

The past doesn't always stay dead and buried...

'A stunning read
from a superb storyteller.'

Clare Mackintosh

the
good
daughter

ALEXANDRA BURT

Alexandra Burt

**The Good Daughter: A gripping,
suspenseful, page-turning thriller**

«HarperCollins»

Burt A.

The Good Daughter: A gripping, suspenseful, page-turning thriller /
A. Burt — «HarperCollins»,

‘A stunning read from a superb storyteller.’ Clare Mackintosh
From the #1 ebook and Sunday Times bestseller, comes the tale of a young woman in search of her past, and the mother who will do anything to keep it hidden... What if you were the worst crime your mother ever committed? Dahlia Waller’s childhood memories consist of stuffy cars, seedy motels, and a rootless existence traveling the country with her eccentric mother. Now grown, she desperately wants to distance herself from that life. Yet one thing is stopping her from moving forward: she has questions. In order to understand her past, Dahlia must go back. Back to her mother in the stifling town of Aurora, Texas. Back into the past of a woman on the brink of madness. But after she discovers three grave-like mounds on a neighbouring farm, she’ll learn that in her mother’s world of secrets, not all questions are meant to be answered... The Good Daughter is a compelling take on a genre that shows no sign of slowing down. The perfect read for fans of Gillian Flynn and Paula Hawkins.

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the
good
daughter

ALEXANDRA BURT

Copyright



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Dedication

To those who live under beds,
and pass through walls.
To old and battered houses
with creaking wooden floors.
“All the great stories have witches in them.”

Unknown

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Prologue

They stopped once for the night, in Albuquerque. The name of the city intrigued the girl, so she looked it up in the encyclopedia she carried with her. It was her most prized possession.

Albuhkirkee ... She silently repeated the word until it lost all meaning. The girl caught herself drifting off into some paranoid daydream, not knowing what time it was or where they were going. They had never driven this far for so long, never had to pump gas so many times.

Weary with the burden of her heavy eyelids, she was drunk with sleep by the time her mother stopped at a hotel. *Rodeside Inn*, the sign read. All she'd remember later were the weeds that grew through the cracks of the concrete parking lot.

The next morning, her mother bought donuts at a drive-through and they got back on the road. The girl went to sleep, but when she woke up and looked out the window, the scenery hadn't changed at all. After days on the road, she felt as if she was leaking electricity. The hours stretched, and she wished her mother hadn't thrown her bag in the trunk of the Lincoln—she longed for her American Girl magazine and the jelly bean-flavored ChapStick.

She opened a bag of Red Vines, sucked on them, and then gently rubbed them over her lips until they turned crimson.

Running her fingers across the cracked spine of her encyclopedia—the first pages were missing and she'd never know what words came before *accordion; a box-shaped bellows-driven musical instrument, colloquially referred to as a squeezebox*—she concentrated on the sound of the pages rustling like old parchment as she flipped through the tattered book.

Her mother called her Pet. The girl didn't like the name, especially when her mother introduced her. *This is Pet*, she'd say with a smile. *She's very shy*. Then her mother moved on quickly, as if she had told too much already.

Pet, the encyclopedia said, *a domestic or tamed animal kept for companionship. Treated with care and affection.*

The girl opened the encyclopedia to a random page. She remembered when it was new, how the pages and the spine had not yielded as readily, and she wondered if the pages would eventually shed. She attempted to focus on a word but the movement of the car made her nauseous. Eventually she just left the book cracked open in her lap.

"My feet are cold. Can I get a pair of socks from the trunk?" she asked somewhere after the New Mexico/Texas border.

"Not now," her mother said and checked her watch.

The girl fell asleep again and later awoke to the slamming of the car door. She rubbed her eyes and her surroundings came into focus: red brick walls, a large sign that read *Midpoint Café*, her mother standing by a pay phone only a few feet away, rummaging through her purse for change. It was noon and the girl felt ravenous as she stared at a display poster of fries and milkshakes in the café window.

"I'm hungry," she called out to her mother.

"It has to be quick, we have to be somewhere," the mother said, and the girl slid on her sandals in a hurry.

In the gloom of the dingy café, their knees touched under the narrow table. The mother opened up a newspaper left behind in the booth and scanned the headlines.

The girl had so many questions: Why are we rushing?; Who did you call?; Where are we going?; Why did we drive all the way from California to Texas?—she had the whole conversation planned out, knew exactly what to ask: short, direct questions that left no room for vague and elusive answers. The place was loud and crowded and the diners competed with one another to be heard, creating an overall atmosphere of raucousness. In the background, a baby cried and a waitress dropped a plate.

They ordered lunch—French fries and a strawberry shake for the girl, coffee and a Reuben sandwich, no sauerkraut, for the mother—and while they waited for their order to arrive, the mother excused herself. “I have to make another call, I’ll be right back.”

She ate and watched the diners and minutes later, her mother returned. She had seemingly perked up, now appeared bubbly, almost as if in a state of anticipation, and her eyes moved quickly. “Let’s play a game,” she said and opened the paper. “Tell me a number between one and twenty-two.”

The girl loved numbers. *Numerology; belief in divine, mystical or other special relationship between a number and a coinciding event.* The number 7 was her favorite one. 7 meant she was a seeker, a thinker, always trying to understand underlying hidden truths.

“Seven,” the girl said and silently recited random facts: *seven ancient wonders of the world, seven days of the week, seven colors of the rainbow.*

They ate silently, the girl devouring the fries, then taking her time with the milkshake, studying the people around her while her mother skimmed page seven of the newspaper. She wondered how naming a number of a page was a game to begin with, but her mother seldom answered questions posed to her, and so she didn’t ask.

The mother paid the check and the waitress counted out the change.

Just as the girl attempted to decipher the headline the mother had been studying, she called out to her. “Hurry up, Pet.”

The girl did as she was told.

Later, the mother rolled down the window and the girl watched her check her face in the rearview mirror. When a siren sounded, the mother licked her lips, fluffed her hair, and pulled into a dirt patch where three wooden posts formed an entrance with a cow skull nailed to its very top. An officer appeared next to the car.

“Your headlight’s out,” he said and scanned the car’s interior.

The police officer was lean with closely cropped hair and skin the color of nutmeg. The mother got out of the car, pulled her red scarf tighter around her head. Her hair fluttered in the wind, her clothes clung to her body, and her arms were tightly wrapped around her.

The girl noticed a boy in the back of the police cruiser. “What did he do?” she called out to the officer.

“He didn’t do anything. That’s my son, Roberto,” he said, “he’s just riding along.”

The next time the girl turned around, her mother and the officer were standing in the shade of a large oak tree. Her mother’s voice trailed toward the car like pearls rubbing gently against each other. The officer leaned back and laughed at something her mother said.

Later, the mother drove to a motel, where the girl fell into a deep sleep. The next morning, after free coffee from the dingy lounge and day-old donuts, they emerged from the Aurora Police Precinct with paperwork in their hands. When the girl read the paperwork, it stated Memphis Waller and her daughter Dahlia Waller had been robbed by the side of the road, including the mother’s wallet and identification.

Dahlia; flower, symbolic meaning of a commitment and a bond that lasts forever.

The girl did not ask questions. She was glad to finally have a proper name and no one, not even her mother, would refer to her as Pet ever again.

Later, she would remember that the sky was overcast and turning darker by the minute.

part one

What is this madness blazing in your hearts?

Achilles

Chapter 1

Dahlia

It all started with the crickets.

My mother sweeps them off the porch but to no avail: they seem to multiply exponentially—*They're taking over*, she says melodramatically—and she sprays lemon-scented Raid in every nook and crevice until the fragrance of artificial citrus descends upon her Texas bungalow and becomes part of our lives like the unsightly boxes in her room she hasn't managed to unpack in decades.

April and May bring more rain, which in turn brings more crickets. By June, the porch is covered in shadowy forms climbing up the wooden posts, reaching the horizontal rail just to fall off the precipice and pool under the porch. Come July, my mother is convinced that a rogue crowd of crickets will work their way up the brick walls and discover small pockmarks and cracks along the exterior. *Eventually they will invade the house*, she says.

I explain that last year there were the frogs, and the year before there were the crane flies, and before that—I can't remember, but I make something up—there were the potato bugs. “Next year it'll be something else. Just relax,” I say but she won't have any of it.

“I just can't stand those crickets,” she says, getting more irate with every swipe of the broom.

“Let me go for my run. I'll think of something when I get back,” I say, feeling myself getting impatient.

Over the past months, I have become a master in avoiding fights with her, yet the better I've become, the more she insists on the drama. The world always revolves around her, she sees no point of view other than her own, no explanations occur to her but the ones that make sense to her and her alone.

I step off the porch and stretch my calves, yet my mother is determined to discuss the crickets.

“I hate the sound they make,” she says and follows me into the street.

“*What* sound?” I ask. If I wait any longer it'll be too hot for a run.

“It's like an old hardwood floor when the flooring nails rub together and they squeak,” she says and holds her hand behind her ear as if she is attempting to direct sound waves into it. “You don't understand, Dahlia ...” She pauses as if something important just occurred to her. “They crunch when you step on them. At least no one can come in undetected,” she adds as if her logic has a special shape that fits a special key which in turn fits a special lock.

“I'll call an exterminator,” I say and jog off before she can say anything else.

I regret having come back to Aurora.

Months ago I stood in front of her door and I realized the house hadn't changed at all—the same crooked solar lights from fifteen years ago were stuck in the cracked soil like elfin streetlights. The same drab curtains covered the windows; the paint was still chipped; the door chime hadn't been fixed. I knocked and my mother opened the door and as we embraced, I felt a hesitation, but I was used to that. She still looked impeccable—wore a dress, had done her makeup, didn't have a gray hair to be seen—yet she seemed grim and dark, and rarely was she without a cigarette between her manicured nails. And now she obsessed about crickets.

Leaving my mother's subdivision behind, I make my way down a rural road toward the woods. It's July and the sun that was orange an hour ago is about to turn into a yellow inferno. Another hour and everything will cook.

About two miles into the run, I realize I haven't stretched nearly enough. I feel a slight stinging behind my left knee, an old injury that has been flaring up lately. When I reach the top of the hill leading into the woods, I stop. Hands on my hips, I attempt to catch my breath. The heat bites into me and the sun eats my skin and eyes. I ignore the pesky insects swarming around me, barely wipe away the salty beads trickling down my neck. I scan an unfamiliar tree line to my right—haven't I

paid close enough attention, or have the columns of rain that have swept North Texas for the past few months somehow changed the vegetation?—and I long for shade to stretch my leg.

Squeezing between the trees, I step into the woods and the temperature drops twenty degrees. The scorching sun loses its grip and the air turns dank and muggy. The beauty of the woods takes me by surprise; it's not just a collection of trees but there are paths leading toward what looks like ancient tree cities; some are still standing, and others have turned into mere skeletons. The springy ground is an array of leaves and chunks of rotted wood, the dark wet earth soothes my feet after the unforgiving asphalt.

I follow deer tracks, and brambles claw themselves to the mesh fabric of my Reeboks. With my palms I lean against a gnarly Texas oak, stretching my calves. The bark is sharp, leaving painful imprints on my hands. The burn in my leg ceases and as I bend over and pull brambles off my shoes, I catch a glimpse of a crescent indentation in the ground, like a burrowed tip of a boot in the soil. Next to it, a speck of red, a shade somewhere between scarlet and crimson. I can't make sense of it, as if my mind is trying to fit a square block into a round hole.

I step closer and my brain catches up; the colorful speck is a fingernail, a half-moon rimmed with dirt, resting among the tree scraps. A pale hand with nails a shade a teenager would wear, one with a silly name like *Cajun Shrimp*. The hand is motionless, just lies there, bare and helpless, a peculiar intruder disturbing the methodical layers of the forest's skin.

I scan the ground. There's a pale silver bauble—a coin maybe, larger than a dime but smaller than a nickel. The sun hits it just right and throws a sparkle my way. There's a luster to it, radiant and sparkling, illuminated as if it wants to be observed. I believe the hand and the sunlit glint among the browns and greens of the woods to be a figment of my oxygen-deprived runner's brain.

I bow down to get a closer look. Eyes peek from within the ground. They are surrounded by a spongy layer of pine needles.

Still the square block doesn't fit into the round hole. Broken and cloudy, the eyes stare beyond the cathedral high pillars. The lids seem to quiver ever so slightly.

And then the hand moves.

Run.

My body obeys. Ten steps and I lose my footing and stumble, hit the ground, left shoulder first. I roll down a hill and sharp branches nip at my skin. I tumble farther and farther, a steady and painful descent that I'm unable to stop. I come to a halt and I feel a sharp pain hit me right between my eyes. Then my world goes dark.

When I come to, everything is quiet but for the thumping sound of my heart. I swallow water. I'm drowning. My head throbs but I manage to push my body off the ground. I'm in a creek, facedown. The vision of the hand has carved itself into my brain. *I must be mistaken*, I tell myself.

I catch my breath and return to the very spot. I kneel down and a burning sensation moves up my arm, to my face, then to my neck. There is an anticipation, a nervous kind of energy tingling through me, as if electrical sparks are traveling all the way to my toes. A scent hits my nostrils, an olfactory hint of something ... unpleasant ... out of place within the otherwise fresh forest. The scent is sickly sweet, a mere hint one moment, then a good stench. Something is dripping onto my lap—warm moisture spreads onto my bare thighs—and I realize my nose is bleeding profusely. My shaking hands are covered in blood.

A buried body, I think, as if I have finally solved a riddle I've been pondering for a while. My mind tumbles, spills into itself. My sense of smell is heightened and the soil and decomposing leaves make the atmosphere thick. I feel a sense of paranoia, I imagine someone watching me, no, I don't imagine, I *know* there's someone watching me.

I scan the trees around me. I know what I am; prey. A small sob works its way up and out of my throat.

There's no visual clue, just knowledge and intuition, and my eyes find a narrow path with knotted roots. *Run*, I repeat to myself, and again my body obeys.

I reach the road and wave down a truck filled with men in overalls. There's a large ladder covered in paint splatters extending beyond the truck bed. I scream and point at the tree line and they rush in that direction.

One man stays behind and says words in Spanish I don't understand.

I feel as if I have traveled through a time machine: I remember the clinic well—Metroplex, a three-story building, aged and tacky, from the industrial carpet to the disassembled pay phones left deserted on linen fabric-covered walls.

I recall the emergency room—every strep throat, every fever that wouldn't go away, every sprained ankle, every cut that required stitches resulted in arguments with nurses and administration. My mother refused to sign paperwork, wouldn't give them any information but our names.

There's this rage inside of me that I feel toward my mother and I wish my memory was a sieve, yet it maintains a detailed account of her transgressions, all fresh, all defined, neat and organized. They sit in waiting and many have come back to me lately, so many memories have returned, yet not a single one of them pleasant. Lately, all it takes is an image, a smell, a faint recall, and the dam of restraint breaks. It sloshes over everything, unforgiving in its clarity.

They say—I've done the research—humans are hardwired to retain negative memories as a matter of survival.

Survival; the act of surviving, especially under adverse or unusual circumstances.

El Paso, Texas, 1987

I roll down the car window to allow the night to seep in. I hear trucks idle. I listen to the drone of the engines; observe them maneuver in and out of the parking lot. They hiss and scream; sometimes their engines fall silent. Men emerge and climb from the cabs.

It's their house on wheels, my mother tells me.

My house is the backseat of my mother's car. From there I watch the constant movements of trucks and men. I arrange my pillows and blankets just right. I have learned how to tuck myself in. I am to remain underneath, hidden.

It's just a game, my mother says. So no one knows you are here.

I listen to their radio until it jitters, and then there is nothing left but silence. Underneath the many layers, I hear my mother talk to the truckers.

One man said, I saw a black dog, so I pulled over.

I'm afraid of the black dog. I watch the road sometimes, expect him to stand in the middle, drooling, baring his fangs.

I spread out my crayons over the seat. When I run out of paper, I flip through my drawings until I find one that's blank on the back.

We wash up in a sink in a nearby building. The floor is cold and my bare feet leave dirty wet trails all over the white tiles. I wiggle and struggle to get away from the cold that makes my skin turn into tiny bumps.

Is the black dog coming for me? I ask my mother.

She just laughs.

The dog's not real—it's when you drive too long and you see things. It's time to pull over and sleep. That's all.

I know the feeling of seeing things. I will keep an eye out for the black dog anyway. To make sure. Mom leaves and when she returns, she smells of food. She hands me a donut, and I eat in the car. I get powdered sugar all over everything but mom doesn't seem to mind.

Those days don't feel real. It's almost as if I travel while I sleep. When I wake up, I'm in a different place but still in the car.

I love the car. All my toys are in the car.

Chapter 2

Dahlia

The ER waiting room is quiet but for the hypnotic tick of an old plastic clock hanging on the wall. A whiff of latex and disinfectant hangs in the air.

Bobby's uniform is tidy, his blue button-down shirt and navy-colored slacks pressed immaculately. His hair is short, his face freshly shaven. A lifetime ago Bobby and I went to high school together, but he stuck around and I left Aurora days after graduation. We haven't spoken since I've been back in town.

"I can't believe this," I say and struggle to line up the events. My clothes are wet; so is my hair.

Bobby smiles at me. "You've been back in town for what ... a few months, and I see you're still the same old troublemaker."

For a split second I'm a teenager again, remembering how we'd roam through town, wandering around in abandoned buildings, acquiring cuts and bruises and sprained ankles along the way. "Seems that way, doesn't it?" I finally say.

"I waved at you the other day, at the gas station. I was going to follow you and pull you over."

I feel some sort of way about his words. That's how we met a long time ago; his father pulled my mother over by the side of the road. Bobby sat in the backseat of his father's cruiser, I was in the backseat of my mother's car, and we stared at each other.

I ignored Bobby at the gas station because of the way I'd left fifteen years ago. That and the fact that my life is nothing to be proud of. I have been dreading having to make small talk with him, catch up, swap stories about our lives.

"How long has it been?" Bobby asks. "Just about fifteen years?" he says as if he's kept track of time.

I do the math. I arrived in Aurora just shy of thirteen. I did one year in middle school, then went to high school. In high school, I saved every dollar I made; I bagged groceries, worked at the car wash, even put away my allowance. There wasn't any money for college, and I didn't have any motivation or big dreams short of getting out of town—but Bobby was going through something then. His mother had cancer, had been well for years, but then it returned. There seemed to be something else; he was preoccupied with things I knew nothing about, things he was reluctant to share. I left Aurora at eighteen. Fifteen years exactly.

The last time we spoke was the night I left.

"If you think about it, why not go to Colorado, or California? If we're going to leave, might as well go far," I had said but he had remained quiet. We had talked about leaving Aurora for years, leaving Texas altogether; we had imagined it many times.

"You want to hear what I think?" he finally asked.

I sensed sarcasm. He started talking about having a different perspective and maybe I should be thankful for what I have instead of griping about what I don't. That night, he made his way through a six-pack in no time, and by the time he was on the last beer, he didn't make a whole lot of sense. He went on and on about choices some people have that others don't. Had we not talked about leaving Aurora since tenth grade, had we not imagined what life could be like *somewhere else*?—but suddenly there was no more *I vent and you listen*. He was judgmental and mean and not what I needed that night. We parted ways then; he was drunk and I was angry.

At home, I saw my mother hadn't lifted a finger to fill out the paperwork I needed to apply for financial aid. I threw my clothes and a few books in a duffel bag, waited for the sun to come up. When I heard my mother rummage around in the kitchen, I went downstairs.

"You still haven't filled out the forms." It came out sharply, just as I intended. All my life there had been missing paperwork and incomplete forms. "Are we still doing this? We still don't have the

right paperwork?” I asked. There were the missing papers when I was a kid—what I now know to be shot records and residency documentation—and school was the mother of all wounds. She would never let me leave, wanted to attach an eternal tether to me, to make sure I’d never be more than she was.

We argued. I told her I’d leave. She said she’d pay for a community college close by. I told her I wanted to go out of state. We argued some more. Eventually she turned silent and ignored me.

I left that night. I drove down the highway, leaving Aurora behind me. I had about five hundred dollars, a fifteen-year-old car, and my high school diploma—a pretty meek start for a life on my own. There were regrets about that night: I had fought with my mother, and I had never said goodbye to Bobby.

I felt panic rise up. The streets felt alien to me, yet I drove on until I reached Amarillo. The city was depressing, with nothing but dust and yellow grass, far away from everywhere and close to nowhere. I found work the very next day and a place to stay. *Help Wanted* signs at motels were plenty along the two major highways running through town, and my mother had taught me well: the right motel and the right owner, and you can offer free work for a week in exchange for a room. One week’s worth of work for the room each month, cash for the next three weeks of work. I knew that many employers didn’t mind turning a blind eye to the fact that I insisted on getting paid under the table.

I got a second job at a nearby motel, and after a year of saving every penny, I felt confident I was in a good place. One day, on my way to my second job, a tapping and slapping sound under the hood made me pull over. The car, by then sixteen years old, was no longer fixable. The next day I went to apply for a car loan, for a used older model Subaru—though it was still better than what I had—but I needed my social security number.

“I’m sorry we can’t process the application,” the car salesman said. “Do you have your card on you?”

“I think I lost it,” I lied.

He scrambled through the papers. “You might want to go to the social security administration office downtown.”

“How about I pay you cash for the car?” I hated to use every penny I had saved up, but I needed transportation. I haggled some, paid for the car. I never went to the local social security office. It was just like it had always been, the old and familiar hurdle that was *paperwork*.

I worked more jobs to save more money and eventually moved out of the motel. I knew better than to try to rent an apartment, but I waited for a sublet to come available—there’d be no credit checks, no paperwork, and no contracts to fill out. I lived in a three-bedroom apartment with two other women: a flight attendant and a pharmacy student from Ecuador.

I thought about starting my own residential cleaning business, but I knew the business license would never happen. Again, there’d be *paperwork*. There were better jobs I qualified for over the years—cruise ships taking off from Galveston—but I needed a passport. I kept my head down, never forming lasting friendships or getting seriously involved with anyone. Fifteen years passed, and I saw myself going nowhere but down a lonely, dead-end road of minimum wage jobs and double shifts.

I thought about returning to Aurora, but those moments passed. I thought about my childhood, and those thoughts lingered. My early years remained sketchy at best; I couldn’t name my favorite childhood food, stuffed animal, board game, friend, place, or person. Glimpses emerged, yet none of them could be verified; there was no attic stuffed with trunks and boxes holding dolls and toys and old bicycles. When my mother and I did move, we started completely from scratch; no phone calls to left-behind friends, no letters, no Christmas cards. Everything was final, never to be revisited.

I imagined myself twenty years from now and I panicked. I needed a social security number, a birth certificate, and proper documentation so I could emerge from the shadows of my bleak existence.

With those thoughts, I got on the same highway that had led me to Amarillo and I went back to Aurora. The trunk was filled with hardly more than I had left with fifteen years before. On the highway, I folded the visor down, and in the mirror I saw my reddened face. I was going to appear back in my mother's life the same way I had left; one minute there, then gone, then back again.

I had questions. The kind of questions that, once raised, demanded answers.

Sitting in the ER, I want to apologize to Bobby for ignoring him all these months.

"You okay?" His words pull me out of my lulled state.

I attempt to speak, but my voice fades into unintelligible croaks.

I hear a gurgling sound from the water dispenser and he holds my hand steady as he places a cup of cold water in it.

"Drink this." He raises his hand and brushes my wet hair out of my face.

Water spills over my hands. I remember the creek. There's that odor, the one I smelled in the woods. Sweet and pungent—roadkill is what comes to mind, a recollection of hiking and coming across a deer cadaver, weeks old, dissolving in the heat. All blood leaves my face and I grip the paper cup so tight that I nearly crush it.

"Maybe you should spend the night in the hospital? You look horrible. You don't seem well at all."

"I'm fine. Really, I am. How's your dad?" I ask to change the subject. I wish I looked more put together, hair done, makeup, a shower.

"You know, he's old." Bobby pauses for a moment, and a shadow falls over his face. "He's not the man he used to be."

A nurse behind the counter turns up the volume of the TV mounted to the wall. Bobby and I both look up, glad to be distracted.

There's mention of breaking news about the girl from the woods coming up and immediately a vision of the tree line appears out of nowhere and my mind pops like an overheated lightbulb. The hand of a dead woman with red fingernails. There's no sense in fighting the image of her fingers prodding through soil layers, a hand stealing a glimpse of the underworld.

"You're shaking." Bobby waves his hand in front of me as if to fan me some air. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"Is she alive?" I haven't dared ask but I must know.

"Yes, barely. She's in a coma."

I'm back in the woods, bent over her body. Someone dug a hole and shoveled dirt on top of her. Buried her alive. How long ago? A day? Hours? Minutes, even? The possibility that someone watched me discover her—stood behind a nearby tree, his boots covered in soil, his heart beating in his chest, sweat on his brow, watching me—is mind-boggling. I manage to wipe the thought away like a determined hand removing fog from a bathroom mirror.

"You're right, I look awful," I say. My reflection in the glass doors that lead into the emergency room speaks for itself.

"How are you supposed to look after falling into a creek and busting your nose?"

"I need to call my mother," I say. It's been hours since I took off running; she must be frantic by now.

"They sent an officer over. She was a bit ... well, a bit feisty about the police coming to the house. Took a lot of convincing to get her to open the door. What's that all about?"

I ignore his question. I imagine the doorbell ringing, a suspicious *Who are you looking for?* through the closed door, an insistent *Are you Memphis Waller?*, her silence on the other side, the officer attempting to convince her to open up. Did *This is about your daughter* prompt her to let her guard down? Did the entire conversation happen through a bolted door, or did she reluctantly allow the officer inside, just to regret her lack of vigilance?

"Do you know who the woman is?" I ask.

“She’s still unconscious. We can’t interview her,” Bobby says. “We haven’t IDed her yet either.” Bobby hesitates ever so slightly and leans forward in the chair. “Did you see anyone?” Every muscle in his face communicates tension.

“I was running the trails. My leg started hurting and I needed to stretch. I went into the woods. It was just one of those things, I guess. I just happened to be there.”

“So you don’t remember anyone? Other joggers? Trucks? Hikers? Even just cars passing by? Anything?” His voice sounds breathless, but then he seems to compose himself. “What are the odds, huh?” He checks his wristwatch. “You’ll have to give an official statement once you feel better. So ... someone will check you out before you leave. I’ll come back and give you a ride home. They’ll let me know when you’re ready to go, okay?”

I nod. My head pounds and I have lead in my veins, my limbs heavy and saturated with exhaustion. I watch Bobby push the square stainless steel elevator button and the large doors swallow him as if he is a ghost of times past.

After the doctor looks me over and concludes that I’m *just a bit beat up and bruised*, a nurse helps me take off my wet clothes and change into a pair of gray scrubs. In the waiting room, with my wet clothes in a plastic bag on my lap, I sit and wait for Bobby.

The TV is still tuned to the local news. First, the reporter focuses on the closing of the road, detours, and forensics being done out in the woods. Then, with one hand tight around the microphone, a piece of paper in the other: “According to an anonymous hospital source, the woman was in the woods for a very short time before she was discovered.” *An anonymous source?* It sounds clandestine, but someone probably knows a nurse who’s overheard a comment or read a file. In small towns like Aurora it’s really as simple as that.

The reporter smiles and promises to keep the viewers updated. KDPN has told me nothing more than I already know.

I feel an odd sense of kinship with the woman I found in the woods and figure there is no public plea for her identity because law enforcement expects her to wake up and tell them her name at any moment.

Suddenly the screen switches to a black-and-white sketch of a woman. I catch a few words here and there—similar case ... mystery woman ... almost thirty years ago ... sketch artist ... cold case. The woman was reported missing by a man who had no photo of her, hence the sketch. It is an image drawn with pencil on paper, facial features created by a forensic artist to identify unknown victims or suspects at large. Old-fashioned wanted posters far from present-day digital images created by computer programs. The reporting then turns to high school football scores.

A nurse appears and informs me Officer de la Vega is waiting for me at the ER entrance. When I stand up, the world around me spins, then stills.

Instead of departing through the two large sliding glass doors, I take the stairway. Holding on to the railing, I walk up two stories. I have one more place to go before I leave the hospital.

The third floor lies abandoned but for a security guard whose silhouette I see strolling down the hallway. He then disappears around the corner. A board on the first door on the right says *Jane Doe*, scribbled with a dry erase marker. *My Jane*, I say quietly to myself, as if the fact that I found her gives me the right to claim her.

I enter the room. I shut the door behind me, and as I part the curtain, the plastic gliders gently purr in their tracks.

I approach Jane in a very pragmatic way, partly to calm my nerves, partly not to miss anything. First, I take in the visuals; her weight, height, and skin color: five seven, one hundred and forty pounds, plus or minus five pounds, pale complexion with a gray undertone. Her hair is ashy blond, medium brown maybe, slicked back, hard to tell.

The monitor above her bed is busy; Jane’s heartbeat is rushing along in one neon green jagged line, unsteady like the jittery crayon stroke of a child. There are two other lines, one red and one

yellow. Measuring blood pressure and oxygen saturation, I assume, but I can't be sure. But it seems that's what those machines ought to track. A body needs circulation, oxygen, a heartbeat.

There are three tubes in all. One in her left arm, one leading from under the blanket to a urine collection bag. The third is a breathing tube. With a rhythmic hissing sound that raises and lowers as the machine cycles, a ventilator blows air into her lungs. Jane's chest is rising and falling in a steady wave. The side rails of the bed are pulled up as if there is a conceivable chance she might spontaneously get up and make an attempt to get away.

I'm taken aback by the measures required to keep her alive. I feel the desperate energy her body radiates in its lulled state of unconsciousness, compensatory for some unknown act of violence inflicted upon her. I spot Jane's likeness in the reflection of the large window, her ethereal body an apparition, and beyond that lies the town of Aurora, a faraway carpet of glitter, like an otherworldly background of sorts.

I step closer and I allow my hand to hover over Jane's hands. They are now scrubbed clean, but some dirt remains under her nails. They are jagged, as if she tried to claw her way out of the grave someone had put her in. I lower my hand and feel her skin; it's warm to the touch, alive, prickly almost.

An odd scent fills the air. I tilt my head back and sniff at it like a dog. *Is that cinnamon?* My mind slips like feet losing ground on a slick floor, then the pressure behind my eyes becomes unbearable. I can't quite interpret what message is coming from her, but I *know* she's trying to communicate with me. That's it—how else can I explain the tremor in my hand that slowly works itself up to my shoulder? It then rushes through my body and a metallic taste develops in my mouth. I plunge into what feels like madness in the making; images of trees, branches clawing at me. Someone has turned a switch, making reality hard to identify; it's blending with visions of Jane in the woods, digging a hole with her own bare hands. I can smell dank creek water, feel it seep into my nostrils. Is that what my Jane went through or am I reliving falling into the creek and losing consciousness? Suddenly we are one and I am inside Jane's body, *I am* the one in the woods, not her.

I'm not sure when I fall, but I hit the floor, knees first, then my body folds in on itself. Cold linoleum seeping through the thin scrubs snaps me back into reality. There's a voice coming from above, almost as if I'm at the bottom of a well and someone is talking down to me. A pinpoint-sized speck of light seems to appear out of nowhere. The speck turns into a beam, then the beam turns into something brighter than the sun, so bright that it sears my eyes, hot and sharp like a blade.

"Are you okay?"

I know the voice. *Dahlia. Dahlia. Dahlia.* Over and over. I want to answer but I can't. The pungent cinnamon scent is trapped in my nostrils, bitter and sharp. There's pressure under my arms and then around my waist. I'm nothing but dead weight, yet Bobby manages to place my body onto something rather soft and comfortable.

All that is left of what's happened is a pounding headache and aching joints. I'm beyond hungry. Famished.

"What happened? No one is allowed in here. Did you pass out?"

I find my voice: "I think she just tried to communicate with me."

Bobby cocks his head to the left; his eyes go soft. "Look at her," he says. "Does she look like someone trying to communicate?"

I have taken a long hard look at her. I know it sounds nuts.

"You smell that?" I ask.

"Smell what?"

"Cinnamon," I say.

"I don't smell anything. Let's go," Bobby says.

How can he *not* smell that? It's all over the room, pungent, sharp, biting its way up my nostrils.

"Wait. You really don't smell that?" I ask and resist when he tries to push toward the door. "Just breathe in."

“I don’t smell any cinnamon, Dahlia. But we’re about to be in a shitload of trouble if they find us in here. I’m taking you home. Now.”

The scent remains with me as we depart through the sliding glass doors and even when I fasten the seatbelt in Bobby’s police cruiser. I stare straight ahead, my head against the headrest. Something feels different, as if a part of me went AWOL in Jane’s room. What that missing part has been replaced with I can’t tell.

The police radio squelches and splats until Bobby turns the volume down, the communication now white background noise.

“It’ll be okay. Just try to relax,” he says and rests his hand on top of mine, which are shaking in my lap.

His hands are familiar, sinewy, with short fingers and large palms. I roll down the window, close my eyes, and allow my hair to blow in the breeze. The silence between us is natural, soothing. We used to be that way, comfort for each other. I feel myself calm down, almost as if hardly any time has passed between us at all.

Fifteen minutes later my mother’s house appears on Linden Street, a road ironically lined with Mulberry trees. The scent remains, yet watered down, the pungent part now in need of detection, no longer presenting itself without any effort. The sweetness, now replaced by an earthy, nutty scent, reminding me of something pure and uncontaminated, not the syrupy and artificial kind drifting through the mall when you pass the Cinnabon counter in the food court.

“She’s in a coma?” I ask Bobby one more time as I reach for the car door. “You know that for a fact?”

Bobby nods. “It’s all over the news.”

I try to tell myself I just went through a lot—finding Jane, hitting my head, falling in a creek, seeing her comatose and hooked up to machines—and that I have the right to feel out of sorts and that it’s really no surprise that I’m beside myself.

I nod and as we shuffle along the driveway, I see the front door is ajar, my mother kneeling on the porch. She sees us, stands, and goes inside, slamming the door shut.

“It’ll be okay,” Bobby says. I’m not sure if he’s talking about me or my mother. “Get some rest and call me when you wake up, okay?”

I trust Bobby. Trust him with my life. And so I just come out and say it again. “She tried to tell me something.” Just like that. I don’t know of any other way to communicate what just happened to me in that room.

He doesn’t acknowledge the comment, but doesn’t tear at it either.

“Don’t come inside,” I say. “She’s in a mood.” There is no such thing as rest in my mother’s house, there is no resting from my mother’s moods. She is unpredictable at best.

Bobby looks at me as if he is going to argue, but then his shoulders drop. My eyes follow his cruiser lights as he drives off. He taps the horn three times and I smile. It’s something he used to do a lifetime ago.

I catch another whiff of the cinnamon scent. I turn my head, expecting to see its origin, but I know better. What if this is it? This is how it starts. Soon there will be crickets in my world too. Have I been a sitting duck, a sure victim of my mother’s faulty and mentally deranged DNA?

At the threshold I sidestep a cricket that looks like a miniature black raven on its back. But there are others I can’t avoid, and as the tip of my shoe crushes the carcasses to dust, I hear my mother’s voice.

“Where’ve you been?” She appears calm but her voice is higher pitched than usual. She wears makeup and a dress; her hair is a couple of shades lighter than it was this morning. She is barefoot as if somehow she forgot to complete the illusion of having it together.

“You’ve heard what happened?” I ask.

She turns the kitchen faucet on full blast. The microwave stops running, then beeps. The scents of burnt popcorn and cigarette smoke sting my nostrils. The cigarette between her fingers is short enough to burn her. She leans forward and crushes it out in an already overflowing ashtray.

“Have you heard what happened?” I repeat, my voice louder than I want it to be.

“You had some sort of an accident. They wouldn’t tell me anything else,” she says.

“I found a body in the woods. A woman. She’s alive but in a coma.” I shudder at the mental image of my Jane covered in forest debris.

My mother shifts in place as if she is trying to find a way to perfectly position herself, like she is expecting a blow. “You should’ve stayed home and taken care of those crickets. You never listen to me.”

I stand next to her, pass the dish soap, and watch her swirl her hands around in the water.

“I was running but my leg hurt and I went into the woods and—”

“Where did you find her?”

“Let me tell you the story from the beginning.” My mind is still attempting to make sense of everything and recalling the moment. Allowing me to relive what happened might help me do just that, might help me separate truth from imagination. But as always, my mother won’t have any of it.

“What woman and where?” She scoops up dirty silverware and immerses the pile into the sudsy water.

“Will you just be patient,” I say and then lower my voice. “If you’ll allow me to tell the story without—”

She stomps her foot on the linoleum, and it strikes me how silly the gesture is. I watch the sudsy water turn into a pink lather. It takes me a few seconds to realize what has happened.

“Mom,” I say gently, “you cut yourself.” I grab her by the forearms and allow the water to rinse off the blood. There’s a large gash in the tip of her middle finger; a line of blood continuously forms.

“I don’t understand,” she says, and I realize she’s begun to sob.

I hug her but she remains stiff, her arms rigid beside her body. She has never been one for physical affection, almost as if hugs suffocate her. I rub her shoulders like she’s a little kid in need of comfort after waking from a bad dream. *There, there. You’ll be okay.*

I speak in short sentences; maybe brevity is what she needs. “I found a woman. She’s okay. I’m fine. Everything’s okay,” I say as I wrap a clean kitchen towel around her fingers.

“The police came to my house.” She pulls away from me, dropping the bloody towel on the floor. “I don’t like police in my house. You know that.”

“I’m not sure you understand. A woman almost died. I found her while I was running and they took her to the hospital. If I hadn’t—”

“You’ve been here long enough,” she says and starts banging random dishes in the sink, mascara running down her cheeks. “You came for a visit and you’re still here.”

“Mom.” She doesn’t mean to be cruel—she’s just in a mood, I tell myself. She needs me. I don’t know what’s going on with her but I can’t even think straight and all I want is to go to bed and sleep. “Please don’t get upset.”

“Can’t you just ... lay low?”

The tinge of affection I just felt for her passes. I recall the time I didn’t lay low, years ago, right after I started school in Aurora. It was the end of summer, the question of enrollment no longer up in the air. I wondered how she had managed to enroll me in school, how she had all of a sudden produced the paperwork. “But remember,” she said, “stay away from the neighbors. I don’t want anyone in my house.” The girl—I no longer remember her name but I do recall she had freckles and her two front teeth overlapped—had chestnut trees in her backyard. One day, I suggested we climb the tree. When I reached for the spiky sheath that surrounded the nut, it cut into the palm of my hand and I jerked. I fell off the tree and I couldn’t move my arm. I went home without telling anyone my arm hurt. The next day a teacher sent me to the school nurse. They called my mother—I still wasn’t caving, still telling no

one what had happened, still pretending my swollen arm was nothing but some sort of virus that had gotten ahold of me overnight—and an hour later my secretive behavior prompted them to question my mother regarding my injury. When I finally came clean, her eyes were cold and unmoving.

Laying low is still important to her. “What did you want me to do?” I ask with a sneer. “She’d be dead if it wasn’t for me.”

Even though she hardly looks at me, I can tell her eyes are icy. Her head cocks sideways as if she is considering an appropriate response. Her responses are usually quick, without the slightest delay in their delivery, yet this one is deliberate.

“I don’t need any trouble with the police,” she says.

“That’s what this is about? The police? What did you want me to do? Just leave her in the woods because my mother doesn’t want to be bothered? You can’t be serious.”

“I’m very serious, Dahlia. Very serious.”

“I have to go to bed. I’m exhausted. Can we talk later?”

“I’ve said all I had to say.”

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling. I don’t want to think anymore—just for a few hours, I want to not think. I envy Jane in her coma. I wonder if she’s left her body behind. Has she returned to the woods, reliving what’s happened to her? And did she hear me when I spoke to her? Can one slip out of one’s body and back into the past, removed from time and space?

My mind has been playing tricks on me lately—all those childhood memories that have resurfaced, at the most inopportune moments, memories I didn’t know existed. I haven’t even begun to ask my mother the questions that demand answers.

Aurora; a phenomenon. A collision of air molecules, trapped particles.

I’m exhausted, yet sleep won’t come. I didn’t think coming back to Aurora was going to be so unsettling. There is no other explanation. It must be this town.

Chapter 3

Quinn

The old, detached garage had been in desperate need of a paint job for years. The layers were peeling off and the bleached birch wood had been painted numerous times; multiple coats had merged into a shade that was hard to identify.

Killing time in the swinging chair on the front porch, Quinn listened to the metal poles screeching with every painful descent. First, the garage was there. Then it was gone. There, gone. She wished everything was that easy, that she could make things disappear. She went over the list in her mind; PE on Tuesdays and Thursdays—she was too heavy and sweated profusely—even though she liked watching the boys play football and loved the sound of the rumbling buzzer; church on Sundays came in a close second. She could do without the itchy tights and the leather shoes pinching her feet, the dress stretching tightly over her body, the scent of Play-Doh and gossip and old hymnals with gold-rimmed pages. But most of all, she wanted to make a woman disappear—the woman she was waiting for on the porch.

She hadn't met her yet; in fact, she had just found out about her the previous morning. Her father had waited for her to come down for breakfast—she couldn't remember the last time they'd had breakfast together—and he hadn't even given her a chance to eat.

"I met a very nice lady," he had said and set the coffee cup down. "And I hope you'll grow to love her as much as I have."

Just like that. There'd be another woman in the house. All those days and nights of business in some town were nothing more than a lie. He'd been out looking for a wife.

Quinn thought about all their plans, traveling for the summer—he had even promised he'd take her to Galveston this fall, had told her all about the hotel, the Galvez. He had described in detail how only rich and famous people and American presidents had frequented it in the past, Roosevelt and Eisenhower, even famous actors, like Jimmy Stewart and Frank Sinatra, and Howard Hughes. Suites were named after them and Quinn had been looking forward to the trip.

"What about Galveston?" Quinn had asked. "The hotel? The spa? Are we still going?"

"Don't you worry," Mr. Murray said and patted her arm, "we'll go soon, I promise. Really soon."

"The two of us?" Quinn asked.

"Sure. Maybe we all go?"

He had all but *promised* it would be just the two of them, and there'd be spas and a theater and restaurants where they'd serve fish with the head attached and he'd teach her how to use one of those fish knives with a spatula blade to separate the fish's skeleton from the body. In a moment of clarity she admitted to herself that she'd have to give up on Galveston—it was never going to happen.

Quinn continued swinging with brisk speed, hypnotized, running her fingers through her hair. It was poufy and frizzy and regardless of how diligently she used the flat iron, it returned to its untamed state once she stepped into the humidity of a Texas summer day.

Quinn's mind started to rush and her hands began to fidget as she recited ingredients from a cookbook. The old ladies at church, smelling of talcum powder, were always impressed.

"What's your daddy's favorite dish?" they'd ask, and Quinn tried not to stare at their hands covered in dark spots with veins like blue rivers running through them.

"Chicken-fried steak," Quinn said and elaborated on the cut of meat—cube steak—and how she had to pound it fiercely with a meat mallet and then dip it in seasoned flour, pan-fry it, and serve it with a cream gravy made from pan drippings.

As Quinn continued to swing, she yearned for that night's dinner, could almost smell rosemary and chives on her fingertips and the scent of the pot roast with mashed potatoes and okra cooked to

perfection wafting through the house. She loved the comforting clinks the fork made against the fine china as she scraped off every last morsel of food.

Quinn forced herself to abandon this culinary vision—after all, she was waiting on the porch for her father and her new mother to show. He hadn't given her a time or date, just said he'd pick her up—and so Quinn had been waiting out on the porch for the second day in a row, waiting for a car to kick up a cloud of dust on the winding road up to the house.

Quinn stared at the cracked floorboards. She mistook the fissures for spilled paint but then looked closer and recognized an orderly army of ants marching along it, carrying food back and forth. Soon there'd be hundreds, even thousands more, carrying away everything in the house, and even though they were small and insignificant, moving mountains seemed only a matter of time. She hated insects, bugs, beetles—pests, all of them. She didn't even like butterflies.

Kneeling down, she was painfully aware of her stomach pushing against her lungs, forcing her to make a wheezing sound. Out of nowhere, almost like a hummingbird flapping its wings, she felt anxiety flaring up inside her.

Hours passed, and her anxiety became a peculiar state of being. Sitting there with nothing to stare at but the wall with chipped paint, she began to drift into an unpleasant daydream, a memory of the last time she'd been on this porch waiting for someone to show.

For her twelfth birthday she had handed out invitations in school, and she had sat in this very swing when her classmates showed up, gift bags in tow. Quinn knew they didn't come for her friendship's sake but out of sheer curiosity.

At the birthday party, the kids ran through the house, opening and slamming doors, entering rooms no one had any business going in. "What's in there?" they'd ask and rip the door open so it hit the wall behind it with a thud.

"A study. You're not allowed in there," Quinn said but they entered nevertheless, giggling and intruding, leaving the door wide open. She heard distant, hazy chatter. She couldn't make out the words, but laughter rang loud and clear and didn't seem to stop.

Due to the commotion her father had appeared at the top of the stairs. Everybody stared at him, the last button of his dress shirt undone, gaping open, exposing his belly. And they snickered when they saw him, mocked him, his waddle gait, how he used his body weight to swing his leg up, like a pendulum.

After everybody left, cake crumbs and smears of icing were all that remained of the once-triple-layered Victoria sponge cake that had taken her all morning to make. No one had admired the light perfection of the cake itself and the richness of the frosting, none of the kids had said anything, but they had scraped the icing off and made a mess on their plates.

Now this woman, her new mother, was going to live with them. For a split second, she felt the need to run to one of the trees up front and climb up so she could see farther down the road. To everybody's amazement, despite her size, Quinn was proficient in climbing trees. She was strong and not afraid of falling and even though she scraped her legs and skinned her knees in the process, it was all worth it; to peek into a nest—she would *never* disturb it; after all, momma bird was taking care of the baby birds—and to be able to catch a glimpse of her familiar surroundings that seemed so different from a higher viewpoint.

Her new mother didn't appear until nightfall. She wore one of the prettiest green silk dresses Quinn had ever seen—the color of beans dropped in ice water just at the right time to stop them from cooking—and her hair smelled of oranges and bergamot pear and when the light hit it just right, the colors and highlights reminded her of autumn leaves, amber hues melded together like a crown on a princess. And in the middle of her face sat her eyes, deep green and dark as a lake. Quinn couldn't help but imagine how pretty she'd be if she'd been given half of her new mother's beauty.

Quinn was adept at hiding her feelings, yet her heart had a life of its own. It picked up a beat or two, stumbled even, causing her to draw in a deep breath. She didn't know what to say to her and

so she just stood watching her father busily wiping his shiny face with a handkerchief. He seemed happy, his eyes were wide in anticipation, and he stood close to the woman, who was so small that three of her would fit into his body. Quinn could tell by just looking at her that she'd never love him. She was too exquisite a woman to love a man like her father.

"Call me Sigrid," the woman said and she grabbed Quinn's hand, hanging limp by her side. Her smile was small, then fleeting. "I've heard a lot about you," she added but it sounded as if she had just told a lie.

Quinn felt the woman's eyes wander from her round face down her plump body and back up. The woman's cheeks had a rosy hue, but the rest of her skin was quite pale, as if the warmth had recoiled the moment she realized Quinn was not what she'd expected.

"Call you Secret?" Quinn asked, stretching the first syllable.

"S-I-G-R-I-D," the woman replied, spelling out her name.

"Where are you from?" Quinn asked, since she detected an accent.

"Austria," the woman said.

Quinn didn't know what to expect of living with a mother or a woman functioning as a motherly figure, because she had never had one. There was a certain kind of pain and longing for her very own mother—a woman she had never met and who wasn't spoken about unless Quinn brought her up herself—yet the pain was vague at best, elusive, as if Quinn was unable to assign any true meaning to someone she had lost but who had never been there to begin with.

Sigrid turned out to not be very domestic. It took her hours to get ready in the morning, and she never seemed to have time to prepare breakfast or lunch. She drove into town, to the local beauty salon, frequently, however, and always returned in high spirits with arms full of bags and packages. The laundry piled up, and after a few months, it was decided that Mrs. Holmes would return to resume the responsibilities of maintaining the house.

In due time, Sigrid made it a habit to stay in her room. Mrs. Holmes brought her tea on a silver tray with dainty fine china Quinn's father had ordered from Austria as a gift to Sigrid, and she ate all her meals from the plates with gaudy peacock-looking birds and orange and blue flowers. The set came with cups and saucers, sugar bowl and creamer, a soup tureen, and serving plates, dessert bowls, bread plates, a cake stand, and a gravy boat.

"Where did you get those peacock dishes from?" Quinn asked, fascinated by how every dish had its very own bowl or container.

"It's not a peacock, child," Sigrid said as she gently caressed the shiny smooth surface of the dainty plate. "It's a pheasant bird of paradise. The pattern is called Eden."

"Eden like Adam and Eve Eden?" Quinn asked, tempted to reach for the plate, wanting to feel its smoothness and weight, since Mrs. Holmes had been instructed to serve Quinn's food on simple Pyrex plates with a thick red border.

"Adam and Eve? Not so much. More like a perpetual place of bliss, you know, like your father and I."

Quinn knew it was all a lie—there was no paradise, no Eden, not even close. There was, however, Cadillac Man.

Less than one year after her father had married Sigrid, a man in a midnight blue Cadillac had pulled into the driveway. Quinn had dug her shoes into the porch and halted the swing with a violent screech. The man was tall and wore a gray suit and shoes shinier than a newly minted quarter. He retrieved a suitcase from the trunk, nodded at her on his way to the front door, then knocked. Mrs. Holmes wasn't expected for another two hours, but Sigrid must have been standing behind the door, because it opened just seconds later.

"Go play, child," Sigrid called out, and Quinn wondered what kind of games Sigrid thought teenagers played these days. She remained on the front porch for a while, then snuck into the kitchen. She ate the leftover cobbler, wondering what kind of cake and ice cream Mrs. Holmes would serve

after dinner. She wasn't supposed to eat before dinner nor roam or sneak about or spy on Sigrid, but Quinn was curious and if she was careful not to step on the wrong floorboard, if the slats remained silent on her behalf, she might be able to peek into Sigrid's room.

Quinn tiptoed as softly as her body size allowed, avoiding the raised edges of the boards. She turned the knob silently, and after releasing it, she pushed the door inward, allowing for a gap. She waited.

The first thing she became aware of was Sigrid's perfume lingering in the air. She took in the rich scent, a fruity and floral aroma like the sweet peas growing behind the house. The curtains were drawn, but an inch-wide gap let in a beam of light. After her eyes adjusted, she made out the man's jacket draped over the back of a chair. The breakfast tray sat abandoned on the nightstand; the jelly-stained knife rested next to the shredded remnants of a biscuit.

Cadillac Man was kneeling on the bed, next to Sigrid. She must have fainted—her body flat on her back with one leg hanging off the side of the mattress—but there was no shaking of Sigrid's shoulder, no fanning of air, no smelling salt wafting toward her nose. She watched him undo the top button of Sigrid's blouse with one hand while pushing her skirt up with the other.

Quinn straightened up as if she'd been awakened by a bang of cymbals, her heart pounding and blood rushing like a fierce river through her ears. Cadillac Man's hand made Sigrid's body glide effortlessly with a swaying motion, peeling off her skirt. It rustled to the floor. His pointy shoes hit the wooden planks. Sigrid sat up, propping herself up by her elbows, watching him. Sigrid's body had the shape of a violin and as Quinn stood watching, she imagined her own ample body struggling to execute such deliberate moves.

Cadillac Man opened Sigrid's blouse slowly, twisting each button. He ran his fingertip from her throat toward her breastbone, barely dragged it across her neck, but it had left behind a reddish streak on Sigrid's pale skin. The blouse fell open and he studied her body. He held her left breast, gently at first, then, as if he thought otherwise, his hand clutched and covered it, making it entirely disappear. He lifted his hand, barely grazing her nipples, and meandered down her stomach, then back up, and paused again at her breastbone. He shoved Sigrid back onto the bed—for a moment Quinn wondered why Sigrid didn't struggle against him when it seemed so violent, making her entire body bounce on the mattress. Cadillac Man crudely removed Sigrid's underwear, the fabric cutting into her thighs. He got off the bed and on his knees. He kissed her just above her pubic bone, and a finger disappeared inside Sigrid.

Sigrid in turn moved into his hand until he stopped suddenly, removing his finger. While she propped herself up on her elbows again, Cadillac Man got up and unzipped his pants. He grabbed Sigrid by the back of her head, wrapping her hair round his fingers, and then pulled her head back so she had to strain to look at him. Their bodies were statue-like but something seemed to unleash, like horses when the starting gates open. Quinn watched as they moved with the constant sound of flesh on flesh, only interrupted by the man flipping Sigrid onto her stomach. They switched places over and over and then Cadillac Man's round backside heaved one last time and there was nothing but the sound of heavy breathing.

Quinn was captivated as if she were a hare spellbound by the talons of an eagle. An unfamiliar scent lingered in the room, a scent she couldn't quite place. Something much more powerful than red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting, something that reached deeper than the stomach, surged through her, sank its teeth into her, leaving her with a terrible feeling of throbbing and longing.

Leaving the way she had entered, silently, unbeknownst, Quinn went back to the swing on the porch. For a while, she kept momentum, but then allowed the swing to come to a stop. Still shaking, her body two steps ahead of itself, she couldn't erase the image of Cadillac Man's shiny shoes, their tips pointing upward as if to aim toward heaven. Like her father, he too was no match for Sigrid—he was a man who just showed up and stayed for an hour or two just to move on.

Quinn lost her appetite. It wasn't that her hunger had ceased, but that the knowledge had emerged that food was no longer what she was after. The thought of meat roasting in the oven and the sound of swirling and rattling ice cubes in a glass of iced tea nauseated her, no longer made sense as a means of comfort. She pushed it all aside just to feel a sadness she had never felt before. How easily people throw each other away. She knew, in due time, she'd look just like her father and people would make fun of her too. The thought of him made her eyes sting—not the way people ridiculed him, nothing like that—but how he had easily cast his daughter aside for a beautiful woman who had never loved him in return.

There she was—Quinn Murray, who had stopped growing at five foot five inches, who had the kind of face people forgot even before they'd stopped looking at it, a girl who had gained thirty pounds since her fifteenth birthday, all of them around the hips.

Satisfying her hunger suddenly seemed no longer suitable. She felt that yearning leave her and she was fully awake, had only one mission. She longed to be like Sigrid, with violin hips and men adoring her, never to be discarded for anyone. Yet there was also a seed of fear inside of her, and she was unsure of its origin, like a dream she was unable to interpret.

She wanted to be powerful, like Sigrid, as if this world was an instrument to be played. She wanted to be powerful, yet there was also this vulnerability that seemed too familiar to shake. And it terrified her.

Chapter 4

Dahlia

In the Barrington Hotel parking lot, I take one last look in the rearview mirror; the bruises around my nose are still noticeable but the swelling has completely subsided. I run my tongue over my chipped front tooth. The flaw is barely visible but the tip of my tongue is tender from persistently running over the sharp edge. I'm part of a crew of women who clean the guest rooms. We have been hired on probation and get paid under the table. We go unnoticed—we are actually told to never make eye contact nor speak to the guests—yet we are held to the same standards as the room attendants in their black uniforms with white aprons. They are a step up from us; they help unpack, assist with anything the guest might need, they don't scrub toilets or change sheets. I get out of the car, fluff my bangs, and check my likeness in the window; my baby blue housekeeper's uniform is starched, pressed, and fits me impeccably, just as management demands. There are no allowances for stains, wrinkles, and snug skirts or fabric pulling against buttons. At the Barrington, even my crew of undocumented help isn't allowed to slack off.

Every single time my sore tongue touches the tooth's jagged edge, I'm reminded how long it's been since I found Jane in the woods. Seven days—*an entire week*—and not a word about her identity; she remains in a coma and her name is still a mystery. Watching the local news, I'm taken aback by the absence of appeals to the public and the overall lack of urgency. I am able to abandon the image of Jane in her hospital bed, attached to monitors, but I can't forget what happened to me in her room.

Since the day I saw Jane last, I have had another episode. I have decided on the word episode until I figure out a more appropriate word.

It happened earlier this morning, in the shower: the calcified showerhead's water pressure was mediocre at best, yet I felt my hands tingling, starting at the tips. The prickling traveled up my arm, past my neck, into my eyes and nose. I didn't only *feel* the water pounding on my body but I smelled the minerals, tasted them like miniature Pop Rocks exploding on my tongue. Every single drop thumped against the wall of the shower stall—individually and all at once—as if the world was magnified while simultaneously zooming in on me, allowing itself to be interpreted. I dropped on the shower floor before my knees could buckle on me. It was over as quickly as it had started. I was left with an anticipatory feeling, a nervous kind of energy that tingled through me like electrical sparks as if I was positioning myself on the blocks to prepare for a race. I remained on the shower floor for a long while, only getting up when I realized I was going to be late for work.

Housekeepers are forbidden to enter through the front door but I'm late. If I hurry and my supervisor, Mr. Pratt, doesn't catch me between the door and the lockers, I can clock in without a lecture.

The revolving mechanism makes a gentle *sswwsshh* and Pratt lies in wait behind a marble column, motioning me to approach him, curling his index finger as if he has caught a kid with muddy shoes trampling through the house.

I follow him to his office. He does not offer me a seat and the lecture is short. "We have to let you go," he says, and within the same breath, he assures me of the Barrington's empathy for what I have been going through after finding Jane in the woods. "But you've been consistently late and you are unable to complete your assigned duties. We only pick the best for our full-time positions, you were informed about that policy. I will escort you to clear out your belongings."

Later, as Pratt watches me from the door of the locker room, I dump the few accumulated belongings—a change of clothes and a brush, and granola bars—in my purse. I hesitate when I see the stuffed giraffe at the bottom of the locker that I failed to take to lost and found days ago. One of its eyes dangles on a thread, and I attempt to stuff it back in its socket.

“Your last check will be mailed to you. I was hoping to offer you a full-time position, but we do probationary part-time for a reason. Sorry it didn’t work out.”

I always knew it wasn’t going to work out. A full-time position includes paperwork, forms I don’t have. For as long as I can remember, less than eight hundred a month—the cut-off for tax-exempt wages—has always been the magic number.

I leave the Barrington through the back door. When I reach my car, I steady myself, lean against it. As I drop the giraffe in the nearest garbage can, a memory hits me: my mother waking me in the middle of the night, thrusting a stuffed animal into my arms: a lavender bunny. Another one of her cloak-and dagger operations, leaving everything behind—*grab the papers, anything with our name on it*—and off we went to a town unknown, unaccustomed rooms and a bed unfamiliar to me. There aren’t too many memories but this one is clear as day. I wonder what happened to the lavender bunny.

Above me, moths’ wings make contact with the streetlight.

I bend backward, looking up; the moths swirl around like snowflakes. Hundreds of them spin aimlessly in the harsh whiteness of the LED light.

Snow. A blizzard. That too is a memory I can’t place.

Chapter 5

Aella

They appeared at Aella's door by nightfall. There had been signs; first the dog had raised his head, then his ears had perked up, and he had let out a deep bark, shallow and low. Atlas was a crossbreed, half wolf, half dog, and she trusted him with her life.

Aella opened the door and stepped outside. Atlas followed her, stood motionless to her left, let out a bark. It was a mere warning on his part, giving her a sign: *Watch me. I'll tell you if there's trouble.*

A man with an unkempt beard and teeth too perfect to be his own stepped forward and Aella knew he had rapped on her door. There were more; she heard their mumbled voices in the dark from where they were standing, to the right where the road had led them to her trailer in the woods.

Aella's eyes got used to the dark and she realized they were all men, with beards and grimy clothes, who had parked their cars by the road, car doors propped open. The men had gathered around, smoking, talking, and stretching their backs.

Atlas continued to keep his distance from them, remaining next to her, his nose darting out occasionally, only to retreat immediately. Bad news, yes, but dangerous, no. Atlas was a skillful judge of people and therefore Aella was not afraid.

"It's a bit late for a visit," she said and watched a couple of cats scurry off into the dark.

"We are just passing through and were wondering if it'd be okay to camp out back."

Out back was a field with cedar stubs caught between shrubs and trees releasing pollen in explosive puffs of orange-red smoke whenever cold winds blew from the north. Like gnarly little fishhooks, the pollen invaded nostrils and sinuses. It wasn't a place to camp out, but it was all the same to Aella. It wouldn't be the first time they had passed through—not the same men, but their kind. "Who's passing through?" Aella asked, shushing Atlas as he let out a low growl.

"It's twelve of us. Just for one night."

"I can count," Aella said, even though the night was pitch-black and she barely made out the men's silhouettes. "But who are you?"

The man paused for a second, then stroked his beard downward. In the light coming from the trailer Aella saw strong hands, uncut and clean, maybe a man working with gloves? His arms and face were sunburned and the knees of his jeans worn.

"We are travelers," the man finally said.

"I see." *Tinkers*, Aella thought. Irish travelers passing through, looking for employment. "I guess one night is okay with me."

The man mumbled something Aella couldn't make out, and another man from the group called out to him. They conversed in a language with soft vowels and words Aella hadn't heard before.

"You are here why?" Atlas had settled down, yet he kept his distance.

"Roofing jobs, after the fall storms."

"But why are you coming here? To my house? You can park anywhere and spend a few days. Who told you about me?"

"Well"—he scratched his beard again—"we've heard from travelers that they sometimes pass through here and that you allow them to camp on your property."

He spoke the truth. *Tinkers* passed through all the time. Mainly bad seeds, the ones that trick the old folks, scam everybody out of some money, and before locals know they've been had, they've long since left town.

Aella didn't care about their dealings but she didn't want people in town to know they stayed on her land, didn't want to be connected to them. Aurora had never got used to her, and people gossiped. Women like her didn't want to be the talk of the town. Too many people came snooping, and then there were the teenage dares, and it would all get out of hand so easily.

The local men were reluctant, shook their heads at the sight of her; some spit in the dirt as they passed by. The women worried. *How can you live out there, all by yourself? Aren't you afraid?* they'd ask, and Aella just grinned. *I'm the baddest thing out here*, she'd say, and they'd stare at her and then break out in a nervous giggle. Yet the people of Aurora flocked to her: meek boys who wanted the pretty girls, men who couldn't keep beautiful women in their beds, lacking money and prowess. They asked for potions and salves and bottles containing strange things. Reconciling with a lover was what men were usually after—nothing a black cat bone and lodestones couldn't fix—but the women looked to cure ailments. Ringing in the ears was a big one—no doctor can help with that; no ear drops or pills can cure the dead talking about you because you've done them wrong while they walked this earth. Some women wanted to keep their men, bind them so they'd never leave, not thinking about the future when they'd long for them to go, and then they'd return and the unbinding would cost thrice. Mothers came for their children: a cleft palate, a head tremor making other kids scatter in disgust, the inability to read or write, infants who stared straight past their mothers, struggling to make eye contact. Mothers were the most desperate of them all.

Aella held the man's gaze and cocked her head, as if to say, *What's it worth to you?* The man shoved a hand at her, causing Atlas to growl again. This time Aella didn't correct him. The man took a step back, then extended out his arm again, his hand facing upward. In his palm was a substantial wad of dollar bills held together by a rubber band. Aella reached for the money.

"Wait," the man said. "There's something else. One of us needs to stay here for a few weeks. We'll get her on our way back."

Her. Aella scanned the group of men, and a woman of petite stature emerged from the backseat of one of the cars and walked toward them, dragging her feet. Atlas approached her and sniffed the air. When the woman stepped next to the man and the moonlight illuminated her, Aella saw an expanding stomach that seemed overly large, almost freakish. Her elfin frame had nowhere to put a baby but to push it outward, and then there was her age; she seemed young, too young to be pregnant, and her eyes were vacant as she protectively placed a hand over her stomach.

"She doesn't feel well. We thought a bit of rest would do her good."

Aella grabbed the wad of dollar bills and counted the money. The amount was more than generous, more than double what they usually paid to camp out on the land behind her trailer. It was hard to admit, but she looked forward to having company, especially during a time of year when storms kept her indoors for days on end.

"You can spend the night in the field. She can stay with me." Aella pointed at the pregnant woman and then back at her trailer. Aella beheld the belly underneath the filthy shirt poking out from an unzipped jacket one of the men must have given her. There was something in her eyes—not so much what was there but what was lacking—that made Aella consider her longer than she would have any other woman. Atlas continuously sniffed the air, tracking invisible scents, veering left to right. He approached her and put his nose on her hand. He slinked back and hid behind Aella.

It was a sign. "What's wrong with her?" Aella asked.

"Nothin'." The man scratched his head, then shrugged.

Inside, after the men had carried their tents and belongings past the trailer, Aella took a good look at the woman. She wasn't a woman after all; she was merely a girl, barely grown. If it wasn't for the obvious signs of pregnancy, the belly and the engorged breasts, she would have assumed she was barely sixteen years old.

The girl lowered herself into a chair, her feet clearing the floor by several inches as they swung back and forth. Her face had an unhealthy look to it and her eyes were open as she stared at nothing on the wall. Her pale skin was a peculiar backdrop for her black hair and bushy eyebrows. "What's your name?" Aella asked.

The girl sat, still and quiet, scooting farther back into the chair. "Tain," she finally said, and it seemed as if the words had fallen from her mouth by accident.

“You can stay with me until they come back.”

Her brown eyes then lost their emptiness, became rounder, glossier. Her face buckled, her breathing stopped momentarily, and tears streamed down her face.

“What’s the matter? Why are you crying? You’re safe with me, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“There are storms coming soon,” the girl said. “I’m afraid.”

“It’ll be all right,” Aella said. “It’s not so unforeseeable, you know. If you pay attention to certain things you’ll be able to tell exactly when the storm is coming.”

“Like what?” Tain seemed fascinated by the fact that Aella could predict the weather.

“Watch the bees,” Aella told her. “Horses shake their heads a lot, and there are lots of cobwebs in the grass. Most of all, the clouds are pink in the evenings.”

“I’ve always been afraid of thunder and lightning.”

“Nothing to be afraid of. It’s like this here in the summer, but usually storms are severe on the coast, never this far inland. No need to worry. Just a little bit of rain and thunder.” The words didn’t seem to calm the girl, who wrapped herself in the jacket and continued to stare straight ahead, burying her hands in the oversized pockets. She looked cold. “Let me make you a cup of tea.”

Tain’s face remained blank. Aella thought about the chamomile she had collected in the nearby fields and how she’d brew the blossoms for a long time so they’d be strong enough to calm her, and maybe she’d add valerian root.

When Aella finished brewing the tea, she extended the cup. Tain’s tiny hands reached for it and they touched Aella’s ever so slightly. Tain’s hands were cold—icy as if the girl was merely a ghost or was about to turn into one. Aella had felt that sort of thing before, people who didn’t have a lot of time left, as if they were already part of another world—and she watched Tain cup her hands around the hot tea and then something gave way, as if a floorboard had shifted. Tain’s form shimmered and fluttered, and Aella held on to the table. She wasn’t worried; everything around her had been gleaming for a while—the woods and the trees, the cars passing her, even Atlas and the red cardinals outside—and it was always like that in her head when a storm was gathering strength. The girl was right to be afraid of it. It would be a big one.

Later, as Tain slept on the couch, her stomach tucked off to the side to allow her to breathe easier, Aella regarded her; her face was softly flushed with sleep, and her dark eyes shone through her thin and heavy lids.

The girl seemed ethereal, as if painted into this life with a fine brush; with every stroke the colors faded so quickly that she was dissolving in front of Aella’s very eyes. Aella knew it was a sure sign that the girl wasn’t going to be on this earth for a long time, or maybe the baby’s life would be cut short—Aella wasn’t sure.

She tried to make sense of this girl, wondered how easily people who didn’t know any better could fall victim to her. Tain was like a gentle uprising of heavy clouds in the distance on a windless day—but then there was a distant boom, announcing what those brooding clouds had promised all along—a powerful storm.

Aella watched Atlas. It was true that the dog cared for no one but his master, yet he always allowed for courting by strangers, especially women. He remained at a fair distance from Tain at all times, didn’t make any attempt to approach her.

That too was a sign.

Chapter 6

Quinn

Quinn placed one foot in front of the other, skipping the third step from the top, the one that screeched like an angry old woman. She paused at the bottom of the stairs. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a movement beyond the hallway, inside the darkened kitchen. It was formless and indistinct, like a shadow, barely shifting, and she knew it was her imagination. She calmed when she reminded herself that Sigrid was sleeping upstairs and that it was nothing more than the fear of being found out that made her see shadows and other spooky obscure shapes. Without as much as a creak of the wooden floorboards, Quinn made her way through the kitchen and out the back door.

Outside, the darkness disturbed her, as if there were feathered beasts baring incisors lurking beyond the shadows, yet Quinn vowed to embrace the feeling, for she was no longer a child, easy to impress. As she marched down the dirt road toward the fields, near the woods, a faint wind brushed against her, making her skirt cling to her thighs. Her gait was nimbler than it used to be, than it had ever been, really; her body was now as agile as a dancer's. Quinn could no longer conceive of inventing recipes and chatting with old ladies in town, she was no longer preoccupied with harvesting vegetables in the backyard and the planning of future meals.

Taking a lover was what she called it. It was an expression Quinn had pondered and concluded was something that would make her powerful beyond comparison. To *take* him implied power, yet her lover was merely a boy, hardly a couple of years older than herself, and far removed from Cadillac Man. But to Quinn he meant everything.

After she had watched her stepmother and Cadillac Man in her father's bedroom—along with the many times since that encounter, in secret, through the same crack in the door—Quinn had begun to wonder about it all. It seemed to be a matter of men succumbing to a certain kind of beauty; not the cheap kind that came from loose behavior and tight blouses, no, but the power of women who were what she liked to call *mysterious*. The less a man knew about a woman, the more he seemed to be enamored of her. Cadillac Man, after all, knew nothing of Sigrid's true self—her indigestion and frequent belching after large meals, or the way her eyes were red and puffy when she woke and how ill-tempered she was before noon—but he got to enjoy her company after she had bathed and dressed and curled her hair. Quinn had read about geishas and how they were considered artists and could seduce a man with just a hint of their necks, but only if they chose to, as if all the power was within them, a power so intricate Quinn had problems understanding it herself. Supposedly you could tell a prostitute from a geisha by her clothes; prostitutes tie their kimonos in the front while geishas have help tying them in the back.

She thought of geishas when she watched men stare at Sigrid, their eyes eating her up, with her restrained makeup and tasteful appearance, always crossing her legs and appearing helpless somehow so random men would offer to lift groceries into the car, carry packages, and pump gas. Some men were even in the company of other women, yet they couldn't refrain from staring, their eyes wondering what it would be like if she belonged to them. Maybe they thought possessing her somehow would automatically elevate them to some higher standard.

Wiles, Sigrid called it; *the wiles of a woman*.

Quinn's father had had a coronary during a city hall meeting the previous year. Seconds after he had pulled a starched handkerchief from his pocket, beads formed on his brow and the room watched his large frame drop and hit the floor with a *thud*.

"He was gone before he knew what was happening," the doctor told Sigrid later and went into detail about how it took six grown men to lift him up onto an ornate desk, where the doctor performed CPR with a high degree of difficulty due to the circumference of his body.

“Don’t worry, child,” Sigrid said to Quinn after the doctor had told them the news. “You’ll stay with me. He wouldn’t want it any other way,” Sigrid added and uncrossed her legs.

“He was a sick man and he was sick for a long time. The town will remember him. He was a good man,” the doctor said while taking in Sigrid’s face underneath her new hat, a veiled half-moon-shaped affair with matching gloves.

Oddly, in the days after his death, Quinn imagined he was still alive, and it seemed quite plausible because her father had never been home when he was living, never spent a lot of time with her, so he might as well still be around, just not present in the house. She preferred to retain the memory of him this way, absent yet still alive somewhere. As with her mother’s passing, the word still was a strange concept, implying a movement from one state to the other, yet she couldn’t imagine what or where that place was. And so Quinn thought of her father often, with great sadness but also with great reverie, knowing that his body no longer held him back. Diabetes had caused ulcers on his legs, and he should have retired years ago, should have taken better care of himself, seen doctors—it was not as if one can cure diabetes with magic water—but he had seemed to be content going on as long as he had. Quinn prayed for him often and kept his watch in her jewelry box. When she did cry she thought mainly of the trip to Galveston they’d never taken. How she’d love to have that memory of him, on chairs by the pool, dining at fine restaurants, strolling along the harbor with Spoil Island in the distance. She would have held his hand. She wished she had this memory, but maybe one day she’d get to go after all. As time passed, imagining this lost opportunity became more and more painful, and eventually Quinn tried not to think about it anymore.

That night, as Quinn made her way to meet her lover, she knew her trim body was powerful; she now ate only two small meals a day, but mostly she was thin because she had decided for it to be so. Her new body was a mere mouthpiece of her never-ending dominance over her hunger. She had stood in front of a mirror that morning and admired the part where her thigh curved into her hips, the dimples above her buttocks, and her defined collarbone. Not a single part of her hidden below a layer of flesh. Feeling the power of her new body, she strode through the bright night with a crescent moon overhead and imagined the pressure of her lover’s hands all over her, even though he hadn’t dared touch her quite yet.

Quinn called him Benito, and they had met for the first time when he and his uncle had delivered bales of hay to her house to fertilize the rosebushes. Sigrid, after the death of her husband, had insisted on growing roses, and even though the bushes looked measly and were speckled with what seemed like large black pepper flakes, she wouldn’t give up on them.

“Hay is good for the soil, it makes it fertile. You’ll see,” Sigrid said and had Benito and his uncle drop the hay next to the forlorn flower bed. The uncle inspected the soil, rubbed a clump of dirt between his fingers and promised to return the next day and till the flower bed and fold in the hay.

Benito wouldn’t look at Quinn that day, but when he returned the next, they struck up a conversation even though the uncle gave them sideways glances. From then on, Quinn waited on the porch until she heard the rumbling engine of the old truck become more powerful with every passing second that it approached the house, imagining the pipes spewing twin plumes of black smoke. Once the uncle was tending to the flower beds, Benito was the one who was sent back and forth for a forgotten tool or to empty a bucket of rocks they had dug up from the soil. Quinn sat on the front steps and watched Benito jump in the bed of the pickup, the muscles of his long skinny arms quivering under his brown skin when he lifted wood, bags of mulch, and gardening tools.

“What school do you go to?” Quinn asked.

“I’m not in school,” he said. “I’m from Palestine. I went to school there,” Benito said and reached for the hand tiller, pushing it to the very edge of the truck bed. He jumped out and landed on his feet like gymnasts Quinn had seen in school. Then, seemingly without strife, he lifted the heavy tiller and placed it gently on the ground. His hair had a sheen like deep dark mahogany wood and it swished gently in the wind, swaying with each word he spoke.

“Palestine. Where’s that?” Quinn asked, merely trying to be polite. She crossed her legs like she had seen Sigrid do. She feared she didn’t look half as sophisticated as her.

“About thirty miles from here, a small town.”

“Do you always work with your uncle?”

“I do a lot of work for lots of people,” he said and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “I’m saving up to start my own business.”

Soon Benito’s uncle had enough of Benito taking his time collecting tools or dumping buckets and he began interrupting their conversations by tossing random items to and fro in the truck bed and then walking off, mumbling something under his breath. After a week of protest, the uncle called from the backyard every few minutes, making it impossible for them to have a conversation at all.

“*Ven aquí*,” the uncle shouted at first, then he’d yell, “*Me estas escuchando?*” and by the end of the third week, when the soil was tilled, the hay folded, the rosebushes planted, and all that was left was to attach a trellis to the back porch, Benito no longer accompanied his uncle.

“Where is Benito? Please, tell me,” Quinn begged and watched the uncle holding a nail below the head with the fingers of one hand.

The uncle simply replied, “*No hablo inglés*,” and Quinn watched him tap the nail gently to set it in place, then he grasped the hammer firmly at the end and hit the nail straight on. A few smacks and it was done. “*Todo ha terminado*,” he added and turned his back to her.

Days later, after school, Benito waited for Quinn by the hardware store she passed every day on her way home. They drove out of town and parked in secluded places, knowing people would talk about the daughter of the late town treasurer and the Mexican farm help, but that too was power to Quinn, the fact that she did as she pleased. They sat in Benito’s truck and he told her about his hometown, where he had lived before he came to Texas. A mesa in Mexico, *Mesa de Sagrado*, an elevated piece of land with a flat top, and on one of its steep sides, his family owned a small farm where they raised goats and chickens. He spoke of his grandmother, who still operated the farm with her cousins, and how she lived for the one day a year when the gates of heaven opened and the spirits of the deceased reunited with their families.

“There’s a day for that?” Quinn asked, wondering if this was real or something the superstitious people who had their futures read at the yearly carnival believed in.

“*Día de los Muertos*,” Benito said, and crossed himself.

“What’s that mean?” Quinn asked and tried to pronounce it the best way she could. “Dee-oz dayla merde,” she said and they both laughed and scooted closer to each other.

“It’s the Day of the Dead and the only night of the year my *abuela* sleeps in her bed.”

“Where does she sleep if not in her bed?”

“On the floor.”

“But she’s an old woman. Why would she do that?” Quinn thought of Sigrid and her large bed covered in the finest linens.

“When my grandfather died, she promised to never again sleep in their bed unless it was with him. That one night she believes he joins her and she cooks and sets out a plate of food for him, and washes his clothes and lays them out on the bed.”

Quinn tried not to think about Benito’s story too much, for it made her remember her father, and Sigrid hardly even visited the cemetery to leave flowers on his grave.

“Does her husband ever show up?” Quinn asked, but the image in her head was not one of old *abuela* waiting for her dead husband to join her, but rather of her father in the blue suit, his head resting on a satin pillow in the cherrywood coffin, propped up at Mitchell’s Funeral Home in town. His face had appeared waxen and bloated, he had looked nothing like himself.

“It’s just something you do. The dead don’t show—I mean not really, but in spirit—it’s a matter of honoring them,” Benito said.

Later, careful as to avoid curious eyes watch Quinn get out of Benito's truck, they agreed on another day and time when they'd meet again. The following Sunday, after they walked the fields by the forest, Benito showed her how to pick grass with the widest and coarsest blade. He put it between his thumbs, pulled it taut, and pursed his lips and blew into it. Depending on how he cupped his hands, the sound changed. He said that the grass in his hometown grew higher than any grass he'd ever seen in Texas. Soon they began meeting after dark and with every passing day, with each stride she made toward him, she felt more in command of her own life. She felt like a girl walking toward her destiny, and geisha stories seemed silly and thoughtless and she imagined leaving Aurora with Benito to start a life someplace where no one knew them.

That night, with thoughts of a future together, Quinn forged ahead, mesmerized by the moon above. It offered a brilliance and silvery light that she had never seen before and even as she stumbled over dips in the ground, she continued to stare into the night sky. Some stars were rather dull, merely flickering into existence every now and then, but some were powerful enough to illuminate the night. She walked on, down the rural road, and at some point she cut across a field and ended up on the dirt path leading into the woods. When she entered, low-hanging branches tickled her cheek ever so slightly, making her jump.

The woods seemed different that night, the surroundings suddenly unfamiliar. The trunks were slanted and the paths had all but vanished, the trees were higher than in the daylight and they were spreading toward something way beyond their reach, up into the night sky, almost touching the moon. There was talk about these woods. Always had been. The trees *whispered*, locals said; on certain nights you could make out voices and it was best to walk in the other direction and not turn around. Quinn knew that the cottonwood trees were abundant and the leaves were flattened sideways, conducive to a particular type of movement in the wind, and that was all there was to it, even though she had to admit when the wind picked up and rustled the leaves, the noise level seemed unnatural, even to her. When she finally reached their secret place, an oval clearing within the darkest part of the forest, she sat on a fallen tree and waited for her lover.

"Mi corazón." She felt the words more than heard them.

They embraced and his wet hair tickled her cheek. His wrinkled shirt smelled of soap and some faint odor of food that was unfamiliar to her. Everybody in his family called him Benito. He was nineteen with a strong body from the hard labor of setting up fences and removing trees, stints at farms where they'd brand cattle and build barns. He had a broad face with a hooked nose and his skin was soft with barely a hair on his entire face.

They spread a blanket on the forest floor and they became lovers. Quinn was a virgin but Benito wasn't and he was gentle and whispered words in Spanish Quinn didn't understand yet that sounded like a melody to her. Even though his hands were coarse and calloused, they felt soft as he took hold of her face, forcing their eyes to meet. A beautiful stillness descended upon them as they lay on the forest floor and even though he was not inside her yet, they were one. Their bodies were trembling and Quinn felt something take hold within her, some entity clinging to her as if she'd done this a million times. His mouth captured hers and he kissed her slowly as he moved with her. Her chest rose as she drew in a breath and held it while his body shifted. She felt a tinge of pain and cried out. Benito stopped moving. Finally Quinn let out the breath she'd held in and then she slowly drew in another. Everything she'd ever believed this to be was a mistake, this was not crude and vulgar, there wasn't any power *over* Benito, not like Sigrid and Cadillac Man, but the power was within her, and pouring out of her into him. It was like the lunar eclipse she had watched with her father years ago, an event so momentous that every time she thought of it, she felt as if she was reliving it. That's how this moment would feel to her for all eternity.

Benito reached out and touched her, running his fingers over her flushed cheeks. He drew her into a hug, then covered her face with kisses. Eldorado was real, a golden city, he told her, the land of a king who was covered with gilded dust so thick he seemed to be made of solid gold. Quinn

wasn't sure if it was a legend or if a scrap of truth rested beneath his words but she didn't care. She thought of Benito as a prince who would soon become a man and then rule some sort of kingdom. And she'd be his queen.

"I have to go," Benito said. "I have to work with my uncle early in the morning."

"Come see me after school on Monday? At the hardware store?"

"Yes, *mi corazón*, I'll try but it's a big job. A deck. It will take all weekend and maybe all of Monday. I'll wait for you Tuesday, maybe Wednesday," he said and held out his hand to help her up. "Let me drive you home."

"I'll leave in a bit. I want to see the sun come up."

He bent down to kiss her and Quinn watched him disappear between the cottonwood trees. She heard a faint sound of a car door opening, then slamming shut, followed by the revving engine. Quinn imagined Benito skillfully maneuvering across the potholed dirt road.

She propped her arms behind her head and stared at the night sky. The wind had died down and as she lay under the stars, she still felt Benito's soft breath and his heartbeat. She was nothing like Sigrid, and whatever wiles were, they didn't apply to boys like Benito. She was too much in her heart and not at all in her head, so whatever advice Sigrid had given her was no longer relevant, maybe never had had any significance at all. Forever she wanted to remember the moment she became Benito's lover. Quinn closed her eyes and drifted off into an inky darkness.

She awoke to a gunshot sounding in the distance. Quinn opened her eyes, but only for a second, and when all remained silent she drifted back to sleep, thinking she could have been mistaken.

The last image she'd remember later was the moon looming overhead with a sharp point, almost like a hunter's horn.

Chapter 7

Dahlia

After leaving the Barrington for the last time, I rack my mind, wondering what the next step down from hotel housekeeper is going to be. On my mother's street, I find her house sitting quietly without a sign of life. The glaring and lonely porch light illuminates the impeccably clean front porch. I can't make out a single cricket in the harsh light of the bare bulb.

When I cross the threshold, beneath my feet something crackles as if I am stepping on a cracker or a piece of popcorn. I take another step and again I hear a crunching sound. Another step, another crunch. I swipe the light switch upward. Arranged two inches apart like cookie dough on a sheet pan is a carpet of cricket carcasses.

"Mom?" I call out, but there's no answer.

The back door gapes open, leaving a hole big enough to swallow a body. After I check the house and search for a note haphazardly left atop newspapers and magazines, I step out into the backyard. The fence gate is wide open.

My mother's neighborhood sits in rows of identical houses, all bungalows, no basements, small upper windows above narrow porches and square bays. The only differences are the conditions of the lawns and an occasional hanging basket, but mostly the houses are uniform. I call out her name every so often and I tell myself that she went for a walk and forgot to shut the back door. And the gate. And forgot to leave a note.

When I arrive at the nearby park, less than half a mile from the house, I find the parking lot deserted. The entrance sign states that entering after dark is prohibited but around here no one really cares. The walkways are concrete and the silver maples, planted many years ago, now reach all the way up to the streetlights. No faint trickle of a nearby creek, not in the summer, not in Texas.

I stride down the walkway, past park benches and a small pond. I catch a whiff of garbage cans from the dog park to my right and I smile, for once certain this is not a figment of my imagination or my nose betraying me. About half a mile later, I hear a whining sound coming from the playground. Then I hear a whimper; this time it seems almost childlike.

"Mom?" I walk toward the general location of the whine, stop, and wait for it to resume.

"Mom?" This time louder, more urgent. I hear hissing that sounds like a snake, but then a cat scurries past me and disappears into the bushes.

I return home and dial the Aurora precinct number. I ask for Officer Roberto de la Vega and leave a voicemail. I tell him, "My mother has walked off into the darkness." I realize how melodramatic that sounds. "Call me back," I add. "I don't know if I should wait at home or look for her. Or where to look. I don't know if I should worry even. The back door is open and she's gone." I'm trying not to sound too alarmed, it's not an emergency, but it *is* in the middle of the night. "She didn't leave a note or anything."

I am exhausted and I prop my legs up on the coffee table and fall asleep.

I awake to harsh lights shining through the kitchen window. Parting the curtain, I see a police cruiser parked in the street with its nose poking into the driveway. A face stares at me through the window and Bobby points toward the front door. After I open the door, Bobby fumbles with the radio attached to his shoulder.

"Hey, troublemaker," he says and smiles. Then, more seriously, "I got your message. A couple of patrol cars are out looking for her. Do you have any idea where she could be?"

"She goes out without telling me, but never in the middle of the night. I told her to always leave a note so I know where she is. I checked the park earlier. That's where she goes often."

"Was she upset or acting strange at all?" Bobby asks.

My body blocks the view into the house and the crickets on the floor. I step outside and pull the door shut behind me. No one needs to know about the crickets just yet.

“Not that I know of,” I say. “I got home and the back door was wide open. I wouldn’t have known she was gone if it hadn’t been for that door. I thought she was upstairs, in bed. She’s usually asleep by the time I get home.”

“Well, sit tight, we’ll find her. Call me if she shows up?”

“Sure,” I say.

I follow Bobby down the driveway to his cruiser and watch it crawl down the road. He never really speeds up, and then he stops and puts it in reverse. He rolls down the passenger’s seat window and leans forward.

“Just got word. They found her.”

“Where?”

“Down country road 2410, toward Elroy.”

“2410 and Elroy? That’s miles from here.”

Bobby doesn’t answer. He fumbles with the mobile computer and, without looking at me, he says, “They’re taking her in.”

“Taking her in for what? Did she rob a gas station or something?” I say, trying to sound lighthearted.

“She’s okay, but she has a few scratches. And she refused to tell the officers her name. They asked her repeatedly but she wouldn’t tell them. Told them she was out for a walk.”

FM 2410 is nothing but a deserted country road and I don’t know of any houses out there at all. There’s an occasional mailbox, and driveways leading to properties, most of them just plots of deserted land. Walking down 2410 is a peculiar thing to do. Not telling the police her name is a new one, even for my mother. And then there are the neatly arranged crickets in the house. A voice in my head is whispering, telling me that none of this is remotely in the realm of *normal*, reminding me that lately she has been talking without punctuation or taking a breath, but all I can think is that I’m glad she’s okay.

“They’re taking her to Metroplex,” Bobby finally confirms. “They will call you.”

He goes on, but I stop listening. I don’t mean to tune him out but I can’t erase the picture of my mother walking down a dark country road. I imagine her defiant, ignoring the officers, stomping off: *I don’t need to tell you my name, walking down the street isn’t illegal.*

I spend the rest of the day sweeping the crickets out of the house, and I do the long-neglected laundry. As I finish folding the towels, a Dr. Wagner calls me from the hospital. He’s calm but curt. Emotionless. After scribbling down his number and asking him to repeat it back to me three times, I ask him about my mother.

“Your mother is a bit confused,” he says, and I wonder if that’s a word a doctor ought to use regarding the mental state of a patient. “I have her on a mild sedative and we’ll keep her for a few days. She has asked to stay and seems content for the moment.”

“When can I see her?”

“No visitors for the time being.”

“But she’s okay, isn’t she?”

“She’s requested a few days of peace. That’s what she called it. No reason to be alarmed.” I hear him take in a deep breath. “Something seems to have happened?”

A few days of peace seems like something she would say. In the back of my mind I hear my mother’s voice during our last conversation, sharp as a knife, the day after I found Jane.

“*Why did you bring the cops to my house?*”

“*I told you last night, I found a woman in the woods.*”

“*You lied when you were a child,*” my mother said. “*You’d tell stories, get people in trouble.*”

“You mean when I broke my arm?” There were many incidents but the one with the broken arm was big.

“There were others,” she said and kept wiping the sink that was already clean.

“Give me an example. I don’t remember any of them.”

“Reliving your glory days? I’m not repeating any of your stories if that’s what you’re trying to get me to do.”

“Why don’t you tell me something else then?” I asked her, feeling myself getting upset. That sharpness in her voice, the cold eyes. “Tell me why we moved so much, why I never went to school. I don’t even recall going to school until we moved to Texas.”

“No one remembers their childhood. It’s not unusual.”

“Why didn’t I go to school like everybody else?”

“I homeschooled you.”

“You were never home.”

“I worked, more than one job at a time. You’re going to blame me for not being home?”

“If you worked so much, why did we live in squalor?”

“You want me to hand you a résumé? What’s with all the questions?”

Her spotted, blue-veined hands held the dirty rag, shaking ever so slightly, hardly noticeable, but I knew there was a storm brewing underneath her cool and calm demeanor.

“Who is my father?” The question hung between us like a heavy gray rain cloud about to unleash its fury. “I don’t remember him at all.”

“He ran off when you were a baby, I told you that. He was—”

“I remember Bobby’s father taking us to the police station. I remember when they filled out the paperwork and you told them my name was Dahlia.”

There was a long moment of silence. It stretched beyond the kitchen, beyond the house, beyond both of us, her need to keep secrets a gaping divide no bridge would ever overcome.

“Dahlia was not my name,” I add. “You called me Pet before that.”

Finally she broke her silence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. He stopped us because we had a broken headlight. You know that.”

I know better. I knew better then and I know better now. There was no broken headlight. There are, however, questions that I must ask before she drifts off deeper into this murky world of hers, infested with crickets and her fear of police. Our love for each other is fierce, we are all we’ve ever had to hold on to, and it was enough when I was younger, it was even enough when we just talked on the phone the past fifteen years, but it’s not enough now.

Later that night, I wake up. When I open my eyes, I can feel something is wrong. *Off* somehow. It’s dark outside—not even six judging by the lack of light—but something is glowing up ahead of me, almost like a pinprick-sized dot of light at the end of a tunnel. I blink and blink again. Is it possible to observe light and it remain obscure at the same time? It takes me a while until I realize that it’s not an actual glow but more a feeling of being lit up from the inside out that is reflected off my eyelids. It remains within me, never leaves my body. My hand tingles, then twitches. My skin feels snug and hot and I remain completely still, hoping it will just go away. My hand twitches again, stronger this time, no longer just a feeling but a visible spasm now. As quickly as the feeling materialized, it vanishes.

I don’t hear the AC humming and that’s all the explanation I need. Nothing wrong here, just the heat. The air is thick and heavy, making it hard to draw a breath. Stagnant and idle, capable of melting candles. Texas heat has a fierceness to it, everyone knows that. It makes people lose their minds, my mother always says.

I lie in the dark, unable to shut off my thoughts. Like a bundle of yarn, my mind loops around itself, repeating things to me, no matter how hard I try not to think at all. It’s been ten days since I found Jane and still there’s no update. I have no job, no money. My mother is in the hospital after wandering down a country road in the middle of the night. I want to call her, talk to her, and convince

myself she is okay, but then there are these fears I have. That I'll call and she'll be confused and dismissive. That I'll never get to the truth if her mental decline continues—I am halfway there myself, it feels like at times, with my headaches and smells and twitching limbs. I am as afraid for her sanity as I am afraid I'll lose my own before I ever get any of the answers I need.

When the sun comes up, I check the news on my phone, call the hospital for a report on my Jane (I call every day even though they are not allowed to give me any information, but they have taken to *No change* now instead of *Only relatives may inquire*). Just as I hang up, I get a call. It's Dr. Wagner.

"Your mother is well," he says and after a short pause he adds, "Relatively speaking. She agreed with me that it would be best if she stayed with us for a few more days. Her exact words were *Going for a walk is not a crime*." Dr. Wagner goes on and on about how she doesn't think there's anything wrong with her, although he believes there's a personality disorder or two but "without proper counseling and an official diagnosis I'm unable to categorize her just yet."

He calls her actions *a behavioral pattern of impairment in personal and social situations*. I don't care about what he's saying—his medical gibberish is redundant; after thirty years I know my mother is teetering on the edge of crazy. She hasn't quite fallen in, yet she's staring into the abyss. That's what I know during this moment of clarity: the crickets, her secretive nature, the suspicion she feels toward just about everybody aren't normal. When we go shopping and the cashier asks for ID, she holds up her wallet, and when the cashier reaches for it, she gets irritated; *Don't touch it, I don't like germs. See with your eyes, not your hands*.

"Has anything stressful happened in your mother's life lately?" he asks. "Any specific event you can tell me about may be important and could help me gain a better insight into what triggered this."

I can't help wondering if the police showing up at her house is what did her in. I tell him about the woman in the woods, how I was in the hospital and the police came to the house and how she's an overall suspicious person. He listens intently, does not interrupt me. I drift into talking about myself, the strange odors coming out of nowhere, passing out or whatever those episodes are, the forgetfulness, at the same time remembering things I'm not sure about. I want to talk about everything, I even use the appropriate terms, *cognitive problems* and *dizziness*, just so he doesn't think I'm like her, because I'm nothing like my mother.

"All in all I'm still pretty shaken up about this woman in the woods," I concede. "Please forgive me if I'm not making much sense. I don't really understand what's going on with my mother. Is there anything you can prescribe for her? Someone she should see?"

"Your mother's diagnosis isn't just a matter of a blood test or therapy. It's hard to pinpoint any diagnosis at this point. I need to know more about her, but she seems tightlipped, which makes it difficult for me. There should be some extensive counseling and I have offered to set up an appointment with a colleague of mine, but"—I can hear him switching the phone to the other ear—"she just flat out declined."

I punch down the urge to ask him the question that is rising like mutant dough over the rim of a bowl: the possibility of heredity.

"I prescribed her anxiety medication that should mellow her out some for now. Your mother isn't bothered too much about anything but her purse. She is quite upset about it. She told me she lost it where the police picked her up. I assume she had her wallet and credit cards in there. She didn't elaborate, but if you could make an attempt to locate her purse that would make life a lot easier. Not just on her."

"I'll see what I can do."

"We are testing her for Alzheimer's but I don't think that is the case. We just want to make sure. She is scheduled for release in forty-eight hours. I really want to talk to you in person so I can get a better picture of what set her off. Do you think you can pick her up Wednesday afternoon? We can talk then?"

"Sure," I say. "Anything else I can do?"

“Keep all stress away from her when she comes home, make sure she takes her medication, and just basically do what you can to keep her even-keeled.”

After I hang up the phone, I check under the sink for cleaning supplies. I rummage past the balled-up plastic bags and dirty sink towels, deformed and dried up. Empty spray bottles tumble out. There is Borax and some foam promising to do the work for you. Not a single sponge or glove. There is a jar. It seems to be an empty jelly or pickle jar, with the label pulled off partially but not quite; lots of white residue and glue sticks to the glass.

I lift it out of the dark below the sink and into the light, hold it up. It is a jar full of crickets, their antennae and legs tangled beyond recognition. There are about twenty of them, if not more. I shudder, wondering what that’s all about. Do people freeze and eventually cook them? I don’t know and I don’t plan on dwelling on it.

Later, at the market, I’m greeted by the scent of rotisserie chicken and a smile from a seventy-something age-spotted man with orthopedic shoes and a heavy limp. He offers me a cart and I decline, making my way straight to the cleaning supply section and grabbing one bottle of multipurpose cleaner, a box of wet mopping cloths, and yellow latex gloves. The lines are long; children are fussing and leaning out of carts, reaching for candy planted enticingly nearby. I don’t care to interact with anyone and use the self-checkout at the far end of the store.

The image of the crickets in the jar remains with me, even though I no longer ponder the logical reason as to its existence. I am realizing that most of my mother’s peculiarities cannot be explained by a sane mind. As I make my way back to the entrance, I pass a bank, a customer service counter, and a Western Union. On the wall that separates the restrooms, I see a poster dotted with pictures of children of all ages, declaring that *Every Second Counts*. I step closer. Individual pages behind document protectors are thumbtacked to a large blue board. I do the math; altogether there are eighty-four pages. Every page has a picture of a child, a name, gender, age, height, weight, eye, and hair color. *This child was last seen on*, then a date, sometimes a description of the circumstances—*disappeared walking home from school* or *didn’t return from a friend’s house*—and some have an additional age-progressed picture. I scan the missing dates and realize they reach as far back as ten years. Just a few of the pictures have a red *Located* banner across them.

I wonder where they are. Have they willingly abandoned their families or are some held captive? I cannot conceive of the fact that so many people, children at that, just float around somewhere, on the fringes of society, forgotten, abandoned, and written off. Those who are no longer alive ended up ... where? In basements, ditches, hidden graves? Washed up on shores, floating on ocean surfaces in plastic bags? Hidden somewhere in basements just to be recovered decades later, in shallow graves in backyards? Or buried in some woods, underneath branches, shed leaves, bark, acorn caps and other vegetative debris in various stages of decomposition.

The images of missing children overlap and tilt my mind; suddenly I sense a zigzag pattern, like a contorted screen between my eyes and the physical world. I see flashing lights and my skin starts prickling. It begins in my fingertips and travels slowly up my arm and my shoulder blades, all the way up to my temples. As they start pulsating, I feel as if I am on my back in a field of prickly grass or some golden yellow crop that suddenly turns black right in front of my eyes. It grows all around me, tingling and pinching my skin. I want to scratch my entire body but my hands won’t cooperate and then billions of spores fly off the black crop and I can no longer breathe. The world around me is shrouded in hot and aromatic pungency and trying to escape this odor is like trying not to smell food cooking on a stove. I desperately bury my face into the crook of my elbow to make it stop, to escape this almost resinous compound. The scent reminds me of a place I can’t be sure of, for I don’t recall the location itself, but I stand barefoot on rough wood, a porch maybe, peeling away squeaky corn husks and handfuls of silk.

By the time I get home, the feeling has dissipated. The Texas summer sky is a doodle of colors, hesitant brushstrokes at best. The sun is about to set and the entire picture will soon turn into a canopy of luminous stars; minute specks of light will shine within the blackness.

I have never hulled the husk of an ear of corn in my life. Not that I know of. Just like the snow blizzard, maybe this is all just my brain misfiring?

Chapter 8

Memphis

Days ago, when, through the peephole, Memphis laid eyes on the distorted bodies of two police officers standing in front of her door, the first crack had appeared. *This is it*, she had thought, *now it all comes to an end*.

That night, on a whim, when she had left the house and had tried to find the farm again—merely wanting to know if it was still standing, still out there at the end of a dirt road with its barn and shed—she had lost her purse. Just like that; it was in her hand one moment, gone the next. At first she hadn't noticed, but once she did, she didn't dwell on it. She was preoccupied with the scent of the night and the memories that rushed toward her.

Not a single car passed her as she made her way down the road. It was cool, at least in relation to the three-digit daytime temperatures, and her legs moved all on their own as if they were on a mission. Before she knew it, she was on the outskirts of Aurora, on FM 2410, and it seemed as if those three miles took her less than an hour to walk.

Thirty years had passed since she had left the farm, maybe more; she wasn't so sure anymore. The departure had been hasty and unorganized and she had left everything she owned behind. After their time on the road, she'd lived right here in town, yet she had never been back, never so much as looked at it from afar, not until the police had come to her door.

She had been unprepared for the police, hadn't even heard them approach. Too many cars passed by the house, too many doors slammed, too many children went to school or walked home, rapping twigs against fences, screaming and running and laughing. Over the years she had let her guard down, especially since Dahlia had left town. There had been over fifteen years or so without Dahlia, years she had lived alone, working menial jobs, and during those years she had become less vigilant.

She loved cleaning houses the most—the people were usually at work and money was left on some foyer table for her to collect—she enjoyed the solitude and she'd imagine those houses were her home and she'd walk in and for a split second she'd picture Dahlia as a child, running through the hallways, playing in backyards, so far removed from what reality had been.

The care of the elderly was also something she didn't mind, mostly Alzheimer's patients, still capable of living with their families, not so far gone that they needed 24/7 supervision. She'd play the radio as she cooked for them, did the laundry—sometimes she'd sit and read books she found somewhere on a nearby shelf, and then she'd imagine that one day she'd be one of them and Dahlia would care for her the way she cared for these strangers. She watched their old wrinkled faces, eyelids drooping over their eyes, staring off into space. At times she was jealous. Not having any worries, any consideration for people watching them, not fearing the doorbell, not dreading the ringing of the phone. Compared to what she had been through, their existence was bliss.

So yes, her guard had been down and when the police showed up, when she saw the uniforms, every muscle in her body went tight, preparing for her escape. Her brain shouted at her, *Run run run*, her mind a merry-go-round of fears, and with every turn another thought developed, one more disturbing than the last.

“Are you Memphis Waller?” the female officer had asked.

Memphis stood in silence. Frozen. Then she nodded.

“This is about your daughter.”

Memphis still couldn't move, stood in the doorway to keep the officers from entering.

“Your daughter,” the officer then said, “is at Metroplex. Don't worry, she is fine. She's just being looked over right now. If you want to, we'll give you a ride to the hospital?”

It wasn't easy to shut off the adrenaline and so she just stood there blocking the door; she couldn't move an inch.

“Are you all right? May we come in?” the second officer, also a woman, asked and leaned in slightly.

She would have asked them in if she had had any power over her body, but she was reduced to a pillar of salt. The officers all but pushed her aside and entered the house, looked around, nosy and prying, intruded into the dining room, even up the stairs, as if it was any of their business. After they’d left, she sat with her heart beating out of her chest. It wouldn’t stop thrashing and at times her own reflection in a window prompted her to call out, *Who’s there?*, and she’d stand still and so did the shadow, and then she’d move and so did the shadow, and she realized she couldn’t trust her own eyes. She had looked out of the window and seen shapes moving across the yard; then a branch swiped against a window, making her jump.

She took to creating acoustic clues then, arranging dead crickets in a carpet of even rows and columns to alert her if someone came in, no longer trusting that the shadows mocking her were born of her imagination, so their dry and rigid bodies would crunch beneath someone’s feet and there’d be no mistaking the actual weight of a real person for shadows and ghosts are weightless and luminous.

When she couldn’t stand it another minute, it got worse. There was another knock at the door—yet a glance out the window revealed nothing but a porch bathed in the harsh light of a bare bulb—and she ran out the back door then, leaving it wide open.

She had to lay the ghosts to rest, silence them somehow. She had to see the farm one more time. Yet again, it was the little things she didn’t take into consideration. If Dahlia had thought her to be in bed, Memphis would have made it out to the farm and back home by the time the sun came up, before Dahlia woke. She could even have waited until after Dahlia was asleep and taken the car, but she didn’t, just ran out, and that was another blunder in her thinking. The only reason she’d agreed to stay at the hospital was to calm herself, get her story straight. She could have fought the hospital stay—no one was able to keep her against her will, that wasn’t even legal—but she needed time to think. Time to put her ducks in a row.

That night, after Memphis realized she had lost her purse, it took her some time to find the dirt road behind the trees and shrubs. Over the years, property lines had been redrawn, new roads had appeared, and if it hadn’t been for the old wooden bench she would have never found the place. The fact that it was still there meant there was money in the bank to pay property taxes, even though she had never checked up on how much exactly was left, but Bertram County had only a couple of schools and taxes were low and the money must have been enough or the farm would have been sold by now, or even torn down.

That night, she didn’t plan on setting foot onto the property at all; she just wanted to look at it from afar. It was still so vivid in her mind—the winding dirt road, the meadow, the shed, and the barn—and decades later reality matched her memory. The farm was still intact—the barn slightly warped, the meadow in full bloom—but as she stood peeking through the trees, crickets started chirping all around her, and one did jump at her, pecked at her leg, or maybe it was something else, she couldn’t be sure. And she stood by the road, determined not to set foot on the property, as if history was going to catch up with her, as if merely walking the grounds was going to infect her with some contagion.

Her muscles were tired, her limbs heavy from the long walk. She licked at her cracked lips, feeling the thickness of her saliva. She looked past the shed, and there it was. The cypress. She couldn’t make out anything underneath, but the old cypress stood there, firmly anchored; had gained a few more feet in height, even. She beheld the tree from afar but still she felt mocked by it, as if it said, *I’ve guarded the secrets, but they are still here. Don’t you get any ideas. You haven’t escaped.*

In a way, she had it coming, Memphis knew that. And she decided to stop fighting.

Chapter 9

Dahlia

It's almost as if there's a hole in the ground somewhere, swallowing lives, like the hole in the woods was supposed to swallow Jane. At home, I throw the bag of cleaning supplies on the couch and power up my laptop.

The numbers are staggering; thousands of people go missing every day, adults and children alike. Other crimes take priority and missing persons cases are mostly solved by sheer accident or coincidence; there are tens of thousands of unidentified remains waiting in coroners' offices all over the country; more than a hundred thousand cases are open at one time.

The computer freezes. As I wait for it to recover, I imagine a map with tiny dots for every buried body, missing, undiscovered. And there's my Jane, found, safe, yet no one seems to know her. It seems impossible that no one but me seems to care who she is. But maybe nothing is as it seems, maybe the police have a clue, maybe found DNA even, but how would I even know? Bobby should know, or at least he should be able to find out. I dial his cell and he answers after two rings.

"I'm on patrol. Something happen?"

"No, nothing happened." I don't know how to ask the questions that bounce around all day long in my head.

"I'm in your neighborhood. I can come by."

Fifteen minutes later we are in the very house and on the very couch where we used to sit together as teenagers.

"I can't believe no one knows who she is. Someone must miss her. Is there anything you can tell me? The hospital won't talk to me."

"They expect her to wake up from the coma and tell them who she is. Who did this to her?"

"How do they know she'll wake up and be okay?"

"They don't know. They've done tests but they won't know for sure until she wakes up. But we know she's not matching up to anyone reported missing."

"Why don't they make her picture public? Someone might recognize her."

"She's got a tube in her mouth, her face is swollen—I'm not sure that would do any good. I've seen people after car accidents, or fights, and they are so swollen not even their own family recognize them."

"You've seen her lately?"

Bobby pauses, ever so slightly, then takes a sharp breath in. "No, not really. Detectives are working on the case and I don't really know any more than you do."

"Are there others?"

"Other what?"

"Missing women. In Aurora." There is a hint of a shadow descending over his face. His cheeks become stiff, no longer a friend sitting here, catching up, but a door just closed, like the gates of a fortress. "What if there were other victims, in the past? How can you explain the way he buried her? What if he was right there, watching me? What if I interrupted something and he knows who I am?"

"Dahlia—"

"There must be others. What he did to her, that's not something that someone does once. There's someone out there, maybe, I don't know. Really, I don't. But it's not impossible. You can't say it's impossible."

"You're going overboard. I—"

"Bobby, what if there are more missing women? And no one does anything about it."

"You need to stop worrying. There's no reason to believe that he was watching you. How do you—"

“Are there others?”

“Dahlia—”

“Missing women. Cases like this. As a cop you should know if there’ve been any cases in the past ten years or so.”

His expression goes blank. I know the face, have seen it before. We used to get into a lot of trouble, back in high school. We smoked behind the gym, broke some equipment in the chemistry lab, but Bobby—the most honest person I know—changes when he lies. His face turns indecipherable with no signs of life. *Your facial expressions give it away. Learn to have a poker face*, he used to say to me.

“She’ll wake up. It’s only a matter of time.”

“So there are others?”

“Just allow it to play out for now. I think she’ll wake up and then we’ll know what happened. In the meantime, try not to worry. You saved her life. Isn’t that enough?”

His radio goes off, the voice of a female dispatcher squawking, just a couple of words at most, clipped, short. Bobby gets up and walks off to the side, pushing radio buttons, talking into his shoulder mic. “Let’s talk some other time,” he says and ends our conversation.

After he leaves, I go back to skimming through the articles. When I run across something with additional information, I hit the print button—I can’t stand reading on a computer screen—and finally I pull up the FBI site, which lists the missing by state.

I’m just about to compare online photos of missing girls with any resemblance to my Jane when I remember my mother and her lost purse. Lately, forgotten tasks enter my mind in completely unrelated moments, like an air-filled float popping to the surface of the ocean. The purse had completely slipped my mind, yet here it is, urging me to go find it. It’s too late to go out and search for it now; it’s about to get dark.

The composite woman pops back into my head, and the report on TV I watched that day in the hospital. I do a search for her and come across an article.

I see a red blinking light coming from the printer on the kitchen counter. I reload the tray and wait for the last few pages to print. I grab the stack and sit on the couch in the dining room and I start reading.

Last week, a jogger found a young woman on the brink of death in the woods of Aurora, Texas. The very discovery has stirred up a cold case of another alleged missing person that began with a man appearing at the Aurora police station over thirty years ago. The headline in the 1985 Aurora Daily Herald read as follows:

Man booked for resisting arrest after reporting disappearance of a woman

Aurora, December 12, 1985

A man by the name of Delbert Humphrey appeared at the Aurora police station claiming his girlfriend, a woman known to him only as “Tee,” had gone missing after he looked for the woman at the Creel Hollow Farm in Aurora. Two deputies questioned Humphrey extensively but even the police chief, Griffin Haynes, was unable to make sense of his story. Questioned further, Humphrey admitted he was not licensed to drive a vehicle and he was also unable to produce a photograph of the missing woman. He did, however, offer a pencil drawing of her. When the police doubted his story, he insisted on a sketch artist. A composite was rendered of the mystery woman.

The deputies asked permission to search his vehicle. During the search, they recovered what looked like drugs, commonly referred to as rock cocaine or crack. The rocklike substance, however, had a strong fragrant odor. Upon questioning, Humphrey referred to it as “High John the Conqueror Root” and “Balm of Gilead.” Humphrey explained that the missing woman was part of a group of travelers working at local carnivals, reading palms and selling herb and plant resins, the very rocks deputies thought to be rock cocaine.

The deputies also recovered an old rudimentary brass scale and weights. Humphrey was booked for driving without a license, on suspicion of possession with intent to distribute an imitation controlled dangerous substance and possession of drug paraphernalia.

The young woman who was found by a local jogger in the woods, which locals refer to as the Whispering Woods, is on the mend, however. It's been over a week but police are confident that her identity will be revealed as soon as they are able to question her.

At the end of the article is a rudimentary pencil drawing of the woman who went missing in 1985. Her individual features are flat, barely dimensional. The composite, however, shows more depth and dimension. She seems to be a woman in her twenties, long hair parted in the middle, full lips.

When I emerge from the stack of papers, it's dark outside and the cold air coming in through the open sliding glass door makes me shiver. I sit on the floor and fan out the papers on the coffee table. There are Jane's articles, and the woman whose only likeness is a composite.

When I run out of room on the coffee table, I arrange the papers on the floor. I get lost in sorting them and realize no one cares about Jane as much as I do. They can't possibly know what I have come to realize the day I snuck into her room; how I saw and felt that she wanted to communicate with me. And that she holds the key to her very own identity and she wanted to tell me. How else can I explain what happened at that moment, the whiff of cinnamon, my mind slipping, feeling as if I'm tumbling down a staircase, the tremor going through my body? How can I explain what I saw that night? The vision of the woods. It can't be nothing, I'm sure of that.

The printer behind me feeds more paper and I grab the last of that stack once the motor goes quiet. The mystery woman without a photograph was a rather big story—even papers of surrounding counties had picked it up. The articles revolved more around the man going to jail for the possession of an antique scale and some resin than the fact that he was there to report a missing person.

The papers on the floor get mixed up. Short of stapling them there's no way to keep them in order. I collect them into a stack, and with thumbtacks I pin them to the wall. I run out of room; I have covered the entire wall behind the couch with papers.

I tuck the composite underneath the mirror frame. The woman looks to be about twenty years old. Her eyelashes are long, her eyes slightly bulgy between prominent cheekbones. Her face is gaunt. Her picture floats to the ground but I am out of tacks and nothing would irritate me more than the wall not being complete. I stick it back under the mirror and this time it remains.

I step back and take in my wall. The pattern of the pages—aligned with perfect angles and grouped by person, sequenced by date and positioned in a star-shaped design in the center of the wall—seems to shift, appears to close in, yet the pages remain, as if all my senses are tuned in to this design I just created. A strong emotion overcomes me—I feel afraid of what's happening but all my senses kick in at the same time—I see the composite face, the wind outside plays with the leaves, a sprinkler hisses somewhere down the street, I smell the dank soil of my neighbor's lawn. *Fusion*. That's what it feels like. A fusion of all my senses. It must mean something. I just have to figure out what. There is a feeling of anticipation and my senses seem to battle with one another, not to dominate but to achieve equality. It is overwhelming, as if some *thing* makes itself known, telling me not to be afraid. The images of the two women jumble, like dice in a cup, just to emerge again, tumble out on a table that is my wall.

There is a hunch, a premonition of some sort.

A spark of the whitest light I have ever seen sears into my eyes like a camera flash. The ground shifts as if someone is picking me up. I am on my back, looking up at the ceiling fan blades *wop-wop* like helicopter blades. They slice the air, disturb the light, turn it into snow.

I'm in a blizzard yet again, the same blizzard I keep seeing over and over. I can't escape it—can't hide from it either.

Like a monster, it just won't go away.

Roswell, New Mexico, 1988

Camelot Mobile Home Park

I read the sign. I don't know what the word Camelot means. But I know what a mobile home park is. It's where I live now. Small paved walkways lead to similar houses just like ours. They are not really houses, I don't think they are—they shake and hum when it rains and strong winds come through the cracks in the wall. Mobile homes are what they're called.

Outside my window I see a long driveway with occasional weeds peeking out from cracks in the concrete. Sometimes I can see mom through the window as she walks from door to door. She collects the rent, she tells me. I watch children play through the window. They must be smarter than me, must be because they get to go to school and I don't, and so I study more, study harder, force my mind to make connections, do my math even though I have to imagine things like balloons or pizzas to understand the concept of multiplication and subtraction. And one day, once I catch up with those children, then I'll get to go to school too.

The coffee table is covered in books. Most of them have torn pages and crayon marks but I don't care. I love books. I read anything I can get my hands on.

I have many questions when mom comes home for lunch: Do airplanes fall out of the sky and what's the meaning of "Lockerbie"? What are the rules of tennis? Most of those questions I can't ask because she'd know that I changed the channel from the only one I'm allowed to watch. Mom only stays for a little while and when I tell her I have more to ask about she tells me she'll get me a book that will answer all my questions.

"All of them?"

"Yes. All the words in the world are in it," she says and hugs me. I hang on to her shirt, I don't want her to leave, and I need to know about that book.

"When?" I ask and don't really believe her. There's no such thing as an answer to all questions.

"Soon."

I want to cry. Soon is like saying never. Like soon I'll be going to school. Soon we'll have friends over, soon, everything that never happens is soon. I cling to the thought of owning such a book, vow that the first words I'll look up are Camelot, then Lockerbie, then tennis game rules.

I have a schedule. Reading Rainbow after mom leaves. I write down all the words I learn as I watch and then The Jetsons comes on. After The Jetsons I read until mom comes to make lunch and checks my workbooks. I have so many questions: Why can't I get on the bus with the other kids in Camelot? Why am I not allowed to play outside?

I did sneak out that one time. The girl's name who was playing outside I never asked as if I knew I wasn't going to see her again. We stole chalk from the bucket by the community board and we drew squares on the concrete, picked the biggest rock we could find—there were plenty in between the patchy grass and the crumbling road—and we played as the sun was beating down on us. When mom pulled up in her car, I ran back to the trailer and locked the door behind me, pretending to be studying. As if I could trick her, make her believe that she had seen another girl looking just like me outside while I was inside practicing my upper- and lowercase letters. She was mad, but not that mad. But I can't do that again. Ever.

As I learn to read and draw, as I begin to prefer the news channel to The Berenstain Bears, as my mind expands, the road leading to the trailers crumbles a bit more with each passing day. And then we leave.

The stolen chalk, the stones, and the memory of the nameless girl are all I take with me from Camelot the night we pack up the powder blue car and drive farther west.

West, is what mom says, We are going west, as if it is going to be the end of all our troubles.

Chapter 10

Quinn

Quinn was awakened by the sound of slapping wings intensifying in the trees around her. Morning faded in like a scene on a stage accompanied by a screeching murder of crows. She gathered the colorful woven fringed rectangle of a blanket and tucked the wet, reddish stain into the innermost fold. She wasn't sure what to do with the blanket and even though Sigrid didn't care where she was and when she returned home, walking in through the back door with a sapphire blue-and-maroon-striped Mexican blanket might cause her to ask questions.

Quinn decided on the route through the woods instead of the dirt road, even though it would take longer, but there was no rush, Sigrid didn't rise before noon on any day of the week. In the soft morning light, the trees were no longer menacing with their long and dark shadows, and sun rays fell through the branches, warming her skin. She stopped in her tracks when a sound pierced the air like the whip on the back of an unruly horse. There was a voice, then two, maybe even three? They multiplied, projected toward her.

Quinn found herself standing in front of a man who fixed his eyes on her rumpled dress and tousled hair. His thick lips and his unkempt beard made her uneasy.

"Who we have here?" he asked and turned a bottle of beer upside down, his lips sucking every drop out of it.

Quinn clutched the blanket closer to her chest, suddenly remembering the way her body had left an imprint on the earth after she had gathered it up off the ground. If she had left one hour earlier or one hour later, they would have never met. Strange how life is. *I should have gone down the dirt road*, Quinn thought, shuddering as she became aware of more voices around her. She caught a glimpse of three other men in camouflage pants and shirts approaching them.

The woods suddenly seemed dark and musky, the canopy of live oaks shielding the sun from reaching the forest floor, merely lifeless sticks emerging from the ground. Quinn stood motionless. The man held up the empty beer bottle, inspected it, and then tossed it into the woods. The amber glass landed gently on a bed of pine needles and moss, hardly making a sound. Without a word, he unzipped his pants and released a powerful stream of urine merely inches from her feet. Quinn felt a warm droplet touch her left foot when he fanned the stream left to right.

As her fingers clawed themselves into the blanket, she thought of something to say. "What are you all up to?" She hated that her voice shook. She watched him unshoulder his shotgun and gently lower it to the ground. Quinn managed to get the words out with a smile but then realized the man hadn't zipped up his pants.

"Huntin' season," he said.

"What are you hunting this time of year?" Quinn asked, no longer able to force even a hint of a smile on her face. She was shaking. Her brain was only able to gather one characteristic per man; Beard, Bony Fingers, Pony Tail, and Pimples. Beard was staring at her when she faintly became aware of his hand moving rhythmically by his unzipped pants. She scanned Bony Fingers, Pony Tail, and Pimple's eyes. Not one of them was going to stop Beard. There was no way they were going to stop, period. Not a single one of them.

Run.

Like a rabbit, Quinn turned on her heels and bolted down the path. She barely got ten feet away, didn't even have time to break into an all-out sprint, when she stumbled over roots and skeletal branches strewn about like bones. Her legs had springs and she recovered quickly. As if her mind had no mercy, everything was magnified, her surroundings in the light of day seemed like an alien landscape and the man pursuing her was a giant—but then her brain flooded and nothing mattered but the path in front of her.

said, *hydrosalpinx*, he told her. *The infection caused your fallopian tubes to be blocked and filled with fluid.*

Benito, Quinn thought. *I wonder if Benito knows what happened. What they did to me.*

“How long have I been here?” Quinn asked when her thoughts became clearer.

“Two days. You are on heavy antibiotics. We have to wait for the infection to completely clear up. You are young and healthy, but ...” The doctor paused and lowered his eyes. “I’m sorry to tell you that your fertility will be affected.”

Affected. Quinn wasn’t sure what that meant, had never thought about anything remotely related to fertility, was detached from the whole diagnosis. Nevertheless she tried to make sense of it all, but not for one second did she consider telling the doctor what had happened.

After her fever ceased and the pain was dull and manageable, she tried to erase it all from her mind. She imagined that a fine paring knife cut out the part of her brain that held the memory of it, but regardless of how hard she tried, the images didn’t disappear, and instead she felt a longing for the woods, the pure creek and its cold water running over her. She longed to immerse herself in it, even wondered how far down the bottom was.

After the doctor left the room, absolute clarity was bestowed upon her. She wondered if it was possible to live life as a ghost. She could not live one more second in this body as the person she used to be, and that’s what she felt like anyway, a mere ghost of the girl Quinn. It was that or nothing at all.

Chapter 11

Dahlia

When this latest episode is over, I'm famished. I pop a TV dinner in the microwave. I've been living off microwaved and prepackaged food all my life. I haven't developed an aversion to it—its American ingenuity comforts me: the divided trays, the thin plastic covering, and the eventual sliding of the empty tray into the box. Even now I stick with the foods I ate in my childhood: meat loaf and mashed potatoes, chicken-fried steak and corn.

While I eat, I stare at the papers I thumbtacked to the wall the previous day: composite woman, *my Jane*. I refer to them as *my missing people* as if it is up to me to tape a red LOCATED sign over their pictures.

After I eat, exhaustion takes over. I want nothing more than to close my eyes and stay on the couch for the rest of the day, but it's Wednesday and I have to pick up my mother at Dr. Wagner's office.

My hair is still wet from the shower when I pull into the parking lot of the clinic located next to the Metroplex compound famous for same-day lap band surgery.

Minutes later, a middle-aged woman in pink scrubs shows me into an office. I've barely had time to look around when Dr. Wagner enters the room. The first fragrance I notice is the minty scent of hand sanitizer as he furiously rubs his hands together. When he's satisfied, he extends his right hand toward me.

"Dahlia Waller. I've heard so much about you."

I manage a cheerful smile and shake his cold hand. He sits and inserts some sort of ID card in a slot of his laptop. With his posture straight and his coat as white as snow, he hits the keyboard, his every movement precise and purposeful.

"How's my mother doing?" I ask and the image of the finely arranged crickets pops into my head. I imagine her with her packed bag on her lap staring at mauve-colored plastic cups on the tray of her bedside table, her hair styled, her eyes staring straight ahead, impatiently looking toward the door.

"She's ready to go home."

"Good," I say and clear my throat.

"Did you ever find her purse?"

"Not yet, I don't know the exact location the police picked her up," I lie. My mother's purse had completely slipped my mind until last night. "I'll track it down after I drop her off at home."

Dr. Wagner takes a deep breath in. He seems annoyed by my inefficiency, and I feel the need for him to like me. I want him to know that I'm here for her, that I love my mother. Despite her craziness. Despite everything. And that I need her to be okay, but I also need her to answer my questions.

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