

CHEVY STEVENS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *STILL MISSING*

"A CHILLING, COMPELLING READ."

—William Landay,
author of *Defending Jacob*

ALWAYS
WATCHING

A NOVEL

ALWAYS WATCHING

Also by Chevy Stevens

Never Knowing

Still Missing

ALWAYS WATCHING

CHEVY STEVENS

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

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www.stmartins.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stevens, Chevy.

Always watching / Chevy Stevens. — First edition.

pages ; cm.

ISBN 978-0-312-59569-2 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-03189-1 (e-book)

1. Family secrets—Fiction. 2. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PR9199.4.S739A79 2013b

813'.6—dc23

2013011251

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First Edition: June 2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my brother, Steve

ALWAYS WATCHING

CHAPTER ONE

The first time I saw Heather Simeon, she was curled into a ball in the seclusion room at the hospital, a thin blue blanket tight around her, the bandages sharp white lines circling her wrists. Her blond hair obscured most of her face. Even then, she still gave off a sense of refinement, something in the high cheekbones barely visible through the veil of her hair, the beautifully arched brows, the patrician nose, the delicate outline of pale lips. Only her hands were a mess: the cuticles raw and bleeding, the nails jagged. They didn't look bitten, they looked broken. Like her.

I'd already read her file and talked with the emergency psychiatrist who'd admitted her the night before, then gone over everything with the nurses, most of whom had worked in the Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit for years, and who were also my best sources of information. I might spend fifteen minutes to an hour with each patient during my morning rounds, but the rest of the time I was at my office in the Mental Health building, treating patients who are out in the community. That's why I like to bring a nurse with me when I first meet a patient, so we're on the same page with the care plan. Michelle, a cheerful woman with curly blond hair and a wide smile, was with me now.

Heather's husband had come home the night before to find her sprawled on the kitchen floor, the knife near her hand. When she was admitted to the hospital, she'd become agitated, crying and fighting the nurses. The emergency-room doctor ran a drug screen that came back clear, so she'd been given Ativan and placed in the seclusion room. She was under close observation on the monitor, and a nurse checked on her every fifteen minutes.

She'd been sleeping all night.

I knocked softly on the door frame. Heather stirred and opened her eyes, blinked a few times. I stepped closer to the bed. She gazed up at me, licked her lips, which were dry and chapped, then swallowed. Her mouth parted as if she were going to say something, but only her breath escaped in a long sigh. Her eyes were dark blue.

"Good morning, Heather," I said in my gentlest voice. "I'm Dr. Lavoie, the attending psychiatrist." When I had my private practice up island, my patients called me Nadine. But since moving to Victoria to work at the hospital, I'd started using my title, had come to like the emotional distance—one of the reasons for my move in the first place. "Would you like some water?"

She was staring somewhere over my shoulder, her expression blank, devoid of sorrow or anger. She might not have succeeded in checking out physically, but she had definitely disappeared emotionally.

"I'd like to talk with you for a little bit if that's okay."

Her eyes skimmed past me, landing on Michelle. She pulled the blue blanket tight around her.

"Why . . . is she here?" Her voice was a whisper.

"Michelle? She's one of our nurses."

On the psychiatry floor, the doctors are generally in business casual, the nurses dressed more for comfort. Michelle tended to favor fun clothes, today a funky striped shirt with dark denim dress jeans. Unless you noticed the ID badge around her neck, you might not realize she was a nurse.

Heather's body language was defensive, almost cringing under the blanket, her gaze flicking back and forth between us like a cornered animal's. Michelle stepped back, but Heather still looked

overwhelmed. Some patients felt ganged up on when we brought a nurse in with us.

I said, “Would you be more comfortable just talking to me?”

She gave a small nod as she worried a corner of her bandage with her teeth. Again, I was struck with the image of a wild animal trying to escape its bindings. I glanced at Michelle, signaling that it was okay for her to leave.

Michelle smiled at Heather.

“I’ll check on you later, honey. See if you need anything.”

I liked Michelle’s warmth with the patients, had noticed it before. She’d often sit and talk with them, even on her breaks. When the door closed behind her, I turned back to my patient.

“Can you tell me how old you are, Heather?”

She slowly said, “Thirty-five,” as she looked around, starting to become more aware of where she was. I saw the room through her eyes and felt bad for her: the small plastic window in the heavy metal door, the Plexiglas cover on the window with scratch marks down it like someone had tried to claw their way out—which someone had.

“And your name?” I said.

“Heather Duncan . . .” She shook her head, catching herself, but the movement was sluggish, delayed. “Simeon. My name now, it’s Simeon.”

I smiled. “Did you get married recently?”

“Yes.” Not *yeah* or *uh-huh*, but *yes*. She was educated, brought up to speak clearly. Her gaze focused on the heavy metal door. “Daniel . . . is he here?”

“He’s here, but I’d like to talk with you first. How long have you and Daniel been married?”

“Six months.”

“What do you do for a living, Heather?”

“I don’t do anything now, but I used to work in the store. We take care of the earth.”

I noticed her shift to present tense.

“Are you a landscaper?”

“It’s our job to tend and keep the land.”

I felt an uncomfortable flutter in my stomach about the phrase. It

sounded familiar, and she'd also said it like she was reciting an expression she'd heard many times. She was repeating it, not speaking for herself.

"I heard you had a bad night," I said. "Would you like to tell me what happened?"

"I don't want to be here."

"You're in the hospital because you've been certified under the Mental Health Act. You tried to hurt yourself, and we don't want that to happen again, so we're going to help you get better."

She pulled herself up into a sitting position, and I noticed how thin her arms were as she braced on the mattress, the veins popping. Her arms shook as if the effort of holding up her body was exhausting.

"I just wanted it all to stop." Her eyes filled with tears that weaved down her face, dripped off her nose. One landed on her arm. She stared at it as though she had no idea how it got there.

"What did you want to stop?"

"The bad thoughts. My baby—" Her voice caught and she flinched, gritting her teeth as though something had stabbed her deep inside.

"You had a miscarriage, Heather?" According to her file, she'd lost the baby a week ago, but I wanted to see if she would tell me more about it herself.

Another tear slid down and dropped onto her arm.

"I was three months along. I started bleeding. . . ." She took a breath and let it out slowly through clenched teeth.

I paused, a beat of silence in honor of what she'd just told me, then said, very gently, "I'm sorry, Heather. That must have been very painful for you. It's normal to have feelings of depression after losing a child, but we can help you manage your feelings so they aren't so overwhelming. Your file said your doctor prescribed Effexor last year. Are you still taking it?"

"No."

"When did you stop?"

"When I met Daniel." I caught the slightly defensive tone and knew she felt guilty that she'd stopped taking the pills, ashamed that she needed them. People with depression often stop their medica-

tion when they fall in love, the endorphins creating their own natural antidepressant. Then real life kicks in.

“The first thing I’d like to do is put you back on the antidepressant.” My voice was casual: *This isn’t a big deal. You’re okay.* “We’ll start you off on a low dose and see how you do. Your file mentioned that you also went through a hard time a few years ago.” Her previous two suicide attempts had been with pills. She’d been found at the last second in each case, but now that Heather had progressed to more violent means, she might not be so lucky next time.

“You were referred to a psychologist. Are you still seeing him?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t like him. Daniel, is he okay?”

“The nurses said he stayed here all night and only went home this morning to get some of your things. He’s back in the waiting area now.”

Heather frowned, her face worried. “He must be so tired.”

“I’m sure Daniel just wants you to get well. We’re here to help with that.”

Fresh tears made her eyes seem even bluer, like sapphires set in diamonds. She was so pale you could see every vein in her neck, but she was still hauntingly pretty. People often assume that beautiful people have no reason to be unhappy. It’s usually the complete opposite.

“I want Daniel,” she said. Her eyelids had begun to droop, the effort of talking draining what little energy she had left.

“I’m going to speak to him first, then we’ll see if we can arrange a little visit.” I wanted to get a sense of what kind of emotional shape he was in, so he didn’t make the situation worse.

“They can’t find me in here.” She said the words to the room as though she’d forgotten I was there and was just reassuring herself.

“Who are you afraid is going to find you?”

“I want them to leave us alone, but they just keep calling and calling.” She picked at her cuticles as she spoke, tearing at a small piece of flesh.

“Is someone bothering you?” Her file hadn’t said anything about paranoia or hallucinations, but psychosis is sometimes possible with severe depression, which Heather was clearly suffering from. But if

she was also having problems with some people in her life, we needed to know about it.

She started to worry the bandage with her teeth again.

I said, “This is a safe environment—it’s a place for you to get better. We can bar anyone you don’t want to visit, and there’s a security guard on the floor at all times. No one can get to you.” If there was a real threat, I wanted to make sure Heather felt secure enough to tell me what was going on. If it was just paranoia, she still needed to feel protected, so we could begin to treat her.

“I’m not going back.” The last part was said as though she was warning herself. “They can’t make me.”

“Who can’t make you?”

She forced her eyes open, met mine with a flash of confused alarm. I could see her wondering what she’d just told me. Fear, and something else, something I couldn’t name yet, rolled off her body in thick waves, pressing into me. I fought the sudden urge to step back.

“I need to see Daniel.” Her head lolled forward, and her chin dropped onto her chest. “I’m so tired.”

“Why don’t you get some rest while I talk to your husband.”

She curled up under the blue blanket in the fetal position, her face to the wall, shaking even though the room was warm.

Her voice now barely a whisper, she said, “He sees *everything*.”

I paused at the door. “Who sees everything, Heather?”

She just pulled the blanket over her face.

When I walked into the visiting area, a tall man with dark hair leaped to his feet. Even unshaven, with shadows under his eyes and a rumpled dress shirt hanging outside faded jeans, Daniel was an attractive man. He was probably in his mid-forties, judging by the laugh lines around his eyes and mouth, but I had a feeling he was one of those men who grow even more handsome with age. Their child would have been lovely. I felt a wave of sorrow for them.

He strode toward me, a brown leather bomber jacket hanging over his arm and a knapsack hooked over his shoulder.

“How is she? Is she asking for me?” His voice cracked on the last word.

“Let’s go where we can talk privately, Mr. Simeon.” I led him down the hallway toward one of the interview rooms, skirting the janitor mopping the floor. I frowned when I noticed that the utility room behind him was unlocked and gaping, and made a mental note to mention it to the nurses.

“Call me Daniel, please. Can you tell me if she’s all right?”

“I’d say yes, considering. She’s having a hard time, but we’re doing everything in our power to help her. This is the best place for her right now.”

“There was so much blood. . . .”

I felt bad for him, knowing what he was probably thinking: *What if I’d come home ten minutes later? Why didn’t I see the signs?* Families seem to fall into two categories: those that blame themselves and those that blame the patient. But they always need to blame someone.

“It must have been very upsetting to find her like that,” I said. “Is there anyone you can talk to? I’d be happy to suggest someone.”

A quick shake of his head. “I’m okay. I just want Heather to be safe.”

I thought about what Heather had just told me. *Was* someone harassing her? Or was his fear just related to what she had done?

“That’s what we want too.” I unlocked the heavy metal door to the interview room and waved Daniel into a chair.

He sat across from me. People might think that the ward would be decorated in soothing colors, a warm, nurturing environment, but the chairs, mismatched shades of pink, blue, and puce, have been there since the seventies. The desk was laminate, the edges cracked and peeling. A wood shelf stood against one wall with a few lonely books stacked haphazardly. Even the waiting area where he’d been sitting for so many hours was just a few chairs by the elevators. It’s an old hospital. But the funding isn’t there, and this isn’t meant to be a holiday.

“Did she tell you why she . . .” Daniel choked up, took a quick breath. “Why she tried to kill herself?”

“I can’t share anything Heather tells me without her permission. But I’d like to ask you some questions.”

“Sure, anything.”

“Did you know how depressed she’s been?”

He rubbed his chin, his face bleak. “Since we lost the baby, she won’t eat or get out of bed. Most days she won’t even shower. I thought it was postpartum, or whatever it’s called, and she just needed some time. . . . I keep thinking about how quiet she was when I left last night. I was late for work—I’ve been picking up odd jobs in the evening to make some extra cash—so I was in a rush.” He shook his head. “If I’d stayed with her . . .”

He was the type who blame themselves. I leaned forward.

“This isn’t your fault, Daniel. If you’d been there, she’d have waited until you weren’t and tried again. People as troubled as Heather always find a way.”

He looked at me—long enough, I hoped, for my words to sink in—then his face clouded over.

“Her parents are going to take this really hard.”

“They don’t know?”

“They’re on an RV trip in Northern BC. I tried to call, but they must be out of range. She hasn’t talked to them for a while.”

“What about her friends?”

“She never wanted to do anything with them, so they stopped phoning.”

I wasn’t surprised that Heather had pushed people away, except for Daniel. A classic symptom of depression was detaching from friends and family.

“What do you do for a living, Daniel?”

“I’m a carpenter.” That explained his build, and his deep tan. He smiled as he looked down at his rough hands. “Heather and I came from different worlds, but the minute we met, we had this instant connection, like on the deepest level. Neither of us had ever felt that way before.” He looked at me as if expecting skepticism.

I gave him an encouraging nod.

He continued. “She’d just gone through a breakup—her ex was a real jerk. But we started hiking and doing yoga together. It seemed to cheer her up.”

It had been a good idea on his part. Exercise is one of the best natural aids for depression.

“So you noticed some signs of depression before you got married?”

“I guess. . . . She’s the kind of person who’s always trying to take care of everyone else, so it’s hard to tell sometimes. She’d get really quiet or start crying, but she wouldn’t want to worry me, so I wouldn’t know what she was upset about. But when she got pregnant, she was really happy about the baby, picking out names, buying toys. . . .” His voice wavered. “I don’t know what to do about the baby’s room or all the clothes she bought.”

My mind flashed to Paul painting Lisa’s nursery strawberry red with apple green stripes because our child would be different, would skip to her own beat. Which she had, always—a trait I’d admired, until she danced away from me.

“Let’s take it one day at a time,” I said, as much to myself as to him. “You can work all that out later.”

“When can Heather come home?”

“She’s been involuntarily admitted into the hospital so we can keep an eye on her. We can’t release her until she’s no longer a danger to herself.”

“What if she tries . . . you know.” He swallowed hard. “What if she tries to do it again?”

“We won’t let her here. And we won’t send her home until she’s stable and has a good support system in place.”

“Can I see her? I brought some of her things.”

Normally, we’re strict about visiting hours—they’re only from four to nine in PIC, where everyone has to be buzzed in and out. We don’t allow visitors before noon, so patients can attend programs, and we can make our rounds. But he looked desperate, and I thought seeing him might help Heather settle in.

“She’s resting right now, but you can say a quick hello.”

We didn’t talk as we rode up the elevator to Psychiatric Intensive Care on the next floor. Daniel seemed lost in thought, and I was

busy counting my heartbeats while focusing on my breathing. I've suffered from claustrophobia for years, a fact that would probably shock my patients. Various coping techniques help, from mental imagery to breathing exercises, but when I first heard the elevator seal shut, I had to restrain myself from hitting the panic button.

We were buzzed into the unit. In PIC, the nurses' station is behind glass, and a security guard is always at hand. One side of the unit is for high-risk patients like Heather, and the other is the step down unit, where they go when they don't need the same level of monitoring. If they continue to improve, they are moved down to the next floor, where they have more freedom.

The nurse searched the bag Daniel had brought for Heather to make sure there wasn't anything she could hurt herself with—the frame was removed from their wedding photograph, same with the tie from her robe. When the nurse was finished, I showed Daniel to an alcove in the lounge area, where they could have some privacy but still be in view, then went to get Heather.

As I entered the seclusion room, I gave her a quick visual. She was still curled in a ball, her pale arms wrapped around her torso with both small hands on her shoulders, as if she were trying to hold herself together.

“Heather, do you feel up to a visit with Daniel now?”

Heather twitched at the sound, then slowly rolled over. Her voice was pleading, and her eyes flooded with tears, as she said, “I need to see him.”

“Okay, but you'll have to come out with me because we don't allow visitors in the seclusion rooms. Are you feeling strong enough to stand?”

She was already pulling herself up into a sitting position.

When we entered the lounge area, Daniel jumped to his feet—and froze as he took in the sight of his wife slowly shuffling beside me, the bandages on her wrists, the hospital blue pajamas, the blanket she'd wrapped around her shoulders like an old woman's shawl.

“Daniel!” she cried out.

“Oh, sweetie,” he said as he gathered her into her arms. “You can’t scare me like that again.”

Once a patient has been in for a few days we leave them alone with their visitors, but I wanted to see how Daniel and Heather interacted—in case Daniel was part of the problem. I sat in one of the chairs a little to the side.

Daniel gently helped Heather lower herself before taking a seat. Heather rested her head against his shoulder, and he wrapped his arm around her back, supporting her.

“I’m sorry, Daniel.” Heather’s voice was raw with emotion. “I hate what I’m doing to you. You shouldn’t have to take care of me all the time.”

A red flag. Suicidal patients try to convince themselves that people would be better off without them.

Daniel said, “Don’t talk like that. I love you. I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to take care of you forever.” As though to prove his point, he pulled the blanket up around her shoulders, tucking it around her neck where the hospital pajamas had drifted down, revealing the hollow of her thin collarbone.

She clearly wasn’t frightened of Daniel, so I decided to leave and finish my rounds. Then Heather, speaking slightly under her breath, said something that caught my attention.

“I told the doctor about how they keep calling.”

“What did you say?” Daniel didn’t sound upset, just a little worried.

“Not much, I don’t think. . . . I’m confused, and my head feels funny. Are you mad at me?”

“I’m not mad, sweetie. But maybe you shouldn’t think about any of that right now, just think about getting better. We can talk about everything else another day.” His face was earnest, making sure she understood.

“Do you think Emily knows . . . what I did?”

“No, they probably wouldn’t have told her at the center.”

Heather nodded, then glanced up at the camera in the corner. She’d also glanced at it when she first sat down, and I wondered if she’d been at a treatment center where patients were monitored.

“Is there someone you’d like me to contact for you?” I said.

Heather looked at Daniel. He shook his head, just a slight movement, but she nodded back, acquiescing to whatever he'd just silenced.

I said, "It would help my treatment plan for Heather if you told me what program you were attending."

Heather rested her hand on Daniel's leg, her eyes pleading with him. Daniel's were focused on her bandages, then he turned to me.

"We used to live at a spiritual center. It's out in Jordan River. We left when Heather got pregnant because she didn't want to have the baby there. Some of the members have been calling to make sure we're okay. They're nice people."

I'd heard that there was a center out in Jordan River, a spiritual retreat of sorts that was well respected, but I didn't know much else about them.

Heather had started to cry again, her shoulders shaking.

"They made me feel like it was my fault I lost the baby."

"They don't really believe it's your fault—no one thinks that," Daniel said. "They're just trying to help, sweetie. You were doing so well."

Heather was crying harder now, her face twisted.

"I didn't like how they're always telling us what to do. They—"

"Heather, stop—you don't know what you're saying." Daniel's eyes shot to my face, his voice concerned and his expression helpless. "They have rules, Dr. Lavoie, but they're so we can stay focused on the workshops."

Heather and Daniel clearly weren't on the same page about the center, but she didn't want to contradict Daniel in front of me. She kept glancing at him. *Is it okay that I'm saying this? Do you still love me?*

She gazed at him now, her hands gripping her blanket tight around her.

"They wouldn't let me say good-bye to Emily."

This was the second time Heather had mentioned Emily.

"Emily didn't want to leave with us, remember? She loves it at the center. I know you miss her, but you need to worry about yourself and the bab—"

Heather recoiled like he'd hit her.

Daniel said, “Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry. It was just habit.”

Heather’s eyes had gone dark and empty again, her hands dropped by her sides, palms up—defeated.

“It’s my fault I lost the baby. You’re mad at me.”

“It’s *not* your fault, Heather—and I’m not mad at you.” In a voice so loving and sad it made my heart hurt, he added, “You’re the most important thing in the world to me.”

“They said we should stay. They said it was better for our baby—and maybe they were right. I made you leave, and now the baby’s dead.”

“Heather, stop.” Daniel was rubbing her back. “Don’t say things like that.” He put his face close to hers. “Hey, look at me.” But Heather was just staring at the wall now, her expression blank.

I didn’t want to push things too much, especially with Heather starting to dissociate from the conversation, but I was concerned about why she was blaming herself so much for the loss of her baby.

“Why did you want to leave the center, Heather?”

She began to rock, her arms wrapped around her body.

“They said that *all* adults are the child’s parents. So everyone helps raise them, and they don’t even stay with you.”

The horror in her face made it clear that this hadn’t sat well with her.

“At the center, they believe it’s better for the baby’s spiritual growth to be loved by many hearts,” Daniel said. “They have highly trained caregivers.”

This center sounded highly controlling. I turned to Heather.

“But you didn’t want to share your child?”

She nodded and glanced at Daniel, who stared down at Heather’s bandages again. She looked like she wanted to explain herself more, but then she reached out and held Daniel’s hand. He gave it a small squeeze.

“I think I was wrong, though,” she said. “We should’ve stayed. Then I wouldn’t have miscarried.”

I said, “How can you know that you wouldn’t have miscarried even if you *had* stayed? Did they actually tell you that you were responsible?”

“They didn’t say it was our fault,” Daniel said. “They were just worried that Heather had gotten herself too stressed out by moving.”

In other words, they had implied that it was her fault.

“What is this center called?” I said.

Daniel sat straighter, his shoulders proud.

“The River of Life Spiritual Center.”

Something tickled at the back of my mind, followed by an uncomfortable feeling of dread settling in my stomach.

“Who runs it?”

“Aaron Quinn. He’s the director of all the programs at the center.”

Aaron Quinn. He said Aaron Quinn.

It couldn’t be the same man.

Heather’s voice was a whisper. “Most of the members call it the commune.”

The commune. I hadn’t heard that name in years. I hadn’t wanted to hear it ever again. I stared at Heather, trying to think, my heart thudding in my ears.

“Dr. Lavoie?” Heather’s blue eyes were full of sorrow and pain.

“Do you think it’s my fault the baby died?”

It took a second for me to refocus my thoughts. *You have a patient, and she needs your help.*

“No, I don’t think it’s your fault. You made a decision you thought was best for your child—you were just being good parents.” I talked on for a minute or two, heard the comforting words coming out of my mouth. But all the while my head was filled with a dull roar, the sound of fate and life colliding. Because what I couldn’t tell them was that I knew Aaron Quinn.

I knew exactly who he was.

CHAPTER TWO

When I was twenty-five, I'd decided to go back to school and was attending the University of Victoria for a degree in science. I'd learned ways to deal with tight hallways and stairwells, mostly by avoiding them, but during final exams, all the outside lots were full and I'd been forced to park underground. I'd been overwhelmed by panic in the dark space and hadn't been able to step into the elevator. I had to walk the long way around, while hyperventilating in big gasps of air, my hair soaked with sweat, earning me stares from every student I passed. I'd missed the beginning of my exam and the door was closed, so I failed the course. It had been a humiliating experience, and I began therapy soon after.

While discussing my childhood with the therapist, I shared that my mother had run away with my brother and me to a commune when I was thirteen. The commune, led by a man named Aaron Quinn, had been built beside the Koksilah River on the outskirts of Shawnigan Lake, which is a small community about thirty minutes north of Victoria—on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. We lived there for eight months until my father came to get us.

My therapist had found this period in my life fascinating and

wanted to explore it further. Especially because I'd been unable to pinpoint when my claustrophobia had developed, but I had more distinct memories of it interfering with my life after we'd moved back home. I slept with a night-light and my door open—I couldn't even clean the barn without hyperventilating, and Robbie, my brother, had to take over the chore for me.

Believing that my claustrophobia was linked to suppressed trauma, from something that had happened while at the commune, my therapist had suggested we try hypnosis as a way to unlock my memories. Recovered Memory Therapy was a popular treatment at the time, and he felt it was the best way to recover any lost memories. I'd been hesitant at first—I had enough painful memories already.

My family life hadn't been easy growing up. My father, a strict German, was hard to please but easy to anger. His temper often turned violent, and we spent much of our childhood hiding while he was on a drunken rampage, smashing his huge fists into the windows or knocking our mother around. If we intervened, she'd just scream that we were making it worse. He worked on a fishing boat, and my mother, who was unbalanced when he was around, became downright dangerous when he was away. She was either on top of the world, buying us gifts we couldn't afford and taking us on trips all over the island, or shut in her room for days, the curtains pulled down and the door locked. She'd often threaten to kill herself, the pills in her hands as we pleaded with her until she finally handed them over. Other times she'd take off in the truck, drunk or high on medication, not returning until the morning. Now I would diagnose her as manic-depressive, but back then all we knew was that my mother's moods were a slippery slope and we never knew where she would land.

The only person I could depend on was Robbie, my older brother by three years, whom I followed everywhere. He was my first best friend, my only friend growing up on a ranch where all our school friends lived miles away. Though we were very different, me with my love of books and school, he with mechanics and carpentry, we'd spend hours in the woods, building forts and playing army. Robbie wanted to join the army as soon as he turned eighteen, but I secretly

hoped he'd change his mind. I didn't know how I would survive without him.

One February, just before I turned thirteen, my father was away on the boats, and we were at the local corner store with my mom. Robbie was waiting in the truck. Mom was in one of her down phases, which meant she'd barely eaten for days—neither had we—and she was listlessly picking up items: Kraft Dinner, tomato soup, bread, peanut butter, wieners, hot dog buns, cereal. Her hair, normally a glossy, shiny black, was dull and limp. Mom's hair started going gray in her thirties, though she never lived long enough for it to turn completely silver. When I also started going gray young, I dyed my hair for years, wondering sometimes if it was more out of fear of becoming my mother than vanity.

That day there were a couple of young men in the store, wearing faded bell-bottoms and loose, caftan-styled shirts, ponchos for coats, strange knit toques, their hair almost as long as my mother's. Back then, in the late sixties, it was common to see hippies in town, but I still thought them fascinating. I flipped through some magazines at the counter while I watched my mom talking to the earnest young men. I was used to men paying attention to my mother, with her pale blue eyes and long dark hair, her body slim from working on the ranch; she always attracted attention, but something seemed different about the tone of this conversation. Though it was cold out, the men were wearing sandals, and I couldn't stop looking at their feet.

I don't know what they had said to my mom, but by the time we drove home, she had switched to her up phase. Laughing as she careened around corners, her eyes too bright, teasing us kids, who were terrified, for being "scaredy-cats." Robbie tried not to show his fear, but his knuckles were white as he gripped the truck door, his other arm around my shoulders, holding me in place. It wasn't the first time she'd taken us on one of her wild rides.

Years later, when I was twenty-six, my mother was killed in an accident. She'd slid on wet roads and lost control, hitting a tree doing a hundred. But I'd read the report, there were no skid marks: She never tried to slow down. She wasn't trying now either.

When we finally made it home, Robbie climbed out, and I slithered after him on wobbly legs. Mom had already leaped out, slamming the door behind her. We followed her into the house, a small rancher with cedar-shake siding, a sloping floor, and so many leaks we had buckets all over the house when it rained. Mom was in her bedroom, throwing clothes into a suitcase.

Robbie said, “Mom, what are you doing?”

“We’re getting out of here. Grab your things.”

Robbie said, “Are we going on a trip?”

“Pack everything—we’re not coming back.”

Robbie’s face was scared. “We can’t just leave Dad—”

She stopped and turned to us. “He leaves us alone for months—I can’t live like this anymore. We’re going to stay with some people out by the river.”

A kaleidoscope of confusing thoughts spun through my mind. Was she going to divorce our dad? What people? Did she mean the hippies we’d met?

She said, “They’re a revolution, and we’re going to be a part of it. We’re going to change the world, kids.”

Both Robbie and I knew that she wasn’t going to change anything, except probably her mood in another day or so, but we also knew it was best just to go along with her. She would come down eventually, and then we’d go home.

Now she pulled some old suitcases out of the closet and handed them to us. “Pack your clothes and anything else you want to bring.”

Robbie and I looked at each other, then he nodded: *Just do as she says, it will be okay.* I was scared, but I trusted Robbie.

All I brought were some clothes and my books. When we were finished, we found Mom outside by the truck, her suitcase and bags full of food already thrown in the back. Our dog, Jake, a black border collie mix with one blue eye, followed us out of the house, his tail wagging in concern, and an anxious whine leaking from his throat. Terrified she was going to leave him—we had two cats, Jake, and a couple of horses—I said, “What about the animals?”

She paused in the middle of throwing some of Dad’s tools in the

truck, a confused expression on her face, like it was the first time she'd even thought about our pets. After a moment, she said, "We'll take them. They should be free too." She turned to us, her eyes lit up with frantic energy, her skin coated in a fine sheen of sweat. "You kids don't know how lucky you are. You're going to experience something *amazing*. Your lives are going to change forever."

The commune was in a clearing alongside the river, hidden from the logging road, which leads up to Glen Eagle Mountain, by a thick wall of forest. The river wrapped around one side of the clearing and glimpses of jade green pools were visible through the trees. As we came into the center of the camp, the forest opened up beside the river to reveal a sandy beach, with the odd dead tree from winter runoffs littering the shore. One tree made a makeshift clothes hanger as a woman did her laundry in the water, soap bubbles frothing in the current. Across the river, the high bank was a sheer dirt wall, trees and ferns clinging to the earth as it eroded from underneath their roots.

There looked to be at least a couple of dozen people living at the site, the women dressed in loose dresses and skirts, their hair long. The men wore cut-off jeans, their chests bare, also with long hair and beards. Cats, dogs, chickens, and kids were roaming free, and there was a tangible air of excitement in the air. It was cold, and it had snowed the week before, but some of them were living in tents. Two old yellow school buses had been converted into sleeping areas, and there were signs that they were building more cabins. A couple of horses grazed in a meadow to the right of the main clearing. I also noticed a tractor, and pens with goats and pigs. A group came to greet us, pulling us in for hugs, touching and stroking our hair as they welcomed us to their camp. One blond woman, smelling of cedar and smoke, turned to my mother.

"Peace, sister. What's your name?"

"Kate. These are my children, Nadine and Robbie."

The woman smiled. "Welcome, Kate. I'm Joy."

A tall kid with red hair and freckles, who looked about the same age as Robbie, came over and introduced himself as Levi. He clasped Robbie on the shoulder. “Welcome to our camp, man. Want to meet some cool chicks?”

As they walked off, I said, “Robbie, wait.” But he was already out of earshot, moving toward a couple of teenage girls, who looked happy to see Robbie. Since he’d turned sixteen, girls had been flocking to him—tall, with lean muscles from working on our ranch, shaggy black hair framing his face, and a perpetual tough-guy scowl, he looked like a moody rock star.

Mom was following Joy toward one of the cabins and gestured for me to come along.

I said, “You said we had to unload the horses from the trailer.”

Over her shoulder, she said, “We’ll do it in a minute.” She turned back to Joy. “Nadine’s my little rule follower.”

It was true. I did crave the comfort of rules, of science and math. With a mother as mercurial as mine, I was constantly searching for absolutes. I stood near the truck, wishing Mom had left the keys. I didn’t like the camp, the way it smelled, a bitter, metallic scent. The scent my mother gave off in her manic phase.

Then I saw an attractive young man, maybe early twenties, sitting on a log at the side of the clearing. The winter sun slanted down through fir trees and made his hair, a thick mane of chocolate brown, glow with rich tones and bathed his face in light. His dark brown eyes, with long eyelashes, had an almost sleepy look to them, and his cheekbones were high, creating shadows and hollows on his face. His mouth was full, the lips perfectly symmetrical and turned down at the corners. He also had a full beard, even darker than his hair, and he was wearing jeans, a tan corduroy jacket, and a string of leather tied around his neck. He was watching me as he held an old guitar, the embroidered strap across his chest. He smiled and motioned me over. I wanted to stay near the truck and shook my head. He shrugged, gave a wink, and started to strum the guitar, softly singing.

Jake, who’d been guarding my feet, sauntered over. The man

paused his singing and ruffled the fur around Jake's neck. Jake didn't like anyone normally, but he rolled onto his back, wiggling on the ground. The man laughed and rubbed his belly with his foot. I was a cautious, distrustful kid by nature. But when the man lifted his head and said, "What's his name?" I left the safety of the truck.

CHAPTER THREE

I promised Heather and Daniel again that she was safe on the ward and reminded them that anything they shared would help me treat her. Then I finished my rounds and entered my notes on the patients' charts, all the while trying to ignore the dark feeling closing in around me, the question clamoring in my head.

Could it really be the same people?

Finally I had finished all my appointments at Mental Health, and my day was over. Each night when I got off work I'd take a detour down Pandora Street, where the homeless camp out, and search for the tall frame of my daughter, Lisa. She was turning twenty-five that March, and I wondered the same things I'd wondered every year since she had packed her bags at eighteen: Would I get to see her? Would she call? In the background there was always the more frightening thought: *Would she make it to her next birthday?* Each time the phone rang, I'd hold my breath, terrified the police were calling to say they'd found her body.

I parked my car and walked up and down the street, studying the clusters of street kids, wondering if their parents also lay awake at night worrying. It was cold, and I was tired and hungry, but I took another lap around the block, eyeing misshapen lumps sleeping

under dirty blankets, straggly, unwashed hair, scarred arms, feeling a surge of hope when I'd see a young woman, followed by a crash of despair when I'd realize it wasn't Lisa. I had no idea how vast the streets of Victoria were until my child was lost on them. How many dark alleys and abandoned buildings there were, or how helpless it would all make me feel.

When I didn't find Lisa anywhere, I headed home. I'd moved from Nanaimo, a city about an hour and a half north of Victoria, on the first of December, in the hopes of connecting with her. Back in July, before I'd made the final decision to move, I continued with my practice for a couple of weeks, not wanting to leave my clients without a support system. Once I had referred any remaining clients to an excellent therapist in town, I took the rest of the summer off and traveled. That fall, I'd just put my house on the market, still considering opening a private practice in Victoria, when a job came available for an adult general psychiatrist at St. Adrian's Hospital. My house sold soon after.

Now it was February, almost two months later, and I was still getting used to Fairfield, my new neighborhood in Victoria, a lovely community with tree-lined streets surrounded by Oak Bay, James Bay, Rockland, Beacon Hill Park, and to the south, the ocean shoreline of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Normally I took my time, so I could admire all the heritage buildings, but today I was too distracted, and sighed in relief when I pulled in the driveway of my new home.

Set on a street of older Victorian homes, my house was an architect's funky blend of West Coast natural with Asian contemporary: all strong angles, golden-stained wood exterior on the lower part, steel blue HardiPlank siding on the top half, and broad sheets of glass windows, trimmed in thick white casings. An aluminum roof jutted down in a slash of silver, and there was even a penthouse deck for morning tea. Bamboo in big black ceramic planters lined the front steps and walkway, setting off the amber-stained wood fence and gates with their black hinges. The garage had been turned into a potting shed in the back, perfect for my new hobby—bonsai trees, an art form I've long admired and yet to master. I'd taken a

class on a lark and ended up finding the discipline extremely relaxing. I spend so much time in my head that it was nice to do something creative for a change. The careful shaping and cultivating of a tree over a long period of time also reminded me to be patient with my clients.

Before I got out of my car, I did a quick check of all my mirrors to make sure no one was lurking in my driveway. I'd been attacked outside my office that summer in Nanaimo—another reason for my move, though I had already been thinking about it. I hadn't broken any bones but I'd been knocked unconscious and never saw my assailant. A patient at the time had been involved in a situation with her birth father, whom we originally suspected of assaulting me. But as the investigation continued, it seemed less likely. Another of my patients had recently left her husband, who viewed her sessions as an abandonment of her wifely duties—something he communicated with his fist to her face. When her husband confronted me, I refused to tell him where she was staying. A week later, I was attacked. The police couldn't prove it was him, but I was sure of it.

I let myself into my house, stopping to notice a stray black cat, all skin and bones, saunter across the road and head toward Ross Bay Cemetery. I hoped she had somewhere warm to hide. My last cat, Silky, had passed away in June, and I hadn't been able to bring myself to adopt another, telling myself it was because I wanted to travel, knowing it was because I wasn't ready. Inside the safety of my home, I had a bath to wash away the smell of the hospital, put on my favorite dove gray yoga outfit, made a cup of tea, and then, and only then, did I let myself think about what I'd heard at the hospital—and what I was going to do about it.

My mother had told us that the commune moved down to Victoria not long after we left, and I'd assumed they'd eventually split up. Once, in my early twenties, I'd been driving on the mountain roads with a boyfriend, looking for a good swimming hole, and recognized the old entrance to the commune site. He'd wanted to stop and explore, having heard the rumors about a group of hippies that

had camped there. I didn't divulge that we'd also lived there, but I'd been curious too. We'd walked around the site, now overgrown, and it had felt like visiting a ghost town. The barn and cabins empty, doors hanging open and windows broken, our voices hushed in the still forest. I'd become anxious the closer we got to the river, my heart beating fast and my chest tight, and had made him leave, assuming that it was just the silence and the dark woods that had frightened me.

Under my therapist's guidance a few years later, I had talked about the months I spent at the commune, sharing memories that I had of the place, the other members, my brother and mother, swimming at the river, the late-night campfires. But I never could recall any specific event that might've caused my claustrophobia, and hours of hypnosis never revealed anything further. There was just this murky sense that I hadn't liked some of the things that the adults were doing, and I'd been uncomfortable around Aaron, the young man I'd met that first day, and Joseph—his younger brother. Sometimes I felt like there might be things I was forgetting, gaps in my timeline, but nothing that I could put my finger on.

Now I couldn't believe that they were still in Victoria. I was curious about what the commune was like these days and whether the same people lived there.

That evening I spent some time online, reading about The River of Life Spiritual Center. It didn't take long to find their Web site, with its mission statement, "Guiding you on your journey to enlightenment." There were glorious photos of the commune, situated on more than 250 acres of land, where the river joined the ocean. I hadn't been to Jordan River for years, but I remembered that it was a small community about an hour west of Victoria. Originally a logging camp, there wasn't much in the way of a village, just a couple of cafés and a general store.

The commune land seemed to be mostly forest and hiking trails, but a big chunk was farmland, part of their stay-and-work program. It sounded like a fascinating place to visit, with its descriptive passages

about the healing properties of the land, the intellectual and soul-fulfilling workshops on meditation, spiritual awakening, relationship building, living and dying consciously, blending East and West philosophies toward achieving your highest potential. There were sweat lodges and mineral pools, elaborate gardens, and descriptions of organic food grown on the property, all extolling the virtues of a simple, balanced way of living.

The Web site described the friends you'd make, the greater understanding you'd gain of yourself and life as you learned about the all-embracing world, your newfound self-confidence and personal satisfaction. There was a lot of emphasis on being a steward of the land, that humans must take responsibility for the earth. I thought of Heather's words the first time I met her. *We take care of the earth.*

They also gave back to the community and helped countries around the world. There were photos of people digging ditches, working in fields, building structures. There was a donation button, and I wondered how much money was actually used to help these struggling countries.

I was impressed—and surprised—at how professional they'd become since the sixties, and what they'd grown into. They were obviously a sizable organization now, with centers in three countries, and probably very wealthy. They had elaborate online catalogues, opening with a letter from their director, Aaron Quinn.

I stared at his photo. Gone was the long hair and straggly beard. His hair was now snow-white, neatly trimmed, and so was his beard, but he was still an attractive man. He was wearing a dark turtleneck and smiled kindly at the camera, a wise expression in his eyes. He looked exactly like what he presented himself as: a director of a center devoted to self-awareness and spiritualism. But as I studied his face, I felt myself drawing back in my chair, wanting to put some space between us.

I read his opening letter, about how he'd formed the center because he believed it was more important than ever, with the current global-warming crisis, to awaken people to the earth's plight. They commanded large fees for workshops and intensives, ranging from a weekend to a month—if you were accepted into the program. They

would only take so many at a time. Members had to apply to stay on and live permanently at the commune. I wondered what that was evaluated on. I also wondered what had happened to Joseph. I tried to calculate his age, and if he was eighteen when I knew him, he'd be almost sixty now. Aaron, twenty-two, would be in his early sixties.

I looked again at Aaron's photo, his tranquil smile making me suddenly angry when I thought about Heather in the hospital, her wrists bandaged, blaming herself for the loss of her child. I turned my computer off.