

Prologue

Today something interesting happened. I died. *How awful*, they'll say. *How tragic*. *And she was so young, with everything ahead of her*. There will be an article in the paper about how I burned too bright and died too young. My funeral will be small . . . a few weeping friends, some sniffing neighbors and acquaintances. How they'll clamor to comfort my poor husband, Gray. They'll promise to be there for our daughter as she grows up without me. *So sad*, they'll say to each other. *What was she thinking?*

But after a time this sadness will fade, their lives will resume a normal rhythm, and I'll become a memory, a memory that makes them just a little sad, that reminds them how quickly it can all come to an end, but one at which they can also smile. Because there were good times. So many good times where we drank too much, where we shared belly laughs and big steaks off the grill.

I'll miss them, too, and remember them well. But not the same way. Because my life with them was a smoke screen, a carefully constructed lie. And although I got to know some of them and to love them, not one of them ever knew me, not really. They knew only the parts of myself I chose to share, and even some of those things were invention. I'll remember them as one remembers a favorite film; beautiful moments and phrases will come back to me, move me again. But ultimately I'll know that my time with them was fiction, as fragile and insubstantial as pages in a book.

Now I'm standing at the bow of a cargo ship. It cuts through the

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night with surprising speed for its size, throwing up great whispering plumes of foam as it eats the high waves. The water around me is black. My face is wet with sea spray and so windburned it's starting to go numb. A week ago I was so terrified of the water that I wouldn't have dreamed of sitting close enough to feel it on my skin. Because there is such a myriad of things to fear now, I have been forced to conquer this one.

The man at the helm has already gestured at me twice, made a large gathering motion with his arm to indicate that I should come inside. I lift a hand to show I'm all right. It hurts out here; it's painful, and that's what I want. But more than that, the bow of this boat represents the farthest point away from the life I've left behind. I'll need more distance before I can climb back inside, maybe get some sleep.

I can feel the heat of my predator's breath on my neck. For him I will never be just a memory. I'll always be a goal, always the thing that lies ahead just out of reach. If I have anything to do with it, that's where I'll remain. But I know his hunger, his patience, his relentlessness. His heart beats once for every ten times mine does. And I'm so tired now. I wonder here in the frigid cold if the chase will end tonight and which of us will be dead, really dead, when it's done.

I stand in the bow and support myself on the rail. I remind myself that death is my easy escape; I can go there anytime. All I have to do is to bend, drop my weight over the railing, and I will fall into black. But I won't do that, not tonight. We cling to life, don't we? Even the most pathetic among us, those of us with the fewest reasons to keep drawing breath, we hold on. Still, it gives me some small comfort to know that death is an option, handy and at the ready.

Finally the cold and the wind are too much for me. I turn to make my way back to my tiny cabin, and that's when I see it: the round, white eye of a spotlight coming up behind us, the small red and green navigation lights beneath it. The craft is still too far for me to hear its

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engine. I can just see the white point bouncing in the black. I turn to signal to the captain, but he's no longer at the helm. I think about climbing up to warn him, but I'm not sure it will do any good. I hesitate a moment and then decide I'd be better off finding a place to hide myself. If he's found me, there's nothing anyone will be able to do. I realize I am not surprised; I am not at all surprised that he has found me. I have been waiting.

There is a familiar thud-thud in my chest as I look over into the big waters and think again about that dark temptation. It would be the ultimate defiance, to rob him of the only thing he's ever wanted, the ultimate way to show him that my life belonged to me and no one else. But a small round face, with deep brown eyes framed by a chaos of golden curls, a tiny valentine of a mouth, keeps me on deck. She doesn't know that her mommy died today. I hope she won't have to grieve me, to grow up broken and damaged by my early demise. That's why I have to stay alive. So that someday, hopefully sooner rather than later, I can go back to her and tell her why I named her what I did, so that I can take her in my arms and be the mother to her that I always wanted to be.

But first I have to fight and win. I'm not sure how much fight I have left in me, but I *will* fight. Not so much for the shattered, cored-out woman I have become but for my daughter, Victory.

PART ONE
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*The fair Ophelia!—Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.*

HAMLET, III.I

1

When my mother named me Ophelia, she thought she was being literary. She didn't realize she was being tragic. But then, I'm not sure she understood the concept of tragedy, the same way that people who are born into money don't realize they're rich, don't even know there's another way to live. She thought the name was beautiful, thought it sounded like a flower, knew it was from a famous story (play or novel, she wouldn't have been able to tell you). I guess I should consider myself lucky, since her other choices were Lolita and Gypsy Rose. At least Ophelia had some dignity.

I'm thinking this as I push a cart through the produce aisle of my local supermarket, past rows of gleaming green apples and crisp blooms of lettuce, of fat, shiny oranges and taut, waxy red peppers. The overly familiar man in meats waves at me and gives me what I'm sure he thinks is a winning smile but which only serves to make my skin crawl. "Hi, honey," he'll say. Or "Hi, sweetie." And I'll wonder what it is about me that invites him to be so solicitous. I am certainly not an open or welcoming person; I can't afford to be too friendly. Of course, I can't afford to be too *unfriendly*, either. I look at my reflection in the metal siding of the meat case to confirm that I am aloof and unapproachable, but not strangely so. My reflection is warped and distorted by the various dings and scars in the metal.

"Hi there, darlin'," he says with an elaborate sweep of his hand and a slight bow.

I give him a cool smile, more just an upturning of the corner of my mouth. He steps aside with a flourish to let me pass.

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I have become the type of woman who would have intimidated my mother. Most days I pull my freshly washed, still-wet blond hair back severely into a ponytail at the base of my neck. The simplicity of this appeals to me. I wear plain, easy clothes—a pair of cropped chinos and an oversize white cotton blouse beneath a navy barn jacket. Nothing special, except that my bag and my shoes cost more than my mother might have made in two months. She would have noticed something like that. It would have made her act badly, turned her catty and mean. I don't feel anything about this. It's a fact, plain and simple, as facts tend to be. Well, some of them, anyway. But I still see her in my reflection, her peaches-and-cream skin, her high cheekbones, her deep brown eyes. I see her in my daughter, too.

“Annie? *Hel-lo-oh?*”

I'm back in produce, though, honestly, I don't remember what caused me to drift back here. I am holding a shiny, ripe nectarine in my hand. I must have been gazing at it as if it were a crystal ball, trying to divine the future. I look up to see my neighbor Ella Singer watching me with equal parts amusement and concern. I'm not sure how long she has been trying to get my attention or how long I've been staring at the nectarine. We're more than neighbors; we're friends, too. Everyone here calls me Annie, even Gray, who knows better.

“Where were *you?*” she asks.

“Sorry,” I say, with a smile and a quick shake of my head. “Just out of it.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Good. Great.”

She nods, grabs a few nectarines of her own. “Where's Vicky?”

All the women in our neighborhood, her teachers, her friends' mothers, call my daughter Vicky. I don't correct them, but it always

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makes me cringe internally. It's not her name. I named her Victory because it meant something to me, and I hope in time it will mean something to her. True, I named her in a fit of overconfidence. But Gray understood my choice and agreed. We were both feeling overconfident that day. I'm still clinging to that feeling. Though recently, for reasons I can't explain, it has begun to fade.

"She's with Gray's stepmom. Swimming lessons with Grandma," I say, dropping the fruit into a clear plastic bag. The nectarines give off a fresh, sweet aroma. They are almost to the point of being over-ripe, fairly bursting with themselves. An old woman inches past, leaning heavily on an aluminum walker. Some mangled, Muzak version of "Don't Stand So Close to Me" by the Police plays tinny and staticky from unseen speakers.

"That's nice," Ella says with a nod. "Time for a cappuccino?"

I look at my watch, as if calculating whether or not I can fit it into my busy schedule, even though we both know I have nothing else to do and Victory will be hours yet—between the swimming lessons and her favorite lunch and time with the neighborhood kids. They're all bigger, older boys, but she commands them like a queen. And they love her for it.

"Sure," I say. And Ella smiles.

"Great, meet you over there when you're done." She means the little spot by the beach where we always go.

"See you in a few."

She pushes off. I like Ella a lot. She is so easy, so warm and open, so trusting and unfailingly kind; she makes me feel bad about myself, as though I'm some icy bitch. I smile and give her a small wave. My heart is doing a little dance. I think it's just that I've had too much caffeine already and my heart is protesting the thought of more. Maybe I'll just have some chamomile.

On my way to check out, I see a sullen teenage girl, standing

beside her mother at the deli counter. She is so thin her hip bones jut out against her jeans. Her lips are moist and sparkling with pink gloss. She holds a cell phone to her ear and chews on the nail of her right thumb.

“Taylor, cut that out,” her mother says, pulling her daughter’s hand away from her mouth. They look at each other like rival gang members. I wonder if Victory and I will ever come to that place, that bloody rumble of adolescence. Somehow I doubt it. I am always afraid I won’t have the luxury of warring with my teenage daughter.

I step out to load the groceries into my car. I see Ella pulling out of the parking lot; she holds up her fingers indicating five minutes. She’s headed home to put away her groceries before we meet for coffee, and I’ll do the same since we both live just minutes from here. Then we don’t have to worry about the chicken going bad, the ice cream melting, those suburban concerns I appreciate so much for their simplicity and relative safety. But it’s as I slam my trunk that I feel it.

It’s as if the sun has dipped behind a thick cloud cover and the sky has gone charcoal. Only they haven’t. It is a bright, unseasonably cool, spring day in Florida. The parking lot is packed, populated by moms and nannies with their kids of all ages on spring break before Easter. I hear laughter, a gull calling; I smell the salt from the Gulf of Mexico. But inside I am quaking. There’s cool black ink in my veins.

I slip into my SUV and lock the door, grip the wheel, and try to calm myself. I’ve had these panics before. Usually they are isolated incidents, intense but brief like the summer storms here. In the last few days, though, they’ve come one after another, surprising me with their ferocity. False alarms, Gray calls them. I’ve always thought of them more as an early-warning system.

This one is deeper, blacker than I’m used to. I am truly afraid, sweating and going pale. My breathing starts to come ragged, and I glance in my rear- and sideview mirrors but see nothing out of the or-

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dinary. The contrast makes me dizzy, almost angry at the day for being so clear, at the people in the parking lot living their lives so benignly.

After a while I pull out from the lot, still shaky, and drive carefully the short distance to our home. I pass through the residents' side of the security gate with a wave to the watchman, cruise past ridiculously opulent homes nestled beneath clusters of tall palms with their barrel-tile roofs and colorful mailboxes shaped like manatees, dolphins, flamingos, or miniature versions of the larger house. Late-model luxury cars rest on stone-paved driveways.

As I pull up my drive, a neighbor is watering her flowers and lifts a friendly hand to me. I return the greeting and try to smile as I open the garage door with the remote on my rearview mirror. Afraid there's an inane conversation in my immediate future, I close the garage door while I'm still in the car. I turn off the engine and sit for a minute; my heart slows its dance. *I'm safe*, I tell myself. *This house is safe*. The shaking starts to subside. My breathing steadies. I press a button on my dash and hear a dial tone.

"Call Grandma," I say.

"*Calling Grandma*," the car phone answers stiffly. Victory *loves* this, giggles uncontrollably every time she hears it.

After only one ring, a smooth male voice answers, "Hello."

"It's Annie," I say, and I know my voice sounds wobbly. There's a pause; he hears it, too. He is a man who misses nothing.

"Hi, Annie." The ever-calm tones of my father-in-law, Drew. I imagine him sitting behind the oak desk of his home office, surrounded by all his degrees and military decorations, photos of his Navy SEAL buddies—eerie, grainy images of men too young, too happy to be holding guns. "They're in the pool."

"Everything's all right?" I ask, hating the words as they tumble from my lips.

"Everything's fine here," he answers, solid and sure. I am soothed

by the certainty and reassurance in his voice, as much as I hate to reveal any weakness in front of him.

“Is everything all right there?” he asks after a beat has passed. I try not to hear the note of contempt.

“Yes,” I say too quickly. Then I have to say it again, lighter, more slowly to balance it out. “Yes. Everything’s fine. Don’t bother them. I’ll be by around two for Victory.”

I end the call before he can ask any more questions, and I start unloading the groceries. As I’m putting things away, I turn on the television in the kitchen and am greeted by the image of a sad-looking, emaciated blonde. The caption beneath her photo reads, *Woman’s body found in Central Florida; the sixth in a five-year period.* In the background a slurry male voice with a thick Florida accent goes on about the lack of evidence, the similarities between cases. I turn it off quickly; this is the last thing I need to hear right now.

I try to shake off the uneasy feeling that seems to have settled in me and go about my day—meet Ella for coffee, run a few errands, then pick Victory up from Drew and Vivian’s. By the time I walk through the door at Vivian’s and greet my little girl, the black patch is mostly past. But it’s not forgotten. It follows me like a specter.

“Everything all right, dear?” Vivian asks as I lift my daughter onto my hip. (*She’s too big to carry, Annie. You baby her,* says Gray.) Victory leans her full weight against me in her fatigue, smelling of some magic mix of sunscreen, chlorine, and baby shampoo.

I turn around and try for a smile. “False alarm,” I say. We all know the lingo.

“You’re sure,” she says. I notice that she looks tired, puffy gray half-moons under her eyes. She wears a certain expression, a mingling of worry and love, that makes me want to weep in her arms. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Behind her I can see the Gulf lapping unenthusiastically against

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the shore. The whole back of her house is glass. An infinity pool outside seems to flow into the ocean beyond, but that's a carefully constructed illusion. In this family we're quite good at that.

"Mommy's worried," Victory says softly into my neck. "Don't be worried." She tightens her tiny arms around me, and I squeeze.

"Not worried, darling," I say, feeling a tingle of guilt. "Just tired."

I'm sure she doesn't believe me. You can't fool children, you know. You shouldn't even bother trying; they just grow up doubting themselves.

"Did you call Gray?" says Vivian, her brow creased. She smells like lemon verbena. She puts a hand on my arm and rubs gently.

I offer her what I hope is a dismissive, self-deprecating smile. "No need."

She looks at me skeptically but says nothing more, just places a kiss on my cheek, one on Victory's, then squeezes us both with her expansive arms. As I pull away down the drive, I see Drew watching me from the upstairs window.

That afternoon while Victory is down for her nap, I sit on the lanai, looking out onto our own view of the ocean, and start to think about all the ways that I can die.

Gray is late coming home, and Victory is already sound asleep upstairs in her room. I am sitting on a leather sofa I didn't choose and don't actually like, watching the high, dancing flames in our fireplace as he walks through the front door. For a second he is just a long shadow in the foyer; he could be anyone. But then he steps into the light and he is my husband, looking strained and tired. He doesn't know I'm watching him. When he sees me, though, he smiles and looks a little less world-weary.

"Hey," I say, getting up and going to him.

“Hey.” His embrace is powerful and I sink into it, hold on to him tightly. There is no softness to him; the muscles on his body are hard and defined. In this place I am moored. The churning of my day comes to calm.

“Want a drink?” I ask as I shift away from him. He holds me for a second longer, tries to catch my eyes, then lets me go.

“What are you having?” he wants to know.

“Vodka on the rocks.”

“Sounds about right.”

I walk over to the bar that in the daylight looks out onto our back deck. At night all I can see is my reflection in the glass doors as I fill a square lowball with ice and pour cold vodka from the freezer. This is another feature I didn’t choose about our house, a wet bar stocked with liquor we rarely touch. There is so much about this place, a ridiculously extravagant wedding gift from my father-in-law, furnished and decorated by Vivian, that has nothing to do with me—or Gray. It is hard to ever be grateful enough for such a gift and impossible to complain about the various features that don’t appeal. Sometimes I feel like we live in a model home, everything shiny and perfect but just slightly off from what we would have chosen ourselves.

I walk back over to him, hand him his drink, and we sit together. I put my legs up on his lap, take my waiting glass from the table. The ice has melted, the vodka gone watery and tepid. I drink it anyway, too lazy to make myself another.

I have one of the glass doors open, and the unseasonably cold salt air drifts in, warmed by the fire. I see him glance over at it. I know he’s thinking that the door should be closed and locked, but he doesn’t say anything. I notice the deep crescent of a scar between his right eye and his temple. I realize that I barely see his scars anymore. In the beginning they made me wary of him, made him seem hard and distant. I wondered what kind of violence could leave so many marks on a man. But I know the answer now. And I know his heart.

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“It’s happening again,” I say after a minute of us just sitting there staring at the flames. Somehow the words seem melodramatic even before I add, “Worse than it’s ever been.”

He barely reacts, but I see a muscle clench in his jaw beneath the shadow of black stubble. He stares at the fire, closes and opens his eyes slowly, and takes a breath. We’ve been here before.

He puts a hand on my arm, turns his eyes to mine. I can’t see their color in the dim light, but they’re steel gray, have been since the day he was born, hence his name.

“He’s dead,” he says. “Long dead.”

He’s always gentle with me, no matter how many times we’ve been through this. I curl my legs beneath me and move into the hollow of his arm.

“How do you know for sure?” I say. I’ve asked this question a thousand times, just to hear the answer.

“Because I killed him, Annie.” He turns my face up to his to show me how unflinchingly certain he is. “I watched him die.”

I start to cry then, because I know that he believes what he says to be true. And I want so badly to believe it, too.

“Do you need to start up the meds again?”

I don’t want that. He leans forward to put his drink on the table. I move back into him, and he wraps me up in his arms and lets me cry and cry until I feel all right again. There’s no telling how long this can take. But he’s always so patient.