

SONG OF A CROCUS MOON

by Mary Jo Rhodes

Mary Jo Rhodes

novel

329 Adams Street

Hoboken, NJ 07030

(201) 659-9046

maryjorhodes@optonline.net

I suspect ...that when descendants of the first modern humans expanded into Eurasia, they intermixed with the populations there. Why the genetic evidence, as currently interpreted, doesn't reflect this, I don't know. Perhaps the current reading of the evidence is incorrect.

—Richard Leakey, *The Origin of Humankind*

PART ONE

ONE

I noticed the woman's slingback satin pumps first. One shoe was lime-green, the other forest green. The woman wearing the shoes led a boy toward a Mister Softee truck, parked near the playground. She pulled a package of Kools from her purse and lit a cigarette. After she sucked in a few deep drags, she flicked it away. The cigarette, still burning, landed a few inches in front of me.

I watched as the boy moved away from the woman, and turned toward the park. She grabbed his arm and dragged him toward a blue Oldsmobile parked near the ice cream truck. In one movement, she opened the door and shoved him in. The boy pounded against the window, yelling something I could not hear.

Something was wrong here, seriously wrong. I fumbled in my purse for a pen and jotted the license plate number on an envelope before the car was swallowed in traffic. Maybe I was overreacting. The boy may have been late for his first day of preschool. He may have been whining about ice cream and his mother or nanny lost her patience.

I rushed toward the PATH train, which would take me away from Hoboken into Manhattan. On the train, the fluorescent lights pierced my eyes straight

through to my brain. My head throbbed, a migraine blossoming in my skull. To distract myself, I pulled a course syllabus out of my satchel, but couldn't focus on it. Even after years of teaching, I was eager for the first day of the semester. But today my back-to-school euphoria was tempered by thoughts of the incident by the ice cream truck. Should I have intervened?

I remembered the woman's mismatched shoes and odd clothes. Her blouse, a ruffled blouse with a ribbon bow, looked like something a secretary would have worn in 1984. The shoes reminded me of a pair of bridesmaid shoes I had stuck in the back of my closet. Unlike his mother or nanny, the boy wore an outfit suitable for one of the fancier preschools in Hoboken: new tennis shoes, blue-and-yellow striped polo shirt, khaki shorts.

What upscale Hoboken mother would put her young child in the hands of a woman who looked like that? Unless she was his mother. Of course she was the boy's mother. She had rushed that morning and had put on whatever was hanging in the closet.

When the train arrived at 9th street in Manhattan fifteen minutes later, I stumbled up the steps and hurried to NYU, a few blocks away, where I taught anthropology. I didn't stop at The Campus Eatery to pick up my usual yogurt muffin and iced chai.

Inside my office, I opened the blinds and took a deep breath. A half-written manuscript spilled out of a manila folder. Unread monographs towered on a garage sale card table. This year I was determined to create order out of chaos. I brushed the dust off Rufus, a bobble-headed Neanderthal man, a gift from a former student.

My headache persisted. I put a cloth over my eyes and did Lamaze breathing to ease the pain. When that didn't work, I fished through my purse for an aspirin and found the paper with the license number. I tossed it in the garbage. I had read too many news stories about abducted children.

Class started in ten minutes, but the room spun around me. I hadn't had a headache like this since Ben and I had signed our divorce papers. Thinking of Ben reminded me that it was best not to stew about things forever. I reached into the garbage and pulled out the paper with the number. Before I talked myself out of it, I called the Hoboken police.

"Hoboken Police Department."

"My name is Bronwyn Bloom," I said. "I witnessed an unusual incident this morning, a child being pushed into a car near Church Square Park. It's probably nothing, but it seemed off to me."

"Let me transfer you."

A new voice came on the line. "Detective Victor Cabrera."

I told my story again.

"I need information," he said. "Description of child, exact address of incident." That he was taking me seriously and not trying to humor an hysterical woman frightened me.

"I have the license plate number," I said.

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Make and model of the vehicle? In case the number is wrong."

"Blue Oldsmobile, an old car, parked behind the Mister Softee truck...you know, where it always is near the park, on Fourth between Park and Willow."

"You'll need to stop by the station so I can file an official report."

"I'll stop by after work."

"Fine."

Maybe he got a couple of these calls every day. All in a day's work. Some paper pushing to pass the time until his next paycheck.

A few minutes later, I stood in front of my first class, a senior seminar on the

Neanderthals. The disturbing morning vanished from my mind. I was eager to teach again after the summer hiatus. The students, seated around a seminar table, looked up at me, opening their new notebooks and uncapping their new pens.

"I always begin this class by showing two photos." I turned off the lights and opened a laptop connected to a projector. "This first photo has personal meaning for me. These two men are my identical twin great-uncles from Wales, whom my mother and everyone else in village thought were Neanderthal. School children were even taken to their house every year to meet them and learn about evolution."

In the photo, my uncles stood in front of a stone cottage in the Cambrian Mountains in Wales. One uncle held a currant cake to serve to the visiting students. The other uncle held a ceramic jug of lemonade, a shy expression on his face. I pointed out my uncles' prominent brow ridges, huge noses, receding chins, sloping foreheads, and massive, barrel-shaped bodies.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm not coming out as a Neanderthal. But my mother's stories about my great-uncles fueled my lifelong interest in our ancient cousins. I became an anthropologist because of these weird-looking guys. I know now, of course, that they were descended from the Cro-Magnons--what are more properly called early modern humans--like every other human on the planet."

I switched to the next image, a museum reconstruction of the face of a Neanderthal girl. The girl had a soulful, human expression, and was not unattractive.

"This Neanderthal girl—I call her Daisy—lived about 35,000 years ago," I said. "I like to show this picture of Daisy to remind you that Neanderthals were indeed human and intelligent, in fact, with a cranial capacity 10% larger than ours."

I turned on the lights and faced the class. "Neanderthals weren't grunting cavemen and cavewomen. They hunted in teams, buried their dead, made elegant

tools, and took care of the elderly and injured. Sometimes we forget how successful our hominid cousins really were. For 200,000 years, they lived all across Eurasia, from Britain to Spain, Greece to Israel and Iraq, east to Siberia. And they lived in the harshest climate imaginable. They were emphatically not the dim-witted brutes of cartoons."

After this introduction, I wrote on the board important terms of the Mousterian stone tool culture and a timeline of the Middle Paleolithic period. The nuts and bolts of anthropology.

I finished my lecture and returned to my office, where I checked my phone messages. I had one message—from the detective at the Hoboken police station. He wanted to speak to me as soon as possible.

A child named Ian Waltham, who matched the description of the child I had seen, had been reported missing from the Elysian Cooperative Preschool.

TWO

"Ian Waltham was discovered missing at his preschool about two hours after you witnessed his abduction." The detective paused, as if giving me time to absorb this information.

I had arrived at the police station out of breath, having rushed back to Hoboken after hearing Detective Cabrera's message. At the station, an officer led me to the detective's office, where I sat on a molded plastic chair in front of his desk. The detective, with his black hair and jutting cheekbones, reminded me of a high priest from a Mayan carving. I was dizzy with the surreal nature of the day, as if I had been dropped into a made-for-TV movie being filmed in Hoboken.

"The teacher switched in the middle of recess in the park," he said. "The second teacher didn't know he was missing—it was the first day of school. No one realized he was gone until almost lunchtime."

"It definitely wasn't a family member or a friend?"

He shook his head. "Mother's hysterical. It's not a custody case. She's a single mom—dad's an anonymous sperm donor."

A container of melon perched on the edge of his desk, forgotten. The sweet smell left me queasy. The air-conditioning penetrated my sweater with an arctic chill.

"What's your job again?" he asked.

"I teach at NYU."

He frowned and put on reading glasses. "I've been appointed the primary law enforcement contact for the case. Once we have the police sketch we'll set up a command center and implement an Amber Alert. Be prepared for a media feeding frenzy."

On the wall behind the detective hung a diploma from John Jay College, *summa cum laude*, and a framed commendation from the mayor of Hoboken.

"You'll need to be interviewed by the forensic artist before you leave the station," he said. "Before that, I'd like your impressions of the abductor."

I closed my eyes and visualized the scene that morning. I described as much as I could remember.

He peered over his glasses at me. "You sure you've never seen this woman before?"

"No, never," I answered.

"Keep going."

"She was dressed oddly. She had mismatched shoes."

He hesitated a second. I hadn't combed my kinky red hair since the morning. It sprang untamed from my head like copper springs. An Upper Paleolithic fox tooth necklace hung around my neck. I always wore it on the first day of class.

The phone rang again. Detective Cabrera spoke to the person in police shorthand. He hadn't jotted down notes about the woman's appearance. Distracted, he glanced over my shoulder. Two officers hovered in the hall as they waited to speak to him.

"So why did you take the license plate number?"

"The boy pounded on the window as she drove away. That surprised me, didn't seem right."

He absorbed this information in silence, while he filled out a form.

"We're going to need you to look at pictures."

"I'll help in any way I can."

"You'll also need to take a polygraph test, although this is voluntary—"

"A polygraph test?" I asked, alarmed.

"It's a routine procedure in child abduction cases," he said, his eyes not meeting mine. This Mayan priest seemed ready to sacrifice me to the gods.

"We're not releasing your name to the media yet, but they might find it out anyway. Keep your cool and don't say anything."

"I understand."

He stood up, towering over me, and shook my hand, his skin cool and papery. Then he made eye contact with the officers outside his office. I stepped aside to let them in. His phone rang again.

"We'll be in touch," he said, casting a glance my way.

Another officer led me to an elevator that took me down to a windowless room in the basement. The forensic artist, a man with a long face and a beaky nose, sat slumped at a table, a sketchpad and pencils in front of him. He opened a book called the Facial Identification Catalog.

"Nice to meet you," he said, smiling to reveal large teeth, with I noted, shovel-shaped incisors. "You might be familiar with this from cop shows."

I nodded, but decided not to tell him I never watched cop shows nor read detective novels, that I checked first to make sure a novel or TV show had no dead bodies in it, unless it was death by natural consequences--maybe old gramps whose time had come. At the movies, I walked out of the theatre as soon as I heard the dull thud of a mobster being thrown out a window.

“The shape of the head and face is very important.” He opened the book and showed me the page with face shapes.

I closed my eyes and saw the kidnapper's face clearly--a plain round face with a double chin. Scanning the pages of faces, I placed my finger on a face. "This one."

“Now we’re going to move on to the eyes,” he said. “Take your time. A lot of people get overwhelmed by the eyes.”

Soulless eyes, open and unblinking, stared at me from the page. I quickly eliminated most of them. The abductor had close-set, small eyes. I found a pair that matched.

“That’s pretty fast,” he said. “Most people take at least five minutes to pick out the eyes. Don’t rush, this is important.”

“Now the mouth. Take your time.”

I remembered the woman smoking a cigarette. Her mouth protruded and she had thin lips, the kind of lips that disappear when a person smiles. “Can you show me mouths of people with bad teeth?”

“Not really, but I can sketch it that way.” In a few quick strokes he captured her mouth.

“That’s it.”

He continued to ask questions—about her hair, skin tone, and any unusual facial markings. He sketched with a woodless pencil, smudging with his thumb to put in the shadows. When he was finished, he held up the drawing.

“That’s close, very close.” I wrapped my sweater around me in hopes of warming up.

“I’d like you to rate this drawing from one, not close at all, to ten, very close.”

The drawing wasn’t perfect. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what was missing. “I’d say nine. There might be something else. If I think of it, can I let

you know?"

"Definitely." He handed me his card. "Nine is pretty damn good for me. I usually get a five or six."

I was free to go home. I pushed my way through the crowded hall and emerged into the sunlight. Other than the two TV news camera vans parked across the street, it was an ordinary day for most people. The kids from the Catholic school up the block were out of school already.

I took my usual route home, but as soon as I reached the park, I wished I had gone another way. The ice cream truck was parked in the same place, its red lights flashing. I saw Mister Softee again, still grinning, dressed in his cherry-red bow tie, his hair a vanilla swirl bouffant. A line of parents and kids snaked from the truck's window through the park. I had never noticed until now the slogan painted on the side: Watch for Our Children.

News vans were double-parked around the park. Policemen held clipboards and interviewed people. Crowds gathered, right at the spot on the sidewalk where I had been, where the woman pushed the child into the car. Had I remembered to tell the police that she smoked Kools? Yes, I had mentioned that.

I glanced over my shoulder and turned onto a parallel street, away from the park. Even on a good day, I rushed home after work, eager to retreat to my apartment. Today I was desperate to get home and see my son.

THREE

My least favorite nursery rhyme was the one about the ladybug whose house was on fire and who had to fly, fly away home. Whenever fire engines approached my neighborhood, I rushed home. Today I heard a shrieking fire siren. I might arrive home and find the people who lived in my building out on the sidewalk, streets blocked off, and firefighters in brown jumpsuits entering the building with hoses.

As I got closer, I saw that the smoke rose over Jersey City, up on the hill overlooking Hoboken. Sure enough, my row house was not in flames when I arrived home. Inside my first-floor apartment, my son David had created his own after-school disaster—frozen burrito wrapper on the floor, open milk jug on the table, its cap lost among the debris. Pre-calculus handouts papered the kitchen table.

David sat on the sofa in front of the TV watching the local news. I resisted the urge to wrap my arms around him. Instead, I threw my bag over a chair and joined him on the sofa.

"What are they saying?" I had called him earlier to let him know what had happened.

"That there was a witness to the crime," he said. "They haven't said anything about you."

The news of the missing boy was the top story. The newscaster, a heavyset man with a New Jersey accent, whose stories usually involved the agenda of the Hoboken city council meeting, reported the story with barely concealed excitement.

A photograph of Ian flashed on the screen. He held a Thomas the Tank Engine toy, with a Christmas tree behind him. He had the radiant smile of a child who had just opened his favorite present. I turned away from the TV.

"This is too weird," David said, echoing my thoughts. "Are the reporters going to be after you?"

"Probably, after they find out I witnessed the abduction."

He pushed his fingers through his wiry red hair and wrapped his arms around his knees, curling up on the sofa.

"Dad know about this?" he asked.

"Yeah, I called him."

I cleaned the kitchen of David's debris. "So how was the first day of senior year?" I asked, attempting to inject normality into this disturbing day. "I didn't even get a chance to ask."

"The last year boiling in blood in the seventh circle of hell." He switched the channel to a show on the Science Channel about parallel universes and higher dimensional space. The Australian host explained how our universe is just one universe bubble among many.

"Relief is in sight," I said. "It's spelled c- o- l- l- e- g- e. By the way, dig up that paper you did on Dante's *Inferno*--you could send that along with your college applications as a sample of your work."

On a normal day, I would settle in and nag my son about how he needed to practice for the SAT, find an eleventh-hour impressive volunteer job, join Quiz Bowl, or become president of a club. Today, I did not nag him.

I grated Swiss cheese for a quiche. I chopped tomatoes and tossed a salad. My parrot Gypsy squawked "Oy gevalt" at me, his only words, over and over. He was the legacy of my 21-year marriage to Ben, who had inherited the bird from his late aunt. I had traded a human mate for an avian mate. Parrots, unlike some humans, pair bonded for life. Gypsy flew over to me as I filled up a bowl in the sink for his daily splash. He fluttered in the water, and then flew to my shoulder to fluff his feathers and preen.

I remembered when I had lost David's older brother Aidan for a few minutes when he was about four. While I was preoccupied in a store in the mall, he had disappeared. I had raced out of the store, screaming his name, adrenaline coursing through me. An older woman, who later said she had five children, took control and found Aidan in front of the hermit crab tank in the pet store.

Having one's child abducted? That nightmarish abyss lurked in the back of every parent's mind, fueled by lurid stories on the news about children taken by strangers. I could not imagine how Ian's mother would survive this night.

I whisked the cream and eggs together and poured it into the pie shell. The phone rang. My hands shook and the liquid spilled over the sides of the shell onto the baking sheet. I picked up the phone.

"Professor Bloom? Detective Cabrera. We've ID'd the vehicle. It belongs to a piano teacher in town named Basil McFarland. The missing boy took lessons from him for a few months."

"I've heard of him." In Hoboken, one or two degrees separated everyone, especially those who weren't B&Rs, the people born and raised in Hoboken. I wasn't a B&R, and neither were most of my friends. "My sons didn't take lessons from him, but I have friends whose kids have taken lessons from him for

years."

"Turns out he rarely drives the car--he says he didn't know it was missing. Someone took the keys from his apartment. Can you come and look at pictures of his students, family members?"

"Of course, when?"

"As soon as you can get there."

* * *

Twenty minutes later Detective Cabrera and I met in the lobby of Basil McFarland's high-rise apartment building near the Hoboken waterfront. We rode the elevator to the 20th floor in silence. McFarland greeted us at the door and led us to his studio/living room, dominated by a grand piano.

Above the piano, I saw a poster-sized photograph of McFarland, dressed in a tuxedo with cowboy boots and hat, standing in front of a Carnegie Hall. On another wall was a vintage poster from the 1930s advertising a concert for Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys and another more recent poster announcing the annual Guymon Oklahoma Pioneer Days Rodeo.

"I've already talked to a dozen people," McFarland said. With his jeans and cowboy boots, dark tan, and piercing blue eyes, he looked as if he should be leaning on a fence on his ranch overseeing his prized steers, not leaning on a Steinway B grand piano.

"I know you've talked to the FBI team," the detective said, "but I have a few questions and I'd like to go over it again formally with you after Professor Bloom looks at your photographs."

McFarland sighed. "This is the craziest thing that's ever happened to me."

"What was your relationship like with Ian?" the detective asked.

"His mother came to see me last spring," he said. "Thought her son might be musically gifted. I don't usually teach kids this young, but she really

put the pressure on me--she was one of those moms who thinks my kid is a prodigy. So I finally agreed to teach him on a trial basis."

"So what happened?" The detective sat on McFarland's leather couch. A framed *Time* magazine cover from the 1950s of the famous pianist from Texas, Van Cliburn, hung above his couch.

"He's a bright little boy, very musical." McFarland paced from his piano to the picture window that looked out over the Hudson to the Manhattan skyline beyond. "But after a few weeks I knew he wasn't ready for formal lessons. I told his mother to enjoy music with him and come back in a year or two and try again."

"That's the last you saw of him?"

"Yeah. Last lesson was in June."

"Show me exactly where you kept your car keys."

After they returned to the living room, the detective asked, "Who has access to your apartment?"

"You mean besides students, friends?"

"Yes, anyone."

"No one really," McFarland said. "My family is Oklahoma trailer trash. They have their own pick-ups—they don't need to steal my car--and they all have about 25 kids among them."

The detective's eyebrows shot up, but he did not smile. "Who else comes into your apartment?"

"My students, their parents, adult students, friends, the UPS man. Also, I suppose the three hundred or so people who live in this building could enter without me knowing."

Detective Cabrera jotted the information in a notebook. "Anyone else?"

"No."

"You said you had pictures of family, students, friends," Cabrera said.

"We need to look through every one of them. In the meantime, take a look at this sketch."

"I've seen the sketch," he said. "She doesn't look like anyone I know."

McFarland brought out stacks of pictures, gave the detective the web address for his website that included photographs of students, family weddings and reunions in Oklahoma, group shots of recitals, Hoboken church events.

I looked through every photograph, while the detective hovered near me, but I didn't see anyone who resembled Ian's kidnapper. The parents looked too well off, the Stevens Tech students too young, and the adult students and his friends too intellectual or bohemian.

I inspected a photograph of McFarland's family in Oklahoma. They sat around picnic tables, wearing "McFarland Family Reunion" t-shirts. The McFarland's seemed wholesome, fairly prosperous, and middle American. Maybe the trailer trash types hadn't been invited, or didn't want to go, to the reunion.

I finished looking at the photographs, and the detective took me aside. He would stay with McFarland to conduct a formal interview with him and would call me if he needed me. I might be asked to look at photographs of possible suspects, and would be informed when my polygraph test was scheduled. I should avoid the media and take greater precautions as the abductor may have spotted me.

I headed home. Everything that was so familiar seemed tainted: the playground where I had once taken my children everyday, the ice cream truck, the local piano teacher. This city was so seemingly safe, a self-contained bubble. Oldtimer Hoboken types, those people who used to frequent the waterfront, lived next door to once artsy, now well off, professionals, who were proud they didn't follow their peers into the suburbs. Masses of the post-college party crowd lived alongside with the Latinos and African Americans who had moved

to the city in the fifties and sixties. Mostly people got along. The city had lots of petty crime, an occasional crime of passion. But a child had never been abducted in the city.

I crossed Washington Street, and retreated into the light and color of the local gourmet grocery store. I hadn't finished baking the quiche. I picked up a frozen quiche and a container of hot chocolate mix. A cup of hot chocolate had always calmed David when he woke up from nightmares. But he was 17, not 10, and this wasn't a nightmare he could wake up from.

It reminded me of the day we had stood together at the waterfront gazing across the river at the column of smoke where the World Trade towers had once been. A day, like today, that shook me to the core.

The next morning, I got David off to school and headed for work. I hoped for good news, but didn't expect it. The work crowd rushed by me, heading to the city. I shuddered, feeling only darkness on this sunny day. As I headed down the steps to the train, my cell phone vibrated in my purse.

"Professor Bloom? This is Posey Waltham, Ian's mother." The woman's voice was hoarse, shaking, almost inaudible.

My heart raced. Why was she calling me? I climbed back up the steps toward the newsstand. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry—"

"I need to speak to you. Can you come see me?"

"Of course." I steeled myself to meet the mother of the missing boy.

FOUR

Posey Waltham lived in a brownstone on Bloomfield Street, no apartment number given. A CBS Outside news van was parked nearby. I rushed behind a Verizon phone service van. I did not want to draw attention to myself. Once inside, I noticed Posey was alone, except for the phone repairman.

“We finished installing the trap-and-trace line,” the repairman said to Posey. She looked at him, her face blank, as if he were speaking a foreign language.

“I want to do anything I can to help.” My offer sounded hollow and inadequate.

I followed Posey through a front parlor to a living room. A faded Oriental rug covered a hardwood floor. An oil painting, from a different era, perhaps the forties or fifties, of a mother and daughter in matching blue taffeta dresses, hung above a fireplace. On the mantelpiece sat a silver cup, with "Seawanhaka Junior Club Regatta" engraved above the yacht club burgee.

"I saw the police sketch." Posey checked her cell phone again. Her eyes darted around the room. "But she doesn't look like anyone I know, I mean at work, or around town."

Posey paced, her arms wrapped around herself. She pulled back the curtain and looked out the bay window onto the street outside.

"Where do you work?" I sat on velvet Victorian loveseat. I wanted to find a link, a clue that might explain a possible kidnapping.

"I work in children's book publishing, in the city. I'm an editor," she said, after a minute of silence.

The money for the brownstone, I reasoned, may have come from a trust fund. She probably didn't make enough money to afford a Hoboken brownstone. She might be the daughter of a prominent person, or maybe she was from a wealthy family. Money might be a motive for the kidnapping.

Posey rubbed her hands together rapidly as if she were trying to warm myself. She bounced up and looked out the window again. "Please. I need to hear from you what this woman was like."

"She wasn't nice to Ian," I said, "but I don't think she deliberately wanted to hurt him either. She looked unemotional."

"Was she strung out on drugs?" Posey twisted a gold signet ring around and around her pinky.

"No, I don't think so, but she did look like she might be on the fringes—tacky clothes, her shoes were—"

"What was Ian doing?" She avoided eye contact with me, as if to ward off the pain of what I might say.

I chose my words carefully. "It seemed as if he trusted her or knew her at first, but then he turned away from her. I took the license plate number because the incident seemed off to me." I didn't tell Posey that he pounded on the car window. Maybe the detective would tell her that. But I didn't want that image to

haunt her.

Posey shook her head, continuing to rub her hands. "I drummed into him he shouldn't talk to strangers—and he didn't. He doesn't like ice cream that much. Did she have a dog? He'd follow anyone with a dog. But she didn't have a dog, right?"

"I didn't see a dog."

A golden retriever was flopped down by the back door, leading to the backyard.

"He was confused, very very confused." Posey's voice caught in her throat. "It was his first day in a new school. I told him to listen to the teacher, do what she says. This person must have pretended to be a teacher. Why did I tell him that? Why did I tell him to do that?"

I was close to tears. But I knew I had to remain calm and not cry.

"Because that's what all mothers say to their kids on the first day of school."

Posey leaned over, head between her knees, her straight blonde hair brushing the floor. "I can't think of anyone who looks like the police sketch." She stood up again, as if in perpetual motion.

"Do you know anyone who showed any special interest in Ian?" I asked.

"No. I've asked Paula too, his Jamaican nanny. She doesn't remember anyone either. They're very close. She's devastated."

Posey looked out the window again, crumpling onto a matching Victorian loveseat, her arm bent over her face. She seemed too numb for tears. Where were her friends and family? As I observed this woman's agony, my stomach twisted in knots, and my hands balled in fists. Why I hadn't intervened, why I hadn't trusted my instincts? I could have prevented the tragedy. I had been a few feet from her son, sensing something odd, and could have stepped between the boy and the woman.

"Can I get you something to eat or a cup of tea?" I asked, a feeble suggestion, but an automatic one for me. "I imagine you haven't eaten since yesterday."

"The social worker is bringing me take-out food I think. She just went out for a few minutes. With the policeman. Where are they?" Posey jumped up and opened the drapes, and looked out the window again. She seemed to be breathing heavily, almost hyperventilating.

"I'll bring you real food later."

"Don't bother." Her tone that implied that eating was something she did in a previous life, but now was of no consequence. "You'd be wasting your time."

As the police and social workers returned, I left Posey's house. A swarm of people surrounded me. It reminded me of the time I got knocked over by a wave at the ocean when I was five. I ended up face down with a mouth full of sand and salt water, certain I would drown.

"Professor Bloom, can you make a statement?" one blonde newscaster asked me. "We understand you were a witness to the abduction of Ian Waltham."

What had the detective told me to do? I tried to remember. I didn't think the cheesy, "no comment," was appropriate.

In one of David's parallel universes I might find this an interesting story to read in the paper over my morning tea: NYU professor was disturbed enough by an incident she witnessed to take a license plate number, but didn't intervene. Would I get sympathetic or unsympathetic treatment? Undoubtedly the latter. Made for a better story.

My ladybug instinct was in overdrive. I needed to get home, but I wasn't sure how to evade the reporters. I had always been the slowest runner in the class, the last one to be picked for the softball games. Unfortunately I also stood

out in a crowd. My shoulder-length bushy red hair, odd face that once upon a time my ex-husband had said was "striking," and my height, 5', made me too easy to spot.

I took a left into an alley, unseen, and jogged to Washington Street, jaywalking across the street, between the double-parked cars. The #126 bus was loading passengers to New York City. I joined the line, and soon was safe inside the bus. The bus careened up the Avenue across the bridge out of Hoboken through the Lincoln Tunnel, and twenty minutes later unloaded me into the anonymity of Port Authority Bus Terminal.

FIVE

I took the subway from Port Authority to the West Fourth Street station. Rushing to NYU, a few blocks away, I glanced over my shoulder, feeling like a fugitive. I waved to Larry, who manned the used-book table near the Bobst library, but did not stop to linger as I usually did at his table. When I reached my office, I closed and locked the door and took deep breaths to calm my racing heart.

After I collected myself, I called the detective.

"Detective Cabrera? It's Bronwyn Bloom."

"I see the media found you. Did you say anything to them?"

"No nothing, but it was frightening. Am I in danger once my picture gets in the paper?"

"You could be. Take extra precautions."

"I spoke with Posey Waltham." I peered out my office window but saw no news vans. "She mentioned that Ian was shy, and wouldn't have gone with

anyone, the woman may have posed as his teacher."

"She said that to me too." I detected impatience in his voice.

"I asked her where she worked to see if there was an clue as to why her son was abducted. Have the police spoken to Ian's nanny Paula? I imagine he spent a lot of time with her and—"

"Wait a minute." His voice was soft, but not friendly. "All questions must go through appropriate law enforcement channels."

I was taken aback by his reprimand. "I'm sorry. Uh, if you'll excuse me, I have a class now." I snapped the cell phone closed. I heard a knock on my door, probably a student who needed me to sign a drop-form.

"Who is it?" I tried to keep the quaver out of my voice.

"It's me," the voice said.

I swung open the door and wrapped my arms around my friend James, a fellow anthropology professor.

"This will turn out fine," he said. "I know it. You still want me to teach your afternoon class?"

"No, I need to talk to the students. Tell them what's going on. They may hear about it on the news. Also, if they see your pretty face, they'll wish you were their professor, not me."

James was the Indiana Jones of the NYU anthropology department, but he was uninterested in the crushes he inspired in his students. That only made their hearts beat faster. I was immune to his charms. James was the younger brother I had never had as an only child.

James wished me luck, and I gathered papers for my class. I hadn't prepared a lecture. When all else fails, I thought, begin a class discussion. I wasn't a fan of classroom discussions. The shy, often smarter, students never said a word.

The whispering stopped when I entered the seminar room. I wanted to

teach, but first I had to deal with the students' curiosity.

"Yesterday was a normal day," I said, facing my students. "I walked to work, by a park in Hoboken, where I witnessed an incident that was strange, but not strange enough for me to confront the person. This may be a decision that will haunt me for the rest of my life."

I tried to read the students' faces, but I couldn't tell if they thought I was innocent or guilty. I took a deep breath and hoped to plead my case.

"The mother in me reacted to the boy and to his obvious distress." I glanced around the table. "As my sons will tell you, I'm a touch overprotective. I make them go out each day dressed in full body armor."

A few students laughed. It's possible I reminded them of their own overprotective mothers, many of whom, I was sure, wished their sons and daughters had picked a college in Iowa, not one in New York City.

"I called the police because the situation didn't feel normal to me, yet it wasn't obvious either what was happening. I was shocked anything had gone wrong. I hope my information will help the authorities find the boy."

I hesitated. I didn't want to cry in front of my class. The serious, though sympathetic, looks on their faces gave me strength.

"I'm not sure how it is going to play out. You might even, God forbid, have reporters asking you questions. But that's all I want to say about it. I want to teach you anthropology."

The students opened their notebooks, their pens poised to take notes. I began the class discussion.

"In the reading about the Neanderthals," I said, "You will learn about skeletons found with fractures on the upper body and ribs similar to the pattern of injuries of rodeo clowns. This has been repeated so often in the literature that we paleoanthropologists visualize the Neanderthals in chaps and spurs riding bucking broncos. Can you think of ways to approach the problem of the

rodeo-riding Neanderthals?"

One woman, a student whom I recognized from my freshman survey class, raised her hand. "I might try to find other instances where being thrown from an object would cause the same injury. A climbing accident or rock fall?"

"Good."

"Maybe check bone density?" suggested another student asked, a jock-type guy wearing a Yankee cap turned backwards.

"Good point. The Neanderthals' bones were quite porous due to their adaptation to extreme cold." I sat on the edge of the table. "We know they were not fast runners. They didn't chase after their prey and hurl spears at them like the early moderns. I suspect Neanderthals hunted by ambushing animals, possibly medium-sized herbivores. They jumped on them and held on like rodeo clowns. Not the easiest or most painless way to get a meal, yet it seems to have worked for the Neanderthals..."

The students scribbled away in their notebooks or typed on laptops.

"Anthropology," I said, "is nothing more than academic detective work. And don't forget. The simplest answer is often the correct one."

After class, I returned to my office, and put out a motel-type "Please Do Not Disturb" sign. I needed solitude to think. James slipped an online news article under the door. In the article, I was portrayed as the absent-minded professor whose head was in the ivory tower. Even when faced with what was obviously a crime, I did not intervene.

Ben would see this article and would be calling at any minute. I checked my cell phone messages. He had already called.

"You read the article," I said when I reached him.

"God, this is a fucking disaster."

"What do you think I should do?"

"Send David over to my place. You might be in danger and he could be too."

"I'll send him over tonight."

"Why didn't you stop the woman?"

"I don't know. The whole thing was off to me—a cute preppy kid who was with a woman who was clearly not his mother—and didn't really look like a babysitter either."

"I've got to go. Another call is coming in." Not once had my ex-husband continued to talk to me, while he made the other person leave a message.

James peeked in my office. "Everything okay?"

"No, not really. Even Ben thinks I should have done something."

"You can do something."

"What do you mean?"

"Find the boy. You're smarter than the Hoboken police."

"It's not only the Hoboken Police. The state police in Trenton, and the FBI from the field office in Newark are involved too."

"Do it, Bronwyn. Remember, you have 10% more brain than most people."

"Cranial capacity doesn't equal intelligence and you know it."

"What about our big-brained dolphin friends who see by using sound waves? You know you're a brainy Neanderthal."

James was obsessed with my supposed Neanderthal connections. He had measured my skull and found what he claimed to be an occipital bun, a bulge at the back of my skull. This was characteristic of Neanderthals, but was a relatively rare trait in modern people. He couldn't understand why I had shovel-shaped incisors. My body type, short and compact, resembled the modern Inuit and other people who lived in cold climates—as the Neanderthals had. He encouraged me to get a DNA test.

I considered my mother's Neanderthal stories the product of her rich, imaginative childhood in rural Wales. My mother had left school when she was 13. Soon after, her parents "sold" her to a local farmer, a practice still going on in the 1950s in parts of Wales and Ireland.

I didn't blame my mother for her lack of education. But James was a tenured anthropology professor with a Ph.D. from Princeton. His theories about my "Neanderthal heritage" had as much credibility as the TV programs my mother had loved to watch about Bigfoot and crop circles.

SIX

The next day I found myself again in the basement of the police station, this time with a woman named Rosa Minacozzi from the New Jersey State Police Polygraph Unit. Rosa was a grandmotherly type, with an orange perm and matching orange lipstick. Her glasses dangled on a chain around her neck.

Rosa shook my hand and pointed to the polygraph device. "I'm sure you're familiar with this from cop shows on TV."

"I don't watch crime shows or movies."

Rosa raised her eyebrows.

"I know what a polygraph is, of course." My hands were sweaty, my mouth sandpaper dry. "Sorry, I'm nervous. Will this effect the result?"

"No, that's factored into the examination. Be honest. That's all I tell people. Don't lie and you'll be just fine."

Rosa explained the test to me. She placed rubber tubes over my chest and abdomen to record respiratory activity. She attached two metal plates to my fingers that recorded sweat gland activity, and wrapped a blood pressure cuff

around my upper arm to record cardiovascular activity. As Rosa attached electrodes to me, I had visions of being electrocuted in the basement of the Hoboken police station.

Then came the chart collection phase. Rosa asked me control questions to get my baseline responses—obvious questions like what city did I live in, where did I work. After each question, I had to wait 30 to 40 seconds to let my heart rate and blood pressure return to normal.

Now came the meat of the polygraph test. Rosa asked questions about the case. Had I ever seen Ian Waltham before the day he was abducted? Did I know where he was now? Did I know Ian's abductor? Did I know his mother or anyone in his family? Did I know the identity of Ian's father, the sperm donor?

I was breathing rapidly, my heart hammering against my chest. I hadn't done anything wrong. I was cooperating with the police department. I would ace this test. I would be the most honest person she had ever tested, a paragon of truthfulness.

"We are now at the post-test phase." Rosa pointed to the charts. "I can see the results immediately."

"What?" I asked, panicked.

Rosa slid her reading glasses up her nose and squinted at the charts. Her face revealed nothing. "The results show DI on each response. Almost off the charts."

"DI?"

"Deception Indicated." Rosa looked grim. "You can take the test again, and don't forget, polygraph tests are not admissible in most courts."

"You think I'm lying!" The blood rushed to my face. "This is completely insane!"

Rosa packed up the polygraph device and her charts. I wanted to scream, shake her, but I knew it was no use.

"We are, of course, required to pass along these results to the coordinator in charge of the case." Rosa's orange lips were pursed. Her eyes did not meet mine. She had a whiff of satisfaction about her. Rosa had done her job. She had found a liar.

I left the police station and staggered to the park by the Hudson River, flopping down on a bench. Would I now be under closer scrutiny? I might even become a suspect in the case. The police would do a criminal-history check on me.

I wracked my brain as I tried to think of anything in my past that might raise red flags. I had walked out of a boutique when I was 16 with a white crochet beret from the store on my head. I had to have that beret. It was a personal challenge to see if I could get away with it. I hadn't been caught, but I never shoplifted again.

My life in crime had been short lived. For years I had been too frightened to go within ten blocks of the store, and was relieved when it went out of business. What else had I done except get a few parking tickets?

I couldn't call Ben. Not that he would gloat over my situation. But if I talked to him, I would feel worse. I called James.

"I failed the lie detector test."

"I'm not surprised."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice rising. "You think I'm guilty?"

If James didn't believe me, no one would. And how could I tell Aidan and David I had failed a lie detector test?

"No, but as a part-Neanderthal your reactions are extreme. You're hypersensitive. I bet your heart rate goes way up when you tear those tags off pillows."

I laughed. "I never tear those tags off. God forbid. Do you?"

"All the time. It's very satisfying. You think I'm kidding about the

Neanderthal thing?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"The test might not work for you. It tests galvanic skin response, which is highly variable. Those polygraph tests are based on junk science anyway."

"So you don't think I'm guilty?"

I heard his hooting laugh, the laugh I could recognize all the way across Washington Square Park on a crowded day. "You need to schedule a session with my friend who does past-life regression therapy."

"I think not. Didn't you find out you were a Druid burned at the stake?"

"That was only one of my lives. A few have been fairly pleasant."

James's academic specialty was the healing techniques of the Peruvian shamans. As part of his research, he had ingested the hallucinogenic *ayahuasca*, used by Amazonian shamans. He didn't like to talk too much about it, though he had implied it had taken him many years to feel balanced again after the year he had lived with a shaman.

James hadn't played the academic game at NYU for years, and could often be found at East-West Books in Manhattan where he taught courses in esoteric healing techniques. He didn't schmooze with fellow anthropologists at American Anthropology Association conferences. Luckily, he had had tenure for years. He was well known in anthropological circles and could coast on his reputation.

"I have enough problems in this life to worry about past lives," I said.

But my involvement in this crime was no joke, I thought to myself. I could not hide from, avoid, or wish this away. I had witnessed a crime and now might be a suspect.

SEVEN

Once home, I turned on mindless New Age music, hoping it would relax me. But the drone of the harmonium in the *Chakra Suite* grated on my nerves. I turned it off. Gypsy squawked for my attention and I let him out of his cage. He sat on top of my head and nipped at my ears, sensing that I was stressed out. I put him back in his cage.

I could retake the polygraph test and pass it, I thought, the same way I had passed my driver's test after two failed attempts. I would know now what to expect. But I might fail it again. Then what?

James had said I needed to use my large Neanderthal brain. After my many years of research, I had come to the conclusion that the Neanderthal brain was limited. For years, anthropologists gave Neanderthals new respect after the pollen of cornflowers and yarrow was found at the burial site at the Shanidar IV cave in Iraq. It suggested the Neanderthals had left flowers on graves as part of a burial ritual.

But now my colleagues believed the pollen was introduced by the burrowing action of a gerbil-like rodent known as a Persian jird. So much for the spiritual Neanderthals. The 40,000 year-old Neanderthal flute was now thought to be a bone with holes made by bears gnawing on it. So no musical flute-playing Neanderthals either.

Despite what I taught my students, I was disappointed with the Neanderthals. They had shown no artistic spark, no genuine innovation. They plodded along for 5,000 generations making the same tools. I couldn't help resenting them. Couldn't they once show me that they hadn't been prehistoric dolts, Middle Paleolithic underachievers?

To figure out the puzzle of who abducted Ian, I would use my Cro-Magnon brain, a brain with such remarkable plasticity it gave humans the ability to make lightning fast connections. I would figure out the connections that led to Ian's abduction.

All elements seemed to connect to Basil McFarland. He was at the epicenter of the abduction. Presumably the abductor had entered his apartment and stolen his keys. Ian had taken piano lessons from McFarland.

I couldn't call McFarland and make an appointment to question him. He might refuse and if the detective found out, I would be in trouble. But I had to speak to him and spend time with him if I wanted to learn who abducted Ian and why.

David's friend Aaron had taken piano lessons with McFarland. I looked up Aaron's home phone number in an old school directory. I hesitated for a moment, then picked up the phone and called Aaron's mother Geri.

"This is confidential," I said, "but I need to sound you out about Basil McFarland. I've met him and he seemed a bit off to me."

"He's really shaken up over this."

"What's he like with his students?" I asked.

"Oh my God, you're not implying he's involved are you? Look, he's a devoted teacher and has great rapport with his students."

"I don't know. I'm just trying to find answers. "

"You should schedule a piano lesson with him. I kid you not. I doubt he would refuse. His whole world is music, like he has blinders on and nothing else really matters."

"I always did want to take piano lessons. It's worth a try."

Later, I called McFarland and heard his gruff hello. "Don't hang up, please. It's Bronwyn Bloom. I want to start piano lessons."

"Sure you do." His Oklahoma twang dripped with sarcasm.

"I always wanted to learn to play the piano." That wasn't a lie. My mother could not afford lessons for me when I was a child although I fooled around on the old upright piano and played by ear. "I also want to talk to you."

"I bet you think I'm involved in the abduction. Well, I guess I better get you over here to prove to you otherwise. Come on over tomorrow around 4. Watch out for any reporters lurking around the building."

The next day the big story was about the Hoboken billionaire who had left all her money to her mangy Pekinese, but none to her children or grandchildren. She was being compared to Hetty Green, the famous Hoboken miser.

When I arrived at his building, I passed a guard sitting behind a desk in the lobby reading *The Jersey Journal*. I took the elevator to the 25th floor, and found the door to McFarland's apartment ajar. Inside his apartment, I heard the thumping sounds of a simple duet of "Hall of the Mountain King," one set of hands confident, the other lurching along the keyboard like a drunken troll.

I noticed one hall went to his living room/studio, where he sat near his student at the piano, the other way went to two rooms, an office/sitting room and a bedroom. Anyone could sneak into either room while McFarland was

absorbed in teaching. I waited in his sitting room until the lesson was over.

I had expected a 10-year-old girl or boy to emerge but was surprised to see a woman in her thirties with a honey-colored chignon wearing a short skirt and heels.

"I can't get this piece, Bazeel," she said with a French accent.

"Use the metronome when you're practicing. Remember it's a duet so it's important to keep your rhythm even."

"Yes, a duet between an elephant and a swan--I'm zee elephant, of course."

"Never, Françoise. See you next week."

When McFarland caught sight of me, his glance was withering. "Let me hear you play something, Maestro." He waved me to the piano. He sat down near the piano, crossing his arms and stretching out his long longs.

"My mother was quite good and played by ear," I said, not rising to the bait. "She was Welsh, born in Wales, and taught me a few hymns. Here's one I remember." I played the Welsh hymn *Cym Rhondda* with as much gusto as I could manage.

He nodded. "Anything else?"

I played a shaky rendition of the Welsh lullaby, *Ar Hyd Y Nos*, All Through the Night. "That's my whole repertoire." Out of the corner of my eye, I watched his reaction to my playing. He winced, as if he had a throbbing toothache.

"Can you read music?"

"Yes. I've sung in choirs since I was a child."

"Good, at least we don't have to start from scratch," he said, with weariness.

I glanced at the clock. In forty minutes, I would have to leave. I needed to talk to him, to feel him out. He wouldn't volunteer information.

"Mr. McFarland, can I ask you a few questions? I mean, about the case?" What I really wanted to know, was why and how. Why was his car involved and why had the abductor used it and not some other car. What was his relationship with the abductor? What was McFarland hiding?

A cloud passed over his face. "This is like a horrible, horrible nightmare. I have to take a polygraph test!"

I nodded sympathetically. Now also wasn't the time to tell him I had taken the test and failed.

"Even Ian's mother has to take a polygraph test. It's routine procedure for child abductions. The woman who took the child most likely entered your apartment, knew where your keys were, and knew where to find your car. So it had to be someone who lives in this building, who knows you, or is connected to one of your students."

"I've been over it in my mind a million times. A few people in the building knew about the car, but I didn't drive it much. It belonged to my late mother. I drove it back from Oklahoma about ten years ago. I've got lots of 'elevator friends,' but except for the lady next door, few people in the building actually come into my apartment."

Even in my four-story row house, the neighbors on the second through fourth floors rarely entered my apartment. That was basic city living. I was cordial to my upstairs neighbors, but kept my distance.

He looked at the clock. "I have another student soon, so we better get you a piece to work on."

"Before I leave, I'd like to ask you something."

He sighed. "What?"

"Who do you think stole your keys? You must have an inkling."

"You playing detective?"

I hesitated. "I'm letting the police do their work and I'm doing mine. I

couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to do something, use whatever skills I have to find the answer."

He nodded, his eyes meeting mine. I wasn't sure, but he appeared to take in what I said, and I saw a flicker of sympathy. "Okay, you may not believe me, but I have no friggin' clue who came into my apartment and involved me in this. I feel violated, even responsible. But I didn't do anything wrong, except I'm too casual about keeping my door locked during the day. My students come and go all day. It's easier to keep the door propped open. Even now it's hard for me to break the habit. Was the door unlocked when you got here?"

"Yes."

"I better go lock it." He rose and moved away from the piano.

I glanced at his shelves of Acoma Indian pottery, with dark red-and-white geometric patterns and parrot motifs. A Navajo rug with a zigzag pattern covered another wall.

McFarland returned to his chair by the piano and jotted in the fingering for the piece. "I keep wondering if the kidnapper is someone I know. But none of my friends nor anyone in my family looks like the police sketch."

He stared out his picture window toward Manhattan. Directly across the Hudson was the Empire State Building, and north of it, on the river, a cruise ship was leaving a dock. I wished I was on that ship heading for Barbados, where I would lie in a hammock, palm fronds rustling above me, a big orange-red sun sliding below the horizon.

"You get along with your family?" I asked, returning to reality, hoping he wouldn't be offended by the personal question, but realizing his family in Oklahoma might be involved, even if he wasn't.

"Yeah, but I'm a bit a black sheep—my family's kind of Bible Belt, you know, went to Oral Roberts U. and all that."

He shrugged, running his fingers through his wavy silver hair. "We're

like chalk and cheese, but they're proud of me—you know, playing Carnegie Hall and all that. No feuds, at least none that I'm aware of."

"You mentioned 'trailer trash.' Did you mean that?"

The woman who had abducted Ian might uncharitably be called trailer trash, like one of the women who used to hold court for hours in the Burger King in my hometown in New Hampshire.

"It was a stupid thing to say I guess, but that detective was bugging me and I wanted to get his goat. Actually, my dad started a successful chain of restaurants in Oklahoma and Texas. But we tease each other in my family--I'll call them white trash and they call me a latte liberal—that kind of thing."

"You should call the detective and straighten him out about that," I said. "So he doesn't have the wrong impression."

"If I backtrack it might seem like I'm involved."

I looked at the clock. Only a few more minutes. I hadn't learned anything. "Would you willing to let me sit in on a few days of your teaching?"

"Why?"

I hesitated. "I'd like to get a look at everyone, see if anyone has weird vibes...not to sound New Age-y, but--"

"None of my students has 'weird vibes,' or I wouldn't teach them. I'm pretty good at reading people."

"I admit it's a long shot, but I might pick up something, possibly something you've missed because you're so close to the situation."

"I don't think so. Don't forget our friend the detective might visit again--and his pals from Newark and Trenton."

"I'm willing to take that risk," I said. "By the way, what was the exact date of Ian's last lesson? You said late June. I was wondering what day of week, what date. Might not matter, but I want to have all the facts."

"I'll check. Not that it makes a damn lick of difference." He flipped

through his appointment book. "His last lesson was June 22, a Thursday. Oh damnit all to hell, I forgot about Alara."

"Who's Alara?"

"A Turkish girl, talented, around seven or so. Her mother was lovely. Father a lawyer." He pointed to a spot in his appointment book. "I can't believe I forgot to tell the police about her."

"What do you mean?"

"I was supposed to give the detective the names of all my students who took lessons during the same time as Ian."

"Anything suspicious about them?"

"No, but Alara left around the same time as Ian stopped his lessons. Alara's grandmother in Turkey was sick. So Alara's mother wasn't with me for her last few lessons. Her dad didn't bring her. A babysitter brought her I guess."

"Do you remember what the babysitter looked like?"

"The babysitters go right to the sitting room. They don't stay in the studio like the parents. Unless I see them week in and week out, I don't pay much attention to the sitters. I'm focused on the kids."

"But you think a babysitter brought Alara?"

"Alara is too young to come by myself, and her father worked in the city. Yes, it had to be a babysitter or a friend of the mom's."

"Do you have pictures of Alara or her mother?"

"I don't have pictures of them because she wasn't in a recital."

"Can you give me the mother's full name?"

He looked in the back of the appointment book. "Her mother's name is Leyla Burakgaz."

"You'll need to call the police department and report this new information," I said.

The doorbell buzzed, announcing the arrival of the next student.

McFarland pushed a button near his front door to unlock the door in the lobby, and returned to his chair by the piano.

"Now, getting back to music. Here's a piece for you. I want you to practice this everyday left and right hands separately first, then together three times."

For ten minutes, he went over the notes, the staff and meter, and started me on a simple piece, the spiritual, "Deep River." Geri was right. Ultimately the piano was the most important thing in his life. He had assumed I would continue with the lessons. And how had he known I loved that song? He had read me as well.

EIGHT

I left McFarland's apartment and walked to my gym, a few blocks from his building. I did leg presses at 190 pounds and lifted barbells. I held a 40-pound ball as I leaned over the Roman chair.

I had started weight lifting a few months after Ben had left, when I lacked the strength to get out of bed. In those nightmarish months after he had moved in with a graduate student he'd had an affair with, but before the official separation, then divorce, I tried to maintain normality in my life. It was a volatile time, especially with a preteen and teenage boy in the house. Pumping iron in the gym was therapeutic.

People were astonished at my strength, but I wasn't that surprised. I had lifted weights every day for five years. My mother once told me a story, probably apocryphal, about the boy who lifted his calf every day from its birth until he lifted it as a full-grown bull at the Hopkinton State Fair. I got stronger and stronger until I could probably lift one of the guys who wore skintight ribbed t-shirts to show off their pecs.

I left the gym and headed to the grocery store. I had promised Posey I would bring her food. When results of my lie detector test became public, Posey might become suspicious of me.

At home I browned the onions, chopped the tomatoes, and simmered the beans for veggie chili. I made a quiche and pesto. I tossed an enormous salad with cranberries, apples, walnuts, and feta cheese. Then I called Posey.

"Hello," a voice said.

"Is Posey there? This is Bronwyn Bloom."

"Posey's not available, may I help you?" A woman asked, with a lockjaw country club accent. "This is Ginny Waltham, her mother."

"I'm so sorry to bother you, Mrs. Waltham. I told Posey I'd drop off food."

"Fine," she said without emotion.

I put the food in containers. Posey wanted her son back. She did not want veggie chili. Yet Posey and her mother needed to eat. It was, I knew, a pathetic attempt to help them.

When I arrived, Ginny Waltham, a patrician woman with a blondish-gray ponytail, opened the door. She had the leathery skin of a woman who had spent one too many summers sailing or playing doubles. "Please come in. I'd like to talk to you."

I followed Ginny into a study, where she sat down behind a desk, looking like the chair of the garden club planning the summer fundraiser. She opened a date book with a floral cover from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"My boarding school motto was 'function in disaster,' That's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to keep functioning." She flipped through some papers and opened a folder. "I'd like to pick your brain about this city."

I talked with her about Hoboken—the odd juxtaposition of newcomers with lots of money and old-timers who had sold their brownstones, made a

killing, and moved away to buy McMansions out in the New Jersey hinterlands, but who returned on weekends to buy fresh mozzarella.

I told her about the remnants of old-fashioned times: the Italian delis, the Elks Lodge, Scouts, Catholic churches. I filled her in on the bistros on the waterfront with Manhattan prices, the private schools, and the gigantic new condo complexes full of investment bankers who worked on Wall Street.

Ginny jotted down notes and asked pointed questions. “I forgot, you’re an anthropologist. You can properly explain this strange city to me. Who has the power here?”

I explained Hoboken’s nepotistic, almost corrupt, politics. Ginny needed to get chummy with the Mayor’s office, the local council person, and the state senator. The oldtimers had most of the power and influence in the town, not the newcomers.

“You teach anthropology at NYU?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I heard Margaret Mead speak at Wellesley in the 60s—fascinating stuff. What’s your specialty?”

“I’m a paleoanthropologist, specializing in the Neanderthals.”

I was self-conscious when I told people this, because I could read their thoughts: *She looks like a Neanderthal!* But my slightly stooped posture had nothing to do with our doomed human cousins. It was a myth that Neanderthals hunched over, caused by the famous La Chapelle-aux-Saints skeleton of a Neanderthal man, who was found later to be suffering from osteoarthritis. I had been meaning to cut what Ben had called my Welsh Afro and wear the close-cropped masculine look so many academic women favored, but I couldn’t do it.

“This is going to sound strange,” Ginny said. “But don’t avoid the media. You provide an interesting angle to the story—you know, the college professor who could have stopped the abduction and all that. Don’t get me

wrong—I'm not blaming you. I'm grateful to you for solving half of this crime. At least we have a description of Ian's abductor and know what car she's driving. But we have to remember the media is our partner in this, not our enemy."

"The detective told me to avoid the media."

"The local law enforcement people don't always know what's right because they've had little experience with child abductions." She held up stacks of downloaded printouts from the FBI. "I've become an expert in this very quickly. I'm the one who had the police contact *America's Most Wanted*—they hadn't thought of doing it yet. I'm trying every angle I can, including getting posters in Wal-Marts across the country."

Her voice cracked, but she sat up straighter and stuffed a stack of media kits. "I'm also posting a million dollar reward with Crime Stoppers. But this will be set up carefully as a media hook—a press conference and all—to get it on the news. Awards can backfire because it brings all the nuts out, but I'm willing to take the risk."

Ginny flipped open one of the printouts she had on her desk and read—"One spot on the TV news is worth 20,000 posters." The father of an abducted child wrote that. You see what I mean? After a while, the media loses interest if there isn't a new hook, and they are off to the next story. It does mean that Posey and I are constantly in the public eye, but I am a tough old bird—they can't rattle me, and I'm keeping Posey protected for now."

I did see her point. It took only one person watching the news to connect the woman with Ian, and considering she had a car, she could be anywhere in the United States at this point.

"I think that's it." Ginny stood to shake my hand, her fingers wrapping around mine in a vise-like grip. She had the air of a bossy schoolgirl who controlled any situation, but in an intimidating way, as if she'd smack you with

a field hockey stick in the shin if it meant that she could run ahead of you and score the winning goal.

“Thank you for the food. We’ve been living on Boston Chicken.”

“My sons call that place Boston Grease. Can I bring you more food? I mean, if it’s not intrusive. I’d like to help.”

“Thank you.”

I stood, preparing to leave. “If possible, I’d like to ask Posey a question.”

“Posey isn’t in any shape to see anyone right now. She’s on sedatives, in emotional shock.”

“Just one question.”

She frowned. “Posey is barely functioning.”

“It could be important.”

“Okay, but for a few minutes only.”

Ginny led me to the kitchen. Posey shuffled toward us, her slippers flapping against the terracotta tiles. Clinging to the island counter, she squinted at me.

“Posey, do you remember seeing a Turkish girl named Alara who took lessons from Basil McFarland? She had the lesson right before Ian.”

“Yeah.” Her voice was hoarse. She stirred powder into a pitcher of water. “Why?”

“A babysitter brought her to her last lesson. It might not mean anything, but I’d like the police to check the babysitter out.”

“Did you tell the police about this?” She continued to stir the yellow powder, instant lemonade, long after the powder had dissolved.

“I told Mr. McFarland to call and tell them about her. He had forgotten about this family because they took lessons for a few months and had to stop suddenly.”

“I chatted with Alara’s mother.” Posey dropped ice cubes in the

lemonade. It spilled over the sides of the glass and onto the floor. "She was a writer, very intense, but friendly. She had a manuscript for a picture book--a Turkish folktale she wanted me to look at."

"Did you read it?" I searched for any fragment of a clue.

"Yes, but it was dreadful. It was a bit awkward between us after that."

"Do you remember anything odd about Ian's last lesson there, or if you saw Alara, or Alara's nanny?"

She shook her head. "I've already gone over this so many times. No, I don't remember anything unusual. I was concentrating on Ian. I was a little sad he was stopping lessons. I understood why Mr. McFarland wanted to stop teaching Ian. He wasn't ready....Are you working with the police?"

"No, just exploring possibilities."

"I am trying to think, trying to make connections, but I can't. I can't think straight." Posey clasped both hands around the glass and drank the lemonade in one gulp.

Her mother motioned to me from the doorway. It was time for me to leave. "Will the police contact this woman in Turkey?"

"I'm not sure. Mr. McFarland didn't have her email or any way to contact my."

"I can try and find her email. It should be pretty easy to find her address. A Turkish family living in Hoboken couldn't be that common."

Walking toward the front door, I glanced out the bay window. TV vans were parked across the street. I didn't want to face reporters. I wanted to hide, cover my face. But I couldn't remain here. I had to leave. I stood on the top of the short flight of steps to the brownstone. The questions were coming fast.

"I'm willing to answer questions," I said, my voice shaky, "on one condition only. Ian's face must be bigger than mine in any newspaper articles. If the story is on TV, his face must appear on the screen at all times."

I worried about what Detective Cabrera would think or what he would do. I was already on shaky ground with him. But in this case, I hoped he was wrong.

NINE

Of all the composers, I thought, Beethoven must be the most tortured, turning in his grave at all hours, as young pianists around the world, thrilled to be playing the quintessential piano piece, butchered Für Elise. One of these teenage girls was now playing the piece, her fingers flying through the opening arpeggios with confidence, then stumbling and collapsing on the allegro section.

To my surprise, Basil McFarland called and agreed to let me sit in on his students' lessons. So far the results of my polygraph test hadn't been leaked to the media, but it was only a matter of time before the information became public. I sat in the corner of McFarland's studio as I read and tried to seem as unobtrusive as possible. I wasn't sure how McFarland maintained his Zen-like patience.

After the Für Elise girl, another teenage girl arrived with her mother hovering near her. I recognized the girl. Her name was Lucy and she had been in David's class in elementary school. Lucy was an annoyingly perfect girl who

never had problems with long division and whose drawings were inevitably pinned to the classroom wall. I nodded hello to Lucy's mother Lisa. We knew each other. I didn't like Lisa much, but I doubted she harbored ugly secrets. Lucy played Mozart's *Rondo alla Turco* note perfect.

After Lucy the next student of the evening was evidently a close friend of McFarland's. He spoke to her in low tones and I tried not to eavesdrop. She was in her forties, preppy, but with a Bohemian side, as if she were trying, unsuccessfully, to mask the preppy part. She played what was meant to be a sprightly Mozart piece so slowly and hesitantly it sounded like a dirge.

After the preppy/bohemian woman came a man, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, who looked as though he arrived straight from the New York Stock Exchange. He talked nonstop to McFarland for ten minutes. McFarland nodded, not saying much, as though he understood that this man needed to run his battery down before he could relax and play the piano. He played a Bach prelude with surprising precision and feeling.

The last student was a young woman in an orange sari and sandals.

"Let's hear the *étude*, Anjali," he said.

She played a difficult Chopin *étude*, the tinkling of her gold bangles an accompaniment to the piece's rolling arpeggios.

"Nice," he said with feeling when she finished playing the piece.

After the student left, he turned to me. "So Detective, what do you think? See anything suspicious?"

"Nothing at all," I said.

"I didn't think so. Satisfied now?"

"I do have one question."

"What?"

"How soon I can learn *Für Elise*?"

He laughed. "Maybe six months, if you work hard."

Over the next week, from 4 to 8 every day, I got to know all of McFarland's students. None of them struck me as unusual. The younger students came with their parents, and one or two came with nannies. The parents, recognizing my face from news reports, were surprised to see me. I pretended it was the most normal thing in the world for me to be in Basil McFarland's studio. Perhaps he liked having me there to ease some of the vague suspicions of his students and their parents.

My days revolved around McFarland and his students. I forgot to check in with David. I forgot to pick up my mail. I checked the local online headlines every 20 minutes when I was near a computer. I turned on the TV every afternoon to watch the tri-state area news show, *Live at Five*. Often they had an update on the case, although nothing new had happened. My teaching was a distraction, not the main part of my life. I taught my classes by rote.

On a day when I didn't have to teach, I set aside a day to sit outside McFarland's building. I watched people go in and out. McFarland said he would call me if any police were expected. I wasn't sure what I'd find. But I didn't have to worry about reporters who might ask me awkward questions. They were still stuck on the story of the miserly billionaire.

McFarland's apartment building, one of Hoboken's tallest buildings, had subsidized rent. People handed down their apartments from one generation to the next. The tenants were teacher, nurses, police, a few artsy types, middle-aged gay couples, and senior citizens. I saw none of Hoboken's newcomers, the fresh-faced émigrés from the suburbs who worked in the financial district in Manhattan. They lived across the street in the new building on the waterfront that charged six times as much rent.

I sat off to the side so people didn't see me, but I saw them. I watched people go to work. Children in maroon plaid Catholic school uniforms passed

me on their way to school. The school children took an hour or two, and tapered off by 8:30 am.

Later I watched mothers on their way to Church Square Park. They pushed Hummer-like strollers that took up most of the sidewalk, burdened with bags and ride-on toys, with special coffee cups and other unidentifiable gizmos attached to the handle.

During the middle of the day, the senior citizens emerged, coupons in hand, an army of them. As soon as they got outside the building, they saw friends and stopped for a chat before they headed uptown to Shop-Rite for their shopping expeditions.

By 6 o'clock I decided this building represented a 21st century Hoboken version of Norman Rockwell. That did not prove that Ian's abductor was not connected with a person who lived in the building. But the people who lived here were not a "fringe" crowd, at least on the surface. I needed to dig deeper to discover anything unusual.

Around 6:30 or so, I was ready to give up. That's when I saw her, the woman who had abducted Ian. I couldn't believe it was so easy. She was right there in front of the building smoking a cigarette. I approached her to get a closer look.

She held three yapping Pugs on leashes and looked the same as she had that day: Capris, heels, blouse. Her shoes, however, matched, and her outfit was more stylish. My heart jumped into my throat. I didn't know if I should call the detective, or wait until I got a better look.

I walked by her and glanced at her with peripheral vision. She shouted, "Anthony, get ovah here!"

Then I got a closer look at the woman's face. She had large blue eyes, a prominent nose, clear skin, and full lips. It wasn't her.

I left McFarland's building and headed home. The windows in the

steeple of Our Lady of Grace Church glowed with reflected sunlight. The church's carillon played "Faith of Our Fathers" as it had every evening for the last twenty years.

At home, my kitchen was clean and empty; David was with Ben at his apartment in Manhattan. To calm myself, I sat outside on the deck. The white flowers on the moonflower vine opened for the evening, while the sky blue morning glories closed. The fuzzy purple flowers on the sedum plants were a clear sign to me that fall was coming. I loved the pungent September smell of the ripe grapes on the grapevine spilling over the deck. The pears on the pear tree were so ripe they dropped from the tree.

I was reminded that I had been meaning to plant my crocus bulbs. I sliced open the mesh bags of bulbs, dozens of them because I had optimistically bought the "Estate Special," though I had to search in my small city backyard for space to plant more crocuses. I planted one hundred crocus bulbs.

The names of the flowers were like poetry to me: Snow Crocus Blue Pearl, Glory-of-the-Snow Crocus, and Cloth-of-Gold Crocus. I was partial to the Jeanne d'Arc Crocus—snow-white flowers with bright orange pistils. I looked forward to the blah time in late winter, when the green shoots of the crocuses poked out of the grayish cold mud in my backyard.

I poured water into four birdbaths. The sparrows perched on the deck railing. They fluttered and chattered as they watched me pour the water. As soon as I filled the birdbaths, they flew down, unafraid, to drink and bathe. I noticed a mourning dove. Was it the same bird that had lost a chick the previous spring.

I discovered the dead chick one morning and buried it under the Norway maple. The mourning dove sat on the deck railing and cooed for hours, a different lower and more persistent call than the usual call. It was as if the bird was sitting shivah for its lost chick, truly in mourning.

After my therapeutic digging and planting, I returned inside. I would do whatever I normally did in the evening. I would make David dinner, talk to him about school, and nag him about this and that. But he wasn't here.

The phone rang. "Thank you for talking to the media."

I recognized Ginny Waltham's patrician voice.

"I insisted that Ian's picture be shown," I said.

"I found Leyla Burakgaz's email. Alara had left her email with her classmates so they could correspond. The school has an email for me. I called the police and gave it to them. Do you want the email address? I mean, unofficially?"

"I better stay out of it."

"I'll send it along via email in case you change your mind."

An hour later, my cell phone rang again. I braced myself.

"Detective Cabrera here. Please come to the station tomorrow. We need to talk." His tone was not friendly.

I had been waiting for his call and it had finally come.

TEN

The next morning, I gathered myself together to visit the police station. The heavy rain had stopped, but the day was damp, drizzly. I smelled coffee in air. It reminded me of the days before the Maxwell Coffee plant closed and relocated down South. The coffee plant had been resurrected as Maxwell Place, luxury condominiums with a heated rooftop pool and hot tub, landscaped rooftop garden, and 24-hour concierge service.

A Hoboken old timer fed pigeons the remnants of a personal pizza in front of Grimaldi's restaurant. The real difference between the old timers and the new comers in Hoboken was not class, income, or anything else. It was their attitude toward pigeons. The old timers treated the pigeons like a treasured form of wildlife that should be pampered, just like Marlon Brando had treated the pigeons in *On the Waterfront*, parts of which were filmed three blocks from my home.

Near me, I saw people rushing to work, wires dangling from their ears, as they focused on their day ahead. No one else stopped to philosophize about

the pigeons. The masses of details of daily life that most people ignored overwhelmed and preoccupied me.

Over the years I had become better at seeing the bigger picture. Ben had helped me with that, but he was a peripheral part of my life since the divorce. He had helped me survive graduate school and the grueling PhD program at Columbia. My attention to detail did, however, help me in my work. While on a dig in Spain, I had located important fragments of a Neanderthal femur the rest of the team missed.

I continued across town and reached One Police Plaza, which had the same name as the famous one across the river in Manhattan. Hoboken's version was a low-slung seventies-style building. I sat outside Detective Cabrera's office until he was off the phone and waved me in the door. He pulled a folder from his in-box. "You probably know why you're here."

"The polygraph test?"

"Yes."

"The polygraph test was wrong. They aren't 100 percent accurate."

"If your child was missing, would you take any chances?"

"No, but every minute you spend investigating me will be a minute wasted."

"Are you willing to take the test again?"

"I don't know... if I have to, I will."

"I know you've been interviewed several times, but I want to go over it a again. Did anyone see you that morning on the way to the park?"

It had been a cool foggy morning. I remembered seeing the neon orange vests of the school crossing guards on the street across from the park.

"I passed the school crossing guards. But they were looking out for school kids. I doubt they would remember me. Maybe the Mr. Softee guy? It's the same guy who's been there for years. I didn't stop and say hi, but I've been to

that truck to get ice cream for my kids many times over the years."

"He doesn't remember you and he doesn't remember the blue Olds parked behind the truck. He didn't see the woman or the boy."

"He probably sat in the truck and reading the newspaper. It was a school day, too cool for ice cream anyway. He had no customers."

"Maybe so, but we are basing our whole case on what you've told us. What if you're lying?"

The rancid smell of McDonald's French fries wafted in from the hallway. This time I was prepared for the arctic cold and wore a fleece jacket.

"What motivation could I possibly have to lie?" I said. "My life has been turned upside down. I'm afraid for myself and for my son. I'm going crazy if you want to know."

He ignored my outburst and picked up another paper. "You've been spotted going into McFarland's apartment building. What's that all about?"

How could I explain this? Honesty seemed the only solution.

"After I failed the lie detector test, I was scared. I decided I'd work on trying to find Ian myself. I was feeling desperate--"

"I'm pretty sure I was clear on the phone about getting involved the other day." He did not make eye contact with me.

"You were quite clear."

He opened another folder and sighed. "I'm also getting several calls from Posey's mother asking why we aren't investigating a woman in Turkey?"

"Uh—"

"Do you want to be thrown in jail for obstruction of justice?" He was enunciating each syllable, as if he were talking to a child.

"No."

"We are coordinating with The Missing Persons & Child Exploitation Unit in Trenton and the FBI in Newark. We have a protocol in place for dealing

with child abductions."

"I see."

The past week had been stressful and may have addled my brain. Yes, they did have the resources of the FBI in Newark and the New Jersey state police in Trenton. And yet....

I tried to keep my voice steady. "Basil McFarland forgot to mention a student who had taken lessons around the same time as Ian. I thought it was important the police know about this."

"I understand you want to help, but you are muddying the waters. Trust me, this situation is way out of your league. And what's with that impromptu press conference? I told you not to speak to the media, didn't I? Information to the media must be tightly controlled."

I couldn't come right out and say he was wrong. "Posey Waltham's mother asked me to do this. The more media exposure, the more chance someone may spot the woman with Ian--"

"Did you ever consider it might have the opposite effect? Make the abductor go deeper into hiding?"

"Mrs. Waltham had read that often the abductor will abandon the child with an onslaught of media exposure."

"Mrs. Waltham is now in charge of the case?"

I didn't respond.

"I am consulting with my superiors about the polygraph," he said. "It is, of course, one of many tools we use, and it's not generally admissible in court. But we may have you come in to the station for further questioning. Or we may recommend you take a voice stress analysis test."

The phone rang. He spoke in Spanish.

As I was leaving, I asked him, "Did you grow up in Colombia?"

His accent was pure Colombian, probably coastal Colombia, which

meant he had spent most of his childhood there.

A shadow passed over his face. He closed the folder and did not look at me. "My family is from Puerto Rico, not Colombia."

"My mistake."

I had to leave—soon—with as much dignity as I could muster. I glanced at the photograph of him on a police horse as I stood to leave. He was a good rider by the way he sat in the saddle and held the reins. He hadn't been plunked onto the saddle for the picture. At least I knew that for sure.

"Don't worry," I said. "I won't interfere in this case again."

ELEVEN

Another week passed without a break in the case. Posey had not received a ransom note, or any other communication from Ian's abductor. The FBI agent assigned to the case had received dozens of tips, most of which he dismissed. He had emailed me photographs to get my reaction. So far, no one in the photographs resembled Ian's abductor. I had not been asked to take a voice stress analysis test.

With David away, I had time to practice the piece McFarland had given me. The upright piano, tucked in the corner of the dining room, had been in the front parlor in the farmhouse I grew up in. My reason for continuing the lessons was music, not detective work. I was finished with that.

When I arrived at McFarland's for my next lesson, I recognized a Bob Wills song coming from his apartment: "*The Texas Playboys are on the air!*" "*What makes Bob holler, betcha bottom dollar, he does it cuz he feels that way!*"

I walked into McFarland's studio, surprised to hear Texas Swing music and not Chopin. McFarland sat on the couch reading a paperback, but didn't

notice me.

"Mr. McFarland?"

Startled, McFarland jumped up.

"Sorry," he said, turning down the music. "I play Bob Wills to clear my mind after a day with Chopin. My grandfather was a roadie with Wills's show. "

"No other students today?" I glanced around his empty apartment.

"No, I had two cancellations. I'm starting to feel paranoid, I mean that people are connecting me with the abduction." He placed the paperback face down on his coffee table. "The police seem to be trying to dig up dirt on me."

"You?"

"They took my computer." He shrugged. "Said it was routine procedure--"

"Are they allowed to do that, I mean legally?" It didn't seem like routine procedure to me.

"They got a court order. But I don't have anything to hide, unless they can read something sinister into my music orders to Patti. God knows, I wish my life were more exciting. Let's get to the lesson." He moved to his usual place near the piano.

"I had to take the lie detector test, too--I didn't pass it." I placed my music above the keyboard without looking at him. I wanted to tell him before he heard about it from news reports.

"You didn't pass it?" he asked, concerned. "I did pass, thank God."

"The woman said my reactions were extreme. She had never seen anything like it. I was incredibly nervous, you know, like when you go to the doctor and get your heart checked and your blood pressure is up."

"But she told me that's factored in."

"I know, that's why this is so scary. If you feel uncomfortable with me being here, let me know--"

"I trust my instincts, not a bogus machine. Let's hear you play."

"I like playing this song, but it makes me cry." The song "Deep River" reminded me of my mother, although I had never heard her sing it.

"That means you're connecting to the music. Most students never do."

I was nervous, but I played piece without hitting too many wrong notes.

"Not bad." He sounded surprised I had not butchered the piece.

"Thanks. I have an empty nest at the moment, my son is staying with my ex-husband. I have time to practice."

"I picked out another piece for you." He riffled through his sheet music and handed me a Welsh lullaby. "We'll get you into classical stuff pretty soon. Maybe the easy Chopin prelude."

"Really? I love Chopin."

"I've loved Chopin since I first heard Liberace play a 'Chopin Medley' on his TV show in the 50s," he said. "My parents didn't allow a TV in the house...so I had to sneak over to a friend's house to watch the show."

"Liberace?" She could understand Rubenstein or Horowitz, but Liberace?

He laughed, a big booming laugh. "I love to shock my students with that. Listen, imagine your only exposure to music is church hymns like 'The Old Rugged Cross' and country tunes. Then you hear Chopin. It changed my life, and here I am, 50 years later, still playing Chopin."

"I have a new respect for Liberace," I said. "I first heard Chopin when I was about 3--my mother enrolled me in an Isadora Duncan-like dance class and we flitted across the room in white flowing dresses dancing to Chopin waltzes."

"You grow up in Greenwich Village?"

"No, New Hampshire. The dance teacher was an elegant older woman from Boston who had relocated to our little town, and brought a bit of culture with her."

"I had to chase after music by myself without a whole lot of encouragement." He wrote in the fingering for the piece. "My folks didn't understand why I didn't only want to play church music, you know? They just couldn't understand it."

His tone implied that he had painful stories to tell. But it didn't seem the right time to probe. "Of course, they didn't understand it either when I decided to change my name from Wayne B-for-Basil McFarland, to just Basil McFarland."

I laughed. This guy was growing on me. "A great improvement, I'd say. More distinguished."

"By the way, what happened with Leyla Burakgaz?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Posey Waltham's mother got my email address from a school, and sent it along to the detective, but I got chewed out by him for getting involved."

"I got along nicely with Leyla—send along her email address and I'll try and get information from her."

"Good idea. If you find out anything, let the police know. She's a loose link."

At the end of the lesson, I did not hear buzzing for the next student. I left McFarland, on his couch reading, in a pool of light.

The next morning McFarland forwarded me the email he had received from Leyla Burakgaz. I would read her email, but that was it. What happened was a tragedy that ripped apart Posey Waltham's life, and disturbed my stable, easy-going life, but I needed to get my life back to normal.

Yes, I remember the little boy. He was so sweet, very quiet. I had to leave suddenly for Turkey because my grandmother was so sick. Emre hired a

nanny those last couple of weeks they were in the states before they joined me in Turkey. The nanny did take Alara to her last lesson. Then Emre and Alara came to Turkey. Does this information help? I am so sad to hear of this.

I never met the nanny. She came with references from an agency in New York called Better Nannies, Inc. Her name is Heather Davis. My husband doesn't remember much about her. But it was a crazy time, and he only spent a little time with her. He said she was quiet, unsure of herself.

Another email followed, a response to McFarland's sending a scan of the police sketch from the newspaper to Leyla:

I showed the picture to my husband. He's not sure if it's her. Heather had black hair, and was a little fatter than this woman. He can't say yes, he can't say no. He said she was a plain woman, and didn't have a pretty or memorable face.

I forwarded these emails to him to Detective Cabrera:

I know you weren't interested in this information, but I am forwarding this email anyway. It could be important. I am sorry I made that comment about your past. Obviously I was way off base.

I did not receive an answer, but my conscience was clear.

The next day I found the Better Nannies agency on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. I was buzzed in and sat in a waiting room, where I was given a ten-page form to fill out. Evidently the employers were screened as much as the

employees. I had to lie. It would be odd to be to hire a nanny for a 17-year-old boy. I subtracted ten years from his age.

A brisk older woman led me into an office with Louis XV chairs with double-cane backs and leather seats. My feet sunk into a cream-colored rug. This nanny agency catered to the carriage trade.

"How can we help you?" She folded her hands, as if in prayer.

"I'd like a part-time nanny for my son, to pick him up after school."

After we went through a mock matching session, I asked, "Is it possible to request a nanny by name? A friend told me about a great nanny she hired from your agency."

"Generally we can't fit you with a specific nanny, but occasionally we can. Whom were you interested in?"

"Heather Davis."

She turned to her computer. "She's no longer with the agency. In fact, she was with us for just a few weeks."

"How strange," I said, lying. "My friend said she had her for months."

"Hold on one minute please. Let me check with my supervisor."

The woman left the office. I heard her heels clicking on the hardwood floor in the hallway outside the office. I calculated how much time I had until the woman returned. Forty seconds or less. I stood and opened my purse, as if looking for something. My heart pounding, I quickly peered at the computer. The screen was dark so I touched a key. I now had just enough time to glance at the nanny's address. The entry listed her home address as Parnassus, New York. I didn't see a picture with her entry.

I heard the heels clicking again and rushed back to my seat. The woman returned to her desk.

"Actually, Heather was let go," she said, settling herself in front of her computer. "I'm surprised you got such a glowing report. My supervisor said she

didn't make it through the one-month trial period."

"I'm willing to consider anyone else you have who might be suitable."

We continued with the charade until I could leave. As soon as I was out on the street I called James on my cell phone to ask if I could stay at his weekend house in upstate New York. James had made decent money over the years from a monograph he had written about the shamans of the Peruvian Amazon, a standard text for college anthropology courses, enough to buy a second home in the country.

"Where's Parnassus, New York?" I asked.

"A couple of hours from my shack upstate. Why?"

"Can I stay with you this weekend? I'll explain later."

"I'm giving a shamanic drumming demonstration at my house, but you're welcome to come."

"Oh."

"Don't sound so enthusiastic."

"Audience participation required?"

"You may have to say, 'Hello my name is Bronwyn.'"

"I can survive that, I guess."

Later I googled "Heather Davis." On an online people search site, I found her address after paying \$14.95. It was so easy being a detective these days. Anyone could do it.

TWELVE

"Come back, come back, wherever you are," James whispered in my ear. His drumming had relaxed me so much I had fallen into a trance. The drumbeats penetrated my body, relaxing and hypnotizing me.

A few people sat cross-legged on silk pillows, in proper meditation stance, with palms up, a reverent look in their eyes as they gazed at James. One woman, with purple dreadlocks and star-shaped earrings, cast a schoolmarmish look my way.

"Shamanic drumming is the world's oldest type of healing," he said as he looked up from his drum. "When you listen to the drumbeats, you must give up your need for control. Close your eyes and focus on the sound. Observe your thoughts as they flow in and out of your consciousness. Insight and guidance comes through visions, symbols, or images."

As he drummed, I could feel myself drawn in by the repetitive and insistent beat. I slipped again into a trance. What did I need to ask guidance for? I thought about my trip tomorrow to Parnassus.

“In your journey, you will enter a time outside of ordinary time.”

My stomach grumbled. I smelled James's famous garlic bread, made with fresh basil, in the oven. I was looking forward to a glass of pinot grigio, and later when his acolytes loosened up, a couple of pisco sours.

“The women of the Yakima tribe in the Pacific Northwest keep a Time Ball, a string of hemp," he said. "To them, time is the relationship between events, kept fresh in memory by knots of the rope; connection between these knots is as important as separation. I like this image because time does wrap around itself. We like to think time marches logically from A to B to C, but time is more complicated than that. Think of smells or songs instantly transporting you to a specific time in your past.”

I was too distracted by smells of the present to focus on what he was saying. I wished I had eaten before coming to his house. I lay on the alpaca rug and stared at the photographs of Amazonian shamans with whom James had studied. A brightly colored Peruvian *arpilleras*, sewn from scraps of cloth, of women dancing down a flower-strewn path between shanties, hung on the wall. On a shelf were devotional paintings of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Shiny Mexican tin angels hung by ribbons from the ceiling. Looking at these angels, deities, and shamans usually relaxed me.

Yet tonight I couldn't relax, anxious about my day ahead. I had no plan except to find the ex-nanny. It could be a fool's errand.

“One final thought, before we break for dinner. We humans like to think of ourselves as disconnected from the rest of the animals on this planet. But within our cells, we share genetic material with fish, reptiles, even sea anemones. We are all connected, and time is more fluid than you think. Open

yourself up to this. If you resonate at a higher frequency, you will be in tune with archetypal rhythms of the earth--like the beating of your own heart.”

A drumming circle formed around him. I sat outside the circle, observing. I watched the faces of the drummers, caught up in the rhythm, oblivious to me. Even if I didn't believe what he was saying, I had to take seriously this aspect of him. His version of reality did literally resonate with these people, even if it didn't for me.

* * *

The next morning, I left James and drove to Parnassus, a town in the middle of nowhere in Western New York. In the nineteenth century, things had been lively in this part of the state, but each town I passed was more forlorn than the last.

I found my motel, called The Red Caboose, the only motel near Parnassus. The motel was “under new management.” Others had tried to make a success of the place and had moved on. Yet the cabooses were newly painted red, the lawn was mowed, and cars and motorcycles were parked in front of the cabooses.

After checking in, I found my caboose, a real caboose with a table bolted to the floor, bunks, and narrow windows above the bunks. I pushed a button on a speaker on the wall for the train whistle. A call to David was overdue. At 2 p.m. on a Saturday he should be awake.

“Get out of bed, sleepyhead.”

“Hi, Mom.”

“I'm in a motel where the rooms are in real cabooses. You would have loved this about 10 years ago.”

He sounded glum. “Hey, I'm not too old to enjoy that. Take me along next time.”

“Everything okay?”

“I want to go home.”

“I’ll talk to Dad. But it’s safer right now for you to be with him. What’s the matter?”

I did not hear anything. “You there?”

“Uh yeah,” he said. “Um...Dad has a new girlfriend named Ellie.”

“A new girlfriend?” I asked, breezily. “Another shiska?”

“No.”

“She’s Jewish?” What did I care whom my ex-husband dated? As a political science professor at Barnard, he had access to lots of women—visiting lecturers, young adjunct professors, and occasional grad students from across Broadway, at Columbia.

“Yeah, she’s keeps kosher too,” David said.

Ben called himself a secular Jew and didn’t even go to Temple on the High Holidays. I was the one who had taken David and Aidan to Hebrew school and arranged their Bar Mitzvahs.

“Dad’s getting into it. I think he’s serious about her.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“She’s giving me a weird vibe. I don’t think she likes me.”

“I’ll talk to Dad about you coming home after the weekend.” I was glad David considered my home his official “home,” and his father’s place was “Dad’s place.”

I clicked off the cell phone. Being in this caboose motel had brought me back to a time when I was part of a family, a symmetrical family with two adults and two children, perfect for booths at diners. We visited crayon and potato chip factories, and quirky places like the Jell-O Museum. We road on old-fashioned stream trains through Pennsylvania, and watched sea turtles lay their eggs on beaches in Florida.

Now I was part of a family of three, my husband gone, and my first born

across the country at a college in Northern California, where he studied lichens and fungi in the forest canopy by climbing redwood trees in a special harness. My last bird would soon fly from the nest.

Ben might marry Ellie, who was inevitably young, pretty, and brilliant. She might even have children with Ben. And she was Jewish. I had tried so hard to be Jewish. I had even converted before marriage to please Ben's parents, learning Hebrew and immersing myself in the *mikveh*, the ritual bath. I had, however, drifted back to my old church after the divorce and now was an uncomfortable Judeo-Christian hybrid, neither one faith nor the other, but a bit of both.

My loneliness was compounded later by dinner at a nearby low-rent Denny's. Near the entrance a mural had been crudely painted of a soldier wearing Ray Bans carrying a machine gun with the Twin Towers behind him. I had to pick out my food selection before I sat down. The flimsy plastic plates reminded me of the ones I ran through the giant Hobart dishwashing machines in my student job at UNH.

Even the locals shunned this place. The only other customer was a man with a gray ponytail wearing a Harley cap and bandana, who had a fire-breathing dragon tattooed on his forearm, probably a biker passing through who, like me, didn't know any better.

I called James. "Help."

"What's the matter?"

"Can one die of existential dread in a Denny's?"

"Probably. What's the matter?"

"I'm sitting in the most depressing restaurant on earth."

"Eat chocolate. That might help."

I opened the sticky laminated dessert menu. "You mean like a warm chunky chocolate chip brownie with vanilla ice cream drizzled with chocolate

sauce?”

“Mmmm.....perfect.”

“Thanks, that might work.”

“Anytime.”

The brownie wasn't bad though my stomach didn't appreciate the sweet and sticky concoction. After I paid my bill at the register, I walked through the dark parking lot to my car. My eyes adjusted easily to the dark.

Back at the motel, I switched on the TV attached to the wall above the bunks. *The Sound of Music* was on the Family Channel. I drifted off to sleep as the Von Trapps, in their capes and lederhosen, climbed over the Alps to escape to Switzerland.

* * *

The next morning, I looked at the DeLorme map of New York to figure out where Heather lived. I would drive by the house first to see if anyone was home. I wasn't sure what my strategy was except to find Heather Davis and ask her a few questions.

Heather's house was several miles from the motel, down a two-lane highway. It was a newish pre-fab house, a step above a trailer home with wooden barrel planted with mums by the front stoop. An unlikely lair for a kidnapper.

I drove on, trying to think of what I would say to her. I would pretend to look for a second home. It was not a great excuse, but it might explain why I was driving around the area. I didn't want to scare the woman, if indeed she had abducted Ian. I would have to trust my instincts.

I went another mile or two, fortifying myself with courage, then turned around and drove back to the house. I carried a local newspaper, turned inside out under my arm, and rang the doorbell.

A woman answered the door. "Yes?" she said, a toddler hanging off her hip and an older child hiding behind her. The young woman looked like an updated Gibson girl with chestnut hair swept up and held by a ribbon hair band, thin arched eyebrows, and an aristocratic profile. This woman was not Alara's nanny. She was not plain.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I'm Bronwyn Bloom." I stuck out my hand.

"Heather Davis," the woman said.

I wanted to say "huh?" but resisted. "I was looking for a road around here and I'm lost and low on gas."

The woman looked at the ad in the newspaper, and at my map. "Here, I can show you an easy way." She pointed out the route on the map.

"I'm from Hoboken, in New Jersey, and get lost in the country." I hoped mentioning Hoboken might open up the conversation.

"Hoboken? That's close to New York City, right?"

"Uh, yeah. Right across the Hudson River."

It was clear this woman had never been to Hoboken. She did not seem uncomfortable talking about the city.

"Uh, thank you so much for your help."

"No problem," she said, closing the door.

I drove back to The Red Caboose. Nothing made sense. Rather than check out of the motel, I booked another night. I couldn't go home yet. I needed to find out why this woman had the same name as the nanny. It was unlikely two women in this town with six hundred people had the same name.

"Do you have a phone directory?" I asked the motel owner, a scarecrow of a man who looked as if he might blow away with the next wind.

"Sure." He handed me the directory.

H. Davis was listed with the correct address, and I found one other

Davis--Gloria Davis.

“Are there any churches around here?” I asked.

“We have one church in town, a Catholic church, oh, of about, 10 miles away, and the big born-again type church about 35 miles away.”

I got the directions for the church in town. As it was the weekend, it seemed the only place to find out any information about this tiny town, except for the roadhouse on the highway with pick-ups parked out front.

“What about restaurants?” I would starve before I returned to the Denny’s.

“The diner across the street has been closed for years. There’s a Denny’s down the highway...you might be best making your own supper. We do have kitchenettes in the cabooses. There’s a superette about 4 miles down the road.”

I drove down a two-lane highway, searching for dinner. On the Classic Country radio station, I heard the Hank Williams sing, "I'm so lonesome I could cry."

THIRTEEN

The next morning I discovered life in the area. The Lutheran church in town was full. A lady in the narthex of the church honed in on me, handing me the church bulletin. Another bird-like woman invited me to the fellowship hour after the service. I spied a sturdy woman in her sixties, complaining to the pastor that the lector hadn't arrived yet.

During the "pass the peace" part of the service, this woman stopped at my pew, shook my hand, and peered at me.

"Visiting the area?" she asked.

"Yes, visiting. I was wondering if I could speak to you after the service." I pegged her as the main church lady.

"Of course. I'll be helping the ladies with hospitality right after the service. You'll find me downstairs in the Parish Hall."

When the service was over, I filed past the pastor, a hearty man with thinning yellowish hair, whose damp hand squeezed mine with enthusiasm. I followed the scent of church coffee downstairs to the parish hall. I craved a venti caramel macchiato. But the church coffee was good, excellent even, as

were the home-baked treats—ham on croissant rolls, little quiches, chewy lemon squares, cream puffs. I was tempted to drop food in my pockets as Greta the homeless lady did at my church in Hoboken, but I resisted.

“Sally Foster,” the woman said, introducing herself. “How can I help you?”

“Is it possible to talk privately?” I could not say out loud that I was searching for a kidnapper among the parishioners. It wasn't appropriate fellowship-hour conversation.

“Of course.” The woman led me to a room, filled with old hymnbooks and church bric-a-brac.

“Have you heard about the child abducted in Hoboken, New Jersey?” I showed her the police sketch.

“I heard about it on the news. Why?”

I filled her in on everything. Sally Foster could be a fount of information and I needed her trust. She seemed to enjoy being part of our secret, as if she could not wait to share her information.

“I know Heather,” she said. “She worked as a nanny a few years ago, for a family near Boston. She got pregnant—I think she met a boy there. She's raising the child as a single mom. Had another baby too. Nothing strange or off about her. As level-headed as you could find.”

“That's why this whole thing is so strange to me,” I said. “Would it be possible to look through pictures of people at the church, in the off chance I might recognize the woman who abducted the child? She may have come from this town. It doesn't seem like an unreasonable stretch she'd be a member of this church.”

“I don't mind showing you the church directories. It's a real long shot, but I suppose it's worth a try. Which years?”

“Assuming this woman is between, say, twenty and thirty, I'd say from

about ten years ago to the present.”

I looked through the recent books. No matter how good-looking these people might actually be, in their Olan Mills church photos, their smiles looked insincere, their skin chalky-colored, their hair lifeless.

None of the women looked like Ian's abductor, even if she had put on a nice dress, and had done her hair especially for her church photo. New directories were made every four years or so. Soon the people looked alike, and in fact, they were alike, but at different points in their lives. Even further back in time their hair became bigger, their glasses larger. I had reached the early nineties.

Sally poked her head in. “Any luck?”

I shook my head. “Is there anyone who comes to mind, who was on the fringes and might have had psychological problems?”

“No one who looks like the police sketch. Oh, we have our share of problems—the usual problems like alcoholism, and so on.”

At the end of each directory were pages with pictures of church events—picnics, youth group ice skating trips, Christmas pageants, the altar guild, the choir.

“Can you give me another stack?” I asked.

Sally handed me the directories, but looked uneasy. “I’m going to have to speak to the pastor if you don’t mind. To let him know what’s going on.”

A few minutes later the pastor entered the room. “So what’s going on? Sally told me a little bit, but I’m curious. We’re a law-abiding parish here and I don’t think you’ll find any kidnappers in our midst.” He said it lightly, but I detected an edge to his voice, as if he wanted me to leave.

“I witnessed a crime--I have to do whatever I can to find out what happened.”

“You think the woman used Heather’s name?” he asked. “And used her

connections to get the nanny job?"

I hadn't yet reached that conclusion. What he said made sense.

"It could be a girl she met in Boston, where she met that fellow. Not a girl from around here." This pastor may have missed his calling, I thought. He would have made a good detective. He was right. Ian's abductor didn't have to be from this town.

"The man at The Red Caboose said there was another church in the area, not the Catholic church, the other one," I said.

"We've lost a lot of people to that church," he said, with a gloomy tone. "It's called New Redeemer, a Pentecostal church. We can't compete. We don't have comfy movie-theatre seats, big orchestras, with the whistles and bells. Plus they tell them Jesus is their best friend."

"So people from this town might be members of that church?" I asked as I steered him back to the main point.

"Yes, quite a few. You might want to talk to the pastor over at New Redeemer." He looked at his watch. "Their Sunday service is longer than ours—it should still be going on."

"What about the Catholic church?" I asked.

"There are Catholics in town, too, but their service is over by now."

I would go to the Pentecostal church, and later pop by the Catholic church. I couldn't do much else unless I stayed around until Monday and tried the school or other places in town. I had classes to teach, and had to get back home. I thanked the pastor, but before I left, I wrapped a lemon square in a napkin and snuck it in my purse.

I drove along a quiet two-lane highway, passing a few farms that reminded me of the horse farm where I had grown up. These farms looked well maintained, but just barely, the way our farm had been. My mother had run a horse camp for girls in the summers. A life of backbreaking work, it never made

the profits she had anticipated. In fact, it had never made any profits. My mother taught the girls riding, cooked their meals, checked the tack, ordered the hay and grain, hired the counselors, and dealt with the crises of prepubescent girls.

I was the big cheese, the girl who lived on the farm full time—every horse-mad girl's fantasy—and was a much better rider than any of the campers. I also had a group of friends to hang out with every summer, a plus for an only child.

But my summer friends didn't understand my life on the farm. In the frigid New Hampshire winters, with snow piled up to my waist, I shoveled a path to the barn to feed the horses twice a day. I mucked out their stalls in sub-zero temperature, and broke the ice with an ice pick on the buckets and trough so the horses could drink.

My mother had a jewelry and watch repair business on the side. She could fix and repair almost anything, with surprising dexterity despite her ungainly hands with their large round fingertips, which I had inherited. In the winters my mother peered through a jewelry loupe as she bent over tiny watch pieces. This side business brought in enough money to play the feed and vet bills, to cover the insurance payments, to send me to UNH.

I continued down the rural highway, and after about ten miles, a modern spire rose out of farmland. My mother had been born again when she was around 60, baptized in a pool in the front of the church, speaking in tongues. She had taken me to her church once. These people jumped up, clapped, and swayed. They were so open in their faith. I never went back. I felt too much like a cultural anthropologist doing fieldwork, in a typical participant-observation. I didn't "feel the spirit" as they did.

This service was still going on, and as the pastor of the Lutheran church had predicted, with a twenty-piece orchestra by the altar, complete with an ear-

piercing trumpet. I was not sure how to approach the pastor here. I doubted he could shake a thousand hands after the service.

After the service was over and people filed out, I spotted the pastor. He had ducked into the sacristy by the altar.

I boldly popped my head in. "Pastor, I'm sorry to bother you. I have to ask you a question—it will be very fast—but it's extremely important."

Red-faced, with bushy uplifted eyebrows, high forehead and cheekbones and slicked back hair, he reminded me of Frank Morgan, the actor who played the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*. "Uh, can you make an appointment to see me sometime this week?"

"I can't, I don't live here, it's a matter of extreme importance."

"I'm sorry, I can't today."

"It could be a matter of life and death."

"Let's go into my office," he said wearily. "I have to let the ladies know, so they don't think I'm shirking my duties, though I'm beat and wish I could go home and take a long snooze."

He left for a few minutes, then returned and led me out of the church into a modern building fronted with large glass windows. His office was unpretentious, rows of Bibles on the shelf behind his desk, but no religious pictures or statues. It could be the office of any middle-management type.

"Let me see if I've got this right," he said, after I had told him my story. "You think a kidnapper is among our parishioners?" He sounded amused.

"If it makes you feel better, I went to the church in town first and I'm going to the Catholic church too."

"You're not going to find her here, I'm afraid. And how would you check this out anyway?"

"At the other church, I looked at the directories."

He laughed and pointed to a set of directories the size of *Who's Who in*

America.

"I'm willing to look through them."

"I don't know about this. Where are the police? How can I trust you?"

"Good question. I suppose you have to trust your own instincts. The police are not involved because they don't think there's any connection yet, but I do."

He stared out the window and watched the streams of people heading for their cars.

"This is a police sketch of the woman," I said.

He shook his head as he looked at the sketch. "Doesn't look familiar. I'm sorry, I don't think I can help you. And I don't want to get involved in this unless I speak to the police and our church attorney first."

"I could give you the number of the police department in Hoboken, but the detective there thinks I'm meddling."

"You should leave this to the police," he said, but in the tone of a parent who has told a child he shouldn't eat a cookie before dinner. Maybe I could change his mind.

"You ever hear of Pastor Reed of the church in Manchester, New Hampshire?" I asked.

"Why yes." His face brightened. "You know him?"

"My mother was a member of his congregation for many years. I went to the church there." I stopped short of say "once." Maybe he would believe I was Pentecostal too.

"Of course, I know him. Was with him at a conference, maybe two three years ago."

"He was very helpful when my mother passed away, a nice man," I said.

"He would remember me, if you wanted to give him a quick call."

"Oh, no, I believe you." He was softening. "I'll let you look through those

directories, but I don't want you to do anything with this information, until you talk to me and I can figure out how to deal with it."

"Fair enough. The woman was in her twenties so I'd need to check the last five to ten years. I don't think I would recognize her as a child."

He piled the directories on a conference table in his office. The pictures were thumbnails, not full-page pictures as in the other church directory.

I flipped the pages, but the task seemed impossible. The people looked the same after a while.

"I'll be back in a minute." He left the office.

I looked through the past year, followed by the previous years. My mother had enjoyed her Pentecostal church, the busyness it brought into her life. She went to Bible study, to the mid-week service, the Sunday service. Her friends seemed "normal," not speaking in tongues or otherwise acting like maniacs. They were typical middle-aged or elderly women.

I pulled the next book off the shelf, and the next, going back in time.

The pastor popped his head in. "Find anything yet?"

"Nothing."

"I didn't think so."

I looked at pictures of older women with blue-gray perms, young men in uniform, girls with curls and bows, and boys dressed up, with comb marks in their slicked-down hair.

The woman who had abducted Ian might not be from this town, but she might be from a town very much like it. It wasn't that different from the New Hampshire town where I grew up, though my hometown had a few more prosperous people than this area did. The poorer people in my town, who lived downwind of the paper mill, reminded me of the people in this directory.

I was looking at 1989 to 1990 when she saw the picture. It was a family picture. The father was smiling, but it was a false smile. This was an angry,

mean man. The mother was not smiling. Her arms were wrapped around a three-year-old boy. The teenage girl in the picture caught my attention. I recognized her eyes.

I raced out of the office searching for the pastor, wandering through the halls. As I tried to return to where I had started, I bumped into him.

"I found a picture of a girl—she might be the person I'm looking for."

He followed me into the room, put on his glasses, and stared at the picture.

"What can you tell me about her?" I asked. "I'm not sure if she's the one, but I had an immediate reaction when I saw her picture."

The pastor looked at the photograph again and sighed, as if all the air was being released from him. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"I recognize the girl. Her name is Tara Stackley." He sighed again.

"That bad?"

"We are a popular church, no doubt about it, but we attract a lot of people who have troubles of one kind or another."

He sat down behind his desk and leaned back in his chair. He looked out the window. "Don't get me wrong, I mean that's part of my ministry--but it gets tough. This family is a case in point. The girl's mother remarried when the girl, Tara, was 12 years old or so. Her stepfather was abusive, possibly even molested her—and I know he hurt her so badly once the authorities got involved. We tried to help them--" He threw up his hands in surrender.

"When Tara was about 16, she was babysitting her half-brother and the boy wandered away for a second and fell in a pool, an accident that could happen to anyone. You turn away for a second and boom—the child has fallen headfirst in the water and drowned. So that unhinged her and her life got much worse. The parents moved to Florida. I don't know what happened to Tara."

"From your experience of her, do you think she might be the kind to

abduct a child?"

"I hate to jump to conclusions, but I have to jump to them a lot, dealing with so many people, not all of whom have their screws in place. Let's say I wouldn't be that surprised if the person you're looking for is Tara."

"Thank you so much," I said. "Is it alright if I pass this information along to the police?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No, I guess not."

With effort, he pulled himself up from his chair. "I'm going out on my Harley later so I can blow off steam. But first I need a long nap."

"Sounds good."

I had to call the detective. No more emails. No more leaving him alone. If he did not listen to me, I would go over his head and drive to Newark and camp out at the FBI office.

There was still hope. The boy might be alive.

FOURTEEN

The pastor had given me Tara's old address. For the sake of thoroughness, I would at least drive by her house, though it seemed unlikely Tara still lived there. First I needed food. I was never so happy to see an Applebee's. I had traveled far enough away from rural Parnassus to re-enter modern American civilization.

I ordered French toast, then called Detective Cabrera.

"Detective Cabrera, this is Bronwyn Bloom."

There was no response.

"I may have found the person who abducted Ian. I'm upstate New York, in a small town called Parnassus."

"I thought you were looking for clues in Turkey," he said. "Now it's upstate New York?"

"You don't understand. I think saw a picture of the woman, in a church directory--when she was a teenager. I recognized her."

The detective sighed.

"Why is that so impossible? I'm in the town where the phony nanny Heather Davis is from, and I found her picture."

"You saw a picture of a teenager in a church directory? What a grainy photograph from years ago?"

"Yes, but— "

"I'm sorry, I have to go. I have another call coming in—from the FBI."

I called Ben, who had a way of seeing the big picture. He claimed he had a mind that came from seventeen generations of rabbis, and could sift through reams of information and come to a logical conclusion.

"Ben?"

"Hey, Bron."

"I need a reality check."

"What's up?"

"I want to tell you everything. Get your take on the situation."

After I was done, he said, "There is a chance you found her. One loophole. How did this woman pass herself off as a competent nanny, when she was clearly not competent and is probably mentally unstable?"

"She used Heather Davis's name and her recommendations?"

"Let's assume she gets hired as a nanny. Then what?"

"So she's taking care of this little girl and sees Ian at the piano lesson," I said, thinking out loud, "and he reminds her of her half-brother who died. The idea comes into her head to abduct Ian. McFarland mentions the car. She puts these two things together."

"You shouldn't be looking into this by yourself. Tell the police, but not that detective who's got the pole up his ass."

"I will do that, as soon as I get home. I'm just going to drive by Tara's house."

"Call me and let me know what you find."

"I will." I did not mention the new serious girlfriend. Better not to think about it. I drank another cup of coffee and called James to update him on what

had happened.

“Where are you right now?” he asked.

“In an Applebee's, eating French toast.”

“Sounds awful.”

“No, it's not. I'm enjoying it—I mean from an anthropological point of view, it's interesting. It's manufactured and fake, but it works.”

“Whatever you're into. You should submit an article on it to *American Anthropologist*, you know, 'Applebees: Cross-cultural Attitudes of French Toast Consumption.' ”

“Not a bad idea, actually. I'd call it, 'Family Restaurant Chains: Issues of Class, Connectivity, and Predictability in 21st-Century America.' ”

He groaned. “When are you coming? I'm making a nice dinner for you tonight.”

“I'll drive by the house--don't think I'll find anything. I should get to your house by 5. When I get back home, I'll take a couple of days off work and find someone who will listen to me.”

I said goodbye to James, paid my check, and consulted a map. I drove back to “town,” a post office and a gas station with a 7-11. As the crow flies, Tara's house was close to Heather's. It was on another two-lane highway, this one passed rusted trailer homes, abandoned crumbling farms, boarded up mini-malls, houses with stacks of tires in the front yard, and improvised car body shops. Down a lonely stretch of road, I turned a corner and found the house.

A modest frame house with a wraparound porch, it stood at the end of a short driveway. A decorative house flag, a faded Christmas flag of an elf, was attached to the house. Bundles of supermarket circulars wrapped in plastic had been tossed on the porch.

The sky was azure blue with a breeze blowing a whirligig of a teddy bear in a helicopter. It was a mellow September day, with the warmth of summer still

in the air, but a hint of cooler days to come, of shorter days, of holidays, of the close of a year. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, made sense to me. It did seem like the end of one year and the beginning of another, but with a touch of melancholy in the air. Despite the beautiful day, this house had a shadow over it. I kept driving. I couldn't stop there. Not yet.

I drove further down the road, almost a mile, to the next house. A man raked leaves in the front yard of a small farmhouse with Indian corn tacked to the front door and pumpkins on the porch. With his LL Bean flannel shirt and a Subaru in the driveway, he appeared to be a weekender, not a local.

I slowed down, parked the car, and approached him.

He looked at me warily as if I might be a Jehovah's Witness or another type of person he would rather not deal with.

"I'm not from here, and was wondering if the house up the road was for sale."

"Thinking of buying a house around here?"

"Yes," I lied.

"I don't think that house is for sale--it's not being lived in either. But I do see the light on there once in a while. The place creeps me out. You may find nicer properties for sale. There's a beautiful farm up the road for sale."

"Thanks. I think that house has potential so I'll leave a note for them—in case they are interested in selling."

"Good luck."

I turned around and drove back to Tara's house. But I resolved right off not to enter this house. I couldn't stay long anyway. I had a long drive to James's house, and was looking forward to eating his eggplant Parmesan with garlic bread.

I parked the car and walked toward the house. I looked around the porch and knocked on the door. If anyone were there, I would say I had run out of gas.

It was not a good excuse, but it was the only one I could think of.

I knocked hard and peered in the window. I couldn't see much through the lacy curtains. My knocking echoed in the silence. Stepping down from the porch, I walked over to the barn and glanced in through a crack in the barn door. A car was in the garage. It was not an old wreck without wheels as I would expect, but rather a fairly new silver Toyota Camry, with Pennsylvania plates. That's all I remembered, however, before I was engulfed in darkness.

FIFTEEN

When I came to, my head was covered, a cloth stuffed in my mouth. Waves of pain throbbed in the back of my head. My hands were tied behind my back. I knew I shouldn't panic. I might gag and choke. I could breathe, but I did not have much air. I had to conserve what air I had. Straw poked into my back and I figured she had dumped me in the barn near the car.

This person would return and kill me. My cell phone vibrated. Ten minutes later, it vibrated again. It could be James calling, wondering what had happened to me. Could it be Ben or David calling? The phone would soon run out of power.

James would be alarmed if I didn't show up on time. I was prompt to the point of getting to places an hour early. *When I don't arrive, he will notify the police.* They would send police to investigate and retrace my steps. I had to stay calm. My legs shook and tears streamed down my face. James would freak out when I did not arrive on time. Wouldn't he?

I tried to push the cloth out of my mouth with my tongue. I was

desperate to get this hood off my head. The barn door slid open. My breathing was shallow. *I should not have come here alone. I should not have even ventured out of the car.* I tried to think of what might happen to Aidan and David. David would have to live with Ben and his girlfriend. I said a prayer for them. I said a prayer for myself. A match was lit and I smelled cigarette smoke.

How do people in these situations help themselves? My mind went blank. At some instinctive level, I knew I should not act scared or panic the person. My cell phone vibrated again. The person pushed me over onto my stomach, and pulled the cell phone out of my pocket.

I calculated my odds of survival. If she put me in a car, my odds were low. That's what I told my sons. Never get in a car with a stranger. I wiggled my fingers and toes to increase the circulation in my hands and feet. The person left again, closing the door. A few minutes later I heard voices.

I heard a woman's voice. "I brought along your favorite Power Ranger. The Blue Ranger."

I heard other footsteps but no response. Power Rangers was a cartoon my sons had loved, but it hadn't been on TV for years.

"That's the one you like, right, Sean honey?"

"Right," a tiny voice said.

This had to be Ian. Sean was the boy who had died. Tara's half-brother. The woman was Tara. I could hear the fear in Ian's voice. He had spotted me.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"She's a very bad woman who wants to take you away from me," she said. "We'll sic the Blue Ranger on her."

"Is that my mommy?"

"Your mommy? No, honey. Mommy is in Florida. We're going to drive there and see her."

I focused my mind on him and attempted to reassure him. My best hope

for him was for Tara to be distracted by me.

"What are you crying about, sweetie? Don't you want to see Disney World? You said you wanted to go there. You want to go there, right?"

"Yes."

She heard soft crying, as if he was trying to swallow his sobs.

"You wait in the car while I take care of this bad woman."

The car door opened and closed. The keys jangled; she had locked the car, probably with a child lock. Ian would not be able to escape.

Tara wrapped her arms around me. She squeezed me, struggling to lift me. I was a dead weight and she couldn't do it. I did not want to go in that car.

"Shit on a stick. I can't fucking do this."

I willed myself to be as heavy as possible, and as I was heavier boned than most women, this wasn't difficult.

Tara wrapped a blanket around my body, taping it around me. She then used something as a lift to put me in the car, perhaps a hay lift. I was going in the car. Nothing in my life had prepared me for this moment. Inside the trunk Tara curled me into a fetal position and slammed the trunk closed.

Breathe. Keep breathing. As long as I keep breathing, I'm alive. Ian is alive and she is treating him like her brother. She will not kill Ian. She's too far into my own fantasy world to realize she will get caught. I'm the one she needs to get out of the picture, not Ian. She will drive to Disney World and a smart person will spot him. A smart person will see his eyes and know this woman is not his mother. This was a boy with a crazy woman who had abducted him.

Tara drove for about twenty minutes; the road turned bumpy, like a rocky dirt road. My head bumped into the side of the trunk. My mouth was dry, so dry. Tara stopped the car and opened the trunk. I smelled pine trees. Now Tara had to remove me from the trunk. That was my only hope of saving myself.

Tara tried to pull my legs out, but they were dead weights, impossible to

move. She might give up, I thought, close the trunk, and drive to Disney World. Tara removed the blanket around my body, removed the ropes from my legs and arms, and unwrapped the duct tape around my head. She pulled chunks of my hair out of my scalp as she removed the tape.

"Get out." In her hands I saw a double-barreled shotgun, the kind used for bird hunting. I crawled awkwardly out of the trunk. I glanced quickly around to try and figure out what kind of place we were in. She had parked along the side of a dirt road, in a wooded area. I saw no trails or signs.

"Walk down that hill."

I scrambled through crinkling leaves down the hill. Ian's eyes followed me. I did not want to leave him. Was anyone was taking a hike, walking the dog? That was a city person thinking. People around here must be at home watching wrestling on TV. The thrum of a motorcycle engine broke the silence. Was the motorcycle-riding preacher out for a ride? I prayed he would drive by and see Tara with the gun. But the sound of the motorcycle died away.

As we bushwhacked through the heavy brush, Tara tripped. I used that moment to smack her on the side of her head and kick the arm with the gun. My hand hit her temple hard, harder than I expected. She fell to the ground. Had I killed her? She lay unmoving on the ground.

At that moment, I ran to the car. If the keys were still in the ignition I could escape with Ian. The door was locked and I shouted to Ian.

"Ian, I'm a friend of your mother's, unlock the door!" I yelled.

He looked straight ahead, not toward me. I pounded on the window.

"Ian, please, open the door! I'm here to help you."

He crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head back and forth, tears sliding down his cheeks.

At that moment, I heard her shriek, "Nooooo!"

Tara had stood up, and was running toward me, the gun pointed toward

me. "Away from the car."

I felt a bullet whiz past my head and ducked behind the car. As she got closer I ran away from the car. I wouldn't help Ian if I was dead, but I might find someone who could help us. And I didn't want a stray bullet to hit him.

Tara chased me down the hill and I managed to stay far ahead. But Tara was taller and faster. She gained on me, still shrieking. I tripped on a branch and Tara caught up with me, the afternoon sun glinting off the shotgun's barrel. She grabbed the back of my blouse. "Don't move."

"Tara, please don't hurt me. I know you don't mean to harm Ian."

"You don't know nothing about it," she said. "Why did you follow me here? I saw you in Hoboken, following me and Sean. You trying to get him away from me?"

"Tara, he's a small boy, he's scared, he needs his mother. Please. Do the right thing."

"Sean belongs to me. I take good care of him. Nobody is going to take him away from me."

I turned around, but only for a second, to get her off guard. Then I spun around again, grabbed Tara's arm holding the gun, and squeezed her wrist as hard as I could. She screamed in pain and the gun flew out of her hand. I sprinted away from her, jumping over branches on the untended trail. Tara was getting winded faster than I was, but she wasn't showing any signs of stopping.

I heard a loud firecracker noise that exploded in my leg into a searing pain. She had shot me in the calf.

I had to hide from Tara. She chased me up a rocky trail, where I ran, limping and slipping on loose rocks. I thought of hiding behind a long low boulder on the side of the trail that was shaped like a whale. She might not see me there. But before I could decide, she saw me and continued to chase me. I ran across a wooden bridge over a stream and saw painted blazes on trees. We

were now in a state park or a hiking area, with trails more clearly marked, and perhaps more people. But on a cool September day at dusk, I doubted anyone was around.

As the sun went down, it was cooler, and the woods were quiet and shadowy. I was losing blood. I had to hide before she shot me again.

I saw a laminated sign that said "Mine Trail" tacked to a tree. I tore off the sign and headed down this side trail. Around 200 feet down the trail, I came to a clearing. A placard said it was an old iron mine from the 19th century, and was closed to the public from April 1 through September 1 to allow bats to hibernate in peace.

I saw a small opening to the mine at ground level with just enough clearance for a person to crawl through. If the public was allowed in, I reasoned, how bad could it be? Much further above the small opening was a natural opening like a window that would at least let some light in.

Before my more rational mind could talk me out of it, I crawled through the small opening into the mine. Most people were afraid of bats, but I wasn't. Growing up in the country I enjoyed seeing them emerge at dusk on summer evenings. I could do this. I could hide here. Even if she did come across this cave, I doubted she would crawl in after me.

I quickly slipped through the opening. I felt coolness around me and felt the wet and slippery walls. I heard trickling water. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, but I didn't see any hibernating bats. I was worried about other animals, like snakes. I lay quietly. She wouldn't find me here.

I heard the motorcycle again. The engine sound got getting louder and closer. Then I heard nothing. A single wood thrush trilled, unaware anything was amiss in its part of the woods.

My calf was covered in blood. I removed my shirt and ripped off one of the sleeves and wrapped it around my leg as a tourniquet. It quickly became

soaked with blood.

Then I looked up at the walls and sensed movement. Insects with long antennae and giant back legs covered the walls and were leaping toward me. Out of my mouth came spasms of uncontrollable screams. My screams echoed off the cave walls.

PART TWO

Chaya searches for crocuses, her face warming in the sunlight reflected from the snow. She is in a meadow halfway down the mountain when a Runner approaches from behind and spears her in the leg.

Blood flowing from her wound, she smacks him hard in the face, and he stumbles backward. She scrambles up the rocky cliff. Her people climb trees and cliffs, but they cannot outrun these tall strangers with their long thin limbs and baby-like faces. They can only hide from them. Sometimes she hides high in a tree quietly watching them.

Chaya returns to her cave. Her mother cleans the wound and wraps an animal skin around it. Even next to the fire, she shivers under the bearskin.

The healer, painted with black stripes, stands over her. She dances, with beechnut husks threaded with deer sinew hanging around her neck. The husks clack as she dances. The healer shakes a stick with hard seeds dangling off it. She shakes another hollow

stick filled with tiny pebbles. It makes a soothing sound, like the sound of a waterfall. She moves with little jumps as her heels stomp on the ground. The healer must scare the sickness out of Chaya. If she doesn't, Chaya will die, and the bad spirits will travel into other people and they will also die.

A small circle gathers around Chaya. They hum, cup their hands, and clap with sharp claps as they stomp their feet. Chaya's mother's sister holds her son, wrapped close to her body in an animal skin. Chaya's sister died when she was the same age as this boy, a knee child, no higher than her mother's knee. Her mother did not have any more babies.

Chaya's mother sits away from the circle and bites down the stem of a milkweed she has twisted into a rope. Her face is wet with tears. She has told Chaya many times not to go out alone. Chaya had gone anyway, desperate to feel the sun on her face, now that winter is almost over, to hear the rushing water of the snow melting in the stream, to hear the honking of the returning geese.

Chaya's father, sitting on his heels, moans and sways. He gathers Chaya in his arms, sobs racking his body.

ONE

When I woke up, I was lying in a hospital bed with a curtain pulled around it. I saw James slumped in a chair, his eyes closed. The room was quiet, except for an occasional machine beeping.

"James. What happened?" I remembered Tara, woods, fear, running away, trying to open the car door, a pain in my leg, horrific insects.

His eyes opened and he leaned close to me. "You were shot. "

"How did they find me?" I had been a mine or a cave, a strange dream, my leg bleeding. It was all mixed up in my mind.

"It's a long story. I'm just glad you're alright." He looked drained.

"I almost had the boy, James. I lost him again."

I turned away from him, the tears streaming down my face. I had failed this boy again. How could I ever face the child's mother?

"There was no trace of them when they found you."

"Oh God, there were bugs, like some horrible horrible nightmare."

"What do you mean?"

"In the cave, or the mine." I shuddered with the memory.

"Big flying things with long legs?"

"Yeah.

"They were probably cave crickets. They look like something from a sci fi movie, but they're completely harmless. I've seen them when I went spelunking."

"How did they find me?" My legged throbbed in pain.

"When you didn't show up at my house, I got worried. I mean, how often are you late?"

We often had fights about being places on time. James thought I was a slave to Emily Post, a cruel and unforgiving WASP deity of etiquette. I thought he was selfish and inconsiderate to be late all the time.

"I called the state troopers and lied and said you'd been missing for 24 hours. God forgive me." He looked up at the ceiling, his hands cupped together in supplication.

"Why did you lie?" My mind was fuzzy. I couldn't focus on what he was saying or what it meant.

"I knew you were in trouble—no call, no nothing. They have to wait at least 24 hours to search for a missing person. They retraced your steps—from the motel to the church, to that born-again church and then Tara Stackley's house. A teenager out on a ATV heard the gunshot, they did a search of the area with dogs, and found you unconscious in the mine."

I touched the bandage on my aching leg. "They have no leads on Tara and the boy?" My mouth was dry. It was difficult to talk.

"Not yet. How are you feeling?"

"So strange, oozy. I guess they have me on pain killers."

James pulled back the curtain around my bed so I could look out the window. The yellow and red leaves of the trees outside glowed in the late afternoon sunshine. Crows squawked outside my window.

I sat up with a jolt. "How are David and Aidan?"

"They're fine. Ben called Aidan and David is here—he just went down to the cafeteria for a minute. Ben's here too."

"Please tell me the girlfriend's not here."

"The girlfriend is in the city."

"I'm near Parnassus?" I asked.

"Fairly near."

I lay back, sorting out the images in my mind. "While I was unconscious I had a hallucination or dream—I was in a cave with a healer, maybe with Neanderthals? It was so real. It didn't feel like a dream."

"Tell me about it."

"I was injured by a Cro-Magnon I think. I had a father who was so sweet. He loved me a lot, this father." I missed this man, who wore a fur cape and had long ragged hair, a bushy beard, and warm eyes. My father.

James nodded. It was a relief having him as a friend. He simply accepted what I said. "It might have been what the shamans call a dream-experience, brought on by a traumatic event."

"Is my laptop here?" I glanced around the room.

"I don't know."

"Can you check?"

James opened the drawers by the bed and found my personal belongings, including the laptop.

"You're going to do work now? I think you better rest. We've all been worried. Even Ben."

"No work. But I have to write down this dream or whatever it was, before I forget it. It was so real, so vivid. The girl in the dream had a name, it sort of sounded like Chaya--like with a Hebrew Khaf or Cheit."

I typed, lost in the world of the dream. "I need to see David and I'd like

to talk to the police."

"I'm supposed to call them as soon as you're up for it." He pulled out his cell phone and made a call.

Within a few minutes, the room was full of people, mostly men, and a few women. A woman in a police uniform, sat next to me. A large woman, she was bursting out of her uniform, but had a kind face.

"How you feeling?" She bent over me and gently touched my shoulder.

"Not great, but I want to give you information."

"Shoot." She pulled out a small notebook and a pencil and nodded to a policeman in the back of the room

"The woman's name is Tara Stackley," I said. "She wants to take Ian to Disney World. She's driving a silver Toyota Camry LE with Pennsylvania plates. She's not abusing him as far as I can tell."

I described what happened. Whether it was the medication I was on, or a delayed reaction, tears continued to stream down my face.

"We should be able to wrap up this case soon," the officer said. "You get some rest and take care of yourself."

Ben and David stood in the doorway. Ben was unshaven, his shirttail hanging out. David looked disheveled also. What had I been thinking coming here alone and putting myself at risk? Obviously Ben would survive without me, and maybe even Aidan would be alright. But David still needed me.

TWO

I was released from the hospital the next day. David had been unusually quiet since my return home from the hospital. After I re-oriented myself, I sat next to him on the couch in the living room as he channel-surfed.

"You want to watch the Science Channel?" I asked.

"Nah. Not in the mood."

"I did learn from this experience," I said, trying to break through the barrier between us. "Go with back up. I mean Tara's house looked abandoned, like no one lived there—I wouldn't have gone inside the house. She found me poking around outside the barn."

He stopped channel surfing when he came to an old Seinfeld episode. "You need to read a couple of Stephen King novels. Bad idea to go anywhere near abandoned houses."

"Hey, I did read a couple of his novels, just not the gory ones. I'm sorry I took a risk like that. I had to prove I was right. No one in the police department took me seriously. I felt guilty because I didn't stop Ian's abduction when I could

have. But I went too far, got too involved."

"You could have died," he said, his voice breaking. "Don't do anything like that again--"

"I won't. I promise."

He put his hands over his eyes. "You aren't in a movie. This is real life."

"I'm sorry."

He continued to watch Seinfeld, ignoring me, as if he had said enough, revealed too much.

"You know, I realized I'm pretty strong—I mean I've always been strong, but—"

"So what's your point?"

"Part of what gave me the strength was thinking of you and Aidan. I had to escape. I had to get back to you. I had to come back so I could nag you about your SAT vocabulary words."

He shrugged. "I think I found a college."

"You have?"

"Up near the town where you were in the hospital. There's great stargazing there. Dad drove me by a college that has an observatory with the largest optical telescope in New York state."

"It's pretty remote. Can you live without fast food?"

"I saw a pizza parlor in the town so I guess I'll survive."

"You have to write your college essay first."

"I wrote it. Ellie helped me with it--"

"Ellie helped you write your college essay?" I was unable to keep the indignation out of my voice. "You like her now?"

"Calm down. She teaches freshman writing at Barnard, so she's good at this stuff."

"Oh...I'm glad the essay is done. What's the topic?"

"How I cope with being a teenage Neanderthal."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Sort of. Ellie thought it was brilliant."

I blocked all further thoughts of Ellie out of my mind. Knowing Ben, she would be history soon anyway.

"Did you join Quiz Bowl yet?" I asked. "You have to fill those lines on the Common Application with activities—you can't leave them blank."

"It's such a game getting into college."

"Of course it is. But you've got to play it."

"Yeah, yeah. Woman is raised from the dead, so she can come back and nag son."

"You got it."

David retreated in his room to play videogames while I tried to figure out where my life was at. I was in pain, out of whack with my job. I remembered the dream that had seemed so real. Maybe I was even losing touch with reality.

Despite all I had been through, Tara was at large. Ian was still missing. Had Tara seen the news reports, and if so did she change her plans and decided not go to Disney World? It was difficult for me to get into my mind. I worried Tara might have a moment of clarity and recognize that Ian was not Sean, and so might hurt him. They needed to find Ian soon.

THREE

"Let's say I had a rough weekend," I said to the small cluster of reporters gathered outside my building.

I had woken up the next morning, hearing noise outside my building. David had left for school early. When I looked out the window, I saw news vans double-parked. They were waiting for me.

"And the story isn't over yet unfortunately."

I wanted to hide in my apartment, not go to work, get all my meals take-out. But the media now had a juicy story. My attack and the revelation of the abductor's identity were headline news. More news meant more people searching for Tara and Ian. Now they had many stories to occupy them: they could dig up information about Tara's family and friends. They could send reporters up to interview townspeople in Parnassus, and they had my story—the professor who maybe wasn't so bad after all.

The questions came quickly and I answered them as they came.

"Were you really shot and dumped in the woods?"

I pointed to my bandaged leg. "I was shot with the smallest size birdshot and she didn't hit a bone."

Several hands shot up.

"Why didn't the police department believe you?"

"I don't know." At least I would try to be diplomatic.

"Do you think Tara Shackley is a sociopath?" asked a young man with narrow black retro glasses.

"I'm not an expert in this so I can't say. She didn't seem to be harming Ian Waltham. I think she's confused and needs help."

Once I answered all the questions, I took a cab to the PATH station and hobbled the few blocks to NYU. The students' and my colleagues' stares bored into me. I limped to my office and locked the door. James had left a box of dark chocolate champagne truffles in my in-box.

I glanced at the syllabus for the Neanderthal seminar. I couldn't remember what we had covered. It all suddenly seemed meaningless. What did I really know about the Neanderthals? Not a whole lot.

I slinked through the hallway hoping to avoid Georgia Armand, the chair of the department. When I entered the classroom, my students' faces were consumed with curiosity and also with a feigned "it's no big deal" look. They were trying to make me feel comfortable, despite my recent notoriety.

"I imagine you are all curious to hear what happened to me," I said, standing in front of my class. "It's such a relief to be back, to teach. I don't want to talk about what happened this past weekend. My office door is open, however, and I'd be glad to talk to any of you personally. But for now, let's just get on with anthropology."

I wrote a word on the board, "hyoid." "Does anyone know what this is?"

"Something to do with language?" a young man wearing a purple knit cap volunteered.

"Yes. It's the bone attached to the cartilage in the larynx. It anchors the muscles necessary for speech. For years, anthropologists didn't think Neanderthals were capable of speech because no hyoid bone had been found. One was found in Kebara Cave in Israel, and the opinions are shifting back—a gene associated with language, FoxP2, has been isolated from Neanderthal DNA. Neanderthals were theoretically capable of speech."

The people in my dream had had high-pitched sing-songy voices and were communicating with strange-sounding musical speech, along with complicated hand, body, facial expressions, and arm movements.

"I believe the Neanderthals may have been capable of symbolic thought, but I'm not so sure their speech was like ours," I said, surprising myself because I had always stayed out of the Neanderthal language controversy. I had never believed they were capable of symbolic thought or speech of any kind.

In the few days since my return from the hospital, I had become obsessed with exploring the research on Neanderthal communication, even if it meant straying outside the mainstream of academia.

"I want to play you a computer simulation of a Neanderthal's voice. The position of the larynx in a male Neanderthal is similar to a modern female *Homo sapiens*, so that he would have had a high-pitched nasal-sounding voice."

I opened my laptop and clicked on a link for a website from a colleague in Florida who had created the simulation. The sound startled the students. They looked up, amazed at hearing a voice from thousands of years ago, even if simulated. It sent a chill through me. It wasn't exactly what I had heard it in my dream, yet the voice resonated with me.

"Remember, with a hyoid bone a Neanderthal might have been capable of making many of the same sounds we do, though not all of our vowel sounds. Think of the variety of sounds a human can make—yodeling, whistling, Indian mantras, humming, and sounds imitating birdcalls. Yet these sounds do not

constitute a complex language with syntactical structures. The neural 'wiring,' however, for music is separate, and from a more ancient part of the brain than that for speech."

I didn't tell them, of course, why I suspected the Neanderthals communicated musically. If I sought credibility, I wouldn't get it by telling them I had traveled back to Neanderthal times in a dream.

After class, I found a note from the chair of the department in the in-box on my office door. When I entered her office, Georgia smiled at me with a tight, insincere smile. She stretched her arms around her head with feline agility.

Her specialty was the politics of female goddesses of Hinduism, especially Kali, the one who stuck her tongue out and had cut-off male heads around her waist. Georgia flirted in faculty meetings with Barclay Wilmerding III, a young adjunct professor, whom I loathed for his articles full of academic jargon that even I, with a PhD from Columbia, couldn't wade through. Wilmerding and I were both up for full professor this year. He would probably get it, whereas I predicted I would be passed over.

"Have a seat," Georgia said. "Uh, listen I admire you for trying to solve this crime, but I'm not sure how you can do this and teach at the same time."

"My life should be getting back to normal," I said. "The police have good leads and I'm hoping the case will be solved soon."

"We've had to put extra security around the building, there are reporters everywhere, and calls like you wouldn't believe. Don't you think you should take a leave of absence?"

She wanted to get rid of me, had always wanted to get rid of me. Now she had a good excuse. But I would fight for my job. Sometimes I thought Georgia's nastiness was jealousy. Georgia's ratings from students on RateMyProfessors.com were low. I had better overall ratings than her—a smiley

orange face next to my name, not a sad blue face as she had. Not only that, I had been given a red apple as a standout professor.

"I have missed two days of classes, and that's after being shot and left for dead. I imagine others in the department occasionally take a couple of personal days?" I smiled as insincerely as Georgia did.

Georgia frowned, clearly annoyed I didn't want to take the easy way out.

"I'm also in the middle of teaching my Neanderthal seminar, and a very full survey class."

"We could, of course, find a substitute."

"Thank you for giving me the option, but I'd like to continue. I hope to get back to normal soon—no rides in trunks of cars or bleeding to death in abandoned mines in the woods."

Georgia shuddered. I had told her more than she wanted to know, but I couldn't stand another moment with the woman. "If you change your mind, the option is open."

"Thanks. Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all."

I hobbled back to my office. A young man with a sheepish expression waited for me.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked.

"Sure, come on in, Greg."

"I wasn't able to get the reaction paper in that was due today." He seemed embarrassed that he was bothering me with something so trivial. His eyes were bloodshot, his dark blond hair mussed.

"Big party last night?"

He looked surprised. "Uh, yes. My girlfriend's 21st birthday party."

I gave him a point for honesty.

"You've made good comments in class, Greg," I said. "I'll give you an

extension, but I'm giving you an extra credit assignment. I want a short review on the recent literature on the fragments of mineral manganese dioxide found on Neanderthal sites."

As I left the building, I saw reporters and TV vans clustered outside the main entrance. I walked down the fire stairs to the basement and left by the service entrance. Later, I would speak to them again, but first I needed to rest.

Once home, I lay on the couch, closed the curtains, and turned on Japanese flute music. Every sound made me jump. I wanted calmness again in my life. In the midst of the soothing flutes, the discordant sound of my phone ringing startled me. I would screen the call. No matter who was calling, she wouldn't pick up the phone, unless it was David or Aidan.

"Hi, Bronwyn. This is Basil McFarland. You missed your lesson. Unfortunately unless you cancel 24 hours in advance, I have to charge you."
His voice sounded grumpy.

I picked up the phone. "Mr. McFarland? I am so sorry, I completely forgot about the lesson."

He laughed. "Don't worry, I'm kidding. I called to thank you. You saved my life. And you can call me Basil."

I had forgotten the police were no longer investigating McFarland, his friends, his students, or his family in Oklahoma.

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that. Sorry you had to go through that."

"I feel like the weight of the world has been lifted off me, but how are you?"

"Not so good. I need to google post-traumatic stress disorder. I may have that."

"I was born with PTSD. Work on that piece I gave you and we'll reschedule the lesson. Music is restorative."

"I'll do that."

"You know, you should talk to a therapist after what you've been through."

"Maybe you're right."

After the call, I pulled out the piece McFarland had picked out for me. It was called *Suo-Gan*, a Welsh lullaby. I read the words translated from Welsh: *Have no fear now, waves are beating, gently beating on the shore. Sleep, sleep, none shall harm thee.*

FOUR

I scanned the movie titles at Blockbuster. I needed a good movie, one that would help me escape from my life. Ghouls, werewolves, and zombies stared out at me from the shelves, along with the inevitable vampires. I picked up movies about vigilantes, mean-looking cowboys, and gangsters. One movie promised a spectacular fourteen-minute bone-crushing finale, another a perfect crime gone awry with a shattering climax. I could watch a story about a living hell of interrogation and relentless mental and physical abuse, or one about a doctor who brutally tortures and kill his patients. The last movie I looked at was about a child who is kidnapped and molested by a ruthless sociopath.

I rushed out of the video store. I would go home and dig out my boxed set of Astaire Rogers movies. If I watched Fred and Ginger dance, I might calm down.

I took the long way home, avoiding the park. When I got home I listened to my messages. There was only one, from Detective Cabrera. What had I done wrong now? I would not call him. I didn't want to think about him, the police

station, and lie detector tests. I had meddled in the case, but I had also discovered the identity of Ian's abductor. I didn't expect a framed commendation from the mayor. Yet I didn't want to be criticized either. I didn't want to deal with his macho Latino attitude.

I slipped in the DVD of the movie *Top Hat*. I had been in love with Fred Astaire when I was 16. He was an odd idol for a teenage girl. He didn't exactly exude sexuality. Maybe I had imagined myself as Ginger Rogers being swept up into his arms.

The phone rang again. The voice mail picked up the message.

"Hello, Professor Bloom? This is Detective Cabrera again. Just trying to reach you. Could you give me a call please when you get in?"

I took the phone off the hook. David and Aidan called by cell phone anyway. Maybe the detective thought I had not received enough punishment by being shot. I needed a relentless hell of interrogation as that movie at Blockbuster promised.

I watched Fred dance with Ginger as he sang "Cheek to Cheek" in an Art Deco wonderland, ostrich feathers flying off her satin dress.

The doorbell rang. It was too late for the meter reader or the UPS man and it wasn't election time. I went out in the hallway to peak through the front door curtain. Detective Cabrera stood on the stoop. He didn't look happy. Now he was going to take me to the station, lock me up.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I called a couple of times and you didn't return my call. Your colleagues said you were on your way home."

"You're watching my every move now?"

He shifted from one foot to another and glanced around. "We were concerned down at the station."

"Now that you know I'm alive and well, can I go back to my Fred Astaire

movie?"

"Fred Astaire movie?" The corners of his mouth turned up a centimeter. Was this man congenitally unable to smile? "I would like to ask you a few questions."

"I'm not going to the police station again, unless you put handcuffs on me. You'll have to get a court order or whatever the hell policemen do to harass innocent citizens."

"Fine," he said. "We can do the interview somewhere else. How about a restaurant--at lunch."

I was surprised he had called my bluff.

"I need to get a detailed report of your contact with Tara Stackley. Can we get together tomorrow?"

"Yes, but I have to go to work in the morning. I won't be done until mid-afternoon. My boss chewed me out yesterday--"

"Chewed you out for being the heroine of the hour?"

"Huh?" I had gone from villain to heroine?

"That's how the media is playing it up. You know, brave anthropology professor who puts herself in danger to find the missing boy, when the police don't believe her theories."

His tone wasn't ironic or sarcastic. Did I detect a microgram of apology?

"I don't want to be a heroine. I want to get my life back to normal."

"I understand. Can I take you to lunch to my favorite Colombian restaurant in Union City?"

"Colombian? You're not making fun of me, are you? After the idiotic thing I said?" I squirmed as I recalled the know-it-all way I had asked him about his Colombian accent.

"It wasn't idiotic. I'll explain tomorrow." He smiled, a boyish grin, revealing deep dimples, the first time I had seen him smile.

The next morning, after I taught my survey class in the morning, I returned to Hoboken at lunchtime. I met the detective at the station and we drove in a squad car to a modest storefront restaurant, its name "Esmeralda" spelled in green neon in the window. Inside was a lunch counter with a few tables along the other wall.

After they sat down, he said, "I'm sorry for not taking you seriously."

"You had every right to be cautious," I said, twisting the edges of the paper placemat.

"I get stuck sometimes on an idea and can't get loose from it," he said. "We thought you and McFarland were hiding something. I mean, we didn't believe the polygraph and obviously we didn't think either of you were the abductor—that's why I didn't share the results with the rest of the team or leak it to the media--but things didn't add up either."

"Thank you not telling anyone about the polygraph, really."

"But the piano lesson excuse sounded lame--"

"What I told you about it was true. I felt compelled to find the answer myself--you know, after I failed the polygraph. I was told that the only way to reach McFarland was to take lessons with him—because he's so obsessed with music and the piano."

He unfolded a paper napkin and placed it on his lap. "This case has almost caused me to hand in my retirement papers."

"I can imagine," I said.

He shrugged and opened his menu. "Try the *arepas* I know from personal experience. I grew up in Colombia."

"Your family isn't from Puerto Rico?"

"No, though my stepfather Hugo is from Puerto Rico. So I wasn't entirely truthful about that."

"Your parents are Colombian?" I asked.

"Yes, my mom lives in Queens. My dad is dead," he said in a flat tone.

"He was in the police force in Colombia--killed in a drug-related incident when I was eight."

"I'm sorry about your father, losing him so young." I took a sip of café con leche. "I've been to Colombia, to Cartagena. That's why I recognized your accent."

"You have?"

"You look surprised."

"Not many people from the states travel there."

"My mother's best friend from her church moved back to Colombia," she said. "We went to Cartagena twice—it was beautiful."

"It is beautiful—too bad my country is so fucked up...I hardly ever go back now."

"I know what you mean," I said. "Did you learn horseback riding in Colombia?"

"How did you know I ride horses?"

"I saw the photo on your office wall."

"My grandfather on my mother's side had a ranch. I lived there in the summers when I was young. I started as a mounted police in Hoboken. You know there was a stable in Hoboken, only a few years ago?"

"I was sad when they closed it. I used to like walking by it and smelling the horses. I grew up on a horse farm in New Hampshire."

I didn't often tell people about this because it was a lost part of my life. My mother was dead, the farmhouse sold, the horses dispersed to other farms. Once a month I dreamed of riding one of the horses, Friar Tuck or Meadow Muffin, in the back pasture. But there was such a huge disconnect between that life and my life now.

"I ride at a stable in Queens," he said.

"I had no idea there were stables in Queens. I know there is one snooty stable in Manhattan where rich girls practice dressage on Dutch Warmbloods. I'd love to go riding again." I hoped he wouldn't think that I was hinting for an invitation.

"I go about once a month. I'll let you know when I go and I can introduce you to the lady who runs the stable. You can't get in there unless you know someone."

"Thanks," I said, genuinely surprised by the invitation, wondering if it was a real or polite one.

The waitress returned to the table to take our order.

"Definitely get the coconut rice," he said.

"I love coconut rice."

He fiddled with his menu, as if not sure how to continue the conversation. "How are you feeling? I mean your leg and all."

"My leg is fine. It's my mind I'm worried about."

"I can give you the names of therapists and social workers."

"Thanks. You know, Tara recognized me, from when she saw me by the Mister Softee truck. The strange thing is that I couldn't read her."

"What do mean?"

I hesitated.

"Uh, I know, you're psychic, right?" he asked. "That's why you knew the Colombia thing and the horseback riding--I mean anyone can sit on a horse in a parade, but you knew I rode horses."

"I'm not psychic. It's more subtle and hard to describe."

"So what vibes did you get from this woman?"

"I sensed she was mentally ill, maybe from a fringe community, without much money, but—"

"You don't know what makes her tick."

"No, and I usually can with people. She's delusional about Ian—but her attempt to kill me was pretty half-hearted. I mean it was incredibly scary. Yet I don't know--"

"You managed to get away from her."

"Yes, all those hours at the gym paid off. I was much stronger than she was."

The waitress brought our food and we ate in silence.

"Whatever her motivation, I'm glad you made it through alright," he said.

"One less thing for me to feel guilty about."

"I thought I had the monopoly on guilt."

"Not quite," he said simply.

The men are digging in the valley for buried acorns in the frozen ground. Chaya's people are starving. There is no game on the mountain. The red deer go away this time of year and do not return until the cool days after summer.

Now Chaya is in the Hungry Time. Soon after the Crocus Moon, green shoots will appear for her to eat. She will climb trees and suck the yoke out of tiny birds' eggs hidden in nests. She will feast on tender pinecone buds.

Chaya longs for the time when the sun is high in the sky and the meadowsweet is in bloom. She loves to throw the sweet-smelling white flowers around the cave to banish the bad smells.

She remembers the old days when her people left the cave in the spring and built new nests by the river in the valley. But now they live in the cave all year long, hiding from the Runners.

On summer days, she collects thistles, careful not to get stung. The leaves and stalks take away the pain of sore fingers and knees. When the sun is highest in the sky, she cuts the leaves, stems, and flowers of yarrow. She likes the smell of the pungent feathery green leaves. The clusters of tiny white flowers are a welcome sight.

Summer, when the berries are ripe, is her favorite time. Chaya picks berries all day long, her fingers dripping purple juice. Later she picks beechnuts and mushrooms and makes cakes out of dried lichens. Best of all, the red deer return, and after the hunt, they share the roasted meat, sizzling on the fire. During the Hungry Time, she dreams of these days.

Today, Chaya's stomach is twisted in pain. She waits in the cave for the men to return. Most of the men return, but a few don't. The men carry the wounded up the cliff to the cave. One man has fallen, scrambling up the mountain. His leg is broken. He is placed by the fire, moaning.

The healer gestures for Chaya to help her. Despite her mother's protests, the healer leads Chaya out of the cave. She cannot refuse the healer. The healer has chosen her, an honor.

Chaya rarely leaves the cave at night. During the day, the hyenas sleep. At night they emerge to hunt. But they cannot wait for morning to take care of the man's broken bone.

She looks into the darkness for green eyes shining, but sees nothing. She and the healer clap, a

familiar rhythm. They do this to show the hyena that they aren't sick stragglers. They are healthy, confident. They watch their backs. The hyena strikes from behind only.

Chaya searches for willow saplings to splint the man's broken bone. She finds two forked saplings of uneven lengths, one long sapling to fit under his armpit, the other under his groin. The healer finds a smaller branch as a piece to fit across.

Inside the cave, they fit the saplings around the man's leg and tie it with strips of animal skin. The healer places willow bark in a sack made from animal stomach. She fills the sac with water, letting it steep. The man with the broken leg drinks the willow bark water to bring down his fever. He falls asleep, exhausted, but is no longer in pain.

The healer shows Chaya how to mix animal fat, of which they have only a little left, with the juice of sorrel to make a salve for wounds. She crushes dried mint leaves, soaks them in water, and gives this to the other wounded men, to help them sleep.

They are not finished. Every evening they care for the oldest woman. She has no teeth and her fingers are bent into a claw, her knuckles swollen. The old woman lies on the thickest fur they have, a mammoth fur, passed down from mother to child to mother to child. Another fur covers her frail body. The healer roasts, and then mashes, the acorns into a paste. It takes time to feed her and sometimes Chaya is impatient.

The healer never rushes the oldest woman. After the oldest woman eats, it is time to soothe her swollen limbs. The healer rubs her hands together until they are warm, moving them over the woman's gnarled fingers.

The healer rubs the woman's swollen legs, turning her so she does not get sores. She chants to her and asks Chaya to chant alone. This is the first time her has chanted alone in front of the oldest woman. She feels shy and self-conscious. The old woman smiles, a toothless smile, and nods her head. The healer rubs the woman's forehead, stroking her thin strands of white hair until she falls asleep.

Basil and Victor were right. I did need to see a therapist. The strange dream-experiences came every night, even when I dozed on the PATH train. I wrote down the dreams everyday, remembering only fragments. I could see the faces of the cave people. I could hear them singing.

My friend Gwen offered to give me a free therapy session. We had been friends since my first month living in Hoboken, when we had met singing together in a woman's choir. Gwen was a psychiatrist, yet this was the first time I had needed her services.

"You look terrible," Gwen said with her usual candor when I arrived at her office in Manhattan. "Have you been sleeping?"

"Restless sleep when I'm able to get to sleep, with pretty strange dreams every night."

She nodded. "You've been through a major trauma and you're working through it."

I stared into the eyes of dozens of dolls: cloth dolls from the Caribbean, jazz diva Barbie, African folk art dolls. I had seen Gwen's collection of black angels, but not these dolls.

"Earth to Bronwyn." Gwen cleared her throat.

"How do your patients concentrate with all these dolls?"

"The dolls are a good ice breaker," she said. "I bring out the Spider Man and Ninja Turtles action figures when the men and boys are here."

I stared at a Madame Alexander doll wearing Army camouflage fatigues.

"Bronwyn, wake up!"

"Sorry."

"Let's start from the beginning. Tell me everything that happened."

I told Gwen the story, from my arrival at The Red Caboose until I woke up in the hospital. I also told her about my dream-experiences.

"I guess these dreams are connected with your work. Why do you think you dream this stuff?"

"My mother said we were Neanderthal. She was convinced of it and it didn't matter what I said. She may have told me stories when I was a child I'm remembering now?"

"What do you think about the Neanderthal connection?"

"It's not possible. I mean, that Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons interbred, even if they did, their offspring probably wouldn't have been fertile."

"No chance at all?"

"It's within the realm of possibility, but there's no DNA evidence yet—in fact, the DNA samples from a few Neanderthals tend to confirm that they *didn't* breed with *Homo sapiens*."

"So we've established that you're not a Neanderthal."

"But I do feel like a Neanderthal in a Cro-Magnon world. I can't wait to get away from the Cro-Magnons every night and escape to my cave."

"You're not a Neanderthal." She nibbled on her pencil. "You're a classic introvert, afraid of the world. When you saw the boy being abducted you were forced to encounter the big, bad world you generally try to avoid. I'm not being facetious—just saying that you are way more thin-skinned than most."

"So I prefer Fred Astaire to Chuck Norris. Is that pathological? Maybe it's the other way around. Maybe I'm the sane peaceful Neanderthal and everyone else is a bloodthirsty Cro-Magnon."

Gwen laughed. "Interesting theory--I give you points for your

imagination. But seriously, you're a hermit. I must have asked to you to go to a hundred things with me and it's always no, no, no."

"Wait a minute, I'm outgoing. I have a couple of friends. I do things with you. We went to the 'Summer of Love' exhibit at the Whitney."

"Yeah, and I almost threw up in the strobe light exhibit. I mean parties, social events, where you actually have to talk to people."

I fled from Gwen's invitations to wine-and-cheese art opening events and women's networking functions. On the rare occasion I did say yes, I often found myself near the tray of crudités, where I feigned fascination with broccoli florets.

I shrugged. "Maybe that's why I can't relate to many people—I really *am* a Neanderthal. It even helps me as an anthropologist. You know, I've been a participant-observer my whole life--I'm not even the same species as you, I'm a sub-species. What could be a more perfect background for an anthropologist!" I was kidding, but for an instant it made perfect sense.

Gwen rolled her eyes. "You have unresolved issues about not having a father. You've pushed that under the carpet for way too long."

"You might be right."

"What about your father? No contact with him? What's the deal? You never talk about him at all."

"I was conceived in a graveyard in Wales when my mother was about 17. My mother fell in love with a guy from another village named Dewi Jones. He left Wales soon after."

"Your mother never tried to find him?"

"No, never. She was conservative. I was born out of wedlock, and she wanted to push the incident away."

"You never tried to find your father?"

"I was afraid. Also, he has a common name, maybe the most common

name in Wales. I'm assuming he changed the Welsh Dewi to the English David if he left Wales."

"Did you name David after him?"

"In a way—although not consciously. David is the patron saint of Wales and it's a good Jewish name too, King David and all."

"So it took a near-death experience to bring these dust bunnies about daddy to light. Except in your dream your father is this sweet Neanderthal guy."

"You got it. "

"What else is going on?"

"I've got a crush."

"Ah, things get juicy."

"It's silly and inappropriate."

"Let me decide."

"The detective, you know, the one I had some conflicts with..."

"Is he married?"

"Not that I know of."

"Is he gay?"

"I don't know, but I don't think so."

"Is he like 20 years younger than you?"

"No, about the same age, maybe a little younger. I think he's in his mid-forties."

"So, why is this silly and inappropriate? So far he's passed the Dysfunctional Attraction test."

Why was it inappropriate? I wasn't sure.

"He's out of my league...you know, looks-wise, although come to think of it, he's not really classically handsome. There's just something very visceral and sexy about him..."

"Go for it. You've been celibate too long."

I laughed. The idea was absurd, though it was fun to think about, and as Gwen said it was a healthy, not a dysfunctional, fantasy.

"Beside having the hots for the detective, what exactly are you feeling right now?"

"I'm frightened of everything, like the days after 9/11, but multiply it times a thousand."

"That's normal under the circumstances. You need short-term therapy and meds to get you through this period."

"Short-term?" I was relieved I wasn't about to be committed.

"Yes, short-term. You're weird, but not crazy. You've suffered a major trauma, not to mention your lingering feelings of guilt." She wrote the prescription on a pad. "I won't give you anything too strong, just something to take the edge off. I want to see you twice a week."

"I can't afford you and it's not right for you to do it for free."

"We'll do a barter system. Whatever insurance doesn't cover, we can do a trade."

"I can't trade anything, I don't have any skills except anthropology," I said. "Wait, I could make you homemade veggie chili with corn bread?"

"Yuck. You know I'm a carnivore," she said. "Why don't you give me personal training sessions. Get me off the couch. Teach me how to use the weights and machines in the gym I never go to."

"Sounds good, I could do that."

"Go get this filled and take one ASAP." Gwen handed me the prescription.

I took the subway downtown to NYU to teach my Neanderthal seminar. Today I was giving a lecture about the environmental causes of the demise of the Neanderthals. I had become well known in the tight-knit world of

paleoanthropology for this theory, which had caught on quickly.

The idea was that abrupt global cooling had caused the forest habitat of the Neanderthals to recede. Early modern humans had the intelligence and agility to survive this climate change on the open tundra-steppes. But the Neanderthals did not and that's what led to their extinction, not annihilation by the early moderns. I had a manuscript half-written and a university press had expressed interest in publishing a monograph on the subject.

After class, Greg stopped me in the hallway. "I have the extra credit assignment."

I opened my office. "Have a seat. Can you give me a short presentation? I don't have time to read it."

He opened his notebook. "Stone nodules that contain the mineral manganese dioxide have been found at many Neanderthal sites, which means it was probably used for black paint. As no Neanderthal cave paintings of any kind have been found, it's theorized they used it for body painting. The nodules almost look like crayons, so they may have been used to paint stripes or spots."

"So what else did you find out?" I asked.

"They may have used the paint for camouflage—because they were light-skinned—either to hide from prey, or to hide from early modern humans who may have been darker skinned."

"But the Neanderthals weren't light skinned."

"What?" he asked, confused.

I stopped myself, flustered. Now I was mixing reality with my dream world. In my dreams, the Neanderthals had medium-brown skin, as had the early moderns. A few of the Neanderthals had reddish hair and lighter-colored eyes, not blue, an amber color.

"Uh," I said, recovering quickly. "Not all people who live at high latitudes are light-skinned. Look at the Inuit and Yupik people. Maybe it was

European prejudice that caused people to assume the Neanderthals were lighter-skinned. They might have had other adaptations to synthesize vitamin D, despite their skin pigmentation—something in their diet. After all, both the early moderns and the Neanderthals originated in Africa, just several thousand years apart."

Now I was babbling. He looked thoroughly confused. I was contradicting what I had taught in an earlier lecture.

"Do you have any theories about the black paint?" I asked. "I don't think they used the paint for camouflage."

"I'm not sure. Maybe it was used for a ritual, isn't that how it's usually used? To connect with spirits, like an animal spirit. A powerful animal, such as a saber-toothed tiger maybe."

"Yes, could be. By the way, you sure you don't want to consider continuing in anthropology? I could pull some strings for you."

"Nope. Filling out my law school apps now. Hey, I've got to put food on the table."

"You've got a good brain. You'll be a good lawyer, but...we could really use your brain in this field."

"I'll keep it as my hobby. I'll be one of those rich people who pay to go on volunteer digs."

I didn't try to argue. It was a tough field, and even with a PhD, he might not be assured of a job. And yet, I was sad to lose him.

Greg left my office and I thought about the painted Neanderthals. I imagined presenting a paper at the American Anthropological Association about this topic. The only problem was that the evidence came from my collective unconscious or my genetic memory, or from somewhere else. It did not from empirical evidence. Yet so much of anthropology was intuition, guesswork, and imagination.

No, I would be laughed off the panel or podium, or rather, sneered off the podium. It was wiser to plod along with my Neanderthals Were Too Dumb to Adapt to Climate Change theory. It appealed to my colleagues and caused no flak.

These dreams were confusing me. I wanted them to stop.

SIX

The medication Gwen prescribed did help me. My dreams about Neanderthals stopped almost immediately. I focused on teaching again and was not so obsessed with the case. But there had been no breaks in the case anyway. The back-to-school decorations in stores morphed into Halloween decorations, in what David called the American hype cycle. The next part of the hype cycle was Christmas. The first commercial on TV for the Radio City Christmas Spectacular had already aired.

The case had lost its momentum. After a flurry of stories about Tara, the FBI had followed up the many tips they had received. Tara and Ian had been spotted in Tennessee, in Delaware, even in Canada and St. Croix in the Virgin Islands. But none of the tips had been legitimate. I suspected Tara had

abandoned the Disney World idea.

In the coming days, the media and the police department learned more about Tara. She had skimmed the surface on life, not making much impact. She dropped out of high school soon after Sean's death. Her schoolmates' memories of her were hazy, the clichéd phrases about being quiet and unassuming, not a particularly good student. She drifted around, worked in unskilled jobs.

Later, she had ended up on the North Fork of Long Island, where she worked as an aide in a daycare center. She got involved in drugs, particularly meth. She had had a breakdown and ended up in Pilgrim State mental hospital on Long Island.

When Tara was released, she returned to Parnassus. She looked up her childhood friend, Heather Davis. Tara was on medication and was doing relatively well, but couldn't find work. She had evidently gotten the idea to become a nanny from Heather, and even used her credentials to do so. She had had no contact with her mother in Pensacola, Florida, and her stepfather was dead. Records from the hospital indicated her real father was dead too.

After weeks of endless stories and speculation, including several tips that didn't lead anywhere, the story died abruptly. The New York *Times* ran a two-part article about how most of the money and resources went to finding missing middle-class white kids, and not to finding Latino and African American children. The rest of the news media had picked up the *Times* story. As a result, the media exposure on the case became less intense.

In an effort to give the case more visibility, Posey's mother organized a prayer vigil at the Elks Club in Hoboken on Ian's 5th birthday. Entering the Elks Lodge on a gloomy cold day in mid-October, I walked past the life-sized gold statue of an elk, and saw a crowd gathered in the main room. The Lodge's "Esteemed Leading Knight" handed out flyers. Across the room, the Scoutmaster of Troop 146 organized the Scouts. Police and firefighters mingled with earnest

young professional men and women.

Posey had yet to speak at a press conference. Her mother had been the main spokesperson. Balloons hung from the ceiling and "Happy Birthday Ian" signs were tacked on the walls. Mercifully there were no young children in the room, only the older Scouts. I waved to the Scoutmaster, an ex-Marine who had always scared me. But Aidan had made Eagle Scout because of him. David, however, had quit the Scouts between Tenderfoot and First Class after a Scout had thrown a live daddy-long-leg in the campfire.

I passed the mayor of Hoboken, a genial man with a ruddy face, who looked as though he had eaten a few too many meatball heroes at his desk in city hall. The mayor had given a speech at Aidan's Eagle Scout ceremony in this same room, and since that time, he could do no wrong as far as I was concerned. Hoboken was like a 19th-century Sicilian village.

Along one wall was a long table with baked ziti in aluminum foil chafing pans, Italian bread, oily antipasto—the usual Hoboken spread. Cosmos Bakery had donated a birthday cake. People had been encouraged to bring a gift for Ian, as a way to express hope that he would be found. I added my present to the pile, a picture book about Pinkerton, the mischievous Great Dane.

Posey and her mother entered the room and walked straight to the podium, the mother with her headmistress-like bearing, shoulders back, looking straight ahead, the daughter, with her head down, shoulders slumped, looking at the floor.

The mayor made a short speech, then the Catholic priest, the Methodist pastor, the rabbi, and the Muslim Imam from Jersey City each said a prayer. It reminded me of the annual 9/11 memorial services by the waterfront. A choir, combined of the various Hoboken congregations, sang, "You'll never walk alone." By the time Posey stood behind the microphone, I didn't see a dry eye in the room.

"Today is Ian's 5th birthday." Her voice was shaky, almost inaudible. "I wish I could celebrate Ian's special day with him. Tara, please, bring my son home to me. I know you don't mean him any harm. Bring him back to me. You won't be hurt. We will help you. But my son needs to be home, with his mother."

Then she put her hands over her face. She couldn't speak. Posey's mother took over.

"Thank you, the people of this city, the mayor's office, and the local police department, the state police in Trenton, the FBI for all you have done for us," Ginny Waltham said. "We couldn't have gotten through this terrible time without you. "

She looked directly at the TV cameras." Now we need the help of the entire country. We need you to be our eyes, to look at the next table at McDonald's, look behind you in the grocery line, at the convenience store. Look around when you're at the gas station. Tara might be within a few hundred miles of Hoboken. With your help, we can find Ian. Thank you."

With that, she left the room with Posey. Victor stood on the edge on the room. I wanted to speak to him, but didn't want to disturb him while he was working. I looked around for friends or acquaintances, but didn't see anyone I knew, except the Scout leaders, who seemed too busy to chat.

I remembered being in this room when Aidan was about 10 for his bridge ceremony from Cub Scout to Boy Scout. My mother had been visiting from New Hampshire, and she watched the ceremony with David, Ben, and I. She had been so proud of her grandson. As far as she was concerned, Aidan was receiving the Nobel Prize. The room held too many bittersweet memories. I had to leave.

Outside it was already dark, the night chilly. I crossed the street and entered the Korean deli. Mrs. Yang greeted me like an old friend. I looked over

the salads in plastic containers. I hadn't touched the ziti. Instead I walked to the back of the store and roamed through the aisles of bottles of pinot noir, chardonnay, pinot grigio, Bordeaux. I picked up a bottle of Chilean red wine.

Maybe Gwen was right. I didn't want the big, bad world to intrude into my life. At this point, the big bad world was beginning to pull me under, to a place that was too frightening to comprehend. I had to pull myself out of this abyss.

Drinking a bottle of wine by myself wouldn't accomplish anything. But it would help me forget about the case, for tonight anyway. This "party" hadn't given me hope. It had drained all hope away.

I left the deli. Now it was dark--the depressing dark of early fall, when it should still be light out. I headed for home.

SEVEN

"Pusillanimous?" I asked David.

"Does it mean, like, infected?"

"No, think 'pussy, wimp.' It means lacking in courage."

The day after that press conference, and a killer hangover so bad it resulted in a sick day from work, I decided I had to return to normal life and ignore the case. If I didn't, I would lose my mind--and maybe my job. David had returned home. Commuting to his school in New Jersey from Manhattan had proven difficult.

On a rainy, cold Sunday afternoon, a week after Ian's "birthday party," David agreed to practice for the SATs with me. I took a vocabulary flash card out of the *SAT in a Box* kit. We sat at the kitchen table, while he ate a burrito. First he lectured me about why the SATs should be abolished, why the tests were culturally biased, how the College Board was ripping everyone off, why they were the symbol of all that was wrong with the education system. Only after he finished his rant could we get to work.

"How about 'cerebration'?" I asked.

"Cerebrate, cerebrate, dance to the music!" he sang.

"You want to work at Subway your whole life?"

"What's so bad about that? ' 6-inch or foot- long? American cheese or Swiss' "?

"Cerebrate means thought," she said. "Think cerebellum, cerebral—like brainy, which you are, if you'd put some effort into it."

I picked up another card. "Aplomb."

"A juicy purple fruit?"

"We are *not* amused. It means with self-assurance. Paradox?"

"Quack, quack....quack, quack."

"Very funny...a veritable Marx brother. You're going to laugh your way all the way to Slippery Rock."

"Is there really a college called Slippery Rock?" He mashed the burrito into his mouth, his elbows on the table. I had nine months to teach him table manners, but it might already be too late.

"I think so. In Pennsylvania."

"Ahhh." He screamed and bounced up from the table, running into his room. "No colleges in Pennsylvania!"

"We're not done!" I yelled after him.

We had driven to Pennsylvania to visit colleges. David claimed the students looked like Stepford students, after the Stepford wives, all made out of ticky tacky, all looked just the same.

Thinking of Pennsylvania reminded me of the case. Despite my return to a reasonably normal life, thoughts of Ian's abduction lurked in my mind, ready to pounce at any second. No one had yet figured out why Tara's car had had Pennsylvania plates. Every car rental place in Pennsylvania had been checked; no missing cars fit the description. No one named Tara Stackley had rented a car

anywhere. Every woman who rented a silver Toyota Camry in Pennsylvania between the dates in question had been investigated.

Tara knew I had heard her speaking to Ian. She may have gone north or west instead. I wished I had memorized the license plate number on her car. That type of car was common, too common. Maybe that's why she had dumped the Oldsmobile. Those cars weren't even made anymore.

I pushed the thoughts from my mind. I had returned to being a mother, to being a professor, and to caring about my students. I had detached myself from the case.

Gwen was right. I was an introvert, not a Neanderthal. The combination of failing the polygraph, the traumatic near-death experience, anxiety and guilt about the abduction, and fear about losing my job had brought on the dreams. It was possible, as Gwen had suggested, that Ian's abduction brought to the surface the lingering sadness I had about the father I had never known. Or maybe the dreams were due to James's weird New Age influence. Despite the interesting insights the dreams had given me about my work on the Neanderthals, I was glad they had not returned.

My only remaining connection to Ian's abduction was that I continued to bring food once a week to Posey and her mother. Posey's father was dead, and she had one brother, who visited from Long Island every couple of weeks, one or two old college friends who visited, a work friend or two, and one friend in Hoboken. It wasn't much of a support group.

Posey's mother Ginny met me on the stoop and accepted the food with thanks. I needed to cook and bring the food. She needed the food. She never invited me inside when I dropped off the food.

To get my mind off the case, I spread out David's college information on the kitchen table. I looked through a brochure for one of the colleges we had visited in rural Pennsylvania, a collegiate paradise, where it never rained or

snowed, where students had no blemishes, and all had identical outfits from the Gap. Golden autumn leaves were limned with sunshine in every photograph.

Where were the students lugging backpacks through the ice and snow, empty cans of Jolt and beer cans littering dorm rooms? Where were the students like one of my female students who dressed in patchwork quilt skirts, with white patent leather go-go boots and a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat? Or the young man who wore pleated skirts and knee socks, but did not carry around a bagpipe? I had noticed that pink Mohawks were back this fall after disappearing for a couple of decades. *Plus ça change*. These students didn't make it into the college marketing materials.

My mind drifted again from colleges. Why hadn't they found the car? And why the Pennsylvania plates? I opened my cell phone to call Victor, but snapped it shut. I couldn't do this to myself again--or to David. I would make one call only, to satisfy my curiosity, and that would be it. I called Victor, whom I hadn't talked to in a week. He had called once after the press conference to check in.

"Did they find any connection at all with Pennsylvania?" I asked him.

"Her father was from there."

"He's dead though, right?"

"Yes. According to the records at the mental hospital, he's dead. Once he left Parnassus, he seems to have had almost no contact with Tara."

"What was her father's name?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Can you find it out for me, please?"

"You want to check out a dead man?"

"The father-daughter thing is powerful, even if the relationship is nonexistent. There might be a connection."

"I'll find out and call you back."

A few hours later, he called back to tell me the name of Tara's father— Mitchell Holmes. I plugged his name into the people search sites. I eliminated those people whose ages didn't fit. A few sites listed his name, age, and the various places he had lived. I found it strange he was still listed, but maybe the names stayed on these people search sites, even after the person had died. There was an address listed for Pennsylvania. I ordered his full name, address, and phone number. Then I called Victor.

"Victor? Sorry to bother you. But I found the name and address of Tara's late father."

"So what are you suggesting? Having a séance?" he asked in a playful, but not confrontational, way.

"I think the police should talk to his neighbors. It may be important. Check the records and find out whom the house belongs to now."

"I'm not sure they'll give me the time to do this."

"Should I go?" Even as I asked it, I knew I couldn't. I had managed to get on an even keel with David and despite the meds I was still jittery, jumpy.

"No, I don't think so."

"Any chance at all you'd go with me, on your own time?" I asked.

"Because of the Pennsylvania connection, it seems important to check out."

"I don't know—"

"Please."

"It's an interesting theory, but no," he said, with finality.

EIGHT

A few days later I had another appointment with Gwen. I waited in Gwen's office, coveting her floppy Waldorf-style doll, with mocha-colored skin, mohair yarn hair, floral-print jumper and matching hat, and removable felt boots. Gwen entered her office and noticed me staring at the doll.

"You can play with her if you want," Gwen said as she handed me the doll. "Play is important, even for adults. Have you done any playing lately?"

"I wrote a paper on play therapy in Psych 101." I picked up Addy, the American Girls doll, who wore a pink dress, a straw bonnet with a calico ribbon, and a cowrie shell necklace. "I'm not sure I'll ever be able to play again. That's what I want to talk to you about. The aftermath of all this."

"You mean, if Ian isn't found?" she asked.

I nodded. "What I'm feeling can't compare to the horror that Posey Waltham is going through. I'm just the bystander to the crime, but a guilty bystander. But I don't think I'll ever feel normal again."

Gwen removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. "*You* think you're guilty, but no else does. I suppose there will always be a before and an after. But you

have to move on."

"I am better. No more weird dreams. You're right. Anxiety brought them on. But now I'm not getting much sleep."

I thought of my sleepless nights, the streetlight outside my bedroom casting an orange glow on my mother's ceramic Toby jugs from Wales, turning their jolly smiles into sadistic leers. Maybe it was time to pack up those Toby jugs and sell them on Ebay.

"I don't want to prescribe sleeping pills."

Tears sprang to my eyes. "Please, I'm going a little batty. I'm not a pill popper, but I need sleep."

"No sleeping pills. Go to the health food store and get melatonin, a natural herb that might help you sleep. Are you having any fun these days?"

"I'm mainly working on helping David apply to colleges."

"That's stressful, not fun. You need to find something simple and childlike you can do outside."

"Like play in a sandbox?"

"Good idea. Go to the beach and build a huge sandcastle. That's the kind of thing I do when my mind needs a rest."

This was a long way from Freud, but it made sense. Gwen had told me she did mix modalities in her treatments.

"You need to take this burden off your shoulders. Remember, most people wouldn't have noticed anything strange about the woman and the boy that morning, they would have just walked on and not taken the license number. We're conditioned to keep our distance from messy situations with strangers. I mean, if she had been hitting the child..."

I nodded.

"You don't seem convinced."

"At some level, I knew she was off, especially when I saw the shoes."

She looked at me in question.

"Her shoes didn't match. I know people might wear mismatched socks—but completely mismatched shoes? She had one light green shoe, one dark green shoe...."

"You can torture yourself forever over that. But you are probably the only person in Hoboken that morning who noticed her shoes. Because you noticed the shoes, it triggered an alarm in your mind and you took the license number. You followed up on links and uncovered the identity of the abductor. So stop beating yourself up."

The dolls stared at me. They knew the truth. I was guilty. No matter what Gwen said. I thought of that Twilight Zone episode about Talky Tina, the doll who murdered the girl's father.

"What are you thinking about?" Gwen asked.

"I'm thinking about the evil talking doll in the Twilight Zone."

She let out a laugh. "Hey, we're making progress. You're not thinking about the case. But now we need to find you an outlet. What did you like to do as a child?"

"Maybe ice skating?" I ventured.

As a child, I skated on a pond near a beaver dam almost every day in the winter, practicing my backwards crossovers and camel spins, pretending to prepare for the Olympics.

"Wollman Rink isn't open for a month," Gwen said.

"How about bike riding?"

"Isn't it too cold for that?"

"I guess so."

"What about horseback riding? You were into that."

"Maybe..."

My childhood was spent outdoors riding, exercising the horses, or inside

the barn, working. The horses were my family. I didn't consider taking care of them a chore, but it wasn't play.

"What else did you love to do as a child?" Gwen persisted.

"I loved to read, especially books like *Eloise* that totally took me out of my life--not that my childhood was bad--but it did get lonely in that drafty farmhouse."

I loved to sneak away into the linen closet and curl up with a book among the quilts. I didn't read *Misty of Chincoteague* like the girls that came to our horse camp. I read *The Little Princess* about the lonely orphan who lives in an attic, then finds out she has a rich father. I had only one horse book as a child--called *Season of Ponies*—about a girl who lived on a farm and whose glass ponies came alive at night, turning into misty-colored, weirdly beautiful ponies led by a boy with a flute.

"We're getting somewhere. What else did you like to do?"

"I loved the times when my Welsh relatives visited New York City and we came down from New Hampshire and went to the natural history museum with them. I liked looking at the old-fashioned dioramas with my mother and aunts, windows into another world. Now everything at the museum is so glitzy. But it was quiet then--not so many people. My aunts spoiled me and were very patient, stopping at every exhibit. One was a school teacher who loved to teach me things, as if I was the most important student in the world."

"Don't go there," Gwen said, shaking her head. "That would too much like a busman's holiday."

I nodded in agreement, but I had already made my decision.

NINE

I could almost feel the chill of an Alaskan spring morning. I stared at the brown bear standing on his hind legs, as if stretching after a long nap. The Upper West Side of Manhattan seemed far away, as I gazed at the snow-capped mountains and purple-tinged clouds in the distance. This was my favorite diorama in the natural history museum.

I had thought of asking David to come with me, but decided against it. He would drag me to the Hayden planetarium. I considered asking Gwen, but she would drag me to all the gift shops, planted like land mines around the museum. Gwen embraced the experience of scouting out new merchandise with zeal of a birdwatcher scanning the horizon for the elusive Resplendent Quetzal.

Instead I would wander through the museum by myself. I walked through the dim uncrowded hall of Northwest Pacific Coast Indians. I passed the Crooked Beak masks, the Haida totem poles, and dugout canoes. In the quiet hall the Eastern Woodland Indians, I admired the beaded moccasins. I wandered into the Hall of African peoples with its ceremonial costumes, religious idols, and masks. I moved to the people of Asia and passed an elaborate Chinese

wedding chair.

I had not planned to go to the Hall of Human Origins, but I got lost trying to find the café. I passed the early stages of human evolution until I stood in front of the diorama of a Neanderthal campsite. A Neanderthal man stood in front of a cave, high in the mountains. He was attaching a spearhead to a wooden shaft. He had a low forehead, long matted hair, and a beard. He didn't look a like a dimwitted brute. There was a quiet dignity about him. A Neanderthal woman sat near him, scraping an animal skin while holding it with her teeth. It was a homely placid scene.

The description on the wall said that humans could learn from the Neanderthals, that is, we could learn what made us human. Neanderthals were proto-humans. They didn't have art, language, or symbolic thought. They made no necklaces, bracelets, or other personal ornamentation. They had no paintings on their cave walls, carved statuettes, or beaded clothing.

Homo sapiens, the advanced hominids, could place the Neanderthals, an offshoot of humanity, conveniently in this diorama. They were a dead end, a half-human evolutionary experiment. What the exhibit label didn't say, I thought, was that these hominids had existed for 300,000 years longer than *H. sapiens*' 40,000 years so far.

I moved on to the case nearby that housed the diorama of the Cro-Magnons. The label extolled their achievements--their ivory Venus statuettes and cave paintings, sewn clothing, and advanced weapons. These guys were the smart ones, the ones who naturally took the place of the Neanderthals.

The Cro-Magnon man in the diorama stared at me with cold blues eyes. He wore a fur outfit and stood in from of a hut made of mammoth bones covered with animal skins. I shivered and rushed from the room.

Gwen was right. I shouldn't have come here.

TEN

I raced down the steps of the museum, almost colliding with a group of schoolchildren walking up the steps. I crossed Central Park West, and walked south, to the 72nd Street entrance to Central Park, where I headed across the park. I had agreed to meet Gwen at my gym and give her a personal training session. On this Indian summer day, the park was crowded, mainly with older people, runners, and young mothers and nannies with young children.

I looked over my shoulder. No one was behind me. The museum visit had spooked me. Did I expect to find a man dressed in furs from the Upper Paleolithic stalking me in Central Park?

I walked by Strawberry Fields, passing the black-and-white circular mosaic, the memorial to John Lennon, then returned to the path by the lake, where I bought a soft pretzel. I loved the stretch of plane trees here, now bare of leaves. At this time of year the wisteria in the arbor were not in bloom, but I could see their gnarled roots.

At the lake, I climbed down stone steps to Wagner Cove, a secluded

corner of the park, with an outcropping of bedrock and overhanging trees. A small boy, around five years old, threw pebbles in the water. His nanny stood nearby, not hovering over him, but keeping a close eye on him.

I broke off a few pieces of my pretzel and threw it to the pigeons bobbing their heads near me in anticipation of a treat. They swarmed around me, pecking at the crumbs. This delighted the boy, who chased after the pigeons. They rose above him in a flutter of wings.

I continued my way through the park, emerging on Fifth Avenue, then walked east to the gym. Gwen waited for me near the front desk.

"So how was your day off?" Gwen asked. "No offense, but you look like you've seen a ghost."

"I did see a ghost. You were right. I shouldn't have gone to the museum."

"What happened?"

"I went to the Neanderthal diorama, then to the Cro-Magnon one next to it. The Cro-Magnon guy gave me the willies. Like he was evil."

"Jesus, girlfriend. You should have gone to Elizabeth Arden and gotten a pedicure instead. No wonder you look white as a sheet."

"It was weird. It was like the Cro-Magnons were the bad guys and the Neanderthals were the good guys."

"Hey, don't forget there are good Cro-Magnons," she said, laughing. "What about Mother Theresa or Nelson Mandela?" We headed to the locker rooms.

"True. But *Homo sapiens* are the only animals who have the potential to be genocidal."

"You don't think you're romanticizing the Neanderthals?" Gwen asked, a flicker of concern on her face. "You know, like they were prehistoric hippies, putting flowers in their hair, and wearing peace symbols?"

"I used to think they were dumb, pretty violent brutes. I even co-authored

a paper about possible cannibalistic practices of the Neanderthals. But lately I'm not so sure."

"I guess no one will ever know, right?" She swung a towel over her shoulder.

"No, I suppose not."

After changing in the locker room, we entered the main room of the gym, filled with gleaming machines and guys with buff bodies working out. This gym was intimidating, more so than my little gym in Hoboken.

"Okay, first rule," I said. "No one is looking at you. They're admiring themselves in the mirror. So don't feel self-conscious. Let's warm up on the treadmill."

"You know," Gwen said, striding on the treadmill, "once I get here, I like it."

"How many hours do you work a week?"

"Forty or fifty?"

"The truth." Gwen was a workaholic.

"Okay... maybe 70 hours?"

"Shave a few hours off work and come here instead."

She groaned as I programmed the treadmill to a faster speed. "You're tough."

Gwen proceeded to tell me about her latest fantasy, a distinguished middle-aged man, who had lots of money, but was unfortunately married, therefore unavailable. Because of moral qualms, Gwen would never act on this fantasy.

"He sounds like the last guy you had a crush on," I said. "Do I detect avoidance of intimacy issues here? And he doesn't pass the Dysfunctional Attraction test."

"Hey, I'm the therapist, not you."

I led her through biceps curls, lunges, squats, and triceps kickbacks.

"Please," Gwen said dramatically, while lying on an incline bench with two dumbbells. "I'm begging for mercy. What have I done to deserve this?"

"Put away your violin. You're helping me with my mind. It's the least I can do to help you with your body. "

Gwen grunted as she lifted the dumbbells. When we got to the rowing machine, I removed the weights. "Another rule, always rack your weights after you use them. Some jerk didn't do that."

Gwen's eyes widened. "You just lifted a hundred pounds, like it was a feather!"

Flustered, I looked away. Normally, I took the weights off one at a time if someone was watching me. My strange day had unnerved me. Everything felt a bit off.

"Don't worry, I'm not Wonder Woman. I work out everyday, so I'm strong. Period, end of story, as my mother used to say."

"Sorry, but that was just plain freaky seeing you do that."

"It's not freaky when a guy lifts that much weight, only when a woman does?"

"Touché."

We continued with the training session, but I didn't lift any more heavy weights. And I didn't tell Gwen that I could lift much, much more than two dinky 100-pound-barbells.

ELEVEN

When I returned home, I found my answering machine blinking. I had a message from an FBI agent. The agency had received a tip they were taking seriously, a possible picture of Tara and Ian at Disney World, taken in one of the gift shops by a video surveillance camera. The agent wanted me and other people who knew Tara to look at the picture before the news became public.

I threw my bag over a chair and fired up the computer, my hands shaking. I zoomed in on the blurry photograph. The boy did look like Ian, blond, around the same age. Although it was difficult to make out details, he appeared to be well dressed, with a Disney t-shirt tucked into cargo shorts. The woman had bleached-blond hair like Tara, and was around the right weight and height. But in half a second, I knew it wasn't her. The woman in the picture wore a polo shirt, pressed beige summer slacks with a canvas belt, and white sandals. She was not a fashion plate, but she looked like a woman who took good care of myself and had enough money to take her family to Disney World.

I called the agent.

"Did you see the picture?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure it isn't Tara and Ian."

The agent, however, wasn't interested in my take on the photograph. He had already made up his mind. The FBI had consulted facial identification experts who compared her face to other photos of Tara and were convinced it was a match. People who knew Tara confirmed it might be her. Disney employees had seen this mother and child at various rides. They had been spotted at the Epcot Center. Even the costumed characters remember shaking hands with the boy.

Victor called to get my reaction to the Disney World "sighting."

"You don't think it's them?" he asked.

"I know it's not them. I'm surprised the experts think it's a match. What does Posey think?"

"She thinks the boy could be Ian."

"I'm not 100% sure of the boy, but I know that's not Tara. I told the FBI agent, but he kind of brushed me off."

"You don't think they got that far?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say she's nearby--I'm not sure why--"

"I'll try to talk to them. You have good hunches."

"Thanks."

"Uh, I wanted to mention," he said. "I'm going riding in Queens on Saturday. You want to go with me, to meet the owner of the stable?"

I gulped and attempted to sound casual. "I'd like that. My leg is much better and I think I could handle it."

That Saturday, I met Victor at the newsstand near the PATH station in Hoboken. He wore a beige wool sweater, jeans, and tall leather riding boots. I had spent over two hundred dollars updating my equestrian attire at Miller's Saddlery in

Manhattan—brand new breeches, the kind riders wore now that were like leggings and a short riding jacket for the cool weather. I saddle-soaped the custom-made leather boots my mother had given me for my 16th birthday—a huge extravagance at the time.

“I look silly in this horseback riding get up,” he said, shrugging with a boyish grin.

Silly wasn't the first word that came to my mind. Maybe sexy--he looked like an aristocratic caballero. A PATH train eased into the station grinding its gears. We took the train to Manhattan, where we switched to the F train to Queens. I was glad to escape from my life for the day. Later I would return home to my worries and obsessions, but for now I could relax and enjoy myself.

Once at the stable, I signed a release form that removed any legal rights I had should anything happen to me, including paralysis, loss of limbs, or brain damage. In the barn, I put on a plastic riding helmet that reminded me of the hats construction workers wear.

A young woman wearing chaps helped me mount a dapple-gray mare named Shimmer. Victor mounted a former racehorse named Sparky. Both horses were frisky with the onset of cool weather, their ears pointed forward, eager to get out on the trail. The horses seemed happy to have riders who didn't pull on their mouths. They were neither ornery nor resigned to their sad fate as most rental horses were. When we reached the bridle path, the city seemed far away. We had the park to ourselves.

"Nice, right?" he said.

"This is heaven. And to think we're in Queens. It feels great to ride again."

He yawned. "Sorry, no sleep again last night."

"Insomnia?"

"I haven't slept more than two hours a night since Ian was abducted," he said simply.

"You too? I've had insomnia too—I even begged my therapist friend Gwen to give me sleeping pills."

Shimmer tested me by grabbing a mouthful of leaves from a bush we passed until I gently and firmly coaxed her head back up.

"We weren't prepared for this in Hoboken," he said. "I don't think we've ever had a child abduction in the city. We have crime, you know, like a Wall Street guy has his bike or laptop stolen, or maybe drug-related problems down by the projects, once in a while a murder, but never an abduction."

"It's cast an awful shadow over the whole city."

We walked in silence, and then trotted. I inhaled the scent of pine trees, ignoring the hum of traffic outside the park. The horses came to a clearing, undoubtedly a place where they were used to moving a little faster.

"Ready for a canter?" Victor asked.

"Yes, definitely."

I followed him, my horse behaving nicely. I did feel child-like again, with that feeling of exhilaration I had as girl when I jumped the horses over fences, raced down a too-steep hill on a bicycle, or dove from the high board at the pool. Most adults were too sensible and cautious to have many moments like this. Reentering the woods, we slowed the horses to a walk to cool them off.

"I don't know many people who know how to ride. My ex didn't like to ride." He turned around on his saddle to talk to me.

"She didn't like horses?" I asked with studied nonchalance.

"She was afraid of them. The only time she was on a horse was a pony ride in Hoboken at the Madonna del Martiri street fair."

We cantered again on a smooth path. I blocked out all thoughts, and focused only on being in sync with Shimmer.

I didn't want to disrupt the relaxed atmosphere, but I had to ask Victor questions before our ride was over.

"Have you thought about Pennsylvania?" I asked. "I mean, just driving out there and checking out the neighborhood where Tara's late father was from? You never know. I have a feeling about it."

"Fess up. You're psychic, right? Even though you said you weren't?"

"No, but sometimes I can figure out a puzzle only having one piece. I was aware of this even when I was a kid, like when I was around six years old. It's not like I'm a mind reader or psychic. More like a sort of hyper-awareness. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, I think so."

The sunlight slanted through the quiet woods. It was time to get the horses back to the barn. As eager as they had been to go out for a run, they were as eager now to get home. We had a final canter. Victor gave me a thumbs up, grinning.

After we returned to the stable and had dismounted, he said, "You're going to be really sore in a day or so."

"Oh my God, I already am." I walked bow-legged away from the barn.

"Let me introduce you to Adele." He led me into a little office, where a woman with a sour, pinched face talked on the phone.

"Victor!" she jumped up to greet him, her sour face turning sweet. "And who is this?" Her tone was suspicious as she gazed at me.

"A new rider for your stable."

Her face darkened. "You know I'm not taking any new riders."

"Adele, this woman can ride. She grew up with horses. She's good for these horses."

Adele's demeanor changed. Suddenly I went from dilettante equestrian to stable insider.

"Okay, Miss --?"

"Bronwyn is fine."

"Welcome to the elite Adele's Riding School of Queens."

Approaching the subway, he said, "Now you know why you need an introduction. She doesn't let people in easily."

"She did seem a bit prickly."

"Adele's okay though, and great with the horses," he said. "Can I take you out for Greek food—in Astoria?"

"I'd love that." I was relieved I didn't have to return home and eat a tuna wrap by myself.

On the subway, Victor motioned for me to take the last available spot. The train rumbled through Queens. I was glad Victor was turning into a friend. We had both been imprinted with a tragedy. If nothing else, I had a support group of two—Basil McFarland would also be in the group—to help me get through the months and years ahead if Ian was never found.

We entered a Greek taverna called Mykonos. After we were seated at a rough wooden table, Victor ordered a bottle of white wine from Crete. The waiter brought stuffed grape leaves and *melitzana*, fried eggplant.

"Cheers. To happier times ahead."

"Cheers."

"So tell me." He rested his head on his hands. "What's it like being an anthropology professor?"

"It's a lot like detective work," I said, "but if you're wrong about your theory, nobody is hurt. The worst that can happen is you get shunned at the cocktail parties at the American Anthropological Association conferences."

"You get to go to exotic places to do digs and all that?"

"Sometimes, but you need grants, connections. I study the Neanderthals mainly in the NYU library and at conferences and so on." *And in my dreams.*

"Those cavemen with the clubs who pull their ladies by the hair into the cave?"

"Sort of, but that's a stereotype."

We continued to chat. I noticed he was matching me glass for glass. The bottle of wine was soon gone, replaced by another. I dug into my *spanokopita*.

"Victor, tell me honestly, do you think Tara will be found?"

"Before you found Tara in New York, I wasn't too hopeful. But we do know who she is...."

"You don't sound optimistic."

"We can't be in law enforcement--humans are only so predictable. I mean, nothing in her profile suggests she's a sociopath... Her profile is more like one of those young women who pretend they're nurses and abduct babies from the hospital, mainly to show that they can be good mothers. But we have to expect the worst."

I picked at my Greek salad of tomato, cucumber, feta cheese and olives, a familiar feeling of gloom settling over me.

"You're divorced, right?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Ah, yeah, for about five years," I said. "But I get along pretty well with my ex-husband—even though he left me for a cute grad student. So clichéd right?"

"He's a professor too?"

"Yeah, a political science professor at Barnard."

"He still with the student?"

"No, she dumped him about six months later and went back to Wisconsin." I wondered what had become of Jess, the blond and buxom Lutheran milkmaid born and raised on a dairy farm. What was it with Ben and women who had grown up on farms? Had Ellie grown up on a farm? If so, it was probably a farm in Vermont where they made organic goat cheese.

"At least there's justice in the world, right?" he said. "You know, that she left him?"

"Yes, that's true. I suppose that's why we get along. He was such a mess for

a few years, while I came into my own after the divorce."

My head felt light. I sailed in a happy wine-dark sea with a starry sky overhead. Eventually I'd crash my little sailboat into a cliff, but for now I enjoyed this heady sensation.

"So are you feeling better, I mean since I last saw you?"

"Yes, except I think I'm a Neanderthal." Was I actually slurring my words? I had had too much wine.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Tell me. Now you've gotten me curious."

I hesitated. "Really, it's nothing, an anthropological joke."

"So explain the joke."

I was stuck and had to tell him now. "This going to sound strange, and it's not really a joke. But after Tara shot me and I was unconscious, I had a dream, I was a Neanderthal girl and I continued to have the dreams."

"Interesting. Tell me about the dreams."

"The dreams have a thread, like a story," I said. "I have vivid images, even smells, sounds. But I've stopped having them since my therapist friend put me on medication—which is good because reality was getting mixed up with my dream world."

He took a sip of wine, his eyes far away. "How will you ever know the end of the story?"

"I know the end of the story. The Neanderthals disappeared about 28,000 years ago and there are 8 billion *Homo sapiens sapiens*—they, or rather we, won that fight."

"But I would want to know what happened to this girl, even if it was something bad. You need to find out the rest of her story."

"Go off the medication?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not a therapist. But I don't think the dreams are a sign of craziness. You don't seem crazy to me. Maybe the Latin way of seeing things is more open to this kind of thing. I don't think I'd freak out and try and medicate myself."

"But traumas to the brain can do odd things to people."

"Did you have a trauma to the brain?"

"Not that I know of. But maybe I had a mini-stroke that might have caused these dreams."

"Maybe. Or maybe not. Why not let the dreams come into your consciousness. If you don't, they'll stay in your brain, repressed. Don't you think?"

"I suppose so. The odd thing is that my eccentric traits, what my friend James calls my Inner Neanderthal, have become more pronounced too, like my physical strength. I know this probably sounds loony to you."

I didn't tell him that occasionally my sense of smell or sight was acute. The smell of a rose was almost overpowering to me. I could see individual pollen grains on the pistils of flowers. But this happened only when I was in what James called the "alpha state," a time when my mind was relaxed, not quite awake, nor asleep.

"Not really loony," he said. "At John Jay, I remember seeing a photograph in my bio textbook of a baby whale with a little leg sticking out its back. Millions of years after the ancestors of whales who lived on land lost their legs, a baby whale shows up with one sticking out the back—a kind of genetic glitch."

"Yes, a vestigial limb. Maybe that's what I am...a vestigial human."

After the second bottle was empty, I asked Victor about "the ex."

"I told you my sad marital story. What's yours?"

He shrugged. "Elena and I got married too young. We were only like 20 and we both grew apart as we grew up. I guess I'm not really into talking about it. I'd need about two more bottles of wine."

"No kids?" I asked, suppressing my curiosity about the "ex."

"No. She's remarried now and has two kids."

He said it with regret, but not bitterness.

"You know," he said, changing the subject. "The stereotypes aren't true at all. Neanderthals are quite charming."

After a final glass of ouzo, this comment struck us both as hilarious and we staggered out of the restaurant laughing.

TWELVE

I woke up the next morning to heavy rain, the kind of drenching rain that didn't mean a cozy day snuggled under the covers, but rather a day sloshing around in rubber boots manning the sump pump in the basement. This was my punishment for choosing to live in a city below sea level. Ben had always done sump-pump duty, but now he was in a basement-free condo in Manhattan with his lovely girlfriend, probably reading the *Times*, while she made espresso for them. David was with a friend this weekend.

My mouth was so dry my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I had a killer hangover, and was so paralyzed from horseback riding I couldn't move my legs. I tried to remember the evening with Victor. We had had a good time and that he walked me home. I had no memory of saying good night to him.

My head hurt so much I couldn't move. If I didn't get out of bed, I wouldn't be able to take an aspirin. But whenever I thought about moving, I was nauseous.

I cringed when I thought about the Neanderthal stuff I had talked about with Victor. I put the other cool pillow over my head, hoping to ease the

throbbing pain between my eyes. He had gone horseback riding with an anthropology professor from NYU, and had ended up with a Neanderthal. I reminded myself not to tell anyone else about my "Neanderthal problem." Would I ever date a man who claimed he was a Neanderthal? Very doubtful.

And yet, he had seemed interested in the Neanderthal stuff. I remembered what he had said about the medication and the dreams. I would call Gwen and get her permission to dump the pills. Victor was right. I needed to dream again.

I crawled out of bed and peered into the basement. The water rose to the second step. I set up the sump pump in the basement and waded through the cold, viscous water. Unrolling the hose, I stuck it out the front basement door onto the sidewalk, where the water gushed out. If I didn't do this, the water would rise step by step until it reached my apartment.

The rain stopped but the sidewalks were flooded. Mini-lakes formed on each corner. I was trapped inside. To distract myself, I turned on the TV. I hoped to find a cheesy History Channel show, like the one about the real Mary Magdalene. My mother had loved those shows and believed every word of them. After all, she said, the History Channel wouldn't show something untrue, would it? I flipped through the channels, but found nothing.

I let Gypsy out of his cage and he clung to my fingers, busily nibbling on my cuticles, giving me an avian manicure. I enjoyed this time with him, as he preened me while I petted his cream-colored and green head. In a strange way, I always knew what he was thinking. I knew the exact moment when he became bored with my baby-talk patter. He would fly to the top of the coat stand, his favorite perch, and gaze away, as if he had more interesting things to do than listen to me.

My mother had been this way with horses—knowing what they were thinking or feeling. She had been the original horse whisperer, before it became

a fad. She bought cheap horses, biters and kickers, one step away from the dogfood factory, and calmed them down enough to put beginner riders on their backs.

I stared at my mother's photograph on the bookshelf. In the photo, she held Puella, a bay mare, on a halter and lead. Puella had been found in a stable of neglected horses. Her hooves were curling because they hadn't been clipped, my sorrel mane and tail were matted, and she stood in months of her own manure and urine. The vet had advised putting the horse down. My mother nursed the horse back to health, and regained her trust.

Underneath her picture, I noticed a book called *The Natural History of Man in Britain*. I had found that book in a second-hand bookstore in Wales during a visit I had taken there with the boys a year or two after my mother's death. The author's name, H.J. Fleure, had caught my eye. My mother had spoken about how this elderly anthropology professor from Aberystwyth University had visited her village in Wales when she was a girl. He carried his notebooks in a large leather satchel around the village, recorded information, drank pints of bitter with the villagers in the Black Lion Inn, and took hundreds of photographs.

During college after I had made the decision to study anthropology, my mother had urged me to look up this man's books. She wanted me to take her stories seriously, but I never did. I had never even bothered to open the book after I returned home. It reminded me too much of my mother, or rather of the huge hole in my life her death had caused.

Today I dipped into the book. Professor Fleure had photographed and measured the heads of Welsh people he speculated were Neanderthal hybrids. One passage in the book struck me. He wrote how the people who made Mousterian tools in the later millennia of the Lower Paleolithic in Western Europe and the Middle East may have been Neanderthal. Skulls found in the

Tabun and Skhul caves on Mount Carmel in Israel, dating from Mousterian times, suggested hybridization there between *Homo neanderthalis* and *Homo sapiens*. One of the Skhul skulls resembled those of modern man.

The hours passed as I read the entire book. I glanced at the photo section in the middle of the book. One of the men he photographed was Great-Uncle Emrys.

Night is falling. Chaya sings a song she has sung many times before, a song that lasts for hours. Once Chaya had seen a Runner watch her people sing. The strangers don't sing. They make harsh, ugly sounds with their baby-like mouths.

When her people are frightened, they sing. They imagine themselves as wolves, boar, antelope, leopards, tigers, and hyena. One singer makes a sound like the call of a hawk and the sound of a breeze blowing through spring leaves. One woman imitates crickets chirping, bees buzzing, the thunderous sound of red deer galloping when they return, and the sound of the mountain wind blowing across the mouth of their cave.

When Chaya sings, she hears the voice of the cave sing back to her. She has her own song. Her mother taught her the song when she was a baby. She sings her song when she is alone, when she is happy,

or when she is frightened. She sings it with her mother. Her song protects her. Her song is about the moon of her birth, the Crocus Moon. When she was born, the geese had returned, the snows melted, and the water in the river was fast moving. During this time the hares made their nests. All this is in her song.

When Chaya sings, she rubs bones together or shakes rattles. Others pound deerskin stretched over hollow stumps and blow through a hollowed-out willow bough.

The drummers beat the drum all night long. They take turns keeping watch. Every night Chaya falls asleep to steady drumbeats. When the drummer changes the rhythm, he is telling them they are in danger.

The drummer is now beating the drum fast. Chaya is not worried. Unlike her people, the Runners are blind in the dark. They have never climbed to her cave at night. But tonight Chaya hears the voices of many strangers, climbing up the cliffs to their safe place. The rhythm of the drums becomes louder and faster. Chaya's mother wraps her arms around her.

Chaya knows she is a good hunter because she thinks like an animal. She is patient and can hide for hours. She senses the animal before it senses her. To catch a hare, she hides, making a kissing sound with two fingers pressed against her lips--the sound of a hare in distress. The hare is curious and comes toward her--straight into her trap.

Now Chaya knows how the hare feels. Trapped.

THIRTEEN

On the way home from work, I remembered the dream. I stopped into Rue de Jardin on Bleecker Street, a café decorated with mismatched antiques that reminded me of the parlor in our farmhouse in New Hampshire. Luc, the Turkish/French owner, handed me a frothy cappuchino, without my having to say a thing.

I opened my laptop and started writing. The girl had been a hunter, this girl who seemed like a prehistoric version of myself. She had been so connected to the natural world, almost viewing herself as another animal. She had sung songs--odd songs with no words, more like imitations of natural sounds. It reminded me of the songs of the Tuvan throat singers of Siberia.

But the dreams weren't really like typical dreams--surreal visions created by my memories, unconscious feelings, or random thoughts from the day. Could the dreams of prehistoric time be a genetic memory encoded in my DN, triggered by my traumatic experience in the mine? Or perhaps I was tapping into the fragmentary collective unconscious of the Neanderthals? Although experiencing this world disoriented me, I had come to appreciate the ancient

connection, however brief and tenuous.

I riffled through my purse to find Victor's card. Even with the awkwardness of the drunken evening at the Greek restaurant, I wanted to call him and thank him.

"Detective Cabrera?"

"Hi, Victor. Just a quick call. I wanted to thank you for your advice, about getting off the medication."

I heard no response. "Oh, yeah," he said, as if remembering. "I'm glad. Do you know the end of the story yet?"

"No, the story is ongoing. I'm writing it down."

"I'd like to read it someday. By the way, you were right about the Disney photos. It wasn't Tara and Ian—it was a mom and her son from Toledo, Ohio."

"I never thought it was them, not even for a minute."

"Any other feelings or inklings?" He still seemed to believe I might be psychic, that I might lead him to Ian.

"Not really, but I'd like to check out her late father's house. I promised my son I wouldn't be stupid and do anything alone again. Do you have any interest in going and taking a look? Would you be allowed to do this?"

"I could go on my own time."

"Please, Victor."

"Okay, I'll go with you. I'll drive my car and won't go in uniform."

He picked me up a few days later, at around 6:30 a.m., in a white Honda, not a squad car. Inside the car, the speakers blasted a Spanish ballad.

"You know Juan Fernando Fonseca?" he asked, turning toward me.

"No."

"He's a Colombian pop star. You speak Spanish?"

"Yes, but with a Castilian accent. I spent a couple of summers in Spain

doing fieldwork.”

He sang along to a song called “La Casa.”

“It’s a beautiful song. Fonseca comes from the same part of Colombia as me—way out in the sticks.”

“I grew up in the sticks. Sometimes it’s hard for me to be in the city. Is it for you?”

“Yeah. I miss seeing stars at night.”

“You sound like my son David, he’s obsessed with astronomy—I guess because we can only see a couple of stars in Hoboken.”

As we drove out of Hoboken, he asked about Aidan and David, and I asked about his family. Some of his older family members were still in Colombia, but most were in the States. He had a sister in Pittsburgh, his mother and stepfather and several cousins lived in Queens.

After an hour so Victor asked me, "So tell me about the dreams."

He wanted me to describe the dreams. What did the Neanderthals eat? What did they wear? How did they communicate? Were they anything like the Neanderthal man in the movie *Ice Man*?

"The actor in that movie was a bit too cute for a Neanderthal," I said, "and his teeth looked like he had lived on Pop Tarts his whole life. But the language part of that movie might not be that far off. Neanderthals weren't able to pronounce a lot of the vowels and consonants that we can."

"You mean they didn't just grunt--they had language?"

"I'm not sure. They may have spoken a quasi-language--more like a song without words than a true language. I had a boyfriend in graduate school who studied the calls of ancient Icelandic shepherds--a kind of combination of music with meaningful sounds. But this isn't the same as true language."

"Wow, this is cool stuff. I should have taken a course in anthropology at John Jay."

"You're welcome to audit one of my classes."

"I might do that."

After a few hours, we stopped in a small town in northwestern Pennsylvania. We searched for a place to eat breakfast and passed a second-hand clothing store, a bar reeking of stale beer, an "antique" store that sold junk, a tattoo parlor, and a nail salon. We found an empty coffee shop.

The waitress, poring over a book with the lofty title *Anselm Keifer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, didn't notice our arrival. With my sallow skin, stringy hair that need a cut, and a few too many lines on my face to be a college student, I assumed she was a graduate student working on my thesis. I didn't envy her. I remembered those days, but not with nostalgia.

The waitress rose from her red vinyl perch at the counter, upturned our cups, dropping a container of non-dairy creamer next to the cups.

"Can I please get real cream for my coffee?" Victor asked the waitress, with a smile.

She rubbed her eyes, distracted. "Uh, sure."

We ordered a safe choice—scrambled eggs and toast.

Victor's cell phone rang. "I'm not going to make it to the church, Rick. I'm in Pennsylvania for the missing kid case. They can't understand that?"

He held up the phone in resignation. I heard a loud voice at the other end. "Give Ignacia a big kiss for me." He snapped his cell phone closed.

"That was my cousin Enrique," he said. "I'm missing my first-cousin once removed's First Holy Communion today."

"He's pretty upset?"

"Yeah. Problem is I've been to three Communion parties this month. I love my nieces and nephews and cousins, but I just can't take any more family parties--all the oohing and aahing over the presents all afternoon."

"Sounds awful, but the grass is always greener," I said. "I envy people

with big families like yours. I just have my boys and a couple of ancient cousins in Wales." I picked at my greasy, runny eggs and burnt toast.

After breakfast, we looked at a map and found Mitchell Holmes's neighborhood. His house was four miles out of town, down a rural two-lane highway. The house wasn't fancy—a squat ranch house from the 60s. The nearest houses were in shouting distance, but not next door.

I didn't see a car parked in the driveway. The grass in the front yard was dry and yellow. The curtains were closed. Victor got out of the car and walked to the house and rang the bell. He peeked in the windows and strolled around to the back.

After he poked around, he gave up and we drove to one of the nearby houses. Victor rang the bell. A middle-aged woman in a floral housecoat opened the door.

"Detective Cabrera from the Hoboken, New Jersey, police department," he said, flipping open his badge. "I understand Mitchell Holmes lived in the house next to yours when he was alive."

She peered at his badge. "Last I heard he was in a nursing home."

"You mean before he died?"

"What are you talking about? I saw Mitch a month or so ago. He's got Alzheimer's--wandered around, got lost. He had a stroke and fell—they took him to the hospital."

"You're talking about Mitchell Holmes, right?"

"Of course," she said, with annoyance.

"Oh."

Either I had found the wrong Mitchell Holmes, or the man wasn't dead.

"You see anything out of the ordinary at the house?" he asked.

"Mitchell and I weren't real friendly. A wave here or there, or a chat once in a while."

"I see. Thanks."

Victor checked with the house on the other side too. A balding man with sagging jowls opened the door.

"Yeah?" He looked at Victor with the same suspicion as the lady down the road.

"I'm looking for information about Mitchell Holmes."

"Mitch has been gone a while. He was wandering around by himself, almost burned that house down. He's in a nursing home now."

"You know which one?" Victor asked.

"Most likely the place run by the state. About three miles past the Taco Bell. You can't miss it."

"You ever see any lights on? Or see any family members?" Victor asked.

"He didn't have any kids. His wife died a few years back. I did see a light on a week or so ago. Maybe an automatic light."

"Thanks," he said.

Why did the FBI have the wrong information? It would seem a simple enough thing to check—you didn't even need a badge to check death records. It made no sense.

We got back in the car and headed for the nursing home. As the man said, you couldn't miss the state home. It loomed on the horizon, an imposing structure made of poured concrete, with slit windows, and no landscaping.

Victor parked the car and we walked to the entrance, not speaking.

"Is there a Mitchell Holmes here?" Victor asked the man who sat in the lobby.

He looked at a computer screen. "2nd floor, unit H."

After signing in, we took the stairs to the second floor. The smell made me nauseous—chicken croquettes combined with Formula 401. At the second floor, we signed in at another desk.

"He's in the sun room," a nurse's aide said.

Down the hall, we found the "sun room," a room with vinyl chairs lined up against a wall with flowered wallpaper. The TV blared, but most of the people slumped over in their wheelchairs seemed oblivious to it.

I walked over to one of the men. "Mitchell?"

"He's over there," the man said in a loud, grating voice, pointing to another man.

I approached the man. I had known people with Alzheimer's who still could sing songs from their childhood, or remember things from their past, but Mitchell Holmes seemed beyond this point, possibly because of the stroke. I thought he might slide out of his wheelchair. His corduroy slippers were falling off his feet. He didn't speak or respond to his name. A nurse's aide entered the room, a young man who pushed a cart with trays of food.

"Anyone ever visit this guy?" Victor asked him.

"Nope. Never."

"Someone must have brought him here."

He shrugged and fed pudding to one of the residents. We walked over to the nurses' station and Victor flashed his badge.

"How can I help you," the nurse said, a pleasant-looking young woman with a wide freckled face and a reddish blonde ponytail.

"I need information about a patient named Mitchell Holmes," Victor said. "Family ever visit him?"

"I'm not allowed to reveal private information about our patients," she said, as if by rote. "You'll have to see my supervisor."

"I'm looking for his daughter who may have abducted a young child, who at this moment is in grave danger."

She looked at the police sketch. "I don't recognize her. You'll have to speak to my supervisor. But she's not in today. All I know is he came straight

from the hospital. He had a stroke, fell and hurt himself. I don't know who signed the papers to get him admitted. He's never had any visitors."

"Alright," he said. "Thanks."

Outside on the way to the car, I turned to Victor. "You' don't want to talk to anyone else?"

"I can't. I'm not here officially."

"Maybe Ian's there—at that house. I have an awful feeling—"

"Like he may be— "

"Don't say it." My head burst with pain.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You're a shade of green," he said.

"I've got a headache. I have a bad feeling. We can't go and break into that house?"

"No one was in that house."

I remembered the dream about catching the hare. Would it have been better to hang out near the house and wait for Tara to come?

"You really think she's living there?" he said. "We don't even have solid proof Mitchell Holmes is connected to her."

"You will pursue it, won't you? I mean go back to nursing home with permission to talk to people there."

"Yeah, I will. I ignored your hunches before. I won't do that again."

"Good."

We stopped at the parking lot of a Dunkin Donuts. He went into the store and brought me a plain donut and coffee. "Thanks for coming along today."

"I don't think I helped much."

"You did help. And I'm glad you were with me when we visited that hell-hole. I hope someone shoots me before I end up in a place like that."

"Me too."

By the time we passed electric pylons near exit 13 on the New Jersey Turnpike, the sun was setting. I smelled the refineries and saw OIL HEATS BEST, each word painted on three enormous oil tanks. The oldies station was having a doo-wop show, with the Five Satins singing "In the Still of the Night."

A few minutes later, Victor dropped me off in front of my apartment building. I waved good-bye, feeling a whiff of loneliness. As he turned the corner, I realized we had a foxhole friendship that was only temporary.

I was disappointed we had made no progress finding Tara. Maybe tomorrow Victor could return and talk to the people at the hospital. But he had other work, and would probably not get to it. No one would search the house. Yet Tara and Ian may have been there. They could check for fingerprints.

I called David to check in with him.

"Hey, Mom."

"What are you up to?"

"I'm playing Scrabble." His voice sounded unnatural, as if he wasn't free to speak his mind.

"You can't really talk, right?"

"Right."

"Are you playing by the rules?"

"Uh, yeah, no Godpod allowed." He laughed.

We had always played Scrabble with loose rules, allowing made up words. Godpod was one of David's favorites: a vehicle the Almighty used to cruise around the Universe.

I tried to sound upbeat. "Okay, have fun."

“Mom?”

“Be careful.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Just be careful.”

“Okay,” I said, mystified by the tone of his voice.

Rather than run to Mrs. Yang’s for a bottle of wine to drown my sorrows, I called my other son in California.

“Hey, Ma!” he shouted. Aidan was always in the woods, or in a car, or otherwise occupied.

“Just checking in. How the tree-climbing degree going?”

“I think I’ve discovered a rare fungus--an undescribed species. How cool is that?”

“Cool, but please come home in one piece,” I said.

“How about two pieces?”

“No. One piece only.”

I missed my sons. I would gladly watch *Silent Running* or *Apollo 13* for the tenth time with them instead *Out of Africa* by myself. I pulled out the DVD and slipped it in my TV. I loved the mournful soundtrack, which never failed to release a flood of tears, as if the composer had discovered some Pavlovian trick to make me cry.

I heard Karen say in her luscious Danish accent, "I had a farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills" over and over. Wildebeests ran next to the train chugging along the African plains.

By the end of the movie, I was groggy. People were coming in the front door of my building. I heard thumping up and down the central stairway and the front door creaking open and closed. My upstairs neighbor Cheryl had a smoke on the front stoop, before she returned to her apartment to pace in stilettos.

I checked the locks on my doors. The back door to the deck and yard was

locked. The front door was bolted shut. I crawled in bed and struggled to keep my eyes open. Meryl/Karen and Robert/Dennis danced around a Victrola in the bush, lions and hippos nearby in the darkness. I closed my eyes, reassuring myself I would doze only for a minute. I would wake up before Karen delivered Dennis's eulogy.

The Runners remove the animal skin that covers the entrance to Chaya's cave. They carry small bowls with flames that smell like animal fat and burning juniper. Chaya does not understand how these demons carry their own fire. The Runners' bodies are covered in blood-red paint, white dots painted around their eyes. They are like bad spirits descending on them.

When they enter the cave, Chaya moves to the back of the cave with the rest of her people, where they hover in the darkness. The only person who doesn't move is the oldest woman. She lies whimpering by the fire. A Runner approaches, spear pointed toward her. Without thinking, Chaya jumps up and screams at the man. He knocks her on the side of her head so hard she falls to the ground. Her father screams. He runs toward Chaya. A Runner thrusts a spear into him, killing him. He lays crumpled, blood spurting from his chest. Chaya and her mother kneel over him,

keening.

One by one they kill Chaya's people, as if they are animals. They smash a baby against the wall of the cave. The healer looks toward Chaya and doesn't take her eyes off her. A man thrusts a spear into the healer's heart.

The screams and moans of Chaya's people echo against the cave walls, along with the yells of the strangers. They touch the bundles of the cattail fluff her people use for tinder with their fire, along with the beds of milkweed down, and the dried grass they use to keep the babies dry. They burn the rattles and drums. They grab the meager store of dried meat and stuffed dried berries in their mouths. They put the rest in sacks slung on their shoulders.

An ugly face presses close to Chaya. Before she can escape, the man wraps his arm around her waist. Chaya sings her Crocus Song. Only she can hear it.

FOURTEEN

I was in a nightmare, the kind when my voice was strangled in my throat. A high-pitched, shrieking call woke me. It was Gypsy's panic cry, the one he used to warn me of danger. Gypsy only rarely used this vigilance call, and never late at night when he slept.

My eyes stung and I smelled smoke. I lurched out of bed, panic shooting through me like an electric current. I looked around, desperate to find the source of the smoke. I raced through the bedroom. The fire was in the dining room. Flames engulfed the piano, licking the ceiling.

A dark figure stood near the piano. I screamed. It was a woman. Maybe Cheryl from upstairs? But when the woman turned around, I recognized her. It was Tara.

I stood paralyzed, unable to decide what to do. Stop the fire? Run away from Tara? What about Gypsy? A parrot, with its fragile respiration, would die quickly in a smoky apartment.

Tara turned away from me for an instant, distracted by the fire alarm that

was shrieking along with the parrot. With one hand, Tara grabbed the broom in the corner of the kitchen to smash the smoke detector, a plastic disc on the ceiling. In her other hand, she held a can of gasoline. At that instant, I pulled a wool Hudson Bay blanket off the sofa in the living room and threw it over the flames shooting from the piano. I found an afghan to throw over Gypsy's cage. He quieted.

The blanket suffocated the fire on the piano. The apartment filled with the acrid smell of burning wool. Tara leapt toward me. I kicked her arm. The can of gasoline flew out of her hands and pooled on my living room rug.

Tara grabbed my hair, pulled my head back, and smacked me in the face. I heard pounding on the door.

"Hey, Bronwyn, is everything okay?" Cheryl shouted over the alarm "Open up, open up!"

"I need help," I managed to scream. "Call 911."

I knocked Tara's arm away, and she released my hair. I leaped onto her like a lion on prey. I wrapped my arms around Tara in a vise-grip. She struggled and her teeth sank into my arm. Animal-like grunts emerged from deep in Tara's throat.

Above the sound of the smoke alarm, I heard the sirens of approaching fire engines. This time I appreciated the Hoboken fire department's propensity for overkill. Even for a small fire, the entire department came out and blocked off several blocks, dozens of firefighters lining the streets.

I continued to hold on to Tara, pinning her arms to her side as she twisted away, kicking me. Every kick with her pointy boots on her shin shot pain up my leg. I would not be able to hold her much longer.

"Where's Ian?" I asked her.

"He's dead. I tried to keep him alive, but couldn't."

"Tell me, Tara. Where is he?"

"Gone. I killed him. It was my fault." Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"You killed him?" I wanted to cry, scream, but I couldn't let my guard down. I couldn't cry now.

"He drowned. I turned away for two minutes."

"It wasn't your fault," I said, suddenly understanding. "That was an accident, a tragic accident that could happen to anyone."

"My stepfather was right," she said, not listening to me. "I didn't deserve to live. He said I should have died, not Sean."

Tara's straggly uncombed hair hung around her face, pockmarked with teenage acne scars. Her mouth was full of crooked, discolored teeth no dentist had touched. She had a jagged scar on her left cheek. That's what I had forgotten to mention to the forensic artist.

The sirens were getting closer and louder until they stopped. Cheryl screamed at a man in the hall. Tara's eyes opened wide as she twisted her head away from me to look toward the backyard, as if planning an escape. The front door to my apartment burst open. Firefighters in brown jumpsuits with orange neon stripes entered my apartment.

"This is the woman who abducted Ian Waltham," I screamed above the shrill alarm. "Don't let her get away."

Hoboken policemen surrounded us. Tara screamed curses at them, as she flailed her arms and fought the police. They led her out of the apartment, one of each side of her. The paramedics rushed toward me.

"You've got to get outside," they yelled at me.

"I can't go without my bird," I screamed, tears streaming down my face. "Please."

"Quickly." They pushed me toward the door.

I lifted the afghan off Gypsy's cage.

He squawked, "Oy gevalt."

"Can you carry the cage?" I asked the paramedic, relief flooding through me.

He lifted the cage, while I grabbed a container of birdseed. Four fire engines with flashing lights, including a ladder engine, and a fire department van, blocked the street. Gawkers from the neighborhood gathered across the street, curious about the fire and police presence.

I called Ben.

"Bron?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

"It's a long story," I said. "But Tara came after me, started a fire in the apartment—I'm okay, Gypsy's okay, but don't let David come home. I want to get everything back to normal first."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm alright." I tried to stop myself from crying. "I'm not hurt too bad, just bruised with a few cuts."

"I'm coming to get you. Now."

"No, it's okay. I'm going to call James and go to his apartment. Just tell David I'm alright—and call Aidan in case he hears about this. I'll call them tomorrow."

I was standing with the birdcage next to me when I saw Victor run toward me. "You okay?"

I nodded.

"You held Tara off by restraining her, without a gun?"

"Yeah."

"That's your bird?" He knelt down and peered into the cage.

"Yeah. He's okay, thank God, but it's kind of cold outside."

He took off his leather jacket and draped it partly over the cage.

"Thanks."

"You don't look so good."

"The paramedics fixed me up," I said.

"They did a rush job." He inspected the wound. "Where are you going to go tonight?"

"To my friend James's apartment."

"You should go to the hospital. In case of smoke inhalation."

"I'm okay. No hospitals."

Victor spoke with the firefighters and police officers. I called James and then huddled with the other people from the building. It was odd sharing a crisis with them. We hardly knew each other. One by one they drifted off to friends' houses.

I tried to figure out how Tara had entered the building. People in the building were casual about security. They opened and closed the front door all night, coming home from work. They let the pizza and liquor store delivery guys inside. Following someone into the building would not be difficult.

Tara had been a nanny for a family in Hoboken and knew the general layout of most of these row houses. To get to the backyard, you walked through the basement. She had gone down to the basement, walked up the deck stairs, and had broken the pane in the back door to open the back door. Where was Ian? He might be in Hoboken, in the car. He was locked someplace. I was sure of it.

Before Victor left, I asked him when the house in Pennsylvania would be searched.

"It takes a little time and paperwork to initiate a search," he said. "It has to be done properly or you get screwed in court later. But they will probably search at dawn."

"You mean, no one has been there since we were there?" I asked.

"I don't think so. It hasn't even been 24 hours."

"They need to use dogs."

"The case is moving on its own momentum, I can't do anything. Besides I think they're planning to use heat-sensing helicopters, assuming Ian is alive. But so far we have nothing to connect Mitchell Holmes to Tara. So it's not exactly moving along at lightning speed."

"Please, try to get them to search thoroughly, with dogs. As soon as possible. Tonight."

"Nothing will happen before daylight. Relax--everything will be taken care of."

"Thanks, Victor."

"No problem," he said. "Oh, I forgot to tell you, they found Tara's car a few blocks from here, but no sign of Ian."

At that moment, I saw James running down the block toward me. He wore loose pajama pants, a Ron Jon Surf Shop t-shirt, flip flops, and a Peruvian poncho. The sight of him almost made me laugh.

"Lady Neanderthal comes through." He gave me a crushing hug.

"I was strong. Tara is a large woman, but she was like a child to me. It's strange but I feel as if I am getting stronger."

"You're tapping into your strength." He placed his hands on my shoulders.

"We can't go inside. The smoke is awful and the fire department won't let me go back in."

"Come on over to my apartment," he said. "You're bringing Gypsy?"

"Oh damn. I forgot about your cats."

Victor was turning the corner, when I called after him.

"Victor!" I yelled.

He turned around. "Yeah?"

"Can you take my parrot for a day or two? I don't know who else to ask right now. James has three cats."

"Sure. I had a parakeet in Colombia--when I was little. He'll be okay with me."

"Thanks." I handed over my precious cargo.

"Come on, buddy," he said to the parrot. "Let's go."

A firefighter retrieved my purse, but I had nothing else. I checked in my purse for my car keys, and then James and I walked away from the chaotic scene toward his apartment, around ten blocks away.

"Ian is at the house in Pennsylvania," I said. "I can't imagine he'd be anywhere else. As I tell my students, the simplest answer is often the right one."

"Have they checked there?" James asked.

"No, they haven't checked yet."

We took a short cut through the Church Square Park.

"Come to my apartment and rest, you look like a wreck," he said.

"There's nothing you can do tonight."

"Oh my God!" I shouted. "They have a dog."

"Who has a dog?" He had a concerned look on his face.

"Ian's mother—a golden retriever! This sounds crazy, but we should take the dog there and see if he could find Ian."

James shook his head. "Dogs have to be specially trained for that."

"I don't think so. All dogs have an incredible sense of smell. And this dog would recognize Ian's scent."

"Tonight? I don't get it."

"Ian's in trouble. I have to go out there tonight."

James looked at me oddly. "You seem keyed up. I think you should get some rest first—"

"I have to get that frigging dog and take it to Pennsylvania."

"What's the detective going to think of this idea?" he asked.

"Oh damn." I looked at my watch. "It's 11:45—I can't call Posey."

James let out a hooting laugh. "Why? Emily Post is going to strike you dead with lightning?"

"I couldn't bother her, especially with this crazy request. I'd feel stupid."

"What's worse, feeling like an idiot, or not helping her son? Courage. Come on, Lady Neanderthal, courage."

"I don't have that kind of courage." I flopped down on a park bench, a wave of dizziness washing over me. "I don't have courage to have bad manners and to be looked at as a fool. I mean, to call and ask if I can borrow their dog for the night? She'll think I'm a loon. You're right. I am just too keyed up. I'm not thinking straight."

I heard the cry of a nighthawk, once common, in this city, but rare now.

"Listen," I said.

James cocked his head, listening.

"Okay, I will trust the police, the FBI. And, of course, they might be able to get information from Tara. And tomorrow they will connect the dots, which should lead them to Ian."

"Aside from her homicidal tendencies, did Tara seem lucid?"

"No. I almost felt sorry for her, if you can believe it."

I heard the creaking of a swing and saw a group of teenage girls flirting with boys near the swingset. Only a few years earlier, they had stood in line with their mothers or fathers by the Mister Softee truck to get vanilla swirl ice cream cones with rainbow sprinkles after a summer day playing on these same swings.

"Do you think Emily Post would try and save the life of a child even if it meant having bad manners, possibly even making a fool of herself?" I asked, rhetorically, because I knew it was a ridiculous question.

"No. Emily Post would not save a life if it meant she had to call someone at 10:01," he said. "But then again, I never heard of Emily Post until I met you. She sounds like one uptight bitch."

I looked at my watch. "Okay, here goes. Professor Bloom makes a fool of herself. But I hesitated once before with this boy and I'm not going to hesitate again."

I punched in Posey's number, but her voice mail picked up. I left a message.

"Posey, this is Bronwyn Bloom. I assume you've been informed that Tara Stackley is in custody. I'm calling because I need to talk to you as soon as possible. I'm sorry to bother you." I snapped my cell phone closed.

"At least you tried," he said.

A few minutes later, my cell phone ring. It was Posey.

"This is going to sound strange," I said, "but I think there's a good chance Ian might be at Tara's father's house in Pennsylvania--well, I'm pretty sure it's Tara's father. You have a dog, if he sniffed around—"

I heard her sighing. "I don't have time for this crap. I appreciate what you've done for us. I'm glad Tara Stackley is in custody. But my son is still missing. Don't bother me with this stupid shit."

I looked over at James. "She hung up on me. So much for courage."

James shrugged. He never seemed to care what people thought of him—good or bad.

The cell phone rang again.

"Bronwyn? This is Ginny, Posey's mother. I would like you to try to take Popcorn with you, uh, that's the dog. What do we have to lose?"

"But I don't want to upset Posey." I also did not want to endanger the friendship I had with Victor.

"Please come over."

"If you're sure it's alright," I said.

I turned to James. "Posey's mother asked me to go over there. Will you go with me?"

"Yes."

Posey's mother was waiting for us outside on the stoop. "Come in. Posey is upstairs and doesn't want to see you."

"Are you sure this is alright? I feel terrible and a little stupid."

"It's okay, really."

I hoped I wasn't causing friction between Posey and her mother.

"Can you show us Ian's bedroom?" James asked.

We climbed the central stairs to the second floor. The people who had first lived in this Victorian brownstone with its wainscoting, pocket doors, and mahogany woodwork had undoubtedly been the German and Scandinavian elite of 19th century Hoboken. By contrast, my row house had been built for the poor Italian workers from Naples who had worked in the pencil factory and took their baths in the kitchen.

Ian's bedroom had a bay window with a built-in window seat. His bedroom walls were painted with quirky elongated circus animals. Plush dogs were piled on his bed. He had a box of toy musical instruments, a collection of chunky Legos, and a large wooden parking garage with movable elevators.

James sat on the window seat. "What's Ian like?" he asked the child's grandmother.

"He's like his mother. Quiet, sensitive, imaginative."

James nodded. "That will help him to survive. His imagination might help to remove him from the reality of his situation."

She shook her head. "I worry about the effect of this on him." The unspoken words were "if he survives."

"Kids are remarkably resilient," I said.

James looked through the books, as he tried to get a handle on the boy.

Ginny handed James a silky but frayed receiving blanket. "Take this, for

Poppy to get his scent. It's Ian's 'bangy.' Never slept a day without it." Her eyes teared up.

"You should know that the police have not given us permission to do this," I said.

"I see. You don't look so good. I haven't even thanked you."

"Don't thank me," I said. "I feel Ian might be there and be in danger. Tara must have seen me poking around her father's house. She knows we're getting close."

"You can't do any harm by seeing if Poppy can find Ian, the dog loves that boy," her mother said. "Tara Stackley is in custody anyway."

Posey stood in the doorway. Her greasy hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wore baggy sweatpants tied with a drawstring, and cheap embroidered slippers, like the kind sold in baskets on the streets in Chinatown.

"I'm sorry I was a bitch on the phone," she said.

"I understand," I said.

"I'd like to come along. Poppy is nervous around strangers. I should be with him."

"You want to come with us?" I asked, surprised.

"What if there is a one in a billion chance you find him? I want to be there."

We left the brownstone and walked in silence, heading for my car. I had bandages on my head and wore a ragged t-shirt and sweats. Posey was slumped over and leading a peppy golden retriever on a leash. James looked like an Amazonian shamanic surfer dude. I was no longer in a made-for-TV movie. I was in an existential French New Wave film, and as I recalled, these movies didn't have happy endings.

FIFTEEN

"I don't think I should drive anymore," I said after an hour of driving on Route 80. I couldn't keep my eyes open. Driving for several hours after almost dying in a fire suddenly did not seem like such a sensible idea. "I'm getting tired and it's foggy." I put on the defogger, but nothing happened. I couldn't see where I was going.

"Stop at the next rest area," James said. "We'll wait for the fog to clear."

"I'll drive," Posey said. "Don't worry, I'm a good driver. I've been off the sedatives for a few weeks so I'm not drugged up."

I pulled over at a rest area. Posey climbed into the driver's seat. She turned on the windshield wipers and everything was clear.

"Wow," I said. "Much better."

"It wasn't fog," Posey said. "It was a light rain."

She was a good driver, not as cautious as I was, but not fast or reckless either. The silence in the car was awkward, but James was in the front seat with her. He would start a conversation. I sat next to Poppy, who kept his distance from me in the back seat.

"Tell me about Ian's birth," he asked Posey.

"Ian came late, so late I was induced and had to have an emergency C-section. I was in the hospital by myself—my mother got there the next day."

"Was that hard?" James asked.

"It was weird. Not like I expected it."

"I read that Ian's father was a sperm donor?"

Why couldn't James be discreet? Yet he always got away with his questions. My mother had met James once and had said he could charm rosary beads from the Pope.

"I was engaged, but it didn't work out."

"What happened?"

"I found the perfect guy—his grandfather was a famous yacht designer, he designed *Westerly*."

"That's a ship?" James asked.

"Sorry, yes a boat—it won the America's Cup in the mid-60s."

"I take it that's a big deal."

Posey laughed. "He was a minor celebrity with the yacht club types."

"But Mr. Perfect wasn't so perfect for you?"

Posey sighed. "He was perfect for my mother. It took almost going down the aisle with him to realize he wasn't perfect for me."

"So you had Ian."

"I was almost 40—I had to find another man quickly, get engaged, married, and have children within a couple of years. So I had the baby without the husband. "

James nodded as if it made perfect sense.

"Are you married?" she asked.

"No."

She nodded. "It's tough finding someone."

"I know."

"I haven't put much effort into it. Too busy with Ian." She gasped, as if in that brief moment she had forgotten what had happened to Ian.

"Don't, I know what you're thinking, but I think Ian will be okay."

She was silent for a few minutes. "You know that Zen saying? 'The barn having burned down, I can now see the moon.' I guess I'm seeing things so clearly now. I just need another chance, to be a better mother."

"It's not your fault."

"At some level I realize that, but I could have been a better mother. I have so much more perspective now. I need another chance."

"I understand."

They reached the Delaware Water Gap. The rain had stopped. I looked at my watch. 1:45 a.m.

Later James took over driving. Posey lay in the back seat, threading her fingers through Poppy's silky coat. She closed her eyes and appeared to be asleep.

When I was sure she was asleep, I said to James, "My dreams are getting incredibly scary. I was in a cave and we were attacked, and a man, a Cro-Magnon, carried me away—I hated him, this wasn't a romantic fantasy. I remember I didn't care what happened to me because my family was dead. The healer woman was looking right at me as she died, urging me to escape but I couldn't."

"I've never doubted you were Neanderthal, but you never believed it. Do you believe it now?"

"You know me—I can't wrap my mind around anything that isn't so solid you can poke it with a stick. Yet this whole experience of being close to death twice has been so strange for me. It has pushed me to my limits."

"You're a powerful human—but a different sort of human."

"The dreams are so vivid. Like I'm experiencing my life 35,000 years ago? That's too weird."

"You know 35,000 years ago is barely a blink of an eye in terms of earth time."

I was silent for a minute. "I suppose you're right."

"What was your relationship to the woman in the dream," he asked, "not your mother, the other woman, the healer?"

"She was teaching me how to be a healer. But she wasn't really a shaman, though she did paint herself with black stripes as a way, I think, to connect with powerful animal spirits. Her healing was practical—how to splint a broken leg, how to relieve pain using tree bark, and so on."

"And did you ever know how to do any of this stuff before?"

"No, unless I remembering bits of *The Clan of the Cave Bear*—that was my favorite book when I was a teenager. Someone in the novel was a healer. The blonde Cro-Magnon girl? Or the Neanderthal woman? I can't remember."

"I doubt you're channeling Jean Auel in your dreams."

I shook my head. "So what you do want me to do? Go teach a class at the Omega Institute—'Discovering Your Neanderthal Shamanic Roots'?"

"Just don't deny or ignore what is obvious. I'm not sure why you were the one to witness Ian being abducted, but you've received messages from your past--to help find him. Believe me. You need to pay attention to them."

"How do you know this?" I asked, challenging him.

He hesitated. "I don't talk about it much, but when I was doing research in Peru, I had similar experiences...shamanic journeys into my past. And no, it wasn't as a result of the *ayahuasca*."

"Are you a shaman?"

"I don't know. I'm still on the journey to figure that out."

I didn't respond. I was too confused to know what to think. I looked

back at Posey. She had opened her eyes.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Fine."

"We're almost there."

SIXTEEN

When we arrived at Mitchell Holmes's house, we found no evidence that police or FBI had been here. The neighboring houses were far enough away that they didn't have to worry being seen. I checked my watch—3 a.m. The neighbors were asleep anyway.

James inspected the front door. It was locked, as were the windows and back door. "We're going to have to break in. Anyone have any criminal credentials?"

Tara had broken into my apartment by breaking the glass in the deck door. I walked around the house to the back door.

"I could break a hole in the back door," I said.

"You could get arrested for that," James said.

"I don't care. Remember the ethics question from junior high? Would you break into the drugstore if you had to save a life?"

"Yeah," James said. "I answered that obeying the law was more important. Hey, I was a good Catholic and didn't want to have to go to Confession."

"I'll do it," Posey said. "What do I have to lose? They're not going to put me in jail."

"No," I said, "That's not fair. We got you involved."

"I insist," she said. "If I get in trouble I'll say I was in an unstable mental state."

"No, I'll do it," I said. "This was my idea and I'll take the heat for it."

"What would Emily Post think?" James asked.

"Fuck Emily Post," I said as I broke the glass.

"This whole upper panel of the door will come out if I unscrew it," I said. "I need a Phillips head screwdriver."

I remembered the gizmo I had received as a secret Santa present. It was a flashlight, Phillips head screwdriver, scissors, and wire cutter all in one. I had stuck it in the glove compartment of my car. After I retrieved it, I loosened the rusty screws and pried out the top panel. I pried the similar panel on the inside of the door, reached in and unlocked the door.

"We're in," I said.

We entered the kitchen, fumbling in the darkness for a light switch. The calendar with pastels of Jersey Shore lighthouses had not been changed since March. I opened the refrigerator. It was empty except for a few juice boxes and two boxes of Pizza Treatza Lunchables.

"Oh God," I said, looking at the kid food.

Posey understood immediately. In a frenzy, she called Ian's name, running from the kitchen. The dog ran after her.

The house was a split-level, with no upstairs or attic. I looked in the master bedroom. Posey was on her knees, searching under the bed. She ripped the peach-colored chenille bedspread off the bed.

Popcorn was not acting like the police rescue dogs, sniffing around, leading them to Ian. He nuzzled my hand and wanted to be petted.

We searched the inside the washing machines, closet, crawl spaces, and even in the freezer. We looked in the basement, behind the boiler and in an old army trunk. We opened the garage—McFarland's Oldsmobile was there under a tarp. I looked inside the trunk. We looked anywhere that a “person of small stature,” as the police literature called a child, could be hidden.

Upstairs, James flopped down on the worn brown corduroy couch. A couple of copies of *Sports Illustrated* were on a glass table in front of him. On top of the TV were photos, but none of Tara, just one picture of Mitchell Holmes with a woman, in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. The room, with its heavy dark drapes, was claustrophobic, the air stuffy.

Posey returned to the living room and sat on the couch next to James. She looked numb, as if she had no tears left.

"I'm going outside for a minute," I said to James.

I left the house with the dog on a leash. It had cleared up, no rain or fog, but a cold front was coming in. I looked up. I could see Orion's Belt.

Popcorn pulled me along, thrilled to be going for a walk. I put Ian's blanket in front of his nose. He dutifully sniffed it, but was more interested in exploring new scents.

The dog grabbed a stick in his mouth and dropped it in front of me. I didn't want to take him off the leash. That's all Posey needed was to lose this dog. Instead I played the tug-of-war stick game with him. It was too bad, I thought, that Posey didn't have a border collie or a German shepherd. Golden retrievers were sweet, but they lacked that extra spark of intelligence those dogs had.

I walked around the patch of yard with a flower border full of weeds. A bindweed vine clung to chain link fence, its white flowers closed for the night. I poked around, but didn't see much, except a lean-to with a lawn mower and gardening tools. Popcorn sniffed in the lean-to and grabbed a rubber glove in

his mouth. I pulled it out of his mouth and put it on a shelf out of his reach.

This house was too new to have an old bomb shelter on the property. As a four-year-old I had loved playing in the bomb shelter behind a friend's house—the damp smell, the dusty jars of peach and tomato preserves on shelves, a secret place. This house was in a newer development, built after those paranoid times.

I continued to walk beyond the yard. On the left and right were bushes defining the property boundary, but beyond was woods. I would have expected recently planted pine trees. Instead I saw old-growth oaks and maples. The woods were quiet.

I sat on a large boulder and pulled my sweater around me. Popcorn was eager to play the stick game again. He wasn't sniffing around looking for Ian. He pulled me back toward the house. Inside I found Posey and James deep in conversation. I didn't want to disturb them. Popcorn flopped down next to Posey.

I was close to a kernel of truth that would help me find Ian. If I weren't so damned tired. I needed to take a catnap before the drive home. I would close my eyes for a minute, but I didn't want to dream. No dreams. Not now.

Outside the cave, the man wraps his arms around Chaya, squeezing her chest. She refuses to leave the cave. She will never leave her people. She cannot leave her mother and father. They need to be buried deep in the cave, so they can take the journey back from where they had been before they were born. Not burying them would be like not wrapping a fur around a cold baby. They would not have their burial gifts with them. Chaya mother would not be buried with her milkweed, her father would not be buried with the animal skin scraper he was so proud of, that he had chipped and shaped it to perfection over many long winter nights. The healer would not be buried with the seeds of yarrow and meadowsweet. Chaya wonders what will happen if she dies. She will not be buried with crocus bulbs. She will be left to the hyenas like the Runners leave their weak, sick, and old.

One of the Runners grabs Chaya and she is forced

to leave the cave, the echoes of moaning in her ears. The night air is cold against her skin. She has no fur to wrap herself in. The man is dressed in fur-- even his feet are covered in animal skins. Only babies and young children cover their feet in animal skins. Chaya refuses to walk for him. She doesn't care if he kills her. She doesn't want to live. Torn away from her people, she has no reason to live.

When they reach the bottom of the mountain, the ugly man ties Chaya to a large cape made of animal skin attached to two logs on the ground. She hums her song to herself. She will be singing when she dies.

They come to a place near a river with many Runners--mothers and babies, children, older people. This is a familiar place to Chaya. Before the Runners had arrived in the valley, her people used to live by the river in the spring and summer, building their nests with pine boughs. They caught and roasted fish, laughing and singing around the fire.

The Runners gather around Chaya, shouting. She is forced to stand, as the people circle her. Will she be killed in front of these people? She is pushed toward a young man with a withered leg. The young man sneers at her. He grabs Chaya by the arm and pulls her toward him, kissing her on the lips. Everyone laughs. The man smells foul, like deer carrion.

He takes her to a nest made of dozens of mammoth bones covered with animal skins. He removes his fur apron, standing over her naked. Seeing him, Chaya keens. She closes her eyes and places her hands over her body. She will not let this man touch her. She

will scratch out his eyes. She will kill him. The man puts his hands over his ears.

The covering to the entrance of the nest is pushed aside. An old woman, stooped over with deep wrinkles in her face, pushes aside the covering to the entrance of the nest. She makes loud noises at the man. The young man turns to look at her, dropping his chin to his chest. The old woman looks at Chaya with sympathetic eyes. She takes her hand and leads her into another nest.

She lays Chaya down on a thick soft wool fur. The old woman's hands brush over her. She put salve on the cuts on Chaya's back and legs. She gives her water from a sack made of animal skin and covers her with a fur. The old woman has a string of shells around her neck. When she moves, they make a soft clacking sound.

Once Chaya knows she is safe, she cries freely. She sings her Crocus Song. The woman watches her closely. She imitates Chaya's song. Her voice is so deep and low it sounds like a man's voice. She holds Chaya's hand, stroking it.

Despite the kindness of this woman, Chaya doesn't want to live. Her mother and father are dead. Nobody will bury them. The hyenas will find their bodies in the cave. Chaya rocks back and forth. She needs to return to bury them. It is bad to leave those who die to the animals. The old woman tries to comfort her, but she can't. Chaya cries herself to sleep.

Chaya is awakened later by a call. The owl song

is familiar to her: *hoo-hoo-to-hoo-oo--hoo hoo-hoo-to-whooo-ooo*. This was the way her people called to each when they were separated in the woods. When they heard this call, they hooted back so the person knew they are not lost. This owl call sounded as if it were coming from a child.

Chaya gestures to the woman that the noise is a child by imitating a mother nursing a baby. The old woman nods as though she understands quickly without the need for any other gestures.

The old woman stands up, looks outside the entrance to the nest, and glances around the settlement. The other people are asleep. She pulls Chaya along. Out in the open air, they follow the call. The moon lights their path. Once they leave the settlement, Chaya hoots back, a long clear song that travels for miles. Her call is answered by returning hoots. They walk until a band of light spreads along the horizon.

They enter a forest. Chaya hears the call above her. A small boy, a knee child, crouches among the branches. He looks down at her, scared when he sees the stranger woman. Chaya recognizes the boy. She lets him know he will be safe. She senses this old woman is a powerful woman among her people, who will not let anyone hurt him. He climbs down the tree, then clings to Chaya, clasping her like a baby does his mother. She wraps her arms around him and cries, pressing her nose into his hair. She has a reason to live.

SIXTEEN

A scratching noise woke me up. I wasn't disoriented this time waking up from the nap, but it did take me a minute to shake myself out of the dream. I could almost smell the woodsy scent of the young boy in the dream, and feel the joyous sensation of holding him again. I was jolted back to the present, to the boy who was missing, who might never be found. I wanted Posey to have that same ecstatic feeling of holding her son again.

The scratching noise was Popcorn at the back door. He pushed opened the door and dashed out. I ran after him, calling his name. He raced across the yard and bounded into the woods. I hoped there was a fence at the other end. He had run so far away I couldn't hear him. The only sound was the crunching of leaves as I bushwhacked through the woods.

I called the dog's name over and over. I couldn't return to the house without the dog. Yet I had to get back soon. We couldn't stay around the house. The FBI would be here soon after daylight. Georgia would have legal means to get rid of me. My career would go down the drain. No one would hire a middle-

aged anthropology professor with a police record.

James approached me, flashlight in hand, walking awkwardly in flip-flops. "You okay out here?"

"I lost the dog."

He sat down next to me on a boulder. "We have to find the dog. We can't return to the house without the dog."

"I'm sorry. Next time I ever try to do anything impulsive again, stop me."

"I'll go look for the dog. I'll use my best alpha dog call."

"How's Posey?"

"She's dozing on the couch, exhausted by the roller coaster emotions of all this. I told her we'd be leaving soon. We have to be out of the house before the police arrive."

"As it is, they'll know we were here and we'll get in trouble for it."

"Hey, if we get fired from NYU, we'll start the Neanderthal Detective Agency."

"Ha, ha. At the very least, we can keep each other company in jail. You were an accomplice."

We continued to call the dog's name, but heard nothing--no barking, no leaves rustling.

"I dozed for a minute just now and had another dream," I said. "I can only remember fragments, but I think I was taken away by a group of early moderns to their settlement, almost raped. This older woman saved me. At the end, I think I discovered a lost boy, another Neanderthal."

"That's good. Very, very good." He jumped up and put his arms on my shoulders.

"What do you mean?"

"How did you find the boy in the dream?"

I could see James's thoughts were racing.

"He was lost and called to me with a bird call—it sounded like an owl, like this." I demonstrated the call as best as I remembered.

"Interesting." He tested the call several times. His owl call resonated throughout the woods. "Modern hunter-gatherers use these kinds of imitative animal calls."

We sat in silence, shivering, on the boulder.

"Where did you find the boy?"

"He was hiding in a tree," I said.

"I'll be back in a few minutes with Popcorn," he said, standing up.

"Then we'll keep looking around here. You'll be okay by yourself for a few minutes?"

"Sure."

James disappeared into the woods calling Popcorn's name.

The trees loomed above me. In the woods, my *Homo sapiens* part, more comfortable in the open savanna, took over. Brown bears were common in the woods around here. I tried to calm myself. Brown bears were not grizzly bears. Yet a bear is a bear. What did one do to scare bears away? The boys had worn bear bells on hikes in the Adirondacks.

To make noise, I clapped, using the unusual rhythm the healer had used in my dream to keep the hyenas away. It reminded me of the rhythm of a Hungarian Gypsy ballad I had sung in my college choir. The choir director called the rhythm, "the gypsy 9": CLAP-CLAP CLAP-CLAP CLAP - CLAP clap- clap- clap, then CLAP-CLAP CLAP - CLAP clap-clap-clap CLAP-CLAP. In the dream, the rhythm had been slow and steady, increasing in intensity to alert people of impending danger.

My hands sore, I stopped clapping. I let my mind take in details of the woods around me. Unlike James, I didn't need a flashlight to see in the dark. I

paid attention to every detail. Most of the time, I forced myself to ignore details, to push away the details crowding my mind so that I could function like other people.

But I knew there had been a time, before I could speak, when I was able to see the micro-details around me. I remembered this time as a toddler without speech. My mother placed me in a playpen outside in the sunshine while she worked. Through the mesh of the playpen, I watched ants drinking droplets of water on single blades of grass, the complicated patterns of veins on the undersides of leaves, the whorl of a tiny snail's shell.

When I learned to speak, fairly late at 3 1/2, I lost this ability to see micro-details. Did I still have the ability to see them, but it lay buried because my brain was occupied with language? The ability to speak in humans had masked the extraordinary senses that animals—and possibly Neanderthals—had. Neanderthals had an enlarged occipital bulge, an area of the brain concerned, not with language, but mainly with vision. Being aware of the tiniest detail in my surroundings might help me find Ian.

Walking through the woods, I took in the intricate details in the bark, the many shades of green and brown in the lichens, the patterns of spores on ferns. The leaves were tamped down slightly, but not in the direction of where James and the dog had gone. I saw the faintest of impressions in the damp leaves. A person had walked here, and not long ago. I followed the impressions in the leaves, through pine needles, down an embankment, over a stream, up a hill, and across an old logging road.

Had a bear made these tracks? I clapped my hands again, walking further into the woods. Almost hidden under leaf mold, I found the butt of a cigarette. A Kool.

In the distance, James called for Popcorn. I clapped again and again, the sound comforting me. In a grove of pine trees, I heard a faint rhythmic tapping

that sounded like a woodpecker, but it wasn't loud enough for a woodpecker. The tapping had a pattern. A shiver ran down my spine. It matched the rhythm of my clapping: TAP- TAP TAP - TAP TAP - TAP tap- tap- tap, then TAP- TAP TAP - TAP tap- tap- tap TAP - TAP. Now I had proof I was becoming unhinged. That's what these dreams/hallucinations were doing to me. I was losing touch with reality. I was no different than Tara, unmoored from reality, drifting toward who knows what.

The tapping began again. I saw an oak tree with sturdy lower branches, perfect for climbing. As I moved closer, the faint tapping became louder. Was James fooling with me?

“James. If that's you, this isn't funny. Please.”

Yet I doubted James would play a joke on me at a time like this. I got closer to the noise. Remembering the dream of the boy in the tree, and thinking about my son who spent his days scaling redwoods, I looked up through the branches. I noticed a tree house with a door that had a padlock on it. Planks of wood were nailed to the tree as a ladder.

I climbed the tree, putting one foot above the other on the loose planks. The sound could be a raccoon or another animal inside the tree house. I climbed higher and higher up the tree, reassuring myself that Aidan was climbing 200- foot high trees. I could climb this tree. I reached the platform where the tree house had been built. The wood was warped, the paint faded. The tree house had been up in this tree for years.

I peered through the slats and gasped. I screamed for James. A boy, his leg tapping rhythmically against the wooden slat, lay sleeping in the tree house.

SEVENTEEN

The doctors said Ian might have died if he had not been rescued that night. Tara had given him her own medication to put him out. He had been in a coma when I found him, close to death.

As I found out later from a colleague, Ian's foot tapping was caused by a motor pathway in his nervous system responding to rhythm even when he was in a coma. Ian had unconsciously responded to the clapping by tapping his leg.

Ian woke up from the coma after three days. He remembered sketchy things about his time with Tara. Clingy and subdued, he was otherwise unharmed outwardly.

Later I learned the full story of Tara, or as much as they gleaned when she spoke and was lucid. She was heavily drugged, on suicide watch.

After Tara had been released from the psychiatric hospital on Long Island, she had been on medication, which had kept her on an even keel. She tried to get a job as a nanny but, but was not able to because of her mental health record. That's when Tara got the idea of using Heather's credentials. She

gathered the information she needed while visiting her childhood friend Heather Davis. She applied to Better Nannies and got a job with the false credentials.

When Tara saw Ian, who looked so much like her half-brother who died, something clicked in her brain. She became obsessed with the boy, and soon delusional. She lost her job as a nanny, stopped taking her medication, and lived on her meager savings at a cheap motel near Jersey City. When that money ran out, she lived at Hoboken's homeless shelter, which was why she was dressed in odd clothes, including mismatched shoes, when I had first seen her.

From June through September, Tara spied on Ian and his mother, though Ian was often with his nanny Paula, which further confirmed to Tara that he needed to be with her. In her mind, he was Sean and the fact that his name was so similar, both Celtic versions of the name John, made it more so. Tara had to get him back. She needed a car, but did not know where to get one. She had no money, no means to escape with him.

Tara had taken Alara to her lesson and had heard McFarland talk about the car he never used, and that he kept it in the garage attached to his highrise. She must have seen the keys when she was waiting for Ian. Getting the keys and finding the car were easy. He had an Oldsmobile tag on the key ring. There weren't too many Oldsmobiles around any more, and the garage was open to the public. Anyone could walk in there.

As Posey had guessed, Tara watched the preschool class and pretended to be a teacher, telling Ian he had to go with her. She left Hoboken with Ian and returned home in upstate New York. In mid-September, she received the message about her father. She drove to his house, picked up her father's car, and signed the papers for her father to be transferred from the hospital to the nursing home. She returned to New York with his car. That's when I barged in. Not knowing where to go, she returned to her father's house.

No one was sure how Tara discovered the tree house. It's possible when

Tara was younger she had visited her father once or twice. She had been in the house at the time Victor and I had gone there the first time. It had looked unlivable, but it wasn't. She drugged Ian, locked him in the tree house, and drove to Hoboken to kill me. That's where her story ended.

* * *

In mid-December, I received a call from Posey asking me over for coffee. A blue spruce now dominated Posey's living room. It was decorated with sleds made of Popsicle sticks, god's eye yarn ornaments, and seashells outlined with glitter. A few strands of white lights lit up the tree.

In an adjoining room, Ian sat at the piano, playing a simple Christmas carol over and over, note perfect.

"He's good, isn't he?" Posey said, unsmiling. "But he's a different boy now."

I wasn't sure what she meant, but Posey continued.

"He was always serious, but now he's so inwardly focused, withdrawn. Music has been helping him. He's in intensive therapy. He's also taking lessons again with Basil McFarland."

Posey poured me a cup of coffee out of a silver pot. To make small talk I said, "I love your tree."

"I left my job. Ian and I made the decorations. I have enough money to work freelance and I want to paint anyway."

"Did you paint the animals on the wall in Ian's room?"

"Yes."

"They're wonderful."

"Thanks. I've changed. I've climbed out of the hamster wheel."

I nodded, and listened to Ian play "We Three Kings."

"Anyway, you're probably wondering why I asked you here."

Posey had sent a heartfelt letter of thanks after the rescue, but I hadn't heard from her since then, and didn't expect to. I hoped Posey wasn't upset with me for occasionally speaking about the case in public.

"Basil McFarland and I were chatting the other day," Posey said. "I had no idea you took piano lessons from him as a way to get to know him and maybe learn about who abducted Ian. I knew, of course, that your piano was burned in the fire. He was the one who gave me the idea for this."

Her stoic face crumpled in tears. "Sorry. I am always about two minutes away from tears these days."

She handed me an ivory envelope. "For you."

I opened the envelope and removed a picture of a Steinway Boston upright piano.

"It's going to be delivered in two weeks," Posey said.

I looked into her eyes, but couldn't speak. I wanted to hug her, but held back. It didn't matter. Posey wrapped her arms around me, sobbing softly.

* * *

It was my last class of the semester. I would miss the students, who were the best students I had ever had. But I said that every semester. I turned on the projector. Daisy, the Neanderthal girl, peered out at the class again, her expression curious, if a bit frightened.

"Remember Daisy from our first class?" I asked the students. "Now you have an idea what Daisy was like. Yet I wonder if we will ever really know what her thoughts were. How did she see the world? What knowledge did she have about the stars, about animals, about healing?"

"Did Neanderthals contribute to the modern human gene pool? Although the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming that we are related to Daisy, I believe there is room for speculation"

"We've discussed the 25,000 year-old skeleton of the child found in the rock shelter in Portugal. He had features of both early moderns and Neanderthals. Similar skeletons have been found in Romania , Israel, and the Czech Republic.

"I recently read a paper by a colleague at the University of Chicago who hypothesizes that interbreeding with Neanderthals might have contributed a gene variant, called an allele, into the human population that enhanced our brain function. The introgression of this allele might have regulated brain size. In other words, our Neanderthal cousins may have contributed to early modern's increased brain size and robustness.

"But even if we aren't related to Daisy, I hope you can now appreciate, understand, and celebrate her."

I turned on the lights. Watching my student's faces, so absorbed in what I was saying, I knew I had done my job. My goslings would leave the classroom imprinted with knowledge that might change their lives.

"Each person alive is connected from mother to grandmother to great-grandmother in an unbroken line back to a mother who lived thousands of years ago," I continued. "As one of my anthropology professors at UNH said, imagine one hand reaching back to another, then back to another and another. Within each of our cells we have genetic material connecting us to our ancient human mother. So take that thought with you as you leave the class, and thanks, for being my best class ever."

Greg raised his hand. "Professor Bloom, we have a present for you." He slipped a CD into his laptop.

A computer-simulated Neanderthal voice had been overlaid with complex drumming rhythms, along with the sounds of rattles, rain sticks, and percussion instruments. A voice imitating an owl had been added. "It's a Neanderthal jam."

“Thank you. It's beautiful,” I said, closing my eyes as I listened to the ancient music.

After class, I headed over to the West Fourth street subway station where I was meeting Victor. We took the F train to Queens for a winter ride, to catch the last few daylight hours before sunset. Before I left Victor that evening, I handed him a package.

“This is for you. I turned my dreams into a story. I thought you might like to read it.”

He took the package, holding it close to his chest. “I’m glad you found out the ending.”

“Me too.”

He gave me a hug, smelling of horses. I said good-bye before descending to the subway. Victor had to stay in Queens to show his face at a family Christmas party.

Later, alone, I climbed the steps from the PATH train. Smoke curled above the row houses in western Hoboken, fire sirens disturbing the sleeping city. As I got closer to home, I noticed the smoke was rising from Jersey City, not Hoboken. I strolled, but did not jog, home.

AUTHOR NOTES

The inspiration for this novel came from a book my husband John gave me a few years ago: *Saxons, Vikings, and Celts: The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland* by Bryan Sykes, a geneticist at Oxford University. Bronwyn's Neanderthal great-uncles are based on a story in this book. Because I find the anecdote so fascinating and atmospheric, I have quoted it in full:

There is abundant work from the early twentieth century by H.J. Fleure, an eminent anthropologist based at Aberystwyth University, on the unusual head shapes and Neanderthal-like faces of people living in the remote mountains near Plynlimmon in mid-Wales at the headwaters of the River Severn and the River Wye.

Plynlimmon is not very far from the market town of Tregaron, where while staying at the Talbot Inn on the market square one October night on another trip to collect DNA samples, I was told the fantastic story of the Tregaron Neanderthals. The Talbot Inn is an old drover's inn, complete with stone walls, oak beams and open fires. It was a dark night

and the rain had not stopped all day. The fire was blazing away and there were a few local men, staring at their pints of bitter and glad to be out of the rain.

We got talking, and before long I was telling them about what I was doing in the part of Wales, and about the Genetic Atlas Project. We had evidently been overheard by a man sitting along at a small table. And then he began to tell me about the elderly twin brothers, who had lived at the end of a long track leading into the Cambrian Mountains behind the ruins of the Cistercian Monastery at Strata Florida, further up the Treifi from Tregaron. I knew this track, as once in my youth I had been up it looking for an incredibly rare bird, the Red Kite. Now, thanks to successful reintroductions to the Chilterns, anyone can see these fantastic birds gliding and twisting every time they travel on the motorway between Oxford and London. But, back then, there were only a few pairs left, all in mid-Wales. I had heard that a pair was nesting in the woods behind Strata Florida and I remember walking for several miles, first through the woods then onto the grassy uplands. I did not see a Red Kite, but I did see a cottage up on a side track, which, from the washing on the clothes line, was clearly inhabited. I think this must have been the place. I don't remember any other dwellings.

My companion at the Talbot went on to tell me that the men who lived in this cottage in the 1950s and 1960s were Neanderthals. This fact was well known. So well known that a visit to the brothers was on the history syllabus at Tregaron school. Every year, in the summer term, the third form History class would take the school van as far as they could up the track, and the children would walk the rest of the way to the cottage. The Neanderthals obviously looked forward to the visits, because, on the appointed day, they made sure they had plenty of cakes

and lemonade. The children stayed for an hour while the teacher explained about human evolution and where the Neanderthals fit into the scheme of things. Then they left and walked back down the hill to the van.

Of course, I didn't actually believe these men were Neanderthal any more than I am. But I still do hope one day to find just one person with Neanderthal DNA.

* * *

A few years ago, I traveled to Wales with my family to visit the town where my ancestors were from, a village called Llanybydder, only a few miles from Lampeter. We wandered through ancient graveyards with overhanging yew trees, touched Neolithic stone circles, and hiked on the same paths ancient stonemasons had walked on to mine the bluestone that became part of Stonehenge. Time seemed to stand still in this part of Wales. This is where my imagination came in. I visualized people in a remote Welsh village who may have retained Neanderthal characteristics over thousands of years.

I based my vision of the Neanderthals mainly on my imagination, but I tried to reflect what has and hasn't shown up in the fossil record. Neanderthals, for example, used black paint, but no one knows why. They also had almost no personal ornamentation, art, and so on. The musical instruments I designed for them were from my imagination—they were made of wood, hollow sticks, etc. that would disintegrate over time.

I also gathered ideas and insights from the following books:

Grandin, Temple. *Animals in Translation*.

How autistic people view the world primarily visually like animals, not verbally. This influenced how I portrayed Bronwyn as someone who is lost in details, but is able to see things other people have missed.

Fleure, H.J. and M. Davies. *A Natural History of Britain*. London: Collins, 1969.

In the pre-DNA era, Fleure studied the skeletal structures of modern Welsh people to find evidence of Britain's early inhabitants, including Neanderthals.

Kiple. *The Cambridge History of Food*. New York/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. A comprehensive, 2-volume history of food from Prehistoric times to the present. I read about lichen cakes in this reference book--I didn't make that up!

Kroeber, Theodora. *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America*. I borrowed Ishi's method of catching a hare.

Levitin, Daniel, *This is Your Brain on Music* Explores the neuropsychology of the brain and music. He explains how the most ancient part of our brain is wired for rhythm and music.

Mithen, Steve. *The Singing Neanderthals*. The author speculates about how Neanderthals may have communicated with what he calls *hmmm*—a holistic, multi-modal, musical, and manipulative type of communication.

Sykes. Bryan. *Saxons, Vikings, and Celts: The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland* New York: W.W. Norton, 2006. The first DNA-based history of the people and tribes of the British Isles.

Sykes, Bryan. *The Seven Daughters of Eve: The Science that Reveals our Genetic Ancestry*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. Sykes devotes a chapter to his unsuccessful attempt to locate Neanderthal DNA in modern-day people in Wales.

Thomas, Elizabeth Marshall. *The Old Way: A Story of the First Modern People*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. My idea of the Neanderthals calling the Cro-Magnons "Runners" came partly from this book. Thomas writes,

We seldom think of 'early man' as running after animals. Some of the textbooks show our stereotype--a big muscle-bound guy in a leopard skin, standing with his knees bent, wielding a club or spear. That, to us, is early hunting. Yet several important truths support the probability that we became big-game hunters by chasing animals....Some scientists believe that hunting by running contributed to our present body shape....The biologist Bernd Heinrich, who is himself a highly successful marathon runner, suggests that running was indeed a feature of early human development. He points out that as the forests disappeared, we became bipedal and more gracile, until we had long thighs, deep lungs, and well-developed multi-purpose feet that could carry us from everything from mud to sand and mud.

I borrowed the term "knee children" from Thomas's book. This is how the San people refer to toddlers. I also borrowed the idea that early people may have referred to their homes as nests, based on the simple nest-like homes that the San people once constructed as shelters.

