

CHEVY STEVENS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *STILL MISSING*

A NOVEL

NEVER
KNOWING

"Never Knowing will consume you with the desire to read every page, gasp at every twist, and know every last secret." —Lisa Gardner

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CHEVY STEVENS

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For Connel

SESSION ONE

I thought I could handle it, Nadine. After all those years of seeing you, all those times I talked about whether I should look for my birth mother, I finally did it. I took that step. You were a part of it—I wanted to show you what an impact you had on my life, how much I’ve grown, how stable I am now, how balanced. That’s what you always told me, “Balance is the key.” But I forgot the other thing you used to say: “Slowly, Sara.”

I’ve missed this, being here. Remember how uncomfortable I was when I first started seeing you? Especially when I told you why I needed help. But you were down-to-earth and funny—not at all how I imagined a psychiatrist would be. This office was so bright and pretty that, no matter what I was worried about, as soon as I walked in here felt better. Some days, especially in the beginning, I didn’t want to leave.

You told me once that when you didn’t hear from me you knew things were going well, that when I stopped coming

altogether you'd know you did your job. And you did. The last couple of years have been the happiest of my life. That's why I thought it was the right time. I thought I could withstand anything that came my way. I was solid, grounded. *Nothing* could send me back to the nervous wreck I was when I first met you.

Then she lied to me—my birth mother—when I finally forced her to talk to me. She lied about my real father. It felt like when Ally used to kick my ribs when I was pregnant with her—a sudden blow from the inside that left me breathless. But it was my birth mother's fear that got me the most. She was *afraid* of me. I'm sure of it. What I don't know is why.

It started about six weeks ago, around the end of December, with an online article. I was up stupidly early this one Sunday—no need for a rooster when you have a six-year-old—and while I inhaled my first coffee I answered e-mails. I get requests to restore furniture from all over the island now. That morning I was trying to research a desk from the 1920s, when I wasn't laughing at Ally. She was supposed to be watching cartoons downstairs, but I could hear her scolding Moose, our brindle French bulldog, for molesting her stuffed rabbit. Suffice it to say, Moose has a weaning issue. No tail's safe.

Then somehow or another I got this pop-up advertising Viagra, which I finally got closed, only to accidentally click on this other link and find myself staring at a headline:

Adoption: The Other Side of the Story

I scrolled through letters people had sent in response to a *Globe and Mail* piece, read stories of birth parents who've been

trying to find their children for years, birth parents who didn't want to be found. Adopted children growing up feeling they never belonged. Tragic tales of doors slammed in faces. Joyful stories of mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters reuniting and living happily ever after.

My head started to pound. What if I found my mother? Would we instantly connect? What if she wanted nothing to do with me? What if I found out she was dead? What if I had siblings who never knew about me?

I didn't realize Evan was up until he kissed the back of my neck and made a grunting noise—a sound we picked up from Moose and now use to signal everything from *I'm pissed off* to *You're hot!*

I closed down the screen and spun my chair around. Evan raised his eyebrows and smiled.

“Talking to your online boyfriend again?”

I smiled back. “Which one?”

Evan clutched at his chest, collapsed into his office chair, and sighed.

“Sure hope he has lots of clothes.”

I laughed. I was forever raiding Evan's shirts, especially if he had to stay with a group at his wilderness lodge in Tofino—three hours from our house in Nanaimo and right smack on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Those weeks I often wore his shirts around the clock. I'd get caught up working on a new piece of furniture, and by the time he was home the shirt would be covered in stains and I'd be exchanging all sorts of favors for his forgiveness.

“Sorry to break it to you, honey, but you're the only man for me—no one else would put up with my craziness.” I rested my foot on his lap. With his sable hair spiked in all directions and his usual outfit of cargo pants and polo shirt, he looked

like a college student. A lot of people don't realize Evan actually owns the lodge.

He smiled. "Oh, I'm sure there's a doctor somewhere with a straitjacket who'd think you're cute."

I pretended to kick at him, then said, "I was reading an article," as I started to massage the throbbing pain on the left side of my head.

"Getting a migraine, baby?"

I dropped my hand down to my lap. "Just a little one, it'll go away."

He gave me a look.

"Okay, I forgot my pill yesterday." After years of trying various medications I was now on beta blockers and my migraines were finally under control. The trick was remembering to take them.

He shook his head. "So what was the article about?"

"Ontario's opening up their adoption records, and . . ." I groaned as Evan worked a pressure point on my foot. "There were all these letters from people who were adopted or who gave up their children." Downstairs, Ally's giggle rang out.

"Thinking about finding your birth mother?"

"Not exactly, it was just interesting." But I *was* thinking about finding her. I just wasn't sure if I was ready. I've always known I was adopted, but I didn't realize that meant I was different until Mom sat me down and told me they were having a baby. I was four at the time. As Mom grew bigger and Dad prouder, I started worrying they were going to give me back. I didn't know just how different I was until I saw the way my father looked at Lauren when they brought her home, then the way he looked at me when I asked to

hold her. They had Melanie two years later. He didn't let me hold her either.

Evan, willing to drop things long before me, nodded.

"What time do you want to leave for brunch?"

"A quarter past never." I sighed. "Thank God Lauren and Greg are coming, because Melanie's bringing *Kyle*."

"Brave of her." As much as my father loves Evan—they'd probably spend the entire brunch planning their next fishing trip—he despises Kyle. I can't say I blame him. Kyle's a wannabe rock star, but as far as I'm concerned the only thing he's playing is my sister. Dad always hated our boyfriends, though. I'm still shocked he likes Evan. All it took was one trip to the lodge and he was talking about him like he was the son he never had. He's still bragging about the salmon they caught.

"It's like she thinks if they're around each other more Dad will see all his good qualities." I snorted.

"Be nice, Melanie loves him."

I gave a mock shudder. "Last week she told me I better start working on my tan if I didn't want to be the same color as my dress. Our wedding's nine months away!"

"She's just jealous—you can't take it personally."

"It sure feels personal."

Ally came barreling into the room with Moose in fast pursuit and threw herself into my arms.

"Mommy, Moose ate all my cereal!"

"Did you leave the bowl on the floor again, silly?"

She giggled against my neck and I inhaled her fresh scent as her hair tickled my nose. With her dark coloring and compact body, Ally looks more like Evan than me even though he's not her biological father, but she has my green eyes—cat's eyes,

Evan calls them. And she got my curls, though at thirty-three mine have relaxed while Ally's are still tight ringlets.

Evan stood up and clapped his hands.

“Okay, family, time to get dressed.”

A week later, just after New Year's, Evan headed back to his lodge for a few days. I'd read a few more adoption stories online, and the night before he left I told him I was considering looking for my birth mother while he was gone.

“Are you sure it's a good idea right now? You have so much going on with the wedding.”

“But that's part of it—we're getting married and for all I know I was dropped here from outer space.”

“You know, that might explain a few things. . . .”

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

He smiled, then said, “Seriously, Sara, how are you going to feel if you can't find her? Or if she doesn't want to see you?”

How was I going to feel? I pushed the thought to the side and shrugged.

“I'll just have to accept it. Things don't get to me like they used to. But I really feel like I need to do this—especially if we're going to have kids.” The entire time I was pregnant with Ally I was afraid of what I might be passing on to her. Thankfully she's healthy, but whenever Evan and I talk about having a child the fear starts up again.

I said, “I'm more worried about upsetting Mom and Dad.”

“You don't have to tell them—it's your life. But I still don't think it's the best timing.”

Maybe he was right. It was stressful enough trying to take care of Ally and run my business, let alone plan a wedding.

“I’ll think about putting it off, okay?”

Evan smiled. “Riiight. I know you, baby—once your mind is made up you’re full speed ahead.”

I laughed. “I promise.”

I did think about waiting, especially when I imagined my mom’s face if she found out. Mom used to say being adopted meant I was special because they chose me. When I was twelve Melanie gave me her version. She said our parents adopted me because Mom couldn’t have babies, but they didn’t need me now. Mom found me in my room packing my clothes. When I told her I was going to find my “real” parents she started crying, then she said, “Your birth parents couldn’t take care of you properly, but they wanted you to have the best home possible. So now we take care of you and we love you very much.” I never forgot the hurt in her eyes, or how thin her body felt as she hugged me.

The next time I seriously thought about looking for my birth parents was when I graduated, then when I found out I was pregnant, and then seven months later when I held Ally for the first time. But I’d put myself in Mom’s shoes and imagine what it would feel like if my child wanted to find her birth mother, how hurt and scared I’d be, and I could never go through with it. I might not have this time either, if Dad hadn’t phoned to ask Evan to go fishing.

“Sorry, Dad, he just left yesterday. Maybe you can take Greg?”

“Greg talks too much.” I felt bad for Lauren’s husband. Where Dad despised Kyle, he had no use for Greg. I’d seen him walk away when Greg was in midsentence.

“Are you guys going to be home for a while? I was just going to get Ally from school and come by for a visit.”

“Not today. Your mom’s trying to rest.”

“Is her Crohn’s flaring up again?”

“She’s just tired.”

“Okay, no problem. If you need help with anything, let me know.”

Throughout our lives Mom’s health had been up and down. For weeks she’d be doing fine, painting our rooms, sewing curtains, baking up a storm. Even Dad was almost happy during those times. I remember him lifting me onto his shoulders once, the view as heady as the rare attention. But Mom would always end up doing too much and within days she was sick again. She’d fade before our eyes as her body refused to hang on to any nutrients, even baby food sending her rushing for the bathroom.

When she was going through a bad spell Dad would come home and ask what I’d been doing all day, like he was trying to find something, or someone, to be pissed at. When I was nine he found me in front of the TV while Mom was sleeping. He dragged me to the kitchen by my wrist and pointed to the stack of dishes, calling me a lazy, ungrateful child. The next day it was the pile of laundry that set him off, and the next, Melanie’s toys in the driveway. His big workingman’s body would loom over me and his voice would vibrate with anger, but he never yelled, never did anything Mom could see or hear. He’d take me out to the garage and list my shortcomings while I stared at his feet, terrified he was going to say he didn’t want me anymore. Then he’d barely speak to me for a week.

I started doing the household chores before Mom could get to them, staying home when my sisters were out with

friends, cooking dinners that never got my father's approval but at least didn't earn his silence. I would do anything to avoid silence, anything to keep Mom from getting sick again. If she was healthy, I was safe.

When I phoned Lauren that night she told me she and the boys had just gotten home from dinner with our parents. Dad had invited them.

“So it was just my kid who wasn't allowed over.”

“I'm sure it wasn't like that. Ally just has so much energy, and—”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It doesn't mean anything, she's adorable. But Dad probably thought three kids were too much.” I knew Lauren was just trying to make me feel better before I went on a rant against Dad, which she hates, but it drives me nuts that she can never see how differently Dad treats me, or at least never acknowledges it. After we hung up I almost called Mom to check on her, but then I thought about Dad telling me to stay home, like a stray dog who's only allowed to sleep on the porch because she might mess in the house. I put the phone back on the charger.

The next day I filled out the form at Vital Statistics, paid my \$50, and started waiting. I'd like to say patiently, but I practically tackled the mailman after the first week. A month later my Original Birth Registration, or OBR, as the woman at Vital Statistics called it, arrived in the mail. I stared at the envelope and realized my hand was shaking. Evan was at his lodge again and I wished he could be there when I opened it,

but that was another *week*. Ally was at school and the house was quiet. I took a deep breath and ripped open the envelope.

My real mother's name was Julia Laroche and I was born in Victoria, BC. My father was listed as unknown. I read the OBR and the adoption certificate over and over, looking for answers, but I just kept hearing one question: *Why did you give me away?*

The next morning I woke early and went online while Ally was still sleeping. The first thing I checked was the Adoption Reunion Registry, but when I realized it could take another month to get an answer, I decided to look on my own first. After searching Web sites for twenty minutes, I found three Julia Laroches in Quebec and four down in the States who seemed around the right age. Only two lived on the island, but when I saw they were both in Victoria my stomach flipped. Could she still be there after all this time? I quickly clicked on the first link, and let my breath out when I realized she was too young, judging by her article on a new mom's forum. The second link took me to a Web site for a real estate agent in Victoria. She had auburn hair like me and looked about the right age. I studied her face with a mixture of excitement and fear. Had I found my birth mother?

After I drove Ally to school, I sat at my desk and circled the phone number I'd jotted on a piece of paper. *I'll call in one minute. After another cup of coffee. After I read the paper. After I paint every toenail a different color.* Finally I forced myself to pick up the phone.

Brrring.

It might not even be her.

Brrring.

I should just hang up. This was a bad way to—

“Julia Laroche speaking.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hi, I’m calling . . . I’m calling because . . .” *Because I stupidly thought if I said something brilliant, you’d instantly regret giving me up, but now I can’t even remember my own name.*

Her voice was impatient. “Are you looking to buy or sell a home?”

“No, I’m—” I took a deep breath and said it in a rush. “I might be your daughter.”

“Is this some kind of joke? Who are you?”

“My name is Sara Gallagher. I was born in Victoria and given up for adoption. You have auburn hair and you’re about the right age, so I thought—”

“Honey, there’s no way you’re my daughter. I can’t have children.”

My face burned. “God, I’m sorry. I just thought . . . well, I hoped.”

The voice softened. “It’s okay. Good luck with your search.” I was about to hang up when she said, “There’s a Julia Laroche who works at the university. I get calls for her sometimes.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

My face was still hot as I dropped the phone onto my desk and headed out to my shop. I got most of my paintbrushes cleaned, then sat and stared at the wall, thinking about what the real estate woman had said. A few minutes later I was back at my computer. After a quick search the other Julia’s name came up under a list of professors at the University of Victoria. She taught art history—was that where I got my love of all things old? I shook my head. Why was I letting myself get excited? It was just a name. I took a deep breath and called

the university, surprised when they put me straight through to Julia Laroche's extension.

She answered, and this time I had my speech ready. "Hi, my name is Sara Gallagher and I'm trying to find my birth mother. Did you give a child up for adoption thirty-three years ago?"

A sharp intake of breath. Then silence.

"Hello?"

"Don't call here again." She hung up.

I cried. For hours. Which kicked off a migraine so bad Lauren had to take Ally and Moose for me. Thankfully, Lauren's two boys are around Ally's age and Ally loves going over there. I hated being away from my daughter for even one night, but all I could do was lie in a dark room with a cold compress on my head and wait for it to pass. Evan phoned and I told him what had happened, speaking slowly because of the pain. By the next afternoon I'd stopped seeing auras around everything, so Ally and Moose came home. Evan phoned again that night.

"Feeling better, baby?"

"The migraine's gone—it's my own stupid fault for forgetting to take my pill again. Now I'm behind on that desk and I wanted to call some photographers this week and—"

"Sara, you don't have to do everything right away. Leave the photographers for when I get back."

"It's fine, I'll take care of it." I admired Evan's laid-back personality in many ways, but in the two years we've been together I've learned "we can do it later" usually translates into me rushing around like a crazy woman to get something done at the last minute.

I said, “I’ve been thinking about what happened with my birth mother. . . .”

“Yeah?”

“I was wondering about writing her a letter. Her address is unlisted, but I can just leave it at the university.”

Evan was silent for a moment. “Sara . . . I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“So she doesn’t want to get to know me, fine, but I think the least she could do is give me my medical history. What about Ally? Doesn’t she have a right to know? There could be health issues, like . . . like high blood pressure, or diabetes, or *cancer*—”

“Baby.” Evan’s voice was calm but firm. “Take it easy. Why are you letting her get to you like this?”

“I’m not like you, okay? I can’t just brush things off.”

“Listen, cranky-pants, I’m on your side here.”

I was silent, my eyes closed, trying to breathe, reminding myself it wasn’t Evan I was angry at.

“Sara, do what you have to do. You know I’ll support you no matter what. But I think you should just leave it alone.”

As I made the hour-and-a-half trip down-island the next day I felt calm and centered, confident I was doing the right thing. There’s something about the Island Highway that always soothes me: the quaint towns and valleys, the farmland, the glimpses of ocean and coastal mountain ranges. When I got closer to Victoria and drove through the old-growth forest at Goldstream Park, I thought about the time Dad had taken us there to watch the salmon spawning in the river. Lauren was terrified of all the seagulls feasting on the dead salmon. I hated the scent of death in the air, how it clung to

your clothes and nostrils. Hated how Dad explained everything to my sisters but ignored my questions—ignored me.

Evan and I talked about opening a second whale-watching business in Victoria one day—Ally loves the museum and the street performers in the inner harbor, I love all the old buildings. But for now Nanaimo suits us. Even though it's the second largest city on the island, it still has that small-town feel. You can be walking on the seawall in the harbor, shopping in the old city quarter, or hiking up a mountain with an amazing view of the Gulf Islands all on the same day. Whenever we want to get away, we just take the ferry to the mainland or drive down to Victoria to do some shopping. But if things didn't go well in Victoria this trip, it was going to be a long drive home.

My plan was to drop off the letter requesting information at Julia's office. But when the woman at the front desk told me Professor Laroche was teaching a class in the next building, I had to see what she looked like. She wouldn't even know I was there. Then I'd leave the letter at the front desk.

I slowly opened the door to the auditorium-style classroom and crept in with my face turned away from the podium. I found a seat in the back, scrunched down—feeling like a stalker—and took a look at my mother.

“As you can see, architecture of the Islamic world varied . . .”

In my daydreams she was always an older version of me, but where my hair is auburn, falling in unruly waves down my back, her black hair was cut in a sleek bob. I couldn't see her eye color, but her face was round, with delicate bone struc-

ture. My cheekbones are high and my features Nordic. The lines of her black wrap dress revealed a slight boyish frame and small wrists. My build is athletic. She was probably a couple of inches over five feet and I'm almost five-nine. The way she pointed out images on the projector's screen was elegant and unhurried. I talk with my hands so much I'm always knocking something over. If her reaction on the phone wasn't still haunting me, I'd think I had the wrong woman.

As I half listened to her lecture, I fantasized about what my childhood might've been like with her as my mother. We'd have discussed art at dinner, which we'd eat off beautiful plates and sometimes light the candles in silver candlesticks. On summer holidays we'd have explored museums in foreign countries and had deep intellectual talks over cappuccinos in Italian cafés. On weekends we'd have browsed bookstores together—

A wave of guilt swamped me. *I have a mother.* I thought of the sweet woman who raised me, the woman who made cabbage-leaf compresses for my headaches even when she wasn't feeling well herself, the woman who didn't know I'd found my birth mother.

After the class ended I walked down to the stairs toward the side door. As I passed near Julia she smiled, but with a questioning look, like she was trying to place me. When a student stopped to ask her something, I bolted for the door. At the last second, I glanced over my shoulder. Her eyes were brown.

I went straight back to my car. I was still sitting there, my heart going nuts inside my chest, when I saw her leave the building. She walked toward the faculty parking lot. I inched my car in that direction and watched her get into a white classic Jaguar. When she pulled out, I followed.

Stop. Think about what you're doing. Pull over.

Like that was going to happen.

As we drove down Dallas Road, one of the more upscale areas in Victoria along the waterfront, I kept back. After about ten minutes Julia turned into the circular driveway of a large Tudor house on the ocean. I pulled over and got out a map. She parked in front of the marble steps, followed a path around the corner of the house, then disappeared through a side door.

She didn't knock. She lived there.

So what did I do now? Drive off and forget about the whole thing? Drop the letter in her mailbox at the end of the driveway and risk someone else finding it? Give it to her in person?

But once I reached the big mahogany front door I stood there like an idiot, frozen, torn between tucking the letter into the door and just sprinting back down the driveway. I didn't knock, I didn't ring the doorbell, but the door *opened*. I was face-to-face with my mother. And she didn't look happy to see me.

"Hello?"

My face was burning.

"Hi . . . I . . . I saw your class."

Her eyes narrowed. She looked at the envelope clutched in my hand.

"I wrote you a letter." My voice sounded breathless. "I wanted to ask you some things—we talked the other day. . . ."

She stared at me.

"I'm your daughter."

Her eyes widened. "You have to leave." She moved to shut the door. I put my foot on the jamb.

Wait. I don't want to upset you—I just have some ques-

tions, it's for my daughter." I dug into my wallet and pulled out a photo. "Her name's Ally—she's only six."

Julia wouldn't look at the photo. When she spoke her voice was high, strained.

"It's not a good time. I can't—I just *can't*."

"Five minutes. That's all I need, then I'll leave you alone."

She looked over her shoulder at a phone on a hall table.

"Please. I promise I won't come back."

She led me into a side room with a mahogany desk and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Moved a cat off an antique brown leather high-backed chair.

I sat down and tried to smile. "Himalayans are beautiful." She didn't smile back. She perched on the edge of her seat. Hands gripping each other in her lap, knuckles white.

I said, "This chair is gorgeous—I refinish furniture for a living, but this is pristine. I love antiques. Anything vintage, really, cars, clothes . . ." My hand brushed the fitted black velvet jacket I'd paired with jeans.

She stared at the floor. Her hands started to shake.

I took a deep breath and went for it.

"I just want to know why you gave me away. I'm not angry, I have a good life. I just . . . I just want to know. I *need* to know."

"I was young." Now her voice was reedy, flat. "It was an accident. I didn't want children."

"Why did you have me, then?"

"I was Catholic." Was?

"What about your family, are they—"

"My parents died in an accident—*after* you were born." The last part came out in a rush. I waited for her to say more. The cat brushed against her legs, she didn't touch it. I noticed a pulse beating fast at the base of her throat.

"I'm very sorry. Was the accident on the island?"

"We—they—lived in Williams Lake." Her face flushed.

"Your name, Laroche. What does that mean? It's French, right? Do you know from what part of—"

"I've never looked it up."

"My father?"

"It was at a party and I don't remember anything. I don't know where he is now."

I stared at this elegant woman. Not one thing about her fit with a drunken one-night stand. She was lying. I was sure of it. I willed her to meet my eyes. She stared at the cat. I had an insane urge to pick it up and throw it at her.

"Was he tall? Do I look like him, or—"

She stood up. "I told you I don't remember. I think you'd better go."

"But—" A door slammed at the back of the house.

Julia's hand flew up to cover her mouth. An older woman with curly blond hair and a pink scarf draped around her thin shoulders came around the corner.

"Julia! I'm glad you're home, we should—" She stopped when she saw me and her face broke into a smile. "Oh, hello, I didn't realize Julia had a student over."

I stood up and held out a hand. "I'm Sara. Professor Laroche was kind enough to go over my paper with me, but I should be off."

She took my hand. "Katharine. I'm Julia's . . ." Her voice trailed off as she searched Julia's face.

I jumped into the awkward silence. "It was nice to meet you." I turned to Julia. "Thanks again for your help." She managed a smile and a nod.

At my car I glanced over my shoulder. They were still

standing in the open doorway. Katharine smiled and waved, but Julia just stared at me.

So you understand why I had to talk to you. I feel like I'm standing on ice and it's cracking all around me, but I don't know which way to move. Do I try to find out why my birth mother lied or heed Evan's advice to just leave it alone? I know you're going to tell me I'm the only one who can make that decision, but I need your help.

I keep thinking about Moose. When he was a puppy we left him in the laundry room one cold Saturday when we went out, because he wasn't housebroken—little guy piddled so much Ally tried to put her doll's diapers on him. We had this beautiful bright-colored rope rug we'd brought back from a trip to Saltspring Island, and he must've started nibbling one corner, then just kept pulling and pulling. By the time we got home the rug was destroyed. My life is like that beautiful colored rug—it took *years* to sew it together. Now I'm afraid if I keep pulling on this one corner it's all going to unravel.

But I'm not sure I can stop.

SESSION TWO

I thought about everything you told me: how I didn't have to decide right away, how I needed to be sure of my expectations and reasons for wanting to know more about my past. I even made a chart of all the pros and cons like we used to do together. This time I put everything in neat little columns, but I still didn't have an answer, so I stomped out to my workshop, cranked Sara McLachlan, and sobbed my heart out while I attacked an oak armoire. With each layer of paint I stripped off, I felt calmer. It didn't matter whether she lied or where I came from. What was important was my life now.

I'd called Evan the minute I fled my reunion with my birth mother, so when he came home that weekend he brought me chocolates and red wine, an early Valentine's surprise—that man's no dummy. But smartest of all, he didn't lecture, just gave me a hug and let me rant and rave until I ran out of steam. And I did—run out of steam. But then the depression kicked in. It had been so long since I'd had one I almost didn't recog-

nize it at first, like an ex-boyfriend you bump into and you can't remember what it was about him that made you feel so awful, so angry at everything. It wasn't until a couple of weeks later that I almost started feeling back to normal. I should've stopped there.

Evan had headed back to his lodge, and Lauren's husband, Greg, who works for our dad's logging company, had just left for camp, so Ally and I hightailed it over to Lauren's for dinner. I do all right in the kitchen department if I'm not obsessed by my latest project, but Lauren's roast beef and Yorkshire puddings put my stir-fries to shame.

While Lauren's two boys—towheaded, with big blue eyes, just like her—chased Ally and Moose around the backyard, Lauren and I took our coffees and dessert to the living room. I'm glad we're having a mild winter this year, although it never really gets cold on the island, but it was nice to curl up in front of her fireplace and catch up on our kids' latest events. Her two have usually just broken something, while mine is generally in trouble at school for bossing the other kids around or talking when she's not supposed to. Evan just laughs and says, "I wonder where she got that from," whenever I complain.

When we'd scraped the last trace of chocolate from our plates, Lauren said, "How are the plans coming for the wedding?"

"God, don't get me started. My file is *huge*."

Lauren laughed, tilting her head back and revealing a scar on her chin from when she fell off her bike all those years ago. Of course, Dad gave me hell for not watching her properly, but nothing could spoil her natural beauty. She rarely wears makeup, but with her heart-shaped face, honey-gold

skin, and lightly freckled nose she doesn't need to. And Lauren is one of those rare people who are as nice as they look—the kind of person who remembers what brand of shampoo you like and saves the coupon for you.

She said, “I told you weddings are more work than you think. And you thought it was going to be so easy.”

“This from the woman who wasn't stressed about hers at all.”

She shrugged. “I was twenty. I was just happy to be married. Mom and Dad's backyard was all we needed. But it will be beautiful at the lodge.”

“Yeah, it will. But there's something I have to tell you. . . .”

Lauren glanced at me. “You're not getting cold feet?”

“What? Of course not.”

She let out her breath. “Thank God. Evan's so good for you.”

“Why does everyone say that?”

She smiled. “Because it's true.” She had me there. I'd met Evan at a garage while we were waiting for our vehicles—his was in for a tune-up, mine was on its last legs. I was worried they weren't going to be able to fix my car and had no idea how I was going to pick up Ally, but Evan assured me everything would be fine. I still remember how he put the cardboard sleeve around my hot cup before he handed it to me, how relaxed and steady his movements were. How calm I felt around him.

Lauren said, “So what do you want to tell me?”

“Remember when I used to talk about finding my birth family?”

“Of course, you were obsessed when we were kids. Remember that summer you were convinced you were an Indian princess and tried to build a canoe in the backyard?” She

started to laugh, then looked at my face and said, “Wait, have you been searching for real?”

“I found my birth mother a couple of weeks ago.”

“Wow. That’s . . . huge.” Lauren’s expression changed from surprise to confusion to hurt. “Why didn’t you tell me?” It was a good question and one I couldn’t answer. Lauren married her high school boyfriend and had the same friends she’d had in elementary school. She had no idea what it felt like to be rejected, to be alone. But the other reason was her husband. It was impossible to talk when Greg was around.

“I needed to process everything first,” I said. “It didn’t go very well.”

“No? What happened? Does she live on the island?”

I filled Lauren in on the whole mess.

She made a face. “That must’ve been awful. Are you okay?”

“I’m disappointed. Especially that she didn’t tell me anything about my biological father—she was my only chance of finding him.” Most of my daydreams growing up were of my birth father whisking me away to his mansion, where he’d introduce me to everyone as his long-lost daughter, his hand warm on my back.

“You haven’t told Mom and Dad, have you?”

I shook my head.

Lauren looked relieved and I stared at my plate, the chocolate now sour in my mouth. I hate the wave of guilt and fear that comes whenever I worry about Mom and Dad finding out, hate myself for resenting it.

I said, “Don’t tell Melanie or Greg, okay?”

“Of course.” I searched her face, wondering what she was thinking. After a moment she said, “Maybe your father was married and she’s scared of it coming out after all these years?”

“Maybe. . . . But I think she even lied about her name.”

“Are you going to talk to her again?”

“Hell, no! Pretty sure she’d call the cops on me. I’m just going to drop it.”

“It’s probably for the best.” Again she looked relieved. I wanted to ask who she thought it was “best” for, but she was already picking up our plates and moving toward the kitchen, leaving me alone and cold in front of the fire.

As soon as we got home Ally and Moose tumbled into bed and I tidied up the house—I have a tendency to let things get a little out of hand when Evan isn’t around. After my chores were done I wasn’t in the mood to hit my workshop like I usually do when I’m wired on coffee and chocolate, so I turned on my computer. I’d planned on just checking my e-mail, but then I remembered Julia’s words.

My parents died in an accident.

Had Julia told me the truth about anything? Maybe I could at least find her parents’ names online. First I Googled “car accidents, Williams Lake, BC.” A few results popped up, but only one fatality involved a couple, and they’d died recently—wrong name, too. I expanded my search to all of Canada but still didn’t find any accidents with my birth mother’s last name. If they’d died years ago the article probably wouldn’t even be online, but, not ready to give up yet, I Googled “Laroche.” Odd hits, random mentions here and there, but other than the university directory I’d found before, nothing connected to Julia.

Before I packed it in for the night, I decided to look up Williams Lake. I’d never been there, but knew it was in the heart of the Cariboo—the Central Interior of BC. Julia hadn’t struck me as a small-town girl and I wondered if she’d es-

caped as soon as she graduated. I stared at the screen. I wanted to know more about her, but *how*? I didn't have any contacts at the university or with any government agencies, and Evan didn't either. I needed someone with connections.

When I Googled private investigators in Nanaimo, I was surprised to see there were a few companies. I browsed their Web sites, growing more confident when I realized they were usually retired police officers. When Evan called later I ran the idea by him.

He said, "How much do they cost?"

"I don't know yet. I was going to make some calls tomorrow."

"It seems pretty extreme. You don't know for sure she was lying."

"She was definitely hiding something—it's driving me nuts."

"And if it's something you don't want to know? She might have a good reason for not telling you."

"I'd rather deal with that than spend the rest of my life wondering. And they might find my birth father. What if he doesn't know I exist?"

"If you feel like it's something you need to do, then go for it. But check them out first. Don't just hire anyone out of the phone book."

"I'll be careful."

The next day I called the private investigator with the slickest Web site, but as soon as he told me his fees I knew how he paid for it. Two numbers led straight to an answering machine. The fourth, TBD Investigations, had a bare-bones Web site, but the man's wife was friendly when she

answered, telling me “Tom” would call me right back. And he did, an hour later. When I asked about his background, he said he was a retired cop and did this to keep himself in golfing money and his wife off his back. I liked him.

He told me he charged by the hour, with a five-hundred-dollar retainer up-front, and we agreed to meet that afternoon. Although I felt like a cliché as I pulled alongside Tom’s sedan in the public parking lot, I was more comfortable after we talked for a few minutes and he told me anything he discovered would be confidential. I filled out his forms and drove away with mixed emotions: guilt about invading Julia’s privacy and giving out her address, hope I might find my real father, and fear he wouldn’t want to meet me either.

Tom had told me I might not hear anything right away, but he called a couple of days later when I was cleaning up after dinner.

“I have that information you were looking for.” The friendly grandfather tone was gone, replaced by serious cop.

“Do I want to know?” I laughed. He didn’t.

“You were right, Julia Laroche isn’t her real name—it’s Karen Christianson.”

“*That’s* interesting. Do you know why she changed it?”

“You don’t recognize the name?”

“Should I?”

“Karen Christianson was the only survivor of the Campsite Killer.”

I sucked in my breath. I’d read about the Campsite Killer—I’ve always been interested in serial killers and their crimes. Evan says I’m morbid, but when *Dateline* or A&E features a famous murder case I’m glued to the TV. They all had lurid

names, like the Zodiac Killer, the Vampire Rapist, the Green River Killer, but I couldn't remember much about the Campsite Killer—just that he'd murdered people in the Interior of BC.

Tom was still talking. "I wanted to be sure, so I drove down to Victoria and took some shots of Julia at the university, then compared them to online photos of Karen Christianson. It looks like the same woman."

"God, no wonder she changed her name. So she must've met my father after she moved to the island. How long ago was she attacked?"

"Thirty-five years ago," Tom said. "She moved to the island a couple of months later and changed her name. . . ."

Something cold and dark was unfurling in my stomach.

I said, "What month was she attacked?"

"July."

My mind raced to calculate dates and times. "I'm turning thirty-four this April. You don't think . . ."

He was silent.

I stepped backward and collapsed into a chair, trying to grasp what he'd just told me. But my thoughts were all over the place, fragmented pieces I couldn't pick up. Then I remembered Julia's pale face, her shaking hands.

The Campsite Killer is my father.

"I . . . I just—are you *sure*?" I wanted him to contradict me, to tell me I heard wrong, made a mistake, something.

"Karen's the only person who can confirm it, but the dates match up." He paused, waiting for me to say something, but I was staring at our calendar on the fridge. Ally's best friend, Meghan, had a birthday party on the weekend. I couldn't remember if I'd bought a present for it yet.

Tom's voice sounded far away. "If you have any more

questions, you have my number. I'll e-mail the photos I took of Karen with your receipt."

I sat in my kitchen for a few minutes, still staring at the calendar. Upstairs I heard a cupboard door slam and remembered that Ally was in the bath. I'd have to deal with this later. I forced myself off the chair. Ally was already out of the bathroom, leaving a trail of raspberry bubble scent and damp towels behind her.

Normally I love bedtime with her. When we're snuggled up she tells me about her day, part little girl as she mispronounces words, part little woman as she describes what the other girls are wearing. Back in my single days I let her sleep in my bed all the time. I loved the closeness, loved feeling her breathing next to me. Even when I was pregnant and Jason was out partying, I could only fall asleep with my hand on my stomach. He usually didn't come back until the wee hours of the morning. When I flipped—and I always did—he'd push me out of the room and lock it. I'd scream at him through the door until I was hoarse. I finally left him when I was five months pregnant, and he never got to see his daughter—he wrapped his truck around a tree a month before she was born.

I've stayed in touch with his parents and they're great with Ally, telling her stories about Jason and saving his things for when she's older. She spends the night at their house sometimes. The first time, I worried that she'd wake up crying, but she was fine. I was the one who couldn't sleep. Same with her first day of school—Ally sailed through it, but I missed her every minute, missed the noise in the house, missed her giggles. Now I crave this little window into her life outside our home, want to know how she felt in each moment: "Did

it make you laugh?” “Did you like learning about that?” But that night Tom’s words kept flashing in my mind: *The dates match up*. It didn’t feel real, couldn’t be real.

After Ally drifted off, I kissed her warm forehead and left Moose with her. In my office I turned my computer on and Googled the Campsite Killer. The first link was a Web site dedicated to his victims. While the site played haunting music, I scrolled through photos of all his victims, with their names and dates of death below each picture. Most of the attacks were staggered every few years from the early seventies on, but sometimes he’d hit two summers in a row, then go years without surfacing again.

I clicked on a link that took me to a PDF map that had a little cross marking every location where he murdered someone. He’d moved all over the Interior and northern BC, never killing in the same park twice. If the girls were camping with their parents or a boyfriend, he murdered them first. But it was clear the women were his real target. I counted fifteen women—healthy, smiling young women. All told, they believe he’s responsible for at least thirty murders—one of the worst serial killers in Canadian history.

The Web site also mentioned the only woman who ever got away: his third victim, Karen Christianson. The photo was grainy, her head turned away from the camera. I went back to the Google home page and typed in “Karen Christianson.” This time numerous articles popped up. Karen and her parents were camping at Tweedsmuir Provincial Park in the West-Central region of BC one summer thirty-five years ago. The parents were shot in the head while they slept in their tent, but he hunted Karen in the park for hours until he caught and raped her. Before he was able to kill her she managed to hit him in the head with a rock and escape. She’d

been lost in the woods for two days when she stumbled out of the mountain and flagged down a passing motor home.

In most of the photos she was hiding her face, but some industrious journalist found her senior year picture from the high school yearbook, taken just months before that fateful summer. I studied the photo of the pretty dark-haired girl with the brown eyes. She did look a lot like Julia.

The phone rang, making me jump. It was Evan.

“Hi, baby. Is Ally already in bed?”

“Yeah, she was tired tonight.”

“How did your day go, any word from the PI?”

Normally I tell Evan everything—the good, the bad, and the ugly—the second he walks in the door or answers the phone, but this time the words caught in my throat. I needed some time to think, to sort through it all.

“Hello?”

“He’s still looking into it.”

That night I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to get the horror out of my mind, trying not to think about Julia’s face turned away from the cameras, turned away from me. Hours later I woke from a dream, the back of my neck soaked with sweat. I felt hungover, my mouth dry. Snippets of the dream came to me—a girl running through dark woods in bare feet, a bloody tent, black body bags.

Then I remembered.

I turned and looked at the clock. Five-thirty a.m. No chance of falling back to sleep after that nightmare. Like metal to magnet I was sitting at my computer again. I studied the photos of the victims, every article I could find on the Campsite Killer, my body filled with fear and disgust. I read every newspaper article on Julia, every scrap of information in every

magazine, examined every photo. The reporters had hunted her for weeks, staked out her house, and followed her everywhere. The media frenzy was mostly in Canada, but some American papers had picked up the story, comparing her to one of Ted Bundy's victims who had also escaped. When Karen disappeared the articles changed to speculation about where she was, then gradually the coverage disappeared.

That morning I also got the e-mail from Tom with Julia's photos at the university, walking to her car, outside her home with Katharine. I compared hers to online photos of Karen Christianson. It was definitely the same woman. In one shot Julia was touching a student's arm, smiling encouragingly. I wondered if she touched me after she gave birth, or just told them to take me away.

This week I went through the motions, but I felt flat, disconnected—angry. I didn't know what to do with this new reality, the horror of my conception. I wanted to bury it in the backyard, far away from anyone's eyes. My skin crawled with knowledge, with the evil that I'd looked into, that had created me. I took long showers. Nothing helped. The dirt was on the inside.

When I was a kid I used to think my birth parents would come back if I was just good enough. If I got in trouble, I worried they'd find out. Every good grade in school was so they'd know I was smart. When Dad looked at me like he was trying to figure out who let me into his house, I told myself they were coming. When I watched him play piggyback with Melanie and Lauren after telling me he was too tired, I told myself they were coming. When he took the girls to the pool

and left me to mow the lawn, I told myself they were coming. They never did.

Now I just wanted to forget they existed. But no matter what I did or the million ways I tried to distract myself, I couldn't get rid of the dark, heavy feeling pressing down on my chest, grabbing at my legs. Evan had been out of cell range for most of the week with a group. When he was finally able to phone I tried to listen about the lodge, tried to make the appropriate responses, tried to share about Ally's day, then I ended the call after a while, claiming fatigue. I was going to tell him, I just needed more time. But the next morning he picked up on it right away.

"Okay, what's going on? Don't want to marry me anymore?" He laughed, but his voice was worried.

"You might not want to marry *me* after you hear this." I took a deep breath. "I found out why Julia lied." I looked at the door, knowing Ally would be up soon.

"Julia? I don't know who—"

"My birth mother, remember? I heard from the PI last week. He told me her real name's Karen Christianson."

"Why didn't you tell me you found her?" He sounded confused.

"Because I also found out my real father is the Campsite Killer."

Silence.

Evan finally said, "Come on. You don't actually mean—"

"I mean my real father's a *murderer*, Evan. I mean he *raped* my mother. I mean—" I couldn't say what else has been driving my nightmares: My father's still out there.

"Sara, slow down. I'm trying to take this all in." When I didn't say anything, he said, "Sara?"

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "I don't . . . I don't know what to do."

"Just start at the top and tell me what's going on." I leaned against my pillow, clinging to the strength in Evan's voice. Once I was done explaining everything, he said, "So you don't know for sure Julia is this Karen person?"

"I looked at her photos online myself. It's her."

"But there's no proof the Campsite Killer is your father. It's all just speculation. She could've hooked up with a guy after."

"Rape victims don't usually just 'hook up' with someone right away. And there was a woman at her house—I think she might be gay."

"She might be now, but you don't know what she was into back then. For all you know she was pregnant at the time of the attack. This private investigator could be scamming you."

"He used to be a cop."

"So he says. I bet he calls and tells you he can find out more for a price."

"He wasn't like that." But was Evan right? Had I jumped to conclusions? Then I remembered the look on Julia's face. "No, she was seriously freaked out."

"You showed up on her doorstep and demanded she talk to you. That would scare anybody."

"It was more than that. I can feel it—in my gut."

Evan paused for a moment, then said, "E-mail me the links—and the photos that guy sent you, his Web site too. I have some time this morning, I'll read over everything and call you at lunch. We'll talk about it, okay?"

"Maybe I should call Julia—"

"That's a really bad idea. Don't do *anything*."

I didn't answer.

"Sara." His voice was firm.

"Yeah."

"Don't."

"Okay, okay."

Ally was now talking to Moose in her room, so Evan and I said our good-byes. I tried to be cheerful for Ally as we made toad-in-a-holes with ketchup smiley faces. But every time I looked into her innocent eyes I wanted to cry. *What will I say when she's old enough to start asking about my family?*

After I drove Ally to school I took Moose for a hike, thinking the fresh air might help. But I knew it was a mistake as soon as I stepped into the woods. Normally I love the scent of fir needles in the air, of earth rich and fragrant after a rain the night before. All the different woods: red cedar, Douglas fir, Sitka spruce. But now moss-covered trees loomed over me and blocked out any light. The air seemed thick and quiet, my footsteps loud. Every dark corner of the forest caught my eye. A gnarled stump with one branch reaching out, a dead tree with ferns growing from it, the gap behind it blanketed by rotting leaves. *Did he rape her in a spot like that?* Moose, running ahead, startled a deer and it bounded off, its brown eyes wild with fear. I imagined Julia fleeing through the woods, her body cut and bleeding, her breath frantic, hunted down like an animal.

I came home and tore apart my workshop. The plan was to organize my supplies and clean my tools, then hang them back up in some semblance of order, but when I saw the mess I'd made—chisels, rubber mallet, clamps, orbital sander, brushes,

rags, and paper towels piled up all over my workbench—I couldn't think straight enough to hang a ruler. I picked up a broom and started sweeping up shavings.

Evan phoned at lunch as promised, but his cell kept cutting out.

"I'll call when . . . off . . . water. . . Following . . . pod . . . humpbacks."

Back in my shop I concentrated on sanding a mahogany Chippendale-style chest. As I smoothed away years of scratches and grooves, I reveled in the fresh wood scent, the rasp of sandpaper. With each stroke my muscles relaxed and my mind began to calm. But then the mahogany wood made me think of Julia's office. No wonder she didn't want to talk to me—she was still traumatized by what had happened, and seeing me brought everything back. But she didn't have to be scared of me. Maybe she was just afraid I might expose her secret? I stopped sanding. If I reassured her I wouldn't tell anyone . . .

The phone was on my desk. Julia's number at the university was still on a Post-it stuck to the base of my computer.

After four rings I got a computer recording: "You've reached the mailbox for Professor Laroche in the Art History Department. Please leave a message."

"Hi, it's Sara Gallagher. I don't want to upset you again, I just . . ."

The silence stretched out. I started to panic. What if I said something wrong? *Stop, calm down.* I took a deep breath and said, "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry I came to your house like that, but I understand now why you were so upset. I just need to know my medical history. I was hoping we could talk?" I

rattled off my number, twice, and my e-mail. “I know you’ve been through a lot, but I’m a nice person and I have a family and I don’t know what to tell my daughter and—” To my horror my voice broke and I started to cry. I hung up.

I just about had to break my hand to keep myself from dialing back and leaving another message apologizing for the first, then another filled with all the things I’d wanted to say but didn’t. For the next hour I went over the call in my mind, my embarrassment greater each time. When Evan finally called last night, I felt so bad for going against his advice, I couldn’t even tell him. He’d checked out the links and agreed that Julia Laroche did look a lot like Karen Christianson, but he still wasn’t convinced the Campsite Killer was my father.

I said, “So what should I do?”

“Only two things you can do—tell the cops and they’ll look into it, or just let it ride.”

“If I tell the police they’ll probably do a DNA test and I’m sure it would come back positive. What if the results got out? He could find me. I don’t want anyone to know about this.” I took a deep breath. “Does it change how you feel about me, knowing who my real father is?” I hated myself for asking, hated how weak it made me feel.

“Depends. Are you going to get him to knock me off?”

“Evan!”

His voice was serious when he said, “Of course it doesn’t change anything. If he is your father, then it’s scary he’s still out there, but we’ll get through it.”

I let out my breath, pulling his words over me like a soothing blanket.

Evan said, “But if you’re not going to talk to the police, then you have to just accept it, forget it, and move on.”

If only it was that easy.

Evan also doesn’t think I should tell anyone other than you—he’s just as afraid as I am that it will get out and all hell will break loose. I thought about telling Lauren, but she likes things light and fluffy—she doesn’t even watch the news. How can I tell her about this? I’m scared to read anything more about him myself.

When I first started seeing you after I pushed Derek—the first man I allowed myself to care about after Jason died—down those stairs, I was afraid I might have some horrible genetic predisposition, but you suggested I might be looking for something or someone to blame, so I didn’t have to take responsibility for my own actions. It made sense at the time. I wasn’t proud of what I did, even if the cheating bastard wasn’t really hurt. But it scared me.

I can still hear the words coming out of Derek’s mouth, still feel the pain of them: “You knew I wasn’t over her when we met.” And he was right. I did know, but it didn’t stop me from going after him. Did I tell you how we met? It was at a party when Ally was a few months old—I hated leaving her, but Lauren forced me to go. Derek was smart and funny, but that’s not what attracted me. The minute he said, “I’m not ready for anything serious right now. I just broke up with a girl,” I was hooked. That was my catnip in every relationship: unavailable with a high chance of breaking my heart. It wasn’t until the brutal ending of that one that I finally realized I owed it to myself—and my daughter—to get some help.

I wish I could say it ended there, but as you know, I bounced

from bad relationship to bad relationship for the next few years. I guess that's why I gave Evan such a hard time when we first started dating. You probably don't remember the story because I stopped seeing you not long after I met him, but he sent me a message through Facebook. Thinking a man as good-looking as him who also owned a fishing lodge had to be a player, I brushed him off. But he kept sending little *How was your day?* notes, asking about my work and my daughter, commenting on my status updates. Because I wasn't viewing him as a potential boyfriend, I'd tell him about my problems, my fears, my jaded view of men and relationships, anything that was on my mind.

One night we talked on MSN until three in the morning, drinking wine, getting half blitzed in our own homes. The next day he sent me a link to his favorite love song—Colin James's "These Arms of Mine"—which I must have played ten times in a row.

After a month of talking online I finally agreed to go on a date, walking in the park with Moose. Hours sped by without one anxious moment, just laughter and the wonderful feeling of being safe while totally being myself. When he met Ally a couple of months later, they adored each other instantly. Even moving in with each other was easy: if one of us was missing a household item, the other had it. But in those early days I still caused arguments, trying to push him away, testing his loyalty. I was just so scared of being hurt again, so scared of losing myself like I had with Derek—of what might happen if I did.

When I was a kid I felt angry a lot, but I kept it bottled inside, which is probably why I was depressed so much as a teenager. It wasn't until I began dating that I started losing my temper. But I always managed to stop myself at a certain

point—until that moment with Derek on the stairs. When he told me he'd spent the night with his ex-girlfriend all I could feel was shame. All I could think was how everyone was going to know I wasn't good enough. Then my hands were reaching out and he was falling.

Afterward I was shocked and horrified by what I'd done, even more by how powerful I'd felt. It terrified me—this sense that there was something dark inside me, something I couldn't control. And I wanted to believe what you said, that it was the same trigger it always was: abandonment issues, intimacy issues, low self-esteem, all of the above. But now we know one of my parents is violent, *beyond* violent. It's looking like maybe I was right to be scared.

This morning I was in my shop sanding that mahogany chest, trying to forget everything, and it worked for a couple of hours. Then I nicked my finger. As blood welled up I thought, *I have a killer's blood in me.*

SESSION THREE

I'm angry and confused, all right. I'm so stressed out I want to take a baseball bat and smash the crap out of something. I can't believe it's been over a month since I was here. I worked all that weekend on that mental exercise you taught me. Imagining how life would be if I wasn't worried about my family or genetics, what I would doing with my time. I tried to envision myself feeling light and happy as I looked at wedding decorations and invitations. But I still couldn't stop thinking about the Campsite Killer—where he was, who he was. I even went back to the site and looked at the photos of all his victims again. My thoughts always turned to Julia. Did she get my message? Did she hate me? On Monday I got my answer.

I was out in my workshop, scrubbing varnish off my hands while Stevie Nicks belted out "*Sometimes it's a bitch . . .*," when

I heard the phone. I scrambled through the pile of tools and equipment on my bench to a mound of rags, under which was the cordless. The number was private.

“Hello?”

“May I speak to Sara, please?”

I recognized the cultured voice. My pulse sped up.

“Is this Julia?”

“Are you alone?” Her voice sounded tight.

“I’m in my workshop, Ally’s at school. I was just getting ready to go inside for some lunch—I skipped breakfast this morning. . . .” I was babbling.

“You shouldn’t have called again.”

“I’m sorry. I’d just found out who you really are and I wasn’t thinking—”

“Obviously.” It hurt, and I caught my breath.

“Don’t call here again.” And she hung up.

I handled it with my usual grace and aplomb—chucked the phone clear across my workshop, which knocked the battery out of the back and sent it spinning under a shelf. Then stormed into the house and ate a bunch of Ally’s Oreo snack packs and Ritz Bits cheese sandwiches, cursing with every mouthful. She’d spoken to me like I was something she’d stepped in, something she wanted to scrape off her shoe. My face burned and tears stung my eyes when I thought what I always thought after an ex-boyfriend dumped me or stood me up, or when Dad didn’t hold my hand when I reached for his: *What’s wrong with me?*

An hour later I was still too upset to focus on any work. And wedding stuff? Forget about it. I considered calling Evan,

but then I'd have to explain what I'd done in the first place. I grabbed my car keys.

Lauren and Greg still live in the first house they bought after they were married—Mom and Dad helped with the down payment, which meant Dad told them what to buy. It's just a basic 1970s-style four-bedroom box, but it overlooks Departure Bay and has a fantastic view of the ferries as they come around Newcastle Island. I'd wanted to move to the same neighborhood, but nothing was for sale when Evan and I were house-hunting. We ended up in a newer subdivision, but I love our home. It's a West Coast contemporary with cedar plank siding, earth-toned granite countertops, and stainless steel appliances.

Greg's still in the process of restoring their house, but it's going to be beautiful when they're done. Lauren's brightened it up a lot over the years with handmade curtains, pastel walls, vases full of fresh flowers. I'm constantly pilfering from her vegetable garden.

I rapped on the back door, then pushed it open. "Hey, it's Sara."

She yelled down from upstairs, "Brandon's room!"

When I got to the room—decorated in hockey motif—I found Lauren putting away laundry. I curled up on the quilt with its Canucks logo and hugged the pillow as I watched Lauren, envying how content she is with her life.

She paused with a pair of socks in her hand. "What's wrong?"

"I don't really want to talk about it."

Her voice was teasing as she said, "You have to tell me now." She held a sock up like she was going to throw it at me.

"I'm okay. I just wanted to hang out for a bit."

“Are you still upset about your birth mother?” She turned and put the socks away, opened the next drawer.

I hadn’t planned on telling her, just wanted to be around her warmth for a while, but before I knew it the words were coming out.

“I found out who my real father is.”

She turned around, a small blue T-shirt clutched in her hand.

“You don’t sound happy. Who is he?”

I was torn between my fear of what Lauren might think and my need for her to tell me it was okay, to make me feel better like she always does. I remembered Evan’s warning not to tell anyone. I remembered my vow to Julia not to tell anyone. But this was my sister.

“You can’t tell *anyone* about this—not even Greg.”

She placed her hand across her heart. “Promise.”

My face felt hot as I said, “You’ve heard of the Campsite Killer, right?”

“Everyone’s heard of the Campsite Killer. Why?”

“He’s my father.”

Her jaw dropped open and she stared at me with a stunned expression for what felt like hours. Finally she sat beside me on the bed.

“That’s just . . . Are you sure? How did you find out?”

I sat up, the pillow in my lap, and told her about the private investigator and everything that had happened since. I searched her face, waiting to see all the horrible things I’ve been thinking mirrored in her eyes. But she just looked concerned.

She said, “Maybe Evan’s right and it’s just a coincidence?”

I shook my head. “The way she spoke to me today—she hates me.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t hate you. She probably—”

“No, you’re right, it’s worse than that, it’s like I disgust her.” My voice was thick as I tried not to cry.

Lauren rubbed my back. “I’m so sorry, Sara. The people who matter love you. Does that help?”

Except Dad didn’t love me, and the fact that she wouldn’t see it made it even more painful.

“You don’t understand what it feels like to be adopted, to have your birth mother give you away like you’re a piece of garbage, then reject you again. I’ve been waiting to meet her for years, and now . . .” I shook my head.

“I know it hurts, but you can’t forget all the good in your life.”

Lauren was about to say something else when we heard a voice downstairs.

“Hello, hello, hello, witches.” Melanie.

Lauren said, “We’re up here.” I gave her a look and she made a zipping motion across her mouth.

Melanie came around the corner and dumped her purse on the floor.

“Thanks for hogging the whole driveway with your Cherokee, Sara.”

“Not like I knew you were coming over.”

She ignored me and turned to Lauren. “Thanks for your help the other day. Kyle and I appreciated it.”

Lauren waved her hand in the air. “No problem.”

I said, “What’s going on?”

“Not everything’s about you and the wedding.” Melanie smiled like she was joking, but it didn’t meet her eyes. Melanie looks Italian like our mom, but she wears her dark hair in a short spiky cut and favors bold red lips and kohl-circled eyes. When she’s not glaring at the world or sulking about something, she’s a knockout.

Dad loved taking her to all his logging camps with him when she was growing up—he was convinced she was going to be an accountant and help run his business. But as soon as she hit her teens the only thing Melanie wanted to spend time counting was boyfriends. And she found plenty of them at the pub where she tends bar. It used to be Dad’s favorite hangout, but he hasn’t stepped foot in the place since she started working there when she turned nineteen.

Lauren said, “Kyle needed a place to rehearse so I let them use the garage.”

Melanie turned to me. “You book anyone for your wedding yet?”

“Evan and I are still talking about it.”

“Perfect, because Kyle wants to do it for your wedding gift.” She smiled big.

It was far from perfect. I’d heard Kyle’s band a few months ago and they were barely in tune. I glanced at Lauren. She was looking back and forth between Melanie and me.

“That’s an interesting suggestion, but I have to talk to Evan. I’m not sure what he has in mind.”

“Evan? He’s so easygoing, he won’t care.”

“Maybe, but I should still talk to him first.”

Melanie laughed. “Since when do you wait for Evan’s approval?” She paused, then her eyes narrowed. “Oh, I get it. You don’t *want* Kyle to do it.”

Here we go. Melanie was spoiled by all of us when she was a kid, but especially by Dad. If Mom was sick I was in charge and that’s when the problems really began. Lauren was easy, I could tell her to pick up her toys and she’d do it right away, but Melanie would just stand there with her hands on her hips, glaring at me. Lauren or I would just end up doing it for her.

“I didn’t say that, Melanie.”

“*Unfuckingbelievable*. Kyle’s band’s gotten really good and he’s willing to do this nice thing for you, but you’re going to say no?” Before I could respond, Melanie shook her head and said, “I told you she’d shut it down, Lauren.”

I said, “You’ve already talked about it?”

Lauren said, “No, well, just a little. Melanie mentioned last night that Kyle could use the exposure, and—”

“And you said he could probably meet some people at the wedding,” Melanie said. “You said it would be a good opportunity for him.”

My face felt hot and my pulse sped up. Melanie wanted to use my wedding as an audition for her boyfriend? And Lauren *gave* her the idea?

Lauren said, “But I didn’t know if Sara already had other plans.”

“She *doesn’t*,” Melanie said. “It’s just because she doesn’t like Kyle.”

Melanie stared at me, her chin out, daring me to deny it. I wanted to tell her exactly what I thought: *He’s not good enough for you and he sure as hell isn’t good enough to play at my wedding*. But I counted to ten, took a couple of deep breaths, and said, “I’ll think about it, okay?”

Melanie said, “Suuuure you will.”

“You will. Right, Sara?” Lauren’s face was pleading as she looked at me, worried there was going to be a fight. And there was going to be a big one if I didn’t get out of there fast.

“Right. I should get going.” I stood up.

Lauren said, “You can’t stay for a coffee?” I knew she wanted me to stay so we could work everything out, or at least pretend nothing was wrong, but if I heard one more thing out of Melanie’s mouth I was going to blow up. I forced a smile.

“Sorry, I have to get Ally. Next time, okay?”

I didn't look at Melanie as I walked out.

That night I tossed and turned. Finally I got up and made notes—the only way I could calm down. First item was to call Lauren in the morning and apologize for leaving so abruptly. Then I wrote a letter to Melanie, saying all the things I'd wanted to tell her earlier but never would. Four years of therapy and I'd finally learned how to manage my anger—counting to ten, writing letters, leaving a room to cool off—but Melanie could push my buttons faster than anyone. I hated how quickly she could make me lose my temper. How out-of-control I felt when I did. But mostly I just felt sad. I'd loved her so much when she was little, loved how she looked up to me and followed me everywhere. Then I lost her in the mall when she was four.

We were Christmas shopping and Dad told me to watch her while he went into a store. Melanie wanted to walk around, but I knew Dad would be furious if we moved an inch, so I held on to the back of her coat. The tighter I gripped, the harder she fought, pulling and clawing at me, until she broke away and ran into a crowd of shoppers. The next twenty minutes were the most terrifying of my life. I started screaming her name frantically. Dad came running out of the store, his face white. When we finally found her—playing on a mechanical pony—Dad dragged me to the parking lot and spanked me behind his truck. I still remember trying to break away from him, crying so hard I could barely breathe, his hand coming down again and again.

Most of my worst childhood memories are of my getting into trouble because of Melanie. One Halloween Lauren and

I were dressing up as cheerleaders. Melanie wanted the same costume, but we had only made two, so I told her she could be a princess. She grabbed my pom-poms and ran out of the room, saying she was going to throw them in the fire. I chased her, slipped in the hallway, knocked over a lamp, and broke the shade. When I told Dad, he was furious—not because of the lamp but because I should have included Melanie. I wasn't allowed to go trick-or-treating, and he let Melanie wear my costume. The worst part was he made me walk with them from house to house. I still remember watching Melanie skip up to the door in the costume I'd spent weeks making, the little skirt swinging with each step, my heart breaking when people told her how cute she looked.

When we hit our twenties—and neither of us was living at home—we started getting along better. After I had Ally, Melanie would come over sometimes and hang out, watching movies with me, laughing and eating popcorn. It was great, like we were finally sisters. We still argued once in a while, but the only times we really fought were if I tried to give her advice about her friends or some of the guys she was seeing. When she started dating Kyle I told her I was worried he might be using her because she worked at a bar. She flipped out and we didn't speak for a while. Then I met Evan and Dad began inviting us over for dinner—he only called when Evan was home—and arranging family brunches and barbecues.

Melanie missed a lot of these dinners because she was working, but when she did make it to one, she started taking shots at me—especially if her boyfriend was there. I didn't know if she was just pissed off that Dad liked Evan more than Kyle, or because I didn't like Kyle either, but she was hell-

bent on making me look bad. And if I did lose my temper, Dad would come down hard on me and wouldn't say squat to Melanie. The more I tried not to react, the harder she hit. Now anytime we talked about the wedding it felt like a setup for a fight.

Lauren always ended up in the middle and I knew she was probably feeling awful about what had happened earlier, which made *me* feel awful. But guilt still gnawed at me for another reason, and I made a note to remind her not to tell anyone about my birth father.

The next morning I slept late and ended up rushing around to get Ally off to school. Then a client called and needed an emergency repair on a hall stand that was going into an antique show. I never did get a chance to call Lauren, and I collapsed into bed swearing I'd deal with it the next day. But I didn't, and as the days turned into a week I slid back into a depression.

The simplest task seemed insurmountable and my body ached all over. Even the idea of going to therapy was exhausting. So I slept too much, ate too much, and stayed on the couch all afternoon watching movies. I had to force myself out for walks with Moose, steering him away from his preferred path through the woods to the safer, more populated nearby park. Usually I love watching him chasing bunnies all over the fairgrounds, the earthy scent of hay and animals still lingering in the air. But now the buildings just looked old and abandoned as my feet slogged through puddles.

The only other times I dragged myself out were for Ally, using any energy I had left to hide what I was feeling. But I didn't do a very good job. One day we were driving home in a downpour, not unusual for March, or any month on the coast,

but it added to my already dismal mood. We stopped at a red light and I was staring out the windshield.

Ally said, “Why are you sad, Mommy?”

“Mommy’s not feeling well, honey.”

“I’ll take care of you,” she said. She was so sweet that night, trying to make me soup and telling Moose he had to be quiet. She also spent the night in my bed. We snuggled together as she read me stories, lending me her favorite Barbie for comfort, the rain pattering against the window. The next morning I finally called Lauren to apologize for leaving so fast, but she beat me to it.

“I’m sorry I said anything to Melanie about Kyle playing at the wedding, Sara. But you two are always fighting and it makes it hard to say anything to either of you.”

“Melanie drives me nuts.”

“I wish you two weren’t so jealous of each other.”

“I’m not *jealous* of her, I just hate that she gets away with everything.”

“Dad’s just as hard on her, you know.”

I laughed. “Yeah, right.”

“He is—you just don’t see it. He’s always on her case about her job, telling her how well your business is doing and how big your house is and how successful Evan is. I think sometimes you two clash because you’re so alike.”

“I’m nothing like Melanie.”

“You’re both really strong people, and—”

“*Nothing*, Lauren.”

She was silent.

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just going through a hard time.”

Her voice was gentle. “I know, hon. Call me anytime you want to talk.” But I didn’t, because as much as I loved my sister,

there were some things she couldn't help with, some things that would always separate us. She knew where she belonged.

When another week slipped by and I was still moping around, I decided it was time to make some changes. I stopped Googling the Campsite Killer ten times a day, stopped reading about genetics and deviant behavior, which only led to nightmares, and bought material for a birdhouse—something Ally had wanted to build for ages. We had so much fun working on it together, Ally giggling while she painted, waving the brush around and splattering paint all over her fingers and the table. And slowly the darkness started to lift. Evan and I even managed to have a nice dinner over at Lauren and Greg's one weekend. Or at least it was nice until Dad showed up to go over some work stuff with Greg.

I felt terrible for Greg, listening to Dad berate him downstairs—when he knew we could hear in the kitchen. It was especially bad considering Dad came up after and told everyone he'd just hired a new foreman. Greg has been waiting years for Dad to promote him. Dad stayed for a beer and spent the entire time talking to Evan about fishing. It disgusts me that he plays favorites, but I was also disgusted at myself for feeling proud that he likes my fiancé.

By the first week of April, I finally felt like my depression was behind me. I was sleeping through the night and staying awake during the day. I was spending hours in my workshop again and getting caught up on projects. I'd been feeling so good I even got up early this morning and went on a shopping bender for Ally. I dropped a ton of money on craft supplies and a Netbook, telling myself it would help her learn.

I love buying her things: costumes, books, games, paints, clothes, stuffed animals. If Ally's happy, I'm happy. As I walked back into my house carrying all the bags, the phone rang.

"You better come over tonight." It was my father. And his tone told me I was in trouble—big trouble.

"What did I do wrong?"

"I got a call. . . ."

Dad paused for an excruciating minute. I held my breath.

"It says on the Internet that your father's the Campsite Killer." His voice was tight with anger, *demanding* an explanation. I tried to make sense of what he'd just said, but it felt like the wind had been knocked out of me.

"Did you know about this? Is it true?" His words hammered into me again, sending my pulse skyrocketing. This was the last way I wanted them to find out. I thought of Mom, of how hurt she was going to be. I dropped onto the hall bench, closed my eyes, and got it over with.

"I found my birth mother a couple of months ago." I took a deep breath, then spat out the rest. "And it looks like my birth father is probably the Campsite Killer."

Dad was silent.

I said, "Who called you?"

"Big Mike."

Dad's head foreman? How did he find out about this? The man is barely literate. Dad answered my questions for me.

"He said his daughter found it on *Nanaimo News for Now*."

"You mean that gossip Web site?" I was already running upstairs to my computer.

Dad's voice was hard. "You found your birth mother two months ago, but you didn't say anything? Why didn't you tell us you were looking for her?"

"I wanted to, but I just . . . Hang on, Dad."

I typed in the Web site address and found the article.

Karen Christianson found in Victoria . . .

“Oh, no.”

I tried to read the article, but shock made the words jumble. I caught snippets. *Karen Christianson . . . Only survivor of the Campsite Killer . . . Julia Laroche . . . Professor at the University of Victoria. Thirty-three-year-old daughter Sara Gallagher . . . Family-run business Gallagher Logging in Nanaimo . . .*

It was out, everything was out.

Dad said, “How did they know she was your mother?”

“I have no idea.” I stared at the screen as panicked thoughts careened through my head. How many people had seen the article?

Dad said, “I’ll call Melanie and Lauren. I want everyone here by six. We’ll talk about it then.”

“I’ll e-mail the site right away and tell them—”

“I’ve already called my lawyer. We’ll sue their asses off if they don’t take this article down right away.”

“Dad, I can handle it.”

“I’m taking care of it.” His tone made it clear he didn’t think I could handle anything.

After he hung up I realized he’d said, “Your father’s the Campsite Killer.” Not your *birth* father, just your father.

Now you know why I’m so stressed out, Nadine. After I got off the phone with my dad I read the rest of the article, wanting to throw up the whole time. It had a ton of pictures of Karen Christianson—they even posted her staff photo from the university. I couldn’t believe how much detail was in it about me too, what I do for a living, stuff about Evan’s lodge. The only thing it didn’t mention was that I had a daughter—thank God.

Even though Dad had called his lawyer, I sent the Web site an e-mail asking them to remove the article and phoned every extension listed on the site, but no one called back. Yet again I was left feeling like an idiot who couldn't do anything right. I tried to call Evan, but he was out on one of the boats with a group and wouldn't be in until after dinner. Lauren wasn't answering her phone, and she's a stay-at-home mom. She was probably hiding out in her garden. I'm sure she's dreading tonight's meeting as much as me—Lauren hates it when people are upset.

Now I'm wondering if Melanie could've heard Lauren and me talking. But bitchy as Melanie can be, I just can't see her doing something this mean. Of course, if she told Kyle . . . he looks like the kind of guy who'd sell his kid sister if he thought it would get him ahead. There's no way Lauren or the PI would have said anything.

I haven't been this scared about a family meeting since I had to tell my parents I was pregnant. Dad got up in the middle of that speech and left the room. I took Moose for a walk, hoping to get rid of all the nervous energy humming through my body, but I just ended up rushing back home to my computer. The article was still up when I had to leave for our appointment. I'm trying to calm down by reminding myself this can't go anywhere if I don't confirm anything. Dad's lawyer works at one of the top firms in Nanaimo. He'll have the article pulled off that site by the end of the day. People might gossip for a while, and then something else will take its place. I just have to wait things out.

But I have a feeling something worse is waiting for me.