

Spring 7-9-2019

## Nine Times Out of Ten, You Don't Die

Patrick Ronald Wensink  
*Portland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open\\_access\\_etds](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds)



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Wensink, Patrick Ronald, "Nine Times Out of Ten, You Don't Die" (2019). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 5039.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.6915>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

Nine Times Out of Ten, You Don't Die

A novel

by

Patrick Ronald Wensink

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:  
Gabriel Urza, Chair  
Leni Zumas  
Janice Lee

Portland State University  
2019

## Abstract

My novel, “Nine Times Out of Ten, You Don’t Die,” is the story of Layla Wisnewski and her quest to write a book about her famous father. In the 1970s, “Big Dan” Wisnewski was a motorcycle stuntman who broke more bones than anyone living. He jumped cars and buses and rivers atop a white Harley Davidson. Big Dan was considered an American Hero.

Fast forward forty years, Big Dan has been dead for decades, and his daughter Layla is writing a book about his life. While researching the book, she learns she was kidnapped as a baby. This triggers a domino effect that leads Layla on a trail to uncover the many ways in which she has been lied to over the years and just how dangerous her family really is.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....i

Chapter One.....1

Chapter Two.....10

Chapter Three.....13

Chapter Four.....21

Chapter Five.....23

Chapter Six.....25

Chapter Seven.....30

Chapter Eight.....31

Chapter Nine.....35

Chapter Ten.....37

Chapter Eleven.....41

Chapter Twelve.....42

Chapter Thirteen.....44

Chapter Fourteen.....45

Chapter Fifteen.....54

Chapter Sixteen.....55

Chapter Seventeen.....58

Chapter Eighteen.....61

Chapter Nineteen.....63

Chapter Twenty.....64

Chapter Twenty-One.....72

Chapter Twenty-Two.....	74
Chapter Twenty-Three.....	77
Chapter Twenty-Four.....	79
Chapter Twenty-Five.....	84
Chapter Twenty-Six.....	86
Chapter Twenty-Seven.....	90
Chapter Twenty-Eight.....	94
Chapter Twenty-Nine.....	99
Chapter Thirty.....	106
Chapter Thirty-One.....	111
Chapter Thirty-Two.....	112
Chapter Thirty-Three.....	126
Chapter Thirty-Four.....	127
Chapter Thirty-Five.....	128
Chapter Thirty-Six.....	135

## ONE

The package landed on my porch with the weight of a casket. The small box was heavy enough that the living room tchotchkes tinkled and the picture frames rattled and I jerked so sharply from a nap that I thought I must be dying.

From the door, I caught a glimpse of a blue delivery van speeding down the street, autumn leaves swirling in its wake. My breath curled cottony white into the cold morning air. At my bare feet was a banker's box, mummified in packing tape. The label said it had been overnighted from New York at a cost that would have drained our meager checking account. The package took serious effort to drag into the kitchen and a steak knife to hack through its wrappings. Finally, I pried open the lid, catching a whiff of antique stores and attics and forgotten places.

I leaned closer to the contents of the box. It was stuffed tight with manila file folders. Paperwork so densely packed that my fingers couldn't even slip between them. Cowlicks of faded newspaper, bent corners of glossy photographs, crimped edges of magazine spreads.

There was also a note scratched across some stationary. My editor, Nancy, had written in large, red cursive: **LAYLA, CALL ME.**

I squinted at this hernia-maker sitting atop the kitchen table and debated what to do next. October's distant sun slanted over the room and struck the tape job just-so, every ripple and ridge of the discarded lid seemed to radiate light. I sipped at my mug only to find the coffee had gone cold and sour.

The note didn't say "**Call Me Immediately**" and it didn't say "**CALL ME. IT'S LIFE OR DEATH!**" It never said when to call at all. Maybe I could get away with waiting a day. Maybe a week. Maybe this room would catch fire and the entire box would be lost forever. That plan sounded like a winner, because it meant I would never have to call Nancy.

Roughly a year earlier, an email had arrived just as mysteriously. It was from a woman who worked for one of those big publishing houses that used to be three or four smaller ones. Her name was Nancy and she said she'd been a great admirer of my writing for years. She mentioned details from that feature I wrote for *Woman's Day* about sexual discrimination in the airline industry—the one that got all that publicity and helped ensure female pilots were paid the same as men. I was very proud of that piece and its impact. It was the only time in my career I really made an impact in someone's life. It was great.

This editor, Nancy, said intoxicating things about all my work, views nobody ever had, she called my writing "gripping" and "beautifully researched" and "so alive I wanted to puke," which I came to discover was her favorite compliment.

"We're reaching out to see if you would you be interested in writing a biography. We're curious, what was it like to be part of America's First Family of Daredevils?" Her email continued, "I've been dreaming of a book like this for years, so when I discovered you were not just a writer, but a genius writer *and* Big Dan Wisnewski's daughter to boot, I gave my palm reader a kiss! (She'd said something life changing was going to happen.)"

I wanted to ask Nancy, if I was such a Pulitzer-Winner-in-the-making, why had I been pecking away at bullshit online freelance articles for 10-cents a word since that magazine piece came out? But I didn't dare breathe a word of this doubt because I am human and humans get drunk on compliments. Humans also need money. And when editors from New York offer serious chunks of it, humans shut up and cash the check.

It took all of about ten seconds to agree. Nancy's offer looked great and they had an important-sounding marketing plan. Everything was perfect except for a few things:

One, the deadline seemed ridiculously close.

Two, I knew almost nothing about my famous father.

Three, my family and I were at a constant state of war.

Phoning New York always turned my hands into a team of spiders. Reaching out to Nancy wound me up so tightly that my temples began to throb. Calling her meant that whatever she wanted to say was too complicated for email. And complicated calls meant life was always about to get harder. The book, *Ghost Riders*, wasn't allowed to get harder because I was finished. I'd turned in a final draft.

So, I was in no rush to ring her up.

I took every opportunity to distract myself from Nancy's mysterious package. I washed the dishes and folded laundry and waited for some other domestic chore to rescue me. But I hated housework even more than anxiety, so I caved-in pretty quick. I dialed and swallowed a breath, my fingers going into full busybody mode. "Nancy, hey, what's with the box?"



“Layla, that box is a great big, fat question mark,” she said. “The box is asking: why wasn’t any of *this stuff* in your manuscript?”

“Oh. I haven’t opened it yet.” I said, running my fingertip across the open files like a piano keyboard.

“Please, you aren’t that patient.” She waited and it sent my guilty hands into a fit of spot cleaning the countertop. “There is a goldmine in there. You need every bit of this stuff.”

I knew where this was headed and tried to put on the brakes by sounding as firm as possible, but I wasn’t very good at standing up for myself. Not yet, at least.

Nancy began speaking before I could even counter. “I’m not worried. But the people in legal and marketing and production are hyperventilating into paper sacks.” She spoke the way a chef works a knife: sharp, quick, in desperate need of a smoke break. “And, yeah, okay, that first part was a lie. I’m a little worried. A lot worried, actually.”

“Worried?”

“The final draft you sent over is a long way from final. What you submitted.” She held for another beat. “I mean, the interns could have scanned Wikipedia and written this.”

Nancy was correct. I had rushed through the entire 275-page draft hoping it would be good enough. It all seemed like a no-brainer. My father was that guy in the seventies, the one who jumped a motorcycle over cars and busses and rivers. He was that guy who crashed more times than he landed. That guy who set Guinness Book World Record for broken bones. That guy everyone seems to think is an American hero. I whizzed through the draft hoping that maybe Nancy didn’t actually care. I’d read plenty of poorly written,

poorly researched crap and saw myself fitting nicely among the tradition of hack biographers before me. Writers just in it for a paycheck. That's just how desperate things were at that time.

"I'm tapped out. I can't think of a single thing to add." My bare feet paced the house, the hardwoods were cold. The morning sunshine seemed to have gone behind the clouds, which chilled the rooms. The entire place was empty because Ellie was at school and Austin was at work. I began picking up the toys and shoes scattered across the living room. Decorative pillows everywhere but where they belonged. Eventually, I returned to the banker's box and gave it a decent shove with my hip. "Seriously, I thought this might be a bomb at first."

"You wish." She exhaled with a rush of distortion, and then something cracked on her end of the line. A pencil? Knuckles? The neck of an administrative assistant? "Do I have to spell it out? Yes, you hit all the high notes. Your dad was rich and famous and then came down very hard, blah-blah-blah. But the whole thing, it's skimpy. Very surface level. *Ghost Riders* needs a lot more juice."

"It's the most I can give."

That felt like the truth. I knew most writers would have killed for such a break and at a certain point in my career, I would have, too. But I was in strange place. I briefly thought *Ghost Riders* would reinvigorate that passion, but it did the opposite and killed the joy. I was so sour on writing, that I was actually planning to go back to school and get my Master's in social work. A low-paid government career actually felt like a step up. It was part of a plan to start doing good deeds and helping people—to recapture that feeling

I walked around with after all those pilots sent me thank-you emails after the *Woman's Day* story.

“Your draft is missing a pulse.” The crackling returned on her end. “Here is some advice. Write this down.”

I did not even attempt to find a pen, but instead stomped around the house, feeling helpless and angry and realizing I was on the verge of going somewhere I didn't want to be.

“First, we need more of your memories as a child,” said Nancy. “What anecdotes do you have that nobody knows?”

“Big Dan died when I was eight. I don't really remember much.”

“*Start remembering.* Eight is plenty old enough to know all sorts of things about being a Wisnewski kid,” her voice snapped. “While we're on the subject, there's zip about Big Dan's own childhood.”

“He didn't do anything interesting then,” I said. “At least, probably not.”

“Layla, a man does not jump over seventeen busses in Madison Square Garden because he had a nice, neat, by-the-book childhood.” There was an edge in her voice now, almost like she was offended. “And then, there's not even anything about his sleeping around.”

“Gross. That didn't seem like my place.”

“Nothing about his arrest record.”

“I don't know, that's such a cheap shot.” My voice had grown soft and my restless hands had bouldered up.

“Look at what you have to work with: Sex, drugs, drinking, betrayal, bankruptcy,” she chuckled darkly. “Motorcycle jumping is the least interesting part.”

The sensation of gravity, a weight on my shoulders and neck, grew constant. It was so depressing to hear this load of feedback all at once, even though I knew it was true. Probably the most depressing news was that I was not such a master of fooling people. What else do I suck at without even realizing? I wondered.

“We need to know about the childhood that made Big Dan this way.”

“Do you really think so?” I said. “The growing-up chapters are always the parts I skip.”

“Good for you. But we still need fifty pages on him as a boy.”

“Nancy.”

“Also, the rest of the family comes out looking so dull and,” she paused.

“*Normal.*”

The clarity of Nancy’s attack seemed to soften and grow distracted. Was I boring her? I suddenly wanted her attention so badly. It reminded me of something my husband lullabied into my ear whenever we fought: “Once a youngest child, always a youngest child.”

Nancy had reminded me a few times before, when my work ethic looked pretty bleak, that she’d already extended the deadline to the max. Failure to turn in an acceptable final draft by Thanksgiving would void the contract. That would start a domino effect I couldn’t handle. First of all, a voided contract meant I would never see the second half of my advance. Worse still, it meant I would have to return the first half

of the money. That first half had been swallowed up long ago by the mortgage and Ellie's dental work and her private school tuition.

This was not one of those headline-grabbing advances, but it was a fortune to us. Nowhere near beach house money, but serious bill paying ability for a few years. Enough that we could live comfortably while I went back to school for my Master's.

I put up one last fight, but it was just as weak as the effort I put into *Ghost Riders* itself. "I'm just not comfortable writing about the ugly stuff my daddy did." No, I never once called Big Dan *daddy* before that moment. My voice shrank even smaller, scratching for any sympathy it could. "And, honestly, Ellie's been a handful lately. She's getting into so much trouble. It's ruining my ability to focus." I made it sound like maybe I was veering toward tears, but righted the ship and said as strongly and clearly as I could manage: "I think the draft we have is good enough. Don't you?"

I sat down on a stiff wooden chair, glaring at the banker's box and waiting, but was only met with a hush.

A hush so long that the only noise was the soft kick of the refrigerator motor behind me.

"You really want to know what I think?" she said. "I think you're making things hard on yourself. I think you had an idea about how *Ghost Riders* was supposed to be. A quickie. Wham-bam-thank-you-Sadam. Collect some easy money. Right?"

"No." My cheeks went hot. I curled my legs up under me, attempting to, I don't know, get smaller? Disappear completely?

"Just because you have the same last name as Big Dan, you thought you could just hit the word count and we'd greenlight the manuscript?" She sighed like I was the

saddest thing she could imagine. The sigh left a wasp stinger in my chest. One day earlier I didn't want anything to do with this book, now some long-lost pride was shifting me in the other direction. "Are you this difficult for everyone?"

"Difficult? I just thought I was done. You don't know how painful it is to dig like this." I stretched out painful into several dramatic syllables. I may have even pounded a fist on the table. Once a youngest child...

"That's good. Use that pain. I need you to go to those uncomfortable places, Layla. That's the kind of book we are expecting here. Honest, true, raw. So, let's go over it again: Tell us your memories, research Big Dan's childhood, and dish on his sins." She mumbled yes and no a few times, as if someone—perhaps that broken-necked assistant—was passing her paperwork. "And get it done in a month. We're already so far behind schedule we had to make this book a crash. You know the marketing department scheduled *Ghost Riders*' release so that it lines up with the thirtieth anniversary of Big Dan's death. So, *hint-hint*, the manuscript has to be tight, complete, and on my desk by Thanksgiving."

I clutched the upside-down box lid on my lap like a tray table. My fingernails slashed nervous designs across virgin cardboard.

"The childhood stuff, okay, I can ask my mom and brother for more stories." I didn't speak after a long while. My mind thrashed—hunting for a way to avoid rewriting this book, but each path failed. "Plus, I think there're some birthday cards and other things in the attic from when I was a little girl."

"You've been holding out on me, Layla."

“But all the ugly stuff, the sins, that would take forever to dig up,” I said, relieved to have made a solid argument. Finally, I was building my case. You might just get out of this yet, I thought.

“Music to my ears. This brings us back to the lovely package we just overnighted to your doorstep. I had the research department put together some files on Big Dan. *That,*” she said. “That’s what is in the box. News clippings, photos, transcripts, you name it. All the successes and all the sins. Plus, obscure stuff. Everything organized and color coded by year to make your life easier. See what a sweetheart I am?”

“Thanks.” I said, the way you thank a dentist after filling a cavity.

Something drastic overcame Nancy’s voice. A fast-settling sincerity and calm.

“You can do this. You Are a good writer and this book will be great.”

“Thanks,” I said, softly. “I mean that.”

“Okay. Here’s a prompt—tell me about the first time you realized Big Dan was a stuntman.” She coughed. “Get it? Got it? Good. Keep it. Call me in a week with updates.”

## TWO

A memory:

It's 1986. I've rapidly evolved from one of those kids that eats like a sparrow to one who eats anything within arm's reach. My older brother, Keith, has taken to calling me "The Buzzard" after I treated Thanksgiving dinner like a wrecking crew—picking apart the drumsticks, scraping mashed potatoes bowls clean with my fingers. My cheeks are thick and I don't care. The more he calls me "Buzzard" the more I eat—it feels like a middle finger, but it also feels like giving up and crying. I'm six and won't let anyone tell me what to do. I dress myself every morning in some combination of Sunday School lace and neon sweat suits and whatever T-shirt I find glamorous. My mother is too busy to help, so I scrunchie and braid and barrette my dark hair to such extremes that a kid at K-Mart once high-fived me and complimented my dreadlocks.

Big Dan is mostly retired now. But he still takes every opportunity to creep back under the spotlight and relive the glory days.

On this particular afternoon we are at a stock car racing track in a rough section of Portland. The beat-up wooden bleachers are empty, the sky is the color of granite and ashes and sharks. Dad is followed by a photographer and another guy who holds a shiny white umbrella in front of a bunch of lights.

I remember wearing my favorite puffy red coat and a million pink barrettes. Dad has dragged me along in the middle of the day, so I can't be in school yet, but probably close.

At this racetrack I see a motorcycle ramp for the first time. The plywood and metal look almost like playground equipment. Thrilling. Big Dan lets me stand at the top



and I feel taller than a house, I stare out across the lined-up cars as the frosty wind makes my nose goop. I have no idea what all this is for.

You'd think a world-famous blowhard like Big Dan Wisnewski wouldn't shut up about his highlight reel around an impressionable daughter. But that is not the case. He's never mentioned it.

I wonder why Big Dan is dressed like an astronaut, squeezed into white leather and a matching helmet. Then he spends an hour buzzing up and down the straightaway on a motorcycle. Back and forth, dozens of times, while the photographer snaps away. The air smells like skidmarks and exhaust, which I hate. The engine scares off the birds and I hold mittens to my ears.

I am eager for him to stop so I can ask when we can go home and play.

But first, my father flies.

Big Dan, white as a heron, guns the bike toward the ramp and sails over four cars. He returns to Earth just as smooth as taking a speedbump. I will learn later that this was not much of a challenge—I will see all the videos and read articles and learn that the man can jump four cars in his sleep. This simple speedway ramp is all setup just to capture a shot.

This is the moment I learn that jumping a motorcycle is something my dad can do. All around our house are pictures of some guy in a white outfit atop a motorcycle, soaring through blue skies, but they could have been anyone. Until this day, nobody ever mentioned that he is the man who rode those bikes. Nobody mentioned all the records he holds, and all the hearts he touched. Nobody mentions the pills and women and pain.

His engine roars, but I do not cover my ears now.

He flies again.

And again.

I have always loved my dad before this moment. But now I am *in LOVE*. He is not human. He is a hero.

The photographer waves Dan over to the lighting rig where he stands and smiles beside a pyramid of motor oil. He is handsome, with a clump of brown helmet hair, and that iconic chin scar. Big Dan still has all the good looks of a national spokesman.

His bike is beautiful and enormous, like a spacecraft with all that shining silver. I see myself in whole bent sections—pink and red and freckled. There is a familiar feeling in my belly: a thrill, a gravitational pull toward something dangerous. I am one of those kids, I'll jump out of a tree or swallow a penny just to see what it is like. So, after the engine goes silent, I am compelled to reach out to the chrome tailpipe.

I remember my entire body whipping backward. Screaming and crying. The photographer runs over and presses a cold can of soda against my palm.

Dad holds me and shushes into my ear. "Layla, you can't get too close." He kisses my cheek and pulls me tighter, closer.

### THREE

The banker's box had been stashed under my desk for a full day, but curiosity kept stirring. Nancy's "gift" seemed like such an obvious carrot on a stick. So obvious that I was too proud to take the bait at first.

But after I went into the attic and found a few birthday cards, I was reminded of the year Big Dan failed to show up to his own party. Probably too drunk or high or something. What else had I forgotten? There was so much about Big Dan that had always been right in front of my face and I just never asked about. Or I just chose to ignore it.

I knew that the right thing to do would be to pull that box apart and study every scrap. But that would have been admitting I had half-assed this project to begin with. That would have been admitting that there was more to be done with *Ghost Riders*. That would have been admitting that I had already made big mistakes.

I wasn't quite ready to fess up yet.

For the time being, I stayed focused on quick rewrites. A cinch, considering my background, having interviewed hundreds of people and written, probably, a thousand articles. But this was a different kind of challenge: Of all the subjects to write a book about, I had to tackle the one I didn't want to write about. The easiest solution meant reaching out to my mom, Big Dan's wife of nearly thirty years, and the keeper of the family secrets. My mother, Gail Wisnewski, the woman whose text messages I often deleted before reading, the woman whose voice echoed in my head whenever I felt

shame. The same woman who practically raised me by herself and did everything to make sure I was taken care of growing up and beyond.

My mother and I had a relationship like crystal stemware and concrete floors.

“I had the weirdest phone call with my mom today,” I said, stuffing wads of cotton deep into a knee-length pink sock. I had been doing so with great handfuls for nearly an hour.

I was sitting in the kitchen with my husband, public radio murmuring low in the background.

“Get in line,” said Austin. “I’ve had about a thousand weird conversations with her.” He inched closer to our work—a hot glue gun in one hand and a small circle of white felt in the other. “Have you heard her theory about where the dinosaurs came from?”

“Mom’s going through a phase.”

“Yeah. A phase where Jesus invented the triceratops.” Austin had just shaved his head again and the light haloed off his scalp in strange ways. I liked this look. It brought out those arching eyebrows and gave him the optimistic wonder of a kid. When he got eager to speak, he blinked like he was caught in a bright light.

“Her new boyfriend is religious,” I said. “It’s harmless.”

Dirty dishes were stacked in the sink, dinner had long ago congealed on the stove, the cat was rubbing at our ankles, squeaking for food. Austin and I had been focused on making this costume for so long that we hardly even noticed.

“Back to my point, I finally worked up the nerve to call Mom and ask about Big Dan’s childhood.” I kept my voice level. As if this was nothing important.

“Why?” Austin snorted. “Nobody reads the childhood chapters of biographies.”

“Thank you!” I clenched a wad of polyester fibers until they were dense as a marble. “Tell that to Nancy.”

“So, your mom?”

“I asked about Big Dan’s childhood, and it felt like she was quiet for almost a full minute.” My eyebrows lifted. “Weird, right?”

I wasn’t about to give any hints about big news. It was so rare to scoop your husband, especially after twelve years. Nothing ever surprised us about one another and most news was not a surprise. But today I was hiding a bolt of lightning in my pocket, and I planned to savor it. I wanted this news to burst with maximum impact.

“Get real.” Austin inspected a clog in the glue gun. “A coma couldn’t silence your mom for that long.”

We sat beneath two rows of powerful track lighting. The kitchen was completely, and embarrassingly outdated like that—laminated countertops, an electric stove that had lived through about four presidencies, and white perforated drop ceiling like an insurance office. However, the ugly, intense lighting was perfect for sewing together pink fabric.

“Mom got pissed and said something like, *Big Dan grew up in Roseburg. His father drove a truck or worked at the timber mill. He died in the War, I think. Who knows? Who cares?* Then Mom cleared her throat and asked if I’d had my flu shot yet. She spent ten minutes explaining how many people died from flu last year.”

“Sounds about like her,” he said.

“Here’s where it gets good. I decided I wasn’t going to let her walk all over me today. I wasn’t going to let her slink out of answering like she always does. So, I said,

sure, Mom, but don't you think something from childhood made Dad do all that stupid stuff? I said, a man does not just jump over seventeen busses at Madison Square Garden because he had a nice, neat, by-the-book childhood."

"You said that?" He seemed impressed.

"Mom was like, *Layla, your dad was not stupid. He did what he did because it paid well. We had a family to feed. Period. End of story. You always make things harder than they have to be.*"

"Finally, something I can agree with," Austin said.

"Hush. This is going somewhere." I worked my arm deeper down the sock.

It was well beyond any sensible bedtime and I craved sleep. My spine rang with pain from those rickety wooden chairs we picked up at a yard sale. My temples stung from molten plastic smell of glue. But it was worth it. Ellie was going to love this outfit.

"Get this. Next, Mom spent five minutes telling me how global warming was part of God's plan. Noah's Ark Part Two," I said. "But I did like a good journalist and circled back before we hung up."

Austin nodded, deep in focus with the glue gun shaking over another white dot. A long pebbled pattern was beginning to form on the taffy-colored sock in his hand.

"It was weird. Mom was so agitated. She was talking fast and whistling through her nose, you know how she does that?" I was getting giddy, my voice tickling with enjoyment. "I just kept asking and asking about Dad's childhood. The more I asked, the more I felt like I deserved to know. Right? It's not just about the book at this point. It's important for me, too, which I never really thought about. And finally, hey, listen to this." I knocked on the tabletop and our wine glasses clinked together. "Mom practically

screamed at me. She was like, *your poor father was an orphan. Does that make you happy?*”

I basked for a moment. Headline news had been delivered, and it made me tingle below the skull, as if my thyroid were on fire, which I’m pretty sure is not actually a thing—nor a sign of good health.

“Orphan?” Austin’s lips crumpled. He sat motionless for a moment. “God, that sucks. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s good.” I pulled my hair into a ponytail to keep it off my neck. I was getting sweaty and the tiny scars on my scalp itched. “This means my dad has a documented history. It means someone can tell me more. I need to go to Child Protective Services. There’s a records office in Salem. There must be files and stuff, right? That’s where all the answers for *Ghost Riders* are hiding.”

I was suddenly overwhelmed with heat. It was either too hot or too cold in the house that time of year. The furnace probably needed an exorcist, but we had been ignoring all sorts of problems lately.

“How much will Salem cost?”

“Don’t worry.”

“How much?”

“We’re cutting corners making an octopus from scratch, right?” I held up the final sock and a handful of snowy white fluff. “The trip’ll be cheap. Promise.”

A printout was taped to the microwave above me. The Etsy Halloween costume pattern, caught in the heat register’s draft, featured a young girl in a pink ski cap with two enormous googly eyes. She wore a matching pink sweatshirt. Tethered around her waist

were six long pink socks covered in white felt octopus suckers. The child's actual legs wore matching socks.

"Don't go down this rabbit hole," he said, feeding another stick into the back of the hissing hot gun.

"Blame Nancy." I squeezed the sock, choking it. But blaming Nancy was wrong. I was being pulled from my rut with this project and was getting addicted to the thrill of finding answers. "You'd do this if it was your family."

"I just wish you'd just finish the book, that's all."

A silence fell over our work again. My feelings were hurt that Austin didn't gasp at my big news, or at least act as moved as me. He glued more octopus suckers before I gave up the nerve and found something to talk about.

"Ellie's going to freak when she tries this on," I said, harnessing my mother's talent for dodging subjects. "It'll be so cute for Trick-or-Treat."

"She'll be adorable." His jaw seemed to relax the same as mine. He chuckled and flashed a smile. Beside the baldness, Austin was very much the same man I married a dozen years ago. He couldn't shake a few pounds around his waist and chin, but his smile was the same—one tooth a little crooked. With all the chaos life had been throwing, I found comfort in our sameness.

What did Austin see? Was I the same? Was I different? I looked and felt a lot sleepier, that was a fact. Staying up late with *Ghost Riders* was one thing, but the added stress of Ellie's issues had seemingly aged me by a decade. I was always yawning and my knees filled with lava after even a short jog and my hair totally skipped going grey and sprouted up porcelin white in strands.



I was a lot more focused when we first got married, too. Back then, I was going to be a feature writer for *Vanity Fair* or the *New Yorker*, like Susan Orlean. Period. Now, who knew? I wanted to stop being a writer completely, stop constantly fighting uphill. It was this dream of a nine-to-five job that led me to consider that Master's in social work. Help keep good families together and help kids in bad situations find a safe home. This whole news about orphans and Child Protective Services was right in line with this new vision for myself.

But that dream was getting more and more distant. I was not a social worker. I was a Wisnewski. And I was starting to figure out what that really meant.

Austin yelped, wagged his hand, and sucked on a finger. "You know, this is fun but still, Darth Vader would have been easier."

"Ellie hates *Star Wars*." I shoved up my sleeves and mopped my forehead. "That was all your idea."

"Tell me it wouldn't have been cool, the black mask and cape ringing on doorbells. Me dressed as Luke and you as Leia," he said.

"You've put way too much thought into this."

"And then, you know, maybe you and I could keep the costumes on and go into the bedroom. I've always wanted to—"

Without hesitation I clutched my throat and gagged. A sound less like choking and more like a spoon trapped in the garbage disposal. We burst with laughter. This was an inside joke from college. Since before we were married, Austin and I gagged in that exaggerated way when something was too gross to for words. We had done it so many times no one remembered how the noise was actually born.

“Luke and Leia are brother and sister.” I pressed one final fistful into a sock and pinned it closed. “Keep me out of your incest fantasies.”

“You know that’s not what I’m saying. Still—” He reached out to delicately rub against my hand. I knew what that meant.

“Save it.” My lava knee was stinging, and I needed to walk it off. My fingertips plucked a white circle from Austin’s shoulder and I kissed his cheek. “You missed one.”

It was a night where I found myself on the other side of the house and didn’t remember getting there, a night where I had to stop and blink out the haze before cracking Ellie’s door and entering the darkness. Under the soft blue beam of phone light, I found her completely uncovered. She rolled away hard, her sea creature jammies leaving her belly exposed. Long black hair, like her mother’s, twisted across the pillow. Her thin lips, also like mine, breathed softly, and her arm was cold and goose pimped. I pulled up a blanket and kissed her forehead. She smelled like jelly.

I had never loved anything like this child.

I knelt and picked a stuffed octopus off the floor. Ellie named it “Green Octopus.” Austin and I tried convincing her to go with something cute like “Ollie” or “Ocho,” but her name stuck, just like all the rest. A sparkly eyed brown grizzly was “Bear,” a soft plush calico was “Kitty,” the annoyingly long python from the carnival was “Snake.”

Back in the kitchen, I thought: *Maybe just a peek into the banker’s box?*

I heated a kettle and swayed from foot to foot until the water hissed. I poured myself a cup of tea. “Care if I work on the book tonight?”

“Do what you need to do,” Austin said, glue gunning with precision. “I’ll just be playing with my tentacle.”

I gagged our secret gag and disappeared.

## FOUR

### **1970: THE YEAR IN REVIEW (Or—THE YEAR I FOUND GOD ATOP A 750cc ENGINE)**

*Rolling Stone*

December 31, 1970

1971 cannot get here fast enough. I was asked to write a few pages to recap all the uppers and downers of the past twelve months, but man, honestly, there were mostly only downs. Ah, but there was one ray of hope: a madman broken-boned Svengali tearing his motorcycle across the land to save our souls.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. 1970 was first and foremost all about Nixon sending more and more young men to die. Mai Lai and Cambodia and it feels like it'll never stop and all the protesting and draft card burning in the world doesn't do any good.

Then in April, Paul McCartney announced the Beatles were kaput.

And then in May more innocent brothers and sisters were gunned down at Kent State.

When the summer sun arrived, I got a little optimistic, thinking things would be okay, but then Jimi died. And then Janis. And any kid with a beating heart

just about wanted to put his fist through plate glass, ya know?

So far, 1970 was dark and nasty. Real four horsemen of the apocalypse time. Then, by God, a hero really did emerge. A lunatic hero in white leather who ain't scared to risk his ass and ain't scared to get up again when he fails.

Big Dan Wisnewski is the real deal. Just watch one of his leaps, (It seems like there's a new one on television every couple months) whether he lands or spills his guts across the ground, it's always a breath of energy. Watch him straddling a bleached white Harley 750, cranking the engine and gunning it with all his might toward a ramp and tell me your heart doesn't freeze.

That's because there's no bullshit in Big Dan. There's no politics. He's a one-man A-bomb going to war against gravity and physics and dread. And, buddy, when he's really slashing down the straightaway, flashbulbs lights flickering off his helmet, you feel something *real*

in your gut. And it's been a long time since any of us have felt something real.

It's fear and admiration and honest-to-goodness amazement. And when he zips up into the sky, right at the apex of his jump, *soaring*, it's the only thing everyone in America can agree on—old, young, conservative and hippie, baby, we're all holding hands and asking *will Big Dan make it?*

He's bringing this nation together. And now he's got a partner in crime. Big Dan swears that his oldest son, Lanny (age 8) is going to start warming up his crowds

in 1971. Big Dan claims that little chip off the block's already a better rider than he is. There's something amazing in that, you know? A family of daredevils dead-set on doing the impossible. Makes me think, if the Wisnewskis can do *that* maybe we should be working harder ourselves.

I know it sounds crazy, looking up to a guy who left most of his spleen in a Las Vegas parking lot last June. But if that's not the kind of cloth America should be cut from, I don't know what is.

Look out, 1971, we're coming for you!

## FIVE

A memory:

It's maybe 1984, and I'm living in the Day-Glo make-believe world of tea parties and frog princes. I am four and have not yet filled out into "The Buzzard," so I'm still a twig of a kid, so scrawny that the cab of Big Dan's truck feels like a barn. That ratty brown F-150 could also double as a photo gallery. His dash is wall-to-wall snapshots and faded Polaroids of us three kids. I doubt he can see the gauges. Not that that he would obey the speed limit anyway.

I spend more time in that truck than anyone. Big Dan has begun to shift his obsessive personality away from stunts and drinking and God-knows-what. He channels it into antiques. He has a thing for Tiffany lamps and walking canes with strange heads on them—brass wolves, brass lions, brass roosters. Since my mom enrolled in law school, he babysits most days. This means we visit nearly every junk shop for a hundred miles.

That rattling pickup smells like grease and Naugahyde and the inescapable odor of Pacific Northwest mildew.

I remember playing dolls on the passenger side, no seatbelt, totally oblivious in that innocent eighties sort of way. I remember zipping down the road, sitting Indian-style, sucking milkshakes from white Styrofoam cups. I remember climbing into Dad's lap (Again, don't even ask about the seatbelt situation) and pointing to the dashboard.

“You know who that is,” he says. Gas station signs with ridiculously ancient prices blur just beyond the window. It is a sunny September day, hot in the cab despite our windows being down. The photos shiver in the wind. Dad touches a faded snapshot of a pale little boy with cake on his face. “That’s your oldest brother Lanny on his first birthday. And there’s him in a tuxedo, going to a fancy dance called prom. Here,” he taps a small picture stuck to a dead space above the heater controls. “That’s Lanny riding his first motorcycle.”

I ask why he has so many pictures of Lanny.

“Because your brother was the best.” Dad rattles my spine when he clears his throat. I have never met this brother, but from here on out, he is on a pedestal. Lanny the ideal son, the ideal brother, the ideal man, you name it.

“I put everyone I love on this dash,” Dad says. “That’s why there’s lots of pictures of you and Keith, too.”

I ask where the pictures of mommy are.

I remember a lot of time passing, suburbs turning to farmland outside the window, it feels like forever before Big Dan speaks again. I actually begin playing with dolls before he says, “Mommy’s gotta earn her way back up on the dash.”

## SIX

I was not one of those people who stuck photos of high school boyfriends to the dashboard. Not that I ever really had a boyfriend back then. And I was not one of those moms who taped a baby picture over the RPM thing.

But after writing that bit about Big Dan's truck cab, I felt compelled to pay tribute. I stuck up a single snapshot—my favorite family photo. Christmas 1979. The picture's background glowing orange from the check engine light. The warning had been going for months, but the Honda didn't give me any trouble on the way to Salem.

This was looking like my lucky day.

It had to be luck. Already, I'd avoided the perfectly pruned moms slipping from their waxed SUVs and chatting about Pilates as I dropped Ellie off at school. Then, halfway to Salem, my debit card wasn't declined for lack of funds at a gas station. I spent long stretches admiring that lucky photo, warming in the memory. According to Mom, my birth had given the family something to bond over just when things were tense—probably Big Dan cheating or drunk or mean. Growing up, there were stories of that one Christmas all five of us were together, before Lanny drowned. It felt good, being the glue we once all depended on.

We were once whole.

In the snapshot, I am doll-sized and wearing a ruffled white gown, asleep across Lanny's lap. His hair was short and he wore a tight green snowflake sweater. Fresh, cherry red scabs were up and down his face, probably from another motorcycle wreck. I hardly noticed them because Lanny smiled so wide with this amazing set of teeth and big,

soft eyes. Dad and Mom formed a back row, hands on Lanny's shoulders, both in gaudy holiday outfits and high beam grins. My dad had grown a well-groomed beard and looked overfed. Mom was stunning—long black hair slashing down one shoulder, high cheeks, and a sharp figure that looked nothing like she'd just given birth.

My other brother, Keith, sat next to Lanny, but his seat was a bit to the side. Nobody had a hand on his shoulder. Keith was in the deep throes of middle school awkwardness, buck toothed and wearing glasses too big for his head, forcing something like a smirk.

Over the course of my life I had always wondered what they were like. What must it have been like to be in *that* version of my family? Happy, fun, wealthy, alive. As a kid, I played make-believe that we still had a whole family. Most often, I daydreamed about Lanny. He would have been the perfect brother. In this alternate reality, the bully girls at school elected me class president because Lanny campaigned for me. Later, in high school, I'd wish Lanny was around because I knew he would knock on my door after I slammed it in a teenage fit, and Lanny would give great advice and be an even better listener. It's weird to admit, but I never dropped this fantasy. I envisioned the perfect speech Lanny would give at my wedding rehearsal, touching and funny and just enough to make everyone cry. Even in those months after Ellie was born, when I couldn't even scrape together enough time to shower, I'd know that if Lanny were alive he'd be popping by with kung pao takeout and smiles and the promise of sanity.

My family never posed for holiday photos after I was eight. By then, both Lanny and Dad were gone. It was probably just too depressing for Mom, to force a smile for a photo of just her and me and Keith with two larger-than-life voids in between.



By the time I arrived at the Child Protective Services office in Salem, that lucky Christmas photo seemed to have lost its luck.

“I don’t think we can give you what you want,” said the records clerk, a girl with jagged green fingernails and brown bangs over one eye. “I can call up the general file, but all the real details are in the Mother File.”

The building was dark and smelled like cleaning fluid. Seats were scarce, so lots of people leaned against walls or just paced the empty aisles. 0

“Okay, how do I get ahold of the Mother File?”

She squinted a beat, like everybody on the face of the earth knows how to acquire such paperwork. “I mean, since you are not the client or the client’s parents, you’d need a court order.”

“But I’m the client’s daughter.”

“You’d still need a judge to sign off on it.”

My chest seemed to slip. The prospect of all this information being only a few key strikes away was infuriating. I grew hungry in ways I didn’t know possible. Edgy and nervous, suddenly craving the thing I couldn’t have. “Well, what’s in the general file?”

“Not much.” Her gnarled fingernail scratched at her nose. “Dates, orphanages, foster parents’ names. Reasons for dismissal. They’re usually pretty short and basic. It’s mostly used for reference.”

“If that’s the best I can do,” I muttered, suddenly wanting to go home and sit under a blanket and give up.

“It’ll take, like, twenty minutes. My supervisor, Glenn, has to approve pulling a file. We’ll call you back up.”

In the waiting room, babies screamed and a boxy television played Jerry Springer. I found a molded plastic seat and pulled a folder from my bag. The entirety of my dad's public life had been laid out by Nancy's researchers: one folder for each year between 1969-1989. A fifty-pound monument to the Big Dan Wisnewski hype machine. The choice of which year to bring along to kill time was easy. 1980 was the smallest and, therefore, easiest to fit into a purse. It was the slimmest file by a longshot.

1980 looked starved, in fact.

1980 didn't seem to match the others, which also pinged my curiosity. Big Dan apparently had nothing happen from about January to June of that year. The man vanished, which was out of character. Six months without publicity was six months without oxygen for Big Dan Wisnewski. He was like the weather or box scores back then—a weekly, often daily—part of the American news cycle.

Big Dan worked his ass off to stay very public, which was no easy feat in the analog era. From this long historical view, it was easy to see an addiction beginning with his first taste of fame in 1970, after nearly dying during his first nationally-televised jump outside of a Las Vegas casino. He came down crooked and ended up doing summersaults across the pavement at 80 MPH. He broke fifteen bones and was unconscious for a week. The public flipped out. By the mid-70s, Dan was a pop culture phenomenon, drawing millions of viewers for his jumps, his own Saturday morning cartoon, and even a line beer with his name on it. In retirement, he discovered that fame was not transferable to other industries. Dan tried working in broadcasting, and even started a few of his own businesses, but ended up as little more than a joke on Carson monologues and the victim

of a Dean Martin Celebrity Roast. Throughout the lows and the highs, my dad still found ways to grab attention.

Except for 1980.

I knew this blip on his technicolor history wasn't something I should concern myself with. It had nothing to do with *Ghost Riders*, nothing to do with Big Dan's childhood, nothing to do with any of his boneheaded controversies, and had nothing to do with my own childhood, really. I wasn't even a year old in 1980. But the one newsworthy event that year was enormous: Lanny's death.

My oldest brother, the heir to my father's legacy, died when he was only 20-years-old. It was a surfing accident near Port Orford. He was trying to escape the spotlight, camping on the beach alone. A family found his body washed up onshore. That meant the 1980 file was mostly obituaries, except for one small oddball article that I couldn't stop rereading.

## SEVEN

### **BIZARRE LAWSUIT SETTLES OUT OF COURT**

*The Oregonian*

December, 29 1980

Retired stuntman, Big Dan Wisnewski and his wife, Gail, reached an out of court settlement with Amy Beth Brubaker, the former girlfriend of their deceased son, Lancelot "Lanny" Wisnewski.

Brubaker, who lived with Lanny Wisnewski at the time of his death in July, recently put several of the young stuntman's possessions up for auction through Sotheby's in New York. The lot consisted of memorabilia, such as a used

leather racing suit, jewelry, correspondences, and items found in Wisnewski's possession and campsite when his body was discovered on Port Orford Beach following a tragic surfing accident.

Upon reaching the settlement, the auction was immediately cancelled and all items were returned to Dan and Gail Wisnewski. Both parties declined to comment. Terms of the agreement have not been made public.

## EIGHT

“Layla Wisnewski?” said a wide-shouldered man in khaki pants and short hair the color of tarnished silver. His hands flagged my way like he was directing air traffic. “I’m Glenn Dexter, the department manager. Can we have a word?”

Glenn Dexter’s office did not look like what I imagined Child Protective Services might be. Posters for *Star Trek* and *Spiderman* were taped against naked white walls. Action figures lined a window sill. His desk was covered in chunky rubber cartoon figurines I didn’t recognize. Stacks of books and files and papers were all around. Not to mention several jack-o-lanterns, strings of black paper witches across the ceiling, and thin plastic ghost softly flapping against the door.

It also smelled wonderful. A bright vase of lilacs sat in the direct path of the sunlight, heating up and filling the room with that perfume of humid flowers.

A space had been cleared on Dexter’s desk, enough for a pale-yellow folder. His hands hovered above it, anxiously banjoing a rubber band between flaky-skinned fingers. His eyes were low and strong. His goatee, the same shade of grey as his hair, was carved with precision. When he spoke, he leaned forward, almost like he wished we could touch foreheads, despite having that desk between us. Glenn’s shaggy eyebrows lifted as he spoke, and there was a sweetness to his voice. “When this came across my desk, I did a serious doubletake.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Your dad is Dan Wisnewski. *The Big Dan Wisnewski?*”

Over the years, I had dealt with this question differently. Depending on my mood I could be either very proud of this fact, or disgusted, or even completely deny it. However, nobody had ever asked mentioned my father when I desperately needed something from them. It surprised even me when my shoulders perked and my eyes matched Dexter's level of excitement. I dug deep and found the closest thing to an aw-shucks voice my conscience would allow. "Of course! You know him?"

"Know him? *Know him?*" Dexter unclasped his cuff and peeled up a sleeve. His arm revealed freckles and ginger hair so thin it glowed in the afternoon light. "I live with him."

"Pardon?"

Dexter raised a hand and pointed to a bulging line of flesh across the palm. "1975, my buddies and I built a plywood ramp and I got six stitches jumping over a doghouse." He continued rolling the sleeve past the inner left elbow. "1976, eleven stitches trying to jump my Huffy across a pit we dug into the back yard. We even set the hole on fire with lawnmower fuel." He turned his skull and tugged back an earlobe revealing another long gash that stopped at the base of his neck hair. "Concussion, 1977. After watching Big Dan set the world record in Tampa, I tried going over my old man's pickup truck with a 10-speed. Came close. Got a bunch of stitches and even lost some hearing on this side. Mom was furious."

"God, I'm so sorry."

Dexter smirked like when you wait for someone to break into laughter. "I don't think," he held it a moment before returning to chipper familiarity. "I don't think you get it. I'm fifty-one years old and that man has brought a smile to my face nearly every one

of those days. I'm alive, like capital-A alive, because of Big Dan. He's royalty in my book."

Dexter had prodded the outer limit of my comfort zone. I was eager to bring things back to where I could be in control. "That's so sweet. You'd be surprised, but I don't hear that very often," I said and returned Dexter's smirk. "Often enough, I mean."

This seemed to grant a permission I didn't know was on the table. Dexter swallowed a huge breath. All happy gestures and excitement. "I have a million questions for you." His busy hands began pulling the rubber band into star shapes. "But, oh shoot, I have to run. There's this meeting I can't get out of." His tongue pressed a bubble of flesh from his cheek. "Just my luck."

"About the file, though?" I said.

He passed a thin folder. It felt nearly weightless.

"It seems so small," I said, rubbing two or three sheets between my fingers. "I guess I was expecting *more*."

"Oh, no. That's actually pretty huge for a general file." Dexter shuffled the insides of a briefcase. "They're usually half a sheet, max."

"So, what does this mean?" I flipped quickly across pages.

Dexter's mood fell hard. His smile turned flat. "Unfortunately, it means Dan had to move around a lot as a boy. A dozen foster homes. Ten orphanages. Very sad."

I glanced down, hoping, I guess, for an answer to rise up off the page. "Why?"

"Tough to say. It's probably not good news, that much I know," said Dexter. "But you'd need the Mother File for specifics."

My neck tensed and I couldn't hold eye contact. "There's no way I can afford a lawyer."

I made a mental note to call Nancy. Plead my case. Tell her how hard I had worked to find answers, but just came up blank. Beg her for forgiveness and a cashier's check.

"Yeah, I figured a court order might be out of reach." His chuckle returned, but darker and sharper. "But, for the daughter of royalty, you know, I might be able to make an exception. Would that be okay?"

"Please. Yes." I said, half-standing, maybe to hug him? The relief overcoming my body was so great, I didn't know what to do. "Give me every Wisnewski file you have."

"Deal." Dexter shook my hand and I noticed his lips curl and his eye glimmer. It was a look I'd seen in other strangers. "Before I go, can I ask just one of those million questions I have about Big Dan?"

"Sure."

"What's your favorite memory of him?"

I smiled sweetly, still living in the warmth of relief. Without hesitation I went into deep detail about the Easter I split my knee wide open.



## NINE

A memory:

It's 1987 and I'm in second grade and I'm turning into this hybrid of the most important people around me. I'm one-third untamed, attention-starved redneck like Big Dan. I'm a third hold-my-ground, street smart tornado like my mother. I'm even a third like Keith, an irreverent nerd who wields a 16-sided die with confidence. I am all of these things to different degrees depending on the day.

Today, I'm a little more Big Dan.

It is Easter Sunday, Keith and I are dressed for church. He is in a clip-on tie and a powder blue suit that matches Big Dan. I wear a lacy white dress that is fun to spin. Keith sits on the porch balancing a textbook on one knee and a graphing calculator on the other. Even when he's home on break he is always studying, constantly working toward a mechanical engineering degree from Harvard.

I am pedaling my bike in the morning sunshine across the driveway. My shadow falls behind and then catches up and speeds ahead along the angle of light. In my head, the silhouette is an evil wizard chasing me. The bike zags and waggles to lose the shadow before I fall hard and start screaming.

I'm rolling in pain on the pavement. Keith calls me a baby and says to stand up. When my eyes open, Big Dan blocks out the sun. The pain vanishes for split second and I go numb with fear. Years later, I will wonder what invisible switches were plucked to bring on such fear. My father leans closer and the sunlight explodes over his shoulder and blinds me and brings back the pain. I know I am in trouble and I get sweaty with guilt and expect the worst.

Instead, my father kisses my closed eyes and scoops me into his arms. My relief is complicated by the vision of wet blood against Dad's pastel blue suit breast.

The rest of the family leaves for church while Dan cleans and bandages the wound with enormous hands. Surprisingly delicate hands. Musky cologne fills my nose as he kisses my forehead and says, "Good news. Doctors think you'll walk in six-to-eight weeks." I hug him. For a moment, there is no pain. Dad says, "You will ride again, Layla. We always get up and ride again."

We watch cartoons until I fall asleep with my head on his lap.

I am loved and feel close to my father, but that fear from before has not completely vanished.

## TEN

As a parent, I could be such a liar. I told Ellie not to worry every time she got into trouble. I told her that the world will get easier as she got older. These were the kinds of lies I had to tell because the battle between Ellie and the world had become constant. At least she was not alone. After reading Big Dan's general file, I started to think being in the Wisnewski family meant that you were always at war with the world. Moving and battling, moving and battling. But why were we fighting?

Forget the world, sometimes we were at war with one another without knowing why. There were days it felt like my own child was sent here to sabotage me.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. When Ellie was born, she was just going to assimilate into our life. Austin and I would be the cool parents on Instagram, with a toddler tagging along to Kuala Lumpur. Parents with a kindergarten sushi connoisseur. She'd be a self-productive little dynamo who left us with plenty of free space. Austin and I had read books on French parenting and it was going to be simple.

Except, genetics didn't care about books. Ellie was not that simple kid. Right about here is where life went to war with my writing career. Ellie was born about the time the *Woman's Day* story came out. My time faded and my connections in the industry faded and, yet, I loved this saboteur.

How can creative people love their offspring? These children who so completely wreck our lives? This little person who was supposed to eat Ethiopian food and doodle while I wrote Susan Orlean-type profiles. This phantom kid who was never going to need

me to entertain her on weekends. How can I love this leech? Love her so fully and richly that I kiss her every night and feel grateful for the opportunity?

Mothers and daughters were a mystery like that.

“Ellie, we’re leaving for school,” I called. “Five minutes.”

Inside our cramped bathroom, I flipped open a compact and checked my makeup. Normally, I spent a solid chunk of time before a mirror on weekday mornings, lying to the World, saying I cared about smooth skin and eye shadow and presenting myself as a woman who didn’t have a hole on the ass of her yoga pants. The other moms at Ellie’s school looked like they just arrived from central casting, and I felt some strange need to fit in—to mimic them, to be friends even though I didn’t want their friendship.

But something felt different that morning when I pressed the dark sagging flesh under my eyes. I snapped the compact shut and tossed it into my purse. I considered maybe even the trash. That morning, something said to wear your exhaustion with a smile. *I was up until two AM writing a book about my famous stuntman father,*” I imagined snapping at one of the more bug-eyed, intense PTA parents at St. Maria’s. “*What did you do last night?*”

Something had let loose within me.

There was an edge to my thinking and this meanness brought confidence.

Confidence was welcomed, because I was scheduled to meet my brother Keith later that morning. Normally, I avoided Keith. He still made me feel like the baby of the family. In fact, it had been almost a year since I saw him face-to-face, despite the fact that we both lived in Portland.

But obtaining our father's CPS file made me set up an appointment with him. I wondered what Keith knew about Big Dan's childhood. It had to be something.

But first, school.

"Ellie. Where are your backpack? We have to go." One side of her hair was pulled tight into a cheerful pigtail, while the other had burst into a squirrely mess. She was dressed in her plaid Catholic school skirt and a white t-shirt screenprinted with an octopus holding eight lollipops. Students were supposed to wear a plain white polo, but that morning I was too exhausted to argue.

Her body was constantly in motion, crawling over furniture, donkey kicking into cartwheels, breakdance spinning on hard floors, and climbing anything remotely like a foothold. This constant action made her thin and surprisingly strong.

"Galileo-A-O-A-O-A-O-A-O-A-O-A-O-A-O-A-O," she said in her usual carbonated voice, twirling on tiptoes. She always walked on her toes. Seamlessly, Ellie transitioned to the kitchen and filled a cup of water. "Mama! Mama, pour agua on your head."

"Why?"

"Do you even know what agua is?" she said.

"It's Spanish for water."

"No, it's an ancient Chinese saying that means *Justice*. Just kidding, *Ellie* is the Chinese word for justice." She downed the full cup of water in massive gulps, belched softly, and went back to reciting something like her favorite song, "Bohemian Rhapsody." "Galileo. Galileo. Galileo." She froze and looked up with tender green eyes, the eyes she so rarely locked on mine. "Galileo. Galileo. Galileo."

It held me steady, completely transfixed, afraid to break our trance. I could look at my kid and count freckles all day.

“*Mama.*” She spoke in a sugary baby voice.

“Yes?” I said softly.

“Mama?”

“Uh huh?” I knelt. The television went silent. The countdown in my head stopped—the one ticking off all the minutes we were late to school. My urge to draw near and *love* this child overcame all other impulses.

“Wanna to hear a question?”

“Of course, sweetie,” I said and opened my arms for a hug.

“Mama?” she whispered. “Do you want to get cut with my chicken butt?”

She burst into laughter and a tiptoe-twirling frenzy.

At age seven, the kid already knew I was a sucker for sincerity. She knew I would fall for just about anything if someone sounded like they meant it, especially if it was something I wanted to hear. I always realized this flaw in retrospect, but never during the moment. It didn’t hurt that Ellie also knew my weak spot for bathroom humor.

Her principal, Sister Constance, on the other hand, was not as big a fan of butt jokes. Several notes had recently been sent home about this standup routine. According to *The Nun*, Ellie was a major disruption in class.

I reached out to fix that shattered pigtail, but she was gone, yelping about being late for school. Ellie meowed at the door and ran to the car.

I grabbed the keys and said something like a prayer, hoping she would finally have a good day. I desperately wanted Ellie to have a better run at this new school. Her track record was beginning to look a lot like her grandfather's.

ELEVEN

**Child Protective Services of Oregon**

General File

**Subject:** Daniel Jerome Wisnewski Jr.

**DOB:** 1-15-1944

**SSN:** ■■■-■■-■■■

**Case #:** W3349

The following is a reference record of juvenile housing. For full details please request the full file using subject's social security number and case number.

<u>RESIDENCE</u> <u>DISMISSAL</u>	<u>DATE</u>
Wittingstat Home for Boys (Baymill, OR) Disciplinary	5-10-1954
Mr. Don and Sylvia Herman (Newport, OR) Fighting	3-24-1955
Mr. Jacob Haastaad (Corvallis, OR) Disciplinary	6-8-1955

Saint Claudia's Orphanage (Pendleton, OR) Fighting	11-18-1956	
Mrs. Aretha Duffy (Boring, OR)	3-1-1957	Theft
Saint Mark's Children's Home (Portland, OR) Disciplinary	9-1-1957	
Mr. Jacob Haastaad (Corvallis, OR) Disciplinary	12-25-1957	
Mr. Ken and Brenda Cuth (Portland, OR) Runaway	6-6-1959	

Page 1-of-3

## TWELVE

The Honda banged and bounced along the outskirts of civilization. My brother's workshop was beyond town on a two-lane highway that kept coiling until the houses vanished and the rolling green hills began, out where the only signs of life were billboards for Keith Wisnewski Motorsports.

The building was modeled after some NASCAR shop Keith visited before doing a jump in Charlotte. The facility's interior was built from custom colorless walls and glossy white floors that reflected light like pools of milk. He once bragged about the building being so large he could punt a football across it. The complex was part functional motorcycle garage, part tourist trap. Fans were welcomed to venture over a plexiglass catwalk and peer down on mechanics pulling apart engines, or some lab coated engineer meticulously constructing a scale model of a long wooden ramp butting up against



miniature version of a huge blue river. On rare days, they caught a glimpse of the man himself—the flesh and blood offspring of America’s favorite daredevil. Keith seemed to pretend not to notice the whispers, which probably made the hair stand on his neck.

The workshop’s tidiness was one of the few traits Keith inherited from our mother. His mathematical OCD brain would never allow itself to be a slob like Big Dan. Keith also inherited our mother’s IQ. Back when the family had money, he was sent to an elite prep school from third grade on up to Ivy League college.

As a kid, Keith never did stunts. Lanny was always the one on track to inherit the legacy. But then Lanny died, and then Big Dan died, and then Keith stunned everyone by dropping out of Harvard and hopping on a motorcycle, attempting to jump huge distances. It seemed like some kind of suicide pact between all the men in my family. There was no way Big Dan’s skinniest, nerdiest offspring could handle it, right?

But Keith thrived.

He maybe even outdid the others, if you consider the fact that “Krazy” Keith Wisnewski never once broke a bone during his career. Keith’s engineering background helped calculate jumps to such perfection that he never even wrecked. Some people thought he really was supposed to be the heir apparent. He hit the ramps, graced across whatever lay below, and landed as smooth as cake batter pouring into a pan. He destroyed all of Big Dan’s records. Recently, Keith had stopped doing the nightly tour circuit and hyped only a few jumps per year, all of them leaps Big Dan had failed to land. Keith went in chronological order, something like twenty-eight jumps, sticking each one and now zeroing in on our father’s unfinished masterpiece: the Columbia River Gorge.

## THIRTEEN

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*The Today Show*

August 14, 1976

-Page 6 of 7-

**DAN WISNEWSKI:** ...that was the last time I ever helped anyone crack a safe. I was only eighteen and about a kitten whisker away from the federal pen. I wasn't going to waste my best years on that junk no more. *Anymore.* You know...that's ancient history. Hey, let's talk about something new. My next jump. It's a pickle. I might die.

**BARBARA WALTERS:** Oh?

**WISNEWSKI:** It's so dangerous, I'm estimating probably a 95% chance of fatality. Nobody else on Earth has the guts to try what I'm trying.

**WALTERS:** Sounds like an exclusive.

**WISNEWSKI:** I'm going to jump the Columbia River Gorge. It's a mile wide and that's three-times longer than any previous record. It's the crown jewel of America, the same pathway Lewis and Clark took to the Pacific. Just like them, I consider myself an explorer. I'm charting new territory, asking how far can a man push his body and what are the limits of bravery? I'm up there with Neil Armstrong and Magellan. Except I'll be piloting a nitrogen-fueled rocket bike. I'll hit speeds of 300 M.P.H, use a hundred-yard long ramp, the works. It'll be unlike anything anyone's ever seen if I don't die. And even if I do, you won't be able to miss it.

## FOURTEEN

Keith seemed particularly eager to revisit the Columbia River Gorge. That stunt made so famous by all the footage. The moment of shame Big Dan carried until his death. Keith was hot to rewrite history and bypass the moment that forced our father to walk away from his career in tears.

Keith was going to do that jump, minus the pandemonium. Minus the failure. Minus the mystery. Minus just about everything that made Big Dan's attempts noteworthy. If anything, that was my brother's biggest downfall: Keith lacked Dad's edge. He lacked raw authenticity.

Not that the general public seemed to mind. Keith strutted around like the Grand Marshall of his own parade, and fans ate it up. The parking lot outside his headquarters was packed. Eager gift shop crowds inspected mugs and posters and DVDs. A few reporters were interviewing people about Keith's big jump in a few weeks. I weaved through the masses, toward the smell of motor oil, to the shop floor and eventually, at the rear of the building, I found a door labeled: THE BOSS.

Keith's office was probably the same square footage as my entire house, except much nicer. It was dominated by a long oak desk, artsy lighting, and an expansive window that framed acres of lush pine forest.

"Happy Halloween," I said, walking in without knocking.

I'd been to his office dozens of times and it was always exactly the same. So, I was stunned for a moment by the massive stack of cardboard boxes in the corner. I found Keith jimmying a pair of scissors into a flap. "Hey, Buzzard. What's going on?"

"I was wondering the same thing."

"White gold." Packing peanuts drifted to the floor as he hauled a carton of cigarettes from the box. "Me and Mom got hooked up with a new sponsorship. I'm the world's most dangerous man, right? So what's more dangerous than these?"

"Gross," I said. "You don't smoke anymore."

"Big deal. I don't wear Pampers anymore, either." He nodded toward a merch shelf where a pink package of disposable diapers sat, featuring Keith's motorcycle wheelieing across the brand name, promoting some contest where he would jump over your child's entire birthday party.

"Real cool."

Keith looked good, considering he was fourteen years older than me. The flesh around his eyes was cracked and his hands had a jerked quality to them. But otherwise, he carried himself with the same speedy, nervous energy Ellie did. Not bad for 52-years-old.

Keith wore snug jeans and a shirt with our father's face printed across the chest. There was a serious resemblance—shaggy brown hair, alert eyes, thick lips. Keith even picked up some of Dad's mannerisms, like gnawing on a thumbnail. I never knew if any of it was truly who he was or just a gimmick.

Keith was a genius at giving people what they wanted, or what he assumed they wanted. While at Harvard I remember him coming home for Thanksgiving, having

picked up a soft, rounded East Coast way of speaking that Mom said, “sounded like George Plimpton on crack.” Since then, Keith had shifted back to his natural voice, but jacked it up with our father’s testosterone. He was over the top, but in calculated ways only I seemed to note. At performances, Keith wore an imitation white leather jumpsuit with stars and stripes in all the right places, just like Big Dan. I often tried explaining to Keith how ironic all this was, this desire to mimic someone else, since an original like Big Dan would not have been caught dead imitating anybody.

Did my brother even care? I doubt it.

“People are going to laugh their asses off when they see you hawking cigarettes.”

“Buzzard, I don’t give a big, fat ball of shit what people think,” he flipped a cigarette into his mouth and began toothpick chewing the filter. “I’m a bad boy. End of discussion.”

“Totally. Bad boys always announce the fact.”

“You’d announce it too, for what this company is paying.” He plucked out the smoke and admired it. “These little suckers are a blessing. I have so much money tied up in the river jump.” His snakeskin boot kicked a box and the top of the stack teetered dangerously. “They’re going to send a truckload of cash when I light one up after sticking the landing next week.”

“That’ll be tough to do inside a casket.”

Keith flicked the cigarette into my chest. “Buzzard, what exactly do you want? I’m busy. As if this jump weren’t enough, the paperwork and red tape are a nightmare. Did you know jumping a bike across a river from Oregon to Washington is considered interstate commerce?”

“Don’t you have a lawyer for that stuff?” I began wandering the room, pausing a long while at the bay window, catching the shadows of trees knifing across the floor.

“I canned my lawyer because I’m broke.” He looked over and locked eyes the way he always had whenever his kid sister annoyed him. “You can leave, you know. Unless you came to your senses and are finally going to watch my jump.”

“Keith, I’m never going to support any of this. Your routine, it’s embarrassing.”

“We need the whole family at the river. Dad would want it that way,” he said.

I cleared my throat. “I came for other reasons.”

“Okay, let me guess, you need help on your stupid book again.”

“Yes, please,” I fake begged. “Only Krazy Keith can save the day. The James Joyce of,” I paused, “whatever.”

“James Joyce of Jumping,” he said, snotty. “*Triple-J*. Slap it on a t-shirt and we’d make a million bucks. But you’re too punk rock for all that, huh?”

“Sure, okay.”

He began to grumble. “Jesus, if I’d have written this book I’d have it on the bestseller’s list by now.”

“Obviously.”

“Instead, *Buzzard* gets a book deal. She only went to state college and wrote for a couple of sinking ship magazines, but, sure, why not? Publishing’s a joke these days. The big money’s in viral videos, streaming content.”

“Thanks for the pep talk. The book is fine, actually.” I swallowed. “Great, really. I just wanted to talk, I just—I don’t know. Have you ever looked into Dad’s history?”

I was growing a little anxious, getting more and more curious about Big Dan's childhood. I needed to know, both for the book but for myself. Plus, here was a second chance to make a splash with this orphan news. Austin failed to see how important it was, but my own brother was sure to be shocked.

"Did you ever stop to think that he never really talked about his childhood?"

"So?" he said.

"Isn't that strange?"

"No. Who gives a shit, Buzz?"

Normally, Keith could erase my enthusiasm like pinching a candle flame. He was incredibly smart and quick-witted. But that day, I had an advantage over Mr. Mensa.

"Did you know Dad was an orphan?" I spoke so calm and offhanded, so as to hide my thrill.

"Sounds kind of familiar. But people say all sorts of crap about Dad. None of it's true, all of it's true, who knows?"

"What if I told you." I lifted a box of flavored cigarettes. *Krazy Kiwi. Wisnewski Watermelon. Columbia River Coconut.* "I have proof. I went to Child Protective Services. They confirmed it."

I wasn't facing Keith, but waited for a question, or a howl of confusion, or the smack of his passed-out body hitting the floor. Nothing happened. This made me regret coming at all and it made me desperate for some impact. Why was I the only person moved by this information? "Not just an orphan. I read his file and Dad got shipped around to a ton of foster homes and orphanages. Like, over a dozen in an eight-year span. I think something weird happened."

“You have proof something weird happened?”

“Not yet. But all this was from the time Dad was ten to eighteen.”

“Buzzard, so what?” Keith walked toward his desk. He disappeared into shadows between artsy beams of light streaking from the ceiling. I had never noticed just how desolate the place was. He cleared some boxes from the chair and started typing. “It’s like you aren’t happy unless you are creating drama. Nobody wants to hear about this. I have never had one person ever ask about Dad’s childhood. And I’ve talked to some real dingbats.”

“I feel like you, of all people, might know more about Dad’s childhood.”

“I don’t.”

“Okay, let’s say that’s true.” I began talking faster, louder. “But aren’t you curious? For us?”

“Oh? You’re doing this *for us*?” He laughed. “This book is going to be such a pile of crap.” From his desk chair, he began cracking open the cardboard sleeve of a cigarette carton.

“Dan didn’t have a family. He never got adopted. At least, I don’t think. And he never told us kids.” I cleared my throat and tried another attempt. “I mean, *seriously*, what? Right?”

“Just let him be dead,” Keith said. He held one pack of cigarettes under his nose and inhaled.

“Come on, you don’t know anything?” My irritation was doubling by the second. How was this man my brother? We had nothing in common. “Imagine how unloved he must have felt as a kid. How unwanted.”



“It means nothing. He would’ve ended up just the same no matter if he’d had a family or not. You’re going to be what you’re going to be, to paraphrase Kierkegaard. Which you wouldn’t know.” From his desk chair Keith lobbed a pack of cigarettes my way. “See you later, Buzzard. Here’s a present for your kids.”

“I only have one kid and you know it.”

He shrugged and returned to typing at the computer.

This was familiar. It was the way I always felt in this family, always the baby, always the one nobody took seriously. “You’re such an asshole. This is our father and you act like it’s no big deal.” The cigarettes he tossed me smelled like spring break—pina colada and tobacco and bad decisions. I dropped them where I stood. “What if *we* were orphaned? Wouldn’t you want your children to know your story?”

“We were orphaned.”

Jesus, I thought. A tumor grew in my gut. I’d never thought about myself like that. Orphans were sad and alone and screwed-up. Not like me. I got angry that Keith could make me feel so bad so quickly.

My shoes echoed, pacing the office in tiny, anxious clops. The boxes gave off candy store scents of kiwi and watermelon. “You’re as bad as Mom. I asked her this same thing, and she played dumb, too.”

“What are you so worried about? Everyone always skips the childhood chapters in biographies.” His finger pounded the plastic keys harder. “Besides, you’ll just pull a Layla, anyhow.”

“Pull a Layla?”

“Come on, you screw everything up. Always have.”

By the time my feet stopped shuffling I was standing before a framed leather jumpsuit on the far wall of the office. An urge for equal parts joy and revenge appeared. A spotlight beamed down from the ceiling. I ran my finger over the glass and watched the shadow cut across fireball-orange leather, across a patch with our oldest brother's name stitched into the chest.

"Too bad Lanny isn't alive," I said. "I bet Dad shared everything with him."

"Shut up about Lanny." His typing reached terminal velocity.

The kid sister in me never could let go of an advantage. It was so rare and felt so good, even now. Keith and I were sick. We fell into these roles without even realizing. I was always the brat and he was the touchy middle child. It had gotten so bad that Austin refused to be around us during holidays.

"God, if I could only interview Lanny. He'd have so many stories to tell. Dad and Lanny were like Yin and Yang."

"*Buzzard.*" The keyboard clatter went silent. "I'm busy planning this jump."

"Lanny knew exactly what Dad's childhood was like." I made a carefree snort. "You were probably too busy jerking off to *Scientific American* back then."

I clacked a fingernail on the glass and felt the glands in my neck heat up with thrills. There were no people you could torture like a sibling. *Once a youngest child, always a youngest child.*

"God, if Lanny was still alive I bet he would have jumped the Columbia by now, don't you think?" My voice went breathy and sweet. "He was so *great.*"

"Lanny didn't know his dick from a throttle cable," yipped Keith. He chucked a stapler against the wall. Keith, same as me, inherited our father's temper. It made my

back tense and straight the way it got thirty years ago when Big Dan was angry, back when Big Dan's voice filled the house and raised my heartrate. "I'm tired of everyone glorifying that idiot."

A thin spring from the stapler plinked across the floor.

My spine loosened, because there was more dagger twisting to be done. "I don't know what you mean, Lanny was pretty great. The proof's out there."

"Lanny wasn't anything but a stupid junkie."

"A junkie surfer?" I smiled wide. "Now who's the one that doesn't know anything?"

Keith stood and approached, his bootheels connecting like ballpeens on the glazed white concrete. His face crashed down into something familiar and wicked. He was going to hurt me. He was going to enjoy every moment of it. I flinched.

"You want to know a secret? You want me to tell you something you don't know today?" he said. "Lanny never surfed a day in his life." He spoke low. "That's just a horseshit story you were dumb enough to believe."

"Yeah right." I leaned back to the point of nearly losing balance. "You're just jealous because he had real balls."

"Lanny did everyone a favor by dying. Mom and Dad hated his guts, look that up sometime. The shit he said about Dad—" Keith pulled out a phone that made no noise. "I have to take this," he said and turned. "I'm kind of busy accomplishing something Dad and Lanny could never dream of."

## FIFTEEN

### **EASY RIDER**

*Reptile Aficionado*

December 1, 1978

### Page 2 of 2

**Lanny Wisnewski:** ...I'm serious, man. I think Gary can read my mind. That snake, he's magical. Heck, I'm closer to my pets than, like, anyone in my family.

**Reptile Aficionado:** Speaking of your family, what do they think about your passion for snakes?

**LW:** Who cares? I'm getting real bored talking about snakes.

**RA:** Well, that's sort of our focus. Sure. Okay. Let's rap about your family some more. This rivalry with your father, you have been, let's say...not-so-shy.

**LW:** Yup. I'm like god on two wheels and Big Dan has become a total joke.

**RA:** Care to elaborate?

**LW:** Nah.

**RA:** Guess you didn't inherit your old man's gift for gab.

**LW:** Beats me. Life's not a talking contest. I just jump bikes, man. I can jump further than Big Dan with my eyes closed. I already make more money than him.

**RA:** You really believe you are better? He holds fourteen world records.

**LW:** Whatever. People just want me to do the same stuff as him. Whatever.

**RA:** Records don't lie.

**LW:** Records are just numbers. I think beyond numbers. Like, what about high jumps? Like the Eiffel Tower. I could jump over that, easy.

**RA:** Height kind of sounds like a number...jumping the Eiffel Tower also seems doubtful.

**LW:** Why?

**RA:** Gravity, for one.

**LW:** I don't know, man. Science is dumb.

**RA:** Your father would disagree. He has a whole team of engineers helping him.

**LW:** Whatever. People just want me to do the same stuff as him. Whatever.

**RA:** You said that already.

**LW:** (Laughs) No, I didn't.

**RA:** We just...Yes, you did.

**LW:** Whatever, man. Your word against mine.

**RA:** So, what started this rift between you and Big Dan?

**LW:** He just wants to control me. He wants a piece of this action. But I'm a lone wolf and stuff.

**RA:** Big Dan says he's worried about you. He said in *Newsday* that you are living too fast and dangerously.

**LW:** Pot kettle black, man. My old man has been the king boozier, pill-popper, and womanizer for years. Me, I'm the good guy. **RA:** What do you think keeps him together? Big Dan's broken nearly every bone in his body, yet he's trying to jump the mile-wide Columbia River Gorge?

**LW:** What keeps him together? My old man's held together by pins and wires and Jack Daniel's.

**RA:** Would you ever jump something so big?

**LW:** Hell, man, I could jump Niagara Falls...

## SIXTEEN

A memory:

It's 1985, or 1986, or '87, or '88. Take your pick. Whatever spirited little girl you think I am at this point, she does not exist at home. Home is a warzone where I learn to keep especially quiet when the kitchen lights are off.

Outside this place I am an attention hog, and a scrapper, and a whirling ball of personality, but I am practically mute at home—at least until I can gauge whether or not Big Dan is in one of his moods. I hug the walls, careful not to be noticed. A chubby little ghost in pigtails and Umbro shorts.

These days Big Dan is the frequent victim of migraines, backaches, and crippling arthritis across every inch of his body. I don't understand any of this when I am five and six and seven and eight, of course. I just know that sometimes Dad sits by himself in the kitchen with the lights off. Sometimes a whole evening—from sundown until after I go to bed. Sometimes only one night, sometimes a long string of them. A week. More?

At the kitchen table in the corner, he is a statue in the shadows. Never speaking a word unless he's exploding.

Sometimes the only sound that tells you he is there is the snap and hiss of beers. Other times the only way to know whether things are safe is to simply hold my breath and tiptoe onto the cold linoleum. If I inhale cigarette smoke, I freeze. By the time I catch a glimpse of the burning orange dot in the corner of the room, it is too late.

“Damn it, Layla,” he shouts if I make a decibel of sound rummaging for a cookie or spoiling the darkness by inching open the fridge. “Can I get some peace and quiet for ten damn minutes?”

The pitch of his voice, harsh and confused, straightens my back like post. Sweat. My eyes burn hot with tears.

“Gail. For God’s sake, Gail!” he screams. “Get your daughter out of here.”

Dan actually tends to be more severe with Mom and Keith. Keith once snuck into the kitchen for a pencil, and I remember hearing words that I never knew existed. The volume alone was aimed to kill. “Cocksucker,” “son-of-a-bitch,” “faggot.”

Whenever Mom breaks into Dan’s darkness, it goes differently. Dan’s abuse snarls out in bursts like “bitch,” and “slut,” but Mom doesn’t run away like us kids. If this is the warzone, she is the warrior. The house fills with the sound of plates shattering against the wall. You can’t get far enough away. Her razorblade voice slashes meaner than anything Dan can muster. “Bastard,” “worthless,” “getting-what-you-deserve.”

These days are rare. It only happens a couple times a year. And when it does occur, the television stays low, fewer lights go on, we speak to each other only when absolutely necessary.

But even decades later, whenever I walk into any house and smell cigarettes, my heart starts chopping wood.

During these moods, Big Dan is more like a werewolf. At night he is some strange monster, but Dad is himself during the day—the same good-natured father as always. The guy who hobbles around the house, picking up toys, kissing his wife on the

back of the neck, asking Keith how calculus and trig are going, despite instantly going blank in the eyes.

When I am eight and a little more aware of how abnormal all this is, I get curious and began to dig—an investigative reporter to the core, I guess.

“Dad,” I say, when he drives me to school after one of his spells. “Why do you sit in the kitchen sometimes?”

He chews his thumbnail a moment. “That’s just me meditating, sweetheart.” He uses the turn signal like he is any law-abiding citizen who hasn’t once jumped nineteen Ford Fairlanes at the Metrodome. He waves kindly to crossing guards as if he never once saluted thousands of fans cheering his name.

“What’s meditating?”

Kids run past the truck, swinging their arms, yelping, wearing short sleeves in the warm spring sun.

“It’s like medicine for your head.” Big Dan nods, convinced. “You sit and you focus real deep until all the pain goes away. Sometimes it do and sometimes it don’t.”

“*Does*, Dad. Sometimes it does,” I say, hugging my backpack for warmth, suddenly chilled.

“You’re the spelling bee champ.”

I am, second grade blue ribbon. I had to spell “amphitheater” in front of a few hundred people.

He kisses my forehead and scoots me out the door, then Big Dan spends five more nights in darkness after that.

The last one of these meditation sessions that I remember comes maybe a year before his heart attack. It's a big one and the entire house fills with parents yelling about Lanny.

"He was your responsibility," Mom screams.

"That's a load of shit, Gail," he yells. "You know what I mean?"

"You don't know anything."

"I know you've been lying," he says.

I get scared and run to my room, and try, unsuccessfully, to forget for thirty years.

## **SEVENTEEN**

The only thing that kept us warm on Halloween night was a thermos of bourbon, lemon, honey, and steaming hot water.

Sunset had shifted to a fiery orange—purple-streaked and pink. Crisp fallen leaves were crushed beneath the feet of rushing children: dressed as pirates, princesses, video game characters, furry animals. Nice, spotless, new costumes, bought straight off a rack. Ellie seemed like the only kid with something homemade.

I liked that distinction.

Her stuffed pink tentacles swayed as she darted from house to house, hammering on doors, jumbling "trick-or-treat." What started as "Snick-or-Sneat," evolved to "Kick Our Meat," until Austin had to stop her from declaring "Lick My Feet" to anyone holding



a bowl of candy. Ellie loved wordplay, rearranging letters, and constructing anagrams. Her brain was always hustling. That brain was one of the things I loved best about her.

I felt nourished to see her so happy. School was such a stress that it was good to remember there was a joyful, silly, loving kid in there. I couldn't help but nuzzle Austin's shoulder as we walked past some new buildings.

Geometric, blocky-shaped condos had started dotting the main street of our neighborhood. Their ground floors were occupied by chic shops we couldn't afford. Over the last few years our neighborhood had been getting drastically safer, but still far from a dream. There were strange noises and voices in the alleys some nights and maybe once a month you'd find a silhouette of shattered glass where someone's car had been parked. But that happened less and less. The area had become a much nicer place to raise a daughter, but that meant I was starting to feel unwelcomed.

The musky scent of fireplaces and backyard pits filled the air as we shuffled down the sidewalk. The smoke infused with the cold as we passed the chipped green thermos back and forth.

"I spent the rest of the day calling every orphanage and foster parent on the list."

"Any luck?" said Austin.

"Dream on. Everyone is long dead and the orphanages have closed. It's like my dad's entire childhood has vanished."

"That was a long time ago," he said.

Ellie was off to the next house and we trailed behind.

"I know, I just kind of hoped I'd find a trace of Big Dan. Some, I don't know, *clue*. But I think you're right, this childhood research is useless and—"

My attention shifted quickly to the middle of the street, toward a boy pedaling his bike at top speed while wearing a white jumpsuit, a glittering red X slashing across his chest. A short blue cape, maybe a satin nightie stolen from a dresser, snapped behind him.

The boy yelled something I couldn't understand and the entire block went stiff.

A motherly ache needled my stomach. It was getting dark and I knew, I just knew the boy was as good as run-over. All it took was one car rolling through a stop sign. The boy wove between kids and parents crossing the street. He pedaled faster and faster, yelling, sending my anxiety to ragged places. *Where are his parents?*

"That's a good costume," Austin said and took a sip from the thermos.

The boy cut a long turn at the end of the block and swung back our way, pedaling at hyperactive speed. At the top of his lungs: "Look out! Big Dan the stunt man! Move!" He hopped the curb, tore through the grass and toward a thick walnut tree.

A violent metal clank shocked through the cool evening.

I didn't breathe for a flicker.

The kid was motionless in the yard.

Children stopped hunting for candy, parents lowered their phones.

The boy sprang to his feet and let loose a yelp. A bold green grass stain spread over the uniform. The blue nightie dangled off his shoulder as he waved both hands with political flair. Adults cheered and whistled, kids threw handfuls of goodies. The boy's eyes went wide with a desperate satisfaction I recognized from the real Big Dan. He collected the candy and sped down the block, warning: "Look out! Big Dan the stunt man! Move!"

It was still common to see Big Dan still pop up in the real world. Costumes, TV parodies, clips of his many wrecks shown in slow-mo on cable channels. Like the memory of long-gone loved ones, he never quite vanished but never fully returned.

It was common, but nothing like his heyday, as I discovered.

## EIGHTEEN

### **OFFICIAL SCRIPT—TRUMBULL CORP. PRODUCTIONS—DO NOT COPY**

**Script:** Big Dan Wisnewski Action Jumping Set

**Shooting Location:** Gilbert Studios International, LOT B, Encinitas—California

**Director:** Howard Trumbull

**Actor(s):** Dan Wisnewski; Johnny Powell; “Skip” Armstrong; Ashish Singh; Howie Trumbull Jr.; Ferdinand The Cat

**Editor:** Faith Seacrest

**Run Time (est):** 30 seconds

**Recorded:** April 3, 1972

*Open with slow pan of WISNEWSKI in patriotic riding gear atop his bike, twisting the throttle. Before him is a ramp and a long row of cars. A stadium crowd roars as a puff of black exhaust escapes into the sky.*

VOICE OVER (VO): There’s daredevil Big Dan Wisnewski. The bravest man on the planet. Wilder than Billy the Kid, more handsome than James Dean, smarter than Einstein. But today’s no normal day. Today, Big Dan’s really going to do something special.

*Cut to shot of Wisnewski and bike taking off, roaring closer to the ramp.*

VO: He’s going to use his courage to break another world record, leaping over fourteen cars...

*Cut to Wisnewski hitting the ramp.*

VO: and a bus...

*Cut to Wisnewski going airborne over cars and bus.*

VO: ...and the *family* cat?

*Cut to a shot of three young boys playing with the Dan Wisnewski Action Jumping Set in the yard. The toy bike leaps over a row of Matchbox cars, a toy truck, and a sleeping tabby cat.*

*Cut to a closeup of the toy cycle tumbling over the cat. Cat runs off and Wisnewski action figure spins to a stop in the grass.*

VO: The Big Dan Wisnewski Action Set is the only toy with Astro Jumping Power and the only way to live life the Big Dan Way!

*Cut to shot of the boys gathering the detachable arms and legs and head of the toy.*

BOY 1: (to Camera) And it's the only toy where Big Dan's bones really break.

*Cut to closeup of red, white, and blue boots in the dirt beside the boys. Pan up to reveal actual Big Dan joining the kids in the backyard.*

BIG DAN: Hey, there, doc. Make sure you put me back together real good. (Big Dan Addresses Camera) Because I've got another dangerous leap coming up soon.

*Cut to overview of Big Dan Wisnewski cycle toy, the Big Dan Action Trailer, and the Big Dan Emergency Room Playset.*

BIG DAN in VOICE OVER: Kids, be honest. Be true. And don't be afraid to fail, no matter what your friends and teachers and, *even your parents*, say.

That's how we live the Big Dan way.

-END-

## NINETEEN

### **“The Daredevil Teaches Us His Language”**

*New York Times Book Review*

March, 1973

*Fluent in Dan-ish* (Harper & Row, \$9.95), Big Dan Wisnewski’s collection of wit, wisdom and anecdotes hit shelves this week with quite a splash. Naturally, fans are asking what makes its author tick? I was lucky enough to catch up with Wisnewski last month. Catching him was rather easy, considering he was in traction inside a Fort Collins, CO hospital suite.

**What made you decide to write a book?** Nobody’d ever done it before.

**Is writing a book harder than jumping a bike?** Yes, writing hurts my

head more than getting a steel plate put in. And I’ve tried both.

**What do you want readers to walk away with?** I want them to find some inspiration and harness their own inner-Big Dan.

**What is your favorite passage?**  
Easy, one of the poems I wrote.

*Don’t be scared to fail/I tell ya, you gotta try/’Cause nine times out of ten/Baby, you don’t die...*

## TWENTY

Another sip from the thermos scorched the length of my throat as Halloween night ramped up around us.

“So, I haven’t had a chance to talk to you since Ellie got home from school,” said Austin. “Pick-up was kind of a thing today.”

“Tell somebody else. I can’t handle more bad news.” I made like covering my ears.

“This is serious.”

I took a long, gasping pull from the thermos, hoping the subject would change.

“Sister Constance had a chat with me,” said Austin. “Sounds like Ellie pushed some kid who cut in line.”

“It’s always when someone cuts in line. Or when someone tells a lie.” I sighed. “She’s like a four-foot tall cop.”

“Well, The Nun does not want anything to do with the fun police,” he said.

“The *Nun*.” I gagged our secret gag. Austin returned the noise. We shared a nice laugh.

“This boy fell backward and hit his head on a wall,” said Austin. “He wasn’t hurt, but, obviously, the school has to do something.”

“Obviously.”

“Sister Constance wants a meeting tomorrow. I think Ellie might get expelled.”

“They can’t kick her out of a private school. We’re paying to be there.”

He stole a drink from the thermos. “If you’d have seen The Nun’s face, you wouldn’t be asking.”

Saint Maria’s was her third school since starting kindergarten last year. After burning through two public elementaries, the superintendent said the only option left was the special school for violent and troubled youth. In a panic, we enrolled Ellie in Catholic school and felt the drain on our bank account ever since.

In silence, we kept up for a few blocks. In a perfectly-timed, majestic snap the street lamps began to glow orange. An empty soda can crinkled under my shoe. “Why does Ellie keep doing this?”

“She’ll grow out of it,” said Austin.

“She’s so loving, and sweet, and funny, like, ninety-five percent of the time.” I took a swig. “But, God, when she loses it. It’s like.” Nothing came out. That trail-off was the sound of whipping dead horses. I’d said it before, said that when Ellie’s temper exploded it was like she wasn’t herself. I’d said it so many times that when I locked into that groove of saying it again, I now trailed off. Somehow saying nothing felt like a louder statement. It said: I am out of energy to even keep complaining.

“What else is there? Military school? Study abroad for kids?”

“Probably cheaper than Saint Maria’s.”

Austin stopped and locked eyes on me. Costumed children rushed by, one grazed my elbow with a set of butterfly wings. “You know what our next option is.”

“—Some days,” I said, eager to interrupt his familiar plea for homeschooling. My eyes followed Ellie rushing around in joy, yelling something back to us. “Some days I think we are the worst parents in the world.” My hand struggled to find somewhere to

go—in my pocket and then out of the pocket and then deep inside again. I couldn't get comfortable.

Austin chirped up a single laugh. "That's a good thing." He put an arm around my shoulder. He was warm as the sunset vanished into a black-purple sky. "Thinking we're the worst means we care. I've seen so many of my students with shitty parents, these awful people who'll tell you they are great moms and dads. They say there's nothing wrong with their kid, it's the school, or the teacher, or the system. They love to blame the system."

"What system?" I said. "Is there a system I can blame?"

"Get in line."

We took quick nips from the thermos, the hot toddy was, at best, now warm.

"Kit-Kats!" Ellie said, running down the wooden steps of a pale green Victorian. Her pumpkin swung in large, excited arcs. She came so close she stepped on my toes. She was bad with space like that, always bumping into us or standing on your shoes. "That house is giving out whole, entire Kit-Kats! They're rich. This is the greatest day ever!"

"Awesome!" Austin said.

"Yay," I said.

Austin knelt, pulling out a small sewing kit. "You're losing another tentacle." He fixed it with a few graceful tucks of the needle. He was insanely domestic like that. His parents worked long hours in factories in Pittsburgh, so he basically raised his siblings. By middle school Austin could cook from scratch, sew, and get ketchup stains out of



shirts. My parents were absent, too, but the only skill I ever mastered was memorizing all 75 cable channels.

He kissed Ellie on the cheek and told her to go grab some more because it was getting late. He was very kind to children, which is probably why he taught third grade. Maybe. I honestly never asked why he chose teaching, he just always seemed perfect for it.

I'd been noticing this trend since diving into Big Dan's story. I had a real knack for going along with whatever was happening in front of me, never asking the obvious.

"Thanks, Daddy," Ellie hugged Austin's waist with massive force—she did not know subtlety. "You're so nice, you're going to win the Miss America Pageant for Daddies." Ellie was off again before Austin could reply.

I grabbed his hand, humming the Miss America theme song.

"Jealous?" he said.

"Very." I passed the thermos. We followed Ellie down the street with our fingers locked. It was peak Trick-or-Treat time, the sidewalk was clogged with parents. "She's right. You are a good daddy." I clutched tighter.

"If you really mean that, you'll buy me a scepter and a sash."

"There's your Halloween costume next year!" I bumped against him. "You can finally put this Star Wars thing to rest."

"Not. A. Chance," he said, finishing the hot toddy and pointing. A Darth Vader, about Ellie's size, walked alongside her, teetering a heavy pumpkin.

"Cute octopus," said Darth's mother. She walked sharp, legs slicing like scissors.

This woman was taller than me and dressed in a flowing white robe and those Princess Leia side-buns that I never really understood how to make. The father was in some sand-colored getup, I guess like Luke Skywalker. I'd never met this couple, but I knew their type. These were the kind of put-together families that dominated Saint Maria's. Condo owners who put on makeup for morning drop-off.

"Thanks!" I said, swaying a little. "My husband actually did all the sewing."

"You guys are so awesome," she said.

"Are you kidding? Your costumes could be in the movie."

My fingers couldn't stop fidgeting. I was so jealous. I didn't even know why. I was never really into *Star Wars*, but some people just seemed to glow. And I knew that I was not one of them. Her husband's costume had also been made with serious attention, distressed in the shoulders and knees just-so. There was a grace and ease about them—they looked like the anti-Us. The kind of couple who paid the mortgage in advance, bragged about owning an electric car, and scheduled weekly massages together.

I could hate anybody if you gave me enough time.

Ellie and Darth took turns ringing doorbells. The night seemed to drop a few degrees, and I rubbed my arms for warmth. This block had fewer streetlights—entire stretches of blackness between single-story houses.

The boy's parents small talked more, mindless chat about weather and about costumes and how much simpler Halloween was in the eighties. They were not rude, but not nice either. Our friendship was officially toast when I felt compelled to fill the silence with a second mention of weather.

Austin tugged my elbow. "Tell me you don't wish that was us!"

“Why stop there?” I said. “There are plenty of other weird siblings we can be. Do you have a fantasy about Charlie Brown and Sallie, too?”

Wind chattered the tree limbs. Leaves hurricaned at our feet. I craved more warm drinks, and also craved going home.

The children returned. “No, I’m telling the truth,” Ellie said, smashing her words together, eager to blurt everything out. “That house back there gave away whole entire Kit-Kats.”

“Who cares?” snapped Darth Vader. He removed the mask, revealing thick eyebrows and a missing front tooth. “I got, like, a hundred whole candy bars tonight.”

“No, you didn’t. Your bag would be full,” Ellie’s voice whip cracked a note higher—a familiar leap that commanded my attention. “You’re lying.”

“Yes, I did,” said the boy. “But I already ate them all.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Prove I didn’t.”

“Liar!”

A set of guy wires cinched together in my chest and lurched everything inward toward the heart. I reached for Ellie but it was already too late.

She pinned the boy to the grass, her fists making awful slaps as they beat his chest and stomach. Tentacles bucked and twisted. She swung. Screaming. We struggled to pull her back. Ellie’s voice went wild. Ellie’s voice was raw. Ellie’s voice was from a darkness my family was all too familiar with. A darkness that scared outsiders. Austin lifted her and she kicked and squirmed like a hooked fish. Her nose snotted and her cheeks went hot. Her teeth sunk into Austin’s hand.

A crowd of children and parents circled the scene, none stepping closer, the static of their whispers coming from every direction. It was dizzying. The entire outburst hadn't lasted more than maybe ten seconds. I wanted to run or just die. Death would have been a welcomed break from my usual shame. I just knew these strangers were judging my parenting, judging me, judging my daughter. I wanted to grab each one by the shoulders and shake them, and explain that we are doing our best and tell them Ellie was capable of so much more—she could do division in her head, she wrote me a Mother's Day poem that actually rhymed, she recycled cans and donated the money to the Humane Society.

But the boy's high, crooning sobs spoiled all opportunity for redemption. I swear each whimper lasted an hour. His thin black mask was on the sidewalk with a snapped elastic cord. Both parents looked our way with wide eyed, spooked stares.

I ran the backside of a sleeve across my nose and stood to apologize, like I always did when Ellie punched or tackled or kicked another kid. Just like always, my tongue pressed against the back of my teeth, waiting for the right words to come when the wrong ones appeared. Under a soft white streetlamp, Princess Leia's purse captured my attention. It was like something from a display case. Leather, large, expensive.

These people.

My father rushed in and I let it happen. "Put that dog on a leash." I spoke with the all darkness and drawl of the man who'd said those same words thirty years ago. A tiny hiccup of nerves tensed inside my chest, realizing I just quoted Big Dan. It may have been the first time.

“Excuse me?” Luke Skywalker said, his bangs scattered and shielding his eyes. He complained through his nose, appalled, a voice I imagined he used when the waiter brought pinot in a merlot glass.

My voice came out clear and bold, like hissing fat in a pan. “I said, put that dog on a leash.” In the commotion I managed to glimpse the boy’s shoes. New Nikes that probably cost enough to pay our electric bill. Ellie wore scuffed sneakers from the thrift store. Who were these intruders, trying to change me and my life? Who were these outside forces applying their will? “How about I teach that little liar some manners?”

“Your daughter *attacked* Asa.”

I stepped forward, fully possessed by some electricity I had never known. My tongue pressed stiff against my teeth once more, but not with an apology. I had given in to the ugly impulses of my gene pool and enjoyed the power. *Half the fight*, a memory said. A long-forgotten quote from Big Dan. *Is kicking rich people in the face hard enough to remind them we’re alive.*”

“Let me tell you something about *Asa* and about *you*—”

“Layla,” Austin shushed. He sounded as if he’d just watched the family pet run into traffic.

With his confused voice, the spell was broken.

Princess Leia mopped at running mascara and my urge to crawl off and hide was now stronger, making my legs buckle and shake. Luke Skywalker slung the boy onto his shoulders and they marched down the street beneath orange lamplight.

“I told you we shouldn’t have moved to this neighborhood,” the mother said, looking back.

“You were right,” he said at a powerful volume. “It’s still pretty trashy.”

Porch lights began going dark. Halloween was over and the street was practically deserted.

I collected three dismembered tentacles and ignored all the pearly white stuffing embedded in the grass. Nobody spoke. With Ellie, it didn’t do any good to punish her or shame her at the moment. We could only ever communicate after the adrenaline faded, and by then she barely remembered what she’d done. Some kids, you’d know for certain it was all an act to get out of trouble. Not Ellie. You got the feeling her violence was truly some out of body experience.

We all staggered home, each catching our breaths.

## **TWENTY-ONE**

A memory:

It’s 1988. My rougher edges are slowly being sanded down. Somewhat. I am still struggling with my body, and Mom has forced me to try Weight Watchers. I am the only second grader on Earth who knows how many points macaroni and cheese is worth. Keith is away at school, but doesn’t stop calling me “Buzzard” whenever he is home, and it always makes my hands tremble.

I am in love with Samuel Van Echt. Samuel plays kickball like a god, once fearlessly ate a beetle on the playground, and makes me laugh whenever we sit beside one another in Music. This is my first boy-crazy phase and he is the bullseye of my heart.

All I can think about is our wedding and how many perfect babies we will have. I'm leaning toward an even five girls and five boys.

But wait, big shock, I'm not exactly Miss Congeniality. I am shy around kids my age. They tend to tease me about my looks or tease me because my father is famous or tease me for things I didn't even know I did.

We're at the school carnival when Samuel and some of friends tease me into tears. Dan stumbles upon the scene and brings Samuel to his parents by the neck. "Put that dog on a leash," I hear Dan say, slow and dark. This is one of the few moments I witness his fighting side working in my favor. Today I discover anger is a two-way street and this moment at the carnival is bittersweet: vindicating, and embarrassing. I am immediately uncomfortable, expecting Dan's fury to turn back on me. Whenever Dan is in a bad mood I expect it to be my fault somehow and it makes my chin tremble.

But he doesn't. Instead, my dad jaws with the other fathers, but I can't hear them.

On the drive home, Dad still crackles with fire while we speed through the city. "Those rich shits."

"Dan, you're rich," Mom says, still rosy cheeked with shame.

"We *were* rich. But not like them. We had money, but we were never rich." He knocks on the side of his skull where the hair grew back patchy from a steel plate. "Rich is a state of mind. Rich assholes deserve everything coming to them. People like us, we're fighters. And half the fight is kicking them in the face hard enough to remind them we're alive."

## TWENTY-TWO

“So, November first,” Austin said, cheerfully. The Nun squeaked the chair with all her squirming. She stayed silent. Austin—eternally Midwestern—felt compelled to fill in the awkward gaps until the guidance counselor could finally join the meeting. “Day of the Dead.” He patted fingers on his thighs.

“I’m sorry?” said The Nun. Atop her lifelessly clean desk, soft twists of steam rose from our coffees. I didn’t taste it, but it smelled like one of those gross chemical hazelnut flavors.

“Does St. Maria’s have anything neat planned to celebrate Dia De Los Muertos? At my school, the kids make masks and have a little parade around the playground.”

“That would be inappropriate,” she said.

“Oh?” said Austin. “Sorry.”

My eyes shifted to the wall clock about twice a minute since we got here.

Finally, a young man in a sweater vest arrived and The Nun began to visibly take on breaths again. Had she been holding it in until this moment? Were things really that bad? Whatever her reasons, it put me on edge for a meeting I was already anxious about.

The guidance counselor found a chair and began fidgeting with his watch.

“I wish we were meeting under,” The Nun said. “*Better circumstances.*”

Austin handled the talking. He reassured everyone that we were working hard at giving Ellie as much support as possible back home. He spoke their coded teacher language, he said he knew this behavior was unacceptable and prayed—he actually used the word “prayed” which proves how brilliant he is—that the other child was unharmed.



Austin didn't leave much room for me to talk. Normally, walling me out of conversations made me want to kill him, but I got the point. I had been stomping around the house all night, popping my neck and eating fingernails, muttering all the things I truly wanted to tell The Nun, things unfit for our G-rated environment.

"This is the fourth time we've filled out a purple sheet for Eleanor this year, and, well, it's barely November," said the counselor, spreading reports across the desk.

"We call her Ellie." I said as sweetly as I could fake. Austin gripped his knees when I spoke, but I saw them loosen slowly. "Also, what's a purple sheet?"

"A purple sheet is filed whenever a student has a physical incident," he said. This guy, Geoff or Jesse, had bright blue eyes and lineless skin. The arms of his checked Oxford shirt were creased weird, like it had been tightly folded in a cellophane package until about an hour ago. Saint Maria's was his first job out of college. "For example, I only have one other child who's even been issued a single purple sheet thus far. We try to really stress a *peaceful* environment for learning. And most of the kids embrace that ethos."

*Most of the kids?*

Here were the school's experts on child behavior, two people who almost certainly never had a child of their own. A woman whose maternal instinct petrified decades ago and a guy so young he probably still kept a condom in his wallet. There was quite a gulf between them and us.

I was used to gulfs. My entire life was lived on the shore of some wide gap between me and the rest of the world. A gap between us and Ellie's school, a gap between me and the wealthy parents at Saint Maria's, a gap between me and my own

parent, a gap between me and Keith, a gap between me and Nancy and the end of *Ghost Riders*. I was always alternating between feeling depressed about those gulfs, and being energized by the independence.

At that moment, I was feeling depressed about it, so I found myself avoiding the conversation and picking lint from my sweater. I chugged coffee with a violence reserved for vampires and arteries. I did everything to avoid saying something that would cost Ellie her last chance.

The guidance counselor cleared his throat and leaned closer to a notepad, as if he'd written down some thoughts beforehand. "We see a disturbing overlap," he took a moment to lean a nudge closer. "Between misunderstandings and violence with Ellie."

I nearly laughed. My daughter wasn't the only one in this family living at intersection of misunderstandings and violence. Geoff or Jesse would have an aneurysm if he took a look inside the 1979 folder on my desk.

**TWENTY-THREE**

**ABC's WIDE WORLD OF SPORTS**

*-The Thrill of Victory, and The Agony of Defeat™-*

**APPLICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT**

**DATE:** January 11, 1979

**POST APPLIED FOR:** Broadcaster **SALARY EXPECTED:** Beats me. How about \$50,000?

**SURNAME:** Mr. **FIRST NAME:** Daniel **LAST NAME:** Wisnewski

**DATE OF BIRTH:** December 17, 1943 **PRESENT AGE:** 37

**ADDRESS:** 1229 NW RIDGELINE ROAD, PORTLAND OR

**PHONE:** 503-887-9765

**EXPLAIN YOUR INTEREST IN THIS POSITION:** The money.

**WHAT SKILLS/QUALIFICATIONS WILL YOU BRING TO THIS POSITION?**

I'm the most famous man in America. At least I was. Plus, I filled in on Wide World last year when Frank Gifford had to have emergency gallbladder surgery. Not to mention, now that I'm thinking about it—I'm in the damn credits of the show. Go look it up. When the announcer says "And the agony of defeat" you replaced that footage of the Italian skier going ass-over-teakettle with that shot of me jumping all those Cadillacs and eating a mouthful of pavement. I broke seven bones and was unconscious for a day. I never seen a dime in royalties. You guys owe me!

**PRESENT JOB:** Daredevil (retired) **EMPLOYER:** Big Dan Enterprises, LLC

**REASON FOR LEAVING:** I decided I am afraid to die after what happened on the Columbia River.

**HAVE YOU EVER BEEN CONVICTED OF A FELONY? Yes**

**IF SO, PLEASE PROVIDE DETAILS.**

**1972—Skydiving While Drunk**

I'm sure there's some more official title, but the F.A.A. has a real hard-on about what you can and cannot do when jumping out of a plane. Either way, it wasn't my fault. I think they were just looking for some publicity. I mean, ask any of my friends, I wasn't drunk. Buzzed at best.

**1975—Assaulting a Federal Employee**

This one I'm kind of proud of. So, some friends and I were minding our own business in Yosemite. And this prick park ranger who was built like Leon Spinks walks over and tells me I can't have my car stereo up that loud. He claims it disturbs the other park guests and the animals. So we get into an argument and I inform him it's my right to free speech to play Eric Clapton any damn volume I please. Then, this jagoff starts writing me a ticket, so I pop him one in the mouth. Turns out, you can't do that to a ranger. Even one with shitty taste in music.

Okay, I did more than pop him one. It's weird. It's like I don't really remember, but I guess I beat on him a lot. I don't recall a lick of it though. I get like that when I'm mad. But, that's all behind me now. I'm on the straight and narrow!

**1977—Possession of Cocaine With Intent to Distribute**

Again, total garbage and not my fault. I was holding that kilo for my buddy, Skeet. When did it become a crime to just hang on to a suitcase for a friend?

1977, I guess.

Oh, wait, that was reduced to a misdemeanor. Forget I said anything.

## TWENTY-FOUR

“Right now, it is simply unsafe to have Eleanor around the other children,” said The Nun, taking a sip of her hazelnut coffee slop.

“We call her Ellie,” I said, still perky. I hated the word *perky*—a word for weather girls and silicone boobs.

The Nun nodded. She didn’t wear a habit or anything, just a long grey skirt and a cheap polo with the school logo stitched into the chest. A silver cross hung around her neck and her black hair was done up tight in a permanent. If the nameplate didn’t say Sr. Constance Renton, you would just guess she was anyone’s elderly aunt.

Her tone said everything about who was in control. “You have to agree that it is hard for the other children to focus and thrive when they are in fear whenever Eleanor is in the room.”

Her slow, condescending voice flicked some switchblade in my soul. “*We call her Ellie.*”

Austin pressed a finger into my leg, warning me. Maybe?

“Sorry,” I said, even perkier. I noted that this rise in my voice, this imitation of the well-groomed trophy mothers around this place, seemed to soften the mood. People *listened* when I talked like this. It was gross and confusing and not me, but an observation worth stashing in the vault.

“Of course, every child’s safety is our concern,” said Austin.

“The other children—” The look on The Nun’s face told me she was torturing us. I don’t know what I was expecting; torture did seem like the most Biblical of moves. She made the same face my mother did when she used to pinch my waist and thighs and *tsk*.

A storm cloud burst inside me. I knew what it was like to be my father up against authority figures asking to turn down the volume. Misunderstood and misguided and not giving a care either way. “Maybe *the other children* should be the ones you have a conversation with?” I said, dropping the perk.

“I don’t think you understand.”

“Maybe you should be teaching more sensitivity toward a young girl having trouble fitting in.” The Nun opened her mouth, but I didn’t give her any room. “I am not saying Ellie is totally innocent, but you can’t tell me the other kids aren’t just as guilty.”

“You are saying that the little boy is responsible for getting pushed into a brick wall and possibly receiving a concussion?” said Geoff or Jesse the guidance counselor, out of, I think, actual confusion.

“Of course not. But, has anyone considered what that kid was *saying* or *doing* to trigger Ellie? Did anyone ask? She told me that her classmates won’t let her play with them at recess, is that the peaceful environment we are paying a fortune for?”

“If they choose not to include Eleanor in their games.” I sensed The Nun was taking perverse pleasure in mangling Ellie’s name. “It likely stems from her behavior. She yells about the rules, and loses her temper, and assaults them,” said The Nun. “Both physically and emotionally.”

“Because they are so mean to her.” I skidded the seat back, as if the instinct was to leap to my feet. The chair squelched across the tile and jostled my senses enough to

stay in check. “Did you know last week they all sang a song at lunch called *Ellie is Stupid?*”

“I was unaware—”

“These are small children and small children do regrettable shit.” I clicked my lips, but decided not to apologize, even though The Nun looked like she’d just swallowed a sliver of glass. “Last time we were summoned to your office *Eleanor* hit that boy in PE, right? Did anyone know that that kid had tripped Ellie on purpose?”

“Well, now, I—” stammered the counselor, flipping through papers.

“For every action, there’s an equal reaction,” I snapped. “Does The Lord teach physics at this school?”

The silver crucifix on The Nun’s chest began to bobble and wink with light. She was breathing fast. “This seems like a good time for us to address our suggestion that Ellie be tested. We are concerned that she may have ADHD or Asperger’s or—”

“Just shut up,” I said. I didn’t even know I’d said it until I caught a glimpse of The Nun’s creased face.

Austin grabbed my hand and I expected one of his famous glares. But instead, he gave a wrinkled grin and an encouraging nod. Ellie was getting kicked out one way or the other, so I might as well crank up the blowtorch. None of it mattered.

Purging our complaints was something we both wished we had done when Ellie was expelled from the other schools. Instead, we played the kind, sensitive parents who apologized for simply breathing, and threw ourselves at the mercy of the administration, only to get a solid shove out the door.

It was such a frustrating sensation, holding all this emotion inside. The pressure pounding deep in your abdomen with no way to escape. A good young lady does not talk like that, my mother would say. A good woman does not talk like that, my guilt told me as an adult.

There, on a squeaky seat with a lovely soft light beaming in, absolutely radiating The Nun's Jesus painting, I found a way to release the guilt. I slayed. I pricked a balloon filled with years of frustration and confusion and love and anger. I told them everything.

It felt great.

The Nun's office was not very large, but I was up pacing the floor—gesturing wildly with every complaint.

“All you know is that Ellie is a square peg who doesn't fit into your round holes. She isn't the easy kid, the quiet kid, the *good* child you expect everyone to be. But, you know, not everyone's the same. Just because someone's different doesn't mean they don't deserve respect. This place is such a joke.”

When my voice rose and my finger pointed an inch from the guidance counselor's chest, I felt sharp cadences of my father slipping back in. Rhythms of speech and a cowboy attitude I had always kept bottled inside. *A good young lady does not talk like that.* I finally took my foot off the gas at the sign of The Nun's cheeks turning the same shade as the ceramic apple on her desk.

“Thank you for your opinions. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to attend morning mass.” Finally, she stood and I noticed one of her thin fists had been crushing a sheet of paper the entire time. Her polo shirt was dark around the armpits. “Dana at the front desk



will have some paperwork for you to sign regarding Eleanor's release. God bless you in finding a school that fits her needs."

Still standing, I gripped the back of my empty chair. "I hope you're proud of yourselves," I said, running on fumes but unwilling to let go of this power, the only shred of control we had in the situation. "You think this is the Christian way of handling problems?"

"Faith is far more complicated than that."

"What did I expect?" I spoke low, exhausted. "Churches have been treating women like shit for two thousand years. I guess now I'm just getting a closeup look."

"Okay," Austin said, clutching my hand and tugging it toward the door. "Point made."

We signed and initialed several forms. A reimbursement check had already been cut for the remainder for Ellie's tuition, which told me there was never any hope of her staying.

I shouted back into the principal's office. "I thought Maria was supposed to be the patron saint of forgiveness?" The Nun was gone. I caught a glimpse of the guidance counselor, slumped in his seat, blue eyes glittery and wet. I knew that look and it vaporized my anger. Geoff or Jesse was me as a child, caught between a couple of grownups arguing, blaming himself.

## TWENTY-FIVE

A memory:

It's November 10, 1987, the last time we celebrate Lanny's birthday. He has been dead for seven years and up until this point, we always make a cake and leave an empty chair on this date.

My dad is in a happy mood, but smells strange. My seven-year-old head thinks: yuck. But I gobble up his attention and soon the scent of hot candle wax overpowers whatever is on his breath.

Mom has rings under her eyes and moves slow, probably exhausted from studying late every night. The dining room lights are off and bright orange flames bounce in her huge, stylish glasses. She wears her favorite Lewis and Clark School of Law sweatshirt, cuffs shoved up past the elbows.

Keith is at school. It's just the three of us.

"Come on, Gail," Dad commands. "You lead the singing this year."

November 10 is usually happy in our family. Mom and Dad and Keith share stories about Lanny, tall tales of his bravery and generosity and his remarkable talent. But not this year. As the wax spirals down the candles and hardens atop the frosting, Dan grows more insistent.

"Do it for Lanny." I am on his lap and remember his grip tightening around me. "For your innocent baby boy."

Mom whips off her glasses and presses palms to her eyes. I get squirrely and try to wedge out of my father's lap. "Mommy?" I say. "Daddy?" I say.

She pulls back a long snuffle and leans across the table. Her wet cheeks reflect the candle glow. “I thought you gave up drinking?”

“Just sing the song.”

“All your meetings and chips—”

“Sing for Lanny,” Dad says.

“And medallions and promises.”

“I was doing great. I wonder why it all went to Hell, Gail?”

“Always someone else’s fault.” Mom takes a glass of water and tips it over the cake.

The room goes dark, like my eyes are replaced by charcoal.

I feel her hands under my arms, prying me out of Dan’s grip. There’s a struggle.

“Don’t you dare hit me,” Mom says from the deep blackness of the room.

“You’ll know if I hit you.”

There is some jostling I cannot see. My body swings wildly for a bit. Does Big Dan hit my mother? I do not know. I just know that I will not forget the fear in her voice when she calls my dad a dirty word. She holds me close and carries me to the next room, toward some light.

## TWENTY-SIX

The car ride after Saint Maria's was silent. The radio was off, which was odd. My heart still kicked quick but my nerves couldn't settle enough to even figure out how to begin a conversation.

"The Nun," I said, and half-gagged our secret gag.

The car stayed silent for another block and I wanted to take that comment back, maybe take back my whole performance at Saint Maria's.

"Well," Austin said, so sluggish he barely shoved the clutch from gear to gear.

"That went about like we figured."

"Yeah."

"I assumed Ellie was out, but that wasn't even," his voice fell. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know." This was good. I felt blood returning to my limbs, my fingers uncurled and I my ankles rolled until they crackled.

"Homeschooling is really our only choice," said Austin.

"Who would teach her?" I said, growing skittish, considering changing the subject.

"You're around all day."

"I'm home working. I need focus and quiet and—"

"Or you could just turn in this book and be done," he said with an archer's accuracy, like he'd been waiting to say it. That was Austin, letting his anger simmer forever, until the right moment, so that it landed with maximum impact.

He and I, we thought and we fought so differently.

“I’m almost finished. I just need a little more information. The CPS guy emailed me and said the Mother File is ready.” My voice tipped toward excitement, hoping to infect Austin and buy some time. “The Mother File is the last piece of the puzzle.”

“What even is the puzzle?”

“To get enough information to finish the book. But, I mean, more importantly, also to learn about my family.” I looked at the floor mats and counted the stray leaves stuck to the carpet until I felt I could continue. “I am starting to see a lot of myself in Big Dan. I think it’s really healthy to know. This is solving a lot of problems.”

“Layla, we have a lot of problems, but genealogy isn’t one of them.” He suddenly seemed to have found enough energy to jam the clutch quickly as we climbed the hills above Portland toward my mother’s house. She had been watching Ellie.

“I know. I know this looks really bad.”

“It looks selfish.” His voice fell an octave, a move he saved for moments like this. I did not budge, though.

“Just trust me. I’m going to get enough childhood info and turn the book in by deadline. I swear.”

“Layla, we are being buried alive in bills.”

“It’s simple, it’s—”

“On top of it all, now you’re saying you won’t help Ellie. So, you know what that means? Her last option is Pagoula.”

“No.”

The Pagoula Excellence Academy was an old brick building down near the industrial part of the river. Pagoula had to shut down for a few weeks last year because it

was so close to the interstate that the air was unhealthy to breathe. It was the public school system's final dumping zone for kids who fought and started fires and threatened teachers with weapons. The local TV news station did a three-part investigative story, saying the actual education standards there were next to nil.

"She can't go to Pagoula," I said. "Ellie's too smart. It feels like child abuse, just giving up on her like that."

"But you have to work," he said, taking the same perverse pleasure as a nun with *Eleanor* on her lips. "You need quiet."

"That's not fair. You never take my work seriously."

This was something I had been burying, which now evened the score, I suppose. Austin never took writing as a legitimate job because the money was inconsistent and when it did come in, the money sucked. There were no benefits, no retirement, and they didn't even take out taxes, so we had to pay a huge chunk back to the IRS every April.

I focused on the window and the shadowless, sickly skies.

Austin now slammed the clutch. The pine tree air freshener swung like a clock. "You know what? You're right. You are a lot like your dad. He totally brainwashed you. This *my way or the highway* bullshit. It's unhealthy." He paused at a red light and didn't speak until it flipped green. Rain began pelting the glass. "You have to give an inch sometimes. You have to work with other people or else, Jesus Christ, eventually everyone just gets pushed away."

The rain and the speed started streaking the windshield like melting wax.

"Do you?" I looked across the front seat. He stared ahead, nipping his lip with his top teeth. My ribs tried clawing from my chest. I hesitated, because actually saying it

would make it real. Not saying the obvious words somehow kept them in the imaginary realm. I couldn't handle the silence, though. "Do you think I'm pushing you away?"

He glanced over quick, making that clicking noise at the back of his throat, the *you've got to be kidding me*-sound.

I began rooting through my purse for lip gloss, despite not needing lip gloss. I'd done the wrong thing enough times to know that I needed to stop myself from lashing out. Austin was the most optimistic person I knew, so when he went fire and brimstone, it slowed me down.

Maybe he was right? I had been digging in my heels for so long that I didn't know how to release, how to walk away from fights instead of just picking every one of them. It was all I'd known since I was almost Ellie's age.

Once a youngest child, always a youngest child.

The black wipers dashed across the glass, erasing everything. Wheels hummed the way tires seem to get louder on wet pavement. The car turned onto my mother's street.

I had stopped rattling around my purse and my eyes locked shut. I was so nervous I felt sweaty, so sweaty that the two small scars on my scalp began to itch. The air felt thick to breathe, like it had to be forced out. When I exhaled, there was clarity.

"Okay," I said. "I'll homeschool her. We'll make it work."

## TWENTY-SEVEN

A memory:

It's 1988, and unbeknownst to everyone, Big Dan is only a few months from a widow-maker heart attack. I'm on summer break and have spent nearly every day at my best friend Julie's pool. My legs are smooth as seal skin and bronzed from the magnificently brief Portland sunshine. Each year from June to August the skies peel open and the light arrives and the city is something like I believe Los Angeles to be. My parents don't ever ask where I'm going and I don't tell. My parents, in fact, tend not to be very present because they are always screaming at one another and slamming doors and jumping into a car and squealing tires out of the garage. They almost completely ignore me, which means I am always staying up past midnight, drinking Pepsi and reading *Baby-Sitter's Club* books. My favorite is "Kristy and the Walking Disaster". It also means that a daily dip in Julie's pool is close enough to a shower, so that by August my hair is so brittle you could snap it off in thin black planks.

At some point, Julie and I have a falling out over which of us would be Kristy in real life. She nudges and nudges me, I warn her please not to push my buttons, but that kind of honesty is only used against me and brings on more severe teasing, until I shove Julie's face in the dirt. Hard. Bloody-nose hard.

Twenty minutes later I am in my bedroom crying and the phone rings downstairs. This has to be Julie's family calling to complain or worse. I hear Big Dan answer. I am tense and scared and start crying harder.

But I don't get punished.



Instead, Big Dan takes me out to Dairy Queen, and we eat soft serve while late summer light fills our red plastic booth. This will end up being our final summer outing before third grade. I just had a haircut that morning—a shearing, really. Probably Mom’s plan to cover up all the chlorine damage, and also an attempt to pass me off as one of the other perfect girls at my school. I don’t realize it now, but Big Dan has lost all our money and the family is held together by credit. My classmates are wealthy, fashionable girls like Julie. Girls who attend horse riding camp and play piano recitals. Mom feels a pressure to keep up appearances, so I am given the haircut every rich girl has: this hybrid somewhere between a Tinkerbelle and a bob, all cemented with an intense level of hairspray. Think *True Blue*-era Madonna losing a bet with Dorothy Hamill.

It was actually the woman at the salon who mentioned my scars. She found two red pinpricks that raise up just a little. For years after this conversation I will never forget the scars, especially when I am attempting my latest exercise fad, because the scars itch when I sweat.

During ice cream, I ask if Dad thinks maybe a spider bit me while sleeping?

“No spider, Layla.” Big Dan has grown into his name. Wide bellied, red-cheeked, with a neat brown mustache. He perspires through shirts, just sitting around. He wears baseball caps to hide bald spots. His voice is huge in public. It rings like an alarm that, as I will realize as an adult, is sort of his way of begging for attention, recognition, and love from strangers. He is terribly lonely, but I’m too young to see that yet.

“That’s your special mark.”

I laugh and tell him to stop.

The evening ice cream rush builds. A line of people pushes toward the entrance. The whole room smells sweet, like your every sense is sugar-coated.

Dad has a look on his face. A daze. He doesn't even flinch as vanilla drips down his knuckles. "You were born real early. Over a month early. Caught everyone by surprise. I didn't even have a crib built yet. We hadn't picked out a name or anything.

"You came near the end of Thanksgiving. I remember we were just cleaning up turkey dinner and I was scraping mashed potatoes into the garbage when Mom said she felt lightheaded, she stumbled and fell. The doctors said her blood pressure was sky high. The kind of thing that could kill her. So, the hospital decided you was coming out early."

"*Were,*" I say. "Were coming out early."

He smiles. "The hospital said you *were* coming early, even though you weren't fully baked. The scars are from the forceps. It was such an emergency they had to tug you out by your head."

With his clean hand, Dad leans across the table and searches my scalp with his warm, callused fingers. He finds the bumps right away, like he's been touching them daily for the last eight years.

"God, you were all jaundiced and your gums were practically black. When you cried," he pauses. "And you cried a lot. It sounded like some tortured animal, like a wounded duck. I still hear it." His lips rustle that mustache, taking a moment. "I burned that sound into my brain, even though it scared the jeepers out of me."

I laugh and say, you were scared of a crying baby?

"Darn right. I thought that was all I'd ever hear of my Layla. The doctor said you wouldn't make it. A priest came and read you last rights and all that."

His hand trembles and he seems to have caught a cold, the way his nose sounds. Ice cream has started puddling white on the tabletop. Just when I want to mention it, Dad perks up and slurps at the fingers with joy.

“But then, you just got healthier. Stronger. Bigger. You were home by Christmas. Your skin turned normal, your mouth turned normal, you started feeding from your mother, and before we knew it your cry could shatter glass.” He grabs a napkin and goes to work without breaking our gaze. “That’s when I knew you were special. You lived for a reason.”

Big Dan crumples the napkin into his fist until it’s the size of a marble. The setting sun strikes it, and it’s like he’s holding a cloud.

“You know, I had to do the same thing as a kid. I was born okay, but I had to find a way to survive.” He tosses the cloud aside. “But we get back up and ride again, right?” He switches to my side of the booth and kisses the raised scars. “Of all my children you are the most like me, Layla.”

This is the moment he becomes the man I remember. It has been so long since one of his scary streaks, that I have forgotten them in that way only kids can forgive. This kind, introspective Big Dan is the Big Dan in my head for the next thirty years. Until he dies next year, he and I are best buddies. It is the most wonderful time of my life.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

The Christmas photo—me freshly out of the hospital, gently lying across my big brother's lap—nearly flew out the window. But I caught it at the last second. I mashed my finger into the dash with all my might until the picture was steady. Luck had been with me again. It had been a week since starting to homeschool Ellie and I was proving to be a better teacher than I ever dreamed. Ellie was an eager learner, and was even excited about this impromptu field trip.

On the drive south toward the Child Protective Services office, I even made this into a lesson about government. I think Ellie was kind of into it. It was hard to focus, though. My mind was flooded with the idea that all my questions were going to be answered about Big Dan's childhood. I could finally finish the book and feel whole—feel like I knew where I came from. Thank you. Good night. Roll credits.

Ellie was just happy to tag along if it meant she could wear her new school uniform in public. I had thrown away the plaid skirt and St. Maria's polo shirt. She'd begun wearing the octopus every day. Homeschooling was surprisingly fun like that. There were entire online communities and web sites that provide lesson plans. I read the material out loud with her, printed off worksheets and turned my student loose. I was a far more patient teacher than I expected, and it felt good to help her learn. Plus, I still managed to find time to write parts of *Ghost Riders*. Memories, like Big Dan at the Dairy Queen, were flooding back.

Forget social work, maybe teacher/writer was what I was meant to do all along?

The Honda sputtered to Salem without incident and Ellie fell quickly in love with Glenn Dexter's office when we arrived. She gravitated right to the brightly colored superhero figures along his window, but grew bored. Make-believe was not her thing. Playing with toys usually just involved bashing them together for a couple minutes. I watched other kids her age who would invent entire worlds and adventures and romances, while Ellie only wanted to talk about planets, and octopuses, and farts. At moments like this, I could tell she had an urge to pretend, like there was some deep genetic energy suggesting it, but the execution was a mystery. *She'll learn*, I always thought. *Or maybe she's just too smart for make-believe.*

"I have the files," Glenn Dexter said with his usual cheer.

"You told me already." I was gnawing my thumbnail with increased ferocity.

"Sorry," he suffered out a grin. "I should have been more—*how are you?* It's nice to see you again. How is the book coming along?"

I released a small pocket of breath, deep down in my stomach and up through my nose. I wasn't in the mood for small talk but caught myself. "It's good, thanks," I said. "But honestly, the faster we get going the less chance we have of her melting down." I pinched Ellie's knee; she was in the neighboring chair, deep into her iPad, working on a game that taught fractions via pizza slices.

Teacher of the year!

"Drumroll please," Glenn Dexter began beating the desktop with pencils.

I must have made a face.

"Sorry, that was insensitive." He dropped the pencils and began tickling the grey hairs of his goatee. "Insert foot in mouth, Glenn."

I assured him it was alright. My father has been dead a long time. “I’m not upset, I’ve just been dealing with a lot at home lately and—” I went to gnaw my thumbnail, but held still. “You know what. I don’t need excuses.”

“Amen.”

“I’m doing my best with what I have.” That felt good. I’d spent my entire life acting like the woman I wanted to be and immediately apologizing for it. Dan never needed to apologize and my flaws were microscopic by comparison. But inside my head those flaws felt a mile wide. They normally echoed and morphed into larger shadowed shapes. But they didn’t stand a chance that day.

Maybe that was what I’d been missing all those years? Confidence. Now is the time to stop apologizing and whip up a great book, I thought. A kick ass book. This book was work, but also a healing experience. This kick ass book was going to be the thing that made me whole, answered my questions, and paid the mortgage for a couple years. And that kick ass book could also lead to, who knows, a movie or a TV show. Then, I could write about what I really wanted to write about, become the Susan Orlean *New Yorker* reporter of my dreams.

The ecstatic feeling of my plan’s different threads finally weaving together sent sparkles up my spine.

“Now, I hope you don’t mind, but I took some liberties with you request,” said Dexter. He opened a drawer and hauled out an absolutely massive stack of papers. It hit the desktop like a fifty-gallon drum.

Ellie briefly looked up from her iPad. She hated loud noises and surprises. She pulled the pink octopus hat down low over her eyes.

“My request?”

“Again, if I’m overstepping my boundaries, let me know.” He seemed jumpy, nervous. Which made me jumpy and nervous. “I’m just a big fan and *Ghost Riders* sounds really cool and it would mean a lot to be any help any way I can, even if this isn’t probably what you were intending when you said it.”

“It?” My jaw popped. I leaned forward. “I don’t understand, Glenn.”

Dexter looked up. I caught him licking and tothing his lip repeatedly. “You said.” He slid a thinner, slightly newer yellow file folder off the top and laid the pair side-by-side. “You said, *Give me all the Wisnewski files*, right?”

The small folder was red-stamped: CONFIDENTIAL.

“Sure. Probably. I don’t really—” The names on both files were cursive and badly faded. I felt a surge of excitement. More information, more secrets buried deep in the CPS system. There was no time to waste, this kick ass book was practically writing itself. For the first time since starting *Ghost Riders* I felt true, honest confidence in the project. I was really going to finish and I was really going to make Nancy happy, and make myself happy. My hand snapped toward the mystery file. “What do we have here?”

Dexter gulped and his eyebrows jumped. “Just like you asked, it’s *all* the Wisnewski files. Here’s Big Dan’s.” He patted the Bible-sized stack. “And, um,” he pushed the little one across the desk. “Here’s *yours*.”

It was like a winter wind whipped down from the north and left me deaf.

My chest came to a rolling boil.

My pinprick head scars begged to be scratched.

I didn't fully regain myself until Ellie grunted, softly stabbing at the iPad screen. She didn't need comforting, she was fine, but I began rubbing her shoulder in soft loops.

A few breaths later, the buzzing lightbulb filament came to life in my ears, as did the singing of Glenn Dexter's asthmatic nostrils. I was suddenly hyper aware of every leg shift, every chair squeak.

"I'm sorry. That was stupid," said Glenn. "You don't want to relive this. Just forget I ever brought it up." He dragged the tiny file back across the cluttered desk.

"No!" My spine straightened to a post, a familiar sensation. I felt oddly guilty, suddenly caught, like I had done something illegal. "This is perfect. I'd love to relive." Another sandpaper swallow. "This. *That*."

"Really? Gosh, I mean you were so young. Just a baby and—" Glenn's eyes got big. "Okay, full confession, I took a peek. Unprofessional. Foot-in-mouth part two."

Somehow among the confusion my mind discovered its perky side again. Some sort of defense mechanism, willing to say anything to lock my fingers around that file. "You did a great job. Thank you," I said. "It's like you read my mind, Glenn."

Relief like I have never seen fell over Dexter. He plucked his shirt collar and fluffed it for air a few times. But I knew no such relief.

I had a safe childhood.

A happy childhood.

Didn't I?

The idea that CPS was ever called during my life seemed impossible. But really, was it? My parents had a marriage like fireworks and flames.



God, did Dan hit her? Did he hurt me? He was probably drunk or high or, I don't know, and did something horrible.

**TWENTY-NINE**

**MISSING PERSON REPORT**

*Multnomah County Sheriff's Dept, Portland, ORE*

Date: May 13, 1980  
Case No.00008754-J

**Type of person missing:** Juvenile      **AGE:** 6 months      **DOB:** November 27, 1979

**First Name:** Layla      **Middle:** Danielle      **Last:** Wisnewski

**Height:** 32-inches      **Weight:** 22 lbs      **Race:** Caucasian/white

**INVESTIGATOR NOTES**

Interview held at home of missing juvenile (1229 NW Ridgeline Rd).

Spoke with mother, GAIL WISNEWSKI (age 39) at approximately 1400 hours.

According to the mother, juvenile daughter, LAYLA D. WISNEWSKI (age 6 months), was last seen at approximately 1100 hours when the child was laid down for a nap in her own bedroom in the home. After which, GAIL WISNEWSKI claimed to have lied down on the living room couch for a nap as well, approximately 20-25 feet from LAYLA's bedroom.

GAIL awoke approximately two hours later, she estimates near 1300 hours. Upon entering the child's bedroom LAYLA was not found. GAIL located a piece of paper she believed to be a ransom note. The message was pasted together from letters cut from magazines (See Photo A).

**PHOTO A:**  
bRIInG \$50o,000

UNMarckeD bills

pIoneEr SQuaRe

NOON. ThuZday

The immediate family of LAYLA WISNEWSKI were accounted for at the time of the incident. Father, DANIEL WISNEWSKI (age 39), was confirmed to be in Dallas, TX working as a broadcaster for a demolition derby for *Wide World of Sports*. KEITH WISNEWSKI (age 14), brother to LAYLA, was confirmed by administrators to be present the entire day at Conrad Atchmoore Preparatory Academy. LANCELOT WISNEWSKI (age 20), brother to LAYLA, was confirmed to be at a screening of the film, *Blues Brothers*, with girlfriend AMY BRUBAKER (age 19) at the approximate time of the incident.

Due to the nature of the incident, potential kidnapping, and ransom situation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been notified.

**PROGRESS REPORT**

*Federal Bureau of Investigation  
Portland, OR*

Date: May 15,

1980

Case No. CV44329-W

**AGENT:** Coleman Hannah

**Badge No.:** 822219

As noted in reports 004; 005, 007, myself and agents Burroughs (Badge # 33321), and Greeves (Badge # 009134) have been working closely with the family of the missing juvenile LAYLA WISNEWSKI (DOB 11/27/79). Agents received the agreed upon \$500,000 in consecutive \$100 bills from the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, Portland Branch [See Invoice 31G] at approximately 800 hours. Money was recounted and distributed into two (2) unmarked suitcases. Suitcases were outfitted with three (3) radar tracking units each. All confirmed fully functional by testing performed by AGENT GREEVES.

As noted in Report 004, LAYLA WISNEWSKI's father, DANIEL WISNEWSKI (DOB 1-12-41), agreed to act as courier for the delivery [See photos 21a, 21b, 21c]. As stated in note, the delivery was scheduled to occur at 1200 hours, May 15, Pioneer Square, Portland, OR. [See Report 004 for further details] DANIEL WISNEWSKI was outfitted with a Geometrix microphone and transmitter, concealed beneath the subject's shirt. Applied and tested by AGENT BURROUGHS.

Myself, AGENT GREEVES, and AGENT BURROUGHS coordinated with local, state, and federal agencies to fully monitor the delivery and potential arrest of UNKNOWN SUSPECT 1 and recovery of LAYLA WISNEWSKI. The agents and myself oversaw 13 plainclothes and uniformed officers, stationed said officers, and distributed orders [See Form G100R].

DANIEL WISNEWSKI arrived at Pioneer Square at 1155 hours. Weather was clear. Visibility excellent. Microphone and transmitter confirmed functional while DANIEL WISNEWSKI was in field. DANIEL WISNEWSKI was in possession of both suitcases and was in visual contact for full duration of operation. DANIEL WISNEWSKI positioned himself in the center of Pioneer Square, which is a paved, open-air section in the downtown area of Portland. A large number of foot traffic and civilian presence was noted, likely due to it being the lunch hour on a weekday.

Though several individuals approached DANIEL WISNEWSKI in conversation, none are believed to have been UNKNOWN SUSPECT 1. None made any mention of a transaction.

DANIEL WISNEWSKI stayed in position until 1315 hours. At which time agents cancelled the operation due to the failure of UNKNOWN SUSPECT 1 to appear. Officers were dismissed.

Money was recounted by AGENT GREEVES and confirmed returned to Federal Reserve Bank.

**PROGRESS REPORT**  
*Federal Bureau of Investigation*  
*Portland, OR*

Date: May 26, 1980  
Case No.CV44329-W

**AGENT: Coleman Hannah**

**Badge No.: 822219**

[The following is a brief account of the events of 5-26-80 and the arrest of LANCELOT WISNEWSKI (DOB 11-10-60); This account is meant for reference only, see full arrest report for details.]

Following the alert at 900 hours by forensic scientists claiming that a second investigation of the LAYLA WISNEWKI ransom note located a fingerprint embedded in the adhesive used to affix one of the letters. Agents immediately began consulting records for a match. AGENT GREEVES discovered the print was that of LANCELOT WISNEWSKI. Agents were immediately dispatched to the last known address of suspect (1395 NE Harrison, apt. 5).

AGENTS HANNAH and GREEVES knocked on the front door while AGENT BURROUGHS monitored a potential rear exit. After repeatedly knocking and announcing our affiliation with the FBI, AGENT GREEVES heard what he believed to be the cries of a child. Agents found probable cause to forcibly open the front door. Once inside LANCELOT WISNEWSKI and AMY BRUBAKER (DOB 4-2-61) were located in bed. Further investigation revealed what is believed to be drug paraphernalia consistent with the use of heroin, cocaine, and marijuana [See EVIDENCE REPORT 002].

AGENT BURROUGHS discovered a baby, female, approximately 6-months in age, in a rear bedroom. The baby appeared to be healthy and its level of distress normal and acceptable. Child Protective Services were immediately contacted and the child was turned over to their care.

LANCELOT WISNEWSKI and AMY BRUBAKER were immediately placed into custody and questioned.

## **CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES**

### **INCIDENT REPORT**

**Page 3 of 5**

...child was in excellent condition despite being away from parental care for nearly two weeks. JUVENILE was found in remarkable care. Her sleeping area was clean. JUVENILE appears to suffer no rash, which leads this investigator to confidently conclude diapers were changed frequently. JUVENILE gained 0.4 pounds since being taken from parental care, which leads this investigator to confidently conclude JUVENILE was adequately fed during this time. This investigator also noted a clean crib and sleeping area, as well as an abundance of stuffed animals, toys, and homemade decorations in the makeshift nursery...

**ORAL STATEMENT**

*Federal Bureau of Investigation  
Portland, OR*

DATE: May 26, 1980

Location: Federal Detention Center 5, Portland, Ore

Time: 2044 hours

Subject: Lancelot Daniel Wisnewski

DOB: 11-10-60

SSN: ■■■-■■-■■■

Dictated by: Agent Coleman Hannah, #822219

[Subject has been read full Miranda Rights. Subject has requested to make an oral statement in lieu of a written one. This testimony is witnessed by agents FRED GREER and AMANDA BURROUGHS.]

L. WISNEWSKI:

No, I don't want one. A lawyer can't help me. I messed up, man.

You want to know how I got into this? Simple, I got this dealer, Ray-Jay, I owed him a ton of cash, alright? I'm so stupid. My old man is right, I'm a shit and a screw up and a waste of talent, okay? I'm broke, right, I haven't jumped my bike in like, what, a year? Since Niagara Falls. I know, everyone thinks I'm probably some rich dude. But my family? Shit, we don't have a pot to piss in because Big Dan blew every penny he ever earned. Me? Jesus, look at my arm. You want to know where my money went? But Ray-Jay doesn't care, you know, he needs his money. Needs it now. So, I don't know, I got this stupid idea one night. Amy said not to, she said we'd find another way. But, no, I just went and whipped up that dumb note and came and grabbed my little sister. What kind of a shithead does that?

I hope you guys lock me up for life. I was so messed up, I wasn't thinking clearly, but still, man, that is totally nuts. I used to blame everybody else for my screw-ups, just like my dad. (Laughter) But this is all me. It's all on me.

You want to hear something crazy? I really enjoyed having Layla around the house. This baby, man, she's, like, the coolest, sweetest, little thing. When she was born, shit, that was the only time I ever really, truly, honestly, tried to get clean. It made me realize I

want to be around for this kid's life, yeah? And like, I want kids of my own someday. It was just—I never felt that way about anything. Nothing. Zero.

But you know how kicking goes, right? Yeah. I tried like hell. Then a couple months back I slipped. And I slipped. And I kept slipping until my dealer is beating on my door and I need to come up with five-hundred grand. That number doesn't even seem real, you know? Like, did I really get that much on credit? I guess there's interest? Man, I don't know how business works.

But, man, I know I'm a monster. I'm a kidnapper and all that. But, for a while, it was so nice. Just me and my girlfriend and Layla. I think the baby said my name once, I'm not kidding. Can babies talk that early? We loved her like our own kid and it was beautiful.

I want to make it up to my folks, and my little brother, Keith. Jesus, he must be so freaked. And Layla, I'm going to make it right. I'm going to be the best brother anyone ever had.

I'm sure I'm going to jail for a long time and I deserve it. But I'm done with junk, man. I want that life I saw, a normal family, but I'm going to do it the right way. You know? Shit. I'm so tired. Like, when can I sleep?

## THIRTY

Now I knew why the 1980 folder was so small. Why Big Dan was out of the spotlight for so much of the year.

My eyes refused to close the night after I read my file. Thinking, my brother kidnapped me.

Thinking, kidnapped me as a baby.

Thinking, my kidnapper brother then died a month after kidnapping me.

Thinking, my parents didn't press charges and, according to an angry memo written by Agent Hannah, the federal charges were also dropped rather mysteriously.

I raced through the banker's box when I got back from CPS and, sure enough, I found a few news clippings about Lanny. None good. Drunk and disorderly. Possession of a firearm. A stint in rehab for "exhaustion" after his infamous Niagara Falls jump.

It was all so disappointing. I was supposed to feel whole by this point.

I spent hours lying motionless in the dark, feeling my belly and lungs work, watching specks of orange streetlight creep through the curtains. Sometime around three AM it began raining hard and the pling of fat drops on the window suffocated the silence. By morning my hands throbbed from being bunched tight all the sleepless night. I felt beaten up, and stupid, and abused, and furious. I was so angry that I wanted to lash out. Some cavewoman sensibility was whispering, telling me that the only way I would ever feel whole was to wreck someone else's life, destroy the source of these strange, conflicting, hurtful feelings.

But what was I really angry about?

Angry because I was kidnapped before I could even remember?



Angry because I was taken care of by my kidnapper?

Angry because I was returned safely?

Angry because someone I loved did it?

This was the childish anger I saw so often in Ellie, an anger that said you should be mad even though you don't know its source. Someone has cut in line, someone has told a lie, and I am now an incendiary device.

I was not mad at Lanny. Confused, but not angry.

I was mad at Mom. Mad at Keith. Mad for keeping this secret from me. Though I could kind of see how someone's kidnapping might never come up in conversation. Part of me sympathized with my family for probably just wanting to move on with their lives.

But sympathy was short-lived. It always was. That sensible side vanished, and refilled again with piping hot blood. If Mom kept this a secret from me, what else was she capable of hiding?

It was with this bolt of electricity crackling through my veins that I woke early and dashed off a text demanding to see Mom that day.

I walked downstairs to start making breakfast for everyone. Outside the rainstorm beat on the walls of the house. It was one of those sunless, black mornings where I had to flick on every light. I didn't even fully realize anything was wrong until my sock soaked cold with water.

There was a puddle in our kitchen.

When I turned on the track lighting, I saw that the perforated dropped ceiling had a stain the color of coffee and the shape of a kidney. Water fell steadily and collected in that strange indent on the floor beside the fridge. Each drop rippled like a sunflower.

I yelled for Austin to grab a bucket.

My throat cinched tight and tears began to spill. I was not normally a crier, but I was so tired from staying up late nights, so exhausted from the stress of secrets, so pulled in a dozen directions.

“Cool!” Ellie leapt in the water, soaking her jammies. “Can we keep it?”

“Dream on,” I said, still snuffling a bit, but mostly back to Earth.

She helped mop up the mess with white paper towels that soon soaked grey and brown. We dried the floor and positioned the bucket just-so. I told Ellie she was earning extra credit for school, but I don’t think she cared.

“It doesn’t look so bad,” Austin said, staring at the ceiling, poking the epicenter with a broom handle. “Easy fix.”

The broom punctured through the soggy tile and out poured a stream of filthy water into the bucket and sloshed across the linoleum. The surprise sent Ellie howling into the next room, screaming, “gross.”

Ellie began pacing the floor when she settled. Talking to herself. She got frazzled like that from unexpected surprises and loud noises. You couldn’t shake her out of it, you couldn’t redirect her to a toy or a TV show. There was a need in her to simply walk off the adrenaline. Sometimes she had to tear a room apart. Austin and I found that if we ignored it, it usually went away.

“We do not have enough money to fix the roof,” he whispered, flipping a green patterned tie around his neck, tightening it into a knot. “Not even close.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Layla, I’m begging you here.” He slipped on a sportcoat and searched for his shoulder bag.

“I’m really onto something. The book’s so close.” I hadn’t yet told Austin what I had found in the CPS file. Until that moment, telling him didn’t even seem like a choice. There was an urge that said to keep the kidnapping a secret. I needed secrets and couldn’t explain why.

“Rabbit holes,” he grumbled before grabbing an umbrella and stomping off for work. He didn’t kiss either of us goodbye.

Ellie and I ate breakfast to the metronome plunk of the bucket. We talked about her science lesson, about penguins and Antarctica and UV rays. It was casual and productive and, again, weirdly easy. She did a worksheet while happily meowing “Bohemian Rhapsody”. Ellie was still intense, but seemed far less scattered lately.

“Mama,” she said, wandering the room a bit. Tapping the surface of the water in the bucket. “I like your school.”

*Jesus Christ*, I thought, stroking my daughter’s hair. Maybe this was what she needed all along? Maybe Austin was right? The sense of relief from not fighting Ellie, from seeing my kid change and grow and become more human, was so magnetic. I wanted to gobble it up and get as much as I could.

“I like my student.”

I understood Ellie a lot better than Austin. Not that he didn’t bend over backwards for that kid, but I just had a sixth sense about working through her oddities and temper. Probably because I was so much like her as a child. I remember being rabid and bored in school. I talked back and left a mess everywhere I went.

Shortly after Dad died, Mom put me on antidepressants that made me sleepy and my legs hurt all the time. When I was a teen I began throwing the pills away until she caught on and began watching me swallow the pink and white capsules. She never stuck around long enough to see them gagged back into the toilet with whatever I had eaten for breakfast.

We fought furiously until I went away to college. Far away. I started returning with a boyfriend named Austin; he played bass in bands and was an education major. Mom and I tried to get along, but she knew the blueprints to all my buttons. She seemed to delight in igniting my fuse and watching me burst. Maybe she held a grudge about something snotty I said as a kid? Mom was an expert grudge holder. Maybe she hated that I went to school in New Hampshire, and only came back for money? Maybe she was still upset about Dan dying? Or Lanny? More than likely, I'd begun to realize, there was some chaotic recipe of dozens of factors that made us fight and prod and wound one another. Even though I saw these collisions brewing, I couldn't pull us from them. I'd make gestures—spa trips, hikes, dinners, grand apologies—and every attempt ended in disaster.

Only once I became a mother myself did I start to see our glacier budge a little. I still couldn't stop myself from snapping and jabbing at Mom. But I realized that I loved this strong, opinionated woman who practically raised me alone. Our love was just complicated.

Austin said our love was deformed.

He wasn't incorrect.

My phone buzzed. Mom said she had a window of time available and suggested meeting for lunch downtown after she was done at the tailor. I could have typed thirty pages in response, accusing and questioning and begging.

Instead, I began building the trap.

## THIRTY-ONE

### **Editorial**

*TV Guide*

July 1, 1978

If you're having trouble picking between the dueling jumps on Daredevil Day, you are not alone. On ABC (*12PM EST*) Big Dan Wisnewski is set to leap his nitro-powered rocket cycle across the mile-wide, scenic Columbia River Gorge. Meanwhile, on CBS (*12PM EST*) his main rival and eldest son, Lanny Wisnewski, is set to leap over Niagara Falls in his own space-aged contraption at a distance the cocky upstart claims is 132-feet further than his pop.

One wishes this family would just bury the hatchet. How can one family fail to get along so strongly? How can a mile-wide rift lead to this?

More importantly, how are we, the stunt-loving public, to choose? Personally, I'll be flipping between both, holding my breath that these two can come down safely and maybe bury the hatchet.

## THIRTY-TWO

Gail Wisnewski was in her mid-60s, but younger than me by a mile. Her clothes were cooler, she exercised more, ate healthier, watched hipper movies and actually listened to new music—something I hadn't done since Ellie was born. Her vivacious streak was a recent change and easily traced to a new boyfriend, Feng. Feng was an artist about my age and was never seen without a pair of tight jeans and cowboy boots and a paint-spattered denim shirt. He had a charming way of peppering his speech with bits of Mandarin, which was the only language spoken around the house during his childhood in LA.

Feng also apparently owned a fountain of youth because my mother had never been so infuriatingly happy.

It was a struggle not to roll your eyes at this new lease on life. She had previously never been anywhere near this exciting—Mom had dabbled in criminal defense when I was young, but retired to a life of vacationing and philanthropy when the first wave of Big Dan nostalgia hit around 1995. Everything vintage 1970s had become cool again, which led to some lucrative licensing deals, which led to more stable money than she'd ever known while he was alive.

I doubted that this recent shift was honest—can someone just flip a switch like that?

Feng was a weekly churchgoer and Mom had begun attending, too, which also accounted for more than a little of this fresh coat of happiness. Of all her recent changes,

it was this newfound religion that raised my eyebrow most. I reminded myself to stow all that skepticism away while interrogating her at the dress shop.

She'd been having clothes tailored for years by a seamstress who ran a cramped store downtown. You had to half-step into a dank sub level to reach the entrance. The store seemed so out of place compared to the bright, fresh, gentrified city around it. This shop was one of the few places in Portland that hadn't been steamrolled and given a plate-glass gloss.

The bell above the door sounded, and Ellie stumbled into the middle of the store. The ceiling was low and the room was mostly empty except for banks of mirrors along the walls. Glossy, worn hardwoods dominated, touching every inch of the space. Ellie actually held still there for a moment, which was surprising. She held so long, in fact, that her tentacles swayed to a halt. "Wow, Grandma," she said. "You look like a Pacific Herring."

*Or a chandelier*, I thought—which was something like what I would have normally said, but kept to myself, staying on my best behavior for this mission.

"Hello, sweetheart," Mom said with a smile that quickly bent out of place. "*A what?*"

Each mirror burst with life as my mother began twirling like a small child. She was being fitted for the outfit she'd wear to Keith's big jump. A thousand cameras would be pointed in her direction and she knew it. The form-fitting white dress stopped at the knees and hugged her hips and cut a sharp V of cleavage. It was studded with, the tailor later told me, one thousand and sixty-two rhinestones. A touch of Vegas maybe in honor of Big Dan's heyday, or just the tacky redneck side of Mom's bloodline. My eye was

drawn quickly to the spangled stripes of red and blue crossing in an X over the chest and back.

I was reminded of the boy on Halloween.

“The Pacific Herring is the prettiest fish ever! It’s got sparkly silver scales, just like your dress.”

Mom laughed.

The thing I liked best about my mom was how she laughed with every atom of joy her body could hold.

“A herring, huh?” Mom said, and Ellie gleefully rattled off more obscure ocean life details. “I love fish, sweetheart.” Mom found her perky tone and I knew what was coming. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. That’s Matthew.”

“Who?” I said, unable to hold back the vaudeville in my voice. No sarcasm, I told myself. Not today.

“The Bible, Layla,” she said.

“Oh, right. I saw *The Ten Commandments* on TV once.” This, I told myself, was being playful. This was part of the normal banter Mom expected. I didn’t want her getting suspicious.

“Layla, you could learn a few things from the Bible.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

“Ellie, come give your herring a hug.” Mom said, as Ellie went in for her normal power squeeze, which was met with a dramatic sigh of disapproval I was all too familiar with. “Layla, what is my grandchild wearing?”



“Her Halloween costume,” I said, finding a seat in the corner near a hot plate with a sizzling teapot. The smell of rose hips and mint swirled around the room.

“It’s a little late for that,” Mom said.

I answered with my own sigh of disapproval.

Ellie’s tentacles danced in the mirrors. Most of the suckers had dropped off. Her valentine-colored sweatshirt was marked with a dried milk splotch over the heart. She refused to change since leaving Saint Maria’s. I couldn’t tell her no. She needed something to hang on to, and this didn’t hurt anyone.

“Grandma, did you know every octopus grows up an orphan?”

“No, I—”

“A mommy octopus lays thousands of eggs, but she dies after they hatch. The daddy octopuses die before that, even. They die right after mating. So every cutie little baby octopus grows up without a mommy and a daddy. That’s so sad!”

“Oh,” Mom said. “That’s—”

“Grandma, what’s mating?” Ellie said.

My mother let loose one of those joyful, every-atom laughs. “That’s a good question for mommy.”

“I think the Bible says it’s kind of like dancing.”

“Okay,” Ellie said and began jumping up and down, swinging her arms, tentacles twisting. “Grandma, look! I’m mating.”

Ellie unwound something like a front handspring, arms sloshing in eight different directions. She knocked into a black dress form that teetered and sounded like a wobbling manhole cover. Hildegard, the tailor, wrinkled her eyebrows in my direction. I instantly

reached for my purse, hunting for a digital distraction. I always felt guilty, or like I was imposing, when my kid got a little wild in public. But why did I care? Why was I embarrassed? My daughter was just being herself. And that's a good thing. Why couldn't I appreciate that? Why couldn't others?

It was like there was some expectation—probably heldover from the Pilgrims, probably something trapped inside every mother's genetic code—that made us ashamed if our kid acted up, like it was a reflection of how flawed we were as women. Suddenly, I had found another battle I was ready to fight.

Ellie didn't need her iPad, she was okay just how she was.

I admired this dance. Charmed.

We should all be more like Ellie, not the other way around. Ellie didn't give a shit what people thought, and I wished I could harness that power.

“Eleanor, sit down,” Mom snapped. “Honestly, Layla, I don't know how you two even leave the house in one piece.” She jerked to the side from a fresh pin inserted into the dress.

“You know what, Mom?” I half-stood, but reined it back. I did not come here to prove a point, I came to interrogate. “We, you know, we get by okay. Great, actually.”

I was proud for avoiding a fight, but it left me edgy and unfinished. Why was it that the moment my brain started filling with that mean adrenaline, it had to be satisfied? There are few things more frustrating than pulling back from an argument. I knew it was the right thing to do, but there was this need for release, this glowing in the chest, that begged to be put out.

Once the youngest child...

I slid around my seat, trying not to blow this chance. I needed to stick to the plan. I needed to ask questions about the kidnapping. “Hey, Mom—”

“Grandma! Guess what?” Ellie shouted. “Our house has a big hole in it now! It’s so awesome!”

“What?”

“Here,” I coughed, quickly stuffing the iPad into Ellie’s lap. “Play something educational.”

“What kind of *hole*?” Mom said.

“The kitchen ceiling. It’s nothing. We’ll get it patched up. Barely noticeable,” I said. “Hey, you look amazing in that dress. Tell me about it, Hildegard.”

Hildegard’s small voice filled the shop and went on at length about those thousand-plus rhinestones. “A perfect recreation of Keith’s jumpsuit, which is, of course, a perfect recreation of Big Dan’s jumpsuit.” Hildegard was a frail woman with short white hair that swooped back over her ears like swan wings. She spoke with the softened consonants of an Eastern European upbringing. “But still elegant.” Hildegard ducked and dashed and whipped a measuring tape across the ridiculously spangled dress.

Her shop was sparse beyond the mirrors. A rack of outfits on hangers had been rolled into the corner. Ankles and knees whirred past the window—the lunchtime crowd rushing down the sidewalk. Shadows flickered across the hardwoods. One man knelt to tie his shoe and gawked at Mom. He extended a thumbs up, to which she gave the floorboards a sultry smile, and mouthed, “*thank you.*”

Mom was a master of playing two sides at once like that—shy and surprised, but also eating up attention.

We didn't look much alike. Mom was tall and trim with red hair that fell a few inches below her bare shoulder blades. The hair was real, but the color was something else. Like raw wire spilling from electrical cable. Until very recently her hair had been black as crow feathers, black as mine, black as Ellie's. But this new shade fit her reinvigorated second act. This overly dramatic dye job also helped to dull the harder edges she so desperately aimed to hide. Gail Wisnewski could wear a custom dress and live in the ritzy West Hills, but she would always be the tough girl from the blue collar ends of Portland—the disgraced prom queen from Central High, the teen stripped of her crown after pinning Suzie Armbruster to the bathroom floor and shaving Suzie bald after she attempted to steal Big Dan away senior year, the disgraced daughter who got pregnant with Lanny at age 17.

I liked the Suzie Armbruster story about Mom. It meant we were fighters. Our secret reserve of spunk and pride gave me hope. Aside from Austin, and even with our battling, Mom was still my best friend. It only took about 38 years to learn not to take her antagonizing so personally. Growing up and into my twenties, her jabs sent me into pits of depression and toward food and any other substance that helped me forget. But the nearer I got to forty, the more I realized the sting of words only lasts as long as you let it.

The sting of lies, on the other hand, I was just learning about.

I watched Mom take tiny, careful steps around the room. Over to the cash register and to the bench opposite me. The light struck her dress and called to mind a sheet of shattered glass. I loved this woman, but she had been lying to me.

Suddenly, the urge to fight came back. My foot began tapping wild beats. “You look beautiful, Mom,” I said. “Really.”

“Oh, boy, Hildegard. She tossed in a *really*. Somebody is up to no good.”

“Stop. You look,” I took a quick breath and redacted all my comebacks. “You look *really* happy.”

“You’re damn right I’m happy. I finally found someone who appreciates me.”

“Dad appreciated you.”

“Your father had his moments, but Feng is the one. I sat by for years while Dan put his dick in anything with a pulse. *Sorry, Ellie*. Now, the Lord has blessed me with a man who makes me smile, someone who makes me a better person. From now on, I’m only focusing on things that make me smile.” Her leg juked sideways from another pin. “Correction—after your brother’s stupid jump, I’m focusing on things that make me smile. *Ouch*.” She swatted the tailor. “Assuming he doesn’t end up in a morgue.”

“Mom, come on.”

“Excuse me. I’m just scared to death. I lost the two loves of my life to motorcycles and I don’t want to lose a third.”

“Dad had a heart attack and Lanny died.” I gripped my elbows to keep from launching to my feet. “Surfing.”

“The *life* killed them both. All the attention and the macho bullshit.” She saw something in a mirror, began nudging an eyebrow with the tip of one long French-tipped fingernail, obsessively flecking away. “Keith is warped worse than Dan and Lanny combined. He’s got some sick need to prove something. *Everything*.”

I faked a laugh. My hands slid to my lap. They were warm and wet. “Yeah, I bet Lanny wouldn’t have been caught dead jumping the Columbia.”

Mom sighed, which was her equivalent of an agreement.

“Hey, about Lanny.” My wet palms pressed tight together. “Did you ever hear that, I don’t know, he was, like, mixed up in drugs or anything?”

“Lancelot? You can’t be serious.”

“Really? Because there are a couple articles about.” My stomach lurched toward the floor and I nearly lost the nerve, but I mastered the strength. “About *drug busts*?”

“You found those, huh?” Mom continued absently fidgeting with her eyebrow. “His enemies set him up. Put that in your book.”

“What enemies? I mean, Lanny was such a nice guy, right?”

“Lanny was a straight arrow.”

“But he had enemies? Who?”

“How should I know?” she said. “You don’t get rich and famous like Lanny without stepping on a few people along the way.”

“What about toward the end? I mean, doesn’t it seem weird, him dying in a surfing accident? I heard maybe he wasn’t even a surfer.”

“Lanny loved surfing. Put that in your book, too.”

“Mom, are you telling me everything?”

She laughed with every atom, but I found a lot less to love about it this time.

“But would it be possible that Lanny was on drugs and went too far out in the water,” I said. “Or maybe he was depressed about something and maybe committed—”

“Lanny was a good boy. The best. Don’t even joke about suicide.” She waved Hildegard away from the hemline and took twitchy steps in my direction. She bent to my level to fully turn on the jets. I knew this look, this sizzle in her voice, it made me wish

I'd never had this interrogation plan, maybe never learned anything about Lanny. "You better not even be dreaming of doing some hatchet job on him. It would kill me."

"No. I love Lanny. He's my favorite."

"Not to mention it would *embarrass* your father. Do you want to tarnish Dan's memory?"

Suddenly, I was nervous. Suddenly, I felt like the one being interrogated, like I was guilty. How did she always turn the tables like that? I went back to knuckleballing my elbows. "Don't be stupid," I said. "I just heard things about Lanny. Rumors. Someone said, you know." The flesh of my arms screamed with pain. My nails dug deeper. "They said to check police reports from back then. He didn't get in any trouble, right? Nothing like, kidnapping?"

We made eye contact in the mirror. I couldn't read her. Was this look meant to shut me up or communicate something deeper?

Mom hummed thoughtfully, loudly. "Ugh, these hips look like, I don't know, too much hip." Mom tugged at the dress's sides. "What does Layla think?"

She flattened out a perfect wave of red hair over her shoulder. This third person address was a holdover from years of our fighting, of refusing to speak to one another, of using Keith as a go-between while we were in the same room. Third person made me feel small and reminded me who was in charge.

I let the interrogation slip away with the intention of coming back. "You look really cute, Mom," I said. "The hips look fine. I mean, the dress is *bold*, but I think that's what you're going for."

“This dress is what Keith is going for. I should have told your brother to forget it.” She began to fidget with that eyebrow again. “But I have too much money invested to refuse and he knows it, too. Little manipulator.”

“What’s that Bible thing about false prophets?”

Her face tightened in ways I hadn’t seen in a long while. A glow. Her eyebrows jumped. The boss was impressed. “Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. That’s Matthew again.”

She twirled and tugged the neckline up a touch. She adjusted the crucifix so it sparkled, perfectly centered on her chest. After a moment, she knotted her hair in a mock up-do and looked over a shoulder at the mirror.

“Our man Matthew,” my voice unwound. “But I still think it’s sweet how much you are helping Keith. Even though he isn’t perfect.” My alter ego returned: Hello, Perky! “This kind of support means a lot to him.”

Mom made her way back to Hildegard, who began cinching the hemline with a needle. Her moves were unexpectedly furious and quick. Gold light spilled in from the windows and the shadows of legs flickered across them.

“Oh, please,” Mom said. “I think Keith will kill himself just fine without me around.”

I shrugged and stayed playful. I had long ago released my elbows, but the flesh still throbbed with tiny halfmoons of pain. “That’s what normal families do, right? Help each other?”

“Define *normal*?” she said. “We’re about as normal as a solar eclipse.”



“Normal-normal. Sunday dinner normal, like with you and Feng, me and Austin and Ellie, and Keith and his kids. I think that sounds kind of nice.”

This was part of my interrogation plan, but it was also true. There was a part of me that wanted a normal, whole family. Or at least as close as the remaining Wisnewskis could muster. I took a chance, hoping Mom also wanted this.

“Good luck with that dinner,” she snapped. “You’d have to hire a party planner just to coordinate Keith’s mess. Six different kids with six different mothers in six different states. One, I think, Keith only knows by her stripper name.”

“Treena Delight is actually on her birth certificate. I was the witness at their wedding, remember?”

“How could I forget? The vows took longer than the marriage.”

We laughed almost in unison. I had a little more of Mom’s joyful side in me than I ever admitted. Mom and I were bipolar like that, pushing each other one minute and laughing the next. It kept us from ever having to talk about serious issues, which was obviously real healthy. But we didn’t know any other way to behave. Disfunction had gotten us this far.

“Don’t get me started with Keith. He’s bleeding me dry with all the added expenses. He’s got this idea that he’s going to recreate *everything* from the ’78 jump, right down to this ridiculous dress I wore back then—”

“Well,” I cut in, angling to get back to where my interrogation was supposed to lead. “You look just as good as you did back then.”

“Aren’t you being sweet?” Mom gripped a length of lava-toned hair and nervously ran her fist to the tips. She wrung it like a neck. “Real sweet.”

I shrugged.

“I know why you’re here, Layla.” She tilted her gaze in the mirror.

I folded my legs underneath my body. Aiming once more for invisibility. My eyes stayed low, so low that I began to notice the cracks in the floor, the patch jobs and wood filler putty aimed at making everything look good. “Why?” My legs tucked tighter under my body until I was just knees.

“Quit pretending to be so nervous.” Her blue eyes caught me in the mirror in the fraction of a moment that I glanced up. “I’ll write you a check for the roof. I don’t want my granddaughter living in a slum.”

“Oh, no. Mom, that’s not why we came here—” I thought for a moment about lessons learned in journalism school, lessons about treating hostile interviewees delicately, about bobbing along with them until your opportunity appeared. “Um, okay. Yes. Thank you. Things are tight at home and this roof is really not in the budget.”

“Say no more,” she said and waved the tailor away. “But there’s something I need from you.”

“Oh, sure.” I uncurled my legs. Feet flat on the ground again. My toes and calves prickled like they’d been asleep for hours.

I didn’t dare move. Mom was capable of siphoning so much. I knew this wouldn’t be pleasant, but I also knew I needed to hold steady.

“I want you at the Columbia River jump. We need the whole family present for PR. People expect to see us all together. There’s so much riding on this. TV specials, documentaries, all the marketing junk. Plus, it’ll be good for your little book.”

“I’ll worry about my little book, thanks.” I shifted gears, smiling, perky and I lied like she’d been lying to me for years. “I mean, yes. Okay. I’ll help with Keith’s jump. Who knows, it might be fun?”

“This will be anything but fun.” She laughed like I was the dumbest person on earth—a laugh I was familiar with. “I’ll have Hildegard whip up an outfit for you, too.”

“No cocktail dresses,” I said.

“My little tomboy needs a pantsuit or a pair of bib overalls?”

“All silver, right?”

“I want to be a silver octopus!” said Ellie, still working away at the iPad screen.

I looked over, surprised. She was always listening. Austin called Ellie *The KGB*.

A few minutes later Mom had changed and we stepped out of the dress shop and into the street with the smell of bus fumes and fall leaves.

“Mom,” I said, confident with the lie that I was going to be at Keith’s jump. There was no way I’d be caught dead at the Columbia River. But it looked like I’d given her something and this was a chance to get something in return. “You never answered my question.”

“What, dear?”

“About Lanny. Are you one-hundred percent sure he never did anything back then? Be honest. You know I’ll find out if he did.”

“Nope,” she said, looking right at me with the most natural smile. “From cradle to grave, Lanny was always a perfect gentleman.”

## THIRTY-THREE

### HUMILIATION ON DAREDEVIL DAY

July 10, 1978

*Sports Illustrated*

Page 4-of-7

...the pressure must have been enormous. Big Dan was strapped into his nitrogen-powered rocket cycle, staring at the mile wide gulf between he and fame, while his chief rival, his own son, was preparing for a deadly leap of his own on the other side of the country.

The countdown crept below two minutes. His wife, Gail, wearing a stunning rhinestone gown, covered her eyes. Suddenly, a shout carried across the hushed valley from the steps of one of the ABC news trucks. The voice grew louder. Soon, Keith Wisnewski was sprinting past shocked security guards and aimed directly for the ramp.

“Stop. Wait!” he screamed. “Stop!” The boy waved his arms so furiously that his black horn-rimmed glasses flew off. The lanky 14-year-old stomped up the ramp stairs, screaming. “It’s Lanny. It’s Lanny. Stop!” He reached the platform

beside his father with a little more than a minute before launch. Keith shouted something into the cockpit, and the audience buzzed with confusion, their trance broken.

A moment later Big Dan’s white gloved hand shot out of the cage and slashed through the air. Young Keith Wisnewski slit at his throat, too. Big Dan quickly climbed out and stood beside his son, clutching him tightly, and slowly easing down the stairs. He could barely walk after hearing the news that Lanny died upon impact.

But an hour later, when the real news from Niagara Falls finally reached the West Coast, Big Dan Wisnewski was humiliated.

Lanny Wisnewski had pulled a fast one...

]

## THIRTY-FOUR

### **LANNY WISNEWKI: WHY I DID IT**

*Saturday Evening Post*

August 1, 1978

-Page 2 of 2-

**Lanny Wisnewski:** ...I don't think I'd call it a *prank*. A prank is for a laugh. This was no joke.

but the Wisnewskis are a bunch of cannibals. Kill or be killed. It's not, like, normal, but it's us...

**Saturday Evening Post:** But what else would you call sending fake news to your father that you died jumping Niagara Falls?

**LW:** I'd call it a business decision.

**SEP:** Weren't you worried your father might get rattled and attempt the jump anyway? Did it ever cross your mind that Big Dan might actually die from this *business decision*?

**LW:** You don't know Big Dan like I do, man. He was begging to chicken out. I knew he'd quit and then I'd jump Niagara no sweat and there'd be yolk on his face.

**SEP:** That's a pretty big set of coincidences. He could have died just as easily.

**LW:** Yeah, okay, but that was a chance I was willing to take.

**SEP:** Is this how a child should treat their parent?

**LW:** In my family, yes. We might look all spit-shined and nice on the outside,

## THIRTY-FIVE

A memory:

It's March 12, 1989. Big Dan's last day on earth. He will be discovered in a hotel room the next morning. His death does not shock the general public, though most are surprised by the way his body is found: Fully-clothed, alone, sober, nowhere near a wrecked motorcycle.

This is the last memory I will have of my father and it is the one that will overshadow all others for the next thirty years. It says my father was a good guy and a hero and my mother was a wreck.

Today is a freak snow day and school is cancelled. I woke up to the blazing white joy of an inch of frost lacing the trees and roadways and yards. Everywhere is pure and blinding and new.

I am sitting crosslegged at the kitchen table with Big Dan. There is no clue he is so near a heart attack—no pasty skin or complaints of a tingling arm. He is in a great mood, all smiles and kindness and filled with life. It is lunchtime and I am still wearing pajamas. He has made turkey sandwiches on white. I ask if we can play my favorite board game while we eat. It's just the two of us. Keith is at Harvard and Mom's law school classes never get cancelled for snow.

“Okay, Dad, name an animal you're likely to find on the farm?”

My favorite game? The *Family Feud* home game. Rumor has it this box was given to us as a consolation prize back in 1977, when the Wisnewskis were featured on an episode of *Celebrity Family Feud*. As anyone who's ever seen a TV blooper show can

tell you, that was the one where Dad and Lanny got into an argument on-air and then were defeated by the Osmonds. Beaten so badly that if Big Dan still sees Donnie and Marie on TV, he throws a shoe or a newspaper or whatever he can lug at the screen.

“Tough one,” says Dan. “I’m going to say, cow?”

I pull back a yellow plastic tab on the board. “Number one answer!” I shout, doing my best Ray Combs impression.

There’s a frigid breeze from the gaps around the windows, so I snuggle deep into a blanket and ask Dan for another farm animal. But he’s staring out the window. The flakes are racing to the ground and a black stone birdbath in the backyard has grown a snowy pyramid in its basin.

“Dad, what’s another animal you’d find on the farm?”

“Layla, would you ever want to live somewhere else?”

I look at the answer card a long while, motionless, confused. “Um, maybe,” I say. “Like Hawaii?”

Dan smiles. He sips green Kool-Aid, our favorite. He is relaxed and easy going. Really, he has been for a while. It’s been over a year since one of his meditation moments. I will be told by my mother years later that Big Dan had started seeing a therapist and taking medicine for his mood swings.

This is all to say, our home life has seemed peaceful.

Though it won’t be until decades later when I am writing a book about my childhood that I recall my mother and father were hardly ever in the same room during this peaceful final stretch. I couldn’t tell you the last time I heard them have a

conversation. Also, it won't strike me as noteworthy until later that Big Dan's dirty clothes are always on the floor of the guestroom and the bed is perpetually slept-in.

"I mean, would you ever want to go somewhere new and live with me? I got offered a pretty cushy job recently. Vice President of the United States Motorcycle Association. But we'd have to move to Phoenix is the catch."

"What's in Phoenix?"

"This job, for one." He fingertips his mustache a moment. "But also sunshine. Swimming pools. A new school. You've been having a hard time with that one lately."

"Yeah," I mumble and peck at my sandwich.

"Yeah. We've all been having a rough time. I think it'd be good to change things up."

"Is Mom coming?"

"Maybe." He is silent for a moment. Behind him, the window slashes with white flakes, making a mirage of the neighbor's house. "I don't know. I gave her the option, but, well, Mom's been having a rougher time than all of us."

"I don't want to go to Phoenix." I am not yet someone who thrives on change. Later in life, I will bounce around cities and apartments and houses and practically not be able to sit still. But right at this moment, the prospect of a big change makes me nervous. "I want to stay here with Mom."

"I understand." Big Dan starts to skin the crust from his sandwich in one long band, the same as running a knife along an apple peel. "You know, I had something like this happen to me when I was a kid."



It will be thirty years until I remember this moment. For all those years I thought my father never talked about his childhood. But he did. I will recall it clearly when I am writing a book about Big Dan.

“I had to leave my mom when I was about ten. She went to the hospital to dry out and a judge ordered me to stay with another family. I didn’t really understand any of that at the time. I cried and it was hard and lonely. These people, they were strict Catholics. Mean. I’m talking hitting you for getting out of line and,” he strips the sandwich clean and clutches wads the crust into a knot in his fist. “A lot of other things you don’t need to worry about. Stuff I can’t forget.” His mood jumps up, just as quick. “Point being, it wasn’t easy, but moving away was the right thing. It got me where I needed to be in life.” He isn’t speaking to me, he’s looking over my head at something outside, I don’t know what, I’m just watching those brown eyes get smaller and smaller as he talks. “I’m saying, I get what you’re going through, Layla. Change is real scary. But you won’t be all alone. Me and you will be together.”

“But Mom will be alone.”

His gaze returns, the distance and smallness in his eyes has vanished. It stiffens my spine to a post. “Someone’s always the odd man out.”

I shake my head *no*. I want this conversation to be over, but I’m not yet skilled at the family art of changing the subject.

He slides the gameboard to the edge of the table so there is a clear path between us, although it wasn’t like I couldn’t see him over *Family Feud*. He maybe wants my full attention and this gentle act clutches it.

“Here’s what I’m thinking: me and you go down to Phoenix and scout out the city. Make an adventure of it. Hunt for cool stores are at the mall. Find the good pizza parlors. They got an ice cream joint that serves a scoop the size of a bowling ball, I heard. And, then, if we both give Phoenix the thumbs up, we’ll holler for Mom. She can join us later.”

“What if she tells us ‘no’?”

“Who could say no to the two of us?” He says. “You’re cute and funny and smarter than Keith, even. And me, I’m the world’s greatest dancer, right?”

I laugh and tell Dad to stop joking. “When would we go?”

He slows his cadence, his voice plummeting a notch. “That’s the funny part. It’d have to be soon. Real soon.” His hands get fidgety and that thumbnail goes directly into his mouth. He’s destroying the cuticle. “I’d like it if maybe we could leave today. Maybe even while Mom’s at school.”

“I have basketball practice tomorrow.”

“Sweetheart, I love you and you’re getting mature, so I’m going to tell you something important.” He waits a beat and my heart is a set of hummingbird wings. “This isn’t a healthy place to grow up. If I helped you pack a bag right now, would you come with me to the airport?”

“I don’t know.” I am silent for a long time, nervous to move because movement feels like it might encourage Dad to say something else I can’t deal with. I just stare at that *Family Feud* card. WHAT ANIMALS WOULD YOU SEE ON A FARM?

Here’s the thing: The idea of change scares me, but the idea of leaving Mom doesn’t. That part feels kind of exciting, actually. At this point, if I had to pick a side, I’d

pick Dad. Yes, those dark days in the kitchen scared the hell out of me, but my mom is always pinching my waist, telling me I look bigger today. Mom is always interrogating me on Friday nights about why I am not having a sleepover or why I am never invited to any birthday parties; she says she was very popular at my age. Even worse, Mom is always blaming me when she is in a rotten mood, and I am in an exhausted, anxious race to please her.

With Dad, at least, there is love, and the potential that our worst days are behind us.

“Can you just do that? Take me without telling Mom? Isn’t that stealing?”

“No, it’s not stealing. My lawyer and I filled out some paperwork that makes it okay for you to live with me. At least until Mom and I get things ironed out.”

“Are you getting divorced?”

“Maybe.” His face tints red and he nibbles that thumbnail again. “You don’t need to worry about it. Phoenix will help. What do you say?”

I think I want to say yes. But there is a heavy guilt, knowing I’d be betraying Mom. Despite the way she treats me, I do love her. I care about what she thinks. I don’t want to break her heart. But, a change sounds good.

“Um.” My chin bobs the way it does when my thoughts finally begin to untangle.

“Okay. We can come back if we don’t like Phoenix?”

“You bet. Anything for you.”

I am mentally filling up the purple suitcase in my closet. I’m choosing which books to bring with me. *Babysitters Club*, *Nancy Drew*, *Nate the Great*. I am thinking about cute boys and suntans and cactus.

I get jarred from this dream by the front door bursting open.

Mom screams and it sounds like shredded vocal cords. Snowflakes are captured in the fur cuffs and hood of her thick green coat. She shakes a sheet of paper in Dan's face, screaming something almost like words, punching his arm.

Dan keeps calm. He stands and my mother begins pounding his chest and slaps him hard once. I run to my room and lock the door. The screaming continues until maybe five minutes later. It feels like an hour. Now my mother is sobbing.

There is a tiny knock at the door and Big Dan quietly urges me to open. He is alone, hot-faced and sweating at the temples. He sounds soothing. "Mom wants me to spend the night at a hotel, sweetheart."

"I want to come with you." Twenty minutes ago I didn't know whether I wanted to go away with my father. Now that I can't have it, it's consuming.

"I know," he says. "And you will. Soon. I just have to sort some things out with Mom and then we'll be off to Phoenix. You can wait a few more days, right?"

We hug. He kisses me on the top of my head. "I love you" is the last thing I ever tell him.

The last thing my mother ever tells Big Dan involves throwing a vase full of fake flowers against the wall. For days after, the carpet is a graveyard of white glass and red plastic petals.

## **THIRTY-SIX**

“My mother would be so pissed if she knew about this,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, well, she hasn’t been by to visit since, what, Ellie was born?”

Austin pressed a shining chrome staplegun to the kitchen ceiling and fired a few more shots. We had ripped out the soggy tile and were now fastening a roll of plastic tarp where it once was. The bare minimum in waterproofing.

“We are doing the best we can with what we have.” His jaw barely moved when he spoke lately. Austin was a brick of ice. He popped in a few more staples before folding up the ladder and ignoring the problem.

When Mom wrote me a check to fix the roof, our mortgage was two months overdue and we needed groceries and we couldn’t even afford to fill up the Honda’s gas tank. I considered stealing this money to be the right thing to do. For one, it would be less than a month until I finished the book and got the advance money and fixed the roof proper. Two, Mom had been lying for almost forty years and my tiny lie felt like reimbursement. But this lie was only the beginning. The interrogation was far from over.

I still hadn’t told Austin any of this and I don’t know why. My strange behavior, this new reluctance to talk about the book and my family, seemed to have had a chemical reaction with his anxiety about finances. I missed the jolly husband who kept things light around the house, but didn’t make any moves to bring him back.

I had hoped Mom's check would improve Austin's mood, but he got guilty whenever someone helped out. He knew, maybe better than me even, that Mom's money wasn't free.

My blood pressure began to rise when she started discussing photo ops and news interviews and fan Q&A sessions we would have before the jump. It was looking harder and harder to Pull a Layla and back out of this. But the strangest part was Mom's sudden enthusiasm.

"Layla, this is the best decision you've ever made," she said by phone while I was dragging leftover plastic sheeting to the basement. She was driving out to the Columbia Gorge to see the progress on the ramp. "I'm really starting to see things your way."

"My way?"

"You said yourself, Keith really appreciates the support. I'm going to support him. Together, as a family. A *normal* family." She laughed.

This attitude, this welcome mat, made me nervous. I wanted to end our phone call as quickly as possible. I wanted a breath of air. I wanted to return the money and hide. But Mom kept bringing me in closer. Closer than I had been in years, maybe ever. I looked down at a glossy scar on my palm, from a long ago burn, and knew what happened when you get too close.

"I love you," Mom said before hanging up. It sounded like a foreign language. We were not really that kind of family.

"Okay. Thanks."

"Come on," she pouted, but silly. "That's it?"

"I love you, too." I hung up.

Mom's behavior was strange, but Keith went even further. I spoke to him more in the days leading up to his Columbia jump than in whole years prior. In an age when everyone texted or at the very least emailed, Keith rang you up repeatedly until you answered.

"Buzzard, make sure you bring an ID to the jump site. Caleb can be a real dick about who gets VIP passes, but I guess that's a manager's job," Keith said. "So, here's the schedule, are you writing this down?"

"Can't you send it to me?"

"Is your hand broken?" he said. "Seriously, write this down."

"Of course," I said. Nowhere near a pen.

It was a Saturday and Austin had taken Ellie to the children's museum so I could write. I was in the spare bedroom that doubled as my office. A space heater hummed in the corner and blew some of the paper stacks. I'd removed everything from Nancy's bank box and had begun tacking important items to the walls. One entire side of the room was covered. I was trying to reorganize a bunch of clippings from 1977, including a transcript of that infamous *Family Feud* episode, when my brother called.

"The full rehearsal is at 2 PM next Saturday, but you need to be onsite by 9 AM. Go get your pass and find my trailer. We have a full day of publicity shit. Make sure you wear the new outfit. We have to look like a team."

"Right, *the outfit*. What, exactly is this *thing* going to—"

"Jesus Christ, Buzz. I can already hear it in your voice."

"What? I just." I stammered. Where had all that confidence gone?

“You’re trying to back out. You do this shit every couple of years and we all know it.”

“I don’t—” I started diploma-rolling the transcript, needing a chore for my nervous hands.

“You do something decent, like with the lake house, and you try to erase all your stunts, you try to extend an olive branch and be part of the family again.”

“That was one time—”

“But then you pull a Layla. You get close and you get nervous and blow it all up,” he said. “Or just run away.”

I released the papers and they uncurled in an explosion.

He was so accurate it made me dry in the mouth. Keith was referring to my entire life, but specifically a trip I begged my family to take. A weekend at Lost Lake, peace and quiet, campfires and swimming, and a chance for me to apologize. We hadn’t all spoken in months. Mom agreed and Keith blocked out the days on his schedule and even brought his new girlfriend. At first, when my mother and brother were cold to the idea, I worked my ass off and went into full saleswoman mode, convincing them Lost Lake was a great idea. The challenge of swaying them was addictive. But as soon as Mom and Keith agreed, I soured on the plan. I suddenly didn’t want it. Austin and Ellie and I actually drove a couple of hours toward the cabin before I had a panic attack on the side of the road and forced us turn around, ditching my mom and brother, who never spoke about it after that, which was weirdly unsettling.

Knowing Keith had me so pegged about his Columbia River jump made me actually lean into this thing. I always did, and maybe he knew that. “You’re wrong,” I



said. “I am doing the jump. One-hundred percent.” It felt gross to say, but I couldn’t back down. “I just have a hunch you or Mom, or the both of you, will put me in some outfit that will make me nauseous.”

His tone was refreshingly kind. “Trust me, you’ll look cool.”

“Define cool for a thirty-eight-year-old mother?”

My knee had begun to lava-tingle, so I was up and eyeing the wall. A rainbow of thumbtacks stuck into the plaster, holding up wrinkled copies of articles and some brittle originals. I needed to return to CPS and look at Dan’s Mother File, which I never even did.

“I got your back.” He softened, just like that. Keith did that when he felt someone was genuinely trusting him. The problem was, he was a hard man to trust. “I’m serious. You’ll look cool, Layla. Trust me.”

I waited for a jab, but none came. “You actually called me Layla.”

“You actually listened to me.” He chuckled. “Hey, I was kind of a prick the other day and I’m sorry. I’m under a ton of stress and, you know.”

“No. What do you mean?” I parted the curtains and leaned my head against the cold, dewy window. It had been overcast and cool all morning, but the grey sky seemed to be fissuring, spilling just a shred of light through the bare tree branches. It was warm.

“This jump.” Keith’s voice went to something conversational and sweet. “I mean, Dad didn’t even think this stunt was a good idea. You know? It’s got me a little spooked. Sometimes I’m like, *what’s wrong with me?*”

Here was a moment I’d been waiting for: Keith exposing his throat. But I tossed my ax aside. That startled me a little, but in a good way. It felt surprisingly honest.

“Nothing’s wrong with you. This is pretty amazing. You know, I am finally starting to realize we’re part of a really strange, but, you know, awesome family.” I waited a second.

“But, yes, this jump is a hundred-percent insane. Even for you.”

A pause so long that I got a little jumpy, assuming the call was dropped.

“Yeah,” he said, a little upset.

“You’ll be alright.” I couldn’t help but prop him up. My usual urge to say the wrong thing was replaced with the kind things. What was happening to us? “You’ve never missed a jump. Not once in, like, two-hundred and seven attempts.”

“Jesus.” He brightened. “I didn’t know you knew that much about my work.”

“Of course,” I said, verging on perky, but not fake. This was a place I never knew I could go, especially with my family. “Hey, I know you’re busy, but do you have a sec?”

“Sure,” he said.

“I wanted to say, you were right the other day, when you told me about Lanny. I did some research and I didn’t realize what kinds of problems he had.”

“Yeah. I should have been more gentle. I know you love him—”

“I read a police report about the kidnapping.”

Silence.

“I tried asking Mom about it.”

Silence.

“And she pretended not to know.”

Keith cleared his throat in short, awkward bursts.

“And then I started thinking about the way Lanny died. I believe you now. You’re the one who said he never surfed a day in his life. What is Mom hiding, Keith?”

“There’s, *yeah*, some shit you should know.” My brother laughed. But not the sharp, wounding kind he dished out so frequently. This was the kind of laugh people made at funerals. A strained, through-the-nose exasperation. “There’s some stuff I want you know before this jump, in case I don’t—it’s a long jump and I want a clear conscience.”

“What?”

“She’s. Jesus, I don’t know how to frame this.”

“What about Mom?”

“Layla, you can’t trust her,” Keith said. “She dangerous. Back in 1980, back when you were a baby, I think she killed Lanny—” A rustling and slamming filled the background of Keith’s line. “Hey, Mama. Hey, Feng. You guys look great.” A murmur. “No, just one of my idiot lawyers asking another idiot question.”

The phone went silent.