

**School of Creative Arts, Media and Social Inquiry**

**Our Dark Places: the shadows between public record, private lives  
and ethics in true crime–inspired fiction**

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**Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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## **Dedication**

To Kristian, for rescuing me from my own dark places throughout the writing of this thesis. Your clever insights, emotional, practical support and constant love made this possible.

And to my supervisors: Susan Bradley Smith and David Whish-Wilson, for their intelligent, invaluable advice and support. I don't know if I would have had the confidence to complete this thesis without your encouragement and mentorship.

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## **PhD Title: Our Dark Places – The Shadows between Public Record, Private Lives and Ethics in True Crime–Inspired Fiction**

### **Abstract**

My research project consists of a creative work and an exegesis. *I Shot the Devil* is a true crime–inspired fiction manuscript that melds memoir with fiction. My exegesis locates itself in debates surrounding feminism, representational politics and existing cultural historians’ enquiry into creative responses to trauma such as crime, via two autoethnographic essays. Both work in tandem to explore the ethical, ideological and epistemological issues surrounding the narrativised representation of marginalised subjects, including victims of crime. While engaging with contemporary true crime–inspired fiction texts including crime memoir, these essays seek to catalogue and address the unique ethical quandaries that arise from fictionalising true crime. They also seek to explore the complex cultural topography surrounding sensational true crime events. This exegesis proposes that true crime–inspired fiction texts such as *I Shot the Devil* can assist in collapsing culturally constructed dichotomies between what we conceive of as private and public narratives, the objective and subjective, the real and the fictive and ultimately, challenges what constitutes an archival source

\*I would like to make a note that in *I Shot the Devil*, the usage of US spelling in the main body of the narrative is a purposeful rhetorical choice. In *Resident Alien*, the parts of narrative allegedly written by an Australian character, the spelling follows Australian rules and usage.

*I Shot the Devil*

I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea, except I think it's because in addition to the fact that the sea changes, and the light changes, and ships change, it's because we all came from the sea. And it is an interesting biological fact that all of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea – whether it is to sail or to watch it – we are going back from whence we came.

– John F Kennedy

**Prologue: *Resident Alien***

***October 31, 1994***

*Why me? Why him?* I asked the darkness.

*Well, hell, because it's fun,* the darkness answered.

At that moment, October 31, 1994, 11:11 p.m., the darkness had six heads, twelve arms, and twelve legs. The woods were all around, part of it, already knowing everything and swollen with our secrets.

You know that record *Rumours*, the one with the gaylords in leotards on the cover that everyone's parents have? Well, that's how it all started. Someone said something to someone and someone's mother heard it and then it's all over the school, the PTA, and later, the news: Satan worship, group sex, animal sacrifice.

West Cypress Road Woods have a soundtrack. In the daytime, it's all Disney: hummingbirds and redheaded woodpeckers, the light footfall of deer. At night, the deep-bellied hoot of barn owls and nightjars and more sinister rustling, deeper in the dark. There was an occasional homeless guy wandering through, kids parking, getting high, fooling around. Wildcats, you think; wolves, you imagine. Another layer of the soundtrack was the noises he made in the dark: gurgles, snorts, moans. Feet shuffling in dirt, the crunching of sticks under boots and canvas sneakers.

Steve said that he'd killed a bear not far from there. He claimed to be a hunter, but all he had for evidence was a bearskin rug that none of us wanted to go near, let alone sit on.

We told Andre we had something for him. It was the only way to get him there that night without arousing his suspicion. Andre knew something was up – he was sweating and his eyes were unfocused, but he kept licking his lips and pumping his fist. Still, he came without fight, slapping a mosquito and drinking a beer too fast, humming what sounded like “You gotta fight for your right.”

Death's a lottery, Ricky Hell once said. Now Andre's number was up, everyone agreed. That's why he was smiling, Danny said. He compared Andre to a white cat: blond as a mouse and blind as a bat. It explained his resting aggression – natural disadvantages that made him overly willing to please, but also extremely

aggressive. He wheezed from asthma and wore contacts most days, but sometimes tinted glasses. He had a pear-shaped, near womanly body; he almost always smelled like beer and plant matter: something botanical, earthy, rank.

Sometimes it's like the movies, a montage of faces, feet, and hands, kicking, breaking. The crack in his expression where he knows what's going to happen and he seems less afraid and even a little sad.

I rewind the tape, the bit where the reel is baggy with wear and warped, the break in Andre's voice, *Why me?*

You heard it all and you saw and you saw.

The worst bit is remembering before, the bits you can remember.

At Wendy's near the highway, all sharing the same Frosty and French fries at the back booth, before getting kicked out by some junior manager. Danny making devil horns and singing along in that deep growl of his, "Blood will rain down". Carole, still in her Dairy Queen uniform, smelling like Windex and sugar. Carole, grabbing you by your denim jacket, running her fingers down all the badges, like she was ticking boxes – yes, correct. Megadeth. Slayer. Metallica. The Crue. Tick, tick, tick. Getting high in the parking lot in the tray of the short-bed Chevy, with the tarp covering us, Hellhammer turned up so loud it was shaking the truck, and smelling dope and menthols and her Bonne Bell lip balm. Smiling at each other. This little moment of belonging before everything breaks.

You didn't do it, did you? You just saw and you saw and you saw.

Some nights it king-hits you and you're on the ground, tasting blood, hands over your ears – yours, his, you don't even know. You don't know what you saw.

You don't even know if you made this all up. The same way you didn't feel real while you were in America. Whatever happened there feels like an MTV video clip; you keep editing and editing and then in the final cut, Andre gets up and walks away.

## Chapter 1

*September 10, 2010*

I used to think that I'd escaped Newport, but as I got older I realized that I'd simply absorbed the town into my system, like when I ate a nickel as a kid and never saw it re-emerge. Newport had become a part of my intimate geography, ingrained and shadowy. Near my heart, the library, where I hid and read *Les Miserables* until the German librarian kicked me out. Near my spleen, the Waldbaums where I was busted for shoplifting. Take a right and you'll hit my liver, the nightclub Escapades, where I took my first drink, seriously underage. Over there by the gloomy underpass to Newport train station, my stomach, where I threw up the drinks, somehow glittery and foamy like I'd ingested a snow globe.

And yet all these parts that I'm showing you, these were not the worst parts, not by a long shot.

I was initially excited when my editor from *Newsday* called and asked me to come down to the Rockville Center, near to where their new digs were located. I worked on their glossy monthly mag supplement called *Island Life* – long-form crime features that you could sort of sink your teeth into – while supplementing my income with boring-as-batshit writing gigs for real estate agents and insurance companies. Denise preferred a facer to a phoner, which meant a coffee meeting. The magazine had decentralized, which meant many of the supps writers worked “remotely” (translation: from the local Starbucks), but Denise eschewed Starbucks and all chains. Denise was “hyperlocal” and into “decluttering” – she'd applied that concept to the magazine, which she was trying to make a little bit *New Yorker* meets *Salon*, but slicker and more superficial. And all the economizing and prettifying was working; there was less profundity, less terror, and more artisan ice cream, loft conversions, and suburb profiles. This, alongside my tasteful gore, meant that even in the aftermath of the GFC, *Island Life* was selling. We were still in print and even glossier than before. I was nearly a “lifer” – which meant a guaranteed gig with them. This next job would be the clincher, which was lucky because my father's medical costs were astronomical and far exceeded his NYPD pension. I had heard of people in his care unit being moved to state facilities. I toured one and the infernal

moaning and occasional screams in various dialects, the smell of piss and shit mingling with disinfectant, was enough to make me write a living will.

Even though the fastest route was the Southern State Parkway, there was a three car pile-up, which meant I had to take Sunrise and drive down Newport Avenue, past the train station, which was just blocks away from Roosevelt High.

At the lights, I looked out at the now fenced-off Old Res, as locals called it, a dried-up catchment filled with old soda and beer cans, scrap metal, and according to the adults, hepatitis. Besides from some fencing and a new billboard (the old one had featured the obese man who got skinny on Subway holding his old fat pants, grinning), I was semi-surprised it was still there. In freshman year, my classmate Linda Bauer was dismembered from below her armpit to her groin, while clambering up an embankment onto the track, wasted on wine coolers.

All the local papers memorialized her and somehow in the floral tributes and acrostic poems that enshrined her picture at our junior high – L is for lovely, I for inspired, and so on – somehow, they forgot the N for Nasty, D for diabolical, and A for Autocratic. But Linda was also L for lucky, in that she didn't have to go to any of the three high schools in the districts of Newport and Belmont. My dad, who had access to the crime scene pics, told me all about it the next morning over eggs benedict and OJ. He knew I'd been at the Old Res and said the way I drank, the company I kept, it should have been me.

I took out half an Ativan from my purse and swallowed it dry.

It was 11:11 a.m. when I found the Lyrebird Café; I was either three minutes early or eleven minutes late, I honestly couldn't remember. Denise was a good friend and she wouldn't sweat it – she was already in a booth drinking cappuccino at the retro Formica table. I noted her little bottle of Sweet N Low on the table. Denise wasn't too much older than me, but she was literally twice my size. Her breath permanently smelled like diet Cup-A-Soup, ketosis, and breath mints. She was no-carb, exercised constantly, but at her lightest was still two hundred pounds. If I'd learned anything about life, it was that you need padding; Denise had figured this out. It was not just armor; it made her difficult to ignore, allowed her to break down doors. I would not insult her to say that despite this, Denise had a pretty face – her weight was like an expertly tailored power suit. She wore a lot of vintage dresses that

seemed to wrap her up like a gift, rather than sheathe her. And she was usually made up like a drag queen on a Saturday night. I guess you could take the girl out of New Jersey.

“Erin. It is so good to see you,” Denise enthused in her talk-show-host sincere fashion. “Sit. You look skinny.” She popped the last word out like she was snapping gum.

A waitress with swallow and star tattoos took my order. Denise had a tendency toward clucking and fretting, so whenever I met with her, I ordered too much food to pre-emptively assuage her fears. Today it was gluten-free cake and a full-milk cappuccino.

I took my coat off. My face felt flushed. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and winced. I looked somehow erased next to Denise. Wan. Wimpy. I was not breaking down doors – I was pulling down blinds in dark rooms.

“How’s your father?”

“He’s, um, in a kind of care facility. He hates it but ... it’s necessary. I’m cleaning out his place. Then I’m going to sell it.”

“Oh God.” She drove her hands across the table to touch mine. It was like they were warm liquid and my hands were a pile of autumn leaves. I recoiled impolitely and then offered them up Christ-like as an apology.

The cappuccino and cake arrived. I couldn’t really attempt the cake; instead, I sipped the lukewarm milky coffee, wishing I’d ordered an Americano. The Ambien had made the serrated edges of the morning softer; the lights in the café took on a romantic glow. I drummed my fingers on the counter. I’d given up my one-bedroom apartment in Bed Stuy months ago for the split-level bungalow on Oceanside Avenue, Massapequa.

Just talking about being in Nassau County, its proximity to Newport, or any of the roads that led me there, made me feel like there was a mosquito droning in my ear and then covertly biting me through the night. The house was always cold; it ate into my bones. I ached. I was wired. I was tired. Glasses dropped out of my hand; I fell asleep in the bath. I had started smoking again and always had low-level colds, tonsillitis. I hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep since ’94.

“Are you okay for money?” Out of another mouth this may have seemed impolite, impudent even – but I know Denise would have taken her checkbook out right then and there. Mother Hen, they called her at *Island Life*, because she knew

everyone's family names and birthdays, called you a cab after the Christmas party, and held your hand and your hair through a breakup barf, but she was also tough. When she was breaking balls and canning copy on most deadline days, she was the Seven Year Bitch (she'd been there seven years: seriously unimaginative). Then there were New Year Blimp and Shamoo. No one dared tell me what my nickname at *Island Life* was, but I doubt it was flattering.

"I'm all right. We're all right. For now."

My father had early-onset Alzheimer's that had rapidly turned him into a high-care patient – both aggressive and self-harming, flooding the house, wandering onto busy roads, threatening the mailman with a leaf blower. The life insurance settlement from my mom, back in the day, had taken ten years to pay out. While the delay in payment meant that Dad had gotten most of his more illegal addictions under wraps and the money had been placed in safe stocks and bonds, the galloping cost of my father's care meant it wouldn't last long.

"I can't believe I've never been to your house. Isn't Oceanside Avenue the same street as ..."

"The De Frio house? Nah. It's another Oceanside. They're not very imaginative with street names. And trust me, you don't want to go there. I told you, it's only marginally less haunted than Amityville."

Denise made a face like she'd sucked on a lemon. I believe I made one back. She was disappointed – imagine the possibilities of me and my batshit-crazy dad living on the same street as the Amityville Horror house. As soon as we moved in back in 1994, it was acknowledged by all who crossed its threshold that the house was haunted. It was damp and cold in winter, warm in summer; the old-lady smell of mothballs, kidney disease, and rose water never went away. The rattling sounds and bursts of cold air, the sensation of being watched, the flickering lights, and even the objects that seemed to transplant themselves from room to room, at the time seemed to be physical manifestations of our mutual grief, but they persisted. Since moving back in, I would walk into a room, foul tempered, and a lightbulb would explode. Sometimes a glass would jump off a shelf – hardly an Indian burial ground or demonic pig, I know, but still unnerving.

For someone with a little Zen garden on her desk and an out-of-office email sig that read *Ohm Name Padme Hum*, Denise liked true crime, and what's more she liked gore. Throw in a baby, or better yet a few babies, and Denise was happy.

Although she knew very little about my past, I trusted Denise more than I'd trusted any human since my mom. I knew if I drove to her brownstone at dawn with self-destruction in my heart, she would open the door and take me inside wordlessly to the sofa bed, despite her girlfriend standing behind her, with a face like Lot's wife.

"You'll be happy to know Editorial got great feedback on the Babylon Kung Fu School molestations. Even the freaking families liked it, which is like im-fucking-possible."

"Thank you." Praise burned my cheeks, incinerated me like a vampire in a cathedral. I could do without it.

"So ... kudos to you." There was a big breath at the end of the salutation. She was building up to something.

"Erin, I've got a story for you. It's short notice for a feature like this. We had the Bethpage baby beauty pageant scandal, but we've had to scrap it." Denise rocked in her seat, like a top-heavy see-saw.

"This story – it got emailed to me and Nick Jelen tried to claim it ... but I want you to have it."

Nick was my rival. I had taken him to lunch at Denise's insistence to talk about future features. He ordered grass-fed veal on sourdough and a bottle of Bordeaux and basically spent most of the lunch bullshitting about the community spirit of Brooklyn and its various small breweries. Like Denise, he was from New Jersey, but wouldn't be seen dead there, despite professing his love for Bruce Springsteen and his working-class spirit. At twenty-eight, with a wife, twin daughters, and a labradoodle, he was younger and faster than me and had won a few nonfiction prizes. He was good. Not as good as me, but he spent the hour telling me why he was. He let me pick up the tab and I carried the insult around with me for years. Later, I found out he had been sleeping with the intern and he'd left her with an infection that required months of antibiotics. I wished I'd ground glass into his veal sandwich, but now I understood why Denise had set it up: I hated cheaters; I was competitive as hell. Like a puppet master, she knew how to pull my strings and masterfully triangulate to bring out the best performance.

"Ever heard of the Newport Three?" She said it like you would a punch line. "A high school senior called Andre Villiers was murdered by his group of friends in Newport, Nassau County. A very photogenic Satanist by the name of Ricky Hell was the ringleader. He was shot dead on the scene, which was a major bummer because

he was like the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine – kind of a nineties Charlie Manson, but like, better looking.”

“Maybe? That was about ... 1994?” Instead of sounding vague, I’m sure I sounded stoned. You’d have to have lived under a rock to not hear about the murders, to not know the name Ricky Hell. Deception was not my forte. It was my father’s. It was one of the reasons I’m not a cop like him.

“Sixteen years ago. Halloween. You’re from Newport, right, Sloane? Were you, like, upstate or under a rock or something at the time?”

1994. I was sixteen. *You’re sixteen, you’re beautiful... and you’re mine.*

“Under a rock,” I managed.

“You must have at least been permanently stoned at the time because it was a huuuge story.” Denise ran with the pun. “It was a very sexy case: think Satanism, celebrity lawyers, Geraldo Rivera, essays in the *New Yorker*, opinion pieces about youth violence, drugs, video games, apathy, blah blah blah.”

She slid her iPad across the table – it was cued to a true crime channel called *Child’s Play: Kiddie Killers*. Klassy. The episode was titled “The Devil came to Newport: Ricky Hell and the Satanic teen thrill-kill murder of Andre Villiers.”

A beady-eyed man in a nylon suit and oversized spectacles, wearing a beige, old-school trench, wandered around a woody area. I recognized those woods – a mile from the Old Res. As he reached a clearing at “the spot” as we called it, the ring of stumps sat like makeshift bar stools: old beer cans and cigarettes, candy wrappers, and empty baggies littered the forest floor.

Denise provided me with a voice-over:

“Andre Villiers was eighteen when he was murdered, the same age as Ricky Hell and nearly two years older than Danny Quinlan-Walsh, Carole Jenkins, and Cormac O’Malley. Quinlan-Walsh was in placed in a secure facility in Westchester, a slap on the wrist, really. The other two didn’t even get charged – they were branded morally bankrupt and callow MTV babies. This is the only interview Danny Quinlan-Walsh made, right before he went batshit crazy and his lawyer told him to stop talking to the press.”

Oh, I remembered.

“I’ll fast forward to the interview with him.” Denise moved the cursor to 13:13. She sat watching me expectantly.

The clip jumped straight into an interview with Danny Quinlan-Walsh, in a starched Gap shirt. Danny Quinlan-Walsh, the hot WASP next door, with his long blond hair pulled into a neat ponytail, who looked like he was going to the junior prom and not a murder trial, except the part where he held up Satan's horns above his head for one of the reporters – which became an iconic image in 1994. There was a constellation of zits on his usually unblemished face: prison food. Despite that, he was healthy and strapping, a milk-fed, well-nourished middle-class teenager. I heard Danny's unreconstructed "Long Island" (hang onto the G, ditto with the *eye* in isle and drag out the *land* like doing so will save your life) for the first time in sixteen years:

*"I mean, I just don't know how it happened, man. Ricky had a plan and we just did it. He changed form once we got there. We all did. And then it like started, and we couldn't stop. There was no stopping. Ricky Hell, he like flew up and at the cop like a freakin' crow and the cop like shot him, like: bang, bang, bang, and Ricky was shouting, 'Pray for us, Pray for Satan.' And then it was, just, game over."*

"Game over," Denise repeated. "Like Mario Brothers or something." You could hear the silent *tsk tsk* of reprimand that followed, but I knew she was thrilled.

Listening to Danny, sixteen years later, I realize that it's not a voice numbed by fin de siècle apathy; in fact, his voice crackles with emotion. I wouldn't name that remorse, which is what was needed. It was disbelief. Danny seemed temporarily gone – in a cloud of crystal – and when his senses returned, well, wouldn't he be in for a fright.

The DA bought it; I had never bought it.

*"But for Danny Quinalan Walsh, it was indeed, game over," the narrator intoned. "The churchgoing quarterback was sentenced to fifteen years in a maximum-security Westchester County facility for the criminally insane."*

Next, a collage of photos of Danny Quinlan-Walsh on the family boat, *Dr. Zhivago*, at a lunch with his family. I was there that day; I remember Danny turning his metal tee inside out for the photograph. Another photo is from a sophomore dance and I'm in it – even if my face is blacked out and all you can see of me is a clinging cherry-red velvet dress. The hands around my waist are the size of mallets.

Danny Quinlan-Walsh. The memory of him was like the skin of milk at the top of the bottle, the cream of youth: the smell of clean sweat, menthol cigarettes, double-mint gum. The taste of my own blood in my mouth. The taste of Danny was

in my mouth and I had to remove it. I swallowed my frothy coffee. I gulped down water. Denise watched me with naked curiosity, fluffing her hair up.

“It’s cheesy, but you ought to watch it when you get home,” Denise pressed pause. “The sentence was reduced to six years after five because of diminished capacity and good behavior in time served. He was twenty-two years old upon release, has never done an interview since. Carole Jenkins, the only girl present, was exonerated with her boyfriend Cormac O’Malley and she wrote a book *Dancing with the Devil: How I Survived a Satanic Teen Murder*. I’ve scored a copy of the book from AbeBooks – already on its way to you via FedEx. It was out of print. The book came out early ’96, but by then, the buzz around the case had died down a bit.”

I remembered that Cormac, Carole’s semipermanent boyfriend, had been in my art class at Roosevelt High, but his face floated past me like confetti. I struggled to conjure up his features beyond his long bangs. I thought about digging up my old yearbooks – except, of course, I’d burned them.

“There were whispers surrounding the cop from Queens who shot Ricky Hell. He was a ...”

“Narco cop. Yeah.”

“Steve Shearer. Your dad know him?” Denise scanned me with what looked like mild scientific interest.

The name Steve Shearer was the mental equivalent of someone running a rusty knife down my spine. Sweat beaded where the blood might have been.

“He knew *of* him.”

“As I said before, he was Cormac O’Malley’s stepfather. Although an investigation was undertaken and it was ascertained that deadly force was used – it was a shoot to kill – but it was ruled a good kill nonetheless. It was dark, he aimed for a shoulder but shot him in the heart.”

“And then the face,” I finished.

“Correct. He shot Ricky fatally, in the aorta, and then in the left cheekbone, claiming he was resisting arrest, he aimed for the shoulder and missed. Ricky was a drug pusher, a Hispanic in an all-white area; he’d brained a white kid. Ricky Hell obviously wasn’t around to dispute his role as catalyst, activator, ringleader. Shearer’s a narco cop and rumored to have known Hell.” Denise rolled her eyes. “No one investigated the connection further. And Villiers – I mean, he simply doesn’t feature in any of this. His parents were Jehovah Witness, I think, and he was in

trouble with the law constantly. They condemned him, their own son. A meaningless death and lost in the trial and the media storm. He sank, like, without a trace.”

I had never felt any warmth or animation toward or from Andre. He had never lived in color to me and this translated to the press: Andre, “the victim,” was as one-dimensional as a victim as he was in life.

“It’s all kinda fishy to me. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you there’s a humongous human-interest element in these Satanic-style murders. You know, like the West Memphis Three and with false confessions and a cop killing a minority kid ...” Denise kissed her fingers in a *bellissimo* gesture.

“Erin?”

“Yes?” I said, placing my palm on my solar plexus. Breathe. My heart was in my throat. I tried to swallow some of the cake but it was gritty and a little stale; bile came into my mouth.

“Let’s find out why it really happened. Why Villiers was murdered. Let’s get an anniversary piece on the murder – sort of contextualize it in the whole post-Reaganite Satanic Panic context. Get a big sprawling portrait of the times type thing. Like the Amy Fisher story – a ‘where are they now?’ piece.”

By now my heart had plunged into my asshole, somewhere near the Old Res and the train station.

Newport had been coming for me all this time.

Denise leaned in.

“What’s with the hesitation? You’re not, like, religious.”

“I’m actually still a teeny bit Catholic.”

“Come off it. You started with the Amy piece, then you slam dunked the Cathy Carver abduction story, you nailed those kung fu kiddy fuckers. C’mon, Erin, Satanism in the suburbs!! This is gonna be your *pièce de résistance*.” Denise was like a demon cheerleader – she raised her arms in a V for victory, her meaty biceps oscillating.

“I can’t, Denise,” I managed, “I’m sorry. You should give it to Nick. It’s just not for me.”

“Give it to Mr Dick Disease?” Denise hissed. “What do you mean, it’s not for you?”

“It’s just a bit too close to home.” *The understatement of the millennium.*

My first three death knocks as a trainee reporter on the crime beat at *The Post* caused three consecutive heart attacks, earning me the nickname The Angel of Death. I knew that the nickname and rep persisted, and it was also the reason Denise chose me, favored me really. I remembered Denise pointing out my vowel sounds (waaant, maaalll) at the Christmas party, my use of the word *like*, commenting on what linguists refer to as “uptalk,” meaning my sentences traveled up with permanent uncertainty, maintained a raspiness.

She made a face.

“Let me tell you something, Erin. You are the Amy piece. You are the Cathy piece. You are Satanism in the suburbs.”

Was I ever.

“You grew up there, on the outside looking in,” she editorialized. I expected a smoke machine to be wheeled out next. “That’s why you write Long Island so well. Babe, your byline is borderline hot, but it won’t be for long.” Denise finished her cappuccino and typed something into her iPad. “Now eat your cake.”

The cake was Black Forest – maybe it was gluten-free, but it was packed with maraschino cherries and cream and glazed with dark chocolate. I picked up the fork and speared the center, easily disemboweling the three-tiered structure. It leaked cream and I licked at it uncertainly. Eating was hazardous. Like the Count of Monte Cristo, I’d marked the years since my adolescence – wearing my sentence on the inside: gastritis, food intolerances, gall stones. No, food was not really my thing. There was a police report and a doctor’s file about the size of *Les Miserables* about the things I liked.

“You want to be somebody, don’t you? Don’t let a mediocre writer like Nick take the gold. You’re not bronze.”

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?” she said. Denise was watching this, watching me. Her pupils dilated. She forked my cake. She ate a mouthful.

She smelled my animal ambition, underneath my all-day antiperspirant and the Anais Anais that I had been wearing since 1993.

I looked at myself, wan as a ghost, wearing an old coat that belonged to my mother, which still had the dry-cleaning receipt pinned to it.

“Erin, I’m getting the feeling you knew these kids.” She cocked her head, seeming to be doing an equation in her head that she already knew the answer to.

I had long had an atavistic knowledge that the past was not going to stay contained forever, but it had managed to sit there, mostly undisturbed. I had never researched, I had never even Googled the crime. I had never wanted to learn anything. I knew that Carole Jenkins wrote a book about her experiences. I knew that none of Andre's family engaged with the press (nor had Ricky's) and that the public largely believed Ricky murdered Andre as a sacrifice to Satan. There was a true crime book or two about the murders – I'd never read them. If it weren't for my job, I would have never had even gone online. I had no Facebook account. My Twitter account was attached to my byline and I had the blue egg usually reserved for trolls and technophobes. Denise eventually insisted on a staff photograph, a dinkus, but I was permitted to have it shot in the dark; it appealed to her sense of theater.

"I more than knew them. I was at Roosevelt High in ninth grade. I hung out with them – like, my nickname was Eerie Erin."

"Oh my fucking God." Denise was nearly hyperventilating.

"And Danny Quinlan-Walsh was my first boyfriend. And I, um, knew Ricky Hell. Biblically." Another forkful of cake went in.

"I love you. The personal angle, it's so Capote. You. Must. Do it. We could dig out your high school diaries, you know, like cute notes he wrote you in class ..."

"Mmmmm, unlikely," I managed. Not only was everything burned in a bonfire of my making, but those sweet notes were more ashes of unwanted memories: *DIE WHORE* written on the mirror in blood, a beanie baby with a noose around its neck.

No, Danny was not my first love, not by a long shot.

"You could get to Danny Quinlan-Walsh, make him go on record," she continued, leaning across the table and snatching my hand. Maybe even the Villiers family would talk to you too? There's something about you Erin – a story that needs to be resolved, a potential that's, like, begging to be fulfilled."

Her expression was cool, but her eyes screamed *closure* – maybe even *vision board* – and knowing Denise, *syndication*, *book deal*. "If you file by the eighteenth, we'll go to print on October 31st. The Halloween edition again!"

Barring Christmas Eve and the eighth of October – the date Danny and I had our last encounter – Halloween, next to Christmas, was one of the most traumatic anniversaries in my extensive back catalog.

When Ricky died on Halloween, I nearly did too. I was in an ICU in Bethpage, many miles away from West Cypress Road Woods, in a vodka- and sedative-induced semicoma. The song that was playing on repeat in my room that night, performed and written by eighties band Dramarama, was called “Anything, Anything.”

After I recovered, I was sent to my Aunt Marnie’s in Maine, without TV and central heating. It was the spring of 1996 when I returned to Long Island and went back to Massapequa and St. Mary’s. By then, my father had cleaned up his act and the media circus had died down. No one ever spoke of it to me. It was like it never happened – but over the last few months, I’d heard Ricky’s voice in my ear. *Eerie!* He was the only one who called me that. Sharp, like he was trying to get my attention. It had been sixteen years since I’d seen him.

“The cover story,” Denise vowed. “I promise you’ll be a lifer, at the end. I promise you that.”

If I was still alive at the end of it all.

“All right, I’ll do it,” I said, just to shut her up.

## Chapter 2

After another cup of coffee with Denise at the Lyrebird, I headed back to my car. I think the fact that it was fall, the exact time of year as Andre's death – the same smell of smoke and leaves and the same, crisp, biting quality to the air – created a sense of déjà vu and synchronicity.

I found myself back in my father's old gunmetal-gray Volvo sedan, turning down Morris to Lakeview and taking Hempstead Highway – literally on autopilot, en route to Roosevelt Fields Mall in Garden City. I could have easily gone to the Barnes and Noble in Westbury to buy a new notebook, as per my private ritual – new story, new notebook. This was not only a big detour but also my first return to Roosevelt Fields since '94.

I tuned the radio past Z100, a mainstream station all the Island kids listened to back in the nineties. One of the announcers brayed that it was Flashback Friday and I winced as I recognized the monotonic stream of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire." I turned the dial to ESPN and lit a cigarette as I headed down Oceanside Avenue to the Parkway.

An SUV pumping Eminem out of rolled-down windows cut me off as he illegally turned into Nassau Community College. I flipped the guy the bird and pressed on my horn for a full minute, before I turned to merge on Zeckondorf Boulevard.

As soon as I sighted the parking lot, I knew my return to Roosevelt Fields was a mistake. Dread knotted my stomach; my feet began to perspire, my palms began to sweat. I had forgotten how gargantuan the building was – it was the second-largest mall in the state and spanned two stories, plus a concourse level. The directory indicated new additions and the excision of older chain stores. Like its sister mall, Sunrise, Roosevelt Fields functioned like an airport and a destination in itself – a kind of small, insulated country, where kids of all races co-mingled in the very segregated white-bread Island. It was also a coliseum, an arena where commerce and class lines blurred. There were people packing guns. There were record stores and bookstores, portals out of Newport, and the Island itself, a jungle of hormones and subcultures seething and sedated by bright strip lighting and R and B auto-tuned Muzak.

I exited the car and walked what felt like a half mile from the parking lot to the entrance, where the smokers used to congregate but now seemed to be extinct. The exterior was the same – the building was the color of baked salmon, the signage written in apple-red Lucida Calligraphy font. I barely made it into the automated doors, which opened onto a Hannigan’s family restaurant.

Incidentally, it was at the Hannigan’s in Roosevelt Fields where I first got to first base with Danny, next to the cigarette machine – but more memorably, the adjacent Burger King was where I first met Ricky, who seemed to be getting to third with Carole Jenkins, his square hand jammed halfway up her denim cutoffs as she sat semi-perched, near catatonic, on his knee. Ricky, who resembled a depressed crow in his tight black tee and jeans, opened his mouth to accept the occasional greasy spiral onion ring she offered.

I recall Ricky was sitting on a backless swivel stool. He barely registered me, but his glassy eyes went straight to the book I had just shoplifted from the very same Barnes and Noble I was heading to now. It was a small book of poems by Edgar Allan Poe from the Great American Poet series. Then Ricky shifted Carole off his lap – she seemed to accept it good-naturedly – and Ricky seized the book, reading aloud while I squirmed with embarrassment:

*“It was night in the lonesome October of my most immemorial year.”*

He read the title, as if tasting it. The press had only got hold of a few photos of the brooding, sneering teenage Ricky, with his cut-glass cheekbones and black eyes. He’s in a tux at a family wedding, where he looks more like an Aztec king about to attend a sacrifice, his fleshy lips pursed in a scowl of moral disobedience. He was wearing a tight AC/DC T-shirt, with a Charles Manson smile, the white tops of his black eyes showing and all his white, strangely perfect teeth lined up like tombstones, vicious acne scars that marred his vaulting cheekbones. I have no photographs of him and my memory is porous from pain, but the shape of that day’s memory remains strong – the T-shirt read *Thunderstruck*. (After lightning strikes, lights up the sky, residue will fall. Fulgurite, they call it.) It was October 1993. Clinton was president, the World Trade Center towers were yet to targeted. This was a time before the word terrorism was a familiar taste on everyone’s tongue. Arrow, meet heart.

“‘Ulalume,’ huh?” Then he looked at me. It was not my heart that took the hit, but somewhere lower, the gut – the small intestine even. Love makes you shit water.

“Gay,” Danny sighed.

“These were the days when my heart was volcanic,” Ricky quoted. “Brutal assault,” he added, nodding at me in approval. There was a white-blond figure behind him, wearing an army greatcoat and tinted John Lennon shades, holding a super-sized milkshake that looked doll-sized in his giant’s hand: Andre Villiers. He looked like Ricky’s astral body – a phantom, a ghost.

Within a year, both boys would be dead.

In my thoracic cavity, a girdle of ribs, grayed-out lungs, a heart in contraction, a hard sternum where some of the pain emanated from: Ricky Hell. I walked, tapping my solar plexus and temple, trying to regulate my breathing.

Now despite retail going online, it seemed that on the Island shopping at the mall was still a regular competitive sport, rather than a chore or an occasion. Although it was lunchtime, midweek, teens on free periods or simply cutting class roamed in packs and pairs, wearing colorful puffer jackets and signature white iPhone ear buds. The gaggle of ye olde nineties gum-cracking girls and braying boys in their baggy pants, who clotted the arteries of the mall, who beached themselves on the benches lining the concourse, now looked so professionally groomed and stylized they resembled extras from the set of a music video who were playing misbehaving teenagers. I watched as they clowned and pouted in front of their smartphones. Some made out, some made war, draped on each other and vaped while typing on their devices.

I kept my eye on the prize and found my way into Barnes and Noble. The process of scanning the aisles, walking through the new releases into the literature and stationery section was somewhat calming. I immediately decided upon a hardcover notebook: candy striped along the spine, seaside themed, high Americana. Small painted figurines waved from the shore; a boy chased a spotted dog. A diner advertised chowder. A seagull crested a lighthouse. This was the kind of idyllic New

England I had dreamed of growing up in. The notebook was almost too pretty to write in, let alone depict a Satanic thrill-kill murder that had haunted my life to date, but part of me relished the perversity – the other part longed to escape into its landscape.

I paid the cashier and headed west to the exit and when I made it into the parking lot, I sat in my car with my purchase and lit a cigarette, taking deep breaths. Making lists normally calmed me; writing distanced me from emotion.

I wrote down the date, October 31, 1994: the story's anchor, my portal to the past. Then my title:

***Satan in the Suburbs: The Newport Three and the Making of a Satanic Teen Thrill Kill Murder***

*Follow-up:*

- 1) *Interview the rest of the NP3, including Carole.*
- 2) *Steve Shearer – look at arrest history/rep with narco cops; track down Ricky Hell's family; locate records of dealing/arrest sheet/juvie offenses.*
- 3) *Similar cases of minority kids being shot/Satanic murders, etc.*
- 4) *Andre Villiers (talk to living relatives) – victim profile, interest in Satanism and occult.*

Panic hummed around me in the car – the drone of the radio, the sound of my jagged breathing. The cardboard feeling, the derealized feeling was not waning. What Denise said had hit home to me: Ricky's motive for killing Andre was "classically" motiveless – a sacrifice to Satan. The whole point of the murders was that there was no point. The crime was one of 90s nihilism: heavy metal, drugs, disaffected youth. And Ricky Hell had both a rep and a rap sheet for dealing drugs. He was a disenfranchized minority. He and his sister grew up in foster homes and suffered physical and psychological abuse.

Back there had been miasma, a fug, a buzz of Newport gossip that surrounded Ricky, but it was all self-promotion – he was the descendent of an Aztec prince, the son of a Colombian drug lord, he could shape shift, etc.

I had long believed that this alleged devil worshiper, the same boy who put a cup over roaches and took them outside, a boy who had attended every one of his sister's dance recitals, who told me he had shed silent tears at the end of *Beauty and*

*the Beast*, wasn't in fact evil at all. I always suspected it was Danny who incited and executed the attack – because I had seen the violence he was capable of. And Satan had zilch, zero, zip to do with it.

Because there were also rumors surrounding Andre back then. Very loud whispers that suggested Andre liked to harass and sometimes hurt girls, that he liked it rough, that his favorite kind of girl was young – extremely young.

And yet when Denise said the name Andre Villiers, I smiled like a game show host with a frontal lobotomy.

When she used the word “victim,” I had flinched.

My father had seen multiple violent deaths. I had reported on homicides so vile, I still struggled to process the details. My father's adage was this: no one deserves to be murdered, but some people were seriously asking for it. And over the last few years I came to conclude that he was right. Andre was one of these people.

I had not told Denise when I was writing the Cathy Carver story that Andre Villiers' name had come up but was excluded because, quite simply, it was all smoke and no fire; he was just one in a hundred names.

And a memory had resurfaced and persisted since writing the Cathy Carver piece, and had continued to rise to the surface like scum, in the waters of my trauma-stained, sometimes unreliable, bong-water memory.

And one time, we were in the backseat of Danny's car, a skunk fug around us, when Andre “joke-choked” me in the car. Maybe the others were doing a fast food run, possibly they were in the woods, their location eludes me, all I know is only we remained in the car. One minute we were talking, smoking, Faith No More playing at unholy decibels:

*Go on and wring my neck*

*Like when a rag gets wet*

*A little discipline for my pet genius*

Andre turned very serious and something passed over his face. Finally, my fist went out and connected with his gut and it was like hitting a stack of Jell-O, which immediately firmed. He laughed it off and I was forced to join him, after cursing him out and staying to smoke a cigarette. I didn't want to be the “crazy

bitch” who made trouble. I just made sure not to be alone with him and the occasion was forgotten. Apparently. But nothing ever is, not really.

There were finger bruises around my neck that lasted for a week; bruises that were hidden by my mom’s arsenal of concealers and foundations. I knew not to resort to turtlenecks and scarves, that my friends, my parents and Danny would assume I was concealing hickeys.

Now I felt the ghostly memory of his soggy hands around my neck.

The possibility that Andre was a predator provided a motive and, yes, a reason to kill (no, not an excuse), and it reframed the crime in a way that reassessed the tangle of my feelings for Ricky (*These were days when my heart was volcanic*), who I could never see crouched in the dirt, bearing a bat with fragments of blood and bone.

As for Danny, I really had none.

So I decided to start with the no-feelings Danny.

### Chapter 3

It took all of five minutes to find him. Danny Quinlan-Walsh didn't have a Facebook or a Twitter account – or if he did, he had an alias – but he was on LinkedIn. He was living (surprise, surprise) on the Island, managing his dad's boat storeroom in South Newport. To reach the Prestige Marine Storeroom, I had to backtrack, head down Meadowbrook State Parkway to the end of Newport Avenue.

Freeport, and to an extent, North Newport, were viewed as “the projects” by the South, because both suburbs were ethnically and culturally more adventurous. North Newport, where I was from, consisted of Italians, Irish, a few Hispanics, and a black family or two, living in the Catholic zones in the suburb, in single bungalows with neat lawns protected by American flags.

South Newport, as my father Raymond Paul Sloane, RP to those unlucky enough to know him, put it when he was sober, was predominantly Jewish and was all about mansions, maids, and lipo. People walked to temple on Sundays simply to show off their new mink. Kids expected rhinoplasty for their Sweet Sixteenth and got it.

The Quinlan-Walshes were as Catholic as the Kennedys. They lived on the water. I went out on the boat with them a few times, feeling like Jackie Onassis. I could see the appeal of South Newport: life on the water, watching the light hit the Sound, watching the birdlife. There was a quiet sense of otherworldliness, of being the only people out there, at sea.

Despite the day having been deceptively bright and clear, the wind was biting and there was ice in the air. I barely recalled Prestige Marine from back in the day, but from the looks of the empty parking lot, it wasn't doing well. But maybe it was just off season. Rich people probably made appointments. Either way, I was buzzed through instantaneously by a heavysset guy with a ponytail – a goon in Hugo Boss, basically. He was in his late twenties, with the full, too-red lips of a sexual deviant. He was an ectomorph – a tidy guy who ballooned in the chest and arms and tapered down to the waist.

He didn't even ask my name, he just started in on his sales pitch, gesturing to a boat that took up nearly the whole floor space. It was ugly, but the marine

equivalent of a Ferrari. It was called *Lady and the Tramp*. “That’s a motor yacht,” he said, “It’s a Silverton, 43, so very current – twin Volvo engines –”

“Safe,” I suggested, rubbing my hands together.

He fiddled with his expensive but ugly Rorschach-blot tie. He seemed uncomfortable with the adjective.

“But check out her dangerous curves. There’s a salon on the main deck with a convertible sofa, loveseat, entertainment center. And that killer cherry finishing is featured throughout in high gloss with satin accents. A second head serves the salon and guest stateroom. Wanna see the cockpit? It’s big.” I watched his fleshy mouth form innuendo after innuendo and then I realized who he was. A boy at the dinner table, pouring American mustard all over his plate.

“Little Pat?”

“It’s been preloved, so it’s a regretful sale. A stockbroker. Finance is available. What?”

“You’re Little Pat, right? Pat junior? I’m actually looking for Danny Quinlan-Walsh.”

“Oh, you are, are you?” His tone was teasing, but his eyes had a sleeping fury that I recognized. Like Danny, who was given a punching bag and karate lessons, Pat had nerf balls and hand weights to squeeze and saw a therapist. Angry, angry boys; angry, angry brothers.

“I’m Erin Sloane. I used to go out with Danny. I came to dinner at your house, a few times ...”

A slow, shit-eating grin spread on his face.

“Riiiiight. I remember you. Well, he’s in his office. First door on the right.”

I walked down the polished concrete hallway and found the door ajar.

Danny was on the phone. He didn’t drop it or anything. He just put it down. He was nothing like I expected. Mostly because he looked the same, except he may have had his teeth professionally whitened and there were some sun and smile lines around his eyes. His office was Scandinavian minimalist – the desk an ugly meadow yellow, with framed pictures of humans that bore some resemblance to him and two industrial lamps, one either side of the desk. He had a Far Side calendar, which to me was like a tell – I’d bet money his dad had one before him. It was like he’d gathered recon on how to emulate an adult human male and replicated it flawlessly. Danny

Quinlan-Walsh had a clean bill of mental health and the room was a monument to his newfound normality. I'd always felt he had the emotional complexity of a Twinkie: pretty package; hard layer; gooey, radioactive center. Now I knew that he was psychologically a bit more complex, and thus, more toxic than ever.

"Erin," he said flatly, devoid of excitement, pleasure, or dread. It was like I'd served him coffee and the order was right, but he was still deciding on something else.

I automatically sat down opposite him. I picked up the framed photo: Madonna and child. "Is this ...?"

His perfect jaw worked overtime. "My wife Gina. And my daughter, Kelly." My middle name.

Gina looked Southern Italian and was prettier than me, but the similarity was unmistakable. We shared the same round face and apple-like cheeks, the nose that was slightly too wide and flat; only her black hair probably hadn't come out of a bottle. And her eyes were very dark and alive with joy in the picture, which drove a stake of pity into my heart. Danny's kid was adorable and the mirror of her mother, with Danny's rosebud mouth.

"You want to get a coffee? The diner across the road?"

I couldn't get into a vehicle with him.

"Let's walk," I said.

"You're kidding?"

No one in the Island walked anywhere. They drove down their driveway to collect the papers. I just stared at him and he shrugged on his overcoat.

Pat leered at us as we walked out of the storeroom.

"When should I expect you back?" he called out to Danny, who flipped him the bird.

"Nice to see some things never change," I said and waved at Pat who watched us through the glass, open mouthed, barely disguising his hostility.

As we walked, I scanned Danny's clothes. He was wearing a black cashmere wool coat and black pants, both well cut. His hair was still long, golden, but he tied it back into a neat ponytail. Just like he did for the trial.

His pants and button-up shirt were also black, as were his suede ankle boots – a metalhead in Armani.

Danny, a surfer boy, with a touch of evil Danny, the fixer upper for a wannabe-bad-but-basically-good girl. Sun-bleached hair, diamond-cut jaw, a deviated nose – a football injury – to give him character. Those green eyes, shallow pools for girls to drown in.

“Business looks slow,” I said, just to say something.

“Always is, this time of year,” Danny said, blowing on his fingers. He lit a cigarette and offered me one, which I refused, even though I was weirdly relieved to see he still smoked. Marlboros even. It was especially cold for September. I felt the sense of snow in the air, in the same way you anticipate a bone breaking. The silence between us was equally sharp and only softened when we crossed the road and entered the diner. It was the jingle of the door and the central heating, Danny opening the door – a memory cue. He looked at me and felt it too: the number of times we had walked together, hand in hand, or in furious single file, to sit over single cups of coffee and full packs of cigarettes.

Despite the inherent clash between us, if we weren't making out, we were touching: an endless, impossible game of sexual Twister. Mouth on nipple, orange. Hand on cock, red. From ages fifteen to sixteen, we were tied by the umbilical of the telephone, connected by hand and tongue, we were in each other's pocket (quite literally) around the clock. And yet, despite the pyrotechnic public sexual couplings, we were hardly Romeo and Juliet. More like Sid and Nancy.

Part of me was always busily erasing bad memories about people. It was my worst quality, a readiness to forget. I used to think it was a reflexive forgiveness, forged by too much Catholic education. *Turn the other cheek*. But I later realized it was a psychic survival mechanism: I forgot so I could live with myself. In turn, I also forgot my enemies, re-exposed myself to physical danger. Here in the diner, on one level, I wanted to remember Danny as a harmless but hapless lover boy, to find safety in our shared history. His expression suggested he felt the same – it was benign, paternal, and a little bit critical.

I watched the waitress's hand shake as she filled his cup and I remembered that at age sixteen he was so attractive it endangered the Island's stratified social structure and subcultural and gender norms. I saw women (and sometimes men) swerve their cars when he crossed the road; shop girls regularly dropped change and slipped scraps of paper with phone numbers into his hand. Not much had changed. It

was just me who found him ugly. I sipped the weak diner coffee. He ordered a bagel without looking at the waitress, plain, cream cheese on the side.

“You look thin,” he said, when the waitress poured us coffee.

“Yes, I am thin,” I replied.

“You look good. Tired, though.”

“Thanks again. You look rested. All that time in mental hospital?” I asked, bringing the coffee to my mouth, wincing as if expecting a slap. Ricky Hell had been likened to Richard Ramirez, the infamous Night Stalker, and Charles Manson, but no one had ever picked Danny’s serial killer doppelganger – Theodore Bundy. It was there in the prematurely creased forehead, the storm that passed over the still, glass-green eyes. There was no “tell” in his incandescent fury. Until the storm hit.

Danny just smiled.

“You always had a way with words. I hear you’re a writer now.”

“Mmmm. And you took over your dad’s business. Because of the criminal record or was it your choice of career?”

“Pretty much both,” he said seriously. The swooning waitress returned with his food. He winked at her, buttering half the bagel carefully and spreading the other half with cream cheese, avoiding the salad leaves and tomato. I noticed he moved the pickle to the far end of the plate, for me. He always hated pickles. The gesture was perversely intimate. Anyway, I couldn’t eat now, not with my stomach twisted up like this. The cake and frothy coffee sat in my gut like a boulder.

“Partly because Dad got sick. I heard yours is now, too.” He put down his bagel. “Like gone, in the mind.”

I shrugged.

“My dad’s dead.” Danny munched on the bagel. Typical – he always had to win. “Cancer. Now Mom lives with us. She had a stroke. She’s in a wheelchair.” He shrugged in a glib “What are you going to do about it?” gesture.

“Sorry.”

“You know ... you look, like, the same. A bit thinner, but the same.” He seemed to be marveling at this. I had nothing to say. I didn’t need to supply any details of my life. I wore no ring and must have reeked of spinster.

“Whatever happened to Carole and Cormac, do you know?”

“She married some old dude, moved up to Florida, works in real estate. Cormac, dunno. Dude disappeared. I’m not meant to have contact with either of

them, so it suits me fine. Your dad end up with his partner, what was her name, Mona?”

“No.” My dad’s affair was common knowledge. Mona was the reason my father and mother slept in different rooms, the reason my mom was on antidepressants and rocky road. But RP kept Mona on the side and then put her on the shelf for reasons unknown to me.

“Hey, so what do you know about Steve Shearer?” I asked.

“Steve Shearer?” Danny repeated, shrugging. “He sounds familiar?”

“Umm, he arrested you. He shot ...”

“Ricky,” Danny finished the sentence. “Yeah, like, not super well, no. Also, the shrinks all said I had retrograde amnesia. Because of witnessing and abetting the murder, you know. And all those drugs.” He gave me the look of frat boy date rapist – bashful, but unapologetic, maybe even a little proud.

“I see.” *Amnesia. How fucking original.* I can’t believe he said the word abetting. Danny had slammed that bat into Andre’s head and hard. The killer blow. I shredded my napkin, drove my nails into my palm. “I wanted to talk about Andre ...”

“Andre ...” Danny went blank.

“You know, the guy whose head got caved in like a dropped watermelon at West Cypress Road Woods.”

“Erin, you gotta know, I don’t really remember Andre ...”

“Cut it out, Danny. This retrograde amnesia, this puff-of-madness shit won’t work on me. I know who you are. I need to know who Andre was. For real.”

“May I, like, ask why? After all this time?” He drank his weak diner coffee.

“I’m writing an article. For *Island Life*.”

“Ah, shit,” he said. “And here’s me thinking you’re being sentimental.”

I pulled up my sleeve to show the row of burns.

“I’m not going to unbutton my shirt in here – but just so you know, you have a funny idea of sentimental,” I said, just as a waitress arrived to refill us. She poured the coffee and looked down at my arm, visibly startled, but continued pouring with a steady hand.

“I feel bad about that.” He leaned back against the booth, looking out at the traffic, giving me his right side, his best side by his reckoning. The guy had no bad side – with a nose like a child, a chin you’d want to chuck, his profile would never go on a coin – and front on he was a pinup, made for *Tiger Beat* and *Seventeen*. But

what I once liked about Danny, because I did once like him, apart from an absurdist humor that came out when he was unguarded, was that while he was too canny not to be aware of his own good looks, they were loathsome to him. I remember once we were watching *Grease* with his siblings (it was turned off halfway through because of its adult content), and he was transfixed by the character Crater's face. "Scars are fucking savage," he kept saying. Was this a warning? In hindsight, I think it was.

"I had problems, you know. I think of you all the time, you know."

"Some kids lose their parents. Some kids are foster kids. Some kids take care of their parents when they're up on multiple homicide charges. Some kids deal with real adult shit."

"Like you and Ricky Hell?" Danny gave me a dead-goldfish stare. I looked away first.

I had gone into our meeting wanting to be the consummate professional and was pissed at myself for betraying any emotion, for giving anything away to Danny, even righteous indignation. The fact was, I wasn't a consummate professional. It took every fiber of self-control I had not to upturn the coffee onto him.

"Listen, you could write a book about what you don't know about my life," Danny insisted. "Things that I never told you ... well." Was he dangling his backstory as bait? I wouldn't bite, despite being insanely curious about what he would come up with. I had long suspected things were not what they seemed at Casa Quinlan-Walsh.

"I'm you, like, you know, like really sorry about the past. Things never changed for me, I mean, feelings wise ... I still care." He looked up, showing me the cerulean blue of his eyes, the whites exposed. "You're, like, in my heart."

*Like, sorry.* I quietly set my cup down. If Danny was convinced he loved me and I could exploit it for the story, I would.

"But you could do something now. Help me answer some questions about Andre ..."

I willed tears into my eyes as he squeezed my hand. I could feel his pulse. Only skin separated us.

"I know that you're no Satanist. And nobody at West Cypress Road Woods was there to do anything that night except beer bong and maybe Carole Jenkins."

Danny smiled pleasantly.

"The only person who actually believed in that crap was Andre ..."

Danny looked at me like my math teacher did when I'd finally solved a problem.

"And maybe Ricky ..."

"Ricky was a poser, plain and simple," Danny scoffed. "That jacket was the only metal thing about him." I smiled. I'd got him to admit that much.

Danny flicked his pickles onto a napkin, crushed the napkin in his fist. There was cream cheese on his lip. "He was weak."

"Agreed. And there's something else. Andre's name came up in a suspect list while I was investigating a missing Massapequa girl called ..."

"Cathy Carver. I read your piece in *Island Life*," Danny signaled for a refill. I held my hand over my cup. He appraised the waitress with naked sexual interest, but I knew Danny – it was a performance.

The Cathy Carver story was last year's Halloween anniversary special and it, too, was a little too close to home. The story had a touch of the JonBenêt tragedy: a pretty young blonde girl, missing presumed dead since 1993. The family were suspected.

"Think it was the same guy who took the Weiz kid and Scott ... whatshisname?"

"Jason Weiz and Trey Scott," I recited. "I don't know."

There was a rumored connection between Cathy and two boys who disappeared in 1992 and 2000 respectively: disappearances from Belmont and South Newport. The abductions had changed the landscape of the suburbs they came from, informing house prices and school bus routes. All the kids had in common was that they were all eleven and only children – no siblings, no second chances for the parents.

Whether he was telling the truth about reading the piece or not, everyone knew about a child killer operating in Long Island in the nineties and early noughties. The victims had turned up on Jones Beach, miles apart, buried with their arms crossed. It was a cruel gesture, because there was no dignity in their death – they both had sand in their lungs, indicating live burial.

Andre was one of at least twenty high school kids who was a suspect in the Cathy Carver case. He'd been spotted at her elementary school several times, talking to fourth graders. The forensic psychologist who I interviewed told me it was his conviction, and the police's, that Cathy was being groomed by an older man, and the

same man or men that took her went into hibernation or even changed hunting ground, returning to his activities and the Island in 2001 for Trey Scott.

Either way, Andre was in the clear for these crimes. The man that was grooming Cathy was significantly older and Andre was like the skull and crossbones he wore on his jacket by 2001.

Ricky and Danny were the eldest kids at West Cypress Road Woods. They had sisters at Lakeside Elementary. The others most likely had younger siblings too.

The stain on Andre persisted; the rumors buzzed in my ears.

“Was there a reason for luring Andre there that night? Like, did Ricky believe he’d done something bad?”

“If you come to Freeport with me, I’ll tell you everything.”

I looked up, genuinely gobsmacked. Danny was aiming for shy, but he just looked sly.

“Wait. The motel?”

“I need to fix this,” his eyes had a triple glaze. He was still medicated, had been since the mental hospital.

“I ... can’t. You can’t do that. You have a wife and child. Not to mention you treated me like a human punching bag.”

He shook his head.

“There’s a sense of incompleteness about us. An unfinished story.” His lips began to tremble with the emotion of his poetics. “Maybe if I knew what happened, you know, between you and Richard.”

*Richard, even.*

“Were you intimate?” His tone and phrasing had become officious, cold. It wasn’t passion, it was venom that had hardened his tone. This was a pissing competition – I was the fire hydrant.

I knew this switch well.

“Yep,” I said, knocking back my coffee. “We certainly were. But you knew, right?”

Danny’s face went blank and then he smiled. It was a phenomenon, that smile, but he still made me sick to my stomach.

“If we got to the motel, I’ll spill. On or off record.”

The thing about Danny was he always wanted to win. I didn’t trust him, not emotionally, not psychologically, and certainly not physically.

“It’s the motel or nothing.”

“You know what,” I said, leaning across the table. “I’ll take nothing.”

“Just keep in mind, guys won’t be lining up for forever. Tick, tock, you’re on the clock. And you know, you could do with a hot meal or two and a baby wipe – you’d shame a hooker with that eye makeup.”

That was Danny in one – tears of contrition and then a slap in the face. If I was a less fucked-up person, I probably would have been offended. Instead, I felt a rush of euphoria. My lips tingled and became fuller. I glowed. I was beautiful, incandescent with rage.

“Thanks for the tips. I mean you make marriage and children seem so fulfilling.”

I was hardly Angelina, but I could still score when I wanted and I couldn’t see that stopping me unless I was further visibly disfigured in the next little while. When you knew how to put it to them simply, men were easy. When I was in active therapy or rehab programs, I cut down on booze, pills, sex; all my sublimations went on the shelf and I was monastic in all aspects. Then I went rabid, the binge of the sexual/social anorexic. Whatever money or love I acquired, I spent it. For a while, I drove around at night, trying not to go to bars, and mostly I didn’t succeed. Lately, I had simply stopped leaving the house altogether.

“Maybe I could place a personal ad. Emotionally disturbed succubus seeks callow hottie for meaningless dalliance. Must worship Satan. What do you think? Score myself a hubby that way?”

“I think you win Scrabble, but you’re lonely. In fact, you reek of it,” he leaned in as if he smelled something foul and popped a stick of gum in his mouth. “Everyone needs someone, Erin.” Or multiple someones, in Danny’s case.

“You don’t even like me. Did you ever?” I asked him.

He shrugged himself into his coat and had the gall to lean in and kiss my cheek. He smelled of Armani and leather and money. “Does anyone like anyone, really? They just belong to each other,” he said. “But yeah. I always liked them crazy.” Then he gave an involuntary twitch or, very possibly, winked. He left a pile of singles and his business card, with the waitress staring at his retreating back.

It was the back of a quarterback, the back of a killer.

After I collected my car, I drove down Newport Avenue to Danny's family house, about five blocks from the boat storeroom. Marine Way was a typical tree-lined cul de sac, consisting of "splanches," two-story homes that retained a ranch house exterior. I was amazed to note that the same BMW SUV that Pat Senior drove with the personalized license plate LVTHLRD was parked in the driveway. I parked on the road, squinting through the French windows into the living room, and saw the silhouette of a woman sitting on a couch in front of a large flat-screen TV. The hunch of her shoulders, the Roman hook of her nose told me it was Danny's mom, Cindy.

In Newport, the houses were laid out identically with a few variations. The layout of Danny's house was an alternative version of my house, the Shelbyville to my Springfield. Danny's mom had modernized their place in the eighties, so there were lots of skylights and white walls with beige and stucco columns, tiles and marble, modern art on the walls. It was rendered in silver cloud, with two ivory columns at the entrance.

All unhappy families are alike. My mom was husky, into aerobics, binge eating, wine, and Ambien. My father had never been home for Mom's frozen and nuked dinners and lived like a medieval ghoul in the dark recesses of the den, occasionally emerging, drunk, in his Homer Simpson tightie whities. Sloane unhappiness was manifest – it was soaked into the carpet and foundations of our house.

The Quinlan-Walshes' misery was told in small cues. The first time I was at their house for dinner (they called it *supper*), Danny's dad came home to the set table, the heat from a homemade lasagne steaming up his heavy black, accountant's frames. But Danny's dad wasn't an accountant. Dr. Walsh was a local paediatrician – the boating business was a hobby, an earner on the side. And while they had six kids (the eldest two were adopted, the third was a foster child, the rest were biological), they were rich, but Dr. Walsh, AKA Big Pat, was stingy. I noted Danny's mom's cheap pleather bag on the counter, his father's no-brand watch. They wore cheap knock-off sneakers and no-brand jeans and backpacks, which in Newport was a cardinal sin. And speaking of sin, you couldn't sit down anywhere without a Child of Prague simpering at you or the Virgin Mary casting down a pissed, prayerful look at you. Except of course, in Danny's bedroom, which was painted black and had matching satin sheets.

“The devil sleeps in satin,” his mother said once.

“The devil’s a smart dude,” Danny replied.

His mom (*Please call me Cindy*) was dressed in last decade’s fashions. I spotted that underneath the superficial differences – Cindy’s Karen Carpenter physique swamped in a cinched floral dress, badly applied makeup (the wrong shade, too much pink for her yellow complexion) that covered acne scars and the pained smile permanently residing on her face – our mothers were perhaps alike after all.

Their unhappiness was told in the brittle conversation between parents, the chattering among the children that was silenced with a look, the razor-sharp atmosphere that made me so nervous I now understood why Cindy was having so much trouble with the whole swallowing food thing. The eldest three kids, named after Biblical characters, fought endlessly. The fourth child’s autistic rocking made me so nervous I managed to chew. An infant and toddler clung to Cindy constantly, wheedling and whining, smelling of colostrum and fruit rollups.

As we started eating, Big Pat interrupted.

“Aren’t we forgetting something?”

“Let us give thanks,” Big Pat intoned.

I held Danny’s hand and we hung our heads down like evangelists at a prayer meeting. Even if I couldn’t eat, I could do Catholic. I faintly recalled I was one.

“Bless us, oh Lord, and these thy gifts ...” As he spoke, I felt Big Pat’s finger rubbing the inside of my palm, in a way that all girls understand is code for creep. I can’t touch you intimately, the finger says, but I want to. I’m imagining this is your pussy. The finger rubbed and rubbed.

When we were getting along, Danny and I had played a game called *How much more could it suck?* The scenarios were mostly funny and always obscene, inserting historical and popular figures into the humiliation of the everyday – in Danny’s case, masturbating to Candace Cameron when *Full House* was on and being caught by his mother was all the suckier when Nancy Reagan and Celine Dion came in and made him sing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In French. My father getting drunk and crashing the car into my bike and then vomiting all over Christmas dinner was made worse when the New Kids on the Block came over, with a film crew. And had a gangbang with my whole family.

Danny whispered a particularly obscene scenario into my ear and I sprayed milk out in a fine mist all over my mashed potato. Little Pat guffawed, his mom gasped, and Big Pat squeezed my hand like a python.

“... bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen.”

Underneath his glasses, I saw eyes that were nothing like Danny's: the color of macadamia, lustreless, brown, round as an owl's, and equally predatory. A cross glinted in the dark bed of his chest hair.

Cindy excused us and we went up to Danny's room for “homework.”

“Door open,” Big Pat bellowed.

Danny's finger went up and the lock went on.

“Was my dad weird to you,” he stated. This was not a question. I noted his hands were clenched into balled fists.

I said nothing and sat on his bed, his bedspread was black velour featuring the image of a panther with yellow eyes. I looked in the curved mirror over his bed. He had an adult's ensemble, complete with side tables. My hair was still good. I'd teased it and sprayed it so it stood up over my bangs on one side. My makeup was toned down for the family: eyeliner, blusher, lipgloss. I had put my Megadeth T-shirt on inside out, so it wouldn't upset his mom (his request). Despite sassing her, he was a Catholic boy after all.

“He's such a fucking creep.” Danny paced the dimensions of the room, looking fit to punch holes in the wall, but he calmed himself down by taking out a bowl of weed and a pipe.

“He just touched my hand,” I said. I was pacifying him, but I felt a little shocked by the hand molesting, myself.

“I'm just happy I'm adopted, you know,” he said, as he passed the pipe to me.

The AC hummed and the incense was lit. It was sage – co-mingling with the weed it created a ham-like aroma.

“Blow it out the window,” he coached me. “Because they couldn't have a baby. They got me, Little Pat, and Joshua and then started popping them out, as you can bear witness.”

“Like Pringles?” I laughed, already stoned.

“That doesn’t make sense.” Danny didn’t laugh. He flopped back on his tiger bedspread. He wasn’t smiling. I put my hand on his stomach. His belly. His abs, would be more accurate. This was the body of a teenager, remember. He didn’t go carb-free or drink protein drinks. He lifted barbells – but his muscle was lean, carved out of surfing, skating, and his unknown genetic bounty. His eyes were the most azure blue and long lashed. His mouth was, well, almost slutty for a boy – a rosebud, full, pink, and curling with possibility.

I, on the other hand, swathed and draped my newfound curves in cords and jeans, big T-shirts, and long hair. In retrospect, I was beautiful in that I was young, but nothing special to behold; not like Danny.

“Once you pop, you know? She couldn’t stop ... popping.”

He held my wrists too tightly.

“Did you wash your hands?” he asked. In addition to a problem with containing his anger, Danny also had an undiagnosed and certainly untreated OCD. The grubbiness of my house, the rotaviruses that lived in our towels, the filthy soles of my feet, for example, could inspire hour-long funks and lengthy lectures and usually ended in scalding showers and apologies.

“Yes ...” I groaned.

“Sorry. I just hate the way you *touch* everything.”

At first dope, acid, smoothed the jagged edges of his OCD. I think that’s why he liked it. And I liked him better stoned. But the comedowns came with writing on his skin, Biblical condemnations, germs you could literally see. I liked Danny best undressed: the silk of his skin, sex, the cinnamon of his breath (Big Red gum, cigarettes), his semipermanent hard-on, the fact that he paid attention to me, not in a healthy way; no, it was the vigilance of a parking inspector or a lion on the Serengeti guarding the gazelle’s carcass.

Why did Danny, a kind of golden god come down from Mount Apollo, choose to fraternize with me? It was because of his predilections, rather than any notion of romantic love.

Because what started out as games like *How much more could it suck?* turned into a love of ropes and an understanding of knots that transcended the maritime, and we quickly escalated from traditional teenage fumbling into what I now understand to be hard-limit SM. The introduction of the unimaginatively named games *Light My Fire*, featuring lighters on the skin, and *Take My Breath Away* – breath control,

autoerotic asphyxiation – being prime examples of where he was headed, where we were headed. In the beginning, we were just two red-blooded Roman Catholic metalhead misfits doing things we’d seen and heard on late night TV– but his appetite for pleasure was beginning to be rewired. New neural pathways of pleasure and circuitry were informed and amused by my physical pain, my subjugation. As he lit a fire under my feet, I thought – this is what it feels like in the beginning, when you’re being burned at the stake. Sometimes Danny would stare at me for what seemed like hours, staring into my eyes, asking things like “What are you thinking?”, “Penny for your thoughts?”, and “Do you need me?” Sometimes this would turn into recrimination. Sometimes it would take a burning, ugly turning. You may think, for all my coldness, that I am tough, that I was tough. I was still a teenage girl. Once he slapped me, more than once he used fists on me; once or twice, a car lighter. We called them smileys. And then he really hurt me.

In the beginning, I liked our games and I liked to play with him equally. In fact, I was beginning to understand the heady power that my sexuality engendered, without understanding consequence. It was like owning a Ferrari but having no real idea how to drive it, except putting my foot to the pedal and fast. All I knew was, I could inspire in him a frenzy of feeling, fulfill a fetish that seemed to inspire a kind of unparalleled devotion, not knowing I was careening straight into a head-on collision.

He wanted to make me love him. He thought he could force it. Or maybe he was in fact, just lashing out.

Naturally you would think with the sexual Twister, epic make-out rashes and crotch burn, and weird sadomasochistic games, that we were having sex like bunnies, right?

You may look around Danny’s room – its black walls, damp, seed-smelling satin sheets, tiger-fur patterned velour throw, and his perfection – and think that Danny was in fact a Long Island Lothario: a serial wooer and an expert lover, a gigolo like David Lee Roth, and I was his Lolita.

You would be wrong.

Danny was a virgin, as was I. Danny was holding out on me. He wanted me to love him. And I was waiting for him to weaken. I was a furious, reluctant, and wrathful virgin. Which is why, he said, Ricky Hell became interested in me, and that is another story altogether.

I killed the engine and sat deciding whether to try talk to Cindy, if she'd even remember me, and how much wrath it might inspire if Danny found out, when a sporty aqua hatchback pulled up to the driveway. I knew who she was straight away. Gina, Danny's wife, was sans toddler and, like me, petite – five feet three, five feet four max. Unlike me, even dressed in yoga pants and a Champion sweatshirt she was effortlessly chic. Gina caught my eye as she pulled into the driveway and parked. She got out and strode over to me, leaning into the driver's window with a brittle flight-attendant smile – her makeup equally perfect. I couldn't see her eyes clearly through her tinted Armani sunglasses. She was wearing politely expensive jewelry: discreet diamond studs and a tennis bracelet, and on her olive décolletage sat the letter G in white gold. Her naturally thick black hair had been professionally blow dried. I wondered where their progeny was kept – maybe inside, with zombie Grandma Cindy.

“Like, maybe I have the wrong house,” I brayed in an exaggerated Long Island brogue.

“Like, what number are you looking for?” Her voice was surprisingly warm, like spiced rum.

“My friend Cassie lives at 1125?” I made sure to inflect up.

“This is 1125,” she said pleasantly, but her mouth drooped. Like Danny's, her teeth were professionally whitened.

“The Glass residence? Marine Drive?”

“Avenue,” she amended. Something lifted in her expression. Then I realized: she was an old hand at this, the drive-by mistress encounter. She was back from the gym, from Pilates maybe, reckless on adrenaline, ready to rumble.

“I'm sorry, wrong place,” I guffawed. Gina was so beautiful, she'd turned me into a clowning teenage boy. She was gracious, though, accustomed to the idiocy her beauty provoked.

“That's okay. Happens more than you think,” she said, smiling at me, her wide photogenic face suddenly lighting up in a perfect smile.

Why was Danny fucking around on a *Sports Illustrated* version of Snow White? He hadn't cheated on me, but was constantly convinced I was cheating on him. Jealousy, born of self-hate. Now he was enacting that self-hate, lost in the

endless parade of women who would sublimate his loneliness and bad memories. Or maybe it was because Gina wouldn't play Danny's games.

I realized in that moment what Danny had liked about me and still did: I saw through to his wicked core. He didn't have to pretend with me. Because I was a little bit bad too.

*It's fall, I thought. It's overcast. Why are you wearing sunglasses?*

*Run, Gina, I wanted to say. Take that kid and run.*

"I'm really sorry," I said. I meant it.

"No problem. Good luck finding your friend."

Inside, Cindy moved and faced the glass, and for a second I was sure that she looked out at me in recognition.

## Chapter 4

I pulled into my driveway on Oceanside Ave and my aging cat, Mister, ran from the house, trotting up to the car like a dog, flicking her tail rather than wagging. She'd been a rescue kitten who I presumed was male, but the name had stuck by the time I took her to the vet for a checkup and made the discovery.

The Oceanside Avenue house was a split-level bungalow, which remained completely unchanged since we moved in at the wheezing tail end of 1993. The outside was colonial style, with thatched wooden siding on the front. Inside was shag carpeted and faux tiled, pure unrenovated, unreconstructed seventies kitsch. Every surface was mirrored and/or rendered in lino or shag, in shocking shades of orange or burnt sienna. The Oceanside Avenue house had a force field of sorts; it repelled. Our neighbor Jude wouldn't even come in for a glass of water. Maybe it wore our trauma; maybe we brought their ghosts with us, or the house was feeding off our mutual pain.

The exterior of the house was the faded rust color that blood makes after a few days on the sidewalk. The mailbox, perched precariously on its decomposed hinge, was overflowing, like the yard. A few flyers for pizza parlors and nail salons spilled out, clotted the gutters. Spiderwebs had colonized the wrought iron balustrades. I made a fake promise to rake the leaves and I collected the mail – a *Reader's Digest*, a few bills, and a gun mag my dad subscribed to, which I read in the bathroom. In the spare room, there were still unpacked boxes marked *old house* with a black Magic Marker, in my hand. RP had simply gutted the back garden and filled the remaining garden beds with stones –much like a quarry. I had yet to clear the house, sell some of my father's things, and patch up the house – make basic repairs. There were holes in the walls and doors made by drunken fists, a hole in the plaster of the living room, made by a Smith and Wesson bullet circa January'94. Like my father, it had never been properly patched up.

There was the pool that he tended to in place of a garden and loved more than a child. Right now, it was covered. The house smelled of rising damp, stale smoke, and mustard, which incidentally was also how you would describe my father.

I had taken his room at the front of the house, because of its superior position and the morning light streaming through the bay window that Mister liked to lie in, looking out at the street. My senior photo sat in a frame beside his bed – the sole

souvenir of family life. My hair was a very unnatural blue-black; I look so wan and frail, I could pass as Morticia Adams's sick sister. Why he chose this, over the auburn-haired, round-faced teenager of fall '93, I simply don't know. I could put the photo away, now that RP no longer lived here, but instead it was laid face down, a sign of respect of sorts.

I took off my day clothes and dressed in my mom's coffee-stained ice-blue chenille robe, a relic from '93. It still smelled of fabric softener, Chips Ahoy cookies, and her perfume, Sunflowers – I had washed it since then, but the smells lingered. Wrapping myself up in her robe was like hugging her ghost. I cut up chicken livers for Mister, turning on the radio for company. Early AC/DC growled away in the background, which I took to be another omen. I hadn't heard them since 1994.

I ate some Tums and a Somac and sat down in front of my seaside notebook with Dad's Rangers mug, firing up my laptop at the water-stained oak table, while I waited for the pot to boil. I put a few Yummy Relaxers in the water. It contained traces of lavender, mint, and cinnamon and a natural sedative herb and the packet depicted a family of teddy bears in patchwork smocks sitting at a kitchen table. From experience, coming down and hungover, Yummy Relaxer was the equivalent of pissing on a house fire – but it tasted okay and I needed all the help I could get with the twilight hallucinations.

I looked at the Yummy Relaxer in front of me, knowing what this would turn into: while I had stopped taking illegal drugs, I pretty much ate prescription drugs like candy. While I said to myself I was a social smoker and drinker, I hadn't really been in a social situation for quite some time and I was managing to smoke and drink just fine.

Know thyself, someone wise once said. And then a teenage boy quoted it back to me.

The fluorescents buzzed and flickered as I retrieved one of my mom's ridged Lido honey-gold glasses, a wedding gift to my mom and dad, and filled the glass up with whiskey.

I returned to the *Child's Play* true crime video on YouTube. The screen flickered and warped. It had the low-res look and feel of the nineties, like it had been recorded onto a VCR and uploaded recently. The reporter in the long trenchcoat's Vincent Price narration would have been comical if the content of his speech wasn't making all the hairs on my arm and back of my neck piloerect:

*“It was just a normal afternoon for Roosevelt High students Danny Quinlan-Walsh, Carole Jenkins, and Cormac O’Malley – meeting up in a local Wendy’s parking lot to score tabs of acid from friend and dealer Richard Juan Hernandez. Richard, 19, was known to the Newport stoner kids as Ricky Hell. A high school dropout, Hell was also a known misfit and a notorious Satanist. The group would regularly indulge in sex, drugs, and devil worship in the West Cypress Road Woods under his evil tutelage. And tonight was Halloween: Ricky Hell had big plans for his classmates.*

*“Andre Villiers, 18, was known to have drug problems and emotional and learning problems. The oversized senior was also heavily influenced by Hell, learning occult practices, and he was known to have sacrificed several small animals to Satan in the woods over the previous weeks.”*

The narrator picked up a long branch and examined it, before he returned to his monologue. All the saliva dried up in my mouth. As I’d said to Danny, I’d never witnessed any of this small animal sacrifice; I’d never seen anything other than an upside-down cross scrawled in the dirt with a stick, a pentagram necklace, or devil’s horns made in tribute to bitchin’ music.

*“Tonight, the sacrifice was to be human. Only Andre didn’t know that it was to be him. That night, Villiers was initiated into a fire circle, where the kids took magic mushrooms and LSD, mixing it with amphetamines.*

*“Former quarterback, Danny Quinlan-Walsh, 18, and Hell attacked Villiers with ‘superhuman strength’ – producing an aluminium bat to finish the job on the 6’3”, 300-pound teen. Hell struck Villiers first. The youngest teens, Cormac O’Malley and Carole Jenkins, both 16 – material witnesses for the DA – ran and allegedly hid in the woods. They were not charged as accessories, but were discredited after they alleged that Ricky Hell ‘changed shape’ or ‘shapeshifted.’ O’Malley called his stepfather, a local police officer called Steve Shearer, to the scene from a nearby payphone and returned, allegedly to render medical aid to Andre.”*

The next footage showed Andre Villiers’s school photo. I remembered he had permission to wear lightly tinted sunglasses in his senior photo because of his vision problems. Andre was very fair and had a genetic issue with his eyes that made him look creepy. They were a stonewashed blue –all the animation and emotion had been

rinsed out. Cold, Andre was cold at the core – despite the damp body heat he emanated.

Three kids, three blows; six in total, the number of the beast.

Imagine how much the media loved that shit.

The camera panned to a cawing crow as the narrator really hammed it up:

*There were no other witnesses except the woods.*

I moved the cursor to pause.

I wandered into the unrenovated orange and brown bathroom, ignoring Mister's outraged cries, shutting the door behind me as I undressed, hanging up my robe. I stepped inside the shower, letting the hot water run so that it was scalding as I loofahed away the day, Danny Quinlan-Walsh, the memories that arose from our meeting – a collage of wincing body memories and words that I long forgotten. Words I had not been called, nor had I called myself, since.

I stood in front of the mirror with strip lighting that belonged to old Hollywood, looking at my reflection in the glass through the condensation. It reminded me of a subzero morning in February, when Ricky Hell drew *R 4 E* in the foggy windscreen and winked at me, laying his head in my lap with a sigh.

After a half hour of scalding water, I'd nearly scrubbed my meeting with Danny off me.

I never looked at myself undressed – or let anyone else for that matter. I was a turtleneck-and-no-pants-in-the-bedroom kind of gal. I had a special swimsuit for ladies who were modest. Except I wasn't modest; it was just that my body told stories. All up my arms, like the Count of Monte Cristo, were the faint white marks of my imprisonment. My survival. But if I know anything about life, it's not divided into victims, survivors, and perpetrators – we're all those things, all at once. I'd survived life so far, but it would win in the end.

My father always said it was lucky I took after my mom physically – I had the same green-grey eyes, wide, flat nose, full lips. I had my father's jutting chin, however, a reminder of my stubbornness and all his bad habits.

RP never got a hangover when he drank whiskey – leave the wine to the Italians, he said. I stuck with whiskey and my mom's olive oil beauty regimen every night, I poured warm olive oil into my scalp, onto my face. My mom's skin, at forty,

was creamy and thick, the color of burnt caramel. Incidentally, I could not bear to think of it burning, but I often did.

There was an urban legend circulating at St. Mary's called "Bloody Mary": you said the Virgin's name three times and she appeared. If you were lucky/unlucky, she dropped the baby Jesus, who was wrapped in a bundle, and you had to catch him or burn in hell for all eternity.

I recreated the R 4 E in a heart.

*Ricky*, I said to my reflection in the mirror. *Ricky Hell, Ricky Hell, Ricky Hell.*

Nothing. I cleared the condensation on the mirror

The doorbell rang and I answered it, in my robe, whiskey in hand.

"Ms. Erin Sloane. Express delivery from a Ms. Denise Weisman." I nodded at him through the locked screen door. He bore an electronic tablet and a brown paper package with a sticker with the imprint AbeBooks.

"Sign."

I looked at the van and his uniform and unlocked the screen; the FedEx courier reeled slightly. I signed for it, holding my robe closed, conscious of my noxious whiskey-and-cigarette breath. I thanked him and took the package inside, shutting the door behind me. I took the package back into the kitchen with me. Carole Jenkins's true crime book, *Dancing with the Devil* (out of print) from AbeBooks was published by HarperCollins in 1995. The cover featured a teenage girl in a prairie frock with a survivor's grimace, a pinup or a saint; either way, she sat in a position of supplication. But I recognized that smirk – imagine a slutty Jennie Garth from *Beverly Hills 90210* gone Christian. The first few lines of emotionally flat reportage droned and grated – it was a damsel-in-distress narrative, one where Carole was not only a victim, but a survivor. The first few chapters seemed to mainly focus on Carole's early life and the trial itself – there was a glossy insert in the middle, with pictures of Carole, a faxed copy of the original police statement, a few courtroom snaps. Carole Jenkins, who did regularly put her fist in her mouth as a party trick, who watched a boy's brain's get battered in and left her boyfriend at the crime scene, was born again after a trial and a church revival.

Finding her online was as basic as Carole herself. She really hadn't taken many measures to conceal her identity – Carole (Jenkins) Ruffalo and her husband, the CEO of a brokerage, a moneyed-looking silver fox, had an open profile. She'd reinvented herself as a much fuller Florida blonde – still very lean, now very tan, she

had plumper lips, eyelash extensions, a boob job, lots of facial fillers. While she looked corporate and subdued in many images, judging by the status updates (*Love Life write now!! Date nite with my man!!!! Why are ppl so inconsideriate GRRR*) she was still classless and immature and penetratingly passive-aggressive. She'd clearly had a ghostwriter for *Dancing with the Devil*.

My email pinged with a message: 8:37 p.m. Denise.

*Sloane! My email receipt says you got my package. Sorry to bombard you, but check out [www.myspace.com/AishyOm-MySpace](http://www.myspace.com/AishyOm-MySpace) LOL – found it on a subreddit thread. Looks like the site's not been touched since 2008 ... but I am betting she's a relative of NP3's Cormac O'Malley – lady seems a bit looney tunes, but there's some juicy stuff here. Maybe track her down for an interview?*

***X D***

Myspace? Wasn't that the technological version of rollerblades? As far as I knew, Facebook was the rage these days.

Andy Warhol's iconic image of Marilyn blinked psychedelically in the background, which nearly made my eyeballs bleed. Aishy OM was an emaciated frizzy redhead in a red leotard, her body contorted into a dancer's pose. She was trying to pull off a young Kate Bush, but managed to look more like an eating disorder outpatient with a perm. She was scarily thin – it made her other features look weird; her ears stood out, her lips seemed overly sensuous. Crazy was written all over her flat, freckled face and shamrock-green eyes, her wild red curls. Untidy hair, untidy mind. I did have an irrational bias about people with curly hair. My dad always told me curly hair was synonymous with crazy – spirals equaled messy thoughts.

**Aishy Om, 26!**

**Actress, Dancer, Model!!**

**New York, New York**

I couldn't look away, even if I couldn't figure why Denise had led me down this rabbit hole. Denise was normally not a micromanager – and she also had bigger and better things to do than trawl subreddit true crime threads about a 16-year-old murder and nerd out on some whack job's Myspace.

Aishy stopped uploading videos in 2008, but there were several. I clicked on one of her in a monastic-looking bedroom, where she sang an Alicia Keys song, all in her head voice. Then I skipped to another where she sat in what looked like Central Park, wind buffeting around her (the sound quality was terrible), while she recited Shakespeare by heart, eyes closed, completely earnest, in a transparent white Spanish-style peasant blouse, a heart-shaped locket sitting on the bony cavern of her freckled chest.

I clicked on a video called “Inside Job!!!!!!”, where I watched her spouting various conspiracy theories about 9/11 in a high, shrill voice. She had a curious accent, that was neither American or European, nor could I place it with any other continent.

Then I saw it, what Denise had been talking about: a post entitled:

*The NP3 were victims of a police conspiracy!!!!*

It was hard to read because the layout was crazy – lots of red, misspellings, screamy caps and crank-style exclamation points!!!!

*Andre Villiers murder was not a scarifice 4 Satan!!! A crooked cop called Steve Shearer was the real Devil in Newport. Andre Villiers was a pedofile who was being dealt vigilante justice He was not an inconecentvictim!!! The kids put a hit on him were told to by Steve!!! Richard Hernandez AKA Rikcy Hell didn't even help!! Steve Shearer's partner Cooper Deane was killed on job....and Steve was sleeping with Cooper's wife.... Steve Shearer murdered Ricky bc he dealt for Steve and Ricky was gonna Narc on Steve 4 the murder and drugs. Steve got the kids 2 kill Andre coz Andre knew 2 much!!!!*

Say what? Ricky dealing for a crooked cop? Ricky was a dealer – small time: acid tabs, weed, mushrooms. But Ricky as a narc? Andre as the victim of a hit by said dirty cop? Then I saw my father's name. The rest of the paragraph might have been written in Latin; I had to reread it several times to understand what the author was trying to say:

*RP Sloane a key Homicide detective arrived at the scene intoxicated– leaving less qualified officers to handle it..he was a corrupt, fall-down drunk who was A KNOWN FRIEND to SHEARER and covered up for him!!!! You better believe money changed hands. Like Steve Shearer, RP Sloane was a CHEATER --- he and his partner Mona Byrnes were considered in the death of his wife and child under suspicious circumstances in Newport '93 ...RP tried but didn't succeed in killing himself later that year!!!.... guilty much????!!*

It was a surreal experience, seeing the Sloane name there. And I had entered the story vicariously, by relation to RP. The room warped a little, lost its three-dimensionality, took on the look of a bad high school play set. Derealization, it's called.

My stomach lurched. I put my hand to my solar plexus, coaching myself into deep breathing. I opened Carole's book, went straight to the glossy pull out. I flipped the page over. There were pictures of Carole as a young teen, a kind of before the crime and after. Carole was thin, with Etch A Sketch features – no sharp angles, no deviations from the custom-made WASP. Her high school year book pic: enough Aqua Net to put a hole in the ozone layer, a Metallica tee and a Maybelline pout. Then Carole, hair in a French braid, a middle-aged pantsuit (she had a good lawyer), looking like a sister-wife from Utah. There was a picture of the Newport3 in the courtroom, Shearer giving evidence, with a Grizzly Adams undercover beard and a haunted expression.

Steve Shearer, the object of this little redhead's virtual vitriol, just looked like a broken man to me.

Then I saw it. The police statement had been typed up on a Remington: Statement of Carole Jenkins, Nassau County Police Department.

It had been slightly smudged by an index finger, but there was no mistaking the name:

Taken by Detective Mona Byrnes and Detective Scapelli. 3:33 a.m., November 1, 1994.

So now Mona fucking Byrnes, that bobble-headed Irish homewrecker, was back in my life. Typical.

I went straight to Chapter 3, skim-reading Carole's staccato whining, past her banal observations, to her account of the murder:

“When I arrived at 6:30 p.m., Ricky, Danny, Andre, and Joe were at the Wendy’s but had gotten kicked out and they were hanging around the front entrance. They had a fight going on with the manager at Wendy’s because Ricky used to work there, but got fired he said, because he was tampering with the food and was suspected of stealing money. Some people said that he painted a pentagram in blood in the bathroom and that’s why he was fired. Danny told me that he once did it in his girlfriend’s menstrual blood, because it gave the pentagram more power.”

I laughed aloud at the phrasing and then remembered Ricky’s lack of aversion to my menses. A hot tug of pride was met by a cold shower of jealousy.

“Ricky and his friends all listened to heavy metal music and said that they worshipped Satan, but I didn’t believe them. I thought that Ricky was trying to scare people and everyone said that it was because he dealt weed that he spread rumors so that no one would try and turn him into the cops.”

This was the probably the most insightful statement in the entire book. And weirdly, it aligned, sort of, with this crazy Myspace page. I also noted Carole was distancing herself from the gang, *Ricky and his friends*, even though she was in tight with them.

“When I went into the car, Cormac gave me a beer and Danny passed around a joint. We listened to music and I smoked grass with them. We drove from the parking lot to the woods and it was getting dark. I think it was 6:06 p.m., I remember looking at the radio in the truck and thinking that was weird. We were there for several hours and I think it was around 10 p.m. when they all took LSD and Cormac gave me a few magic mushrooms.”

No LSD for Carole, thank you very much!

“I asked Cormac to open the door because the car was noisy and smelled like marijuana and I was nauseous. I went to the side of West Cypress Road Woods, because we went that far near the road and I could see the creek. I went as far away from the car as I could for privacy and threw up.

“Then I ran toward the truck, but I turned when I heard a loud crack.

“I think that he was struck on the head, with an object that looked like a bat and then he dropped, even though I did not witness that. I saw that there was a large pool of blood on the ground. I think that Andre had released his bowels because I

could smell a bad smell. I think that person who hit him on the head was Ricky Hell, because the person I saw out of the corner of my eye was very tall and dark.

“All I could hear was God is dead, Satan lives; let it rain down.

“All I remember was Ricky’s arm was raised and under the light of the full moon I realized it was an aluminum baseball bat. It caught the light. His eyes were completely black. I thought it was Cormac who carried me out of that field, but later I thought it may have been Danny. My church group says that it was God himself. And when I think of Ricky’s black eyes, I realize now that they were right.

“I think Ricky was following me, because I heard footsteps but they stopped when I reached the road. Cormac was running behind me and he wanted to get to the payphone. I reached the road and a car stopped. I told the driver that my boyfriend and I had a fight and I needed to go home. I did not go to the police, because I was high and I was afraid.”

A line from one of Ricky’s favorite poems came to me:

*In short, I was afraid.*

“I did not say this in the police report, because I couldn’t be sure of who had attacked me, or if it happened at all. But I think it was Andre who had his pants down next to me, trying to force me into a sex act. I accidentally hit him in his stomach. I think that’s why the boys attacked him, but I can’t really be sure.”

I set the book down. She’d amended the story for the audience – and to garner pity. Despite the insinuation, I knew Ricky and Danny would never have attacked Andre because of Carole, simply because a sexual assault of that nature was sort of mundane. It was the prevailing attitude that if you weren’t someone’s girl, you were fair game. You didn’t complain if you’d behaved provocatively, if you’d gotten wasted. I knew not to tell anyone about what he’d done to me, simply because I’d been stupid enough to be alone with him. Sick and sad, but true.

I thought back to Cormac. I remember him now in my freshman year, at an easel, drawing a very metal kind of illustration of a woman who was half panther with exaggerated breasts. I thought when I first met him that he was a very pretty girl. His long bangs, the pale crescent moon of his face, the chin that dipped out, the aura of blue Marlboro smoke and mystery around him. I’d heard rumors he’d hit

someone – a girl even – but I think it was an accident. Cormac struck me as physically weak, ailing, plagued by migraines.

If Carole was his girl, he may have snapped, for sure – but as far as I knew Cormac had never been charged with, or accused of, hurting Andre. He wasn't even able to attend trial. And note: Carole abandoned him at the scene of a Satanic teen murder without batting a Revlon-covered lash and hopped in a car out of there. I saw her mouth like a silent movie star form the words "Let's motor." Note also the hysteria, the butter that wouldn't melt in her mouth. Fainting Carol the Dairy Queen had left the scene, dizzy and nauseated from all the pot smoke and 'shrooms. Let it be on the record here: Carole was literally known as Bong Queen throughout our sophomore year. Despite her stature, she could smoke and drink every boy under the table.

I drew a line under Carole Jenkins's name. LIAR.

In Carole's rendition of "that night," Ricky was a cult leader, a premeditated murderer – a predator, even.

Another small detail got me thinking that it was all an elaborate, fantastical lie with one truth written in (Andre) – because I believed that. It was the only part of the story I did.

It was minor, but it mattered: Danny's truck had a sound system – a ghetto one that he bought himself, that he adored, and that had been removed by his dad as a punishment for flunking eleventh grade. In another stroke of misfortune, a more modest car radio he borrowed had been stolen the week before in Freeport. Unless he got another one that day, they must have been using a boom box to listen to music that night. And there was no way to tell the time in the car. Please, 6:06 p.m.? Give me a fucking break.

My stomach was churning, so I chugged the remnants of the whiskey in the glass, somewhat enjoying the esophageal burn that turned to nausea. How did Aishy fit in? There was a big clue in the name, clearly: OM. She resembled Cormac O'Malley and her investment in the case, the personal vendetta against Shearer, made me think she was intimately involved. Aishy was a washed-out redhead at what, twenty-eight, now? I did the math. That sounded about right – she'd have been eleven at the time of the crimes.

I clicked on a photo album called *3 Amigos*. They were scanned images, low res, grainy, with the look and feel of the nineties, confirmed by the date in the corner

in red printed lettering from the drugstore: 10/10/1993. In one, a little girl with an auburn pageboy, crooked teeth, and a nose and ears she never grew into stares at the camera with an ennui that belongs to a child in wartime. Aishy. An older kid with obviously dyed jet-black hair and a Ministry T-shirt and Doc Marten boots leans against her. Cormac O'Malley.

In the next, an eggshell blue sky, a church looming in the background. The little girl is wearing a white dress that resembles a meringue. If you look closely, you can see the little prayer book. A confirmation, I gathered, but judging by her size it could well be her first communion, her first taking of the sacrament – the first taste of guilt and wafer. Beside Cormac and Aishy, a woman dressed in simple cheesecloth, so young looking they could be siblings. The three of them holding on to each other as if a strong wind was buffeting them. But the day is clear; the grip means something else.

*Aisling, Mac, Ma*, the caption read. Aisling was not a common name in America. I added a *ling* to the word *ash* – ash-ling, not ice-ling, as I had originally been saying it.

The next photo nearly took my breath away: Julie Hernandez. She had Ricky's bone structure, the same black and slightly Asiatic eyes. She and Aisling are both wearing the same ugly tan, stained roller skates with big orange wheels, dressed in tiny fluorescent shorts and slogan T-shirts, big ugly earrings. Very nineties. A gaggle of preteen girls stand around them, but Lisa and Aisling are clearly the centerpiece of the photo.

Julie Hernandez was Ricky Hell's sister and Aisling was Cormac's. Which would obviously make Aisling Steve Shearer's stepdaughter.

I looked a little closer at the crowd of kids around them. They were at the United Skates of America. The kids were all Hispanic and black, unfamiliar – kids from the non-whitewashed suburbs of the Island, who came out on Friday night to skate, and at the end of the night, when the rink closed for skating, dance to hip hop and reggae.

I used to go there. Technically, I could have been in that picture. I looked back at the picture and saw the boys and the girls together – two sets of unlikely teenagers – one preteen and gooey as caramel, another who sacrificed mice to Satan. I squinted hard at the picture. Carole Jenkins's little sister was there too. She was a

year above Michelle, my little sister. I wondered if Cormac was standing away from the group, having stepped out just when the flash went off.

And Danny. His hair was the most distinctive thing about him: wavy, lush, and streaked with sun. He had that golden olive skin that only surfers have. His arms were hairless, sinewy. And you can't see the person holding up a V, but I know the ring on the fingers. It's a tiger's eye. Ricky Hell believed in psychic protection. It didn't really help him in the end. I looked again: there was Andre, on Ricky's left, sunglasses on at night, a white-blond dyed black, his face as flat and featureless as a sock puppet's.

I clicked to a hyperlinked interview with Julie Hernandez. She was thirteen years older, two babies in a stroller beside her, standing on a busy street in what looked to be Brooklyn, calm and self-possessed. Her hair was now ironed straight. I took a deep breath. Julie was so like Ricky it put me somewhere between laughter and tears. An emotion that could not be named. Or something similar, whatever Oscar Wilde said.

“Richard – Ricky – was troubled, right? We had a tough life. He was acting scary, talking about Satan, all that kind of noise. He never killed that boy, right, even if that kid was evil as all shit. He was planted in that group by the police. So, what I want to know is why the Nassau County allowed one of their own to ice him? Ricky, my brother, died in the arms of the Lord is what I'm sayin'. Those other kids got away with murder, right? Ricky died in the arms of the Lord, and with God's grace, his name will be cleared. Those people who trashed his name and the cop that murdered him ... they all gonna be punished.”

Julie swayed, her eyes closed, the babies blissfully unaware of their mother's distress.

I was also swaying in my seat. I decided to stop free-pouring whiskey and went back into the built-in kitchen to heat up a tin of vegetable soup with freezer-burned gluten-free bread at the kitchen bench. I managed to eat a quarter of it and typed a quick email to [aislinggo@gmail.com](mailto:aislinggo@gmail.com), the email address attached to her Myspace. I slurred as I read and reread aloud what I'd written:

*Hi Aishy,*

*My name is Erin Sloane, I'm a crime reporter with Island Life. I'm writing a story about the Newport Three and the murder of Andre Villiers.*

*I found your Myspace page and I'm getting the picture that Cormac O'Malley is your brother, or a close relative.*

*You said Steve Shearer was being protected by an RP Sloane and you made some allegations about Andre Villiers.*

*I would really like to hear your side of the story, including your theories on why Andre was murdered and your understanding of Ricky Hell's relationship with Steve Shearer – and obviously how RP was involved with Shearer. Incidentally, I thought I should disclose that my father is RP Sloane.*

*The man you're slandering.*

*I'd also like to get in touch with Cormac, if he's interested as I've already spoken to Danny Quinlan-Walsh and will be trying to speak with Carole Jenkins to get her side of the story.*

*Please get in contact to arrange a time to talk, either in person, by phone call, or to Skype if that's more convenient.*

*All the best, Erin.*

The email reply came within three minutes.

*I know who u R. Yes, Cormacs my brother and hes in Dublin. I was in NY until Steve Shearer got my permanent visas cancelled – I took steve 2 court over Our Mother Marion's death in 07 and won (civil suit, he settled) I can visit but not live in US unless I go through the whole process again he knows ppl, ppl in immigration.*

*Steve told Our Mother everything about the job, she was like his diary – but also, I have a “source” in Nassau County (ex police).*

*Firsthand, Andre was a perve. He deserved what was coming. BUT he knew about Ricky Hell dealing for Steve and Ricky knew too much about Steve. Newport 3 = Carole Jenkins is a lying slut so don't even bother- and if u do DONT mention MAC and that Danny = evil shit (but u know that)*

*I dont care for or about RH but he went down wrong in history and Julie H is like my oldest friend... u should talk to her. We lost touch tho, so don't have her*

*number. I want to bring Steve down so I'll not only talk to you, I'll fly over for it!!!!!!!!!!!!*

*How does that sound*

*PS. Can skype but not now because of work.*

*X Aish*

Another email pinged in – a blank subject field with a message in the body.

She'd attached a photo. I recognized the occasion – it was a Nassau County PD awards ceremony. 1992. This was the same year Shearer's partner, Cooper Deane, had been killed. Mom and Shelly died the year after.

RP has a slightly beery smile stretching across his face. And next to him Steve Shearer, who looked like the WWF wrestler Randy "The Macho Man" Savage, a nose that had been broken and set wrong. He had a dark, scraggly beard, a mustache that looked like a disguise – maybe he was undercover as a biker – but underneath that, he was sharp, alert like a soldier.

*PPS: Ur dad and Mona drank with Steve. I think RP took a bribe about the RH case, maybe Steve knew something about your mum and sis?? RIP btw. Sorry your dad prbly did it? Dads r the worst.*

On our old family mantelpiece, we had a folding frame with the official photographs: one, my dad in full uniform, receiving his award; two, he's holding my mom and she's in an off-the-shoulder cocktail dress. I remembered that night. My mom called me into the hallway before to zip her up – all her clothes smelled like moth balls and fabric softener – and she turned to me all dark shining eyes and lipstick-smearred teeth. Mona wasn't there that night. She must have been so happy to have RP to herself:

*How do I look?*

What I should have said:

*Beautiful. You're a babe. I love you.*

What I said:

*You have lipstick on your teeth.*

The memory made me shrink internally, curl in on myself. Would it have killed me to be nice? Why was I so mad all the time?

I was also the worst. I was also behaving rather a lot like RP Sloane – unhinged, sentimental, free-pouring and smoking indoors.

Guilt, whiskey, the freezer-burned bread, gluten-free cake, and coffees lurched in my gut and I ran into the bathroom, missing both the toilet seat and bowl as I vomited thunderously, bringing up black water, brown soup, and maraschino cherries. From the looks of things, it was like my stomach had simply stopped digesting food and it went in, sat for a while and fermented. I looked in the mirror. Bloated, with the red-rimmed eyes of a reefer smoker, Erin Sloane was not looking fit to keep anything down, let bring an allegedly crooked cop named Steve Shearer down and solve a fishy-as-fuck sixteen-year-old Satanic murder.

All that this photo had proved was that my father had known Steve, which was not really headline news – maybe they'd socialized at the after party – all this stuff about Steve killing his partner, well, it was hearsay so far, old cop gossip. But it struck me that both men aged twenty years in the two years before Halloween and Andre Villiers. And what ages you rapidly? The same things that eat you up on the inside, like it did me. Secrets. Cocaine.

The Christmas Eve ice-creamery shooting of Cooper Deane wasn't anywhere on the internet. The killing of a cop, well, ranks would have closed quick. While I could always do actual legwork – get a list of parlors, ask around the neighborhood – a well-placed phone with a source was always preferable.

At the time, RP told me that all he knew of Steve Shearer was that he was with the Queens precinct, even though he moved to Nassau County, that he was a stepparent of one of the kids. But RP Sloane was a man with (sober) zipped lips and a penchant for mistruth, and his moral compass had no true north. So, he could have responded to the scene, hushed it up, taken money – sure. While Ricky Hell being sold out by my corrupt-ass dad and stitched up for eternity was painful and unpalatable, something else was choking me.

It was the patronym of Sloane and the shadow that my mother's and sister's deaths cast on our name. In the late nineties, I thought about taking my mother's maiden name, but it never felt right. Ultimately, I wanted to absolve, or rather solve, the problem of the Sloane name. But I couldn't, because I had all the Sloane problems.

I mopped up the mess and drank a gallon of water, put on a pot of Folgers.

I wrote another item in my list:

5) *My dad and Mona: logs and attendance, review statement, talk to Mona*

Now my cell was buzzing. Denise. 11:11 p.m. One missed call. It had been a few hours since the delivery and she was unlikely to quit until I gave her the dirt. I called her back.

“Sloane. You sound croaky.”

“And you sound breathless.”

“I’m on the treadmill, babe.”

The exchange was more ritual than revelatory – I knew her nightly habits.

“I just puked,” I admitted.

“Uh huh.” She also knew mine, so didn’t sound surprised. “You OK?”

“Not really,” I admitted, putting my hands over my eyes. *See no evil*. It was all around me.

“Thanks for the book and the heads-up re Aishy OM, real name Aisling O’Malley.”

Denise had stopped heavy breathing, ceased her workout. She was in her kitchen, getting out her bowl. I could hear the freezer door open. Denise was into rituals. Denise was into running and rocky road. Denise was the reincarnation of Lenora Sloane, only with better taste in clothes and life partners and no drug and alcohol problems.

“Pretty far out stuff. I mean, I like that Aisling endorses the theory that the NP3 were incited to murder Villiers by Shearer and that Satanism theory was basically hogwash. And that Hell was murdered. But she’s also claimed Steve Shearer’s killed her mom and his partner. She says she’s got dirt on him via an old Nassau County cop source. But if she has all this proof why hasn’t any of it come to light?”

I sipped my tepid coffee, heard the clink of the spoon into the bowl. Resting.

“Is that really that far out Sloane?” Aisling says Andre was a ‘perve’ or pedophile. You knew him? He ever hurt you?” Denise lowered her voice, she wanted more trauma porn. I didn’t take the bait, I couldn’t vocalize it directly at this stage.

“It was rumoured that Andre was interested in children sexually and hurt animals and he also was violent toward young women in at least one known

instance,” I recited. “To me Aishy fits the profile of an abused child ...” One whose wounds were to fester; everything about her Myspace screamed “Listen to me or I’ll fuck you up!!”

“One with a vendetta,” I finished. “There’s a possibility that Andre had abused some or one of NP3’s siblings. If so, they had a stake in protecting them.”

“Then back to the theory that Steve Shearer could have put the kids up to killing Andre.” Denise was excited. The spoon was down again.

“Well, I’m thinking aloud here, but why would Shearer want to do that? For kicks? Cause he doesn’t strike me as a very civic minded kind of guy. Maybe the more likely narrative is that maybe Shearer wanted Andre dead because he knew about Ricky and Steve’s business relationship.”

“Which is what Julie Hernandez proposes.”

“Right. And then Ricky got disposed of too – someone like RP told him about how he’d grassed on Shearer. Maybe Shearer incited one or some of the kids to whack him. Which makes the devil-in-Newport story a totally different story. A different genre.”

Fiction became nonfiction – the devil was a narco cop, not a mixed-race high school dropout with Aries as his rising sign.

“First cab off the rank: Did you know that your dad was supposed to attend the scene? How do you feel about this, Sloane? I mean there are some unfounded rumors that need to be brought to light, addressed, dismissed ...” Denise trailed off.

“You mean the possibility of my dad taking money, killing my mom and sister, and sleeping with Mona Brynes, his partner. Who took Carole Jenkins’s statement.”

“These connections are just far out,” Denise enthused. “Sloane, you’ve never talked about your mom and sister. You’ve always referred to it as ‘the incident.’ You’ve alluded. Heavily. I need to know more, as it pertains to the case and our story. Must know, in fact.”

“Denise ... I know. It’s just. I can’t even talk about it in therapy.”

The past had come gunning for me – it had an agenda I wouldn’t uncover until it was all uncovered. Once unearthed, the secrets of the past had a kinesis, a second-life timetable of their own.

“Well, can you write it out? Because it’s going to come out, babe. The genie is out of the bottle. You may really hurt your father. You may in fact implicate him in a crime. A few crimes, even.”

My dad may not make it through October, let alone 2010. This was for me to know. Like Denise said, this genie was coming out of the bottle – whether I liked it or not.

“Yes. I can write it out. With RP, any involvement in my mom’s and sister’s deaths was ruled out – I mean formally, their deaths were deemed accidental. Then he tried to blow his brains out, missed by a mile, about a month later. He said he was cleaning his gun, but I found a note.”

“What did it say?”

“*That’s all she wrote.* And that’s a direct quote.” I lit a cigarette, heard her suck in her breath at the same time as I inhaled. “

“Sloane, I knew you had a story in you – and like, literally, you have one in you. It’s spilling out and it’s gonna be *huge*. Book deal huge. Oprah huge. Get it while its fresh. While the wound is open, get the poison out and onto the page.”

“Then do it. The first installment. Like, *hasta pronto.*”

I took the laptop and coffee outside and sat there on one of my dad’s aluminum beach chairs that faced northeast into the pool. Despite the yard being half the size of our previous one, most of it was paved to accommodate the pool shaped like an inflamed kidney. A sheet of flame-colored autumn leaves congealed on the cover. I could hear canned laughter drifting from a television and a Spanish language program, both interrupted by a sudden sharp yowl and a growl, the sound of two things rushing at each other. Racoons, maybe, or cats.

### ***December 24, 1994: The Night of the Incident***

*I’d spent most of the night in Ricky Hell’s van trying to score weed in Freeport. The boys were tense. This was the winter of hallucinogens – rather than the summer of love. Danny’s mood swings had begun to rapid cycle – he had a new sour smell to his Ivory-soap-and-pear-smelling skin and hair. He was beginning not to wash because he said it retained his high better. While his mom laundered his clothes, because they were now worn consecutively, he smelled yeasty, ripe. His*

*Pacific blue eyes were red rimmed and I had noticed that his normally flawless skin had erupted and he had begun picking at his chin. He snapped at Ricky and me a few times that night.*

*When Danny went to pay for gas and get cigarettes, Ricky stared at me in the rearview mirror. It was a long look and not entirely polite. I gave him a look that was all deer in the headlights. He frowned and shook his head. Not like that, the look said. That's not it at all.*

*We came home to wrap presents and decorate the tree. However, in Sloane family tradition, my mom had taken Ambien and was in bed with her wine, my father was absent, and my little sister had taken herself to bed, dreaming of boy bands and kisses. So, Danny and I went upstairs, to do what we did – everything but. Danzig's "Twist of Cain" came on and I went into Mom's stash of benzos, scored some Valium. I rolled up a towel and placed it under my door. We had the window open. We blew a joint.*

*"Ricky's into you," Danny remarked in a you know, it's snowing outside, kind of casual way.*

*"OK," I said, inhaling, blowing delicious creamy smoke out of my nostrils and mouth. Knowing where this was heading.*

*"He knows you're a virgin. It's a turn on."*

*"Whose fault is that?" I said. "Anyway, it's not even a purity thing," I continued, "Guys just think they own it if they take it away."*

*"Is that what happens?" Danny said taking the joint out of my mouth, "Quit hogging it."*

*"Of course not. But it's a kind of power, right? To have like ... initiated someone?"*

*Danny inched across the bed, a terrible pink and white paisley bedspread my mother had bought me, to go with the terrible pink and white girl's bedroom she had decorated years ago, despite pink being my most despised color. There were chocolate and menstrual blood stains on them that horrified Danny.*

*"It's about love," he said seriously. "And trust. I want to be able to trust you. To know it's like ... you and me. Forever."*

*"It is you and me," I recited weakly.*

*“Why do I catch Ricky checking you out?” Danny’s Patrick Swayze-blue eyes were as cold and blue as the Atlantic. Mobsters died in these waters. “And my father the other day, trying to palm-fuck you.”*

*“You’re like always pissed at me. You tell me I dress like ... a guy and to wear better clothes. Then you chew me out over guys talking to me or looking at me,” I protested. I was getting deeply weary of this. I looked at my watch. 5:00 a.m. We’d been fighting on and off since the last bell at school. Boyfriends were a giant pain in the ass, if this one was anything to go by. “Even if guys do that, it doesn’t mean it’s like ... reciprocated.”*

*“Stop using big words,” Danny muttered blackly. “That’s the way you try to win.”*

*“Reciprocated? Right. A real Double Jeopardy word.” I said sarcastically.*

*“My father said you’re Satan’s main handmaiden,” Danny told me, drinking milk. Then he dunked a Entemanns cookie in it.*

*“Isn’t that a good thing?” I said. “Wait – Michelle left those out for Santa.”*

*“It means you’re a slut. I’ve seen the way you ogle him,” he concluded.*

*I rolled my eyes. I made a face. I was losing patience, challenging the whole dynamic.*

*“Please. You wish.”*

*It wasn’t a Brooke and Ridge soap opera slap. He’d burned me before, hit me – but it was in an extremity, once upside the head, the leg and arm – designed more to bully and humiliate. He had accidentally-on-purpose sliced my arm with a lino cutter in art. When Danny slapped me square across the face, my ears rang and my sense of time and space sort of warped and refracted. It would have almost been comical if it hadn’t hurt so much: my head snapped to one side, like whiplash. It caught my nose and I had to elevate my head to stop the blood.*

*The silence had a song of its own – the electrics in the room, the sound of leaves scraping against glass, the feedback in my ear all joined Danny’s fire-engine-loud wail. Much like a child, he cried more out of fright than remorse. After the first sob, he began to heave silently. He brought me Kleenex. His head on my lap, mouthing:*

*“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’ll never do it again. I love you I love you. I’m adopted I’m adopted.” It was a whiny tune I knew too well. He fell asleep, somehow. I fell asleep too: the dope and the Valium, but it was mostly shock.*

*Then Danny was shaking me awake. He was the color of snow and equally cold, frigid. He was grabbing and dragging me. I thought it was a jealous rage. I began my own whiny, unconvincing solo:*

*“Sorry. Sorry. I love you. I love you. Only you!”*

*I had a guilty conscience. Or rather, I just knew I should be sorry.*

*“Erin! Get up, get up.”*

*I was mumbling nonsense and he grabbed a coat, a denim jacket lined with fleece. I was barefoot. It was snowing outside. Danny literally dragged me down the stairs by one arm, glue-mouthed, no bra, sockless. I noted the house smelled like rotten eggs, sulfur. Outside, the subzero temperature did not clear my head. As I hit the cold air, I immediately vomited. My vomit was warm and steam rose from it, like it was on fire. My hands and feet burned from the cold. What day was it? Was it day or night? Suddenly, my dad’s Volvo was pulling into the drive, like a hallucination.*

*I checked my watch. It was 6:06 a.m.*

*The cold snap of air, the sulfur and marine smell of the Sound slapped me awake. I stood there still high, thick with Valium and booze and poisoned, throwing up what looked like eggnog on the driveway, while a boy with no T-shirt and a girl’s jacket and his jeans undone screamed at me. I had blood crusted around my nostrils and probably streaking down my face and puke in my hair – but I couldn’t care less. All I could think was: My father is going to kill me.*

*That night, I did what I knew best – I ran and I hid. I was in the pool cabana shaking and cowering in a corner next to some flippers and my little sister’s Little Mermaid pool float when John Kovlozky, otherwise known as Ox, came into the shed, filling it with his wide body and alcoholic sweat. We’d been at his poky little house in Belmont that summer for a cookout. All John’s Romanian family were there, having come from the flea markets where they sold fake Umbro shorts and Champion sweatshirts. There was so much beer and Tuica consumed, the hotdogs were all burned. Michelle cried because there was a pig on a spit.*

*“Pumpkin. C’mon.”*

*Ox spoke to me in hushed tones, helping me put shoes and woolly socks on my feet one at a time – my Converse, the ones I’d written band names on. “Gay” bands, bands that Danny hated. Jane’s Addiction. The Cure. I was a closet Goth. A freak, we called them in my school. He held each foot in a way that made me think he had raised children, but I knew Ox was childless. The kindness that he showed me,*

*the softly delivered instructions, the repetition that I was okay, I was going to be okay. He wore a gray Queens College sweatshirt, stained with sweat, despite the temperature.*

*Cop cars. An ambulance, no sirens. A fire engine, ditto.*

*I needed oxygen. The mask tasted of plastic and chest infections.*

*Pluto came out in my father's arms. That was our dog. Yes, our father took the dog first.*

*That's not fair, exactly. My little sister, my mom – they came out on stretchers, Dad couldn't obviously carry them. But my dad, well, he loved Pluto and the pool and in that order.*

*He gave me a look then, the first time he'd made eye contact. It was so accusatory and full of self-loathing and hatred I hung my head and gasped.*

*Danny was wearing shoes – not his own, my father's velour slippers.*

*I watched my father talking to him. It was strange. They weren't fighting. He wasn't yelling or asking Danny just what the fuck he'd been doing in his teenage daughter's bedroom or why she had blood all over her face. He was shaking Danny's hand and then hugging him. My father was crying. Danny had rescued me. He was a hero. They were both dead to me. Michelle was ten, liked stuffed animals, mint chocolate-chip ice cream, horses, the color purple. I told her that they ate horses in France. For a week, I pretended that she was a ghost and no one could see her. I was a bad sister; I was a bad daughter. I can't think of the last time I thanked my mom for doing the laundry; I threw a pair of underwear at her and they had a used pad in them. On Christmas Eve, no less.*

*It was then that I made the decision: I was going to hell.*

If I was Carole Jenkins, I would have written a book about it. It would have been called *Marijuana and Danny Saved My Life*. I was not Carole Jenkins, I was Eerie Erin and I was working out a new title for the story. Ricky Hell was maybe, just maybe, the doomed protagonist and Steve Shearer the villain. What that made Andre and the other kids, I didn't quite know yet. Danny was up there. I called it *The Devil You Know*: exactly who the devil – devils – were, at this stage, remained the central mystery.

I put that title into the email field and hit send.

It was only five minutes later when the reply pinged through.

*Sloane, this is what we needed! This is good. Can you write more first-person stuff? Weave fragments of the past with the present? Do it well and you'll get a cover and a six-page spread, with you, my precious little ex-metalhead, at the very heart of it ... on that note, this Ox fellow? Would he talk to you about that night and what your dad was up to?*

**XXD**

Now Ox, AKA John Kovlozky, was in his early fifties. He was a hulking loner whose shunning of human and animal contact led him to work in a cybercrimes specialist unit – which meant sitting at a computer all day and all night in sweats, pretending to be a thirteen-year-old girl on forums like *GRL Zone* and *Teen Talk*. Ox was last sighted at six feet three, weighing in around three hundred pounds, florid faced and hypertensive from a diet of Coors and Cheetos. I had often contemplated that there was some terrible reason behind his voracity for punishing those who preyed on the weak and his genuine affection and empathy for children, his singledom and melancholy brown eyes.

The chip of ice my Mom had suggested lived in my crisper-like soul whispered to me Ox would be more than receptive when I asked him about Andre Villiers.

*He would. He also may have some intel on Andre Villiers himself – creeps are his speciality – and Shearer too. I'll call him now. Thanks for your kind words. Always.*

**E**

I cleared my throat and finished my whiskey.

It was closer to midnight than morning, but I knew Ox would answer his cell – like me, like Denise, he started to think better just as the sun came up.

## Chapter 5

I could tell the brightness in his tone was born of alarm – Ox clearly thought it was a death call.

“Hey Pumpkin,” he said. How’s RP?”

“He’s still alive, Ox. Listen, I just wondered if you could do me a solid.”

“You just jump right in, don’t ya? What has it been, like, six months? A year?” he chuckled, but there was no malice. Ox didn’t mind my lack of social graces, or what Denise called my killer instinct. Compared to my dad I was like “Dear Abby” or something.”

“It’s almost a year, sorry Ox. Real sorry. Work, you know. And speaking of, I’ve got a new/old story I’m working on. I need some intel. It’s a cop. A narco cop, actually.”

I paused.

Ox cleared his throat.

“Go on.”

“Detective Steve Shearer. Nassau County ... The Andre Villiers murder in Newport.”

I could hear him light a cigarette, drag on it. I walked outside, looked up at the weirdly bright moon, a filmy blue ring around it.

“The Newport Three,” he said, flat as a tack.

Like Pavlov’s dog, I took out and lit up another Marlboro, which burned my raw throat. I hadn’t puked in ages.

“Yeah. I already spoke to Danny.”

“Your old ball and chain,” Ox said, in a jokey but knowing tone.

“Yeah, the very same one. I’m going to try and locate the other two: Carole Jenkins and Cormac O’Malley. Cormac’s abroad. I found an online résumé on LinkedIn. Birthdate’s 3.17.1974. He claims he went to Belmont High, but pretty sure it’s him.”

“Cormac O’Malley born on St Paddy’s day.” Ox said in a Lucky Charms accent and cleared his throat again. There was a clownish side to him that came out at odd times, namely the small disasters of my life, but also when he’d been drinking. I started to wonder if he had been drinking alone, too, in his basement apartment, lit

up by the glow of computer monitors, occasionally answering calls and texts on his burner cells, reeling in cyber creeps. I cough-laughed, humoring him.

“His sister, Aisling, has a conspiracy site naming Steve Shearer as a kind of criminal mastermind. She claims he was a dirty narco cop, dealing drugs – that’s the reason Andre was killed: he cottoned onto Ricky and Steve’s relationship.”

“Yeah?” Only Ox’s “yeah” wasn’t a really a question. “Not uncommon for a narco cop to make a few bucks on the side. And to ice a few people. But how did he have that kind of power over those kids? I mean your old beau, and the Lucky Charms kid, and his lady friend were all there and told the same story ...”

“I dunno. The other thing is she’s saying Andre was a perve. Sort of like the guys you go after.”

Ox used pauses, body language, to communicate. His pause was interminable and it could have meant anything. If I could have put a thought bubble above his head it would have read:

*“Fascinating. Can’t wait to get back to my GRL Zone friend forum and bash in a cyber creep’s cranium in due course.”*

“His name came up in the Carver case,” I continued.

“Oh yeah?”

“I mean Aisling seems like she’s totally nutso. Shearer is Aisling’s stepfather and she’s clearly got a grudge against him. She says he killed his partner, Cooper Deane.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Yes, me too. It was a long time ago – nothing on the net about it. She took him to court for her mom’s death too. A civil suit, she said. She also alleges RP was allegedly too drunk to attend the Villiers murder scene and did not take the NP3’s statements. Mona and Scarpetti did. She insists Steve was tight with my dad. There’s been an insinuation that he took money from Shearer to corroborate details of Andre Villiers’s murder. She sent me a photo of them together.”

“Unlikely. Your father was always bombed and functioned great. And, I mean, maybe they knew each other socially, but they were different divisions and Shearer was stationed in Queens for a long time. And Steve Shearer, that guy, well, he has a big rep, I can tell you that already. He was a coke fiend. A lot of narco cops were back in the eighties, early nineties. It was a recreational drug in New York back then.”

“I’ve seen Carole Jenkins’s statement, Ox. Mona took it.” I picked up *Dancing with the Devil*.

“Look, Pumpkin, you could go down to Benny’s on Sunrise Highway and hear all kinds of sick shit about your dad. Me too. No cop has an immaculate rep. But is that other stuff true? Shearer killing his partner, inciting a group murder? Who is he, Charles Manson?”

“Okay.” I backed away. Ox was being uncharacteristically defensive. I was planning on talking to Mona next anyway. “There’s something else,” I said. I stopped breathing for a second as I heard a crashing sound around the side of the house and I took the phone with me as I looked over the gate and spotted the culprit – a bandit-striped face, an outraged sound as it clambered off the trash can so fast it was a streak of black and white. Racoons.

“I’m wondering if you could talk to me about the night of the inc ... Christmas Eve, I mean. When Mom and Shelly died.” I winced and held the phone away for a second. I had never tried to access the police records of the night my mom and sister perished, namely because that period of my life was an amnesiac and treacherous place, somewhere I had no interest in returning. A pause opened like a grave. Ox swallowed. It was a comic sort of gulp.

“Ox? You there?”

“Yeah.” He took a drink of what I knew to be a 7-Eleven Big Gulp, most probably spiked with rum.

I should mention that his build was not the reason he was called Ox. Despite his appearance and a diet of hotdogs, cheeseburgers, and booze, his constitution was legendary. He’d never missed a day of service and hadn’t had so much as a cold in twenty years.

“What do you want to know?” he asked finally.

“I was in the house. I had a towel under the door. Why wasn’t I suspected for trying to knock off Mom and Michelle? Or, like, me and Danny? I remember being questioned the once, but like, that was it. My peer group had a criminal element. I fought incessantly with my mom. Why my dad, who wasn’t even there?”

The chasm opened again.

“Ox,” I repeated impatiently. “You’re killing me.”

“Sweetie. Listen. RP came speeding home, Erin. He ran a red light. He was caught on camera.”

I absorbed this.

“So, he knew something was wrong, when there was no way of knowing,” I said, finishing the thought for him. “That meant that they thought he caused the gas leak, but felt remorse and sped home to rescue us.”

“100 points, Pumpkin.”

“What about instinct? Wasn’t it you who said that fifty percent of the job is rational legwork and the rest comes from the gut?”

“There’s that,” he agreed.

There had been a problem with the gas heater, – the filter, I believe. It was faulty. It had been my dad’s job to maintain it. He didn’t. I mean, sometimes the lights went off because he neglected to pay bills. And that’s what exonerated my father – but maybe he couldn’t live with himself, with his own negligence.

“He and Lenora had a screaming fight the night before. She had even called her sister in Maine.”

I remembered. A grown man singing, “*Lenora-the whore-a.*” Yep – RP was a first-class asshole, especially when drunk. “Aunt Marnie.”

“Look, if your folks had not had a troubled marriage ...”

“What kind of trouble?”

Ox ignored my babe-in-the-woods act. He knew I knew about Mona. Everyone did.

“And if your dad had no motive and hadn’t raced home to rescue them, maybe it would have been different. You and Danny Quinlan-Walsh were under suspicion for maybe all of five minutes. It was a combination of RP’s behavior, his relationship, ah ... outside the marriage, and the fact that you and Danny were both poisoned by carbon monoxide and in the house, was enough for them to eliminate you two pretty quick and focus on him as the prime suspect.”

“It could have been a murder–suicide,” I argued.

“Unlikely, but I’m sure it was considered and then dismissed.”

“Did you ever think RP did it?” I couldn’t believe I had uttered it. I felt I had ripped off a reeking, dirty Band Aid and exposed my wound. Aunt Marnie, like the rest of Newport, had suspected my father. I knew this because she told me after a bottle of California red. She was a bad drunk, worse still, an ugly crier.

“If anything, he could have been suicidal, the way he drank, the way he talked when he drank even. Homicidal? I wondered. The doubt just sort of corrodes you. But I had to believe he wouldn’t. He couldn’t.”

Another pause.

“Look, did my father ever take money?”

“Look kid, RP was a good cop. But like all good cops, he was flexible with the rules. He did have that impulse control problem.” I could see an invisible pair of scales in Ox’s hand, weighing it all up. Ox and his near three-hundred-pound body, his bloodshot eyes. Was he projecting, ever so slightly?

“Your dad had a code of ethics that maybe don’t make sense to you – blood money, another cop’s blood money, nope, I wouldn’t say so. That don’t mean he wasn’t resourceful. If he did earn on the side, I’ll bet he tucked it away, for a rainy day.”

“My father spent money like a drunk sailor at port on New Year’s Eve,” I countered. “I made sure he had paid off the mortgage, the car. There were a few stocks and bonds belonging to my mom that hadn’t been sold by him, but my inheritance was nearly decimated. He didn’t save, he couldn’t save, Ox. It wasn’t in his nature.”

“RP always had something going – dice games, poker. But he was old school, I mean, down to the bone. So, if he did, he’d be keeping it, you know, not in a savings account.” Ox cleared his throat.

RP had threatened to kill the bank manager for neglecting to remove Mom’s name from their mail. A lawsuit was threatened and then rescinded when I wrote to the manager with deliberate misspellings written in naïve girlish cursive. Fact: I only print and have never failed a spelling test in my life. Ox was someone who my dad said you’d approach with a dead body in your trunk and he would say without a beat: “Where’s the shovel at?” I wondered how many “dead bodies” my dad had brought to him. Was this one?

“What are you saying, Ox? He’s got a stash?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he breezed, but it sounded asthmatic. “If he does, it’s close to his heart is all I’m saying. You’re a smart cookie. You know what I mean. Talk soon,” Ox said. But he didn’t like to sign off, hang up, whatever, and for a moment it was both of us suspended there, together alone, smoking, looking up at the same stars.

I started to try and think like RP – where an old man may have stashed a significant amount of cash before he totally lost his marbles. The house had a crawlspace and an attic, a Freddy Kruger basement-slash-boiler-room, which was full of seed-smelling damp recesses and whining, sighing foundations. I avoided it for obvious reasons – the gas heater scared me. There was the living room sofa, the photo frames, the recess under the floorboard.

My father had transplanted all my mother's clothes from the old house to her side of the mirrored built-in wardrobe. I sometimes went into the wardrobe and felt the plastic sheaths of dry-cleaned clothes, poking holes in the bags and fingering the fabric of good suits and formal dresses she'd never really worn. The real clothes she'd worn, the threadbare sweat pants and tangy sweatshirts, were all gone, bar the ones I wore still, even if I had to roll up the waistband four times.

The closet also yielded shoeboxes of receipts and clippings, yellowing and musty, with the corpses of a few moths that had also been embalmed with the paperwork.

I checked the bathroom (toilet cistern), the first aid kit, the hamper. I stood there in Dad's ensuite bathroom, reflected in the full-length mirror drinking whiskey, with enormous sweat pants, my unwashed, lank hair in a bun, vomit splashed on my Rangers T-shirt, and I realized out of all the low points in my life, this was not a valley or a trough or a nadir, rather a kind of peak, or pinnacle, of batshit crazy. I hesitated. I didn't want to unpick the thread. If I went forward, I would learn some terrible truths. I looked in the mirror and remembered Ricky Hell paraphrasing another dead philosopher:

*“Knowledge is terrible when it brings no profit to the man that's wise. But you gotta get wise,” he said.*

My head had started to thump.

Close to his heart.

RP's favorite saying: *Dogs are the best people*. My mom, my sister, they were in sealed urns on the mantelpiece. But our family dog, Pluto, Jupiter's successor, came first.

Stories that my mom had told me about my father growing up in care in Brooklyn came to mind: a foster home dealt in quick, thick beatings, kids not washing to deter any advances from older kids or the foster carers themselves, who

fed the kids the dog's food. My dad saved his and fed the dog, who became his protector, his best friend. What was his name? Jupiter, I think.

My father had cremated Pluto and put a kind of shrine in the garden in the stone quarry that was the garden – he hadn't wanted to leave him behind in Newport.

I went outside and located Pluto's shrine. I dug through the stones; they were blunt, but eventually the force of my bare hands digging cut my knuckles. A foot deep, under the stones: a layer of soil, dirt. Then a layer of plastic sheeting. My bloodied, gritty hand retrieved it, like a vet feeling for a foal. I retrieved a long, shrink-wrapped sheet of money. So many stacks of green notes, more dead presidents; more money than I had ever seen in my life.

## Chapter 6

I finally fell asleep just before dawn, into that dreamless, iron-heavy sleep of sedatives and whiskey and trauma. I woke up being slapped by an impatient paw, the mattress still stripped, my mouth glued to the pillow. I checked the time: 10:30 a.m. There was a glut of unread texts, all from a blocked number. I thought I knew who it was and I thought it prudent to ignore them.

First, I attended to Mister and then took a thirty-minute scalding shower to wake up. Next, I made real espresso, not from a percolator, but from a proper Italian coffee machine, with an engine like a Ferrari. It was my dad's one concession to domesticity and I think was from a police auction – it was rumored to have belonged to a Gotti. Coffee was a form of food for him. My dad was like the clichéd police captain from eighties cop shows, slamming shots of Pepto Bismol and alcohol and chasing it with coffee and cigarettes.

I sat down in front of my notebook and considered the next portal into my story.

### **The day I went to Hell: Valentine's Day, 1994.**

*I found him at Wendy's – or rather, I allowed him to find me. Danny wasn't working, nor was he with me; he wasn't allowed to have a girlfriend. He was in fact on his dad's boat on the Sound, on a family outing. Valentine's Day was his mom and dad's anniversary. They were probably singing rock versions of hymns or whatever it was bible bashers did for kicks. I drank a diet cherry Coke with too much ice, watching Ricky watch me through the galley of the grease-fragrant kitchen. I drew a heart and an arrow in salt with my black nails, once six inches, now gnawed down to the raw, pink cuticle. I counted the steps that it took for him to come from the galley to my table. Sixteen. He smelled like ketchup, oil, and cigarettes. He steepled his fingers and I noted his knuckles were crusted with scabs. I wonder, if like me, Ricky ran his knuckles across walls while walking.*

*Like Persephone, the last three months of my life had been spent in the underworld with my dad, Hades. I had become head of the house by default. I learned how to cook for two and screen the machine messages for debtors. I attended*

*the inquest and learned that my sister died first, while I listened to Danzig and performed oral sex on my boyfriend: time of death approximately after midnight. Despite being Catholic, Shelly and Mom were cremated and the metal in Shelly's wrist was detected and removed and the ashes sifted through, without fragment. Shelly's ashes were in an urn shaped like a horse; Mom's was a seashell, because she loved the beach. That cost extra. I learned that my father, a police officer of some seventeen years, was being investigated for causing the gas leak and that the double he pulled that night referred to something else altogether.*

*More and more, I was gaining momentum, a fire inside me was burning. Danny was a blanket – he suffocated it and me.*

*Ricky sat down in the booth, soundless as a cat.*

*“Eerie Erin,” he said and smiled, showing me his gray tooth. It was awful. I watched his fingers in the salt. He used my Newport nickname. I would use his.*

*“Ricky Hell.”*

*He had drawn a knife.*

*We sat in the truck and he lit my cigarette. He took out his own pack. He smoked Newports like Danny. Maybe he wanted the minty breath too.*

*“I heard about your family,” he said, as if commenting on the weather.*

*I nodded.*

*“Sorry. Is your dad okay?”*

*I shrugged. We lived in a state of depression – a terrible, paralyzing despair left him unshaven and practically catatonic, drinking scotch, smoking and drugging himself into unconsciousness and loss of motor and bladder control in front of old family videos. We lived in Amityville, a fitting place for two ghosts.*

*Before my Dad's gun-cleaning accident, he was never and had never been okay. Not really. He had night terrors for as long as I remembered and now he wept in his sleep.*

*The radio was playing the Eagles. He flicked it off.*

*The truck was not like Danny's – expensive, new, hotted up, smelling like pine and cigarettes. This was a working van – a greasy, manly, fumey truck. It did a job, other than ferry spoiled teenagers to fast food eateries.*

*“You usually work on a Saturday?”*

*“I work on an everyday,” Ricky said. I seem to remember Danny saying he had three jobs. He was poor, remember. Minimum wage. The working class, Bruce Springsteen bullshit that hack Nick Jelen boasted about but knew nothing of – Ricky Hell was living it. Shitty jobs, no college, no health care.*

*“Then the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did He who made the lamb make thee?  
Did He who made the lamb make thee?” he repeated, with emphasis on thee.*

*“The Bible?” I guessed. Real Satanists quoted the Bible at will, I knew. Real Satanists were well read – even if they did garble it. You didn’t have to spell out reciprocate to them.*

*“William Blake, Songs of Innocence and Experience.”*

*He reached under the seat and handed me a huge book – thick as a doorstep, with many dog-eared pages. It was the Norton Anthology of Poetry.*

*“A robin red breast in a cage, puts all of heaven in a rage,” he said. Although he looked cold, dark, and spooky and his eyes had no animation, he oozed words, treacly and convincing.*

*That’s me. I thought.*

*“That’s you,” he said.*

*“Are you on break?”*

*“Unofficially. I just quit,” he said and gunned the engine.*

I drank two cups of black coffee and ate gluten-free Pop-Tarts my dad had purchased for me before he lost the remaining functioning cogs of his mind. There was another reason for me eating the Pop-Tarts – last night I had defrosted the refrigerator and stacked the freezer with money. There was part of me that was terrified of touching it. I literally gasped and shrank back. Had he forgotten it was there, in the depths of losing his marbles? I mean, why would an adult male American citizen with a Bank of America account have a pirate’s booty, shrink-wrapped? There was something very dirty about the money. Like, it was blood money from Steve Shearer. Ricky Hell’s blood money.

So, now I needed to know not just where but *when* did it come from?

*Money's just paper. It's the energy you give it that makes it good or bad,*

Ricky told me once.

“Don't give it to the cops. Spend it with good energy, Eerie,” Ricky would have said.

“Julie should have it,” I answered back.

The messages jumped out at me:

*Did u come 2 my house?*

*My wife is pissed.*

*U need 2 bck of*

*Like srsly*

I didn't know how he got my unlisted cell number, but immediately I knew it was Danny. Danny had always written like this, even before we had cell phones – he spoke in text talk before it was invented. He had only scorn for the written word; he wanted to mutilate it. I decided to ignore him.

There were one thousand listings for J. Hernandez in Queens in the White Pages. Then I remembered that in the video the backdrop Julie was standing in front of was a famous burger joint that Ricky had taken me to, a family favorite and a Queens institution: Jackson Hole on Astoria Boulevard. That narrowed it down to one hundred forty-five (listed) J. Hernandezes. After I called 411, spinning a story about a diabetic long-lost aunt from Puerto Rico, they told me I needed to do the legwork myself and quit wasting their time. I put on more coffee, sat, and made my calls. Randomly calling people in NYC is a terrifying and bizarre experience – I heard a trombone in the background in my first call and then a lot of old people speaking Portuguese, someone cursing me out in English very creatively and someone cursing me out in Spanish (coincidentally enough, something about the devil). Next up, someone was screaming like they were being murdered and there was a cop car's siren wailing in the background. By lunchtime, the calls were ringing out, I was walleyed and ready to hang up when I heard Julie's voice after the sixth ring.

“Hello, you’ve reached the Hernandez family.” Julie’s voice was a mixture of honey and gravel; she rolled her *r*’s like a real Latina. Ricky’s accent was curious – kind of like the Golden Age of Hollywood’s Clark Gable or Laurence Olivier, if either man had watched *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. But it wasn’t Julie IRL, it was a recording. An actual answering machine.

“We’re not home, so leave a message for Rosie or Jose –”

“Or Mami,” a kid shouted and another shushed and a chorus of giggles sounded. “Or me,” she recovered. It made bitter tears sting my eyes for some reason.

I left a brief message and gave her my cell number, explaining I’d be available any time to talk to her.

Maybe it was picturing the whorls and loops, the DNA sequencing of Ricky’s bloodline replicating and living on in small fingers turning sticky pages, falling asleep on a mother who wasn’t out turning tricks, but stroking their hair as they slept. Maybe I had a sentimental idea of motherhood because my own mom was gone, and while she’d been alive she had been a deep spring of maternal nurturing and support.

I decided my next port of call was Mona. I toyed with the idea of using the element of surprise as leverage, because she, Mona, was an opaque and somewhat slippery kind of human. Her moods, loyalties, values all seemed to shift. Up was down with Mona. Sounded like someone else I knew. Plus, I knew she had retired and was somewhat of a homebody; old-school cops like Mona didn’t know what to do with themselves in the real world. They were morally dubious night dwellers who needed bar stools, smoke, and criminal activity, not stamp collections or Jodi Picoult book clubs. But I changed my mind. I wanted to go in soft, play to her (hopefully) warm memories of my father. Luckily, she hadn’t moved from Belmont. Her home phone number was the same. She sucked in her breath when I called.

“Mon over after lunch. I walk Moscow at three,” she said.

Moscow, I imagined, was a dog. Like RP, Mona loved dogs.

It was nearly lunch time. I dressed in the same black-and-gray wool dress, black stockings, boots, my mother’s winter coat, day after day. I washed it at night and rotated it with an identical one in aubergine. It wasn’t that I lacked imagination, exactly; it was just easier to wear a uniform and I had no idea what suited me

anymore. I ran a ceramic brush through my hair and examined my face in the mirror – like, I really looked at my face. Every day I went through the motions of applying concealer stick like war paint, daubing foundation and outlining my eyes with kohl, a little blush to make me less corpse-like.

Was Danny right? I mean, I'd been wearing the same eye makeup since high school, irrespective of fashion. It wasn't an accessory – it was a mask. The roundness that had plagued me until my late twenties had become subtly more angular, more defined as my collagen slowly disappeared. The last doctor I'd seen said I looked drawn and anemic. I was childless, single, and antisocial. I was basically a witch. Maybe I should streak my hair, buy a bottle of spray tan, use bronzer, and do online dating as I'd suggested to Danny.

I mentioned before that my mother referred to me as having a chip of ice in my heart – but I realize now that it was more about an insistence of personal freedom. Maybe I was born a lone wolf (and my dad was certainly one, despite being in two packs: a family, which he regularly abandoned, and the police, which he was later abandoned by), but having someone transgress and trespass on your sense of self so heavily might make you that way. Danny's face would be so close to mine it was like he was trying to steal my breath. In some cultures, they describe ghosts who steal your breath and paralyze you as night hags. In Africa, they say the devil is riding you.

I was better off alone.

My phone pinged, an auditory signifier of deep dread or simply the sound of an email coming through. Maybe both. Her writing made me feel dizzy and odd – the run-on sentences with no punctuation, the clipped syntax, the changing fonts and colors.

It was a forward from Cormac O'Malley, from Aisling.

His email address was [lostinspace@gmail.com](mailto:lostinspace@gmail.com). I scanned his email sig: Cormac O'Malley was a graphic designer and an author of two fantasy books.

The message was short and simple:

***Dear Aisling, I have a great deal of consternation***

*(consternation even!!)*

***about sending this and ransacking the past, but as you say, Steve's got to be held accountable one day. Doing it for Mam. Love always,***

## *Mac*

I clicked download and a large file filled the screen.

Ah, Christ, not another memoir. I put my head in my hands. The title was peculiar:

### *Part One: Resident Alien*

I made a snap decision. If it was sci-fi or fantasy, I would discontinue.

Past the shapes of lightning, beneath the clouds, a dark sea of skyscrapers and buildings lit up by a million blinking lights like church tabernacles, which my sister had said before was like Jesus jumping up and down very fast, the city. The arteries of light that intersected the islands of light and steel were roads and freeways, and the little vibrating objects, cars and in the cars, people. And on and in all the islands, linked over the dark water by bridges that were as elegant as running writing, were people, more people than we could ever meet in our entire life.

We were told be silent. We were silent throughout the storm that made the plane pitch; Aisling drove her nails into my hand, leaving little half-moons behind, and the drinks cart nearly crashed into the lady next to us, who was moaning and dry-nibbling pills like they were peanuts. Steve knew a guy in Customs, so we sat silently waiting in the room at JFK Airport that backed onto the runway until he came and showed his badge to a large black woman with a hundred braids in her hair, and she waved us through. *Go on in. America.* It was that easy.

Steve and Our Mother stood waiting with a cluster of helium balloons and a placard that read *O'Malley*. Our Mother had drawn it; I'd know her writing anywhere – the O and M too big and extravagant so that all the letters were squashed together at the end. Next thing we knew, we were in the car that was called a Jeep, Our Mother holding both our hands through the front seat. Aisling said in a tiny voice, "I've forgotten how to talk it's been so long."

"I've forgotten how to talk," Steve mimicked in a voice that was meant to be Irish or Australian, but was so off the mark we all laughed. "You're a trip, kid," Steve ruffled her hair and he whistled and beeped his horn all the way home from the airport. High up in the Jeep, not as high as the plane, we looked out at the city. The night was charcoal and there were no stars, just lights and horns and rain.

Steve Shearer, in living color, on the page. I decided Mona could wait. I revved up the Gotti machine and made myself a black coffee and decided to read the entire installment of *Resident Alien*.

Steve's apartment was in a suburb called Queens. In the morning, we walked to Austin Street, through a steady stream of traffic. Green ash and red maples lined the streets. Fat bottle-green and scarlet leaves crunched under our feet. We crossed bridges and underpasses, looked up at fire escapes, where cops chased criminals in the movies. People were sitting outside their apartments with boom boxes and glittery blue-black men were ducking and weaving around basketball courts. Men in heavy overcoats with skullcaps and prayer shawls walked in pairs; an obese woman wheeled a dog in a pram.

Queens was full of streets called blocks, with apartments and basketball courts. We learned words like *fall* and *mall* and *want*. Exotic words – *Hasidic*, *kosher*, *bodega*, *burrough*.

But it was the food that really got to us. Our pupils were permanently dilated and our mouths salivated for the street foods: roasted honeyed nuts sold by vendors, and pizza pies – hot, saucy, cheesy slices so big you could fold them, with bubbles in the dough.

In the first week Steve introduced us to Nathan's hot dogs with canary-yellow mustard, which had the medicinal tang of pickles, sandwiches with six kinds of cold meat, called cold cuts, fake cheese in a can, marshmallow and peanut butter together, cakes rumored to be radioactive, and pizza pockets. We went to supermarkets and came out with brown shopping bags filled with Pop-Tarts, knishes, bagels, pretzels, ring pops, candy bars longer than a ruler. Our Mother took us to a place called Greenwich Village.

"Faggotsville." Steve laughed and Aisling laughed too.

Faggot. Queer. Spic. Nigger. Kike. We learned a new glossary of insults as Steve drove his '89 Land Rover, The Eagles on the tape deck, a baseball bat in the back of the car, and two pieces strapped to him – Aisling and I saw him take them off at night time. At the red lights, he brushed his hair with a boar's hair hairbrush and looked in the mirror as he did it. Only Steve could touch the brush, not even Our Mother.

We were somewhat famous in Queens. People praised our pallid skin. They made us say words like “bath” and “ask” and “pardon” and sometimes they stroked Aisling’s long red hair. We often got free things from shops; men honked their horns and shouted out of the car, “Lookin’ fine Blondie,” and “Marry me, Blondie.”

Very soon it was December, but we had to say Happy Holidays, not Happy Christmas. Snow fall that was as starched and white as a businessman’s shirt – hard and painful to the touch – became filthy slush on the street from exhaust pipes. It was a bit early, but we were wrapping presents we now called gifts in front of the small tree Our Mother had bought when Our Mother and Steve told us we had a guest.

Cooper Deane was Steve’s partner – and the first visitor we had over to the apartment. We were excited because he looked like Kurt Russell from the movie *Overboard* and he rode up the street on a Harley Davidson. I remember the roar of the engine as he pulled up. He wore a brown leather jacket that smelled like cow hide and made jokes out of the side of his mouth.

“I miss Christmas, man,” he said. “I’m Catholic, but my wife Ange is Jewish. No can do! What grade are you in?” Cooper asked Aisling, who was practically climbing on him. She’d not met another person since October.

Before we came to New York, Aisling had said she hoped that Steve would be like Tony Danza in *Who’s the Boss*. Steve had lost that smiley Tony Danza dad-ness or maybe he had never really had it. He did not take me or Aisling to shoot hoops, like Tony Danza, but watched us in the same way that a dog guarding his dinner does, out of the corner of his eye, ready to growl.

“She should be going into fifth grade,” Steve answered, looking at Our Mother like he got extra points for getting it right.

We were illegals, so we couldn’t go to school. We would remain illegals until a year and half in and our immigration lawyer helped us get cards that read “Resident Alien.”

“What pretty hair for such a pretty girl.”

Aisling looked up at Cooper, starstruck. Her hair was not auburn, but vermilion, and tightly corkscrewed. It was the hair adults praised, kids ridiculed, and the owner suffered through.

Steve ordered pies (which meant pizza) with peppers (which meant capsicum) and sausage and we ate watching a video: *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, which we’d seen already.

Steve had schooled us on what to do – wipe our pizza with napkins to absorb the fat – and what not to say, “pardon me” being one of them. To fit in, we had to speak “less British.” We needed to start thinking about getting into a good college.

We drank diet soda only and never without a straw.

“We can’t afford the dentist. My ex has MS, but she’s basically just a lying dope fiend.” Steve looked at Cooper when he said this, like a challenge, and Cooper just shrugged and took the peppers off his pizza, just like me. I gathered it was about not having medical insurance, medical security minus dental, but when Aisling inevitably asked “What’s MS?”, Our Mother said it was an autoimmune disease – a wasting sickness – something that could kill you slow or fast, depending on how lucky you were.

Before Cooper left after dinner, he took Aisling for a ride around the block on his motorcycle. I watched them ride off, Aisling with a too-big helmet on her head, clutching him around the waist like a baby koala. He said he’d take me for a spin too but I said “No, I’m right.” Cooper just smiled wider, confused. Steve nudged me, shoved me towards the bike.

“I’m right,” I said.

“C’mon, kiddo,” Cooper said. His smile was open and ready.

“It doesn’t mean the same thing in America, to say you’re right.” Steve was watching me, watching Cooper.

“I’m going inside.” I broke away, Aisling still on the bike, her mouth an O of surprise, glued to Cooper, like a 1950s biker’s moll, her cheek pressed against his leather jacket, the engine idling.

“He’s scared,” Steve said loudly. He didn’t mention that our biological father was killed on a motorbike, and Our Mother was inside, shut up in the room with a headache and blackout curtains and painkillers, so she said nothing, did nothing.

On Christmas Eve, Steve took us ice-skating in Forest Hills. I watched from the sidelines. Aisling could roller-skate and so she should have had relatively good balance, she but crashed. Waved at me, like *I’m fine, I’m fine, look at me, everyone watch me*. She attempted to shadow skate with Our Mother, who was scared and clung to the wall. Steve had played ice hockey all his life. As far as I could see, ice-skating was all about flying pucks, hitting each other hard with sticks, and cheering when blood stained the ice. For a big guy, he was very graceful, balletic even. He

found his form on the ice – all his machismo and meanness seemed to evaporate; his menacing bulk made sense as he executed what I learned later was a camel spin, one leg extended in the air. Still, he wouldn't help Aisling when she fell and I watched her sitting on the ice, blinking back tears.

“Aisling's got as much coordination as a drowning cat.” Steve sat next to me and smoked a menthol, his breath like ice.

I nodded and blew on my hands.

“Aisling needs help,” he said suddenly.

“What kind of help?” I asked, but it came out weakly.

I caught Our Mother creeping up to surprise Steve, with a tray of orange juices and hot dogs. She'd overheard. She gave Steve a look that she gave us when we'd broken her favourite lamp. *I'm not angry; I'm disappointed.*

She rubbed my shoulders.

“That OJ?” Steve rubbed her arm and I took one, too, but the drink burned on the way down.

“Your hands are frozen. He needs gloves,” she said to Steve, as if he was to blame, even though I'd lost them.

After, we went to TGI Fridays for sundaes. Aisling puked up her mint-green ice-cream peanut-butter triple-fudge sundae in the booth.

“Is she, like, retarded or just a gross kid?” Steve asked.

“She's lactose intolerant.” I made a five-pointed star out of sugar on the table.

“Your mom told me she wets the bed. She's ten, right?” Steve commented.

Aisling had started to wet the bed – I had to sleep in the bathtub sometimes because of it – but it was a secret. A family secret.

“She's just nervous. A lot of kids do it. It's your fault anyway. Everyone knows you're a bully. You wouldn't even help her up off the ice. Our real father was much nicer than you. I wish you were dead instead of him.” I drank the coffee that Our Mother had left when she took Aisling to the bathroom to clean her up.

One minute I was in the booth, and the next, I was lifted off the ground by the force of the punch, hitting my head back into the wooden booth. Steve explained it was not his fault that I drove my top teeth through my bottom lip, but he apologized for it later and paid for the cleaning of the booth and the four stitches in my lip at a hospital in Queens.

Our Mother told a black nurse I had a fight with my sister and fell backward and then hit my head on the booth. The nurse shined a light in my eyes and stitched my lip up, right there in the corridor. A young Indian doctor came past and did some more tests and asked me the date. My name. Where I lived. I hoped he wasn't an undercover, with Immigration. His voice was machine-gun fast. I looked at Our Mother, too fearful to talk. He got the idea I might be concussed.

Our Mother toyed with the gold heart necklace Steve had bought her, with a pear-shaped diamond in the middle. Her eyes were bright from crying. Men liked that.

"Can't we take him home? He's just got a headache," she pleaded.

There were people in the corridor who had been stabbed; one man had a knife still jutting out of him. An obese woman on a gurney moaned, a bullet lodged in her, her frantic daughter pacing the hall shouting curses. An old woman had a cardiac arrest on a hospital gurney and Our Mother prayed a rosary for her soul and cried nonstop, because it was so sad to die on Christmas. As far as I could see, everyone wanted to kill each other at Christmas.

"Rest him up, Mrs. O'Malley. Not too much excitement, OK," the Indian doctor smiled, looking down her shirt at the same time. Aisling was waiting, in her white ski jacket with a pack of M&Ms she'd bought me a from the vending machine with her own money and a teddy from the gift store, but I noticed she sat with Steve. It was like she'd figured out if she sucked up to him, she was less likely to get hurt.

We stopped at Tower Records where Steve bought me *Master of Puppets*, and Aisling Mariah Carey's *Emotions*.

We had to drive past Steve's ex's house, in a place called Staten Island, for something to do with maintenance. His ex-wife, the drug fiend with MS, was standing in the doorway, not in a wheelchair. She was wrapped in an expensive fur coat and her earrings were pear-shaped diamonds; her eyes were pinpoints.

"What a nice family you have," she called out, and her smile, when it broke out on her face, was like a slow, devastating fire.

Later that day Cooper Deane was shot dead.

## Chapter 7

Now Steve's slain partner, Cooper Deane, had entered the story, alongside could-be assassin Steve – a felled idol for the fatherless O'Malley kids. It all made for compelling reading, but it was difficult to concentrate because I'd received ten more texts from the unknown number since I sat down to drink my coffee. Half of the texts I didn't read. They were a blur of menace: *Bitch, listen to me, I love you* and (hopefully) empty threats, one of which sounded almost Ancient Babylonian in its promised punishment and had succeeded in rattling my cage a little. I corralled Mister inside and locked up the house and then went back and triple-checked all the locks and punched in the alarm code.

I normally parked on the street, mainly because the overhanging fruit tree from my neighbor's yard scratched my car – which wasn't a big deal as it was a fifteen-year-old Chrysler Le Baron that had belonged to my dead mom, but the bird shit was a problem. As I left the house, I clocked a fresh oil stain on the driveway; a car had parked there and recently. The oil was still wet, in the shape of a boot or an upside-down gun.

Maybe my visit yesterday stirred something dormant in Danny. So far, I had managed to simply ignore him and let him have his prolonged tantrum, but in the past that hadn't worked so well with Danny Quinlan-Walsh. In fact, it had left me permanently scarred. I was the daughter of a cop – but an old-school one, one who didn't believe in restraining orders, but broken legs. Having seen the failure of the cops to serve and protect with domestic violence as a crime reporter, I tended to agree. Confrontation was inevitable.

Far from my haunted house and potential stalker, I could focus on *Resident Alien*. I wondered if Aisling had read *Resident Alien* before sending it on, as it was not an especially flattering portrait of her; she was rendered almost like a family pet, lovable but challenged. It even read like a thriller, and while I thought it was readable, it struck me as a bit too stylized to be a diary, all the while being overly partisan. It had an agenda. I mean, there was nothing about Newport yet, but it was giving me a good background picture of who Steve Shearer was.

Driving through Newport, I knew I would attract a few stares. No one here drove a secondhand car. My bumper was held together by rust.

The streets were empty, but the town always had a permanent quiet. It wasn't a country quiet: it was a kind of morose suburban apocalypse. While there were a few power walking moms, dogs getting exercised, and maids en route to and from the train station, using legs was a real novelty in these parts. With the streets devoid of people, you could hear the sizzling power lines, droning cars, lawnmowers, and sometimes a car backfiring. The town's real occupants were whisked to and from the suburb in SUVs and Mercs.

After Jason, fear had taken over – his disappearance and then Trey's had informed house prices and school bus routes; it had changed the neighborhood irreparably. I wondered if kids still rode their bikes, skateboarded on the block, danced in formation, in summer, on weekends.

I crossed Roosevelt Avenue – all the street names were American Revolution themed. Jason Weiz, the first boy to go missing in '92, had lived at 11 Patriot Bend. The house was an innocuous-looking tan bungalow with a semitrailer parked out front – lower middle class. Very different from Cathy Carver's South Newport home, on Leonard's Lane, a long, quiet street lined with oaks and sycamores that faced away from the water, in a navy blue and ivory Dutch Colonial that resembled a very large and grand dollhouse, thick with retrospective secrets. It fit an Ecuadorian maid, two Dalmatians, and a nanny (for one child), who lived in a converted apartment in the basement. Cathy's mom, a Swiss national, and father, an American banker, were both under suspicion. And impending divorce, custody issues, children in other countries, the father sleeping with the nanny.

The truth was, as disturbing as the other boys' deaths were, it was little snub-nosed Cathy Carver who haunted me – that's why I'd written the story.

The whole place felt like it had bad juju. I circled back and headed down Lexington Road, Mona's street.

If Mona had gone in the same direction as my father, her home didn't suggest it. The front yard was neat and tidy, with a winding path that was weeded so evenly it could have been done with nail scissors. She had an Irish flag on the front porch and a porch swing. A pair of men's boots were lined up by the door. She was single, then, I guessed – I did the same thing. A metal placard with an Irish saying was

nailed above the door, alongside a Celtic cross. I think it meant something like bless this house or may the road rise to meet you or come on in and get shitfaced.

“Tae,” Mona’s voice barked at me from behind the screen. *Tea*. It wasn’t an offer, but a command. Mona had spent most of her adult life in the States, but still had the dregs of the accent. Her long vowels were pure, with no upglide; the “ea” of words turned into *a*’s, *e*’s were *o*’s, almost Rastafarian. Things that were small were wee; she scornfully referred to a criminal as a “hard mon” more than once. And Mona was, of course, a hard woman. She wasn’t only a cop at a time when women were practically still unarmed – unwanted, bullied, belittled, and worse – she was also from Belfast.

Mona’s house was dark and smelled like dogs and stale cigarettes, with a top note of cinnamon potpourri. My mother also liked potpourri. I wondered if Mona too liked to decoupage old boxes and scrapbooks. Her face was a child’s drawing of a woman: two very round eyes with long lashes and a full mouth, a cascade of thick chestnut hair. In the thin yellow light from the dining room, she had a weak chin, the beginning of jowls, and silver in her hair – what Susan Sarandon would look like if she hadn’t taken care of herself.

Still, Mona had maintained her hourglass figure. Her shirt was more of a blouse and despite the fact she was retired and in jeans, I could totally picture a shoulder holster going over it.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi yourself.”

She led me into the dining room – there was no hallway to speak of. It was oddly formal and fitted out for a woman who lived alone – who always had. There was a dark oak family table with too many seats. Cabinets lined the wall, with display glasses and dishware, framed pictures of children, some small and some grown, amidst old black and white restored photos. A radio played what sounded like The Screaming Jets in a far-off room.

“Where are the dogs?” I asked.

“Dead,” Mona said, calling out from the adjacent kitchen. “Moscow is the neighbor’s. He’s a Rottweiler–Doberman.” She returned, not bothering with the teapot or china cups. She had two Christmas mugs; mine was a Santa skull, full of black tea, with the bag still in.

“Let me guess, you take it black?” Mona thrust the mug at me and sat on the chair at the head of the table, folding her jeaned legs underneath her. I sat next to her, facing a cherry-red display cabinet. A series of drugstore china leprechauns sat next to a series of commemorative plates that you ordered from a magazine.

“I do, thanks. I’m sorry,” I said. “About Whiskey and Brandy.”

Mona shrugged. She wasn’t going to show weakness to me, but her hand shook as she collected her cup.

“Someone baited them,” she said.

“Oh God. Did you find out who did it?” Mona had most of her family on the other side of the world and her dogs were her children, the same way that Mister was mine. Grief clawed at my throat, closing it up. *This could be you; this will be you.*

“They’d not still be walking the earth if I did,” Mona answered, in that gravel-and-honey voice.

She offered me one. Virginia Slims.

“Lovely,” I said, mimicking one of her expressions – usually used sarcastically. She frowned.

“Ray’s not dead, is he?” Most of the cops I knew referred to my father as RP or Sloane. Ray was intimate.

“No.”

Her shoulders relaxed slightly. “Sweet jumping Jesus, that’s a relief. I was worried that’s why you were here.”

I looked around the room and then made eye contact.

“There are two reasons I’m here. The first is the NP3. The Andre Villiers murder. It’s for a story. According to Ricky Hell’s sister, Julie, he was working with Nassau County PD.”

She just stared at me, arms folded. I stared back. She was better – I looked away, blinking first.

“I know you took the statement that night with Scarpetti. I know you attended the scene, only not with RP. I want to know where he was that night, why I never heard about any of this. I mean, he knew I was going out with Danny ...”

“And Ricky,” she interrupted.

“I’m sorry, is that common cop knowledge?”

“No. Your dad knew. I knew.”

“How?”

“He had you followed, Erin. After ... Christmas Eve ... well, he thought you were going to, you know ...” Her voice dragged on *Erin* like a flat tire as she made a cutting motion across her throat.

“You followed me.”

She shook her head and stabbed out her cigarette.

“Ox.”

Ox. A ripple of unease ran through me. I wanted to lubricate my dry throat and took a sip of the hot, strong tea.

“I just talked to him. He never mentioned that.” Ox had said nothing last night about tailing me, and moreover, nothing about Ricky Hell at all.

“Surprise, surprise. He and RP must be cut from the same cloth. Speaking of, you have a knack for dating scumbags.”

I just stared at her.

“And yet you were sleeping with a married alcoholic who was suspected of familicide.”

“I suppose we have similar taste. Your dad was a dipso, true. You read don’t you, Erin? You like horror?”

I shrugged. If my life had a genre, horror was the most appropriate.

“Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?” I asked. The cigarette was beginning to make me feel ill – my breathing was shallow and my heart rate began to build up.

“Edgar Alan Poe wrote a story called ‘The Purloined Letter’.”

“I think I remember it. Is that the one about the monkey?”

She screwed up her nose.

“No, you twit, it’s about a letter. A stolen letter. Me and your dad, we were told this story as detectives by this very screwy supe of ours. I won’t bore you with the details,” she said, watching my eyes glaze over, “But in the story, your man Dupin finds out the letter is right there, hiding in plain sight. See, we look so hard for answers and our brains don’t allow for the possibility that the whole time, the answer is right there.”

“Your point?”

“You’re a real jammy bitch, you know that.”

I looked at her blankly.

“You have a knack for surviving,” she translated. “You’re lucky, even if you’re thicker than you look.”

“Lucky,” I echoed.

“Doesn’t seem to me, though, that you are pleased about it,” she remarked.  
“The surviving part, I mean.”

I shrugged. What can I say? She hit the nail on the proverbial head, Mona did.

“And the second reason?”

“Another source says said that you and my dad and Steve Shearer had something going on. Did you and RP take his money?” I said, watching smoke trickle out of her nostrils. Her round, polished doll’s eyes registered nothing

“Come outside.” She snapped. Mona had the kind of face you don’t argue with. Severity was her resting pose.

“Okay,” I said. We walked through a wood panelled hallway, through a rec. room and down some stairs into a small yard.

“Are you wired?” She said it so fast, her lips didn’t move.

“What?” I looked at Mona’s white button-up Gap blouse and high-waisted blue jeans and wondered if she’d last gone shopping in ’94. When she last had her sanity.

“Your dress,” she said.

She leaned down to her ankle, where her holster was strapped. The doll’s face set like asphalt. Packing at home; she was a hard woman.

“Wait.” I didn’t fully believe she’d shoot, but there was a margin of doubt that felt uncomfortable.

I reached around and unzipped the back of my dress, but stood there. I had thick stockings on. Did she expect me to take those off too?

“You want your answers, then strip. The bra, tights, boots.”

I was standing outside in forty-three degrees. And the last time I wore a bathing suit without a T-shirt over it, I was sixteen and it was a bikini with skulls on the tits.

Mona’s place bordered the east side of West Cypress Road Woods – about a mile away from the crime scene. Her backyard was the size of a small field. A chain fence erected to keep the dogs in the yard also kept out whatever wild things lived in the woods. Despite being so close to the place where Ricky Hell took his last breath, I felt safe around the trees. As a family we would go into the woods and RP would reel off scientific names. Me and Shelly would paste leaves with Elmer glue into a

scrapbook and transcribe the scientific name: *Quercus borealis*, *Cornus florida*, American Beech, Northern Oak, Flowering Dogwood. My dad liked trees; my dad liked facts – I mean he liked things that didn't talk. Like me, my dad didn't take usually off his shirt (shame, lashes) and he also knew Latin.

“Holy Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Mona said as I unclothed myself.

The grass felt wet, I shivered; I smelled wood fire in the air.

## Chapter 8

“In some cultures, the pentagram is a symbol of protection,” Mona offered. We were sitting in the off-limits wood-paneled rumpus room, dead relatives in frames on dusty shelves, a family coat of arms on the wall, me, with a port in one hand, wrapped in a plaid blanket – like a shock victim at the end of an action thriller, waiting for a cop to come and take my statement.

“Carved on your chest with a razor, a giant 666 and the letter *D* in the middle?”

She grimaced.

I drank the godawful port. Mona knocked back her whiskey and topped it up. The room smelled of mold and regret.

“Yeah, I s’pose not.”

I just shook my head.

“My father once said my only future was as an exotic dancer if I kept on the way I was going. Now I know that option is lost to me.”

“Had he known he would have hunted him down and ended him.” She was almost smiling and she touched my hand. I flinched and withdrew it quickly.

“You know you didn’t check my orifices. Did you want me to assume the position?”

“Come on, Erin, I’m sorry. You need to understand. Some pretty savage stuff went on. When your Ma and sister died ...”

The pre-disrobing conversation.

“The affair. Your affair.”

She tipped the bottle in a question. Despite its wood-and-paint palate, I nodded yes to the refill.

She returned to the scar. Mona wasn’t one to be rushed into a conversation. “You never thought to get it removed?”

“I’ve tried creams. And a derma roller ...”

“The one on TV?” Mona looked interested. I looked around at the shelves again. She clearly bought things from magazines: commemorative plates, bric-a-brac. I pictured her sitting all night in front of the television, filing those perfectly oval nails, dialing 1-800-Juicebullet and giving over her credit card details.

“No good. I’ve been looking into laser therapy,” I said. The fact was, I could have removed it, but it was extremely confronting to show up at one of those places and explain how it got there in the first place. Then I sort of grew into it; it became part of me, like a vestigial digit.

“Contrary to rumor, when your mom and sister died, we weren’t actually together. A hiatus, I thought. But no, it was because he wanted to make it work with *Lenora*.” I didn’t like her saying my mother’s name – she didn’t love her. I swallowed my rage with my port – it wouldn’t serve me well to erupt. Her mouth puckered, like she was sucking proverbial lemons. A phrase occurred to me – you get the face you deserve. Age was a great equalizer. In the day, Mona was really something – but it was those eyes, those big, Hershey-chocolate-kisses eyes. While the skin on her face was still taut, the large semi-lit lanterns that previously animated her were dull. Her face was taut, but her neck was loose, crepey skin.

“Start at the start, Mona. Christmas Eve, ’93, I mean.”

“That night, just so you know, I was on the job. We both were. We were meeting with Richard Hernandez. Richard was an informant.”

I nearly choked on my port.

“I’m sorry? A narc?” The word *narc* came out like Tourette’s – it was the word Aisling had used.

“Not a narc, you dope. He wasn’t a cop.”

“What then, a rat?” My stomach turned, thinking about Ricky and his *21 Jump Street* denims and secret listening device: a cuckoo, a foundling, in our death-metal nest.

“He was more of a plant. He approached Shearer, got him to be his distributor in exchanged for wiping his record. Year after, the Andre Villiers murder happened.”

“Wait, I don’t understand. Go back to the beginning. You were Homicide. Why were you after Steve Shearer?” I demanded.

“Shearer was a cokehead who shot another cop, his old partner, Cooper Deane, outside an ice-cream shop on Austin Street called Sweetie IC’s. Steve pinned the murder on a mixed-race kid from Stuvy Heights called Franklin Rivera and he shot him dead.”

“Christmas Eve?”

“Ah, no. It was actually the day before New Year’s Eve,” she said, looking at me weirdly. Cormac had taken creative liberties with the murder of the all-American Cooper Deane in *Resident Alien*.

“Rivera was Hell’s cousin. Hernandez was late meeting Franklin – he witnessed the shooting without being seen. He’d dealt a little green, but he’d had a few juvie priors – breaking into cars, shoplifting, possession – kids’ stuff, really. Back in the day, there was an initiative to deter prior and persistent offenders.”

“The three strikes rule.” I remembered the headlines at the time, a conversation my dad and I had about the since-deemed-unconstitutional hard line initiative, which did little but persecute minorities and keep jails teeming. You could rob a store, steal a loaf of bread, get busted for possession, and end up in Rikers for thirty years. I remember thinking it was unconstitutional, Medieval even, at the time. “Wait, that wasn’t in place in ’92, ’93 was it?”

“No. But it was in the works. We smoked Hernandez out and gave him some options.”

“Essentially you lied. You told Ricky he may go to jail for possession. Adult jail. And for a long stretch. And let me guess ...”

“Richard had no lawyer,” she said. At least she had the good grace to look ashamed. “He’d been in QAS. That’s Queens Academy for the Sciences. He was in an accelerated learning program, but he’d been bombing out. He was heading down a bad road, squandering his opportunities. And he was scared. He saw Shearer shoot Franklin, after he killed Deane. Shearer didn’t clock Hernandez. So, we decided to use him.”

“Ricky was basically a kid, who watched a cop kill a cop and then his cousin and you used him.”

“Yes,” Mona said, brushing her hair off her face.

“And Steve killed Cooper because ...”

“As I said, Steve was a cokehead. And he was dirty – he was dealing on the side. We thought Deane cottoned on to Shearer and would have busted him eventually. The other theory is that Deane’s wife, also a cokehead, was a very old friend of Shearer and they were doing the business.”

“So early on there a question of foul play?”

The phrase felt surreal and hokey, like we were in some made-for-TV movie.

“Rumors, more like it. Just a stink around the situation.” For an adulteress, Mona looked ridiculously self-righteous.

“All we know is Steve set Franklin Rivera up, then shot him through the heart.”

*Like he would Ricky.*

“Richard made a deal with us – if he worked with us, we’d wipe his record clean. He went on to Roosevelt High, to summer school, and then a few months in was expelled. We had some damning intel on Shearer. Just before the summer of ’93, we moved him to Newport to go to summer school and become friends with Danny, Andre, all the bad kids. Cormac O’Malley just happened to be there too, which I gather Shearer wasn’t nuts about. Ricky got kicked out of Newport early ’94, as was the plan. But he went a bit rogue. He got in deep with them kids, got involved with you. He was cracking up. He became his persona, I suppose. Then he died.”

Mona went over to the bookshelf, and picked up a floral printed box. It was decoupage. There was a glut of photos, black and white, color, some papers, underneath a Polaroid. I sat there with my arms folded, my heart rate was immediately jacked. The Polaroid traveled across the scuffed table. It was Ricky Hell, or rather Richard Hernandez. He was wearing steel-framed spectacles, something I’d never seen before. The only thing about him that was the same was a black T-shirt.

Mona studied me like a scientist. “You okay?”

I had killed the lover, the romantic, in me a very long time ago. At least I had my memories, right? Wrong. Gravediggers had come in, defiled the corpse of my one true love. I fell back in my chair. The heart doesn’t feel the pain of romantic betrayal, it’s further down. The gut feels it. The bowel feels it. The betrayal snaked around in my lower intestine.

“Ricky wore glasses?” I managed.

“Hernandez did. Hell wore contacts.”

In another, he wore a flannel shirt; his hair was long, not metal long, more chin length, Keanu Reeves in style. Grunge. A tiny silver cross around his neck. His face was pitted with vicious acne scars. On Ricky, they worked. He looked serious, worried. My father sat next to him – he had all his hair, a bad tie, and a “gotcha” expression.

“This was Richard Hernandez, pre-Hell. That Satanic stuff was BS. All part of his persona. We were briefing him on his back story that afternoon.”

“What year was this taken?”

“’93. Obviously, Hell was no longer a juvenile, so he was scared and he looks it.”

I scrambled for dates. In ’93, I was in ninth grade, fifteen. I remembered Ricky descending from the yellow bus in September, like the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli, blood on his knuckles, HELL spelled out in studs on his denim back. I remember thinking I’d seen the devil himself. But it was a delicious thought – a delicious feeling. We got together when I was sixteen. He did say his aunt (who was also eighteen), was a chambermaid at Freeport Motel and she let us use the key, but I saw a receipt and he’d paid with cash. It was a fleabag, but still. The kid was on the bones of his ass – he lived off Taco Bell, ramen noodles, cookies, and leftovers I brought him. He had three changes of clothes. He often slept in his van, and he showered at friends’ places – or the Y. So, Ricky was older than he said he was. He was not a boy, but a man.

“How old was he?”

“He’d turned twenty-one on October 8th.”

“He told me he was a Taurus with Aries rising.”

Mona made a face.

The eighth, another trauma-versary, was the actual real birth date of my beloved. I supposed it was big deal in a sense; for half of our relationship, it was technically statutory rape – only more so than I’d known at the time. Technically, my dad could have arrested Ricky. And if I knew my dad at all, he should have, would have, done a lot more than arrest Ricky. But he didn’t.

“He never went to Belmont High?”

“Nope.

“He told me he was from Buffalo,” I said.

“We moved him and his sister Julie to South Newport in 1993 so she could go to a better school. That was also part of the deal. We enrolled him in Roosevelt and we got him expelled. As was the deal with Wendy’s. Except he just quit, started hauling crayfish. But he took what he was doing with us seriously. Listen, Erin, I know you think we coerced him and maybe we did, but Richard really took to our undercover option. He had a real talent for deception. He also had a conscience. He

could have gone on to pursue a career if he wanted. I think he wanted to reinvent himself.”

Maybe he felt guilt in deceiving me. He often looked sad, pensive, even lonely – sometimes I felt he was on the verge of spilling over. I missed all his confessional cues.

“We could have gotten Shearer for Cooper Deane’s murder, Franklin Rivera’s murder too. Losing Richard was a real blow,” Mona continued, oblivious to my personal distress. “We had no formal record of his involvement or arrest even. It was all under the radar, you see.”

“Wait, hold up. Before you said Ricky saw Shearer shoot his cousin. Shearer wasn’t any the wiser about their connection to the two boys?”

“Rivera was just one of thousands of kids from the neighborhood and Richard was under the radar. His juvie crimes all took place outta state – Richard was kind of a nerd in the hood.”

*Richard this, Richard that.* It was as if Mona had really cared for Ricky Hell – she certainly knew him better than me.

Then she held up the prize. It was a yearbook. Queens College, 1993. “He went to night school.” Mona said.

There was a gray square in place of a photo and the year of his birth was listed with a dash suggesting he was still alive.

1971—. I filled in the blank.

Ricardo Juan Hernandez, a High School Diploma, major in criminal justice and law enforcement studies.

The quote below his name:

*To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson.*

“Look, I didn’t fight for Richard, or try to pursue it further. I know you think I’m a piece of shit, but I needed my job. Pension. I needed my pension,” Mona went to pour me another and I put my hand over the glass. I was probably too wasted to drive already.

“He started out in juvie, but he wanted to be a cop.”

“Richard wanted to atone. And so did your dad. As you well know, your dad was disgraced after your mom and sister died. It was a black mark against him.”

“And then he got fired.”

Mona’s eyes glinted.

“He wanted to expose Shearer.”

“And I had presumed it was constant intoxication.”

“That didn’t help. It was hushed and he got the sack. Fired, I mean. Well – technically it was early retirement. He got his pension.”

“And his gold watch. But he fought for both. We never got any money from Shearer,” her jowls wobbled with the force of her conviction. “I’m telling you – your dad was like a pitbull with Shearer. The case destroyed him. He was a pariah to the precinct in the end.”

“This woman, Aisling – O’Malley, Cormac O’Malley’s sister – has a website with all these conspiracy theories on it. She tried to ‘expose’ Steve Shearer.”

“I know of it,” Mona said. “I don’t do the online, but I know of it.”

“She said RP was in bed with Shearer. That he killed my mom and sister and then tried to kill himself. That Andre Villiers was a pedophile.”

Mona swallowed.

“She’s not exactly the full shilling, is she?”

“No. She’s definitely screwy.” One beer short of a six-pack. Maybe Cormac was too.

“She suggested that Andre cottoned on to Ricky and Steve’s relationship ... thus, he needed to be eliminated. What do you think about that?”

She shrugged.

“Possible. I mean, with Shearer and Richard it was all very covert, though. You’d have to be very sneaky or very bright to work it out.”

And Andre wasn’t. He wasn’t even wily.

“I never thought Richard was responsible for Andre’s death. When he was shot dead – we lost our witness.” She tapped the photo. “He should have been a physicist or something; he should have gone college.”

“Those kids in the woods all know what happened. And it’s locked up here,” she gestured to her forehead. “Maybe Shearer bribed them. Want some coffee?” she guessed. “I’ll put a pot on.”

“Somehow Shearer found out about Ricky. Who blew his cover?”

“We ... thought that it was Quinlan-Walsh, possibly. He was at the house. He had access to files ... and motive.”

I did think Mona was a piece of shit, but I could see that this had been eating her up for years. I wasn't the type to kick someone when they were down. That was Danny.

“But the short answer is, I don't know. It was a covert op. Your father didn't talk much to anyone about anything work-related. Richard was a good scapegoat and conveniently disposed of for Steve,” she called out from the kitchen. I followed her in there. I watched her take out the Folgers and put it into a stovetop perc – I realized then that my father must have bought it for her. Mona had a dripolator gathering dust in the corner. While I enjoyed snooping in people's bathroom cabinets immensely (Mona took a beta blocker, a mood stabilizer, hormone replacement therapy), their kitchens were even more telling. Did they entertain? Were they on a diet? Did they drink? I noticed an anachronistic penchant for cutesy barnyard animals cuddling together with aphorisms about friendship, and next to a real estate agency refrigerator magnet, a few novelty magnets, one that read:

*Wine, chocolate, and men – they're better when they're rich!*

She lit the stove. Frivolity, sentimentalism, feminine conspiracy – all aspects of Mona I had never seen. There was nowhere to sit in Mona's cramped kitchen: I leaned against the window and started sneezing. She didn't dust much.

She placed the percolator on the stove and had her back to me. “Your dad met Richard at 9 p.m. that night. I think it was at the phone booth at West Cypress Roads Woods. Then Richard went on to meet the kids. Then RP went to –”

“Benny's on Sunrise Highway. In Massapequa. I called Benny that night. He said you were there too.” *He's with his lady friend.*

“I was for a little while. He stayed on, of course. Until close.” West Cypress Road Woods was a mile from here. Benny's closed around midnight. Benny was a legendary drinker, going shot to shot with all the cops, firemen, and other shift-working dipsos he served. They would have been plastered, in no state to drive, even.

“If RP knew I was with Ricky, why didn't he ...” On the night of Andre Villiers's and Ricky's deaths, I had paged him. But he didn't get home until 1:11 a.m. He told me he was doing double – previously I thought that was Mona.

And RP, well, I just don't think he cared enough for me to kill for me. And Mona confirmed this.

"Erin, I want to say something to you that's going to hurt. I promise you – he did care about you, even when he was all fucked up after your Mam and Shelly. But you reminded him of himself and I think he couldn't handle that. And take this from personal experience – no one, no one person, was more important to your dad than the job. He couldn't risk alienating Ricky." She lit up a cigarette, baring her port-stained teeth. RP's own daughter, an honor roll student and confirmed good Irish Catholic girl, seduced by a grown man, an informant, and he couldn't give a fuck. *Shit happens.*

"Look, I'm pretty sure they had ... words. But in the end, he needed Richard. And Ricky wasn't bad to you. Was he? Even your dad, in the state he was in, he could see how much better you were. Happy even," Mona said, as if she was watching the wheels turn in my mind. I wondered why she was batting so hard for my father; after all, the guy dropped her like the proverbial hot potato, leaving her to her dead dogs, Santa mugs, whiskey, and lonely nights in front of the psychic network.

"Ricky sure was convincing. Kids believed he was bad. It was partly the look, but also the stuff he talked about." Ricky could riff on poetry, paganism, economics – it was like they only really heard the parts about the devil.

"He really took on the persona. We never told him to get the tattoos." Mona sounded annoyed. She was the type to hold a grudge.

The coffee perced and she took it off the stove. I watched her pour coffee into two clean Pottery Barn mugs.

If you knew Ricky you would know that he had wings on his back, on his heart a 666, and when he held up his arms he thought he looked like Lucifer, but what I saw was Jesus, pre-cross.

"Every Sunday, 10 a.m. Saint Al's, Belmont. Ricky took his sister. He had been an altar boy once. Why did that not come out when Ricky was being crowned Mr. Teen Lucifer?"

Mona poured a lot of cream and sugar into hers, left mine black, and turned around and faced me, thrusting the mug of black coffee at me. "Because it wasn't going to sell."

She was right. What did sell: Carole Jenkins's stories of animal sacrifice and PCP in the West Cypress Road Woods, a mixed-race Satanist inciting rich white kids to murder, rather than a kid butchering "Smoke on the Water" on an electric guitar missing a G-string in a water-damaged hotel room. Or taking his little sister to communion and for Nathan's hotdogs afterwards.

What a poor faux-Satanist Ricky was – he loved poetry; he was always talking about flowers. I remembered the time he hit a deer: he cried. Because it was beautiful, Ricky said afterward. Death. But I think it must have been because he was very sad.

I took a sip of the coffee. It had a kind of burnt chemical taste. For a minute, I worried that she'd slipped me a mickey, but I had watched her prepare it. And she made the same face. The coffee was burned. Then I realized – boot-tough Mona had cared for Ricky Hell. There was something about him that invoked maternity in the most unlikely places.

"Look, the kids could have been under Shearer's orders," she said. "When you think about it, all of those kids were abused or damaged – on a level. They were suggestible. Carole been an ex-beauty pageant kid and a real brain donor."

She was onto something. Cormac and Aisling were clearly damaged kids. Danny was adopted, his father was a creep – I always suspected something was going on at that house. Andre Villiers's family seemed the sanest: stay-at-home mom, dad worked in the city, but he was potentially a pedophile.

I didn't trust Mona, not enough to even turn my back to her, but I wanted her reaction.

"I found money," I said carefully. "In my father's room."

She shrugged.

"A lot." I watched her carefully, noting the swallow of her throat, how her hand flew toward her throat as if to protect it. Her hands were old: the phalanges were almost all bone and her knuckles were prominent. She wore an antique-looking ring, a pear drop of citrine. It glinted at me. I thought of Ricky's tiger eye.

"I left it with a friend."

"Not a boyfriend, I hope." She rolled her eyes.

A deflection.

"A lawyer friend."

“Good. Look, I don’t know anything about any money. Do I look loaded to you?” she gestured around the small bungalow, lower middle class in every way, and she had a point. Neither RP or Mona were in it for power or money. They were in it because they had a compulsion. They were the job. They couldn’t do life, or anything like it.

“Do you think I’d have taken this job if I cared about anything like that? For what it’s worth, I cared for Richard, almost like a son. Maybe your dad took some out of your trust fund when he was losing it?”

Mona was being my friend – or rather acting like she gave a shit about me. I wanted the warmth; it was like sitting next to a bonfire.

I sipped my coffee, tasting the possibility. I wanted to believe the money was mine. My trust had been diminished down to practically nothing. Dad told me a bunch of reasons at the time and I bought it. I didn’t question it further – I almost wanted to go through it as fast as possible, because if I did, it meant my mom wasn’t dead.

“O’Malley reportedly called Steve Shearer to the scene around 11:00 p.m. From what I understand, there was a record of a phone call from the booth at that time, but obviously, there’s no record of who made the call as it was a call to the home phone and not 911. But Cormac didn’t trust his stepdad,” I said. “I don’t think he was the one who called him after all.”

“So, who made the call then?” Mona asked. The milky afternoon light streamed through the window, exposing the silver in her hair.

Something wasn’t right. Mona was either complicit or covering up for RP. I knew I had to go to the source, Steve Shearer, the villain of *Resident Alien*, to get the real story of the Newport Three.

“One may smile and smile and be a villain,” Mona said. Now she was quoting Ricky quoting Shakespeare.

I remembered what my father had always told me: *It’s important, Erin, to know your enemy*. Mona’s new loyalty gave me a bad aftertaste in my mouth, like a salty coin. It tasted like blood – it tasted like money.

“I’m going to find out,” I concluded. My heart had sunk, like the *Titanic*. It was there, near West Cypress Road Woods.

## Chapter 9

I was a quarter of a mile up the gravel road when I finally spotted the old AT&T phone booth – the phone booth of my pre-cell phone adolescence was still there on West Cypress Road Woods. And it was a good thing; I was losing my signal out here and I had one bar on my phone.

I parked the Chrysler about five feet away. It wasn't an off-road vehicle, and besides, I wanted to walk the same way (in reverse) that Cormac had gone to make the call.

I took a Poland Spring from the passenger seat and my old police flashlight that had belonged to my dad, mace, a digital camera, and a pack of cigarettes. It was six p.m. and I could see the outline of a harvest moon – it incited in me a misplaced sense of anticipation, a gnawing nostalgia for summer days now gone.

There was graffiti all over the vandalized booth, which had a meth and butane tang – sexual slang, aspersions about a girl named Sheryl, aspirational gang tags, and finally on the semi-shattered glass door, just above the AT&T logo, what looked like blood but had the consistency of nail polish: a childish scribbling of a pentagram and *Riki Hell lives!!!!*

Underneath there was a crude drawing of a pipe and the phrase *Bong On!*

So, Ricky Hell lived on, except it was in the memory of idiot Newport stoner kids, who partied in West Cypress Road Woods and probably tried to summon his ghost on Parker Brothers Ouija boards. I bet there was a kind of Candyman mythology about him.

I picked up the handset and realized the phone receiver's elasticized silver cord was severed.

I took a few photos and stepped out. I was five minutes on foot from where Ricky died.

Unlike winter, when the dark fell hard and sudden like a guillotine, the half-light of the autumnal afternoon was a gentler, almost woozy. My heart beat matched the energy in the woods – something about all that oxygen, all that nature, made me heady and excitable. I almost felt giddy as I spotted the fat old sugar pine at the front of trail, the same trail we'd walked down to get to the spot. I had climbed it as a kid.

Underneath me, a confetti of blood orange, red, and tongue-pink leaves. Then the trail: a cathedral of silver birch trees. I could almost taste the cold beer, the smoke, the stars, hear the stream running, remembering the Iroquois creation story Ricky had told me when we parked our here in his van, a story he'd been told by his father. Later he laughed and told me he'd made it up – *I'm like, a quarter Arapajo; Wyoming, dummy.*

Was that even true?

He liked to tell tales. He had night terrors – he battled invisible hands and unseen tormentors. Sometimes he talked in his sleep: Spanish. One phrase repeatedly. I knew some Spanish from school:

*Tomar el pelo, tomar el pelo.*

Directly translated, it means to “pull someone’s hair.” Closely related is *enganar*, to deceive. There’s another Spanish phrase that Ricky taught me, referring to a person who has gone crazy. They say someone is “combing the doll’s hair.” But Ricky wasn’t crazy; he was afraid. It was clear to me now that Ricky was being deceived and deceiving someone – me, for example. My head was swimming with *enganar*: small betrayals, little inconsistencies. *Richard had a talent for deception.*

I walked alone into the trail, heady with my own despair, down to the spot, counting the steps it took – adding a Mississippi – thinking of Carole Jenkins’s reverse jog-run to the booth. In the dark, it was a clear enough trajectory to the road, but high as she was, she could have gone off track, wandered as far as the brook.

Around the ninety-Mississippi mark, I started to hear a crunching in the leaves, an echo of my own footsteps. I stopped dead in my tracks, immobile with panic – afraid somehow to retreat, my hand fishing into my bag for my mace. Because of my father, Ricky, I couldn’t carry a gun. And I was scared if I carried a knife it would be used on me.

I was, we were, nearing the clearing now (one hundred, Mississippi). There were a few kegs, an old tire, and the remnants of a fire – and a figure moved fast from the side. The rush of his body as it passed mine made a kind soundless energetic rip in that moment of time. His two legs (so, no, not a deer, not a bob cat), passed me, a man substantial in height and weight; a man, not a boy – but dressed as

one, in jeans and a hoodie – he took off running, dashed off into the woods, the opposite direction to me.

One hundred one, Mississippi; my heart went into my bowels.

He must have meant to scare me, to be seen but not injure me. Weirdly, although I was frozen on the spot, my instinct was to stand still, as if I'd been menaced by a bear or a lion. Instead of taking out my phone to call 911, I took out my camera, aimed, snapped. Then a delayed hit of adrenaline kicked in and my legs started to function. I ran the whole length of the trail back to the car, arms pumping, phone in hand, in case my stalker changed his mind – and direction. When I got back to the car, I wasn't even breathless. I took out my phone and tapped 9-1-1 on the screen. There was still no signal – and I nearly dropped it when I spotted the message on the bonnet. Black, semi-neat cursive, spray-paint, probably, because it dripped and I could smell it: *Die Whore*. Danny. Or someone sent by him.

There were no cars on the road, no one was around, but he, or his agent, was somewhere in West Cypress Road Woods. The only language he knew was violence, retaliation. The police would not do – I needed muscle. I needed Ox.

I got into the car, locked all the doors. I dialed Ox: no answer. I started the engine, shot him a text.

***Can you talk? It's important.***

He shot one straight back.

***Spinning a web. Got a few talkies. Email me.***

I drove. I had no idea where I was going; I was shaky from the incident.

I drove past the school and the convenience store and headed to Marine Diner – an old hangout of Ricky's and mine, a place where we loaded up on onion rings and Cokes to soak up alcohol, remove the odor of dope and smoke and booze. I checked my rearview the whole time, paranoid about a tail, and attracted a few strange looks in the parking lot. It would be dark soon. I'd take it to the shop in the morning – *Die Whore* was not the worst thing that had happened to me, not even a little bit.

## Chapter 10

The place was a 1950s-style diner but with a nautical theme. There were lots of rope and compasses, life rings were stuck to the walls, and the waitresses wore spray-on tight aqua polyester dresses. The place was empty, so the dinner special must have just ended. I ordered a Greek salad with a baked potato, which I wouldn't really eat, and more coffee. The booth that I slid into was covered in an aqua-and-silver pattern – it also hadn't been reupholstered since 1993. They still had jukeboxes in the booths and the list of adult contemporary and R and B hadn't been updated either.

I fished in my bag and took an Ambien, and I chased it with Adderall. The world's sharp, dangerous edges became glowy, the fluorescents a garland of fairy lights. I was no longer afraid, drunk, or hungover. I was no longer anything really except alert, yet relaxed and really, really thirsty.

For reasons unknown to me, I selected the Toni Braxton track 'Breathe Again' and a bottle-blonde waitress with a shit-ton of low-karat gold jewelry and a very high ponytail poured me coffee. I always wanted waitresses to like me – I wanted to stack my plate and cutlery just right, not make a mess. They reminded me of my mom: tired, poorly tipped, scarcely acknowledged, weary, with a lot of insight if you bothered to talk to them. My mom also hovered with beverages and food, only she never received tips. This girl worked gum in her jaw and while she looked bored, her eyes were bright and healthy. She graced me with a smile as she took my order.

Spinning a web was relatively easy, Ox said – writing texts, IMs was emotionally tough, but easy enough to pull off. Talkies required more skill. You had to make a phone call. They were a necessary but troubling evil, all part of the process, to reassure the spider that the prey was indeed a child. Not for the first time, I pitied Ox his job, but he was probably just avoiding talking to me.

I texted him:

*I just got stalked in the woods by Danny.*

*Wat? R U OK?*

*Yep. He vandalized my car. I'm at the diner now.*

*K. Good.*

*Mona said my dad had you follow me and Ricky. WTF, Ox?*

Three waiting dots in the reply field as he scrambled for an answer. Then nothing. I wasn't getting a text back. I called again; the call was diverted. I looked at my camera – the image of my stalker was blurry, indistinct, but I could upload and sharpen the image once I was home.

I drank water, wrote down a few notes about what had just happened in the woods in my Norman Rockwell seaside notebook at the lino table.

I wanted to jot down my meeting with Mona, my father's meeting with Ricky, while it was still fresh. I had to find out if Ox had also been pulling my hair last night and why. Besides Denise, he was the only living soul I had any real faith in.

### ***Secret Meeting at the Freeport Hotel: March 17, 1994***

Ricky and I sat on the semi-collapsed bed watching Sally Jessie Raphael and Ricky Lake on the tiny TV that gave electric shocks, drinking cold Coors. I was missing Technology, which involved building useless household objects. I was wearing a green flannel, a nod to St. Patrick's Day. On my wrist, a black leather bracelet that my mom had given to me. I fiddled with it and Ricky looked at my arm. A fresh smiley was there.

*"What's this all about?" he asked, typically deadpan. The day Ricky had quit Wendy's with style, he had already lined up work at the docks, hauling crayfish. That's how we got the dollars for the room. Typical Ricky. It was a grand gesture – he was very theatrical, with a practical core. He would have made a great front man. Maybe he would have gone on to be one, had he lived longer.*

*"I wasn't paying enough attention to Danny." Normally I didn't discuss Danny, but the beer had made me bleary and reckless. I leaned in to smell his hair – instead of the oil-and-biscuit smell of his scalp, his hair smelled like green apples, compliments of the hotel shampoo.*

*"Danny's been getting into acid," I said, lighting one of Ricky's cigarettes.*

*"No shit. We've been doing it together," he said. I watched him become defensive. He was staring into the mirror, seemingly trying to memorize his own terrifying beauty, or at the very least psych it out.*

*You could never tell if Ricky was high. Alcohol scarcely affected him; he always seemed in control. While the other boys slurred their words, took out their dicks, or clowned around with self-harming or homicidal gestures, Ricky remained a kind of Roman statue, cool and imperious. A watchful director of events, thus easily attracting the label of cult leader.*

*“I know you’re all about the doors of perception and stuff ... but Danny doesn’t ...”*

*“Reflect?”*

*“Yes. It goes outward. Into the world. It makes him, I don’t know, more insecure, jealous. He gets ugly.”*

*I fixed my hair in the mirror.*

*“Life is ugly. Beauty is terrible.”*

*“That’s why,” he said, kissing me on the nose, “you’re a living, waking nightmare.”*

*A Hallmark sentiment from a Satanist.*

*“Danny’s the nightmare,” I said.*

*He nodded and leaned back, lighting a cigarette.*

*For Ricky, our stolen, secret times seemed to be enough and I could say that this relieved me, but a tiny part of me longed for his jealousy.*

*“You want me to knock him off or something?” he said suddenly. I could see him shrinking inwardly, snapping into a mood, which happened on occasion. He was never angry, however, more remote and sometimes cold. It was when we touched on things that threatened him. His family. Getting arrested. Danny.*

*“Shut up.” I punched his arm, playfully, and he recoiled as if I’d really hit him. Ricky Hell was the most easily startled person I’d ever encountered. He could not abide rough touch, sudden movement – the sound of a chip packet being crumpled made him jump. I had seen the foster home scars, but more importantly I knew about the internal scars – something that no one else did. And when I say that, I refer to a cochlear problem, a malformation of the inner ear that gave him intense pain in the cold, mostly late at night and in the morning, in damp conditions – such as the Freeport Hotel. His teeth were another clue to the abuse and neglect he suffered as a kid. In Newport, expensive orthodontics were nothing – not when kids in junior high were having cosmetic surgery. Ricky had not one, but two bad teeth,*

*the color of cement. He didn't fear the reaper or teachers or seemingly even the police for that matter; he feared dental floss.*

*"You're scared of him," he remarked, but there was bitterness in his words.*

*"Only because he's stronger than me," I said, which was true.*

*"You're a victim," he said tonelessly. He got up on his knees and hovered over me, forcing me into the dull mirror that was above the too-soft bed, the bedspread patterned with ivy and flowers that looked like it belonged in a grandmother's bedroom but was more contaminated with fluids than your average crime scene.*

*"I'm a realist. You know my situation."*

*A carer for a drunk, homicidal/suicidal adult, an honor roll student despite my affection for drugs and alcohol and with a surfer boyfriend who moonlighted as Bluebeard and was beginning to beat me.*

*"Look at all that power you have, Erin. You've got this brain. And look at yourself." I saw myself as a kind of dumpy Goth version of Kelly Kapowski on Saved by the Bell.*

*"You could be Salome. But instead you're a servant. A punching bag."*

*"Fuck you, Ricky," I said, putting on my T-shirt. "You're trash anyway." I watched him blink. Once, twice. It hurt.*

*"So are you," he said reasonably. "Everyone thinks your dad killed your mom and sister and nearly you."*

*I looked around at things to throw at him and then decided on my fists.*

*I rained down punches on him that quickly lost momentum. I couldn't hit Danny but Ricky could take hits. Ricky could take bruises and burns. Ricky was like me. Boxers, punching bags.*

*He stopped them with one hand, gently. He wasn't even mad.*

*"Danny is really bad news. Your dad is, too. He's not an anchor, he's a weight. He's bringing you down," he said.*

*I spluttered with indignation.*

*"Sit back. Breathe," he coached me. "You and I have something in common."*

*"Besides being trash?"*

*"We're both caught in a net," he said, one hand encircling my wrist. More maritime clichés. I thought they were so romantic.*

*The slap had changed things between me and Danny. After the apologies, there were no limits anymore – soft or hard. And energetically that night I had stepped out of the relationship, the way you might imagine the soul leaves the body. He was desperately wooing me again and bought me a beanie teddy with a little latex skull on it, a troll doll with a face painted like Gene Simmons, lingerie (nylon, the cups three sizes too small, a snap crotch), and a journal to write about him in. He wrote little songs for me on the guitar; the most disturbing one he played me was to the tune of “Would” by Alice in Chains.*

*I want to kill her so bad, I'll kill her  
For good  
I'll leave her there  
In West Cypress Road Woods.*

*Ricky said lots of things and I listened. Poetry helps. People hinder. School was a slave ship; the world was a prison. He wanted to open the doors of perception, he said.*

*I hugged him goodbye and he wrapped both arms around me in a tight, vise-like hug, which took me aback.*

*“You need to get away from them.”*

*Outside of sex, Ricky seemed to flounder with affection. He patted my head, like I was a child or a dog. He pecked my cheek like I was his goddam grandma.*

*“I will.”*

*“We should go somewhere. Maybe west.”*

*We were both a bit drunk on daytime sex, drunk on booze; the air was cutting, crackling with electricity – the way it does when it's going to snow.*

*“It's going to snow,” he said, sticking out his tongue. He could tell it was going to rain, just by the way the leaves puckered up. He knew shit about nature.*

*“I might love you,” I said and he grimaced at me, embarrassed.*

*I threw up in the bushes when his truck pulled away.*

I checked my phone. No new texts from Ox – but there was another extract of *Resident Alien* from *Lost in Space*. Reading on the screen was challenging for my eyes, especially seeing that I was half plastered.

March comes in like a lion and leaves like a lamb, Steve said. The low light of winter days turned into spring. Aisling and I kicked each other to sleep until I got my own air mattress, which hurt my back so bad I went back to sleeping in the bath.

Cooper Deane, Steve's motorbike-riding partner, was killed in the line of duty, shot by a criminal in an ice-cream parlor in Queens that Steve took us to a few times.

"The poor man's grave is still cold," I heard Our Mother say, when Steve mentioned rumors Cooper's wife Ange was seeing someone, that she was already with someone else. "It's scandalous."

That word felt right – scandalous. I drew him, slumped over the silver dish, blood and vanilla making a raspberry swirl. I recreated Cooper from the photo of him and Steve in the den, where they were sitting in a diner, wearing similar-looking jackets. I made Steve shoot him. I hid the drawing.

I turned fifteen. I got books, a shaving kit, and a voice that was a few octaves lower.

In May, we moved to Long Island to get away from Steve's ex-wife, renting Steve's folks' friend's house in a suburb called Belmont.

Aisling turned eleven. She asked for a cat, but got a pearl necklace she didn't like and new clothes – teenager stuff that didn't fit a doll-sized human who hadn't entered puberty. She seemed to be getting younger, regressing. She smiled over cake in the photographs Steve took in a way that looked maniacally happy, despite the fact she had no friends, no party.

Steve, please like me, please like me.

They've been through a lot, the adults always said, except Steve. Spoilt, we were sometimes. Well behaved, he called us, when he wanted to praise Our Mother. Eccentric, he said over the phone to his friend who lived in Coral Springs, near Fort Lauderdale. Kooky. Addams-Family weird.

The suburbs were boring. No one walked anywhere and there was no subway, and seemingly there were no busses. We all walked around reading and bumping into each other, except Steve, who only read *Playboy* in the toilet. Or he looked at the pictures. There were kids on the streets and housewives on recliners and everyone stared at us, but we were not allowed to talk to them. We were being homeschooled until the Autumn, to catch us up, but Our Mother rarely bothered with lessons.

I wanted to make it seem like it was his decision. I brought it up over a rare sit-down family dinner: meatloaf and potatoes. Our Mother was trying to be an American housewife – she was even wearing an apron.

“Ma gets the capitals wrong. She doesn’t know anything about American history,” I said to Steve when Our Mother was getting wine from the basement.

“Your brains are rotting from cable. And no offense to your mom, but she’s not that bright,” Steve said. “You’re going to get your ass into a proper classroom. Summer school. Meet some other kids, who aren’t your sisters. Girls,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

He’d been trying to draw me into this for a bit, check if I was normal, lend me his *Playboys*. These women, Bambis and Tiffanys with their nut-brown hairless bodies and implants and bright pink vaginas, just scared me. If anything, I liked the MTV punk-haired rock women, their noses pierced, ripped clothes, like fallen angels. I didn’t want to see their anatomy, though. I wanted their heart. Even Steve knew it.

“Come outside for a swim,” he said – even though the water was icy.

I came out in my swimmers and T-shirt and I realized he was smoking a joint and his mouth, concealed by his Tom Selleck moustache, turned up in what looked like a smile. He had a tattoo that read *Pride* on his back; there was a Confederate flag underneath. He was in bathers, or swimming trunks as he called them, and a cross on a gold chain was embedded in his chest hair. There was a pink spot on his upper chest, near his shoulder, where no hair grew. He said it was where a bullet nicked him. He did push-ups, fifty at a time. One hundred sit-ups. Still, his man boobs could fill an A-cup. Aisling joked that she was jealous.

“Take a hit,” he said. I took the joint from him. Under the flouro lamp he was a blur of hair and gold jewellery.

Nearby, a mosquito was zapped in the device that Steve bought – an electric chair for insects.

“We’re going to Florida to visit an old friend of mine, Ange. She lives in a place called Coral Springs. Cooper, you met him, well, you know he died last year. Tragic.”

He said “tragic” like he was describing a traffic jam. All I could think of was Coral Springs: it sounded luminescent; a landscape of pearls and coral.

“More like scandalous,” I said, testing out the word and he took the joint back.

“Don’t get cute,” he warned me. Cute wasn’t a good thing. Steve called some movies cute, but acting cute wasn’t the same.

“Trust me, I know how to hit a guy and leave no bruises. Not that your mom would care,” he added. He stretched his arms over his head, yawning and showing his tonsils. “She gave me permission to hit you. Both of you. At least your mom believes in discipline. Everyone needs some, sometimes,” he added and then cannonballed into the pool.

On the way back inside, I watched Aisling sleep for a bit, in the corner of the couch, curled up like a full stop. In America, they say period.

We all drove down together that summer in a giant air-conditioned Pontiac, clocking up state lines and reading increasingly devout bumper stickers. The heat was dizzying – high humidity, Steve said. Even the bedding in the cheap motels we stayed in was damp. Pre-hurricane electricity in the air, sun showers in the day when we went to theme parks and shopping malls, night storms in the hotel. Steve snoring, my sister whimpering beside me, sometimes wetting the bed. This time no one said anything.

Throughout the breakfast buffets and tongue-pink houses in new developments, covered outdoor pools, proud strip malls, we shoplifted and nearly got caught. We went to the Everglades and went on a boat out to a Native American settlement where kids with braces sold handwoven bracelets.

She held hands with Steve and they both wore a lot of khaki, wore matching baseball caps.

We watched dark, slippery shapes on banks and held our breath.

Later we stopped at Old Town and had five-cent Cokes and Steve said to Aisling and me, “God bless the USA, huh kids?”

I wish I’d said something about God then, how God hates America, how God was cursed and so was America, but Aisling looked so happy and dopey, staring up at Steve and saying, “Can we go over there, Dad?” and I said nothing at all. I could feel myself shrinking every minute we spent in the hugeness of the country, state line by state line, accent to accent, bistro to diner.

Ange and her kids lived in Coral Springs. We dropped in to a few places and quickly lost our bearings. Like Long Island, all the streets were similar and the houses looked much the same – except Coral Springs was a planned suburb, so all the beige and terracotta mansions, neat as a row of Floridian teeth and just as ivory inside, were identical. Every house was surrounded by neat manicured gardens and a spotless driveway. All the streets and all the houses looked like that – no cars on the drive, no bikes, toys, or people.

When Ange opened the door, I quickly realised that her street and her house were the prize of Coral Springs. It made the other sandstone and concrete houses look like bungalows, which was a dirty word in these parts. The house was a good twenty degrees cooler than outside – to the point where you’d want to wrap up. It smelled of floral perfume and cleaning product. A lethargic Latina maid in a tracksuit was dust busting near the stairs.

Ange squawked a welcome; a dog yipped from a far-off room.

The ceilings were high, decked with crystal chandeliers. At the top of a marble staircase, bookended with Roman columns, two boys stood watching. I made eye contact with the taller one, who turned his middle finger up like he was moving a dial and both retreated to their rooms.

“Look how cute you are. Aussies. I thought you’d be so tan.” She tried to cuddle Aisling, who recoiled, then she drew me in for a half-body hug and her implants crushed my rib cage. I had never met a real-life woman with implants – I’d only seen them in Steve’s *Playboys*. Ange was nut-brown all over and all lean muscle in shorts and a T-shirt. I could not believe that this was the woman that Cooper Deane had been married to. I’d pictured Heather Locklear, not Linda Hamilton from *Terminator 2*. And Ange looked older than Sarah Connor, like an action doll figurine left out in the sun. She pronounced Aussies like “Ossies.”

“They’re Irish, by nationality. They’ve been there for the last year,” Steve said. “Ghost white, they are.”

She leapt into his arms in an embrace that went for longer than Our Mother was happy with. I could tell; her smile was stretching to the point it looked like it would snap.

“Hello,” she called out to the maid who looked mildly alarmed, clearly not used to being addressed. Steve and Ange stared at her and each other before breaking down into laughter.

“You’re a hoot,” Ange said to Our Mother, but it wasn’t a compliment.

Aisling tugged at my arm and I shrugged, bored of interpreting for her.

Ange lead us into a pastel-coloured living room, showing us to an overstuffed white leather couch that smelled like Mister Clean. From the living room, I could see their pool had a glass ceiling like an atrium.

“How are the boys doin’?” Steve asked, his voice dropping.

“Gooooood.” Ange replied, a smile like the Vacancy sign on our hotel – but there was something eating her. The kids were traumatised after the death of their father, Our Mother said. Al and Andy and all were on meds: Ritalin antidepressants, mood stabilisers. I saw their yearbook photos on the wall – they looked like Ange, only with braces and acne.

“They like the Nintendo?” Steve asked and Ange clucked her disapproval but it wasn’t real. That was when I realised Steve must have bought it for them.

“Are you guys thirsty? Rosa,” she called out to the kitchen, “The kids will have juice? Or soda. Do you want soda? We’ve got diet and regular.”

Our mother shook her head. “Just juice please, Ange.”

The grownups decided on mimosas. It was a special occasion. Steve and Ange had not seen each other since the funeral. They touched each other absently and reminisced. Our Mother smiled, frozen as if she was modelling the sofa. She looked at Steve and Ange and patted Aisling’s head; Aisling patted an imaginary cat. That’s just the sort of thing she did.

“Oh, she’s a card! What a little doll,” Ange said to Our Mother, licking her lips. Her words were warm, but her eyes weren’t. I watched her rake her hand through a cloud of permed hair. Her pupils were massive. She worked her jaw as if chewing on something.

Ange’s maid handed us frosted glasses of Coke with painted roses on the side, loaded with ice. She’d not gotten the juice memo.

“Rosa, for crying out loud!” Ange bawled.

“*Lo Siento, Senora.*”

“It’s fine, really, thank you, Rosa,” Our Mother said, cueing us.

“Thank you, Rosa,” we droned.

“Just like twins! So cute! You have them so well behaved,” Ange said to Our Mother. “So, welcome to Florida. Coral Springs Cascades is a planned community. We’re crime free,” Ange said with a degree of pride.

Our Mother nodded at this, like it was less of a worry for her.

“The high school has metal detectors.”

The next morning, when Our Mother woke up, there was blood on the pillow. Aisling had hit her in her sleep, dreaming there was a burglar.

Back in Long Island, something was wrong between Our Mother and Steve. They’d stopped holding hands in the car. Now, I saw the long-coiled phone cord under the door of the downstairs bathroom, heard Steve murmuring away at night. Our Mother had puffy eyes, grew even thinner – the tension at meal times gave Aisling stomach aches. Our Mother slept a lot and read *The National Enquirer* and cleaned before Steve got home. When Steve and Our Mother were fighting, Aisling would go completely white and curl up, shaking uncontrollably. I watched her on the couch; she looked like a cat, hand over her face for protection. Part of the way that we survive is to wrap ourselves up into little balls, to become very small.

The first day of school, I waited for the yellow school bus, like I was on an American TV show. I smoked a cigarette and got shot a bunch of dirty looks from the girl who was waiting with me – she flicked her hair, rolled her eyes, and chewed gum like it was cud. On the bus the girls were all the same, in different variations – short shorts, tank tops, gold necklaces spelling their names across newly developed chests. The guys all had the same Nike pumps and gelled hair, T-shirts that read *No Fear*.

The dude got on at a stop that wasn’t on the route – outside of Wendy’s on Newport Avenue. He seemed to know the bus driver – they greeted each other with a *Que Pasa – Lo Mismo, bro*.

From the back, he looked like a rhino, a glitter of studs on denim like armor spelling out the word METAL. You’d think he was a skinny guy, watching him from behind, too tall and hunching to accommodate the low roof of the school bus, but he was built more solidly, I later realised. He sat rows in front of me, which was weird – bogans, metalheads, punks, and weirdos, in any country, always take the back seat. Church, class, bus trips, you sit in the back – smoke, dope, drink, observe.

“Like, what’s a Danzig?” the girl from a few rows back said loudly, turning her focus to the dude, rudely laughing.

There was an invisible ripple in the air as the dude suddenly turned and faced us. I felt the same sick butterflies as you do when you see a pretty girl, except this felt more uneasy. He looked like Johnny Depp's younger brother – maybe if he'd done time in prison. His cheekbones were Native American, but I knew he was Hispanic. He had the lips of a woman. From a black panel of unwashed hair, his eyes were like the tiger-eye stone, appearing dark, but with filaments of fire in them. The flaw in his perfection – acne craters that pitted his cheeks and gave him a tougher look. I'm ready for juvie, his face said. I set shit on fire, his clothes said. I don't care about anyone, his eyes said. All the same, I needed him to save me and he knew it.

His nostrils flared like a bull's and I saw a series of silver rings and studs as he combed back his hair.

He stood up, hunching down so he didn't hit the ceiling, filling the whole bus.

Inexplicably, I rose too, my legs supporting me despite a sudden feeling of weakness. The bus lurched at that moment and I fell forward, a head-on collision into the blonde girl. Think of marbles kissing. That's how gentle it was. Still, I heard a wet crunch, a sound I'd heard when our first (real) dad took us to the football: the wreck of cartilage and bone.

"You broke my nose," the girl was howling and gulping blood and I smiled in disbelief, thinking she was somehow faking, and her guy grabbed me and all I could see was the dude's eyes, dancing with laughter, and his smile and it was like, I think we're gonna be friends, and then the bus stopped and he mouthed something to me and it was like the sun had come out and eclipsed the sky, but it was also terrible, like a kids' rollercoaster derailing.

The girl, Randie Miller, had a broken nose. I had facial lacerations, swelling, from her boyfriend's beating.

I remembered the shape of the dude's mouth and the words I put to music in my bedroom later:

"Let it rain down, friend."

The dude's name was Richard Hernandez. Ricky Hell, he called himself back then. It was an accident, I said. There are no accidents, he said.

After my week's suspension and a terse phone call with Randie's father and mother, an arrangement had been made to get me back into school. Steve drove me

personally, delivering me in air con practically to the doors of the school. I had learned from the first day and left my Docs behind and had worn Converse instead.

My conversation with Steve was brief.

“What did you say to Randie’s parents?”

He thumped me on the shoulder.

“Neva-mind what I said. Just try to fit in. Don’t fuck up. ’Cause if you do, there are consequences.” Steve chewed on the word, like a steak, groomed his hair. Even when disciplining, he groomed his hair.

I nodded and tried to smile my thanks when he drove off.

First period, homeroom, I sat drawing, looking out the window, pretending not to hear the whispers:

Dude, someone hissed. Are you a vampire?

Pssst, Freak. Randi’s dad’s gonna sue you.

Oh my God, Lucky Charms, you’re dead.

No, his dad’s a cop, stupid.

Nobody said my name. Nobody could pronounce it. Core-mock, they said. Car-mack was the other one. Poor Ass-ling.

Girls were everywhere, their deodorant and hairspray and perfumes. I studied them; I learned – decoding all the jewellery, hair tugging, lip biting, and hair flicking. It was like the Renaissance paintings of women I had seen in books had turned into scratch-and-sniffs. The burnt sienna, yellow ochre, ivory black, and flake white of their fleshy bodies turned into peach, strawberry, and vanilla in my nose and mouth.

Then I saw Carole. The school had its own pool and outdoor volleyball teams, as well as track and field and football. She was staring at the pool, coloring in the tips of her white-blonde hair with pink highlighter. Her legs were almost completely exposed in short denim shorts and she had a series of bruises all over the shins and thigh, one the size and shape of Africa. She was wearing an inside-out black T-shirt, which made me think it was a metal T-shirt, because anyone wearing a shirt with an inappropriate logo would be asked to do that. All the guys wanted Carole; they shifted textbooks as she walked past to cover their embarrassment, they followed her around, fetched her things from the cafeteria.

Weirdly enough, it was Carole who seemed to like me; she called me by name, even if she misspelled it. It was Carole who passed the note:

– Hey Cormack, Are you really a vampire??? Cum to the Old Res on Creek Road this lunch. Carole Maree –

I thought the signature was vaguely formal and old-fashioned, but it was garlanded by rows of badly drawn skulls, and at the centre, a knife with a rose.

I looked back at her and raised my eyebrows to see if she was serious.

“Meet at the west parking lot at 12:00. I’ll be in the truck playing Hellhound,” she said.

“Maybe,” I managed. She looked at me like Our Mother looked at Steve. Like I was a rebel. She smiled, showing crooked teeth, and gave me a hypermobile thumbs-up. Despite an aura of danger around her, I tasted stars and hubba bubba.

Carole wasn’t there, but a big guy with a gut that made his black T-shirt expand, in too-tight jeans, was standing next to the truck, which was vibrating with music, windows fogged up with smoke and bodies. He had blue eyes that looked close to tears and a crop of acne on his face, underneath a fully grown moustache. His hair was white – not blonde, but white as a mouse.

“Andre,” he said.

“Cormac.”

“I know. We’ve been waiting on you.”

I realised he didn’t mean today, but since school began. A sense of burning panic made my mouth dry as Clag. I felt queasy. It was possible that Carole had been sent to ensnare me into the truck, like a honey trap, only to get beaten within an inch of my life. When I had gazed into Ricky Hell’s eyes last week, I saw something in there like those dark shapes we had seen in the Everglades, all dark instinct and appetite. But perhaps I was mistaken; I’d never known anyone who looked like him before, who moved like him.

“Danny and Rick are inside.”

I opened the door and a gust of dope that smelled like BO hit me – or maybe it was BO – from the five bodies inside. Ricky sat in the centre of the circle, taking a hit from the bong. Danny, a tall, big-jawed guy, whose truck it was. Who, if he cut

off his long sandy hair, would look more like a football player than a metalhead. Danny had a girlfriend, Erin, but she was at a swim meet. Carole was drinking a beer out of a brown paper bag.

“Welcome brother,” Ricky said, belched, and handed the bong to me. I knew I had to take it and not cough – looking at that thick yellow smoke and skunk weed, I knew I was going to struggle.

He frowned his disapproval at my delay.

Carole saved me. “He can’t smoke that. He’s got a meeting with Rosenthal after lunch. He’ll be expelled if he’s high.” Carole gave me a look that passed as pitying, and passed me the beer.

Danny was sussing me out. Carole was biting her lip, watching him as she passed it to me. I noticed her arm was touching his.

“You got anything stronger than pussy-assed beer?” I said, pushing it away so that it sprayed her shirt.

“Fuck, bitch, give him the Turkey,” Danny said. I watched him shift his weight away from her. Carole had her arm around Ricky, even if the whole time she had her eyes on Danny. But Carole was shit out of luck – Danny was not into her, not even a little. I didn’t feel even a little bit relieved, more curious.

“I’m going to get expelled soon,” Ricky said, almost softly. “The bus thing was like the last straw.”

“He’s been kicked off the bus for dealing,” Carole whispered.

He smiled at me wickedly and skulled the Wild Turkey, but he seemed a little sad.

“He’s like, a genius,” Carole whispered. “Off-the-charts smart.”

“Ricky?”

“I can hear you,” he said over the gurgle of the bong.

“Ricky’s a senior. So is Andre. Maybe. If they pass.”

I didn’t like the way Andre looked at her. I said it once Andre left the car – he had a shift at Little Caesar’s pizzeria.

She shrugged. “He’s scary,” she admitted. “Do you know the kids that went missing?”

“No,” I said.

“That little blonde girl, Cathy Carver? Check out the paper sometime. There’s been, like, six reported runaways, but a few that are, like, abductions. Andre

saw a picture of her in the paper and was, like, she's a slut, I can tell, I seen her around Waldbaums. She's like nine."

"Eleven." Danny's ears seemed to prick up at this. "It's gnarly. Erin's dad says that the kids are dumped in the water, because they all lived 'round the Sound."

"Erin's his girlfriend." Carole said the word "girlfriend" like she would "scabies." "She does dance and swimming. Extra-curriculas," she scoffed. "Her old man's a cop so she's not s'posed to hang out with us. She's, like, dating Danny but rumour is, they don't even fuck."

"My stepdad's a cop," I said.

"Everyone's dad's a fuckin' cop," Danny said, rolling his eyes.

"I'm a cop," the redheaded kid shouted and everyone laughed.

"Maybe it's a cop," Ricky said and stubbed out his cigarette, "who's done it."

"Yeah, right," Cheryl said, blowing smoke through her nostrils.

"Shut up, *estupida*," Seth said.

All eyes were on Ricky. He relished it. He rolled up his sleeves and I saw a brand on his arm. But couldn't make out the letter. He looked old, suddenly.

"Forget it," he said.

This line of *Resident Alien* floored me. Ricky, the pretender. I was one, too. Sports-playing, square Erin – Danny's girl. Only that's not who I was. There were a few paragraphs left; I read on:

It was later that night that Carole showed up unannounced at my house, a sixer in her backpack. We sat out by the pool drinking Bud Lite; Our Mother and Steve were out and Aisling was inside, playing with a doll she was way too old for.

"Weird kid," Carole crinkled up her nose.

"She's fine," I said.

I'd never kissed a girl. She grabbed my thigh, put her Alpine ice, pot, and ring pop-flavoured tongue in my mouth. It felt staged somehow. I put my hand up Carole's shorts, into the slit of her underwear, moved my hand inside her and was guided by her sighs, the sounds she made. Carole's head thrown back, her neck flushed red – and as her muscles contracted on my hand I realised that Steve was at the window. Carole had of course been putting on a show, only it wasn't for me.

“What’s up?” she said after she finished her beer, pretending like she didn’t see him.

Steve came downstairs and blew a joint with us, bummed a beer. It was silent except for the cicadas and crackling tension between me and Steve.

Carole said she needed to get home for dinner. Steve said to her, “Hang back for a sec – it’s not safe to walk. I’ll run you home.” I wanted to come along, but Steve just looked at me and said, “Someone has to watch the kid.”

He came into my room that evening.

“That chick is bad news. You don’t want to get in there, not unless you want an STD. And that Hell kid and his crew? Stay away from them. That’s my first and final warning.”

## Chapter 11

Steve and Cooper's wife in some sort of clandestine relationship? Steve and a teenage Carole? While so many of Cormac's words rang true for me, some of it seemed bizarre and incredible, including the amended date of Cooper's death and the conversation about the missing kids. There was something suspect about it. Curated.

Irrespective, I was beginning to understand, if it was all true, why Aisling was so unhinged. I pitied her and Cormac and even though our childhoods were totally different, I knew them both on a level. We were the same: tarnished objects, set aside, that time had washed up on different shores. Here we were now, all coming together at long last.

And maybe, if *Resident Alien* was more creative nonfiction than fiction, Steve Shearer was the key to my story.

I typed in Steve Shearer and Coral Springs and got a hit.

The *Coral Springs Gazette* article was dated 2002.

***Local man wins Sweepstakes!!*** A picture of Shearer with a sinewy blonde – a face lined like a prune pit from the sun, with beetle-black eyes. *Shearer, a New York native, relocated to sunny Coral Springs with wife Angela, and they found their own pot of gold.*

Angela was Ange – Cooper Deane's wife, or rather, widow. Say what you want about Steve Shearer, the prick really seemed to land on his feet. I sucked in a deep breath and when the waitress came by to refill my coffee and water – with a worrying look, as I'd had drunk nearly a gallon of water already – I made a point of attacking the potato with a fork, to make it look like I'd eaten more.

"I like your nails," I said. They were peach-colored talons with little flamingos. "Very Florida Keys." My mom also loved apricot and coral.

"Life's a beach," she said, refilling my cup.

Then I remembered something. Mona had a magnet on her refrigerator, just below the wine and chocolate magnet. At the time I saw the *Ruffalo Realty Executives* magnet, I filed it away. Like Mona's purloined letter it was out there, in the open, in my face: ***We buy and sell Coral Springs.*** The O'Malleys visited the same place in *Resident Alien*. Now, Carole, Steve Shearer's Long Island Lolita, and

Steve were both in Coral Springs, Florida. And Mona had a magnet for her business. As my father liked to say, coincidence was for the birds.

Google Images brought up Coral Palisades, a new development in Coral Springs that was being sold up quickly. I looked at a few images: McMansions in a gated community, built in the confidence of our great swollen economy. It was like the crash of 2008 had never happened. Ruffalo Realty specialized in luxury housing in Coral Springs – the fact that Carole still had a job was amazing because the GFC had well and truly killed the property market; the country was in a recession, a depression even.

Because I had no call, no text back from Ox, I emailed him, trying to keep my tone in check: factual and only semi-accusatory.

It seemed there was no moral compass anymore. Ricky, Ox, my dad, Mona were all deceivers and I, the deceived. If life were a noir movie, which it was, this would be the title.

*Hey Ox. I've just seen Mona. She tells me Dad and Mona planted Ricky Hell in Newport to deal for and entrap Steve Shearer. Mona says my dad asked you to tail me and Ricky – if that's true, any reason why you didn't mention this last night? I found out Steve Shearer is with his old partner's ex-wife and now current wife and last living in Coral Springs FA in 2002 and one of the NP3 kids lives there now. I'm going to head down to Florida to talk to them.*

It was as I wrote this I realized I was going to do that. I hadn't been out of state in ten years.

Ox replied almost immediately.

*Pumpkin. I knew zilch about Hernandez. That was a covert op between Mona and RP. Not my jurisdiction. Not my business.*

*I don't know what that bitch is playing at. You know I'd never follow you, right? Not even for your dad. He asked me to look in, look after you when you were sad, after your Mom and Shelly. A few times I drove to the school or the house to check in. I knew you were hanging with a bad crew, Pumpkin, but that's all I knew and we both thought the Walsh kid was looking after you.*

A bad crew – Steve’s words. I thought of my pentagram and laughed a little. The irony.

*If you were with Hell, well that’s your business. I guess we all got our own weakness.*

Yep. And mine were substances, boys who worshipped Satan, and trusting anyone who showed me kindness.

*Nassau County PD far from procedurally perfect, especially in ’94. Neither am I. I’m sorry if I dismissed you last night. Will help in anyway I can.*

*– Ox*

RP was a cop first and a human, well, hardly ever, and wouldn’t talk shop if it meant jeopardizing an undercover op. I believed this much was true. My chip of ice said that if Ox lied to me on the phone, if he had lied over the years, he certainly would have felt guilty. If he didn’t, he’d want to overcompensate, to try to convince me he hadn’t. I could use this as leverage. Ox had contacts with the Department of Motor Vehicles, but it was implicit in my request that he would access the departmental database and use his contacts to find out the word on the street.

I typed back:

*Okay. Thanks. Steve Shearer, can you get any info on him and an Ange/Angela Deane or an address for the two?*

I didn’t wait. I needed to get home, I took the back roads to Massapequa and was back at home in my kitchen, reacquainting myself with a whiskey soda, in my sloppy sweatpants and Rangers jersey, when I got my reply email.

*Her name is Angela Miller. She kept her maiden name. Some of the guys in Queens precinct called her The Black Widow after Cooper Deane was shot. Her affair with Shearer didn’t sit well with his cop buddies. In 2002, she moved to 6 Clairfontaine Bend, Coral Palisades, FA. This is the official address for both parties.*

The story, set in the parking lots and train tracks, the woody hangouts and metalhead hamlets of Long Island, 1994, had somehow been transplanted into the gunfire, the gloss, and the peeling façade of post-GFC Florida. Mona's lies or omissions of truth, her involvement with the case, Steve Shearer's proximity to Carole were all stacking up.

A window on my Gmail chat opened.

*Heya ☺*

*Hi Aisling. Can Cormac skype me? I'm wondering if I can ask him some questions about Resident Alien?*

*Talk 2 me. He won't talk direct.*

*Can we skype? I'm erin.sloane78*

*AishiOm. Will call u.*

Then she signed off. I refilled my whiskey and opened Skype. An electro beat, a familiar underwater sound came from my computer: *AishyOm is calling you!*

My mind raced for a minute and my hand shook – I hesitated. I barely had a chance to absorb the information, the potential ramifications about Steve and Ange, Steve and Carole. I didn't feel ready to externalize my theories and ask the right questions. My initial doubts about the authenticity of the story and Cormac's reluctance to talk to me directly made me think I would need to approach her carefully. Already there was so much misplaced desire, so much misdirection, manipulation, and intrigue in the drafts, I didn't know where to look, let alone what to think.

It was about five beats in when I clicked on the green phone icon like I was picking up a supposedly non-venomous snake.

There was another warped, underwater sound as the pixelated holograph of Aisling O'Malley came into focus. The background of the room was pine paneled. Her hair, once the color of flame trees, was now like the dying embers of a stoked fire – no, more like a slurry of dead autumn leaves.

Her voice was smaller, higher pitched than I'd expected. Her big, shamrock-green eyes were popping out, hyperthyroidal. Her nose and mouth were sort of insignificant.

I clicked on my camera so she could see me.

“Hi,” the tiny voice said.

“Hi Aisling. Thanks for agreeing to talk.”

Aisling leaned in. “You’re prettier than you look online. You look kind of ... dead in the eyes in photos, ha-ha.”

“Um, thanks?” I said. “You look pretty too,” I lied.

“No, I don’t,” she retorted. “I look like a tea towel that’s been wrung out and left on a Hill’s hoist in the midday sun. But that’s what happens when you get your life sucked out of you, ha-ha.”

Although I didn’t entirely understand what she was talking about, bitterness was a universal language. I had spoken it earlier with Mona. I was fluent in bitter. The pitch of her voice had an almost electronic whine and hum. Her dialect, if I had to describe it as anything, was a hybrid of Eurotrash, American, and Australian. All the words ran together and the “ha-ha” was tagged on, as if in a text. Her emails, chat, and Myspace read like a cross between TMZ, a Victorian serial, and a ten-year-old girl’s diary. Alarming enough, she spoke the way she read, albeit a little more lucidly.

“I’ve been enjoying reading Cormac’s, uh, diary?”

“Manuscript,” she chirped and ran her fingers through her curls. “Cormac fictionalized a few minor details.”

I thought back to the word across Ricky’s back spelled out in studs: METAL. My fingers remembered spelling out the letters H-E-L-L across his back. Whose memory was unreliable? The benzos and the traumas had left sinkholes in my memory, short and long term, but I would swear under oath that Ricky’s jacket was customized.

“You said Steve got the kids to kill Andre. Why did they really killed Andre? And why did they lie?”

“You want to know why the kids killed Andre?” Aisling repeated, shifted in her chair, and scratched her nose. Then she went quiet. The video didn’t warp.

“Aisling ...”

“I’m here.”

I knocked back the whiskey. “Look, my understanding is that Andre might have found out that Ricky was Shearer’s distributor. Maybe he threatened them. Maybe Steve got rid of them both – Ricky and Andre. But I’ve heard that Andre was

a creep, not just from you. Carole claimed Andre assaulted her. Was he, like, a pedophile, just as you mentioned on your Myspace?”

Aisling licked her lips.

“He was strange. He teased us. If you passed him, he would bail you up, talk in a crazy voice, say he was Satan’s helper. He smelled like BO and weed and he was always drunk. There was a rumor that he liked little kids ...”

“A rumor, as in a substantiated one?”

“Julie Hernandez told me he tried to take her into the West Cypress Roads Woods from Subway. And someone said he was weird with Libby Jenkins, Carole’s little sister.”

That Subway store was very close to the Little Caesar’s where Andre worked. If it was true, it was a big fat incentive for Ricky to kill Andre – his sister was his life. Plus, kids from foster care hate a perve – my dad told me he broke small bones and stepped on soft parts of their body and called it the result of a struggle.

“And you?” I prompted her. I suspected some grievous trauma had arrested her development. I watched her blink, once, twice, thrice.

“Nuh-uh. But word could have gotten around about Andre.”

It could it be that simple: they lured Andre with Carole, and killed him, not for pleasure, not for sacrifice, but for protection. And Steve cleaned up their mess, and his. They all got off lightly, except Danny. And Ricky.

“I heard he killed a kid. A boy.” She said this much in the same way you may say “There’s a sale at Sears.”

“What?”

“That’s all I know. Put it this way – if anyone was a real Satanist, it was Andre. I think he wanted a sacrifice.”

That sounded like kids talking shit to me. I decided to head back to the inconsistencies in the timelines of *Resident Alien*. “The last extract detailed a conversation in Danny’s truck about the missing kids – and Danny’s offered a killer on the water theory. Well, this scene took place on the first day of school, so that would be early September ’93? Cathy Carver’s abduction was October 30, 1993.”

“Right. Well, he had to use poetic license to, like, make it flow better. It’s going to be a book. Way overdue; better late than never though, right?”

My mom was a librarian before she had us. She would have disagreed. I decided to bypass *Resident Alien* and get straight to the point.

“Cooper Deane and his wife Ange are mentioned a few times in the book. It seems that Steve and Ange were having an affair, and that Steve and Carole may have had a kind of ... uh ... dalliance when Carole was a teen.”

“Steve was with Ange since '93, I believe. And Steve and Carole were lovers, probably at the same time, even.”

“Lovers.” I washed the phrase around in my mouth. I didn't like the taste.

“I know, it's sickening!” Aisling struck the air, like a crazed conductor. She leaned forward.

“And Steve and Angela live in Florida now; Carole sold them the house. Do you know anything about the Palisades development that Carole's involved in?”

“Nope, but I'll bet the three are in bed, so to speak,” Aisling snorted. “I think Our Mother found out about Steve assassinating Ricky because he knew he was a fake – maybe even about Franklin Rivera and Cooper Deane. And when he was sleeping with Ange, maybe she threatened him with it. She died not long after.”

“I'm sorry, Aisling. Do they have any idea what happened?”

Aisling liked to begin sentences like this, one finger stabbing the air to punctuate her vitriol.

“An OD, technically. OxyContin, Xanax, booze. We sued him because he failed to render adequate medical assistance. Steve denied all guilt but he paid up – he should be rotting in jail. He all but put pills in her mouth, and left her there to die ... He didn't even try to resuscitate her.”

I swallowed heavily. Oxy, my old friend.

“Why didn't your mother ...”

“Listen – when I was a kid Steve once slapped me straight across the face, left a handprint. I said I would tell my mom; he convinced me that my mom was not only on his side, but against me.”

I was getting a picture of what Steve was like – what he was capable of. Gaslighting. Manipulation and extreme violence. Sexual predation. Speaking of which – Andre. If Carole paged Steve saying Andre attacked her, Steve could have committed both murders. He could have convinced the kids to take the rap. After all, he'd possibly killed for Ange Miller.

“Could Carole could have called Steve that night?”

Aisling reached for something. Gum. She popped it in her mouth. Then she leaned in, tossing her hair in a strangely girlish way, provocative even – like she was going to tell me a juicy secret.

“Possible. But she didn’t have a cell. She had a pager,” Aisling said. She obviously didn’t know about the payphone.

The word *pager* bounced around the room; it was like she’d said telegram. My dad made me carry one. Ricky paged me. I called him. It wasn’t all love letters and ESP.

“How do you know?”

“Because that’s how Cormac contacted her.” The “duh” was implicit in Aisling’s tone.

“Steve could have committed both murders and convinced the kids to take the rap.”

“Carole’s a—”

“Lying slut, yeah, I know.”

“Just getting back to the details that were fictionalized. The kids discussed Cathy Carver’s abduction – which was October 30, 1993. So, before it happened. Like, over a month before – the first day of school would have been early September.”

Still, now I saw Andre’s hands on preteen necks, saw him with that look, half amused, a little scared and titillated, like he was watching *Toddlers and Tiaras*, as he watched them struggle for life.

“Ah, that’s probably just ... Cormac’s not good with dates. I am. Know much about numerology?” she asked. “Eleven times three?”

“Is thirty-three.” My age. I wondered where she was going with this.

“Which is six.” She paused, like she was on *Ricky Lake*, and blinked into the eye of the web cam. Poor Aisling, an extra in the *Teen Satan!* show – doomed to be a footnote in and not allowed to publish her own e-book. No wonder she didn’t care about the way she was represented in *Resident Alien*. She just wanted to be heard.

“The number ...”

“Of the beast.”

“That little boy that went missing – Jason Weiz?”

I understood where she was heading with this.

“Yes. I wrote a piece about the Cathy Carver disappearance. It touched on both Jason Weiz and Trey Scott,” I said neutrally. *But you knew that already.*

“The parents believed that all kids were taken by the same person. And obviously given that Trey went missing long after Andre’s death, it’s unlikely it was Andre who committed the crimes.”

“But what if he killed Jason Weiz? He could have had an accomplice who killed the other kids. Carole, Danny, Cormac, they were, like, tripping balls. Steve coached them and coaxed them. He could do it to you if you weren’t even high. That’s his signature.”

“I’ll do what I can to find out the truth. Why is he sending the story in installments?”

Aisling shrugged. “It’s trust. I keep feeding back to him and encouraging him that we can, like, trust you. And that you like his writing.”

In truth, I found it a little too affected, but I loved the story. Even if Aisling was writing it.

“I do. Tell him to send more.”

“All we have is the past. We got our permanent residency taken away. I can apply for a holiday visa. But I can never be a citizen unless the decision is revoked. He took my life from me. I had a boyfriend, an apartment, a career ...”

I doubted this. Aisling looked like a pre-Raphaelite madwoman. She was Ophelia, floating down the river. Life was not made for Aislings: Erins, either.

“Get our story out there. Maybe I’ll get my visa back. We’ll get our visas back.”

Secrets and lies were heavy. She’d most likely been deceived all her life. She had grown up deceiving. A pang of empathy hit me, somewhere around the gall bladder. Me, Ricky, Joe, Aisling – we were the deceived. We were also the deceivers, self and otherwise.

Denise picked up on the second ring.

“Sloane.”

“My pet theory: the kids killed Andre, not for pleasure, not for sacrifice, but from pain – for protection. And Steve cleaned up their mess, and his.”

I filled her in on Mona, the woods, Steve, Ange, Carole – Danny. The money.

“You’re being stalked by Danny,” she concluded.

“Is that all you’ve got to say? Probably. I’m not that worried.” And I wasn’t. Why wasn’t I? He’d proven to me time and time again that he could and would hurt me. Physically. Badly.

“Look, if you’re right about Hernandez being undercover, the Carole-and-Steve connection is interesting. The Mona connection is extraordinarily tenuous – it’s just a refrigerator magnet for Christ’s sake – but head out there, talk to your Satanic Lolita and her demon cop lover. Also, you’ll be safer down South. Book it in and send through your receipts. We can cover it. Also, I want you to stay with me until then. Get off the Island.”

The phrase brought more relief than I could verbalize.

Off the Island. Yes. Anywhere but here.

I booked a Jet Blue flight to Fort Lauderdale and went onto hotels.com and booked myself a room for a week in Lauderdale Lakes, with the intention of stalking Steve and the additional bonus of lobbing up unannounced at Carole Ruffalo’s workplace. I packed a bag and then headed to Denise with Mister’s cat cage. On Oceanside, I noticed a little red Kia, 2008, behind me. I’d seen it before. It tailed me all the way to Southern State Parkway but I lost it at Pennsylvania Avenue, noting the plates.

Denise greeted me at the door in a terry toweling robe, her hair in curlers, and an avocado face mask painted on.

“So, where’s the loot?” She did a good gangster’s moll impression. She poked her fingers into the cage, clucking in at Mister. But he wasn’t in there.

I’d left Mister inside with the guarantee that my elderly neighbor, Jude, would take Mister to her place for the week – just after my car had left Oceanside Avenue. A grand would have her guaranteeing steak dinners for Mister for the week I was away.

Denise just nodded at me. “Let’s put it in the safe. Are you ready for this? Are you okay?”

“I’m not okay, but I’m ready.”

## Chapter 12

All my life I'd felt like a ghost; never more so than in Florida. In New York, I could get away with my blue-white skin and witchy blacks, my pinched, life-worn face and poor teeth. The laser quality of light showed my skin for what it was: thinned and reptilian. In my compact mirror, I saw every worry and frown line on my forehead; I looked frayed, coming apart at the seams.

At baggage, I encountered the apartheid between Florida natives and tourists: the pale and aerobicized, the obese squeezed into synthetic dresses and shorts, the poor minorities with their kids in cheap Asian Disney rip-offs, the pixelated features of Ariel, Pocahontas, slightly distorted.

Fort Lauderdale was about eighty degrees and climbing and I cursed my standard wool dress. I was uncomfortably hot but I couldn't just rock a tank and let my Satanic branding freak flag fly; this was a death penalty state, chock full of Christians.

My cab driver was a leathery old ex-Marine turned beach bum, who resembled Robert Mitcham as Max Cady. His old navy ink was green-blue and creased into indecipherable symbols in his bronzed skin. I scanned him for the tell-tale "Loretta" tattoo and found none. He was wearing a Grateful Dead T-shirt and knock-off Ray-Bans.

"Lenny Tuna," he offered.

"Erin Sloane," I said.

I rolled down the window, the heat rising off the asphalt and warping the road. I sucked in humidity and oleander. The seats smelled like wet bathing suits left too long.

I asked him what he knew about Coral Springs.

"A graveyard for the rich, huh," he wheezed and laughed.

"I'm investigating the property market. An old high school friend of mine, Carole Ruffalo, is killing it in real estate there. I think they're building a lot of new estates."

"Most of Florida got KO'd after the GFC, but the rich survived it. And the property developers like your gal up there at ..."

“Ruffalo Realty Executives. They’re based in Coral Springs. The new development is called Coral Palisades”

He looked at me through the rearview with a peculiar mixture of disappointment and anger.

“Carole’s not really a friend,” I amended and told him a sanitized and condensed version of my assignment.

“Well, I don’t know your friend’s story, but nobody who is making an honest living is turning a profit, especially with these new estates and their ticky tacky houses. Lotta places overcharging, taking kickbacks, you name it. You can light up in here – I ain’t no puritan.”

He provided me with a list of cop and dive bars, shooting ranges, and steakhouses that Steve Shearer may hang out in. I jotted them down in my notebook.

“Can we make a detour?” I said, trying my luck. “On the meter. I just gotta dash in.”

“Nah,” he said. “Gotta get lunch anyways. I’ll just pick you up at one.” He winked at me in the rearview.

More texts had come through that morning from Danny since I’d turned my phone back on:

*thinkin of u ... 😍*

*You look good ❤️*

*MISS U ❤️😭*

*Why r u ignoring me?*

*UR such a bitch....*

*I know where u live...*

*R U ignoring me E?*

After all these years, the anxiety felt sickeningly familiar. It was close to fear, but nearer to rage now. I had an urge to hurl my phone in the trash can. Every fiber of my being wanted to block him, but I wouldn’t until this was over – there was something he wanted from me and I had to wait to find out.

The *you look good* component felt threatening. It had a vague horror-movie threat – “*I’m inside the house*” – and I began to feel slightly dizzy, light-headed, as I scanned the mall, which was lined with palm trees: all open-planned light and glass, full of designer outlets. The impossibly beautiful or impossibly elderly queued at frozen yogurt stands.

Clad in black in a sea of beige, I was easy prey.

I took an Ambien and went from store to store and ordered a new one of everything: makeup, underwear, new shoes, three new outfits. I was moving away from black, but I had to run before I could walk, so I went for tan and navy. By about one p.m., loaded with a bunch of shopping bags, I asked Lenny to drop me at the car hire. When we arrived there, he helped me with my bags and then after wiping his hand on his shorts, handed me a card. Tips-n-Toes nail salon. Fort Lauderdale Beach.

“You can reach me there,” he said. “It’s the wife’s place. They also got tanning beds there, huh.”

“Oh yeah?” I said.

“Think about it. Stay groovy, hon.” He tooted the horn.

The White Sands was a double-story cement building, painted mint and bone-white, sat much like a melting ice cream, paint peeling, ceilings leaking, walls sweating. Only it didn’t smell like ice cream. It was also twenty miles from the coast. The interior reminded me of the Freeport Motel. The room had a Bible in the drawer, a flamingo-pink bathtub, and a mattress that would probably give me bedbugs. I could have booked somewhere better and claimed it, but I wanted to be inconspicuous. And being in a fleabag made me feel close to Ricky.

There was a pool long enough to do laps in and a bar, not wet but close enough, but I decided to take a cold shower and rest a little before seeing Carole. I knew she was going to be in the office until at least six. She updated her status at least ten times a day – *Lunchbreak Pilates owww!! Tonite is cheat night! Om Nom Nom* (referring to her diet, I imagined). I laid out my purchases on the bed.

Women do lots of things for other women: they dress for other women, for instance. And in my case, they buy Chanel Number 9 at the mall. I’d finished *Dancing with the Devil* on the plane and I was pissed. As I sprayed perfume on my wrists and in my hair, I thought of Carole’s Charlie, the lingering smell on Ricky’s

mattress in the van – the same mattress on which Carole claimed, in *Dancing with the Devil*, she'd been “initiated” by Ricky.

I put on the tailored tan skirt and white shirt over new the La Perla lingerie and slipped into the patent leather stilettos.

In the tiny bathroom, I ironed my hair; I changed my makeup to high blush, nude lips, and natural eye makeup. After I dressed, I scanned my new Veronica Lake silhouette in the mirror. All that was missing was the hair. I had no time to cut or style it, so I just tied it up in a bun and sprayed the shit out of it with hairspray.

I checked my phone: Jude. A grand had bought me regular pics and updates. Mister looked pissed, but safe. He was staying indoors.

Then Ox.

*The Kia is reg 2 Kelly Quinlan-Walsh. Time 4 a home visit?*

*Thanks Ox. Maybe go to Prestige Marine instead? I think his wife is OK – would be Danny driving. And if u could keep an eye on the Oceanside Ave address that would be great.*

*U got it, Pumpkin.*

Back in the Caddy, I was happy to note the car had a cigarette lighter and an ashtray – it also had a tape player. I took a gamble and pressed play. At first it was warped and then I realized I was listening to Johnny Cash. Mona the rat had inspired me to smoke Virginia Slims – I tapped one out of the pack and sang along:

*I fell into a burning ring of fire.*

Listening to Johnny sneer and splutter through bar fights and revelations, I leaned my elbow on the door, hitting the dash for emphasis as I sang along, soaking in the vitamin D and smoking, feeling generous about the Floridian driving. The cool of the car and the approving looks from other drivers began to give me a shine, a cloak of invincibility. I sped up, gained confidence. It seemed that the Floridian heat dispelled damp and ghosts. Danny's messages, the incident at West Cypress Road

Woods, the ghost of Ricky Hell, and the dead kids felt far away. Now I understood the renewed confidence in the property market after 2008. Here I'd been saying things like: "Put it on the AMEX." Here, I was driving a classic Cadillac.

The satnav in the car was telling me I was ten miles from Ruffalo Realty Executives. As I drove into downtown Coral Springs, I felt I'd maybe discovered what Sweet Valley would look like in real life in an economic downturn. There was still a glut of For Sale and In Escrow signs. Golf courses and real estate agencies seemed to be in high demand, but now no one was buying and no one had time to play. Brokerages and time shares clearly desperate for business had signs that promised raffle tickets, free dinners, hell, even a car, if you bought a house. Everything was beige and stucco; shiny condos loomed next to squat frozen yogurt stores, Subway sandwich-style chains, and strip malls, all warped and shimmering in the heat of the afternoon. It was in fact probably only seventy degrees, but the humidity was at one hundred percent and my thighs were glued to the driver's seat.

Carole's building, a single-story marine-blue Art deco building, with curved edges and a smooth-edged rectangular column running down the center like a stripe, or a Mohawk. I briefly remember my dad taking me to Manhattan and telling me the old Art Deco buildings had "eyebrows." And unlike Carole, the building had a face and a soul.

I parked the Caddy and headed into the air-conditioned interior. Sadly, and perhaps predictably, the building had been exorcized of character – gutted and modernized with chrome and glass. There was a giant feature wall that was an aquarium full of tropical fish. A receptionist in a tangerine dress rested her fluorescent nails and stopped typing, looking me up and down with a smile so bleached and so saccharine, it was diabetic.

I realized I looked less like an undertaker and more like a buyer. I straightened up my shoulders and managed a smile, hiding my crooked incisors.

"Erin Sloane. Carole Ruffalo is expecting me," I said and sat down.

"Would you like some water? Café latte?" She pronounced this in a faux-European accent.

"An espresso and bottled water?" I suggested. I hadn't had time to get a manicure at Tips-n-Toes. My gnawed fingers were a tell. I thrust my hands deeper into my pockets. "Thank you so much."

After the girl disappeared into the kitchen, Carole Ruffalo came through the front entrance, accompanied by a gust of hot air and an older man with a George Hamilton tan and bleached teeth. I knew it was her because – despite the fillers, Botox, boobs, the pert, upturned nose – the mouth remained the same, thin and sullen, and her eyes the same glacial blue. Up close I could see the lemon-yellow dress she wore was designer and even I, a fashion illiterate, knew Louboutins when I saw them. She looked thinner, rich, and more inscrutable. If she recognized me, she didn't show it; I thought the Botox might have had something to do with it. She squeezed the man's arm and whispered in his ear. He disappeared into the first office as the tangerine blonde came out with the espresso and Perrier.

“A Ms Erin Sloane here to see you.”

Carole stood in the foyer, just staring at her.

Maybe she had been trained to translate Carole's facial expressions, because she looked worried and teetered helplessly on her heels. I took the drinks from her. It was like ninety degrees; I was very thirsty. Carole waved the girl back to her post.

“Eerie Erin. A real blast from the past. You on vacation or something?” Newport lived on in Carole's vowels. The voice did not match the glossy image.

“You came to grab a drink?” I could hear the amusement, but it was unfriendly. Suddenly she reminded me of Mona.

“Not really. I'd rather go see Coral Palisades. Let's take my car,” I said, finishing my very hot espresso. I took the Perrier with me. It had a little straw with the paper still on the end.

Carole's expressionless face moved slightly. We headed outside together.

“We're going out. See you in twenty,” Carole called out to the girl without moving her lips, slamming the door behind us.

## Chapter 13

“That’s your car?”

“I’m trying a new look.” *Bong Queen*. “Did you know that Bruce Springsteen originally wrote the song ‘Pink Cadillac’? Natalie Cole butchered it in the eighties – if you listen again, it’s really about a vagina. All the references to the crushed velvet interiors and Adam and Eve.”

“Ew.”

“C’mon, Carole. For old times’ sake.”

She hesitated, looking back at the office.

“I’ve got coke,” I tried.

Carole complied as she eased slowly into the passenger seat. As we drove, the Johnny Cash tape played and I wondered if I’d missed my calling. Maybe I was a cop, like my father. Or just a liar, like him.

I looked at Carole in the light and realized that despite her tan and thick makeup, her skin was quite uneven. Her teeth had all been capped.

“Take a left, keep going until you hit Coral Palisades Drive,” Carole said, taking the pack of Virginia Slims off the dash and lighting one without asking. She was polite enough to offer me one.

“Palisades usually means a high line of cliffs, or a fence of stakes,” I said. My father, the quizmaster, had told me this. “This area appears to contain no palisades, no cliffs or inclines of any kind in Coral Springs. It is, in fact, flat.”

Carole rolled her eyes.

The car had no air conditioning, so at the afternoon peak of eight at one hundred percent humidity, I was sweating through my linen blouse and my hands were wet on the steering wheel. Beads of sweat had gathered on my forehead and made my ironed hair spring into frizz. I looked at Carole, cool and dry, unbothered by the situation. She wasn’t perspiring.

*Coral Palisades*, the mint-and-lavender sign read. There was an artist’s interpretation of the estate: a multi-tiered replica of Southern-style mansions in the colors of saltwater taffy, built in a ring, surrounded by an artificial lake and golf course. It was a fortress of a kind – a panopticon, you could call it. The security office at the front was empty. I wondered if the cameras even functioned.

“You don’t seem all that surprised to see me after all these years, Carole. How did you recognize me?”

Carole blew out a blue ring of smoke. “You don’t look all that different. I mean older, clearly. But you, like, dress the same. You know, Rick had your picture in his glove compartment. A Polaroid.”

*Rick.* I flushed. She was trying to distract and rile me – lording whatever feigned intimacy she believed that they shared over me. No one called him that.

“Cut the shit, Carole.”

“I got a heads-up you were coming here to, like, rake up the past for your paper.”

“Who?”

“It was anonymous.”

“Mona Byrnes?” I pressed her.

“Mona who?”

I was an expert in detecting deception, but if Botox made sweating a thing of the past, it rendered lie detection from body language and facial reading next to impossible. Carole toyed with her gold chain and displayed her throat. It was like she was flirting. Carole was a cool customer. She would have won at statues, made an expert poker player.

“I understand Steve Shearer lives here in a half-built ghost estate. Weird,” I said, injecting incredulousness into my voice. “I heard he won the lottery.”

I turned to face her. Now recalling Carole’s curated account of that night in West Cypress Road Woods in *Dancing with the Devil*, I pictured Steve Shearer, like an evil Tom Selleck, and Angela Lansbury in *Murder She Wrote* sitting down to co-author the book together.

“That name rings a bell. I believe he owns a property.”

“Because he’s the cop that shot Ricky Hell. And you sold it to him.”

“It’s like, nearly finished,” Carole said without a hint of bitterness in her tone.

“And yet, it’s never going to be, is it? Everyone’s paid their deposit and all their money is tied up in this ...” I gestured at the estate.

“It’s not our fault. It’s the builders. There are some residents already living in the estate. You know, I drove past your house with Rick and Mac once,” she continued. All the hairs on my neck stood up.

“He wanted to see if Danny was there.”

“Was he?”

“Yes. He was. And then we all got high. You can guess what happened next.”

She was trying to goad me into a reaction. I resolved to give her nothing.

“So, where’s the coke?”

“I might have lied about that.”

Carole yawned and looked at her nails. She was the kind of woman who respected you for calling her out, for being tough. But she got bored easily and craved attention. I didn’t have money to pay her off – but I could give her the attention she wanted. And she had an agenda, that much was obvious. I was starting to sniff it out. Once I found the source, everything else was gravy.

“I read your book on the plane.”

Carole shrugged. “Whatever. It was boring. I just gave the publishers what they wanted.”

“In your book, you say you were dating Cormac O’Malley, but that Ricky was in love with you – that you were pressured into sex with him by the group. And you were a virgin. I *know* that’s not true ...”

“Look, I hit it with Ricky, yeah.” The nineties jargon jarred me. “With Mac. And Danny too. You didn’t know that, did you?” She blinked at me a few times. Her eyes were a very icy blue. Wolven, you might call them.

I didn’t believe the last part. Danny was far too moral. Ricky, well, the stink of Charlie on the mattress, his open promiscuity, her proximity – he could have slept with Carole.

“I know you and Mac knew about me and Ricky. Did Danny?”

Carole’s shoulders shrugged and the rest of her stayed motionless.

“I can’t say for sure, but Ricky made us promise not tell – like, on our lives.”

“Tell me about you and Steve Shearer and Mona Byrnes.”

Johnny sang about walking the line.

“I don’t know a Mona,” she said.

“She was the cop who took your original statement, Carole. Also, she has a Ruffalo Realty Executive refrigerator magnet on her fridge. That’s quite the coincidence.” As Denise had said, it was a stretch. But I trusted my gut. The synchronicities were adding up. I took out a cigarette and offered her one. Her hand shook as she took it. After my stint in rehab, I knew soccer moms and brokers who were on the pipe – and I recognized the enlarged pores, the marks and abrasions from

long nails and long nights. I guessed that underneath the Lancôme foundation, her Britney Spears Fantasy perfume and self-tanner, there would be a stench of ammonia and vinegar.

“A lot of people know of us. We have a strong professional reputation all along the East Coast and the word’s spreading,” Carole parroted.

“Save me the mission statement, Carole. Did you get an email from an account called Lost in Space? Or from a woman called Aisling O’Malley? Mac’s sister?”

She seemed unperturbed, but her jaw clenched tighter. “It was from an account called `mindyourownfuckingbusiness@gmail.com`.”

I shook my head. If I was in a hard-boiled detective novel, I would have pistol-whipped her. If I was a cop, I would have started heating the interview up a notch. Maybe I would have hit the dash and shouted. But I was just a hack with a mania for knowing the truth, whatever that was, and an old-ass grudge.

“I want to represent you in the article in a way that’s true and accurate. And fair.” The heat had made me feel slightly stoned; the humidity had leached all my vital energy.

“For the sake of peace and closure, I’ll help you.” *Liar*. But we both were. Despite how much I loathed her, we both wanted revenge.

“Just ask what you want. I’ve got to go back and freshen up for a client meeting.”

I finished my cigarette and stubbed it. I shouldn’t even be smoking in here; the ashtray was probably only for display purposes.

“Ask your questions, get it over with.”

“Who called Steve out that night? I don’t think it was Cormac.”

“Look, whatever you heard, Steve is a good man. His wife died. He just deserves some peace.”

“I heard he remarried. Ange’s first husband, Cooper Deane, was shot in the line of duty in ’92, only there was very little written about it. Just an article about violent crime pre-Giuliani in the *Times* and an image of a headstone on Find A Grave. Beloved husband, father, and only son. 1954 to 1992. And Steve was his partner. Now Steve lives with Ange.”

“Who cares?” Carole said, and though I couldn’t read her face, her tone was unmistakable. I had hit a nerve.

“Do you know her?”

“Never met her.”

“But you have some sort of relationship with Steve? You sold him a house. Back then, were you ...”

“Ewww.” Her Long Island goyim princess came out. “No way. He was old. And Mac’s stepfather.”

“And now?”

“What do you think?” Carole folded her arms.

“I’ve seen your husband, the silver fox. I think you were an adventurous young girl who liked drugs and booze. Maybe Steve had some hold on you and he still does. Did he convince you to lie about Ricky killing Andre?”

Carole’s larynx moved. Think of a bird darting on a branch.

“Ricky killed Andre because he was out of his mind on acid and mushrooms. So was Danny. End of story.”

I tried a different approach.

“I’ve been developing this theory about that night. That Steve was the one who beat Andre to death that night, partly because he tried to strangle you, rape you even. I believe that by the way. He choked me too. Hard.”

She assessed me coolly and shrugged.

“Sorry.”

“I didn’t tell anyone. Now I wish I had. Did you call Steve out because Andre was hurting you? And Steve lost control. Shot Ricky cause he’d seen him kill Andre and he’d tell. Maybe Steve bribed Danny and the other kids not to tell on him?”

Carole gave me a look that said “*Really?*”

“Try again,” she said.

“I think Andre Villiers was a bad dude and there was a reason he had to die. Am I right? I understand. I’m not judging. I just don’t buy Ricky Hell being Andre’s executioner.”

“Why don’t you ask Aisling and Cormac O’Malley?” Carole spat out.

It took a second for her meaning to become clear.

“Aisling was twelve at the time of the crime.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you saying Cormac was involved in killing Andre? Because of Aisling?”

Her agitation was increasing. She sat and idly picked at her face, as we listened to side A at a slightly warped speed – the tape was starting to go.

Her growing discomfort felt like nails on a blackboard.

“I’m just saying the past is the past. Ricky Hell is just a pile of bones in the dirt. And let’s face it, that’s all he ever was gonna be.” She folded her arms. “I’m done talking.”

I nodded and started the engine. When I dropped her back at her luxury office to get high, she turned to face me.

“Move on, Eerie. You could get hurt by this.”

Was it a threat? She looked at me with something that resembled kindness. I watched her canary-yellow back disappear, like a bird into a cat’s mouth.

Back at the hotel I took another ice-cold shower and played my “Summer of ’94” mix on my phone. Motels made me nostalgic. I wanted a guilty little memory-lane vacation. I’d tried to meet other lovers at motels since Ricky, but they lost their sheen and the seediness just made me sad. As Jane’s Addiction’s “I Would” came on, a ping on my cell indicated that there was an email. I changed into a T-shirt and lay down on the sagging mattress thinking of Ricky Hell, postponing reality.

*“He had your picture in his glove compartment.”*

Carole’s adenoidal intrusion was like an active construction site outside a beach house. It ruined my reverie.

What picture was she referring to? I never gave him one, from memory. He could have cut one out of a yearbook, but I doubted it. Despite poetry and what not, Ricky was not a sentimentalist. He also used to talk about photographs stealing your soul or something like that, but it was less about some ill-informed idea that he had about Indigenous beliefs – Ricky played up his Native American heritage for the girls – and more about an invasion of a very deep-seated sense of privacy that he held sacred. I understood that a little better now that I knew about his double life.

Carole had cleverly identified some unsullied girlish part of me that delighted in the idea that he was mooning over some picture of me and had tried to manipulate me with it.

Jesus, sentimentality was making me gullible. I poured myself a whiskey and seltzer and connected to the Wi-Fi. Someone had tipped Carole off and I my bets were on Mona Byrnes – but Carole’s insinuation of Aisling and Cormac’s

involvement in Andre's death made me further question Aisling's intentions, her integrity. My list of questions for her was growing; the burning, billion-dollar question was obvious – what really happened with Andre Villiers?

Like Mona said, the kids probably did kill Andre, but not because Ricky told them too. Maybe Ricky killed Andre, for picking on girls.

Money wasn't an incentive – not for Newport kids anyway. Danny once told me he had hit his dad, he had broken his dad's nose for picking on Patrick. He wouldn't say any more.

All the boys were from violence; they were violence. All the girls were victims.

But she got in first. No subject line, just a question.

### ***Where R U?***

I ignored Aisling's chat window. I didn't want to tell her I was in Florida – I had the sense she knew. That she had in a way, sent me here, via *Resident Alien*.

It had just turned 6:00 pm – it was the end of the hotel's notorious happy hour. I refilled my whiskey from my Jameson bottle and slipped it into my handbag and headed out to the pool area with my laptop to write.

Outside it smelled like magnolia and wet laundry. Even though the humidity was draining, I liked the intensity of the Florida climate, the constant threat of thunder, the mineral smell of petrichor among the spilled rocket fuel and chlorine.

Half-drunk cocktail glasses and empty beer bottles lined the pool area. A couple were engaged in a sex act at the east side of the pool, underneath the palm tree. One of the Cuban bellboys was cleaning the pool with strong chemicals, grim-faced. He stopped. "The bar is closed," he said, with scarcely concealed disgust.

"I know," I shook my whiskey and the ice rattled. "I brought my own."

He shook his head, muttering "*Blanquito*."

I ignored the insult. His job sucked, I sympathized. People were generally terrible, white people especially, but they were at their very worst on vacation. I headed out to a plastic lounge at the west end of the pool area, underneath the palm, and the couple across from me had disentangled and lit up a joint. The smell of reefer drifted across the pool.

Listening to the cicadas and the rumbling of distant thunder, I couldn't have been further away from the bonfires and Jack-o-lanterns of Massapequa, further away from the woods where Ricky Hell took his last breath, the streets where those kids had been taken and brutalized, killed. Maybe it was all too far-fetched.

Lost in Space had sent me an email direct. It was another installment of *Resident Alien*. There was a subject line, but no salutation. It should be 1:00 a.m. in Dublin, but the time was 3:34 p.m. Either Cormac was in Australia now, with Aisling, or Aisling was sending the extracts and pretending to be him.

## Chapter 14

The night that Linda Bauer was killed was March 17, 1993. It was a Wednesday. What happened that night was uncertain, remains uncertain to me. All the kids had different stories and they started spot fires of rumors that quickly turned into fires. In Health Ed, Seth Greene said the police found a skull and bones forty feet away from where she was hit. In Spanish, Cheryl Martinez said she was *cortar in dos*. Naomi Glass told the gym locker room that the policeman who found her passed out and had to be airlifted too.

Most of this was not true. Steve knew fire and rescue and he told me things after, a joint to his lips, a man-to-man talk.

In Spanish, Linda means pretty. In Newport, no one knew the phrase about not speaking ill of the dead.

Aisling told me that according to the graffiti on the walls of George Washington Middle School where Linda had just graduated, Linda was gay and had two vaginas. According to the graffiti at Roosevelt, she was burning in hell.

In the hours leading up to the party at the Old Res, Carole passed me a note written in purple glitter pen that was folded up and shaped like a bird:

Linda is so Fat, knappy hair, poor, just a pig. I think Ricky had sex with her!  
Gross!! X Carole Maree

I felt something sink inside me, a brick tied to my bowel. I was shitting water all day long.

Maybe it was all the green dye; it was St Patrick's Day. The school cafeteria put green dye in the cream cheese. There were green cupcakes, cookies, and donuts. No one ate the hot lunches, except poor kids and losers. Most kids went out and bought Subway, McDonalds, Taco Bell, Burger King – some kids even went to White Castle, which was considered ghetto. Only black and Spanish kids went there.

Because we had the same lunch period, Carole and I sat together. Carole had a green sprayed-on streak in her hair but was wearing black and leopard print, as usual. She buttered her bagel thickly, green cream cheese on top. She unpeeled a

straw carefully and put it in the soda. I noted the careful way she laid out a napkin, arranging it at the right angle.

“She lives on the other side of Newport Avenue, behind the Pathmark, where all the blacks and Puerto Ricans live and Linda once did crystal with them. Ricky does it too, you know. Linda was at Escapades blowing guys for tequila at fourteen years old. She knows where to get a gun,” Carole continued.

I picked at the crusty outer shell of the knish and forked the fluffy mash into my mouth and shrugged. Carole leaned in and I saw her bra – it was a shock, a kind of scalding white, with lacy daffodil flowers all up and down the straps.

“Linda once ate a knish off the ground when she was hungry”.

I pitied Linda. Not only was she hugely fat, she had hair like a Brillo pad and it was about the same colour – apparently, she dyed it brown so that no one would know it was very prematurely grey.

I watched Andre Villiers get pulled up by our English teacher for an armpit fart in the lunch line, only to distract the queue as he tripped up an eighth grader, pretending afterwards that it was an accident. The lunchroom was cleared as the blood was mopped up.

“Looks like Andre will be suspended again,” Carole said as we stood outside, waiting for the bell.

That night at the Old Res, Carole undid her halter neck and showed me her breasts. They were tiny, round as mandarins and about the same colour. Her skin was self-tanned and according to the label should be Brazil-nut brown. She lifted her skirt: I see London, I see France. But Carole wore no underpants and even if she did, I still would have been drawn to the bruise that reminded me of Africa, that had faded and now looked like Marge Simpson in a side profile. I ignored the swell of ash blonde pubic hair, groomed into a heart.

Instead of touching her, I asked her to pose for me.

As I laid down the lines on the paper in my mind, the excitement I experienced was mostly aesthetic.

I touched her; she touched me. It was not unpleasant, but it was like watching a badly dubbed movie; it was all out of sync. The only way that I managed to get hard was thinking of the diesel and tobacco smell of Ricky’s truck, the way his hair fell into a curly tip, like it had been dipped in ink the colour of midnight. Eyes, lips,

biceps. As I was thinking of Our Mother's disappointment in my manliness, I heard Steve's voice in my ear: *You little queer*.

New York was experiencing a cold snap – the air cut like an ax, but that wouldn't stop us. The Old Res filled up with kids who formed a circle around wood and stone, squished together on old planks of wood balanced on concrete boulders, getting splinters on our asses. We sat around a bonfire fed on scrap wood, firelighters, and schoolwork. There were a few groups of kids from Newport High – footballers, cheerleaders – and a few burnouts from Belmont who brought shrooms and a baggie full of purple hearts. Two middle school girls sat with lipstick on their teeth, drinking beer nervously. They were, as Danny put it, lining up to get fucked. But Danny wouldn't be the one to do it. He seemed to have contempt for the sex act; Ricky would be the one they were waiting for. He was a boy slut, Carole said. All I saw was Ricky growing broodier and more intense; that night he was throwing rocks at the boom box, which was playing *Naughty by Nature*, *Onyx*, *The Black Crowes*. One of the girls put on *Slayer*, *Metallica*; harder stuff, black metal, Swedish stuff followed. The songs formed a sort of seamless soundtrack with the sounds of the night: a glut of cans being cracked, shit being shot, the sucking of bongs, the high-hat rattle and horn of the LIRR as it shot through Newport Station.

There was a conversation about the missing Newport kids: the little girl, Cathy Carver, was in the fifth grade at the same elementary school Carole and Danny had gone to.

"I'm telling ya, I talked to the cops about them kids. I reckon the kid killer is a cop himself," Andre said. His loose, sloppy mouth made my stomach turn. He reached for Carole; she shirked away. He shrugged.

"Why did you talk to them?" I asked him.

He just shrugged. "I hang out at Waldbaums. The candy and comic aisle. So did the kids, I guess."

Next to Danny, diagonal to me was Erin, Danny's elusive girlfriend, Eerie Erin from my art class. She used to get the bathroom pass and return way too long after, her long auburn hair smelling of cigarettes and liquor. I hadn't seen her for months. I had noted her absence. I had heard that she was she was sent to Catholic school because of some family tragedy.

"Know who that is?" Carole asked me.

“Eerie?” I faux-guessed. I knew her name. We would have, could have been friends, had she stayed on. Unlike the other metal kids, she didn’t seem to be posing, so much as emanating near-tangible pain. I feared the others, as much as I was drawn to them – their destruction and derision. I longed for level-headedness, someone to laugh with, someone to tell a secret to. Erin looked the type. She even carried books.

On the other hand, hanging out with Carole was like reading a diary being read aloud 24/7. She literally gossiped about herself. Very quickly I learned that Carole didn’t trust men who didn’t want to have sex with her; moreover, they angered her. She was seeing a therapist because she tore her own hair out sometimes. She used vaginal deodorizers – she carried breath spray, she wore smelly floral insteps, she showered several times a day. She got stoned even more. She hated her parents and thought about fixing their brakes. The food she ate had to be certain colours. She also gossiped about everyone else, mostly because she, Carole, watched everyone; she, Carole, had a savant-like ability to calculate frailty and desire.

“Just after school started, Eerie Erin’s dad killed her mom and sister. She and Danny were in the house, but they survived.” Carole’s eyes looked big and wolfish; she cracked a beer.

I did not ask how.

“I heard she and Ricky are together. Isn’t Ricky gorgeous? Wouldn’t you just die if you kissed him?” she asked in a voice that came out like a purr. “Silly boy,” she said. “My Lucky Charms leprechaun,” she cooed.

“He likes girls,” I said, but there was an ember of hope in my voice. Carole knew I was burning.

We two watched Erin and Danny walking to the side of the fire, lit up by the flames like the anti-homecoming king and queen. Rings adorned her ears, rings covered her fingers, a huge khaki parka covered her body, but you could see lean, long legs in denim cutoffs over black stockings. He wore all black, but instead of looking metal, he looked more like Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*: sculpted muscle, legs like Michelangelo’s *David*.

Danny’s father was a doctor. He lived on the right side of Newport, they didn’t have a maid, though – they lived poor, despite all his father’s money. I noted the way he watched Erin constantly. He never took Carole, Cheryl, or Naomi up on their offers for second and third base, all the way. He was a teenage boy, but somehow, he was made of steel. That was not to be trusted.

“Fuck off,” Erin shouted, flipping him the bird as she walked off.  
“She’s a little bit chubby from the back,” Carole said underneath her breath.  
“Erin,” Danny called. “You’re outta line.” But he was smiling.  
Ricky watched Erin leave with an intensity that troubled me.  
The way I watched Ricky was the thing that I hoped nobody noticed.

*Estoy Abasandro: I am burning.*

What do I know? What do I remember?

Carole and I drank a six-pack of Bud Light that she stole from home; we all shared a bottle of Wild Turkey. We kept expecting our breath to freeze midair; the mushrooms made everything feel damp and liquid. Time sucked sound, light was invisible. Hands were holding hands; bodies were moving on bodies. Carole’s perfume, her cold hand in mine at the bonfire. Things I do remember: she fed her social studies textbook into the fire ,and her tongue straight in my mouth did nothing to turn me on.

All of Carole’s metal jewellery looked like it came out of a vending machine called Skull-n-Snakes. A gleaming silver ring, a daisy, hung on a long chain around her neck. It caught my eye as it was not a Carole ring; her snake ring caught my hair and pulled out a clump.

I passed out near the fire and when I woke up, it was just a pile of smouldering ashes and I was freezing, soaked in my own cold piss. Danny was shaking me awake and Carole was just shaking.

They were saying that Linda tried to reach the platform but it was like her perception of space and time was all fucked up. Everyone said she moved like she was underwater.

“She was like a bug in a toilet bowl,” Carole said flatly. “Ricky called it.”

“She’s fucking dead,” Danny said. There was a sleeping hysteria in his voice.

Carole crinkled up her nose at me. “You stink. Do you think it would hurt to die like that?”

“Not really,” Danny said. “Shock will get you.” He rubbed his hands to warm up.

“You’re my best friend, Mac,” Carole kept saying to me, over and over, kissing my face.

“Where’s Ricky,” I asked, over and over.

Danny just shook his head.

“No one knows, man.”

It was later that week when Steve went into the pharmacy to collect a script for Our Mother. Aisling went through the glove box and took out Steve’s brush. Goofing around, she was pretending to be Steve, brushing her curls. We saw it at the same time. A silver daisy on a chain. Carole’s necklace.

Aisling put it around her neck. Her smile devastated me – I realized then, she thought it was a gift for her.

Steve clocked it that night at dinner – Roy Rogers burgers and fries, eaten at the kitchen table. Our Mother wasn’t cooking. Our Mother was barely doing anything, except smiling occasionally.

“It’s too old for you,” he told her.

Her face fell. “It’s pretty.”

Our Mother shrugged.

Steve made her take it off. I saw from the stiff set of her jaw he’d killed the last bit of hopeful devotion she’d been nursing for him. I watched him take it down to their bedroom and I stole it back from the dresser drawer when he was at work, alongside some of Our Mother’s Valium. I didn’t give it back to Carole, but I put it around the neck of Aisling’s favourite teddy bear.

She understood not to wear it again.

That night Carole called.

“I lost my necklace,” Carole said. “Have you seen it? I’ve, like, searched everywhere.”

“No. Have you been to the Res?” I tried to sound helpful, curious.

“I had it since then.”

“Oh. I wonder ... I know ... have you, like, checked with Steve? Like his car?”

She went silent. Carole was smarter than anyone thought – she was crueller too. It was partly why I liked her – she didn't disappoint.

“No. But I'll check with Ricky. Maybe on the back seat, you know?”

## Chapter 15

I sat there absorbing the meta-narrative weirdness of being written into a scene in *Resident Alien*.

I had always suspected *Resident Alien* was unreliable, taking liberties with timelines and such, but now the document seemed as authentic as Milli Vanili. That conversation at the camp felt contrived, the notion of the killer as a cop again seemed to allude to Steve Shearer, Aisling's nemesis, being involved – all the while reinforcing Andre's creepiness, casting a shadow on him for the crimes, too. The author also hinted that the kids might be involved in Linda Bauer's death. What was next? Was the book going to suggest that Danny and Carole helped Steve Shearer kill Ricky Hell?

One more obvious whopper was Linda's death being a homicide. I mean, I knew Linda Bauer's death was an accident. I had seen the crime scene pics, read the police reports. A camera captured the moment of impact – it looked like she'd been hallucinating – she'd wandered onto the tracks too slow, too disorientated to clamber onto the platform when the train approached. No one pushed her.

The only true part of that evening was that Danny and I had fought that night – he stuck a finger in my ribs that made a stellate bruise.

The point was being driven home that Carole and Steve were fucking. Cormac O'Malley (and, ostensibly, Carole Jenkins) and I had the same taste in men – Ricky Hell – and he may have been there when Linda died, alongside Carole and Danny.

What was excluded in *Resident Alien* was that Linda had been more aggressive than normal that night. She had tripped Carole up, right near the fire, and she had beat up and/or at least threatened the middle school girls (I heard that in the past she'd bullied Julie Hernandez and Carole's little sister, Libby Jenkins).

Further markers of inauthenticity: Ricky never "called" anything – he never saw Linda after 10:00 p.m. And I know that because I was with Ricky at West Cypress Road Woods when Linda Bauer was killed. In fact, while Linda was pronounced dead, Ricky and I were very much alive, naked and curled up like two cold spoons in a cutlery drawer in the back of his freezing truck listening to Judas Priest. And there was no way I looked chubby from behind.

I retired to my room and found an old Vincent Price movie. A text pinged through from Danny:

***WTF u got some pig to come to my work and threaten me? I'll sue u. I'll END u.***

I called my neighbor, Jude, and reminded her to keep Mister inside. I explained I'd been getting some threats from a source, knowing that would appeal to her sense of drama. I asked her to keep an eye out for the Kia, or any other vehicles at the front of our place. She excitedly agreed, on the condition she didn't have to enter our house again, on any condition.

I texted Danny back:

***Police are watching my place, dude. I'm blocking your number now.***

Mister was safe at Jude's. Nothing that ever really meant anything to me was in that house. In fact, it was an albatross. Danny Quinlan Walsh was welcome to burn it down. The money was with Denise – but I didn't even care about the money. It wasn't mine – it was almost one hundred percent blood money.

"I'm not scared," I said aloud. I wasn't. Even with my growing intelligence of his real nature, what he may or may not have been involved in, when I saw him in the diner, whatever spell he had me under was gone. I looked at his bleached teeth and pretty-boy menace and saw a bully, bloated with insecurity and unresolved anger.

Danny again, even though I'd blocked it – and him. A different number.

***ALL THE SLOANE BITCHES ARE DEAD. EVEN THE DOG. LCKY UR CATS A BOY.***

He was wrong, but I wasn't going to correct him.

That worked. I called Jude.

“Everything’s fine on our side. Mister is not happy about being kept in, but he’s got extra treats. Don’t worry, sweetheart,” she said.

“Call the cops, actually call this number if you hear or see anything.” I gave her Ox’s details. I guess I still trusted him. “I’ll be back real soon.”

I must have fallen asleep, somewhere between my third whiskey and second Xanax. I woke at 4:30 a.m. with my mouth literally glued to my pillow and the distinct sense that something was wrong. I looked around, drinking in my surroundings. I realized that there was no weight on the foot of my bed, no gravelly purring. The walls were the color of a melanoma. The detergent used on the sheets was scented with suntan lotion and frangipani air freshener. The air in my hotel room was as chilled as a meat locker, compliments of Floridian air conditioning.

I was relieved to be alone in a strange hotel room, alive, and not too hungover. As I mentioned before, I often wake up screaming or desperately sucking in air. Sometimes I wake up stringing out apologies in a kind of prayer. I used to dream that someone was sitting on my chest, feeding on my breath, like an incubus. Sometimes it was Danny. In the days where I drank like my dad (admittedly these days were repeating on me – if, in fact, they’d ever ended), I woke in hotels not unlike this, but somebody was usually beside me.

I checked my phone. No more Danny messages, but there was another email from Lost in Space. This one had no body, just an attachment. I opened the JPEG and it was a scanned obituary notice, grainy but legible. I phoned Denise. She answered in a string of expletives that sounded a lot like:

“motherfuckerdoyouknowwhatthefuckingtimeisfuck.”

It was early, I realized. I don’t keep normal hours and I tend to forget that other people do.

“A dead man just sent me his obit,” I said.

## Chapter 16

“It reads ‘Cormac Joseph O’Malley November 13, 1973–2007’. It looks legit, Denise. As you suspected, *Resident Alien* has a ghostwriter,” I said. “I had to pay to check *The Irish Times* back issues, but I found it.”

In the black and white snowstorm of the births, deaths, and marriages his name jumped out at me, screaming. There were a handful of tributes – a workplace, relatives.

“What the fuck?” Denise said and yawned.

“Either this is an old manuscript that Aisling’s feeding me via Cormac’s ghost account ...”

“Or Aisling is the real author and this is her way of letting you know. What a loon. Read more. I’m making coffee. Fuck, my girlfriend hates you,” Denise laughed; a meaty, hearty sound. “Maybe she couldn’t tell you he was dead because she’s in denial. Maybe this is her way of narrativizing.” Denise and her Dr. Phil dialect.

“What sane person impersonates a dead sibling?” I asked. “It’s pretty weird. How can I trust anything she says or does?”

Maybe it was because Danny’s messages were accompanying the extracts, maybe it was the past catching up with me, but the extracts were making my heart race, my palms sweat. My father medicated himself so that he didn’t have to listen to his cop’s gut all the time – instinct gives you an ulcer. Ignore it, though, and you’re likely to end up dead.

“The obit’s not that old. We can find out who set up the Lost in Space account in minutes. We can get our web guy to do it,” she replied, yawning again.

“What if she’s got a screw loose?”

“Just get onto Shearer and don’t freak out. She’s probably not dangerous,” Denise said, but she sounded dubious.

“I’m pretty sure Carole and Steve have been involved for some time. And now, maybe they’re entangled in some sort of property scam and affordable housing. They’re also maybe building estates that won’t get finished and pocketing the proceeds.”

“All right, all right. This substory is good and all, but you need to stay focused on Villiers. And get closer to Steve Shearer,” she said.

“I’m trying.”

“I would suggest not engaging anymore with Miss Batshit Crazy 2010. Locate Steve Shearer ASAP. And get back to me when you do.”

“Wait,” I said.

“Hold on,” Denise snapped, impatient to get back to her girlfriend. There was a low, tense conversation taking place. Then Denise jumped back on. “Shoot.”

“Two things. Danny is sending me more back-off messages. I’m not that worried. Well, maybe a little. My dad’s old cop buddy Ox is on it.”

“You want me to drive by, check out the house?” she asked.

“If you could check in with number twelve, that would be better. That’s Jude, my neighbor’s place. She’s got Mister.”

“I’m on my way to Mister now. Just keep me in the loop. And in the meantime, keep up with the extracts. I know there’s more in there.”

I could tell Denise was worried. I also knew she was thinking what I was thinking: this could be a book.

“Just one more thing, quickly: Julie Hernandez. I’ve tried her ten times, no reply.”

“You identified who you were? You’re a reporter, babe. I’d say that’s probably why.”

“But she’s eager to talk to the press and clear Ricky’s name,” I protested. “I just have a bad feeling.”

“Erin, when have you ever not had a bad feeling?” she demanded and hung up.

She had a point. I showered and went down to the breakfast buffet, picking at plain yogurt and fruit. The coffee was hot and fresh, albeit weak. I did ten laps of the pool in my high-necked swimsuit. I got out of the pool, went to a lounge with a refill of coffee, took out my laptop, and saw there was an email from Ox.

*Pumpkin, Aisling has a record for stalking and harassment and that’s why her permanent residency was revoked.*

*Cormac O’ Malley moved back to Aus in 2005. He died of an OD in ’07 – heroin. I got curious. The sister has been an inpatient at Melbourne Clinic*

*recently, got a real serious eating disorder, mental health problems. The family are all kinds of fucked up – Mom died of an oxy OD.*

*Villiers was clean, like I said ... but I spoke to a buddy at Nassau PD. Get this – the original police report had a description of a tall, husky teenager talking to Jason at Waldbaums and it fits Villiers. Obviously, he was interviewed about Cathy and cleared – so that puts him talking to two of the missing kids.*

I felt both nauseated and excited; the anomalies tugging at me. Cathy's body was not found. The abduction was different. If it was Andre Villiers – if he was indeed back in the picture – then what about Trey Scott? He had been taken after Andre, 2000, yet killed and buried like Jason.

Candy Weiz, Jason's mom, drunk on bitterness over the corruption and ineptitude of the Nassau County Police and Stolichnaya, died after burying Jason's father. She had emphysema. She'd told TV reporters she'd hired a private detective, that the truth was coming out. Nothing came of it.

The Scotts were meek, hyperprotective of the Nassau County PD.

The Carvers were cagey. There were theories that Cathy's father was involved, that she'd been groomed by an internet pedophile, but "conveniently" the family computers had been stolen in a B and E weeks before.

Cathy was a serious, snub-nosed blonde, with slightly crossed, blue-gray eyes. From the photographs of her bedroom, I realized she had a gift for drawing and despite all her privilege, she was bookish and young for her age, likable. There was a soft pastel drawing of a lone honeyeater on a branch. The level of detail, the proficiency, was of course impressive, but it was the melancholy in the drawing that got me. On October 30, 1993, Cathy walked alone to the end of Leonard's Lane and took a shortcut through her school friend's property to the water, where she was last seen talking to a man in a speedboat.

Cathy was never seen again.

A red glove found on the cross street proved to be Cathy's. She was wearing a red jacket, with a silk lining that featured dancing Dalmatians (red was her favorite color, Dalmatians her favorite animal) and a cursive print that read *I Love Dogs*.

It was their maid and a pot-smoking teen couple who saw Cathy talking to a much older man – and Paola, their maid, had seen the man more than once. Cathy, a little kid, crunching in the leaves, a young eleven, was being groomed by someone.

“She slip out of the house to meet him. She come home, little bottles in her pockets. I find ... blood in her jeans. Mom say she shave her legs; say, no, no, don’t tell anyone,” Paola said.

Little bottles. She meant minis, the kind that drinkers like me carried around in their purses, that were stocked in mini bars. Blood in her jeans. Her mother told me she’d not even gotten her period yet. I asked to see them, to sight the blood – but the jeans were gone. I did not put this, nor any other details in my piece

I suspected abuse; while I suspected a known predator, I couldn’t say or wouldn’t say that the Carvers were involved. I did not exclude the theories, nor did I remove the witnesses’ account of an older man creeping around little Cathy, but painted the parents as grieving – even if they disgusted me. They wrote in and praised me for the piece: “elegiac and tasteful,” they called it.

I felt complicit. I wrote the story because I wanted to find her.

Even though Cathy’s body was never found, I never fantasized that she’d lived to be an adult. I never pictured her like Lolita on an endless road trip. Don’t hate me for saying that on some level, I wasn’t sorry that Cathy’s life most likely ended before it really started. Don’t hate me for saying that there were moments when I envied her.

I emailed Ox, thanking him for all his help and forwarded the obit from Aisling saying that *The Age* obit pretty much corroborated Cormac’s death.

I forwarded the email thread between myself and Ox to Denise and finished the lukewarm coffee and punched in Ox’s number – his home phone, not his cell. He was a creature of habit. He’d be on *Teen Talk*, pretending to be Brittney from Little Neck, 13.

“Hey Pumpkin,” Ox said after the third ring, sounding cautious about the change of medium. I knew he hated the phone but my head was spinning from the back and forth

“So, Cormac O’Malley is actually dead.”

“This is legit weird shit,” he said finally. “The kid sister, Aisling, I’m thinking now in light of the obit, is maybe one of them multiple personality types. ’Cause for fun, I checked that email you sent me and it’s registered to her.”

*You knew this*, an inner voice sing-songed.

“I guess I’m not surprised. She was off from the outset,” I said.

“Just be careful with this kid,” he warned. “She sounds like a crank. She’s just come outta hospital.”

“Speaking of cranks who’ve been to the nut house,” I said. “I’m getting more texts. Threats. From Danny.”

“I thought I made myself clear to that guy ... Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it,” Ox said smoothly.

“It’s okay for now, Ox. I swear. I’ll tell you if it’s not.” While I enjoyed revenge fantasies of Danny blubbing on the ground, convulsing in his own blood, his ruined bleached teeth, his guitar hand broken, it wouldn’t be prudent. Also, there was the higher moral ground.

“Let’s talk about Andre,” I said.

“The Villiers kid,” he paused for a second. I heard dribbling, the hissing of a zip. He had me on portable; he was taking a piss.

“Anything?” I said, clearing my throat and attempting to do the same with the image of him in the bathroom.

“Nothing official. Rumors and speculation. No sex crimes registered, no rap sheet at all. A caution, but that was for weed.”

“OK,” I said breathing out.

“Doesn’t mean he wasn’t a creep,” Ox said. “He was young. He just may not have gotten caught yet.”

“Ox. There’s something I need to ask you about. My mom was seeing someone.” I cleared my throat. “Mona told me.”

“Mmmm,” he said. And then the pieces fell into place – sharply. The realization was a guillotine.

“Oh no, John. Really?”

Despite the heat of the day, I shivered. I wrapped my towel around me. A young family in their swimsuits, with snorkels and inflatable pool toys, came out to the pool area. I lowered my voice.

“I just can’t believe it ...”

“That’s the first time you’ve called me that,” he said and there a catch in his throat.

“What?”

“*John*.” He said it like it was a dirty word. I had nothing to say in response, so I just forged ahead with the questions that were being generated.

“Did Dad know?”

“Yes, he did. He, uh ...accepted it. Look, Pumpkin.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Kid. Erin. Listen: Lenora was lonely. She was sad.”

“Clinically depressed.”

“Whatever. Look, she was a typical cop’s wife – a widow in waiting. She just wanted more attention from your dad. And he was doing Mona on the side when he wasn’t working all the hours that God sends.”

“And drinking,” I added. Mom was drinking too. Sad Mom drinking a bottle of red at home in front of the TV, chased by cookie dough and regret, not tequila shooters and dancing on the bar at Hannigan’s on Ladies’ Night.

“I was like a comfort to her,” Ox continued. I heard him zip up.

*With your dick.*

“There must have been an element of revenge for her there,” I said, to drive the knife in.

“That too.” He didn’t sound in any way put out. Love will do that to you. Proximity is good enough.

“I thought you liked being around us.”

“I did. It wasn’t like that ... I just sort of fell for Lenora. It never should have happened. I wanted a family. I tried to step into your dad’s shoes and they didn’t fit real well.” Ox sounded at peace with it. He was a philosophical guy, or perhaps just an underachiever.

“Do you still love her?” I needed to believe this was what it was; it was too tawdry otherwise.

“Always will. I love your dad too. And you and little Shelly ...” Ox wanted me to believe it too.

“You let me down. You let us all down. Make it up to us. Help me find out what the connection between Steve and my dad is, who really killed Ricky Hell.”

“If that’s what you want,” he said.

“It’s what I want. Thank you, Ox,” I said.

Ox wasn’t dumb, despite his nickname.

“This story means a lot to you.”

“It’s more than a story,” I said, and I was surprised to find it was true.

## Chapter 17

RP had taught me how to tail someone undetected. For the task, I'd normally be in my gunmetal-gray Chrysler, about sixty feet behind, making a sound like Mona or some other veteran smoker clearing their lungs. The Chrysler was in Nassau County and I was now in Coral Springs in a pink Cadillac that was the color of a vulva – not an anatomical one, more a color-saturated, Penthouse-pussy pink.

All along I'd been thinking Carole wasn't all that bright. Like her brain was made of cotton candy and Covergirl – but now I was starting to glean that, as Cormac inferred, she was as sharp as a nail file, or perhaps even a shank. My advantage was that she was very distracted this morning and she must be physically tired – she had been up since the crack of dawn working out at an elite Coral Springs gym. I know, because I was watching Carole execute burpees in a neon orange outfit with a personal trainer. Exertion never showed on her face as she pulled the lat bar down, squatted under a bar, crunched, and planked. Think of a stocking over an egg, pulled taut.

While I drank my large cappuccino, and smoked Slims, I realized that Carole was the kind of woman who knew calm, who understood patience. She did not put her hand through a window and require sixteen stitches when she couldn't stop her brain buzzing. She did not knock out girls in Math who called her metal slut. She did not OD when her boyfriend stood her up. She was the kind of person who ground up glass and put it in your drink, or called her baby the same baby name you'd told her about in third grade. Carole was a zoster virus: she lay dormant and when you were weak, she'd attack you in some profound and crippling manner.

Carole emerged from the gym. The other day Carole had been driving Barbie's convertible, today she was in a sober VW Golf, steel gray. A family car. As she raised her keys to unlock her car, her crop top lifted to reveal a slice of unscarred, spray tanned six-pack. But something was eating Carole. It was in her posture, the angry knot of her shoulders. She lit a cigarette when she turned onto Main Street.

I kept about twenty feet and a few cars behind her and the tape turned over to the B-side of the Johnny tape – a bunch of religious and repentant tracks, post-June Carter. Like Johnny, the landscape around me was changing. The shopping strip

around the corner had all the usual Coral Spring necessities: cosmetologists, frozen yogurt eateries, and pet groomers, but they were blasted with graffiti and haunted by a murder of gangster dudes out front, aggressively chilling.

Carole pulled into a Taco Bell drive-through, where a litter of grubby children, prematurely pubescent due to food additives and hormones, loitered out the front. I could hear Carole bitch out the server for reading her order back wrong. Meth rage, maybe. I hoped the girl would spit in her soda, or enact some small revenge.

Carole smoked while her super-sized sodas and food were brought out by the girl in the drive-through and Carole drove away, burning rubber. There was enough food for two or three and wherever we were going would lead me to them. Somehow, I didn't think it was Mr. Ruffalo and Carole's small children.

I took a right onto Pelican Crescent. I had expected Carole to live in a soulless condo. Instead of glittering white pearlers and a neat Astroturf strip on the front, it was like watching a meth addict's teeth in rapid decline. A real estate wizard such as Carole would describe Pelican Crescent as downwardly mobile – and that was being generous. The paint on the semi-suburban bungalow was peeling and sagging with water damage. The wire fence around the premises added a kind of prison aesthetic. Many of the houses on the street were obviously derelict and boarded up, either because they were crack houses, meth labs, or shooting galleries – or to prevent it from happening. It was like the whole of the GFC had hit this pocket of Florida. Lauderdale Lakes was no Coral Palisades, that's for sure.

Carole locked the car and got out, looking around her. I watched her Florida orange derriere disappear into number three. I saw the figure of a man at the door. He was tall, in blue jeans, T-shirt tucked in like a narc. He took the bag. He grabbed Carole gruffly and shook her, the kind of way they do in cartoons; I pictured her teeth rattling. Despite my prehistoric dislike of Carole, I experienced a spasm of pity. I fought the urge to scream at him, to march out of my car and knock him to the pavement. Then I saw who it was. Steve Shearer.

He had either made me, or was expecting a tail, because he stood out of the house, grinning like Wiley Coyote. Steve wanted a fight. I continued to drive, as discreetly as I could in a flamingo-pink Cadillac.

Like Johnny, whose love for God was passionate and submissive, at times violent, I had a sense that Carole had it wicked bad for Steve Shearer. And it was taking her to bad places. Very literally.

I fished out the Tips-n-Toes card and called Lenny. He didn't strike me as a texter.

"Ms. Sloane? The lady writer, huh," he said and began to cough up phlegm.

"Hey Lenny," I said. I couldn't very well call him Mr. Tuna. "How've you been?"

"I'm keeping out of trouble. And you?"

"Not really."

He laughed.

"You get a tan yet?"

"No," I said. "But thanks for asking. Do you remember me saying that I was looking for my old acquaintance, Carole, who works for an agency called Ruffalo Realty Executives?"

"Huh, yeah. As I said, I know of the estate. There was a lot of talk about it in the papers. Those people got bad a reputation in Fort Lauderdale. People suing and what not."

"They've got another scam involving government subsidized housing ..."

I checked my satnav: Howard County. We were still in Lauderdale Lakes, but it came up as Coral Glades.

"I'm in Lauderdale Lakes. Pelican and Sunset. Those parts. A place called Coral Glades? Do you know anything about that?"

"Huh," he said again. It was a tic, not a question. "Coral Glades is bad medicine, pal. I got a buddy you could talk to though. He's the fuzz. Well, was. He owns a place in the Glades; got royally screwed. Name's Marvin Abelard. You find him at the Monkey Bar, Pompano Beach. He drinks."

"Oh, man, thank you Lenny," I said and he snorted in response and hung up. I made a vow to visit his girlfriend's salon and give them some business.

I went to Google Maps to look up the Monkey Bar and there was a glut of hateful messages:

*Fucken bitch, srsly.*

*I'm like, crying ☹*

*Sike (:*

*Can you just call me?*

*Please ♥♥♥*

Danny again. He must have thought it was '94 also, using slang like “sike.” I ignored Danny’s messages, filing them under D for Dread, and headed for the Monkey Bar, which was in a semi-industrial part of Pompano, with another sports bar opposite it, ominously titled Shenanigans. Both bars were badly reviewed and had two-star ratings. My favorite comment: *Bartender was drunk and belligerent. Nasty and dirty. Won't be going there again.*

Marvin Abelard was my kind of drunk, and the Monkey Bar, my kind of venue.

The day was so bright and dry it was serrated, so walking into the cool cavern of the sports bar, and the drink, made me feel nocturnal, normal even. There were no customers. A muscle-bound barman with Bruce Willis good looks, who probably did stunt work, wiped the bar with a cloth with the enthusiasm of the undead. He offered me discount Tex Mex food mechanically and walked away before I declined. Inexplicably, I ordered a screwdriver, my mom’s go-to party drink. I ordered a bowl of nuts. I tried to work out what game was on in the background, for common ground, but it was Fox Sports, baseball, minor league and I was out of my depth. I munched on salted peanuts and asked him about the neighborhood.

“I’m thinking of buying property,” I said, crossing and uncrossing my legs. I sipped the tea – it was basically vodka, with a splash of OJ.

He looked suddenly concerned and dubious.

“You aren’t from around here, so I’ll tell you. Pompano Beach is the worst town for crime. It makes Detroit look like Disneyland. DC even. Had a guy in here, picking his face up off the floor just before you walked in, left blood all over the ground. It’s in the skirting boards now.” He pointed into the gloom of the bar, over to a booth, at an old black man with white hair and a beer in front of him. “Even Marvin got stabbed on the way here one night.”

Marvin Abelard. My cop.

“Lotta crime,” I commented uselessly.

“Lotta crime, a lot of drugs, a lot of drinking,” he amended. “A lot of people out of work. Me, I live in LA now.” I guessed right – he was an out-of-work actor. Or extra. “Mom got sick. I’m out of here once she falls off the perch, so to speak.”

I waved at Marvin.

He frowned in reply.

“I’m actually hoping to chat to Mr. Abelard. I’m a journalist from New York,” I said. “I’m writing about the GFC and the property market.”

He shrugged off my lies, which sat between us, a house of cards.

“This place is gonna fold any day because of it,” he slid a second bowl of nuts over to me. “Take these over to Marvin, if you please. I like to keep him eating so he stays moderately sober. He drinks Pabst Blue Ribbon, and just so you know, he’s not super fond of strangers.”

I ordered a Pabst for Marvin and as I approached the booth I watched his bushy eyebrows converge, like caterpillars in a sex act. His beard was white, the scleras of his eyes were shocking white, but from the smell of liquor and the sad set of his mouth, I knew he was a drunk. He had something of my father in the mouth and the slight glaze in his eyes. Yet I knew he’d be able to walk out of here in a straight line.

He slid his wallet over to me. I frowned. “Open it,” he said, with the dropped vowels of the Deep South. I scanned his ID. His creds were there; he still carried them around.

“You’re a cop,” I said.

“Was,” he corrected me. “You got good instincts.”

“Actually, a man called Lenny Tuna told me to talk to you. He told me you were a cop. My dad was a detective. You work around here before you retire?” I realized Marvin Abelard was the kind of man I didn’t want to lie to.

“Actually, I got fired,” he mimicked me. “Because of this,” he tapped his near-empty bottle. “Yeah, in Miami. Got the wounds to prove it too. But I’m originally from Louisiana. What you want, girl?” he asked, suspicious. He necked the last of his beer and started on the fresh one I slid over to him.

“Mr. Abelard, I was wondering if you could tell me about Coral Glades?”

“Girl, I’m older than dirt, but I tell you this – I ain’t seen worse folk than them people out there at the Lauderdale Lakes. It was a mixed neighborhood, a few little businesses, lot of folk doing all right and then the GFC hit. Add some crack

pipes and crystal and then the neighborhood take a very bad turn. In '08, the government built an estate. It was called The Lakes. Like the Lake District or some shit." He paused for a chug.

"Excuse me, 2008," he continued. "Now it wasn't Coral Springs, not exactly Pompano, somewhere between. For low-income people, decent people though. I own a house there in Lakes with my wife who passed. Whoever stays in the property two years plus with solid rent can own it for a fraction of the cost. Then this bad crew with enough money to burn a wet mule decide that if they scare out the poor folk, then occupy the place, they own it. Get the blacks, Hispanics do their dirty work. Then they gonna bulldoze it and sell the land to overseas investors or something. There's a loophole in the law and they tried to pull the string loose," he explained.

"If it's who I think it is, they also deal in luxury housing. They sold a half-finished estate too, place called Coral Palisades," I said. "They're a white crew. Ruffalo Realty Executives. They built Coral Palisades."

"Yeah, well they mingling up with some shady people. I seen an older-looking dude, brown hair, ugly-assed mustache, in good shape. He's in business with the pretty blonde woman with a face that got run over with an iron." He held his fingers to his forehead and pulled it taut. Carole. "And he runs with a lady. She's badly burned. Her face is like a melted candle. Some locals call her Dyab."

"Is that Haitian?" I sipped my drink and winced

"Correct. For *devil*. And *the witch*. You see, she's got this eye that's totally white – the color of milk. Some superstitious folk said it gives her powers."

I sipped on my Molotov cocktail, wondering how Carole and Steve had roped a dyab into their tawdry ménage à trois – and where Ange fit into all of this. Unless.

"Could the witch be a woman named Ange Miller?"

"Could be. All I know is they lit up another place in Miami for insurance reasons; she got all barbecued up in it. Either way, they all scared of her and maybe that's what she wants."

He seemed to think for a minute.

"I still live there even though it's like living in Beirut. Not ten miles away, but I can't drink in my own neighborhood now.

"Are they dealing?"

"They brought the dealers in, but they I don't think they touch that. They just made the whole area a ghetto and turn a profit, don't get their own hands dirty." He

sucked in his breath. “But I ain’t scared of no one or nothing except my mama and God, and my mama’s passed away. I gotta piss so bad my eyeballs are floating,” he clucked. “Excuse me,” he added, giving me a little gentlemanly bow as he loped off to the men’s room. He came back seeming almost sober, as I swallowed the remainders of my drink.

“Give me that cell of yours,” he said. “I don’t have one, incidentally. They’re the instrument of the devil.”

The devil was a multi-instrumentalist, clearly. Wordlessly, I slid it across and I watched him punch numbers into the phone, from memory. His voice changed. His face changed.

“Ariana? Marv here. Yes, I’m alive and well, girl. So, I got a question about a title. I got a property in the Lauderdale Lakes Estate. Yeah. I know. I bought it in 2001. Now I ain’t got a pot to piss in – or a window to throw it out of,” he laughed. “I gotta know who owns number three and four. Their sewage all up on my property. It’s a hazard. I know. I know. That’s why I’m ever so grateful,” he crooned. Marvin looked at me expectantly. I took out a pen and paper and he made a gesture with his hand. A cigarette. I lit one for him and me.

“I’d be real grateful,” he repeated. “Uh huh, uh.” He scribbled something down. He hung up, with a triumphant expression.

“A company called Shearer Inc. owns it. Sound familiar? A Steven Gerard Shearer. That the dude with the’tache?”

“Yeah. He lives out in the Palisades. I’m going to visit him after this.”

“No one lives in the Palisades, girl. It’s a bad Hollywood set.”

He handed me the paper.

“No power out there, even. This is the address of the registree.”

I read it aloud: “1005 Cable Grove Road, Beatrice.”

“That’s one itty bitty town. It’s got barely a hundred people in it, from memory. Howard County. If there’s an op, I’m guessing they run it from up there or The Lakes, but there’s a lot of heat up there – smarter to go out to Beatrice. Deliverance country, you know?” Marvin mimicked a banjo.

“Is that the Everglades?”

I saw dark shapes on the water. I shuddered.

“Sure is. Don’t go out there alone, you hear?” Marvin said sternly.

“I’m not an idiot. I’m going to the Palisades Estate, see it for myself. Shearer is there, I’m telling you.”

“Well, if he is, he’s eating cold beans and shitting in a bucket. Wait,” he said to me as I peeled myself out of the booth.

He passed me a coaster.

“My home phone number.” I made out his full name, *Marvin J. Abelard*, written in a spidery hand.

“Call me. You get me there or the bar,” he said. “There ain’t nowhere else for me to go to.” On the street outside the Monkey Bar, a young family were walking, the mother and father hitting each other while the toddlers and older children recoiled and huddled. I watched the adults fall to the ground, fighting. Even the youngest child, an infant being held by a toddler in the same way a kid carries a cat, looked disgusted. I wondered if I should intervene, then the adults picked themselves up and carried on walking, kissing now, carrying open beers. Once in the car, I turned over the coaster in clammy hands. I typed Steve’s HQ address in Google Maps but I couldn’t find it. I tried different spellings – but I kept getting an error message. *No address found*. Maybe this was another cipher, another game. I instinctively trusted Marvin. I didn’t believe he’d mislead me for any reason. This place was just totally off the grid. Maybe it was a second residence, a hideout.

I counted the casualties in the story so far on my bitten-down fingers: Ricky Hell and Cooper Deane murdered; Cormac O’Malley OD’d, maybe suicided. Marion O’Malley dead, under suspicious circumstances. Aisling was a basket case. Steve Shearer was potentially a serial killer and a property mogul. Ange was a burns victim and a religious imposter, who dabbled in property fraud. Carole, a teen murderess and a Lolita, was now in the deep end with both the Glades and the Palisades. Danny had become a psycho stalker and a wife beater – I’d seen those daytime sunglasses, the shadows of bruising under Gina’s eyes.

And me, well – time would tell.

I forwarded the latest installments to Denise and the information about Coral Glades and Marvin’s intel on Shearer.

She called me.

“Steve and Carole are involved in low-income property scams, houses. In Lauderdale Lakes. And they set a place on fire for insurance money. And the dyab or the witch is Ange Miller, I think.”

“Great, but like, do you have proof?”

“Not yet. Well, some. Shearer Inc., Ruffalo Real Estate; it’s all public knowledge. I’ve just got to join the dots.”

“Look, this is very, very juicy, babe, albeit fucked up and twisted, but honestly, not really our business. You’re not a cop, Sloane. This is a brief and you’re after the Andre Villiers story. Anything extra is just garnish. I’m not sure I’d buy what Aisling’s selling. Just stay safe: Shearer is bad news. Wait, where are you heading now? And uh, are you drunk?”

“Coral Palisades. Maybe a little,” I muttered and hung up.

From my vantage point of the gated entrance, in the half-light of dusk, Coral Palisades looked like a dreamy provincial French village – after a light earthquake. The sign showed that the gated community consisted of several streets, all with Gallic names. While it was close to eighty degrees, a bulk of gray storm clouds had muscled into the blue sky. The air smelled of metal and electricity; Johnny was warping on the tape. I had a Wendy’s cup that was half seltzer, half whiskey. It was maybe a bad idea, but if I didn’t move on Shearer now, I’d lose my nerve. As it was, my Dutch courage surged and lurched. I was feeling ill; a headache hammered away softly behind my eyes. Idling at the security gate, I got out some Advil and Mentos from the glove. Denise was calling me. I ignored it, instead examining the cut on my finger. Deep, annoying, but it didn’t need stitches. Denise texted me:

*Erin, I’m not so sure about this. You seem, like, not okay.*

*At Palisades now. I’m okay E X*

## Chapter 19

A white security guard with a crew cut emerged from the booth: five foot nothing, built like a pit bull. He had a bad teenage mustache that looked more like milk scum above the duck bill of his mouth. Tracks were shaved into the sides of his cranium, but I was too busy reading his body – the prison tattoos on his neck, forehead, and forearm – the readily identifiable Iron Cross, the numbers 14, 88. Everyone knew the Iron Cross was an Aryan Brotherhood symbol. While I couldn't remember what 14 meant, I knew 88 was code for Heil Hitler. Ricky taught me that – he'd been to juvie. It must have been where he got his stick-and-poke 666.

I thought about the box cutter I kept in my purse, the mace on my key ring; I hugged my pocketbook to me, like a baby.

“Hi,” I said, grabbing my press card out of my purse.

“Wait a minute, girl.”

“Steve Shearer and Ange *Miller*?” I said. She could be Shearer now, if they were married, but Miller was a very Jewish name, so I thought I'd see what his reaction was. The guard didn't look perturbed. He didn't look much like anything. A pot plant was more expressive. “He's expecting me.”

“That right?” he said, finally showing. “What business does he have with you, Morticia Addams?”

“What do you think?” I said. “*Business*.”

“Whatever. But first, I gotta frisk you.” Then he smiled. It was like a spider crawling across his face.

“Feel free to search the car,” I said, getting out of my seat, “And my bag. But don't touch me, dude.”

He dumped my pocketbook on the ground, confiscating my weapons, my phone, shaking his head. Then he frisked me. I gritted my teeth and tolerated the patting down, looked at the tattooed knuckles, the tattooed hands, wishing at the very least I had my phone in my hand. I could smell his cheap deodorant, the fried chicken he'd eaten.

A red Jeep Cherokee pulled up. There was one man in the front seat. Steve Shearer wore bad mirrored cop sunglasses and a cap and I could see that even though he'd shaved off the beard and had just had a handlebar mustache – which Marvin

was right to ridicule – he couldn't lose the biker-dude vibe. He was all puffed up on the gym, but thinned out in the face from drugs. I noticed a tribal tattoo sneaking out of his sleeve and thought of the Confederate flag *Resident Alien* alleged he had tattooed on his body. *Patriot*, it read.

“Any recording devices?” Steve called out from the driver's seat.

“Not that I can see,” the guard said.

“Leave it then,” he told him.

“Hey. Look at me,” Steve said, snapping his fingers. He used his left hand. I looked at him.

“You wanna see inside? Follow me,” he said.

“Are you taking me on a tour of the estate?” I asked.

The security guard stared at Steve and then me. Conspiracy passed between them. Steve Shearer was a void of a man, even if his stature and manner exuded menace. This was the man who had killed one of the only humans I had loved. I saw nothing in his eyes – no cruelty, no kindness, no compassion either.

“I know who you are. You're RP Sloane's kid.”

“My editor knows where I am,” I said.

“But do you know where you are?” he asked, raising his Magnum P.I. eyebrows. I wanted to tell him he looked like the cop from the Village People.

“Like, literally or existentially?” I said.

“Get in the fuckin' car,” he snapped.

And despite the screaming warning that arose from within and the furious buzzing of my phone, which was on the ground, surely Denise texting, calling me, I did it.

We all looked at the device but the guard was quick; he collected the phone and my lipstick, picked up a few more dangerous items (the mace, box cutter), and threw my bag and the items unceremoniously into the Caddy. Then he went back to his little box and pressed a buzzer. Steve Shearer and I were let through the wrought iron gate and down a palm-tree-dotted Clairfontaine Bend. There was a lot of cultural and geographical confusion going on here at Coral Palisades – to my left, there was a small park with Astroturf and a mini windmill in the Dutch style. To my right, like a ring of teeth, the gleaming, half-constructed veneers of pre-paid mansions that were attempting to look like Versailles. There were a few vehicles in the long winding driveways, but mostly the smallish estate homes were completely barren. It was

eerily quiet. Steve and I pulled up to number six, an ivory mansion with an obscene fountain out the front that wasn't even functioning. It was day time, so none of the Victorian streetlamps would be on, obviously, but none of the houses, including Steve's, had lights on.

"Steve, do you actually live here?"

"What?" he spat.

"I know Carole said she sold you this place and you use it as a formal address, but I know you're a lottery winner. You've got other shit going on. This is, like, a ghost estate." I gestured around the mile-long circle of mansions, half-constructed. Marvin was right – no one would live out here, unless they were desperate. And Steve was not.

"We sold a dream and they bought it. So what?" he said almost cheerfully. Underneath his Fahrenheit, old sweat and tobacco.

"Did Mona Byrnes buy it too?"

"Who's that?" Steve winked at me.

"No, she's in on it too," I said, more to myself.

He said nothing, just breathed through his nose. He tried a new angle. "Look, I'm just a simple guy. I just believe in my country and my right to bear arms."

"And money," I added. I simply couldn't resist. But Steve seemed to be tickled by the comment.

"Yeah. What did that guy say in that movie, *Wall Street*? 'Greed is good.' Yeah, boy."

"But something went wrong along the way, right? Did you know someone knocked off Mona Byrnes's dogs?"

"What a pity. I like dogs. They're the best kind of people. Christ, but you do remind me of RP. You're actually not as dumb as you look." Steve studied my face.

"Thanks."

"But not as smart as you think you are," he said and then he hit me, square in the nose, but as he did, I instinctively turned. Part of his class ring caught my eyelid, but at least my nose wasn't broken. He grabbed a fistful of my hair in his hand, winding it around the knuckles.

"I don't really like hitting women," he began.

*And yet you just did.*

"But I don't like a smart mouth making accusations."

Because he still had my hair in his hand, because my right eye was throbbing and my cheekbone, too – I decided to not be cute. Steve didn't like cute. I thought of Aisling and Cormac. Steve Shearer was like Danny, a dangerous bully. I had excised Danny, but never exorcised him. I had never gotten even with him. Now was my chance. Judging by the texts, Danny was clearly worried about what the past might uncover. Steve was, too. Why would he have his guard on site and risk beating me up?

“Listen, Steve, whatever Ruffalo Real Estate are into, the Palisades, or whatever's going on in Lauderdale Lakes, I really don't care. Even if Mona Byrnes is involved. And my dad somehow. I'm just nosey by profession. I just want to know one thing – it's for the story. Why did he have to die?”

He relaxed his grip on my hair.

“That spic, Hernandez?” he asked, almost incredulous.

“No, I know why Ricky had to die. He saw you shoot Franklin Rivera and Cooper Deane in cold blood. I'm guessing that you found out your distributor was a narc. I'm also guessing that Mona is – was – dirty, that she sold him out. But what I don't understand is Andre Villiers.”

“Huh? Get outta here with that shit. That's ancient history. That's *folklore*. Why do you think those kids wanted Villiers dead? Because of what, Satan?”

“I thought maybe he was he onto you and Ricky.”

“Get the fuck outta here. Read my lips: Villiers was a freak with a brain the size of a pea. The only thing he was onto was a Cabbage Patch doll. He hurt Libby Jenkins.”

“What?” I said.

“He fucked with a lot of little girls. Maybe he even fucked with Hernandez's sister. RP met with Hernandez that night, right?”

*Right.*

“So maybe your old man told him that to get rid of Andre ... who knows? All I know is, when I got there all the kids had beaten him half to death and Hernandez was outta his mind. I put him down. Do I regret it? Nope,” he finished his own sentence.

“I don't know,” I said. “Why would my father have told Ricky about Julie? That seems very irresponsible. Like, for a cop. Unless he had some reason to want him dead.”

“Andre ever meet your sister? Come 'round to the house with your degenerate buddies?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your little sister ... whatsername.”

*Michelle. Shelly.*

“If he touched Michelle, RP would have ended him,” I said.

“Really? Did he love you guys that much, you think? 'Cause rumor had it, Sloane took a lot of money from an unknown source to keep quiet about some kids going missing.”

“He wouldn't have done that,” I said.

“The guy was a fall-down-drunk bum, doing blow every day.”

*Look who's talking.*

“He had gambling debts up the wazoo. He was sleeping with his partner. Do you think he was the paragon of virtue?”

Paragon was a big word for Steve.

“No,” I said slowly. “But he was old school. Old-school guys get even themselves. He wouldn't get Ricky to take out his trash.”

“You believe whatever you want to believe, I don't give a shit,” he said, reaching into the glove compartment, taking out some cigarettes.

He broke one and put it back in the box.

*Okay.*

“I smoke when I want to. I enjoy it. Right now, I don't. That's how I roll. I do a hundred push-ups a day.” Maybe he did back in '94 – he still looked beefy and strong, but there was a paunch there. Steve Shearer was either still a cokehead or it had thrown his brain into a loop. Either way, aggression was emanating from him in near-visible waves. “You're soft. You got no self-control, like RP. I can tell. You reek of it,” he continued.

“Where's Angela Miller? And how is Mona involved in this? If she has a piece of the pie and my dad is such a piece of shit, why not get him into it too? He likes to earn, too, you're saying,” I said, calming my voice, refusing to take the bait.

“Bitch, you and your vegetable father got nothing and no one and if you print any of this, or you mention Ange, or try come near any of us, I'll take that knife from your purse, and I'll cut your fucking voice box out and feed it to him. And I won't stop there. You fuckin' ax wound,” he said, shaking his head. “You make me sick.”

“I understand,” I said. I did. Killing men was business. Andre maybe who had killed kids, who choked women; Danny who carved them up and hated himself for it – they were minor league. Steve Shearer would smile as he strangled the life out of me. He killed for material gain and convenience, but there was pleasure in it – now, I could see it.

“I’m not interested in writing this anymore. I’ll just can the story. I only took it to know what happened that night. I never believed it was Ricky, you know?” I was bargaining, but I really believed it in the moment.

“You think I’ll buy that?” he said. “You won’t quit, I know your type. You and RP. Like little terriers.”

“Dogs are the best people,” I managed and Steve smiled.

“Oh, what now?” Steve released the grip on my hair. My scalp throbbed. My cheeks burned. My hair was in his knuckles. The security guard was coming up to the Jeep, had walked the quarter mile on foot. He leaned into Steve’s window, breathing heavily. He had my phone in his hand, my pocket book. There was a crack in the screen, the fucker.

“Cops are here. Behind me,” he said to Steve.

“Must have been my editor. She called them,” I said to Steve.

“They’re driving through.” The security guard looked nervous.

“Give her the pocketbook,” Steve said. “Pass it through.”

The guard handed it to Steve and made a face at me.

“I’m not going to say anything,” I said to Steve.

“Well, you better not. ’Cause I know where you live.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, as I clambered out of the Jeep.

“You’ve got balls,” Steve said, with no admiration whatsoever in his voice.

“But you won’t, not if you touch me again,” I said, ducking in anticipation of another blow. I didn’t get one.

As the cop car drove slowly toward us, I raised my hands in surrender.

“I’m all right, officers,” I said loudly. Florida cops – shoot first, ask questions later.

The two cops got out of the vehicle slowly. They were uniform; one black older cop, one white younger cop; one fat, one thin. They looked like extras on *Miami CSI*.

“Can I see a badge?” I called out.

“Can you shut the fuck up?” the white cop replied. “We heard someone was disturbing the peace,” he said, looking at Steve.

I shook my head.

“License and registration,” the black cop said, not to Steve, but me – the woman with the bleeding face, the obvious victim of an assault. Crooked fucking cops. I fished into my purse, saying nothing.

“You been drinking?” he continued, staring me down.

Again, I said nothing.

“You’re from out of state. You are poking around in things that ain’t your business. Why don’t you walk out of here, get in that ugly-assed pink Caddy and get the fuck out of Florida State by morning? Sound good?” The black cop thrust my license back at me.

I just nodded.

The whole time I walked back to the car, I expected a bullet in my back, and when it didn’t come, I sat in my car and shook. Then I hit the dash. Hard.

My phone screen was cracked, but still functioning.

I called Denise.

“Erin, are you okay?”

“Well, thanks to you, I am. Although the cops out here seem to be on Shearer’s payroll,” I said.

“Uh, come again?” she said.

“You didn’t call them.”

“No, what cops?”

“It was a trick. That fucking prick.”

“Who? Steve Shearer?”

Steve Shearer was good. He wanted to fuck with my head. He could have me killed or arrested. He could do it by the book or in a dark alley, but he wanted to let me know he could fuck me up, good and proper.

“I’m worried, Sloane. You don’t sound good. And it doesn’t sound very safe. What did Steve Shearer do?”

“He punched me, then he called the cops, who actually threatened me.”

“What?”

“They let me drive with one busted eye, half plastered. They knew who Steve was and they just wanted to intimidate me. They were, like, hired goons.”

“Do you need the hospital?”

I looked in the side mirror. My cheekbone felt tender, but it didn't appear fractured or broken. The left side of my face, including my swollen-shut eye, was the color of mincemeat. Through the slit I could see there was a little blood in the iris. My vision appeared unaffected, but it was going to be a bad shiner in the morning.

“I'm okay. Nothing's broken.”

“All right, I'm booking a flight back for you. Lay low, pack, and then get your ass home, pronto.”

## Chapter 20

Back at the hotel I got ice from my favorite bellboy and applied it to my face. According to Google, blood in the iris was common with a blow to the eye; it was called a hyphema. There was nothing really to do, except swallow a few Advil. I put a Band Aid on my finger and headed back into the pool area. If I didn't put my head under, I could swim off Steve Shearer, the daytime booze headache, the throbbing pain in my face. I checked my email and saw Denise had sent me a message entitled Red Eye, which was kind of funny – the flight left at 5:00 a.m., so I could technically still head out to Beatrice.

Twin girls around four or five who looked like they were wearing makeup were splashing in the water with their mom, who had cornrows, drawn on, pencil-thin eyebrows, and a semiautomatic tattooed onto her shoulder blade. All three wore matching stars-and-stripes bikinis. I entered the pool via the deep end. One of the little girls stared at me, slack-jawed.

I began a series of furious laps, enjoying the sting from the chlorine and the burn of my muscles as I tore through the water, cupping my hands, using my feet like fins. I had been swimming away rage and pain since I was a preteen. I'd been quite the competitor even: butterfly, breast stroke – that is, until Danny Quinlan-Walsh happened. All thought was obliterated in my frenzy; my right hamstring seized, my lungs burned in a sensation not too dissimilar to a nicotine craving, and as I was rolling into my twentieth lap at the left side of the pool, I heard Carole – she was smoothly negotiating a pair of banana loungers at the left side of the pool. One was in the sun, which she took. She placed a Chloé bag on the second lounge to claim it – which was game of her, given the clientele. I followed the line of her reclining body. Two coral-pink stilettos were attached to a pair of legs that resembled waxed, inverted chicken drumsticks; they ballooned at the ankle and became dangerously slender, bruised.

Carole Jenkins née Carole Ruffalo draped herself like an artist's model on the lounge, only she was clothed in a marmalade and lilac-colored sixties-inspired mini and matching box-cut jacket, with detailed piping on the lapels. I'd seen this look on the latest cover of *Vogue* (Mulberry, pre-fall fashion). Panting and chlorinated, wrung out like Aisling's proverbial dishcloth, I clung to the side of the pool and then

hoisted myself up and walked over to Carole, who sat dry as saltine and equally tasteless. She attempted to crinkle her nose at me as I accidentally-on-purpose splashed her.

“Classy place,” she commented as the cornrowed mom lit up what smelled like a doobie. It seemed like it was suddenly happy hour at the White Sands. Floodlights illuminated the pool area; there was a growing chatter of Spanish-speaking bar staff, an amiable soundtrack of rattling ice and laughter as they prepared strong, cheap cocktails for the gringo guests.

“Yikes,” she said. “What happened to you?”

“Steve Shearer. But you already know that, right?”

“Dry off and let’s have a drink and a little chat,” she said without moving her lips.

I don’t know if Carole possessed a sense of humor, or if I was projecting, but when I returned from the cabana, where I’d changed, she’d ordered two Long Island iced teas.

“The only problem with living in Florida is all the spics,” she said conversationally.

*Lovely*, Mona’s voice deadpanned in my head. I had my phone on record, so I could play this to her clients, some of whom, I’m sure, were rich Cubans.

Carole had relaxed enough to kick off her heels. I had wrapped a towel around my hair, and under another I’d slunk out of the swimsuit and into my American Apparel sweatsuit. I sat next to her, knees to my chest. The waiter brought the drinks over to us, gator-green eyes fixed on Carole, looking both cowed and lustful. I slapped down some singles that were a bit damp and he scowled at me and cursed. Carole waved him away.

“So, Carole,” I said, arranging my limbs on the banana lounge and sitting on my fists, so I wouldn’t slap her. I watched her drink from her iced tea before deciding to swap them when she wasn’t looking. I wouldn’t put anything past her. “What about you Steve and Mona and Coral Palisades? Mona Byrnes is an investor, or was. Things went sour, clearly.”

Out of the corner of my eye, the cornrowed mom clambered up to a banana lounge a few feet away from us, lighting a cigarette. The same waiter brought her a weak-looking piña colada.

“Mona Byrnes?”

“We’ve been through this, Carole.”

The little girls splashed each other. One girl shouted that she was fixing to fuck the other up. Although they seemed able to manage adult content, they were a few feet away, so I kept my voice down.

She scanned the banana lounge and looked at me knowingly. Mona all over again. I wasn’t about to strip in the White Sands pool area.

“I’m not wired,” I said.

“Wouldn’t trust you as far as I could throw you,” she said.

“Likewise, babe.”

We sat locked in a hateful contest of eye contact. That is to say, I radiated hate and received nothing in return. Any animation, curiosity, any playfulness had been crushed by drugs, by bad men, by life. I thought of the light coming through stained glass of St. Mary’s church, my mother’s collection of Murano glass from Venice, the Lido glasses in the kitchen – the beauty emanated from the one-dimensionality of the glass, the color itself. I unzipped my hoodie, revealing a supportive Cross-My-Heart bra, the midnight-blue color a nice contrast to the raspberry-and-white scar tissue on my chest.

One of two little girls had been watching, picking at her nose, teasing her sister who was trying to liberate herself from a stars-and-stripes wedgie. Her face crumpled like she was going to cry. Maybe she wasn’t so tough. I mouthed “sorry” at her.

I pulled down the sweatpants, revealing matching underwear, no visible scars.

“I’m not a rat, Carole,” I said, sipping the tea, which was all bottom-shelf spirits. I could taste Hawaiian Punch. Carole followed suit and winced. Then she turned her phone on; Mariah Carey’s ‘Dream Lover’ played loudly. She was trying to drown out any recording I may have been undertaking. I knew then: Carole wasn’t entirely stupid and she wasn’t really a metal fan.

“Have you seen Danny since ’94?”

“That loser. Please. He nev-a even got off the Island. Look, I never think about that place, those people. Mona Byrnes is a client. She invested. She lost out. Maybe she’s bitter. But whatever.”

She kicked off her heels and I was shocked to note her toes were unpedicured, gnarled looking.

“Aisling O’Malley told me that you and Steve were lovers back in the day. That you and Steve and Ange are into some criminally bad shit. Property scams, fraud, you know – the American dream.”

“Oh yeah,” Carole crunched on her ice, her expression completely blank. “I’m a businesswoman. Like, what’s in all that for me?” Carole’s Southern Peach had bled out, revealing more train-tracks-rat-Newport. It came out like: “Faw-mee.”

“Steve. The meth.”

She threw a look that was so disdainful it was nearly embarrassing.

“Drugs are ghetto. I’m not into anything like that. If Steve and Ange are involved in something nasty, that’s their funeral.”

“I don’t believe you, Carole. You’re a threesome of sorts, aren’t you? Or maybe you’re, like, just the third wheel?”

That was a low blow, but I had to try and divide and conquer, tug at Carole’s insecurity. Guilting her wouldn’t work. The only weak spot in Carole was Steve. He clearly had a hold on her; she’d been somehow spellbound by this second-rate fake-father-figure Lothario since age sixteen. And from our encounter, Steve seemed on the edge of reason. Carole was too hard to read for me to really judge, but I knew that she was using. Money was a buffer against the heavy and fast erosion of meth – there was the purchased gloss and shine of health from IV vitamin treatments; teeth could be capped, pits and cracks in the skin covered. Paranoia, hallucinations, and going clinically nuts – well, there was no insurance policy, no way to buy your way out of that.

“I think Steve killed his partner for Ange, to like, be with her. Imagine a man loving you so much he killed for you,” I was starting to sound like Aisling O’Malley, a second-rate romance writer – I was sure it wasn’t true, but it sounded good. “That’s what got Ricky involved in Newport in the first place,” I continued.

“You’re coming off crazy, Eerie. I mean, I heard stories that you were all fucked up because of what happened with your dad killing your mom and sister like that, but I didn’t realize you’d gone totally nuts. Steve and me together? Steve, like, murdering Ricky because the kid was working with Nassau County narco? Look, just know this. If you keep scratching away at the past, there’s going to be a problem. It’s defamation, you saying that Steve assassinated Ricky or he ordered it. And your poking around the Palisades, hating on my business practice. That impacts *me* personally.” Carole cracked her jaw.

“Don’t forget The Lakes,” I added. “You three will go down. And you won’t be with Steve. You and Ange will be in prison playing gyno with Aileen Wurnos or something for the next twenty years.”

“She fried.” Carole snapped her umbrella in two.

I knew that, of course.

“All this is really about Ricky Hell, right? You’re not really going after us.”

“Right. Like I said to Steve, I’m not interested in any of that,” I lied. “I was just being nosey. It’s my job to be a snoop.”

“I mean, *if* I know anything about anything that even matters. That’s why I’m here – I’ll answer your stupid questions if you back off.” Carole’s hair had been straightened, so it sat, sleek and severe at her shoulders, if I grabbed it, as I might need to. I’d had enough fights in high schools to identify biters and hair pullers – once they locked in, you had to grab back.

“Look, Andre Villiers was a very bad kid. A rotten apple. This story ... is about him, right? My sister Libby ...” she began and took a drink. I watched her trachea bob up and down and then I realized she was on the verge of tears. She was (spontaneously, genuinely?) emoting.

“Your sister Libby,” I prompted her. “Andre hurt her?”

She drank noisily and lit a cigarette. I had touched a nerve. “And Julie H. I was told by Libby and Libby and Julie’s best friend, Jamie, and a few other little girls, all in elementary school. He choked me, as you probably know – it was in my book. Linda Bauer said he raped her, but like Danny said, you can’t rape a girl like Linda.”

Black spots began to swim before my eyes. I wanted to punch Carole out for what she just said, but also the phrase *He choked me* made me breathless, in a kind of body memory way; I felt his hangnail, his big thumbs, the tomato soup and weed on his breath.

“He hurt little animals. Danny and I, Mac, we all thought we’d teach him a lesson. It just got outta hand. We were in the woods, getting stoned in the back of the truck. We were all on mushrooms, so like, it’s jumpy, my memory, you know? Ricky was there, he left for a while. It was me and the other boys, drinking beers and kind of talking about it and then it was like we all knew and we all decided at once.”

Group consciousness, she meant – collective consciousness. Carole sipped her drink. The sun was setting. The Florida sky turned into a pink, bile, and yolk–

colored bruise. More people were moving outside, laughter, Seals and Crofts' "Summer Breeze" had moved into Phil Collins's "Easy Lover"; Carole's phone continued with contemporary pop, moving into what the screen told me was a band called Matchbox Twenty's "3 a.m."

"Danny, of course, planted the idea," she said, without blinking. "Cormac hit Andre, which was a surprise. I kicked him. But that was after."

"There was a discussion?" I lit a cigarette and offered her one. She just stared at me.

"Not exactly. We just all knew. We'd talked about it, all of us, like all the time over summer. Like, me and Danny, Mac, we were like, let's kill him. Let's end him. It wasn't serious at first, it was like he was annoying ..."

I winced and finished my drink. Carole looked at her nails and grimaced. Then she took the cigarette.

"But then Libby came home and told me what that pig did to her. I told the guys, the guys were like, fuck it, let's do it. We started to play a truth or dare game, so that ..."

"Someone would dare you to kiss him," I suggested. I felt sick.

"Actually, it was the other way around. He pinned me up against the truck," Carole drained her drink. The waiter set down the drinks. I handed over a heap of soggy singles so that he wouldn't interrupt Carole's confession. She went quiet for a minute.

"Carole, this is not on tape. It's not even on the record," I lied. I just wanted to know if Ricky had been the one to "batter up," as Danny reported he had in court. I wanted those gruff, tobacco-colored hands free of dirt and blood. I noticed that Carole had not said Ricky's name once, when she talked about that night.

"The truth is that he came from behind. Cormac," Carole amended.

"Cormac went in first?" I didn't hide my surprise. Cormac seemed so gentle – with his New Romantic bangs and comic books.

"And you were underneath Andre?" I guessed.

Carole paled under her tan.

"He was like a dog with rabies, foaming at the mouth. He was licking my neck, had one hand here," she gestured to her breast. "Had my panties down in seconds and I'm like, panicked, thinking ... this is it."

"Danny and Cormac ..."

“They didn’t need no excuse. They ...” She hesitated. “We hated him.”

“You ran away next,” I prompted her.

“I called Steve. He was going to like rape me, Eerie.”

I nodded. This part I believed. Andre was a bad dude. I didn’t believe in an eye for an eye, but his death would not keep me awake at night.

“The whole Satan angle was all the media’s fault. And Steve told Danny the way to plead, to get less time.”

Sort of what Steve had said.

“Less time killing for kicks as opposed to vigilante justice?” I asked her, incredulous.

She shrugged.

“We shoulda said that. But the books, movie deals, all that. It was ...”

“Lucrative. Satan sells,” I concluded. “Thing is – that phone booth was quite far from the spot. As far as I know, you never did track at Roosevelt. Plus, it sounds like you were in no shape to do anything like that.”

Someone who was athletic – Danny? Was he dealing for Steve too? Did he want to get rid of Ricky and not just because of me?

“I think Steve had been coaching you all summer. I think he was in your ear. He wanted Ricky removed and Andre was a really great way to achieve that. Who swung first?” I said. “You got him on the ground and wailed on him and Danny joined in. I know Danny. He’s a sadist but he’s also a fucking coward. He needed a leader.”

“You’re wrong,” she said, but she was smiling.

“You didn’t care about Cormac at all, did you? You left him there.”

“Mac hit Andre, his choice,” she retorted.

“I think someone told Steve about Ricky being a narc and he came down and executed him.”

“When I came back, Mac was crying and shaking. Danny was like, covered in blood and ... stuff. Like head to toe. He’d gone in and just wailed on him.”

“And where was Ricky?” I asked.

“Ricky? He was like, barfing,” she said. Something like disappointment came over her face. She ground out her cigarette. “Maneater” by Hall and Oates came on. I lit another cigarette.

“Ricky didn’t touch Andre. Mac said he went white as a ghost and started shaking all over when they were beating on him. He threw up. But Danny was like smiling and laughing. He asked Ricky to turn up the music. Then Steve pulled up in his Jeep and went over to Ricky. I was on PCP. Shrooms. I heard a gunshot. I just ran, didn’t even wait for him – Mac, I mean.”

“Why didn’t anyone stop Steve? Did you just watch him kill Ricky? Did you hate him or something?” I closed my eyes thinking of Ricky, white-faced, shaking, knowing that something terrible was going down, again.

“I saw Steve go over to him, Andre I mean, and he started to yell. I ran. I don’t know. I don’t know about the others. I was trippin’ out, crying, scared.”

Part of me wanted knock her brains out with a bat, but the problem was I felt sorry for her. Groomed by Steve Shearer, assaulted by Andre, watched a kid get his brains beat in, and her (probably gay) boyfriend goes bananas. Even at sixteen, Carole was a nasty piece of work, but no one deserved that.

“It wasn’t about Ricky. It was to save Mac,” she said, baby blues welling with tears. “Mac hit Andre first. If Ricky told on him, then he would probably get the death penalty. The story was Ricky did it and we were accessories only, scared of Ricky’s power or, like, under it. Steve came in and put Ricky down – stopped him.” Carole even used the same words as Steve. *Put him down*, like a dog. She’d swallowed the story herself. All those kids – Danny, Cormac, they’d all celebrated the violent spectacle; they’d cheered for Andre’s slow death, maybe Ricky’s too, like Romans at the Colosseum.

New York State did not have the death penalty until ’95, when lethal injection came back in vogue and was then rescinded again in 2007. I knew this, most people knew this, but again, Carole was trying to play me for a fool. Just like Mona. I remembered the picture-in-Ricky’s-glove compartment line she fed me.

“Is that what Steve said?” I injected sympathy into my tone.

“Yeah,” she said, draining her cocktail. The gurgling sounds at the end were like a death rattle.

Carole stretched and reached over me to get my cigarettes. The movement was liquid, sensual.

“Look, Ricky didn’t suffer, all right? It was real fast.”

It seemed that the temperature had dropped from the early seventies to the late fifties in a matter of minutes while we drank in the balmy, frangipani and

chlorine-scented air. A javelin of lightning had been hurled through the sky, which in the day had been titan white cumulus clouds and now was an ominous mob of muscular charcoal-gray shapes.

“I thought you’d run off by then,” I said and Carole just smiled. She picked up her jacket and I spotted the label. Turns out she was rolling in it and I had a poorly trained eye. She stood up, as if to leave. I had been watching her smoking and drinking for the last hour. Carole was right-handed. Steve was ambidextrous. He hit me with his right, but used his left for driving and pulling hair. I had less than a shadow of doubt that it was Steve.

“I heard that it was quick.”

“Right.”

I didn’t know what to believe anymore. At least I knew Ricky hadn’t incited or participated.

“How long have you and Steve been together? This whole time? How do you feel about Ange?”

“I feel good. You’re planning on coming out to Beatrice to meet her, right? I’ll make it easy on you. Why don’t you just follow me in that ugly pink Caddy?” she said, pausing by the poolside.

The two little girls had recovered and were like drowned rats, performing an elaborate cheer, while their frazzled mom looked on.

“I don’t usually drink and drive,” I lied.

“This is Florida. I’ll wait in the parking lot. You got ten minutes. By the looks of it, you probably take that long to get ready.”

She turned as if it was an afterthought.

“Stay close behind – it’s not on the grid. No GPS.”

In the lobby of the White Sands, “Crocodile Rock” was playing. I watched the cornrow mom arguing with her two soaking wet kids, pink with tears and tantrums. She yanked hard on one girl’s arm and the other child let out an ambulance wail, as if the injury had been done to her. Twins, I realized.

“Oh Lord, is there gonna be a hurricane?” the cornrow woman asked the short Spanish bartender with the apple-green eyes, who was now at the front desk.

She wasn't from here, I realized. She was Southern – a Texan maybe – from some arid, unyclonic state. I read her T-shirt as I got closer – it said *Pornstar*.

“It's just a cluster storm,” he replied. “We at the end of the season, ma'am.”

“What's that?” she asked, mouth hanging open.

My dad, the autodidact (he couldn't even pronounce the word), had told me all about multicelled storms.

“It's when a group of cells move as a single unit, sort of like a gang. Each cell is a different stage of its thunderstorm life cycle and gets a chance at being the being the gang leader. The younger cells tend to become the upwind, the western or southwestern edge of the cluster, and the older guys go to the center. This one's on the way out; the older guys are on the downwind, east or northeast,” I said.

The cornrow woman and the Spanish bartender stared at me.

“It's not a hurricane,” I repeated and went toward my room. I changed out of my sweat suit, into jeans. I slid my cell and credit card into my pocket. I put on Chuck Taylors and a light jacket, braided my hair tight, put a Mets cap on over the braid, removed my earrings – like a teenage hood heading into a fight, which I ultimately was. All the surviving members of NP3 were there, except Danny – I knew he was there in spirit, cursing me.

## Chapter 21

Back in the parking lot, I sat in the Caddy, with shaking hands flat on my diaphragm, breathing in and out as slowly as possible. Rain beat down, at first softly and then marble heavy. It could have been romantic in a different context, but the howl of the wind and the sense of impending doom was something out of my many nightmares. I fiddled with the radio dial: still stuck. The night had a sheen to it, like someone had exhaled onto a mirror and then wiped it clean of condensation.

I felt like my stomach was being dragged and the lake of my bowels invaded by distressed waterfowl. I began a self-peptalk that sounded a bit like *You're a cop's daughter. You can do this. By any means necessary.* Then I lit a Slim and examined my nails, waiting on a cue from Carole.

I surrendered to Johnny's penitent gospel and just as he began to warble about climbing a mountain, the tape began to warp into a death-metal moan.

Carole's VW Golf was bunny hopping along in front of me, trying to exit the parking lot. All week I had watched Carole drive. She was cocky and defensive, a real New York driver. Now the car was jerking unsteadily, like a wounded panther. It drove into the wrong lane, then reversed, burning rubber. It was like the driver perhaps kept forgetting which side of the road they were on – if they had a license at all.

Call 911, I thought. Wait and see, I thought.

I gunned the Caddy into action; the VW Golf sped through a red light and I waited. God knows why. I'm ultimately a law-abiding citizen, I suppose. An email pinged into my inbox as my phone began to ring. Denise.

I answered.

"I'm on the road. I'm following Carole, but I think she's in trouble. Call the cops, send 'em to the Beatrice address. It's in the email. Shearer and Ange's joint. I gotta go."

After twenty minutes on the road with my churning belly, my portable GPS passed the town called Beatrice and then it seemed to die. The road became dirt and gravel, the scenery a semirural slum of shacks and stray auto parts, a sign up: *You are now entering Gator Country* and then a hand-painted road sign that read *Cable Grove Rd.* It resembled a frayed rope tossed into a field and the road itself felt

knotty, lined with rock and gravel. Out here, near the gloom of the Glades, away from the highway and the rest of the county, the only sounds were the rain on the roof of the Caddy and my own heart beating. I recognized the erratic flutter: a bird tangled in a Venetian blind, knocking itself out on the glass.

I drove slowly. The light from the VW and the porch lights of a few distant houses were all I had to go on; the last thing I needed was a flat from an animal trap or a sharp rock, gravel. I was grateful that the Caddy was sturdy as a tank, and would pretty much cream any animal or human predator.

The VW came to a lurching stop in front of an old Florida-style cracker house, the wood painted cream and periwinkle blue. Underneath the iron roof were the peeling words: *Steve's Place*. Maybe it was an airboat hire, maybe a shanty bar or floating brothel, but whatever it was, now it was peeling, cracking, and overgrown with old-world climbing ferns. I walked out and floodlights illuminated the entry – a wraparound porch, bare-assed wooden boards, unvarnished and unadorned by furniture.

The driver's car door opened. There was a figure in an orange slicker, holding what looked like a .38 with a pink handle, spatter on it. I had a feeling it was Carole's gun. Overpowering a woman like Carole would not be difficult – she was five feet five, one hundred twenty pounds, but she was a tough cookie. I wondered if Carole was even conscious, and if she did awaken, would she attempt to regain control. Then a bloody hammer fell with a clatter as the driver stepped out of the car.

Carole opened the passenger door – fell out onto the ground, on hands and knees, making wretched, gulping, sniffing sounds as she crawled. The figure in the orange slicker looked up at me; and in that moment, I barely recognized her, except for all that red hair. I had a box cutter, but no real weapon – even if she was about five feet three and ninety pounds soaking wet, wearing a pink T- shirt that said *Sugababe* and blue boot-cut jeans that swum on her– she harbored enough psychotic rage that had allowed her to beat Carole's face in with a hammer ..

“Aisling,” I said, exiting the Caddy very slowly. “Look at me.”

“What?” she snapped, facing me, raising Carole's gun and I flinched. I raised my hands in an act of surrender.

“I'm on your side.”

Her face and arm relaxed. I noted her Sketchers were pink and had a platform base. Her body, her whole look was that of a preteen from 1996 – which, I suppose, she was. The Aisling I'd seen on Skype had been washed out; rage gave her a slightly feral degree of youthfulness. She was thirteen again; her skin was very pink, her lips were red, her gloss-stained teeth were bared. Carole was younger, too – in fact gurgling and kicking on the ground, regressed to a state of infancy, her hands groping on the gravel, like she was reading Braille. Even if Carole potentially was the bait and mastermind of Andre's demise, even if she was the one who dealt the first blow to Andre, the image of Carole, a corrupt broker, a murderess even, in shredded stockings bleeding from her surgically enhanced face, was surprisingly unsatisfying. But I was inherently moral; blame it on all those years of Catholic education. I was sick of people being hurt. Steve Shearer, however – Aisling could go nuts on him.

Speak of the devil.

Steve in his Giants T-shirt – grinning – appeared at the front door, his two arms raised in a hello or surrender. The moment it happened was silent; Aisling pointed and shot. Steve looked down and brought his hand away from his abdomen, dark and wet with blood. He looked more pissed than anything. Then Carole started screaming. Someone or something shot out at me, from behind, dragging me into the black. I had no time to turn to see my attacker.

From the floodlight and the view of the moon on the water, I figured I was out back of Steve's Place. All the normal humming and spruiking of Florida nature, frogs doing their croaky mating call, subtle and larger animal disturbances on and in the water, was drowned out by the gale force wind. I wondered if it could tear off the iron roof as it battered the spiky fronds of the palms and wild tamarind. Either way, I was seemingly safe from the elements at least, wrapped up tight in a blanket, like a baby in swaddling. I freed my right arm and felt the surface of what I was lying in; whittled, flaky, splintered wood – the paint was periwinkle blue. The boat was landed on the low, rickety jetty. All I could see was dark water all around me. When I groped at my head, my hand came away red and there an accompanying throbbing pain at the base of my head, but it felt more like a hangover, induced by severe dehydration. There appeared to be no obvious open injury, so wherever I was

bleeding from must have been a small gash. Aisling O'Malley swam into view. A small figure, spirals of red hair. Her tiny weird voice began to quiz me.

“Who’s the president? Where do you live? How old are you?”

Legs, I thought. Wiggle them. I willed them to move, but it was like the message was blocked from my brain to my two limbs. Urgency was betrayed by bodily pain and, wait, numbness. I simply couldn’t move them. And there was a smell that troubled me even more than the fact that I was in fact in the cavity of a boat, on a jetty in a storm with a maniac. It was gasoline. I was, in fact, soaked in it. Any relief at not having wet myself had dissipated. I was drenched in gasoline, a Viking funeral waiting to happen. I wondered if Aisling was the one who’d dragged me out here to kill me, even though she had chosen me to tell her story.

Then I heard a creaking on the boards. Oh fuck.

“How many times have you broken a man’s bones? How many times have they broken yours?”

“Six,” my own voice replied. *Six, Six, Six.*

*Fuck this shit for a joke, Sloane, move.*

I needed to get out. My pocketbook was missing. Wait, I didn’t bring it. My phone was gone. My card was not in my back pocket. I sat up. “What happened to my legs, Aisling?”

“Chill out,” came her voice, more Irish sounding than Australian.

*Transatlantic.* When she smiled, I saw a missing tooth on the left side of her mouth. Her lips were chapped and indented from her overbite. When she sat on the side of the boat and touched my legs, I felt nothing, just her candy-apple-red hair – she must have dyed it redder – tickling my arm.

“You thumped your head good and proper, sit back.” She sat on the side of the boat, catching her breath.

“How?” I managed.

“She shot you. Ange.”

“I can’t feel my legs.”

“It was a dart gun. The kind that they use on the gators. It hit you in the back. A nerve block, I think. It should wear off.”

Aisling patted my arm.

“Don’t freak, Erin. The feeling will come back, promise. I got Ange for you, I missed the femoral artery, which is was what I was aiming for – got her hip, painful

but not fatal. She can't walk. I'm sure of it. Steve's on the porch. The stomach's the most painful place to get shot."

"You have a lot of medical knowledge," I said.

"I trained to be a nurse," she replied. "Mental health."

I had also experienced a nerve block before, when I broke my wrist, or rather Danny did – the week before the pentagram. They call that an escalation. I was an hour late to meet him at the Marine Diner. He pushed; I pulled. Colles fracture.

Like my mom, like Michelle, I was going to burn too, except I would not be dead first.

"Can I get up?" I asked. "Try to stretch my legs?" She nodded. I tried to pull myself up with my arms, but my legs wouldn't work. We were about two, three feet high. The water beneath us was turbulent.

I looked over at the wretched semiconscious Carole, in the cervix of the boat next to me. Aisling had done hospital-scale damage to Carole. Carole's puffed-up face was pink and she was folded over like an *hors d'oeuvre*, like a pig in a blanket, gagged and bound. The angle of her arm made me think maybe her collarbone or arm was broken. Carole, a little bird with a broken wing. And Aisling, now a python. Aisling was not driven to acts of violence without really committing to it – if she wanted her dead, it was going to happen, unless I stopped it.

"That's not the Glades, you know. It's where the sea starts. Isn't that neat?" she said.

"Any gators, you think?" she asked conversationally.

"Alligators don't like salt water," I said. "They're swamp dwellers."

"Whatever," she seemed agitated. "So, you haven't read the final chapter," she said. It was a statement.

"No, I'd like to live to do that. Steve's got a crew," I told her. "It's best we get out of here, like now."

"No cell phone reception," she said. "It's just him and Ange out here. And Carole, of course. And no one's going anywhere. I hope I didn't kill Steve. I want him to watch this."

"I'm going to throw up," I said and heaved. She made no movement to help or hinder me. I tried to project the straight spirits and bile away from my body.

"So, what have you learned since you've been out here?" she asked me pleasantly. She got to my level and sort of squatted next to the boat.

“Steve and Ange, Carole, they’re all investors in Coral Palisades. Then they brought Mona Byrnes, you know, my dad’s ex-partner, in on it but Carole or Steve or both screwed Mona over. I think Steve threatened Mona or something when Mona threatened her, threatened to bring the heat on them, sue them. Killed her dogs or something?”

“*If I knew who they were, they’d not be breathing,*” Mona had said. But it wasn’t true. She did know who and it was eating her up.

“I think Steve had something on Mona and he corrupted her,” I said.

“The Steve Shearer Effect,” Aisling agreed.

“Mona Byrnes and my dad were after Steve Shearer. But Mona ended up in bed with Steve in the Palisades. I’m wondering if it’s because Mona or maybe Mona and my dad killed my mom and sister and Steve knew.”

She crouched and examined my face, like a therapist.

“Maybe it was your dad. Dads aren’t great, are they?”

I shrugged.

“Not really.”

“Look, Aisling I know you hate her, but Carole was being manipulated and controlled by Steve from a young age.”

“Hold on for a minute,” she said holding up her hand. “Carole Jenkins is a lying –”

“Slut,” I finished for her. “I know you’re not a fan of Carole, but immolation seems a little ... extreme.” The gasoline that was doused over me had collected in a reservoir at the bottom of the boat. Carole was the collection point, the repository. I wiggled my legs. The nerves were firing; I was ready to stand. Carole moaned at my feet, seemingly conscious.

“Steve likes to act, so I’m giving him a bit of theater.” Aisling smiled. But theater was more an Aisling thing. “Don’t worry, you won’t go up with her. I need you alive, to tell our story. You’ve read *Resident Alien*. Carole was in on the Andre murder all along. She probably would have been banging Danny, but you were going out with him. Even though you didn’t even like him.”

“He was beating me up. For real.” I said, trying to make eye contact with her.

“Love is like that, isn’t it though? ‘If Love be rough with you, be rough with love’,” Aisling quoted dreamily. Then Aisling ran her hands over her nonexistent hips and made a kissy face and then grew grave.

“‘Violent delights have violent ends,’ is that what you mean?” I asked, finding the phrase among my high school English remembrances of *Romeo and Juliet*.

“And Ricky, you slu-t.” She winked at me, to indicate she wasn’t really judging. She seemed impressed. Her eyebrows executed a Groucho Marx wiggle. “I never cared for Ricky Hell, but. He was a Satanist wannabe and a fake cop pretending to be a teenager and he nearly turned my brother queer,” she continued.

*Don’t speak about Ricky. You didn’t know him.* I was starting to get pissed, even though I was partly paralyzed, my eye was closed shut, and I was soaked in gasoline. My dad called it the famous Sloane temper. I bit my lip, held my tongue. Maybe I was learning. Or maybe I was just learning it was better to stay afraid. I tried to steer her back to the subject at hand. The nerve feeling in my legs was returning, but it was an overexcited feeling. All my senses were heightened: the sound of Carole’s jagged breathing, her moving at the bottom of the boat. As much as I hated Carole, I didn’t want her to burn.

I tried to think fast, through my cotton-ball concussion.

“I’m going to stand,” I warned her. I stood up slowly, on shaky legs that nearly buckled but managed to hold my weight. My shoes were soggy with gasoline.

“I chose you, you know. To tell our story,” Ailsing whispered. “I was there that night. I was hiding in the woods; I followed him. Cormac was in trouble. I saw what he did. He killed Andre. Carole told Cormac he’d hurt me too. She put him up to it.”

I gulped.

“Was it ...”

“Doesn’t matter!” Ailsing said severely. “Ricky arrived, gunning for Danny for some reason. Then Steve’s car pulled up, and I heard the gunshot. In the end, if I’d been braver, if I’d said something, if I did something. But I couldn’t. I was scared.”

I swallowed heavily.

“You were just a kid. No one blames you. Especially not me.”

“And all my life I’ve been paying for it. And Cormac paid for it. He killed himself, couldn’t handle the guilt. And all my life, I’ve been in trouble because of Steve, because of his choices. And Carole. I got nothing to lose. My mom’s dead, Cormac’s dead.”

“When the murder was happening, I saw Ricky was paging someone. Maybe it was to you? I suppose Ricky loved you.”

Hope rose inside me stupidly for a second and then violently deflated.

“No. Not me,” I said. “But I think ... that Ricky loved as much as he could. We were kids. It wouldn’t have lasted.”

The planks creaked as Ange shambled along the jetty; there was a dragging, thumping sound as she walked – it was the dragging of her wounded leg. She’d ripped off one shirt sleeve, made a tourniquet – her jean shorts, which showed very developed quads, were soaked in blood.

Aisling turned around, expecting her.

Despite her half-burned face and body, Ange still had something. Actually, it was a rifle and it was pointed at Aisling.

“You little twat. You shot Steve.” Ange’s Queens twang was like a garrote. One eye was the color of Hershey’s chocolate, the other reminded me of Andre Villiers: a milky film transplanted over the iris. Scar tissue webbed over the lid and grew up the eyebrow, like ivy. It was like she’d half been dipped in fire and put out. The scoured and melted browned skin, slackened and pulled taut on her right side.

“Nah, I want you to suffer,” Ange said. “Sit down in that boat. Next to Carole.” Ange nodded at Aisling. “Untie her.”

Aisling just folded her arms across a bony chest. Aisling had a piece, Carole’s, tucked into her jeans.

“Where’s Steve, Ange?” I asked.

“He’s out the front,” Aisling answered for her. “He’ll die, probably. I shot him. I shot the devil.”

Ange choked back a sob and spat blood instead.

“Untie her,” she said to me. She kept the gun on Aisling.

I looked out past the jetty, back toward the house. The lights were as bright as Fourth of July fireworks, but not loud, just flashing – no sounds, no sirens. The cops were here. They had about sixty seconds, by my reckoning, to get to the jetty before Ange killed Aisling. Would they render aid to Shearer first? Were they on his dime?

I knelt to Carole, removed the gag.

“These guys have a thing for fire,” Aisling piped up.

I noticed it then. The silver Zippo in Aisling’s palm.

“He and Ange and Carole bought up houses in a downscaled neighborhood like The Lakes and made a ghetto.” For emphasis, Aisling kicked Carole, who screamed. “Then they set people’s homes on fire for insurance money. And then there are accidents. It happens. It happens a lot in their line of business. It’s common knowledge you got burned up in that fire on purpose. Three’s a crowd, you know?”

Ange rolled her good eye, but I could tell Aisling had had hit a nerve.

“Shut up bitch.”

“Did you know Ange, that Carole was sleeping with Steve since ninth grade. And now, I mean, well ...”

Ange cocked the rifle.

“Not true.”

Aisling leaned in and touched my cheek.

“I’ll send the rest.” She flicked the Zippo and the flame was visible.

As she got close, I could see the visible lanugo on her face, a fuzzy mold all over the shriveled apples of her cheeks. Anorexia nervosa. She’d been sick for a very long time. The smell of her breath. It was like she’d been sucking on rotten meat. Aisling’s eyes were half closed. She looked beatific. I never liked her, not until that moment. I thought of *Resident Alien*. *Steve, Steve, please love me*.

Aisling reached in her waistband for the pistol, but Ange blew a hole in Aisling – and the Zippo dropped. The force knocked Aisling off the boat and back into the water. I heard her body hit the water, the sound strangely light, innocent even, like two sandals dropping in the water from a boat. Or maybe it was my concussion; cotton wool was packed into my sinuses and the volume and brightness had been turned down.

I jumped off the jetty, my jellied legs carrying me into the shallows – the water was not deep – maybe only three, four feet. For a second all I heard were screams.

The cops were on the deck – I heard them shouting at Ange to put the gun down; shots were fired.

I was dissociating, I suppose. The flames appeared even as my lids were shut and the soundtrack of Carole’s screaming returned to my aural awareness. I could smell smoked meat and blood; burnt fabric scored my nostrils. I puked up cocktails and bile. I was dragging Aisling out of the water, like a broken pull toy. She was curled up and her story had died with her. Except, of course, it hadn’t.

## Chapter 22

“This is kinda like Hamlet.” I imagined the hangover of Häagen-Dazs on Denise’s latte breath, as I lay back on my unmade bed. I needed something – a hug, reassurance that I didn’t get everyone killed, some answers. Because they were all dead – Aisling, Carole, Ange.

“Something’s rotten in Howard County?”

“I meant more the body count and all the ghosts and shit. But that, too.”

Denise’s voice was a balm at 3:00 a.m. We were talking on the hotel phone because my cell was still missing – probably in the water. Ditto my credit card. I had missed my red-eye flight back to New York. Denise scheduled one for that afternoon. The hotel let me check out late, adding room service to the final bill. I free-poured sugar into my sludgy hotel coffee. Shock. Sugar treated shock.

“What did the hospital say?” Denise asked.

“They made me take blood tests in case the dart Ange shot me with was dirty or contaminated. I got a tetanus. Minor concussion. Steve was at the same hospital, in surgery.”

“You know, I was against this whole substory,” Denise chided. “And you know, it wasn’t just me who called it in. A Marvin Abelard called me – how he got my number, I don’t know ...”

“He was a cop. Still is, in a way.”

“He said he went to visit you at the White Sands because he heard about the size of the arsenal Steve and Ange had at Beatrice. Then he saw Aisling break into Carole’s VW and smash her in the face with the hammer, so he called in the cavalry when he saw you take off after them. Both Howard and Broward County PDs wanted to be there – because of all the nefarious activities at Lauderdale Lakes. Steve Shearer and co. pissed off a lot of people.”

“Well, Shearer was arrested on gun charges – the police raided the shack, but they didn’t find any evidence of drugs, of course.”

I wondered if Marvin was there, on site, when I was taken away in an ambulance as Howard and Broward County PDs took over the property, labeling and bagging evidence of contraband firearms. But I doubted it. He was like a drunk guardian angel – probably he went back to his safe zone, the Monkey Bar.

I remembered Aisling's smell as she moved in close to tell me something so Ange would shoot her – chemical, sour, like a baby's spit-up, mixed with her hairspray.

“Aisling was sick. She wanted to die. She never intended to leave America alive. It was like suicide by cop, but suicide by dyab.” I told Denise “And Carole – God. I keep replaying it.” The smell of her flesh, the unearthly frequency of Carole's screams. No one deserved a death like that.

Carole might have toed the line with the Ricky Hell murder, but she didn't pull the trigger.

The coffee burned my esophagus; acid bile filled my mouth. My desire to know what part Mona and my dad had played in Mom and my sister's, in Ricky's death, was literally eating a hole inside me.

“*Steve had a thing for fire,*” Aisling said. What about gas?”

“You didn't light that fire.” Denise missed the point. “You just tried to find out the truth. They were going to end up killing each other. You just got caught up in the crossfire.”

“The money, though.” It was like a question mark in a bubble over my head. “Ultimately, I know why Steve killed Ricky. But Aisling said Ricky paged someone before he died. She thought it was me, but it wasn't. Was he paging Mona Byrnes? Or my dad? Was Steve bribing them, because of what he knew about my mom and sister?”

“What about the guy? The one your mom had the affair with? Ox? Could he have killed your family?”

“Ox? No way. He loved my mom.”

“And no one's ever killed no one they loved before,” she deadpanned. “Look babe, gas leaks happen all the time. The money – well. RP gambled. I mean, you could always hire a private investigator, someone who isn't intimately involved, with a lot of ... trust issues. I'm going to pick you up from the gate in about eight hours, so get some rest.”

At JFK, I was going through baggage reclaim when I spotted Denise's big, black-clad body. I was expecting her open arms, a bear hug. She was red lipped, but that was the only vibrant thing about her. I didn't want to absorb the pity in her eyes. I drowned out the downward inflection in her tone, looking down at my shoes, my

head full of noise, her Gucci Envy hurting my delicate sinuses, still aching from the night before. I set my bag down.

I knew that look, that tone. It was the angel of death visiting.

“Mister,” I said.

“No. Your father. I’m so sorry. They couldn’t reach you.”

“The cops still can’t find my phone,” I said, almost accusatorily.

“He just slipped away in his sleep. Shanae at the home said it was real peaceful, babe.”

Typical RP. He gave everyone hell, but slipped off on a fluffy white cloud.

“But Mister’s okay?”

She nodded slowly and squeezed my hand.

“It’s okay to feel relieved.”

There was no grief, only waiting questions.

Given the way he’d left NYPD, they weren’t about to give my father a departmental funeral and he hadn’t wanted one. His will, which I never knew existed, strictly prohibited a viewing and a private cremation took place at a funeral home in Patchogue, Suffolk County. He’d requested cremation and a scattering of ashes over the Sound, refusing a place in the family plot at the Calvary Cemetery in Queens with my mom and sister. It turns out in death, RP was also quite the lone wolf, not wanting to belong or lie down next to anyone. The house was willed to me and any pension monies left over, went to the Humane Society. And the money I had found – maybe now I would never know where it came from.

Nassau County had heard Carole’s tape-recorded confession. I told them about RP, Mona, Steve. I excluded the fact that I had located the money at this stage – I wanted to find its source myself. Carole’s confession obviously did not constitute proof – all the parties, including Andre Villiers, excepting Danny Quinlan-Walsh, were dead, and Steve Shearer was in an induced coma. Broward and Howard Counties said Mona had been listed as an investor, had been one of the folks to put down a deposit, lose out. That was it. They said they’d investigate, question Danny – but until I had proof of Steve’s involvement in Ricky’s murder, there wasn’t a lot I could do. Furthermore, they had a suspect with the missing kids. They were (still) building a case. They did not appreciate the Carver story. They did not want us

printing anything about them in the story – they threatened the magazine, me, with criminal charges if we did.

Due to the mounting body count and the meta-narrative nature of the crimes, the story had created a small sensation. There were all the elements: a journalist being dragged into an old love triangle and her own painful and traumatic past; the uncovering of a sordid interstate or trans-state property scam in the search for the answer to a seemingly meaningless sixteen-year-old crime. The socioeconomic and racial angles of Ricky Hell's murder, well, they were just the icing on the cake. There was nationwide interest in the story – talk shows, syndication, a book deal. Denise was suspending their interest as we headed toward print. She'd offered me an extension, grief leave or whatever, she called it, but I registered her relief when I refused it. She knew I would. I lived to work, or rather I worked because I had no life. And I hadn't chosen the story; the story had chosen me.

And we couldn't go to print until I knew all the facts – some of them I couldn't know. I wanted to talk to Julie Hernandez before I filed. At least I knew she was okay. On my insistence, police had gone to do a welfare check the week before, drily reporting that Julie and her kids were in the Midwest somewhere and had just arrived home.

Steve was still in ICU. The shell had hit the colon, which had caused peritonitis – so sepsis and an induced coma. Odds weren't on his side, but he was the type to land on his feet.

Carole was made famous again by immolation – a kind of celluloid saint. Hers was a big splashy funeral; reporters swarmed the cemetery and pictures of her, her past self, went nationwide; an image of her young kids and grieving husband was on the cover of every paper.

Ange's funeral, I am told, went by with a whimper, with only one of her sons attending.

Aisling's body was sent back to her country of birth, where her extended family claimed her. She and Cormac were both in the family plot.

I sent Marvin a case of Pabst via the Monkey Bar, alongside an eighteen-year-old bottle of scotch as a thank you.

Marvin wrote me an email – via the bartender at the Monkey Bar's account, no doubt dictated by him.

*The gifts were unnecessary, albeit appreciated, Ms Sloane. It was my pleasure to render aid. I am sorry about your father. Best to draw a line under it and write The End. Let sleeping dogs lie. They bite when disturbed.*

– M

I knew this intimately. That morning alone, Danny texted me about thirteen times. There were expressions of concern:

*Read the papers. Heard about your Dad.  
thinkin of u.  
Sorry.  
worried about u.*

Cue requests for return calls:

*Call me back, Erin. K? Plz.*

Cue incandescent rage and expletives:

*u think ur fkn better than me? I am a married man n have a wife hotr than ull ever be. Ur alone and fkced up. U Freak.*

**WHORE**

Cue threats:

*This isnt a threat U know what I can do to you?*

And then, as always, remorse:

*Call me bck. Please. Please.  
I'm sorry, I'm sorry.  
Luv u, Eri.  
Babe?*

I was in the bathroom when the phone began to ring and I let the machine pick up. When I heard her voice, I sprinted to the kitchen.

“Julie,” I breathed out. I hadn’t quite realized the extent of my concern for her; hearing her voice was like an opiate. I felt stoned with relief.

“Yeah. You sic the police on me?” I heard a child yell in the distance. “No, you can’t have another Little Debbie, Pachucho.” She was met by a wail of indignation. I remembered how much Ricky loved Hostess-brand anything. If it glowed in the dark, didn’t biodegrade, he wanted it.

“No. I asked them to do a welfare check. I was just worried. Aisling O’Malley ...”

“Yeah. I read about it in the paper.” Her voice was thick with emotion. “Crazy fucking girl. I can’t believe she’s dead.”

“I have some old photos she scanned and sent me. You guys at the roller rink. I can email them.”

She laughed for a second. It was strangled.

“For real? Aisling was so funny and goofy. She had a good heart. She had a hard life. I didn’t realize how much so, until I was older, you know? All I saw was the big pool, the rich stepdad ...”

“Just make some copies, mail them to me.” Then her tone went flat, hard, uncompromising. “I can’t do email. We got no computer. You already got my address.”

“Julie, I want to exonerate Ricky. I know part of you wants you to help me even if it is painful.”

“You’re right, I do. But I straight up shut out the past. I don’t go online. I don’t want to be a character in your story. It’s not personal. Just do what you gotta do, but leave me out of it.”

God, this pissed me off, but it made me like her so much.

“Do you know anything about what happened with Ricky and Steve Shearer?”

“I knew that Ricky was involved with the police; I knew it was because of drugs. The funny thing is, before he came back to Queens, he was always so straight, such a Goody Two-shoes. He used to want to be a cop, or like, a farmer. He ironed his jeans.”

I snorted with laughter. Or maybe I was crying. Surely not.

“Ricky grew up in Kansas. That’s where we were just at – visiting my dad in Salinas. He was living with Dad. He came back to the city when he was like fifteen. He went up to Buffalo to juvie after he got in trouble. Then we went to the Island.”

So that explained where Buffalo fit in. And the mid-Western accent, his weird affinity with nature.

“I got a box of Ricky’s things, some photos and stuff. I’ll send it to you,” she said. “I gotta go. I got kids to look after.”

She set down the receiver. I followed suit.

I went into the kitchen, where I continued weeping in an unselfconscious, jagged kind of howling. I had to feed Mister, so I began the task of chopping up livers and he began his habit of nipping at my legs through my sweatpants to hurry me along. In my unbridled lachrymose, I was listening to Slayer’s “Raining Blood,” because it reminded me of Ricky. I had long quit crying; I think it may have been in 1994, after the night Ricky died. I theorized at the time I had wept so much in ’93 and ’94 that I had exceeded a quota of sorts.

It wracked my body; I was unable to stop it.

The world would never know Ricky Hell, not like I did. Not at all.

I thought about Ricky’s face next to mine, his bad tooth mingling with Juicy Fruit and Marlboro Reds. Naked, he said into my hair, “Saints smell like carnations.” He smelled like clams and green apple shampoo.

“What do devils smell like?” I asked.

“Roses,” he said immediately.

Then I remembered a time on the water, watching boats. Danny’s family were fishing over the side.

Patrick, fleshy lipped, in a blue polo shirt and Z Cavariccis, spotted a dolphin.

“Dolphins are perverts,” Danny whispered into my ear, pinching me. His belt buckle stuck into my leg. Or was it Patrick?

Patrick smiled at me. “I wish we had a harpoon,” he said.

I never really noticed Dr. Walsh much. I never spoke to him alone after that hand grope, but that day he taught me how to get a fish and Danny watched, unsmiling.

“I love fish, but the smell is what gets to me,” their mother said, wringing her too-large hands. She went into the galley, to drink iced tea. It never occurred to me until now that she was probably drunk.

“Fish is good when it doesn’t smell or taste like fish,” Patrick said.

“I can think of another thing that’s like that,” Dr. Walsh said. “Right Erin?”

Danny spat into the water and pulled me back into a bear hug.

“Erin smells like roses, Danny says,” Patrick told his father.

“What a lucky boy Danny is,” Dr. Walsh smiled. Danny pinched my arm so hard it left a bruise that even his mom noticed.

It was like Ricky was breathing in my ear.

*Eerie! Wake the fuck up!*

I thought of Mona’s purloined letter.

Ricky knew evil had another face. Sometimes it looked like beauty, sometimes it looked like love – or indifference, cruelty.

I thought of the pentagrams the boys were obsessed with: power and protection. I thought about Danny: his issues with sex and his long-held virginity, his aggression and cruelty.

Danny’s father, Big Pat, was weird, sexually inappropriate. Danny was scared for me to be alone with him. Dr. Walsh lived on and loved the water. All the kids went missing near the water. Danny had told me at the diner it was cancer that took his father. I went online and searched for his obit. There was something about an accident – the phrase “vehicular suicide” jumped out at me.

I heard the doorbell and grabbed my father’s Glock.

When I saw who it was through the peephole, I shoved the Glock in a dead pot plant and opened the door, wrapping my shawl around myself.

“Hey Ox,” I said, hugging him. He responded in his usual fashion – stiff and unresponsive.

“Nice surprise,” I said. “I haven’t heard from you for so long.”

“Sorry. I had to get out of town for a few days.” I wasn’t sure if he was drunk or just socially awkward as usual. He didn’t have his usual six-pack, pizza, or bunch of gas station flowers. He had a box tucked under his arm. His hair stood up at odd angles, his jeans were sagging, and his gut spilled over his too-tight button-up shirt. I wondered if he’d been on a bender.

He shuffled in, handed me a box. It was marked *John*. It was unmistakably RP's writing; one foster parent taught the kids calligraphy. He had beautiful cursive, RP did. The DT shake was there, though.

"Lawyer gave me this. It was with him at the home, alongside a whole bunch of old letters between your mom and him. I guess he knew, about us – that was his way of saying 'fuck you,' maybe."

I shook my head. "Sick."

"You can have them."

"You got a tape player?"

I did. I had my old '88 hot pink Casio boom box in my old room, my initials carved into it with a pocket knife. I went into the old bedroom and retrieved it. We tested it out with an old Blondie cassette – which didn't warp or unravel. Ox shrugged off his ancient brown leather jacket and seated himself in Dad's favorite overstuffed armchair. Then I popped in the cassette. The scratchy reel started – we both sat watching the tape player, knowing that the tape could still unravel – knowing that what was being heard could never be unheard. A confession? A song?

A muffled ring.

"Your father was pretty paranoid. He recorded all his incoming and outgoing calls," Ox explained.

"Figures." I felt ill. I didn't know how deep my mistrust was, my fear and loathing for my own father – it had roots though. I could feel my whole body shaking.

There was a background sound – a low, bronchial wheeze: the blip of a machine. I made out a name through the jungle of medical sounds and *Judge Judy* on in the background, Judy screaming insults at a cowed defendant.

"You okay, Mrs. Weiz?" It was the first time I'd heard RP's Brooklyn gutter-dragged tone in months. Despite myself, I choked back a sob.

"Yeah, I'm on the oxygen now."

Candy Weiz.

"I'm sorry."

She sucked in air: once, twice, three times.

"Yeah, yeah. I wanted to see if you'd gone over the original police report."

I had read the coroner's report, seen the crime scene pics, but not witnessed the original missing Nassau County PD missing person's report.

“It’s missing.”

“The first report?” She laughed bitterly. Then, I heard her light up. Emphysema, on oxygen, but still smoking.

“Filed and lost on the same day.” RP sounded a little cold.

“We told them that the kid that got his head beat in, Andre? He was seen talking to my kid at Waldbaums. And another time, Jase came home with a pack of Garbage Pail Kids stickers. I didn’t like ’em. I was religious back then. I confiscated them.”

“Villiers was on the list of men questioned about Cathy Carver, but he was cleared.” His tone was kinder now, but weary. “Trey Scott was taken by the same man as Jason, Nassau County PD are positive about that. And that was 2000, Candy. So that rules Villiers out.”

He couldn’t talk burial with a victim’s parent, but the subtext was this: Trey was found a mile away from Jason, buried the same way. Unless it was a copycat. Or there had there been an accomplice, as Aisling had suggested.

“Andre was seen talking to Jase at Party Perfect,” Candy wheezed. “Then the cops forgot all about Andre. Then I remembered the stickers. Predators groom kids. They give them gifts ... Andre was seen with Cathy there, too, wasn’t he?”

I remembered Party Perfect. It was the only shop in twenty miles where they sold Lisa Frank stickers and oilies – stickers that were liquid crystal; you touched them and they changed color – and of course, Garbage Pail Kids stickers.

“He was spotted talking to her. That’s all I know.”

“All the same, I want to know why they eliminated him. He was a victim in the papers. That freak. That albino fuck. Loitering at the elementary school. What do you think he was doing there? Playing fuckin’ marbles?”

“You’re right – there’s no reason for Andre to be at Party Perfect or the elementary school, but the kid had a low IQ and a screw loose. He could have been looking at stickers, playin’ marbles. But as I said, Trey Scott was abducted and murdered in 2000, after Villiers died. Jason and Cathy were a school district apart, but was there any way they may have met? Jase do extracurriculars?”

“Computer club. No athletics. Religion at St. Al’s.”

I went to St. Al’s back then, too. I had presumed Candy was Jewish, from her surname. All of us public school Catholic kids went to Religion class at St. Al’s. Andre, Danny, and I. Cormac. Aisling. My mom had been a teacher.

“Jase do the Wednesday night Religion class?”

“Of course.”

“Who was his teacher?” My father’s voice went up at the end. It was subtle. But I knew what it meant. Now, I tried to swallow, but the lump in my throat became a bolus.

“Dr. Quinlan-Walsh.”

“Dr. Quinlan-Walsh,” RP repeated.

“He used to take all the kids out for pizza. His wife took over last year. And his son now.”

I heard my father cough. I could almost see the wheels turning. My father was not good at much, not good as a father, a husband, even being a human, but detection was his forte. He was great at that. After he got kicked off the team, or rather, benched, he became a private detective. And he was good at that, despite being blasted, blazed – whatever.

“Danny, the eldest?” he asked, softly now.

I remembered RP in the eighties, with his hands in the earth, planting a rose bush for my mom. Everything good had left him after that.

“Lord no. No, Patrick. Lovely boy. I stopped volunteering, but he visits me sometimes. Tries to get my faith reignited. That family has suffered ... You know, whoever did it, I’m gonna find out and murder him. God don’t do justice no more,” Candy stated, as if she was reading the weather bulletin. “Don’t call here now, not unless you know something.”

The tape kept whirring until I leaned over and turned it off.

Ox finally spoke. “If it was Dr. Walsh, it made sense that Danny had been warning you off the story. He had the opportunity. He was respected, he worked with kids. The kids would have willingly gone with him.”

Danny’s father was dead and it was over. But secrets never stay buried. They sleep inside us, eat us up from the inside out.

And RP Sloane, wasted twenty-four hours a day, was no fool. He found out the truth about secrets – they pay.

“Stay away from Danny, Pumpkin. We’ll get it to the authorities. But only if you want to.”

“If I want it to?” I felt ice cold; I was burning up. “Get out of here with that. I’m not my father, Ox. I don’t want blood money – it’s at Denise’s. Go get it, bring it to your crooked friends. Can I count on you to do that?”

He got to his feet, his big belly showing as he hiked his pants up. He didn’t embrace me before he left. I didn’t want him to.

“I’ll turn it in. Don’t do anything stupid, Sloane.” He was grave, but not angry. I smelled the ghost of booze and Fahrenheit aftershave as he exited.

That’s what he used to call my father.

## Chapter 23

Danny picked up on the second ring. It sounded like he was in a bar – I could hear the drone of sports and clinking glasses in the background.

“Sorry about your dad.” He sounded almost resentful. “You want to talk?” His voice always sounded hoarse when he drank. It broke at the end. He was smoking a lot, too. He coughed; it was thick with mucus.

“Yes. The diner?”

“No,” he said. “My office. No one will be there.”

“That sounds extremely lonely and deserted.”

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I’ve heard that one before,” I laughed and he joined in, mirthlessly.

“Hey, so I know some things about your dad and the missing kids,” I said. “I’ve left a tape for my editor, plus some stuff about you, should any harm come my way.”

“Pop ... he ...”

*Pop.* I forgot that they called Pat Senior “Pop”; it was so hokey at the time, I gagged.

“He did bad things to those boys, maybe at St. Al’s?” I prompted him.

“I only wanted to keep you safe.”

He carved a giant pentagram on my chest so that I’d be safe.

It dawned on me it was October 8, 1994, today. Unknown to me, Ricky’s twenty-first birthday and the night of the pentagram.

I applied a slash of Stop Traffic Red on my lips. I put RP’s old service revolver in my purse.

It wasn’t smart, what I was doing, but I was with Candy on justice. You had to find out the truth and make your own justice. And I had to make it right. I sat down and sent my final extract to Denise, explaining what I had found out, where I was going. I was facing the monster from my past, incidentally the son of the real monster, sixteen after he marked me. The timing was uncanny.

### ***The Night of the Pentagram: October 8, 1994***

*Since the wrist, Danny had been overly solicitous, eager to nurse me. I think that night he wanted to make me dinner. But he was also sullen, with, as Mona would*

*have said, a face like a wet weekend once he was there, poking around the house and my possessions, asking leading questions. I had gotten a page from Ricky, which simply read **13, 69**, which meant I would probably put Metallica on and dance around in my underwear for him later at the Freeport Motel, Room 13, and this would end in said sex act. For now, I was studying.*

*I lit the roach, turned the TV down and picked up Richard III and looked out at the window. Beethoven was playing in the background, because it aided concentration. In the illuminated window, amongst the moody blues and greens of the flickering television, there was a face looking in at me. I shrieked like a Hollywood scream queen. I had been drilled and coached on this; practically prepared since birth for the bad man to come through the window (which was locked). I carried mace and a box cutter (still do). I also knew how to shoot a gun; I had done jujitsu. It was the same feeling that I had the night my mom and sister died, the warm, wet blood on my face and the burning sensation of my feet in the snow. In the same kind of decibel range as the snap of a bone, Danny literally put his fist through the glass – he was wearing wool gloves – and punched a neat hole in the glass. My first thought: Dad’s gonna be so pissed. The second: Danny’s literally going to kill me.*

*The next few minutes were all about the broken glass, Danny opening the window almost politely, climbing onto the bed, and commandeering the joint. I thought at first he was laughing, but he was actually crying, or at least his eyes were leaking fluid. His whole body was shaking.*

*He opened my bedroom door and looked in the house. He checked the wardrobes, under the bed. I grabbed the mace, ran to my dad’s room and he held out a foot and tripped me. There’s a scar above my eye, two millimeters long, from the collision with the door. No stitches.*

*I realized right away he was on acid, because he talked a lot about the devil, the devil being in me. And for some odd reason, his eyes always leaked when he was on hallucinogens. The way he was gnawing his jaw made me feel like he had also taken a lot of speed, maybe crystal. It was going around at the time. It was in fact PCP.*

*I’m just trying to protect you, he said.*

*He busted open a man’s razor on the floor of my dad’s bathroom. Maybe it was a lady’s razor. Maybe it was pink.*

*He cut himself first.*

*I am going to be in your life forever, he said. Whether you like it or not.*

*It was something his dad had said when they fought.*

*Not if I can help it, I said.*

*Are you in love with Ricky Hell?*

*And I did the worst thing you can do in that situation. I laughed at him.*

*I don't know how long it took, I don't know what happened to time – ten minutes, twenty, a half hour. The pain was hot and jagged, searing; it had an alphabet and chronology, a timeline, of its own. His breath was like he'd been sucking on quarters, his eyes were not blue, but a kind of silver. There was something about his face that kept shifting. It was either madness or possession. His cries were not like a man, but a cat calling out an enemy. More than anything I wanted him to not touch me with his hands. All I know is, he decided that the D would protect me. The pentagram was additional. It was fifteen minutes, I think. Five for the star, ten for the D – and it shows. The pentagram is more faded these days. The 666 was surface, half-hearted. Still, he must not have known that Ricky had a real similar one. Or maybe he did, maybe that was the point.*

*He took ink from my calligraphy pen, tipped it onto the wound.*

*I made it back to my room, soaked in blood and ink, sweat from the pain. When he left, I bundled up my clothes, my sheets, and threw them out. I screamed as I cleaned myself up in the shower, disinfected the wound, taped myself up with medical gauze.*

*And what did I go do next? I told everyone, my dad and Ricky, that I had glandular fever. I found antibiotics in the house from an old script. I went to bed for a week.*

*I never went to the Freeport Motel. Ricky found out about it the day before Halloween. I just couldn't hide it from him any longer. And clearly, he couldn't face me after it happened. Maybe he was mad at me. Maybe he blamed me. Maybe he pitied me. Maybe he loved me. Either way, he wanted to confront my dad, confront Danny about it. The rest is history.*

*Why didn't I tell, you wonder? Why didn't I go to ER? My dad was a policeman, for God's sake. I mean, he would have shot Danny dead.*

*He had sent me to jujitsu, he had taught me to shoot.*

*Maybe it was because even though I had a knife to my jugular I knew I was stronger than Danny and I was ashamed because he had cornered me, carved me up like a Thanksgiving ham.*

*I was embarrassed by my weakness; I was ashamed of my victimhood. Also, most of my family were dead. I didn't want to make a fuss. In short, I was afraid.*

This October had started mild but turned icy; there was a bite in the air from the Sound that went into my bad wrist. I was brittle with fear.

It was now completely dark outside, the only car in the parking lot was Danny's Range Rover. The storeroom was bright inside, industrial strip lighting, but with warmer globes, giving the place a rich, creamy glow. A security light was triggered as I approached the entry. I looked out onto the boatyard and, beyond, the water, which was still and dark. The storeroom was unlocked and there was a sense of a disturbance in the room – RP had experienced this at homicides; he said crimes left a psychic imprint. The hairs on your neck stood up as you walked through – it was animal instinct, he said. Danger.

Danny's office was open, the steel chandelier that lit up the desk showed that it had been ransacked, or rather, vandalized. All the photos on his desk were shattered. His wife, his child, his Sharper Image gadgets were on the ground, the Scandinavian wood splintered. I was a stronger animal than Danny, I told myself.

He was slumped in the chair, not facing me.

“Danny,” I said, “Turn around.”

He wasn't moving.

But it was Patrick, Danny's little brother, who turned around. What a cheap trick.

Danny's fist went into my gut, winding me instantly.

Monkey see, monkey do.

After I caught my breath, still panting, swearing at Danny, ducking and weaving, I connected my fist with his high cheekbone and it shocked my arm all the way through to my funny bone. I socked him hard, but with my bad wrist and the cold, it wasn't a good one. I screamed. He reeled, but smiled blearily, pupils fat, like he was on ecstasy. But it was anger, and anger was one hell of a drug.

“It looks like someone has been knocking you around,” he said, pointing to my black eye. “Ow.” He patted his cheekbone. I ran behind the desk and picked up a letter opener.

“Correct. I got punched out, shot with a dart, partly paralyzed. I saw someone – several people – get shot, and even burned alive. Carole Jenkins, in fact. Then my dad died. What’s next?”

“Your father died,” Danny repeated. “Now you’re an orphan.”

I kneeled, put my fingers to Pat’s neck. His pulse flickered under my fingers. He moaned, stirring back into consciousness.

“I only knocked him out,” Danny said, annoyed

“I’d like to get him help,” I said. “He needs help.”

He kicked Pat, square in the ribs, like it was a response. I winced.

“Pat and my mom made me go back to hospital. Pat tried to fire me. My own brother.”

“Did you stop taking your meds?” I asked, injecting sympathy in my tone.

“No. I just smashed up the kitchen at home.” And Gina, I bet.

“Take a seat,” he said. He gestured to a rip-off Eames chair, the color of burnt caramel, and I sat down.

“You first,” I said. He sat opposite me. His Versace tie had blood spatters on it. Danny would get a shiner, I realized. Even if I died, I’d got one in – finally. My father’s gun was in my purse. I had to get it out in a way that was natural. I eased myself down. I hit record on my phone – in that way, I was my father’s daughter.

“You told me your father died of cancer, but that’s not true. Why did Big Pat kill himself?”

“You didn’t need to find out any of this.”

“So, you sent me messages to put me off.”

“I wanted to talk,” he said seriously. “What I always wanted was to protect you. My dad had a list. I thought you were on it.”

“OK,” I said. “You thought if he carved a giant pentagram on my chest that I’d be safe. That makes sense.”

“Like, I was high. God, Eri, I missed you.” He began to tug my wrist, like he was literally trying to pull me over the desk by one arm. It was my once-broken one, the one that was now fantastically painful. I relaxed into it, went limp – our last push–pull had ended badly.

“He was their doctor. He knew the signs. They were abused kids,” Danny said almost softly. “So, my dad helped them escape. That’s what he said. They were better off.”

“Better off dead?”

He looked me blankly, his whole body a question mark.

“The boys he took to the Sound, I think, but he let Cathy go. Canada somewhere. She’s alive, Erin. She could be a mom now.” I could see the desperation in his eyes. He wanted to believe it, wanted it to be true.

“Was Andre Villiers involved somehow?”

“You tell the cops about that money?” Danny asked. His ham-sized fists were so tightly clenched they were purple.

“I had to.”

“Your dad found out when he started investigating for the Weizes. But he blackmailed my dad.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You know shit,” he wept. “Cathy was in the basement, crying. I gave her one of my sister’s stuffed dogs. The next morning, she was gone ...”

*Dogs are the best people.*

“Big Pat paid RP to keep quiet about it. RP agreed. But RP kept squeezing. My dad drove himself into a tree. Then my mom got sick. It destroyed my family. You know, at my trial, he was a different guy, your dad. He just got more and more crooked, I guess. The gambling.”

The booze, the coke, the doubles. My dad had made so many deals with the devil that even he, blackhearted as he was, couldn’t pay up. He went downhill from there, careening steadily himself.

“I know. I’m sorry, Danny.” I offered him a weak smile, my eyes bright with tears. Men liked that. “What about Andre?”

“Andre had to die, because he was evil,” he said. “He hurt kids. And there’s something else. That night. Someone came to the woods. Before Mac’s stepdad. That friend of your dad. Maybe ’cause your dad was hammered. He shot Ricky in the face, screaming that he was a rapist. Steve shot him in the heart.”

“Ox?” I said. It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be true.

It was at that point he realized I was recording and reached across the table and grabbed my bag from me, breaking the strap as he yanked it. I was starting to

hyperventilate. He seemed to not see the revolver, thank God, but extracted my new iPhone and shook his head. He grabbed my wrist, his thumb driving into the webbing of my thumb, into my wrist bone. Then he pressed stop on the voice recording, hurling the phone against the wall. He dug around further, where his fingers must have found the metal.

“Are you planning on hurting me?” His lips puffed out. His tongue lolled in his mouth, obscene and purple tinged. Inadvertently, I thought of Carole on fire. The tongue of those burned alive can reportedly protrude, flex. I blocked the image. “I mean, aren’t we going to fuck first? We got to. Don’t you want to?”

Danny lunged across the desk, landing in the broken glass, grabbing my hair, some of it in his knuckles. His knuckle hit my eyes, which had only just recovered from Steve Shearer’s class ring. Rage and helplessness overcame me; he was on me, his free hand around my throat, and it was like three men in one. His eyes bore into mine, his gums receded and his face drained of all color and I thought I heard something snap. Was it my hyoid?

I forked my fingers and drove them into his eyeball. There was a sound like a dropped squash, a sickening squelch. Pat had risen, Lazarus-style, hitting Danny over the head with one of those ugly Scandinavian lamps.

Unlike the cartoons, the lamp didn’t just crack him and knock him out – there were no cartoon stars. The base of the lamp collided with the back of his skull. Blood poured from what turned out to be an open head wound. Danny seemed beyond pain, grimacing, half in and out of consciousness as his brother held onto him, crying while I called the ambulance. I watched the shadow of fear pass over his face, a visible panic, and I wondered if it was the faces of the kids, of Andre, that he was seeing because it looked like a violent haunting that passed over him. “I think I get it now,” he said. Then his muscles contracted and relaxed.

Time stopped and we waited some more. We were still waiting for the paramedics when an email pinged through my smashed phone.

It was from [lostinspace@gmail.com](mailto:lostinspace@gmail.com). It wasn’t a message from beyond the grave. Aisling had obviously set up an automated email, cued well in advance, in the event of her death, which she already knew was imminent. It wasn’t supernatural.

And it wasn’t the end of the story.

## ***Resident Alien: The final chapter***

**October 31, 1994**

The sound of the woods, rushing sounds: wind, the warning sounds of the LIRR in the distance, Hellhound throbbing away, beers popping, bong rattling.

Mostly I'm listening. Mostly I'm remembering, when the darkness lets me. No cats, no dogs. Ricky saw three crows overhead that day. Ricky had a Magic 8 Ball and we turned it around and asked questions like Am I going to get laid tonight? Not likely. Ask again. The. Answer is. Uncertain.

PCP, acid, shrooms, speed. Hits from the bong.

Something was there, in the woods; it was moving through them. Through me. Something wicked this way comes.

I was on my knees puking from the mushrooms when I saw them. Two sets of shoes— Converse, aqua — Danny, his calves were thick — and Ricky's work boots. There was a bristling energy, a fury between them. I could hear hissing words and then shouting.

There was a pause in the night, a rip in time.

My hands were cold; I was shaking. Danny was saying something to me like the devil's inside, the devil's inside and I never believed any of it until tonight. I couldn't see so well but it looked like Carole was with Andre, on the top of the car. Her legs fell open like a doll's. Her mouth was an O of agony or ecstasy. I didn't know which. I was so high, everything was turning into something else; it was two people, humping, moving, transforming into the beast with two backs. Andre was on her and he was hooting something. Then Carole was screaming.

I was on my feet and I was standing over Andre. I had the bat in my hand. It was hot and sticky. There was hair and part of a tooth on it.

It was Danny standing over me, saying everything's going to be all right.

Steve was in the gloom of the woods, holding Carole and then suddenly she took off running and Steve took the bat from me and said, Batter up, play ball. You actually did good, Mac. You did real good.

What? I did what?

And then a big bear came out of the woods and he was so angry – he moved fast, screaming fire, and shot stars at Ricky and Ricky he turned into a crow. Steve had his foot on my back and he said, you tell anyone what you saw and you're as dead as that kid over there.

That dead kid was Ricky. That dead kid was Andre.

I thought of the lights as we flew into JFK, dirt in my mouth. The stars were knives, darting out of the sky and stabbing me and over and over he asked me what did you see what did you see?

I swear I never meant to really hurt Andre and then Ricky was gone – in the air, above us all.

Steve, he kept hitting me until I said I saw nothing, I saw nothing, nothing, nothing at all. And after a while, I really meant it.

## Introduction

*I Shot the Devil*, the novel written for my creative artefact for this PhD, is a case study in what I refer to throughout this exegesis as true crime–inspired fiction.

Donna Lee Brien advocates for a genre she calls “true crime fiction” (1999, 131), one that

when based on rigorous research, is not only popular (that is, read by a significant number of people) but also able to write a more discursive, more subjective, less linear criminal history, a feminist criminal history focusing on ethics, emotions and human values.

(1991, 131)<sup>1</sup>

Lee Brien’s argument slightly predates, or rather arrives at, the juncture when creative nonfiction texts, of a true crime nature, are becoming not only popular, but mainstream.<sup>2</sup> Since Lee Brien’s paper, there has been a

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2. Micheal Buozi suggests that such texts “offer a hybrid of mainstream journalism’s empirical rigor and traditional true crime’s narrative demands, producing a textual space for the accused to introduce their own form of Foucault’s subjugated knowledge” (Buozi 2017, 255). In the mid-nineties, a growing literary interest in narrative nonfiction meant that many crime authors “crossed over” into literary fiction – and vice versa – resulting in further cross-pollination between genres. It is significant that this influx of these creative nonfiction true crime narratives sprang from a “boom” period for memoir and traumatic childhood autobiography (Douglas 2010, 13). New journalism-inspired, creative nonfiction true crime narratives, told in the Truman Capote immersive tradition (often by journalists) have become bestsellers from the early nineties onwards, with a few standout titles including: John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994), James Ellroy’s *My Dark Places: An LA Crime Memoir* (1996), Helen Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation: A True Story of Death, Grief and The Law* (2004) and Chloe Hooper’s *The Tall Man: Death and Life on Palm Island* (2008). Many of these titles took out prestigious literary awards, endowing the true crime genre with a new respectability. While this true crime renaissance has persisted in writing and publishing, its growth has extended

growing appetite in contemporary cultural texts, from podcasts and television shows to popular and literary fiction, for narrativised true crime stories – and in historical studies, an increasingly “literary turn” (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 4), encouraged by a deeper understanding modern linguistics and discourse analysis (La Capra 1985, 36).

True crime–inspired fiction is a genre largely by its ambivalent relationship with the real. Because true crime–inspired fiction is at once documentarian and imaginative, factual and invented, it contains possibilities to both subvert and reaffirm Dominick La Capra’s assertion that “literature becomes most redundant when it tells us what can be gleaned from other documentary sources. Paradoxically, literature becomes most superfluous when it confirms the most ‘useful’ and reputable information, what can be found in more literal documents such as police reports” (LaCapra, 1985, 126).

This tension between wanting to recreate and rewrite history with the real is evident in many of the rhetorical decisions of true crime–inspired authors (including my own). In many cases, the true crime events in these texts become secondary to what happens *around* the crimes: the social, political and cultural constellations of traumatic events and how they change us as private citizens and public bodies.

While some might argue it may not be necessary or helpful to focus on the distinctions between the borders of fiction and nonfiction – and/or the need for genre subclassifications – my exegetical research and examination of my own writing of true crime–inspired fiction locates an ideological distinction between true crime–inspired fiction and true crime fiction that I suggest is significant. True crime fiction’s commitment to “rigorous

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into other mediums. Stella Bruzzi (2016, 249) traces the migration of true crime documentary narratives into the mainstream and the explosion of films that followed Jean Xavier De Lestrade’s *Death on The Staircase* (2005), which she maintains are now a discrete genre. Well-produced, quality true crime narrative-style podcasts, following the success of Sarah Koenig’s *Serial* (2014), are also extremely popular, and like *Serial*, several have had an impact on social justice outcomes by reigniting police interest in cold cases and highlighting alleged miscarriages of justice.

research" (Lee Brien 1991, 131) is allied with its endeavour to faithfully replicate the real, filling in gaps and silences with subjective and fictive imaginings – where the latter seek to represent real events in an entirely fictive content. However, like historians, all who struggle with "the strangeness of a dialogue with the dead, who are reconstructed from their textualised remainders ... it (history) is a polemic, a conversation with themselves, others ... bound in institutional and political issues" (La Capra, 1985, 36).

And like historians, writers of true crime–inspired fiction and creative nonfiction/true crime memoir grapple with transference, which La Capra causes "fear of losing control over the past and one's control over both it and oneself" (1985, 72); "backshadowing", the process of superimposing contemporary emotions and reactions onto testimony of subjects of the past (Bernstein 1994, quoted in Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 19–20),<sup>3</sup> ventriloquism<sup>4</sup> and projection. However, what are conceived of as markers of the unlikelihood of objectivity in historical record are cues for the true crime–inspired writer to inject a purposefully "imaginative, subjective and ambiguous response" (Haebich 2015, 2).

Amy Gilman Srebnick provides illumination of these distinctions and the adoption of story in the context of the historical sensational crime by utilising author Tim O'Brien's (1979) dichotomy between "the happening truth" and "story truth" (O'Brien 1979, 203 cited in Gilman Srebnick 2005,

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3. The term is attributed to Michael Andre Bernstein: "a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events as though they too should have known what was to come" (Bernstein 1994, 16).

4. I refer to ventriloquism throughout this exegesis, in a specific context – when an author speaks for a deceased real-life subject. This is within a true crime context; however, Timothy Bewes expounds the impossibility of language in vocalising of trauma and expresses a sense of futility when faced with ethical representation and the colonial subject, dismissing it as mere "ventriloquism" (Bewes 2010, 3).

12) to argue the validity of O'Brien's assertion that "story truth can be truer than happening truth" (2005, 12). This is discussed in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), the happening truth being an accurate or incontrovertible historical truth, and the story truth is "a readers' genuine experience of the story, even if the details are invented" (Young 2017, para 3). O'Brien's metafictional works are also linked to the traumas of war and the collapse between memory, imagination and confabulation (2017, para 3).

In my exegesis, I investigate the cultural climate, sociopolitical landscapes and psychogeography surrounding the writing and reception of true crime-inspired works, true crime fiction / creative nonfiction texts, including my experience of writing and publishing, with my first novel, *Nothing Gold* (still unpublished), and *I Shot the Devil*, which won the 2018 Richell Prize for Emerging Writers. By engaging with theoretical arguments surrounding feminism and crime fiction, representational politics, history, trauma and shame, I posit that a fictional and subjective response to true crime is both a valid and ethical practice and a necessary response to the problem of structural violence. I propose that a creative response enables a more complex and more complete story of history, crime and trauma – especially in the telling of stories of private lives that are "historical, subjective, political and embodied" (Smith and Watson 2007, 357).

In my first essay, I discuss how as an adolescent female I was immersed in media narratives of unlucky victimhood and serial-killer vernacular, which, although it ultimately made me fearful, made me think victims were mythological. The victim had somehow become othered, at once elevated and denigrated – at once deified and abject. Ultimately, they were not *real*. *I don't look like those girls, I'm not like those girls*, I thought at the time. And that gave me a feeling of being invincible, untouchable. *I can walk alone. I am not anyone's victim*. But I was. We all were.

Ultimately, I challenge the notion that true crime-inspired fiction and crime fiction itself is inherently violent and misogynistic, but more a logical response to society where structural violence is a fact of life. As a feminist crime writer, I am inspired by Linda Alcoff's suggestion that in "crises of representation" (Alcoff 1991–2, 9), the "retreat response" (17) is not ethically neutral, nor is it culturally considerate. Retreat is not an option for me, either. However, the problems of representation alone are inherent in the term

“representation” itself, as Gayatri Chakravory Spivak points out in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” – does representation conceive of individuals as constituents in a political sense, or does it imagine a kind of re-presentation? (Spivak 1988, 70). Both applications are saturated with imperialistic claims over a subject. Instead, I argue that we cannot really claim to be ethically sound, more rigorous in our commitment to exploring possibilities of voicing and enabling agency, as opposed to avoidance and retreat.

I also argue that true crime–inspired fiction seeks both to expunge the traumatic effects of crimes – seeking cultural catharsis and narrative resolution where real life offers none. The bibliotherapeutic possibilities inherent within crime fiction and true crime–inspired fiction warrant further investigation. Furthermore, there has been no formal study of true crime–inspired fiction writers’ techniques and not enough space to do so exhaustively here within the scope of this thesis. I have drawn upon Leanne Dodd’s doctoral research into the bibliotherapeutic possibilities of crime fiction in this exegesis, proposing that “trauma fiction can provide a safe space for readers to confront fears brought about by this trauma culture” (Dodd 2017, 3).

In my second essay, I investigate the ethical and representational responsibilities that creators such as myself consider when utilising true crime for fictive purposes – rather than analysing its existence or its growing popularity, the writerly and readerly magnetism to the genre, which I call the “true crime effect”.

## I. What If It's Him? Ethics and Shame in Telling Trauma in Fiction

"What is this horrific mother tongue I am trying to speak? What can I know of its legibility, if indeed it is legible?" (Orford 2013, 222)

### Perth, May 2017

It is an apocalyptically quiet Saturday night in Perth's western suburbs when we pull up to 12 Wellington Street in the dark, in a three-hundred-dollar nineties-model BMW that looks like it has been hot-wired. The interiors of the car doors are exposed; a spaghetti tangle of wires and fuses hangs like intestines. None of the windows open. The autumn sunset over the Indian Ocean is spectacular and gauzy, a Turner painting gone wrong, which inspires a queasy reverence, nostalgia and a gnawing sense of dread. The dread has been with me all week.

My friend and I have been house-sitting a double-storey limestone mansion at the end of a cul-de-sac in a luxury North Fremantle housing estate, bookended by the Swan River and lush parkland. Silos and cranes loom in the distance. The ocean is visible over the train line, a long shoreline of dreaming and danger that stretches infinitely in my early childhood imagination.

On the first night staying in North Freo, I had taken the train home from Curtin University. It was only 7 pm, but growing dark. I was at two per cent battery on my phone, freaked out by the lack of human traffic and light on the Stirling Highway compared to the populated streets of Melbourne's inner north. I spotted a stray black high heel, which was adjacent to a bench advertising a property manager, a metanarrative *mise en scene* replaying in my mind ever since.

What woman has not slipped off their shoes walking home in a moment of heel-induced agony, or drunken abandon? One could easily fall to the ground unnoticed. Or could it be that the shoe's owner was followed and grabbed, one heel lost in her abduction? Desperately lost in the labyrinthine estate, a car idling along the lonely street, I finally found my bearings and ran home. I felt foolish and puffed, but it seemed all too easy to disappear, totally unobserved.

All week long I have been thinking about the Claremont victims.

I included a similar detail of a dropped shoe in my final draft of my first novel, *Nothing Gold*. The novel was the product of an ongoing fascination with late-nineties Perth's urban/suburban spaces and the Claremont murders, a high-profile Western Australian true crime cold case that was then, still, very cold. Three young women disappeared from the Claremont area between January 1996 and March 1997; two were found murdered in remote bushland near major roads on opposite sides of the city. Their names were Sarah Spiers, 18, Jane Rimmer, 23, and Ciara Glennon, 27.

Claremont, less than ten kilometres from Perth's CBD, banked along the north side of the Swan River in Perth's elite western suburbs, is a kind of living monument to Perth's private school culture. From the newly developed beach-bound northern suburbs, I was introduced to its tree-lined streets, heritage houses, ye olde municipal buildings and iconic private schools by friends I had made at the University of Western Australia (UWA).

Just off Stirling Highway is Bayview Terrace, a designer shopping district where not-so-desperate housewives get day procedures and grocery shop at upscale provedores. At night, the strip is a party precinct, colonised by tertiary students and affluent twenty-to-thirty-somethings who congregate at The Claremont (formerly The Continental or The Conti). Club Bayview, colloquially known as Club Bayspew, is now closed. All three women had attended one or both venues on the night of their disappearance. And they literally seemed to vanish; it was not sleight of hand, nor was it a trick of the eye. At the time, I saw it as a kind of dark and powerful magic that had taken place. I originally based my novel on the murders, but found I could not replicate the real, and instead wrote a fictionalised story of murders occurring in Highgate and Subiaco: two very different sets of victims from two different sides of the city.

Like my fictional abductee in *Nothing Gold*, I have taken my shoes off on my walk home, hyperaware of enticing a nearby predator with the sound of heels on pavement. Perhaps it has been since the public safety campaigns targeting Perth, one of which featured *Blue Heelers* actor Lisa McCune, a TV campaign infuriatingly titled "Use Your Head" (Laurie 1997, 26), and posters

featuring a lone woman in heels click-clacking down a pedestrian underpass, the cartoonish shadow of a man looming behind her.

At the time of the abductions, I was seventeen. I had learned my father knew all three victims – very coincidentally, very tangentially. It was around the time of the abduction that I was at my dad’s rented Como flat for the weekend, and I sat in the spare room with my history textbook, after getting high on too-strong weed. I was caught in a strange loop of panic – his voice from the other room, offering me a sandwich, was suddenly strange. He worked as a travelling salesman, and like me, was interested in true crime. At the time of the Claremont murders, many women all over Perth were looking at their fathers, partners, brothers with the same sense of poisoned possibility. And for a moment I let my mind hold the thought: *What if?*

My friend, I will call her Frankie – driver of the fucked BMW – is a photographer and an artist. Buddhist born and raised, she eschews violence and doesn’t revel in tragedy. Yet, she was the one who suggested we do a drive-by of the Mosman Park flats I’ve been reading about. She remarked that she only did weird ghoulish stuff like this when we’re together. In fact, we did a drive-by of the former mayor of Claremont’s house twenty years ago, after she had a spectacularly weird interaction with him as an eighteen-year-old (again, her suggestion). They were neighbours. There was a property border question. He quizzed her at the door, turning on the charm like a used-car salesman, repeatedly asking her if she was alone in the house, peering behind her. It spooked her.

Like all young women in these suburbs in the late nineties, our psychic landscapes were formatively shaped by the Claremont crimes. There were over 35,000 calls to Crime Stoppers in the three months following the disappearance of the last known victim, Ciara Glennon, in March 1997, causing enormous strain on police staffing and resources (Laurie 1997, 24). This was, in part, prompted by a series of public safety campaigns and requests for public assistance. Crime Stoppers had heard it all. Women all over town were shopping the men they knew: fathers, sons, exes, friends, workmates, partners. No one, including the mayor of Claremont, was exempt (Marshall 2007, 28).

On the morning of 4 April 1997, I was on my way back from a rave in Lancelin with a few other University of Western Australia (UWA) first-year girls. Our car had a flat along Wanneroo Road, Yanchep, an outer coastal suburb, then undeveloped, fifty-six kilometres north of the city. None of us knew how to change a tyre. We stood on the side of the road, seedy and desperate, until someone pulled over to assist. The body of Ciara Glennon had just been disposed of in dense bushland. We were so close, we could have literally flagged down the Claremont killer. Eighteen years later, there were reports of a taxi with its headlights off, pre-dawn, driving down the very lonely stretch of Pipidinny Road (Flint 2005).

On my return to Perth, my father presented me with a folder that contained press clippings and a copy of what read like a police statement but was typed up by a civilian. They'd come into his possession entirely by chance last year via a former taxi driver, Steven Ross, who had been a suspect in the Claremont case. In yet another "real life" coincidence, Ross had become a suspect alongside Weygers and was the author of the rambling statement that was randomly passed on to my father, the true crime obsessive, in a Midland shopping centre in 2017 – and to me in 2018. The typed report reads like someone struggling with literacy – it's riddled with typos and is grammatically incorrect. The last page is a handwritten page of theories; the penmanship is childlike, the writing chaotic. It's a disturbed and disturbing account of Sarah Spiers's movements in what were presumably the last forty-eight hours of her life. Sarah has never been found.

Steven Ross is clearly obsessed with these crimes; a page of scrawled theories follows. The statement – and Ross himself – reads like something from a crime fiction novel: an eccentric suspect penning his own statement and circulating it to the police and the public some twenty years later to clear his name.

This was just one in a series of stranger-than-real-life twists, six degrees or less of separation, presentiments and synchronicities involved with these crimes and my life experience that it reads at points like unconvincing fiction. In fact, it reads in parts like *my* crime fiction novel.

Ross claims he collected two fares on Australia Day eve; one girl was so intoxicated she didn't know where she lived and the second girl was drug-affected, or so he reckoned. He then inexplicably invited a random

bloke in the car to share the fare. During the ride, the male and the drug-affected girl began to chat. Ross deposited the paralytic girl near Dalkeith Park, leaving her to find her way home at dawn. En route to South Perth where the second girl lived, the random male and the high girl chatted amicably. However, the random male reportedly forced the remaining girl out of the cab (her cab) to walk the rest of her journey home, despite her requests to be dropped off at her original destination. Ross uses the word “duress” and suspects “something’s not right” as the stranger accompanied her. But the weary cabbie didn’t intervene. Ross instead went to the casino. On his shift. He didn’t report the incident. Both girls survived this cab ride. Presumably, the drunk girl was fine. The allegedly high girl was Sarah Spiers. She went missing the next night, never to return home.

Ross is obsessed with Mosman Park; his theories underpin the victims’ connection to the suburb. This is not a rogue theory – most people cognisant of the details of the case know that all three women attended Iona Presentation College in Mosman Park, albeit in different years. Sarah visited the Wellington Street flats several times. And although Mosman Park resembles a Toorak by the sea, there are pockets of cheap housing, namely brutalist apartment blocks. And the suburb has a resonance with crime – stranger violence – and murder.

Incidentally, my father was also friendly with Pamela Lawrence, the owner of Flora Metallica. She was murdered in her shop in 1994, another brutal incident of stranger homicide. Another incident of a high-profile wrongful conviction – following Daryl Beamish and John Button for Edgar Eric Cooke’s murders (1959–63), and the Mickelburg brothers, framed for a gold heist known as the Perth Mint Swindle (1982). While Lawrence’s murder reverberated around Perth for its sensationalism, it was not exactly an isolated incident, rather one episode in a series of violent homicides in and around the suburb.

While Mosman Park is a costal and riverside western suburb, it has an entirely different resonance from Claremont, where these abductions occurred. Cottesloe, a neighbouring pine tree-splashed, azure and yellow sand dream of a suburb is known for wealthy farmers, old money, tourists and drinkers drawn to its famous beach and sundowners at beachside hotels. Peppermint Grove, Dalkeith: old and new money and lots of it, lining the

mansions along Millionaires Row. It has been pointed out to me that the peninsular nature of these suburbs contributes to a sense of confinement – and its insularity from the other western suburbs.

### **An “Air of Manufactured Innocence”: A Psychogeographical Exploration into Perth’s Public Spaces**

David Whish-Wilson (2015) refers to the role the physical and geographical isolation of Perth in the context of political and judicial corruption. Perth’s “air of manufactured innocence” (Hewett 1982, quoted in Whish-Wilson 2015, 5) reinforces a sense of safety, wealth and seclusion. In the media and police telling of the Claremont abductions (and many other homicides involving women), the narrative suggests that random violence has forced its way into a sleepy coastal town – editing out the role of rape culture and the saturation of sexual violence. The story of unlucky, ill-fated victimhood persists in media narratives about women being murdered by men they don’t know.

Despite re-experiencing a pronounced sense of dread and isolation when I visit, my twin love and loathing of Perth’s sprawling suburbs resulted in a complicated push–pull effect that saw me flee and return – persisting with *Nothing Gold* over ten years. And despite its geographical isolation and small-town character, Perth has known numerous sensational serial murders. Robert Drewe writes of “an eerie feeling that hung over the coastal suburbs” and an “ominous sensation that lingered over the Captain Stirling, Nedlands park and highway hotels at the time of the Cooke murders” (Drewe 2000, 190). To this day, I picture Eric Edgar Cooke with his harelip and one-thousand-yard stare, stalking a potential victim as I pass what used to be an old fish and chip shop in Shenton Park.

In my book, *Nothing Gold*, my protagonist pictures the ghost of the sex-killer couple, known as the Birnies, driving their Datsun down Stirling Highway, crushed Bundy cans rattling at their feet. Laura Elizabeth Woollett replicates this image with eerie likeness in her short story “Cathy” in *The Love of a Bad Man*:

Doing eighty, we take Stirling Highway across the river, past the old factory buildings and flat ground that hasn’t changed in twenty years. Dingo Flour Mill. Train tracks. Powerlines. Nothing growing but wild grass and bindi grass. I drink rum and cola and pass them to David at

the lights ... "Look at that one," David says, every time we see a young thing sticking her thumb out or waiting alone at a bus stop. "Ask if she wants a lift." (Woollett 2016, 557)

I attribute these parallels and synchronicities to the notion that while memory is private, subjective, embodied, it is also collective: a shared cultural text (Douglas 2010, 20). Memory is also geographic: place-based. Historian Maria Tumarkin describes sites such as Port Arthur, the site of a modern mass shooting and an Indigenous massacre site as "traumascapes" (Tumarkin 2002). The contemporary Port Arthur, post-Martin Bryant, she describes as "being torn between wanting to erase and wanting to keep objects inscribed with trauma, ruins, as it turned out, were a way of doing both" (Tumarkin 2004, 17).

The inclination to create true crime-inspired fiction seems to me to be a similar impulse towards erasure and enshrinement – and a form of reckoning with historical forces beyond individual control – an impulse La Capra links to the historian's anxiety-driven imperative to "master the past" (La Capra 1985, 25) and for me, a way to apprehend a shifting psychogeographical map of a city lost to time and gentrification.

It was 2006 when I left Perth for Melbourne. As the mining boom surged, all the live music and old-man pubs were rapidly being transformed into slate-grey bars for young professionals. Music and bookstores bulldozed for designer outlets; the iconic Subiaco markets were torn down. True crime-inspired fiction was a way to revisit these lost venues and cultural landscapes, not necessarily to promulgate nostalgia, although there is guilty pleasure in revisiting the old haunts of pre-gentrification, but that seeks to force the reader to remember cultural blackspots, flaws in the overall airbrushed image that government and corporate bodies present as safe, sanitised, lucky: rich.

In writing my novel, in writing this exegesis, I mentally scanned the uniform, tree-lined heritage streets of Subiaco, the wide Federation-style streets of Northbridge, the arid grid of Highgate, an area where street prostitution was once perceptible. While women in any kind of dress and of all ages, prior to the mid-2000s, could not walk down the streets of Highgate unmolested by vehicle-bound johns (known as kerb crawlers) in the daytime, a Vice crackdown on streetwalkers, which made street soliciting illegal

(*Prostitution Act 2000*), and an increased police presence disappeared them. I was told that at night, around the lush oasis of Hyde Park, they would reappear, but not in the same numbers as before. These erasures of people and buildings, casualties of time and gentrification, however unsightly they are to town planners, are a loss – a different “Lost Perth” from the city nostalgically rendered on Facebook groups. I wanted to record its existence, rather than read a purely sentimental recollection of the era.

In the case of Claremont, there are no visible ruins, no physical evidence of the crimes. There is, however, a corpus of collective psychic scar tissue from twenty-plus years of waiting, wondering, fearing – for those intimately involved, and the population of Perth itself. Psychogeography, a philosophical concept and practice, sprang from the European Situationist movement in the 1950s (Bridger 2013, 286; Lyons 2017, para 2). Originally it involved recorded written and photographic interactions with largely urban spaces, a way of cataloguing and criticising the psychic, social and cultural impact of a gentrifying capitalist landscape (Bridger 2013, 286). Traditionally it is a “masculinist movement” (286), involving the practice of moving leisurely through landscapes designed and built by male bodies. Popularised by the inquisitive (male) flaneur (Lyons 2017, para 5), the ritual and the ideology are defined by the social, racial and gendered privilege to move through spaces, without fear of grievous harm to the physical or mental body. My experience of Perth has been one of unsafety – from low-key poor menace on urban streets to outright assault.

Maggie Orford, who writes true crime as fiction, particularly as it pertains to sexual violence towards women in South Africa, argues that the experience of the city is gendered (Orford 2013, 226):

The twentieth century city produced two kinds of streetwalker. One is male, the flaneur who walks about endlessly, is able to venture everywhere. The other streetwalker is the flaneuse, the prostitute, the woman alone on the streets who is always suspect, always a target, frequently the victim.

Orford proposes that in the “psycho-geography of the gendered space produced by a misogynistic patriarchal society like South Africa” (2013, 226), crime fiction is the only genre in which women like her protagonist, Dr Clare

Hart, a PhD in femicide and serial rape, are permitted plausible mobility: a reason and a place to exist in public spaces (226).

### **Narratives of Unsafety in the City**

As Orford (2013) points out, moving through the city is a gendered experience (226). As women, we are attuned to the sonics of fear: in public spaces, footsteps behind us, the hoot and shout of a drunken group; and at home, raised voices, cracking beers, the sound of doors slamming – or opening. As women, we have played what a friend of mine refers to as “the long game” – the polite nodding so as not to provoke anger, the curt acknowledgment, the head down so as not to encourage them too much, the artful see-saw between showing-no-fear and depicting submission in public spaces. I think about the Australian movie *Last Train to Freo* (2006), which captures the fear and anxiety of being trapped in a guardless carriage, on the last train, with unhinged, drunk or predatory men. And then exiting the carriage at poorly lit and unpopulated stops, where we frequently must venture into dark underpasses to make it to the road.

*We take off our shoes so we can run.*

Stories of stranger violence have a different resonance; they sound an alarm that is silent for victims of crimes in the home, by known offenders. In Melbourne’s inner north, June 2018, Eurydice Dixon was raped and murdered in a park, just 900 metres from her home. At the time of Eurydice’s murder, Victoria Police’s initial response to women was to encourage them to exercise “situational awareness” (Davey 2018, para 8). This was met with widespread, vocal outrage – social and news media outrage (Davey 2018 para 5), a remonstration from the premier of the police’s response to the “problem” of unsafe female bodies in unsecured public spaces:

“These recommendations for public safety that only seem to apply to women are a clear symptom of a gender-unequal society,” Patty Kinnersly told Guardian Australia. “Women are already cautious. Telling women to behave more cautiously will not reduce violence against them, but rather will limit their freedom and reinforce the belief that if violence is perpetrated against them, it is their fault.” (paras 18, 19)

It seemed that back in 1996 and 1997 fear, rather than outrage about victim blaming and unsafety, was the dominant discourse. Now we have

private transport apps such as Uber, which has not been without incident, but which provides driver details, licence plate numbers and photographs of drivers. Now in Melbourne, a female-run service, Sheba, exists specifically for female passengers of all ages. For years after the Claremont murders, girls texted our taxi driver's licence plate to friends on nights out – even when we made the cross-country exodus from Perth to Melbourne, he was every man, he was no man. He's still out there, the papers screamed; you are not safe. We feared men in uniforms. Every girl I know from Perth, whether they fit the victim demographic or not, was a potential victim. I wonder how many other girls pictured the Claremont Serial Killer mute and Lego bland, travelling down the Stirling Highway in a meticulous Toyota, slate grey.

We were told Perth was safe, except for this monster – or monsters – who was preying on young women. That's why mobile phone sales increased exponentially in Perth (Laurie 1997, 23), why women dyed their blonde hair brown, and changed their patterns of moving around at night. What interests me about this, in externally changing our behaviours and appearance, is how we internalised mistrust, internalised fear and how we ingested the question – what if it's him? And for two women, how it was.

### **Traumascapes: My Dark Places**

One night when I was nineteen, high on E outside of a Wellington Street nightclub, I went to the ATM with no real intention of getting money out. I wanted to look at the flashing screen and interact with it, as if it were a video game. Inside the loft where the ATM stood it was smoky, sticky with spilled alcopops and triangulated desires, people offering unwanted shoulder massages. Ecstasy made me physically introverted, monkish, wanting to hermetically seal myself off in the safety of my Highgate room. I was about nine or ten metres from friends, who congregated at the bench. A man approached me; he asked a question, something about the time. I wasn't sure what he was saying. The event occurred in a kind of slow motion, a jump cut – words muddy, his age and frame amorphous and indistinct. What was clear was his energetic presence. If you have ever been in the water with a shark, or had a dog turn on you, or watched someone become psychotic, you will know what I mean. As a child, I knew how to read the energy in a room – who was upset, who was angry – how long till an eruption occurred. This time, I had no time.

I must have looked at my wrist; I had no watch. I think my wallet was a red Hello Kitty wallet, my bag was black patent leather with red straps. No, the Hello Kitty wallet is a false memory. I bought Frankie that wallet. Sometimes our memories bleed together, are conjoined.

*Are you ready?* he asked.

His eyes went totally black.

He grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back in one motion and dragged me, with great violence, into the open alley. I began to scream, very loudly, and this obviously startled him. He threw me on the ground and ran away.

Male friends of mine noticed and gave chase but did not catch up with him.

I was asked later, by the police, what he looked like. I reported it days later because it occurred to me through his boldness in plucking a girl off the street that he might have done it before, maybe even with different results, or at least that he would do it again, would keep trying. His hatred for me was so palpable – on an animal level, I knew, this man wanted me dead. I had never seen pupils dilate like that before, so they looked entirely black. The air all around me felt wrong – I was doused in it. It felt like evil.

I was convinced by my housemate to report the alley man to the police a few days later. I had been high and drunk but wouldn't admit this to the police, a young male cop, who seemed exquisitely bored and judgemental. So I edited my account of the night. The gaping ellipses of events, the overall fuzziness of the night, made making the police report much like a macabre game of *Guess Who*.

*He had glasses. He was an Asian man. Maybe in his forties? At nineteen, anyone older than me was a homogenous old – and forties was ancient. I would say South-East Asian, like Vietnamese, maybe.*

*You know your Asians, do ya?*

It was the only reaction I'd seen from him thus far. I retaliated by correcting his spelling mistake. This disappointing interaction aside, it was allegedly treated as a potentially serious sexual assault by the police. However, it was never followed up on. And I duly informed my family and it was shrugged off. Nothing happened; just a fright. I think I expected not to

be traumatised because no sexual assault had occurred. Yet, the whole year after is a fugue.

A twenty-one year old woman, known as Jessie in the media, was attacked in the same area as Eurydice Dixon a few months before her. She reported a man running at her from behind with great force – tackling her in what she referred to as a kind of “bear hug” from behind. She screamed and fought and believes the amount of screaming may have prevented the next assault from occurring: “I have never felt that somebody could rip me out of this world before,” she said (Pearson 2008, para 4).

That phrase literally winded me. Because it was yet another *What if?* I had that same moment of understanding.

While these cautionary tales have a compelling sense of dread, what is more terrifying is that, statistically, the home is the real horror movie with the monsters being men that the victims already know.

According to Bureau of Statistics data, of the women who reported being physically assaulted, 92% said the most recent assault was perpetrated by someone she knew. Sixty-five percent of these women said the assault occurred at home. (Davey, 2018, paras 20, 21)

Like many young women, I had already experienced sexual assault, but it had not been perpetrated by a stranger. And it was not reported. It led me into many dark places, including a severed neural pathway and a large, unsightly keloid scar. I was sewn up badly; however, I regained most of the feeling in my left hand. My mother was angry at me. She said the reason I was sewn up badly was because I did it to myself; doctors hate self-harmers.

This is a story within a Matryoshka doll of stories.

Why tell it? Why tell them?

### **Writing Trauma: Shame and the Public and Private Body**

Susan Bradley Smith claims that confessional poetics, or “telling stories from the contemplative trauma pad” (2018 para 4), are a form of “disobedience” (para 16) – in fact they are “the only form of disobedience at many a woman writer’s legal disposal” (para 16). These sometimes-lurid confessionals serve as a form of bibliotherapeutic activism (para 4):

For some of us, showing life in its full monstrosity — no matter what costume we must assume and even if it involves a loudspeaker and a hashtag — is the only business in town. It is also the only way to turn

trouble away from its ruinous attachment to our lives, which are otherwise sometimes too horrible to bear. (para 5)

My personal narrative of experiencing real physical endangerment and trauma is not an indulgence, although there is an element of narcissism in my adoption of my experience, according to La Capra (1985, 72), a sense of trying to mitigate my own anxiety about history – my experience of unsafety in Perth’s public (and private) spaces – the police’s reaction to a “non-typical” offender profile. I recall this story because while my real sense of experiencing physical endangerment is not an indulgence, I am aware that I write these accounts of unsafety as a white, European-born, female-born body moving through a post-colonial space. My unsafety is experienced on stolen land, land where massacres are not demarcated on common maps, where atrocities against the Noongar people occurred, and reoccur. The Indigenous experiences of these same public spaces are from a completely different standpoint. These are sites soaked in a singular cultural significance and moored in intergenerational trauma and ongoing physical threat and persecution at the hand of authorities.

In Tumarkin’s traumascapes, even without a physical monument, a psychic imprint of tragedy remains. Tumarkin (2013) suggests that even though monuments to history are static, history itself has an “afterlife” (17), “because death, anguish, loss of faith, all that is inconsolable in this life, finds its afterlife in the bare bones of everyday objects, buildings, people’s faces” (13). Writing is an act of memory, both private and public. Can writing trauma keep the atrocities of the past and the present alive in memory? And more to the point, how does trauma in the public realm affect the private body?

Trauma is from the Greek word meaning wound: “the self-altering, even shattering experience of injury and harm” (Gilmore 2001, 3 cited in Douglas 2010, 107). When we talk about trauma, the corporeal is always present – by nature, trauma is experienced viscerally. And, as Kate Douglas posits, the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied (Douglas 2010, 37). Trauma theorist Leigh Gilmore, reiterates that the complex and perverse nature of trauma is the difficulty in trying to articulate the experience of the wound (Gilmore 2001 cited Douglas 2010, 107), while the trauma or the wound is “central to self-representation”

(107). In autobiography, particularly traumatic autobiography, Gilmore claims that “truth claims about identity are made through the body” (116).

Timothy Bewes (2011) argues that the nature, practice and purpose of shame, specifically post-colonial shame in writing, is in its nature based on deficit (23). Bewes expounds the impossibility of language in vocalising trauma and a sense of futility of ethical representation, dismissing it as mere “ventriloquism” (3). Bewes’s version of shame denies the commonly utilised binary between shame and guilt and situates shame as ontologically closer to pride – post-colonial shame being an extension of colonial pride (32). Shame and writing are “coterminous” but fundamentally unresolvable (23); therefore, writing will not exorcise shame, nor can it properly represent it (23).

Sabine Binder (2017) criticises such quintessentially Eurocentric postcolonial approaches to trauma (101) and its apprehension of trauma as “unknowable, unclaimable and unrepresentable” (100). Elspeth Probyn concurs, postulating that “the rawness and indeed the embodiment of trauma, ‘the un-healing wound’, in life and in memory, is what produces the need for the word, for clear communication” (2005, 156).

Like trauma, shame and memories of shame are moored in the somatic. For Probyn, shame can collapse the binary between private body and the public self (2005, 41):

The promiscuity of shame, heightened through its telling, broadens notions of what is personal and what is social. The body is key here because it generates and carries so much meaning and in ways that academics have not really attended to. We have tended to overly privilege the body’s cultural meanings and have not really tried to tell the psychosomatic body’s stories. (41)

Shame is perceived as subjected and sociocultural; genetic, the body a site where social rules and norms are passed down (Probyn, 2005, 47). Quoting somatic psychologist Katharine Young, Probyn affirms: “Bodies are passed down in families ... ‘The body is the flesh of memory’” (Young as cited in Probyn 2005, 47).

Probyn draws a comprehensive sociological and sociophysical catalogue of epistemologies of shame to conclude that rather than a reactive experience to the perceived violation of norms, the shame experience can

provoke a “global revaluation of self” (2005, 45) and incite lasting personal and social change. In contrast, guilt, especially white guilt, is fleeting, and closer to the self-congratulatory prideful experience of shame that Bewes describes (Bewes 2011, 9). Probyn goes on to say “The rules that structure a field or a social space also repel outsiders. This is precisely what happens when a body knows it does not belong within a certain space” (2011, 49).

The sense of the *unheimlich* I still feel in Perth, despite spending only eighteen years of my life there, I used to attribute to my Europeaness. I always felt dislocated in Perth and from my extensive Irish family and my heritage. I thought I was estranged, because I was a stranger. I realise that the original fear and sometimes loathing was linked to white guilt. And now the feeling is closer to shame. And this case; my interest in this case has provoked shame. I became obsessed with the Claremont case partly because of this question entering my consciousness: What if it’s him? This too caused great, white-hot shame.

And yet I was only one of so many women in Perth asking.

One woman, one daughter, was right – when they asked this question, if they asked. Did they sleep thickly, or restlessly, a weight on their chest, their guts churning? The body somatises knowing? How overwhelming their must shame be. We take on our lover’s DNA; their skin and hair and blood and genes become ours too. Do they deny it, again and again, the spirals of DNA, looping and replicating in them? If shame collapses the notion of the private body and the public self as Probyn suggests, can conquering shame cure the epidemic of internalising and silencing traumatic events? If so, I write it here, to lift the gag, to interrupt the silence, my own and others, that has surrounded public and private dialogues about gendered violence. I claim my own place in the traumascapes, the ruins of a lost city where three women lost their life at the hands of a prolific and unapprehended predator.

#### **Claremont as a Cautionary Tale: The Making of a “Celebrated” Case**

Amy Gilman Srebnick (2005) studies the intersection between fiction, history and crime through the lens of “celebrated cases”: cases that communicate both dominant and subterranean social and cultural anxieties about changing cultural moments. Sensational cases also “tell much about the press, about the transmission of information and about the relationship between private life and public culture” (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 16). Gilman

Srebnick (2005) argues that celebrated cases are so compelling because they occur at the “critical disjuncture of a cultural moment” (129), offering “windows into why historical events become culturally iconic” (11).

In the Claremont murders, the mystery of how these young, Caucasian, upper-middle-class women literally vanished from a wealthy nightclub strip is just one of numerous reasons the case became such a high-profile, sensational or celebrated case. The same subtext of sociocultural anxiety concerning unmarried young women moving away from the family home, working and moving around in the city unchaperoned (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 16) parallels the vulnerable and fecund bodies of Grace Brown in 1906, fictionalised in *An American Tragedy* (Theodore Dreiser, 1924) and Edgar Allan Poe’s Marie Rogêt, AKA Mary Rogers, a true crime story of a young woman found floating in the Hudson in 1841, which formed the basis of the short story “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842, 11). A similar cautionary tale is embedded in the media and police narrative of the Claremont murders: a dark fable of young women, away from the family home, single and drinking heavily in a party district, unsupervised.

Like many serial murder cases, the women’s likeness was emphasised in local papers and broadsheets. And because this was an (unsolved) serial murder case and a closed taskforce, confidentiality was fundamental, which meant rumours abounded; speculation rushed in to fill the gaps in the narrative. Conspiracy theories, gossip and media speculation posited that officials were involved, men in uniform, police officers, army men, taxi drivers. After all, who could coerce three intelligent, adult women into a vehicle so soundlessly but someone in an official capacity?

Where historical archives can be seen to be traditionally oppressive, silencing the “voice of the victim, accused and accuser” (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 9), they contain possibilities to “actively encourage writing that is imaginative, subjective and ambitious” (Haebich 2015, 1). Furthermore, crime fiction inspires identification – a means to connect empathetically to character and events, connecting readers and those experiencing trauma to a larger “cultural consciousness” (Dodd 2017, 3).

### **True Crime becomes Crime Fiction**

According to Walter Benjamin, crime offers “figures that fascinate” who open our eyes to “unanticipated constellations of social and historical

forces and psychological processes" (Walter Benjamin quoted in Haebich 2015, 4).

In Denise Mina's *The Long Drop* (2017), serial killer Peter Manuel goes on an all-night pub crawl with a man whose family he had murdered. This is a crime fact, even though it reads like fiction. And all these truths are stranger than fiction: strange twists and characters, seemingly implausible storylines that are beyond "story like" and define this celebrated case. Some true crimes are so novelistic, they are hyperreal. Seltzer says "true crime is crime fact that reads like, or looks like, crime fiction" (2008, 11).

The Claremont case read like fiction, offering an array of colourful, eccentric – nearly fictive – characters, who all appeared guilty, were guilty in some way, or were at least hiding secrets. There was the flamboyant and controversial mayor (an ex-psychologist). Then the dubious overseas experts outsourced by the flailing taskforce. The special agent flown in from America who "sounded like an FBI sleuth in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*" (Laurie 1997, 28), who delivered inane made-for-TV observations about the killer, such as: "This guy sure likes to kill." (28) The FBI agent who came in to construct a profile, suggested the public police individuals who displayed the following: "headaches, absenteeism, behavioural changes, including paying a lot of attention to their car" (28). Then there was the much publicly derided questionnaire given to suspects, based on an American codebreaker's theory that in "answering provocative questions, the guilty may sometimes hint at their responsibility for their crime" (28). The questionnaire posed questions like: "Did you abduct or murder Sarah Spiers?" and "Should we believe the answers to these questions?" (28). For a killer who evaded the taskforce for twenty years, this is retrospectively more ludicrous than it seemed at the time.

The taskforce was criticised for their myopic and obsessive focus on one suspect, a public servant who was captured attempting to pick up a female undercover officer in the Claremont area during a covert sting operation. Lance Williams was known for clocking up to thirty laps of the area on a given night, where he offered intoxicated women lifts home and went through the Hungry Jacks drive-through like clockwork (Marshall, 2007, 124). Unlikely white knight, predator or maladapted loner, Williams ticked a series of boxes.

Then there was the audit of taxi drivers: 2500 drivers and the first mass DNA testing in Australian history (Marshall 2007, 138). More than 78 cab drivers lost their licence amid rigorous police checks and comprehensive DNA testing (24). There were theories and rumours of a bad taxi driver, which was supplemented by a story in the media about a woman flagging a cab in Claremont, only to find a man, presumably his accomplice, crouching in the back seat – the woman jumped out at the lights to safety. There was a sighting of an off-duty cab near where Ciara Glennon’s body was dumped (201). A documented 40 per cent drop in cabs being used in 1996–7 (138) demonstrated the city-wide anxiety surrounding the widespread theory that the women got into an official vehicle – namely a cab. There were worse things, rumour had it – they could have got into a police vehicle (24).

The threat of violence closer to home was more compelling. Fear sold many headlines.

From my hours in the archives, clicking through the microfilm, I retraced the paranoia promoted by outlets such as *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times*. From January 1996 to 1997, the peak of the Claremont abductions and murders, coverage of the victims last movements and the Macro taskforce flooded the broadsheets. These multiple page spreads became serials, with the same tone of *Penny Dreadfuls*. One *West Australian* serial dated Tuesday March 18, 1997 was entitled: “The Glennon Mystery” (Mallabone, 1997). Several sensational subheadings were included: “Case rings alarm bells” and “Perth’s trail of terror.” (1997). The Glennon Mystery continued the next day with a new headline: “Stalker is a Mr Ordinary.” (1997).

Victoria Laurie (1997) draws upon crime researcher David Indermauer’s insistence that violence in public spaces in Western Australia were statistical anomalies to illustrate how the media and police were co-authoring a story: it was a mystery and a cautionary tale in one. It made fear the dominant culture and the monster a dark shape looming in the periphery. Indermauer’s referred to a ‘bidding war’ between media outlets and police public safety announcements, that targeted Perth women going out nightclubbing: *don’t go out alone, don’t walk by yourself, stay in groups: never walk alone* (Laurie 1997, 26). Concerned about the level of fear mongering, Indermauer went so far as to propose that “down the track there may need to

be a public reckoning of whether fear and anxiety are commodities to be used by the police in pursuit of their interests" (Laurie 1997, 26).

The public safety message was broadcast on TV, in papers, on posters. Women were pictured on the front of *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times*, in groups, wasted, clinging to lampposts, trailing away from the flock, in tiny dresses and high heels. The police presence in this strip was enormous. There were vehicles stationed there, undercover police even. Yet more girls disappeared. Don't be dumb. So, take a taxi? But wasn't the killer a taxi driver? Be smart; stay safe. Stay alive. I was still in the protection of a crowd, at an ATM, under the surveillance of cameras, clad in black from head to toe, a non-conventional non-victim, and I was attacked. I was just lucky.

Writing about fear and Western Australian crime fiction, Whish-Wilson (2015) maintains:

What is truly corrosive and frightening is not the danger to the crime fiction "hero" but the damage done to the body politic, just as what is represented isn't the policing of the kind of regular crime associated with a modern metropolis but the implicit violence and layering of fear associated with protecting the reputations of often powerful interests. (159)

Police media campaigns smacked of citizen surveillance and self-policing, including the "costly" *Act on Your Suspicions* saturation campaign aimed at reaching 90 per cent of Perth's TV, radio and print audience (Laurie 1997, 29), and a billboard that read: *They may only be suspicions, but what if you're right?* (29).

The day after Ciara Glennon's body was found, the Police Commissioner reiterated this internalising of responsibility in West Australian citizens, re quoting Police Commissioner Sir Robert Peel (1829):

(The) Police are the public, the public are the police, the police being the only members of the public who are paid to give full time attention to the duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence. (*West Australian* 1997, 9)

Rather than examine its insularity and the violence from within, police corruption and incompetence and major miscarriages of justice, arbitrary dread and self-policing became themes in a persuasive and best-selling story

of the Claremont murders. In the case of Claremont, story truth coexists, however uneasily, with the happening truth of Perth – sun soaked, privileged, sleepy, secluded – ultimately safe. The vague and concrete mistrust of authority – “these tensions between what is known but what cannot be said (on the record) and as such is precisely what has drawn WA crime writers and journalists towards its representation” (Whish-Wilson 2015, 160) Whish-Wilson’s interest in the incorporation of the real into the context of the fictive is “to represent politics, business and organised crime that is generally neglected in formal histories” (159).

In the case of Claremont, I sought to recreate Perth’s atmosphere of abject fear, its lineage of police corruption, its gender, class and racial tensions, without replicating real events. In rewriting the real, I attempt to recreate the feelings, the atmosphere, the themes of the time. I wrote it to dispel the fairytale, to unveil the monsters hiding in plain sight.

### **Story Truth and The Archive: Moving Towards a New Format of Public Record**

Following Post Structuralism’s “assault on truth” (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 2), historians such as Dominick La Capra contest an objectivist notion of history, a challenge which relies heavily on poststructuralism and postmodernism and the precondition of the Lyotardian notion of language as performative (La Capra 1985, 37). La Capra’s proposal that “rhetoric is a dimension of all language” (17) is somewhat revolutionary in that it acknowledges the inherent “voicing and dialogising” (36) in historical narratives. Consequently, La Capra asks the historian to carefully consider:

The relational aspect of historical sources, as well as attention to language, point of view, and even the role of transference, in the psychoanalytic sense, in the sources themselves and in the interpretation of those sources. (La Capra 1985, quoted in Gilman Srebnick 2005, 15)

Transference, La Capra avows, occurs on multiple levels in the study and interpretation of historical documents, in reportage and official records, such as police reports, court transcripts and witness/victim statements. Further to transference, the historian’s additional burdens are “backshadowing”, the process of superimposing contemporary emotions

and reactions onto testimony of subjects of the past (Bernstein 1994, quoted in Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 19–20), and ventriloquism, where words and testimony belonging to victim, accused and accuser are implanted by authorities and then interpreted by historians – negating the notion of neutral telling in archival sources. By elucidating the rhetorical nature of historical documentation, the neutrality and infallibility of the archive becomes debatable.

Furthermore, the drive to adhere to a “monological understanding of an authoritative, unified, and objective authorial voice providing an ideally exhaustive and definitive (total) account of a fully mastered object of knowledge” (La Capra 1985, 36) neglects the authentic voice of the marginalised or subjugated historical subject. Gilman Srebnick (2005) posits that the polyphonic or “multivocal” quality of fiction offers the multiplicity of perspectives (9) traditionally neglected in history to argue for the place of story in history – one that admits “victim, accuser and accused” (9).

Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone point out that contesting the “truth” of the past or the veracity between sources needs to transition from a notion of true versus false, to an ongoing dialogue that conceives of memory as a process, ideological in “motivation and meaning” (2003, 4).

Memory is both private and public:

Memory, though we may experience it as private and internal, draws on countless scraps and bits of knowledge and information from the surrounding culture, and is inserted into larger cultural narratives. (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 5)

In a discussion about her true crime–inspired fiction novel and celebrated cases, Denise Mina’s *The Long Drop* (2017), about a serial killer in postwar Glasgow, author Denise Mina maintains the story played a big part in the “mythology of the city ... it was in an era where one Glasgow ended, and the other began” (Evans and Mina 2017, 12:14). She refers to the clash between stories in “high profile cases as the story the court tells which becomes the official story and then there’s the story the other people tell, or the story the city is telling or the papers are telling” (12:16). Mina incorporates oral histories, anecdotes and pub stories, offered sometimes unsolicited from the Glaswegian public: “there’s a great cultural emphasis on being good at talking and being funny and telling” (12:14).

While the Claremont murders were occurring, the media raised the issue of numerous unsolved missing persons' cases; few focused on the crimes against a very different demographic of woman, namely Highgate- and Northbridge-based sex workers. Some victims were portrayed in the press as collateral damage from a war on drugs, generational poverty and abuse. To the media, the story threads – the heroin epidemic of the 1990s, rape culture, the kerb crawlers who used and abused their vulnerability – were far less compelling than the missing Claremont women. Yet many of these women vanished off city streets with barely a whisper of community protest.

It was a climate of controlled fear and these were the players, characters, places and themes that belonged in a complete cultural history of Perth in the 1990s and that I included in *Nothing Gold*. I concur with La Capra's assertion that "Literature becomes most redundant when it tells us what can be gleaned from other documentary sources" (1985, 126). Story emanates between the gaps and silences of the master narrative – police reports, official statements that are then conveyed through the media.

And in the case of Claremont, I believe story can tell a more culturally comprehensive narrative than the "happening truth": rather than seclusion, picture staggering geographic isolation, a city divided by the Swan River and invisible seams of privilege. Imagine nuanced societal divisions and tensions, frissons in photogenic riverside and beachside landscapes. Story can depict these rival narratives of unsafety and discord, and furthermore, tell a very important subplot of police corruption, injustice and oppression. Furthermore, story can allow for voices not previously accounted for in dominant historical texts, namely "the voice of the victim, the accused and accuser" (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 9). In the case of Claremont, the 'real' story has long been inaccessible; these true crime events have been part of a closed task force for over twenty years and the subject of a sole book, *The Devil's Garden* (2007) by Debi Marshall.<sup>5</sup> Marshall lamented the obstruction by the

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5. Marshall also refers to the panic surrounding the crimes and remarks upon the deluge of public interest she received, making mention of the "hysterical ravings" of people keen to incriminate loved ones and ex-partners, allegations not backed up by any hard evidence of tightly

Western Australian police force in the writing and publishing of this book, referring to the “blue wall of silence” she was met with. (Marshall, 2007, ix)

The pain of victims’ families was echoed in the papers; many of the victim’s families would not talk to Marshall, not wanting to criticise the task force. However, the victims’ stories were truncated, mute. There was the occasional chiming in of living victims, and the din of gossip, speculation in online forums, web forums. People talked among themselves, to each other. The story felt like it belonged to all us – yet it didn’t. Perthites became so familiar with the victims and their families that they were referred to by their first names in the local paper, and their parents as “Sarah’s dad” and “Jane’s dad” (Laurie 1997, 24).

Rhetorical devices create and recreate the sensory experience of fear: girls and women dyeing their hair, afraid of the dark, afraid of cab drivers, afraid to walk alone. And these story truths are accessible to a wider reading public because they are rendered in a format and style that is both accessible and compelling, increasing public awareness.

I argue that to glean stories such as the Claremont murders from the public domain poses a challenge to the dominant archival narrative of these true crime events, and, in doing so, may deliver a more complex and comprehensive account of a celebrated crime and its sociocultural context. However, as Hodgkin and Radstone (2002) point out, the melding of private and subjective memory, “the collapsing of personal and public registers” (8), can detract from impartial assessment and sometimes valuable critical distance (9). This critical distance, however, is based on the presumption that it is possible to have critical objectivity in history, which is of course highly debated.

I propose that the “truth” lies somewhere in the gap between stories: the official and public record, O’Brien’s “happening truth” and the private stories, civilian or citizen narratives, many of them emotive, imaginative, fictional. This is the closest we can get to the “real” or complete story of a celebrated case.

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organised paedophile rings in the “big end” of town and the scary, sordid stories of sacrificial occult offerings’ (Marshall, xiii).

## Crime Memoir

In writing crime memoir, personal experience becomes the aperture to apprehend the incomprehensible and aberrant. Crime memoirs are autodiegetic narratives framed by true crime events that possess a unique possibility – for authors to “rewrite” public records of crimes by utilising true crimes, real victims and perpetrators and private life narratives and family storylines. In James Ellroy’s *My Dark Places: An LA Crime Memoir* (1997), Ellroy is self-conscious in his blending of personal and private history and cognisant of his colonisation of his mother’s murdered body, a space where he projects lust, rage and longing and tabloid violence:

You made me. You formed me. You gave me a ghostly presence to brutalise. I never wondered how you haunted other people I never questioned my sole ownership of your spirit. I wouldn’t share my claim. (Ellroy 1997, 156)

In Ellroy’s (1997) crime memoir, victims and crimes both inhabit and exceed the emblematic – they are the product of authorial obsession, a mode of enshrining the dead, “rescuing” the victim, Jean Hilliker Ellroy (“the redhead”), from tabloid status and amending the public record of these events, even if he shamelessly turns her into a saleable psychosexual symbol. While Ellroy audaciously and unabashedly plunders the case of his mother and muse, he also accesses crime stories from the public domain, amalgamating LA crime lore into his life narrative (Walker 2002, 181).

Ellroy takes similar liberties with his fiction – taking a revisionist approach to dominant political and cultural events and tabloid smut and blurring the distinction between the two. James Walker (2002, 181) claims Ellroy is “one of the most significant historical novelist’s working today” (because of his tendency to ransack the past and radically rewrite it). Murder victims existing only in the annals of LA Police cold cases and the public’s dwindling memory are immortalised as characters in Ellroy’s semifictional pulp kingdom and in the reader’s imagination. The ethics of this are dubious, even if the reading is compulsive; perhaps it is Ellroy’s honest engagement with his own depravity and plundering that makes Ellroy’s novels more acceptable.

In Robert Drewe’s *The Shark Net* (2000), crimes and their victims serve a function as a narrative device, a cultural motif of innocence lost, a method

of establishing place, and to recreate a cultural and social milieu. While Kate Douglas (2010, 87) suggests childhood narratives about traumatic events can cast an important challenge to postwar constructions of childhood and challenge cultural nostalgia itself, Drewe's *The Shark Net* reinforces "cultural stability" (2000, 86). Although Eric Edgar Cooke's presence menaces the text, the overall tone of the crime memoir is jolly, affectionate and endearing, erasing or at least easing, social, cultural and postcolonial angst with tales of yellow sand dunes, childhood naivety and family in-jokes about the family's obsession with Dunlop. In this sense, Drewe seemingly corroborates Perth's sense of "manufactured innocence" (Hewitt 1985; Whish-Wilson 2015, 5). Douglas affirms that untroubled and simplified accounts of childhood largely written by older white men (2010, 97) takes a "non-conflict" view of history (87).

In contrast, Estelle Blackburne's *The End of Innocence* (2007) focuses on Blackburne's proximity to two major (and sensational) Perth crimes – taking crime out of the abstract, symbolic realm and into the concrete. The book also details Blackburne's experience with domestic violence.<sup>6</sup> Blackburne's books are a direct challenge to the archive and the Western Australian police – both dominant historical and personal record, made accessible to a larger community by their readability. Indeed, David Whish-Wilson conceives of true crime narratives such as Blackburne's as being aligned to investigative journalism, exposing corruption and injustice – even, in some cases, reversing miscarriages of justice (Whish-Wilson 2015, 156).

*Slate* writer Laura Miller (2017, para 3) attributes a second-wave publishing boom in crime memoir to the podcast *Serial* (Koenig, 2014). This explosion of intimate true crime-inspired memoirs written by (mainly female) authors about their experiences of crime enjoyed a new popularity parallel to the current upsurge in serialised true crime podcasts and documentaries (Miller, 2017, para 2).

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6. *The End of Innocence* (2007) is also a supplement to Blackburne's true crime Walkley-winning book, *Broken Lives* (1998), which assisted in the exoneration of John Button for a crime committed by Eric Edgar Cooke. Drewe's *The Shark Net* (2000) also draws heavily upon Cooke's crimes.

Some of these are told in the immersive tradition, sometimes by journalists, mainly by young women, some of them essayists, many of them emerging writers. Miller (2017, para 2) is not only critical of these “MFA fiction” middle-class memoirs piggybacking on the true crime genre – she’s openly hostile.

The authors of these new true crime/memoir hybrids also put themselves at the center of the story to an extent that surpasses even the questing Sarah Koenig, producer and narrator of *Serial*. Each has a personal connection to the crime, or attempts to persuade her readers that it speaks to her inner life in some irresistible way. But they are writers and memoirists first, unlike those victims of notorious crimes who publish a ghostwritten book or two. They spend less time describing how they tracked down facts or pored over forensic reports than they do scrutinising their own feelings, turning them over and over like heirlooms. (Miller 2017, para 3)

This critique of both the rhetorical delivery and the choices and motive behind the narrative self-indulgence is inherently harsh and reproachful; their prose is “moony, brooding and overwrought” (Miller 2017, para 9). While women are becoming dominant in this genre, it seems Miller is affronted by their interest in crime and their interpolation into the story of crime and trauma – which is odd, given the statistical female proximity of being a victim of traumatic crime. Despite Miller admitting that these texts’ “central preoccupation, is women trying to fathom the capacity in certain men for terrible violence when their desires are thwarted” (para 12), Miller glosses over the sociocultural validity of female meditations on violence and accusations of female narcissism in genres such as memoir (paras 4, 6). There’s a subtextual charge of millennial narcissism inherent in the review, however, a sense of a feminist generation gap that has become a treacherous gully to have induced such (misogynistic) derision.

### **Crime and Creative Nonfiction**

Laura Miller (2017) praises *The Lost Girls: An Unsolved American Mystery*, a highly elegiac creative nonfiction book written by former *New York Magazine* editor Robert Kolker (2013), who attempts to bring attention to the fate of a cast of murdered (and largely unmemorialised) sex workers in an unsolved serial-killer case in Long Island, New York. Kolker, she alleges,

resists the urge to “fill in the blanks” (Miller 2017, 17) and while this is perhaps true in contrast to some of the texts she mentioned (all of them debut writers, all young women), Kolker, in fact borrows heavily from fiction.

Part I of *The Lost Girls: An Unsolved American Mystery* (Kolker 2013), consists of a chapter named after a “victim”, who he transforms into a character, with some close third-person point-of-view perspectives narrated by a living relative, friend or partner. Each character is completed with scene and dialogue. All are vulnerable women from low socioeconomic (and some from minority) backgrounds who worked as Craigslist prostitutes.

Kolker’s intentions are clearly noble; he has exhaustively researched each victim and spent a significant amount of time with their families, hoping to provide empathetic insight, three-dimensionality, shape and colour to their character and individual story. This is the intention of the project: to reclaim the victims who disappeared in the news bleed. After all, in the press, these women have been both neglected and unmemorialised. Thus, his character sections read much like eulogies:

Through performing, Shannan found a way to deal with whatever dissatisfactions and sadness she buried deep within. During high school, she developed a soulful voice that gave some of her friends chills and made some of her friends cry. They could feel every note, every riff, every ripple. Her poetry and essays seemed to tap into a dark well of pain, too – sharp and emotional, accessing some damaged part:

“I take on armor every time I walk out the door  
But that’s what life’s all about, right?

I immerse myself in the moment and I will enjoy it.” (Kolker 2013, 35)

Although Kolker’s book has been largely critically lauded, *The New York Times* points out: “Kolker works hard to distinguish his main characters, but their histories bleed together in one long chronicle of childhood abuse, neglect and sorry choices” (Swartz 2013, para 4).

The ethical quandaries that true crime–inspired fiction writers face are not necessarily unique to the practice of rewriting trauma and true crime stories. In fact, they resemble those of the “life writer” or memoirist: *how*

*much to tell, how soon to tell, whose story is it?* Like life writing and other forms of nonfiction, crime memoir and true crime–inspired fiction can potentially deliver harm to the living and to the memory of the deceased, by the act of misrepresenting the dead.

Kolker’s book is undeniably captivating, stylistically and emotionally intelligent, and above all, deeply invested in these victims. However, the power dynamics of a white male journalist inhabiting the consciousness of several murdered Craigslist prostitutes, many of them from minority backgrounds, is undeniably problematic. Even if the prose is exquisite and the story enthralling, Kolker’s role as champion or rescuer of these women inherently positions him in a position of power – he is the author of their lives and their deaths. Although he doesn’t judge their life choices, their sale of sex over the internet, the book’s sense of classist voyeurism, colloquially referred to as “poverty porn”, is inescapable, given the authorial tone and its intended audience – a white, middle-class audience who read *New York Magazine*.

### **The Gendered Ethics of Telling True Crime**

In the critical reception of true crime–inspired fiction and crime memoir, style seems especially pertinent: the more “literary” the rhetoric, the more poetical the prose, the better critically received the text is. After all, as Donna Lee Brien maintains (1991), the stigmatisation of true crime has a lot to do with quality and the publishing cycle in shaping the perception that these texts are pulpy, exploitative and lowbrow (Lee Brien 1991, 131) . Literary crime memoir, such as Robert Kolker’s *The Lost Girls: An Unsolved American Mystery* (2013) and Michelle McNamara’s *I’ll Be Gone in the Dark* (2018), are marketed (and likely read) as *novels* – whereas Debi Marshall’s true crime books, including *The Devil’s Garden* (2007) are true crime paperbacks, closer to the penny dreadful: pulp (non) fiction.

A comprehensive study into the paratextual is required here to support this thesis, with a comprehensive inventory of literary criticism to validate how style is perceived as a marker of ethical intention, how the style and quality of production communicate a moral directive, even if the narrative content and the publishing outcomes are divergent from the authorial intention. Regrettably, there is no space to do so here. In the texts I have reviewed, gender appears to play a significant role in the critical

reception of crime memoir and true crime–inspired fiction. One standout example is Scott Blackwood’s *See How Small* (2015), which reimagines the facts of a cold-case murder of three teenage sisters working in a Texas ice-creamery in the 1990s. At several points, Blackwood speaks in a Grecian chorus utilising the three deceased girls’ conflated group consciousness – attempting to bring the reader back to the death site, forcing them to sight the wound and suffer with the victims.

What a shame, our mothers said from somewhere, no time to tidy up.

Before the men with guns bound and gagged us with our own bras and panties a few things happened ... the men with guns did things to us. Afterward, our cheeks on the tile, we could smell something in the air that smelled like our own blood. Then lighter fluid. (Blackwood 2015, 4)

Despite the poetic rendering of the rape and murder of these girls and the author’s intention to be spare and minimal in his descriptions of their defilement, I find this approach too politically and ethically suspect. The intention appears to be to give voice to real-life actors in crimes, namely victims, but Blackwood’s poetic prose exemplifies the difference between the dramatisation and the fictionalisation of traumatic crimes, the difference between speaking about or for victims, and using victims for dramatic effect. I have not encountered one review where Blackwood’s narrative position and rhetorical choices, including content, are queried. Blackwood’s book has seemingly been universally extolled. It is “a near perfect novel” (Schaub 2015, para 9). And *The New York Times* describes the book in equally admiring terms:

Interview transcripts and a written essay also populate the novel, and toward the end compassionately examines the fragile psyches of the individuals left behind in the haunting wake of murder. Instead of a decisive close to a horrific crime, there is only remembrance; and in the case of this thought-provoking novel, remembrance fused with literary invention and at times even grace (Walsh 2015, para 7).

Emma Cline’s *The Girls* (2016), is a book loosely based on the Manson family murders, written from the perspective of a teen acolyte of “Russell”, who resembles Charles Manson. Cline insists she was not “after an assailable historical truth” (Love and Cline 2016, para 5): “It was a lot more about

trying to achieve a certain mood or tone—which was menace adjacent to California sunshine—than focusing more directly on the group” (para 5). *The Paris Review* concurs, saying:

*The Girls* may be loosely based on the Manson murders, but it isn’t really about Manson at all—it’s about the women around him, those attracted to life at the edge of the world. ... Instead of dwelling on him, the novel follows fourteen-year-old Evie Boyd, who’s increasingly enthralled by one of the older girls in Russell’s circle. (*Love and Cline* 2016, para 1)

While Cline’s success has been somewhat phenomenal, an alleged two million dollar advance for a three-book deal has overshadowed the debut of the twenty-seven year old Master of Fine Arts (MFA) graduate’s first novel. Cline’s precocity, the hype surrounding her advance, her sense of having dodged a rite of writerly passage – the struggle to become published – is part of *The Girls’* mixed reception. Like Cline, Laura Elizabeth Woollett is a twenty-something creative Honours graduate whose first novel, *The Wood of Suicides* (2014), was a comparatively less publicised debut. Both authors are very much concerned with female sexuality, female proximity to historical evil, namely bad men. Both authors exercise remarkable skill – and restraint – in their description of the crimes. Woollett’s second book was short-listed for the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Fiction and the 2017 Ned Kelly Award for Best First Fiction, but has not yet received the same global attention as Cline’s *The Girls*. Nevertheless, her reviews are universally benevolent, despite her first person perspective fictional forays into contemporary true crime history’s most loathed criminals; including child killers such as Myra Hindley and Hitler’s lover, Eva Braun.

Like Helen Garner, Laura Woollett is impelled to explore the darkest corners of the human heart, the savage cognitive distortions of love; to understand and empathise with the monstrous, rather than to instinctively recoil or judge ... Woollett's pitch-perfect command of narrative voice, period, and psychology creates 12 tales to fascinate and unnerve. (Woodhead, 1)

Cline’s entire novel centres around women: their relationships with men and each other, the toughness and fragility of teenage girls, the disappointment of growing into a woman. It is an inescapably feminist text;

Evie's interest in the cult is because of her fascination with Suzanne, a psychopathic teen seductress with whom she forms a romantic friendship. The passages that describe the murders, especially the murder of a mother and child, are undoubtedly disturbing but are spare in detail, the author opting for frequent shifts and imagistic phrases:

How Suzanne's hands must have already been sprayed with blood. The warm medicinal stink of the body on her clothes and hair ... The calming mystic air on her, like she was moving through water. "Come on," she said one last time and the boy inched toward her. Then he was on her lap and she held him there, the knife like a gift she was giving him. (Cline 2016, 329)

*The New Yorker* praises Cline's "painterly" style (Wood 2016, 3) but simultaneously criticises it as "overwritten, flashing rather than lighting ... Cline has a habit of reaching for glamorous phrases, even if the glamour blinds the meaning" (12).

This part of the review strikes me as critically balanced – but then Wood's focus shifts onto the author's rhetorical choice of subject – shaming her:

In making the case that there was anything personally or historically necessary about Cline's decision to raid the American-culture store and pluck one of the best-known and most lurid episodes from the shelf. The novel's attempts to link the story of 1969 (which consumes the bulk of it) with questions of present-day ideology and manners seem a bit thin; in this respect, the book is a poor cousin to superficially similar projects of historical archaeology by writers such as Don DeLillo, Rachel Kushner, Dana Spiotta, Hari Kunzru and Peter Carey. As I read *The Girls*, my admiration for its many beauties was corrupted by a worming question: Why this subject? Without an answer, the novel comes to seem manipulative. (2016, para 12)

Although Cline interjects her poetic renderings of cruelty with more graphic descriptions, including reports of the contents of the little boy's stomach, violence is largely suggestive, inferred: subtextual. Scott Blackwood, an established but less instantly celebrated male novelist and nonfiction author, adopts the first-person consciousness to penetrate the consciousness of three raped and murdered teen girls and is lauded for his

efforts. Blackwood's task is deemed by NPR's Michael Schaub as both "brutal and necessary" (Schaub 2015, para 9), but Wood chastises Cline for depicting a (fictionalised) lurid crime. In the same way that *Slate's* Laura Miller charges her young (female) MFA authors with navel gazing on the page (Miller 2017, para 3), there is a sense of implied outrage at their audacity in her choosing true crime as a genre. This is just one micro-example of how (successful) female authors are chastised for their depiction of violent subject matter, and very likely, for their ambition. While, Woollett chooses to tackle arguably more provocative true crime topics and perspectives, her impressive but steady ascent follows the acceptable trajectory of an emerging (female) author in Australia. Cline's sudden literary and cultural capital, make her at once threatening and confrontational to reviewers.

### **Censuring and Censoring Violence against Women in Crime Fiction**

Maggie Orford condenses crime fiction's preoccupation with sexual violence, death and the violated body of women into an epitaph for all crime fiction writers: "misogyny is part of the grammar of crime fiction" (2013, 225).

There is an incontrovertible legitimacy in the backlash against women's representation in crime fiction. Orford acknowledges how deeply entrenched violence against women is in our cultural aesthetic, with the sadistic delight in the rape and torture of the female body being entwined with beauty, scintillation and pleasure in art, film and literature over the last century (Orford 2013, 227). Her ethical ambivalence lies in the inadvertent promulgation of the relationship between desire, death and the female body.

While I am aesthetically and politically opposed to gratuitous violence towards women in literature, I equally don't uphold the erasure of it; the censorship of gynocide or femicide negates the universal fact of violence towards women as a worldwide epidemic. In "The Problem of Speaking for Others", Louisa Alcoff (1991-2, 9) suggests that in a "crises of representation", the "retreat response" (17) is not ethically neutral nor culturally considerate, and can be perceived to be irresponsible as well as disinterested, betraying a desire to not politically engage (17). Furthermore, it reduces the possibility of "political effectivity" (17). As a feminist crime

writer, regarding the depiction of violence against women, retreat is not an option for me either.

Like Orford, I have queried my textual representations of sexual violence in a fictive setting because of the connections with sadism and the female body. I concur with Sabine Binder (2017, 100) that crime fiction can “expose and revise, yet at times also reiterate, gendered and racial assumptions about women as victims, women’s suffering and the representation thereof” (2017, 100).

Maggie Orford corroborates that while some crime fiction fetishises and even celebrates violence against women, “crime fiction is, however, a flexible genre that can be bent enough out of shape to tell women’s stories too. It can even exact a woman’s fictional revenge” (2010, 225). Orford’s assertion that “(crime) fiction might be a means of finding a way back, after the obliterating effects of violence, to some semblance of a language: a different language, an empathic language, a language that speaks of resilience and survival” (Orford 2013, 229)

While crime fiction arguably offers a voice to the unspeakable and devastating systemic sexual violence, the cultural contempt for crime fiction that depicts violence against women is perpetuated by literary efforts such as The Staunch Awards, launched in 2018. The Staunch Awards seek to erase representations of violence, but effectively also works towards “obscuring the effects of structural violence” (Binder 2017, 103), by representational negation.

The conditions of entry to the literary award is for a book where no woman is “raped, beaten, stalked or murdered” (Flood 2018, 6). The prize’s founder, Bridget Lawless explains her reasoning for the award, stating that “fictional depictions of violence happening to women in books, films and television ... echoes, exaggerates, fetishises and normalises what happens to women in the real world. But I know there are writers creating thrilling and complex work without going there” (Flood 2018, 7).

Crime author Val McDermid responded to The Staunch Awards announcement in *The Guardian* with dismay, claiming that violence against women is the impetus for writing crime, stating “As long as men commit appalling acts of misogyny and violence against women, I will write about it so that it does not go unnoticed” (Flood 10, para 10). While the prize is

awarded to both men and women, McDermid seizes the opportunity to highlight the inherent inequalities in being a female crime writer, lamenting that “female writers get asked all the time, ‘How does it feel as a woman to write about women as victims of violence?’ Male writers are never asked this question” (13).

Jane Caputi (1989) points out that rape and sexual murder, or acts of “gynocide” are not only acts of violence but political acts against women (1989, 437): “Gynocide as further defined by Andrea Dworkin (1976), gynocide is ‘the systematic crippling, raping, and/or killing of women by men ... the relentless violence perpetrated by the gender class men on the gender class women’. She adds that ‘under patriarchy, gynocide is the ongoing reality of life lived by women’” (Dworkin quoted in Caputi 1989, 439).

Fetishised, gratuitous violence against women, often found in paperback crime thrillers, is presented as other than literary crime fiction – but this is not always the case. In my review of crime fiction, true crime–inspired fiction and true crime texts, the same question reoccurs: do aesthetics betray an author’s ethical intentions – or rather, perceived ethical intentions?

Ethical narratology has evolved substantially since Wayne C. Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961); however, the exclusion of political, class, race and gender consideration – fundamentally an understanding of ideology – makes Booth’s Aristotelean template seem dated and irrelevant. However, I concur with Booth and with James Phelan’s thesis that rhetorical choices are essentially ethical (Phelan 2011, 55). They betray our political agendas, our disobedience or collusion. I argue that choosing *not* to represent is not just a rhetorical or artistic choice, but also an ethical decision.

Phelan (2011) revises and surmises the ethical dimensions of rhetoric as bipartite, claiming “There is an ethics of the telling stemming from how the author relates to her audience through the deployment of various means at her disposal, and there is an ethics of the told stemming from the ethical dimensions of what is represented through those means” (2011,56).

As a true crime–inspired fiction writer and a feminist, my process is instinctive and artistic, but cautious with regards to representation. It involves an exhaustive ethical inventory, but I feel I can never completely

reconcile all my decisions. However, I am committed to my own ethics of telling, which I have come to conclude is more about showing, dramatising, fictionalising, representing – ultimately, speaking about, not for, others. However, most of the time I am troubled by the notion of appropriation and/or erasure of people of colour. I recall when I removed an Indigenous Australian from my first book, because I thought that representing a slain sex worker who was Indigenous would be offensive. Having read Alcoff's article (1991-92, 8), I don't think that was the right decision after all – and that this action furthered the erasure of historical crime against Indigenous women on Perth's streets. It was politically irresponsible and a little bit cowardly.

After years of researching, reading and writing true crime-inspired fiction, I have come to conclude that a creative and emotive response to the real, traumatic events of history is both a cogent and effective practice. However, it is not without risk – the risk of injury to the victim's memory, to the victim's family and to the demographics of people the writer is representing.

The idea of being enshrined as victim is such a fundamental act of misrepresentation, of being and becoming deified. In my story, I experienced a dilemma of voicing. I wanted to know what these young women – these victims – were really like. I wanted to inhabit their realities. In my research, I visited the graves of Jane and Ciara. I wrote fictional accounts of their lives. Even though I had fictionalised them, I grew distressed at my own actions, attached to the grief of the families, not wanting to contribute any more pain. I felt ghoulish, reprehensible. *It's art*, I thought. *It's in the public domain*. But it was a story that felt private.

*Who am I to speak for them? About them?* I tore up drafts and rewrote and rewrote.

Ultimately, narrative privilege is tied inexorably to cultural, social and racial privilege. While the rhetorical and discursive practices of narrativising in a true crime context enables authors to construct a cultural product that enables a broad readership, these narratives have the potential to have an impact on real lives – both positively and negatively. Linda Alcoff (1991–92, 19) debates the difference between speaking about others and speaking for them, and her discussion of political effectiveness is very relevant when discussing previously underrepresented cases, where subjects are deceased,

such as in Kolker's (2013) *Lost Girls* and Christine Pelisek's (2017) *The Grim Sleeper: The Lost Women of South Central*.

Christine Pelisek is an authority on the Grim Sleeper case; she broke the story in 2008, and alongside her crime editor, came up with Lonnie D. Franklin Jr.'s eerie moniker, The Grim Sleeper. Pelisek's book is described by the *Los Angeles Times* as an

informal ethnography that describes how African American families came to Los Angeles from the South and Midwest, what they found there, what they didn't. It is a group portrait of families clawing their way into the middle class, only to often slip back into poverty, drugs and alcohol. (Nazarayan 2017, para 1)

The Grim Sleeper was an African American serial killer who tallied up to and probably beyond thirty-eight known victims – all women of colour, prostitutes and addicts who walked the streets of South Central, many unaware he was in operation for up to twenty-five years. He hunted in his neighbourhood. Many of the Sleeper's victims were disposed of in alleys and dumpsters, much like unwanted furniture. Debra Jackson was disposed of in an alley with gunshot wounds to the chest, age twenty-nine; Princess Berthomieux was his youngest victim at fifteen years old.

*The Lost Women of South Central* (Pelisek, 2018) assisted with raising the profile of both the victims of the Grim Sleeper and the cold case, inspiring and encouraging public interest where the police's interest in the case was, at best, limpid. The case was solved on a familial DNA match in 2009. Pelisek is less ornate than Kolker and more journalistic in tone when describing the desperate situations and troubled backgrounds of the Sleeper's victims. Like Kolker she opts for a first name as a chapter heading, narrated in close third-person omniscient to describe the fate of a recently homeless recovered addict who was picked up and murdered by Lonnie D Franklin Jr, AKA The Grim Sleeper.

*Debra, 1985*

Beatrice Mason was fed up. Her wallet was missing and she was certain her girlfriend of fourteen months, a cocktail waitress named Debra Jackson, had taken and blown her entire paycheck on cocaine. Beatrice, a 29-year-old former Army nurse, was tired of

Debra's lying and denials about her fondness for drugs. It was time to end things, she decided. (Peliseck 2017, 19)

*The New York Times* points out that Peliseck tries to restore dignity to some of the victims by drawing sympathetic and carefully detailed life histories for each and every one of them. The sad thing is, the recurring pattern of their lives — the unhappy home, the runaway escape, the demanding pimp, the drug addiction — destroys their individuality and makes each victim indistinguishable from all the others. (Stasio 2017, para 2)

Peliseck is undoubtedly an excellent journalist and an accomplished and attentive prose writer; she was awarded a certificate of appreciation from the city for her reportage. Does this prismatic "misery effect" indicate a failure on Peliseck's part? Or is this a political issue, a consequence of the mundane uniformity of real-life victimhood? After all, Kolker is charged with the same failings.

Phelan's (2011, 56) notion of bipartite ethical layers is pertinent here. I would argue even that the layers are manifold and increasing complex as conversations concerning the politics of representation grown and evolve. On one layer, the telling appears as ethical, but what is told and then how it is received and interpolated, what is omitted, are ethical substrata to explore and attempt to measure.

Sabine Binder posits that "Writing the female victim is a risky endeavour – made even riskier when she is a woman of colour" (2017, 101). In writing her, the author is bound to "acknowledging her as a victim" while risking "fixing her, almost as a cipher, in victim status and of perpetuating racial and gender stereotypes of invisibility, passivity, subordination and inferiority" (101).

The political and racial politics of this book, of this case, are especially fraught. While both books centre around vulnerable, marginalised people – sex workers, and in Peliseck's case, sex workers of colour, all with addictions, Peliseck is covering a veritable war zone where an astonishing six serial killers were working at one time in a fifty-one-square-mile area (2017, 16). Furthermore, the fact that the women were black and poor and the police were already burdened in an area saturated with drugs and violence and serial killings added to the seemingly impossible task of apprehending him

(16.) The founder of Coalition of Black Women against Serial Killers, Margaret Prescod, continually hounded officials about the murders and why no women were made aware of or formally warned about the Grim Sleeper; demanding a composite sketch be released. (Gold and Bernstein, 2016, Para 42).

Pelesik has clearly researched exhaustively. She has consulted with the community and the families. But was her decision to speak for these women ethically sound – as a white Canadian journalist and an outsider to the South-Central community? And more to the point, while Pelisek makes a point of speaking about the black community and discusses Margaret Prescod's important role in this case, the voice of the coalition herself does not get an opportunity to speak.

Alcoff (1991-2) argues that in cases where these texts perform an important function in subverting dominant historical narratives of crime, victimhood and gender, speaking for others in some instances, they are not only productive but necessary. In the instance of Pelisek and Kolker, I agree that these texts strive to represent responsibly, but the risk and responsibility associated with such texts is both explicit and grave. Both authors are white journalists and/or writers, adopting similar rhetorical choices regarding structure and poetic prose. They are bound in a problematic condition in that it is sometimes unacceptable to speak for or about others, and yet not to speak in the instance that there is no one to speak for them is also ethically suspect and politically reprehensible.

Rather than retreat, I propose that engagement in texts such as these could not only consist of consultation, but also involve something more entirely representative and collaborative, something akin to restorative justice. Nick Broomfield's (2014) documentary *Tales of the Grim Sleeper* covers the same subject. Broomfield enlists Pam Brooker, a former crack addict and prostitute, as a guide and a protector for the British, white, conspicuous documentarian, but she rapidly and happily assumes control of the investigation. Initially it could be considered as a gimmick, but Broomfield gets closer to the community and his subject and the focus shifts from the Sleeper, to Pam, to other Sleeper victims. This collaborative approach is obviously suited to the documentary presentation and while documentarian ethics have been widely researched, it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to

answer some of the questions that arise from viewing Broomfield's documentary. For example, if it becomes Brooker's story, should she be credited, remunerated and celebrated as much as Broomfield? These important considerations aside, the format introduces an interesting possibility about how to tell stories about others more inclusively.

At the very least, the political and ethical ramifications of writing in this genre bind authors to an intensive self-investigation: how to speak, why to speak and what to tell – or whether to tell at all. Some texts, such as Scott Blackwood's, appear as ethically dubious behind the rhetoric, as if these questions were neglected in favour of style. Aesthetics can give moral direction – but they also misdirect. As an author I now ask, *Just because I can, should I?* Instead of asking, *Is it artful?* ask, *Is it honest?*

### **Shame and Telling: The (Gendered) Ethics of the Told**

Without Stephen Ross's statement, or even any knowledge of it (I refused to discuss details of the case after the story broke in 2017, or to read about any developments, so as not to pollute my rewrite with the real), I included something extremely similar in my debut novel, *Nothing Gold*. It had a lot to do with Estelle Blackburn. Back in 2010, I interviewed author Blackburn, who worked very hard to exonerate John Button with her Walkley award-winning book *The End of Innocence* (2007). Estelle maintained that her violent ex-partner was involved in the murders. She'd reported this to Western Australian Police force. This was investigated by the ABC (*Australian Story* 2007) and followed up by the WA police with no success.

After interviewing Estelle and scouring the archives, I theorised that in the real case there were two men working in concert, both uniformed – one a law enforcer, the other a taxi driver. Their relationship was more homosocial than sexual, emblematic of the anxieties expressed at the time – bogeymen collated from media archives, gleaned from gossip, rumour and public speculation, an amalgam of monsters. This made it into the final draft of *Nothing Gold*.

Even though my writing on this subject has generated industry interest and commercial endorsement, which denotes the value of true crime-inspired storytelling, choosing to fictionalise these specific events caused me much self-castigation, shame, apprehension and actual fear. I confess, prior to the arrest, the thought of me publishing the book and

having the Claremont Killer (CSK) read it, looking up my name online, plucking my address from LinkedIn or a stray CV, had occurred to me late at night. The thought was over the top, melodramatic, but potent. Sometimes it warned me off real representation – but not more so than the thought of the families of victims reading a review of my book, or my book itself, and being further traumatised. Imagined and real censure stopped me telling people my subject matter. Real fear halted and then changed the story. And, ambivalence and apprehension aside, on another level, there was the impossibility of knowing.

I rewrote and reframed the novel (after many, many drafts). Just one month after I sent the book to my prospective agent, it appeared that the twenty-year-old cold case had been solved. A suspect had been arrested; there was DNA evidence. It was Christmas Eve, 2016. I broke as the story did. I felt terror and loss and incredulity, mistrust in the police. In my narrative, I had “solved” the fictional crime; I had identified my killers. When I thought about the “real story”, however, I quietly visualised a father’s creepy friend, a bloated white man, perhaps more middle class: a wolf in white-collar clothing. Even though I longed to reveal the monster’s true face – I long intuited he would look very ordinary, bland even – I had a sense of genuine cognitive dissonance when I saw the accused, Bradley Robert Edwards on the front page of *The West Australian*: he was a big guy, avuncular, paunchy, a bit dark around the eyes. He had a peculiar, off-putting smile, something a bit vacant there, if you really *looked*. He flashed that smile in court. But I wouldn’t have picked him out of a line-up.

Twenty years later, arrested based on alleged DNA evidence at age 48, Bradley Robert Edwards was only about eleven years older than me, which seemed inconceivable – still seems inconceivable. There’s been an overwhelming silence as his solicitor builds their defence. It is important to note that Edwards has not yet been tried – a jury trial scheduled for July 2019 and has been postponed until November 2019.

For years, part of me wanted to “solve” the case – part of me believed I could. I spent hours trying to fill in the blank void of his face. Picture Tom Ripley’s scratched out passport photo – I tried to create an identikit of a monster; I tried to give him a name. I could not. He loomed blank and

elusive, like a storm cloud: menacing, muscular, where viewers like me drew the image of their monster.

I am reminded of Michelle McNamara's (2018) prophetic epilogue: *Letter to An Old Man*, addressed to the faceless murderer she knew as The Golden Gate Killer. Her book concerned a thirty-five year old case, an obsession which culminated in her early death and the book's posthumous publication:

This is how it ends for you. "You'll be silent forever and I'll be gone in the dark," you threatened a victim once. Open the door. Show us your face. Walk into the light. (McNamara 2018, 321)

The Claremont Serial Killer, or CSK as he was known, was "larger than life" to me, and yet not real, not a flesh-and-blood man. And now, the accused, in the spotlight was very ordinary: a Telstra worker, a suburban husband and stepfather, a Little Athletics coach. Someone who offered to help to someone with their internet speed issues on a Whirlpool forum.

The representational politics of gender, race and class and victimhood and the privileged position of the author as narrator, alongside a tacit or internalised sense of ethics, shape what Phelan refers to as the "ethics of the told" (2011, 56). The ethics of the told constitute what is voiced, uttered or represented in the text. My narrative outcomes were shaped by decisions made on narrative levels but the rhetorical choices were ultimately shaped by my own ambivalence, and what I locate now as shame. I believe that this is an affliction of true crime-inspired writers, and writers of the real, such as life writers.

I had soaked up so much of the second-hand pain of the victims' families and the fear of the victims, I felt genuine shame and remorse for using their lives, albeit heavily fictionalised, in my story. As a writer, I felt that this had been my story, my characters, because I had rewritten it. But it never was. The shame floored me for about a week. In using shame as productive emotion and potential narrative framework, Elspeth Probyn maintains that "shame forces us to reflect continually on the impact of our writing ...a reminder to be true to interest, to be honest about how or why certain things are of interest" (2005, 132).

Where aesthetics and stylistics can mislead, with baroque prose posturing as a marker for literary quality – thus being "tasteful" – and where

shame can problematise “authentic” representation, it can also operate as methodology, or an ethical framework.

My shame was partially an ethical response, moored in imagined internalised social reprisal. The knowledge that a family member, might recognise their murdered child in a crime novel, in a novel I had written and that I might add to their grief, overwhelmed me with shame. In choosing this subject, I was sometimes greeted with dismay or judgment – often, ambiguous praise about how “tough” I was to adopt such a challenging subject. It reinforced a belief that my narrative ambition was ghoulish, ruthless, even cruel. Even though intellectually I could justify the content I had chosen, I was in a shame spiral. I started to rewrite, again. I rebuilt; removing all but a few threads of the true – a different demographic of victim, the same narrative dynamics, the same thematic intention remained, even though the story had become very different. Nevertheless, I wrote what I believed to be the story truth of true crime in Perth in the late nineties.

The agent I was working with suggested waiting for six months or more before considering sending it out, claiming it was a dangerous endeavour in such an emotional climate, even though I felt my criticism of the Western Australian police and police culture was even more relevant. I did not push this, nor did I seek another agent. From a purely commercial point of view, her reluctance seemed erroneous to me, but she said the sensitivity surrounding the case could crush the book’s reception – and my budding career. I sent it back after three months. She declined it. Later that year, Western Australian crime fiction writer and personality Dave Warner (2017) published *Clear to the Horizon*.

Why an established male crime writer ultimately felt entitled to tell his version of the story, why his publisher published it when they did, the way they did, when I was warned off doing the same by writing and publishing professionals, is a sense of male privilege that is reinforced by the writing and publishing industry. I am in no way castigating Warner for his book. Warner’s reasons for writing about Claremont (albeit fictionalised) were, like mine, both personal and cultural, even if the delivery and execution is and was different. His journey to publication and its reception is an example of structural inequality and my ingrained sense of this imbalanced value system.

Like me, Warner experienced trepidation in his representation of the Claremont murders in fiction, causing harm to the living family of the women (Gartner 2017, para 11). Curiously, Warner had been a suspect in the case. “Almost the last straw was the police visiting me (about five years ago),” he says. “It was like, well, it seems that this is a story that should be told in a certain way” (para 15). Warner insists the book is not about the case, claiming “it’s using the template of that case to get emotional connections” (para 20), but his publisher (Fremantle Press) marketed the book as being based on the crimes. The fact is, Warner’s use of the crime as a template is a common technique employed by writers of this genre, and tagline “based on a true crime” – with the added disclaimer “this is a work of fiction” – is a kind of licence to narrativise.

Dave Warner’s *City of Light* (1995) is an award-winning noir with a big cult following. It is also inspired by true crime. It is in fact, the first Western Australian novel since 1957 to conspicuously blend true crime and reportage with fiction (Whish-Wilson 2015, 158). It was the first book, besides David Whish-Wilson’s, that I found doing what I was doing at the time: melding the real with the fictive. Coincidentally, I first named *Nothing Gold as City of Light*, back in 2010 when I started writing it – and renamed it after I discovered Warner’s book in 2015.

As much as I admired the novel, it was difficult to overlook the dated and problematic, very one-dimensional representation of women. The hypermasculinity and casual objectification directed against women in the book reads like Penthouse-inspired wish fulfilment, from the eager nubile young Natasha, to the lady reporter friend with benefits, Carole, who makes him a cooked dinner pre-strings-free sex. At the best of times it’s a very gritty noir, James Ellroyesque in style. Even if Ellroy’s women are venerated and worshipped to a degree that’s also problematic, they are also deeply known. While *Canberra Times* reviewer Kirsten Lawson refers to the book as highly entertaining, she emphasises it is both “blokey and sexist” (1995, para 4):

Snowy has a drink from a bar “stacked better than Kim Basinger”; his smile is “perky and firm as an LA actress’s breasts”; a beach is “as narrow as a dancer’s pubic strip” and the 19-year-old daughter of a cop buddy has a daughter has “a body that was g-string-taut.” Snowy

may be a good cop, but he has to be dense to espouse these views towards women and then in the next breath wonder why it is that men can rape. (paras 8, 9)

In *City of Light* the women are cardboard cut-outs and the violence against them has a kind of nightmarish, snuff quality that is genuinely chilling. This is partly because the novel evokes the Birnies and other “real” monsters, and partly it was a sign of the literary times – where the representation of women and violence against them was not only doled out more casually, but also served with extra gratuity:

She was prone on the concrete apron. At least her naked torso and legs were. Her head was staring back at me, severed, and fitted back-to-front like a doll whose head had been twisted one eighty degrees. The face was swollen, distorted, the eyes like glass. Blood had congealed on the floor in pools. One arm was tucked under the stomach; the other, also severed was propped up against a corner of the wall.<sup>7</sup> (Warner 2015, 10)

I would argue that authors of true crime and true crime-inspired fiction experience vicarious trauma in telling – firstly, because “violence, like pain unmakes language” (Orford 2010, 228) and the author trades in words.

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7. Indeed, Lawson notes the paratextual discrepancy of the cover and the text, querying the choice of the publisher to depict a “naked female body ... draped in lace, sanitised of violence” (para 10) when the story features grotesque violence against women. The first edition of Warner’s *City of Light* (1995) features a stylised, neatly disembodied, black-and-white negative of a naked female torso. While very sexualised and very nineties, it resembles more what true crime authors refer to as a “body picture” than a romance cover, so I can only speculate that either an earlier cover was used in an advance copy, or my interpretation of the visual is very different from Lawson’s. Irrespective, sanitised or fetishised, the cover is disturbing, perhaps enough to warrant a new cover in the subsequent 2015 edition ([www.fremantlepress.com.au/products/city-of-light](http://www.fremantlepress.com.au/products/city-of-light)). This new cover features a vacant, vandalised official building in the foreground, ominous skies in the background – no dead or disembodied women feature, but one can only imagine the contemporary reader to be less forgiving than Lawson.

There is the struggle between the intention and the delivery, the gap between the goal and the published work – the mistake that is the end result of the text, always a little skewed, compromised, disappointing to the author. And secondly, because we are depicting the pain and violation of others. Maggie Orford writes: “What is this horrific mother tongue I am trying to speak? What can I know of its legibility, if indeed it is legible?” (2010, 213).

### **Women Are Not Roses: Exceeding Representation**

The flats at 12 Wellington Street have been redesigned, Frankie says. Now they have a security gate. Brutalist functional concrete balconies, a prison aesthetic on the outside. Judging by the cars parked out front, someone has ripped out the crime-scene-stained carpets, washed the walls yellowed from cigarette and bucket smoke and popped in a renovated kitchen, parquet floors. They look like they cost a packet to rent. We leave and drive to a nearby Super IGA and are served by an eighteen-year-old-ish girl, an uncultivated girl-next-door, a roundly pretty, unsophisticated look that’s becoming extinct in the age of Instagram. We both immediately think of the first Claremont victim, Sarah Spiers, 18, who visited these flats several times during the long weekend and twice that night he drove her. These are the last places she visited. Sarah went out consecutively on an Australia Day weekend, and caught cabs to and from a Mosman Park flat.

*Was she like her? Was she his kind of victim?*

It seemed obvious to me that she was partying that weekend; flats like that are places to buy anything from weed to heroin. You can lose parts of yourself in places like these, suburbs like these. I did. Not a little bit, but profoundly. These nights are like an endless yawning black hole in my subconscious – a series of dangerous moons, near-death experiences and lucky escapes. For me, for us, the subtext is there, in the Times New Roman 12-point font. If it’s fact or fiction, I don’t know. But it *sounds* like story truth – a sense of character emerging finally out of a one-dimensional media creation, an innocent, soft-faced girl, with a sunflower hat, who never got to speak for herself. Frankie and I were both visibly alternative in the 1990s – not his type, I thought at the time. And that gave me a feeling of being invincible, untouchable. *I can walk alone. I am not anyone’s victim.* But I was. We all were.

My interpretation of Ross's document is a perfect example of La Capra's argument regarding history, trauma and transference. The historian's likelihood of projection, over-identification with the subject and the past, and/or the vehement denial of the past and its likeness to our cultural context and self (La Capra 1985, 72), means that they either consciously or unconsciously fill in the gaps and silences, as well as interpret (and misinterpret) the narrative. Narcissism, which seems to be a familiar charge in criticism of crime memoir and first-person-narrated true crime narratives, is a key trope in transference – and a “one sided but alluring response to the anxiety of transference” (72), which La Capra attributes to “a fear of loss of control over the past and a neurotic desire to control the subject in history” (72). Gilman Srebnick advocates how “La Capra's notion of the ‘middle voice’ or: the ‘in-between’ voice of undecideability and the ambivalence of clear-cut positions, provides a useful analytic tool” (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 9).

While I critiqued Ross's amateur sleuthing, his obsession with Mosman Park and the flats – which seemed to me to be a displaced sense of guilt for so grossly neglecting his duty of care to Sarah and his other female passenger – I was displacing my own guilt; I was backshadowing, projecting.

Considering Maggie Orford's description of transference as “over-identification in both the public and the private psyche of victimhood and guilt” (2010, 222) and the notion of an in-between voice, I propose that story and narrativised historical account could be a kind of middle ground – or an in-between voice, akin to what La Capra later refers to in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* as “the middle voice” (2001, 20). It provides a self-conscious, reflective, identifiably subjective interpolation of events: a voice where transference is permitted, acknowledged, scrutinised, and finally, accepted. After all, in my reading of Ross's statement, I immediately entered the “charged arena of subjectivity and human feeling” (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 36)

My drive to identify with victimhood – or to dissociate myself from it – is transference. For female crime writers like myself, there is an obvious explanation, one that launches from Bradley Smith's traumapad (2018, para 4) and the reality of a gynocidal society: men wish to actively hurt women. Women try to reconcile this against our fathers, brothers, lovers, friends. We

survive. These women did not. And I am sorry every day that they did not. They had become public property – owned by the *West*, the *Post*: *our* girls. Women always become girls when they are lost, more so when they are murdered. They were, however, not *Our Girls*. They were not ever mine. See, I never cared about *him*. I cared about *them*: I wanted to know these women, these still-girls, who had never made it home from a night out. But I could not, not really. In *The Devil's Garden*, Debi Marshall refers to the victims as roses:

These girls were all beautiful roses – young, fresh, in first bud. It became a metaphor for how I thought of the killer: a monster who stalked the innocent yet to blossom and who, when he was finished, tossed away their bodies as nothing more than human compost ... planting them in the Devil's Garden around which, the death lilies grew. (Marshall 2007, xiii)

The Claremont victims were not roses. All young women are more complex than their symbolic function. The Claremont victims were flawed, three-dimensional – and above all – *real* young women, full of complexities, banalities and secret worlds. Yet they had become characters to me – or rather, I had transformed them into characters. The murdered woman takes on a mythological sheen; she becomes a cipher, a symbolic realm. In a sense, I had tried to own these murdered women without knowing them, or rather I tried to *know* them through characters, to absolve myself from the crime of representation.

In writing and rewriting *Nothing Gold*, my aim became to write the story about the girls who didn't make it home and how they were real, using characters that are not them. But saying their names aloud has been difficult until now.

In writing about them now, I am demythologising them; in saying their real names, I am naming them for perpetuity: Sarah Spiers, Jane Rimmer, Ciara Glennon.

## II. The Dream Deceivers: Rewriting a Sensational Teen Crime and Childhood Trauma Through the Lens of the Real

I first discovered the Ricky Kasso case by chance in the true crime corridors of YouTube in 2015. The title of the documentary *Satan in the Suburbs* (2000) read like clickbait: it was juxtaposed against a thumbnail of a picturesque portside hamlet.

In 1984, eighteen-year-old Gary Lauwers was murdered by Ricky Kasso in front of their peers: metal-loving teenagers under the influence of PCP in a wooded area in Northport, Long Island. The murder was described by *The New York Times* as ritualised:

The cult, according to Assistant District Attorney Bill Keahon of Suffolk County, is known as the “Knights of the Black Circle.” It has about 20 teen-age members and has held gatherings for several years in the Northport area involving “the sacrifice of animals, the burning and torturing of animals” in satanic rituals. (McFadden 1984, para 8)

The Ricky Kasso case was a real-life, privileged version of the movie *River's Edge* (1986), with added elements of occultism. However, police officers involved in the case scoffed at the occult aspect of the crimes – reiterating that a minor drug debt was the motivation behind the murder and the catalyst for the crimes (Hauserman 2011, S1, E1). It also appeared that Lauwers was as antisocial as the other teens, troubled and well-known to local law enforcement – and was not reported missing by his family at the time. A police officer assigned to the case was interviewed for a documentary on Netflix (salaciously titled *Killer Kids*) and went so far as to say, “If he wasn’t the victim, he would have been the murderer” (E1).

The Ricky case was one that defined an era – sold by reputable media outlets as a “ritualised crime”. Although Ricky Kasso died in police custody before he could be charged for the murder of Gary Lauwers, he briefly became a Manson-like cult icon, who was as Jean Murley says “the first real icon in a new American mass market celebrity killer industry, a lurid world of ill-gotten fame” (2004, 140). Like Manson, books, movies and documentaries were made about Kasso. He even made the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. His accomplice, Jimmy Troiano, served a short sentence and

was interviewed years later, completely unremorseful and seemingly unaffected by the crime. And the victim Gary Lauwers was lost in the narrative as Kasso took centre stage as the master villain.

### **The Body as a Cultural Site of Teen Trauma**

In my first essay, I discussed how a series of true crimes in Perth, Western Australia – the most isolated city in the world – went unsolved for twenty years and the psychic and cultural scar tissue it left behind. I should take this opportunity to point out that this case went largely unnoticed not only internationally – but also interstate. When I discussed my novel *Nothing Gold* with RMIT staff and students, they received the idea with naked curiosity – and when I pitched the novel to room of international writers and a panel of publishers at the Bloody Scotland festival in 2014, the response was utter disinterest. After all, on a scale of serial murders, the publishers reasoned, the body count wasn't that impressive. Plus, who cares about Perth, Western Australia? Not the reader. And yet, just a few years later Australian crime fiction, moreover, rural, place-based crime fiction, like Jane Harper's best-selling novel, became the latest international publishing phenomenon – arguably subsuming Scandi noir.

At the time, I was both deflated and outraged. In my next manuscript, I sought to travel, to give myself both physical and psychic distance from Western Australia. My creative work, *I Shot the Devil*, was inspired by and channelled through my memory of a former life in the US. It was somewhere between girlhood and early adolescence: a chimeric, hyperimaginative state defined by displacement, trauma and wonder. Because it has been twenty-four years since I left America and I have not returned, these memories feel hyperreal and confabulated, conflated with collective memory texts of the era. In fact, 1989–94 feels like an intertextual blur of tabloids, sitcom television and novels. I utilised a teen murder that had all the hallmarks of a sensational crime: metaphorically fecund, cinematic, hyperreal.

Initially I framed the book as a memoir that centered around a true crime that occurred in New York in the 1990s, which as ten-year-old I had been exposed to, but couldn't comprehend. Shortly after moving to New York with my mum and brother, we stayed with a long-term friend of my stepfather (in *I Shot the Devil* I call her Ange Miller). She and her husband and my stepdad went to Studio 54 together in the 1970s; he, always wildly

inappropriate around children, spoke of his “coke days” with them, telling myself and my brother stories of cocaine, afros and sex parties. After “Ange” and her husband “Cooper’s” relationship soured, she allegedly ordered a hit on him. She was not prosecuted for his murder; her lover, who shot him, was. Ange denied involvement in Cooper’s death, even though she visited her husband’s killer in jail. She then went on to marry a rich property lawyer and reinvented herself as a Florida blonde, in a newly blended family in Coral Springs, FA. She was somewhat infamously known in the *New York Post* and tabloid media as a “black widow”, even appearing on a US talk show (*Geraldo* or *Phil Donahue*). And although he had once been good friends with Cooper and was certain of Ange’s guilt, my stepfather remained friends with her. Cooper’s tragic murder and the kids’ wellbeing was spoken of in hushed tones among the adults.

When we visited Ange and her new husband in their Coral Springs mansion, the atmosphere was electric, weird, spooky; her kids, like my brother and I, were obviously traumatised. I subconsciously understood that they could not formally acknowledge their mother’s guilt, but they seemed to know that she was guilty. They were bratty, rich, unlikable – but I pitied them, loaded up on ADHD meds and old-school antidepressants, repeating a false narrative, living with their father’s killer.

When we stayed with them in Florida, I experienced night terrors. My main memory of Florida is my mortification at waking up to my mother silently washing my bedsheets at 1 am. I was frightened by the moral vacuity surrounding the telling of this crime among family friends that read like something out of a pulpy true crime novel – cocaine, orgies, infidelities. There was a sense of the unreal about the crime – that it had never really happened. And in the context of a highly dysfunctional and abusive family environment, that phrase has a special resonance: a sense of doubting my own observations, memories – a sense of profound disturbance, somatised, but never formally expressed.

Kate Douglas claims that autobiographies of childhood are products of, and confrontations with “cultural memory”—the collective ways in which the past is remembered, constructed, and made intelligible within culture ...

Memory texts born from individual, group and collective memory.  
(2010, 20)

The act of relaying and reconstructing childhood memory is never neutral, but “a cultural practice” (Douglas 2010, 42) – negotiated and constructed intertextually, and ideologically fraught.

As Douglas maintains, the body is “a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied” (2010,114). As in my fictive memoir, a metanarrative called *Resident Alien*, trauma causes dislocation, substitution – when it speaks, it speaks in metaphor. Psychedelics play a large role in Cormac O’Malley’s and the other kids’ recollections of that night in the woods and their sometimes-collective hallucinatory recollections, such as seeing a bear shooting stars and Ricky turning into a crow. I hoped to convey how trauma had eroded the “real” memory of that night; instead, cartoonish substitutions stood in for a violent homicide that shaped all their lives. Furthermore, in the main narrative, *I Shot the Devil*, my protagonist Erin Sloane’s repressed, traumatic recollections are often conveyed in fragments, preceded by bodily panic.

I also wanted to communicate how the notion of fraudulent memory loss has become a site of cultural contestation, a means of manipulation – and a common place of cowardice and evasion of responsibility by abusers. Danny Quinlan-Walsh, Erin’s ex-boyfriend, is a violent teen who goes on to become an adult psychopath. Danny utilises a defence that got him sectioned, rather than jailed. When Erin meets him again she challenges his “selective memory”:

“Hey, so what do you know about Steve Shearer?” I asked.

“Steve Shearer?” Danny repeated, shrugging. “He sounds familiar?”

“Umm, he arrested you. He shot...”

“Ricky,” Danny finished the sentence. “Yeah, like, not super well, no. Also, the shrinks all said I had retrograde amnesia. Because of witnessing and abetting the murder, you know. And all those drugs.” He gave me the look of frat boy date rapist – bashful, but unapologetic – maybe even a little proud.

“I see.” Amnesia. How fucking original. I can’t believe he said the word abetting. Danny had slammed that bat into Andre’s head

and hard. The killer blow. I shredded my napkin, drove my nails into my palm. "I wanted to talk about Andre..."

"Andre..." Danny went blank.

"You know, the guy whose head got caved in like a dropped watermelon at West Cypress Road Woods."

"Erin, you gotta know, I don't really remember Andre..."

"Cut it out, Danny. This retrograde amnesia, this puff of madness shit won't work on me. I know who you are. I need to know who Andre was. For real." (McIver 2019, 35)

Considering Douglas's assertion that accounts of childhood are "memory texts" (2010, 20), it seemed that the 1980s and 1990s were an era in which adults rewrote their own memories of past abuse, or parental anxieties about the potential abuse of their children onto the present, resulting in distortions and confabulations. One of the many unfortunate consequences of the Satanic Panic was the "false memory syndrome" movement, which arose during the 1990s (108), a movement that "warns against the fabrication or exaggeration of child abuse narratives – offering protection to parents who have been falsely accused of abuse by their children" (108).

The fact that "the panic stemmed from national anxieties surrounding the recently articulated problem of child abuse" (Douglas 2010, 692) is particularly fascinating, seeing as the panic started out as a misguided campaign to protect children – only to end up psychologically abusing children (and devastating the lives of adults falsely accused).

### **Wound Culture: Mass Media and the Selling of a Teen Crime**

Mark Seltzer (1998, 2) posits that "murder is where history and bodies cross" and as such "senseless murder" is a nexus where "body and society, identity and desire, violence and intimacy are secured or brought into crisis" (2). Seltzer refers to contemporary Western culture as trauma culture or "wound culture" (278), a post-industrialised mass-media machine addicted to the "atrocious exhibition" (34). Sensational true crime texts reaffirm scandalous media narratives, encapsulating how murder can be used as a vehicle to celebrity in an America obsessed with true crime culture (135).

The Kasso case was also a by-product of and fuel for the Satanic Panic, a confluence of moral, cultural, political and psychic anxieties surrounding children, youth and abuse that became the subject of voracious media

coverage. Sarah Hughes claims the panic “was an indication of the New Right’s political and cultural influence” (2017, 694) and was reinforced by sensational media coverage, infotainment, movies and television (694). The incredible thesis of “the panic’s central narrative ... [was that] Satanists, paedophiles, and pornographers, who owned and operated suburban day-care centres, were seducing, abducting, molesting, and sometimes murdering the nation’s children” (692). This culminated in high-profile cases such as the McMartin Preschool trial (697), where salacious and obscene ritual abuse stories were concocted and counterfeit memories implanted into children by adult imaginations. The atrocities alleged against attending children were so grotesque and fantastical, they resembled the testimony in the Salem witch trials, when in fact they were revealed to be categorically false, a similar instance of collective fear and mass-scale projection.

Satanism in popular culture is preoccupied with inversions – the upside-down cross, records being played backwards; concepts of family, felicity and charity are turned inside out and made absurd, evil. This obsession with Satanism spoke loudly of a menace *outside* the confines of safe, middle-class America, whereas the threat really emanated from within these parameters – literally and psychically. In the Kasso case, unlike the trial or Ramirez or Manson, the interloper was not a black-hearted fringe-dweller, but a privileged white suburban youth from within the community, whose fall from grace epitomised the evil of drugs and the decay of these institutions. The attack came from within. According to Seltzer (1998, 21) “atrocities indicate something more than a taste for senseless violence ...but are a way of imagining private bodies and private persons to public spaces”. This specific “atrocities exhibition” (21) seemed to communicate a conflict between the private and public selves in Republican middle-class America: the fiction of the corruption or violation of youth from a fantastical source, such as Satanism.

Heavy metal and Satanism became catalysts and signifiers in my fiction, to detonate a series of intertextual connections to the reader: true crime cases, sociocultural landmarks and historical signposts. Also, in the 1990s, key sensationalist cases involving children and youth dominated media narratives and troubled the collective cultural consciousness – key themes in my manuscript. One was the case of the West Memphis Three,

popularised by the *Paradise Lost* documentary series, where a trio of heavy metal-loving, poor outcast Arkansas teens were imprisoned and sentenced to death for the death of three boys in Robin Hood Hills. Both cases had synergies with complex arguments surrounding childhood, memory and trauma, controversies surrounding youth and counterculture.

In neo-conservative eighties America, the devil had many faces. Heavy metal music was a portal into Satanism, suicide and murder. The quasi-forensic examination of heavy metal and its links to youth crime were part of the cultural discourse, with talk show host Geraldo Rivera famously interviewing an incredulous Ozzy Osbourne about heavy metal music's link to youth crime (Hughes 2017, 704).<sup>8</sup> In 1990, members of British heavy metal band Judas Priest were tried by the parents of two teens, who believed the teens' 1985 murder-suicide pact was the consequence of an album containing subliminal Satanic messages. *The Dream Deceivers* (Van Taylor 1992), a documentary made about the case, features suicide survivor James Vance. Watching footage of this gave me nightmares as child: Vance was severely deformed, an elephantine creature, with unbearably sad human eyes staring out. I remembered his lisped testimony of a suicide pact, which occurred in a playground, under a willow tree. Vance told documentarians he had been mesmerised by music that lyrically resembled the Gospels, describing the music as a narcotic, putting him and his friend, Ray Belknap, who succeeded in his part of their suicide pact, into a state of "electric ecstasy" (Van Taylor 1992, 35:55).

In my writing of *I Shot the Devil*, I channelled much of my childhood and teen years, which were heavily invested in hard rock, metal, punk and gothic counterculture – the soundtrack and costume of outsiders. Music that as a primary school student I was punished for listening to. Music that carried warning stickers, that was confiscated, demonised, and literally, put on trial. In that sense, *I Shot the Devil* – which incidentally is named after a

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8. According to Hughes, "Rivera provided a pre-taped interview with serial killer Charles Manson, whose recognizable image was already culturally synonymous with demonic crime." (Hughes 2017, 705). Rivera also drew heavily upon the sexualisation of children, which Hughes sees as pivotal to the Satanic Panic (705).

Suicidal Tendencies song – has a soundscape, which features iconic metal, saccharine pop and the gothic/new wave music Erin secretly listens to away from the metal kids.

Ricky Hell, like Ricky Kasso, who my alleged murderer/protagonist Ricky Hell is based on, also has many similarities to serial killer Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker. In *I Shot the Devil* I draw upon Hell's resemblance to Ramirez and teen heartthrob Johnny Depp to maximise the somewhat incompatible cultural effect that these likenesses inspire.<sup>9</sup>

Ramirez was also obsessed with both AC/DC's "Highway to Hell" and Satanism, and in the same year was splashed all over the media, sneering and unrepentant. Although Ramirez killed thirteen people and attempted to murder many more, and Kasso killed one, he was visually so like Ramirez that it added another hyperreal element to the case. Sentenced to the death penalty, Ramirez famously snarled: "Big deal. Death comes with the territory. See you in Disneyland." Footage of Kasso, wild eyed, impossibly high, crazed and unrepentant in an AC/DC T-shirt, was on all news channels mirroring Ramirez, headlines screaming "Say you love Satan."

Both Kasso and Ramirez seemed to have aspects of Charles Manson's drug-fuelled madness and aura of dark occultism, no doubt aided by the infamous true crime text, *Helter Skelter*. Jean Murley (2004, 105) posits that Manson and the Manson Family were seen to be the originator of Satanic murderers, even though Manson and the Family had only tenuous links to occultism. They are, instead, a reservoir for anxieties about youth counterculture and the hippie anti-establishment movement (121), posing the ultimate threat to nuclear family values and white suburbia and a potential cautionary tale: one of the dark avenues along which leading alternative lifestyles could take wayward youth (97).

By utilising multiple layers of intertextuality, bricolage and pastiche, I sought to illustrate how crime mythologies like Ricky Kasso, "The Acid King", are born.

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9. Incidentally, Johnny Depp, once an outsider from a small town, formed a friendship with the West Memphis Three and was a powerful advocate in freeing the accused men.

From the back, he looked like a rhino, a glitter of studs on denim like armour, spelling out the word METAL. You'd think he was a skinny guy, watching him from behind, too tall and hunching to accommodate the low roof of the school bus, but he was built more solid, I later realised.

There was an invisible ripple in the air as the dude suddenly turned and faced us, I felt the same sick butterflies as you do when you see a pretty girl, except this felt more uneasy. He looked like Johnny Depp's younger brother – maybe if he'd done time in prison; his cheekbones were Native American, but I knew he was Hispanic. He had the lips of a woman. From a black panel of unwashed hair, his eyes were like the tiger eye stone, appearing dark, but with filaments of fire. The flaw in his perfection – acne craters that pitted his cheeks and gave him a tougher look. I'm ready for juvie, his face said. I set shit on fire, his clothes said. I don't care about anyone, his eyes said. All the same, I needed him to save me and he knew it. (McIver 2019, 115)

### **Kiddy Horror: Nineties Textual Anxieties**

I relocated my narrative to 1994 partly to fictionalise the true crimes I had utilised, but also because it was a preference for the known era. Furthermore, the 1990s were a period of rewriting childhood: tales of damage, trauma and repair (Douglas 2010, 106). Blake Morrison writes of a flood of cultural narratives depicting children as evil and dangerous, stating: "In the early 90s, the only show in town was Kiddy Horror" (2003, para 6). This was writ large in the James Bulger case, a horror movie come to life. Indeed, Morrison refers to the James Bulger case, the murder of a two-year-old boy in Liverpool by Robert Thompson and Jon Venables (both ten, the youngest killers in Britain in 250 years) as iconic, calling it a "moral panic about children – the threat of other people's, the defenseless of our own" (para 1).

The tropes of *Child's Play* evident in the murder and the fact that both boys had watched a lot of R-rated horror movies in the lead-up to the crime, had come from abusive homes and were bunking off school, created numerous storylines for cultural conversations surrounding evil and innocence, televised violence, desensitisation and child abuse.

Indeed, everything about the story – the criminals’ youth, James’s proximity to both his own mother and safety, the children being stopped and questioned along the way by adults who inexplicably did not separate the injured, weeping toddler from the older boys – is both heartrending and terrifying. With the Columbine school shooting, themes of video game and televised violence, juvenile psychopathy and gun laws were brought into the public sphere (tragically not for the last time). The murder of JonBenét Ramsay, another toddler, this time a baby beauty queen, whose death was framed as a tragic consequence of the hypersexualisation of children in contemporary America. Indeed, as Hughes points out, much of the Satanic Panic was reinforced by “infotainment’s trend of sexualizing children” (2017, 75), focusing on bizarre, graphic ritual sexual abuses that were entirely concocted by adults.

Gilman Srebnick’s supposition that celebrated crime cases offer “windows into why historical events become culturally iconic” (2005, 11) remains relevant here. Indeed, Morrison refers to the Bulger case as iconic, adding that:

In hindsight, its lesson is almost the opposite of what it was taken to be at the time – not that children had grown big and dangerous, but that adult society had lost sight of their smallness and vulnerability. There were 38 witnesses who claimed to see two boys kicking and beating a smaller boy but who didn’t intervene; the failure of teachers and others to halt Robert Thompson’s extraordinary level of truanting or notice Jon Venables’ sense of neglect; the barbarism of a legal system which demanded that 10-year-olds be tried as adults in a public courtroom: all these point to a failure to protect children, or act in their interests. (2003, 8)

The CCTV image of little James Bulger being led off by the two older boys, the Mothercare logo in the background, is a Gothic visual narrative that has inspired numerous fictive renderings of the murder of James Bulger. The power perhaps lies in its eerie presentiment and foreshadowing – one feels that they could almost reach in and save him. A mother letting go of her child’s hand in a suburban shopping centre and a wicked boy taking it is rich with intertextual cultural connotations – Blake Morrison uses the extended metaphor of the children’s crusades in his book, *As If* (1997).

There have been plays, a novel, a lesser-known film by David Schmoller called *Little Monsters* (2012), numerous creative nonfiction texts, including Morrison's *As If* (1997) and two memoirs written by his now-separated parents in the last twenty-five years. Playwright Mark Ravenhill recalls the case as "the drama of the nineties" (2004, 307), an anchor for post-Thatcherite dialogues about crime, children and poverty, but also an unconscious catalyst to write "And suddenly I see my own personal narrative very clearly, in a way that I never did before – not even as I was talking to the novelist and he was telling me that it was the James Bulger murder that made him write. How could I have never spotted before that I was someone who had never written a play until the murder of James Bulger?" (308)

Iconic crimes seem to generate interconnections and intersections – from the public and the private, the creative to the critical. In my first novel, I was inspired to write by a series of cold-case murders of women who were murdered in my adolescence. In *I Shot the Devil*, the Ricky Kasso case was the main catalyst to write a murder that featured in my childhood – but other traumatic events – abuses, both public and private, moulded my narrative world.

Like James Bulger, a "cottage industry" (Joyce 2014, 203) has sprung up around murdered toddler, JonBenêt Ramsay. The iconic image of thickly made-up, doll-like baby beauty-pageant queen, JonBenêt and the mystery surrounding her murder has been rendered fictively by Joyce Carol Oates in 2008, *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skylar Rampike* and Laura Ellen Joyce's *The Museum of Atheism* (2012) and has formed the subject of numerous nonfiction documentaries. Laura Ellen Joyce reflects on the youthful "static perfection" and voicelessness of her subjectivity as to why JonBenêt is endlessly rewritten in cultural texts, claiming she is perceived almost as a blank space to inscribe upon (203).

What underlies these crimes involving children and the texts about them is that as a common denominator they invoke horror and panic, fearfulness about children and youth and how they are parented. While this makes them contentious, it also makes them compulsive. Joyce (2014, 203) situates JonBenêt as a symbol of our culture's obsession with "dead white girl". For many, JonBenêt's death emblematises the chasm between her

“protected” middle-class American family life and the abuse that lies beneath the gilded surfaces. It is also perceived that much of her short life was stolen by pageantry – there was already a presentiment of innocence lost in the images of adult beauty superimposed on a small child.

But I wonder where the *real* JonBenêt is in all of this? I ask this not to chastise, but I find it puzzling and deeply tragic that a toddler occupies this mythological and symbolic space, rather than a flesh-and-blood child, who was not defiled and murdered, who became a space to be written on.

Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) explores themes of maternal ambivalence and child psychopathy and the consequence of a mass school shooting through the perspective of the mother of a “fictional” school shooter – despite it being obviously based on the events of Columbine. Shriver (2011, para 6) was told the book would be unsalable and needed to be rewritten, as the American market was hypersensitive and “thin skinned” regarding violence (9/11 had just happened). Shriver declined and sought another agent and the book became a bestseller, winning the Orange Prize (para 9). Shriver points out that “word of mouth” and “book clubs” fed the publicity machine for the best-selling novel (9). Reviewers argue that the book is a “resolutely anti-parenthood and anti-children book, everything that can go wrong does” – while agreeing that it is a quintessentially “taboo breaking” novel (Smith 2003, para 3) and that “books seldom feel as contemporary as this” (para 1). This is undoubtedly the reason why this contentious novel became a mainstream success. However, as it seems to be in so many cases, Shriver’s decision to represent a crime like this is chastised, to write such a mulishly anti-maternal text seems to echo the gendered ethics of the told. In this instance, a woman is again asked not only why this subject – but subtextually, how could you feel this way?

### **Techniques that Create the True Crime Effect**

In my creative artefact, by engaging with true crimes, both personal and political, real and imagined, in a way I believed to be artful and ethical, I attempted to capture and catalogue a changing psychic, cultural and political landscape on a personal, intersubjective and intercultural level. This memory effect is viscerally emotive; it is also cerebral and political – the reader instinctively recognises that the crime is a signifier.

However, these associations threaten to supersede the significance of the crimes themselves – which is only one component of the many ethical problems inherent in the “true crime effect”. When combined with the autodiagetic mode, this can be especially captivating to the reader, but can multiply the problematical component of the representation of the real, an area explored by numerous life-writing theorists. I wanted to utilise the Black Widow plot-line as more of a cultural product from my memory practices – and a portal into my pseudo-memoir narrative. I used true crime as a lens for re-remembering my own life to uncover the “real” reimagined story – or stories – behind the dominant narrative.

The Ricky Kasso case, and the entirely imagined crimes of Steve Shearer, Ange Miller and Carole Jenkins, assist in creating a narrative bricolage of “true crime” events, or by-products of crimes that resonated with “memory texts” of a different kind (Douglas 2010, 20). By accessing and manipulating fact and recollection, while employing fictive rhetorical devices, my desire to represent the real and my disinclination to expose my real-life experience became integral to my creative process.

Amy Gilman Srebnick posits that the polyphonic or “multivocal” quality of fiction offers the multiplicity of perspectives (2015, 9) traditionally neglected in history to argue for the place of story in history – one that admits “victim, accuser and accused” (9), allowing for the voice of the marginalised or subjugated historical subject. In Woollett’s “Cathy” (*The Love of a Bad Man*, 2016), a vilified criminal’s toughness is conveyed through a suburban dialect that’s at once sexually coarse, brutal and blunt and somehow humanising:

There’s something that hasn’t changed about me over the years, even if my face has gotten harder, my lips thinner and my cunt slack from pushing. And he likes me to do things with my hands, too, things you wouldn’t expect from looking at something so small and white.

(Woollett 2016, 531)

While Woollett explores several female killers from contemporary history at close range, Emma Cline utilises the Manson family group purely for “mood and tone” (Love 2016, para 4), to peruse peripheral perspectives in *The Girls* (2016), which is narrated by a fourteen-year-old girl drawn into the cult by her fascination for a female acolyte (Love 2016, para 1).

In *Lullaby*, Leila Slimani (2018) also plays more subtly on intertextual crime connections uses dislocation, relocation and renaming with regards to place and character. “Louise” is named after Louise Woodward, in another “killer nanny case” that occurred in 1997 (Allardice, 10, para 9). Emma Cline renames Charles Manson in *The Girls* (2015), referring to him as “Russell”, and perhaps most significantly renames and changes the names and ages and the number of Manson victims. There is no pregnant Sharon Tate, instead, a mother and young boy who are equally mercilessly and brutally killed.

While Slimani’s *Lullaby* (2018), reconfigures and restages the brutal murder of two children by their nanny in New York City in 2012 to contemporary Paris, temporal shifts and location shifts are less common strategies that true crime-inspired authors use to create emotional and historical distance. I believe this is because true crime is an informal historical record and true-crime inspired fiction writers are preoccupied with recreating cultural histories, both public and private.

I relocated my narrative to 1994 partly because I was 14 in 1994, and my novel is all about a dark entry into adolescence, but also because in the 1990s, key sensational cases involving children and youth dominated media narratives and troubled the collective cultural consciousness – key themes in my manuscript. I wanted to utilize pop cultural references, film, music and television to recreate a cultural era. Many characters resemble pop culture icons: Ricky Hell a teen dream version of Richard Ramirez and Johnny Depp; Danny Quinlan-Walsh an evil Patrick Swayze. Steve Shearer is intended to resemble a villainous WWF wrestler; Erin Sloane is a gothic version of Tiffani Thiessen from *Saved by the Bell* (1989–92). On yet another narrative level, after my last experience with replicating the real with *Nothing Gold* I craved historical distance from the original crimes.

In *I Shot the Devil*, I used intertextual references to create a true crime bricolage. As well as keeping the details of the crimes sparse, fragmented and hallucinatory, I intended to denote to the reader that these crimes perform an important rhetorical and symbolic function – but they are not a replication of the real-life case, people and players. I recast the alleged murderer, Ricky Hell, as a troubled Latino youth and petty criminal, a pawn in a police conspiracy, and Andre Villiers, the victim, as a deeply

unsympathetic character: a sexual predator, in fact. This makes him both a suspect and a likely candidate for the second set of crimes that feature in the story: the missing and murdered Newport children.

This rather obvious tactic of reversing binaries such as “innocent victim/evil criminal” could be morally dubious and even be seen to reaffirm the media’s erasure of the gravity of crimes and victims’ humanity.

However, my authorial intention was to depict how narratorial power operates in the telling and retelling of true crime stories and subverts the dominant media narrative. In my excavation of an imagined teen crime, I thought of the multiple possibilities as to why kids would murder kids: subterranean reasons, motivations that an adult or law enforcer might not immediately seize. Group dynamics are complex, especially when they are mixed gender and in a subculture and an era of rape culture and male entitlement. In this passage, the now-grown narrator Erin recalls Andre Villiers, murder victim:

A memory had resurfaced and persisted since writing the Cathy Carver piece, and had continued to rise to the surface like scum, in the waters of my trauma stained, sometimes-unreliable, bong water memory.

And one time, we were in the backseat of Danny’s car, a skunk fug around us when Andre “joke-choked” me in the car. Maybe the others were doing a fast food run, possibly they were in the woods, their location eludes me, all I know is only we remained in the car. One minute we were talking, smoking, Faith No More playing at an unholy decibel:

Go on and wring my neck  
Like when a rag gets wet  
A little discipline for my pet genius

Andre turned very serious and something passed over his face. Finally, my fist went out and connected with his gut and it was like hitting a stack of jello, which immediately firmed. He laughed it off and I was forced to join him, after cursing him out and staying to smoke a cigarette. I didn’t want to be the “crazy bitch” who made

trouble. I just made sure not to be alone with him and the occasion was forgotten. Apparently. But nothing ever is, not really.

There were finger bruises around my neck that lasted for a week; bruises that were hidden by my Mom's arsenal of concealers and foundations. I knew not to revert to turtlenecks and scarves, that my friends, my parents and Danny would assume I was concealing hickeys.

Now I felt the ghostly memory of his soggy hands around my neck.

The possibility that Andre was a predator provided a motive and yes, a reason to kill (no, not an excuse), and it reframed the crime in a way that reassess the tangle of my feelings for Ricky (These were days when my heart was volcanic) who I could never see crouched in the dirt, bearing a bat with fragments of blood and bone. (McIver 2019, 22)

## Conclusion

Allison Jaggar (1997, 191) proposes that “outlaw emotions” pose a necessary feminist challenge to the Western positivist philosophy, whose epistemological imperative is to subordinate both emotion and sensory observation. She argues that not only would the human experience be inconceivable and unrealised without both, but also emotion and sensory observation are in fact key survival instincts (190). I reason that a history of a crime, one that recalls injury, trauma and survival, without a subjective, emotional and sensory response would not only be one-dimensional and inert, it would be a literally incomplete record.

I have argued that true crime–inspired fiction contains productive possibilities, in true crime–saturated wound culture. While trauma is depicted by many theorists as being without or even beyond language, Leanne Dodd (2017, 4) advocates fiction, namely crime fiction, to overcome trauma, vis a vis an imaginary world that mimetically may mirror their experience, all the while knowing that there will be resolution – unlike trauma, which is a repetitive loop. Crime fiction, with its interest in restoring order and drive towards narrative resolution (4), inspires identification – a means to connect empathetically to character and events, connecting readers and those experiencing trauma to a larger “cultural consciousness” (3).

In their “best” ethical form, true crime–inspired fiction texts speak about, not for, criminals and victims; they strive to depict the social, political and cultural atmosphere of real events. Because of their adoption of rhetorical fiction techniques, works of this nature can provide a compelling and accessible vehicle into the aberrant, neglected demographics, blacklisted passages of crime history. These texts can create empathetic connections with readers and represent polyphonic voices and a multiplicity of perspectives. Anna Haebich suggests crime encourages writing that is “imaginative, subjective and ambiguous” (2015, 202) enabling authors to “emerge rich constructions of the past that uniquely enlighten, elucidate and explain” (6).

Furthermore, true crime–inspired narratives can operate much like “a wide-angle lens” (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 12) to observe the complex cultural landscape surrounding celebrated or sensational crime cases. In *I Shot the Devil*, I explore the shockwaves of domestic crimes (domestic abuse, coercive control) hidden in among “spectacular” crime (sexual assault, paedophilia,

sensational murder) in the 1990s. By examining the Kasso case as an aperture through which to view a complex cultural topography, we can examine the anxieties and obsessions of a given cultural era. We can explore the psychological and sociocultural subtexts surrounding the crime. In place of vacuous “killer kids”, I could explore alienated, bored, neglected wealthy teens with drug habits. Faced with the apathy and materialism of the 1980s and the nihilism of the 1990s, a lacuna where religion or family once was, I located teenage boys playing with badness, teen girls playing with bad men, with fire, and adults absent or conspiratorial to their crimes.

True crime–inspired fiction texts contain discursive possibilities to agitate dominant historical narratives. By utilising fictive devices, they can inspire emotive reader responses, affecting a large readership and impacting upon real-world outcomes, even amending public record. Authors can undertake a nuanced and resistant revision of archival crime material, traditionally narrated by patriarchal and punitive authorities (Haebich 2015, 1). I would argue that via true crime–inspired fiction and true crime memoir, story has become a branch of both public memory and public record and is being amalgamated into a new kind of archive.

I propose that true crime has a unique cultural association, an effect on the reader that fiction does not. True crime–inspired fiction’s effect upon the reader – and on the writer – bears a semblance to the exhilaration and immersion of life writing and new journalism, and can be deeply challenging, troubling and impactful. By utilising true crimes, authors gain a unique set of cultural associations and intertextual memories, charged with complex emotions. However, it’s undeniable that the “true crime effect” is fraught with ethical issues. Details of real cases, or even the significance of the crimes, are overpowered by what they mean to the cultural connotations they detonate: “their representation become more important than the case themselves” (Gilman Srebnick 2005, 9). There is so much about true crime–inspired fiction that is potentially ethically and politically suspect and damaging because of this. After all, “borrowing” is a form of subtraction: it takes, it lessens, even if the intention is not to.

In this discussion of appropriating victimhood, La Capra’s notion of empathetic unsettlement is pertinent:

I would argue that the response of even secondary witnesses (including historians) to traumatic events must involve empathic unsettlement that should register in one's very mode of address in ways revealing both similarities and differences across genres (such as history and literature). But a difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity. And a post-traumatic response of unsettlement becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to the aporia, paradox, or impasse. (La Capra 2001, 47)

La Capra's notion of "empathetic unsettlement" – as both a mode to witness, corroborate and convey trauma – is inherently imperfect. While identification is necessary and empathy often automatic, overidentification, projection and transference become hindrances; however, like La Capra, I propose they are processes to work through. Furthermore, in this process is the possibility to observe, humanise and restore meaning to witness, to comprehend aberrant events that have become sensationalised in the media – conflated with violence and fused with victimhood. By reframing sensation-soaked true crime stories, we can strive to comprehend and exorcise the trauma of exposure to violence and give voice to conflicting cultural conversations that surround false binaries of good and evil, innocence and experience.

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