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Excerpted from  
***My Soul to Keep***  
by **Melanie Wells**

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My  
SOUL  
TO KEEP

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

MELANIE  
WELLS



MULTNOMAH  
BOOKS



WHEN DID I GIVE up on certainty?

At what hour on what day did I realize that you never get to know the answers? Especially not the juicy ones?

It was a misguided affectation, I realize, my little preoccupation with verity. One that served no more purpose than a set of wisdom teeth or a manual typewriter—fitting, perhaps, in some other millennium, but out of place if not archaic in a postmodern world of news cycles, reality shows, and million-dollar half-minute Super Bowl ads. I never saw it as dangerous, though. Of course, that was back when I was young and dumb and blissfully wafting through my days as though nothing sinister was sharing the air with me.

But the air is indeed crowded. And the other inhabitants rarely announce their presence, much less their intentions. Which sends the rest of us spinning around in unexpected directions, bumping into invisible barricades and teetering off into unseen ravines.

Eventually, of course, if you have any spunk at all, you right yourself and you find your bearings. But just when you think you've spotted the lodestar, you discover that what you thought was true north is neither. That truth in the universe is the most elusive of the elements. And that if you're dumb enough to go looking for it, you're liable to get smacked in the face by one of the legions of liars you're trying to outwit.

My own personal liar—the one assigned to me by some force out there in the ether—is named Peter Terry. He's a nasty, ratfink bottom-dweller—a mind-stalking, soul-dissing prevaricator of the first degree. He lies, cheats, and steals, amusing himself by shoplifting, pickpocketing, breaking and entering, or outright armed robbery.

I thought I'd seen the worst of him. But with beings like Peter Terry,

I've learned, low expectations cannot possibly be low enough. And where Peter Terry is concerned, I have lowered my expectations all the way down to the black pit of hell.

It began this time on a sunny Saturday in May. Graduation day. My favorite day of the academic year.

I teach psychology at Southern Methodist University. Like most professors, I experience a powerful surge of enthusiasm every August when classes begin. In those first moments standing at the blackboard, chalk smudges on my fingers, my students' faces aglow with curiosity, I swell with the intellectual and spiritual stimulation of my craft. I love a fresh roomful of unsuspecting minds, the smell of new school supplies, the squeak of the freshly waxed floors of Dallas Hall, the sound of the crowd at football games (a small crowd since 1987, unfortunately).

Of course, that sentimental nonsense lasts about forty-eight hours. And then, like the rest of my colleagues, I spend the following nine months wishing the little darlings would quit bothering me and go home. The students are equally sick of us by May, however, which is one of the reasons graduation is a uniformly glorious occasion on campuses around the world. It's one of the few Hallmark holidays about which everyone involved is truly unconflicted.

On this warm summer Saturday (the solstice comes early in Texas, whether we want it to or not), I found myself hooded and tasseled, wrangling a roomful of rowdy degree candidates. Technically, they would not be graduates for another hour or so—which ensured my last, tenuous thread of authority over them. Our caps and gowns gave us all an impressive, if misleading, air of credibility, at least until you glanced down at the wild variety of (mostly tasteless) footwear on display.

I was shouting instructions, trying to herd them all into a reasonably straight, alphabetically ordered line, when my cell phone rang. Amid hoots from my charges—I'd confiscated cell phones from several conspirators who were plotting to interrupt the festivities with coordinated Pink Floyd ringtones—I hiked up my gown and fished in the pocket of my cutoffs, which, paired with my stilettos, made me look

like a streetwalker on a *Dukes of Hazzard* episode. I smiled sweetly and flipped open my phone.

"We're here, Miss Dylan!" the caller shouted.

It was my little friend Christine Zocci, due to arrive from Chicago today to celebrate her sixth birthday with me.

"Did you know this airport is called Love? *Love, love, love,*" she sang.

"Where did you learn that song?"

"Everyone knows love love love," she said, clearly disgusted with me. "It's the Bees."

"I think that's Beatles, Punkin."

"I don't like beetles. I like bees."

"*Beatles* is the name of the band that sang the song. Not a bug."

"I like bees," she insisted.

And that was the end of that.

"Are you guys getting your bags now?"

"The pilot has our suitcases."

"I don't think so, Punkin. The pilot flies the plane. He doesn't carry the bags."

"His name is Captain George. He's nice."

As though that explained it.

"How do you know his name is George? Did he tell you?"

She sighed. "I had a bee in a jar once, but it stang me and died."

"How about if I talk to your mommy?"

I heard series of clunks as the phone changed hands, and then her mother came on the line.

"Hi, Liz. Where are you guys?"

"All I know is we landed at Love Field. We're..." She paused. "I don't see any signs. I'm not sure where we are."

"Baggage claim is on the bottom floor. Take the escalator down."

"The pilot has our bags."

"Um, okay, Liz. Have you guys been doing a lot of craft projects lately involving glue? Because glue fumes can cause serious brain damage. You should be aware."

"Oh, there he is." I heard her shout to someone named George. I

pictured an American Airlines pilot carrying Christine's lavender Barbie suitcase. And then, of course, I realized what was going on.

Liz and Andy Zocci are the primary shareholders in a Midwestern regional airline called Eagle Wing Air, founded by Andy's father. They have more money than the Mormon church.

"You guys brought your own plane, didn't you?"

"It was just easier," Liz said, sounding embarrassed.

"Oh sure, well, I always think it's easier to take my own plane. Because, you know, the other ones are so...crowded. All those peeeople!"

"Dylan..."

"And the snacks are just not acceptable. Crummy little packets of pretzels passing for food. And don't even get me started on those filthy blankets. I hate those things."

"Dylan, this is very original humor. I'm laughing hysterically. Really, I am."

"You can see other people's hairs on them. It's disgusting."

"Are you done? Or is there more?"

"Hmm...that's about it. Do you want directions to my house, or should I meet you at your hotel?"

"I think we'll go unpack and then meet you at your place. Christine has been talking about this for weeks. I don't think I can hold her back much longer."

"I've got another couple of hours here in the salt mines," I said. "Can she make it that long?"

"We'll unpack and get some lunch. It might take me a while to find something Christine will eat. You know how she is."

"Is she still on crunchy food?"

"It comes and goes. For now it's crunchy food mainly. And orange, if at all possible. Carrots, Cheetos, things like that. Yellow's okay too. We eat a lot of vegetables and corn chips."

"Your kid is weird."

"I try not—Christine, gum and hair don't mix—try not to think about it."

"Did Andy and the boys come?"

“They’re out of the country.”

“Well, la-di-da,” I sing-songed. “They’re not even in kindergarten, and they’re already world travelers?”

“It’s an Angel Wing mission.”

“Oh.”

“To your friend Tony DeStefano’s orphanage in Guatemala.”

“Well, that’s different.”

“Thank you. I thought so. Want to retract your la-di-da?”

“Da-di-la.”

Angel Wing Air is the Zoccis’ charity airline. They fly small planes into remote areas around the world to supply and transport medical personnel and missionaries. And Tony DeStefano was a friend from my seminary days. He’d also been a sort of spiritual touchstone in recent years, an ally in that whole Peter Terry, life-disintegration fiasco. He and Jenny had recently returned to the mission field.

“I made a cake,” I offered, more to change the subject than to announce the menu. “A regular, spongy, noncrunchy cake.”

“What kind?”

“Strawberry. Isn’t that what you said?”

“Yep. She makes exceptions for strawberry anything. What time do you want us? We’ve got a car.”

“La-di-da again. You didn’t bring a limo too, did you? Like, in the cargo hold?”

“We’re renting a regular, run-of-the-mill car, just like the little people.”

“Where are you staying?”

“The Crescent. Do you want me to call you? Or just show up?”

“I’ll call with directions when I’m done here. Hey, you didn’t tell Christine about her present, did you?” I said. “I want her to be surprised.”

“Not a word.”

“Great.” I checked my watch. “I think I can be out of here by two o’clock, assuming no one blows anything up or passes out or anything.”

The students in my immediate vicinity began making explosion noises and pretending to faint.

“I gotta go, Liz. I’m losing control here.”

Someone shouted, “She never had control!” into the phone as I hung up.

I spent the next two hours sweltering under my regalia—surely one of the more enduring medieval torture devices—enjoying one of the slim gratifications of another year of largely thankless effort. As much as I gripe about my work, there’s no fighting off the joy when my students high-five me as they walk off the stage toward the rest of their lives, clutching four years of hard-won education in a maroon leather folder, their families cheering from the seats. It’s one of the few times of the year when I feel proud of my incredibly low-paying, bottom-of-the-academic-ladder job.

The rest of the time I feel poor, mainly.

After the ceremony, I walked a hot half mile to faculty parking, swept off my mortarboard, and drove my crummy pickup home to my tiny house. I parked in the driveway under the sycamore tree that always needs pruning and cut the motor, which shrugged reluctantly to a stop. I hauled my stuff to the porch and unlocked my front door. The air conditioner hummed a pleasant little greeting, which is always good news on a hot Dallas afternoon. I threw my keys on the kitchen table, placed my once-a-year heels in the back of my bedroom closet, tossed my graduation gown into the dry-cleaner hamper, Frisbeed my mortarboard onto the dryer for sponging and Febreze, and walked over to the rabbit hutches in the corner of my bedroom.

“Bunnies, I’m home,” I cooed, peering into the cages. Two small rabbits hopped over to greet me—a little red one, whose auburn coat matched my hair color exactly, and a tiny gray lop-ear. Melissa and Eeyore. I reached down and scratched them behind the ears.

I’ve never really been a pet person. All those bodily fluids and floaty little hairs are prohibitive for a person of my obsessive inclinations. Even the smell of a pet store is a problem—I order all pet supplies online to avoid that trauma entirely. But both bunnies had been orphaned the previous winter when their owners were caught in one of Peter Terry’s snares.

So I had taken them in—Melissa first and then, later, Eeyore.

It turns out that nonverbal roommates are better than no roommates at all. And as an added bonus, rabbits are relatively tidy little creatures. These two were actually housebroken. But since almost no one has need of two bunnies, especially two bunnies of the opposite gender (though Melissa had recently surrendered her femininity at the vet), Eeyore was to be my birthday gift to Christine.

I couldn't wait to give him to her. I'd gotten him a big, purple bow—Christine's favorite color—and had his name painted on a set of (mail-order) ceramic bowls. I could now send his hutch home with the Zoccis as well, since cargo room was clearly not a problem.

I showered quickly and went to the kitchen to set out some refreshments. I was squeezing lemons for lemonade when the doorbell rang. I glanced out the kitchen window and wiped my hands on a cup towel. My friend Maria Chavez had arrived with her little boy.

Maria is an ob-gyn at the local public hospital and one of my All Time Favorite People. She also happens to be a fellow Peter Terry target. She is my only local friend, the first recruit in my campaign to improve my abysmal social life—an effort I commenced last year along with a rigorous Thigh Recovery Program. (I like to believe in the possibility of Total Overhaul.)

I opened the door and greeted her with a best-friend hug, then knelt down and said hello to my groovy little friend, Nicholas.

“Hey, doodlebug.” I gave him a quick hug, squeezing the air out of him as he tried to say my name.

“Hi, M(squeeze)iss (squeeze) Dy(squeeze)lan,” he coughed out.

We did The Squeeze every time I saw him. It was our little thing. He giggled. “Do it again!”

I did it again. He coughed out my name in spurts.

Nicholas had wild, curly brown hair just like his father, who at that moment was sitting in a hot cinderblock cell down in Huntsville, serving ten flat for aggravated sexual assault. That crazy mop of hair framed bright blue eyes and a face so flushed and pink with innocent vim you couldn't possibly imagine he'd been conceived through violence.

“What do you have behind your back?” I said to Nicholas. “Did you bring your G.I. Joe?”

He shook his head and giggled.

“Is it your turtle?”

Another giggle.

“Is it a skyscraper? I heard one was missing from downtown. Or maybe a buffalo? I’ve always wanted my own buffalo. Let’s saddle him up and go for a ride.”

“A buffalo is too big,” he said, giggling. He swung his hand around and pointed a plastic gun at me. “BANG!”

I pretended to die, clutching my heart and crumpling to the ground.

“Don’t shoot people, Nicholas,” Maria said. “It’s bad manners.”

“But that’s what it’s for,” he whined.

I picked myself up. “He’s got a point, Maria.”

“Enrique gave it to him,” she said. “He’s recruiting him, I think. It came with holsters and a badge and a little red siren for his bicycle. It runs on batteries.”

“The holsters sound cool. I could use a set of those myself.”

“I may never forgive him.”

“How is he?”

“Enrique? Charming. Handsome. Overworked.” Her brown eyes twinkled mischievously. “Slightly unavailable.”

“Ooh, I love that in a man,” I said.

“Very sexy,” she agreed. She gave me her girlfriend-confrontation look. “I still think you should call David.”

“It’s a procedural violation to call a man six months after he breaks up with you.”

“You’re stubborn.”

“Check the handbook.”

“And it’s only been four and a half months.”

“I think he’s made it perfectly clear, Maria, that he doesn’t want to be with me.”

“I keep hoping.”

“You’re an optimist. I hate that about you, you know that? I truly do. You really should get it seen about.”

Liz and Christine arrived then in a regular, run-of-the-mill, rented Suburban. I made the introductions, and we all trailed inside. Christine went nuts over Eeyore, as I’d known she would. We sent the kids to the backyard with the rabbits while we blew up balloons and lit candles, then brought them all in and gathered at the kitchen table for cake and presents.

We’d all gotten gifts for Nicholas too. And though Christine was officially the birthday girl, she let Nicholas wear her Barbie birthday princess tiara while she sported the cowboy hat I’d bought for him. Eeyore wore his spiffy satin bow and sat in Christine’s lap eating crumbs from her strawberry birthday cake.

I was setting up my homemade version of pin the tail on the donkey when Christine announced she wanted to take Eeyore to the park. I decided to bring the game along, just in case the kids got bored. I threw the blindfolds, tails, and donkey—which I had drawn myself in a misguided fit of Martha Stewart ambition and which, I’m proud to say, actually looked sort of like a donkey—into a shopping bag, tossing in my staple gun at the last minute.

I live in a Dallas neighborhood called Oak Lawn, which is funky and artsy and pleasantly rickety. It has groovy old houses, giant, misshapen trees, cracked sidewalks, and quirky people. My next-door neighbor has a bubble machine on his balcony. That’s how cool my neighborhood is. The parks, however, are full of weeds, doggie poo, and sticker-burrs.

Two streets over is Highland Park, a much nicer, nonfunky, not-at-all-rickety neighborhood that has fabulous parks with manicured azalea bushes and banked flowers and lacy white gazebos. Sort of like a Thomas Kinkade painting.

Highland Park, for me, is like the Bermuda Triangle. My luck is terrible there.

It’s a low-crime area with huge houses, fancy cars, and its own police

force. Which means it's crawling with bored cops trolling around all day in a shiny fleet of Suburbans.

They care if you go thirty-five in a thirty.

Interlopers like me, driving loud, crummy vehicles with lousy mufflers and cracked windshields, stand out like goats in the piano parlor. Since I am a fast driver and a slow learner, I'd received, at last count, three—count 'em, three—speeding tickets in Highland Park. And that was in one year.

Given the nature of our mission, however, I caved to the sticker-burr issue and let Liz drive us over to Highland Park, banking on her luck to overcome mine.

Apparently, lots of other birthday groups had the same idea. The place was crawling with kids—balloons tied to their wrists, cake smeared on their faces. Their defeated moms trailed behind them yelling out halfhearted prohibitions. Off to one side, someone had set up a petting zoo with a tiny Brahman calf, two saddled, bored ponies, a little herd of baby goats, and a few baby rabbits hopping around in a pen. Melissa and Eeyore sniffed sympathetically through the pickets at their imprisoned relatives.

Maria, Liz, and I found a bench and watched the kids as they made friends and played on the swings. The breeze blew softly as sunlight dappled in through the leaves of the live-oak trees. A soccer game buzzed like a hive in the center of the green lawn. A gardener clipped hedges with manual choppers and swept up the leaves with a real rake, not one of those obnoxious, nuclear-decibel leaf blowers.

An ice-cream cart came by, and we all bought Popsicles. I got one of those orange push-up things that taste like sherbet but are probably made out of xanthan gum and high-fructose corn syrup. I tried not to think about it. It's important to not blow such lovely moments obsessing about food additives. I've spent a modest fortune on therapy to learn that little trick.

It was a beautiful day. A perfect, grade-A, blue-sky day, in fact. I licked my xanthan pop and searched my memory for the last time I'd been this happy.

While Liz and Maria talked, I got up and began stapling my donkey to a tree. He looked a bit like a special-needs donkey, now that I got a good look at him. A special-needs donkey in need of orthodontia and maybe orthopedic shoes. Several children left the swings and came over to check out the afflicted animal. Nicholas pointed his gun at the donkey, no doubt intending to put it out of its misery.

“BANG!” he said and then ran off, sprinting away and scooting behind a tree. He stuck his head back around and pointed his plastic gun, took another shot at the donkey, then ran all the way to the other end of the park and ducked behind the tennis courts.

“Have you mentioned to him that the headwear might be a problem?” I said to Maria. “I mean, the gun is kind of manly. But the tiara...” I tsked. “It ruins the look.”

Maria shrugged. “Maybe with the holsters...”

The tennis courts were fenced, with black wind netting covering the chain-link way up past eye level.

“Where’s Nicholas?” Christine asked.

I pointed. “I think he’s hiding behind the tennis courts. Go see if you can find him.”

“Could you tell him to come back over here, sweetie?” Maria asked. “I don’t want him that close to the street.”

Christine ran to the fence, then stopped short and cocked her head.

Liz shouted over to her. “What is it, Christine?”

Christine pointed at the area behind the tennis courts. “Mommy, that man is mean.”

“I’ll go.” Liz stood up to fetch the kids.

Christine screamed, and we saw a hand—a large hand, a man’s hand—grab her by the arm and yank her behind the netting, her cowboy hat flying out behind her and spinning onto the ground.

We all covered the ground in seconds. By the time we got there, Christine stood behind the fence, her panicked face red and wet with tears, her birthday tiara in the dust at her feet.

Nicholas was gone.

I RACED TO THE other end of the tennis courts, Maria screaming and running at my heels. With the staple gun still clutched in my hand, I rounded the row of shrubs that led to the street. As we got there, a blue minivan pulled into the street and took off. I'd learned how to shoot a gun the year before. Instinctively, I stopped, assumed the stance, and raised the staple gun, shooting industrial staples at the back of the van. They landed all around me in the street, pinging harmlessly on the asphalt.

Maria kept running, following the van as it turned onto a side street and sped away. When I caught up to her, the van was gone and she was standing in the middle of the street, her mouth open, her hands at her sides. Her eyes darted around frantically. She kept opening and closing her fists, like she was trying to pump blood into her hands.

I stopped beside Maria, my chest heaving. "I got two letters and a number off the plate. *AK* and a *9*."

Maria turned and began pounding her fists on one of the cars parked in the street, yanking on the door handle. The alarm began wailing loudly, splitting the still silence of the quiet, tree-lined neighborhood.

"Where are the keys?" Maria shouted.

"Maria, this isn't our car. Try to calm down."

"Where's Liz? We have to go after them. He's got my baby!"

"Maria, they're gone. We can't catch them. Look at the street." I pointed. The lane was empty, the van long gone. "We have to call the police."

She stared at me.

"Did you see the license plate?" I shouted over the car alarm.

Her face was blank.

I raised my voice. “Maria?”

Her eyes were vacant. Empty. I put my hand on her shoulder. “Maria, look at me.” Still no response.

The street around me began to blur. I felt myself get dizzy, the panic choking the air out of me. I struggled to hold on to consciousness, blinking the darkness away and taking a few deep breaths.

Maria was looking at me as though we’d just met. Like she didn’t even know who I was.

“Maria, did you see the plate? Did you get the number?”

“He’s got Nicholas. We have to—”

“Did you see the plate?” I had her by the shoulders now, yelling at her. “Do you remember the license-plate number?”

Maria wrenched free from my grip, yanked on the car door again, and pounded the window. Then she sank to her knees and began to cry. Frantic, gulping cries, sucking in mouthfuls of hot asphalt-scented air.

I screamed for help—a shout in the general direction of the house next to us—and knelt down to hold her. The car alarm stopped abruptly. By now people were coming out of their houses and staring at us. We were still in the middle of the street. I tried to stand Maria up. A car had come up behind us and was waiting for us to move. The man behind the wheel tapped the horn.

I turned around and glared at him. He averted his eyes, ducking behind a baseball cap.

I stood Maria up and led her back toward the park, letting the car pass beside me. A crowd of women from the park had reached us by then, holding their children in white-knuckle grips. Several of them were talking on cell phones, looking around for street signs and house numbers to get their bearings.

We made it back to the park in a clump, all of us clinging together and moving in unison—frightened zebras after a lion has attacked the herd. Police cars began to arrive from both the Highland Park and Dallas police departments—lights flashing on the tops of their cruisers. Someone pointed in our direction, and a Highland Park cop walked over to us.

“Are you the mother?” he said to me.

I pointed at Maria. “This is Maria Chavez. Dr. Chavez. Her boy Nicholas is...he’s the one that...” I didn’t want to say it.

Maria had collected herself. She looked at him and began to recite. “My son’s name is Nicholas René Chavez. He’s five years old. He weighs thirty-nine pounds, and he’s forty-one inches tall. His hair is blondish-brown and curly, and his eyes are blue. He was wearing denim shorts, white sneakers, and a Dallas Cowboys jersey with the number twelve on it. He had a”—she choked back a cry—“a little toy gun.” She put her hand to her mouth and began to shake, tears streaming down her cheeks. “It was a blue van. That man in the blue van took my son.”

I hugged Maria. The cop kept talking.

“You saw someone get in a van with your son?”

I told him the story, pointing at the bench, the tennis courts, and the street as I filled in the details. “We saw a man’s hand reach out and grab Christine.” I gestured toward Christine, who was draped over Liz’s shoulder in a heap, hugging her mother tightly.

“But you didn’t see anyone actually get in the van with the kid?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Where’s the boy’s father?” the cop asked.

“Um, that’s sort of a long story.” I glanced around at the gathering crowd, wanting to spare Maria’s privacy. She saved me the trouble.

“He’s in prison in Huntsville. It wasn’t his father.”

“One of your husband’s friends, maybe?” the cop asked. “Criminal associate—”

I interrupted. “He’s not her husband. And, um...that’s really not a possibility, Officer.”

He raised his eyebrows at Maria.

“He’s never met Nicholas,” Maria said.

He looked back at me and let it go.

“Did you get a plate?”

“AK something, 9 something something.”

“Texas plate?”

I nodded.

“Happen to notice whether it was a vanity plate? Or one of those fund-raiser plates—State of the Arts, Humane Society?”

“No. I think it was just a plain Texas plate.”

“What kind of van?”

“I think it was a Chrysler.”

“Are you sure?”

“Maria? Did you see?”

She shook her head. “No. It was blue. It had a sticker on the back.”

“What sort of sticker?” the cop asked.

“Ducks Unlimited,” she said.

“On the bumper?”

“The back window.”

“Right or left side?”

“Upper right. And one of those.”

She pointed at a sticker on another car. It was the logo of one of the local Christian schools.

“That’s the Dickersons’ van,” someone said.

The cop turned around. “Ma’am?”

A woman stepped out of the huddle around us and said, “Richard and Anne-Marie Dickerson. Their little girl is on my daughter’s soccer team. They carpool with us.”

“Were they here today?” he asked.

“Anne-Marie was, and Lauren. I never saw Richard. I think he travels.”

“Do you have an address for them?” the cop asked.

The woman gave the address, and the cop gestured to his partner to call it in.

“Is there any way you can contact Enrique Martinez?” I asked. “He’s a detective with the DPD.”

“What division?”

“Robbery.”

“Kidnappings go to robbery. They’ll get the call anyway.”

“Aren’t we in Highland Park?”

“Something like this, it’ll go to DPD. You know him?”

“He dates Maria.” I glanced over at her. “And he’s a DPD chaplain. I think it would be good to have him here.”

He raised his eyebrows but didn’t comment. “I’ll try to raise him for you, if you want.”

I nodded my thanks.

Martinez came, along with a crowd of uniformed cops, detectives, and a van full of crime-scene investigators. I hugged him and led him over to Maria, who leaned into him and held on for a minute, then squared her shoulders and stepped away. Maria handled herself well, answering questions with astonishing poise under the circumstances, though the strain was obvious. Martinez, pacing around and asking questions, seemed more agitated than she did.

Christine couldn’t stop crying. The bad man was real mean, she kept saying.

“How did you know he was mean?” Liz asked.

“He was all black, and I could just tell.”

“You mean he was a black man? His skin was black?” I asked. She hadn’t mentioned this to the cop who questioned her.

“Noooo, *he* was black,” Christine insisted. “Not his skin.”

“Punkin, I’m not sure what you mean,” Liz was saying. “Were the man’s clothes black?”

“Noooo, *he* was black,” she said again. “And really mean.” She stuck her thumb in her mouth. “Where’s Eeyore and Melissa?”

We’d all forgotten about the bunnies. When we got back to our stuff, the petting-zoo guy had given them some water and rabbit pellets and put them in the pen with the other rabbits. We thanked him and loaded them up. We were all due at DPD headquarters to give statements. They wanted us to come in while our memories were still fresh. I needed to take the rabbits home first, so we agreed that I’d meet Liz and Christine at the station. Maria would ride with Martinez.

An alert had been issued for a missing child, with Nicholas’s name

and description and a description of the van. It flashed on a sign over the highway as I drove downtown from my house. Flashing red, over and over again.

*Kidnapped child. Kidnapped child. Kidnapped child. Male. Five years old. Abducted.*



I'D BEEN DOWNTOWN TO DPD headquarters a few times last winter, but I got lost anyway. When I finally walked into the lobby, it was almost empty. A bright expanse of sparkling-clean, waxed floors reflected the sunlight streaming in through floor-to-ceiling windows. A few disheveled, distracted people stood near a row of benches that were scooted against the wall near the metal detectors. I gave my name to the officer at reception and waited at the desk, away from the benches.

Martinez appeared in a few minutes. I could feel the stares of the small crowd as he hugged me, walked me around the metal detectors, and escorted me to the elevators. We were silent as the elevator took us up to the fifth floor. We stepped out past a sign that read Crimes Against Persons (CAPERS).

I saw Maria sitting at a desk. "They can't find the van," she said. "They went to those people's house. But no one was home."

"Was it that family's van? What's their name—Dixon?"

"Dickerson," Maria said. "They're trying to find them. It's a really good sign, don't you think? That it was a family? Maybe it's just a mistake. Maybe they just grabbed the wrong kid. Maybe they thought he was someone else. Someone who was supposed to ride with them or something."

I looked at Martinez. He met my eyes, and we silently agreed not to say anything. Let her think that if it would keep her calm.

"It's a good lead," Martinez said. "You want something solid like this in the first forty-eight hours."

"I saw the alert," I said. "On the highway signs."

"Did you know most of those kids get found?" Maria asked. "They

told me. Eighty percent last year. That's pretty good odds, don't you think?"

"Did you see anyone?" Martinez asked me. "Anything at all?"

"The only thing I can come up with was one guy who looked funny to me. He was standing with all the parents at the soccer game, but I never saw him with a kid. All the other parents seemed to have kids running on and off the field, and they were yelling for their kids by name. He was watching the game, but not the same way."

"What sort of way?" Maria asked. "What do you mean?"

A stocky, necktied man with thick black hair and wire-rims interrupted us. He greeted Martinez and then turned to me. "I'm Detective Ybarra. Are you Dr. Foster?"

I nodded, and he said, "Could you follow me, please?"

I trotted obediently behind him down a short hallway and past a tidy kitchenette. I caught the acrid scent of coffee left too long on the warmer.

"Offer you a cup?" the detective asked.

I glanced at the stained carafe. "No thanks."

He opened the door to a small room furnished with a white Formica table and two chairs. "Mind if we record this?"

"Not at all."

"Have a seat."

He took down my name and contact info, my profession—all my vital signs except temperature and blood pressure—and asked me some general questions about the afternoon and about how I knew Maria and Nicholas. She'd told the police by then about how Nicholas was conceived. I filled in a few blanks about my brush with his father the previous winter. Gordon Pryne was his name. Career criminal, serial violent offender. Nasty slick of a man.

"He's back in Huntsville. At least, I assume he's still there."

He paused. "We're still confirming that."

I wondered if he knew something I didn't.

"Listen," I said. "I was just telling Maria—the one thing I do

remember is this parent. At least, I assumed he was a parent. He was standing with the crowd, but thinking back on it, I don't think he really fit in."

"Why would you say that?" He began to scribble notes.

"Well, he was pretty tall, for one thing. Like, almost NBA tall. So he stood out that way. But the other thing is, he didn't seem connected to any of the kids. He wasn't rooting for anyone."

"Could he have been there with another parent? Was he talking to any of the adults?"

"Not really. But he was watching the game very closely."

"A coach, maybe. Or a scout."

"Do scouts come to little-kid soccer games?"

"No, you're right. Probably not. But a coach, maybe."

"I think a coach would be more engaged than he was."

"Engaged how?"

"He seemed disconnected from them. He was watching them like they were objects, not people. Objectifying the kids, I think. He had a look on his face that was..." I searched for the word. "Predatory," I said at last.

"You got a good look at him, then?"

"I got a decent look. I'm not sure I can tell you much about him. I wasn't really paying attention."

"Sounds to me like you were."

"I was paying attention to the dynamic—the interaction between the people. But not really to the people themselves."

He looked at me skeptically. "Is that a shrink thing?"

I shrugged. "Occupational hazard."

"So you can't describe him?"

"Tall, like maybe six-six or so? And white or maybe Latin. Not black, definitely. I think he had on a white shirt and shorts. Khaki, maybe. But honestly, that's a wild guess. I may have imposed that in hindsight."

"Hair color?"

"Don't remember."

“Get a look at his face?”

“No.”

“Facial hair or anything?”

“Not that I noticed. Did you guys interview anyone like that? You talked to all the parents, right?”

“We’re talking to everyone who was in the park when we arrived. If he left before that, I can’t say.” He hunched thick shoulders over the table and scribbled on his notepad for a minute, making lists and drawing arrows between columns. He was left-handed, his writing square and precise, his manners genteel. He wore a gold wedding ring that had clearly gone the distance.

He looked up and caught me staring.

“Would you be able to identify him?” he asked.

“From a photo? Or in person?”

“Either one.”

“Probably not from a photo. I don’t remember a face. Maybe if I saw him in person, dressed the same way? I don’t know. I’m sorry. I guess my memory isn’t very reliable.”

“Nobody’s is, really,” he said. “That’s only on TV. Eyewitness testimony is always the least reliable evidence in any case.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yep.”

A knock at the door, and Martinez came in.

Ybarra told him what I’d said.

“How’s your girlfriend?” Ybarra asked.

“Tougher than I would be.”

“Did you guys talk to Christine Zocci?” I said. “She got a good look at the guy.”

“We talked to her,” Martinez said. “She wasn’t too helpful. Just said he was mean and black.”

“Dr. Foster just said he was white,” Ybarra said.

“I said white or Hispanic. But we may not be talking about the same guy. I saw the guy on the field. I didn’t see the guy behind the tennis courts. Christine was the only one who saw him.”

Ybarra checked his notes. “The kid told me he was white.” He turned to me. “Didn’t you say you saw the arm when he grabbed her?”

I nodded. I’d forgotten. “It wasn’t black.”

“She also told us he had a snake,” Martinez said. “Did she mention that to you?”

“A live snake? How is that possible?” I said.

“She couldn’t elaborate. I don’t know if she saw a real snake or maybe he had one on his T-shirt,” Martinez said.

“Or maybe a tattoo,” Ybarra said.

“She could have meant he was mean as a snake,” I said.

Ybarra looked at me blankly.

“Christine”—I hesitated— “has a way of seeing things from... I don’t know how to say this without sounding like a lunatic” I said, realizing even as I said it that I sounded exactly like a lunatic. I slowed down and thought about how to word it. “She has a way of seeing things from another point of view.”

“What point of view would that be, Dr. Foster?” Ybarra asked.

“A spiritual one.”

Martinez watched him, waiting for his reaction.

Ybarra was looking at me like I’d just coughed up a live frog.

I stammered on. “It could be what she meant when she said he was black. That he had a mean, dark soul.”

“What, you mean she sees things? Like, literally? As in ‘I see dead people?’” Ybarra said.

“No, not like that,” I said. “She just has a vivid imagination and a good feel for spiritual things. It’s like a radar.”

Ybarra rolled his eyes, irritated.

Martinez poked him and winked at me. “Seriously. I’ve seen it before. My grandmother was that way. She could tell things before they happened.” He shrugged. “The kid could have a gift.”

I figured this would be an inappropriate time to mention that I’m cursed with the same gift. A gift I would give back in an instant if I could locate the customer-service department and acquire the necessary forms.

Ybarra rolled his eyes again. “I’ll make a note.”

"It's just a possibility," I said. "I'll see if I can clear it up—"

Ybarra interrupted me. "I'd prefer you didn't talk to her about any details like that."

"Why not?" I felt strangely hurt.

"Kids' testimony is fungible enough without anyone poking around in there trying to suggest things."

"I wasn't going to suggest anything. I was just—"

"All the same, Dylan," Martinez said. "It's better if you stay out of it." He turned to Ybarra. "*Fungible?*"

"My eight-dollar word for the day. Look it up."

Ybarra turned to me. "We'll add the snake to the description as a possibility, just in case it wasn't a 'radar' thing."

I forced a smile and thanked him. "Who does your kid interviews? Do you guys have a child psychologist or something?"

Martinez nodded. "She's in with them now."

"Could you write her name down for me?" I asked. "I'd like to talk to her."

"I thought we just agreed you were going to stay out of our investigation," Martinez said.

"Sorry." I held my hands up in defense. I'd try to pry it out of him later.

I answered a few more questions but had nothing more to contribute. Ybarra eventually thanked me and cut me loose.

Martinez decided to stay with Maria. She had no family in the area and obviously needed the company. I hugged her good-bye and promised I'd check on her later. I waited around for Liz and Christine to finish with their interviews. I walked a path between the coffee makers and the bathrooms, resisting an overwhelming urge to clean both. When they finally emerged, Christine was tearful, sucking her thumb and whining for her new bunny.

Since Eeyore wasn't welcome at their hotel, we stopped there to pick up clothes and toothbrushes, and then we all went back to my house.

Christine, usually a buoyant, joyful child, was grouchy and weepy. She cried throughout the evening, fussing over the littlest things. Wanting

the stereo on, then off. Wanting to be outside, then in, always on the wrong side of the door. Complaining about her supper. Making picky requests and then refusing to eat anything at all. All she wanted was to hold Eeyore and Melissa. We finally settled her on a pallet on the bedroom floor, the three of them nestled into a pile of pillows and old quilts, and at last she fell asleep.

Liz and I talked into the night, trying to come to terms with what had happened.

As much as you know otherwise, this sort of catastrophic event seems unreal, impossible. Almost imaginary, as though it happens only to fake people in some distant netherworld. You see them on news programs, their faces flushed and wet with tears, their sanity leaking out a drop at a time, and you want to believe it's not possible for such a thing to happen to you.

It's a necessary form of denial. If we didn't think about it that way, most of us could never leave our houses.

But now we were the ones in the drama. Live action, real-time, real-life. It wasn't virtual. It was actual. And it was too terrible to take in.

It wasn't that I couldn't allow myself to think about it. I was just missing the circuitry to comprehend it. I couldn't get my brain to imagine where Nicholas might be or who might have him. It was as though the passageway, the avenue, was just blocked.

It wasn't until the middle of the night—3:30 a.m., to be precise—that the passageway gaped open, an empty hole of the blackest blackness, smelling of rotting eggs and death. Peter Terry stood right there in the doorway, bald and emaciated, his pasty white skin looking pickled and lifeless. He wore khaki shorts and a white polo shirt—a nice little dig, and just like him to pay attention to such details.

He walked over to the bed, pulled an ashen hand out of his pocket, and tossed something heavy onto the mattress.

“For you, Dylan,” he said with a snide smile. “And we begin again.”

He turned and walked away from me, showing me the bloodstain on the back of his shirt—evidence of an ancient badge of dishonor. A gash running blade to blade, where wings had long ago been ripped away.

I looked down to see a snake writhing on the quilt—and then woke with a lurch to a dark, cozy room, Liz breathing quietly behind me.

I lay there and shivered, though the night was hot and thick with humidity.

Christine had woken up on the floor. I got out of bed and tiptoed over to her, whispering for her to follow me. We scooted into the kitchen and shut the door behind us. I poured her a glass of milk and cracked open a fresh package of Oreos.

I sat on the table, my bare feet in the chair next to hers. “Christine.” I handed her a cookie. “Is there anything you haven’t told me?”

She dipped it into her milk three times and took a slow bite.

I waited until she washed it down with a swallow of milk. “Was his skin black?”

She took another bite and chewed with her eyes down, looking into her glass.

“Or was it his soul? Did you mean maybe his soul was black?”

I heard her mumble something.

“What did you say, sweetie?”

She took another sip of milk. “His heart.”

“His heart was black.”

“Uh-huh.”

I handed her another cookie and watched her dip it into the milk. Three times, each bite.

“Why didn’t he take you?” I said. “I mean, he grabbed you. But then he left you there behind the fence, all safe and sound. Why would he do that?”

“It was scary,” she said.

“I’m sure it was.”

“He was mean.”

“I know he was.”

I waited for her to answer my question.

She started to cry.

I got up and got her a Kleenex, kneeling down beside her chair so my eyes would be level with hers. “Christine?”

She took the Kleenex and wadded it up in her hand, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her pink jammies.

“He didn’t want me,” she said at last.

“What? Did he say that?”

She nodded.

“He said that out loud, in words? That he didn’t want you?”

She nodded.

“Why did he grab you, then?”

“It was a mistake. He said he made a bad mistake and it burned his hand.”

“When he grabbed you, he burned his hand?”

She looked down at her glass and nodded. “And then he said something to Jesus.”

“To Jesus?” It took me a moment to realize what she meant. “You mean, he yelled Jesus’s name when he burned his hand?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Not to Jesus.”

“To you. I meant to you.”

“He said he didn’t want me. He wanted Nicholas.”

“He mentioned Nicholas by name?”

She nodded.

“What else did he say to you? Did he tell you why he wanted Nicholas?”

She looked down at her glass again.

“Christine, I know you’re holding something back. You need to tell me so we can find Nicholas. It’s okay, honey, whatever it is.”

I saw a tear plunk into her glass of milk.

“What did he say? What did he tell you?”

“He said he came to get Nicholas.”

“Did he say why? Or where he was taking him?”

She looked up at me, brown eyes fringed with miles of lashes, too serious and wise for a newly minted six-year-old.

“He said it was to keep him safe.”