

Prologue

Tampa, 2004

The mall was busy, even for a Monday in December. Two floors and people everywhere, surging and shuffling in and out of the doors and between the kiosks, every which way, bumping against each other in their push to get through to a couple of hundred stores.

Up by Santa's Grotto, the lineup stretched right over to the food court. At the food court, the lineups for McDonald's and Starbucks and Popeye's reached far beyond the tables. Shoppers pressed in under the Sunlight Dome, striding and pressing, ducking and deking in the last few days before Christmas itself.

The red-haired woman was no different from the other young mothers, pushing a three-wheeled stroller, guiding a small girl in a green summer dress who held tight to the stroller's arm. She was talking to her children, of course, and the security guard who watched through the cameras couldn't hear what she was saying but he zoomed in anyway. She had great legs, well toned and well displayed in blue denim shorts.

Most of the cameras in the mall had fixed viewpoints, capable of zooming in and out but too simple to move from side to side. They were set to capture and record a high-resolution digital frame grab every ten seconds, and the videos were constantly playing out on two of the three large TV screens in the security office, half-hidden over by the restrooms. There were also some new, moveable video cameras near the food court and the watching guard could slide them around with a joystick, roaming the floor, looking for women with good legs.

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The guards called the TV screens “the Fly” because it looked like something a housefly would see through its multi-lensed eyes. There were forty-eight color video feeds displayed on a grid across the two sixty-inch screens, but the guards rarely watched them – there were too many images in one place and they’d give a headache if watched for too long. They were really just there as a record for checking back on anything that had already happened, and to look impressive to the unfortunate visitors to the office, those caught with light fingers in the mall’s smaller stores and brought in for processing at the outer desk.

Instead, whoever was the guard on camera duty would watch the third big screen, which showed the images from the four video cameras that could be moved around. The pictures weren’t great resolution, especially when they zoomed up close to capture some enticing cleavage or promising ass, but you could sweep most every inch of the mall like a drone over Iraq and, with a bit of imagination, it was almost like flying.

There was only room for one guard, usually the Supervisor, to watch the Fly while the other three were out on patrol duty. There was no need for more than one person, anyway. If the Super saw anything that caught his eye, he’d radio through to the floor and the patrol guards would hear his words in their ear pieces and talk into their wrists to acknowledge and head on over.

Nobody monitored their conversations and outsiders couldn’t hear the spoken words, but they kept up a special code anyway. A 10-44 was a large pair of breasts and the code ranged all the way up to a 10-48, depending on the Supervisor’s estimate. Occasionally, he would call in a 10-49 over by Millie’s Shoes or the Sears and all three guards would wander over to offer their own assessment. A 10-55 was a spectacular ass. A 10-69 was athletic. Didn’t have to be pretty.

The Supervisor was a fleshy man with shaved hair that only accentuated his fleshy face and jowls. He was chewing on a toothpick and watching the red-haired woman – had been, off and on, for twenty minutes since she walked in with the kids out of the heat. He was watching a half-dozen other women too, though he hadn’t radioed any of them in. He was darting around with his video cameras more like a mosquito than a housefly, zooming right in for a poke, a prod, then out again to take in more and more of the shoppers, swarming just outside his patch. It was tedious, boring work, watching silent

people living noisy lives, but at least it could pick right up when a 10-55 came into view.

The redhead paused outside the Pens'n'Ink stationery store and bent over to look into the stroller, probably to tend to the child inside. Her back was to the camera and when she bent right over, her ass was right there in those tight blue shorts.

The Super zoomed in, sucking on his toothpick, rolling his thumb over the wheel on the joystick, *waaaaay in*, so the grain on her denim was clear and filled the camera's lens. He raised the camera slightly and could see some blue and black ink swirling above the shorts on the woman's back, but her shirt wasn't raised enough to get a good look at the tattoo. There would be no recording of this video unless he pressed the Record button. Video used far too much digital storage, which is why the cameras recorded still photographs only once every 10 seconds, and their repetitive, inconsequential images were erased every two days.

The ass disappeared suddenly when the woman moved, and instead, the Super saw the child inside the stroller, a big kid, a boy, fully dressed, probably three or four years old and too big, surely, to be pushed around like this, sitting back on a light blue blanket with his eyes closed. *Lazy*, thought the Super.

He rolled his thumb back to pull the camera out from the tight shot and saw the woman had turned to look back the way she'd come. She was attractive, all right. Short hair in a bob, small features in a slim frame, a white designer T-shirt that, if she twisted to one side, showed a tan, flat stomach. And she was twisting. A lot.

Something wasn't right. She was looking into the mall, at the throngs of strangers, her head turning left and right. Now she was calling something, her mouth opening and closing in the silent video on the screen.

The Super stopped chewing on his toothpick and rolled his thumb some more on the joystick to pull out from the woman. He hit the button on his keyboard that expanded the image on the screen, pushing the other three video feeds into a small vertical grid to the left, and he saw the groups of people near the stationery store slow down and look at the woman and her stroller.

He saw an older woman approach her, say something to her, then turn and look around. He squinted at the screen as he reached for his radio to call for

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a guard on the ground, then realized the cause: the little girl in the green summer dress was nowhere to be seen.

The images on the Fly changed in a constant rotation of flickering color. They showed the unending rivers and streams of Christmas shoppers moving, eddying, swirling through the mall, and the red-haired woman ran between them from camera image to camera image, parting the people with the stroller's chunky tires, calling, yelling, shouting through the mall, silent on the screen. They showed the guards approach her and they showed her flail her arms and twist her head every which way.

In the security office, the radio was crackling with calls from the guards. The Supervisor was scanning the Fly, looking for a green dress, looking for anything. He flew through the mall as best the video cameras would let him, but finally settled back for one last look at the red-haired woman, and he reached for his phone to call the police.

He saw her look directly at his camera and he couldn't help but roll his thumb over the joystick wheel, zooming up tight, letting her face fill the screen. And he watched her eyes close and her mouth open, and even so far away, over by the restrooms on the other side of a locked door, he could hear her scream.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

CLAIRE, Toronto, 2020

My daughter's father was an asshole. Is an asshole. I know he's still alive because I creep him online, which is as much as I want anything to do with him. I doubt he creeps me. I doubt he even thinks about me these days, but I think about him, not in a good way.

He's not on any social media because he's a low-life dickhead, but he sells cars and so his name comes up in the advertising for his dealership down in Florida. I'm really curious to know more – wouldn't you be? – but not so much that I'll do more than Google his name every week or so, just to see if anything's changed.

He could find out more about me if he wanted to and maybe he does, but I really doubt it. My life's not very interesting: I go to work on the ward at the hospital, I visit with my mom, I go out for a drink every now and again with friends, and I knit sweaters and put photos of them on Instagram. Knitting keeps me sane; it keeps me busy. I've turned into a homebody over the last decade though my apartment's nothing to speak of. Dull, huh?

I started knitting back when I was with John because that's what I thought new mothers were supposed to do. Baby socks and baby hats. The only ones I could find in the stores then were either pink or blue and I've never bought into that, so I made them myself in yellow, red, green, purple, whatever else looked good. Not that Jess really needed woolen socks or hats because it never gets cold down there in Florida, but they looked nice and the knitting gave me something to do while I couldn't work and John was away.

John was away a lot. Asshole.

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Jess. I think about her all the time. I hear a baby cry and I'm looking down into her cot, reaching in to let her hold my finger in her bunched fist. I can smell her clean hair after her warm bath and feel her pressure on my breast. I don't smell the bad things but I smile at the thought of the diapers and the towel on my shoulder.

I hear a little girl's voice and immediately, I picture her looking up at me at three years old, asking about her shoes, asking for a cookie, asking about our dog. She's talking constantly, catching up on lost time. So many questions.

I hear a young girl's voice and I see her ready for school, and I imagine myself packing her a lunch, no peanut butter. Even when I hear a teenage girl, just calling to a friend, I see Jess. But it's never Jess. I've not seen Jess since the day she turned four years old, that day at the mall.

I've put it all to one side, tried to concentrate on other stuff, but the smallest things will set me off. If I hear a girl on the street calling for her mother – *Mom!* – then I'll be a wreck for hours. If I see a girl with red hair like mine, I'll want to look away but I can't look away, in case it's her. Which is ridiculous, I know, because Jess will be a woman now. She'll be fully grown, with hips and breasts and a life of her own. I like to think so, anyway. Maybe even a child of her own. I was young when she was born, and maybe it runs in the genes.

I like to think that Jess was taken and raised by a nice family that just really, really wanted a daughter, and when she came along, she completed them. She just moved from my house to another house, perhaps a bigger house, and she had her own room and she went to school and now she's studying law and she has no idea that the person she thinks is her mother is not her mother. Because I'm her fucking mother. But that's the best case scenario and it's possible and that's what keeps me going. I like to think that. It's quite possible, isn't it?

The truth is, I think I know who took her. I think I've always known, and maybe it's what kept me alive. I think it was her father. I think it was John, or Jonathan, or whatever he calls himself now. The police thought so too at the time and I didn't want to believe them, but I could never get it out of my mind.

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John and I were together for five years. I thought it was a good relationship. John was rough, but a loveable rough, you know? Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I've never seen the movie, but I've seen the photos in that white singlet. That's just the kind of guy who would click for me, like Jack Sparrow or Han Solo, that sort of thing. They weren't junkies and although John wasn't that clean when we first met, he had a streak of decency in him and he had a conscience. He came from a hell of a family but he kept away from them when he was with me and I thought we were solid. And then I realized we weren't.

This was back when I was living in Florida, of course. I hate Florida now, but back then, I loved it. No snow! Tans in the wintertime; pelicans on the beach; mimosas for breakfast; do your own thing. What's not to love, right? I'd gone down to stay over Christmas with a friend who had a place on the beach at Clearwater, and then I met John on the third day and that was it. He was so *magnetic*! He pulled me in like one of those big deepwater marlins on the lines out in the bay, and I never even put up a fight. I was pretty confident back then.

At the end of the two weeks, I moved into his place and blew off my second semester of school; it was only the first year of Liberal Arts at York, but I didn't want to go back. I'd ended a pretty intense relationship with a guy in Philosophy and was happy to never see him again. I moved in with John, pulled all the cash out of my bank that was supposed to pay for school, told my mom I was taking a break, and then just stayed down there in Florida's endless summer. I'm a Canadian with red hair and freckles, so everyone just assumed I was a snowbird, hiding from the winter. Which I was.

Mom was surprisingly okay with it. I told her I was living with my friend on the beach at Clearwater and she'd send my mail to her. John worked for his uncle at a car repair place, which was good for him because he spent more time playing hooky from the shop than he ever spent fixing cars. He sold some drugs on the side but not the bad stuff, just weed and hash and coke, and he was away a lot but in those early days, I didn't mind.

The guy at York, his name was Jerry, he'd been intense but he was a jerk, Jerry the Jerk, and John was as far removed from him as a real man could be.

John was laid back and he was smart. He had lots of friends – everyone liked John, and he looked really good in a wife-beater. Don't get me wrong, he never hit me, though a few times I thought he was going to, but those firm tan biceps and that sculpted chest, and that treasure trail leading down into his jeans, well, I just couldn't resist.

I was nineteen years old while he was twenty. He was Mr. Perfect, if only for a winter. A winter with palm trees and hot sunshine and Mr. Perfect and warm sand between my toes.

"I love you so much," he used to say, of course, and I told him I loved him, of course, and we probably both did, and then in just three months, I was pregnant. I wasn't ready for it – I was nineteen, for chrissake – but I didn't really mind. It helped make the decision that I should stay down there with him.

"You want to keep it?" he asked.

"Of course I goddam do!" What a question! "And don't say 'it'," I told him – "this is a baby, a he or a she, a boy or a girl. John, this could be your son! Or she could be my daughter!"

"Or it could be some other guy's kid," he said.

Wrong thing to say!

I smacked him hard across the face.

"Whoa! Kidding, baby! Take it easy!"

He used to wear a little gold ring through his eyebrow, and when I hit him, my hand ripped it out. I didn't mean to, but it just tore away. There was a smudge of blood in his hair and he looked like it hurt. He'd have a scar forever and I didn't care – that was such a hurtful thing to say. He told me he didn't mean it, said sorry a hundred times, and I ended up believing him because John was always one to speak first and think about it later. Back then, neither of us really understood what we were getting into.

We'd been using protection but we were passionate and we were reckless. The rubber came off a few times, so I'm not sure exactly which occasion it was, but I like to think it was the middle of the night in our bedroom. It could have been the back of his truck, and it could have been on the kitchen table, but in the bedroom would have been best: the air-conditioner in the window shut off and the overhead fan churning slowly through the thick, humid air; the sheers willowing a little in the breeze; shadows on the wall from the trees

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outside and no traffic on the road. Perhaps an owl hooting quietly, or a dog in the distance, barking at the moon.

Who am I kidding? It was the back of his truck. That's where the rubber came off for Jess.

I had to come back up to Canada in the summer to apply for a visa to remain in the U.S., and I stayed with Mom and Lex, who was my step-dad back then. I was five months pregnant and I hadn't told them. I wanted John to come with me, meet the family, smoke cigars with Lex and flirt playfully with Mom or whatever it is potential husbands do, but he wouldn't do it and I didn't press the point. I never thought of him as a potential husband anyway because that was way too formal, too conventional, too middle-class. I thought of him as the father of my child and didn't like to start imagining too far into the future about anything else.

So I stepped off the big dieselly bus in Toronto and Mom and Lex were there at the terminal to see my five-months-pregnant belly and Mom's eyes widened and Lex just seemed to sag, and that's the way it was. Too late for an abortion, not that they'd have wanted that, but too late to do anything except just accept it and be supportive.

I told them in the car that we'd been together for most of the year. What could they do now? "John so wanted to come up to meet you both, but he couldn't take the time from work," I lied to them. "He's going to be such a great father. I hope you can come down to meet him."

They tried to persuade me to stay in Canada, with free health care from both the government and my mom, but it was never going to happen. I'd applied for college in Tampa to study nursing, I told them, which was true. I expected to get a generous scholarship from the school, I told them, which was a lie. I said John really wanted to move up to Canada with me and open his own repair shop, which was a huge lie on both counts, but it sounded good and helped swing them to support my return to Florida. I wanted my baby born in the States, I told Mom, so he or she would have a right to U.S. citizenship, just open up the options for later in life. That same month, I got the year's visa, which didn't allow me to work, and Lex even paid for health insurance.

I flew back south and landed at the airport. I remember all the people who were at the gate in the terminal to meet their families, their friends, off the plane. They all had super-tan legs in primary-coloured shorts and deeply brown arms in matching pastel Ts, and white teeth, and sunglasses on the tops of their super-tan heads.

I walked through into the chill of the air-conditioning that was even colder than the plane and saw all these smiling faces and I just felt *triumphant* – I’d won this one – and waited for John. He wasn’t there. He’d said he would be there but he didn’t come. I called his phone and got his machine, with its curt, all-business message: *You got John. It’s your dime, so speak.* I called again, and again, and again.

After an hour, all the passengers in the terminal who’d been waiting to file onto the plane for its return flight to Canada had boarded, and the plane pulled away, and I was sitting there on a grey vinyl seat, linked to a dozen other grey vinyl seats, all empty now, and I felt a kick inside me. It was the first time I ever felt her move. I sat there with one hand cupped below my belly and the other on top of it, as pregnant moms are supposed to do but which just comes naturally, and I realized for the first time that there really was somebody inside me. A real person, moving around, making contact at last. Before then, it had been John and me, but there in the terminal, it was her and me, Jessica and me together, against the world.

The airline hostess was still at the counter and we made eye contact when I got up and reached for my carry-on. She looked concerned. “Do you need a ride to the luggage carousel, hon?” she asked. No, I said, I need a ride to Northview Hills. I didn’t have any checked luggage. My old bedroom in Toronto was still full of clothes.

I took a taxi to John’s house, to the little blue single-storey stucco house we shared together. There were bars on the windows, but everyone had bars on the windows around there. All the way over, I hoped the cab would pull up and he’d fling open the front door, run down the short driveway to the road, hopping shirtless with bare feet on the sharp gravel of the driveway, his long hair flapping over his face. *Babe!* he’d call out. *Oh my god, I’m sorry – I fell asleep waiting to go get you!* But there was none of that.

I paid the cab, lugged my carry-on over the gravel, and felt the baby kick again. *We’re home, Lovely,* I said, but I wasn’t sure I believed it. The shades were across all the windows, shielding the inside from the hot sun like a

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phalanx of shields. The air-conditioner in the bedroom window hummed and dripped water onto the grass, a small patch of green in a crisp lattice of dead brown. I remember a dove cooing for its mate in the sugarberry to the side.

I tried the handle on the door and it was locked, and I remember pausing for just a moment before sliding my key into the lock, wondering if it would still fit.

The key worked, the door opened, and inside was pretty much just as I'd left it, though messier: the couch in front of the TV, with the open kitchen at the back and the doors open to the two bedrooms. There were plates on the counter and pans in the sink. I stepped into the cool, into the quiet, into the dark, and put my case down beside the couch. My hand went straight to my belly and cupped it from beneath.

Welcome home, I whispered. There was no movement inside me and the only sound was from the air-conditioner, just a low *thrumm* that underlaid everything. I thought about leaving, getting a hotel room and making him run around town to find me, but I was too tired for that. I fell asleep on the couch. It would have been 4 pm. I was still asleep when John came in at 6:30. He woke me by squatting down and taking my face in his hands and stroking my hair away from my eyes.

"Baby, I'm sorry. I should have come get you," he said.

It wasn't his touch that I noticed, but the smell on his fingers of the other woman.

Chapter 2

JON, Tampa, 2020

My name is Jonathan Anthony Morgan. People call me Jon, unless they're pissed at me and then they call me Jonathan, usually with a bit of a sneer and pronouncing each vowel. *Jon-A-Thon*. It doesn't matter to me. Just don't call me late for biscuits and gravy. Or a beer. Or biscuits and gravy with a beer. Best meal of the day.

I used to be just plain John, but I didn't like that and changed my name legally a decade back. You should know that. You have all that stuff. Most of it's fake news, of course. Fake info told to the cops who just want to hear a good story from a dozen snitches, a hundred people with axes to grind, but that's okay. I'll tell you the real story now, since I'm here, drinking a beer.

I changed my name because my dad was a john. Not a John – his name was Carl – but a john who used prostitutes all the time. It was a weakness of his. He had a lot of weaknesses, all laid out in a thick file somewhere, getting dusty, I hope, since his death. It's all in there about my dad and his record and his FBI files and his psychiatric reports. I'm sure it was my dad's idea to name me John so eventually I bucked against that and became Jon, or Jonathan. I know the difference, and that's what's important. Far more clean-cut, if a bit Ivy League. I've done okay by it.

It was Claire who got me to strike out on my own, get away from the family. Anywhere else, I'd be the black sheep but with my lot, I was the good one, the one with the conscience and the morals. I saw her when I stopped at a 7-11 to buy Marlboros and she stood out with her smooth pale skin in a halter top and short shorts. She has red hair, but it was hidden away under a big straw hat. All the women down here have dark hair or they're fake blond, and they're brown as turds. British, I figured, but then she spoke to the clerk while we were both at the counter and I couldn't quite fix her. New York? Chicago?

“You from up north?” I asked her, which is a stupid question in Florida because every English-speaking out-of-stater is from up north. She turned to

me, looked me up and down, and just said, “sure,” then turned away again. Cheeky bitch. She had a tramp stamp on the small of her back, just a pattern of swirls but it was enough to lure me in. I had to follow that, didn’t I?

I bought the smokes and caught up to her at the door. “Hey!” I said. “I want to know where you’re from!”

“What do you care?” she asked. She has blue eyes and they looked straight at me, not blinking. Confident. A great body too, but it was the blue eyes that hooked me in. Light red eyebrows as well, and this close, I could see her hair under that big straw hat. I’ve always had a thing for red-heads.

“I just do. You look kind of interesting. I want to know if you really are interesting. I want to know if I should buy you a drink.”

She looked me up and down again and, I’ve gotta say, in those days I was in pretty good shape. Fifty pounds less than now, anyway. A hundred and seventy pounds with not an ounce of fat, and long hair that I thought turned me into Jesus. Women would say *Jesus!* around me a lot. Usually a few days’ growth of beard, but I don’t remember if I’d shaved that day. Her mouth curled up at the ends – she does that when she smiles, just the ends of her mouth – and she said to me, there in the doorway of the 7-11, that she’d make me a deal. Like I said, confident.

“You’ve got three guesses to figure which city I’m from,” she said. “It’s a big city, there’s a clue. If you get it right, you can buy me that drink. If you get it wrong, you have to throw away those cigarettes and quit smoking.”

Hell of a deal. I hadn’t unwrapped the pack. I could come back later and pull it from the trash.

“New York.” She shook her head and showed me her index finger. I remember she had pale blue nail polish and long fingernails. Good for digging into my back.

“Philadelphia.” It was a wild guess based on nothing, and she showed me the finger and her thumb, turning them to point at me like a gun. I pictured them sliding down into my jeans.

“This ain’t fair!” I said. “You could be from anywhere! I need a clue!”

It was a pretty good clue. Later, she told me she’d wanted me as bad as I wanted her. “It’s not in the States,” she said. “Think farther north.” And I realized she was Canadian. I blurted out the only Canadian city I knew.

“Montreal!”

“Close enough,” she said. “Where are we getting that drink?”

Montreal is 300 miles from where she lived in Toronto, different province, different language even, but that wasn't going to stop her hooking up with me. She even got me to quit cigarettes, for a while, anyway.

We did okay, the two of us. Getting knocked up was a surprise and we were really young, the ink still fresh on our fake IDs, but I had my own place and she moved in and we had a good time. I made no promises for marriage or anything like that but she never asked. I didn't want to meet the family up north in their big house and I sure as shit didn't want her to meet mine. My brother was in a Big House of his own, *know what I mean?*

I was working for my Uncle Luis at his chop shop, cutting up cars and trucks and bikes and running errands, and I sold some weed on the side, like we all did. There was always cash to pay the bills. Not cartel cash in thick rolls of C-notes, but enough that we ate better than wieners and beans. Steak for us! Fish on the grill, always fresh.

Claire liked the weather down here that winter, and she waited till the summer to go back up to Canada and sort herself a visa. She told her folks about the baby too, and they went along with it. Her mom, Vivian, can be a tyrant, but she was okay with being a grandmother. Claire wanted to go to school here to be a nurse but there wasn't any time for that – Jessica was born just before Christmas.

You know how people say their lives change when they have a kid? It was like that for me. I took Claire to the hospital and it was no big deal – she wasn't that fat, just a big bump where her stomach should be. She wanted me there for the birth and I said sure, why not, but I really wasn't bothered.

There were problems, though, when the time came and she was in the birthing room. The doctors started calling to each other and nobody would speak to me. I kept my hand on Claire's shoulder and she was sweating and cussing and suddenly this all started to really *matter*. I thought we might lose the baby and I didn't want that to happen, not if it had come this far. All I'd been thinking about was how this baby was going to tear up my girlfriend's snatch, but now I started thinking about the baby in there fighting to get out and it really *mattered*, you know?

When she did come out, it was really quick and suddenly she was there and I saw her little crotch and I squatted down so my head was close to Claire.

“It’s a girl, just like you,” I told her, and she smiled and at that moment, all was right.

For me, it was like a bolt of lightning, a shaft of sunlight, a blinding fucking spotlight onto the stage in the room, and suddenly everything was different.

If I hadn’t been there, if I’d been out in the waiting room or at work, waiting for a call or something, it would just have been a hassle, another thing to deal with, but because I was in there, it was all okay. She was so delicate, so vulnerable, her tiny fingers so wrinkled and her soft fingernails torn from padding around inside and never getting chewed, and when they let me hold her, I whispered to her and made her a promise. *You’ll be okay, kid*, I said. *I’ll always be here for you*. And that was the first lie I ever told her.

Claire’s mom flew down to look after her in that final month and she stayed through Christmas. Tampa’s a great place to be in December. There’s sunshine and warm evenings and energy everywhere, and she stayed at a hotel near our place. It was a fancy hotel, too, the Hilton, and I wondered how she got to pay for it, but when I saw Vivian on the day she arrived, it was obvious she had money. Nice clothes. Designer clothes.

She looked good for a woman in her fifties, too. I figured she’d married well but Claire told me her dad was an engineer or something and the two of them had done okay with a business they’d started and they were “comfortable.” That’s middle-class talk for rich. It didn’t matter to me, though. I figured I was comfortable already and I’d be rich soon enough.

“Claire says you’d like to come visit Canada,” Vivian said to me back then. “She says you’d like to open your own shop, maybe in Toronto.”

Now why in hell would I want to do that? So I could sell snowmobiles? I was doing just fine down here. I get to watch the weather reports and laugh at all the Northerners in the cold. They’re shoveling their sidewalks and sliding into ditches and wishing they’re in Florida, so why would I ever want to trade places? Even so, I knew what to say to Vivian.

“Yeah, that would be a dream. Canada looks like a really cool place.”

She smiled at that, and I smiled back, and we moved right along.

The money kept coming in, but it started getting stretched. Claire was stretched, too – *know what I mean?* I loved my baby girl, but my relationship

with Claire just wasn't the same. I wasn't the Number One person in her life any more. That was okay, though. I hung out with my friends like any guy in his twenties and I came home to play with my baby and make sure her mother was looking after her right, and we'd take walks in the park and all that family stuff.

We really did try. We even got a puppy from the pound and it grew up to be like a guard dog, protective of its women. We called it Rags because it looked like its pen at the pound was full of rags, and it was like a big pit bull, some kind of mastiff. Scary-looking dog with yellow teeth and drool and pale eyes that never quite closed, always watching you.

I got him to protect Claire and Jess, and Jess was scared of him at first, but she quickly came to love him. The dog growled at me a few times when I moved too sudden but I showed him who was boss. He even bit my sister Tammy's boyfriend one time when they were over to visit and the guy had to get a shot, and I was kinda proud. I never liked that asshole. I think there was way more chance of him infecting the dog with something disgusting than the other way around.

I tried to leave my own family alone in those years, but my sister would visit sometimes, usually to pick up some weed or borrow some money. My dad was dead and my twin sister too, she died as a child, and my brother Mike was in prison, and my mom moved to Texas with some guy, so they were all out of the picture, and there was Uncle Luis of course, but Tammy was still around, for a couple of years anyway. She was a meth-head. Claire hated her and her loser boyfriend Billy and wanted me to have nothing to do with them, and for the most part I didn't, but they lived nearby so we'd catch up every now and again. She died of an overdose, heroin, when Jess was still with us.

Mike's still alive, kind of. Depends if you think rotting away upstate on Death Row is still alive. In any case, his heart's pumping for now but he's dead to me.

. . .

Where was I? Drinking a beer and filling you in on all this background shit, that's right. You holding up okay? You need some context up front if you're going to understand, right?

Anyway, you want to know about the snatching. The abduction. The *disappearance*, and that's what it was – just a complete, total fucking disappearance into thin air that nobody's ever explained. She was there and then she was a ghost, just a memory, like smoke off a cigarette. Pixels on a screen. Ink fading on a thin sheet of paper.

We still had her things, the clothes she would wear and the toys she would touch, but Jess herself was gone. No idea where. It was her birthday, too. She was four years old that day, and Claire took her to the mall as a treat.

I don't think she's still alive, but it's taken a long time to come to terms with that. I hope she didn't suffer too long. Sometimes, I'll think of her as she would be now, a young woman with red hair like her mother but green eyes, and that's a comforting thought right up until I imagine her locked away in some room, captive to some perv, shut away from society like my asshole brother. The only thing that settles my thoughts when that happens is Jack Daniels and lots of it.

It's been happening more recently that I've been thinking about her. If there was a body, I could live with that. If there was even a photo from one of the mall cameras that showed her being led away somewhere, I could even live with that because it wouldn't be such a mystery, but there's nothing, nothing at all.

After she wandered away from Claire at the mall, there's only one photo that shows her clearly, and she's looking up at the camera near a cookie booth and smiling, like she's smiling straight at you. People everywhere and she only comes up to their waists, but she's the only one looking at you and she's smiling like she's just recognized you. That's the picture they used in all the newscasts. That's the one people remember. But after that, nothing. Just ... *poof*.

The press wanted to know how a little girl can vanish in a crowded shopping mall. The cheap bastards who owned the place had plenty of cameras but their hard drives only stored photos, not video, because video used too much memory and their hard drives weren't big enough to store that much memory. These days, I have more memory on my friggin' iPhone than that shopping mall back then, but that's the way it was, cheap bastards, and there's no point dwelling on it. There are thousands of photos from the day, all filled with people but only one with Jess in it after that moment, 12:17 pm

on December 20th, when she walked away from her mom and looked up at the camera.

Claire was looking after our friend's kid that day. Kim. She had a son called Jason, who was a gimpy little boy with a bad foot. She lived a couple of streets over and was married to a guy who worked on a rig in the Gulf, so for three weeks every month she was a single mom. That was hard work for her with Jason, who was a live wire, either full on or asleep with no middle ground.

Kim had an arrangement with Claire where she'd pay Claire to look after him every Monday, so she could run errands and just get a break. Claire didn't mind. She wasn't working and it was some cash of her own and Jason and Jess were about the same age, and they were friends.

Of course, that day, Kim was getting a break with me. We had our twice-a-month nooner and I'm not too proud of that, but again, it's just the way it was and there's no changing anything now. I told you I'll tell you the real story. No fake news with me.

I never made Claire any promises that I would be faithful to her alone, and that I'd be monogamous – *monotonous*, more like – now I was the father of our child, but I knew well enough that she expected it. I might even have done it too if she'd paid me some more attention, not fallen asleep every night just as I was getting going. This way, with Kim and with all the others, I made sure I was okay but that Jess and Claire were also okay. I just didn't talk about it, that's all, and she didn't ask about it.

She called me when I was in Kim's bedroom – *in Kim*, since I'm trying to be precise – to tell me Jess was gone. I remember, I had one of those silver flip phones that showed the name of the caller on the little screen at the front, and I saw it light up on the bedside table and start buzzing around on the polished oak, and then the name came up, CLAIRE, and I didn't answer. Would you? I was right in the middle of it with Kim. She was a great lay, too. Claire called back a few times over the next twenty minutes or so. CLAIRE. CLAIRE. CLAIRE. CLAIRE. Eventually it got annoying, so I pulled out of what I was doing – *who* I was doing – and answered the phone, CLAIRE, and for the second time in four years, my life changed in a bolt of lightning.

John, I'm at the Fairfield Mall and Jess is gone! I could barely understand her, she was crying so much, gasping for air. Big wet gulps I could hear

through the phone. *The cops are here. No-one can find her. I need you here now!*

I pulled on my pants and shirt and told Kim and she was horrified and pissed at the same time, then I ran out to my truck that was parked in the back alley and rolled coal all the way over to the mall, maybe 15 minutes away, feeling really shit for not answering the calls.

The cops had already closed off the mall and were talking to all the shoppers who were trying to leave. I told them I was Jess's dad and they let me go in and find Claire. I had to phone her again to find her because she was still running all over the place, pushing Jason in his stroller. The cops had told her to wait over by where she'd last been with Jess and eventually she did that, and I waited with her, sitting on a wooden bench, holding her hand. I don't think she looked at me once.

"Where the hell were you?" She spat the question at me.

"I was at work, baby. I left my phone out in the truck."

"I called Luis. He didn't know where you were."

"I was out in the yard. I was taking inventory."

Claire didn't question me any more on that. She kept running her fingers through her hair, pulling on it, hard, and she kept breaking down, sobbing, loud. She called Kim to come collect Jason, and when Kim got there and looked me in the eye, I felt like a total shit. Claire never noticed. She only cared about where Jess was.

"I should be searching for her," she said. "She might be frightened by all these cops. She might be hiding. She'll come to my voice."

"She'll come to where she last saw you," I said, and we waited, helpless, useless, as she cried and held onto my hand.

The cops said they wanted to talk to me but I had to wait till things slowed down a bit. That was at least an hour, maybe two hours, while they searched the mall and looked over the photos from the cameras. It wasn't easy for them with all those people around. They could only close the mall to really search it properly for two hours, and then some lawyer from the mall owners made them reopen and people poured back in like nothing had happened. Assholes, all of them.

Finally, some young guy in a uniform came over and said the lead detective wanted to speak with me. He took me over to where there was a fat guy in a tartan sport jacket talking to another fat guy in another tartan sport

jacket, and he told me to wait there, and then left. I stood there patiently and I could hear what they were saying, these two fat guys. They were the detectives, and they were talking about Jess, and I can remember every word. Every. Single. Word.

“Little girls like that, they don’t last long,” said the fat guy with his back closest to me, talking to his fat pal. “That red hair and that cute smile with those little white teeth – every pedo wants a mouth like that on his cock, even if he has to keep the head in his fridge.”

That was my introduction to Detective Sergeant Cocksucker Floyd Woods. His introduction to me was when I cocksucker-punched him in the back of the head, knocking him to the shiny ground right in front of all his cop friends and hundreds of shoppers, as well as a photographer from the *Tribune*.

That caused a scene, I can tell you, all those uniforms and suits and me rolling around on the floor. And when the photo was published the next day in the paper, that’s when the squad cars came to the house and Cocksucker Woods himself met me with a smirk on my doorstep in front of Claire and a bunch of cameras and took me in to the station to ask why I would steal my own daughter.