Dark Places

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Extract

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Libby Day

NOW

I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ. Slit me at my belly and it might slide out, meaty and dark, drop on the floor so you could stomp on it. It's the Day blood. Something's wrong with it. I was never a good little girl, and I got worse after the murders. Little Orphan Libby grew up sullen and boneless, shuffled around a group of lesser relatives—second cousins and great-aunts and friends of friends—stuck in a series of mobile homes or rotting ranch houses all across Kansas. Me going to school in my dead sisters' hand-me-downs: Shirts with mustardy armpits. Pants with baggy bottoms, comically loose, held on with a raggedy belt cinched to the farthest hole. In class photos my hair was always crooked—barrettes hanging loosely from strands, as if they were airborne objects caught in the tangles—and I always had bulging pockets under my eyes, drunk-landlady eyes. Maybe a grudging curve of the lips where a smile should be. Maybe.

I was not a lovable child, and I'd grown into a deeply unlovable adult. Draw a picture of my soul, and it'd be a scribble with fangs.

—

IT WAS MISERABLE, wet-bone March and I was lying in bed thinking about killing myself, a hobby of mine. Indulgent afternoon daydreaming: A shotgun, my mouth, a bang and my head jerking once, twice, blood on the wall. Spatter, splatter. "Did she want to be buried or cremated?" people would ask. "Who should come to the funeral?" And no one would know. The people, whoever they were, would just look at each other's shoes or shoulders until the silence settled in and then someone would put on a pot of coffee, briskly and with a fair amount of clatter. Coffee goes great with sudden death.

I pushed a foot out from under my sheets, but couldn't bring myself to connect it to the floor. I am, I guess, depressed. I guess I've been depressed for about twenty-four years. I can feel a better version of me somewhere in there—hidden behind a liver or attached to a bit of spleen within my stunted, childish body—a Libby that's telling me to get up, do something, grow up, move on. But the meanness usually wins out. My brother slaughtered my family when I was seven. My mom, two sisters, gone: bang bang, chop chop, choke choke. I didn't really have to do anything after that, nothing was expected.

I inherited $321,374 when I turned eighteen, the result of all those well-wishers who'd read about my sad story, do-gooders whose *hearts had gone out to me.* Whenever I hear that phrase, and I hear it a lot, I picture juicy doodle-hearts, complete with bird-wings, flapping toward one of my many crap-ass childhood homes, my little-girl self at the window, waving and grabbing each bright heart, green cash sprinkling down on me, *thanks, thanks a ton!* When I was still a kid, the donations were placed in a conservatively managed bank account, which, back in the day, saw a jump about every three–four years, when some magazine or news station ran an update on me. Little Libby's Brand New Day: The Lone Survivor of the Prairie Massacre Turns a Bittersweet 10. (Me in scruffy pigtails on the possum-pissed lawn outside my Aunt Diane's trailer. Diane's thick tree-calves, exposed by a rare skirt, planted in the yellow grass behind me.) Brave Baby Day's Sweet 16! (Me, still miniature, my face aglow with birthday candles, my shirt too tight over breasts that had gone D-cup that year, comic-book sized on my tiny frame, ridiculous, porny.)

I'd lived off that cash for more than thirteen years, but it was almost gone. I had a meeting that afternoon to determine exactly how

gone. Once a year the man who managed the money, an unblinking, pink-cheeked banker named Jim Jeffreys, insisted on taking me to lunch, a "checkup," he called it. We'd eat something in the twenty-dollar range and talk about my life—he'd known me since I was this-high, after all, heheh. As for me, I knew almost nothing about Jim Jeffreys, and never asked, viewing the appointments always from the same kid's-eye view: Be polite, but barely, and get it over with. Single-word answers, tired sighs. (The one thing I suspected about Jim Jeffreys was that he must be Christian, churchy—he had the patience and optimism of someone who thought Jesus was watching.) I wasn't due for a "checkup" for another eight or nine months, but Jim Jeffreys had nagged, leaving phone messages in a serious, hushed voice, saying he'd done all he could to extend the "life of the fund," but it was time to think about "next steps."

And here again came the meanness: I immediately thought about that other little tabloid girl, Jamie Something, who'd lost her family the same year—1985. She'd had part of her face burned off in a fire her dad set that killed everyone else in her family. Any time I hit the ATM, I think of that Jamie girl, and how if she hadn't stolen my thunder, I'd have twice as much money. That Jamie Whatever was out at some mall with my cash, buying fancy handbags and jewelry and buttery department-store makeup to smooth onto her shiny, scarred face. Which was a horrible thing to think, of course. I at least knew that.

Finally, finally, finally I pulled myself out of bed with a stage-effect groan and wandered to the front of my house. I rent a small brick bungalow within a loop of other small brick bungalows, all of which squat on a massive bluff overlooking the former stockyards of Kansas City. Kansas City, Missouri, not Kansas City, Kansas. There's a difference.

My neighborhood doesn't even have a name, it's so forgotten. It's called Over There That Way. A weird, subprime area, full of dead ends and dog crap. The other bungalows are packed with old people who've lived in them since they were built. The old people sit, gray and pudding-like, behind screen windows, peering out at all hours. Sometimes they walk to their cars on careful elderly tiptoes that make me feel guilty, like I should go help. But they wouldn't like that.

They are not friendly old people—they are tight-lipped, pissed-off old people who do not appreciate me being their neighbor, this *new* person. The whole area hums with their disapproval. So there's the noise of their disdain and there's the skinny red dog two doors down who barks all day and howls all night, the constant background noise you don't realize is driving you crazy until it stops, just a few blessed moments, and then starts up again. The neighborhood's only cheerful sound I usually sleep through: the morning coos of toddlers. A troop of them, round-faced and multilayered, walk to some daycare hidden even farther in the rat's nest of streets behind me, each clutching a section of a long piece of rope trailed by a grown-up. They march, penguin-style, past my house every morning, but I have not once seen them return. For all I know, they troddle around the entire world and return in time to pass my window again in the morning. Whatever the story, I am attached to them. There are three girls and a boy, all with a fondness for bright red jackets—and when I don't see them, when I oversleep, I actually feel blue. Bluer. That'd be the word my mom would use, not something as dramatic as *depressed.* I've had the blues for twenty-four years.

I PUT ON a skirt and blouse for the meeting, feeling dwarfy, my grown-up, big-girl clothes never quite fitting. I'm barely five foot—four foot, ten inches in truth, but I round up. Sue me. I'm thirty-one, but people tend to talk to me in singsong, like they want to give me fingerpaints.

I headed down my weedy front slope, the neighbor's red dog launching into its busybody barking. On the pavement near my car are the smashed skeletons of two baby birds, their flattened beaks and wings making them look reptilian. They've been there for a year. I can't resist looking at them each time I get in my car. We need a good flood, wash them away.

Two elderly women were talking on the front steps of a house across the street, and I could feel them refusing to see me. I don't know anyone's name. If one of those women died, I couldn't even say, "Poor old Mrs. Zalinsky died." I'd have to say, "That mean old bitch across the street bit it."

Feeling like a child ghost, I climbed into my anonymous mid-sized car, which seems to be made mostly of plastic. I keep waiting for someone from the dealership to show up and tell me the obvious: "It's a joke. You can't actually drive this. We were kidding." I trance-drove my toy car ten minutes downtown to meet Jim Jeffreys, rolling into the steakhouse parking lot twenty minutes late, knowing he'd smile all kindly and say nothing about my tardiness.

I was supposed to call him from my cell phone when I arrived so he could trot out and escort me in. The restaurant—a great, old-school KC steakhouse—is surrounded by hollowed-out buildings that concern him, as if a troop of rapists was permanently crouched in their empty husks awaiting my arrival. Jim Jeffreys is not going to be The Guy Who Let Something Bad Happen to Libby Day. Nothing bad can happen to BRAVE BABY DAY, LITTLE GIRL LOST, the pathetic, red-headed seven-year-old with big blue eyes, the only one who survived the PRAIRIE MASSACRE, the KANSAS CRAZE-KILLINGS, the FARMHOUSE SATAN SACRIFICE. My mom, two older sisters, all butchered by Ben. The only one left, I'd fingered him as the murderer. I was the cutie-pie who brought my Devil-worshiping brother to justice. I was big news. The *Enquirer* put my tearful photo on the front page with the headline ANGEL FACE.

I peered into the rearview mirror and could see my baby face even now. My freckles were faded, and my teeth straightened, but my nose was still pug and my eyes kitten-round. I dyed my hair now, a white-blonde, but the red roots had grown in. It looked like my scalp was bleeding, especially in the late-day sunlight. It looked gory. I lit a cigarette. I'd go for months without smoking, and then remember: I need a cigarette. I'm like that, nothing sticks.

"Let's go, Baby Day," I said aloud. It's what I call myself when I'm feeling hateful.

I got out of the car and smoked my way toward the restaurant, holding the cigarette in my right hand so I didn't have to look at the left hand, the mangled one. It was almost evening: Migrant clouds floated in packs across the sky like buffalo, and the sun was just low enough to spray everything pink. Toward the river, between the looping highway ramps, obsolete grain elevators sat vacant, dusk-black and pointless.

I walked across the parking lot all by myself, atop a constellation of crushed glass. I was not attacked. It was, after all, just past 5 p.m. Jim Jeffreys was an early-bird eater, proud of it.

He was sitting at the bar when I walked in, sipping a pop, and the first thing he did, as I knew he would, was grab his cell phone from his jacket pocket and stare at it as if it had betrayed him.

"Did you call?" he frowned.

"No, I forgot," I lied.

He smiled then. "Well, anyway. Anyway, I'm glad you're here, sweetheart. Ready to talk turkey?"

He slapped two bucks on the bartop, and maneuvered us over to a red leather booth sprouting yellow stuffing from its cracks. The broken slits scraped the backs of my legs as I slid in. A whoof of cigarette stink burped out of the cushions.

Jim Jeffreys never drank liquor in front of me, and never asked me if I wanted a drink, but when the waiter came I ordered a glass of red wine and watched him try not to look surprised, or disappointed, or anything but Jim Jeffreys–like. *What kind of red?* the waiter asked, and I had no idea, really—I never could remember the names of reds or whites, or which part of the name you were supposed to say out loud, so I just said, *House.* He ordered a steak, I ordered a double-stuffed baked potato, and then the waiter left and Jim Jeffreys let out a long dentist-y sigh and said, "Well, Libby, we are entering a very new and different stage here together."

"So how much is left?" I asked, thinking *saytenthousandsayten thousand.*

"Do you *read* those reports I send you?"

"I sometimes do," I lied again. I liked getting mail but not reading it; the reports were probably in a pile somewhere in my house.

"Have you *listened* to my messages?"

"I think your cell phone is messed up. It cuts out a lot." I'd listened just long enough to know I was in trouble. I usually tuned out after Jim Jeffreys' first sentence, which always began: *Your friend Jim Jeffreys here, Libby . . .*

Jim Jeffreys steepled his fingers and stuck his bottom lip out. "There is 982 dollars and 12 cents left in the fund. As I've mentioned

before, had you been able to replenish it with any kind of regular work, we'd have been able to keep it afloat, but . . ." he tossed out his hands and grimaced, "things didn't work out that way."

"What about the book, didn't the book . . . ?"

"I'm sorry, Libby, the book did not. I tell you this every year. It's not your fault, but the book . . . no. Nothing."

Years ago, to exploit my twenty-fifth birthday, a publisher of self-help books asked me to write about how I'd conquered the "ghosts of my past." I had in no way conquered much of anything, but I agreed to the book anyway, talking over the phone with a woman in New Jersey who did the actual writing. The book came out at Christmas time, 2002, with a cover photo of me sporting an unfortunate shag haircut. It was called, *Brand New Day! Don't Just Survive Childhood Trauma—Surpass It!* and it included a few childhood snapshots of me and my dead family, packed between two hundred pages of gloppy, positive-thinking porridge. I was paid $8,000, and a smattering of survivors' groups invited me to speak. I flew to Toledo for a meeting of men who'd been orphaned young; to Tulsa for a special gathering of teenagers whose moms had been killed by their dads. I signed my book for mouth-breathing kids who asked me jarring questions, like did my mom cook pies. I signed the book for gray, needful old men peering at me from behind bifocals, their breath blasting burnt coffee and stomach acid. "Start a New Day!" I'd write or "A New Day Awaits!" How lucky to have a pun for a last name. The people who came to meet me always looked exhausted and desperate, standing uncertainly near me in loose packs. The groups were always small. Once I realized I wasn't getting paid for any of this, I refused to go anywhere. The book had already bombed anyway.

"It seems like it should have made more money," I mumbled. I really wanted the book to make money, in an obsessive childish way—that feeling that if I wanted it enough, it should happen. It should happen.

"I know," Jim Jeffreys said, having nothing more to say on the subject after six years. He watched me drink my wine in silence. "But in a way, Libby, this presents you with a really interesting new phase of your life. I mean, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

I could tell this was supposed to be charming, but it brought a burst of rage up in me. I didn't want to be anything, that was the fucking point.

"There's no money left?"

Jim Jeffreys shook his head sadly, and started salting his newly arrived steak, the blood pooling around it like bright Kool-Aid.

"What about new donations—the twenty-fifth anniversary is coming up." I felt another splash of anger, for him making me say this aloud. Ben started his killing spree around 2 a.m. on January 3, 1985. The time stamp on my family's massacre, and here I was looking forward to it. Who said things like that? Why couldn't there have been even $5,000 left?

He shook his head again. "There's no more, Libby. You're what, thirty? A woman. People have moved on. They want to help other little girls, not . . ."

"Not me."

"I'm afraid not."

"People have moved on? Really?" I felt a lurch of abandonment, the way I always felt as a kid, when some aunt or cousin was dropping me off at some other aunt or cousin's house: *I'm done, you take her for a while.* And the new aunt or cousin would be real nice for about a week, try real hard with bitter little me, and then . . . in truth it was usually my fault. It really was, that's not victim-talk. I doused one cousin's living room with Aqua Net and set fire to it. My aunt Diane, my guardian, my mom's sister, my beloved, took me in—and sent me away—half a dozen times before she finally closed the door for good. I did very bad things to that woman.

"There is always a new murder, I'm afraid, Libby," Jim Jeffreys was droning. "People have short attention spans. I mean, think how crazy people're going about Lisette Stephens."

Lisette Stephens was a pretty twenty-five-year-old brunette who'd disappeared on the way home from her family's Thanksgiving dinner. All of Kansas City was invested in finding her—you couldn't turn on the news without seeing her photo smiling at you. The story had gone national in early February. Nothing at all had happened in the case for a month. Lisette Stephens was dead, and everyone knew that by now, but no one wanted to be the first to leave the party.

"But," continued Jim Jeffreys, "I think everyone would like to hear you're doing well."

"Awesome."

"What about college?" he chewed off a hunk of meat.

"No."

"What about we try to set you up in some sort of office job, filing and whatnot?"

"No." I folded in on myself, ignoring my meal, projecting glumness. That was another of my mom's words: *glum.* It meant having the blues in a way that annoyed other people. Having the blues aggressively.

"Well, why don't you take a week and do some thinking on it?" He was devouring his steak, his fork moving up and down briskly. Jim Jeffreys wanted to leave. Jim Jeffreys was done here.

HE LEFT ME with three pieces of mail and a grin that was supposed to be optimistic. Three pieces, all looking like junk. Jim Jeffreys used to hand me bulging shoe boxes full of mail, most of them letters with checks inside. I'd sign the check over to him, and then the donor would receive a form letter in my blocky handwriting. "Thank you for your donation. It is people like you who let me look forward to a brighter future. Your truly, Libby Day." It really did say "your" truly, a misspelling that Jim Jeffreys thought people would find poignant.

But the shoe boxes of donations were gone, and I was left with a mere three letters and the rest of the night to kill. I headed back home, several cars blinking their headlights at me until I realized I was driving dark. Kansas City's skyline glimmered to the east, a modest, mid-rise Monopoly scatter, radio towers spiking here and there. I tried to picture things I could do for money. Things that grown-ups did. I imagined myself in a nurse's cap, holding a thermometer; then in a snug blue cop's uniform, escorting a child across the street; then wearing pearls and a floral apron, getting dinner ready for my hubby. *That's how screwed up you are,* I thought. *Your idea of adulthood still comes from picturebooks.* And even as I was thinking it, I saw myself writing ABCs on a chalkboard in front of bright-eyed first graders.

I tried to come up with realistic occupations—something with computers. Data entry, wasn't that some sort of job? Customer service, maybe? I'd seen a movie once where a woman walked dogs for a living, dressed in overalls and sweater sets and always holding flowers, the dogs slobbery and loving. I didn't like dogs, though, they scared me. I finally thought, of course, about farming. Our family had been farmers for a century, right down to my mom, until Ben killed her off. Then the farm got sold.

I wouldn't know how to farm anyway. I have memories of the place: Ben mucking through the cold spring mud, swatting calves out of his way; my mom's rough hands digging into the cherry-colored pellets that would blossom into milo; the squeals of Michelle and Debby jumping on haybales in the barn. "It itches!" Debby would always complain, and then jump in again. I can never dwell in these thoughts. I've labeled the memories as if they were a particularly dangerous region: Darkplace. Linger too long in an image of my mom trying to jury-rig the blasted coffeemaker again or of Michelle dancing around in her jersey nightgown, tube socks pulled up to her knees, and my mind would jerk into Darkplace. Maniacal smears of bright red sound in the night. That inevitable, rhythmic axe, moving as mechanically as if it were chopping wood. Shotgun blasts in a small hallway. The panicked, jaybird cries of my mother, still trying to save her kids with half her head gone.

What does an administrative assistant do? I wondered.

I pulled up to my house, stepped onto a slab of sidewalk where someone had scraped "Jimmy Loves Tina" in the concrete decades ago. Sometimes I had flashes of how the couple turned out: He was a minor-league baseball player/she was a housewife in Pittsburgh, battling cancer. He was a divorced fireman/she was a lawyer who drowned off the Gulf Coast last year. She was a teacher/he dropped dead of an aneurysm at twenty. It was a good, if gruesome, mind game. I had a habit of killing off at least one of them.

I looked up at my rented house, wondered if the roof was lopsided. If the whole thing crashed in, I wouldn't lose much. I owned nothing of value but a very old cat named Buck who tolerated me. As I hit the soggy, bowed steps, his resentful mews reached me from inside the house and I realized I hadn't fed him today. I opened the door and

the ancient cat moved toward me, slow and crimped, like a jalopy with a busted wheel. I didn't have any cat food left—that had been on the to-do list for a week—so I went to the fridge, pulled out some slices of hardened Swiss cheese, and gave those to him. Then I sat down to open my three envelopes, my fingers smelling like sour milk.

I never made it past the first letter.

Dear Ms. Day,

I hope this letter reaches you, as you seem to have no website. I have read about you and followed your story closely over the years, and am very interested to hear how you are doing and what you are up to these days. Do you ever do appearances? I belong to a group that would pay you $500 just to show up. Please contact me and I will happily give you more information.

Warmly,
Lyle Wirth

PS This is a legitimate business offer.

Stripping? Porn? Back when the book came out, with its section of Baby Day Grows Up photos, the most notable was me at seventeen, my wobbly, woman-breasts barely held in by a white-trash halter top. I'd received several propositions from fringe nudie mags as a result, none of them offering enough money to make me think hard. Even now five hundred wouldn't quite do it, if these guys did want me to get naked. But maybe—*think positive, Baby Day!*—maybe it really was a legit offer, another of those mourners' groups, needing me to show up so they had a reason to talk about themselves. Five hundred for a few hours of sympathy was a doable exchange.

The letter was typed, except for a phone number that had been inked at the bottom in assertive script. I dialed the number, hoping for voicemail. Instead, a cavernous pause came on the line, a phone picked up, but not spoken into. I felt awkward, as if I'd called someone in the middle of a party I wasn't supposed to know about.

Three seconds, then a male voice: "Hello?"

"Hi. Is this Lyle Wirth?" Buck was nosing around my legs, anxious for more food.

"Who's this?" Still in the background: a big loud nothing. Like he was at the bottom of a pit.

"This is Libby Day. You wrote me."

"Ohhhhh holy cow. Really? Libby Day. Uh, where are you? Are you in town?"

"Which town?"

The man—or boy, he sounded young—yelled something at someone back behind him that included the phrase, "I already did them," and then groaned into my ear.

"You in Kansas City? You live in Kansas City, right? Libby?"

I was about to hang up, but the guy started yelling *hel-ooo-o? hel-ooo-o?* into the line, like I was some dazed kid not paying attention in class, so I told him I did live in Kansas City and what did he want. He gave one of those *heheheh* laughs, those *you-won't-believe-this-but* laughs.

"Well, like I said, I wanted to talk to you about an appearance. Maybe."

"Doing what?"

"Well, I'm in a special club . . . there's a special club meeting here next week, and . . ."

"What kind of club?"

"Well, it's kind of different. It's sort of an underground thing . . ."

I said nothing, let him twist. After the initial bravura, I could feel him get uneasy. Good.

"Oh crap, it's impossible to explain over the phone. Can I, uh, buy you a coffee?"

"It's too late for coffee," I said, and then realized he probably didn't even mean tonight, probably meant sometime this week, and then I wondered again how I'd kill the next four or five hours.

"A beer? Wine?" he asked.

"When?"

Pause. "Tonight?"

Pause. "Fine."

LYLE WIRTH LOOKED like a serial killer. Which meant he probably wasn't one. If you were chopping up hookers or eating runaways,

you'd try to look normal. He was sitting at a grimy card table in the middle of Tim-Clark's Grille, a humid dive attached to a flea market. Tim-Clark's had become famed for its barbeque and was now being gentrified, an uneasy mix of grizzled old-timers and flop-haired dudes in skinny jeans. Lyle was neither: He was somewhere in his very early twenties, with wavy, mousy hair he'd tried to tame with too much gel in all the wrong places, so that it was half fuzzy, half shiny points. He wore wireless glasses, a tight Members Only windbreaker, and jeans that were skinny, but not in a cool way, just in a tight way. He had features that were too delicate to be attractive on a man. Men shouldn't have rosebud lips.

He caught my eye as I walked toward him. He wasn't recognizing me at first, just assessing me, this lady-stranger. When I'd almost reached the table, it clicked for him: the freckles, the baby-bird skeleton, the pug nose that got pugger the longer someone held eye contact.

"Libby!" he started, realized it was too familiar, and added, "Day!" He stood up, pulled out one of the folding chairs, looked like he regretted the chivalry, and sat back down. "Your hair's blond."

"Yup," I said. I hate people who start conversations with facts—what are you supposed to do with that? *Sure is hot today. Yes, it is.* I peered around to signal for a drink. A miniskirted waitress with voluptuous black hair had her pretty backside to us. I table-tapped my fingers til she turned around, gave me a face that had to have been at least seventy years old, her pancake makeup pooling in the crepe of her cheeks, purple veins marbling her hands. Some part of her creaked as she bent down for my order, snuffing when I asked for just a PBR.

"The brisket is really good here," Lyle said. But he wasn't having it either, just sipping on the dregs of something milky.

I don't eat meat, really, not since seeing my family sliced open—I was still trying to get Jim Jeffreys and his sinewy steak out of my head. I shrugged no, waited for my beer, looking around like a tourist. Lyle's fingernails were dirty, first thing I noticed. The old waitress's black wig was ajar: Strands of sweaty white hair stuck to her neck. She tucked a few back under as she grabbed a packet of fries sizzling beneath the heat lamp. A fat man sat by himself at the next table, eating short ribs and examining his flea-market purchase:

a kitschy old vase with a mermaid on it. His fingers left grease marks on the mermaid's breasts.

The waitress said nothing as she set the beer squarely in front of me and then purred over to the fat man, calling him Honey.

"So what's with the club?" I prompted.

Lyle turned pink, his knee jittery beneath the table.

"Well, you know how some guys do fantasy football, or collect baseball cards?" I nodded. He let out a strange laugh and continued. "Or women read gossip magazines and they know everything about some actor, know like, their baby's name and the town they grew up in?"

I gave a wary incline of the head, a be-careful nod.

"Well, this is like that, but it's, well, we call it a Kill Club."

I took a slug of beer, sweat beads popping on my nose.

"It's not as weird as it sounds."

"It sounds pretty fucking weird."

"You know how some people like mysteries? Or get totally into true-crime blogs? Well, this club is a bunch of those people. Everyone has their crime that they're obsessed with: Laci Peterson, Jeffrey MacDonald, Lizzie Borden . . . you and your family. I mean you and your family, it's huge with the club. Just huge. Bigger'n JonBenét." He caught me grimacing, and added: "Just a tragedy, what happened. And your brother in jail for, what, going on twenty-five years?"

"Don't feel sorry for Ben. He killed my family."

"Heh. Right." He sucked on a piece of milky ice. "So, you ever talk with him about it?"

I felt my defenses flip up. There are people out there who swear Ben is innocent. They mail me newspaper clippings about Ben and I never read them, toss them as soon as I see his photo—his red hair loose and shoulder-length in a Jesus-cut to match his glowing, full-of-peace face. Pushing forty. I have never gone to see my brother in jail, not in all these years. His current prison is, conveniently, on the outskirts of our hometown—Kinnakee, Kansas—where he'd committed the murders to begin with. But I'm not nostalgic.

Most of Ben's devotees are women. Jug-eared and long-toothed, permed and pant-suited, tight-lipped and crucifixed. They show up

occasionally on my doorstep, with too much shine in their eyes. Tell me that my testimony was wrong. I'd been confused, been coerced, sold a lie when I swore, at age seven, that my brother had been the killer. They often scream at me, and they always have plenty of saliva. Several have actually slapped me. This makes them even less convincing: A red-faced, hysterical woman is very easy to disregard, and I'm always looking for a reason to disregard.

If they were nicer to me, they might have got me.

"No, I don't talk to Ben. If that's what this is about, I'm not interested."

"No, no, no, it's not. You'd just come to, it's like a convention almost, and you'd let us pick your brain. You really don't think about that night?"

Darkplace.

"No, I don't."

"You might learn something interesting. There are some fans . . . experts, who know more than the detectives on the case. Not that *that's* hard."

"So these are a bunch of people who want to convince me Ben's innocent."

"Well . . . maybe. Maybe you'll convince them otherwise." I caught a whiff of condescension. He was leaning in, his shoulders tense, excited.

"I want $1,000."

"I could give you $700."

I glanced around the room again, noncommittal. I'd take whatever Lyle Wirth gave me, because otherwise I was looking at a real job, real soon, and I wasn't up for that. I'm not someone who can be depended on five days a week. Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday? I don't even get out of bed five days in a row—I often don't remember to eat five days in a row. Reporting to a workplace, where I would need to stay for eight hours—eight big hours outside my home—was unfeasible.

"Seven hundred's fine then," I said.

"Excellent. And there'll be a lot of collectors there, so bring any souvenirs, uh, items from your childhood you might want to sell. You

could leave with $2,000, easy. Letters especially. The more personal the better, obviously. Anything dated near the murders. January 3, 1985." He recited it as if he'd said it often. "Anything from your mom. People are really . . . fascinated by your mom."

People always were. They always wanted to know: What kind of woman gets slaughtered by her own son?