

# SUMMER 1998

From the kitchen, Callie heard Trevor tapping his fingers on the aquarium. Her grip tightened around the spatula she was using to mix cookie dough. He was only ten years old. She thought he was being bullied at school. His father was an asshole. He was allergic to cats and terrified of dogs. Any shrink would tell you the kid was terrorizing the poor fish in a desperate bid for attention, but Callie was barely holding on by her fingernails.

*Tap-tap-tap.*

She rubbed her temples, trying to ward off a headache. “Trev, are you tapping on the aquarium like I told you not to?”

The tapping stopped. “No, ma’am.”

“Are you sure?”

*Silence.*

Callie plopped dough onto the cookie sheet. The tapping resumed like a metronome. She plopped out more rows on the three count.

*Tap-tap-plop. Tap-tap-plop.*

Callie was closing the oven door when Trevor suddenly appeared behind her like a serial killer. He threw his arms around her, saying, “I love you.”

She held onto him as tightly as he held onto her. The fist of tension loosened its grip on her skull. She kissed the top of Trevor’s head. He tasted salty from the festering heat. He was standing completely still, but his nervous energy reminded her of a coiled spring. “Do you want to lick the bowl?”

The question was answered before she could finish asking it.

He dragged a kitchen chair to the counter and made like Pooh Bear sticking his head into a honey pot.

Callie wiped the sweat from her forehead. The sun had gone down an hour ago, but the house was still broiling. The air conditioning was barely functioning. The oven had turned the kitchen into a sauna. Everything felt sticky and wet, herself and Trevor included.

She turned on the faucet. The cold water was irresistible. She splashed her face, then, to Trevor's delight, sprinkled some on the back of his neck.

Once the giggling died down, Callie adjusted the water to clean the spatula. She placed it in the drying rack beside the remnants from dinner. Two plates. Two glasses. Two forks. One knife to cut Trevor's hot dog into pieces. One teaspoon for a dollop of Worcestershire sauce mixed in with the ketchup.

Trevor handed her the bowl to wash. His lips curved up to the left when he smiled, the same way his father's did. He stood beside her at the sink, his hip pressing against her.

She asked, "Were you tapping the glass on the aquarium?"

He looked up. She caught the flash of scheming in his eyes. Exactly like his father. "You said they were starter fish. That they probably wouldn't live."

She felt a nasty response worthy of her mother press against the back of her clenched teeth—*Your grandfather's going to die, too. Should we go down to the nursing home and stick needles under his fingernails?*

Callie hadn't said the words out loud, but the spring inside of Trevor coiled even tighter. She was always unsettled by how tuned in he was to her emotions.

"Okay." She dried her hands on her shorts, nodding toward the aquarium. "We should find out their names."

He looked guarded, always afraid of being the last one to get the joke. "Fish don't have names."

"Of course they do, silly. They don't just meet each other on the first day of school and say, 'Hello, my name is Fish.'" She gently nudged him into the living room. The two bicolored blennies were swimming a nervous loop around the aquarium. She had lost Trevor's interest several times during the arduous process

of setting up the saltwater tank. The arrival of the fish had sharpened his focus to the head of a pin.

Callie's knee popped as she knelt down in front of the aquarium. The throbbing pain was more tolerable than the sight of Trevor's grimy fingerprints clouding the glass. "What about the little guy?" She pointed to the smaller of the two. "What's his name?"

Trevor's lips curved up at the left as he fought a smile. "Bait."

"Bait?"

"For when the sharks come and eat him!" Trevor burst into too-loud laughter, rolling on the floor at the hilarity.

Callie tried to rub the throb out of her knee. She glanced around the room with her usual sinking depression. The stained shag carpet had been flattened sometime in the late eighties. Streetlight lasered around the puckered edges of the orange and brown drapes. One corner of the room was taken up by a fully stocked bar with a smoky mirror behind it. Glasses hung down from a ceiling rack and four leather bar stools crowded around the L-shape of the sticky wooden top. The entire room was centered around a giant television that weighed more than Callie. The orange couch had two depressing his-and-her indentations on opposite ends. The tan club chairs had sweat stains at the backs. The arms had been burned by smoldering cigarettes.

Trevor's hand slipped inside of hers. He had picked up on her mood again.

He tried, "What about the other fish?"

She smiled as she rested her head against his. "How about . . ." She cast around for something good—Anne Chovey, Genghis Karp, Brine Austin Green. "Mr. Dar-Sea?"

Trevor wrinkled his nose. Not an Austen fan. "What time is Dad getting home?"

Buddy Waleski got home whenever he damn well got home. "Soon."

"Are the cookies ready yet?"

Callie winced her way to standing so she could follow him back into the kitchen. They watched the cookies through the oven door. "Not quite, but when you're out of your bath—"

Trevor bolted down the hallway. The bathroom door slammed.

She heard the faucet squeak. Water splattered into the tub. He started humming.

An amateur would claim victory, but Callie was no amateur. She waited a few minutes, then cracked open the bathroom door to make sure he was actually in the tub. She caught him just as he dipped his head under the water.

Still not a win—there was no soap in sight—but she was exhausted and her back ached and her knee was pinching when she walked up the hallway so all she could do was grit through the pain until she reached the bar and filled a martini glass with equal parts Sprite and Captain Morgan.

Callie limited herself to two swigs before she leaned down and checked for blinking lights under the bar. She had discovered the digital camera by accident a few months ago. The power had gone out. She'd been looking for the emergency candles when she noticed a flash out of the corner of her eye.

Callie's first thought had been—*sprained back, trick knee, and now her retina was detaching*—but the light was red, not white, and it was flashing like Rudolph's nose between two of the heavy leather stools under the bar. She had pulled them away. Watched the red light flash off the brass foot rail that stringed along the bottom.

It was a good hiding place. The front of the bar was done up in a multi-colored mosaic. Shards of mirror punctuated broken pieces of blue, green and orange tile, all of which obscured the one-inch hole cut through to the shelves in the back. She'd found the Canon digital camcorder behind a cardboard box filled with wine corks. Buddy had taped the power cord up inside the shelf to hide it, but the power had been off for hours. The battery was dying. Callie had no idea whether or not the camera had been recording. It was pointed directly at the couch.

This is what Callie had told herself: Buddy had friends over almost every weekend. They watched basketball or football or baseball and they talked bullshit and business and women, and they probably said things that gave Buddy leverage, the kind of leverage that he could later use to close a deal, and probably that's what the camera was for.

*Probably.*

She left out the Sprite on her second drink. The spiced rum burned up her throat and into her nose. Callie sneezed, catching most of it with the back of her arm. She was too tired to get a paper towel from the kitchen. She used one of the bar towels to wipe off the snot. The monogrammed crest scratched her skin. Callie looked at the logo, which summed up Buddy in a nutshell. Not the Atlanta Falcons. Not the Georgia Bulldogs. Not even Georgia Tech. Buddy Waleski had chosen to be a booster for the division two Bellwood Eagles, a high school team that went zero-to-ten last season.

Big fish/small pond.

Callie was downing the rest of the rum when Trevor came back into the living room. He wrapped his skinny arms around her again. She kissed the top of his head. He still tasted sweaty, but she had fought enough battles for the day. All she wanted now was for him to go to sleep so that she could drink away the aches and pains in her body.

They sat on the floor in front of the aquarium as they waited for the cookies to cool down. Callie told him about her first aquarium. The mistakes she had made. The responsibility and care it took to keep the fish thriving. Trevor had turned docile. She told herself it was because of the warm bath and not because of the way the light went out of his eyes every time he saw her standing behind the bar pouring herself another drink.

Callie's guilt started to dissipate as they got closer to Trevor's bedtime. She could feel him start to wind himself up as they sat at the kitchen table. The routine was familiar: An argument about how many cookies he could eat. Spilled milk. Another cookie argument. A discussion about which bed he would sleep in. A struggle to get him into his pajamas. A negotiation over how many pages she would read from his book. A kiss goodnight. Another kiss goodnight. A request for a glass of water. Not that glass, this glass. Not this water, that water. Screaming. Crying. More battling. More negotiating. Promises for tomorrow—games, the zoo, a visit to the water park. And so on and so on until she eventually, finally, found herself standing alone behind the bar again.

She stopped herself from rushing to open the bottle like a

desperate drunk. Her hands were shaking. She watched them tremor in the silence of the dingy room. More than anything else, she associated the room with Buddy. The air was stifling. Smoke from thousands of cigarettes and cigarillos had stained the low ceiling. Even the spiderwebs in the corners were orangey-brown. She never took her shoes off inside the house because the feel of the sticky carpet cupping her feet made her stomach turn.

Callie slowly twisted the cap off the bottle of rum. The spices tickled at her nose again. Her mouth started to water from anticipation. She could feel the numbing effects just from thinking about the third drink, not the last drink, the drink that would help her shoulders relax, her back stop spasming, her knee stop throbbing.

The kitchen door popped open. Buddy coughed, the phlegm tight in his throat. He threw his briefcase onto the counter. Kicked Trevor's chair back under the table. Snatched up a handful of cookies. Held his cigarillo in one hand as he chewed with his mouth open. Callie could practically hear the crumbs pinging off the table, bouncing against his scuffed shoes, scattering across the linoleum, tiny cymbals clanging together, because everywhere Buddy went, there was *noise, noise, noise*.

He finally noticed her. She had that early feeling of being glad to see him, of expecting him to envelop her in his arms and make her feel special again. Then more crumbs dropped from his mouth. "Pour me one, baby doll."

She filled a glass with Scotch and soda. The stink of his cigarillo wafted across the room. Black & Mild. She had never seen him without a box sticking out of his shirt pocket.

Buddy was finishing the last two cookies as he pounded his way toward the bar. Heavy footsteps creaking the floors. Crumbs on the carpet. Crumbs on his wrinkled, sweat-stained work shirt. Trapped in the stubble of his five o'clock shadow.

Buddy was six-three when he stood up straight, which was never. His skin was perpetually red. He had more hair than most men his age, a little bit of it starting to gray. He worked out, but only with weights, so he looked more gorilla than man—short-waisted, with arms so muscled that they wouldn't go flat to his sides. Callie seldom saw his hands when they weren't fisted.

Everything about him screamed *ruthless motherfucker*. People turned in the opposite direction when they saw him in the street.

If Trevor was a coiled spring, Buddy was a sledgehammer.

He dropped the cigarillo into the ashtray, slurped down the Scotch, then banged the glass down on the counter. “You have a good day, dolly?”

“Sure.” She stepped aside so he could get a refill.

“I had a great one. You know that new strip mall over on Stewart? Guess who’s gonna be doing the framing?”

“You,” Callie said, though Buddy hadn’t waited for her to answer.

“Got the down payment today. They’re pouring the foundation tomorrow. Nothing better than having cash in your pocket, right?” He belched, pounding his chest to get it out. “Fetch me some ice, will ya?”

She started to go, but his hand grabbed her ass like he was turning a doorknob.

“Lookit that tiny little thing.”

There had been a time early on when Callie had thought it was funny how obsessed he was with her petite size. He would lift her up with one arm, or marvel at his hand stretched across her back, the thumb and fingers almost touching the edges of her hip bones. He called her *little bit* and *baby girl* and *doll* and now . . .

It was just one more thing about him that annoyed her.

Callie hugged the ice bucket to her stomach as she headed toward the kitchen. She glanced at the aquarium. The blennies had calmed down. They were swimming through the bubbles from the filter. She filled the bucket with ice that smelled like Arm & Hammer baking soda and freezer-burned meat.

Buddy swiveled around in his bar stool as she made her way back toward him. He had pinched off the tip of his cigarillo and was shoving it back into the box. “God damn, little girl, I love watching your hips move. Do a spin for me.”

She felt her eyes roll again—not at him, but at herself, because a tiny, stupid, lonely part of Callie still bought into his flirting. He was honest-to-God the first person in her life who had ever made her feel truly loved. She had never before felt special, chosen,

like she was all that mattered to another human being. Buddy had made her feel safe and cared for.

But lately, all he wanted to do was fuck her.

Buddy pocketed the Black & Milds. He jammed his paw into the ice bucket. She saw dirt crescents under his fingernails.

He asked, "How's the kid?"

"Sleeping."

His hand was cupped between her legs before she caught the glint in his eye. Her knees bowed awkwardly. It was like sitting on the flat end of a shovel.

"Buddy—"

His other hand clamped around her ass, trapping her between his bulging arms. "Look at how tiny you are. I could stick you in my pocket and nobody'd ever know you were there."

She could taste cookies and Scotch and tobacco when his tongue slid into her mouth. Callie returned the kiss because pushing him away, bruising his ego, would take up so much time and end up with her back at the exact same damn place.

For all his sound and fury, Buddy was a pussy when it came to his feelings. He could beat a grown man to a pulp without blinking an eye, but with Callie, he was so raw sometimes that it made her skin crawl. She had spent hours reassuring him, coddling him, propping him up, listening to his insecurities roll in like an ocean wave scratching at the sand.

*Why was she with him? She should find someone else. She was out of his league. Too pretty. Too young. Too smart. Too classy. Why did she give a stupid brute like him the time of day? What did she see in him—no, tell him in detail, right now, what exactly was it that she liked about him? Be specific.*

He constantly told her she was beautiful. He took her to nice restaurants, upscale hotels. He bought her jewelry and expensive clothes and gave her mother cash when she was short. He would beat down any man who even thought about looking at her the wrong way. The outside world would probably think that Callie had landed like a pig in shit, but, inside, she wondered if she'd be better off if he was as cruel to her as he was to everyone else. At least then she'd have a reason to hate him. Something real that she could point to instead of his pathetic



tears soaking her shirt or the sight of him on his knees begging for her forgiveness.

“Daddy?”

Callie shuddered at the sound of Trevor’s voice. He stood in the hallway clutching his blanket.

Buddy’s hands kept Callie locked in place. “Go back to bed, son.”

“I want Mommy.”

Callie closed her eyes so she wouldn’t have to see Trevor’s face.

“Do as I say,” Buddy warned. “Now.”

She held her breath, only letting it go when she heard the slow pad of Trevor’s feet back down the hall. His bedroom door creaked on its hinges. She heard the latch click.

Callie pulled away. She walked behind the bar, started turning the labels on the bottles, wiping down the counter, pretending like she wasn’t trying to put an obstacle between them.

Buddy huffed a laugh, rubbing his arms like it wasn’t sweltering in this wretched house. “Why’s it so cold all a sudden?”

Callie said, “I should go check on him.”

“Nah.” Buddy came around the bar, blocking her exit. “Check on me first.”

Buddy guided her palm to the bulge in his pants. He moved her hand up and down, once, and she was reminded of watching him jerk the rope on the lawnmower to start the motor.

“Like that.” He repeated the motion.

Callie relented. She always relented.

“That’s good.”

Callie closed her eyes. She could smell the pinched-off tip of his cigarillo still smoldering in the ashtray. The aquarium gurgled from across the room. She tried to think of some good fish names for Trevor tomorrow.

*James Pond. Darth Baiter. Tank Sinatra.*

“Jesus, your hands are so small.” Buddy unzipped his pants. Pressed down on her shoulder. The carpet behind the bar felt wet. Her knees sucked into the shag. “You’re my little ballerina.”

Callie put her mouth on him.

“Christ.” Buddy’s grip was firm on her shoulder. “That’s good. Like that.”

Callie squeezed her eyes closed.

*Tuna Turner. Leonardo DeCarpio. Mary Kate and Ashley Ocean.*

Buddy patted her shoulder. “Come on, baby. Let’s finish on the couch.”

Callie didn’t want to go to the couch. She wanted to finish now. To go away. To be by herself. To take a breath and fill her lungs with anything but him.

“God dammit!”

Callie cringed.

He wasn’t yelling at her.

She could tell from the shift in the air that Trevor was back in the hallway. She tried to imagine what he’d seen. One of Buddy’s meaty hands gripping the counter, his hips thrusting at something underneath the bar.

“Daddy?” he asked. “Where did—”

“What did I tell you?” Buddy bellowed.

“I’m not sleepy.”

“Then go drink your medicine. Go.”

Callie looked up at Buddy. He was jamming one of his fat fingers toward the kitchen.

She heard Trevor’s chair screech across the linoleum. The back banging against the counter. The cabinet creaking open. A *tick-tick-tick* as Trevor turned the childproof cap on the NyQuil. Buddy called it his sleepy medicine. The antihistamines would knock him out for the rest of the night.

“Drink it,” Buddy ordered.

Callie thought of the delicate ripples in Trevor’s throat when he threw his head back and gulped down his milk.

“Leave it on the counter,” Buddy said. “Go back to your room.”

“But I—”

“Go back to your damn room and stay there before I beat the skin off your ass.”

Again, Callie held her breath until she heard the *click* of Trevor’s bedroom door latching closed.

“Fucking kid.”

“Buddy, maybe I should—”

She stood up just as Buddy swung back around. His elbow

accidentally caught her square in the nose. The sudden crack of breaking bones split her like a bolt of lightning. She was too stunned to even blink.

Buddy looked horrified. “Doll? Are you okay? I’m sorry, I—”

Callie’s senses toggled back on one by one. Sound rushing into her ears. Pain flooding her nerves. Vision swimming. Mouth filling with blood.

She gasped for air. Blood sucked down her throat. The room started spinning. She was going to pass out. Her knees buckled. She frantically grabbed at anything to keep from falling. The cardboard box toppled from the shelf. The back of her head popped against the floor. Wine corks hit her chest and face like fat drops of rain. She blinked up at the ceiling. She saw the bicolored fish swimming furiously in front of her eyes. She blinked again. The fish darted away. Breath swirled inside of her lungs. Her head started pounding along with her heartbeat. She wiped something off her chest. The box of Black & Mild had fallen out of Buddy’s shirt pocket, scattering the slim cigarillos across her body. She craned her neck to find him.

Callie had expected Buddy to have that apologetic puppy-dog look on his face, but he barely noticed her. He was holding the video camera in his hands. She’d accidentally pulled it off the shelf along with the box. A chunk of plastic had chipped off the corner.

He let out a low, sharp, “Shit.”

Finally, he looked at her. His eyes went shifty, the same way Trevor’s did. Caught red-handed. Desperate for a way out.

Callie’s head fell back against the carpet. She was still so disoriented. Everything she looked at pulsed along with the throb inside her skull. The glasses hanging down from the rack. The brown water stains on the ceiling. She coughed into her hand. Blood speckled her palm. She could hear Buddy moving around.

She looked up at him again. “Buddy, I already—”

Without warning, he wrenched her up by the arm. Callie’s legs struggled to stand. His elbow had smacked her harder than she’d first thought. The world had started to stutter, a record needle caught in the same rut. Callie coughed again, stumbling forward. Her entire face felt smashed open. A thick stream of blood ran

down the back of her throat. The room was swirling like a globe. Was this a concussion? It felt like a concussion.

“Buddy, I think I—”

“Shut it.” His hand clamped down hard on the back of her neck. He muscled her through the living room and into the kitchen like a misbehaving dog. Callie was too startled to fight back. His fury had always been like a flash fire, sudden and all-encompassing. Usually, she knew where it was coming from.

“Buddy, I—”

He threw her against the table. “Will you fucking shut up and listen to me?”

Callie reached back to steady herself. The entire kitchen turned sideways. She was going to throw up. She needed to get to the sink.

Buddy banged his fist on the counter. “Stop playing around, dammit!”

Callie’s hands covered her ears. His face was scarlet. He was so angry. Why was he so angry?

“I’m dead fucking serious.” Buddy’s tone had softened, but the register had a deep, ominous growl. “You need to listen to me.”

“Okay, okay. Just give me a minute.” Callie’s legs were still shaky. She lurched toward the sink. Twisted on the faucet. Waited for the water to run clear. She stuck her head under the cold stream. Her nose burned. She winced, and the pain shot straight through her face.

Buddy’s hand wrapped around the edge of the sink. He was waiting.

Callie lifted her head. The dizziness nearly sent her reeling again. She found a towel in the drawer. The rough material scratched her cheeks. She stuck it under her nose, tried to staunch the bleeding. “What is it?”

He was bouncing on the balls of his feet. “You can’t tell anybody about the camera, okay?”

The towel had already soaked through. The blood would not stop pouring from her nose, into her mouth, down her throat. Callie had never wanted so desperately to lie down in bed and close her eyes. Buddy used to know when she needed that. He used to sweep her up in his arms and carry her down the hall

and tuck her into bed and stroke her hair until she fell asleep.

“Callie, promise me. Look me in the eye and promise you won’t tell.”

Buddy’s hand was on her shoulder again, but more gently this time. The rage inside of him had started to burn itself out. He lifted her chin with his thick fingers. She felt like a Barbie he was trying to pose.

“Shit, baby. Look at your nose. Are you okay?” He grabbed a fresh towel. “I’m sorry, all right? Jesus, your beautiful little face. Are you okay?”

Callie turned back to the sink. She spat blood into the drain. Her nose felt like it was cranked between two gears. This had to be a concussion. She saw two of everything. Two globs of blood. Two faucets. Two drying racks on the counter.

“Look.” His hands gripped her arms, spinning her around and pinning her against the cabinets. “You’re gonna be okay, all right? I’ll make sure of that. But you can’t tell nobody about the camera, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, because it was always easier to agree with him.

“I’m serious, doll. Look me in the eye and promise me.” She couldn’t tell if he was worried or angry until he shook her like a rag doll. “Look at me.”

Callie could only offer him a slow blink. There was a cloud between her and everything else. “I know it was an accident.”

“Not your nose. I’m talking about the camera.” He licked his lips, his tongue darting out like a lizard’s. “You can’t make a stink about the camera, dolly. I could go to prison.”

“Prison?” The word came from nowhere, had no meaning. He might as well have said unicorn. “Why would—”

“Baby doll, please. Don’t be stupid.”

She blinked, and, like a lens twisting into focus, she could see him clearly now.

Buddy wasn’t concerned or angry or eaten up with guilt. He was terrified.

*Of what?*

Callie had known about the camera for months, but she had never let herself figure out the purpose. She thought about his

weekend parties. The cooler overflowing with beer. The air filled with smoke. The TV blaring. Drunken men chuckling and slapping each other on the back as Callie tried to get Trevor ready so they could go to a movie or the park or anything that got them both out of the house.

“I gotta—” She blew her nose into the towel. Strings of blood spiderwebbed across the white. Her mind was clearing but she could still hear ringing in her ears. He had accidentally knocked the shit out of her. Why had he been so careless?

“Look.” His fingers dug into her arms. “Listen to me, doll.”

“Stop telling me to listen. I *am* listening. I’m hearing every damn thing you say.” She coughed so hard that she had to bend over to clear it. She wiped her mouth. She looked up at him. “Are you recording your friends? Is that what the camera is for?”

“Forget the camera.” Buddy reeked of paranoia. “You got conked in the head, doll. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

*What was she missing?*

He said he was a contractor, but he didn’t have an office. He drove around all day working out of his Corvette. She knew he was a sports bookie. He was also an enforcer, muscle for hire. He always had a lot of cash on him. He always knew a guy who knew a guy. Was he recording his friends asking for favors? Were they paying him to break some knees, burn down some buildings, find some leverage that would close a deal or punish an enemy?

Callie tried to hold onto the pieces of a puzzle she couldn’t quite snap together in her head. “What’re you doing, Buddy? Are you blackmailing them?”

Buddy held his tongue between his teeth. He paused a beat too long before saying, “Yeah. That’s exactly what I do, baby. I blackmail them. That’s where the cash comes from. You can’t let on that you know. Blackmail’s a big crime. I could be sent away for the rest of my life.”

She stared into the living room, imagined it filled with his friends—the same friends every time. Some of them Callie didn’t know, but others were a part of her life and she felt guilty that she was a partial beneficiary of Buddy’s illegal scheming. Dr. Patterson, the school principal. Coach Holt from the Bellwood

Eagles. Mr. Humphrey, who sold used cars. Mr. Ganza, who manned the deli counter at the supermarket. Mr. Emmett, who worked at her dentist's office.

What had they done that was so bad? What horrible things had a coach, a car salesman, a handsy geriatric asshole for the love of Christ, done that they were stupid enough to confess to Buddy Waleski?

And why did these idiots keep coming back every weekend for football, for basketball, for baseball, for soccer, when Buddy was blackmailing them?

Why were they smoking his cigars? Swilling his beer? Burning holes in his furniture? Screaming at his TV?

*Let's finish on the couch.*

Callie's eyes followed the triangle from the one-inch hole drilled into the front of the bar, to the couch directly across from it, to the giant TV that weighed more than she did.

There was a glass shelf underneath the set.

Cable box. Cable splitter. VCR.

She had grown used to seeing the three-pronged RCA cable that hung down from the jacks on the front of the VCR. Red for the right audio channel. White for the left audio. Yellow for video. The cable threaded into one long wire that lay coiled on the carpet below the television. Not once, ever, had Callie wondered what the other end of that cable plugged into.

*Let's finish on the couch.*

"Baby girl." Buddy's desperation was sweating out of his body. "Maybe you should go home, all right? Lemme give you some money. I told you I got paid for that job tomorrow. Good to spread it around, right?"

Callie was looking at him now.

She was really looking at him.

Buddy reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. He counted off the bills like he was counting off all the ways he controlled her. "Buy yourself a new shirt, all right? Get some matching pants and shoes or whatever. Maybe a necklace? You like that necklace I gave you, right? Get another one. Or four. Be like Mr. T."

"Do you film us?" The question was out before she could

consider the kind of hell that the answer could rain down. They never made love in the bed anymore. It was always on the couch. And all those times he'd carried her back to tuck her in? It was right after they had finished on the couch. "Is that what you do, Buddy? You film yourself fucking me and you show it to your friends?"

"Don't be stupid." His tone was the same as Trevor's when he promised he wasn't tapping the glass on the aquarium. "I wouldn't do that, would I? I love you."

"You're a goddam pervert."

"Watch your nasty mouth." He wasn't screwing around with his warning. She could see exactly what was going on now—what had been going on for at least six months.

Dr. Patterson waving at her from the bleachers during pep rallies.

Coach Holt winking at her from the sidelines during football games.

Mr. Ganza smiling at Callie as he passed her mother some sliced cheese over the deli counter.

"You—" Callie's throat clenched. They had all seen her with her clothes off. The things she had done to Buddy on the couch. The things that Buddy had done to her. "I can't—"

"Callie, calm down. You're getting hysterical."

"I *am* fucking hysterical!" she screamed. "They've *seen* me, Buddy. They've *watched* me. They all know what I—what we—"

"Doll, come on."

She dropped her head into her hands, humiliated.

Dr. Patterson. Coach Holt. Mr. Ganza. They weren't mentors or fatherly figures or sweet old men. They were perverts who got off on watching Callie get screwed.

"Come on, baby," Buddy said. "You're blowing this out of proportion."

Tears streamed down her face. She could barely speak. She had loved him. She had done *everything* for him. "How could you do this to me?"

"Do what?" Buddy sounded flip. His eyes darted down to the wad of cash. "You got what you wanted."

She shook her head. She had never wanted this. She had wanted



to feel safe. To feel protected. To have someone interested in her life, her thoughts, her dreams.

“Come on, baby girl. You got your uniforms paid for, and your cheerleading camp, and your—”

“I’ll tell my mother,” she threatened. “I’ll tell her exactly what you did.”

“You think she gives a shit?” His laugh was genuine, because they both knew it was true. “As long as the cash keeps coming, your mama don’t care.”

Callie swallowed the glass that had filled her throat. “What about Linda?”

His mouth fished open like a trout’s.

“What’s your wife gonna think about you fucking her son’s fourteen-year-old babysitter for the last two years?”

She heard the hiss of air sucking past his teeth.

In all of the time Callie had been with him, Buddy had talked constantly about Callie’s *small hands*, her *tiny waist*, her *little mouth*, but he had never, ever talked about the fact that there was more than thirty years between them.

That he was a *criminal*.

“Linda’s still at the hospital, right?” Callie walked over to the phone hanging by the side door. Her fingers traced the emergency numbers that were taped onto the wall. Even as she went through the motions, Callie wondered if she could go through with the call. Linda was always so kind. The news would devastate her. There was no way Buddy would let it get that far.

Still, Callie picked up the receiver, expecting him to wail and plead and beg for her forgiveness and reaffirm his love and devotion.

He did none of this. His mouth kept trouting. He stood like a frozen gorilla, his arms bulging out at his sides.

Callie turned her back to him. She rested the receiver against her shoulder. Stretched the springy cord out of her way. Touched the number eight on the keypad.

The entire world slowed down before her brain could register what was happening.

The punch to her kidney was like a speeding car sideswiping her from behind. The phone slipped from her shoulder. Callie’s

arms flew up. Her feet left the ground. She felt a breeze on her skin as she launched into the air.

Her chest slammed into the wall. Her nose crushed flat. Her teeth dug into the Sheetrock.

“Stupid bitch.” Buddy palmed the back of her head and banged her face into the wall again. Then again. He reared back a third time.

Callie forced her knees to bend. She felt her hair rip from her scalp as she folded her body into a ball on the floor. She had been beaten before. She knew how to take a hit. But that was with someone whose size and strength were relatively close to her own. Someone who didn’t thrash people for a living. Someone who had never killed before.

“You gonna fuckin’ threaten me!” Buddy’s foot swung into her stomach like a wrecking ball.

Callie’s body lifted off the floor. She huffed all of the air out of her lungs. A sharp stabbing pain told her that one of her ribs had fractured.

Buddy was on his knees. She looked up at him. His eyes were crazed. Spit speckled the corners of his mouth. He wrapped one hand around her neck. Callie tried to scramble away but ended up on her back. He straddled her. The weight of him was unbearable. His grip tightened. Her windpipe flexed into her spine. He was pinching off her air. She swung at him, trying to aim her fist between his legs. Once. Twice. A sideswipe was enough to loosen his grip. She rolled out from under him, tried to find a way to stand, to run, to flee.

The air cracked with a sound she couldn’t quite name.

Fire burned across Callie’s back. She felt her skin being flayed. He was using the telephone cord to whip her. Blood bubbled up like acid across her spine. She raised her hand and watched the skin on her arm snake open as the phone cord wrapped around her wrist.

Instinctively, she jerked back her arm. The cord slipped from his grasp. She saw the surprise in his face and scrambled to get her back against the wall. She lashed out at him, punching, kicking, recklessly swinging the cord, screaming, “Fuck you, motherfucker! I’ll fucking kill you!”

Her voice echoed in the kitchen.

Suddenly, somehow, everything had come to a standstill.

Callie had at some point managed to spring to her feet. Her hand was raised behind her head, waiting to whip the cord around. Both of them stood their ground, no more than spitting distance between them.

Buddy's startled laugh turned into an appreciative chuckle. "Damn, girl."

She had opened a gash along his cheek. He wiped the blood onto his fingers. He put his fingers in his mouth. He made a loud sucking noise.

Callie felt her stomach twist into a tight knot.

She knew the taste of violence brought out a darkness in him.

"Come on, tiger." He raised his fists like a boxer ready for a knock-out round. "Come at me again."

"Buddy, please." Callie silently willed her muscles to stay primed, her joints to keep loose, to be ready to fight back as hard as they could because the only reason he was acting calm right now was because he had made up his mind that he was going to enjoy killing her. "It doesn't have to be like this."

"Sugar doll, it was always going to be like this."

She let that knowledge settle into her brain. Callie knew that he was right. She had been such a fool. "I won't say anything. I promise."

"It's too far gone, dolly. I think you know that." His fists still hung loose in front of his face. He waved her forward. "Come on, baby girl. Don't go down without a fight."

He had nearly two feet and at least one hundred fifty pounds on her. The heft of an entire second human being existed inside of his hulking body.

*Scratch him? Bite him? Pull out his hair? Die with his blood in her mouth?*

"Whatcha gonna do, little bit?" He kept his fists at the ready. "I'm giving you a chance here. You gonna come at me or are you gonna fold?"

*The hallway?*

She couldn't risk leading him to Trevor.

*The front door?*

Too far away.

*The kitchen door?*

Callie could see the gold doorknob out of the corner of her eye.

Gleaming. Waiting. Unlocked.

She walked herself through the motions—turn, left-foot-right-foot, grab the knob, twist, run through the carport, out into the street, scream her head off the whole way.

*Who was she kidding?*

All she had to do was turn and Buddy would be on her. He wasn't fast, but he didn't need to be. In one long stride, his hand would be around her neck again.

Callie stared all of her hatred into him.

He shrugged, because it didn't matter.

"Why did you do it?" she asked. "Why did you show them our private stuff?"

"Money." He sounded disappointed that she was so stupid. "Why the hell else?"

Callie couldn't let herself think about all those grown men watching her do stuff she did not want to do with a man who had promised he would always, no matter what, protect her.

"Bring it." Buddy punched a lazy right hook into the air, then a slow-motion uppercut. "Come on, Rocky. Gimme whatcha got."

She let her gaze ping-pong around the kitchen.

*Fridge. Oven. Cabinets. Drawers. Cookie plate. NyQuil. Drying rack.*

Buddy smirked. "You gonna hit me with a frying pan, Daffy Duck?"

Callie sprinted straight toward him, full out, like a bullet exploding from the muzzle of a gun. Buddy's hands were up near his face. She tucked her body down low so that when he finally managed to drop his fists, she was already out of his reach.

She crashed into the kitchen sink.

Grabbed the knife out of the drying rack.

Spun around with the blade slicing out in front of her.

Buddy grinned at the steak knife, which looked like something Linda had bought at the grocery store in a six-piece set made in Taiwan. Cracked wooden handle. Serrated blade so thin that it

bent three different ways before straightening out at the end. Callie had used it to cut Trevor's hot dog into pieces because otherwise he would try to shove the whole thing in his mouth and start to choke.

Callie could see she'd missed some ketchup.

A thin streak of red ran along the serrated teeth.

"Oh." Buddy sounded surprised. "Oh, Jesus."

They both looked down at the same time.

The knife had slashed open the leg of his pants. Left upper thigh, a few inches down from his crotch.

She watched the khaki material slowly turn crimson.

Callie had been involved in competitive gymnastics from the age of five. She had an intimate understanding of all the ways that you could hurt yourself. An awkward twist could tear the ligaments in your back. A sloppy dismount could wreck the tendons in your knee. A piece of metal—even a cheap piece of metal—that cut across your inner thigh could open your femoral artery, the major pipeline that supplied blood to the lower part of your body.

"Cal." Buddy's hand clamped down on his leg. Blood seeped through his clenched fingers. "Get a—Christ, Callie. Get a towel or—"

He started to fall, broad shoulders banging into the cabinets, head cracking off the edge of the countertop. The room shook from his weight as he dropped down.

"Cal?" Buddy's throat worked. Sweat dripped down his face. "Callie?"

Her body was still tensed. Her hand was still gripping the knife. She felt enveloped by a cold darkness, like she'd somehow stepped back into her own shadow.

"Callie. Baby, you gotta—" His lips had lost their color. His teeth began to chatter as if her coldness was seeping into him, too. "C-call an ambulance, baby. Call an—"

Callie slowly turned her head. She looked at the phone on the wall. The receiver was off the hook. Slivers of multi-colored wires stuck out where Buddy had ripped away the springy cord. She found the other end, following it like a clue, and located the receiver underneath the kitchen table.

“Callie, leave that—leave that there, honey. I need you to—”

She got down on her knees. Reached under the table. Picked up the receiver. Placed it to her ear. She was still holding the knife. Why was she still holding the knife?

“That one’s b-broken,” Buddy told her. “Go to the bedroom, baby. C-call an ambulance.”

She pressed the plastic tight to her ear. From memory, she summoned a phantom noise, the bleating siren sound that a phone made when it was off the hook too long.

*Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah . . .*

“The bedroom, baby. G-go to the—”

*Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah . . .*

“Callie.”

That’s what she’d hear if she picked up the phone in the bedroom. The unrelenting bleating and, looped over that, the operator’s mechanical voice—

*If you’d like to make a call . . .*

“Callie, baby, I wasn’t going to hurt you. I would never h-hurt—”

*Please hang up and try again.*

“Baby, please, I need—”

*If this is an emergency . . .*

“I need your help, baby. P-please go down the hall and—”

*Hang up and dial 9-1-1.*

“Callie?”

She laid the knife on the floor. She sat back on her heels. Her knee didn’t throb. Her back didn’t ache. The skin around her neck didn’t pulse where he had choked her. Her rib didn’t stab from his kicks.

*If you’d like to make a call . . .*

“You fucking bitch,” Buddy rasped. “You f-fucking, heartless bitch.”

*Please hang up and try again.*