

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Black Out

Lisa Unger

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Also by Lisa Unger
Title Page
Dedication
Prologue

Part One: cracked

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22

Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30

Part Two: dead again

Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45

Epilogue
Author's notes
Acknowledgments
Copyright

About the Book

On the surface, Annie Powers' life in a wealthy Florida suburb is happy and idyllic. Her husband, Gray, loves her fiercely and together they dote on their beautiful daughter, Victory. But cracks are beginning to appear as demons from Annie's past come back to haunt her. It is a past she has no memory of - and it won't let go.

Disturbing events - the appearance of a familiar dark figure on the beach, a mysterious murder - trigger strange and confusing memories for Annie. And as her world starts to fracture around her, she soon realises that she must piece those memories together before her past comes to claim her - and her daughter ...

About the Author

Lisa Unger is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Beautiful Lies*, *Sliver of Truth* and *Black Out*. Her novels have been published in more than twenty-six countries. She lives in Florida with her husband and daughter.

Also by Lisa Unger

BEAUTIFUL LIES
SLIVER OF TRUTH

BLACK OUT

Lisa Unger



arrow books

For
Ocean Rae, Sophie, Lucy, Matilda, Zoé, and Josie, my
daughter and the daughters of women I love and admire ...

Let's love our girls well and protect their spirits, Introduce
them to their own strength and power, and Keep them as
bright and beautiful as the day they were born.

Prologue

Today something interesting happened. I died. *How awful*, they'll say. *How tragic. And she was so young, with everything ahead of her.* There will be an article in the paper about how I burned too bright and died too young. My funeral will be small ... a few weeping friends, some sniffing neighbors and acquaintances. How they'll clamor to comfort my poor husband, Gray. They'll promise to be there for our daughter as she grows up without me. *So sad*, they'll say to each other. *What was she thinking?*

But after a time this sadness will fade, their lives will resume a normal rhythm, and I'll become a memory, a memory that makes them just a little sad, that reminds them how quickly it can all come to an end, but one at which they can also smile. Because there were good times. So many good times where we drank too much, where we shared belly laughs and big steaks off the grill.

I'll miss them, too, and remember them well. But not the same way. Because my life with them was a smoke screen, a carefully constructed lie. And although I got to know some of them and to love them, not one of them ever knew me, not really. They knew only the parts of myself I chose to share, and even some of those things were invention. I'll remember them as one remembers a favorite film; beautiful moments and phrases will come back to me, move me again. But ultimately I'll know that my time with them was fiction, as fragile and insubstantial as pages in a book.

Now I'm standing at the bow of a cargo ship. It cuts through the night with surprising speed for its size, throwing up great whispering plumes of foam as it eats the high waves. The water around me is black. My face is wet with sea spray and so windburned it's starting to go numb. A week ago I was so terrified of the water that I wouldn't have dreamed of sitting close enough to feel it on my skin. Because there is such a myriad of things to fear now, I have been forced to conquer this one.

The man at the helm has already gestured at me twice, made a large gathering motion with his arm to indicate that I should come inside. I lift a hand to show I'm all right. It hurts out here; it's painful, and that's what I want. But more than that, the bow of this boat represents the farthest point away from the life I've left behind. I'll need more distance before I can climb back inside, maybe get some sleep.

I can feel the heat of my predator's breath on my neck. For him I will never be just a memory. I'll always be a goal, always the thing that lies ahead just out of reach. If I have anything to do with it, that's where I'll remain. But I know his hunger, his patience, his relentlessness. His heart beats once for every ten times mine does. And I'm so tired now. I wonder here in the frigid cold if the chase will end tonight and which of us will be dead, really dead, when it's done.

I stand in the bow and support myself on the rail. I remind myself that death is my easy escape; I can go there anytime. All I have to do is to bend, drop my weight over the railing, and I will fall into black. But I won't do that, not tonight. We cling to life, don't we? Even the most pathetic among us, those of us with the fewest reasons to keep drawing breath, we hold on. Still, it gives me some small comfort to know that death is an option, handy and at the ready.

Finally the cold and the wind are too much for me. I turn to make my way back to my tiny cabin, and that's when I

see it: the round, white eye of a spotlight coming up behind us, the small red and green navigation lights beneath it. The craft is still too far for me to hear its engine. I can just see the white point bouncing in the black. I turn to signal to the captain, but he's no longer at the helm. I think about climbing up to warn him, but I'm not sure it will do any good. I hesitate a moment and then decide I'd be better off finding a place to hide myself. If he's found me, there's nothing anyone will be able to do. I realize I am not surprised; I am not at all surprised that he has found me. I have been waiting.

There is a familiar thud-thud in my chest as I look over into the big waters and think again about that dark temptation. It would be the ultimate defiance, to rob him of the only thing he's ever wanted, the ultimate way to show him that my life belonged to me and no one else. But a small round face, with deep brown eyes framed by a chaos of golden curls, a tiny valentine of a mouth, keeps me on deck. She doesn't know that her mommy died today. I hope she won't have to grieve me, to grow up broken and damaged by my early demise. That's why I have to stay alive. So that someday, hopefully sooner rather than later, I can go back to her and tell her why I named her what I did, so that I can take her in my arms and be the mother to her that I always wanted to be.

But first I have to fight and win. I'm not sure how much fight I have left in me, but I *will* fight. Not so much for the shattered, cored-out woman I have become but for my daughter, Victory.

PART ONE
cracked

*The fair Ophelia!—Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.*

HAMLET, III. I

1

WHEN MY MOTHER named me Ophelia, she thought she was being literary. She didn't realize she was being tragic. But then, I'm not sure she understood the concept of tragedy, the same way that people who are born into money don't realize they're rich, don't even know there's another way to live. She thought the name was beautiful, thought it sounded like a flower, knew it was from a famous story (play or novel, she wouldn't have been able to tell you). I guess I should consider myself lucky, since her other choices were Lolita and Gypsy Rose. At least Ophelia had some dignity.

I'm thinking this as I push a cart through the produce aisle of my local supermarket, past rows of gleaming green apples and crisp blooms of lettuce, of fat, shiny oranges and taut, waxy red peppers. The overly familiar man in meats waves at me and gives me what I'm sure he thinks is a winning smile but which only serves to make my skin crawl. "Hi, honey," he'll say. Or "Hi, sweetie." And I'll wonder what it is about me that invites him to be so solicitous. I am certainly not an open or welcoming person; I can't afford to be too friendly. Of course, I can't afford to be too *unfriendly*, either. I look at my reflection in the metal siding of the meat case to confirm that I am aloof and unapproachable, but not strangely so. My reflection is warped and distorted by the various dings and scars in the metal.

"Hi there, darlin'," he says with an elaborate sweep of his hand and a slight bow.

I give him a cool smile, more just an upturning of the corner of my mouth. He steps aside with a flourish to let me pass.

I have become the type of woman who would have intimidated my mother. Most days I pull my freshly washed, still-wet blond hair back severely into a ponytail at the base of my neck. The simplicity of this appeals to me. I wear plain, easy clothes—a pair of cropped chinos and an oversize white cotton blouse beneath a navy barn jacket. Nothing special, except that my bag and my shoes cost more than my mother might have made in two months. She would have noticed something like that. It would have made her act badly, turned her catty and mean. I don't feel anything about this. It's a fact, plain and simple, as facts tend to be. Well, some of them, anyway. But I still see her in my reflection, her peaches-and-cream skin, her high cheekbones, her deep brown eyes. I see her in my daughter, too.

"Annie? Hel-lo-oh?"

I'm back in produce, though, honestly, I don't remember what caused me to drift back here. I am holding a shiny, ripe nectarine in my hand. I must have been gazing at it as if it were a crystal ball, trying to divine the future. I look up to see my neighbor Ella Singer watching me with equal parts amusement and concern. I'm not sure how long she has been trying to get my attention or how long I've been staring at the nectarine. We're more than neighbors; we're friends, too. Everyone here calls me Annie, even Gray, who knows better.

"Where were you?" she asks.

"Sorry," I say, with a smile and a quick shake of my head. "Just out of it."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Good. Great."

She nods, grabs a few nectarines of her own. "Where's Vicky?"

All the women in our neighborhood, her teachers, her friends' mothers, call my daughter Vicky. I don't correct them, but it always makes me cringe internally. It's not her name. I named her Victory because it meant something to me, and I hope in time it will mean something to her. True, I named her in a fit of overconfidence. But Gray understood my choice and agreed. We were both feeling over-confident that day. I'm still clinging to that feeling. Though recently, for reasons I can't explain, it has begun to fade.

"She's with Gray's stepmom. Swimming lessons with Grandma," I say, dropping the fruit into a clear plastic bag. The nectarines give off a fresh, sweet aroma. They are almost to the point of being overripe, fairly bursting with themselves. An old woman inches past, leaning heavily on an aluminum walker. Some mangled, Muzak version of "Don't Stand So Close to Me" by the Police plays tinny and staticky from unseen speakers.

"That's nice," Ella says with a nod. "Time for a cappuccino?"

I look at my watch, as if calculating whether or not I can fit it into my busy schedule, even though we both know I have nothing else to do and Victory will be hours yet—between the swimming lessons and her favorite lunch and time with the neighborhood kids. They're all bigger, older boys, but she commands them like a queen. And they love her for it.

"Sure," I say. And Ella smiles.

"Great, meet you over there when you're done." She means the little spot by the beach where we always go.

"See you in a few."

She pushes off. I like Ella a lot. She is so easy, so warm and open, so trusting and unfailingly kind; she makes me feel bad about myself, as though I'm some icy bitch. I smile and give her a small wave. My heart is doing a little dance. I think it's just that I've had too much caffeine already and

my heart is protesting the thought of more. Maybe I'll just have some chamomile.

On my way to check out, I see a sullen teenage girl, standing beside her mother at the deli counter. She is so thin her hip bones jut out against her jeans. Her lips are moist and sparkling with pink gloss. She holds a cell phone to her ear and chews on the nail of her right thumb.

"Taylor, cut that out," her mother says, pulling her daughter's hand away from her mouth. They look at each other like rival gang members. I wonder if Victory and I will ever come to that place, that bloody rumble of adolescence. Somehow I doubt it. I am always afraid I won't have the luxury of warring with my teenage daughter.

I step out to load the groceries into my car. I see Ella pulling out of the parking lot; she holds up her fingers indicating five minutes. She's headed home to put away her groceries before we meet for coffee, and I'll do the same since we both live just minutes from here. Then we don't have to worry about the chicken going bad, the ice cream melting, those suburban concerns I appreciate so much for their simplicity and relative safety. But it's as I slam my trunk that I feel it.

It's as if the sun has dipped behind a thick cloud cover and the sky has gone charcoal. Only they haven't. It is a bright, unseasonably cool, spring day in Florida. The parking lot is packed, populated by moms and nannies with their kids of all ages on spring break before Easter. I hear laughter, a gull calling; I smell the salt from the Gulf of Mexico. But inside I am quaking. There's cool black ink in my veins.

I slip into my SUV and lock the door, grip the wheel, and try to calm myself. I've had these panics before. Usually they are isolated incidents, intense but brief like the summer storms here. In the last few days, though, they've come one after another, surprising me with their ferocity.

False alarms, Gray calls them. I've always thought of them more as an early-warning system.

This one is deeper, blacker than I'm used to. I am truly afraid, sweating and going pale. My breathing starts to come ragged, and I glance in my rear-and sideview mirrors but see nothing out of the ordinary. The contrast makes me dizzy, almost angry at the day for being so clear, at the people in the parking lot living their lives so benignly.

After a while I pull out from the lot, still shaky, and drive carefully the short distance to our home. I pass through the residents' side of the security gate with a wave to the watchman, cruise past ridiculously opulent homes nestled beneath clusters of tall palms with their barrel-tile roofs and colorful mailboxes shaped like manatees, dolphins, flamingos, or miniature versions of the larger house. Late-model luxury cars rest on stone-paved driveways.

As I pull up my drive, a neighbor is watering her flowers and lifts a friendly hand to me. I return the greeting and try to smile as I open the garage door with the remote on my rearview mirror. Afraid there's an inane conversation in my immediate future, I close the garage door while I'm still in the car. I turn off the engine and sit for a minute; my heart slows its dance. *I'm safe*, I tell myself. *This house is safe*. The shaking starts to subside. My breathing steadies. I press a button on my dash and hear a dial tone.

"Call Grandma," I say.

"*Calling Grandma*," the car phone answers stiffly. Victory *loves* this, giggles uncontrollably every time she hears it.

After only one ring, a smooth male voice answers, "Hello."

"It's Annie," I say, and I know my voice sounds wobbly. There's a pause; he hears it, too. He is a man who misses nothing.

"Hi, Annie." The ever-calm tones of my father-in-law, Drew. I imagine him sitting behind the oak desk of his

home office, surrounded by all his degrees and military decorations, photos of his Navy SEAL buddies—eerie, grainy images of men too young, too happy to be holding guns. “They’re in the pool.”

“Everything’s all right?” I ask, hating the words as they tumble from my lips.

“Everything’s fine here,” he answers, solid and sure. I am soothed by the certainty and reassurance in his voice, as much as I hate to reveal any weakness in front of him.

“Is everything all right there?” he asks after a beat has passed. I try not to hear the note of contempt.

“Yes,” I say too quickly. Then I have to say it again, lighter, more slowly to balance it out. “Yes. Everything’s fine. Don’t bother them. I’ll be by around two for Victory.”

I end the call before he can ask any more questions, and I start unloading the groceries. As I’m putting things away, I turn on the television in the kitchen and am greeted by the image of a sad-looking, emaciated blonde. The caption beneath her photo reads, *Woman’s body found in Central Florida; the sixth in a five-year period*. In the background a slurry male voice with a thick Florida accent goes on about the lack of evidence, the similarities between cases. I turn it off quickly; this is the last thing I need to hear right now.

I try to shake off the uneasy feeling that seems to have settled in me and go about my day—meet Ella for coffee, run a few errands, then pick Victory up from Drew and Vivian’s. By the time I walk through the door at Vivian’s and greet my little girl, the black patch is mostly past. But it’s not forgotten. It follows me like a specter.

“Everything all right, dear?” Vivian asks as I lift my daughter onto my hip. (*She’s too big to carry, Annie. You baby her,* says Gray.) Victory leans her full weight against me in her fatigue, smelling of some magic mix of sunscreen, chlorine, and baby shampoo.

I turn around and try for a smile. “False alarm,” I say. We all know the lingo.

“You’re sure,” she says. I notice that she looks tired, puffy gray half-moons under her eyes. She wears a certain expression, a mingling of worry and love, that makes me want to weep in her arms. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Behind her I can see the Gulf lapping unenthusiastically against the shore. The whole back of her house is glass. An infinity pool outside seems to flow into the ocean beyond, but that’s a carefully constructed illusion. In this family we’re quite good at that.

“Mommy’s worried,” Victory says softly into my neck. “Don’t be worried.” She tightens her tiny arms around me, and I squeeze.

“Not worried, darling,” I say, feeling a tingle of guilt. “Just tired.”

I’m sure she doesn’t believe me. You can’t fool children, you know. You shouldn’t even bother trying; they just grow up doubting themselves.

“Did you call Gray?” says Vivian, her brow creased. She smells like lemon verbena. She puts a hand on my arm and rubs gently.

I offer her what I hope is a dismissive, self-deprecating smile. “No need.”

She looks at me skeptically but says nothing more, just places a kiss on my cheek, one on Victory’s, then squeezes us both with her expansive arms. As I pull away down the drive, I see Drew watching me from the upstairs window.

That afternoon while Victory is down for her nap, I sit on the lanai, looking out onto our own view of the ocean, and start to think about all the ways that I can die.

Gray is late coming home, and Victory is already sound asleep upstairs in her room. I am sitting on a leather sofa I didn’t choose and don’t actually like, watching the high, dancing flames in our fireplace as he walks through the front door. For a second he is just a long shadow in the foyer; he could be anyone. But then he steps into the light

and he is my husband, looking strained and tired. He doesn't know I'm watching him. When he sees me, though, he smiles and looks a little less world-weary.

"Hey," I say, getting up and going to him.

"Hey." His embrace is powerful and I sink into it, hold on to him tightly. There is no softness to him; the muscles on his body are hard and defined. In this place I am moored. The churning of my day comes to calm.

"Want a drink?" I ask as I shift away from him. He holds me for a second longer, tries to catch my eyes, then lets me go.

"What are you having?" he wants to know.

"Vodka on the rocks."

"Sounds about right."

I walk over to the bar that in the daylight looks out onto our back deck. At night all I can see is my reflection in the glass doors as I fill a square lowball with ice and pour cold vodka from the freezer. This is another feature I didn't choose about our house, a wet bar stocked with liquor we rarely touch. There is so much about this place, a ridiculously extravagant wedding gift from my father-in-law, furnished and decorated by Vivian, that has nothing to do with me—or Gray. It is hard to ever be grateful enough for such a gift and impossible to complain about the various features that don't appeal. Sometimes I feel like we live in a model home, everything shiny and perfect but just slightly off from what we would have chosen ourselves.

I walk back over to him, hand him his drink, and we sit together. I put my legs up on his lap, take my waiting glass from the table. The ice has melted, the vodka gone watery and tepid. I drink it anyway, too lazy to make myself another.

I have one of the glass doors open, and the unseasonably cold salt air drifts in, warmed by the fire. I see him glance over at it. I know he's thinking that the door should be closed and locked, but he doesn't say anything. I notice the

deep crescent of a scar between his right eye and his temple. I realize that I barely see his scars anymore. In the beginning they made me wary of him, made him seem hard and distant. I wondered what kind of violence could leave so many marks on a man. But I know the answer now. And I know his heart.

“It’s happening again,” I say after a minute of us just sitting there staring at the flames. Somehow the words seem melodramatic even before I add, “Worse than it’s ever been.”

He barely reacts, but I see a muscle clench in his jaw beneath the shadow of black stubble. He stares at the fire, closes and opens his eyes slowly, and takes a breath. We’ve been here before.

He puts a hand on my arm, turns his eyes to mine. I can’t see their color in the dim light, but they’re steel gray, have been since the day he was born, hence his name.

“He’s dead,” he says. “Long dead.”

He’s always gentle with me, no matter how many times we’ve been through this. I curl my legs beneath me and move into the hollow of his arm.

“How do you know for sure?” I say. I’ve asked this question a thousand times, just to hear the answer.

“Because I killed him, Annie.” He turns my face up to his to show me how unflinchingly certain he is. “I watched him die.”

I start to cry then, because I know that he believes what he says to be true. And I want so badly to believe it, too.

“Do you need to start up the meds again?”

I don’t want that. He leans forward to put his drink on the table. I move back into him, and he wraps me up in his arms and lets me cry and cry until I feel all right again. There’s no telling how long this can take. But he’s always so patient.

2

I DESCEND A narrow, rusting stairway and walk quickly down the long hall, steadying myself against the walls. The lighting is dim and flickering. I struggle to remember what my cabin number is—203, I think. There are five men on board other than the captain, and I don't see any of them.

I reach my cabin and fumble with the lock for a second, then push into my room. A small berth nestles in the far corner. Beneath it is a drawer where I have stowed my things. I kneel and pull out my bag, unzip it, and fish inside until I find what I'm looking for—my gun. A sleek Glock nine-millimeter, flat black and cold. I check the magazine and take another from the bag, slip it into the pocket of my coat. The Glock goes into the waist of my jeans. I've drilled the reach-and-draw from that place about a million times; my arm will know what to do even if my brain freezes. Muscle memory.

I consider my options. Once again suicide tops the list for its ease and finality. Aggression comes a close second, which would just be a roundabout way toward the first option. Hide and wait comes in third. Make him work for it. Make him fight his way through the people charged with protecting me and then find me on this ship. Then be waiting for him with my gun when he does.

The thrumming in my chest has stilled, and I listen for the sounds that will signify that the fight has begun, but there's only silence and the distant hum of engines. I'm not afraid at all—or else fear has become so much a part of me that it has come to feel like peace.

3

MY FATHER IS a tattoo artist and a pathological liar. The latter is nearly the only thing I can count on, that, likely as not, every word out of his mouth is a lie. He truly can't help it.

"How are you, Dad?" I'll ask.

"Great," he'll say enthusiastically. "I'm packing."

"Packing for what?" I'll say, skeptical.

"I'm taking a Mediterranean cruise, heading out tomorrow."

Or:

"Did I ever tell you I was a Navy SEAL?"

"Really, Dad?" I'll go along, half listening. "When?"

"Served in Vietnam."

"Wow. Tell me about it."

"I can't; too painful. I'd rather forget."

That's how it goes. It doesn't even bother me anymore, partly because he usually doesn't lie about anything important. Just weird stuff. Almost like hiccups, they seem to bubble up from within, unbidden, unstoppable. I generally play along, because in spite of all the lies there's something true about him. Even though he was a lousy father, he loves me and I know it, always have.

When he comes to the phone, I can hear chatter in the background, the hummingbird buzz of the tattoo needle. His shop, Body Art, is located on Great Jones Street in NoHo. And though it's a hole in the wall, barely five hundred square feet, people from all over the world travel there for my father's skill. Rock stars, supermodels, even (it is rumored) rebelling young Saudi royals have been

beneath my father's needle. He'd told me this for years, but naturally I didn't believe him. Finally he sent me a *Village Voice* article about him, and I realized he'd been telling the truth. How about that?

"Everything all right?" he asks, lowering his voice when he realizes it's me.

"Great," I say. "We're doing great."

He's quiet for a moment, and I know he heard the lie in my voice. Takes one to know one. I listen to him breathing as he ponders what to say. I remember a lot of heavy silences over long-distance lines with my father, me desperate, him inadequate or unwilling to help. At last I say, "Tell me again, Dad."

"Oh, honey," he says after a slow exhale. "Come on. I thought you were past this."

I sigh and listen to Victory chatting to her doll in the other room. "You're so pretty," she tells it. "On the outside *and* the inside. And you're smart and strong." She's mimicking the things I've told her about herself, and it makes me smile.

"Opie, are you there?"

My father always thought my name was silly. He calls me "O" or "Opie" or sometimes just "Ope." As if *those* aren't silly things to call someone. I think he used them to annoy my mother. And they did, to no end. But those silly nicknames stuck, at least between us.

"Just tell me," I say, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

I close my eyes, and I can see my father's face, brown and wrinkled from too much time in the sun on his Harley. When he was a younger man, he wore his hair in a long black mane down to the middle of his back. I've never seen the entirety of my father's face, hidden as it has always been behind a thick black beard. The last time I saw him, years ago now, his hair and beard were well on their way to ash gray. He is forever dressed in a T-shirt and jeans,

motorcycle boots. His voice sounds like cigarettes and whiskey.

“You were kids when you came here, you and him,” he says, because he knows that’s where I want him to start. “Right away I didn’t like him. Something not right about his eyes.” He issues an angry grunt. “I *really* didn’t like how you were mooning over him. It made me jealous. Even though you said otherwise, I knew you were in big trouble. But I let you down, kid. I’m still sorry about that.”

I just listen and remember.

“I should have taken care of the guy right then and there. Or called the police or something, but I didn’t. That was always one of my biggest flaws as a parent: I was always trying to be your friend.”

My father had multiple “flaws as a parent,” lying and abandonment chief among them. Trying to be my friend was not high on my list of things for which he should be sorry, but I don’t say this.

“I let you hide out at my place for a while. I didn’t know how bad things had gotten. I really didn’t.”

I hear the stuttering wail of a siren in the background. Someone comes into the room and coughs. I hear my father put his hand over the receiver and say something that sounds like, “Give me a minute, for fuck’s sake.”

“You’d never done a tattoo like that. Never before and never since,” I prompt impatiently.

“That’s right,” he says quickly. “I gave the bastard a tattoo. It was unique in all the world. His drawing, my bodywork.”

“It couldn’t be duplicated,” I say.

He releases a disdainful breath. “Not by anyone I know in the industry. And I know *everyone*. It was the kind of art I wanted to do for you. But you never wanted that.”

I never have. Life is hard enough, leaves enough scars—why voluntarily put your flesh under a needle? Piercing is

another thing I've managed to avoid. I don't get people who take pleasure in pain.

"Tell me about the tattoo."

He sighs before going on, as if he regrets starting down this road with me. "I've never seen anything like it. That was part of the reason I wanted to do it. It was a nice piece. Stormy seas, breaking waves on these crags that jutted out of the water like shark teeth—lots of lines and shadows, lots of small hidden images within, even the shadow of a girl's face. Your face, Opie. That's how I know."

He doesn't have to describe it; I can see it so clearly in my mind's eye. It's an image that comes back to me again and again in my dreams, and sometimes when I'm awake.

"And when they showed you the picture, there was no mistaking it."

There's silence. "No, girl. There was no mistaking it." Then, "He's dead, Opie."

"Call me Annie."

I know he hates the name Annie even more than he does Ophelia. He thinks it's common. But it's no more common than his name, Teddy March. Everyone calls him "Bear." Anyway, I'd give my right arm to be common.

"He's dead, Annie. He'll never hurt you again. Not you or anyone else. He didn't kill you back then. You fought and won." I like his words; I try to let them in and become my truth. Pathological liar or not, he has a kind of horse sense that always calms me.

"Don't turn your life over to him now," he goes on. "You're hurting yourself and Victory—and that husband of yours. Move on, kid."

These are my little rituals, the things I do and need to hear to comfort myself. In the past couple of years, knowing what I know, it has taken only one or two of these things to calm me, to assure myself that it is safe to live my life. But this time nothing's working; I don't know why. I feel like

I'm seeing these signs that no one else is seeing: the dog running in circles because some vibration in the ground has told him that an earthquake is coming, a hundred crows landing on the lawn. I tell myself it's not real, that it's all in my head. Of course, there's no worse place for it to be. Maybe I *do* need to talk to the doctor.

Esperanza, our maid and nanny, is unloading the dishwasher, putting the plates and bowls and silverware away with her usual quick and quiet efficiency. She's got the television on, and again there's that image of the now-dead woman on the screen. It's as though nothing else is ever on the news. I find myself staring at the victim, her limp hair, her straining collarbone and tired eyes. Something about her expression in that image, maybe an old school portrait, makes her look as though she *knew* she was going to die badly, that her mutilated body would be found submerged in water. There's a look of grim hopelessness about her.

"Terrible, no?" said Esperanza, when she sees me watching. She taps her temple. "People are sick."

I nod. "Terrible," I agree. I pull my eyes away from the screen with effort and leave the kitchen; as I climb the stairs, I hear Esperanza humming to herself.

Upstairs, Victory's happily playing in her room. She'll go on like this for a while before she needs some company or attention from me. For now she's rapt in the world she's created with her dolls, Claude and Isabel. Her babies, as she calls them.

In my bedroom I can hear her whispering to them on the baby monitor I still keep in her bedroom. The sound of her breathing at night is my sweet lullaby. I wonder when she'll make me take it out of her room. How old will she be when she doesn't want me to hear her every breath any longer? *Mom*, she'll say, *get a life*.

When I was sixteen, my mother moved us from government housing on the Lower East Side of Manhattan to a trailer park in Florida so that she could be closer to a man with whom she'd become involved. They'd been having a white-hot correspondence for a number of months, involving thick letters written in red ink and the occasional collect telephone call where my mother cooed into the phone, holding the receiver to her mouth so intimately that I'd half expected her to start sucking on it. After some tearful proclamations and heartfelt promises between them, my mother and I packed our few belongings into the back of a brown Chevy Citation we bought for seven hundred dollars and headed south to begin our new life.

"We can live much better in Florida," my mother told me with certainty. "Our money will go a lot farther. And it's *so pretty* there."

I watched the Lower East Side pass outside the car window and wondered how anything could be more beautiful than New York City. Sure, it can be cold and dangerous—a frightening place, a lonely one for all its crowds. But the grand architecture, the street noise, the energy of millions of people living their lives—you can never mistake yourself as being anywhere else when you're there; there's no mistaking that heartbeat. It's unique in all the world. If one considers the great beauties in history—Cleopatra, the *Mona Lisa*, Ava Gardner—none of them were pretty in that cheap, cookie-cutter way that seems to pass for gorgeous these days. They were beautiful for what was *unique* about them from the inside out, for features that might have been ugly on anyone else. If you don't know how to look at her, her hidden alleys and minuscule precious side streets, her aura of mischief, her throbbing nightlife, you might find yourself intimidated by New York City, even repulsed by her odors and sounds, you might even turn away from her because she's too brash, too haughty. But it would be your loss.

I thought my father would put up more of a fight when my mother wanted to leave with me. But he seemed to agree that the move would do me good. I'd been getting into some trouble in school for insolence, tardiness, and absence. The city offered too much temptation to a young girl with too little parental supervision. In any case, my needs always came last in any decision-making process my parents employed. My mom was motivated only by male attention. My father could never love anything as much as he loved his art. I fit in there somewhere, I think. I'm not saying they didn't love me.

"Don't worry about it, kid. Florida's a hop and a jump. We'll be back and forth all the time," my father told me as I sobbed into his chest.

He never once came to Florida to see me, though. And I didn't see him again until I ran away almost two years later. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

So we moved into a trailer park, and my mother got a job as a waitress in a diner that was just a few blocks away, which was good because that Chevy overheated about three times on the drive to Florida and died altogether on our arrival.

"Well, everything happens for a reason," my mother said with her usual depraved optimism as the car sputtered and went on to a better place. "At least whatever we need is walking distance. If there's an emergency, we can take a cab. And I can take the bus to see Frank. Meanwhile, we'll save on gas and insurance." If there was ever anyone with less reason to look on the bright side, I wouldn't want to meet her. Nothing *ever* worked out for my mother. And if there was any reason for the things that happened to her, it has never been made clear to me.

Take the man for whom we moved down to Florida. He was an all right guy, sort of soft-spoken and not unkind to me during visits. But there was one problem: He was a convicted rapist and murderer on death row in the Florida

State Prison. My mother had “met” him during a letter-writing campaign initiated by her church. The goal was to spread the word of the Lord to the lost souls on death row, to “save” them before they faced their earthly punishment for the wrongs they’d done. My mother, obviously, took the whole saving thing a little bit too far.

I’ll never forget our first August in Florida. I didn’t even know it could get that hot; the humidity felt like wet gauze on my skin; it crawled into my lungs and expanded. Violent lightning storms lit the sky for hours, and the rain made rivers out of the street in front of our trailer park. And the palmetto bugs—they made New York City roaches look like ladybugs. The only thing that redeemed Florida for me was how the full moon hung over the swaying palm trees and how the air sometimes smelled of orange blossoms. But generally speaking, it was a hellhole. I hated it, and I hated my mother for moving us there.

The Florida I live in now with Gray and Victory is different. This is the wealthy person’s Florida, of shiny convertibles and palatial homes, ocean views and white-sand beaches, margaritas and Jimmy Buffett. This is the Florida of central air and crisp cotton golf shirts over khakis, country-club days and fifty-foot yachts. To be honest, I hate it just as much. It’s so fake, so tacky and nouveau riche, so proud of its silicone-filled and bleached-blond Barbie women.

Give me concrete and street noise any day. Give me Yellow Cabs and hot-dog stands. Give me legless, homeless guys pushing themselves on dollies through the subway cars, shaking their change jars with self-righteous aplomb.

I am thinking about this as I sit on the floor by the bed and reach up under the box spring. I’ve cut out a large hole there. Inside, I keep things that Gray and my doctor would be very unhappy about. They just wouldn’t understand. I reach around and don’t feel anything at first. Maybe Gray found them, I think, panic threatening. Maybe he took them