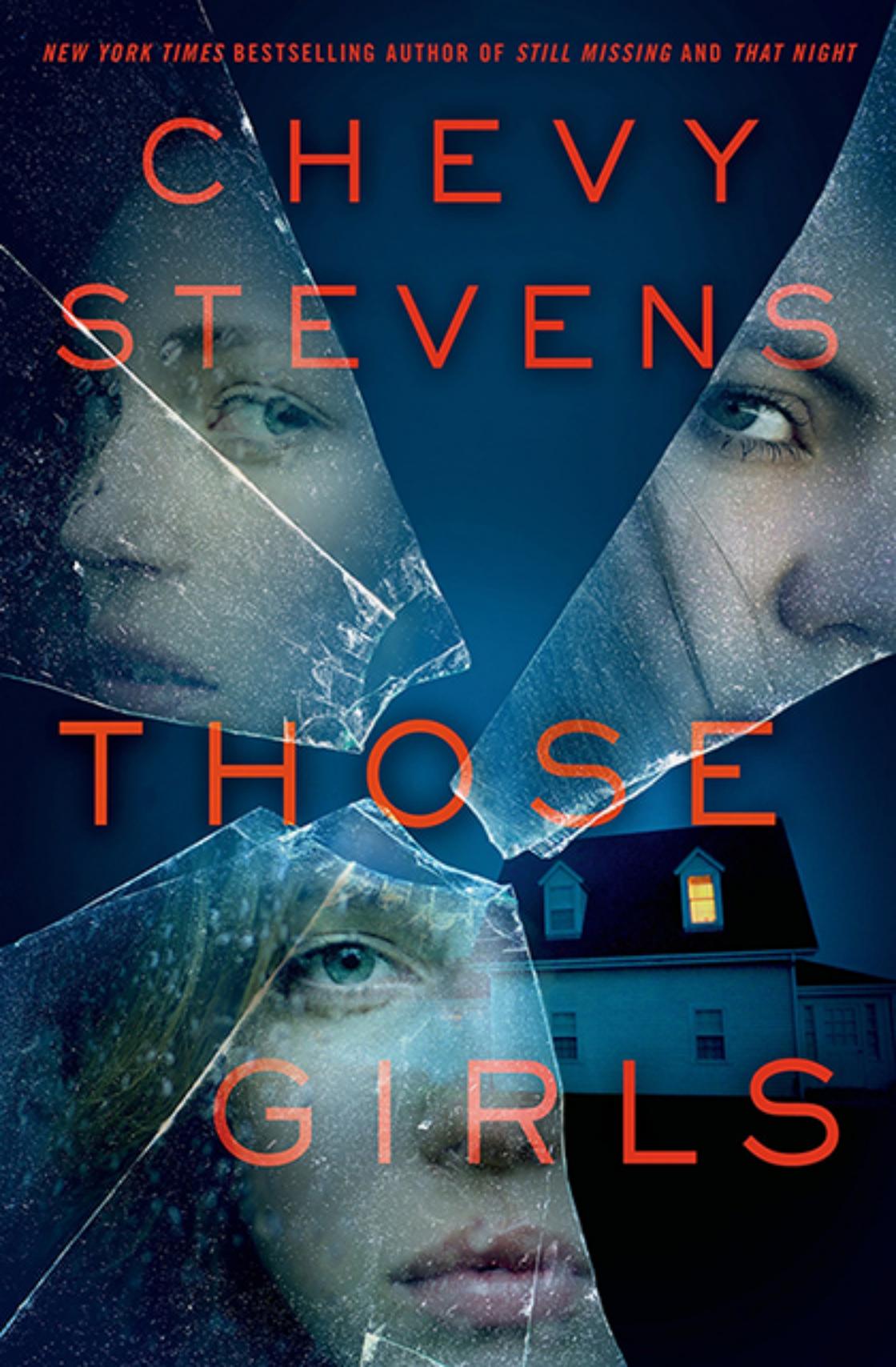


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *STILL MISSING* AND *THAT NIGHT*

CHEVY
STEVENS

THOSE

GIRLS



THOSE GIRLS

ALSO BY CHEVY STEVENS

That Night

Always Watching

Never Knowing

Still Missing

THOSE GIRLS

CHEVY STEVENS

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Piper, my favorite girl

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Though there is a town called Cache Creek in British Columbia, my “Cash Creek” is fictional and in a different location. The town of Littlefield is also fictional. All other locations are real.

PART ONE

JESS

CHAPTER ONE

JULY 1997

We'd only been on the road for an hour but we were almost out of gas. The white line of the highway blurred in front of my eyes, my lids drooping. It was three in the morning and we'd barely slept for days. Dani was driving, her face pale, her long dirty-blond hair pulled under a baseball cap and out the back in a makeshift ponytail, her eyes staring straight ahead. Her name was Danielle, but we just called her Dani. The oldest at almost eighteen, she was the only one who had her license. She'd barely said a word since we left Littlefield.

On my right, Courtney was also staring out the window. When her favorite country song, "Wide Open Spaces" by the Dixie Chicks, came on the radio, she turned it off, then stared back out into the dark night. She brushed at her cheeks and I could tell she was crying. I gave her hand a squeeze, and she gripped it back. Her hair was down, one side pushed forward, trying to hide the burn that had left an angry red mark along her jawline.

None of us had ever traveled this far from home before. We'd

found a map at the hardware store—Dani had stolen it while Courtney and I kept watch—and carefully planned our route to Vancouver. We figured we could make the drive in about eight hours if the truck held up. But we had to stop in Cash Creek first and borrow some money from one of Courtney’s old boyfriends.

It was the middle of July and so hot you couldn’t walk outside without feeling your skin cook. We were golden brown, freckles covering our faces and upper arms—a family trait. Forest fire warnings had been out for a month, and a few towns had already been evacuated. Everything was dried out, the fields pale yellow, the weeds in the ditches covered in gray dust. We were in jeans shorts and T-shirts, our skin sweaty even this late at night, and the air smelled hot.

I touched the camera hanging around my neck. My mom had given it to me when I was ten, just before she died. Dani hated it when I took her photo, but Courtney loved it—*used* to love it. I didn’t know now. I glanced over at her again, then down at my chewed nails. Sometimes I imagined that I could still see the blood under them, as if it had soaked into my skin like it had our floors.

“We’re going to need gas soon,” Dani said suddenly, making me jump.

Courtney turned back from the window. “How much money do we have?”

“Not enough.” Before we left town we’d siphoned a little gas from a neighbor’s truck and gathered what food we could, picking fruits and vegetables from the farm’s fields, taking eggs from underneath the hens and storing them in our cooler. Our cupboards were empty by then—we’d been living on soup, Kraft dinners, rice, and the last few pounds of ground deer meet in the freezer from the buck Dad had shot that spring. We pooled our money—I had a few dollars from babysitting, and Dani had a little money left from when she helped during hay season, but she’d used a lot of it already that year trying to keep us afloat.

“We could get some money for your camera,” she’d said.

“No way!”

“Courtney sold her guitar.”

“You know why she really sold it,” I said. Dani had gotten quiet then. I’d felt bad but I couldn’t do it, couldn’t let go of my one good thing.

“What are we going to do?” I said now.

“We’re going to steal some gas,” Dani said, angry.

Dani always sounded pissed off, but I didn’t pay any attention to it unless she was really mad. Then I got the hell out of her way.

She had a right to be angry. We all did.

We found a gas station in the next town, an old Chevron with two ancient pumps and a lone shadowy figure visible through the window. Was he the only one working? We pulled around back, gravel crunching under our tires. Dani switched off the engine and we sat there while it ticked. I held on to my camera tightly.

“Jess, go in and make sure no one else is there,” Dani said.

I darted a look at her but her profile was rigid. “Okay.” I tried to sound confident, but we’d never done anything like this before—only shoplifted food and makeup, small items. Of course it would be me. Courtney was too pretty—she had the same dirty-blond hair we all had, but she used peroxide and gave it highlights and had our father’s blue eyes that looked even brighter against her tanned skin. And now, with her burn, people would remember her. But I was small at fourteen, with plain toffee-colored hair and green eyes. People forgot me.

The door jingled when I opened it. The guy behind the counter glanced up. He was young, maybe in his early twenties, with long sideburns and acne. I looked around, didn’t see anyone else working. The store was empty, and there were no security cameras or monitors. I cleared my throat.

“Can I have the key to the bathroom?”

He pushed the keys across the counter, then looked back down at his magazine. I browsed the shelves, then made my way outside around the back of the store, where a sign pointed to the restrooms. A laundry room for truckers was beside the wash-rooms. I pulled out the slots, checked for spare change under the machines—sometimes you get lucky, but nothing today. In the garbage can, I found a few cans and a pizza box with a couple of crusts. My stomach growled, but I left the box and went into the bathroom, used the toilet, and washed my hands. I glanced in the mirror. My eyes looked big, scared. The fluorescent light above my head was humming loudly, the bathroom seeming suddenly cold and empty.

I turned my face so I could see the bruise on my jaw. The makeup was smeared. I rubbed at it with my finger, spread it smooth. I stepped back, staring at my reflection. I tried to narrow my eyes and squared my shoulders, pulling my hat down hard, making myself look tougher, more like Dani. It didn't work.

I returned the key and walked back to the truck.

"What did you find?" Dani said through her window.

"Just one guy at the counter—he's reading a girlie magazine."

She nodded.

"Now what?" I said.

"Courtney, you go talk to him."

"Shit, why me?" Courtney said.

Dani gave her a look. Courtney heaved a sigh, undid the top button of her shirt, and got out of the truck.

"I'm going too," I said.

"No. Stay in the truck, Jess."

"But I'm hungry!"

"Jesus Christ." Dani bitched all the time about my "hollow leg," but she still gave me extra helpings.

I followed Courtney into the store. She leaned over the counter and began talking to the guy, who immediately put down

his magazine and turned to face her. Through the corner of my eye, I saw Dani pull the truck around to the pump. Quickly, I walked down the aisles and shoved chocolate bars and snacks into my pockets. Courtney glanced out the window once in a while, waiting for the signal. I was also keeping an eye on Dani. Finally she lifted her hat and wiped her brow.

I left the store and jumped in the truck. Courtney took the pen the guy was holding out, wrote something down on a piece of paper. He was smiling big. She made like she was checking the pocket of her jeans shorts, then shook her head and nodded at the truck.

Now she was heading back to us, walking slow, letting her hips sway. I could see the guy inside staring at her, riveted. She got in the truck, made it look like she was reaching for her purse, then slammed the door behind her. Dani pounded the accelerator. The truck fishtailed onto the road, swerving on the dusty, dry edge. I watched behind as the guy ran out of the gas station, his hand on a phone, already calling the police. Our license plate was covered in dried mud, but my heart was still pounding. If we were caught, we'd be brought back to Littlefield and the cops would have questions—lots of questions.

I turned around and pulled out my chocolate bars. We ate, silent in the dark.

“Remember when Dad used to buy us Caramilk bars every Christmas?” Courtney’s voice was small, the memory big.

I chewed slower now, my eyes filling with tears. It had been years since Dad had brought us chocolate bars, not since our mom had died.

It had only been three days since I’d killed him.

CHAPTER TWO

LITTLEFIELD
THREE DAYS EARLIER

Dad had been gone a month this time, working in Alberta on the oil rigs. Before that job he mostly worked construction around town and on the ranch where we lived. Littlefield was a small town near the Alberta border and it didn't have a lot of jobs—mainly farming or logging since the mill had closed down—so a lot of men worked in Calgary, a couple of hours away. Dad said he'd make better money in Alberta, and maybe he did, but we never saw any of it. He worked three weeks in and one week out. He'd stop at a couple of bars on the way home from the rigs, then usually didn't quit drinking until it was time for his next shift.

I was sure this time things would be different, though. My fifteenth birthday was coming up and he'd told me he'd bring me something special. I'd been thinking about it all week.

"He's not bringing you diddly-squat," Dani had said that morning.

"He promised," I said.

"So?"

I didn't look at her, just shoved another spoonful of scrambled eggs into my mouth. Across the table Courtney was practicing some chords on her guitar, scribbling into a little notebook. She gave me a smile.

"I'll write you a song," she said. "For your birthday."

"That'd be cool." I smiled back at her.

"Jess, I just don't want you to be disappointed," Dani said from the other end of the table.

"I know, but I've got a good feeling. I think he's going to bring something for my camera—maybe a new lens."

"You're such a dumbass." Dani was always telling me I was too hopeful, Dad would never change. But sometimes he went weeks without drinking. Maybe one day he'd quit for good.

I was half expecting to see Dad's truck in the driveway now as I walked toward our house, or have him roar past me, laughing as he left me choking on the dust. I glanced behind me. In the distance I could hear calves mooing and a tractor out in the fields. I aimed my camera at a pretty bird sitting on the fence, then took another shot of our house. Dani was home. I could tell she was in a mood by the way she'd parked the truck—sideways, windows down, the grille almost touching the front steps—and by the music blasting from inside the house. I slowed my pace.

I didn't mind living on the ranch, but I wished it was ours—the bank had foreclosed on our old place. That house had been pretty—I still remembered the front patio swing, the white fence that went down to the road, how Dad would repaint it every year. This was just an old ranch hand's house on a cattle farm, but we had lots of room, a big yard for Dad's stuff, and we needed the work. After Mom died—she was hit head-on by a truck carrying a load of hay—Dad lost his job. He took off to Calgary for months. I'd just turned ten. Courtney was eleven and a half, and Dani almost thirteen. We ended up in foster homes.

They couldn't find one willing to take all of us so I got put with a family that already had six kids, two of them handicapped. There never seemed to be enough food for everyone. I'd wait until my foster mother wasn't looking, then slip some of my mashed potatoes or whatever onto the little kids' plates, shaking my head to warn them to keep quiet about it. If one of them forgot and yelled, "Thank you!" my foster mom would whip around and we'd end up with nothing. I ran away once, trying to get to my sisters, but got picked up by the cops. I found out later they'd tried to run away a few times too. None of us made it.

Finally, after five months, Dad came back, promising to stay sober.

Courtney told me a little about her foster family, how the father peeked at her in the shower, how the mom used to slap her when he wasn't watching.

Dani didn't talk about her foster home much, just said the people had been old and couldn't take care of their farm and wanted a helper. I don't know if they were mean to her—she never said. Sometimes I wondered if she wished she was still there. "Did you like it better than taking care of us?" I said. She cuffed me lightly across the head and said, "Don't be a dumbass."

When I walked into the house she was sweeping the kitchen and I could smell pine-scented cleaner. All the windows were open.

"Where've you been?" she said. "I looked for you at the barn."

"Ingrid needed help in the fields."

During the school year we worked on the farm at night and on weekends, but in summer we worked whenever they needed us. Our arms and legs were muscled, our hands blistered—Courtney was always putting lotion on them or doing her nails. Dani would spend all day in the fields if she could, riding the

tractor with a smile on her face, her hair under a big cowboy hat. Sometimes after school she'd even go over to her boyfriend's place to help—his family had the neighboring farm. I didn't mind working in the fields, but I preferred working with the animals. Spring was my favorite, all the babies being born, but I refused to eat the meat, which made Dad furious. I took a few beatings for that.

"We've got to get this place cleaned up before Dad gets back," Dani said.

"Okay." I started washing some dishes that had been on the counter for at least a week, scraping at the dried food, imagining a big dinner when Dad got home. I hoped he'd take me grocery shopping with him.

After Dad got us out of foster care, he'd found this place and kept himself together for months. Then the beer cans started piling up. The cops came by a few times, asking if we were okay, but we kept our mouths shut. When teachers asked about a black eye or a bruise we couldn't hide, we'd say we fell or hurt ourselves on the ranch, tangled with a mean horse. If Dani heard someone teasing us, she delivered what we'd gotten good at taking. I didn't tell her when a kid gave me a hard time about the smell of manure on my shoes or called Courtney names. It just made Dani feel bad.

"Where's Courtney?" I said.

Dani shrugged. "Where is she usually?"

So she was off with another boy. I wondered who it was this time.

Dani and I had the house clean by the time Courtney got home. We were out in the backyard, setting up beer cans to do some target practicing. Dad left us his rifle when he was out of town—an old Cooley .22 semiautomatic he'd gotten from his father—and made sure we had enough bullets. He said he wanted us to be able to take care of ourselves. We didn't have much time to just kick around, but we liked shooting stuff or

going fishing. I squinted, took aim on the can, held my breath, and squeezed the trigger. The can flew into the air.

“Good shot!” Courtney’s husky voice said from behind me.

I lowered the gun and turned around. Courtney had a case of beer on one hip and a cigarette in her hand. Her long hair was damp and tangled, and her baseball cap was on backward. She was wearing dark sunglasses too big for her face, which looked cool, and a bikini top under a black tank top.

“She’s always a good shot,” Dani said. She didn’t give a lot of compliments, so it meant something when she did. I liked shooting, liked that moment when everything came into focus, came down to a split second. Same with my camera, seeing the frame, lining up the shot, taking a breath, then boom!

“Jesus, what’s with your shorts?” Dani said. Courtney’s jeans shorts were cut so high you could see the bottom of her front pockets.

Courtney laughed. “You like them? They make the boys go *craaaaazy*.” She sang out the last words. Courtney was always laughing or singing. Mom used to say Courtney sang before she talked. She was a pretty good guitar player too, had bought a secondhand one and taught herself by listening to the radio.

“They just about show everything.” Dani wore cutoffs—we all did—but Courtney’s were always the shortest, the frayed bleached-out edges contrasting with her golden skin. I glanced at her legs, then down at mine, wondering if I could get away with taking my shorts up an inch.

“Here, take a beer and shut up already,” Courtney said.

Dani grinned and grabbed the beer, opening the can with a pop, and took a long swallow.

“God, that’s good.”

Courtney handed me one. I took a slug, savoring how cold it felt going down my dry throat on a hot day. I liked beer, the fuzzy feeling it gave everything, the malty taste, but the smell always reminded me of Dad.

“Where did you get the beer?” Dani asked.

“A friend.”

Dani just shook her head. There wasn’t much you could say to Courtney. She did what she wanted. Dani would get mad at her, but Courtney would grab her in a big hug or sing her a silly song or get her laughing somehow. She worked hard but she played hard too. If Dani got after her about how she needed to sleep, she’d say, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

Dani pointed to the cigarettes and Courtney threw her the pack. Cigarettes were another luxury. Sometimes we’d steal a couple from Dad’s pack when he was home or from one of the farmhands. Then we’d sit out on our porch, sharing drags. We sat now on the rock edge of what used to be a nice garden running around the house. It was just weeds these days. Dani kept trying to grow vegetables in the backyard, but Dad kept driving over her patch.

Courtney passed me a cigarette, lighting it with the end of hers. I set the gun against the warm rocks and took a drag, watching to see how Dani did it, her mouth parting slightly to let the smoke out in a long, lazy exhale. I leaned back so she couldn’t see, tried blowing it out the same way.

Only the middle of July and the grass was already dead, same with the flowers we’d planted. Most of our front yard was dirt. Dad was always dragging home stuff from the junkyard, and scrap metal and wood littered the property. The house was in bad shape—in the winter we had to board up the windows—but I liked the sprawling deck on the front. I was going to ask Dad if we could paint it.

I didn’t bring any friends home, and we kept to ourselves at school. Dani was usually with her boyfriend, Corey, who was kind of cute in a redneck farm-boy way with his tanned skin, white teeth, and dimples. Courtney was always skipping or hanging out with a boy; most of the other girls didn’t like her. I tagged along with my sisters or worked on my homework during

breaks. Dani put my report card up on the fridge, like Mom used to. I helped with their homework sometimes. Courtney would just get me to do hers if she could, but Dani wouldn't let her.

Dani moved over to sit on the tailgate of her truck. It was an old Ford, and silver where it wasn't rusted out. She'd bought it from her boyfriend's dad for cheap, then worked it off. It was usually broken down. She kept it cleaned out, hung a coconut air freshener on the rearview mirror, but it didn't hide the stink of manure from our boots. I always kicked my boots on the fender, trying to get the dirt off before I climbed in or she'd yell at me.

Courtney took a long drag. "I'm going out again later."

"You nuts?" Dani said.

"If he's back, he won't be home for hours."

"You don't know that for sure," I said. Sometimes he stopped at Bob's, his friend in town, and they hit the bars, but other times he came straight home.

She tugged the back of my hair. "Don't worry."

Courtney acted like she didn't care what Dad did to her, but I knew she was scared of him. Mom was the only person who'd ever been able to keep him under control, but he'd still go on benders with his friends, then come home yelling and throwing stuff around, breaking dishes. She kicked him out a couple of months before she died, but he sweet-talked his way back in, sober and swearing he'd stay that way. Mom was really happy for a while—we all were. Dad stayed sober until the night we found out she'd died. Sometimes I think about how sad she'd be over what happened to us, how pissed off she'd be at Dad.

I looked down the road again, imagined his truck getting closer.

"*Promise* you'll come home early?" I said. The last time Dad caught Courtney sneaking in, she hadn't been able to sit for days.

"Promise," Courtney said.

"He told you what would happen if you mess up again." Dani

dropped her cigarette onto the dirt, ground her heel into it. “He *warned* you.”

“God, you guys are paranoid,” Courtney said. “He’s not even in town.”

But I’d seen the way she glanced at the road before she picked up the rifle.

“Come on, let’s shoot some more cans.”