

Prologue

Thirty-two hours of my life are missing.

My best friend, Lydia, tells me to imagine those hours like old clothes in the back of a dark closet. Shut my eyes. Open the door. Move things around. Search.

The things I do remember, I'd rather not. Four freckles. Eyes that aren't black but blue, wide open, two inches from mine. Insects gnawing into a smooth, soft cheek. The grit of the earth in my teeth. Those parts, I remember.

It's my seventeenth birthday, and the candles on my cake are burning.

The little flames are waving at me to hurry up. I'm thinking about the Black-Eyed Susans, lying in freezing metal drawers. How I scrub and scrub but can't wash away their smell no matter how many showers I take.

Be happy.

Make a wish.

I paste on a smile, and focus. Everyone in this room loves me and wants me home.

Hopeful for the same old Tessie.

Never let me remember.

I close my eyes and blow.

PART I

Tessa and Tessie

My mother she killed me,
My father he ate me,
My sister gathered together all my bones,
Tied them in a silken handkerchief,
Laid them beneath the juniper-tree,
Kywitt, kywitt, what a beautiful bird am I!

—Tessie, age 10, reading aloud to her grandfather
from “The Juniper Tree,” 1988

Tessa, present day

For better or worse, I am walking the crooked path to my childhood.

The house sits topsy-turvy on the crest of a hill, like a kid built it out of blocks and toilet paper rolls. The chimney tilts in a comical direction, and turrets shoot off each side like missiles about to take off. I once slept inside one of them every Saturday night in a summer and pretended I was rocketing through space.

More than my little brother liked, I had climbed out one of the windows onto the tiled roof and inched my scappy knees toward the widow's peak, grabbing sharp gargoyle ears and window ledges for balance. At the top, I leaned against the curlicued railing to survey the flat, endless Texas landscape and the stars of my kingdom. I played my piccolo to the night birds. The air rustled my thin white cotton nightgown like I was a strange dove alit on the top of a castle. It sounds like a fairy tale, and it was.

My grandfather made his home in this crazy storybook house in the country, but he built it for my brother, Bobby, and me. It wasn't a huge place, but I still have no idea how he could afford it. He presented each of us with a turret, a place where we could hide out from the world whenever we wanted to sneak away. It was his grand gesture, our personal Disney World, to make up for the fact that our mother had died.

It took forever for Granny to sell the house, years later, after Granddaddy was laid in the ground next to his daughter. Nobody wanted it. It was weird, people said. Cursed. Their ugly words made it so.

After I was found, the house had been pasted in all the papers, all over TV. The local newspapers dubbed it Grim's Castle. I never knew if that was a typo. Texans spell things different. For instance, we don't always add the *ly*.

People whispered that my grandfather must have had something to do with my disappearance, with the murder of all the Black-Eyed Susans, because of his freaky house. "*Shades of Michael Jackson and his Neverland Ranch,*" they muttered, even after the state sent a man to Death Row a little over a year later for the crimes. These were the same people who had driven up to the front door every Christmas so their kids could gawk at the lit-up gingerbread house and grab a candy cane from the basket on the front porch.

I press the bell. It no longer plays *Ride of the Valkyries*. I don't know what to expect, so I am a little surprised when the older couple that open the door look perfectly suited to living here. The plump worn-down hausfrau with the kerchief on her head, the sharp nose, and the dust rag in her hand reminds me of the old woman in the shoe.

I stutter out my request. There's an immediate glint of recognition by the woman, a slight softening of her mouth. She locates the small crescent-moon scar under my eye. The woman's eyes say *poor little girl*, even though it's been eighteen years, and I now have a girl of my own.

"I'm Bessie Wermuth," she says. "And this is my husband, Herb. Come in, dear." Herb is scowling and leaning on his cane. Suspicious, I can tell. I don't blame him. I am a stranger, even though he knows exactly who I am. Everyone in a five-hundred-mile radius does. I am the Cartwright girl, dumped once upon a time with a strangled college student and a stack of human bones out past Highway 10, in an abandoned patch of field near the Jenkins property.

I am the star of screaming tabloid headlines and campfire ghost stories.

I am one of the four Black-Eyed Susans. The *lucky* one.

It will only take a few minutes, I promise. Mr. Wermuth frowns, but Mrs. Wermuth says *Yes, of course*. It is clear that she makes the decisions about all of the important things, like the height of the grass and what to do with a redheaded, kissed-by-evil waif on their doorstep, asking to be let in.

“We won’t be able to go down there with you,” the man grumbles as he opens the door wider.

“Neither of us have been down there too much since we moved in,” Mrs. Wermuth says hurriedly. “Maybe once a year. It’s damp. And there’s a broken step. A busted hip could do either of us in. Break one little thing at this age, and you’re at the Pearly Gates in thirty days or less. If you don’t want to die, don’t step foot inside a hospital after you turn sixty-five.”

As she makes this grim pronouncement, I am frozen in the great room, flooded with memories, searching for things no longer there. The totem pole that Bobby and I sawed and carved one summer, completely unsupervised, with only one trip to the emergency room. Granddaddy’s painting of a tiny mouse riding a handkerchief sailboat in a wicked, boiling ocean.

Now a Thomas Kinkade hangs in its place. The room is home to two flowered couches and a dizzying display of knickknacks, crowded on shelves and tucked in shadowboxes. German beer steins and candlesticks, a *Little Women* doll set, crystal butterflies and frogs, at least fifty delicately etched English teacups, a porcelain clown with a single black tear rolling down. All of them, I suspect, wondering how in the hell they ended up in the same neighborhood.

The ticking is soothing. Ten antique clocks line one wall, two with twitching cat tails keeping perfect time with each other.

I can understand why Mrs. Wermuth chose our house. In her way, she is one of us.

“Here we go.” I follow her obediently, navigating a passageway

that snakes off the living room. I used to be able to take its turns in the pitch dark on my roller skates. She is flipping light switches as we go, and I suddenly feel like I am walking to the chamber of my death.

“TV says the execution is in a month or so.” I jump. This is exactly where my mind is traveling. The scratchy male voice behind me is Mr. Wermuth’s, full of cigarette smoke.

I pause, swallowing the knot in my throat as I wait for him to ask whether I plan to sit front row and watch my attacker suck in his last breath. Instead, he pats my shoulder awkwardly. “I wouldn’t go. Don’t give him another damn second.”

I am wrong about Herb. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been wrong, or the last.

My head knocks into an abrupt curve in the wall because I’m still turned toward Herb. “I’m fine,” I tell Mrs. Wermuth quickly. She lifts her hand but hesitates to touch my stinging cheek, because it is just a little too close to the scar, the permanent mark from a garnet ring dangling off a skeletal finger. A gift from a Susan who didn’t want me to forget her, ever. I push Mrs. Wermuth’s hand away gently. “I forgot that turn was coming up so soon.”

“Crazy damn house,” Herb says under his breath. “What in the hell is wrong with living in St. Pete?” He doesn’t seem to expect an answer. The spot on my cheek begins to complain and my scar echoes, a tiny *ping, ping, ping*.

The hallway has settled into a straight line. At the end, an ordinary door. Mrs. Wermuth pulls out a skeleton key from her apron pocket and twists it in the lock easily. There used to be twenty-five of those keys, all exactly the same, which could open any door in the place. An odd bit of practicality from my grandfather.

A chilly draft rushes at us. I smell things both dying and growing. I have my first moment of real doubt since I left home an hour ago. Mrs. Wermuth reaches up and yanks on a piece of kite string dancing above her head. The bare, dusty light bulb flickers on.

“Take this.” Mr. Wermuth prods me with the small Maglite from his pocket. “I carry it around for reading. You know where the main

light switch is?”

“Yes,” I say automatically. “Right at the bottom.”

“Watch the sixteenth step,” Mrs. Wermuth warns. “Some critter chewed a hole in it. I always count when I go down. You take as long as you like. I think I’ll make all of us a cup of tea and you can tell a bit of the history of the house after. We’d both find that fascinating. Right, Herb?” Herb grunts. He’s thinking of driving a little white ball two hundred yards into Florida’s deep blue sea.

I hesitate on the second step, and turn my head, unsure. If anyone shuts this door, I won’t be found for a hundred years. I’ve never had any doubt that death is still eager to catch up with a certain sixteen-year-old girl.

Mrs. Wermuth offers a tiny, silly wave. “I hope you find what you are looking for. It must be important.”

If this is an opening, I don’t take it.

I descend noisily, like a kid, jumping over step sixteen. At the bottom, I pull another dangling string, instantly washing the room with a harsh fluorescent glow.

It lights an empty tomb. This used to be a place where things were born, where easels stood with half-finished paintings, and strange, frightening tools hung on pegboards, where a curtained darkroom off to the side waited to bring photos to life, and dress mannequins held parties in the corners. Bobby and I would swear we had seen them move more than once.

A stack of old chests held ridiculous antique dress-up hats wrapped in tissue paper and my grandmother’s wedding dress with exactly 3,002 seed pearls and my grandfather’s World War II uniform with the brown spot on the sleeve that Bobby and I were sure was blood. My grandfather was a welder, a farmer, a historian, an artist, an Eagle Scout leader, a morgue photographer, a rifleman, a woodworker, a Republican, a yellow dog Democrat. A poet. He could never make up his mind, which is exactly what people say about me.

He ordered us never to come down here alone, and he never knew

we did. But the temptation was too great. We were especially fascinated with a forbidden, dusty black album that held Granddaddy's crime scene photographs from his brief career with the county morgue. A wide-eyed housewife with her brains splattered across her linoleum kitchen floor. A drowned, naked judge pulled to shore by his dog.

I stare at the mold greedily traveling up the brick walls on every side. The black lichen flourishing in a large crack zigzagging across the filthy concrete floor.

No one has loved this place since Granddaddy died. I quickly cross over to the far corner, sliding between the wall and the coal furnace that years ago had been abandoned as a bad idea. Something travels lightly across my ankle. A scorpion, a roach. I don't flinch. Worse things have crawled across my face.

Behind the furnace, it is harder to see. I sweep the light down the wall until I find the grimy brick with the red heart, painted there to fool my brother. He had spied on me one day when I was exploring my options. I run my finger lightly around the edges of the heart three times.

Then I count ten bricks up from the red heart, and five bricks over. Too high for little Bobby to reach. I jam the screwdriver from my pocket into the crumbling mortar, and begin to pry. The first brick topples out, and clatters onto the floor. I work at three other bricks, tugging them out one at a time.

I flash the light into the hole.

Stringy cobwebs, like spin art. At the back, a gray, square lump.

Waiting, for seventeen years, in the crypt I made for it.

Tessie, 1995

“Tessie. Are you listening?”

He is asking stupid questions, like the others.

I glance up from the magazine, open in my lap, that I had conveniently found beside me on the couch. “I don’t see the point.”

I flip a page, just to irritate him. Of course he knows I’m not reading.

“Then why are you here?”

I let the air hang with thick silence. Silence is my only instrument of control in this parade of therapy sessions. Then I say, “You know why. I am here because my father wants me to be here.” *Because I hated all the others. Because Daddy is so sad, and I can’t stand it. “My brother says I’ve changed.” Too much information. You’d think I’d learn.*

His chair legs squeak on the hardwood floor, as he shifts positions. Ready to pounce. “Do *you* think you’ve changed?”

So *obvious*. Disgusted, I flip back to the magazine. The pages are cold and slick and stiff. They smell of cloying perfume. It’s the kind of magazine that I suspect is filled with bony, angry girls. I wonder: *Is that what this man sees when he stares at me?* I’d lost twenty pounds in the last year. Most of my track star muscle tone, gone. My right foot is wrapped in a new leaden cast, from the third surgery.

Bitterness rises in my lungs like hot steam. I suck in a deep breath. My goal is to feel nothing.

“OK,” he says. “Dumb question.” I know that he’s watching me intently. “How about this one: Why did you pick me this time?”

I toss the magazine down. I try to remember that he is making an exception, probably doing the district attorney a favor. He rarely treats teen-age girls.

“You signed a legal document that said you will not prescribe drugs, that you will not ever, ever publish anything about our sessions or use me for research without my knowledge, that you will not tell a living soul you are treating the surviving Black-Eyed Susan. You told me you won’t use hypnosis.”

“Do you trust that I will not do any of those things?”

“No,” I snap back. “But at least I’ll be a millionaire if you do.”

“We have fifteen minutes left,” he says. “We can use the time however you like.”

“Great.” I pick up the magazine full of bony, angry girls.

Tessa, present day

Two hours after I leave Granddaddy's, William James Hastings III arrives at my house, a 1920s bungalow in Fort Worth with somber black shutters and not a single curve or frill. A jungle of color and life thrives behind my front door, but outside, I choose anonymity.

I've never met the man with the baronial name settling in on my couch. He can't be older than twenty-eight, and he is at least 6'3", with long, loose arms and big hands. His knees bang up against the coffee table. William James Hastings III reminds me more of a professional pitcher in his prime than a lawyer, like his body's awkwardness would disappear the second he picked up a ball. Boyish. Cute. Big nose that makes him just short of handsome. He has brought along a woman in a tailored white jacket, white-collared shirt, and black pants. The type who cares only vaguely about fashion, as professional utility. Short, natural blond hair. Ring-free fingers. Flat, clipped, unpolished nails. Her only adornment is a glittering gold chain with an expensive-looking charm, a familiar squiggly doodle, but I don't have time to think about what it means. She's a cop, maybe, although that doesn't make sense.

The gray lump, still covered in dust and ancient spider threads, sits between us on the coffee table.

"I'm Bill," he says. "Not William. And definitely not Willie." He

smiles. I wonder if he's used this line on a jury. I think he needs a better one. "Tessa, as I said on the phone, we're thrilled that you called. Surprised, but thrilled. I hope you don't mind that Dr. Seger—Joanna—tagged along. We don't have any time to waste. Joanna is the forensic scientist excavating the bones of the . . . Susans tomorrow. She'd like to take a quick sample of your saliva. For DNA. Because of the issues we face with lost evidence and junk science, she wants to do the swab herself. That is, if you're really serious. Angie never thought—"

I clear my throat. "I'm serious." I feel a sudden pang for Angela Rothschild. The tidy silver-haired woman hounded me for the past six years, insisting that Terrell Darcy Goodwin was an innocent man. Picking at each doubt until I was no longer sure.

Angie was a saint, a bulldog, a little bit of a martyr. She'd spent the last half of her life and most of her parents' inheritance freeing prisoners who'd been bullied by the state of Texas into wrongful convictions. More than 1,500 convicted rapists and murderers begged for her services every year, so Angie had to be choosy. She told me that playing God with those calls and letters was the only thing that ever made her consider quitting. I'd been to her office once, the first time she contacted me. It was housed in an old church basement located on an unpleasant side of Dallas known best for its high fatality rate for cops. If her clients couldn't see the light of day or catch a quick Starbucks, she said, then neither could she. Her company in that basement was a coffeepot, three more attorneys who also worked other paying jobs, and as many law students as would sign on.

Angie sat in the same spot on my couch nine months ago, in jeans and scuffed black cowboy boots, with one of Terrell's letters in her hand. She begged me to read it. She had begged me to do a lot of things, like give one of her expert gurus a shot at retrieving my memory. Now she was dead of a heart attack, found facedown in a pile of documents about Goodwin's case. The reporter who wrote her obituary found that poetic. My guilt in the week since she died has been

almost unbearable. Angie, I realized too late, was one of my tethers. One of the few who never gave up on me.

“Is this . . . what you have for us?” Bill stares at the filthy plastic grocery bag from Granddaddy’s basement like it is stuffed with gold. It has left a trail of pebbly mortar across the glass, right beside a pink hair band twisted with a strand of my daughter Charlie’s auburn hair.

“You said on the phone that you had to go . . . find it,” he says. “That you’d told Angie about this . . . project . . . but you weren’t sure where it was.”

It isn’t really a question, and I don’t answer.

His eyes wander the living room, strewn with the detritus of an artist and a teen-ager. “I’d like to set up a meeting at the office in a few days. After I’ve . . . examined it. You and I will have to go over all of the old ground for the appeal.” For such a large guy, there is a gentleness about him. I wonder about his courtroom style, if gentleness is his weapon.

“Ready for the swab?” Dr. Seger interrupts abruptly, all business, already stretching on latex gloves. Maybe worried that I’ll change my mind.

“Sure.” We both stand up. She tickles the inside of my cheek and seals microscopic bits of me in a tube. I know she plans to add my DNA to the collection provided by three other Susans, two of whom still go by the more formal name of Jane Doe. I feel heat emanating from her. Anticipation.

I return my attention to the bag on the table, and Bill. “This was kind of an experiment suggested by one of my psychologists. It might be more valuable for what isn’t there than what is.” In other words, I didn’t draw a black man who looked like Terrell Darcy Goodwin.

My voice is calm, but my heart is lurching. I am giving Tessie to this man. I hope it is not a mistake.

“Angie . . . she would be so grateful. Is grateful.” Bill crooks a finger up, the Michelangelo kind of gesture that travels up to the sky.

I find this comforting: a man who is bombarded by people blocking his path every day—half-decent people clinging stubbornly to their lies and deadly mistakes—and yet he still believes in God. Or, at least, still believes in something.

Dr. Seger's phone buzzes in her pocket. She glances at the screen. "I've got to take this. One of my Ph.D. students. I'll meet you in the car, Bill. Good job, girl. You're doing the right thing." *Gurrl*. A slight twang. Oklahoma, maybe. I smile automatically.

"Right behind you, Jo." Bill is moving deliberately, shutting his briefcase, gingerly picking up the bag, in no apparent hurry. His hands grow still when she shuts the door. "You've just met greatness. Joanna is a mitochondrial DNA genius. She can work goddamn miracles with degraded bones. She rushed to 9/11 and didn't leave for four years. Made history, helping identify thousands of victims out of charred bits. Lived at the YMCA at first. Took communal showers with the homeless. Worked fourteen-hour days. She didn't have to, it wasn't her job, but whenever she could, she sat down and explained the science to grieving families so they could be as sure as she was. She learned a smattering of Spanish so she could try to talk to the families of the Mexican dishwashers and waiters who worked in restaurants in the North Tower. She is one of the best forensic scientists on the planet, who happens to be one of the kindest human beings I've ever met, and she is giving Terrell a chance. I want you to understand the kind of people on our side. Tell me, Tessa, why are you? Why are you suddenly on our side?"

A slight edge has crept into his voice. He is gently telling me not to screw them.

"There are several reasons," I say unsteadily. "I can show you one of them."

"Tessa, I want to know everything."

"It's better if you see it."

I lead him down our narrow hall without speaking, past Charlie's messy purple womb, usually pulsing with music, and throw open the door at the end. This wasn't in my plan, not today anyway.

Bill looms like a giant in my bedroom, his head knocking into the antique chandelier dangling with sea glass that Charlie and I scavenged last summer on the gray beaches of Galveston. He ducks away and brushes against the curve of my breast by accident. Apologizes. Embarrassed. For a second, I see this stranger's legs tangled in my sheets. I can't remember a time that I let a man in here.

I watch painfully as Bill absorbs intimate details about me: the cartoonish portrait of Granddaddy's house, gold and silver jewelry littered across my dresser, the close-up of Charlie staring out of lavender eyes, a neat pile of freshly laundered white lace panties on the chair, which I wish to God were tucked in a drawer.

He is already edging himself backward, toward the door, clearly wondering what the hell he has gotten himself into. Whether he has pinned his hopes for poor Terrell Darcy Goodwin on a crazy woman who has led him straight to her bedroom. Bill's expression makes me want to laugh out loud, even though I am not above entertaining a fantasy about an all-American guy with two degrees, when my type runs the opposite direction.

Even though what I'm about to show him keeps me up at night, reading the same paragraph of *Anna Karenina* over and over, listening to every creak of the house and finger of wind, every barefoot midnight step of my daughter, every sweet sleep sound that floats out of her mouth and down the hall.

"Don't worry." I force lightness into my voice. "I like my men rich and less altruistic. And you know . . . old enough to grow facial hair. Come over here. Please."

"Cute." But I can hear relief. He makes it in two strides. His eyes follow my finger, out the window.

I am not pointing to the sky, but to the dirt, where a nest of black-eyed Susans is still half-alive under the windowsill, teasing me with beady black eyes.

"It is February," I say quietly. "Black-eyed Susans only bloom like this in summer." I pause for this to sink in. "They were planted three days ago, on my birthday. Someone grew them especially for me, and

put them under the window where I sleep.”

The abandoned field on the Jenkins property was licked to death by fire about two years before the Black-Eyed Susans were dumped there. A reckless match tossed by a lost car on a lonely dirt road cost a destitute old farmer his entire wheat crop and set the stage for the thousands and thousands of yellow flowers that covered the field like a giant, rumpled quilt.

The fire also carved out our grave, an uneven, loping ditch. Black-eyed Susans sprung up and decorated it brazenly long before we arrived. The Susans are a greedy plant, often the first to thrive in scorched, devastated earth. Pretty, but competitive, like cheerleaders. They live to crowd out the others.

One lit match, one careless toss, and our nicknames were embedded in serial killer lore forever.

Bill, still in my bedroom, has shot Joanna a lengthy text, maybe because he doesn't want to answer her questions on the phone in front of me. We meet her outside my window in time to watch her dip a vial into the black speckled dirt. The squiggly charm on her necklace, glinting in the sun, brushes a petal as she bends over. I still can't recall the symbol's meaning. Religious, maybe. Ancient.

“He or she used something besides the dirt in the ground,” Joanna said. “Probably a common brand of potting soil, and seeds that can be picked up at Lowe's. But you never know. You should call the cops.”

“And tell them someone is planting pretty flowers?” I don't want to sound sarcastic, but there it is.

“It's trespassing,” Bill says. “Harassment. You know, this doesn't have to be the work of the killer. It could be any crazy who reads the papers.” It is unspoken, but I know. He is uncertain of my mental state. He hopes I have more than this patch of flowers under my window to bolster a judge's belief in Terrell. A little part of him wonders whether I planted the flowers myself.

How much do I tell him?

I suck in a breath. “Every time I call the cops, it ends up on the Internet. We get calls and letters and Facebook crazies. Presents on the doorstep. Cookies. Bags of dog poop. Cookies *made* of dog poop. At least I hope it’s just dog poop. Any attention makes my daughter’s life at school a living hell. After a few years of beautiful peace, the execution is stirring everything up again.” Exactly why, for years, I told Angie no and no and *no*. Whatever doubts crept in, I had to push away. In the end, I understood Angie, and Angie understood me. *I will find another way*, she had assured me.

But things were different now. Angie was dead.

He’d stood under my window.

I brush away something whispery threading its way through my hair. I vaguely wonder whether it is a traveler from Granddaddy’s basement. I remember sticking my hand blindly into that musty hole a few hours ago, and turn my anger up a notch. “The look on your faces right now? That mixture of pity and uneasiness and misplaced understanding that I still need to be treated like the traumatized sixteen-year-old girl I used to be? I’ve been getting that look since I can remember. That’s how long I’ve been protecting myself, and so far, so good. I’m *happy* now. I am not that girl anymore.” I wrap my long brown sweater around me a little more tightly even though the late winter sun is a warm stroke across my face. “My daughter will be home any minute, and I’d rather she doesn’t meet the two of you until I’ve explained a few things. She doesn’t know yet that I called you. I want to keep her life as normal as possible.”

“Tessa.” Joanna ventures a step toward me and stops. “I get it.”

There is such a terrible weight in her voice. *I get it*. Bombs dropping *one two three* to the bottom of the ocean.

I scan her face. Tiny lines etched by other people’s sorrow. Blue-green eyes that have flashed on more horror that I could ever fathom. Smelled it. Touched it, *breathed* it, as it rained down in ashes from the sky.

“Do you?” My voice is soft. “I hope so. Because I am going to be

there when you excavate those two graves.”

My daddy paid for their coffins.

Joanna is rubbing the charm between her fingers, like it is a holy cross.

I suddenly realize that, in her world, it is.

She is wearing a double helix made of gold.

The twisted ladder of life.

A strand of DNA.

Tessie, 1995

One week later. Tuesday, 10 A.M. sharp. I am back on the doctor's plump couch, with company. Oscar rubs his wet nose against my hand reassuringly, then settles in on the floor beside me, alert. He's been mine since last week, and I will go nowhere without him. Not that anyone argues. Oscar, sweet and protective, makes them hopeful.

"Tessie, the trial is in three months. Ninety days away. My most important job right now is to prepare you emotionally. I know the defense attorney, and he's excellent. He's even better when he truly believes he holds the life of an innocent man in his hands, which he does. Do you understand what that means? He will not take it easy on you."

This time, right down to business.

My hands are folded primly in my lap. I'm wearing a short, blue-plaid pleated skirt, white lacy stockings, and black patent-leather boots. I've never been a prim girl, despite the reddish-gold hair and freckles my wonderfully corny grandfather claimed were fairy dust. Not then, not now. My best friend, Lydia, dressed me today. She burrowed into my messy drawers and closet, because she couldn't stand the fact that I no longer make any effort to match. Lydia is one of the few friends who isn't giving up on me. She is currently taking her

fashion cues from the movie *Clueless*, but I haven't seen it.

"OK," I say. This is, after all, one of two reasons I am sitting here. I am afraid. Ever since they snatched Terrell Darcy Goodwin away from his Denny's Grand Slam breakfast in Ohio eleven months ago and told me I would need to testify, I have counted the days like terrible pills. Today, we are eighty-seven days away, not ninety, but I do not bother to correct him.

"I remember nothing." I am sticking with this.

"I'm sure the prosecutor has told you that doesn't matter. You're living, breathing evidence. Innocent girl vs. unspeakable monster. So let's just begin with what you do remember. Tessie? *Tessie*? What are you thinking right now, this second? Spit it out . . . don't look away, OK?"

I crane my neck around slowly, gazing at him out of two mossy gray pools of nothingness.

"I remember a crow trying to peck out my eyes," I say flatly. "Tell me. What exactly is the point of looking, when you know I can't see you?"

Tessa, present day

Technically, this is their third grave. The two Susans being exhumed tonight in St. Mary's Cemetery in Fort Worth were his older kills. Dug up from their first hiding place and tossed in that field with me like chicken bones. Four of us in all, dumped in the same trip. I was thrown on top with a girl named Merry Sullivan, who the coroner determined had been dead for more than a day. I overheard Granddaddy mutter to my father, "The devil was cleaning out his closets."

It is midnight, and I am at least three hundred feet away, under a tree. I have darted under the police tape that marks off the site. I wonder who the hell they think is walking a cemetery at this time of night but ghosts. Well, I guess I am.

They've erected a white tent over the two graves, and it glows with pale light, like a paper lantern. There are far more people here than I expected. Bill, of course. I recognize the district attorney from his picture in the paper. There's a balding man beside him in an ill-fitting suit. At least five policemen, and another five human beings dressed like aliens in Tyvek suits, wandering in and out of the tent. I know that the medical examiner is among them. Careers ride on this one.

Did the reporter who wrote Angie's obituary know that his words would pry loose the rusty lever of justice? Create a small public out-

cry in a state that executes men monthly? Change a judge's mind about exhuming the bones and considering a new trial? Convince me once and for all to dial the phone?

The man in the suit suddenly pivots. I catch the flash of a priest's collar before I duck behind the tree. My eyes sting for a second, struck by this furtive operation and the supreme effort to treat these girls with dignity and respect when no one has a clue who they are, when there is not a reporter in sight.

The girls rising out of the earth tonight were nothing *but* bones when they were transported to that old wheat field eighteen years ago. I was barely alive. They say that Merry had been dead at least thirty hours. By the time the cops got to us, Merry was pretty well scavenged. I tried to protect her, but at some point in the night I passed out. Sometimes, I can still hear the animated conversation of the field rats. I can't tell anybody who loves me these things. It's better if they think I don't remember.

The doctors say my heart saved me. I was born with a heart genetically on the slow side to begin with. Add the fact that I was in peak running condition as one of the nation's top high-school hurdlers. On a normal day, doing homework, eating a hamburger, or painting my nails, my pulse clicked along at a steady thirty-seven beats a minute and crawled as low as twenty-nine at night when I slept. The average heart rate for a teen-ager is about 70. Daddy had a habit of waking up at 2 every morning and checking to see if I was breathing, even though a famous Houston cardiologist had told him to relax. For sure, my heart was a bit of a phenomenon, as was my speed. People whispered about the Olympics. Called me the Little Fireball because of my hair and my temper when I ran a bad time or a girl nudged me off a hurdle.

While I fought for life in that grave, the doctors say my heart wound down to around eighteen. An EMT at the scene even mistook me for dead.

The district attorney told the jury that I surprised the Black-Eyed Susan killer, not the other way around. Set off a panic in him,

prompted him to get rid of the evidence. That the large bruise on Terrell Darcy Goodwin's gut in the blown-up exhibit photograph, blue and green and yellow tie-dye, was my artwork. People appreciate pretty fantasies like this, where there is a feisty hero, even when there is no factual basis for it.

A dark van is slowly backing up to the tent. O. J. Simpson got off the same year I testified, and he massacred his wife and left his blood behind on her gate. There was no solid DNA evidence against Terrell Darcy Goodwin, except a tattered jacket mired in the mud a mile away with his blood type on the right cuff. The spot of blood was so tiny and degraded they couldn't tackle DNA, in its infancy in criminal court. It was enough for me to hold on to back then, but not anymore. I pray that Joanna will work her high priestess magic, and we will finally know who these two girls are. I'm counting on them to lead all of us to peace.

I turn to go, and my toe catches the edge of something. I pitch forward, instantly breathless, palms out, onto an old broken gravestone. The roots have bullied the marker until it toppled over and broke in half.

Did anyone hear? I glance around quickly. The tent is half-down. Someone is laughing. Shadows moving, none of them my way. I push myself up, hands stinging, brushing off the death and grit clinging to my jeans. I tug my cellphone out of my back pocket, and it casts its friendly light when I press the button. I shine it over the gravestone. A red smear from my hands marks the sleeping lamb guarding over Christina Driskill.

Christina entered the world, and escaped it, on the same day. March 3, 1872.

My mind burrows into the rocky dirt, fighting its way to the small wooden box that rests under my feet, tilted, cracked open, strangled by roots.

I'm thinking of Lydia.

Tessie, 1995

“Do you cry often?” First question. Gentle.

“No,” I say. So much for Lydia’s beauty fix of sticking two frozen spoons under my eyes after my little jags.

“Tessie, I want you to tell me the very last thing you saw, before you went blind.” No lingering on my puffy face. Taking up right where we left off last time. *Smart tactic*, I think grudgingly. He actually used the word *blind*, which no one else would dare say to my face except Lydia, who also told me three days ago to get up and wash my hair because it looked like stale cotton candy.

This doctor has already figured out that a warm-up act with me was a complete waste of time.

I saw my mother’s face. Beautiful, kind, loving. That’s the last perfectly clear image that hung before me, except that my mother has been dead since I was eight, and my eyes were wide open. My mother’s face, and then nothing but a shimmering gray ocean. I often think it was kind of God to introduce me to blindness that way.

I clear my throat, determined to say something in today’s session, to appear more cooperative, so he will tell Daddy that I am making progress. Daddy, who takes off from his job every Tuesday morning to bring me here. For whatever reason, I don’t think this doctor will lie to him, like most of the others. The way this doctor asks his ques-

tions is not the same. Neither are my answers, and I'm not sure why.

"There were a bunch of cards on the windowsill in my hospital room," I say casually. "One of them had a picture of a pig on the front. Wearing a bowtie and a top hat. It said, 'I hope you squeal better soon.' The pig—that's the last thing I saw."

"An unfortunate choice of wording on the card."

"Ya think?"

"Did anything else bother you about that greeting card?"

"No one could read the signature." An illegible squiggle, like a wire spring.

"So you didn't know who it was from."

"A lot of strangers sent cards from all over. And flowers and stuffed animals. There were so many, my father asked them to be sent on to the children's cancer floor." Eventually, the FBI got a clue and swept everything to a lab. I later worried about what they might have ripped out of a dying kid's hands in return for not a scrap of useful evidence.

The pig held a daisy in his pink hoof. I had left that part out. At sixteen, drugged up in a hospital bed and scared out of my mind, I didn't know the difference between a yellow daisy and a black-eyed Susan.

My cast is itching like crazy, and I reach into the slim gap between my calf and the cast with two fingers. Can't get to the spot on my ankle. Oscar licks my leg with a sandpaper tongue, trying to help.

"OK, maybe that card was the trigger," the doctor says. "Maybe not. It's a start. Here's my thinking. We're going to talk about your conversion disorder before we move on to preparing you for court. In the interest of time, there was hope by . . . others . . . that I could work around it. But it is in the way."

Ya think?

"As far as I'm concerned, time stands still in this room." He's telling me *no pressure*. That we're sailing together in my gray ocean, and I control the wind. This is the first lie I know he's told me.

Conversion disorder. The nice, fancy name for it.

Freud called it hysterical blindness.

All those expensive tests and nothing physically wrong.

All in her head.

Poor thing doesn't want to see the world.

She will never be the same.

Why do people think I can't hear them?

I tune back in to his voice. I've decided he sounds like Tommy Lee Jones in *The Fugitive*. Rough Texas drawl. Smart as hell, and knows it.

“. . . it's not that uncommon in young females who have endured a trauma like this. What is uncommon is that it's lasted this long. Eleven months.”

Three hundred and twenty-six days, *doctor*. But I don't correct him.

A slight squeak as he shifts in his chair, and Oscar rises up protectively. “There are exceptions,” he says. “I once treated a boy, a virtuoso pianist, who had practiced eight hours a day since he was five. He woke up one morning and his hands were frozen. Paralyzed. He couldn't hold a glass of milk. Doctors couldn't find a cause. He began to wiggle his fingers exactly two years later, to the day.”

The doctor's voice is closer. At my side. Oscar bangs my arm with his nose, to let me know. The doctor is sliding something thin and cool and smooth into my hand. “Try this,” he says.

A pencil. I grasp it. Dig it deep into the side of my cast. Feel intense, gratifying relief. A slight breeze as the doctor moves away, maybe the flap of his jacket. I'm certain he looks nothing like Tommy Lee Jones. But I can picture Oscar. White as fresh snow. Blue eyes that see everything. Red collar. Sharp little teeth if you bother me.

“Does this piano player know that you talk about him to other patients?” I ask. I can't help myself. The sarcasm is a horsewhip I can't put away. But on our third Tuesday morning together, I have to admit this doctor is starting to get to me. I'm feeling the first pinch of guilt. Like I need to try harder.

“As a matter of fact, yes. I was interviewed for a Cliburn docu-

mentary about him. The point is: I believe you will see again.”

“I’m not worried.” I blurt it out.

“That is often a symptom of conversion disorder. A lack of caring about whether you’ll ever go back to normal. But, in your case, I don’t think that’s true.”

His first direct confrontation. He waits silently. I feel my temper flare.

“I know the real reason why you made an exception to see me.” My voice cracks a little when I want it to sound defiant. “What you have in common with my father. I know you had a daughter who disappeared.”