

SARAH ALDERSON

# In Her Eyes



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# I

## DAY 1

A sledgehammer slams into my chest, splintering my ribs. In its wake comes a lightning bolt of pain.

‘Ava!’ Someone is shouting my name over and over, but I can’t see who. The fog deepens, darkens. Cold, bony fingers are snaking around my throat, sliding over my mouth, clamping my lips together – and I start to panic. I can’t breathe. But the harder I fight, the more tightly I’m held. What’s happening? Where am I? Where’s June?

June. Her name rises up in front of me and I snatch for it, grasp it tightly, as though it’s a flashlight that will light a path out of the fog. June. Not just a name or a promise of summer. A face too; dark hair, deep blue eyes, freckles scattered across her cheeks – one on her lip that looks like a chocolate sprinkle. She’s smiling. She’s always smiling. I reach for her, but she vanishes. I try to scream her name but I can’t open my mouth. Fear surges through me. I need to reach her and so I start to fight – kicking and punching with every ounce of strength left in me, trying to get free, but it’s impossible.

It hits me then that June’s dead. And if she is, then I want to be too. I stop fighting and let the fog pour into my ears. It kills all sound and then it rams its fists into my

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eyes and blinds me. It's a darkness so complete I might as well be encased in lead, free-falling to the bottom of the ocean.

Gratefully, I let myself sink.

## 2

### DAY 1: Earlier

‘An affair?’

Laurie hands me the olive from her martini and nods.

‘You honestly think Dave’s having an affair?’ I ask her, shaking my head in astonishment. I can’t believe it for a moment. It’s absurd. It would be easier to believe he was Grand Wizard of the KKK.

Laurie downs her drink in one swallow. ‘He’s been acting shifty for months, working late, refusing to open up and talk to me.’

‘How’s that any different to normal?’ I ask, and immediately realize I shouldn’t be making light of it. Laurie’s serious. I reach across the table and take her hand. ‘I’m sorry, I’m just finding it hard to imagine.’

She forces a terse smile and signals the waiter for another martini.

Now I get why she sounded so tearful when she called and begged me to meet her. I was meant to be having dinner with Robert. He’d arranged a special date night for our anniversary completely out of the blue (admitting to me that Hannah had reminded him). But given the last time he asked me out was about three hundred years ago, I had been looking forward to it. He wasn’t at all happy when I postponed. But Laurie has been there for me through so

many ups and downs; I couldn't not be there for her in her hour of need.

'Do you have any proof?' I ask Laurie, still incredulous.

'What? Lipstick on his collar? Credit card receipts for a Motel 8?' She shakes her head. 'No. I just know there's something going on.'

I take a big gulp of my wine and try to process what Laurie is telling me, but I just can't. Dave's Dave. If the *Jeopardy* answer was 'Dependable', the question would be 'What is Dave?' He and Laurie have been together for fifteen years. I was maid of honor at their wedding and I'm godmother to their son, Cory, who has just started college.

There are lots of our friends' husbands who I'd lay money on playing away from home – in a small town like ours rumors fly like the winged monkeys in Oz – but not Dave. No way. It took him two years to pluck up the courage to ask Laurie out, and even then he made it a double date with Robert and me because he was worried he'd be too nervous to talk to her if he was on his own.

'Are you sure you're not just jumping to conclusions?' I ask Laurie. 'It doesn't sound like the Dave I know.'

She snorts. 'How well do we ever really know anyone?' she asks, arching an eyebrow.

I ponder that.

'He's acting different,' Laurie goes on. 'He's started taking care of himself. He gets up every morning at the crack of dawn and does this seven-minute workout thing.'

I stare at her blankly.

'Siri barks orders at you as you do jumping jacks,' she explains. 'It's some mid-life crisis app that someone out there is getting extremely rich off of.' She glances my way for a beat, almost apologetic, before shrugging it off and moving

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swiftly on. ‘And the other day I found all these bottles in the bathroom cabinet – pills and oils and ointments.’

‘Pills?’ I ask.

She taps her head and automatically I think she’s talking about anti-depressants. I know Dave was on them before, but these days who isn’t? Doctors are handing them out like candy.

‘For his hair,’ Laurie clarifies. ‘To make it grow back. We’re broke and he’s pouring money away on snake oil to make his hair grow back. He’s been bald, Ava, for half his life. There are billiard balls more hirsute than him.’

I stifle a smile as the waiter lays a fresh martini in front of Laurie.

‘What did you think when I said pills?’ Laurie asks, glancing at me over the rim of her glass. ‘That he was taking Viagra?’

I give a tiny, non-committal shrug.

‘I wish!’ Laurie spits. ‘I can’t even remember the last time we had sex. I think it was my birthday. So when was that? Six months ago? And believe me, I think I exerted more effort blowing out the candles on my cake. And the cake was way more satisfying. And it was a *vegan* cake. Take a minute to think about that.’

I take a sip of wine and try not to think about that. Instead I think about Robert. When was the last time we had sex? Last week? No, last month. That’s right. It was after June’s school play. And it was good, definitely better than cake, vegan or otherwise. It’s always been good, if a little sporadic recently. We’ve been together for twenty-two years though, since I was a young and naive nineteen-year-old, so I suppose it’s no surprise that our sex life is in decline. The fact we’re still together and still having sex (albeit occasionally) and don’t hate each other’s guts feels like success to me, given

how many of our friends' marriages are hitting the dust and then the divorce courts. Besides, everyone's sex life takes a nosedive after forty, doesn't it?

I switch my attention back to Laurie. 'So, Dave's getting in shape, how does that equate to him having an affair? Maybe he just wants to be on a par with you.'

Laurie is forty-one, like me, with jet-black hair and an angular face that most people would call striking, if not outright beautiful. She's tall and slender and has never had to work out in her life to stay that way. Unlike me. I have to work harder than Beyoncé at the Super Bowl to keep the weight off, which could be why I'm never going to get back to the size I was before I had kids. I've had to let that ambition go, along with a million others.

Laurie swallows half her martini in one go and then sets it down. 'I overheard him the other night in the bathroom. He thought I was asleep. I get up to pee and I hear him in there, whispering, on the phone to someone, telling them he'll be there, promising them, he just has to make sure I don't find out.'

'Maybe he was arranging something for your anniversary.'

Laurie scowls. 'At three in the morning?'

OK. She has a point . . . but still. 'Why didn't you just ask him what he was doing?'

'I did.'

'And?'

'And he told me it was a missed call. At three in the morning. What? I'm some kind of idiot now? I checked his phone the next day.'

'And?'

'He'd cleared his call log. Who does that? A guilty man! That's who.'



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Laurie huddles closer and casts a furtive glance around the bar. We live in a small town and everyone knows everyone, but The Oak mid-week is half-empty so we're safe. 'I think it's someone from work,' she tells me. 'He keeps coming home smelling of perfume. Something cheap and nasty too, like a Vegas stripper might wear.'

I pull back to study her. Is she serious? Dave's the manager of a local wine-tasting room. I know there are a couple of girls in their late twenties who work there; LA hipster types who've migrated north to our idyllic little valley and who all dress like they're extras in *Little House on the Prairie*, but I can't imagine for a moment that Dave has seduced any of them. Not that Dave doesn't have a certain appeal – he's got a brilliantly droll sense of humor – but he's not exactly Brad Pitt. More William H. Macy.

Laurie digs in her glass for the stray olive and starts stabbing it violently with the toothpick. 'I thought about hiring a private investigator.'

I almost choke on my drink. 'Are you serious?' I ask, assuming she can't possibly be, because it sounds far too Hollywood noir to be something people actually do in real life.

Laurie doesn't smile back. 'Absolutely.' She stabs the olive again, this time so viciously its pimiento guts spill out. 'But I can't afford it,' she sighs.

My face warms, and I take another sip of my drink. Money has always been a contentious issue and I try not to bring it up when I'm around Laurie. I know she and Dave have been struggling financially but I've learned my lesson about offering to help. Not that I would ever offer to pay for a private investigator, because I can't for the life of me believe Dave is doing the dirty. The evidence Laurie has laid out isn't exactly a slam-dunk for the prosecution.

Laurie slips off her stool and heads to the bathroom, swaying a little as she goes. I ask the waiter to bring two glasses of water, and while I wait for Laurie to come back I think about what she said about never really knowing anyone completely. Is it true? No. I would know without a shadow of a doubt if Robert were having an affair, though I also know I'm probably echoing the words of every woman who's ever been cheated on in the history of the world.

But there's barely room in Robert's life for the kids and me. When would he have time for an affair? He shuts himself in his study every day, emerging like a vampire when it's dark to eat dinner with us, before returning to his study to work late into the night. So, unless Robert's locked in there all day every day watching porn . . . I laugh to myself, but then I abruptly stop, recalling an article I read a while back about a man who was addicted to porn. He re-financed his house, basically bankrupted himself paying for cam girls – not even in-the-flesh girls, but girls performing on a camera, which seems like a monumental waste of money to me – and then the wife found out when she used his computer to check her email one day and got an eyeful of waxed vagina. But you couldn't help reading the article and rolling your eyes at the wife's stupidity for not knowing what was going on right under her nose. I'm not that wife. I'm not that stupid. I feel confident that I would know if Robert was having an affair.

I doubt he could say the same about me, however. Ever since June was first diagnosed with cancer six years ago, Robert's become increasingly insular and uninterested in what's going on around him. It's as if he can't trust the real world anymore, so he's withdrawn into a realm of binary numbers instead; a virtual reality where no surprises exist,

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where there's no uncertainty, and where there are no rugs that can be yanked from beneath his feet.

He spends his time working on his world-building app for kids; a world, I like to joke, in which he gets to play both architect and God. He's so involved in it that I could have swinging-from-the-chandelier sex with Javier the gardener right outside his study door and he wouldn't notice. Not that I would. Javier is about sixty and has hands like antique shovels.

My phone buzzes in my bag. I pull it out. It's June. I answer it, feeling the usual gnawing anxiety I always feel whenever I think of her. 'Hey sweetie,' I say.

'Mom,' June blurts. 'I'm sick.'

'Oh no, what's up?' I ask, immediately looking around and signaling the waiter for the check.

'I feel like I'm coming down with something. I've got a headache and I think a fever.'

Laurie reappears, weaving her way through the tables towards me. She waves at the waiter, holding up an index finger. One more martini. Damn.

'Did you try your dad?' I ask.

'He's not answering,' June says, and I can hear the sigh in her voice.

Anger flares inside me. I bet he's at home with his phone switched off, sitting in front of his computer. It's always the same with him. Laurie's had to drive me to the hospital both times I've gone into labor.

'OK, I'm on my way,' I tell June, just as Laurie sits down opposite me. She frowns at me questioningly. *June*, I mouth, pointing at the phone.

'Thanks, Mom,' June says, hanging up.

'She's not feeling well,' I tell Laurie. 'I said I'd pick her up from her sleepover.'

Laurie gives me a smile that fails to hide her disappointment. I slip my credit card to the waiter, hoping that Laurie's too drunk to notice.

'I'm sorry,' I tell Laurie as I slide off my stool. 'It's really bad timing. How about we pick this up tomorrow? Brunch?'

'I've got to prep for work tomorrow,' Laurie slurs. I forgot. She's a teacher and spends most Sundays preparing for the week ahead. 'Work,' she adds, grabbing her bag off the back of her chair, 'that thing some of us don't have the luxury of avoiding.'

I sign the credit card slip and take the receipt, glancing at Laurie as I do and trying to shake off the jibe, which I put down to her being drunk. I link my arm through hers and lead her out the back to the parking lot.

'I think I need to eat something,' she announces, resting a hand on her stomach and swallowing queasily. 'Do you have to pick up June right now? Can we get a bite to eat first?'

I shake my head. 'I can't, I'm sorry.'

Laurie's lips purse as if someone is pulling a drawstring bag shut. I know she thinks that all I do is go running whenever the kids call, but I can't help it, especially not where June's concerned. It irks me that she's even making a point about it. I fish out my car key. 'Come on, I'll drop you home.'

Reluctantly, Laurie gets in the passenger side, and I spy her surreptitiously eyeing up the interior. The car's brand new and still has that chemical smell to it – a smell that Robert joked made his eyes water even more than the price of the car. When I press the button to turn on the engine and the dash lights up like a space ship, I notice Laurie's raised eyebrows. I cringe, waiting for a comment. She doesn't say anything though, so I put the car in drive and pull quickly onto the street.

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Laurie flips the visor down and looks at herself in the mirror, grumbling under her breath at her reflection and swiping at her smudged lipstick.

‘Thanks for telling me I look like a two-bit hooker,’ she jokes. She flips the visor back up. ‘What time is it?’

‘Ten thirty.’

‘Why don’t you come back to mine?’ she says. ‘Bring June too. We can order pizza and watch a movie. There’s that new Jennifer Aniston one on Netflix.’

I shake my head. ‘I think it’s best I get her home to bed. She sounded really sick on the phone.’ As I say it, though, I catch myself questioning it. Did she sound sick? She may have just got into a fight with Abby and wanted an excuse to leave. She knows she can pull the sick card any time with me and I’ll drop everything. Maybe Laurie was right to give me that tight-mouthed look a moment ago.

We drive for a few minutes in silence until I pull up outside Laurie’s house, a small craftsman bungalow in the east end of town. The lights aren’t on and Dave’s car isn’t in the drive. Laurie frowns. ‘Where is he? He said he’d be home.’

‘Maybe he’s working late.’

Laurie doesn’t answer me. She just gets out the car, pulling her phone from her bag.

‘Call me tomorrow,’ I shout after her. ‘Let’s go for a hike or something. If you’re not too busy,’ I add, remembering she has to work.

Laurie’s not listening. She’s dialing a number – probably Dave’s. ‘Good night,’ she says to me, slamming the car door and hurrying up the path.

On a whim I pull a U-turn and decide to drive by the tasting room on my way to pick up June. I’m hoping I’ll spot Dave through the window sitting at the till, tallying receipts.

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But the lights are off, the closed sign hanging crooked on the back of the door. It doesn't mean anything, I tell myself firmly. There's no point in jumping to conclusions – that's what the doctors used to tell us after June's diagnosis. We need all the facts before we can determine the correct path of action.

### 3

June must have been waiting for me, looking out the window, because I haven't even put the car in park before the front door flies open and out she runs, head down, bag flung over her shoulder. She's wearing a pair of gym shorts with Hannah's NYU hoodie over the top. Abby – a friend of June's since pre-school days – is leaning, scowling, against the doorpost. I wave at her and smile. She gives me a perfunctory wave back before slamming the door shut. Charming.

June gets into the passenger seat, slumping low, and grunts hello at me. At least I think it's *Hello*. It could also be *Drive*. I step on the gas. Sometimes I feel like all I am is a glorified chauffeur, but I don't say anything. She's twelve, I remind myself. I need to make the most of it. She'll be gone before we know it, flying the nest just like Hannah did before her. And then what?

Her hood is pulled up and she turns away from me to stare out the window. I know that I have to let her come to me, not try to push, but the silence eventually gets to me and I cave. 'How are you feeling?' I ask.

'I'm fine,' she mutters. I catch a glimpse of her face as she says it – that beautiful, heart-shaped face that I used to spend hours staring at as she slept on, oblivious, webbed by tubes and wires. She looks pale, her eyes red-rimmed. *Is she sick?* That familiar sense of dread creeps through me and I struggle to shake it off. *Don't go there, Ava.*

‘You have an OK time with Abby?’ I ask.

She grunts again and I sigh. She used to be so eloquent that adults would often mistake her for being older than she was. It was all that time around doctors and hospitals. I’m not sure switching her to a private school was worthwhile; her linguistic skills seem to have regressed to pre-verbal days.

We could have bought a Caribbean island with the money we’ve spent on June’s education, not to mention the cash we’ve bled to pay for Hannah’s college tuition. But how can I resent it? They’re both happy, healthy, bright, going places. I want their lives to be glorious. I want them to achieve more than I ever did, to be successful and fulfilled and to reach their potential in ways that I was never able to.

As we head up the winding road to our house, I glance surreptitiously across at June, trying to resist reaching over and laying my hand on her forehead to check her temperature.

She’s frowning, her hands working at the cuffs of her hoodie, fraying holes in them. What’s going on in that head of hers? I suppose she’s just entering that awful early teen phase, and I steel myself, knowing what’s coming. Hannah was just the same, though I think I’ll take it worse with June because we have a much closer bond than I ever had with Hannah, who was always so aloof as a child, so self-contained and independent, that at times I felt redundant. I used to long for her to be like the other kids at kindergarten refusing to let go of their mothers. She’d push me out the door and march off to her desk without so much as a bye or a backwards glance.

I’ve often thought that if our family was a circus, I’d be the plate spinner, Hannah would be the ringmaster, Robert would be an illusionist (for his skill at creating invisible worlds that people spend millions of dollars buying unreal real estate in) and June would be the clown. Gene would be the



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hanger-on who doesn't earn his keep and who has to sleep under the big top at night.

June always made others laugh. Even when she was throwing up what looked like all her internal organs, the ulcers carving craters into her mouth, she could still somehow find a way to crack a joke. She had a book of them, *10,001 Jokes for Kids*, and she'd memorize as many as she could. Every time she saw us looking sad she'd pull one out, and she'd keep pulling them out until we smiled again.

So now, when I see clouds scudding across her face, gathering like an ominous storm front, I worry. I can't help it. Fear entered my life when the children were born but it fused with my DNA when June got sick. Now I live with it constantly. It whispers into my ear most nights, keeping me awake, seeding nightmares that the cancer will come back and this time we won't be so lucky.

'What's black and white and red all over?' I ask.

June rolls her eyes and keeps glaring out the window. 'A newspaper,' she grunts.

O-kay, that didn't work.

Normally June talks ten to the dozen, bombarding me with so much information about her teachers and school and who said what and who did what and who has a crush on who that I often have to get her to slow down. The silence now is disconcerting.

She's had an argument with Abby, I'm guessing, most likely about the choice of movie to watch. Abby's parents – buttoned-up evangelical Christians who preach God's love and forgiveness while campaigning vigorously against transgender bathrooms at the school and regularly posting pro-life propaganda on Facebook – don't allow Abby to watch anything rated over a U. They even pulled the poor girl out of sex-ed class last semester. Later Sam, Abby's mother,

called me up in a rage to complain that June had taken it on herself to explain to Abby the ins and outs of how babies are made. You would have thought from her reaction that June had forced Abby to build an altar and worship the devil.

I apologized, of course, and then took June out for ice cream and talked to her about consent, choice and Planned Parenthood, hoping she'd find a way to leak the information to Abby. Because otherwise that girl is very likely going to go the way of Bristol Palin – abstinence spokeswoman and teenage mom.

I glance across at June again. She's pulled back her hood and is still staring out the window, lost in thought, and I realize she's no longer an open book. She's keeping secrets from me. Laurie's words echo loud in my head. *You can never really know anyone completely.*

She's right, isn't she? I reach forwards and turn the heat up in the car. I know that better than anyone.

## 4

Even after five years of living here I still get a thrill as I pull in through the gates. I used to look up at these houses on the hill when I was a kid and wonder about who lived there and how they could possibly afford it.

Sometimes, when I walk through the rooms at night, I find myself tiptoeing and looking over my shoulder like a burglar. You're supposed to put a stamp on a home but I feel like other than my paintings, which are dotted around the place – more at Robert's insistence than mine – we've failed to do so. It feels too big, too vault-like, too grand. I wanted something more modest but Robert insisted nothing but a big house in the hills would do. So I went along with it, even though it meant having to drive into town rather than walking and having to hire a gardener and housekeeper as the grounds were too expansive and the house too big to take care of on my own.

After all those years of living hand to mouth, relying on my parents a lot of the time to bail us out, when Robert's business finally hit the big time he wanted to make a statement, show the world he'd made a success of himself at last. And I get that, I do, and it's hard not to fall in love with the place. It's a beautiful old ranch house on one hundred acres, with the Topa Topa mountains rising up majestically behind us and the valley tumbling away below.

As soon as I pull into the garage, June jumps out of the car and runs through the side door into the house. I follow her,

frowning at the thumping music coming from overhead. Gene's home. Of course he's home. He's always home. He's like an obnoxious foot wart that we've tried treating but which refuses to go away, so now, utterly defeated, we just hope it will one day vanish of its own accord. Though there are times I wish we could squirt liquid nitrogen on him and watch him fizz.

I know plenty of twenty-six-year-olds live with their parents these days, given the state of the economy and the outrageous size of college debt, but Gene has no college debt (he also has no college degree either, having dropped out in his sophomore year) and the state of the economy doesn't really affect him, since Robert and I provide him with free bed and board.

If Gene were my son he would not be living over the garage. He would be a successful graduate, in his first, maybe second job by now, living in his own house and dating someone normal, not one of the many dubious-looking, sleeve-tattooed females who shuttle through his apartment on a high-speed conveyor belt.

Gene isn't my son though. He's Robert's son from his first marriage. He was eighteen months old when I first met him and lived with his mother on the other side of the country. He only moved in with us when he was twelve, after his mom married some guy she met at the bar where she worked and who, it turned out, hated children. She drove across the country and dumped him on our doorstep unannounced. She said she'd be back for him but never returned.

Gene barely scraped through high school, not because he isn't bright, because he is – he takes after his father in both brains and looks – but because he kept skipping class to hang out at the skateboard park or to go surfing. I think his mother abandoning him was a major factor in his teenage rebellion.

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But that was also around the time that June got sick, so we weren't paying that much attention to his attendance, or to anything to be honest, except for cancer treatments and prognoses. I think the guilt about that and about leaving Gene with his mother for the best part of his childhood is why Robert's so soft on him now.

Gene moved back in with us after he flunked out of college. When we argued with him he told us college educations were worthless. *Hell, look at Ava* were his exact words – something to which I frustratingly had no comeback. He moved into the apartment we had converted over the garage and for a time he just stayed in all day watching TV, apparently on a mission to win the world record for most amount of weed to ever be consumed by a human being in one sitting.

Given how much he smoked – the garage resembled a giant hot box most days – it was amazing he was even sentient. When Robert and I sat him down to talk about his habit and how it might be contributing to his lack of ambition, he pulled out his medical marijuana certificate, signed by a real MD, and told us he needed it to deal with stress, which, I told them both, was like the Pope claiming he needed a prescription for Viagra. Gene's comeback to that was that the Pope, like most Catholic priests, probably did need a prescription for Viagra. Maybe he should look into a career in improv.

Robert finally gave him an ultimatum. Either he quit smoking and got a job, or moved out, as we were no longer going to fund his drug habit and didn't want June exposed to it. Gene took the ultimatum to heart, or maybe he was just scared he'd end up homeless, because the very next day he got a job working behind the bar at the Bison Lodge in town, and we never again smelled the heady aroma of weed wafting from the apartment.

Maybe he goes somewhere else to smoke, I'm not sure, but he doesn't seem like quite so much of a space cadet as he used to; he's up before ten most mornings, he puts out the trash, cleans the leaves from the pool, takes June to soccer and basketball at the weekends and occasionally wanders into the house with a cake he's baked and flops on the sofa to watch *American Crime* with me.

When he lost his job two weeks ago (he said they were laying people off but I suspect he was fired for being unreliable) I started talking to him about turning his talent for baking into a career as a chef. I thought he'd laugh at me like he usually does when I offer him ideas for a career path that requires getting out of bed before seven each morning, but he actually took the idea seriously. Yesterday he showed me some culinary courses he'd bookmarked on his iPad, so maybe there's light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe he won't still be living with us when he's sixty, although perhaps by then we won't mind so much as we'll likely be senile and grateful for having someone to lift us out of bed, change our diapers and spoon-feed us baby rice.

'Always look for the silver lining,' my dad used to say, and that's what I'm trying to do.

As I head inside the house behind June I think I hear a raised voice over the top of Gene's music. I stop. Nothing. Maybe the TV is on. It better not be *American Crime* – he promised we'd watch the last episode together.

In the kitchen, June's left the milk on the side and the refrigerator door ajar. I put the milk away and wipe up a spill, set the alarm by the back door, and then wander over to the other side of the house to Robert's study. The door is shut. I press my ear to it. Not a peep. Silently, I try the handle. It's locked. That's unusual. I try to ignore the first thought that

flashes into my mind, which is that he's in there watching porn. I knock and call his name. There's the sound of a filing cabinet slamming shut with the force of a guillotine, and then I hear Robert clearing his throat before the door jerks open.

'You're back,' he says, surprised.

He seems flustered and his shirt is half hanging out of his pants. I frown at him and try glancing over his shoulder to see if I can see his computer, but he's angled the screen away from the door. 'I had to pick up June, she wasn't feeling well,' I say, eyeing him with suspicion.

'June's home?' Robert asks, looking mildly alarmed.

'Yes, she's gone up to bed. She's fine, I think, don't worry.'

Robert rubs the bridge of his nose and glances at his watch. He hasn't shaved and I notice the flecks of white in his beard now far outnumber the black, but it only makes him look more handsome. Men have it so much easier than women, I think, making a mental note to make an appointment with my hairdresser.

'Did you eat already?' I ask, hoping to salvage something of this evening.

He nods.

'Do you want to come to bed?'

Robert shakes his head. 'No, no,' he says, distracted. 'I have some things to finish off.'

I really hope he's not being literal, but he doesn't look like a man caught with his pants down. He looks more like a man in the final moves of a challenging chess match.

'Oh,' I say, trying not to sound disappointed, 'OK.' I kiss him on the cheek. 'Well, goodnight then. I'm sorry again about our plans. Maybe we can do it tomorrow night?'

'Maybe,' Robert says, hurriedly closing the door. A hissing voice in my head tells me he's just not that into me anymore, but I try to ignore it.

I cross the living room and draw the blinds. As I'm doing that I see someone rushing down the stairs from Gene's apartment. Whoever it is is dressed all in black and is wearing a dark sweater with a hood covering their face. Adrenaline shoots through me before I realize that it's not a burglar at all. It's Gene. I'm just not used to seeing him move that fast. And I'm not used to seeing him wearing actual clothes. He usually lounges around the house in his ratty old college athletic shorts and a pair of Adidas sandals with tube socks – a fashion look that doesn't seem to deter the girls.

I watch him jog right past the carport where his Highlander is parked and take off down the drive, sticking to the gloomy shadows cast by the trees. He glances over his shoulder up at the house and I instinctively edge behind the blinds. Where is he going at this time of night and why isn't he taking his car? We're three miles out of town so it's a little odd to go anywhere on foot.

Halfway down the drive, just where the road curves and disappears into the orange grove, a set of headlights flash on, giving me a start. They briefly douse Gene in a halo of light and I watch him dart to the passenger side and jump in. The car – a dark SUV – takes off down the drive and I lose sight of it. Who was that? And what's with all the cloak and dagger?

I go and pour a large glass of Pinot, a gift from our neighbor's private vineyard, and carry it with me upstairs, pausing to straighten a painting in the hallway (my wedding present to Robert – a sketch I'd drawn from memory of him on our first fateful meeting). I stop again on the landing outside June's room. The wall here is covered in photographs that I've taken over the years. There's a black and white one of Robert and me on our wedding day. I look like a child bride, albeit one glowing with happiness, and Robert looks as dashing as a movie star. There's another of me – taken a few months later, visibly



## *In Her Eyes*

pregnant with Hannah – with my arm around a smiling, chubby-faced Gene. I was younger than Hannah is now, just nineteen, and every time I pass that photo I feel a pang of something – an ache – for the girl I was. I was so stupidly young. If Hannah got pregnant now, I'd strangle her.

I knock on June's door and turn the handle but I'm stopped by her shouting from the other side for me to hold on. I hear her scrambling around, opening and slamming a drawer, and a few seconds pass before she finally wrenches the door open. She's pulling her robe on and she's a little out of breath. 'Yeah?' she asks, using her body to try and block my view of her room.

What is with my family tonight? Everyone has secrets all of a sudden.

'I just wanted to see how you were feeling,' I say. Her room is a mess – clothes strewn all about, her desk overflowing with books and drawings, the hamster cage looking like it hasn't been cleaned in weeks. I think about speaking out, at least about animal welfare, but as usual I bite my tongue.

'I'm fine. Better,' she adds quickly.

I give her a long, hard stare and place my hand on her forehead. She jerks out of my way. 'Mom,' she moans. 'I'm fine, honestly. It's just a headache. I took an Advil. You don't have to worry about me all the time.'

'It's my job to worry about you,' I say, kissing her on the top of her head.

She doesn't pull away this time, but lets me hug her. 'I love you,' I tell her.

'I know,' she sighs, 'I love you too.' There's a pause and I smile to myself. Here it comes.

'Mom?'

'Mmmm?'

'Should you always tell the truth?'

‘Of course,’ I say.

‘Well, what about that time you told Dad you loved the earrings he bought you for Christmas?’

‘I do love them.’

‘Then why do you never wear them?’

I hesitate.

‘See!’ June pounces. ‘You just lied. You said you liked them and you don’t.’

Hmmm. She’s got me there. They’re great big diamond drop earrings and when I wear them they make me feel like a chandelier.

‘And remember when you told me that I was only a little bit sick and there was nothing to worry about?’

I make a sound in the back of my throat, knowing where this is going.

‘And it turned out I had cancer and was probably going to die?’

‘You didn’t, though, did you?’

‘But you and Dad didn’t tell me the truth.’

‘No, we wanted to protect you. And how would it have helped you knowing?’ I kiss her forehead. ‘There are times when telling the truth isn’t always the right thing to do.’

She’s silent for a bit. ‘But how do you know when it’s right and when it’s wrong?’

‘Do you want to tell me what it is? Did Abby do something?’ I know last semester June caught her going through another girl’s bag in the locker room at school, something Abby denied when confronted – probably because if she’d admitted it, her parents would have sent her off to the Christian reform school they often threaten her with.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ June mumbles.

‘OK,’ I say, trying not to pry further. If she wants to tell me she will. ‘If you need anything let me know.’

## *In Her Eyes*

She gives me a smile and I feel a sharp tug on my heart-strings. She's in that beautifully awkward in-between space – half girl, half young woman; long limbed and gangly, with pink-colored braces on her teeth, but her face is losing the softness of childhood and she's starting to fill out her training bra. Maybe that's why she didn't want me to come in while she was getting undressed.

I think about how I used to fear never seeing her grow up and before I can stop them, tears start to well up.

June rolls her eyes at me. 'Mom,' she says, laughing, 'I'm not dying, OK? Good night.' She pushes me out of her room and I go, laughing too.

I didn't want June. When I found out I was pregnant I seriously considered an abortion. Hannah was ten and I'd just got my life back, had finally graduated from college – the oldest in my class at twenty-nine – and had scored my first job working in a museum, helping to run the arts program for school kids. Those two blue lines showed up like little daggers and slashed my dreams to pieces. I didn't tell Robert at first. I wrestled with it on my own, and then with Laurie, even booking an appointment at Planned Parenthood, before I finally told him and he convinced me that we could do it, that we could find a way to manage. But, of course, when it came to it we didn't have the money for childcare and I couldn't go back to work.

I waited five years, until June started kindergarten, and after applying for a dozen jobs I managed to find one working part-time on a terrible salary as an assistant arts educator for the Board of Education. I saw it as an entry position, worked my butt off and within six months was put forward for a promotion. On the day of my interview we found out June had cancer. Clear cell sarcoma of the kidney, to be precise. So that nixed that plan. The only thing I was

promoted to was full-time nurse, mother and carer for the next four years – becoming an unpaid expert in the right angle to hold a cardboard bowl when your child is projectile vomiting and what to say to someone who is bald as an egg and asking you how they look.

Not that any of it matters now. I'd give up everything, even my own life, for June – for any of the kids. In a heartbeat.

I wander into our en-suite and turn the shower on, stripping out of my clothes and dumping them in the laundry bin. Once June was in the clear a career didn't seem so important. We didn't need the money by then and it felt like it was far too late, despite what all those articles in women's magazines like to preach. But recently I have to admit I've been feeling the itch, the need for something more than bi-weekly yoga, managing the gardener, mind-numbingly dull PTA meetings, and watching back-to-back episodes of *American Crime*.

I step into the shower and let the hot water sluice over me. Maybe tomorrow I'll take that walk down to the gallery in town with my portfolio. But even thinking about it makes me squirm. Just uttering the word *portfolio*, even in my head, makes me feel like a fraud. No one wants to look at my paintings.

I reach for the shampoo and start washing my hair, and I'm just rinsing out the suds when I hear a scream.

## 5

My heart slams into my chest like an axe into a block of wood. I turn the shower off and stand there, dripping. Did I imagine it? I strain to hear but there's only a buzzing silence and I'm about to turn the water back on, putting it down to faulty pipes, when another scream tears through the house.

*June.*

I wrench back the shower door, skidding in my haste. I grab my robe, pulling it on as I race out into the hallway. The door to June's room is wide open, the bedside light on, but she's not there. I'm about to call her name – shout it loud – when I hear another scream from downstairs; a sound so gut-piercing that for a moment I can't reconcile that it's June, that it's even coming from a human, because it sounds like an animal caught in a trap. I follow it, my legs elastic, my heart constricting tighter with every beat.

Adrenaline flooding my body, I'm about to leap down the stairs three at a time when I hear Robert yelling, the words slurred and twisted: 'Leave her alone!'

I freeze instantly, gripping hold of the bannister. From this angle I have a partial view of the kitchen. A man in black is standing in the doorway with his back to me, holding June by the arm. She's sobbing, trying to pull away from him. At first I think it's Robert and wonder what on earth he's doing but then the cogs turn and I realize it's not Robert. It's a stranger. In our house.