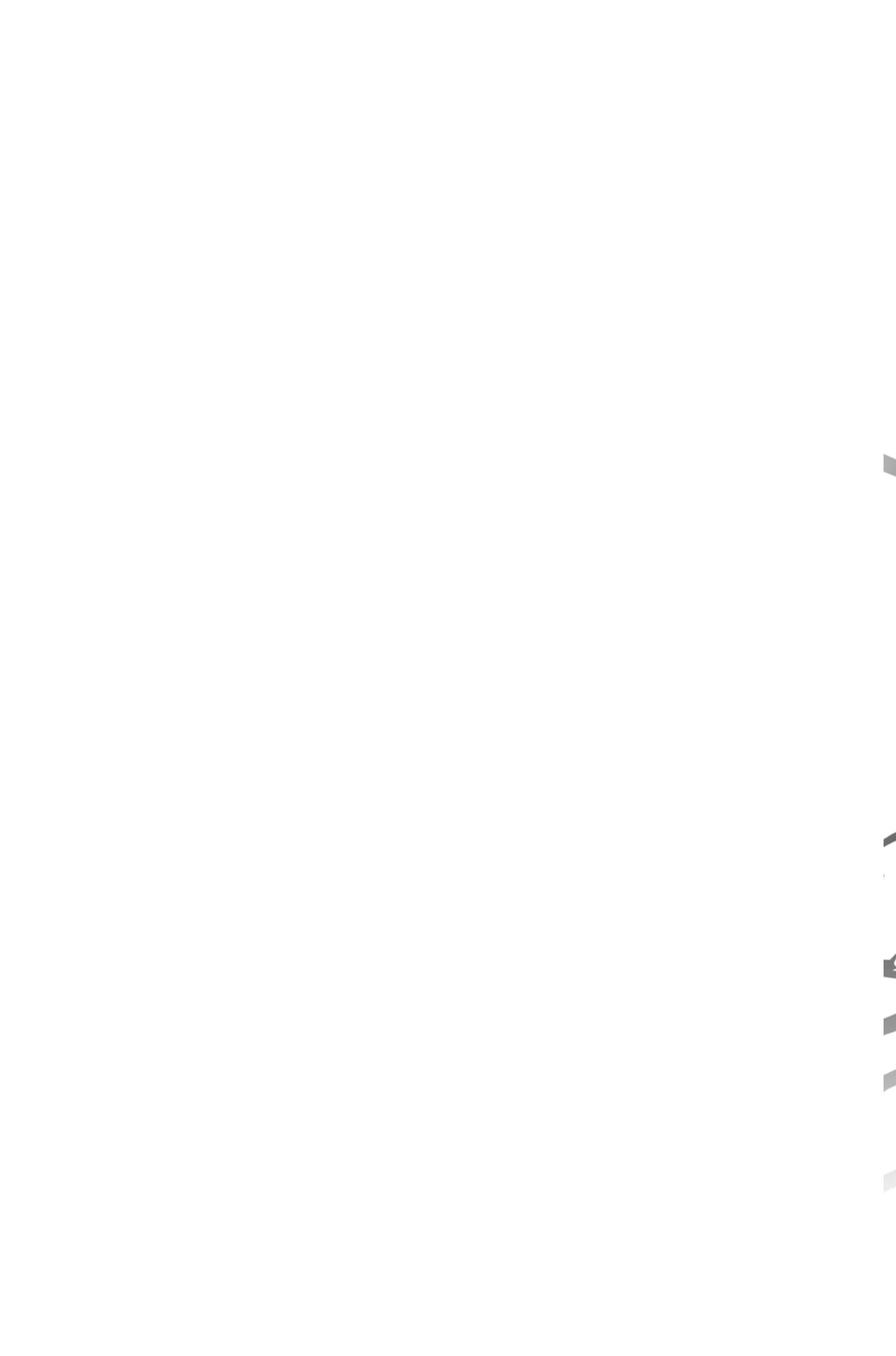
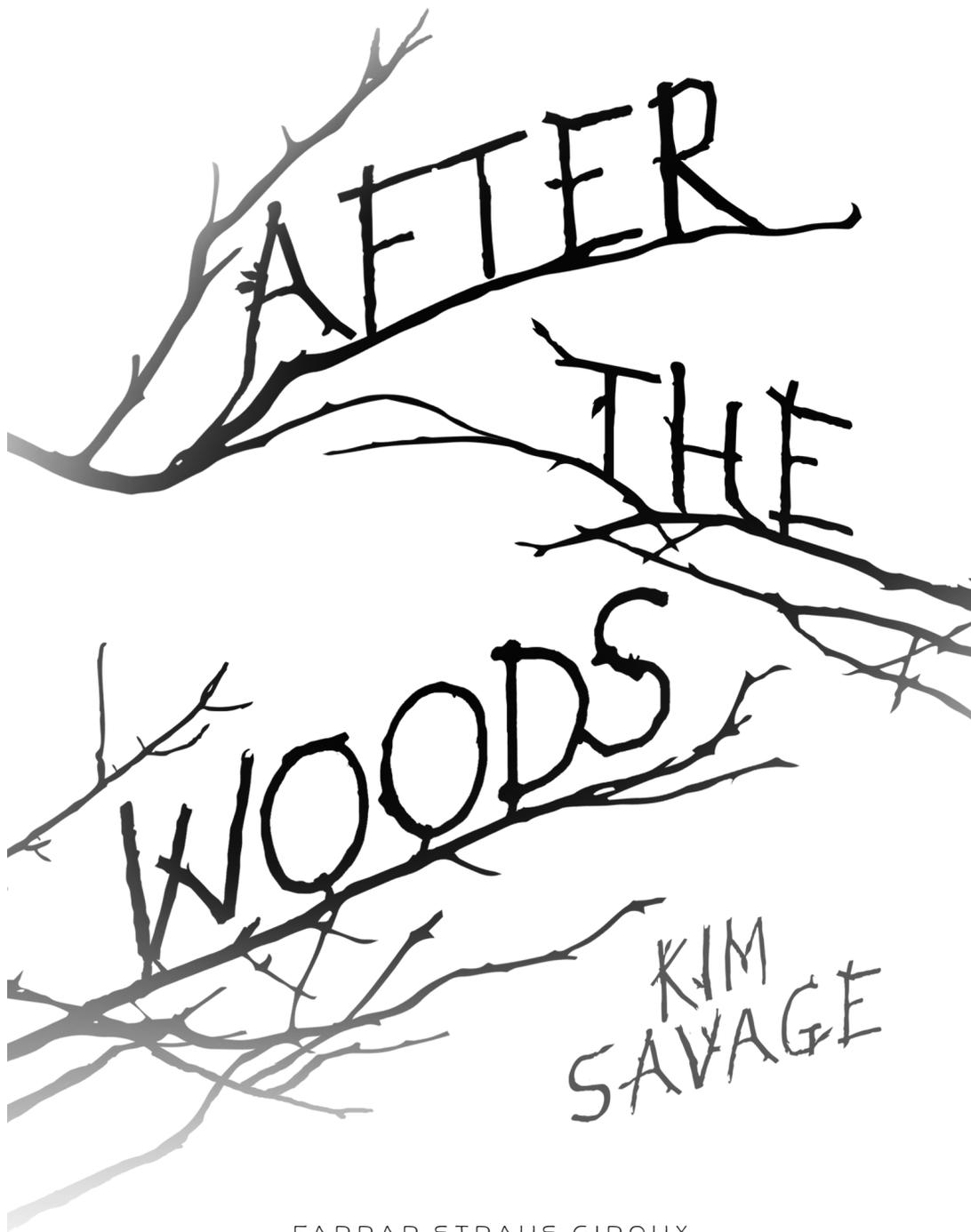


AFTER THE WOODS





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*For Jackson,
whose quiet bravery never makes headlines*

Keep her down, boiling water.
Keep her down, what a lovely daughter.

—“Seether” by Veruca Salt

Truth has rough flavors if we bite it through.

—George Eliot

AFTER THE WOODS

PROLOGUE

November 22, 2013
In the Woods

How can something so bright be so cold?

There's no use sharing my ironic observances about the sun. Liv's been barely responsive today, all aimless energy and distraction. I didn't want to run in the woods, but she insisted. Leaves crunch under my sneakers. A tingle in my earlobes warns of pain to come. We'll run like jackrabbits, like banshees, like Diana through the trees, with only an hour left of light.

Liv will. I'll do my best to keep up.

I finish my last quad stretch and find her staring at the trailhead. "We're losing light. Maybe we should bag it," I suggest.

Liv throws back her shoulders. "I need you with me."

"Of course. I'd never let you go alone." I bend at the waist and yank my laces tight, clumsy in gloves. "Aren't you going to warm up? Oh right: you don't need to." I say it softly, tucking the envy behind a gentle chide.

“Have you ever felt like your heart is swollen inside your chest?” she asks.

I rise fast. “You *are* into him! You said it was just a party hook-up!” I exclaim.

“I’m not talking about Kellan MacDougall.” The low curves of her cheeks flush. “What I mean is, did you ever feel like you were on the brink of something?”

I follow her eyes past the poker-burned entrance sign, past the kiosk with maps under glass. Despite the desolation—no one runs at four p.m. in November after weeks of rain—the woods pulse. The canopy shatters fast-dropping light into glittering shards. A chipmunk skitters close to my foot and ducks into a hole. I know what Liv means. All day, I’ve felt a fullness, as though there’s something waiting for me, today, tomorrow, soon. I start to say this but my words are lost to geese barking overhead.

Liv shakes off her trance. “We should go,” she says, as she leaps up the railroad tie steps like a deer, flashing pale calves. Speed is easy for her. We come to a puddle buzzing with damselflies and thick with icy rot. Liv jumps over and keeps going. The cold slows me, and I call for her to wait. Liv tosses a grin over her shoulder, the smile that forms her cheek into a shiny rubber ball. She’s about to leave me. While I fight to match my breathing with my pace, Liv goes from zero to ten with no effort. We meet another pocket of water. Leap over, dig deep, keep going. She sprints ahead of me as I track her powder blue jacket, leaves crackling in her wake. We’re supposed to stay together. It’s the only way my mother allows me

to run in the woods, with its overgrowth and lonely trails winding across town lines and Indian ruins. But we run on, longer and farther than we should. I fight to catch up, and I get faster. Liv makes me faster.

Before the flat Sheepfold lies the Hill, a lump of stone and shrub covered by gravel. Today, the gravel will be frozen in the earth, making an ankle-turning hobnailed path. I'm about to call out, tell her to stop, but she breaks into a full-on sprint. I dig in, watch my footing, hop, and weave. My phone falls from my jacket pocket and lands with an ominous clap.

“Wait!” I call to Liv.

I squat. My quadriceps tingle and itch. “Got it!” I raise the phone to my nose; the earbuds dangle. A spiderweb of cracks spreads across the screen. I'm screwed. We need to go home. I wrap the cord around the phone and stash it away in my jacket. No way of avoiding the Hill. I throw my weight forward, and drive myself up, up, up, mounting the crest.

“Liv!”

Sunlight flashes between trees and blinds me. I blink through the pain until I see the man on top of Liv. She writhes, kicking up gravel and leaves. The man shifts his weight rhythmically to keep her pinned.

Liv is screaming.

I am screaming.

“Let her go!” My voice is strangled.

His eyes are red-streaked aggies.

“Who are you?” he bellows. He braces Liv with his forearm and reaches up his pant leg. Metal glints near his hand.

I scream, an animal sound.

He holds a knife at Liv's throat, eyes darting between us, but lingering on Liv. When she squirms, he pulls the knife away from her neck.

"Walk away and forget what you saw! Now, or her blood's on your hands!" His pitch wavers.

I shake my head slowly.

"I'll end her life, right here!"

I don't believe him.

He has a baby face and his head is small for his body. A slice of forehead, pink and smooth, peeks from under a black knit cap, and the buckles on his camouflage jacket clang as he fights to keep Liv from escaping.

Liv sobs. "Julia, please don't leave me!"

I feel my front pocket for my phone, the phone we take turns carrying in case someone gets hurt and we need help. Then I remember: my phone is cracked.

She's been my best friend since she gave me her cherry cola ChapStick in the sixth grade.

If I grab the scruff of his jacket and yank, I might move him, a little, maybe. Just enough so Liv can roll and run. We can run.

I step closer. A light flickers in his eyes. Greedy. He wants us both, but he can't hold two of us. He imagines we'll fight.

Liv's eyes flit over my face. Pleading.

ChapStick.

I rush him.

My fingertips graze his jacket as a glove clamps down on

my ankle. I fall. My ankle snaps. The pain fills every space in my body. I hear someone howling. Me.

I turn my head. The view is different from the forest floor.

Liv rolls and scrambles to her feet. Liv is a powder blue smudge, running and falling and running, until the crashing fades.

The man stands over me, smiling. He has small teeth like a child.

“You’ll do.”

ONE

353 Days After the Woods

Statistically speaking, girls like me don't come back when guys like Donald Jessup take us.

According to my research, in 88.5% of all abductions, the kid is killed within the first four hours. In 76% of those cases, it's within the first two hours. So when they found me alive after nearly two days, the reporters called it a miracle.

They liked it even better when they found out Donald Jessup didn't want me at first. He wanted Liv. But I took her place. Not only did they have a miracle, they had a martyr. In the eleven months since the abduction, more than half of the *Shiverton Star's* stories (so, thirty-two of them) have been about us. And Paula Papademetriou, who lives right here in Shiverton and anchors the evening WFYT News, still won't leave us alone.

Liv says we must move on.

It had rained a lot that November, and everyone's basement got water, and the high school gym flooded. The track warped in places where the water underneath forced it up, so the track team had to run in a pack all over town. Off hours and against coaches' rules, we trained in the woods.

I think Liv reminded Donald Jessup of a deer, all knees and angles and big brown eyes. In his sick mind he thought he was the Greek hunter-god *Zagreus*, his avatar in *Prey*, which he played 24/7 in his mother's house. *Zagreus* is the ancient Greek word for a hunter. My theory is Donald Jessup couldn't get enough of virtual *Prey* and decided to bring the action to life.

Liv doesn't let on that she used to be a bit of a gamer. Liv would never cop to knowing more about *Prey* than I do. It doesn't fit the perfect-girl image, the maintenance of which is her mother Deborah's full-time job. What little I know about *Prey* comes from my research—research that Liv wants me to stop. If Liv had her way, I'd have spent the last eleven months forgetting the woods ever happened.

Dr. Ricker, on the other hand, wants me to remember. Ricker is my new therapist, for better or for worse. The jury's still out on that one. Mom secured my first appointment the day we got home from the Berkshires. The trip started out as "a little time off" and lasted through the second half of sophomore year and the whole summer. I felt like one of those nervous Victorian ladies hustled by my mother to the English countryside for a rest cure. Less than a week after the woods, and as soon as the cops gave us permission, Professor Mom announced a sabbatical, pulled me out of school, and closed

up the house. We hightailed it out of Shiver-ton in time for Thanksgiving for two at the vacation home I hadn't seen since I was nine due to Mom's workaholic tendencies. Mom said holing up 135 miles away from Shiver-ton would allow the media frenzy to die down. Also, it would give me time to get myself together: stop melting down at the sight of trees and such (for the record, Western Mass was the last place I should have been. So. Many. Trees.). But clearly it was a reflexive act. She was verging on a breakdown of her own, and needed to feel I was safe. After a while, between the homeschooling and our mutual lack of any friends, I actually looked forward to my visits to Patty Petty, RN, MS, CSW. Dr. Petty (Call me Patty!) was supposed to cleanse me of the trauma that I don't totally remember. Her expertise is expressive arts therapy, which involved staging interpretative dances of my feelings about Donald Jessup (I refused). We mostly ended up making masks out of paper and chicken wire, and drawing in what she called my art journal. I went along with it, mainly because Mom, in a weak moment during one of my crying jags, gave me her word this would be the extent of my therapy. And her word is weak. Because here I sit, as I have for all of September and October, on Elaine Ricker's cliché of a couch, deciding how to screw with today's template for Fixing Julia.

At least Patty Petty didn't make me play with dolls. "Seriously?" I groan as Ricker reaches for the basket under her desk.

Ricker is convinced Donald Jessup did something to me that I can't talk about, so I'm supposed to show her. That's where the anatomically correct dolls come in.

The basket rests on her lap. There are girl dolls and boy dolls.

“I know this is an unorthodox approach for someone your age. But I’m asking you to be open-minded,” Ricker says.

“Open-minded means willing to play with dolls?” I ask.

“Uncovering lost memories is key to developing a plan for treatment. It may take a long time, and it may be painful. This is a marathon, not a race.”

I want to ask if she’s ever met a cliché she didn’t like. But I stuff it, deep into my bowels, feeding the thing I think of as the black in my belly. I don’t want to rouse the black because I actually like Ricker, with her glossy bangs, funky glasses, and big man hands. But that’s not for her to know.

Best simply to remind her who’s in charge.

“So I’ve been thinking about Newton’s Third Law. Of Motion. You know: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction,” I say.

Ricker tucks the basket under her desk. “You can’t touch without being touched.”

“Exactly. Here’s the thing. Two people, call them X and Y, are pushed by another person. Call him . . . D. No wait: call him Z.” I smile and continue. “We’ll call the push ‘force A.’ If person Z exerts force A on persons X and Y, then persons X and Y exert an equal and opposite force A back on person Z. $A_{xz} = -A_{zx}$. And, $A_{yz} = -A_{zy}$. You get pushed, you push back. Follow me?”

Her mouth parts, then shuts.

“Cool. So according to Newton’s Third Law, how can Person Y not exert an equal and opposite reaction?” I say.

“You cannot compare individual responses to trauma,” Ricker says.

“Work with me here.”

She exhales through her nose. “Y wasn’t pushed with the same force as X.”

I sigh, throwing my boots up on the couch. “If you’re more comfortable with dolls . . .”

“Let me be clearer then. Only one of you was abducted.”

“A psychopath dropped into our lives. Mine and Liv’s. It was worse for me, I get that. But is it healthy to just go on, with no questions? *Que sera, sera?*”

“There is no useful outcome for comparing your recovery to Olivia Lapin’s.”

“I’m not talking about recovery. I’m talking about basic, everyday behavior.”

Ricker scans her desk and settles on a small legal pad and a pencil. Her mouth twists as she scribbles for a second, then two.

I lean over my knees. “Are you sure that’s how you spell ‘*que sera, sera*’?”

I am a monster. She is trying to help me, and is probably the only person who can. Gosh knows I have a better chance talking with her than by mask making with Patty Petty, with her silver ponytail and turquoise and Wellies that smelled of manure.

“The most important thing to remember is that when an

evil act is committed, the shame belongs to the perpetrator. Donald Jessup's shame is not your shame—”

“And my strength is my survival. I covered that with Patty Petty,” I interrupt.

Ricker folds her swishy pant legs and leans back until her chair creaks. Dramatic leg swoops signal a change in tactic.

“It might help our progress to put a name on what you're experiencing. The clinical term is post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.”

“That happens to me every month. I bloat and break out. One word: Motrin.”

Ricker doesn't blink. “When a person experiences a physical threat, and the person's response involves intense fear, helplessness, or horror, certain side effects can result for that person. I'd like to explore if you're experiencing any of these side effects,” she says calmly.

“As a person?”

Her face is blank.

“Just checking.”

“Sometimes, the traumatic event is re-experienced over and over, in the form of dreams, or during the day, as intrusive thoughts. Do you have thoughts, Julia?”

“Never. I never think,” I say, grinning.

“Another feature is avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma.”

Liv thinks I have the opposite problem.

“Julia?”

“Still here. Not thinking.”

“Perhaps it would help if I gave you a specific example. Because the abduction happened during track practice, you might avoid running.”

“I still run. Like a madwoman. Like someone’s chasing me. Doh, bad joke. And in case you’re keeping count in your little notebook of the PTSD markers that I don’t have, that’s like the tenth negative.”

The cell phone on her desk buzzes.

“Restricted range of effect? That means you’re unable to have loving feelings where they previously existed,” Ricker says.

“Are you going to pick up? It might be one of your kids.”

She holds my eyes and turns the phone facedown. “Are you having difficulty feeling affection, Julia?”

“I’m as loving as ever. Ask my mother. You, I’m not so sure about, seeing as your kid might have an emergency and you’re not answering your phone.”

She pretends to write words, but draws small squares. “Irritability? Outbursts of anger?”

“Zen as ever. Ask my therapist.”

She blinks at the phone.

“Maybe I’m projecting my own experience, but you are freaking me out by not answering that phone. Answer it. Seriously. I don’t care.”

“Normally I would never allow an interruption on our time. But that was my emergency ring tone. I promise this will only take a second.”

“I won’t tell,” I stage-whisper.

Ricker says a deep hello, pressing the curve of her hand into her top lip as she listens. She sets the phone down and stares at it for a second.

“I was just yanking your chain about your daughter. Is everything okay?” I ask.

She smiles tightly at her lap, and when she looks up, she’s the composed Ricker again. “I apologize. Where were we? Oh yes. We know for sure that you have the final symptom: inability to recall aspects of the trauma. That said, I’d like to hypnotize you.”

“Whoa! What?”

“It will be like falling asleep. When you’re fully under, I’ll regress you to those lost moments.”

“Can’t we just wait for my memories to return?”

“It doesn’t always work that way. Repressed memories can stay repressed for a lifetime. They’re not like seeds. Shoots won’t rise from the ground without some nurturing,” she says.

“I’m not so sure of that. Ever hear of the yellow tansy? It’s the worst invasive plant in North America, and it grows better when ignored. Pretty, fragrant, and totally poisonous.”

“Once we understand the past, we can move forward.”

My master plan—to humor Man Hands while secretly rejecting her textbook dogma—suddenly seems wrongheaded. If she wants to understand what happened in the woods, we’re on the same page.

“I’m all for understanding,” I say.

The secretary’s light tap at the door signals Ricker’s next

appointment is waiting. I lean across the couch, reaching for my bag on the floor.

“Julia,” Ricker says suddenly. “The reporters. They’ll be back.”

I sit up slowly, frowning. “Why would you say that?”

“Slow news cycle.” Ricker rushes over her words. “Or they might try to make a big deal out of the one-year anniversary. It’s less than two weeks away.”

“I’m aware.”

“You need to be prepared to reject them completely.”

“You make it sound as if I actually like the attention.”

“I simply want to be clear about where you should put your energy in the days ahead. The media is in the business of selling stories. Our business is healing you.”

I consider pointing out that, unlike the media, not one of the persons supposedly concerned with my healing has used the word *brave* to describe what I did. As in, *Brave Teen Saves Friend*, *Brave Girl Fights off Predator*, or *Lucky Teen Escapes Attacker Because of Brave Friend*. Nor do they take advantage of the delightful wordplay my name affords: *Meet Julia Spunk, a teen whose name suits her perfectly*.

“If your business is healing me, then isn’t it in your interest that I stay broken?”

“Maybe I’m not being clear. I’m advising your mother that you should stay away from all press.”

Deep in my belly, the black thing shifts. “I can handle it,” I insist.

“When it comes to the press, it’s your mother’s job to

handle it. I know it's hard to hear this, but the work we have to do is here, in this room." She sits back and sweeps her hand in front of her head—"Here"—and her chest—"And here."

She's losing my favor fast. I roll my eyes so hard I see stars. "We're done, right?"

Ricker nods, tucking her lips. I scramble off the couch and yank my cuff down to cover the metal doorknob, one of many tricks for never being cold again. The door opens and there is Mom, a shudder through her springy, dark curls.

"I apologize! It was me knocking," she calls to Ricker, then leans in and says in her shrink-shop undertone: "I need a few minutes to catch up with Dr. Ricker, and I wanted to make sure she had time for me before her next appointment."

"Sorry I used every minute. I won't do it again," I say.

Her smile falls. "You can't think I minded."

"I didn't. I was teasing."

"Oh!" She reaches to smooth my hair, then stops. "I won't be long."

I watch Mom slide through the door, a sliver of a woman, birdlike, with a small head and hollow bones. I take over her chair, feeling ungainly, stretch my legs, and scan the room, daring someone to say something. A fat kid with emo hair and a mole on his cheek points his phone at my head and takes a photo.

"For real? I'm right here!" I lean over my knees. "I. Can. See. You."

He jams the phone into his jacket and rises, shuffling over

to a receptionist talking into a headpiece. He begs her for the men's room key, which she shoves through a glass arch. The last thing I need is this loser posting my photo for his pals to ogle. I trail him into the bathroom and kick open the door.

“Give me your phone.”

“This is the men's room, freak!”

The black thing in my belly flicks. “Give it or I'll send that mole to the other side of your face.”

“Here.” He holds it up. “Look, I'm deleting it.”

I swipe the phone from his doughy hand and pitch it over the stall wall. His eyes widen at the porcelain clatter, followed by a plop.

“What the . . . ?”

I harden my gut. “Now it's deleted.”

His mouth opens and shuts soundlessly. Finally, he stalks into the stall, reappearing with his dripping phone. “What do you even care if I send your picture to a couple of my friends?” He pulls paper towels from the holder on the wall. “It's not like your face isn't going be back all over the news by the end of the day.”

I remember Ricker's weird warnings. What are she and this dork talking about? I squint at him.

He wraps his phone inside a mealy towel wad, shaking his head. “Who would ever guess that in person, you'd be such a bitch?”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, if anything, I'd expect you'd be super happy. Grateful, even.”

“Grateful?” I hiss, my breath hot behind my teeth. “That’s rich.”

“Yeah, grateful. Most people would feel lucky they got out alive.”

I snort, an ugly noise that echoes off the stalls and lingers. “Thank you so much for putting everything into perspective for me, Moleman. What am I even seeing Elaine Ricker for? I could just come see you! But here’s the thing.” I poke his soft shoulder. “Dr. Ricker isn’t a fan of her patients showing up on the Internet. Pictures of them at her office and what-not. It’s a violation of patient confidentiality. I wonder how she’ll take your little transgression. Drop you as a client, I imagine.”

He jabs his sausage finger in the air at me. “Oh, man. Now I get it.”

“Sorry, too harsh? You prefer your abductees with cream and sugar?”

“You haven’t seen the news, have you?”

“I’ve been the news, Dough Boy. And I can tell you, it sucks. So no, I don’t watch much of it these days.”

The mole slides toward his ear in a sickening grin. “Then you don’t know about the body.”

The video is at the top of the WFYT Web site. I tap Play on my phone’s touchscreen. Hometown gal-slash-glamorous ladyanchor Paula Papademetriou ticks her voice down a notch, the way she does when she’s talking about Nor’easters, school shootings,

and Liv and me: “A couple out walking their dog early this morning stumbled upon a body police believe to be eighteen-year-old Ana Alvarez, who went missing while jogging in the Sheepfold section of the Middlesex Fells Reservation in August of last year. Many are wondering about the involvement of a man arrested for an attack on two local girls in these same woods nearly one year ago.”

The cold and nausea come at once, like they sometimes do, and prickles erupt on my chest. I jam my phone deep in my pocket and take the back stairs one floor up, duck into the women’s room, and lock the door. I tug my cuffs down before pressing my palms against the chilly walls, and sway over the toilet, willing the black, or lunch, or anything to expel itself so I will feel better. Nothing comes.

Get abold of yourself, Julia. A body in the woods is just another fact.

To normal people, researching facts about abductions, and then your own abduction, labels you all kinds of morbid. But research soothes me. The methodical ordering of gathered facts is a beautiful thing, especially when I order them in ways that make me feel safe. If I put my hand over my heart while I reread the facts I’ve collected in my Mead wide-ruled black marble composition notebook, my heart beats slower. I sway out of the bathroom and down the stairs, leaning outside Ricker’s waiting room. I slide down the wall. The carpet smells of cleaning chemicals and mud from shoes, but it’s not a totally unpleasant spot to sit. “You are good,” I whisper to myself, rubbing my knuckles across my chest with one hand and feeling through my messenger bag with the other. I touch

my notebook's hard taped spine, then a pencil. On a clean page, I draw a circle. Next to it, I draw a second overlapping circle of equal size.

My shoulders fall. I bury my head in the notebook, ignoring passing shins and murmurs.

In the the first circle, I write JULIA. In the second circle, I write LIV.

The seed shape in the middle stares back at me, no longer a seed, but the pupil of a cat's eye. I draw a third circle above the first two, overlapping. It bisects the cat's eye. Inside the third circle, I write BODY. The three of us share a space, the bisected cat's eye, and it is small, but there's still room to write.

I wiggle into my pocket for my phone and click on Paula Papademetriou's live feed. I'm too impatient to listen to her, though her perfect aubergine lipstick transfixes me for a second. Besides, I'm a faster reader than listener. In the transcribed story below, I scan for the word *pit*, but it's not there. In Ionian Greek, the word *zagre* means a "pit for the capture of live animals." The important word here is *live*. You can debate back and forth whether it's better to be killed or kept, but either way, a body popping up in the Sheepfold means old Zagreus was tweaking the mythology.

Liv is alive. I am alive. The body is irrelevant, Liv would say.

At the bottom of the page, I write PROBABILITY.

The probability of Liv and me stumbling across a deranged maniac in the woods was low: 1 out of 347,000. And stranger abductions are the most improbable, at 24% of all abductions, versus 49% by family members and 27% by acquaintances. So

Liv's right when she insists what happened in the woods was a fluke, just a forgettable, little thing.

But if Paula Papademetriou is right, and Donald Jessup killed before? That makes us part of a big thing.

After PROBABILITY, I add a question mark.

TWO

354 Days After the Woods

I am disappointing naked.

Since the woods, kids stare at my naked body parts, hoping to spot scars that will reveal the things Donald Jessup did to me. In gym, they stare at my arms and legs. I imagine it's a letdown that the marks aren't visible. But the real reason I prefer to dress in Sherpa layers is what I call cold-avoidance. For me, cold—the kind that slips down your collar and swirls down your spine like a frosty helix—is unstoppable. It sends me right back to the woods, and that can be inconvenient during, well, everything. In my first ten weeks back at school, I've concocted some excellent excuses to avoid changing into my standard issue gym shorts and tee. Today, Ms. Dean isn't having it, possibly because today's excuse, Kuru disease, is found only among cannibals in remote New Guinea.

Liv warned me that my crazy clothes only fuel the gossip.

Gossip, I will add, that doesn't seem to plague Liv. You'd think she'd get her share of stares, though I guess because she never took a break from school, and maybe because she wasn't *actually abducted*, she never generated my brand of buzz.

Lucky for me, something else has everyone's attention.

A bustle near the bleachers. Kellan MacDougall is getting shoved by his hockey pals into a pretty freshman. He shoves them back. The girl giggles, knuckles pressed against her upper lip. Kellan barely makes eye contact with her, twisting the toe of his sneaker like he's grinding something into the parquet. She puffs her chest and tips her chin, spilling flat-ironed hair down her back. Her cheek is the color of a pink apple. Kellan's a player; he even hooked up with Liv at a party the weekend before the woods, then never spoke to her again. It had to be awkward for him when his detective dad was assigned our case.

Kellan spies me as I end my walk to the door marked GIRLS. I hold his stare, making my eyes vacant. Apple Face follows his gaze, her eyes lashed. He's probably thinking we have some connection because his dad captured my abductor. Those days were smeary. I didn't deny myself hits off the morphine pump meant for my ankle. By the time my head cleared, I was settled in my ivory tower on Mount Greylock, and Detective MacDougall had made his career by locking up Donald Jessup. I wonder how he felt when Donald Jessup killed himself by swallowing a pen spring in jail.

I lean my shoulder against the door with the GIRLS sign. GIRLS are flouncing creatures with satin bows in their hair

who circle maypoles and use their eyelashes to charm—a luxury for people who assume other people won't hurt them. I have let my charm shrivel. GIRLS are weightless, without black things in their bellies that coil and spring. Apple Face is a GIRL. Somehow, Liv is still a GIRL.

The door moves beneath my shoulder. I fall into Liv, pulling the door open from inside.

“I've been looking for you!” she says, stepping back and tugging her shirt down over her flat belly.

“Just giving the fans something to stare at,” I say, righting myself.

“You skipped lunch.”

“Not exactly. I had a strategically timed guidance office appointment-cum-wellness check-in.”

Liv smiles. “I'm familiar. But you're going to have to face lunch someday. Like, tomorrow.” She parts a pack of wispy, wan girls—friends of my next-door neighbor, Alice Mincus—and stakes out a corner. They change clothes and tie their sneakers fast. I try to decide if it's Liv they're intimidated by or my weird factor, but Liv seems not to notice either way. When the last few scatter, she circles the locker room, yanking back shower curtains and checking under stalls. I watch, mystified. Liv usually pooh-poohs my paranoia, but here she is, feeding it. It's like a minivindication. Satisfied there are no spies, she turns to me.

“They found a dead girl in the woods,” she says.

“I know. My mother told me last night.” After Moleman did. But no sense mentioning that.

“You knew? Why didn’t you call me?”

“I figured your mom talked to you about it.” As soon as it comes out of my mouth, I realize how ridiculous that sounds. If Liv glosses over what happened, Deborah Lapin shellacs it. Being preyed upon by a man who played dress-up in the woods is not in line with the image she has cast for Liv, one which does not involve role-playing psychopaths. “I mean, I was trying to be better. More like you. Not get hung up on the past,” I add. That last line is a direct quote from one of our weekly e-mails while I was in the Berkshires, the ones that kept me sane and tethered to reality. While Patty Petty said let it all hang out, Liv gave me permission—really, more of a directive—to let it go.

Liv brushes her hair back roughly behind one ear. It’s Liv’s hair, cornsilk-fine and aggressively highlighted, that guys always notice first. That and her boobs, full-blown by sixth grade. “I think that’s great,” she says, her eyes skipping around the room. “Moving forward and all.”

“Right? Ricker wants me to do hypnosis. She says unlocking my repressed memories is the way to heal. But then she avoids answering questions that might actually help me heal. To me that’s a contradiction. It’s like she wants me on one path: hers.”

Liv slides her jaw from side to side.

“I’m pretty sure Ricker got a call about the body right in the middle of our session yesterday. She tried to pretend it was her daughter, but I knew something was up,” I say. “So do you think Donald Jessup killed that other girl?”

Liv's face goes dark. After the woods, my mother spun into action, jetting me out of town and hooking me up with Patty Petty, then Ricker. Deborah's sole effort at supporting Liv was dragging her to speak with a local priest exactly once before signing herself into Valium rehab. I can be bitter about my forced removal, but at least what my mother did was in the realm of appropriate reactions for a mother.

Of course Deborah isn't a mother, but a hedgewitch.

"How are things with your mo—"

"Eighteen is hardly a girl," Liv says suddenly. "She was old enough to vote."

"Everyone out!" Ms. Dean booms as she rounds the corner, sporting an unfortunate choppy new haircut. She stops short and knits her brows, making a lumbering mental calculation. I imagine she's recalling what she learned during meetings of the school's Incident Management Team.

"Are you ladies okay? Do you need, um, support?" she says.

"We are so okay!" Liv says, already out the door when Ms. Dean plants her ham-hand on my shoulder.

"You're not dressed." In her other hand is a balled-up pair of jersey-style Shiverton shorts and a T-shirt, my punishment for wearing jeans to gym. I accept them as Ms. Dean says that while she respects my need for time to readjust, there are no exceptions to the sweats rule. She's a softie for anyone with issues, always letting the cutters wear long sleeves to hide their razor scars. Still, I give her a nice piece of cold back, waiting until she leaves to drop my sweatercoat with a thump. Next, I shimmy out of my hoodie, unzip my fly, and yank off my jeans.

A Henley button-down is the last layer standing before bra and bare skin. The locker room might be warm, but the gym is a drafty space with exposed beams that stretch to the ceiling like ribs. I tear the Henley over my head and wriggle into my shorts and extra-large tee. My white legs and arms make me look spectral. The Shiverton High girls' locker room is exactly the same as when it was built in the 1960s, with its faint smell of mildew and decades of bad energy that lingers. Echoes of teasing banging around lockers, inadequacies stuck inside mirrors. Special pains inflicted by GIRLS onto GIRLS. But I'm not a GIRL anymore. I shake my hair out, press my lips together, and stride out, hand on belly, willing my serpentine friend—the black thing in my gut that Liv doesn't have and doesn't need, but I do—to rise and get me through this, the real, indoor, after-the-woods world.

Ms. Dean nods as I join the far end of the line for stretches. Liv has been absorbed among the slouchy-loud girls. I will not be absorbed. She smiles at me, hard and tight. I smile back anemically, hugging my elbows and rocking slightly, just enough to feel better and not look catatonic.

So. Cold.

My hands float up and bat at my ears, burning, as though I am outside, in the woods, but I'm not, I'm in the gym, with its faint smell of mold from last year's flood, and still the snowy flash spreads until the gym is white. The smell of night air and woodsmoke blooms around me. Now the rush, the sensation of plunging down a hole. I'm going and I can't stop.

What Ricker doesn't know is that I don't need hypnosis. Not when there's a trigger.

The joint shakes in his hand as he winds it. His tongue flashes to lick the paper. It falls in his lap.

"Shhit!" His hands flutter.

"Are you okay?" I say. Begging, reasoning, and crying haven't worked. Empathy is the only thing I haven't tried.

"Been off-line too—too long—long," he stammers, patting his lap. "In the six hours I sleep sleepy-time raiders plunder my camps, destroy my weapons, and take my prey. I set traps, everything, but nothing does any good. I hardly have any girls left. What's gonna happen when I'm gone for days? Can't play 24/7, I just can't. How'm I gonna get ahead after this? Phew, there it is." He lights the fat white pupa at his lips, a flame dancing at his trembling fingers, his inhalation like a long sip of water.

I take tiny breaths. Being a pot virgin, I have no idea if just being near the smoke will make me high, and the thought of losing my wits terrifies me. I wiggle away from the downwind. The movement triggers pain in my ankle, and I cry out. He looks at me quizzically.

He holds out the joint. "Want a bit?"

I shake my head wildly.

He shrugs. "Might help."

He takes softer drags, puffing and sucking, intimate sounds that make my privates clench. I'm hit with a wave of revulsion. I stare hard at the outlines of trees and hills, trying to get back into my head, match their silhouettes with the woods I know in daylight. The fire between us burns

a low flame, but it's enough for me to imagine my rescuers will see it and come. How long ago did Liv run away? Seven, eight, nine hours? Why hasn't anyone come?

"This was a mistake," he says.

I shift in my spot. If I am a mistake, I am less valuable to him. That feels dangerous.

"If you free me, you could go back to your game," I say, my voice small. He giggles, teeth flashing in the dark like little pearls.

I force myself to mirror his laugh, but I sound like a hyena.

"What are you laughing at?" he says.

I stop laughing. "I'm not."

"Oh, what, was that an owl?" He laughs again, uncontrollably this time. "Was that an owl laughing in the woods?"

I become very still, trying to make myself shapeless so he'll forget I am a GIRL, because that feels the most dangerous of all.

If only there were stars to count. Math, then.

1,133 divided by 2 equals 566.5.

8,349,179 divided by 7 equals 1,192,739.8 . . . 6.

"Funny, isn't it?" he sputters, taking a last drag and flicking the orange stub into the darkness.

"Yeab!" I say, unconvincing.

"Here we are, you and me. Not what I expected. But something."

"What happened to you?" Liv cries, her hand out, warding off others.

In nine months of e-mails, she never did ask me what happened in the woods.

Ms. Dean mouths my name in slow motion. A ring of pale

faces crowd in over my crumpled body, their voices drifting, but I make out “swallow tongue” and “orange juice” and “so sad.” Liv plants herself to avoid being shoved. Now she’s arguing with the guy next to her. Ms. Dean’s mouth moves again, but I can’t hear her over my own breaths, loud as shotgun blasts.

I sit up. “I think I have a fever.”

Ms. Dean dings my forehead with the nugget on her college ring. “You’re burning up. Off to the nurse.” She yanks me up light as paper and tosses me toward the exit.

The pack collapses, and Liv runs after me, grabbing my arm and whispering close to my ear. “It was like you went somewhere else. Where did you go?”

I look at her meaningfully.

“My God. You’re remembering.”

“Lately, yes.”

Ms. Dean turns to the crowd. “Nothing to see here but a girl with Kuru disease. Lapin, back in line. Make teams for dodgeball!”

I smile lamely at the floor. There’s something grounding about having a gym teacher straight from central casting screaming about dodgeball, the purest form of Darwinian selection in any high school. Shane Cuthbert, slouched on a bleacher until now, rises on loose legs and strolls over. He wears the required sweats and a ratty T-shirt with a smiley face, its eyes Xs, its tongue hanging out. Some girls think Shane is hot, with his inky hair and unnaturally blue, Siberian husky eyes, but never me.

He stands behind Liv, thumbs jammed deep in his pockets. He's always had a creepy thing for her. I glare at him above her shoulder.

Liv's eyes flicker all over my face.

"A-hem," Shane says, his nasal pitch cartoony.

Liv spins and he catches her wrist in the air, grinning, his eyes popping white.

"What do you want, Shane?" I say his name like a swear.

"Nothing you can give me, nutters. Weren't you heading to the nurse?"

I check Ms. Dean's coordinates. She's already heading back toward us, overdeveloped forearms pumping.

"Whatever you've got, it better not be contagious. I don't want my girl here catching it," he says, snaking his hand around Liv's waist.

I wait for Liv to twist away. Instead, she giggles.

My *girl*?

"Liv?" I rasp.

Shane's lank hair brushes Liv's cheek as he whispers something in her ear. She pulls away with a sour look, which he catches. She smooths it over with a quick smile. "You have a filthy mind," she says, swatting his chest with a fist. He explodes in a pratfall, sharp knees and elbows, a bug on its back. He grabs her ankle. She squeals and tries to shake him off, like it's the funniest thing in the world, so funny to get grabbed, but he'll let go before the ankle snaps, because it's Shane Cuthbert and not Donald Jessup and the panic lacing round my throat can stop now.

I've known Shane since kindergarten. He lives on the other side of Shiverton, where the walkways to tidy houses are lined with pansies in the summer and chrysanthemums in the fall. Every so often, you pass by one where the windows are glazed yellow and a car sits on the lawn. Donald Jessup lived in one of those houses. His mother still does. Shane's house is pretty nice, and by all accounts he's lucky to have it, because he was adopted from a Russian orphanage where prostitutes dump their unwanted babies. His real name was Alexei, but his parents renamed him Shane. In elementary school, Alexei-Shane couldn't sit still, so by seventh grade doctors put him on a rainbow of pills. When he missed half of sophomore year, everyone said he'd been sent to McLean Psychiatric Hospital, and got thrown out when he stabbed an orderly in the hand with a jackknife.

Shane clambers up, shaking hair from his eyes. He laughs, at me or at nothing, and his lips peel above a tooth lodged high on his gum. His hand settles on the small of Liv's back, steering her away. I cry, "Wait," but it's barely a whisper.

Slowly, his hand moves to his left pocket, so much bigger than the right, to a rectangular bulge, so much like a folded knife. My throat tightens.

"Liv!"

They turn, his smile in profile with that one misgrown tooth.

Her eyes are worried. Is she afraid of what I'm going to say? Or that I'm remembering again?

"What is it?" Liv says.

What is it? What?

“I’ll see you after school,” I say. “I’ll come over. We’ll do . . . statistics.”

She cocks her head and squints like I’m daft. Then she laughs, not a real laugh, but like she knows other kids are watching. “Awesome. You can help me with independent and dependent events.” As they turn back around, Shane slaps her hard on the butt.

Her shoulders clench. They stay. They do not fall.

I squeeze my elbows and hustle to the nurse’s office. The nurse is missing, and this is good, because I’m learning the memories might surge fast, but they also cool and crust. It’s best to record them fresh. Except my notebook is in my locker.

I look around the sterile exam room wildly. Stealing a pen from the nurse’s desk, I tear a sheaf off the roll of exam table paper, and write:

Things I Know About Donald Jessup:

- *Dopehead*
- *Losing his game*
- *Not what he expected (me)*

THREE

Later

*Lamp*light burns the side of my face. I close my stats book and flatten my cheek against the cool nubs of Liv's white crocheted bedspread.

"They're hard to explain. I think of them as nightmares, only during the day," I say.

"A daymare," Liv says.

"Right. And it's not like watching a movie. I smell what I smelled. Sweet smoke and leaves. Alive and dead things underneath the leaves; that's a musty smell. The rain smelled like metal. I taste things, too. The beef jerky he gave me. Blood."

Liv winces. "What were you remembering in the gym?"

"That first night. The night he and I were together. The night I escaped. The next day and night I spent being hunted . . ."

Liv exhales loudly.

"Right. Sorry," I say, trying my best to "move forward and

all.” “It was after we stopped. We couldn’t go farther because it got dark, and he was tired of dragging me. I could barely walk. And he wanted to smoke a joint.”

Liv twists her hair hard near her ear. “Did the joint make him, you know, talky?”

“Mainly he was jonesing to play his video game. He was worried other players would steal his weapons and his prey.” I raise myself on my elbows. “You know about Prey better than I do. That’s what he was playing, in his sick mind. But you know that.”

Liv ignores my mild dig, releasing her hair and winding it around her fingers again, tighter. “How do they happen? The daymares.”

“A trigger sometimes. Sometimes nothing at all. This last time, it was the cold.”

She drops her hair. “This last time? How often do they happen?”

“Too often. In Ricker-speak they’re called intrusive.” I don’t mention that I haven’t gotten around to telling Ricker I have them.

“Can you make them stop?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t been able to yet.”

“You never told me about them in your e-mails.”

The back door slams and the old Victorian house quakes. Keys clatter in a china bowl, the antique rimmed with gold Greek keys on the hall curio. Liv groans and rakes her hair with both hands.

“Olivia!” Deborah screams up the stairs.

“Should we go?” I say.

“I need a minute,” she says.

“Then it’s your turn,” I say quickly. “Speaking of things unmentioned: Shane Cuthbert? When did that start? And why?”

She tips her head forward until her hair waterfalls onto the desk, and kneads her scalp. “I’m just fooling around.” Her voice is muffled. “It’s not serious.”

“With Shane Cuthbert? You could have anyone!”

“Shane Cuthbert happens to be an exceptionally effective way of pissing off Deborah.”

“I heard he got thrown out of McLean for stabbing an orderly. Is that true?”

“How would I know?”

“You’re seeing him! He called you his girl.”

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Seeing Shane Cuthbert is not nothing. He’s always been obsessed with you. Even if it’s nothing to you, it’s something to him, I’m sure of that. What happens after you use him to piss off Deborah? How will you ever get rid of him?”

She draws her hands through her hair hard. “I know exactly what I’m doing with Shane.”

“Olivia! I know you’re up there!”

She flips her hair back. “Down in a second!”

Deborah murmurs something sharp below. Liv fans her fingers in front of her, examining hair like floss—lots of it—threaded through each set of fingers, catching the desk lamp light.

“Liv?”

She shakes her hands above the wire trash can under her desk.

“Your hair!” I say.

“Come down now, we have no time!” Deborah’s voice is clearer now; she’s moved to the gilt mirror at the bottom of the stairs. Liv slowly pushes away from her desk and trudges down the bare stairs, her steps hollow, the runner long ago stripped to wood and staples and left that way. I wait, wondering if I should bother to come, wondering if I want to. Slanted rain pelts the quarter moon–shaped window. Barring Deborah’s box-of-chocolates persona (never know what you’re gonna get), I’ve always felt at home here, especially in the cool, quirky attic bedroom, with its secret eaves and its *Amityville Horror* window. Now the house seems as if the rain might poke straight through. Before the woods, Deborah constantly renovated the Victorian like it was another whole being she cared for in reverse proportion to how much she cared for Liv. Now the repairs have ground to a halt. Curlicues of yellow paint speckle the tops of shrubs overtaking the porch, worn silver in spots. Today, the front doorknob fell off in my hand.

I stash my book in my backpack and head for the landing.

“That idiot hairdresser took forever and it was pouring by the time I left, and I had to wear my hood, and now I have static.” From my spot, I can see Deborah leaning toward the hallway mirror, glaring at hair plastered against her cheek. “How will I ever fix this?”

“It gets worse if you touch it,” Liv says, taking the last few stairs.

“I’m going to have to leave it alone, because we have less than two hours, and I still need to write down what I’m going to say to that reporter. I am so perpetually *rushed*. You could have started your own hair while I was out; you know how to mix the chemicals by now. Honestly, everyone on the planet is so selfish with my time.”

Liv follows her into the kitchen and leans against the doorframe. The TV on the kitchen wall plays a commercial. I recognize the sounds: a savvy mom whips up a fancy chicken dish using a jar of mayonnaise, and the teenage son goes from dour to amazed. My stomach rumbles. In most homes in the Northeast region, it is the dinner hour.

“I had a terrible day at work. No one is satisfied with the schedule—the dentists want it full, the hygienists want breaks, and the assistants want time to clean the instruments. I have no energy left and a million things to do in less than two hours.” Deborah pauses her rant. “Do not expect me to make some lavish dinner right now.”

Liv sinks against the wall. “I do not expect you to.”

Deborah heaves a dry sigh. “You know, you can be very difficult to love.” I come from behind Liv just as Deborah reaches for a bottle of pinot noir from the lattice rack above the fridge.

“Olivia!” she exclaims. “You didn’t tell me Julia was here.” She sets the wine on the counter and swoops me in her arms, her chest hot through her blouse. “I thank God every time I see you.” I feel her shove up her sleeve to check her watch behind my back.

Box of chocolates. Right after the woods, Deborah was grateful that I saved Liv. In the news footage of Mom pleading for my return, Deborah was right there, holding Mom up (though the opposite scenario was true: Deborah took Valium and could barely lift her eyelids). The news stations made a lot of the two-attractive-single-mothers angle, but the reporters cared mostly about Dr. Spunk, who managed to look elegant and calm during the worst two days of her life. Besides, Deborah had her daughter back, and Mom was still in that bad place. After I got home, the *Today* show asked Mom to host segments on missing children (she declined). For a while, Deborah was all about girl power and hugs. But then the frost set in. She never visited our house between the time I was released from the hospital and when we left for the Berkshires. Liv blamed it on her Valium detox, but finally she slipped that Deborah thought Mom and I liked the media attention a little too much.

“Liv probably didn’t tell you that there’s a reporter from the *Shiverton Star* coming over at seven thirty to interview me about being Catholic Woman of the Year, and he’ll be photographing Liv and me together. I want to make sure she looks her best, so I planned a little pampering session. You should probably be heading home . . .”

Liv stares past Deborah to the TV. I follow her stare, and Deborah follows mine.

A reporter with a snub nose and a pancake face rests his foot on the railroad-tie stairs that mark the main entrance to the woods. His suit jacket flaps over his crotch in an unseen

breeze. Behind him, yellow caution tape flutters between two young trees. The sign says MIDDLESEX FELLS RESERVATION: GATES CLOSE AT DUSK.

“I’m at the Middlesex Fells Reservation in Shiverston, where a couple out walking their dog yesterday afternoon stumbled upon a body many believe to be eighteen-year-old Ana Alvarez, who went missing while jogging in a remote section of this enormous wooded area in August of last year.”

A thud, then *glug-glug-glug*. The wine bottle lies on its side, its nose pointing to a scarlet puddle. A rivulet makes its way to the middle of the island. No one moves to clean it up. The scene cuts to two women, Paula Papademetriou and a generic blonde, sitting in the WFYT studio.

“Ryan, has the body been positively identified?” Paula asks the on-scene reporter.

“That’s what police are working on right now, Paula.”

“Is this a murder investigation?” Paula asks.

“The police will not yet say. But many are wondering about the involvement of a man who attacked two high school students in the same area nearly one year ago. That man has since died in jail awaiting trial.”

“You’re referring to Donald Jessup, a man on parole at the time for earlier attacks against women in those same woods,” Paula says.

“That’s right, Paula. It sounds like the police may be explaining once again why a parolee was loose in these woods. This time, perhaps, with fatal consequences.”

Paula folds her brow and leans in to ask more questions as

Deborah cuts her off with a wave of the clicker. She rushes Liv. “My baby!” she cries, pulling back and grabbing Liv’s jaw. “Do you know how lucky you are to be alive?”

I wrinkle my nose at the smell of damp earth and cherries and turn away, embarrassed for Liv, embarrassed for Deborah for being the only person in the world who hasn’t heard this story in the last forty-eight hours, and embarrassed for me, because hello, I’m pretty sure I was in the woods, too.

“Should we clean up the wine?” I ask.

Deborah releases Liv and flutters her hand at the TV. “But for the grace of God! The mother of that girl could have been me!”

“If we don’t have time to do my hair, it’s all right,” Liv says.

“It’s most certainly not all right! There’s no chance those reporters aren’t going to be sniffing around again now. We have to prepare, Olivia. What do you want, roots on live television?” She unravels a trail of paper towels and goes at the wine spill with a grunt. “This body in the woods is going to be a great big distraction, that’s what it’s going to be.”

“You’re telling me,” I pipe up, just to say something. “Once in the Berkshires, a reporter camped out next to us on the concert lawn at Tanglewood.”

“I’m talking about my award! This honor was planned last November, before the incident happened. It’s like the world is out to thwart me. You need to promise me that you will not speak to any reporters about this latest bit of ugliness, even if that Ryan Lombardi comes around again, flattering you, Olivia.” She drops the wine-soaked towels into the trash and

turns to clear coffee mugs from the sink. “I’m sure your mother will say the same to you, Julia.”

“What happened in the woods is over,” I say, for Liv, even if I don’t believe it for a second, because it’s what Liv wants to hear, and she needs me on her side, having to deal every day with this big bag of crazy.

Liv smiles weakly. “Exactly.”

Deborah tears open a box with a flaxen-haired girl on the front and expertly combines the contents of the two plastic bottles. The ammonia smell is acrid and instantaneous, and it sings my nostrils. I hold my breath.

“So, I’ll see you at school tomorrow. Stay well, okay?” Liv says, turning to Deborah. “Julia got sick in gym.”

Deborah raises an eyebrow as she peels thin clear gloves from a sheet of directions, the tearing sound a perfunctory note of dismissal.

“Right.” I glance back to say “you stay well, too,” but Deborah already has her hand on the back of Liv’s neck, drawing perfect rows of poison down her scalp.

I’ve been rinsing the salad greens for minutes before I notice they’re wilting. The oven timer is buzzing, which means the chicken is nice and crispy, but I ignore that, too. I was determined to have dinner ready by the time Mom changed out of her wet clothes, a little dig for being later than she said she’d be, on a rainy night when she should have known I wouldn’t want to be alone, because I despise rain nearly as much as trees, the cold, and

sociopaths. But then I got to thinking about Liv's perverse interest in Shane, and the body, and whether what happened in the woods is really over, and suddenly the mesclun was mush.

And the phone's been flashing. Voice mail can wait, because surely it's Ricker, the only person who calls the house phone, asking how does the news of a body in the woods make me feel, exactly? Also, what were my thoughts before collapsing in gym? I wrinkle my nose at the phone and reposition the remaining grocery bags, so Mom will see them when she hustles downstairs and act sheepish because her work is creeping right back in where it was before the woods, to that place that comes before me.

Blink after spastic blink. "Easy, Ricker," I murmur, wiping my hands on my jeans. Raindrops thrum the skylight over my head. I glance up warily as I cross the room to the phone and press Play.

"This is Paula Papademetriou calling for Julia Spunk." The voice is husky and confidential.

I run from the kitchen to the bottom of the stairs and look up. A crack of light glows under Mom's bedroom door.

"I'd like to talk with you about the recent developments in the Middlesex Fells Reservation," she says, and then she leaves her personal cell phone number.

I tear back to the kitchen and scan the counter. The glazed clay fish I made in fifth grade to hold pencils contains only lead dust. Mom's door squeaks open; her feet thump down the stairs, quick, like a child's. I grab a box of aluminum foil off

the counter, tear off a sheet, and lay it flat, using my fingernail to scrape digits into the silver as she enters the kitchen.

“Honey, the timer,” she says.

I hunch my shoulders, fold the foil into a triangle, and drop it into the fish’s mouth. “Give it five more minutes.”

“Is everything all right?” she asks me.

I catch her gazing into the sink at the colander of green mush. “The mesclun was dirty. Gritty dirty.” I rush to the stove and bang at the timer, avoiding her eyes. I’m acting crazy, speaking way too fast, but I can’t slow down. “Better safe than sorry. Did you know a woman found a black widow spider in a bunch of supermarket grapes?”

Mom unlatches her silver bead necklace and sets it on the granite counter with a pretty click. “Can’t say that I did.” She meets me at the stove and pushes my hair behind my ear, frowning. “How are you handling the awful news?”

“News?”

“About that poor girl.”

“Oh that. I don’t know. Aren’t I supposed to wait for Elaine Ricker to tell me how to handle it?”

“Chilly night.” She turns away and rubs opposite arms, heading for the sink. “We can talk about it later. If you want to. Or not.” She covers the lettuce with a paper towel and pats it carefully. “Who called?”

“Oh, the voice mail? That was a reporter.” I hold my breath.

“Leaving their personal number? Pushy.”

She heard more than I thought. “It’s just the same old,” I say.

“If only it were. Dr. Ricker warned me that this new discovery in the woods would rekindle the media’s interest in you. I didn’t want to do this during Girls’ Night, but that call makes it clear: we need to talk about how we’ll manage intrusions into our privacy.”

As if having reporters crouching in the bushes outside our house last fall, or setting blankets next to ours on the Tanglewood lawn last summer, was manageable. That’s the special talent of Gwen Spunk, biomedical engineer. MacArthur Genius Award winner at the tender age of thirty-five. Survivor of *Having Your Child Abducted*. Other moms pop Valium. Mine strategizes.

“Dr. Ricker advises a no-tolerance policy when it comes to the media,” she says. “I agree.”

“She mentioned that. I don’t see how local news reporters are the enemy. In fact, to hear Paula Papademetriou tell it, the police are the ones who screwed up by not watching Donald Jessup in the first place.”

“Dealing with reporters isn’t useful to your healing. In fact, quite the opposite.”

I consider pointing out that spending hours alone after school during torrential downpours is not useful to my healing. Instead, I grunt.

She sticks her index fingers into the ends of her eyes and stretches them into slits. “By the way, which reporter was it?”

“Ryan Lombardi,” I lie, tossing out a name less likely to ping Mom’s radar, since Paula was way aggressive last time around.

“Is Ryan a woman?”

“Ryan is a man.”

“That’s odd. I thought I heard a woman’s voice.”

“Nope.”

“Male or female, we aren’t letting a reporter ruin Girls’ Night,” she says.

Every night is Girls’ Night. From a medical perspective, Erik Meijer is my father, but that’s pretty much the extent of it. I’m not even supposed to know Erik was Mom’s sperm donor, but I figured it out around age ten, and since then it’s been a silent understanding among the three of us, along the lines of Santa Claus. I know the truth, Mom and Erik get that I know the truth, but talking about it would spoil the magic. My discovery is based on our identical looks (Erik is half-Japanese and half-Dutch, which for us translates into being tall, with blue almond-shaped eyes, oval faces, and pale skin, for me, with a dusting of freckles) and, more directly, the legal paperwork Mom keeps on the family desktop outlining said sperm donor’s parental rights (none). Keeping my knowledge on the down-low saves me from taking a stand if vague tensions erupt, as they inevitably do, when Mom feels Erik is overstepping. Despite all this unspoken weirdness, Erik’s always been devoted to Mom, especially when she didn’t get tenure, and apparently that’s some kind of learn-who-your-real-friends-are moment. It’s mutual, because when Erik was being wooed away from her lab by the big Ivy across the Charles River, Mom was beside herself until he rejected their offer.

How she resists an übersmart, ridiculously fit hottie who’s

devoted to her and gave her his guys to produce a fabulous kid like me is another question entirely.

Mom circles behind me and reaches up to give my shoulders a gentle squeeze. “What’s in the oven? It smells like chicken.”

“Bingo.”

“Really lovely, Julia.”

I should admit it’s precooked supermarket rotisserie chicken, but she’s already yelling into the fridge. “Thanks for getting dinner going! The rain had traffic at a standstill! Did you know the Aberjona overflowed and they closed Main Street?”

“I notice rain, yes,” I say.

She produces a bruised onion triumphantly. “This should perk up the salad.”

I take the onion and set to work at the cutting board. The knife gets stuck in the mealy layers. “I don’t care that you were late,” I lie. It’s a fine line, wanting Mom around, but not wanting Mom around as much as in the Berkshires.

“I care.” She cups her hand over mine. “I’ll slice. You finish the salad.”

I drop the knife and move to the sink. Mom chatters about a dating epidemic among her latest crop of postdocs while I squint through the window. Somewhere in that purple darkness is an improbably gorgeous, rolling grass lawn. We are the last people in the world who should have a backyard, given that Mom spends most of her life under artificial light and I’m

afraid of trees in any number. Yet there's our backyard, a rarity in Shiverton, where grand colonials and Victorians are wedged into lots the size of postage stamps. We even have a deck and Adirondack chairs, price tags still tied to the legs.

The knife slices, onion to wood, *chop, chop, chop*, a solid noise that I should like, but it flicks at my belly.

"Truth be told, I had a difficult day," Mom says. "The rhythm gets lost when the lab director goes on sabbatical. Grievances take root among the more difficult personalities. And obviously I feel guilty about being late for dinner again. Perhaps it's not the best night to strategize. I'm not thinking clearly."

"It's not like I'm going to call her back," I say.

The knife hangs in the air. "Her?" she says.

"Him. I meant him."

Mom smiles tightly at the board and starts a vigorous hand-over-hand chop. "The Berkshires are looking better every minute." She catches my alarm at my slip and misinterprets it. "Don't worry, we're not going anywhere."

I manage a fake laugh. "Speaking of difficult personalities, I saw Mrs. Lapin today. She hasn't changed."

"Still hard on Liv?"

"You could say that. Actually, she's worried the reporters are going to start up again, too. Because, you know, they might catch her off guard, when her hair isn't perfect. Or Liv's hair isn't perfect. That would be worse, I think."

Mom grimaces, slipping on quilted mitts and pulling the chicken from the oven. Its taut skin crackles. The smell fills

the kitchen, and I know it's heavenly, and that I should feel hunger, but there's nothing.

"We all have different coping mechanisms," Mom says.

"Deborah is a narcissist so obsessed with her daughter's shiny image that Liv isn't *allowed* to cope." I rinse the cutting board and wash the knife. "She barely gives Liv room to breathe. Now Liv's seeing Shane Cuthbert, which is wrong on so many levels."

"Liv was always a bit fickle. Maybe her tastes have changed."

"Shane tastes like rancid meat, trust me. Or like pot. A pot-burger," I say.

"I remember him as a handsome kid. Friendships evolve, Julia. Maybe you're reacting to the fact that the Liv you've returned to junior year isn't the same Liv."

"Friendships *evolve*?"

"What Liv went through was horrific, but it wasn't half of what you experienced. Maybe she truly is okay. And you've just outgrown each other. I know that's hard to accept."

I throw the knife into the sink with a clatter. "We've outgrown each other?"

Mom's shoulders freeze. She searches for a spot to rest the pan, but the counter is cluttered with paper bags, and the table is ten steps away. She's trapped, and she has to listen to me. Because the black thing is here in the kitchen with us.

"I mean, you have an inquisitive mind. A really, really good mind. And sometimes we look for answers that aren't actually there because we don't want to face the reality that things have changed," Mom says.

“That’s a load of bullshit.”

“Don’t be crude.” Her mitts tighten on the sides of the pan, and the fat underneath the chicken lists. “This is getting heavy.”

“Something’s off with Liv,” I insist. “You don’t refuse to talk about an experience, however awful, with the only other person in the world who understands what it was like to go through it. Nor do you start dating a half Orc. Suggesting that Liv has outgrown her friendship with me is your not-so-subtle way of implanting the idea in my head because you don’t want me to hang around with her.”

Mom grips the edges of the pan. “That’s untrue.”

“You probably feel like what happened to that girl Ana shows how dangerous it was to save Liv. Like it proves some lesson,” I say.

“How could you ever say such a thing? I’m not a monster!” she says.

“You never liked Liv. I did the right thing by saving her, but you hate her so much you couldn’t even be proud of me.”

“You think you did the right thing.”

“I know I did!” I step forward and Mom jumps. The pan tips and fat splashes across her left arm. She cries out. I cover my hands with a kitchen rag and grab the pan, and she bolts to the sink, wrenching on the cold water valve. The smell of burned flesh and butter fills the kitchen.

“Mom?”

Pain twists her mouth. She looks away.

“I’m so sorry,” I say softly.

She shuts off the water and inspects the mark, blazing pink. I set the pan on the table and spread paper towels on a spray of fat congealing on the tile. She blows at the burn while digging one-handedly in the junk drawer for wound salve. When she finally climbs onto the leather counter stool, arm slathered in goo, I hold my breath, waiting for her to say something bouncy, like “At least I’m a righty!” or “If you didn’t want chicken, you should have said so!”

She blows on her arm. This time, her eyes are closed. Outside, wind chimes tinkle helplessly in the bluster.

“Mom?”

“I’m always proud of you.”

“I know.”

“I don’t hate Liv. But sometimes I do think there are better friends for you. Remember Alice next door? Whatever happened to Alice Mincus?”

“Mom,” I whisper. “I haven’t hung around with Alice since fifth grade.”

Her eyes open and settle on me, the fine skin underneath newly crosshatched and gray. “A mother wants the best for her daughter. That is all. Can we just be quiet for a few minutes?”

Deborah wanted things for Liv, too. Different things. The pageant career she blew when she had Liv, for one. Living in the Northeast stunted that, since pageant culture is more foreign to New England than sweet tea and hush puppies. Then there was the virtuous persona that Liv resisted. When we were thirteen, Liv got the idea to meet this guy she liked and ride the T into

Boston to see a free concert. His name was Stevie Something, and he was seventeen. Which doesn't seem old now, until I think about a guy around my age dating a thirteen-year-old. Liv told Deborah she was going to my house, and I told Mom the reverse, and we took a bus to Parlee, the next town over. We met Stevie Jerkface and a friend, Nameiforget, who was supposed to be my "date" except that I don't think he was expecting a flat-chested child. Stevie Jerkface was drunk or high, and Liv giggled nonstop while we waited on the platform. Once we got on the train, the Jerky twins shared nips that smelled like pinecones. I refused, got called a word I'd never heard, and we were abandoned at the next stop—Savin Hill, or as the locals call it, Stab 'n' Kill. At which point a large homeless woman in a dress boarded the train and wandered around the car. When she bent over, we saw she wasn't wearing underwear. And that she'd been using newspapers as toilet paper, because they were still stuck there. I vomited in my mouth. Liv buried her face in my sternum. The story ended when we begged a T cop to ride the train home with us to Parlee and called Mom, throwing ourselves at her mercy.

So when Mom suggests Liv is a questionable influence, I can't deny it. But together we have history. An undeniably funny history.

Mom slides off the stool and digs through her bag for Advil, twisting the cap with her teeth and knocking back two. "I think it's important that we see Dr. Ricker together. Sort through all your questions. She thinks your obsession with the case is getting in the way of your progress."

“Actually, Dr. Ricker is on board with my approach. She even wants to hypnotize me to regain my lost memories.”

Mom looks sideways at me.

“It’s either that, or play with dolls,” I add.

“That sounds a bit . . . regressive.”

“Regressive would be hanging around with my friend from elementary school.”

“Alice has always been good to you,” Mom protests.

“I believe you mean good for you.”

Mom pops a third Advil. I wish she would laugh.

“Let’s talk about Deborah again. She’s beside herself about the girl in the woods,” I say. “To the extent that she could have been her mother. That would have been upsetting.”

Mom chokes. I slap her back, fearing I might break every fine bone through her shirt. She waves me away. I pour her a glass of water and continue. “Also, the news will take away from her Catholic Woman of the Year announcement, which is clearly a competing local news item. I don’t know how WFYT is going to decide which to cover.”

“Try to cut Deborah Lapin some slack, please,” Mom rasps as she pads across the kitchen and eases a glass from the hanging wine rack. “You’re not being respectful.”

I serve the meal that neither of us wants, tonging soggy salad onto our plates. The suction sound of Mom opening the wine fridge is the tearing off of a figurative bandage: a natural marker for a scene change.

So I go there.

“What happens if the woman in the woods has some connection to Donald Jessup?” I ask.

“Then the police will find that out. And hopefully, her family will have some closure,” Mom says, filling her glass to the top with pale wine. “But that’s not a story you have to follow. It doesn’t have import for you.”

“Kind of hypocritical, don’t you think? Criticizing me, given you’re someone who spends your whole life questing for knowledge.”

She moves her wineglass in a slow circle. “You make my life sound like a Homeric epic.”

“A scientist’s mandate is to question,” I say.

“Not when the question is irrelevant,” she says.

“Relevance is an elusive concept. Its meaning is impossible to capture through logic.”

“Something is relevant to a task if it increases the likelihood of accomplishing the goal. Your task is healing; your goal is to be well.” Mom swirls the straw-colored liquid. “Trying to make connections between yourself and Ana Alvarez is not healing, and it will not make you well.” The windowpane above the sink rattles in its casing.

“I take it you’ll be drinking your dinner this evening?” I rise and stack her full plate on my empty one.

Mom points with her glass. “Maybe everything’s not as complicated as you think it is.”

“You’re the one who taught me to think critically. That most stories are not black and white.”

“On the color spectrum, black and white represent the highest level of contrast to the human eye. Maybe viewing a situation in black and white is seeing critically,” she says, smiling as she turns it over in her mind, annoyingly mellow.

“Okay, here’s black and white for you. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, there are approximately 258,000 child abductions each year. Only 115 children are abducted by strangers. That’s four one-hundredths of one percent of total abductions, and fourteen one-thousandths of one percent of total children reported missing. The odds of Donald Jessup stumbling upon Liv, me, and Ana Alvarez in the woods by chance is infinitesimal. So what does that mean? It may mean nothing. You can look at it as a fluke, or you can consider the alternative. I’d think a MacArthur Genius would have no trouble seeing that.” I blow past her and dump the plates into the sink with a clatter. “Perhaps you can act like the mother and fill the dishwasher tonight.”

Mom’s smile dissolves. “Donald Jessup is dead, Julia.” She sets her glass on the counter and reaches for her phone. “I need to speak with Dr. Ricker.”

As she shuffles away, texting, I snatch the tinfoil wedge from the fish mug and tuck it into my jeans pocket. I throw my messenger bag over my shoulder, the hard spine of my notebook sticking out of the top at a jaunty angle, and head for the stairs.

She stops texting and suddenly looks up. “Homework?”

“Tons,” I yell, charging up the stairs and slamming my bedroom door. I scoot down in my bed with the laptop against

my bent knees and bring up the WFYT Web site. A new headline inside a banner blazes across the top: PAROLE BOARD CHIEF UNDER FIRE. I click it to see Paula, her dark hair brushed behind one ear, the other side in a vintage Hollywood wave. Square red fingernails pop from the cuffs of her cheetah trench coat and gleam on the microphone. Behind her are trees, stark in the camera's blazing light.

“One year after the Shiverton Abduction, WFYT wants to know why parolee and convicted sex offender Donald Jessup was not properly monitored when he attempted to kidnap two teenage girls”—wave of one lacquered hand—“from this wooded enclave on the edge of the suburb of Shiverton, last fall.”

THE SHIVERTON ABDUCTION: ONE YEAR LATER materializes in front of a graphic of silhouetted pine trees. Then the Fells entrance is gone, and it's Paula, sitting in an office across a desk from a guy wearing a purple tie and a badge plate. He has a long, Roman face, sunken cheeks, and shadows under thick-lidded eyes. Across the bottom of the screen reads PAROLE BOARD CHIEF VALERIO PANTANO.

Paula scissors her legs and leans forward.

“Donald Jessup was on parole following his 2010 conviction of stalking a woman with intent to harm, before he brutally attacked two females in the Middlesex Fells Reservation in November 2013. Mr. Pantano, who is responsible for monitoring serial offenders on parole?” Paula asks.

“The governor is convening an outside committee to examine the monitoring of Mr. Jessup,” Pantano says.

“Was it the psychiatrist who treated Donald Jessup following his conviction in 2010? Who said, and I quote: ‘His prognosis is excellent. I do not suspect he will ever be at risk for violence?’” Paula says.

“I am not qualified to speak toward his psychiatrist’s findings,” Pantano responds.

“Was it the probation officer who rarely visited Jessup at his home, never talked with neighbors or local police to know if he violated his parole, and ignored complaints by coworkers at the GameStop where he worked that Mr. Jessup made them feel uncomfortable?”

“The actions of the probation officer in question are being examined internally,” Pantano says.

“Or is it the seven members of the Massachusetts parole board who granted parole to this high-risk offender? The seven men and women appointed by the governor who decided Donald Jessup should be allowed back on the streets of Shiverston, so that he could strike again?” Paula presses.

Pantano runs the tip of his pinky finger over a ring on the other hand.

“The seven men and women who directly report to you?” Paula adds.

Pantano grimaces. “I cannot say that the parole board or the police did all they could to ensure public safety.”

“Let me be clear: you’re telling me you cannot say that the parole board or the police did all they could to ensure public safety,” Paula repeats.

Pantano twists his gold ring hard.

“The governor is convening an outside committee to examine the monitoring of Mr. Jessup, who has since committed suicide while awaiting sentencing in custody at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Cedar Junction, as you know. I have no conclusions at this time,” Pantano says.

Switch to the studio, and the pancake-faced reporter, now in the anchor chair, asks Paula if what they just heard is the department’s official statement.

“You heard him, Ryan,” she says. “Parole Board Chief Valerio Pantano cannot say that the parole board or the police did all they could to ensure public safety. We’ll keep following this story it develops. Live in Shiverston, I’m Paula Papademetriou. Back to you.”

I whistle. “Damn, girl,” I murmur.

My last thought before I fall asleep is of a severed pinky finger in a box.

I wake in the predawn dim with an anger hangover. The memories come at night now, more vivid than the daymares. So real that I’m lying here thoroughly pissed, because I remember the days after the woods, in the hospital, like it just happened. I’d been ready to cry with Liv, looked forward to a good, long, cleansing cry, one that included survivor high fives and hugs. Instead, she had observed me with an alien lack of empathy, refusing to acknowledge my busted ankle, my terror, or the fact that I took her place in hell.

Everything had looked creamy from the morphine drip, lit

from within, with glowing trails coming off the nurses' fingers as they tended to my IV and adjusted the traction ropes that held my foot. The blue fluorescent bar above my head made Liv look angelic.

"You went to heaven," I'd said, all dopey.

"I went where?" Liv asked.

"Never mind. It's the drugs. You came. How'd you get out?"

"I sprinkled a ground-up Ambien in Deborah's pinot noir and begged a ride from Boseman."

Liv's cousin Boseman was a party hanger-on who stunk of cloves and always looked me up and down with skittery eyes. He was at least twenty-four and made beer runs for the whole school, taking too much money and skimming off the top.

"I'm glad you came," I said.

"Of course I came." Liv stared at the IV taped to my hand.

"Where's my mom?"

Mom hadn't left my side. She slept in a vinyl chair under a blanket and ate leftover Jell-O off my tray. I figured Erik had finally dragged her to get something real to eat. Later, I found out she'd been in the parking lot arguing with a reporter doing a stand-up, which is when they plop themselves at the scene of the action, like town hall or a burning house. And that Liv had bumped into her on the way in.

"I have no idea," Liv said. I don't know why she lied.

"So she doesn't know you're here," I said, sulking. Even half-sedated, I wanted Mom to see what a good friend Liv was, checking up on me.

“Did you really think I was dead?” Liv asked.

“No. I get confused. Like I said, it’s the pain medicine.” I held up the round end of my morphine pump. It had a button in the middle that I pushed every hour. The other end was tipped with a cannula that delivered the drug into my spine. Every part of me hurt, but mostly my ankle, the one Donald Jessup snapped. Ropes and pulleys forced my body to form new bone to repair the break: an impressive contraption that you might mention if you were seeing it for the first time.

“I bet the morphine confuses things. Makes your memories unreliable. But all things considered, that’s probably best. Forgetting, in order to move on,” Liv said.

“There are gaps. But I remembered his face enough to ID him. And the things he said.”

Liv’s smile went stiff, as though she caught it before it slipped away. “Things?”

I shimmied down into my blanket a touch. Jessup’s voice was still in my head: the jangly shouts and the sharp orders. The stammering when he was jonesing. The spooky calmness when he arrived at an idea. “He talked a lot.”

“Did you tell the police what he said?”

Her question confused me. “They weren’t interested in what he said to me. They were interested in what he did to me.”

“You weren’t raped. They told me you weren’t raped,” Liv said quickly.

There are other violations. Like forcing someone to see something in a pit that will haunt them forever.

“I wasn’t raped.” I said it wearily.

“See? We’re both fine now.” She reached for my hand, but I left it there, tethered to its needle.

“Why are you downplaying it?” I said.

She grabbed my other hand and patted it enthusiastically. “I’m simply trying to say we’re okay.”

“We’re okay now.” I sounded sour. For a second, I had wished I was her, unblemished and upbeat. Already looking ahead. Maybe I could act normal too, if I could get the fractals of my memory and how Liv was acting right then to make sense. “Can I ask you a question?” I said.

“Yes?” Liv said.

“What did you do after you got away?”

Liv asked if I was chilly and didn’t wait for my answer. She pulled the sheet to my chin and perched on the bed, speaking mechanically, with measured beats and pauses. “I ran back down the trail. I had no cell—you had yours, remember?—so I had to drive all the way home before I could call the police. They went and looked for you, exactly where I told them, where the Hill crests, to the exact spot where I—”

“Left me.”

She sighed like I was a child.

“Were you with them? The searchers?” I asked.

“Everyone was there. The whole town came out, it was over the top”—*Did she roll her eyes?*—“you’d just vanished.”

“Were you there looking for me?” I had to force myself to be still under my blanket.

“I wanted to,” she said, smoothing the blanket across my

chest. “But they wouldn’t let me. I had to be examined. Make my report. Besides, they said if I went back in the woods, it would distract the volunteers.”

“They wouldn’t let you?” I asked.

“Of course not. I mean, he was still out there,” she said.

“So was I.”

Liv stared hard at the muted TV, twisting a bit of blanket between her fingers. Red, white, and blue streamers rippled across the screen and dissolved into stars that chased one another in a circle and split to re-form the number three. I’d memorized all the promos: *Trust WFYT—the Friend You Can Trust!*—for the local angle on the biggest miracle-recovery story since *Elizabeth Smart*. Paula Papademetriou folded her arms and nodded. I softened a little, watching Liv frown and pick at the cotton weave, and considered asking what she thought of Paula Papademetriou, just to break the tension.

“To be honest, as long as we’re fine, it’s really not a big deal,” Liv said.

Her words hurt more than my junk ankle and my briar-shredded back and my hypothermic hands and feet. I twisted on my hip and faced the wall. After a while she left. I rolled back and felt under the sheets for my morphine pump, grabbing the TV remote in my other hand. By then the twenty-four-hour news stations had picked up the story. Every show had some version of the same opening shot—the main entrance to the woods, its trees blanched dry and pale in the camera lights. The woods I knew were wet and black. Newscasters used phrases like *plucky teen* and *heroine* and *remarkable courage*.

When one segment ended, I found another on a different station. Some channels covered my story twice in the same hour. The story became more horrific with every telling, proving that we'd been through hell, and that Liv should have been relieved that we were alive, grateful we both made it out, and shocked that it had happened. Yet she was none of these things. And I wanted to know why.

After a while, I let the morphine pump fall, and swore I'd never let anything cloud my mind again.

My alarm blasts Kiss 108. I roll over and hammer the top with my fist, then feel for the thick glasses I abandoned for contacts in sixth grade. My notebook lies, propped on its fanned pages, spine-up on the floor next to my bed. The memory trails off like the ends of clouds. I grab a pen and scribble in the growing light:

Things I Know About Liv:

- Drove home before calling the police
- Said my memory is unreliable
- Lied