She reached into her pack for a PowerBar and a bottle of water.

Tabby had slept for a while this afternoon, and Lou had dozed along with her, but now the elephant was pacing again.

"It's okay," Lou called. "Good girl."

She was vaguely aware of the videographer turning his camera in her direction. Tabby came over to the fence again, and Lou reached into a basket for a sweet potato. Tabby took it from her open palm.

"Plenty more where that came from," Lou whispered. She hoped Tabby wasn't afraid.

The elephant tossed her trunk and began circling the enclosure again. Lou wanted to let her out so she could roam the miles of trail, but all the medical equipment was here. It would be too tough for everyone to follow her and get to her quickly in case of an emergency. Besides, the vet was napping on a cot a dozen yards away, so he'd be fresh if he was needed.

Lou took a sip of water and kept her eyes fixed on Tabby. Lou knew the birth would be sudden, almost violently so. They'd have very little warning before the baby slipped out and fell to the earth. Maybe Tabby would make a sound, or suddenly become very still. Lou wasn't sure what the signal would be, but she felt confident she'd recognize it when the moment arrived.

The elephant took long strides around the perimeter of her enclosure, her tail swinging, her movement the only sign of her discomfort. Pacing . . . there was that word again, the one tickling at the edges of her mind.

Lou closed her eyes and tried to hold on to it.

Pacing was the only thing that helped. Someone had spoken those words to Lou. She could hear their echo, a tinny, faraway sound. Had it been Jamie, recounting the story of one of her kids' births? The memory fluttered away again.

"You got another PowerBar?" the videographer asked, his voice too loud. He was just a kid, maybe twenty-two, with a pimply chin and long hair. But Lou didn't regret being so hard on him; she'd do it again if she needed to.

Lou reached into her pack, grabbing a bottle of water, too, and walked over to hand the snacks to him.

"She needs quiet," Lou said, gesturing to Tabby. "If you want

anything else, you come to me and whisper. But only if it's an emergency."

Instead of sitting down again, Lou began to walk, too, trying to keep up with Tabitha. Together they went back and forth, back and forth, Lou wishing she could absorb some of Tabby's discomfort.

Pacing was the only thing that helped.

Lou felt her eyes widen and her heartbeat stutter. It wasn't Jamie who had said that about labor.

Lou could hear the voice, low and soft and faintly musical, so clearly now. Suddenly the memory snapped into place.

The voice belonged to her mother.

...

Henry was waiting in the camp director's office, his T-shirt torn and his right eye swollen.

Christie wanted to run to him and throw her arms around his thin shoulders, but she knew it would embarrass him. Despite his defiant expression, she could tell from the quiver in his lips that he was struggling to hold himself together.

"Hey, buddy," Mike said. He reached out and tilted up Henry's chin. "You're going to have a serious shiner. Didn't they give you some ice for that?"

"I don't need ice," Henry said, jerking his chin out of Mike's hand. There was blood on the front of his shirt, too. It pained Christie just to look at it.

Suzanne, the camp director, cleared her throat. She was thirtyish, broad-shouldered and pink-cheeked, with khaki shorts and wheat-colored hair pulled into a ponytail—exactly the type of person you'd expect to be running a camp.

"As I said on the phone," Suzanne told them, "Henry was in a fight. I saw it myself. He threw the first punch."

"Henry wouldn't do it without a good reason," Christie said. Of that she was certain.

"I'm all ears," Suzanne said. She squatted down next to Henry so she could look him in the eye, but Henry just shook his head.

"If he won't talk about what happened, we have no choice but to dismiss him immediately," Suzanne said. Christie had been prepared to yell at her, to call her on bureaucratic bullshit, but it was clear from her expression Suzanne didn't relish the thought of making Henry leave.

"I have a feeling this is probably unusual for Henry," Suzanne said as she straightened up. "He's only been here a day, but I saw him helping the younger kids with batting practice while the rest of his group was swimming."

Suzanne walked to the door and hesitated. "He won't tell me, but maybe he'll tell you," she said as she left, closing the door behind them.

Christie had no idea what to say. She wondered whether the onset of puberty was responsible for the changes in Henry, or if it was something more. She'd hidden so much from her mother—boyfriends, joints, cleavage-baring tops (though she'd hidden those only so her mother wouldn't borrow them). Maybe she'd been foolish to think that because Henry was kind and polite and a good student he'd be immune from the typical pressures of adolescence.

"Did someone say something to you about me?" Mike asked.

"Why do you think everything's about you?" Henry asked.

"Henry!" Christie was shocked.

"Look, it had nothing to do with that stuff," Henry said. "The guy was just a dickhead."

"Okay," Mike said calmly. "But you usually don't go around punching dickheads, which makes me think there's something more to it than that."

"Maybe," Henry said. "Can we just go already?" His duffel bag was near his feet. He probably hadn't even had a chance to unpack it.

Christie looked at Mike, who shrugged. "Sure," she said.

They opened the door, and Christie shook her head at Suzanne. "He wants to leave," she said.

"I understand," Suzanne said. "Henry, if you change your mind and want to talk about it, I'd still like to hear your side. You can call me anytime. Even after the session ends."

Henry nodded. "Okay," he said.

Suzanne touched Mike's forearm. "Usually we don't give refunds if kids are asked to leave, but in this case . . . Well, please call me," she said.

Mike nodded his thanks and shouldered Henry's bag, despite Henry's protest that he could carry it, and the three of them walked down the dirt path toward the parking lot. There were a half dozen wooden cabins nestled in the woods to the right, and a little farther off, Christie could see the sun setting low over the cool blue sheen of a lake. A few sailboats with bright masts were docked by the edge and a big tire swing dangled from the limb of a tall tree.

"How'd you find this camp?" she asked Mike. Despite whatever had happened to Henry here, it looked like a really nice place. Henry lived in the suburbs and certainly had access to parks and other green spaces, but there was nothing like this in Mike's neighborhood or in Christie's. Even though the camp was just sixty miles away, it was like something out of a storybook, an enchanted spot for kids.

"I didn't," he said. "Jamie did."

"Oh," Christie said. She thought about how Jamie had complained about paying child support, yet willingly put up money to send Henry here without even asking Christie to chip in. She wrestled with an unwelcome feeling of gratitude toward Mike's wife.

"I think we should go get something to eat," Christie said. "Are you hungry, Henry?"

"Do you even need to ask?" Mike joked.

Christie could tell they were on the same page; they'd silently agreed not to bring up whatever was troubling Henry for now, to keep the mood light and safe.

"Let's go find someplace with man food," Mike said. "No stinking salads for us." They reached the car, and Henry climbed into the backseat. The sky was completely dark now, and the Mercedes thrummed comfortably as they headed down the paved road.

After a few miles, the street widened into two lanes and they began seeing neon signs for gas stations and fast-food outlets.

"Is Wendy's okay? Or wait—how about Subway?" Mike asked. "There's one up ahead."

"Subway's good," Christie said at the same moment Henry said,

“Okay.”

They pulled into the parking lot and found a spot near the entrance. The place was deserted, so their food and sodas arrived quickly.

“I was thinking we could throw the ball around tomorrow,” Mike said. “Just you and me.”

Henry nodded and took a bite of his foot-long sub.

“Do you want to stay with your mom tonight?” Mike asked.

Henry shrugged. “Whatever.”

“We’ll figure it out later,” Mike said. “Still got a ways to go before we get home.”

They ate quietly for another minute, then Henry’s voice erupted in the stillness. “I’m not going to apologize!”

“Okay,” Mike said, again in that calm cop voice.

Christie didn’t respond. She hoped Henry would keep talking if they didn’t bombard him with questions.

“There was this jerk who kept cheating!” Henry said. “He kept insisting he got on base when it was so obvious he was out. Then we played hoops and he was fouling this short guy nonstop. And I kept calling him on it, but he just gave me this stupid smile, like he knew exactly what he was doing. And then I see him trip the short guy when everyone was running out to the fields to practice getting fly balls before dinner. He did it on purpose. Just stuck out his foot, watched the guy go down, and then he kept running like he had nothing to do with it.”

“Did you tell one of the counselors?” Christie asked.

Henry shook his head. “What’s the point?”

“They’re there to help you, buddy,” Mike said. “They would’ve done something to the guy. Talked to him, or watched him more closely.”

Henry shrugged. “He’s the kind of guy who sucks up to adults. It would’ve been his word against mine.”

Christie saw something flicker across Mike’s face. He pushed away the rest of his sub.

“Listen to me,” Mike said. “Never stop doing the right thing. It doesn’t matter if they believe you or not.”

Henry slumped back in his seat. He was still wearing his baseball cap, and the brim cast a shadow over his eyes. “Look where it got

you,” he said.

Mike closed his eyes, and Christie could see pain washing over his face.

“I get it,” Mike said, opening his eyes again. “I messed up.”

“But you said the guy had a gun—” Henry began to protest.

“That’s not what I meant,” Mike said. “But yeah, I thought he did. Every bit of training I’ve had, every instinct— Look, that doesn’t matter. I did what I thought was right.”

Mike leaned closer to Henry. “But then you saw people on the Internet attacking me, and your friends were saying stuff, and I was just sitting around the house doing nothing.”

Henry began to cry then. “Are you and Jamie going to get divorced?” he asked.

Christie’s eyes widened.

“What? Why do you say that?” Mike asked.

“Because you’ve been sleeping in the basement!” Henry said. He swiped his hand across his nose. His voice rose and cracked with his next sentence. “You think I didn’t notice?”

Christie tried to hide her shock. Things were that bad between Jamie and Mike?

“Look, I’ve had insomnia, okay?” Mike said, his voice low. “That’s why I started staying down there.” He was lying, Christie thought. She wondered if Henry picked it up, too.

“Henry, we should talk about this privately later,” Mike said. Christie looked down at the table and didn’t say a word.

“I didn’t know you felt this way . . . I guess I’ve been wrapped up in my own stuff. Seeing my best friend like that, knowing I might’ve been able to stop it if I’d only been faster . . . It killed me,” Mike said.

“It wasn’t your fault!” Henry blurted.

Mike reached across the table and grabbed Henry’s hand. “Partners are supposed to protect each other.”

Mike’s eyes were nearly as red as Henry’s now, and Christie could see a muscle in his jaw tensing. “After I went back to my beat, and— and everything happened and they said there wasn’t a gun . . . I was first at the scene and even I couldn’t find a gun . . . it did stuff to my mind. Made me wonder if I was going crazy. Sometimes I thought you

guys might all be better off without me.”

“Dad!” Henry burst out, his voice panicked.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not going to do anything. But maybe I should’ve talked to you.”

He let go of his son’s hand and took a sip of soda, then continued. “Your mom has been helping me. She and the detective she works with, that guy Elroy.”

“You are?” Henry asked, turning to Christie. She nodded, feeling oddly shy.

“I don’t think I’m going to be found guilty of anything, Henry,” Mike said. “I thought I saw a gun, so I did the right thing in that moment. That’s what I keep trying to tell myself, anyway.”

“Was it weird?” Henry asked. “To kill someone?”

Christie saw Mike swallow hard. He didn’t directly answer Henry’s question, but in a way, he did. “I think about it all the time,” Mike said. “All the time.”

“I’m almost his age,” Henry said, looking down at the napkin he was shredding.

Mike closed his eyes briefly. “That’s the worst part,” he said.

They were quiet for a moment, then Mike released a tired-sounding sigh. “Look, maybe I wanted to be punished. Maybe that’s why I didn’t fight back. Because even though I did what I thought I had to, he was just a kid . . .”

His voice trailed off.

Henry’s tears had dried up, but Christie noticed his usually neat fingernails were chewed off. How had they missed the signs that Henry was suffering so? She’d been buying a Mercedes while her son was floundering. She wondered if Jamie had seen it and had come up with the money for camp because she sensed Henry desperately needed an escape.

“I felt like you never talked about it,” Henry said. “And it was all anybody else was talking about.”

“You mean your friends?” Mike asked.

“And sometimes when I was at someone’s house, I’d hear a mother on the phone say my name. Once I went into Brian’s kitchen and his dad and mom were there. They got quiet and looked all guilty when

they saw me,” Henry said.

“I’m sorry you had to go through all that,” Mike said.

Henry nodded and sniffed a few times. Then he looked down at his father’s half-eaten sub. “Can I have that if you’re not going to finish it?”

Christie laughed. Mike didn’t join in, but at least he smiled, even though his face still looked sad. “I’ll buy you another one,” Christie said. “As many as you want.”

“Look, why don’t you go to your mom’s tonight,” Mike said. “I’ll come for a while, too, if that’s okay, and we can talk more. Christie can tell you what the private detective found.” He looked at Christie.

She felt as if the three of them were ensconced in something as fragile and shimmering as a bubble. Whatever was unfolding now—she wasn’t exactly sure what it was—felt beautiful and true.

“That would be really nice,” she said, and she was rewarded by matching smiles from her son and his father.

Chapter Seventeen

MIKE'S ABSENCE WAS EVERYWHERE: in his blue toothbrush standing in a cup by the bathroom sink, in the empty running shoes by the front door, in the T-shirt in the basket of still-warm laundry Jamie was folding. She held the shirt against her front and folded down its arms, realizing her movements mimicked a hug.

It was nearly ten o'clock on the second evening after he'd left. As darkness had fallen, her regrets had begun to mount: the anger she'd flung at Mike, the way her effort to save him had led to an even bigger gulf, and her disastrous visit to Ms. Torres. She should have known what had happened would forever be unfixable. She couldn't get Jose's mother's haunted brown eyes out of her mind. She wondered if Mike ever saw them, or if it was only Jose's face he pictured.

But one emotion had risen above the others swirling within her, like a bright buoy bobbing in dark, turbulent waters. She still loved her husband.

She finished folding the T-shirt, laying it atop the stack in the laundry basket. Maybe she shouldn't have blamed Mike for withdrawing, because she'd done plenty wrong lately, too. She should have told Mike about the incident at the mall instead of shielding him, and she never should have blown up at Christie. She probably should have pulled Mike back into the family by asking him to help more with the kids, instead of letting him retreat. And she'd known exactly what the strange barking noise she'd heard in the basement had been; she'd just been too scared to acknowledge it, because if Mike was breaking down, where would that leave her?

She stood up, the heavy basket of laundry digging into her hip as she carried it into her bedroom and set it atop the dresser. She went back into the living room, tossing plastic Barbies and metal trucks into toy bins and retrieving a sticky sippy cup of apple juice from beneath a

pillow on the couch. She straightened a pile of books on the coffee table and picked up the small, handheld vacuum to get the crumbs off the rug. Every time a car drove past the house, its headlights flashing, her heart leapt, then fell as she realized it wasn't a taxi bringing Mike back home.

She finished tidying the room, then went into the kitchen with the thought of having another of the Budweisers she'd bought for Mike. She froze, the unopened bottle in her hand, when she heard a sound that could've been Mike's key scraping in the front door's lock, but the door never opened. She looked at the beer, wondering if she should skip it and go to bed. But she felt wide awake, her nerves tingling, and she knew her bed would feel too empty tonight, even though she was used to sleeping alone by now. She set down the unopened drink and picked up her phone, her finger hovering over the button that would connect her to Mike.

Jamie hesitated, then slid the screen of her phone over to the next page and found the app they'd installed a few months earlier, after they'd—well, actually Christie had—gotten confused about whose turn it was to pick Henry up from baseball practice. It had been Jamie's turn, but Eloise had had a potty-training accident just as Jamie was about to leave. By the time she'd gotten her daughter cleaned up and changed and made it to the field, it was empty. An hour later, Jamie was in a full-blown panic and Mike was rushing home. Henry wasn't answering his phone. None of his teammates had seen him leave. She finally reached Christie, who blithely informed her they were at a bowling alley and hadn't heard their phones ring over all the noise. A few days later Mike had suggested they install the app, which used satellites to track the location of every phone in their family plan.

Which meant Jamie could use it to see Mike's current whereabouts. She pressed the button to activate the app and watched as it zoomed in on Mike's location. She recognized the address immediately: Christie's place.

The room spun as she gulped air. Mike had known how upset she was about the shift in his relationship with Christie. And yet his ex was the one he'd turned to! Jamie wondered if they were having drinks together again, if Christie was leaning forward, her fingernails gently

scraping the skin on Mike's forearm.

She started to call Mike, then hung up before being connected. She couldn't bear to talk to him, knowing Christie would probably be listening in the background. She began to pace, hot currents roaring through her.

Even though she couldn't believe Mike would cross the line into cheating with Christie, his presence at her apartment was betrayal enough. He couldn't be planning to spend the night in Henry's room, which would be empty since Henry was at overnight camp. Could he?

Whatever was happening between Mike and Christie needed to stop—now. Jamie gripped her head in her hands, trying to think of what to do next. She had to find someone to come watch the kids. Lou was still at the zoo, and it was too late to call a friend. But there was a college kid named Rob who lived around the corner who'd occasionally babysat for them last summer. He was in school somewhere on the West Coast. Maybe he'd come home for the summer and hadn't yet heard about the shooting. Jamie found his number in her contacts, then texted him, asking if he was around and free to watch the kids for an hour or two while she ran an errand. *They're asleep so it'll be easy!* she typed, hoping her desperation didn't show.

She waited, wondering if he even had the same number. Maybe he'd joined the Peace Corps, or had decided to stay in California for the summer. Maybe he knew about the shooting and didn't want to return her message. But a moment later, a reply pinged back: *No prob. Be there in 10.*

Okay, she thought, feeling the clamp in her chest ease a tiny bit. She went upstairs and changed into a clean shirt, then loosened her hair from its ponytail and brushed it out around her shoulders. Her heart was pounding and her throat felt thick and dry. She cupped water from the sink in her hand and sipped at it greedily despite the metallic taste.

She went back downstairs and waited by the open front door until she saw Rob approaching, his stride loping and his shaggy hair falling into his eyes, whistling a tune she didn't recognize. She suddenly felt as if she'd never been that young and carefree; Rob existed in a

different universe, one Jamie had departed so long ago she couldn't even remember its contours.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," she said. "You can hang out and watch TV or whatever. I'll be back as soon as I can. Just call me on my cell if one of the kids wakes up, but they should be good."

"No worries," he said.

I wish, she thought.

She waited until he shut and locked the door, then she hurried down the front path and got into her minivan and turned on the ignition. She pulled into Christie's apartment complex fifteen minutes later with no memory of driving there. She parked in a guest spot near the entrance and got out, staring up at the squares of light streaming from windows in the brick structure, wondering which one Mike was behind.

Now that she'd arrived, she felt unsure of her plan. She'd have to be buzzed into the building, unless she waited for a resident to enter and slipped in behind them, which seemed like the better choice. Then she'd knock on the door and wait for one of them to open it . . . and then what?

A feeling of *déjà vu* washed over her, heavy and foreboding: For the second time this evening, Jamie was standing outside an apartment building, unsure of her welcome, desperate to salvage something vitally important.

She sat down on a decorative rock wall, wondering if there was a chance Mike could sense she was here. She'd always felt as if an invisible current was binding them together. When they were in conversation with other people, she knew without even looking at him the precise moment when he became bored or impatient (the room mother for Sam's class usually inspired those feelings in him within thirty seconds; if the conversation revolved around football, that moment would never occur). And sometimes, when she was waiting for him to come home from work, she'd be drawn to the window seconds before his car turned into their driveway. She'd always wondered whether there was an extrasensory element that grew in happy marriages over time, similar to the phenomenon that caused longtime couples to resemble each other.

But Mike didn't come out. Maybe the current had finally snapped.

It was a warm night, and soon her T-shirt grew wilted and damp, and her hair felt sticky against the back of her neck. She was tired now, and more scared than angry. What would she say when she saw Mike? *Come home*, maybe. But those words might not be enough. He could shut the door in her face, as Ms. Torres had done.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting on the rock wall before a couple finally approached the building. Jamie blended in behind them as they entered. They were young and wrapped up in each other and barely noticed her as she followed them onto the elevator and pushed the button for Christie's floor.

She exited and walked down the hallway, treading the familiar path to Christie's apartment. She'd brought Henry here countless times, but she hadn't been inside in at least a year.

She stood before the door, staring at it as she gathered her courage and rapped twice. After a moment it opened to reveal Christie wearing a short, silky bathrobe. Jamie felt as if she'd been rammed in the stomach with something sharp and hard.

"Oh," Christie said in a flat voice. "It's you."

"I'd like to see my husband," Jamie said.

Christie opened the door wider and stepped back. Jamie walked in, her eyes glancing off Mike's flip-flops by the front door. She couldn't help picturing him kicking them off, just like he did at home. When did he become so comfortable here?

Christie led Jamie down the hallway toward the bedrooms and hesitated at the one with the closed door. She pushed it open and gave a little wave with her hand that Jamie took to mean she should look inside. Jamie sucked in a breath as she walked across the threshold. The light was dim, but she could see Mike sleeping in Henry's queen-size bed. For a moment her eyes blurred, which was why she didn't immediately notice the lump beside him in the bed.

She moved closer and saw a second thatch of dark hair against the light pillowcase. Why was Henry here instead of at camp?

Jamie reached out to shake Mike's shoulder, but seeing him sleeping so peacefully, his right arm flung over his head, his son by his side, made her hesitate. Instead she pulled the covers higher over them both, then bent down and kissed Mike on the cheek. She

straightened up and walked out of the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

"You're not going to wake him?" Christie asked.

Jamie shook her head. The anguish had drained out of her at the sight of Mike, and now she felt only a deep exhaustion, her stress and sleepless nights piling up and crashing into her. She took a step forward and stumbled, regaining her balance just before she fell.

"He should rest," Jamie said. That was what she needed, too. She closed her eyes and rubbed a hand against her forehead as a wave of dizziness washed over her. She hadn't eaten anything today, and the intense emotions roiling through her had left her feeling gutted. She wasn't even angry with Christie any longer. Maybe Mike had come to see Henry, not Christie.

"You don't look so good," Christie said.

Jamie's throat felt parched again. "Could I have some water?" she asked, her tongue thick and heavy. "Then I'll go."

Christie shrugged and led the way to the kitchen. She filled a glass from the tap and handed it to Jamie.

Jamie started to lift the glass to her mouth, but it slipped through her hand and smashed against the floor, shattering into dozens of pieces.

"I'm sorry," she said. She crouched down and began to pick up the bigger shards. "Shit!" She'd knelt on a piece of glass, and it had bitten into her skin.

"It's just a stupid glass," Christie said, misunderstanding the reason for Jamie's curse.

Jamie stood up, grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser by the sink, and pressed it against her knee. "Do you have a broom?"

"Forget it," Christie said.

"No, I can't let you clean it up," Jamie said.

"It's fine," Christie said. "I'll— Are you crying?"

"No," Jamie sobbed.

"Oh, Jesus," Christie said.

"I'm sorry," Jamie repeated. She couldn't stem the tears flowing down her face. She was gulping air and making weird, squeaking sounds. Ugly crying, that's what it was called. She bent over and wrapped her arms around herself.

“Do you want a Valium?” Christie offered.

Jamie began to laugh through her tears, despite herself. “You mean you’ve had Valium all this time and I’m only now finding out about it?” She gripped the counter and pulled herself to a standing position.

“I need to go,” she said.

Christie squinted at Jamie. “Have you been drinking? I don’t think you should drive. I’ll take you.”

Christie walked to the hall closet and pulled on a trench coat.

“Are you coming?” She was already at the door. “I’m rethinking my offer.”

Jamie looked at Christie and nodded. “I’m coming,” she said.

She forced herself not to look at Mike’s shoes as she left.

...

It was happening. Lou ran to the fence and watched as Tabby stood motionless except for a slight flicking of her tail. Her sudden stillness was the giveaway.

“Good girl,” Lou said, just loudly enough for Tabby to hear. Her heart pounded but her voice stayed calm.

Tabby’s body began to quiver. Lou shot a warning glare at the videographer, then turned her entire focus back to Tabby.

“It’s okay,” Lou whispered, wishing more than anything that she could be with Tabitha, stroking her and providing comfort. She was tempted to do it, to ignore the rules and scale the fence and leap down onto the soft earth on the other side, but she’d probably lose her job. She was more scared of that than of being accidentally injured by the elephant.

Tabitha didn’t make a sound, but she shifted from side to side a few times and then squatted slightly. Lou held her breath and gripped the fence so tightly her hands ached.

The calf’s rear legs, encased in the milky-looking embryonic sac, appeared first, sliding out of Tabby’s body agonizingly slowly. Lou’s eyes flitted from the emerging baby to Tabby, whose trunk was now curled around a fence post, as if for balance.

Tabby wasn’t looking back at her any longer. She seemed lost in a

world of her own. Lou wanted to speak words of encouragement but worried it would distract the elephant. Tabby squatted lower and opened her mouth wide, as if in a silent scream, but she didn't make a sound.

Suddenly, the baby slid completely out of Tabby, still in its opaque embryonic sac. It crashed to the ground, and the sac burst, releasing a torrent of fluids.

Lou glanced quickly at her watch to mark the time, then looked back at Tabby because she already sensed something was wrong. The calf wasn't moving. It was curled on its side, looking impossibly small next to its mother. Lou could make out the chunky outlines of the baby's toenails, and the fuzzy hair on its head. It was perfect.

"It's not breathing!" a zoo volunteer cried, her voice high and frightened.

Tabby walked in a circle around her baby, her trunk reaching out to explore it. Then she lifted her front leg and kicked it—hard.

Lou heard someone gasp.

Tabby kicked her calf again and again, jerking it along the ground. The baby's body flopped helplessly with each blow.

"Oh no!" the same volunteer cried.

Tabby reached down with her trunk, scooping up the baby's head and letting it bang back down. Lou glanced at her watch. Forty-five seconds. The little elephant remained still.

Tabby stepped over her baby—for a moment Lou worried she would step *on* it—and struck it with her front foot again, this time even harder.

"Lou, shouldn't you call Tabby over here?" someone asked. "We need to get in there!"

Another kick rocked the calf's limp body back and forth. One minute.

The volunteer ran over and tugged on Lou's arm. "Make her stop!" she said. "She's killing it!"

"No." Lou shook her head. "She's saving it."

Tabby was in great distress now, circling her baby, pawing at it, trying to lift it with her trunk, trumpeting loudly near its ear.

"Come on," Lou said urgently.

And then the calf's mouth opened, and it took its first breath.

Tabby's foot had been poised for another kick, but she stilled the motion and stepped back.

"Oh, Tabs," Lou said, her voice trembling. "You got your baby to breathe. Good girl. You're such a good girl. You did it."

Tabby gently explored her calf with her trunk while it lay on its side, its mouth opening and closing as it gasped in air. Its wide, inky black eyes were finally visible. The volunteer who had been so panicked squeezed Lou's arm, and she could hear murmurs of relief from the other workers.

After a moment, Tabby reached down with her trunk and encircled her baby's head again, trying to lift it up. The calf seemed too weak to move, but Tabby was determined. Again and again she used her trunk and foreleg to jab at it, trying to get it on its feet. Lou knew why: In the wild, an animal might be attacked if it looked helpless. Its survival would depend on it being upright. Tabby was still trying to save her baby.

The little elephant protested mightily, releasing a kind of yelp that Lou thought sounded not unlike that of a human kid who didn't want to wake up for school.

Tabby kept at it, relentlessly, and with her help, the baby finally found its way to its feet. It wobbled a bit, then fell back down when it tried to take a step. But Tabby was there by its side, helping it stand up again, more gently this time, and soon the small elephant found its footing. Lou's eyes roved over its wrinkly gray body, its gently curved back and fuzzy forehead and wide feet. She'd never seen anything so beautiful.

Tabby took a step forward, and her calf followed, struggling to move its front and hind legs in synchronicity. With every passing minute, it seemed to grow more confident.

Lou slid back to the ground, her legs as weak as the baby elephant's had been. Someone pressed a paper cup into her hand, and she took a sip of something dry and fizzy. Champagne. She didn't usually drink alcohol, but if ever an exception was called for, this was it.

She lifted her cup toward Tabby in a silent salute. "Congratulations, Mama," she said.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” the young videographer said. “Usually I do weddings.”

His voice was still a bit louder than she would’ve liked, but Lou let it go. “I’ve never seen anything like it, either,” she said.

She rested her head against the fence. Tomorrow—or actually, later today—Lou would open the gate to let the little elephant explore miles of trails with Tabby. She’d hide extra sweet potatoes and greens and apples along the way. She’d give Tabby a thorough examination, then she and the vet would carefully look over the calf, although Lou already knew it was healthy. They’d learn the gender, too. The other elephants were being kept away for now, but elephant herds were famously protective and nurturing of their young. Soon they’d get to meet little Masego—whose name meant blessing in Setswana.

Lou smiled as she watched the baby unfurl his or her trunk, then curl it back up, like a kid with a paper blower at a party. The tiny elephant’s gray coat was saggy, as if he or she was wearing a too-big suit.

I can’t wait to watch you grow up, Lou thought.

She took another sip of champagne as Masego gave a trumpet, testing out its voice. Lou’s limbs felt as loose and heavy as honey and she didn’t think she could get up even if she wanted to.

Tabby walked over to her water supply and took a long drink, but she kept her eyes on her baby the whole time.

“You’re a natural,” Lou told her. “I always knew you would be.”

Lou could see the videographer beginning to pack up, and the volunteers and veterinarian doing the same. She was going to stay straight through for another day or two, to keep watch. She welcomed the sweet solitude, not just so she could enjoy the new elephant but because she was holding close a remembrance that had been buried deeply for decades and had loosened only with Tabby’s pacing. She wanted time to replay it again and again, to imprint every word and inflection on her memory, so she’d never lose it.

On the eve of Lou’s birthday, her mother had always told her the story of her birth. It was their tradition. The story had always begun the same way: *Pacing was the only thing that helped . . .*

Lou sipped champagne and watched Tabby and her baby make

slow progress around the enclosure and felt her cheeks grow wet as she remembered.

I thought I'd have plenty of time to get to the hospital, but I barely made it there before you decided to come out! her mother had said. *They had a resident deliver you because my doctor couldn't get there fast enough—I swear, the resident looked about twelve—but you didn't make things difficult. Out you came, with just three pushes. And then they put you into my arms and you gave this little bleat, like a sheep, and fell fast asleep. You had Daddy's eyes and my chin. I held you for hours.*

Lou could hear the voice so clearly now, the memory as true as the summer-blue sky of her mother's eyes.

"Thank you," Lou whispered to her beloved elephant.

...

"Isn't Henry supposed to be at camp?" Jamie asked. She was sitting in the passenger's seat of Christie's Mercedes as they drove through darkened streets.

"He got in a fight," Christie said. "Mike and I had to go pick him up."

"What?" Jamie didn't seem as surprised as Christie had expected.

"Yeah, he punched some other kid in the dining hall. Mike talked to him about it. He's okay now, I think," Christie said. "Henry, I mean. I hope the other kid has a broken nose."

Jamie shook her head, then turned to stare out the window. They rode in silence for another few minutes, with Christie sneaking glances at Jamie. Was this how a nervous breakdown began? Jamie seemed completely unaware that blood from her knee was running down her leg, but at least she wasn't crying any longer. It was unlike her not to ask more questions about the incident at camp, though. Jamie always wanted "open lines of communication"—a reference that Christie used to think sounded annoyingly New Agey. But the absence of Jamie's chatter made Christie realize she missed it.

"This other kid was being a jerk to a smaller boy," Christie said. "Henry was trying to protect the littler kid . . . Well, there's more to it than that."

Jamie just rubbed her eyes, leaving Christie unsure if she'd even heard. Jamie's hair was slightly matted and her shirt wrinkled, but that wasn't what made Christie nervous. She'd glimpsed something when Jamie was kneeling on the kitchen floor, looking small and vulnerable, surrounded by shattered glass. There had been this awful expression in Jamie's eyes—or maybe it was an absence of expression. Her eyes were so . . . bleak.

"Oh, no," Jamie said.

"What?" Christie asked, nervous about what Jamie might do next.

"I got a little blood on your car seat," Jamie said. "It's leather, though, so it should come right off. Do you have a napkin?"

Christie reached into her purse and gave Jamie a tissue. Yesterday she might've been upset at the thought of something marring her Mercedes. But now all she could think about was Henry's raw, bitten nails, and that emptiness in Jamie's red-rimmed eyes . . .

"I'm returning the car tomorrow," Christie said. She wasn't sure if she'd be able to—who ever read the fine print in contracts?—but she was going to try.

"Why?" Jamie frowned. "Because of what I said?"

Christie pulled up to a stoplight and turned to look directly at Jamie. "You mean when you called me a mooch?"

Jamie sighed. "I'm sorry, okay?" she said.

"You were right," Christie said. "Not the part about me being a mooch. But I shouldn't have bought this car. I don't really need it. And just so you know, I already told Mike I don't want any more child support."

Jamie nodded, and Christie felt a little deflated. A thank you would've been nice.

Jamie didn't say anything else as Christie made a few turns and eventually reached Jamie and Mike's street. She pulled up in front of their house and waited for Jamie to step out, but Jamie didn't move.

"Can you, um, tell Mike I stopped by?" Jamie finally asked.

Christie nodded. "Sure," she said. It felt strange, Jamie asking her to convey a message to Mike.

"I left the minivan there, so if he wants to bring it home when he wakes up tomorrow . . . he can," Jamie said.

“Okay,” Christie said.

“If you talk to him, could you just let him know . . .” Jamie gulped in some air and her face crumpled. “Would you tell him . . .” Again Jamie’s voice trailed off, then she reached for the door handle and exited the car.

Christie stared after her as Jamie made slow progress to her front door in the darkness. She was limping, and the strap on one of her cheap-looking sandals was broken and flapping with every step. She’d trip if she weren’t careful.

Christie put the Mercedes in drive and made it a few feet away before stopping again and looking back. Jamie still hadn’t reached her front stoop. She was shuffling along like someone who was sick, or very old. Her head was bowed, and every line in her body seemed steeped in misery.

Christie flung open her door and ran after Jamie.

“Listen, Mike’s at the apartment because of Henry,” she said.

Jamie stopped walking and looked up at her. “That’s the only reason,” Christie continued. “Henry really needed him tonight. That stuff I said to you earlier about Mike and I—all we did was go over the case. The private detective I’m working for is trying to help him. That’s why we’ve been talking so much.”

Jamie nodded slowly. “Oh,” she said.

How many times had she communicated with Jamie through the years? Christie wondered. Hundreds. No, thousands. They’d talked about Henry and the other kids, about immunizations and diaper rashes, about music recitals and grades and cyberbullying. Jamie knew Henry intimately, maybe even as well as Christie did.

“But you don’t know me!” Christie blurted. “You’ve never once tried to know me!”

Jamie looked up at Christie, her forehead creasing. Christie hadn’t meant for her private thoughts to spill out, but before she could backpedal, Jamie spoke up.

“Maybe that’s true,” she said.

“Well,” Christie said. She cleared her throat. “It’s probably a little late now. I mean, Henry’s going off to college in a few years, so . . .”

“Yeah,” Jamie said.

“Anyway, maybe I didn’t notice what was going on with Henry, or how upset he was . . . and fine, so I shouldn’t have gotten that car . . . but I’m still a good mother!” The words erupted from Christie with a force that surprised her.

Maybe this was what it came down to, she thought as Jamie blinked up at her. The discomfort that had always underlain her relationship with Jamie could be rooted in the times she’d messed up and Jamie had rushed to cover for her, in the way Henry had asked long ago why Christie never made green trees for dinner like Jamie did (trust Jamie to find a way to turn broccoli into a treat), and in the moment when a waitress had mistaken Christie for just another guest at Henry’s birthday party a few years back. The waitress had caught Christie’s eye and said, “What a beautiful family”—meaning Jamie and Mike and Henry and the other kids. Christie had felt a kind of rage toward Jamie then. She’d watched Jamie rub her big, pregnant belly, Mike’s hand resting possessively on her lower back, and Christie had walked to the bar and ordered a tequila shot and downed it quickly. Only then was she able to rejoin the party. When the balloon had popped a moment later, she’d hung on to Mike’s arm and hadn’t let go until Jamie noticed and glared at her.

Jamie looked confused. “I mean, our styles are different. But you’re a good mother. Of course you are. Anyone can see how much you love Henry.”

Christie felt her throat tighten and she shook her head. She wanted to say that wasn’t what she’d meant, but she was unsure of what she did mean. So she walked back to her car before she did something ridiculous, like burst into tears. There had been far too much crying tonight anyway. She had no idea what had gotten into her; maybe Jamie’s crazy mood was contagious.

She put her Mercedes in drive but waited to pull away from the curb until Jamie made it safely inside her house.

You’re a good mother, Jamie had said, sincerity threading through her voice.

As Christie headed home, back to her son, she knew in her heart it was true.

Chapter Eighteen

MIKE STOOD IN THE doorway, wearing a T-shirt Jamie had picked up last year at a discount outlet because she knew the mossy green color would complement his olive skin. His hair curled down around his ears and stubble coated his jawline, a look she loved.

"Are the kids ready?" he asked. "I'm gonna take them to the park."

It had been two weeks since she'd gone to find him at Christie's. When she'd awoken the next morning, the minivan was in the driveway and Mike was sitting at the kitchen table, his hands cupping a steaming mug of coffee. She'd begun to hurry toward him. Then she'd glimpsed the expression on his face and she'd stopped short.

"Christie told me you came by when I was asleep," he'd said. "I want you to know I wasn't there the whole time. I crashed on Shawn's couch the first night."

She'd eased into the seat across from him. "Okay," she'd said, her voice coming out as a whisper.

Mike's two duffel bags were at his feet. He hadn't unpacked them.

"I'm going back to stay at Shawn's," he'd said.

His words had felt like a hard pinch. "For how long?" she'd asked.

He'd shaken his head. "I don't know."

"A night? Two?"

"Look, I just— I've got to get away for a little while."

From me, Jamie had thought.

Shawn was one of the guys who'd brought over fried chicken after Ms. Torres's press conference. If Mike was sleeping there, it meant he would have to watch his friend leave for work in his blue uniform, a painful reminder of the life Mike used to have.

How could staying with her be worse than that?

"I'll tell the kids it's because of all the reporters hanging around the house," he'd continued, not meeting her eyes. "The press is going to

be all over me now that we're going to trial. I'll say I want to draw them away. Henry's having a rough time, so when he's here I'll be around as much as possible. I'll probably stay in the basement some of those nights. And I want to come by and see the kids every day."

"Why even leave, then?" Jamie had asked, wondering when he'd planned this all out and how long he'd been thinking about it. "You can keep sleeping in the basement. Or I'll stay there if you want!"

But he'd just shaken his head and stood up and put his barely touched mug of coffee into the sink. She'd bought that mug for the kids to give him last Christmas. It was the kind you could write on with a special pen, and all the children had signed their names, with Jamie's hand helping guide Eloise's as she printed shaky but still recognizable letters. Henry had sketched a baseball next to his signature, and Sam had drawn a paw print for Sadie. After he'd torn away the gift wrap, Mike had said he'd never use anything else for his morning coffee.

"Wait!" Jamie had cried as Mike picked up his bags and began walking toward the front door. "Don't just— Let's talk this out! Go to marriage counseling or something!"

"I need to get through the trial," he'd said.

She'd hurried after him. "I know things haven't been good between us," she'd said. "But I still love you, Mike. Why are you so angry with me? It can't only be because I went to see Ritchie!"

He'd sighed, one hand on the doorknob. "Look, I'm not even sure I can explain it," he'd said. "All I know is I need a break, okay?"

"No, it's not okay!" she'd cried. "I've been furious with you, too. Don't you think I haven't wanted to walk away once or twice? But I didn't. And you can't, either! Talk to me, Mike. You can't just leave . . ."

But he had.

Now she gestured for him to come inside, feeling a mixture of anger and sorrow that she was inviting her husband into their house. "The kids are in the kitchen," she said. "They're finishing up breakfast."

Sadie ran to Mike, her nails scrabbling against the wood floors, and he squatted down and rubbed her neck. Then he followed Jamie to the kitchen, where Lou was flipping a pancake high into the air. Lou tried to catch it in the pan, but missed and it landed on the floor.

“Oops,” Lou said as Sadie gobbled it up. “You weren’t supposed to see that.”

“Hey, elephant girl,” Mike said, giving Lou a quick hug.

“Hey, Thor,” she replied, hugging him back.

“Sadie’s eating the pancake!” Eloise said, laughing. “Do it again!”

“Want one?” Lou asked Mike.

“Sure,” he said, taking the empty seat next to Emily.

“I’ll get their shoes,” Jamie said. “Oh, and sunscreen. Do you want me to pack some snacks?” Talking about logistics helped fill the empty space between her and Mike.

“Nah,” Mike said, stealing a strawberry off Emily’s plate and popping it into his mouth. “We’ll pick something up if they get hungry.”

Twenty minutes later, they were all clustered by the door and Jamie was rubbing sunscreen on Sam’s arms over his protests while Mike helped Eloise strap on her sandals. Above the din came the sound of Mike’s cell phone ringing.

He reached into his pocket and glanced at the caller ID.

“Better take this,” he said. “It’s J.H.”

He stepped away, toward the family room, but Jamie could still hear his side of the conversation.

“When is it going to happen?” Mike was asking. His tone revealed it wasn’t good news. Jamie felt a clutch of fear.

“Okay. Talk to you after.”

He slid his phone back into his pocket and stood there, staring into space.

Jamie handed the tube of sunscreen to Lou and walked over to him. “What is it?” she asked softly, not wanting the kids to overhear.

“Lucia Torres is holding another press conference,” he said.

Jamie gasped. A few days after Mike had left, Jamie had called and told him about her visit to Jose’s mother, knowing she needed to be honest with him. She’d been worried Mike would feel betrayed again, but he’d only said he appreciated her effort. Now Jamie wondered if she’d violated some sort of law.

“What’s she going to say?”

“He doesn’t know,” Mike said. “But she’s starting it in half an hour. He said it’s so rushed that a lot of reporters probably won’t get there in

time.”

“That’s good, right?” Jamie asked.

Mike shrugged.

“Do you want to watch it here?” she offered.

Lou stepped toward them. “How about I take the kids to the park?” she suggested. “I can bring them back in an hour.”

Mike hesitated. “Yeah, okay,” he finally said.

He was probably going to watch it with her only because he didn’t have time to get to another television, Jamie thought, feeling stung. They saw Lou and the kids off, then Jamie busied herself cleaning the kitchen. Mike sat on the living room couch, flipping through the newspaper so quickly he couldn’t be reading a word.

“Seven minutes,” he said, looking at his watch. He flicked on the television and switched the channel to a local news station.

“Can I get you anything?” Jamie asked, sitting down a few feet away from him.

“No thanks.” Mike began drumming his fingers against his leg.

They stared at a commercial for a retirement community, then another for English muffins.

They should’ve watched the earlier press conference together, Jamie thought as she remembered how she’d stayed upstairs instead of going into the basement with Mike. She’d thought she’d been shielding him. Now it was just another regret.

A young male reporter appeared on the screen, holding a microphone and recapping the facts of the case. The press conference was taking place at Ms. Torres’s lawyer’s office, the reporter said. He wrapped up, and the camera cut to a podium positioned next to the doorway of a large room.

In a voice-over, the reporter narrated what was happening on-screen: “Ms. Lucia Torres is approaching the podium. She called this press conference unexpectedly and has not released any statement about its contents.”

Only when she began to feel light-headed did Jamie realize she was holding her breath. She exhaled and leaned forward, trying to glean clues from Ms. Torres’s appearance. Jose’s mother wore the same black dress she’d had on for the last press conference, and her

expression was somber. She seemed to have aged since Jamie had seen her just a few weeks ago. She reached the microphone and stood there for so long that Jamie wondered if she was going to speak after all.

"I have always told the truth, all my life," Lucia Torres finally began in a low voice. "And I have tried to teach my children to do the same."

Jamie gripped her hands together, wishing she could hold Mike's instead.

"My younger son, Alejandro, is not here today, and I ask that none of you try to contact him in the future. My lawyer or myself will answer your questions. He is to be left alone. He is a little boy, eleven years old." Her voice faltered on the word *little* and her mouth twisted. But then she straightened up and lifted her chin higher. "He made a mistake because he was trying to protect me from something he knew would break my heart."

She stepped back, and the woman standing behind her—the lawyer? Jamie wondered—leaned toward the microphone. "Ms. Torres wants to let you all know that she received a gun from her younger son last night. The boy took it from where it had fallen near his brother Jose's body just after Jose was shot by Police Officer Michael Anderson. Alejandro had followed Jose to the scene of the fight and was hiding under a nearby parked car during the time of his brother's shooting."

The room was silent for a moment, then it exploded with shouted questions.

"The gun was turned over to the district attorney early this morning," the lawyer said, waving her hand for quiet. "That's all the information I have at the moment. Please respect the fact that this is a grieving mother who tried to do the right thing. And Alejandro, too. Until recently he didn't understand the extent of the repercussions of his actions. Once he did, he took the courageous step of telling the truth." She took Ms. Torres by the forearm and led her from the room.

Jamie struggled to process the words. She stared at the television, remembering the pair of big brown eyes peeking out at her from behind Ms. Torres. Alejandro—Jose's little brother. He'd listened as Jamie begged on behalf of her husband and talked about how her

children needed their father. He'd seen her cry.

The male reporter appeared on the screen again, his voice tense and his words spilling out rapidly. "We have just heard from Lucia Torres that her—that a gun was recovered from near her older son, Jose Torres's body immediately following his shooting death. The gun—Ms. Torres said—was picked up by her younger son and brought home, where presumably it has remained this whole time. We'll, ah, we're going to bring you an update on the case as soon as we have more information. Right now we are—we are confirming that Lucia Torres has just said there was a gun a few feet away from her teenage son, Jose's body immediately after he was shot by Police Officer Michael Anderson."

The phone erupted upstairs.

Jamie turned to Mike. His mouth had fallen open. He was still staring at the television, even though a weatherman was now on, predicting another scorcher.

The phone stopped ringing, then started up again. Jamie could hear her cell phone buzzing frantically.

Mike's breathing turned ragged. "They found a gun?" he asked. "I knew—I thought—but then when there wasn't any evidence—"

"Mike, he had a gun, just like you said." Jamie felt dazed and muddy, as if everything was happening in slow motion. "You were right all along."

"I saw it in his hand. There wasn't any doubt—but then after I got to him so fast, and nothing was there—" Mike said.

Mike's cell phone was ringing now, too, but he ignored it. He was a cop again, intent on puzzling out the clues.

"That was why I couldn't find it. It must have fallen behind him, toward the cars," Mike said, his voice gaining confidence. "Someone had to have cut in between me and Alejandro right when he bent down to get the gun. Otherwise I would've seen him."

Mike was very still. He squeezed his eyes shut, something he only did when he was concentrating intently.

"But something still doesn't add up," he said. "Jose was a good kid. Everyone said so. He'd never been in any real trouble before. People don't just turn on a dime like that. So why'd he have a gun? Why'd he

aim it at Jay? It doesn't make any sense."

Jamie reached a hand toward Mike's leg, then withdrew it without touching him.

"I gotta figure this out," Mike said. "There's another piece I'm not seeing yet." He opened his eyes.

"You will," Jamie said. "But Mike, we've got to tell the kids!"

She still felt numb, but she leapt to her feet. "And your parents!"

"Yeah," he said, but he didn't move.

"They'll have to drop the charges!" she cried.

Why was Mike just sitting there?

She knelt down so they were face-to-face. "I know this has been horrible for you. We haven't even really had any time to think about what you had to do. But I want to help. We can get through this."

"Yeah," Mike said again, leaning back. Away from her. "I just wish . . ."

"What is it?" she asked. She reached for his hand, but his fingers didn't close around hers.

Fear clamped her body like a vise. It wasn't over, not yet, she thought.

"I wish you'd believed me," Mike said, and he dropped his hand from hers.

The knowledge of what she'd done slammed into her. "I'm sorry—I was just trying to help!" she cried. "I was scared!"

He didn't respond.

"Mike, I didn't mean—I wasn't even focused on if there was a gun or not, I was just trying to protect us!" she continued. "To save our family!"

Why hadn't she believed him? She thought back to right after the shooting, when Mike had come up their front walk, his head low, his gun missing from its holster. He'd gripped her shoulders and looked at her intently. *I swear to you*, he'd said. *I saw it, Jamie*.

And she'd responded: *It was raining! It was hard to see! Anyone could've made that mistake!*

"It made me doubt myself," Mike was saying. "When you didn't even pretend to believe me. You're the person who knows me best, so if you thought I really did it . . . that was the worst part. Wondering if I'd

killed a boy for no reason.”

“You have to understand,” she said, her voice frantic and choppy. “It was like J.H. said, it was about what the jury would believe! And it was raining, and you were so stressed, and— Mike, I’m not saying this well, but don’t you see that I couldn’t even think that much about what actually happened?”

“But it meant everything,” Mike said. His dark eyes were wet. “I see Jose on the pavement everywhere I look. I dream about him all the time. And I began to think it was all my fault again. Just like with Ritchie.”

“Oh, Mike, no, it wasn’t your fault! Neither of them,” Jamie said. She was crying hard now. “I was just— Mike, I was so afraid for you, for our family . . .”

Her voice trailed off as he stood up, leaving her kneeling on the floor. “I should call my parents, like you said. And J.H. But Henry first.”

“Do you want to do it from here?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I’ll go meet Lou and the kids at the park. I can phone everyone on my cell there.”

“Mike, I know you’re still so angry with me,” she said. She tried to catch her breath, to find the words to make him understand. “You deserve to be angry with me! But I did what I had to. Can you try to see that? It wasn’t just me—J.H. talked about PTSD, and—”

Mike cut her off. “Christie believed me,” he said.

Jamie went still. “I was wrong, Mike,” she said.

He nodded, just one quick up-and-down movement of his head. Then his phone rang again, and this time he looked at it. “Henry,” he said.

He answered and began walking away as he talked to his son. “I know,” Jamie could hear him saying. “Me, too. Yeah, I’ll come get you right now. I want to see you, too . . .”

Mike left without even saying good-bye. Without looking back at her.

Chapter Nineteen

A PUFFY WHITE CLOUD drifted in front of the sun, providing temporary relief from the relentless heat. Dozens of parents and siblings packed the bleachers of a local community center for the final game in the summer youth league baseball tournament, but it was so quiet that Christie could hear a breeze rustling the leaves of the tree behind her.

Her eyes were fixed on Henry, who was leading off second base. In the bottom of the final inning, the game was tied six-all, with one out.

Henry was in position to score, and his team's other best player was up at bat. "He's got this," Christie announced to no one in particular, then began gnawing her thumbnail.

The pitcher wound up and let the ball fly. At the crack of the bat, Christie jumped to her feet, screaming, "Go, Henry!" Next to her Jamie and Lou leapt up, too.

Henry sprinted toward third base as the ball hung in the sky, then it began arcing down as two outfielders ran to make the catch. But Henry's teammate had hit it into the sweet spot, the no-man's-land between first and second base, and the ball bounced against the turf before being scooped up by one of the opposing team's players.

Henry rounded third hard, never hesitating as he headed for home plate.

"Gogogogogo!" Christie shrieked.

"The play's at home! The play's at home!" the opposing team's coach bellowed, his voice soaring over the noise of the crowd.

The ball smacked into the glove of the cutoff man, who pivoted and hurled it toward the catcher. Henry's arms were pumping, and his feet kicked up puffs of brown dirt with every step. He ran so fast the batting helmet flew off his head and bounced behind him. But the ball was faster.

Just after it slammed into the catcher's mitt, Henry threw his head and shoulders backward, sliding in feetfirst.

"He made it under the catch, didn't he?" Jamie asked, grabbing Christie's arm. "The ball didn't touch him, right?"

"Of course it didn't!" Christie said, although she wasn't sure.

The umpire extended his arms straight out, and half of the people in the stands erupted in applause. Lou reached over and stung Christie's palm with a high five.

"Did Henry win?" Eloise asked. She was eating a snow cone and her lips were the color of blueberries.

"He sure did," Jamie said. "Him and the rest of his team. Aren't you proud of your big brother?"

Christie squinted and caught sight of Mike running toward Henry, pumping his fists over his head. Even though he'd never played baseball, Mike had signed up as an assistant coach for the summer league, saying he wanted to spend more time with Henry.

Christie had been with Henry at the time of Ms. Torres's second press conference. She'd been getting ready to take him out for breakfast when Henry had pounded on the door of her bathroom, yelling for her to come quick. She'd stood there with him, her hair damp on her shoulders and mascara coating only her right lashes, staring at the television screen while everything changed.

Immediately after that Mike had picked Henry up, but this time, he hadn't come upstairs. Instead, Henry had waited outside the apartment building, eager to see his father the moment he arrived. Christie had thought about going downstairs to wait with him, but in the end, she'd thought Henry deserved to be alone with Mike.

"What a game," Christie said now, watching Henry's teammates dog-pile on top of him at home plate.

"It was amazing," Jamie said. Christie was surprised to hear a catch in Jamie's voice. But then, Jamie understood how badly Henry had needed this moment.

Christie reached for her purse and started to follow Lou and the kids as they exited the bleachers, but Jamie put a hand on her arm, drawing her back.

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you," Jamie said, her

voice low. "How did you know all along there really was a gun?"

Christie looked at her, surprised. "Because it was Mike," she said without even having to think about her answer. "He never would've made that kind of mistake."

"Oh," Jamie said. She nodded slowly. "You're right . . . Well, thank you for helping him. Mike told me about Elroy."

"Hey, it was nothing," Christie said quickly. Jamie's face was a little scrunched, which was a tad alarming, given what had happened the last time Christie had seen her.

"Come on," Christie said, heading toward the dugout. "Let's go see Henry."

They had to wait a few minutes, but finally Henry pulled away from his team and ran over to them.

"Did you see it?" he asked.

"Are you kidding?" Christie said, throwing her arms around her sweaty boy. "You were awesome!"

"I caught it all," Lou said, holding up a video camera. "I'll make you a copy so you can watch the highlights."

Henry grinned. "Thanks," he said.

"Congrats, sweetheart," Jamie said. She gave Henry a quick hug, then released him as Mike walked over to them.

"So what's the plan, champ?" Mike asked, slinging an arm around Henry's shoulders.

"The guys are going out for pizza," he said. "Can we go?"

"You bet," Mike said.

"I'll get my stuff," Henry said and ran off toward the dugout again.

There was a pause, then Mike said to Jamie, "Are you guys coming tonight?"

"No, I think Eloise is too tired," Jamie said. "But thank you."

"I can take the kids swimming tomorrow," Mike said. "Should I pick them up around eleven?"

"Sure," Jamie said.

Whoa, Christie thought, watching as Mike gave the younger kids hugs and swung Sam around a few times before ruffling his hair. She shot Lou a questioning look, but Jamie's sister was fixated on some sort of bug that had flown onto her arm, pointing it out to Emily, who

was making a disgusted face, as they walked toward the parking lot with Jamie and the other kids.

“Man, do I need a Gatorade,” Mike said, pulling off his baseball cap and running a hand through his hair.

“It sounded like you and Jamie aren’t even living together,” Christie blurted.

“Yeah,” Mike said. “I guess it did.”

“Oh, don’t give me one of your cryptic cop nonanswers,” Christie said. “What’s going on?”

Mike glanced around—probably hoping Henry would save him—but Henry was posing for a team picture.

“Are you separated?” Christie pressed.

“More like a break,” Mike said.

“Does Henry know?” she asked.

“Sort of,” Mike said. “I stay at the house when he’s there. I told him we’re working things out.”

“Are you?” Christie asked.

Mike looked at her for a moment. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Oh,” she said. She looked down at the ground.

“Anyway, can I catch a ride to the pizza place with you?” Mike asked. “I don’t have my cruiser, since I’m not officially back at work yet.”

“What have you been doing for a car?” Christie asked.

“My friend Shawn loaned me his,” Mike said. “But he needed it today.”

“Sure, I’ll drive you,” Christie said. She walked a few steps away to lean against the chain-link fence surrounding the field, needing a moment to think. This was what she’d wanted only a month or so ago—not for Jamie and Mike to separate, exactly, but for her to have another chance with Mike. But the two events were entwined. One was impossible without the other.

Henry was still posing for photos, near one end of the line of players, his red socks pulled up to the knees of his gray uniform, the number 8 boldly stamped on the back of his shirt. As a little boy, Henry had dressed up as a baseball player one Halloween, back when he’d first become interested in the game. Jamie had even

bought him a tiny Rawlings glove, which had instantly become Henry's favorite possession. Christie had gone trick-or-treating with them for an hour or so, then she'd peeled away, because she had a sexy cat costume and a party of her own to go to. She'd walked back to her car parked next to the white picket fence Mike had built, passing a wooden swing hanging over a branch of the maple tree in a corner of the yard.

The brown lines of the baseball field bisecting the grass reminded Christie of something. Henry had adored that swing. And Jamie had spent so much time pushing him on it that a patch of grass had been worn away by her footsteps, leaving a streak of brown earth cutting through the green.

Christie glanced at Mike again. He was staring off toward the place where Jamie and the kids had been.

Oh, who was she kidding? Mike had never truly wanted her, not when they'd first been dating and not now. He'd only been grateful for her help. She'd tried to imagine Mike kissing her that night in her apartment, when they'd been interrupted by Henry. But he'd leaned away ever so slightly at the precise moment she leaned in. She'd tried to block out that part of the memory, but there was no unseeing his quick, reflexive action.

She thought of the money Jamie had spent to send Henry to camp, while the broken strap on her sandal flapped with every step. That bit of earth woven through the rich green grass under the swing. The catch in Jamie's voice when Henry had scored the winning run.

She walked back over to Mike. "You're a big old idiot," she said.

"Say what you really think," he countered, but he was smiling. "Don't hold back. You need to get over your shyness."

"You and Jamie were meant for each other," she said. "Don't you dare get divorced."

"Look, it isn't—"

"Yeah, yeah, it's none of my business," she finished for him. "Who cares? I'm your friend and I'm telling you to go home to your wife, who loves you."

Mike was looking at her strangely. "Since when are you such a fan of Jamie's?" he asked.

“So she didn’t believe you about the gun,” Christie said. “People make mistakes. Don’t tell me you’ve never made one in your life.”

“It isn’t that easy— How are we talking about this?” Mike asked.

“She’s sorry, Mike. Really sorry,” Christie said. “I can tell. And she loves you. She loves Henry. Jamie loves your family more than anything in the world. That’s got to count for something.”

She let it go then and walked back to the fence, suddenly remembering something she’d meant to do at the game. She picked up her phone and began to type in a text message.

“Who are you calling?” Mike asked.

“Not Jamie, so calm down,” she said. “I’m texting Lou. I forgot I’m staging an intervention with her tomorrow.”

“An intervention?” Mike furrowed his brow.

“Have you seen her haircut?” Christie asked.

Before Mike could answer, Henry came back to them.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Let’s hit it,” Christie said, putting away her phone.

The three of them left the field, with Henry walking between her and Mike, which, Christie thought, was exactly as it should be.

Chapter Twenty

Two months later

JAMIE WAS STARING AT the dry-erase board they'd attached to the kitchen wall to use as a family calendar when Lou walked into the room, yawning hugely.

"Sleep okay?" Jamie asked.

"Like a sloth on a fat branch," Lou said. She grabbed a Honeycrisp apple from the fruit bowl on the counter and crunched into it. "You?"

"Fine," Jamie lied. She walked over to the coffeemaker and poured herself another cup. She would've offered one to Lou, but Lou had sworn off coffee after quitting her barista job, saying it made her feel like she was at work. Jamie added a spoonful of sugar and a dash of cream to her mug—her appetite had resurfaced recently, beckoning back six of the nine pounds she'd lost—then she began taking out the ingredients for waffles. The kids would be hungry when they woke up. They'd all shot up like crocuses over the summer, and Sam had become a really good swimmer, while Emily had lost two more of her baby teeth. Eloise had begun preschool the previous month, and Jamie had worried the transition might be difficult, but Eloise had marched right in on the first day, her new Dora the Explorer backpack firmly in place.

None of the kids seemed to bear scars from that horrible stretch of time in early summer and all that had followed. Jamie only wished she shared her children's resilience.

"I'm heading out," Lou called softly. Jamie walked to the front door to see her sister off.

"Dinner at six, right?" Jamie said.

“Yup,” Lou said.

“I can’t wait to meet him,” Jamie said. “He sounds really great.”

Was Lou blushing?

Jamie leaned against the doorframe, watching Lou head toward the secondhand Honda Accord she’d leased. A cool breeze nipped at Jamie’s bare arms and she shivered. Soon the rising sun would burn off the chill, but right now, the promise of fall had encroached upon the day.

As Lou climbed into her car, Jamie reflected that she still wouldn’t recognize her sister from behind. Christie and Lou had formed a completely unexpected friendship—Jamie still had no idea how it had happened—and Christie had whisked Lou away to the salon where she used to work. Jamie, feeling protective of her younger sister, had almost intervened in Christie’s intervention, but Lou had just laughed and said she didn’t mind. Lou had returned home three hours later, looking dazed, her hair shaped into a layered bob with highlights framing her face.

“It’s crucial that you keep up the highlights,” Christie had instructed Lou. “Go back every four weeks.”

Lou had just nodded, her eyes wide and round—Jamie noticed her eyebrows had been waxed and wondered if other, more delicate parts of her had been, too—and Lou hadn’t ventured anywhere near the salon again.

Christie had given a deep sigh when she’d seen the highlights growing out. “I did my best,” she’d said, then she’d asked Lou if she could set her up on a blind date. That, at least, had gone well, and Lou was bringing Elroy by for dinner tonight, so he could meet the family.

Jamie had sent Christie an email, asking if she’d come, too. *Sure*, Christie had written back. *I’ll bring the wine*.

A friendly toot sounded from a car horn, and Jamie waved at the neighbor driving past. It was the elderly woman down the street who’d ignored them after Mike had been indicted. A week ago, the neighbor had shown up with a casserole, lingering on their doorstep and chatting away as if she’d been in their corner all along.

Mike had brought the kids to visit his parents right after the charges were dropped, partly to escape the reporters who’d returned to camp

out in front of the house. He hadn't asked Jamie to come with them. Knowing her husband needed to escape from her, too, was one of the most painful things she'd endured, along with her father telling her that her mother had died.

Jamie had planned to immerse herself in activity while the kids were gone, to try to distract herself by getting caught up for once—the refrigerator was desperate for a good scrubbing, the kids' toys begged to be organized, and the attic needed to be cleared out before the floor collapsed under it—but she'd ended up staying in bed, not even bothering to shower or change out of her nightshirt. The quiet and solitude she'd used to fantasize about felt like a form of torture, and the sleep she'd long craved eluded her. The kids phoned every evening, their bright voices bubbling over as they talked about body surfing, picnics on the beach, and a trip with Grandma to a candy store to load up on saltwater taffy. Jamie made sure her voice was equally cheerful, even though she felt as if something heavy was crushing her. Mike came on the line only to say a quick hello, which was almost worse than him not talking to her at all.

On the fourth morning after they'd left, Lou stood at the foot of her bed like an apparition.

"Come on," her sister had said, yanking back the covers. "Get up."

"Why?" Jamie had muttered.

"Because you need to," Lou had said, opening the blinds and flooding the room with sunlight. Lou's voice was so determined it seemed as if it would take more energy for Jamie to fight her than to succumb, so she'd crawled out of bed and headed for the hot shower Lou had already turned on. It was odd to think their roles had somehow been reversed while she'd been resting.

Lou had driven her to the zoo and directed Jamie to muck out the elephant enclosures and weigh food. At first Jamie had moved slowly, her limbs aching and her eyes gritty, wanting nothing more than to be in the dark nest of her bed. But gradually she'd become aware of her sister. Jamie had brought the kids to visit Lou at the zoo dozens of times, but she'd never spent the whole day here, watching Lou give directions to volunteers and work with the animals. This was her sister's habitat, Jamie realized with a sense of wonder. She watched

how the elephants responded to her sister, and listened as Lou talked to baby Masego in a gentle voice, her movements swift and assured as she examined him, and Jamie was filled with pride.

“How did you know this was exactly what I needed?” she asked Lou as they drove home that night, her muscles pleasantly sore.

“I guess,” Lou said slowly, “because it always helps me.”

Mike had returned to work, too, and he’d been paid for the weeks of salary he’d lost. Gradually, the story had emerged: Jose was supposed to stay home that afternoon and watch his younger brother, but instead he’d turned on the television and slipped out to meet up with a new group of friends—several of whom were gang members. Alejandro had secretly followed his brother, and when the brawl broke out, he’d become frightened and crawled under a parked car. He’d seen the blood blooming on his brother’s chest, and had watched Jose collapse.

Jamie could see it happening: Jose falling onto his back like a snow angel. The gun—which turned out to be a Beretta with a filed-off serial number—following the arc of his arm as it was thrown backward. The gun clacking against the pavement behind Jose, bouncing and sliding to land within ten feet of Alejandro’s hiding place. The boy slipping out from beneath the car, unnoticed in the melee. Alejandro closing his hand around the weapon and running home.

After they’d retrieved the gun, investigators determined that Jose’s fingerprints were still on the handle. They also learned Jose had been given the gun the previous day by a leader of the gang. Apparently Jose wanted to join it so he could begin selling drugs—but one of his friends said Jose told him he’d do it only temporarily, to help his family. He knew his mother worked long hours, and dreamed of someday owning a house. Jose had wanted more than anything to give her one.

Jamie closed the front door and went to start making waffle batter, her eyes flitting to the calendar once more. The day’s activities were listed: a dentist appointment for Eloise, Sam’s soccer practice at three-thirty, and Henry’s baseball practice at five.

One previously scheduled item was missing, though. Mike’s trial was supposed to have begun this morning.

Jamie shivered again.

“Cold?”

Mike walked up behind her and enveloped her in his thick arms. She leaned back against his chest, tears pricking her eyes. He *had* forgiven her, eventually.

“If you hadn’t gone to Ms. Torres, Alejandro might not have come forward,” Mike had said during one of their marriage counseling sessions. He’d looked at her then—really looked at her for the first time in weeks—and she’d felt a glimmer of hope. “You saved me. I need to thank you for that.”

Now she had to find a way to forgive herself.

“Do you want to finish making the waffles and I’ll go wake up the kids?” she asked Mike.

“Sure,” he said. She gave him a kiss—she found herself kissing him all the time now, and constantly touching him—and headed upstairs. Mike had started to renovate the basement in the time he’d taken off before going back to work, roughing out a tiny bedroom and bathroom for Lou, so Sam could have his old room back until Lou found a place of her own. *No rush*, Jamie had told her. She liked having her sister around.

Mike hadn’t returned to his patrolman’s job, even though he’d been offered it back. Instead, he’d taken the detective promotion he’d once turned down. Jamie had also heard through the grapevine that no officer in the entire force would agree to be partnered with Jay. He’d quit and had apparently moved to North Carolina.

Jamie had asked Mike whether he thought he’d ever go back to working a foot patrol, and Mike had shaken his head. “Doesn’t feel right without Ritchie,” he’d said. It made Jamie sad to think that part of his life was over, at least for the foreseeable future.

But they were going to visit Ritchie, who was back at home now, too, this weekend. Jamie was planning to make a couple of giant lasagnas—one spinach and mushroom instead of meat, because that was Ritchie’s favorite—and Mike and some of the other officers were going to tear down the wheelchair ramp. Ritchie had made swift progress to a walker, and his speech was improving, too. Jamie could almost hear the teasing that would go on. The guys would joke about

signing Ritchie up for a marathon next year, and they'd pretend to eat a bite of the veggie lasagna and gag. Before they tore down the ramp, they'd probably hold races down it in the wheelchair. She and Sandy would make a big salad in the kitchen, chatting as they sliced cucumbers and washed lettuce side by side. The officers would pick up Ritchie's kids and toss them around, and they might notice a sticky door hinge or a leaking pipe and they'd make a mental note to come back and fix it. And in the thick of it all would be Mike, clinking beer bottles with his pals, reminiscing about old cases, making plans to get together for a football game. Because he was one of them again.

Jamie walked upstairs, into Sam's room, and saw that he'd kicked off the covers. Sadie was curled up in the curve behind his knees, and she opened her eyes, looked sleepily at Jamie, and then closed them again.

"Thanks for keeping my boy warm," Jamie whispered.

She sat down at the edge of Sam's bed, watching him sleep. The once-soft curves of his face were turning angular, and his feet looked too big for his body. In another few years, he'd be a mini-Henry.

The buttery smell of cooking waffles drifted upstairs, and Jamie knew she should wake up her son and then her daughters, prod them all to get dressed and come downstairs, but she wanted to stay like this, for just a little longer, listening to the peaceful sound of Sam breathing.

Jamie thought about what they were going to do today.

After they took the kids to school, they were going to drive to Ms. Torres's apartment. Mike had already phoned to ask if he and Jamie could visit. At first he'd suggested a neutral spot, like a diner, but she'd said she preferred that they come to her home. They were going to bring donuts and coffee, and Mike was going to ask if he could talk to Alejandro sometime, to tell him how proud he was of the boy for doing the right thing.

And Mike needed to tell Ms. Torres about the missing piece of the puzzle. Maybe the most important piece.

He'd finally figured it out in the middle of the night, while he'd been lying in bed. He'd sat up so abruptly that he'd awoken Jamie.

"Are you okay?" she'd asked.

"I can't stop thinking about how that idiot Jay was running toward Jose with that can of pepper spray," Mike had said, his voice hoarse. "What if . . ."

Jamie had sat up, too, suddenly feeling wide awake.

"Jose wasn't the kind of kid who joins a gang," Mike had said. "He had no idea what he was getting into. He probably thought he could move some pot and buy his mom a house and get out in a couple of months. He was fifteen. Kids that age—they don't think through stuff."

Jamie had remained silent, sensing Mike was on the cusp of something vitally important.

"So he's in the fight, and he's probably scared out of his mind because he's in way over his head. Maybe he was thrown in as a type of initiation. Maybe it would've scared him enough so he would've tried to have gotten out." Mike had massaged his forehead with his thumb and index finger. "Then he hears someone yell, 'Freeze!' and he looks up to see a cop charging him. The cop is lifting his hand with something metallic and gray in it. Pointing it at him."

"Oh my God," Jamie had gasped. "You think—"

Mike had nodded slowly.

"All along, everyone assumed I was the one who'd imagined I'd seen a gun. But I think it was Jose who did."

"It was raining," Jamie had said. "Maybe he couldn't see clearly . . ."

"Exactly what they said about me. You just gotta flip it," Mike had said.

"Mike, Ms. Torres told me a police officer harassed Jose when he was just a boy," Jamie had blurted. "The officer told Jose to get home and stop causing trouble or the officer would give him real trouble. He made Jose cry."

"Might not have been the only time something like that happened. Maybe that officer was the regular one on the beat," Mike said.

"So Jose drew the gun because he thought he had to defend himself?" Jamie had asked.

"Yeah," Mike had said. "That makes . . . what happened . . . even worse."

He'd fallen back against his pillow and exhaled.

"He was like Henry," Mike had said softly. "He loved his mom. He

took care of his younger brother. He didn't have a violent record. You heard what one of his teachers said—he was a smart kid. He started out life like Henry.”

Your son lives in a different world, one that doesn't automatically treat him with disrespect, Ms. Torres had said. *You have no idea what life is like for our brown boys.*

You're right, Jamie had thought. She'd closed her eyes, feeling herself begin to tremble.

“Henry started a fight at camp when he was under pressure for the first time in his life,” Mike had said. “If he'd been feeling desperate, and wanted to help Christie—if he didn't have us around—you can't tell me he wouldn't be tempted by the idea of moving pot.”

Jamie had rolled over and put her head on Mike's chest, feeling his heart thudding.

“Do you still dream about him?” she'd whispered.

“Not as much,” Mike had said after a moment. “Not every single night.”

But she knew Mike thought about Jose every single day, as did she. She saw it in the way the expression in her husband's eyes changed sometimes when he was with their children, in the way he stayed kneeling at church, praying, after everyone else had risen to their feet.

Today they would tell Ms. Torres everything. Mike had said if she wanted to hold another press conference, to reveal the whole story, he'd stand beside her.

Now Jamie stared at Sam, seeing the sweep of long eyelashes against his cheek, remembering the photograph of Jose in the paper. She wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting there when Sam lifted his head and stared at her sleepily.

“Do I have school today?” he asked.

She reached out and stroked his soft, thick hair. “Yes,” she said.

He groaned and flopped his head back onto the pillow.

“Daddy's downstairs,” she said. “He's making waffles.”

The bedroom window was cracked open, and she could hear a squirrel chattering in a nearby tree. Sam's laundry basket was overflowing, so Jamie picked it up as she began to walk out of the room. She'd try to throw in a load after breakfast.

She could hear the sounds of Eloise stirring in the next room now, and Mike was calling from downstairs that everybody should come eat while it was hot, and Sadie was giving a little whine that meant she needed to go outside, fast, or there would be an accident to clean up.

“Come on, honey,” Jamie said to Sam. “It’s morning.”

Acknowledgments

Things You Won't Say was born during a conversation with my extraordinary editor, Greer Hendricks. Greer helped me pinpoint exactly what I wanted to write about—and because of her probing questions and creative contributions, this novel was in good shape even before I sat down to type a single word. A good editor can improve a manuscript. A great editor can help inspire an entire book. I'm honored to get to work with Greer, and I'm grateful beyond measure for her friendship, her faith in me, her talent, and her generosity.

My literary agent, Victoria Sanders, is fiercely protective, brilliant, boundlessly kind and loyal. Victoria's careful reading of *Things You Won't Say*—and her subsequent suggestions—made this book better. In good times or bad, Victoria is the kind of agent, and friend, an author needs by her side.

I suspect Sarah Cantin cloned herself a few years ago, because there's no way one woman can do so much, so well. I'm immensely grateful for her constant help.

Marcy Engelman is one of the best dinner companions you could ever hope to have in New York City, and I'm so thankful she continues to sprinkle publicity magic dust over my novels.

My thanks to Chandler Crawford for her many years of hard work and dedication in selling foreign rights to my books, and to Lisa Keim at Atria for the same. Bernadette Baker Baughman is a joy to work with, as is Chris Kepner, and I look forward to many more years and books together. My heartfelt appreciation also to Emily Gambir in Marcy's office.

My gratitude to everyone at the amazing publishing house Atria Books: Judith Curr, Ben Lee, Lisa Sciambra, Carly Sommerstein, Hillary Tisman, Jackie Jou, Yona Deshommes, and Paul Oleswski.

And a special thanks to the very funny, very smart Ariele Fredman.

My sincere appreciation to my film agent, Angela Cheng Caplan, and to Kim Yau in her office, for all they have done. And thanks also to Caroline Leavitt for an insightful early read, and to Judge Jennifer Anderson and Robert Seasonwein for providing legal expertise.

More than a decade ago, while working as a features reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, I wrote an article about police officers in crisis. Recalling that story helped inspire this book. I was incredibly fortunate to work with editors Bill Marimow, John Carroll, and Jan Winburn on “Officer Down!” And I will always be grateful to Officers Lavon’De Alston and Keith Owens for speaking with me at such a difficult time. Officer Harold Carey Jr., a hero who died in the line of duty in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1998, was the subject of that story.

My gratitude also to the incomparable Kathy Nolan, for her friendship and her incredible support. I’d also like to thank the elephant keepers at the Seattle Zoo for sharing their experience.

Finally, a gigantic hug to my sometimes chaotic, occasionally nutty, usually messy, and always beautiful family.

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Washington Square Press
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

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First Washington Square Press trade paperback edition May 2015

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Cover design by Anna Dorfman

Cover photography of women and foliage © Thomas Barwick/The Image Bank/Getty Images

All other cover photographs © Shutterstock

Stepback photograph © Cameron Whitman/E+/Getty Images

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pekkanen, Sarah.

Things you won't say : a novel / Sarah Pekkanen. -- First Washington Square Press trade paperback edition.

pages ; cm

1. Police spouses--Fiction. 2. Domestic fiction. I. Title.

PS3616.E358T56 2015

813'.6--dc23

2014039811

ISBN 978-1-4516-7355-5

ISBN 978-1-4516-7356-2 (ebook)

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