

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER WITH A SHOCKING TWIST

THE ONLY SON

A person wearing a red hoodie and dark pants stands with their back to the camera, looking at a two-story house at night. The house has white siding and a porch. One window on the ground floor is lit up, casting a warm glow. The sky is dark and cloudy. The title 'THE ONLY SON' is overlaid in large, bold, yellow letters across the top half of the image.

BRIAN R. O'ROURKE

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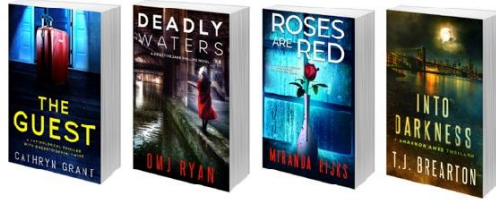
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*This novel is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Jenna, and my
two amazing daughters, Fiona and Eloise.*

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THURSDAY

The walls at the agency are not sound-proofed. The heated argument between my brother-in-law and his client is coming through loud and clear. I can hear every word they're saying from my desk while I finish my lunch.

"I'm not upset about your relapse," Carl says. "It's the lies I can't deal with anymore, Jayden. I vouched for you with the judge. The next time I go to bat for another client, he won't believe me."

Jayden is one of Carl's more difficult clients, assigned to the agency through the court per the terms of his parole. He's been to prison once already and narrowly avoided another stretch when he pled to a lesser offense.

"I ain't lying to you!"

"I have it on good authority that you were using again," Carl says. My brother-in-law is usually even-keeled. He's a great social worker, hard-working, as empathetic as he is patient. But Jayden pushes all his buttons.

"Screw this, man. You just wanna put me back inside."

"That doesn't make a lick of sense, Jayden. If I wanted you in prison, why would I stick my neck out for—"

Carl's office door is thrown open. Jayden emerges and shoots me a nasty look like I've been intentionally eavesdropping. My face turns bright red. I want to tell him I didn't hear a thing, but I'm not very good at lying and by the time I even consider fibbing, I've taken too long to try.

Jayden storms out of the office, nearly bowling over another social worker standing in the aisle between cubicles.

Carl comes flying out of his office but he doesn't give chase when he realizes Jayden is almost to the exit.

Carl resembles his brother. They have the same blue eyes and chestnut hair, though Carl is beginning to go bald and is thick around the waist in a way that my husband has never been. Dwayne is five years younger than him, is in fantastic shape, and is the handsomest man I've ever dated. Being very plain-looking myself, I still have days where I wonder how I landed such an attractive husband.

Carl is looking at me.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, knowing it's not.

Carl shakes his head sadly. "I really thought Jayden had gotten over the hump."

As a social worker and counselor, Carl has worked primarily with addicts for over twenty years. All that experience has given him a surprisingly accurate intuition about when a person has finally kicked their habits, i.e. gotten over the hump. He's not wrong often.

I feel like I should say something but everything I think to say sounds so hollow and cliché. Still, I feel bad for him. A lot of people say they want to make the world a better place, but Carl is one of the few who actually works toward that goal.

I also owe him a great deal. He was there for me when I left my first husband. And he got me this job at the agency, even though I had no college degree or relevant work experience. I've been his assistant for nearly ten years now.

Carl's voice flattens. "Jayden seems determined to become another statistic."

Before I can express sympathetically how much Carl has done for Jayden, my phone is buzzing.

It's my son, Andrew.

Andrew normally texts, and he's at wizarding camp right now, so this is unusual. I immediately suspect something is wrong.

"Sorry." I hold up my phone. "It's Andrew. Do you mind if I take this?"

Carl smiles at me. "You know you don't have to ask."

Carl reenters his office.

At least five other people would be able to hear my conversation if I took the call at my desk. I duck into the nearest unoccupied conference room and close the door.

"Hey, Andrew," I answer.

"Mom." He sounds like he's been crying. "Can you come home?"

"What's wrong? Why are you home?"

He bursts into tears, and my heart breaks. My first thought is he's been bullied again. Andrew is different. We know he has a severe case of ADHD. Without medicine he can't relax and he's argumentative. To make matters worse, he's also a sensitive boy, so naturally he gets picked on a lot. I suspect he might be on the spectrum too, but Dwayne is tired of us having to take him to doctors.

When school is out, Andrew prefers to be at home, by himself, typically. So I was thrilled when Andrew expressed interest in wizarding camp this summer. But now I'm worried that the typical problems he faces at school have followed him to camp. The bad kids always find him.

"Honey, tell me what's wrong," I say.

"Please come home."

"Andrew, I'm at work right now."

"Mom—please."

He sounds scared, almost panicked.

“What’s wrong?”

“Something terrible’s happened. I just need you to come home.”

It’s a little after one o’clock. I’m supposed to work until 4:00. I had a couple things to tidy up, but they could wait until tomorrow. I haven’t left work early in years. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I took a sick day.

Carl will understand, I hope.

“I’ll be there in ten minutes, okay?”

Andrew hangs up without saying goodbye. I have no idea what this is about, but I’ve never heard my son this upset before.

I stick my head in Carl’s door. He looks up from his computer.

“What’s up?”

“It’s Andrew...” Some intuition holds me back from telling Carl the truth. “Andrew’s not feeling well. Do you mind if I leave early?”

Carl doesn’t take his eyes off me. “Is everything alright?”

He’s seen through me. I’m not a very good liar, partly because I don’t get much practice at it. But it’s also because lying is not an option I normally consider.

I trust Carl, but at the same time I don’t know what’s upset Andrew so much. I have a bad feeling about what awaits me at home. Plus, my husband thinks I have a tendency to overshare. Dwayne doesn’t yell at me, but a few months ago he raised his voice when he found out I’d told Carl about his cholesterol. Dwayne is a very private man.

“Yeah.” I fake a smile and keep my voice low. “You know how Andrew can get sometimes.”

Carl nods knowingly. “It’s no big deal. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

I hurry out of the office. I’m hoping my intuition is wrong and it’s nothing bad. We don’t need any more drama this year. Andrew’s grades took a dip and he quit the basketball team halfway through the season, which infuriated Dwayne. Then there was the bullying at the end of the term.

The agency is only fifteen minutes from home. I park in the driveway. As I head up the sidewalk, I get the creepy-crawly feelings on the back of my neck like I’m being watched. I stop before I reach the porch and look down our street. We live in a nice neighborhood of single-family homes with a lot of space between houses. Dwayne does very well for himself. I really am lucky to have found a man that provides so well. My father could barely hold down a job, and my mother would spend fifty hours a week trying to finagle unemployment or disability rather than put in an honest forty hours at a real job. Needless to say, my childhood wasn’t very stable.

A curtain shifts next door. But our neighbors on that side, the Pritchards, are away on vacation. It must be their orange tabby, Hobbes. He loves watching people from the windows on the ground floor. Their niece usually comes by to take care of Hobbes while they’re gone, but I don’t see her car. They’re not due home till next week.

I look past the Pritchard house but don’t catch anyone spying on me. Everybody else in that direction is at work as far as I know. The only other person who might be around is our neighbor’s seventeen-year-old son, John DeMarco. He’s on summer break and last I heard, he just got fired from his part-time job at the deli around the corner. John is a wild kid who’s always getting into trouble.

At a neighborhood party a few weeks ago, I caught John looking down my dress while I bent over to get a beer out of the cooler for Dwayne. When I gave him a reproofing look, he just shrugged and with a smile told me I had great tits. I was so shocked, I didn’t know what to say, and when Nora from next door came in to grab a drink I acted like nothing had happened. I thought about discussing the disrespectful

behavior with John's mother but didn't want to turn it into a big thing.

If Dwayne knew, he'd probably kill the kid.

Not seeing anyone about, I proceed to my house.

The front door is locked, which I find odd. Andrew has a bad habit of never locking doors when we're *leaving* the house, so it seems strange he'd shut himself in, especially when he knows I'm due home any moment.

After fumbling with my keys and getting inside, I call out from the foyer.

"Andrew, honey, where are you?"

"In here."

Andrew comes out of the den. He won't meet my eyes. He doesn't know what to do with his hands. They're all over the place.

"What's wrong?"

His lower lip trembles. "I didn't do it, I swear."

"Do what?"

"He's in the garage."

“Who’s in the garage?” I ask.

Andrew shakes his head and covers his face with his hands before bursting into tears again. “I swear. I didn’t do this.”

“Do what?”

He won’t look at me, won’t answer my question. And now his words are beginning to sink in. There’s someone in the garage. And I know, without Andrew coming out and saying it, that this person, whoever it is, must be...

“Andrew, what happened?”

He tears his hands away from his face. His eyes are bloodshot and his cheeks are wet with tears.

“I left camp early because there were these two assholes making fun of my costume and I came home and he was here in the garage like that. Just ... *dead*. I didn’t do anything, I didn’t *even touch* him. I swear!”

Dead. There it is.

There’s a dead person in my garage. And—I hate the next thought that occurs to me—my son found the body. I’m not a detective. I don’t even read mystery novels or watch crime shows. All those things upset me.

But I know what this means. I know how this *looks*. There’s a dead person in my house, and Andrew is the one who discovered him.

“Andrew—”

Before I can say anything else, my son bolts upstairs. I hear his bedroom door close. I don't know what to do. I wish Dwayne were here. But I can't call him without knowing exactly what the problem is. He hates when I do that.

I hurry through the kitchen. The door to the garage is open, another oddity. Even Andrew always remembers to close it.

I stick my head in the doorway and peer inside. Right there, in the middle of the concrete, is a body lying on its back. It's obvious the person is dead, but still I call out.

“Hello? Can you hear me?”

No response. I watch the body. Its chest doesn't rise and fall with breath. Though long blond hair obscures the face, I feel like I know this person. The body is angled away from me, its head closest and its feet farthest. But I can tell the body belongs—or belonged—to a young man.

To a teenager.

Oh God...

I step into the garage, careful not to touch anything. I'm already thinking of my house as a crime scene.

Keeping my distance, I round the body so I'm standing at its feet now. There's no blood, but my immediate intuition is that this was a violent death. His head is tilted backward, his neck bulges, and his jaw juts. His mouth is open, his jaw locked as if he were gasping for air. Though the boy's long blond hair obscures half his face, the cheek that is visible appears puffy. The lifeless eye I can see is sickeningly rolled back into his head and horribly bloodshot. I bite back the bile creeping up my throat.

Now that I've gotten a closer look, I notice the marks on his neck too. As a mother of a teenaged boy, I know what fresh bruises look like. But there are also other markings. The skin of his neck looks *raw*, almost like it's been scrubbed by something rough. With a flash of insight, I realize what has happened: this boy was hit hard in the face, pinned to the ground, then strangled. And once that was done, the killer

frantically scrubbed the victim's neck, presumably to remove any DNA evidence.

I clamp a hand over my mouth and fight tears. Who would do this? And why? And why would it have happened here?

It's while I'm asking myself these awful questions that I finally recognize the young man. It shouldn't have taken me this long. After all, I've known him for thirteen years. Under all that hair, under the swelling, under the bruising, it's Hal English.

Hal and my son used to be best friends.

I don't know what to do.
I should call the police.

No, first I should call a lawyer. Right?

No, the first person I should call is Dwayne. I can't talk to an attorney or a police officer before speaking to my husband.

I return to the kitchen, leaving the interior door to the garage open, and phone Dwayne. Hopefully he's not trapped in one of his many meetings and can actually take the call.

"Sarah, now's not a great time," Dwayne answers in a huff, and I cringe. He owns his own business, so I try not to bother him during the work day. The man basically runs from one meeting to the next and often works through lunch. "What is it?"

It sounds like he's in the car. "Are you on your way somewhere?"

It takes him a moment to answer. "What did you say?"

"It sounds like you're in the car."

"Yeah, I'm in the car..." Something's wrong, I can tell. Dwayne doesn't like to talk about work—I worry enough, he says, and he doesn't want me thinking about everything he has to deal with also. I know his attitude is a bit old-fashioned, but I think it's sweet. "One of our vendors no-showed and the county is due to come in for an inspection. Anyway, I needed

to get out of the office for a stretch. Everybody is driving me nuts.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” he says, turning sweet like he always does. “But I have to get back to it. Can we talk tonight? How about I pick up some di—”

“Dwayne, I need you to come home right now.”

“You’re *home*?” he says, sounding angry. “I mean, why did you leave work early?”

“Andrew called. It’s...” I’m already thinking ahead, wondering if the police will later be able to play back this conversation. I don’t know if the phone company records calls and if the police can later obtain them, but I have to be careful about what I say. “...I’m sorry, but Andrew’s not feeling well. Something happened at camp and he’s just beside himself. I’ve tried talking to him but it’s not working and I’m worried. I really need you to come home *right now*.”

I’m expecting Dwayne to push back. He’s a good father, but when it comes to dealing with our son’s many, and volatile, emotions, Dwayne usually asks me to handle it. I don’t blame him. All day long, Dwayne is responsible for managing an entire workforce spread across several locations. It takes a lot out of him. Some nights, he doesn’t have much left for us.

But he must read between the lines and sense there’s something else wrong, something more terrible than Andrew’s bad day at camp.

“Okay,” Dwayne answers, a bit distracted. No doubt he’s thinking of all the things he still has to accomplish today that now won’t get done until tomorrow. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Dwayne?”

“Yeah?”

It takes every ounce of my will to keep from crying. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, Sarah.”

He ends the call. I’m so lucky to have him. If it were just me and Andrew, I honestly don’t know what I’d do.

After pocketing my cell phone, I turn to go upstairs but a thought occurs to me. I return to the front door and check its exterior. Then I move through the ground floor, examining all our windows and, finally, the back door that opens onto our deck.

As far as I can tell, no one broke into our house.

That means... I cannot complete the thought.

With a heavy heart, I go upstairs and knock on Andrew’s door. He doesn’t answer.

“Can I come in?”

“Did you see him?” he asks.

“Yes, sweetie, I saw him. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Somebody did that to him. Did you call the police?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

“I called your father.”

“You called *Dad*?”

“Yes.”

“He’s going to freak out and blame me. You know he hates me. That’s why I called you.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true.”

I’m tired of talking to a door. “Can I come in?”

“I didn’t do anything to him,” Andrew says. “I swear.”

Then why can’t you say his name?

“Tell me what happened.”

“I told you. I came home and found him in the garage.”

I can't very well tell Andrew it doesn't look that way. But then again, what does he expect me to think happened? That someone else killed Hal in our house without leaving any trace? Thinking about Hal makes me want to burst into tears. I've known that boy his entire life. Dwayne and I are very close with his parents. Hal and Andrew were tight for many years, until they grew apart.

I take a deep breath. Andrew's ADHD makes him impulsive and prone to fibbing. That doesn't mean he necessarily killed Hal, but it certainly doesn't work in his favor either.

"How could Hal have gotten inside the house?" I ask.

"I don't know," Andrew says. "It doesn't make any sense."

Andrew has been riding his bike to the wizarding camp at the rec center this week, usually leaving the house after Dwayne and me. A thought occurs to me.

"Did you remember to lock up when you left the house this morning?" I ask.

"I... I think so."

"Honey, it's really important that you remember."

"I think I did."

I don't know whether to believe him. The problem is, locking a door is one of those automatic actions you perform and immediately forget about.

"Andrew, honey, did you get into an argument with Hal?"

"No!"

"You can tell me. It's okay."

"No, he was already, you know, like that when I found him."

Then how did he get into the house? And who else would have done that to him?

"Can I come in?"

"Are you going to call the police?"

When they were younger, Andrew and Hal were friends. Hal's mother, Bridget, and I used to meet at the corner and push our strollers to the library every Tuesday morning for story hour. He and Hal used to have play dates all the time, and later sleepovers. They were friends, until fourth grade. That's when Andrew really started struggling, both socially and scholastically. Every doctor we saw gave us a new diagnosis. Even though we have a much better handle on our son these days, and have gotten him a lot of treatment over the years, poor Andrew still finds connecting with other kids his age very difficult.

In fourth grade, Hal blossomed into one of the more popular kids. He had more friends than he knew what to do with, as Bridget was so fond of saying.

Andrew, on the other hand, turtled up.

I've been trying not to think about Hal's parents. We're very close with them. Dwayne has known both Russ and Bridget since middle school. I didn't meet them until I was in my twenties, but all the same, I've known them both for fifteen years. Russ works, but Bridget is home. It won't be long before she starts to wonder where her son is.

"Andrew, are you telling me the truth?" I ask.

He doesn't answer.

I hear Dwayne pulling up.

And it's then I realize—

I should have told him to park in the driveway!

I'm running down the hallway, headed for the stairs, not sure if I can even stop him at this point.

We had been parking in the driveway for the longest time, ever since we moved in. The garage was the one room in the house where we put all the stuff we didn't know what to do with. Dwayne hated how messy the space got to be, though honestly it was mostly his things in there. Anyway, Dwayne got one of his ideas and suddenly we had to empty the garage because he wanted to start parking inside. That was a month or

two ago. I'm not good at parking in close quarters so I usually leave my car in the driveway.

Because it's still a new habit of his, it didn't even cross my mind that he'd open the garage. If someone's walking by, or if a neighbor across the street happens to look out their window —

I hear his brake squeak outside as he comes to a stop. My whole body is shaking as I throw open the front door. Dwayne is already out of the car, jogging toward the front door.

“What's going on here?” he asks.

“Please come inside.”

I close the door behind my husband and we stand in the foyer. Dwayne is tall and broad. He played basketball in high school and still has his athletic physique even though that was twenty years ago. He towers above me. Normally he's so calm, but right now his eyes have a wild look about them. I must have panicked him with my strange phone call out of the blue.

“Where's Andrew?” he asks.

“He's upstairs. But first you and I need to talk.”

“What's this about?” he asks, looking past me, his eyes wandering up the stairs. “What did he do?”

“Dwayne, something terrible happened.”

“Oh God, what now? You know I'm trying to run a business here. I can't just leave work in the middle of the day every time he...” Dwayne shakes his head, then raises his voice. “Andrew! Get down here.”

I put my hand on his chest. “He's not talking right now.”

“Not talking right now?” He peers down at me, his face growing stern. “What the hell is going on here, Sarah?”

“Dwayne, Hal English is in the garage.”

“Okay... What, did they get into a fight again?”

“No, it's...” I take his hand. “Come with me.”

His palm is slick as I lead my husband through the house. I take another look at my husband before we reach the garage. He was angry a moment ago, but now he seems nervous. He must be picking up on my mood. Dwayne can read me like a book.

I stop in the kitchen before we reach the interior door to the garage.

“Dwayne, I don’t know what to do... That’s why I called.”

“Do about what? Were they fighting again?”

“I...”

Dwayne is growing annoyed again. “Sarah, they’re thirteen years old. They’re not toddlers at the playground learning to share the swing. That ship has sailed at this point. Why is Hal even in the garage? If he wants to leave, you should let him.”

“Hal is dead, Dwayne. He looks like he’s been strangled.”

My husband stares at me dumbly for a second. Then it hits him all at once. “*Strangled?*”

I nod, wipe away some fresh tears.

“Why do you think that?”

Is he really going to make me describe what I saw? I give him a pleading look, but Dwayne doesn’t relent.

“His mouth is open like he was trying to take a breath and there are all these marks on his neck...”

I can’t go on.

“Jesus Christ,” Dwayne mutters.

I had been keeping it together for Andrew’s sake, but now that Dwayne is home I burst into tears.

“I didn’t touch him...”

Dwayne gently squeezes my shoulders, then heads for the garage. I don’t follow. I don’t look either. Seeing Hal’s dead body in my garage will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Dwayne is in the garage for a minute before he emerges. He closes the door behind him. His face is flushed.

“Don’t go in there again,” he says. “What did Andrew say?”

“He left camp early because some boys were making fun of his costume. When he came home, he found Hal like that in the garage.”

Dwayne looks as skeptical as I feel. Like any other mother, I’ve got my blind spots when it comes to my own child. But I’m not totally oblivious.

Andrew and Hal have been growing apart since they were eleven years old, but at school this year, things really took a turn for the worst. Andrew accused Hal of bullying, while Hal claimed Andrew was constantly talking about him behind his back. This culminated in a nasty fistfight during recess where Hal got the best of Andrew, embarrassing our son in front of all his classmates.

“Then Andrew called you?” Dwayne asks.

“Yes.”

“He didn’t call anybody else? Or text anyone?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so, or you know for a fact?” he asks.

“I... I didn’t ask for his phone.”

Dwayne motions. “Go get it.”

“His phone?”

“Yes, Sarah, get his phone.”

“Why?”

Dwayne sighs, like I’m being an idiot. “Because we have to act quickly.”

“What do you mean? What are we going to do?”

He turns and points at the door behind him. “Regardless of whether we believe our son, there’s a dead body in our garage and Andrew looks guilty as sin.”

“I was thinking we should call a lawyer.”

Dwayne shakes his head. “What’s a lawyer going to do? Get him a more lenient sentence?”

“I don’t understand... Do you want to call the police?”

“We are not calling the cops.”

I think I’ve misheard him. “*What?*”

“We have to act fast here.” Dwayne puts his hands on my shoulders and looks me in the eye. “Go get his phone, before he does something stupid.”

After I manage to coax Andrew into sliding his phone under his bedroom door, I unlock it and check his call history. He's only contacted me today, so that's good.

When I return to the kitchen, Dwayne is kneeling in front of the sink with his hands inside the cabinet there.

"Did you get it?" he asks.

"He hasn't called anybody but me."

"What about texts?"

"I didn't look."

Dwayne stops what he's doing to peer over his shoulder. "Sarah, you need to check."

Andrew has had his phone for almost two years now and in all that time I've not once violated his privacy. I don't really want to scroll through his messages, at least not without first understanding why I'm doing it.

"Where are the rubber gloves?" Dwayne asks, his attention returned to the cabinet.

"Oh." My stomach drops. "You know what? I moved them."

Dwayne retracts his hands. "Where?"

My husband is very particular about where we keep things in the house. Chaos and disarray stress him out. He likes to

joke that he's a little OCD. It's one of his quirks, but I don't mind.

"Sorry," I say. "I moved them into the cabinet to your right."

"Why would you—never mind," he mutters.

Dwayne opens the correct drawer and fishes out the yellow gloves I use when I'm working on the dishes that need handwashing or scouring the sink. He pulls them on, sliding them over his white dress shirt. An oval of sweat has formed on his back.

"Did he text anybody?" Dwayne asks.

I still haven't looked. "Honey, can you tell me what you're doing?"

Dwayne comes over and takes the phone out of my hands. Without a word he opens Andrew's text messages and scrolls through.

"Who's Anna?" he asks.

"I don't know..." Andrew has never mentioned an Anna before. "Did he write her today?"

Dwayne passes the phone back to me. "Is he still in his room?"

I put my hand on his chest. "Dwayne, what are you doing?"

He nods, as if just now realizing he hasn't shared his plans. "Sorry, babe. You know how I get when things have to happen. I just act and everybody else has to play catch-up. But we don't really have time to discuss this. I need to know right now if you're on board with this."

"With what?"

"We need to move the body."

Everything stops.

Everything.

"We ... can't."

“We can’t *not*,” he says. “Look at the facts.”

“Andrew didn’t do this.”

Dwayne doesn’t lower his voice. “Who else could have?”

“I don’t know, but that doesn’t mean Andrew is guilty.”

“Look, Sarah, we don’t have a choice. That boy is dead in our garage. Andrew is the one who found him. They got into a fistfight not too long ago, for God’s sake.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean Andrew killed him.”

“Honey.” Dwayne cuffs my forearms. His grip is a little too tight. “How is this going to look?”

“We can’t move the body. That would be wrong.”

“Do you really want to take our chances with the police?” he asks. He’s giving me his firm voice, the one that signifies he’s already made up his mind and won’t be dissuaded. “Come on, honey. *Think*. How hard are the police going to look for another suspect if they find Hal’s body here and learn about their history?”

I hate to admit it. But Dwayne has a point.

He continues. “Once the lawyers get hold of his medical records and see all the doctors and all the diagnoses and the medications, not to mention all the trouble Andrew’s gotten into at school the last few years, they’ll tear him apart.”

Andrew hasn’t gotten into *trouble* per se. He’s acted out, sure, but that’s because of his particular form of ADHD and delayed executive functioning, as well as whatever else he’s got going on that hasn’t been diagnosed yet. I’m sure there’s more. But now that we’ve got him in the right classes and now that he’s actually learning to read the way he needs to be taught, things are turning around.

But all the same, Dwayne has a point. Andrew has a temper and he’s been caught in a lot of lies. When you look at all these things together, it paints an unflattering picture. Thinking Andrew is capable of murdering one of his classmates is a leap for me, because I know my boy, and for all

his troubles, he has a good heart. But to an outsider, to someone who doesn't know him at all, it's not a stretch.

"It's illegal," I say.

It's a weak argument, one which Dwayne will dismiss easily. But I'm just not *there* yet, not certain this is the best thing for our child. Or for us.

I add, "If we move the body, and it's later discovered, then how is *that* going to look for Andrew?"

"So what if it's found later?" he points out. "How are they going to tie it to Andrew?"

"But if we get caught—"

"We're not going to get caught." Dwayne sounds so confident. "It's simple. We put the body in my trunk, and I'll take it somewhere. While I'm gone, you clean the whole house. If anyone ever asks, we'll say we didn't get around to spring cleaning till the school year was over. It'll be like it never happened."

"We both know that's not true."

He gives me a stern look. "I can't worry about sleepless nights in the future. Can you focus on the here and now?"

I nod. "You're right. Sorry."

He loosens his grip on my forearms and his face softens. "I'm really sorry you had to come home to this. I wish ... I wish Andrew had called me."

I know he's trying to be sweet but the thought of him moving a dead body and keeping it from me doesn't sit right.

"I would want you to call me, Dwayne. I'm not fragile, you know."

"I know." He puts his arms around me. "It's just that I like to take care of you."

I hug him back. Dwayne really is a good guy. He has taken care of me for a long time. Ever since I first met him, actually. He saved me from a terrible, abusive relationship.

“Alright.” He rubs my back. “It’s going to be okay. You’ll see.”

I look up at him. “Are we really going to do this?”

“Do you want our son to go to prison?”

“Would he?” I ask, a thought occurring to me. “I mean, he’s only thirteen. They don’t send kids to prison.”

“For shoplifting, no. But for murder? Sometimes they’re tried as adults. And you know what happens then? He’d be sent to a prison *with actual adults*.”

My stomach drops. The thought of my son incarcerated with hardened criminals is too much.

Dwayne mistakes my silence for reluctance. “Sarah, he wouldn’t last a day in prison. Hell, he wouldn’t last a week in juvenile detention. I love him, but Andrew’s not cut out for it.”

This is a variation on what Dwayne’s always saying. Andrew is too sensitive. Too soft.

Too weak.

“Besides,” Dwayne says, finally lowering his voice. “What if he’s guilty?”

“He would never.”

“Come on, honey.” Dwayne rolls his eyes. “I love my son more than anything, but you have to admit that’s the most likely explanation.”

As bad as this all looks, I can’t bring myself to admit Andrew did this. It’s too much to think about. “I don’t know about that.”

“Then what happened?” Dwayne asks. “Let’s start with the most obvious question: how did Hal get into our house?”

“Andrew’s not great about locking up. Hal could have walked right in.”

“If Andrew wasn’t here to invite him in, why would Hal do that?”

“I don’t know...” My head is spinning. Dwayne wants me to have all the answers to every possible question, but that’s impossible. I just found out thirty minutes ago that there was a dead body in my garage. How am I supposed to have figured all this out? “You say it all the time: kids do things.”

“Okay. Fine.” Dwayne is beginning to lose his patience. “Andrew didn’t lock the door and Hal coincidentally decides to come to our house. Then what?”

“Then...” I’m reaching here. “Maybe Hal didn’t come alone? Maybe he came here with somebody else to, I don’t know, to steal or to vandalize the house...”

“Then what?”

“Things got out of hand. Maybe Hal had second thoughts and the other person—”

“Sarah, look around you. Does our house look like it was robbed? The place is pristine.”

He’s got a point there. I’ve been through the house and didn’t notice anything odd. When I was ten years old, our apartment was robbed. The minute we came home, we knew something was off.

“What about this Anna, the person Andrew was texting?” I ask.

“We don’t have time to play the what-if game. I’ve got to get Hal out of here. While I’m gone, you ask Andrew about Anna.”

“He wouldn’t do this, Dwayne.”

“He might,” my husband says. “Every time we take him to another doctor, we come home with another diagnosis. What if Hal pushed the right buttons? Or the wrong ones? You know it’s possible. Hal’s a sneak. He’s one of those kids that likes to instigate and needle. Russ and Bridget are our friends, but their son could be an asshole, you’ve got to admit.”

Could be.

Past tense.

And now I'm thinking about Russ and Bridget again. Russ and Dwayne used to meet up for drinks once or twice a week after work. Bridget and I did yoga and Pilates together. We went out to dinner all the time. Barbecues, birthdays, New Year's Eve parties ... we did all those things together. Ever since our boys got into a fight, we haven't been in contact as much, but we have so much history together that I still think of them as close friends.

"I feel so bad for them," I say.

"We can't think about that right now."

I look away. Dwayne might be right about that, but it's a cold attitude to adopt toward our friends.

"Sarah, we have to think about our son, and what's best for him."

I bite back some tears. "Where are you going to move him?"

"The less you know, the better," he answers, then gets another idea. "If I'm caught, I'll say you had no idea what happened, that this was all my idea. Okay?"

"You just said you weren't going to get caught."

"If, Sarah. *If*. There's always a chance. You can't go through life without taking any risks."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

Dwayne checks the time on the microwave. "Alright, we can't stall any longer."

"Dwayne ... hold on."

"For what? For Russ and Bridget to come knocking?"

"No." I can't hold his stare. The thing is, I'm not ready for this. "You haven't even spoken to Andrew yet."

"You did," Dwayne answers.

"Yeah, but..." I realize I'm stalling, but I can't simply agree to move a dead body without giving it some thought first. "Don't you want to at least talk to him?"

Dwayne shakes his head. “It sounds like you asked him everything I would.”

I know every second counts, but all the same, Dwayne is moving too fast. “But—”

“You and I both know that Andrew doesn’t open up to me,” Dwayne says. “What is he going to tell me that he won’t share with you?”

“I don’t know!” I regret yelling immediately when I see the look of annoyance on Dwayne’s face. I lower my voice. “Sorry. But I just think you should *speak* to our son before you do anything.”

Dwayne checks his watch. “There’s no time for this, Sarah. Andrew’s been home for what, almost an hour now? Pretty soon somebody is going to notice that Hal’s missing.”

Every argument Dwayne has made is compelling and logical. But I still find it odd that he won’t take a minute to speak to his son. At the very least, Dwayne must realize how traumatic this situation has been for Andrew.

“Fine.” Dwayne tosses his hands into the air in frustration. “I’ll *talk* to him.”

“No.” There’s still one percent of me that thinks moving Hal’s corpse is a bad idea, but I can’t see any flaws in Dwayne’s logic. “You’re right. It’s more important for you to...”

I can’t bring myself to say it.

Dwayne nods appreciatively. “You should talk to Andrew. Make sure he’s okay. I’m going to run to the hardware store to buy some supplies.”

“*Supplies?*”

“I can’t just throw him in the trunk the way he is.”

“What are you going to get?”

He thinks it over. “I’ll need plastic wrap and a tarp.” He grimaces. “A saw too.”

“Oh God.” I don’t know if I can take this. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

Dwayne closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Sarah, I’m going to the hardware store. In case you run into Rose at the pool or Josh at the gym, I don’t want you to be surprised when they mention seeing me in the store.”

That’s a really good point. I’m glad Dwayne is here to think of these things. We’re friendly with the owners of the hardware store, Josh and Rose, and I run into them often around town. It wouldn’t look good if either of them mentioned seeing Dwayne buying a saw and tarp in the store and I had no idea. We need to have a story prepared.

“We’ve been meaning to touch up the basement for a while,” I say. “The paint we bought is still good, I think. So that explains the wrap and the tarp. But do you really need to buy a saw too? That one’s a bit harder to explain.”

Dwayne’s mind is already made up. “He’s a big kid and moving him in one piece won’t be easy. I might have to ... anyway, I’ll figure that out. I need you to talk to Andrew while I’m gone and figure out who Anna is. And also, start cleaning the house. Not the garage, not yet. Wait for me to get him out of here before you do that. Just clean the rest of the downstairs.”

“What did his texts to Anna say?”

Dwayne takes Andrew’s phone out of my hand. I’m expecting him to just hand it over to me so I can read for myself, but instead he unlocks the phone and reads it out loud.

“There’s a long chain here that goes back a month or so... Andrew says that he doesn’t care if he’s sorry, he fucking hates someone. Anna swears that this somebody is sorry and feels awful, but Andrew doesn’t care, he says he hopes this person would die.”

I bring a hand up to my mouth. “Jesus.”

“Just figure out who Anna is and who they’re talking about. And hope it’s not Hal. Okay?”

“Dwayne, wait a minute. Please, wait.” I close the distance between us, put a hand on his chest. “Are you sure this is best?”

He smiles sadly. “Remember how I always told you that I’d do anything for our son? Well, I’m doing it.”

I know he’s right. Logic prevails, like Dwayne is always saying.

But all the same, I can’t get rid of the bad feeling in my stomach.

“We haven’t done anything wrong yet,” I say. “We don’t have to go through with this.”

“What choice do we have, really?” Dwayne sets his jaw. The more I express doubt, the more Dwayne’s resolve grows. “Even if Andrew’s innocent—and that’s a big fucking if—the police will think he did it.”

He’s right.

Dwayne adds, “Everybody will.”

“**A**ndrew, honey.” I tap on the door. “We need to talk.”

“What’s happening? Did you call the police?”

“No. Can you please unlock the door? I need to come in.”

“Is this a trick? Are the police already here?”

“No, son, I swear. Please open the door.”

Downstairs, I hear Dwayne leave.

“Was that Dad?” Andrew asks.

“Yes, he’s gone.”

“Where’s he going?”

“Andrew.” Between Dwayne and me, I’m much more even-tempered. But I’m running out of patience. “Open the door.”

His bed squeaks as he gets up. Andrew unlocks and cracks the door so I can only see a sliver of his face.

“You promise you didn’t call the police?”

“I’m coming in.”

I nudge the door open. He gets out of the way and sits on the swivel chair in front of his desk. Behind him, the wall is decorated with posters of his favorite cartoons. Andrew is young for his age.

Delayed, is what many of the doctors have said.

I sit on his bed on the other side of the room so I'm not crowding him. He's in his swivel chair, unnaturally still, like he's afraid to move. He's thirteen, but he seems so childlike.

"Honey, I need you to tell me everything now."

"I already did," he answers, looking away.

"We need more details, Andrew. What time did you leave camp?"

"I don't know, I wasn't looking at my phone."

"Was it before or after lunch?"

"Oh. During."

"So around what time then?"

"Oh, it would have been twelve thirty? Maybe one?"

"And how long does it take you to ride your bike home?"

"I've never, like, timed it."

"Andrew, honey." He's not going to make this easy. "I need you to make an educated guess."

He shrugs.

Our son has very little sense of time, and even less a sense of urgency. When he's running late for the school bus—which happens every morning—he acts like he's got all the time in the world. It drives me nuts. He'll be due at the bus stop in two minutes and won't have brushed his teeth or gotten his shoes on or packed his laptop yet. Getting him out the door always ends up turning into a fire drill.

"Okay. When you got home, did you find Hal right away?"

He thinks it over. "I came home and got something to drink. I was so thirsty from the bike ride. But that only took a minute. I went into the garage to get an ice cream out of the spare freezer and that's when I saw him."

"Did you call me right away?"

"I didn't know what to do, Mom."

"I understand, sweetie. But did you call me right away?"

“Yes. I mean, pretty much right away.”

“What does that mean?”

Andrew looks down at his hands. “I thought about running away first.”

He points at his dresser and sure enough, I spot his backpack on the floor in front of the furniture. It’s unzipped and clothes are stuffed inside it. His headphones are jutting out one side.

“Oh my God, Andrew. Running away is never the option. Okay?”

“I knew how Dad would react. I knew what you’d both think.”

I act innocent. “What does that mean?”

“Mom.” He shakes his head. “I know you and Dad think I did something.”

I force myself to lie. “Andrew, I believe you.”

His eyes snap up to meet mine. “You do?”

It takes some acting, but I manage to say it. “Yes.”

He looks for the lie in my face. The truth is, I don’t know that he’s guilty. But I also don’t know if he’s innocent. I’m stuck in that cognitive hell between.

Before he accuses me of lying, I change the subject. “Why did you leave the camp?”

“Because.” His eyes grow dark. “These guys came over and called me a fag.”

“*What?*”

“They’d been making fun of me all day. One of them grabbed my wand and smelled it and made this disgusted face and he said...” Andrew looks down. “He said I must have stuck it up my, you know.”

Kids can be such cruel bastards sometimes.

I’ve started to wonder about Andrew’s sexuality recently but haven’t shared my thoughts with Dwayne. My husband is

not a bigot, but I'm not sure how he'd take the news. So much has happened with Andrew recently, and I'm not sure Dwayne can handle one more thing right now, especially with how crazy work has been. It's been difficult for all of us to share a family meal during the workweek recently, and for the last month, Dwayne has stayed late at the office two or three times a week. He's even gone in to work a couple Saturdays recently, something he swore he'd never do. But those are the breaks when you're the boss. When the alarm system malfunctions on a Saturday, or when the water main in the building breaks in the middle of the night, or when you find out one of your ex-employees took some proprietary information with them after getting fired, you have to go to the office no matter what time it is.

Regardless, I don't care what Andrew's sexual orientation is. I just want him to be happy. Dwayne feels the same way, I'm sure. I mean, he's willing to move a dead body for his son. He obviously loves Andrew, no matter what.

"I'm so sorry, honey. Who were these kids?"

"I don't know." He shrugs. Andrew is never good with details. He has two bad habits, which only exacerbate each other. First, he has trouble reading the room. Second, when he gets in bad situations, he tends to shut down. One of his doctors called it tunnel vision, a severe, unproductive freeze-fight-or-flight response, where Andrew can't think clearly. "They don't go to school with me."

"I'm sorry that happened," I repeat. "You must have been very upset."

He shrugs. "Whatever. This is my life. People hate me. Everybody thinks I'm weird."

"Andrew..." My heart breaks to hear him say that. "That's not true."

"And then I come home and Hal is dead. What the hell did I do to deserve all this?"

"Nothing," I say. "Sometimes bad things happen. There's not always a rhyme or a reason."

“I still...” Andrew leans forward and puts his elbows on his thighs. “Hal was an asshole but I didn’t want him to die. And now everybody is going to think I did it.”

“They won’t,” I say. “Your father is taking care of this.”

“What does that mean?”

I shake my head. “Don’t you worry about that. Now I’m sorry, but I had to check your phone. I had to know if you called anybody else, or texted someone about what happened.”

“No,” he says. “Why would I do that?”

“I had to check,” I repeat. “Who’s this Anna? You messaged her.”

At my mentioning this girl, Andrew sits up and grows stiff. “Oh, she’s just somebody from school.”

My son is a terrible liar. If the police ever got him in a room, they’d tear him apart. Even if he’s innocent, I don’t like Andrew’s chances in an interrogation. He has trouble articulating what he’s thinking, is bad with details, and gets easily overwhelmed.

“Andrew, this is serious. I wouldn’t be asking if it weren’t important.”

“She’s Hal’s girlfriend.”

I have to pass Bridget and Russ's place on my way back home. Russ is at work, but Bridget's BMW is in the driveway. Right now she's probably sitting down with a glass of wine, relaxing before she prepares dinner for the family. Bridget takes great pride in her cooking. It's important to her because she's a stay-at-home mother.

I feel terrible.

As much as Andrew drives me nuts sometimes, I couldn't imagine losing my child. This is going to hit Russ and Bridget hard. The best of marriages often unravel after the death of a child, and Russ and Bridget don't even have that.

Sarah has no idea because Russ swore me to secrecy. But a few months back, he called me out of the blue to meet for drinks.

"Just us," he'd said.

Just the guys, in other words.

I was a little anxious driving to the bar. Russ and I hadn't talked much since our boys got into a scrap at school. Though we'd ostensibly patched things up, forcing our sons to apologize and shake hands, ever since that day he and I had kept our distance. As much as I no longer liked their boy, I still thought of Russ as my best friend.

When I arrived, I hardly recognized Russ. He's a pharma rep and more than a little vain, so Russ fusses over his appearance. He doesn't go more than two weeks without a

haircut and he buys expensive designer clothes. But that night he looked haggard, his hair a mess, his face unshaven.

Just as jarring as his change in appearance was his change in attitude. Russ has always been full of energy, one of those guys always looking for ways to conquer the world. But that night he looked lost, almost defeated.

“It’s Hal,” Russ said. “We don’t know what to do with him. He keeps getting into trouble. I think it’s time to be firm, but Bridget wants to treat him with kid gloves still. We never argued before, not once, but now it’s all we do. We fight constantly about how to handle our son.”

It was easy to relate. Though Hal and Andrew weren’t quite having the same problems, the overall shape of their experience was similar. Both young men were acting out, changing in ways unexpected. They were no longer the sweet little boys we had known for twelve years. Now they were teenagers, and acting like it.

“And...” Russ paused to throw back another shot of whiskey. But when he came up for air, he didn’t complete the thought.

I had my own ideas about what he was going to say, but kept them to myself. Instead of voicing his concerns, Russ fortunately changed the subject. “Ahhh, forget it. So, how are things with you and Sarah?”

“Great,” I lied.

I drive past the Englishes’ house, putting them out of my mind. I’ve got a job to do at home, and it needs all my attention.

When I pull onto our street, my hand reaches for the button in my car to open the garage door. But I remember, right before my thumb taps the device, that there’s a dead body in there. Lauren from down the street is coming up the sidewalk with her Labrador. She would have been able to peer right inside.

I wave to Lauren and allow her to pass my driveway, then I back in. My crash sensors beep annoyingly while I inch my

way to the garage door. I park and pop the trunk. Before I can grab the supplies out of the trunk, Sarah comes outside.

“That was fast.”

“I didn’t stand around to chat.”

She frowns. Sometimes I can be a little sarcastic. But they say it’s supposed to be a mark of intelligence.

“Sorry,” I mutter, lowering my voice. “Did you start cleaning?”

Sarah shakes her head. “I had to speak to Andrew. And it feels like you were gone for five minutes.”

“It was almost twenty minutes.”

I know, because I timed it.

“Let’s get this stuff inside.”

We both do the same thing before we grab the tarp, plastic wrap, and the saw out of the trunk: we check the street. Lauren is almost to the corner, not looking back at us. There’s nobody else about. Discreetly, I scan the nearby houses and don’t spot anyone watching us.

Once inside, I lock the front door. We make our way to the interior door to the garage. Sarah keeps her distance, putting the plastic wrap down in front of the dishwasher.

“Where’s Andrew?” I ask.

“Still in his room.” Our number one priority is getting the body out of here. Next is cleaning the house. After that, we’ve got to get our stories straight. If everything goes according to plan, the police will never get a whiff of us. But if they do, we all have to be ready for their questions.

“Who knows you left the office early?” I ask.

Sarah chews on her bottom lip. “I mean, probably everybody.”

“Are you serious?”

“I w-w-work out in the open, and it’s a small office. Plus, I didn’t know what had happened.”

That may be true, but my wife has a bad habit of letting everybody know our business. At a block party last summer, I caught her telling that idiot down the street that Andrew was seeing a new doctor. No doubt that story made the rounds fast. Before the end of the party, the entire neighborhood was probably discussing the fact that our boy was seeing yet another shrink.

Sarah stutters when she's nervous. I feel bad about coming down on her, but we're in the middle of a crisis and I don't have time to treat her with kid gloves.

"I'm sorry, Dwayne," Sarah says. "I should have been more discreet."

"No, you're right." I fake a smile. "You had no idea what you were coming home to. What did you tell my brother?"

"Just that Andrew wasn't feeling well."

I nod. "Good. We can work with that. Text Carl to let him know that Andrew should be better tomorrow, so you'll be back at work."

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now." I pick up the rubber gloves off the sink. "I'll be in the garage."

Sarah makes a pained face. "We need to talk, Dwayne."

"About what?"

"That girl." She whispers the name. "Anna."

"What's more important right now? That conversation or the body in there?"

"It's ... she's Hal's girlfriend."

I palm my forehead. "All the more reason for me to get him out of here then. Go text my brother, okay?"

Carl texts back.

Everything okay?

Yes. Sorry about running out of there today.

NP. See you tomorrow.

A feeling of guilt overwhelms me. While it's a little one, this is my first in what I know will be a series of lies. How are we going to manage this if fibbing to Carl about why I left work early is this difficult? Here I was worried about the police questioning my son, but if they get me in a room I'll probably crack too.

Overcome by second thoughts, I hurry back to the interior garage door. I'll tell Dwayne he has to stop.

But then I realize he's been there for at least fifteen minutes. By now my husband has done *something* to the body.

The decision's already been made. It's too late now.

An image of Dwayne using the newly purchased saw comes to mind. Clutching my belly, I race to the bathroom. Somehow I manage not to retch. Several calming breaths later, the nausea has passed.

I hear Andrew's door open upstairs while I'm in the foyer.

"Honey?" I call out. "Are you okay?"

“What’s going on? Why aren’t the police here?”

“Keep your voice down,” I say, like there could be someone in the house listening.

A terrifying thought suddenly grips me. What if someone is listening?

I go room-to-room again but find nobody lurking. Still, I can’t shake the feeling that there’s an intruder hiding somewhere. What if Andrew came home while they were still here, and that person had to hide?

After shuddering at the thought, I go through the house again. Check under beds, behind doors, inside closets, even pop into the attic.

There’s no one else here.

Following my more thorough search of the premises, my terror begins to dissipate. Still, I’m troubled by the fact that Hal got into this house somehow. Andrew might have forgotten to lock up after leaving for camp. Or Andrew might have let Hal in—

No.

There’s another explanation.

I smack my forehead, feeling stupid.

Russ and Bridget have a key to our house. We gave it to them years ago, back when we had our yellow Labrador, Lennie. Whenever we went away on vacation, they’d come over to let Lennie out. We used to return the favor for their cats, stopping in to feed them and change their kitty litter. Lennie was a rescue, already old when we got him, and he passed when Andrew was still in grade school. We haven’t since gotten another pet, and I honestly forgot about Russ and Bridget having a key to our place until this very moment.

Would Hal know about it?

Yes, as a matter of fact. Now that I think about it, Bridget used to bring him over to help dog-sit. Hal would come to play with Lennie, take him outside, throw the ball around in the

backyard for the dog to retrieve. Hal was young then, but he might know where Bridget keeps the spare key to our house.

What if Andrew is innocent?

I want to share this revelation with Dwayne, but even more time has passed. Who knows what state Hal's body is in.

"Mom?" Andrew calls out from somewhere on the second story. "What's happening?"

"I'll be up in a moment, okay?"

"What's Dad doing?"

"I'll be up in a moment, Andrew."

I hear the sound of his footsteps then his bedroom door closing.

I walk back through the kitchen, stop at the door to the garage. Dwayne doesn't like to be bothered when he's in the middle of work, and I can't imagine the grisly job he's doing right now is going to make him respond uncharacteristically to an interruption. But this is important.

Steeling myself, I tap on the door.

"Dwayne?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I, uh, I don't know what you're doing in there but I had—"

"Sarah, just say what you need to say."

"Sorry."

"I'm literally up to my elbows in ... what is it?"

Deep breath. "Russ and Bridget have a key to our house, remember?"

He takes a moment to answer. "You're right."

"Maybe that's how Hal got in?"

"Uh ... yeah, I'll check. Don't come in here."

"I won't."

I step away from the door, as if I can distance myself from the horror in the garage. That's when somebody taps me on the shoulder.

I scream bloody murder and whirl.

It's only Andrew.

"Sarah, what the hell's the matter?" Dwayne shouts.

"It's fine. Don't open the door. Andrew scared me."

"Why the hell'd he do that?" Dwayne asks.

My son's panicked eyes are on the door behind me, where his father is doing whatever to a corpse.

"It's okay," I call out. "I'll take care of it."

"Please don't interrupt me again," Dwayne says. "I've got to get this done."

"I won't."

I focus on my son and point to the living room. "Let's go out there, sweetie."

Andrew whispers, "What's Dad doing?"

"Andrew, do what I say."

He looks past me a moment at the garage door as if he's considering opening it. But then he nods glumly. Now I've gotten over the initial shock of everything, I have the presence of mind to discreetly examine my son.

He's wearing jean shorts and an old t-shirt depicting a cat playing a violin. It brings up fond memories of those wonderful three months in grade school where he took up the instrument and showed his first real, passionate interest in anything. He played that violin every day, without fail. There were days we even had to ask him to stop, because we feared he was practicing too much and might hurt himself. And he displayed a natural talent for it. Dwayne and I allowed ourselves to even imagine how good Andrew could be, that maybe he'd become a musician and attend a conservatory.

Until he just quit.

No explanation, other than he “didn’t want to do it anymore.”

At first Dwayne and I didn’t challenge him, thinking it one of those many passing whims children have. But when a week passed and then another, we knew it was over. Just like that, Andrew had decided to give up something he could have excelled at. It broke my heart.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Andrew asks, fidgeting.

“Don’t worry about anything,” I say. “Dad is taking care of it.”

“What is he doing?”

I wrap him in a hug and breathe him in. No matter what soap or shampoo I buy him, my son always smells like the earth, like he’s just been rolling around in the dirt.

“It’s going to be okay, Andrew.”

When he lets go I take another long look at my son. And it’s then I notice something.

He doesn’t have a scratch on him.

I reach for his wrists and pull his hands up to examine them.

He squirms. “What are you doing?”

His hands could use a good washing. But it’s only pencil and ink. There aren’t any scratches on his hands or forearms. He doesn’t look like he’s been in a fight.

“Andrew, honey, did you touch the b—did you touch Hal?”

He rips his wrists out of my grip. “No.”

“Andrew, I need you to be honest with me now, okay? Did you and Hal get into a fight?”

“No!” He’s backing away more quickly now. “I told you!”

I want to believe him. I really do. And the fact that there’s not a scratch on him—

The doorbell rings.

Andrew's face goes white and, without another word, he turns around and bolts upstairs.

"Who the hell's that?" Dwayne calls out from the garage.

"I don't know."

"Don't answer it."

"I have to," I say. "Andrew just ran right past the front door. Whoever it is, they know we're home. Plus, both cars are in the driveway."

"Get rid of them," Dwayne says.

Managing people, telling them what to do, is not my strong suit.

"Can you do it?" I ask.

"Not the way I look."

My stomach does a little somersault.

"Just get rid of them," Dwayne repeats.

I pause a moment, hoping it's some door-to-door salesperson and they'll go away if I ignore them. But then the doorbell rings again.

Taking a deep breath, I run a hand through my hair and smooth my shirt. It's only then, as I go to answer the front door, that I realize how sweaty I am. I must look a mess.

I don't see any flashing blue-and-red lights as I move through the foyer and stop at the front door. Peering out the sidelite, I see the one and only person I don't want to talk to standing on our porch in her tennis outfit.

Hal's mother.

Bridget English.

Bridget offers me a big smile when I open the door.

“Hi, neighbor,” she says.

We used to pop over and see each other all the time, especially when the kids were younger. But our relationship has been strained ever since the boys duked it out at school. I haven’t been to their house since, now that I think about it.

“Hi, Bridget,” I say, remembering to smile. “This is a surprise.”

Normally I would invite her in, no questions asked. But this afternoon I plant myself firmly in the doorway.

Bridget is dressed in her usual tennis outfit: a skirt that leaves little to the imagination with shorts underneath, and a top that shows off her toned, tanned shoulders. She’s always exercising and spends lot of time outdoors. Bridget was a cheerleader back in high school and she hasn’t lost a step in the last twenty years. She’s always put together and there’s not an ounce of flab on her. Her hair is still the same blonde and her breasts are still high-school perky.

Her smile slips when I don’t invite her in. “Sorry to drop by out of the blue like this.”

“It’s no problem,” I answer, but don’t move an inch. “We’ve had a heck of a day, though.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that. Is everything okay?”

Why did I say that? Why do I say things I always regret? Dwayne is always telling me to think before I speak, but no matter what, I can't seem to do it.

"It turned out to be nothing. I had to leave work early because Andrew ... he wasn't feeling well."

"That's too bad." She looks past me. "Is he alright?"

I point to my stomach, an idea coming to me. "You'd actually better keep your distance. It might be a bug."

I expect this to be deterrent enough, but Bridget doesn't back up.

"I'm really sorry to hear that. How is he doing, you know, otherwise?" she asks.

Why is she asking me this?

There was a time when we talked openly about our boys, when we shared intimate details about the challenges of raising a child. But we haven't spoken that intimately in a long time. And now her asking me about my son feels more like prying than it does sympathetic curiosity.

"Oh ... you know."

I leave my answer vague, allowing Bridget to take it however she wants. I don't want to tell her about the boys at wizarding camp bullying him. After all, that could have been the first link in this horrifying chain of events. Maybe those boys put him in a violent mood, and, when he came home, he found Hal here already, sneaking around the house or whatever. One thing could have led to another and—

"The reason I'm here..." Bridget's smile is completely gone now. "...I don't know where Hal is. Did he stop by?"

Again I'm left wondering why she would come here and ask me that. Did somebody see Hal at the house, and does Bridget already know, for a fact, that he was here? Is she trying to trap me?

No, that can't be it. She'd only be trying to trap me if she already knew that Hal was here *and dead*, and there's no way she can know that.

Right?

But still ... that doesn't answer the question. Why would Bridget assume Hal came here? Even though Andrew and Hal made up after their fight, they didn't become friendly again. Hal hasn't been to our house since last summer, come to think of it.

"No." I wonder how convincing I sound. "I haven't seen him."

Bridget nods. "Yeah, I didn't expect him to come here. Not because of anything that happened, but because—I'm sorry. It's just I don't know where he is and so I'm trying everywhere."

Next thing I know, Bridget's eyes are watery. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out some tissues to dab her eyes.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I move out of the door and put my hand on her shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

"Not really." She wipes under her eyes and, seeing the doorway open, she says, "Do you mind if I come inside for a moment?"

How can I say no? I've known this woman for fifteen years. She is Andrew's godmother! We literally used to pop into each other's houses without knocking first.

Our children used to have play dates.

"Bridget, I'm really sorry, but Hal's not doing well."

She gives me a strange look. "Hal?"

I realize what I've done. "Andrew. Ha. Sorry. I meant Andrew."

Bridget's gaze lingers for a long moment. Then her eyes go soft. "I'm sorry to impose, but I promise it will only be a minute. We haven't talked, *really* talked, in a while. I miss our conversations, and I could use a good friend like you."

"I miss our talks too."

I manage to sound sincere.

Bridget lifts an ankle and scratches furiously, leaving the skin red and raw.

“What happened there?”

“Oh.” She blushes. “Chiggers.”

I don’t know why she’s embarrassed. Chiggers are tiny mites and they don’t discriminate. They live on grass and their bites cause intense itching. Poor Andrew must have walked through a colony last year. He couldn’t stop clawing himself. His legs were all torn up for weeks. A few of the microscopic bugs even migrated up to his groin area, making life especially miserable for him.

“Were you at the golf course?” I ask, because that’s where most chiggers in this area make their home.

“No.” Her blush deepens. “I must have just stepped in the wrong spot.”

“That’s a shame. We went through about three bottles of calamine lotion with Andrew last summer.”

Bridget forces a smile, but it’s obvious she didn’t come here to talk about her chigger bites. She stops scratching and drops her foot back to the ground.

“I’m really sorry, but do you mind if I come in for a minute?”

I can’t let her in.

But how I can reject her? I already gave her a good excuse but that wasn’t enough. Besides, won’t it seem strange later if I don’t let my closest friend into my house the day Hal goes missing?

“Just for a minute.”

I close the door behind us. Bridget stands in the foyer and takes in the house.

“You’ve changed something,” she says, turning around. “This picture, is it new?”

“Not new, but moved. It used to be in the den.”

“Oh. Right. I remember.” She drops the brave face and stops looking around the foyer. Her eyes are down. “Hal and I argued.”

“Teenagers, right?”

“Right. Teenagers.”

Bridget gives me a tight smile, before moving toward the kitchen. I hold my breath until she stops short of the threshold and turns to face me. Dwayne is going to kill me for letting her in, but what choice did I have?

“What was the argument about?” I ask.

She shakes her head, doesn’t answer my question. “I feel like everything is falling apart.”

“Do you argue a lot?”

“Does every day count as a lot?”

I give her a sad smile. Andrew and I are on good terms but my husband and son have been at each other’s throats recently. Hardly a day goes by where they’re not having a disagreement. Dwayne has raised his voice a lot at our son recently.

The silence between Bridget and me feels like a physical thing.

“I guess I was being silly,” she says suddenly. “Coming here. Like this.”

“No, of course not. I’m glad you did.”

“I’m really sorry,” Bridget says, moving toward me.

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“I’m really sorry,” she repeats.

Bridget looks about to cry again but manages to keep it together.

“Where do you think he went?” I ask.

She looks like she wants to say something, but then takes a big breath. Whatever was on her mind, the moment passes. She answers my question.

“Hal could be anywhere. He’s been hanging around with some new kids. I’m not crazy about them. They live on the other side of town.”

I take her meaning. I wouldn’t call Bridget a snob, but she can put on airs sometimes. The other side of town is her way of saying “the wrong side of town.” Ironically enough, that’s where she grew up, in the apartments by the park and nature preserve. It’s several acres of protected woodlands. When we were kids, we went there to drink, but these days the crime is more serious. I’ve heard there’s a real drug problem there, and just last year, somebody found the body of what appeared to be a homeless man who’d been stabbed to death.

As if reading my mind, Bridget nods. “Yes, they like to go to the park. I caught Hal there a couple weeks ago. He’d been drinking, if you can believe that. He’s only *thirteen*.”

I don’t point out the fact that I wasn’t much older the first time I tried a beer. Then again, my childhood wasn’t ideal so perhaps that’s not a great comparison to make. On the other hand, Dwayne, Russ, and Bridget spent a lot of time sneaking around in the preserve for parties in high school. Sounds to me like Hal was following the same pattern as his parents, only a couple years earlier.

“They’re a bad influence,” Bridget says. “That’s not who Hal is.”

I keep my opinion to myself. If you had told me three years ago that Hal as a seventh-grader would be drinking alcohol at the preserve, I wouldn’t have believed you. But knowing what I know now about the boy, it’s not so shocking.

Bridget rubs her forehead. “Sometimes I don’t know what to do with him.”

“Do you think he’s there now?” I ask.

“I was already there,” she says. “But it’s a big place.”

“I’m so sorry. It’s really difficult.”

Bridget purses her lips. “I should really be going.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m so sorry, but I’ve been out in this heat looking for him. Could I have a glass of water?”

“Sure,” I say, then add, “You wait right here. I’ll bring it out.”

She reaches for my hand as I pass and gives it a squeeze. “Thank you, Sarah. You really are a wonderful friend.”

We used to share sentiments like that with each other all the time. Hearing the like from her made me feel warm inside.

Today, however, it feels like she just shoved a knife in my belly.

I fake my way through yet another smile before disappearing into the kitchen. While I stand at the sink and fill up a glass for Bridget, I gaze out the window into our backyard.

Andrew has left his bike out, again, leaned up against the deck. Our son is messy, a symptom of his dyslexia. I’ll sneak out later and put it away. Last thing we need is for Dwayne to see that bike and flip out. Tempers are short enough right now.

I hear Bridget come up behind me. She puts her back against the counter as I turn off the faucet and hand her the glass.

“Thank you.”

The woman is fifteen feet away from the door that opens to the garage. I should never have let her in. But now I don’t know how to get her out of here.

Bridget takes a drink. “Is Dwayne around?”

“No—” I blurt out, before correcting myself. “I mean, yes. He’s home. But he’s busy.”

She nods. “He’s always busy. What’s he up to these days?”

“He’s—we want to paint the basement. Maybe redo it.”

“Oh really? I always loved your basement.”

The basement is like a second living room. Russ and Bridget spent a few New Year's Eves in it with us, while our then young boys were asleep upstairs. We had a lot of fun together down there, drinking champagne at midnight and laughing our heads off...

"It really needs a fresh coat of paint."

Bridget takes another sip and sets the glass down. "Everything okay between you two?"

"Yes. Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Sorry." She looks away. "Guess I'm projecting."

"Are you and Russ arguing?"

She sighs. "It's ... complicated. I have to say, I never thought I'd find myself here, always arguing with my son and having problems with Russ. I couldn't have ever imagined it."

This is surprising. Russ and Bridget have always come across to me like the perfect couple. "It's hard."

She follows my eyes to the garage door. "Is something the matter?"

"Oh no, no, nothing." I laugh, but it comes out sounding nervous. "I just noticed that Andrew left the door to the garage unlocked is all."

Red-faced, I walk to the door and flip the deadbolt into place, hoping the whole time that Dwayne doesn't call out and ask what I'm doing.

"You can't be too careful these days," Bridget says. "Did you hear the Van Horns' place was vandalized recently?"

I turn back around and position myself on Bridget's opposite side so she's not even *looking* at the door to the garage.

"When did that happen?" The Van Horns live a couple blocks away. They're about ten years older than us but we know them from church. "I hadn't heard."

"Last week."

“What happened?”

Bridget takes another sip of her water. Her coloring is getting better. “They think it was a couple kids. They got in somehow, grabbed a few things, and smashed the place up.”

I can’t help but feel Hal’s turning up here is connected. Did he and someone else break into our home with plans to steal, only to get into an argument which escalated to extreme violence?

“My God, that’s terrible.” I shake my head. “I really need to cure Andrew of his bad habit of not locking up.”

“I can count on one hand the number of dinner plates Hal has picked up on his own without being reminded.”

We share a laugh at that. Bridget puts her glass of water down.

“Well, I’d be better be going. Again, I’m really sorry for bursting in here like this.”

“You didn’t burst,” I say.

“If he does stop by,” Bridget says, “would you tell I’m looking for him? I’ve tried texting, but he’s not responding.”

My stomach drops. “Sure.”

I walk Bridget out. She lingers in the doorway for a moment, giving me a look I cannot decipher, before leaving. After she’s gone, I lock the front door and my knees go weak. Bending at the waist and putting my hands on my thighs, I take big gulps of air. My whole body is shaking.

“Mom?” Andrew calls out from upstairs.

It takes me a moment to find my voice. “Not now, Andrew.”

I knock on the garage door.

“Dwayne?” I call out. “It’s okay. She’s gone.”

He doesn’t answer. I hate talking to a door, but there’s no way I’m going to open it and see what’s on the other side.

“Dway—”

“Was that who I think it was?”

He sounds irate.

I swallow hard. “Yes.”

“Why the hell did you let her in?”

I back away from the door, as if scared of my husband. That’s silly. He would never hurt me. Sure, Dwayne loses his temper from time to time. But who doesn’t? But I’m certain Dwayne would never hurt me. He *saved* me all those years ago. Dwayne is a protector, not an abuser.

I know the difference.

“Dwayne, I’m sorry,” I say, moving back closer to the door. “But I had no choice. She was distraught.”

“What happened?”

I summarize my exchange with Bridget, but then Dwayne makes me go through it again, word for word. When I get to the part about the Van Horns’ residence being vandalized, he doesn’t have much to say.

“What do you think about that?” I ask. “Going off what Bridget just shared with me, Hal’s been acting up. Maybe it was him.”

“So what if Hal burgled the Van Horns’ place?”

“Well, I mean, Russ and Bridget have the spare key to our house. Hal might know where it is—”

“I checked,” Dwayne says. “No key.”

“Maybe Hal gave it to whoever he came in here with.”

“Sarah—”

This time I don’t let him stop me. “Hal wouldn’t have wanted to get caught with it.”

“You’re really reaching.”

“It’s possible, is all I’m saying.”

“Anything is possible, Sarah,” Dwayne says, struggling to be patient with me. “But the ship has sailed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m fucking covered in you-don’t-want-to-know-what right now, and Hal is ... he isn’t the way you found him.”

“Oh.”

“Even if your theory is correct, that Hal and somebody else broke in here to vandalize the house, now we’re committed, aren’t we?”

I knew I shouldn’t have agreed to this. If only we’d waited a few minutes, we could have thought things through better. Without Dwayne rushing me into a decision, I might have remembered about Bridget having a spare key to our house. One of us might have gone online to google stories about local break-ins. Ten minutes might have made all the difference.

But now that Dwayne has done what he’s done to the body, we *look* guilty.

“Dwayne...”

“Don’t go soft on me now,” he says, his voice firm. “It’s done. We have to make the best of it.”

I close my eyes and nod. The ship has sailed. And he's right: we didn't have time to talk it out and think things through. We had to *act*.

Dwayne says, "Either way, the facts are still the same. Andrew found the body. There's no evidence of anything being stolen or disturbed. The boys have a history and now we've got these texts to Anna to contend with. Hell, maybe Andrew came home and *found* Hal in here planning to rob or vandalize us."

I know he's right, but I can't help but second-guess our decision.

Dwayne continues. "But don't you think Andrew would have told us if that were the case? Hal broke into the house, tried to steal something, and Andrew intervened? I mean, at least there, you've got an arguable case of self-defense. Just a fight between boys that got out of hand. Hal would have been the aggressor, right? But if that were true, then Andrew would have admitted to it. Instead we get this story about how he came home and found this dead body. Nobody is going to believe that."

I rest my forehead against the door. I'm beginning to think we've made a terrible mistake.

Dwayne goes on. "Besides, now *I've* committed a big crime, Sarah. Even if—*even if*—the police believed us and didn't pursue Andrew as a suspect, now *I'm* on the hook for what I've done in here. Do you know what would happen to me?"

I whisper. "You'd go to jail."

He doesn't hear me. "I'd go to *prison*, Sarah. My business wouldn't survive the damage to my reputation. I'd be done, forever. I'd be lucky to get a fucking job stocking shelves at the grocery store after this."

He's right.

"Sarah, are you listening to me?"

"Yes."

“Think it through to the logical consequences. If I go to prison, our lives are over. We wouldn’t be able to survive on your salary at the agency, and, let’s be honest, you don’t have much earning potential.”

He is making a very good point. I don’t have a degree, or any specialized skills or unique training. I’m an administrative assistant, and that’s all I’m ever going to be at this point. If Dwayne went to prison, his business would fold and we would lose everything. We’d have to sell the house and move into some lousy apartment in a bad area. Things are already difficult enough for Andrew.

I put my hand against the door. I wish I could run to my husband, let him wrap me up in a hug. But I can’t go in there.

“I’m almost done in here,” he says, his voice a little softer now. “Could you bring me a trash bag?”

“What do you need that for?” I ask.

“We have to get rid of everything I’m wearing.”

Oh right. Makes sense. A thought occurs to me.

“Dwayne, did you find his cell phone?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Did you look at it?”

“No.”

“Well, maybe we should. Maybe there are texts or emails on there that would—”

“I already destroyed it and got rid of it.”

“What?” Why would Dwayne do that? There could have been evidence on there about what Hal was doing here. “When did you do that?”

“On my way to the hardware store,” he explains.

“Oh.”

“Honey, they can track cell phones,” Dwayne says. I can tell he’s trying to be patient with me. “I didn’t want its last

location to be our house, and I don't want to take it with the body, obviously."

"Right. I guess not."

"Right. Now look, I need you to bring me a trash bag, okay? I'm going to get a shower, then we can clean the house. Are you with me?"

"Yes, Dwayne."

"Good girl."

They don't believe me.
I fucking knew they wouldn't. I should have followed my first instinct: run away.

Now Dad is in the garage doing who-knows-what and, of course, Mom is just going along with whatever the hell he says because that's what she does. My mother is a sweet woman, but my God, she just lets Dad walk all over her. I'll bet if he told her to confess to killing Hal, she'd probably do it and go to prison for the rest of her life.

I hate him sometimes.

They have my phone, and Mom told me to stay off the computer. But they're busy downstairs cleaning the house. I'm not stupid. I know what they're doing and what it means. They think they can fool the police, or whatever, but that's really dumb. Dad acts like he's the smartest, toughest guy on the planet. Talk about ego. But he's going to get caught.

I called Mom because I thought—stupidly—that I'd at least have a chance of getting her to believe me. With Dad, forget it. He never believes a word I say and automatically assumes the worst when it comes to me.

Some asshole picking on me? It's because I'm too soft—blame the victim, much?

Can't complete a series of chores at home? I'm not trying hard enough—like it has nothing to do with my ADHD.

I can't even imagine ever having a conversation with him about my bisexuality. With Mom, maybe. But with him? No way. He wouldn't understand. He never does.

After listening at the door and satisfied they're both downstairs, I power on my tablet and go online.

Things are only going to get worse.

And I want to be prepared.

SARAH

It doesn't get dark until around 8:30 p.m. tonight. Dwayne and I have been cleaning the first floor non-stop for the last four or five hours and I've run out of adrenaline. Nobody's eaten, and we're not even close to done yet.

I'm just about to finish mopping the kitchen floor when Dwayne comes in. After finishing in the garage, he stripped, put his clothes, socks, and even shoes in the garbage bag I left for him, then took a long shower. He came out dressed in only a white t-shirt and underwear, and we got to cleaning the first floor.

But now he's changed—again—into an all-black outfit. Pants, long-sleeved hoodie. He's even got his black ski mask on, though it's not pulled all the way down on his head.

"I'm going to move him now," Dwayne announces.

I stop what I'm doing and lean the mop against the island counter so it doesn't fall.

"Where?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "The less you know, remember?"

I fold my arms and look down. For the last few hours, while I've gotten down on my hands and knees and scrubbed floors, while I've vacuumed every square inch of the downstairs, while I've even washed the windows, the terrible feeling that we've made a huge mistake has only grown.

“I’ll be gone for a few hours.” Dwayne reaches into his pocket and pulls out his cell phone. “I’m leaving this here.”

“Why? What if I need to get hold of you?”

He crosses the kitchen floor and puts his hands on my arms. “Calm down, Sarah. We need to keep our heads.”

“But what if I have to reach you?”

“It’s a risk we’re going to have to take. Remember, they can track cell phones. I did a little research while you were vacuuming, and the police can ping a phone and sometimes even get a location history.”

“Oh my God, they can?” I shake my head. “Then we’re already in trouble. Hal was here. That means they can—”

“All it means is they’ll be able to show he *was* here, briefly. Maybe he stopped by to hang out with Andrew, but Andrew was at camp when he showed. That’s not a reach. As long as we stick to our story, they can’t prove Hal was ever inside the house. It’s a good thing I got rid of Hal’s cell when I did, isn’t it? The last location they’ll get is between here and the hardware store. He could have been going anywhere. They won’t be able to tell.”

What he’s saying makes sense, but I still don’t feel great about it.

“Anyway, that’s why I’m leaving my phone here,” Dwayne says. “That way, there’s no digital trace putting me anywhere near where this body is going to be.”

“What should I do while you’re gone?”

“I hate to ask this of you, honey.” He gives me a little squeeze. “But I really need you to clean the garage.”

I was afraid he was going to ask.

He pulls me in close. “Like I said earlier, there isn’t too much blood.”

“I don’t know if I can do it, Dwayne.”

“You have to.” He looks down at me. “For Andrew.”

There's a lump in my throat, but I manage to nod silently.

"Good girl," Dwayne says. He tilts my head back so I'm looking up at him. "You've been a rock, Sarah."

"I'm this close to falling apart."

"No. You're *strong*. And I need you to keep being strong. We'll get through this."

"What *is* our story, Dwayne?"

"I've thought about that," he says, letting go of me and moving toward the garage door. "It's always best to keep a lie as close to the truth as possible."

I don't like the way he says that, like he's some kind of expert at lying.

As if reading my mind, Dwayne holds out a palm. "That's what Carl told me. He meets all kinds of liars in his work."

Carl would know. Most of his clients are addicts who get a lot of practice at lying.

Dwayne goes on. "Andrew left camp today because he wasn't feeling well. Pretty simple, and it's true."

"But if it was just a stomach bug, why would you leave work early too? I could handle that myself."

"Right. Well, Andrew was being picked on today." He nods, smiling, warming to some idea. "Actually, that's exactly how we play this. If anybody asks, like Bridget, we just say he was sick. But if push comes to shove, if the police press us, we tell them we were really worried about Andrew hurting himself. It wouldn't be the first time we had that concern."

I see where he's going with this. "Right. It's not something we would broadcast, and it's not something I'd share with even Bridget. I lied to her because we didn't want the whole world knowing about our son having suicidal thoughts. So if we're caught in that lie, we have this to fall back on."

He nods.

I bite my bottom lip. "But then Andrew has to lie."

“He’s going to have to lie no matter what,” Dwayne points out.

“I know that. But asking him to lie about not finding a body in the garage, and asking him to lie about wanting to harm himself are two different things.”

“Really?”

“I think so,” I say, though I’m not so sure. Now that I’ve said it out loud, they’re both pretty awful, though in different ways. “I don’t know if he can—”

“He’s going to have to grow up and get over it,” Dwayne says. “He put us in this mess, didn’t he?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?” Dwayne lowers his voice. “Come on, Sarah. You and I both know what happened here.”

He gives me one of those Dwayne-stares, the kind that melts what little resolve I’m able to muster. I can’t hold that stare for long. At some point in the last six hours, he’s gone from merely suspecting our boy of committing murder to absolutely believing it. And I don’t know when that happened. If anything, we should be more doubtful of his guilt, given that Andrew doesn’t have a scratch on him, Hal could have used the spare key, and the Van Horns’ place was vandalized recently.

But instead of pushing back, I just nod. “I know you’re probably right.”

“While I’m gone, I need you to clean that entire garage. We’ll put out some bug traps too. If anybody asks why we scoured the entire house, we’ll say we found roaches in the garage. Then our sudden spate of cleaning won’t look so crazy.”

“Okay, Dwayne.”

“As soon as you’re done,” he says, “I need you to begin prepping Andrew.”

He means tell my son to lie. “I’m going to need your help with that.”

“I know.” He smiles at me. “All I’m asking you to do is grease the skids, so when I talk to him about getting his story straight it’s no longer a question of if, it’s a matter of what and how. Alright?”

DWAYNE

I close the interior door to the garage behind me.
Now for the unpleasant part.

I grab the tarp and drag it about five feet so it's not sitting in the middle of the garage floor. I work out religiously and am a pretty strong guy, but moving literal dead weight around is not easy. Hal is in several parts right now, all of them wrapped in duct-taped plastic, and each part remains on the tarp as I haul it across the floor. Moving it carefully, I manage not to spill any blood where the car's tires will be.

When that's done, I get a stool out and place it under the garage door opener. It's been a while since I changed the light that automatically activates when the garage is opened, but I manage to remove the plastic covering and slightly unscrew the bulb. This way, there won't be too much light inside the garage while I back my car in.

Then I exit the house through the front door. I get in my car and start the engine. The automatic headlights come on, so I toggle the switch and they turn off. My brake lights will still illuminate the garage as I back in—that can't be helped—but I've done everything else I can to keep the space as dark as possible while the exterior door is open for the whole neighborhood to see.

I check myself in the rearview mirror. There's no blood, no other marks of the crime I've just committed. That long, hot shower took care of it all. I don't think I've ever scrubbed

under my fingernails before in my life, but I must have spent a good ten minutes earlier.

I'm good to go.

I activate the garage door opener. The automatic light does not activate. The interior of the garage is eerily illuminated by my red brake lights. Taking my foot off the brakes, I cut the wheel so I can angle the car toward the body, provide some cover on the off-chance that a neighbor happens along.

I get the vehicle in far enough then hit the button. The garage door begins to descend, agonizingly slow, as I keep watch on the sidewalk in front of our house. A car goes by I don't recognize, but they don't stop or even slow as they pass.

The garage door stops when it reaches the floor.

I toggle the switch so my headlights come on. Then I hop out of the car. I'm working quickly now, screwing the bulb for the automatic light back into place, even flicking on the other lights inside the garage.

I get the body pieces into the trunk, leaving the bloody tarp where it is. Then I toss one of the shovels we keep inside into the trunk and knock on the door leading into the kitchen. I hear the deadbolt flip and Sarah appears. I'm worried about her. The truth is, she's not a very strong woman at all, and I think she *could* crack at any moment. All I can do, however, is keep building her up. I can always count on her doing what I say—Sarah rarely challenges me and, even when she does, she doesn't put up much of a fight.

"Is he..." She looks at the car.

"I'm leaving now." I motion at the ground. "There's a little on the floor to be cleaned up, and the tarp, obviously."

I give her another hug. She dead-fishes me, but that's okay. I wasn't expecting a passionate embrace.

"I'll be back in a few hours."

"Be careful."

I get behind the wheel and hit the button for the garage door again. This time, as it rises, the automatic light activates.

I pull out and tap the button the moment I clear the garage. I only see Sarah for a moment before the garage door descends once more.

There's a dead body in the trunk of my car. Never thought I'd say that.

But if being a business owner has taught me one thing, it's this: you can never be prepared for all the shit that's going to happen in your life.

I normally drive fast. Usually do thirty-five in a residential area, and at least twenty-five miles per hour over the speed limit on highways. Sarah is always asking me, in her small, sometimes annoying, way to slow down.

Stop signs are *slide* signs. Sometimes, especially when I'm coming home late from the office, I ignore No Turn On Red signs at intersections where I know the cops usually aren't hanging out.

But tonight I obey literally every rule of the road. I cannot get pulled over. For any reason. I don't think the police are allowed to look in my trunk without probable cause, but from what I've heard that's kind of a grey area. If one of them pretends to smell alcohol on my breath, or if one of them thinks I've got drugs in my vehicle, then they might be able to look, or at least *ask* me to look. I can't let them. But I also can't say no.

Point being: I'm not speeding tonight.

Have you ever driven exactly the speed limit before? Turns out, it's actually really difficult. While I'm still in the neighborhood, my car seems to possess a treasonous desire to speed up. Before I've gotten to the edge of the development, the speedometer has ticked up to nearly thirty miles per hour, which is, technically, speeding. But I manage to get out of the neighborhood unscathed.

I make a right. It's a Thursday night, well after rush hour, and there isn't much traffic. I keep it to forty-five miles per hour, the posted speed limit here, as I wind my way back toward town. I could take the longer way to get where I'm

going. That route has the advantage of taking me past fewer people and cars, but the disadvantage, obviously, of increasing the amount of time I have a dead body in the trunk of my car.

I realize, as I approach the center of town, I don't have a story prepared. What if I get stopped and they ask me what I'm up to? What if I see somebody I know while I'm stopped at a light? I have no idea what to say, and it terrifies me.

I'm just out for a ride? Who does that?

I'm going to the store?

As I run through these hypothetical conversations in my mind, the black ski mask on the passenger seat catches my eye. I'm about to hide it in the glove compartment, but then realize that's the worst place for it. If I get pulled over and a police officer asks for my insurance and registration, both those documents are in my glove box. So instead I open the center console between the driver and passenger seat and bury the ski mask under the various fast-food napkins, phone chargers, random receipts, and empty snack-sized bags of chips my son loves to leave behind in the car for somebody else to fucking pick up.

Andrew...

I do feel bad about asking him to lie about wanting to hurt himself, but I take a little comfort in the fact that it's not *really* a lie. Last year, after a particularly difficult day at school, he mentioned having "bad thoughts."

I'm hard on him sometimes, but Sarah's kid-gloves approach isn't working either. Besides, I'm worried about him being too soft. Dad let Mom push him around, figuratively, and it was only by some miracle that he found the balls, after being laid off at the machine shop, to start his drycleaning business. Without that, Dad would have drunk himself to death and died broke. That's how things were looking for a few years anyway. I'm worried that Andrew's got too much of my father's shortcomings in him and not enough of his strengths.

Though I've pretended not to think about them, for Sarah's sake, I do feel horrible for Bridget and Russ. With the shape

their marriage is in, they might not last the rest of the year. Bridget has been unhappy for a couple of years now, ever since she caught Russ being unfaithful. He's always had a wandering eye.

I reach the center of town in ten minutes, passing right by my office. Dad started the drycleaning business in his early fifties, after he'd been let go from the plant he'd worked at his whole life. I wasn't particularly interested in running a drycleaning operation, but it was there for the taking when Dad was ready to retire a few years back, relatively easy money, and I sure as hell didn't want to work for anybody else. Since Dad hung 'em up, I've expanded the operation into a small chain, with three locations throughout the county. I've got lots of different places to be on any given day, which suits me just fine. It's a lot of responsibility, but it also comes with a lot of freedom. Sometimes I'm here, sometimes I'm elsewhere, sometimes I just tell my people I'll be working from home. I don't think I could manage being tied down to one office eight hours a day. I'd go crazy.

I follow the slowly winding route that is Main Street. Once I'm through town it's only another five minutes to the nature preserve.

SARAH

I check on Andrew. He won't open his door for me but says he's reading.

A thought occurs to me. "Do you have your tablet in there?"

"No," he says.

I don't believe him. Andrew has a habit of sneaking his tablet upstairs so he can stay up late and play games. I'm tempted to use the skeleton key and barge inside, but the kid has been through enough today. And, just as importantly, I have to get to work on cleaning the garage.

"You promise me?" I ask.

"I swear."

"Okay, honey. Are you hungry?"

"Where's Dad?"

I take a deep breath. "We're going to talk about everything later. But right now, I have some things to take care of."

"Like what?"

"Don't you worry about it."

"Are you going to leave? Please don't."

"Andrew, honey, I'm not going anywhere."

I head back downstairs. It's gotten dark out, so I turn some lights on. As I pass through the kitchen, I realize I never

turned the deck light on. When I flick the switch, the backyard is illuminated and I spot Andrew's bike.

I walk back into the foyer and call up to my son.

"Honey, I really need to do what I have to do. Can you put your bike in the shed for me?"

"It's in the shed," he says.

"Andrew, I can see it leaned up against the deck. You forgot again."

His door opens. A moment later, his head appears above me on the landing. "I swear, Mom, my bike is in the shed."

I'm not in the mood for this tonight. One of the more frustrating qualities ADHD engenders is habitual lying. Last year, Andrew came out of the bathroom with about half as much hair on his head as he went in with. Of course, it was uneven and misshapen and I knew if the kids at school got one look at it, they would tease him mercilessly, which would then only lead to more problems. When I questioned him about it, he denied cutting his own hair again and again, even after I held the trash can full of shorn hair up for him to see.

Interacting with someone who will lie constantly about the most mundane things is exhausting. And tonight is not the night. My nerves are shot, and I've got a garage to clean before Dwayne gets home. The last thing I feel like arguing about is whether Andrew put his bike away.

"Andrew, I'm not going to ask again. You do not want your father coming home and finding your bike out back tonight, not after the day we've all had. So get down here and put it away."

He stomps downstairs, moody, acting like his teenager self again, like this is any other night and we didn't just move Hal English's dead body out of our house. I want to scream.

He blows by me, eyes down and shoulders rolled forward, like I'm the most demanding person in the world because I want him to put his bike away.

"And if you've left anything else out—"

“I’ll put it in the shed. I *know*, Mom.”

My fingernails dig into my palms. I cannot deal with the attitude tonight. I want to lock myself in the bathroom, turn on the fan, and vent all this anger with a good cry. But I can’t.

Not only do I have to remind my son and argue constantly with him when he lies about completing chores—I also have to watch him now to make sure he actually puts the bike away and doesn’t get sidetracked on his way to the backyard.

While he stomps through the house, I take my phone out to distract myself. I’m really close to snapping at him, something I hate doing. I log onto Facebook to see if anybody’s talking about Hal English online. Of course, there’s nothing. At this point, Hal has been missing for eight or nine hours... I wonder if Russ and Bridget have contacted the police yet.

As I’m about to close out of Facebook, though, I spot a post on one of the neighborhood groups I joined. The members mostly post about free stuff they’re trying to get rid of, occasionally about yard sales, and sometimes about crimes. Apparently, the police have set up a random breathalyzer stop a few blocks down from the pubs on Main Street. My blood runs cold. What if Dwayne is headed that way? Can they ask him to get out of the car? Once he’s stopped, are they allowed to look inside his vehicle?

I don’t know the answer to any of these questions. And, even worse, I cannot very well google these things on my phone. I’d be leaving an electronic trail full of some very suspicious inquiries if someone were to later confiscate my cell and review its history.

I’ve got to call Dwayne.

Dwayne’s number is near the top of my recent calls. My thumb reaches for the CALL icon next to it, when I remember.

Dwayne left his phone here.

I have no way to warn him about the breathalyzer trap.

“Oh no...”

The room starts spinning. I have to grab the counter and put my head down and take deep breaths.

I have to tell myself over and over that Dwayne is very smart, a natural salesman, and a good negotiator. He can talk anybody into anything. He didn't get where he is by being meek and letting people push him around. He's not like me. He's *strong*.

Besides, he hasn't been drinking. He'll test negative, or however a breathalyzer works, and the police won't have any reason to look in the trunk, right? And if they dare ask to see inside his car, Dwayne will know what to do. He'll tell them no, they don't have probable cause, and he'll threaten to get his attorney on the phone.

I'm being silly. This breathalyzer stop will cause a traffic jam. Dwayne will see the long line of cars from a mile away and avoid it. He's too intelligent to—

“Mom.”

Andrew has come back inside. I didn't even hear him in my panic. He stands in that space between the kitchen and living room, his eyes wide.

I act like nothing is wrong. “What's the matter?”

“I told you, I put my bike away.”

“Then whose...”

Oh God.

DWAYNE

Traffic is horrendous on the far side of Main Street. Just my luck. Thursday night, almost 9:00 p.m. What the hell is going on? Either an accident, or construction.

All I see is a string of red brake lights. They wink off, we move about ten feet ahead, the lights activate, we stop and wait several minutes. The driver of the oversized pickup truck ahead, which has been blocking my view of the cause of the traffic jam, sticks his head out the window to get a better look himself, before executing an illegal K-turn in the middle of Main Street, igniting several horns from cars traveling much more quickly in the opposing lane of traffic.

With the huge truck out of my way, I get a clear view. About two blocks away sit two police cruisers, one of them in the middle of the road. Several uniformed cops are walking around.

Shit.

The guy in the SUV behind me hits his horn when I don't immediately fill the vacancy in front of me. Normally I wouldn't let that rudeness go unchecked, but I keep a lid on my anger. I cannot get into a confrontation with another driver with police fifty yards away and a dead body in my trunk.

So I force myself to wave apologetically then slide into the space the truck left for me. And I try to sort out what the cops could be doing up ahead.

My first thought is that Russ and Bridget have reported their son missing, and the police department has set up road blocks throughout town to stop anybody going by. Can they check cars to see if Hal is hitching a ride, either willingly or unwillingly?

I don't know.

If the police ask me to pop the trunk, what can I say?

A cop suddenly appears beside the sedan in front of me. He's young and looks familiar. The driver rolls their window down to speak to him. The pair laugh about something, then the cop begins moving toward my car.

What do I do if he asks me to pop the trunk?

Before he reaches my car, I plaster the fakest smile of my life onto my face and power down the window. The young man—he looks all of twenty years old—stops a few feet away from my car. Now that I've gotten a better look at him, I know who he is: George Whister, from church. His father was a few years ahead of me in school. A look of recognition touches his eyes too.

"Hi, Mr. Mullen." He smiles. "How are you?"

"Great, George. How have you been?"

"Doing well." He hooks his thumbs in the loopholes for his belt. "Been with the department for almost three months now."

"Wow, has it been that long? How are your parents?"

"They're good. Dad has to get his knee replaced, and Mom is enjoying her summer off."

That's right. The kid's mother works at the middle school. I don't think she's taught my boy, but she's probably seen him and Hal around.

I motion ahead, acting as innocently as possible. "What's going on?"

"Sobriety checkpoint," he says.

"Really?" I ask. "That's still legal?"

He chuckles. “Still is, though the lawyers are always fighting it in court. We’ve had two bad accidents recently so we’re doing what we can. I’m sure you understand.”

“Oh sure. Of course.”

“Well,” he says. “When it’s your turn, just pull ahead. The police administering the test might ask you to get out of your car. Sorry for the inconvenience. It was nice seeing you.”

Get out of my car? Jesus Christ, if they can ask me to do that, what else can they ask me to do? I should call my attorney, Larry. He’s been the family lawyer ever since Dad started the drycleaning business. Problem is, by the time I get him on the phone and get to my questions, it’ll be too late.

“Nice seeing you too, George.”

He starts to move on.

“Hey, George,” I call out.

He stops, turns back around. “Yes, Mr. Mullen?”

“Uh.” I fidget in my seat. “I wasn’t expecting to hit this much traffic and I’ve been sitting in this line for almost fifteen minutes, uh...”

“Yes?”

“I was hoping to run to the store and back home really quickly, and I drank a cup of coffee before I left the house. Stupid, right?”

He smiles. “Nature is calling?”

“Yeah.” I pull a face. “I don’t think I’m going to make it if I wait any longer. I’ve got this thing with my, you know, bladder.” I laugh, now acting embarrassed. “Getting old is not all it’s cracked up to be.”

He nods slowly, as if sensing a lie.

“Have you had anything to drink tonight, Mr. Mullen?” he asks.

“No, of course not. It’s Thursday and I don’t drink and get behind the wheel.”

He nods again.

“Look, all I’m asking is, can I just turn around and pop into the Dunkin’ Donuts across the street to use their restroom? I’ll get back in line. I just don’t want it to look like I’m running away to avoid a breathalyzer.”

The cars ahead have moved up again, leaving a huge gaping space.

George is thinking it over. He’s new to the job, obviously wondering if he’s got the authority to tell me no.

“George, you know what my brother does for a living, right? He works at that agency, helping people with their problems. My company has donated every year. My family takes addiction very seriously. We would never ... anyway, I’m going to burst—”

“Alright, it’s no problem. I’ve gotten a chance to interact with you and can tell you haven’t been drinking. You can turn around right here, Mr. Mullen.”

I won’t lie. The fact that my family is well-known and respected around here has helped get me out of a few jams. It also doesn’t hurt that young man has seen me in church over the years, either.

“Thanks, George. I owe you.”

He shakes his head, but he’s smiling. “That would be bribery, Mr. Mullen.”

I wave and smile apologetically. Once George moves along, I execute the same K-turn the truck did before me. As I pass him, I catch George speaking into the walkie strapped to his shoulder, his eyes on my car. I peer in my rearview and spot one other cop at the road block looking my way too.

Shit.

I want to keep going, but I can’t not stop at Dunkin’ Donuts now. That would look very bad. So I pull in and hop out of my car quickly, like I’m about to piss my pants, and hurry inside. The man behind the counter eyes me but I ignore him and duck into the bathroom. I don’t have to urinate, but I

take my time, forcing what little is inside my bladder out, then flush and wash up. When I come out of the bathroom, I head straight for the door.

“The bathroom is for paying customers only,” the man behind the counter says.

“Look, buddy, I have a problem with my bladder and got stuck in that traffic jam unexpectedly. I’m sorry I had to come in here and use the bathroom. But it was an emergency.”

“No problem, but—” He points to a piece of paper taped to the front of his register, facing customers. “—you need to buy something.”

Any other day of the week, I’d tell this guy to fuck off. He operates a business that by law requires him to offer restrooms to the public. People must come in here all the time and use the john without paying. Annoying, I know, but not the end of the world. Plus, what’s he going to do if I say no? Sue me? I don’t think so. He’s also about one hundred fifty pounds soaking wet. If I wanted I could rip this asshole in half.

But I can’t get into it with him right now.

“Fine.” I stalk to the counter. “What’s the cheapest thing you have?”

“We’re out of munchkins, but you can purchase a donut.”

“Great, I’ll take a donut.”

He points to another sign. “If you’re going to use a card, the minimum purchase is—”

“Just give me a half-dozen, of whatever, you asshole.”

He looks aggrieved, but goes about his work when I give him a hard look. Two minutes later, I’m out of there and back in my car. The line for the sobriety checkpoint has only grown, stretching back several blocks now, giving me yet another reason to avoid it. Waiting another twenty minutes with a dead body in my trunk while police sniff around my car is not on the menu.

I reach into my pocket for my cell phone. In case George Whister or any of the police are keeping an eye on me, I could

fake a phone call and pretend to have a conversation that would change my plans and force me to head home instead of waiting in line. But the only thing in my pocket is my wallet.

That's right. I left my phone at home.

There's nothing to do for it except hop in the car and head in the opposite direction. I get in and sit behind the wheel for a moment. George Whister is across the street, methodically working his way down the long, impatient line of cars, advising the drivers of their upcoming breathalyzer test.

I make a right out of the parking lot, head away from the road block. My eyes jump the whole time from the road in front of me to my rearview mirror. George Whister has stopped what he's doing to watch me. I plod along, keeping it to fifteen in a twenty-five zone, as if driving slowly makes my behavior less suspicious.

At my first opportunity, I make a left, cutting through the ever-increasing line of cars. I slice through the oldest part of town, picking up speed but keeping it at twenty-five. A car turns onto the street behind me. In the darkness and from this distance, I can't be sure, but it could be a cruiser.

I make a left and whip around a bend in the road. Now I've got to take the longer way to the preserve, nothing to be done about it. I keep my eyes on my rearview. That same car I saw a moment ago must have made the same turn and is following me.

How could we have missed this?
It's not Andrew's bike leaned up against the deck in my backyard.

It's Hal's.

And it's been sitting back here all afternoon and evening, plain as day, for anybody to see.

Andrew is watching me from the living room, standing in the frame of the back door. He looks as scared as I feel.

"Could you turn on the oven, Andrew?" I ask, hoping my voice sounds normal to anybody that might be listening. Our next door neighbors, the Smiths, they love to throw a couple logs in the fire pit and sit in their backyard while she drinks her wine and he smokes his cigars. I don't smell a fire burning, but they could be out there. The fence blocks my view of their backyard.

Without answering, Andrew closes the back door and disappears back inside.

I've got to get myself together. Deep breath. In and out.

The whole neighborhood cannot see into my backyard. As a matter of fact, only two families really can. The Smiths and the Pritchards, and the latter are on vacation. Behind our house is a thin stretch of trees and some trails that lead to the golf course. Truth be told, this is the best spot outside that Hal could have left his bike on our property. Very few people would have any occasion to notice it. And while the Smiths

are nosy, they probably assumed the bike in the backyard belongs to Andrew.

Unless they saw Hal riding it.

Speaking of Hal, he must have cut through the woods from his house. He only lives a few blocks away, over on Maple, but this would have saved him some time. Still, it's a little strange that he would have parked his bike in the backyard. Even if he cut through the woods, if he was coming here to see Andrew, he would have knocked on the front door.

Unless he wasn't coming here to see Andrew.

My mind jumps back to the theory that Hal was here to burglarize our house. Why else would he park his bike in the back? Because he didn't want anybody to see him, and because, once he was done inside, he would leave quickly through the back, jump on his bike, and ride through the woods running alongside the golf course.

But none of that matters right now.

I have to get rid of the bike.

Dwayne is going to be so angry with me. He'll say I should have thought of this, or should have searched the property. And maybe I should have, but I never once got a moment to stop and think about how Hal got here.

What can I do with a bike, however? I wish there were a way to destroy it. Throw it in some big, industrial incinerator, or dump it in a big vat of acid. Dwayne has all kinds of chemicals at his drycleaning stores. But I doubt I could use any of them to make a bike literally disappear. Besides, if that were possible, wouldn't he have done that with the body already?

I just have to get rid of it.

"Sarah, is that you?"

I freeze, my hand hovering over Hal's bike. It's my neighbor, Nora Smith. She must be in her backyard. I hesitate for a moment, wondering if I should pretend to not be here. But I can't be caught ignoring her.

“Hey, Nora, just me.”

“Oh, thank God. I’ve been on edge ever since I heard about the Van Horns’ place. Apparently, there was another robbery a couple days ago also.”

If she’s been in her backyard all this time, then there’s no way she thought I was a burglar lurking in the darkness. She would have heard me talking to Andrew—my God, what *exactly* did I say? What did he say? I rack my brain, recalling the completely mundane, and brief, exchange my son and I had just shared. There was nothing spoken about the bike or Hal.

This is Nora’s way of just showing off how much gossip she knows. Nora and Tom are decent neighbors, we’ve never had any problems with them, but they like to act like they’re all-important and plugged in to everything.

“Really?”

I try to keep the panic out of my voice. I move away from the bike, toward the fence. If Nora cranes her neck to look over at me, I don’t want to be anywhere near that bike.

“Yes. Tom has a couple friends on the force, as you know. Anyway, the police haven’t made that information public yet.”

Yes, I know. Nora is one of those people who goes on and on about all the people she and her husband know. It’s annoying, especially considering most of their connections usually turn out to be several times removed. During one block party, when Dwayne had had too much to drink, he asked Tom point-blank if he’d actually ever met M. Night Shyamalan, or if that story had all been “bullshit.” Tom had been embarrassed, eventually admitting that it was more a friend-of-a-friend situation and that he’d never met the famous director.

I’m not sure how much to trust Nora’s information, but I might as well make some use of it while we’re talking.

“Do the police think all these robberies are connected?” I ask.

“Oh yes. That’s exactly what they think. From what I hear, they think it’s a bunch of kids doing it.”

Kids.

“Really?”

“Yes, well, they’re saying the jobs are messy and opportunistic. They try not to break in. At this other house—I can’t say who it happened to, but I know—there were no signs of a break-in apparently. They must have gotten the key, or they knew when the door would be unlocked and nobody around.”

That’s too much of a coincidence. I really think Hal was here to burglarize our house now. What have we done?

“That’s terrible.”

“Isn’t it? And in this town too. It’s such a nice area. Those things aren’t supposed to happen here.”

“Right.”

“So how are things with you?”

Nora’s head suddenly appears above the fence. She must have climbed onto the edge of her deck to see me. We’re about five feet apart and now she’s looking down at me.

“Oh, we’re good.” I smile nervously, wondering if she can see Hal’s bike from her vantage point. “Actually, uh, Andrew’s not feeling well. I have to get back inside.”

“Oh no, that’s a shame. He’s getting so big. I think he’s taller than me now.”

“He probably is.”

“I remember when he was just a baby. You and Dwayne must be so proud of him.”

I get the sense she doesn’t mean that. She’s just fishing for information.

“Proud parents, yes. Well, I’ve got to finish up here and head inside. He might be thirteen, but he’s still a boy when he’s not feeling well.”

“Before you go, I meant to ask you...” She looks over her shoulder, like she’s checking for her husband. “...how are

things between Andrew and Hal? I was wondering if they've mended their friendship since you-know-what happened?"

I want to tell Nora it's none of her business. But I discussed the incident with her before, not long after it happened. I just needed someone else to talk to, other than Dwayne or Andrew. Bridget was out of the question, obviously. And, honestly, I talk to a lot of people around the neighborhood but I don't have that many close friends. Everyone I know is through Dwayne. Even when it comes to the neighbors, I can't say this person or that person is *my* friend. They're *our* friends.

In retrospect, Nora is probably the worst person I could have shared this with. The entire neighborhood probably knows about it now. But in my defense, I was really feeling bad and had nowhere to turn.

"Oh, they're fine," I say. "You know, boys will be boys."

She gives me a skeptical look. "Really? Because the way you made it sound before—"

"Really," I cut her off. "They're fine."

"Hmm, well, that makes sense." She nods. "I was only asking because I've seen Hal hanging around here recently, so I figured they were getting on again."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I saw him the other morning." She looks over her shoulder again. "Stopped in front of your house."

"You did?"

"He was out there for fifteen minutes, if I had to guess."

Fifteen minutes. That's really odd. Was Hal casing our house? He could have been watching the street too, checking for vehicular and foot traffic.

"I figured he'd come to knock for Andrew, but he didn't. He was just there, straddling his bike on the sidewalk in front of your house."

“Andrew’s at camp this week,” I answer. I’m stalling, trying to get myself to think and ask the right questions. “What, uh, what time was this?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say between 10 and 11.”

Nora doesn’t have to guess. She knows exactly what time he was here.

“He came by last week also. Same thing. He was out in front of your house, like he was waiting for somebody.”

Great. If Nora saw Hal hanging around our house Tuesday morning, as well as last week, then other neighbors noticed him too. Once his disappearance becomes news, people will start talking about how he was last seen hanging around the Mullens’ house, where his childhood friend Andrew lives, the same boy whose eye he blackened during an ugly fight at school that got them both suspended.

All that information is more than enough to get the cops interested in us.

And then, what if they find Andrew’s texts with Anna?

“I’d better head inside,” Nora says. She looks past me. “I wouldn’t leave that bike out if I were you. What with these burglaries, you don’t want to tempt anyone more than they already are.”

Like a periscope, she lowers her head. A moment later I hear her glass door *swush* open and *swush* closed as she goes inside. I haven’t moved an inch.

Nora saw Hal on his bike.

And she just saw the same bike in our backyard.

I don’t think she recognized it...

DWAYNE

Now that I've gotten to the other side of town, it's been smooth sailing. I had to cut through the next town over and double back. But the preserve is close, only a couple more minutes up the road. Getting here has been more difficult than anticipated, but the most difficult part of all is ahead.

After I round a bend, there's a blur of movement in my sideview mirror. A moment later, headlights pop on in the road behind me and the vehicle picks up speed.

Shit.

I just passed a bear trap. It's a cop. Was I speeding?

I check the speedometer for the thousandth time this trip. No, I'm actually under the speed limit here, going about forty miles per hour.

The cop must be headed somewhere else. Maybe they got a call they have to respond to, or maybe it's their turn at the sobriety checkpoint in town. Coincidence, bad timing. Either way, it's nothing to do with me.

As the cruiser closes the distance between us, coming into better view, I see two policemen in the car, a big shotgun between them up front.

The cop inches his way up till he's tailgating. Is he running my plate? I wonder if my information has been broadcast to all units on patrol because George Whister caught me ducking the breathalyzer.

The preserve is just ahead now. I pass right by.

I maintain my speed, staying under the limit. The road bends back on itself here, connecting ahead with another artery that leads back to Main Street and the center of town. I can't believe I've been gone nearly an hour. The sobriety checkpoint took up a lot more time than I realized.

Next thing I know, the blue-and-red lights come on behind me. The driver also activates a small spotlight attached to the car near his sideview mirror. It lights up my entire interior.

"Please pull over to the side of the road."

The voice comes through a loudspeaker system. I kill my radio and activate my right turn signal as if I intend to comply, but the whole time I'm thinking about running.

It takes my Audi A7 around five seconds to go from zero to sixty. The vehicle's top speed is 130 miles per hour.

But the police cruiser following me likely has similar capabilities. Besides, these guys have probably already run my plates. They know this car belongs to me. I can't make up a story about it being stolen earlier this evening, because Geroge Whister saw me not more than twenty minutes ago.

I'm screwed.

I brake and pull onto the dirt shoulder of the tree-lined road and, remembering something Dad told me, I switch on my interior lights so cops approaching my vehicle will be able to see me very well.

Like I have nothing to hide.

I put the car in PARK, power down my window, and place my hands at 10 and 2 on the steering wheel, acting the part of tax-paying, law-abiding citizen who would never in a million years engage in criminal activity.

The cruiser stops about ten feet behind me. Both doors open. The driver approaches my car, while the passenger takes his time, coming up on the other side of my vehicle. Their hands hover near their hips.

The driver of the cruiser stops a little behind me. “Good evening, sir. How are you?”

“I’m good, Officer. How are you?”

“Just fine, thank you for asking. Do you mind if we see your license and registration?”

“Of course,” I say. “What is this about, if you don’t mind me asking? I don’t think I was speeding.”

“License and registration, sir,” he says firmly.

“Yes, I’ll get it. I’m sorry. My license is inside my wallet, which is in my pocket. And my registration is in the glove box. I’ll have to reach into both places. Is that okay?”

“Thank you for letting me know. You can get both out, starting with the license.”

“Sure thing.”

Moving slowly, I retrieve my license and hand it over while the other patrolman comes up on the passenger side of my vehicle.

“Can I get the registration now?”

“Please do.” The cop consults my license. “Mr. Mullen.”

His partner shines a flashlight into the passenger side of my car as I pull the catch for the glove box. Thank God I was smart enough not to stash the ski mask in here.

I hand the registration over to the cop already holding my license.

“Thank you, Mr. Mullen,” he says.

The other policeman rounds to the front of my vehicle, his eyes not meeting mine. He inspects the front of my car like he’s looking for something.

“What brings you out here, Mr. Mullen?” the cop holding my paperwork asks.

I have to stick to the story I shared with George Whister earlier. But I’m nowhere near the store.

“Officer, this is private, family business, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t share what I’m about to tell you with anyone else.”

He nods.

“My boy is going through a difficult time in his life right now. It’s been hard on all of us. Anyway, I came out to pick up his favorite ice cream as a treat. But once I got out on the road, I realized I needed some time to myself. I had to clear my head.”

The man regards me. “I’ve got a family myself, Mr. Mullen, so I understand. Please turn off your engine and stay inside your vehicle.”

Holding my license and registration, he meets the other patrolman behind my car. I watch them in the rearview. They talk for a moment, then they both get back in the cruiser. For the next ten minutes, I run through nightmare scenarios in my head.

None of it is productive. Bottom line is, if they ask to see inside the trunk, I have to comply. Andrew will have to go away, and I’ll throw myself on the mercy of the court. I’m the kid’s father. Would anybody expect me to have behaved differently?

The more I think about Andrew, however, the angrier I become. This is all his fault.

I’m jarred out of my angry reverie when both patrolmen pop out of the cruiser. The driver returns with my license and registration. The passenger hangs back, hand hovering over his gun.

“Mr. Mullen,” the cop says. “Do you know you have a broken taillight?”

I breathe a sigh of relief. All I’ll get is a slap on the wrist, maybe a fine, and then they’ll send me on my way.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t realize.”

“It’s on the passenger side,” the man says. He’s more even with me now so I can get a better look at him. He’s about my

age. “Were you in an accident recently?”

“No,” I say, too quickly. “No, I think I’d remember that.”

“You think?” he says.

“Some asshole must have hit my car in a parking lot without leaving a note. That’s happened to me before.”

“Are you sure you haven’t been in an accident this evening?” he asks.

“No, Officer.”

“Mr. Mullen, I spoke with George Whister. I know you pulled out of line when he informed you of the breathalyzer test.”

My blood runs cold.

“That’s not—” I have to be careful here. I can’t call Officer Whister a liar. “I told him why. I have this thing with my bladder. I’ve been meaning to see the urologist about it.” I pretend to be embarrassed. “I can’t go more than an hour without running to the bathroom. I didn’t expect to get caught in a traffic jam on Thursday night. I told George exactly what I was doing and then he saw me stop across the street to use the john.”

“But you didn’t get back in line.”

“I would have had to start over and, like I was saying, I wasn’t really driving anywhere specific. I just needed some time to myself before I went to the store.”

He folds his arms. “Doesn’t look like you ever got there. I don’t see any bags in your car. Did you put them in your trunk?”

“No.”

And then it hits me. The broken taillight coupled with my odd behavior at the sobriety checkpoint might give the police reason to suspect criminal activity.

That would give them probable cause to search my car.

“I never got to the store. After I went to the bathroom and got out of town, I just drove around to clear my mind. Look, Officer, I’d be happy to take a breathalyzer right now if that’s the issue. You can see for yourself: I haven’t had anything to drink.”

The officer nods. “I think that would be a good idea, Mr. Mullen. To be clear, you are consenting to voluntarily submit to a sobriety test?”

“Yes, absolutely. I don’t drink and get behind the wheel.”

He looks me over. “Could you step out of the car?”

I frown. “Is that really necessary to—”

He reaches for the handle. “Please step out of the car.”

“Okay, sure, be happy to.”

I hit the button to unlock the car and the cop opens the door for me. A couple vehicles pass, their headlights blinding me as they come around the bend. His partner is standing behind the car, examining the taillight and examining the exterior of my trunk.

I realize now I should have floored it when the police asked me to pull over. But I don’t know what else I could have done differently.

Leaving the body in the nature preserve was supposed to split the difference between hiding it in a good place and transporting it far enough from home to keep the police away from us. My plan was to muddy the waters as well. Even if the police were to discover Hal’s body and determined that it had been moved, they wouldn’t know where it had come *from*.

As it turns out, a broken taillight and bad timing with a sobriety checkpoint have ruined everything.

“Please come around to the back of your vehicle, Mr. Mullen,” the police officer says.

I stop where he gestures. The trunk is right behind me. I put my mind as far away from what’s inside as I can.

“Could you walk the shoulder line? One foot in front of the other, heel to toe, okay?”

My legs are shaky. After my first step, I realize I’m in trouble. Even though I’m stone sober, I’ve never walked heel-to-toe in my life. It’s unnatural, very different from my normal, hip-width gait. Moving deliberately, it takes all my concentration not to teeter.

I reach the police cruiser, then the cop tells me to turn around and come all the way back to my car.

Another car whips past. The wind from it is like turbulence, blasting me from behind, threatening to unbalance me. But I make it back to my car without stumbling and spin around so I’m not facing the trunk.

“Okay, Mr. Mullen, could you recite the alphabet backwards for us?” he asks.

“Z, Y, X ...”

I have to think about the next letter before I say it, but I get through the alphabet backwards. When I’m done, the two cops share a look before the driver approaches and stops beside me in front of the trunk.

“Mr. Mullen, is there anything you want to tell me?”

What does that mean?

“No.”

He looks me over. “Did you hit something with your vehicle and leave the scene of the accident?”

“No, I would *never* do that.”

He exchanges an indecipherable look with his partner, then puts his hand on my trunk. And I know he’s going to ask me to open it.

“Mr. Mullen, would you mind popping your trunk for me?”

My throat has gone dry. “Uh, sure. My fob is in the ignition, so I’ll have to hit the manual button inside the car to...”

That's not true. All I have to do is put my hand under the latch. The vehicle is unlocked, so the electronic sensor will open the trunk for us.

I point toward the driver seat. "Can I...?"

I'm stalling to give myself time to think. Will I be able to start the car and get away? Can they shoot me if I try to run? No, probably not. But then what?

The other cop moves closer, his hand staying near his hip.

"Go ahead, Mr. Mullen," the driver says.

I smile politely. With the window down, I could just stick my arm inside the car and hit the button. But instead I open the door and go to sit down.

"Mr. Mullen, what are you doing?"

I sit but leave the door open. I'm at a complete loss.

Suddenly the cop's walkie blasts to life. It's so loud and garbled I can't make out what's being said. The driver moves away from my car and gives me his back while he talks into it. His passenger watches me intently.

The cop speaks in code. Something about a one-two-nine over on Hudson Street. That's where most of the banks and car dealerships in town are located.

"We're on our way," he says, before reaching into his back pocket and whipping out my license and registration. "Here you are, Mr. Mullen. Please drive safely and make sure to get that taillight fixed ASAP. We've decided not to cite you."

After reclaiming my paperwork, I thank the man and wait in my car till they head down the road. When they're gone, I turn off the interior lights of my car and breathe a huge sigh of relief. I don't know whether to laugh or cry, so I end up doing a bit of both.

SARAH

“What’s happening?” Andrew asks. “Where are you going?”

“I have to...” I can’t bring myself to say, *Dump Hal’s bike somewhere*. “I won’t be gone long, okay?”

“Where’s Dad? Is he coming back home tonight?”

“Of course he is.”

“Then where is he?”

“Andrew.” I put my arms around him and for once he doesn’t squirm out of my embrace. Andrew hasn’t let me hug him like this in a long time. “Everything is going to be fine. Dad will be home soon and I won’t be gone long. Why don’t you make yourself something to eat? There’s frozen pizza in the freezer.”

When I let go of him, he only squeezes me harder. I rub his back in small circles, the way he liked when he was a little boy. It calmed him in those days, but I’m not sure it’s having much of a soothing effect now.

“Do I have to go to camp tomorrow?” he asks.

“No. Yes.” I pull away. “Maybe. I can’t think about that right now.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“Nothing. I promise.”

“How can you promise that?”

I put my palms on his face. “Andrew, I have to leave. I need to know you’ll be okay here by yourself.”

His lower lip juts. After swallowing hard, he nods.

“Just make yourself something to eat.”

“Is he still in the garage?”

Again, I can’t bring myself to speak about the crimes we’ve committed. Instead, I merely shake my head.

“What do I do if Bridget comes back?”

“She won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“You have to trust me.”

“What if Russ shows up?”

“He won’t.”

Andrew rolls his eyes. “Why didn’t you call the police?”

“Don’t think about that now,” I answer. “Okay?”

“What if the police come?”

“They won’t. No one knows Hal was here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I lie.

Andrew hasn’t gotten good yet at spotting my lies. At least, he’s not as good as I am at spotting his. He takes me at my word, which only makes me feel guiltier.

“Go upstairs to your room, keep the lights off. If anybody else comes to the house, don’t answer the door. Pretend like you’re not here. They’ll go away.”

“What about dinner?” he asks.

“Andrew...”

“I know, I’ll keep all the lights off and sneak the food upstairs to my bedroom.”

“Yes. Good.”

“I love you, Mom.”

He surprises me with another hug. On my way through the house, I turn out what lights I can. Andrew remains in the kitchen, watching me from behind the island counter. I wave at him from the foyer, then leave through the front door.

There’s a cool breeze tonight, the humidity of the summer day gone. I get a chill as I round the house and fish Hal’s bike out of the bushes. I’d rather Dwayne take the bike somewhere, but who knows when he’s getting home tonight? I can’t leave this thing lying around and I don’t want to store it in the shed or in the house in case anybody else comes by unexpectedly. Dwayne might snap if he sees it here, and I’m not up for that tonight.

That means I have to get rid of it.

I walk the bike to my car. It won’t fit in my trunk. It takes some doing, but eventually I find the right angle and am able to feed the bike through my door so it’s leaning against the back seat of the car. The door won’t close until I jam it shut with my hip.

I don’t even know where I’m going until I turn left at the stop sign up the block. I can’t go anywhere near Main Street with the sobriety checkpoint. As I pull out of our development, I realize I’ve brought my phone with me. If Dwayne is right, someone will be able to later track my movements.

At the first traffic light I come to, I consider going back to the house to leave my phone. I probably should.

When my phone buzzes with a text, shattering the silence of the car, it makes me jump in my seat. It’s a message from Bridget.

My chest gets tight. It’s hard to draw a breath. Is she going to ask me a question I don’t have a good answer to? Without Dwayne here to help me, I don’t know what to say.

I don’t want to read the text, but how can I not?

My fears are allayed somewhat when I discover I am one of many recipients on this group message. If she was writing to accuse me of something, or ask a pointed question, Bridget

would have messaged me solely. She has included several of our mutual friends, including people from church, school, and the community pool. They come up as names for me on the text. There are also recipients identified by number only, people who are not contacts in my phone.

I've already spoken to some of you but am reaching out again. No one has seen Hal since earlier this afternoon. He did not answer calls or texts and his phone is apparently off. We are really worried about him. If any of you have seen or spoken to him, could you please let us know? I can't believe I'm writing this, but we have already contacted the police. Please pray for my Hal.

The driver behind me blasts his horn. The traffic light has changed to green. I pull through the intersection. Since I'm already on the road, I decide not to turn around and leave my phone at home. Better that I get rid of this bike quickly.

While I skirt town, staying away from the sobriety checkpoint, I try to think up a story about why I left the house tonight. Like Dwayne said, it's best to keep the lies as close to the truth as possible.

Andrew isn't feeling well. That's true enough. I'm out to buy something for an upset stomach.

That thought leads to another idea. Philips' Pharmacy is an old free-standing store but it shares a parking lot with a strip mall. With all those small businesses in operation, there must be a dumpster in the back.

Five minutes later I pull into the parking lot. Most of the stores are dark. Only the convenience store at one end of the strip mall and the pharmacy are still open. The pharmacy is going to close in a few minutes. I park in front of the door and hurry inside.

"Hi, Sarah. How are you?"

Bill Philips stands behind the register. He's an abnormally tall man, bald on top. Old age has stooped him a bit. Bill knew Dwayne's parents. He has two daughters, both older than Dwayne. Bill used to go to church but stopped once his wife

passed. At his age, I'm surprised he's still working, never mind this late. But then I think about him being a widower. With his wife gone and two daughters grown, there's nobody waiting for him to come home. I'd be terribly lonely in his position. I don't want to think about a time where Dwayne has passed and Andrew is all grown-up and moved out of the house.

"Hi, Bill. I'm so sorry." I smile politely. "I know you're about to close."

"I've got a few minutes. How can I help?"

"It's Andrew. He wasn't feeling well earlier and came home early from camp. We figured it was just a bug and he'd be better by now, but..." An idea comes to me. "Now I'm not feeling so great either."

"Something to calm the stomach then. In that aisle behind you."

"Yes, thank you."

Bill comes out from behind the register. He must have sent his cashier home already. The man trails me down the aisle. "How is Andrew getting along, by the way?"

Being our pharmacist, Bill naturally knows about the various medications we've tried with Andrew over the years.

"Okay."

Normally I would open up with Bill in this situation, especially since we're the only two in the store. He's not a gossip. He genuinely cares about the people he's been serving for almost forty years. My one-word response and brusque manner draw a surprised and embarrassed look from Bill, who quickly tries to cover it up with a smile.

"If you need any help then, just let me know."

I go through the motions of looking at over-the-counter remedies for an upset stomach. After what I feel is an appropriate amount of time, I grab the cheapest thing I can find and head to the register. Bill has taken his white lab coat off.

“That everything?” he asks.

“Yes.”

While he’s ringing me up, Bill asks, “How is Dwayne, by the way?”

Something in his voice makes me think this is more than a casual question.

“He’s fine. Great, actually.”

“Good.” Bill smiles. “With all the stress he’s under, I’m glad I could help.”

“Help with what?” I blurt out.

Bill’s face falls when he realizes he’s committed a gaffe. “I’m sorry, I assumed... I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

What stress is Dwayne under? His business is thriving, and our marriage is good. He’s been leaving me to deal with Andrew mostly, ever since that fight with Hal, so it can’t be that.

I begin to worry that Dwayne’s business has suffered a setback, which he has kept from me. He’s always saying he doesn’t want to worry me. That’s why Dwayne manages our money too. How he maintains all our accounts and tracks the money going in and out without any help from me, I’ll never know.

But that’s Dwayne. He’s one of those guys that takes care of everything. The thought makes me appreciate him all the more—he’s exactly the sort of person you’d want with you in a crisis like this.

At the same time, however, I’m dismayed by the idea that he’s been dealing with stress and felt like he couldn’t share his problems with me.

“Is Dwayne taking something?” I ask.

“Sarah. I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

I’m eager to ask him more but also embarrassed by the fact that our pharmacist knows something about my husband that I

don't.

“In the old days,” Bill says, “we didn't think twice about what we said to a spouse. But with all these newfangled laws...”

He shakes his head, and I let it go. It's more important right now to ditch Hal's bike anyway.

“Thanks, Bill.”

“Take care, Sarah.”

I drop the bag of medicine I don't need onto the passenger seat and back out. The lights inside the pharmacy start winking out as I round behind the adjacent strip mall. A rusty, green dumpster sits in the back. After discreetly checking the area for people, I park, wipe the bike down with a rag to remove my fingerprints, and toss it into the dumpster.

ANDREW

Mom and Dad didn't say I *couldn't* go online. But then again, they took my phone away. If I point out the fact they didn't *literally* tell me not to, Dad will only get angry. He'll say what he always says: *You know what we meant, Andrew.*

Problem is, I don't always know what they mean. Mom gets that, usually. But Dad doesn't. He never has.

But what do they expect me to do? Sit here in the dark, eat frozen pizza in my bedroom, and hope the police don't bust down the front door? That's ridiculous. I'm really pissed off they left me alone, tonight of all nights.

It doesn't take much doom-scrolling through Facebook to find the doom I'm looking for. People are talking about Hal. Nobody's heard from him. He last posted this morning, a cryptic note that seems ominous to me:

Everybody's a liar.

Somebody else who claims to have inside knowledge says the police have already opened an official investigation.

It's all becoming too much to read. I know if I keep going, I'll do something that Dad thinks is stupid and will get everybody into trouble. Right when I'm about to log out, an IM box pops up.

It's a message from Anna.

Hey – I've been trying to get hold of you. Have you heard from Hal?

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She can tell I'm logged in and active. I shouldn't have come online, but now I can't ignore her message. That would look weird.

Hey – No, haven't seen him. Got sick at camp and left early, been home since.

Anna: Sorry you're not feeling well. And sorry about camp.

Me: ?

Anna: I heard what happened.

Great. Anna wasn't even there. If she knows, then that means everybody knows. The truth has made the rounds. Now I just have to hope and pray it doesn't reach Mom and Dad. The truth and the story I told them aren't exactly the same thing.

Me: I told my parents they called me a fag.

Anna: Oh.

There's a long electronic silence before she writes again.

Anna: Did Hal IM you? Are you sure he didn't come by?

Me: No. Why would he? Did you tell him what I said?

Anna: NO. I would never. You know that.

Me: Then why do you keep asking if he came over?

Anna: Bc he asked me if you were going to be home.

Me: Why did he ask you? Why didn't he text me?

Anna: I don't know ... but I told him not to bother bc you'd be at camp. Then he said, Perfect.

Me: What? Why?

Anna: He wouldn't tell me. You know how he is, he likes to be mysterious.

Me: You mean keep secrets.

Anna: Can we not get into this right now? I'm worried.

Me: Sorry, but this doesn't make any sense.

Anna: Nobody knows where he is.

Me: You mean you didn't go to the preserve with him? (Barf)

Anna: He was supposed to meet his friends there, but he never showed. Do you think I should tell his parents? I don't want to get him in trouble. You know what they do back there.

Me: Yeah, I know. You do too, but you're still dating him.

Anna: I've told you before. Things are complicated.

Me: That's just what people say when they don't have a good reason for doing what they do.

Anna: Andrew, you'd tell me if he stopped by, right?

Me: I told you, I haven't seen him. Do you think I'm lying?

Anna: Andrew, I know that sometimes it's hard for you to tell the truth...

I should pause. That's what Dr. Brooks is always saying. Pause before you respond. Take a deep breath. Don't do the first thing that comes to mind.

But I'm too mad to pause.

Me: Fuck you, Anna, I'm not a liar.

Before she can respond, before I can even begin to think of ways to apologize, I log off.

DWAYNE

My parents first brought me to the preserve when I was eight years old. Mom loved spending time in nature, having grown up in the boonies, and was always after the old man about going on a hike. Dad was not outdoorsy. His idea of spending time in nature was sitting in the backyard listening to the radio while he smoked like a chimney and drank a case of light beer. He was always doing whatever Mom demanded. Going on a hike was the one thing he absolutely refused to do with his free time.

One weekend, after enduring what he half-jokingly called her pestering for years, Dad finally relented. We packed some food and bug spray and jumped in the car.

It was a miserable day.

Even though he'd agreed to the hike, Dad expressed immediate regret as the bugs attacked him relentlessly, undeterred by the layers and layers of spray he'd swathed himself in. Within ten minutes of our humid journey, he declared he wanted to go home. On Monday through Friday, from 6:30 a.m. until 3:00 p.m., he was on his feet, working with his hands, sweating through his greasy coveralls, making sure he didn't lose a finger or a hand, while the machines around him whirred and the foreman was never happy and where layoffs were a constant, looming threat. He preferred to spend his weekends with his feet up in the air-conditioned living room, in his favorite recliner, where he could watch the ball game in peace.

Mom, who had never worked a full-time job, never mind one so labor-intensive, had no sympathy for the man. She called his attitude poor, pointing out that he'd agreed to the trip and now owed it to her—not us—to make the best of it. Though she hadn't expressed the sentiment beforehand, she claimed to have known all along he would ruin the day.

Their disagreement devolved into bickering, the fight over the hike becoming a fight about everything else. It was same old, same old. I knew, from an early age, I never wanted a marriage like that, one full of simmering resentments and endless disappointments. I was going to marry a woman where there would be no arguments, ever.

I thought I did.

The next time I went to the preserve, it was on a bike, not in a car. Russ and I were thirteen. He'd filched some smokes from his older brother, and we wanted to enjoy cigarettes away from the eyes of any adults overeager to step in and set us kids straight. I took my first drag down by the creek, where the massive sycamore used to tilt at nearly a thirty-degree angle over the burbling water until a nor'easter ripped through one winter.

Later, it wasn't cigarettes we snuck at the preserve, it was booze. Russ's older brother, Malcolm, once again supplied us, only this time willingly—and for a price. Russ and I paid twenty for a case of cheap beer that only cost him fifteen. Being underage, we weren't in a position to argue with his finder's fee.

Throughout high school, I spent a lot of time with Russ and the guys, and later Bridget and the girls, in what we simply referred to as “the woods.” That was all you had to say, and everybody knew, even the kids too lame or scared to go there. The woods. The raging keggers we enjoyed here were legendary, the talk of high school. It was where everybody who was anybody came. Times were simpler then. Even when the cops chased us out of here, nobody got into serious trouble. It was more, knock it off, get out of here, nobody drunk get behind the wheel.

Other than that one outing with my parents, I had only fond memories of this place. Now here I am, dragging parts of a dead body down a deer trail and wielding a flashlight.

I push through the brush and slide the parts of the body I've carried this far under a bush, then begin back-tracking to the car. Before I get close to the vehicle, I pull off the ski mask and stuff it into my pocket. Just in case someone else has parked nearby, I don't want to be seen coming out of the preserve in total darkness wearing a ski mask.

Back at the car, I pop the trunk once more and haul the last plastic bag out. I couldn't carry all of Hal in one trip. It's going to be cumbersome carrying both the shovel and flashlight in my one hand, but at this point I just want to get the body in the ground and not make a *third* trip to and from the car.

Picking my way carefully through the darkness, once I'm a couple hundred yards away from the car I flick on the flashlight. I train the light low, aiming it at the ground a few feet ahead. I pause to pull the ski mask back on before proceeding.

Five minutes later, I'm back to the spot.

I search the immediate area with my flashlight till I find what looks promising. There's a bare patch of earth near a maple tree. Flicking the flashlight off, I use the weak, silvery moonlight as a guide and begin shoveling. The ground here is soft, yielding. Despite the gravity of my situation, the work is mind-numbing and my mind wanders. I fall into a rhythm, a pile of dirt growing beside what will hopefully never be known as a grave. I keep the hole narrow. As Hal is no longer in one piece, depth is more important than width.

How did everything come to this?

In my mind I cycle back through the last twenty years. I lasted three semesters at community college before I called it quits. School had never really been for me. I worked, for a short while, at a bar slinging drinks, and that's where I met Justine...

She was just what I needed at the time: sexy, sensual, and fun-loving. She played hard to get, until she learned I was going to work for my father at his newly opened drycleaning business. Looking back now, the bad signs were obvious. But I missed them all.

Our relationship was tumultuous. When we weren't partying till we passed out drunk or screwing each other's brains out, we argued bitterly. She was wild and she loved me, at least for a time.

Problem was, I didn't realize she was poison until after we were married. When I demanded a divorce, Justine laughed wickedly and revealed that not only was she pregnant, but that she planned to "never work a day again in her life" and I'd better be prepared to pay alimony forever.

I thought I was doomed, but fate intervened.

Justine ODed.

Sarah and I met not long after my first wife passed. Opposite in nearly every way to Justine, Sarah was sweet, thoughtful, and mild-tempered. Justine couldn't go more than a few hours without raising her voice, whereas Sarah didn't know how.

When I met Sarah, she was in a bad relationship. Her then-husband was abusing her, both mentally and physically. Everybody knew it, but of course, nobody did anything about it. Most people are too weak to do the hard thing. Not me. I stepped in. All it took was one surprise visit from me and he left her alone for good.

Of course, Dad approved of Sarah. He appreciated the fact that I'd have the two things in a marriage that he had always wanted but never tasted.

Stability.

And control.

Mom only met Sarah once, a few days before the wedding. She wasn't even in town for my nuptials—she'd stopped by to see an old boyfriend and called me out of the blue. She and Sarah didn't get along, and Mom didn't stick around for the

ceremony. Six months later, she was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. Mom died quickly.

Sarah listens to me. And she obeys. That's an un-PC concept these days. But I don't pretend to live in the same fantasy world as everybody else. Marriages are rarely equal partnerships. Difficult decisions are rarely made unanimously. Someone needs to take charge. That someone is me.

And here's another un-PC truth: Sarah prefers it that way. My wife has trouble deciding what to make for dinner most nights. She needs a strong man in her life. If we're going to get through this ordeal in one piece, I have to call the shots.

The hole I've been digging is only three feet deep when I hear voices.

SARAH

When I get home, the house is completely dark. I go upstairs to check on Andrew. I'm expecting him to ask more questions, but instead he tells me he's fine and wants to be alone.

Back downstairs, another thought occurs to me. What if Hal left more than just his bike lying around? I do another sweep of the backyard, finding nothing, then go from room to room, starting with the basement and working my way through the house.

I don't find anything in the basement or ground floor so make my way upstairs again. As I pass Andrew's door, he calls out, "When's Dad coming home?"

"He'll be home soon."

"Are you going to tell me where he is?"

"Please, Andrew. I can't talk right now."

"You keep saying that."

Instead of engaging further, I walk on. Not sure what to do with myself, I take refuge in the master bedroom for a few minutes. Thank God there's laundry to put away—it gives me something to do.

I start with Dwayne's clothes first. While I'm putting his underwear away, I notice something I missed entirely before, during my many sweeps of the house.

The top of his dresser is messy. A couple pictures are knocked over, and his paperbacks, which are usually standing neatly at attention, have partially toppled.

Dwayne hates a mess. He would not leave his things like this.

I get the feeling that Hal has been in here. With my skin crawling, I check the rest of the room. Not finding anything else odd, I'm about to write my suspicions off until I notice something else.

The indentations where the bed's feet rest in the carpet are visible. Why would Hal move the bed? Was he looking for a safe underneath, perhaps?

Steeling myself, I get on hands and knees and look underneath. No one is hiding, and nothing appears to have been disturbed. All I see are the old portraits we stashed under the bed when Dwayne suggested we hang new paintings in the bedroom.

I've checked the house many times now but I can't shake that feeling of utter violation.

I lock myself in the master bathroom. While splashing some water on my face, I get a good look at myself in the mirror. My brown hair is a mess. Several strands have escaped my pony tail. I could do with a shower, but I'm afraid to get one—what if someone knocks on the door, or what if the police show? I need to be ready for anything, not half-naked and dripping wet.

I splash more cold water on my face, then open the medicine cabinet to retrieve the case for my contact lenses. It's only after I've removed my contacts and am about to leave the room that a thought occurs to me.

If Dwayne is taking medication, he would probably have it up here.

I look through the pill bottles but nothing jumps out at me. It's all the usual stuff we've had up here for ages, including the medicine I had to take briefly for anxiety, when I was suffering

from panic attacks. According to the label on the bottle, the medication expired nearly two years ago.

I close the cabinet and palm the counter as I put my head over the sink. This is where Dwayne keeps his medicine. Always. This is where he stored that gel that was supposed to help prevent hair loss. This is where he kept his heartburn pills. This is where he leaves his antibiotics whenever he gets the odd infection.

All those things are here.

But I don't see anything new from the pharmacy.

What could Dwayne possibly be taking? He didn't mention going to the doctor's recently, come to think of it. He would have had to in order to be prescribed medication. As I leave my bedroom, I go back over what Bill said but can't recall the exact words. It was just something about stress.

The sound of Andrew moving around in his room snaps me back to the present moment. I stop at his door.

"Andrew, if you have to go to sleep right now, it's okay. But you and I need to talk tonight. I'll just wake y—"

"You think I'm going to be able to sleep ever again?" he asks.

I take a deep breath and try to imagine what Dwayne would say. "I know it doesn't seem like it, but everything is going to be—"

"Don't say that," Andrew says. "Don't be like him."

Andrew's relationship with his father has been strained recently, but there's no call for talking about Dwayne like that. I feel myself about to snap, but I manage to douse my emotions.

"He's your father," I say. "You will show him more respect than that."

Andrew doesn't answer, and I let him be.

Back downstairs, I give the first floor another once-over, making sure nothing is out of place or missing. I'm

embarrassed that I missed the signs that Hal had been in the bedroom. Dwayne is going to be angry about that. In my defense, I was moving quickly through the house earlier, looking for obvious clues. The overturned pictures are small and it was easy to miss the paperbacks. Though I get the feeling Dwayne won't see it that way.

Once I'm satisfied I haven't missed anything else, I head toward the garage but only get as far as the kitchen.

Someone's knocking on the front door.

It's after 10:00 p.m. now, much too late for a neighbor to be knocking. No, this can only be about one thing.

I make sure the interior door to the garage is still locked before returning to the foyer. The porch light captures the balding head of a man I immediately recognize.

It's Hal's father, Russ.

I wonder how I can open my door to this man knowing I'm going to lie to him. And now I feel terrible all over again about how I lied to Bridget earlier. Just before I open the door, I go over in my head what I'm supposed to know and what I'm not supposed to know and it dawns on me that keeping these two groups of things separate will only get more and more complicated as time goes on.

There will be an investigation and the police will come here eventually. What few lies we have prepared so far will not suffice. The police will want to know about more than our movements from today. They will question us all about the last six months, the last year...

The foyer is doing a slow spin. I palm the door and take a breath, just enough to get myself under control before I open the door.

"Hi, Russ," I say. "Is everything alright? Have you heard from Hal?"

Each word is like a punch to the gut.

He comes in without answering, throws his arms around my neck. "Oh, Jesus Christ, Sarah, I'm sorry to knock at this

hour, but he's still missing. Have you seen him?"

I hug Russ, pat his back. He's not as big and strapping as my husband, only an inch or two taller than me. Russ has always had a youthful face. When he smiles, he still looks like a boy. But tonight he's aged *years*.

"No, I haven't," I say, inwardly cringing. "I got Bridget's text. I would have called right away."

"I know." He lets go and backs away, looking down. "I've been trying to get hold of Dwayne, to see if he could help out. Is he around?"

Shoot.

"The police are looking but it's not enough, you know? They can only be in so many places," Russ goes on. "Bridge and I are asking everybody we know to come out and help us look."

"Of ... course," I say. "We'd be happy to help. Dwayne will be back soon." Why did I say that?! I have no idea when Dwayne is returning. I don't know where he's going or how long it will take him to do what he's doing. "I mean, I can help you. Dwayne's out right now."

"Where'd he go?" Russ asks. "Down to the pub?"

I'm so mixed up now, I can't figure out what to say. I was supposed to say that Dwayne was out getting Andrew medicine. But thirty minutes ago, I told Bill Philips at the pharmacy that I was out doing the same thing. It's little inconsistencies like this that could ruin everything.

"No, he's..." I look toward the stairs, realizing it's better if I simply say nothing about Dwayne. "Andrew's not feeling well, is all."

"Oh." Russ pulls a face. "Sorry to hear that."

"Tell you what," I say. "I'll check on Andrew. If he's feeling better, I'll get in the car and drive around too."

Russ closes his eyes and nods. "You're the best, Sarah, you know that? I really appreciate it."

“It’s no problem. Really. It’s the least we can do.”

“After what happened, I’d understand if...” He looks away, tears filling his eyes. When he speaks again, it’s a new train of thought. “They say the longer it goes, the more likely that something happened. We really need to find him.”

I want to die. I want to get down on my knees and seize Russ’s hand and tell him everything. He would understand what we did. If his boy were innocent but looked guilty of murder, he’d cover it up too. Most parents would do exactly what we did, and they might blame other parents who didn’t.

I force myself to reach out and rub Russ’s shoulder, feeling every bit the two-faced, lying bitch that I am.

“It’s going to be okay.” I don’t know how I even get the words out, until I say something much worse. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

Russ bites back tears. It breaks my heart to see him like this.

“Thanks, hon,” he says. “I’ll let Bridge know one of you will be out there. We owe you.”

“You don’t owe us a thing.”

Russ gives me another hug before leaving. He left his car running in front of our house, the hazards blinking and lighting up the street. Without looking back, he jumps in his car and zooms away.

I lock the front door and clamp a hand over my mouth to keep from crying. I don’t want Andrew hearing me. Dwayne would say that I need to be strong right now, and he’s absolutely right.

Strong.

I grab the cleaning supplies and head to the garage.

DWAYNE

When I hear the voices, I drop the shovel and whirl around.

It's a couple of kids. Two teenaged boys are standing about twenty yards away, pointing in my direction. The flashlight is on behind me. All I am to them is a dark silhouette in the woods. In that terrible instant, I consider many different courses of action, none of them palatable.

One child has died today. That is enough.

I disguise my voice, make it gravelly and hoarse. "Get the hell out of here!"

One kid screeches and they take off running. The preserve is a big place, several square miles. It's just horrible luck they ran into me. Now they're bolting through the woods, trying to get away. Kids back here, they're like deer—there's always more of them.

They say you need to dig at least six feet deep so that animals don't unearth remains. I've only gone half that distance but now I can't stick around. After wedging the different parts of the body into the hole, I frantically shovel the dirt back to cover it. I'm breathing hard and in a sweat by the time I'm done.

What did those kids see? And did they come back? Are they watching me right now?

I tamp down the dirt and kill the flashlight. I know the way to the car, which I left in a gravel pull-off lot. There weren't

any other vehicles there when I stopped. Hopefully those teeny-boppers didn't park there too. As I hustle through the woods, low branches smacking me in the face, I listen for any sounds.

My car is the only vehicle in the pull-off. I throw the shovel into the trunk and pull out of there fast, keeping my lights off until I'm nearly half a mile up the road and certain nobody's been following me.

Fucking kids. Today has been one long stretch of bad luck.

SARAH

I've scrubbed the garage floor several times now. At this point, I've definitely gotten rid of any remaining physical evidence, but I'm reluctant to stop. No matter how much I wash this floor, I can't shake the feeling there's some damning, microscopic piece of DNA that will ruin our lives forever.

It's only when I hear Dwayne pulling into the driveway that I stop.

I check the floor for the hundredth time. That speck by the tool bench isn't blood—I've scrubbed it a dozen times—but it still *looks* like it is. I grab the cleaning supplies and move them out of the middle of the floor, then I hit the button to open the garage door.

As it slowly rises, making a whole lot of noise in the otherwise quiet neighborhood, I notice that one of Dwayne's taillights is out. I wonder if he got into an accident—maybe that's why he was gone so long?

He backs into the garage and parks. My hand is already on the garage door button, and I know he probably wants the door down, but I let Dwayne make that decision anyway. He might have some plan that would never cross my mind and wants to keep the garage door open for reasons I would never anticipate.

A moment later, the door winds down. Dwayne gets out of the car. His hair is a mess and his clothes are drenched with sweat. He peels off the gloves he was wearing.

“We need to get rid of all this clothing,” he says, without preamble. “Where’s Andrew? Did you clean up in here?”

I reach for him, but he backs away.

“I just said we need to get rid of these clothes. You can’t *touch* me right now.”

“Sorry.” I shake my head. Sometimes I’m so stupid. “Did you...”

“It’s taken care of,” Dwayne answers. “Did you clean up?”

“Yes. I’m all done in here. Were there any problems?”

“Everything’s fine,” Dwayne says in that tone of his voice that precludes any follow-up questions. He quickly examines the garage. “Are you sure you cleaned everything? What’s that spot over there?”

He’s pointing at the floor near his tool bench.

“That was already there. It’s not blood.”

“I don’t care if it’s not blood. It *looks* like blood. Can’t you get rid of it?”

“It won’t come up.”

He shakes his head. “Come on, Sarah. Do I have to do everything?”

He grabs the scrub brush out of my hand, gets down on hands and knees, and goes to work on the floor. Arm pumping, whole body in a frenzy, he scrubs for what seems like a full minute before he comes up for air.

“Jesus, what is this?”

“I told you it wouldn’t come up,” I say, a little miffed by his attitude. I understand that we’re in a difficult position right now, but there’s no reason to snap at me when I’ve done everything he’s asked, and then some. “It’s just a dark spot in the floor.”

“I know *that*, Sarah. I asked...” He stands up, closes his eyes, and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be short with you.”

My husband is a good man. He always apologizes. “It’s okay, Dwayne.”

“Could you get another trash bag?”

“Yes.”

When I come back to the garage, he’s already stripped down to his underwear. His whole body is glistening with sweat. He smells like he does when he helps me with the garden. He’ll need another shower.

“Have you spoken to Andrew yet?” he asks.

“No, Dwayne, I just got done with the floor.”

“I’ve been gone for *hours*. What took you so long? What if somebody came over?”

“Somebody did come over.” I hand him the bag.

“Can you hold it open so I can put the clothes in?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

I pull the trash bag open as wide as it will go without ripping.

“Who stopped by?” he asks.

“Russ.”

“Jesus,” he says. “When was this? What did he say?”

I share what was said.

“You didn’t tell him where I went?” Dwayne asks. “You should have said I was out picking up medicine for Andrew.”

“I-couldn’t-I-had-to—” My words are coming out too quickly. I get like this when I’m really nervous. Nobody can understand me. I force myself to slow down. “I had to go to the pharmacy.”

“You what?”

“Dwayne, please don’t raise your voice at me.”

He grimaces. “Let’s not make this about you right now, okay, Sarah? We’re in a world of trouble and I’m worried

about our son going to prison. Can we skip the formalities and focus on what's important?"

"Okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "Just ... listen. Please. Hal's bike was in the backyard."

Dwayne's face turns white.

"I'm sorry I didn't notice it right away."

"What did you do?"

I bring my husband up to speed, making sure he knows everything. He rolls his eyes when I mention our neighbor, Nora, commenting on the bike. And he grows very still when I recount my conversation with Bill Philips at the pharmacy.

"You spoke to Bill?" he asks.

"Yes. He was about to close. It was just me and him in the store."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes ... well, I mean, I didn't go up and down every aisle and check."

"Take a moment and *think*," he says. "Were there any other cars in the parking lot?"

Why didn't I check while I was there? I should have thought of this. "Uh ... I don't think so, but I'm not sure."

"Okay." Dwayne starts pacing. "So Bill Philips thinks you went out to get medication for Andrew. Did you talk to anybody else?"

"No. I put the bike in that dumpster and got out of there."

"Were there security cameras?"

"No..."

"You looked for them?"

"Yes," I say, telling the truth. "I didn't see any."

"That doesn't mean they weren't there."

My heart is racing.

“Did I do the right thing, Dwayne?” I ask. I need him to tell me yes. “Or should I have waited for you to come home?”

He thinks about it for a long moment. “No, you did the right thing, honey. We needed to get rid of that bike.”

I smile, but my relief is temporary. “What are we going to do?”

“It’s messy,” he says. “It’s really messy now. But we’ve got to come up with a story to explain away these inconsistencies.”

“What about helping Russ and Bridget?”

“We can’t go anywhere near them until we’ve got our stories straight,” he says. “Otherwise the lies will blow up in our faces.”

“Right.”

“The problem is, I told the police I went out to the store to buy something for Andrew.”

“The police?” I say, panicked. “You told me everything was fine.”

“And it is. They had one of those drunk traps set up on Main Street. Everybody going by had to submit to a breathalyzer.”

“What did you say to them?”

He puts his arms akimbo. “I told them I was going to the store for my son and then...” He makes a face. “I told them I went out to get something for Andrew, but then felt like going for a drive to clear my head.”

“Oh.”

Dwayne shoots me a nasty look. “The story still works. Andrew came home early from camp, not feeling well. At least, that’s what we’re saying *first*. If we get pushed on that, we let on that he was thinking about harming himself. I went out to get him a treat to cheer him up, but while I was on the road, I realized *I* needed some time to myself. It’s been a lot with him the last few months.”

“And then, when you were gone,” I add, “Andrew *actually* started to feel sick, from nerves or anxiety. He’s worried about going back to camp tomorrow.”

Dwayne is nodding. “That’s good. I left my phone here by accident, so you couldn’t reach me. Rather than wait around till I got back, you went out to the pharmacy.”

“Yes, I see. That makes sense.”

For a moment, neither of us says anything. Then Dwayne’s whole body relaxes and he gives me one those smiles that still has the power to make my knees weak.

“See, honey?” he says. “We make a good team.”

I offer him a weak smile in return. I’m glad we got our stories straightened out, but we’re not out of the woods yet. I have to tell him.

“Dwayne, I went upstairs while you were gone. It looks like somebody else had been up there.”

My husband freezes. “Are you sure?”

I tell him what I noticed, about his dresser being messy and the bed being moved.

Dwayne is at a loss for words. That rarely happens.

I go on. “It seemed like somebody was looking for something, you know? Like a robbery?”

“You mean Hal.”

“Yes, Hal ... or whoever was in here with him. Maybe they thought there’d be a safe under the bed?”

“Could be.” Dwayne nods slowly. “What did you do?”

“I put everything back the way it was.”

He nods. “Probably for the best.”

“Do you keep anything valuable in your dresser?” I ask.

“No.” He cups his chin. “Did they take anything?”

“That’s the strangest part,” I say. “All my jewelry is still there. They didn’t actually take anything.”

Dwayne is moving past me, no doubt on his way to take another shower. But he stops in his tracks, struck by some thought.

He shakes his head. "It wasn't Hal upstairs."

"What?"

He gives me a look. "You said it yourself: nothing was taken. Even if these alleged robbers didn't find a safe, they would have grabbed your jewelry at least. The TV in our room is small too, anybody could have carried that away."

"I don't understand. If it wasn't Hal..." Dwayne sighs and turns away from the door leading into the kitchen. I can barely hear him when he speaks.

"*Andrew* was upstairs."

"*What?*"

"Think about it," he says. "Where would you look in this house for a weapon?"

"A weapon?" I don't understand what he's driving at. Dwayne has always been a little quicker than me. "The kitchen? There are knives right there."

He shakes his head. "Come on, Sarah. Hal would have been standing right there too. If he saw Andrew go for a knife, he'd do the same thing."

"But that means..."

I don't want to say what I'm thinking. It's terrible.

Dwayne looks me in the eye. "Yes. It means that Andrew didn't *want* Hal to know he was looking for a weapon. He wanted to surprise him."

"Oh God..." I cover my mouth. It was bad enough when I thought my son might have killed Hal in a fit of rage, possibly during a fight that simply got out of hand. But this is worse, so much worse... It means Andrew snuck around looking for a tool to murder Hal. It means he had time to think about what he was going to do.

And he still went through with it.

No. I don't want to believe that. I *can't*.

"Where do most people keep weapons?" Dwayne asks.

I don't want to admit he's right, but there's a force to his logic. "In their bedroom."

"This wasn't a robbery," Dwayne says.

"But that means..."

I can't bring myself to say it.

"It fits," Dwayne says.

I'm not sure. "Hal came over, they got into argument, Andrew got really angry, and then our son came all the way upstairs to look for a weapon while Hal just stood around waiting downstairs?"

Dwayne nods. "What else could it be?"

"But..." I feel like I'm sinking. "Andrew doesn't know you have a gun, though," I point out.

Dwayne gives me a look. "He's not stupid. He probably *suspects*. Or maybe he overheard us one night talking about it."

It's possible, I guess. Dwayne keeps a handgun in the house for self-defense, but we've never told our son about it. ADHD and impulsivity do not mix well with firearms.

Dwayne is waiting for me to counter his point. I don't have a better answer, but that doesn't mean my husband's guess is correct. I have a hard time imagining that chain of events. If the boys got into an argument, why wouldn't Hal just leave when Andrew went upstairs?

The problem is, I don't have a better explanation.

"You're probably right," I say.

DWAYNE

The last thing I feel like doing after this horrific day is getting back in the car at midnight and driving around town to look for a boy that I know is already dead. But I have to. After another scalding shower, during which I scrubbed every square inch of my body raw, I put on gym shorts and a t-shirt, kissed my wife goodbye, then jumped in the car again.

I've got several missed texts from Russ, each subsequent message more desperate-sounding than the last. I write him back to let him know I'm on the road, happy to help, and hope for a text in response, as opposed to a phone call.

I don't want to talk to him right now.

Before I can put my phone down in the center console, it starts ringing.

"Hey, Dwayne," Russ says. "Just saw your note."

"Hey, Russ." I make sure I sound pained, and a little worried. But I don't overdo it. I watch true crime TV shows a lot, and one thing the criminals always do, especially the murderers, is overemote, swear they're going to do anything and everything to help. To the detectives, it's a dead giveaway. "Sorry I missed your texts. I went out for a drive and left my phone at home. I had no idea what was happening. How can I help?"

"Where are you now?"

"Still in the development."

“Okay.” He pauses to think. “We’ve just been by the diner and middle school. Could you try the high school?”

Our boys are going into eighth grade. “You think he’d go there?”

“Dwayne, I have no idea where he is.”

“Right. Understood.” I have to be careful about what I say, but at the same time, I’m a friend and need to be concerned. “When was the last time you heard from him?”

“He called me at work this morning,” Russ says. “I couldn’t take it because I was meeting with a doctor. That was around 11:00 a.m.”

“Did he leave a message?”

“Yeah...” Russ’s voice trails off. “He said we needed to talk.”

“That was it?”

“Yes. I have no idea what it was about.”

There was a time when Russ and I let our guards down and discussed the challenges we had with our kids. He was the one guy in the world I shared Andrew’s many diagnoses with. But no more. Not since Hal and Andrew got into it.

“Did he call Bridget too?” I ask.

“No,” Russ says. “Whatever it was, he wanted to talk to me about it.”

“I see.”

“We’ve been arguing a lot recently,” Russ says. “You know how it is.”

“I do.”

“No matter what I say,” he continues, “it leads to a fight. The other day, I mentioned how blue the sky was and you know what he said to me?”

I pull out of the development. “What’s that?”

“We don’t see what color a thing is, only what wavelength of light it reflects. So the sky isn’t blue ... that’s just what we

see, or something like that.”

Kind of like people. We only see their reflection, not what they truly are. I wonder what kind of reflection I’m casting right now, and if it’s making Russ suspicious.

“Anyway,” Russ says, “thanks for helping out. We really appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem.”

“No, really, it means a lot.”

“We’re going to find him, Russ.”

“I know. He’s just being a kid, right?”

“Yes,” I say, almost choking on my words. “He’ll probably come home with a story.”

We say goodbye. The high school is about ten minutes up the road from where we live. Russ, Bridget, and I graduated twenty years ago. Since that time, the township has added a whole new wing to the school, knocked down the old gymnasium and built a state-of-the-art facility, and extended the parking lot to accommodate the increase of students and student drivers.

I turn onto the school property, activate my high beams and slow to a crawl. The parking lot is empty. I drive by the bleachers on the perimeter of the football field, where Russ and I used to bring girls during games. Bridget and I had our first kiss down there, close to the fifty-yard line. I had hoped it would be the first of many but that’s not exactly how things turned out.

Everything was simpler back then.

I pull around the football field and approach the main building of the high school. The place is a ghost town. School has been out for a couple weeks now. The support staff probably only works half-days during the summer, I’ll bet. Good work if you can get it.

I take my time driving around the property, allowing my mind to focus on more important things.

SARAH

I tap on Andrew's bedroom door. It's really late, but we need to talk. "Andrew, honey, are you awake?"

"Yeah."

I'm about to ask if I can come into his bedroom but stop short. I have a hard time taking charge of situations, but that's what I need to do here. Dwayne trusts me enough to handle this moment. And my son needs me. I can't let either of them down.

Without asking, I enter his room.

Andrew is lying on his side on the bed, turned away from me. His room is a mess, but that's normal. I high-step around piles of clothes and half-finished art projects like I'm wading through a marsh.

I sit on the edge of his bed and rub his shoulder. He cringes and moves out of my reach, still keeping his eyes on the wall.

"Andrew, we need to talk."

He doesn't answer.

I take a deep breath. For as long as he's been able to understand the concept of deceit, I've always told him it was wrong to lie. I remember a conversation we had when he was young, maybe five years old, and I found someone had written in crayon on the wall. I'll never forget what he said. When I told him to tell the truth, he shook his head and said, *But then I'll get in trouble.*

Now, when it matters most, I'm going to tell him to lie. But what choice do we have? An honest, innocent person is forced to lie when nobody will believe them anyway, right?

"Could you turn over so we can talk?" I ask.

With a groan, Andrew rolls onto his back. He still won't look at me, putting his eyes stubbornly on the ceiling, but at least I can see his face.

"Andrew, I know I said that you always have to tell the truth. But sometimes we're forced to lie in order to protect ourselves." I hate what I'm saying and don't even agree with it. "I mean, when we know we didn't do anything wrong, but there's a chance nobody will believe us, and it's ... well, in that situation, we're justified in lying."

He's very still for a moment. Then his eyes find mine.

"Do *you* believe me?"

"Of course, Andrew," I say.

"If you believe me, then others would too."

"No, son. I'm your mother. That's not how it works."

"What about Dad? Does he believe me?"

I should say yes, without thinking, without hesitating. But I'm not a good liar. "He's thinking about how this *looks* to someone who doesn't know you well. If you told a stranger you found a dead body in your house, the body of a former friend, and there was no evidence that the person broke in..."

"So Dad doesn't believe me."

"I didn't say that."

"But you want me to lie?"

I swallow hard. "We think it's for the best."

He frowns. "I thought telling the truth was important."

"It is. Most of the time. But that's..."

I'm really struggling. If I had only known earlier about the robberies in the area, if I had only thought of Russ and Bridget having the spare key to our house, if I had paid closer attention

while searching the house and noticing Dwayne's dresser and the bed being moved, I would have rejected Dwayne's idea to move the body.

But here we are.

Dwayne's already committed a crime, a crime which only makes our boy look guiltier, and now I'm part of the cover-up too, having disposed of Hal's bike.

"When you have a child, you give them rules," I go on, hoping to say something sensible. "Yes, no. Right, wrong. This way, not that way. That's because a child isn't mature enough to understand nuance. The real world is complicated. Many of the *rules* I gave you are more guidelines. The world isn't a black-and-white place with clear-cut answers all the time."

He sighs. "So *you've* lied to me, my whole life. There really are no rules."

I go on, hating everything I'm saying. "Life is messy. You try to do the right thing. You try to do your best."

"Does this mean I don't always have to tell you and Dad the truth?"

"No," I blurt out, realizing immediately that I've fallen into a trap.

"Right." He shakes his head. "The rules only apply to me, I guess, or when you say they do."

"Andrew." I reach for his hand, but he pulls it away and turns his head. "The reason you should tell your father and me the truth is because we always have your best interests at heart."

"Do you?" he asks.

"What kind of question is that?" I feel myself getting angry now. Dwayne and I have moved heaven and earth for our child tonight, risking prison ourselves. "Have we ever done anything to hurt you?"

"I don't know," Andrew says. "I'll have to think about it."

"Andrew!"

He rolls onto his side, facing the wall again.

I grab his shoulder and force him to turn back around.

“Now you listen to me!” I snap.

He perks up, eyes wide. The last time I raised my voice at him, there was a different president residing in the White House.

“Today, some kids were bullying you at camp. You decided to leave early. You called me at work because you weren’t feeling well. Your stomach was in knots. We didn’t know if it was a bug or anxiety from how the kids treated you, but either way, you were having a really hard time. That’s why you called me at work and begged me to come home.

“When you got home, there was no body here. There was no evidence even of a crime, no signs that anybody else was in our house today. I called your father because you were distraught and I didn’t know what to do. You said you were thinking about hurting yourself.”

His already wide eyes get a little wider at this.

I bulldoze my way through the rest of the fiction.

“You told us you were thinking about hurting yourself,” I repeat. “We didn’t know if we should take you to the hospital, that’s how bad it got. Bridget stopped by because Hal wasn’t answering calls or texts and she was worried. I told her I thought you had a bug—I lied because I wanted to respect your privacy. It’s none of Bridget’s business that you were thinking about hurting yourself. After she left, we finally got you calmed down. It was a long afternoon. We all needed to unwind and decompress. Especially your father. He’s under a lot of stress ... with work. Dad went for a ride to clear his head and he left his phone here on purpose. He needed some time to himself. While he was gone, Russ stopped by because still nobody had heard from Hal, and now they’re out looking for him.”

A thought occurs to me.

“While Dad was out, you asked me why Bridget stopped by earlier. I already knew at that point Hal was missing but I

didn't say anything because I didn't think you could handle any more stress. But you kept pressing me on it and eventually I broke down and shared the news. When I told you, the news made you even more upset and your stomach was in knots. So I went to the pharmacy."

Andrew shakes his head.

"What?"

"It won't work."

"Why not?"

"Because I already knew Hal was missing."

"How did you know that?"

"I was on my tablet."

"Andrew—"

He pulls a face. "And I wouldn't be upset if Hal went missing. Because I hate him."

SARAH

FRIDAY

My 6:30 a.m. alarm jars me awake. I must have finally dozed off.

Normally Dwayne sleeps right through my alarm. But this morning it rouses him. Lying on his stomach like he usually does, he picks his head up and looks around like he doesn't know where he is.

“What time is it?”

I'm all thumbs trying to grab my phone and turn the alarm off.

“Early,” I say. “Go back to bed.”

I talked to Andrew for an hour last night in his bedroom, going over the story again and again. He would stop me every few minutes to point out how a suggested lie wouldn't work. Apparently he had snuck his tablet into his room yesterday and was IM-ing this girl Anna off and on, while checking social media for information about Hal's disappearance. Andrew uses an incognito browser when he's online, which does not keep his internet history. But there's nothing we can do about the IMs with Anna. Even if Andrew could delete his digital copy of the conversation, she still has hers.

After we got the story in as good a shape as possible, I told him to go to bed. There was no way I was sleeping, so I basically wandered the house while my mind roamed. Dwayne

didn't come home till almost 2:30 a.m. We went over every detail of my conversation with Andrew. I felt like I'd done a good job, under the circumstances, but Dwayne didn't seem happy with anything, pointing out the many problems he saw. He almost went ballistic when he found out Andrew had been on his tablet and then snapped at me when I told him what our son and Anna had been talking about.

"We don't want Andrew speaking to Hal's girlfriend right now, Sarah," he said, sighing. "Anyway, what the hell were they talking about?"

"Dating is more complicated now than when we were in school. Kids don't really do it. They sort of see a lot of—"

He held up his palm. "I don't need a sociology lecture. What about it?"

"Hal treats her horribly," I explained. "And she's one of Andrew's few friends. I think Andrew is that guy whose shoulder she cries on. Anyway, Hal was making out with somebody else and it upset Anna."

"I thought you just said kids don't date anymore."

I nodded. "Apparently, Anna thought they were exclusive. Or Hal led her to believe it. I don't know. It's difficult to get details out of Andrew. Anyway, Hal's done some other mean things to the girl. He told her she had to lose weight, and he was openly flirting with her best friend, which is still a no-no even in today's hook-up culture."

"Okay," Dwayne said. "So what?"

"So over text and IM Andrew told her how much of an asshole Hal is, how much he wanted to fight him again, only this time he'd win. He told Anna he'd been training at home, getting himself ready."

"Training?" Dwayne shook his head. "Jesus."

"It gets worse. Andrew said he wished Hal would die."

Needless to say, Dwayne wasn't too happy about it. But there was nothing we could do. All these texts and IMs are on Anna's phone or computer. We don't have access to these

things and even if we did, I'm not sure we could permanently erase them. Besides, she could always simply tell the police what Andrew had said. Even if the police couldn't access the texts or IMs, her word would be enough to put them on Andrew's trail. And once the police learn of Andrew and Hal's nasty fight in the schoolyard, it might all be enough to get them a warrant to search the house. Hal embarrassed our son badly in that fight, which the police might view as sufficient motivation for Andrew to want revenge.

We did clean the first floor and garage, but now that I think about it, we have to clean the upstairs too. Hal, or someone else, was rooting around in the bedroom. I have to clean every inch of this house.

I get out of bed, still half-asleep, and go into the master bathroom. My eyes are red and puffy, the wrinkles on my face a little more pronounced. I look like I haven't slept.

The warm shower wakes me up, though I'm definitely going to need more than one cup of coffee to get me through the day. Dwayne is sitting up in bed when I step out of the bathroom, arms folded, and staring into the middle distance. I start getting dressed, pulling on some underwear and a bra, then I pull out my favorite pair of sweat pants.

"What are you doing?" Dwayne demands.

"I was thinking I should call out of work," I say.

"What? No, absolutely not. You need to go in."

"Dwayne, I need to clean the rest of the house. It might have been Hal up here."

"I'll do that. You need to go in to work."

"But why?"

"We need to maintain appearances, Sarah."

I'm standing there in my underwear, holding the sweat pants out of in front of me. "I'm confused. Our story is that Andrew was ready to hurt himself yesterday. If that's true, wouldn't his mother stay home with him the next day?"

“No. We got him under control. If you call out of work, it might look suspicious later on.”

This doesn't make any sense. Not only would I stay home, but Dwayne would probably call out too if we had literally been considering taking Andrew to the hospital yesterday.

“Dwayne, I don't know...”

“I do. We talked to him, he's feeling better. We need everything to go back to normal. Any uncharacteristic behavior on our parts is only going to come back to bite us in the ass later, especially if this Anna tells her parents or the police what Andrew said.”

I'm still not sure. “How are you going to clean the upstairs if you're going to work?”

“I'm the boss, remember? I can go in when I want. I know exactly what I'll tell my assistant: I've decided to surprise each location with a visit. That will give me a lot of room to maneuver today, in case I need to ... you know.”

I don't know. “In case you need to what?”

“Something might come up,” Dwayne says. “Andrew might need to be picked up from camp, or maybe some new evidence comes out or, who knows? The point is, I have flexibility when it comes to work. You don't.”

He's right. It'd be better if Dwayne were “on the road” today.

“I thought Andrew should stay home today,” I say.

He's already shaking his head before I'm done. “No. He's going to camp.”

“After what those boys did to him?”

“I'll have a word with the camp director.”

“Do you think *that's* a good idea?”

“Sure. Andrew's my son and he's being bullied.”

I really think Andrew should stay home today. “He had a terrible day yesterday, and he also found out his friend is

missing.”

“Like I said, we need to keep up appearances.” Dwayne gets out of bed, very agitated. “Look, Sarah, I didn’t make this fucking mess. I’m just trying to clean it up.”

My husband curses, but he *never* curses at me. I’m shocked.

“I crossed a line yesterday when I hacked Hal’s body into pieces and buried him in the fucking...” He stops short, remembering the less I know, the better. “We’re *in this* now, Sarah. You have to listen to me and do what I say.”

I’m overwhelmed. Dwayne has never spoken to me like this before. Totally flustered, I just end up agreeing with him because I don’t want to argue.

“Okay, Dwayne. Whatever you think.”

He nods. “Good girl. Now get Andrew up. I’m driving him to camp today. You can pick him up this afternoon. I don’t want him riding his bike because then he’ll be more likely to leave in the middle of the day.”

“You’re making me go to camp?”

Our bedroom door is closed, but Andrew must be on the other side. How much of our conversation has he heard?

“Andrew!” Dwayne shouts. “I’ve talked to you about this before. You are not to eavesdrop on conversations between your mother and me.”

Dwayne stalks to the door and throws it open. At the sight of his irate father, Andrew shrinks and backs away. I grab my towel and wrap it around me—my son hasn’t seen me in my underwear in a few years now, and it feels weird.

“Get dressed,” Dwayne says. “I want everybody downstairs in five minutes so we can sit down and talk. We are going over the story again. Andrew, we’re going to talk about what you knew and when, in case anybody asks questions at camp today.”

Five minutes later, we’re sitting down at the table. I’ve heated up Andrew’s favorite breakfast—cinnamon apple

oatmeal—and made rye toast for Dwayne. I'm not hungry. Dwayne grills Andrew on the story we invented last night, tripping him up in several places. Andrew, red-faced, starts over, again and again. This must go on for twenty minutes, until Dwayne finally smiles and puts a hand on Andrew's shoulder.

“That's good, son. Very good. Now, here's the important part: at camp today, do not volunteer any information. Don't bring up Hal's disappearance. Don't even broach the subject. Okay?”

“Okay, Dad.”

“If somebody asks you about Hal, you keep it simple and as close to the truth as possible. You two haven't spoken in months. You don't know anything. Okay?”

“Anna talks to some of the people at camp,” Andrew points out.

Dwayne and I share a look.

My husband answers, “So what? You have nothing to hide. She's your friend and Hal has treated her horribly. You can say *that*, but don't get angry. Just mention it, matter of fact, if it comes up. Okay?”

“I would never kill someone,” Andrew says.

Dwayne's face brightens. “Exactly. Just like that.”

“No, Dad.” Andrew shakes his head. “I wasn't *acting* when I said that. I *meant* it.”

Dwayne's smile slips. “Oh. Right. Sorry, I thought you were—anyway, that's exactly how you should say it, if it comes up. But remember, the best thing you can do is avoid conversations like that altogether. Do you understand?”

Andrew shrugs.

“I don't know what that means,” Dwayne says.

“Yes,” Andrew says miserably. “I understand.”

“If people start talking about Hal, you can listen in to the conversation. That's what you *would* do under normal

circumstances. But don't offer up any information. Don't gossip, or debate whatever rumor is going around. You're a fly on the wall today."

"I'm always a fly on the wall."

I reach for my son's hand. "Andrew, that's not—"

"I'm done."

Andrew pulls his hand out of my reach, grabs his half-eaten bowl of oatmeal, and carries it into the kitchen. Dwayne finishes his toast, then checks his watch.

"Almost time to go," he calls out to Andrew, who's still hiding in the kitchen. "We leave in two minutes."

Andrew doesn't answer, which is one of Dwayne's pet peeves. My husband is about to raise his voice, but I hold up a hand.

"Let me talk to him."

"Fine," Dwayne says, then his eyes bulge. "Did he even take a shower yesterday? Or this morning? Goddamnit, I'm going to have to clean his room too, definitely his sheets—"

Dwayne is about to fly into a rage, so I lay a hand on his forearm.

"Yes, he showered, Dwayne. I made sure of that."

"Did you make sure he cleaned under his nails?"

I don't even want to think about why he's asking me that, but I can't help it. A ghastly image enters my mind. Andrew has Hal pinned to the floor, his hands around the other boy's throat. Andrew's nails are digging into Hal's neck, little bits of Hal's skin are getting under Andrew's—

"I didn't ask him," I admit.

"Well, I'm glad I thought of it," Dwayne says, a bit sarcastically. "You'd better ask him."

"Okay, Dwayne."

As I get up, Dwayne's hand shoots out and grips my forearm.

“No, don’t ask him. Take him into the bathroom and clean under his nails. Okay?”

He’s gripping me a little too tightly. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Good girl.” Dwayne lets go of my arm, sits back in his chair. “What would I do without you?”

I find Andrew just standing in the kitchen, doing nothing.

“Can I have my phone back?” he asks, when I stop in front of him.

“Can I trust you with it?” I ask.

“God.” He lowers his voice. “You sound like him.”

“Andrew.” I lower my voice too. “Now is not the time for this. We are in the middle of a crisis. We need to stick together, don’t you understand that?”

His shoulders sag. Next thing I know, he’s embracing me. My son never initiates hugs.

“I don’t want to go,” he whispers.

“You have to.”

“Why?”

“Because...” The truth is, I don’t think he should go either. But I can’t say that. I have to present a united front with Dwayne. He’s keeping everything together for us right now. “...that’s what your father thinks is best.”

Andrew lets me go. “What do *you* think is best?”

I force a smile. “Come with me to the bathroom.”

“Why?”

“I want to make sure your nails are clean.”

“Why?”

“It’s important, Andrew.”

A terrible recognition fills his eyes. My son is not an idiot. With a defeated look, like I’ve utterly betrayed him, Andrew walks ahead of me to the bathroom. Under the sink, I find an

extra toothbrush from one our visits to the dentist. I pass it to Andrew, who gives me a bitter look.

“Take your time. Scrub really good.”

While Andrew makes a big deal out of scrubbing under his nails, I examine his hands. There’s not a single scratch on them from what I can see. When he’s done, he puts the brush down on the sink and with an exaggerated flourish, holds his nails out for me to examine.

“They look good,” I say. “Now please wash your hands. Really well, okay?”

He sighs theatrically, but he does what I say. Andrew scrubs his hands for a full minute, the water actually beginning to steam before he’s done. When he’s finished, his hands are squeaky clean, his fingers pink.

“Is that all?” he asks.

“That’s it,” I say. “You’d better get your sneakers on.”

“Can I have my phone?”

One track mind, my son. “I’ll meet you by the front door.”

Dwayne comes into the bathroom. “Are we ready?”

“We’re ready,” I say.

Andrew isn’t moving.

Dwayne comes over and puts an arm around Andrew’s shoulders. “Everything is going to be fine, pal. You’ll see.”

“How can you know that?” he asks.

“Because I just do. You don’t have anything to worry about,” Dwayne says.

“What if the police come?” Andrew asks.

“Let them,” Dwayne says. “There’s no evidence that Hal was ever here.”

“What did you do with him?”

Dwayne doesn’t miss a beat. “I took him somewhere else.”

“What if someone finds him?”

“They won’t. I made sure of that.”

Andrew steps away from Dwayne’s arm. “Then his parents are never going to know he’s dead? That’s terrible. They’re going to be looking for him the rest of their lives!”

Dwayne always knows what to say.

Except right now.

Andrew sulks his way into the car.
“Ready?”

He grunts what I think is a yes.

Sarah waves to us from the porch as we pull away. I wave back but Andrew can't be bothered. His rudeness toward his mother drives me up a wall. Sarah is a good mother to our son.

But I've lectured him enough already this morning so I bite back what I want to say.

“So, Andrew, tell me about this Anna girl.”

He glances over at me for a moment. “What about her?”

“Who is she? What's she like?”

“Uh...” His brow furrows. “She's my friend. I, like, told you about her this year.”

“Right.” My son goes through friends like a chain smoker burns through cigarettes. It's hard to keep track of who he's talking to. “What's her last name again?”

“Silver.”

“That's right.” I tap the steering wheel like I actually remembered. “Silver.”

“Why are you asking about her?”

No reason to be coy here. My son is not an idiot.

“Why do you think?” I ask.

He grows uneasy. “I don’t think she’ll say anything.”

“Do you know that for a fact?”

He throws his hands up. “What are you saying? Nobody knows anything for sure.”

“Take it easy.” I come to a complete stop at the intersection. Apparently, I’ve developed this new habit of strictly obeying all rules of the road overnight. “I’m trying to get a sense of what you think she’ll do.”

“Why?” Andrew looks out the window. “Are you going to talk to her?”

“God, no.” I frown. “That would be really stupid.”

He seems relieved. “We’re good friends. We’re really close.”

“But Hal’s her boyfriend.”

He takes a deep breath. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Dad.”

I pull out of the development. The sky is painfully blue today, the temperature at seventy-five degrees. A perfect summer day, in an alternate reality.

“Be careful about what you say to her,” I answer. “She might be your friend, but her loyalties are divided. If you do talk to her, tone down anything you say about Hal. Express concern.”

He nods.

“Where does she live?”

“On the other side of town, in the apartments by Myers.”

“Is she at camp with you?”

“No, she’s home,” Andrew says. “Why do you keep asking me questions about her?”

“Just curious.”

A few minutes later, we arrive at the YMCA for Andrew’s wizarding camp. I ask him if he’d like me to speak to the camp director about the bullying.

“No! Don’t do that!”

I figure he’s worried about being embarrassed, so I let it go. After dropping him off, I call my assistant, Deanna. She passes a couple of messages along, then her tone grows dark.

“I’m assuming you’ve heard about Hal?” Deanna asks.

“Yes. I spoke to his father. That’s one of the reasons I’m calling.”

“Oh?”

“I was driving around till almost 3:00 a.m. looking for Hal. That’s why I got a bit of a late start this morning. Not sure when I’ll be in. Don’t tell anybody this, but I might make surprise visits to all the locations, or maybe just a few, and see what’s what. I’ll probably cut out early. If Hal hasn’t turned up, I’ll help with the search again.”

“You’ve got a meeting at 11:30 with that new vendor—”

“Re-schedule for next week, please. I’m not up for bullshit today.”

“Will do,” Deanna says. “Are you doing okay?”

Deanna worked for my father before me. She knows my family well enough to get invited to Andrew’s birthday parties. Well aware of my family’s ties with the Englishes, her asking me this question is not alarming.

“I’m worried,” I say. “I’ve known that kid his whole life. I can’t imagine what Russ and Bridget are going through right now.”

I spoke to Russ last night. I really need to make time for Bridget too.

“You know what they’re saying?” Deanna asks.

She has spent all fifty-eight years of her life in town. She knows everybody. When it comes to the latest gossip, I can always count on her.

“What’s that?”

“That Hal was involved with all these recent burglaries and that’s what got him into trouble.”

“I hope it’s not that,” I say. “And I hope he’s alright.”

“Me too,” Deanna says. “I have to admit, I hated the little shit when he was bullying Andrew. But he’s just a kid, right?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Anyway, the longer he’s missing...” Deanna’s voice trails off. “...they say it’s more likely he’s dead.”

“Right, that’s what they say. Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Dump all my calls to voicemail, okay? Only ping me if it’s an emergency.”

She laughs. “That’s what your father used to say.”

I say goodbye and pull into the parking lot of a diner to think. It’s tempting to speak to Anna’s mother. I’m confident I could convince her to tell her daughter to erase any messages from Andrew where he expresses anger or resentment toward Hal. The woman is single and works retail at the mall. All it would take is a little bit of money and some charm. I have both.

But it’s not a good idea. I’d forever be worried she’d have a change of heart, talk to the cops about the visit she got from Andrew Mullen’s father the day after Hal went missing, and then I’d be in trouble. But still, I’ve got to do something.

After I make my decision, I pull out of the lot and wind my way through town, jump on the highway, and drive twenty minutes north. The Ashford Mall isn’t open yet, but there’s a convenience store on the other side of the road. Keeping my sunglasses on, I go inside and buy two burner phones, paying with cash, then leave. I don’t know if I’ll need them, but better safe than sorry.

“Morning,” Carl says as I set my things down on the desk. I made sure to come in early since I left early yesterday.

“Morning,” I answer.

My brother-in-law is usually the first person at the office. He’s devoted to his job. He’s one of those rare people who dedicates their life to helping others. Carl is very intelligent, just like his brother, and could have run the drycleaning business with Dwayne if he’d wanted to. But he forged his own path, becoming a social worker because he wanted to make this community where he grew up into a better place.

“How we doing?” he asks, leaning against his doorway. Carl isn’t quite as tall or broad as Dwayne. The athletic gene that Dwayne inherited must have skipped him too. He’s a bit uncoordinated.

He knows about Andrew’s struggles. Normally I feel comfortable sharing with him. But normally, I’m not lying about it.

“Andrew had a really difficult day at camp,” I say, in a low voice.

No one else is in yet, but all the same Carl gestures toward his office. “Want to talk in here?”

I don’t really want to. I’d much prefer to keep my story vague, leaving me wiggle room to fill in details later if necessary. But I can’t very well *not* talk to Carl when I’m in

the habit of doing so. And I owe the man a little more of an explanation because I did leave so early.

I get up, wondering how much of a mess I look to him. I'm usually very put together—Dwayne likes it that way—but after a night of not sleeping and then a blur of a morning, I don't even remember if I put makeup on.

Carl closes the door behind him. Though he's been working at the agency ever since he graduated college and he's a great social worker, his office is tiny, a bit cramped, and incredibly messy. That's another difference between Carl and my husband. Dwayne likes everything to have a place. He gets cross if I don't turn all the labels face-out in the pantry. We like to joke that he has a touch of OCD.

I have to move a pile of case files off a chair just so I have somewhere to sit. Carl slumps in the chair behind his desk. I stifle a yawn. The minute I get out of his office, I'm headed straight for the coffeemaker.

“Is Andrew okay?” he asks.

I shake my head. Yesterday I wasn't able to really process what Andrew told me with everything else going on. Now I feel a mother's rage.

“My son actually got bullied at *wizarding camp*, for God's sake. That's the last place on Earth I would have thought that would happen. But wherever he goes...”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. If only Andrew *hadn't* come home early, things would be different. Maybe Hal English would still be alive.

Or, maybe, Hal would have still ended up dead, only *I* would have been the one to find him in the garage. Still terrible, but at least that way, I wouldn't even have to wonder if my son was a murderer. Instead of helping my husband to move a dead body, I would have just called the police.

If only, if only, if only—

I'm about to cry.

Carl pops out of his chair and comes around his desk, nearly bowling over the pile of case files stacked precariously on the corner.

“Hey, you okay?”

His hand is rubbing my shoulder.

“Sorry,” I say, getting myself under control. “Andrew was already upset, then he found out about Hal going missing and—we just had an awful night. I barely slept.”

“Jesus.” Carl gives me a hug, then sits on the edge of his desk right in front of me. “You shouldn’t be here. Go home.”

“I left early yesterd—”

He’s shaking his head. “You should be with your son.”

I agree. But that’s not the plan. I have to come up with something.

“I’d rather work, Carl.”

“But Andrew—”

“He’s at camp. I don’t want to go home and be alone all day,” I say, surprised at how convincing I sound. “I’d rather be here. At least work will take my mind off things.”

“Yeah.” Carl nods. “I understand.”

For a moment we stare at each other. I hope he doesn’t ask me any more questions. I don’t want to lie at all, but lying to Carl is really difficult. He’s always been so good to me.

“I’m assuming you heard from Russ and Bridget,” he says.

Deep breath. “Yes. It’s terrible. Dwayne was out driving around till almost 3:00 a.m. last night, looking for Hal.”

Carl nods. “Did Russ or Bridget share anything with you?”

Leave it to Carl. He’s not being nosy. The man is genuinely concerned about this boy. Carl is always the first to volunteer to help.

“Hal and Bridget got into an argument, I don’t know what about. After that, he disappeared and wasn’t answering calls or texts.”

“God,” Carl says, looking away. “I can’t imagine.”

“Me neither.” I get up. “I’m going for coffee. Can I get you one?”

“Thank you, that’d be great.”

I’m reaching for the doorknob when Carl speaks again.

“Sarah.”

His voice is grave. He sounds like he has bad news to deliver. I have no idea what it could be, but that doesn’t stop my mind from assuming the worst, that it has to do with Hal English. As I turn around to face my brother-in-law once more, I steel myself for what’s to come.

“I could get into trouble for this, but there’s something I have to tell you.”

“**Y**ou’re kidding me,” I say.
Carl shakes his head.

“Like I said, this has to remain strictly confidential,” he reminds me. “I only shared this information because I want to make sure your family is safe.”

I feel like my whole world has been upended. We should have called the police yesterday, rather than move the body. But now it’s too late.

We have doomed ourselves.

“Are they going to arrest him?”

“I’ve seen this movie before.” Carl folds his arms. “It’s only a matter of time.”

Oh my God.

“How much time?”

He holds out a palm. “I’m guessing here. But John DeMarco is an addict, and addicts do stupid things. Even the smartest criminals leave a trail of evidence. And this kid isn’t going to be a Rhodes scholar. John told me he’s broken into a few homes, sometimes in the middle of the day. The police will have this cracked in a week or two, I’ll bet.”

Sometimes in the middle of the day...

Because John is his patient, Carl is bound to hold any talk of prior criminal activity John has shared in confidence. He’s

been in the same spot before with other clients, where he knows they've done something and are likely going to be arrested soon.

I've also worked with Carl long enough to have some ideas of my own. "John was stealing to pay for his drugs, wasn't he?"

Carl nods. "Same old, same sad story."

"How did he get into all these houses?" I'm doing my best to hide how worried I am. "Did he have help?"

Carl gives me a long look. "Yes."

I swallow hard. "Did he say who?"

"No. But once the police get hold of him, he'll start talking. No honor among thieves, as they say."

I take a moment to process what Carl has shared. John DeMarco is the person breaking into houses around town. Living just down the block, he's in the perfect position to case our house, knowing our comings and goings this week. And Carl thinks he had help.

The picture is coming into focus now.

Hal could have used the spare key and let himself and John inside. Following that premise, my mind quickly fills in the rest of the story in broad strokes: Hal had second thoughts once they were in the house, the two of them got into an argument, things got out of hand, John killed Hal, and then he fled the scene, leaving the body behind.

If that's true, it's proof positive my Andrew isn't a killer.

The only problem is, Dwayne is still guilty of covering up a crime.

I bury my emotions as far down as they'll go.

Could John DeMarco be a killer?

He's always been wild and reckless. A frequent subject of gossip around the neighborhood, John wrapped his father's Lexus around a telephone pole last year while still on his learner's permit. He walked away without a scratch. Two

weeks later, his parents left for his father's business trip to Colorado. John was still grounded at the time for totaling the Lexus but didn't hesitate to throw a keg party. Someone called the police—I'm guessing Nora.

But reckless is one thing. Violent is another.

"His father brought him in a week ago," Carl explains. "When he found cocaine in John's backpack."

"My God."

I'm going to be sick.

If John broke into the house with Hal...

...and the police arrest John...

...and they're able to place Hal in our home...

...then Dwayne will be in trouble for...

"Sarah, are you okay?"

I must look a sight to him. "It's scary to think that someone living on my street was breaking into homes. If he's high on something and comes into my house, who knows what could happen."

Carl nods. "That's why I had to tell you."

I feel his hand on my shoulder again.

"Thank you, Carl."

I return to my desk, coffee forgotten. From where I'm sitting, I can see Carl in his chair, eyes on the computer monitor in front of him. It's still early enough that the office is mostly empty so I call Dwayne from my desk.

It goes straight to voicemail.

I don't understand why he'd have his phone off when he's supposed to be home, cleaning the house.

“**H**e’s dead.”

I keep my eyes on the table as I mindlessly take another bite out of my peanut butter sandwich. All anybody can talk about is Hal.

“He’s not dead.”

“Then what happened to him?”

“He ran away.”

“Why would he run away?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“That’s what Cheryl said.”

“How would she know? Is she giving him treats too?”

Everybody laughs. I realize I should smile, at the very least. The other boys find it funny that Hal got both Stephanie and Lori to give him blowjobs. I happen to know that it’s true about Stephanie. She’s Anna’s friend, or was, and confessed to her at a party one night after she drank a whole beer.

“No, you idiot. Cheryl knows because Anna told her.”

It’s the first moment of silence since we sat down to lunch. Up until now, our conversation has been filled with rumors and wild speculation. This counts as a rumor too, but given that Anna is the alleged source, it rings with a sound like truth.

“Did Anna tell *you* that?”

I try to pretend like I don't realize this question has been directed at me. I do that a lot: act like I don't hear, or understand. The first few times I tried it, the trick didn't work. But I committed to it and over time it became my thing. Now I pretend to not hear them say, *Andrew's off in his own world again.*

"Yo, shit talker!" Don calls out, from the other end of the table. "Are you thinking about shoving your wand up your ass again?"

The whole table bursts into laughter. I smile nervously, like I'm laughing along with them, like I'm in on the joke and not the butt of the joke.

"You're up Anna's ass," Don says, drawing more laughs. "What did she say to you?"

I play dumb. "About what?"

That jerk sitting across from me is now red-faced, in hysterics.

"About what?" Don mimics, giving my voice a more nasally, pathetic sound. "About Hal, dumbass. Try to keep up."

"Yeah, come on, Andrew, we all know you love her."

"You talk to her every night."

I force another smile. "We're just friends."

"You love her, come on."

"You want to marry her."

"No, he doesn't! He wants to marry a dude."

I take another bite of my sandwich and hope that my silence is enough to change the course of the conversation.

It isn't.

Don leans forward. "What did she say?"

I shrug. "She's worried."

"Did you tell her?" Don asks.

"Tell her what?"

Don gets this evil grin and shares a look with the other boys at the table. “That you love her?”

“No.”

I can’t hold his stare and look away. The worst part about this is it isn’t even true. Anna is only a friend. I’m not even *attracted* to her.

“Hold on,” Don says, wagging a finger at me. “I just had an idea.”

I don’t look at him.

“I think I know what happened to Hal.”

I freeze. Everybody is looking back and forth between Don and me.

“Yeah,” Don goes on. “He *owned* you in that fight. He made you look like a pussy. Remember? Shit talker here was crying like a bitch.”

I’m shaking my head. Don calls me shit talker because of what I said earlier in the week. He didn’t hold a door for me. When people are rude, which is all the time, I get triggered. Wanting to get him into trouble, I later told one of the counselors he called me a fag, which wasn’t true at the time. But I was so mad at him, and sometimes I can’t help what I say. It’s the ADHD, always getting me into trouble.

After I was caught in my lie, Don took full advantage of the situation. Now that nobody believes he called me a fag earlier this week, he’s attacked me with homosexual slurs, knowing he likely won’t get into trouble for them.

“You wanted to get him back, didn’t you?” Don says, really grilling me now. I can feel the sweat on my back. “I mean, he kicks your ass and then dates the girl you love? Cheats on her too...” Don is shaking his head. “Guys, I think we’ve found our suspect.”

Some people are still laughing. But not everyone.

A few of the other kids have grown serious. They’re watching me, checking my reaction for any signs of a lie.

Don asks, “Did you do it?”

My voice cracks. “Do what?”

“*Do what?*” Don howls after he mimics me again. “Do what? Come on, shit-for-brains, you know what I’m asking. Did you *kill* Hal?”

“N-n-no.”

The laughter has died out now. Everybody is staring at me. The only person still smiling is Don. He’s really enjoying watching me squirm.

“You didn’t kill him?”

“No.”

“Then why do you sound so sus?”

“I d-d-don’t.”

One of the other kids points at me. “Holy shit, I think he’s lying.”

“I’m not lying.”

“He killed Hal!” another blurts out.

I stand up. My eyes are teary.

“I didn’t do anything!”

Gripping my brown paper bag, I move away from the table. I’m too frazzled to even notice what’s happening around me. I end up backing into the kid sitting behind me at another table and lose my footing. My sandwich and lunch bag go flying. Everybody’s laughing at me again, while Don starts to chant.

“Kil-ler! Kil-ler!”

As I bolt toward the exit, the chanting intensifies. A few of the camp counselors are trying to quiet everyone down. One of them yells at me to stop running, but I do what I do: act like I didn’t hear or understand. I throw open the door and nearly run into someone I never expected to see today.

Anna.

“KIL-LER! KIL-LER!”

I pull the door shut quickly.

Anna is looking past me, to the lunch room. She obviously was able to hear what the kids were shouting.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“What’s happening?” She frowns. “Andrew, what are they saying?”

“Nothing. It’s just a joke.”

She doesn’t believe me.

I ask again, “What are you doing here?”

“I…” She looks very confused, and a little worried. “I had to talk to you.”

“Okay.”

The door to the lunchroom bursts open and one of the counselors sticks his head out. “Andrew, where are you going?”

“Uh, I’m not feeling well again.” I pat my stomach. “I’m going.”

“This time, make sure to call your parents and let them know.”

“Okay, thanks.”

The counselor ducks back into the lunchroom. I’m relieved to hear the chanting has died down. Everybody is back to eating and speculating about Hal.

“Why were they calling you that word, Andrew?” Anna asks.

“I told you, it was a joke.”

Without opening my mouth and risking saying anything else I’m going to regret, I walk past her and head down the hallway to the room where I keep my bag. After quickly packing up, I leave the building with a confused-looking Anna in tow.

“Andrew, I’m really sorry about last night,” Anna says, hurrying to match my gait. “I didn’t mean anything. I’m just worried about Hal.”

“That’s okay,” I say. “Forget about it.”

I push through the exterior door and the heat and humidity hit me. I feel like I’m moving through soup.

“Can you slow down?” Anna asks.

I’m almost to the street when I stop and turn. Anna has asthma; I forgot. She pulls an inhaler out of her pocket and puts it up to her mouth. She puffs, air shooting into her mouth.

“Sorry,” I say.

She takes another puff then puts her inhaler away. Today she’s wearing a spaghetti-strap t-shirt and shorts that show off the bottom of her ass. I want to ask why she’s dressed like that, but that would only lead to another argument.

“So what’s up?” I ask. “Why’d you come all the way here?”

Anna walks over to a tree and collects her bike. She lives on the other side of town. This was no short ride for her.

“Have you heard from Hal?” she asks.

“No.”

I don’t know what else to say. Anna jumps on my silence. She stops walking her bike and grabs my forearm. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No. I mean—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She closes her eyes and rubs her forehead for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

“I didn’t tell you everything.” Her eyes open. “Yesterday.”

I get a sinking feeling.

Anna takes a deep breath. “Hal said he was going to do something that could get him into trouble. He told me he was really scared, and that it was going to change everything, but that it had to be done.”

“Did he say what it was?”

“All he said was that his parents weren’t going to be happy.”

I keep putting off the one phone call I absolutely have to make.

After dealing with Anna's mom and extricating myself from the cramped, dingy office of that cheap t-shirt store at the mall, I made a token appearance at our shop a few minutes away, then drove straight home. I went upstairs and remembered to tidy up my dresser and pull the bed back into its normal position. Just to be thorough, I carefully study the rest of the room for any strange signs.

Finding nothing, I pull the carpet cleaner out of the basement, fill it with soap, and go to work, starting downstairs.

It's after lunch by the time I'm done. I've missed a call from Sarah. If it was important, she would have called back, or at the least texted. Whatever it is can wait. I've got to make another call first.

I bring up Bridget's number.

For a moment, I consider texting. It would be easier. A hell of a lot easier.

But she'd find it odd and cold. The woman is emotional and volatile right now, liable to do or say anything. As a matter of fact, that is Bridget's personality: high one moment, down the next, on edge after, laughing again in five minutes. She is a bundle of jagged, extreme emotions. She just puts on that suburban housewife face and smiles her way through it, making everyone—even me—think everything is perfect.

It's not.

I'm dreading this phone call, but I can't put it off any longer.

"Hi, Dwayne," she answers in a flat voice.

"Bridget ... my God, I'm so sorry."

"Why didn't you call yesterday?"

I can tell she's been crying.

"You came by and spoke with Sarah, then Russ was here, and then I talked to Russ. I didn't want to do anything suspicious."

"Um-hum."

The woman is probably sitting in her living room, two blocks over. But she might as well be a million miles away with that cold tone.

"I really needed to talk to you yesterday," she says.

"Hey, come on. I didn't know what to do. I drove around for three hours last night, looking."

"You should have called."

Careful. I have to be really careful here.

"Did you see Hal yesterday?" she asks.

"No, I didn't."

Bridget grows quiet.

I say, "Any news?"

"No." Her voice is like a razor blade, cutting. "We have no idea where he is. Nobody does."

"I'm sorry."

Her next words are like a splash of cold water in the face.

"Dwayne, I think he *knows*."

DWAYNE

I've had feelings for Bridget for a long time. But I was never quite good enough for her.

Until a few months ago, when suddenly I was good enough for her. She came to me in a moment of weakness, and I couldn't say no. Since then, Bridget hasn't been able to say no either, and things have only grown more complicated between us. It's more than just sex, but I won't lie: sex is a *big* part of it.

I say, "What makes you think Hal knows?"

"He asked if I was ... if *we* were..."

No. No, no, no.

"What did you say?"

"What do you think?" she says. "I lied.""

"When was this?"

"When I got home."

Jesus.

"Then what happened?"

"We got into an argument," Bridget says. "I tried to calm him down, but he ran out of the house and rode off on his bike. I drove past your house looking but didn't see him. So I went around the block a few times. When I didn't hear anything from you, I figured he didn't go to your house."

"He didn't," I say.

“Anyway, that was the last time I spoke to him.”

“Bridget, I’m so sorry.”

“Where is he, Dwayne? Where did he go?”

“I don’t know,” I say, the lie coming easily. “Did he look at your phone again?”

“No.” She grows defensive. “I was careful. I swear.”

“I know you were. I was just asking.”

“I’ve been following the rules,” she says.

I let out a big breath. When she says *the rules*, she means *my rules*.

“You can understand why I’m asking. If Sarah found out...”

“I know, Dwayne. I’m in the same boat, remember?”

“Of course.”

Her voice breaks, and my heart along with it. “Where is he? Where would he go?”

I shake my head.

“Where’s Russ?” I ask.

“Driving,” she says. “He’s headed out to the highway.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Try not to go out of my mind.” She laughs an ugly laugh. “Try not to drink myself stupid, in case I have to get behind a wheel again.”

“Don’t think like that,” I say. “Hal is going to turn up. Everything will be fine.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just do.”

“Can you come over?”

“*Right now?*”

“I need you.”

Despite the terrible situation, I feel myself getting excited. Nothing turns me on more than a woman telling me she needs a big strong man to take care of her.

“Bridge...”

“What? We’ve been friends forever, and my son is missing. It wouldn’t look weird.”

I’m all too eager to be talked into it. But I need to be careful. “You know I’d be there if I could, Bridge. But it’s not a good idea.”

She makes me wait for her response. “No. I suppose you’re right.”

I try not to sound relieved. “I’ve gotta clean some things up at the office, then I’m going out again.”

“Where is my boy?” she asks, on the verge of tears.

“He’s out there,” I say. “I know he is. Now I’ve got to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I love you, Dwayne.”

“Love you too, Bridge.”

I stare at the phone for a moment, then place my palms on the island counter in the kitchen and lower my head. That went about as well as I could have hoped.

I should really call Sarah back, but I can’t have a conversation with her right now after having just spoken to Bridget. I need a reset.

I grab a couple beers and sit in the living room where I can watch the street but not be seen. This thing with Bridget technically started a few months ago, but from my perspective, it’s been going on forever.

She was my first crush—and then my first love. She was the one girl in high school I wanted but couldn’t quite have. Bridget’s dream guy was a good-looking man who came from money or who almost certainly was going to be wealthy. Despite my very average prospects, I still had a chance with her until the beginning of senior year, when my father was let

go from the shop and my plans to go to college evaporated. All of a sudden, Bridget's interest waned. Russ, on the other hand, was getting a full ride with his grades.

I'm not calling Bridget superficial or materialistic, but when you grow up poor, these things make a difference. When it was clear my chances with Bridget were over, college was no longer a realistic possibility, and it looked like I was doomed to work menial jobs, I fell into a self-destructive pattern. We all do stupid things when we're kids.

Turns out, we continue to do stupid things when we're adults.

While I'm sitting on the couch and reliving the past, a familiar-looking tan SUV comes down the street, slowing almost imperceptibly in front of our house.

It's Russ.

He continues down the street at a crawl.

Bridget just said he was headed for the highway. So what's he doing in the neighborhood?

Leaving my beer on the coffee table, I hurry to the front door and poke my head outside. It's gotten hotter and more humid since I got home. The insects are whirring. Russ's SUV hasn't gotten far. Its brake lights activate, and it slows to a stop in front of the DeMarcos' house.

My phone rings. Sarah calling. With a sigh, I answer.

"Hey, hon."

"I've been trying to reach you," she says.

"You only called once. I didn't think it was an emergency."

"When I couldn't get you on your cell, I tried the house. Then I emailed. You said you were going to be home, cleaning the house. Where have you been?"

"Whoa," I say. That's not how this relationship works. "Calm down. I've been busy as hell. I had to run out, stop in one of the shops, and I just spent the last hour using the carpet

cleaner. What the hell do you think I've been up to, Sarah? Do you think I'm just fucking around?"

I wait for her apology.

"I'm really sorry, Dwayne. I should have thought."

"Yeah, you should have."

"It's just, I'm so worried. I can't sit still at my desk. I can barely think."

I've already dropped the hammer, so it's time to be conciliatory. "I'm sorry, hon."

"There's something I have to tell you."

"Where are you?" I ask. I don't like the panicked tone in her voice. "Are you alone?"

"I'm in the car, taking my fifteen. It's about that boy that lives down the street, John."

"What about him?"

"He's been breaking into people's houses and stealing things. He's an addict."

"How do you know this?"

"He's been to see your brother. Carl told me in confidence. He was worried about us."

Leave it to Carl. The guy could get into serious trouble for sharing that information with us, but he's willing to risk his career. My brother has always looked out for me.

"Dwayne," Sarah says, almost breathless. "Don't you think ... maybe it was *him*?"

"Maybe," I say. Now I understand why she's so worried.

"If he gets arrested, and if he confesses to being in our house..." she says.

"Not good," I say.

"What are we going to do?"

I look down the street. Russ has gotten out of his car and is approaching the DeMarcos' front door.

“I’ll think of something,” I say.

DWAYNE

Russ has been inside the DeMarcos' house for almost ten minutes, while I've been standing on the sidewalk next to his SUV. I'm about to walk back home when I hear the door open.

"Hey, buddy," I say.

"Hey, pal."

We meet on the sidewalk and I give him a hug, thumping his back.

"I stopped home and just happened to see your car go by," I say. "Any word?"

"Not yet." Russ bobs his head toward the DeMarcos' house. "I'm going door-to-door now. Figured I'd start here with John since he was home."

I wonder at that. Russ skipped over plenty of doors on his way here, coming straight to this house. That suggests he wanted to speak to John DeMarco specifically, as opposed to performing a general canvassing of the neighborhood.

Does that mean Russ knows something?

When he doesn't elaborate, I ask, "Anything I can do?"

Normally Russ is very decisive. But right now he seems utterly lost, unsure of himself. "I could use some company, I guess. I've been in my head too much the last two days."

We hop in his SUV. Russ drives slowly up the street, checking houses. Most of the driveways and garages are

empty—it's the middle of the day, after all.

“Everybody's still at work,” he says. “This was a dumb idea.”

I shake my head. “You're doing everything you can. If it were my son, I'd be out here too.”

He pops a K-turn at the end of the street and backtracks, passing my house. Next door, the Smiths are home; at least Nora is. She's a busybody, always sticking her nose in everybody's business. Russ parks in front of their house.

“I might as well try Nora,” he says.

She's the last person I want him speaking to. Nora is a gossip queen. Where there isn't any drama, she makes sure to invent some. Who the hell knows what she's going to say? Even if she makes an innocent comment about seeing a bike in our backyard, it could lead the conversation somewhere dangerous.

Then again, I can't order Russ to avoid her.

I make a face. “I don't have to tell you this, but take half of everything this woman says with a grain of salt. You know what she's like.”

He gives me a sad smile. “At this point, I'll take whatever I can get.”

The Smiths' porch is spotless. A few rockers sit in front of the bay window overlooking the street. Nora is out here with a broom every day. I think sweeping the porch constantly gives her the perfect excuse to watch the neighborhood.

Russ rings the doorbell. Nora Smith's face appears in the sidelite window and she adopts a serious expression when she see it's us.

The door opens. “Oh, Russ, I'm so sorry. I heard the news late last night. Is Hal back home?”

“He's still missing,” Russ answers in a thick voice.

She invites us in. Nora has the air conditioning blasting. She's dressed in pants, a shirt, and she's got a cardigan on too.

Ninety-plus degrees outside, but sixty degrees in here.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

We settle in the den. I haven't been inside the Smiths' house in years, but it looks pretty much the same. Nora's husband, Tom, is an avid golfer, and he's got pictures of famous courses and players on the wall. The guy plays several times a week and practices a ton, much more than me anyway, but whenever we have a match, I'm still giving him two shots a side. Some people just never get better.

Nora appears a moment later carrying a tray loaded with a pitcher of iced tea and crackers. She stoops to place the tray on the coffee table. We make small talk while she pours out three glasses, then she gets herself situated on the recliner.

Russ says, “Nora, I know you probably would have contacted me already if you had any information, but all the same, I figured I'd ask. Did you see Hal at any point yesterday?”

“Not yesterday,” she says, pausing dramatically. “But I *did* see him the day before.”

I have to tell myself not to fidget. Nora loves theatrics, so maybe this is nothing. But, judging by the way her eyes slide over to me, she might have something important to share.

The woman is such a ham, she actually waits for Russ to ask, “Where did you see him?”

Nora motions. “He was riding his bike back in the woods here.”

“Behind your house?” Russ sits up. “What was he doing?”

“He was by himself. He rode past a few times. But then he stopped and was just sitting there. Almost like he was *watching*.”

I roll my eyes, but I'm squirming on the inside. I have a sneaking suspicion about what Hal was doing back there.

“Watching what?” Russ asks.

“I don’t know. He was closer to Dwayne’s property. He was there, sat up on his bike, looking at the house.”

“At Dwayne’s house?”

She nods.

I feel my face turn red. “That’s odd. How long was he out there?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Kids are back there all the time, riding bikes or running around. A lot of them go there to be alone, or to get out of the heat in summer.”

It’s wooded behind our homes. The properties technically abut the golf course, though there’s about fifty yards of trees between our back yards and the fifth hole, a long par-four. Though it’s private property, most of the families living here are members and the golf course has gotten into the habit of looking the other way when members and their families use the trails to get around the neighborhood.

“But with what happened between them,” Nora goes on, “seeing Hal back there did seem unusual.”

Russ and I have been best friends going on thirty years, but that doesn’t change the fact that our boys have a complicated history. Hal and Andrew were close for most of their lives, before things turned a year or so ago.

Andrew claims that Hal bullied him throughout the school year. Sarah, ever gullible, believed our son’s story, but I spotted a few holes in Andrew’s account. When pressed, Andrew admitted to talking shit about Hal, though he claimed that was only in response to Hal’s nasty behavior. I wasn’t so sure about that.

Eventually, things came to a head and the boys got into it at school. I knew there was more to the story than Andrew was sharing, but when we spoke to the principal I pretended like I didn’t know that and took a firm stance that Hal was the aggressor.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard, Nora,” I say, sticking out a palm. “But our sons are on good terms. Boys get into fights one minute, then they’re best friends the next. Anyway,

we sat them down and had them apologize and that was that. There were no hard feelings.”

That’s putting things a bit too simply, but Nora doesn’t need to know that Hal embarrassed Andrew in the school yard. To make matters worse, every kid watching the brawl had their phone out so that Andrew and Hal’s brief and one-sided fight made the rounds on YouTube before the school had it taken down. Andrew was mortified, and I know he bears a grudge. Who wouldn’t?

“So Hal was back there for a little bit?” Russ asks, trying to get her back on track.

“I guess it was ten, maybe fifteen minutes.” Nora takes a sip of her iced tea. “But not yesterday. Bridget came through yesterday.”

I make sure I stay still. It’s not unusual for Bridget to be back there.

Bridget is very athletic and keeps in fantastic shape. She loves jogging through the woods, especially on hot summer days where the trees provide some cooler air and shade. Russ must already know this, and I don’t want it to seem like a big deal.

“You saw Bridget?”

Russ is talking to Nora, but he flicks a glance my way.

“Yes,” Nora says. “She’s back there a lot, always running.”

“Right,” Russ says, returning his gaze to Nora. “She does love to run.”

“But now that I know about Hal, I’m wondering if she was looking for him,” Nora says. “She wasn’t actually running yesterday, she was only walking.”

“What time was this?”

Nora pretends to think about it, but I see right through the act. This woman probably keeps a surveillance notebook.

“It was still morning, but getting closer to lunch,” Nora says.

Russ gives me another glance. His expression is neutral, though I'm worried about what must be going through his mind. I hold his gaze for just long enough, hoping it seems like a natural reaction to his glance.

After such a long pause, I begin to think he's done asking Nora questions. But then Russ says, "Did Andrew come out to meet Hal the day before yesterday?"

I can't help my reaction.

"Oh." Nora senses the change in the room, looking from Russ back to me. "I don't think so."

"But you don't know."

I should be angry at Russ accusing Andrew of something. I try to appear mad, but in truth I'm panicked.

"Well." Nora laughs nervously. "I wasn't just sitting here, watching Hal the whole time."

"But you know he was back there for ten or fifteen minutes."

Nora blushes. "That's an estimate."

Russ gives me an apologetic look, but I have to jump on Nora's last answer to make a point.

"So you don't know if he was standing there for fifteen straight minutes," I say, turning back to Nora, and putting an edge in my voice. "Since you weren't watching the whole time."

"It was close to that," Nora says. She has grown very uncomfortable in our presence now, sensing the surprising tension between me and Russ. "I was in the kitchen, unloading the dishwasher, then handwashing some china ... it was about ten or fifteen minutes, I'd say."

I let it go. Who knows what else she'll say, and besides, Russ looks like he's embarrassed now at having put questions to Nora that are incriminating to Hal.

"Thanks, Nora," Russ says quickly. "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

“It’s nothing.”

Russ rises. “We’ll show ourselves out.”

Outside, the heat is now sweltering. I pull Nora’s door closed, and we stand on her porch a moment to stay out of the sun.

“Sorry, Dwayne, I didn’t realize how that must have sounded...” Russ stammers. “What do you think Hal was doing, watching your house?”

I give him a hard stare, playing the part of an angry father. “No idea. But keep in mind she’s a gossip who loves stirring shit up.”

“I don’t think she’s lying about Hal.”

“Maybe,” I say. “Kids are back there all the time on their bikes. But watching my house? Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know.” Russ turns to look in the direction of my house, and his expression changes at the sight of something. “Are you expecting company?”

When I turn around to look, I see a sedan slowing to a stop in front of my house. Both doors open. Out step a middle-aged, heavysset, balding man and a thirty-something woman, both wearing suits.

It’s the police.

DWAYNE

The detectives are obviously here to see me. I put on the act, hoping I appear confused, or surprised, or both. Russ's eyes linger on me before he hurries up the sidewalk to meet them. I follow.

Russ says, "Any news?"

"Mr. English." Detective Carter extends a hand. "I'm afraid not. We are making inquiries."

Russ shakes the detective's hand as I come up beside my friend. There's an awkward moment of silence while Russ and Carter look at me.

"Dwayne," Russ says, "I, uh, think you already know—"

I eye the detective. "I know who Liam is."

"Hello, Dwayne," Carter says.

The detective's beady eyes are steady on me. Liam is a few years older than us. Back in high school he was an accomplished wrestler who nearly won states for his weight class, making him the talk of the town for years. The man is still short but he's no longer that wiry teenager who could choke out anybody that gave him a dirty look. The guy's now as wide as he is tall.

He's hated me for years.

We don't shake hands.

"Dwayne," Carter says, "do you mind if we come inside to talk?"

I don't want the police inside my house, obviously. But all the same, I can't very well demand they get a warrant as that would look suspicious, and it's much too hot outside to suggest we have a conversation on the porch.

Russ is watching me like a hawk.

"Sure," I say. "What's this about?"

Carter keeps his expression neutral. "It's best if we speak inside. Could you show my partner in? I'd like a quick word with Russ first."

"Yeah, no problem."

I wish I could overhear their conversation, but that's not happening. I meet the other detective by the unmarked police car.

"I'm Maya Lopez." She offers her hand. Maya is a little taller than Liam Carter and whip-thin. "Nice to meet you."

"You must be hot," I say, trying the friendly approach with her. "Let's get inside."

"My partner has told me a lot about you," she says.

The words feel like a warning shot.

"Your partner doesn't really know a lot about me." I step onto the porch and turn around to face her. Nobody's going to bully me, not even the police. "The last time we spoke there was a Bush in the White House."

"It doesn't always take long to get to know someone." She smiles politely, but there's a playfulness in her eyes, like she enjoys the challenge of bantering with a person of interest. "Especially under extreme circumstances."

As she comes up the steps of my porch, I steal a glance at Carter and Russ. The two men are deep in quiet conversation, standing only a foot apart. Carter is doing the talking. I can't help but feel he's sharing an important development in the case.

While I show Lopez in, Carter and Russ shake hands, then the older detective waddles toward my house. The man is

deliberately taking his time, drawing this uncomfortable moment out. Russ gets in his car and heads off. When Carter reaches my steps, I hold up a palm.

“Liam, I don’t appreciate you poisoning your partner’s well.”

He’s surprised by my attitude. “I haven’t poisoned anybody’s well.”

“It’s been seventeen years,” I say. “Are you ever going to be man enough to admit you were wrong?”

He shakes his head. “You really wanna have this conversation out here?”

“Why not?” I fold my arms. “I don’t have anything to hide.”

I sense his partner coming up behind me. “Mr. Mullen, why don’t we start over inside?”

Carter comes up the steps and stops in front of me. If he wasn’t carrying a badge, I’d lay this guy out.

“I assume this is about Hal English,” I say. Carter doesn’t react. “That boy is more important than whatever differences you and I have. I’m willing to start over, assuming you’re man enough to do the same.”

Detective Carter’s face betrays no emotion. “Let’s go inside.”

Carter barely fits through the door, he’s so wide. It’s thirty degrees cooler inside the house. The AC should feel great, but instead it’s giving me a nasty chill.

“Were you cleaning something up?” Lopez asks, looking into the living room.

I try not to react. I did not put the carpet cleaner away before I went outside in the hopes of understanding what Russ was doing over at the DeMarcos’ place.

“Spring cleaning,” I say.

“It’s not spring anymore,” Carter points out, unable to keep the condescending tone out of his voice.

“We’re just getting to it. The end of the school year is always so busy.”

Lopez moves into the living room, obvious about studying the carpet. “Did you spill something out here?”

“No,” I say quickly. “It’s been a few years since we shampooed the carpets. We were overdue.”

Lopez nods.

Carter puts his hands in his pockets. “Is there anybody else in the house, Dwayne?”

“No.”

“Your wife’s not home? Or your boy?”

“My wife is at work. My son is at camp.”

He nods, like this correlates to information he already has. “What are you doing home so early?”

“I was out earlier,” I say, opting to keep things vague. “Ran over to one of the shops, but I’m basically working from home today.”

“How does that work?” Carter asks. “Just out of curiosity. I mean, you run a drycleaning business—how do you do your work from home?”

It takes all my willpower not to roll my eyes. The man is obviously trying to goad me.

“I’m the owner. I don’t do the actual drycleaning myself, Liam.”

“Right.” He fakes a smile. “Of course. So what *do* you do?”

“Payroll, taxes, HR issues, work with our vendors and suppliers. Basically, everything. When you own a business, everything is your responsibility.”

“I see.”

“Mr. Mullen,” Lopez says, coming back into the foyer. “You mentioned Hal English outside. Why do you think we’re here about that?”

They're going to make everything difficult.

"We are close with Russ and Bridget," I say. "Our boys have been friends their whole lives."

"Until recently," Carter mentions.

Before I can address his point, Lopez raises a palm. "I'm sorry, Mr. Mullen. But you didn't actually answer my question. How exactly did you find out about Hal's disappearance?"

I'll give them this. They're doing everything in their power to unbalance me. But I'm glad I'm the one answering questions. Andrew or my wife would crack under this pressure. At least this way I can set the stage, and hopefully throw them off our trail.

I walk them through our story.

"When was the last time you saw Hal?" Lopez asks.

I have to think about it.

"Jeez... I don't know. A couple weeks ago, I guess."

I realize, at this worst possible moment, that the last time I saw Hal he was talking to John DeMarco.

I don't want to put that thought in their head.

"Where did you see him?" Lopez asks.

"I was driving through town and saw him on his bike with some friends."

That's vague enough. It'll be difficult for them to pin that down and call me a liar.

"I thought your two families were close," Carter points out.

"We are. But like I said, the end of the school year is busy, then summer camps start and before you know it, it's August and you're already preparing for next school year."

Neither Carter nor Lopez acknowledge how busy life can get, how easily you can go from seeing close friends every week to months going by with no contact. The two detectives

share a look, and then Lopez says, “Mr. Mullen, would you mind if we sat down?”

That means this is not going to be a short conversation.

“Sure. Can I get either of you something to drink?”

“I’m fine,” Carter says.

“A glass of water would be great, thanks,” Lopez says.

I show them into the living room. Lopez sits but Carter remains standing. He’s got his eyes on the carpet cleaner.

I return with a glass of water and hand it to Lopez. She takes a sip and puts the glass on the end table next to her chair.

“Mr. Mullen,” Lopez begins hesitantly, like she’s embarrassed by the delicate question she has to ask. She’s a pretty good actress. “I’m afraid we have to ask you some questions about your son’s relationship with Hal.”

“Okay.”

She smiles like we’re friends. “Did you know your son threatened Hal two weeks ago?”

My stomach drops. “No, I had no idea.”

She gives me a sympathetic look, like this conversation pains her. “This apparently happened over at Sprinkles, that ice cream parlor not far from your—”

“I know it.”

“Right.” She pauses. “Hal was there with some friends. According to them, your son instigated the confrontation.”

Sarah usually takes Andrew for ice cream on Fridays. She’s been trying to lose a few pounds recently, however, and hasn’t been getting herself anything. So whenever this happened, she probably drove and then let Andrew run inside by himself to get his treat.

“This is news to me...” I feel like I’m sinking. “What did he say exactly?”

Carter is the one who drops the hammer. “That he was going to kill Hal.”

I shake my head. “But why?”

Carter cocks his head to the side and puts on an annoying smile. “Come on, Dwayne. He picked a fight with Hal a few months ago at school. Is this really that surprising?”

“Hold on.” I stick out a palm. “Andrew did not pick the fight. Hal did.”

Carter purses his lips. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes.”

He shrugs. “Well, we’ve got several witnesses saying otherwise.”

“I’ll bet all of them are Hal’s friends.”

Carter is still smiling. “I’d be happy to talk to some of Andrew’s friends and get their side of the story.”

Bastard. He must know Andrew doesn’t have a lot of friends.

“The point is,” I say, “Andrew didn’t pick the fight. Hal spent most of the school year making fun of him, behind his back and to his face. Andrew had enough.”

“And yet, somehow, you’re still close with Russ and Bridget,” Carter points out.

This is not going well.

“It’s complicated.” I tell myself to keep calm. “Russ has been my friend since grade school. Bridget and I have been close since high school.”

The detectives share a look when I mention Bridget. It’s noticeable enough, but I plow on, determined to get through my story.

“Our boys were friends growing up,” I say. “It was only recently they grew apart and then had this falling out. But after they got into it, we sat down as families and talked everything out. The boys shook hands and made up. That was it.”

“Or so you thought,” Carter says.

“Mr. Mullen,” Lopez jumps in, before I can respond to Carter. “Would you mind if we spoke to your son?”

“I’d like to be there.”

“Of course,” she says. “We would never speak to a minor without a parent present.”

“You’ve got to understand something about my son,” I say. “Andrew has some challenges. He has learning differences: ADHD, executive functioning issues, and some other things. We’re still trying to pin it all down. He doesn’t always think before he—” I almost said *Before he does something*. “—before he *says* something. But he’s got a good heart. He wouldn’t hurt a fly. Like I said, Hal was pushing his buttons all year long and Andrew had had enough.”

“Where did he get the knife?” Lopez asks.

“Knife? What are you talking about?”

I’m in a cold sweat. These two detectives have information I do not. It gives them a deadly advantage.

“He flashed a knife at the ice cream parlor,” Carter says.

“What?”

“He drew it half out of his pocket after he threatened to kill Hal.”

The room starts doing a slow spin.

“Who saw this? Just Hal?”

“I’m afraid not,” Lopez says, again acting pained. “Two of Hal’s friends—”

“Hal’s friends.”

“—and a couple sitting at the next table. We spoke to them as well.”

Where did Andrew get a knife? And why the hell didn’t he mention this? I thought I plugged a leak this morning by finessing Anna’s mom, when I should have been dealing with this. Then again, what could I have done? Multiple witnesses

saw this, and who knows if money or my charms would have worked with all of them.

No. This was a time bomb scheduled to go off at this very moment.

“We really have to speak with him,” Lopez says. “When will Andrew be home?”

“Later,” I say. “He’s at camp and we were planning on—could you come by after dinner?”

“No problem,” Lopez says.

They ask me some more questions about Hal and Andrew, as well as what happened yesterday. I’m forced to go through it for them.

“I’m sorry your son was bullied yesterday,” Lopez says. “So Andrew rode his bike home from camp, then?”

“That’s right.”

“And he’s coming from the rec center...” Lopez looks up into her head, like she’s picturing something. “He would ride past Hal’s house, right?”

“Well, yeah. We live in the same neighborhood. If we’re going that direction, we *have* to go past their house.”

“I’m just thinking out loud here,” Lopez says. “Andrew must have been very upset when he left camp. What if he ran into Hal on his way home?”

“What are you saying?” I ask.

“Did your boy see Hal yesterday?” Carter asks.

“No,” I say immediately. “No, we asked him. He didn’t.”

Carter points behind him. “Do you mind if I get a glass of water? Come to think of it, I am thirsty.”

He’s not. This is some kind of ploy to see more of the house without coming out and asking. I see right through him.

“Let me get it for you,” I say.

“Tell you what, I’ll come with,” Carter says, then gives Lopez a look. “Maya, why don’t go out to the car and see if

there are any developments. I'll be out in a few minutes."

Lopez rises from the couch. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Mullen. We'll be back later."

The female detective shows herself out. Carter and I stare at each other a moment, before the heavysset detective points.

"This way to the kitchen?"

I nod.

He follows me through the dining room into the den, where Carter stops to peer out into our backyard for a moment.

"Nice property you've got here."

"Thanks."

I start moving toward the kitchen, but Carter doesn't budge. "You back right up to the golf course, huh?"

"That's right."

"Play much?" he asks, mimicking a golf swing.

"Not as much as I'd like."

"Too busy, huh?"

Where is this going? "Running a business eats up a lot of my time."

"I'll bet. Do you ever go for walks back here? I hear the trails running along the course are real nice."

"Occasionally," I say.

"How about your son? Does he play back there a lot?"

"My son's thirteen. I need a crowbar to pry him off his phone."

Carter nods. "Ever see Hal back here?"

Nora just told me Hal was back there the day before yesterday. If I don't mention it now, and the detective later hears about it from her...

"I never see him back there," I say. "But Nora mentioned she saw him two days ago."

“Really?”

“Yeah. He was back behind our houses,” I say.

“What was he doing?”

“I don’t know. She said he was on his bike. You’d better talk to her.”

“Oh, I’ll definitely talk to her.”

I can’t help but feel this is getting worse. Andrew flashed a knife and threatened to kill Hal, and now the police know Hal was mucking around our house two days ago.

Then again, this is all circumstantial. As far as evidence goes, it’s pretty weak if they never find Hal’s body. Even if by some miracle they do dig him up, they won’t be able to place Hal inside our house on the day of his murder. We’re still a long way from the police being able to bring charges.

“I’ll get you that water,” I say.

Finally, Carter follows me into the kitchen. But his eyes are drawn once more to the backyard. He looks out through the window over the kitchen sink, while I fill his glass. I hand him the water and take a step back, leaning on the counter behind me.

Carter takes a sip, puts the glass down. “Did you have anything to do with Hal’s disappearance, Dwayne?”

“No. Of course not.”

Carter folds his arms. “Your son gets that temper from you, doesn’t he?”

“Listen, Carter.” He is not going to push me around. “I want to help. I’m happy to answer questions, but I’m not going to stand by while you abuse me.”

“Come on,” he says. “You and I both know you’ve got a short fuse.”

“If you don’t have any other questions, you can leave.”

He takes a step toward me. “Is Hal dead?”

I’m about to say no, but then realize I’d be trapped.

“I hope not.”

He smirks, seeing right through my dodge.

“Do you *think* he’s dead?”

“Kids do stupid things all the time. Maybe there’s something going on at home and Hal just needed to blow off some steam.”

“And he didn’t leave a note, didn’t text to say he was alright and would be back? If he was angry about something, why didn’t he tell his parents?”

“Kids don’t think things through.”

Carter eyes me for another moment, before suddenly changing the subject.

“Justine’s mother has cancer,” he says.

“Oh. I’m really sorry.”

I feel bad in an abstract way. I wouldn’t wish cancer on anyone. But I wasn’t close with my ex-mother-in-law while Justine was alive, and after my first wife passed, the woman slandered the hell out of me.

“Stage four,” Carter says. “She doesn’t have long.”

“That’s awful.”

Carter sighs. “She’s going to die thinking her daughter ODed.”

“She did OD,” I say.

Carter shoots me another hard look. “We’ll be back later.”

The detective shows himself out. I stand in the kitchen for a moment as I try to gauge just how much trouble we’re all in.

“Any word?” Carl asks from his office doorway.

“No,” I say, turning in my chair. “Bridget texted about an hour ago. They’re holding a candlelight vigil at the church tonight.”

“I can’t even imagine.”

“It’s awful.”

Carl shakes his head sadly. “The longer he’s missing...”

I can’t bring myself to say Hal will turn up.

It’s only been a day, and I haven’t had to fib too much. But I’m already tired of the lies. Maintaining a fiction is exhausting and utterly terrifying. You don’t realize how automatic speech is until you have to carefully consider every word you say.

It’s a small town and Hal English has come up in conversation. During each exchange, I’ve had to *act*. Smile here, but not too much, and not too long. Express hope there. Laugh at offhand jokes told in meetings or at the water cooler, but don’t overdo it because you’re supposed to be worried.

There is no rest in even the quiet moments, because then my mind *really* goes to work. I end up replaying every interaction in my head, imagining how I seemed and what I sounded like.

“It should feel just as bad when it’s an adult that’s missing,” Carl goes on. “But for some reason it’s worse when it’s a kid.”

I nod silently.

Carl looks down. “Do you think that’s evolution?”

I can’t tell a joke to save my life, but I try to lighten the mood with humor. “Carl, I barely got through high school.”

He looks up at me with a smile. “You’re smarter than you think, Sarah.”

I blush. Compliments have always made me uncomfortable. “No, not really.”

“Why do you always do that?” he asks. “Put yourself down?”

“I don’t do that.” I frown. “Do I?”

He nods and is about to go on, but I quickly change the subject.

“How did your call with Jayden go this afternoon?”

“Not well.” Carl shakes his head. “I found out he’s been mucking around in the reserve again.”

In our line of work, that is code for doing drugs.

“He says he was just there for a walk, but I don’t believe him. Then he tried to lie to me, saying he saw something...” Carl’s voice drifts off. “Once you know they lie, it’s difficult to spot the truth.”

I feel bad for Carl. He is intelligent, kind, and can be charming if he wants. He could have used all those skills to make a fortune doing something else. Instead, he’s poured his life into helping others. When a client like Jayden relapses, it is both aggravating and heartbreaking all at the same time.

My cell phone rings. “It’s Dwayne. Do you mind?”

“Course not.”

He goes back into his office. I turn away from his door and lower my voice. We’ve got a full office today. My office

neighbors can hear everything I say.

“Hey, honey,” I answer with the phoniest voice imaginable.

“Sarah, can you get out of there early? We need to talk.”

“How is that going to—”

“It doesn’t matter. The police want to speak to Andrew, so I think we should all sit down before that happens.”

Oh no. “How do you know they want to?”

“Because I’ve already spoken to them. And it gets worse.”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Dwayne says ominously. “But not over the phone.”

“What?”

“I just said not over the phone.”

“Dwayne, please tell me what’s going on.”

He sighs impatiently. “The detective assigned to the case hates me. He’d love nothing more than to ruin my life. Our lives, actually.”

How does Dwayne know a detective? And why would the man bear such a grudge against my husband that he’d look for ways to ruin our family?

Dwayne says, “We must sit down with Andrew right away. Go pick him up. My brother will understand.”

Leaving early two days in a row is going to look really odd. But then again, the police are already coming to question Andrew, so there’s no point in maintaining appearances.

“I’ll get him.”

“Good girl. I’ll see you at home soon.”

“Love you, Dway—”

He’s already ended the call.

I take a moment to think about what to say, then step in Carl's office. He gives me one look and knows right away what I want.

"Go home," he says. "I'm surprised you stayed this long."

"You're the best," I say.

He smiles. "Enjoy your weekend."

"You too."

I collect my things and sneak out of the office. I'm only leaving a half hour early, so it's not *that* bad. All the same, several of my co-workers make eyes as I pass by quietly.

It's a short drive to the rec center. Since I'm early for pick-up, I have to go inside. A girl not much older than Andrew buzzes me in and gives me a bright smile.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm here to pick up my son a bit early. Andrew Mullen."

Her smile slips. "Oh."

"Is something the matter?"

"Ummm..."

She turns to peer over her shoulder, like she's looking for someone with more authority.

"Did something happen?"

"I'm sorry." Her smile is nervous as she snatches up her cell phone and begins texting. "I have to contact the director."

"What is the matter?"

"I'm sorry. Just one moment, okay?"

A horrible feeling comes over me. Andrew must have gotten himself into trouble again. At least the police aren't here, waiting for me. Perhaps those same kids from yesterday

"Mrs. Mullen?"

The camp director is a man in his late twenties. He's wearing a yellow t-shirt with the name of the wizarding camp

on it. A magic wand juts out of the back pocket of his shorts.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“I’m sorry.” He makes a pained face. “Your son left early again.”

“What?”

“I asked him to contact you. Did he not?”

I double-check my phone. “No. What time did he leave?”

“Lunch,” the director says. He motions and I follow him toward the exit. I get the impression he doesn’t want the girl at the desk to overhear our conversation. “There was an incident. Some of the kids started calling him a killer.”

“*What?*”

“Don’t worry,” the director says. “We’ve talked to all of them and have notified their parents. This behavior will not be tolerated.”

“Why were they calling him that?”

“It’s always difficult getting the full story out of children,” the director explains. “But everyone was talking about Hal English, the boy that’s missing?”

“I know who he is,” I say curtly, then soften my tone. “It’s awful.”

“Yes, well, he was the topic of conversation and, well, given what happened between your son and Hal earlier this school year—apparently there was a fight?—they started joking around with him, saying he must have killed Hal.”

“Jesus.”

“I know. It’s terrible. And I’m terribly sorry. Like I said, this behavior will not be tolerated. If Andrew wants to come back next week, for free, we’d be happy to find an extra spot for—”

“Are you kidding me?” I ask. “He was bullied twice this week. I don’t want him coming back here.”

“I understand.”

“And now I have no idea where my son is!”

I’m losing my temper. I don’t raise my voice at anyone, never mind a perfect stranger. But now I don’t care. I give the director my back and call Andrew. When he doesn’t answer, I send him a text.

“I cannot believe this,” I say, turning back around. “He’s been bullied and—”

“We did ask him to contact you,” the director says.

“Why didn’t *you* call me about the bullying?”

“We planned on it. But this is still fresh. We’ve done nothing since but try to understand what happened and figure out what steps to take. We’ve had to ask two kids not to come back next week.”

“You should have more staff!” I snap. “You should maintain control of these kids. This is unacceptable!”

“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Mullen.”

I shake my head and storm out of the rec center before I say something I’m going to regret. Just as I’m about to get in my car, the director calls out my name. He jogs over.

“Andrew left with someone. It was a girl. She looked about his age.”

“A girl?”

He nods, slightly out of breath from the short run. “She’s short, has dirty blonde hair. The staff member who saw her said she seemed a little preoccupied.”

“Thanks,” I mutter before getting in my car.

Andrew does not answer my subsequent calls or texts. I want to find him before I contact my husband. Dwayne is not going to be happy, and I can’t deal with that right now. He’ll probably blame me, even though it was his idea that Andrew go to camp today. I just know that somehow this is going to wind up being my fault—

What am I saying? Dwayne’s not like that.

All this stress and lying and sneaking around is eating away at me, making me think crazy things.

I take a deep breath and call Dwayne. “Andrew left camp early again.”

“He what?”

Dwayne sounds like he’s going to lose it. As quickly as I can, I explain what happened.

“Where is he?” Dwayne asks.

“They don’t know. He left with some girl, about his age.”

“Anna,” Dwayne says.

“Has to be. Who else does he talk to?”

Dwayne curses. “That’s the *last* person we need Andrew talking to right now. Her boyfriend is missing, and Andrew... Jesus Christ, I didn’t want to tell you this over the phone.”

My heart sinks. “What?”

“Andrew ran into Hal a couple weeks ago at the ice cream parlor. Andrew flashed a knife and told Hal he was going to kill him.”

No.

“I don’t believe it,” I say. “That doesn’t sound like my son.”

“There are witnesses,” Dwayne says. “When I get a hold of that boy, I’m going to let him have it.”

“Dwayne,” I say. “Maybe he was provoked?”

“Into pulling a knife? Come on, Sarah.”

“What do you want me to say?” I snap. “I’m grasping at straws here.”

It’s the first time I’ve ever raised my voice at my husband. Dwayne is quiet for a stretch.

“I understand you’re upset, Sarah. But don’t take it out on me.”

I let out a breath. I was expecting him to really give it to me, but that wasn't so bad.

"I'm sorry."

"Hey." I can hear the smile in his voice. "It's okay. You didn't sleep and we've got all this going on. Everything will be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am."

"Okay." His confidence has always propped me up. "What do we do?"

"Andrew is friends with Anna on Facebook. I need you to turn around and go back to the rec center. Pull up Anna's picture and ask if it was her."

"Dwayne," I say, feeling uneasy, "I just yelled at the camp director."

"So what? You had every right to. Now go back there. We need to find our son. I can't tell the police *he's* gone missing right when they've come to question him."

"Right. Okay." Deep breath. "I'll call you back. Oh, Dwayne?"

"What is it?"

"Did you hear? They're holding a vigil at the church."

"Shit," Dwayne says. "What time does *that* start?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Well, we have to go. We have to be there, for Russ and Bridget."

"I just don't know if I can handle it."

"What choice do we have?"

"It's the lying, Dwayne. It's getting to me. I don't think I can look Russ or Bridget in the eye again and *pretend*."

"Sorry, honey, but that's exactly what you're going to do. All three of us will be there."

The Frazier Commons is an old apartment complex. Eighty years ago, when it was first built, it was probably nice, designed for young married couples just getting started out, or retired widows looking to downsize. But the complex hasn't been nice in a long time.

For the last twenty-five years, it's been a cheap, poorly-maintained place. Loud music blasts from the window of a third-floor apartment, and there are some suspicious-looking characters sitting in cars or standing around in the parking lot. The last time I set foot in this building, it was a hot, sticky day just like this and I was here to pick up Bridget.

She was heartbroken at the time. In the days before Russ had gone away to college, he had told her he wanted to be able to see other people. Before this, he had promised her they would continue to be exclusive, as they had been senior year of high school, while he went away to school and while she stayed home and started working in the hopes she could attend community college at some point.

When Bridget shared the news with me, I acted surprised but in truth had already suspected Russ would demote their relationship. He had been to the university early for freshmen orientation and could not stop talking about all the other women he had met there, and the wild redhead he'd hooked up with one night. As much as he loved Bridget, he felt like he'd be missing out on college if he were tied down to a girl from high school he'd see only a few times each semester.

I waited a full week to ask Bridget out, and even then I didn't make it clear I was asking to go as more than friends, not wanting to press too hard. I knew if I called too early she'd reject the idea out of hand, still hurting from their sort-of-breakup and suffering from the delusion she could change Russ's mind. I knew better. Russ always had a wandering eye and had, on more than one occasion, mentioned all the women he'd meet at school while Bridget "wasn't around." But I also knew if I waited too long to call Bridget, somebody else would swing in quickly and scoop her up. There were always two or three guys, myself included, just waiting to ask her out.

So I gave her a week. She'd still be hurting and vulnerable, but I figured seven days was enough time for her to start thinking about dating other people.

I was wrong.

We spent the whole time at the diner talking about Russ. In one breath she'd complain about what a jerk he was. In the next, Bridget would ask for my advice on winning him back. She was even thinking about finding a job near his college, moving three hours away and finding a cheap apartment up there and working herself to death just to be near him. After dinner, we went to the movies. I knew I didn't have a chance, but like they used to say before the world went batshit crazy with the MeToo movement, you can't blame a guy for trying. About halfway through the film, I reached for her hand. She gave me a friendly squeeze and held it for a moment before letting go. Toward the end of the film, I leaned over to kiss her, recalling sophomore year when we had made out behind the ice cream parlor. She turned her head and pushed me away.

That's how it's always been for me and Bridget.

The timing has never been right.

Getting inside the apartment complex is just as easy as it was for me to get Anna's address. Using one of my burner phones, I found Anna's mother on Facebook. The woman has a bad habit of oversharing on social media, going so far as to list the name of her apartment complex. The elevator lets me out on the fourth floor. I knock on the right door.

When it opens, I recognize the young woman standing in the doorway from her Facebook page. Anna is short, has fair skin and is built like a grown woman, though she's only thirteen. Recognition fills her eyes. My son has my eyes and jawline. She knows who I am.

"Hi, Anna. I recognize you from all the pictures my son Andrew has shared with me. My name's Dwayne."

"Hello."

She doesn't invite me inside, or move out of the doorway.

I give her my best friendly smile.

"Andrew forgets to charge his phone," I say, like it's nothing. "So sometimes we can't get hold of him. I was wondering if he was here."

"No." She frowns. "He left."

"Okay." I keep that smile firmly in place, even though I want to scream in frustration. "Do you know where he went?"

She shakes her head. She has a suspicious look on her face.

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"No."

The door inches its way closed.

"Do you remember what time he left?" I ask.

"I don't know. Like three?" This girl does not like me. Andrew must have poisoned her. I drop the smile. There's no point. "I, uh, have to go."

I put my hand on the door, keeping it open. Her eyes widen in fright.

"We really need to find him," I say. "He's not well."

Anna looks scared.

I ease up on the door. "Andrew talks about you a lot," I lie. "He considers you a good friend, someone he trusts. So I'm going to trust you. He's had a really difficult time recently. School this year was tough, and now at camp ... everywhere he goes he gets bullied."

The fear leaves her eyes. In its place is confusion.

“What?”

“Andrew doesn’t get bullied, Mr. Mullen.”

“What did you say?”

She pushes on the door again. “I have to go now.”

I feel someone’s eyes on me. Turning, I spot a door down the hall cracked open, and the sliver of someone’s face.

“Are you okay, Anna?” the woman calls out from the safety of her apartment.

Anna’s silence is answer enough.

I smile, step back from the door. “I’m just trying to find my son,” I say loudly enough for the other woman to hear also. “You know about social contagion, don’t you, Anna? One kid does something, then another kid wants to do it too. I’m worried that Andrew’s just mimicking what his friend Hal’s done.”

“They aren’t *friends*.”

She closes the door in my face.

SARAH

Dwayne is angry when he comes home. He gets like this from time to time, where he's so mad he can't even talk to me. I'm pretty good at spotting the signs, so usually I steer clear of him. When he's in a mood, he disappears for an hour or two and gets himself together. He'll spend time in our bedroom, or sometimes in the basement, getting his head right as he likes to say.

Unfortunately, there's no time for Dwayne to decompress. The police are coming, and we have a candlelight vigil to attend. That means I'll have to bear the brunt of his anger.

"Fucking kid is nowhere to be found," Dwayne mutters, his voice more a growl, after he closes the front door.

"He wasn't—"

"No, Sarah, he wasn't." Dwayne shakes his head. "After everything I've done—*we've* done for that kid, he pulls a disappearing act? Sometimes I think he wants to set everything on fire and watch it burn."

"Dwayne." I approach him cautiously. Dwayne would never hit me, but all the same I edge my way toward him and lay a hand on his chest. "He's only a kid, and he saw something horrible yesterday. It has scarred him for life."

"Did he take his medicine this morning?"

Oh no.

No, no, no.

“Dwayne...”

We both hurry to the foyer. We keep Hal’s medicine on the end table by the front door to serve as a visual reminder for him to take it. Even still, I have to remind him most days.

Dwayne reaches the pill strip first and pops open the slot for Friday.

Andrew’s medication is still in there.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Sarah,” Dwayne says. “This is *your* responsibility. You’re supposed to make sure he takes this every morning.”

“Dwayne, I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head. “You know what he’s like when he misses a dose. He could do *anything*.”

“I know—”

“How could you let this happen?” he says. “Really, Sarah. You’re his mother.”

I feel awful. Dwayne’s right; I’m the one who normally ensures Andrew takes his pill. If he doesn’t, his ADHD runs rampant and his day can turn into a disaster. Without his medicine, Andrew is argumentative, short-tempered, sometimes dangerously impulsive. When I came down with the flu this winter and was stuck in bed for a few days, Dwayne forgot all about Andrew’s medicine and our son started lighting matches in his room and burning random things.

I feel like I should get on my knees and grovel, but something stops me. From the back of my mind, a tiny voice tells me to speak up and defend myself.

“Dwayne,” I say. “This morning was unusual. I didn’t even want Andrew to leave the house because I didn’t think he could manage camp today, but you insisted. Anyway, I completely forgot because we were out of our routine.”

“Oh, what? Is this, *I-told-you-so*?”

“Honey, do you think that’s what I’m saying?”

Dwayne takes a deep breath. When he lets it out, all the tension leaves his body.

“You’re right.” He gives me a half-smile. “It slipped my mind too. I’m sorry.”

He puts his arms around me. I realize it’s the first time we’ve hugged since there was a dead body in our garage. That seems strange, but I put it off to the unusual, strained nature of the last two days.

When he lets me go, I say, “Where could he be?”

“I don’t know, but we’ve got to find him. Anna didn’t know where he went. Who else does Andrew talk to?”

“Well ... he doesn’t have too many friends, Dwayne.”

“But there has to be someone.” He checks his phone for the time. “It’s after five already. The police could be here in the next hour or so.”

“Do you want me to drive and look for h—”

“No,” Dwayne answers. “We need everything to look normal. You stay here, get dinner started. We can’t let on that Andrew disappeared or the police will only become even more suspicious.”

“Even more?” I ask, scared. “What do you have to tell me?”

His shoulders slump and his eyes close. For a moment, I fear this is all too much for Dwayne and the thought terrifies me. Dwayne is the strong one. He’s the family’s rock. If he crumbles, we all do.

“Dwayne, honey—”

The moment passes. His eyes open and he’s back to the man I know and love.

“Let’s sit down.”

My nerves are almost shot as we move into the living room. I sit on the couch, but Dwayne remains standing.

“The detective in charge of the investigation into Hal’s disappearance is a man named Liam Carter. He’s a few years older than us. He was Justine’s cousin.”

Dwayne doesn’t talk about his first wife much. When he does, he rarely has nice things to say. I never met her because she passed before I met Dwayne, but from what he’s shared with me, Justine was a real piece of work. As poorly as she treated Dwayne, however, I tell myself she probably couldn’t help most of her behavior. After all, she did have a drug problem.

“Why does Detective Carter have it out for you?” I say, making the connection. “Does he blame you for what happened to Justine?”

“You could say that.” Dwayne stops pacing. “He thinks I killed her.”

“*What?*” I’m stunned. “Why would he think that?”

Dwayne resumes his pacing. “He didn’t want to believe that Justine had a drug problem. She was an angel, in his eyes.”

“But they all knew, right? They had to.”

Dwayne is shaking his head. “Justine was really good at hiding herself. She had her parents and family fooled. None of them knew she was using until she ODeD.”

“How is that possible?”

“Ask my brother. He knows. Addicts excel at hiding things.”

“So they think ... what?”

“It’s insane.” Dwayne smiles ruefully. “They think I killed her by giving her too many drugs.”

My head is spinning.

“But why would you do that?”

“Beats me,” Dwayne says. “I tried to help that woman. Carl even got involved. But there was nothing we could do or say to get her straightened out. I was actually in the middle of

getting treatment set up for her, you know, one of those rehab centers where people go for a few months till they get better. But I woke up one night and she was in the living room, dead, a needle sticking out of her arm.”

He’s never gone into such detail before. My hand covers my mouth. Now that he’s put that image into my mind, it’s not going anywhere for a long time.

“That’s terrible.”

“It makes no sense,” Dwayne goes on. “Why would I kill her? If I wanted to end the relationship, I would have just divorced her. But her family couldn’t accept the truth. They saw her as this wonderful person who would never, ever take drugs.”

“Did this Liam Carter try to arrest you?”

“He was the junior detective on the case,” Dwayne explains. “He pushed hard for it, even went around the lead cop, his mentor, and tried to put more pressure on me.”

“But how? If there was no evidence that you killed her, if there was no motive...”

“Don’t be naïve,” Dwayne says. “If a cop has it out for you, they can *find* evidence. Believe me. Carl has shared horror stories with me. Plus, I later found out that Justine was making up all these crazy stories. She called her cousin a few days before she passed, telling him I was abusive and manipulative, that *she* wanted a divorce but I wasn’t going to let her go. She told him she was thinking about getting a restraining order.” Dwayne shakes his head sadly. “It was the drugs. They scrambled her eggs. At that point, she was too far gone. Justine had become delusional and paranoid. She thought I was being controlling, but I was only trying to help her. If only I had acted sooner, maybe gotten the help she needed earlier, things would have turned out differently.”

“My God, Dwayne, that’s terrible. I had no idea.”

He looks out the window and grows silent. Normally I would give him his space here, let him collect his thoughts and

come back from that place he sometimes goes. But I can't let this go.

"Dwayne," I say. "Why didn't you ever tell me about this?"

When his eyes shift back to me, his expression is guarded. I'm afraid I've pressed too hard on a delicate subject. But I don't think I'm crazy for asking the question.

"If someone thought you were a murderer, and you weren't, would you go around advertising that fact?"

I can see the logic. On which date do you tell your significant other that you were once suspected of murder by a vindictive police officer who clearly has an agenda?

But at the same time, his answer isn't quite satisfactory. He should have told me at some point.

"There was never a good time," he continues. "And as the years went by, it became more and more difficult to bring up. *Hey, honey, remember my first wife? Well, a detective thought I killed her.*" He laughs, but it's hollow-sounding and forced. "Eventually, I didn't think there was any point in bringing it up at all. It was a long time ago now. And, most of all, I didn't kill Justine. You know that."

I can't sit still any longer. After rising, I head into the kitchen and open a bottle of wine.

"What are you doing?" Dwayne asks, hovering in the threshold.

"I need a drink," I say.

"Sarah, do you think that's a good idea right now?"

"Just one drink, Dwayne," I say.

I pour a much larger glass of pinot grigio than usual and take a sip that turns into a gulp. Dwayne doesn't like me drinking too much, so I try not to have more than a glass of wine a couple of times a week. But tonight is different. I finish with another big gulp. When I put the wine glass down on the counter, my hand is shaking. Dwayne approaches and gently takes my quivering hand.

“It’s going to be okay.”

I don’t answer. I feel like Dwayne has kept something very important from me. He does that from time to time because he doesn’t want to worry me or add any stress to my life. People might think I’m old-fashioned, but generally I appreciate him doing that—I’ve always seen it as his way of being thoughtful.

But this is different.

I let go of his hand and pour myself another glass of wine. His disapproving gaze is too much for me. I only manage a tiny sip of wine this time. Ignoring him for a moment, I stoop to fish a large pot out of the cabinet beneath us and move to the sink.

“I’d better get started on dinner,” I say. “I’m making pasta.”

“Okay, honey,” he says, his voice sweet. “There is something else I have to tell you, before I head out to look for him.”

I fill the pot halfway with water, then place it on the stove and turn the burner on.

“Dwayne, what are we going to do if you can’t find him?”

Before he answers, the doorbell rings.

ANDREW

Nobody believes me.

I knew Dad wouldn't, because he never does. He sees the worst in me, never the best. When Dad sees my report card, his eyes skip right over the As and go directly to the Bs. The first thing he says is never, *You did great*. It's more like, *Why did you get an 88 in science?*

When I was really struggling to read, he assumed I was being lazy even though I told him how hard it was to get through even two pages of a book below my grade level. I was so happy to get a diagnosis of dyslexia, because it meant I would get the help I needed and it meant Dad would have to apologize for accusing me of not trying hard enough in grade school.

Instead, he met the life-changing news with a shrug.

When I found Hal in the garage, I didn't expect Dad to believe I'm innocent.

That's why I called Mom.

But she doesn't believe me either. If she did, she'd find a way to finally stand up to Dad. Now I see that's never going to happen. If Dad told her he wanted to date another woman, Mom would probably help him get dressed for the occasion.

Sometimes I wonder why they ever got married. Their relationship is weird. I always thought husbands and wives were supposed to be partners, make decisions together. But that's not the way our house is at all. Dad calls all the shots

and Mom just goes along with them. She gives and he takes, and she gives more and he keeps on taking.

But that's not all.

Dad is always gaslighting Mom. He gets upset if the dishes aren't put away exactly how he likes. He doesn't yell at her about it, but he makes his feelings known all the same. If she forgets something stupid, like remembering to face the labels out in the cupboard, he'll chuckle and pretend he's making a joke and say shit like, *That's my little Sarah. She's a little forgetful.* He finds ways to get his digs in, and Mom just smiles along with him, like he's joking and not being a total asshole.

Some days he comes home from work pissed off and nobody is allowed to say anything to him. We have to act like he's not home, be quiet, and wait till he speaks to us.

This is not normal.

I'll never forget last summer's block party. It was the first time I ever saw Dad drunk. He had his hand on Mrs. Nealon's ass. Mom saw and didn't even say anything! When I tried talking to her about it a few days later, she acted like it hadn't happened. She told me Dad would never do a thing like that.

Yeah, right.

Not only do my parents not believe me, but Anna doesn't either. As my best friend, she's supposed to. And now, thanks to those assholes at camp, that rumor is going around online that I did something to Hal.

So here I am. Hal is dead and I didn't do it. But everybody thinks, or is going to eventually think, that I did. I'm starting to see there's no difference between being guilty and having the whole world think you're guilty. I have to find a way to prove my innocence without Dad knowing I went behind his back.

I reach into my backpack and take out the can of spray paint. After checking to make sure the coast is clear, I shake the can and uncap it, bringing the nozzle up to the wall.

There's no going back if I do this...

“I t’s the police,” I call out.
“Already?” Sarah asks.

I open the door to find Detectives Carter and Lopez on the porch. Lopez still looks put together, but Carter looks like crap, those sweat stains under his armpits having spread out and grown larger, his thinning hair messy now.

“Evening,” Carter says pleasantly, like he didn’t threaten me a few short hours ago. “Can we come in?”

“Sure,” I say, then raise my voice. “Honey, would you come out here?”

Sarah appears in the threshold to the kitchen. “Oh, hello there. You must be the police.”

“That we are, ma’am,” Carter says. He’s really putting on the friendly act now. After introducing himself and his partner to my wife, he turns his fake smile back to me. “Is now a good time to speak to Andrew?”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “We weren’t expecting you back so soon. Andrew’s not here right now.”

Carter’s smile is gone immediately. “Where is he?”

“He’s out,” I say, keeping it vague. “This has been hard on him.”

“What has?” Lopez asks.

“Hal disappearing.”

Lopez nods slowly and takes out her notebook. “When do you expect him back?”

“Soon,” I say.

“Did you tell him we wanted to talk to him?” Carter has dropped the nice act. “Is that why he’s not here?”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” I say. “Some of the other boys were making fun of him at camp. Our son doesn’t have a lot of friends, and he’s sensitive. He just needed some time to himself.”

“Where does he go when he needs time to himself?” Lopez asks.

“He didn’t say where he was going,” I answer.

“And you didn’t ask?” Carter picks up, incredulous. “Another boy his age, who lives two blocks away, goes missing and you don’t ask your son where he was off to?”

I’m sinking here. Carter is right. Parents in our position would demand to know where the child was going—some might prohibit their leaving altogether. I can only hope that Carter doesn’t intuit what that suggests. I look to Sarah, but of course she’s no help.

“Hold on.” I’m putting on the act here. “Do you think Hal was *taken*?” Without waiting for their answer, I face my wife. “Sarah, would you call Andrew right now? We need to know where he is.”

“Excuse me,” Sarah says to the police, as if she needs permission from the cops to contact her child in this potentially dangerous situation.

While Sarah collects her phone in the kitchen and then wisely carries it into another room where the police can’t hear her conversation, the detectives size me up.

“You were assuming Hal ran away?” Lopez asks.

“Yeah...” I rack my brain for something reasonable. “I read somewhere that’s usually the case. Kidnapping is supposed to be much rarer. Isn’t that right?”

“The department should hire you,” Carter says. “Since you know so much.”

I pin a smile on my face, determined not to rise to this asshole’s bait.

Sarah returns after another moment of awkward silence in the foyer. With a little shake of her head, she says, “He didn’t answer.”

The detectives exchange a look and a silent understanding passes between them. I get the bad feeling they’re not going to leave and come back later. They have more in store.

“Well, Mrs. Mullen, we already spoke to your husband,” Carter says, that fake smile returning. “Mind if we ask you some questions? It will only take a few minutes.”

Sarah immediately looks to me.

“She just put dinner on,” I say. “Is there any way we can do this later? We could call you after Andrew gets home.”

“When someone goes missing,” Lopez says, “time is everything. I’m afraid we must insist.”

“Yeah, Dwayne. A guy like you, you could handle dinner, right?” Carter says.

Sarah shoots me a pleading, wide-eyed look while the detectives aren’t watching her. I give them an easy smile and act like we have nothing to hide.

“Yes, of course. I’ll take care of the pasta, honey.”

“Great,” Carter says, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s sit down in the living room, Mrs. Mullen.”

“Okay,” Sarah says.

I watch the three of them. Sarah precedes the detectives stiffly into the living room. She needs me in there with her, but the detectives have shut me out. It’s all in my wife’s hands right now.

SARAH

How could Dwayne let them separate us? I can't talk to the police without him. I'm disappointed that Dwayne would let them outmaneuver us like this, though I guess we couldn't contact his attorney yet without raising some red flags.

Still, I feel overwhelmed and underprepared. Even though I've gone over the story in my mind a thousand times at this point, I'm not ready for this level of professional scrutiny. These two are real detectives.

I take my place on the couch, where I normally curl up to read a good book. Lopez sits across from me in Dwayne's recliner, while Carter remains standing. He moves next to the fireplace and puts his hands in his pockets.

"Mrs. Mullen," he begins, then changes tack. "Do you mind if I call you Sarah?"

I give him a timid smile. "Please do."

"Sarah, I'm going to ask you an open-ended question to start with. Is there anything you'd like to tell us before we begin the interview?"

I try to sound innocent. "I don't know what you mean."

His skeptical gaze lingers on me a moment before he nods slowly. "I see."

He gives Lopez a look. The other detective proceeds to ask me about my son, Hal, their relationship. I do my best to gloss over the fight at school, but she doesn't let me. Finally she

establishes our whereabouts yesterday, going over the timeline again and again till she's got it nailed down. There's a long pause and for a moment I dare to think it's over, but then Carter steps forward, reinserting himself into the conversation.

"Which pharmacy do you use?" he asks.

Every question feels like a trap, especially this one.

"Philips, the one on York Road."

"I know it. What time was that?"

I've already told Lopez. "Around nine, I think. I wasn't really paying attention."

"Did you stop anywhere else while you were out?"

I don't like that question. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," I say.

I can hear the water start to boil in the kitchen. A moment later, the sound of spaghetti being dumped into the pot fills the room.

"You went straight home after that?" Carter asks.

Why is he pressing me on this? It can only mean he knows something. But what? Did someone see me pull behind the strip mall?

Does Carter know I threw something into the dumpster?

Does he know it was a bike?

"Mrs. Mullen?" Carter says. "You went straight home after the pharmacy?"

"Ye-yes. I think so."

"You think so?"

Before I can answer, the front door opens.

Andrew's come home.

“Hey, buddy,” Dad says, rushing to meet me in the foyer. “Glad you’re home. Dinner’s almost ready.”

Buddy? Who is he talking to? Dad doesn’t call me that.

“Son, the detectives I told you about are here,” Dad says, speaking just as loudly but more slowly than usual. It is as if he wants to make sure I follow each word. “We told them that you wanted to go out for a bit because you needed some time to yourself.”

The detectives?

Did someone see what I was doing, recognize me, and contact the police? As soon as I was done spray-painting, I immediately regretted what I’d done. I tried painting over the words, but those spray cans run out fast, and by then more cars were coming and a few high schoolers were coming up the path... I had to get out of there.

A short, fat man appears in the entryway to the living room. He’s wearing a suit that’s too small. There’s no way he’d be able to button that thing closed. So this is what a cop looks like. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it was something else.

“Hello, Andrew,” the man says, extending a beefy paw. “I’m Detective Carter.”

I don’t like him immediately. He has slow eyes. They stay on me too long. I know he’s watching how I act because of his

job, but I get a feeling he'd look at people like this even if he didn't carry a badge: rudely. His partner, a Latina, is next to appear. Detective Lopez is taller and younger than Carter. She introduces herself and I don't like her either. She reminds me of this teacher I had in third grade. She was always smiling and never believing a word I said—so fake.

"I'm glad you're home," Dad says, putting his hand on my shoulder. I don't remember the last time he said such a thing to me. Usually he seems indifferent to my existence. All he cares about when he's home is having control of the TV and if there's enough food and beer in the fridge. "Can I get you a glass of water?"

"If you don't mind, Dwayne," Carter says, giving my father a strange look, "we'd like to speak to Andrew now."

"He just walked in," Dad says. "Let him use the bathroom and get a drink. He's also got some medicine to take."

My medicine ... now several things make sense. Mom didn't remind me to take it this morning. No wonder I couldn't sit still at camp, called Anna a bitch, and then bought that spray paint.

Sometimes, I'm my own worst enemy.

"Right." Carter forces the fakest smile I've ever seen. "My partner and I will wait in the living room. Whenever you're ready, Andrew."

The two detectives, however, don't move. They stay where they are, hovering between the foyer and living room, just to watch us. Dad's arm wraps around my shoulders and as he gently ushers me to the kitchen, the can of spray paint in my backpack clinks against something else metal—maybe my keys?

I'm alarmed by the sound. I don't want the police, nor Dad, nor both, knowing I scrawled that message on the concrete wall below the old train overpass about a mile away. Mom enters the kitchen from the other direction, coming in for a big hug. She manages not to rattle the metal things in my backpack.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she says, peering into my eyes. “How are you?”

“Okay.”

She nods. There are tears in her eyes. She lowers her voice. “I was worried about you.”

“We both were,” Dad says softly. “From now on, you answer our calls and texts immediately.”

Mom frowns at Dad’s tone. I mutter an apology. Dad opens the cupboard and begins rooting.

“Where’s his medication?”

“Dwayne, it’s too late. If we give it to him now, he’ll be up all night.”

Dad shoots her a murderous look. In a quiet but strained voice, he says, “He’s not going to answer questions without it. Now, where’s the smaller dose we used to give him? Remember, we kept it for situations like this.”

“Oh right.” Mom’s face brightens. She thinks Dad’s so smart. It drives me crazy. “I’ll get it.”

The doctors started me out at a much lower dose. Over the years they’ve regularly increased it. Mom finds a bottle with the lower dosage—good for days when I forget in the morning and need something to help me through the rest of the day, but not keep me up all night—and gets out a pill for me, while Dad pours a glass of water.

“Here you go, son.”

Normally I’d argue about taking medicine, even in situations like this where I missed the morning dose. But I have to admit Dad is right. I need something to help me concentrate if I’m going to talk to the police.

I take the pill, then look at Mom. “Will you be in there with me?”

Before she can answer, Dad jumps in. “We both will.”

Usually, I don’t want Dad around. He’s bossy and thinks he’s the smartest person in the room. He makes mistakes like

everyone else, but his ego blinds him to them. All that being said, I have to admit I'm glad Dad will be in the room. As much as I love Mom, she's easily intimidated and not always the quickest. Better to have them both there.

"Do I have to talk to them?" I ask, trying to stall, then remembering what I've seen on TV. "What about a lawyer? Should we get one?"

Dad shakes his head. "It's premature for that. If we bring our lawyer in at this point, that will only arouse suspicion."

I'd rather have a lawyer with me, somebody who actually knows what they're doing when it comes to the police and answering questions. Not Dad, who *thinks* he knows what he's doing but might not. But all the same, I can't think of a way to argue against Dad's reasoning. Besides, he's probably right. If he already told the police I'd answer questions, we can't now back out of it, stalling for a lawyer.

Dad drops his voice even lower. "Son, they're going to ask you about the ice cream parlor."

My stomach drops. I feel my face grow warm.

"What about it?"

Dad's lips grow very thin. "We don't have time to fucking lie to each other right now. You'll have to be honest, tell them about how much Hal has bullied you at school, okay?"

I don't say anything. The truth is, Hal didn't really bully me at school. His friends were teasing me early in the school year. When Hal didn't stick up for me, I was hurt so I started talking about him behind his back. Things spiraled from there ... but I didn't want to get into trouble so I made up the bullying story.

Dad misreads my reluctance. "I know you feel bad about what you ... what *happened*. But you can't hold back. You have to tell them everything nasty Hal said or did to you. Do you understand me?"

"Okay."

“We’d better get in there,” Dad says, moving to the sink and putting a lid over the still-steaming pasta sitting limply in a strainer. He turns the burner heating the spaghetti sauce off. “Dinner can wait.”

Mom rubs my back. “Everything will be fine, sweetie.”

Like we’re any other normal, happy family, the three of us walk to the living room together. Lopez is reading something on her phone, while Carter is looking over the family photos on the fireplace mantel. He immediately takes command of the situation.

“Please have a seat, Andrew, wherever you’re comfortable.”

“How about the couch?” Dad says, steering me that way. I take his hint, sitting in the middle, so my parents can flank me.

When she finishes whatever she’s reading on her phone, Lopez shoots Carter a meaningful look. A terrible feeling overwhelms me that they’ve just gotten their hands on some incriminating piece of evidence. Lopez sits across from me in the armchair, folding one leg over the other at the knee. She’s what the kids at school call a PAWG, even though she’s not white, and I guess she’s pretty, but right now I’m too nervous to even think about that.

“Andrew,” she says in a friendly voice. “Did you see Hal yesterday?”

Her question throws me for a loop. I was expecting her to ask a more open-ended inquiry, such as, could you tell us where you were yesterday?

Dad throws his arm onto the back of the couch and pats my shoulder. “It’s okay, son. Just tell her the truth, no matter what. You have nothing to hide.”

He means the exact opposite, of course.

“Dwayne,” Carter says, his voice almost a growl. “Let your son answer without cuing him.”

Dad normally doesn’t let anyone tell him what to do, but he makes a big show of being agreeable. “I’m sorry. Just the

dad in me kicking in. Andrew suffers from anxiety, so you can imagine he's nervous to be questioned by the police."

I hate when Dad tells people that, but I guess here it works in my favor.

"Well, Andrew?" Carter says.

"N-no. I didn't see him yesterday."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Lopez asks.

"I guess it was the last day of school," I say.

"That was three weeks ago, right?"

I have to rack my brain. "Yeah...?"

I look to Mom, who nods.

Lopez keeps smiling. Carter keeps frowning.

Lopez says, "Didn't you see Hal two weeks ago, though? At the ice cream parlor?"

I'm stricken. Even though Dad warned me this was coming, I'm still not prepared for it. We're only a minute into the questioning and they've already caught me in a lie.

Even if I fib and tell them Hal bullied me, I realize now it's not going to be enough to explain away my behavior. So what if he called me a name—is that justification for flashing a knife? The truth is, I'm really lucky Hal didn't complain to his parents about what I did.

"Yes. Sorry, that was the last time I saw him."

She nods and leans forward, drawing her hands together. "Can you tell us what happened the last time you saw Hal?"

I'm in a cold sweat. Dad told me to lie, I know I have to, but I don't have anything prepared. And even though I lie all the time—it's the ADHD—it's usually spontaneous, not the result of a well-thought-out ploy. And I'm not good at lying either. Words just come out of my mouth and only half the time do they sound plausible, like something I can pass off for reality.

“Hal was mean to me all school year,” I say. “He called me names and talked about me behind my back. The worst part is, we used to be friends. We played together all the time growing up. So he knows a lot about me. He knows...” I’m making this up as I go, and a thought occurs to me. “He knows I really like Pokémon, or used to anyway, and he spread that around school so the other kids would make fun of me. They called me a Pokey.”

“I’m sorry that happened,” Lopez says.

Carter shrugs. “And you flashed a knife at him for that?”

None of this is true. Hal spread a rumor about another boy, calling him Pokey, not me. And now that I’ve said it, I realize how dumb this story is. The police will just ask my classmates about this, and then I’ll be caught in another lie.

“He meant, like, I wanted to have sex with Pokémon characters,” I go on.

This gets more of a sympathetic reaction from Carter, but it’s gone quickly. “Tell us what happened at the ice cream parlor.”

I stay away from the truth, which is: Hal has treated Anna horribly, and I wanted to scare him straight. I don’t want the police talking to Anna, because then they’ll see all the IMs and texts I sent her where I talked about how much I hated Hal.

So instead I stick to the general script, though I don’t point to anything specific that Hal did or said to me. “It was more like a build-up all year long, and I’d just had enough.”

Mom always has tissues, either nearby or on hand. She reaches for the box on the end table next to the couch and dabs at her misty eyes. I didn’t even realize she was about to cry.

“Andrew,” Lopez says. “Isn’t there something else you’re not telling us?”

Oh no.

“Uh, no.”

Her smile dims. “Didn’t you see Hal two days ago?”

“What?” I ask. “What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t see him on the golf course trails behind your house?”

How do they know about that?

I look to Mom for guidance, but she’s wearing a newly shocked expression. Then I turn to Dad, who gives me a subtle shake of his head before answering the detective’s surprise question.

“Hey, what the hell is this?” Dad says, standing up. “You said you had some questions for my son, so we didn’t feel the need to get our attorney involved. But this is starting to feel more like an interrogation. I’m not comfortable with this whole set-up.”

“It’s a simple question,” Lopez says, her kind voice now full of steel. “Did he see Hal two days ago or not?”

I don’t know what to do. The police are asking a very pointed question that I know Dad does not want me to answer, because he and I already discussed my encounter with Hal two days ago.

Dad holds out a palm. “That’s enough. My son is innocent and has nothing to hide. We want to answer your questions because we want to help your investigation. No matter what’s happened between the boys, Andrew and Hal are still friends and we want to see Hal back home, safe and sound. But we’re not going to continue this conversation without our attorney present. Frankly, I’m surprised you’d use such an underhanded method with a child.”

Lopez watches Dad for a moment, before turning to her partner. Carter nods at her. Lopez rises and puts her little notepad away.

“Thank you for your time,” she says. “We would like to get your son’s statement tonight, so please contact your attorney immediately.”

“Tomorrow,” Dad says. “They’re holding the vigil in two hours, and we are not going to miss it. We’ve been friends with Russ and Bridget forever—we have to be there for them.

If we skip that, the whole town will think Andrew had something to do with this. You will literally ruin his life.”

“Did you?” Carter asks. “Have something to do with this?”

“No,” I say, trying to sound offended. It should be easy, since I am innocent. But it doesn’t come out sounding that way. “I would never.”

I have no idea what just happened. One moment, Andrew was answering their questions like we all agreed he should. The next, Dwayne is terminating the interview on what feels like a very suspicious note. When Andrew refused to answer a question, and Dwayne demanded to involve our lawyer, we lost whatever goodwill we had with the police.

The detectives are gone, and the pasta is still sitting in the sink. We should eat, but nobody's hungry.

Dwayne is in a mood. He's pacing from room to room and won't meet my eyes. Normally, when he gets like this, I know better than to bother him. But I literally don't understand what happened. I get the impression that Andrew did in fact see Hal two days ago, but I don't know if Dwayne *already* knew that, or if Dwayne just figured out he had and immediately shut down the interview before Andrew got himself into trouble.

Andrew, meanwhile, is still on the couch in the living room. He stares vacantly ahead of him, his eyes not focused on anything. My poor boy looks both lost and miserable. Something's eating him up inside.

"Goddamn kid," Dwayne mutters in the other room. "Goddamn kid."

"Dwayne," I say, my voice trembling. I don't normally speak to my husband like this, but I have to say something. "I can hear you. So can Andrew."

"What?"

My husband appears in the kitchen. And there is murder in his eyes.

“What?” he repeats. “I’m not talking about Andrew. I mean Hal.”

“Hal?”

I don’t have a clue.

Dwayne sighs, the anger finally leaving him. “Look, honey, I didn’t want to tell you this because it’s bullshit but...”

His voice trails off. He looks past me and raises his voice.

“Son, come out here. Let’s explain this to your mother.”

Andrew doesn’t answer, but a few moments later I hear him get up off the couch and plod his way into the kitchen, each step slow and heavy. When Andrew leans against the threshold, his eyes are downcast.

He looks like he knows something and doesn’t want to share with me.

“What is happening?” I ask, growing angry.

“Hal came by here two days ago. He thinks his mother is...” Dwayne glances at Andrew, who looks like he wants to die of embarrassment. “...He thinks Bridget is stepping out on Russ.”

I am shocked. Bridget and Russ have been together for a long time. Sure, Bridget has confided in me from time to time about some minor disagreements, but that’s normal for a marriage. She’s usually singing his praises.

Once I get over the initial shock, what Dwayne has implied but not come out and said finally hits me.

I struggle to put this into words. “You mean, Hal thinks Bridget was here?”

Dwayne nods.

Andrew is looking at the floor.

“Hal confronted Andrew about it two days ago. He apparently came by in the morning, then again later in the

afternoon, once Andrew was home from camp.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I ask.

“Because it’s ridiculous,” Dwayne says. “And I didn’t want to upset you with this utter nonsense. We both know how sensitive you can be, so I asked Andrew to keep it to himself.”

I might be sensitive—okay, I definitely am—but I’m also not made of glass. I’m a grown woman living in the twenty-first century. My son shouldn’t be made to keep things from me because Dwayne fears I might get upset.

“Andrew, would you give me a minute alone with your father?”

He mumbles a reply, then darts upstairs.

Before Andrew reaches his room, Dwayne is already moving forward.

“Honey—”

I step back to keep out of his embrace.

“You should have told me this.”

“I know,” he says, contrite. “You’re absolutely right. But you know how you get. Remember that time—”

“Yes, I remember when that rumor went around about you staying late with one of the shop managers.”

“Sarah.”

I fold my arms and shake my head. I’m recalling that time last summer when I caught Dwayne with his hand on Betty’s ass and acted like nothing had happened. I’m hurt and angry with myself all over again.

I snap. “I can’t believe you’d keep this from me and then ask Andrew to lie!”

“I never asked him to lie.” Dwayne shakes a finger at me. “Never.”

“Okay, Dwayne. You told him to keep something from me. Same difference.”

Oh goddamnit. Now I'm going to cry. While I wipe under my eyes, Dwayne moves in and puts his arms around me.

“Are you having an affair with *her*?”

I can't bring myself to say Bridget's name.

“No, honey. Absolutely not.”

“But she was your first crush, and you two dated in college.”

“That was a long time ago.” Dwayne pulls back to look down at me. “And we *barely* dated. We went out a couple times when she and Russ were taking a break, but that was it. She dumped me the minute he showed interest again. That was almost twenty years ago, for God's sake.”

I look up into his eyes. I really hope he's not lying. After everything that's happened, I can't take any more upset.

“Sarah, I love you,” he says, rubbing my arms. “I would never do anything to hurt you, and I would never do anything to risk breaking up this family. You know that.”

That's what I thought, but it's a relief to hear him say that. I close my eyes and put my head against his chest. His heart is beating wildly, giving away the lie to his otherwise calm demeanor. I squeeze him back. It feels good to be held.

But the moment is over quickly.

Dwayne lets me go and takes out his cell. “I'm calling Larry. Could you reheat the food?”

My attorney, Larry, mostly handles commercial transactions and wills, but he has some experience with criminal law. Even if we eventually have to hire another lawyer who specializes in criminal defense, I figure it's better to get Larry here now so we can develop a strategy. With the clock ticking and the police expecting to speak with Andrew tomorrow morning, I can't wait for the best.

"The vigil's starting," Sarah says, after checking her phone.

"We'll be there," I say.

"Are you sure it's a good idea?"

"We have to."

She nods, then begins to gather the dishes and take them into the kitchen. I managed to eat, but neither Sarah nor Andrew had much of an appetite. My son has been in my home office with Larry for nearly two hours now. Ideally, I would have been in the room with my them, listening to what my son shares with Larry. But if I was present, the conversation would no longer be protected by attorney-client privilege. Larry insisted they speak privately.

During that time, Sarah and I have tried to make small talk but our conversation has been strained. We're both worried, obviously, about Andrew's interview with the police tomorrow morning, but there's more to it than that. Despite my reassurances, Sarah must be wondering about me and Bridget,

and she must also be wondering about what Andrew is sharing with Larry.

Even though Larry is bound by attorney-client privilege, we told Andrew to stick to the script. We don't want Larry knowing Hal's body was here, or about our subsequent criminal activity in covering up the crime. If we shared that with Larry, he would advise us to hire our own attorneys and then we'd be in a real jam. He couldn't represent all three of us and then things would start to get really messy.

Still, with how long they've been speaking privately, I too am starting to worry that Andrew has gone off script. Why else would they need almost two hours to hash everything out? As far as Larry knows, Andrew last saw Hal two days ago—that's it.

Finally, I hear the door to my home office open. Without so much as a look or word, Andrew goes upstairs to his room. Larry appears in the dining room a moment later, carrying his briefcase. He's about ten years older than us and looks his age. He worked for my father before me.

"We need to talk," Larry says, sitting catty-corner to me at the table. He's still in his shirt and tie, having come straight from his office.

"Sarah, honey," I call out.

My wife returns to the dining room and sits opposite Larry. I reach for her hand. After a moment's hesitation, she takes it and gives me a squeeze.

Larry folds his hands on the table and leans forward.

"You were in there a long time," I say. "What did you talk about?"

Larry shakes his head. "You know how this works, Dwayne. If I tell you what Andrew and I discussed, it's no longer privileged."

I take Larry in. He looks like he has bad news to deliver, but there's no judgment in his eyes. Hopefully that means Andrew didn't tell him about finding the body.

“I’m going to get right down to it,” Larry says. “This doesn’t look good.”

“What do you mean?” Sarah asks.

“They got into a fight at school a few months back. Then your son pulled a knife on Hal at the ice cream parlor. Then, just two days ago, Hal came by and they had another confrontation.”

“They *got into a fight*?” Sarah asks, leveling her eyes on me.

“No,” Larry answers. “But they argued, and it got heated. Your son says Hal threatened to hit him. But I don’t believe Andrew. I think he was the instigator.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Come on, Dwayne.” Larry purses his lips. “Two weeks ago *Andrew* was the one flashing a knife in public. Do you think Hal would come back here, looking to pick another fight with him?”

“Kids do things,” I say.

Larry shakes his head. “Even if Andrew’s not lying to me about their meeting two days ago, he doesn’t make for a good witness. There’s something untrustworthy about him.”

“He has ADHD,” Sarah says. “It makes him act out, say things and do things he doesn’t even mean to.”

“I understand. My nephew is the same way. But you have to remember that most people don’t understand the condition. Most cops—and most members of a jury—are going to think that ADHD is something a person can control if they wanted to, if only they had a little more discipline. People don’t appreciate what it’s really like.”

“That’s so unfair,” Sarah says. “It’s the twenty-first century.”

“Honey,” I say. “Larry’s here to give us his honest opinion.”

“It gets worse,” Larry says. “I’m sorry to bombard you with bad news but it’s my job to prepare you for everything.”

“What do you mean, it gets worse?” Sarah asks.

“All day long I interact with people and ask them difficult questions. With that experience comes an even sharper intuition for spotting a lie. Your son is holding something back. If I see it, the police will too.”

“He’s not,” I say. “It’s just his condition.”

Larry holds out a palm. “Even if he’s not, he *seems* like he is.”

Sarah says, “But that doesn’t mean he had anything to do with Hal’s disappearance. He’s probably just embarrassed by everything that’s happened. He was made the laughingstock at school this year.”

“The way Andrew answers questions, the police will be suspicious.” Larry pauses a moment, as if to gather himself. “If things develop, and the police bring charges against Andrew, the last place you’d want him to be is the witness stand.”

“Whoa, Larry,” I say. “You’re acting like a crime has been committed, but all we know is that Hal is missing.”

Larry gives me a dubious look. “The way it stands right now, a crime probably was committed. I’ve got a few contacts inside the department and with the media. I’ll see what I can dig up, as discreetly as possible.”

“Thank you.”

“Shame that it’s Carter on this. He’s had it out for you for a long time.”

“Yeah.”

Larry rises and grabs his briefcase. “I’ll contact the police and set the meeting for nine tomorrow morning. Bring Andrew to my office at eight, and I’ll prep him.”

“Thanks, Larry.”

We shake hands, and he begins to leave but stops before he reaches the living room.

“Do me a favor,” Larry says, turning back around. “Talk to Andrew. I can’t defend him to the best of my ability if he’s keeping anything from me.”

“I’ll talk to him,” I say.

“Dwayne, it’s not too early to start thinking outside the box. If Andrew had anything to do with Hal’s disappearance, you’ll want to consider other options.”

I know what Larry means without him coming out and saying it, but Sarah is slower on the uptake.

“What other options?”

Larry looks at her, then back to me. “I’ll let you two discuss that. Good evening.”

Once Larry’s gone and we hear the front door close, Sarah throws her hands in the air.

“What is he talking about?”

“Calm down,” I say. “Larry can’t come out and tell us to do anything illegal.”

“*Illegal?*”

“Sarah, what would you be willing to do to keep Andrew out of prison?”

“Obviously anything, Dwayne.”

I nod. It’s not often I ask a dumb question and it’s even rarer for my wife to call me out on it.

My mind is racing. “A good friend of my father retired in Mexico a couple years ago.”

Her jaw drops. “You want Andrew to run?”

“I don’t want him going anywhere. But if it’s that or prison...”

“No, absolutely not. We’re his parents. I won’t let anyone else raise him. If it comes to running, we are going with him.”

“It would never work,” I say, realizing how carefully I have to tread here. “For starters, it’s much easier to find a family of three people than it is to find one teenager. Also, most of my money is tied up in the business. We’d have nothing, no way to support ourselves while we were on the run. It would never work.”

“I could never live with myself. Sending Andrew away is not an option.”

“If it’s that or prison...”

“What else could we do?” she asks.

I knew going into this conversation that Sarah would never be able to let Andrew go. And the truth is, I couldn’t either. As much as the kid drives me nuts, he’s still my son.

“There’s only one other option,” I say.

“What?”

“One of us takes the fall.”

Sarah sits back in her chair. She obviously hasn’t considered this possibility yet. My wife isn’t the most forward-thinking person in the world, but I knew from the moment I got her call yesterday that this might end up being the only option.

“You mean we say we killed Hal and that Andrew had nothing to do with it?”

Not we. “We can’t both go to prison. Andrew needs at least one of us.”

Sarah is a good mother. And Andrew loves her very much. Of the two of us, she’s the better parent.

But I’m the breadwinner.

I hold out a palm. “Let’s hope we don’t have to make that decision, okay? It’s just something to think about.”

She nods slowly. “Okay, Dwayne.”

“Now we’d better get moving.”

“**T**he whole town is here,” Dwayne says.

We’re about twenty minutes late and the church parking lot is full. People have parked illegally on the street and have also filled up the municipal lot opposite the church. Dwayne isn’t exaggerating. It really does look like the whole town is here to pray for Hal.

Dwayne creates a parking spot ahead, pulling onto the shoulder of the road and parallel-parking between some trees. He turns in his seat to look at Andrew, who’s in the back of the car and hasn’t said a word since our attorney left.

“Ready, pal?” Dwayne asks.

“I guess.”

Dwayne nods. “You’ll be fine. Just keep your head down and we’ll get through this.”

“Okay.”

Dwayne looks over at me. “Ready?”

I take a deep breath. I changed into a nice pair of jeans and a new white top, but now I’m wondering if I underdid it. As we drove past the church, I spotted a lot of women wearing dresses, like they were attending a function at the golf course. Dwayne looks fine in his polo and khakis, but Andrew refused to get changed. He’s wearing gym shorts and a t-shirt under his favorite purple hoodie. I don’t think that thing’s been washed in two weeks.

Dwayne's hand is on top of mine. "It's going to be fine."

I smile. "Okay. I'm ready."

As a family, we approach the church. I was raised Presbyterian, but Dwayne insisted that we get married in his church, and ever since then I've been a practicing Catholic of sorts. I was never that religious growing up, only attending church because my mother forced me. I assumed that Dwayne was more devout, given his insistence we get married in his church, but after the wedding I was surprised to find he rarely attended Mass. He has made Andrew, who isn't very religious either, go through the motions of the sacraments.

Dwayne is a mystery to me when it comes to religion. He normally can't be bothered to go to church, but when *he* thinks we should go, there's no room for discussion. There was a stretch where we didn't attend services for nearly a whole year, one thing or another always seeming to come up, and I saw our extended absence as a good opportunity to suggest a change. I was beginning to suspect that Andrew might be part of the LGBTQ community and wanted to find my son a more welcoming place of worship.

But Dwayne shot that down without a second thought.

"This is our church, Sarah." He grew pious as he said this. "We will not turn our backs on God."

I've never heard him talk like that, before or since.

Lines of congregants sit outside the church silently. The night air is warm and sticky and smells of candle smoke. The mosquitoes are out in full force, attacking me and Andrew, but as usual they leave Dwayne alone. I don't see Russ or Bridget anywhere, but there are literally over a thousand people here. We nod and offer polite but sad smiles to neighbors, friends, people we've seen at Mass for many years, as we head inside the church and collect three candles.

The church is also packed, every pew filled. Most people are kneeling, holding their candles out in front of them. A few small children sit and play at the other end of the church, one of the deacons keeping them quiet and respectful. Before we

can head back outside, Father Henry spots us. He's dressed like he would be for Mass.

"Thank you for coming," he whispers, offering each of us a kind smile. "It means a lot to Russ and Bridget."

I swallow hard. Even though I'm not particularly religious and don't feel like the Catholic Church is the holiest of places, being in a church brings out the guilt in me. Dwayne and I are hypocrites, showing up in a house of God, pretending to support our friends, acting like we're hoping there's still a chance that Hal comes home when we know there's none. When we know he was murdered in our own home, when we know that Dwayne cut him up into smaller pieces and hid his body somewhere else, when we now know that Andrew threatened him with a knife only two weeks ago...

We are horrible people.

I remind myself that we did what we did for our son. Despite the increasing evidence against Andrew, in my heart of hearts I still hold out hope that he's truly innocent of the crime. I have to believe that, otherwise there is no justifying any of our actions. Because if Andrew is guilty, then maybe prison is the best place for him. I can't believe I let Dwayne talk me into this. As I stand by all my neighbors, all my friends, in this place, as I act like the innocent suburbanite, the woman whose son would never commit a crime, who herself would never cover up a crime, I might have all these people fooled.

But I haven't fooled myself.

Or God.

I realize that Father Henry has said something to me.

"I'm sorry?"

"You're a godsend, Sarah," he repeats. "Bridget is so lucky to have such a great friend like you."

It takes all my willpower not to cringe. I manage to squeak out a pained thank you, then fake-smile my way through the remainder of the short exchange. At last Dwayne says something and we are moving. I feel hollow inside, like my

innards have been carved out and there's only a vacuum where my soul used to be.

We light our candles and then Dwayne leads us outside. The entire lawn in front of the church is taken up. While Dwayne looks around, searching for a spot to stand, I see Russ and Bridget seated in the midst of the silent crowd ahead. Russ's back is to us, but Bridget is in profile. With that magic power all humans seem to possess, she feels me looking at her.

Her cheeks glisten with tears as her head turns. Her eyes find me. I offer her a weak smile but don't get much of a response. Her gaze, on the other hand, is penetrating, and I'm fortunate that thirty feet separate us. I'm blushing badly.

I want to tear my eyes away but instead bring a hand up to my heart and make a pained face, then I mouth the words *I'm thinking of you*.

I'm a terrible person.

She frowns, unable to read my lips in the candlelight. Her expression softens but she continues to peer at me, like she's trying to figure something out. A terrifying thought occurs to me.

What if the detectives contacted her and Russ before the vigil and told them about the trouble they experienced when trying to question Andrew?

Have our friends begun to suspect us of something?

Finally, Bridget gives me the slightest of nods, then her eyes drift over to Dwayne and pause for a moment. I'm a mix of jagged emotions, feeling tremendously guilty and terribly scared, but I have the capacity for jealousy still. Despite everything else that's going on, I can't help but wonder if her lingering glance at Dwayne belies a little more than mere friendship between two people who've known each other most of their lives.

Dwayne catches her looking. After quickly offering her a sympathetic smile, he motions and we follow him through the quiet crowd, finding a place almost on the side of the church. Dwayne stops suddenly and does a double-take, his expression

sober before he offers a tight smile to the two people we have moved in front of.

It's Josh and Rose, our friends who own the local hardware store.

After giving them a quick smile, I turn around immediately and bow my head as if in prayer. Other than Russ and Bridget, these two people are the last ones we want to speak with at the vigil, but we can't very well now move out of this spot, because that would look strange. So we root ourselves and I try to think about anything other than my husband showing up at the hardware store two days ago to buy plastic wrap, tarp, and a saw.

I don't know if Josh and Rose are actually staring at us, but I feel their eyes on my back the entire time, while I do everything *except* pray. Speaking to God right now, asking for his help, all that seems hypocritical and horribly self-centered. My mind wanders as I think back over the last two days. I'm torn with conflicting emotions. We should have done the right thing. But now it's too late for that, which means we have to keep doing the wrong thing.

My mind turns back to what Dwayne suggested after Larry left our house. If it looks like Andrew is in trouble, then one of us has to take the fall.

What can we say, though? What's the new story going to be?

Instead of praying, this is what I think about: the new lie we have to tell.

We can say that Andrew left camp early and that Hal showed up, forgetting he wasn't supposed to be there, asking if he could hang out. We can say we were as surprised as Andrew by this, given their strained relationship. We can say that Andrew and Hal got into an argument, because Hal was being mean to Andrew. Maybe we can say that his asking to hang out was merely a pretext, part of some elaborate practical joke, because he just wanted to torment our son again.

It will have to be this way, because Carl and probably other people at the office know that I had to leave the office early two days ago because of something to do with Andrew. It will be known that he was home before me. Unfortunately, there's no way of getting around that, no possibility of removing him entirely from the situation so there's no doubt about his innocence.

I can say that I came home to find Andrew and Hal still bickering. I can say that Hal used slurs, maybe homophobic slurs. I can say *he* brought a weapon, perhaps in retaliation for Andrew's frightening him at the ice cream parlor. I can say Hal was wild, that he seemed like he was on drugs, irrational.

I can say that a mother's rage consumed me, that I didn't even know what I was doing, that I was trying to get Hal to leave and threatening to call his mother and the police when he put his hands on me. I can say that I was only defending myself—after all, who is going to believe that five-foot, two-inch Sarah Mullen, who's never raised her voice in public once, who weighs one hundred and ten pounds soaking wet, who volunteers every chance she gets at the PTA, would be the aggressor and murder a taller, stronger, teenaged boy in a blind rage?

I can say that I moved his body, that Dwayne knew nothing about it. I can say that's what I was doing when I went to the pharmacy—not only was I getting rid of Hal's bike, I was also moving his body.

I'll need Dwayne to tell me where the body is, obviously. I'll have to know that for this elaborate story to work. Dwayne's going to the hardware store will be tricky, though... I'll have to say that I made up a story, offering to paint the basement myself if only he'd pick up the tarp and plastic. I'll say that was my belated Father's Day gift to him, or something like that. Yes, a belated Father's Day gift and an early birthday present, all wrapped up in one. He didn't ask questions, obviously, because he was all too happy to get out of having to paint—Dwayne hates painting. Most people do.

I'll say that I told Dwayne I accidentally broke our old saw while cutting wood for our raised beds in the garden in the

backyard, and I thought since he was going to the hardware store he might as well buy a new one.

Coming up with lies is easier than I thought.

It's the telling of them that's actually difficult.

I can say I swore Andrew to secrecy. I can say I scared him with the possibility of my going away to prison for years, and even though he was really sad and wanted to tell the truth, he also didn't want to lose his mother. We can say, honestly, that Andrew and his father don't get along well, and that he didn't want me going anywhere.

It all sounds plausible, but there are some obvious problems. Once Dwayne brought the supplies home from the hardware store, he didn't leave the house until much later that evening. How, in all that time, did he not discover a dead body? I'll have to say I kept him away from it somehow. Bridget knows he was in the garage, so I'll have to make sure the body is somewhere else in my story—

The basement.

In my story, I told Dwayne I was going to paint the basement. That involves moving a lot of stuff around, picking up after both my husband and son, both of whom tend to leave a mess down there for me. I'll say I didn't want anyone going into the basement and undoing all the work I'd already put into painting.

I know what I'm doing the minute I get home tonight. That basement needs to look like it was about to be painted. So that means moving furniture into the middle of the room, covering it with tarp and sheets, bringing the paint cans, pans, and brushes down. I have to take the pictures down and—

Can I really do this?

And ... do I want to?

I love my son more than anything, but I don't want to go to prison. That's not an unreasonable feeling. And, I would never say this out loud, but I'm a better parent to our son than Dwayne.

He's too hard on Andrew. He doesn't listen to our boy, doesn't want to think Andrew might be anything other than purely heterosexual. He thinks our son is too soft and will get pushed around his whole life. He doesn't think all the medicine and therapy have made a significant difference. He's less willing to try a new doctor or seek a new diagnosis than I am, even though it's obvious we haven't found all the root causes of Andrew's behavioral problems. The truth is, Andrew needs someone to nurture him rather than scold him.

From that perspective, it'd make sense for Dwayne to take the fall.

But there's a problem with that.

Dwayne makes the money. What little I'm earning is going toward Andrew's college fund and while that's not nothing, it's still not much. If Dwayne went to prison, providing for Andrew would be my responsibility. Despite the ensuing scandal, Carl would do his best to keep me at the agency. I guess. At the very least, he'd serve as a great reference. Who am I kidding? We'd have to move. Both Andrew and I would need a clean start somewhere else. With Carl as a reference, maybe I could get a job at another agency like his. I'm a good employee, capable of holding down a job, but I will never make the kind of money that Dwayne does. We can't live off thirty-five thousand dollars a year, the two of us. We'd have to dip into savings and the college fund... Where will that leave Andrew then?

My train of thought leaves me with no good answers to the problems we might face. Eventually I sense a change around me. Some people are beginning to leave. In the darkness they are like phantoms, moving silently away from the church and getting into their cars. I feel a hand on my back. It's Rose, from the hardware store.

"Hi, Sarah," she says, surprising me with a hug. Rose is a little gruff, not the demonstrative type to show emotions, but I guess this unusual setting has made her more sentimental than usual.

"It's just awful, isn't it?" she says, letting me go.

Dwayne shakes hands with Josh and smiles at Rose. “I hate to be rude,” he says, “but I wanted to catch my brother before he goes.”

I hadn’t even noticed Carl, but now I see him. He’s just said something to Russ and Bridget and is turning to go. Dwayne moves away to catch up to him. Rose and Josh both greet Andrew, who mumbles a reply and then puts his eyes back on the ground.

“It is terrible,” I say, giving Andrew a little squeeze. “He’s very upset, as you can tell. He and Hal have known each other their whole lives.”

“Oh, you poor boy,” Rose says, reaching for his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

Rose and Josh don’t have any children, so they’re not as plugged in to the goings-on at school. They might not have heard about Andrew and Hal’s scuffle earlier this year.

Andrew doesn’t respond. The moment Rose’s hand leaves his shoulder, he turns to me. “Can I wait in the car?”

“Sure, honey. Of course.”

He hands me his candle and, without another word, pulls his hood up and puts his head down and leaves.

“Poor boy,” Rose says.

“It’s horrible,” Josh adds in a quiet voice.

The crowd around us has broken up. We’re among the last few standing near the side of the church. There are still hundreds of people in front of the church, waiting to speak to Russ and Bridget. Overhead, insects swarm the floodlights on the corner of the roof.

“So, how are things otherwise?” Rose asks.

“As well as can be, under the circumstances.” I figure it’s not too early to plant the seeds of the story we might have to tell. “I have to get to work in the basement. We’ve been meaning to repaint it for years now.”

“Right,” Josh says, nodding. “Dwayne stopped in before the lunch rush the other day.”

Something about what he says bothers me, but I can’t pin it down. Next thing I know, I feel a hand on my arm and turn to find Russ standing there.

“Oh, Russ.” I throw my arms around him and squeeze. “I’m so, so sorry.”

He hugs me back, albeit reluctantly. Josh and Rose get the sense, as do I, that Russ wants to speak to me privately. He exchanges curt pleasantries with them, and they leave quietly. Then it’s just me and Russ, the closest people to us at least ten feet away, as if they too want to give us a moment.

“Sarah,” he says, his voice full of emotion. “I talked to the detectives before the vigil.”

“Oh.” My stomach feels heavy. “Are there any developments?”

“Did you know that Andrew threatened Hal?”

Eyes wide, I shake my head. “That was news to me, though I’m not sure that’s exactly what happened, Russ.”

He narrows his eyes and regards me skeptically for a moment. “They also told me he refused to answer questions —”

“That’s not what happened,” I interrupt. “They came to our house under false pretenses and started pressuring Andrew. We felt it best to—”

“To lawyer up?” Russ asks, his voice dark. “Why would your son need a lawyer, Sarah?”

“Russ...” I’m drowning here, not at all prepared for his attitude even though I should be. I look past him, hoping to spot Dwayne. “I’m really sorry about Hal going missing, but Andrew had nothing to do with it. We are just making sure our son doesn’t get bullied.”

“Oh, this story again?” Russ says. He’s losing his temper. I’ve never seen him like this. “You know, we’ve been friends forever, and that’s why we didn’t push the issue. Boys will be

boys and all that. But Hal did not *bully* your son. If anything, it was the other way around.”

“Andrew would never—” I realize my voice has gotten loud and defensive, and I’m attracting the wrong kind of attention. “Andrew is not a bully, Russ. He gets picked on all the time.”

“And who told you that? Your son?”

“Russ.” I take a deep breath in the hopes it will calm me down. “I understand how terribly upset you must be right now. I’m very emotional myself. I value our friendship and I’m afraid we’re both close to saying things we might regret.”

He doesn’t answer.

I feel the need to fill the terrible silence. I always do. “We love you guys. Andrew does too. He’s been totally distraught. He barely slept last night. He wants Hal to come home also, safe and sound.”

The lies are killing me. Each one feels like getting stabbed.

“If your son had anything to do with Hal’s going missing —” Russ begins.

But I raise a hand and wave at Dwayne, hoping my husband’s presence will be enough to change the tenor of the conversation. Russ might feel like he can push me around, but with Dwayne, it’s a different story. Dwayne sees me and quickly steps away from his brother.

Russ sees Dwayne coming.

“What, you don’t think I’ll say the same thing to Dwayne?” Russ asks.

I force a smile at Russ but don’t answer.

Dwayne comes up beside us and offers Russ his hand. Russ gives him a long look, then reluctantly shakes it.

“I was just talking to Sarah,” Russ says, “about how you’ve hired a lawyer for your son.”

Dwayne’s whole expression changes. “Russ, I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I didn’t *hire* anybody. Larry is our

family attorney, and we were concerned with how the detectives were treating Andrew. The one in particular, Carter, has had it out for me for years. You know that. After all this time, he *still* thinks I had something to do with Justine's death. Anyway, they crossed a few ethical lines when talking to our son, so we thought it best to consult with Larry. We haven't *lawyered up* or anything like that."

Dwayne is so much better at dealing with people. He's figured out a way to present our otherwise questionable actions in a reasonable light. Russ's shoulders relax a bit, but I get the feeling he's still suspicious.

"Right," Russ says slowly. "I remember about Justine."

Dwayne tilts his head to the side in a display of sympathy. "Russ, we want to do everything we can to help, of course, but this guy is looking for any reason to make my life miserable." He lowers his voice. "This was never made public due to the nature of the agreement, but we reached a settlement of sorts with the department after Justine died. I'm not supposed to go into details, but I will share this with you because I trust you and Bridget with my life: Carter nearly lost his job."

I'm as shocked as Russ appears. Dwayne didn't mention this earlier.

Dwayne puts a hand on Russ's shoulder. "You're my best friend. I want nothing more than Hal to come home. We are going to do everything we can to help, including having Andrew go to the station tomorrow and answer all their questions. We love you guys."

Dwayne sounds so sincere, even I believe him. The rest of the fight goes out of Russ. He smiles sadly and nods.

"Sorry, pal," Russ says. "I'm not myself right now, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"Of course you're not," Dwayne says. "Nor should you be. You're a father."

Russ breaks a smile, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Somehow, my husband has found a way to defuse what was, in my hands, a bad situation. Bridget appears a moment later.

“Hey, you,” I say.

She gives me the same muted response I got earlier, a microscopic smile. Bridget hikes a knee and scratches absently around an ankle. Her skin is red and looks raw from all the itching.

“What are you two talking about?” Bridget asks.

“Hey, Bridge,” Dwayne says. Rather than answer her question, he moves in to hug Bridget. I feel a pang of jealousy despite Bridget’s lack of a response to his embrace. “I’m so sorry.”

“Where’s Andrew?” she asks, after Dwayne lets go. “I thought I saw him earlier.”

“In the car,” I answer quickly. “He’s really upset. He can’t even talk to anybody.”

She nods absently. Everything about Bridget is muted, so much so that I wonder if she’s taken some medicine to calm herself down.

“I’m assuming the answer is no,” I say, “but have there been any developments?”

“Yes,” Bridget says.

There is a pregnant pause, while Dwayne and I wait for more details.

Bridget shrugs. “But we’re not allowed to share anything because it’s an ongoing investigation.”

“Right.” Dwayne turns to Russ. “Is there anything we can do? Are you going back out tonight?”

Russ nods. “Yes. A few of the guys have volunteered again to drive around.”

“Count me in,” Dwayne says immediately. “I’ll drop Sarah at home, then get on the road.”

“What else can we do?” I ask. “Have you eaten anything?”

“I can’t eat,” Bridget says. “I have no appetite.”

“You need to.” I shake my head. “I’ll bring some food over tomorrow then.”

“You don’t have to go to any trou—”

“I want to. No arguments.”

Bridget sighs. She doesn’t seem happy about this, more resigned to accepting charity from friends. “Okay.”

“Don’t give up hope,” Dwayne says, looking at them. “We don’t know anything yet. Kids do things. For all we know, he’s hiding with friends.”

“You’re right.” Russ’s eyes light up. “I know my boy’s out there. I know he’s still *alive*. I can *feel* it.”

His words and the force of his convictions are like a gut punch. Before I know it, I burst into tears. I cover up my face and mutter apologies for my outburst before burying my head in Dwayne’s chest. He wraps his arms around me.

“We feel awful,” I hear my husband saying, as if he’s speaking from miles away. “We haven’t slept a wink. Hal is all we can think about. Sarah keeps looking out the window, expecting to see him on the street, or walking up to our door.”

I hear Russ thanking us for our help and even offering me an apology for how he spoke to me a minute ago. Then I feel his hand on my back. I manage to get myself under control long enough to accept his apology. Bridget only stands there, watching the whole scene play out like it’s a movie and she’s merely a member of the audience, not actually a participant. There is a dull, but sorrowful, look in her eyes.

“Anything you need,” Dwayne says. “Anything.”

“Thank you, Dwayne,” Russ says, his voice thick.

Dwayne touches Bridget’s shoulder, and this physical contact snaps her out of her trance-like state. She jumps a little bit.

“I’m going to run Sarah and Andrew home, then I’ll be out looking.”

BRIDGET

“**T**his is my fault,” I say.

Russ hits the gas the moment the traffic light changes to green, and we zip through the intersection. He always drives too fast.

“Babe, you can’t talk like that,” he says.

“But it is,” I say.

Russ flies around a corner. He’s eager to drop me at home so he can get back out on the road and look for our son. But I’m a bit queasy from not having eaten much in the last two days, and his erratic driving isn’t helping matters.

“Why do you say that?” he asks.

This is it. Here is my opportunity to confess. Russ has cheated on me at least once, and probably many more times. I don’t feel like I owe him the truth.

No, I’d be confessing because it might help with the investigation. Hal was on my phone and read some texts he shouldn’t have seen. It was stupid of me to send Dwayne those messages. When the affair began, he set down some rules to protect us, one of those being no electronic trail. But I couldn’t help myself. Though I put on the appearance of a happy suburban wife, the truth is my marriage with Russ is not great. He loves his job, our money, our son, but I’m not enough for him. I never have been.

Hal is fearless. It’s part of what makes him a great athlete. But he’s also got a temper. I don’t know where that comes

from, as neither Russ nor I do. Those two traits, fearlessness and a short fuse, aren't a good combination. When I got home Thursday morning, Hal threatened to confront Dwayne himself. What if Hal went to the Mullen house and something happened there?

I know I should tell him, but what will Russ do with this information? He would probably divorce me and then where would I be? Dwayne has made no promises. As a matter of fact, he's made it very clear he would not leave Sarah until I was officially divorced from Russ. I understand why—I've burned Dwayne in the past.

This is killing me.

I can't go on like this. I open my mouth to speak, but my husband beats me to the punch.

"Honey, there's something I have to tell you," Russ says.

I grip the armrest and turn my head to look at him. I have a horrible feeling that he *already knows*.

"What is it?"

Russ grimaces then takes the next turn much too quickly. My stomach lurches.

"Can you slow down?" I ask.

"Sorry." He eases up on the accelerator. "It's about Hal."

It starts to drizzle. Russ activates the windshield wipers before continuing.

"A few weeks ago, I found a ton of pot in Hal's backpack."

I'm dumbfounded. "What?"

Russ nods. "I confronted him about it. He planned on using some of it himself, but selling the rest of it to his friends."

My mind is racing. "Where did he get it?"

"The DeMarco kid," he says, shaking his head. "Fucking guy is poison. When I found out, I had a little chat with the kid, told him to stay the hell away from my son."

I'm shocked Hal uses marijuana. Then I realize how silly that feeling is. I wasn't much older than him when I first tried pot. I'm upset with him for trying drugs, but that makes me a terrible hypocrite. We all smoked weed in high school, usually back in the preserve, and we didn't think anything of it.

"Did you talk to his parents?" I ask.

He nods. "I told them about the weed, and they promised to take care of it. They begged me not to go to the police, and I agreed. It was for Hal's sake, really."

"Do you think this has something to do with him going missing?" I ask.

"I put the screws on John today," Russ says, shooting me a dark look. "I went by their house when I knew his parents wouldn't be around."

I'm shocked. "You did?"

Russ nods. "At this point I think I need to share this with the detectives. I was hoping Hal would turn up today and this would be over, but I'm really worried. He might get into trouble for the drugs, but I'm more concerned with getting him home."

My mind is a whirl. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugs. "I took care of it. I didn't see the need."

That's me. I'm just an afterthought to my husband of nearly twenty years.

Dwayne is better to me than Russ. He always has been. If I could rewind the clock about twenty years...

ANDREW

SATURDAY

Normally, Dad yells into the room when it's time for me to get up. Occasionally he'll come in and jostle my shoulder, especially when I take a few extra minutes.

This morning, he's so kind and gentle that for a moment I think it's Mom waking me instead of him.

"It's time to wake up now, son," he says.

He lays a hand on my shoulder and leaves it there for a moment. I open one eye and check the time: just after six. I've slept all of two hours. After church last night, I couldn't get to sleep. I kept thinking about what a horrible person I am for lying about Hal, and I keep thinking what a stupid person I am for having spray-painted that message under the overpass.

"Can I have a few more minutes?" I ask.

Dad actually cracks a smile. "Just a few more."

I wasn't expecting that answer. I close my eyes and drift. But thoughts about my upcoming interview with the police keep invading my dream-like state. Next thing I know, I'm wide awake, sitting up in bed.

I would do anything to get out of this.

Mom opens my door. "Good morning, sweetie."

I muster up an unconvincing smile. The smell of pancakes hits me.

“Get dressed,” Mom says. “Then come down to eat.”

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

She waits in the doorway for me to ask my question.

“What if I mess up today?”

Mom comes in and sits on the edge of my bed with her knees together and her back stiff. “Andrew, no matter what you say, no matter what happens, I want you to know something. Everything will be okay.”

I frown. What the hell is she talking about? How can she be so sure everything will be alright?

“How do you know that?”

She doesn’t answer the question. “Your father and I will make sure of it. Now get dressed, please. Like we’re going to dinner at the golf course.”

She leaves the room and I put on some clothes. Khaki shorts and one of my polos. I look at myself in the mirror and don’t recognize the person staring back at me. After grabbing my favorite purple hoodie, I feel a little better.

Downstairs, Dad is fussing over the griddle, in the middle of pouring out batter for another round of pancakes. There’s a pile of golden-brown pancakes waiting for me on the table, steam lifting off them.

“Where’s Mom?” I ask.

He looks over his shoulder, frowning. “I thought she was getting you up.”

“She did,” I say.

Dad looks puzzled. He motions for me to take over at the griddle so he can go check on Mom, but then we hear the upstairs toilet flush, and he relaxes.

He smiles at me. “Have a seat. I’ll finish up.”

SARAH

About a year ago, Dwayne was suffering from a bout of anxiety. This was around the time the newest shop was opening. There was a problem with the site, some defect the previous owner hadn't disclosed, and there were unforeseen problems with the zoning and then one of the permits. Everything worked out in the end, and it's all a bit of a blur now, but anyway, Dwayne got a prescription for a mild sedative, something to take the edge off and help him manage.

I need that today.

Despite my calm demeanor, I am a nervous wreck this morning. After Dwayne left to join the roving search party for Hal, I tried falling asleep but it was impossible. I was still awake when Dwayne came home after one o'clock in the morning, himself in a bad mood, and I was still awake when he went upstairs to bed. I had already rearranged the furniture in the basement and thrown down sheets and tarps, making the room look like it was about to be painted, so there was no other activity to keep me occupied. I moved from the bed to the couch, back to the bed. I don't think I drifted off until closer to four, and even then my rest was fitful.

I kept seeing Hal in my dreams.

This morning my stomach is in knots. The mere thought of eating makes me nauseous. I kept up appearances for Andrew's sake a moment ago, but I need some help.

Normally I ask Dwayne if I can go through his things before I do so. But he's already got enough on his mind, and I don't want him worried about me too. He's a strong man, but even he has his limits. I will not be a burden to him today. I'm determined to take care of myself.

So rather than ask for permission, I simply go into the bathroom and root around in the travel kit where he kept his anxiety medication.

The master bathroom has a double sink. Dwayne keeps his travel kit in a drawer to the right of his sink. I take the small, black leather bag out and unzip it. I see a razor, a small can of shaving cream, a plastic case for contact lenses, contact lens solution, a spare toothbrush and—there—in the bottom, a pill bottle.

I take out the bottle and read the label. I'm not sure how long this type of medicine lasts, so I check the expiration date.

It's good for another six months.

That surprises me. I wouldn't think anxiety medication could be good for a year and a half. Before I open the bottle, I see the generic name of the drug inside.

I'm not great with drug names. They all kind of sound the same. But this one isn't familiar. I could have sworn Dwayne was taking Bosporus, or Bospurine, something like that.

This medicine is Sildenafil.

I put the pill bottle down. My stomach was already in knots, but now it feels even worse. Fortunately, I have my phone on me. I google Sildenafil and am shocked by what I discover.

There's a knock at the door.

I shriek.

"Honey?" Dwayne says. "Is everything alright?"

It takes me a moment to find my voice. "Ye-yeah. Fine. You startled me. I'm finishing up."

"Breakfast is done, and we have to get moving."

“Alright. Be right out.”

I can tell he hasn't moved away from the door.

“Are you feeling okay, Sarah?” he asks.

“I'm fine, Dwayne. Please give me a moment.”

“Alright, honey. See you downstairs.”

Finally I hear him moving away from the door. I give it another thirty seconds before I put the pill bottle back into his travel kit, making as little noise as possible. Even though I don't know what to do about this yet, I know for sure I want to keep my knowing about this a secret.

DWAYNE

Sarah is acting strangely. It'd be easy to assume that she's not herself because we are driving to the police station right now. But my wife is an open book to me. I know her moods better than she does, can spot when something's bothering her and she either hasn't realized what yet or wants to keep it from me.

She's so easy to read.

But I don't know what's bothering her, and I know from Larry that it can be really dangerous to ask a question you don't know the answer to. Plus, Andrew is in the car and even if she's willing to share her thoughts with me, she might be tight-lipped in front of our son. Whatever it is will have to wait.

I park in a spot reserved for visitors, and we wait by our car. The police station is an old building, and it shows. It's a concrete, box-shaped affair. Larry pulls into the parking lot a moment later, having gotten snagged behind us at a red light. He jumps out of his car, all business. He's dressed in an expensive navy-blue suit and is wearing a blood-red tie.

He gives Andrew a pat on the back. "Remember what I told you: only answer the question being asked. That's most important. Do not volunteer any information. And pause before answering anything. Give me a second to interrupt if I feel it necessary."

"Okay," Andrew says.

We head inside. Larry speaks to the uniformed police officer managing the front desk. A couple of unsavory characters are sitting in the waiting area. Both are disheveled, and one smells like he hasn't showered in a week. We sit as far from them as possible. Andrew can't stop staring. Sarah, normally the chipper one, hasn't said a word of encouragement to him either.

"You'll be fine, pal," I say, rubbing his back. "Just tell the truth."

Andrew doesn't respond for a moment. Then he rises out of his chair and palms his mouth.

"I'm going to be sick," he says.

"The bathroom is back this way," Larry says, pointing.

Right before Andrew breaks into a run, the two detectives appear in the waiting area. Carter watches while my son hurries to the bathroom, his face green, and gives me a smug look. If this man did not carry a badge, I would lay him out.

"Is everything alright?" Lopez asks, pretending like she's concerned about Andrew. She's so phony. This woman can go to hell too for all I care.

"He's very upset," I say, giving Sarah a look. She is staring down at the floor, almost in a daze. What the hell is wrong with her? I need her to act fucking normal right now. "We were at the vigil last night and it really disturbed him. Andrew hardly slept. He feels terrible."

Carter is watching Sarah like a hawk.

"What about you, Mrs. Mullen? Are you alright?"

"What?" Sarah looks up a second later, like she's on a delay. "Oh yes, I'm okay. I mean, not really. I'm..."

Her voice drifts off. Carter waits for her to finish the thought, but Sarah retreats inside herself again. I can tell something *else* is bothering her, but what?

I get a sinking feeling that she knows about me and Bridget.

“We’re not ourselves,” I say. “This has been difficult.”

“I’m sure it has,” Lopez says.

Carter’s eyes move from me to my wife steadily, like he’s just waiting for us to admit to something. He doesn’t hide his enjoyment at watching me sweat. When Andrew doesn’t return right away, Sarah goes to check on our son. Lopez follows along, saying she’d like to make sure Andrew is alright, but I see right through the act. The detective is worried that he’s run off to avoid questioning.

A few minutes later, the three of them return. Andrew’s color has improved a little. He wipes under his mouth. It’s obvious that he’s been vomiting.

“I’m, uh, sorry,” he says.

“It’s quite alright, Andrew,” Larry announces, moving beside my boy. “It’s understandable, given the circumstances.”

“Are we ready to begin?” Carter asks, now impatient.

“Do you think you’re able to answer a few questions?” Larry says, looking at Andrew and emphasizing the word *few*.

“Ye-yeah.”

Larry nods proudly at him, then turns back to the detectives. “Show us the way.”

I begin to follow Andrew and Larry, but Carter sticks out a palm. “You can wait here, Mr. Mullen.”

“My son is a minor,” I say. “I’m going to be in the room ___”

“You’ve retained an attorney,” Carter says. “Larry will make sure everything is above-board.”

“You can bet on that, *Detective*,” Larry chimes in.

The attorney walks beside me as we proceed through the station. We must pass three people in handcuffs, two men and one woman, while a lot of police officers tap away on their computers. The detectives bring us to a room in the back and open the door. I see my reflection in what must be a one-way mirror and wonder if there are cops on the other side of it. They keep calling this an interview but that mirror tells me otherwise, and when Detective Lopez closes the door and I hear a locking mechanism fall into place, whatever little unreasonable hope I held is gone.

Carter asks us to take a seat, but he remains standing. Lopez sits opposite me and places a thick folder on the table between me and Larry. It's bulging with paperwork.

"Really?" Larry asks, eyeing the folder with a wry grin. "That old trick?"

He warned me about this in his office. Cops will often bring a folder to an interview, stuff it to the gills with otherwise meaningless paper, and pass it off as a case file. It's supposed to give the impression that they're in possession of a lot of information. They want the suspect to think they already know everything.

If it is a trick, Lopez pulls off a convincing act. "We wanted to make sure we had everything at our disposal for this interview."

Larry is having none of it. “My client agreed to answer a few questions to aid in your investigation. I assume you’re already recording this, so for the record my client Andrew Mullen is a minor and represented by counsel today. Let’s stay on point here.”

Lopez states the names of the people in the room for the record. Then Carter starts in immediately. He opens the bulging folder and whips out a photograph.

“Do you know anything about this?”

He lays the photo in front of me on the table.

My heart is racing. It’s a picture of what I spray-painted under the overpass. It must have been taken a few hours after, since it’s nighttime in the image. The police must have used floodlights to illuminate my scrawl: *I didn’t do it.*

I take too long to answer. Thank God I have an attorney here. Larry saves me from myself.

“Whoa, Liam. Let’s back up a step. You are not going to bully a minor. First you need to identify what this is for the record and explain to my client what he is looking at.”

Carter folds his arms. “You and I both know I don’t need to do that. It’s a simple question. Don’t stall me again to give your client time to come up with an answer.”

“I’ll interrupt any time I feel like you’ve overstepped,” Larry says. “Andrew is a minor, and he has rights.”

I can’t stop my legs from shaking. Carter ignores Larry and gives me a scathing look.

“Andrew, explain to us what is it that you apparently didn’t do?”

We are barely one minute in to this interview, and already I’m trapped. By the time I mumble something unintelligible, I’ve lost whatever little credibility I showed up with.

“You need to speak your answer,” Carter says. “For the record. Our sound equipment doesn’t record gestures. I’m sure your attorney here told you that.”

Larry did mention that in his office, but I'm so overwhelmed, I've already forgotten most of his advice.

"I didn't..." I almost said, *I didn't write that*. But what if he knows that I did? "At camp, the other kids were making fun of me."

"About what?"

My face is on fire. "They were joking that I, uh, did something to Hal."

"Did what exactly?"

"It was stupid," I say. "Just kids being kids."

"Did what *exactly*?" Carter insists.

"Look, it was a joke. They all hate me. They just wanted to get under my skin—"

"*What did they say?*"

I swallow hard. "They were making a joke of me killing Hal. It's because of that fight we got into."

That's it. I'm in real trouble now. I expect Carter to read me my rights or whatever, but he stares at me silently. His gaze burns a hole in my soul. Then he moves away from the desk, and Lopez takes over.

"Andrew, three days ago, did you see Hal on the trails behind your house?"

"Yes."

She nods, opens the folder, and removes a document. After reviewing what looks like a witness statement, she looks back up at me.

"Did you threaten him that day?"

"*What?* No."

"You didn't say—" She looks down at her notes. "—I'll kill you if you ever come back here?"

What? How does she know this? Who told her that? I rack my brain, then realize the answer is obvious. Hal must have

told one of his friends about our conversation, maybe Anna, and they shared it with the police.

“He was bothering me,” I say. “I mean, he was making fun of me.”

“But you did threaten to kill him,” Lopez says.

“I don’t think I used those words.”

“What words did you use, then?”

“It was an argument, I don’t know... He was—all year long he’s bullied me and then I saw him like, loitering behind my house. I thought he was back there planning something, you know? So I went outside and told him to leave.”

Lopez takes out her little note pad and jots something down. The silence is unnerving. I want to scream.

Carter slowly leans forward, puts his hands on the table, and levels his eyes on me.

“Andrew, Mr. and Mrs. English want to know where their son is. He’s only a boy, just like you. He’s been missing for more than forty-eight hours now. You’re a smart kid, so I don’t have to tell you what that probably means. Russ and Bridget are parents. They’re hurting terribly. They just want to know what happened to their boy. The not knowing is the worst.”

As he continues to talk, I feel my resolve crumbling. Even though I didn’t kill Hal, even though I didn’t help my parents cover up the crime, I still feel guilty. I can’t go on like this. I can’t go on pretending like nothing happened in my house. I can’t lie anymore.

I’m going to tell this man everything.

“You say the kid bullied you, then I understand,” Carter is still speaking. “I dealt with that myself in grade school. Jimmy Leone. I’ll never forget it. The guy made my life a living hell. I was scared and couldn’t sleep and I fantasized about what I’d do to him if only I was stronger and bigger and knew how to fight. So I know what you went through in school this year. I know what it’s like to be the butt of the joke. It hurts and it consumes your life. You can’t focus on school work and you

dread going to recess. But for you, these days, it's even worse."

Carter nods at Lopez. She opens the folder again and digs out some more documents. This time, they are print-outs of screen captures from social media pages.

"Back in my day, the bullying stopped once the bell rang," Carter says. "But nowadays, the bullying never ends."

I look over what Lopez has put in front of me. These are all anonymous posts or tweets, all of them throwing shade at Hal English. I don't have to read them to know what they say.

Because I wrote them.

"Nobody's saved by the bell anymore," Carter says, "because all the hate continues online. Non-stop, twenty-four seven. Isn't that right, Andrew?"

"Our computer forensics team is looking into this," Lopez explains. "They have ways of identifying who wrote these messages. It's only a matter of time."

Oh God... I have to tell the truth. I have to.

"Andrew," Carter says, "I think it's time you admitted to us who the real bully is here. We all know it wasn't Hal English."

But... "He was a dick to me. Most of the year. I tried ignoring it, but I couldn't deal with his bullshit any longer. The truth is—"

"Andrew," Larry interrupts. "You don't have to—"

"Let him answer the question!" Carter shouts.

The words are right there, on the tip of my tongue. All I have to do is say them, and this nightmare will be over. If I tell them the truth, that I found Hal's body in the garage, then they'll have to believe me that I didn't kill him. I know Mom and Dad will get into trouble for moving the body, but they didn't murder Hal. Maybe if they come clean too and cooperate with the investigation, actually help the police find the real killer, they'll get off.

“I...”

There's a knock at the door. Larry shoots me a look to be quiet. When Carter realizes I'm not going to continue, he opens the door. A uniformed police woman is waiting in the hallway.

“I need to speak with both of you right now,” she says.

DWAYNE

“**W**hat the hell’s going on?” I ask. “Where’s Andrew?”

“Not in here,” Larry says.

I’m about to ask if they’ve arrested Andrew, but Larry’s sharp look makes me swallow my question. There’s a new buzz to the police station. All this activity has finally brought Sarah out of her daze. In the short time my wife and I have been in the waiting area, at least fifteen more cops have shown up. I get the sense they weren’t all scheduled to come in this morning. Everyone moves with a sense of urgency.

Something has changed.

Larry leads us out into the parking lot. He opens his passenger door and signals for me to get in.

“I need to speak with Dwayne,” he says.

Sarah pulls a face. She obviously wants to hear what Larry has to tell me.

“Honey, there’s a reason Larry is only speaking to me.”

“It’s for the best,” he says.

Sarah looks hurt to be excluded, but she relents like she usually does. I get in Larry’s car and close the door, waiting for him to come around to the other side. Sarah watches me miserably for a moment before getting in our car.

“What’s happened?” I ask, after Larry closes his door.

“Anonymous phone call,” he explains. “They reported suspicious activity in the preserve two nights ago. They asked Andrew if he was involved or knew about it. When he said no, it was the first time I felt like he was telling the truth in there.”

“An anonymous call? What else did they say?”

“That’s all Carter shared. But they’ve obviously got something to go on.”

Shit. “But they didn’t arrest Andrew. That’s a good thing, right?”

Larry gives me a long look. “We were saved by the bell, Dwayne. Andrew was drowning in there. The police found some hate messages directed at Hal. He wouldn’t admit to it, but it was obvious your son wrote them.”

“Are you sure?”

He nods. “They might be able to trace the messages back to him. Also, Andrew all but admitted he threatened Hal three days ago behind the house. Said he was going to kill Hal.”

“Jesus.”

“And there’s one more thing.”

“What?”

“I think your son spray-painted a message. It’s under one of the overpasses in town. The police have photos and have reason to believe it was him. Could be they have a witness, or maybe they pinged Andrew’s phone and know he was in the area at the time.”

No, no, no. This is exactly the kind of impulsive thing Andrew does when he hasn’t taken his medicine.

“What did it say?”

“I didn’t do it.”

I play dumb. “And the police think that is somehow related to all this?”

“Of course they do, Dwayne.”

“Well, what about this call? If they find Hal in the preserve, then that message, if Andrew even wrote it, doesn’t mean anything.”

Larry cocks his head to the side. “Before you say anything else, I want to remind you that I represent your son in this criminal matter, Dwayne. Not you. None of this conversation is privileged.”

I nod slowly. “I understand, Larry.”

“Your father and I were friends, and I think of you the same way,” Larry says. “I love Sarah, and I think Andrew is a good boy deep down. But he has some serious issues.”

“He does.” I sigh. “It’s just bad wiring.”

Larry nods sympathetically. “I’m going to speculate now. What I say next will never leave this car, is that clear?”

“Yes.”

Larry stares hard at me. “If anyone ever asks what you and I said, you will leave this next bit out. If you don’t, I could lose my license. Is that understood?”

“Absolutely. You have my word.”

Larry nods. “I think Andrew was about to admit to something. I’ve seen it happen before, so I know all the signs. He was overwhelmed and couldn’t answer a simple question. He looked like he was ready to unburden himself, if you take my meaning.”

I say nothing.

Larry points at the police station. “If that call hadn’t come through when it did, I think Andrew would be signing some kind of statement—maybe a confession. I don’t know what he did, or what he knows, but whatever it is, I know it’s ugly and that it’s criminal.”

I swallow hard. Thank God I’ve already planted the seeds with Sarah about one of us having to take the fall. It’s looking more and more like that’s necessary. But I’ve still got one more play left. Hopefully it won’t come to that.

Larry continues. “They’re holding Andrew here for the time being.”

“Do you mean they’ve *arrested* him?”

He shakes his head. “They haven’t arrested him.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. How can they keep him there but not arrest him? That has to be against the Constitution.”

“It’s not. Police can hold a suspect for up to twenty-four hours without bringing charges. At that point, they’re forced to make an arrest or let the suspect go.”

“Twenty-four *hours*?” Andrew is never going to make it that long, especially if Larry’s assessment of my son’s fragile state is accurate. “That’s not right!”

“He’s a minor, so I’ll pressure them to release Andrew sooner. Even the most conservative judges have soft spots for minors. But unfortunately, both detectives are going to be tied up with the search party now.”

“Oh right. I’ll bet that’s on purpose.”

He nods. “It is. They want Andrew to sit inside that room and have all the time in the world to think about everything. He was close to cracking. That short break, when Carter took the phone call, is what saved us. Andrew clammed back up. When the detectives realized he was stonewalling them, they changed gears and decided to join the search party.”

“This is a fucking nightmare. What do we do?”

“I can’t sit in the room with Andrew all day. If you want my help, I have to go to work. That means hiring a PI to run down witnesses and find holes in the evidence and come up with alternative suspects if possible. One of you should stay here with Andrew. He obviously needs support.”

“Sarah,” I say, without even thinking about it.

I’ve got other plans.

Larry nods. “Good. I’ll let you deliver that message. I’m going to get to work.”

I shake his hand and thank him for his help. But as I go to leave, Larry asks me to wait.

“I mentioned this last night, but you really need to start thinking through your options.” Larry looks out through the windshield. Two dozen cops are moving through the parking lot and getting in their vehicles. I spot Carter waddling toward his own unmarked sedan. “I don’t know what he knows, or what he’s done, but Dwayne, it’s not too early to think about a plea deal.”

I don’t say a word. Larry obviously doesn’t know the whole story, otherwise he wouldn’t suggest a course of action implicating not only his client but also my wife and me.

Larry reads my reluctance. “A plea bargain is probably your best bet if things continue the way they have. But if that’s truly not an option, then ... it would be better if the police were unable to question any of you again.”

“I understand, Larry.”

I thank him once more and exit the vehicle. I get behind the wheel of my own car and wait for Larry to pull away before addressing Sarah. She’s turned in her seat to watch the activity in the parking lot. The fleet of police cars has begun to move out.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

I bring her up to speed, sharing with her everything Larry said. When I’m done, she sits for a moment in heavy silence, her eyes getting that faraway look. She’s gone to that place. It almost feels like she’s not in the car with me.

“Did Andrew kill Hal?” she asks, like we’re trying to decide what we should have for dinner tonight.

“Honey, I told you from the beginning. But you didn’t want to hear it. You think the best of others. I love that about you. It’s what makes you you. But unfortunately that blinds you to the bad in people. And there’s a lot of bad in Andrew.”

She nods slowly, as if admitting to the dark side of our boy.

“He did this, Sarah,” I say. “The evidence against him is growing, and he was ready to admit to something in there.”

“What do you think we should do?”

She poses the question like the matter really concerns someone else, not us.

“I want you to stay here with him. He listens to you. Get him to understand that he *cannot* admit to anything. If he does, we are all going to prison.”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” she asks. “About yourself going to prison?”

“Of course I am, Sarah. That doesn’t make me a monster. Especially when we both know I didn’t kill Hal.”

“Right...” She faces forward and stares blankly out the windshield. “What are you going to do, then, while I’m sitting here with Andrew?”

“I have a plan, but the less you know, the better.”

She cracks a rueful smile. “Of course.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head. “Nothing, Dwayne.”

“Honey.” She cringes when I put my hand on her shoulder, so I take it away. “Sarah, I need you to be strong right now. Now get in there and make sure Andrew understands what he has to do. Is that clear?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Sarah, honey, did you hear me?”

“Are you having an affair with Bridget?”

Her question throws me for a loop. “Honey, I already told you: no.”

“I found your pills.”

My heart skips a beat.

She nods at my reaction, a look of vindication in her eyes. “I felt like I was going to have a panic attack, so I looked in

your kit for that medication you were taking a year ago. It wasn't in there, but I found your other pills."

"Sarah..."

"I know I don't have much of a sex drive these days, as you're always mentioning, but then I started thinking back to the last time we had sex. It was probably three or four months ago, that night Andrew stayed with Carl and we went out to dinner. Three or four months ago, Dwayne."

"It's not what you think."

"Erectile dysfunction? I didn't notice."

"It's embarrassing, okay?" I turn away, red-faced. "Like you said, we don't have sex that often anymore and so I've been, you know, taking care of myself more often. Anyway, there have been times where ... I couldn't get off."

Sarah normally believes me. But there's a look of doubt in her eyes. "Dwayne, what am I supposed to think?"

"I'm your husband. You're supposed to give me the benefit of the doubt."

"Why should I?" she says, an unusual edge to her voice. "You never tell me anything. And why wouldn't you tell me this? I'm your wife. You're supposed to give *me* the benefit of the doubt."

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

"I can't believe we are even having this conversation right now, Sarah." I grip the steering wheel tightly, my knuckles turning white. "Our son is this close to being arrested for murder, and you're fucking giving me a rash of shit about an embarrassing *medical condition*?"

"Fine," she says. "Let's drop it for now. Where are you going?"

"I just told you, the less you know—"

"Where are you going, Dwayne?" she demands.

I shake my head. When this is all over, I am going to sit my wife down and explain things to her. I'm the one that runs

the show. She doesn't get to make demands of me like this.

"I'm going to talk to Carl," I say. "He's always helped me when I'm in a jam. He's good at coming up with solutions to unusual problems. That's what he does all day long."

She eyes me suspiciously, but this time I'm not actually lying.

"Are you going to tell him everything?" she asks.

"We can trust him."

She looks away, lost in thought, then grabs her purse and gets out of the car without another word. I watch her reenter the police station, surprised to find I'm just as worried about her talking now as my boy.

There's nothing to be done about that right now, and I have to act fast. Carl's house is ten minutes away, in an older section of town. He lives in a small development of townhouses. I call to let him know I'm on the way. I park in front of his place, an end unit, and his front door opens before I've turned my engine off.

He closes the door behind me. The TV is on in the other room, tuned in to the local news. Some reporter must have gotten a whiff of the police searching the nature preserve. She speaks in that neutral, flat tone American reporters tend to use and explains that they have no confirmation from police yet that this search is related to Hal English, which is her sly way of revealing her unconfirmed suspicions and thus enticing people to stay tuned.

Carl has always been excellent at reading people, and I'm no exception. It doesn't hurt that he's my older brother and has been watching me for most of my life. Once he's done turning the volume of the TV down in the other room, he comes back into the foyer and gives me one look.

"Are you in trouble again?" he asks.

I shake my head. "It's not like that."

He arches one eyebrow.

"It's not," I say. "I swear."

“Because the last time was supposed to be the last time,” Carl says. “Remember I said that?”

“I know. If it were just me, I wouldn’t have come here for help. But this time my whole family is in trouble. The police are holding Andrew for questioning.”

Carl’s face registers shock. “Andrew?”

I nod.

He bobs his head in the direction of the TV playing in the other room. “Is it about this?”

“Yes.”

Carl palms his forehead, then runs his hand through his thinning hair. “Did Andrew kill the kid?”

That’s Carl. He always cuts right to the heart of the matter.

“Do you want me to answer that?” I ask.

He nods.

I look my brother in the eye. I’ve trusted this man with my life before, and he loves Andrew dearly, so I know I can trust him with this.

When I’m done explaining, Carl eyes me for a long second. Then he nods slowly, his mind already working to fit the whole narrative together.

“This is why Sarah left work early the last two days, isn’t it?”

“How much more do you want to know?” I ask.

He nods and holds out a palm. “No more. But I’m not sure what I can do if the police already have Andrew. Last time it was my word against a dead person’s—”

“That wouldn’t work here,” I say. “Even if you could provide an alibi, it would be suspect because you’re his uncle. But you can’t—”

“Because I was at the office when it happened.”

I nod. “That’s right.”

“So what are you asking me to do?”

“The police received an anonymous call about suspicious activity in the preserve,” I say carefully, then realize there’s little use in mincing words now. “They are probably going to find the body there.”

I let that sink in before continuing.

“I need someone to come forward and paint a different picture.”

Carl takes a moment to piece it together. “Ah. I understand.”

He’s always understood me.

“You must know someone who goes into the preserve late at night, who’d be afraid initially to come forward with information. Somebody who’d wait a day or two to call the cops, maybe somebody already in trouble with the law, who needs a get-out-of-jail-free card?”

Carl folds his arms and thinks it over. I can tell he’s got someone, maybe a few people, in mind, but he’s deciding whether he should give me a name.

“I see what you’re doing, but this could blow up in your face really easily,” Carl answers, leaning a shoulder against the wall. “The only person I can think of is not reliable.”

“I wouldn’t expect them to be,” I say.

He gives me an incredulous look. “I’m not just worried about you and your family.”

“I’ll handle him,” I say.

“This could blow up in *my* face too,” Carl says.

I shake my head. “He won’t know you’re involved.”

Carl isn’t convinced. “Dwayne, you know I’d do anything for you, Sarah, and Andrew. But you’re asking me to risk everything.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“I handled it last time,” he says.

“You stepped in,” I say, “but I *made sure*.”

My brother and I started this conversation many years ago, and we’ll probably never finish it.

“I’ll handle it,” I repeat.

Carl and I share a look. We don’t have to say another word. He takes my meaning.

“Okay,” Carl says.

SARAH

They're keeping us in the interview room. The door is locked from the outside. We have to knock when one of us needs to leave the room. When Andrew had to use the restroom, the man guarding the door escorted him and waited inside while Andrew did his business. I'm on my third cup of coffee and need to go myself in a moment.

"Are you okay?" I ask my son, who's curled up on the chair next to me in his hoodie. I haven't gotten more than five words out of him. "Need anything?"

He shakes his head and turns farther away from me on his chair. My butt and the back of my legs are starting to hurt from having to sit on these hard plastic seats all morning. I get up and move around the room to help with the circulation and rub my hamstrings.

"I'm running to the bathroom," I say. "I think there's a vending machine. Can I bring you something?"

"No, Mom."

I bring my hand up to knock on the door to be let out, but pause a moment. Looking over my shoulder, I say, "Andrew, is there anything you want to tell me? I mean, about your father?"

"What?" He shifts on the chair, sitting up. "I don't know what you mean."

"About..."

I know they've got cameras in this room. Even if we're not actively being watched, the police will be able to rewind the tape and listen in on our conversation if they want to. Still, it's tempting to ask Andrew more questions. I'm just tired of all the deceit and evasions and maintaining this increasingly complicated web of lies. I want this to be over.

But I know that's a selfish impulse. I'm a mother. My first duty is to protect Andrew.

So I force a smile. "Nothing, sweetie. I'll be back in a moment."

After the policeman lets me out, I walk down the hall and then along the perimeter of the station to the facilities. I open the outer door to the bathroom and am standing in the small communicating space when I hear two women talking inside.

"I think we're going to arrest him this afternoon."

My heart stops.

"Congratulations," the other voice says. "I know you've been building this case for a while."

I frown. Hal went missing three days ago, so they must be talking about something else. I'm about to push the door open and go inside, but the next line stops me dead.

"Yeah. Politics, as usual. The DeMarcos draw a lot of water. But we have too much evidence now. The mayor can't protect them any longer."

I go still and put a hand over my mouth to muffle my breathing.

"Was he working alone?"

"No. We've got his accomplices also."

"There's a lot happening on that street."

"*Right?* Did you see the Mullen woman, by the way?"

"Poor girl, I don't know how she's married to a man like that."

They're talking about me.

“You’ve been listening to Carter too much.”

“His cousin was no addict—we graduated together and ran in the same circles. Super bitch, for sure, but not into the hard stuff. More of a casual user, a party girl.”

Their voices are getting louder. They must be approaching the inner door to the bathroom. I stay very still and quiet, hoping to catch a little more of their conversation.

The other woman says, “Come on, one leads to another. People act like there’s no such thing as a gateway drug. Anyway, it was a bad batch. That’s why the dealer—”

The inner door opens and I come face-to-face with two women. One is in uniform, the other is in plain clothes. They’re surprised and embarrassed to see me. They offer polite nods and slip quietly out.

I’m alone in the bathroom. I take a moment to examine myself in the mirror. My eyes are red and I’ve got bags under them. After splashing some water on my face, I sit down in the far stall. I take my phone out and search online for more information about the death of Dwayne’s first wife, Justine.

I’m surprised by how many news articles appear in my search. I read through some, but pretty soon I realize most of them are simply regurgitating what’s already been reported. Eventually I come to the end of this story’s life in the news cycle, an article published after the police classified the death as accidental and the department decided not to bring anyone up on charges. The article details the history of the investigation, devoting several paragraphs to Dwayne. He was eventually ruled out as a suspect after two things happened.

First, the dealer that allegedly supplied Justine with her drugs overdosed himself a few days later, lending credence to the idea that she’d ingested part of a bad batch. I would have expected this to be enough evidence to clear Dwayne of any suspicion, but Justine’s family remained adamant that she did not do hard drugs. They admitted she drank a lot, some of them even saying “too much,” but that she stayed away from cocaine and heroin, and that she was careful about not mixing too many things in her system.

What really closed the case was the second thing that came to light.

The police eventually got a statement from Dwayne's brother, Carl, who told investigators a different story. He said that Justine came to him for help, knowing he worked with addicts, and shared her drug problems. Carl explained that she'd found ways over the years, like all addicts do, to hide her addictions from the people that loved her, and that not even Dwayne knew how bad off she was. Carl told investigators that she had hidey holes in their apartment, would leave drugs with friends, and was even driving while under the influence and frequently going to work high, at least while she still had a job. He tried setting her up with a doctor and an addictions counselor, but she resisted and a few days later she ODeD.

At that point, despite the family's insistence to the contrary, the police had credible testimony from a man who was well-known and trusted within the community that Justine had a major drug problem. They ruled her death accidental and closed the case.

No matter what her family said, I take Carl at his word. I've worked for him for years now and can say without a doubt that he's genuinely interested in helping people and would never make up a story like this. The police were right to close the case. Dwayne had nothing to do with Justine's death.

I'm about to close the article when my eye catches one new piece of information.

Justine was pregnant.

Dwayne never mentioned that.

I close the article and look in other places online. Justine passed in the early days of the internet. She did not have a MySpace page, but I do find an old thread in a long-dormant forum about local events mentioning her death. Most of the comments have been deleted, some of the thread has been taken down too, but a small piece of it remains.

You know he was beating Justine, don't you?

I gasp, now really confused. Dwayne has never laid a hand on me. I've never even *worried* about it.

But this person, whoever they are, insists he was abusing Justine?

DWAYNE

Ever since I took over the business from Dad, I've socked away cash inside a safe at the office. Nobody knows about it, not even Sarah. But a couple hundred here, a thousand there, repeated many times over the years, and it all adds up into a sizable, and secret, emergency fund. I haven't counted it in a while and am surprised to find nearly forty grand in the safe.

I don't need that much. From what Carl shared, this Jayden character is desperate and won't look a gift horse in the mouth. I'm not just offering him money, I'm offering him a way out of his legal troubles too. By providing the police with information about Hal, the cops might be willing to look the other way and forget about his pending drug charges.

I figure I could get this done for ten grand, at most fifteen.

Still, though, there's no telling if I'm suddenly going to need more cash in a hurry. With the way things are going right now, I decide to remove all forty grand from the safe. Carrying that amount of cash around is difficult, but not impossible. I stash several thousand in my wallet and pockets, then divide the rest into envelopes which I store in my glove box and inside a compartment in my trunk. I don't plan to leave all that money in my car for a long period of time, but it's good to have it in a pinch.

Using one of the burners I purchased the other day, I dial the number Carl gave me. Jayden answers after the third ring.

"Who this?"

“A friend of a friend gave me your number.”

“Oh yeah? Who they?”

“Never mind. I have a business proposition for you.”

“Man, fuck that. I don’t do business over the phone.”

“Ten grand,” I say.

He doesn’t answer for a moment.

“You still there?”

“Like I said, I ain’t do business over the phone.”

“I don’t like to either.” I tell him where and when to meet me and ask what his car looks like. “I’m bringing half that money with me.”

“I’mma see you there.”

Carl sure picked the right guy. This is going to be easy.

As I’m pulling out of the parking lot, my cell phone rings. I stash the burner in the glove box and pick up my mobile. It’s Larry calling.

“They found Hal,” he says.

Shit.

“That was fast,” I say, playing it cool but wanting to scream.

“The source gave them a good sense of place, and they brought in dogs from the county. It didn’t take long.”

“What about this source? Who are they?”

“They think it’s a couple high schoolers, who went out there to drink, maybe get high, and fool around. They didn’t want their parents knowing what they were up to—that’s why they didn’t say anything—but they must have had an attack of conscience. They probably went to the vigil. Nothing like the fear and judgment of God to make people talk.”

“What happens now?”

“I’m guessing here, but I think the detectives will wait for preliminary forensics to come back before they take another

run at Andrew. If they can find something that links the two boys together, some physical evidence, they'll want to use that in their next round of questioning. Though you never know with Carter. The guy's a hothead. He likes to pick a suspect first, then make the evidence fit."

"Yeah, I remember. So how are you going to handle him?"

"I've thought it over, Dwayne, and at this point I'm going to direct Andrew not to answer any more questions."

"You mean plead the fifth?"

"Exactly. His not talking will force the police to make a decision. Now they have to charge him or let him go. No sense in our being coy any longer. Like I said, your son was ready to confess earlier and their finding the body will likely push him over the edge."

"Do you think they'll charge him?"

"Depends." His voice turns grave. "Do you think they'll find anything on Hal that would implicate Andrew?"

It's the most direct thing Larry has put to me.

How best to say this... "I would be surprised if they did."

I can picture Larry nodding along in his car.

"I'm headed to my office now," Larry says, "then will go to the station in an hour or so."

"Thank you, Larry. For everything."

"Don't thank me yet. We're still up the creek, buddy."

I pull out into the light traffic of early Saturday afternoon. It's a muggy, grey day. The police investigation is building steam. I picture a snowball rolling down a mountain, growing larger and larger, eventually kicking off an avalanche, and all that snow is headed right for us.

Despite the overcast sky, the community pool is busy. As I drive slowly past, a boy about Andrew's age darts across the diving board and executes a cannonball, his big splash reaching several of his friends standing alongside the pool. I haven't even thought about going to the pool in years, but

right now I wish more than anything I was there. I'd rather be sitting in a lounge chair, discreetly checking out all the other women, while Sarah reads her airport thrillers and Andrew sulks about not being allowed to buy a second ice cream.

I'd take his bad attitude and constant negativity over the current state of affairs any day.

I reach the lot for the old car dealership ten minutes later. It's situated on a two-lane highway most people use to reach the county seat when they're called for jury duty. The dealership closed about five years ago. The building still stands, but now it's an empty lot. Before pulling in, I check to make sure I'm not being followed, then I drive around back.

Jayden's thirty-year-old Toyota is parked along the rear wall of the empty building. Its passenger-side rear wheel is low, and the driver door has been replaced; it's grey but the body of the car is tan. The windows are also tinted. I stop a moment to pull on my ski mask, then I pull alongside the car.

He rolls his passenger window down and sticks a gun out. I hold my hands up, so he can see them. Then he gestures for me to roll my window down.

"Take the mask off," Jayden orders.

He's younger than I expected, twenty-five years old at most if I had to guess.

"I can't do that," I say.

"Man, I seen your car already."

"This isn't my car," I lie. "It's a rental."

His eyes rove over my vehicle. I keep it in good shape. It could pass for a rental. Jayden looks back at me.

"Where's the money?"

"First I'm going to tell you what I need."

"Man I know what you need. Ten grand is a lot of blow."

"Uh-uh," I say. "I don't need drugs."

He pulls a face. "I ain't jerking off for you or nothing."

I shake my head. "Someone told me you're in trouble with the police."

"Yeah ... so what?"

"What if I could help you get out of that trouble?"

"I'm listening."

"Could you lower the gun?" I ask. I don't want this drug addict to get twitchy and blow my head off accidentally. "I'll keep my hands right here."

Jayden keeps the weapon aimed at me. "You a cop?"

"No."

"You police?" he asks again.

"No."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Not a cop."

He nods. "You have to tell me if you are, you know. That's the law."

I'm not sure that *is* the law. That's what they say in movies. But I'm not going to disabuse him of that notion.

"That's right," I say. "And I'm telling you, I'm not a cop."

"Then what you want?"

"Please lower the gun."

He does. I keep my hands in plain sight. Then I tell him what I want.

"That's all?" he asks.

"Ten grand," I say.

"Ten grand for that." He smirks. "You must be in the shit then."

"Not me. I'm asking for a friend."

"Friend my ass." He shakes his head, chuckles. "You in it, otherwise you wouldn't be talking to a guy like me."

“Ten grand,” I repeat. “Can you do it? And can you be convincing?”

“Yeah, man, I can do it. But it’s going to cost you fifteen.”

I pretend to be hard up. “I don’t know...”

“Fifteen. Or I’m rolling and I tell the cops all about you anyway. That’d get me outta trouble too, I’ll bet.”

“Hold on.” I stick my palm out, pretend to be frazzled. “Just give me a minute.”

“Nah, man. I think I got what I need already. Some white dude called me outta blue and asked me to—”

“You wouldn’t have any money, though. What I’m offering, it gets you in the police’s good graces and ten grand.”

“Fifteen,” he says.

I knew he was playing the whole time. No way was this guy going to turn into an honest citizen and pass up on all this money.

“Okay, okay. Fifteen.”

“That’s better.” He flashes a gold-toothed smile. “You got it with you?”

“Five now,” I say. “Ten after it’s done.”

“Nah, man. All now.”

I shake my head. “I don’t have it on me. And besides, I’d never give you the whole thing before I knew the job was done.”

“You forgetting, I got you, man. You ain’t got me.”

I take a deep breath. A minute ago I played the nerve-racked man in desperate need of help, who was worried about scrounging up an extra five thousand dollars. I put on that act to make Jayden’s decision easier. I wanted him to feel like I was somebody he could control.

But the guy smelled blood in the water and now he’s threatened me. I can’t have that.

I pull the ski mask off. It's time to get serious. I stare hard at Jayden.

“Look at me,” I say.

Jayden leans his head back and arches his eyebrows. He's surprised I've revealed my face.

“Look at me,” I repeat. “I don't care if you see my face. Want to know why?”

“Why not?”

“Because if you fuck me over, I will kill you.”

Jayden's smirk slowly slips away. He knows what I'm capable of.

“I'm in a bad way. Which means—I've got nothing to lose. You know how dangerous that makes me?”

His silence is answer enough.

“Five grand now,” I say. “Ten later, when I get confirmation.”

Jayden is slow to answer, but his annoying smirk returns. “Alright, man. Let's talk details now. No reason to get hard. We talking here.”

I shake my head. “Before that, I want you to know something else.”

“What?”

“I know where your son and his mother live.”

SARAH

When the door opens, I'm expecting the detectives to enter. But instead, Larry appears.

"Come on," he says. "You're going home."

I gasp. The news is so surprising that I wonder if I misunderstood him.

"They're letting him go," Larry says.

Andrew actually cracks a smile. I throw one arm around him, then check the time.

It's almost six o'clock. Time for dinner. I haven't heard from Dwayne since he left the police station this morning. I guess he's still angry with me for asking those questions earlier.

Andrew is up and on his feet immediately, like he hasn't been sitting hunched for hours on an uncomfortable chair. It takes me a few minutes to work out the kinks. My back, hips, and legs are sore from having been cooped up in here all day.

"What happened?"

"Dwayne's meeting us back at my office," Larry says. "I'll explain there."

"Okay."

Andrew cracks another smile when I motion at the door. Larry leads us out of the police station. As we go, all work stops. Cops look up from their desks, or look out at us from

office windows. My son's departure knocks everyone out of their routine.

Andrew hates being the center of the attention. Not surprisingly, he pulls his hood up so he can disappear like a turtle inside its shell. Detectives Carter and Lopez are waiting for us by the door to the reception area.

"You're free to go," Lopez says sweetly, like this was all one big misunderstanding and we can go back to being friends. I think some nasty things about her.

"Don't leave town," Carter growls.

Outside, thunderclouds gather on the horizon. We get in Larry's Tesla and the car takes us back to his office. We ride in silence the short distance. The initial joy surrounding Andrew's release begins to wear off. By the time the car slots itself in front of Larry's office and next to Dwayne's vehicle, I want some answers.

Dwayne is waiting in the lobby for us.

"Hey, champ," he says, grabbing Andrew. Our son throws his arms around his father, hugging him fiercely for the first time in ages. "You feeling okay?"

"Better now," Andrew says.

"Hey, you."

Dwayne turns to me and gives me that easy smile, the grin that won me over and made me fall in love with him all those years ago. I'm still upset with him, but being angry over his hiding medication for what is admittedly an embarrassing ailment seems petty, especially at a time like this. So I smile back and give him a brief hug.

Larry is smiling at the two of us when he opens the door to his office suite. I've never been here before, but it's really nice and expensively furnished. A huge aquarium gurgles inside the wall by the front desk. We follow Larry through to the back where his office sits and overlooks the pond behind the office complex.

“Andrew,” Larry says. “I’m going to speak to your parents first, if that’s alright.” He points over Andrew’s shoulder. “There are some snacks in the break room. Please help yourself.”

Andrew wanders off happily. The three of us sit down in Larry’s office. Dwayne and I take the couch facing Larry’s desk. Larry folds his arms and sits on the edge of his desk.

“Good news,” he announces. “A witness came forward.”

All my joy is gone. My stomach feels heavy. I steal a glance at Dwayne, who doesn’t look the least bit bothered by this information. Without looking at me, Dwayne reaches for my hand. I take it and squeeze.

“A man came forward. He was there, in the preserve, and saw three black men lugging this big, heavy thing covered in tarp and plastic wrap.”

“Three men?” I ask.

None of this is making sense. Dwayne gives me a meaningful look and I realize I shouldn’t be *that* surprised by this information.

“That’s right,” Larry says. “The witness stated they had shovels. He was able to describe the area where they found Hal’s body. Anyway, the three men dragged this big object there. One man stayed to shovel, while the other two spread out, likely to serve as lookouts. The man who stayed donned a ski mask to hide his identity. The other two did not, presumably because they were not close to the burial site and if they ran into anyone, they didn’t want to arouse suspicion.”

“My God,” I say, squeezing Dwayne’s hand.

I don’t understand what is happening. Did Dwayne work with these three men to dispose of the body? That seems like it’d be incredibly risky. If they’re arrested, aren’t they just going to say Dwayne hired them? This isn’t good news at all.

It’s quite the opposite.

“I advised the detectives that Andrew would not be answering any more questions, which put them in a difficult

position. With this new information coming to light, they had to reconsider their strategy. They couldn't very well charge him as things stand." Larry holds up a finger. "But that doesn't mean we're out of the woods yet."

"On the whole," Dwayne says, "this is good news."

"Yes," Larry says cautiously. "But Carter isn't going to forget about you. He might still like Andrew for the murder, but now he has to contend with this extra information. He has to explain how the body got to the preserve and how these three men became involved. The long and the short of it is, the police have some more hoops to jump through. And they couldn't hold Andrew any longer without making it official."

"What do we do now?" I ask, trying to process everything.

"Go home. Be a family. Eat dinner together and get some sleep. You're going to need it. This isn't over yet."

Dwayne rises. He hasn't let go of my hand. "Come on, hon."

I can't believe this is happening. None of it makes sense. Dwayne's muted reaction to this news doesn't follow either. Larry spends a few minutes speaking privately with Andrew. When our son emerges from the office, he's smiling again. He and his father share another big hug, then Dwayne leads us to the car.

I have to talk to Dwayne but don't want to ask any delicate questions in front of Andrew. The car ride home is the longest fifteen minutes of my life.

"How about pizza?" Dwayne says.

"Yeah!" Andrew says.

I call our favorite place and Dwayne stops on the way home. We eat in the living room with the TV on, sitting together on the couch. Normally I'd be overjoyed that we're actually sitting down as a family for a meal, but tonight it feels wrong. Despite how hungry I am, I eventually put down my half-eaten slice of pizza and look at Dwayne.

"Can I talk to you?"

He smiles at me, like this is all perfectly normal. After rubbing Andrew's shoulder affectionately, Dwayne follows me into the den where I know Andrew can't hear us over the noise of the TV.

"I don't understand what's happened," I say.

Dwayne smiles knowingly, like he's been waiting for me to ask.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes!"

His smile falters. He was not expecting such a reaction from me.

"I think it's better if we keep this compartmentalized."

"Dwayne, I want to know what the hell is going on."

His lips are still smiling, but his eyes go dead. Dwayne invades my space and looks down at me.

"Don't you ever talk to me like that again, Sarah."

My blood runs cold.

"I did what was necessary. That's all you need to know. Is that understood?"

I can't find my voice, so I just nod.

When Dwayne puts his hands on my arms, I can't help but shudder.

"Hey..." His voice has softened. He's all charm again. "Take it easy. I'm your husband. You know I'd never hurt you."

I don't know what to think, actually.

"Sorry." I laugh nervously. "It's been a long three days."

He takes me in his arms and normally this would be enough to end any unpleasantness between us. But instead, the sensation makes me feel trapped. Like he's got me right where he wants me.

“I have to go out,” Dwayne whispers in my ear. “To finish the job.”

I pull away from him. “What job?”

“Better that we don’t talk about it,” he says.

He lets me go and checks his watch. “I’m leaving my cell phone here again. Just a precaution.”

“Dwayne...” My eyes are watery. Wherever he’s going, whatever he’s about to do, I know it’s not good. “...please don’t leave. Not tonight.”

“Have to.” He shrugs like this is out of his hands. “I swear, Sarah, it’s just this one more thing and we are clear of this. I promise.”

He leans forward and kisses my forehead, then he’s gone.

T here's no traffic tonight.

By now, word has gotten around of Hal's murder. I can picture moody teenagers angrily slamming the doors to their rooms when their parents forbid them from going out on a Saturday night in the middle of summer. The fear of losing a child is all-consuming. At a time like this, when a thirteen-year-old boy is found carved up and rumors are undoubtedly circulating—perhaps word has gotten out about the supposed three men who deposited Hal in the preserve—you can bet even the most unengaged parents are taking precautions.

I drive past the empty lot of the used car dealership not once, but twice this time. I've arrived over an hour early to scope the place out. Once I'm certain the coast is clear, I pull around the building once more and back the car into roughly the same spot I took earlier. I roll my windows down and listen to the traffic go by. From this angle, passing drivers can't see me.

I don a long-sleeved black wicking shirt and gloves, then slip on the ski mask, grabbing a baseball bat out of the trunk and an old flashlight I took out of the shed. I leave the windows of my car down and hurry toward the building. I try the metal rear door but find it locked so I use the bat to shatter a window near the door. After clearing the sill of anything jagged, I carefully slip through the opening and use the bat to open the metal door. The interior of the long-closed auto dealership still contains some office equipment. I pry a panel off one of the remaining cubicles and use it to prop the door

open. Then I turn on the flashlight and place it on the floor so the beam is projecting onto the ceiling.

Once that is done, I hurry out of the building and hunker down in the trees behind my car. I've got thirty more minutes till Jayden gets here.

SARAH

“I think Dad loves me,” Andrew says.

His words startle me out of the daze I’ve found myself in all day long. I sit up on the couch and look at my son, who is sitting across the room and pretending to look at his phone.

“Of course he does,” I answer. “Why do you say that?”

“Does he love you?” Andrew asks. “Do you still love him?”

“Yes.” My God, where is *this* coming from? “Your father loves us very much.”

“I wasn’t sure he still loved me,” Andrew says. “But now I know he does. He did something to get me out of the police station today, didn’t he?”

I don’t answer, but my son is not an idiot. My silence is telling.

“He would do anything for you.”

He looks relieved. “But what about you?”

I drop a bookmark in my novel and close the book. “What do you mean?”

“He’s always bossing you around, Mom. He treats you like you’re his assistant, not his wife.”

Children are always surprising you with how both shockingly oblivious and sharply perceptive they can be.

“Oh, I wouldn’t put it like that. We work together.”

Andrew looks skeptical.

“It’s true,” I say, sounding like I’m trying to convince myself as much as him. “His job is very demanding, so I try to do everything around the house to give him a break.”

“He makes sure you turn the labels out in the pantry.”

I blush. “That’s just because—”

“And if the towels aren’t hanging up correctly in the bathroom, he gets mad. I’m sorry, but one time I was really pissed off, so I went in there and purposely messed them up.”

I suppress a smile at his childish rebelliousness. “Your father is particular about certain things.”

“About everything. Remember when you left the—”

How many times has this story come up? “Left the lasagna pan in the sink overnight rather than handwash it after dinner. Yes, I remember, Andrew.”

He picks up on my increasing agitation.

I soften my voice. “I was really tired and didn’t feel like scrubbing that night. Your father and I spoke about it the next day.”

“Why did you have to explain yourself, though? So what if you left the pan in the sink overnight?”

He’s getting in one of his moods. “Andrew.”

“You say it’s alright, but you’ve also never done it again.”

“What? That’s not true.”

I’m lying. The next morning, when I calmly explained it to Dwayne, he smiled and said he understood. *We all get tired.* But Andrew’s correct. I made sure never to do it again.

Andrew looks back down at his phone. “Sorry. I know how easily you get upset.”

I know how easily you get upset. He sounds just like his father.

“It’s been a long day,” I say. “Why don’t you go up to bed?”

Without looking up at me again, Andrew rises and heads for the stairs. I was expecting more of an argument because it’s not even ten o’clock yet, but Andrew can tell I’m ticked off. But I don’t hear him going upstairs.

Turning on the couch, I see him lingering in the foyer. Very slowly, he puts his phone away and stares straight ahead.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everybody is saying I did it,” he answers.

Of course this would happen. We were thrilled just to get him out of the police station without being charged. Dwayne was acting like the whole thing was over, or would blow over, like everything would be fine and we’d simply go back to our lives.

But I knew better.

In the back of my mind, I was thinking ahead. I was worrying about Andrew ever having friends in this town again, being able to return to school, being forced to face Hal’s clique. I feared that people would always say, *There goes the kid that murdered Hal English and got away with it.*

“Mom?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Who do you think killed Hal?”

It’s the first time he’s asked me that. The problem is, I don’t have a good answer.

“I don’t know, Andrew. We may never know.”

“I think it was John DeMarco,” Andrew says.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because he’s into drugs and he’s the one that’s been breaking into people’s houses.”

I already knew that. But I need to know how my son learned of this.

“How do you know that?”

“He never talks to me. But two weeks ago, he saw me at the playground and pulled over and started a conversation for no reason. He eventually got around to asking if we had any vacation plans this summer, and how long we were going to be away. It was really weird.”

Why didn't Andrew mention this before? I'm ready to scream.

“I'm sorry,” he says, sensing my anger. “I told him when we were going away. I told him I'd give him a spare key.”

“Andrew, why in the world would you do that?”

He shrugs. “I was really mad at you and Dad. I'm sorry. I won't actually do it.”

“You can never tell anyone about your conversation with John,” I say.

Without another word, he tromps upstairs leaving me to my thoughts.

I pour myself a glass of wine in the kitchen. Andrew's questions have unsettled me. What a thing for a child to ask their mother—if their father loves them! Of course Dwayne does.

He can be a difficult man at times, but nobody's perfect. Dwayne provides for the family. In a few years, when Andrew goes away for school, I won't have to work anymore. And we'll be able to buy that second house up in the mountains like we always dreamed.

Andrew also doesn't know that Dwayne literally saved my life.

I've hinted around it before, telling my son that my first husband was “not very nice” and that I had to call the police on him once. Andrew's old enough now to understand what I was trying to convey. But there's a lot he doesn't know.

I met Dwayne when at the drycleaner's. My ex-husband, Frank, liked his dress shirts pressed and starched, and my ironing wasn't up to par. So even though we didn't have much

money, I took all his dress shirts to the nearest drycleaning shop, which happened to be owned by Dwayne's father.

One day, they couldn't find a pair of Frank's pants. While the clerks working at the shop hunted for my husband's clothes in the back, Dwayne struck up a conversation with me. I wasn't in the habit of speaking to other men—Frank discouraged it. So at first I was shy and awkward with Dwayne. But next thing I knew, he had me laughing about something. I don't even remember what it was.

Frank had enough shirts that I could get by only going to the drycleaner's once every two weeks. But soon enough, I made a habit of stopping in every Tuesday morning, when I knew Dwayne would be there.

Those ten minutes I spent talking to him were the highlight of my week. One day he asked if I wanted a cup of coffee, then went into the back to pour me one. The next week, he had one waiting for me.

I know what this sounds like, but it truly was harmless conversation then. Despite how horrible things were with Frank, I didn't consider leaving him. He put his hands on me from time to time, and he yelled at me often, but I didn't know where to go or what I could do about it. I'd done poorly in school—I know now that my dyslexia went undiagnosed, making every subject pure hell—and I didn't have a college degree, so I felt trapped.

I'm plain-looking. All the other girls in school seemed to have several things going for them: a great pair of legs, a pretty smile, big breasts, a shapely bottom. And they were smart, or at least knew how to flirt, could figure out how to get their way in a pinch. Even if they didn't go to college, they managed to land good jobs. Some of them knew the right people. They were lucky in ways I had never been.

Frank was really the first man to show any real interest in me. I'd never even had a boyfriend in high school. So when Frank whipped out an expensive-looking ring and asked me to marry him, I didn't think too long about it.

It wasn't long before I saw the cracks in Frank's armor. We weren't home more than two weeks from our honeymoon the first time he smacked me. He thought I'd been too friendly to the teenaged boy who'd waited on us at the restaurant that night.

He also drank a lot. Alcohol made him totally unpredictable. When he got a few beers in him, Frank could be sweet, doting, thoughtful. Or he could be a raging, jealous monster. I never knew what I was getting, until I learned to read the signs. Eventually I understood on an intuitive level when to stay away from him and when it was safe.

One Monday night, when I came home from my walk in the park, Frank was sitting in the living room without any lights on. I knew right away I was in trouble. One of our neighbors in the complex, a woman Frank kept on the side, also went to the drycleaner's and saw me "flirting" with Dwayne.

Frank punched me for the first time. Normally, he preferred to swat me with the back of his hand, usually on the shoulder, or to smack me on my side. If he left marks there, nobody would see them. But he was in a rage that night, striking me in the face.

The next morning he apologized. He was always sorry. He even tried to be gracious about it, telling me I could still frequent Dwayne's business but that I had to make it clear to this man that I was happily married.

The next day I did my best to hide the bruise still blossoming around my eye, but makeup wasn't doing the trick, so for the first time in months I skipped the drycleaner's on a Tuesday. On the following Tuesday morning, Frank was looking for a particular dress shirt that fit him really well. He had a big presentation at work and wanted to look his best. But the shirt he needed was still in the wash. Of course, Frank was livid and hit me again, telling me I couldn't do anything right.

I remember being in a daze, after he left for work angry and wearing a less suitable shirt. I went into the bathroom to

apply some makeup, wondering how I was going to cover up not one but two black eyes and face the world.

Then I realized I didn't care who saw me like this.

When I went to the drycleaner's, it must have been obvious to everyone. But nobody said a word.

Only Dwayne was brave enough to talk to me.

"Did your husband do that to you?"

I remember nodding. I remember trying not to cry. I remember Dwayne's gentle hand on the back of my arm. I remember him bringing me to his office.

"My brother knows people. He's got a friend at the women's shelter..."

Dwayne did most of the talking that day. I don't recall what I actually said, if anything. But Dwayne made me feel so safe. He asked me where I lived and I gave him the address, not sure why he needed it, and then he told me he was going to explain things to my husband. I knew what that meant. I warned him that Frank was tough and I didn't want him to get hurt, but Dwayne just smiled easily, reassuring me that people like Frank didn't worry him.

We went back to my apartment and Dwayne helped me get my things. We packed the essentials into four cardboard boxes. It was mostly clothes. What few other things I possessed reminded me of Frank. I didn't want them. He could keep the refrigerator magnets I always bought when we went on our trips. Before that moment, I had never imagined leaving Frank. But suddenly it was a foregone conclusion. I didn't question Dwayne's suggestion that I go to the women's shelter. It just made sense.

He called his brother, and Carl arranged for me to meet with someone he knew at the shelter. Dwayne drove me over and waited outside till I got settled. It took some time, but after I was admitted, I met Dwayne in the parking lot and threw my arms around his neck and bawled my eyes out for a good ten minutes. He kept telling me that everything was going to be alright. Carl had already contacted the family's attorney, Larry,

who was filing for a restraining order. When I told Dwayne that I couldn't afford a lawyer, he told me not to worry about it.

It's taken care of.

Dwayne never went into detail about his meeting with Frank that night at the apartment. And I've never pressed him too hard. All I know is this: Dwayne talked to Frank for about ten minutes and I never heard from my husband again. We managed to get divorced quickly, in large part because I didn't want anything.

A few months later I was dating Dwayne and soon working for Carl at the agency.

One day I'll explain all this to Andrew. Maybe even soon. He's old enough now, I think. He needs to know how important it is to treat your partner with respect.

But that's how I know Dwayne loves me. While he might be very particular, while he has a habit of making decisions without consulting me, I know deep down he loves me fiercely. He's my knight in shining armor. He saved me from that monster.

I'm getting teary-eyed thinking about all this.

I can't believe I thought for a moment he was having an affair with Bridget.

I'm not a bad person.
I've just had to do some terrible things to protect myself and my family.

Justine was an evil bitch.

I should have realized it before I married her. The signs were all there.

Dad warned me many times. But who listens to their father when they're twenty-two years old? Especially when their father married the wrong person himself, a vicious, self-centered, carping woman whom he could never please? He was in no position to give me marital advice. You don't ask somebody filing for bankruptcy for investing tips.

I should have known Justine was no good when Mom gushed over her. Mom had never liked any of the girls I'd brought home. She liked Justine because the woman reminded her of herself, I realize now.

I should have, at the very least, called off the engagement when my brother Carl showed up at my apartment one night out of the blue and, after barely acknowledging Justine's presence, demanded that he and I go somewhere to talk. Though I wasn't in the habit of listening to either my father or mother, I always considered what my older brother told me. He'd steered me away from trouble in high school. He drove us to the diner and we split an order of the loaded bacon and cheese fries, the appetizer we'd been sharing ever since Mom and Dad had first started taking us there. Before the fries came

out, Carl tore into me. He never hit me, never even intimidated me growing up. But there was always a force to his words, a hard logic I couldn't contend with.

This woman is going to bring you down.

I see her kind every day at the clinic.

She will take all your money and disappear one day.

Or, even worse: you'll get her pregnant.

One morning you'll wake up and realize I'm right. You'll want to divorce her but she'll always be in your life if you have a child together.

What are you doing? You have your whole future ahead of you. You don't have to get married now. You don't have to get married at all.

Dad's business could take off. I don't want it—I want to help people. In ten years, when he's ready to retire, the shop could be yours. You can have the life you always wanted. But you'll never get it if you're with her.

You like to be in charge. You should find a woman looking for a man to make all the decisions in her life.

Carl was right.

I should have listened to him.

But nobody could reach me.

I was too hurt.

The one and only woman I'd ever loved was going to marry my best friend. What made it even worse was the fact that I knew Bridget had some feelings for me. Whenever Russ returned to college, she'd call me up and we'd do things together. Sometimes, when she and Russ were on one of their many "breaks," while he was away for the semester and nailing every chick he could manage, Bridget and I would sort of date and make out.

But I was never enough for her.

In those days, I was just a high school graduate with no prospects. Much like her. My father had lost his job at the machine shop, we'd had to sell our house, and the three of us—Mom had moved in with an old boyfriend from high school—were just scraping by. I had to go to work. There was no college in my future, no high-paying office job, no respectable profession.

No security.

That was what Bridget wanted.

With Russ, she got it in spades.

The ink on his college diploma wasn't even dry when one of the big pharma companies hired him as a rep. At twenty-two, when I could barely afford to make rent for my crappy apartment, Russ was putting in a down payment on a three-hundred-thousand-dollar house in the best neighborhood in town. The company paid for his car, his gas, and his cell phone. Bridget went from working retail at a strip mall to never having to work again.

When Russ and Bridget got engaged, I had to put on a master class of acting. Pretending to be thrilled at each milestone—news of the engagement, wedding shower, bachelor party, and the ceremony. It was an honor to be Russ's best man, but that didn't make things any easier. When Bridget looked into his eyes and said I do, something in me died.

After that my life became a blur of booze and broads. I picked up women in bars, women I would never have given the time of day to before. Eventually I landed on Justine. In the beginning, she was wild, outrageous even, and fun. In the end, she was just outrageous.

But she got my mind off Bridget. We would go out every night, drink every night, fuck every night. Justine even popped a few pills. None of the hard stuff, mind you, just the party drugs. She was wild. She brought her girlfriends back to the apartment from time to time for some fun. Threesomes were not unusual. We even had a foursome once. Me and three sexy women. I thought I'd struck gold.

All the wild sex, heavy drinking, and partying distracted me. I didn't think about Bridget. And I ignored all the glaring problems with Justine. She couldn't keep a job. She was always running out of money. She had maxed out several credit cards. She was a big flirt, but since we had so much sex, I never imagined she'd act on her flirtations with other guys. I was wrong.

By the time she moved into my apartment, Dad's drycleaning business had taken off. Justine couldn't keep a job, but she was smart enough to spot a meal ticket. She knew that Dad would retire one day and that I would likely take over the business.

After we got married, Justine "lost" her job. She pretended to look for employment elsewhere but never went back to work, all the while continuing to run up debt. She had opened a third credit card without my knowing and maxed that out as well. When I finally woke up from the fever dream of my early twenties, I told her we were getting divorced. She told me she was pregnant, that she'd just found out, and that if I tried to leave her, she'd make up a story about how I abused her.

I found out that she'd been cheating on me with some guy she'd always had a crush on in high school too. She came right out and told me she was going to fuck whoever she wanted because she had a very high libido. It wasn't her fault, she said. She was born that way.

I vowed to get out of the marriage, no matter what. And I told myself I would never consider being with a woman again unless I could control the relationship. I couldn't allow someone like Justine to come into my life and threaten to ruin everything.

Headlights snap me back to the present moment. It's the same vehicle from earlier. I hunker down farther in the trees behind my car while Jayden pulls into the spot next to my vehicle. He waits a moment, no doubt wondering why I'm not in the car and why the rear door to the building is open, with a light on inside. Eventually he kills his engine and gets out.

Jayden tucks a gun into his jeans at the small of his back.

“Hey, man, you in there?” he calls out.

I come out from the trees and sneak up between the cars. He doesn't know I'm there till I'm right behind him.

I plunge the knife into his throat. There's more blood than I'm expecting. Jayden staggers backward, one hand up to the gaping wound in his neck. He wants to scream but he can't. He's choking on his own blood.

When the terrible realization that he's going to die comes over him, Jayden changes strategy. He can't save himself but he can try to take me with him. But I'm anticipating this change of heart, so when he reaches for the gun at the small of his back, I seize his wrist and wrench it forward, twisting it at an awkward angle.

Jayden might have been strong, but he's bleeding out quickly and he doesn't have much energy left. The fight is over in a few seconds. He falls to his knees then pitches forward. His blood spills from his throat like it's running out of a faucet, darkening the pavement. I wait till I'm sure he's dead.

I'm not a bad person.

I've just had to do some terrible things to protect myself and my family.

Jayden is an unreliable drug addict. Now that he's served his purpose of throwing the police off our trail, I can't leave anything to chance. The guy could get arrested next month on another drug charge and realize his only bargaining chip is me. When they eventually find his body, the police will naturally assume the three men he identified in the preserve are responsible.

I don't feel bad about killing him. Carl told me the guy's life story. Jayden was a walking moral hazard, making life miserable for everyone around him. He betrayed friends and burned family members, and showed no remorse for any of his actions.

The world is a better place without him.

SARAH

SUNDAY

When I wake up the next morning, Dwayne is fast asleep beside me.

I didn't hear him come in last night. Missing so much sleep on Thursday and Friday finally caught up to me.

Without waking him I go downstairs. It's later than I expect, almost nine already. I'm usually up and at 'em by seven, even on weekends in the summer when I have nowhere to be. I brew some coffee and think over the last few days and try not to worry about the future.

I figured out the problem last night, after Andrew went to bed and while Dwayne was out. Although the police didn't arrest Andrew yesterday, word will get around and everyone will think he's guilty. Even without formal charges, the stigma of being questioned for the death of his former friend will haunt him. The only way that narrative can change is if the police arrest someone else for Hal's murder.

But that is unlikely to happen.

I love my son with all my heart, but there are plenty of reasons to believe he's guilty, reasons not even a mother can ignore. If Andrew is the murderer, then the police probably won't be able to make a case against anyone else—not that I'd want an innocent person to go to prison.

On the other hand, if Andrew is innocent, by moving the body we have made it more difficult for the police to actually solve the crime. Even worse, Dwayne arranged for someone to come forward and report seeing three black men moving what could only be a body in the preserve, fouling the investigation up further. That sits badly with me. What if the police arrest a person of color based on this lie? It's yet another horrible thing we've done.

The coffee maker stops whirring. Steam rises from the mug as I lift it away from the machine. While I mull the problem over, coming up with no solution, I absently blow on the coffee to cool it.

A knock at the door startles me. I don't see any flashing red-and-blue lights when I enter the foyer. Looking through the sidelite, I recognize Nora from next door.

What could she want?

I don't feel like talking to her, but she has noticed someone moving in the foyer. When I hesitate, she knocks more loudly.

Taking a deep breath, I open the door. It's another grey, muggy day with storm clouds threatening again.

"Hi, Nora," I say.

"Sarah." She gives me a wide-eyed look. "I just had to come over and talk. Mind if I...?"

She's already moving one foot inside my house, but I don't budge and stick my palm out.

"I'm sorry, Nora. But now's not a good time."

She gasps theatrically. "So it's *true*, then?"

I play dumb. "What?"

She makes a pained face, like this is embarrassing her, but I can tell she's enjoying every moment of this conversation.

"Did they arrest Andrew yesterday?"

"No." I shake my head. "I don't know where you heard that but it isn't true. They did not arrest my son."

“Ohhh, really?” She tilts her head to the side. “Because that’s what I heard.”

“Like I said, it isn’t true.”

“Oh.”

She scratches the back of her head like she’s stumped. Any normal person would take a hint, apologize, and politely excuse herself here. I didn’t let her in, I’m giving her a tone, and my body language is not friendly.

But Nora doesn’t take hints. She ignores them.

“It’s just, well, word gets around, you know? It is a small town after all. He was at the police station, right?”

“Sarah.” It’s Dwayne. He’s standing on the stairs behind me. I didn’t even hear him moving around upstairs. “Close the door.”

“Oh, hi, Dwayne!” Nora says, like she didn’t hear what he said to me. “There’s been a lot of talk around the neighborhood. Everyone is obviously worried. I’m sure you can under—”

“Nora, you need to leave,” Dwayne snaps.

Her eyes bulge, like my husband is the rude one in this exchange.

“Well, I just thought, as your neighbor, you’d want to reassure me that nothing’s been going on—”

“Get the hell out of here!”

This time it isn’t Dwayne speaking.

That voice belongs to me.

My fists are balled, the fingernails digging into my palms, as I tremble with rage.

“Go! Get out of here!”

Nora holds her palms out, like I’m acting crazy.

“Okay, Sarah. I can tell this is not a good time.”

She turns to leave but stops at the edge of the porch to stare down the street.

“Would you please leave?” I say, trying to get myself under control.

Nora points in the direction she’s facing and adopts a smug air. “The police are coming.”

ANDREW

I've been awake most of the morning. Anna hasn't texted me back since threatening to tell the police everything I said about Hal. None of my other friends at school are responding either. They all think I killed Hal.

I didn't.

But no one is ever going to believe me.

When I hear someone knocking on the front door, I grow very quiet and listen in. I think it's that busybody next door, Mrs. Smith. I can't quite make out what she or Mom are saying, but I do hear Dad start down the stairs and then tell Mom to close the door.

Next thing I know, Mom is yelling at the woman. She never yells. I crack my window to better hear them. The only thing I catch is Nora saying the police are coming.

I duck down and hide under the window. I'm in a panic. I can't answer any more questions from the police. Can't sit in that room another minute while they watch me from behind the window.

But where can I go? If I'm really going to run away, I need Dad's help. Yeah, he's bossy, but I have to admit he's good at solving problems. He has money and knows people. He can make that happen.

I peek out the bottom of the window. Three police cars are coming up the street.

DWAYNE

I tell Sarah to go inside and wait on the porch. An unmarked sedan and two police cruisers come up the street, their lights and sirens off. That bitch Nora has finally moved off our porch. I wonder who they're here to arrest: my son for murdering Hal or me for murdering Jayden.

The police cars draw even with Nora's house. She's standing on the sidewalk out front and waves at them like they're part of the Fourth of July parade as they go by. I peer at the driver of the unmarked sedan, expecting to see Detective Carter behind the wheel.

But it's not him.

Frowning, I come down the steps to get a better look. It's a female I don't recognize. And she's not even looking my way.

The three police cars proceed past my house. I come down to the sidewalk to see where they're going. They eventually stop in front of the DeMarcos' house, blocking the driveway. Two plainclothes police officers, both women, pop out of the unmarked car, while a couple uniformed men get out of the cruisers. They head up the front walk and knock on the DeMarcos' door.

When I turn around, I find Sarah waiting for me in the doorway. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," I say, raising my voice so Nora can hear what I have to say. "It has nothing to do with our family."

Before I go back inside I glare at my neighbor, who gives me an innocent look. What a two-faced bitch. She was salivating at the prospect of watching these cops arrest us.

I want to flip her off but think better of it, instead returning to my house.

“They’re here for the DeMarco kid probably,” I say.

“Do you think he...”

I don’t know what to make of this information. “Whatever is happening, we need to behave normally.”

“What does that even mean?” Sarah asks. “What would normal people do when their son is suspected of murder?”

“They act like he’s innocent. They go on with their lives. We should go out today, as a family. Be seen.”

“Dwayne, we can’t. Our next door neighbor literally popped by to ask if Andrew was arrested. We shouldn’t go anywhere today.”

“No.” I shake my head. “We will not be prisoners in our own home. Go upstairs, wake Andrew, and get dressed. We’ll go to the movies.”

“The movies?”

“We need to do *something*, Sarah. We need to get away, be normal, act normal, and that way we can start to *feel* normal again.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere. I think it’s a bad idea.”

This woman...

What am I going to do with her?

I do still care about Sarah. She’s not the smartest and she’s not the sexiest woman alive—things have gotten boring in the bedroom with her—but she is caring and sweet and she’s the mother of my child. And, most importantly, she follows my lead. I never have to run anything by her. I do my thing, usually no questions asked.

Sarah likes being taken care of. She appreciates not having to make difficult decisions. I'm happy to do all that and give her this great life.

But she better fucking listen when I speak.

Now is not the time for a difficult conversation where I reassert my expectations, so I try a different tack.

“This is what Larry told me to do. We should listen to him. He's the expert.”

Sarah wants to challenge me, but she can tell I've got her beat.

“Fine, Dwayne. We'll go to the movies.”

When she's gone, I shake my head. None of this would have happened if Bridget had been more careful.

Bridget is not happy.

As a Regional VP, Russ is always on the road and that means he's always cheating on her. She's caught him in a couple of affairs, but she won't leave him because she's afraid of what it will do to Hal. She came to me in a moment of weakness, like she always does, and I gave her what she needed.

To my horror, I had some performance issues the third time we screwed. We both had a laugh about it, her suggesting it was nerves.

But I knew better.

I didn't feel bad about cheating on Sarah, and I wasn't worried about getting caught. My problem wasn't mental. It had to be physical. So the minute Bridget snuck out the back of my house and jogged the trails lining the golf course, I went to the doctor's office, obtained a prescription, and got those pills. There was no way in hell I was going to blow my chances at having an affair with Bridget on a limp dick.

The pills worked. For the first couple of months, our relationship was purely physical. She enjoyed how I made her feel special, like she was the most beautiful woman in creation. The sex was great. Bridget is uninhibited in the

bedroom, sensual and unabashed, the very opposite of Sarah. Pretty soon I was hooked on her, the same way all those addicts my brother tries to help are on drugs.

Things between us changed a month ago. Bridget started talking about leaving Russ. She asked me in vague, hypothetical terms if I'd ever divorce Sarah. It was obvious what she was really asking. She wanted to be with me, if only I made the first move. Finally she came out with it. She loved me, had always loved me, and realized now that she should have married me all along.

I'd heard similar sentiments from her before, nearly twenty years ago, when Russ went away for college.

She asked me to divorce Sarah first. Bridget would wait a few months to not arouse suspicion, then ask Russ for a divorce. She didn't want to be part of any local scandal, for her son's sake and her own.

I told her that wouldn't work for me.

While I've always been in love with Bridget, I'm older and wiser now. I wasn't about to blow my life up for her. How many times in the past had she kept me hanging around, only to drop me the instant Russ returned from school or called her out of the blue and declared his undying love once again? I had to be careful.

I told Bridget that she had to leave Russ first. Then, in a few months, we'd see how things were going between us and then I'd only *consider* divorcing Sarah. I made it very clear that I couldn't promise Bridget anything and that if we were ever together, she would be playing by my rules. It had to be that way. She'd burned me before. Justine had too, very nearly ruining my life. I didn't tell Bridget what really happened with Justine, but I did tell her that I had my business to consider and didn't want to give away half my earnings and this house unless she was absolutely serious. Truth was, I didn't plan on leaving Sarah—I just wanted to keep fucking Bridget. I'm not the greatest dad in the world, but I care about my son and know a divorce would be really hard on him.

Anyway, Bridget was torn by my demands. After a bout of wild sex, Bridget would swear off the affair, only to show up a couple of days later begging for it, sopping wet and ready to tear my clothes off.

Her behavior grew increasingly erratic. She was ecstatic one minute, depressed the next. She would tell me the affair could continue and we'd stay married to our spouses, then the next day she would beg me to end things with Sarah. When I pointed out that she was being as terrible to Russ as I was to Sarah, Bridget shrugged it off, saying he had cheated on her many times. She rationalized her behavior and suggested, without directly saying, that I was treating my wife horribly.

Bridget began calling and texting more frequently. I told her the phone calls had to stop and the texts absolutely needed to end. She sent me love notes. She took pictures of herself, both clothed and naked, and forwarded them to me. We were playing a dangerous game. Part of me wanted her to be more careful, but I got a thrill each time Bridget forwarded another nude image of herself. Pretty soon, she was out of control and I couldn't rein her in.

No wonder Hal figured out what was going on.

I hear Sarah and Andrew coming. I look up the staircase and smile.

“Everybody ready for a family outing?” I ask.

Dwayne decides we're going to the mall. We take both cars "just in case," which I take to mean "just in case we have to split up and one of us has to run Andrew somewhere." But I don't question Dwayne's decision-making. I don't have it in me to argue right now.

We shop for an hour. Even though he's already bought Andrew some new clothes in other stores, Dwayne all but forces Andrew to stop in one more t-shirt store. It's not really Andrew's style, this place, but Dwayne is insistent. *All the cool kids shop here, son.* The minute we enter the store, the female manager working behind the register can't stop looking at my husband like she knows him. It makes me think about his secret pills, about Bridget, and if I was wrong to dismiss my woman's intuition last night.

I realize I'm always making excuses for my husband.

After he's bought Andrew some more clothes, culminating in an awkward exchange with this woman who's been gawking at him the whole time, Dwayne takes us to the food court. A few people recognize us. Andrew averts his eyes and blushes under the gaze of some kids who look about his age. It's obvious they're talking about him and just as obvious what they're saying.

Dwayne ignores it, of course, acting like everything is normal. He peels off several twenties and tells us to order whatever we want while he checks the movie times at the theater attached to the mall. Andrew gets some Chinese food

and I have a salad. Dwayne returns about ten minutes later with three tickets for the latest superhero movie. He loves this theater because he can order beer and get it delivered to his seat.

In the theater, I zone out. A server comes by with a pitcher of beer. Even though Dwayne knows I don't like wheat beers, he asks if I want some and then acts surprised when I decline. I realize this is his way of ordering himself a whole pitcher of beer while acting like he's thought about me. Why did this never occur to me before now?

What else have I been blind to about my husband?

Andrew gets up to use the restroom when the trailers start. While he's gone, I lean over and ask Dwayne if he knew the woman from the t-shirt shop.

"What?" He looks offended. "Is this how you're going to be whenever a woman looks at me now?"

I think he's lying. No—I *know* he's lying. But I don't have any proof. I smile sweetly and rub his chest to placate him.

"I guess I can't blame her for staring," I say.

That seems to do the trick. Dwayne takes my hand and gives me a kiss. Andrew returns just in time for the movie to start. The speakers are cranked all the way up, loud enough to hurt my ears. I feel like I'm being assaulted, by sight and by sound. This is one of those Big, Dumb Movies that's ninety-nine percent CGI. The characters always make quips right before they shoot someone, and they suffer horrendous injuries only to bound away like they've just been scratched.

I shut down, let my eyes close. If this is what counts for spectacle anymore, I don't want or need it. At some point I become aware of Dwayne moving around in his seat. I open my eyes to find him holding his phone out for me to see.

Larry is calling.

I sit up. Andrew is sitting to my right and has noticed as well. Dwayne leaves the theater to take the call. Andrew and I share a nervous look then turn back to the screen, but it's no use. I already wasn't interested in the movie before Larry

called. Now I can't focus on it at all. I nod at Andrew. We exit the theater together and look for Dwayne.

I don't see him in the hallway. Andrew and I turn a corner, and suddenly Dwayne appears. His eyes are wide and his face is white.

“We need to talk.”

SARAH

We are in serious trouble.

Detectives Carter and Lopez were already at our house. The court has issued a warrant for Andrew's arrest, and the police are currently searching our home.

I want to scream. "How did this happen?"

Dwayne shakes his head. He's sitting behind the driver seat of his car. "Larry says they've got a witness. Someone saw Hal enter our house. Larry can't be sure but he thinks it's the DeMarco kid."

"What are we going to do?" Andrew asks from the backseat of the car.

Dwayne turns in his seat and looks Andrew in the eye. "Stay right here, pal. And keep your head down."

Andrew pulls his hood up and slinks down in his seat. Dwayne motions for me to get out.

"You and I need to talk."

Dwayne keeps his car running so Andrew gets the benefit of air conditioning. We sit in my car for privacy and I turn the engine on. Hot air blasts out of the vents for a moment, until the AC finally kicks in.

My husband won't look me in the eye.

"Dwayne." I shake his arm. "What are we going to do?"

He gives me a sidelong look.

“There’s only one thing.”

“What?”

He pats his chest. “I’ve got almost forty thousand dollars on me. It’s all money I saved up over the years and kept at the shop, in case of an emergency.”

“You’ve got forty thousand dollars on you?”

He nods. “It’s our contingency plan.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Honey.” He turns fully in the passenger seat and reaches for my hand. “We’ve already talked about this. I thought we were agreed. Andrew can’t go to prison.”

What is he saying? What is he *not* saying?

“If the police can put Hal inside our place, then the jig is up,” Dwayne says. “Andrew is *lost*.”

I agree with him there. But what does that mean?

“Honey, I know how scary this must be for you, but we did agree that you’d admit to killing Hal.”

“Wait—what? We never said that. We said one of us might have to take the fall.”

Dwayne is shaking his head. “Come on, Sarah. Don’t hide behind words now. We had a clear understanding about who would go away. I’m the breadwinner. If I go to prison, Andrew doesn’t just lose his father. He loses his home and this lifestyle we’ve created for him. Do you think he could handle that?”

“No. He’d be a wreck. It wouldn’t be as terrible as prison, but it’d still be horrible.”

Dwayne nods. “That’s why it has to be you. If you go away, I’ve still got the business and we keep the house.”

Oh God ... oh God ... he’s right. I don’t want to do this, but Dwayne is right. The choice really is between me and Andrew, which isn’t a choice at all.

I have to do this for my son.

I hang my head and go dead inside. At some point I'll burst into tears, when this awful development finally hits me. But I haven't gotten there yet. Dwayne's hand is gentle on my shoulder.

"I know," he says, rubbing my arm. "I'm sorry it has to be this way. Believe me, I didn't want this. But I don't see any other way out."

My words come out flat, like I'm an early robot mimicking the sounds of human speech. "Dwayne, what am I going to say?"

"I've given it some thought," he begins.

Dwayne goes on to explain this new fiction. It's the same fantasy I came up with the other night, when I first considered this possibility. Andrew came home early after a hard day at camp. Hal surprised him with a visit, but it was all part of some practical joke. The two boys got into an argument and Andrew called me for help because Hal refused to leave. When I got home I found Andrew crying in his room and Hal still downstairs. After hearing about this boy humiliating my son all year long at school, I lost control.

"You called and asked me to buy the tarp and plastic wrap, saying it was for the basement," Dwayne goes on. "You've been planning to paint down there for ages."

I don't say a word.

"It's important that you tell the police I didn't know anything about this," Dwayne says. "If this is going to work, I can't be implicated."

Of course.

"So let's say it happened in the basement," Dwayne continues. "You kept both Andrew and me out of there, telling us you were getting ready to paint it. But all the while you were ... taking care of the body. Neither Andrew nor I knew what was really happening."

He tells me where he buried Hal, describing the location in great detail. I know where he's talking about. It's not far from one of the streams running through the preserve. I shudder

when I realize Dwayne and I once had a picnic not far from the burial site.

“What’s going to happen?” I ask.

I almost don’t care. It’s just a thing to say. My life is over. I don’t know what the difference is between murder and manslaughter, but either way I’m looking at many years in prison. And even when I do get out, my life will never be the same. Dwayne is acting like everything will one day return to normal, but how can it if I go away? If he wants to keep his business alive, he’ll *have* to distance himself from me.

He can’t stay married to a murderer. No one would ever forgive him.

As if reading my mind, Dwayne says, “I will always take care of you, Sarah. I promise. We’ll get Larry to draft a post-nup, or whatever they call it. You won’t have to worry about money.”

He’s *already* thinking about divorcing me?

“You’d leave me?” I ask, my voice small.

“It’s for Andrew’s sake,” he explains. “I’ll have to distance myself from you to maintain my reputation in the community, otherwise the business will die.”

My husband always has an answer.

“Who knows, though? If the business keeps going the way it is, maybe I’ll be able to retire early by the time you get out. We can move to an island somewhere and be together again. We can start over.”

We both know that’s not going to happen. They’re just words coming out of his mouth, no truth behind them.

“Dwayne...”

Is this really happening?

Can I let it?

“I know this is difficult, Sarah. I hate to ask you to do this.”

“What if Andrew *is* guilty?” I ask.

“Sarah.” He gives me a patronizing look. “He *is* guilty. But that’s not the point, is it?”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Dwayne starts again. “You’re going to drive to the police station now and turn yourself in. Don’t worry about Andrew. I’ll take care of our son.”

“What are you going to do with him?”

“That’s where the contingency plan comes in. I’ll drive Andrew somewhere safe and lie low. If your false confession falls through, Larry will get word to me and I can pivot. If I have to run with Andrew, I’ve got this money. It’ll give us a fighting chance.”

I cannot believe he has thought that far ahead.

“But what about me?”

“Our first priority is Andrew,” Dwayne says. “You’ll get into some trouble in giving the police a false confession, but afterward I’ll do my best to bring us back together.”

I stare out the windshield.

“But that’s not going to happen,” Dwayne says, rubbing my shoulder again. “I know you can do this, honey. You’re the best mother in the world.”

I turn to look at my son. I can only see the top of his head down to his eyes. He’s watching us from the back of Dwayne’s car.

“I can’t do this,” I say.

“You will,” Dwayne says. “For him.”

“Dwayne...”

“At this point, hon, Larry has already notified the police that you’re coming in.”

“*What?*” My head snaps around. “How could you tell him that before we even talked?”

“I had no choice, Sarah. Things are happening fast. I had to act. We needed to give the police something to keep them distracted. This way, I bought us some time so I can run with Andrew.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Sarah—”

“Get the fuck out of my car!”

“Sarah.” He’s astonished I would use that word at all, never mind direct it at him. “I know you’re emotional right n—”

“Go! Get the fuck away from me! I fucking hate you.”

“Fine.” He takes his hand away. “When you promise me you’re going to the police, I’ll go.”

“I’m going,” I say. “Now leave. I don’t want to look at you.”

“Okay, Sarah. I understand. I’m sorry.”

Dwayne slinks his way out of the car, all apologies. Before he gets into his own vehicle, I back out and speed out of the mall parking lot.

The police station is fifteen minutes from here. That means my life will cease being normal in a quarter of an hour.

Hot tears scald my cheeks. My vision is blurry from crying. I shouldn’t be driving. Then again, I shouldn’t be doing a lot of things.

I can’t believe Dwayne. Making a decision like that without my input. Fuck him. He can bet we’re getting a post-nup. I wish I could take all his money. I’m going to need it. For the rest of my life, I’ll be a convicted killer. God, I hate Dwayne so much.

I don’t want to do this.

But what choice do I have?

I could let the police take Andrew into custody. Just because they arrest my son doesn’t mean they’ll be able to

convict him, right? And so long as Larry advises him to plead the fifth, then Andrew won't reveal anything incriminating about Dwayne or me.

I'm being silly. Our lives will still be ruined. If the police arrest Andrew, they'll probably bring charges. And now that they've got a witness placing Hal inside our house, what are the chances Andrew gets off?

No, it has to be me or Dwayne. And my husband, cold bastard that he is, has logic on his side. If I go away, my life is ruined. If he goes away, Andrew's life is ruined too.

So I really have no choice.

I nearly run a red light. After slamming my brakes, I take a deep breath and get myself together. I need to go over the story again before I reach the police station. It's bad enough I'm about to give a false confession. It'd be even worse if the police poked holes in it—then everyone would be in serious trouble with the law.

I go over the details in my mind while I wait for the light.

Andrew called me at the office. It was almost one o'clock. I came straight home and discovered the body—no, I mean, I found my son crying in his room and Hal downstairs. After losing my temper and ... I called Dwayne and asked him to buy—

I check the phone log on my phone for Thursday afternoon. The timing of calls roughly corresponds to my memory. I contacted Dwayne shortly after one o'clock. He came home for a few minutes, we discussed my painting the basement, then he went back out to pick up supplies. He must have gotten to the hardware store around one-thirty, maybe a little later.

The driver behind me blasts his horn. The light is green. I proceed through the intersection.

Dwayne saw Josh and Rose at the hardware store. That's good. They will be able to corroborate the story he fed them: that he was buying these things for me because I planned on painting the basement. Then—

I slam the brakes and pull off to the side of the road.

The driver behind me blasts his horn again and gestures rudely as he whips by, nearly swiping my car.

My hands are choking the steering wheel, and I'm breathing heavily.

I take out my phone and find the number I'm looking for. It rings a really long time. I realize it's Sunday. I don't know the hours they keep today. When I'm about to curse my bad luck, Rose answers at the hardware store.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Rose. It's Sarah Mullen."

"Oh." Her voice changes. She must have heard the news. "Hello, Sarah. Is everything okay?"

"I'm calling about Thursday. Dwayne was there. Do you remember?"

"Right. We talked about it at the vigil. What is this about?"

My legs are trembling. I put the car in PARK. The cars coming up behind me are forced to slow and edge into the opposing lane to pass. My stop is earning me a lot of hard stares and some nasty horns. But I don't care.

"You said Dwayne was there before the lunch hour, or lunch rush. Am I remembering that right?"

She doesn't answer for a moment. "Um, yeah. Before the lunch rush."

I take a deep breath. "What time was that?"

"We get a lot of business then. Josh and I try to eat before it gets busy at lunch. The rush starts at twelve, sometimes twelve-thirty. Contractors swing by while they're out getting food to pick up tools or equipment. We know we're going to be busy then, so we usually wait to eat till later."

"And you're sure Dwayne was there before that?"

"Oh yeah. I remember we were talking about ordering from the pizzeria across the way when Dwayne came in. We

got busy after he left and didn't get around to actually ordering for a bit, not till after one. We were *starved*."

I have to be certain. "And Dwayne was gone by then?"

"Yes. He bought that tarp and plastic wrap and the saw too." Her voice darkens, like she's just now making the connection. "Why are you asking me this, Sarah?"

I end the call.

The drive to Carl's house takes me twenty minutes. When I pull into his development, I'm a nervous wreck. Everything depends on timing and judging people correctly. I'm pretty good with timing, but when it comes to anticipating what another person is going to do, I'm not the best. That's why Dwayne never consulted me on strategy.

Dwayne.

It's amazing how it's possible to both love and hate someone at the same time. He's done something terrible, covered it up, then tried to manipulate me. But the last fifteen years with him have not all been terrible. As a matter of fact, most of my time with my husband was good. We lived a nice life and raised a son together. Part of me wishes we could rewind back to Wednesday, before Hal was killed, and start over.

But I realize how silly that idea is. Am I *so* afraid of change that I'd even consider staying with Dwayne knowing what he's capable of?

I might have thought my life with Dwayne was good, but it wasn't. He never laid a hand on me like Frank did, but the truth is, Dwayne is abusive in his own way. He knew from the moment we met that I was vulnerable, easy-going to a fault, capable of being manipulated and controlled. He took full advantage of that, I see now.

I park around the corner, a block away from Carl's townhouse, and check myself in the rearview mirror. I look like I've been crying, which is both true and the effect I'm going for. I want Carl to see me the way he and his brother always have: weak.

I get out of the car. Keeping my head down and eyes on the sidewalk in front of me, I walk briskly but not suspiciously up the street. Before I reach his front door, it's opening and Carl is standing there, both wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

"Hurry up." He motions and looks around. "You'd better get inside."

I keep up the act, rushing toward the door like I don't want to be seen by his neighbors. Carl closes the door behind me and peers out the window, checking the street for witnesses before turning around to give me a hug.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. "Dwayne called and told me you were going to..." He lowers his eyes and lets me go. "...turn yourself in."

"I was. But there's a problem."

"What problem?"

"Carl, I've been on the run for the last three hours. I'm going out of my mind. Can I use the bathroom and have something to drink?"

"Yes, of course. Please come in."

"Thank you."

I step in the bathroom, splash some water on my face, check myself in the mirror. I pull the neckline of my blouse up a little bit. There. That's better. I take a moment, giving Carl enough time to contact Dwayne.

Carl is waiting for me with a bottled water in the foyer when I come out.

"Thank you." I give him a nervous smile. "I really need to talk this through with someone I trust. Do you mind if we sit down?"

“Sure.”

He looks a little put out, but that’s to be expected, I guess. He is harboring a fugitive after all.

We move into the living room. I sit on the edge of an armchair while Carl takes his usual place on the far side of the couch. Carl’s house has always been messy, much like his office. It could use a woman’s touch, but Carl has never settled down. I don’t know why. I guess he’s so busy helping other people that he doesn’t have anything left for himself.

Yeah. Helping other people.

“I didn’t know where else to go,” I say. “My parents are gone, and I have no siblings. You’re the closest thing to a brother I’ve got.”

He nods and folds his hands in his lap. Carl *looks* the part of social worker, with his sympathetic eyes and unintimidating demeanor. It’s part of what makes him good at his job.

“Sarah,” he says. “If the police are looking for you, it won’t be long before they show up here. It’s only a matter of time. If I want to stay out of trouble, I’ll have to contact them soon.”

“I understand.” I offer him a grim smile. “But like I said, I’ve got nowhere else to go.”

He nods. “I’m sorry this is happening to you. How can I help?”

I take a deep breath. “Look, Carl, I don’t know how to tell you this so I’m just going to come out and say it. Dwayne killed Hal English.”

He perks up in his seat. “What?”

“It’s a long story but basically Dwayne convinced me to make a false confession. He was going to let me go away for a crime he committed. I figured everything out before I got to the police station. Since then I’ve been hiding out, trying to figure out what to do.”

“This is incredible...” Carl shakes his head. “How do you know Dwayne killed this boy?”

I explain my theory.

“That’s difficult to believe,” Carl says, but there’s no conviction in his voice.

“The point is,” I go on, “even if I wanted to lie to the police, I can’t confess to the crime now. All the detectives would have to do is speak with the owners of the hardware store and they would discover that Dwayne already knew Hal was dead before Andrew called me. Then *I’d* be in trouble for lying as well, and for no reason. Do you see?”

He nods tentatively.

“The timing is fishy,” Carl says. “But what about motive? Why would Dwayne kill that boy?”

I have my suspicions but keep them to myself. “I don’t know.” I pretend to feel helpless. “I need your help. I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you want to call Dwayne?” he asks.

“And say what? I know you’re a murderer?”

He nods, beginning to understand my dilemma.

I add, “He’s got Andrew with him.”

Carl looks skeptical. “You don’t honestly think Dwayne would do anything to Andrew, do you?”

“At this point, I don’t know what to think. My husband was ready to send me to prison for a crime he committed.”

My brother-in-law watches me steadily for a moment before nodding.

“I think,” I begin tentatively, “that Dwayne needs to come clean. But I don’t know how to convince him. He doesn’t listen to me, Carl. He never has. Dwayne has always done whatever he’s wanted. If I confronted him myself, I don’t know how he’d react. But if you were there too, then maybe he’d see reason. He listens to you. He always has.”

“You want me to call Dwayne?”

I pretend to hesitate. “Would you?”

Carl takes a deep breath. “We can’t meet him here. We need to—”

I hold up a palm. “The police are looking for me, not Dwayne or Andrew.”

“Okay.” Carl rises. “My cell is in the other room. I’ll call him.”

Carl leaves the room. I stay where I’m seated till he’s gone, then quietly get up and tiptoe to the edge of the living room. Carl is in the kitchen. A moment later, he’s speaking in hushed tones.

“Sarah is in my living room... No, you listen to me, Dwayne. You need to get your ass over here, right now... She didn’t go to the police... There’s been a complication... Hurry up. Your life depends on it.”

His voice is getting louder. Fearing that he’s about to step around the corner, I hurry back to my seat. When he returns to the living room, I act like I haven’t moved an inch.

“He’s coming.” Carl pockets his phone. “Twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes.

I fake a smile and thank Carl for his help.

I can do this.

DWAYNE

“Dad, what’s wrong?” Andrew asks. He grips the armrest of the passenger door tightly as I take a corner too quickly.

“Nothing, buddy,” I say. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

“What about Mom?” he asks. “Where is she?”

“She’s with Uncle Carl. That’s where we’re headed now.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you said she was going to talk to the police and everything would be better.”

“Well, she didn’t do that, apparently.” I can’t keep the anger out of my voice. What the hell has this bitch done for the last three hours? I took Andrew to an indoor trampoline park in the next county, and I was in the middle of booking a hotel room under a fake name when my brother called. “Sometimes things don’t go the way you planned and you have to adapt.”

Andrew doesn’t say anything as I press the accelerator. I realize I’m driving too fast and take my foot off the gas pedal. Sarah is with Carl. She trusts him. Even if she has a sudden change of heart, Carl won’t let her leave his house.

He loves Sarah, but he’s always looked out for me. Nothing’s going to change that.

I can still make this work.

Andrew senses my mood and doesn’t ask any more questions. I slow down, sticking mostly to the speed limit. The

police were expecting Sarah to show up three hours ago. At this point, they're probably looking for me and Andrew as well. When I get to Carl's development, I park well away from his house, near the playground and basketball courts.

"Okay, buddy," I say, turning to Andrew. "I need you to stay here."

"Why can't I come? I want to see Mom."

"It's not a good time, buddy." I pull a face and heave a sigh. "I didn't want to tell you this. God, I hate your mother for putting me in this position but I have no choice."

He leans away, shooting me a weird look. "What do you mean, Dad?"

I look out the windshield and pretend like this is difficult for me to say. "Son, your mother killed Hal."

"What?"

He practically flies out of his seat.

I nod. "I'm sorry. I thought Hal broke into the house with somebody, the two of them got into an argument, and the other guy killed him. But that's not what happened. You see, your mother decided to eat lunch at home on Thursday and Hal showed up."

Andrew is frowning. "That doesn't make any sense. Why —"

"I don't know what happened," I say, cutting him off. "That's for the cops to sort out. Your mother has a bad habit of repressing her emotions, you know. You've never seen her angry, have you?"

"No..."

"Right. Exactly. She keeps it all in. I've told her, so many times over the years, to let it out and express herself. I've begged her to speak to a therapist, but she won't do it. She's like this because of her upbringing. Your mother had a terrible childhood. In a way, none of this is her fault. But you know what happens when you keep your emotions in all the time?" I shake my head. "Eventually you explode, and it's messy and

ugly. After everything that happened to you at school this year, I think your mother just *snapped* when she saw Hal at the door. Yeah... that's probably it." I'm figuring this out as I go. Carl will back me up here. He'll tell the police that Sarah left the office for an early lunch on Thursday. Her colleagues won't know any better. She's not close with any of them, not really. I make sure of that, always telling her to come home when she asks if she can attend a happy hour with work colleagues, always suggesting she decline the end-of-year office parties as well because we have too much to do for the holidays. "After all the grief Hal gave you, when he showed up pretending to be your friend again, Mom lost it. She flew into a blind rage. That's what happens to people sometimes, especially people like your mother, who doesn't know how to process her emotions in a healthy way."

Andrew is crying. "But why would she go back to work after doing that? Why would she just leave him there?"

"I think your mother was in a state of shock. She might not have realized what she'd done. Perhaps she blocked it out. I don't know. Or she decided to leave Hal where he was in the hopes it would look like he died during a break-in. There have been a string of robberies. Maybe that's what went through her mind. We may never know or fully understand, Andrew. I'm sorry that you had to find out this way, but the thing is, your mother is not well. Her childhood was terrible, and her first husband was an abusive asshole. She's not right in the head."

"I don't believe any of this," Andrew says. "It doesn't make sense."

"I know, son." I give him a pained smile. "Life doesn't always make sense."

"No." Andrew shakes his head. "When did you know? And if you knew, why did you ... do that to Hal?"

I sigh. "The idea that your mother killed that boy never crossed my mind until she confessed it to me last night."

"But why..."

I know what he's asking.

I turn in the driver's seat to look my son in the eye. "I never once thought you killed Hal. But I knew it would *look* that way to the police. I did what I did to protect you."

He wipes under his eyes. "Can I see her?"

"I don't know what your mother is capable of right now," I answer. "I can't take any chances with her. You have to stay here, Andrew. It's for your own good."

He looks miserable. "Okay."

"I'll be back, son. I promise."

He smiles through his tears and nods.

I exit the car and cut through the woods separating the park from the homes. I move quickly through someone's backyard and slip between two blocks of townhouses, then jog through a cul-de-sac. A dogwalker comes around the corner, so I decide to stay on the sidewalk and look less suspicious. I round a bend and enter the next court, where Carl's townhouse is. I don't see Sarah's car anywhere.

With no one in sight, I hurry up the block and walk into my brother's home.

“Sarah, what are you doing here?” I ask.

She rises from her chair when I come into the living room and instinctively takes a step back like she expects me to attack her. I never thought of my wife as intelligent, but I also never thought of her as stupid. Carl’s house is the last place she should have come. Whom does she honestly think Carl is going to help? If he’s forced to pick a side, he’s going to choose his brother over his sister-in-law.

“I couldn’t go to the police,” she says.

“Why not?” I ask.

She fixes her eyes on me. “Because you killed Hal, and the police will figure that out.”

How does she know?

I fake a laugh.

“What the hell are you talking about? I would never kill a child. I’d never kill anyone.”

Carl shakes his head. “Dwayne, they’re going to figure it out. I fucking told you to run.”

I shoot Carl a look, then realize it’s useless. The game is up.

Time to adapt.

Carl continues. “You went to the hardware store before Andrew even got home, and definitely before Sarah knew Hal

was in the garage.”

Goddamnit.

I was afraid this might happen, but as the days passed I thought I could get away with this.

Sarah’s eyes go wide. She’s just had another realization.

“You normally park in the garage. But you didn’t on Thursday because you *knew* Hal was in there!”

I sigh. In the end, it’s the little things that get you.

“You’re right.”

This is really Bridget’s fault.

She wasn’t being careful enough. I told her to stop with the texts and emails and phone calls. She was leaving too much of a digital trail. And she never locked her phone. I threatened to call the affair off if she didn’t take more precautions, but it was only a half-hearted threat and she knew it.

Anyway, things at home weren’t great and her son suspected something. The kid got hold of her phone and read some texts. She found out and tried to explain away what he’d read, telling him that she and I were old friends and often made weird jokes about our feelings and hypothetically doing sexual things to each other. Bridget played it off like it was strange adult humor.

Her son obviously didn’t buy it.

“So you *did* kill him?” Sarah says.

God, she’s really slow up on the uptake.

“Yes, Sarah.”

Even though she already suspected me, she looks horrified.

I say, “If it makes you feel any better, I didn’t plan on it.”

That’s why Hal was hanging around our house this week. He was trying to catch his mother screwing one of the neighbors.

Bridget came over Thursday morning for a quickie. She didn’t have much time, but neither of us felt like waiting any

longer. The desire had been building for almost a week. Ever since Hal had gotten hold of her phone, Bridget had stayed away in the hopes of lessening his suspicions. But come Thursday neither of us could contain ourselves. We threw caution to the wind.

Being a business owner is difficult. Every problem becomes your problem. Clogged toilet? You've got to fix it. Some kids painting graffiti on your wall? Your issue. Big pothole in front of your store that the shopping center is supposed to fill? You have to make the calls. The list is endless, the demands on your time never-ending, always sudden, always pressing.

But being the man in charge also comes with its perks too. When there *aren't* any major issues, I can make up my own schedule. It's easy for me to slip away from the shop for a couple hours here, an afternoon there. One time I even took off the whole day without Sarah even knowing.

The sex on Thursday morning was wild. We must have knocked the bed out of its grooves in the carpet. At one point she was bent over my dresser, displacing some items. She wanted to watch me in the mirror while I thrust away. Those pills I've been taking have really helped.

After Bridget got off, it was my turn. Bridget forced me to lay back on the carpet, swallowed my cock, and bobbed her head up and down, sucking and stroking furiously. I exploded in her mouth.

When it was over she put her tennis outfit back on and asked if she could come back tomorrow morning. I told her she'd better. We made out a little bit and nearly had sex again, but she had a tennis lesson at the country club. Her friends would have missed her and that would have led to questions. Before Bridget left, I remember her scratching her ankles, those long fingernails which she loved to paint pink raking her skin.

She always takes the trails behind the golf course to sneak over to my house. She must have picked up some chiggers along the way.

After she was gone, I took a quick, scalding shower to wash the smell of Bridget off me and changed clothes. If anybody at the shop asked, I'd tell them I got a quick workout in. It was close enough to the truth anyway. Bridget and I are usually panting and sweaty by the time we have enough of each other. Our lovemaking is unabashed, aggressive, very physical. Sex with Sarah is so bland in comparison.

"Wait a minute," Sarah says, turning to Carl. "Did you know about this too?"

Carl doesn't answer. The silence is damning. "It's not as bad as you think, Sarah. Dwayne didn't plan on doing it. It just sort of happened. He came to me for help." Carl shoots me an angry look. "Like he always does."

I want to tell Carl to fuck off with his holier-than-thou attitude. Though he's never shared any of his sins with me, I know he's got some. We all do.

But he's my only ally in the room, so I don't call him a hypocrite.

"Carl, you *knew* that Dwayne killed Hal?" Sarah asks.

I roll my eyes. Is my wife really this stupid? She can't be. It must be nerves, slowing her already slow brain down. I shake my head, still angry with Bridget. If only she'd been more careful with her phone.

Once the affair began, I decided to make a habit of parking in the garage. Without my car out in the driveway for all the world to see, fewer neighbors would notice me at home at random, strange hours during the day. So that morning, after Bridget snuck out the back, I got in my car and hit the automatic door opener. As the garage opened, I saw the kid standing in my driveway. Hal was waiting out there for me.

He rushed inside.

He ran to the interior door and tried to get into the house, but it was locked. He must have thought his mother was still inside and wanted to catch her, I guess. I spotted a neighbor across the street coming out of her house to water the flowerbed in front of her porch, so without thinking, I hit the

button for the garage door opener again. Even though everything was happening so quickly, I still had the presence of mind to grasp why Hal was here. I didn't want the neighbor overhearing us quarrel about my affair with Bridget.

The kid got in my face. I'll give him this: Hal had some balls on him. He was only thirteen and not fully mature yet. Despite the fact that he only came up to my shoulder, Hal had the stones to threaten me. Either he was fearless or he didn't think he had any reason to be afraid—he never thought the grown man living a few blocks away, who'd been friends with his parents forever, who'd shown him how to shoot a basketball, who'd split car-pooling duties with his parents for soccer practices, who used to drive him and Andrew to the big water park ... he never thought that man would strangle him to death.

Hal threatened to tell his father. He demanded I fess up and insisted I break it off with his mother. His parents were going through a rough patch and he didn't want them getting a divorce. I don't know what came over him.

Or what came over me.

I wasn't about to let this kid ruin my life. If he told his father, I'd lose both Bridget and Sarah. I couldn't even contemplate that. And just that morning, Bridget told me she planned on meeting with a divorce lawyer the following day while Russ went to work.

She was *close* to leaving her husband.

I'm not saying I would have eventually left Sarah, but at the very least, Bridget being single would have made our affair even easier to manage.

Now I'll never know if Bridget would have kept that appointment. She'd flaked out many times before with me, when we were young and she was confused about her feelings. But there was a *chance*.

And I wasn't willing to let that chance go.

Hal came at me, so I cracked him in the face. We got clinched up, which was bad for him considering our size and

strength differences. I manhandled him. Now I remember throwing him up against the back of my car. That must have been how the taillight got broken. But in the moment, I didn't even realize.

That's when he started screaming for help.

I put my hands around that kid's throat to muffle the sound, and I choked the life out of him. He put up a struggle, but the kid didn't know how to fight. Instead of going for my eyes or throat, trying to strike me in the groin, pinching me, or trying to bite me, he merely struggled against my wrists while he ran out of air. It happened much more quickly than I expected. There was no blood when I killed Hal, but his eyes were terribly bloodshot and his neck was swollen, with bruises already forming. Using a scrub pad from the kitchen, I scoured the kid's neck to remove my DNA. I scrubbed my hands, the hot water scalding my skin, but couldn't come up with a plan. Normally I know what to do right away in any given situation, but this obviously was unlike anything I'd dealt with before. I was still in shock over what had happened and, as I scrubbed away at my hands, my thoughts turned dark and pessimistic. I didn't see a way out of this, so I considered taking the cash out of the safe and running. But how far could I get? And where would I go? I thought of contacting my dad's friend down in Mexico. That seemed like a possibility.

Then another thought occurred to me. I considered contacting Carl and asking, outright, if there was someone we could set up for Hal's murder. I'd heard of the local robberies and Carl was plugged into a lot of criminal activity around town. He would know of someone we could, at the very least, steer the police toward.

But neither idea appealed to me.

In the first scenario, my guilt would be obvious. Innocent people usually don't run. As for the other scenario, I simply didn't have enough time to execute it. Even assuming Carl went along with the idea, we'd have to concoct some plausible story and find the perfect suspect...

Eventually, the fog in my brain lifted and the obvious answer came to me. I had to move the body. It was the best course of action, but in my state of shock I had already lost precious time.

Once I settled on that idea, the rest of the plan came to me quickly. I called my assistant and told her I got held up and might not be back. I drove to the hardware store where I saw Josh and Rose. I couldn't avoid speaking to them, so I made up a half-true story about painting the basement.

It would have worked. Andrew and Sarah weren't due home till after four, but of course my son left camp early and then everything went to shit. Andrew must have come home only a few minutes after I left. I was on my way back to the house from the hardware store when Sarah called.

"Dwayne." Sarah's voice brings me back to the present, to my brother's living room. "It's not going to work. I can't lie to the police. They'll figure it out anyway. You've got to tell the truth and confess to the crime."

I hold up a palm. "Sarah, if I go away, Andrew's life is over."

"Stop pretending like this is about Andrew," she says.

I look at my brother. "Carl, I can't go to prison."

He nods. "I know you can't."

Sarah turns to face Carl and takes a step away from him. "What are you doing?"

Carl grimaces. My brother is a good man. He's made a life out of helping people.

Including, and especially, me.

He's the one that got me the hard drugs I used to make Justine OD. He's the one that later lied to the police about her, making up a story about how Justine came to him and admitted to having a serious drug problem and needing help. It's what got the senior detective off my back, though Liam Carter never believed the story.

Carl is the one who connected me with Jayden, after I told him what really happened in my garage. He's the one who suggested I kill the man also, to permanently silence the unreliable addict once he'd done his job and lied to the police about seeing three men moving a body in the preserve. He'd tried helping Jayden for several years, but Jayden was an unrelenting recidivist, destined to ruin all his friends and family to support his drug habit.

Carl is all about helping people. But even he knows some people are beyond help and will only end up hurting others. That's what twenty-five years of working with addicts and victims of abuse has taught him.

My brother is all about helping people, but in the end he's my brother. And blood is thicker than water.

"I'm sorry, Sarah," Carl says. "But Dwayne's right: he can't go to prison."

Watching Sarah squirm brings a smile to his face. I'm not a sadist, not really, but I do enjoy seeing that flicker of fear in her eyes the moment she realizes she's made a terrible mistake.

My wife has never been good at planning ahead. She has trouble figuring out basic strategy when it comes to playing Monopoly.

"I did love you," I say, with some regret. "You were a good woman. But your problem, I realized, is you're both a little too smart and not smart enough."

My brother gives me the nod, and we begin to close on her. We've got to kill her. There's no doubt about that. Carl won't do it, but he won't stop me either. He'll hold her down, or keep her quiet, even. But that's all. After it's done, I'm going to run. I'll have to make up a story for Andrew. I'll tell him Mommy lied to the police and convinced them I'm guilty. Maybe I shouldn't even take Andrew with me. I could leave him with Carl. My brother loves him dearly. He'd do that for me.

I could start over.

I could convince Bridget that Sarah killed Hal. I think she'd believe me. I'd harp on the fact that Detective Carter has always had it out for me, ever since his cousin Justine died, and that Sarah made up a story and he was all too eager to believe it.

Bridget might leave Russ. She was close to doing it when Hal was alive—she has even less reason to stay with a man who's been bad to her now. Maybe she'd run away with me. We could *both* start over. Yeah, this is starting to sound good. She lost a son, I lost a wife and had to leave my son, and we'll need someone we love and can trust to help us pick up the pieces. We're perfect for each other...

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

First, I have to get away.

Years ago I gave Carl a small share in the business, as a way of thanking him for helping me with Justine. He's got money. He can get it to me. And I can get my hands on some. Hell, if I'm going on the run, there's no reason to be coy. I might as well withdraw everything we've got in our savings and the business accounts. That's several hundred thousand dollars of money moving around. It won't be easy getting it all out, but I *can* do it with some effort.

This can still work.

If Sarah had any common sense, she'd be screaming her head off by now. Carl might live in an end unit, but it's still a townhouse. Someone's bound to hear her.

But she's either too stupid or too scared, or both, to fight. Looking back now, I realize how flimsy my reasons for loving her were. She's pretty, she's kind, and she *practically begged* me to control her. But that's it, really. The truth is, she's kind of boring. She's kind of *average*.

I do feel a twinge of regret. Unlike Justine, unlike Jayden, and unlike that little shit Hal who tormented my son, Sarah is not a bad person. As a matter of fact, she's honestly the first good person I've had to kill.

“I’ll make this painless,” I say. “Don’t fight it. It will be quick. I promise you.”

She should be screaming her head off, scared out of her mind. She is trembling and jumpy, but there’s something else in her expression that I’ve never seen before. It takes me a moment to recognize the sentiment that her terror has done a good job at masking and that my ego has blinded me to.

She looks triumphant.

“Now!” Sarah yells, almost gleefully, then looks at my brother. “NOW!”

Next thing I know, somebody is kicking in the back door and someone else has burst through the front. There’s a lot of shouting, hard men barking orders at me and Carl, then I’m on the floor, the side of my face mashed into Carl’s carpet. Someone heavy has got their knee in my back.

It’s the police.

SARAH

THREE HOURS AGO

Detective Carter enters the interview room with two big folders, both of them bulging with documents. This must be the case file. There's a lot of information in there.

I smile nervously at him. The police haven't arrested me yet, but I know they want to. They're expecting a confession. That's what Larry promised them.

"Would you like something to drink?" Carter puts the folders on the table between us. "Coffee? Tea?"

"I'd love some water," I say.

Carter calls to somebody in the hallway. A woman about my age brings me a bottled water then leaves the room and closes the door. He sits across from me and opens one of the folders and begins flipping through all the documents inside. Carter goes through them quickly, too quickly to read any of them. I get the feeling he's making me wait, hoping the prolonged silence will unnerve me. A minute later, his partner, Detective Lopez, enters the room.

Without preamble, Carter says, "We know that Hal English was at your house Thursday around noon. John DeMarco saw him."

So that's their witness. I wonder why it took John so long to come forward.

Carter nods. He's read my mind. "He was next door, in the Pritchards' house."

Robbing it, in other words. John didn't willingly come forward. I think back to this morning, when I saw the police cars stop in front of his house. They must have arrested him. I wonder how much John was willing to bargain for. This was a pretty big chip to have in his back pocket. He saw Hal in or around our house.

I'm struck by a memory. When I got home Thursday afternoon, I felt like somebody was watching me from the Pritchards' house, even though I knew they were away on vacation. It was probably John.

"Your attorney said you wanted to provide a confession regarding the death of Hal English," Carter prompts.

"He's not my attorney," I say.

Carter gives me a puzzled look.

"In fact, you'd better take his phone. He's probably trying to get hold of Dwayne right now."

"Why?"

"To warn him."

"Sarah, much as I'd like to, I can't just take an attorney's phone," Carter says.

"What if he's helping a murderer escape justice?"

"What murderer?" Carter asks.

"My husband."

Carter and Lopez leave the room. They're gone for nearly twenty minutes. When they return, I ask them if they've arrested Larry.

Carter shakes his head. "We're only holding him."

"You have his phone?"

"Why is this so important to you?" Carter asks.

"Because my husband has my son, and I'm worried what he'll do if Larry is able to contact him."

“Sarah,” Lopez jumps in. “Are you saying that your husband might hurt Andrew?”

“My husband is capable of hurting anyone, my son included.”

Lopez’s eyes go wide. She’s not as practiced as Carter at hiding her feelings.

Carter nods at me. “We’ve got his phone.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank you for listening. I have something to tell you.”

Carter glances at the two-way mirror. Perhaps it’s a signal to make sure whoever’s behind there is recording.

“We’re here to listen,” Carter says, leaning back in his chair.

“I can prove my husband killed Hal.”

Carter tries to hide his excitement, but he is human after all. “How do you know that?”

I walk Carter and Lopez through Thursday’s timeline. Carter interrupts occasionally with clarifying questions, then they make me go through it several more times. By the time they’re satisfied, an hour has passed and I’m sweaty everywhere.

“Okay, Sarah. After Dwayne came home with the tarp and plastic wrap, what happened next?” Carter asks.

I put my palms flat on the table. I feel like I’ve got friends in this room, but of course that could just be an act. Maybe Carter wants to see me go away too. I can’t tell.

“Dwayne said he was going to move the body and that I was not to contact the police.”

“He used those words?”

I nod. “I suggested we do that, but he told me no.”

“What did he say?”

I’m wondering how far I should go, then figure I might as well go for broke. The police have Dwayne dead to rights for

Hal's murder. He can't talk his way out of the timeline. If he calls me a liar, nobody's going to believe him anyway.

"He said I'd be in trouble if I called you."

They ask me more questions but I don't want to make up too many details because I'll never remember all of them. Instead I tell them I was really scared and also worried that my son might go to prison, making my memory fuzzy.

Satisfied with my account, Carter consults his notes. "That's what Dwayne was doing when he left the house that night, right? He avoided the sobriety checkpoint and then was stopped for the busted taillight. Hal was in the car ... in the trunk, right?"

"Yes."

Carter frowns. "Why did you go out that night?"

So they know. I've got to hand it to them. They've done their homework. I don't see a reason to lie here. I've already planted enough seeds. Either they believe me when I say Dwayne threatened me, or they don't. I'm inclined to think Carter believes me.

"I found Hal's bike in the backyard. I was worried that Dwayne would come home and get really angry with me for having missed it earlier. So I got rid of it. I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have done that, but like I said, Dwayne made it very clear what I was supposed to do. I went to the pharmacy to give myself a cover story. I said I needed medicine for Andrew's upset stomach. Then I threw Hal's bike into the dumpster in the next strip."

"And after that?"

"Well, I had to keep up the lie. I went to work the next day. God forgive me, I went to the vigil and I spoke to Bridget and Russ and told them how sorry I was, that I'd pray for Hal... I felt horrible the whole time. But I had no choice. Dwayne made that very clear."

"Did he threaten you multiple times?"

“I was scared for my life,” I say. “He said he’d do whatever he had to, in order to protect his son.”

“What do you think he meant by that?”

“I took it to mean that he’d ... kill me if I didn’t go along with the plan.”

“Then what happened?”

“You found Hal’s body and then started circling Andrew. Dwayne brought Larry in. I was really scared. I was worried that my son would go to prison—”

“Did you ever think your son might have killed Hal?” Lopez asks.

It’s an astute question, and it nearly gets me off my game. She watches my reaction closely.

“I ... didn’t know what to think. They say that it’s usually the person who finds the body, but in Andrew’s case I really wasn’t sure.” I think I’ve answered without answering. “But what I thought, or what I didn’t think, none of it mattered. Dwayne was calling the shots. While Andrew was in custody, Dwayne said he was going to take care of things. But he never told me what he had planned.”

Lopez and Carter share a long look. The older detective gives his partner a nod. Lopez asks the next question.

“Sarah, do you know a man by the name of Jayden Washington?”

Her question throws me for a loop. “Yes. He’s a client of Carl’s, my brother-in-law.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Thursday afternoon, actually right before Andrew called me. Why do you ask?”

“He’s gone missing,” Carter says, then pauses to watch my reaction.

“What? Oh my God. What do you think happened?”

“Has your husband ever met Jayden?” Lopez asks.

“Not that I’m aware of.”

I wait for them to explain, but of course they don’t. The detectives are here to ask the questions, not answer mine.

“You don’t know what Dwayne was up to on Saturday, but did he tell you whether he’d accomplished what he’d set out to do?” Carter asks.

I nod. “He said everything was taken care of.”

“Tell us what happened this morning.”

I go through the details. It’s painfully obvious now why Dwayne was so adamant about leaving the house and taking two cars. He was hedging his bets. In the event the detectives didn’t buy Jayden’s story, or if some new piece of evidence was uncovered, Dwayne didn’t want to be anywhere near the house, the first logical stop for the police intent on arresting him. The two cars gave him flexibility to improvise as well.

“Finally,” I say, “Dwayne told me I had to admit to killing Hal and moving the body myself. I was supposed to take the blame for everything.”

“Why?”

I laugh bitterly. “You know the thing about manipulators? They always have a good reason. He said that neither of us wanted our son to go to prison. That left him or me. Dwayne is the breadwinner in our family. I barely got through high school and have no earning potential. If Dwayne went away, then *all* our lives would be ruined. But if it was just me, then he and Andrew could weather the storm.”

Carter shakes his head. “But what was the new story going to be?”

“That I came home to find Andrew and Hal arguing. After listening to my son go on for a year about how poorly Hal treated him, I was supposed to have just lost my mind. I fell into a rage and choked him to death.”

Carter’s face softens.

“I almost did it,” I say, biting back tears. I came *so* close to giving up my life for Dwayne. “I was on my way here, going

over the timeline in my head to prepare for your questions, when I realized that Dwayne had already been to the hardware store before Andrew even called me.”

Lopez pushes the box of tissues across the table. I dab at my eyes. I’m crying for real, but I hope it doesn’t come across as too theatrical.

I’ve told them my story. It’s mostly true. Maybe it’s so close to being the actual truth they’ll never be able to find the few lies I peppered throughout.

It’s also possible that Carter is more than happy to take my account at face value given his antipathy toward Dwayne.

But do they believe me? I’m still not sure. I realize I have to sell it. I can’t leave any room for doubt.

“My husband is a dangerous man,” I say, rubbing my wrist like I’ve got a nervous tick. “He controls every aspect of my life.”

Carter nods and looks to Lopez. She leans forward, subtly taking over. Better to have a woman ask another woman delicate questions like this.

“How did he do that, Sarah?” Lopez asks.

I tell them everything. The weird part is, I don’t even have to lie. It’s true that Dwayne gets angry when the cans aren’t facing label-out in the pantry. It’s true he has a fit when I don’t have his favorite shirts cleaned for going out on the weekends even though he’s the one that works at a drycleaning shop. It’s true that he snaps at me whenever I ask about finances. It’s a fact that he almost always tells me what to wear when we’re going out. It all comes pouring out of me, all these things I just accepted as normal but which are really telling when I say them out loud.

I tell the detectives about the time I opened a bank statement and how Dwayne got furious, snatching it out of my hand and telling me I wouldn’t understand how to read it. That was the last piece of mail we ever received from our bank. After that transgression, Dwayne moved all his

communications with the bank and about bills online, where I couldn't see them.

I tell the detectives about that time Dwayne threatened to throw my scrapbooking supplies out because I had left the den a little messy. Andrew had called from a party, asking to leave early, so I'd rushed over to pick him up, leaving a bit of a mess. I would have cleaned them up before Dwayne got home if I hadn't had to get Andrew.

I tell the detectives more. There's so much more, so much I've forgotten about until this moment. All these things I didn't realize were bad, all these things I'm seeing for the first time. It's like they were invisible to me until this moment.

The truth is, my husband's a monster.

"Sarah," Lopez says, "I have to ask you. If your husband was this terrible, why did you marry him and stay with him all these years?"

"Those are two different questions," I answer. "I married him because he saved my life. My first husband was abusive, and Dwayne helped me get out of that relationship. I fell in love with him. Gratitude blinded me to his faults, I guess. And he was in line to take over his father's business. I knew he'd be a good provider. I got pregnant with Andrew not long after we were married. So I stayed. We had a child together and ... I felt trapped."

"Before this thing with Hal, did your husband ever threaten you?"

"Not in so many words. You see, Dwayne's really good at being subtle, and he's got a strong personality." I take a breath. "But yes, he left no room for discussion. That's what he said all the time, *we're not discussing this*. I just had to go along with it. There was no choice."

The two detectives share a look. I've told them everything. I sense this is my moment to ask for what I want.

"Dwayne spoke with Carl at the vigil, then again on the phone, I think," I say. "I'm just guessing here, but Carl would

have been the one to connect my husband with Jayden, assuming that's what happened."

Carter purses his lips.

"Look, I'm worried about my son," I say. "Dwayne's got him. I'm afraid of what he might do to Andrew if he suspects you're coming for him."

Carter and Lopez share a look.

I swallow hard. "I've got an idea."

"I'm all ears," Carter says.

"What if I can get a confession out of Dwayne and maybe find out what happened to Jayden?" I ask.

"What do you want in exchange?"

"That you'll get Andrew to safety," I say. "And then we'll be left alone. With a confession, I won't have to get involved in a trial. I just want to put this behind me and my son."

They left the room to discuss it with an assistant district attorney. They were gone for a long time, but in the end they agreed to my offer.

SARAH

SIX MONTHS LATER

They say the criminal justice system moves very slowly.

They're not wrong.

Dwayne was finally sentenced last week. He'll be serving thirty years for the deaths of Hal English and Jayden Washington.

At first, I was worried he'd be out in only fifteen years. While Dwayne intended to kill Hal, Larry argued that Hal provoked him, which would make the crime manslaughter as opposed to murder. According to Dwayne, Hal threatened to ruin his reputation and then attacked him. Both claims were laughable. What thirteen-year-old would think to threaten to expose a businessman's affair with a married woman in order to ruin his reputation in the community? And, just as implausibly, what child would think twice about attacking Dwayne? Hal was big for his age and a good athlete, but Dwayne's over six feet tall and has a bodybuilder's physique from all his years of lifting weights. He probably had seventy pounds on poor Hal.

As ridiculous as the defense story was, unfortunately it was Dwayne's word against a dead man's.

For a while that's how things stood. It was looking like Dwayne would go away for, at most, fifteen years. But then

authorities discovered Jayden's body. Once more Larry argued that the killing was not premeditated, and only committed in self-defense. They made up a story about Jayden demanding more money than was agreed upon, then flying into a rage when Dwayne refused.

Nobody believed Dwayne, of course. But again, it was his word against that of two dead people.

The prosecutor brought pressure to bear by threatening to charge Dwayne with murder, a crime that carries a life sentence. Larry might have been able to successfully argue that *one* of the killings was manslaughter, but in the end they did not want to take their chances twice and risk having Dwayne face a life sentence. Dwayne relented and pled guilty to the lesser crime of manslaughter for both killings, agreeing to serve the maximum sentence permissible under state law. Combined, those two crimes earned him thirty years. He'll be seventy years old by then.

With the sentencing finalized, the prosecution turned its attention to Carl. He'll be serving five years in prison for abetting his brother in covering up Hal's death. Everyone knew he was responsible for putting Dwayne in touch with Jayden as well, but there was no evidence to suggest he had anything to do with Jayden's death. I still can't believe that a man who otherwise did so much good in the community would help cover up his brother's horrendous crime of killing a child.

Pursuant to my agreement with the police, I wasn't charged with anything. I get the sense that Carter wouldn't have arrested me anyway. He believed my mostly true story and saw me as a victim too.

Once Andrew and I were free to go, I went about the business of selling the house and moving several states away, so we could start over. We're in the messy process of untangling our assets from Dwayne's drycleaning business. Because I wasn't charged with a crime, under the law I'm entitled to that money as his wife.

I'm his ex-wife now, for the record. I asked my lawyer to serve him with papers during his sentencing hearing. Call me petty, but I wanted to rub it in.

I pull up outside Andrew's new school a few minutes early. While I settle in to wait in the long line of cars, my mind turns back to my son. He's had trouble adjusting to our new life and hasn't made any friends. But today is a big step: he stayed after school for the robotics club. Fingers crossed, he'll find his tribe.

The entrance to the school opens, and a woman about my age with a walkie-talkie approaches the line of cars. I roll down the window when she reaches my vehicle.

"Hi. Who are you here to pick up?" she asks.

I'm still getting used to the name change. I have to remind myself before I speak that my son doesn't go by Mullen anymore. He's taken my maiden name.

"Andrew Olsen," I say.

"Oh, Andrew." She smiles. "I met him in the lab today. Very nice boy."

It's been a long time since anybody paid me a compliment about my son.

"Thank you."

The woman moves on and I try to contain my joy. It's one thing for a teacher to like your child. It's quite another for other children his own age to take to him.

All this thinking of teenagers reminds me of Hal. I continue to wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, still half in the grip of a nightmare, worried that I've forgotten to move the body, or hide the bike, or get Andrew to safety...

But it gets worse. Eventually I realize I'm dreaming. The reality of what happened, what I did, and what I was willing to do, it all overwhelms me. And then I feel shame.

When I look in the mirror, all I see is a credulous, gullible woman who helped her evil husband cover up a crime and

then barely put up a fight when he asked her to take the blame for a murder he *knew* she didn't commit.

I almost threw my life away for him.

I think of Russ and Bridget often.

Not long after Dwayne was arrested, I reached out to Bridget but she didn't return my call. I waited a few months, wanting to respect their privacy during such an awful time, and wrote them a long letter apologizing for what happened.

I never heard back.

I don't think I ever will.

Through social media, I learned that Russ and Bridget divorced. Though that news was no surprise, it was still terrible to hear. So many lives have been ruined.

Dwayne and Bridget's affair came out during the investigation and was reported in the local media as well, to my great embarrassment. I made the mistake on one occasion of reading the comments to one of the news articles, in which one anonymous poster alleged *I* was having an affair with Russ and that he'd asked me to murder his boy and pin it on my husband, whom he'd never liked.

People will say anything when they're sitting behind a keyboard.

I knew they had their spats from time to time, but Russ and Bridget still seemed like the perfect couple who had it all. High school sweethearts married right out of college. The big house. The country club membership. Three vacations a year, at least one of them overseas. The tennis lessons. The golf lessons. The ballroom dancing lessons. Memberships to the gym, the yoga studio, the Pilates club. A new car every three years. Their son a popular, straight-A student and budding athlete.

Russ was the successful businessman who would leave a ton of money to his children and grandchildren. Bridget was the devoted housewife who kept a perfect house and always seemed to have it all together.

We were close friends with them for years and in all that time I'd never seen any cracks in the armor. But then again, I've lived most my life a naïve, easily fooled woman, apparently.

And come to think of it, all of our friends and neighbors must have been just as surprised to hear about how much of a gaslighting, manipulative monster Dwayne was. I'll bet there are people out there saying the same thing about me and Dwayne—that we seemed like the perfect couple. That we had it all.

Or maybe not.

Perhaps everybody else knew exactly what kind of man Dwayne really was, and only I was blind to it. I shudder to think that's the truth, that all along our friends, family, and neighbors wondered why the hell I'd put up with him, how anyone could allow herself to be that easily manipulated. Despite all the therapy since then, I still live with a lot of shame.

Regardless, it's true what they say...

You never know what happens behind closed doors.

Andrew pops out of school a moment later with a group of kids. They're all laughing about something and, for once, Andrew is laughing along with them.

I hold my breath as he gets in the car and closes the door.

“Well?” I ask. “How was it?”

He smiles over at me. “I made some friends.”

I want to cry tears of joy, but I manage to keep myself together.

“That's nice, sweetheart.”

INKUBATOR NEWSLETTER

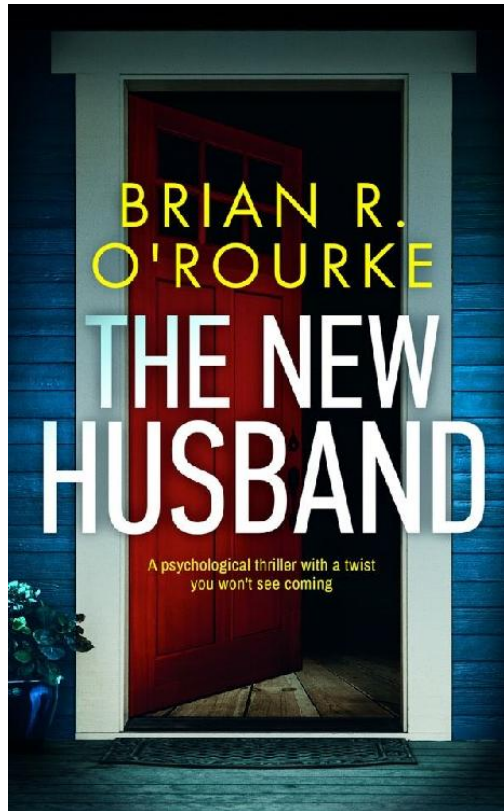
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Mary always dreamed of a perfect husband. Now she's got one.

When Mary's husband Brent returns from a month-long wellness retreat, he seems like a totally different person.

Before he went away, Brent was anxious, depressed, and in danger of losing his job.

Now, he's decisive, optimistic, and full of energy. He also has big plans to start his own business ... big plans which require a lot of capital.

As Mary spends more time around her husband, she begins to realise just how much he's changed in every little way. Is the man she's living with really the same person she married?

And who is the guy in the grey SUV who keeps following her?
Does he know something sinister about her husband?

Little by little, Mary realizes Brent has been hiding a dark secret about what really happened on that wellness retreat.

And as she draws closer to the horrifying truth, she finds herself trapped in a nightmare beyond her wildest imaginings.

***The New Husband* is a stunning psychological thriller that will keep you guessing until the very last page.**

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Please enjoy this preview of *The New Husband*.

PROLOGUE

I hit my brakes just in time. The two children continue to pedal their bikes through the crosswalk, oblivious to the fact that I almost drove into them. I can't believe I didn't even see them coming.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel to still my hands. They're shaking.

But they're not shaking from my having almost run into those kids.

My hands were already trembling before that.

Normally when I'm having a bad moment like this, I'd call Brent. But I can't call my husband now. I literally just ran out of the house to get away from him. Brent's not the same person ... he's changed.

A car horn blasts me from behind, snapping me out of my panic. The driver motions angrily in my rearview mirror. I wish that was all I had to worry about right now, another driver blocking the street for a few seconds. But, instead, my whole world is falling apart.

I wave apologetically, my heart racing as I pull through the intersection.

How did it come to this?

Brent went away for a month. He was supposed to come back better ...

But he's gotten worse.

As I pull into the parking lot of the diner, I check my mirrors. It's a new habit I've picked up in the last few weeks. I don't see anybody following me. But that doesn't mean they're not there.

I sit in the car and try to keep from having a full-on panic attack.

I can't believe this has happened. Who Brent has become. Who we've become. I know wellness retreats are supposed to be transformative but ... I don't recognize my husband at all.

And now I don't trust him anymore.

CHAPTER 1 - Wednesday, May 10

"Are you excited, or are you nervous?" Paige asks.

I offer her a nervous smile, which I hope looks excited. "Both, I guess."

"Remind me," Paige goes on while I fill out a balance transfer form. "How long has Brent been away?"

I fill in the amount, double-check the form, and slide it across the counter. The bank is usually empty on Wednesday mornings, which is exactly why I'm here. I'm not agoraphobic. At least, I've never been *diagnosed*. But I don't like crowds.

"It's been a month," I remind her.

Paige has been my friend since high school and is, honestly, one of the reasons I do my banking at this branch. We were really close all the way back in senior year, but then lost touch when she went away to college and I stayed home. I don't do social media and am a proud homebody, so it was completely by accident that I ran into her at the grocery store a few years back. Nowadays she's my closest friend. We see each other once or twice a week, usually over coffee and sometimes getting dinner.

"Wow." Paige takes the balance form and goes to work on her computer. "That is *quite* a long time to be without a man. I think I'd go crazy."

She gives me a wink, and I feel my face turn red. Paige's sex drive has always been a lot higher than mine. If she knew how infrequently Brent and I had been intimate before he went away, she'd probably be shocked. Paige has been married

twice already and can't seem to go more than five minutes being single.

"I miss him," I say. "That's for sure."

Paige finishes with the form and hands me a receipt. Then she leans in and lowers her voice. "Joanne went to one of those places," she says in almost a whisper. "And she was a totally different woman when she came back. Like, *totally*."

Joanne is one of our mutual friends from high school, though I probably haven't spoken to her since ... gosh, has it been that long?

"Really?" I say, trying not to get even more worked up than I already am. Brent and I were both very nervous about his trip, but ultimately we thought it was for the best. That being said, the idea of him coming back a totally different man is scary.

"Oh yeah," Paige says. "Joanne walked into her job the next day and quit on the spot. A week later, she'd opened her own online business. Once that got off the ground, she finally divorced that good-for-nothing. Now she's single and doing *great*."

All this talk of a person completely changing, of leaving their job and then their spouse, is not helping matters. Paige finally realizes how uncomfortable she's made me.

"Oh, I'm sure things will be great with Brent. He's such a good guy."

He is. He really is. He's just been struggling for a long time. Nobody knows this, but Brent suffers from depression. He's really good at hiding it. He learned at an early age to put on a brave face. He had to act like nothing was wrong, or he'd get it from his parents. Paige knows where Brent has been, but nobody else does. We told our friends and people from the neighborhood he was traveling for work. Some nosy neighbors tried to pry and ask me lots of questions, but I shut those conversations down immediately. It's none of their business.

"Yeah," I say. "I hope so."

Paige smiles at me. “It’s going to be great. I’m really excited for you, Mary. Give me a call later, and let me know how everything is, okay?”

“Okay.” I really am grateful to have Paige. I don’t have a lot of friends, and she genuinely cares about me. Paige is also good at getting me, occasionally, to come out of my shell. “How about coffee on Friday?”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

I leave the bank. Outside, the spring air is warm, and the sky is clear. It really is going to be okay. It really is. I need to keep telling myself that. Brent is supposed to be home in a few hours, which gives me plenty of time to get the rest of the house together. Brent has never cared about how neat—or messy—the house is, but I really wanted to make it look nice for his return. I wanted this day to be special, to be as perfect as it could be. I really want everything to be better, for him, for me, for both of us.

But as I cross the parking lot, I get the eerie feeling that I’m being watched. I spot a gray SUV parked on the far side of the lot, far away from all the other cars, just sitting there by itself. The engine is running. There’s a man behind the wheel, but I can’t see him that well.

Relax, Mary, I tell myself.

I get into my Prius and take deep breaths. I’m on edge. I get this way a lot, but it’s even worse today. I haven’t seen my husband in a month, and now I’m worried he’ll come back a totally different man. That he’ll quit his job and ask for a divorce.

My knuckles are white on the steering wheel. I ease up and take more deep breaths. Everything is going to be fine.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian R. O'Rourke has been writing stories since he was eight years old. A lifelong, avid reader, Brian believes that fiction has the power to change the world. He enjoys spending time with his family, exercising, playing the violin, and golfing.

He also writes mysteries and thrillers under the pen name Evan Ronan.

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