

CHAPTER ONE

He watched the girl with long, dark hair and bangs enter the state-of-the-art medical building with her mom. The girl couldn't be more than 15 or 16.

He approached.

"Dr. Don Parks" was listed among other medical names near the arriving elevator.

The girl and her mom got on the elevator.

The guy boarded behind them, eliciting a shy smile from the girl.

She noticed him!

After they all arrived on the third floor, the guy opened the door labeled "Dr. Don Parks" for the girl and her mom to enter the waiting area.

A 2010-model Lexus pulled out of the driveway of a suburban adobe-style home.

Once it drove off, the guy headed toward the now empty home.

The girl approached her apartment building as the guy opened the door from inside and reached for her.

She squinted in at him with mild recognition. "Why are you—?"

He violently yanked her inside.

A gray car's driver shoved the girl's lifeless, strangled and abused body out of the open passenger door, onto the shoulder of a desert highway.

The car sped off.

CHAPTER TWO

On Chicago's north side, in the busy medical district, a very plain office building is dwarfed by surrounding high-rises, all within a three-block radius from Lake Michigan.

In his second-floor office of the building, Dr. Don Parks, whose nameplate sits before him, slumps behind his desk. Melancholy hangs over him as he looks at a happy family photo of a younger Don, his refined wife, and their little boy.

A chime draws his attention to a digital timer: 4:00 p.m.

In the waiting room, mute colors and sparse decor bespeak the handiwork of an uninspired decorator.

Emotionally clamped 13-year-old Autumn Rudolph stares at sleep-inducing wall art opposite the couch where she sits.

Her frazzled mom, Meg Rudolph, pretends to read a magazine. Seated next to Autumn, her knee bounces. She chews her nails.

Autumn puts her hand on Meg's nervous knee.

Meg offers a smile and puts her hand over Autumn's.

"Autumn?" a receptionist calls out.

Autumn takes a deep breath, stands, and pulls her oversized sweater close around her. She heads in, reluctant.

Once inside Don's office, Autumn appears small and frail in the spacious love seat.

Across from her, Don sits, unthreatening, legs crossed, in his easy chair.

Autumn checks out the dim, boring room. A nice view of the lake is its only redeeming quality.

Her eyes settle on Don.

Don half-smiles. "So, what's on your mind?"

"Just wondering why you're so depressed," Autumn says in a matter-of-fact tone.

Surprised, Don shifts in his seat. "Why do you say that?"

Autumn shrugs. "This place... I've only been here a couple minutes and I'm already getting depressed—"

Something catches Autumn's eye by the bank of windows.

Don holds in a smile and looks down at his notes. “Think I need to redecorate?”

“Maybe. At least you got a view—”

A *whoosh* of gray gusts from Don’s end of the room to Autumn’s along the windows.

Autumn jerks her head to look. Nothing. She’s freaked.

Don looks up. “What’s wrong?”

Though distracted, Autumn doesn’t miss a sarcastic beat. “Thought we were talking about you.”

Don smiles at her snark. He sits up a bit straighter. “I’m pretty sure we’re here to talk about you... Something happened a few weeks ago, right?”

Autumn gestures toward the windows. “You didn’t see anything just now?”

“Birds sometimes hit the window. I’ve stopped ducking.”

“So you’re indifferent to the plight of birds. What else should I know about you before I spill my guts?”

Don’s eyes almost twinkle. He’s captivated. “What do you want to know?”

Autumn, dead serious, asks, “*Why* should I spill my guts to you?”

Don reaches for a blue file on the end table and flips through it. He opens his mouth to speak—

“Yeah, I know. I’m a mess. I get it.”

She mimics hiding behind a sheet and mocks, “I see dead people.”

Unamused, Don pages through the file with increasing concern.

“What’s it say there?” Autumn asks, genuinely curious. “I suppose my mom told you all my dirty secrets.”

“I haven’t spoken with her yet, but she did provide some information.” He looks up. “Nothing too incriminating. Some imaginary friends, a few lies, a bit of partying, arguing—”

“Typical tweenybopper stuff, right?”

Don doesn’t take her bait and stays on point. “She says there was a...an incident you won’t talk about?”

He waits for her to fill in the blank.

Autumn looks toward the window again, distracted. Wraps her sweater around

her as if chilled. "Is it normal that I haven't gotten my period yet?"

Taken aback, Don tries to keep up. "You mean since the—"

"*Ever*. I'll be fourteen in a few weeks, and nada." She looks down the wide neck hole of her top. "Nothin' under here. Flat as a pancake. I'm a freak."

She looks at him closely for the first time, cocks her head. "Shouldn't I be talking to a chick about all this?"

Don takes a deep breath. Not at all insulted, he says, "That's up to you. If you want, I can refer your mom to someone else."

Autumn looks over toward the window.

The raspy, damaged voice of a young woman fills the room from somewhere behind Autumn:

"Stay."

Autumn whirls, looks behind her. She looks back at Don.

Don leans forward. He scrutinizes her. Is she trying to act crazy for his benefit?

She cowers back, still distracted.

Don, trying to figure Autumn out, asks, "Something here I'm missing?"

In a monotone devoid of mockery, Autumn repeats, "I told you, I see dead people."

Don sits back, scrawls in his folder, then looks back up.

Raw tears of emotion sparkle in Autumn's eyes.

Don falters to adjust to the sudden shift in mood.

"We...can talk about that... Or are you ready to talk about what happened at school?" He softens his tone. "It's up to you, Autumn."

In another place and time, Autumn looked up, disoriented. Through a fuzzy, drug-induced view, she saw a shirtless, blond boy in a blue baseball cap atop her...

Autumn recoils. Pained by the memory...

The boy forced himself on Autumn. He ignored her groggy protests...

Autumn breaks down in tears.

Don reaches out to comfort her. Draws back... Inappropriate.

“Take your time,” he says with as much compassion as he can muster.

Autumn’s red eyes roam the room. Tucked in a corner by Don’s desk, she spots a sports bag with a tennis racket poking out.

She composes herself and makes eye contact with Don.

His genuine concern relaxes her shoulders a bit.

“It wasn’t at school,” she begins. “It was a dumb summer league banquet at the community center. He plays baseball. I play tennis.”

Don smiles. Encourages her with a nod.

“I guess he put something in my pop... When I woke up, he was already on top of me...”

Don listens as she devolves into sobs.

Behind Autumn, a gray shadow hovers.

CHAPTER THREE

Red eyed, Autumn walks out from the patient area into the waiting room.

Meg stands and goes to her.

Autumn shakes her off and rushes past her to the exit.

Meg starts to follow—

“You must be ‘Mom’?”

She turns to see Don enter, wearing a clinical, caring smile.

She nods and shakes his extended hand.

He doesn’t let go.

“It got a little intense. She’ll be alright.”

Meg nods. Withdraws her hand.

“Was she awful to you? I wanted to be there, for your sake, but Autumn overruled.”

“She’s embarrassed to talk about it,” Don tells her. “And she’s working through the other issues too. Which is why you came to *me*, right?”

Meg nods. “I thought she’d grow out of this – the lies, imaginary friends. She’s shutting down, and shutting me out.”

Don nods, sympathetic.

“But she talked to you?” Meg asks.

“She seemed to get comfortable pretty quick. She’s smart.” He smiles. “Kinda funny.”

“That’s a nice way of saying she’s a smartass,” Meg says. “You must have a brood of kids at home to build such a high tolerance.”

Don’s expression falls. “I’ve been working with kids awhile.”

“Oh, of course. They said you specialize in pediatrics...” Feeling a little dumb and awkward, Meg heads for the door. “Well, I’d better go get her—”

“I’d like to see her in a couple days. Both of you. Together.”

Meg stops at the door. “Am I part of the problem?”

“You can be part of the solution.”

“I’ll check my schedule and call.”

Don watches Meg leave.

His young receptionist, Gemma, slides open the glass partition to the check-in desk, and pokes her head out.

Oblivious, Don just faces the door, pondering.

Annoyed, having observed the way he held Meg’s hand, knowing it isn’t any of her business, Gemma pipes up. “Love at first sight?”

Don snaps out of it and turns to her. “Don’t be absurd. She’s a little girl—”

Now Gemma is amused. “Um, the mom. Kinda hot, huh?”

Don walks back into the office area. He faces her from across the check-out counter. “Didn’t notice. That kid is really something, though.”

He walks back toward his office. Rolls his shoulders and stretches his arms overhead, as if doing a morning stretch after a good, long sleep.

“I feel great.” He turns to Gemma. “Any more appointments today?”

“Dr. Li is stopping by at five thir—”

“Cancel. I need a round of tennis. I feel like I could take on John McEnroe, bad attitude and all.”

Who is John McEnroe? Gemma watches him go into his office. Generation gap aside, she senses a shift in Don’s personality.

CHAPTER FOUR

Meg's puke-green '70s throwback, a rusted, duct-taped Gremlin, is an emissions-violation ticket waiting to happen.

In the passenger seat, Autumn stares unseeing out the window.

Meg drives. She glances at Autumn, worried. Frustrated.

They arrive in silence at their low-rent little duplex decorated with cheesy Halloween props and uncarved pumpkins. Meg parks on the street out front.

With the recent time change, it's already getting dark, so the place does look a little spooky with no lights on yet.

Autumn is out of the car and in the house before Meg can even turn the ignition off.

Autumn's bedroom is decorated with Cubs baseball memorabilia everywhere, posters of female sports stars, a couple of tennis trophies.

The bottom of a metal-frame bunk bed is her "junk bed" – strewn with clothes, schoolbooks, a tennis racket, junk-food wrappers, etc.

Autumn, painting her nails black, lies stomach down on the top bunk. She listens to her best friend, Chelsea, chatter on about her Halloween outfit.

"You gotta be kidding me, Chel. You can't wear that to school... Not even for Halloween. They'll expel you—"

"Autumn, our show's on," Meg shouts from out in the living room.

Autumn rolls her eyes.

Chelsea asks, "What show?"

"Huh? Oh, just this lame thing we did when I was like ten!"

As Autumn listens to her friend, she glances out the door where TV noise seeps in...

Out in the living room, Meg sits curled up on the couch. She watches Wheel of Fortune. Her eyes move to the empty end of the couch.

She sighs.

Asleep in her bed, alone, Meg awakens to a THUD. That's followed by a cry of pain.

She throws aside the cover and dashes out half dressed.

Meg charges into Autumn's room to find Autumn lying on the floor.

Autumn looks up at her. "Someone pushed me!"

Meg's panic turns to skepticism. "Are you hurt?"

Autumn looks up at the bunk. She shakes her head. "Knocked the wind out of me, though."

Meg helps her to her feet. She hugs her. Tight.

Autumn squirms out of it, but Meg grasps her arms. "I'm okay, Mom."

"I hope so, kiddo. Love you." Meg finally lets go and heads out the door.

She stops. "Time to clean that bottom bunk and sleep a little closer to Earth?"

Autumn ignores that and turns to climb back in bed, but stops. She looks at Meg. Pleads with her eyes.

Meg gives in. "Okay. Just for tonight."

Autumn smiles and joins her mother, who kisses her and leads her out.

Later that night, Meg sleeps soundly in her own bed.

Next to her, Autumn is wide awake. Her eyes glisten in the dark.

CHAPTER FIVE

A few days later, Meg and fidgety Autumn sit on the love seat together, facing Don in his office.

Relaxed, Don absently tosses a tennis ball up and down. He looks at Autumn. "You've been 'pushed' out of bed before?"

"After her dad left," Meg tries to explain, "she started to make up friends. Well, 'frenemies' she called them. They weren't always friendly."

Don watches Autumn scan the room. "Do you remember those friends?"

Autumn shrugs, distracted.

Meg offers, "Weird names. All ages."

Not listening, Autumn asks, "What's different in here?"

Don looks around the room. "Nothing." He looks back at Autumn to find her staring at him.

"It's *you*," Autumn says, almost accusingly.

Don sets the ball down. Leans forward. All business now. "Autumn... Stop deflecting. You need to tell me...us...what's really going on."

"Why?" she asks. "I tell you guys things and you act like I'm crazy. Or lying."

Meg is frustrated. "If you'd give details...something that makes sense...it would help."

Don looks at Meg. "She told you about the...incident?"

"Just the highlights," Meg says. "Still won't talk about it."

Autumn goes into her own world, stares off. "They were so mean."

Shocked, Don looks back at Autumn. "Them? More than one?"

Autumn looks at him, back to reality. Shakes her head "no."

Meg, confused, asks, "Isn't that why we're—"

Don waves Meg off, trying to sort it out. "Autumn... You're talking about frenemies?"

Autumn gets up and goes to the window. She leans against the glass. She's done.

Don turns to Meg who's now emotional. He offers a soft smile.

She tries to hold it together. "You know where she used to find her imaginary friends? Online obituaries."

Don looks over at Autumn. She's a million miles away. "Maybe it's time she ventured out with some real, living friends."

CHAPTER SIX

All the Halloween lights and decorations are on full display as Autumn and Meg's entire neighborhood is transformed into a playground for bag-toting ghouls, superheroes, Disney characters, and whatever costumes the budget-conscious families have come up with.

Four costumed tweener girls ring Autumn's doorbell.

Autumn's best friend, Chelsea, is a skanky goth while their gloomy, chubbier friend, Grace, is just a sad goth.

The other two shyer girls are convincing zombies of a sort. Both have long, dark hair. The one without bangs is Asian. She has a bloody hatchet in her head. The other, whose bangs and matted hair cover some of her face, has obvious strangle marks on her neck.

The door creaks open. The girls try to peer in. A recorded spooky laugh track plays from inside...

"Autumn?" Chelsea calls out. "The goths and zombies you ordered are here—"

Autumn leaps out at the girls, evoking a collective screech. She's punked out with blue hair – half goth, half zombie.

"Nice!" Chelsea says. "Way to blend it."

Disappointed, Grace says, "So you're a 'gombie'?"

"I prefer 'zoth,'" Autumn proclaims, quite proud of herself. She steps out to join the girls. She shouts back before closing the door, "Later, Mom."

"Eleven sharp!" Meg calls back. "Have fun, girls."

The girls head down the street.

Concerned, Meg sneaks a peek out the window. She gnaws at her nails.

Despite their median ages of 14, the girls brazenly "trick or treat" at multiple doors.

Homeowners, surprised at their age, give them candy.

A mom with two young kids slams the door in their face.

Autumn, Chelsea and shy hatchet-head zombie Sue write "I TURN TRICKS FOR TREATS" in soap on the windows of the car in front of the mom's house.

Autumn sees gloomy Grace and the strangled zombie girl stand off to the side in

apparent disapproval.

An old couple admire the girls' costumes. They take Polaroids of them and put them in their candy bags along with full-size Snickers.

Autumn sits at her triple-mirrored vanity in her room. She removes makeup and eats candy. Her phone is on speaker on the vanity top.

Chelsea's voice is loud and clear on speaker. "Get any Reese's? I didn't even get *one*."

"Nope," Autumn says, making a face. "Just a Snickers and a buttload of mints and jellybeans."

Chelsea giggles. "My mom says all the fat ladies give up their stale candy-dish junk while they hoard the premium stuff for themselves!"

Autumn laughs.

She hears Chelsea's mom declare in the background, "Lights out!"

Chelsea's excitement falls. "Gotta go."

Autumn looks at the time. Almost midnight.

"Me too. G'night." Autumn picks up the phone to turn it off then stops herself—"Wait! Chelsea?"

"Still here," Chelsea says.

"Who was that girl? Didn't seem to really want any candy. Kinda weird."

"Grace?" Chelsea asks. "She didn't approve when we played tricks. Geez, you know her, with or without the makeup."

"No," Autumn says. "The other one. She was shy, like Sue."

"Dude, who are you talking about?"

Autumn digs in her bag and pulls out the Polaroid. "C'mon, you know... the other zombie girl, with fake strangle marks. Awesome makeup. Gray skin. Matted hair with bangs..."

"O.M.G., you're trippin'! Must've got acid-laced candy."

Autumn looks at the photo, which shows all the girls except the strangled zombie.

"What the—"

A *whoosh* of gray passes behind Autumn.

She looks up at the mirror's reflection—

The strangled zombie girl menaces behind her.

Autumn whips around. Nothing there.

“Autumn?” Chelsea says. “Hello?”

Frazzled, Autumn runs out of the room toward Meg's room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Autumn sits in silence at the kitchen table, a cereal bowl in front of her.

Meg cooks unappetizing-looking eggs in the greasy pan.

“You know you can’t keep sleeping in my room, Autumn.”

Autumn sits back, uninterested in the cereal.

“I think we should talk about it with the doctor next time.”

Autumn looks at Meg. “We? Hate to break it to ya, Mom, but that was a one-off.”

Meg turns around, puts the eggs on a platter on the table and sits. “You don’t want me there?”

“Definitely not,” Autumn says as she sees the eggs for the first time.

Autumn pushes the platter away from her.

Meg reaches for Autumn’s hands. “Will you talk to the doctor about whatever’s going on lately?”

Autumn pulls her hands back. “Nothing’s going on.”

Meg watches, helpless, as Autumn physically withdraws.

Autumn sits with Chelsea, Grace and Sue, all in pajamas, their sleeping bags splayed out around a huge communal pile of leftover Halloween candy.

All four girls’ faces contort in a contest of who can stuff the most candy in their mouths.

Clearly Grace is the winner.

They laugh, spit and snort the candy from their mouths.

Grace looks around in mock accusation. “Okay, who brought that extra bag of candy?”

Chelsea, still laughing, blurts out, “Probably Autumn’s imaginary friend.”

Mortified, Autumn’s laughter turns sour. “Shut up, Chelsea.”

Grace asks, “You have an imaginary friend?”

“No!” Autumn says, defensive.

Chelsea says, “Just some girl she saw in the reflection of a window or something when we were out the other—” She gasps. “O.M.G. We have to play Bloody Mary.”

Grace asks, “Who’s Bloody Mary?”

Under Chelsea’s direction, the girls dim the lights and rearrange the room.

They all sit in an orderly circle, legs crossed.

Chelsea goes into ghost-story mode. “Mary Worth lived here a hundred years ago...”

Sue, gullible, asks, “Here?”

“Yeah...or in England maybe. Whatever.” Chelsea gets back into the mood. “They said she was a witch and that she attacked a child.”

Autumn looks around, uncomfortable. The others are rapt.

“She scratched the child’s face, disfiguring her for being more beautiful than her. And if that wasn’t bad enough...” Chelsea leans forward for effect. “It was her *own daughter*.”

Gasps all around.

Pleased at their response, Chelsea continues, “The townspeople convicted her and put her in front of a mirror...” She makes a violent slashing motion. “Each person sliced her face with whatever sharp object they had, and made her watch in the mirror as her face became bloody and hideous.”

Grace swallows hard.

Chelsea grows more dramatic. “Mary cursed the town and swore vengeance on them all just as the child’s father delivered a fatal stab to her heart!”

She looks at each girl, whose terror is evident. “Now her spirit is trapped inside all mirrors, waiting for someone to release her soul from Hell.”

“No way,” Sue half-whispers.

“Cool,” Grace says.

Unable to hide her curiosity, Autumn asks, “How can she get free?”

Chelsea goes for a serious, poignant finish. “We just have to look into the mirror...and say ‘Bloody Mary’ three times. Once we all see her face, she’ll be released.”

Grace is especially into it. “Hell yeah! Let’s go...”

All get up, enthused, except Autumn who follows slowly.

In the bathroom, the lights are off, except for two candles.

Each girl takes their turn looking into the mirror, and each freaks themselves out.

Chelsea now stands in front of the mirror, staring. "Bloody Mary... Bloody Mary..."

The candles flicker.

"Bloody Mary!" Chelsea slowly freaks out. Then screams. "O.M.G. I see her! That is so freaky!" She catches her breath and turns around, exhilarated. "C'mon, Autumn. Your turn."

Autumn tries to disappear into the corner, making herself as small as possible. "Not a chance in... No."

"C'mon," Grace whines. "You have to. We all did."

The three girls physically drag and place Autumn in front of the mirror and hold her head so she can't look away, despite her protests.

Chelsea commands her, "Say it!"

Autumn struggles. She squeezes her eyes shut. "Stop it! Let me go." She becomes frantic and goes into full panic mode. She fights and scratches at their hands to get away.

The girls finally let go, annoyed.

Autumn collapses to the floor into a fetal position.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Meg drives the rusty, old Gremlin with Autumn curled up in the passenger seat, still in her pajamas. She's nearly catatonic.

Meg glances at Autumn. "Want me to talk to Chelsea's mom?"

Autumn adjusts in her seat and stares out the window.

"Talk to me, babe. What happened?"

"Doesn't matter," Autumn mumbles.

Meg, tearful, reaches for Autumn...stops herself. Unsure.

Autumn sits on the top bunk in her room, biting her nails. She stares at the triple vanity mirror that reflects her poster-filled walls.

She pulls herself into her long sleeves and tucks her feet under herself as if suddenly very cold.

She looks around, wary.

"Who are you?" she asks timidly.

Dead silence.

Later, as Autumn sleeps, tightly tucked in her warm comforter, the metal bed frame rattles. Autumn resists waking up.

The bed shakes more until it becomes violent.

Autumn sits up. She rubs her eyes and looks around—

She freezes in fear.

The strangled zombie girl stands at the corner of the bed.

The girl opens her mouth to speak. No sound. She mouths "Elina."

Autumn stares in disbelief.

Realizing she's not being heard, Elina screams, frustrated, out of control. No sound comes out.

Autumn calms herself, mesmerized by the display. “Did you say...Elina?”

The soundless screaming stops immediately. They lock eyes.

Without moving her lips, Elina emits an ethereal, strained voice as if from a crushed windpipe...

“Elina.”

They stare at each other.

The door crashes open. Meg flips on the light as she enters. “Autumn?!”

Autumn looks around. Elina is gone.

Meg is frantic. “I heard a scream.”

Autumn snaps out of it and meets Meg’s worried gaze.

“Another nightmare?” Meg asks.

“You heard a scream?”

Meg steps forward, right where Elina had stood. She shivers. “Why’s it so cold in here?”

Officially freaked, Autumn throws off her covers, jumps down and rushes out past Meg.

Meg sighs. “Fine, one more night...”

Meg moves to leave, stops in the doorway to look around, clicks the light off, and closes the door.

“Dr. Parks’ll back me up on this,” she calls out to Autumn.

At the same time, a *whoosh* sweeps through Autumn’s room.

Meg opens the door as if she heard it. She looks around. Nothing.

The door closes. All is dark.

Elina’s voice whispers with effort, “Autumn.”

CHAPTER NINE

Across the street from Don's office building, a gray sedan idles. A guy in a backward baseball cap sits in shadows in the driver seat, watching.

In a bad mood, Autumn approaches the entrance and glances at the creepy driver. Irritated by the car, she enters the building.

The car's tinted driver-side window goes up.

Back in her seat across from Don in his office, Autumn stares at Don's restless, bouncing leg.

"Did the girls know you'd been assaulted?"

Not expecting that question, Autumn hedges.

"Have you ever told anyone?"

"Besides you?" Autumn asks.

"And your mom... You've told her."

Autumn shrugs.

Don sits forward, more focused. "Autumn, what did you tell your mom?"

"Shouldn't you have asked that when you met her? Or were you too busy staring at her ass?"

Autumn glimpses his indignation before he can contain it. "Whoops. Too far?"

Don puzzles, "You being snarky or protective?"

"Observant."

Don sits back, trying to figure out Autumn's hostility. "You think I'm... 'hot' for your mom?"

She shrugs.

"Use your words, Autumn."

She leans forward and blurts, "I think you want to hump her brains out. Enough words for you? Don?"

She stands and shuffles over to the window. Looks out.

Don takes a deep breath and stands. He watches her by the window. He leans against his desk. "Why does your mom think you're here?"

Focused on something outside, she talks over her shoulder. "Hello? She thinks I'm nuts."

"No she doesn't."

"Yeah." Autumn shrugs. "Maybe she just thinks I'm having 'woman' troubles."

"Well, you are—"

Autumn mumbles under her breath, "Who the frick is this guy?"

Don stands and takes a step toward her. "Alright, let's keep this civil."

She looks at him, then back out the window. "Not you, Dr. Genius." She points outside. "Him."

Don sighs and steps over to the window. He looks out.

The gray sedan is still there.

"Who?"

Autumn, all patience gone, gestures to the car with both hands. "Gray car, dark windows. He's been there since I arrived—"

"Nothing unusual about that."

"—the first time. He's been here every time I've come."

Don struggles to see the point. "Can we focus on you here? I see the same cars out there all the time."

"With some perv sitting in them for hours?"

Don goes to the drawstring, closes the curtains.

Autumn steps away, still suspicious. She sits.

Don's clock chimes: 4:50 p.m.

Autumn grins and gets up to leave.

Don asks before she's out the door, "When does your mom get off work tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"I want to ask her out," he says with dry sarcasm.

She makes a face at him and exits.

He ponders a bit, then goes to the window and pushes the curtain aside. He looks out.

A man's arm protrudes from the sedan's now open window.

The following day, Don, in his usual spot in his office, sits across from nervous Meg.

"She said she got her period in gym class, and at first she thought the blood was a field-hockey injury, so it scared her and she screamed. Some other girls made fun of her and..."

Don holds back a chuckle.

Meg fails to see the humor. "What?"

"Haven't you ever seen 'Carrie'?"

"Who's that?"

"Sissy Spacek. Stephen King. They even did a remake."

"I work three jobs to keep a roof over our heads. I haven't got time—"

"Autumn's story is from the movie. She lied to you."

"Son of a bitch!" Meg, still clueless, fills with angst. "So what did happen?"

"I'd rather she tell you."

"So would I." Meg flops back in her seat.

Don nods, sympathetic.

CHAPTER TEN

Autumn walks through her neighborhood to school, alone. She slows when she sees Chelsea and Sue walking ahead.

Sue notices Autumn behind them and nudges Chelsea.

Autumn turns, crosses the street, and goes another direction.

Chelsea leads Sue toward Autumn. "Autumn! C'mon..."

Autumn walks faster, until— She stops abruptly.

At the end of the next block she spots Elina waiting, staring at her.

Autumn turns to Chelsea, who waits with Sue for Autumn to join them.

Autumn can't decide. She looks back and forth.

Finally, Chelsea and Sue shake their heads and move on.

With one last glance at Elina, Autumn turns to follow Chelsea – though she keeps her distance.

Later, in the school hallway, a square envelope falls out from Autumn's locker when she opens it.

She looks around at passing students, suspicious. She pulls out a handwritten card that reads "Best friends?" in loopy cursive with hearts and smiley faces.

Autumn contemplates the note for a bit—

"We cool?"

Autumn turns to face Chelsea. She shrugs.

Chelsea takes it for a yes and gives her an excited hug. "Good! Now wait 'til I tell you who just asked me out."

Autumn makes an exchange of books while Chelsea gives hints.

"He's an older man. Good at sports..."

Autumn freezes. She fears what's coming...

Chelsea blurts out, "Chad Kensington!"

Autumn SLAMS her locker shut. "Aren't you too young to date?"

Defensive, Chelsea reminds her, "I'm like eight months older than you."

"Why would a junior want to go out with a freshman? Unless he thinks you put out."

Chelsea's bubble is burst. "Why are you being so mean about this? You know I've liked him forever. Some friend you are."

Seething, Autumn pulls her books close and walks off.

Chelsea follows. "You were supposed to talk to him for me at that sports banquet, but you bailed on me."

Autumn turns on her, on the brink of explosion. "Trust me. Talking isn't his thing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Autumn takes a deep breath, pulls it together and disappears into the crowd.

Chelsea stares after her. She makes the connection. *No way.*

A pair of masculine hands come from behind to cover her eyes.

Chelsea touches the hands. She smiles and turns to face Chad, a sandy-haired 16-year-old jock wearing a blue baseball cap.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Red-and-white Wildcat emblems are displayed all around the high school, inside and out.

The whole school is in attendance at the big pre-game pep rally.

In the middle of the auditorium, Chelsea cheers with the squad.

Chad sits nearby with the jocks.

Autumn sits high up in the bleachers with her class. She shrinks into her oversized sweater not far from Sue and Grace, trying to ignore their glances in her direction.

Elina *whooshes* in to sit behind unsuspecting Autumn.

The principal steps up to a mic when the cheerleaders end to a roar of approval.

“Alrighty, all you Wildcats, let’s hear it!”

The entire auditorium erupts in a cougar-like cat call.

“We’re four and two this season,” the principal reminds them. “Time to put up some W’s!”

Cheers go up. Chelsea does her thing with the cheerleaders on the sidelines.

Elina grins and puts her hands on Autumn’s shoulders.

Autumn grows very quiet and still.

Just as the cheers die for the principal to continue his speech, Autumn stands, her fist in the air.

“GO COWBOYS!”

Everyone looks in her direction.

Embarrassed, Autumn sits back down. She tries to disappear, confused.

Why did I do that?

At the end of the school day, when the bell rings, Autumn, books clutched to her chest, hurries out ahead of the crush of students. She turns down the sidewalk toward home.

Chelsea emerges from the exiting crowd and catches up.

“T.F., Autumn. What was that?”

Emotional, Autumn sprints away down the street, leaving Chelsea flummoxed.

Autumn spies Elina at the end of the block.

Enraged, Autumn rushes right at her – *through* her. And away.

After watching yet another episode of Wheel of Fortune alone, Meg walks past Autumn’s closed door. She hears whimpering.

Meg stops. Listens. She puts her hand to the door to knock, then decides against it.

She listens a bit longer to Autumn’s quiet crying. Feeling powerless, she heads to her room, sad with sympathy.

The next day, Meg goes inside Don’s office building.

Autumn follows, but she stops at the door when something catches her eye.

The gray sedan is parked across the street.

And behind the car...Elina stands, a look of defiance on her angry face.

Autumn looks at the car’s closed, darkened window.

The sedan’s engine revs and it takes off.

Autumn looks for the license number but only sees a yellow blur.

Puzzled, she looks around.

Elina is gone.

Soon after, in Don’s office, Meg, an emotional wreck, paces by the window.

Autumn talks in a quiet monotone from the love seat. “Sorry I lied. I didn’t know how to tell you what really happened.”

Don, in his chair, looks at Meg. “You alright, Meg?”

Emotions tongue-tie Meg. She’s about to lose it.

“Meg?” Autumn repeats. “First-name basis?”

Don ignores the comment but Meg pounces. “Really? Even now you’re being a smartass?”

Autumn slumps back into the love seat.

Immediately regretful, Meg rushes to her side. She sits by Autumn. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Before Autumn can come up with a snarky comment, she hears Elina’s voice.

“Schizo—”

Autumn jumps up. Looks around. Her eyes go wide...

In the corner, Elina’s vague figure struggles to remain visible. Her lips don’t move as she strains to speak.

“—phrenia.”

Elina jerks her head toward Don and glares.

Don puzzles at Autumn’s demeanor. “What’s wrong?”

Autumn fumes. “You specialize in schizophrenia?” Her glare moves to Meg.

Meg’s look of guilt confirms it.

Autumn is incredulous. “You think I made *everything* up!”

“Of course not—”

“Then why take me to a quack for schizos?”

Autumn moves toward the door. “I’m not here to work out my problems! You just want me to stop being your problem.” She opens the door to leave—

“Tell us about what happened at the pep rally,” Don interjects.

Autumn stops. She scowls at Elina in the corner.

Drained of energy, Elina fades away.

Autumn turns her ire on Meg. “Who ratted?”

“Your principal was worried.”

Furious, Autumn drops a bombshell. “I want to live with Dad.”

She storms out the door.

A *whoosh* follows her, unnoticed by Don and Meg, who both stand.

Meg gives an apologetic look to Don, then goes after Autumn.

Don stands alone. He glances over at the empty corner where Autumn had been looking.

Autumn rushes outside the building. She looks around. Relieved and disappointed at once, she realizes there is no car. No Elina.

She slumps against the building, buries her face and sobs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In Don's apartment office-den, the wall behind a gold-leafed desk is covered with pictures of Don's once-happy family. A booze tray sits below the photos on the credenza.

Don kicks back, reading patient files.

Nervous, alone in her kitchen, Meg dials from a landline.

Don's cell phone rings. He picks up. "Hello?"

"Dr. Parks? This is Meg." She hesitates. "Autumn's—"

"Hello, Mrs. Rudolph."

"So sorry we ran out like that. I got your message. Is this a good time to talk?"

Don finds Autumn's blue folder. He opens it.

"How's Autumn doing?"

"Okay, I guess." Meg looks at the clock on the stove: 8:30pm. "She turned in early."

"I just wanted some more information about Autumn's dad."

"Nothing to tell. Deadbeat. Gone."

Puzzled, Don flips through some notes in the file. "Autumn seems to think he's—"

"I lied to her, okay? For years. I've been doing the fake-letters-at-holidays thing for nearly a decade." Meg sits, defeated. She laughs—without joy. "Guess we know where she gets her lying tongue from now, huh?"

Don makes a few notes in the file as Meg dumps on him.

"You try raising a kid without any help and no real skills to speak of. I was so naive when I married that... that..."

Don smiles.

"Soon as things got a little bumpy, he split. Autumn barely remembers him. But of course she idolizes him. Thinks I drove him away..."

Meg stands up with the revelation. "Maybe I did?"

She waits for Don's reassurance.

Don notices the silence. He stops writing. "Don't worry. This isn't about you..." Distracted, he says, "I'd like to do some tests."

He takes out a Post-it note and scribbles on it.

"What kind of tests?" Meg asks.

Don affixes the note to the file. It reads: "HCG – full work-up."

Holed up in her room, unaware of her mom's conversation with Don, Autumn surfs the net on her tablet.

She brings up various state license-plate images until she finds a few yellow ones. She scans them until she sees something familiar.

"New Mexico: Land of Enchantment" is the embossed slogan.

Autumn addresses the empty room. "Why New Mexico?"

No answer.

The 2010-model Lexus was parked haphazardly at an angle in the driveway of the adobe-style suburban home. Its rear New Mexico license plate faced the road.

Crime-scene tape and parked first-responder vehicles surrounded the house.

Inside, investigators swarmed about with somber murmurs.

Bloody sheets covered two corpses: a woman and child.

A tech flashed a photo of a child's tennis shoe sticking out.

Near the door, handcuffed, Don, ten years younger, stared through reddened eyes at the bodies. Blood covered his shirt and tie.

A strong-jawed, middle-aged homicide detective, more cowboy than cop, watched the cops escort Don out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Meg and Autumn snuggle on the couch, watching “Wheel of Fortune.”

Autumn holds onto her mom like a little girl.

On the TV, Vanna White turns letters on a half-filled puzzle.

Meg guesses, “Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft!”

Autumn smiles until she realizes it looks distorted... Autumn watches the hangman letters expand to show two more ghostly letters—“EV”— before the first name.

Autumn bolts upright. “Evangalina?”

Meg looks at the screen then at Autumn.

A contestant guesses the same as Meg, “Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft!”

“That’s right!” Pat Sajak declares, and the audience applauds.

The applause fades as Autumn stares at the TV.

Behind the couch, arms outstretched toward the TV, Elina looks relieved, but weak. She fades.

Alone in his consultation office, Don stands over the open blue file on his desk. He dictates into a digital recorder. “Gemma, case R-333.”

Don looks at the photo of his family. He gives it a ritualistic finger kiss before returning to the dictation.

“Some progress in the prodromal stage,” he states in a very clinical tone, “but the risk phase remains—”

CRACK! The photo frame’s glass breaks in a starburst pattern from where he’d touched it.

Don gawks at the photo. Weak-kneed, he drops into his chair, mystified by the crack.

Elina stands behind Don, who stares at the damaged photo.

In a crowded mall, Thanksgiving decor beckons shoppers into every store. Some already have Christmas lights up along with red-and-green sales posters.

Even the Game Depot has a mix of advertisements for holiday-themed games.

Inside the store, Autumn plays “Assassin’s Creed” at a demo station.

A nerdy store clerk with pale skin and hair, wearing a name badge with “JIMMY” embossed on it, sees Autumn execute a skillful maneuver as he passes.

“Nice move!” Jimmy exclaims.

Startled, Autumn puts down the controller and backs off from the game.

Jimmy notices Autumn’s skittishness. “Weren’t you here for last week’s demo?”

Autumn shrugs. Nods.

“Don’t worry,” Jimmy assures. “At orientation they specifically told us to never call the cops on someone who just comes for the demos.”

He leans in with a conspiratorial whisper. “Especially if they’re cute and win a lot. Good for business.”

Autumn manages a shy smile and picks up the controller.

Later, Autumn walks past the food court, head down, distracted by her earbuds as she shuffles through a playlist on her smartphone.

She passes a fountain with bench seating around it—

“Well, if it isn’t the Cowboys fan.”

Laughter follows.

Autumn turns to see Chelsea snuggled up at a table with Chad, who wears his signature blue cap.

With them are Grace, Sue and a couple of other jocks.

One jock turns a chair in invitation.

Chelsea makes it official. “C’mon. Hang.”

Autumn’s eyes dart around. Indecision freezes her.

Wary, Autumn pulls one earbud out and steps toward them. The tinny music continues through the earbud.

“We were just talking about you,” Chelsea says.

The others snicker.

Autumn glares. She avoids eye contact with Chad.

Oblivious, Chad teases, "You got a hot new boyfriend over at Coleman High?"

Autumn doesn't get it.

"You know. Coleman 'Cowboys'?" Chad prods.

A jock friend interjects, "Yee-haw!"

The others laugh out loud.

Autumn turns and walks away.

Chelsea calls out, "C'mon, Autumn. I'm really curious why you did that. What happened?"

The question jolts Autumn physically.

She spins around, a murderous look in her eye – focused on Chad.

His smile fades as she stalks toward him. "You want to tell them, Chad? Tell Chelsea 'what happened'?"

He puts his hands up, the picture of innocence.

Off in the distance, Jimmy exits the game store putting on a jacket. He stops when he sees the teens' exchange. Watches.

Chelsea glares at Chad. Back-hands him in the chest. "Did you two do it or something?"

Autumn's rage turns on Chelsea. "*Do it? Why would anyone want to do anything with such a jerk?*"

Chelsea jumps up, face to face with Autumn. Fierce. "That's my boyfriend you're talking about."

"Yeah, well, tell your boyfriend to stop stalking me." She turns to Chad. "Leave me alone!"

Autumn turns and rushes away, shocked and embarrassed.

Chelsea looks at Chad. "What's she talking about?"

"Crazy talk. Why would I give a crap about a wacko like that? I only have eyes for one chick." He pulls Chelsea in for a kiss.

Mollified, Chelsea gives him a kiss and a big hug.

Over her shoulder, Chad watches Autumn disappear into the crowd of shoppers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Autumn and Meg enter Don's office building.

Autumn looks back. No gray sedan.

Inside the office, Autumn and Meg take their seats across from Don, who smiles.

"Good news, ladies."

"Aren't you chipper today?" Autumn quips.

"I had a great game of tennis and..." He pulls out the blue folder and opens it.
"...your test results are good. First, you're not pregnant—"

Horrified, Autumn springs to her feet. "Pregnant?" She turns on Meg. "The hell, Mom?"

Don waits patiently for her to sit down before he continues, "But there is a bit of a hormonal imbalance. It would explain some of the behavior and why you haven't begun menstruating."

Meg leans in. "And that means...what?"

Don starts to answer—

"What behavior?" Autumn blurts. "How's a girl *supposed* to act when someone drugs her and...?"

Don leans forward, very serious. "That's why we're here, Autumn. You should never have been made to deal with something like this, but your mother is supporting you one hundred percent and I'm here to help. You need to trust us."

Autumn crosses her arms and leans back, mutters... "Yeah, until the insurance runs out."

"Young lady," Meg interjects. "I'd take on a fourth job to pay for this if I had to."

Autumn shrugs and tunes them both out. She stares at the windows.

Don takes a deep breath. He speaks to Meg, but his eyes are on Autumn.
"There's a mild drug on the market..."

He watches for Autumn's response.

She's elsewhere.

"It'll help her sleep, and it should balance things out, hormonally."

Meg is not happy. "I'm not keen on drugs, doctor. And after the way things went

down with this guy... Are drugs the answer?"

Don assures, "Temporarily."

"Autumn," Elina's tortured voice cries out.

Trance-like, Autumn stands and goes to the window.

Don and Meg keep a wary eye on her.

"It's not just about what happened," Don says. "It's what's going on now."

Autumn sees the gray sedan parked below. The blue bill of a baseball cap pokes out the open window.

Enraged, Autumn turns, rushes out the door.

Don and Meg exchange startled glances.

Don hurries after Autumn.

Meg follows.

Moments later, Autumn runs out of the building and across the street, heedless of traffic. "Haven't had enough yet, punk? Go get a life!"

A semi heads right for her.

Oblivious, she screams at the car, "Stop stalking me, you psycho piece of—"

Don pulls her out of the truck's path.

Brakes hiss. Gears strain. Tires smoke.

The driver shouts out the window, "Are you insane, kid? I coulda killed you!"

The truck pulls away, and...

The gray sedan is gone.

Don leads Autumn back to the entrance where Meg greets her with a bear hug.

Don, shaken and a little out of breath, nods to Meg. "I'll write that prescription, pronto."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Night falls over Autumn and Meg's quiet neighborhood.

Inside, Autumn exits the bathroom in a state of bewilderment. She wanders down the hall to her room.

The next morning, Autumn sits alone in the kitchen, eating toast, deep in thought.

Meg rushes in, late for work. She grabs a slice of toast from Autumn's plate. "Thanks. Did you sleep well, my belle?"

Autumn nods.

"Really? Good." Meg takes out an orange juice bottle and drinks straight from it then puts it back. She puts the toast between her teeth, slides her coat on, grabs her keys... "Gotta go, kiddo. Love ya."

Meg pulls the toast from her teeth and gives a crumbly kiss to Autumn's forehead. She disappears out the door.

Autumn brushes the crumbs from her forehead and tells the empty chair across from her, "So, I got my period."

She takes a bite of toast and stares into space.

In the mall's food court, Autumn sits eating ice cream with store clerk Jimmy.

Autumn is surprised when he tells her he saw her friends giving her a hard time the other day.

"You sure they're your friends? That guy seemed like a real jerk."

"Tell me about it."

"After you left, they just kept laughing at everything he said. I couldn't hear, but it was pretty obvious he was talking about you."

Autumn fumes as Jimmy finishes his ice cream.

Jimmy offers his two cents, "I'd keep a distance if I were you." He stands to leave. "Gotta get back to work. Nice running in to you. See you at the store later?"

Autumn, lost in angry thought, doesn't respond.

Jimmy shrugs and leaves.

At work in his office, Don, glasses on his nose, hunches over paperwork.

The door swings open. Autumn enters.

Don looks up over his glasses rims. "Hey there. How are the meds—"

"I wanna tell."

Don puts down his glasses and sits back. "Tell?"

"The cops. About Chad."

Don stands and motions for her to sit. "Is that the boy's name?"

They take their usual seats.

She looks off. Nods.

Don asks, "You want to press charges?"

Tears well. She nods again.

"Good...no, great. But..." He looks to the door. "Where's your mom?"

"Work."

"You'll need her support. Things may not go...smoothly."

"I don't care! That jackass needs to be in jail, not dating my fr—" She stops herself.

"You're worried he'll do this to someone else?"

She nods.

Don nods, somber. "I won't sugarcoat... These are tough cases to prosecute."

"How do you know?"

Don shifts in his chair. "I've testified in a few."

"Tell the truth," Elina says from somewhere nearby.

Autumn scopes the room. No Elina. She looks at Don. "What do you mean 'testified'? For other patients?"

Don nods. "In my Albuquerque practice. It's always a 'he said, she said' – and when the accuser is a mental health patient..."

"Yeah, well, everyone already thinks I'm crazy."

Don smiles. "This could be good for you. A big step in taking your power back...regardless of the legal outcome."

"Tell the truth!" Elina shouts.

Jarred by Elina's insistence, Autumn stands. Fidgets. "...just thought I should let you know."

Don stands and smiles warmly. "Want me to talk to your mother about it, or set up an appointment?"

"I guess. I don't know." Autumn heads to the door, opens it... She hesitates. "Doc... Albuquerque... That's in New Mexico, right?"

A nostalgic smile comes over him. "Home of the tumbleweed. I practiced there several years."

"Why'd you leave?"

Don's smile disappears. He returns to his place behind the desk, puts on his glasses and becomes instantly busy. "I hate tumbleweeds."

Autumn stares a moment, then leaves, followed by Elina's *whoosh*.

Don removes his glasses and wipes his eyes.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Inside a corner diner with half-lit neon signs in the windows, a disheveled Meg busses a table at her second job.

Autumn walks in and sits at a clean table.

Meg spots her and comes over. "Hey, chicklet. Bring your homework?"

Autumn plops her backpack on the table, pulls out books.

"Sorry I had to stay late tonight. Other gal's got the flu."

Autumn looks around the diner. It's empty, except for an overly affectionate young couple in the corner.

"Need anything?" Meg asks.

"Advice."

Meg looks to the kitchen where the cook cleans up, his back to them. She sits across from Autumn. "Shoot."

"I spoke to the doc. He thinks I should go to the cops."

Meg reaches for Autumn's hands to show her support.

Autumn says, "Prob'ly won't get any real justice."

Meg sees the cook turn around. She squeezes Autumn's hands and stands quickly as if wiping down the table.

She leans over Autumn and kisses her on the head. "Whatever happens, I'm with ya, babe."

"Two burgers up," the cook calls out.

Meg pats Autumn's shoulder on her way to get the food.

Autumn watches the couple in the corner as Meg delivers their food then leaves them to their amorous selves.

Disgusted, Autumn turns back to her books and homework.

The next day, Meg and Autumn stand outside the police station, mustering the courage to go in.

Meg wraps her arm around Autumn's shoulder. They enter together.

At the end of the day, in the hallway at home, Meg walks past Autumn's door. She stops, listens.

Music emanates from within.

Meg smiles and moves on to her own room.

In a bustling courthouse corridor, dressed in a sharp suit, Don looks at his watch. People pass him to enter the closest courtroom.

Meg and Autumn, dressed nicely, step off the elevator.

Don smiles at them as they approach.

Chelsea comes from another direction. She marches up to Autumn. "You are such a bitch. I can't believe we were ever friends."

Don steps up to physically place himself between them.

Meg, still not in the loop on everything, is genuinely puzzled at her presence. "Shouldn't you be in school, Chelsea?"

Chelsea turns on Meg. "Didn't your daughter tell you? She's jealous I have a boyfriend. She's just making this all up to hurt me."

Chad and his spiffy-looking father approach. They avoid any confrontation and head straight for the courtroom door.

Chad calls to Chelsea, "C'mon, babe."

Chelsea gives Autumn the evil eye then enters the courtroom with Chad and his father.

Don hunches down, eye to eye with Autumn. "You alright?"

Autumn takes a deep breath and stares at the courtroom door a moment before nodding.

Don escorts them both inside.

Later, outside the courthouse, Don, Autumn and Meg exit to find a beautiful sunset forming in the west.

Autumn is giddy as they walk through the parking lot. "Can you believe it?"

"You were something else in there, kiddo!" Meg smiles. "I'm so proud."

Don loosens his tie. "Me too."

"Doc," Autumn says, "you were great. After you testified even I believed I might be sane!"

Meg and Autumn stop at their ugly Gremlin.

Don heads for his late-model Lexus. "What's say we celebrate? On me. I know just the place."

Amidst Thanksgiving and Christmas decorations up and down the Magnificent Mile downtown, the trio walks past shops.

Autumn and Meg halt when they see a Ghirardelli store.

Autumn speaks for Meg and herself, "I've died and gone to heaven!"

Later, the three sit bundled up on a park bench enjoying ice cream out of bags, talking and laughing as they take in the sight of colors in the falling leaves around the well lit park.

After their outing, Don's Lexus is parked behind the Gremlin on the street in front of Meg and Autumn's house.

Meg unlocks the front door.

Autumn runs inside the house with a Ghirardelli bag.

Meg turns to Don. "I hope that medication can override two tons of sugar."

He smiles. "Been awhile since I've spoiled a kid. Maybe let her sleep late tomorrow?"

Meg shakes her head. "School day."

Don ponders a moment. "I don't know if she should go to school for a couple days. An order of protection's just a piece of paper."

"You think that boy might hurt her at school?"

"I doubt it. But, maybe give a heads-up to the principal about the situation."

"Yeah. Especially with Chelsea. She and Autumn were so close... I've never seen that girl so angry and hateful."

The TV goes on inside just in time to hear the studio audience shout, "Wheel...of...Fortune!"

Meg looks at Don as an awkward silence falls over them.

“I better go,” he says.

“Thanks. For everything.”

Don nods and turns to leave.

Impetuous, Meg stops him, then plants a big kiss on his lips.

She steps back, embarrassed.

Don seems stunned.

“C’mon, Mom,” Autumn calls from inside. “You’re missing it.”

Meg swallows, looking for words. “Um... You want to join us? We—”

Don pulls her in for a deeper kiss. He then steps back. “I definitely should go...”

Both smile, awkward.

Meg rallies to say something—

Don makes an abrupt beeline for his car.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Autumn sits at her vanity, contemplating different hairstyles.

She tries to make her hair look like Elina's – with bangs.

Trance-like, she stares at her reflection...

After a few seconds, Elina's face fades in over her own.

Frightened, Autumn stumbles backward over her vanity seat.

Elina's image fades.

"Bloody frickin' Mary!"

Later, a sheet covers the mirrors.

Autumn sits on the lower bunk. She stares at her tablet. She types "Don Parks, Albuquerque" into a search engine.

A ten-year-old Albuquerque Journal headline pops up: "Family Murdered in Home."

Breathless, Autumn pages down through the article, taking in the information. She stops when it hits a family photo of Don, his wife and young son.

Scrolling down, her eye catches words such as "home invasion," "tragedy," "wife and child," and... "Dr. Donovan Parks, a suspect in—"

Autumn slams the tablet down and looks around. She crosses to the mirrors and rips away the sheet. "Okay. I give. Talk to me."

Elina's vague image returns to the mirror. She appears weak. "He...knows." Elina's strength seems spent. She fades away.

"Knows what!?"

"Everything."

With Elina completely disappeared, Autumn opens the tablet, wary.

"Evangalina Vazquez" populates the search field. Not typed by Autumn.

Autumn looks around. No Elina.

She clicks on a link in the search results.

A headline pops up: “Family Claims Detained Boyfriend Not the Murderer.”

A photo stands out: Elina, alive and vibrant, is at a Dallas Cowboys game with her boyfriend, both decked out in Cowboys jerseys and accessories.

As the girl approached her apartment building, a guy opened the door from inside.

She squinted in at him with mild recognition. “Why are you—?”

The guy’s hand reached from the shadows, violently pulled her inside and covered her mouth when she tried to scream.

Autumn squeals and jerks back as if to escape someone’s hold on her. She falls back on the bed, recovers and looks around.

She’s alone.

She looks back at the photo of Elina and her boyfriend. According to the caption, his name was Luis. An update link takes her to another page that shows he is serving a life sentence for Elina’s murder, despite the family’s protests that he is not her killer.

Don looks out the office window as Autumn marches into the building. He looks across the street. No gray car.

Moments later, Autumn, agitated, paces near the loveseat across from Don. “Why do *I* have to avoid *him* at school? I didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not like I murdered my family or anything.”

Autumn measures Don’s response. Nothing.

“If Chad comes anywhere near you, go straight to the principal’s office—”

“I don’t get it,” Autumn raves. “I thought we won! How is me having to see him at school winning?”

“It’s not a perfect system—”

Autumn spins and faces him. “Yeah. You know all about the wheels of justice, don’t you?”

Don shoots her a puzzled look.

“I know all about Albuquerque. I only came here to let you know I’m not coming back. I don’t need a doctor that—”

Elina *whooshes* by between them, physically blowing Autumn’s hair a bit.

Don looks at the windows. They’re closed. “I don’t know what you think you know, Autumn, but I can tell you that in my professional opinion—”

Another *whoosh* knocks Autumn off her feet into the love seat.

“What are you doing?” Don asks.

“Keep lying, doc. She’s happy to make life hell for you. She’s done a great job of it for me so far.”

“Who? And...what am I lying about?”

Autumn calls out to the ethos, “C’mon, Elina. Show yourself to the good doctor. Maybe it’ll do him good to see your face again.”

Don goes white. “Did you say...Elina?”

“Her real name’s Evangelina.”

Nearing a heart attack, Don goes from pale to red with anger. “What have you been... Are you trying to be cruel?”

A cool confidence overtakes Autumn as she looks at Elina, who settles herself in the corner. “Should you tell him or should I?”

Don looks to the corner. No one there.

He gets up, cautious and slow, worried he might spook Autumn into some violent action. He steps toward his desk and presses an intercom button. “Gemma? Need you in here a moment.”

“Be right there,” Gemma answers through the speaker.

He looks around, then at Autumn. “Who’s in here right now?”

“I told you. Elina.”

“Anyone else?”

The door opens and Gemma walks in.

Autumn smirks. “And her.”

Perturbed, Don stares at Autumn a moment. “Mind if I call your mom?”

“Finally going on a date?”

Ignoring her sarcasm, he tells Gemma, “Get Meg Rudolph here ASAP.”

Gemma nods and rushes out.

Don leans against the desk and studies Autumn who smiles over at Elina, proud of her confrontation.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

In the otherwise empty waiting room, Meg stares at Don sitting across from her. “Observation? What does that mean?”

“Exactly that,” Don says. “Plus a few non-invasive tests. We need time to—”

“We? Who?”

“Experts in the field.”

“Of schizophrenia?”

“Among other things, but yes.”

“And what if she isn’t schizophrenic? What if she’s still just trying to grow up? Let go of her imaginary friends? Or—”

“There’s no diagnosis going in. Our minds are open.”

“What if it’s not explainable by science?”

“You mean paranormal?”

Meg nods.

“I doubt there’s any—”

“Open minded?” Meg asks.

Don gives in with a Boy Scout salute. “I promise we’ll be thorough, and we’ll come out of this with the best modern science has to offer in explanation. If it’s unexplainable...we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“How long?”

“Seventy-two hours. Tops.”

“And then we’ll know?”

“We’ll know enough to make a plan.”

Don glimpses Gemma lost in paperwork behind the partition.

He reaches his hand to Meg’s and squeezes it, eliciting makeup-smearing tears.

The next day, Meg finds herself in an observation room, staring through a large picture window.

In the sterile, sparse holding room on the other side of the glass, Autumn sits on a bed, wearing a hospital gown.

A psychologist questions Autumn, but Meg can't hear what's said.

Meg turns to Don, who stands beside her, also observing. "I thought this kind of stuff only happened in the fifties."

"It's the only way to control the variables," Don says. "While a team assesses, another team observes."

"And what do you observe?"

"A confused little girl trying to become a woman."

"Then why are we here? That's all I've seen for the past year."

A nurse with a clipboard steps up next to them to observe.

Don pulls Meg aside out of earshot. "You know it's changed. Paranoia. Accusations. Hallucinations."

"Why now?"

"Why not? Adolescence is when this kind of thing rears its head. Then there's genetics... You've admitted there's a possibility her dad had mental issues."

Meg chortles. "I think I said he was mental. There's a difference."

"Well, we don't know where to find him to figure it out. That's why I grilled you about his history as much as about yours and Autumn's."

"What if she...winds up..."

"So far, her symptoms are positive."

Meg looks at him like he's the crazy one.

"That means that they're treatable. Negative symptoms – disassociation and severe confusion – are harder to treat."

"By 'treat' you mean...?"

"Medicate."

Meg sighs. Rubs her tired eyes.

Late at night, alone, Autumn lies on the bed.

She glares at the huge mirror as if searching beyond her reflection, through it.

Don, alone in the observation room, looks back at Autumn. Seeing the intensity of her gaze, he picks up his notepad.

Autumn sits up and moves closer to the foot of the bed. "Don't you think he should confess?"

Don backs up instinctively.

She grins, as if at him.

"What are you up to, Autumn?" He looks at the scribbles on his notepad, then writes in block letters: "BUCK CARTER."

On Autumn's side of the glass, Elina is the only "reflection" Autumn sees.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next day, haggard from work and lack of sleep, Meg rushes into the room where Don and the psychologist confer in murmurs.

Meg goes to the glass and leans her forehead against it, watching Autumn sleep like a lamb as the nurse fusses about.

The psychologist excuses himself and leaves Meg alone with Don.

“Did you say breakthrough on the phone?” Meg asks. “My reception was in and out.”

“I wanted to check with you before I tried to force a breakthrough.” He motions for her to sit.

They both sit.

“She’s got it in her head...” Don hesitates. A wash of guilt spreads over his face. “There’s something I need to tell you. Maybe I should’ve told you sooner, but not sure how, or why...”

Meg tries to follow along. Confused.

“I was married.”

“Weren’t we all?”

“It was a great marriage. I loved my wife, adored my little boy—”

“You have a kid?”

“He...and my wife...” Don takes a deep breath and exhales a string of words... “Ten years ago. It was a home invasion. I’m the husband... They suspected me right away, then cleared me. I left my practice when patients started dropping off. I came here to...start over.”

Meg is dumbfounded.

Don waits for a response. “You heard the ‘they cleared me’ part, right?”

“This is what Autumn’s paranoid about? She found out?”

He nods.

“How?”

“I’m not sure,” Don says. “She keeps talking about one of my patients. A tragic case. Fifteen-year-old girl.”

“What happened?”

“Borderline schizophrenic. Responded well to meds. Very well. But she got pregnant and went off the meds...and off the grid. She eventually turned up dead. The bastard left her like trash along the road. They locked her boyfriend up a few days later.”

Meg looks at Autumn, teary eyed. “That poor girl. Her poor mother.”

“I didn’t want to tell you...not like this. Not now. But Autumn’s so focused on me, I thought I’d ask if it’s alright to bring in a friend.”

Don, Meg and now retired detective Buck Carter enter the holding room. Buck holds a weathered cowboy hat in his hands. He’s the same detective who had arrested Don years ago.

Autumn jumps off the bed and cowers in the corner.

Her reaction draws a concerned look between them all.

“Autumn, honey,” Meg says, her voice shaking, “we want you to meet someone. I have to get to work. I just want you to know I talked this over with Don, so please listen to what they have to say. Okay?”

“When can I leave?” Autumn asks in a weak little-girl voice.

Meg can barely hold in her emotion. “Tomorrow for sure. Maybe tonight if things go well. Cooperate, okay?”

Autumn, reluctant, stands up straight and nods.

Don acknowledges Buck. “This is Detective Carter. He has something to tell you.”

Meg goes to Autumn and gives her a hug and kiss, then exits.

Don pulls up chairs for Buck and himself.

Outside the high-rise medical building, Meg hurries to her rust bucket, gets in, cranks the reluctant ignition. She backs out of her space, then—

The car dies. She tries the ignition. It won’t start. “Dammit!” She smacks the dashboard and has a mini meltdown, nearly busting the steering wheel.

Finally, she looks heavenward with pleading eyes. She tries the ignition again... The engine purrs to life.

Exasperated, she puts the car in gear and putters off.

In the holding room, Autumn sits at the edge of her bed, physically as far as possible from the two men, who sit in chairs in the middle of the room. She glances at the mirror.

“Who’s watching us?”

Don looks at the mirror. “Do you see someone?”

Autumn rolls her eyes. “In the next room.”

“Oh. Dr. Gabriel. And a nurse.”

Autumn waves at the mirror.

Don is troubled by her behavior but plows on. “Do you recognize Detective Carter? Maybe his name?”

Autumn thinks a moment. Shrugs.

Buck speaks with a low drawl that could melt butter. “I worked homicide back in New Mexico.”

Autumn is surprised. “Oh yeah. *Buck* Carter? I saw your name in an article.”

Don braces to get the words out. “And you read about what happened to...my family?”

Hesitant, Autumn nods.

“Why?”

Autumn’s shoulders slump.

“Alright... When? Did you search the obituaries or something?”

“What? No!”

“You’re sure you didn’t manipulate things for your mom to seek me out? Maybe you read about what happened to my family awhile ago—”

Autumn looks at Buck. “Wait... Am I in some kind of trouble with the law?”

“Of course not,” Don assures. “This is part of the assessment. I’m trying to figure things out for you, Autumn.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Don’s frustration overpowers him. “You think I do? You made this personal...” He checks his emotions. “Autumn, do you remember what you promised when we started this process?”

“About answering every question honestly?”

Don nods. “No consequences. It’s all about collecting data.”

Autumn snorts. “You may think you mean that, but I’d call being put in a rubber room a consequence.”

“This isn’t a rubber room.”

“That’s the next step from here, isn’t it? If I tell you, you won’t believe me, then you’ll lock me up for good.”

“That’s not going to happen...” Don leans forward. “What won’t I believe? Something to do with Elina?”

Buck reacts, surprised to hear the name.

Autumn nods.

Don puts his hands palms up. “What about her? What does she have to do with my family?”

“Dunno.” Autumn thinks. “Albuquerque? I just know she wouldn’t leave me alone until I looked stuff up. Easy enough to do with a name like Evangelina.”

Buck stands and turns to Don. “Hey, doc, I thought this was about your family. The two cases have nothing to do with each other—”

Overhearing, Autumn chimes in. “Yes they do. All the victims knew Dr. Parks. And they’re all in Albuquerque.”

“Darlin’,” Buck says, “I came here to assure you that Don had nothing to do with his family’s murder. And he sure as hell didn’t have anything to do with Elina Vasquez’s murder, so—”

Autumn’s countenance morphs from mouse to lion. “What do you know? Maybe he frickin’ lied to you!”

“His story was solid. Trust me.”

“Why is everyone asking me to trust them? You know who *e/se* told me to trust them?”

The psychologist opens the door, concerned.

Don waves him away.

The door closes as Autumn continues in possessed rage.

“Chad FUCKING KENSINGTON. That’s who!”

Buck mouths “who?” to Don.

Don motions for him to hang tight.

Frustrated, Buck sits back down.

Autumn paces. “Trust me,” she mocks. “I would never hurt you.’ Then he slips something into my drink and next thing I know...” Autumn looks around, dizzy. The room sways. “He takes me to that weird trailer, with that itchy burlap sofa. That stupid ceiling fan. It was so hot, but the fan just squeaked around. Dead air...” Autumn stares into the mirror.

Elina, in the mirror, looks back at her. Urges her to continue.

A look of alarm crosses Buck’s face.

Don is enthralled. “Then what?”

She looks at Buck. Takes on a Hispanic-American accent. “I yelled. But nobody heard me.”

Don searches a stack of folders frantically. He pulls a yellow one out and sifts through it. “What else? What happened?”

“I told him I wanted to go home. He tied my wrists.”

Don shows Buck something in the file.

Buck looks up at Autumn. “What did he use to bind your hands?”

“That plasticky yellow rope – like they have on boats. And he made me drink that awful stuff.”

“Vodka?” Buck asks.

“I guess so. I never had more than a beer in my life. I told him to stop it. I didn’t want the alcohol to hurt the...”

Autumn snaps out of it. The spell is broken.

Don presses... “The baby?”

Mortified, Autumn looks at the mirror – her own reflection. “What baby?”

Buck whispers to Don, “Is this for real?”

Don glances at Autumn, shrugs.

“How’d she know about the ceiling fan...and that old couch?”

Autumn plops down on the bed. “I hate it when grown-ups whisper.”

Don catches up with Autumn’s shift. “I thought you were grown up now.”

“Yeah, well I want my mommy. And I want her now. I’m cooperating. I’ve told you

everything I know. What more could there be?"

Buck draws Autumn's gaze as he leans forward, dead serious. "Then how come you're tellin' us about how Elina Vasquez died?"

Autumn is stupefied.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The mood in Don's office is somber.

In the love seat, Meg wrings her hands.

Seated next to her, Autumn puts her hand over Meg's.

At the desk, Don flips through a stack of folders, chooses two, steps around to face them. He holds up a blue file thick with papers. "Autumn's." He holds up a thinner yellow file. "Elina's."

Meg makes a face. "Who's Elina?"

Don looks to Autumn to answer.

"Just some girl" is all Autumn gives her.

"Real or imaginary?"

Don ponders his answer. He takes a seat across from them. "Elina was real. Very real. Not much older than Autumn. But that was ten years ago. Before she was murdered."

Meg looks at Don. "You mean the patient you told me about?"

He nods. "Her boyfriend Luis has been locked up ever since."

Autumn, dead certain, adds, "Even though he didn't do it."

Meg is shocked.

Exasperated, Don musters a little snark of his own. "Twelve of his peers said he did."

"Elina says he didn't."

"So who does *she* say it was?"

"I don't think she knows for sure... She was drugged. Like me."

Don stares at Autumn with mounting impatience.

"What the hell does this have to do with anything?" Meg interjects. "I thought we came here for a diagnosis."

Don smiles, sympathetic. "You did."

Autumn stretches her arms forward. "Measure me for the straitjacket."

Unamused, Don turns to Meg. “We’ll try some simple meds.”

“What is it you’re treating?”

“I can only tell you what it isn’t. We’ve ruled out the usual suspects...thyroid, adrenal gland, Cushings, dementia, epilepsy—”

“But you specialize in schizophrenia.”

“Her reaction to stronger meds will clue us in.”

“So now my daughter’s a science experiment?”

Autumn slumps back in the love seat, crushed. “I knew no one would believe me.”

“You’d be surprised how much I do believe. Give it a couple days. I think these meds will change your outlook...and your life. But you have to follow directions exactly.”

Don pulls a prescription from the blue file, hands it to Meg.

She and Autumn stare at it as if it’s a death certificate.

The next morning, Autumn retreats to the bathroom and displays the three very different pills on the counter by the sink.

Alone, Autumn stares at her own reflection. “Guess I should say goodbye now. If this magic potion does its job...”

She waits.

The door opens. Meg peeks in.

“Hover much?” Autumn mimics a helicopter’s whirring sound.

Meg gives an apologetic smile. “He said I need to be a hundred-percent certain you’re taking them correctly.”

“To be sure I’m taking them at all. Right?”

Sympathetic, Meg smiles and steps in. She glances at the meds laid out on the counter. “Ready?”

Autumn nods, fills a cup with water and takes the pills, one at a time.

After a week on meds, Autumn, lost in thought, slow-steps toward her school’s entrance, hugging her backpack in front of her.

The bell rings. Other kids run in.

Autumn shuffles along at her slow pace.

Once at her locker, Autumn trades out her books when she hears...

“Lying bitch.”

She freezes.

While Chad and his jock friends pass behind her, she keeps her head down.

She doesn't feel tense, scared or worried... She just doesn't move until he's gone.

At lunchtime, Autumn reads a science text book with a tray of half-eaten cafeteria slop before her.

“Mind if I sit here?”

It's Chelsea.

Autumn glimpses the full tray in her hands. She shrugs and goes back to reading.

Chelsea sits. She waits for Autumn to look at her.

Autumn doesn't.

“I've missed you,” Chelsea says almost in a whisper.

Autumn turns a page.

“Nothing's the same anymore.”

“You have Chad now,” Autumn says without looking up.

“Doesn't mean there's no room in my life for you.”

Autumn finally looks up with a cold stare. “Even though I'm a lying bitch?”

Chelsea searches for words while she picks at her food. “I still don't really get why you said those things... And going to court? He promised me he didn't do it. I believe him.” Chelsea starts to get angry just thinking about it. “You made it all up! I just wish I knew why.”

“Guess I'm just cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.” Autumn goes back to her book as if engrossed in it.

Defeated, Chelsea picks up her tray and moves to another table where Sue and Grace are halfway through their meals.

Autumn looks away from the book in deep thought.

In the holding room, Buck drew Autumn's gaze as he leaned forward, dead serious. "Then how come you're tellin' us about how Elina Vasquez died?"

The realization hits her. "Why *would* anyone make that up?"

Two jocks walk by and snigger at Autumn. "Crazy bitch is talking to herself."

Autumn looks up and stares at them as they walk away.

Maybe I am crazy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Meg and Autumn sit on the couch watching their show.

Meg leans forward, excited. "Ooh, I just got it... You?"

Autumn's glazed eyes stare at the TV.

Meg tries to prod her. "Food and drink. C'mon—"

In a monotone voice, Autumn states it like a boring fact. "Fruity drinks with umbrellas."

Meg scrutinizes Autumn's flat countenance.

On TV, the contestant guesses, "Fruity drinks with umbrellas?"

Music and applause.

Meg's scrutiny of Autumn turns to concern.

The next day, Meg and Autumn sit across from note-taking Don.

"I'll adjust the dosage on the olanzapine. That should take away the listlessness. Any other side effects?"

Autumn shrugs. "I got my period again, but just one day."

Meg looks to Don. "Is that because of the meds?"

"Early pubescence. Her body hasn't found its rhythm yet. It could be awhile before you're regular, with or without the medication."

Meg clearly doesn't like the answer.

Don catches her look. "We'll also adjust the aripiprazole."

Don puts down his notes and focuses on Autumn. "How are things otherwise?"

"You mean, do I still see ghosts?"

Don waits.

"Well, I have no friends at school and now I have no 'friends' at home. So I guess everything's progressing as planned."

Don and Meg exchange a look of mutual sympathy.

Meg tries to console her. "It'll get better, sweetie."

“I know it seems like all the fun has been taken away,” Don says, leaning in, “but we’re looking for a balance. It *will* get better. That’s the goal we all have. Isn’t it?”

Autumn nods, unconvinced.

Don’s cell alarm goes off. He stands, as do Meg and Autumn. “You’re my last patient today. What’s say you let me treat you ladies to dinner?”

Meg shakes her head. “You don’t have to—”

“Duh, Mom” Autumn says. “He’s just looking for an excuse to spend time with you.”

Meg gives an apologetic look to Don.

He spreads his hands – busted.

Don looks at Autumn. “And you.”

A genuine smile threatens to curl Autumn’s lips.

Inside the classic Chicago restaurant, Ed Debevic’s, a visually and audibly loud, ’50s-retro vibe fills the air.

Don, Meg and Autumn sit in a booth, looking around.

Don’s professional reserve is gone, showing them a whole different side of his personality. “You’re gonna love the wait staff. In fact, Autumn, you should get a job here someday. You’d be a natural.”

Meg shoulder-bops to the music. “I should get a job here. This would be fun.”

Don shakes his head. “Not so sure about that...”

A frumpy waitress with really bad makeup, wildly teased hair (adorned with Barbie dolls) and a mouthful of bubble gum, saunters to the table. “What ya gonna order that’ll fill your skinny bellies and get you out of here the fastest?”

Autumn and Meg look at each other in surprise, then break into laughter.

The waitress smacks her bubble gum then snaps her fingers. “C’mon, c’mon. Haven’t got all night, ya know. Got a bunch of other slobs waiting for this table.”

Don, smiling, picks up his menu ready to order...

The three of them enjoy what feels like a normal, silly family night out.

All smiles, Don, Meg and Autumn exit toward the parking lot.

Don pops the locks on his Lexus with his key fob.

Autumn rushes to the car and gets in the back. She pilfers fries from a take-home bag.

Don stops and turns to Meg. "We should do this again sometime."

Meg is a bit uncomfortable. She glances at his Lexus. "This isn't because you feel sorry for us or anything, is it?"

"Why would I?"

"Struggling mom with a troubled daughter. In need of rescue by a rich, handsome doctor with all the answers?"

"You think I'm handsome?"

Meg smiles.

"You guys don't need rescuing. You just need some...momentum."

"So you don't hit on the moms of all your patients?"

Don lets that sink in. "Actually, no."

"Never? Why me, then? I'm straight out of Dullsville."

"Three jobs and a kid like Autumn? You're a hero. I'm the dull one. All work, no life."

They look at Autumn in the car.

Autumn presses her face against the glass, bored silly.

Meg looks back at Don, whose eyes seem to grow moist as he watches Autumn.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“You know, this every-day-after-school routine is destroying my thriving social life,” Autumn tells Don, each in their familiar chairs in Don’s office.

“It’s just while we’re trying to get the meds right. We’ll go back to once a week soon.”

“And when do we go back to zero times a week?”

Don feigns a hurt look. “Let’s talk about progress. Any signs of the frenemies?”

Mixed emotions fill Autumn’s face as she shakes her head.

“You miss them?”

She shrugs.

“Words...”

“I don’t have any. I can’t decide if it’s good or bad. I mean, I kinda started to think of her as a friend... Elina...”

Don bristles at the name.

“You don’t like me mentioning her. Sorry.”

“It’s not about me. Why was she a friend?”

“When I started to figure out what happened to her, it seemed we had something in common... You know. It’s sorta the same, I thought...”

“And now?”

Autumn musters all her courage to say it aloud.

“Now... I’m starting to think maybe Chelsea and Chad were right... Maybe... I suppose it’s possible...” Her eyes well up and choke her into silence.

“That it didn’t happen?” Don is flabbergasted.

Autumn nods and buries her face in her hands. “Maybe you’re right. I could have read that article awhile ago. I don’t know... I can’t think straight.” She looks up. “Did I accuse an innocent guy?” Autumn sobs into her hands.

“Even if you read that article,” Don consoles, “your...situation...*your* details... You weren’t making it up. What you told me that first day was real.”

She looks up through red eyes. “You believe me?”

Don sits forward and pulls Autumn's hands from her face. "I believe *in* you."
Autumn's countenance changes. She manages a smile as she looks into his eyes.

Don panics, realizes he's too close and pulls away.

Autumn sits on her lower bunk, now devoid of clutter. She listens to music with earbuds while reading.

Meg stands at the open door watching. She smiles faintly. Knocks on the doorjamb and enters.

Autumn pulls one earbud out. Moves over to make room.

Meg sits. "Doing okay?"

"Yeah... I'm good."

"No more frenemies? No more nightmares? Things looking up?"

Autumn frowns.

"What?"

"At school. I'm one of those whatchamacallits... Pariah... I'm a pariah."

"Believe it or not, every kid your age feels that way."

"It's not just a feeling. They're literally shunning me."

"That'll probably change by next week. But if you want to make it change, maybe we should invite some people for your birthday?"

"First, my birthday's on Thanksgiving this year. And what people? Everyone's on Chelsea's side."

Meg observes her matter-of-fact affect. "How does that make you feel?"

"Armchair-shrink much?"

"I'm asking as your mom."

Autumn searches for words. None come.

"Think of a way to say it for Dr. Parks tomorrow. Tell him what you feel. Or if you actually don't feel anything, make sure he knows that."

"Maybe he's turning me into a zombie." Autumn mocks with a guttural zombie impression.

Meg smiles, gets up, and goes to the door. "Lights out at ten, kiddo. I have to work early, so you're on your own in the morning."

Autumn nods and resumes reading.

Meg watches her, concerned.

The next day, at her main job as a dental assistant, Meg sits at the reception computer. She looks all around. Not a soul to be found.

A dental drill screeches from inside one of the rooms.

Meg opens a browser on the computer and types in a search for "don parks murder albuquerque."

The same article Autumn had read pops up in a list with other headlines. She clicks on a link that says "Still No Suspect in Cold Case" and begins to read.

Unseen, behind her, Elina watches. She outstretches her hand as if making a typing motion.

Meg doesn't notice. Nothing changes on the computer.

Meg scrolls to a formal photo of Don's family. Meg stares at the sophisticated-looking wife. Sighs.

The picture of Don's family sits in a new frame on his work desk. He writes out a script on a pad in front of the picture, rips the page from his pad and hands it to Autumn, who stands on the other side of the desk. "I'm not keen to lower dosages just yet. But I've added something that might help you feel those highs and lows again."

"Anti-zombie meds? Cool." Autumn takes the prescription and stuffs it in her pocket.

Don watches her as she exits. He smiles.

That night, seated on her lower bunk, Autumn laughs at a YouTube cat video on her tablet.

Mid-video, a new browser window pops up over the YouTube page.

"Hey! What's going...?" Autumn whines.

In the search field, letters appear:

"E V A N G—"

Autumn stands and bumps her head on the top bunk. She looks around the room.

Sensing, she turns slowly to face the mirror.

From inside the mirror Elina glares at her, angry. She shouts at Autumn, but no sound comes out. She points at the tablet.

At the same time, Meg gets out of the Gremlin with armloads of groceries.

Elina's voice startles Meg. "LOOK! NOW!"

Meg drops the bags. She scrambles for her keys to the door.

In the bedroom, Autumn sits down and looks at the tablet. She takes a deep breath and hits "enter."

On the tablet, yearbook photos of Elina pop up and fill the screen. A small window with a link pops up dead center.

Autumn looks up at Elina's reflection. Elina air-types at the tablet with outstretched arms.

Autumn clicks the link and watches the screen.

Up pops a blog entitled "Elina's Murder Is NOT Solved!" with the subtitle "Help find the *real* sleazeball."

There are no words in the article until they start typing onto the screen:

"Evangelina Vasquez was NOT a victim of 'domestic violence' from her boyfriend. Only one person knows what happened—"

Meg comes bounding into the room, out of breath. "What's going on? I...I heard yelling?"

Autumn looks at her puzzled for a moment then slowly moves her gaze to Elina.

Meg follows her gaze. She doesn't see anything, but she definitely senses it. "Elina's back?"

Reluctant, Autumn nods. She looks back at the tablet and turns it for Meg to see.

The screen is a mess of electronic mumbo jumbo.

"What? Your tablet broke down?"

Autumn turns the tablet back and looks at it. It still has Elina's photos and the

self-typing article on it.

She looks up.

Elina is completely engrossed as she continues to *type*.

Autumn reads aloud from the screen as words appear... "Only one person can explain what happened between the night that Evangelina disappeared and the day her body was found..."

Autumn stops cold as the typing continues furiously then stops. She looks up at Meg.

"What are you reading?"

Autumn reads more. "At the center of it all is one man. A man once arrested for child molestation..."

Puzzled, Meg asks, "What? Who?"

Autumn looks up, ashen faced. "Dr. Donovan Parks."

In the mirror, Elina collapses. Disappears.

Meg blinks at Autumn, then holds onto the bedpost to steady herself.

Autumn goes quiet, lost in thought. Realization hits. "You know that guy I thought was following me?"

"The car outside Don's office?"

"He's a dick."

"Autumn!"

"A P.I. – from New Mexico. He was following *Don*. Not me."

Meg tries to process it all.

"Oh geez. *That's* why he put me in that loony bin! I was getting too close. These meds. He's trying to shut me up!"

"Autumn, you're letting your imagination go too far. You can't possibly believe Don's a—"

Autumn points at the screen, which is now blank. "Child molester? He works with kids. He had his own kid. Now that kid is dead. He's a murderer too!"

Meg shakes her head in denial. She looks around. "What does Elina say?"

Autumn searches the room. No sign of Elina.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Inside the den of the adobe-style house, atop a stack of files, a man's hand opened a yellow folder to reveal Elina's headshot paper-clipped inside the cover.

On a corner of the desk, Don's wife and son smiled from a framed photo at the guy sitting behind the desk.

The guy slammed a bottle of vodka down between the photos.

Somewhere else in the house, a door opened.

The guy's hand reached for a metal letter opener.

His reverent fingers rubbed across Elina's photo. "No one can take you away from me," he whispered.

The door burst open. Don's little boy ran in, arms wide open. "Daddy!"

The boy stopped, puzzled, as Don's wife entered behind him. "I thought you were on call—"

The guy white-knuckled the letter opener and stood abruptly.

The framed photo of the wife and son fell and shattered.

A scream rang out, echoing through the entire quiet neighborhood.

In his den in his apartment, Don sits at his desk. He rubs his face with his hands. He contemplates an untouched glass of vodka in front of him.

He reaches for the glass and taps it with his finger until he drags it about an inch across a gold-leaf groove on the desktop. *Just another line being crossed.*

He lets the glass hypnotize him a bit longer. Then, with an explosion of violence, he swipes the drink across the room...

Right *through* Elina, who glowers.

The glass smashes the wall.

Outside her house, staring at the rotting pumpkins by the door, Meg sits at the wheel of the Gremlin, thinking.

She picks up her cell phone and dials.

Gemma picks up on the other end of the line. "Dr. Parks' office."

"Gemma, right? This is Meg Rudolph. Autumn's mom."

"Of course! Would you like me to see if the doctor's available?"

"No! No, I just... I was wondering if you might have the number for his friend, Buck."

"Buck Carter? Uh—"

"Oh, that must sound weird. But, uh, I'm trying to put together a birthday party for Autumn, plus a bit of a thank you for Don...Dr. Parks. So I want it to be a surprise. Mr. Carter told me he's staying with family in Evanston through Thanksgiving. I just want to get him in on it before he flies back to New Mexico."

"I suppose I could have Buck call you. How's that?"

"Perfect, thanks." Meg is relieved. "Just...keep it under wraps from Dr. Parks, okay?"

"Will do."

"Thanks. Bye."

Meg disconnects and takes a few deep breaths.

She starts the car after a long stalling sound, revs it, then takes off.

Moments later, the gray sedan with New Mexico plates drives into the parking spot vacated by Meg. It idles.

The front door of the house opens. Autumn steps out.

The car takes off while Autumn locks the door.

Autumn waits her turn to play a game at the game store. There are just a few customers. A teenage boy plays an intense game at the demo stand.

Clerk Jimmy steps up beside her. Nudges her and whispers, "He's got nothin' on you."

Autumn shrugs.

The kid loses to the computer, throws a fit.

"Show him how it's done, champ."

Autumn smiles with a boost of confidence as she steps up to the demo controls.

She cues up a violent game and starts mowing people down with a viciousness that captures several customers' attention.

Looking out the window from his work office, Don looks at his watch: 4:30 pm.

He goes to the desk and presses the intercom button.

"Yes, doctor?" Gemma's chipper voice comes through the speaker.

"Have you heard from Autumn Rudolph or her mother?"

Gemma answers, hesitant, "Well... No."

"Would you give Autumn a call? She's never been late."

"Will do."

Don sits at the desk and looks back and forth at the two closed file folders. He rubs his eyes. Weary.

Elina stands in the corner, glaring at him with fury.

The intercom chimes. "No answer. Straight to voicemail. Want me to call the mom?"

"Hmm. No need to alarm her at work."

Don opens the two folders simultaneously.

Elina steps forward.

Don looks around. He rubs his arms as if chilled.

Elina grins. She's getting to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

At a dive bar/girlie club, female dancers in various stages of undress entertain the mostly male clientele.

Meg, in skimpy costume, makes her way through the crowd bearing a round tray of empty glasses and bottles and one fresh beer. Job number 3 is in full swing.

Buck slouches in a corner booth. He watches the dancers with mild interest.

Meg puts down her tray. Sits across from him. Hands him the fresh beer.

He takes a swig, eyes on the stage.

“These little ladies look like they just got their braces off. You ever work up there?”

“I just deliver the drinks. A job’s a job.”

Buck straightens up and gives her his full attention.

Meg starts, “About this Vasquez girl—”

“What’s all this interest in that poor little gal? Let her rest in peace.”

“That’s the goal. Did you ever make a connection between the murder of Don’s family and that girl?”

Buck doesn’t like the question. Shakes his head.

Meg pushes. “Anything. Like the rope, or...”

“I’m tellin’ you, missy, Don had nothing to do with *anyone’s* death.”

“You sound more like a protective friend than a lawman, detective.”

“I’m retired. I can afford to be. Doesn’t change those rock-solid alibis.”

“What alibi?”

“Don was doing psych evals at the hospital...during both murders actually. 'Bout thirty witnesses put him on the other side of town.”

“And he couldn’t have slipped away between shifts? For an hour or two?”

Buck leans in for emphasis. “Rock. Solid.”

Meg pulls a printout from her pocket. She slaps it on the table in front of him. “She wouldn’t be the first kid he took advantage of.”

Buck squints at the printout in the dim light. He takes out granny glasses and peruses it, surprised. His eyes skim to the bottom of the page. "Says right here – Don was cleared of the charges. You find a pediatrician who ain't been accused a few times – that's probably the only guilty one in the crowd."

"You let him out of jail the same day that girl went missing."

"I dropped him off at the hospital myself. Don Parks ain't no kiddy diddler. Not a killer either."

A bell rings at the bar. Meg turns to see an angry bartender glaring at her with a tray full of fresh vodka martinis at the ready.

Meg gets up to rush off with the tray, but hesitates. "There has to be some kind of connection. Something that struck you as odd. Maybe his accuser? Another patient. Anything."

"Why do you think—"

She's gone before he can finish.

At his apartment, Don listens on his cell phone to endless ringing.

With one hand balancing the martinis, Meg pulls her phone from a hidden pocket. It shows Don calling. She hits "ignore" and delivers drinks to a grabby group of drunk old men.

Don dials another number and waits.

Buck takes out his ringing phone. Grins. Answers. "Yo. Your ears burnin'?"

"Should they be?" Don asks.

"You recall a patient you had...after that poor girl's murder. We—"

"Is this about Elina?" Don asks, irritated.

"Don't get your panties in a wad. I'm just askin'. Seems to me there was some strung-out patient of yours we questioned. I liked him for Elina's murder before the boyfriend got nabbed..."

"Yeah, I know who you mean. Swedish name. I've got the files here..." Don flips through a manila file. "Here it is. Benjiman Sjostrom. Benji. His appointments were right after Elina's. Turned out he wasn't schizophrenic. He was bipolar and abusing drugs."

The combination made him delusional.”

Buck writes the name in the printout’s margin.

Don adds, “I referred him for inpatient treatment a couple weeks before the...well, you know.”

“Think I’ll do a little follow-up. Meanwhile, I got a name for you.” Buck scans the printout. “Wanna tell me about Lydia Feldman?”

Don cringes. Glares at the phone, ready to hurl it across the room. “Really, Buck? You know I never touched that little girl.”

“How would I know? You never mentioned her.”

“Why bring her up now?”

Buck’s gaze fixes on a vodka bottle in the bartender’s hand. “Good question.” Buck disconnects the call.

Buck thinks a moment and dials another number.

Meg comes back and sits down.

He puts his finger up for her to wait while he talks into his phone. “Hey, chief. Buck Carter here. Yeah, been awhile... And you?... Good. Listen, I know it’s late, but I was hoping you could look into something from an old case.”

In the den of Don’s apartment, the wall over the credenza is bare, save nails and wire. Empty photo frames sit in a pile next to the liquor tray where a bottle of vodka is uncapped, half empty.

Don buries his head into his folded arms on the desk.

Elina hovers over him, frustrated.

Don sits upright, wipes away the emotion.

Elina SCREAMS into his ear, unheard.

Nostalgic, Don gathers up the pile of unframed photos and shuffles through them. Fans them out like a hand of cards.

Don kisses them collectively and lays them down.

Anger swells into a moment of decision— “Gotta end this...now.” He stands, grabs his coat and storms out – on a mission.

On his desk, the myriad photos of his wife and son are spread out atop Elina and Autumn’s yellow and blue files.

Still at the girlie club, Buck checks a text then looks at Meg with a tinge of concern. "Where's your kid right now?"

"Home. Probably eating junk food instead of doing her homework."

Buck stands, hand in his pocket. "What do ya take in on a typical Friday night here?"

"About a hundred. Cheapskates."

Buck pulls out two Ben Franklins. Puts them in her hand. "Take the night off. I wanna talk to that girl of yours...if you think she's strong enough."

Meg nods, grateful. "Let me change..." She starts to run off to the back, then stops. She turns to Buck. "Something's not right. I'm not sure I have time to change."

Buck gives her a funny look, then shrugs. He stretches his hand to the side to let her lead the way out.

At home, alone, Autumn steps off the stairway and heads for the kitchen. She lines up her pill bottles on the counter.

She sits on a stool. Stares at the meds.

The doorbell rings. Her eyes go to the front door.

Behind her, the silhouette of a guy with a baseball cap appears at the back door's frosted window.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Unaware of the silhouetted man at the back door, Autumn gets up and goes through the living room to the front door.

Autumn peers through the narrow side window. Surprised, she opens the door.

Chelsea stands there. She looks nervous. "Hi."

"Hi."

Chelsea looks off, searching for someone. She calls out, "Where'd you go?"

Autumn tries to see where she's looking. "Someone with you?"

Chelsea's sheepish look clues Autumn in.

"You brought *him* here?" Autumn slams the door.

From the other side of the door, Chelsea pleads, "C'mon, Autumn. We just wanna talk. I promise."

Autumn turns toward the kitchen—

She sees the silhouette at the back door.

She inches closer to the kitchen. She spies the knife block on the counter. Autumn looks at the looming silhouette... Paralyzed.

Don drives over a bridge, cell phone to his ear. "Dammit." He throws the phone down. "Man-up, Don. Just gotta do this one thing, then move on."

He hits the steering wheel in frustration.

The car zooms through mounting traffic.

Behind him the bridge goes up for a sailing yacht on the Chicago River.

Meg's Gremlin gets caught in traffic behind the rising bridge.

Meg drives, shivering in her skimpy costume.

Buck is stuffed into the cramped passenger seat.

"Damn!" Meg pounds the wheel. "Who takes their yacht out a week before Thanksgiving?"

Meg looks at her phone. It's calling Autumn. No answer.

Autumn's phone, face up on the vanity seat, vibrates. It's Meg calling.

Down in the living room, indecisive, Autumn stares at the block of knives in the kitchen, then at the silhouette still hovering at the back door.

Meg hangs up the phone. Turns to Buck. "Why do I feel such a sense of urgency?"

"Part of bein' a mother, I s'pose." He looks at her. "That intuition thing is usually about as good as a cop's gut."

She slams her hand on the horn, which is busted. "What's your gut saying right now?"

"Nothing good." He pulls out his phone and dials.

Don's Lexus is now parked down the block along Autumn's street.

His phone sits on the console attached to its charger. Buck's ID makes it buzz. It goes unanswered.

Inside the house, Autumn finally makes a mad dash for the kitchen and takes a knife from the block. She shouts to the silhouette, "Get out of here, Chad. LEAVE ME ALONE!"

A pot flies past Autumn's head and SMASHES into the door.

Autumn spins to find...

Elina.

They both look at the door. The shadow is gone.

Elina nods. "It's him."

Autumn looks all around, at every window. "Who?"

Frustrated, Elina looks at the medications on the counter. They rattle under her scrutiny.

Autumn puzzles, "Chad?"

Elina concentrates hard, losing strength. The pill bottles explode into the air and burst open.

A bottle lands at Autumn's feet. The label is torn off except for "Dr. Donovan Parks."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Autumn picks up the bottle. She looks around.

Elina's gone.

"What the...? Are you saying the doc is the guy—"

The doorbell rings again, followed by pounding and Chelsea's shaky voice. "Autumn. Let me in. It's cold. I just wanna talk."

Autumn creeps through the living room to the door. "Where's Chad?"

"He... He went home."

"B.S. Go away."

Chelsea bangs harder, jolting the solid door.

Autumn backs away. "Leave, or I'll call the cops."

"What!? No! I came...to apologize. You were right. Chad's a jerk. I believe you now..."

Autumn glances back at the kitchen. She sees the shadow return.

He tries the door. Locked.

"You're so full of crap, Chelsea! He's at the back door!" Autumn grabs the landline by the couch. She dials 9-1-1, then listens. It's dead.

Up in her bedroom, the cell phone's vibrations from Meg's calls knock the phone from the seat to the floor with a THUMP.

Autumn jumps at the noise overhead.

With the knife in her trembling hand, she approaches the front door and peeks out the side window.

Chelsea's open hand SMASHES against the outside of the glass.

Autumn reels back in shock.

"Let me in! O.M.F.G.! Some maniac with a shovel just ran around your house. Get out of there!"

Autumn looks back through the rooms to the kitchen door. She sees the shadow lurking...

The silhouette of a second guy appears and yanks the first guy back.

Autumn unlocks and opens the front door a crack—

The door FLIES out of her hands and SLAMS shut.

Autumn turns to see Elina.

Elina shakes her head. She screams “NO” – not making a sound.

In the Gremlin, Meg jumps. She heard Elina. “What was that?”

Buck looks at her. Shakes his head. *Heard what?*

“You didn’t hear a shout?”

“All I hear is your dang motor conkin’ out.”

Meg looks down at the gauges. They go haywire. The car dies. “If I didn’t know better I’d think a ghost did that.”

“Yep,” Buck quips, “the ghost of an ancient engine, rest its soul.”

The bridge finally lumbers down again.

Meg coaxes the car to start as traffic ahead moves again. Dead.

“Pop the hood,” Buck says.

Buck forces the rusty door open and steps out into the chill air.

At the house, Chelsea continues to pound on the door outside.

Autumn tiptoes through the house into the kitchen. She raises the knife as the muffled sounds of a struggle seem to be right outside the back door.

Chelsea’s pounding at the front door stops.

Apprehensive, Autumn flips a switch by the back door.

A light goes on in the back yard.

Outside two men fight in and out of light and shadow. Neither has a hat now and it’s impossible for Autumn to make anyone out.

“The cops are on their way!” she lies.

One guy hesitates a moment. The other takes advantage and knocks him down. Hard. Out cold.

The victor wipes his brow and heads toward the door.

Autumn backs up. "Don't come in here!"

A semi-familiar voice says, "It's okay, Autumn. You're safe now."

Unsure, Autumn asks, "Doc? Is that you?"

The silhouetted guy stops, bends down, then comes up with the cap. Puts it on his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Go away, Chad!” Autumn runs up the stairs and into her room.

She looks for her phone. Sees it on the floor. Relieved, she picks it up and dials “9-1-1.” She is about to hit “send” when the kitchen door SMASHES with the sound of broken glass downstairs.

The phone falls from her hand. She slices herself accidentally with the knife trying to catch the falling phone.

She ends up dropping both.

The guy calls out from the base of the stairs, “Autumn? You up there?”

Autumn reels. Her foot kicks the phone under the bed.

Frantic, she bends down to reach for it when she hears things being smashed downstairs.

She hears two men fight in the kitchen, making a wreck of it.

Autumn gets on her knees. Can’t see the phone.

The fight downstairs ceases. Footsteps run up the stairs.

Still on her knees, Autumn grabs and hides the knife.

Don, ragged and winded from the scuffle, darkens her doorway. “Are you alright?”

Autumn stands slowly as he steps forward. She brushes her hair aside with her cut hand.

Don steps forward. “You’re bleeding.” He reaches for her and she swipes with the knife, slicing his arm.

“Dammit, Autumn. Why’d you do that?”

She waves the trembling knife at him. “DON’T COME ANY CLOSER!”

“What? Why—”

She swipes a radius to hold him back. “Where’s Chad?”

Don’s shoulders slump. “I found him at the side of the house. He’s...he’s dead.”

“*Found* him?” Confused, Autumn lets her guard down for a moment—

Don knocks the knife from her hand. It skids to the hallway.

He tries to check her wound, but she pulls away from him.

“If Chad’s dead, you killed him!” Autumn accuses.

“What? No. It must’ve been the guy I found lurking at your back door. I confronted him and he—”

Elina fills the reflection of the center vanity mirror. The glass BURSTS from the two side panels.

Don jumps back, stunned by the display.

A guy with a blue baseball cap appears behind Don in the hall.

The gray car with New Mexico license plates drove along the desert highway. Headbanger music squawked from the radio.

Gagged and hogtied with yellow rope in the back seat, Elina could see the back of her abductor’s head. His blond hair stuck out from under a blue baseball cap.

He turned to her. It was the store clerk, Jimmy, just 16 years old.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Jimmy?” Autumn puzzles when she sees the store clerk behind Don.

Don turns to face him.

Jimmy, in his blue cap, is covered in bruises and cuts from their scuffle.

“Benji?” Don says, confused. “Benjiman Sjostrom?”

“Only just now recognize me, doc?” Jimmy lunges at Don with the knife from the hall.

Don evades and grapples for control of the weapon.

Autumn yells, “Jimmy! Stop it!”

Jimmy plunges the knife into Don’s already cut arm.

Don hollers in agony when Jimmy extracts the knife. Don yells to Autumn, “Call 9-1-1!”

Autumn kneels down, searches for the phone under the bed.

Don uses a pillow from Autumn’s bunk like a shield from Jimmy’s slashes. “Benji, why...?”

“You took me from her, you bastard.” Jimmy moves to stab Don again— “And now you’re keeping me from *her* too.”

Autumn pulls a tennis racket out from under the bed—

WHOMP! She knocks the knife from Jimmy’s hand. Before he can respond she SMACKS him in the face with the racket.

Jimmy falls back.

Don slumps against the wall, spent.

Jimmy shakes it off and starts after Autumn—

Elina appears in front of Autumn, points at Jimmy. She silently SCREAMS “HIM!” over and over. “HIM! HIM!”

Jimmy backs up, covering his ears. He drops the knife. “What is that?!”

Autumn scuttles to Don’s side as he sinks to the floor, weak. She looks over at Jimmy, and tells him, “It’s Elina.”

Elina’s silent screams send Jimmy to his knees. He looks around. Doesn’t see

her, but looks directly at her. “Evangelina?”

Elina glares at him and her voice fills the room:

“I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHO YOU ARE, YOU DAMN PENDEJO!”

In a filthy, junk-filled, abandoned trailer in the middle of nowhere, headbanger music played.

Inside, the loud music added chaos to the scene. The dusty ceiling fan spun with a squeak even the music couldn’t drown out. The scratchy couch had as many rat-chewed holes as intact spots all over it.

Elina, in tears, hands tied with yellow rope, backed up in mortal fear.

Sixteen-year-old Jimmy stalked her, an empty vodka bottle in hand. “DON’T KNOW me? Every time you came out of that quack’s office, you BEGGED me to TAKE YOU AWAY.”

He pinned her up against a wall by a framed mirror.

“No, what?” Elina was confused. “We never talked. I don’t even know your name...” Inspired, hopeful, Elina pleaded, “See? I DON’T KNOW YOUR NAME! Let me go. I won’t tell. I can’t tell anyone if I don’t know who you are.”

“STOP SAYING THAT! You’re my girl.” He smashed the mirror with the bottle, and both shattered. “I killed two people to find you!”

He showed her a cut on his hand from the mirror. “Now look what you made me do, bitch.” He sucker-punched her in the stomach, and she doubled over gasping for air.

“EI BEBE! You’ll kill him!”

“Baby? You mean...” Jimmy’s pupils dilated black with rage. He grabbed her by the throat and lifted her with superhuman strength like a ragdoll.

“You let some other guy...?” He slammed her against the wall, lifting her off her feet by the throat.

Unable to answer, she tried to push him away. Her feet kicked the air.

“You filthy whore!” He squeezed the life out of her. Nothing she did to fight him fazed him.

Blood formed around her bugged-out eyes. She was dying...

Finally, he let go.

Elina dropped, lifeless, to the floor amidst mirror shards.

Jimmy fell to his knees beside her. Nudged her.

Horrified, he realized she was DEAD.

“No! Evangelina! NO!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“No... Evangelina?” Jimmy cowers on the bedroom floor. “How is it possible?”

Elina glares down at Jimmy.

Haunted, he looks at the shattered mirror pieces all around. “No!”

His guilty eyes move to Don. “I...I’m sorry. I never meant to...”

Don’s icy gaze causes Jimmy to break down completely.

“You?” Don accuses, “*You* murdered my boy? My wife!?”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry...” Jimmy, broken, melts into a pathetic puddle of sobs.

Footsteps through the house bring Buck to the door. He assesses the situation – puts his gun to Jimmy’s head. “Don’t even flinch, kid.”

From behind him, Meg, in her work costume, rushes in to Autumn. “Are you alright?”

Autumn stands and smiles over at Elina.

Elina, for the first time, smiles.

“Yeah...” Autumn says without taking her eyes off Elina. “I’ll be fine.”

Buck gets Jimmy to his feet and marches him out the door as sirens draw near outside.

Meg spots Don’s bloody arm. She kneels beside him.

“I came to break things off,” Don explains. “I got too involved. I shouldn’t have—”

“I was going to fire you anyway.”

She smiles, and he half-smiles back as she tears his shirt to make a bandage for his arm.

Autumn steps past them and faces Elina.

With a scratchy whisper, her lips moving, Elina says, “Thank you.”

Autumn can’t find words.

Elina backs up into the intact mirror, moving back, back, back...until she starts to fade.

Both smile just before Elina disappears.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Outside the house, the street is crawling with first responders inside and out.

Jimmy has a meltdown in the back seat of a cop car.

Chelsea, wrapped in a solar blanket, talks with a cop nearby. Her eyes are on the coroner, who pulls a tarp over Chad's crumpled body. She looks over at Jimmy in the cop car, then breaks down in tears.

From the living room, Autumn, Meg and Don watch the aftermath unfold from the window.

Autumn sees Chelsea crying. "Why'd he kill Chad?"

Buck answers as he enters the front door, "Kid was at the wrong place at the wrong time, I'd wager. Perp won't say."

Meg holds Autumn close.

Buck points over at Jimmy, who is now turning catatonic in the cop car. "But Jimmy did confess to Elina's murder before lawyerin' up."

A few wrapped birthday gifts are piled by the front door of Autumn and Meg's house. One is obviously a tennis racket, wrapped to shape.

At the dining table, Autumn and Don, his arm in a sling, sit before a Thanksgiving spread.

Autumn looks at the wrapped tennis racket. "Wow. Can't wait to see what you got for my birthday."

Don takes a sip of eggnog. "Is your new doctor as charmed by all that snark as you think I am?"

"She's a White Sox fan, so I think it goes over her head."

Meg carries a roasted turkey from the kitchen to the table. "Do the honors, Don?"

Truly honored, Don stands. Picks up the carving knife—

"Wait," Autumn says. "We're supposed to say what we're thankful for first."

Don puts down the knife. He and Meg sit, all ears.

“No meds for five days. And no frenemies for six.”

Don clarifies, “No ghosts?”

“Not a-one.”

Don raises his glass. They all salute with wine and eggnog then drink.

Don picks up the carving knife once more—

“Autumn!” a gurgled voice calls out. “Jimmy didn’t kill me!”

Autumn whips around.

Chad, gray and ghostly, stands by the window, looking like someone just hit him in the face with a shovel.
