

PART I



1

The call comes in just after five in the morning.

I am immediately on guard because everyone knows that nothing good ever happens this early. Not with a phone call, anyway. You never get word that a wealthy relative has passed and is leaving you his inheritance before 9 A.M. It's fortunate, then, that I'm already awake and on my second cup of coffee, so I'm at least moderately prepared.

I've just come back from my walk, where I leaned over the edge of the sea wall and contemplated water that is calm and gray, just like the city itself at this time of year. As usual, I had tried to see the warm, dark current that flows from Japan and turns into the North Pacific, tempering the cold and spreading its tepid fingers to the coastline. And, as usual, it refused me the pleasure.

Vancouver. Some people say it's beautiful here, but they've never idled in the spaces that I call home. They've never been down to Hastings Street, filled with its needles and junkies. They've never considered the gray sky and the gray water for months on end as rain pours down in an unsuccessful attempt at cleansing. Then comes summer and it is so hot that you can roast marshmallows on the fires that burn through the forests in the province. Summer right on the coast is nice enough, but still several months away when my phone rings.

I stare at the unfamiliar number on my call display and, after a moment of hesitation, decline to take it. Several seconds later, it rings again. I'm intrigued. I answer, if only because I've always admired persistence in a caller.

'Hello?'

There's a long pause after the person on the other end explains in a hoarse voice why he is calling. The pause becomes awkward. I can tell the caller is fighting himself, wanting to say more but knowing this is a bad idea. No one wants to talk to a rambler over the phone. Especially one you've never met before. I imagine the caller sweating on the other end. Maybe his hands have gone clammy. The phone slips from his grasp and I hear it clatter on the ground. He swears for a full thirty seconds as he struggles to pick it back up and regain his composure.

'You still there? Did you hear what I said?' he asks.

'Yeah, I heard,' I say, when the silence has become excruciating. 'I'll be there.' Then I hang up.

I've never heard the name Everett Walsh before, but according to him I may know something about a missing girl. He does not tell me what, though. I consider not meeting him but he sounds desperate and if there's one thing that draws me more than persistence, it's desperation.

Even though finding people is part of what I do for a living, what would I possibly know about a missing girl to warrant a call at this hour?

His desperation is so fresh and raw I can almost taste it.

2

It's a brisk winter morning in Vancouver. I would have said wet, but that's implied when you're talking about the west coast at this time of year. In this city, when in doubt, err on the side of precipitation. I sit at a bus shelter across the street for an hour before the meeting, even though my ancient, beat-up Corolla is parked in the lot. People in cars tend to avert their eyes from those waiting at bus stops, unless the light is red and they have nowhere else to look. Since there is no traffic light here, I feel invisible. From my perch, I can see the café and the parking lot clearly. The café is brightly lit at the counter, but dim everywhere else. So this is to be a clandestine rendezvous. Fine with me. I can do clandestine with the best of them. But can this Everett Walsh?

The bus pulls up and I wave the driver away. He moves off with a grunt and the bus belches exhaust fumes into my face as it leaves.

Just off the busy Kingsway, the café is a cross between a coffee shop and a diner, surrounded by auto mechanic outfits and fast food joints. Out of all the dives he could choose from between his Kerrisdale home and the seedier side of Vancouver that I live in, he decided on one that has a pretty red canopy and fading yellow trim. Something in between. Maybe he is hoping to make both of us comfortable.

I can tell that the coffee here is terrible, but the muffins are not too bad. People exiting with takeout cups in their hands peel back the lid, gulp, and then grimace. Those with muffins never bat an eye. They shrug and move on, seeing the muffins as money well spent.

Twenty minutes before go time, a sporty dark Audi circles the parking lot. A well-groomed couple, both wearing sunglasses, peer into the shop. They don't see who they're looking for and start to bicker. The Audi tears away from the lot and returns five minutes later.

They park near the door and the man gets out, sans sunglasses, and makes his way into the shop. He is short and square with a thick neck. A baseball cap covers thinning brown hair. He wears a dark jacket and his shoulders beneath it are hunched with defeat. The woman gets out, flipping her long red hair over her shoulder, and follows him inside. She doesn't care who sees her. She's beautiful and used to being looked at. She does, however, keep her sunglasses on because it adds to her air of mystery and sex appeal. It's very effective. The middle-aged man at the counter ogles her casually as he pours her coffee. He doesn't look at the man beside her, except to take his money.

Then they wait. Both in their forties, nicely groomed, well dressed. They don't speak to each other, but the silence between them is not comfortable. If there was once chemistry between these two, years of marriage have completely eroded it. The man is still interested, but the woman ignores all of his attempts to catch her attention and stares out the window to the entrance of the parking lot. They both sip at the coffee with no outward reaction. Either they're not paying attention or their taste buds are in shock.

I study them for the remaining time left on the clock. They are obviously not a couple that go for coffee together. They wouldn't be here if they didn't have to be, so the situation must be bad. I have a terrible feeling about this, but I have to admit that I'm curious, too. From a web search earlier this morning, I know that they are both architects but work for different firms. They seem innocent enough so I make my way around the back and through the side door. They were not expecting this and are surprised when I appear in front of their table, muffin in hand.

The woman stares at my worn jeans and oversize cardigan with the pulled threads exposed. The man, however, is arrested by my face. My skin that is not light or dark, just something muddy and in between. High cheekbones. Stubborn chin. What he seems most taken with are my eyes. This is not unusual for those who bother

to look. I am unremarkable without them factored in. They are so dark that pupil and iris are virtually indistinguishable, fringed by long lashes that might make them pretty until you take a closer look, and then you will see that they absorb all the light around them and refuse to budge an inch. When looking into them, if you ever do, you will suddenly remember appointments that you should be making and previous engagements that you've forgotten to put in your calendar.

'Everett Walsh?' I pull up a chair next to their table and sit. I look only at the man. The woman needs a bit more time to get over my entrance.

'What? Oh, yes. I am. That's, um, me.' He wipes a bead of sweat under his cap and then discards the cap entirely. The woman frowns at him in disgust. 'This is my wife, Lynn.'

'Pleasure,' she says, her cool, clear voice indicating that it's anything but. They don't recognize me from the bus shelter and were probably not aware that there had been a bus shelter at all. These are not people accustomed to searching out public transportation. Lucky them. Public transportation in Vancouver is best described as a clusterfuck, to be avoided at all costs unless you're poor or your luxury vehicle is in the shop.

Seeing that Lynn has decided to be unhelpful, Everett takes over. 'Thank you for coming. I mean, I know this is out of the blue and you don't know us, but . . .'

'Who referred you to me?' Somebody must have for them to have my phone number.

Everett blinks. 'What? Nobody. We hired someone to find you.'

Now it's my turn to be confused. It's usually the other way around. 'What are you talking about?'

'Our daughter is missing,' Lynn says.

Everett glances over at her. 'I told her that on the phone, honey.'

Lynn turns to him. Years of history pass between them in the look that they share now. '*Her* daughter is missing. Did you tell her that?'

I stare at her with my mouth hanging slightly open. This is the bomb that she expects it to be. For a brief moment, all of the air is sucked out of the room and an unexpected tension arises. Lynn gives me her full attention now and even though she doesn't smile, I can tell that behind the sunglasses, she's pleased with herself.

Everett clears his throat. Opens his mouth to speak, then closes it. We gawp at each other, him and me, until he musters up the courage to try again. 'She means the baby you put up for adoption fifteen years ago.' He's concerned about my reaction, which up until this point has been a blank expression. Now I'm tempted to check if there's a floor underneath me or if I have, as I suspect, fallen down some kind of nightmarish rabbit hole.

He pulls a photograph from his wallet and sets it in front of me.

A chubby teenage girl with golden skin stares back at me. Though the eyes in the photograph are deeper set and upturned at the edges, there is no denying that they are mine. Almost black, and fathomless. She has dark hair that falls to her shoulders, darker than mine, and an adorable dimple on her chin. I look past the cataloging of her features to get a sense of what's underneath. What she's hiding. After a moment, I see that she is smiling with her mouth, but the smile doesn't reach her eyes. She is lying to the camera, pretending that she's happy.

'This is Bonnie. Bronwyn, actually, but we just call her Bonnie.' There is pride in Everett's voice. Love, too.

I glance at Lynn. She refuses to look at the picture. I munch on my muffin, gathering thoughts that have slipped through the creases in the wooden table and scattered on the floor.

Everett can't read my expression, but now that he has started he can't stop. 'She went missing almost two weeks ago. We thought she'd gone camping with friends, but—'

'But she lied and stole all the money we keep in the house. She also stole my bank card and withdrew a thousand dollars before I realized it and deactivated the card.' Lynn removes her sunglasses

and I see shadows under her bloodshot eyes. I begin to understand what is happening here. Lynn is at the end of her rope. The child she'd jumped through hoops in order to adopt has turned into a teenager and she is looking for the receipt in order to return to sender. 'She's done this twice before, but never for this long.'

'The police have been no help at all,' Everett interjects. 'They've put out an alert but because she took the money, they assume she wanted to have stayed away this long. They've stopped looking. I don't know if they ever started. I think one of them talked to some of her teachers at school, but got nowhere. She's a good kid—'

Lynn scoffs. 'They're calling her a chronic runaway or something like that, Everett. She stole from us.'

'She is a good kid!' Everett insists. 'But she's been a handful lately,' he concedes. 'New friends. Staying out late. Been hanging out with these hip-hop dance people. We think she's been drinking and doing drugs. Yes, she has run away before this, but she always came back! Just not . . . not this time. Why? Why wouldn't she have come back home by now?' Emotion overwhelms him. He covers his face with his hands. It's a sad thing to see a grown man cry, but I refuse to look away. It is in these moments that you can see whether someone is being genuine. Fake tears are easy to spot, so to go that route, it is best to be committed. He is. This is a man in pain.

Lynn stares at Everett for a few moments, then turns back to me. No hand on shoulder. No there, there, honey. 'On her computer we found some search history. She knew that we were against it, but she was looking for her biological parents online. Through those . . . what do you call them?'

She looks at me like I should have the answer ready. I shrug.

Lynn's expression does not waver. 'Those sites that reunite adopted children with their biological parents. She's a minor so she can't sign up for the official ones, but we've heard there are other unsanctioned sites out there. Online communities of people looking

for each other. We're hoping that she hasn't contacted you, for her own sake, but if she has . . .'

Everett collects himself long enough to send Lynn an annoyed glance. 'Please excuse my wife. We just want to know where our daughter is.'

It's easy to read between the lines. What they mean is that I'm a bad influence, even though I've only met the child once and she couldn't possibly remember making my acquaintance. I see now that they blame me for her dabbling in alcohol and drugs. That in their minds, she has somehow tossed away their nurture and made a beeline for my nature; she has run off to be with her true family and together we will live a wasteful, booze-soaked life. That we will laugh at them from over the tops of our forties.

There is nothing more demeaning than having decent people look down on you. I don't dare let this show, though, and take small comfort in the evidence that their lives seem to be unraveling quicker than mine. I see now why Everett was so desperate to meet with me.

I'm his last resort.

'A few years ago she was obsessed with finding her biological parents. She used to talk to her friends about it, then she stopped and we thought she was over it. But we realized that she found the adoption papers. Her birth certificate. You're a hard woman to find; we had to hire an investigator to help, but we thought maybe Bonnie was able to get in touch somehow.'

I frown at him. 'That doesn't make any sense. Legally you're supposed to get an amended birth certificate. My name isn't supposed to be anywhere near it.'

'We know,' Everett replies. 'There was a mix-up and we were given the wrong one. We got the amended certificate after and were asked to destroy the original.'

Lynn does not look at Everett, but her next words are directed at him. 'But Everett kept it.'

'I'm sorry,' he says. 'Okay? How many times do I have to say it? I'm so very sorry.'

'I haven't heard from her,' I tell them, after a minute. The muffin is almost gone and both the front and side doors are looking mighty inviting right about now. In the end, my curiosity gets the better of me. 'What happened the day she went missing?'

Lynn shrugs. 'She said she was going camping.'

'Yes, I heard that. Where were you?'

An exchange of glances. They're not comfortable with their own parenting abilities put under scrutiny. 'We were working,' Lynn tells me. Her eyes narrow and her voice is several decibels louder than she intended. A few café patrons glance over at us before returning to their terrible coffee.

'Maybe she's been in touch with her biological father?' Everett says, attempting to resume control of the conversation. He smiles apologetically for Lynn. This is something he appears to be quite used to.

Fat chance of that. I shake my head. 'Can't help you there.' I get up and leave the table, my departure as abrupt as my arrival. It occurs to me to apologize, but I've never understood the Canadian impulse to say sorry when you've done nothing wrong.

As I head for the door, I hear Lynn hiss, 'Great idea, Ev. Just brilliant.'

There are footsteps behind me as I cross the parking lot. I tense as they close in. It's Everett. He shoves the photograph into my hands. 'Nora? That didn't go the way I wanted it to. Lynn . . . She's under a lot of strain at work right now and things have been difficult between her and Bonnie for quite some time.'

Again, his expression is apologetic. He expects me to say, There, there. It's all right. But, like Lynn, I ignore his blatant plea for comfort and understanding. He stiffens and a flush grows from his collar and spreads up his neck. I try to return the photo but he steps just out of reach.

‘Keep it. But, please, if you hear from her call us. I wrote our contact information on the back of the picture. She’s . . . she’s a good kid. Despite everything. I just want her to come back home.’

This is the second time he’s said that. He is trying desperately to believe it. A good kid. I wonder what he means by that. She sounds wretched. ‘Why did you hire a PI to look for me and not her?’ I ask. And then the answer occurs to me. ‘Because you thought she came to me, so I’m your starting point.’

‘Our end point, too,’ he says, turning away. ‘She’s gotten pretty good at running away by now. She’s left us with nothing else to go with.’

As I walk to my rusty Corolla, I try to fight the panic rising inside me. Everett Walsh has gone out of his way to contact the biological mother of his missing daughter, even though there is no evidence that points to me being in touch with the child I gave up all those years ago. She has been looking for me, but so what? Many children look for their biological parents, with no luck. It’s not uncommon. He gives me a photo, even though I haven’t requested one. He tries to impress me with her worthiness. He’s not lying, but his attempts at manipulation are becoming clear. Her history as a runaway has jeopardized any serious investigation into her disappearance and he is grasping at straws.

That he’s managed to find me is not a stretch. My name is on her original birth papers, clear as day. But how the hell does he know that I help look for missing people for a living?

And does he know that his wife was lying about where she was the day their daughter went missing?

3

The girl sits on the rocks and contemplates her next steps. She thinks she has a concussion but does not know how to tell for sure. She is bleeding from her head, her arms, her wrists. There is a dull pain at the back of her hip, but she cannot remember ever being struck there. Her ears are full of the sound of waves crashing on the rocks, threatening to sweep her out into the ocean. She is so light-headed that she knows she wouldn't be able to fight it. The water has a power of its own, a power that scares her.

She must get moving.

Soon they will think she is dead and stop searching for her. She holds on to this thought like a talisman and huddles deeper into herself. The salt in the air bites at her eyes. She flicks her tongue to catch a droplet of seawater on her face and realizes that it is a tear.

4

The intersection of Hastings and Columbia is located in the worst neighborhood in Vancouver, the downtown east side. The city is about to embark on a rejuvenation effort targeted at the area, but for the moment it remains what it has been for most of its existence: a shithole. Vancouver real estate prices being what they are, however, it's the only affordable option for a die-hard downtowner looking to open his own private investigation outfit alongside the love of his life, an award-winning journalist who rents out some office space to freelance, write his book, and work on his syndicated news blog.

I am the receptionist and research assistant for both. Neither can afford to pay me on his own, but in this new cost-sharing economy, they have found a way to make it work. So have I, for that matter. For the past three years, I've been living beneath the firm for free in order to save a down payment for a place of my own. But my bosses don't know that. They think it's just a basement with old records and a broom closet and they've never bothered to check. Sometimes they comment on my Corolla, always parked in the back lot, but they don't know that it's mine. They assume it belongs to the marketing services guy down the hall, and I've never bothered to correct them.

Just down the street, a street filled with junkies, dealers, pimps, and whores, is the hipster haven of Gastown. Gastown is the buffer between the rich and the poor, the people who can afford to live in the nice parts of the city and the others, like me, who squat for free and take whatever we can get. The boss men live in Kitsilano, which is close to the beach but far enough away from the stench of their office environs to make them happy. They are Sebastian

Crow, a slope-shouldered divorce survivor, and Leo Krushnik, the most flamboyant homosexual I have ever met. The two are wildly in love, though less on the wild side for Seb – he’s just in love. A brilliant foreign correspondent by all accounts, Seb reconciled himself with his homosexuality late in life, at age forty-three, after two ulcers due to post-traumatic stress of covering the war in Kosovo and during marriage to a lawyer. His passion for his wife’s much younger private investigator and forensic accountant could not be tamed, however, so he left everything to help Leo open up his own investigation firm, which he now works out of. His own journalistic skills contribute every now and then, but it’s mostly Leo’s business.

Which brings me to a lesson I take to heart: do not ever open a business with your lover. Work and home are now inextricably linked and Seb’s only respite is alone at his desk or alone in the bar across the street when Leo is otherwise engaged.

‘Ah, there’s our expert bullshit detector,’ Leo says as I come in.

I’m late today. This is unusual. I’m never late – living in the basement has its perks – but my meeting with the Walshes has thrown me off my game. Instead of a bringing in a new client, I’ve arrived thirty minutes past nine with nothing to show for it and no desire to offer up an explanation. On the other side of the reception area, Leo peers at me from behind his desk. With his designer spectacles and professionally tailored business casual wardrobe, he doesn’t meet your average expectations of a private investigator, which is part of why he’s so good at it. People usually underestimate him, which is a mistake.

Seb opens the door to his office and stares at me from the doorway. His own drugstore reading glasses are taped up on one side and perched midway down the bridge of his nose. ‘Everything okay, Nora?’ Seb says quietly. My tardiness has upset his routine. He has had to make his own coffee this morning and is most likely wondering why.

‘Yup.’ I sit behind my desk. The red light on the office phone is not blinking. We have not had any calls since yesterday. ‘Sorry I’m late.’

‘You can be late more often,’ Leo intercedes. ‘Seriously, Nora, you need to get a life. Go out a little. Invest in your wardrobe.’

All of these three things are unlikely to occur and Leo knows it. He’s had this one-sided conversation many times. My lack of exciting life stories to tell, along with my unfortunate office wardrobe consisting of two pairs of frayed jeans and three ancient oversize cardigans that cover the holes in my T-shirts, are points of contention for him.

Just as he is about to embark on yet another explanation about the importance of good quality basics and signature pieces, the front door to our suite flies open and hits the opposite wall with a bang. There is a collective wince in the room. A slim blond woman strides in and surveys the place like she owns it. She ignores both Seb and me. Her focus is on Leo. It’s our most regular client. ‘I have work for you.’

‘Melissa—’ Leo begins.

She narrows her eyes at him. ‘You’re supporting the father of my child. How is he supposed to make child payments for Jonas if he’s broke? God knows that book money of his is gone and his next one is past deadline while he fiddles with a goddamn blog. Who makes money off of blogs these days?’ She announces this to the room, reminding everyone yet again of how well informed she is. Seb’s ex-wife knows that she can’t play the alimony card because she makes more money than him. So she uses their son, conceived as a last-ditch attempt to save their marriage, as leverage to come in here and find out if he really is happier with another man.

She drops the file on my desk. ‘We need to find this guy by next week.’

Seb sighs from his office. ‘Really, I don’t need your handouts. We’ve talked about this.’

‘Well, I do,’ says Leo. His smile has a false edge to it. ‘If your firm wants to hire me, by all means. I am the best private investigation operation in town. Here, take a pamphlet.’ He holds out a slickly designed foldout sheet that he invested close to two hundred dollars in last year as a rebranding effort. ‘Please, tell your friends.’

Everyone in the room knows that Melissa, a prominent defense attorney, has no friends. She registers the dig and stares hard at Leo, hostile and bewildered. She doesn’t see how this cheery, overweight Polish émigré could be more attractive than her. She doesn’t understand how the private investigator her firm used from time to time, the one she hired to follow her husband when he grew distant, could end up seducing her husband instead of just investigating privately like he was supposed to do. She doesn’t see how her husband turned gay right under her nose.

It all becomes too much for her. She goes to the door. ‘Next week,’ she says to the room.

And then she’s gone. There is a collective sigh of relief as the door is shut with as much force as it was opened.

Seb glares at Leo and slams his door. Leo busies himself with some paperwork at his desk. Everyone pretends not to be humiliated that we need as many cases as we can get because it has been two years since Seb’s moderately successful book on the genocide in Kosovo was published and the money, mostly spent on their townhouse and the divorce, is gone.

Still, a case is a case and we can’t afford to be picky.

The folder, of course, is for me.

I locate the witnesses in this operation and I sit in on the interviews to discern whether or not they’re lying. To see through the bullshit to what people are trying to hide. That is my specialty. Leo offered to pay for me to go to a special training program in lie detecting, just to make it official, but I know he doesn’t have the money for it and I’ve never been one for having my knowledge on

the radar, so to speak. Sometimes your greatest strength should be kept under wraps. I've learned that lesson the hard way.

I open the folder and stare at the glossy image of Harrison Baichwal smiling earnestly at the camera. My first impression is of heavy brows and neatly trimmed beard that covers most of his lined face. Behind him is the sea wall and overhead the sky is a perfect blue with not a cloud in sight. The man in the photo has no idea what his future holds and how darkness can just seep into any sunny picture, casting shadows. Harrison Baichwal has witnessed a murder, given a flimsy statement in which he claims not to have seen anything out of the ordinary leading up to the events in question, and then has disappeared.

I push all thoughts of missing progeny from my head and get to work. But still. Still it nags at the back of my mind, creating horrific scenarios of what happens to young women who don't come home. I don't know this girl from Eve, but I can't lie to myself anymore. She still occupies a space in my consciousness. In all these years, I've never allowed myself to think about just how much real estate she actually owns there.

5

People will lie about anything, anytime. When you ask them pointed questions, they will lie then, too. The important thing about catching a liar, even the most seasoned, is to ask the right question. Be specific. ‘Where were you last night, baby?’ is open-ended. An amateur bullshitter can coast on dodging questions like these for years. Always better to say, ‘Were you fucking the cashier from the gas station yesterday between 9:37 P.M. and 10:18 P.M.?’

An amateur bullshitter will spill the beans almost immediately when presented with a question like that. A seasoned liar will realize that the game may not be over just yet. Perhaps your best friend Nancy saw someone who *looked* like him go into a motel room with someone who *looked* like the cashier from the gas station. It was night. Night is dark. There was no moon out the previous evening and he chose a room farthest from the streetlights. There may or may not be photographic evidence. The liar will always try to see the possibility of an out and rebut with questions of his own to discern how much you actually know. Also, can this be proven in court, if voiding a prenuptial agreement is at stake? A very good liar will turn it back on you and make you feel bad about your lack of trust and your jaded worldview.

There are still many outs to consider when a liar is confronted, but as these thoughts fly through the liar’s head, his body will give evidence that he is thinking them. A flicker of the eye. A twitch at his lips. Tapping fingers or an involuntary clench of the jaw. An almost imperceptible shift in tone. That’s how you know he’s a dirtbag.

And he could easily be a she. Young, old, and everything in between. Lying is a perfectly normal part of the human experience.

Everyone does it and most people do it well enough to fool those closest to them.

Well, everyone except for me. Lying doesn't come easily to me. Even the most mundane bullshitting is not an option. Generally I prefer to avoid the truth rather than seek to alter it.

I stare at the photo of Harrison Baichwal and wonder what it is about his statement that makes him so uncomfortable that he doesn't want to defend it in court.

Leo isn't stupid. He knows I'm unqualified for this work. That's why the most serious surveillance assignments in our operation go to Stevie Warsame, a young Somali ex-cop from Alberta. Stevie is a very committed freelance contractor and only takes one case at a time, for a substantial chunk of the fees. His thoroughness is astounding; his pace, not so much. You cannot rush what is unfolding, he is in the habit of reminding me whenever he deigns to stop by the office, usually to pick up a check. You can watch and listen and only after you have the full picture can you act.

Leo quickly realized that subsisting only on legal investigations, the boring stuff, the research, the assignments he did well, was not an option for a new firm. He needed a surveillance guy who had access to a team, if required, and Stevie fit the bill. He is good and, more important, available. Because he knows how easy it is to monitor people, he is secretive to the point of obfuscation. His previous employers could not deal with him. He has no personality or people skills. When on assignment, you can't find him to save your life, or his, or the client's.

That's why the smaller jobs go to me. I don't have Stevie's résumé, but I usually get the job done.

As the receptionist and shared research assistant, it's a lot to ask, but it was through these witness locations and taking notes at interviews that the bosses discovered the peculiar skill I have. It's unscientific, though there are plenty out there who claim a scientific knowledge in this field. It's neither Dr Watson nor Sherlock

Holmes. Elementary, maybe, and something a little more than observational. There's a feeling I get when a lie is told. A disgust that creeps up when a liar is doing her best to muck things up or, more likely, save her own ass. Oftentimes, I can't put my finger on it; I can only tell when I see it. And years in foster care honed this skill to an art.

Harrison Baichwal may not be a liar, but he's hiding something. A mother of two was gunned down in his convenience store and the kid whose family owned the gun is crying wolf. His wealthy parents want Melissa to rip Harrison apart on the stand, to spread doubt that it was their child in the store that day wielding a stolen weapon, but Harrison isn't playing the game. He has disappeared and the subpoena can't be served. And now I have to find him to figure out why.

6

I'm not going to lie because, like I said, I generally don't: the years after I officially became a survivor were particularly dark. There were three godawful relapses during that period and one morning, just a couple of weeks after I spiraled into the third, I heard a whisper of a sound just outside the back entrance of the office. At first I thought it was a manifestation of my hangover, but after an hour of huddling in the corner, wrapped in a blanket, I got angry. Okay, that's not true. I got paranoid, drank a beer to calm my nerves, and then got angry.

When I went out, steel pipe in hand, I found a huge ball of matted fur sniffing distastefully at a carton of spoiled chow mein I had put in the garbage the night before. The ball of fur looked at me with baleful eyes and stretched out the kinks in her long, elegant back, but made no move to beat a hasty exit when I tried to shoo her away. I've called her Whisper ever since. And that day I quit relapsing because an alcoholic is a shitty caregiver, and I know this from experience. If someone chooses you, that's a damn honor and you'd better be ready to give it your best. It's not often that you get chosen in the world. Everybody, even a mangy mutt, has options.

Whisper is a gray that exactly matches the pavement below and the clouds overhead. She roams the city with me at all hours of the day and night, and sees what others refuse to acknowledge. Although I have no special fondness for animals, it's impossible to deny that we have a kinship. The best thing about Whisper is that she's a constant reminder that at least I'm happier than one creature out there. Every day she looks at me with mournful eyes. Even

when she passes gas, it's a hint of a sound and a barely detectable smell, leaving behind only a sad trace of odor. Whatever it was that brought her to my door is her little secret, but it must have been a doozy for her to pick up and go in search of a new life in the worst part of town.

And she has proven her worth from day one. I take her with me when I'm looking for information because people walk their dogs at all hours of the day and night. It's an accepted truth of pet companionship that a dog needs exercise and the person has to make sure it happens. No one looks twice at a dog walker, especially if both the dog and the walker appear to be minding their own business. This makes Whisper the perfect cover for surveillance. She is precisely at that age when she's no longer as delightful as a puppy or as pitiful as an old dog. She's somewhere in between and doesn't attract much attention. She reminds me of me, except for her horniness.

The only downside to Whisper is that she is sex-crazed, even though the doctor at the veterinary clinic down the road assures me that she has been spayed. She is part hound, part wolf, and all nymphomaniac. Matted fur aside, I can tell from her excellent physical condition that she was once well taken care of, but I imagine that her slutty ways got her kicked out of a good home. She will gleefully hump anything that sniffs at her for longer than five seconds. She regrets it afterward and spends the following week in a depressed slump. After the hormonal high comes the self-loathing. I don't get mad at her, because I've been there.

I see her as a cautionary lesson in indulgence.

'You whore,' I say affectionately to her after each episode. Then she whines at me and puts her face in her water bowl as if she's trying to drown herself.

After Leo and Seb leave for the evening, I go to the basement and wake her up. Like me, she prefers to be out when the sun goes down.

‘We’ve got someone to find,’ I tell her. Her tail lifts as though she is thinking about wagging it and then falls back onto the floor with a thud. She gets up and goes to the door. She hates to admit it, but she loves watching people almost as much as I do.