

# REDEMPTION ROAD

JOHN HART

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS

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*[[For Norde, Matthew, and Mickey.  
Good men gone . . . ]]*

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*There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love.*

—WASHINGTON IRVING

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## YESTERDAY

*The woman was a rare beauty in that she knew nothing of her perfection. He'd watched her long enough to suspect as much, but only in meeting her had his instinct been proven true. She was modest and shy, and easily swayed. Perhaps she was insecure or not very bright. Maybe she was lonesome or confused about her place in this difficult world.*

*It didn't matter, really.*

*She looked right, and that was all about the eyes.*

*Hers flashed as she came down the sidewalk, the sundress loose around her knees, but not inappropriate. He liked the way the dress shifted, and how neatly she moved her legs and arms. She was pale skinned and quiet. He'd have preferred her hair a little different, but that was okay.*

*It really was about the eyes.*

*They had to be clear and deep and unguarded, so he watched carefully to make sure nothing had changed in the few days since they'd agreed to meet. She looked about in an apologetic way, and from a distance he could sense the unhappiness born of bad boyfriends and a meaningless job. She hoped life would be more. He understood that in a way most men would not.*

*"Hello, Ramona."*

*She shied unabashedly now that they were so close to each other. Her*

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lashes were dark on the curve of her cheek, her head angled so that he lost sight of her flawless jaw.

"I'm glad we decided to do this," he said. "I think it will be an afternoon well spent."

"Thank you for making the time." She blushed, the eyes still downcast. "I know you're busy."

"The future matters for all of us, life and the living of it, career and family and personal satisfaction. It's important to plan and think things through. There's no need to do it alone, not in a town like this. We know each other here. We help each other. You'll understand that once you live here longer. The people are nice. It's not just me."

She nodded, but he understood the deeper feelings. They'd met as if by accident, and she was wondering why she'd opened up so readily and to such a stranger. But that was his gift—his face and his gentle manner, the way they trusted. Some women needed that: the shoulder, the patience. Once they knew his interest was not romantic, it was easy. He was steady and kind. They thought him worldly.

"Are you ready, then?" He opened the car door, and for an instant she looked unsettled, her gaze lingering on cigarette burns and torn vinyl. "It's a loaner," he said. "I apologize, but my usual car needed service."

She bit her bottom lip, muscles tightening in the back of one smooth calf. Stains marred the dash. The carpet was worn through.

She needed a push.

"We were supposed to do this tomorrow, remember? Late afternoon? Coffee and a chat?" A smile creased his face. "I would have had the other car if plans had stayed the same. But you needed to change the day. It was kind of last-minute, and we're really doing this for you. . . ."

He let the words trail off so she'd remember that she'd suggested the meeting and not the other way around. She nodded a final time because it made sense and because she didn't want to look like the kind of person who cared about something as meaningless as a car, not when she was too broke to buy her own. "My mother's coming in from Tennessee in the morning." She glanced back at the apartment building, new lines at the corners of her mouth. "It was unexpected."

"Yes."

"And she's my mom."

*“You told me. I know.” A little frustration was in his voice, a little impatience. He smiled to take out the sting, though the last thing he wanted was to be reminded of the girl’s hillbilly roots in some hillbilly town. “It’s my nephew’s car,” he said. “He’s in college.”*

*“That explains it, then.”*

*She meant the smell and the dirt; but she was laughing now, so he laughed, too. “Kids,” he said*

*“Yeah, right.”*

*He made a mock bow and said something about chariots. She laughed, but he was no longer paying attention.*

*She was already in the car.*

*“I enjoy a Sunday.” She sat straight as he slid behind the wheel. “The stillness and the quiet. No expectations.” She smoothed the skirt and showed the eyes. “Don’t you love a Sunday?”*

*“Of course,” he said, but couldn’t care less. “Did you tell your mother we were meeting?”*

*“Not a chance,” the girl said. “There’d be a million questions. She’d say I was needy or irresponsible, that I should have called her instead.”*

*“Perhaps you underestimate her.”*

*“Not my mother, no.”*

*He nodded as if he understood her isolation. The mother was overbearing, the father distant or dead. He turned the key and liked the way she sat—back straight, both hands folded neatly in her lap. “The people who love us tend to see what they want to see, and not what we really are. Your mother should look more closely. I think she’d be pleasantly surprised.”*

*The comment made her happy.*

*He pulled away from the curb and talked enough to keep her that way. “What about your friends?” He asked. “The people you work with? Do they know?”*

*“Only that I’m meeting someone today, and that it’s personal.” She smiled and showed the warm, rich eyes that had drawn him in the first place. “They’re very curious.”*

*“I’m sure they are,” he said; and she smiled a second time.*

*It took a dozen minutes for her to ask the first meaningful question. “Wait a minute. I thought we were having coffee.”*

*“I’m taking you somewhere else first.”*

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“What do you mean?”

“It’s a surprise.”

*She craned her neck as the city sank behind them. Fields and woods ran off in either direction. The empty road seemed to take new meaning as her fingers touched her throat, her cheek. “My friends will expect me back.”*

“I thought you didn’t tell them.”

“Did I say that?”

*He gave her a look, but didn’t respond. The sky outside was purple, the sun an orange push through the trees. They were far past the edge of town, an abandoned church settling quietly on a distant hill, its steeple broken as if by the weight of the darkening sky. “I love a ruined church,” he said.*

“What?”

“Don’t you see it?”

*He pointed, and she stared at the ancient stone, the twisted cross. “I don’t understand.”*

*She was worried; trying to convince herself everything was normal. He watched blackbirds settle on the ruins. A few minutes later, she asked him to take her home.*

“I’m not feeling well.”

“We’re almost there.”

*She was scared now—he could tell—frightened of his words and the church and the strange, flat whistle that hissed between his lips.*

“You have very expressive eyes,” he said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’ll be fine.”

*He turned the car onto a gravel road, the world defined by trees and dusk and the heat of her skin. When they passed an open gate in a rusted fence, the girl began to cry. It was quiet, at first, then less so.*

“Don’t be afraid,” he said.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

*She cried harder, but didn’t move. The car rolled out of the trees and into a clearing choked with weeds and old equipment and bits of rusted metal. An empty silo rose, round and streaked, its pinnacle stained pink by the falling sun. At its base a small door gaped, the space beyond it black and still. She*

*stared up at the silo and, when she looked back down, saw handcuffs in his hand.*

*“Put these on.”*

*He dropped the cuffs in her lap, and a warm, wet stain spread beneath them. He watched her stare desperately through the windows, looking for people or sunlight or reasons to hope.*

*“Pretend it’s not real,” he said.*

*She put on the cuffs, the metal clinking like tiny bells. “Why are you doing this?”*

*It was the same question, but he didn’t blame her. He turned off the engine and listened to it tick in the stillness. It was hot in the clearing. The car smelled of urine, but he didn’t mind. “We were supposed to do this tomorrow.” He pushed a stun gun against her ribs and watched her twitch as he pulled the trigger. “I don’t need you till then.”*

# 1

Gideon Strange opened his eyes to dark and heat and the sound of his father weeping. He held very still, though the sobbing was neither new nor unexpected. His father often ended up in the corner—huddled as if his son’s bedroom were the world’s last good place—and Gideon thought about asking why, after all these years, his father was still so sad and weak and broken. It would be a simple question, and if his father were any kind of man, he’d probably answer it. But Gideon knew what his father would say and so kept his head on the pillow and watched the dark corner until his father pulled himself up and crossed the room. For long minutes he stood silently, looking down; then he touched Gideon’s hair and tried to whisper himself strong, saying, *Please, God, please*, then asking strength from his long-dead wife, so that *Please, God* turned into *Help me, Julia*.

Gideon thought it was pitiful, the helplessness and tears, the shaking, dirty fingers. Holding still was the hardest part, not because his mother was dead and had no answer, but because Gideon knew if he moved at all, his father might ask if he was awake or sad or equally lost. Then Gideon would have to tell the truth, not that he was any of those things, but that he was more lonesome inside than any boy his age should be. But his father didn’t speak again. He ran fingers through his son’s hair and stood perfectly still as if whatever strength he sought might magically find him.

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Gideon knew that would never happen. He'd seen pictures of his father before and had a few dim memories of a man who laughed and smiled and didn't drink most every hour of every day. For years he'd thought that man might return, that it could still happen. But Gideon's father wore his days like a faded suit, an empty man whose only passion rose from thoughts of his long-dead wife. He seemed alive enough then, but what use were flickers or hints?

The man touched his son's hair a final time, then crossed the room and pulled the door shut. Gideon waited a minute before rolling out of bed, fully dressed. He was running on caffeine and adrenaline, trying hard to remember the last time he'd slept or dreamed or thought of anything else besides what it would take to kill a man.

Swallowing hard, he cracked the door, trying to ignore that his arms were skinny-white and his heart was running fast as a rabbit's. He told himself that fourteen years was man enough, and that he didn't need to be any older to pull a trigger. God wanted boys to become men, after all, and Gideon was only doing what his father would do if his father were man enough to do it. That meant killing and dying was part of God's plan, too, and Gideon said as much in the dark of his mind, trying hard to convince the parts of him that shook and sweated and wanted to throw up.

Thirteen years had passed since his mother's murder, then three weeks since Gideon had found his father's small, black gun, and ten more days since he'd figured out a 2:00 a.m. train would carry him to the gray, square prison on the far side of the county. Gideon knew kids who'd hopped trains before. The key, they said, was to run fast and not think on how sharp and heavy those big, shiny wheels truly were. But Gideon worried he'd jump and miss and go under. He had nightmares about it every night, a flash of light and dark, then pain so true he woke with an ache in the bones of his legs. It was an awful image, even awake, so he pushed it down and cracked the door wide enough to see his father slumped in an old brown chair, a pillow squeezed to his chest as he stared at the broken television where Gideon had hidden the gun after he stole it from his father's dresser drawer two nights ago. He realized now that he should have kept the gun in his room, but there was no better hiding place, he'd thought, than the dried-out guts of a busted-up television that hadn't worked since he was five.

But how to get to the gun when his father sat right in front of it?

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Gideon should have done it differently, but his thoughts ran crooked sometimes. He didn't mean to be difficult. It just worked out that way, so that even the kind teachers suggested he think more about woodshop and metalworking than about the fancy words in all those great, heavy books. Standing in the dark, he thought maybe those teachers were right, after all, because without the gun he couldn't shoot or protect himself or show God he had the will to do *necessary things*.

After a minute, he closed the door, thinking, *Two o'clock train . . .*

But the clock already said 1:21.

Then 1:30.

Checking the door again, he watched a bottle go up and down until his father slumped and the bottle slipped from his fingers. Gideon waited five more minutes, then crept to the living room and stepped over engine parts and other bottles, tripping once as a car rumbled past and splashed light through a gap in the curtains. When it was dark again, he knelt behind the television, slipped off the back and pulled out a gun that was black and slick and heavier than he remembered. He cracked the cylinder, checked the bullets.

"Son?"

It was the small voice, the small man. Gideon stood and saw that his father was awake—a man-shaped hole in a stretch of stained upholstery. He seemed uncertain and afraid, and for a moment Gideon wanted to go back under the sheets. He could call everything off; pretend none of this had ever happened. It would be nice, he thought, not to kill a man. He could put the gun down and go back to bed. But he saw the halo of flowers in his father's hands. They were dry and brittle now, but his mother, on her wedding day, had worn them like a crown in her hair. He looked at them, again—baby's breath and white roses, all of it pale and brittle—then imagined how the room would look if a stranger were looking down from above: the man with dead flowers, the boy with the gun. Gideon wanted to explain the power of that image—to make his father understand that the boy had to do what the father would not. Instead he turned and ran. He heard his name again, but was already through the door, half falling as

he leapt off the porch and hit the ground running, the gun warm now in his hand, the impact from hard concrete slamming up his shins as he ran half a block, then ducked through an old man's yard and into thick woods that ran east with the creek, then up a big hill to where chain-link sagged and factories were rusted shut.

He fell against the fence as his father, far behind him, called his name over and over, his voice so loud it broke and cracked and finally failed. For a second, Gideon hesitated, but when a train whistled in the west, he pushed the gun under the fence and scrambled over the top, tearing skin as he did and banging both knees when he landed wrong in the overgrown parking lot on the other side.

The train's whistle blew louder.

*He didn't have to do it.*

*No one had to die.*

But that was the fear talking. His mother was dead, and her killer needed to pay. So he aimed for a gap between the burned-out furniture plant and the place that used to make thread but now had one whole side falling in. It was darker between the buildings, but even with loose bricks under his feet Gideon made it, without falling, to a hole in the fence near the big white oak in the far corner. There was light from a streetlamp and from a few low stars, but it disappeared as he belly-slid under the wire and plunged into a gully on the far side. The dirt was dry and loose going down. He slipped—scrabbling to keep the gun from falling out in the blackness—then splashed through a trickle of water and clambered up the other side to stand breathless in an alley of scrub that spread out from metal tracks that looked white against the dirt.

He bent at the waist, cramping; but the train rounded a bend and blasted light up the hill.

It would have to slow, he thought.

But it didn't.

It hit the hill like the hill was nothing. Three engines and a wall of metal, it blew past as if it could strip the air from his lungs. But more cars came onto the hill every second, and Gideon had a sense of it in the dark, of fifty cars and then another hundred, their weight dragging at the engines until he realized the train had slowed so much he could almost keep up. And

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that's what he tried to do, running fast as the wheels sparked yellow and built a vacuum that sucked at the bones of his legs. He scrabbled at one car and then another, but the rungs were high and slick.

He risked a glance and saw the last cars racing up behind him, twenty maybe, and then less. If he missed the train, he missed the prison. His fingers stretched, but he fell and smeared skin from his face, then ran and reached and felt a rung in his hand as agony burst in his shoulder and his feet thumped across wooden ties before the car, at last, was a shell around him.

He'd made it. He was on the train that would carry him off to kill a man, and the truth of that pressed down in the dark. It wasn't talk anymore, or waiting or planning.

The sun would rise in four hours.

The bullets would be real bullets.

*But so what?*

He sat in the blackness, determined as hilltops rose and fell and houses between them looked like stars. He thought of sleepless nights and hunger; and when the river glinted beneath him, he looked for the prison, seeing a bright light miles out across the valley floor. It raced closer, so he leaned out when the ground seemed flattest and least rocky. He looked for the strength to jump, but was still on the train as dirt flicked past and the prison sank like a ship in the dark. He was going to miss it, so he thought of his mother's face instead, then stepped out and fell and hit the ground like a sack of rocks.

When he woke, it was still dark, and though the stars looked dimmer, he had enough light to limp along the tracks until he found a road that led to a cluster of brown buildings he'd seen once from the back of a moving car. He stepped beneath a black-lettered sign that said CONVICTS WELCOME and studied the two-windowed, cinder-block bar on the other side of it. His face was a blur in the glass. There were no people or traffic, and when he turned to look south, he saw how the prison rose up in the distance. He looked at it for long minutes before slipping into the alley beside the bar and putting his back against a Dumpster that smelled like chicken wings and cigarettes and piss. He wanted to feel pleased for making it this far, but the gun looked wrong in his lap. He tried watching the road, but there was nothing to watch, so he closed his eyes and thought of a picnic they'd

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had when he was very young. The picture taken that day was in a frame on his bedside table at home. He'd worn yellow pants with big buttons and thought he might remember how his father held him high and spun in a circle. He held on to the idea of that childhood, then imagined what it would feel like to kill the man who took it away.

*Hammer back.*

*Arm straight and steady.*

He practiced in his head so he could do it right in person; but even in his mind, the gun shook and was silent. Gideon had imagined the same thing a thousand times on a thousand nights.

*His father was not man enough.*

*He would not be man enough.*

Pressing the barrel against his forehead, he prayed for strength, then walked through it again.

*Hammer back.*

*Arm straight.*

For an hour more he tried to steel himself, then threw up in the dark and hugged his ribs as if all heat in the world had been stolen, too.

## 2

Elizabeth should sleep—she knew as much—but the fatigue was more than physical. The weariness came from dead men and the questions that followed, from thirteen years of cop that looked to end badly. She played the movie in her mind: the missing girl and the basement, the bloody wire, and the *pop, pop* of the first two rounds. She could explain two, maybe even six; but eighteen bullets in two bodies was a tough sell, even with the girl alive. Four days had passed since the shooting, and the life that followed still felt foreign. Yesterday, a family of four stopped her on the sidewalk to thank her for making the world a better place. An hour later, somebody spit on the sleeve of her favorite jacket.

Elizabeth lit a cigarette, thinking about how it all came down to where people stood. To those who had children, she was a hero. A girl was taken and bad men died. To a lot of people, that seemed about right. For those who distrusted the police on principle, Elizabeth was the proof of all that was wrong with authority. Two men died in a violent, brutal manner. Forget that they were pushers and kidnapers and rapists. They'd died with eighteen bullets in them, and that, for some, was inexcusable. They used words such as *torture* and *execution* and *police brutality*. Elizabeth had strong feelings on the matter, but mostly she was just tired. How many days now with no real sleep? How many nightmares when it finally happened?

Even though the city was unchanged and the same people inhabited her life, it seemed harder each hour to hold on to the person she'd been. Today was a perfect example. She'd been in the car for seven hours, driving aimlessly across town and into the county, past the police station and her house, out beyond the prison and back. But, what else could she do?

Home was a vacuum.

She couldn't go to work.

Pulling into a dark lot on the dangerous edge of downtown, she turned off the engine and listened to the sounds the city made. Music thumped from a club two blocks away. A fan belt squealed at the corner. Somewhere, there was laughter. After four years in uniform and nine with the gold shield, she knew every nuance of every rhythm. The city was her life, and for a long time she'd loved it. Now it felt . . . *what?*

Was *wrong* the right word? That seemed too harsh.

*Alien*, maybe?

*Unfamiliar?*

She got out of the car and stood in the darkness as a distant streetlight flickered twice, then snapped and died. She made a slow turn, picturing every back alley and crooked street in a ten-block radius. She knew the crack houses and flophouses, the prostitutes and pushers, which street corners were likely to get you shot if you said the wrong thing or rolled up hot. Seven different people had been killed on this busted-up patch of broken city, and that was just in the past three years.

She'd been in darker places a thousand times, but it felt different without the badge. The moral authority mattered, as did the sense of belonging to something larger than oneself. It wasn't fear, but *nakedness* might be a decent word. Elizabeth didn't have boyfriends or lady friends or hobbies. She was a cop. She liked the fight and the chase, the rare, sweet times she helped people who actually meant well. What would remain if she lost it?

*Channing*, she told herself.

*Channing would remain.*

That a girl she barely knew could matter so much was strange. But, she did. When Elizabeth felt dark or lost, she thought of the girl. Same thing when the world pressed in, or when Elizabeth considered the real chance that she could go to prison for what had happened in that cold, damp hole of a basement. Channing was alive, and as damaged as she was, she still

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had a chance at a full and normal life. A lot of victims couldn't say that. Hell, Elizabeth knew cops that couldn't say it, either.

Grinding out the cigarette, Elizabeth bought a newspaper from a machine beside an empty diner. Back in the car, she spread the paper across the wheel and saw her own face staring back. She looked cold and distant in black and white, but it could be the headline that made her seem so remote.

“Hero Cop or Angel of Death?”

Two paragraphs in, it was pretty clear what the reporter thought. Even though the word *alleged* showed up more than once, so did phrases such as *inexplicable brutality*, *unwarranted use of force*, *died in excruciating pain*. After long years of positive press, the local paper, it seemed, had finally turned against her. Not that she could blame them, not with the protests and public outcry, not with the state police involved. The photograph they'd chosen told the tale. Standing on the courthouse steps and peering down, she looked cold and aloof. It was the high cheekbones and deep eyes, the fair skin that looked gray in newsprint.

“Angel of death. Jesus.”

Tossing the paper in the backseat, she started the car and worked her way out of the bad parts of town, driving past the marbled courthouse and the fountain at the square, then toward the college, where she slipped like a ghost past coffee shops and bars and loud, laughing kids. After that she was in the gentrified section, moving past condo lofts and art galleries and renovated warehouses turned into brewpubs and day spas and black box theaters. Tourists were on the sidewalks, some hipsters, a few homeless. When she found the four-lane that led past the chain restaurants and the old mall, she drove faster. Traffic was thinner there, the people's movements smaller and more subdued. She tried the radio, but the talk channels were boring and none of the music fit. Turning east, she followed a narrow road through scattered woods and subdivisions with stone-columned entrances. In twenty minutes she was outside the city limit. In another five, she started climbing. When she reached the top of the mountain, she lit another cigarette and stared out at the city, thinking how clean it looked from above. For a moment, she forgot the girl and the basement. There were no screams or blood or smoke, no broken child or irredeemable

mistakes. There was light and there was dark. Nothing gray or shadowed. Nothing in between.

Stepping to the edge of the mountain, she looked down and tried to find some reason for hope. No charges had been filed. She wasn't looking at prison.

*Not yet . . .*

Spinning the cigarette into the blackness, she called the girl for the third time in as many days. "Channing, hey, it's me."

"Detective Black?"

"Call me Elizabeth, remember?"

"Yeah, sorry. I was asleep."

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry. My mind these days." Elizabeth pressed the phone against her ear and closed her eyes. "I lose track of time."

"It's okay. I'm taking sleeping pills. My mom, you know."

There was a rustling sound, and Elizabeth pictured the girl sitting up in bed. She was eighteen years old, a doll of a girl with haunted eyes and the kind of memories no child should have. "I was just worried about you." Elizabeth squeezed the phone until her hand ached and the world stopped spinning. "With all that's going on, it helps to know you're okay."

"I sleep mostly. It's only bad when I'm awake."

"I'm so sorry, Channing. . . ."

"I didn't tell anybody."

Elizabeth grew suddenly still. Warm air rolled up the mountain, but she felt cold. "That's not why I called, sweetheart. You don't—"

"I did like you asked, Elizabeth. I didn't tell a soul what really happened. I won't. I wouldn't."

"I know, but . . ."

"Does the world go dark for you, sometimes?"

"Are you crying, Channing?"

"It goes a little gray for me."

The voice broke, and Elizabeth could picture the girl's bedroom in her parents' big house across town. Six days ago Channing vanished off a city street. No witnesses. No motive beyond the obvious. Two days after that, Elizabeth led her, blinking, from the basement of an abandoned house. The men who'd taken her were dead—shot eighteen times. Now,

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here they were: midnight, four days later, and the girl's room was still pink and soft and filled with all the possessions of childhood. If there was a message there, Elizabeth couldn't find it. "I shouldn't have called," she said. "It was selfish of me. Go back to sleep."

The line hissed.

"Channing?"

"They ask what happened, you know. My parents. The counselors. They ask all the time, but all I say is how you killed those men and how you saved me and how I felt joyful when they died."

"It's okay, Channing. You're okay."

"Does that make me a bad person, Elizabeth? That I was joyful? That I think eighteen bullets was not enough?"

"Of course not. They deserved it."

But the girl was still crying. "I see them when I close my eyes. I hear the jokes they told between times. The way they planned to kill me." Her voice broke again, and the break was deeper. "I still feel his teeth on my skin."

"Channing . . ."

"I heard the same things so many times I started to believe what he said. That I deserved what they were doing to me, that I'd ask to die before they were done, and that I'd beg before they'd finally let me."

Elizabeth's hand went even whiter on the phone. Doctors counted nineteen bite marks, most of them through the skin; but Elizabeth knew from long discussions it was the things they'd said to her that hurt the most, the knowingness and fear, the way they'd tried to break her.

"I would have asked him to kill me," Channing said. "If you hadn't come when you did, I'd have begged him."

"It's over now.

"I don't think it is."

"It is. You're stronger than you think."

Channing grew silent again, and in the silence Elizabeth heard the raggedness of her breath.

"Will you come see me tomorrow?"

"I'll try," Elizabeth said.

"Please."

"I have to talk to the state police tomorrow. If I can make it, I will. If not, then the next day."

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“Do you promise?”

“I do,” Elizabeth said, though she knew nothing of fixing broken things.

When she got back in the car, Elizabeth still felt disconnected, and like other times in her life where she'd had nowhere to go and nothing to do, she ended up at her father's church, a humble building that rose narrow and pale against the night sky. She parked beneath the high steeple, studied small houses lined like boxes in the dark, and thought for the hundredth time that she could live in a place like this. Poor as it was, people worked and raised families and helped each other. Neighborliness like that seemed rare these days, and she thought a lot of what made this place so special came from her parents. As much as she and her father disagreed on life and the living of it, he was a fine minister. If people wanted a relationship with God, his was a good path. Kindness. Community. He kept the neighborhood going, but none of it worked unless it was done his way.

Elizabeth lost that kind of trust when she was seventeen.

Following a narrow drive, she walked beneath heavy trees and ended at the rectory where her parents lived. Like the church, it was small and plain and painted a simple white. She didn't expect to find anyone awake, but her mother was sitting at the kitchen table. She had the same cheekbones as Elizabeth, and the same deep eyes, a beautiful woman with gray-streaked hair and skin that was still smooth in spite of long years of hard work. Elizabeth watched for a full minute, hearing dogs, a distant engine, the wail of an infant in some other far house. She'd avoided this place since the shooting.

*Then why am I here?*

Not for her father, she thought. Never that.

*Then why?*

But she knew.

Tapping on the door, Elizabeth waited as fabric whispered behind the screen, and her mother appeared. “Hello, Mom.”

“Baby girl.” The screen door swung open and her mother stepped onto the porch. Her eyes twinkled in the light, her features full of joy as she opened her arms and hugged her daughter. “You don't call. You don't come by.”

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She was keeping it light, but Elizabeth squeezed harder. “It’s been a bad few days. I’m sorry.”

She stood Elizabeth at arm’s length and studied her face. “We’ve left messages, you know. Even your father called.”

“I can’t talk to Dad.”

“It’s really that bad?”

“Let’s just say I have enough judgment coming my way without the heavenly kind.”

It wasn’t a joke, but her mother laughed, a good laugh. “Come have a drink.” She led Elizabeth inside, put her at a small table, and fussed over ice and a half-empty bottle of Tennessee whiskey. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Elizabeth shook her head. She’d like to be honest with her mother, but had discovered long ago how a single lie could poison even the deepest well. Better to say nothing at all. Better to keep it in.

“Elizabeth?”

“I’m sorry.” Elizabeth shook her head again. “I don’t mean to be distant. It’s just that everything seems so . . . muddled.”

“Muddled?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, bullshit.” Elizabeth opened her mouth, but her mother waved it closed. “You’re the most clear-minded person I’ve ever known. As a child, an adult. You’ve always seen more clearly than most. You’re like your father that way, even though you believe such different things.”

Elizabeth peered down the darkened hall. “Is he here?”

“Your father? No. The Turners are having troubles again. Your father’s trying to help.”

Elizabeth knew the Turners. The wife drank and could get abusive. She’d hurt her husband once, and Elizabeth took the call her last month in uniform. She could close her eyes and picture the narrow house, the woman who wore a pink housecoat and weighed a hundred pounds, at most.

*I want the reverend.*

She had a rolling pin in her hand, swinging at shadows. The husband was down and bloody.

*I won’t talk to nobody but the reverend.*

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Elizabeth had been ready to do it the hard way, but her father calmed the woman down, and the husband—again—refused to press charges. That was years ago, and the reverend still counseled them. “He never shies, does he?”

“Your father? No.”

Elizabeth looked out the window. “Has he talked about the shooting?”

“No, sweetheart. What could he possibly say?”

It was a good question, and Elizabeth knew the answer. He would blame her for the deaths, for being a cop in the first place. He would say she’d broken trust, and that everything bad flowed from that single poor decision: the basement, the dead brothers, her career. “He still can’t accept the life I’ve chosen.”

“Of course he can. He’s your father, though, and he pines.”

“For me?”

“For simpler times, perhaps. For what once was. No man wants to be hated by his own daughter.”

“I don’t hate him.”

“You’ve not forgiven, either.”

Elizabeth accepted the truth of that. She kept her distance, and even when they shared the same room, there was a frost. “How are you two so different?”

“We’re really not.”

“Laugh lines. Frown lines. Acceptance. Judgment. You’re so completely opposite I wonder how you’ve stayed together for so long. I marvel. I really do.”

“You’re being unfair to your father.”

“Am I?”

“What can I tell you, sweetheart?” Her mother sipped whiskey and smiled. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Even after so many years?”

“Well, maybe it’s not so much the heart, anymore. He can be difficult, yes, but only because he sees the world so clearly. Good and evil, the one straight path. The older I become, the more comfort I find in that kind of certainty.”

“You studied philosophy, for God’s sake.”

“That was a different life. . . .”

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“You lived in Paris. You wrote poetry.”

Her mother waved off the observation. “I was just a girl, and Paris just a place. You ask why we’ve stayed together, and in my heart I remember how it felt—the vision and the purpose, the determination every day to make the world better. Life with your father was like standing next to an open fire, just raw force and heat and purpose. He got out of bed driven and ended every day the same. He made me very happy for a lot of years.”

“And now?”

She smiled wistfully. “Let’s just say that as rigid as he may have grown, my home will always be between your father’s walls.”

Elizabeth appreciated the simple elegance of such commitment. The preacher. The preacher’s wife. She let a moment pass, thinking how it must have been for them: the passion and the cause, the early days and the great, stone church. “It’s not like the old place, is it?” She turned back to the window and stared out at rock-lined gardens and brown grass, at the poor, narrow church wrapped in sunbaked clapboards. “I think about it sometimes: the cool and the quiet, the long view from the front steps.”

“I thought you hated the old church.”

“Not always. And not with such passion.”

“Why are you here, sweetheart?” Her mother’s reflection appeared in the same pane of glass. “Really?”

Elizabeth sighed, knowing this was the reason she’d come. “Am I a good person?” Her mother started to smile, but Elizabeth stopped her. “I’m serious, Mom. It’s like now. It’s the middle of the night. Things in my life are troubled and uncertain, and here I am.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Am I a taker?”

“Elizabeth Frances Black, you’ve never taken anything in your whole life. Since you were a child I’ve watched you give, first to your father and the congregation, now to the whole city. How many medals have you won? How many lives have you saved? What’s this really about?”

Elizabeth sat again and stared into her drink, both shoulders lifting. “You know how well I shoot.”

“Ah. Now, I understand.” She took her daughter’s hand, and creases gathered at her eyes as she squeezed it once and took the seat across the

table. “If you shot those men eighteen times, then you had good reason. Nothing anybody ever says will make me feel different about that.”

“You’ve read the papers?”

“Generalities.” She made a dismissive sound. “Distortion.”

“Two men are dead. What else is there to say?”

“Baby girl.” She refilled Elizabeth’s glass and poured more in hers. “That’s like using *white* to describe a full moon rising, or *wet* to capture the glory of the oceans. You saved an innocent girl. Everything else pales.”

“You know the state police are investigating?”

“I know only that you did what you felt was right, and that if you shot those men eighteen times, there was a good reason for doing so.”

“And if the state police disagree?”

“My goodness.” Her mother laughed again. “You can’t possibly doubt yourself that much. They’ll have their little investigation, and they’ll clear your name. Surely you see that.”

“Nothing seems clear right now. What happened. Why it happened. I haven’t really slept.”

Her mother sipped, then pointed with a finger. “Are you familiar with the word *inspiration*? The meaning of it? Where it comes from?”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“In the Dark Ages, no one understood the things that made some people special, things like imagination or creativity or vision. People lived and died in the same small village. They had no idea why the sun rose or set or why winter came. They grubbed in the dirt and died young of disease. Every soul in that dark, difficult time faced the same limitations, every soul except a precious few who came rarely to the world and saw things differently, the poets and inventors, the artists and stonemasons. Regular folks didn’t understand people like that; they didn’t understand how a person could wake up one day and see the world differently. They thought it was a gift from God. Thus, the word *inspiration*. It means ‘breathed upon.’”

“I’m no artist. No visionary.”

“Yet, you have insights as rare as any poet’s gift. You see deeply and understand. You would not have killed those men unless you had to.”

“Look, Mom—”

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“Inspiration.” Her mother drank, and her eyes watered. “Breathed upon by God himself.”