



IN
A NOVEL
HER
KIM SAVAGE
SKIN

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX · NEW YORK

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*For my sparkler, Lila, who knows exactly who she is,
and for Dad. I feel your sunshine on my shoulders, still.*

PART I

UIUI



I was seven the first time Momma taught me how to be someone else.

Sitting cross-legged on the street holding a coffee can for change, I'd listen as she'd tell me to remember how in a past life, I was blind. Straightaway, my eyes would blur, and sure as rain that can would be stuffed with bills by the end of the day. Momma said I had a thousand experiences to tap, because I'd passed through this world many times before. It was just a case of remembering.

Momma taught me other things. Like how flipping the pillow helps you sleep cool when the electricity gets turned off. How pretending every visit to a soup kitchen is your first gets you an extra roll. How saying a thing three times makes it so. How Happy Meals from the trash always contain perfectly good fries. How the only safe people are women with babies. How if something bad

ever happened to her, I should run as far away from Im-mokalee as I could.

So I did.

Looking back, I guess I was still in shock from Momma getting killed, though her boyfriends beating her was as regular as the sun rising. I wasn't quite right in my head. On the bus from Florida, the only seat left was next to me. When a girl close to my age, about fourteen, took it, she put so much space between us you'd think I was day-old fish. She was clean around the fingernails where I wasn't, and had a neat little suitcase that someone had packed for her, and hardware on her teeth that meant someone with money cared enough to fix them. She told the driver loud that she was headed back to her family in Boston. A momma and a daddy, and a sister so close in age they were called twins. The driver said he'd be sure to watch over her, be her family till he got her back there safe.

If I was feeling like myself, I would have taught that girl not to scoot away from me. Regular Jolene Chastain would have reached over and pinched that girl's milk-thigh hard as she could. But I was in shock from seeing Momma the way a girl should never see her momma. So I went to a different place. I leaned back and pretended I was that girl, that her dimpled bare knees and the suitcase on the bus

floor were mine, and that I was going back home to my momma, daddy, and a sister besides. It was a pretty thought. I started to think maybe it was a sign, me seeing that girl, and that my destiny in this life was to have that family.

Maybe if I hadn't seen that girl, heard her plans and started imagining they were mine, I wouldn't have had such a hard time on the street this last year. Living in Tent City is the closest I've come to having family, but Tent City is not my home. Here in the Boston Public Library I see lots of families, real ones that keep you clean and clothed and won't steal your shoes if you leave them outside your tent at night. So it's time to move on, and to that end, as they say, I have decided to mug you and become you.

You haven't noticed me watching. Here, in the library, I look like any other girl our age, even though the children's librarian with one brown tooth knows I'm homeless, performing my daily self-directed study: our private joke. A lot of us come here—the boy with the baby arm, the mutterer, the junkie in her stained hoodie—but I look the youngest. We're not afraid of getting tossed because we know the librarian is an easy mark, like most people who work with children. The teachers, the shelter counselors, the parole officers: their fatal flaw is that they only want to trust and be trusted.

But back to you. Your earring sparkles under the lights every time you brush your hair behind your ear. Earrings are hard—there will be screams, blood—but I'll come from behind, a quick yank on both ears at the same time: gone. Your earrings will be gone, and I'll be gone, and you'll never see me coming, you're so lost in that copy of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* propped beside your silver laptop in your tiny carrel, the same copy you've been rereading since October 3, and you keep smelling the spine, honey hair sweeping over, nose to the page. You have a pink mark where your knee folds and I can tell you wish you could live inside that carrel like I already do, walls blocking out everything not in that book.

For the record, I would like to be a book nerd. I pretend to be, among these books, but I could never read them all. In Immokalee, I'd steal books from the Books for Africa bin at the dump: little-kid Golden Books with hard spines; cheesy, shiny-covered mysteries; classics with USED stickers on them from college bookstores. Sometimes I'd find poetry books, coffee rings on the covers. Like you, poetry is my favorite, because poems are like magic spells, and Momma taught me that words set in certain ways bring luck. I know we're connected, though anyone looking at us would say you are the un-me—a shiny girl who's never

felt her mother's boyfriend brush up against her, never devoured a dirty lollipop dropped by a kid in the park, never slept in a bus terminal with a knife under her thigh for protection—you are me, just like me. So I wait until you go to the bathroom (with your computer, but not your wallet that fell off your lap the third time you crossed your overlong legs in that pleated skirt). I scan the room for Brown Tooth, and when I'm sure it's clear, I snag my score.

To become you, I need your social security number and a birthday. All your wallet contains is one black credit card that reads Henry Lovecraft and a school ID. I tuck the credit card in my sock and lean into the carrel, cupping your ID in my hands, which stink like something bad inside me is seeping out. I try to stay clean. It's easy not to look like a street kid if you're halfway clean, but the soap dispenser in the girls' room has been empty for days.

Temple Lovecraft, the ID reads.

Temple Lovecraft, I mouth.

You frown in the picture. Badass, with your chin tipped up. You love Emily Dickinson but you hate school. Why do you hate school? Because you go to a la-di-da all-girls school in the city when you'd rather be—where? You come here every day. You get off on poetry. You're coddled, fed. Yet you're empty. It's rare I can't figure out another

person's wants and needs. It's how I live. You are worthy of study. But are you worthy of stealing? I flip the ID over. Trapped under plastic, your cheek can't feel me drag my thumb over it slowly.

"Fifteen minutes until closing," Brown Tooth shouts. She doesn't aim this toward Baby Arm, or Muttermouth, or Hoodie, just me, because she worries about me. Wants me warned before I get turned onto the street for the night. I lean back in my chair and nod to Brown Tooth. To speak would encourage Brown Tooth, and I have ten minutes left to mine the Interwebs for your address, where I will paw through your trash for helpful digits. I've got five more minutes to write the note I will leave in my carrel, tacked with gum to the inside of the green lampshade for Wolf to find. He'll look for me here, after I leave him asleep in our tent tonight, headed for my new life as Temple Lovecraft.

Don't think about Wolf. Same way you don't think about Momma.

Wolf's better off without you. Better off without you. Better off.

Saying a thing three times makes it so.

I rush across the hall to a computer station and type *Temple Lovecraft*. I have to be quick, because they'll shut down the servers soon, and I'd like to drop this wallet back

under your chair before you return from your visit to the girls' room.

Oh. Look.

It's you! The daughter of Henry and Clarissa Lovecraft of Boston's Back Bay in a tasteful dress standing next to your catalog parents at an event called Charity Begins at Home, where lots of other kids and their rich parents are in *The Boston Globe's* People and Places section. And Dad is the owner of Lovecraft Construction, the name on the crane that rises against the twinkly Boston skyline that Wolf and me see from our tent flap every night. In one panting article after another, you're named a United States Presidential Scholar and a National Merit Scholar. You won the National French Contest, the Hamilton Award, and the World Scholar's Cup, which has nothing to do with soccer. Not that you aren't sporty. You rank first on the national girls' varsity fencing team. You're musical, too: first cello in the Boston Youth Conservatory and, when you were younger, you were a child opera singer featured on *America's Got Talent* until "vocal nodules ended a promising career." To keep up with all this stuff, you told a reporter you pull all-nighters to study "on a regular basis." The reporter ends her article by telling us "Pinned to her bedroom wall is a quotation from

Oliver Cromwell: ‘He who stops being better, stops being good.’”

You dazzle me, Temple Lovecraft. But I still need your address. I type *Lovecraft* alongside *Back Bay apartment* and . . . what’s this?

NINE-YEAR-OLD GOES MISSING FROM PROMINENT LOCAL DEVELOPER’S HOME

By Stephanie Ebbert | BOSTON GLOBE MAY 23, 2010

Boston—A nine-year-old girl has gone missing from a Back Bay apartment as her playmate’s parents sat dining several feet away.

Vivienne Weir, the daughter of Travis and Marie Weir, was last seen in the brownstone town house owned by Boston developer Henry Lovecraft and his wife, Clarissa. The Lovecrafts were seated in the outdoor section of Restaurant Chloe, which is attached to their home on Commonwealth Avenue, where they say they left Weir and their daughter alone watching a television show around seven p.m.

Abductions with parents in proximity are rare but not unheard of, making the case reminiscent of the 2007

disappearance of four-year-old Madeleine McCann, the British girl who vanished from her hotel room at a resort in Portugal while her parents dined fifty yards away.

Below the article is a photo of a girl taken from the waist up. The back of her head nestles against the chest of a woman who is cropped out, except for her chin, arms that cross the girl in a hug, and dark curls that spill onto the girl's shoulder. The girl's own hair is the color of butter, and she has big square teeth. Her eyes make happy half-moons, like someone she loved said "Smile!" and she did, because she had reasons to. I settle on the woman's arms. They hug the girl so hard, the front of her bathing suit puckers.

My breath burns.

The want I feel for those phantom arms could shatter the screen. Make it pop, sizzle, and die. Make the shelves shake and the books tumble down. The want's like with the girl on the bus, but it wasn't useful then, and it's not useful right now.

Stealing Temple Lovecraft's identity will get me money. It will get me off the street. But it won't get me those arms.

I type *Vivienne Weir*. The next story reads fast.

PLANE CRASH OFF NANTUCKET KILLS BOSTON COUPLE

By Julie Dalton | BOSTON GLOBE July 2, 2011

Nantucket, Massachusetts—Fog is believed to be the cause of a small plane crash off the coast of Nantucket Friday evening. The passengers, Travis and Marie Weir of Boston, are presumed dead. The Weirs are the parents of nine-year-old Vivienne Weir, who went missing in May 2010.

I did not see that coming.

Which is rare.

I tab back to the photo of Vivienne in the sun. The Weirs are dead and they were vain. Instead of giving the newspapers a useful photo of their daughter, they gave the newspaper a pretty one, one that showed them on some fancy vacation, tanned and happy. My hand curls around my neck, dirty hair brushing my knuckles—hair that might have been lighter once. Vivienne's smile is sweet and her cheeks are round, but teeth rot and faces drop with misery. Behind the basic pretty care affords Vivienne is plain, and plain can morph into anything.

The loudspeaker booms: “The library will close in five minutes.”

When dead, vain parents plunge into the sea, they leave behind loving relatives to care for their child. Loving relatives who might not look for that mole, this scar, that overlapping tooth.

“Please bring any items to be checked out to the circulation desk.”

Wallet! I scramble off my seat and run back to the carrels. Yours is empty, the pull-chain on the banker’s lamp swinging, your chair pushed far beneath the desk. Temple Lovecraft is slippery. Temple Lovecraft is gone. But what if Vivienne Weir was back?

I am Vivienne Weir. I am Vivienne Weir. I am Vivienne. Three times makes it so.

.

The back rooms of Precinct 1440 smell of burned coffee and desperation. It is loud and disorganized enough that someone left a picture of an age-progressed Vivienne Weir tacked right on the wall.

An expression leaves a mark on your face if you repeat it enough. The forensic artist knows this, because in the

picture on the right, sixteen-year-old Vivienne Weir has teeny wrinkles beside the bridge of her nose. In the actual photo of nine-year-old Vivienne Weir on the left—the last one taken before she disappeared, the same one in the newspaper—her face is in the act of making those exact lines. I shake my hair around my face (people in shock do this) and lean forward, practicing that exploding smile over and over again.

The wrinkled lap of a skirt appears inches from my nose. I lose Vivienne’s smile and raise my chin slowly.

“Here’s your Coke,” the police social worker says, slipping back into her chair across from me. “Now, can you tell us anything else?”

I ignore the sweaty Coke, look her full in the face, and say for the third time, “My name is Vivienne.”

Police social workers like Ginny have terrible jobs. They aren’t real shrinks and they aren’t cops and they get dragged out of bed in the middle of the night to work with what the cops don’t want to work with. I met one the time Momma and me got caught in a sting. Her name was Reva and she sipped the same Styrofoam cup of tea for hours and her breath smelled like nail polish remover and she wanted to “reach” me the same way Ginny wants to reach me now. But I don’t need to be reached, I need

to be off the streets and nestled in with a brand-new family, and Ginny's going to help me whether she knows it or not.

Ginny is today's mark.

I tuck my mouth and eye the half-eaten doughnut sitting between us, bleeding jelly. Vivienne wouldn't have gnawed at it the way I did, even if she was semi-starved. She'd take baby bites, because a jelly doughnut was considered a sometimes-treat to her instead of enough sugar and fat to live off for three days.

"No matter what you say, nobody will be upset with you. We need anything you can remember about your abductor," Ginny says, pinching her forehead between thumb and forefinger. "For your own safety."

She's getting tired but she won't give up, this Ginny, because Ginny is good at her job. It's the only thing in her life she is good at. I need to be her win. Two cops drag in an old hooker by her sleeves. She's screaming about being profiled even though she is very clearly a hooker, and her voice is on the same wavelength as Momma's, hoarse from cigarettes and stomach acid. When she cuts her way around us, jerking and yelling, Ginny doesn't blink, but I do, because I hear Momma's voice, smell her Pall Malls and cherry Tums.

The hooker's voice is a sign. It's Momma telling me this plan is a good one.

Ginny ignores the hooker. "Consider the other girls he could abduct," she presses. "These kinds of criminals don't quit until they get caught."

Actually, Ginny, these kinds of criminals get caught all the time, and then they get sprung, and then they take out getting caught on their girlfriends. Sometimes, they kill them.

"I told you. I don't remember anything."

Ginny rises and I follow her into a conference room with buzzy fluorescent lights, because Vivienne would follow an adult. Ginny settles into a new seat in the new room. I expect the suspicious detective named Curley who is assigned my case to take her place, to play Bad Cop, because that's the only reason they bring you to a separate room. It's like pushing a reset button. Only Ginny didn't get the memo and launches in one more time.

"Seven years held by the same man. That's a long time not to remember anything about him."

Ginny's thinking I have Stockholm syndrome and I'm thinking I have Can't-Make-It-Up-Fast-Enough syndrome and people like Ginny and the librarian and Reva are all the same. When Ginny goes home at night to her sad cats

in her sad condo, she feels her job rewards her, though she probably reuses tea bags and drives an eleven-year-old Corolla with a suction-cupped GPS and charges groceries on her credit card. I don't feel bad for her, but I do need to move things along, and you'd think she'd be getting antsy since that network TV show calling her name starts ninety minutes from now.

I exhale slowly.

"The last thing I remember is someone pressing a smelly cloth over my nose and mouth. I woke up in a shed. And I stayed there. For a long time. I don't know how long. The man fed me. Food you get from drive-throughs and gas stations. He hit me. A lot. I escaped through a rotted plank that I carved away at with a nail, every day. The next thing I remember, I'm here, on the steps of the police station." I let my chin fall in dramatic silence.

After a respectful pause, Ginny whispers, "Thank you, Vivienne."

I smile into my neck, because she called me Vivienne.

"I'd like to see my mother now," I whisper. It sounds weird coming from my mouth, because my mother is dead.

As I remember this, my eyes fill with tears.

"Sweetheart," Ginny says, "I know this must be very

hard. I'm going to make a promise to you. I'm going to make sure that you get every resource you need. A therapist to talk to. Maybe a stress animal. Do you know what those are? They're pets specially trained to sense when your anxiety level goes up, and when they do, they give you comfort—"

"No."

Ginny's eyelids shoot up. "No you don't know?"

"No I don't want one." What kid doesn't want a pet? Stupid Jo. "I mean, mostly, I'd like another doughnut." I need Ginny to lay off and give me some time to work on the shed thing. I'll have to soft-pedal Vivi's lockup during those seven years. At a certain point, it's easier for everyone, even a sourpuss like Curley, to think of a missing kid as dead than alive, because they don't have to imagine what she must have gone through. We'll talk about "moving on" and not giving my perpetrator one more minute of my life. Fuzzy details will be welcome. Therapy appointments will be made. A foster family will be assigned, as will a pet, funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Ginny might be mine, but if the cops don't buy that I'm Missing Vivi, I'll know right away by their headshaking disappointment, by how they back away a little. In that case, I'll ask to go pee for the second time, in the bathroom

where I've loosened the screws on the window grate. The back alley leads to the YMCA, and farther, down Huntington Avenue, where I can get lost in the sea of college kids from Northeastern.

Detective Curley pops his head in and gives Ginny a questioning look.

Ginny nods solemnly. "Make the call."

I try to sound excited. "You're calling my parents?"

The lines around Ginny's mouth deepen and she looks away. I fake squinty confusion. Rule number one Momma taught me: stay in character, even when no one's looking.

"Vivi," Ginny says, leaning forward and grasping my hand; it's the first time she's called me Vivi, and touching me is not police social worker protocol, since you don't touch the Maybe Diddled. She's going off book, which means she's stuck. There are no guidelines for magically reappearing orphaned dead girls, at least not ones she's read. "There was an accident. Your father was piloting a small chartered plane to Nantucket, like he sometimes did. And there was weather, and he and your mother—their plane, that is—crashed. And they are no longer. I'm terribly sorry."

There's something crazy and wrong about this woman

acting like a plane crash is the worst possible thing that can kill your mother. It's the best possible thing that can happen, Ginny! Having your mother plunged into the Atlantic is better than having your mother's cheekbones caved in by a fist. And Vivi never had to see any of it, and . . .

And Ginny's hugging me. She smells like lilac powder and BO, and I heave once for effect and peek over her arm to the floor where her bag gapes. Inside is a fat file, probably about Vivi. A fat file I can use.

I peel away gently.

"Your parents never gave up hope that they would find you," Ginny says with feeling. "Before they died, they arranged for your neighbors to get custody of you if anything happened to them. Do you remember Mr. and Mrs. Lovecraft?"

I look up, blinking back tears. "The Lovecrafts?"

She doesn't miss a beat. "You remember! The parents of your friend. Her name is Temple. They live two doors down."

I choke.

Ginny does a sad puppy face. "I'm deeply sorry."

I nod hard. "I know you are."

She looks at me strangely, like I am a wondrous creature,

like I know she is awkward and I am making this easy on her and Ginny is hugging me again.

“How soon until they get here?” I squeak.

An angry rap on the half-open door. Detective Curley hears Ginny and wants her to stop talking to me. She’s giving away too much information, he thinks, but he’s already lost this one: Ginny’s on my side. I’m the success story that makes Ginny satisfied with a job that pays her less in one year than Momma made in one month of check kiting. And Temple Lovecraft, library Temple, fascinating Temple, is my new sister.

Then the detective and Ginny do the unexpected. They leave me sitting alone for what only feels like hours because the conference room has no clock. There is someone on the other side of this who is researching child-welfare laws and checking wills and making phone calls and it feels out of my control. They leave me with the soggy cup of Coke and a stained travel pillow from Ginny’s car where I rest my cheek, and I want to think about Temple but instead I am thinking about Wolf and our tent, and it seems like a million years ago since last night, when I lay awake staring through the half-light at his delicate chin, a chin not made for lives like ours, and the shadows that line his nose, thinking about how his beauty

will always be his enemy, attracting the paying men he doesn't want to attract, and knowing, traitor that I am, that it would be our last night. Wolf and I have been together since we arrived at Tent City on the same day, me helping him survive, him helping me not get raped by attaching himself to me. He's older than me, but younger in the head. He is bored by the books I crave. Still, he doesn't mind my days spent at the library, when by rights I should be helping him panhandle and Dumpster dive and carry water up from the rain barrels instead of reading. Wolf accepts my cravings and I accept his, which leave raised red rings on his thighs, because cutting on the street means infection, but burning with cigarettes kills germs. And in this way, we work. Wolf is the closest I've come to having a boyfriend, but one boyfriend does not a family make.

And this is where I leave him.

.

Remembering past lives isn't my only skill. Long ago, I learned I was good at using the ones right in front of me. Momma had a name for it: said I was an intuit.

Every time I switched schools, to avoid getting teased for my backwater accent or my short pants, I'd pick a

certain girl—the girl whose laugh could leave you bleeding, the one who moved other kids around like chess pieces, the one teachers let get away with murder. I couldn't copy clothes, or the smell of clean scalp, or a hard little chin. But I'd get good at the cool rhythm of her speech, her shuffle walk, her nonchalance. Eventually, it wasn't enough to be on the outside: I wanted in. So I decided things. I thought she might be a late sleeper. That she liked salty over sweet. She tanned easy, and had a stripe of white underneath the woven bracelet on her ankle. The lines around both of us dissolved until I was looking through her eyes, and those eyes were fierce slits. When one of Momma's boyfriends would block my way, I'd push past him, sweeping my shoulder like he'd shed something bad. If Momma limped from a kidney punch, I spat into the boyfriend's scrambled eggs and coolly watched him eat. Momma's scams were just games, games that I played along with because I wanted to, and I could stop at any time.

Inside the girl's ferocity, I hardened.

.

I must have slept. New faces crowd the door. In Tent City, cheeks thicken from weather and booze and eyes

flicker. These faces are strange in their delicateness and their concern. I pull my dirty sleeves over my hands and slip down in my chair. Under the stares of these people, everything feels wrong: the distance between my eyes, the shape of my lips, the width of my pelvis. The excitement of a few hours ago has evaporated and I am scared. I don't have Vivi in the flesh to observe, to know what she would do next.

Momma would tell me to remember when I was a soldier returning from battle. You've seen and done unspeakable things, she'd say, and now you are home.

I make my cheeks sag with weariness and my eyes light up with relief. It's not the easiest combination. Momma would be proud.

A woman takes a careful step into the room, with Ginny and the detective behind. The woman's face is unlined and her hair thins at the temples—she wouldn't like that I notice this, is self-conscious about it—and her raincoat is tied at the waist, a plaid pattern that looks frumpy but means the coat is expensive and worth stealing. She has pale, wide-spaced eyes and a nose turned down at the tip, and the same hair as Temple, light-filled syrup, only shorter. Her mouth is tight, but there is movement underneath, like she's turning thoughts over in it and

finds them sour. She pinches her throat between two fingers, leaving pink. Taken together, these are not good signs. But I shouldn't assume this is going to be easy. Hadn't assumed it. Won't assume it.

A man comes behind her, more obviously beautiful. Not how Wolf is beautiful, which is the kind of beautiful you look away from. The kind that gets carved and eaten by hungry men. This is the man who does the eating. This man is ravenous, a man whose shoulders dip and rise as he walks, who uses his whole long body to speak, though he hasn't yet. He has a neat new beard because it is trendy, and it will be gone next week. I can see his arms through the sports coat, and the coat has been cut to do that very thing. The kind of man who could bang the babysitter but maybe doesn't. Not because of what she lacks—they are not equals, these two—but because it is beneath him.

Ginny clears her throat. No one looks at her. She lumps her way forward, graceless against these people. Detective Curley hangs back, watching.

“Vivi?” Ginny asks. Not a statement but a question. My only ally in the room maybe isn't an ally.

This was a mistake. I glance into the hallway, toward the bathroom: my escape to Huntington Avenue.

“Vivi,” Ginny repeats.

My head snaps. “Yes?”

Detective Curley pushes into the room, holding up his hand to silence Ginny. He wants to see my face. He wants recognition; proof. Because Vivi was nine, and Vivi would remember these people. But I’m not going to give the detective a full reckoning, because I’ve been through a lot in that shed. Enough to wipe a memory near clean.

I blink as if through fog.

The woman comes forward in a sweeping rush. “Vivi!” she says, breathy, and crouches beside me, her forehead wrinkling in happy layers. Excitement works for her: she is prettified. The man joins her, still standing; this is not a man who crouches. She searches my face as I search hers. It feels like a violation, those pale eyes over my face, but to look away is suspicious.

“Mrs. Lovecraft . . . ,” Ginny starts.

Mrs. Lovecraft’s eyes are not for Ginny. “May I touch your hand?” she asks.

“Mrs. Lovecraft, we really don’t know the extent to which—the trauma . . . ,” Ginny falters. Ginny is doing a terrible job setting boundaries, and the detective is getting madder. Even I’m mad at Ginny. Because none of

this is by the book. It's strange, to feel like a prize, a rare thing that a rich woman wants to touch.

I nod.

Mrs. Lovecraft places her cool hand on mine. "You are Vivi," she whispers.

Mr. Lovecraft turns to the detective. "We'd like to take her home now."

Detective Curley gets his back up. "That is not happening. We need to take statements. A rape k—"

"Medical exam," Ginny corrects.

I look to Mrs. Lovecraft wildly. "I don't want anyone touching me."

She looks to her husband, begging.

He leans toward the detective. "The Weirs' will states that we are Vivienne's legal guardians. There is no reason we can't just take her home right now." He slips a white card into the detective's hand. "That's my attorney's number, if there are any questions."

"Leaving so soon may not be in the best interests of the child," Ginny warns. "There will be therapy. Grief counseling."

"Mr. and Mrs. Lovecraft, we don't yet have a full statement from the victim. There's a criminal out there to find," Detective Curley says.

I look only at Mrs. Lovecraft. Mr. Lovecraft has hardly looked at me. I should be relieved by this, since I don't trust men much, but it pokes at me, messes with my performance. I refocus on her.

"I want to leave this place," I beg.

Mrs. Lovecraft rises. "You said our coming here was for the purpose of identification. This is Vivienne Weir. She was like a daughter to me." She turns her smile on me. "I would know her anywhere."

Ginny covers her mouth hard, thinking. She wants this win badly. Mr. Lovecraft and the detective glare at each other. Finally, Ginny drops her arms and turns to the detective. "It's late. It wouldn't hurt anyone if Vivienne went home with the Lovecrafts tonight and came back tomorrow. The police can take their statements then, and I can provide therapy referrals. Phone numbers, names. A plan. Will that work?"

I look at Mr. Lovecraft full-on for the first time. He gazes at his wife and they smile at each other, not with their mouths but with their eyes. I won't be coming back here tomorrow, and I am grinning like a dead pig in sunshine, which is inappropriate, so I stop.

Mrs. Lovecraft takes a long look at my unshowered-ness, at my body pouring from my too-small sweatshirt

and ripped leggings, the ones I stole from the tent of a younger girl. I am dirt and sex, too, and maybe that's why Mr. Lovecraft hasn't looked at me yet, though I don't think so.

The station buzzes, an angry vibe, charged by the fact that we are leaving together, which is against the rules. Suited detectives and uniformed cops and the dispatcher who works the phone and even the hooker stare. Mr. Lovecraft is a tall glass of water, and it feels good to walk alongside him. We step outside into the night to their car at the curb. As I sink into the backseat of their huge SUV with its tinted windows, I almost don't care what they do to me. Because the possibility that these people are perverts is low, but it's still a possibility.

Mrs. Lovecraft looks over her seat. "Are you tired, Vivi?"

I nod. The relief of being out of the police station is overpowering. I try to say "very" but it gets caught in my throat.

Mrs. Lovecraft's face bunches up. "We don't need to talk now. You should rest. Go ahead, lie down in the backseat. We don't mind if you don't wear your seat belt."

As if the worst thing that could happen to a girl who was held captive in a man's backyard for seven years is getting

whiplash in a car accident. I'm starting to see these announcements as the habits of people who live with roofs over their heads—pointing out the mildly unsafe to keep away the real horrors. The Lovecrafts are halfway right. Words have power, but you have to use them the correct way.

My family. My family. Mine.

Mr. Lovecraft presses a lit screen and fills the car with soft music. I have never seen Boston through the inside of a car window, and it's a different city. People in light jackets huddle and rush and laugh, the women in shoes made from expensive animals walking with men who look like they smell good when the women lean in. The store displays are lit jewel boxes, and the sidewalks are even and clean, and inside this car you can't smell the garbage and the pee, the exhaust and the sausages. As we turn off Newbury Street and take another right onto Commonwealth Avenue, the street is lined with newly budded trees strung with white lights. This is the Lovecrafts' city, and it glows. I went to a buffet restaurant once and this is like that: food for miles, so many things to choose from, and I want to gobble it up.

I touch the window.

Mr. Lovecraft looks back. "Don't worry about going

back to the station. We would never put you through remembering. This is a new start for you, Vivi.”

They murmur in the front seat, their words watering as I drift again. I catch the name Temple a lot, and there is worry in their voices, worry that relates to newspaper reporters and people who remember our case, but the city is beautiful tonight, because Henry and Clarissa Lovecraft are going to take care of me.

We park a few blocks away from the Lovecrafts’ brownstone. Mrs. Lovecraft rubs her thin arms as we walk. “There’s nothing prettier than May in Boston,” she says. “When the dogwoods bloom. Though they hardly last.” We stop as Mr. Lovecraft slips off his scarf and wraps it around her neck. She lifts her hair. They don’t speak: this is a practiced act, an expected one.

“What Clarissa’s saying,” he says, tweaking the scarf, “is that you picked the perfect time to come back to us.”

I smile weakly at the ground. I am from Boston. I am supposed to know that this city is pretty in May but pretty doesn’t last. On the street corner ahead, laughter trails from a group leaving a restaurant. This is *the* restaurant next door, maybe not exactly the same restaurant where the Lovecrafts sat when Vivi disappeared, but the same spot. Which seems totally wrong, now that I’m on this

well-lit sidewalk on Commonwealth Avenue. This is a busy part of the city, a neighborhood for sure, but still busy, and suddenly I want to know the details of Vivi's abduction. How did the kidnapper get in? How did he escape with Vivi without anyone seeing? Is there an alley in the back? How did Temple not hear anything?

Mr. Lovecraft cups my shoulder and I jump.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he says. "We're here."

"Right," I say, stopping at a set of stairs leading to two huge front doors. I gaze up; the town house is four stories high. I start to ask if they live in this whole thing, but stop myself, because Vivi would know.

A man meets us in the marbled entrance. They introduce him as Slade. Slade is at least six foot three and over two hundred pounds, fit but puffy, wearing a jacket and jeans, and that jacket indoors in May means he's packing heat. The skin under Slade's eyes is gray, and he makes a meaty-lipped smile while he tries not to look at my chest. I wonder if those under-eye circles mean he stays up late watching porn.

Mr. Lovecraft explains that Slade "spent time in Iraq" and "recently transitioned" into "private client security."

Slade tongues his gum into his cheek. "Nice meeting you, Miss Weir," he says as he holds out his hand. I shake it limply.

“We’ve used security professionals like Slade for the last few years. Just a precaution. A lot of folks in our circles do it,” Mr. Lovecraft says.

“In our circles” means income bracket and “the last few years” means since Vivi vanished, and who exactly are the Lovecrafts taking precautions against? Seven years later, are they still afraid someone will climb through a window and steal you?

Slade waits for the Lovecrafts to tell him what to do next, but the Lovecrafts are looking at me like I’m a fish in a tank again, and maybe they’ve forgotten him already. When Slade shifts and makes a small noise, Mr. Lovecraft comes to.

“That’ll be all for now, Slade.”

“I’ll be in my room, then,” Slade says, bounding up a set of stairs, and do all rich people have sleep-in bodyguards? We enter a room with a crystal chandelier dripping from a ceiling painted blue. Not the endless blue of the Florida sky, but mixed with streams of clouds. Where the walls meet the ceiling is trim like frosting, with fruit and baby angels in the corners made of the same white stuff, four of them, mouths open like they’re screaming.

“We’ve redecorated a bit,” Mrs. Lovecraft says, spinning as if she’s new to it herself. It’s hard not to gape at this house I am supposed to know, even if it is changed.

“Technically, *she* redecorated,” Mr. Lovecraft says, squeezing his wife’s skinny shoulders. They touch each other a lot. Momma’s boyfriends touched Momma a lot, and me sometimes, too, but I don’t remember liking it. Mostly it made me think about them bloated, dead on the ground.

“This has become my favorite room in the whole house,” Mrs. Lovecraft says about this room that is the center of everything. In one direction, a polished stair rail leads up; in another is a kitchen with lights over a shiny island, and in another, a cozy room with a fireplace and a standing mirror with a curlicue gold frame and a puckered turquoise couch. In the fourth direction is an office with a desk in the middle and a file cabinet beside it. The desk faces a barred window looking out onto that same restaurant. I wonder if it’s hard for whoever sits at that desk to look at that restaurant every day.

“It’s been a long day for you. You must want a bath,” she says.

I stiffen; maybe they are perverts. More importantly, do I care?

My weirdness registers with her. She looks at Mr. Lovecraft again worriedly before saying, “Or not.”

Mr. Lovecraft moves about the first floor, pulling closed

the heavy drapes, shutting out the city, the restaurant, and the night. I like the way he gives us space when we're talking about me bathing. It's probably just good breeding, but it feels like respect.

"No, it's fine," I say. "You want me clean. It's okay."

She looks at me, puzzled. "That is, if you want to be clean. It's up to you." She looks over my body gently, imagining bad touches, and lowers her voice. "We can't begin to understand what you've been through these last years. We know it's going to take time for you to acclimate. That's why we decided it would be better to wait for you to see Temple."

"You sent her away?" I ask.

"No," Mrs. Lovecraft says, looking up at the staircase as she says it. "She's here. We just thought it would be a good idea to give you some space tonight. It's late, and you should clean up and get some sleep."

"I just thought I'd meet everyone, you know, tonight."

"The truth is, this is hard on Temple, too. Not that she's not thrilled that you're back. We're all thrilled. Your return changes our lives. The papers will want your story—'The Return of Vivienne Weir'—so we'll have to manage that. You'll be going to school, sharing our home. It's a lot for a teenager to adjust to."

“We were friends,” I say. “Sisters, basically.”

“Well, of course. But that was when you were nine. Temple is sixteen. And you’re—”

“Sixteen,” I say.

“Sixteen. Time has passed. I’m sure you’ll be close again, but it might take a little while.”

From the stairs comes a creak.

We snap our heads. Temple Lovecraft is perched on the stairs, hugging her sharp flannel knees.

“Darling!” Mr. Lovecraft exclaims. “Come down and say hello to Vivi.”

You release your knees, unfold your long body, and walk down the stairs slow, slower than I know you have energy for, because I watched you before you knew I was watching. Your feet are bare and white, and bones rise under your camisole straps forming diamond caves. You stand in your pale cami and your hair braided at the temples (Temple!) and tucked behind your ears, so close I can see the pin-dot holes where the diamonds were and smell the black licorice you just ate on your breath. Your eyes start at the top of my head and work their way down: the crown of my forehead, eyes. A flick between both ears, down the nose and settling on my mouth. I twitch. To my chin and down my neck: chest, hands, waist, and knees, every part

examined. I am not safe under plastic and your eyes are not my clumsy thumb. Years with Mama's boyfriends have hardened me to stares, but by the time you get to my feet, my heart is pounding so loud I am sure you can hear it.

Do you know me?

In an instant, your mother is at my side. "You're thinking it's a miracle, aren't you?" she says, hugging you at the shoulder.

You only look at me.

"Temple," Mr. Lovecraft says. "Your mother asked you a question."

Mrs. Lovecraft waves it off. "Vivi's been through so much. We have time to catch up. For now, sleep."

Your eyes flash over me one last time, wary. You aren't sure. I tell myself it's not that my eyes are hazel where Vivi's were green. It's not that my left front tooth crosses over my right, where Vivi's teeth were strong and straight. It's that you don't want Vivi back. And I don't blame you. Vivi was your friend from third grade. You had third-grade things in common: boy bands and glitter nail polish and diaries. I'm going to have to win you over as Vivi, when Jolene Chastain would talk to you about Emily Dickinson and books with coffee rings on their covers and in a book, this is called irony.

Of course you're iffy about me. You're Miss Number One Everything. Vivi's return takes the spotlight off you. Where I spent half my life trying to become invisible from Momma's boyfriends and the cops, you've spent sixteen years as the center of boot-licking admiration. You and Vivi may have history, but Vivi's reappearance could make your whole life go sideways. So yes, it is to be expected that you won't embrace me.

Yet.

With a swish of flannel and hair you are gone. Mrs. Lovecraft puts her arm around my shoulder, just as she did with you, and I show her I like it with a weak smile.

"You're going to have to excuse Temple," she says, steering me toward the stairs. "She has so many questions. In time, she'll adjust to your being back."

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To your room," Mrs. Lovecraft says.

I never go to sleep this early. The less you sleep in Tent City, the less you lose. As if she reads my mind, she says, "Do you think you'll be able to sleep? I imagine it must be hard to quiet your mind."

Ahh. Bad Shed Thoughts. I haven't fully considered the explanations Vivi's kidnapping will provide, from avoiding eye contact to keeping my clothes on to my crappy dental hygiene.

“So hard,” I murmur.

“I think I have something that will help,” she says, leading me up the stairs. Behind us, Mr. Lovecraft slips into his office and slides the pocket door closed. She leads me to the second floor, where a pretty window seat looks out across the Commonwealth Avenue mall to the Charles and the blinking lights of Cambridge. She points out the bedroom and bathroom she shares with Mr. Lovecraft, and a third room, its door shut.

“This is where Slade stays,” she explains. “The surveillance we employ him for requires him to stay awake through the night and sleep during the day. I don’t want you to be surprised if you hear anything at odd hours.”

“So, he protects the family while you sleep?”

“That’s right.”

The house gets narrow as we climb to the third floor, where, again, there are three doors. One leads to what will be my room, which is wallpapered royal blue with tiny gold lilies and contains a dresser, a nightstand, and a four-poster bed fit for a princess. The covers are pulled back at the corner; underneath, the sheets are fresh-looking and tight. My body aches for that bed. The second door is yours, and it’s shut. A tiny bathroom is behind the third, with a tub perched on claw feet and a tufted rug. There is old-fancy and old-crappy, and this is the first.

Mrs. Lovecraft feels for a plushy robe behind the door and hands it to me before twisting the gold faucet on. She straightens and digs her knuckles into her hips. I stare at the water pouring into the tub and I cannot get under that water fast enough.

“Do you need help getting undressed?” she asks, pitchy. She hopes I’ll say no so she doesn’t have to see the stories Vivi’s naked body will tell her.

“I’m good.”

“Then may I give you something to relax?”

I am a Popsicle on a summer day and Clarissa Lovecraft is the sun, and she is offering a soft, cool bed and hot water and now drugs, and I could make out with her, and where at first she was a woman who seemed less than her handsome husband, now she is a goddess, with her beginnings of a neck wattle and her noble beak-nose.

I nod hard.

She disappears and returns with two green pills. “Ativan. Perfectly safe if you don’t make a habit of it.” I want to tell her that if I didn’t make it a habit in Tent City, where one out of two residents is stoned out of their mind, and if I didn’t make it a habit in the years when Momma was using, I’m not going to make a habit of it in Back Bay.

I accept the pills and toss them back. She hands me a paper cup of water, but I've already swallowed. Smiling softly from the side of her mouth, she leads me back to the bedroom, where I am finally alone. As I drop another street kid's clothes, light bounces at the window. I pull on the robe, creep to the window, and look down. The story of Vivienne Weir's return is making the eleven o'clock news. A woman stands before the Lovecrafts' brownstone, holding a mic next to a News 5 truck with a spiral cable running up a pole. I shove the window up, sleeves flopping, and I hear her talking, but I can't make out her words over cars zooming to beat the light at the corner of Dartmouth and Commonwealth. With luck, the reporters will move on, and I will be embraced by this over-the-top house and the arms of my new well-groomed parents who ooze love and maybe you, Temple, will come to love me, too. The edges grow soft, and I hear the water running across the hall, and it's been a year since my baths didn't involve a restroom and mealy paper towels, and you can't pay for this kind of white noise. I tip-toe from my room. The Lovecrafts talk excitedly in their bedroom below, probably because they saw the news truck. I don't want to wake you, who, as the drug moves through my bloodstream, seem less threatened by me and more

curious. Catlike. I slip into the steamy bathroom, shut the door with a soft click, drop my robe and close the faucet.

The water is heaven. Under these bubbles floats my own filth, but I don't care, because the bubbles smell like apples and I am good. I didn't know how tight my muscles were from sleeping on the cardboard box with the egg-crate pad, and then not sleeping, because some nights sleeping in Tent City isn't the best idea, some nights it's better for you to take turns sleeping while one person stays alert, listening—don't think about Wolf—and sometimes instead of sleeping, you both get up and walk until the sun rises, across town, to the Charles and along it. Above your head, the tree branches hold moonlight, and underneath, the path sparkles, and in the river, the light from Cambridge shimmers across black ripples—don't think about Wolf—and he rests his arm across your shoulder, and you wonder if he might be enough family for you.

I hold my breath and slip below the water. Let my hair bloom, let the warmth loosen my jaw. Don't choose to remember, Jolene. Choose to enjoy. After all, it may not last. Make the most of this tub and that bed and this drug.

A mean thought cuts through my Ativan haze, straight

out of a bad TV movie, of a hand holding my head under the water. I break the surface, gasping. I feel frantically for the robe on the floor and hold it over my face for a second, then two.

When I drop the robe, the door is cracked open.

I step from the tub covering my privates best I can and press the door shut with my elbow. Naked and dripping, I clear a circle in the mirror with my knuckles. Great black pupils. Slicked hair. Vulnerable. The girl in the mirror looks frightened by her own imagination. The girl in the mirror looks high. The girl in the mirror looks alone.

I smile close-mouthed. “Pervert,” I whisper, in case the peeper was Slade and he’s still lurking.

No matter. The Slades of the world do not concern me. I have a family, and that family has my back. I section the front of my wet hair and braid it, tucking the braids over my ears. Raise my shoulders until my collarbones make hollows. Lift my chin.

As Vivi’s skin grows over mine, I will slip inside the Lovecrafts. I will slip inside the Lovecrafts. I will slip inside.

Now the girl in the mirror doesn’t look so alone.

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