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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
BEAUTIFUL LIES AND *SLIVER OF TRUTH*

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BLACK OUT

A NOVEL

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A Novel

LISA UNGER


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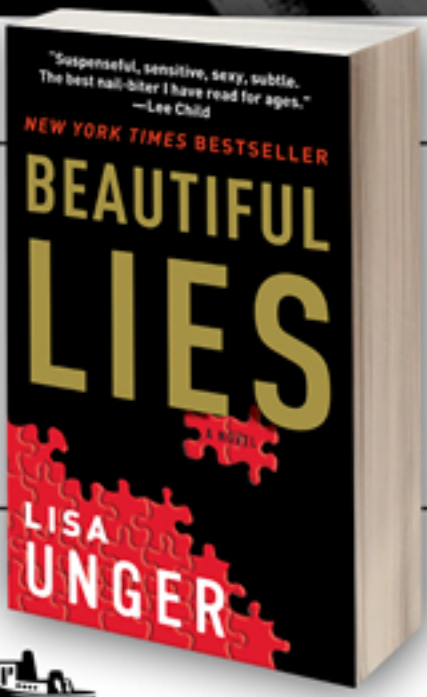

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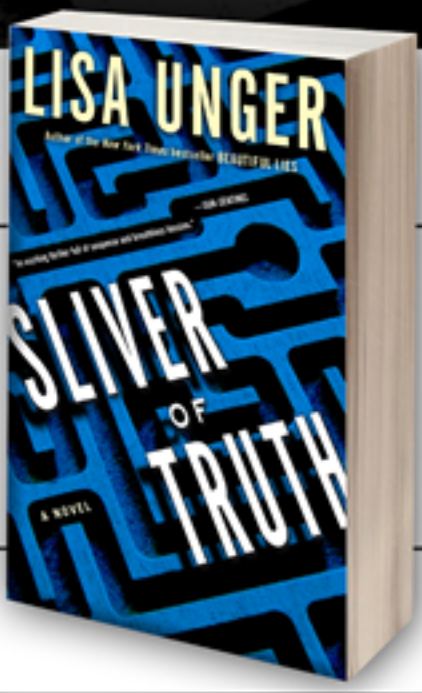

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Prologue

Today something interesting happened. I died. *How awful,* they'll say. *How tragic. And she was so young, with everything ahead of her.* There will be an article in the paper about how I burned too bright and died too young. My funeral will be small . . . a few weeping friends, some sniffling neighbors and acquaintances. How they'll clamor to comfort my poor husband, Gray. They'll promise to be there for our daughter as she grows up without me. *So sad,* they'll say to each other. *What was she thinking?*

But after a time this sadness will fade, their lives will resume a normal rhythm, and I'll become a memory, a memory that makes them just a little sad, that reminds them how quickly it can all come to an end, but one at which they can also smile. Because there were good times. So many good times where we drank too much, where we shared belly laughs and big steaks off the grill.

I'll miss them, too, and remember them well. But not the same way. Because my life with them was a smoke screen, a carefully constructed lie. And although I got to know some of them and to love them, not one of them ever knew me, not really. They knew only the parts of myself I chose to share, and even some of those things were invention. I'll remember them as one remembers a favorite film; beautiful moments and phrases will come back to me, move me again. But ultimately I'll know that my time with them was fiction, as fragile and insubstantial as pages in a book.

Now I'm standing at the bow of a cargo ship. It cuts through the

night with surprising speed for its size, throwing up great whispering plumes of foam as it eats the high waves. The water around me is black. My face is wet with sea spray and so windburned it's starting to go numb. A week ago I was so terrified of the water that I wouldn't have dreamed of sitting close enough to feel it on my skin. Because there is such a myriad of things to fear now, I have been forced to conquer this one.

The man at the helm has already gestured at me twice, made a large gathering motion with his arm to indicate that I should come inside. I lift a hand to show I'm all right. It hurts out here; it's painful, and that's what I want. But more than that, the bow of this boat represents the farthest point away from the life I've left behind. I'll need more distance before I can climb back inside, maybe get some sleep.

I can feel the heat of my predator's breath on my neck. For him I will never be just a memory. I'll always be a goal, always the thing that lies ahead just out of reach. If I have anything to do with it, that's where I'll remain. But I know his hunger, his patience, his relentlessness. His heart beats once for every ten times mine does. And I'm so tired now. I wonder here in the frigid cold if the chase will end tonight and which of us will be dead, really dead, when it's done.

I stand in the bow and support myself on the rail. I remind myself that death is my easy escape; I can go there anytime. All I have to do is to bend, drop my weight over the railing, and I will fall into black. But I won't do that, not tonight. We cling to life, don't we? Even the most pathetic among us, those of us with the fewest reasons to keep drawing breath, we hold on. Still, it gives me some small comfort to know that death is an option, handy and at the ready.

Finally the cold and the wind are too much for me. I turn to make my way back to my tiny cabin, and that's when I see it: the round, white eye of a spotlight coming up behind us, the small red and green navigation lights beneath it. The craft is still too far for me to hear its

engine. I can just see the white point bouncing in the black. I turn to signal to the captain, but he's no longer at the helm. I think about climbing up to warn him, but I'm not sure it will do any good. I hesitate a moment and then decide I'd be better off finding a place to hide myself. If he's found me, there's nothing anyone will be able to do. I realize I am not surprised; I am not at all surprised that he has found me. I have been waiting.

There is a familiar thud-thud in my chest as I look over into the big waters and think again about that dark temptation. It would be the ultimate defiance, to rob him of the only thing he's ever wanted, the ultimate way to show him that my life belonged to me and no one else. But a small round face, with deep brown eyes framed by a chaos of golden curls, a tiny valentine of a mouth, keeps me on deck. She doesn't know that her mommy died today. I hope she won't have to grieve me, to grow up broken and damaged by my early demise. That's why I have to stay alive. So that someday, hopefully sooner rather than later, I can go back to her and tell her why I named her what I did, so that I can take her in my arms and be the mother to her that I always wanted to be.

But first I have to fight and win. I'm not sure how much fight I have left in me, but I *will* fight. Not so much for the shattered, cored-out woman I have become but for my daughter, Victory.

PART ONE
cracked

The fair Ophelia!—Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.

HAMLET, III.I

1

When my mother named me Ophelia, she thought she was being literary. She didn't realize she was being tragic. But then, I'm not sure she understood the concept of tragedy, the same way that people who are born into money don't realize they're rich, don't even know there's another way to live. She thought the name was beautiful, thought it sounded like a flower, knew it was from a famous story (play or novel, she wouldn't have been able to tell you). I guess I should consider myself lucky, since her other choices were Lolita and Gypsy Rose. At least Ophelia had some dignity.

I'm thinking this as I push a cart through the produce aisle of my local supermarket, past rows of gleaming green apples and crisp blooms of lettuce, of fat, shiny oranges and taut, waxy red peppers. The overly familiar man in meats waves at me and gives me what I'm sure he thinks is a winning smile but which only serves to make my skin crawl. "Hi, honey," he'll say. Or "Hi, sweetie." And I'll wonder what it is about me that invites him to be so solicitous. I am certainly not an open or welcoming person; I can't afford to be too friendly. Of course, I can't afford to be too *unfriendly,* either. I look at my reflection in the metal siding of the meat case to confirm that I am aloof and unapproachable, but not strangely so. My reflection is warped and distorted by the various dings and scars in the metal.

"Hi there, darlin'," he says with an elaborate sweep of his hand and a slight bow.

I give him a cool smile, more just an upturning of the corner of my mouth. He steps aside with a flourish to let me pass.

I have become the type of woman who would have intimidated my mother. Most days I pull my freshly washed, still-wet blond hair back severely into a ponytail at the base of my neck. The simplicity of this appeals to me. I wear plain, easy clothes—a pair of cropped chinos and an oversize white cotton blouse beneath a navy barn jacket. Nothing special, except that my bag and my shoes cost more than my mother might have made in two months. She would have noticed something like that. It would have made her act badly, turned her catty and mean. I don't feel anything about this. It's a fact, plain and simple, as facts tend to be. Well, some of them, anyway. But I still see her in my reflection, her peaches-and-cream skin, her high cheekbones, her deep brown eyes. I see her in my daughter, too.

"Annie? *Hel-lo-oh?*"

I'm back in produce, though, honestly, I don't remember what caused me to drift back here. I am holding a shiny, ripe nectarine in my hand. I must have been gazing at it as if it were a crystal ball, trying to divine the future. I look up to see my neighbor Ella Singer watching me with equal parts amusement and concern. I'm not sure how long she has been trying to get my attention or how long I've been staring at the nectarine. We're more than neighbors; we're friends, too. Everyone here calls me Annie, even Gray, who knows better.

"Where were *you?*" she asks.

"Sorry," I say, with a smile and a quick shake of my head. "Just out of it."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Good. Great."

She nods, grabs a few nectarines of her own. "Where's Vicky?"

All the women in our neighborhood, her teachers, her friends' mothers, call my daughter Vicky. I don't correct them, but it always

makes me cringe internally. It's not her name. I named her Victory because it meant something to me, and I hope in time it will mean something to her. True, I named her in a fit of overconfidence. But Gray understood my choice and agreed. We were both feeling overconfident that day. I'm still clinging to that feeling. Though recently, for reasons I can't explain, it has begun to fade.

"She's with Gray's stepmom. Swimming lessons with Grandma," I say, dropping the fruit into a clear plastic bag. The nectarines give off a fresh, sweet aroma. They are almost to the point of being overripe, fairly bursting with themselves. An old woman inches past, leaning heavily on an aluminum walker. Some mangled, Muzak version of "Don't Stand So Close to Me" by the Police plays tinny and staticky from unseen speakers.

"That's nice," Ella says with a nod. "Time for a cappuccino?"

I look at my watch, as if calculating whether or not I can fit it into my busy schedule, even though we both know I have nothing else to do and Victory will be hours yet—between the swimming lessons and her favorite lunch and time with the neighborhood kids. They're all bigger, older boys, but she commands them like a queen. And they love her for it.

"Sure," I say. And Ella smiles.

"Great, meet you over there when you're done." She means the little spot by the beach where we always go.

"See you in a few."

She pushes off. I like Ella a lot. She is so easy, so warm and open, so trusting and unfailingly kind; she makes me feel bad about myself, as though I'm some icy bitch. I smile and give her a small wave. My heart is doing a little dance. I think it's just that I've had too much caffeine already and my heart is protesting the thought of more. Maybe I'll just have some chamomile.

On my way to check out, I see a sullen teenage girl, standing

beside her mother at the deli counter. She is so thin her hip bones jut out against her jeans. Her lips are moist and sparkling with pink gloss. She holds a cell phone to her ear and chews on the nail of her right thumb.

"Taylor, cut that out," her mother says, pulling her daughter's hand away from her mouth. They look at each other like rival gang members. I wonder if Victory and I will ever come to that place, that bloody rumble of adolescence. Somehow I doubt it. I am always afraid I won't have the luxury of warring with my teenage daughter.

I step out to load the groceries into my car. I see Ella pulling out of the parking lot; she holds up her fingers indicating five minutes. She's headed home to put away her groceries before we meet for coffee, and I'll do the same since we both live just minutes from here. Then we don't have to worry about the chicken going bad, the ice cream melting, those suburban concerns I appreciate so much for their simplicity and relative safety. But it's as I slam my trunk that I feel it.

It's as if the sun has dipped behind a thick cloud cover and the sky has gone charcoal. Only they haven't. It is a bright, unseasonably cool, spring day in Florida. The parking lot is packed, populated by moms and nannies with their kids of all ages on spring break before Easter. I hear laughter, a gull calling; I smell the salt from the Gulf of Mexico. But inside I am quaking. There's cool black ink in my veins.

I slip into my SUV and lock the door, grip the wheel, and try to calm myself. I've had these panics before. Usually they are isolated incidents, intense but brief like the summer storms here. In the last few days, though, they've come one after another, surprising me with their ferocity. False alarms, Gray calls them. I've always thought of them more as an early-warning system.

This one is deeper, blacker than I'm used to. I am truly afraid, sweating and going pale. My breathing starts to come ragged, and I glance in my rear- and sideview mirrors but see nothing out of the or-

dinary. The contrast makes me dizzy, almost angry at the day for being so clear, at the people in the parking lot living their lives so benignly.

After a while I pull out from the lot, still shaky, and drive carefully the short distance to our home. I pass through the residents' side of the security gate with a wave to the watchman, cruise past ridiculously opulent homes nestled beneath clusters of tall palms with their barrel-tile roofs and colorful mailboxes shaped like manatees, dolphins, flamingos, or miniature versions of the larger house. Late-model luxury cars rest on stone-paved driveways.

As I pull up my drive, a neighbor is watering her flowers and lifts a friendly hand to me. I return the greeting and try to smile as I open the garage door with the remote on my rearview mirror. Afraid there's an inane conversation in my immediate future, I close the garage door while I'm still in the car. I turn off the engine and sit for a minute; my heart slows its dance. *I'm safe,* I tell myself. *This house is safe.* The shaking starts to subside. My breathing steadies. I press a button on my dash and hear a dial tone.

"Call Grandma," I say.

"Calling Grandma," the car phone answers stiffly. Victory *loves* this, giggles uncontrollably every time she hears it.

After only one ring, a smooth male voice answers, "Hello."

"It's Annie," I say, and I know my voice sounds wobbly. There's a pause; he hears it, too. He is a man who misses nothing.

"Hi, Annie." The ever-calm tones of my father-in-law, Drew. I imagine him sitting behind the oak desk of his home office, surrounded by all his degrees and military decorations, photos of his Navy SEAL buddies—eerie, grainy images of men too young, too happy to be holding guns. "They're in the pool."

"Everything's all right?" I ask, hating the words as they tumble from my lips.

"Everything's fine here," he answers, solid and sure. I am soothed

by the certainty and reassurance in his voice, as much as I hate to reveal any weakness in front of him.

"Is everything all right there?" he asks after a beat has passed. I try not to hear the note of contempt.

"Yes," I say too quickly. Then I have to say it again, lighter, more slowly to balance it out. "Yes. Everything's fine. Don't bother them. I'll be by around two for Victory."

I end the call before he can ask any more questions, and I start unloading the groceries. As I'm putting things away, I turn on the television in the kitchen and am greeted by the image of a sad-looking, emaciated blonde. The caption beneath her photo reads, *Woman's body found in Central Florida; the sixth in a five-year period.* In the background a slurry male voice with a thick Florida accent goes on about the lack of evidence, the similarities between cases. I turn it off quickly; this is the last thing I need to hear right now.

I try to shake off the uneasy feeling that seems to have settled in me and go about my day—meet Ella for coffee, run a few errands, then pick Victory up from Drew and Vivian's. By the time I walk though the door at Vivian's and greet my little girl, the black patch is mostly past. But it's not forgotten. It follows me like a specter.

"Everything all right, dear?" Vivian asks as I lift my daughter onto my hip. (*She's too big to carry, Annie. You baby her,* says Gray.) Victory leans her full weight against me in her fatigue, smelling of some magic mix of sunscreen, chlorine, and baby shampoo.

I turn around and try for a smile. "False alarm," I say. We all know the lingo.

"You're sure," she says. I notice that she looks tired, puffy gray half-moons under her eyes. She wears a certain expression, a mingling of worry and love, that makes me want to weep in her arms. It wouldn't be the first time.

Behind her I can see the Gulf lapping unenthusiastically against

the shore. The whole back of her house is glass. An infinity pool outside seems to flow into the ocean beyond, but that's a carefully constructed illusion. In this family we're quite good at that.

"Mommy's worried," Victory says softly into my neck. "Don't be worried." She tightens her tiny arms around me, and I squeeze.

"Not worried, darling," I say, feeling a tingle of guilt. "Just tired."

I'm sure she doesn't believe me. You can't fool children, you know. You shouldn't even bother trying; they just grow up doubting themselves.

"Did you call Gray?" says Vivian, her brow creased. She smells like lemon verbena. She puts a hand on my arm and rubs gently.

I offer her what I hope is a dismissive, self-deprecating smile. "No need."

She looks at me skeptically but says nothing more, just places a kiss on my cheek, one on Victory's, then squeezes us both with her expansive arms. As I pull away down the drive, I see Drew watching me from the upstairs window.

That afternoon while Victory is down for her nap, I sit on the lanai, looking out onto our own view of the ocean, and start to think about all the ways that I can die.

Gray is late coming home, and Victory is already sound asleep upstairs in her room. I am sitting on a leather sofa I didn't choose and don't actually like, watching the high, dancing flames in our fireplace as he walks through the front door. For a second he is just a long shadow in the foyer; he could be anyone. But then he steps into the light and he is my husband, looking strained and tired. He doesn't know I'm watching him. When he sees me, though, he smiles and looks a little less world-weary.

"Hey," I say, getting up and going to him.

"Hey." His embrace is powerful and I sink into it, hold on to him tightly. There is no softness to him; the muscles on his body are hard and defined. In this place I am moored. The churning of my day comes to calm.

"Want a drink?" I ask as I shift away from him. He holds me for a second longer, tries to catch my eyes, then lets me go.

"What are you having?" he wants to know.

"Vodka on the rocks."

"Sounds about right."

I walk over to the bar that in the daylight looks out onto our back deck. At night all I can see is my reflection in the glass doors as I fill a square lowball with ice and pour cold vodka from the freezer. This is another feature I didn't choose about our house, a wet bar stocked with liquor we rarely touch. There is so much about this place, a ridiculously extravagant wedding gift from my father-in-law, furnished and decorated by Vivian, that has nothing to do with me—or Gray. It is hard to ever be grateful enough for such a gift and impossible to complain about the various features that don't appeal. Sometimes I feel like we live in a model home, everything shiny and perfect but just slightly off from what we would have chosen ourselves.

I walk back over to him, hand him his drink, and we sit together. I put my legs up on his lap, take my waiting glass from the table. The ice has melted, the vodka gone watery and tepid. I drink it anyway, too lazy to make myself another.

I have one of the glass doors open, and the unseasonably cold salt air drifts in, warmed by the fire. I see him glance over at it. I know he's thinking that the door should be closed and locked, but he doesn't say anything. I notice the deep crescent of a scar between his right eye and his temple. I realize that I barely see his scars anymore. In the beginning they made me wary of him, made him seem hard and distant. I wondered what kind of violence could leave so many marks on a man. But I know the answer now. And I know his heart.

"It's happening again," I say after a minute of us just sitting there staring at the flames. Somehow the words seem melodramatic even before I add, "Worse than it's ever been."

He barely reacts, but I see a muscle clench in his jaw beneath the shadow of black stubble. He stares at the fire, closes and opens his eyes slowly, and takes a breath. We've been here before.

He puts a hand on my arm, turns his eyes to mine. I can't see their color in the dim light, but they're steel gray, have been since the day he was born, hence his name.

"He's dead," he says. "Long dead."

He's always gentle with me, no matter how many times we've been through this. I curl my legs beneath me and move into the hollow of his arm.

"How do you know for sure?" I say. I've asked this question a thousand times, just to hear the answer.

"Because I killed him, Annie." He turns my face up to his to show me how unflinchingly certain he is. "I watched him die."

I start to cry then, because I know that he believes what he says to be true. And I want so badly to believe it, too.

"Do you need to start up the meds again?"

I don't want that. He leans forward to put his drink on the table. I move back into him, and he wraps me up in his arms and lets me cry and cry until I feel all right again. There's no telling how long this can take. But he's always so patient.

2

I descend a narrow, rusting stairway and walk quickly down the long hall, steadying myself against the walls. The lighting is dim and flickering. I struggle to remember what my cabin number is—203, I think. There are five men on board other than the captain, and I don't see any of them.

I reach my cabin and fumble with the lock for a second, then push into my room. A small berth nestles in the far corner. Beneath it is a drawer where I have stowed my things. I kneel and pull out my bag, unzip it, and fish inside until I find what I'm looking for—my gun. A sleek Glock nine-millimeter, flat black and cold. I check the magazine and take another from the bag, slip it into the pocket of my coat. The Glock goes into the waist of my jeans. I've drilled the reach-and-draw from that place about a million times; my arm will know what to do even if my brain freezes. Muscle memory.

I consider my options. Once again suicide tops the list for its ease and finality. Aggression comes a close second, which would just be a roundabout way toward the first option. Hide and wait comes in third. Make him work for it. Make him fight his way through the people charged with protecting me and then find me on this ship. Then be waiting for him with my gun when he does.

The thrumming in my chest has stilled, and I listen for the sounds that will signify that the fight has begun, but there's only silence and the distant hum of engines. I'm not afraid at all—or else fear has become so much a part of me that it has come to feel like peace.

3

My father is a tattoo artist and a pathological liar. The latter is nearly the only thing I can count on, that, likely as not, every word out of his mouth is a lie. He truly can't help it.

"How are you, Dad?" I'll ask.

"Great," he'll say enthusiastically. "I'm packing."

"Packing for what?" I'll say, skeptical.

"I'm taking a Mediterranean cruise, heading out tomorrow."

Or:

"Did I ever tell you I was a Navy SEAL?"

"Really, Dad?" I'll go along, half listening. "When?"

"Served in Vietnam."

"Wow. Tell me about it."

"I can't; too painful. I'd rather forget."

That's how it goes. It doesn't even bother me anymore, partly because he usually doesn't lie about anything important. Just weird stuff. Almost like hiccups, they seem to bubble up from within, unbidden, unstoppable. I generally play along, because in spite of all the lies there's something true about him. Even though he was a lousy father, he loves me and I know it, always have.

When he comes to the phone, I can hear chatter in the background, the hummingbird buzz of the tattoo needle. His shop, Body Art, is located on Great Jones Street in NoHo. And though it's a hole in the wall, barely five hundred square feet, people from all over the world travel there for my father's skill. Rock stars, supermodels, even (it is rumored) rebelling young Saudi royals have been beneath my fa-

ther's needle. He'd told me this for years, but naturally I didn't believe him. Finally he sent me a *Village Voice* article about him, and I realized he'd been telling the truth. How about that?

"Everything all right?" he asks, lowering his voice when he realizes it's me.

"Great," I say. "We're doing great."

He's quiet for a moment, and I know he heard the lie in my voice. Takes one to know one. I listen to him breathing as he ponders what to say. I remember a lot of heavy silences over long-distance lines with my father, me desperate, him inadequate or unwilling to help. At last I say, "Tell me again, Dad."

"Oh, honey," he says after a slow exhale. "Come on. I thought you were past this."

I sigh and listen to Victory chatting to her doll in the other room. "You're so pretty," she tells it. "On the outside *and* the inside. And you're smart and strong." She's mimicking the things I've told her about herself, and it makes me smile.

"Opie, are you there?"

My father always thought my name was silly. He calls me "O" or "Opie" or sometimes just "Ope." As if *those* aren't silly things to call someone. I think he used them to annoy my mother. And they did, to no end. But those silly nicknames stuck, at least between us.

"Just tell me," I say, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

I close my eyes, and I can see my father's face, brown and wrinkled from too much time in the sun on his Harley. When he was a younger man, he wore his hair in a long black mane down to the middle of his back. I've never seen the entirety of my father's face, hidden as it has always been behind a thick black beard. The last time I saw him, years ago now, his hair and beard were well on their way to ash gray. He is forever dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, motorcycle boots. His voice sounds like cigarettes and whiskey.

"You were kids when you came here, you and him," he says, because he knows that's where I want him to start. "Right away I didn't like him. Something not right about his eyes." He issues an angry grunt. "I *really* didn't like how you were mooning over him. It made me jealous. Even though you said otherwise, I knew you were in big trouble. But I let you down, kid. I'm still sorry about that."

I just listen and remember.

"I should have taken care of the guy right then and there. Or called the police or something, but I didn't. That was always one of my biggest flaws as a parent: I was always trying to be your friend."

My father had multiple "flaws as a parent," lying and abandonment chief among them. Trying to be my friend was not high on my list of things for which he should be sorry, but I don't say this.

"I let you hide out at my place for a while. I didn't know how bad things had gotten. I really didn't."

I hear the stuttering wail of a siren in the background. Someone comes into the room and coughs. I hear my father put his hand over the receiver and say something that sounds like, "Give me a minute, for fuck's sake."

"You'd never done a tattoo like that. Never before and never since," I prompt impatiently.

"That's right," he says quickly. "I gave the bastard a tattoo. It was unique in all the world. His drawing, my bodywork."

"It couldn't be duplicated," I say.

He releases a disdainful breath. "Not by anyone I know in the industry. And I know *everyone.* It was the kind of art I wanted to do for you. But you never wanted that."

I never have. Life is hard enough, leaves enough scars—why voluntarily put your flesh under a needle? Piercing is another thing I've managed to avoid. I don't get people who take pleasure in pain.

"Tell me about the tattoo."

He sighs before going on, as if he regrets starting down this road with me. "I've never seen anything like it. That was part of the reason I wanted to do it. It was a nice piece. Stormy seas, breaking waves on these crags that jutted out of the water like shark teeth—lots of lines and shadows, lots of small hidden images within, even the shadow of a girl's face. Your face, Opie. That's how I know."

He doesn't have to describe it; I can see it so clearly in my mind's eye. It's an image that comes back to me again and again in my dreams, and sometimes when I'm awake.

"And when they showed you the picture, there was no mistaking it."

There's silence. "No, girl. There was no mistaking it." Then, "He's dead, Opie."

"Call me Annie."

I know he hates the name Annie even more than he does Ophelia. He thinks it's common. But it's no more common than his name, Teddy March. Everyone calls him "Bear." Anyway, I'd give my right arm to be common.

"He's dead, Annie. He'll never hurt you again. Not you or anyone else. He didn't kill you back then. You fought and won." I like his words; I try to let them in and become my truth. Pathological liar or not, he has a kind of horse sense that always calms me.

"Don't turn your life over to him now," he goes on. "You're hurting yourself and Victory—and that husband of yours. Move on, kid."

These are my little rituals, the things I do and need to hear to comfort myself. In the past couple of years, knowing what I know, it has taken only one or two of these things to calm me, to assure myself that it is safe to live my life. But this time nothing's working; I don't know why. I feel like I'm seeing these signs that no one else is seeing: the dog running in circles because some vibration in the ground has told him

that an earthquake is coming, a hundred crows landing on the lawn. I tell myself it's not real, that it's all in my head. Of course, there's no worse place for it to be. Maybe I *do* need to talk to the doctor.

Esperanza, our maid and nanny, is unloading the dishwasher, putting the plates and bowls and silverware away with her usual quick and quiet efficiency. She's got the television on, and again there's that image of the now-dead woman on the screen. It's as though nothing else is ever on the news. I find myself staring at the victim, her limp hair, her straining collarbone and tired eyes. Something about her expression in that image, maybe an old school portrait, makes her look as though she *knew* she was going to die badly, that her mutilated body would be found submerged in water. There's a look of grim hopelessness about her.

"Terrible, no?" said Esperanza, when she sees me watching. She taps her temple. "People are sick."

I nod. "Terrible," I agree. I pull my eyes away from the screen with effort and leave the kitchen; as I climb the stairs, I hear Esperanza humming to herself.

Upstairs, Victory's happily playing in her room. She'll go on like this for a while before she needs some company or attention from me. For now she's rapt in the world she's created with her dolls, Claude and Isabel. Her babies, as she calls them.

In my bedroom I can hear her whispering to them on the baby monitor I still keep in her bedroom. The sound of her breathing at night is my sweet lullaby. I wonder when she'll make me take it out of her room. How old will she be when she doesn't want me to hear her every breath any longer? *Mom,* she'll say, *get a life.*

When I was sixteen, my mother moved us from government housing on the Lower East Side of Manhattan to a trailer park in Florida so that she could be closer to a man with whom she'd become involved.

They'd been having a white-hot correspondence for a number of months, involving thick letters written in red ink and the occasional collect telephone call where my mother cooed into the phone, holding the receiver to her mouth so intimately that I'd half expected her to start sucking on it. After some tearful proclamations and heartfelt promises between them, my mother and I packed our few belongings into the back of a brown Chevy Citation we bought for seven hundred dollars and headed south to begin our new life.

"We can live much better in Florida," my mother told me with certainty. "Our money will go a lot farther. And it's *so pretty* there."

I watched the Lower East Side pass outside the car window and wondered how anything could be more beautiful than New York City. Sure, it can be cold and dangerous—a frightening place, a lonely one for all its crowds. But the grand architecture, the street noise, the energy of millions of people living their lives—you can never mistake yourself as being anywhere else when you're there; there's no mistaking that heartbeat. It's unique in all the world. If one considers the great beauties in history—Cleopatra, the *Mona Lisa,* Ava Gardner—none of them were pretty in that cheap, cookie-cutter way that seems to pass for gorgeous these days. They were beautiful for what was *unique* about them from the inside out, for features that might have been ugly on anyone else. If you don't know how to look at her, her hidden alleys and minuscule precious side streets, her aura of mischief, her throbbing nightlife, you might find yourself intimidated by New York City, even repulsed by her odors and sounds, you might even turn away from her because she's too brash, too haughty. But it would be your loss.

I thought my father would put up more of a fight when my mother wanted to leave with me. But he seemed to agree that the move would do me good. I'd been getting into some trouble in school for insolence, tardiness, and absence. The city offered too much temp-

tation to a young girl with too little parental supervision. In any case, my needs always came last in any decision-making process my parents employed. My mom was motivated only by male attention. My father could never love anything as much as he loved his art. I fit in there somewhere, I think. I'm not saying they didn't love me.

"Don't worry about it, kid. Florida's a hop and a jump. We'll be back and forth all the time," my father told me as I sobbed into his chest.

He never once came to Florida to see me, though. And I didn't see him again until I ran away almost two years later. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

So we moved into a trailer park, and my mother got a job as a waitress in a diner that was just a few blocks away, which was good because that Chevy overheated about three times on the drive to Florida and died altogether on our arrival.

"Well, everything happens for a reason," my mother said with her usual depraved optimism as the car sputtered and went on to a better place. "At least whatever we need is walking distance. If there's an emergency, we can take a cab. And I can take the bus to see Frank. Meanwhile, we'll save on gas and insurance." If there was ever anyone with less reason to look on the bright side, I wouldn't want to meet her. Nothing *ever* worked out for my mother. And if there was any reason for the things that happened to her, it has never been made clear to me.

Take the man for whom we moved down to Florida. He was an all right guy, sort of soft-spoken and not unkind to me during visits. But there was one problem: He was a convicted rapist and murderer on death row in the Florida State Prison. My mother had "met" him during a letter-writing campaign initiated by her church. The goal was to spread the word of the Lord to the lost souls on death row, to "save" them before they faced their earthly punishment for the wrongs

they'd done. My mother, obviously, took the whole saving thing a little bit too far.

I'll never forget our first August in Florida. I didn't even know it could get that hot; the humidity felt like wet gauze on my skin; it crawled into my lungs and expanded. Violent lightning storms lit the sky for hours, and the rain made rivers out of the street in front of our trailer park. And the palmetto bugs—they made New York City roaches look like ladybugs. The only thing that redeemed Florida for me was how the full moon hung over the swaying palm trees and how the air sometimes smelled of orange blossoms. But generally speaking, it was a hellhole. I hated it, and I hated my mother for moving us there.

The Florida I live in now with Gray and Victory is different. This is the wealthy person's Florida, of shiny convertibles and palatial homes, ocean views and white-sand beaches, margaritas and Jimmy Buffett. This is the Florida of central air and crisp cotton golf shirts over khakis, country-club days and fifty-foot yachts. To be honest, I hate it just as much. It's so fake, so tacky and nouveau riche, so proud of its silicone-filled and bleached-blond Barbie women.

Give me concrete and street noise any day. Give me Yellow Cabs and hot-dog stands. Give me legless, homeless guys pushing themselves on dollies through the subway cars, shaking their change jars with self-righteous aplomb.

I am thinking about this as I sit on the floor by the bed and reach up under the box spring. I've cut out a large hole there. Inside, I keep things that Gray and my doctor would be very unhappy about. They just wouldn't understand. I reach around and don't feel anything at first. Maybe Gray found them, I think, panic threatening. Maybe he took them away to see how long it would be before I looked for them again. But then, with a wash of relief, I feel the smooth, cool surface of one of these things.

"Mommy." It's Victory, whispering into her baby monitor. I can hear her, but she can't hear me, and she gets that. "Mommy," she says, louder. "Come to my room. There's a *strange* man on our beach."

She hasn't even finished the sentence and I'm already running. In my panic, the hall seems to lengthen and stretch as I make my way to her. But when I finally burst through the door, breathless and afraid, there's no one on our stretch of sand. Out her window, there's just the moody black-gray sky, and the green, whitecapped ocean.

We live near the tip of a long beach, right before a state nature preserve. There are about five other houses within walking distance of ours, and three of those are empty for much of the year. They are weekend homes and winter homes. So essentially we're alone here among the great blue herons and snowy egrets, the wild parrots and nesting sea turtles. It's silent except for the Gulf and the gulls. People walk along the beach during tourist season, but very few linger here, as all the restaurants, bars, and hotels are a mile south.

"Where, Victory?" I say too loudly. She's gone back to playing with her dolls. They're having a tea party. She looks up from her game, examines my expression because she doesn't understand my tone. I try to keep the fear off my face, and I might have succeeded. She comes over to the window and offers a shrug.

"Gone," she says casually, and returns to her babies, sits herself back down on the floor.

"What was he doing?" I ask her, my eyes scanning the tall grass and sea oats that separate our property from the beach. I don't see any movement, but I imagine someone slithering toward our house. We wouldn't see him until he reached the pool deck. We've been lax about security lately, lulled into a false sense of safety. I should have known better.

"He was watching," she says. My heart goes cold.

"Watching the house, Victory?"

She looks at me, cocks her head. "No. The birds. He was watching the birds."

Victory begins pouring little imaginary cups of tea. Esperanza is still humming in the kitchen. There is no one on the beach. The sun moves from behind the clouds and paints everything gold. I decide it's time to call my shrink.

4

A couple of months after my mother and I moved to Florida and I had settled reluctantly into my new school, she started to act strangely. Her usual manic highs and despondent lows were replaced with a kind of even keel that felt odd, even a little spooky.

The early changes were subtle. The first thing I noticed was that she'd stopped wearing makeup. She was a pretty woman, with good bone structure and long hair, silky and fine. Like her hair, her lashes and brows were blond, invisible without mascara and a brow pencil. When she didn't wear makeup, she looked tired, washed out. She'd always been meticulous about her appearance. "Beauty is power," she would tell me, though I'd never seen any evidence of this.

We were in the kitchen on a Saturday morning. I was eating cereal and watching cartoons on the small black-and-white set we had sitting on the counter; she was getting ready for the lunch shift at the diner. The ancient air conditioner in the window was struggling against the August heat, and I could feel beads of sweat on my brow and lip in spite of its best efforts.

I looked over at my mother, leaning against the counter, sipping coffee from a red mug, her bag over her shoulder. She stared blankly, zoning out, somewhere else.

"Mom, aren't you going to 'put your face on'?" I said, nastily mimicking the chipper way she always said it.

"No," she said absently. "I'm not wearing makeup anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because it's cheap. Frank thinks it makes me look like a whore."

I felt a knot in my stomach at her words, though at the time I couldn't have explained why.

"He said that?"

She nodded. "He said he couldn't sleep at night knowing that I was walking around looking like that, that other men were leering at me, thinking they could have me at any price. He said I should display my face as God made it. And he's right."

I didn't know *what* to say. But even at sixteen—almost seventeen by then—I knew that it was so screwed up in so many ways that there was no way to address it.

"Mom," I said finally, "that's bullshit."

"Watch your mouth, Ophelia," she snapped, turning angry eyes on me. "I didn't raise you to talk that way. When Frank comes home, there won't be any talking like that."

She looked away from me after a moment and stared out the window as if she were expecting someone.

"Mom, Frank's on death row," I said calmly. "He's not coming *home*."

She turned and looked at me sharply. "Don't say that."

"It's true, Mom. You know it's true."

"Ophelia, you don't know what you're talking about," she said, raising her voice. "There's new evidence. Evidence that will prove there is no way Frank did the things they say he did. He's innocent. God won't let an innocent man die for crimes he didn't commit."

Her tone had gone shrill, and there were tears in her eyes. She slammed her empty coffee cup on the counter and left without another word.

• • •

We've talked about this a hundred times at least, my shrink and I. This first moment between my mother and me when I knew that something was wrong, really wrong.

"And how were you feeling after she left that morning?"

"Sick," I say. "Scared."

"Why?"

"Because she seemed . . . different. And I didn't want Frank to 'come home.' I figured he was just a phase she was going through, that it would go bad like all her relationships, and we'd move back to New York."

"You were afraid of him?"

It seems like a stupid question. "He was a convicted rapist and murderer," I say slowly. My doctor gives a deferential nod but doesn't say anything, waits for me to go on. When I don't, he says, "Your mother thought he was innocent. Wasn't it possible? Plenty of people have been convicted of crimes they didn't commit." He does this, plays devil's advocate to encourage me to defend my position. I find it annoying rather than helpful.

"My mother thought he was innocent, yes," I say. I remember those awkward visits where they would put their hands against the glass that separated them until one of the guards barked at them to stop. I remember how he'd look at me, ask me about school. I remember his cool gaze and soft voice. Something about him made me want to run screaming. "There was something dead in his eyes," I say. "Even when he smiled, there was something . . . *missing.* And then all these changes in my mother. If he had such an effect on her from behind bars, what could he do to her if he was living with us?"

My doctor is silent for a moment.

"What do you think you could have done at this point that might have changed the events that followed?" he asks finally.

This is my thing. There was something about that morning in the

trailer with my mother. I feel strongly that it was the last moment where things might have turned out differently. If I had chased after my mother and forced her to tell me what she was talking about. If I had told her that I felt sick and scared and that Frank *was* guilty and that he could not, should *never,* come live with us, she might have listened. I tell this to my shrink.

"But do you really think she would have heard you, Annie?"

"I guess I'll never know."

He lets the words hang in the air. We've both heard them a hundred times. And somehow they never rest easier with me.

"What did you do instead?" he asks.

"I finished my cereal, watched some more television. Told myself that she was nuts, an idiot. I pushed it out of my head."

"You're good at that."

"Pushing things out of my head? Oh, yes."

His office is uncomfortable. The chenille sofa is soft but cheap, seems to push me out rather than welcome me in. It's far too cold in the refrigerated way that indoor spaces get too cold in Florida. The tip of my nose feels cold even though it's blazing outside, and I can see the sunlight glinting off the warm green waters of the Intracoastal.

I don't lie on the couch but sit cross-legged in the corner; on my first visit he told me I could recline if it made me feel comfortable. I told him it wouldn't. He sits across from me in a huge chair that he easily fills, a low cocktail table covered with art books—Picasso, Rembrandt, Georgia O'Keeffe—between us. The space is trying very hard to be a living room and not a doctor's office. Everything is faux here—the table, the bookshelves, his desk all made of cheap wood veneer, the kind of stuff that comes in a box, just a pile of wood, a bag of screws, and a booklet of indecipherable instructions. It seems transient and not very comforting. I feel as if his furniture should be made of oak, something heavy and substantial. Outside his window should be

a blustery, autumn New England day with leaves turning, maybe just the hint of snow. He should be wearing a sweater. Brown.

He doesn't take notes; he has never taped our sessions. I've been adamant about this. I don't want a record of my thoughts anywhere. He's okay with that, said we'd do whatever made me comfortable. But I've always wondered if he scribbles down his thoughts right after I leave. He always seems to have perfect recall of the things we've discussed.

As much as I've revealed to him, I have kept a lot of secrets. I have been coming to him on and off for over a year, ever since Vivian first recommended him. (*He's Martha's friend,* she said. *Martha? Oh, you remember Martha. The fund-raiser last August? Never mind. I hear he's* wonderful.) During our sessions I reveal the truth of my feelings but have altered the names of the players in my tale. There is much about me he can never know.

"Annie," he says now, "why are we back here?"

I rub my eyes, hard, as though I can wipe all the tension away. "Because I feel him."

I look up at him and he has kind, warm eyes on me. I like how he looks, even without the brown sweater, an older man with white-gray hair and a face so tan and wrinkled it looks like an old catcher's mitt . . . but not in a bad way. He wears chinos and a chambray shirt, canvas sandals. Not very shrinklike, more like your favorite uncle or a nice neighbor you enjoy chatting with at the mailbox.

"You *don't* feel him, Annie," he says softly but firmly. "You think you do, but you don't. You have to be careful of the language you use with yourself. Call this what it is. An episode, a panic attack, whatever. Don't imagine you have some psychic feeling that a dead man has returned for you."

I nod my head. I know he's right.

"Why is it so hard?" I say. "It feels so real. So much worse than ever before."

"What's the date today?" he asks. I think about it and tell him. I realize then what he's getting at, and I shake my head.

"That's not it."

"Are you sure?"

I don't say anything then, because of course I'm not *sure* of that or really anything. Maybe he's right. "But I don't remember."

"Part of you remembers. Though your conscious mind refuses to recall certain events, the memory lives in you. It wants to be recognized, embraced, and released. It will use any opportunity to surface. When you're strong enough to face them, I think all the memories will return. You're stronger than you've been since I've known you, Annie. Maybe it's time to face down some of these demons. Maybe that's why these feelings are so intense this time."

Looking at him, I almost believe I can do it, peer into those murky spaces within myself, face and defeat whatever lives there.

"He's dead, Annie. But as long as you haven't dealt with the memories of the things he has done to you, he'll live on. We'll always have to face these times when you think he's returned for you. You'll never be free."

It is a vague echo of my father's words, and Gray's words. And intellectually I know they're all right. But my heart and my blood know something different, like the gazelle on the Serengeti, the mouse on the forest floor. I am the prey. I know my place in the food chain and must be ever vigilant to scent and shadow.

5

I am crouched in my cabin; I will be hidden in the corner by the door when it swings open. My breathing has slowed, and my legs are starting to ache from the position I've been holding for I don't know how long. I can hear the thrum of the engine and nothing else. I start to wonder if maybe everything is all right. It's conceivable that there might not even be another boat out there, I tell myself. Could just be a trick of the night, my own paranoid imagination, or some combination of those things. As I start to accept this possibility, there's a knock at the door. Scares me so badly that my head jerks and I hit it on the wall behind me.

"Annie." A muffled male voice. "Are you in there?"

I recognize the Australian accent; it's the voice of one of the men who have been hired to help me. I open the door for him. His eyes fall immediately to the gun at my waist. He gives a quick nod of approval.

"There's a boat trailing us," he tells me. He has sharp, bright eyes and is thick with muscle. I search my memory for his name. They all have these hard, tight names that sound like punches to the jaw. Dax, I think he told me. That's right, Dax. "Might be a fishing vessel, poachers—or even pirates. We hailed them, and they didn't respond."

His eyes scan the room. He walks over and checks the lock on the porthole, seems to satisfy himself that the room is as secure as it can be. He's like that. They all are, these men, always checking the perimeter, scanning for vulnerability. I like that about them.

"Just turn out the lights in here and lock the door. I'll come get you when I know it's safe."

"Okay," I say, trying to sound as solid and in control as he seems.

He leaves, casting a sympathetic look behind him as he goes, and I lock the door after him. It seems as flimsy as cardboard. I turn off the lights and resume my crouch.

6

The day after I see my shrink, I'm feeling better. It might just be the residual effects of the pill Gray encouraged me to take last night so that I could sleep. Either way, as I sit with him in the sun-washed kitchen drinking coffee, the sense of foreboding is gone.

"It helped you to see Dr. Brown?" Gray asks. It's oddly off-putting to hear Gray use his name. I try so hard to keep these parts of myself separate. Here I'm Annie, Gray's wife and Victory's mom. There I'm a mental patient haunted by my traumatic past. I don't want those two selves to touch.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say with a dismissive, oh-it's-nothing wave. "It's just that time of year, he thinks."

Gray puts a hand on my shoulder. He is headed out of town for a few days. I don't know where he is going or when he will be back. This is part of our life together.

"Vivian can come stay with you. Or you guys could go there?" he says. He is careful to keep concern out of his voice and worry out of his eyes.

"No, no," I say lightly. "Really. It's not necessary. I'll call her if I need her."

I love Vivian, Gray's stepmother. But I hate the way she looks at me sometimes, as if I'm a precious bauble in the grasp of a toddler, always just headed for the floor, always promising to shatter into a thousand pieces. I wonder if she thinks I'm a bad mother, if she worries for Victory. I know better than to ask questions for which I don't want the answers.

Gray and I chat awhile about a few mundane things, how the gardener is really awful and the lawn looks terrible but he's too nice to fire, how the pipes are making a funny sound when the hot water runs and should I call a plumber, how Victory's new preschool teacher seems kind. Then Gray gets up to leave. He takes me in his arms and holds me tight. I squeeze him hard and kiss his mouth. I don't say, *Be careful.* I don't say, *Call when you can.* I just say, "I love you. See you soon." And then he's gone.

"I really *don't* need to go to school today, Mommy," says Victory from her car seat behind me. We're driving along the road that edges the water. Her school is just ten minutes from the house. An old plantation home converted into a progressive preschool where lucky little girls and boys paint and sing and sculpt with clay, learn the alphabet and the numbers.

"Oh, no?" I say.

"No," she says simply. She gives me a look in the rearview mirror; it's her innocent, helpful look. "You might need me today."

My heart sinks a bit. I *am* a bad mother. My four-year-old daughter has sensed my agitation and is worried about whether she can leave me or not.

"Why do you say that, Victory?"

In the rearview mirror, I see her shrug. She's fingering the piping on her pink backpack now. "I don't know," she says, drawing out the words in that sweet way she has. "Esperanza said she was going to make cookies today. She might need help."

"Oh," I say, with relief. "And you don't think I can help."

"Well, sometimes when *you* help, the bottoms get black. They taste *bad.*"

I am a terrible cook. Everyone knows this about me.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to wait until you get home so that you can help Esperanza," I say.

She looks up at the mirror and offers a smile and a vigorous nod. "Okay," she says. "Good."

It is settled. I drop her off, chitchat with the other moms on the front porch. Before I walk back to the car, I look in the window to see Victory donning a red smock and settling in for finger painting. I feel a familiar twist in my heart; I feel this whenever I leave her someplace, even a place as safe and happy as this little school.

When I return home, Esperanza is gone. Probably off to run errands or to pick up whatever I forgot to get at the store the other day—I always forget something, even when I take a list. I can smell her famous chili simmering in the slow cooker; she probably went to get fresh tortillas from the Mexican grocery downtown. I nuke some leftover coffee from earlier and walk up to the second level. At the door to Gray's office, I enter a code on the keypad over the knob and slip inside.

It's dim; the plantation shutters are closed. This is a very manly room, all leather and oak, towering shelves of books, a huge globe on a stand in the corner, a samurai sword in a case on the wall. I stare at the sword a minute and think how *not* like Gray it is to have a weapon hanging on his wall like some kind of trophy. This is another affectation of Drew's. The only things in this room that Gray chose for himself are the photos of Victory and me on his desk.

I sink into the roomy leather chair behind his desk and boot up his computer. I stare at the enormous screen as it goes through its various electronic songs and images. When it's ready, I enter my code and open the Internet browser.

My doctor asked me to spend time trying to remember the things that I have locked away somewhere inside me, to explore those gaping

blank spaces that constitute my past. I've decided that I am going to do that, just as soon as I've done this one last thing, my last tic to assure myself that everything is okay.

I enter his name in the powerful search engine to which we subscribe and spend the next two hours reading about his crimes, the pursuit of him, and his ultimate death. Then I open Gray's case file, read the notes he took during an investigation that spanned two years and five states. I stare at crime-scene photos, drinking in the gore, the horror of it all. When I'm done, I feel an almost total sense of relief. I move over to the leather couch and lie down, close my eyes, and try to relax myself with deep breathing. But the harder I grasp for my memories, the more they slip away. I get frustrated and angry with myself quickly and decide instead to go for a run.

I run along the beach, passing the empty winter houses that look more like well-appointed bed-and-breakfast hotels than private homes. The sky is turning from an airy blue to gray, and far off I can hear the rumble of the storm that's headed in this direction. The towering cumulous clouds are soft mountains of white and black against a silver sky, threatening and beautiful. I run hard and fast. I want pain and exhaustion. I want to collapse when I'm done, have a headache from the exertion.

After I pass the last house, I am on the nature preserve. The beach ahead of me is empty; to the east there are sea oats, tall grass swaying, all varieties of tall palms. Every few feet, small signs warn walkers to stay to the water's edge and not venture into the sea grass, because birds and turtles nest in the protected patch of land. It's hard to believe that there can be a place this empty, this private, in Florida the way it is today, so overdeveloped, condo buildings rising fast on the horizon as if they sprang fully formed from the earth. The locals joke

that the building crane is the state bird. I cherish this quiet and emptiness about where we live, wondering how long it can last. At the tip of the island, exhausted and breathless, I turn back. I slow a bit, thinking I should pace myself to make the distance back to the house.

The Gulf is a relatively calm body of water, the warm, anemic waves a disappointment to anyone accustomed to the roaring of the Atlantic coastline. But today the waves come in high and strong, the water an eerie, churning gunmetal. The sky is ever darker, and I realize that I might not beat the storm home. It's not wise to be the only thing on the beach when lightning threatens here. It's far too early and too cool for this type of weather, I think. I pick up my pace again, though my body protests.

As the wind begins to assert itself, I see something lying on the beach that I don't think was there on my way up. It's far ahead of me still, a kind of large, formless black lump lying half in and half out of the water. A garbage bag, maybe. A mass of seaweed. A dead tarpon or grouper, both large gray fish. Something tells me to slow down, to stay away from it. But there's no other route home, and I can hear the thunder louder now, see the clouds flashing. I press on.

The grass and sea oats have started to dance and whisper in the wind. The form ahead of me—I've just seen it shift. Could be the wind, but I don't know. In spite of the encroaching storm, I slow my pace.

I move over to the side to give the thing a wide berth as I pass. I won't stop to investigate as Victory would. She insists on throwing every stranded thing back into the sea or weeps inconsolably in my arms for those she cannot save. I don't have that kind of heart anymore. We're *all* washed ashore, thrashing, looking for our way home. "Every man for himself" is more my motto these days.

My heart lurches as I draw close enough to see that the form is a man, his back to me. His black clothes are soaked; he is draped in sea

grass from shoulders to knees. I can see one of his hands, mottled with sand, dead white. I stop, look up and down the beach. Not a soul. The sky is nearly black now, the thunder closer. I should keep running; I know this. Move fast, get to a phone, call for help. But I slow to a walk, approach the man. I remember that I thought I saw him move in the distance. But that could have been the wind billowing his clothes. Still, I find myself thinking, *Maybe he's alive. Maybe I can save him.*

"Hello," I say loudly to the man who is most likely a corpse, washed in from sea. I don't feel the fear that I should, just this ferocious curiosity. "Are you all right?"

That's when I hear him groan, low and terrible. A slender, white bolt of lightning slices the sky some miles away. I move in quickly without thinking and put my hand on his cold, wet shoulder, turn him on his back. I see his face then, the face I always see, white and terrible, a deep gouge in his cheek, his mouth gaping, his eyes fixed and staring.

From deep inside his chest, he growls, "You belong to me."

I wake up then on the couch, an afternoon storm raging outside, the rain coming down in slicing sheets. My chest is heaving, and I'm sweating.

"Mrs. Annie!" Esperanza's knocking on the door. I get up and open it for her. She steps back and looks down at her feet when I do, as though she's embarrassed. She's a youngish-looking forty-something with a wide, pretty face, café au lait skin, and the kind of deep brown eyes that men drown in. She looks up at me with concern; she's been witness to my waking from these types of dreams before. I'm the one who should be embarrassed. I must have cried out; that must be what brought her to the door. I don't know, and I don't ask. We both just pretend it didn't happen.

"One half hour until you have to pick up Miss Victory," she says quietly.

I nod and look at my watch. I resist the urge to snap at her, to say, *You don't think I know I have to pick up my daughter?* She loves my daughter and takes care of us, while I nap on the couch in the afternoon. I can never muster anything but gratitude for her.

"Thank you, Esperanza."

7

Impossibly, I have drifted off in my crouch behind the door. That's the level and nature of my fatigue. I am not sure how long it has been since Dax came to tell me about the other boat. Might be minutes, might be hours. Through my porthole I can see that the sun has not risen, that there's not even a hint of morning light in the sky.

My feet and legs are aching with that horrible tingle of having too much weight on them awkwardly for too long. I stand painfully and stretch, try to walk it off. As I make tight circles in my small cabin, trying to get blood flowing to my limbs, I have a growing sense of unease. Something's wrong. It takes another minute of anxious pacing, but I realize eventually what's bothering me: I can't hear the engines anymore. The boat has come to a stop.

I'm not sure what this means, but suddenly I'm a fox in a trap; I'm stuck in the box of my cabin. When he finds me, I'll have no place to hide. It's almost as though he choreographed it that way, like some elaborate dance that we do, that we have always done. But for the first time since we've met, I won't allow myself to be led, to be circled around and dipped at the finale. Tonight I'll take the lead.

I open the door just a crack and peek out into the empty hallway. As I do this, I hear the boat power down, and everything falls into pitch black. There's not even a pinprick of light, and I'm rendered blind. I draw my gun, step into the corridor, and put my back to the wall, then start edging my way toward the staircase that leads to the deck.

About the Author

Lisa Unger is the *New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* bestselling author of *Beautiful Lies* and *Sliver of Truth.* Her novels have been published in twenty-six countries, receiving rave reviews and appearing on bestseller lists around the world.

Lisa was born in Connecticut and lived in Holland and England with her family before returning to the United States. She is a graduate of the New School for Social Research, Eugene Lang College. She now lives in Florida with her husband and daughter and is at work on her next novel.