

PROLOGUE

Hank

IT WASN'T AS though anyone came right out and said it in so many words. That wasn't how small towns worked. No, it was mostly raised eyebrows, grunted half sentences. People knocked on Hank's door, shuffled on his porch. They waylaid him at the post office. They tried to be reassuring. *Not your fault, Hank*, they'd say. *Could have happened to anyone*. They cleared their throats, squinted into the distance. *It was right under our noses*, they murmured. What they really meant was, Right under *your* nose.

Half a million kids go missing every year. Most of them run away or are thrown out of their homes by their families; the rest are kidnapped. These are just the cases reported to the police. So it's a rough estimate.

Look around your neighborhood, at the kids playing in the streets or walking to school. Hold up your hand and blot one of them out. Imagine him wavering, the lines of his body and clothes and backpack gently blurring into a sharp bolt of sunlight, or slipping into a shadow at the end of the playing field. There, between the trees. Gone.

Most abductions are what's known as *custodial interference*, kidnapping by a family member defying a court order. The FBI doesn't look into these cases. They leave it to the local cops to handle the interviews and hunt down leads. You might think that these kids are safe, given that it's a loving parent who's taken them, but you'd be wrong. Although most of these kids are recovered and returned to the custodial parent,

some end up dead, pawns in ugly games that had been going on since long before they were born. You've seen the headlines, clicked through to the images: the car floating in the lake, the dizzying span of a bridge, the house reduced to ash.

A smaller number—just over a hundred kids a year—are abductions by non-family members. Still usually someone the child knows. That kidnapper has spent time learning the kid's habits, marking his vulnerable moments in each day, maybe even casually befriending him, getting things to the point where he willingly agrees to walk away from his friends or his own front lawn and climb into a stranger's car.

The remaining kidnappings are true stranger danger, crimes of opportunity seized during a sliver of time when no one is watching. A day is made of those slivers, isn't it? Sure, your kid can walk three houses down to her best friend's house. Why not let your son play ball with six or seven other kids in a park you can see from your back window? It's helpful when your daughter offers to run over to the bread aisle and grab the hamburger buns while you load a plastic bag with heads of broccoli and wonder whether you can convince your kids to eat them.

Of these true stranger abductions, half the kids make it back to their families and the other half are murdered, usually within the first three hours of being taken. A very few—three percent of all abductions—remain lost, their whereabouts never discovered. Ask any parent what terrifies them the most, and this is what they'd say.

In a town so small you could drive all the way through in seven minutes, a missing child was big news. It had been before, and it was once again. This time, though, two kids were involved. For a while, no one talked about anything else. It got so if Hank saw someone walking toward him with that purposeful gait, he'd yank down the brim of his cap and hurry past. Let them think he'd gone back to drinking. Let them think too many memories had driven him to it.

But it wasn't what folks did say that he didn't want to talk about. It was what they didn't: How, if Hank had devoted his life to finding lost children, had he missed spotting the two staying right next door?



A brown cicada shell, front legs bent and praying. The bug that had lived inside it had crawled out and left behind its skin, perfectly whole. The crooked antenna, the fat eyes and curved back. The only difference from the bug and its shell is the split down the middle, easily pressed back together and made whole.



CHAPTER 1

Cassie

CASSIE COULD NEVER tell, when she pushed off the railing behind her, whether she'd make it to the other side. There was always that sickening instant as she hung suspended between the two balconies when she imagined misjudging the hard lurch forward. Would someone be looking out their window at the exact moment she plummeted past to lock eyes with her and register the horror? She'd be screaming. She always screamed when startled. It annoyed her mom endlessly. *Would you cut that out*, she'd snap, as if Cassie could control it. Cassie would be screaming until the pavement met her body and that would be that.

She hadn't planned on sneaking into the vacant apartment tonight. Everyone had been sitting around the bonfire, complaining there was nowhere to go, when Cassie had found herself saying, *I know a place*. No one paid her any attention. Why should they? They were in high school and she was the seventh grader they let hang around sometimes. Cassie summoned her courage and said it again, blushing when Danny turned to her with sudden interest. His red hair curling out from beneath the brim of his black beanie, Death Cab T-shirt hanging from his shoulders, and jeans dragging to the ground, hems torn and shredded. He got up, and so they all did—Mikey P, Bruno, and Lexi—following her over the dunes, where the huge beach houses sat facing the ocean, and down the sandy road that led around the Paradise and into the courtyard. As they made their way through the parked cars to

the staircase, Cassie began to have second thoughts. Did she really want to give up her secret hiding place, the one space she had to herself, away from her little brother and her mom? Once the four of them claimed it, would it ever be Cassie's again? Worse, what if Danny saw it and laughed at her? She might be shut out of his group, never allowed to return.

They waited outside on the walkway as she let herself into the dark apartment where her parents and little brother slept. She tiptoed to the sliding glass door, unlatched it, and stepped out onto the balcony. She climbed onto a chair and then the railing, pressing her palm against the wall for balance. Stretching out a foot, she hooked her leg over the railing of the balcony next door.

There was always the chance a renter in one of the beach houses on the other side of the alley might look over and spot her. It was almost Memorial Day. Every week, a new wave of vacationers arrived, unloading luggage and beer cases and dogs that ran around wagging their tails and making her brother stand on the balcony and stare. Cassie wasn't worried about the vacationers, though. Even if someone did glance up, who would think to call the police? They lived in their happy world. They never saw Cassie in hers.

The first time, Cassie had landed hard on the balcony. Boon had been the one to notice her bloodied knees and palms the next day, reaching out a finger that she'd smacked away. But it had been enough for their mom to frown at Cassie. *Gym class*, Cassie had lied. Landing wasn't the hard part, though—fixed by lining the balcony floor with cushions hauled out from the sagging sofa inside—it was the jumping.

She counted. *One. Two. Three.*

She sailed weightless. She thought her heart would explode with joy.

She didn't see any of them again for almost a week. After school, she dumped her backpack at home and headed out before Boon could whine about wanting to play, wanting a snack, wanting help with his spelling words. She checked all their favorite places. The fishing pier. The arcade. The Baptist church playground, where they liked to sit on the swings and smoke. The thrift store, the dollar store. But the Cassie-

shaped space she'd carved out among them had lasted just the one night before closing up again, leaving her standing alone on the outside again.

She was coming back from the beach when she entered the courtyard and spotted Bruno and Mikey P over by the swimming pool. They didn't live at the Paradise. None of them did. Danny lived with his mom and two little sisters in the trailer park. Lexi lived with her stepdad the next town over. Bruno lived a couple blocks away with some old lady Cassie figured must be his grandma. Cassie had seen them together once at the grocery store, the old lady pushing the cart and Bruno walking along beside her and looking bored.

Were they waiting for her? Did that mean Danny was coming, too? She felt a flicker of hope. Why else would they be here, hanging around a crappy pool that was still too cold to swim in?

She took a step toward them and another, and then she was committed. She opened the gate. Neither of them looked over. She stopped to stand in a nearby pocket of shade trying not to look obvious about it. She was wearing her black jeans and black shirt, too, and she was hot.

"That was fucking hilarious." Mikey P was talking to Bruno. Mikey P had one side of his head shaved. The other side was wavy and slick with grease. The long silver chain threaded through his belt loops banged against his thigh. He sat down in one of the pool chairs and pulled out his phone.

"Yeah." Bruno stood there striking match after match and tossing each one hissing into the pool. A small nest of them bobbed on the sparkling water.

Cassie should say something. The only thing to talk about was the apartment. How should she say it? *That apartment's still empty*. Did that sound slutty? Did it sound like she wanted to have sex with all of them? She'd never even kissed a boy. What about *Ready*? No. That was even worse. All she knew was that she had to get Danny to spend more time with her.

Bruno straightened. She followed his gaze and saw Danny walking toward them. She felt her cheeks grow warm. She'd been sitting way at the back of the auditorium at the talent show, when he walked across the stage with his guitar. He sat down and everyone went quiet. The

music floated to the ceiling and rained down onto her head and shoulders like soft pieces of gold. He'd been singing for her, and her only. She'd been waiting all year for him to realize it.

Mikey P shoved his phone into his pocket and stood. He looked over at her. "Hey, so can we go to that apartment again?"

"She's cool. You're cool, right?" Danny grinned at her, and she smiled back. He saw her, really saw her. She wasn't some lame seventh grader. She was the girl willing to leap from balcony to balcony four stories up.

"Sure," she said. She guessed they weren't waiting for Lexi. That was fine with Cassie. They'd all almost gotten caught the other night. That had been scary, freezing behind the door as footsteps hurried past. Lexi had giggled. Cassie had wanted to stab her.

Usually, Danny led the way, with Bruno at his side. Then Mikey P and Lexi, bumping elbows or holding hands, then Cassie, following behind like an afterthought. But this time, Danny stood at the gate until Cassie came through it, and then to her amazement and shocked delight, he began walking alongside her. Could Mikey P and Bruno register this development? What if he grabbed her hand? Her palms were sweaty. She didn't dare rub them on her jeans.

A black car rolled through the gates ahead of them. Danny turned his head to watch it coast by. Three people inside, Minnesota plates. They had to be lost. People from other states didn't move to the Paradise.

Danny had slowed his step, and their arms brushed. Her skin buzzed electric. She glanced at him, but he was staring at the car. Bruno and Mikey P had come up alongside them. Now all three guys were watching the car as it pulled in front of the management office. The back door opened and a woman climbed out.

"Now we're talking," Danny said.

"Got a few miles on her," Mikey P said. "But I'd take her for a spin."

"I'll give her to you when I'm done," Bruno said.

Cassie felt a hole open up deep inside. What was so special about that woman? Cassie would have passed her a million times and never given her a second look, but Danny sure was looking. Was it the color of her hair, not red but not blond? The way her ponytail swung and clipped her shoulder as she glanced around the lot? The length of her

legs? How she filled out the top of her white T-shirt? Cassie shrank inside her pretend bra, made of a tank top she'd taken scissors to.

The woman went into the office. Danny leaned against the fountain with his arms folded, staring. There was nothing to see. They'd been on their way to the apartment, and now they weren't. Cassie had no idea why. Something about the woman had stopped them all in their tracks.

The door opened. The woman came out. Behind her was Ted, holding his huge ring of keys. Ted, whom everyone called the Lazy Moron and who never did anything unless a fire was lit under him. The pony-tailed woman must have lit a fire. She had flame-thrown the Lazy Moron out of the air-conditioning and into the heat.

"Hey," Cassie said, but no one was listening.

The woman walked up the stairs with Ted. They reached the landing, passed the railing overlooking the courtyard, then turned to take the next flight of stairs. They went higher and higher, past the second floor, past the third. Cassie knew where they were going, she just *knew*, and she was helpless to do anything but watch. They were all watching. When Bruno stepped in front of her, his head craned, she shoved him back. He stumbled, rubbed his arm. "Bitch," he snarled, but she ignored him. Ted and the woman turned onto the fourth-floor walkway. They walked past Cassie's apartment and stopped in front of the apartment beside hers. They went inside and the door closed behind them.

That apartment had been empty for months. Cassie had watched the family move out. They'd complained loudly to Ted about the fighting coming from Cassie's apartment, said it kept waking up their baby.

As soon as they'd gone, Cassie had walked over to the railing and looked across to the balcony next door. A foot, she'd estimated. Maybe a little more.

All she had to do was be brave enough to make that leap.

CHAPTER 2

Sara

THEY'D ASSIGNED HER a man and a woman—the woman was there to accompany Sara into the restrooms and motel rooms along the trip from St. Paul to the Outer Banks, places where the man couldn't go. Nicole, her name was. His was Luis. Or so they said. Sara didn't care. She'd been playing this game longer than they had.

They rode in a dark sedan with tinted windows. They followed a circuitous route, driving west, then south, and finally east, stopping along the way in small towns to change vehicles—pulling into an empty parking lot, Luis getting out first to walk around and check the new car, shining a light beneath the undercarriage and passing a handheld device along the dashboard before Nicole would let Sara climb out of one backseat and into the next. The vehicles were exactly alike, the differences among them being the way each smelled. The first had reeked of popcorn, and the second, a sharp pine scent. This one, stale coffee.

When they stopped for the night, Nicole would check out the motel room while Luis waited in the car with Sara. Then Nicole would wave Sara out of the car and inside the room, closing the door quickly behind them and sliding the chain. Then it was lights-out—no TV, no reading, no chitchat. Sara was skilled at getting people to talk about themselves, but she didn't even try with these two. What was the point?

Where have you always wanted to live? the Director had asked, back

at the beginning, when they first started talking about using her instead of prosecuting her. California, Sara said, instantly, maybe Seattle. They picked North Carolina. The Outer Banks was filled with vacationers who came and went, they explained, and permanent residents who wanted to keep to themselves. No one would pay Sara the least bit of attention. As long as she kept her head down, she'd be okay.

It had been a long journey conducted mostly in silence, leaving behind sleety avenues and overcast skies before winding through serrated mountains and emerging into a land transformed by greenery and flowers. When at last they drove onto the long, narrow bridge soaring over the ocean, Nicole rolled down the windows. "Smell that air."

Sara said nothing. It wasn't California or Seattle.

The Outer Banks was a strip of land hanging out in the Atlantic, accessible only by bridges at the northern and southern tips, studded with magnolia trees and palms. Signs bristled. Peaches, barbecue, fresh boiled peanuts. Churches and Brazilian waxes.

Luis slowed the sedan and flicked on the turn signal. Sara glanced at the strip mall opposite, the faded placards taped to shop windows. This was an area in transition, though whether it was trending up or down, she couldn't tell. She'd usually spent her time in neighborhoods that had already decided.

They bumped into a courtyard. *THE PARADISE*, the sign said. It didn't look like paradise. The grubby building in front of her rose four bleak stories connected by stark concrete walkways. The roof was patched. Beach towels sagged over railings; miniblinds dangled over every window. The parked cars were older models with sagging bumpers and decaying panels. The only thing running in the stone fountain were rivulets of rust beneath the spigots. Three teenage boys and a girl stopped to let them drive past, all four dressed in black. Making a statement. Clueless, Sara thought.

Luis braked to a stop.

"This is it?" Sara couldn't keep the horror out of her voice.

Luis glanced back at her. Of the two, he'd turned out to be the friendly one. He and Nicole had probably flipped a coin, deciding who would play good cop. "It's on the ocean."

Maybe he was afraid she'd refuse to get out of the car. The Paradise

was a full block from the ocean, a line of private residences standing between it and the water. She could hear the ocean and smell it, but she couldn't see it.

Sara got out to talk to the building manager. Luis and Nicole waited in the car. Inside, a circulating fan beat the humid air. The guy behind the counter glanced up. Bald, fat, sweat prickling his upper lip. "Help you?"

"I'm here about an apartment."

"Name?"

She didn't even stumble. "Sara Lennox." It was her first time using it.

What name do you want? the Director had asked. Sara had just been escorted from jail back to her house. She didn't have time to think. She cast her gaze around her living room, let her eyes settle on the faded spines of her two favorite books from a childhood that now seemed to belong to someone else. She took Sara from one and Lennox from the other. She'd hoped they'd feel familiar, but they turned out to be just four syllables, easy to spell.

The manager tapped his keyboard and frowned at the computer. "Lennox, Lennox." His brass name tag dragged down the pocket of his short-sleeved shirt. TED. "Got it. Fourth-floor single. That right?"

"I guess."

He studied her. Was she supposed to sound more certain, as if she'd been the one to decide on this dump? Well, she hadn't. He reached into the drawer for a ring of keys and, groaning, pushed himself up.

There was no elevator. They took winding metal steps slick with salt spray, the soles of her black pumps sticking and unsticking, the manager wheezing in front of her. Cars baked and winked below. Those kids were still by the fountain, their faces lifted to watch Sara's progress. The boys wore the smirk teenage boys did, but the girl looked furious. One of the boys turned to say something, and the girl gave him an angry shove that sent him reeling. Temper, temper, Sara thought.

Ted was panting by the time they reached the fourth floor. He clomped onto the walkway, stopped. He unlocked a door and swung it open, stepping back.

Sara stepped into a wall of heat. It was gloomy in the apartment, all the shades closed. Ted reached for a light switch, and the space sprang

into view: one room divided into living, dining, and kitchen. Scuffed blue walls, mushroom-colored carpeting. Beige cabinets, chipped Formica counters. The furniture was yellow pine. The previous residents had left chaos behind. Pizza cartons, beer cans, cigarette butts, crumpled paper napkins. The space reeked of weed.

“Huh,” Ted said, and she glanced over to see he was frowning at the cushionless couch. “I’ll get that taken care of. Bedroom’s this way.”

He led her down a hallway to a dim, square space. Double bed, cheap dresser, nightstand and lamp. A single window. A plastic-framed, full-length mirror had been nailed inside the closet door, reflecting back a wavering image of her. The bathroom was sour with mildew.

In the living room, Ted yanked the vertical blinds aside with a clatter, then slid open the glass door. The apartment filled with the crash of the surf.

A narrow balcony hovered in midair, a sheer drop of forty or fifty feet to the alley below. Ted grunted and stooped to pick up the missing cushions. “Former tenants,” he said, as if that explained everything.

The railing was sun-warmed. Black paint crumbled against her palms. Below, the pitched gray roof of a beautiful house shoulder to shoulder among other large homes. Every day she would have to look out over their rooftops to glimpse the ocean glinting in the distance. She was fine with that. It would only fuel her rage, make it easier to con them.

Ted stood waiting for her decision. As if it was her decision to make. But she played the game. “I’ll take it.”

He didn’t ask for ID. He named a monthly rent, tacked on a security deposit—twice as much as she used to pay for a condo in a trendy neighborhood filled with cafés and quirky boutiques. She opened her wallet and counted out the bills Luis had given her. Ted folded them in half, tapped them into the shirt pocket beneath his name tag. “Need help moving in?”

“I’ve got it.” She had two suitcases, all she’d been allowed to take.

He nodded, no doubt relieved at being spared the climb. She’d be making it, though, two, four, maybe six times a day. Was this really going to be her life?

Down in the courtyard, Luis had pulled the car around and parked

it in the speckled shade of a mimosa tree, engine running, air-conditioning blasting. Nicole had moved to the front seat. Sara opened the rear passenger door and got in. Nicole had a habit of clutching her cellphone even when she wasn't using it. She was doing that now.

"How'd everything go?" Luis asked.

What was there to talk about? They'd picked a place. She'd seen it. "Fine."

He nodded, pleased. "You hungry?"

They drove her to a seafood restaurant up the coast for dinner, found a table sheltered beneath an umbrella, and ordered steamed crabs. It was the first time they'd eaten in public, the signal that their mission was over and she was now where they were supposed to leave her. Luis and Nicole took chairs against the wall and did more looking around at the other diners than enjoying the view. The server tossed a sheet of brown paper across the table, then heaved over a bucket of crabs that slithered to an aromatic stop, brilliant red shells with white bellies and black eyes.

Luis showed Sara how to smash the shell with the wooden mallet, pry off the armored chest, and pull apart the legs, teasing out the tender bits of crab with the sharp metal tool. It felt animal to eat this way, indulgent. Her fingers were stained orange. Candles flickered. The moon rose, a mottled silver-gold disk. Luis and Nicole drank iced tea. She downed two margaritas, licking the salt from her lips and wondering if she could get away with ordering a third.

Nicole went over everything again. A car was waiting for Sara at the dealership; she'd be able to open a bank account using her new driver's license and social security card. She'd have to be smart, Nicole warned. Make sure she kept her doors locked. "Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't go anywhere. You need to get drunk, get drunk in your house. No dancing on tables, no guns." No picking up strangers. "Absolutely out of the question," Nicole said, although Sara hadn't argued.

They'd deleted Sara's Facebook page, taken her cellphone with its contacts list. The new phone had only one number in it: Luis's, for emergency purposes only. Down the road, if Sara started dating, she could never tell him who she was. Who she had been. That part of her life was over.

The sun had set, and the tables were filled with people laughing and

eating dinner. The marshals were leaving the next day. But they'd be back. There had never been a breach in the program's history, and these two didn't plan to be the first. They'd considered every exigency. They'd peered around the sharp edges and shone a bright light into every dark corner, and laid it out—a life in which nothing would ever again happen.

They didn't know what Sara had hidden in the lining of her suitcase.