

Praise for *Mister Tender's Girl*

"Not since *Gone Girl's* 'Amazing Amy' has a character from a make-believe children's book been so richly imagined and realized, and led to such a twisting, seductive tale. *Mister Tender's Girl* forces Alice Hill out of her lonely, isolated world to confront the inner demons that arose after she became the victim of a violent attack. As Alice delves into the events surrounding the crime, she finds that the fictional Mister Tender may have been a very different man from what the world believed. Carter Wilson's latest novel will have readers checking outside their windows for monsters—and, like Alice, also looking for those that lurk inside themselves."

—Jenny Milchman, *USA Today* bestselling author of
Cover of Snow, *Ruin Falls*, and *As Night Falls*

"Chapter by chapter, Carter Wilson's *Mister Tender's Girl* compels the reader forward: another question, another mystery, another fear to be dispelled or realized. Start reading this thriller and you won't stop until the end. That's how compelling, whether endearing or nefarious, the main characters are. And that's how talented a writer Carter Wilson is."

—Randall Silvis, author of *Two Days Gone*

"This elegantly written, masterful thriller, by turns meditative and shocking, lyrical and violent, will keep you glued to the pages from start to finish."

—A. J. Banner, *USA Today* bestselling author of
The Good Neighbor and *The Twilight Wife*

“The writing is both gorgeous and gritty, and the story so enticing, that I gobbled it up in one sitting. I can only humbly request that Carter Wilson hurry up and write some more.”

—Sandra Block, author of *The Girl without a Name*
and *The Secret Room*

“Carter Wilson hits it out of the park with *Mister Tender’s Girl*—one of the most suspenseful novels I’ve read in a long time. This book is a true page-turner, riveting on every level. Kudos, Mr. Wilson.”

—Allen Eskens, bestselling author of *The Life We Bury*
and *The Heavens May Fall*

“Dark, unsettling, and full of surprises, *Mister Tender’s Girl* takes the reader on a dangerous journey alongside a woman who must face the past she’s been hiding from. A fast-paced, spine-tingling read—and a reminder that imagined dangers are just as worthy of being feared.”

—Megan Miranda, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Perfect Stranger*

MISTER TENDER'S GIRL

A THRILLER

CARTER WILSON



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Dedication TK

Come, dip on in
Leave your bones, leave your skin
Leave your past, leave your craft
Leave your suffering heart.

— JAMES, "SOUND"

PART I

ALICE

ONE

Thursday, October 15
Manchester, New Hampshire

DEEP, DEEP IN THE morning, sirens.

I peer out the window of my coffee shop, waiting to see the flashing lights, the blur of brilliant, pulsing red, the rush of an ambulance blistering toward the horrors of others. I see nothing, and the sound fades, as all eventually do. Perhaps it was never there at all.

“Miss?”

I snap my attention back to the man at the counter. Older man, salt-and-pepper beard, deep-green eyes, the color of jade. Charcoal suit, no tie.

“I’m sorry. What would you like?”

“Cappuccino. Small. To drink here, please.”

His voice is deep. Enchanting.

“Of course.”

When he hands me the crisp five-dollar bill, I catch his stare, and

his gaze is locked on me. There's an endless longing to it, as if I'm the ghost of someone he once loved. This has happened before.

"Can I get a name?" I ask, holding eye contact for only a moment.

He thinks on this for a moment, as if I've asked a deeply personal question.

"John."

I write this on a sticker and place it on the lip of a ceramic cup.

When I give him his change, he looks only at my hands. John takes his money and leaves my space as quickly as he entered it.

Sometimes I meet a person and my paranoia insists they already know me. Know everything. Where I live. How many scars I have. My real last name. It's a game my mind likes to play when it thinks I'm getting complacent, or cured. Happy, even. I meet people every day at the Stone Rose, the coffee shop I own. Customers rarely give me this feeling.

But John does. I dismiss it, knowing my past has chiseled and shaped my mind into something that favors fear over sense. Paranoia over logic. I take a deep breath, hold it to the count of four, then release. Repeat.

Sometimes this helps.

TWO

PARANOIA IS ALSO THE reason I keep no knives in my house, which makes for practical concerns. My diet at home consists of things I can eat with a fork and spoon, and even when I want a slice of butter on my bread, I reach for an individually wrapped packet, the kind you find in restaurants. Spread it with a fork.

It sounds mad, I know. If someone wanted to hurt me, they wouldn't need to use a knife. On my dining room table alone are things that could maim or kill. Fork in the eye. Ceramic plate smashed over the skull. Wineglass, broken to a fractured stem, sliced across the carotid artery. Cloth napkin shoved down the throat, fingers used to pinch the nose shut. You might even argue that if someone wanted to stab me, why would they bother relying on *my* knife? Surely they would bring their own.

I'd tell you those are all reasonable points. But I don't have to rationalize my horrors to you.

I pour another glass of merlot. The chicken on my plate is tender, and the tines of my fork slide easily into the spongy flesh. I've

developed a friendship with the Hannaford Market butcher, and he always cuts my meat and poultry at the counter for me. His name is Jesus, and he's never asked me why I make this request. I plan on giving Jesus a nice tip at Christmastime.

I drop the fork, my appetite not reaching critical mass. The wall clock reads just past eight, and my stomach tightens at the thought of the coming night. Music from the little Bose player fills the room, but I hear the silence behind it, the vacuum that grows like a cancer as it draws closer to bedtime. In bed, the weight of the night will sit on my chest until it threatens to crush me altogether.

Sometimes I wish it would. Sometimes I fall asleep with that thought in my head, a wish for death, and there's a kind of dark peace to it all, like a shipwreck victim floating gently to the bottom of the ocean floor.

Dinner over, dishes done. My one-hundred-and-twelve-year-old compact colonial house is now as clean as it was one hour ago, things back where they should be, not a fiber or dust mote in sight. I straighten a picture on my wall that probably isn't even crooked. A photo I took of London a decade and a half ago. Street scene, at night, a couple on the sidewalk holding hands and looking into a dimly lit storefront. I was with my father that evening, just after he'd given me that camera for my birthday. It was the first photo I'd taken with it. I was thirteen.

I miss England sometimes—the smell of London, the aroma of time, moisture, and car exhaust swirled together in a blend only big cities can produce. But mostly I try not to think of the place I grew up. I almost died there when I was fourteen.

Beams from car lights sweep along my windows, temporarily

highlighting my living room wall like prison searchlights. Richard must not be working the overnight shift at the hospital tonight. He rents the room on the third floor, above my bedroom. I call it the Perch. It has its own small kitchen, bath, and separate entrance, for which Richard pays me five hundred dollars a month. I rarely see him, and I won't deny he's somewhat odd, but he causes me no trouble, and his rent pays nearly a third of my mortgage.

There's a comforting energy to Richard, one I don't feel with many people, where having him living here makes me feel safe. Well, perhaps not safe, but in some way less panicked. Knowing he's up there makes me feel less alone, I suppose.

The car door opens and closes, footsteps on the exterior stairs, upstairs door hinge squeaking, then silence. He's quiet as a cat. Never even a dribble of music, a foot stomp, or a squeaking bed. Sometimes I imagine that, as Richard passes the threshold into the Perch, he turns into vapor until sunrise.

In my room. Teeth brushed, flossed, gleaming to perfection. Pajamas of the flannel variety, which hang loosely around my thin frame. I haven't eaten enough, I know, and the hunger may wake me if I'm lucky enough to fall asleep. My hour at the gym this morning was intense, as it always is, and I haven't taken in enough calories to account for those I've burned. I'll eat more tomorrow.

I look down at my left arm, which is lean and toned, both bicep and tricep visible if I flex just right. I like what I've become on the outside. But as strong as I am and with all my training, the things with neither form nor mass scare me the most. Like silence. And memories. Nighttime.

If I had been stabbed during the day, would I dread the sunrise

every morning, like a vampire? Maybe. But I wasn't stabbed during the day. I was stabbed late on a half-moon night, a few days before Halloween. So I suppose all this wondering doesn't really matter for anything.

In bed. Grab my phone, which someone who has trouble sleeping shouldn't do. But my sleep issues go beyond my brain's reaction to a little glowing screen.

Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram.

Two-second glances at unrestrained propaganda. The triumphant struggles of supermoms. The political rants. The photos of the perfect kids, the great vacations, the most exhaustive meals. It all makes me so sad, mostly because I don't believe any of it. But I also realize a lot of this is me, my cynicism. I rarely post but often lurk.

An email from my brother, Thomas. It's good to see his name in my inbox, the last name I used to have. I changed my last name from Hill to Gray when I turned eighteen, but just seeing his last name makes me think of the best parts of my childhood. Thomas is bitching about Mom. This doesn't surprise me.

I almost put the phone down and turn off the lights, but I decide to check my BlindDate account. I signed up for the dating site a year ago on the advice of a friend who worried I would die from loneliness. She doesn't know about my past. She doesn't know the name Alice Hill, only Alice Gray. But I did sign up, checked it for about a week, then lost most of my interest. I've never been on a date through it but still stray back to check the activity every now and then. I don't know what I'm hoping for.

Now I scroll through a month's worth of matches, swiping them away like mosquitoes. But the last one freezes my fingertip in

mid-rejection. I stare at the screen name, the man some algorithm has determined me to be compatible with. This match, this man, doesn't know my real name, just the random screen name I created a year ago. Perhaps he would recognize me from my profile photo, though I don't know how. I've changed so much since I was fourteen.

Still, his screen name glows at me, seeming to pulse like a heart-beat on the screen. I whisper it aloud just to convince myself it's real.

"Mister Tender."

THREE

MISTER TENDER MADE MY father famous, at least among fans of graphic novels. My father wrote and inked them. Not comic books—never call them that. *Graphic novels*. My father created Mister Tender, and Mister Tender nearly killed me.

My father was the sole owner of Mister Tender. He wrote the stories, he drew the panels, inked the artwork, colored all the bold and beautiful violence. No one else helped bring that monster to life.

The Mister Tender series ended its run fourteen years ago, shortly after I was released from the hospital. There was no final volume, no end to the story. My father simply refused to ever draw that character again. He also refused all future royalties, assigning them to a local women's shelter, and shunned all interview requests. We never again said the name of that demonic bartender in our household, which we didn't occupy together all that much longer. Two years after the final image was drawn, my parents' marriage fractured, and my mother swooped up Thomas and me and moved us to the States. My father

was left a shell of a man, riddled with depression, his hands bloodied in his own ink.

I visited him as often as I could, which wasn't enough. If it had been up to me, I would have chosen to live with my father, but a child has no recourse when the law proclaims a parent's right to custody as "untenable."

My father was stabbed to death three years ago in London by an Islamic extremist; this is, at least, the common belief, for the single eyewitness (an elderly pedestrian over two hundred feet away) described the assailant as having worn a black, robe-like outfit, which he referred to as "Muslim garb." The murderer was never caught.

Dad had very stupidly drawn a political cartoon showing Mohammed, and despite Mohammed having been made into a rather appealing figure, the cartoon was a death warrant. The murderer's blade pierced my father four times: twice in the chest, once in the stomach, and the fatal blow to the neck. So now, because God apparently finds such things amusing, two members of the Hill family have been brutally attacked with knives, and I stand as the lone survivor.

Mister Tender was a bartender—part human, part demon—and he was excellent at lending an ear to stories of woe. Then he'd convince his customers to do very bad things. The thumbnail image of him on my dating app is not a photograph of a real man but the character himself. Just the sight of him roils my stomach, even though, in truth, he's a beautiful creature. Thick, dark hair, swept back 1920s style; preternaturally smooth, white skin; strong, high cheekbones; dark, jade-green eyes, a gaze that pierces into your deepest, most hidden places. He'd fix that gaze on you as you slid up to the bar. Then he'd slide over a new cocktail of his own devising, a mixture of some

unknown liquid, bubbling and smoking, a kaleidoscope of colors. As you considered the logic of actually drinking it, he'd lean over and, with just a touch of Cockney, say, *So, then, what's your fight against the world today, love?*

That's Mister Tender.

And Mister Tender always pours heavy.

My thumb twitches to delete the match suggestion, but I don't. I'm drawn to it, the way a person might reach out to open a closet door, checking for a hiding intruder.

I press on the link.

He has the same traits as my father ascribed to the character in his debut. Unknown age. Occupation: bartender. Likes: making wagers, watching people lose. Dislikes: teetotalers. Yet there's one bit about this Mister Tender's profile that is markedly different from his deceased namesake. The Mister Tender of my father's creation resided in the West End of London.

Here, on this little screen, Mister Tender lists his hometown as Manchester, New Hampshire.

Mister Tender has come to America to find me.

FOUR

Friday, October 16

THE MAN IN THE gym keeps staring. He's in my direct line of sight as I do my lunges, but I look straight ahead. I'm a regular at Steeplegate Fitness—hell, I should have my name on the wall—and I don't get approached often. But I won't say it's never happened.

Real gym rats keep to themselves, and you can always tell them apart from the trolls. Rats have their routine, their headphones, their focus. They'll leave you alone, because *they* want to be left alone. Trolls, meanwhile, always have bad form and are prone to spending most of their time doing bicep curls and checking themselves in the mirror, secretly hoping you're paying attention to them. They'll slowly begin encroaching into your space, eventually finding some reason to say something to you. Usually something like "Are you a fitness coach? I could use some advice." Or "I haven't seen you here before. Is this your regular gym?" Once, someone walked up and asked me about my scars, which I don't always bother to conceal at

the gym. I'm neither proud of nor ashamed of my scars; they are just a part of me.

My answer to the trolls is always the same. I remove one earbud, ask them to repeat the question just to make sure they haven't said something worth hearing, then tell them I would like to concentrate on my workout. If they press on, I tell them to fuck off.

This man sharks in a bit closer, eyeing the abductor machine next to me. He's stocky but not quite muscular, and his pajama-like sweats and T-shirt don't suggest the image of someone who frequents gyms often. Both of his ears are pierced and full of colored gems, which adds contrast to his smooth white face and gleaming, bald skull. He gives me a smile and a nod, which I ignore, and climbs into the machine. The abductor machine consists of two cushions that rest against your knees, and you can choose whether to open your legs out against resistance, or close them together against resistance. Either way, you're opening and closing your legs a lot, and I can feel him grunting next to me, knowing he set the weight too high but is unwilling to stop and lower it. Perhaps his groin will tear.

I could move to another area of the gym, but I was here first. It's not my nature to yield ground.

I thumb the volume higher on my music.

Then he says something. *Goddamn it.*

I hear his voice but not the words. I ignore him, and as I'm in mid-lunge, he gets out of the machine and stands directly in front of me. My head is level with his waist, so I straighten. Sweat trickles down my forearms toward my hands, each of which is holding a fifteen-pound weight. He gestures for me to remove my earbuds.

For a moment, I fantasize about beating him senseless. He's got

six inches and sixty pounds on me, but unless he has trained in MMA or boxing as much as I have, I could probably take him. I want him to give me a reason to sweep his legs out from under him.

I lower one weight to the floor and remove an earbud.

“What?” I say.

“You’re Alice, right?”

I stare at him, unable to answer, because it all suddenly makes sense. It’s my paranoid fantasy becoming reality: that some of the people you meet in the world already know you. Know every last detail about your life. Have been following you.

This must be Mister Tender from the dating site.

I drop the other weight and shift into a striking position. He holds up his hands.

“Hey, take it easy. We have a mutual friend, Jimmy. You remember Jimmy, right?”

I put my fists up.

Jimmy.

Yes, I remember Jimmy.

FIVE

IF THIS GUY FOUND me, that means Jimmy knows where I am. I shouldn't be surprised; I didn't take great lengths to cover my tracks from my ex-boyfriend. He was never abusive, never threatened me, and there were actually elements of a sweet man in that junkie's body. I've had a total of three romantic relationships in my twenty-eight years, and the one with Jimmy was the longest and most recent. But I had to leave him, and I did so in the middle of the night. In the middle, in fact, of a drug deal gone terribly wrong. There were no good-byes, and he's never tried to make contact with me since.

Back then, Jimmy and I were criminals. He probably still is.

"I don't keep in touch with Jimmy," I say, keeping my stance and fists in place.

"He didn't tell me you were this hot," the gym guy says.

I stay silent, eyeing his kneecap.

"No disrespect," he adds. "I'm just sayin'."

I was convinced I'd rid myself forever of Jimmy, but now it appears I was only in remission.

I put my earbud back in and turn away.

Then he lightly grabs my left arm to get my attention. Apparently, he thinks our conversation isn't done.

I spin and seize his throat with my right hand and grab his testicles with my left hand. I want to slam my heel into his kneecap, but we're not at that level. *Yet*. Instead, I squeeze with all ten fingers. He's immediately disabled, as if struck by lightning. Gasping, arms at his side. He could swing if he wanted to, and I'm prepared for that, willing to release to duck his fist. But he'll miss, and then he'll pay for that, too.

The music thumps in my ear, and I can't understand his desperate words, which suits me fine. I squeeze harder.

He collapses to one knee, and I finally release. As he looks up from the floor, his face is flushed, his eyes narrowed in pained rage. His moving lips leave little room for misinterpretation.

Fucking bitch.

Movement in my peripheral vision. I glance and see Samuel, one of the owners, rapidly closing in. I pop my earbuds out.

"Jesus, Alice, what's going on here?" He pronounces it *heyah*, more Boston than Manchester.

"This asshole grabbed me," I reply.

Sam glances at the man on the floor, comes very close to smiling, then looks back at me.

"I'd ask if you're okay, but maybe he's the one I should be asking. You want to call the cops?"

"No," I say.

He jerks a thumb at the man and says, "You, out of here, and no coming back."

“I was just trying to talk to her,” the man says. “We have a mutual friend, and I wanted to ask her a few things.”

“I don’t care what you wanted,” Samuel says. “*Out.*”

The man doesn’t protest. He rises, smooths his hair and shirt, then winks at me—not in a flirty way, but rather a shared-secret way. As if we’re coconspirators and we’re about to be taken into separate rooms for questioning, and he’s telling me to just *go with the story*.

He turns and walks away, and as he does, he says something that gets lost in the clashing of weight plates on the other side of the gym. But if I had to guess, I think he said:

See you soon.

Six

IN 2003, WE LEFT Old England for New England. We left, in fact, the day after the courts granted my mother sole custody of my twelve-year-old brother and sixteen-year-old me. I was gutted to leave my father; it seemed I was the only person who didn't blame him for what happened. *He* didn't stab me, and he had no idea the character he created was going to be able to twist the minds of two disturbed teen girls.

His face when we left that day... God, I can still see it. In my whole life, I'd never seen such despair in someone's eyes. I used to dream of running away in the middle of the night and setting myself adrift on a raft, floating back across the Atlantic toward him.

We moved to Arlington, a snarky little suburb just outside Boston, all cramped in a flat too small to escape my mother's constant bouts of self-pity.

I spent two miserable years completing my high school education in a Massachusetts public school. Friendships had already taken root years before my arrival, and there was little social room for the likes

of a pale, scared, and scarred British girl who wore long sleeves on the hottest of September days. I was teased, called a freak. The more I hated school, the more I missed my father and blamed my mother for shoehorning me into a new world. And how I hated the sympathy she craved.

I don't like to discuss this much, she would tell anyone she had met for more than five minutes, but poor li'l Alice, she's the victim of a horrible crime. Stabbed multiple times when she was only fourteen, poor, poor dear. And by two girls possessed by a cartoon character Alice's own father created. Let me tell you, it's no easy task raising a child with the issues you can only imagine she has. I never do get a break...

When I turned eighteen, I was ready to leave. I had been accepted into a university in San Diego, which seemed wonderfully distant and exotic. It was to be my chance for a new start, one that I could do on my own terms. I fantasized about making friends, true friends, ones in whom I could confide. I thought about the beach, the smell of the sea. The sun tanning my pale skin. Of not being so conscious of all the scars I carried.

A month before I was to move to California, Thomas got sick. His world changed in a day, changing the rest of ours with his. I couldn't leave. I had to stay and help my fourteen-year-old brother. Medication after medication, none of which seemed to work for very long before Thomas would descend deep within his own world, a world of suffocating darkness that he would emerge from screaming and punching. Then he'd be perfectly fine for a spell, sometimes months. And then, not.

I remained in Arlington with my mother, who seemed constantly hanging on to life by her fingertips, and my brother, who at times

frightened me. I studied general business at a community college and discovered fitness, but it wasn't long before I yearned for a more significant escape.

When I was twenty-one, I met Jimmy in a Boston bar and began my own descent into darkness.

As I walk, I scan the streets, wondering if Jimmy's 1970 charcoal Challenger will rumble and purr down the chilled asphalt, pulling alongside me. But the streets of Manchester are quiet this morning, and for a moment, I only hear the whisking of the fall breeze, which rattles crisp, fallen leaves and straightens the hairs on the back of my exposed neck. It's a three-block walk from the gym to the Stone Rose, a stroll characterized by a collection of hundred-year-old colonial homes, most of them decorated for Halloween. Shiny pumpkins and plastic bones.

I enter through the back of the Rose, the coffee and sweets shop I purchased two years ago with insurance and estate proceeds I received after my father died. I love my coffee shop. There is a good energy here, and within its walls, I have a community of employees and customers that makes me feel normal. In the end, I suppose feeling normal is the best anyone can hope for.

There are three knives in the Rose, because we sell pastries and some things that need cutting. My employees don't know my history, and I couldn't figure a logical explanation for not having knives in the shop, so I tolerate the few we have. But I never use them. I haven't picked up a knife in over a decade.

It's just after ten in the morning, and I spy a dozen or so customers, most of them regulars. I come in for about six hours most days, though I rarely open or close the shop myself. I leave that to my staff, who I try to keep as happy as possible so they stay. There's one thing

about a coffeehouse: people come for the faces as much as they come for the coffee. So I try to keep the same faces around.

The aroma of espresso calms me from my encounter at the gym, and as I walk behind the counter, I find myself steadied. Three years ago, fleeing Boston for Manchester, I never would have imagined myself trading heroin for coffee beans. If I look hard enough, I can still see track marks on my arms, like the faintest of ancient, dried riverbeds on a satellite photo of the desert. The irony is that one of the reasons I left Boston was to get away from heroin, only to find Manchester steeped in it. But I'll never use again.

"Morning," Brenda says as she steams milk. She's been with me for the two years since I opened the Rose. She's a favorite with the customers and has called in sick only once.

"Good morning. Busy today?"

She shrugs and smiles. "Manageable." Brenda is two years younger than me and could pass for a modern version of Audrey Hepburn (if Hepburn were a crunchy liberal). It took me some time to pinpoint what makes Brenda so likable. It's the eyes. When she looks at you, you feel there's no one else she could possibly be more interested in talking to. Fixed, focused, unwavering gaze.

I tie on my purple apron and walk into the seating area, clearing cups and greeting my customers. Most of them know me, and I spend a few minutes of the usual talk with them. The weather is a favorite, especially as we crawl through the last months of the year. Charlie tells me the *Farmers' Almanac* calls for a hard winter. Charlie is a thousand years old and quotes the *Farmers' Almanac* like the New Testament. I don't have the heart to tell him I haven't the faintest clue what the *Farmers' Almanac* even is.

Maggie is nose-deep in her laptop, working on her book. It's either her second or third, and she writes cozy mysteries. I read her first one. I learned a cozy mystery involves a pleasant little murder framed around a lot of cooking and eating. Sometimes the book even gives you recipes. Kyle, armed with his computer and Bluetooth headset, is busy conquering the world of Manchester residential real estate. He greedily guzzles the free Wi-Fi and uses the Rose as his office three hours a day for the price of a large Americano. Jim and Linda sit next to each other and read their books in silence, which, I would suspect, is what most of their relationship consists of. Carla cradles a mocha and tells me her twin boys are dressing up as some Star Wars characters for Halloween. Some names with an abundance of vowels.

Then there's the man, the one from yesterday. John. Cappuccino. He sits in the best chair in the house, a tall-backed, velvet-lined beauty rescued from Craigslist and lovingly restored. It stands like a throne, giving those occupying it a full view of the Rose, small as my place is. He smiles at me, and I reply with a tight-lipped nod, and after a moment, he returns to his book. I push away the nervous edge I get from him, the sense he's watching me, but my paranoia at least seems justified given the events of the past day.

As I make my rounds of the room, John is the only customer I choose not to talk to.

My thoughts snap back to Jimmy. What he wants. I wonder if Jimmy *is* Mister Tender, trying to provoke me. If so, he's smarter than I ever would have credited him. Jimmy doesn't even know the real reason I have the scars, doesn't know anything about my father and his famous creation. I haven't told a single person the truth about my past since we moved to the States.

I head into my office, which is small but has a window looking out onto the street, giving the space a cozy light on all but the most dismal of New Hampshire days. Some prior tenant lined the walls in the office with dark wood paneling, and despite its ugliness, there's a tree-fort feel in here. It makes me feel safe. Protected.

I sit at my desk among the clutter of bills paid but not filed, free samples of coffee beans, a stray case of sugar packets, and a scattering of pens, paper, and notes to myself.

An envelope atop my desk catches my attention.

This wasn't here yesterday. White, thin, with *International Air Mail* blazoned in a red font on the side. My instinct tells me it's some kind of literature from a European purveyor of coffee beans looking to expand overseas. Sometimes I get these. The small wholesalers representing boutique coffee plantations are too expensive for the big boys—Starbucks, Peet's, Dunkin'—so they target the higher-rated independents, like the Stone Rose.

But I've never received a parcel from a purveyor where my name and address are handwritten in exquisite calligraphy. I look at the return address. No company or personal name. Just the words *London, England*.

England.

I pick it up, suddenly not having a good feeling about this at all. Last night, Mister Tender came to me, and today, Jimmy resurfaced in my life via a creepy proxy. Now I have a mysterious envelope from the city I limped away from years ago. At least the name on it is my new one.

I take a pair of dulled scissors and tear along the top of it. The envelope has the weight and shape of a children's book: hard, square,

thin. As I pull out the contents, I realize my guess is right. It is a book, and I see colors emerge as I slide it out from the envelope.

There is no correspondence. There is only the book.

I drop it immediately on the top of the desk as if it bit me. In a way, I suppose it did.

The cover shows the bartender who destroyed me throwing back a shot of what looks like blood. He laughs as he tilts his head back, and some of the shot misses his mouth and streaks the side of his face. He looks like a fucking jackal.

The title is simple.

Mister Tender: Last Call

SEVEN

THIS IS A BOOK that does not exist.

After my attack, my father put away all the inks and pens that went into the bartender's journey to fame and never created another panel with Mister Tender in it. The carnivorous graphic-novel following screamed for more, wanting to know how the artist would treat the story line when life not only imitated his art, but nearly killed his daughter in the process. Reporters from around the world clamored for the exclusive interview, but my father never spoke of what happened to me. Thousands of pounds were thrown at him to create one last book where Mister Tender could be held accountable for his crimes, but my father refused. Mister Tender simply ceased to exist.

As I reach out to touch the book, I have the sense I'm being watched, as if someone wants to see my reaction to this exact moment. I look out the window of my small office. All I see is an empty street. Red and orange leaves litter the sidewalk beneath bony, barren trees.

I leave the book on my desk and go out to Brenda.

"The envelope in my office. Did you put it in there?"

She looks up at me and squints in confusion. "Envelope? The one with the nice writing?"

"Yes. That one."

"Came in yesterday's mail. About an hour after you left. Why, what's wrong?"

"Did you have to sign for it? Was there anything else with it?"

"No, it just came with the rest of the mail. Just catalogs, mostly. It's all on your desk. Was I not supposed to put it in there?"

"It's fine," I say. "I'm just trying to figure out who sent it, is all."

"Alice, you look shaken up. What was in the envelope?"

It's just a book that shouldn't exist and probably came from Hell. That's all.

"It's nothing." Then, I amend the answer. "Well, it's actually something bothersome, to be truthful. But I don't really want to discuss it."

"Okay," she says, giving me my space. Damn it. I want to tell someone about my past, about what happened when I was fourteen. About the things I did when I was with Jimmy. About my sleepless nights, or trying to cook dinner without a knife. But I shove everything down, cramming it smaller and denser, deep within my chest, and now it's all but collapsed into itself, creating a black hole so strong, the truth can never escape. I tell no one, and the worst part is I don't even understand why.

I go back to the office and eye the book from the doorway. Should I take it to the police? Have it fingerprinted? That glossy cover would be a perfect flytrap for prints. But my instinct tells me whoever did this wore gloves. Meticulous. Careful. Just like the handwriting on the envelope.

I won't deny I want to look at it, crack its spine and see what horrors wait inside. But I also know that whatever is on the pages in this book, once I look, I can never again unsee. Whatever is inside will forever be in my mind. And since I constantly struggle against triggers of panic attacks in my daily, routine life, I can only imagine what will happen when I read this book.

I should toss this thing directly in the waste, but I don't. I shouldn't look inside, but I know I will. But I won't look at it alone. I shove the book into my purse.

It's been two weeks since I've seen my mother and Thomas. They're less than an hour away, but it feels like worlds separate us. Despite all the things wrong with my family, they know my history. I will look at this book with them.

I grab my purse, tell Brenda I won't be in the rest of the day, and walk home. As I climb into my Jeep, I look up in the sky and see the gathering white-and-gray clouds to the west. The forecasters were right.

There's something coming, and it'll be here soon.

EIGHT

I SLOW MY CAR as I turn onto Webcowet Road in Arlington, the small Boston suburb just northwest of the city. There is a quiet here that seems unnatural, as if a glass cake cover has been lowered over this suburban neighborhood. Sometimes when I come here, this quiet is embracing and comforting. Other times, it's oppressive and suffocating. There is no middle ground here. This is where my mother and brother live.

Gone is the cramped flat in which I spent my high school years, replaced with an oversize, four-bedroom home purchased with my father's insurance money. Though he cursed my mother for taking his children from him, my father still carried over two million pounds in life insurance, and after Thomas got sick and couldn't be trusted to care for himself, my father included her as a beneficiary.

Thomas and I also received proceeds from my father's estate—Mister Tender money, ironically—and I used my share to purchase the Stone Rose. My mother manages all of Thomas's money, since

he has little interest in doing anything but sitting in his room, playing video games all day.

I pull into the driveway and get out of the car. The air even seems heavier here, and sometimes I think that's due to the few thousand bodies buried in my mother's backyard. From her patio, I could throw a rock over the fence and hit a grave in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, and on occasion, I have done just that. Some people think a cemetery is peaceful and a good place to go for a spell to think. I never have. I don't need my thoughts surrounded by ghosts any more than I need knives in my kitchen drawers.

I walk the steps to the porch and hear the shouting. Mostly muffled behind the old house walls, but it's definitely her. She's shouting at Thomas, which, while not unusual, tightens my skin every time I hear it. I hear snippets of her tirade, chunks of anger like *You can't do anything!* and *If it wasn't for me...*

Normally I walk right in, but I don't want to walk into this. I tend to allow her these episodes, and by *allow* I mean stand by and simmer inside as she vents all her anger on my twenty-four-year-old brother, who seems perpetually on the cusp of being able to care for himself but somehow never makes that final leap. If he were fully mentally disabled and completely dependent on her, I wouldn't stand for any of her verbal abuse. But Thomas is more like a fourteen-year-old trapped in a man's body. So when she unleashes on him, it's like she's yelling at a sullen teen, and somehow that becomes acceptable to me.

Or perhaps I'm a coward. After all, I'm the one who finally moved out so I wouldn't have to hear it all the time.

There's a cease-fire in the shouting, so I take a long, meditative breath and open the door.