

**O**n the day I died, I took the new oars down to the lake. They were heavy, but I was saving myself the second trip. The blades rode flat along the ground, flattening two tracks through the wet grass.

It was morning. The air was cool, but down on the dock, the slats were already hot. I noted a lone fishing boat out on the water. Inside, two men hunched silently over their tackle, their faces turned out across the lake. Beyond them, mist rose off the water, nearly hiding the far shore.

This moment. This is what I return to.

Later, I will note the long crack in the new oar, just before my head goes under, just before the flume of blood rises off my skin under the water like smoke. I will come back to this moment and think, if I had just gone back up the steps to the house immediately. If I had just stayed up at the house in the first place.

If I had just.



# *Part I*





## *Chapter One*

**B**y the time the search volunteers arrived at my door with a handful of flyers, their zeal and concern had worn to a polish. I'd been watching the news and was a little tired of the kid myself. But I couldn't look away. A baby, really, gone all day. He had bottomless brown eyes and tousled hair like the fuzz of a baby bird. He was two. He hadn't toddled down the street to pet the neighbor's dog, wasn't found halfway to the convenience store with a handful of pennies for candy. The real thing, this kid. Missing.

"Have you seen this little boy?" asked one of the women. The other yawned into the back of her hand. They wore yoga pants and Parks Junior-Senior High School Booster Club sweatshirts. One had pigtail braids, like a child, and the other one, the tired one, had her hair pulled back in a band, probably growing out bad bangs. Behind them, the street was overlit with neighborly porch lights.

"I saw him on the news," I said, taking the offered flyer and reading the details I'd already heard: Aidan Ransey, height, weight. So small. "How long's he been gone?"

“Since this morning,” said the one with pigtails, but the other woman didn’t like me being curious, I could tell. Either she’d tired of the questions or she thought mine wasn’t the right kind. “From his own bed,” pigtails said, her voice catching. I was reminding this woman to be worried for other children now sleeping in their beds or waiting up for their mommies to come home from their good deeds. “I can’t believe it,” she said, shaking her head.

The other woman shot her friend a look. She could believe it. “Look,” this one said, getting down to business. “Can you put a flyer in your . . .” She glanced behind me, toward the staircase with its worn carpet, then toward the back hallway with the overhead light dangling, waiting for a new bulb. I lived upstairs, but none of the other neighbors would bother to answer a knock on the front door. Truthfully, I usually didn’t, either, but I knew from the news that there would be canvassers. Better to open the door. Better to take the flyer. “. . . in your laundry room or something?” the woman said finally. “Call the number if you hear or see anything, OK? We need to keep moving.”

“Wait a minute,” the one with the braids said. “I know you from football pickup. Are you Josh’s mother? I’m Caleb’s mom, from Boosters?”

“Joshua,” I said, my tongue thick in my mouth.

“We haven’t heard from you about helping with concessions,” she said. “And the pancake breakfast is coming up—here, let me give you my number.” She folded a flyer in half, Aidan’s face cut in two, and pulled out a pen. “We really count on all the parents to help.”

Her friend smirked as I took the flyer. “Thanks,” I said. It was the second time in one evening I’d been asked to volunteer for something. My activism was normally confined to dropping the

occasional quarter into fund-raising buckets. But not for anyone who rang a bell or stood in street intersections. They were ass-holes. “Pancakes,” I said.

“It’s the most popular fund-raiser for the team we do all year,” Caleb’s mom said. “And so much fun.”

Headband and I exchanged a look. “Great, well,” I said. “I hope they find that little boy soon.”

A shadow passed over Caleb’s mom’s face. “They will,” she said. “As soon as they find his—”

“Come on, Steph,” her friend said. “We need to get this street done.”

They were down the sidewalk, the reflective stripes on their athletic shoes flashing, when the door at my shoulder opened to the chain’s length. The neighbor, Margaret, put one myopic eye against the opening. “What did she say? As soon as they find his what?”

“His mother,” I said.

Margaret pressed her ear up to the door opening. She wasn’t hard of hearing. She caught every noise we made upstairs and let us know about it, thumping a broom handle at her ceiling. She wrestled with the chain to open the door wider. Her twiggy legs stuck out of her housecoat. “How d’you know that?”

I looked again at the flyer, at the infant cheeks of Aidan Ransey, and handed it to her, then at the other copy, with a phone number and the woman’s name—*Stephanie Bux*—written in round, cheerful shapes. The *i* was dotted with a fat circle; the fours in her phone number were pointy, defensive. No—protective. The other woman would fill her in on their way down the street and then Caleb’s mom would be sorry she’d written anything down for me, even if we all knew I had no intention of calling.

I turned to Margaret. “Haven’t you heard?” I held the folded

flyer to my forehead. “Apparently I’m some kind of voodoo priestess. I can see into the future. I seeeeee . . . a small boy, brown eyes. Yellow, almost white hair . . . I see pudgy hands and a full diaper—”

Margaret huffed and closed the door.

I lowered the flyer. After a moment of watching the street, I reached for the switch for our porch light and flicked it on. I didn’t believe in wishful thinking, even though it was all I seemed to do.

THE NEXT MORNING at the café on the courthouse square, the *Parks County Spectator* was sold down to a few copies. A handwritten sign above the cash register read *NO CHANGE SORRY*. I paid for a paper and a weak tea, glancing between the careful, narrow warning on the sign and the careful, narrow man behind the counter.

Outside, the courthouse rose over the square like a castle on high. People scurried over the lawn, between a set of imposing limestone pillars, and through the doors. The mechanical chimes from the clock at the top of the rotunda counted out the hour. I crossed the street and sat on the low wall encasing the courthouse lawn, my back to all the activity.

The same baby photo from the flyer graced the front page. I flipped through the article, then searched the rest of the paper’s photos and captions, paging past high school football scores and gardening club news, chili suppers, a notice for that pancake breakfast. On the back page of the newspaper, a furniture store’s proprietor had signed his name to an advertisement as a guarantee on his low prices. His short, everyman name was embellished with a sweeping flourish. Someone had a Napoleon complex. I paused over the prices. Joshua could use a chest of

drawers, but it was too early for furniture that wouldn't fit in the back of our SUV.

None of the photos showed me the county sheriff, the man I was not rushing to meet.

At last I stood, discarded the tea, and followed the bustle of activity into the courthouse. In the lobby, under a lofty stained-glass dome, people in uniforms and with ID cards dangling from their necks outnumbered the civilians. Their faces grave and important, they rushed in and out of an area cordoned behind makeshift walls. I joined a long line snaking toward a set of metal detectors.

"Is all this fuss for that one kid?" said a man ahead of me in line.

"You know whose kid it is?" said one of the guards, taking all the cords and adapters out of my laptop bag and inspecting each piece as though we had all the time in the world. "Seen enough of them Ranseys come through here to last me the rest of my life."

"Good to know the law will hup to for anyone at all when the time comes," the first man said. He noticed me listening and hurried away.

The line for the elevator was short, but I took the stairs anyway. They were mottled marble, white with gray threads, worn by generations of shuffling feet. Best of all, they were empty of people, empty of pleasantries given and expected in return.

At the top of the third-floor landing, rather too quickly, the Parks County Sheriff's Administrative Office announced itself self-importantly, gold paint on opaque glass.

I straightened my shoulders, took a deep breath. Then another. A minute ticked by. No one went in or came out.

I could tell Kent I didn't want to do it.

But I couldn't. Not really.

The door opened onto a wide gray room crowded with closely aligned desks, each covered with spilling files and old paper cups. At my right, a reception desk sat unmanned. Behind the door, a low black sofa suggested guests, but none were in evidence. No guests, no hosts, no one at all.

A single sticky note was pasted to the front desk. I glanced around, stepped in, and plucked it up.

Square note, yellow. In thick black felt-tip—no. I peered more closely. In thick purple felt-tip, the note said *Back in a jiff!* The letters were round and rolling.

At the back of the room, a light showed through an open door. I put the sticky note back and made my way there. I had raised my knuckles to the door when something inside slammed. I startled backward.

“What do you want?” a man’s voice said.

I nudged open the door. “I—”

A man in a brown uniform and black ball cap sat behind a cluttered desk, his elbows on his knees and his hands steepled in front of his face. He opened his eyes and lifted an arm, crossing-guard style, to hold me at the doorway, and jutted his chin toward his desk.

“We want the same thing you do, Russ,” a woman’s voice said, scratchy through the speakerphone.

“Do we?” he said, waving me away. I backed out of the doorway a bit but studied him. He was younger than I would have predicted—my age, give or take. I had painted all small-town police officers with the same brush as the ones I’d known growing up: pudgy, doughy, bellies hanging over their belts. This one was trim with muscular, tanned arms. Such a shame. I didn’t have time for handsome.

“The truth,” she said. “What the hell is going on over there?”

"I don't know yet and I don't see how jumping the gun on this will help us get to the truth of it all," he said. "I just wish you'd give us a little more time"—his hard look turned uneasy—"to confirm some things. I haven't talked to Erickson yet this morning, for one thing. Have you?"

"We have a deadline," the woman said.

"You can't tell me that it's within the next two hours," the sheriff said. "People are still waking up to yesterday's paper, Kay, for crying out loud. Our deadline's more important than yours, anyway, or you'll be printing two—" His eyes caught mine. He lifted the receiver on the phone and swiveled in the chair, his back to me. "I can't tell you what to do. But it's not time for guessing. Sure as hell not time for blame. We don't know what happened to him yet."

A shiver went up the back of my neck. I'd watched the news again after the volunteers had gone the night before, held hostage by the kid's brown eyes. This morning after Joshua went to school, I watched a top reporter from one of the Indianapolis stations standing with her microphone in front of a row of dirty, peeling houses with sagging porches. "Citizens of Parks, Indiana, are asking themselves today," she'd said, giving her blond bob a punctuating dip, "how could this happen—*here*?"

*Here*—she'd said it with all the wonder and disbelief I still felt after three months.

At the newscaster's elbow, a thick, hardy woman with gray hair falling out of a bun grimaced into the camera. "He's a good boy," she said, peering into the lens. Her voice sounded like concrete rolling in a mixer. Her deeply wrinkled face folded into itself in pain. The bottom of the screen announced that this was Aidan's grandmother.

"Mrs. Ransey, have you heard anything about Aidan's whereabouts?" the reporter asked.

In Parks, there were no forests to search, no standing bodies of water to drag. How much danger could the kid get into, here, where there was nowhere to hide except cornfields and shallow ditches and everyone so eager to help? He should have been asleep in a pile of dirty clothes or behind a closet door. They should have found him within an hour.

I'd only just pointed the remote at the set when the grandmother sobbed and grabbed at the reporter, then the camera. The world shook loose. "He needs to be home with his grandma," she wailed, the sound terrible and mesmerizing. The camera stabilized, refocused. I turned off the TV before the smug reporter could tut-tut the story to a false conclusion.

"Thank you, Kay," the sheriff was saying. "I appreciate that. I promise: the second I can give you anything, I will, OK?"

He leaned forward to hang up the phone, the mechanics of his chair squealing in protest. When he turned back to his desk, he seemed surprised to see I was still there. "Help you?"

"I'm Anna Winger," I said.

He pulled his cap low over his eyes. "You got a lead, headquarters is moved out into the lobby. You couldn't've missed it."

"No, I'm—" I struggled to say the right thing. The introduction would set the tone. "Kent Schaffer asked me to come by."

I let the sheriff take his time placing Kent's name, remembering the offer Kent must have made and the specialty service I could provide. When he looked away in impatience, I knew he'd put the pieces together.

"You're a fed?" he said.

"A . . . subcontractor."

He snorted, shook his head. But before he said anything else, before he stood and introduced himself or shook my hand, before he did anything at all, he did what they all did. He surveyed his

desktop, closed a folder. He selected a single page from the mess of papers and files on his desk and turned it over.

I crossed his office to the window and blinked into the sun. Below, my neighbors made their way to the bank, the café. I could see the trophies in the window of the karate studio. I could see for a mile, actually. I'd read central Indiana had once been a dense forest, but I didn't buy it. A lone tree on the courthouse green had begun to change its colors.

"Well, OK, Mrs. Winger," the sheriff said finally. He came around his desk with his hand outstretched.

"Ms. Winger, please. Sheriff Keller, let's be clear." I let my hand glance off his. "I'm not here to analyze *your* handwriting."

He stayed straight-backed, level-eyed. The brassy details of his uniform seemed to make him taller than he was, though he was tall. The features I had discerned as handsome faded against the razor's edge of his demeanor. He was as hard and stern as a billy club, and probably considered it part of his job not to look away.

"I had no idea Schaffer was into this mumbo jumbo," he said.

"He's a leading international expert," I said.

"In *bunk*," he said. "And how did you become—whatever level of expert you are?"

"Training and apprenticeship, certifications—the way you become anything else."

"But you didn't become anything else," the sheriff said.

We considered each other. "I can go," I said.

"Kent Schaffer wanted you to help." The sheriff squinted at me so I would know that he didn't. He brushed past, swept a pile of newspapers and folders off the guest chair, and nodded toward it. "I'm in no position to turn away volunteers. The entire Indiana law enforcement community is camped out downstairs, and

they've taken every resource we've got. I'm down to just me and my secretary."

I remembered the sticky note in the lobby. *Back in a jiff!* I could have told him his secretary was someone who couldn't quite control her emotions, someone who might be inappropriately confidential with a stranger, who might say too much or the wrong thing entirely. Probably the worst sort of person to have working with confidential information, but then no one had asked for that assessment. I didn't give it away for free.

"Anyway," Keller said.

I sat in the chair, waiting.

He returned to his side of the desk and sat, cleared his throat. "Anyway. This is what you do?"

"This is what I do," I said.

I listened to his knee bouncing under the desk. His handwriting probably had a kinetic wriggle.

"You can really make a living out of this—what's the word? Service? In Parks?"

"Most of my work is federal or for large corporations. None of them are headquartered *here*." I heard the tweak in my voice, not so different from the TV reporter's that morning. "I don't do a lot of—local jurisdiction."

He'd heard the tweak, too. His chin was pointed in my direction now. "I see. And what do you do a lot of? Exactly?"

I sat back and crossed my legs. I'd promised Kent I didn't mind going in person, but I did. I dealt with authority every day—by phone. By virtual, protected networks and hypersecure file transfer. Occasionally by sterile, anonymous package delivery. The justice and corporate work was faceless, often humanless. Under the stern control of technology and distance, the work had

dignity. In the sheriff's office, the search for justice was close and, by the looks of things, in chaos. Papers, books, and binders stacked and falling and, underneath, the smell of the lockup. There was no telling who had been dragged in to sit in this very chair and face the music. I felt the slick of their sweat and blood on the armrests and pulled my elbows in. The office was stuffy and close, reminding me of—

The air, thick, over a Northwoods lake, blood rising like smoke in the water—

Keller narrowed his eyes at me.

I took a deep breath. "I've spent time with ransom notes, forgery, all manner of documents, prenuptial agreements, contracts," I said. "I work a little in corporate recruitment and with the FBI—"

"I heard you were a spy," he said.

"Better than fortune-teller," I said, remembering teasing my neighbor the night before. I needed to stop making jokes about my job. They'd get made by everyone else, given enough time. "I think my son might have started the one about me being a spy."

"Got his handwriting all over it, huh?" The sheriff grinned. "What's his name?"

I shouldn't have come. Kent should have never asked this of me. Other people got involved. Other mothers hosted pancake breakfasts. I was the kind of mother who checked the license plates of passing cars.

"His name is Joshua," I said.

"Joshua," he repeated. "How old?"

The sheriff was perfectly within his duties to ask questions, but I was perfectly within my rights to hate the sound of my son's name coming from a stranger's mouth.

“He’s thirteen. Just. I’m glad you haven’t had to meet him. Now,” I said, retrieving a notebook from my purse. “How can I help?”

The sheriff wasn’t satisfied, I could see that. But he flipped open the cover of a binder on his desk, taking care to tip his notes away from me.

## *Chapter Two*

**A**idan Michael Ransey,” the sheriff began. “Age two years. His father reported him missing yesterday morning, early. And wouldn’t you know it? His mother also seems to be out rambling. She resided in Parks with the husband and son until just a few months ago and now can’t be reached.”

I heard the squeak of Keller’s chair and looked up from my notes. He’d leaned far back in his chair to look over the wall behind him. A diploma, a few certificates with shiny seals, a sea of frames full of photos: Keller and campaign signs. Keller in a crowd of uniformed officers. Keller shaking hands, handing out accolades. In each photo, he held himself tight, his eyes focused somewhere beyond the camera. The people near him shook his hand, clasped his shoulder, leaned into him, and propped themselves up against him. Given half a chance, they might have crawled onto his back and let him carry them.

He spun back around. “So of course the mother is of special interest here. Stealing your own kid is an excellent way to avoid a custody battle.”

I looked down at my notes. *Mother*, with the *t* crossed distractingly. Wasn't it not yet time for blame?

"There's a snag, though," he continued. "Couple of them, actually, but one is an anonymous note threatening to take the kid."

Finally I saw the door through which I'd entered. Kent hadn't given me the details. That was his style, to let me make all my own discoveries. All my own mistakes.

"They're trying to pull prints off the note now," he said. "So all I can get you is a copy of—"

"A copy isn't good enough."

A flat stare from Keller. "Sorry?"

"A copy isn't good enough," I said. "I'll need to see the real thing."

"Well, I'm not likely to get *my* fingerprints on the real McCoy until tomorrow sometime," he said, slapping the desk. Annoyed with either the question or the answer he'd had to give. "Don't even have a copy yet, to tell you the truth."

"I'm surprised Kent didn't tell you I would need the original."

"No, he did," he said. "I just—"

I sensed some piece of his pride was at stake here. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to admit that the only real crime likely to pass over his desk this year—maybe in his entire tenure—had been taken away from him, that he couldn't lay his hands on his own evidence. "You just?"

"I just wanted to get a look at you first."

I froze, but inside I was taking flight, my heart pattering. I glanced at the door. "Excuse me?"

The sheriff closed his notes with a snap. "Wanted to make sure I didn't let any . . . woo-woo in the door."

"And how do I stack up?" I said, willing myself to calm down. "Right amount of woo for you?"

“Now, don’t take it personal—”

“To take it personally,” I said, “I would have to care significantly more than I do about your opinion. As it is, I only care professionally—but if you don’t trust that my profession exists outside the realm of voodoo, I’m not sure what I can do for you.”

“You can prove me wrong,” he said.

“Seems like you’re pretty sure about most things,” I said. I glanced up at the wall of accolades and adoration. “What don’t you already know?”

He didn’t like me shopping his wall. “Where that boy is, first off.”

“What do you think the note might tell us about Aidan’s whereabouts?”

“This is your area. They say. But the whole thing tells me to get nervous.” He nudged his cap crooked on his head to draw his hand over his face. He needed a shave. “Not a lot of kids go missing and almost every one of them turns up somewhere on a play-date everyone forgot about or, if they’re actually gone, with the noncustodial parent, simply being withheld. It doesn’t make a lot of sense—to me.”

I looked back at my notebook.

He said, “I do worry that the note seems to be . . . vague on details. And demands, actually. There was no ransom mentioned.”

I nodded. Without comparing it to a sample of someone’s handwriting, the note was a big unknown in the center of a lot of unknowns. Anyone could have written that note. If the father wrote it, he could be covering his own tracks. The kid could be in danger or hurt. Or dead. And the mother. Was she just not answering the phone or was she in a quick grave somewhere?

I turned my head. From where I sat, Keller’s office window was filled with a span of perfect blue sky. Just the other day I’d been

thinking: maybe. Maybe it didn't have to be so hard. I remembered hot dock slats under my legs, a warm arm thrown around me as the sun dipped into the lake.

"So I'm nervous, all right," the sheriff said. "I'm nervous that kid is really gone. Pedophile gone, or—but forgive me if I hope it's the mother who's got him. You know why, Ms. Winger? Not because it's easier to solve, but because it's so much more likely we'll bring Aidan back home, soon and safe."

I kept my face passive. Sometimes when I needed to keep my mouth shut, I ran my tongue over the backs of my teeth and counted off the states. Tennessee, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Ohio. One of my teeth had cracked at some point, inviting rot, and I'd finally had it rooted and capped in Cincinnati. I always tried to land on that tooth when Ohio's turn came along. Then Illinois, now Indiana. I looked up. "What was the other snag?" I said.

"What's that?" he said.

"You said there were a couple of snags."

I didn't think he was going to tell me. No sample, not enough info. And now a stonewalling look instead of letting me in on what I was up against. There was no reason for him to treat me as a peer, but I didn't have to put up with being treated like a circus freak. I stood and reached into my purse.

"The other snag is the babysitter," he said. "She was missing, too." I waited, a business card in my hand. It was a quality card, simple, with only my name and number pressed into smooth, white paper.

*Was. Was* missing. I sat back down.

"Until this morning," he said, "when her body was discovered in an out-of-service latrine at Sugar Creek Park."

ON THE WAY home, I took a detour. There was absolutely no reason for my going there, but when I saw the sign for the park, I turned in. Under the canopy of trees, I took a deep breath. I drove slowly but no children darted into the lane.

The road abruptly ended in a parking lot with empty playground equipment on the far side. Beyond that, a concrete block structure sat surrounded by more trees and, this morning, several cruisers, local and state, with their lights turned off. A couple of unmarked vehicles—a dark SUV and a panel van, black, maybe a crime scene unit—sat nearby. I parked just in view of the taillights and got out, wandering over to a park bench in the grass and sitting at an angle to the activity.

Why this place? Of all the parks to bring a kid for a day out, this one seemed the least likely. Fall was thinning out the leaves overhead as well as the nice-weather days left in the season. This particular park also seemed out of the way and abandoned, given the better-kept Memorial Park right downtown, mere blocks from where the Ranseys lived.

A hundred feet away or so, an older man in a rumpled sweater stood in the grass with a small white dog on a leash. “Come on, Trix,” he was saying. “Come on.”

He startled at seeing me and then recovered with a gesture toward the goings-on at the facilities. “Bad business in that latrine,” he said. “Safe as houses, this place is supposed to be.”

“The park?”

“The whole town. And the park.”

“You spend time here, I guess,” I said, looking at the dog.

“Until this week, I never bothered taking her anywhere else,” he said. “We used to have druggie types around but the sheriff’s deputies are always coming through, waving. After a couple

of town meetings, you understand. But now they haunt it well enough, keep things tidy. They patrolled it this morning, for heaven's sake, before the body was found. Now my wife won't let our daughter bring the kids up to visit, not until this is sorted."

After a few minutes, the little dog did its business and the man picked up the mess with an inside-out plastic bag over his shaking hand.

On the way out of the park, I met another dark SUV coming in and turned my head. Safe as houses, except I'd only known houses to be as safe as anyplace else. Which is to say, not a guarantee.

"JOSHUA," I CALLED from the front door. "I'm home."

The bare white walls seemed to bounce my voice back to me. All that talk of the missing and the dead gave me the shivers. I felt equal parts relieved and silly when I spotted his backpack on the dining room table. Not where it should be, as usual, but here. *Here*.

"Joshua? Are you home?" I listened for the telltale sounds of his video games, but then he'd be using the new headphones he'd gotten for his birthday. His games were quieter and more private now, which kept Margaret from whacking her broom at us or, worse, from shuffling upstairs in her slippers to snoop and have her say.

Right now all I cared about was he was here. I'd just spent a good deal of the day talking about a little boy gone missing and a woman found dead. Keller had given me a look behind that cordoned area in the courthouse lobby, where it seemed most of his staff and several other battalions of law enforcement now holed up. No one offered credentials to make my next visit any easier. Outside again, I'd taken a slow walk around the square, stop-

ping to look at listings in a real estate office's window. Cheap real estate was of no more interest to me than outlandishly expensive real estate, but I dutifully read the details on farmhouses and split-level ranches until an agent came out to chat me up. After the park I'd driven to the school to catch the end of junior high football practice, only to discover the field empty.

All the way home, I had felt the low sizzle of my nerves. Aidan Ransey was missing, and now any boy could go missing. Maybe I was being a little overdramatic, but that was fine. I had decided years ago to be anything I wanted to be.

*But you didn't become anything else.* That's what the sheriff thought. He was wrong, but it was better if he didn't know it.

I dropped my bag on the table. At Joshua's room, I pressed my ear to the door. The clacking of his thumbs on the game controller gave him away.

In my bedroom, I traded the skirt and blouse for a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. I pulled my hair into a bun, pausing to gather myself in front of the full-length mirror some unkind soul had attached to the inside of the closet door. The sweats did nothing for the waist I'd ended up with after thirteen years sitting behind a computer, and the T-shirt was plain and dumpy. The uniform of a stay-at-home spy.

In the hall, I hesitated at Joshua's door, then knocked. No response. I knocked again. Either he couldn't hear me or he didn't want to.

When I finally opened the door, he was sprawled on the floor on his back, his head propped against his red beanbag chair. His thick brown hair, always too long, hung into his long eyelashes, flicking when he blinked. I loved his eyelashes, and of course the eyes, a deep brown with flecks of colors that had yet to be named. I loved everything about him. I even loved the profile,

the straight nose and high cheekbones inherited from another face.

At that moment, he grimaced at something happening on the screen. His nose sneered, his lip curled in disgust, and everything about him turned into his father. He tossed the game controller to the floor, disappointment changing his face back into his own. Then he saw me at the door, and his scowl twisted back into place.

“Mom, *God*, what?” he said, his voice too loud for the room.

I gestured for him to take off the headphones. He sat up and pried them off. “I wasn’t even *being* loud,” he said.

“No, I know.”

He swiped the hair out of his eyes with the back of his wrist, irritated. At the game or at me, I couldn’t tell.

“I just wondered how your day was,” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “How my day was?”

Sometimes he reminded me to get mad in return. Sometimes he pushed me to a raw anger that made me almost understand things I’d never understood, and then the heat would rush away, replaced by emptiness. That hollow feeling explained a few things, too. Wouldn’t I do almost anything to keep from experiencing it? I would. I had.

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing everything else I might have said. I leaned against the doorframe, crossing my arms. I wished I’d kept my business clothes on. Maybe the scent of the jail would have still been on them. “Your *day*. We humans mark time in twenty-four-hour allotments. How was *yours*?”

He gave a sharp-shouldered shrug. “’s OK.”

I glanced at the alarm clock next to his bed. “No football practice tonight, I guess.”

He looked up at me, considered, then decided on a shake of the

head. I didn't press the issue of having driven out to fetch him. He wanted a cell phone, and I was pushing off any evidence that he needed one.

"Well, I guess I'll go make dinner, and you'll do your homework," I said.

Joshua sighed. "Fine."

"I'll call you in just a few minutes, and I don't want to see that gentleman again tonight," I said, nodding toward the TV, where a muscled military man was frozen in midfrenzy, mouth wide in the rage of attack. The headphones hadn't been for Margaret's sake alone.

"I *said* fine."

I closed the door. Another twenty-four-hour allotment, another chance to see how much I could screw this up.

In the kitchen, I opened the fridge and stared in, going over its contents and the conversation again. It had gone off the rails, but where? At last I had to admit that it was the moment he'd seen me.

Normal teenage stuff. We'd always been close, but his wingspan was wider now. He wanted more rights—more than permission to get himself to school, to join sports teams, to have a TV and games in his own room, to let his hair grow. He wanted his own life.

Of course I would worry how far this would go, how fast. I worried. When he was little, I had feared dropping him, not feeding him well enough, mysterious fevers. In elementary school, he came home scuffed up and knees torn. From playing, he said, but I wasn't fooled and worried that he didn't fit in.

I had worried most that he would never feel safe and, now, that I'd made him feel too safe. I had protected him so well he had no idea what it was to be afraid. I was the only one on notice, so I got to be the warden. I got to be the bad guy.

Which was life's little joke on me.

But lately—the recoil when I tried to touch him, the appraising look he gave me when he thought I couldn't see, as though we were strangers. That's how it felt: the boy in this apartment wasn't the boy I'd raised, the playful one, the artist, the one who could be tickled into hiccups, the boy he had been not that long ago.

This boy—the closed doors, the slammed doors, the constant video games, the wary looks—this boy was a ghost boy, a haunted boy, and my son had vanished. Joshua was missing, just as gone as the little boy Sheriff Keller was looking for. Why was no one looking for Joshua? Who was getting my boy back to me?

I closed the refrigerator and wandered out of the kitchen, gathering some magazines, a sweatshirt, a few other loose items of clutter, then, no plan for them, stacked them on the nearest flat surface. I sat heavily on the couch and gazed around. *Here*. A two-bedroom rental with too-thin white walls and no yard or balcony. The same not-much we'd grown accustomed to. But I'd lived in worse, in places other people would abandon, in places that stank of decay and neglect. *Decay. Neglect*. These were crisp, precise words on the page that stood in for a reality most people didn't truly understand.

Tennessee, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Ohio. Small towns, big towns one after the other, false starts, lost deposits. Mice in the walls and backed-up sinks. Old wallpaper with black freckles of mold.

Then Chicago, where I'd let us get too comfortable. A handful of miles to the Wisconsin border, and I'd started to entertain ideas of settling down, maybe buying a condo. And then—

Small towns were better. Towns with forgettable names,

apartments with two locks on the door. Indiana. You could clean the dirty ovens. You could put out traps. There were more important things than having your slice of the pie, of putting down some roots, but it didn't stop me from wondering. Maybe this was the place. Except it wasn't because there was only one place, and we couldn't go back there.

I went to the kitchen and put some water on to boil, then grabbed the mail from the counter and went to the window in the living room to sort it in the fading light. Across the street, the houses lined up like a hand of solitaire. Down below, people walking their dogs stopped to chat.

I glanced up and down the block. From the second floor, you could see pretty far, a precaution. But I would never get used to the scrubbed look of this place. The whole town, harvested. How long had it been since I had been among the stillness of trees, encircled by a stand of pines like a bunch of protective brothers? The only trees nearby were scrawny, scrub or planted, with no better reason to be here than I had.

I added noodles to the boiling water and then took myself to the table and dropped into a chair. I was tired. Not just exhausted from a day of playing upright citizen for the sheriff, but forever tired, in my bones, in my skin. Tired of days, tired of nights. From the table I watched the window darken, the outside world folding away.

In a minute I would go to the window and close the blinds. Another precaution. But did it matter? Here, in Plain Sight, Indiana, who was I hiding from anymore? I was afraid of thinking it through too fully.

I got up and grabbed the straps of Joshua's backpack to move it off the table but instead pulled it to me.

The guidance counselor had called yesterday, twice. So actually yesterday I'd been asked to do three things I didn't want to do—but I supposed it wasn't volunteering when it was your own kid in trouble.

Down the hall, Joshua's door was still closed.

A tangle of papers caught in the backpack's zipper. I fought it open, pulled out the papers, and checked the spines on the books at the bottom. Language arts, *Our World and Its People*, a ragged copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which he'd finished a book report for weeks ago. Maybe it was a test, to see if I'd take it out. The math text, of course. I'd offered to help. I'd even learned the new alien way they did math in order to help, but he preferred to do it himself, badly.

From the wad of papers, I picked out a math worksheet. Proof. He'd received a well-deserved *D* in red pen.

I tried not to spend much time on the pinched belly of that red letter. So what if the teacher had a tendency toward small-mindedness? That didn't change the facts.

I flipped through a few more sheets, then dug deeper, flattening a few pages to take stock. More math, a report. They were just figures, or typed.

At last I found a short-answer workbook page at the bottom of the pack. It was incomplete—empty, actually, except for the large round zero in red at the top and a few meager pencil markings in a corner. His name, *JOSH*, all capital letters.

I stared at the name for a long moment, then stowed all the backpack's contents as best I could and closed it up, leaving it on the table.

In the kitchen, I stirred the noodles and wished I'd never looked. But I had, and now I knew. His handwriting—once so playfully dismissive of the horizon, so youthful and alive—was

gone. His name, even written by his own hand, was false. It was built of sticks, each letter strategically rendered and apart, lonely and stripped. I'd never seen anything so desolate, so perfectly engineered to give away nothing at all.

Joshua was hiding in plain sight, too. And I was pretty sure he was hiding from me.



## *Chapter Three*

**T**he call, when it came, was from Kent.

“What did you get me into?” I said before he’d had a chance to say hello.

“You’re up to the challenge,” he said. I could hear the smile. Sometimes I thought I might be in love with Kent, even though I hadn’t seen him in person in twelve years. What that said about me—well, it said everything about me that anyone could ever want to know. I’d been in love just the one time, a disaster. I’d had a few dates, if that was even the word. An awkward setup, once, and then the guy, the client, I’d met for a few weeks in a series of beige chain-name hotel rooms—but that was just sex. What I missed was the other person’s hip against mine on the couch. The thoughtless moments of life spent together. When I started thinking like this, I wished Kent weren’t twenty years older and completely in love with his wife.

“Kent, the kid was taken by his mother,” I said. My cheek was growing hot against my cell phone. “Right? We’ve got the nanny, babysitter, whatever—spotted by the neighbors taking the kid

out in her car, early. We've got the nanny and kid witnessed at the park. And then, poof. The woman's dead in the broken-down ladies' john, the kid's gone, and the mother can't be found."

"The mother—yeah, I didn't think that through, did I? Maybe she didn't do it." We both listened to that false tenor of his voice. "OK, I can send someone else. But you're literally down the block. You'd be saving your nation some serious travel expenses."

"I was thinking about charging my nation double this time," I said. "Anything that reminds me too much of home, I charge at least time and a half."

He laughed, but we'd both heard it. *Home*. I couldn't think what to say next.

He cleared his throat. "Was there anything you wanted to know?"

I didn't think he meant about the dead babysitter. Some things, it was better not to know. "How did she die?" I said instead.

"Badly," he said. I could hear the grim set of his mouth. He was worried about me, or maybe it had nothing to do with me at all. "Something heavy to the back of the head—"

"Got it. Sorry I asked. Did you know Keller lied about having the note so he could try me out first? Friend of yours?"

"A little puffed up, but he's all right—good guy, really. Just heard from him," Kent said. "He's got the note in hand and a few other things for you to look at. I could look into sending someone else . . ."

"I'm fine," I said. "I have an appointment at Joshua's school later but I can go do this early, get it over with." I heard the words I had used and cringed. "Not that I don't appreciate all the work."

"There's another package coming from me," he said. "Human resources."

“My favorite.” In fact, I liked the hiring cases that came through Kent less than I liked the little letters and notes people sent me from all over the country in response to a few well-placed ads of my own. My lonelyhearts. Given my preferences, I would never have to take Kent’s subcontracts or talk, really, to anyone else ever again. But a few love letters sent from prison to analyze was no way to keep a roof over our heads.

“I knew you’d be excited. Did you see that article in the *Wall Street Journal* about so-called smart pens saving the art of penmanship?” he said. “Published online, with no irony whatsoever.”

“I hardly go online at all,” I said. “But I’m glad someone is saving handwriting, or we’ll be out of business.” I calculated our age difference again. He’d retire in a few years, and then what would I do? Joshua still needed to go to college. All those forms asking for information, social security numbers, phone numbers. Addresses where you could expect to be for a little while. In a few years, our life would need a solidity it didn’t have just now.

I had met Kent in a university classroom. I was supposed to be cleaning it, and he had just spoken to the students there. I had listened from outside the door, rocking my sleeping newborn against my chest. Up until then, I’d been taking community center handwriting classes for fun. After the class, I let the students and then the visitor and the professor, deep in conversation, walk by and then carried Joshua in his car seat into the room. There were always so many coffee shop cups left behind. At the lectern, I found a lovely leather notebook filled with a geometric script. I was paging through it when the professor cleared his throat at the door. Kent introduced himself, eyeing the sleeping baby. “What did you see?” he said as I handed him the notebook. “Am I a serial killer?”

The professor had laughed, but then his face drew still as I told the visitor what I thought of his script: self-conscious, high-minded, literal, a little too process driven.

“High-minded?” Kent had said, grinning. “Am I really? I think you might be right.” And he had handed me one of his cards.

Now Kent said, “You OK? Seriously, Anna, I didn’t even think—”

I had taken a deep breath to calm myself, but he probably thought I was still thinking about the back of the babysitter’s head. I was glad I hadn’t heard about it while still in the sheriff’s office. “It’s fine,” I said. “Really. And send me as much human resources or whatever else as you want. I’m grateful for everything you—”

“Going to stop you there,” he said. “Get down to see Keller again today, and that will be all the thanks I need.”

All the thanks, but I never got to say them. In this way I was reminded that we weren’t friends. One of us had been a drowning person, and the other, a life raft. I was on land for the moment, and he probably only hoped he wouldn’t have to rescue me again. “I’ll go today,” I said. Not love, not friendship, in some ways not even gratitude on my part. It was relief, pure and deep relief that I might never need anyone’s help as much as I already had.

KELLER’S RECEPTIONIST SAT at her desk, listening to the local talk-radio station at a low volume. When I opened the door, she snapped the dial down and smiled with a recognition I didn’t think warranted. Keller had been mouthing off about me, I figured. “Hey,” she said, drawing out the word. “I’m Sherry.”

I waited for the punchline. Sherry and the sheriff? It was a

bad '70s sitcom, set in a diner with a laugh track and the same cop/doughnut joke in every script.

The woman was just as bright as the sticky note she'd left the day before, just as blond and ponytailed and open-faced as the dot over that *i* had promised. More than that, I could sense that she was sticky, too—curious, wheedling.

I didn't have the patience, not after my repeat trip through the cattle chute of security downstairs. I hadn't brought my laptop on purpose this time, hoping it would speed things up. But a gum-chomping uniformed woman with a nametag that read *Deputy Tara Lombardi*, a woman hardly older than Joshua with a pixie face and spiky black hair, had taken a long look through everything in my purse, including my Illinois driver's license. *Who would leave Chicago for this place?* she had said with sneer.

I had the same feeling now, in front of this receptionist's too-familiar smile, as I had with my purse opened to its guts on the table. "The sheriff left a packet for me," I said, all business.

"Oh, sure, let me get it." She pushed herself from her desk and hurried to the back.

Aidan's missing-child poster had been tacked to the wall over the woman's workspace. The same fluffy-headed photo from all over town. Below it, nearly hidden from public view, was a coloring-book page scratched with red and blue, with a few distended letters in green in the corner. *Mommy*, it read in unpracticed lines and a simple squat pumpkin of a circle. The child's handwriting telegraphed nothing except that he drew his o's clockwise.

Sherry returned carrying a large flat manila envelope. "I had to dig up his desk to find it," she said. "That man, I swear."

I recognized the moment. I was supposed to respond in agree-

ment, a roll of the eyes or a nod that said I also didn't understand the mysteries of men. No problem. I didn't.

"Is there somewhere I can take a look at this?" I said. "I shouldn't be long."

Sherry slid the envelope across the counter and watched my hand claim it. "Back there," she said. "Any of the desks that aren't . . . gross. They're all slob."

I chose a desk near the sheriff's dark door. *That man*, Sherry had said, as though this one was worth distinguishing from another. I don't think I'd ever offered a wry smile over a man's endearing faults. I hadn't had much of a chance for fondness.

Just before I'd started formal training in handwriting, I'd moved into another new—old, actually—apartment, a house with three floors and tall ceilings. Kentucky. I was hugely pregnant and slow on the stairs, which attracted the attentions of the man on the top floor. He always managed to be getting his mail at the same time I was coming home. When he finally asked me to dinner, I couldn't imagine what he saw in me. I wasn't finding men at all attractive, then. But I'd considered his offer.

In my lonely life, even with another life growing inside me, those months were the most alone I'd ever been. I waited tables, and sometimes the other girls would cover me for an extra break out of pity, but we weren't friends. I took reduced-price classes at the community center, taught by retired accountants and résumé-building new college graduates, any topic anyone wanted to teach me. I hardly talked to anyone. I didn't know what I was doing during that time. I spun in place with energy, with freedom and possibility, but also with nerves jangling. Each evening was a struggle not to dial Ray's number and tell him where to pick me up. I missed him. I missed—everything.

My memories would flatten until I couldn't remember why I was somewhere he wasn't.

Then, in one of the community center classes, I learned a bit about handwriting analysis from a librarian who had taken it up as a hobby.

The world peeled away. My manager at the restaurant had a scribble as fast as a rabbit's heartbeat, panicked. The college student taking polls at the bus stop transcribed with a script so tight and hesitant that she seemed to grow smaller as she wrote. People began to reveal themselves on the page. In life, they might be working, playing with their kids, remodeling their houses. But on the page, most of them skirted the edges of complete chaos.

Once I'd scraped the bottom of the librarian's knowledge of handwriting analysis, I'd put together enough tips from the restaurant to order a used textbook. The package came while I was at work, and the nice upstairs neighbor signed for it, leaving it at my door with a note. He hadn't known he was giving me everything I needed.

His handwriting had been calming, elegant in a way I hadn't expected and hadn't ever seen. I put myself to sleep that night remembering the way his script rolled forward, confident and steady and hopeful.

But then every time I saw him afterward, he brought up the package and how happy he'd been to offer his John Henry for the delivery. He meant John Hancock. John Henry, the steel-driving man, had probably signed his name, if he ever had, with a shaky X. Was John Henry a real person? John *Hancock* was the one with the significant signature. Maybe it was a joke? I couldn't tell.

The neighbor only smiled, now with affection. What I saw

was possession. He didn't know me, didn't know what I'd come through to hold this precious freedom in my own two hands. But he was already breaking off a hunk of it for himself.

I started to use the back stairwell. After Joshua was born, his late-night cries drove off most of the other neighbors, including the man with the elegant hand.

*That* man might have been something to regret, if I was in the mood. But these days I only had time for the man I was trying to raise.

I was still holding the sheriff's assignment in my hand. I ran a finger under the envelope's sealed flap and slid out a single sheet of copy paper and a plastic sleeve. I shook the package upside down. Another, smaller piece of paper drifted to the desk.

I took up this one first. Pink, lined. It had been ripped without care from a notepad, probably beside the phone. Two edges of the paper were ragged. Felt-tip pen, black.

Content first:

MILK, CAT FOOD  
AIDAN'S CRACKERS  
PEANUT BUTTER  
BANANAS  
HAMBERGER

I went through the list again, then turned the paper over, looking at the points at which the pen had leaked through. I turned to the front again and studied each line. The lettering was all uppercase, rigid, each letter a hostage on the page. Each word had taken a lot of time. The author might have used a chisel and had similar results—except that *Aidan's crackers* had a little slant to it.

I looked for a long time at those two words, so heavy with at-

tention and care. So laden with the unbearable love for the name a mother called her child.

Then I turned to the other sheet of paper. It was a copy. A color copy, but still a copy. Apparently Keller considered my time his to waste.

Like the grocery list, the note had been ripped from a larger piece of paper, ragged on two edges, too, from the looks of the thing. Pink again. Hearts in a slight darker pink lined the edges. It was unsigned, and the block letters of the grocery list were gone. The script here was slim and girlish, but uneven and hurried. Ballpoint pen, blue.

*that I want Aidan with me. You figure out how to get money  
to us after. We'll go away*

I smoothed the paper under my hand, though it was perfectly flat. I kept reading the content over and over—though I hadn't been hired for content, had I? I was stuck here, hoping that the sentence would finish, that something would link up and make sense.

After a few seconds, I sat back.

"Tough case?" Sherry called from across the room. She sat forward in her chair, making me think of her open, overly giving handwriting, her *Back in a jiff!* Those round letters, the ending flourishes of those *ffs*, like an arm curled, beckoning.

I glanced back at the grocery list. "Pretty tough," I said.

She lit up and hurried to my side, looking down at the two samples for a moment. "I don't know how you can tell anything from that," she said. "Especially that one. Block letters all look the same, don't they?"

We stared at the pages. "Do you know the little boy's family?" I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “I mean, doesn’t everyone know everyone else around here?”

“No,” I said.

“Yeah, but you’re—well.” She could have said *new to town*, but she hadn’t.

“Tell me about the father,” I said.

Sherry’s eyes drifted back toward the note and list. “I thought it was the mother who wrote these.”

“I was just wondering.” I paused, uncertain. Probably it was wrong to prey on what I could tell from the big open bowls of Sherry’s *a*’s and *o*’s. “Just wondering who had her so scared.”

Sherry’s mouth dropped open. She pulled a sample closer to her with a manicured finger. “You can tell that from just—from just a *grocery* list?”

“You can tell a lot from a grocery list,” I said, enjoying the demonstration a little, despite myself. “She was young. She was poor. She loved her son. She had a cat.”

“You can tell she had a *cat*—”

I pulled the list back toward me. “I’m not a psychic. Cat food’s on the list.”

“Oh,” Sherry said with a shaky laugh. “Just like you can tell she likes peanut butter.”

“Or Aidan does.”

“I bet he does,” Sherry agreed, her voice gone soft.

I had a vision of Joshua, age three or so, crying from being left at the bad day care while I worked a double shift. My little boy had loved peanut butter. He used to love everything, including me. I missed that age, his sturdy little legs figuring out the world, but always running back to throw himself at me. I hadn’t wanted to leave him at day care, then or ever. In the time I was

gone, I could imagine a hundred ways for him to be taken from me. A hundred impossible ways to lose him.

This was all wrong. I should be telling CEOs which executives not to hire, or mining the halting love letters my lonelyhearts sent me. I should be turning Sherry's attention back to the question she hadn't answered, about Aidan's dad. But it was surprisingly pleasant to be talking this way to another woman, another mother. I hesitated, thinking of the women at my door from the Boosters, and then said, "For about two years, mine wouldn't eat anything but creamy peanut butter sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Morning, noon, and night."

Sherry looked behind her, found an extra chair, and pulled it up next to me. Her bright ponytail swung over her shoulder. "Mine's five," she said. "I can't talk about him enough. How old is yours?"

My head felt a little light. "He's a teenager. I wish he were still five."

"Yeah, because at five you can still put them in your pocket, you know? Or at least pick them up and carry them out to the car if they're being jerks. In some ways I can't wait for Jamey to grow up and turn into what he'll be," she said. "But in other ways, I want time to stop. I want him to stay perfect, just the way he is."

Perfect ears, perfect hands. I was often startled by Joshua's beauty. How had something so perfect come from such a mess? "Except—" I stopped. Was my life so empty that I was turning into a person who confided in strangers? Sherry had her fist hooked at her chin, waiting. "Except that he was perfect before, and he's perfect now, and he'll be perfect tomorrow," I said. "Suddenly he's a different boy than the one you knew, but still—perfect."

"That's it," Sherry said, triumphantly. "That's exactly—"

Across the room, the door swung open, banging against the wall. Sherry jumped to her feet. I expected the sheriff or another officer but instead a tall, thick man in a grease-smearred zip-up jacket stood in the doorway.

This was Aidan's father. I knew it from the shifty look Sherry gave me as she returned to her desk. I slid the handwriting samples out of sight.

"He's not in at the moment, Bo," Sherry said.

"Is he on vacation? I need to know what's going on." The man's voice violated the silent room.

"He would call you if there was anything at all," Sherry said. "I can have him check in when he gets back."

Bo ran his meaty fingers through his hair, then jammed his fists into his jacket pockets. "I mean it, Sherry, I need to be kept up to speed here. Are they even trying to find my kid?" His eyes swept the room and located me. He froze. "You got some help in to find him or something? Those detectives—"

"She's just doing a favor for the sheriff," Sherry said. "Now, why don't you give us your number again and I'll let him know you were here." She scooted a notepad across the counter to him and held out a pen. He grabbed it and scratched at the paper while Sherry watched. "Put your name down, too," she murmured.

"Shit, Sherry, you don't think he knows my number by now?" But he didn't look up. His hand dragged across the notepad and thumped the pen down. "The second he gets in, all right? I want answers." He wrenched the door open, paused, gave me another look, and was gone.

We listened to his fading footsteps down the stairs. It felt as though he'd taken half the oxygen in the room with him.

With a flourish, Sherry ripped the message from Bo off the notepad and marched it back to me, held high over her head, a

flag. “Looky what I got,” she sang. “Would I not make the best detective? Sheriff won’t let me do anything but take calls and stuff, but I say I’ve got what it takes.” She slid the paper in front of me.

“I don’t even need to see it,” I said.

“I know,” Sherry said, shrugging. “He’s wearing it like an aftershave, isn’t he? He didn’t used to be so—well, maybe he always was. We all went to high school together, me and Bo and—but so what? What do you see?”

For a moment, I didn’t answer or look at Bo’s message. This wasn’t what Sheriff Keller had asked me to do. He wouldn’t like it, and I didn’t, either. This sample would taint the process—though of course encountering Aidan’s dad in person had probably already done that. I thought about the pressed block letters of Aidan’s mom’s grocery list, about the fear etched into such a perfect word as *bananas*.

I picked up the message. White paper, blue ink. It had come from a memo pad with designated blanks for the time and date and the caller’s name and number. Bo had scribbled on the diagonal across the entire sheet. The numbers were uneven, his signature sloppy. He had what my training had taught me to call resentment lines, vertical strokes in letters that clawed across the page like shovels digging a grave. Hidden in each millimeter of ink—*Bo Ransey*—was insult sustained, offense calculated. Not to mention the coiled twirls in his *B* and *R*, lying in wait like snakes.

I looked up.

Sherry put her palms on the desk and sighed. “I know,” she said. “I hope she gets away, too.”