

A GOOD MARRIAGE

ALSO BY KIMBERLY MCCREIGHT

Reconstructing Amelia

Where They Found Her

A GOOD MARRIAGE

A NOVEL

KIMBERLY
MCCREIGHT



HARPER

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FIRST EDITION

Designed by Fritz Metsch

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McCreight, Kimberly, author.

Title: A good marriage : a novel / Kimberly McCreight.

Description: First Edition. | New York, NY : Harper, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2019033129 (print) | LCCN 2019033130 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780062367686 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780062367709 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Murder—Investigation—Fiction. | Man-woman Relationships—Fiction. | GSAFD: Mystery fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3613.C386444 G66 2020 (print) | LCC PS3613.C386444 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019033129>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019033130>

20 21 22 23 24 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Tony,
The beginning of everything good.
And the only ending that matters.*

Love never dies of a natural death

—ANAÏS NIN, *The Four-Chambered Heart*

PROLOGUE

I never meant for any of this to happen. That's a stupid thing to say. But it is true. And obviously, I didn't *kill* anyone. Would never, could never. You know that. You know me better than anyone.

Have I made my share of mistakes? Definitely. I've lied, been selfish. I've hurt you. That's what I regret most of all. That I caused you pain. Because I love you more than anything in this world.

You know that, right? That I love you?

I hope so. Because that's all I think about. And solitary gives you lots of time to think.

(Don't worry—I talked my way into “the box.” That's what they call solitary. It's too damn loud out there in the general population. All night long, people talk and scream and argue and mumble nonsense. If you don't come in here insane, you'll end up that way. And I'm not insane. I know you know that, too.)

Explanations. Would they make a difference? I can at least start with the why. Because this is so much harder than I thought it would be—marriage, life. All of it.

It's so simple at the beginning. You meet someone gorgeous and smart and funny. Somebody who's better than you—you both know it, at least on some level. You fall in love with them. But you fall even more in love with their idea of you. You feel lucky. Because you *are* lucky.

Then time passes. You both change too much. You stay too much

the same. The truth worms its way out, and the horizon grows dark. Eventually all you're left with is somebody who sees you for who you really are. And sooner or later, they hold up a mirror and you're forced to see for yourself.

And who the hell can live with that?

So you do what you can to survive. You start looking for a fresh pair of eyes.

LIZZIE

JULY 6, MONDAY

The sun was sinking lower in the skyscraper forest outside my office window. I imagined myself sitting there at my desk, letting the darkness fully descend. Wondering if tonight it might finally swallow me whole. How I hated that stupid office.

A light in the tall building opposite went on. Soon there would be another—people getting on with their work, their lives. All things considered, it was probably better to accept I was in for another late night. Finally, I reached forward and switched on my light.

In the small circle of brightness cast down onto the floor sat the uneaten lunch Sam had packed for me that morning—the special pepper turkey and Swiss on the right rye bread with carrots because he worried, justifiably, that I was vitamin-deficient. Sam had been packing my lunch every day for the eleven years we'd lived together in New York—eight of them married—even on those mornings he never made it to work himself.

I gave my uneaten lunch a halfhearted kick as I checked the clock on my computer: 7:17 p.m. It wasn't even that late yet, but time always crawled for me at Young & Crane. My shoulders sagged as I tried to focus on the still utterly lackluster response letter to the DOJ that I was revising for another senior associate, one with zero criminal experience. The client was a cell phone battery manufacturer with several board members being investigated for insider trading. It was the

typical criminal matter the firm handled: an unexpected wrinkle for a preexisting corporate client.

Young & Crane didn't have a dedicated white-collar criminal practice. Instead, they had Paul Hastings, former chief of the Southern District of New York's Violent and Organized Crime Unit. And now they had me. Paul had predated me at the US attorney's office, but he'd been close with my mentor and boss, Mary Jo Brown, who'd insisted four months ago that Paul give me a job at the firm. Paul was an impressive, well-known attorney with decades of experience, but at Young & Crane he always seemed to me like a recently retired racehorse, desperate for the gates to snap back again.

M&M's. That was what I needed to get through the letter, which, despite my best efforts, remained three paragraphs of unpersuasive dodge-and-weave. There were almost always M&M's in the overflowing Young & Crane snack cabinet—a perk meant to ease the drudgery of the all-nighters. I was about to go in search of them when an email notification popped up on my cell phone, sitting on the far side of my desk—so it didn't distract me. The message, to my personal account, was from Millie, and the subject line read “Call Me Back Please.” It was not her first email in the past couple weeks. Millie wasn't usually this insistent, but it also wasn't totally without precedent. It didn't necessarily mean it was an actual emergency. I swiped the message into an “old emails” folder without opening it. I would eventually read it and her other recent ones—I always did eventually—just not tonight.

My eyes were still on my cell when my office phone rang. An outside call to my direct line, I could tell from the single ringtone. Sam, presumably. Not many people had my new direct number.

“This is Lizzie,” I answered.

“*You have a collect call from a New York State correctional facility from . . .*,” a computer-generated male voice intoned, followed by an endless pause.

I held my breath.

“Zach Grayson,” an actual human voice said, before the message reverted to the automation. “*Press one if you agree to accept the charges.*”

I exhaled, relieved. But Zach . . . I drew a total blank. Wait—Zach Grayson, from Penn Law? I hadn’t thought about Zach for at least a couple years, not since I’d read that *New York Times* profile about ZAG, Inc., the wildly successful logistics start-up in Palo Alto he was running. ZAG was creating the equivalent of Prime membership for the endless small companies trying to compete with Amazon. Shipping didn’t sound very glamorous, but it was apparently extremely profitable. Zach and I hadn’t actually spoken since graduation. The recorded voice repeated the instruction, warned that I was running out of time. I punched 1 to accept the call.

“This is Lizzie.”

“Oh, thank God.” Zach exhaled shakily.

“Zach, what’s going—” The question was an unprofessional slip. “Wait, don’t answer that. These calls are all recorded. You know that, right? Even if you’re calling me as an attorney, you shouldn’t assume this conversation is confidential.”

Even well-versed attorneys were sometimes comically stupid when acting in legal matters on their own behalf. With criminal matters, they were completely useless.

“I don’t have anything to hide,” Zach said, sounding like every lawyer who’d found himself on the wrong side of the law.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Let’s start there.”

“Well, I am at Rikers, so . . .,” Zach said quietly. “I’ve been better.”

I could not remotely imagine Zach at Rikers, a jail so sprawling it occupied its own island. It was a ruthless place where Latin Kings, sadistic murderers, and career rapists were held perilously alongside the guy awaiting trial for selling a dime bag of weed. Zach was not a big guy. He’d also always been kind of, well, meek. He’d get ripped apart in Rikers.

“What have you been charged with? And I mean only the facts of the charge, not what happened.”

It was *that* important not to disclose anything incriminating, and *that* easy to forget. Once, my office had built an entire prosecution around a single recorded jailhouse conversation.

“Uh, assaulting a police officer.” Zach sounded embarrassed. “It was an accident. I was upset. Someone grabbed my arm and I jerked back. My elbow hit an officer in the face and I gave him a bloody nose. I feel bad, but obviously I didn’t do it on purpose. I had no idea he was even behind me.”

“Was this at, like, a bar or something?” I asked.

“A bar?” Zach sounded confused, and I felt my cheeks flush. It was a weird leap. A bar wasn’t where most people’s problems started. “Um, no, not a bar. It was at our house in Park Slope.”

“Park Slope?” That was my neighborhood, or close to my neighborhood. Technically, we lived in Sunset Park.

“We moved to Brooklyn from Palo Alto four months ago,” he said. “I sold my company, stepped away completely. I’m launching a venture here. Entirely new territory.” His tone had turned wooden.

Zach had always been that way, though, a bit awkward. A weirdo, my law school roommate Victoria used to call him, and worse, in her less charitable moments. But I’d liked Zach. Sure, he was a little nerdy, but he was dependable, smart, a good listener, and refreshingly direct. He was also as relentlessly driven as me, which I’d found comforting. Zach and I had other things in common, too. When I arrived at Penn Law I was still emerging from my grief-hardened shell, the one I’d been tucked inside since I’d lost both my parents at the end of high school. Zach had lost his father, too, and he knew what it meant to pull yourself up by your working-class bootstraps. At the University of Pennsylvania Law School, not everyone did.

“I live in Park Slope, too,” I offered. “On Fourth Avenue and Nineteenth Street. What about you?”

“Montgomery Place, between Eighth Avenue and Prospect Park West.”

Of course. The only time I ever went to that wildly expensive part

of Center Slope was to browse (and browse only) at the equally overpriced farmer's market at Grand Army Plaza.

"Why were the police at your house?" I asked.

"My wife—" Zach's voice caught. He was silent for a long moment. "Amanda was, um, at the bottom of the stairs when I got home. It was really late. We'd been at this neighborhood party together earlier in the night, but we'd left separately. Amanda got back before me and when I walked in— Jesus. There was blood everywhere, Lizzie. More blood than— I almost threw up, honestly. I could barely check for a pulse. And I'm not proud of that. What kind of man is so scared of the sight of blood that he can't help his own wife?"

His wife was dead? Shit.

"I'm so sorry, Zach," I managed.

"I got myself to call nine-one-one, luckily," he pressed on. "And then I did try CPR. But she was already—she's gone, Lizzie, and I have no idea what happened to her. I told the police that, but they wouldn't listen, even though I was the one who called them, for Christ's sake. I think it was because of this one guy in a suit. He kept eyeballing me from the corner. But it was this other detective who tried to pull me away from Amanda. She was right there on the floor, though, and I couldn't just leave. I mean, we have a son. How the hell am I going to—" His voice cut out again. "I'm sorry, but you're the first friendly voice I've heard. Honestly, I'm having a hard time holding it together."

"That's understandable," I said, and it was.

"Anybody there could have seen how upset I was," he went on. "They should have given me a minute."

"They should have."

The fact that the police hadn't was surely a harbinger of bad things to come. They must have already suspected he was responsible for his wife's death. What better way to keep track of a potential suspect than to lock him away in jail on a lesser charge?

"I really need your help, Lizzie," Zach said. "I need a good—a *great* lawyer."

This was not the first time a former law school classmate had called for help with a criminal issue. It wasn't easy to find top-flight criminal defense lawyers, and few Penn Law School graduates practiced criminal law. But people usually wanted help with small matters—DUIs or petty drug possession charges, occasionally white-collar offenses—and always for a family member or friend. They were never calling for themselves, and certainly not from Rikers.

"I can help with that, for sure. I have connections to some of the best criminal defense lawyers in—"

"Connections? No, no. I want *you*."

Fuck. Hang up. Right now.

"Oh, I am not remotely the right lawyer for you." And, thankfully, that was the absolute truth. "I only started working as a defense attorney a few months ago, and all my criminal experience is in white-collar—"

"Please, Lizzie." Zach's voice was awfully desperate. But he was a multimillionaire, with countless lawyers at his disposal, surely. Why me? Now that I'd thought about it, Zach and I had drifted apart long before graduation. "You and I both know what's happening here—I'm probably going to end up fighting for my life. Don't they always end up blaming the husband? I can't have some slick suit standing next to me. I need someone who gets it—who knows where I came from. Someone who will do what it takes, *whatever* it takes. Lizzie, I need you."

Fine, I felt a flush of pride. Being singularly driven had always been my defining characteristic. I certainly wasn't the smartest student at Stuyvesant High School or undergrad at Cornell or law student at Penn. But no one was more focused. My parents had taught me the virtue of raw determination. My dad especially, it was true. And our diligence had served us similarly: it was the rope we used to pull ourselves up—and also to hang ourselves by.

I still wasn't taking Zach's case.

"I appreciate the compliment, Zach. I do. But you need someone with homicide experience and the right connections at the Brooklyn

DA's office. I don't have either." True, all of it. "But I can get someone amazing for you. They can be down to see you first thing in the morning, before your arraignment."

"Too late," Zach said. "I was already arraigned. They denied bail."

"Oh," I said. "That's, um, surprising on an assault charge."

"Not if they think I killed Amanda," Zach said. "That's got to be where this is headed, right?"

"Sounds plausible," I agreed.

"Obviously, I should have called you before the arraignment. But I was so . . . in shock after everything happened, I guess. They gave me a public defender," he said. "He was a nice enough guy, seemed reasonably competent. Earnest, definitely. But if I'm completely honest, I was kind of checked out during the actual proceeding. Like if I pretended the whole thing wasn't happening, it wouldn't be. That makes me sound like a moron, I know."

And now was the moment I could have pressed for details—when was he arrested exactly? What was the precise sequence of events that night? All the questions Zach's lawyer would ask. Except I wasn't his lawyer, and the last thing I wanted was to be drawn deeper in.

"Checking out is a totally human response," I offered instead. And in my experience, being accused of a crime did do something to even the most rational people. And being falsely accused? That was something else entirely.

"I need to get out of this place, Lizzie." Zach sounded scared. "Like, immediately."

"Don't worry. No matter what the prosecution's strategy, they can't keep you in Rikers on an assault charge, not under these circumstances. We'll get you the right lawyer, and they'll appeal the denial of bail."

"Lizzie," Zach pleaded. "*You* are the right lawyer."

I was not. I was the wrong kind of lawyer, without the right connections. It also wasn't an accident that I'd never worked a homicide case, and I planned to keep it that way. But even taking *that* whole issue aside, my life was already out of control: the last thing I needed was

to get mixed up in some old friend's shitshow. And, if nothing else, Zach's situation sounded like exactly that.

"Zach, I'm sorry, but I—"

"Lizzie, please," he whispered, sounding frantic now. "I'll be honest, I am fucking terrified. Could you maybe come down and see me at least? We could talk about it?"

Damn it. I was not representing Zach, no matter what. But his wife was dead, and we were old friends. Maybe I could go see him. It might even be easier for Zach to accept why I couldn't be his lawyer if I told him face-to-face.

"Okay," I said finally.

"Great," Zach said, sounding way too relieved. "Tonight? Visiting hours are until nine p.m."

I checked the clock: 7:24 p.m. I'd have to move fast. I looked again at the draft letter on my computer screen. Then I thought of Sam, waiting at home for me. Now I wouldn't be at the office late like I said I'd be. Maybe that was reason enough to go see Zach at Rikers.

"I'm on my way," I said.

"Thank you, Lizzie," Zach said. "Thank you."

GRAND JURY TESTIMONY

LUCY DELGADO,

called as a witness the 6th of July and was examined
and testified as follows:

EXAMINATION

BY MS. WALLACE:

Q: Ms. Delgado, thank you for being willing to
testify.

A: I was subpoenaed.

Q: And thank you for complying with that subpoena.
Were you at a party at 724 First Street on July 2nd of
this year?

A: Yes.

Q: And how did you come to be at that party?

A: I was invited.

Q: By whom were you invited?

A: Maude Lagueux.

Q: And how do you and Maude Lagueux know each other?

A: Years ago our daughters were in the same
kindergarten class at Brooklyn Country Day.

Q: This party is an annual event, is it not?

A: I don't know.

Q: You don't know?

A: No.

Q: Let's try this another way. Have you been to this party in previous years?

A: Yes.

Q: What happens at this party?

A: Um, socializing, eating, drinking? It's a party.

Q: An adult party?

A: Yes. Kids aren't invited. Anyway most of them are away at sleepaway camp or summer immersion or whatever. That's the point of the party. Sleepaway Soiree, get it?

Q: I do. And does sexual intercourse take place at these parties?

A: What?

Q: Does sexual intercourse take place on the upstairs floor during this party?

A: I have no idea.

Q: You are under oath. You do recall that, correct?

A: Yes.

Q: I'll ask the question again. Does sexual intercourse take place on the upstairs floor during the Sleepaway Soiree at 724 First Street?

A: Sometimes. Not actually *on* the floor. There are beds. It's a regular house.

Q: Have you ever engaged in sexual intercourse during these parties?

A: No.

Q: Have you had sexual relations of any kind during these parties?

A: Yes.

Q: With your husband?

A: No.

Q: With somebody else's husband?

A: Yes.

Q: Did others engage in similar behavior?

A: Sometimes. Not everyone and not all the time. It's not that big of a deal.

Q: Partner-swapping wasn't a big deal to the people at this party?

A: Partner-swapping sounds so, I don't know, purposeful or something. This was only for fun. Like a joke, sort of. A way to blow off some steam.

Q: Did you see Amanda Grayson at the party on July 2nd?

A: Yes. But I didn't know who she was at the time.

Q: How did you learn that you'd seen her?

A: The police showed me a picture of her.

Q: They showed you a picture of Amanda Grayson and asked if you had seen her at the party?

A: Yes.

Q: And where did you see her?

A: In the living room. She bumped into me and spilled wine down my shirt.

Q: When was that?

A: I think around 9:30 or 10:00 p.m. I don't know exactly. But I was only at the party until 11:00. So sometime before then.

Q: Did you see her again after that?

A: No.

Q: How did she seem when you saw her?

A: Upset. She seemed upset.

Q: Upset like crying? Or angry?

A: Scared. She seemed really scared.

Q: Did you speak with Maude Lagueux at the party that night?

A: I was going to talk to her, but when I went over,

it seemed like she and her husband Sebe were arguing about another woman.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: Because I heard Maude say something about "naked pictures of her," and she was *really*, really angry. I mean, I've never seen her like that.

Q: Thank you very much, Ms. Delgado. You may step down.

AMANDA

SIX DAYS BEFORE THE PARTY

“What do you think?” the decorator asked, waving her manicured hand around Amanda’s office at the Hope First Initiative. There was the brand-new tailored orange couch, the gray wool rug with wide white stripes, and the absurdly expensive end tables, handcrafted by some Williamsburg woodworker.

When Amanda glanced up, the decorator—a tall, determined woman with hawkish features who wore only draped clothing in various shades of gray—was looking at her, waiting for a response. There was a right thing to say at this moment. Amanda had no idea what it was, but when she didn’t know exactly *what* to say—which was often—she had found that selecting just a few good words could make up for a lot.

Luckily, Amanda had been collecting good words ever since she and her mom used to snuggle side by side in one of the oversize corduroy beanbags in the children’s section of the St. Colomb Falls Library. That ended when Amanda was eleven and her mom got sick and died all within a few weeks—lung cancer, even though she’d never smoked a single cigarette. After that, Amanda wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to go back to the library. But then, there she was, only days later, still needing someplace safe to be.

The sour librarian had come out of nowhere with a pile of books for Amanda the second or third time she was there alone. She didn’t ask about Amanda’s mom. She’d just said with a wrinkled frown:

"There are these." Then she slapped the fat stack down—*Lord of the Flies, Catcher in the Rye, Little Women*. After that, the librarian's special deliveries became a regular thing. In the end, it was from those books that Amanda's best words came. And so they were *her* words; Amanda needed to remind herself of that sometimes. She'd read those books. That part of her was real.

And right now, the decorator was still waiting.

"It's splendid," Amanda ventured finally.

The decorator beamed, admiring her own handiwork. "Oh, Amanda, what a way to put it. I swear, you are my most delightful client."

"Splendid?" Sarah had appeared in Amanda's office door, arms crossed, looking beautiful as always with her smooth olive skin, sharp dark brown bob, and huge blue eyes. "Easy, Jane Austen. It's a couch."

Sarah came in and flopped down on it for emphasis, patting the spot next to her. "Come on, Amanda. Come sit. It's *your* couch, not hers. You should at least test it out."

Amanda smiled and went to sit next to Sarah. Despite her very petite frame, Sarah was an imposing figure. Amanda always felt much stronger next to her.

"Thank you for all your help," Amanda said to the decorator.

"Yes, bye now." Sarah waved dismissively.

The decorator's mouth pinched at Sarah, but when she stepped toward Amanda, she smiled brightly and kissed her on both cheeks. "Amanda, you feel free to call me if you need anything else."

"Buh-bye," Sarah said again.

The decorator snorted before turning on a tall, thin heel and striding for the door.

"Nothing more galling than an asshole like that insisting you *must* spend fourteen thousand on a stupid couch she could never afford herself," Sarah said once she was gone. She was looking down at her phone to finish a text, probably to her husband, Kerry. The two texted

nonstop, like teenagers. “And that lockjaw? People who are actually fancy never try that hard. You know that, right?”

Sarah had been raised in a struggling, single-parent home outside Tulsa, but Kerry’s family was heir to a button fortune. Like, actual buttons, apparently. It had been dramatically misspent by recent generations, so that Kerry didn’t end up inheriting much of anything, but Sarah had spent plenty of time around his very moneyed older relatives.

“Zach hired her. She’s apparently very well known,” Amanda said, looking around. “I do like the things she picked out.”

“Oh, Amanda. Forever the diplomat.” Sarah patted Amanda’s knee. “You never will say anything negative about anyone, will you?”

“I say negative things,” Amanda protested weakly.

“Just very, very quietly,” Sarah whispered. Then she shrugged. “Hey, I could probably learn to hold my tongue more. You should have heard me ripping into Kerry this morning.” Sarah looked off, considering for a moment. “Though, in my defense, he *is* too old and paunchy for bright-red Air Jordans. He looks ridiculous. And I’ve seen some of the guys he plays with in that pickup game of his. They are young and in shape and attractive and very *not* ridiculous. Come to think of it, you want to come watch with me? There was this one with these blue eyes and a little bit of a beard . . .”

Amanda laughed. “No, thank you.”

Sarah loved to joke openly about attractive men who were not Kerry. She could because her marriage was so rock solid. Sarah and Kerry had three beautiful boys and had been married for ages. They’d met in high school—Kerry the football star, Sarah the cheerleader. They’d even been prom king and queen, something Sarah seemed slightly embarrassed by, but also very proud of.

Sarah sighed. “Anyway, I think Kerry was actually hurt when I wouldn’t let up about the shoes. There is a line, even when it’s all in good fun. Sometimes I forget where it is.”

Sarah was forceful, it was true. She demanded Kerry do this, that, and the other thing—fetch their sons, clean the leaves clogging the storm drain on the corner, help Amanda change that light bulb above their front door. Kerry grumbled sometimes, sure—the leaves, especially, he thought were the city’s problem—but it was always with affection. Like he enjoyed their back-and-forth. Amanda found the entire thing baffling and enviable.

“I think Kerry likes you exactly the way you are,” Amanda said. “Besides, I’m sure Zach would love for me to be as assertive as you. I’d be able to handle everything here at the foundation so much better.”

“Yes, but then Zach would be stuck coming home to *my* harpy ass. Let’s face it, neither your husband nor I would survive a single night together.”

They both burst out laughing at the thought, leaving Amanda feeling breathless and flushed.

She did love Sarah. Only four months into her time in Park Slope, and Amanda was already so much closer to her than she’d been to any of the women in Palo Alto, who’d ruthlessly guarded their perfection like starving dogs. Sarah was no Carolyn, of course; it was impossible to compete with that kind of history. But Sarah didn’t have to compete with Carolyn. There was plenty of room for both friends in Amanda’s life.

Sarah was an invaluable help with the foundation, too. A former educator, fellow Brooklyn Country Day mom, and president of its PTA, Sarah knew the ins and outs of the tangled New York City education system. Sarah hadn’t worked since before her own children were born, but she’d agreed to take the job at the foundation as assistant director because she wanted to lend a hand. Over Sarah’s objections, Amanda had insisted she be paid generously.

It would have been worth any amount of money not to have to deal with the foundation alone. Having grown up disadvantaged herself, Amanda believed deeply in the foundation’s mission—providing scholarships that allowed needy middle-school students to attend some

of New York City's best private schools. But running the Hope First Initiative was very stressful. And Amanda needed to get it right. After all, it had been Zach's brainchild.

Zach's parents—a pair of Poughkeepsie crack addicts—had abandoned him when he was nine. After that, he'd bounced from foster home to foster home. Zach had told Amanda all about it shortly after they met, how growing up in the shadow of swanky Vassar College he'd always known there was more to life. And he'd wanted it. All of it.

And so, Zach had gone out and grabbed it. At the age of fourteen, he began working an illegal overnight shift stocking supermarket shelves to earn enough for the requisite testing and applications to boarding schools. He was admitted to three, including Deerfield Academy, which he attended on full scholarship. From there, he'd gone on to Dartmouth, then a dual JD/MBA from Penn. Amanda had found it all so very impressive. She still did.

Once he and Amanda were together, Zach had shot up the corporate ladder, too, at start-up after start-up in California—Davis, Sunnydale, Sacramento, Pasadena, Palo Alto. Amanda gave birth to Case in Davis, and he was four when Zach decided that if he wanted to really get somewhere, he'd have to create something himself. It was then that ZAG, Inc. was born. (ZAG as in zigzag and also Zach's initials, plus the A; he didn't have a middle name.) Within five years, ZAG, Inc. was worth hundreds of millions of dollars. But Amanda was not surprised when Zach resigned and stepped away, saying he was ready for something new. He'd always been a big proponent of challenging himself. Whatever the finer details of the new company Zach had started in New York—they never talked about the minutiae of his work—Amanda was sure it would be a big success, too.

"Why must my husband text to ask what we're having for dinner in the middle of the day?" Sarah huffed, punching out another text. "It's not even lunchtime. He should have better things to do."

Amanda's office phone rang. She startled, but made no move to answer it, even when it rang a second time.

“Um, you are aware we don’t have a receptionist yet?” Sarah asked. “That phone isn’t going to answer itself.”

“Oh, right.” Reluctantly, Amanda moved to her feet on the third ring and headed for her desk. She picked up the phone. “Amanda Grayson.”

There was no response.

“Hello?”

No answer. In an instant, dread all but overwhelmed her.

“Hello?” Amanda asked one more time. Still, there was nothing except that familiar sound in the background. Heavy, horrible breathing. Her gut twisted.

“Who is it?” Sarah asked from the couch.

There was only a series of zeroes on the caller ID. Amanda slammed down the phone.

“Whoa, killer!” Sarah called out. “What did they say?”

“No. Nothing. Sorry, I don’t even know why I hung up like that. There was no one there.” Amanda smiled, but it was not a good smile. She needed to change the subject. “It’s just— Case being so far away, it’s putting me on edge. I even had this ridiculously awful dream last night. I was running through the woods, barefoot, sticks cutting my feet. I think I was trying to save Case from something. God knows what.” When Amanda looked at Sarah, her eyes were already wide, and Amanda hadn’t even mentioned the most disturbing parts—the blood that had been all over her, and she’d been wearing something, a fancy dress, a wedding dress even; and then Norma’s Diner, from her hometown, appearing out of nowhere like some haunted house in the middle of the woods. Who dreamed such strange, awful things? Certainly not Sarah. “Obviously, it was just a nightmare. But every time the phone rings, I am worried it’s Case’s camp.”

Amanda knew that Case was safe at camp. She just felt unmoored without him. The only time he’d ever been away this long was when he’d been hospitalized with food poisoning as a toddler, and even then Amanda had slept in the hospital with him.

Sarah's face softened. "Well, *that* I do understand." She came over to lean against the desk beside Amanda. "I always chew off all my fingernails when camp starts. Until I get that first letter, actually. And you're dealing with a new camp. My boys usually go every summer to the same place."

"You worry, too?" Amanda asked.

Sarah's youngest son, Henry, was in Case's class, which was how she and Amanda had met. Sarah was one of those blasé mothers who always had everything so under control no matter what new disaster her sons careened into. And there were a lot of disasters.

"Don't let this tough exterior fool you!" Sarah exclaimed. "It's just easier for me if I don't let myself think about it—out of sight, out of mind. It's like the 'come in and see us' message from Country Day I got about Henry right before the school year ended. You wanna know what I did?"

"What?" Amanda asked, on the edge of her seat. What she wouldn't have done for one ounce of Sarah's bravado.

"I *ignored* it. Did not even respond. Can you imagine?" Sarah shook her head as though she was disgusted with herself, but really she seemed a little pleased. "Honestly? I couldn't deal. I needed a break from everything kid-related. Of course, now we have this emergency PTA meeting tonight. So I guess the joke's on me."

"What emergency meeting?" Amanda asked.

"Come on, I told you. Remember? The contact list has been compromised!" She pressed her flattened palms to her cheeks and widened her eyes for a second, then smirked. "I know that Brooklyn Country Day isn't one of those loosey-goosey progressive schools. We all love rigor and discipline and structure. That's why we send our kids there. But honestly, you'd think the Country Day parents were all in witness protection or the CIA or something. They are *losing* it."

Oh yes, Sarah had told her about that and Amanda had deliberately pushed it straight out of her mind. Zach would lose it, too, if he found out about some hacking situation. He was obsessive about their

privacy. If their information got into the wrong hands, he would definitely hold it against the school, which he had picked specifically because of its attention to every last detail. He might even want Case pulled out and *that* could not happen. Despite its demanding academics, Brooklyn Country Day was the only bright spot for Case in an otherwise rough transition.

Amanda had hoped to wait until the end of the school year to move ten-year-old Case east, but in the end that hadn't been possible. At least Case made friends easily. It helped that he fit in many different places socially. On the one hand, Case was an outgoing, athletic baseball fanatic, and on the other he was an introspective artist who could happily sit alone, sketching his favorite animal—jaguars—for hours. But a new school with only a few months left in fifth grade was a lot to ask of any child, even a flexible one.

There had been tears and some nightmares. Once Case had even wet the bed. Having often been plagued by terrifying dreams herself, Amanda had always taken her son's sound sleep as a sign she was doing something right. Now even that was gone. At least Case had perked up once Amanda agreed to sleepaway camp: eight weeks all the way back in California with his best Palo Alto friend, Ashe. But what if her son's sadness returned after camp ended and he came back to Park Slope? Amanda didn't want to think about it. She'd always made whatever compromises necessary for Zach's career, but never at Case's expense. Her most important job was to protect her son, but in balancing Zach and Case, there were no easy answers.

"Oh, now don't *you* get all freaked out, too," Sarah said. "I see that look on your face."

"I'm not freaked out," Amanda lied.

"Anyway, the school is pulling out all the stops to investigate," Sarah said, but she sounded a little like she was trying to convince herself. "Hired some fancy cybersecurity firm. You know Brooklyn Country Day. They take no prisoners."

"I just—I had no idea," Amanda said.

“That’s because the administration is being too close-lipped. I keep telling them that,” Sarah said. “It makes it look like they’re hiding something. So you’ll come to the meeting then?”

Amanda had been to one Brooklyn Country Day PTA meeting thus far and had found it extremely intimidating.

“Oh, I don’t know if I can—”

“Sure you can. Anyway, I need your moral support. These parents are looking for someone to turn on,” Sarah said, as though she wasn’t far more likely to cut them all down to size. “Eight p.m. My place. I won’t take no for an answer.”

Sarah didn’t need Amanda there, but she wanted her to be. And that was enough.

“I’ll be there,” Amanda said to her friend. “Of course I will.”