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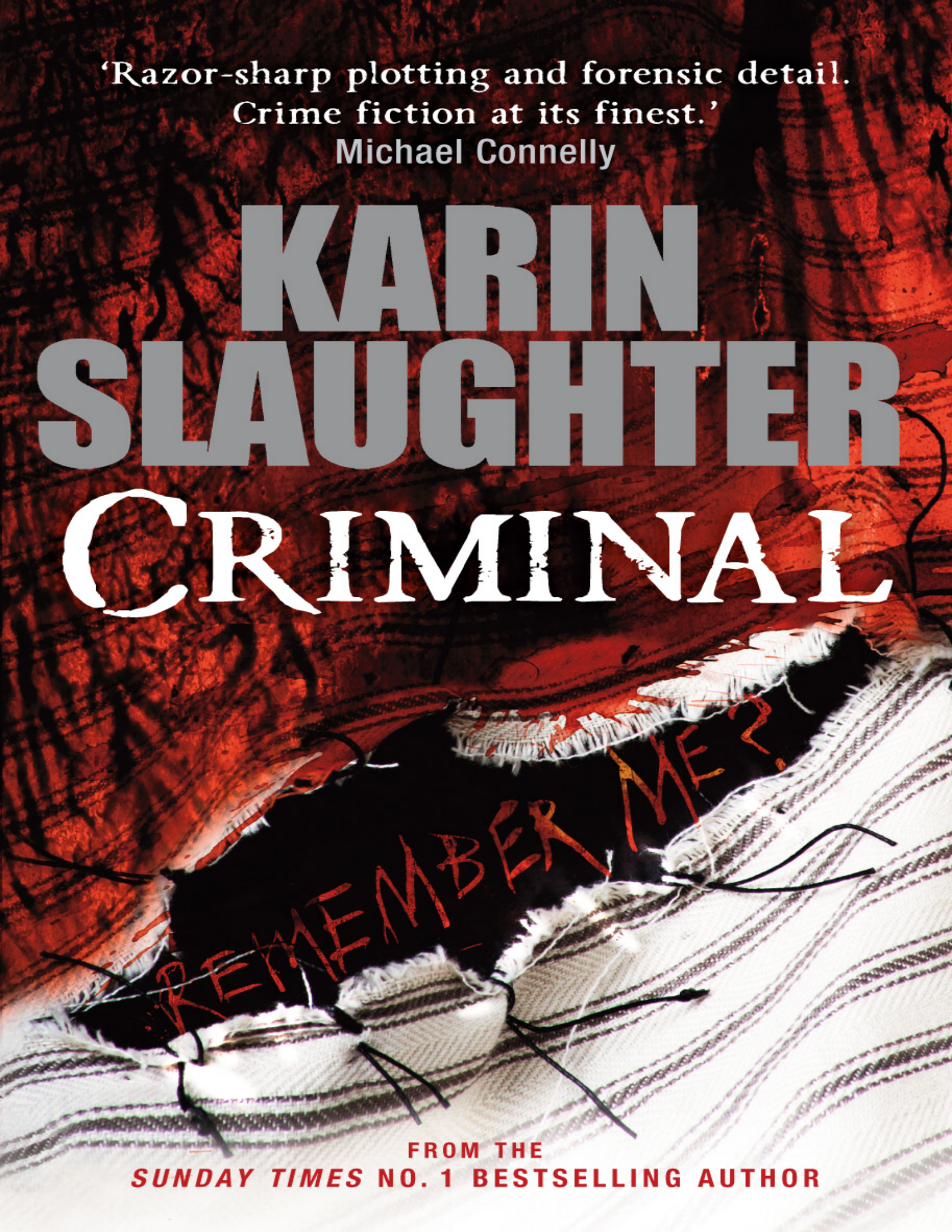
Michael Connelly

KARIN SLAUGHTER

CRIMINAL



FROM THE
SUNDAY TIMES NO. 1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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About the Book

The past will always find you …

A woman is found brutally murdered in a sordid Atlanta apartment.

Her blood-soaked body bears a startling similarity to a woman found dead almost 40 years earlier.

Soon Special Agent Will Trent finds himself returning to the home he grew up in. And a past that could hold the clue to the killings …

About the Author

Karin Slaughter was born and raised in a small Georgia town in the American South.

The author of eleven bestselling novels, Slaughter, a passionate supporter of libraries, has spearheaded the Save the Libraries campaign in America (www.savethelibraries.com) and advocates that everyone 'should fight for libraries as we do for our freedom'. She has donated all income from her short story *Thorn in My Side* to both the American and British library systems.

For her twelfth novel, *Criminal*, Slaughter exhaustively researched both the racial and gender politics of the Atlanta police department and American society in the 1970s, resulting in a deeply personal exploration of her hometown and her country during a period of enormous social change.

To find out more about Karin Slaughter, visit her website www.karinslaughter.com, or catch up with her on www.facebook.com/AuthorKarinSlaughter.

Also by Karin Slaughter

Blindsighted

Kisscut

A Faint Cold Fear

Indelible

Like a Charm
(Editor)

Faithless

Triptych

Skin Privilege

Fractured

Martin Misunderstood

Genesis

Broken

Fallen

KARIN SLAUGHTER

CRIMINAL

Century · London

to Kate—
editor, friend.

one

August 15, 1974

LUCY BENNETT

A CINNAMON BROWN Oldsmobile Cutlass crawled up Edgewood Avenue, the windows lowered, the driver hunched down in his seat. The lights from the console showed narrow, beady eyes tracing along the line of girls standing under the street sign. Jane. Mary. Lydia. The car stopped. Predictably, the man tilted up his chin toward Kitty. She trotted over, adjusting her miniskirt as she navigated her spiked heels across the uneven asphalt. Two weeks ago, when Juice had first brought Kitty onto the corner, she'd told the other girls she was sixteen, which probably meant fifteen, though she looked no older than twelve.

They had all hated her on sight.

Kitty leaned down into the open window of the car. Her stiff vinyl skirt tipped up like the bottom of a bell. She always got picked first, which was becoming a problem that everyone but Juice could see. Kitty got special favors. She could talk men into doing anything. The girl was fresh, childlike, though like all of them, she carried a kitchen knife in her purse and knew how to use it. Nobody wanted to do what they were doing, but to have another girl—a

newer girl—picked over them hurt just as much as if they were all standing on the sidelines at the debutante ball.

Inside the Oldsmobile, the transaction was quickly negotiated, no haggling because what was on offer was still worth the price. Kitty made the signal to Juice, waited for his nod, then got into the car. The muffler chugged exhaust as the Olds made a wide turn onto a narrow side street. The car shook once as the gear was shoved into park. The driver's hand flew up, clamped around the back of Kitty's head, and she disappeared.

Lucy Bennett turned away, looking up the dark, soulless avenue. No headlights coming. No traffic. No business. Atlanta wasn't a nighttime town. The last person to leave the Equitable building usually turned off the lights, but Lucy could see the bulbs from the Flatiron glowing clear across Central City Park. If she squinted hard enough, she could find the familiar green of the C&S sign that anchored the business district. The New South. Progress through commerce. The City Too Busy to Hate.

If there were men out walking these streets tonight, it was with no amount of good on their minds.

Jane lit a smoke, then tucked the pack back into her purse. She wasn't the kind to share, but she was certainly the kind to take. Her eyes met Lucy's. The dead in them was hard to look at. Jane must've felt the same. She quickly glanced away.

Lucy shivered, even though it was the middle of August, heat wafting off the pavement like smoke from a fire. Her feet were sore. Her back ached. Her head was pounding like a metronome. Her gut felt like she'd swallowed a truckload of concrete. Cotton filled her mouth. Her hands felt the constant prick of pins and needles. A clump of her blonde hair had come out in the sink this morning. She had turned nineteen two days ago and already she was an old woman.

In the side street, the brown Olds shook again. Kitty's head came up. She wiped her mouth as she got out of the car. No dawdling. No giving the john time to reconsider his purchase. The car drove away before she could shut the door, and Kitty teetered for a moment on the high heels, looking lost, afraid, and then angry. They were all angry. Fury was their refuge, their comfort, the only thing that they could truly call their own.

Lucy watched Kitty pick her way back toward the corner. She gave Juice the cash, trying to keep her forward momentum, but he caught her arm to make her stop. Kitty spat on the sidewalk, trying to look like she wasn't terrified as Juice unfolded the wad of cash, counted off each bill. Kitty stood there, waiting. They all waited.

Finally, Juice lifted his chin. The money was good. Kitty took her place back in the line. She didn't look at any of the other girls. She just stared blankly into the street, waiting for the next car to roll up, waiting for the next man who would either give her a nod or pass her by. It'd taken two days, tops, for her eyes to develop the same dead look as the rest of the girls. What was going through her mind? Probably the same as Lucy, that familiar chant that rocked her to sleep every night: *When-will-this-be-over? When-will-this-be-over? When-will-this-be-over?*

Lucy had been fifteen once. From this distance, she could barely remember that girl. Passing notes in class. Giggling about boys. Rushing home from school every day to watch her soap. Dancing in her room to the Jackson Five with her best friend, Jill Henderson. Lucy was fifteen years old, and then life had opened up like a chasm, and little Lucy had plummeted down, down into the unrelenting darkness.

She had started taking speed to lose weight. Just pills at first. Benzedrine, which her friend Jill had found in her mother's medicine cabinet. They took them sparingly, cautiously, until the feds had gone crazy and banned the

pills. The medicine cabinet was empty one day, and the next—or so it seemed—Lucy's weight ballooned back up to well over one hundred fifty pounds. She was the only overweight kid in school save for Fat George, the boy who picked his nose and sat by himself at the lunch table. Lucy hated him the same way he hated her, the same way she hated her own reflection in the mirror.

It was Jill's mother who taught Lucy how to shoot up. Mrs. Henderson wasn't stupid; she had noticed the missing pills, been pleased to see Lucy finally doing something to get rid of her baby fat. The woman availed herself of the drug for the same reason. She was a nurse at Clayton General Hospital. She walked out of the emergency room with glass vials of Methedrine chattering like teeth in the pocket of her white uniform. Injectable amphetamine, she told Lucy. The same as the pills, only faster.

Lucy was fifteen years old the first time the needle pierced her skin.

"Just a little bit at a time," Mrs. Henderson coached, drawing a red tinge of blood into the syringe, then slowly pressing home the plunger. "You control it. Don't let it control you."

There was no real high, just a lightheadedness, and then of course the welcome loss of appetite. Mrs. Henderson was right. The liquid was faster than the pills, easier. Five pounds. Ten pounds. Fifteen. Then—nothing. So Lucy had redefined her "just a little bit at a time" until she was drawing back not five cc's, but ten, then ten turned to fifteen, then her head exploded and she was on fire.

What did she care about after that?

Nothing.

Boys? Too stupid. Jill Henderson? What a drag. Her weight? Never again.

By the age of sixteen, Lucy was just under a hundred pounds. Her ribs, her hips, her elbows, jutted out like polished marble. For the first time in her life, she had

cheekbones. She wore dark Cleopatra eyeliner and blue eye shadow and ironed her long blonde hair so that it slapped stiffly against her impossibly thin ass. The little girl her fifth-grade PE coach had, much to the delight of the rest of the class, nicknamed “Steam Roller” was model-thin, carefree, and—suddenly—popular.

Not popular with her old friends, the ones she had known since kindergarten. They all spurned her as a waste, a dropout, a loser. For once in her life, Lucy didn’t care. Who needed people who looked down on you for having a little fun? Lucy had only ever been a token anyway—the fat girl to pal around with so the other girl could be the pretty one, the charming one, the one all the boys flirted with.

Her new friends thought Lucy was perfect. They loved it when she made a sarcastic quip about someone from her old life. They embraced her weirdness. The girls invited her to their parties. The boys asked her out. They treated her as an equal. She finally fit in with a group. She finally didn’t stick out as *too* anything. She was just one of many. She was just Lucy.

And what of her old life? Lucy felt nothing but disdain for everyone who had inhabited it, especially Mrs. Henderson, who abruptly cut her off and said Lucy needed to get her shit together. Lucy’s shit was more together than it had ever been. She had no intention whatsoever of giving up her new life.

All of her old friends were squares, obsessed with college prep, which mostly consisted of debating which sorority they would rush. The finer points of these sororities, whose Victorian and Greek Revival–style mansions dotted Milledge Avenue and South Lumpkin Street at the University of Georgia, had been part of Lucy’s vernacular since the age of ten, but the lure of amphetamine reduced her Greek to a forgotten language. She didn’t need the disapproving glances from her old friends. She didn’t even need Mrs. Henderson anymore.

There were plenty of new friends who could hook her up, and Lucy's parents were generous with her allowance. On the weeks she was short, her mother never noticed money missing from her purse.

It was so easy to see now, but at the time, the spiraling down of her life seemed to happen in seconds, not the actual two full years it had taken for Lucy to fall. At home, she was sullen and sulky. She started sneaking out at night and lying to her parents about stupid things. Mundane things. Things that could be easily disproven. At school, Lucy failed class after class, finally ending up in rudimentary English with Fat George sitting in the front and Lucy and her new friends in the back row, mostly sleeping off the lows, biding their time until they could get back to their real love.

The needle.

That finely honed piece of surgical steel, that seemingly innocuous device of delivery that ruled every moment of Lucy's life. She dreamed about shooting up. That first prick of flesh. That pinch as the tip pierced vein. That slow burn as the liquid was injected. That immediate euphoria of the drug entering her system. It was worth everything. Worth every sacrifice. Worth every loss. Worth the things she had to do to get it. Worth the things she all but forgot about the second the drug entered her bloodstream.

Then, suddenly, came the crest of the last hill, the biggest hill, on her roller coaster ride down.

Bobby Fields. Almost twenty years older than Lucy. Wiser. Stronger. He was a mechanic at one of her father's gas stations. Bobby had never noticed her before. Lucy was invisible to him, a pudgy little girl with lank pigtails. But that changed after the needle entered Lucy's life. She walked into the garage one day, her jeans hanging low on her newly lean hips, bell-bottoms frayed from dragging the floor, and Bobby told her to stop and talk awhile.

He listened to her, too, and Lucy only then realized that no one had really listened to her before. And then, Bobby had reached up with his grease-stained fingers and stroked back a piece of hair that was hanging in her face. And then, somehow, they were in the back of the building and his hand was on her breast, and she felt alive under the bright glare of his undivided attention.

Lucy had never been with a man before. Even high as a kite, she knew she should say no. She knew that she had to save herself, that no one wanted spoiled goods. Because as improbable as it now seemed, back then there was still a part of her who assumed that despite the slight detour, one day she'd end up at UGA, pledge herself to whichever house she chose, and get married to an earnest young man whose bright future met with her father's approval.

Lucy would have babies. She would join the PTA. She would bake cookies and drive her kids to school in a station wagon and sit in her kitchen smoking with the other mothers while they complained about their boring lives. And, maybe while the other women discussed marital discord or colicky babies, Lucy would smile pleasantly, remembering her reckless youth, her crazy, hedonistic affair with the needle.

Or, maybe one day she would be on a street corner in the middle of Atlanta and feel her stomach drop at the thought of losing that homey kitchen, those close friends.

Because, while sixteen-year-old Lucy had never been with a man before, Bobby Fields had been with plenty of women. Plenty of young women. He knew how to talk to them. He knew how to make them feel special. And, most important, he knew how to move his hand from breast to thigh, from thigh to crotch, and from there to other places that made Lucy gasp so loudly that her father called from the office to see if she was okay.

"I'm all right, Daddy," she had said, because Bobby's hand had felt so good that Lucy would've lied to God

Himself.

At first, their relationship was a secret, which of course made it more exciting. They had a bond. They had a forbidden thing between them. For nearly a full year, they carried on their clandestine affair. Lucy would avoid Bobby's gaze when she made her weekly trek to the garage to count quarters with her daddy. She would pretend Bobby didn't exist until she couldn't take it anymore. She would go to the dirty bathroom behind the building. He would grip his greasy hands so hard around her ass that she would feel the pain when she sat back down beside her father.

The hunger for Bobby was almost as intense as her hunger for the needle. She skipped school. She fabricated a part-time job and fake sleepovers that her parents never bothered to verify. Bobby had his own place. He drove a Mustang Fastback like Steve McQueen. He drank beer and he smoked dope and he scored speed for Lucy and she learned how to go down on him without gagging.

It was all perfect until she realized that she couldn't keep up her fake life anymore. Or maybe she just didn't want to. She dropped out of high school two months before graduation. The final straw came the weekend her parents took a trip to visit her brother in college. Lucy spent the entire time at Bobby's. She cooked for him. She cleaned for him. She made love to him all night, and during the day she stared at the clock, counting down the minutes until she could tell him that she loved him. And Lucy *did* love him, especially when he got home at night with a big grin on his face and a little vial of magic in his pocket.

Bobby was generous with the needle. Maybe too generous. He got Lucy so high that her teeth started chattering. She was still high when she stumbled home the next morning.

Sunday.

Her parents were supposed to go to church with her brother before driving back, but there they were, sitting at the kitchen table, still in their traveling clothes. Her mother hadn't even taken off her hat. They had been waiting up all night. They had called her friend, her alibi, who was supposed to say that Lucy had spent the night. The girl had lied at first but after only the slightest bit of pressure told Lucy's parents exactly where their daughter was and exactly what she'd been up to for the last several months.

Lucy was seventeen by then, still considered a child. Her parents tried to have her committed. They tried to have Bobby arrested. They tried to prevent other garages from hiring him, but he just moved to Atlanta, where no one cared who fixed their car so long as it was cheap.

Two months of hell passed, and then, suddenly, Lucy was eighteen. Just like that, her life was different. Or different in a different way. Old enough to quit school. Old enough to drink. Old enough to leave her family without the pigs dragging her back home. She went from being her daddy's girl to Bobby's girl, living in an apartment off Stewart Avenue, sleeping all day, waiting for Bobby to come home at night so he could shoot her up, screw her, then let her sleep some more.

The only regret Lucy felt at the time was toward her brother, Henry. He was in law school at UGA. He was six years older, more like a friend than a sibling. In person, they generally shared long moments of silence, but since he'd gone away to school, they had written each other letters two or three times a month.

Lucy had loved writing letters to Henry. She was the old Lucy in all of her correspondences: silly about boys, anxious for graduation, eager to learn how to drive. No talk of the needle. No talk of her new friends who were so far outside the margins of society that Lucy was afraid to bring them home lest they steal her mother's good silver. That is, if her mother even let them through the door.

Henry’s responses were always brief, but even when he was covered up in exams, he managed to send Lucy a line or two to let her know what was going on. He was excited about her joining him on campus. He was excited about showing around his baby girl to his friends. He was excited about everything, until he wasn’t, because her parents told him that his darling sister had moved to Atlanta as the whore of a thirty-eight-year-old hippie, drug-dealing gearhead.

After that, Lucy’s letters came back unopened. Henry’s scrawl informed her, “Return to sender.” Just like that, he dropped Lucy like trash in the street.

Maybe she *was* trash. Maybe she deserved to be abandoned. Because once the rush wore off, once the highs turned less intense and the lows became almost unbearable, what was there left to Lucy Bennett but a life on the street?

Two months after Bobby moved her to Atlanta, he kicked her out. Who could blame him? His hot young fox had turned into a junkie who met him at the door every night begging for the needle. And when Bobby stopped supplying her, she found another man in the complex who was willing to give her anything she wanted. So what if she had to spread her legs for it? He was giving her what Bobby wouldn’t. He was supplying her demand.

His name was Fred. He cleaned planes at the airport. He liked to do things to Lucy that made her cry, and then he’d give her the needle and everything would be okay again. Fred thought he was special, better than Bobby. When Fred figured out the gleam in Lucy’s eye was for the drug and not for him, he started beating her. He didn’t stop beating her until she landed in the hospital. And then when she got a taxi back to the apartment complex, the manager told her that Fred had moved out, no forwarding address. And then the manager told Lucy that she was welcome to stay with him.

Much of what came next was a blur, or maybe it was so clear that she couldn't see it, the way putting on someone else's glasses makes your eyes cross. For almost a year, Lucy went from man to man, supplier to supplier. She did things—horrible things—to get the needle. If there was a totem pole in the world of speed, she had started at the top and quickly hit bottom. Day after day, she felt the dizzying spin of her life circling the drain. Yet, she felt helpless to stop it. The pain would kick in. The need. The yearning. The longing that burned like hot acid in her gut.

And then finally, the very bottom. Lucy was terrified of the bikers who sold speed, but eventually, inevitably, her love of the speed won out. They tossed her around like a baseball, everyone taking a hit. All of them had fought in Vietnam and were furious at the world, the system. Furious at Lucy, too. She had never overdosed before, at least not bad enough to end up in the hospital. Once, twice, a third time, she was dropped off the back of a Harley in front of the Grady emergency room. The bikers didn't like that. Hospitals brought the cops and the cops were expensive to buy off. One night, Lucy got too high and one of them brought her down with heroin, a trick he'd picked up fighting Charlie.

Heroin, the final nail in Lucy's coffin. As with the speed, she was a quick convert. That deadening sensation. That indescribable bliss. The loss of time. Space. Consciousness.

Lucy had never taken money for sex. Her transactions until this point had always had an air of bartering. Sex for speed. Sex for heroin. Never sex for money.

But now, Lucy found herself in desperate need of money.

The bikers sold speed, not heroin. Heroin belonged to the coloreds. Even the Mafia was hands-off. H was a ghetto drug. It was too potent, too addictive, too dangerous for white people. Especially white women.

Which is how Lucy ended up being tricked out by a black man with a tattoo of Jesus on his chest.

The spoon. The flame. The smell of burning rubber. The tourniquet. The filter from a broken cigarette. There was a romantic pageantry to the whole thing, a drawn-out process that made her former affair with the needle seem woefully unsophisticated. Even now, Lucy could feel herself getting excited at the thought of the spoon. She closed her eyes, imagining the bent piece of silver, the way the neck resembled a broken swan. Black swan. Black sheep. Black man's whore.

Suddenly, Juice was at her side. The other girls cautiously moved away. Juice had a way of sensing weakness. It was how he got them in the first place. "What it is, Sexy?"

"Nothing," she mumbled. "Everything's dyn-o-mite."

He took the toothpick out of his mouth. "Don't play me, gal."

Lucy looked down at the ground. She could see his white patent leather shoes, the way the bell-bottom of his custom-made green pants draped across the wingtips. How many strangers had she screwed to put the shine on those shoes? How many back seats had she lain down in so he could go to the tailor in Five Points to have his inseam measured?

"Sorry." She chanced a look at his face, trying to gauge his temper.

Juice took out his handkerchief and rubbed the sweat off his forehead. He had long sideburns that connected to his mustache and goatee. There was a birthmark on his cheek that Lucy stared at sometimes when she needed to concentrate on other things.

He said, "Come on, gal. You don't tell me what's on your mind, I cain't fix it." He pushed her shoulder. When she didn't start talking, he pushed her harder to get the point across. He wasn't going away. Juice hated when they kept secrets from him.

"I was thinking about my mother," Lucy told him, which was the first time she'd told a man the truth in a long

while.

Juice laughed, used the toothpick to address the other girls. “Ain’t that sweet? She been thinkin’ about her mammy.” He raised his voice. “How many’a y’all’s mama’s here for ya now?”

There was a titter of nervous laughter. Kitty, ever the suck-up, said, “We just need you, Juice. Only you.”

“Lucy,” Mary whispered. The word nearly got trapped in her throat. If Juice got pissed off, none of them would get what they wanted, and all that they wanted right now, all that they needed, was the spoon and the H that Juice had in his pocket.

“Nah, it’s all right.” Juice waved off Mary. “Let her talk. Come on, girl. Speak.”

Maybe it was because he said the same thing that you’d say to a dog—“speak,” like Lucy would get a treat if she barked on command—or maybe it was because she was so used to doing exactly what Juice told her to do, that Lucy’s mouth started moving of its own volition.

“I was thinkin’ about this time my mama took me into town.” Lucy closed her eyes. She could feel herself back in the car. See the metal dashboard of her mother’s Chrysler gleaming in the bright sunlight. It was hot, steamy, the sort of August that made you wish you had air-conditioning in your car. “She was gonna drop me off at the library while she did her chores.”

Juice chuckled at her memory. “Aw, that’s sweet, girl. Your mama takin’ you to the liberry sose you can read.”

“She couldn’t get there.” Lucy opened her eyes, looked directly at Juice in a way she’d never before dared. “The Klan was having a rally.”

Juice cleared his throat. He cut his eyes to the other girls, then zeroed back in on Lucy. “Keep going.” His deep tone wedged a splinter of cold into her spine.

“The streets were blocked. They were stopping traffic, checking cars.”

“Hush now,” Mary whispered, begging for Lucy to stop. But Lucy couldn’t stop. Her master had told her to speak.

“It was a Saturday. Mama always took me to the library on Saturdays.”

“That right?” Juice asked.

“Yes.” Even with her eyes open, Lucy could still see the scene playing out in her head. She was in her mother’s car. Safe. Carefree. Before the pills. Before the needle. Before the heroin. Before Juice. Before she lost that little Lucy who sat so patiently in her mother’s car, worried that she wasn’t going to get to the library in time for her reading group.

Little Lucy was a voracious reader. She gripped the stack of books in her lap as she stared at the men blocking the streets. They were all dressed in their white robes. Most of them had their hoods pulled back because of the heat. She recognized some from church, a couple from school. She waved at Mr. Sheffield, who owned the hardware store. He winked at her and waved back.

Lucy told Juice, “We were on a hill near the courthouse, and there was a black guy in front of us, stopped at the stop sign. He was in one of those little foreign cars. Mr. Peterson walked right up to him, and Mr. Laramie was on the other side.”

“That right?” Juice repeated.

“Yes, that’s right. The guy was terrified. His car kept rolling back. He must’ve had a clutch. His foot was slipping because he was so panicked. And I remember my mama watching him like we were watching *Wild Kingdom* or something, and she just laughed and laughed, and said, ‘Lookit how scared that coon is.’ ”

“Jesus,” Mary hissed.

Lucy smiled at Juice, repeated, “Lookit how scared that coon is.”

Juice took the toothpick out of his mouth. “You best watch yourself, gal.”

“Lookit how scared that coon is,” Lucy mumbled. “Lookit how scared …” She let her voice trail off, but it was only like an engine idling before it was gunned. For no reason, the story struck her as hilariously funny. Her voice went up, the sound echoing off the buildings. “Lookit how scared that coon is! Lookit how scared that coon is!”

Juice slapped her, open palm, but hard enough to spin her around. Lucy felt blood slide down her throat.

Not the first time she’d been hit. Not the last. It wouldn’t stop her. Nothing could stop her. “Lookit how scared that coon is! Lookit how scared that coon is!”

“Shut up!” Juice punched his fist into her face.

Lucy felt the crack of a tooth breaking. Her jaw twisted like a Hula Hoop, but she still said, “Lookit how scared—”

He kicked her in the stomach, his tight pants keeping his foot low so that she felt the toe of his shoe scrape her pelvic bone. Lucy gasped from the pain, which was excruciating, but somehow liberating. How many years had it been since she’d felt something other than numb? How many years had it been since she’d raised her voice, told a man no?

Her throat felt tight. She could barely stand. “Lookit how scared that—”

Juice punched her in the face again. She felt the bridge of her nose splinter. Lucy staggered back, arms open. She saw stars. Literal stars. Her purse dropped. The heel of her shoe snapped off.

“Get out my face!” Juice waved his fist in the air. “Get outta here ’fore I kill you, bitch!”

Lucy stumbled into Jane, who pushed her away like a diseased dog.

“Just go!” Mary begged. “Please.”

Lucy swallowed a mouthful of blood and coughed it back out. Pieces of white speckled the ground. Teeth.

“Get on, bitch!” Juice warned her. “Get on outta my sight.”

Lucy managed to turn. She looked up the dark street. There were no lights showing the way. Either the pimps shot them out or the city didn't bother to turn them on. Lucy stumbled again, but kept herself upright. The broken heel was a problem. She kicked off both shoes. The soles of her feet felt the intense heat of the asphalt, a burning sensation that shot straight up to her scalp. It was like walking on hot coals. She'd seen that on TV once—the trick was to walk fast enough to deprive the heat of oxygen so your skin didn't burn.

Lucy picked up her pace. She straightened herself as she walked. She kept her head held high despite the breathtaking pain in her ribs. It didn't matter. The darkness didn't matter. The heat in her soles didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

She turned, screaming, "Look at how scared that coon is!"

Juice made to run after her, and Lucy bolted down the street. Her bare feet slapped against the pavement. Her arms pumped. Her lungs shook as she rounded the corner. Adrenaline raced through her body. Lucy thought of all those PE classes in school, when her bad attitude had earned her five, ten, twenty laps around the track. She had been so fast then, so young and free. Not anymore. Her legs started to cramp. Her knees wanted to buckle. Lucy chanced a look behind her, but Juice was not there. No one was there. She stumbled to a stop.

He didn't even care enough to chase her.

Lucy bent over, bracing her hand against a phone booth, blood dripping from her mouth. She used her tongue to find the source. Two teeth were broken, though thank God they were in the back.

She went inside the booth. The light was too bright when she closed the door. She let it hang open and leaned against the glass. Her breath was still labored. Her body felt as if she'd run ten miles, not a handful of blocks.

She looked at the phone, the black receiver on the hook, the slot for the dime. Lucy traced her fingers along the bell symbol engraved in the metal plate, then let her hand move down to find the four, the seven, the eight. Her parents' phone number. She still knew it by heart, just like she knew the street number where they lived, her grandmother's birthday, her brother's upcoming graduation date. That earlier Lucy was not completely lost. There still existed her life in numbers.

She could call, but even if they answered, no one would have anything to say.

Lucy pushed herself out of the phone booth. She walked slowly up the street, in no particular direction but away. Her stomach clenched as the first wave of withdrawal made itself known. She should go to the hospital to get patched up and beg the nurse for some methadone before it got really bad. Grady was twelve blocks down and three over. Her legs weren't cramping yet. She could make the walk. Those laps around the high school track hadn't always felt like a punishment. Lucy used to love to run. She loved jogging on weekends with her brother Henry. He always gave up before she did. Lucy had a letter from him in her purse. She'd gotten it last month from the man at the Union Mission, where the girls took their downtime when Juice was mad at them.

Lucy had kept the letter for three whole days before opening it, afraid it would be bad news. Her father dead. Her mother run off with the Charles Chips man. Everyone was getting divorced now, weren't they? Broken homes. Broken children. Though Lucy had been broken for a long time, so it was nothing to open and read a simple letter, right?

Henry's cramped script was so familiar that it felt like a soft hand on her cheek. Tears had filled her eyes. She read the letter through once, then again, then again. One page. No gossip or family news, because Henry was not that way.

He was precise, logical, never dramatic. Henry was in his last year of law school. He was looking for a job now because he'd heard the market was tough. He would miss being a student. He would miss being around his friends. And he really missed Lucy.

He missed Lucy.

This was the part she had read four times, then five, then so many more that she had lost count. Henry missed Lucy. Her brother missed his sister.

Lucy missed herself, too.

But Lucy had dropped her purse back on the street corner. Juice probably had it now. He'd probably shaken it out onto the sidewalk and combed through everything like it belonged to him. Which meant he had Henry's letter and Lucy's kitchen knife that was sharp enough to cut the skin on her leg, which she knew because she had done it last week just to make sure she could still bleed.

Lucy took a left at the next corner. She turned around to look at the moon. It punctured the black sky with the curved edge of its fingernail. The skeleton of the unfinished Peachtree Plaza hotel loomed in the distance—the tallest hotel in the world. The whole city was under construction. In a year or two, there would be thousands of new hotel rooms opening downtown. Business would be booming, especially in the streets.

She doubted she'd live to see it.

Lucy tripped again. Pain shot up her spine. The damage to her body was making itself known. Her rib must be fractured. She knew that her nose was broken. The clenching in her stomach was getting worse. She would need a fix soon or she'd go into the DTs.

She made herself put one foot in front of the other. "Please," she prayed to the God of Grady Hospital. "Let them give me methadone. Let them give me a bed. Let them be kind. Let them be—"

Lucy stopped. What the hell was wrong with her? Why was she leaving her fate to some bitch nurse who would take one look at her and know exactly what she was? Lucy should go back to her strip. She should make up with Juice. She should get down on her hands and knees and beg him for forgiveness. For mercy. For a hit. For salvation.

"Good evening, sister."

Lucy spun around, half expecting to see Henry, though he had never greeted her that way. There was a man standing a few feet behind her. White. Tall. Covered in shadow. Lucy's hand flew to her chest. Her heart pounded underneath her palm. She knew better than to let some john sneak up on her like that. She reached for her purse, the knife she kept inside, but too late remembered that she'd lost everything.

"Are you all right?" the man asked. He was clean-cut, something Lucy hadn't seen in a long while, except on a pig. His light brown hair was shaved into a buzz cut. Sideburns short. No shadow of a beard even this late at night. Military, she guessed. Lots of guys were coming home from Nam. In six months, this asshole would be just like all the other vets Lucy knew, wearing his dirty hair in a braid, beating down some woman and talking shit about the Man.

Lucy tried to make her voice strong. "Sorry, handsome. I'm done for the night." Her words echoed in the cavern formed by the tall buildings. She was aware that she was slurring, and straightened her shoulders so he wouldn't think she was an easy target. "Closed for business."

"I'm not looking for business." He took a step forward. He had a book in his hands. The Bible.

"Shit," she mumbled. These guys were everywhere. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, even some of the freaks from the local Catholic church. "Lookit, I don't need saving."

"I hate to argue, sister, but you look like you do."

“I’m not your sister. I have a brother, and you’re not him.” Lucy turned around and started walking. She couldn’t go back to Juice right now. Lucy didn’t think she could stand another beating. She would go to the hospital and make such a stink that they’d have to sedate her. That, at least, would get her through the night.

“I bet he’s worried about you.”

Lucy kept walking.

“Your brother?” the man asked. “I bet he’s worried about you. I know I’d be.”

She clutched her hands together, but didn’t turn around. Footsteps followed her. Lucy didn’t quicken her pace. Couldn’t quicken her pace. The pain in her stomach was strong, a knife cutting through her viscera. The hospital was fine for one night, but there was tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Lucy would have to find a way back into Juice’s good graces. Tonight had been slow. Even Kitty wasn’t bringing in much. Juice was all about cold, hard cash, and Lucy was betting this Jesus freak had at least ten bucks on him. Sure, Juice would still beat her, but the money would soften his blows.

“I want to call him.” Lucy kept a careful pace. She could hear the man following, keeping his distance. “My brother. He’ll come get me. He said he would.” She was lying, but her voice was strong. “I don’t have any money. To call him, that is.”

“If it’s money you want, I can give you that.”

Lucy stopped. Slowly, she turned around. The man was standing in a sliver of light that came from the lobby of a nearby office building. Lucy was too tall, five-ten with her shoes off. She was used to looking down at most people. This guy was well over six feet. The hands that held the Bible were huge. His shoulders were broad. Long legs, but not lean. Lucy was fast, especially when she was scared. The minute he took out his wallet, she would grab it and dash away.

She asked, “You a marine or what?”

“4-F.” He took a step toward her. “Medical disability.”

He looked capable enough to Lucy. He probably had a daddy who bought him out of the draft, same as Lucy’s dad had with Henry. “Give me some money so I can call my brother.” She remembered, “Please.”

“Where is he?”

“Athens.”

“Greece?”

She sputtered a laugh. “Georgia. He’s in college. Law school. He’s about to get married. I wanna call him. Congratulate him.” She added, “Get him to pick me up and take me home. To my family. Where I belong.”

The man took another step forward. The light picked out the features of his face, which were normal, even average. Blue eyes. Nice mouth. Sharp nose. Square jaw. “Why aren’t you in college?”

Lucy felt a tingle at the back of her neck. She wasn’t sure how to describe it. Part of her was afraid of the man. Part of her was thinking she hadn’t talked to a guy like this in more years than she could remember. He wasn’t looking at her like she was a whore. He wasn’t proposing a transaction. There was nothing in his eyes that told her he was a threat. And yet, it was two in the morning and he was standing in the empty street of a city that pretty much closed its doors at six o’clock after all the white people went back to the suburbs.

The truth was, neither one of them belonged here.

“Sister.” He took another step closer. Lucy was shocked to see the concern in his eyes. “I don’t want you to be afraid of me. I let the Lord guide my hand.”

Lucy had trouble answering. Years had passed since anyone had looked at her with anything close to compassion. “What makes you think I’m afraid?”

“I think you’ve lived with fear for a long time, Lucy.”

“You don’t know what I’ve—” She stopped. “How do you know my name?”

He seemed confused. “You told me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You told me your name was Lucy. Just a few minutes ago.” He held up the Bible for emphasis. “I swear.”

All the saliva in her mouth was gone. Her name was her secret. She never gave it away to strangers. “No, I didn’t.”

“Lucy …” He was less than five feet away from her now. There was that same concerned look in his eyes, though he could easily take one more step and wrap both hands around her neck before she knew what was happening.

But he didn’t. He just stood there holding his Bible to his chest. “Please, don’t be scared of me. You have no reason to be afraid.”

“Why are you here?”

“I want to help you. To save you.”

“I don’t need saving. I need money.”

“I told you I’d give you all the money you need.” He tucked the Bible under his arm and took out his wallet. She could see bills stacked neatly in the fold. Hundreds. He fanned them out in his hand. “I want to take care of you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Her chest shook. She eyed the money. There was at least five hundred there, possibly more. “I don’t know you.”

“No, not yet.”

Lucy’s foot stepped back, but she needed to go forward, needed to grab the cash and run. If the man sensed her plans, he didn’t show it. He stood there with the hundreds looking like postage stamps in his large hands, not moving, not speaking. All that cash. Five hundred dollars. She could rent a hotel room, keep herself off the street for months, maybe a year.

Lucy felt her heart banging against her shattered rib. She was torn between snatching the dough and running for her life and just plain running *from* her life. The hair on the