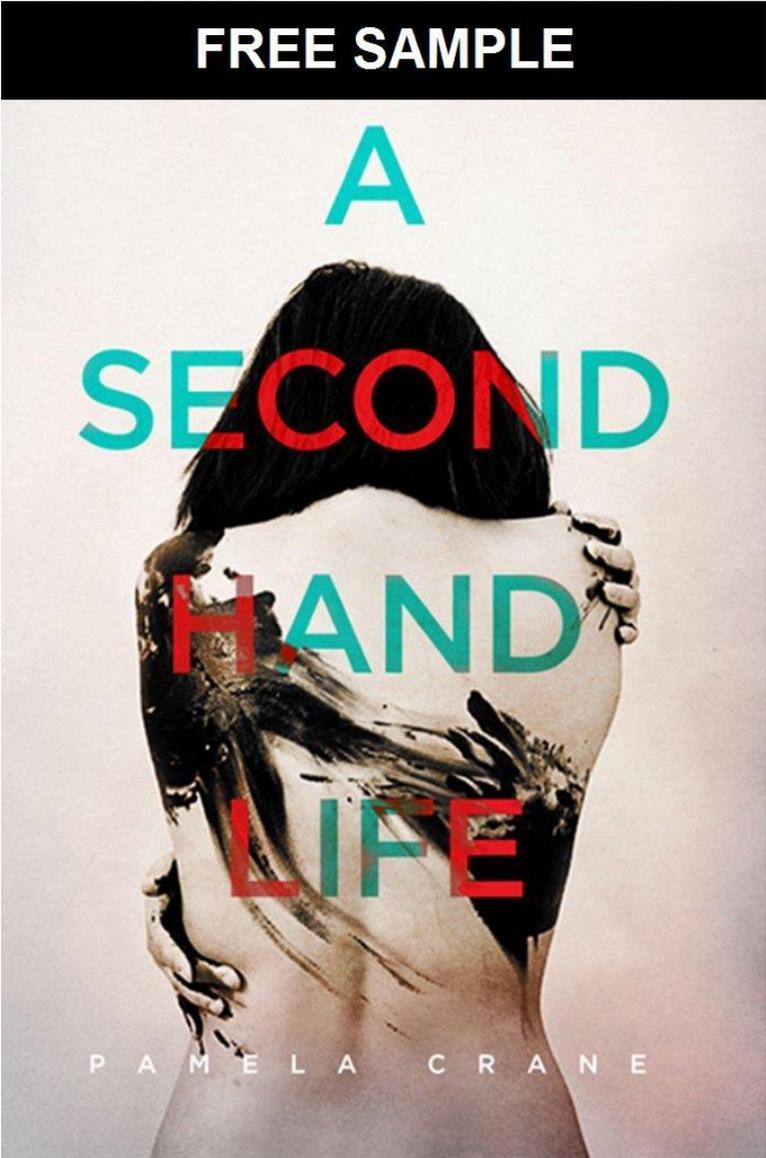


FREE SAMPLE



A  
SECOND  
HAND  
LIFE

P A M E L A C R A N E

**A  
SECOND  
HAND  
LIFE**



**A  
SECOND  
HAND  
LIFE**

PAMELA CRANE



Tabella House  
Hillsborough, North Carolina

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Other books by Pamela Crane:

*The Admirer's Secret*

*A Fatal Affair*



*Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye.*

– H. Jackson Brown, Jr.





# Prologue

*721 Willoughby Way  
Durham, North Carolina  
Wednesday, March 4, 1992  
8:13 p.m.*

I didn't wake up one morning and randomly decide to be a killer; rather, somewhere in the recesses of my soulless being, there it was—a primal urge for blood, for manipulating life and death. Yet all the while I was unable to control my own mind. I had become an animal.

I wasn't always a murderer, as far as I know. Born with it, or raised into it? Nature versus nurture. The question of the day. One that has baffled therapists for decades. As one of the monsters they studied, even I had no answers. Picking apart my gray matter proved fruitless.

I never tortured cats, pulled the wings off of butterflies, or watched too much graphic news. In fact, I hated what television represented, what it took from us. It stole our youth, our time, our minds. Yet our lives revolved around it. So much power granted to one inanimate object. Perhaps I was jealous.

But jealousy didn't mutilate my soul. Something else awakened within me over time, eroding my humanity to the point where I despised what society had become. Perverted. Impure. Corrupt. It was a shame what people had turned into.

And I thought *I* was evil.

Look around you. Look at what people do behind

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closed doors. They're the ugly ones, not me.

I was their savior.

So what exactly turned me into ... this? I will probably never know.

But today I challenged all theories of humanity's innate goodness as the girl's limp neck hung in my hands, my dirt-stained fingers wrapped around her flawless pink flesh like a snake coiled around its prey. I hadn't planned on squeezing until she vented a terror-stricken scream, potentially spooking the neighbors and sealing my red and blue-flashing fate. Reflexively my hands tightened their grip, summoning Death to take its victim.

If my chokehold didn't kill her, certainly the stab wound would. She had made it easy enough for me. Sitting in the recliner watching *Beverly Hills, 90210*—a filthy show no twelve-year-old should be watching—snacking on Doritos, unaware of the threatening shadow lurking behind her. Without hesitation I had placed my hand over her mouth, letting her struggle a bit as she kicked over several empty beer bottles from the coffee table in her frantic state, then I plunged the kitchen knife into her side, feeling the squishy flesh part beneath the blade. I had been pleased with how smoothly the metal edge entered her. A moment later, a pool of red drizzled down, soaking the chair in blood.

“Shhh...” I had soothed. “You must remain quiet, Alexis. If you don't stay quiet, I'm going to have to hurt you more.”

When I had sensed her terror prompting her to scream louder, I had shifted my hands to her neck to snuff out the noise and set her at ease.

First, a gentle rub. Under my kneading palm her shoulders tensed.

“It's okay,” I had lied, blowing my hot breath against her cool ear. Pierced, of course, with a garish bauble

## A SECONDHAND LIFE

dangling from the tender lobe.

That's when my grip tightened, and her fight-or-flight instincts kicked in.

She had chosen fight, and let out a scream meant to alert anyone within a quarter mile.

Silly girl.

In her last battle against surrender, I felt the girl squirm and reach up behind her—for I could not bear to stand before her and meet her eyes, a numbness that would take time to mature, I assumed—to claw at my wrists. Her hot-pink painted nails scraped against my skin, leaving trails of blood in their wake. I'd need to make sure I cleared that evidence before I left. Her hands gripped mine, pulling, tugging. Of course, her meager efforts were futile against my 100-pound advantage.

Beneath my fingers her surging lifeblood slowed and weakened. I wrung harder, feeling the neck muscles relax. I choked out any last remnants of a scream, then the sweet release of the end arrived as I felt her pulse wane. A mixture of delight and fear overwhelmed me at that moment—a desire to watch the light of her youth fade from her green eyes, yet a debilitating dread held me back from looking ... from seeing my masterpiece as I purged the sin from her. I feared regret for something I couldn't change. I couldn't bring back the dead.

Tomorrow I would wake up different. Life would never be the same after my first victim. So young, she was. Only twelve. And prematurely snuffed out. Because of me.

*Me.* Once a nobody, now a somebody. The author of death.

I released my hold and looked down at her once-pure face tainted with whorish makeup. I pulled a bagged cloth saturated in hydrogen peroxide from my pocket, tore it open, and dabbed gently at her skin. Each wipe restored more of her purity as the lipstick, the blush, and the eye

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shadow disappeared. Sure enough, she became a young girl again—who she truly was beneath the makeup mask. When I finished, I swiped the fabric under her fingernails to erase any of my skin remnants, then headed for the phone hanging on the kitchen wall. I punched in 9-1-1.

“9-1-1. Please state your emergency,” the operator said.

In my softest whisper, hoping it was sufficient to mask my voice, I said, “Please help.”

Then I dropped the receiver. By the time they traced the call and paramedics arrived, I would have sufficient time to finish my staging.

I turned back to my victim, stumbled toward her, and stopped cold. I simply stared. Her black hair, braided in two pigtails, framed a sweet, cherubic face—eyelids closed like she was slumbering, an eternal sleep. Red handprints circled her pale neck, below which her Bart Simpson “Don’t have a cow, man!” T-shirt hung loosely on her lithe frame. I hadn’t noticed how tiny she was before now—seventy pounds soaking wet. Shame burrowed its way into me. I reminded myself why I had done it: so she might never lose that purity. She would become incorruptible in death.

What happened next, however, surprised me ... and little surprised me. In sympathy with her discovery of the afterlife, I felt my own life waver. Blood rushed to my head and a blackness crept to the corners of my vision, closing in on me. I was going to pass out.

The taste of bile lurched from my stomach into my mouth, its grassy tang lingering foully on my tongue for a split second. The floodgates opened. I spewed epically on the floor, deluging the rivulets of blood. The acrid scent of vomit wafted upward, prodding more. Hunched over, my gut pumped its contents out—a mixture of undigested lunch and afternoon snack.

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It was at this point I knew my weakness would be my demise. I couldn't stomach the job.

And I left evidence everywhere.

Frenziedly, I grabbed a roll of paper towels and started slopping up my vomit, slipping on a bloody trail as I fell to my knees. A stinging pain coursed through my right kneecap. I paused to examine it and found a sliver of colored glass jutting out from one of the broken beer bottles. I pulled the shard out, but I'd have to nurse it later. Time was running out, and my hands were covered in blood. My jeans and gray T-shirt were stained.

I heard sirens in the distance and worked at a fevered pitch. When I figured I had gotten most of the evidence cleared, I threw it into the garbage and grabbed the bag. I tossed a glance at my first victim. Her glassy eyes had opened partway during her cleansing, but she appeared lifeless. In the background I heard Luke Perry talking his way into the pants of a dreamy-eyed girl. A girl just like Alexis.

Ah, yes. I was forgetting something.

I limped back to the living room and kicked over the television with my good leg, sending the Beverly Hills sluts into black-screen oblivion.

*Take that, you life-sucking machine. You ruin young girls' purity, but I'm here to take it back.*

With one last look at Alexis, I felt a twinge of sadness. She didn't appear as peaceful as I had expected. Instead, her head hung at a crooked angle, her shoulders slumped, her arms sprawled. What should have appeared serene looked dead and mutilated.

Nausea rose once again. The sight of blood and murder was too much. The smell of a metallic cocktail too much. The taste of bile too much.

I needed out. Air.

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As I ran out the back door to the cadence of approaching sirens, I vowed to never be weak again.

# A SECONDHAND LIFE

# Chapter 1

*Duke Hospital*  
*Durham, North Carolina*  
*Wednesday, March 4, 1992*  
*8:22 p.m.*

The last thing I remembered was my life splintering—the crack of bones, the crunch of glass, the shriek of scraping metal ... normalcy as I knew it gone forever and in its place a ghastly existence. After the accident, my life would never be the same.

Gone were the days of carefree antics and childish joys. All that remained of my life was a higher calling, a calling I never asked for but had no choice but to accept.

\*\*

*Duke Hospital*  
*Durham, North Carolina*  
*Thursday, March 5, 1992*  
*10:15 a.m.*

I woke up to a bright light, which at first I thought was my entrance into heaven, but when a foreign face peered down at me, I realized I hadn't died. I only *felt* like death.

His honest eyes gazed into mine a little too intimately. "Mia, do you know where you are?"

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My pupils hurt too much to get a sense of my surroundings. Only white. White everywhere. And beeping. I noticed his blue scrubs, but nothing registered.

“Um...” but I couldn’t push the word “no” from my cracked lips. My throat felt like the Sahara. I shook my head faintly.

“Nurse, some water, please. She’s parched,” Scrubs ordered someone I couldn’t see. I heard a door click shut. “You’re in the hospital, Mia.”

I wiped a layer of crust off my eyes and opened them a little more, then peered around. Tubes taped to my wrists, machines standing sentry on both sides of me, a stiff blue chair in the corner, a window shrouded by cheap aluminum blinds. Yes, it was definitely the hospital. And the pain ... the pain was intense. And everywhere in my body. But especially my chest. It ached like it had been ripped open.

After another door click, a nurse sidled up beside me and propped me upright with a pillow, holding a pink straw to my lips. With my tongue I guided the straw into my mouth and slowly sipped. Water—an oasis to my throat. When my throat was soothed enough for me to speak, I looked at Scrubs.

“What happened to me? Where’s my mom and dad?”

“You’ve been in a car accident. Your mom is down the hall. Once she gets here we can talk about what happened, okay?” His voice was too nurturing. It gave me the sense that something was wrong. Very wrong.

But I didn’t get a chance to plead for more answers, because that’s when my mom came rushing to my bedside, her hands smoothing my matted hair aside.

“Baby girl, are you alright?”

“I think so,” I said. “But everything hurts.”

She planted kisses all over my face, and that’s when I noticed her bloodshot eyes. She had been crying.

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“Don’t worry, Mom. I’m okay.”

With my words the floodgates opened. Tears coursed down her cheeks. Apparently she knew something I didn’t.

“Mom, am I okay?”

“Yes, sweetie.” Her fingertip touched my lips. “Honey, a lot has happened.”

“What do you mean?” That’s when my brain suddenly caught up—a flash of me standing in front of my bedroom mirror wearing my gymnastics leotard, then dad and I in the car, then my screams, and then—nothing. Despite my neck’s protest, I scanned the room of unknown faces. My dad wasn’t here. “Where’s Dad?”

Mom swiped at a tear and shook her head, clearly unable to speak.

All kinds of horrific scenarios swam through my head. “Is Dad...?” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Honey, you and your dad were in the car when someone hit you. Your dad is alive, but he’s in a coma. We’re hoping he’ll wake up soon.”

I was too shocked to cry, to react, to do anything. A somber silence enveloped the room, and I couldn’t speak. Mom had run out of words too. There was no comfort available when the outcome felt so bleak.

“But I don’t want you to worry about your dad,” she finally continued. “Your dad is tough. And you are too. Just focus on getting better and getting home. You’ve been through a lot.”

What was I supposed to feel right now? I couldn’t feel what I needed to feel. I couldn’t feel the sadness or anger that yearned to surface. I was emotionally void. All I felt was the throbbing in my chest. My hand touched where it hurt—my heart.

“It hurts so bad, Mom.”

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“You’ve had emergency surgery, honey. You needed a heart transplant. We were lucky, though. You were able to get one right away. It saved your life.”

Odd as it seems, the thought of losing an organ jarred me more than news of the car accident or my dad’s coma. It wasn’t my heart anymore.

I pulled open my hospital gown and peered down at my chest. Large black staples ran up it, with dried blood clinging to where the halves of my chest cavity met. The skin was shiny and tight around the incision, and blotchy red with yellow crust all over the wound. Little bunches of flesh overflowed where each staple clipped it together. Could this really be my body? I was hideous!

Tears formed, then a sob escaped. After that I couldn’t stop bawling.

“Oh, honey...” Even my mom couldn’t say anything reassuring. She knew it as well as I did—I was disfigured. Doomed to spinsterhood.

“Mia, it’s okay,” Scrubs chimed in. “Those stitches will heal, and you will hardly see any scarring. By swimsuit season you’d never know anything happened.”

“Promise?” I needed his word.

“I promise. You’ll have to put ointment on it several times a day, which will help nourish the skin. But I’ll make sure you get the best cosmetic care available.”

I felt a little relief, but something else was bugging me.

“So I have someone else’s heart?”

Mom nodded.

Simple as that—one day I’m me, the next day it’s like I’m someone else, with someone else’s organ. And not a minor organ like an appendix. My *heart*. It might as well have been my soul.

“Someone died? The person who gave me the heart?”

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“Yes, honey. Unfortunately that’s what happened. But don’t think of it as a girl dying; think of it as a girl living the rest of her life through you.”

“A girl? A young girl, like me?”

Mom wouldn’t answer. Just a barely perceptible nod.

“Do you know the girl who died, the girl whose heart I have?”

Mom tossed the question to Scrubs with a glance.

“We do, but when it comes to organ donation, we prefer to keep names confidential ... out of respect for the family.”

I considered his words for a moment before more questions flooded me.

“Will I ever be able to do gymnastics again?” I had missed tryouts for the competition team when the accident happened. I wondered if they’d let me try out once I healed.

Scrubs shot me an avuncular wink. “Absolutely, you should be able to enjoy your usual activities just as if nothing happened. But you need to heal fully first. For the next couple of months you need to do as little as possible.”

A couple of months? To a twelve-year-old that was forever! Although I was nodding, I felt like my world was falling apart. Though, with the size of my scar, I doubted I’d ever feel comfortable in a leotard again. My life was officially ruined.

“Did they find whoever hit us?” I asked.

“A teenage boy, I think,” Mom answered. “Lost control of the car when he was coming around the bend. The police are handling it.”

“Do you think he’ll go to jail?”

“I’m not sure, honey. Probably some kind of punishment, though. But it seems it was simply an accident. Nothing he did wrong, from what they can tell.”

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A pause. “Why are you asking these questions? You shouldn’t think about this stuff. Just rest, okay?”

I nimbly agreed, though my musings had their own intentions. I thought it ironic how “justice” might require the life of another youth in order to avenge mine. Even if the kid who hit us didn’t go to jail, he’d have to live with the burden of what happened on his conscience. Memory could be a bitch sometimes. And who would avenge the girl whose heart I now bore? Misery was making its rounds today. Three losses in one day.

I wanted to ask more questions, but I didn’t like the answers. Yet my mind was relentless.

As my thoughts rambled on, my mother turned a grateful face to Scrubs.

“Thank you, doctor, for taking such good care of Mia. I can’t imagine what could have happened if that heart wasn’t available.” She shuddered and added, “I can’t bear to think of losing my baby girl.”

“You’ve been through a lot, Mrs. Germaine. Let’s just hope that your husband and daughter make a full recovery so that your family can get back to normal as soon as possible.” He tenderly squeezed my shoulder as he spoke.

I hoped my prayers could reach high enough to appeal to God for such an outcome—being back to normal. But something inside me told me life would never be normal again.

My eyes slid closed and I conjured an image of “normal”—Dad, Mom, and me sitting around our dining room table chatting over the day’s events, laughing and smiling as Dad teased me about the pink streak of dye in my hair or my Paula Abdul dance moves for the school talent show, picking at me good-naturedly as he was wont to do.

Then I wondered if I’d ever smile again.

## Chapter 2

*Hillsborough, North Carolina*

*Saturday, April 5, 2014*

*9:03 a.m.*

My glance wandered upward, noting how the cedar branches grabbed fistfuls of sunlight before tossing shards around me. Spring always came too late, in my opinion. If I could avoid winter altogether, I would, but Florida had never been a viable option. My moving would have killed my mom—emotionally, that is. After my father’s death, I was all she had.

A row of yellow daffodils and red tulips nestled against the walkway beneath my feet. Stray weeds peeked up through cracks in the concrete, a reminder that nature had the final say. No matter how much mankind bulldozed or built, all was vulnerable to Mother Nature’s whims.

Each step was brisk as I approached my boyfriend’s apartment door. I had endured an endless, grueling week of work, anxiously waiting to see Brad Thomas—the love of my life—until at last the weekend had arrived. I reached his door, knocked once, then pushed the door open.

“Brad?” I called out. “It’s Mia.”

I heard the news broadcasting from the living room, so I headed in. When I turned the corner from the entryway, I whiffed the heavenly aroma of bacon—and the salivating began.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Brad called from his position at the

## A SECONDHAND LIFE

stove. “Hungry?”

Even wearing an apron, he was all man. And gorgeous. He made brown eyes and brown hair striking. The dusting of scruff on his jaw gave this sweetheart a bad boy appeal that I could never resist. That, and his devilish grin. I was charmed, to say the least.

I threw my purse on the sofa and traipsed to the kitchen, sliding myself behind him. I slipped my arms around him and kissed his neck, where part of his back tattoo peeked out from under his T-shirt. “What’s cookin’, good lookin’?” I teased. It was a phrase my dad had used daily with my mom when he came home from work and dinner was cooking, one of the many things I fondly remembered about him.

“Eggs Benedict over homemade English muffins ... and of course bacon.”

My favorite.

“Showoff,” I said. “I would have been happy with Cheerios—Honey Nut, of course.”

“You *are* a nut,” he teased. “Besides, a professional chef serving Cheerios? I don’t think so.”

Brad’s culinary genius was one of my favorite things about him. Although being a chef demanded sacrificing most evenings and weekends together, it sure paid off at home when he experimented with new dishes. I loved being his guinea pig.

“Though I’m thinking about skipping breakfast,” he said with a suggestive grin as he swiveled around to pull me up against his chest, “and going straight to dessert. Whaddya say, Miss Germaine?”

“I do have a sweet tooth,” I quipped.

His trail of kisses started at my lips and tiptoed down the ridge of my chin, further down my neck, then trailing the length of my collarbone until I squirmed away. Only a couple of inches further along was the beginnings of the

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scar that my cosmetic surgeons assured me would barely be noticeable.

Lies. The angry pink line stretched vertically down the length of my breastbone, a constant and ugly reminder of my past. I spent years of my adolescence practicing the art of camouflaging it, but no amount of concealer could fully hide my disfigurement.

When I turned twenty-one I decided to get a tattoo over my heart—a rose. A symbol of my life, though I never told anyone what all it represented. If I wore a shirt low-cut enough for the blossom's edge to peek out, or on the rare occasion I wore a swimming suit, viewers merely noted how "pretty" it was. To them it was a flower. To me it was much more. Yet no one, not even the current love of my life, seemed trustworthy enough to share that part of my soul and my past with.

So, eventually my chest became a no-see and no-touch zone with the men I dated ... which luckily were few.

Until Brad Thomas.

Brad had been the first "keeper" of the bunch. A tough gentleman who loved me, scars and all. Yet the insecurity of my scar forced a barrier between us, an obstacle that I wasn't going to be able to hurdle anytime soon. While he'd certainly caught glimpses of it when I undressed, I always shut off the lights and wore a shirt when we made love. We'd had a handful of conversations about it—mainly Brad telling me not to hide it, that he loved every part of me—but to me it was a disfigurement. It made me ugly. I would never accept it, even if Brad assured me he did. Luckily Brad wasn't in a race to overcome this emotional wall I erected, and neither was I. Things were good, and we were content—as far as I knew.

"Let's not burn breakfast," I said coyly as I pulled away, pretending my forestalling tactic was about eating, not my imperfections.

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“It’s just about ready. You wanna grab a couple plates and forks?”

I grabbed two beige ceramic plates and set the makeshift dining-slash-coffee table. I threw a pile of clothes and his Durham Bulls baseball hat on the floor beside me. Brad could be such a bachelor at times. His sparsely furnished apartment resembled a guy’s college dorm room, boasting only the “necessities,” he’d argue—a sofa, television, video game console, and two TV trays—until I gifted him a coffee table for Christmas last year. How could men live like this? It was so Third World.

With the last flip of the bacon, Brad carried his culinary masterpiece into the living room and served us both, then sat next to me. While we ate, an anchor from WRAL was covering the local news. Gunshots at Northgate Mall, a fire in Woodcroft. Local festivals, Durham Bulls baseball stats.

A panning shot of downtown Durham played across the screen, focusing on the packed Durham Bulls Athletic Park where fans decked in royal blue cheered on the local baseball team for their season opener two nights ago against the Gwinnett Braves. Our team opened with a win but lost last night. “The sorry bums,” Brad grumbled.

Zooming across the street to the American Tobacco Historic District, the screen showed the newly renovated tobacco warehouse that now housed an eclectic and thriving mix of shops, restaurants, and office spaces. Handsome red brick walkways and an industrial-style concrete waterway graced the popular venue. The Lucky Strike tower sparkled with lights in the epicenter of the campus, creating a romantic atmosphere that Brad and I had enjoyed several times when dining downtown.

On and on the perfectly coiffed female news anchor droned. Some bad news, some good news. The norm. Then something drew my attention with such force that I

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couldn't chew, couldn't swallow, only watch.

"In breaking news," the anchor said soberly, "a teen death has rocked the Raleigh area. Thirteen-year-old Gina Martinez was found last night in her Apex home with fatal stab wounds to her abdomen." A picture of a smiling, golden-skinned teen flashed on the screen. Her black hair cascaded down her shoulders in heavy waves.

"After an evening out, parents Roy and Amelia Martinez came home to find their daughter, Gina, passed out from blood loss. She was rushed to WakeMed where she was pronounced dead. There was no sign of forced entry, which leads investigators to believe the family knew the assailant. Police report stab wound patterns consistent with a murder committed last March, when police found twelve-year-old Violet Hansen brutally murdered in a local park. Investigators found Miss Martinez with her makeup removed, leading police to recognize this as the work of a serial killer now dubbed the Triangle Terror, though no suspects have been named. A memorial will be held for Miss Martinez at St. Thomas' Church on Monday."

As the anchor moved on, I couldn't. I numbly found the remote and turned the TV off as the anchor cheerily segued into coverage of the local spring fair.

"You okay, Mia?" Brad's voice was barely a whisper above my crowding thoughts.

I shook my head.

I was going to hurl.

Rising to my feet, I darted to the bathroom and frantically flipped up the toilet seat. I dunked my head inside and emptied my eggs into its awaiting porcelain maw.

A moment later I felt Brad's hands pull my shoulder-length hair back. When I felt sure there was nothing left in my stomach, I stood and leaned over the sink to wash the

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sweat from my face. I swished a mouthful of cold water to get rid of the taste of bile.

Brad sweetly stood by, rubbing my back.

What a gem.

I rested my weight against the sink, staring at my own vacant hazel eyes in the vanity mirror. Brown strands of sweat-soaked hair stuck to the side of my face, and I pushed them away. I knew food poisoning when it hit me. This wasn't a reaction to rotten eggs. It was a reaction to bad news. It seemed preposterous. Why would a random sad news story make me sick? It didn't make sense. But I sure as heck didn't want to find out. I preferred blissful ignorance.

"My cooking that bad, huh?" Brad said with a chuckle.

"I don't know what came over me," I said after one final mouth rinse. "I'm so sorry." I wiped my mouth on the hand towel. "And I promise not to gripe about you leaving the toilet seat up again. I didn't think I was going to make it..." I said, attempting humor.

"It's okay, Mia. Don't apologize. Just sit down and rest."

He guided me back to the couch, allowing me to sink into his able arms. Arms that seemed to ward off all fear. They felt safe.

I closed my eyes, but all I could see was blood splatter. A sharp pain surged through my chest, and I grabbed where my heart was. Was I having a heart attack? The pain intensified, and I couldn't catch my breath.

"I think I'm having a heart attack!" I said between hard breaths.

"What? Should I call 9-1-1?" Brad asked frantically. "Try breathing slowly, Mia. You're hyperventilating."

I dropped my head between my knees and concentrated on breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Within a couple of minutes my breaths slowed and my

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chest pain began to subside.

“Do I need to take you to the hospital, honey?” Brad asked again.

“No,” I answered, sitting upright. “I think I’m okay now.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me. My heart just started hurting really bad.” But then I remembered something.

“Do you think it was a heart attack?”

“I’m not sure.”

I hadn’t thought about it in years, but now the memory was as fresh as if it had happened yesterday. Brad’s hand cupped mine, giving me the courage to speak.

“When I was a kid I was in a horrible car accident. This young guy lost control going around a sharp turn and somehow ran into the side of us as we were turning. I got crushed underneath the side door and almost died. When I got to the hospital, they had to give me a heart transplant. I never had complications or anything, but this heart pain just made me think about it.”

“Is this the same accident that killed your father?” Brad asked tentatively. It was a touchy subject, one we had only discussed once before.

“Yeah.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Well, stuff happens. Gotta move on, right?”

Brad squeezed me tenderly.

“Did the guy go to jail?”

“No, my mom never pressed charges. It really was a no-fault. Since he wasn’t drunk or anything, he didn’t deserve to do jail time. And I was okay with that, since there’s no point in one mistake taking two lives. He was just another typical teenage driver who probably considered himself invincible and lost control of the wheel.

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It happens. I'm sure the pain of knowing he killed a man was more anguish than a jail sentence could've inflicted. I never did find out who he was, though. My mom felt it was better I didn't know."

I shrugged. Water under the bridge.

"What about your heart donor—did you find out who that was?"

"Nope. I only know that she was a girl my age—twelve. And local. I don't even know how she died. Part of me wishes I could find out, you know? But the hospital wouldn't disclose organ donor names when I looked into it in the past. It's a sealed record, they told me. Other than through hospital records, how am I supposed to figure out who she was?"

"I dunno, Mia, maybe you're not supposed to know what happened. That sounds kind of morbid to know whose heart you have and what killed her. Besides, how will knowing be of any benefit?"

"It's not about benefiting. It's about closure."

"Closure from what? You had nothing to do with her death."

"But someone did, Brad. Someone, or something, killed her. And she's a part of me now. She's what keeps me alive." My voice rose an octave as my words grew terse. A passion that was never there before surfaced. I didn't know why I cared so much now, but it didn't change the fact that she died and I lived. "I want to know who, and why. She was only a child. She didn't deserve to die."

"Are you saying you think she was murdered? She could have died of natural causes, you know."

"A twelve-year-old suddenly dead, and not from a disease? Because they wouldn't have harvested her organs if she had a terminal illness. Sounds like something shady to me."

"I don't know..." Brad said, shaking his head.

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“I suppose I’ll never know the truth, will I?”

Brad eyed me skeptically. He obviously had no idea what it felt like to be in my position.

“Look,” I said with a razor’s edge to my tone, “you can’t possibly understand because you’re not borrowing someone else’s time. Her heart was alive inside her before I took it. It bothers me, okay?”

“Okay, okay. Don’t get upset with me. Do what you want to do.” I heard the bite to his voice.

Was this our first fight? It was beginning to sound like it, and I had never intended the subject to escalate. Though I didn’t feel I owed him an apology. I was right, after all, even though I wasn’t sure what I was right about.

Surrender was never pretty when pride was at stake.

“Let’s just try to salvage the rest of this day before it’s ruined,” I said, trying to smooth over the tension. The last thing I wanted was our first fight to be about my scar. It should be about picking up dirty clothes off the floor, or whose turn it was to do the dishes. Not about my past. “I just hope nothing’s wrong with my heart,” I added warily.

“Don’t worry, baby. It’s probably nothing, but get checked out just to be sure. Okay?”

“Yeah, I will,” I mumbled.

But Brad’s offering was no reassurance, for somehow, deep in the recesses of my now-empty gut, I knew something was wrong. Something big. And it had to do with murder, a serial killer, and a dead girl.

# A SECONDHAND LIFE

## Chapter 3

Sunday, April 6  
3:09 a.m.

**I** was twelve years old. I sat in the backseat of our red 1989 Subaru station wagon, antsy to get to gymnastics class. I urged Dad to hurry, but he shushed me, assuring me we'd be plenty early.

As he turned his head back to calm me, in that split second the side of the wagon imploded. I blinked and found my body contorted into a mangled cluster of limbs. My eyelids slid closed. A cool breeze chilled me as I was ripped out from beneath the crushing weight of metal. But as soon as I was released from the vehicular coffin I found myself sitting in front of a television. Only it wasn't my television. Not the one I remembered from my childhood, at least.

Rabbit ears poked up from the TV, which sat on the floor. Next to my pile of Pogs, a line of bottles—various beers, but mostly Budweiser—lined the coffee table in front of me, blocking my view. I kicked several over onto the hardwood floor, stained and scratched with years of abuse, though I was sure there was nothing left to spill. Wherever I was, I felt at

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*home, and after a commercial break for Super Soaker, I was ogling Luke Perry and despising Jennie Garth, both at the same time. It wasn't fair how perfect her life was—gorgeous and rich. A combo that none should be worthy of, for it was too much power for one person to properly handle.*

*I possessed neither beauty nor riches. Instead, I was homely and poor.*

*The recliner was a scratchy wool monstrosity upholstered in green plaid, so I wrapped my legs in a soft knitted blanket, creating a leg cocoon. Cuddling into the nook of the cushions, I let my imagination wander into the pleasures of angst-soaked high school TV melodrama at its most outlandish and idealized best/worst—depending on your point of view.*

*Donna's blond hair was styled in cute braided pigtails, so I decided to braid my own. I fingered my hair, twisting it into two braids. Satisfied with my new look, I envied the latest fashion trends that Mom's minimum-wage-plus-tips job would never be able to afford.*

*My bag of Doritos crinkled as I placed a cheesy chip in my mouth. I shivered from a brief wave of cold, the last vestiges of winter's chill. The back door creaked shut, but I ignored it, too engrossed to care if it was Mom arriving home from the bar with a new boyfriend on her arm. Sober or drunk? It was better I didn't find out.*

*When I heard a shuffle behind me, I twisted my neck to glance behind me but saw nothing. As I turned back to the*

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*television, a grip tightened around my mouth and I couldn't breathe. The fingers locked down too hard for me to open up my jaw and bite my way to freedom. I tried to inhale through my nose, but his hands covered my nostrils. Shaking my head frantically, I leaned forward, but he was too strong. He jerked me back and held me still. Then gripped harder.*

*Seconds were passing. Precious seconds of air bidding me farewell.*

*I whimpered, hoping my unspoken message would reach my attacker:*

*Please let me go. Please let me breathe.*

*Still, no air.*

*I began blacking out, my eyes watering, wondering if Luke Perry's face was the last I would ever see.*

*As an ebony cloud shrouded me; my mind screamed for help. Then a picture flashed before all went black. A familiar face.*

*It was Gina Martinez.*

*I needed air... needed air... needed air...*

\*\*

“Help!” I cried, gasping as I bolted upright in bed. My lungs couldn't get enough oxygen as I sucked in lungful after lungful. In an effort to calm down, I examined my bedroom. The teal walls, the tastefully simple décor, and my digital clock revealed the ungodly hour of three thirty in the morning. Sure enough, it was my apartment, and I

## A SECONDHAND LIFE

was alone ... or so I hoped.

The dream had felt so real, like a memory, yet so foreign, like it belonged to someone else. I had never been allowed to watch *Beverly Hills, 90210* at that age, and I never bothered to catch up on the show as an adult, so how did I know those characters? And where had I been? It felt surreally like home ... but certainly not my home. Mom never drank, and she kept a pristine house, even during her mourning. And despite her full-time work, a chef-approved dinner was served every night, dishes and kitchen clean before bed. The Rolodex of my mind ticked through my childhood friends, houses I'd visited. Nothing clicked.

Was it some long-buried memory, or a figment of my imagination? Then I recalled the last image I had seen. Gina Martinez, the girl who had been murdered two days ago. Was it her house? How would I know that? I'd never met the girl.

I wanted to forget it all and go back to sleep, but I couldn't let it go.

After nearly an hour of lying in the dark, afraid to close my eyes for fear of returning to the nightmare, I decided it was morning enough to start my day. I threw on a pair of sweats and a UNC sweatshirt. I brewed a cup of chocolate mint tea and sipped the sweet warmth, staring into the emptiness. My eyes darted at every shadow. Every sound sent me jumping. I could tell already that it was going to be a long day. And worst of all, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was going to die. More than a feeling, in fact. I *knew* it. The nightmare fueled this premonition.

When the tea couldn't sooth my frazzled nerves, I picked up my cell phone and texted Brad.

*Babe, u up? Need to talk.*

A minute passed before my phone beeped in reply.

*Up now. Wzup?*

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*Can i come over?*

*U serious?*

*As a heart attack. Pls?*

*Is this abt yesterday?*

*I'll explain when i get there. So can i come over?*

*Of course, babe. Door's unlocked.*

I grabbed my coat and keys and double-locked my door on the way out. I rarely locked the bolt and knob, but I wasn't taking any chances. As the cool early morning temperature helped clear my head, I realized something.

I needed air.

\*\*

When I arrived at Brad's, the lights were off and he was still in bed. I snuck in, bolted the door, and slipped under the covers, spooning next to him and hoping to subtly wake him. I needed to talk through my thoughts.

My restless shifting around must have worked, because soon his brown eyes groggily opened.

"Sorry to wake you," I said.

"Liar," Brad teased. "So what's the problem? You need some of my lovin'?" he said with a coy grin as he nuzzled my neck.

Refusing to feed his advances, I went on talking. "Something is wrong with me."

"Mmm, nothing's wrong with you, baby. You're perfect." He kissed my jaw, tempering my urgency, but I leaned away.

"Brad, this is serious. I need you to listen to me right now."

He shifted upright and circled his arm around my shoulders.

"All ears. Is this about what happened yesterday?"

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“Sorta...”

He sighed heavily. “What’s going on?”

Where should I begin? I could find no logical beginning.

“Remember how when we were watching the news yesterday I got sick?” Brad nodded, silent. “Well, I went to bed thinking about that girl, Gina, and her death. I ended up having a horrible nightmare and she was in it. I think my dream is trying to tell me something about her murder. Like I might somehow know who’s murdering these girls.”

Even as I said it I winced at how ridiculous I sounded. As if I had some prophetic ability to see things, to reveal things that the cops couldn’t. But the look of incredulity on Brad’s face pissed me off. I was the only one allowed to think myself crazy.

“What’s that look for?” I growled.

“You realize what you’re saying, right? That you are connected to these murders.”

“No,” I corrected, “not connected to them. Let’s call it a”—I fumbled for the right phrase—“supernatural hunch.”

“Supernatural, as in ... what exactly?” he probed.

“I dunno. Something beyond the natural, I guess.”

“That’s pretty crazy stuff, Mia.”

“I know it sounds nuts, but ... well, I can’t explain it. Something in me knows who’s behind this, and I need to follow my gut on this. This could save lives, Brad.”

“And how do you propose to do that—to catch this killer?” His sarcasm was biting.

“I don’t know yet. I guess I’ll figure it out as I go.”

“As you go? Are you kidding me? Mia, this isn’t Nancy Drew. You’re talking about a serial killer and actual murders here. You could be killed! Stay out of it. You have no business playing detective.”

“And you have no business telling me what to do,” I

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retorted. Sure, I sounded childish, but I couldn't think of anything more adult to say. My ire was rising to the point where I couldn't keep my thoughts—or my words—straight. Or it could have been the meager three hours of sleep making me nonsensical. Either way, Brad was pushing my buttons and I didn't appreciate it.

"Mia, I just want you to be safe. I care for you. Please promise me you won't pursue this."

"I can't do that," I said matter-of-factly.

"If you can't assure me that this is over, then I can't guarantee that I'll be around to watch you get hurt."

Whoa. Brad took the argument to a whole new level, and he definitely wasn't playing fair anymore.

"Are you breaking up with me?" I asked point-blank.

"That's up to you, Mia. If you don't let this go, then I guess you're forcing my hand. I don't want to break up with you, but I can't sit idly by watching you chase danger like it's a toy."

"Whatever." With that, I scooted to the other side of the king-sized bed, as far away from Brad as I could get without falling off, and pouted until the sun peeked through the cream metal blinds, casting the bedroom in hues of orange.

Maybe my mom was right about me all these years—I had indeed inherited my father's stubborn streak.

# A SECONDHAND LIFE

# Chapter 4

*Sunday, April 6*

*12:42 p.m.*

I watched from the Starbucks window, observing how the people flowed with antlike organization. A line through the door, a line at the register, a line through the drive-thru ... all following one another, all mindlessly moving from point A to point B. Who among them valued life, cherished each moment? My speculation: none.

That's what was wrong with people these days. They didn't cling to the joys of life until they were gazing down at their own funeral from heaven, or up from hell, wherever, wondering where all the time went. They lay waste to their lives until the end comes—that's when they mourn over their regrets.

The children are our only chance. Start by changing their attitudes early on and you kill the root problem. Remind them to embrace each moment ... yet I knew how stubborn adolescents could be.

Gina Martinez had been stubborn. She spent her last moments fighting, screaming, crying ... what a waste. Apparently my message wasn't clear enough. I'd keep working on it, though. It had taken me years to perfect my message, and still I had so far to go. I wondered how many lives it would require.

Twenty years, and still they were ignorant. They thought Violet Hansen was my first victim ... the blind fools.

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There had been many others before the blue-eyed brunette was stumbled upon by a group of kids at the American Village Park where I buried her beneath a shallow bed of leaves. It would only be a matter of time before they connected the dots to reveal two decades' worth of victims. Though I couldn't boast and take the credit. For it wasn't my work, but the work I was sent to do.

One by one, I would help the young girls of America see the truth.

A black Lexus pulled up to a parking spot in front of my window view. A gorgeous yet overstated car. Was someone compensating for something? Probably a workaholic, neglectful husband trying to keep his wife faithful by buying her expensive toys. We'd see just how devoted she was ...

A girl stepped out of the front passenger seat, then entered the coffee shop with her mother trailing her. The girl was probably twelve years old, though she wore the trumpy clothing of a woman, revealing far too much leg. A hooker in training, apparently. Her mother was no better, showing boob job cleavage and pants suctioned to her jacked-up rear. They were both in need of some truth.

The girl's natural red hair was pulled into a ponytail, and her cheeks and nose were dusted with freckles. She was every bit the image of fleeting innocence.

A perfect illustration.

Chatter about the Triangle Terror infiltrated the conversational din, and a grin crept along my lips.

"Oh, it's just awful what he's doing to those poor girls," a white-haired lady whined to a mother of two across the aisle. "What has this world come to?"

"I'm afraid to let my kids out of my sight," the mother replied, clutching her toddler to her side.

I had become a celebrity. But hearing about my

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achievements wasn't what brought me here. More important matters beckoned me.

I stood up from my table by the window, discarded the rest of my black coffee, and headed for the register, pretending to examine the pastry selections.

"Amy," I overheard the mother say as they approached the cashier, "order what you want." The two ordered their beverages, then Amy's mother pulled out her wallet.

I made my move and rested my hand on the counter. "Actually, allow me." I delivered my most charming smile, a surefire winner. None had been able to resist it yet. I visibly eyed her up and down, resting my eyes on her chest for appearance's sake. No one suspects a typical pervert of murder, after all. It's always the nice, normal, charismatic guys—the Ted Bundys—who are the crazy ones.

I tossed a twenty-dollar bill on the counter. "Hi, I'm Jude. And you are?"

The mother looked at me warily. "Married," she said, flashing her wedding ring. At least two karats adorned her finger.

But I was easily five years her junior, so that gave me an advantage against money.

"Mmm, that's too bad. Well, still, let me treat you both. I insist. Two pretty ladies like yourselves shouldn't have to pay their own way."

Amy's mother laughed. "Quite the gentleman, huh?"

"I like to think so," I said.

"Well, thank you for the coffee, *Jude*."

Judging by her emphasis, I knew she suspected that wasn't my real name. Clever woman. Apparently she knew this game all too well.

"You're quite welcome. Oh, and I didn't catch your name," I prodded.

"That's because I didn't give it to you."

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Oh, this woman was good. I was immediately hooked.  
No matter. I'd find out what I needed to know.

"Well, then, if you're ever not married, I hope to run into you again." With that I winked, collected my change, and left. Yes, I would definitely be seeing her again ... at her daughter's funeral.

\*\*

On my way to the parking lot I slowed my gait as I passed their car. The interior was immaculate, not a car one would throw dirty cleats in. I found nothing noteworthy inside, but the back window gave me just what I needed. An Orange High track team bumper sticker. I might have to make it to a few track meets this season.

I typed the license plate number into my notepad on my cell, along with the name "Amy," and headed for my car, intentionally parking across from the main entrance to Starbucks. My silver Honda Accord was perfectly forgettable and blended nicely with the thousands on the road. I sat behind the wheel, turned on some Journey, and tapping my hands against the wheel to the beat of "Don't Stop Believin'." I waited, keeping an eye on my rearview mirror for their exit.

Thirty minutes into my vigil the two ladies walked out the door, a bounce in their step, to-go cups in their hands. They got into their car and drove through one light, heading for the main intersection. I wondered how long I'd be following them, especially on a Sunday—shopping day. As most men can attest, it was grueling lingering about while women shopped.

As luck would have it, twenty minutes and six turns later they pulled into the driveway of a reasonably unpretentious two-story home in a generic subdivision. I pulled my car over to the side of the road as they headed

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into the garage. The home was normal enough. No apparent bells and whistles. Hell, it didn't even look like they had a security system. I typed the address into my cell's notepad and made a mental note of the surroundings. Trees lined both sides of the yard, obscuring nosey neighbors' views of the house. I looked for motion lights and saw none. The backyard was small but separated from rear neighbors with another line of trees. How much more perfect could it be? I admit, I had a knack for picking the right girls at the start.

It was turning out to be a perfect Sunday, brimming with opportunity.

# A SECONDHAND LIFE

## Chapter 5

I spent the rest of Sunday alone. I wasn't sure where things stood with Brad. After our argument the night before, we both needed a break to cool off, to think things over. Although, my mind was unwavering in its determination to figure out what was happening to me. I only hoped he'd get on board.

I hiked the day away on Little River Park's trails, using the solitude that nature offered to indulge in some much-needed contemplation. The chaos of home was too distracting. There, laundry, dishes, and work beckoned my attention. Here, I was free to think and let go of the burdens of everyday chores.

Nestled on the outskirts of the town of Hillsborough, the park attracted hikers and cyclists to its miles of wooded trails traversing its 300-plus acres. My favorite amenity was the butterfly garden whose colorful flowers were normally matched by the fluttering beauty of butterflies of every description, relishing the banquet of nectar, though today's April chill sadly deterred them from making an appearance.

I wiped trickling sweat from my forehead as I trudged up the hill heading back toward the parking lot. Streaks of sunlight speared through the burgeoning leaves, as branches laden with blossoms hung low. I stopped and closed my eyes, savoring their sweet fragrance. A bench, cleverly crafted from two tree stumps, emerged up ahead. After hiking the dirt trail up to the bench, I sat down. As I looked around, sunlight caught something on the ground.

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Glass. A nudge from my sneakered foot turned it over. A Budweiser bottle.

In an instant I felt my heart spasm, and I clutched my chest, praying for the pain to subside. Tears surfaced, and I squeezed my eyes shut to block out the world, helping me to concentrate against the wrenching within me. An image flashed in my head. A girl. Black pigtails. Green eyes—a brighter version of my own hazel color.

Although the chest pain seemed to diminish, the mental picture grew more vivid ... transitioning from a series of images—a beer bottle, a television, a green blanket—into a moving scene. The television flickered to life, and the beer bottle hit the floor with a clunk. During the first few seconds I felt distanced, foreign, but then it started to feel more intimate, as if I was *in* it. I was watching myself, only it wasn't me ...

\*\*

*His hand held my mouth closed, blocking any chance of air through my mouth or nose. I clawed above me, aiming to scratch his eyes, but I only found empty air. My fingers attempted to pry his fingers loose, but he was too strong. I felt my head growing heavy with blackness creeping in. I was on the verge of passing out.*

*Then something flashed in the corner of my vision. My shriek was smothered by the palm as my flesh tore open. The side of my torso was being ripped apart by a blade as he plunged the knife in, then ripped it out. I hunched over, holding my side. If the lack of oxygen didn't cause my blackout, the excruciating pain in my abdomen would. I felt*

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*the side of my shirt dampen, and an apprehensive glance downward confirmed my fears. Blood was oozing out by the gallon, it seemed, soaking my favorite shirt. An odd, fleeting thought went through my head: Mom would never buy me another Bart Simpson shirt, and I doubted I could wash the bloodstain out.*

*"Shhh..." I heard him say in my ear. A familiar voice. "You must remain quiet, Alexis. If you don't stay quiet, I'm going to have to hurt you more."*

*I nodded as best as I could beneath his firm grip. I couldn't imagine any worse pain, but I couldn't risk finding out what that would be. If being quiet meant not suffocating, I would do anything. His palm went lax, and he tentatively removed his hand, though always maintaining contact with my skin, and slid it downward. He rested it on my neck, rubbing gently.*

*"It's okay," he soothed. Again, a voice I recognized. I knew this person.*

*Despite his creepy nurturing gesture, I knew worse was to come. He was either going to rape me or mutilate me ... maybe both. I had watched enough movies to know what psychos did to their victims. My mom exhibited little supervision when it came to what I watched, leaving it to my discretion.*

*So the moment his fingers tightened around my throat, I screamed as loud as I could, hoping the sound would reach the neighbors. My first mistake. This caused him to grip my neck*

## A SECONDHAND LIFE

*like he was going to snap it in half. Any chance at survival was now gone.*

*I began kicking wildly, knocking several beer bottles to the floor. I heard glass split and shatter across the hardwood. My fingers pried at his to loosen them just enough to breathe... but I wasn't strong enough. Searching the space around me for any kind of weapon, I noticed a few bottles remained on the coffee table. I reached forward to grab one. My fingertip brushed against the closest one, but I needed another inch. One measly inch.*

*Before I could gain that inch, I was thrust against the back of the chair. He must have seen where my reach was heading.*

*My adrenaline was running out. Time and air were running out. Numbness in my side eventually allowed me to focus my efforts away from the pain and, instead, on breaking free. But no matter how much I scratched and scraped at him, his grip was steadfast, and my strength was waning at the rate my blood was letting. The room was fading... then no more.*

\*\*

A phone chirped.

I bolted upright to a throbbing, cramping pain in my side. Scanning my surroundings, I saw that I was still in the park, sitting on the same bench, but in a lot of pain—pain that I knew wasn't from my workout but from the

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daydream.

My cell rang again, tugging me out of my confusion. The caller ID showed it was Brad.

“What do you want?” I answered, more gruffly than I had intended.

“I just wanted to check in on you. I guess you just answered my question if we’re done fighting,” he said.

“Are you done being a jerk?” I retorted.

“Mia, I know you’re angry with me, but please understand that I’m only concerned about you. Look, I don’t want to break up with you. I love you. But I don’t want to stand by while you chase a murderer. If something were to happen to you—”

“Nothing is going to happen to me, Brad. But if you can’t stand by me through this, then get out of the way.”

Silence. I knew I had hurt his feelings, but my adrenaline was rushing too fast for me to care right now.

The rustle of leaves pulled my attention upward toward a man approaching along the path holding a walking stick. I smiled tightly as he passed, his eyes and grin warm with friendliness. Yet in the back of my mind I didn’t trust what lurked behind that façade. No one could be trusted these days.

I waited until his back was lost amid the sprouting foliage before I spoke again.

“How about we talk this over later?” I suggested. “I’m kind of in the middle of something right now.”

Brad muttered an “okay” and hung up. I’d deal with him later. Right now I had something more pressing on my mind. The vision.

The daydream was too similar to my previous nightmare to be coincidence. The events had felt so real, so much so that I had to double-check for blood on my torso. Satisfied that there was none, I began to pick apart the events, searching for clues. There had to be a message

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in there somewhere. But what was it?

My mental inventory began with a name: Alexis. It wasn't much to go on without a last name, but it held meaning of some kind. It had to.

I wanted to talk to someone, but Brad didn't want anything to do with it, and I had no one else I could entrust this kind of secret to. But it was a secret that had to be told. Now more than ever I was convinced that lives depended on it.

\*\*

An hour later I sat in front of my computer with my Google search box waiting for me to type. My fingers keyed the first thing that came to mind:

*meaning of dreams*

A long list of websites about dream interpretation popped up. I scanned the list of sites, pausing on the website of a local dream analyst: Dr. Avella Weaver. I clicked on the link, which took me to a professional-looking site. Skimming through each page, her credentials seemed sound. Certified psychologist, impressive academia, and she utilized alternative medicine methods like acupuncture, hypnotism, and dream analysis. It was worth a shot, though I doubted my insurance would cover it.

On the contact page it listed her work hours. Surprisingly enough in the Bible Belt, where even some gas stations were closed for the Sabbath, she was open on Sundays from one to six. I checked the clock. It was only 4:30, so I dialed the office number.

After two rings I heard an elderly woman's voice on the other end. "Hello, this is Dr. Avella Weaver's office. How

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can I help you?”

“Uh, hi. My name is Mia Germaine and I wanted to make an appointment ... today, if possible.”

“Hmm, yes, I think that could work, Mia. Are you seeking dream analysis or psychological care or something else?”

To be honest, I had no idea what I was seeking. Answers. So I said, “Dream analysis, I think.”

“Okay. You sound unsure, so when you get here we can figure out what you need. Each session is usually an hour long, and I take my last appointment at five, so if you can make it here by then, I can fit you in today. Would that work for you?”

“Yes, thank you! I’ll be leaving now. Thank you again for taking me on such short notice.”

“That’s what I’m here for, my dear. I look forward to meeting you.”

As I hung up, I wondered if I was on the verge of going bat-crap crazy. Meeting a dream interpreter? Should I follow it up with a palm reading? It sounded like something super-spiritual, like from the book of Daniel in the Bible when Daniel had the crazy prophetic dreams about Babylon. Prophecy was certainly was not something that I was into.

I was beginning to lose myself to whatever had taken hold of me.

# A SECONDHAND LIFE

## Chapter 6

Dr. Avella Weaver's office was as strange as her first name.

Nestled between an adorable antique store and an upscale restaurant in downtown Hillsborough, I nearly passed by the nondescript front door, adorned only with a simple brass plaque bearing the doctor's name. Almost all of the shops were closed as I walked from the parking lot behind a row of random businesses—an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, a handful of restaurants, an insurance company. Catching my reflection in the large, streak-free storefront windows, I couldn't help but admire the jewelry and art on display, while potted pink azaleas and purple pansies framed their entrances.

A wrought-iron bench marked Dr. Weaver's.

Past the plain door whose old-fashioned bell jingled as I entered was an office full of unusual knickknacks, and heady with the mingled perfume of fragrant oils, incense, and greenery. Sculptures of various exotic animals—a Bengal cat, a squirrel monkey, a giraffe—littered every table, and the walls were adorned with images of bonsai trees. The décor created a mystic-meets-rainforest atmosphere.

Several chairs in vibrant fuchsia and teal fabrics lined three walls, and since I didn't see a reception desk, I picked a chair and sat. I had barely planted my rear down when a woman in a tie-dyed tunic and matching loose linen pants appeared around the corner. Her gray hair was close-cropped with a hint of curl to it.

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“You must be Mia?” She extended her hand, and I accepted it and shook. I felt her bones jutting out from beneath the wrinkles and loosened my grip.

“Yes, and you’re Dr. Weaver?”

“Call me Avella. Please follow me.” She gestured for me to follow her down a hallway with carved tribal masks hanging on the walls. I felt a particularly penetrating Hopi Indian mask bore into my soul with its dead eyes as I passed.

At the end of the hallway was a large open room, much simpler and less cluttered than the waiting room. A red sofa sat to one side, with two beige chairs in front of it. Two end tables held exquisitely carved wild animal figures—wildebeest, zebras, gazelles, a Serengeti tableau—and colorful coasters with the same exotic motif. Incredibly prolific potted plants decorated a rough-hewn table beneath a windowsill upon which marched a family of miniature elephants. Several degrees hung on the wall—bachelors, masters, doctorate, all in psychology. And from prestigious universities. Perhaps she wasn’t a quack after all.

She gestured to the sofa. “Have a seat, dear.”

The cordiality of her words made me feel like this was a visit with my grandma.

“Coffee, tea, water, juice?” she offered.

“Tea, please,” I answered. She held a tray out for me, which displayed a wide variety of bagged teas. I picked a chai and she took it.

“Sugar and cream?” she asked.

“Yes, both, thank you.”

Avella busied herself at a quaint refreshment nook. A moment later she handed me a steaming cup and holding her own mug, sat across from me.

“So,” she began after a sip, “tell me a little about yourself. Why you’re here today.”

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I was stumped at where to begin and fell mute. It was hard to explain without sounding insane. When the hush lasted for more than a moment, she prodded, "Why don't you start by telling me what happened before you called me. Something prompted you today. What was it?"

"I guess you could say I've been having trouble sleeping."

Avella set her teacup down and folded her hands on her lap. "That's a good start. But don't be afraid to speak your mind, Mia. This is a safe place. Anything we discuss is confidential. Can you share why you've had trouble sleeping? Is something on your mind?"

"Okay, well, I had a dream. One that I've had before. And it kind of scares me."

"Why does it scare you?"

"It involves ... a girl being murdered."

Avella nodded in understanding.

"Do you wish to know the significance of the dreams?"

"I guess, although I think they are more than dreams. I think they've actually happened and are perhaps unsolved murders. Cold cases. Does it make me crazy to think that?"

I wondered how much lower I could go—I was a patient asking my psychiatrist if I was crazy. Of course she wouldn't tell me if she thought I was.

"No, not at all. Dreams aren't always figments of our imagination. They can be glimpses into reality. We've had quite a few unsolved murders at the hands of the Triangle Terror lately, Mia. Perhaps your dreams are related to what's happening in the news?"

The thought hadn't escaped my attention, though I sensed it was more than just that.

"That's what I was wondering. You see, the dreams didn't start until just recently, right after I saw the news coverage of that girl Gina Martinez's death. But my

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dreams aren't about Gina. They're about some other girl, someone named Alexis. And the dream events seemed to have happened a long time ago."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the details of the dream are from the '90s, I think. That's when I was a teenager, and everything in the dream—the furnishings in Alexis's house, the Pog collection—points to that era. And she's watching *Beverly Hills, 90210* on TV—the biggest giveaway."

Avella leaned forward, placing her chin on her hands, intent on my words. "Very interesting, Mia. Do you feel a connection to the girl—Alexis—in your dreams?"

"Definitely. More than a connection, though. It's like I *am* her."

I paused, not sure where to go from there. In the ensuing lull, Avella examined me with sincere eyes. "Tell me about your childhood, Mia. I'd like to know more about your life so that we can dissect this dream's bond to you."

I heaved a sigh. "For the most part it was pretty normal. Middle-class family. Raised well by loving parents. A happy home until I lost my father in a car accident, which happened when I was twelve. Even after that, though, my mom held it together for the both of us and helped me move past it. Sure, I was broken by the loss, but we healed together. I don't think I'm messed up by my dad's death."

"So you don't feel any lingering emotional scars from that loss?" Avella asked. Her eyes penetrated me, and I realized how very blue they were. Not dark aqua, but almost translucent. They were quite striking.

"Not so much emotional as physical scars." I tugged the neckline of my T-shirt down past my tattoo, just enough to show a faint white line running down my chest. "I had a heart transplant as a result of the accident."

Avella's jaw dropped slightly. "You say you were twelve

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when that happened?”

I nodded.

“And I assume your donor was roughly your age?”

“I believe so, though I never found out who she was. It bugged me for a long time, and part of me thinks that has something to do with what’s happening to me right now.”

“Happening to you?” Avella probed.

“I’m not sure how to explain it, but I’ve been having chest pain right before or after those flashback episodes. It’s weird.”

“Hmm, yes, odd. But not unheard of.”

“What do you mean? This kind of thing has happened before?”

Avella rose from her chair and went to a large bookshelf along the far wall. Her finger traced the spine of several books until she found what she was looking for and pulled the book down. She returned and showed me the cover:

### *A Change of Heart*

“This book,” she explained while flipping through several pages, “discusses organ memory. Organ memory is a theory positing that cells retain traits exclusive to the individual. Thus, each person’s organs preserve a part of them, not merely blood type but actual personality characteristics. This particular book shares Claire Sylvia’s experience with an organ transplant back in 1988. She recounts distinctive personality changes after her transplant.”

“Wow,” I said. So I wasn’t the only one? Hope surged through me that I wasn’t crazy after all.

“Yes, wow is appropriate,” Avella said with a chuckle. “Additional research since then has shown that it’s common among organ transplant patients to experience

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the onset of particular changes presumably brought about by the donated organs. For example, in one case study, patients noticed a change in preferred tastes. Before the transplant they might have liked the taste of white chocolate, then afterward they hated it. Or even changes in entertainment—movies, music, for instance—or recreational preferences. Before they liked swimming, afterward they couldn't remember how to swim. It's quite fascinating. Further studies revealed that in most of these cases the new preferences aligned with that of the donor."

She handed me the book to peruse.

"They originally ran these tests on volunteers who donated a kidney or lung, and they maintained contact with the donors and recipients so that they could facilitate further studies to confirm the nature of any changes in preference among the transplant patients. They did this since there was no conclusive way to validate changes from donors whose organs were harvested upon death, except for anecdotal testimony from family and friends."

"But I haven't noticed a change in my tastes or anything. Just weird memories."

"Well, there's more. In many of those documented cases, studies showed memory recall among several organ recipients who claimed to have memories of events not from their own lives."

"So other people had memories from their donors, and these memories were confirmed as real?"

"Yes. In one instance an infant who received a heart transplant recognized the mother of the boy whose heart he received years after his transplant. It made news, in fact, since he was a mere baby at the time of the organ donation. How could a child have known who the donor's mother was if not for organ memory? There are countless other examples, although the topic doesn't get much positive coverage in the mainstream media. Quack

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science, they call it. Needless to say, I would agree that it may teeter on a fine line of speculative science, but we can't discount empirical data, now can we?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This wasn't science fiction? I had walked in here ready to be psychoanalyzed, but instead I was getting answers. Okay, hippie-dippie, pseudo-scientific answers, but at least it was a start. Perhaps therapy wasn't so bad after all.

"So you think my heart is revealing the donor's actual life, maybe a memory of her murder?"

"It's a distinct possibility."

"You've given me so much clarity, Dr. Weaver—"

"Avella," she corrected with a smile. "And I'm happy to have helped you. But be careful in your pursuit of answers, dear. This sounds rather dangerous."

We both stood, and I reached out my hand, but she stepped forward and pulled me into a hug. "I'm a hugger, dear."

I thanked her again and pulled out my checkbook.

"How much do I owe you for the session? It was invaluable to me."

"This one's on me," she said. "As long as you promise to stay safe and keep me informed. It's not every day I encounter a session as enlightening and unusual as this one has been."

I assured her I'd keep in touch and try my best to stay out of trouble. Though lately trouble seemed to have a way of finding me.

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# Continue reading the tale...

Will Mia survive the horrific nightmares and catch the killer before he strikes again? Find out by pre-ordering a copy of *A Secondhand Life* to unravel the rest of the mystery to discover who's behind the gruesome murders. Available at all major book retailers.



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