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THE



A YOUNG CHILD WENT MISSING YEARS AGO.

NOWHERE

THAT CHILD IS YOU.



CHILD

'A nervy, soulful, genuinely surprising thriller'

A. J. FINN, bestselling author of *The Woman in the Window*

CHRISTIAN WHITE

Christian White

**The Nowhere Child: The
bestselling debut psychological
thriller you need to read in 2019**

Аннотация

A little girl went missing years ago. That child is you. A dark and gripping debut psychological thriller that won the 2017 Victorian Premier's Literary Award, previously won by *THE DRY* and *THE ROSIE PROJECT*. 'Read page one, and you won't stop. Guaranteed' Jeffery Deaver. A child was stolen twenty years ago. Little Sammy Went vanishes from her home in Manson, Kentucky – an event that devastates her family and tears apart the town's deeply religious community. And somehow that missing girl is you. Kim Leamy, an Australian photographer, is approached by a stranger who turns her world upside down – he claims she is the kidnapped Sammy and that everything she knows about herself is based on a lie. How far will you go to uncover the truth? In search of answers, Kim returns to the remote town of Sammy's childhood to face up to the ghosts of her early life. But the deeper she digs into her family background the more secrets she uncovers... And the closer she gets to confronting the trauma of her dark and twisted past.

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THE
NOWHERE
CHILD

Copyright

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Praise for *The Nowhere Child*:

‘A nervy, soulful, genuinely surprising it-could-happen-to-you thriller – a book to make you peer over your shoulder for days afterwards’

A. J. Finn

‘The personification of a high-concept thriller, brilliantly executed. Author White raises the bar on psychological suspense, telling Kim Leamy’s tale in a stylish voice and with a heart-pounding pace. Read page one, and you won’t stop. Guaranteed’

Jeffery Deaver

‘Packed with tension, twists and tremendous pace, it’s hard to believe that this is the work of a debut author. *The Nowhere Child* is stunning and flawless. I can’t recommend it enough’

Thomas Enger

‘Beautifully written, perfectly suspenseful and wonderfully dark. I could not put this book down’

Susi Holliday

‘Such a clever idea, which grips from the very first chapter’

Ragnar Jonasson

‘White skilfully builds an uncertain, noxious world of dysfunctional families and small-town secrets – *The Nowhere Child* is a gripping debut from an exceptional new talent’

Mark Brandi

‘*The Nowhere Child* is a fabulous read, populated by such well-

drawn and identifiable characters that I felt I knew them. I was desperate to know how the story unfolded. Brilliant!’

Louise Voss

‘*The Nowhere Child* lures you in, its teeth disguised in remarkably compelling prose, and gnaws down to the marrow of your bones’

Matt Wesolowski

‘I literally could not put this down once I started. A cracking read!’

Michael J. Malone

‘*The Nowhere Child* is a well-written thriller that avoids the clichés of the genre. The characters are interesting and believable and the book kept me reading up to the satisfying conclusion’

Phillip Margolin

‘*The Nowhere Child* is a page-turning labyrinth of twists and turns that moves seamlessly between the past and the present, revealing the story in parts and successfully keeping the reader guessing until the final unexpected reveal ... It’s an exhilarating ride and a thrilling debut’

Books + Publishing magazine

‘How do any of us know that we are who we are told we are? This gripping read takes you to the very edge of reality’

Jane Caro

‘*The Nowhere Child* is a twisty, emotional read filled with suspense and intrigue. The gripping narrative and natural dialogue held me captive all the way through. Dark secrets buried

away for years are gradually unearthed, leading to a dramatic, breath-holding climax’

Off-the-Shelf Books

‘I read *The Nowhere Child* in one gulp of a sitting. From the emotionally stunning opening until the final heart-stopping resolution, this tale of loss, discovery and what makes a family held me in its thrall first page to last’

Liz Loves Books

‘Utterly compelling, emotional and a stunning debut’

Bibliophile Book Club

Dedication

for my parents, Ivan and Keera White.

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MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Now

‘Mind if I join you?’ the stranger asked. He was somewhere in his forties, with shy good looks and an American accent. He wore a slick wet parka and bright yellow sneakers. The shoes must have been new because they squeaked when he moved his feet. He sat down at my table before waiting for an answer and said, ‘You’re Kimberly Leamy, right?’

I was between classes at Northampton Community TAFE, where I taught photography three nights a week. The cafeteria was usually bustling with students, but tonight it had taken on an eerie, post-apocalyptic emptiness. It had been raining nearly six days straight but the double-glazed glass kept the noise out.

‘Just Kim,’ I said, feeling mildly frustrated. I didn’t have long left on my break and had been enjoying my solitude. Earlier that week I’d found a worn old copy of Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* propping up the leg of a table in the staffroom, and since then I’d been busily consuming it. I’ve always been a big reader, and horror is a particular favourite of mine. My younger sister, Amy, would often watch in frustration as I finished three books in the same time it took her to read one. The key to fast reading is to have a boring life, I once told her. Amy had a fiancé and a three-year-old daughter; I had Stephen King.

‘My name is James Finn,’ the man said. He placed a manila folder on the table between us and closed his eyes for a moment, like an Olympic diver mentally preparing to leap.

‘Are you a teacher or a student?’ I asked.

‘Neither, actually.’

He opened the folder, removed an eight-by-ten-inch photo and slid it across the table. There was something mechanical about the way he moved. Every gesture was measured and confident.

The eight-by-ten showed a young girl sitting on a lush green lawn, with deep blue eyes and a mop of shaggy dark hair. She was smiling but it was perfunctory, like she was sick of having her picture taken.

‘Does she look familiar to you?’ he asked.

‘No, I don’t think so. Should she?’

‘Would you mind looking again?’

He leaned back in his chair, closely gauging my response. Indulging him, I looked at the photo again. The blue eyes, the over-exposed face, the smile that wasn’t really a smile. Perhaps she did look familiar now. ‘I don’t know. I’m sorry. Who is she?’

‘Her name is Sammy Went. This photo was taken on her second birthday. Three days later she was gone.’

‘Gone?’

‘Taken from her home in Manson, Kentucky. Right out of her second-floor bedroom. Police found no evidence of an intruder. There were no witnesses, no ransom note. She just vanished.’

‘I think you’re looking for Edna,’ I said. ‘She teaches Crime

and Justice Studies. I'm just a photography teacher but Edna lives for all this true crime stuff.'

'I'm here to see you,' he said, then cleared his throat before continuing. 'Some people thought she wandered into the woods, got taken by a coyote or mountain lion, but how far could a two-year-old *wander*? The most likely scenario is Sammy was abducted.'

'... Okay. So, are you an investigator?'

'Actually, I'm an accountant.' He exhaled deeply and I caught the smell of spearmint on his breath. 'But I grew up in Manson and know the Went family pretty well.'

My class was set to start in five minutes so I made a point of checking my watch. 'I'm very sorry to hear about this girl, but I'm afraid I have a class to teach. Of course I'm happy to help. What kind of donation did you have in mind?'

'Donation?'

'Aren't you raising money for the family? Isn't that what this is about?'

'I don't need your money,' he said with a chilly tone. He stared at me with a pinched, curious expression. 'I'm here because I believe you're ... connected to all this.'

'Connected to the abduction of a two-year-old girl?' I laughed. 'Don't tell me you came all the way from the States to accuse me of kidnap?'

'You misunderstand,' he said. 'This little girl disappeared on April 3rd, 1990. She's been missing for twenty-eight years. I

don't think you *kidnapped* Sammy Went. I think you *are* Sammy Went.'

There were seventeen students in my photography class, a mix of age, race and gender. On one end of the spectrum was Lucy Cho, so fresh out of high school she still wore a hoodie with *Mornington Secondary* emblazoned on the back. On the other end was Murray Palfrey, a 74-year-old retiree who had a habit of cracking his knuckles before he raised his hand.

It was folio presentation night, when students stood before the class to display and discuss the photos they'd taken that semester. Most of the presentations were unremarkable. The majority were technically sound, which meant I was doing *something* right, but the subject matter was largely the same as the folios in the previous semester, and the one before that. I saw the same graffiti on the same dilapidated brick wall; the same vine-strangled cabin in Carlton Gardens; the same dark and spooky storm drain dribbling dirty brown water into Egan River.

I spent most of the class on autopilot.

My encounter with the American accountant had left me rattled, but not because I believed what he said. My mother, Carol Leamy, was a lot of things – four years dead among them – but an abductor of children she was not. To spend one minute with my mother was to know she wasn't capable of maintaining a lie, much less international child abduction.

James Finn was wrong about me and I was fairly certain he'd never find that little girl, but he had reminded me of

an uncomfortable truth: control is an illusion. Sammy Went's parents had learned that the hard way, with the loss of a child. I had learned it the hard way too, through the death of my mother. She went suddenly, relatively speaking: I was twenty-four when she was diagnosed with cancer and twenty-six when it killed her.

In my experience most people come out of something like that saying one of two things: 'everything happens for a reason' or 'chaos reigns'. There are variations, of course: 'God works in mysterious ways' and 'life's a bitch'. For me, it was the latter. My mother didn't smoke or spend her working life in a textiles factory. She ate well and exercised, and in the end it made exactly zero difference.

See, control is an illusion.

I realised I was daydreaming my way through the folio presentations so I downed a cup of cold coffee and tried to focus.

It was Simon Daumier-Smith's turn to show his work. Simon was a shy kid in his early twenties who spent most of his time staring at his feet when he talked. When he did look up, his lazy eye bobbed around behind his reading glasses like a fish.

He spent a few minutes awkwardly setting up a series of photos on the display easels at the front of the class. The other students were starting to get restless, so I asked Simon to talk us through the series as he set up.

'Uh, yeah, sure, okay,' he said, struggling with one of the prints. It escaped from his hand and he chased it across the floor. 'So, I know that we were meant to look for, uh, juxtaposition and,

uh, well, I'm not exactly sure I have, you know, a grasp of what that is or whatever.' He placed the last photo on the easel and stepped back to let the class see. 'I guess you could say this series shows the juxtaposition of ugliness and beauty.'

To my complete surprise, Simon Daumier-Smith's photo series was ... breathtaking.

There were six photos in total, each framed in the exact same way. He must have locked the camera off with a tripod and taken a photo every few hours. The composition was stark and simple: a bed, a woman and her child. The woman was Simon's age, with a pockmarked but pretty face. The child was around three, with unnaturally red cheeks and a sick, furrowed brow.

'I took them all over one night,' Simon explained. 'The woman is my wife, Joanie, and that's our little girl, Simone. We didn't name her after me, by the way. A lot of people think we named her after me, but Joanie had a grandma called Simone.'

'Tell us more about the series, Simon,' I said.

'Right, uh, so Simone was up all night with whooping cough and I guess she was pretty fussy, so Joanie spent the night in bed with her.'

The first photo showed mother spooning child. In the second the little girl was awake and crying, pushing away from her mother. The third looked as though Simon's wife was getting fed up with her photo being taken. The series went on like that until the sixth photo, which showed both mother and child fast asleep.

'Where's the ugliness?' I asked.

‘Well, uh, see in this one, little Simone, ah, the younger subject, is drooling. And obviously you can’t tell from the photo, but in this one my wife was snoring like crazy.’

‘I don’t see ugliness,’ I said. ‘I see something ... ordinary. But beautiful.’

Simon Daumier-Smith would never go on to become a professional photographer. I was almost certain of that. But with his plainly named series, *Sick Girl*, he had created something true and real.

‘Are you alright, Miss Leamy?’ he asked.

‘It’s Kim,’ I reminded him. ‘And I’m fine. Why do you ask?’

‘Well, you’re, uh. You’re crying.’

It was after ten when I drove home through the gloomy landscape of Coburg. Rain fell in fat, drenching sheets against the roof of the Subaru. Ten minutes later I was home, parked, and dashing through the rain toward my apartment building, holding my bag over my head instead of an umbrella.

The third-floor landing was thick with the smell of garlic and spice; the oddly comforting scent of neighbours I’d never actually met. As I headed for my door, Georgia Evvie from across the hall poked her head out.

‘Kimberly, I thought that was you.’ She was a rotund woman in her early sixties with bloodshot, bleary eyes – ‘Heavy Evvie’, I once heard a neighbour call her behind her back. ‘I heard the elevator ding and looked at my watch and thought, who else would be coming home this close to midnight?’

It was ten-thirty.

‘Sorry, Mrs Evvie. Did I wake you?’

‘No, no. I’m a night owl. Of course, Bill’s in bed by nine so he might have stirred but he didn’t complain.’ She waved a dismissive hand. ‘And if he did I’d have reminded him you’re young. Young people come home late nowadays, even on weeknights apparently.’

‘Uh huh.’

Nobody had ever actually seen Georgia’s husband and there was little to no evidence he truly existed. Of course, he might have just been buried under all of Georgia’s crap. From the glimpses I caught of her apartment when she came to her door, I knew that 3E was lined with swaying towers of junk: books, bills, files and over-stuffed boxes. The only window I could see from the hall was covered with newspaper, and although I never actually saw one, I’m sure there were one or two tinfoil hats floating around in all that chaos.

‘Well, seeing as how you’re already awake ...’ she started. Georgia was about to invite herself in for a nightcap. All I wanted was to turn the heat up, lounge on the sofa with Stephen King and listen to the soothing, predictable sounds of my apartment – the hum of the refrigerator, the whisper of ducted heating, the quiet buzz of my laptop charger. ‘... how about a nightcap?’

With a sigh I said, ‘Sure.’ Ever since my mother’s death I’ve found it near impossible to say no to a lonely woman.

My one-bedroom apartment was sparsely furnished, giving

the impression that the place was huge. Even Heavy Evvie looked small sitting in the green armchair by the rain-streaked window of the living room, picking lint from her tracksuit pants and dropping it onto my hardwood floor.

I fetched a bottle of wine from the kitchen and fixed us both a glass. The one good thing about having Georgia over was I didn't have to drink alone.

'What do you think they're cooking up over there, Kim?' she asked.

'Who?'

'Who do you think? 3C. I hear them chattering all day in *Iraqian* or whatever.'

'Oh, 3C. Smells like some kind of curry.' My stomach growled. I had searched the kitchen for something to eat but all I could find were condiments. Wine would have to suffice.

'I'm not talking about their supper.' She lowered her voice to a whisper: 'I'm talking about their *plan*.'

Georgia was convinced the occupants of 3C were terrorists based on two things: they were from the Middle East, and the name on their mailbox was Mohamed. On a number of occasions I'd explained to her that not all people with light-brown skin were terrorists and, regardless, I doubted Coburg, Australia would rate high on anyone's list of targets. But every time, Georgia just shook her head gravely and said, 'You'll see.'

'So what brings you home so late, Kim? I suppose you've been out clubbing.'

‘I work nights, Mrs Evvie. You know this.’

She sipped her wine and screwed her nose up at the taste. ‘I don’t know how you kids do it. Out all hours doing God knows what.’

I finished my wine fast and poured another one, reminding myself to take slower, more contemplative sips this time around. I was only after a warm, foggy buzz that would make it easier to sleep.

‘So something weird happened to me tonight, Mrs Evvie,’ I said. ‘A man approached me at work.’

‘Finally,’ she said, helping herself to more wine. ‘It’s about time, Kim. A woman only has a small window to bag a man. Between fifteen and twenty-five. That’s all you get. I was seventeen when I met Bill, eighteen when I married him.’

Georgia found a remote control stuffed between the green cushions of the armchair and turned on the television. Tinfoil hat and casual racism aside, all she really wanted was some company.

I curled up on the sofa nearby and opened up my laptop while she flicked through the stations at full volume.

I had intended to casually browse the internet, maybe stalk a high-school friend or purge my email inbox, but my curiosity soon grew too strong. When I opened a new tab and searched *Sammy Went + Manson, Kentucky*, it was as if my fingers were acting independently. It reminded me of the mechanical way James Finn had moved his manila folder about.

The first link took me to an archived newspaper article from

7 April 1990. The article had been electronically scanned in, complete with creases and inkblots. The words bled together in places, making me feel like an old-timey researcher poring through microfilm.

POLICE SEARCH FOR MISSING GIRL

The search for a two-year-old girl missing in the Manson area resumed on Friday with volunteers and law enforcement officers.

Sammy Went of Manson disappeared from her home Tuesday afternoon and has not been found despite a search of the town and its vicinity.

‘We have faith we’re going to find Sammy and bring her home safe,’ Manson Sheriff Chester Ellis said. ‘We’re currently working under the assumption this is a search and rescue operation.’

Police do not believe the girl’s disappearance was the result of foul play, but refused to rule anything out.

Hundreds of Manson residents searched the extensive wooded areas surrounding the Went residence on Friday.

Search volunteer Karen Peady, a long-time resident of Manson, expressed her fears: ‘The nights are cold and there are a lot of wild animals in the area, but the idea she was taken by a man is what scares me the most. It’s tempting to think the evils of modern America haven’t reached us out here in Manson yet, but there are plenty of sick people in this world, even in a town as small as this.’

Sammy was last seen wearing a long-sleeved yellow T-shirt

and blue pyjama shorts. Police are asking for any information that may assist their investigation.

The article was accompanied by the same photo that James Finn had shown me, only this version was in black and white. Sammy's deep blue eyes appeared black, and her over-exposed face was stark white and mostly featureless.

A little more internet research took me to a photo of Jack and Molly Went, Sammy's parents. The picture had been taken in the days directly following Sammy's disappearance, and showed them standing on the steps outside the Manson Sheriff's Station.

They looked desperately tired, faces tense, fear etched in their eyes. Molly Went in particular looked permanently damaged, as if her spirit had left the body to run on autopilot. Her mouth was twisted into a frown so severe it made her look deranged.

Tracing her features on the screen, I compared Molly Went's face to my own. We shared the same long, angular nose and droopy eyelids. She seemed much shorter than me, but Jack Went looked well over six foot. The harder I looked the more I could see myself in both of them: Jack Went's small, pale ears, Molly Went's posture, Jack's broad shoulders, Molly's pointed chin. A little DNA from column A, a little from column B.

Of course, that didn't mean anything. I feel the same way when I read horoscopes – they're designed to allow the reader to see what they want.

Do I want to see myself in Jack and Molly Went? I wondered. The question came to me by surprise and soon my mind was

buzzing with more. Hadn't Sammy's eyes been the same deep blue as mine, and couldn't those chubby legs of hers have transformed into long skinny pegs like my own, and if Sammy were alive today, wouldn't we be roughly the same age?

Were Jack and Molly Went still waiting for answers? Did every phone call or knock at the door fill them with hope or dread or some bitter mixture of both? Did they see Sammy's face in every woman they passed on the street, or had they found a way to move on?

The biggest question of all came like a shard of glass to my consciousness: could Carol Leamy, a woman with a background in social work who spent most of her working life as an HR rep for a company that sold and manufactured picture hooks, really, honestly, ever be capable of—

I stopped myself from going any further. The implications were too great and, frankly, too absurd.

The sound of heavy snoring pulled me from my laptop. Georgia had fallen fast asleep in the green armchair, her glass of wine balanced precariously between thumb and forefinger. I took the wine, switched off the television and covered her legs with a fluffy red throw rug. If history was any guide she'd be asleep for a few hours. She'd then wake around three am to use the toilet before waddling back across the hall.

Leaving Georgia where she was, I crept into my bedroom and climbed into bed. When I fell asleep, I dreamed about a tall man made entirely of shadows. The shadow man appeared outside my

bedroom window and reached in with impossibly long arms. He carried me away, down a long, narrow dirt path lined with tall trees.

MANSON, KENTUCKY

Then

On Tuesday 3 April 1990, Jack Went emptied his bladder in the upstairs bathroom. His wife was in the shower a few feet away. There was something fitting about watching her through frosted glass. The vague shape of the woman he once knew. That sounded about right.

Molly shut the water off but stayed behind the screen. ‘You about done, Jack?’

‘Just about.’ He washed his hands. ‘You don’t have to hide in there. You don’t have anything I haven’t quite literally seen before.’

‘That’s alright. I’ll wait.’ She stood behind the screen with her shoulders hunched forward. Her posture reminded Jack of something from his World War Two books – a Holocaust survivor with a broken spirit, or a simple village girl standing in a field of bodies.

Her clothes for the day were hanging on the back of the bathroom door: a pastel-pink sweater with long sleeves and a heavy denim skirt that fell an inch above her ankles. *Pentecostal chic*.

Once upon a time, before Sammy was born, Molly had been warm-blooded and tangible, but lately she seemed watered down.

Haunting the halls of their home instead of living in them. She was a remarkable woman in that way: even with the family drugstore doing well enough that she didn't have to work, three beautiful children and the support of her faith, she could still find something to be sad about.

Molly opened the shower screen an inch to peer out. Her shoulders were pinched with gooseflesh. 'Come on, hun. I'm freezing here.'

'I'm going, I'm going,' he said, stepping out into the hall and closing the door behind him.

He found two of his children downstairs in front of the television, engrossed in an episode of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Neither said good morning. Stu, the lumpy nine-year-old, was getting over a cold. He sat under a woollen blanket with a box of Kleenex, staring at the screen with eyes wide and mouth slack.

'Feeling any better, buddy?' Jack asked, placing the back of his hand against Stu's forehead. He didn't reply. The Turtles had him transfixed.

Sammy, the two-year-old cherub, was also watching, but she seemed just as interested in her big brother. Her eyes darted from the cartoon to Stu's face. When Michelangelo made a wisecrack and Stu laughed, she copied him, parroting not just the volume of the laugh, but the rhythm too. When Shredder put some sinister plan into action and Stu gasped, Sammy gasped with him.

Not wanting to disturb the scene of domestic bliss he'd

stumbled into, Jack backed quietly out of the room.

His eldest daughter, Emma, was eating cornflakes at the kitchen counter, one arm forming a wall around her bowl, the way he imagined prison inmates would eat.

Is that how she sees this house? He wondered. *A sentence she needs to wait out.* Sometimes it felt that way for Jack too.

‘Good morning, sweetheart,’ he said, making coffee. ‘Coach Harris came by the drugstore yesterday. He says you had PMS *again* so you couldn’t participate in gym. Need me to bring you home some naproxen?’

Emma grunted. ‘I don’t know why two grown men think it’s okay to talk about my period.’

‘Isn’t using your period to get out of gym sort of cliché?’

‘It’s not cliché, Dad – it’s a classic. Besides, Coach Harris is a creep. He always makes us climb the gym ropes so he can “spot” us. That reminds me, I need you to sign this.’

She dug deep into her backpack, pulled out a permission slip and handed it to Jack.

‘For permission to participate in the study of science and evolution?’ he read. ‘You need a parent’s permission to take a class nowadays?’

‘You do when half the kids are fucking fundies.’

He lowered his voice. ‘Has your mother seen this?’

‘No.’

He took a pen from his breast pocket and signed the permission slip quickly. ‘Let’s keep it that way. And don’t let her

catch you saying the F-word.’

‘Fucking?’

‘Fundie.’

Emma folded the slip and tucked it safely back into her backpack.

While both Jack and Molly were technically members of the Church of the Light Within – Molly through conversion and Jack through blood – Molly took it far more seriously than he did. She attended all three weekly services. That was common for members who found the faith later in life: usually they already had a hole that needed filling.

Jack had started drifting from the Light Within as a teenager and had stopped attending services altogether when Emma was born. He’d justified it by calling it a safety issue: like many Pentecostal fundamentalists, the Light Within handled venomous snakes and ingested different kinds of poison as part of their worship – not exactly a healthy environment for children. So he had stayed home to babysit and let Molly do her thing. He still called himself a Light Withiner to keep Molly from leaving him and his parents from disowning him – although at times neither of those possibilities sounded too bad – but in truth he had long ago lost his faith.

Molly came downstairs, pulling on her pastel-pink sweater. ‘Morning, Em.’

Emma grunted a reply.

‘Coach Harris told your father you’re using PMS to get out of

gym. Is this true?’

‘Dad’s already given me the lecture, so you can cool it.’

‘Well, I hope he told you that lying is a sin and your studies are the most important thing in your life right now.’

‘Jesus, here we go.’

‘Em.’ Molly drummed her fist on the kitchen counter. ‘*Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. The mouth speaks what the heart is full of. When you say His name in vain—*

—you dishonour the faith,’ Emma finished in a tired monotone. ‘*Words testify to our devotion to God and words are the truth of what we are.* I got it. Thanks.’ She put her bowl in the sink. ‘I have to go. I’m meeting Shelley.’

She picked up her backpack, clomped across the kitchen in her dirty Chuck Taylors and disappeared out the door.

‘Some back-up would have been nice,’ Molly said to Jack.

‘I thought you handled it pretty well.’ He put an arm around her shoulders and tried to ignore the way she stiffened under his touch.

‘I worry about her, Jack.’

‘She’s not a lost soul just yet,’ he said. ‘Just *a little* lost. Remember what you were like at her age? Besides, I won’t be the favourite for long. I read somewhere that when girls hit puberty something is triggered inside their brain and they’re reprogrammed to hate the smell of their father. They say it’s an evolutionary thing. To prevent incest.’

Molly’s face turned sour. ‘Just one more reason not to believe

in evolution.'

Sammy yanked on one of Jack's pant legs. She had waddled into the kitchen, dragging a stuffed gorilla behind her. 'Dada,' she said. 'Incest?'

Molly laughed. It felt good to hear her laugh. 'Good luck with that one. I have to check up on Stu.'

When Molly left the kitchen, Jack hoisted his little girl into his arms and drew her tight toward his face. His whiskers and hot breath made her giggle and squirm. She smelled like fresh talcum powder.

'Incest?' Sammy said again.

'*Insects*,' Jack said. 'You know, like ants and beetles.'

Went Drugs, the family business, was situated on the corner of Main Street and Barkly, in the middle of Manson's shopping district. The store also provided a shortcut between a large parking lot and Main Street, which meant plenty of foot traffic. People always got sick and business was always good.

When Jack arrived, Deborah Shoshlefski was bagging up a customer's order at the front counter. Deborah was the youngest and most reliable of Jack's shop assistants, a dowdy girl with wide-set eyes that made her seem perpetually surprised.

'Morning, boss. There's a load of scripts need filling. They're on your spike.'

'Thanks, Debbie.'

She rolled her eyes, laughing, and told her customer, 'He knows I hate it when people call me Debbie, so he calls me

Debbie every chance he gets.'

Jack smiled politely at the woman as he slipped behind the counter. He barely had time to button on his white tunic before a skeletal hand reached over the counter and grabbed his forearm.

'My joints are hurting something awful, Jack,' an old voice wheezed. Graham Kasey had lived in Manson forever and had seemed ancient even when Jack was a boy. He spoke through loose false teeth in that old-timer death-gurgle that Jack's grandfather had taken on in his final years. 'My bones feel like they're punishing me for something I can't remember. None of the stuff you keep on the shelf is working for me, Jack. Give me something harder than this pussy shit.' He held up an empty packet of Pain-Away, an extra-strength heat rub designed for superficial pain relief.

'Have you seen a doctor, Graham?'

'You expect me to drive all the way to Coleman just so Dr Arter can send me back here with a scrap of paper? Come on, Jack. I know you got what I need.'

'I'm not a drug dealer. And who says you have to go all the way to Coleman? We've got Dr Redmond right here in Manson.'

'Redmond and I don't see eye to eye.'

Jack threw a subtle wink at Deborah, who chortled in return. Graham Kasey was the sort who would rather drive twenty miles to Coleman in his gas-guzzling old Statesman than have Dr Redmond – who was both black *and* a woman – give him a prescription.

‘Sorry, Graham. I don’t write the scripts. I just fill ’em.’

In the whole time they had been talking, Graham hadn’t let go of Jack’s arm. His fingers were cold and bony, reminding Jack of dead white caterpillars. ‘Don’t you know you’re s’posed to respect your elders?’

‘It’s illegal.’

‘Oh, illegal my ear. I know how it works, Jack. You can write off anything you keep behind your little counter there. Things get lost all the time. They go missing or get chewed up by rats or they expire.’

‘And how might you know that?’

‘Well, let’s just say it wasn’t so damn uptight round here when Sandy ran things.’

At hearing his mother’s name, Jack felt hot energy rise in the back of his neck. Went Drugs was opened two years before Jack was born, as the sign above the door – *WENT DRUGS EST. 1949* – reminded him daily. He had bought into it fair and square just four years out of college, but it never really felt wholly his.

It didn’t help that his mother – a druggist too and *technically* retired – popped in every other week under the pretence of picking up a bottle of Aspirin or a jumbo-sized pack of toilet paper, only to wander the aisles saying things like, ‘Oh, why did you put the antihistamines *here*?’ One time she even ran her index finger along the rear shelf to check for dust, like an uptight British nanny.

Graham might have seen a little too much fire in Jack’s eyes

because he softened and finally released Jack's arm. There were pale marks in the skin where his fingers had been. 'Ah, hell. I'll just take another pack of this pussy shit.'

Jack flashed a smile and clapped a hand against Graham's shoulder. He could have sworn he saw dust rise off the old coot's blazer.

'You heard the man, Debbie,' Jack said. 'One pack of pussy shit for Mr Kasey here. Bag it up.'

'Right away, boss.'

Jack went back to his station to fill some scripts but couldn't quite relax. Graham Kasey had picked at an old scab and now he was irritated.

A grown man with mommy issues, he thought. Talk about cliché.

It's not cliché, he heard his daughter say. It's a classic.

Jack tried to focus on work, but as he pulled the first script from the spike, he nearly tore it in half. Luckily the important parts were still readable: *Andrea Albee, fluoxetine, maintenance dose.*

He took a small plastic cup and wandered among the towering pill shelves out back, then returned to his desk with Andrea Albee's Prozac and powered up the fat computer on his desk. It buzzed and struggled. A few minutes later a black screen appeared with a green directory. He found fluoxetine on the database and hit the *PRINT SIDE EFFECTS* button for the side of the bottle.

The printer shook and screamed as the list emerged. *Hives, restlessness, chills, fever, drowsiness, irregular heartbeat, convulsions, dry skin, dry mouth.* Just how sad was this Andrea Albee anyway? Was turning her brain numb – and that’s exactly what she was doing: contrary to popular opinion, Prozac didn’t make you feel happy or *right* – truly worth the side effects?

Deborah poked her head into his station. ‘Phone call for you, boss. Wanna take it in here?’

‘Thanks, Deborah.’

Her eyes grew even wider than usual. ‘You didn’t call me Debbie!’

Jack flashed the same smile he’d given Graham Kasey, and Deborah connected the call to the phone on his desk.

‘Jack Went speaking.’

‘Hi, Jack.’ He recognised the voice right away. ‘Free for lunch?’

At two pm, Jack pulled in to the parking lot at the east end of Lake Merri and stood waiting against his red Buick Reatta convertible – a car Emma lovingly referred to as his mid-life-crisis-mobile. The lot was hidden from the highway by a quarter-mile of shaggy bushland. It was almost always empty, even at this time of year when the spring weather started to bring people back to the water.

Travis Eckles arrived ten minutes later in his industrial cleaning work van. He got out of the van in a pair of baggy white coveralls and checked his windblown hair in the windscreen

reflection. He had a nasty-looking black eye.

‘Heck, what happened to you?’ Jack asked.

Travis gave the bruise an exploratory poke and winced. ‘It’s not as bad as it looks.’

Jack took Travis’s head between his hands and examined the injury. It puffed out his face, made him look thuggish like his older brother. ‘How’s the pain? Need some Advil?’

Travis shrugged. ‘No. It’s alright.’

‘Did Ava do this to you?’

Travis ignored him, which was as good as answering in the affirmative.

Ava Eckles was Travis’s mother, a wild drunk who liked to talk with her fists from time to time. If the rumours could be believed she had also slept her way through half the men in Manson.

Travis’s father was a crewman in the air force and was inside a CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter when it crashed during a training exercise off the southeast coast of North Carolina in 1983. Everyone on board was killed.

Travis had an elder brother too – Patrick – but he was currently serving time in Greenwood Corrections on an aggravated assault charge. Then there were his cousins, a collection of college dropouts, drug dealers and delinquents.

Some family, Jack thought. But Travis was alright. At twenty-two he was still young enough to get out of Manson, and while being a janitor wasn’t anyone’s dream job, it was solid work for

a solid paycheck. He was crude and abrasive sometimes, but he was kind and funny too. Not many people saw that side of him.

Travis slid the side door of the work van open. *CLINICAL CLEANING* printed on the side in big red letters turned into *CLING*. He stood aside. 'After you.'

Jack looked over the lake. The evergreens on the Coleman side shifted as a stiff breeze swept through them, but the water was still and empty. They were alone. He climbed into the back of the van and Travis followed, pulling the door shut behind them. It was warm inside. Travis rolled his coveralls down to the waist and Jack unbuttoned his pants.

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Now

My sister's townhouse was in a labyrinth of identical-looking homes in Caroline Springs. I'd been there at least a dozen times already but I wasn't sure I had the right place until Amy rushed out to meet me.

'What is it?' she called. 'What's wrong? What's going on?'

'What are you talking about? Nothing's wrong. Who said anything was wrong?'

She bent over at the waist and braced herself on her knees, heaving with melodramatic relief. 'When I saw you out front I just ... I didn't know you were coming and ... I'm sorry. I guess I have a habit of assuming the worst.'

'Yikes. Can't a girl just visit her sister?'

'Not when that girl is you, Kim. You're not exactly the pop-in type.'

I made a big show of rolling my eyes because I didn't want her to know she was right – which, of course, she was. I'm generally solitary by nature. I feel much more comfortable alone, staying in and reading a book or wandering the aisles of the supermarket for an hour trying to find the perfect brand of linguine.

Amy was five years younger than me, with a warm, round face and full body. '*Bumps in all the right places*', our mother used

to say. It was as if my sister's genes had defined themselves in opposition to my own. Nobody in school ever stopped her to say, 'Excuse me but I think your boobs are on backwards.'

Technically Amy and I were only half-sisters. Her father (my stepdad) met my mother when I was two, and they had Amy when I was five. But blood and DNA aside, there was no *half* about it. Amy was my sister, for better or worse.

Dean had been around long enough to earn the position of official, bona fide *Dad*. Of course, never knowing my real father meant there was no basis for comparison.

'Aunty Kim!' Lisa, my three-year-old niece, had hurried out through the open front door and onto the lawn, two fingers wedged into her mouth. The grass was wet and her socks were immediately soaked through, but that didn't slow her down. She crossed the lawn as fast as she could. I grabbed her under the armpits, hoisted her into the air and turned her upside down. She screamed in delight, giggling until snot came out of her nose.

I set Lisa down on the front step and let her run into the house, her wet socks leaving tiny footprints on the hardwood floors. As usual, the house was a mess. Dishes were piled six plates high in the sink, Lisa's toys were strewn up and down the hallway, and the living-room sofa was covered with coloured crayon, its creases foaming with forgotten chalk and food crumbs.

The television, a brand new fifty-two-inch, was blaring at full volume. Lisa was lured to it like a zombie. She stopped less than a foot from the screen, mouth agape, as if the cartoon characters

on the screen were whispering all the secrets of the universe.

In the middle of the living-room floor was an Ikea box, roughly torn down the middle to expose a mad tangle of cheap wood and plastic brackets.

If I spent just one day in Amy's shoes my mind would melt with sensory overload, but she seemed to thrive in the chaos.

'It's a goddamn toy chest for Lisa's room,' she said, picking up an L-shaped bracket and turning it over in her hands, as if it were some mysterious archaeological artefact. 'Or at least it will be a toy chest ... one day. In the far off, distant future.'

'Need some help putting it together?'

'Nah, I'll leave it for Wayne to finish. And I don't even care what that says about me as a woman. Coffee?'

'Sure.'

As she prepared coffee in the adjoining kitchen, she talked about the toy chest for a full five minutes. Shouting over the sound of the percolator, she told me how much the toy chest cost, which section of Ikea she found it in, what it should look like after its construction and the complex series of decisions that led to its purchase. She told me all of this without a break as I waited in the living room. I could have left, gone to the bathroom and come back, and she wouldn't have noticed. Instead I used the time to scan her bookshelves, searching for her photo albums.

In particular I was looking for a fat pink folder with *EARLIEST MEMORIES* spelled out in purple block letters on the cover. The album had belonged to our mother, and should really have been

kept at Dean's place, but Amy went a little nutty with photos after Mum died.

The photos were the whole reason I was here. Last night I'd half-convinced myself that I could have been the kid in James Finn's photograph, and I was eager to knock that speculation on the head.

The bookshelf was packed with DVDs, magazines, a framed cast of two tiny feet marked *Lisa, age 6 months*, but there were no albums.

'What are you looking for?' Amy had snuck up behind me. She handed me a cup of black coffee. 'We're outta milk.'

'That's fine. And nothing. I was just looking.'

'You're lying.'

Damn it, I thought. Ever since we were kids Amy could always tell when I was trying to hide something. She had a knack for it that bordered on psychic. The morning after I'd lost my virginity to Rowan Kipling I told my parents that I had stayed over at my friend Charlotte's place. Amy, at all of eleven years old, looked at me over her breakfast cereal and said, 'She's lying.'

Assuming Amy knew something they didn't, Mum and Dean started picking at my lie until the whole damn story came unravelling. It wasn't that I was a bad liar; Amy was just an exceptional lie detector.

Sighing, I came clean. 'I'm looking for the photo album with the baby pictures.'

Amy clicked her tongue, a thinking technique she'd used since

she was a kid. The wet *click-click* sound briefly transported me back in time to my bedroom at number fourteen Greenlaw Street. The memory was hazy and fragmented, lacking context like a fading dream. But I could see Amy clearly, at four or five years old, in pink-and-green striped pyjamas. She was climbing into my single bed and I was pulling back the covers to let her in.

As the memory drifted away a heavy sadness remained.

‘All the photos are probably in the garage someplace,’ Amy said. ‘We still haven’t totally unpacked the garage, if you’d believe it. Six months later. It’s Wayne’s job but every time I bring it up he does this big sigh. You know that sigh he does that sounds like a deflating tyre? Like you just asked him for a kidney.’

‘So you have it?’

‘Why do you want it?’

‘This’ll sound strange, but it’s a secret.’

Amy sipped her coffee, searching my face for whatever hidden tell or psychic signal she usually used to catch me out. Then her eyes lit up. ‘Does this have something to do with my birthday? Did Wayne tell you about the photo collages we saw at the shopping centre? Forget it. Don’t tell me. I want it to be a surprise. Follow me.’

The garage smelled of old paint and methylated spirits. Amy found a pull-string in the darkness and a fluorescent light flickered on overhead, revealing a cramped concrete room with a low ceiling.

Several rows of packing boxes occupied the space between the far wall and Amy's little red Honda Jazz. We spent the next forty minutes carrying out each box, setting it down on the small patch of unused concrete floor and poring through its contents.

Most boxes contained miscellaneous *stuff*: year-old energy bills, a roll of expired coupons, a tattered apron, a chipped ceramic ashtray with a single English penny sliding around inside, a grocery bag full of magnets that Amy snatched gleefully from my hands saying, 'I've been looking for these.'

One of the boxes was full of my old photography projects, many embarrassingly similar to the ones my students had presented the night before. I found a first-year uni photo-series called *Scars: Physical and Emotional*. Amy had organised the collection into a binder. I flicked through it, cringing; it was more like a high school project than a university folio.

One photo showed the small nick I got on my pinkie toe while climbing out of a friend's pool one summer; another showed the grizzly slice running across Amy's thigh from when she fell off her ten-speed. Here was a nasty burn on my mother's hand, and the fading ghost of an old housemate's cleft palate. Next came several photos showing subjects who looked sad or rejected or angry. It was a pretentious, highly unoriginal project designed to force the audience to consider the scars people carry on the inside as well as on the outside.

'Oh, hey, how's it going with Frank?' Amy asked, leafing through an old school report.

‘Eh.’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘We stopped seeing each other.’

‘Why?’ Amy said in a high-pitched, whining voice.

‘No one thing. Just, you know. It wasn’t a love connection.’

‘You’re too fussy, Kim. You know that. And you’re running out of time to make babies.’

Amy was aggressively maternal. Reproducing was her sole purpose in life. She and her fiancé Wayne pumped out Lisa as fast as they could and were planning for a second. I, on the other hand, had never once felt the urge to procreate.

We eventually found the family albums in the ninth or tenth box and sat cross-legged on the floor to look through them. Each album was titled with big block letters, written in colours that somehow matched the theme of the photos within. *PERTH HOLIDAY '93* was black and yellow to match the emblem on the state flag. *NEW HOME*, which chronicled Mum and Dean’s move from their old place on Osborne Avenue to their smaller but much newer pad on Benjamin Street, was written in blue and green: the blue matched the porch steps of Osborne, the green matched the bedroom walls of Benjamin. The humorously named *OUR FIRST WEDDING* was written in bright orange – the same shade my mother wore on the big day.

It’d be easy to assume that my mother was the one who meticulously matched each colour and labelled each photo, but it was Dean. Even before our mother died he obsessed

over photographing, categorising and recording each and every memory for safekeeping.

Amy grabbed the wedding album the second she saw it. With a sad smile she turned the pages, tracing our mother's face.

At the bottom of the box I found the fat pink baby album, *EARLIEST MEMORIES*, written in the same shade of purple as my childhood headboard. Inside were photos of birthday parties, holidays, Christmases; all lost to time. There was a picture of me in the old flat we lived in before Amy was born: smiling broadly, framed against the ugly yellow wallpaper that lined *every single* room. Another showed my first day of kindergarten, my mother holding my hand and grinning.

A third of the way through I came across a bright, pudgy little girl staring at me through the plastic sleeve. She was standing in the shallow end of a hotel pool, dressed in sagging yellow bathers. She looked somehow contemplative and wise. Below the shot, printed in neat black letters was, *Kim, age 2*. I had a vague memory of that day in the pool, riding Dean's shoulders into the deep end.

The remaining pages were blank. There were no baby photos, and nothing else before the age of three. I hadn't been expecting more. My biological father wasn't a *nice man* – that's how my mother had phrased it on one of the few occasions we discussed him. When she had left him she left in a hurry, a toddler under one arm and an overnight bag slung over the other, with no time and no room for baby pictures. That story sounded worryingly

convenient now.

‘Are you okay?’ Amy asked. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

In a way I had. Suddenly the ghost of Sammy Went was haunting each and every childhood photo. Even before I brought up a photo of Sammy on my phone I could see it was more than just a passing resemblance. The deep blue eyes, the dark hair, the tight-lipped smile, the curved chin, the large nose, the small white ears. It wasn’t just uncanny; either Sammy was my exact doppelgänger, or I was looking at photos of the same girl.

Why hadn’t I seen it before? Was it simply that I couldn’t remember what I looked like as a kid, or had I not been ready to see it? Was I ready now?

‘Jesus, Kim, what is it?’

‘Amy, I came here to compare photos from when I was a kid to a little American girl who went missing in the ’90s.’

‘Hold up. So you’re not making me a photo collage for my birthday?’

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and started from the beginning. Sitting cross-legged on the floor of the garage, surrounded by packing boxes and the smell of old paint and methylated spirits, I opened up the Sammy Went door and invited Amy inside.

She listened silently with a cool expression that gave nothing away. When I had finished she sat blinking like an owl; buffering. Then she laughed. It wasn’t a chuckle or giggle, but a heavy *ha*

ha. She put one hand against her belly, threw her head back and cackled, guffawed, snorted. ‘So let me get this straight: you think Mum – the woman who bawled her eyes out when the horse died in *The Neverending Story* – was a kidnapper. And you were the kid she napped? She abducted you from someplace in the States and raised you as her own. And never once, not even on her deathbed, revealed the truth.’

‘I don’t know, I ...’

‘Maybe she bought you on the black market. Makes perfect sense when you think about it. Oh, or maybe she lowered herself down to your cot on one of those wire harness things like Tom Cruise or trained a dingo to—’

I showed her my phone. She froze, silenced by the photo of Sammy Went on the screen. She took the phone from me and stared, her smile quickly fading. ‘Shit, Kim.’

‘Yeah. Shit.’

‘What did this guy say, exactly?’ She was squeezing the phone so hard I thought it might shatter. ‘How did he find you? What evidence does he have?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t really give him time to tell me. I thought he was a nutter.’

After a string of increasingly exasperated expletives, Amy said, ‘Do you wanna smoke a joint?’

We left Lisa inside watching TV and sat together on the back step. Amy’s yard was small and well-manicured. A blue plastic sandbox had filled with rainwater, turning the sand inside to

sludge. The flat grey walls of the houses on either side of Amy's fence blocked out half the sky.

She lit the joint and took a long, deep drag before handing it to me. 'It's a scam. That's what it is.'

'How would that work?' I said. 'He didn't ask me for money or personal details or—'

'Just you wait. He probably stole that photo.'

'Neither of us has ever seen it before.'

'So he, I don't know, took it.'

'Twenty-eight years ago? When I was two? And he's just been, what? Biding his time to pull off the longest sting in history?'

'Is Mum abducting you from a foreign country a more plausible explanation? Something like this, if it was real ... Jesus, Kim. It would fuck everything up. We wouldn't be sisters anymore.'

The joint sent me into a momentary coughing fit, but it helped dull my busy mind. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Kim, if we didn't have blood connecting us I'd never see you. When you dropped around today it nearly gave me a heart attack. I thought something was wrong.' She took the joint back. 'And shit, I guess I was right after all. You weren't just popping in, were you? You were gathering evidence.'

'Please don't turn against me,' I said. 'Not right now.'

Amy sighed.

Smoke danced and swirled, making my eyes water.

'Wayne will still be able to smell this, you know,' I said.

‘If ever I had a good excuse to get stoned, it’s today.’ She wiped her eyes. I couldn’t be sure if it was the smoke that was making her cry, or the situation. She stared off over the back fence. Another townhouse lay beyond it, and another one beyond that.

She shifted her weight and studied her chipped nail polish, looking anywhere but at me.

‘What do you want me to do?’ I asked.

‘Nothing, Kim. I want you to do nothing. Delete that photo off your phone. Delete his number. Forget about the whole thing.’

‘I don’t think I can do that.’

‘I think you have to, Kim. If you follow this thing through, then everything is going to change.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘Swear?’

‘Swear.’

After leaving Amy’s house, I pulled the car to the side of the road and found the number James Finn had given me. I quietly hoped he wouldn’t pick up, but he answered on the first ring.

MANSON, KENTUCKY

Then

Emma scanned the forest floor for psilocybin mushrooms. Ideally they should be young, with white bulbs turning a pinkish brown on top. In time they would turn black and curl up at the edges. Shelley Falkner's cousin had told them all about it.

The forest was wet from an early afternoon shower, and smelled of mildew and mountain laurel.

Fifty feet to Emma's left, Shelley Falkner moved around in the thicket like a sasquatch, kicking up dead leaves and snapping off low-hanging branches.

Emma soon grew bored of the mushroom search, so she sat down on the trunk of a fallen sweetgum and searched her backpack for a cigarette. She had to push aside her algebra textbook to find one, which made her think of Manson High, which in turn flushed her system with a familiar brand of anxiety. She was doubly glad she and Shelley had decided to cut class today.

Emma lit the cigarette and dialled up the volume on her Discman until the deep, mournful sound of Morrissey's 'Every Day is Like Sunday' turned the greens of the forest grey. Morrissey was the perfect soundtrack for a town like Emma's. When she thought of Manson, she pictured a beetle on its back,

kicking its legs helplessly in the air.

To an outside observer, of course, Manson must have seemed like a quaint, friendly community. It was true that the town wasn't nearly as poverty-stricken as its Appalachian neighbours, and Emma guessed there were slightly fewer hillbillies per capita, but it was a long way from being *A Slice of Heaven*, as the sign on the water tower boasted. The few tourists that trickled through only saw half the picture. They came for the hiking trails, good ol' fashioned hospitality, and to bask in the glory of Hunt House, a grand, centuries-old mansion that stood at the top of Main Street.

But Emma knew what visitors didn't: that locals were only truly friendly to other locals, that if it wasn't in the Bible then it wasn't worth knowing, and that Hunt House was built on the backs of slaves (and supposedly haunted by their ghosts).

'No way,' Shelley called, loud enough that Emma could hear even with her headphones on. 'Em, check it out.'

As Emma climbed down from the fallen sweetgum, Shelley came lumbering through the underbrush, both hands cupped before her as if carrying a baby bird.

She extended her arms to show Emma two handfuls of small white bulbs. 'I hit the mother lode.'

Shelley was a hulk of a girl; not fat exactly, just bulky, with wide, slumped shoulders and a pair of glasses she was forever nudging into place with her index finger. 'This has gotta be them, right? They're just like Vince said.'

She handed one of the mushrooms to Emma, who took it and

held it up to the light. It was a creamy colour, with a brown ring on top that reminded her of an areola.

‘I guess so,’ Emma said. ‘It’s funny, I always imagined them red with little white spots, like the ones that make Mario super. How do we know for sure they’re magic?’

‘There’s only one way to be sure: we eat ’em. If we start seeing, like, unicorns or something, then we know they’re the real deal and Vince ain’t *completely* fulla shit. If our throats close over and we go blind, well ...’

‘Let’s take them this weekend,’ Emma said, pulling her headphones down. It wasn’t that she was particularly *pro-drug* – she had tried smoking a bong once at Roland Butcher’s house and nearly coughed up a lung – but she knew she had changed and wanted desperately to *change back*.

It was only last summer she and Shelley spent swimming in Lake Merri; just last spring they spent hiking through Elfish canyon; only last fall they spent cruising around Manson on their ten-speeds; only last winter they spent skiing the powdery peaks of the Appalachian Mountains.

Now the world had turned grey. Perhaps Shelley’s mushrooms would bring back some of that colour.

‘Tell your parents you’re staying at my place,’ Emma said. ‘I’ll tell my parents I’m staying at yours. I can sneak my dad’s three-man and we could hike out to the gristmill, brew the mushrooms into a tea and then—’

Shelley popped a mushroom into her mouth, ending the

conversation. She chewed for a moment, a sour expression on her face, as if her cheeks and forehead were being drawn together. Then she swallowed loudly and grinned.

Emma's eyes nearly bugged out of her head. 'You're my hero. What did it taste like?'

'Dirt. Your turn, lady.'

She took one bulb between her thumb and forefinger and moved it toward Emma's mouth, like a parent trying to convince a kid to eat their greens.

Emma moved Shelley's hand away. 'Oh, I think I'll wait a few minutes to see if, you know, you go blind or something.'

Shelley's grin widened. 'Good call.'

A few minutes later Shelley still seemed fine, so Emma closed her eyes and shoved the bulb into her mouth. Shelley was right. It tasted like dirt.

As they waited for the effects of the mushrooms to hit them, they walked aimlessly through the deep concrete channel separating the forest from the outskirts of Manson. The channel was mostly dry aside from a drizzling current of muddy brown water, which was narrow enough to step over in most places. It was littered with cigarette butts, empty bottles of cheap beer and wine, and the occasional split can of baked beans. According to Shelley's mom, a community of hobos used to roam the channel, setting up shelters under the overpass another mile up.

To their left sat the jagged back fences of the houses on Grattan Street. This was the mostly forgotten end of Manson,

where the lawns were yellow instead of green, and the faces of the people who lived there were tight and worn. Where the fence slats were loose Emma could see into their yards – long grass; a barking dog; two young boys with dirty faces sitting cross-legged on a trampoline.

Dense woodland foamed to the right, on the other side of the concrete channel. Mid-afternoon sun filtered through the sweetgums and cast a spiderweb of shadows over Shelley's face.

'Are you feeling anything yet?' Emma asked.

'Nuh-uh. Not yet.'

'Me neither.'

They arrived at the large circular culvert that carried the pitiful brown stream under the highway. The concrete tunnel was tall enough for Emma to walk into – although she still hunched with her arms up, afraid of creepy crawlies – but Shelley had to slouch to avoid knocking her head.

Emma held her breath and kept her gaze on the bright circle of light at the end of the culvert. She imagined secret passages leading off either side of the tunnel. One wrong turn could mean blindly wandering the drains beneath Manson for the rest of her very short—

Shelley grabbed her on the shoulder. Emma screamed so loudly it echoed around the curved concrete walls for nearly five full seconds.

'You're such a pussy,' Shelley said, shoving Emma forward and into the light of the afternoon. Emma couldn't argue. As the

sounds of Manson came back and a cool spring breeze tickled the back of her neck, she felt more relieved to be out of the dark than she ought to have.

They continued up the channel.

‘I have to spend the summer with Dad in California,’ Shelley said after a few minutes of comfortable silence. ‘Why he chose to move so far away is beyond me, and he only wants me out there to get at Mom. It’s like, ever since the divorce they’ve been in this long, *long* war. But they’re the generals; I’m the only one fighting down in the trenches.’

‘Mm. You’re kind of lucky though,’ Emma said. ‘Obviously it sucks your parents are divorced, but at least that’s sort of proactive. Their marriage didn’t work so they ended it. It’s smart.’

Shelley baulked. ‘That’s like telling a paraplegic they’re lucky ‘cause they get to sit down all day.’

‘My parents’ marriage has been dying slowly for the past two years and neither of them will put it out of its misery. Wouldn’t you rather have your parents separate but happy instead of together and miserable?’

‘Ah, but you forgot about separate and miserable,’ Shelley said, laughing. ‘I didn’t know your parents fought a lot.’

‘They don’t. That’s part of the problem. If they fought, maybe they’d sort some shit out. Instead it’s like they never finish a sentence. There’s a dot-dot-dot at the end of everything they say to each other, never a period.’

‘Ellipsis,’ Shelley said.

‘What?’

‘That little dot-dot-dot at the end of a sentence. It’s called an ellipsis.’

Emma rolled her eyes.

‘Anyway, maybe you’re right,’ Shelley said. ‘Maybe they should get a divorce.’

A nagging sadness fell over Emma then. If her parents really did split then her father would remarry – she knew that. He’d loosen his grip on church ties even further, find happiness and talk bitterly about his fundie ex-wife. But what would become of her mother? Without Jack Went to act as a spiritual buoy, she’d sink deeper and deeper into the Church of the Light Within. Eventually the woman Emma knew might fade away completely.

‘Feeling anything yet?’ Emma asked.

‘Nuh-uh.’

About a quarter-mile into the woods they came across the gristmill, a dilapidated structure surrounded by scrub oak. The sun had dipped behind it, creating a rectangular silhouette reaching out of the earth, like a corpse rising from the grave.

Up until a few years ago the gristmill was still running. Of course even then it made more money from the gift shop and the working tours than it did selling flour and cornmeal.

Emma came here with her mother once. Her dad was visiting his cousins in Coleman and had taken Stu along with him for a boys’ day out. Her mother had put it to Emma to decide how to spend their day together, and she had suggested the mill.

Back then, a wide paved road cut a path in from the highway, wooded on both sides. The road crossed a rattling suspension bridge over a shallow, spring-fed creek. She remembered rolling down her window as they drove over it, sticking her head all the way out to listen to the creek babble below them.

Once inside the mill, they had marvelled at the big pulleys and spinning belts, pounding and churning grain into cornmeal and flour. When the tour was over her mother had bought her a Coke from the visitor centre and they had walked to the south side of the mill to sit in the picnic area.

They had sat in silence, Emma remembered now. It wasn't an awkward silence, but an organic one.

The gristmill was no longer the sort of place mothers took their daughters to marvel at pulleys and drink Coke in the grass. An *economic downturn* – Emma knew the words but had only a vague understanding of what they meant – dried up the mill's funding and what had once been a popular historic attraction soon fell into disrepair. The pulleys stopped pulling, the belts stopped spinning and the windows grew thick with dust. The east wall shifted loose, getting a little closer to collapse with each strong gust of wind.

Shelley shoved the door open and Emma followed her into the mill. It was mostly dark aside from slivers of light falling in through smudged yellow windows. The sour smell of mould hung in the air. Water damage had brought down part of the second floor, exposing a jagged cross-section of wooden beams

and twisted metal rods.

The interior wall of the mill was covered with names, scribbled on with different-coloured pens and markers. Emma recognised some of them: politicians and pop stars, and *Rich Witherford*, a colossal asshole from Manson High. Other names she didn't recognise: *Summer DeRoche*, *Jonathon Asquith*, *Chris Dignum*, *Sophie Lane*, *Angie Sperling-Bruch*. All Emma knew was someone wanted them dead.

That was how the urban legend went: write the name of your enemy on the wall of the gristmill and within twenty-four hours that person will die.

It was an easy legend to disprove; as far as she knew not a single one of the people named on the wall had died – at least not within the allotted twenty-four hour time period. But she doubted that was the point. Writing down the name of your enemy felt weirdly therapeutic. She had written a few names there herself.

She found Henry Micket's name scribbled onto the wood in her own handwriting. Henry was the beautiful track champion at Manson High who Emma had made the mistake of being in love with for a year and a half. He hadn't wronged her in any serious way – in fact she doubted he knew who she was beyond a vaguely familiar face in the halls – but he had broken her heart when he started dating Cindy Kites, another beautiful track champion.

She had written Henry's name on the wall in the heat of devastation and come back later to strike it out with a fat blue magic marker. What remained now was *Henry Micket*.

It had felt good to write his name down and even better to strike it out. A few strokes of a marker had represented anger, then forgiveness. Seeking once again to express her anger, and perhaps even forgive, she was tempted to write another name on the wall now.

Just for the therapy of it, she told herself. But if that were true, why were her hands now trembling?

'I've gotta pee,' Shelley said, disappearing back out the front door.

While she waited, Emma climbed a flight of groaning stairs to the second floor. Every surface she passed was covered in dust. Remnants from the early-afternoon shower trickled through the dozen or so holes in the ceiling, leaving puddles of dirty brown water on the landing.

She cleared a space with her feet, sat cross-legged on the floor and lit a cigarette.

As her vision slowly adjusted to the dark, she noticed a long trail of carpenter ants marching across the wide wooden floorboards and down through a hole below the window, presumably heading toward a nest inside the rotting walls. The trail navigated around broken glass and debris, a used condom – ew – and, at its narrowest point, veered dangerously close to a cobweb. Although Emma couldn't see it, she imagined a fat black spider with gnarly yellow eyes waiting in the shadows.

She stood up suddenly, shaking her head in disbelief. She had to do something about the ants. She set about moving the

obstacles that were blocking their path. She kicked away the debris. She found a heavy metal rod and used it to flick away the condom and destroy the cobweb, sending the unseen and wholly imagined spider fleeing into one of the deep cracks between the floorboards.

Emma chewed her lip and waited for her good Samaritan act to pay off.

‘What the fuck,’ she hissed. ‘No.’

The trail had dispersed and was coming apart in places. The ants were disorientated without the broken glass, used condom and cobweb to guide their way. She had removed their landmarks and now their path was lost.

It hurt more than it should have, more than it had the right to, and Emma was suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to cry. No, she wanted to heave and sob.

Dull clarity crept to her then. The magic mushrooms had kicked in. She wasn’t hallucinating or seeing weird colours and lights – Shelley’s cousin had said that might happen – but all her senses felt heightened. It was as if a fog had cleared and she was suddenly aware of the world around her: her body, the carpenter ants, the gristmill, the forest, Manson, the world, the universe.

Tripping was nothing like she had imagined – certainly nothing like the movies. And it was also nothing like smoking weed. This was subtle and wonderful, and she would spend many years to come chasing this first real high. She would look back on the day she took mushrooms in the forest with Shelley as the

last true day of her childhood.

Emma unzipped her backpack and found a black marker inside.

As she walked slowly down the stairs she focused on the dirty floorboards beneath her feet, the crunch of broken glass, the wet slap of a puddle, the slippery page of an old porno magazine, the rattle of a discarded can of green spray paint.

Then she was on the ground floor and scribbling a name on the interior wall of the mill.

(‘—Emma, did you hear me? Did you—’)

She stood back to admire her work.

(‘—hear what I said? You need to—’)

Among the dozens, or maybe hundreds of names, Emma had written *Sammy Went* in neat block letters.

I’m sorry, she thought. Nothing personal. It’s just for the therapy of it.

(‘—Christ’s sake, snap outta—’)

Shelley’s meaty hands clapped onto Emma’s shoulders and spun her around.

‘Did you hear me, Em? Did you hear what I said?’

Emma reached out and tapped the left lens of Shelley’s glasses. ‘You’re beautiful. You know that, right, Shell? Also, can I try on your glasses?’

‘Ah, shit. Are you tripping right now? Ah, that’s perfect. Just perfect.’

As Emma’s focus shifted from the glasses to the face behind

them, she saw that Shelley had turned pale. Her mouth was locked in a worried frown, and her eyes were wide and rattled. She didn't look like Shelley.

'Listen, Em. You gotta get it together.'

'What's wrong?'

'There's someone else here.'

'What? Who?'

'I don't know,' Shelley said gravely. 'I heard footsteps out by the visitor centre.'

Emma smiled. 'You're tripping.'

'No, I swear.'

'You imagined it,' Emma said. 'It's the mushrooms. They really are—'

She froze as a shadow moved over the window on the far wall. The glass was cracked, dirty and vine-strangled, but for a brief, startling moment she could make out the shape of a person. Whoever it was slunk away before Shelley had time to turn around and look.

'What is it?' Shelley said.

'I think I saw someone.'

The gristmill door dragged in the dirt as they half-ran, half-stumbled outside. Emma quickly looked back to scan the area where she'd seen the shadow. Nobody was there.

It might have been the mushrooms, but Emma felt quietly terrified.

'I think I want to go home now,' Shelley said.

‘Yeah. Me too.’

Step by step, the crunchy leaves underfoot turned to dry soil, to thick grass, to a flat grey sidewalk and finally to the potholed bitumen of Cromdale Street.

Emma knew right away that something was wrong. Too many of the neighbours were out on their lawns and porches, watching her pass. Roy Filly stared out from his open garage door smoking one of his stinky cigars. Loraine Voorhees rocked back and forth in a rocking chair on her porch, a cup of tea in one hand, a mini fox terrier in the other. Pam Grady, resident neighbourhood conspiracy theorist and long-rumoured lesbian, stood on the curb, hands on hips, face knotted with ... was it curiosity? No, it was concern.

Did they know she was high?

The strange energy of the street grew stronger the closer she got to home. As she came over the crest that looked down over her house, she saw her father’s convertible parked halfway in the driveway, halfway across the lawn. The driver’s side door was wide open.

She walked faster. Something was wrong. Something bad had happened.

Shelley said something, but Emma didn’t hear it. She was already running. Her backpack was slowing her down, so she threw it off her back and left it on the sidewalk.

Something bad happened.

As she neared the house, the memory of what she’d written

on the gristmill wall swept from her mind as fast and as steady
as a receding tide.

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Now

I've always been drawn to water during turbulent periods of my life. When my dog Shadow died I rode my bike over to Orel Lake and sat on the bank for three whole hours. I didn't come home until I was all cried out and shivering from the cold. When my mother died I sat alone in my car and stared into Bass Strait all afternoon.

Amy had been furious at me when I finally returned to the hospital, but Dean had understood. He knew as well as I that bodies of water have strange powers, and the larger the problem in your life, the larger the body of water needs to be.

The end of a three-month relationship, for example, could be eased by the amount of water that would fit in your bathtub. A simple shower could cure creative block. But the real stuff, the big stuff, the mother-dying stuff and the maybe-your-whole-life-is-a-lie stuff needed someplace expansive, stirring with energy. So I headed to Dights Falls, a noisy weir built across the Yarra River.

I parked the car and followed a narrow dirt track into the bush. Pine needles crunched underfoot. Although I couldn't yet see the river through the trees, the bush was alive with the sound of churning rapids, and the air was wet with spray.

The trees arched and parted the closer I got to the river, finally peeling back to reveal a wide landscape, stunning and simmering. I stood looking over the rapids for longer than I intended, wondering what doors I would open by meeting with James Finn again. He had agreed to have lunch with me, and I wasn't the least bit prepared. I felt mentally off-balance; one nudge from the odd American accountant could send me toppling. Yet what choice did I have but to hear him out?

A lone fisherman was sitting on an outcrop of rocks on the opposite bank. He stood up suddenly, started reeling in his rod excitedly. When he saw his line was empty he deflated, tossed it back into the water and sat back down to wait.

James was waiting at a table near the back of the cafe, nursing a cup of tea and reading from a Kindle. He looked every bit as cold and wooden as when we first met.

'I'm glad you came,' he said when he saw me.

'That's what she said,' Dean would have answered, unable to resist the opportunity. It hurt to think of my stepdad, to wonder what he might think about me investigating his dearly departed wife for kidnapping.

I ordered a coffee and we looked awkwardly at menus, even though the last thing in the world I felt like doing was eating.

'Claire won't let me drink coffee,' James said. 'That's my wife. She knows how wired it makes me. Hence the tea.'

'She's not out here with you?'

'She's keeping the home fires burning.'

I opened the menu, pretended to read it, then closed it again. 'I feel like I should tell you up front that just because I'm here, doesn't mean I believe you.'

'Understood.'

'What I'm saying is my mother's name is on my birth certificate. And I think I would have noticed if she spoke in an American accent.'

'Yet you're here,' he said flatly. 'And for the record, accents can be faked just as easily as birth certificates.'

'Why are you doing this, exactly?'

'I told you,' he said. 'I believe you're—'

'Sammy Went, I know. But why are you so interested in her? What's your angle, I mean? It was nearly thirty years ago. Do you moonlight as a private investigator?'

'Armchair sleuth is probably more accurate,' he said. His fingers drummed restlessly on the table. Up until now he had been nothing but confident, measured and a tad robotic. Now he seemed awkward, nervous and a tad *human*. 'Like I said, I know the Went family. I was in Manson when it happened. Sammy's disappearance just sort of ... stuck with me.'

My coffee arrived.

'How did you find me?' I asked.

'Let me show you.' He took a small backpack from the seat beside him and pulled out a manila folder. It was marked, *Leamy, Kimberly*.

He opened the file and handed me a picture of a face with

ghostly hollow eyes and a vaguely familiar expression. It wasn't a photograph or a drawing, but something in between: an artist's 3D composite showing a woman with dark hair, a long nose and tightly drawn, lifeless lips. At the bottom of the page was printed, *Sammy Went, predicted age 25–30.*

'I commissioned a forensic composite artist to mock that up,' James said. 'Based on Sammy's appearance and family background they determined that this is what she might look like today.'

The composite looked abstractly like me, but if I had committed a crime and police were relying on it to track me down, I could take my time fleeing to New Zealand.

'I ran that composite through a dozen facial recognition programs comparing it to millions of images online. I got a little over seven thousand hits. I went through each one, narrowed that list down to around nine hundred, and then investigated each one.'

'That must have taken you forever.'

'My mother used to say I have the patience of Job,' he said. 'The sketch matched with a photo you were tagged in on Facebook, which led me to where you teach. I thought about sending you an email, but I had a feeling about you. A hunch.'

'It's a long way to come for a hunch,' I said. 'And this is hardly *proof*. You said it yourself; there were nine hundred faces on your list. And even if what you're saying is true, wouldn't I remember something?'

‘Maybe you do,’ he said. ‘Have you ever heard of decay theory?’

‘No.’

‘So, imagine that when a memory is formed, the brain creates a neurochemical trace, so that when you need to, you can retrieve it. Think of it as a big red thread that starts in your consciousness and weaves deep into your mind. When you want to recall a particular memory, you tug on the thread and up it comes.’

As a demonstration, he raised and lowered the teabag in his cup. ‘Simple. Makes sense. But Decay theory suggests that when a particular memory isn’t retrieved over a long enough time period, the thread fades and weakens, and eventually ...’ He drew the teabag from his cup and snapped the string in half. The bag disappeared beneath the milky tea. ‘When the thread is broken, the memory just floats around in your brain, untethered, unanchored. You might not think you remember being a little girl in Kentucky, but that little girl might still be up there, in your mind. Maybe she’s figured out how to reach you. Maybe that’s why you’re here.’

I pictured Sammy Went sitting in the middle of a vast black void where all the lost memories find themselves. A red string was tied around her waist, but the other end was slack. She tugged and tugged at the thread, but every time it came back empty, like the fisherman at Dights Falls.

‘That’s not why I’m here,’ I said.

He nodded, tapped the manila folder twice. ‘I know. You’re

here to see proof. The smoking gun. Mind if I use the bathroom first?’

While he was gone I stared at my name on the manila folder. He had left it conspicuously on the table. Did he want me to read it myself? If he was right about it containing the smoking gun, then denial might no longer be a viable option.

Ignoring the file for now, I had a snoop through his Kindle instead. In my experience, a bookshelf – digital or otherwise – usually painted a pretty clear picture of the person who stacked it.

Most of the books in James Finn’s digital bookshelf were non-fiction; some history, some war, but mostly true crime. Some of these I recognised – Ann Rule’s *The Stranger Beside Me*, John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* – but there were plenty more I didn’t. There were books about political assassinations, mafia-related crime, celebrity murders, cold cases, serial killings and, surprise, surprise, child abductions.

Oddly enough, seeing all this darkness relaxed me. James’s bookshelf had betrayed him as an armchair sleuth with a macabre curiosity for crime.

Unless ...

Scanning fast for Sammy Went’s name, I wondered if he was secretly a crime writer himself. The awkward, cranky demeanour certainly fit. Maybe he was writing a book about Sammy Went and I was his third act.

When James returned from the bathroom he took a deep

breath before sitting back down. ‘You ready?’

He opened his backpack. Inside were police reports, maps and files. As he fished through the bag he took out a stack of documents to make room. Sitting at the top of a pile was a list of names under the heading *Sex Offenders in Manson and Surrounding Counties*. About a third of the names were crossed off, which I assumed meant James had eliminated them as suspects. Others were underlined or circled.

The backpack made me uneasy. This wasn’t just the curiosity of an armchair sleuth after all, and it didn’t look like research for a true crime book, either. This was an obsession.

He took a stark one-page document from the folder and handed it to me. At the top of the page was a small blue logo with *Me-Genes* printed underneath.

‘What’s Me-Genes?’

‘It’s a genomics and biotech company here in Melbourne. You send them a DNA sample, pay a small fee and they deliver the results. If you pay a little extra you can have those results fast-tracked.’

The bulk of the document was broken into three columns labelled *Marker*, *Sample A* and *Sample B*. Each column contained multiple number and letter combinations, many of which matched. I got the sense I’d need a degree in genomics to read it.

But the part that mattered, the part that made my stomach lurch, was printed in big bold letters at the bottom right-hand side of the page: *Probability of sibling match, 98.4 per cent.*

‘You’re Sample B,’ James said.

As I began to understand what I was looking at, my skin rushed hot and my whole body trembled with anger.

‘You ... You had my DNA tested? How the hell did you even get that?’

‘You were drinking a soda when I first met you.’

‘Jesus. That’s illegal!’

‘It’s not, actually,’ he said. ‘I needed to be sure. That’s why I came out here.’

I lurched back from the table and stormed out of the cafe, feeling like a worm on the end of a hook, reeling back and forth in the current as I waited for the jaws of a hungry fish.

I marched across the street, swung into my car and started the engine. Glancing in the rear-view mirror I saw James. He had come outside and was watching me with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans. His bright yellow sneakers popped against the grey afternoon. Thunderheads rolled above.

‘Goddamn it.’ I killed the engine, got out and walked back over to him. ‘Who’s Sample A?’

‘Kim, listen ...’

‘It says I’m a sibling match with Sample A,’ I said. ‘Who is that?’

‘My wife warned me not to come on too strong. I didn’t want to scare you off.’

‘Who’s Sample A?’

‘I am,’ he said. ‘My real name is Stuart Went. I’m your brother.’

MANSON, KENTUCKY

Then

Chester Ellis, Manson's 64-year-old Sheriff, sat behind his desk reading the *Manson Leader*. His hometown's local rag contained highlights from Tractor Day, photos taken at the groundbreaking of the new Christian history museum and a play-by-play recap of the Manson Warriors game – they suffered a demoralising defeat, as usual, at the hands of the Coleman Bears.

It was set to be another quiet day in Manson. A quiet day in a month of quiet days in a year of quiet days.

He turned each page slowly, scanning the headlines for anything of interest. *Blitz on blackouts: new project to reduce peak energy use; Manson athletics club finds a home; A new take on old drugs: information sessions help seniors identify addiction.*

He arrived at the personals section and found his own ad at the bottom of the second column: *Prof. & Athletic African American man with Christian values. Seeks woman for companionship &/ or relationship.*

Ellis had lost his wife to brain cancer twenty-one years earlier, but with two sons to keep him busy, dating had been the last thing on his mind. Now his sons were adults now, with partners of their own, and Ellis needed ... what? He wasn't looking for a passionate love affair. He wasn't even looking for love, although

if love happened to come along that would be just fine. He was simply looking for someone to share his life with.

Of course, the ad was largely bullshit. He might have been considered ‘athletic’ in his college days, but now all that muscle had settled into fat. The ‘Christian values’ part was a half-truth too. Amelia Turner, who took care of the personals and ran the front desk of the *Leader* on Fridays, had convinced him to add that part.

Sure, Ellis believed in God and tried his darndest not to cuss too much or hate too much, but Christianity was a pretty wide spectrum in Manson. He sat comfortably and conservatively on the casual, love thy neighbour end. But on the other end sat the people he didn’t want to attract: folks from the Church of the Light Within.

The Pentecostal *group* – he’d learned the hard way not to call them a sect or, God forbid, a *cult* – worshipped by handling venomous snakes and scorpions. If rumours were to be believed, they also drank strychnine, spoke in tongues and, according to Tom Kirker after a few too many belts of whiskey at Cubby’s Bar, drank blood and worshipped the Devil.

One of Ellis’s deputies knocked on the door. ‘Sorry to bother you, Sheriff. You got a sec?’

‘Come on in, Beech. What’s up?’

To call John Beecher a *man* felt premature. Ellis was sure he would be a man someday, but right now he was a pale, near-hairless nineteen-year-old with skin that glowed candy-apple red

any time he felt nervous, which was often. ‘A call just came through from Jack Went. As in Went Drugs. His daughter is missing.’

‘His daughter?’ Ellis checked his watch. It was a little after four pm. ‘She’s probably just a little late getting home from school.’

‘No, the little one.’ Beecher consulted his notepad. ‘Sammy Went. Age two. Last seen approximately two hours ago.’

‘Jesus. Get Herm and Louis over there.’

‘Already on their way, Sheriff. Just thought you’d wanna know.’ He looked at the open newspaper. ‘Any takers on your ad yet?’

Ellis tucked the *Leader* into the top drawer of his desk. ‘Do you remember where we put that book, Beech? That crime scene handbook? Herm and Louis might need it.’

Beecher shook his head.

‘It’s called “crime scene” something. *Dissecting a Crime Scene* or *Crime Scene Deduction* ... There’s a chapter in there about missing persons; questions to ask, instructions, suggestions, stuff like that.’

‘Oh yeah, like a how-to thing, right? I’m pretty sure I saw that in the bathroom, Sheriff.’

That sounded about right.

Though Ellis’s sons were grown men, he remembered how small and fragile they once were. Jack and Molly Went must be going out of their minds.

‘On second thought, forget the book. Just give me the Wents’

address. I'll call over there myself.'

Cromdale Street was wide and leafy. All but one of the buildings were big colonial-style homes. The exception was number nine: the Eckles' house. Ellis eased off the gas as he passed. He remembered it all too well: the leaning mailbox, the *NO TRESPASSING* sign hung on the fence – which seemed laughably redundant. Who in their right mind would want to trespass on a property like that?

The yard was well-kept – Travis, the youngest Eckles boy, took care of that. But the house was dilapidated and cheaply constructed. Say someone did decide to trespass on the Eckles' yard, and they kicked in the rattling old screen-door – what then? The only things of value were the brass urn that housed Jeff Eckles's ashes and the veteran pension cheques his death brought in once a month.

Ellis drove on down the street.

His deputies had arrived ahead of him and left their cruiser's cherry lights flashing, so Jack and Molly Went's house shimmered in red and blue against the fading afternoon sun. Ellis pulled in beside Jack's convertible and started up the path toward the front door.

'Sheriff,' came a quiet voice from the porch. A slight figure emerged. It was Emma Went, wearing a grave expression. 'She's gone, Sheriff. The sun will be down in a few hours and it'll be getting cold and Mom doesn't even remember if she was wearing a sweater.'

Her tone was heavier than any thirteen-year-old girl's should be. There was something foggy and zombie-like in her movements. Shock, Ellis guessed.

He put a hand on her shoulder. 'Let's talk inside.'

Emma showed Ellis into the living room, where Molly Went was slumped on a big red sofa. She was a good-looking woman, even now, with her hair tied into a messy ponytail, and her eyes puffy and wet. A tubby child of eight or nine sat in her lap. Molly's arms were laced through his, and every few seconds she'd squeeze him like a stress ball. The boy looked uncomfortable but had enough sense to let his mother keep on squeezing.

Deputies Herm and Louis hovered awkwardly. The younger, more athletic Herm was pacing, while the older, calmer Louis rocked gently in place. Both men looked relieved to see the sheriff.

'Herm, start canvassing the street,' Ellis said, trying to make his voice sound commanding. 'Ask if anyone saw or heard anything unusual. Anything at all. No detail too trivial. Check their yards if they'll allow it, and let me know anyone who won't. Louis, pull together a search party. We need to check the streets, the sewer drains, the woods—'

'Jesus, the woods,' Jack Went said. He was standing by the windows on the far side of the room, drawing back a white lace curtain to peer outside. 'You don't think she could have walked that far, do you?'

'She didn't *walk* anywhere, Jack,' Molly said, squeezing the

boy on her lap so hard he made a short, sharp gasping sound. ‘Someone took her. Someone came into our house and *took* her.’

‘We don’t know that, Molly. Please don’t get hysterical. It’s the last thing we need right now. We have to stay calm. It’s only been—’

‘Hysterical, Jack? Honestly? Our little girl is gone.’

Before excusing Herm and Louis, Ellis took them into the hallway. ‘Leave the Eckles’ place for now. I’ll check in there myself when I’m done here.’

‘Not by yourself, you won’t,’ Herm said.

‘I’ll be fine. Go on, now.’

The deputies left with purpose, and Ellis returned his attention to Molly and Jack. ‘What makes you think she was taken, Molly?’

‘Her window was open. Wide open.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything,’ Jack said. ‘You leave the window open all the time.’

‘I didn’t leave it open this time, Jack. I know it.’

‘You’re talking about her bedroom window?’ Ellis asked.

‘Sometimes I leave it open to let the breeze in. There’s no screen on it or anything, but it’s too high for Sammy to reach. Otherwise I’d never ... Anyway this time I closed it. I specifically remember closing it.’

‘When was the last time you saw her?’

‘Around one,’ Molly said. ‘I don’t usually let her nap so late in the day because she ends up staying awake all night, but she was fussy and cranky and I just thought ... I closed the window.’

I remember closing the window.'

'Does the window have a lock on it?' Ellis asked.

She shook her head.

'The latch is broken,' Jack added. 'It's been broken a while, but I wasn't in a hurry to fix it because it's on the second floor and, well, you know. It's Manson. Not exactly the burglary capital of America.'

Ellis nodded. 'And when you came back to check on her she was gone. Is that it, Mrs Went?'

'I came in around two-thirty. Her bed was empty, and the window was wide open.'

Jack paced. 'Look, Sheriff, I don't want to act like an ass here, but she leaves that window open all the time.'

'For Pete's sake, Jack.'

'I'm sorry, Molly, but you do. I don't want to give the impression that the open goddamn window is some integral clue when there's every chance you left it open yourself. The window is on the second floor, remember, so if she *was* taken, then it was by the world's tallest man.'

'Ever hear of a ladder, Jack?'

Jack threw up his hands. 'Look, she probably just wandered downstairs and went outside. Maybe she, I don't know, saw a bird or Grace King's cat, and she followed it, got turned around ...'

Molly rolled her eyes. The little boy in her arms dug in closer to his mother.

Ellis smiled at the boy. 'And what's your name, son?'

‘Stuart Alexander Went, sir,’ he said.

‘We call him Stu,’ Molly said.

‘Well, Stu, do you have any idea where your little sister might be hiding? Is there someplace she likes to play in the neighbourhood?’

Stu shook his head. ‘I dunno. Sorry.’

‘She’s not out there playing,’ Molly said coldly. ‘She didn’t see a bird or Grace King’s cat and she didn’t wander off on her own. Someone came in her window and took her.’

‘What time did you get home from school, Stu?’ Ellis asked.

‘He didn’t go,’ Molly said. ‘He’s getting over a cold. I thought one more day at home might help.’

‘Did you see anything strange today, Stu?’ Ellis asked. ‘Or maybe you heard something? A noise? Anything?’

The boy glanced at his mother, then shook his head. ‘I was playing *Zelda* most of the day.’

‘What’s *Zelda*?’

‘One of his Nintendo games,’ Jack said.

Ellis felt Emma’s eyes on his back, but as he turned to face her she looked at her feet.

‘How about you, Emma? Do you have any idea where your sister might be?’

She shook her head.

‘Did you notice anything unusual on your way home from school today? Anything at all?’

‘No. I-I don’t think so.’

It looked like she had something to say.

‘You sure? The smallest detail might end up being helpful.’

‘I told you; I didn’t see anything.’

Nodding, Ellis stood and turned back to Sammy’s parents.

‘Can I see her room, please?’

Sammy’s bedroom was a magical mess of pastel pinks and deep purples. A big toy chest in one corner was bulging with stuffed animals. On the walls hung framed pictures of Sammy’s family, some childish drawings, a giant pink ‘S’ covered with silver glitter, and two movie posters: *Honey*, *I Shrunk the Kids* and *The Little Mermaid*.

There were more toys on the bed – a couple of dolls and more stuffed animals. Marked against the tangled, unmade bed covers was the vague outline of a small body. Ellis’s stomach churned.

He went to the window. It was large enough for a child to crawl through, but far too high for a two-year-old to reach. Even if Sammy had managed to grab hold of the ledge, she’d never be able to hoist herself up. Also, the drop on the other side was close to twelve feet. Considering there wasn’t the limp body of a little girl in the garden bed below, it was a pretty safe bet Sammy didn’t go out the window – at least not on her own. ‘So this was open when you came in?’

‘Wide open,’ Molly said. ‘I checked outside for boot prints below the window or marks from a ladder, but I couldn’t find anything.’

Jack shot a glance at Molly.

Ellis put his back to the window and looked across the room, through the bedroom door and into the hallway beyond. ‘And this door was closed when you put Sammy down for her nap?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘We never close the door. Sammy can’t reach the handle and she doesn’t like being locked in. Right, Molly?’

Molly kept her gaze on Ellis. ‘She was being especially cranky, so I ...’

‘You shut the door?’ Jack said. ‘She hates it when you do that.’

‘You weren’t here and you never are.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Where were you when I called the drugstore?’

‘Can we please do this later?’

Ellis turned back to the window and looked out. From this vantage point he had a clear line of sight over to the Eckles’ house. Afternoon was slowly shifting into evening, and the darkness creeping in over Manson felt heavy.

A weathered length of cord had been used in place of a latch. Ellis untied it and swung the gate open with an eerie, horror-movie creak. The *NO TRESPASSING* sign rattled in place. He looked up at the Eckles’ house, set deep in the yard, and started to walk.

Ellis had crossed this yard some years earlier, flanked by seven armed deputies. They were there to arrest Patrick Eckles for aggravated assault. Patrick had beaten Roger Albom’s head in with a pool cue over at Cubby’s Bar, and nobody had been exactly sure why.

The porch light buzzed on, exposing a broken screen door and a dusty old sofa. As the front door opened, some base, primal instinct sent Ellis's hand to his holstered .45. He didn't need to produce the pistol; he just needed to remind himself it was there. And it wouldn't hurt to remind whoever answered the door too.

Ellis squinted into the dark of the house. A small woman stepped outside and into the light, can of beer in one hand, cigarette in the other.

'Evening, Mrs Eckles. Mind if I have a quick word?'

Ava Eckles was an unremarkable-looking woman with tangled blonde hair, wiry arms and a fat, protruding belly. She wore black leggings and an old, loose-fitting, pink T-shirt on which Ellis could just make out the words *2% Angel, 98% Naughty*.

'I figured someone would be stopping by eventually,' Ava said, dragging on her cigarette. 'I've been watching your men all going door-to-door. Ours was the only place they didn't visit.'

'I need to ask you about Sammy Went. Jack and Molly Went's daughter from down the street – you know 'em?'

By way of an answer she tossed her cigarette into the yard and lit another one.

'Sammy is missing, Mrs Eckles. Did you see or hear anything unusual this afternoon?'

She folded her arms across her chest. 'Only interesting thing I ever see 'round here is on the TV, Sheriff.'

'Did you notice any unusual cars or people you didn't recognise?'

She sucked on her cigarette and shook her head.

‘And you were home all day?’

‘Do I look like the sort of woman who has any place to be?’

‘What about your boy, Travis?’

‘What *about* Travis?’

‘Did he see or hear anything strange this afternoon?’

‘You’d have to ask him.’

‘I’d like to,’ Ellis said. ‘Is he home?’

‘He’s working.’

‘Is he still at Clinical Cleaning?’

‘It’s honest work.’

‘Won’t get no argument from me.’

Ava took a step toward him. She was a foot shorter than Ellis but possessed an unpredictable wildness that put him on edge.

‘You sure have a hard-on for this family, don’t you, Sheriff?’

‘I—’

‘Little girl goes missing and you assume an Eckles has something to do with it. It’s not enough you locked up one of my sons, now you’re looking to lock up the other.’

‘We’re asking everyone in the street if they’ve—’

‘I think it’s time you called it a night, Sheriff. If you stick ‘round I’m likely to say something better left unsaid in *polite society*.’

‘What might that be, Mrs Eckles?’

She smiled then. Her teeth were small and yellow. ‘Well, as a for instance, I might say I don’t know what disturbs me more:

opening my door to find a cop on my front porch, or opening my door to find a nigger.'

Ellis exhaled sharply. He hadn't been expecting that. Anger and shame rose within like a geyser, but he suppressed it. 'One more question, Mrs Eckles. That work van your son drives 'round in. Does he keep a ladder in there?'

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Now

There was a space in Dean's driveway behind his Jeep and Amy's Jazz, but I parked in the street in case I'd need a speedy getaway. He still lived in the same roomy three-bedroom house he had shared with my mother. It was painted in heavy browns and reds, but today a misty rain shrouded everything in grey.

My plan for our regular Sunday-night dinner – and the only way I could see to move forward – was to get everything out on the table. Chances were Dean had no idea about Sammy Went, and the news might shatter the way he remembered my mother. But on the drive over I'd decided that wasn't my problem; this was happening *to* me, not *because* of me.

Dean greeted me at the front door with a big hug. As usual, he held the hug for three seconds too long. 'God, Kimmy. You're so skinny. Are you eating enough? Come in out of the cold.'

He was tall and lean and dressed like a sitcom dad from the nineties: white short-sleeved shirt tucked into blue jeans, white sneakers and a brown blazer. The blazer even had patches on the elbows. He ushered me through the front door and into the house. Scout, Dean's thirteen-year-old cat and closest companion, skulked out to greet me. Or to judge me; it was hard to tell.

Amy, her fiancé, Wayne, and my niece, Lisa, were lounging in the living room around a crackling fire. Amy nearly jumped off the sofa when she saw me. She came over with a sad smile and grabbed both my shoulders. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Everything’s fine,’ I said.

‘No news on the thing?’

I flinched. ‘No.’

‘What’s the thing?’ Dean asked, arriving with two glasses of red wine and handing one to me.

‘Nothing.’ I drank half the glass with one gulp. ‘Hi, Wayne.’

‘Hello, Kimberly.’ Amy’s fiancé was the only person in the world who called me by my full name. He wasn’t a bad-looking guy – he might even have been handsome if he had any sort of personality. But he talked so rarely and so softly that it was easy to think he was just part of the house, an ornament found at the Sunday market that Dean hadn’t yet found a place for.

Dean sat down on the sofa, sipped his wine, smoothed the legs of his jeans and stood up again to tend the fire. He never stayed in one place too long.

‘Do you eat walnuts, Kimmy?’ he asked. ‘They have molecules that block the growth of cancer cells. I want you eating a kilo of walnuts a day. I’m not even kidding.’

‘A kilo?’

He disappeared again, returning moments later with an enormous sack of walnuts. He handed them to me, winked and said, ‘Farmers’ market.’

Everyone is afraid of cancer, but Dean's fear bordered on irrational. Ever since it took his wife he'd been convinced it was waiting to take us all. He wasn't so scared of getting it himself – he drank a little too much, and while he'd never admit it, his clothes occasionally smelled of cigarettes – but he was terrified it might come back to take another of his girls.

He pulled the grate aside from the fireplace and jabbed a burning log with an iron poker. Half the log collapsed into glowing red ash. 'Hey, Wayne, would you mind fetching another log for the fire? They're in the little crate thing on the back deck.'

Wayne stood up, gave a formal nod and left the room.

'So, Kimmy, how's life?' Dean asked.

'Same old,' I lied.

Amy threw me a glance bursting with worry. Luckily, Dean was too engrossed in the fire to notice. 'You know, I was at the shopping centre yesterday and someone was doing pet portraits, and I thought of you. She was making a killing. I was going to bring Scout in until I saw her price list. Forty dollars for three prints, and they're not even framed. Can you believe that?'

'She's not going to take photos of pets,' Amy said. 'She's got way too much talent for that.'

'I'm not saying she should *just* take photos of pets. It would be a good way to make some extra cash with her photography, that's all. She's got that five-thousand-dollar camera just sitting on a shelf gathering dust. You know, sweetheart, I really wish you wouldn't let Lisa drink so much cola. Do you have any idea

what aspartame does to a developing body?"

Lisa was standing by the coffee table dunking her hands into Wayne's Diet Coke and licking her fingers. She looked over at the adults with wide eyes.

Wayne came back into the living room cradling a long chunk of wood in his arms. "Where do you want this, Dean?"

"Take a wild guess, Wayne."

Dean had prepared a tuna pasta bake that smelled and tasted of nostalgia. He poured more wine, and I had to resist the urge to guzzle it. Lisa sat in the living room watching TV because she refused to eat at the table with the grown-ups. Amy and Wayne sat across from me, the former mournfully staring at me while the latter checked cricket scores on his smartphone.

"Would you rather be stuck on a deserted island alone, or with your worst enemy?" Dean asked. That was his thing. He asked thought-provoking questions at mealtimes to "stimulate interesting conversation, bring philosophy to the dinner table and to rise above the mundane".

"If your life was a movie," he might ask, "what would the title be?" "What law, if any, wouldn't you break to save a loved one?" "What are the three most interesting things about you and why?"

He rarely repeated a question, and always had his own well-thought-out answer prepared. I happened to like this particular quirk, but Amy, not so much. "Come on, Dad," she said now. "You know I can't enjoy my food when I have to use my brain."

A memory came to me: sitting in my mother's hospice room,

with its yellow wallpaper and the faint smell of shit that we all silently agreed to ignore. Amy had brought in sandwiches, and we were eating them around the bed. Dean brought in some instant coffee from the machine in the hall, turned off the TV – nobody was watching it anyway – and asked, ‘If you could send a message to every single person on the planet, what would it be?’

‘It’s every night with him,’ my mother had said. She was breaking her sandwich into pieces instead of eating it. ‘Last night we ordered in a large pepperoni and as he’s opening the box, he asks me, “What would you change about your life if you knew you would never die?” I mean, what am I supposed to do with that?’

Before she got sick, my mother was a strong, compact woman with piercing blue eyes. By that night in the hospice every part of her had shrunk and yellowed, except for her eyes. They were the same blue all the way to the end.

Had she wanted to tell me the truth? I wondered. Did that make her last few months even harder than they needed to be? Maybe holding on to that secret was what killed her. Maybe holding in something like that, a secret so big and bad, manifested into—

‘Well, I’d choose to be marooned with my worst enemy,’ Dean said as the memory swept away. ‘Because bad company is better than no company, and if things got too tense between us, at least I’d have someone to eat.’

Amy looked at me over the table. ‘Remember when we were kids and Dad was the strong silent type? I miss those times.’

‘Speaking of bad company, what’s wrong with you?’ said Dean.

Amy had been in a mood all night. She had hardly said a word, and when she did it was short and abrasive. If it had been me nobody would have noticed, but when Amy turned shy it was a big red flag.

‘Huh? Oh yeah, I’m fine,’ she said.

‘She’s been like this all week,’ Wayne grumbled, still staring at his phone.

Dean leaned forward onto his elbows and studied Amy. ‘What’s going on, sweetheart?’

Amy glanced at me with an expression that seemed to say both *tell him* and *don’t say a thing*.

‘Fine,’ Dean said. ‘Forget my wonderfully thought-provoking and intellectual topic of conversation. Let’s talk about the weather, shall we? Or petrol prices, or politics.’

‘Let’s talk about Esmé Durand,’ Amy said.

‘Who’s Esmé Durand?’ Dean asked.

‘Do you remember my high-school friend Fiona Durand?’

Dean took a second to think it over. ‘Was Fiona the one who wet the bed?’

‘That was Michelle. Fiona was the redhead: petite, super cute. She was at Mum’s funeral.’

‘Was she the one who came home late after your deb and ate the last of my Jarlsberg?’

‘That was Natalie. The point is, her mother, Esmé, is single

now. Her husband ran off with a woman from his work – he’s in finance or something, and she was his boss and, like, ten years older.’

‘Quite the scandal,’ Dean said, topping up his wine.

‘Yeah, so anyway, she’s single now.’

‘And?’

‘*And* she’s single, and cute, and I really think you guys would get along.’

‘Oh, well, thanks for the offer, Amy, but I don’t need my daughter to find me dates.’

‘Well, someone has to.’

He quieted then. ‘I’m not really looking for that sort of thing just yet.’

‘It’s been four years, Dad. Do you want to be alone forever?’

Her tone had turned hot and serious. Dean looked like a frightened mouse trying to escape a trap. ‘I’m fine, really. I just need to ... It’s not that easy just to ...’

‘Mum would have wanted you to find someone.’

‘Take it easy, Amy,’ I said. ‘He said he’s not ready.’

Her eyes turned red and wet.

‘What’s got into you?’ Dean asked, his own tone more serious now – and, if I had to guess, laced with a little anger. ‘Why are you crying?’

‘Nothing’s *got into me*,’ she snapped back, dabbing her eyes with her napkin. ‘I just don’t want you to be lonely.’

‘I’m not lonely. I have you guys, and Lisa, and Scout.’

Amy cried harder. Wayne sat and watched her with a stunned, terrified look on his face.

‘Darling ...’ Dean moved to rise out of his chair, but Amy waved him away.

‘I’m fine.’

‘You’re the opposite of fine. What is it? Have I done something? Talk to me.’

‘This isn’t about you.’

‘Then what’s it about?’

She took the napkin away from her eyes long enough to glance at me. Then scornfully, bitterly, desperately, she said, ‘It’s about Sammy fucking Went.’

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