

JAR OF HEARTS

JENNIFER HILLIER



PART ONE

DENIAL

“I don’t even know what I was running for—I
guess I just felt like it.”

~*J. D. Salinger*, *The Catcher in the Rye*

1

The trial has barely made a dent in the national news. Which is good, because it means less publicity, fewer reporters. But it's also bad, because just how depraved do crimes have to be nowadays to garner national headlines?

Pretty fucking bad, it seems.

There's only a brief mention of Calvin James, a.k.a. the Sweetbay Strangler, in the *New York Times* and on CNN, and his crimes aren't quite sensational enough to be featured in *People* magazine or be talked about on *The View*. But for Pacific Northwesters—people in Washington state, Idaho, and Oregon—the trial of the Sweetbay Strangler is a big deal. The disappearance of Angela Wong fourteen years ago caused a noticeable ripple throughout the Seattle area, as Angela's father is a bigwig at Microsoft and a friend of Bill Gates. There were search parties, interviews, a monetary reward that increased with each passing day she didn't come home. The discovery of the sixteen-year-old's remains all these years later—only a half mile away from her house—sent shockwaves through the community. The locals remember. #JusticeForAngela was trending on Twitter this morning. It was the ninth or tenth most popular hashtag for only about three hours, but still.

Angela's parents are present in court. They divorced a year after their daughter was reported missing, her disappearance the last thread

in a marriage that had been unraveling for a decade. They sit side by side now, a few rows back from the prosecutor's table, with their current spouses, united in their grief and desire to see justice served.

Georgina Shaw can't bring herself to make eye contact with them. Seeing their faces, etched with equal parts heartache and fury, is the worst part of this whole thing. She could have spared them fourteen years of sleepless nights. She could have told them what happened the night it actually happened.

Geo could have done a lot of things.

Angela's mother was a shallow, materialistic woman fourteen years ago, more concerned with her country-club status than checking up on her teenage daughter. Her father wasn't much better, a workaholic who preferred to play golf and poker on the weekends rather than spend time with his family. Until Angela went missing. Then they banded together, only to fall apart. They reacted to her disappearance the way any normal, loving parents would. They became vulnerable. Emotional. Geo almost doesn't recognize Candace Wong, now Candace Platten. She's gained twenty pounds on a frame that used to be impossibly thin, but the extra weight makes her look healthier. Victor Wong looks more or less the same, with a slightly larger paunch and a lot less hair.

Geo spent a good chunk of her childhood at Angela's house, eating take-out pizza in their kitchen, sleeping over countless times when her father worked nights in the ER at the hospital. She embraced the Wongs during the days when their only child didn't come home, offering them reassurances that their daughter would be found, giving them answers that made them feel better, but were far from truthful. The Wongs were invited to the St. Martin's High School graduation, where they received a special award on behalf of Angela, who'd been captain of the cheerleading squad, a star volleyball player, and an honor student. And every year after high school, wherever she was in the world, Candace Wong Platten mailed Geo a Christmas card. A dozen cards, all signed the same way. *Love, Angie's mom.*

They hate her now. Angela's parents haven't taken their eyes off

Geo since she entered the courtroom. Neither has the jury, now that she's seated in the witness box.

Geo is prepared for the questions, and she answers them as she's practiced, keeping her eyes fixed on a random spot at the back of the courtroom as she testifies. The assistant district attorney has prepped her well for this day, and in a lot of ways it seems like she's just here to shed light on the events of that night, to add drama and color to the trial. Otherwise, the ADA's case seems like a slam dunk. They have more than enough evidence to convict Calvin James on three other murders that happened long after Angela's, but Geo is only here to talk about the night her best friend died. It's the only murder she's been involved in, and once her testimony is given, she'll be shipped to Hazelwood Correctional Institute to begin serving her five-year sentence.

Five years. It's both a nightmare and a gift, the result of a savvy plea deal by her fancy high-priced lawyer and the pressure on the district attorney to get the Sweetbay Strangler put away. The public is screaming for the death penalty for the serial killer, but it won't happen. Not in a city as defiantly liberal as Seattle. The ADA has a good shot at consecutive life sentences for Calvin James, so in contrast, Geo's five-year sentence isn't nearly long enough, according to some of the #JusticeForAngela comments on social media. Geo will still be young when she's released, with plenty of time to start over. She can still get married, have children, have a life.

In theory, anyway.

She chances a glance over at Andrew, seated stoically beside her father in the third row from the back. He's the reason she looks nice today; he had her favorite Dior dress and Louboutin pumps brought to her that morning. Their eyes meet. Andrew offers her a small smile of encouragement, and it warms her a little, but she knows it won't last.

Her fiancé doesn't know what she's done. He'll soon find out. Geo looks down at her hands, folded neatly in her lap. Her diamond engagement ring, a three-carat oval with an additional carat of smaller diamonds encircling the center stone, is still on her finger. For now.

Andrew Shipp has impeccable taste. Of course he does; it comes from good breeding, an important family name, and a big bank account. After he ends it—which of course he will, because the only thing that matters more to him than Geo is his family's company—she'll give the ring back.

Of course she will. It's the right thing to do.

A poster-size photo of Angela is mounted on an easel facing the jury. Geo remembers the day that photo was taken, a few weeks after their junior year started at St. Martin's High School. Geo has the full version of the photo somewhere at home, where the two best friends are standing side by side at the Puyallup Fair (now renamed the Washington State Fair)—Geo with a cloud of blue cotton candy in her hand, and Angela with a rapidly melting ice cream cone. The photo, now enlarged with Geo cropped out of it, is a close-up of Angela laughing, the sun beaming down on her hair, her brown eyes sparkling. A beautiful girl on a beautiful day, with the world at her feet.

Beside that photo, on a separate easel, is another poster-size enlargement. It shows Angela's remains, which were found in the woods behind Geo's childhood home. Just a pile of bones in the dirt, and anyone would agree that you could see a lot worse on TV. The only difference is, the bones in this photo are real, belonging to a girl who died much too young and much too violently for anyone to comprehend.

The prosecutor continues to ask questions, painting a picture for the jury of Angela Wong through Geo's eyes. She continues to answer them, not adding any more detail than is necessary. Her voice carries through the small courtroom speakers, and she sounds calmer than she feels. Her profound sadness—which she's carried with her every day of her life since Angela's murder—seems diluted in her quest to speak clearly and articulately.

Calvin watches her closely from the defendant's table as she speaks, his gaze penetrating right through her. It's like being violated all over again. Geo tells the court about their relationship back then, when they were boyfriend and girlfriend, when he was still Calvin and not yet the Sweetbay Strangler, when she was just sixteen and

thought they were in love. She recounts the abuse, both verbal and physical, telling the enthralled courtroom spectators about Calvin's obsessive and controlling nature. She describes her fear and confusion, things she's never discussed with anyone before, not even Angela, and certainly not her father. Things that for years were packed away in a mental lockbox, stored in a corner of her mind that she never allowed herself to visit.

If they gave degrees for compartmentalizing, Geo would have a Ph.D.

"Years later, when you saw the news reports, did you put it together that Calvin James was the Sweetbay Strangler?" the ADA asks her.

Geo shakes her head. "I never watched the news. I'd heard a little something about it from my father, since he still lives in Sweetbay, but I never made the connection. I suppose I wasn't paying attention."

This part is true, and when she glances over at Calvin, the corners of his mouth are raised just a millimeter. A tiny smile. Her old boyfriend was handsome at twenty-one, nobody would disagree with that. But today, at thirty-five, he looks like a movie star. His face is fuller and more chiseled, his hair tousled in perfect McDreamy waves, the speck of gray in his sideburns and the lines around his eyes only adding to his appeal. He sits easily in his seat, dressed in a simple suit and tie, scribbling notes on a yellow pad of paper. The tiny smile hasn't left his face since Geo entered the courtroom. She suspects she's the only one who can see it. She suspects it's meant for her.

When their eyes meet, a tingle goes through her. That god-damned tingle, even now, even after everything. From the first day they met to the last day she saw him, that tingle has never gone away. She's never felt anything like it before, or since. Not even with Andrew. Especially not with Andrew. Her fiancé—assuming he could still be called that, since the wedding planned for next summer isn't going to happen—never inspired that feeling.

Her hands remain in her lap, and she twists her ring around, feeling the weight of it, the security of it. It was symbolic when Andrew gave it to her, not just of her promise to marry him, but also of the

life she'd built. Undergraduate degree at Puget Sound State University. MBA from the University of Washington. At thirty, the youngest vice president at Shipp Pharmaceuticals. So what if some of her career success is because she got engaged to Andrew Shipp, the CEO and heir to the throne? The rest of it is because she's worked her god-damned ass off.

No matter. That life is gone now.

On the one hand, she knows she's gotten off easy. Her fancy lawyer was worth every penny Andrew paid him. But on the other hand, *five fucking years*. In prison, nobody will care that she was educated or successful on the outside, that up till her arrest she was earning a mid-six-figure salary (including bonus), and that she was about to become part of one of Seattle's oldest and most elite families. When she gets out—assuming she survives prison and doesn't get shanked in the shower—she'll have a criminal record. A felony. She'll never be able to get a regular job. Anytime anyone googles her name, the Sweetbay Strangler case will come up, because nothing on the internet ever dies. She'll have to start her life completely over again. But not from the bottom, lower than the bottom, clawing her way out of the hole she dug herself into.

She continues to speak clearly and succinctly, recounting the events of that terrible night. The jury and spectators listen with rapt attention. Keeping her gaze focused on that random spot at the back of the courtroom, she describes it all. The football after party at Chad Fenton's house. The barrel of fruit punch, so spiked with vodka that *spiked* didn't seem like the right word for it. She and Angela leaving the party early, the two of them giggling and stumbling over to Calvin's place in their skimpy dresses, completely drunk. The pulsing music from Calvin's stereo. Angela dancing. Angela flirting. Drinking some more, the world spinning, turning into a kaleidoscope of dizzying shapes and colors until Geo finally passed out.

Then, sometime later, the car ride back to Geo's house, Calvin driving, Angela folded into the trunk of the car. The long trek into the woods, guided only by a dim miniflashlight attached to Calvin's keychain. The cool night air. The smell of the trees. The thickness of

the soil. The sound of crying. Geo's dress, dirty, covered in earth and grass and blood.

"You didn't actually see Calvin James cut up her body?" the prosecutor presses. Geo winces. He's trying to put the spotlight on Angela's dismemberment, trying to make it sound as horrific as possible, even though her best friend was already dead by then, which was horrific enough.

"I didn't watch him do it, no," she answers. She doesn't look at Calvin when she says this. She can't.

"What did he use?"

"A saw. From the shed in the backyard."

"Your father's saw?"

"Yes." She closes her eyes. She can still see the flash of steel when Calvin holds it up in the moonlight. The wood handle, the jagged teeth. Later, it would be covered in blood, skin, and hair. "The ground was too . . . there were too many rocks. We couldn't dig a large enough hole for . . . for . . . all of her."

There's a movement in the courtroom. A rustling, and then a low murmur. Andrew Shipp has stood up. He looks at Geo; their eyes meet. He nods to her, an apologetic tilt of his head, and then her fiancé makes his way out of the courtroom, disappearing behind the heavy doors at the back.

It's possible she'll never see him again. It hurts more than she thought it would. On her lap, she twists the ring furiously for a few seconds, then mentally tucks the pain away for another time.

Walter Shaw, now with an empty place beside him, doesn't move. Geo's father isn't known for being an emotionally expressive man, and the only evidence of his true feelings is the lone tear running down his face. He's never heard this story before, either, and she won't blame him if he follows Andrew out the door. But her father doesn't leave. Thank god.

"How long did it take? To cut her up?" the prosecutor is asking.

"A while," Geo says softly. A sob emanates from the center of the room. Candace Wong Platten's shoulders shake, and her ex-husband puts an arm around her, though it's clear he's about to lose

it, too. Their current spouses sit in silent horror, unsure how to react, not knowing what to do. It's not their daughter, not their loss, but they feel it all the same. "It felt like it took a long time."

Everyone's eyes are on her. Calvin's eyes are on her. Slowly, Geo shifts her gaze until their eyes finally meet. For the first time since she's arrived at the courtroom, she holds eye contact. Almost imperceptibly, in a tiny movement only she can pick up on because she's watching for it, he nods. She averts her gaze and refocuses her attention on the prosecutor, who pauses to take a sip of water.

"So you left her there," the assistant district attorney says, walking back toward the witness box. "And then you went on with your life like it never happened. You lied to the cops. You lied to her parents. You let them suffer for fourteen years, not knowing what happened to their only child."

He stops. Makes a show of looking right at Geo, and then at Calvin, and then at the jurors. When he speaks again, his voice is a few decibels above a whisper, so that everyone in the courtroom has to strain to hear him. "You left your best friend buried in the woods, a mere hundred yards from the house you lived in, after your boyfriend cut her up into pieces."

"Yes," she says, closing her eyes again. She knows how terrible it sounds, because she knows how terrible it was. But the tears won't come. She doesn't have any left.

Someone in the courtroom is crying softly. More like a whimper, really. Angela's mother's chest is heaving, her face in her hands, her bright red nail polish visibly chipped even from where Geo is seated. Beside her, Victor Wong is not crying. But as he reaches into the breast pocket of his suit to pull out a handkerchief to give to his ex-wife, his hands tremble violently.

The prosecutor has no further questions. The judge calls a recess for lunch. The jurors file out, and the spectators in the courtroom stand up and stretch. Phone calls are made. Reporters type furiously into laptops. The bailiff helps Geo out of the witness box, and she walks slowly past the defense table where Calvin is seated. He rises and grabs her hand as she passes, stopping her momentarily.

“It’s good to see you,” he says. “Even under the circumstances.”

Their faces are inches away. His eyes are exactly as she remembers, vivid green, with the same touch of gold encircling the pupils. She sees those eyes in her dreams sometimes, hears his voice, feels his hands on her body, and she’s woken up more than a few times covered in her own sweat. But now here he is, real as ever.

She says nothing, because there’s nothing to say, not with everyone around watching them, listening. She extracts her hand. The bailiff nudges her forward.

She feels the piece of paper Calvin slipped into her palm and curls her hand over it as she slides it into the pocket of her dress. She stops to say good-bye to her father, twisting off her engagement ring to give to him, the only jewelry she’s wearing. Walter Shaw embraces her roughly. Then he lets her go, turning away so she won’t see his face crumple.

The trial isn’t over, but Geo’s part in it is. The next time she sees her father, it will be when he visits her in prison. The bailiff leads her back to the holding cell. She takes a seat on the bench in the back corner, and when the bailiff’s footsteps recede, she reaches into her pocket.

It’s a torn piece of yellow notepad paper. On it, Calvin has scrawled a note in his small, neat handwriting.

You’re welcome.

Beside the two words, he’s drawn a small heart.

She crumples it up into a tiny bead and swallows it. Because the only way to get rid of it is to consume it.

Geo sits alone in the cell, immersed in her thoughts. The past, present, and future all mingle together, the inner voices chattering alongside the actual voices of the police officers down the hallway. She can hear them discussing last night’s episode of *Grey’s Anatomy*, and wonders randomly if they’ll show *Grey’s Anatomy* in prison. She has no idea how much time has passed until a shadow appears on the other side of the cell bars.

She looks up to see Detective Kaiser Brody standing there. He’s holding a paper bag from a local burger joint, and a milkshake.

Strawberry. The bag is covered in grease spots, and immediately her mouth waters. She hasn't had anything to eat since breakfast, just a small bowl of cold oatmeal served on a dirty metal tray here in the holding cell.

"If that's not for me, then you're just cruel," she says.

Kaiser holds up the bag. "It is for you. And you can have it . . . so long as you tell me what Calvin James slipped you in court."

Geo stares at the bag. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"He took your hand, and he gave you something."

She shakes her head. She can smell grilled beef. Fried onions. French fries. Her stomach growls audibly. "He didn't give me anything, Kai, I swear. He grabbed my hand, said it was good to see me, and I yanked my hand away and didn't say anything back. That's it."

The detective doesn't believe her. He signals the guard, who unlocks the metal door. He checks her hands, then checks the floor. He motions for her to stand up, and she complies. He pats her down, checking her pockets. Resignedly, he hands her the bag. She tears it open.

"Easy." He takes a seat beside her on the cold steel bench. "There's two burgers in there. One's for me."

Geo already has hers unwrapped. She takes a giant bite, the grease from the ground beef dribbling onto the front of her designer dress. She doesn't care. "Is this allowed?"

"What? The burger?" Kaiser removes the top of his burger bun and places fries on top of the patty. He replaces the bun and takes a large bite of his own. "You signed your plea agreement, nobody cares if I talk to you."

"I can't believe you still do that." She looks at his burger in mock distaste. "Fries inside your burger. That's so high school."

"In some ways, I've changed," he says. "In some ways, I haven't. Bet you can say the same."

"So what are you doing here?" she asks a few minutes later, when she's eaten half her burger and her stomach has stopped hurting.

"I don't know. I guess I just wanted you to know that I don't hate you."

"You'd have every reason to."

"Not anymore," Kaiser says, then sighs. "I finally have closure. I can now let it go. I'd advise you to do the same. You kept that secret a long time. Fourteen years . . . I can't imagine what that did to you. It's a punishment all its own."

"I don't think Angela's parents would agree with you." But she's glad he said it. It makes her feel like less of a monster. But only a little.

"But that's why you're going to prison. So you can do your time and then get out and start over, fresh. You'll survive this. You always were strong." Kaiser puts his burger down. "You know, it's funny. When I found out what you'd done, I wanted to kill you. For what you did to Angela. For what you put everyone through. For what you put *me* through. But when I saw you again . . ."

"What?"

"I remembered how it used to be. We were all best friends, for fuck's sake. That shit doesn't go away."

"I know." Geo looks at him. Underneath the tough cop exterior, she sees kindness. There's always been kindness at Kaiser's core. "I wanted to tell you back then what happened, what I did, so many times. You would have known what to do. You were always my . . ."

"What?"

"Moral compass," she says. "I've done a lot of shitty things, Kai. Pushing you away was one of them."

"You were sixteen." Kaiser heaves another long sigh. "Just a kid. Like I was. Like Angela was."

"But old enough to know better."

"Looking back, a lot of things make sense now. The way you were after that night. The way you pulled back from me. Dropping out of school for the rest of the year. Calvin really did a number on you. I didn't realize how bad it was." Kaiser touches her face. "But today you told the truth. It's done now. Finally."

"Finally," she repeats, taking a big bite of her burger even though she's no longer hungry.

It's easier to lie when your mouth is full.

2

There are three types of currency in prison: drugs, sex, and information. While the last of the three tends to be the most valuable, crank and blow jobs are always the most reliable. And since Geo doesn't do drugs, cash will have to do. There are things she needs to survive prison, which she'll procure as soon as she's able, once she's assigned a unit and a job.

Every new or returning inmate at Hazelwood Correctional Institute—or Hellwood, as it's sometimes called—spends their first two weeks in receiving while their assessment is being completed. A battery of psychological tests, along with a couple of interviews and a thorough background check, are performed in order to determine where the inmate will sleep and work. Geo's hoping for medium security and a job in the hair salon. But what she can realistically expect, according to her first meeting with the prison counselor, is maximum security for the first three years and a job in janitorial services.

"It's not a bad thing," the counselor says, in an attempt to reassure her. The name plate on the desk says P. MARTIN. "There are more guards in maximum. Minimum comes with privileges, but maximum comes with protection."

It sounds like bullshit to Geo, but as she's never been to prison before, she's in no position to argue. It's been three hours since she arrived at Hazelwood, and the counselor is the first person she's spo-

ken to who isn't wearing a uniform. P. Martin—Pamela? Patricia? there's no indication of the woman's first name anywhere in the room—seems to genuinely care about the inmates' well-being. Geo wonders what brought her here. It can't be the money. The counselor's pantsuit is cheap; the fabric of her jacket pulls around the arm-pits and there are loose threads along the seams.

"Who's your support system?" the counselor asks. When Geo doesn't answer, she rephrases. "Who'll be visiting you in here? Who are you looking forward to seeing when you get out? Because that day will come, and you should be thinking about those people every day that you're in here. It'll keep you focused."

"My dad," Geo says. She never had many friends, and after the trial, it was safe to say she had none. "I was supposed to get married, but . . . that's not happening now."

"What about your mother?"

"She died. When I was five."

"One last question," Martin says. "Which race do you identify with? You look white, but your intake form says 'other.'"

"Other is correct," Geo says. "My mother was half Filipino, and my dad is a quarter Jamaican. I'm mixed."

Clicking her pen, the counselor nods and jots something down in her file. "It's sixty-five percent white in here, and since you look white, you'll blend in. But if you're part black, you can make black friends. That's good."

"I'm also a quarter Asian."

"Less than one percent of the inmate population is Pacific Islander. It won't help you." The counselor looks at her intently. "So, how are you feeling? Depressed? Anxious? Any suicidal thoughts?"

"If I say yes, does that mean I can go home?"

The counselor chuckled. "Good. A sense of humor. Hold on to that." She slaps the file folder shut. "All right, kiddo. We're done for now. I'll talk to you in a week. You need me before that, tell a guard."

The first two weeks pass without incident, although all new inmates are on suicide watch because prison is a fucking depressing

place. Geo keeps her head down and speaks only when spoken to, spending the majority of her time alone. On the morning of the day she's to be integrated into the general population, she's awake well before the morning bell.

It's hard to believe that just over six months ago, she was interviewed for an article in *Pacific Northwest* magazine profiling Shipp Pharmaceuticals in their annual "Top 100 Companies to Work For" feature. At thirty, Geo was the youngest female executive at Shipp by a decade, and the article was titled, "Steering the Shipp in a New Direction: The Young Face of One of America's Oldest Companies." The photo they used showed Geo sitting on the edge of the long table inside the thirty-fourth-floor glass-enclosed boardroom, legs crossed, skirt hem well above the knee, red soles of her high heels visible, smiling into the camera. The theme of the write-up was diversity in the workplace, though, ironically, not one mention was made of Geo's mixed-race heritage. The article focused solely on her youth and her gender—both of which were enough to make her a standout in the old white-boys' club of Big Pharma—and her plans to expand the lifestyle-and-beauty division of the company.

She suspected the majority of the executive team at Shipp hated that photo, that she was the one chosen to represent them, though nobody ever said so to her face.

The day of her arrest, Geo was speaking in that boardroom. The doors swung open and a tall man in dark jeans and a battered leather jacket strode in, accompanied by three uniformed Seattle PD officers. A flustered administrative assistant followed, her hands gesturing apologetically as she tried to keep up with them. The twelve heads sitting at the giant table turned at the sound of the commotion.

"I'm sorry, they wouldn't wait for me to knock," said the breathless administrative assistant, a young woman named Penny who'd only been with the company for a month.

The man in the leather jacket stared at Geo. He looked extremely familiar, and her mind raced frantically to place him. There was a detective's shield clipped to his breast pocket, and she could see the slight bulge of his holstered gun near the hem of his jacket. He was

tall and quite fit, a far cry from how he looked in high school, when he was forty pounds skinnier and half a foot shorter. . . .

Kaiser Brody. Holy hell.

It hit Geo then, and her heart stopped. Her knees felt weak and the room spun a little, forcing her to lean against the table for support. The boardroom, cool and airy only seconds before, was suddenly hot. The detective caught her reaction and smirked.

“Georgina Shaw?” he said, but he knew damn well it was her. He headed toward her, making his way around the long oval table with the uniformed officers in tow, past the shocked faces of the executives. “You’re under arrest.”

Geo didn’t protest, didn’t say a word, didn’t make a sound. She simply closed her laptop, her presentation disappearing from the large projection screen behind her. The detective took out his handcuffs. The sight of them made her wince.

“It’s protocol,” he said. “I’d apologize, but you know I’m not sorry.”

The members of the executive team seemed not to know what do with themselves, and they watched in stunned silence as the detective pulled her arms behind her back, snapped on the cuffs, and began marching her out of the room. Their confusion was understandable. The Georgina Shaw they knew wasn’t the kind of woman who got arrested for anything. She was the new face of Shipp, after all. She was a VP of the company. She was Andrew Shipp’s goddamned fiancée, and everything about this looked completely wrong.

The CEO’s voice rang out loud and clear, and everyone turned. Andrew Shipp hadn’t been part of the meeting, but his office was just down the hall, and clearly someone had told him what was going on. He was standing at the boardroom doors, barring their way.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Andrew tried to reach for her, but a young police officer blocked him. The CEO’s face reddened, no doubt because nobody had ever dared to block him from anything before. “This is *ludicrous*. What are the charges? Get her out of those handcuffs immediately. This is *ridiculous*.”

Geo tried to smile at him, tried to reassure him that she was okay,

but Andrew wasn't looking at her at all. He was glaring at the police officers, every inch of his body radiating that special blend of outrage and self-entitlement one can only have if one grew up with serious money.

But the police officers didn't care. They didn't care that the woman in handcuffs had a corner office two floors down, or that her wedding reception was going to take place at the pretentious golf club her fiancé's family belonged to, or that she thought it was insane they were charging four hundred dollars a plate for dinner for what basically amounted to steak and French fries. They didn't care that she'd picked pink peonies for her bouquet or that her wedding dress was being flown in from New York. They didn't give one righteous shit. As they shouldn't. Because none of it mattered anymore. And it probably never did.

The detective walked her out of the boardroom. His hand was on the small of her back, not pushing, but guiding firmly. Kaiser Brody didn't smell anything like she remembered. The boy she'd known back in the day never wore cologne, but she could detect a sweet, musky scent on him now, which she recognized immediately as Yves Saint Laurent. She always did have a great nose. She bought the same cologne for Andrew once, but he never wore it, complaining it gave him a headache. A lot of things gave Andrew a headache.

The cuffs jangled around her wrists. They were loose enough that with some maneuvering, she could probably have wriggled out of them. Kaiser had put them on just for show, to make a point. To cause a scene. To humiliate her.

Andrew was walking backward in an attempt to impede their path, and Kaiser waved an arrest warrant in his face.

"Detective Kaiser Brody, Seattle PD. The charge is murder, sir."

Andrew snatched the warrant from him and read through it with bulging eyes. Even in his two-thousand-dollar suit, he was just short of handsome, with his soft frame, his round face, his thinning hair. Andrew's strength came from a different place. But while being rich and well-connected could accomplish a lot, he couldn't fix this.

"Say nothing," he said to her. "Not a word. I'll call Fred. We'll take care of this."

Fred Argent was head of Shipp's in-house counsel. He handled corporate strategy, contracts, litigation issues. He wasn't a criminal-defense attorney by any stretch, and that's what Geo needed. But there was no time to have that discussion. The detective was hustling her out of the boardroom as the rest of the executive team stood frozen, mouths gaping open.

Andrew kept up with them all the way to the elevator, which was down the hallway and around the corner. Word of Geo's arrest seemed to spread faster than they were walking. She passed her assistant Carrie Ann's desk and said, "Call my father. I don't want him to see it on the news." The younger woman nodded, her eyes wide, the small spot of spilled coffee still noticeable on her skirt even after her vigorous attempt to remove it earlier that morning. Less than an hour ago, they'd had a discussion about how best to get that stain out, searching the office for one of those Tide pens as Geo talked about the new restaurant she and Andrew had gone to the evening before.

That life was over now. Everything she'd worked for, everything she'd created, the life she'd built on top of the secret she tried to keep hidden . . . it was all evaporating right before her eyes.

"It's going to be okay," Andrew said to her at the elevator. "Say nothing, do you hear me? *Nothing*. Fred will meet you at the police station. We'll get you the best attorney. Don't worry about anything." He glared at Kaiser, his face full of fury. The detective returned the look with a mild one of his own. "This charge is utter bullshit, Detective. You've made a gigantic mistake. Chief Heron, your boss, is a member of my golf club, and I'm going to call him personally. Prepare yourselves for a lawsuit."

The detective said nothing, but once again the corners of his mouth lifted up slightly. Another smirk. Did he have that smirk in high school? Geo couldn't remember.

The elevator doors closed on Andrew yelling for his assistant to bring him his cell phone. For the next minute, she and the detective stood motionless in front of the mirrored doors. The music from the hidden speakers played softly. Geo could hear one of the uniformed officers breathing behind her. A soft wheeze, with a slight whistling sound behind it. Deviated septum, probably. Kaiser's hand was still

resting on the small of her back. She didn't mind. The pressure was reassuring.

No Muzak instrumental background tunes for Shipp; the elevators were fancy, wired into Pandora, which was set to play a selection of easy-listening tracks by the artists of yesterday and today. Mostly yesterday. The numbers on the screen counted down silently to the soft strains of Oasis, a band Geo liked back in high school. One of the other officers, a younger woman whose septum sounded fine, sang along quietly. Geo did not sing along to "Wonderwall," even though she knew all the words.

TODAY IS GONNA BE THE DAY
THAT THEY'RE GONNA THROW IT BACK TO YOU

The numbers continued to change as they passed each floor, hurtling toward the bottom. Maybe she'd get lucky. Maybe the elevator would hit the ground and explode. Sixteen, fifteen, fourteen . . .

"You don't seem surprised I'm here," Kaiser said, watching her in the mirror.

Geo said nothing, because there was nothing to say. She had played this scenario out a million times in her head, but never had any of her fantasies cast her old friend in the role of arresting police officer. She didn't even know Kaiser had become a cop, but she had to admit he wore the badge well. There was only a hint of the boy she used to know. Scruff covered the jawline where there used to be acne. The angles of his face were sharper. But the eyes were the same. Haunted. Disappointed.

He was right. She wasn't surprised. She'd been waiting for this day for a long time, knowing on some level it would come eventually. And now that it was here, there was no more hiding. No more carrying the secret around like the unbearably heavy two-ton block of cement it had come to be. Slowly exhaling the long breath she'd been holding for fourteen years, she allowed her shoulders to relax. The tight muscles in her back and neck loosened. She gave her old friend a small smile, and he raised an eyebrow. No, she wasn't surprised at all.

She was *relieved*.

“Shaw,” a sharp voice says, shaking Geo out of her reverie. The morning bell has rung. She looks up to see a corrections officer standing at the door of her cell, dressed in a dark-blue uniform, hair pulled back in a tight bun. The CO is short, but stocky and muscular, and Geo has no doubt she could wrestle someone twice her size to the ground. “Your assessment’s done. We’re transferring you. Let’s go.”

“Where are they putting me?”

“Maximum,” the guard says, and Geo’s heart sinks. “You’re in the big room, though, because your unit is under construction.”

The “big room” is temporary housing. She overheard an inmate complaining about how crowded it is to a guard the other day, and she balks. “The big room? Then can’t I just say here in receiving until—”

The CO’s bark of a laugh cuts her off. “You think this is a hotel? That if you don’t like your accommodations you can complain and get an upgrade? Move your ass, Shaw, before I make you move it.”

Geo grabs what few belongings she has. Right now they consist of a small plastic bin full of cheap toiletries and a sweatshirt with DOC printed on the back in large letters.

“You’re working in the hair salon, though,” the guard tells her. “You should be happy about that. Most newbies start in the kitchen, but they need someone who can cut and color hair. Did you work in the beauty industry on the outside?”

“Sort of,” Geo says.

“Hey.” The CO peers at her closely as they walk down the hallway. “I know you. Aren’t you the chick who sliced up her best friend? Like, a long time ago?”

Geo doesn’t answer.

“That’s some sick shit,” the CO says, and it’s hard to tell if she’s disgusted or impressed. Maybe both. “I’m surprised they’re letting you work with scissors.”

Me, too, Geo thinks. *Me, too*.

3

In the beginning, Geo never expected to get away with it. Angela Wong was too popular, too in love with her life, for anyone to believe she was missing of her own accord. But when the first few days passed with no knock on the door, she started to wonder if it was possible that nobody would find out what she had done. Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. And then the next thing Geo knew, years had passed, and it seemed like maybe the past would stay buried. A bad pun, but fitting nonetheless.

When it all finally caught up to her, Geo might not have been surprised, but she was wholly unprepared. Because really, what can prepare you for prison? Not the movies or television, which are designed to entertain and titillate. The reality of prison—the bleakness of it, the sameness of it, the unrelenting fear of getting attacked—is horrific. Her first two weeks in receiving, with her private cell that had its own sink and toilet, now seem like a cakewalk compared to the nightmare she’s currently facing, also known as “gen pop.”

Welcome to Hellwood.

Her counselor, P. Martin, was right in that the maximum-security units have more guards. But more guards don’t make it safer, especially when you’re sleeping in a crowded space where everyone’s in a shitty mood, *especially* the guards. Though Hazelwood is far from crowded, the two units undergoing construction have caused the

other three to fill to capacity, and the overflow has been funneled into a large recreation room that's been converted into communal housing. It's the worst-case scenario as far as life in prison goes.

Gone are any expectations of privacy. Fights break out daily. Personal items are frequently stolen. The threat of violence hangs in the air like a storm cloud. Fifty grown women sleeping in such close proximity to each other isn't normal. The big room contains twenty-five double bunks, lined up in rows of five. The constant noise makes the room feel smaller than it is, and the persistent aroma of sweat and farts makes it feel claustrophobic.

The corrections officer escorts Geo to a double bunk in the back corner, all the way across the room. The women eye her as she passes, and she works to keep a neutral expression on her face so no one will think she's weak or hostile—in here, one is just as bad as the other. Geo is aware that she looks a little different than the rest of them. Her dark hair is expensively highlighted. She has perfect teeth. She doesn't have face tattoos—or any tattoos, for that matter. She's not part of a gang on the outside, nor was she involved in drugs. And unlike the majority of her fellow inmates, this is her first time incarcerated anywhere. She might be dressed in the exact same gray prison scrubs as everyone else, but she's nothing like them, and it shows.

She's a prison virgin. And they can smell it on her.

"This is you," the guard says flatly, stopping at the double bunk.

There's a sweatshirt on the top mattress, and two tattered magazines draped on the bottom bed. Geo isn't sure which bunk is unoccupied. "Am I the top or bottom?" Geo asks.

The guard shrugs and turns to leave. "Don't know. Ask your bunkmate."

A large white woman of indiscernible age—somewhere between thirty and fifty is Geo's best guess—waddles over. The inmate has to weigh well over three hundred pounds, and Geo catches a whiff of her sour body odor as she approaches. A messy bun of dry, bleached-blond hair is piled atop her head, showcasing three inches of dark-brown roots. She has no visible neck; what used to be there is now covered by a mass of double chin. Her eyebrows are painted on in

matching thin black lines, and they furrow when she sees Geo. There are letters tattooed on each one of her sausage fingers. Her right hand spells out FUNS. Her left hand spells out OVER.

Fun's over. Indeed.

The woman takes a seat on the bottom mattress. There's a short metal footlocker in between each double bunk, and half a dozen photographs are taped to the door, showing the woman when she was slightly younger, and slightly thinner. In one of them, a lean black man stands next to her, and beside him is a young boy. The boy is skinny like his father, but his round face is a good blend of the two of them, with large brown eyes, soft mocha skin, and a grin full of oversized teeth. All three look happy in the photo.

Her bunkmate, intimidating as she might seem, is a mother. Okay, then. It can't be so bad.

"I'm Bernadette," the inmate says. Her voice is deep, with a slight accent. Something eastern European. Polish, perhaps. Or Czech. Sliding a hand under the mattress, she pulls out a bag of licorice whips. She doesn't offer Geo any, but she does offer something resembling a smile. "Everyone calls me Bernie."

"Georgina," she says, returning the smile. "Everyone calls me Geo."

"Welcome." Bernie looks up at her, and Geo can see rings of dirt around her neck that were previously hidden in the folds of her skin. "Since we're going to be bunkmates, you should know I have three rules."

"Okay." Geo's still standing, holding her stuff, mainly because she's not sure where she should put it. Since the woman is sitting on the bottom bunk, she's assuming the top bunk is for her, but the woman's sweatshirt is still on the mattress. She doesn't dare move it.

"One. Don't eat my food. Ever." The large inmate takes another bite of her licorice whip, chewing with her mouth partially open. "You see any food lying on my bed, that's not an invitation to have some. Don't even ask me for any."

"Got it."

"Two. I snore. Loud. You complain to the guard about me, like

the last girl did, and I'll beat your ass, like I did her. My snoring bothers you, get earplugs from commissary."

"No problem." Geo can't help but think that it will be the woman's smell that will bother her more than anything else.

"Three. I like the top bunk. You sleep on the bottom."

"Really?" Geo is surprised. She thought bottom bunks were prized, and besides, she can't imagine the woman and all her weight climbing up to the top bunk every time she needs to lie down.

"Yeah, the air feels fresher up there. These fuckers in here are always farting and burping, and by midnight it smells like a fucking toilet. I got a sensitive nose," Bernie says, and her small, mean eyes challenge Geo to disagree with her. "You got a problem with the bottom bunk?"

"Not at all," Geo says, wondering if anyone's ever died from a top bunk collapsing. Getting her chest crushed in while she's sleeping would be a hell of a way to go.

As if reading her mind, Bernie says, "Don't worry. The bed won't break. If that's what you were thinking."

Geo shakes her head quickly. "I wasn't worried."

"First time in Hellwood?" Her new bunkmate extracts another licorice whip and stuffs half of it into her mouth. Her teeth are red from the food coloring. It looks a little like blood.

"Yes," Geo says, figuring that it's better to be honest. "Any tips for me?"

The woman shrugs. "It's not as bad as people think it is. You get used to it. This arrangement is a shit show"—she waved an enormous arm in the general direction of the room—"but it gets better once we get our cells back. I've stayed all over. This place isn't the best, but it's not the worst, either."

Geo nods. She doesn't ask what the woman did to get here. She heard it's not polite. Neither would it be polite to ask the woman to move so she could sit down on the bed they already agreed was hers. Instead, she points to the photos on the locker door. "Your family?"

"Yup," Bernie says, and finally grins. "I keep those pictures there to remind me of what I have to go home to." She finally stands up,

leaving behind an indent on the mattress in the shape of her ass and thighs.

The sheets already reek of the woman's odor, but Geo forces herself to return the smile as she finally sets her things down on the bed. The metal frame groans as Bernie climbs slowly up to the top bunk and lies down. "You got a man waiting for you on the outside?"

"I'm not actually sure." It's the most truthful answer she can give. "Hey, are we allowed to use the phones?"

"Yup, anytime up till thirty minutes before lights-out," Bernie says. "Down the hall, near the bathrooms. Check in with the guard before you try to leave, though. They have to buzz you out."

The women whisper among themselves as Geo makes her way to the guard's booth, but nobody speaks to her. She wonders if they're curious because they've seen her on TV, or because she's new. Probably both.

There's a long line for the phones, and the CO on duty informs her that she can talk for only fifteen minutes at a time before she has to hang up and get back in line. Geo stands for what feels like an hour until a phone frees up, then takes a deep breath and dials Andrew's cell number. The call rings five times and then goes to voicemail.

Thinking he might not want to pick up because he doesn't recognize the number, she tries calling him at work. His assistant answers, which means she had to press 1 to accept the charges.

"Hi, Bonnie," Geo says. "Is Andrew in?"

"Miss Shaw," the assistant says, sounding flustered. Instantly, Geo knows that everything has changed. She's always been friendly with Bonnie, and not once since she began dating Andrew has the woman ever addressed her by anything other than her first name. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Shipp doesn't wish to speak to you."

Geo closes her eyes. *Miss Shaw. Mr. Shipp.* She opens her eyes again. "He told you to say that?"

"Yes, ma'am, he did. I'm only authorized to speak to you this one time."

Geo lets out a breath, slowly, trying to gather her thoughts. When she speaks again, her voice is tight. "What would he like me to do

with the ring?” Her engagement ring is now in a box at her father’s house along with all her other personal belongings, as her house is currently for sale. “Does he want me to have it sent to him, or would he like to pick it up?”

“He says you should send it here to the office.” There’s a catch in the assistant’s voice, and Geo recognizes the conversation must be equally awkward for her.

“Bonnie—”

“Geo, I can’t speak to you.” Bonnie’s voice is hushed. “I’m sorry. I really am. The company’s going crazy. We’ve been getting so many calls; everyone wants to know if Andrew has anything to say about his former fiancée and a VP of the company being a convicted murderer and the girlfriend of a serial killer.”

“But I wasn’t convicted for—”

“It’s what everyone *thinks* that matters,” Bonnie said. Her voice is barely above a whisper. “And you know how it is here, Geo. Everybody’s concerned about the company’s reputation. We’ve had to issue a press statement.”

“What did it say?” When the woman doesn’t answer right away, Geo says, “Bonnie. Please. Tell me.”

“It says we do not condone or support you in any way, and that we’re sympathetic to the victim’s family. Andrew . . .” Bonnie pauses. “Andrew wrote it himself. I’m sorry.”

“He paid my legal fees.” Geo’s voice, even to her own ears, sounds hollow.

“I know. He took some heat for that from his father, but you were his fiancée at the time. Geo, I’m sorry, but I have to hang up now.” Bonnie sounds genuinely upset. “Please . . . please don’t call here again.”

The line goes dead.

So that’s it, then. No good-bye, no chance to explain or apologize. Andrew had ended it, taking the coward’s way out by allowing his assistant to deliver the blow. A two-year relationship over, just like that. She hangs the receiver in its cradle, moving aside for the next inmate. Not quick enough, though. Their shoulders graze.

The woman's eyes narrow. She's smaller than Geo, but there's no fear in her face. "Watch it, bitch."

"Sorry," Geo replies, managing to sound somewhat sincere, even though it was the other inmate who bumped into her. The last thing she needs is a fight, but if the woman starts one, she'll have no choice but to try and finish it. Otherwise she risks being seen as weak. She's watched enough TV to know that if she gets her ass kicked and a CO later asks her who did it, she can never, ever say. Tattling to the guards about anything is a giant no-no. In prison, the only thing lower than a pedophile (which is pretty fucking low) is a rat. And if you're a rat once, you're a rat forever. The other inmates will never trust you, and they'll make your life a living hell.

Bernie is in a good mood when Geo returns. She's still stretched out on the top mattress, a mountain of woman. The package of lico-rice whips is empty, the plastic bag dangling off the edge of the bed. She rolls over on her side, and with Geo standing, they're pretty much eye-to-eye.

"Good phone call?" Bernie asks.

"You asked me earlier if I had a man. I can now officially say I don't."

The woman reaches forward and moves a lock of hair out of Geo's face. "That's okay. In here, we don't need them. There's lots we can do without them."

Geo moves away, uneasy. She resists the urge to outwardly shudder, but inside, she feels sick. The inmate in the next bunk glances over, and a look of what appears to be pity crosses her face before she looks away again. Or maybe Geo's imagining it. Maybe she's being paranoid.

Nothing bad happens that night, or the night after, even though Geo lies in bed for hours, fists and jaw clenched, anticipating the worst. Every night, before she falls asleep, she can't believe this is her life. Every morning when she wakes up, she can't believe this is her life. It's finally hit her, that depression P. Martin warned her about. The overwhelming feeling that she doesn't truly belong here—that somewhere along the way a giant mistake has been made—is impossible to shake.

And the cloak of denial isn't protective at all. It doesn't help. It suffocates her. It makes her vulnerable. It feels like someone took her life, shattered it into small pieces, and then put it back together, all messed up. The pieces are recognizable, but they're all in the wrong places.

On her third day in the big room, she notices her bunkmate is in an extra-good mood. They go to dinner together that evening, sitting across from each other at a table with four other women. Bernie is chatty with Geo and the other inmates, talking up a storm about the good visit she had with her son earlier that morning. Every time she laughs, she places a hand on Geo's arm. It seems harmless enough.

A woman with deep chocolate skin and a close-cropped Afro stares at Geo from a nearby table. There's no hostility in her expression, just open curiosity. The other women at her table appear to defer to her, and occasionally they look over, too, murmuring to each other. Geo wonders what they see when they look at her. She knows she looks white, but she's also aware that her ethnicity is evident if people are really looking for it. It's in the caramel undertone to her skin, the slight almond shape of her eyes. Her hair, however, is straight. Her mother's hair.

When Geo finishes eating, the black woman meets her at the tray return. The other women from her table stand behind her, a few feet away, not close enough to hear their conversation, but close enough to react if anything happens. Her security detail, clearly.

"Are you black?" the woman asks. There's almost a nobility in the way she speaks. Her voice is rich, the pronunciation exact. Up close, her face is beautiful, unlined and smooth, with high cheekbones. Her eyes are almost black.

"One-eighth," Geo says, feeling the need to be specific, though she doesn't bother to explain the rest of it.

"I see you've made friends with Bernadette." The woman glances over at Bernie, who's still eating at their table. Then her gaze returns to Geo, her eyes roving over her skin, her eyes, her hair. "They call her the Mammoth." No explanation is required.

"We're not friends. She's my bunkmate."

The woman nods. "Let me know how that arrangement works out for you. If it doesn't, perhaps we can get you reassigned."

Bernie's good mood continues after dinner, and Geo is beginning to understand that her cellmate's moods are tied directly to how recently she ate. She's talkative up until lights-out, telling Geo about the various prisons she's done time in, including Oregon and California. Drugs and theft, mainly—typical charges for most of the women here. A career criminal. You'd think after a third conviction she'd find another profession, but that's not how a criminal's mind works.

The doors to the big room always remain open during the day unless there's a lockdown, but at lights-out the women are shut inside. If you need to pee, you have to ask one of the guards inside the booth, who are likely to be sleeping or watching a movie. Geo lies in bed and fatigue overcomes her instantly. She hasn't slept well since she's been here, and it's catching up with her. Finally, blissfully, she falls asleep.

It isn't until her bunkmate's sausage fingers are deep inside her vagina that she wakes up. Bernie is on top of her, her exorbitant flesh spilling over Geo's smaller body like a giant water balloon, the skin warm and moist and salty, breath reeking like spoiled milk. Her beady eyes resemble raisins in a mound of dough, and they stare right through her. Bernie smiles and licks Geo's face from her chin to her cheekbone. In the dark of the big room, her tongue looks purple.

Bottom bunk. This is why. Easier to rape someone. It's difficult to see their bunk from where the guard's booth is located at the other end of the room. And to make matters worse, Bernie has tucked the edges of her bedsheet under the upper mattress so that it falls around Geo's bunk like a curtain. If a CO glances over, all they'll see is the sheet. It gives Bernie enough time to get off her and to insist that what they're doing is mutual if the guard rips the sheet away. Punishment for consensual sex between inmates is a stay in maximum security.

They're already in maximum security.

Geo opens her mouth to scream, but Bernie is ready for that, and the large woman stuffs a sock into her mouth. It isn't necessary, though,

because her lungs are already compressed. The Mammoth, well over twice her weight and three times her width, is suffocating her. Panicked, she begins to writhe and kick as best she can, but her bunkmate just presses down harder, her sour breath wafting into Geo's ears as she touches herself. "Do you like it? Does it feel good? Get wet for me, baby."

Barely able to move, Geo's hand swipes at the sheet, but she can't grasp it well enough to tear it down. She only manages to move it a little bit, enough to catch a glimpse of the inmate in the next bunk staring over. After a second or two, the inmate looks away.

Somehow, in a room full of women, Geo is alone with her attacker.

Unable to do anything, she has no choice but to lie still. Tears roll silently down the sides of her face. A minute later, Bernie grunts and rolls off, allowing Geo to take several gasping breaths.

"Nobody can see anything in this corner, bitch," her bunkmate whispers, straightening her clothes. "Our bunk doesn't show on camera. So all you gotta do is say nothing, and I won't have to kill you. But you liked it, didn't you? I know you did."

Geo lets out a loud sob, cut short when the Mammoth punches her in the face. Then she removes the sheet and climbs back up to her bed. Geo places her pillow over her mouth so she can cry into it without being heard.

She doesn't understand any of this. Bernie is a *mother*. Her son's picture is taped on to the goddamned locker less than two feet away. Geo lies in bed the rest of the night, stinking of the woman's vinegary sweat, her legs squeezed together, terrified that the Mammoth will come back into her bed again. She takes comfort in the loud snores coming from above; it means her bunkmate is sound asleep.

Geo, however, does not sleep. Just like she didn't sleep the last time she was raped, all those years ago. She knows from experience that it takes a while before your soul comes back to you.

And it takes even longer before your soul stops bleeding.

4

The next morning, Geo listlessly picks at her soggy oatmeal and burned toast as her bunkmate sits across from her at the table, in her usual spot. She starts her job in the hair salon today, which, relatively speaking, should have been something to look forward to, but all she wants is to find a quiet spot and hide. If Bernie was in a good mood yesterday, she's in an even better mood today. Geo's managed to avoid making eye contact up till now, but when their eyes finally meet, the Mammoth smiles.

Not taking her eyes off Geo, Bernie waggles her fingers, then makes a show of putting them to her nose and inhaling deeply. Then she inserts her first and middle fingers into her mouth, and sucks. The women at their table laugh at the obscene gesture, albeit nervously. Geo's stomach turns. Before she can stop herself, she vomits into her tray and all over the front of her own shirt, and learns that oatmeal looks exactly the same coming up as it does going down.

"Shit!" The inmate sitting beside her jumps out of her seat. "You disgusting bitch."

A corrections officer is at her side a few seconds later.

"Get up, Shaw," he says, his face a mask of revulsion as he surveys the regurgitated oatmeal all over Geo's shirt and pants. "Do you need to go to the infirmary? What happened to your face?"

Geo's cheekbone is purple from where Bernie slammed her fist