

EVERY
LAST
FEAR

ALEX FINLAY



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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PROLOGUE

They found the bodies on a Tuesday. Two days after the family had missed their flight home. Six days after all texts and social media had gone dark. The last post was a selfie saying they'd arrived in Mexico: the dad and mom making exaggerated duck faces, the teenage girl pink-cheeked and mortified, the little boy wearing plastic sunglasses and a gap-toothed smile.

The rental wasn't beachfront. It was off the beaten path, a small structure at the end of an unpaved alleyway, carved into a patch of roadside jungle in Tulum. The smell hit the local cop in the face when the property manager opened the front door. The maid hired to clean up after departing guests was sitting on the cement stoop, her hands working a string of rosary beads, her face streaked with tears.

The place was sweltering.

And filled with the buzz of flies.

But for all the decay in the air, there was no blood. No obvious signs of foul play. That's when the cop knew he needed to get out of there.

Within the hour, men in white hazmat suits trudged through the property, eyes fixed on handheld air sensors. They found the mother lying on the couch, frozen, a paperback tented on her chest. In the bedroom, the girl lay on top of the made bed, her cell phone still clutched in her hand. The boy was tucked in tight, peacefully, stuffed bear at his side.

The team inspected the stove and the water heater.

Then they drifted morosely out the patio doors to check the exterior gas line. That's when they found the trail of blood. And the father—at least what was left of him.

CHAPTER 1

MATT PINE

“Rough night? You look like you slept out here with us.”

Matt studied the chessboard, ignoring the weathered black man sitting across from him at the battered table in Washington Square Park.

“Ain’t you cold? Where’s your coat?”

“Shush, Reggie,” Matt said, waving the questions away with a hand. “I’m trying to concentrate.” He continued to plot his move on the board. A cool morning breeze pushed through the park, and Matt rubbed his hands together from the chill. It was *way* too cold for April.

Reggie made a sound of amusement in his throat. “Take all day. Ain’t gonna matter.”

In two years Matt hadn’t won a single game against the West Village’s homeless Bobby Fischer. Matt wondered sometimes what had brought the highly intelligent man to the streets, but he never asked. He moved his bishop, capturing the pawn on g7.

Reggie shook his head, as if disappointed in him. Eyes on the board, Reggie said, “What, you just getting back from a party or something?”

“Yeah, over at Goddard.” Matt directed his head to Goddard Hall, a washed-brown brick tower just off the park.

“Goddard? Hangin’ with the freshman girls,” Reggie said with a gravelly laugh. He knew more about NYU than most grad students. Maybe that was it; maybe he’d once attended the university.

It was odd because people usually confided in Matt, told them their life stories, their secrets, their problems. He guessed he just had that kind of face. Or maybe it was because he preferred listening, observing, over talking. And boy, could Reggie talk. Yet despite his incessant chatter, Reggie offered no clues about his life before the park. Matt had looked for signs of the backstory. The man kept a green military-looking bag; maybe he’d been a soldier. His hands and nails were always impeccably clean; maybe he’d worked in the medical field. His street talk at times seemed genuine, at times forced. Maybe he was hiding his real identity, on the run, a criminal. Or maybe he was just a guy who’d hit hard times, loved to play chess, and didn’t feel the need to justify his life to an annoying college kid.

“My man. Out all night with the coeds.” Reggie chuckled again. “How’s that pretty redhead of yours feel about that?”

A fair question. But that pretty redhead had broken up with Matt yesterday. Hence too many drinks at Purple Haze. Hence the after-party at Goddard and the frolic upstairs with Deena (or was it Dana?). Hence 7:00 A.M. in the park with bed head and no way to get back into the dorm—his security card, room key, and phone in the pocket of his missing coat.

Reggie moved his rook to g8, then gave a satisfied yellow smile. “I’m startin’ to wonder how you got admitted into that fine institution.” Reggie gazed at the admissions building, the purple NYU flag flapping in the wind.

“Now you’re starting to sound like my father,” Matt said, moving his own rook to e1. His eyes lifted to Reggie’s. “Check.”

Reggie moved his king to d8, but it was too late.

Queen to g3. Checkmate was inevitable.

“Mother . . .” Reggie said. He called out to a player at one of the other tables. “Yo, Elijah, check this out. Affleck gone and beat me.” Reggie always called Matt “Affleck”—his derogatory shorthand for “white boy.”

“Beware the quiet man,” Reggie said, in a tone like a preacher, quoting from something Matt didn’t recognize. “For while others speak, he watches. And while others act, he plans. And when they finally rest, he strikes.”

Reggie dropped a wadded bill onto the table.

“I’m not taking your money.” Matt stood, cracked his back.

“Hell you ain’t,” Reggie said, flicking the bill toward Matt. “You’re a film student—you’re gonna need it.” He cackled.

Matt reluctantly scooped up the money. He looked up at the dark clouds rolling into the city. He loved the smell of an imminent rain. “At least let me get you breakfast at the dining hall. I’ve got some meal swipes left.”

“Nah,” Reggie said. “They didn’t seem so happy last time. . . .”

Reggie was right. Limousine liberalism had its limits, as Matt had learned from his time with the privileged student body of New York University. He was an oddity to most of his classmates, an apolitical Midwesterner.

“Fuck ’em,” Matt said, gesturing for Reggie to join him, when he heard a familiar voice from behind.

“There you are. We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Matt turned and saw the resident assistant from his dorm. Why would the RA be looking for him? Phillip usually appeared only if the music was too loud or the halls smelled like weed.

“There are federal agents at the dorm,” Phillip said, concern in his voice. “They want to talk with you.”

“Agents?”

“Yeah, the FBI showed up at six this morning. They said you’re not answering your phone.”

“What do they want?” Matt asked. It was probably about his older brother. Ever since that fucking documentary, everything was about Danny.

“I don’t know. But if you’re doing something out of the dorm you shouldn’t, I don’t—”

“Relax, man. I’m not—” Matt paused, took a breath. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll go see what they want.”

Phillip let out an exasperated sigh and sauntered off.

“You in some trouble?” Reggie asked.

“I guess I’d better go find out. Rain check on breakfast?”

Reggie nodded. “Be careful, Affleck. Nothing good ever came of federal agents knocking on your door at six in the mornin’.”

A half hour later Matt sat on his small dorm bed, the room spinning.

The lead FBI agent—Matt couldn’t remember her name—was talking again, but it was just a jumble of words. When Matt didn’t respond, the agent knelt in front of him, a concerned look on her face. Her partner, a lean guy in a dark suit, hovered in the background, shifting on his feet.

“I spoke with the dean,” the agent was saying, “and they’ve arranged for a grief counselor. And you don’t have to worry about your classes.”

Matt tried to stand, but his legs buckled, blood rushing to his head. The agent guided him back to the bed.

“All of them?” Matt said. She’d told him twice already, but he didn’t believe it.

“I’m so sorry.”

Mom.

Dad.

Maggie.

Tommy.

He stood again, said something, then tripped to the bathroom. He dropped to his knees and emptied his guts into the toilet. He hugged the dirty bowl, unsure how long he was there.

At some point he heard a soft tap on the door.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” he managed. Gripping the sink, he tugged himself up. He turned on the faucet and splashed water on his face, then glanced at his reflection in the mirror. He looked like he felt.

Back in the room, the female agent was alone, her partner having cleared out.

“How could something like this happen?” Matt asked, the sound of his voice strange to him, hoarse and distant.

“They think it’s a freak accident, a gas leak. But that’s what we’re trying to get to the bottom of. Both the Bureau and State Department are working on it. We’ve reached out to the Mexican authorities. I know this is the worst possible time, but I need to ask you a few questions.”

Matt sat down again, nodded for her to continue.

“We understand they were on vacation.”

“Uh-huh, spring break for my little sister and brother.” The words caught in his throat. “They decided to go at the last minute. My break didn’t match up, so I couldn’t . . .” He let the sentence die.

“When’s the last time you heard from them?”

Matt thought about this. “My mom sent a text from the airport the day they left. Maggie sent one a few days ago.” He felt a stab of guilt. He hadn’t read, much less responded to, his little sister’s text.

“How about your father?”

He shook his head, every part of him numb. They hadn’t spoken since their fight over Christmas break. His heart sank. The last thing Matt had said to him—

“For the timeline—to help us understand things—it’s important that we see those texts. If you don’t mind?”

“Yeah, sure. But my phone, it’s in my coat, which I left somewhere last night.”

“Do you know where?” the agent asked. She was sympathetic, but Matt could tell she was getting impatient.

“I think it’s at the bar.” He’d grabbed the tiny mountain of his clothes before slinking out of the girl’s dorm, so it had to be the bar.

The agent nodded. “I can take you there.”

“I don’t think they’ll be open this early.”

“What’s it called?”

“Purple Haze, on East Thirteenth.”

The agent pulled out her phone and walked to the far end of the room. She looked out the rain-speckled window, murmuring commands to someone. “I don’t care. Just tell them to get somebody there now,” she said, making her way back over to Matt.

“You up to going to the bar with me?” The agent took a few steps toward the door.

Trancelike, Matt nodded.

“You want to get a jacket or umbrella? It’s raining.”

Matt shook his head and followed her out.

A small crowd had gathered in the hallway, gawking students. Matt didn’t know if word had spread about his family or if they thought he was being arrested for something.

The agent—he still couldn’t conjure her name—pushed ahead to the elevator. Inside, Matt said, “Has the media got this yet?”

The agent gave him a knowing look. “It hit the wire, but they haven’t released your last name. They wait a little while to allow time to notify the family.”

“You know what’s gonna happen when they find out, right?” Matt shook his head in disgust. *That goddamn Netflix documentary.*

The agent nodded.

The elevator doors spread open and they were met by a mob of reporters and blinding camera flashes.

CHAPTER 2

The ride to the bar was a blur. Matt sat in the back seat in the stop-and-go traffic of Greenwich Village feeling punch-drunk from the news and from the paparazzi hurling questions at him: *Why weren't you in Mexico with your family? How do you feel? Do you think it was really an accident? Does your brother know?*

The agent had just plowed through the crowd, grabbing Matt's wrist and dragging him in her wake. When a guy with a camera stepped in front of them on the way to the car, she'd calmly flashed her badge and looked him up and down. He'd cowered away. New York paparazzi weren't timid souls, so the guy must have sensed that she wasn't one to trifle with.

Now, Matt stared out the window, the wet road smeared with red taillights. His thoughts skipped again to the reporters. *Does your brother know?*

Danny had no television, internet, or phone, of course. But Matt's dad always said that news—particularly bad news—had a way of

penetrating prison walls at light speed. And with Danny's celebrity status from the documentary, he'd hear soon enough.

The car pulled in front of Purple Haze. The place looked grimier in the daylight, the roll-up metal security doors covered in graffiti. Trash bags puddled with rainwater piled on the sidewalk. A man in a tracksuit was bouncing on his feet under the awning. He peered into the car like he was expecting them, and walked over.

"You with the Feds?" he said, stooping so he could see inside the car. He was heavysset and balding. Sweat beaded on his forehead, even in the chill.

"Special Agent Keller," she said, all business. Matt finally had a name.

"I got a call about a problem at the club," the man said in a Brooklyn accent. "We run a clean operation, so I don't—"

"I don't care what kind of operation you run," Keller said. There were no niceties. No bedside manner. Keller gestured to Matt in the back seat. "He left his coat in there last night. His phone's in the pocket. We need you to let us inside."

The club owner hesitated. Bunched his lips. "Well, you, ah, got a warrant?"

Keller glowered at him. "You really want me to get one? I might have to come back with a team of agents at, say, eleven tonight. Who knows what we'll find."

The owner held up his hands in retreat. "Look, I'd get his stuff if it was there," he said. "But my bouncer, I let him take whatever's left behind after closing."

"Wonderful," Agent Keller said, letting out a breath. "I need his name and address."

"I'm not sure I have—"

"Name and address, or I'm back to us having a problem."

"All right, all right. Give me a minute."

Agent Keller nodded, and the owner disappeared inside. He

returned with a Post-it note scrawled with the information. Keller plucked it from his hand, then lurched from the curb.

Twenty minutes later they were in front of a towering glass building in Tribeca. Keller turned into the mouth of a garage and stopped at a checkpoint. A guard examined her credentials then waved her inside.

“The bouncer lives here?” Matt asked as they circled down the basement lot. It was a high-end building in a high-end neighborhood, not somewhere you’d expect club muscle to live.

“No. I sent some agents to track him down.”

“So what’s here?”

Keller pulled the car into a spot next to a line of identical dark sedans. “Someone needs to tell your brother.”

“Wait, what?” Matt said. He tried to unpack what she was saying. Then: “No.”

There was a long pause while Keller searched his eyes. “I know this is a lot,” she said. “And I can’t pretend to know what you’re going through. But I spoke to your aunt and she said your parents would’ve wanted it to come from you.”

The hair on Matt’s arms rose.

“He’s *here*?” Matt asked, knowing that didn’t make sense.

“Not quite. We need to head up to the roof.”

The first helicopter ride of Matt’s life and he couldn’t tell if the floating in his gut was from being airborne or the surrealness of the day. The water of the Hudson was choppy, the sky a dreary gray. Agent Keller sat next to him with her back straight, her face expressionless.

She wasn’t chatty. And not one to multitask. There was no staring at her phone, no reading the newspaper. Her job was to escort him to Fishkill Correctional upstate, and that’s what she did. Matt never understood why Danny, convicted of killing his girlfriend in Nebraska, was incarcerated in New York. It was his third prison in seven years.

When the chopper hit a patch of rough air, Matt thought about

Tommy. On family trips, while everyone else was white-knuckled gripping the airplane armrest with even the slightest bit of turbulence, his little brother would giggle with delight. Not an ounce of fear. He would've loved this ride.

Matt swallowed a sob, picturing Tommy on the plane to Mexico with no idea it would be the last flight of his life.

The helicopter touched down at a small airfield in a rural area. Matt removed his seat harness and headset and followed Agent Keller out. The propellers whirled, and he ducked down in a reflexive action he'd seen a million times in the movies. Keller walked upright.

She spoke to a man in a stiff suit next to a black SUV waiting for them at the edge of the tarmac. It wasn't her partner from earlier, but they looked similar. Dark suit, sunglasses, blank expression. Neo from *The Matrix*. Keller and Matt climbed in back, and the vehicle made its way along country roads until the cement fortress came into view.

By now Matt's palms were sweating, his head pounding. The reality was sinking in.

They're really gone.

And soon he'd have to take away almost everything that his older brother had left in this world.

CHAPTER 3

EVAN PINE

BEFORE

“Evan, I’m so glad you made it.” Dr. Silverstein gestured for him to take a seat across from her on the leather couch.

Evan’s eyes drifted around the office. The framed diplomas, the neat desk, the grandfather clock that was out of place in the charmless no-frills office complex.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call last week,” Evan said. “You can charge me for missing our—”

“Don’t be silly. I saw the news about your son on TV. I’m so sorry, Evan.”

She kept saying his name. A trick of the trade, he presumed. He imagined a much younger Dr. Silverstein diligently taking notes in her psychology class. *Repeat the patient’s name often to show you’re listening.*

He shouldn’t be so hard on her. She was a good therapist. And it must be difficult counseling someone who was attending sessions only because of a spouse’s ultimatum.

“So what’s next?” she asked. “Legally, I mean. For Danny.”

Evan didn’t want to talk about it, but there would be no escaping it here. “The lawyers say this is the end of the road. The Supreme Court refused to hear the case, so that’s it.” He shrugged.

Silverstein gave him a sympathetic look. “And how’s Danny? Did you get to talk to him?”

Evan thought of the call when he broke the news. He pictured his son’s face pressed to the dirty telephone at Fishkill, knowing he’d probably spend the rest of his life there, or some other godforsaken hole.

“He took it better than I’d anticipated. He actually spent most of our call talking about Linkin Park.”

Dr. Silverstein’s expression was curious. Evan realized she had no idea what he was talking about.

“They’re a band. The day I called Danny about the appeal, the radio said it would’ve been the singer’s birthday. He died a few years ago. Danny and I, we used to . . .” He trailed off. His mind ventured to the two of them driving home from football practice, Danny, smelly and sweaty, cranking up the car stereo, both of them belting out the lyrics to “Numb.”

“Something the two of you used to bond over?” Silverstein said. “The music . . .”

Evan smiled in spite of himself. “In high school Danny was obsessed with the band. I never understood why. Their songs are so rage-filled. Songs about teen angst, wrecked father-and-son relationships—the opposite of me and Danny.” More fitting for Evan and Matt.

“How’s the rest of your family dealing with the news? Olivia?” Before Evan started his solo sessions last year, the Pine clan used to trek out to this very office every other Saturday for family therapy, so Silverstein knew them and their brand of dysfunction well.

“Liv?” Evan said. “I think she’s come to terms that Danny isn’t getting out.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

It used to make him angry. Enraged. But now he was jealous—jealous that his wife didn't spend every waking moment feeling like she'd been thrown into Lake Michigan with cinder blocks anchored to her limbs. Evan had once read about dry drowning, a person slowly dying hours or even days after leaving the water. That's how he'd felt for the past seven years, oxygen slowly being stolen from his damaged insides. "I understand. We all had to find ways to deal with it."

Dr. Silverstein seemed to see right through his forced reasonableness. But she'd prodded enough for now.

"And how about the rest of your kids?"

"Maggie's hanging in there." He smiled, thinking of his daughter. "She's busy wrapping up her senior year, so that helps. But she's always been my trouper—she believes that her big brother will get out, regardless of what the Supreme Court says."

Dr. Silverstein offered a sad smile.

Evan continued. "Tommy, well, he's just too young to understand. And Liv shelters him from it all." Shortly after Danny's arrest, Liv learned she was pregnant—having a baby at "advanced maternal age," as the doctor diplomatically put it. Unplanned and with the worst timing in the world, but somehow the pregnancy and that little boy saved them, especially Liv.

Silverstein waited a long moment. Another psychologist trick. *Let the patient fill the silence.*

When Evan didn't bite, Silverstein finally asked: "And Matthew?"

Evan looked at the floor. "We still haven't talked."

"So it's been what, four months?" Her tone was matter-of-fact, not judgmental.

Evan nodded, folded his arms. He didn't want to elaborate, and was surprised when Dr. Silverstein didn't push it.

She looked at Evan thoughtfully. "Sometimes," she said, "after a traumatic event—and in its own way I think this court decision was its

own trauma—it can be good for a family to reset. To spend time away from your usual surroundings. Have fun, even.”

“You mean like a vacation?” Evan said, trying to hide the *what the fuck* tone in his voice.

“Maybe. Or just some time away together. As a family.”

“I’d love to, but we really can’t do it—financially, I mean.” He blew out a breath, deciding he might as well get his money’s worth for the session. “They let me go.”

“Who?” Silverstein said, her voice concerned. “You mean your job?”

“Yep. Twenty-five years, and *poof*.” He made an explosion gesture with his hands.

“What happened?” Dr. Silverstein’s eyes flicked to the grandfather clock, like she was worried she’d need more time now.

“The inevitable.”

“What do you mean by that, Evan?” She was leaning forward in her chair, fingers laced, full eye contact.

“I mean, I don’t blame them. It’s a big accounting firm, and my billable hours have been terrible, particularly since I transferred to the Chicago office. I lost my main client six months ago. And let’s face it: the show.”

“You mean the documentary?”

Evan tried not to lose his patience, but what other show could it possibly be? The reason anyone knew or cared about Danny Pine. The reason the Supreme Court’s refusal to review Danny’s life sentence made national news. The reason Evan had tricked himself into thinking his son would come home after seven long years. The pop-culture phenom *A Violent Nature*.

“Yeah,” Evan said, “you’ve seen it, right?”

“I’ve seen it, yes.”

“Well, you know then.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I came off like a lunatic.”

“No.”

Evan gave her a disappointed look.

“I think you came off like a father devastated about his son being wrongfully imprisoned for murder.”

“And a lunatic.”

She didn't answer. But she agreed. He could see it in her eyes.

She mercifully stayed away from the questions that had haunted him for the past week. *What are you going to do for money? How will you pay the mortgage? Maggie's tuition?*

“Are you okay?”

Evan sat back, exhaled loudly. “It's funny, when I got the call that the court denied Danny's appeal, I was listening to a Linkin Park song—one released shortly before the singer died. Over the years, his songs had become less angry, more melancholy.” Evan swallowed over the lump in his throat. He could feel Dr. Silverstein scrutinizing him. “The song said something about no one caring if a single star burned out in a sky of a million stars.”

Silverstein narrowed her eyes. “The singer of this band,” she said, “how did he die?”

“Suicide,” Evan said. The word hung in the air.

“Evan,” Silverstein finally said, her voice serious, “are you—”

“Of course not.”

Dr. Silverstein leaned in closer. “The medications you're on,” she said, her tone softer, “in some people they can cause intrusive thoughts.”

“Don't forget the fatigue, sexual problems, and insomnia—all really helpful for someone who's already depressed.”

Dr. Silverstein bunched up her face. “I appreciate the humor, but I'm being serious. The medications can cause suicidal thoughts. The meds can trick a patient into thinking there's only one solution.”

Or maybe they cause the patient to finally see the truth.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about, Dr. Silverstein,” Evan said.
“I’m fine.”

By her expression, Evan could tell she didn’t believe him.

Like he said, she was a good therapist.

Excerpt from
A Violent Nature

Season 1 / Episode 1
"A Body at the Creek"

OVER - BLACK-9-1-1 RECORDING

OPERATOR

9-1-1 operator, what's your emergency?

CALLER

(breathing heavily)

I'm at Stone Creek, walking my dog. And there's
a body—I, I, I think it's a girl.

A dog barks in the background. It sounds
terrified.

CALLER

You need to get someone here right away.

OPERATOR

Slow down, sir. You say there's a body of a
girl? Is she breathing?

CALLER

No, her head, there's so much blood . . . dear
god . . .

INSERT - LOCAL NEWS FOOTAGE

ANCHOR

There's been a big break tonight in the murder of Charlotte Rose. The Adair teenager was last seen at a house party and found bludgeoned to death at Stone Creek. Our sources say there's been an arrest tonight, the victim's boyfriend, Daniel Pine. . . .

INT. STUDIO

SUPERIMPOSED:

"Louise Lester, Institute for Wrongful Convictions"

LESTER

At first, I was skeptical, I mean, the Institute gets thousands of requests for help from prisoners claiming to be innocent. And this one came from the inmate's twelve-year-old sister. But then we examined the trial record.

Lester shakes her head in disgust.

The prosecution's theory was that Danny and Charlotte were at a house party and Charlotte told him she was pregnant and they had a fight. Danny then got really drunk and sometime after the party the two of them got into it again, and he pushed her and she fell, suffering a fatal head trauma. Danny then panicked and moved her body to the creek in a wheelbarrow, and smashed her skull in with a large rock, a big bloody mess. But there was no blood on his clothes, no

DNA, no physical evidence of any kind. Not one trace. Does that sound like the work of a staggering drunk teenager? And then we found out that the prosecutor had withheld exculpatory evidence from the defense. . . .

CHAPTER 4

MATT PINE

The cinder-block room in the prison smelled of bleach. Matt studied Agent Keller, who sat quietly across from him. She was a woman of few words. But she exuded a confidence that was comforting. Even in a maximum-security prison amid murderers, rapists, and the worst society had to offer—with the faint howls of those damned souls just outside the door—she was calm and composed.

“Taking a while,” Matt said, just to break the silence. They’d been in the room a good half hour.

Keller nodded.

“I haven’t seen him since we were kids,” Matt continued, nervous talking. He’d never visited Danny in prison. Dad always said that Danny wanted it that way. His brother refused to let his siblings see him locked up like an animal.

So Danny was frozen in time in Matt’s mind. The archetype of a small-town football star. Danny was no Tom Brady, but in Adair,

Nebraska—where Friday night lights were second only to the enclaves of Texas—his brother had been a big deal.

“How old were you when he went away?” Keller asked, as if fighting her disdain for small talk.

“Fourteen.”

Another nod. “Were you close? I mean, before . . .”

“Yeah,” Matt lied. When they were small, they used to play together for hours, building forts, climbing trees, playing LEGOs, but when Danny made it to high school and became a local celebrity, Matt was no longer part of his universe. Plus, the relationship between his father and Danny sucked out all the air from the room. His father just didn’t see Matt.

Then beautiful Charlotte was murdered. Last seen at a high school house party, she’d been bludgeoned to death somewhere unknown, her body dumped by the creek near their house. Police found blood in a wheelbarrow hidden in the overgrown shrubs along the path that crossed the Pines’ property. No one ever understood why Charlotte’s body had been moved. Or why her skull had been crushed with a huge rock postmortem. They’d been sure of only one thing: the perpetrator was her boyfriend, Danny Pine.

From that point on, nothing was the same. It was Year Zero for the Pines. There was before Charlotte, and after. Now Matt had a new Year Zero.

“So you haven’t seen him since . . .” Keller didn’t finish the sentence.

“My parents kept us away from the trial. We’ve talked on the phone, but yeah.”

The last time Matt had seen Danny free was the night Charlotte was killed. That night had otherwise been momentous for Matt. Jessica Wheeler had asked him to sneak out to meet her. It was before he’d had a phone, and she’d slipped him a note in ninth-grade science class, the culmination of weeks of flirting. Jessica had folded the note

in a square and tied it with a red string, like a miniature package. Matt remembered pulling at the bow, his heart fluttering as he read the note.

MEET ME AT THE KNOLL AT 3 A.M. TONIGHT?

YES OR NO

CIRCLE ONE

The Knoll was a famous make-out spot at the top of a secluded hill near the creek. A place for stargazing and bad decisions. He of course circled *yes*. And he'd been shocked that she was actually there: holding a flashlight, wearing her pj's and slippers. On their backs in the cold grass, they stared at the stars dotting the ink-black sky, the clouds blowing past the moon.

"This reminds me of the stargazing scene from A Walk to Remember," Matt said. "You ever see that movie?"

She shook her head.

"It's old and not very good. Not many Nicholas Sparks adaptations are. But the scene was solid."

"Have you always loved movies so much? I mean, like, you always compare things to stuff in movies."

Matt smiled. "Sorry. It drives my family crazy."

"I think it's cute."

"I want to make movies one day. NYU has this amazing film school. My grandpa, before he got sick, he said that movies are the poetry of our time."

She turned and faced him.

"Nicholas Sparks . . . You ever see The Notebook?"

"Of course. The critics hated it, but it's a cult classic. The kissing in the rain scene is considered—"

Jessica put a finger over his lips. She removed it, and her

mouth softly touched his. It put Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams to shame.

Matt touched his lips involuntarily, remembering the electricity slicing through every part of him, when the door jugged open.

“Matty?”

Matt stood, taken aback at the prisoner before him. The teenage football star was a grown man. He still had the good looks, the blond hair, the square jaw. But Matt saw a hardness in his brother’s once clear blue eyes. And by Danny’s steely gaze, he obviously wasn’t happy to see Matt.

“What are you doing here?” Danny said. “I told Dad that I didn’t want—” Danny stopped, eyed Keller. “Who are you?”

Matt said, “Why don’t you sit down.”

When Danny didn’t take the seat, the guard pulled out a chair. “Sit down, Dan,” he said. It was stern but had an undercurrent of concern, as if the guard knew what was coming.

Danny sat, his eyes locked on Matt’s.

Keller said, “Let’s give them a moment.”

The guard seemed to welcome the opportunity to escape the room. Yeah, he definitely knew what was coming.

“What the hell’s going on, Matty?”

Matt swallowed, fighting the welling in his eyes, the fist in his throat. “There’s been an accident.”

“Accident?” Danny said. “What accident? What are you—”

“Dad and Mom. Maggie and Tommy. They were in Mexico for spring break. They’re gone, Danny.”

“Gone?” Danny’s voice was laced with fear and disbelief.

“They think it was a gas leak. At their vacation rental,” Matt continued.

Danny placed his palms flat on the table and leaned back, as if he were distancing himself from Matt’s words. The muscle in his brother’s

jaw pulsed. He started to speak, but it was as if the words had been ripped out of his throat.

For the next ten minutes Matt watched as his older brother shattered into a million pieces, just as Matt had that morning.

Eventually someone knocked on the door. The guard poked his head in.

“We’ve gotta get you back,” the guard said. “Say your goodbyes.” The guard was about to shut the door again when he gave Danny a pointed look. “And get yourself straight.”

Danny wiped the tears away with his shirt. Matt realized that the guard was telling Danny to collect himself. It wasn’t the kind of place to show weakness.

“I’ll call you when I know more,” Matt said.

Danny made no reply.

Matt sat there, not knowing what else to say. What else could he say? Their parents and siblings were gone. And they barely knew each other.

The guard returned, and ushered Danny to the door.

Before leaving the room, Danny turned to Matt and said, “Don’t come back here, Matty.” Danny swallowed. “They wasted too much of their lives on me. Don’t waste yours.”

And then he was gone.

Keller was at the doorway and had witnessed their goodbye. “You okay?” she asked.

Matt didn’t respond. He was pissed she’d made him do this.

Another guard arrived to escort them out of the facility. He led them along a yellow line painted on the cement floor. Matt could feel the eyes of prisoners in the rafters above them. Waiting for a security door to buzz them through, Matt surveyed the dreary facility. At the far end, he saw the guard marshaling Danny to his cell.

His brother still walked with the swagger of a small-town football star. Maybe it was a show for the other prisoners. But even after all these years, he still had the same cocksure stride.

Matt's mind went back to that night with Jessica Wheeler. His own skip in his step after he'd walked her home. Nearly four in the morning, and his smile so bright that it was probably visible on the black footpath. The path near the house where he saw the dark silhouette of his brother—in the letterman jacket and with that swagger—pushing a wheelbarrow toward the creek.

CHAPTER 5

Matt rode with his head resting on the back window of the Suburban. Rainwater pulsed along the glass.

Keller sat in the front passenger seat, cell phone pressed to her ear. For whatever reason, they didn't take the chopper back to the city. He wasn't sure how long they'd been driving. An hour? Two?

The SUV veered off I-87 and pulled into a Shell station. The agent driving, wearing sunglasses even though it was drizzling, got out and started filling the tank.

Keller twisted around. "I'm gonna get some coffee," she said, opening her door. "Want anything?"

"A Mountain Dew would be great," Matt said. "I need to wake up."

Keller gave a disapproving frown and headed to the station's small convenience store.

Matt's thoughts returned to Danny. He imagined his brother in his cell, fighting the tears. What a terrible place, where any sign of emotion was taken as weakness, easy prey. He thought of his brother's prison muscles and cold eyes.

Keller returned with a coffee and small plastic bag from the store. Instead of returning to the front seat, she got into the back next to Matt. From the bag she retrieved a bottle of water and an apple and handed them to him.

“They were out of Mountain Dew,” she said, clearly lying. “Anyway, at the academy they taught us that water will wake you up more than caffeine.”

“Is that so?” Matt said, eyeing the paper cup of coffee in Keller’s hand.

She gave him a knowing smile and took a sip. The driver started the engine, but Keller stayed in the back. Matt realized that she wanted to talk about something.

“Look,” she said as the SUV merged back onto the interstate, “I know this isn’t a great time, but we need your help with something.”

Matt straightened himself. Took a big drink of the water. “Sure.”

“The Mexicans are being difficult about”—Keller took in a breath—“about releasing your family to come home. They say they need an immediate family member to sign some papers before the bodies can be released.”

“Fine. I’ll sign whatever they send over.”

“That’s just it. They won’t just send the papers. They need someone there in person.”

“Wait, what?”

“We’re working our diplomatic channels, but the locals are being a pain. They haven’t been particularly forthcoming with information, and they’re saying we need a family member there in person.”

“Why would they do that?” Matt asked.

“It could be they’re worried about tourism. What happened isn’t the best PR in the world. Or it could be some bureaucrat on a power trip. Or”—she looked Matt in the eyes—“or they could be hiding something.”

Matt pondered this. “If you think it’s necessary,” he said, “then, sure, yeah. When do you need me to go?”

“We’ve booked you a flight out tomorrow morning.”

Matt let out a breath. Could this fucking week get any better? He gave a noncommittal nod, then continued gazing out the window. He wasn’t particularly travel ready. He had less than one hundred dollars in his bank account. And he’d stubbornly refused any money from his parents after the fight with his father.

They sat in silence for a long time as the SUV made its way to the Henry Hudson Parkway and into Manhattan.

The rain had subsided and there was a sudden part in the clouds, the sun beaming through the gloom. The gold tinge on the buildings brought Matt back to one of their family traditions. Every July, his father’s accounting firm held its annual meeting in New York and they’d all come along. The event overlapped with “Manhattanhenge,” one of two days a year when the setting sun aligned perfectly with the New York City street grid. When the fiery ball of the sun was framed in by skyscrapers as it dipped below the horizon. Matt thought back to the last Manhattanhenge before Year Zero—the family sitting at a café on Fourteenth Street, Dad and Mom holding hands, tipsy on wine and being in the city. Danny checking out the girls strutting by in movie-starlet sunglasses and short skirts. Maggie’s nose in a guidebook, spouting out facts about the rare solar event.

Matt flashed to the same café last year: everyone in their assigned seats, Dad next to Maggie, who was across from Mom. Next to Mom, Tommy, who’d taken Danny’s old seat. And Matt on the outside, trying to squeeze in the small table. Everyone going through the motions, pretending the ritual still had meaning. *The new but not improved Pines*. And now he had an ache on his insides that both versions of his family were dead. After all of the bitterness, the anger, the longing for the original Pines, he’d give anything to have his bizarro post-Year Zero family back. Give anything to tell his father he was sorry for the things he’d said. Tell his mom what she meant to him. Tell Maggie what a light she was in his life. Tell Tommy that he was their savior. But that

life, whatever his grievances, was over. The devastation, the fragility of what they'd had, was almost more than he could take.

"Where would you like us to drop you?" Keller asked. "The dorm?"

"Do you think they're gone yet?"

"Who? The reporters?"

"Yeah."

Keller frowned. "I doubt it. Do you have a friend we can—"

"You can take me to East Seventh, if you wouldn't mind."

The driver looked at Keller in the rearview, and she gave him a nod. The SUV jerked around other cars until traffic was at a standstill. The driver flipped on the strobe mounted to the dash, and the vehicles ahead splayed, creating a narrow path.

Matt watched out the window again as the end-of-the-day crowd headed on foot to happy hours, commuter trains, and cramped apartments.

Finally the SUV drew to the curb on Seventh.

"Here?" Keller said, glancing at the run-down barbershop and dry cleaner next door.

"My friend lives upstairs." Matt looked up at the four-story building in need of a paint job.

Keller nodded. "I just got a text that we have your phone," she said. "I can bring it to you before your flight tomorrow, if that works?"

"Okay."

"We'll also have an agent fly to Mexico with you."

"I don't need a babysitter," Matt said.

"It will just help make sure you're—"

"I'd prefer to go alone."

Keller frowned. "All right. But at least let us have our consular officer pick you up at the airport. He'll take you to Tulum."

When Matt didn't object, Keller retrieved a sheet of paper from her handbag, and handed it to him. "This has your flight information."

Matt remained silent.

“Does your friend have a number so we can reach you?”

“I don’t know it. It’s in my phone.” The art of remembering a ten-digit number extinguished by Apple.

“Okay. Here are my numbers.” She handed him a business card.

Matt glanced at the card. SARAH KELLER, FINANCIAL CRIMES SECTION. He wondered for a moment how a financial crimes agent had gotten stuck babysitting him. He’d assumed that the FBI was involved either because of Danny and the documentary or because of the death of Americans abroad. Whatever.

He opened the back door and stepped onto the sidewalk. The clouds had returned, the sun buried behind them again.

“And, Matt,” Keller said before he shut the door, “I’m really sorry for your loss.”

Matt looked at the federal agent, and he believed her.

CHAPTER 6

Matt stabbed the buzzer on the dilapidated apartment building again. Still no answer. He looked up and down the street. It was lined with dented cars and walk-ups with window-unit air conditioners jutting over the sidewalk. He glanced inside the darkened windows of the barbershop. Just the outline of four chairs facing mirrors. Matt rang the buzzer one more time, and when it went ignored, he walked down an alley to the back of the place. A rickety fire escape clung to the structure. It was rusty and looked like an accident waiting to happen. Matt jumped up, clasped the bottom rung, and tugged. The ladder skated down with a loud clank.

Matt clambered up to the fourth floor. On the narrow metal ledge at the top he peered into the window. And there was Ganesh. Passed out, enough weed paraphernalia on the coffee table to stock a head shop. The window was open a crack, and noise from the blaring television seeped outside. Matt tapped on the glass.

When Ganesh didn't stir, Matt wedged his fingers under the

window frame and lifted. The window was warped from rot and age, and it jammed halfway up. He crawled through the hole.

“Ganesh,” Matt said, but his friend didn’t move. He was out cold, mouth wide open, still wearing his plastic-framed glasses, a bag of potato chips on his lap.

“Ganesh,” he said again, louder, over the din of Fox News blasting from the television mounted on the wall.

Ganesh shot up, startled. He looked around, then seemed to relax when he registered that it was Matt.

“Dude, you scared the shit out of me,” Ganesh said. He spoke with a slight Indian accent, barely detectable, and sounded more British than Indian.

“Sorry, you weren’t answering the door, so I—” Matt pointed his chin at the window. They’d made the same climb once before when Ganesh had forgotten his keys. Matt was sober this time, at least.

“No worries.” Ganesh’s curly hair was a mess. He dusted potato chip crumbs from his shirt, then gave Matt a long sad look. “I heard . . . Did you get my texts? I don’t know what to say.”

Matt nodded. Nothing Ganesh would say—nothing anyone *could* say—would make one bit of difference.

Ganesh leaned forward and lifted a tall cylindrical bong from the coffee table. Lighter in one hand, bong in the other, he gestured to Matt, offering the first hit.

Matt held up a hand to decline. He was never one for weed. And he always found it strange how Ganesh, a law-and-order Republican, used the drug as a crutch. But he supposed that was the enigma of his roommate from freshman year. Ganesh was finishing his four-year degree in three, and had already been accepted to med school to specialize in neuroscience. Fitting—Ganesh’s own brain could provide years of study. He was a conservative who chose to attend liberal NYU. He was an immigrant who loved to chant “Build the wall.” He was sophisticated, yet highly susceptible to cable news conspiracy theories.

He grew up in a ten-million-dollar penthouse in Mumbai, yet chose to live in a shithole apartment on the outskirts of the East Village.

Ganesh blew out a lungful of smoke and aimed the remote at the television. “That douche RA was on TV talking about you. So was your girl.”

“Ex-girl,” Matt corrected.

“I DVR’d it,” Ganesh said. He scrolled through the recordings displayed on the screen, and clicked on one for the local news. Up popped Phillip’s preppy face.

“We’re all heartbroken,” Phillip said.

“You and Matt Pine are close?” said the blond reporter holding the microphone.

“Oh yeah. I’m not just the dorm’s RA. We’re like family.”

Ganesh barked out a cough of smoke at that.

Next up was Jane, her long hair flowing like she’d just had a blow-out, her eyes wet and glistening.

“Mr. and Mrs. Pine were so wonderful. They treated me like one of the family. And Matthew’s sister, Margaret, was such a special girl—she was the family rock, and was going to MIT in the fall. And Tommy”—Jane’s voice cracked—“he was just a sweet little boy.”

The emotion was real. Just yesterday, Jane had told Matt that she loved him but he couldn’t give her what she needed. Whatever that was. Jane dumping him shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Yet for such a supposedly observant guy, he sure hadn’t seen it coming. She was from old money, raised in a breathtaking apartment on the Upper West Side, destined to marry one of those guys from Stern who wore business suits and carried briefcases to class. Matt sometimes suspected that Jane dated him—a film student and scholarship kid—just to piss off her parents.

The screen jumped to an image of Danny from the documentary. Matt reached for the remote and turned off the set.

He and Ganesh sat quietly for a long while, Matt lost in his head,

Ganesh stoned, chomping on more salt-and-vinegar potato chips, not cluttering up the conversation with platitudes. This was one of the things Matt liked most about Ganesh. He never littered conversations. When the documentary had come out during Matt's freshman year, Ganesh kept him sane during the chaos. "Don't stress, bro," he'd said. "Let's make lemonade out of it, and use the show to get some girls." It hadn't been the worst advice.

Now Ganesh said, "There's a party in Brooklyn I was gonna hit up if you wanna come?"

"I think I'll just hang out. You mind if I stay here tonight?"

"Of course, man, as long as you need. It'll be like the old days," Ganesh said, as if their freshman year had been a lifetime ago. In many ways, it was.

"I can skip the party," Ganesh said. "If you want some company, I can—"

"No, you should go. It's been a long day. I'm just gonna get some sleep."

"Cool, cool, cool," Ganesh said. He disappeared into the bedroom and came out wearing a hoodie and smelling of Axe body spray.

"Your ex keeps texting me looking for you. So is everybody else. You want me to—"

"Hold off telling them where I am. I wanna be alone for a bit. I'll reach out to everyone in the morning."

Ganesh nodded. "You sure you don't wanna come? Take your mind off things?"

Matt shook his head. This wasn't one where he could just make lemonade out of it. "You go, have fun."

Ganesh stuffed his hoodie pocket with what was left of the bag of weed on the coffee table and headed out.

Finally alone, Matt balled up on Ganesh's sofa, and he wept.

CHAPTER 7

SARAH KELLER

Agent Keller slid the key into the door of the small ranch-style house, moths circling the porch light above her. Readington, New Jersey, wasn't a fancy neighborhood, which was just as well. That would've been cost prohibitive, given her FBI salary. But it was safe, filled with working-class families and young couples in starter homes.

In the entryway, she stopped at the sound coming from the kitchen. She dropped her keys softly in the bowl on the front table and crept down the hall, walking carefully, avoiding the creaky patch of wood floor.

Outside the kitchen, the noise was louder. A shaking sound like maracas.

And giggling.

Staying quiet, Keller peeked inside.

At the stove was Bob, making one of those old-fashioned popcorns, the kind you shake on the stovetop, creating a dome of foil. Two feet away the twins watched him in action. Michael wore dinosaur pj's and Heather the cotton nightgown with Belle on it.

Bob grasped the thin metal handle, rattling the foil pan quickly, and the two wiggled their bodies at the same speed as the jostling. He stopped suddenly, and the twins froze in place—Michael’s hands in the air like a scarecrow, Heather trying to hold in her laugh. Bob then made wide figure eights with the pan as the grease sizzled, and the kids made circular movements with their hips, spinning invisible Hula-Hoops.

Keller felt warmth run through her. Bob was bald, and not in the slick stylish way of the young agents at the Bureau. He had an old-school doughnut of thick black hair. His stomach hugged his frayed concert T-shirt. But he evoked the awe of a movie star in the eyes of their children. And to Keller.

Some girls wanted to marry their fathers. It was the reason why so many couples were unhappy, Keller surmised: women seeking idealized versions of the first man in their lives. But Keller had no illusions about her dad. Whereas her father was a hard-charging lawyer who spent too much time worrying about appearances, Bob was a stay-at-home dad who—well, look at him. Whereas her father thought showing emotion was for the weak, Bob wore his heart on his sleeve, crying during movies and at the kids’ school performances. Whereas her father had engaged in an affair with his secretary in the oldest of clichés, Bob was as loyal as a Labrador. Most of all, he was kind.

“Mommy!” the twins said in unison when they finally saw her spying in the doorway.

Keller knelt down and accepted the squeeze and she felt that sensation she loved.

Bob moved the popcorn pan to an unlit burner, and came over and gave her a kiss.

“We’re going to watch *Frozen!*” Heather said.

“Again,” Keller said, eyeing her husband. “But isn’t it past bedtime?”

“Pleasssse, Mom, please,” Michael said.

“Daddy said we could,” Heather chimed in.

“Give Mommy a minute to relax,” Bob said. “She’s had a long day.” He looked at Keller. “Can I make you something to eat?”

“I picked up a sandwich,” Keller said.

“How about some wine?” he said as he cut into the tinfoil dome and poured popcorn into a plastic bowl.

“*That* I could do.”

He looked at the twins. “You two go get the movie started,” he said. “We’ll be right there.”

Michael took the bowl of popcorn and padded off to the living room, his sister on his heels.

“Small bites!” Bob yelled after them. “Popcorn’s a choking food.”

Keller sat at the small kitchen table as Bob pulled a wineglass from the cupboard and placed it in front of her. He displayed the bottle and, in a fake French accent, said, “Only the finest from the Trader Joe’s collection.” He filled the glass.

Keller swirled the wine, then put her nose in the glass before taking a taste and swishing it in her mouth. “It’s no Whole Foods 2019, but it will do.”

He sat beside her. “Long day, huh?”

Keller exhaled heavily. “I took him upstate to Fishkill prison so he could tell his brother.”

“How’s he doing?”

Keller took a drink of the wine. “He’s twenty-one. His parents and little brother and sister are dead, and his older brother’s in prison. And let’s not forget the media circus.”

Bob listened as Keller told him about her very long day.

“I just kept thinking of his family,” Keller said. “The little boy was the same age as the twins.”

Bob put his hand on his wife’s. “Speaking of, it’s a bit too quiet in there. I’ll be right back.” He left the kitchen to check on the kids. He returned carrying Heather in one arm, Michael in the other, both fast asleep.

“Ahh, I wanted to cuddle them,” Keller said.

“Look on the bright side. Were you really up for *Frozen* again?”

Bob carried the twins to their bedrooms. When he made it back to the kitchen, Keller said, “I’m sorry I’ve been working so much lately.”

“Don’t you apologize.”

Keller drained the rest of her glass.

“Do you think there’s a connection with the father’s accounting firm?” Bob asked as he poured her a refill.

Keller’s money-laundering investigation into Marconi LLP was the only reason she’d been dragged into this mess with the Pines.

“I doubt it. Evan Pine wasn’t a big player at the firm. He was only on my interview list because he’d been fired,” Keller said. Fired employees were always the most willing to dish dirt.

“It’s a big coincidence, though,” Bob said. “The firm is in bed with the cartel, and the family dies in Mexico.”

“That’s what Fisher said, but it’s a stretch. He’s just using the connection to get us involved with a high-profile case, curry favor with State and headquarters.”

“So you think it was just an accident?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Excerpt From
A Violent Nature

Season 1/Episode 3
"You Fucking Idiots"

BLACK SCREEN

The sound of a murmuring crowd is broken by THE JUDGE'S voice announcing the jury has reached a verdict. FADE IN ON:

INT. COURTROOM VIDEO FOOTAGE

The judge reads the verdict, and the spectator section is a mix of cheers and sobbing. The judge calls for order, when a man rises. He's pointing angrily at the judge, then the prosecutor, the defense lawyer, his finger landing on the jury box.

EVAN PINE

You fucking idiots! Shame on you, shame on all of you.

JUDGE

Order! I will not have outbursts in this courtroom.

EVAN

He's innocent. You fools. You fucking idiots!

TWO SECURITY OFFICERS confront Evan Pine, a struggle ensues, and he's dragged from the courtroom.

EVAN

He's innocent. My son is innocent!

CHAPTER 8

EVAN PINE

BEFORE

Evan examined the wild-eyed man with curiosity. With the wrinkled shirt and unruly hair, the man looked like one of those homeless street preachers who hold Mass outside the subway. Or an angry cable news pundit on a bender.

“With the advent of DNA,” the man ranted, “we learned something that people still just don’t seem to get: we lock up a shocking number of innocents. And you know what? About a quarter of them confessed. So when people say innocent people don’t confess to crimes they didn’t commit, well, it’s horseshit. And teenagers falsely confess at rates much higher than adults. They just tell the police what they want to hear. One study of people exonerated through DNA found that forty percent were kids who falsely confessed. . . .”

Evan clicked the mouse on his laptop and paused Netflix. *Horseshit*. It wasn’t a word he’d normally use. But there Evan was, for twenty million viewers to see. He’d once made the mistake of reading the comments section on one of the forums for the documentary.

The father has lost his shit.

He's so devastated, he can't see straight.

Free Danny Pine!

Boo fucking hoo, I hope his son rots for what he did to that poor girl.

Off-camera, the documentary filmmakers, Judy and Ira Adler, were quietly stoking Evan's flame. They meant well, the Adlers. They believed Danny was innocent. But in the aftermath, Evan couldn't help being angry with them. For exploiting their private lives for public entertainment. For getting his hopes up. He clicked the mouse, and his face was animated again.

A voice spoke from off-screen—Judy's. "But if Danny wasn't involved, how did he know that Charlotte's head had been crushed with a rock?"

"He didn't *know* anything," Evan replied, angry at the question. "Those two cops, they fed him all the details. Watch the tape, for Christ's sake."

The screen jumped to the now infamous interrogation video. It showed Danny with his head down on the table in the windowless interview room. The cops had picked him up at the house early that morning. Evan had been out of town for work. Liv had been running errands, and had missed the calls from Maggie.

The burly cop, Detective Ron Sampson, slammed his open hand on the table, making a loud smack. Danny jolted up, his face puffy and tear-soaked.

The other cop, Wendy White, with her frizzy hair and circa-1985 bangs, said, "Just tell us what you did, and we'll work this out. You can go home."

"I didn't do anything."

"*Stop lying!*" Sampson said, his voice showing the frustration of several hours of interrogation. Evan felt a sting of guilt that no one—

not Evan, not Liv, not a lawyer—had been there to help his son. Danny had turned eighteen just two weeks before. Technically an adult, so the cops didn't need to notify his parents. Still, if Evan had caught a different flight and not been in the air, or if Liv had just been home and . . . Evan stopped himself, deciding not to go down that road again.

Sampson continued playing bad cop: "We have your prints on the rock." A lie.

White: "Just tell us the truth and we can get you home. We can talk to your mom and dad and get this sorted out. I'm sure it wasn't something you planned."

Danny shook his head.

Sampson: "Let's just lock him up now. I'm sure his cellies will have a good ol' time with a firm young man like him."

White: "No, not yet," she said in a soft tone. "Just tell us the truth, Danny, and we'll get you home."

Exhausted and tearful, Danny finally said it: "Okay."

"Okay, what?" White said.

"I did it."

"Did what?" Sampson said. He put a reassuring hand on Danny's shoulder. "Tell us what you did to Charlotte."

"I hurt her with a rock."

"Good job," White said. "What'd you do with the rock?"

"I, ah, threw it at her." It came out more like a question.

"You know you couldn't throw a rock that big, Danny," Sampson said, yanking his hand from Danny's shoulder. "I'm done," the cop said, standing, the chair scraping loudly against the linoleum floor. He made a show of pulling out handcuffs.

"What'd you do with the heavy rock?" White continued, her voice urgent, like she was trying to head off her partner.

Danny shook his head, said something indiscernible.

"You already told us you did it, and we have the proof. The only thing that'll help is if you tell us what you did to her head."

Danny swallowed. "I hit her with the rock."

"Where did you hit her?" Sampson said, sitting down again.

"Her head."

"Good boy," White said. "You're doing great."

"How many times did you hit her with the rock?" Sampson continued.

"Once."

"Stop lying, Danny," Sampson said, "we have the proof."

"Just tell the truth and we'll work this out, we can get you out of here," White said. "One hit wouldn't cause her head to smash in like that."

Danny gulped down a sob.

"Just tell the truth," White said.

"Two times."

"No," Sampson said.

"Three," Danny replied.

"Okay, good job Danny, you're doing great," White said. "Now why did you do it? Was it because you'd had a fight at the party?"

He nodded, his eyes on the floor.

"Great job, Danny."

"And you then used the wheelbarrow and took her to the creek."

Danny put his head on the table. "Okay."

The two cops looked at each other, and Sampson gave White a tiny nod. They had what they needed.

Danny lifted his head and looked at both of the detectives. In a quiet voice, he said, "Can I go home now?"

Evan stabbed the laptop keyboard with his finger, shutting down Netflix. No matter how many times he watched the video, his blood always flowed hot, his fists clenched. He remembered Danny crying when Evan finally got to the station house. No sound was more heartbreaking than your child sobbing. Danny was shell-shocked, asking when

he could go home, worried because he had a school project due on Monday.

Evan clutched the bottle on the counter and poured himself a large glass of Scotch. It worked as well as—no, better than—his therapy session earlier that day.

The house was quiet. Liv and Tommy were in Nebraska, seeing to Liv's father. He'd been causing problems at the nursing home again, and Liv needed to convince them not to kick him out. Maggie was staying the night with a friend. If there was ever a good time, it was now.

At the kitchen counter, the lights dimmed and shades drawn, he clicked the mouse again and opened the banking site to the savings account. Less than two thousand dollars. The checking was no better. And the mortgage was due in a week. He'd managed to conceal his deception—the tens of thousands he'd spent on lawyers and investigators for Danny. But the reckoning was coming. He imagined Liv seeing the statement for the first time. Evan telling her he'd been fired, that he'd been pretending to go to work.

He imagined his wife's face. The anguish, which would turn to fury when she would inevitably insist on examining the rest of their accounts. She'd find Maggie's college fund down to \$12,332, not enough to cover even the cost of the dorm room at MIT.

He closed the site and set up an automatic email timed to send to Liv tomorrow morning. It told her to call the police and make sure Maggie stayed at Harper's until they removed his body. It told her where to find the files on his computer with notes to each of the kids. And it told her where to find the information on his life insurance, which he'd confirmed would pay out even after a suicide. A cool ten million.

He thought of Dr. Silverstein's warning. *The meds can trick a patient into thinking there's only one solution.*

But he wasn't being tricked. It had started as a whisper in his ear. The voice of reason, snaking into his subconscious, confirming

his every last fear: “They’ll be better off without you.” He was doing this for them. To spare them financial ruin. To spare them living with someone who was broken. That’s what the voice kept saying. But deep down he knew it wasn’t for them at all.

It was for him.

To turn off the faucet of despair.

He slammed the fistful of pills into his mouth, then chased them with the Scotch. They went down hard, and he had to suppress the gag reflex. He poured another glass and downed it quickly as he waited for the pills to take effect.

Evan wasn’t a religious man. But he liked the idea of organized religion, with an emphasis on the *organized* part. As an accountant, he found virtue in organization and order. And something about the rituals and traditions of religions—rules largely aimed at making you a better person—was appealing. Back in Nebraska, Liv had insisted that they attend church every Sunday. Faith had helped her through her mother’s death when she was ten. After Danny was convicted and they moved to Naperville, Illinois, Evan had no patience for it all. Still, while he was waiting for the pills to do their thing, he said the words nonetheless: “God, please forgive me. And take care of them.”

As if answering, his iPhone chimed. Not the usual ring.

He looked at the screen. It was a FaceTime call. He didn’t ordinarily use FaceTime, and he didn’t recognize the number. He was going to ignore it, but if this was divine intervention, he’d better answer.

He swiped the phone. The screen was dark, but he heard music and the din of a crowd, like a nightclub or a bar. His own image floated in the small box in the upper right corner. He looked much like he did in the documentary. The camera jostled about, then a woman’s face appeared. It was shadowed, but he could somehow tell she was scared. She was walking quickly, bumping into people, her heavy breathing and muffled music pounding through the phone’s tinny speakers. Finally she came under some grim lighting and stopped.

Evan's heart stopped as well. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. He moved his own face closer to the screen.

She said something into the camera, but he couldn't make it out. But it was the face—the freckles, the strawberry-blond hair, the small scar on her forehead—that caused an electrical current to shoot through every nerve in his body. Evan rubbed his eyes with his balled fists. It just couldn't be.

He fumbled for the volume, turning it up.

She said the words again, and this time they were clear.

“Help me.”

A hand grabbed the woman by the hair and the phone jerked violently and went black.

Evan blinked several times, trying to process. He ran to the sink and jammed two fingers down his throat. Vomit projected out of his mouth. Brown liquid and pill capsules. Many were still intact.

His legs felt weak and his thoughts muddled. He didn't know if it was from the shock or if some of the pills had made it to his bloodstream. He needed to stay awake. Needed to understand what he'd just witnessed.

Gripping the iPhone, he pulled up the number. The caller ID said MOLOKO BAR and gave a place of origin: Tulum, Mexico. Light-headed, he clicked on the number. His own face projected on the screen as it rang. But no one answered.

Answer, he thought.

Please answer, Charlotte.