



Esquire
FICTION

STEPHEN KING

The
GINGERBREAD
GIRL

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THE GINGERBREAD GIRL

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SYNOPSIS: In the emotional aftermath of her baby's sudden death, Em starts running. Soon she runs from her husband, to the airport, down to the Florida Gulf and out to the loneliest stretch of Vermillion Key, where her father has offered the use of a conch shack he has kept there for years. Em keeps up her running—barefoot on the beach, sneakers on the road—and sees virtually no one. This is doing her all kinds of good, until one day she makes the mistake of looking into the driveway of a man named Pickering. Pickering also enjoys the privacy of Vermillion Key, but the young women he brings there suffer the consequences. Will Em be next?

1

Only fast running would do.

AFTER THE BABY DIED, Emily took up running. At first it was just down to the end of the driveway, where she would stand bent over with her hands clutching her legs just above the knees, then to the end of the block, then all the way to Kozy's Qwik-Pik at the bottom of the hill. There she would pick up bread or margarine, maybe a Ho Ho or a Ring Ding if she could think of nothing else. At first she only walked back, but later she ran that way, too. Eventually she gave up the snack foods. It was surprisingly hard to do. She hadn't realized that sugar eased grief. Or maybe the snacks had become a fetish. Either way, in the end the Ho Hos had to go go. And did. Running was enough. Henry called the *running* a fetish, and she supposed he was right.

"What does Dr. Steiner say about it?" he asked. "Dr. Steiner says 'Dr. Steiner says run your ass off, get those endorphins going.'" She hadn't mentioned the running to Susan Steiner, hadn't even seen her since Amy's funeral. "She says she'll put it on a prescription pad, if you want."

Emily had always been able to bluff Henry. Even after Amy died. *We can have another one*, she had said, sitting beside him on the bed as he lay there with his ankles crossed and tears streaming down the sides of his face.

It eased him and that was good, but there was never going to be another baby, with the attendant risk of finding said infant gray and still in its crib. Never again the fruitless CPR or the screaming 911

call with the operator saying *Lower your voice, ma'am, I can't understand you*. But Henry didn't need to know that, and she was willing to comfort him, at least at the start. She believed that comfort, not bread, was the staff of life. Maybe eventually she would be able to find some for herself. In the meantime, she had produced a defective baby. That was the point. She would not risk another.

Then she started getting headaches. Real blinders. So she did go to a doctor, but it was Dr. Mendez, their general practitioner, not Susan Steiner. Mendez gave her a prescription for some stuff called Zomig. She took the bus to the family practice where Mendez hung out, then ran to the drugstore to get the scrip filled. After that she jogged home—it was two miles—and by the time she got there, she had what felt like a steel fork planted high up in her side, between the top of her ribs and her armpit. She didn't let it concern her. That was pain that would go away. Besides, she was exhausted and felt as if she could sleep for a while.

She did—all afternoon. On the same bed where Amy had been made and Henry had cried. When she woke up, she could see ghostly circles floating in the air, a sure sign that she was getting one of what she liked to call Em's Famous Headaches. She took one of her new pills, and to her surprise—almost shock—the headache turned tail and slunk away. First to the back of her head, then gone. She thought there ought to be a pill like that for the death of a child.

She thought she needed to explore the limits of her endurance, and she suspected the exploration would be a long one. There was a JuCo with a cinder track not too far from the house. She began to drive over there in the early mornings just after Henry left for work. Henry didn't understand the running. Jogging, sure—lots of women jogged. Keep those extra four pounds off the old fanny, keep those extra two inches off the old waistline. But Em didn't have an extra four pounds on her backside, and besides, jogging was no longer enough. She had to run, and fast. Only fast running would do.

She parked at the track and ran until she could run no more, until her sleeveless FSU sweatshirt was dark with sweat down the front

and back and she was shambling and sometimes puking with exhaustion.

Henry found out. Someone saw her there, running all by herself at eight in the morning, and told him. They had a discussion about it. The discussion escalated into a marriage-ending argument.

“It’s a hobby,” she said.

“Jodi Anderson said you ran until you fell down. She was afraid you’d had a heart attack. That’s not a hobby, Em. Not even a fetish. It’s an obsession.”

And he looked at her reproachfully. It would be a little while yet before she picked up the book and threw it at him, but that was what really tore it. That reproachful look. She could no longer stand it. Given his rather long face, it was like having a sheep in the house. *I married a Dorset gray, she thought, and now it’s just baa-baa-baa, all day long,*

But she tried one more time to be reasonable about something she knew in her heart had no reasonable core. There was magical thinking; there was also magical doing. Running, for instance.

“Marathoners run until they fall down,” she said.

“Are you planning to run in a marathon?”

“Maybe.” But she looked away. Out the window, at the driveway. The driveway called her. The driveway led to the sidewalk, and the sidewalk led to the world.

“No,” he said. “You’re not going to run in a marathon. You have no plans to run in a marathon.”

It occurred to her—with that sense of brilliant revelation the obvious can bring—that this was the essence of Henry, the fucking *apotheosis* of Henry. During the six years of their marriage he had always been perfectly aware of what she was thinking, feeling, planning.

I comforted you, she thought—not furious yet but beginning to be furious. You lay there on the bed leaking, and I comforted you.

“The running is a classic psychological response to the pain you feel,” he was saying in that same earnest way. “It’s called avoidance. But, honey, if you don’t feel your pain, you’ll never be able to—”

That’s when she grabbed the object nearest at hand, which happened to be a paperback copy of *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*. This was a book she had tried and rejected, but Henry had picked it up and was now about three quarters of the way through, judging from the bookmark. *He even has the reading tastes of a Dorset gray*, she thought, and hucked it at him. It struck him on the shoulder. He stared at her with wide, shocked eyes, then grabbed at her. Probably just to hug her, but who knew? Who really knew anything?

If he had grabbed a moment earlier, he might have caught her by the arm or the wrist or maybe just the back of her T-shirt. But that moment of shock undid him. He missed, and she was running, slowing only to snatch her fanny pack off the table by the front door. Down the driveway, to the sidewalk. Then down the hill, where she had briefly pushed a pram with other mothers who now shunned her. This time she had no intention of stopping or even slowing. Dressed only in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt reading save the cheerleader, Emily ran out into the world. She put her fanny pack around her waist and snapped the catch as she pelted down the hill. And the feeling?

Exhilaration. Pure pow.

She ran downtown (two miles, twenty-two minutes), not even stopping when the light was against her; when that happened, she jogged in place. A couple of boys in a top-down Mustang—it was just getting to be top-down weather—passed her at the corner of Main and Eastern. One whistled. Em gave him the finger. He laughed and applauded as the Mustang accelerated down Main.

She didn’t have much cash, but she had a pair of credit cards. The American Express was the prize, because with it she could get traveler’s checks.

She realized she wasn't going home, not for a while. And when the realization caused a feeling of relief—maybe even fugitive excitement—instead of sorrow, she suspected this was not a temporary thing.

She went into the Morris Hotel to use the phone, then decided on the spur of the moment to take a room. Did they have anything for just the one night? They did. She gave the desk clerk her AmEx card.

“It doesn't look like you'll need a bellman,” the clerk said, taking in her shorts and T-shirt.

“I left in a hurry.”

“I see.” Spoken in the tone of voice that said he didn't see at all. She took the key he slid to her and hurried across the wide lobby to the elevators, restraining the urge to run.

2

You sound like you might be crying.

SHE WANTED TO BUY SOME CLOTHES—a couple of skirts, a couple of shirts, two pairs of jeans, another pair of shorts—but before shopping she had calls to make: one to Henry and one to her father. Her father was in Tallahassee. She decided she had better call him first. She couldn't recall the number of his office phone in the motor pool but had his cell-phone number memorized. He answered on the first ring. She could hear engines revving in the background.

“Em! How are you?”

That should have been a complex question, but wasn't. “I'm fine. Dad. But I'm in the Morris Hotel. I guess I've left Henry.”

“Permanently or just a kind of trial balloon?” He didn't sound surprised—he took things in stride; she loved that about him—but

the sound of the revving motors first faded, then disappeared. She imagined him going into his office, closing the door, perhaps picking up the picture of her that stood on his cluttered desk.

“Can’t say yet. Right now it doesn’t look too good.”

“What was it about?”

“Running.”

“*Running?*”

She sighed. “Not really. You know how sometimes a thing is about something else? Or a whole bunch of something else’s?”

“The baby.” Her father had not called her Amy since the crib death. Now it was always just *the baby*.

“And the way I’m handling it. Which is not the way Henry wants me to. It occurred to me that I’d like to handle things in my own way.”

“Henry’s a good man,” her father said, “but he has a way of seeing things. No doubt.”

She waited.

“What can I do?”

She told him. He agreed. She knew he would, but not until he heard her all the way out. The hearing out was the most important part, and Rusty Jackson was good at it. He hadn’t risen from one of three mechanics in the motor pool to maybe one of the four most important people at the Tallahassee campus (and she hadn’t heard that from him; he’d never say something like that to her or anyone else) by not listening.

“I’ll send Mariette in to clean the house,” he said.

“Dad, you don’t need to do that. I can clean.”

“I want to,” he said. “A total top-to-bottom is overdue. Damn place has been closed up for almost a year. I don’t get down to Vermillion much since your mother died. Seems like I can always find some more to do up here.”

Em's mother was no longer Debra to him, either. Since the funeral (ovarian cancer), she was *just your mother*.

Em almost said. *Are you sure you don't mind this?* but that was the kind of thing you said when a stranger offered to do you a favor. Or a different kind of father.

"You going there to run?" he asked. She could hear a smile in his voice. "There's plenty of beach to run on, and a good long stretch of road, too. As you well know. And you won't have to elbow people out of your way. Between now and October, Vermillion is as quiet as it ever gets."

"I'm going there to think. And—I guess—to finish mourning."

"That's all right, then," he said. "Want me to book your flight?"

"I can do that."

"Sure you can. Emmy, are you okay?"

"Yes," she said.

"You sound like you might be crying."

"A little bit," she said, and wiped her face. "It all happened very fast." *Like Amy's death*, she could have added. She had done it like a little lady; never a peep from the baby monitor. *Leave quietly, don't slam the door*, Em's own mother often said when Em was a teenager.

"Henry won't come there to the hotel and bother you, will he?"

She heard a faint, delicate hesitation before he chose *bother*, and smiled in spite of her tears, which had pretty well run their course, anyway. "If you're asking if he's going to come and beat me up... that's not his style."

"A man sometimes finds a different style when his wife up and leaves him—just takes off running."

"Not Henry," she said. "He's not a man to cause trouble."

"You sure you don't want to come to Tallahassee first?"

She hesitated. Part of her did, but-

"I need a little time on my own. Before anything else." And she repeated, "All this happened very fast." Although she suspected it

had been building for quite some time. It might even have been in the DNA of the marriage.

“All right. Love you, Emmy.”

“Love you, too, Dad. Thank you.” She swallowed. “So much.”

HENRY DIDN'T CAUSE TROUBLE. Henry didn't even ask where she was calling from. Henry said, “Maybe you're not the only one who needs a little time apart. Maybe this is for the best.”

She resisted an urge—it struck her as both normal and absurd—to thank him. Silence seemed like the best option. What he said next made her glad she'd chosen it.

“Who'd you call for help? The Motor-Pool King?”

This time the urge she resisted was to ask if he'd called his mother yet. Tit for tat never solved anything.

She said—evenly, she hoped: “I'm going to Vermillion Key. My dad's place there.”

“The conch shack.” She could almost hear him sniff. Like Ho Hos and Twinkies, houses with only three rooms and no garage were not a part of Henry's belief system.

Em said, “I'll call you when I get there.”

A long silence. She imagined him in the kitchen, head leaning against the wall, hand gripping the handset of the phone tight enough to turn his knuckles white, fighting to reject anger. Because of the six mostly good years they'd had together. She hoped he would make it. If that was indeed what was going on.

When he spoke next, he sounded calm but tired out. “Got your credit cards?”

“Yes. And I won't overuse them. But I want my half of—” She broke off, biting her lip. She had almost called their dead child *the baby*, and that wasn't right. Maybe it was for her father, but not for her. She started again.

“My half of Amy’s college money,” she said. “I don’t suppose there’s much, but—”

“There’s more than you think,” he said. He was starting to sound upset again. They had begun the fund not when Amy was born, or even when Em got pregnant, but when they first started trying. Trying had been a four-year process, and by the time Emily finally kindled, they were talking about fertility treatments. Or adoption. “Those investments weren’t just good, they were blessed by heaven—especially the software stocks. Mort got us in at the right time and out at the absolute golden moment. Emmy, you don’t want to take the eggs out of that nest.”

There he was again, telling her what she wanted to do.

“I’ll give you an address as soon as I have one,” she said. “Do whatever you want with your half, but make mine a cashier’s check.”

“Still running,” he said, and although that professorial, observational tone made her wish he was here so she could throw another book at him—a hardcover this time—she held her silence.

At last he sighed. “Listen, Em, I’m going to clear out of here for a few hours. Come on in and get your clothes or your whatever. And I’ll leave some cash for you on the dresser.”

For a moment she was tempted; then it occurred to her that leaving money on the dresser was what men did when they went to whores.

“No,” she said. “I want to start fresh.”

“Em.” There was a long pause. She guessed he was struggling with his emotions, and the thought of it caused her own eyes to blur over again. “Is this the end of us, kiddo?”

“I don’t know,” she said, working to keep her own voice straight. “Too soon to tell.”

“If I had to guess,” he said, “I’d guess yes. Today proves two things. One is that a healthy woman can run a long way.”

“I’ll call you,” she said.

“The other is that living babies are glue when it comes to marriage. Dead ones are acid.”

That hurt more than anything else he might have said, because it reduced Amy to an ugly metaphor. Em couldn't do that. She didn't think she'd ever be able to do that. “Ill call you,” she said, and hung up.

Vermillion Key lay dazed and all but deserted.

3

Vermillion Key lay dazed and all but deserted.

SO EMILY OWENSBY RAN DOWN TO the end of the driveway, then down the hill to Kozy's Qwik-Pik, and then at the Cleveland South Junior College track. She ran to the Morris Hotel. She ran out of her marriage the way a woman can run out of a pair of sandals when she decides to let go and really dash. Then she ran (with the help of Southwest Airlines) to Fort Myers, Florida, where she rented a car and drove south toward Naples. Vermillion Key lay dazed and all but deserted under the baking June light. Two miles of road ran along Vermillion Beach from the drawbridge to the stub of her father's driveway. At the end of the driveway stood the unpainted conch shack, a slummy-looking thing with a blue roof and peeling blue shutters on the outside, air-conditioned and comfy on the inside.

When she turned off the engine of her Avis Nissan, the only sounds were waves crashing on the empty beach, and, somewhere nearby, an alarmed bird shouting *Uh-oh! Uh-oh!* over and over.

Em lowered her head against the steering wheel and cried for five minutes, letting out all the strain and horror of the last half year. Trying to, anyway. There was no one in earshot except for the uh-oh

bird. When she was finally done, she took off her T-shirt and wiped everything away: the snot, the sweat, the tears. She wiped herself clean all the way down to the top of her plain gray sports bra. Then she walked to the house, shells and bits of coral crunching under her sneakers. As she bent to get the key from the Sucrets box hidden beneath the charming-in-spite-of-itself lawn gnome with its faded red hat, it occurred to her that she hadn't had one of her headaches in over a week. Which was a good thing, since her Zomig was more than a thousand miles away.

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in shorts and one of her father's old shirts, she was running on the beach.

FOR THE NEXT THREE WEEKS, her life became one of stark simplicity. She drank coffee and orange juice for breakfast, ate huge green salads for lunch, and devoured Stouffer's cuisine for dinner, usually macaroni and cheese or boil-in-the-bag chipped beef on toast—what her dad called shit on a shingle. The carbs came in handy. In the morning, when it was cool, she ran barefoot on the beach, down close to the water where the sand was firm and wet and mostly free of shells. In the afternoon, when it was hot (and frequently showery), she ran on the road, which was shady for most of its length. Sometimes she got soaked. On these occasions she ran on through the rain, often smiling, sometimes even laughing, and when she got back, she stripped in the foyer and dumped her soaking clothes in the washer, which was—conveniently—only three steps from the shower.

At first she ran two miles on the beach and a mile on the road. After three weeks, she was doing three miles on the beach and two on the road. Rusty Jackson was pleased to call his getaway place the Little Grass Shack, after some old song or other. It was at the extreme north end, and there was nothing like it on Vermillion; everything else had been taken over by the rich, the super-rich, and, at the extreme south end, where there were three Mc-Mansions, the

absurdly rich. Trucks filled with grounds keeping gear sometimes passed Em on her road runs, but rarely a car. The houses she passed were all closed up, their driveways chained, and they would stay that way until at least October, when the owners started to trickle back. She began to make up names for them in her head: the one with the columns was Tara, the one behind the high, barred iron fence was Club Fed, the big one hiding behind an ugly gray concrete wall was the Pillbox. The only other small one, mostly screened by palmettos and traveler palms, was the Troll House—where, she imagined, the in-season inhabitants subsisted on Troll House cookies.

On the beach, she sometimes saw volunteers from Turtle Watch, and soon came to hail them by name. They would give her a “Yo, Em!” in return as she ran past. There was rarely anyone else, although once a helicopter buzzed her. The passenger—a young man—leaned out and waved. Em waved back, her face safely masked by the shadow of her FSU ‘Noles cap.

She shopped at the Publix five miles north on U.S. 41. Often on her ride home, she would stop at Bobby Trickett’s Used Books, which was far bigger than her dad’s little retreat but still your basic conch shack. There she bought old paperback mysteries by Raymond Chandler and Ed McBain, their pages dark brown at the edges and yellow inside, their smell sweet and as nostalgic as the old Ford woody station wagon she sighted one day tooling down 41 with two lawn chairs strapped to the roof and a beat-to-shit surfboard sticking out the back. There was no need to buy any John D. MacDonalds; her father had the whole set packed into his orange-crate bookcases.

By the end of July she was running six and sometimes seven miles a day, her boobs no more than nubs, her butt mostly nonexistent, and she had lined two of her dad’s empty shelves with books that had titles like *Dead City* and *Six Bad Things*. The TV never went on at night, not even for the weather. Her father’s old PC stayed dark. She never bought a newspaper.

Her father called her every second day, but stopped asking if she wanted him to “yank free” and come on down after she told him that when she was ready to see him, she’d tell him so. In the meantime,

she said, she wasn't suicidal (true), not even depressed (not true), and she was eating. That was good enough for Rusty. They had always been straight up with each other. She also knew that summer was a busy time for him—everything that couldn't be done when kids were crawling all over the campus (which he always called *the plant*) had to be done between June 15 and September 15, when there was nobody around but summer students and whatever academic conferences the administration could pull in.

Also, he had a lady friend. Melody, her name was. Em didn't like to go there—it made her feel funny—but she knew Melody made her dad happy, so she always asked after her. Fine, her dad invariably replied. *Mel's as dandy as a peach.*

Once she called Henry, and once Henry called her. The night he called her, Em was pretty sure he was drunk. He asked her again if they were over, and she told him again that she didn't know, but that was a lie. *Probably* a lie.

Nights, she slept like a woman in a coma. At first she had bad dreams—reliving the morning they had found Amy dead over and over again. In some of the dreams, her baby had turned as black as a rotten strawberry. In others—these were worse—she found Amy struggling for breath and saved her by administering mouth-to-mouth. They were worse because she woke to the realization that Amy was actually the same old dead. She came from one of these latter dreams during a thunderstorm and slid naked from the bed to the floor, crying with her elbows propped on her knees and her palms pushing her cheeks up in a smile while lightning flashed over the Gulf and made momentary blue patterns on the wall.

As she extended herself—exploring those fabled limits of endurance—the dreams either ceased or played themselves out far below the eye of her memory. She began to awaken feeling not so much refreshed as unwound all the way to the core of herself. And although each day was essentially the same as the day before, each began to seem like a new thing—its own thing—instead of an extension of the old thing. One day she woke realizing that Amy's

death had begun to be something that *had* happened instead of something that *was* happening.

She decided she would ask her father to come down—and bring Melody if he wanted to. She would give them a nice dinner. They could stay over (what the hell, it *was* his house). And then she'd start thinking about what she wanted to do with her real life, the one she would soon resume on the other side of the drawbridge: what she wanted to keep and what she wanted to cast away.

She would make that call soon, she thought. In a week. Two, at the most. It wasn't quite time yet, but almost. Almost.

4

Not a very nice man.

ONE AFTERNOON NOT LONG AFTER July became August, Deke Hollis told her she had company on the island. He called it *the island*, never the key.

Deke was a weathered fifty, or maybe seventy. He was tall and rangy and wore a battered old straw hat that looked like an inverted soup bowl. From seven in the morning until seven at night, he ran the drawbridge between Vermillion and the mainland. This was Monday to Friday. On weekends, “the kid” took over (said kid being about thirty). Some days when Em ran up to the drawbridge and saw the kid instead of Deke in the old cane chair outside the gatehouse, reading *Maxim* or *Popular Mechanics* rather than *The New York Times*, she was startled to realize that Saturday had come around again.

This afternoon, though, it was Deke. The channel between Vermillion and the mainland—which Deke called *the thrut* (throat,

she assumed)—was deserted and dark under a dark sky. A heron stood on the drawbridge's Gulf-side rail, either meditating or looking for fish.

"Company?" Em said. "I don't have any company."

"I didn't mean it that way. Pickering's back. At 366? Brought one of his 'nieces.'" The punctuation for *nieces* was provided by a roll of Deke's eyes, of a blue so faded they were nearly colorless.

"I didn't see anyone," Em said.

"No," he agreed. "Crossed over in that big red M'cedes of his about an hour ago, while you were probably still lacin' up your tennies." He leaned forward over his newspaper; it crackled against his flat belly. She saw he had the crossword about half completed. "Different niece every summer. Always young." He paused. "Sometimes *two* nieces, one in August and one in September."

"I don't know him," Em said. "And I didn't see any red Mercedes." Nor did she know which house belonged to 366. She noticed the houses themselves, but rarely paid attention to the mailboxes. Except, of course, for 219. That was the one with the little line of carved birds on top of it. (The house behind it was, of course, Birdland.)

"Just as well," Deke said. This time instead of rolling his eyes, he twitched down the corners of his mouth, as if he had something bad tasting in there. "He brings 'em down in the M'cedes, then takes 'em back to St. Petersburg in his boat. Big white yacht. The *Playpen*. Went through this morning." The corners of his mouth did that thing again. In the far distance, thunder mumbled. "So the nieces get a tour of the house, then a nice little cruise up the coast, and we don't see Pickering again until January, when it gets cold up in Chicagoland."

Em thought she might have seen a moored white pleasure craft on her morning beach run but wasn't sure.

"Day or two from now—maybe a week—he'll send out a couple of fellas, and one will drive the M'cedes back to wherever he keeps it stored away. Near the private airport in Naples, I imagine."

“He must be very rich,” Em said. This was the longest conversation she’d ever had with Deke, and it was interesting, but she started jogging in place just the same. Partly because she didn’t want to stiffen up, mostly because her body was calling on her to run.

“Rich as Scrooge McDuck, but I got an idea Pickering actually *spends* his. Probably in ways Uncle Scrooge never imagined. Made it off some kind of computer thing, I heard.” The eye roll. “Don’t they all?”

“I guess,” she said, still jogging in place. The thunder cleared its throat with a little more authority this time.

“I know you’re anxious to be off, but I’m talking to you for a reason,” Deke said. He folded up his newspaper, put it beside the old cane chair, and stuck his coffee cup on top of it as a paperweight. “I don’t ordinarily talk out of school about folks on the island—a lot of ‘em’s rich and I wouldn’t last long if I did-but I like you, Emmy. You keep yourself to yourself, but you ain’t a bit snooty. Also, I like your father. Him and me’s lifted a beer, time to time.”

“Thanks,” she said. She was touched. And as a thought occurred to her, she smiled. “Did my dad ask you to keep an eye on me?”

Deke shook his head. “Never did. Never would. Not R. J.’s style. He’d tell you the same as I am, though—Jim Pickering’s not a very nice man. I’d steer clear of him. If he invites you in for a drink or even just a cup of coffee with him and his new ’niece,’ I’d say no. And if he were to ask you to go cruising with him, I would *definitely* say no.”

“I have no interest in cruising anywhere,” she said. What she was interested in was finishing her work on Vermillion Key. She felt it was almost done. “And I better get back before the rain starts.”

“Don’t think it’s coming until five, at least,” Deke said. “Although if I’m wrong, I think you’ll still be okay.”

She smiled again. “Me too. Contrary to popular opinion, women don’t melt in the rain. I’ll tell my dad you said hello.”

“You do that.” He bent down to get his paper, then paused, looking at her from beneath that ridiculous hat. “How’re you doing,

anyway?”

“Better,” she said. “Better every day.” She turned and began her road run back to the Little Grass Shack. She raised her hand as she went, and as she did, the heron that had been perched on the drawbridge rail flapped past her with a fish in its long bill.

THREE SIXTY-SIX TURNED OUT to be the Pillbox, and for the first time since she'd come to Vermillion, the gate was standing ajar. Or had it been ajar when she ran past it toward the bridge? She couldn't remember—but of course she had taken up wearing a watch, a clunky thing with a big digital readout, so she could time herself. She had probably been looking at that when she went by.

She almost passed without slowing—the thunder was closer now—but she wasn't exactly wearing a thousand-dollar suede skirt from Jill Anderson, only an ensemble from the Athletic Attic: shorts and a T-shirt with the Nike swoosh on it. Besides, what had she said to Deke? *Women don't melt in the rain*. So she slowed, swerved, and had a peek. It was simple curiosity.

She thought the Mercedes parked in the courtyard was a 450 SL, because her father had one like it, although his was pretty old now and this one looked brand new. It was candy-apple red, its body brilliant even under the darkening sky. The trunk was open. A sheaf of long blond hair hung from it. There was blood in the hair.

Had Deke said the girl with Pickering was a blond? That was her first question, and she was so shocked, so fucking amazed, that there was no surprise in it. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable question, and the answer was Deke hadn't said. Only that she was young. And a niece. With the eye roll.

Thunder rumbled. Almost directly overhead now. The courtyard was empty except for the car (and the blond in the trunk, there was her). The house looked deserted, too: buttoned up and more like a pillbox than ever. Even the palms swaying around it couldn't soften it. It was too big, too stark, too gray. It was an ugly house.

Em thought she heard a moan. She ran through the gate and across the yard to the open trunk without even thinking about it. She looked in. The girl in the trunk hadn't moaned. Her eyes were open, but she had been stabbed in what looked like dozens of places, and her throat was cut ear to ear.

Em stood looking in, too shocked to move, too shocked to even breathe. Then it occurred to her that this was *a fake* dead girl, a movie prop. Even as her rational mind was telling her that was bullshit, the part of her that specialized in rationalization was nodding frantically. Even making up a story to backstop the idea. Deke didn't like Pickering, and Pickering's choice of female companionship? Well guess what, Pickering didn't like Deke, either! This was nothing but an elaborate practical joke. Pickering would go back across the bridge with the trunk deliberately ajar, that fake blond hair fluttering, and—

But there were smells rising out of the trunk now. They were the smells of shit and blood. Em reached forward and touched the cheek below one of those staring eyes. It was cold, but it was skin. Oh God, it was human skin.

There was a sound behind her. A footstep. She started to turn, and something came down on her head. There was no pain, but brilliant white seemed to leap across the world. Then the world went dark.

5

He looked like he was trying to play creep-mouse with her.

WHEN SHE WOKE UP, she was duct-taped to a chair in a big kitchen filled with terrible steel objects: sink, fridge, dishwasher, a stove that looked like it belonged in the kitchen of a restaurant. The back of her

head was sending long, slow waves of pain toward the front of her head, each one seeming to say *Fix this! Fix this!*

Standing at the sink was a tall, slender man in khaki shorts and an old Izod golf shirt. The kitchen's fluorescent fixtures sent down a merciless light, and Em could see the deepening crow's-foot at the corner of his eye, the smattering of gray along the side of his short power haircut. She put him at about fifty. He was washing his arm in the sink. There appeared to be a puncture wound in it, just below the elbow.

He snapped his head around. There was an animal quickness to him that made her stomach sink. His eyes were of a blue much more vivid than Deke Hollis's. She saw nothing in them she recognized as sanity, and her heart sank further. On the floor—the same ugly gray as the outside of the house, only tile instead of cement—there was a dark, filmy track about nine inches wide. Em thought it was probably blood. It was very easy to imagine the blond girl's hair making it as Pickering dragged her through the room by her feet, to some unknown destination.

“You're awake,” he said. “Good deal. *Awesome*. Think I wanted to kill her? I didn't want to kill her. She had a knife in her gosh-damn *sock!* I pinched her on the arm, that's all.” He seemed to consider this, and while he did, he blotted the dark, blood-filled gash below his elbow with a wad of paper towels. “Well, also on the tit. But all girls expect that. Or should. It's called *FORE-play*. Or in this case, *WHORE-play*”

He made quotation marks with the first and second fingers of his hands each time. To Em, he looked like he was trying to play creep-mouse with her. He also looked crazy. In fact, there was no doubt about his state of mind. Thunder crashed overhead, loud as a load of dropped furniture. Em jumped—as well as she could, bound to a kitchen chair—but the man standing by the stainless-steel double-basin sink didn't glance up at the sound. It was as though he hadn't heard. His lower lip was thrust out.

“So I took it away from her. And then I lost my head. I admit it. People think I’m Mr. Cool, and I try to live up to that. I do. I try to live up to that. But any man can lose his head. That’s what they don’t realize. Any man. Under the right set of circumstances.”

Rain poured down as if God had pulled the chain up there in His own personal WC.

“Who could reasonably assume you’re here?”

“Lots of people.” This answer came without hesitation.

He was across the room in a flash. *Flash* was the word. At one moment he was by the sink, at the next beside her and whacking her face hard enough to make white spots explode in front of her eyes. These shot around the room, drawing bright cometary tails after them. Her head snapped to the side. Her hair flew against her cheek, and she felt blood begin to flow into her mouth as her lower lip burst. The inner lining had been cut by her teeth, and deep. Almost all the way through, it felt like. Outside, the rain rushed down. *I’m going to die while it’s raining*, Em thought. But she didn’t believe it. Maybe no one did, when the deal actually came down.

“*Who knows?*” He was leaning over, bellowing into her face.

“*Lots of people,*” she reiterated, and the words came out *losh of people* because her lower lip was swelling. And she felt blood spilling down her chin in a small stream. Still, her *mind* wasn’t swelling, in spite of the pain and fear. It knew her one chance at life was making this man believe he’d be caught if he killed her. Of course he would also be caught if he let her go, but she would deal with that later. One nightmare at a time.

“*Losh of people!*” she said again, defiantly.

He flashed back to the sink and when he returned, he had a knife in his hand. A little one. Very likely the one the dead girl had taken from her sock. He put the tip on Em’s lower eyelid and pulled it down. That was when her bladder let go, all at once, in a rush.

An expression of somehow prissy disgust momentarily tightened Pickering’s face, yet he also seemed delighted. Some part of Em’s mind wondered how any person could hold two such conflicting

emotions in his mind at the same time. He took a half step back, but the point of the knife didn't waver. It still dimpled into her skin, simultaneously pulling down her lower eyelid and pushing her eyeball up gently in its socket. "Nice," he said. "Another mess to clean up. Not unexpected, though. No. And like the man said, there's more room out than there is in. That's what the man said." He actually laughed, one quick yip, and then he leaned forward, his vivid blue eyes staring into her hazel ones. "Tell me one person who knows you're here. Don't hesitate. Do not hesitate. If you hesitate I'll know you're making something up and I'll lift your eye right out of its socket and flip it into the sink. I can do it. So tell me. *Now*"

"Deke Hollis," she said. It was tattling, *bad* tattling, but it was also nothing but reflex. She didn't want to lose her eye.

"Who else?"

No name occurred to her—her mind was a roaring blank—and she believed him when he said hesitating would cost her her left eye. "*No one, okay?*" she cried. And surely Deke would be enough. Surely one person would be enough, unless he was so crazy that—

He drew the knife away, and although her peripheral vision couldn't quite pick it up, she felt a tiny seed pearl of blood blooming there. She didn't care. She was just glad to still *have* peripheral vision.

"Okay," Pickering said. "Okay, okay, good, okay." He walked back to the sink and tossed the little knife into it. She started to be relieved. Then he opened one of the drawers beside the sink and brought out a bigger one: a long, pointed butcher knife.

"Okay." He came back to her. There was no blood on him that she could see, not even a spot. How was that possible? How long had she been out?

"Okay, okay." He ran the hand not holding the knife through the short, stupidly expensive tailoring of his hair. It sprang right back into place. "Who's Deke Hollis?"

"The drawbridge keeper," she said. Her voice was unsteady, wavering. "We *talked* about you. That's why I stopped to look in."

She had a burst of inspiration. “He saw the girl! Your niece, he called her!”

“Yeah, yeah, the girls always go back by boat, that’s all he knows. That’s all he knows in the world. Are people ever nosy! Where’s your car? Answer me *now* or you get the new special, a breast amputation. Quick but *not* painless.”

“The Grass Shack!” It was all she could think of to say.

“What’s that?”

“The little conch house at the end of the key. It’s my dad’s.” She had another burst of inspiration. “*He* knows I’m here!”

“Yeah, yeah.” This didn’t seem to interest Pickering. “Yeah, okay. Right, big-time. Are you saying you *live* here?”

“Yes...”

He looked down at her shorts, now a darker blue. “Runner, are you?” She didn’t answer this, but Pickering didn’t seem to care. “Yeah, you’re a runner, damn right you are. Look at those legs.” Incredibly, he bowed at the waist—as if meeting royalty—and with a loud smack kissed her left thigh just below the hem of her shorts. When he straightened up, she observed with a sinking heart that the front of his pants were sticking out. Not good.

“You run up, you run back.” He flicked the blade of the butcher knife in an arc, like a conductor with a baton. It was hypnotic. Outside, the rain continued to pour down. It would go on that way for forty minutes, maybe an hour, and then the sun would come back out. Em wondered if she would be alive to see it. She didn’t think so. Yet this was still hard to believe. Impossible, really.



“You run up, you run back. Up and back. Sometimes you pass the time of day with that old man in the straw hat, but you don’t pass it

with anyone else.” She was scared, but not too scared to realize he wasn’t talking to her. “Right. Not with anyone else. Because there’s nobody else here. If any of the tree-planting, grass-cutting beaners who work down here saw you on your afternoon run, will they remember? Will they?”

The knife blade ticked back and forth. He eyed the tip, seeming to depend on this for an answer.

“No,” he said. “No, and 111 tell you why. Because you’re just another rich gringa running her buns off. They’re everywhere. See ‘em every day. Health nuts. Have to kick ‘em out of your way. If not running, on bikes. Wearing those dumb little potty helmets. Okay? Okay Say your prayers, Lady Jane, but make it quick. I’m in a hurry. Big, big hurry.”

He raised the knife to his shoulder. She saw his lips tighten down in anticipation of the killing stroke. For Em, the whole world suddenly came clear; everything stood out with exclamatory brilliance. She thought: *I’m coming. Amy.* And then, absurdly, something she might have heard on ESPN: *Be there, baby.*

But then he paused. He looked around, exactly as if someone had spoken. “Yeah,” he said. Then: “Yeah?” And then: “Yeah.” There was a Formica-topped island in the middle of the room, for food preparation. He dropped the knife on it with a clatter instead of sticking it into Emily.

He said, “Sit there. I’m not going to kill you. I changed my mind. Man can change his mind. I got nothing from Nicole but a poke in the arm.”

There was a depleted roll of duct tape on the island. He picked it up. A moment later he was kneeling in front of her, the back of his head and the naked nape of his neck exposed and vulnerable. In a better world—a fairer world—she could have laced her hands together and brought them down on that exposed nape, but her hands were bound at the wrists to the chair’s heavy maple arms. Her torso was bound to the back by more duct tape, thick corsets of the stuff at the waist and just below her breasts. Her legs were bound to

the chair's legs at the knees, the upper calves, the lower calves, and the ankles. He had been very thorough.

The legs of the chair were taped to the floor, and now he put on fresh layers, first in front of her, then behind. When he was finished, all the tape was gone. He stood up and put the empty cardboard core on the Formica island. "There," he said. "Not bad. Okay. All set. You wait here." He must have found something funny in this, because he cocked his head upward and loosed another of those brief, yapping laughs. "Don't get bored and run off, okay? I need to go take care of your nosy old friend, and I want to do it while it's still raining."

This time he flashed to a door that proved to be a closet. He yanked out a yellow slicker. "Knew this was in here somewhere. Everybody trusts a guy in a raincoat. I don't know why. It's just one of those mystery facts. Okay, girlfriend, sit tight." He uttered another of those laughs that sounded like the bark of an angry poodle, and then he was gone.

6

Still 9:15.

WHEN THE FRONT DOOR SLAMMED and Em knew he had really left, that abnormal brightness in the world started to turn gray, and she realized she was on the verge of fainting. She could not afford to faint. If there was an afterlife and she eventually saw her father there, how could she explain to Rusty Jackson that she had wasted her last minutes on earth in unconsciousness? He would be disappointed in her. Even if they met in heaven, standing ankle-deep in clouds while angels all around them played the music of the

spheres (arranged for harp), he would be disappointed in her for wasting her only chance in a Victorian swoon.

Em deliberately ground the lacerated lining of her lower lip against her teeth... then bit down, bringing fresh blood. The world jumped back to brightness. The sound of the wind and down-rushing rain swelled like strange music.

How long did she have? It was a quarter of a mile from the Pillbox to the drawbridge. Because of the slicker, and because she hadn't heard the Mercedes start up, she had to think he was running. She knew she might not have heard the engine over the rain and thunder, but she just didn't believe he would take his car. Deke Hollis knew the red Mercedes and didn't like the man who drove it. The red Mercedes might put Deke on his guard. Emily believed Pickering would know that. Pickering was crazy—part of the time he'd been talking to himself, but at least some of the time he'd been talking to someone he could see but she couldn't, an invisible partner in crime—but he wasn't stupid. Neither was Deke, of course, but he would be alone in his little gatehouse. No cars passing, no boats waiting to go through, either. Not in this downpour.

Plus, he was old.

“I have maybe fifteen minutes,” she said to the empty room—or perhaps it was the bloodstain on the floor she was talking to. He hadn't gagged her, at least; why bother? There would be no one to hear her scream, not in this ugly, boxy, concrete fortress. She thought she could have stood in the middle of the road, screaming at the top of her lungs, and still no one would have heard her. Right now even the Mexican groundskeepers would be under cover, sitting in the cabs of their trucks drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes.

“Fifteen minutes at most.”

Yes. Probably. Then Pickering would come back and rape her, as he had been planning to rape Nicole. After that he would kill her, as he had already killed Nicole. Her and how many other “nieces”? Em didn't know, but she felt certain this was not—as Rusty Jackson might have said—his first rodeo.

Fifteen minutes. Maybe just ten.

She looked down at her feet. They weren't duct-taped to the floor, but the feet of the chair were. Still...

You're a runner; damn right you are. Look at those legs.

They were good legs, all right, and she didn't need anyone to kiss them to make her aware of it. Especially not a lunatic like Pickering. She didn't know if they were good in the sense of being beautiful, or sexy, but in utilitarian terms, they were very good. They had carried her a long way since the morning she and Henry had found Amy dead in her crib. Pickering clearly had great faith in the powers of duct tape, had probably seen it employed by dozens of psycho killers in dozens of movies, and none of his "nieces" had given him any cause to doubt its efficacy. Maybe because he hadn't given them a chance, maybe because they were too frightened. But maybe... especially on a wet day, in an unaired house so damp she could smell the mildew...

Em leaned forward as far as the corsets binding her would allow and gradually began to flex the muscles of her thighs and calves: those new runner's muscles the lunatic had so admired. First just a little flex, then up to half. She was approaching full flex, and starting to lose hope, when she heard a sucking sound. It was low at first, barely more than a wish, but it got louder. The tape had been wrapped and then rewrapped in crisscrossing layers, it was hellishly strong, but it was pulling free of the floor just the same. But slowly. Dear God, so slowly.

She relaxed, breathing hard, sweat now breaking on her forehead, under her arms, between her breasts. She wanted to go again at once, but her experience running the Cleveland South track told her she must wait and let her rapidly pumping heart flush the lactic acid from her muscles. Her next effort would generate less force and be less successful if she didn't. But it was hard. Waiting was hard. She had no idea how long he had been gone. There was a clock on the wall—a sunburst executed in stainless steel (like seemingly everything else in this horrible, heartless room, except the red maple

chair she was bound to)-but it had stopped at 9:15. Probably it was a battery job and its battery had died.

She tried to remain still until she had counted to thirty (with a *delightful Maisie* after each number), and could only hold out to seventeen. Then she flexed again, pushing down with all her might. This time the sucking sound was immediate and louder. She felt the chair begin to *lift*. Just a little, but it was definitely rising.

Em strained, her head thrown back, her teeth bared, fresh blood running down her chin from her swollen lip. The cords on her neck stood out. The sucking sound became louder still, and now she also heard a low ripping sound.

Hot pain bloomed suddenly in her right calf, tightening it. For a moment Em almost kept on straining—the stakes were high, after all, the stakes were her *life—but* then she relaxed within her bonds again, gasping for air. And counting.

“*One, delightful Maisie. Two, delightful Maisie. Three...*”

Because she could probably pull the chair free of the floor in spite of that warning tightness. She was almost sure she could. But if she did so at the expense of a charley horse in her right calf (she’d had them there before; on a couple of occasions they’d hit so hard the muscle had felt like stone rather than flesh), she would lose more time than she gained. And she’d still be bound to the fucking chair. *Glued* to the fucking chair. She knew the clock on the wall was dead, but she looked at it anyway. It was a reflex. Still 9:15. Was he at the drawbridge yet? She had a sudden wild hope: Deke would blow the warning horn and scare him off. Could a thing like that happen? She thought it could. She thought Pickering was like a hyena, only dangerous when he was sure he had the upper hand. And, probably like a hyena, wasn’t able to imagine not having it.

She listened. She heard thunder, and steadily whooshing rain, but not the blare of the air horn mounted beside the drawbridge keeper’s cabin.

She tried pulling the chair off the floor again, and almost went catapulting face first into the stove when it came free almost at once.

She staggered, tottered, almost fell over, and backed against the Formica-topped service island in the middle of the kitchen to keep from doing so. Her heart was now running so fast, she couldn't detect the individual beats; it seemed to be just a steady hard hum in her chest and high in her neck, below the points of her jaw. If she had fallen over, she would have been like a turtle lying on its back. There wouldn't have been a chance in the world of getting up again.

I'm all right, she thought. It didn't happen.

No. But she could see herself lying there all the same, and with hellish clarity. Lying there with only the swash of blood made by Nicole's hair for company. Lying there and waiting for Pickering to come back and have his fun with her before ending her life. And he would be back when? In seven minutes? Five? Only three?

She looked at the clock. It was 9:15.

She hunched beside the counter, gasping for breath, a woman who had grown a chair out of her back. There was the butcher knife on the counter, but she couldn't reach it with her hands bound to the chair's arms. Even if she could have grasped it, what then? Just stand there, hunched over, with it in her hand. There was nothing she could reach with it, nothing she could cut with it.

She looked at the stove, and wondered if she could turn on one of the burners. If she could do that, then maybe...

Another hellish vision came to her: trying to burn through the tape and having her clothes catch on fire from the gas ring instead. She wouldn't risk it. If someone had offered her pills (or even a bullet in the head) to escape the possibility of rape, torture, and death—likely a slow one, preceded by unspeakable mutilations—she might have overcome the dissenting voice of her father (*"Never give up, Emmy. good things are always just around some corner or other"*) and gone for it. But risking the possibility of third-degree burns all over the upper half of her body? Lying half-baked on the floor, waiting for Pickering to come back, *praying for* him to come back and put her out of her misery?

No. She wouldn't do that. But what did that leave? She could feel time fleeting, fleeting. The clock on the wall still said 9:15, but she thought the beat of the rain had slacked off a bit. The idea filled her with horror. She pushed it back. Panic would get her killed.

The knife was a can't and the stove was a won't. What did that leave?

The answer was obvious. It left the chair. There weren't any others in the kitchen, only three high stools like barstools. She guessed he must have imported this one from a dining room she hoped never to see. Had he bound other women—other “nieces”—to heavy red maple chairs that belonged around a dining-room table? Maybe to this very one? In her heart she was sure he had.

And he trusted it even though it was wood instead of metal. What had worked once must work again; she was sure he thought like a hyena in that way, too.

She had to demolish the prison that held her. It was the only way, and she had only minutes to do it.

7

It's probably going to hurt.

SHE WAS CLOSE TO THE TENTER ISLAND, but the counter stuck out slightly, creating a kind of lip, and she didn't trust it. She didn't want to move—didn't want to risk falling over and becoming a turtle—but she did want a surface wider than that projecting lip to beat against. And so she started toward the refrigerator, which was also stainless steel... and big. All the beating surface a girl could want.

She shuffled along with the chair bound to her back and bottom and legs. Her progress was agonizingly slow. It was like trying to

walk with a weird, form-fitting coffin strapped to her back. And it *would be* her coffin, if she fell over. Or if she was still whacking it fruitlessly against the front of the KitchenAid when the man of the house returned.

Once she tottered on the edge of falling over—on her face—and managed to keep her balance by what seemed like willpower alone. The pain in her calf came back, once more threatening to become a charley horse and render her right leg useless. She willed that away, too, closing her eyes to do it. Sweat rolled down her face, washing away dried tears she did not remember crying.

How much time was passing? How much? The rain had slackened still more. Soon she would start to hear dripping instead of raining. Maybe Deke was putting up a fight. Maybe he even had a gun in a drawer of his cluttered old desk and had shot Pickering the way you'd shoot a rabid dog. Would she hear a gunshot in here? She didn't think so; the wind was still blowing pretty hard. More likely Pickering—twenty years younger than Deke, and obviously in shape—would take away any weapon Deke might produce and use it on the old man.

She tried to sweep all these thoughts away, but it was hard. It was hard even though they were useless. She shuffled forward with her eyes still closed and her pale face—swollen at the mouth—drawn down in effort. One baby step, two baby steps. *May I take another six baby steps?* Yes, you may. But on the fourth one, her knees—bent almost into a squat—bumped against the front of the refrigerator.

Em opened her eyes, unable to believe she had actually made this arduous safari safely—a distance an unbound person could have covered in three ordinary steps, but a safari for her. A fucking *trek*.

There was no time to waste congratulating herself, and not just because she might hear the Pillbox's front door open anytime. She had other problems. Her muscles were strained and trembling from trying to walk in what was almost a sitting position; she felt like an out-of-condition amateur attempting some outrageous tantra yoga

position. If she didn't do this at once, she wouldn't be able to do it at all. And if the chair was as strong as it looked—

But she pushed this thought away.

“It's probably going to hurt,” she panted. “You know that, don't you?” She knew, but thought Pickering might have even worse things in mind for her.

“Please,” she said, turning sideways to the refrigerator, giving it her profile. If that was praying, she had an idea it was her dead daughter she was praying to. “*Please*,” she said again, and swung her hips sideways, smacking the parasite she was wearing against the front of the fridge.

She wasn't as surprised as when the chair had come free of the floor all at once, almost causing her to flip headfirst onto the stove, but almost. There was a loud cracking sound from the chair back, and the seat slewed sideways on her bottom. Only the legs held firm.

“It's *rot* ten!” she cried to the empty kitchen. “The damn thing's *rotten!*” Maybe not actually, but—God bless the Florida climate—it sure wasn't as strong as it looked. Finally, a little stroke of luck... and if he came in now, just as she'd had it, Emily thought she would go insane.

How long now? How long had he been gone? She had no idea. She had always had a fairly accurate clock in her head, but now it was as useless as the one on the wall. It was uniquely horrible to have lost track of time so completely. She remembered her big clunky watch and looked down, but the watch was gone. There was just a pale patch where it had been. He must have taken it.

She almost swung sideways into the fridge again, then had a better idea. Her bottom was partly free of the chair seat now, and that gave her extra leverage. She strained with her back as she had strained with her thighs and calves while working to free the chair from the floor, and this time when she felt a warning pain way down low, just above the base of her spine, she didn't relax and wait and recycle. She didn't think she had the luxury of waiting anymore. She could see him coming back, running right down the center of the

deserted road, his feet spitting up sprays of water, the yellow slicker flapping. And, in one hand, some sort of a tool. A tire iron, perhaps, that he had snatched from the bloodstained trunk of his Mercedes.

Em strained upward. The pain in the small of her back deepened, took on a glassy intensity. But she could hear that ripping sound again as duct tape let go—not of the chair, but of itself. Of the overlapping layers of itself. Loosening. Loosening wasn't as good as freeing, but it was still good. It gave her more leverage.

She swung her hips against the refrigerator again, letting out a little scream of effort. The shock jarred through her. This time the chair didn't move. The chair clung to her like a limpet. She swung her hips again, harder, screaming louder: tantra yoga meets S&M disco. There was another *crack*, and this time the chair slewed to the right on her back and hips.

She swung again... again... again, pivoting on her increasingly tired hips and *smashing*. She lost count. She was crying again. She had split her shorts up the back. They had slid down crooked over one hip, and the hip itself was bleeding. She thought she had taken a splinter in it.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her runaway heart (small chance of that), and whacked herself and her wooden prison into the refrigerator again, as hard as she could. This time she finally struck the lever of the recessed automatic ice dispenser, releasing a jackpot of cubes onto the tiled floor. There was another crack, a sag, and all at once her left arm was free. She looked down at it, stupid-eyed with amazement. The arm of the chair was still bound to her forearm, but now the body of the chair hung askew on that side, held to her by long gray strips of duct tape. It was like being caught in a cobweb. And of course she was; the crazy bastard in the khaki shorts and Izod shirt was the spider. She still wasn't free, but now she could use the knife. All she had to do was shuffle back to the center island and get it.



“Don’t step on the cubes,” she advised herself in a ragged voice. She sounded—to her own ears, at least—like a manic grad student

who had studied herself to the edge of a nervous breakdown. “This would be a very bad time to go skating.”

She avoided the ice, but as she bent for the knife, her overstrained back gave a warning creak. The chair, much looser now but still bound to her midsection by those corsets of tape (and at the legs, as well), banged into the side of the island. She paid no attention. She was able to grasp the knife with her newly freed left hand and use it to saw through the tape binding her right arm, sobbing for breath and casting small darting glances at the swing door between the kitchen and whatever lay beyond—the dining room and the front hall, she assumed; it was the way he had gone out, and the way he would probably come back in. When her right hand was free, she tore off the broken chunk of chair still bound to her left arm and tossed it on the center island.

“Stop looking for him,” she told herself in the gray, shadowy kitchen. “Just do your work.” It was good advice, but hard to follow when you knew your death might come through that door, and soon.

She sawed through the band of tape just below her breasts. This should have been slow, careful work, but she couldn’t afford to go slow and nicked herself repeatedly with the tip of the knife. She could feel blood spreading on her skin.

The knife was sharp. The bad news about that were those repeated nicks just below her breastbone. The good news was that the duct tape split away without much argument, layer after layer. Finally it was cut through from top to bottom, and the chair sagged away from her back a little more. She set to work on the wide band of tape around her waist. Now she could bend further, and the work went faster, with less damage to her body. She cut all the way through at last, and the chair fell backward. But its legs were still bound to her legs, and the wooden feet suddenly shifted, digging in low on her calves where the Achilles tendons surfaced like cables just below the skin. The pain was excruciating, and she moaned miserably.

Em reached around and used her left hand to push the chair against her back again, relieving that horrible, digging pressure. It

was a filthy angle, all wrong for her arm, but she continued to press the chair to her while she shuffled around so she was once more facing the stove. Then she leaned back, using the center island to relieve the pressure. Gasping for breath, crying again (she wasn't aware of the tears), she leaned forward and began to saw through the tape binding her ankles. Her exertions had loosened these bands and the others binding her lower body to the fucking chair; consequently the work went faster and she cut herself less frequently, although she managed to give herself a fairly good slash on the right calf—as if some mad part of her were trying to punish it for seizing up while she was trying to push the chair free of the floor.

She was working on the tape holding her knees—the last ones left—when she heard the front door open and close. “I’m home, honey!” Pickering called cheerfully. “Miss me?” Em froze, bent over with her hair hanging in her face, and it took every last scrap of will to get moving again. No time for finesse now; she jammed the blade of the butcher knife under the belt of gray tape binding her right knee, miraculously avoided stabbing the tip into her own kneecap, and hauled upward with all her strength.

In the hall, there was a heavy *cluck* sound, and she knew he had just turned a key in a lock—a big lock, from the sound—Pickering wanted no interruptions, probably thought there had been interruptions enough for one day. He started up the hall. He must have been wearing sneakers (she hadn't noticed before), because she could hear them squelching. He was whistling “O Susanna.”

The tape holding her right knee parted, bottom to top, and the chair fell backward against the counter with a noisy clatter, now bound to her only at the left knee. For a moment the footsteps beyond the swing door—very close, now—stopped, and then they broke into a run. After that it all happened very, very fast.

He hit the door two-handed, and it burst open with a loud thump; those hands were still outstretched as he came racing into the kitchen. They were empty—no sign of the tire iron she had imagined. The sleeves of the yellow slicker were pulled halfway up his arms,

and Em had time to think. *That's too small for you, asshole—a wife would tell you, but you don't have a wife, do you?*

The hood of the slicker was pushed back. His power haircut was finally in disarray—*mild* disarray; it was too short for anything else—and rainwater dripped down the sides of his face and into his eyes. He took in the situation at a glance, seemed to understand everything. *“Oh. you annoying bitch!”* he bellowed, and ran around the counter to grab her.

She stabbed out with the butcher knife. The blade shot between the first and second fingers of his splayed right hand and sawed deep into the flesh at the bottom of the V. Blood poured down. Pickering screamed in pain and surprise—mostly surprise, she thought. Hyenas don't expect their victims to turn on th—

He reached out with his left hand, grabbed her wrist, twisted it. Something creaked. Or maybe snapped. Either way, pain bolted up her arm, as bright as light. She tried to hold on to the knife, but there was no chance. It went flying all the way across the room, and when he let go of her wrist, her right hand flopped, fingers splayed.

He bored in on her and Em pushed him backward, using both hands and ignoring the fresh scream of pain from her strained wrist. It was instinct only. Her rational mind would have told her that a push wasn't going to stop this guy, but her rational mind was now cringing in a corner of her head, able to do nothing but hope for the best.

He outweighed her, but her bottom was pressed against the chipped lip of the center island. He went staggering backward with a look of startlement that would have been comical in other circumstances, and came down on either one ice cube or a bunch of them. For a moment he looked like a cartoon character—Road Runner, perhaps—sprinting in place in an effort to stay on his feet. Then he stepped on more ice cubes (she saw them go spinning and glinting across the floor), went down hard, and rapped the back of his head against his newly dented refrigerator.

He held up his bleeding hand and looked at it. Then he looked at her. “You *cut* me,” he said. “You bitch, you dumb bitch, look at this, you *cut* me. Why did you cut me?”

He tried to scramble to his feet, but more ice cubes went zipping out from beneath him and he thumped down again. He pivoted on one knee, meaning to rise that way, and for a moment his back was to her. Em seized the chair’s broken left arm from the center island. Ragged strands of duct tape still dangled from it. Pickering got to his feet and turned toward her. Emily was waiting. She brought the arm down on his forehead using both hands—her right one didn’t want to close, but she made it. Some atavistic, survival-oriented part of her even remembered to choke up on the red maple rod, knowing it would maximize the force, and maximum force was good. It was a chair arm, after all, not a baseball bat.

There was a thump. It wasn’t as loud as the swing door had been when he hit it coming in, but it still sounded loud enough, perhaps because the rain had slackened even more. For a moment nothing else happened, and then blood began to run out of his power haircut and over his forehead. She stared at him, into his eyes. He stared back with dazed incomprehension.

“Don’t,” he said feebly, and reached out one hand to take the chair arm from her.

“Yes,” she said, and swung again, this time from the side: a slicing two-handed blow, her right hand giving up and letting go at the last moment, her left one holding firm. The end of the arm—ragged where it had broken, splinters sticking out—hammered into Pickering’s right temple. This time the blood burst at once as his head snapped to the side, all the way to his left shoulder. Bright drops ran down his cheek and pattered onto the gray tile.

“Stop,” he said thickly, pawing at the air with one hand. He looked like a drowning man begging for rescue.

“No,” she said, and brought the arm down on his head again.

Pickering screamed and staggered away from her in a head-tucked hunch, trying to put the center island between them. He stepped on

more ice cubes and skidded, but this time managed to stay upright. Only by luck, she had to believe, since he had to be all but out on his feet.

For a moment she almost let him go, thinking he would run out through the swing door. It was what she would have done. Then her dad spoke up, very calmly, in her head: *“He’s after the knife, sweetie.”*

“No,” she said, snarling it this time. “No, you *won’t*.”

She tried to run around the other side of the island and head him off, but she couldn’t run, not while she was dragging the shattered remains of the chair behind her like a ball and fucking chain—it was still duct-taped to her left knee. It banged against the island, slammed her in the butt, tried to get between her legs and trip her. The chair seemed to be on *his* side, and she was glad she had broken it.

Pickering got to the knife—it was lying against the bottom of the swing door—and fell on it like a football tackle covering a loose ball. He was making a guttural wheezing sound deep in his throat. Em reached him just as he started to turn over. She hammered him with the chair arm again and again, shrieking, aware in some part of her mind that it wasn’t heavy enough and she wasn’t generating anywhere near the amount of force she *wanted* to generate. She could see her right wrist, already puffing up, trying to address the outrage perpetrated on it just as if it expected to survive this day.

Pickering collapsed on the knife and lay still. She backed away a little, gasping for breath, those little white comets once more flying across her field of vision.

Men spoke in her mind. This was not uncommon with her, and not always unwelcome. Sometimes, but not always.

Henry: *“Get that damned knife and put it right between his shoulder blades.”*

Rusty: *“No, honey. Don’t go close to him. That’s what he expects. He’s playing possum.”*

Henry: “*Or the back of his neck. That’s good, too. His stinking neck.*”

Rusty: “*Reaching under him would be like sticking your hand into a hay baler, Emmy. You’ve got two choices. Beat him to death —*”

Henry, sounding reluctant but convinced: “*—or run.*”

Well, maybe. And maybe not.

There was a drawer on this side of the island. She yanked it open, hoping for another knife—for *lots* of them: carving knives, filleting knives, steak knives, serrated bread knives. She would settle for a goddamned *butter* knife. What she saw was mostly an array of fancy black plastic cooking tools: a pair of spatulas, a ladle, and one of those big serving spoons full of holes. There was some other bric-a-brac, but the most dangerous-looking thing her eye fell on was a potato peeler.

“Listen to me,” she said. Her voice was hoarse, almost guttural. Her throat was dry- “I don’t want to kill you, but I will if you make me. I’ve got a meat fork here. If you try to turn over, I’ll stick it in the back of your neck and keep pushing until it comes out the front.”

Did he believe her? That was one question. She was sure he’d removed all the knives except for the one underneath him on purpose, but could he be sure he’d gotten all the other sharp objects? Most men had no idea what was in the drawers of their kitchens—she knew this from life with Henry, and before Henry from life with father—but Pickering wasn’t most men and this wasn’t most kitchens. She had an idea it was more like an operating theater. Still, given how dazed he was (*was* he dazed?), and how he must surely believe that a lapse of memory could get him killed, she thought the bluff might run. Only there was another question: Was he even hearing her? Or understanding her if he did? A bluff couldn’t work if the person you were trying to bluff didn’t understand the stakes.

But she wasn’t going to stand here debating. That would be the worst thing she could do. She bent over, never taking her eyes from Pickering, and hooked her fingers under the last band of tape still

binding her to the chair. The fingers of her right hand wanted even less to work now, but she made them. And her sweat-drenched skin helped. She shoved downward, and the tape started coming free with another ill-tempered ripping sound. She supposed it hurt, it left a bright-red band across her kneecap (for some reason the word *Jupiter* floated randomly through her mind), but she was far past feeling such things. It let go all at once and slid down to her ankle, wrinkled and twisted and sticking to itself. She shook it off her foot and sidled backward, free. Her head was pounding, either from exertion or from where he'd hit her while she was looking at the dead girl in the trunk of his Mercedes.

“Nicole,” she said. “Her name was Nicole.”

Naming the dead girl seemed to bring Em back to herself a little. Now the idea of trying to get the butcher knife out from under him seemed like madness. The part of herself that sometimes talked in her father's voice was right—just staying in the same room with Pickering was pressing her luck. Which left leaving. Only that.

“I'm going now,” she said. “Do you hear me?”

He didn't move.

“I've got the meat fork. If you come after me, I'll stab you with it. I'll... I'll poke your eyes out. What you want to do is stay right where you are. Have you got that?”

He didn't move.

Emily backed away from him, then turned and left the kitchen by the door on the other side of the room. She was still holding the bloody chair arm.

8

There was a photograph on the wall by the bed.

IT WAS THE DINING ROOM ON THE OTHER SIDE. There was a long table with a glass top. Around it were seven red maple chairs. The spot where the eighth belonged was vacant. Of course. As she studied the empty place at the “mother” end of the table, a memory came to her: blood blooming in a tiny seed pearl below her eye as Pickering said. *Okay, good, okay.* He had believed her when she said only Deke could know she might be inside the Pillbox, so he had thrown the little knife—Nicole’s little knife, she had thought then—into the sink.

So there had been a knife to threaten him with all along. Still was. In the sink. But she wasn’t going back in there now. No way.

She crossed the room and went down a hall with five doors, two on each side and one at the end. The first two doors she passed were open, on her left a bathroom and on her right a laundry room. The washing machine was a top loader, its hatch open. A box of Tide stood on the shelf next to it. A bloodstained shirt was lying halfway in and halfway out of the hatch. Nicole’s shirt, Emily was quite sure, although she couldn’t be positive. And if it *was* hers, why had Pickering been planning to wash it? Washing wouldn’t take out the holes. Emily remembered thinking there had been dozens, although that surely wasn’t possible. Was it?

She thought it was, actually: Pickering in a frenzy.

She opened the door beyond the bathroom and saw a guest room. It was nothing but a dark and sterile box starring a king bed so stringently neat, you could no doubt bounce a nickel on the counterpane. And had a maid made up that bed? *Our survey says no*, Em thought. *Our survey says no maid has ever set foot in this house. Only “nieces.”*

The door across from the guest room gave way to a study. It was every bit as sterile as the room it faced across the hall. There were two filing cabinets in one corner. There was a big desk with nothing on it but a Dell PC hooded with a transparent plastic dust cover. The floor was plain oak planks. There was no rug. There were no pictures on the wall. The single big window was shuttered, admitting only a

few dull spokes of light. Like the guest room, this place looked dim and forgotten.

He has never worked in here, she thought, and knew it was true. It was stage dressing. The whole house was, including the room from which she had escaped—the room that looked like a kitchen but was actually an operating theater, complete with easy-clean counters and floors.

The door at the end of the hall was closed, and as she approached it, she knew it would be locked. She would be trapped at the end of this corridor if he entered it from the kitchen/dining-room end. Trapped with nowhere to run, and these days running was the only thing she was good at, the only thing she was good/or.

She hitched up her shorts—they felt like they were floating on her now, with the back seam split open—and grasped the knob. She was so full of her premonition that for a moment she couldn't believe it when the knob turned in her hand. She pushed the door open and stepped into what had to be Pickering's bedroom. It was almost as sterile as the guest room, but not quite. For one thing, there were two pillows instead of just one, and the counterpane of the bed (which looked like a twin of the guest-room bed) had been turned back in a neat triangle, ready to admit the owner to the comfort of fresh sheets after a hard day's work. And there was a carpet on the floor. Just a cheap nylon-pile thing, but wall-to-wall. Henry no doubt would have called it a Carpet Barn special, but it matched the blue walls and made the room look less skeletal than the others. There was also a small desk—it looked like an old school desk—and a plain wooden chair. And although this was pretty small shakes compared to the study setup, with its big (and unfortunately shuttered) window and expensive computer, she had a feeling this desk had been *used*. That Pickering sat there writing longhand, hunched over like a child in a country schoolroom. Writing what she did not like to think.

The window in here was also big. And unlike the windows in the study and the guest room, it wasn't shuttered. Before Em could look out and see what lay beyond, her attention was drawn to a photograph on the wall by the bed. Not hung and certainly not

framed, only tacked there with a pushpin. There were other tiny holes on the wall around it, as if other pictures had been pinned there over the years. This one was a color shot with 4-19-07 printed digitally in the right corner. Taken by an old-fashioned camera rather than a digital one, by the look of the paper, and not by anyone with much flair for photography. On the other hand, perhaps the photographer had been excited. The way hyenas might get excited, she supposed, when sundown comes and there's fresh prey in the offing. It was blurry, as if taken with a telephoto lens, and the subject wasn't centered. The subject was a long-legged young woman wearing denim shorts and a cropped top that said BEER O'CLOCK BAR. She had a tray balanced on the fingers of her left hand, like a waitress in a jolly old Norman Rockwell painting. She was laughing. Her hair was blond. Em couldn't be sure it was Nicole, not from this blurred photo and those few shocked instants when she had been looking down at the dead girl in the trunk of the Mercedes... but she *was* sure. Her heart was sure.

Rusty: *"It doesn't matter, sweetie. You have to get out of here. You have to get yourself some running room."*

As if to prove it, the door between the kitchen and the dining room hanged open—almost hard enough to tear it from the hinges, it sounded like.

No, she thought. All the sensation went out of her middle. She didn't think she wet herself again, but wouldn't have been able to tell if she had. *No, it can't be.*

"Want to play rough?" Pickering called. His voice sounded dazed and cheerful. "Okay, I can play rough. Sure. Not a problem. You want it? You bet. Daddy's gonna bring it."

Coming. Crossing the dining room. She heard a thump followed by a rough clatter as he stumbled into one of the other chairs (perhaps the one at the "father" end of the table) and shoved it aside. The world swam away from her, growing gray even though this room was relatively bright now that the storm was unraveling.

She bit down on her split lip. This sent a fresh stream of blood down her chin, but it also brought color and reality back into the world. She slammed the door and grabbed for the lock. There *was* no lock. She looked around and spied the humble wooden chair sitting before the humble wooden desk. As Pickering broke into a shambling run past his laundry room and study—and did he have the butcher knife clutched in one hand? Of course he did—she snatched the chair, placed it under the knob, and tilted it. Only an instant later, he hit the door with both hands.

She thought that if this floor had also been oak planking, the chair would have skidded away like a shuffleboard weight. Perhaps she would have grabbed it and stood him off with it: Em the Fearless Lion Tamer. She didn't think so. In any case, there was that carpet. Cheap nylon pile, but deep—it had that going for it, at least. The tilted legs of the chair dug in and held, although she saw a ripple go through the carpet.

Pickering roared and began to beat on the door with his fists. She hoped he was still holding on to the knife as he did it; maybe he would inadvertently cut his own throat.

“Open this door!” he shouted. “Open it! You're only making it worse for yourself!”

Like I could, Emily thought, backing away. And looking around. What now? The window? What else? There was only the one door, so it had to be the window.

“You're making me mad, Lady Jane!”

No, you were already mad. As in hatter.

She could see the window was a Florida special, the kind made only for looking out of, not for opening. Because of the air-conditioning. So what was next? Hurtle through it like Clint Eastwood in one of those old spaghetti westerns? Sounded possible: it was certainly the kind of thing that had appealed to her as a kid, but she had an idea she'd cut herself to ribbons if she actually tried it. Clint Eastwood and The Rock and Steven Seagal had stuntmen going for them when it came to things like the old through-the-saloon-

window sequences. And the stuntmen had special glass going for *them*.

She heard the rapid thump of footfalls beyond the door as he first backed up and then ran at it again. It was a heavy door, but Pickering wasn't kidding, and it shuddered in its frame. This time the chair jerked backward an inch or two before holding. Worse, that ripple went through the rug again and she heard a tearing sound that was not unlike the sound of duct tape letting go. He was remarkably lively for someone who had been beaten about the head and shoulders with a stout piece of red maple, but of course he was both crazy and just sane enough to know that if she got away, he wouldn't. She supposed that was a strong motivator.

I should have used the whole fucking chair on him, she thought.

"Want to play?" he panted. "I'll play. Sure. Bet your butt. But you're on *my* playground, okay? And here... I... *come!*" He hit the door again. It bucked in its frame, loose on its hinges now, and the chair jumped back another two or three inches. Em could see dark teardrop shapes between the tilted legs and the door: rips in the cheap carpet.

Out the window then. If she was going to die bleeding from Christ alone knew how many wounds, she would rather inflict them herself. Maybe... if she wrapped herself in the coverlet...

Then her eye fell on the desk.

"Mr. Pickering!" she called, grasping the desk by the sides. "Wait! I want to make a deal with you!"

"No deals with bitches, okay?" he said petulantly, but he had stopped for a moment—perhaps to get his breath back—and it gave her time. Time was all she wanted. Time was all she could possibly get from him; she didn't really need him to tell her he wasn't the sort of man who made deals with bitches. "What's your big plan? Tell Daddy Jim."

Currently the desk was her plan. She picked it up, half certain her strained lower back would just pop like a balloon. But the desk was

light, and lighter still when several rubber-banded stacks of what looked like university blue books came tumbling out.

“What are you doing?” he asked sharply, and then: “Don’t do that!”

She ran at the window, then stopped short and threw the desk. The sound of the breaking glass was enormous. Without pausing to think or look—thinking would do her no good at this point, and looking would only scare her if the drop was far—she yanked the coverlet from the bed.

Pickering hit the door again, and although the chair held again (she knew this; if it let go he would have been running across the room and grabbing for her), something gave a loud wooden crack.

Em wrapped the coverlet around her from chin to feet, for a moment looking like an N.C. Wyeth Indian woman about to set off into a snowstorm. Then she leaped through the jagged hole in the window just as the door crashed open behind her. Several arrows of glass sticking out of the frame wounded the coverlet, but not a single one touched Em.

“Oh, you fucking annoying bitch!” Pickering screamed behind her—*close* behind her—and then she was sailing.

9

Gravity is everyone’s mother.

SHE HAD BEEN A TOMBOY AS A KID, preferring boys’ games (the best one was simply called Guns) in the woods behind their house in suburban Chicago to goofing around with Barbie and Ken on the front porch. She lived in her Toughskins and shell tops, hair scooped back behind her head in a ponytail. She and her best friend

Becka watched old Eastwood and Schwarzenegger movies on TV instead of the Olsen twins, and when they watched *Scooby-Doo*, they identified with the dog rather than Velma or Daphne. For two years in grammar school, their lunches were Scooby Snacks.

And they climbed trees, of course. Emily seemed to remember her and Becka hanging out in the trees in their respective backyards for one whole summer. They might have been nine that year. Other than her father's lesson on how to fall, the only thing Em remembered clearly about the tree-climbing summer was her mother putting some kind of white cream on her nose every morning and telling her, "*Don't wipe that off, Emmy!*" in her obey-me-or-die voice.

One day, Becka lost her balance and came very close to falling fifteen feet to the Jackson lawn (maybe only ten, but at the time it had looked to the girls like twenty-five...even fifty). She saved herself by grabbing a branch, but then hung there, wailing for help.

Rusty had been mowing the lawn. He strolled over—yes, strolled; he even took time to kill the Briggs & Stratton—and held out his arms. "Drop," he said, and Becka, only two years past her belief in Santa and still sublimely trusting, dropped. Rusty caught her easily, then called Em down from the tree. He made both girls sit at the base. Becka was crying a little, and Em was scared—mostly that tree-climbing would now become an act that was *forbidden*, like walking down to the corner store alone after 7:00 p.m.

Rusty did not forbid them (although Emily's mother might have, if she had been looking out the kitchen window). What he did was teach them how to fall. And then they practiced for almost an hour.

What a cool day that had been.

AS SHE WENT OUT THROUGH THE WINDOW, Emily saw it was a damned good distance to the flagged patio below. Maybe only ten feet, but it looked like twenty-five as she dropped with the shredded coverlet fluttering around her. Or fifty.

Let your knees give way, Rusty had told them sixteen or seventeen years before, during Tree-Climbing Summer, also known as the Summer of the White Nose. Don't ask them to take the shock. They will—in nine cases out of ten, if the drop isn't too far, they will—but you could end up with a broken bone. Hip, leg, or ankle. Ankle, most likely. Remember that gravity is everyone's mother. Give in to her. Let her hug you. Let your knees give way, then tuck and roll.

Em hit the red Spanish-style flagstones and let her knees give way. At the same time she shoulder-checked the air, throwing her weight to the left. She tucked her head and rolled. There was no pain—no *immediate* pain—but a vast jarring went through her, as if her body had become an empty shaft and someone had dropped some large piece of furniture right down the center. But she kept her head from rapping the flagstones. And she didn't think she had broken either leg, although only standing would prove her right.

She struck a metal patio table hard enough to knock it over. Then she got to her feet, still not entirely sure her body was intact enough to do this until it actually did. She looked up and saw Pickering peering out the broken window. His face was cramped into a grimace, and he was brandishing the knife.

“Stop it!” he shouted. *“Stop running away and hold still¹.”*

As if, Em thought. The last of that afternoon's rain had turned to fog, dotting her upturned face with dew. It felt heavenly. She gave him the ringer, then shook it for emphasis.

Pickering roared, *“Don't you flip me the bird, you cunt!”* and threw the knife at her. It didn't even come close. It struck the flagstones with a clang and skittered away beneath his gas grill in two pieces, blade and handle. When she looked up again, the shattered window was vacant.

Her dad's voice told her Pickering was coming, but Em hardly needed that update. She went to the edge of the patio—walking easily, not limping, although she supposed she might owe that to the adrenaline surge—and looked down. Three measly feet to the sand

and sea oats. A bunny compared to the drop she had just survived. Beyond the patio was the beach, where she had done so many morning runs.

She looked the other way, toward the road, but that was no good. The ugly concrete wall was too high. And Pickering was coming. Of course he was.

She braced one hand on the ornamental brickwork, then dropped to the sand. Sea oats tickled her thighs. She hurried up the dune between the Pillbox and the beach, hitching at her ruined shorts and looking repeatedly back over her shoulder. Nothing... still nothing... and then Pickering burst out through the back door, yelling at her to stop right where she was. He had ditched the yellow slicker and had grabbed some other sharp object. He was waving it in his left hand as he ran down the walk to the patio. She couldn't see what it was, and didn't want to. She didn't want him that close.

She could outrun him. Something in his gait said he would be fast for a little while and then flag, no matter how strongly his insanity and his fear of exposure pricked him on.

She thought: *It's as if I was in training for this all along.*

Yet she almost made a crucial mistake when she got to the beach, almost turned south. That would have taken her to the end of Vermillion Key in less than a quarter of a mile. Of course she could hail the drawbridge gatehouse when she got there (scream her lungs out for help, actually), but if Pickering had done something to Deke Hollis—and she was afraid that was the case—she would then be toast. There might be a passing boat she could scream to but she had an idea Pickering was far past any restraint; at this point he would probably be willing to stab her to death on the stage of Radio City Music Hall as the Rockettes looked on.

So she turned north instead, where almost two miles of empty beach lay between her and the Grass Shack. She stripped off her sneakers and began to run.

What she had not expected was the beauty.

THIS WASN'T THE FIRST TIME she had run on the beach after one of these brief but powerful afternoon storms, and the feeling of wetness accumulating on her face and arms was familiar. So was the heightened sound of the surf (the tide was on the come now, the beach narrowing to a stripe) and the heightened aromas: salt, seaweed, flowers, even wet wood. She had expected to be frightened—the way she supposed people in combat were frightened while doing dangerous jobs that usually (but not always) came out all right. What she had not expected was the beauty.

The fog had come in from the Gulf. The water was a dull green phantom, heaving shoreward through the white. The fish must have been running, because it was a pelican all-you-can-eat buffet out there. She saw most as projected shadows, folding their wings and plummeting at the water. A few others bobbed up and down on the waves closer in, seemingly as dead as decoys, but watching her. Out there to her left, the sun was a small orange-yellow coin peering dully.

She was afraid her calf would cramp up again—if that happened, she was done, finished. But this was work it had become used to, and it felt loose enough, if a little too warm. Her lower back was more worrisome, broadcasting a twinge with every third or fourth stride and sending out a heavier flash of pain every two dozen or so. But she talked to it inside her head, babied it, promised it hot baths and Shiatsu massages when this was over and the feral creature behind her was safely incarcerated in the Collier County jail. It seemed to work. Either that or running was itself a kind of massage. She had reasons to think this was so.

Pickering bellowed twice more for her to stop, then fell silent, saving his breath for the chase. She looked back once and thought he was perhaps seventy yards behind, the only thing about him standing out in the misty late afternoon his red Izod shirt. She looked again and he was clearer; she could see his blood-spattered khaki shorts. Fifty yards behind. But panting. Good. Panting was good.

Emily leaped over a tangle of driftwood and her shorts slid down, threatening to hobble or even trip her up. She didn't have time to stop and take them off so she yanked them up savagely, wishing there was a drawstring she could pull, maybe even clutch in her teeth.

There was a yell from behind her and she thought there was fear as well as fury in it. It sounded as though Pickering was finally realizing this might not go his way. She risked another look back, hoping, and her hope was not in vain. He had tripped over the driftwood she had skipped over and gone to his knees. His new weapon lay before him, making an *X* in the sand. Scissors, then. Kitchen scissors. The big kind cooks used to snip gristle and bone. He snatched them up and scrambled to his feet.

Emily ran on, increasing her speed a little bit at a time. She didn't plan on doing this, but she didn't think it was her body taking over, either. There was something between body and mind, some interface. That was the part of her that wanted to be in charge now, and Em let it take over. That part wanted her to turn it on just bit by bit, almost gently, so that the animal behind her wouldn't realize what she was doing. That part wanted to tease Pickering into increasing his own speed to keep up with her, maybe even close the gap a little. That part wanted to use him up and blow him out. That part wanted to hear him gasping and wheezing. Maybe even coughing, if he was a smoker (although that seemed too much to hope for). Then she would put herself into the overdrive gear she now had but rarely used; that gear always seemed like tempting fate, somehow—like donning wax wings on a sunny day. But now she had no choice. And if she had tempted fate, it had been when she'd swerved to look into the Pillbox's flagged courtyard in the first place.

And what choice did I have, once I saw her hair? Maybe it was fate that tempted me.

She ran on, her feet printing the sand with her passing. She looked back again and saw Pickering only forty yards behind, but forty yards was okay. Given how red and strained his face was, forty was very okay.

To the west and directly overhead, the clouds tore open with tropical suddenness, instantly brightening the fog from dreary gray to dazzling white. Patches of sun dotted the beach with spotlights; Em ran into one and then out in a single stride, feeling the temperature spike with returning humidity and then drop again as the fog once more took her in. It was like running past an open Laundromat door on a cold day. Ahead of her, hazy blue opened in a long cat's eye. A double rainbow leaped out above it, each color blazing and distinct. The westward legs plunged into the unraveling fog and doused themselves in the water; those curving down toward the mainland disappeared into the palms and waxy fiddlewoods.

Her right foot clipped her left ankle and she stumbled. For a moment she was on the verge of falling, and then she regained her balance. But now he was just thirty yards behind, and thirty was too close. No more looking at rainbows. If she didn't take care of business, the ones up ahead would be her last.

She faced forward again and there was a man there, standing ankle-deep in the surf and staring at them. He was wearing nothing but a pair of cutoff denim shorts and a sopping red neckerchief. His skin was brown; his hair and eyes were dark. He was short, but his body was as trim as a glove. He walked out of the water, and she could see the concern on his face. Oh, thank God, she could see the concern. "Help!" she screamed. "*Help me!*"

The look of concern deepened. "*Senora? Que ha pasado? Que es lo que va mal?*"

She knew some Spanish—driblets and drablets—but at the sound of his, all of hers went out of her mind. It didn't matter. This was almost certainly one of the groundskeepers from one of the big

houses. He had taken advantage of the rain to cool off in the Gulf. He might not have a green card, but he didn't need one to save her life. He was a man, he was clearly strong, and he was concerned. She threw herself into his arms and felt the water on him soak onto her skin and shirt.

"He's crazy!" she shouted into his face. She could do this because they were almost exactly the same height. And at least one Spanish word came back to her. A valuable one, she thought, in this situation. "*Loco! Loco, loco!*"

The guy turned, one arm firmly around her. Emily looked where he was looking and saw Pickering. Pickering was grinning. It was an easy grin, rather apologetic. Even the blood spattered on his shorts and swelling face didn't render the grin entirely unconvincing. And there was no sign of the scissors, that was the worst. His hands—the right one slashed and now clotting between the first two fingers—were empty.

"*Es mi esposa,*" he said. His tone was as apologetic—and as convincing—as his grin. Even the fact that he was panting seemed all right. "*No te preocupes. Ella tiene...*" His Spanish either failed him or seemed to fail him. He spread his hands, still grinning. "Problems? She has problems?"

The Latino's eyes lit with comprehension and relief. "*Problemas?*"

"*Si*" Pickering agreed. Then one of his spread hands went to his mouth and made a bottle-tipping gesture.

"Ah!" the Latino said, nodding. "*Dreenk!*"

"No!" Em cried, sensing the guy was about to actually push her into Pickering's arms, wanting to be free of this unexpected *problema*, this unexpected *senora*. She blew breath into the man's face to show there was no liquor on it. Then inspiration struck and she tapped her swollen mouth. "*Loco!* He did this!"

"Nah, she did it to herself, mate," Pickering said. "Okay?"

"Okay," the Latino said, and nodded, but he didn't push Emily toward Pickering after all. Now he seemed undecided. And another word came to Emily, something dredged up from some educational

children's show she had watched—probably with the faithful Becka—when she wasn't watching *Scooby-Doo*.

"*Peligro*," she said, forcing herself not to shout. Shouting was what crazy *esposas* did. She pinned the Latino swimmer's eyes with her own. "*Peligro*. Him! *Senor Peligro!*"

Pickering laughed and reached for her. Panicked at how close he was (it was like having a hay baler suddenly grow hands), she pushed him. He wasn't expecting it, and he was still out of breath. He didn't fall down but did stagger back a step, eyes widening. And the scissors fell out from between the waistband of his shorts and the small of his back, where he had stashed them. For a moment all three of them stared at the metal *X* on the sand. The waves roared monotonously. Birds cried from inside the unraveling fog.

11

Then she was up and running again.

PICKERING'S EASY GRIN—the one he must have used on so many "nieces"—resurfaced. "I can explain that, but I don't have enough of the lingo. Perfectly good explanation, okay?" He tapped his chest like Tarzan. "*No Senor Loco, no Senor Peligro, okay?*" And! might have flown. But then, still smiling, pointing at "Em, he said: "*Ella es bobo perra.*"

She had no idea what *bobo perra* was, but she saw the way Pickering's face changed when he said it. Mostly it had to do with his upper lip, which wrinkled and then lifted, as the top half of a dog's snout does when it snarls. The Latino pushed Em a step backward with a sweep of his arm. Not completely behind him, but almost, and

the meaning was clear: protection. Then he bent down, reaching for the metal X on the sand.

If he had reached before pushing Em Back, things might still have worked out. But Pickering saw things tilting away from him and went for the scissors himself. He got them first, fell on his knees, and stabbed the points through the Latino's sand-caked left foot. The Latino shrieked, his eyes flying wide open.

He reached for Pickering, but Pickering first fell to one side, then got up (*Still so quick*, Em thought) and danced away. Then he moved back in. He curled an arm around the Latino's trim shoulders in a just-pals embrace, and drove the scissors into the Latino's chest. The Latino tried to back away, but Pickering held him fast, stabbing and stabbing. None of the strokes went deep—Pickering was working too fast for that—but blood flowed everywhere.

“No!” Emily screamed. “No, stop it!”

Pickering turned toward her for just an instant, eyes bright and unspeakable, then stabbed the Latino in the mouth, the scissors going deep enough for the steel finger loops to clash on the man's teeth. “Okay?” he asked. “Okay? That okay? That work for you, you fucking beaner?”

Emily looked around for anything, a single piece of driftwood to strike him with, and there was nothing. When she looked back, the scissors were sticking out of the Latino's eye. He crumpled slowly, almost seeming to bow from the waist, and Pickering bent with him, trying to pull the scissors free.

Em ran at him, screaming. She lowered her shoulder and hit him in the gut, realizing in some distant part of her consciousness that it was a soft gut—a lot of good meals had been stored there.

Pickering went sprawling on his back, panting for breath, glaring at her. When she tried to pull away, he grasped her left leg and dug in with his fingernails. Beside her, the Latino man lay on his side, twitching and covered with blood. The only feature she could still make out on a face that had been handsome thirty seconds before was his nose.

“Come here, Lady Jane,” Pickering said, and pulled her toward him. “Let me entertain you, okay? Entertainment okay with you, you useless bitch?” He was strong, and although she clawed at the sand, he was winning. She felt hot breath on the ball of her foot, and then his teeth sank gum-deep into her heel.

There had never been such pain; it made every grain on the beach jump clear in her wide eyes. Em screamed and lashed out with her right foot. Mostly by luck—she was far beyond such things as aim—she struck him, and hard. He howled (a muffled howl), and the needling agony in her left heel stopped as suddenly as it had begun, leaving only a burning hurt. Something had snapped in Pickering’s face. She both felt it and heard it. She thought his cheekbone. Maybe his nose.

She rolled to her hands and knees, her swollen wrist bellowing with pain that almost rivaled the pain in her foot. For a moment she looked, even with her torn shorts once more sagging from her hips, like a runner in the blocks, waiting for the gun. Then she was up and running again, only now at a kind of skipping limp. She angled closer to the water. Her head was roaring with incoherencies (that she must look like the limping deputy in some old TV western or other, for instance—the thought just whipping through her head, there and then gone), but the survival-oriented part of her was still lucid enough to want packed sand to run on. She yanked frantically at her shorts, and saw that her hands were covered with sand and blood. With a sob, she wiped first one and then the other against her T-shirt. She threw one glance back over her right shoulder, hoping against hope, but he was coming again.

She tried as hard as she could, *ran* as hard as she could, and the sand—cold and wet where she was running—soothed her fiery heel a little, but she could still get into nothing resembling her old gait. She looked back and saw him gaining, putting everything he had into a final sprint. Ahead of her the rainbows were fading as the day grew relentlessly brighter and hotter.

She tried as hard as she could and knew it wasn’t going to be enough. She could outrun an old lady, she could outrun an old man,

she could outrun her poor sad husband, but she couldn't outrun the mad bastard behind her. He was going to catch her. She looked for a weapon to hit him with when he did. but there was still nothing. She saw the charred remains of someone's beach-party campfire, but it was too far ahead and too far inland, just below the place where the dunes and sea oats took over from the beach. He would catch her even sooner if she diverted in that direction, where the sand was soft and treacherous. Things were bad enough down here by the water. She could hear him closing in, panting harshly and snorting back blood from his broken nose. She could even hear the rapid whack of his sneakers on the damp sand. She wished so hard for someone else on the beach that for a moment she hallucinated a tall, white-haired guy with a big bent nose and rough dark skin. Then she realized her yearning mind had conjured her own father—a last hope—and the illusion blew away.

He got close enough to reach out for her. His hand batted the back of her shirt, almost caught the fabric, fell away. Next time it wouldn't. She swerved into the water, splashing in first to her ankles, then to her calves. It was the only thing she could think of, the last thing. She had an idea—unformed, inarticulate—of either swimming away from him or at least facing him in the water, where they might be on more even terms; if nothing else, water might slow the strokes of the awful scissors. If she could get deep enough.

Before she could throw herself forward and begin stroking—before she could even get as far in as her thighs—he grabbed her by the neck of her shirt and pulled her backward, dragging her toward the shore again.

Em saw the scissors appear over her left shoulder and grabbed them. She tried to twist, but it was hopeless. Pickering had braced himself in knee-deep water, his legs apart, his feet planted firmly against the sand-sucking rush of the retreating waves. She tripped over one of them and fell against him. They splashed down together.

Pickering's reaction was fast and unmistakable, even in the wet confusion: pushing and bucking and convulsive thrashing. Truth lit up in her head like fireworks on a dark night. He couldn't swim.

Pickering couldn't swim. He had a house by the Gulf of Mexico, but he couldn't swim. And it made perfect sense. His visits to Vermillion Key had been dedicated to indoor sports.

She rolled away from him and he didn't try to grab her. He was sitting chest-deep in the rolling boil of the waves, which were still agitated from the storm, and all his efforts were focused on scrambling up and getting his precious respiration away from a medium it had never learned how to cope with.

Em would have spoken to him if she could have wasted the breath. Would have said, *If I'd known, we could have ended this right away. And that poor man would still be alive.*

Instead, she waded forward, reached out, and grabbed him.

"No!" he screamed. He beat at her with both hands. They were empty—he must have lost the scissors when he fell—and he was too scared and disorganized to even make fists. "No, don't! Let go, you bitch!"

Em didn't. She dragged him deeper instead. He could have broken her hold, and easily, if he had been able to control his panic, but he couldn't. And she realized it was probably more than the inability to swim; he was having some sort of phobic reaction.

What kind of a man with a water phobia would own a house on the Gulf? He'd have to be crazy.

That actually got her laughing, although he was beating on her, his madly waving hands slapping first her right cheek then hard on the left side of her head. A surge of green water slopped into her mouth and she spluttered it back out. She dragged him deeper, saw a big wave coming—smooth and glassy, just a little foam starting to break at the top—and shoved him into it, face-first. His screams became choked gurgles that disappeared as he went under. He thrust and bucked and twisted in her grip. The big wave washed over her and she held her breath. For a moment they were both under and she could see him, his face contorted into a pale mask of fear and horror that rendered it inhuman, and so turned him into what he really was. A galaxy of grit lazied between them in the green. One small, clueless

fish zipped past. Pickering's eyes bulged from their sockets. His power haircut wafted, and this was what she watched. She watched it closely as a silver track of bubbles drifted up from her nose. And when the strands of hair reversed direction, drifting in the direction of Texas rather than that of Florida, she shoved him with all of her might and let him go. Then she planted her feet on the sandy bottom and pistoned upward.

She rose into brilliant air, gasping. She tore breath after breath out of it, then began to walk backward a step at a time. It was hard going, even in close to shore. The retreating wave sucking past her hips and between her legs was almost strong enough to qualify as an undertow. A little farther out, it *would* be. Farther out still it would become a rip, and there even a strong swimmer would have little chance, unless he kept his head and stroked sideways, cutting a long slow angle back to safety.

She floundered, lost her balance, sat down, and another wave drenched her. It felt wonderful. Cold and wonderful. For the first time since Amy's death, she had a moment of feeling good. Better than good, actually; every part of her hurt, and she understood that she was crying again, but she felt divine.

Em struggled to her feet, shirt sopping and stuck to her midriff. She saw some faded blue thing floating away, looked down at herself, looked back, and realized she had lost her shorts.

"That's all right, they were ruined anyway," she said, and began to laugh as she backed toward the beach: now knee-deep, now shin-deep, now with only her feet in the boil. She could have stood there for a long time. The cold water almost doused the pain in her burning heel, and she was sure the salt was good for the wound; didn't they say the human mouth was the most germ-laden living thing on earth?

"Yes," she said, still laughing, "but who the hell is th-

Then Pickering surfaced, screaming. He was now about twenty-five feet out. He waved wildly with both hands. "*Help me!*" he screamed. "*I can't swim!*"

“I know,” Em said. She raised one hand in a bon voyage wave and twiddled the fingers. “And you may even meet a shark. Deke Hollis told me last week they’re running.”

“*Help—*” A wave buried him. She thought he might not emerge, but he did. He was now thirty feet out. Thirty, at least, “*-me! Please!*”

His vitality was nothing short of amazing, especially since what he was doing—flailing his arms at the water, mostly, as if he thought he could fly away like a seagull—was counterproductive, but he was drifting out farther all the time, and there was no one on the beach to save him.

No one but her.

There was really no way he could get back in, she was sure of it, but she limped her way up to the remains of the beach-party campfire and plucked up the largest of the charred logs, just the same. Then she stood there with her shadow trailing out behind her and just watched.

12

I suppose I prefer to think that.

HE LASTED A LONG TIME. She had no idea exactly how long, because he had taken her watch. After a while he stopped screaming. Then he was just a white circle above the dark red blot of his Izod shirt, and pale arms that were trying to fly. Then all at once he was gone. She thought there might be one more sighting of an arm, surfacing like a periscope and waving around, but there wasn't. He was just gone. *Glub*. She was actually disappointed. Later she would be her real self again—a better self, maybe—but right now she wanted him to keep

suffering. She wanted him to die in terror, and not quickly. For Nicole and all the other nieces there might have been before Nicole.

Am I a niece now?

She supposed in a way she was. The last niece. The one who had run as fast as she could. The one who had survived. She sat down by the ruins of the campfire and cast the burned butt end of log away. It probably wouldn't have made a very good weapon, anyhow; probably would have shattered like an artist's charcoal stick when she fetched him the first lick. The sun was a deepening orange, kindling the western horizon. Soon the horizon would catch fire.

She thought about Henry. She thought about Amy. There was nothing there, but there had been once—something as beautiful as a double rainbow over the beach—and that was nice to know, nice to remember. She thought of her father. Soon she would get up, and trudge down to the Grass Shack, and call him. Hut not yet. Not Quite yet. For now it was all right to sit with her feet planted in the sand and her aching arms around her drawn-up knees.

The waves came in. There was no sign of her torn blue shorts or Pickering's red golf shirt. The Gulf had taken them both. Had he drowned? She supposed that was the likeliest thing, but the way he had gone down so suddenly, without so much as a final wave...

"I think something got him," she said to the deepening air. "I suppose I prefer to think that. God knows why."

"Because you're human, sweetie," her father said. *"Only that."* And she supposed it was that true and that simple.

In a horror movie, Pickering would make one last stand: either come roaring out of the surf or be waiting for her, dripping but still his old lively self, in the bedroom closet when she got back. But this wasn't a horror movie, it was her life. Her own little life. She would live it, starting with the long, limping walk back to where there was a house and a key to fit it hidden in a Secrets box under the old ugly gnome with the faded red hat. She would use it, and she would use the telephone too. She would call her father. Then she would call the police. Later, she supposed, she would call Henry. She guessed

Henry still had a right to know she was all right, although he would not have it always. Or, she guessed, even want to have it.

On the Gulf, three pelicans swooped low, skimming the water, then rose, looking down. She watched them, holding her breath, as they reached a point of perfect equilibrium in the orange air. Her face—mercifully she didn't know this—was that of the child who might have lived to climb trees.

The three birds folded their wings and dove in formation.

Then she wiped her arm across her eyes, pushed back her hair, got to her feet, and began to walk home.

Emily applauded, even though it hurt her swollen right wrist, and cried, "*Yo, pelicans!*" ¹²