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## **Mental Illness and its Relationship to the Unreliable Narrator in a Work of Creative Fiction**

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MENTAL ILLNESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP  
TO THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN A  
WORK OF CREATIVE FICTION

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by

Shereen P. Siewert

Dec. 7, 2019

*This work is dedicated to my father, who always believed.*

MENTAL ILLNESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP  
TO THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN A  
WORK OF CREATIVE FICTION

by

SHEREEN PATRICIA SIEWERT, B.A.

THESIS

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Preface.....	1
References.....	17
The Double Blind .....	18
Preface: Simon .....	19
Chapter One: Phoebe .....	23
Chapter Two: Simon .....	38
Chapter Three: Phoebe .....	41
Chapter Four: Simon .....	48
Chapter Five: Phoebe .....	51
Chapter Six: Phoebe .....	62
Chapter Seven: Catherine .....	72
Chapter Eight: Phoebe .....	75
Chapter Nine: Phoebe.....	85
Chapter Ten: Phoebe.....	96
Chapter Eleven: Phoebe.....	102
Chapter Twelve: Frank .....	106
Chapter Thirteen: Phoebe.....	109
Chapter Fourteen: Simon.....	113
Chapter Fifteen: Catherine.....	115
Chapter Sixteen: Phoebe .....	117

Epilogue.....127

Vitae.....129



## Preface

More than five years ago, I enrolled at UTEP the ultimate goal of writing a novel. I enrolled at a time when I had just begun a new beat in my newspaper job, covering crime and public safety issues in our region. The first major trial I covered involved a young man who was on trial for murdering his father. The young man, who was schizophrenic, told the judge during a preliminary hearing that he heard voices that told him that his father was evil and must be killed. He was found not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect, what is known in the legal world as NGI, and was ordered into the mental health system. Later, the victim's brother approached me to write a story about the NGI defense, which led me to do significant research on schizophrenia and the role of mental illness in the justice system. In this project, I sought to tell a story that led to a better understanding of mental illness, the fragility of memory, and the devastating impact that schizophrenia has on those who suffer, and the people around them.

In writing fiction, I have found that staying as close to the truth as possible allows for the most credible storytelling. Here, I have put together a narrative that relies in part on research and knowledge of the legal and mental health system. I am naturally drawn to novels that use unreliable narrative techniques, particularly with a mental illness component. My research and love of reading, coupled with the many lessons I learned throughout my time at UTEP, are all reflected in this manuscript. I use flashbacks, Chinese boxes, and specific language in this narrative, a story that rings true because of its origin, something all stories must have. Stories, I would argue, do not simply appear in the imagination without basis. Mario Vargas Llosa said:

“ all stories are rooted in the lives of those who write them, experience is the source from which fiction flows. There is always a starting point in a story that comes from the experience of the writer. I'd venture to claim that there are no exceptions to this rule and

that, as a result, scientifically pure invention does not exist in literature. All fiction are structures of fantasy and stimulate his imagination, leading him to create a world so rich and various that sometimes it is almost impossible ( and sometimes just plain impossible) to recognize in it the autobiographical material that was its genesis and that is, in a way, the secret heart of all fiction, as well as its obverse and antithesis” ( 15-16).

Schizophrenia is a serious mental disorder in which people interpret reality in an abnormal fashion. Hallucinations, delusions, and disordered thinking significantly impairs daily functioning and can be extremely debilitating. Until just a few years ago, doctors placed patients with schizophrenia into five distinct categories: catatonic, disorganized, paranoid, residual and undifferentiated. But those categories have largely been dismissed in recent years in favor of a spectrum of schizophrenia, which has allowed for greater diagnostic freedom among those in the psychiatric medical community. ("NIMH » Schizophrenia") In my novel, the main character suffers from hallucinations, delusions, and thought disorders characteristic of schizophrenia. She began exhibiting symptoms in her teenage years, but it wasn't until a violent event triggered a psychotic break. Consequently, she lost touch with reality altogether. Like the defendant in the case I covered earlier, Phoebe, the main character, committed a crime and was found not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect. The NGI defense is rare; rarer still is the successful NGI defense, in part because mental illness is so difficult to diagnose and quantify. For these defendants, the truth is skewed because their illness prevents them from interpreting what they see in a reliable manner. They hurt people without realizing that they do so. From a fictional standpoint, this is intriguing, and makes for the most compelling unreliable narrator in storytelling.

Without question, the use of an unreliable narrator as a literary technique has a long and well-documented history. A narrator may be deemed unreliable for a variety of reasons, ranging from limited life experience and immaturity to delusion and deliberate manipulation. *The Double Blind* tells the story of Phoebe, a young woman in her late 20s who has experienced significant trauma in her life, spanning from her childhood to her recent past. She does not hear voices, but she does suffer from hallucinations and delusions, which creates a scenario in which she is unable to accurately interpret the events that take place around her. Phoebe and Simon are connected not only through their shared experience in a trauma that precipitates her move to the shelter, but also because they are two facets of Phoebe's shattered mind. This is a story of loss, a life of pain and suffering. Acknowledging the human side of schizophrenia could provide a tool to address problems posed by their illness, even those that are most serious. These are the people, the characters, who may inflict pain, but do not intend to do so. They cannot be trusted to tell the truth, but it is beyond their capacity to do so. This creates a perfect storm for an unreliable narrator in a work of fiction, but also can teach us much about the human condition.

The concept of the unreliable narrator was first introduced by Wayne C. Booth in 1961. His classic definition is widely studied and recognized. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth writes, "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he is not." (Booth 158-159) Not all works follow this model, however. Instead, some authors see unreliable narration as an interpretative technique, a paradigm shift that has been reconceptualized in the context of frame theory and of readers' cognitive strategies. Booth argues that an unreliable narrator is fundamentally mistaken about himself and believes he possesses qualities which he is later revealed to lack; or, conversely, to lack qualities he is revealed to possess. Narrators with a false

assessment of their own abilities and a false sense of story can give room can do so either intentionally or unintentionally. In some cases, the narrator is a liar or a purposeful manipulator who perhaps has something to hide. In other cases, the unreliable narrator is a child who is simply too young and too naïve to accurately comprehend or fully describe what is happening in front of their eyes. There are other situations to consider as well, such as the case of a narrator who lacks intelligence or is feeble-minded. Others may be well-intentioned, but gullible narrators who lack the kinds of life experiences that would give them reason to reimagine the events in their stories. Schizophrenia adds another facet to this issue, because of the nature of the illness and the implications it has for those who suffer from it.

The majority of novels with an unreliable narrator rely on a first-person point of view. In some respects, unreliable narrators are almost by definition first-person narrators. However, there is a solid argument for the existence of unreliable second- and third-person narrators. According to Salem, Weskott, and Holler (242), first-person narration tends to increase the predisposition to take over the perspective of the protagonist but does not always contribute to empathy and interest in the themes of the work. This is especially true within the context of film and television but is also a consideration in fiction writing. John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, addresses the third-person point of view as a technique that can allow the writer to “dip into the mind and thoughts” of a character, thereby offering great range and freedom. (Gardner 76) This narrator can fill in crucial background and offer objective observations, yet vanish from our consciousness when necessary, Gardner explains.

In writing my narrative, I relied on free indirect speech, a third-person narrative style that combines characteristics of third person along with the essence of first person direct speech. Though the 19<sup>th</sup> century French novelist Flaubert was the first to be aware of it as a style, it is

Jane Austen who is widely considered to have pioneered it in her work. (Ferguson 157) Austen's *Emma*, for example, is told from the point of view of a third person narrator who expresses Austen's views and values. Austen tells a story through the consciousness of a character whose understanding of events is deluded or is self-deceived. Before Austen, writers largely chose between first-person narrative, which lets us into the mind of a character but limits us to his or her understanding; and third-person narration, which allows us a God-like or omniscient view of all the characters but makes them pieces in an authorial game. Austen, however, effectively combined internal and external voices, doing so in a way that lets us into the mind of a character. In Austen's novel, Emma is a self-deluded young woman who meddles in the lives of her neighbors; she is manipulative, but hardly mentally ill. The narrative was designed to share Emma's delusions, bending the narration through the distorting lens of the protagonist's mind.

My novel, *The Double Blind*, reflects Austen's narrative technique, but in this case the protagonist isn't simply self-deluded, she is ill. She is not intentionally misinterpreting the events around her. The story is not told precisely from Phoebe's point of view, but largely from a third person limited narrator who can get inside the main character's thoughts. As the story progresses, the reader slowly learns, through alternating voices, vital details about each character's backstory. We gradually learn about the circumstances that led to Phoebe's current living situation, the attack that changed her life, the disappearance of her brother, and the emergence of Simon in her life, all of which adds to the growing sense that nothing is quite as it seems. Though there are advantages to a first-person point of view in an unreliable narrator, the combination of first and third person, in this instance, proved to be the best approach, given that the main character suffers from severe mental illness. It is important that the reader believe, in the beginning, that Simon is his own character who lives and breathes on his own. Only later is it

revealed that Simon and Phoebe are one, two characters residing in our protagonist's shattered mind.

As noted by Fludernik, the extensive use of first-person present tense is a relatively new phenomenon in literary fiction (Fludernik 1996: 223) that results in the reader's "reconceptualization of the natural storytelling frame." The very act of first-person narration creates an issue for the reader and implied audience within a text: since narrators are human, they are subject to the limitations of human knowledge, judgment, memory, intellect, and several other factors that impact their telling of a story (Riggan 19). Of course, these narrators, existing within a human body, are subject to disease, illness, injury and impairment—which is where the concept of disability intersects with narration. In *The Double Blind*, the narration is critical to the reader's understanding of each character's own personal story.

When examining other works, some authors choose to make the narrator's unreliability immediately evident. However, this is not always the case. A story may indeed open with the narrator making a plainly false or delusional claim or admitting to being severely mentally ill. In some cases, the narrator's unreliability is never fully revealed but only hinted at, leaving readers to wonder how much the narrator should be trusted and how the story should be interpreted. Uncertainty can also be a source of tension and can add to the reader's perception of the truth. Alternatively, the story itself may have a frame in which the narrator appears as a character, with clues to the character's unreliability. A more dramatic use of the device delays the revelation until near the story's end, which is the option I chose to use in writing *The Double Blind*. The novel's ending forces readers to reconsider their perceptions and experience in reading the story. They must read between the lines.

One of the inspirations for this work was found in a young adult novel by E. Lockhart, which has a narrator that remains unreliable throughout its entirety. *The Double Blind* allows the narrator's unreliability to gradually unfold, but Lockhart's *We Were Liars* begins with the revelation that all the characters are lying, that no one is to be believed. Lockhart's story revolves around members of the Sinclair family who, being extremely wealthy, have vacationed on their island for all of the main character's childhood. Along with her cousins, Cadence, the main character, has spent much time playing and growing up around those who are extremely interested in keeping up appearances at all costs, even if it means telling lies to cover up the truth. But, like Phoebe in *The Double Blind*, Cadence Sinclair has gone through a traumatic experience on her family's island, one that she cannot bring herself to face. Cadence also suffers from post-traumatic amnesia surrounding the details of the event, which are slowly revealed to the reader. For two years, Cadence is mired in painkillers, migraines, and clouded memories, as she fights between the urge to piece together the shards of shattered memory and the equally strong desire to avoid the truth about what happened. Lockhart's style is one that is filled with metaphor. She uses memory flashbacks, jumping from past to present and back again, which adds to the sense of struggle that her main character feels. Revelations are doled out sparingly, increasing the tension and adding to the sense that all is not as it seems. With each reveal, the reader can see that much of what Cadence recounts in her story is misleading, thus making her an unreliable narrator. Her unreliability ultimately stems from her amnesia and use of painkillers, though there are outside forces, those within her family, who seek to influence this as well.

In my novel, the details of Phoebe's childhood ripple with tension, coupled with a strong desire to avoid facing difficult truths. Her father's suicide, for example is declared by all to be nothing more than a tragic accident, though there are clear signs that he is unhappy and

struggling with both work and marriage. After his death, when Phoebe asks questions about her memories surrounding that night, she is quickly silenced by her mother, a woman who cannot face the truth. There is in fact a great deal of silence within the family; much remains unspoken, simmering just under the surface. For example, no one ever speaks about Phoebe's uncle, who went off to war and came back a changed man. Although we sense that this is a tightly knit family, we are only told much later that this uncle exists at all. The boy with the blood-streaked face in the woods remains a carefully guarded secret as well, leaving the reader wondering if the boy actually lived anywhere, outside of Phoebe's uncertain memory. This particular exchange, the scene with the boy in the woods, purposely leaves a great deal of room for interpretation. The reader is forced to wonder, did this boy truly appear, or was this a figment of Phoebe's imagination? Or, was this the start of a long spiral into madness? Lockhart raises comparable questions by painting a similar picture in her novel, with secrets that leave the reader with many questions. Lying to herself and the reader, Cadence's tale is one riddled with unreliability, just as Phoebe's is in *The Double Blind*.

The madman narrator is a common theme in books, and in screenplays as well, perhaps because the unreliable nature of the madman adds undeniable twists and turns that create suspense within a story line. It forces the reader or filmgoer to look beyond the obvious to carve out a sense of the truth. There are many examples of this, since fiction technique and film technique have much in common and result in similar experiences (Butler 63). The 2001 Ron Howard film, *A Beautiful Mind*, is one such example. In this movie, the viewer follows the main character, Nobel Prize-winning John Nash, as he progresses from socially awkward outsider to celebrated genius as he develops schizophrenia. Initially, we are led to believe that the film is being narrated by a classical invisible observer. We see traveling cameras approaching Nash



from a distance, and secondary characters are in focus in the opening of scenes. But as the film progresses, we begin to question a large part of what we have seen as people, actions, and places are exposed as being hallucinations and mental constructions created by Nash himself.

Curiously, there are scenes in which the point of view shifts to that of other characters. These shifts in points of view, to that of the psychologist and to that of Nash's wife, allow us to experience the story world as the other characters do; consequently, we are made aware that the bulk of the film is not as objective as we initially believed. Instead, we realize we have not only seen the events of the film from Nash's perspective, but we have seen only what he thinks has happened.

Another film, Martin Scorsese's 2010 adaptation of *Shutter Island*, is an abnormal psychology goldmine in which the central character, Teddy, is presented as a U.S. Marshal tasked with tracking down a missing patient. In this film the flashback plays a central role, as Teddy repeatedly relives memories of his traumatic experiences in Dachau. We learn of his past as he relays his memories to Dr. Nehring. But the flashbacks blend with his dreams, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. As in *The Double Blind*, the central character is a prime example of an unreliable narrator whose perception of reality is badly skewed. Only later do we learn that Teddy is not a U.S. Marshal at all; rather, he is an inmate on the island, a sentence imposed for murdering his wife after she killed the couple's children. He is stuck in a dissociative state, one that his doctors hope to break by allowing him to live out his dream scenario, an unorthodox method that is meant to bring about an epiphany of sorts. This served as the inspiration for the reveal at the end of *The Double Blind*, when we learn that Phoebe, too, is also stuck in a dissociative state and is being subjected to a drastic and unconventional treatment

method. The letters Phoebe reads detail only hallucinations; there are no agents, there is no harassment. Even Simon is real only in her mind.

Ian McEwen's *Atonement* is a complex example of the use of an unreliable narrator with a limited world view. The bulk of the novel follows the adolescent protagonist, Briony Tallis, who becomes convinced that the son of the family's cleaner, Robbie, is not the trusted family friend he appears to be. Instead, Briony believes Robbie is a maniac who has sexually assaulted her older sister. Further, she interrupts an actual sexual assault of an older cousin and immediately identifies the attacker as Robbie, and her identification is central to his subsequent conviction. We know that child narrators such as Briony are often unreliable because they do not always properly interpret what they are seeing. As she grows older, Briony realizes she has made a terrible mistake that cannot be undone. To atone for her actions, she writes a novel that gives a revised view of these events and with equal certainty identifies the true identity of the attacker, revealing herself as clearly unreliable and uncertain as to what she did and did not witness. The orthodox view of the novel is that Briony is setting the record straight, but an alternate view raises even deeper questions about the truth or untruth of any of what Briony has seen or written. This is particularly relevant to Wayne Booth's categories of the unreliable narrator and continued debates concerning their continued relevance.

In the real world, the fact that someone is telling us a story doesn't necessarily mean that the story is accurate. The first-person perspective is certainly adept at unreliable narration, but it is not the only approach. By venturing into the third-person point of view, the narrator is an observer. In a close third-person limited perspective, the narrative voice is deeply influenced by the character, making possible a substantial contrast between what readers are told and what they

actually see or what's implied. Third person narration juxtaposes critical components to allow the reader greater access and understanding to a central character with a mental illness.

When a narrator's perception of the matters she narrates does not coincide with facts, it is up to the reader to determine where truth lies, which is not always a simple matter. David Lodge, in *The Art of Fiction*, notes that the point of using an unreliable narrator is to "reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter." (154-5) For the purposes of this novel, the narrator is not necessarily concealing the truth, but tells the story through an intimate familiarity with Phoebe's innermost thoughts. As Phoebe increasingly loses her grip on reality, both the reader and the narrator must question what is true and what is not. Although the narrator in Phoebe's chapters is an observer, rather than a character, the speaker is similar to the first person narrator because we see what Phoebe sees, feel what Phoebe feels, and listen to her thoughts as she struggles to make sense of the information she is confronted with.

Though my story is told largely from the third person point of view, there are also sections in which Simon, through his letters, gives a first-person account of his experiences and his fears. Simon's letters are important because they give the reader a glimpse into three different versions of the truth, and two very distinctly different voices that exist in the schizophrenic patient's mind. The Chinese box, or matryoshka technique, according to Llosa, is a story that is constructed like something of a puzzle with successively smaller parts nestled inside one another. To visualize this, one might think of Russian nesting dolls, a set of wooden dolls of decreasing size, each placed inside the other. In a narrative, this refers to stories that are burrowed within the main story. Llosa does note that the successful use of such a technique results in a uniquely creative effect only when it contributes something to the overall story. If the subsidiary story

adds “mystery, ambiguity, (or) complexity” in a way that not only enhances the story but is crucial to it, then this method can be advantageous. (Llosa 101) The Chinese box method also presents a way for writers to offer a deeper understanding of the characters and scenes within a narrative. A story within a story, so to speak, can add critical context and vital historical details in a way that does not seem contrived or unrealistic; further, it allows readers to show, rather than tell, crucial components of the story. The technique was deliberately chosen and used for Simon’s letters because it connects the past to the present, joining two distinctly different, yet complementary, story lines. Simon’s letters add necessary detail and complexity to the narrative, building tension while creating a sense of mystery that the reader must unravel as the novel progresses. Without the letters, the reader would lack a full understanding of Simon’s motivations, his conflicts, his emotions, and the rationale behind the decisions he ultimately makes.

Because of her fragile mental state, Phoebe is not absorbing the letters with the same sense of skepticism as the reader. She is a well-educated former therapist, and yet she seems willing enough to take Simon’s rather bizarre accusations with an open mind. Still, a part of her does see Simon’s claims through a psychologist’s lens. That is to say, she is someone who has seen and experienced a great deal in her work and understands that truth is rarely simple. Though she recognizes that the man who penned the letters she is tasked with reading is someone who is most likely deeply unbalanced, there are some parts of his story that ring true to her. In a sense, the letters even plant the seeds of her rising panic and mistrust of those around her. To the reader, however, Simon is obviously unreliable because his claims of harassment seem, on their face, so peculiar and implausible. We tend to believe that a “normal” person wouldn’t dream these things up, but still, his story is real and true enough, at least to him, and to Phoebe. For the man himself,

the events he describes -- the nighttime visits from FBI agents, the stalking, being followed, his home being broken into and trashed, the poisoning of his breathing machine -- are all very real indeed. For Simon Bertatto, these aren't delusions, but plain facts. There is no question in his mind that he is relaying real proof of actual events that have plagued him for years, even if we understand, from a rational point of view, that those events exist solely in his mind. Though the reader suspects from the beginning that he is suffering from serious mental illness, to Simon, those experiences are his truth, and become the motivation for his actions. The story of Phoebe and the story of Simon are told in different levels of reality, with plots that do not seem to mix. They are, however, what Llosa refers to as two stories that do not completely intersect, but somehow complement each other. (Llosa 125) They do so not in the way that the two stories are similar, but in the way that they are different.

Language plays a key role in *The Double Blind*, providing a distinction between characters and crucial clues as to the reliability and even the overall identity of each narrator. Llosa also emphasizes the importance of specific language, something he addresses in his chapter on "communicating vessels". In *The Double Blind*, there is a stark contrast between the language of Simon and the language of Phoebe. While Simon appears coarse and uneducated, we know that Phoebe has a post-graduate education and experience as a therapist. When crafting Simon's letters, I relied in part on notes I received, while working as a reporter, from a schizophrenic inpatient at an institution for the criminally insane. I wanted to make plain that Simon is suffering from mental illness; there would be no other way to explain the wild accusations he makes and the stories that emerge from his letters. We know instantly that Phoebe is someone who would never speak the way Simon speaks. Simon swears; he mutters under his breath. Phoebe's devolving mental state is much more subtle. The language creates strict

boundaries between the two competing characters and storylines, yet it is those boundaries that are meant to give this novel its strength. Paying close attention to language gives readers important clues to the characters within the narrative and can serve as a tool to provide critical contrast between those characters.

The newspaper clips near the end of the story are written in the third person, the preferred point of view for journalists who write news stories. It is explicit and precise, and gives the facts of the crime and its aftermath without making assumptions about the mental state of the perpetrator. A third person account is more objective than first person, so the reader is ultimately given a factual account of the events that is more reliable than either of the first two sections of the story. The limitation of this point of view, however, is that if we read the news clip by itself, we would lack background that leads to a fuller understanding. Reading the story by itself, we would not understand the reason for the crimes or even the connection between them. I included this section for several reasons; first, to give readers a deeper understanding and a more satisfying conclusion to the story, and second, to give the most objective view possible of the events that took place. Though as a rule I prefer to write in the first person, I recognize that in doing so we consequently raise questions for the reader about reliability, and leave more of the details open to conjecture and doubt. The narrator, who cannot help but see events through the lens of his own perception and experience, ultimately communicates the meaning of any story to the reader.

In considering this work I was also influenced by William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, a story that demands we consider the question of what is truth, and what is memory, and how reliable they are. In Faulkner's story, each narrator has a unique point of view that is starkly

different from the others. Each tells a story they believe to be true, but how can they all be true if they are so different? The answer lies in our perception of truth, and the recognition that each person, each character in a story, develops his or her own sense of what is real and what is fantasy. In a first-person account, the facts can be skewed by emotion, by preconceptions, by one's upbringing or religious beliefs. It can also be skewed by madness.

It's no secret that memory is an unreliable narrator in itself. And we know that imagination transposes memory. The misinformation effect, a term related to the notorious unreliability of eyewitnesses, tells us that our subjective perceptions prohibit us from ever having a totally clear memory of past events. Different people, according to this theory, interpret events completely differently even when they have witnessed the same incident. If each person subjectively remembers something that happened, how do we know who is right? Take, for example, a 1978 study in which undergraduates watched a slideshow depicting a small red car driving and then hitting a pedestrian. (Loftus & Pickerell, 1995). Some subjects were asked leading questions about what they had seen. Later, all the subjects were shown pairs of slides and asked which of the pair they had previously seen. Those who had been asked leading questions about what they had seen were likely to pick the slide related to those leading questions, rather than choosing the correct slide. In other words, the misinformation in the leading question led to inaccurate memory. It stands to reason, then, that our experiences, as well, contaminates our memories of what we have seen. Hundreds of subsequent studies have demonstrated that memory can be contaminated by erroneous information, that memory is influenced by a myriad of factors. Those outside factors, according to Loftus & Pickerell (1995) have led people to incorrectly remember everything from small, crucial details to objects as large as a barn that weren't there at all.

Indeed, many writers have harnessed the power of memory's fallibility to tell stories that lead readers to determine on their own who is to be believed. The newspaper accounts of the rape and the murders that follow represent the most believable version of the truth. The third person newspaper account of the rape and its aftermath, events that become the basis for Phoebe's psychotic break and subsequent incarceration at an institution for the criminally insane. Shifting to the newspaper account grounds the reader, lending the story an illusion of chronological totality and reinforcing the level of reality in which the story is told. If, even in the best of circumstances, memories are unreliable, Phoebe's story is even more so because of her mental illness, but adding a more factual account through news stories grounds the reader and gives clarity to the sense of what is real, and what is imagined. The techniques I used to write this narrative, combined with extensive research and experience in criminal trials involving mentally ill defendants, can be used to bring a better understanding of the role of mental health in truth telling, the fallibility of memory, and the knowledge that redemption is, indeed, possible.



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## **The Double Blind**

## **Prologue: Simon**

Two years and six days before his body was discovered in a north side alley, Simon tugged at his pilled Green Bay Packers hat, stretching it down further over his ears and paced the library floor, doing his best to ignore the side-eye he was most definitely getting from the blonde librarian seated behind the reference desk. He stopped, stomped one foot on the tile--hard. He really, truly, did not think he could take much more.

It was all that damned Laszewski's fault, all of it. Wait! No. If he was going to blame anyone, he supposed, it would be Henry, his stepfather. He'd never liked Simon, made that clear from the get go, he did. And if it hadn't been for Henry calling Laszewski, he'd have never ended up in that blasted apartment in the first place, where the whole thing started. What he couldn't piece together was why they just wouldn't let it go. Not even now, after so many years had passed. Simon bit a ragged hangnail from his thumb, then spit it out. He tamped down his panic, forcing himself to act as normally as possible. But he couldn't. Damn it! What if that librarian noticed he was acting all crazy, and called someone? His eyes darted to the desk. Was she reaching for the phone now? No. But she might. She just might.

He forced himself to stop watching her. Anyway, he supposed, if she did call the cops, she could just go fuck herself.

His thoughts turned inward, to the thing that had been troubling him now for days, keeping him up at night. All those calls he'd made to Margaret and still not a word. He'd been checking his post office box regularly, all the while knowing that even that simple act put him in ever so much more danger. He was sure Margaret's secretary was in on it, was keeping his messages from her. That had to be it. There was no way someone like Margaret would just

brush him off like that. No way whatsoever. Then an idea popped into his head. Yes. Letters! Now, that's an idea, he thought. Writing a letter might be much better than continuing to phone her. And, well, those phone lines were obviously tapped, anyway, which means \*they\* would undoubtedly be listening. He didn't know why on earth he hadn't thought of it sooner. Yes, a letter was the answer. He was sure of it. But first, he'd need an address. He rose from his chair, nearly tripping over the backpack at his feet, and marched right over to the librarian.

"A copy of the Washington, D.C. phone book please," he said in a measured tone, peeking at the young woman's name tag. "...Mercedes."

Mercedes. Jesus! Where did parents today come up with these kinds of ridiculous names! And who would want to name their child after a car. And one made by krauts, no less.

"You can't have it," Mercedes said primly, nodding toward the row of computers against the wall. "Try Google. You know, like a normal person? And after that, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave." He briefly considered arguing with her. After all, he had just as much right to be here as anyone else. It's a public library, for chrissakes. Clamping his mouth tightly shut, he made his way to the computer, typed a few keywords into the search bar, and Bingo! There it was. Precisely what he needed. He resolved to write that very afternoon. After all, letters would provide a paper trail that, in the event they finally caught up with him, could be the breadcrumbs that the redheaded girl would need to arrive at the truth. In the event, that is, that he disappeared for good. And, unfortunately, that seemed a more likely scenario than ever before. Even the thought of what might lie ahead made the tiny hairs on his arms prickle and stand on end. It was a dangerous business, indeed.

In blue pen, he copied the address on the screen onto his palm before backing away from the desk, nearly knocking his chair over in the process. He knew just what he had to do next, but

he wouldn't do it here, not with that little blonde Mercedes looking at him like that. Who knows. She could be one of them, he thought.

He heard the librarian's rather audible sigh of relief and felt her eyes bore through his back while he pushed through the turnstile that led to the exit. Just in time, too, he realized after sneaking one last look at the girl and seeing her place the receiver back in the phone's cradle. She'd been about to call them. Or worse, maybe she already had.

Well, fuck her anyway, he thought. Fuck them all.

But once the anger subsided, he knew he needed to run, get out of the place he'd been staying. If she'd actually called someone about him, it wasn't safe anymore. He resolved to pack up his things and get out. He'd find somewhere new, and in the meantime, he could sleep in the pickup and hide under the bridge. It was time to go. But first, he'd write that letter and get it in the mail. It would be insurance, just in case they caught up to him sooner, rather than later.

Back at his tiny apartment, he pulled out an envelope and a stack of plain white paper from the drawer, then sat down at the battered Formica kitchen table to write.

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*March 15, 2017*

*Inspector General Margaret Sackmann, U.S. Department of Justice*

*Washington, D.C.*

*Dear Madam:*

*As it has been several weeks since I first contacted your office with no return call, I thought it best to write in the event that my messages to you are not getting through. I do think*

*your assistant is possibly keeping my concerns to herself, as she did not seem to grasp the seriousness of my situation and was, to be frank with you, downright rude.*

*This whole thing started in an apartment building in Stevens Point, Wis. back in 2008. I had to cut a winter in Colorado short that year because of the ski accident that caused my hernia, but then I'm sure you already know all that. That is, at least if you're keeping at least one eye on your agents these days and I hope you are. All due respect, I'm quite surprised that a fine lady like you would allow this kind of harassment to continue, in light of what is really going on. And at such a cost to the government, it almost seems irresponsible, if you think about it.*

*Anyhow, I was 28, like I said, and when I flipped on that mountaintop there was no way I could stay in Lakewood, so I came back to Wisconsin to be close to my mother, though she said she didn't want me in her house on account of her marrying Henry. He always was a finicky fellow, and seemed even more so when I showed up on their doorstep that December, not even a "Merry Christmas" or "How do you do" out of that one. So anyhow, after she heard what happened, she and Henry called Laszewski, the landlord Henry knew from his college days, and they set me up in a studio over on Michigan Avenue, and that's where it all started.*

*New to an apartment building, I was, and I was just being friendly when I said good morning to that 30-ish couple, clean cut they were, not like the hippies that lived down the hall. Two days later the guy is walking through my bedroom at 2 a.m., digging through my stack of papers! Well, I'll tell you, I have my limits, and that's when I hit him on the head with the bat. But I swear to you, ma'am, I didn't want to hurt him, I just wanted to scare him a little, so he'd leave me alone and not come back. I am not a violent man, which you probably know from your reports. Anyhow, that's how the female's glove got in my room in the first place, which I should have found right away but didn't.*

*So a couple days later, the owner, Laszewski, he comes pounding on my door and gives me 72 hours to vacate the premises, claiming I approached the female. And here I was, three days out of hernia surgery, could hardly go number one, let alone do anything else! But Laszewski, he must have been the one to call in the officer who found the glove the guy planted in my room, and that was that. Thank God my grandmother, God rest her soul, wasn't around to hear about all of that, it would have done her in for sure.*

*I did my time, every last day of it, and I thought my troubles would be over when I got out, but it turns out I was wrong about that.*

*I will be waiting for your reply.*

*Sincerely,*

*Simon Bertatto*

## Chapter One: Phoebe

The night Amos cut off his finger wasn't the first time Phoebe suspected there was something not quite right about her brother.

Certainly, Amos wasn't like the other boys at in school. Even at Holy Name, where they'd attended elementary school, he was different from the others. Those boys, the other boys, wore polished shoes and kept their hair neatly combed and short. Those boys chased the girls around the schoolyard during recess and traded baseball cards at the lunch table, where they ate the fried bologna and cheese sandwiches their mothers had carefully prepared and had wrapped in wax paper. Yes, those boys were the ones who played kickball on the grassy field behind the building and taunted the pigtailed girls playing Double Dutch on the sidewalk. They snickered and pointed, whispering secrets to one another when they thought the nuns weren't watching.

No, Amos wasn't like those other boys. His brown hair wasn't neat and trim. It hung greasy and limp, tickling his shoulders, and his gray eyes were perpetually gaunt, as if he hadn't had a good night's sleep in weeks. He didn't bother with those other boys, nor did he bother with the schoolgirls, the kickball, or the secrets. He and Phoebe sat together at lunch, sharing their sandwiches and fruit. In truth, his classmates didn't dare taunt him, or risk a rap on the knuckles from the nuns. Plus, they all knew that Amos and Phoebe's dad had been a cop. Even so, the other boys regarded Amos with contempt, or perhaps a bit of fear. But Phoebe loved him fiercely, and Amos loved her back. If there was one thing Phoebe was sure of, it was this. Born four years apart, the two couldn't be more different from one another. Where Amos was tall and dark; Phoebe was tiny, with bright red hair and freckled skin that burned after five minutes in the sun. Amos loved to run; Phoebe loved to read. The list of differences was long. And yet, the two



were inseparable. They rarely squabbled and nearly always enjoyed an easy friendship, simply accepting one another openly and without question. Maybe it was growing up largely without a father. Even before he died, he wasn't really there. There was always something missing.

Many years later, when she was in college studying to become a psychologist, Phoebe would reflect on that bond, that easy acceptance, as a way to explain why she didn't question it when Amos had begun to act so strangely. It started, she supposed, the summer before the finger incident, when their cat, an old orange tabby they'd adopted as a stray but never bothered to name, had died. Amos, who didn't pay much --- if any --- attention to the cat when it was alive had wept bitterly at the loss and had refused to eat solid food for days. If she thought it was odd when he barricaded himself in his tiny attic room and wouldn't speak to anyone, not even Phoebe, she kept it to herself. Amos, she knew, could be unpredictable; he'd always had his moods. He'd calm down eventually, she figured.

When he finally did emerge from the attic, he did so clutching their Grandma Alice's battered blue suitcase in one trembling hand, the stench of sweat and sickness radiated from his unwashed body while he pleaded with their mother to take them to the lake house for the weekend. He must have been sure she'd say yes, Phoebe figured, since it appeared he'd already packed. At that moment, Amos seemed more than just upset. He seemed fragmented, an atypical urgency about him. His hand shook. His eyes were wild; his hair was greasier than usual. His shirt was untucked, shoelaces untied.

Their Mama, a widowed waitress named Annabelle who worked nights for tips at a restaurant, took one look at her son and picked up the phone, stretching the cord into the bathroom so the children couldn't hear her conversation. Phoebe looked down at her bare feet, picking at her pink cotton nightdress. She caught only snatches of the conversation, but it was

clear that they would, indeed, be going to the lake house, the one the children's father left them in his will before he accidentally shot himself with his police service weapon exactly 12 minutes before Phoebe's seventh birthday.

If Mama was ever perplexed at her son's reaction to the death of a cat he paid no attention to in life, she never said. But after Jimmy's death, she had vowed to put her children first, no matter what. If the lake was what Amos needed, then the lake it would be, even though missing a shift wasn't exactly in the family's already strained budget. Truly, the lake was their family's favorite spot and always had been. It was Phoebe's favorite place in the world. At the lake, they were free from the prying eyes of the nuns at school, from the whispers and disapproving stares of the neighbors, from the well-meaning phone calls from Jimmy's old friends and their wives.

At the lake, Amos and Phoebe were free in a way they couldn't be in the city, free to roam and to let their imaginations fly. Together, on those long weekends spent at the cabin and for most of the summer when their father had still been alive, they created elaborate mazes through the woods using piles of leaves and pine needles they raked up together before arranging them in wild zigzags. In their father's faded green fishing boat they rowed themselves out to the island with their lunches, beach blankets, and playing cards, pretending they were shipwrecked, like the people on Gilligan's Island. Or, that they were orphans growing up without parents who lived together, alone, on that small piece of land. Once, they forgot to replace the transom drain plug in the boat and nearly sank halfway between the island and the dock. Years later, the memory of their panic, of Amos fiercely rowing them to shore just in time, their relieved giggles when they actually made it, and the tacit agreement not to tell their parents, still made Phoebe smile. The lake was a great place, but the island was even better, their own private hideaway where they could escape the tension that could so quickly build after Jimmy had a few too many

whiskeys. There were even times, times when Daddy was in one of his moods, that they would pitch a tent right there and watch the lights of their cabin flicker from across the water while they listened to the crickets and the frogs singing their crazy, predictable song.

It was at the lake where Amos taught Phoebe to do the dead man's float, and then to swim. He taught her to build sand castles, to catch toads, to skip rocks, to thread a hook and cast a fishing rod. They spent hours exploring the abandoned resort on the other side of the shore, ignoring their mama's warning about mice and crumbling floor boards. They ran through the empty rooms together, conjuring up elaborate stories about the people who, they dreamed, had once stayed there for long family holidays back in the resort's early days, back in the resort's pinnacle of popularity. Back then, they were told, horses still lived in the stables, dances were held every Saturday night in the ballroom, and lounge singers crooned each night from the Showboat, once a glittering nightspot where the very famous Tino Rossi had once taken to the stage while on vacation with a woman who was definitely not his wife.

They hiked regularly to the place they called Blueberry Hill, where they filled their buckets with berries and, one year, both wound up with poison ivy, the icy hot rash snaking up their legs and keeping them both awake at night for a week. They watched the sunset from the Adirondack chairs on the deck and made s'mores over the campfire. After their daddy died, though, their Mama didn't join them anymore. Instead, she spent her time back at the cabin sitting in a lounge chair and reading a book beside the great stone fireplace, drinking scotch after scotch until her head lolled to the side and she began to snore. On those nights Phoebe and Amos would raid the kitchen, then tiptoe down to the wooden dock and lie on their backs with a flannel blanket underneath them to avoid getting splinters. Once settled, they'd look up at the mass of stars in the sky, their eyes open wide. Without the noise of city lights, the stars were ever so

much brighter at the lake compared to their own backyard at home, and it was easy to see the constellations Amos liked to point out. Hand in hand, they watched for shooting stars, waiting for the chance to make a wish they both secretly hoped would someday come true, even if they both knew it was hogwash.

Only once had Phoebe felt frightened at the lake. It was shortly before their father died. The four of them had shared a family dinner of grilled burgers and baked beans, all of them sitting around the table while Amos took a stab at starting a conversation. It was a Sunday evening, the one night of the week that their father insisted be devoted to "family time," but on this Sunday neither of their parents would look at one another. They spoke in tightly controlled tones, and only when necessary to ask for the salt or the ketchup.

"In England, they eat their beans on toast, not on the side," Amos said, in between chews.

"That's super fascinating," their mother said, in a tone that made Amos shut right up. Then more silence before their father asked what the family wanted to do that night, and Phoebe heard her mother suggesting that he should just go watch TV, something that was usually forbidden at the lake, and Jimmy looked at her hard and seemed like he was on the verge of saying something but then ultimately not saying it.

"May I be excused?" Amos asked.

Jimmy looked at his son, wounded. "It's family night," he said.

"You're excused," Annabelle said, and Amos leapt from his chair and scurried outside. Phoebe longed to go after him, but she couldn't bring herself to speak. She felt, whenever the tension in the house seemed to gather inside her, the intense need to escape, but she was afraid to open her mouth to ask.

Sensing Phoebe's discomfort, Jimmy smiled at his daughter. "Go on," he said. "You can run along, too."

Once outside, Phoebe scanned the woods and spotted her brother in his favorite spot. He sat cross-legged on the ground, propped up against a tree that marked the edge of their property, a place where the trees were thick enough to conceal them when they wanted to be invisible.

She had been sitting beside him for about an hour, give or take, watching the darkness gather and the sun sink from the sky, when a snapping of branches, a creaking of a tree to the west made them both turn their heads in time to see someone jump down from the tree and land hard on the ground beneath him. It was a boy, no older than Amos, who stood and stared fiercely at both of them, his eyes sharp, green, and almost feline. He was not larger than Amos, nor taller, nor was he in any way physically special except in the fact that he was there at all.

Phoebe scrambled to her feet, but Amos just stared.

"Who are you?" she demanded. But the boy, who she now realized had a thin, beakish face whose cheeks were smeared with what looked like blood, simply put a finger to his lips as if to silence her.

Then, he turned and ran, crashing through the woods in the other direction.

Phoebe wanted to run, too. She told herself to run. The blood on his face terrified her, made her want to cry out. But her feet remained rooted to the ground, waiting for whatever her fate was, succumbing to it. She remained silent, could feel her face constrict, her eyes bugging out as if her skin were being stretched from behind.

"Well," Amos said flatly, rising from the ground and brushing the dirt from his jeans. "That was interesting." He turned to Phoebe and, like the wild boy in the woods, put his finger to

his lips before taking her hand and drawing her back to the cabin. They never spoke of the boy with the bloody face ever again. After a while, Phoebe wondered if it had all been a dream.

The next time she caught a glimpse of the boy, he appeared in the back of the church at her daddy's funeral, a few days after Jimmy's death. The boy was clothed in black and seated by himself, still with a trace of blood smeared on his cheeks. Phoebe, seated in the front pew, spotted him when she turned to watch the pallbearers carry Jimmy's casket from the back of the church. Her eyes grew wide. She clutched her brother's arm, imploring him to look, but his eyes were vacant, unfocused. When she glanced back again, the wild boy from the woods had vanished, as though he'd never been there at all.

When their daddy shot himself, Phoebe reflected later, at least he had the good sense to do it in the basement back home, leaving the lake unscathed by the act. Not, of course, that shooting himself was something done on purpose. He'd been quieter than usual the day before it happened, even when Phoebe babbled on and on about her birthday cake and the blue Timex watch she wanted so badly as a gift.

Phoebe's father was a police officer not because he loved the work. He was a cop because his father was a cop, and his father's father was a cop before that. But unlike the men in his family who'd served before him, it was work he desperately despised. He hated arresting people and he hated the people he arrested even more. Sometimes, on his days off, he would sit all day in the basement smoking a pipe and pretending to work on his model train collection. Phoebe, Amos, and Annabelle all knew he didn't do anything when he was down there, and he knew that they knew. On those days, Annabelle always made an extra effort to fill the house with cheerful things: by putting on music, turning all the lights on, baking cakes, or being roundly beaten by

card games by the children. It was like there was a special button attached to her back, like a Sally Secrets doll. Press it, and she would spring into cheerful wife and mother mode.

Both Phoebe and Amos were sleeping when the shot rang out. When the ambulance came and took their daddy away, Phoebe wondered vaguely why he'd been cleaning his gun so late at night, and while standing on a sheet of plastic besides, but some things only grown-ups were meant to understand. At least, that's what Amos told her. And later, when she'd asked about it, her mother acted as though she'd imagined what she'd seen. There was no plastic, her mother insisted. It wasn't even late at night.

In the afterward, after the funeral packed with fellow officers and after the obligatory luncheon at the house, and after the calls and cards slowed first to a trickle and then to a stop, the lake was the only place they could go to escape. To feel normal again. To forget.

And so, after the cat died, and after Amos emerged from his room, it made a kind of sense that the lake would be the best place to go, since he was so terribly upset by it all. They stuffed their overnight bags and pillows into the station wagon and headed for the cabin, stopping just once along the way for groceries and gas at the convenience store a few miles from their destination. If either Annabelle or Phoebe thought it was odd that Amos had packed such a large suitcase and refused to let it out of his sight, neither of them mentioned it. It was only the next day, after a breakfast of bacon and eggs, when Phoebe, wondering what was starting to smell so sour inside of that suitcase, opened it to discover, with a loud yelp, the cat's rapidly decomposing body tucked inside, nestled in a bed of soiled t-shirts and underwear.

It was a long time before Phoebe would eat bacon and eggs again.

So no, Amos's finger wasn't the first sign of trouble. The episode with the cat had happened about a year before. Since the day they finally buried the poor animal, however, Amos had grown increasingly and uncharacteristically distant. He no longer challenged Phoebe to their usual Sunday night game of chess, which the two of them played on a board handed down from their father's father, a man neither of them ever met. He no longer asked her to go fishing, or to skip rocks, or to watch the stars in the backyard. Worse, he utterly and wholly refused to go back to the lake, the one place that the three of them had always seemed to find peace. For a time, the boys at school, nuns' rulers be damned, began taunting him, perhaps sensing a never before seen weakness in Amos that made him the perfect target for the bullies in class. *Moron!* they cried, pointing their fingers. *Retard. Weirdo. Faggot.* But if their insults ever had any kind of real impact on Amos, he certainly never let on. He just stared blankly ahead when the boys hurled their hateful insults his way. Eventually, as bullies do when they aren't seeing the reaction they're hoping for, they gave up. And so, it seemed, did Amos.

The finger thing, though, that was really something. It happened early on a Saturday morning in the kitchen, early enough that Annabelle had not yet arrived home from work, her overnight shift at the restaurant. Phoebe was still in bed, curled up in a thick quilt, when she heard a WHOMP! followed by an ear-curdling scream coming from the kitchen downstairs. She whipped off the quilt, grabbed her pink robe and ran down the stairs two at a time, barefoot, to discover her brother, still clothed in their father's old Guess Who t-shirt and the dirty jeans he'd worn every day for the past week, standing in the middle of the kitchen. Blood was everywhere; on the white kitchen walls, in the sink, on the cracked yellow tiles of the floor. Blood speckles flecked his tangled brown hair. There was blood on his face, on the door of the avocado refrigerator in the corner of the room. Phoebe stood open-mouthed in the doorway, her feet



refusing to move, taking in the sight. Her eyes shifted to the cutting board, then to the butcher knife, before she saw what looked like half of one of the hot dogs they'd had for dinner the night before.

Except, of course, it wasn't a hot dog.

Phoebe felt the bile rise in her throat as she realized what she was seeing. No, it wasn't last night's dinner. It was a finger, one that had, until a moment earlier, been attached to the hand of her brother. Amos stood next to the sink, eyes squeezed tightly shut, muttering obscenities under his breath while holding onto the stump with a white kitchen towel. Phoebe stood in the doorway and stared. She blinked, willing the scene before her to vanish. Willing it to be a dream. But it wasn't.

She tiptoed into the room, took the phone off its hook and dialed 911, watching the blood creep closer to her toes. After hanging up the phone, she looked away.

"Mom's gonna be mad about that towel," was the only thing she could manage to say before the medics arrived at the door.

Later, at the hospital, Amos told the social worker he'd cut off his pinky finger because it had been bothering him, and that his biology teacher at school had said that pinky fingers were useless anyway. He figured, if he cut it off, it wouldn't bother him anymore.

If he was right, he never had a chance to find out, because two days later when Amos was supposed to be at home resting and Phoebe came home from school, Mama told her that her brother was missing, had taken the station wagon and driven off. This, in itself, was unthinkable because Amos wasn't even old enough for a driver's permit and, as far as either of them knew, had never even asked to learn to drive, had never shown any interest in it whatsoever. In sorrowful tones, the police officer told Phoebe and her mother that they were convinced Amos

was dead, drowned in Lake Michigan after the car had, he said, veered off the road, plunged down an embankment and, presumably, landed in the water. The car was missing, too, apparently, but the police found their license plate next to the skid marks, saw the damage to the trees Amos must have hit as the wagon careened toward the water, and it was the license plate that led the officers, many of whom knew Annabelle as a widow to one of their own, to their doorstep.

Weeks passed. Annabelle arranged to have someone cover her shifts. She was afraid to leave the house, certain that the moment she'd step away from the phone it would ring, or that Amos would walk through the front door, none the worse for wear. She insisted that Phoebe stay home, too, and had one of Phoebe's classmates bring her assignments from school each day so she wouldn't fall behind in her studies. Finally, a knock at the door led Phoebe and Annabelle into the back of a waiting police cruiser and to the edge of the water, where they stood quivering and clutching one another as a tow truck slowly pulled the familiar wagon out of the lake by its rear bumper. A fisherman had spotted it in the water and called the police, who called Annabelle, who then appeared at school to fetch Phoebe so they could both stand vigil at the lakeshore while the water rescue crews did their job. It was then, the moment that the green wagon emerged from the depths of Lake Michigan, that Phoebe saw a flutter of movement from the corner of her eye. She turned her head, and there he was.

It was the boy again, the wild boy from the woods, just a few yards from where they stood. Partially hidden by a thick maple tree, the boy was dripping with sludge and mud. Strands of his black hair were tangled together with slimy green weeds. It was as though he, too, had just been pulled from the water along with the wagon.

"Mom!" Phoebe cried, tugging on her arm. But Annabelle didn't seem to hear her, and when she turned once more to look, the boy had vanished once again.

Phoebe forced the boy from her mind and trained her eyes on the wagon as it inched from the water. She held her breath while the dive team first searched inside the vehicle, then opened the trunk, exhaling only when the lead diver shook his head. No. There was nothing there, thank God.

After the initial relief had washed away, though, uncertainty and grief remained as the hours, days, and years passed. Later, Phoebe and her mother would give DNA samples to the police so their genetic material could be used for a positive identification, should the need arise. Every time they came across a new report of human remains being discovered, they phoned the police and sat together, holding hands, waiting for word, yet not quite sure what to hope for. Every time, they came up empty. Amos, it seemed, had completely disappeared. In some ways, it was as though he had never existed at all, except in their minds. Phoebe's mother used to wonder out loud whether, had they found Amos's body, they would have had some closure, and in some ways at least, Phoebe had to agree with her. After all, they'd heard about so many other cases, so many missing people. Men, women, and children who woke up one morning, got dressed, brushed their teeth, had breakfast with their families, then walked out the door, never to be seen or heard from again. Sometimes, police suspected foul play; the missing had enemies, debts, broken relationships or substance abuse problems that made their disappearances somehow less surprising. Other times, they were mystified. More often, though, there was some kind of mental anguish, something inside their heads, a switch that flipped from a life worth living to one that became suddenly unbearable. That crazy Mary Konkell, for example. She'd thrown herself off a pier in a fit of self pity two years earlier, only to have her body turn up in Grand Rapids,

Michigan, straight across the lake and many miles from where she'd decided to put an end to her long, slow descent into heroin addiction and madness. Did finding her body give her family some comfort? They never got in touch with other families of missing people, choosing instead to keep their grief closeted within their own four walls. Still, but Annabelle still talked about the idea of closure, whether it existed. Maybe, she told Phoebe, had they found Amos's body, then they could finally have gone on with their lives. Instead, they woke up every morning wondering. Hoping that somehow, somewhere, he'd escaped the icy waters and found a new life somewhere else, somewhere better.

But that knowledge, that *closure*, never came. Deep down, Phoebe knew it never really would. Besides, the whole word "closure" made Phoebe want to puke. What a joke that was. Like so many who mourn, all who have lost a loved one--missing or not--Phoebe developed an abiding hatred for the entire concept, with its comforting implications that grief is somehow a time-limited process from which we will all recover. The idea that she could reach a point when she would no longer miss her brother was obscene to her and she dismissed it. Closure, Phoebe knew, is a concept that is never really possible because the pain of loss never completely goes away. Closure, the idea of it, is abhorrent because it provides a false sense of hope. Even if closure really does exist, Phoebe's own colleagues would argue it might not be a good thing because people absolutely do not want to forget the good things about their loved ones. There are other ways to find hope and healing without subscribing to the myth of closure.

Almost immediately after Amos disappeared, their lives were transformed, a parody of the richer, fuller, more normal sort of lives they used to lead. Phoebe began to think of their home as a giant watch face. The basement where her father had died marked the 3 o'clock position. The attic, where Amos once slept, was at six. The kitchen, where Phoebe and her

mother ticked away the minutes, was at nine. Three hours to go until we come full circle. But midnight never seemed to come.

Phoebe's mother stopped working at the restaurant completely. When she no longer could afford to sit at home by the phone, waiting for word, she refused her boss's offer to come back, taking a job instead at the local bookstore down the street so she could be home at night with Phoebe. Inexplicably, she started going to daily mass, though she had avoided the church in which she and Jimmy had wed since the day after his funeral. But after Amos was gone, she made the mile-long trek each day on foot without fail, kneeling in the same pew, lighting a white 10-cent candle and praying for hours for the return of her son. Alive or dead, it almost didn't matter. She just needed an end to the uncertainty. But Phoebe knew better. Eventually, both she and her mother had to accept the reality that they would never be the same people, that some part of their hearts, perhaps the best part, had been cut out and thrust into the deep waters, right along with him.

And sometimes, she knew, people who disappear just aren't meant to be found.

## Chapter Two: Simon

Simon Bertatto watched the girl with the long red hair park her car in one of the three spots reserved solely for residents who lived in the yellow Victorian across the street. He'd first noticed her turquoise Mini Cooper in the parking spot because he'd tried to park his pickup truck in that same spot three months before, and he'd narrowly escaped being towed. Simon had been irate about this. He knew it was private property, but he also held tight to the belief that anyone who had been born and raised in the U.S. of A. should be able to park wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

He'd appeared years earlier at a city meeting to air his grievances, but no one really listened. Eventually, he'd parked in the wrong place one too many times, and a week earlier he'd gone to fetch his pickup from a public lot on Bradley Street and found it had indeed been towed. He had no money to pay the impound lot; the last of the money he did have would, he hoped, keep him supplied with food and postage stamps until at least next month. After thinking it over for a bit, Simon resigned himself to letting it go. That old pickup was falling apart, anyway, and maybe if he didn't have it anymore those men in the black coats would have a harder time tracking him down. In fact, the more he thought about it, the better that sounded. He was getting sick of the constant worry, the constant running.

After that first time he spotted the redheaded girl, he began noticing things. The way she walked, tall and lithe, like a gazelle. Whippet thin. Always, during the week, impeccably dressed in pencil skirts and sling-backs, her thick curls tied back with a ribbon. Always in a hurry. Oh, yes, the girl interested him. The home she lived in looked just about the same as any other Victorian found in the older neighborhoods of the city. White shutters, a white front porch that sagged a bit in the middle. Poorly-tended flower boxes on the first-floor window. The girl lived

on the second floor. Simon knew, because he watched her, watched the light turn on moments after the girl pulled into her parking space, locked her vehicle and bounded up the stairs and into the front door. The girl never noticed him, Simon knew. And why would she? He was just a tired, old man. He sat most nights on his favorite park bench along the lakeshore. It reminded him of better times, when life was better, less complicated. Before the men began following him, stalking him. Breaking into his camper, even putting some kind of chemical in his CPAP machine. The nerve!

Now, the camper was gone, as was the CPAP machine that the doctors said would keep him from dying in his sleep, or snoring too loudly. But there was no one to hear him snore and he no longer cared whether he died in his sleep, and after fleeing his apartment he didn't have anywhere to plug it in, anyway.

There was something about the girl that made him feel happy. Maybe it was her attitude; she didn't seem afraid of him or anyone else in the park. Or maybe it was the sheer joy on her face when, late at night, she emerged from her sunny Victorian, plugged her earbuds into her ear and took off running; always at a steady pace, always alone. He wondered what she did when she wasn't at home. Did she work at a desk all day in a job she hated? Doing what, he wondered? Did she have friends with whom she'd sip tall glasses of iced tea, or even chardonnay, sharing gossip or confidences? It was hard to know. In a way, the girl reminded him of his mother, though it was hard for Simon to picture her now. It had been decades since he'd seen her, and he supposed that by now she had long since passed, released from the torture and torment she'd carried in her mind for so many years. Sometimes, Simon regretted leaving her, was sorry to have left his life behind. Though his memories of those days weren't so clear anymore, he knew he'd had his reasons for leaving back then, serious reasons.

On one particular night in October, Simon was smoking a cigarette on his usual bench when the girl emerged for her nightly run. He watched from the corner of his eye, waited for her to go through her usual routine. He knew it by heart. First, she'd twist her long hair into a ponytail at the nape of her neck. Then, she'd stretch for a bit to warm up before scrolling through her phone, probably checking her messages or finding the right music to suit her mood, he figured. Then, the earplugs went in and away she'd go.

This night, though, Simon sensed something different.

Picking at the hole that was forming at the knee of his denim jeans, he pulled on a loose thread, and frowned. Something was wrong. The girl's face was drawn, her limbs seemed stiff even during her warm-up routine. There was none of the usual joy in it, he thought. Briefly, he wondered if she'd had a bad day at work. Maybe, too, she'd broken up with a boyfriend, though in all the time he'd been watching her he never saw her bring a man home with her. Or a woman, for that matter. She was always alone.

He looked away, shrinking back into the shadows. Well, he thought. It's none of my business, really. He knew from past experience that staying out of other people's business was pretty much always in his best interest. Of that, Simon was certain. It was best to keep to yourself.

And with that final thought, Simon pulled his fleece-lined flannel jacket tighter, warding off the cold Wisconsin air and shooed his thoughts from his mind. He turned his back away from the running path and once again stared out at the glittering waves of the lake, took a long, last drag of his cigarette, and closed his eyes.



### **Chapter Three: Phoebe**

Phoebe opened one eye and reached over to her nightstand, fumbling to find the snooze button. Groaning, she pulled the comforter over her head, where a dull ache was beginning to form, probably--no, definitely--related to the pill she'd taken the night before to help her sleep.

She didn't like to take the little blue pills, but Catherine assured her that a decent night's rest was absolutely, 100 percent paramount in conquering the anxiety attacks that had been plaguing her on and off over the past two years or so. On a professional level, and as a former therapist herself, Phoebe knew her colleague was right. In evaluating patients with anxiety or sleep disorders, doctors initially consider possible underlying medical causes, she knew. She'd gone through the tests, had consulted with her physician. But all of the possible physical causes, from hyperthyroidism to cardiac issues, were eventually ruled out. A sleep study, something her doctor insisted on, showed a mild case of sleep apnea, but there was no way Phoebe, with her intense claustrophobia, would be able to sleep with a mask on her face to control the pressure of her air flow. She finally agreed to take the blue pills. They were certainly better than the alternative. On mornings like this one, however, those little blue pills made her feel like she'd downed a half bottle of vodka all by herself, which she absolutely, positively, definitely did not do. If it wasn't for Simon's note, she probably would have hit the snooze button a few more times and lingered in that twilight between sleep and wakefulness. Instead, she pushed the covers aside and padded barefoot to the bathroom, pulled her tangled red hair into a ponytail without bothering to brush it, then dressed hurriedly before heading downstairs where her colleagues and clients awaited.

Her job at the Milwaukee Rescue Mission had changed her life, probably even more than the catalyst that brought her there. Before, working in the psychology department at Saint Luke's,

her patients were largely ordinary people who lived in nice homes in impressive neighborhoods, usually mothers complaining about their husbands' unwillingness to pitch in around the house, or decrying the constant pressure to drive their perfect and over-scheduled children to soccer games and basketball practice. These were people who had food on the table, a roof over their heads, cars in the driveway. They lived the American dream. The string of faceless men and women who sought Phoebe's help in solving their mundane problems and listening to their incessant complaints were surely not aware that most of the world had real troubles to deal with. Life and death troubles. Real mental illness, not some made up garbage that required nothing more than a daily dose of Prozac, the occasional Xanax, and a sympathetic ear to cure.

Such was not the case at the shelter. The people who she worked with at the shelter needed her in a way none of her Saint Luke's patients ever had. They did not lead ordinary lives or have ordinary worries. Their fears were both real and palpable. They, like Phoebe, knew what true evil truly was. And it was everywhere.

Just a few short years earlier, Phoebe couldn't have imagined working in a place like this. Her job paid well, she lived in a beautiful apartment. She had money to do the things she liked to do. But then, in a single night, in one fell swoop, everything changed. Every single thing. For a time she'd considered leaving therapy altogether, not knowing how someone who she knew was so fractured, so broken, could possibly be trusted to help others work through their problems. After the night it all happened, she had refused all visitors at the hospital, unable to bear seeing pity in the eyes of her colleagues and friends. She was afraid, too, in a way she'd never been before. And she certainly didn't want her friends or colleagues to see the deep-seated shame she felt, a shame she knew was irrational but couldn't stop herself from feeling. Phoebe wanted desperately to forget what had happened, to put the past behind her once and for all, but she

found it utterly impossible to do so. And there was a part of her that blamed herself for her carelessness, her recklessness in running late at night, alone and without protection through one of the worst neighborhoods in the city.

It's human nature to blame the victim, after all. Phoebe saw it all the time, on the news, in her patients. On some level, Phoebe knew she was reacting in much the same way anyone would who had been through such a trauma. She could recite by heart the words she would have told her own patients had they come to her for help after such a violent event.

"Don't blame yourself," she would say. "You did nothing wrong." But for Phoebe, the words rang hollow in her head. The hospital psychologist they'd sent in to work with her failed to make any progress whatsoever; Phoebe simply wouldn't hear it. Of course I could have prevented it, she thought. There is no such thing as an innocent victim. Even after her she was discharged from the hospital, long after her bruises had faded, after her broken bones mended, there was a part of her that she feared would never quite be whole again. It wasn't that she didn't want to get better. She just couldn't seem to let herself.

On the day she was discharged, her first move was to install a security system. By the end of the first day there were locks on every window, cameras at every entrance. The bright, cheerful apartment she once loved first became a fortress. It wasn't long, though, before it became a prison. She began looking for a new apartment, something more secure. Something far away from the lakefront path where the men had stolen her courage, and so much more. Eventually, she found she'd had enough of her old life and her practice at Saint Luke's. In fact, she probably would have been quietly dismissed from her position had she not left on her own, she realized. The signs were there. There had been whispers for some time, hushed meetings behind closed doors. Her supervisor ushered her into his office more than once for a pep talk,

encouraging her to work through it. "See someone," he urged. "You can get through this." Phoebe had nodded, smiled. Made promises, said all the right things, the things he wanted to hear. But privately, she knew that no amount of therapy would save her. She'd already been changed. Her trajectory, her mission, would never be the same. Ultimately, Phoebe resigned. She packed up her few personal items from her office, packed them in the Mini, and left the hospital without so much as a glance in the rear view mirror.

After a few weeks, she took a job as an intake worker at the Mission, a homeless shelter that, miraculously, also had an empty apartment available upstairs. It was an amazing find, since she couldn't bear to live in the Victorian anymore. Ever since she'd come home from the hospital, she felt a deep unease she couldn't shake. It was no longer a haven. The brightly-painted lavender walls of her bedroom now looked garish; the floral fabric on her carefully chosen living room chaise, where she'd spent so many nights curled up with a book, made her skin itch. Even the prints on her walls, reproductions she'd painstakingly collected over the years, failed to give her any sense of satisfaction. For these reasons and more, when she moved, she left her expensive furniture and most of her personal possessions behind. Put plainly, the sight of it all simply made her squirm. She was enormously overqualified for the position at the Mission, something her supervisor brought up in the interview, but she didn't care, and she reassured her new boss that she wasn't just job hopping. Money wasn't an issue; she had plenty of savings and the new apartment was almost laughably inexpensive. A fresh start, she decided, was exactly what she needed, and this would be the perfect place to find one. It was, however, not a coincidence that this was the shelter where a man named Simon drifted in and out, often staying for days at a time before disappearing again into the city.

Phoebe's relationship with Simon began before her arrival at the shelter. It began, instead, on the night her life had been transformed. In fact, if it hadn't been for Simon, she would never have survived. They weren't friends, not in any traditional sense, and with his transient lifestyle, he wasn't always around, disappearing for days or even weeks at a time. But on the days when he did appear, the two spent a considerable amount of time together. Simon, usually fiddling with a crossword puzzle, often sat on the couch in Phoebe's office while she filed her paperwork or wrote up her patient notes. Sometimes, they would play chess. Other times, they would just sit in companionable silence. Usually, even with the chess board between them, Simon didn't say much. But Phoebe found his presence comforting. He made her feel safe just by being there. And Simon seemed to appreciate that Phoebe asked no questions, made no demands, and didn't mind his disheveled appearance or his odd habits, like wearing a hat and gloves even during the hottest days of the summer, or randomly dry-brushing his teeth with a toothbrush he kept tucked in his front shirt pocket.

Catherine, the shelter manager and Phoebe's supervisor, seemed to understand Phoebe's need to be in the orbit of the man who'd saved her, as well as her need to feel as though she was doing work that, in her opinion, truly mattered. She didn't judge. She had demons of her own, after all, though she didn't like to discuss them with anyone, not even Phoebe. And she seemed to have her own reasons for working at the shelter.

Catherine was perpetually single, for reasons she declined to disclose. She had a grown son, a young man with whom she had a troubled relationship and who she rarely saw. Phoebe knew their ongoing disputes had something to do with drugs, but she didn't know the details and didn't want to pry. She respected Catherine, respected her privacy, and was grateful to her for

tossing her a life raft at the exact moment she needed one. In a way, Phoebe thought, Catherine saved her from herself as much as Simon had saved her from the men who attacked her.

Shortly after her arrival and after moving her few personal possessions into her upstairs apartment, Phoebe quickly settled into a pattern that suited her new lifestyle. Much of her new life included regular interaction with Catherine, and it wasn't long before the two felt like old friends. Together, they counseled the many men and women who walked through the door seeking shelter and comfort. Some were just down on their luck. Others suffered from serious mental illnesses, conditions that required powerful antipsychotic medication. These, Phoebe thought, were the people who really needed them. The people with real problems, not the made-up problems that plagued the average, oh-so-ordinary people who had come to her at Saint Luke's. At the Mission, Phoebe's job was to listen, to help match the people who walked through the door with services that could help them get jobs, get food, get homes, get clean, get back on their feet. It was Catherine, though, who helped them work through their psychological problems and helped connect them with the medication they needed to survive and, hopefully, thrive.

Not all who came to the shelter were mentally ill, of course. But for those who were, Catherine, who had gone to medical school and was a licensed psychiatrist, was often able to stabilize them before they moved on. Some would come back after their meds ran out; others simply disappeared. There were some successes, and twice as many failures. But the work was interesting and rewarding, and it was all Phoebe could bear after all that had happened, and somehow made her world seem more normal, more stable, in comparison. Certainly, she no longer drove, having sold the Mini. She no longer ran. She no longer dated or sipped iced tea and Chardonnay with her coworkers. Except for Catherine and the few people she became friendly with at the shelter, she had no companions. She worked. She lived in her tiny studio apartment

upstairs, a square box with few comforts and little color. She ate the same meals as the guests in the shelter, but she ate them alone, sitting cross-legged on her futon with the TV turned off, enjoying the bliss of silence. She spent each night huddled in her twin bed underneath her mother's old quilt with the windows firmly shut, no matter how beautiful the weather, barricading herself away from the noise and danger of the streets. Dutifully, she took the little blue pill that helped ease her into sleep each night. And that's the way she liked it.

And so it was that she found herself, on an early Tuesday in August, scanning the faces at the shelter, looking for Simon's familiar Green Bay Packers stocking cap. He'd slipped her a note the day before, asking her to meet him and telling her he had something important to show her. Not seeing any sign of her friend, she grabbed a bottle of water and headed to her office to sit down and wait.

## Chapter Four: Simon

They were after him again. He knew it.

He'd been wondering for some time when they'd find him. For a while, he was sure he'd been safe, away from the watchers. Staying at the shelter wasn't a bad idea, really, at least in the beginning. He figured they'd never bother to look for him there. Plus, he got to be around the red headed girl. He felt sorry for her, in a way. Clearly, she was being cared for, seemed to be doing fine. But ever since that night in the park, he felt responsible somehow for her. He wondered, too, if there was any way at all that those men were part of the whole plan to bring him out into the open. But even if that were true, he couldn't just let them do that to her. No, he had to save her, had to call for help, even though exposing himself like that was sure to attract attention from the people he'd been running from for the better part of his life.

He'd already begun to suspect trouble when he realized his mail was being intercepted - again. Every last bit of it. He'd been expecting a letter for weeks. It wasn't even so much that the letter itself hadn't come, but that nothing had come. Not a slip of junk mail, not even a politician's flyer or an advertisement from a grocery store. Simon knew what that meant. They were onto him. And time was running out.

He'd started changing his routes. He thought about hopping on a train and getting out of town, but where would he go? And then, there was the red headed girl to worry about. What if they got to her when he wasn't around? He didn't think he could bear it if something happened to the girl, especially if it had anything to do with him and the men who sought to harm him. There was something...fragile about her. Something that drew him to her. Though she was pretty, it wasn't a physical attraction. God, no. It was nothing like that. But she really did remind him of



his mother, a younger version of her, anyway. And she was kind, good. Anyone with half a brain could see that. At the shelter, he found himself watching her as she scurried about, helping serve the meals, keeping the place neat and clean. She had gained a bit of weight and it looked good on her. She was healthier than she'd been in the beginning, after the park. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes were bright and clear. He was glad. Over the past couple of years he'd come to enjoy spending time with her. She didn't pester him or try to make him talk. She didn't ask where he'd been or turn up her nose at the way he looked or smelled. And she was a damn good chess player, too.

The note under his pillow that morning was alarming, to say the least. He'd crumpled it in a ball and shoved it in his pocket before heading out the door, leaving his shoe box behind. He thought for a moment about locking it up, but there was no time. And, with luck, he'd finish what he needed to do and be back at the shelter by the time breakfast was served, with no one the wiser.

Before stepping out onto the street, he took a long look in both directions before satisfying himself that the men weren't there, lurking, watching. Probably too early for those fuckers, he thought. Closing the door with a soft click, he moved swiftly and with purpose, keeping his head down. He stuffed one hand in the pocket of his coat and curled his gloved hand around the pistol he carried with him just for these types of situations, just as a precaution. For a brief moment, he wondered if he was walking into some sort of trap. Shaking off his worry, he continued in long strides toward the designated drop spot, moving straight ahead, careful to avoid the cracks in the sidewalk, just as he always did. Stepping on those, he knew, would be bad luck.

He had just reached the door and was about to pull the handle when he felt the needle prick. His last thought, hitting the pavement with his right hand still curled around the gun, was that of the red headed girl.

## **Chapter Five: Phoebe**

Like most people who first met Catherine Russell for the first time, Phoebe had initially been a bit intimidated by her. She couldn't help it. For one thing, the woman was nothing short of beautiful. Her jet black hair, on the rare occasions she did not twist it into an oversized, haphazard bun, hung to her waist. She was tall, just over 6 feet, but that didn't stop her from wearing heels. Behind tortoise shell glasses, her gold-flecked eyes glowed. Her perfectly applied makeup, impeccably chosen outfits and an exquisite, porcelain face all worked together to make her quite an imposing figure. At least, that is, until they saw her break into a warm smile, which happened frequently. She may have seemed a formidable presence to those who did not know her well, but Catherine was anything but. She was warm, kind, and caring, and yet firm with her patients, the homeless people at the shelter who so badly needed her help. Even Phoebe, after so many months working together, still felt the occasional sense of awe when Catherine entered the room. The two had become as close as sisters. Closer, even, because Phoebe couldn't imagine telling another soul the many secrets and private thoughts she'd shared with Catherine during their time together.

Sometimes Phoebe thought back to her former supervisor's constant nagging about getting help, the "strong suggestion" she consider getting a therapist of her own. How ironic that she'd found the therapy she needed not by formally seeing a psychiatrist, but by befriending one and working with her together, side by side. Technically speaking, Catherine was Phoebe's boss, but it never really felt that way to Phoebe. No, the two were definitely friends, and it wasn't as though Phoebe was about to fall out of line or put Catherine into the uncomfortable position of having to discipline her or, God forbid, fire her. Phoebe showed up early for her shift each day, performed her duties with enthusiasm. She welcomed each newcomer warmly, making sure they

had a cot, a warm blanket, and a hot meal. She helped out in the kitchen, mopped the concrete floors. She sat with the guests who were lonely and just needed someone to talk to. And that included Simon. In some ways the shelter had become more of a home to Phoebe than the bright, spacious apartment in the yellow Victorian ever had. And it certainly felt far more secure. Phoebe wholly admired Catherine's complete dedication to the shelter. It was inspiring, really. With no husband and no romantic attachments to speak of, Catherine put the shelter squarely at the center of her universe at all times. The people who wandered in needed her help, and she was eager to offer it. It wasn't long, though, before Phoebe was equally dedicated and could no longer imagine life outside the one she had built. Together, the two weathered countless storms. They shared a sense of dedication that both bound them and carried them through some of the toughest days at the shelter, which were plentiful.

When Phoebe got the news, she was sitting in her office, looking out the barred window and sipping a cup of tea. Catherine knocked softly on the door frame, then entered, a troubled look on her face. Her pale arms cradled a shoe box that she set on top of Phoebe's metal desk before she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and sank onto the orange velour couch, the only other piece of furniture in the room aside from the desk and an office chair. With a forever shrinking budget and a steady increase in the stream of people who needed their help, the shelter wasn't big on amenities, though neither of the women ever complained.

"There's more, too, but I forgot to bring it," Catherine said, clearly upset. Her face was flushed, her eyes brimmed with tears. "For someone who didn't have much, he sure kept a lot of papers." Catherine had a habit of starting conversations as though everyone should immediately know what she was talking about, something that irritated plenty of people. Usually, Phoebe

found it rather endearing. She gave Catherine what she hoped was a comforting smile and lifted the top from the shoe box. Inside, she saw, was a stack of what looked like letters.

“Are you going to tell me who you’re talking about?” Phoebe asked, her eyes smiling.  
"I'm afraid you've lost me. And what is all this?"

“Oh, Phoebe,” Catherine said, then took a deep breath before continuing. “I’m sorry. So very, very sorry. These are Simon’s things. Everything else in his locker I threw away, but I saved these, because I thought they could help us.”

At Phoebe's obvious confusion, a hand flew to Catherine’s lips. “Oh, God. You didn’t know? About Simon? I...don't know how to tell you this, Phoebe. It's Simon. He's gone.”

“Gone?” Phoebe stared blankly at Catherine. "I don't understand."

“Gone. He died. Yesterday. I can’t believe no one told you.”

“What? Wait. Who?” None of what Catherine was saying made any sense.

“Simon, Phoebe. He's gone. The doctors say he had a massive stroke. He was....”

Phoebe stood, nearly knocking the box of papers off her desk. “No.”

“Right before breakfast,” Catherine said. “Yesterday. He was walking down the street and he just...collapsed. By the time the paramedics got there...”

“No one told me. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

Catherine frowned. “I thought you knew,” she said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn't have assumed. I just figured someone would have said.”

"No. No one did." Phoebe wiped a tear that formed in the corner of her eye. She pointed to the box Catherine held in her hands. "But what is all this?"

"I went through the locker, where we kept his things for him when he wasn't here. It was jammed, completely jammed, with papers and pictures and what looks like journals he kept over the years. How did I not know he had any of this stuff?"

Vertigo hit Phoebe like a punch in the face. She caught herself, put both hands on her desk and sat back down to absorb the blow Catherine had just delivered. Simon, dead? It didn't seem possible. Since the attack, she can come to think of him as some kind of hero, however flawed. And flawed he was, clearly mentally ill, unable to stay on any kind of medication for long. He'd been in and out of the shelter for years, long before she was attacked on the path, long before he'd fired the shot that saved her. It was one of the reasons Phoebe was drawn to the place why she'd chosen to apply for the job when she left Saint Luke's. She'd begun to think of him not just as Simon, but as her Simon, her protector. Initially, when Phoebe first began working at the shelter and Simon began showing up, the two rarely interacted, rarely spoke to one another. The first time Phoebe mustered up her courage and tried to talk with him about what had happened, tried to thank him for what he'd done, he just shook his head as if he had no idea what she was talking about. She didn't know if he was embarrassed to talk about it, or if he simply didn't remember. It was hard to know. But after that, she'd never spoken of it with him again, even as their connection to one another continued to grow.

Deaths happened at the shelter, Phoebe knew. Well, not at the shelter, exactly, but the guests, the clients, they lived hard lives. Some were slaves to their addictions. Others were slaves to their illnesses. Some couldn't abide by the shelter's rules, preferring the more flexible, if dangerous, rules of the streets. So yes, there were plenty of losses over the years, and each one was tough to take. When the news would filter in, everyone would grow somber. It didn't even matter how long or how well they'd known one each other or how long the client had been

coming in. When a life ended, they all keenly felt the cruelty of the world, how hard it was to have a better life no matter how hard they'd tried. But this loss, the loss of Simon, was far worse than any Phoebe had endured in her time at the shelter. It was a pain almost as sharp as the pain of losing Amos, all those years ago.

She shook her head in disbelief, willing it not to be true, but it was. Catherine wouldn't lie about something like that. Simon was really gone.

Catherine went on. "You know he was a veteran, right? Desert Storm."

Phoebe nodded. This was one thing she did know about Simon because the team at the shelter had been trying to work with the Veterans Administration to get him some financial help, maybe find him a more permanent place to live.

"Kevin called over to the VA benefit office to see if Simon has a burial benefit," Catherine said. "We haven't heard back yet, so we don't know. But we were hoping we'd have a little ceremony next week. You know, to say goodbye to him, give him a proper sendoff. I was hoping we could go through his stuff and see if we can figure out where his family's from. I'd really like to see if we can make some contact. They should be notified, if we can manage it."

"Kevin doesn't have any of that?" Phoebe asked. Kevin Solomon was the central administrator at the shelter, keeping track of everyone who came and went, meticulously recording details about their movements, their emergency contacts, their medications, their allergies. While they never shared that information with any outside parties, Catherine was adamant that they at least try to keep records for events such as this one, where a regular client becomes hospitalized or dies, so that the families can be notified. It wasn't always possible, but at least they tried. Some of the people they helped were too incoherent to give a complete history. Many, especially those who wanted to stay invisible or had run away from dangerous

situations, flat out refused to divulge the details of their lives. They didn't want their personal information getting into the wrong hands and didn't trust "the system." Knowing what she did about Simon, it made sense that he would fall into the latter category. He didn't like to talk about himself or where he came from. The only thing Phoebe knew for sure was that he had served. And, that he'd saved her that night in the park.

"Nope," Catherine replied. "He never listed a next of kin or an emergency contact on any of his forms, so we're kind of in the dark here."

Catherine softened. "Look. I know this is hard. I know he meant a lot to you. We never really got through to him, and he never trusted us enough to give him any information about his family or where he came from. You know how he was about his privacy. In some ways, it felt like he didn't come from anywhere. But this," she said, pointing to the box, "might give us some kind of clue."

Catherine and Phoebe both stared at the box, then locked eyes. Phoebe wiped away a tear, then looked away. "He was a special case," Phoebe said, then gave a wry smile. "Maybe a little bit of a lunatic, but not a bad one."

Catherine smiled too, then nodded in agreement. "He was definitely different, that's for sure. I know you always had a soft spot for him, and I understand why. I just wish I could have reached him. Nothing I did seemed to get through to him. He was a difficult case."

Phoebe came out from behind the desk and perched against the front of it, arms crossed, hugging herself tightly. "You tried. You cared. He didn't like to talk. I don't know that he even wanted to be reached."

"I know, but...it's just one of those cases that just got away from me. You know. You must have had cases like that when you were at Saint Luke's, where nothing you did seemed to



work, or times you just couldn't connect." Catherine paused, cleared her throat. She smoothed back a lock of hair that had come loose and tucked it back into place.

Phoebe waited; she could sense there was something else Catherine needed to say.

"Actually, Phoebe, that's why I'm here, why I wanted to talk to you about all this. To ask for your help."

"My help?" Phoebe asked. "What can I do? Unfortunately, I knew even less about Simon than you did. He never wanted to talk to me about what happened. We had a connection, I'll admit that. But it didn't include a lot of communication, that's for sure. He'd sit here and do his crossword. Sometimes we'd play chess. That was it, really. Except...."

Phoebe stopped, remembering the note he'd left on her desk, asking to meet. He must have left it there just before....

"Phoebe? What is it?"

Phoebe squeezed her eyes shut and thought. What could Simon have needed to speak with her about? And why was he so secretive about it? She shook her head, deciding to keep it to herself, at least for now. "I just...I just can't believe he's gone," she replied, her voice weak. Catherine nodded, her face awash with sympathy.

"I know. I can't either. And I know how you must feel," she said, touching Phoebe lightly on the arm. She cleared her throat, then started again.

"What I was hoping you'd agree to is to look through this for me," Catherine said, pointing to the box. "There's quite a bit there. There must be something that could lead us to his family, give them some sort of closure. Even if they haven't seen him in years. There must be someone who's wondering where he is."

Closure, Phoebe thought. Right. There was that word again.

"And?"

"Another set of eyes. Just to see what I might have missed. You're a trained therapist, too, after all. I could never reach him, and now he's gone. If you take a look at all of this, it might, I don't know. Maybe set my mind at ease? And besides...."

Phoebe sighed, then shrugged. She knew where Catherine was going with this. In the three years that had passed since the attack, Phoebe's memories of that night had never fully come back. She knew what she had been told, and of course she saw the headlines. "Jogger Assaulted in East Side Neighborhood," one headline read. "Suspects Identified in Therapist's Brutal Assault," read another. Oh, and the best one: "Victim In Lakeside Assault Daughter Of Fallen Officer."

She hated journalists. They had no shame, that was for sure. Back then, they'd almost reveled in the story, described her injuries in great detail, information they'd culled from police reports. Sure, it was all public record in Wisconsin if you knew how to ask for it. But, Phoebe always thought, just because you "can" publish something doesn't give you a license to pry into the private lives and tragedies of others. Yet, though Phoebe knew some details, she never allowed herself to fully read through all the newspaper stories, and she usually just turned the channel if something showed up on the TV news. She just simply couldn't bring herself to do it, and hung up on the handful of reporters who mustered up enough courage to contact her, asking her to "share her story" with the public. Share her story? Whatever. They could all go straight to hell. In some ways, it was much easier to simply pretend that those news reports were about some other Phoebe, some other young woman who had foolishly gone for a run alone in the park with no pepper spray, no gun, and no sense whatsoever. Some other Phoebe who wound up in that hospital bed, writhing in pain while the detectives asked question after question. Not this

Phoebe, the one whose only external reminder of that night was the scar on her forehead from the fat one's steel-toed boot.

Her actual recollections of that night were nothing more than shadows in her mind, small snippets of information that lay just beneath the surface of her consciousness. She knew, through her own training, that this was not an unusual response for a trauma victim. Some people remembered every detail, reliving each one over and over in their heads, until it all crashed together in a carnival of pain and suffering. But more often, that wasn't the case. Even in everyday scenarios, memory is elusive, a slippery thing. Two people never really see the same exact thing. Take, for example, witnesses who gave statements in Phoebe's own case. One person saw a white van and three men, all of whom were Latino. Another swore the van was tan. Two of the men were black, this one said; one was white. The investigating officers were not surprised at the disconnect.

"Happens all the time," one said.

"At least they all agreed there was a van and three men," the other one said, his head bobbing up and down robotically. "That's something."

For Phoebe, there were often times when something unexpected – a scent, a touch, a bitter taste – might bring about fleeting moment of recall, when a flash of memory would nearly surface. But the details always remained staunchly hidden, just far enough away from her consciousness that she couldn't quite touch them. Most days, she was all right with that. More than all right. Most days she'd rather not remember any of it.

And, as Phoebe knew very well, sometimes burying the past is in everyone's best interest.

But there were other days, days when she felt differently. On those days, Phoebe resented the fear that came out of nowhere, the fear that paralyzed her, kept her from reconnecting with old friends, from meeting new people. From moving on with her life. On those days, Phoebe found herself wondering if the key to a true recovery, not physically but mentally, really did lie in learning the whole truth about what had happened. The police, out of respect for her late father, treated her with the utmost respect during the entire process. They vowed to solve the case, to find her attackers and bring them to justice. "For Jimmy's sake," the older one said.

She had always thought Simon would ultimately be the key to healing, by filling in the blanks. After all, he saw it; he was the one who fired the shot that scared them away. He knew. But after that first time she'd asked, she never quite mustered up the courage to ask him again what he'd seen. She didn't even know why he'd been there in the first place. But now, Simon was gone.

She hesitated for one moment more, then reached for the box. Yes, she decided. She'd very much like to see what was inside.

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*Notes, Patient 5718692*

*...little interest in socializing with others, still refuses to enter the dayroom. Patient continues to have significant gaps in memory. Continues to refuse discussing the event. ECT therapy is not recommended at this time, unless patient fails to improve on increased medication plan.*

*Treatment plan: Increase Clozapine dosage from 12.5 mg to 25 mg twice daily. Increase Clonazepam from .10 mg to .25 mg.*

*From the notes of Dr. F. Skola*

*Attending psychiatrist*

*Winnebago Mental Health Institute Oshkosh, Wisconsin*

## Chapter Six: Phoebe

Phoebe barely made it through the rest of her duties at the shelter. She couldn't concentrate. Every time she thought about Simon, she struggled to hold back the tears. It was so hard to believe she would never see him again, never share a game of chess, never feel the comfort of his presence in her office. The cot where he'd slept had already been cleared by another volunteer, his things cleared away as though he'd never been there at all. Throughout the day, just as it was every time someone at the shelter died, the staff and the rest of the guests were oddly quiet. No one brought out a deck of cards or played a tune on the old piano. Even lunchtime was a hushed affair, the only sounds being the clink of the spoons and the slurps of the men and women eating the soup. Phoebe felt numb as she ladled out the cream of broccoli. But she forced herself to past on a smile, putting on a false sense of calm to the people she was there to serve. She knew they were there because they, too, needed comfort. She would wait until the end of the day to allow herself the luxury of tears.

Before Amos had disappeared, Phoebe didn't cry. Even as a baby, according to her mother, Phoebe would open her mouth and wail when she was wet, or when she was hungry, or if she needed a nap, badly. But the tears just didn't come.

"It's like some kind of parlor trick," Annabelle used to tell friends. "Fake crying, is all it is."

Afterward, though, Phoebe went through a period of about a year where everything made her cry. Something as insignificant as spilling milk on the countertop would reduce her to a slobbering, wet, helpless mess. Sometimes, she didn't even know why she was crying, just that something about being at home drew it out in her. She didn't want her mother to see, so on the days when she couldn't hold it in she'd tell her mother she was going to her room to read. That, in

and of itself, was not unusual. She spent most of her time alone in her room, reading books she borrowed from the library or bought from the bookmobile at school, after Amos disappeared. She liked how the books looked on the shelves, all together like that, arranged in alphabetical order by the author's last name. The books had a clarity and symmetry to them that she found mostly absent in the real world. Sometimes Phoebe would imagine that her life was a book, and that being part of a happy story or a happy ending was just a matter of making the best possible choices. That theory gave structure to her unpredictable world, one she had suddenly, after Amos was gone, begun to find rather terrifying. Afterward, Phoebe would look back on that year as the final year she really had a mother. Annabelle lived long enough to see Phoebe graduate from college, but by then she had withdrawn so far from Phoebe's life that only bits and pieces of her remained. And then she died, after a brief bout with breast cancer that Phoebe hadn't known about until it was too late to make amends for the lost time together. Two years into Phoebe's residency, she took time off to be with her mother and spent four days at her bedside before the end came. At Annabelle's funeral, a day when Milwaukee was caught in a late-summer heat wave, Phoebe stared at the casket, the air a thick glue. The flowers she'd bought to adorn the casket wilted and drooped. But Phoebe didn't shed a single tear. But now, Phoebe knew, she needed to cry.

After the last meal of the day, after all the dishes were clean and the kitchen was swept, Phoebe took off her apron, said her goodbyes and hurried to her apartment upstairs, shoe box firmly in hand. The apartment, a walkup on the seventh floor accessible from a staircase inside the shelter itself, wasn't much, but the view of the city was to die for. It was a tiny space, with black and white checkerboard tile floors, high ceilings, and windows on two sides. The stove in the kitchen hadn't worked in years, the windows were drafty, and the fireplace in the corner was

unsafe to use, but that didn't matter much to Phoebe. She didn't need to cook; she shared her meals with the people in the shelter who relied on her for help. Besides, the claw foot bathtub and the feeling of security it all gave her made it all worthwhile. Well, that, and rent control. She'd been lucky when Catherine offered it to her at a price that wouldn't completely decimate her savings, now that she was no longer earning a six-figure salary at Saint Luke's. It was a steal, really.

She drew herself a cool bath, using the lavender bath oil Catherine had given her last year for Christmas, then lowered herself into the water and waited. But now that she had the chance to let it all out, the tears she had struggled mightily to hold back all day just simply wouldn't come. When her stomach rumbled, she regretted her choice not to eat, even though that evening's meat loaf absolutely did not look appealing. She rose from the bath, dried herself off and pulled on a pair of ragged sweatpants and a Minnie Mouse t-shirt she couldn't remember buying, and walked to the kitchen where, she knew, hidden in the cupboard was last night's bottle of cheap Merlot. It was, unfortunately, uncorked, but despite knowing it would taste like vinegar Phoebe poured herself a glass. Catherine and the rest of the shelter staff frowned on alcohol consumption, but there was a thriving black market at the shelter that not everyone knew about. A glass once in a while couldn't hurt, Phoebe figured. And besides, if ever she needed a drink, tonight was the night. Phoebe tucked the bottle back into its hiding place, then plunked down on her red futon – a relic rescued from her mother's house shortly after she'd died – and took a deep breath. It was time.

Carefully, she lifted the lid from the shoe box and peered inside, almost afraid to see what the contents would hold. The first thing she pulled from the box was a bundle of letters tied together with a gray shoelace. Nearly each letter was tucked inside an envelope addressed to a



Washington, D.C. address, but stamped “return to sender.” Underneath the letters were two canisters of undeveloped film

That’s weird, she thought. Who uses film anymore?

First, she booted up her laptop and looked up places where she could have the film developed. It had been years since she’d taken a photo with anything other than a digital camera, but apparently some people really did still use old-fashioned cameras. How strange! Curiosity fully piqued, she noted the address of a mail-in photo processing center and resolved to send the film canisters in the morning to see what they contained. After setting them aside, she picked up the unopened letters, sliding her finger underneath the flap of the top envelope. Then she stopped, feeling guilty about invading Simon's privacy. And wasn't opening someone else's mail a federal offense? She sighed, put the letters down grabbed her laptop again, this time Googling the address on the envelope. Her eyes grew wide when she realized it belonged to the U.S. Department of Justice. What in the world was Simon doing writing letters to the Department of Justice, Phoebe wondered? And why were they returned to him, unopened? She realized then how little she really knew about the man who had saved her. He'd had an entire life, decades of it, before they'd ever met. Who was he, really? And did she have any right to be pawing through his things, digging into his secrets?

Phoebe set the letters and her wineglass down on the table and began to pace, pulling at her bottom lip. Her mind raced, weighing the dilemma that spun through her mind. Simon may not have told her much about himself, but he seemed to trust her more than anyone else at the shelter. If there was anyone in his family who he'd left behind, anyone at all who could be wondering right now -- at this very minute -- what had become of him, then that person deserved

to know. Satisfied with her decision, Phoebe took one last sip of the wine, then sat back down and opened the first of the letters.

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*August 1, 2017*

*Inspector General Margaret Sackmann, U.S. Department of Justice*

*Washington, D.C.*

*Dear Madam:*

*Once again I am begging you to intervene on my behalf. I don't know how much more of this I can take, and I'm starting to get scared. My health isn't so good, and the doctors are visibly concerned about the lack of sleep.*

*I also want to mention that from May until last week, all my mail was intercepted. Every last piece of it. I kept asking the doorman if he'd seen anyone take it, and he hadn't, so I know it was intercepted before it got to my building. I didn't get a thing, not even one of those begging letters from the Easter Seals people, so if you wrote me back then, well, I apologize, because I sure didn't get it.*

*Since my last letter to you, I have mostly found my car seat out of adjustment, but they have also been in my apartment. I can't stay in the camper anymore on account of the problem with the State Police. The medical supply company is mostly concerned about all the damage done to my CPAP machine. All the hoses and head harnesses have had to be replaced several times, and all in the last three years, which the doctors say clearly shouldn't have happened.*

*As I mentioned in my phone calls to your assistant, local law enforcement suggested that I write to you, since it's your field team here in central Wisconsin for the most part that's stalked*

*this man for nearly 10 years now, and I've just about had enough. They have followed me back and forth to Colorado, damaged my car, clothes, and scared away all of my friends. I don't know why, and ma'am, I need your help, because things have gotten pretty bad the last few years. Worse than ever, really, and I don't know how much more of this I can take.*

*I am almost the talk of the town. The media has expressed an interest.*

*I am still waiting for your reply.*

*Sincerely,*

*Simon Bertatto*

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After reading through the first handful of letters, Phoebe pushed them aside and stared out the window for a long while before picking up the phone and dialing Catherine's number. "You won't believe what's in these things," she blurted. "Either Simon was completely crazy or a criminal or both." Catherine's voice sounded sleepy on the other end of the line. "Phoebe, do you know what time it is?"

Phoebe looked at the cat clock on the wall, its tail wagging back and forth, ticking off the seconds. It read 1:20 a.m. Okay, what? Where had the time gone? "Oh God, Catherine, I'm sorry. I just got so caught up in it. Wait till I show these to you. You're not going to believe it," she said again.

Catherine let out a yawn. "It's okay, Phoebe. But let's talk about it tomorrow, all right?" Red faced, Phoebe apologized, then hung up. She knew she needed to get some sleep, but she was too keyed up now to relax. She went to pour herself a second glass of wine, only to discover she'd already drunk the entire bottle. Funny, she didn't remember doing that, either. Oh well, she

thought, before opening another bottle from her secret stash and pouring herself another glass. There was no going to sleep now, of that she was certain.

She opened the next in the stack of letters and began to read.

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*April 26, 2017*

*Inspector General Margaret Sackmann, U.S. Department of Justice*

*Washington, D.C.*

*Dear Madam:*

*You might remember when I first wrote you. I confess, I am genuinely disappointed that the attacks on my person have continued both daily and weekly, all with no direct response from you. And you know, law enforcement in Silverthorne, Colorado, has the whole thing in their report, too, clear documentation of the damage done to my car. They commented that I certainly was not in the car when any of this happened! But the officer was pretty puzzled about it all, and while I know he was sure I didn't do the damage myself, he had a hard time figuring it was any of your agents, though I convinced him in the end.*

*I do appreciate you having the Denver F.B.I. field office call my lawyer, though, letting him know they were unable to stop the attacks. At least I know they tried. By then, I already knew local law enforcement no longer participated, they pretty much left me alone, but still, after they called I thought it would be best to move back to Stevens Point, get some distance from it all. But that turned out to be a mistake, too. Law enforcement here apparently didn't get the word they'd been called off. The attacks started all over again, and like I said, the past three years has been hard on me.*

*Frankly, ma'am, I cannot understand what you want with me.*

*Since I last wrote to you, the attacks went from weekly to daily and now several times a day. The interior of my camper, which is where I've been staying on account of the fact I can pick up stakes quickly if I need to, looks like a five-year-old lives there. I am getting tired of putting two cement blocks against the door at night, but I better or I get a visit at 2 in the morning from at least one and usually two more agents. I hardly sleep at all anymore.*

*Your staff is welcome to visit Wisconsin anytime. I will wait for your reply.*

*Sincerely,*

*Simon Bertatto*

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Finishing the letter, Phoebe rose from the futon, changed into a pair of faded flannel pajamas, grabbed a blanket from the bed, and got back on her laptop to do a little research. All thoughts of sleep had vanished; what she'd read made her more wide awake than ever. Who was Simon Bertatto, really, she wondered. Was all of this true? Did he assault someone? Was he mentally ill, or dangerous? Or both? Was the man she'd thought of as her own personal hero really that? Or, was he some kind of crazy monster? Phoebe thought for a moment. Where to begin? Where to find out the truth about Simon Bertatto?

Ah, yes. That's right! She probably still had a lifetime access key to LexisNexis, the subscription database that scans public records for background checks for government agencies and other organizations use to uncover crucial information about individuals. Her role at Saint Luke's didn't require much in the way of access, though she'd used it a couple of times to learn more about the men she'd dated, back when she actually did so. But all the doctors and psychiatrists at the hospital had access. Her credentials were still saved in her browser, so it was easy to log into the system. Thankfully, no one had revoked her access when she'd left the

hospital. After navigating to the people search, she typed in the name "Simon Bertatto," and waited.

When the next screen appeared, it was a surprise. No results found. Nothing! How could that be? In this day and age, it was virtually impossible to stay off the grid completely. Especially when a crime was involved. Next, she tried Newspapers.com, which housed newspaper reports from around the country going back to the 1800s, and typed Simon's name in the search box. Still nothing.

The same thing happened when she logged into CCAP, the Wisconsin Circuit Court Access site. And even in PACER, the federal court case search engine that logs everything from bankruptcies to federal fraud charges. Zero. Zip. Nada. It was as though Simon Bertatto had never existed at all. In today's technical age, it's nearly impossible to live your life without leaving breadcrumbs everywhere, and Phoebe knew where to look from her. The whole thing was a puzzle, she thought. But one she certainly wasn't going to solve tonight. Eyes drooping at last, she closed the laptop, rinsed and dried her wine glass, then returned to the futon, where she pulled the blanket up around her before falling into a deep, yet troubled, sleep.

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*Notes, Patient 5718692*

*...refuses to acknowledge culpability in the event and expresses concerns about government monitoring. Gaps in memory appear to be increasing. Patient is showing some interest in photography, which could be a helpful outlet.*

*Treatment plan: Continue Clozapine at 25 mg twice daily while continuing Clonazepam at .25 mg for the time being. A medication change may become necessary if patient fails to improve. May reconsider ECT therapy.*

*From the notes of Dr. F.J. Skola*

*Attending psychiatrist*

*Winnebago Mental Health Institute*

*Oshkosh, Wisconsin*

## Chapter Seven: Catherine

As Phoebe was doing her research upstairs, seven flights below her apartment her boss was becoming increasingly agitated. So much so, in fact, that she called in her oldest friend and mentor to discuss what was on her mind. When he arrived, Catherine gestured him to sit, then poured him a scotch. "I hope I've done the right thing," she said, finally. "I can't stop thinking about it. Questioning myself."

"It was a judgment call," her mentor said. "I know it seems unorthodox, but..." The two sat in companionable silence for a few moments before he spoke again.

"Look, Catherine. I know you're uncomfortable with this approach. But it's been my experience that in cases like these, the best thing we can do is think outside the box and help our patients the best we can."

Catherine let out a small laugh. "Uncomfortable is right. I feel like I'm jumping off a cliff. But this has been one of the most difficult cases of my career. We've come so far, and yet there's still so much work to be done."

"And you're worried that you've opened a Pandora's box?"

"I'm worried that facing the truth could create a setback, not a breakthrough. This patient is not responding. Not coming to terms with the illness. I see more and more withdrawal, and I'm worried."

"That the symptoms are worsening?"

"That stability is impossible."

"Stability is always possible. It's finding the right course of treatment that matters."



"And that doesn't always mean finding the right medication does it?" Catherine asked, though it was more a statement than a question.

"You know the answer to that. Every patient is different. Every case is unique. If we don't want to resort to more aggressive treatment strategies, we have to try every other possibility first."

"And you think this is it?"

"I do," he answered. "I do, if you do. I'm comfortable with it. And I think this is worth a try. I don't see what harm it could do, at this point, do you?"

Catherine closed her eyes. Uncertainty coursed through her veins. She'd never encountered a patient who was so challenging. The situation, she knew, was dire. Every day, she watched the suffering intensify, manifesting itself in physical ways. Thinning hair. Refusal to eat, to participate in group therapy, to even acknowledge the illness. Privately, the two had discussed the possibility of electroconvulsive therapy, a procedure, done under general anesthesia in which small electric currents are passed through the brain. The currents intentionally trigger brief seizure in the patient. Under the best circumstances, Catherine knew, ECT seems to cause changes in brain chemistry that can rapidly reverse symptoms of certain mental health conditions such as this.

"I still don't understand why you're so opposed to ECT," he said. "We know it could work."

Catherine refused. She knew most psychiatrists considered it safe and effective. But to her, it seemed archaic, almost barbaric. She was willing to try just about anything else before resorting to such methods. Her mentor, however, vehemently disagreed with this approach. But, after all, this was Catherine's patient, and it was Catherine's call. He oversaw her treatment decisions, as

her superior, but he believed strongly in giving his team independence, empowering them to make decisions they felt best for their patients. Catherine was an exceptional psychiatrist, one of the best he'd ever worked with. Her intuition was impeccable. Her only flaw, if he had to choose one, was her occasional uncertainty, her lack of sure footedness in emotionally-charged situations. And this was one of those situations. She'd become close to this patient, he knew. Too close, maybe. Too emotionally invested in the result, something he'd cautioned her against from the moment he began to see it in her face and in her treatment notes. He rose, refilled her scotch and poured another for himself.

"Well, Catherine...what's done is done. Now, we must wait. Wait and see how the patient responds. And then, we'll decide."

Their eyes locked. They both took a long sip, uncertain what would come next.

## Chapter Eight: Phoebe

A knock at the door woke Phoebe from her sleep. Sun streaked through the dusty window, warming her face. Her hair, a ratted mess, was stuck to her scalp. Disoriented, she looked at the clock. Ten! Oh, no. What? Her alarm! She must not have set it before she finally dropped off to sleep the night before. Or, early that morning, to be precise.

Another knock, louder this time.

"Just a minute!" Phoebe said, rushing to the bathroom to tame her tangled hair, then pausing for a moment before stuffing the letters into her messenger bag. "I'm coming!" She opened the door to see Catherine, impeccably dressed as always, standing in the hallway.

"Well, what's so important you have to call me at 1 in the morning?" Catherine asked Phoebe, though not unkindly.

"Oh, Catherine, I'm sorry," Phoebe said. "I just got so wrapped up in it all and I totally lost track of time."

Phoebe pursed her lips, fought to tamp down the racing thoughts going through her mind. "Well, let's just say I'm getting a whole different picture of who Simon was, that's for sure. And, oh my God, I'm so sorry I'm so late! I must have forgotten to set my alarm last night." Catherine waved off Phoebe's concerns. "I was just worried about you, that's all. Why don't you get cleaned up, and then come downstairs and we can talk? I want to hear all about it."

"Thank you," Phoebe answered. "I'll just take a quick shower and be right down."

Catherine smiled, then turned to leave, closing the door with a soft click. Phoebe exhaled, not realizing she'd been holding her breath. The last person on earth she wanted to disappoint was Catherine, who had given her so much. A job. A home. And, most importantly, someone to

trust. A true friend, something she hadn't really had since, well, Amos. She thought of showering, but instead turned back to the shoe box peeking from her messenger bag. The film! That's right. She needed to make sure she sent the film away for processing. It could be an important clue. She readied a package for sending, then pulled on yesterday's jeans and a sweatshirt she hoped wasn't too crumpled and worn. She hurriedly splashed water on her face and ran a brush through her tresses before heading out the door and bounding down the steps, two at a time. After placing the envelope that contained the film canisters in the outgoing mail pile, Phoebe made her way to Catherine's office and stepped inside the open door.

"Phoebe! That was quick," Catherine remarked, ushering her into the chair.

"I'm so sorry...." Phoebe started, but Catherine held up her hand.

"It's fine, really. There's nothing to be sorry for. You don't have to spend every waking hour helping out, you know," she said, in a soothing voice. "But I'm glad you're here. I want to hear about what you've learned. Is there any news on where Simon's family might be?" Phoebe shook her head and took a seat. She wasn't quite sure where to begin. "I opened the box," she began. "There were letters inside. And two canisters of undeveloped film. I've sent those to a lab for developing, by the way."

"Good, good," Catherine murmured, encouragingly. "That could be important, finding what's on them. Go on."

Phoebe went on to describe the letters, the picture Simon's words were painting of the man they both thought they knew. "I ran Simon's name through NexisLexis, CCAP, you name it. It didn't come up in any of the usual databases. There was nothing there, Catherine. And that seems...impossible, doesn't it? I mean, the newspapers never mentioned him by name when they

printed stories about what happened to me, so I get that. But he has to be in the system somewhere, especially if he's a Desert Storm veteran."

"Hmmm," Catherine said. "So it seems like he was either living under a different name, or he was completely delusional about his entire past. There has to be a record of his life somewhere, right? I guess the big question is, which is it? Was he delusional, or did he change his name?"

"I don't know," Phoebe said. "I feel like I didn't know him at all. Maybe none of us really did." Phoebe put her head in her hands. Though she and Simon didn't always talk when they spent time together, there was an undeniable -- and deep -- connection between them. It was hard to juxtapose the Simon she felt she knew, the Simon who had saved her life, with the Simon whose letters were now in her possession. Catherine walked over to Phoebe and sat on the couch beside her, touching her shoulder. "I know you felt that way. He saved you. How could you not?"

Phoebe looked Catherine in the eye, determination written all over her face. No, she thought. She would not judge Simon, no matter what he'd done. "I refuse to believe that he was some sort of criminal. Delusional, maybe. Mentally ill? Yes, obviously. We knew that. But someone who saves a stranger from being murdered is not a monster. I have to believe that. Catherine nodded in understanding.

"We have the film, too," she went on. "That should be back in a few days. Who knows, Catherine? Maybe they'll tell us something more about him or give us another clue to his family."

"Well, I'm pretty sure the VA has him down as Simon Bertatto, so I can't see how his name could be something else. But let me know what you come up with. And from the sounds of

it, he may have had a lot of psychiatric problems that were going untreated. And probably for a long time."

Phoebe understood. Knowing there was more to Simon's story could offer Catherine some peace of mind. She'd tried so hard to work with him, and it clearly bothered her that this was something she had never been able to accurately treat, let alone diagnose, while he was alive. From what she'd read in his letters, all signs pointed to severe mental illness. Schizophrenia, most likely. Schizophrenia, Phoebe knew, is a mental health condition most closely associated with unusual expressions or perceptions of reality. She had encountered several such patients during her residency, even if her clients at St. Luke's didn't fall into that category. The condition can be devastating. It can lead to significant social or occupational dysfunction, but it is notoriously difficult to diagnose. In the past, doctors had separated the types of schizophrenia into five separate categories: paranoid, disorganized, catatonic, and childhood schizophrenia, along with schizoaffective disorder. But the criteria changed in 2013, when the American Psychiatric Association brought the categories under a single heading, as a way to better serve patients whose symptoms ran across a spectrum, rather than neatly fitting into a single label.

There are several reasons that psychiatrists find the disorder so difficult to diagnose. One is that people with the disorder often don't realize they're ill, so they're unlikely to go to a doctor for help. Or, they're too frightened or ashamed of what they're experiencing that they're afraid to seek help. Another issue is that many of the changes leading up to schizophrenia can mirror other normal life changes. For example, a teenager who's developing the illness might drop a group of friends and take up with new ones. The same teen may also have trouble sleeping or suddenly start coming home with poor grades. These symptoms may occur for weeks, months and even

years before full psychosis occurs. It can be such a gradual process that even the most perceptive parents may not realize what's happening. Delusions. Hallucinations. Bizarre or hyperactive behavior that patients try so hard to mask. And then, of course, there's the issue of access to care. Not all people who develop symptoms have regular physicians or insurance plans; or, they have parents who refuse to believe there is anything wrong with their children. There are many factors that prevent an accurate diagnosis and a solid treatment plan.

But that knowledge is a small comfort to the doctors and psychiatrists who try so hard to help their patients. Phoebe gave Catherine a warm smile, one she hoped was comforting. It wasn't Catherine's fault, after all, that Simon was dead, or even that he'd struggled so mightily in life. "You are anything but a failure, Catherine," she said. "If I'm right, there's a whole lot more to Simon Bertatto than either of us could have ever imagined."

Catherine picked at a hair that was erupting on her chin, weighing the information in front of her. Finally she rose from her seat and walked to the window, her heels clicking on the black and white checkerboard tile. "I guess the question is now, what's next? Do we keep moving forward with this? Try to learn more?"

Phoebe didn't hesitate. "I'd really like to spend more time reading his letters and doing some research, if you don't mind," she said. "I'd like to know more before his funeral. I know we're short-staffed here, but I'll do it on my own time."

Catherine thought for a moment, then turned to Phoebe and nodded. "I agree. I do think this is important," she said, in carefully measured tones. "You have tons of vacation days stacked up. You never use them. Why don't you take a couple of days and see what you can find out? I'm sure we can manage without you for that long. Plus, I'm with you; I'd really like to be able

to contact Simon's family before the memorial. It doesn't seem right that the only people who will be there will be us."

Phoebe smiled. "That sounds perfect. It's hard to explain why it means so much to me, but it does. It really does."

"Well, with what you've been through, and no family left, I think I can understand," Catherine said. "Just don't get too wrapped up in it. And keep me posted, if you would, please. Sound like a deal?"

"Deal," Phoebe said.

"But be sure to grab a sandwich from the kitchen before you go. You need some healthy food for once!"

Phoebe laughed. "All right. I promise." True to her word, Phoebe stopped at the kitchen and packed up a sandwich and a few snacks to take with her to her apartment. But she couldn't help but stop once again at the sight of Simon's cot, now occupied by a new arrival, a woman dressed in Hello Kitty flannel pants, a faded orange Halloween sweater and a bright pink woolen hat. It was almost like he was never there at all.

Just then, a hand grabbed her arm, spinning her around and nearly knocking her to the floor. She turned to see Jeremy, a young man in tattered blue jeans and a torn winter coat. For a moment, she was relieved to see his familiar face. That is, until she saw his wild, dilated eyes, the scabs that covered his arms. His face twitched; he could barely look her in the eye. Her heart sank. Jeremy had been clean for more than three months. She'd had high expectations for him. "Hey, Phoebe," he croaked. "I'm sorry about Simon, man. He was all right."

"Thanks, Jeremy. Are you all okay?"



"Fine, fine," he said, cracking a smile. But then he frowned, his eyes turning dark. "But," he rasped. "There is something you should know about Simon. I know you liked the dude, but I think he had some serious shit going on."

Phoebe sighed, fighting the urge to roll her eyes. Some shit? "Okay, Jeremy. What kind of shit, exactly, are you talking about here?" Jeremy grabbed her arm again, harder this time, pulling her to the wall and crushing his body against her. He whispered in her ear.

"I know you were friends, right? But Simon was a scary dude, Pheeb. He could be all chill when he was here. But a few years back? Something bad happened, man. He wound up in the loony bin. I don't know what it was, but I heard he mighta killed some guy."

Phoebe pushed Jeremy away, nearly knocking his bony frame to the floor. Jesus! "Okay, Jeremy," she said, keeping her voice as even as possible. "I didn't know that. But thanks for telling me, okay? I'm glad I know." Jeremy's eyes glazed over. He'd already forgotten she was standing there.

On the way back to her apartment, Phoebe banished Jeremy from her mind. In fact, despite losing Simon, she somehow felt lighter and more focused than she had in months. Years, even. It felt good to have a project to focus on, a mystery of sorts to solve. And it was the least she could do for Simon, who she had come to think of as her guardian angel. So far, it sounded as though she and Catherine had been the only ones who really cared about him. She had a smile on her face as she reached the top of the stairs and walked down the hallway to her apartment. She would find out the truth, Phoebe vowed to herself, no matter where it led. She owed it to him, after all. Inside, though, her mood darkened the moment she stepped through the doorway. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she stood frozen in the doorway. Instinctively, she knew something was amiss.

Not just amiss. Someone had been in her apartment. She was certain of it.

She looked about, her eyes frantic, taking it all in. For one thing, the wine glass she'd washed and dried the night before was missing from the countertop. The trash can, which had in the morning held the wine bottle and a few tissues, was empty. And the blankets on the couch had been folded neatly and moved to the bed.

She stared at the scene before her. Briefly, she considered calling the police. But then she realized that whomever had been there was long gone; there was nowhere in the room to hide. And besides, what would she say? Hello, officer, someone broke into my apartment and washed my wine glass and made my bed?

Not likely. They'd laugh in her face. She searched through her drawers and found nothing missing. Yes! Her laptop was still on the table, right where she'd left it. Thank God. It didn't make any sense whatsoever. Who would break into an apartment only to clean things up? Unless, she realized darkly, he – or they – were looking for something? Phoebe knew she didn't have anything worth stealing, not really, except for her laptop and TV, and they hadn't been touched. So what could an intruder have been searching for?

Her hand flew to her messenger bag. Hands shaking, she opened the zipper, then let out a sigh of relief when she saw the stack of letters safely tucked safely inside. There they were. Thank God! If she'd lost the letters, she didn't know quite what she'd do.

But then, suspicion crept up her spine. Was it possible? Was someone looking for Simon's letters? And if so, why? What could possibly be in the letters that someone else would want to know? Unless Simon was right, and someone really was following him?

*Just because you're crazy doesn't mean they're not following you,* Amos used to joke. That used to make her laugh, but she knew, too, that it was true.

Phoebe bolted the door and sank into the couch, realizing suddenly how exhausted she was. Maybe she was overreacting, she thought. Maybe, because she'd slept so little and so poorly, she just didn't remember cleaning up after herself in the morning.

Yes, Phoebe thought. That had to be it. She probably just didn't remember. She'd been up way too late reading. She smiled, realizing she was just being silly.

*Pretty soon they're going to think you're the crazy one if you're not careful,* she thought. Sitting up straighter, she smoothed the letters out on the coffee table in front of her, positioned herself cross legged on the futon, and began, once more, to read.

\*\*\*

August 15, 2017

*Inspector General Margaret Sackmann, U.S. Department of Justice*

*Washington, D.C.*

*Dear Madam:*

*This is my sixth letter to you in as many months, all with no reply. I spent a lot of time in that hospital bed thinking about you and wondering how the investigation is going. I don't understand how you can ignore my situation, which grows more perilous by the day.*

*Things really started escalating again 7th of August. What happened is, after breakfast I took my vitamin supplements and went to work, like I was supposed to, and at first everything seemed okay. After about a half hour, I experienced a sharp, extreme pain in my stomach. It was followed by severe disorientation, and I fell, cut my lip wide open. One of my fellow residents asked if I was okay, and got one of the ladies to come take a look at me, and it was a good thing*

*she had some medical training or I would have been done for. Two hours later, I was in the emergency room at our local hospital with wires connected all over me. The look on the doctor's face made it clear that he did not think I would make it.*

*My upper lip is still somewhat swollen.*

*Today I went to the impound lot to get my camper back and found extreme damage to the roof. Whoever did it also moved the three cement blocks off my briefcase in my car and took three copper bracelets.*

*I have been advised to invite your staff members to Wisconsin to review the damage to my personal property and my mental health. Next month is the anniversary of three years of being stalked by your agents. It probably cost this government millions to accomplish this feat. And so I ask you, ma'am, again. What has been accomplished? And why are they picking on me, a nobody? I feel, after all this time, that I deserve at least a response from you, if not a personal visit.*

*The doctors at the local hospital emergency room, where I have been a patient four times in the past three months, are very concerned.*

*Your staff is welcome to visit anytime. I will wait for your reply.*

*Sincerely,*

*Simon Bertotto*

## Chapter Nine: Phoebe

For the second morning in a row, a loud knock at the door startled Phoebe awake. For the second morning in a row, she sat up, disoriented. What time was it, anyway?

Phoebe untangled the throw blanket from her feet and rose from the futon. She must have fallen asleep there the night before --- again --- while reading Simon's letters, her purple backpack tucked underneath her head. She blinked, shook off the cobwebs. "Who is it?" she called out.

"It's me," a familiar voice replied.

"Oh, Frank! Hang on a sec!"

Phoebe checked herself in the mirror. What a fright she was! But, it was just Frank, and she hardly had to worry about her looks for her neighbor. Sometimes she wondered, with those thick glasses he wore, if he could even see much at all. She turned to walk toward the door.

Then, she froze. The sourness of bile rose into her throat. Panic crept through her body; her fingertips tingled. She could feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins. Something was wrong. The room was a disaster. What on earth had happened?

The intruder, Phoebe realized, a jolt of electricity running through her body. He must have been in again while she was asleep! Her room, usually so immaculate, was in complete disarray. Clothing had been pulled from her drawers. T-shirts, skirts, underwear and bras were scattered around the room. Her stack of National Geographic magazines, usually neatly stacked atop the book case, had been knocked from their perch and were now spread haphazardly out onto the floor. One of the covers was mangled and torn. The empty wine bottle from the night before was on its side on the coffee table, a sticky mess surrounding it. Phoebe hugged herself

tightly, her fingernails digging so deeply into her arms she nearly yelled in pain. She thought she might vomit.

Oh no, Phoebe remembered. The letters!

Tamping down her alarm, she unzipped the backpack she'd been using for a pillow and let out a sigh of relief. Yes! The letters were still there. Thank God! What if she hadn't fallen asleep on the couch, on top of the backpack? Her mind raced. What if he had gotten them? And what was so important that someone wanted them so badly they would rip her room apart? Even more puzzling, why didn't she wake up when someone was tearing through her things? She eyed the empty wine bottle suspiciously. Was it the wine? Was there something in it? Had she been drugged?

Another knock sounded at the door, louder this time.

"Just a minute!" she said, forcing a brightness to her voice that she didn't feel. "I'm not decent!"

A visit from Frank, the kindly white-haired man who lived down the hall, was usually a welcome distraction, even at this ungodly hour of the morning, but the timing clearly couldn't have been worse. What would he think? She raced around the room, picking up as many of her underthings she could and shoving them back into her wardrobe, then tucked the empty wine bottle and glass behind the curtain. Her visitor, she knew, did not approve of alcohol of any sort; and, given the apartment's connection to the shelter, the wine was contraband. She didn't want to put him in the uncomfortable position of having to report her infraction.

Another knock.

"Hang on! I'm coming!"

On an impulse, she stuffed the letters back into her bag before heading for the door. She liked Frank, trusted him, even. Still, her gut instinct told her she should keep the letters secret from everyone but Catherine, at least for now. Until she knew who broke into her apartment, who was searching for whatever truth those letters contained, she knew she had to keep them to herself.

Phoebe fixed a smile on her face, straightened her t-shirt, and said a silent prayer hoping she looked at least somewhat normal when she opened the door. There, Frank stood smiling in the hallway, holding two Styrofoam cups and a white bakery bag. He took one look at Phoebe and his eyes opened wide in alarm. “Phoebe! What on earth happened to your face?”

“What?”

“Your face! Your lip. It’s all swollen. Did you fall?” Phoebe touched her lip. He was right. Her lip was swollen, and sore.

“What? No. At least...no. I don’t think so.” So odd. She hadn’t noticed. When did it happen? Did she really fall? If she did, why didn’t she remember? She searched her brain, came up empty. Then she shook her head. She’d worry about it later. She pointed to the white grease-stained bag in Frank’s hand. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Your favorite,” Frank said, holding out the package. “Right? Raspberry white chocolate scones. From Sconnie’s. And coffee. I was starting to get worried about you. You weren’t in the lounge this morning.”

Phoebe glanced at her watch. It was nearly 11. How could that be? Normally, she was up by 7 and was showered and sipping coffee in the apartment complex lounge by 8, joining Frank and the rest of her neighbors for an hour or so before heading to her office, which was really a modified broom closet. She thought again of the empty wine bottle. Did someone really drug

her? She shook the thought away. Maybe she just really needed the sleep. It's true, she had been staying up awfully late, mired in her research.

"I brought you the crossword," Frank said, his foot tapping. "And two pencils. I didn't want to start it without you."

"Oh, Frank, I'm sorry. Of course. Come on in. You're so thoughtful."

She stepped aside, waving him inside with a flourish. "Sorry for the mess."

Phoebe scanned the room. It really was a mess, she realized, with growing unease. She could barely stand to look at the jumbled wreck the intruder – or intruders, she thought with a shudder – had left in their wake. The state of the room startled Frank so much that he stopped short, nearly colliding with Phoebe. A dollop of coffee sprang from the cup, splattering a dark brown stain into the white doctor's coat he always wore. Some people might think it was funny that he wore the coat. After all, Phoebe knew, Frank had long ago retired from his practice at Memorial Hospital. But she didn't judge. If anything, that he still wore his doctor's jacket every day was an affectation that Phoebe found charming, one that endeared her to him even more than she would have otherwise. She'd always gravitated toward people who weren't exactly...well...normal.

"Crap! I mean, I'm sorry," Phoebe said, taking the cups from his hand. She set them on the counter and wet a paper towel. "Your jacket is ruined!"

"Nonsense. It's just coffee," Frank remarked, blotting the spot with the paper towel. "But the obvious question is, what in God's name happened in here, Phoebe? Is everything all right with you?" Her face turned crimson. How could she explain? She could hardly stand to look around the room. Fastidiousness was a habit Phoebe had adopted when she was just a girl. She liked things to be in order, found a certain comfort in it. While her mother had never complained



about it, she had clearly found it a strange affectation, unusual for a girl Phoebe's age. Her things were always in order, her toys put away neatly. It was the mirror opposite of Amos's room in the attic. That, Phoebe remembered, was a constant disaster of sweat socks and dirty dishes.

In fact, at age six, while Phoebe had been attending her first sleepover party, she'd been aghast at the disastrous state of her schoolmate's bedroom when she arrived for the celebration, her carefully rolled sleeping bag in one hand and a hand-wrapped gift in the other. She could still see the piles of Barbie clothes, discarded books, and stuffed animals scattered on the creamy shag that carpeted her friend's room. Even more vividly, perhaps, she could recall the nearly uncontrollable urge she'd had to tidy the place up. It was like a fiery, terrible itch she wasn't allowed to scratch. She'd been silent most of the night, not joining in the giggles and whispers that went on between the group of girls well past bedtime. The mess was too distracting, making her feel nervous, closed in. It was excruciating, lying there in her sleeping bag, inches from an eyeless Mr. Potato Head that had no business being on the floor. She'd wanted to badly to fix him and put him away, but she was worried, too. Worried about what the other girls, who were as oblivious to the chaos as they were to her discomfort, would think. Beads of sweat had tricked down the small of her back while she lay on her stomach, eyes tightly closed. It had been nearly unbearable. Finally, feigning a stomachache, Phoebe had called her mother to come take her home. When she was safely back in her room, the strict structure she'd created in her life surrounding her, she nearly sagged in relief. Her books, perfectly arranged in order of height on her bookshelves, had a symmetry to them. Every toy was tucked neatly away into her toy chest. Her own stuffed animals were lined up along the window seat in her room, perfectly arranged on the lilac-colored cushion that perfectly matched the carpeting and the duvet on her four-poster

bed. Even now, all these years later, the thought of that birthday party made her cringe. Such a mess. Who could live like that?

The fact that she'd never been invited to a sleepover again didn't bother her one bit. She was in no hurry to repeat that little episode. In truth, she didn't even remember her old classmate's name, it was so long ago. But the details of that night stayed with her. Phoebe shook away the memory and busied herself clearing a space at the tiny Formica table where they finally sat to share their breakfast. She willed herself not to think about the clutter behind her back, too, stifling the nearly uncontrollable urge to put the room back in order immediately. No, she knew. Cleaning would just have to wait, and hopefully Frank wouldn't stay too long.

They sat in awkward silence for a few moments, drinking coffee and nibbling at their scones. Phoebe picked at hers. She didn't have much appetite, for one thing, and she was distracted, fighting the urge to get back to her research. There was just too much to worry about. Too much more she didn't yet know.

Frank finally cleared his throat and spoke. "So tell me, Phoebe," he began. "Is everything all right? I don't mean to be rude. But this," he said, with a sweep of his arm. "This isn't...like you."

Phoebe frowned. How much could she tell him? In truth, in the two years since she'd moved into the little apartment, Frank was her only visitor. Well, Catherine, too, but she and Catherine worked together, so it was a different kind of relationship. Frank was more...fatherly, she supposed, whatever that meant. They had fallen into an easy friendship based on nothing more than proximity and a willingness to listen. She sensed he respected her quirks and didn't judge her for them. And seriously, with that white doctor's coat he insisted on wearing? He had his quirks, too. Phoebe looked down and concentrated on a loose thread that threatened to pull

apart the seams of her pink flannel pants. She realized how odd it must seem to her elderly friend that she was still in her pajamas at such a late hour, home from work, her usually uncluttered home in tumultuous disarray.

“I guess I overslept,” Phoebe said, without meeting Frank’s eye. “I’m taking a few days off work for a side project I’ve been working on.”

Frank raised an eyebrow and sipped his coffee. “A side project? Well. Now I’m intrigued. What kind of research are you doing?” Phoebe sighed. What could it hurt to confide in Frank? He was a kindly, retired doctor. Harmless. Surely, he wasn’t the one who had broken into her apartment. Or was he?

She shook her head, dismissing the notion from her mind. Of course, Frank wasn’t the one to break into her apartment! He’d have nothing to gain, would he? He barely knew who Simon was, never mind wanting to steal his letters and notes. The two never spoke to one another, as far as Phoebe knew, though they may have crossed paths downstairs at some point. Besides, in all the time she’d been at the shelter and living in the apartment, Frank had been nothing but kind to her. And, without a doubt, he was a good listener, often engaging with the clients downstairs during his morning visits. He was, Phoebe saw, both kindhearted and supportive. She’d actually confided in him before, told him things she couldn’t tell anyone else, not even Catherine. She’d told him about Amos, about the night Amos cut off his finger. About the dead cat in the suitcase. About her father's accident. About her mother’s death, how lonely she had been afterward. She'd even told him about the boy in the woods.

But she’d stopped short of telling him about Simon. About telling him about the rape, the Night Everything Changed. It wasn’t that she didn’t think Frank would understand. It was just something she didn’t want to talk about with anyone, even if she could remember all the details,

which lately were coming back to her in waves, especially at night in her dreams. Even after all her talks with Catherine, she still felt a sense of shame and responsibility for it all, for being the risk taker she'd once been. And the details were just too disgusting to share, especially with an old man who was kind enough to bring her coffee and scones. No, she didn't want to talk about any of that with Frank. Not now, and probably not ever. She took a deep breath. "My friend died," she started, the words tumbling from her lips before she could stop them. She began her story, explaining that Simon was in and out of the shelter, that they had become friends, that he had died of a stroke, that she now had his things. Frank didn't interrupt.

"I'm trying to find his family. And someone broke into my apartment yesterday. I..."

Frank shook his head. "Okay, Phoebe, slow down. I'm afraid you've lost me. Broke in? Who would have done such a thing? And why?"

"I don't know," Phoebe admitted. "All I know is, someone has been in here. Twice."

"Twice? When? Are you certain?"

She sighed. "The first time was yesterday, while I was at work. I came home and the minute I walked through the door I knew someone had been in here. It was obvious. Nothing was actually taken, though, at least not that I can see."

"And they left this mess?"

"No," she said, surprised by the defensive, protective tone in her voice. "That happened during the night. Yesterday there wasn't any kind of mess. I knew they'd been here, though. I could just feel it. There were little things out of place. And my garbage had been emptied. Someone had been here. And then last night, while I was sleeping," she went on, her arm sweeping the room, "This happened."

To her relief, Frank didn't seem to think she was crazy. At least, she didn't think so.

“What do you think they were looking for?” Frank asked, his voice gentle.

Phoebe pursed her lips. This was it, she thought. To trust or not to trust? She looked into Frank’s pale blue eyes, crinkled with age, brimming with warmth and concern. Finally, she stood and walked to the couch to retrieve her bag. “I think they were looking for these,” she said, pulling the stack of letters from her backpack.

Frank waited.

“They’re letters,” Phoebe went on. “And newspaper clippings. And some kind of notes from a psychiatrist. I’ve only gone through a few of them so far. They belonged to Simon, my friend who died. Like I said, I...I’ve been looking through them, trying to find a clue to where Simon’s family is, so he can have a decent funeral.”

“And have you found anything?”

“Not yet. At least, nothing that I can use to identify Simon’s family. But what I have found is that clearly, Simon wound up in the hospital at some point. And I can see from the psychiatrist’s notes that he was on Clozapine and Clonazepam, and his doctor was considering electroconvulsive therapy.”

“So, he was suffering from mental illness, then?”

“It certainly appears so.”

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that ECT procedures are reserved for severe cases of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, and usually only when all other treatment options have been exhausted. Did you know your friend was afflicted in this way?”

“Well, yes,” Phoebe said. “I mean, everyone at the shelter knew there was something not quite right about Simon. I guess I just didn’t know it was this bad.”

It was obvious to most people at the shelter that Simon had problems, though other than Catherine, Phoebe doubted whether anyone suspected just how deeply disturbed he appeared to be. But, his letters pointed to serious mental illness, not to mention the treatment notes he kept in the box.

"When I read the first letter, it was a pretty good indication that Simon was suffering from severe paranoia, to say the least," Phoebe said.

Frank nodded.

"But...I talked to one of his friends at the shelter. Jeremy? He mentioned something that surprised me."

Phoebe relayed what Jeremy had told her, about the incident that he'd heard had landed Simon in the hospital. "Other than that, though, I'd never heard anything before that would make me think of him as violent. In fact, he..." She stopped. How much could she tell Frank, she wondered? Then, she made a decision. No. Absolutely not. She wouldn't, couldn't talk about that night. The night Simon saved her from those men, those horrible men who attacked her in the park. She let out an involuntary shudder.

"It's okay," Frank said. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't feel comfortable sharing. But you said your friend was dead." He cocked his head. "What happened, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A stroke, like I said. Well, that's what they tell me, anyway."

Her hand flew to her mouth. A stroke? What if it wasn't a stroke after all? Her mind raced. She thought about the letters, the wild accusations Simon made. Once again, Amos's words echoed in her head. *Just because you're crazy, it doesn't mean they're not after you.* Eyes wide, she stared at her friend across the table.

Oh my God. That's it!

"What is it? Phoebe? Are you all right?"

"I just realized something," she whispered. "But I don't want you to think I'm crazy."

Frank smiled and shook his head, then reached out and patted her hand.

"No one's saying you're crazy, Phoebe. What are you thinking? I want you to know, you can tell me anything. And I promise, it won't leave this building."

Phoebe hesitated for just a moment, deciding. Then her shoulders sagged in relief. It would feel good to tell someone, to confide in someone. And for some reason she couldn't quite put her finger on, Phoebe was beginning to suspect that someone wouldn't be Catherine. Maybe it was the look of kindness on Frank's face. Maybe it was just all too much for her to deal with on her own. Whatever it was, in that moment, Phoebe came to a decision. If she couldn't trust Frank, who could she trust? Hands shaking, she passed him the stack of letters. "I think Simon was murdered," Phoebe whispered. "And I think whoever did it might be trying to get me, too."

Frank uncrossed his legs, then crossed them again. He smiled, looked Phoebe in the eye, and said: "I think it's time you tell me everything, my dear."

Sucking in a breath, Phoebe hugged herself tightly, then exhaled. *Maybe he's right*, she thought.

Maybe it's time to let it all out.

## Chapter Ten: Phoebe

The night Phoebe Adams was raped was in the fall of her third year working as a therapist in the outpatient psychiatric services unit at St. Luke's Hospital in Milwaukee. Quite possibly, she was nearly killed, too, and not in some pathetic date-rape scenario by one of the scrawny, overconfident lawyer types she and her coworkers tended to meet on Match.com but by three – yes, three – men wearing woolen ski masks that covered their faces but could not conceal their foul, snarling mouths or their cold, gray eyes. What happened to Phoebe was something that happened to characters in books, or in movies. Later, she thought, it was something that might have happened in one of the predictable detective stories her mother used to read during the long, hot summers they spent at the lake house. It was the kind of thing that one presumes only happens to other women in other cities, to women who are forever wrecked in the aftermath.

She was out for a run on the wooded path that snaked its way along Milwaukee's glittering lakefront, a space that was once a haven for the drug-addled and the homeless. But that was long before the city invested millions in the east side cleanup and revitalization, a long-term and relatively recent economic development plan that brought young professionals in droves to the nearby high rises and condos that now peppered parts of the neighborhood. To Phoebe, those sleek high rises looked out of place; she preferred the line of Victorians, the older homes that remained, though she knew she was in the minority on that subject. Unlike so many people in the neighborhood Phoebe did not find the lakefront a frightening place, even before the dazzling new buildings and renovations that had transformed the area from the crime-riddled neighborhood it had once been. Milwaukee was home for her, had been for most of her life, except for her years spent at Saint Mary's in Winona and then in Madison, where she'd finished up her education before moving back home to the city. The thought of moving elsewhere was never considered.



No, Phoebe always knew she'd return to the city where she was raised, choosing to work in the very hospital where she'd been born. Where both she and Amos had been born. Where he had died, just like the rest of her family.

Despite her occasional panic attacks at home, Phoebe was never afraid of running alone and was never afraid to walk down even the sketchiest streets of the city. She never carried pepper spray or some tiny pink handgun, carefully concealed in a purse. Instead, she walked with purpose, her head held high, even in her old neighborhood at 49th and Sherman, along the pathways of Sherman Park where the riots were held in the 60s, and then again a few years past, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. She loved to run past the bungalows of her youth, hearing the catcalls from the men, both young and old, who sat smoking fat cigarettes and drinking warm 40s concealed in brown paper bags on the porches of their homes, day in and day out.

Only once had there been cause for alarm when someone passing by on a bike had pushed her, or veered into her path--maybe a drunk man, or a person angry with the world. She had flown in eerie slow motion through the air, thinking, *this is going to hurt*, and landed in a heap next to a brick wall. Her cheek had been badly grazed and her running jacket ripped. Her face had felt puffy and sore for a week. But that was the only time. Usually she simply laughed, ignored them, or flipped them off, depending on her mood.

It happened somewhere around 11 on a Thursday night, the third night in a row that Phoebe had taken to the streets when sleep wouldn't come. She lay on her crisp, 600 thread count sheets and pulled her thick, down comforter up under her chin, willing her thoughts away. Resisting the urge to take another look at the clock, to think about how tired she'd be in the morning. She stared at the ceiling, counting the tiles above. There were 120. She knew, because

she'd counted them about a million times before. The counting calmed her, helped lull her into relaxation, even on the worst nights when she couldn't stop her mind from racing.

For some inexplicable reason, she'd been suffering from what she hoped wasn't turning into chronic insomnia. For weeks, she had been struggling with sleep, and it had been getting progressively worse. Still, she refused to take the sleeping pill her doctor had prescribed, after she'd come to him for help. She didn't like the way they made her feel in the morning - so slow, so sluggish. And with a big day ahead, starting with a big staff meeting at the hospital, she couldn't afford to feel that way.

Consequently, on that night, she'd been lying in bed, counting the ceiling tiles yet again, willing her eyes to grow heavy, contemplating a glass of wine. Instead of the wine Phoebe opted, like she had so many nights before, to pull on her jogging shorts, a pair of well-worn running shoes and a bright green hoodie with reflective tape meant for nighttime visibility and headed for the door.

Once outside the Victorian where she rented the top floor apartment, she scrolled through her favorite playlists on her phone, picked one --- a mix of classic rock, her father's favorites, seemed just about right. Led Zeppelin, early Van Halen, The Who, a little Alan Parsons Project thrown in for good measure. She stuffed earbuds in her ears and took off, taking in the scents of the city and the wet grass left behind by the rains that had passed through just an hour before. She passed Maharaja, her favorite Indian restaurant, taking in the spicy aroma that surrounded it. She breathed in the smell of exhaust, a constant stench that lingered in the air no matter how far from the freeway she ran, along with the acrid scent of urine and trash in the alleyway she passed before reaching the lakefront path. This was the time of night she loved, when the city lights rippled on the lake and the chaos of the daytime seemed far away. The path itself was an oasis.

Somehow, it gave the illusion of country life even when living in the heart of the city, and it was deliciously underused, especially at night. The skies were clear after the rain, with a nearly full moon highlighting the red-gold maple leaves still clinging to the branches in the last gasps of autumn. It was a beautiful evening.

After the attack, of course, Phoebe's memories of the lakefront trail elicited a darker, vastly different feel. After, when she recalled the path, the leaves, the pavement, the moon on the water, she would think not of the beauty, but only of the danger they concealed. She would think of the bruises on her body that turned purple, then orange, before fading to yellow, the same yellow as the leaves that were scattered on the ground beneath her. After, she would think that the great canopy of leaves from the trees – those leaves she had once found so exquisite – only shielded too much of the view and made the woods too thick to truly be beautiful. Even many years after, when she would be fighting her way to sleep, she would think of those branches not as delicate boughs but as skeletal fingers that threatened to grip her and not let go.

But that night, Before, Phoebe had no indication, no prickling sixth sense, warning her that danger lie just ahead.

She was nearing the end of the trail, getting ready to loop back toward her apartment when it happened. David Lee Roth had just stopped singing and she had just pulled the earbuds from her ears when the van emerged from the darkness. It was white, an older model, badly dented and speckled with rust. A conversion van with few windows, the kind either driven by people who needed tools to make a living or who used it for some kind of darker intention. As it passed, Phoebe shoved the ear buds in her pocket and felt a shiver run down her spine, but she shook it off.

Then, a few yards in front of her path, the van stopped.

Phoebe slowed her pace to a walk, watching the red brake lights in front of her. She realized the van was effectively blocking the path that would have led her out of the park to safety and freedom. And at that moment, even Phoebe knew enough to be scared.

Anyone would have been. Anyone in Phoebe's position would have felt the hairs rise up on the back of her neck, would have felt the urge to turn and run the other way.

Before she could dart into the woods, three men emerged from the van, their faces covered by cheap black ski masks pulled down over their eyes. In the darkness, there were no distinguishing features Phoebe could see, no telltale tattoos of dragons or naked women or prison gang signs for her to later describe to the detectives who asked her question after question while she lay battered and broken in the hospital bed.

They wore dark clothes, she would remember. They wore masks. They had bloodshot eyes; cold, bloodshot eyes. A flash of hooded sweatshirt, a smear of paint on a construction boot, the color of the skin on their hands. But despite their crude disguises, the three men - one burly, two thin - could not hide their sickness, their depravity, their unfathomable hatred toward her. The moment she saw the masks she ran, sprinting as fast as she could toward the end of the path. She fumbled in her jacket for her phone, but it slipped from her grasp and fell to the pavement below, cracking the screen. Then, a violent push from behind knocked her to her knees. After she hit the ground the fat one dragged her by her ankles into the brush. She felt her jacket tear, felt the scrape of the pavement against her shoulder blades. Then came the unmistakable scent of urine, which Phoebe dimly realized came from between her own two legs.

The fat one pulled down her shorts, tore her sweatshirt, then her t-shirt to expose her pale skin beneath. She felt the wind on her bare chest, felt a gloved hand press hard on her mouth.

They called her a whore. Fucking whore, stupid whore. Dead whore. Dead fucking stupid whore. All while they took turns, all while they punched her in the face and savagely ripped at her clothes. One spat in her face. It went on, for what felt like hours but was probably only about five minutes. She closed her eyes, tried to block out the pain while she waited for them to finish, but none of them could. And this, too, only added to their outrage.

When it was finally over, the fat one kicked her in the back with his black steel- toe boot, again and again. She heard the snap of one rib, then two. Blood poured from her mouth, from her ears, from between her legs until she couldn't feel anything anymore. On and on, the fat one kicked her until she heard the crack of her collarbone, an injury that would take nearly three months to heal and still, years later, would ache when the weather was damp.

When the shot rang out, Phoebe waited to feel the bullet enter her body, waited for her life to run out. But instead she heard first the sound of running feet, then the rumble of the van starting up. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the headlights of the van as it backed up, speeding toward her, instead of away. For one terrifying moment, Phoebe was sure they were going to drive right over her legs, one final fuck you, one final humiliation, but with a burst of adrenaline she lifted both legs, tucking her knees into her chest, just in time. The van spun out, kicking up gravel and dirt that landed in her eyes and into the blood that pooled beneath her in the moonlight.

When she finally realized they had gone, she threw up.

At first, when Phoebe felt the hand touch her hair, she flinched, until she looked into the weathered face of a man, and in a fleeting moment of clarity realized the stranger was not one of the three madmen who had fled in their rape van and vanished into the lights of the city. Bleeding and filthy, she sobbed like a little girl while the stranger, who was nearly as filthy as

she was, found her cracked phone lying on the pavement and called 911. In a quiet voice he told her help was on the way, then continued to stroke her hair and murmur soothing sounds, words she could not quite make out, as they waited together for the paramedics to arrive. Later, at the hospital, she would learn that the stranger's name was Simon, that he was a homeless man who carried a gun he claimed to have picked up years ago after winning a game of five card stud with some strangers in Colorado. He told police that when he heard Phoebe scream, he came running. And when he saw what was happening to the girl with the red hair he shot a single bullet into the air that frightened her attackers enough to send them fleeing.

It was Simon, too, who had memorized the license plate of the van, an important clue the police used to identify her assailants. DNA from the scene also helped, but that took months. One of the men, the fat one, had been watching her for weeks, Phoebe would learn later, keeping track of her usual route as she ran night after night during that period of insomnia. She sometimes wondered why she had never noticed him, but would then imagine him crouching in the bushes, touching himself as she ran past, oblivious to his malicious intent, not knowing the danger was growing by the day.

The tall one, Phoebe learned, had done this before. Probably, he had done it more than once or twice. As it was, he had served time for rape in Texas before moving north to get a job washing windows with his cousin, the thin one, who of the three looked the least likely to have committed such a crime, though of course he had. It was the tall one, the Texas one, who made a run for it when the police arrived at his doorstep.

She didn't remember any of it. She only knew what they told her, much later.

## Chapter Eleven: Phoebe

Shutting the door behind Frank, Phoebe couldn't help but wonder if she'd made the right decision. Frank seemed to take her seriously and didn't outwardly show any signs of thinking she was out of her mind. He was kind, listening intently when she described what had happened to her, the feelings she had afterward, her sense of guilt and shame. But it was curious that he didn't take more of an interest in Simon's letters. He'd combed through the pile with cursory interest, at best. As a retired psychiatrist himself, he'd commented on the nature of the letters, but rather than focusing on Simon's concerns, he seemed much more intent on the psychiatrist's notes.

"It's odd, don't you think that he had copies of a portion of his treatment file?" Frank asked. "Certainly, he had a right to them. But I wonder what made him ask for them in the first place?" She considered Frank then: his collar-length white hair and neat beard; his round glasses; and behind them, sad, blue, watchful eyes. There were deep creases on his face she hadn't noticed before and the beginnings of a cold sore at one side of his mouth. Phoebe wasn't sure, but she supposed he had a point. In her own limited experience, she'd never had anyone ask for their own records, unless they were requesting a transfer to another facility or provider. And even then, they went through more traditional channels. Requested records were typically transferred directly from one provider to the next, though if a patient were to ask, they would certainly be given a copy. But even that was usually digital, not a hard copy of the file.

"Maybe he wasn't confident in his treatment protocol," she surmised. "Or maybe his paranoia had gotten to the point where he didn't trust anyone, not even his own doctors."

Frank nodded in agreement. "That happens more often than you might think. Sometimes patients, especially the ones who need the most help, can't accept what we tell them. And maybe he found it helpful to look through it all. But why he hung onto them for all these years?" He

shook his head, patted her on the shoulder. "Well, it's a mystery, that's for sure. I think you've got your work cut out for you on this one."

Frank stared at Phoebe so intently at that point that she began to feel uncomfortable, regretting having shared so much with him. After all, what did she really know about the old doctor? Not that much, really. And she didn't have a clear answer for why Simon's problems could be putting her in danger, too. It was more of a feeling. That, and the unequivocal fact that someone had broken into her apartment not once, but twice, and possibly assaulted her, given the nasty gash on her lip. When she finally cleared away the coffee and crumbs from the scones and ushered him out the door, being alone was a bit of a relief. With Frank's visit out of the way and her time off, she vowed to dig more deeply into Simon's affairs, and that included reading the rest of the letters. She made herself a cup of tea, then settled down on the futon to read.

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*Notes, Patient 5718692*

*...refusing to adhere to prescribed treatment plan. At this time does not appear to be a danger to others. Increasing signs of paranoia, irritability, and isolation. Refuses to engage in group or individual treatment at this tie. If patient shows no improvement, new measures must be considered, including possible ECT therapy.*

*From the notes of Dr. F. Skola*

*Attending psychiatrist*

*Winnebago Mental Health Institute*



*Oshkosh, Wisconsin*

## Chapter Twelve: Frank

While Phoebe sipped tea and continued reading through Simon's letters and notes in her apartment, Frank and Catherine were having a bit of a disagreement in an office on the first floor.

"I understand you're worried," Frank said, seated once again behind his desk. "But at this point, I think you need to let it all play out. Come now. Sit down. Have a scotch. It'll calm you down."

Catherine paced the room, hugging her arms tightly to her chest. Her hair was loose; she'd taken her shoes off and kicked them aside. Her brow was creased with anxiety. She felt completely out of her element at this point, out of control. Their little experiment, which is what Frank liked to call it, was spiraling. Backfiring. She shook her head. "No scotch this time. I have too much thinking to do, and I need a clear head. And calm down? That's easy for you to say," she said, unable to control her anger.

"Not so. I cared very much about Simon. You know that's true. That's why I allowed those treatment notes to be released. So there could be some understanding. Some clarity."

"And what if that clarity turned out to be a disaster? For Simon? Or for Phoebe, for that matter?"

"You don't know that."

"And neither do you!" Catherine groaned, rubbed her eyes. Frank smiled, looking at her fondly, almost as if she were his child, not his colleague.

"Let's not argue," he said. "Come now, Catherine. We both want the same thing. And at this point, Phoebe already knows that Simon is absolutely a part of the puzzle. What happened to Simon has everything to do with her. She has a right to know the truth."

Catherine sighed. She sat down on the couch, put her head in her hands. God. The truth. What really is the truth? That's always the question. And in cases of severe mental illness, truth and memory are even more complex. People with schizophrenia have a difficult time retrieving memories in context, she knew, creating significant challenges in everyday life. You can't work if you can't remember the next step in what your boss told you to do, for example. In medical school, Catherine learned that memory troubles arise from dysfunction of frontal and temporal lobe regions in the brain. Memory is most impaired when people with schizophrenia try to form relationships between items—remembering to also buy eggs, milk, and butter when buying flour to make pancakes—and that this encoding problem is accompanied by dysfunction in the brain. But people with schizophrenia also have greater difficulty encoding memories altogether. There were more traditional routes of therapy than what Frank and Catherine were discussing. Avoiding certain medications, encouraging regular exercise, treating sleep apnea, even some fatty acid supplements were all pieces of the puzzle. But these methods didn't always work. When that happened, doctors had to think outside the box. And thinking outside the box was precisely what they were doing at this very moment, the same moment that Phoebe was reaching for yet another letter in the box.

"I truly hope you're right, Frank. I truly do. Because I'm starting to think that Phoebe's life may depend on it."

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*May 15, 2018*

*Inspector General Margaret Sackmann, U.S. Department of Justice*

*Washington, D.C.*

*Dear Madam:*

*I am increasingly frustrated with the lack of response from your office. Even as I write this, the attacks on my person continue, and I don't know how much more of this I can be expected to take.*

*You should know, ma'am, that this isn't just about me anymore. This time a young woman, a relative of mine, has been hurt by your men. It's one thing to bother an useless old piece of shit like me. But there's no excuse for hurting that girl with the red hair.*

*I want to tell you, I have a plan in place. If anything happens to me, well, you'll be sorry. I've left plenty of evidence behind. And if anything more happens to that girl, well, I'll hold you personally responsible. In fact, I don't know if I can be expected not to retaliate.*

*I don't know that you grasp the seriousness of this situation.*

*The ball is in your court, ma'am. Choose your next move wisely, or you're certain to regret it. I can promise you that.*

*I will be waiting for your reply.*

*Sincerely,*

*Simon Bertatto*

## Chapter Thirteen: Phoebe

Holy shit! This is it, Phoebe thought. Finally, a mention of the attack! But what on earth did Simon mean about being related?

Phoebe allowed herself a moment's thought about her family. About her brother. About Simon. Was it possible? Maybe there really was a connection. Pursing her lips, she wracked her brain, trying to remember her family history. Outside of her parents and Amos, they didn't really have anyone. Her dad was an only child, the son of a policeman, a man who had died before Phoebe was born. She never knew any of her grandparents. She knew her mother had a brother, but she knew little about him. He never visited, and Mama never discussed him. She knew he'd served in the army, in combat and all her mother would say is that he came back "different." But then, war changes people. One of the women who lived in her old building had a husband who served in Desert Storm, she remembered. After three tours, he came back profoundly changed, but refused all offers of help. One day, he just disappeared. Went out for a beer and never came back. His wife, who had quietly moved from the couple's home and into the apartment below Phoebe's in the yellow Victorian, had shared few details about their years together after his return from combat, but Phoebe knew it had been bad. Bad enough that she often had bruises she tried unsuccessfully to cover with makeup. Bad enough that she was visibly relieved when he disappeared, perhaps even more so when his body washed ashore a week later.

Her mind racing, Phoebe sat on the bed, pulled her legs to her chest and hugged them tightly. What was her uncle's name? David? Daniel? No, was something that started with a B, she thought. Brian? Benjamin. Yes! That was it. Benjamin. His last name would have been McCarthy, same as her mother's maiden name.

It hit her. Was Simon really Benjamin? Could that be possible? She opened up her laptop and went back to the search engines. This time, entering the name Benjamin McCarthy into NexisLexis. A string of results immediately popped up on her screen. But Benjamin McCarthy was, apparently, a common enough name that sifting through the results would be an impossible task. There had to be an easier way.

Probably, she realized. She had to think! She tried the court system website. Now, this looked a bit more promising. Several Benjamin McCarthys were listed, either with criminal records, divorces, custody suits or small claims action against them. Scanning the columns, she saw two possible candidates in her search. The first one had three divorces in the system (three!), but she dismissed him easily when she found his profile on Facebook. That guy was definitely not a Desert Storm veteran and was definitely not Simon. He was a high-priced lawyer in Madison, had gone straight from high school to university and then law school at Marquette.

Nope. Not him.

The second possibility was a little more interesting. This Benjamin McCarthy had a record. And a long one, at that. The first conviction was for marijuana possession, a Milwaukee County case in which he was put on probation. But from there, McCarthy's crimes escalated rapidly. Assault. Criminal trespassing. Battery. Burglary. Robbery. And murder.

Phoebe turned to Newspapers.com. A cursory search turned up the story she was looking for. On April 14, 1999, the story said, Benjamin McCarthy called 911 shortly after 11:30 a.m., telling an emergency dispatcher "he had just killed his girlfriend and needed to be arrested by the police." That same day, police found the body of 23-year-old Deana Kraus, who had been stabbed to death at her home on Edgewood Drive. McCarthy was charged with first-degree intentional homicide, a charge that carries a mandatory sentence of life in prison. A judge

ordered him held on a \$100,000 cash bond. Somehow, he paid the bond. And he'd been on the run ever since.

It was impossible to tell from the grainy, black and white photo in the Milwaukee Sentinel story whether the young man pictured was actually Simon. Frankly, with his weathered face and enormous beard, it was hard to even know how old Simon really was. It was like that with a lot of the people who drifted in and out of the shelter. They often looked much older than their true age, with all they'd endured. But, Phoebe had to admit, it was a good possibility that the two men were one and the same. In fact, the young man in the photo looked an awful lot like her brother. Amos.

The room began to spin. She took a deep breath, then steadied herself. No, she thought. *I will not panic. I will not...*

She gulped in huge breaths to calm herself and, after a moment, she picked up the next item in the shoebox. It was a letter, written in the same scrawl as the others. But this one wasn't addressed to the Department of Justice. It was addressed to her. To Phoebe.

## Chapter Fourteen: Simon

*Dear Phoebe:*

*If you're reading this letter, that means I'm likely dead. I know the men in the black coats are after me, they have been for years now and it's only a matter of time before they find me. You probably think I'm crazy, and maybe I am. But remember? Just because you're crazy, it doesn't mean they aren't after you.*

*I don't know how much you remember about the night those men hurt you. Hopefully, you don't remember much of it. I don't know how much you remember about what happened after, either. But here's what you ought to know. You aren't responsible for any of it, so don't let your mind go there. Just don't. Okay?*

*Here's what you need to know. I wanted to tell you for a very long time, but I wasn't ever really sure just how you'd take it. But here it is. The truth is, I'd been watching you for a while, back at your apartment. Now, I know what you're thinking, and trust me, it's not that. It wasn't in a weird, pervert sort of way. I don't want you to think that. You just reminded me of someone, someone good, back in the years when I still had a family. You seemed nice. Sad, maybe. But nice. I watched for you to come out of your pretty yellow house, I did. And I watched you start your run, like you always did. Then I saw the van. And something, maybe some sixth sense, who knows? Something told me that whoever was inside that van was up to no good. Turns out I was right.*

*I know I didn't get to you in time to stop them from hurting you. I wish I had. I wish it with all my heart. But I did make sure they'd never hurt you again. I'm writing this to you so that if the police ever come asking, you have proof that you didn't do it. You didn't kill those men. I*



*did. And Simon isn't my real name, something you might've guessed by now, if you've made it this far.*

*One of them I recognized from a shithole on the west side where an old buddy of mine used to tend bar. He was kind of a regular, back then, and I figured he'd be back at some point. All I needed to do was watch and wait. And when I found him, he led me to the rest of them. And, let's just say, they weren't so tough when they had a gun pointed in their faces. I made the fat one tie the other two up, then I tied the fat one up myself. I made them kneel. They cried. Begged. But you'd have been proud of me, Phoebe. I didn't flinch. I showed them exactly the same amount of mercy they showed you, which was none whatsoever, those motherfuckers. And then, the double tap, nice and clean. Just like daddy taught me.*

*That's how you put a bad dog down, he always said. And he was right.*

*I want you to have a good life. I want you to forget those men. They don't make you who you are. And forget me too, because I've been a lost cause for years, so my being gone isn't going to make an ounce of difference on this earth, not to you or not to anyone else. You hear me?*

*Other than that, I just want you to be careful who you trust. Not everyone is as good as you, and there are people in this world who won't understand that what's done is done, and I can't undo it now.*

*Yours,*

*Amos*

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*Notes, Patient 5718692*

*... increasing signs of paranoia. Shows no interest in other patients or socializing in the dayroom. No signs of auditory hallucinations but has significant memory gaps and continues to*

*deny key events. Speech is rapid and intense and shows signs of increasing irritability. Denies hearing voices. Appears unwilling to focus on treatment.*

*From the notes of Dr. F. Skola*

*Attending psychiatrist*

*Winnebago Mental Health Institute*

*Oshkosh, Wisconsin*

## Chapter Fifteen: Catherine

Three days had passed since she'd last seen Phoebe, and Catherine was starting to wonder if giving her the shoe box had been a serious lapse in judgment. Initially, she thought that giving Phoebe such a project would be good for her. But now, she wasn't so sure. Sipping a mug of tea, she stared out the window. When did it come to this? She never should have let Frank talk her into it, that she realized now. But it was too late now. They'd just have to proceed. Proceed, and hope for the best. A knock startled her, and she turned around to see Kevin standing in the doorway with a slim package in his hand.

"This arrived for Phoebe today," he said, placing the package on Catherine's desk. "Do you want me to take it up to her?" Catherine considered for a moment, then shook her head. "No. I'll do it. I wanted to check on her, anyway."

"Well, yeah. We've all been wondering. Where's she been? No one has seen her in days." Catherine gave her best, most reassuring smile and squared her shoulders.

"She's working some things out," she said. "I'm sure she's fine. But I do know she's been waiting for this, so I'll go ahead and run them up to her."

"All right. Tell her we miss her. If she needs anything...."

"I'll tell her."

Kevin had a secret crush on Phoebe. Everyone knew it. But fraternizing was strictly forbidden, and Phoebe, like most everyone working or living at the shelter, had enough to deal with without any kind of romantic entanglement making things even more difficult. Catherine rose from her seat, picked up the package, and straightened her shoulders. She was determined not to let Phoebe see the stress she was under, the weight she'd been carrying. No. That was the

last thing Phoebe needed right now. She needed Catherine to be strong. Open. To help her untangle the mysteries that plagued her. To work through it.

Before leaving her office, Catherine fought the urge to open the envelope. Her finger slid under the flap, but then she changed her mind. She certainly was curious what images the photos from the shoe box would contain, though she had a guess. Her only hope was that they would help, not hurt, the woman upstairs who was so desperately seeking the answers to so very many questions.

## Chapter Sixteen: Phoebe

Simon's last letter fluttered to the floor. Phoebe stood immobile in the middle of the room. Her feet were anchored to the checkerboard tile. Sweat poured from her forehead, trickled between her breasts, down the curve of her back. She heard the knock at the door but could not respond. Her mouth opened but no sound would come out. The panic was crawling up her spine, a feeling that was all too familiar, and had been for years. She'd first felt it in high school, after a disastrous Saturday in April, the night of Phoebe's senior prom. Nick Halsley had picked her up at six o'clock, dressed in a rumpled rented tuxedo, carrying a corsage for her pink gown. She'd been surprised when he asked her to be his date; the two hadn't had much interaction in high school and if Nick ever gave any indication of being interested in Phoebe, she'd certainly never noticed it. He was tall and burly, a fullback on the football team who had previously dated a popular cheerleader, though that ended in drama and tears some months earlier. Her initial reaction was to politely decline the invitation, but to her surprise she found herself opening her mouth and saying "Yes."

On the night of the prom after being ushered through the front door and after watching Phoebe descend the stairs, her hair in a carefully arranged waterfall style she'd mimicked from the pages of a teen magazine, Nick fumbled with the flowers and the fabric near her chest while Phoebe stood clutching the sides of her dress. The fact that he was completely inept with flowers somehow endeared this boy to her, and she felt a sudden and quite unexpected surge of warmth, almost daring to hope that the evening wouldn't be the disaster she feared. After fumbling with the pins under her mother's watchful eye, he finally managed to arrange the corsage on Phoebe's dress, but not before the needle grazed across her skin, leaving a thin red line on her breastbone. She smiled. "It's okay," she reassured him. "The flowers are nice. Thank you."

At the dance, things did not get easier. Nick, abandoning Phoebe the moment they entered the gym, sipped smuggled vodka in a corner with a group of fellow football players while Phoebe picked at avocado toast and sat watching the couples who clung to one another on the parquet floor, all the while wondering why on earth she had agreed to come. She wondered, too, why Nick had even bothered to ask her. She was a wallflower, a social outcast and always had been. No one had even asked her on a date before, not ever. Nick was the opposite, a popular boy who was quick with a smile and handsome in his own way, with his expertly mussed brown hair and a dimple in his cheek. He ran with a fast crowd and usually dated cheerleaders, not bookish types like Phoebe.

At the end of the night, when the deejay announced he had time for one more song, Phoebe was making her way to the women's room when she felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Nick, who, she was surprised to note, did not appear as drunk as she suspected he was. "Dance?" he asked, leading Phoebe to the middle of the dance floor without waiting for an answer. The voice of Adele, singing the words to a song inspired by an incident in which she punched a former boyfriend in the face, drifted above their heads as Nick pulled Phoebe tighter. She lifted her arms to circle his neck, closed her eyes and swayed to the beat, breathing in his scent.

Afterward, Nick took her to the park, a quiet neighborhood park near her house. It was unlit, private. A place to be alone. Phoebe expected this, not because she knew Nick very well at all but because this is what boys do. In the light of the moon, she looked at his face, his grinning, self-satisfied face, that big stupid dough-boy face, and it made her so angry that she wanted to tell him cruel things. That he would be a better person if he didn't drink the vodka.

Or if he owned a dictionary.

Or if he knew more multisyllabic words, which she knew was petty and shitty.

She felt Nick crush himself against her, felt his hardness, blunt and rigid, pressing into her belly. It surprised her, how solid he was. Like a broom handle, she thought. He leaned in for a kiss but all her attention was on those few square inches, that obscene pressure. She felt his hands run over her back, pulling her even closer. But before their lips could touch Phoebe found herself shoving him, pushing him with such force she fell to the ground herself, ripping a hole in the top layer of her gown.

"Phoebe!" Nick hissed. "What are you doing? Get up!"

She began to cry. Big, wet tears streaked her mascara; snot ran from her nose. She gulped for air, willing herself to open her mouth and explain, tell him that it was a reflex, that she didn't really mind, that she maybe even wanted to feel him against her, but the worlds refused to come. He pulled her to her feet and walked her home without speaking. By the time Phoebe slammed the door behind her he was already halfway down the steps. Inside, where she prayed her mother wasn't waiting up for her, Phoebe pressed her back to the door and slid, landing with a thump on the floor, next to a pile of shoes. Her hair had come unpinned on one side. She'd lost her purse somewhere along the way. There was a run in her stockings. How did this night end so badly, she wondered? "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, so sorry," she muttered, just as her mother descended the steps, eyes wide with worry. She pressed her hands flat on the floor, trying to fight off the feeling that she was dying, that she was a ghost flying above, that she was outside of her body, watching the scene unfold.

Her mother knew right away what was happening. "You're having a panic attack," she said, and Phoebe simply nodded, wide-eyed, unable to speak. The two sat together for what seemed like an hour, Annabelle cradling Phoebe's head in her lap, stroking her hair and encouraging her to just breathe, to calm herself. Finally, she pulled Phoebe to her feet and led her

upstairs, undressed her, and put her to bed, then warmed milk on the stove and dabbed a cold washcloth on her forehead. "It's okay, it's all okay," Mama whispered, in her quiet, sweet, hushed, motherly voice. Phoebe curled into a fetal position, holding her knees to her chest while her mother ran fingers through her hair. "You're not dying, you're not going to die."

They stayed that way until the episode passed and Phoebe began breathing again.

"Don't tell anyone," she said to her mother. "Please?"

They locked eyes. Her mother nodded, then squeezed Phoebe's hand before leaving to fetch another washcloth. Now, they had another secret.

Phoebe thought about Amos then, and about their father, and closed her eyes.

A knock at the door brought her back to the present, where the revelation felt like a punch.

"Phoebe? Are you in there?"

Another knock. Phoebe stood, unmoving, unsure of what to do or what to say.

"Phoebe. It's me, Catherine. Can you hear me?"

Phoebe willed herself to say something, anything. But try as she might, she was frozen in place, her feet rooted firmly to the floor.

A key turned in the lock. Catherine walked through the door.

Phoebe stared at her friend. There was something different about Catherine today, Phoebe thought, the way her face creased about the eyes and mouth in a way that suggests not time, nor age, but rather emotion, experience, heartache, wisdom. It's one of those things you can recognize in a blink but can never quite point out specifically.



Catherine cocked her head to the side and looked at Phoebe. "Honey?" she called, her voice softer this time. "Phoebe? Are you all right? Can you tell me what's going on? What's happening?" She crept closer, then reached out and touched Phoebe's elbow.

Phoebe looked down at the letter that lay at her feet. Following her eyes Catherine bent over, picked up the letter and sucked in a breath. "Oh, Phoebe," Catherine said. She led her to the futon and guided her to her seat before clasping her hand. "It's going to be all right," she whispered. "I promise."

Phoebe began to cry; big, wet tears that splashed onto her pajama pants and soaked immediately through to her skin beneath. She gulped for air, struggling to breathe, while Catherine rubbed her back. "My brother," Phoebe managed, in an anguished cry. "Simon," she panted, shoving the crumpled letter into Catherine's chest.

Catherine, still rubbing Phoebe's back with one hand, used her other hand to pull a cell phone from her pocket, then made a quick phone call. Less than a minute later Frank walked through the door, pulled up a chair, and sat before them as Phoebe rocked back and forth, her arms clasped tightly around her, her fingers white. "Phoebe," he said, gently pulling her arms from their position and taking her hands in his. "It's me. Dr. Frank. It's time we had a talk about all of this."

Catherine rose and walked to the countertop, pulled out the electric kettle and filled it with water for tea. Phoebe looked at Frank, then at Catherine, then back at Frank. Wariness set in, then suspicion. "Neither of you seem very surprised about this," she said, caution in her tone.

"I'll explain," Frank promised, handing her Catherine's package. "But first, I need you to look at something." Hands shaking, Phoebe tore the envelope open and pulled out the stack of photos, now developed, from the roll that had been secreted in the shoe box. She sucked in a

breath when she saw the first photo. It was her mother, Annabelle, standing in the doorway of their old house, waving. The next photo was of her brother. In it, Amos was hamming it up on their mother's ukulele, pretending to know what he was doing. He looked...happy.

There were pictures of the lake, of the station wagon. Of the cat with no name. Of the Christmas tree they'd decorated and draped with hand-strung popcorn and cranberries the year before Amos disappeared. There was a picture of her parents, holding hands at the dinner table, the remains of a beef roast in the foreground. Every snapshot brought a jolt of memory to Phoebe, who thrust them at Frank with a scowl on her face. "You see?" she hissed. "Proof! These were in Simon's shoe box. These are pictures of my family. Our family! The house. Our mother! The cat. The car. Even Amos! They're all there!" Tears poured down her face. Her body shook. Catherine set down the tea and sat, putting her arms around Phoebe.

"Phoebe," she said. "Look at me. These photos. You've looked through them all. You've told us what you see in them. But can you tell us what you don't see?"

She shook her head. "I don't understand. What do you mean, what I don't see? What don't I see?"

"Yourself," Frank said, not unkindly. "You don't see yourself. Do you understand? You took these pictures, Phoebe. They're yours." She shook her head. Covered her ears, blocking the sound of their voices. No! That can't be true.

But they were in Simon's box! Amos's box. They were in the box with the letters. Don't you see? She wanted to scream. That they couldn't see this for themselves made her so angry she began to shake so uncontrollably she thought her teeth would begin to rattle. "Amos was alive until just last week," Phoebe yelled. "He left these for me!"

"No, Phoebe," Catherine said gently. "Amos died. he died a long time ago, in that station wagon in the water. You and your mother watched his body being carried from the lake."

"No!"

"Simon is not Amos because there is no Simon," Catherine went on in a steady voice. "Simon did not exist. Or, rather, he existed only in your mind." Phoebe shook her head so violently her vision blurred. This was not--could not--be true. Or could it?

Catherine sat down once again and began to explain. "When you ran away last week, we were frantic. We sent the medics after you. It took them an hour to track you down. They found you at the Mission, on the doorstep, talking to yourself about the men in the black coats."

Phoebe stared, her eyes fiery. "I don't believe you! You're a liar," she snarled. Catherine went on. "They sedated you, brought you back here. Ever since then, you've been convinced that Simon was real. This was the only way we could think of to convince you that Simon isn't a person. He's a part of you, Phoebe. Simon is you."

Phoebe shook her head once again. "Come on, Phoebe," Catherine said. "Let me show you what else is in the box."

She took the box from the bed and laid its contents out on the table next to the photos. Along with the letters were several newspaper clippings. Catherine handed her the first. Hands shaking, Phoebe took the clipping and began to read.

***Jogger Assaulted In East Side Neighborhood***

*By Jeff Starck, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Staff Writer*

*MILWAUKEE --- Police are searching for three suspects in the brutal attack of a 28-year-old woman Thursday on the city's east side.*

*The alleged victim, whose name has not been released, remains hospitalized at Froedert Memorial Hospital and is listed in critical but stable condition as of Friday morning.*

*Cell phone data shows the woman was out for a late night run when she was accosted on the path along the Lake Michigan shore. A witness told police she heard a gunshot and saw three men fleeing the scene in a white panel van with no visible license plate. The witness called 911 and waited with the victim until medics arrived at the scene. Police say the call came in at about 11:45 p.m.*

*Investigators say a firearm at the scene was registered to the late father of the alleged victim.*

*During the assault, the suspects disarmed the woman, but she eventually turned the gun on one of the men, shooting him in the leg. DNA analysis of blood taken from the scene is expected to take weeks, or even months, due to a backlog in the Wisconsin State Crime Lab, officials said.*

*The alleged victim suffered four cracked ribs, a cracked sternum, and had surgery early Friday to relieve bleeding in the brain, hospital officials said.*

*No description of the suspects is currently available.*

She exhaled. Beads of perspiration dripped down the small of her back. Why was it so hot in here? "That doesn't make sense," Phoebe said. "That isn't what happened. I didn't have a gun. I didn't shoot. It was Simon. He fired into the air!"

Catherine shook her head. "No, Phoebe. I'm afraid not. And there's one more news clipping you need to read."

Phoebe shook her head. How much more could she possibly take? She covered her ears, squeezed her eyes shut. Catherine gently pulled her hands from her ears. "Look at me," she said. "I'm not here to hurt you. You've been wanting to know the truth about what happened, right?"

This is your chance, Phoebe. And Dr. Frank and I, we're both here to help you. We're not going to let anything happen to you."

She held out the clipping.

***Judge Accepts Insanity Plea For Vigilante Sexual Assault Victim***

*By Jeff Starck*

*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Staff Writer*

*MILWAUKEE, Wis. --- The sexual assault victim who systematically hunted down her attackers and shot them execution style in a west-side alley has been found not guilty of homicide by reason of mental disease or defect.*

*Phoebe Adams, 29, could be released from custody as early as next year, if a judge agrees she is restored to mental competence. Police say Adams was out for a late night run Oct. 25 when she was viciously assaulted by three strangers. Adams, who was critically injured in the attack, spent nearly three months in the hospital after the attack.*

*The sole witness to the attack was unable to provide police with a description of the suspects.*

*Investigators eventually identified one of the suspects, 34-year-old Randall P. Cunningham, through DNA evidence at the scene. Cunningham had previously served five years in prison for a sexual assault committed in San Antonio, according to court records. Through an investigation of phone records, police identified Cunningham's cousin, 32-year-old Phillip Rice, and the cousins' colleague, 35-year-old Steven Stezenski, as the remaining two suspects in the case.*

*All three suspects were found shot to death in July over a three-day span in an alley on West Clarke Street, behind Master Lock's north side facility. All three men were bound with rope and died of bullet wounds to the head, according to police reports. When investigators informed Adams of the suspects' deaths, she confessed to shooting all three men.*

*Police describe the shootings as acts of revenge for a despicable act.*

*"Our hearts go out to Ms. Adams," said Milwaukee Police Lt. Chuck Fitzke, in a prepared statement. "Phoebe has been through a terrible ordeal and has had a difficult life. But we cannot condone vigilante justice in any form.*

*Adams faced three counts of first degree intentional homicide in the case, which drew nationwide publicity. But when Adams appeared in court, her attorney, Dennis LaFond, entered a plea of not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect on her behalf. During an initial appearance held July 6 Adams replied only "yes" when asked by Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Michael Metropulos if she understood the potential penalties for the charges she faced. Metropulos ordered Adams to have a mental health exam. As a result of that exam, she was found not guilty of the crime by reason of mental disease or defect and was committed to a secure mental health facility for an "indefinite period of time," with mental health exams every six months. She will remain at the Winnebago Mental Health Institute in Oshkosh until she is declared fit to re-enter society.*

*Adams, a former psychiatrist at St. Luke's Hospital in Milwaukee, has had a life of tragedy, her attorney stated. She is the daughter of the late James "Jimmy" Adams, a retired Milwaukee Police officer who died nearly 20 years ago in an accidental shooting at his home. Five years later Adams' older brother, Amos Adams, died in a tragic crash when the vehicle he was driving plunged into Lake Michigan. Her mother, Annabelle Adams, committed suicide last year after a brief battle with cancer, leaving Phoebe Adams with no immediate family.*

Phoebe crumpled the news clipping in her hand. Then, everything went black.

## Epilogue

When Phoebe opened her eyes, she saw nothing but white light. She blinked once, then again. For a moment, she couldn't place where she was. She looked down, smoothed the quilt that covered her body. And then, she remembered.

It had taken a long time to come to terms with what had happened, the horrible knowledge that she took the lives of three men, as terrible as those men were. But the mental illness that had held her so firmly in its grip did not have to break her. Of that, she was sure.

She stretched, then stood in the sunlight that streaked through her apartment window. It was hard to believe that six months had passed since she left the Winnebago facility where Catherine and Doctor Frank worked with her to avoid ECT and come up with a care plan that would allow for her conditional release. She was determined to make the most of this, her fresh start. As was her habit, she peeked underneath the bed, reassuring herself that the shoebox was still there, right where she'd left it. At first, she considered throwing it away. But at the last minute, she found she couldn't do it. Part of her worried that someday she might need it again. Leaving the box in its hiding place she tidied up the bed, then walked to the kitchen for her usual morning ritual: pills, coffee, toast, and the morning crossword puzzle.

After showering she put the breakfast things into the dishwasher, wiped the crumbs off the table and left the house. She nodded to her new neighbor before pushing through the front door of her apartment building and boarding the bus that would take her to her new job as a teaching assistant at the community college. It was a job she liked, and one she looked forward to each morning. The professors knew about her condition, but they were patient and kind. They made her feel safe. Sitting next to the window on the bus, she looked out at the changing leaves,

the colors of the city she still loved and had no wish to leave. The past felt thin and vague, a shadow in her mind.

About two miles before her scheduled stop, the bus ground to a halt to load more passengers. That's when she looked up and saw him: the wild boy from the woods. He stood before her, staring, gripping the hand rail with filthy, dirt encrusted fingers, his old army jacket too big and tattered. Leaves were stuck in his hair. Only one of his cheeks was smeared with blood this time, rather than two. But she'd recognize his eyes, his pointed chin, anywhere. She took a deep breath.

"You're not real," Phoebe said, pointing to him and squeezing her eyes shut. When she opened them once again, the wild boy was gone. She nearly sagged in relief. But then, she straightened her shoulders and smiled, ignoring the side glances of the passengers around her.

After class, she stopped at the Indian restaurant for a takeout order of Hyderabadi Dum Biryani, then briefly lingered in front of the liquor store contemplating a bottle of wine before rejecting the idea and returning to her apartment to eat. A text appeared on the screen of her iPhone: Catherine, checking on her as usual. "All okay?" the text read. "Never better," Phoebe texted back.

After dinner, she pulled on her running tights, a fluorescent green jacket, and her running shoes, then scrolled through her playlist to find the music that matched her mood for the day before heading out for her nightly run. David Lee Roth's voice sounding in her ears, her feet graced the pavement as she wound through the streets and then along the riverfront path, circling the park bench where she'd once imagined Simon had sat, breathing in the scents of the city.

And she was not afraid.



## **Curriculum Vitae**

Shereen Siewert was born on September 6, 1968 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Frank J. Skola and Patricia Fae (Adams) Skola. She grew up in Wausau, Wisconsin and graduated from Rhinelander High School in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, in the spring of 1986. She worked as a local radio broadcaster before enrolling at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism in the spring of 2014. She entered the University of Texas at El Paso Creative Writing program in the fall of 2015.

While pursuing a master's degree she worked as an investigative reporter for the Wausau Daily Herald and the USA Today Network, based in Wisconsin, before becoming news editor of The City Pages in Wausau, Wis. In March 2017, she left traditional media to launch her own nonprofit, online news website, Wausau Pilot and Review, and remains editor and publisher as of the fall of 2019. She is also the host of "Route 51," a regional weekly talk show on Wisconsin Public Radio. She was the online student representative at Creative Writing faculty department meetings in the 2017-2018 academic year.

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