

**THE GIRL  
FROM  
WIDOW  
HILLS**

ALSO BY MEGAN MIRANDA

*The Last House Guest*

*The Perfect Stranger*

*All the Missing Girls*

**THE GIRL  
FROM  
WIDOW  
HILLS  
  
MEGAN  
MIRANDA**



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*For my family*



# PROLOGUE

**■ WAS THE GIRL WHO** survived.

The girl who held on. The girl you prayed for, or at least pretended to pray for—thankful most of all that it wasn't your own child lost down there, in the dark.

And after: I was the miracle. The sensation. The story.

The story was what people wanted, and oh, it was a good one. Proof of humanity, and hope, and the power of the human spirit. After coming so close to tragedy, the public reaction bordered on rapturous, when it wasn't. Whether from joy or pure shock, the result was the same.

I was famous for a little while. The subject of articles, interviews, a book. It became a news story revisited after a year, then five, then ten.

I knew, now, what happened when you turned your story over to someone else. How you became something different, twisted to fit the confines of the page. Something to be consumed instead.

That girl is frozen in time, with her beginning, middle, and end: victim, endurance, triumph.

It was a good story. A good feeling. A good ending.

Fade to black.

*Megan Miranda*

As if, when the daily news moved on, and the articles ended, and the conversations turned, it was all over. As if it weren't just beginning.

**THERE WAS A TIME** when I knew what they were after. Reaching back to that cultural touchpoint, whenever someone would say: *The girl from Widow Hills, remember?*

That sudden rush of fear and hope and relief, all at once.  
A good feeling.

**I HAVEN'T BEEN THAT** girl in a long time.



# CHAPTER 1

*Wednesday, 7 p.m.*

**T**HE BOX SAT AT the foot of the porch steps, in a small clearing of dirt where grass still refused to grow. Cardboard sides left exposed to the elements, my full name written in black marker, the edge of my address just starting to bleed. It fit on my hip, like a child.

*I knew she was gone before I woke.*

The first line of my mother's book, the same thing she allegedly told the police when they first arrived. A sentiment repeated in every media interview in the months after the accident, her words transmitted directly into millions of living rooms across the country.

Nearly twenty years later, and this was the refrain now echoing in my head as I carried the box up the wooden porch stairs. The catch in her voice. That familiar cadence.

I shut and locked the front door behind me, took the delivery down the arched hall to the kitchen table. The contents shifted inside, nearly weightless.

It clattered against the table when I set it down, more noise than substance. I went straight for the drawer beside the sink, didn't prolong the moment to let it gather any more significance.

*Megan Miranda*

Box cutter through the triple-layer tape. Corners softened from the moisture still clinging to the ground from yesterday's rain. The lid wedged tight over the top. A chilled darkness within.

*I knew she was gone—*

Her words were cliché at best, an untruth at worst—a story crafted in hindsight.

Maybe she truly believed it. I rarely did, unless I was feeling generous—which, at the moment, staring into the sad contents of this half-empty box, I was. Right then, I wanted to believe—believe that, at one point, there had been a tether between my soul and hers, and she could feel something in the absence: a prickle at her neck, her call down the dim hallway that always felt humid, even in winter; my name—*Arden?*—echoing off the walls, even though she knew—*she just knew*—there would be no answer; the front door already ajar—the first true sign—and the screen door banging shut behind her as she ran barefoot into the wet grass, still in flannel pajama pants and a fraying, faded T-shirt, screaming my name until her throat went raw. Until the neighbors came. The police. The media.

*It was pure intuition.* The second line of her book. She knew I was gone. Of course she knew.

Now I wish I could've said the same.

Instead of the truth: that my mother had been gone for seven months before I knew it. Knew that she hadn't just disappeared on a binge, or had her phone disconnected for nonpayment, or found some guy and slipped into his life instead, shedding the skin of her previous one, while I'd just been grateful I hadn't heard from her in so long.

There was always this lingering fear that, no matter how far I went, no matter how many layers I put between us, she would appear one day like an apparition: that I'd step outside on my way to work one morning, and there she would be, looming on the

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front porch despite her size, with a too-wide smile and too-skinny arms. Throwing her bony arms around my neck and laughing as if I'd summoned her.

In reality, it took seven months for the truth to reach me, a slow grind of paperwork, and her, always, slipping to the bottom of the pile. An overdose in a county overrun with overdoses, in a state in the middle of flyover country, buried under a growing epidemic. No license in her possession, no address. Unidentified, until somehow they uncovered her name.

Maybe someone came looking for her—a man, face interchangeable with any other man's. Maybe her prints hit on something new in the system. I didn't know, and it didn't matter.

However it happened, they eventually matched her name: Laurel Maynor. And then she waited some more. Until someone looked twice, dug deeper. Maybe she'd been at a hospital sometime in the preceding years; maybe she'd written my name as a contact.

Or perhaps there was no tangible connection at all but a tug at their memory: *Wasn't she that girl's mother? The girl from Widow Hills?* Remembering the story, the headlines. Pulling out my name, tracing it across time and distance through the faintest trail of paperwork.

When the phone rang and they asked for me by my previous name, the one I never used anymore and hadn't since high school, it still hadn't sunk in. I hadn't even had the foresight in the moment before they said it. *Is this Arden Maynor, daughter of Laurel Maynor?*

*Ms. Maynor, I'm afraid we have some bad news.*

Even then I thought of something else. My mother, locked up inside a cell, asking me to come bail her out. I had been preparing myself for the wrong emotion, gritting my jaw, steeling my conviction—

She had been dead for seven months, they said. The logistics already taken care of on the county's dime, after remaining

unclaimed for so long. She would no longer need me for anything. There was just the small matter of her personal effects left behind to collect. It was a relief, I was sure, for them to be able to cross her off their list when they scrawled my address over the top of all that was left, triple-sealing it with packing tape, and shipping it halfway across the country, to me.

There was an envelope resting inside the box, an impersonal tally of the contents held within: *Clothing; canvas bag; phone; jewelry*. But the only item of clothing inside was a green sweater, tattered, with holes at the ends of the sleeves, which I assumed she must've been wearing. I didn't want to imagine how bad a state the rest of her clothes must have been in, if this was the only thing worth sending. Then: an empty bag that was more like a tote, the teeth of the zipper in place but missing the clasp. There once were words printed on the outside, but everything was a gray-blue smudge now, faded and illegible. Under that, the phone. I turned it over in my hand: a flip phone, old and scratched. Probably from ten years earlier, a pay-as-you-go setup.

And at the bottom, inside a plastic bag, a bracelet. I held it in my palm, let the charm fall over the side of my hand so that it swung from its chain that once had been gold but had since oxidized in sections to a greenish-black. The charm, a tiny ballet slipper, was dotted with the smallest glimmer of stone at the center of the bow.

I held my breath, the charm swinging like a metronome, keeping time even as the world went still. A piece of our past that somehow remained, that she'd never sold.

Even the dead could surprise you.

In that moment, holding the fine bracelet, I felt something snap tight in my chest, bridging the gap, the divide. Something between this world and the next.

The bracelet slipped from my palm onto the table, coiling up

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like a snake. I reached my hands into the bottom of the box again, stretched my fingers into the corners, searching for more.

There was nothing left. The light in the room shifted, as if the curtains had moved. Maybe it was just the trees outside, casting shadows. My own field of vision darkening in a spell of dizziness. I tried to focus, grabbing the edge of the table to hold myself steady. But I heard a rushing sound, as if the room were hollowing itself out.

And I felt it then, just like she said—an emptiness, an absence. The darkness, opening up.

All that remained inside the box was a scent, like earth. I pictured cold rocks and stagnant water—four walls closing in—and took an unconscious step toward the door.

Twenty years ago, I was the girl who had been swept away in the middle of the night during a storm: into the system of pipes under the wooded terrain of Widow Hills. But I'd survived, against all odds, enduring the violence of the surge, keeping my head above water until the flooding mercilessly receded, eventually making my way toward the daylight, grabbing on to a grate—where I was ultimately found. It had taken nearly three days to find me, but the memory of that time was long gone. Lost to youth, or to trauma, or to self-preservation. My mind protecting me, until I couldn't pull the memory to the surface, even if I wanted to. All that remained was the fear. Of closed walls, of an endless dark, of no way out. An instinct in place of a memory.

My mother used to call us both survivors. For a long time, I believed her.

The scent was probably nothing but the cardboard itself, left exposed to the damp earth and chilled evening. The outside of my own home, brought in.

But for a second, I remembered, like I hadn't back then or ever since. I remembered the darkness and the cold and my small

*Megan Miranda*

hand gripped tight on a rusted metal grate. I remembered my own ragged breathing in the silence, and something else, far away. An almost sound. Like I could hear the echo of a yell, my name carried on the wind into the unfathomable darkness—across the miles, under the earth, where I waited to be found.

## **TRANSCRIPT FROM PRESS CONFERENCE**

**OCTOBER 17, 2000**

We are asking for the public's assistance in locating six-year-old Arden Maynor, who has been missing since either late last night or early this morning. Brown hair, brown eyes, three feet six inches, and approximately thirty-eight pounds. She was last seen in her bedroom on Warren Street outside the town center of Widow Hills, wearing blue pajamas. Anyone with information is urged to call the number posted on the screen.

**CAPTAIN MORGAN HOWARD**

Widow Hills Police Department

# CHAPTER 2

*Friday, 3 a.m.*

**HEARD MY NAME AGAIN**, coming from far away, cutting through the darkness.

“Liv. Hey, Liv.” Coming closer. “*Olivia.*” The scene sharpened, the voice softened. I blinked twice, my vision focusing on the row of hedges in front of me, the low-hanging branches, the light of a front porch glowing an eerie yellow through the leaves.

And then Rick’s face, the white of his shirt as he turned his body sideways and angled himself through the line of vegetation dividing our properties. “Okay,” he said as he approached, hands held out like I might spook. “You okay?”

“What?” I couldn’t orient myself. The chill of the night wind, the dark, Rick standing before me in a T-shirt and gray sweatpants, the skin wrinkled around his eyes, callused hands on my arms near my elbows—then off.

I took a step back and winced from a sting on the sole of my right foot, the pain jolting through the fog. I was outside. Outside in the middle of the night and—

*No. Not this. Not again.*

My reflexes were too slow to panic yet, but I understood the facts: I’d come to in the wide-open air, bare feet and dry, itchy



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throat. I took a quick tally of myself: a sharp pain between two of my toes; the hems of my pajama pants damp from the ground; palms coated with grit and dirt.

“All right, I got you.” Hands on my shoulders, turning me back toward my house. Like an animal that needed to be led back inside. “It’s okay. My son, he used to sleepwalk sometimes. Never found him outside, though.”

I tried to focus on his mouth, on the words he was saying, but something was slipping from me. His voice was still too far away, the scene too dreamy. Like I wasn’t entirely sure I was back from wherever I’d been.

“No, I don’t,” I said, the words scratching at my throat. I was suddenly parched, desperately thirsty. “It doesn’t happen anymore,” I said, my feet rising up the front porch steps, a tingle in my limbs, like the feeling was returning after too long.

“Mm,” he said.

It was true, what I’d told him. The lingering night terrors, yes—especially around the anniversary, when everything felt so close to the surface. When every knock at the door, every unknown caller, made my stomach plummet. But the sleepwalking, no, it didn’t happen anymore. Hadn’t since I was a child. When I was younger, I’d taken medicine, and by the time I’d stopped—a forgotten dose, then two, then a prescription that had not been renewed—I’d outgrown the episodes. It was a thing that had happened in the past. A thing, like everything that came before, that was left behind in another life, to another girl.

“Well,” he said, standing beside me on my front porch, “seems like it does, my dear.” The porch light cast long shadows across the yard.

Rick put his hand on the doorknob, but it wouldn’t turn. He jostled it again, then sighed. “How’d you manage that one?” He looked at my empty hands, like I might have a key lodged in my

fist, then narrowed his eyes at the dirt under my nails, his gaze drifting down to the blood on my toes.

I wanted to tell him something—about the things my subconscious was capable of. About survival, and instinct. But the evening chill finally registered on a gust of cool wind, goose bumps rising in a rush. North Carolina summer nights, the altitude could still do that. Rick shivered, looking away as if he'd be able to see the cold coming next time.

"Do you still have a key?" I asked, crossing my arms over my stomach, balling up my hands. He was the original owner of both his lot and mine, and I'd bought this house directly from him. Rick had designed it himself. At one time, it had been occupied by his son, but he'd left town a few years back.

Rick's face tightened, the corners of his lips pulling down. "I told you to change the locks."

"I'm getting to it. It's on my list. So do you?"

He shook his head, almost smiling. "I gave you everything I had."

I pulled at the door myself, imagining this other version of me. The one who must've walked out the entrance but managed to lock the handle behind her before pulling it shut. Muscle memory. Safety first.

The porch beams squeaked as I walked to the living room window. I tried lifting the base, but it, too, was locked.

"Liv," Rick said, watching me peer in the darkened window, hands cupped to my eyes. I hadn't flipped a single light switch inside. "Please get the locks done. Listen, my son's friends, they weren't all good, not all good people, and—"

"Rick," I said, turning to face him. He was always seeing another version of this place, from years ago, flushed out long before I'd arrived. Before the hospital came through, and the construction, and the shiny new pavement and chain restaurants and

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people. “If someone was going to rob me, they probably wouldn’t wait over a year to do it.” He opened his mouth, but I held out my hand. “I’ll change them, okay? Doesn’t help with the situation right now, though.”

He sighed, and his breath escaped in a cloud of fog. “Maybe you got out some other way?”

I followed him down the porch stairs and stepped carefully through the grass and weeds as we paced the perimeter together, as if we were following the ghost of me. My bedroom window was too high to reach from the slope of the side yard, but it appeared secure. We tried the back door, then the office and kitchen windows—anything within reach.

Nothing was disturbed, nothing gave an inch. Rick looked up at the set of beveled glass windows from the unfinished attic space on the second floor, frowning. The windows were partly ajar, leading to a small balcony that was purely decorative.

I fought back a chill. “I think that’s a stretch,” I said. The upstairs was mostly unused, empty space, anyway, except for the single wooden rocking chair left behind, which was too large to maneuver down the stairs—as if it had been built in that very spot and was now trapped. A single bulb hung from the center of the exposed-beam ceiling, the only place you could stand fully upright between the slanting eaves.

There was one narrow stairway up, tucked behind a door in the hallway. The space was too enclosed, too dark, every one of my senses elevated. From up there, you could hear the inner workings of the house: water moving through the pipes, the gas heater catching, the whirl of the exhaust fan. I rarely went up there, other than to keep it clean. But any time I did, I’d gotten into the habit of opening those windows immediately after climbing the stairs, just to get through the task.

I’d heard if you were ever trapped underwater and didn’t know

which way was up, you could orient yourself by blowing out air and following the bubbles—a trail to safety. The open window worked much the same. If I ever needed it, I'd feel the air moving and know which way was out.

I must've forgotten to close them after the last time.

But a jump from up there would've done a lot more damage than dirt on my hands and a scratch on my foot.

Rick shuffled his feet, and it was only then that I noticed he was barefoot, too. That he'd heard me or seen me in the night and rushed out to help before grabbing his own shoes, or a coat. He circled to the back entrance of the house, and I followed.

"My son, he used to keep a key . . ." He bent down to the bottom rail of the wooden steps. Fished his fingers into the splintered hollow. Pulled out something coated in mud. He placed a hand on his knee as he straightened again, then handed me the metal with a crooked grin. "Still here, I'll be."

I slid the key into the back door, and it turned. "Hallelujah," I said. I handed the key back to him, but he didn't take it.

"Just in case," I said. "Please. I'll feel better knowing you have a copy."

He was frowning when I placed it in his open palm, but he slid it into the pocket of his sweatpants. He looked like a different person in the night, without his jeans and flannel shirt and his beige work boots laced tight, regardless of the fact that he had long since retired from his job as a general contractor. He had just turned seventy earlier this year, his hair a shock of gray over a deeply lined face—all proof that he'd spent decades out in the sun, building his own life by hand. He still tinkered around in his shed, still told me if I ever wanted to finish the upstairs space, we could do it together. But apart from his typical attire, he seemed smaller now. Frailer. The contrast was unnerving.

Rick entered the house first and flipped the light to the kitchen,

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peering around the room. The wineglass had been left in the sink. I felt the urge to straighten up, prove I was taking care of this place. That I was worth it. He was soft-spoken but perceptive, and his gaze kept moving, to the arched entrance, to the dark hall.

Rick was the one I'd gone to when I'd found a baby bat hanging from my front porch in mid-daylight; when there'd been a snake at the foot of the wooden steps; when I'd heard something in the bushes. He'd said the bat had probably gotten lost, then he'd used a broom to urge it along; he'd declared the snake harmless; he'd told me to stomp my feet and make noise and act bigger than I was to scare whatever might be watching. Most of the wildlife had been driven farther back with the development over the past couple of years, but not all of it. Things got lost. Things staked their claim. Things stood their ground.

He was looking over the house now as if he could see its past remaining. Different people inside, with a different history. He twisted the gold band on his ring finger with his other hand.

"I heard you yelling," he said. "I heard you."

I closed my eyes, searching for the dream. Wondered what I'd been calling into the night. Whether it was a noise or a name—the word on my tongue, in my memory, as my eyes drifted over the bare kitchen table. The box of her things tucked out of sight in my bedroom closet now, where it had been stored since it had arrived two days earlier.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No, no, don't be." His hands started to faintly shake, as they seemed to be doing more and more now. The tremors, either from the start of illness or from craving his next drink. I didn't ask, out of politeness. Same way he didn't ask about the marks on my arm even though his gaze would often linger on the long scar, eyes sharp before cutting away each time.

He raised his trembling fingers to my hair now, pulling a dead

leaf from a spot above my ear. It must've gotten caught as I walked through the lower-hanging branches between our properties. "Glad I found you," he said.

I shook my head, stepping back. "I used to. I used to sleepwalk. I don't anymore," I repeated, like a child who didn't want it to be true.

He nodded once. The clock on the microwave said it was 3:16. "Get some sleep," he said, pulling the back door open.

I had to be up in less than three hours. It was pointless. "You, too."

"And lock up," he called as the door latched shut behind him, the silverware drawer rattling. His bare feet made hardly any sound as he walked down the back steps.

Now I peered around the house like Rick had done, like I was looking for signs of an intruder. Holding my breath, listening for something else that might be here. Even though it was just me.

I trailed my fingers down the wall of the dark hallway as I headed for the bedroom door, gaping open at the other end. I flicked the switch just inside. The sheets were violently kicked back, pulled from the corners of the mattress. A chill ran through me. The scene looked familiar—the aftermath of a night terror. Though I hadn't had one in years. My childhood doctors had attributed the episodes to PTSD, a result of the horrors of those three days trapped underground.

It was the box on the shelf of my closet, I decided. My subconscious, triggered by that almost-memory—of the cold and the dark—that may have been real, but maybe not. That same nightmare I used to have as a child in the years after the accident:

Rocks, all around, everywhere my hands could touch. Cold and damp. An endless darkness.

I used to wake from the nightmare feeling that even the walls

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were too close—kicking off the sheets, throwing out my limbs, pushing back against something that was no longer there. The fear lingering in place of the memory.

I remembered what my mom used to do back then. Hot chocolate, to calm me. The pills, to protect me. A hook and eye on the top of my door, for night. A rattle, the first line of defense, so she would wake. So she would stop me this time.

I turned back for the hall, and the glow from the bedroom lit up the wood floor. A few drops of blood trailing down the hall. I couldn't tell whether that had happened before I left the house or just now. I followed the trail, but it stopped at the entrance to the kitchen again. On the left, the hall forked off to the kitchen and another bedroom, which I used as my home office; on the right, the arched entrance to the living room led straight to the front door. There was no sign of blood anywhere else. Just this hall.

I sat on the living room sofa, examining the cut on my left foot. Something was wedged between my first two toes. A splinter, I thought at first. But it was too shiny. A small piece of metal. No, it was glass. I pulled it out with my nails and held it to the light, narrowing my eyes, to be sure.

It was small and sharp, coated in dirt and blood, impossible to tell the original color. I looked around the room, searching for something that had been broken. A vase on the coffee table; a glass mirror over the couch; a lamp on my bedside table. But nothing appeared damaged or disturbed.

I kept going, room by room. Checking upstairs, even, though I kept nothing fragile there. The stairway didn't have a light switch, and I felt my way through the dark, trailing my hands along the narrowed walls. The moonlight slanted through the open windows, and the shadow of the rocking chair came into focus. I reached up for the chain to turn on the light, but when I pulled

*Megan Miranda*

it, nothing happened. I felt around the space above my head, but there was no bulb attached to the base. Now I couldn't remember if there ever had been.

A chill ran through me from the gust of cold air funneling into the room. I pulled the window doors shut, latching the hook between them—there was no screen, a bird could've gotten in.

When I looked out into the night from this height, my stomach dropped. I backed away quickly, heading downstairs before the panic set in, resuming my search. Checking the shelves, the windows, counting the cups in the cabinets, peering into the garbage can. Growing restless and increasingly panicked as the minutes ticked by.

Searching for signs of what I had done in the dark.



## TRANSCRIPT FROM LIVE INTERVIEW

OCTOBER 18, 2000

She's a tiny little thing. Well, you've all seen her picture by now. Big brown eyes and all that hair. She was just standing there in the middle of the street, in the dead of night, outside my kitchen window. This was before she went missing. Maybe a month or two back. My daughter was sick, so I was getting her a glass of water. Spooked me at first, seeing someone standing out there, watching back. Until I turned on the porch light and saw it was her. I called out to her from the front door, but she didn't answer. I knew who she was, knew her mother. Knew where they lived. It's not that far, not even a mile, probably. But she must've walked all that way barefoot, in the dark. Had to cross three or four streets between her house and mine—I'm just grateful there aren't many cars out that time of night.

I walked up to her and said her name again, but she just stared right through me. There was nothing behind her eyes.

MARY LONG

Resident of Widow Hills

# CHAPTER 3

*Friday, 6 a.m.*

**HADN'T GONE BACK TO** sleep, too high on the adrenaline, trying to understand what had happened during the blank spots of my mind.

But everything seemed calmer in the daylight. The sliver of glass could've come from anywhere. Outside, maybe, from any time in the past. A forgotten shard rising up from the dirt in the rain; the earth turning over.

The disorientation and panic, a side effect of waking up outside with no understanding of how I'd gotten there. A biological reaction. I had to keep busy, keep occupied. Keep my mind from drifting back to the contents of the box in my closet. The sweater. The phone. The bag. The bracelet.

I took a long shower, focusing instead on the pressing matters of work: the quarterly report for the hospital and the unyielding budget that required department cuts to be made—and it would be up to me to give an opinion on the matter. Two years in, and I was still proving myself.

My alarm went off while I was getting dressed, and when I silenced it, I noticed a text that had come through late the night before, just after midnight.

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A quick drop of my stomach at Jonah Lowell's name. Even now. Every time. *Thinking of you.*

Of course. Unprompted, after months of silence, waiting until I'd successfully excised him from my thoughts. Of course, in the middle of the night, when I could picture him in his living room, hair disheveled, feet propped up, bourbon beside his laptop.

Last I'd heard from him was three months earlier, in May, when he'd texted: *Will you be in town for graduation?*

A slippery slope with him.

Back in May, I'd responded on impulse, had slid into an ongoing conversation, an endless flirtation. I'd been talked into a visit. I knew better now.

With the distance, it had been easy to forget why it hadn't worked.

To be fair, I was here in Central Valley, with my current job, because of Jonah. He'd been my grad school professor in health care management initially, was coming here on a temporary consulting assignment, and there would be a spot for me in the group if I wanted it. I was in even before I knew the details: It was a newer hospital in a rural area, necessary to the surrounding communities but still looking to find its footing—and its funding. It had been having trouble getting doctors and nurses to come and then stay.

Central Valley really was halfway from one place to the next, but not close enough to either extreme to commute. The college was too far to the east, and no one but the skiers heading west came out this far. On the map, this town was a pit stop. A bathroom break between the outer edge of a larger town and the mountain lodges.

I'd come because I thought I was in love with Jonah back then. But I'd stayed because I was fully in love with the place instead.

When the hospital offered me a full-time role, I accepted. It was good for my résumé, a higher position with more autonomy

than I'd land at a larger facility, and I'd already recruited a lot of the staff.

Most of the doctors and nurses were young. Not entrenched in a community with their families but free of the roots that held them in place, willing and hungry for an opportunity.

Central Valley was a town that had transformed itself around the hospital, that existed in its current form because of it. All shiny new and built over a rural stretch of land, with the best of both worlds. It was a young town, and I was young.

The town center was self-contained and self-sufficient. It provided and fueled itself in a closed loop. The old Victorians getting fresh coats of paint, renovated porches, new landscaping. On the outer arch: apartment complexes with glass-walled gyms and mostly empty playgrounds. I'd lived in one such building myself when I first arrived, in housing provided by the school.

It was so different from where I was from, seven hours to the west. Widow Hills, Kentucky, was perfectly nice, with tree-lined streets and cookie-cutter houses that backed to the woods, but nothing new had come to the area in at least two generations. It seemed no one wanted to put a business in a place called Widow Hills.

Nothing bad had happened in Widow Hills to give it the name. It was, up until my accident, a very safe place to live. At least that's what the articles all said.

Living in Central Valley required more of an active process. It attracted a certain type of person, outdoorsy and weatherproof. Who would trade convenience for adventure. Stability for curiosity.

But *here*. *Here*, I told the potential hires, you could ski and hike and tube down the river. *Here*, you could discover something—about this place and yourself. *Here*, you could be the person you always imagined you might be.

## THE GIRL FROM WIDOW HILLS

Say it enough, and you might convince yourself, too.

Every day on my way in to work, I'd pass a house with a for-sale sign in the yard. Every day I caught sight of something new as the leaves changed and fell. A bird feeder. A balcony from a second-floor window. A set of slate stepping stones through the open grass field.

Something about it called out to me. Reminded me of the ghost of that first house, with my mom and me. Before the cameras and the money. Before the move to a generic suburb with a white picket fence—the first in a series of steps that would bring us several states north but eventually circle us back to nowhere.

When the consulting assignment was finished, and I accepted the job but lost the subsidized housing, the first place I thought to call was the number on that sign.

Jonah had seen it once when I'd first moved in, laughed under his breath, and declared I'd gone full-country. I said I was only a handful of miles from the town center, as the crow flies. He said the fact that I now used the term *as the crow flies* only proved his point.

I'd spent enough of my time unraveling the things he said and meant. Trying to decide whether it was a critique of me or of him. Whether his words meant anything at all other than a way to pass the time.

I dressed early for the day. Slipped on my shoes. Tied my hair in a quick bun. Cleaned the blood from the crevices of my wood floor on my way out.

I decided to ignore the text.

**THERE WAS A TWENTY-FOUR-HOUR** grocery-slash-convenience store three blocks from the hospital, where my road intersected with the rest of civilization—one of the few places native to the town. It

was called Grocery and More, and there was no name more fitting. Here, you could get dinner and packing tape; a magazine and a box of nails; Advil and wine. The owners understood the importance of a twenty-four-hour one-stop shop when servicing hospital personnel with nontraditional hours.

It was just barely before seven a.m. when I pulled into the lot. There were a couple of cars scattered throughout, but nothing like the afternoon crowd.

Inside, there was faint classical music playing. It was a time warp not only in that you could never tell what time of day it was in the bright fluorescent-lit interior, but also because of the layout. There was a spinning rack of chips beside an aisle of unfinished lumber and hardware. Fruit and ice cream in refrigerated bins around the corner. A coffee station next to the checkout area. One clerk working the early shift, watching a TV behind the counter, which was tuned to an old black-and-white western with the sound off. He tipped his head to me when the door soundlessly swished closed, sealing us back inside.

I picked up a basket beside the entrance and went straight for the hardware aisle. The sleepwalking was probably a one-time thing, but it wouldn't hurt to add a lock.

Everything was a balance: A few extra seconds spent unhooking this lock in a fire could be deadly. But so could turning on the stove in my sleep. Walking into the road. Getting hit. Getting lost. Falling.

The hook-and-eye latches were buried under a mismatched assortment of locks and hinges, but I finally got one in my basket. I'd just turned out of the aisle when I collided with another shopper.

"Oh—"

"Shit, sorry," the other woman said.

Our baskets had caught, and we set them on the ground to disentangle them.

## THE GIRL FROM WIDOW HILLS

She hadn't looked up yet, but I recognized her. Almost-white-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, sharp angled cheekbones. Someone from the hospital, but she was out of uniform, and it always took my mind another second to catch up. Scrolling through a list of faces, removing the stethoscopes, the name tags, the scrubs. This was Dr. Britton in the emergency department. Sydney. "Hey. Hi, Sydney. Sorry about this."

She stood slowly, her basket hooked on her arm, indentation already forming in her pale skin, weighed down by the microwave lasagna and the bottle of red. "Liv? God, I'm sorry. I didn't even notice it was you." She raised her arm slightly, the basket swaying. "Just getting off work. I make no excuses."

She eyed my basket—empty except for the hook-and-eye latch—and then rubbed her eyes with her free hand. "Sorry, if I don't get out of here soon, I'll crash before the microwave finishes. And I've got a marathon of *Law & Order* waiting for me."

"Enjoy," I said. Then I turned down the next aisle, spent a few moments trying to remember the type of liquor in Rick's cabinet. Settled on a bottle of dark rum that looked the same shape and shade—as a thank-you, and as an apology.

I stopped for a coffee before paying.

"Quite the eclectic basket you've got here," the checkout clerk said. He was cheerful and soft and of indeterminate age, somewhere between twenty-five and forty. But his smile was contagious, even this early in the morning.

He scanned the hook-and-eye lock, rang up the coffee I'd just poured myself beside the counter.

"Hey, it's your store," I said. I, too, made no excuses.

He laughed once, loud and sharp, then paused at the liquor, looked from the bottle label to me, then back. "ID?"

I pulled it from my wallet, and he took it from my hand, squinting.

*Megan Miranda*

Something fell in the aisle behind me. The sound of boxes tumbling off their stack. I turned, smiling, expecting to see Sydney, clumsy with fatigue. How you can get with lack of sleep. Disoriented. Slow to react. But instead I saw a man in jeans and a short-sleeved button-down, ball cap on, tuck himself away behind the spinning rack of chips.

My smile fell, my shoulders tensed.

I thought, from the way he seemed to be watching, that maybe it was someone I knew. But there was something else. A long-cultivated instinct.

It was the way he was standing—half-hidden—that made my skin prickle. The way he turned back to the chips, spinning the rack but looking at nothing. A feeling I hadn't gotten in a long time: a feeling that meant they were looking for me.

It made sense: On the ten-year anniversary a decade earlier, the journalists had come out of the woodwork. In supermarket aisles, outside the high school entrance, resting against the side of our neighbor's house. Manifesting from structures all over town like something out of a horror movie.

I'd been sixteen, a junior in high school. I saw my English teacher interviewed on the news, saying I was a good kid, a solid student, a little quiet, but who could blame me. My mom went on a talk show—it was an offer we couldn't turn down, she said, though I refused to join her. They showed our new house on the news. Blurred out the numbers, as if that mattered. Used my picture from the yearbook.

I received letters of every type, from every sort of person, for the next six months.

*We were praying for you—*

*Wow, you grew up nice—*

*Think you can just ignore the people who helped you, ungrateful bitch—*

It was part of the reason we'd moved again—this time to Ohio.



## THE GIRL FROM WIDOW HILLS

Part of the reason I'd changed my name. So I could start fresh as an adult. Enter college as someone new. The gift of being a person with no history.

The twenty-year anniversary was less than two months away. Would there be more media coverage, regardless of whether they tracked me down? Was it still of public interest, all these years later?

"Have a good day, Olivia," the clerk said, pulling my attention. My ID was in his outstretched hand. I slid it back into my wallet, then peered over my shoulder again, but the man was gone.

"Thanks," I said to the clerk, keeping my head down as I strode for the automatic-exit doors.

He was there. Outside, waiting. Leaning against a blue car parked next to mine. Unwrapping, on the hood of his car, a breakfast sandwich that didn't seem like it had come from the store. "Hey," he said, all nonchalant, taking a bite. Taking his time.

The lot was otherwise empty. I unlocked the door, but kept the keys in my hand, an old instinct rising.

He chewed and swallowed, pointing his sandwich at me. "I know you," he said.

"Don't think so," I said. He had the air of a journalist, if not the look. Not the clothes and not the car, from what I was accustomed to. But the way of casually lingering, pretending he hadn't been waiting just for me.

"Olivia, right?"

I was already shutting the driver's-side door. Mentally working through the moves to escape, tallying the seconds to get away. The time to start my car and accelerate out of the lot versus the time it would take him to do the same—and follow. I didn't second-guess myself. I'd been born with a healthy dose of self-preservation, and I'd learned to trust my gut.

In my rush to leave, I didn't give him another glance. Couldn't

*Megan Miranda*

say what he looked like if asked, other than: guy, white, average height and build. Perhaps he'd known my name to start, or perhaps he'd just overheard the clerk inside.

Whatever he was after, I didn't have to speak—I knew that by now.

But how easily he could topple everything I'd built. The comfort of anonymity. All that I'd run from in Widow Hills. Here, the scars just scars—*surgery after an accident*, I always said, and that wasn't a lie. My name was my legal name now. I stuck to the truth: *Moved here from Ohio for college; fell out of touch with my family; came into some money when I was younger.*

None of these things were lies.

People tended to fill in the blanks however they wanted. It was not my job to correct them.

## TRANSCRIPT FROM LIVE INTERVIEW

OCTOBER 18, 2000

Yes, I found her on my porch once. I worked the six a.m. shift that day, had to leave just after five. My dog was barking, and it was still dark when I opened the door, but there she was. I remember I said, “Honey? Is your mom okay?” Because I couldn’t remember her name.

She turned around and walked back home. I didn’t realize she was sleeping.

I wish I’d told someone, but I didn’t know.

STUART GOSS

Resident of Widow Hills