

For the next hour and a half, he drifted in and out of sleep. Cradled by the night sounds of the desert outside the open window, each time a memory emerged, his thoughts thickened and folded back into sleep. At one point he heard water running for a bath. A little later, he heard a car outside. *Oh God, please don't let it be Travis.* He stumbled to the window and opened the curtains. In the street, two long rectangular taillights moved away, turning south onto Oracle Road.

Matt leaned against the wall, staring at the sunflower sheets on Crystal's bed. The same bed he and Travis had jumped up and down on when they were eight. The digital clock read 10:38 p.m. His head throbbed. He needed to close his eyes. Crystal would wake him in time to leave before Travis got home. He fell back onto the bed.

When he woke up again, the room was very dark. He wore only his boxers and a white T-shirt his mother had insisted upon—claiming his usual dark one would show through his tuxedo shirt. As if the color of his T-shirt could ruin her perfect wedding. But he'd been ingenious and found another way to ruin things for his mother. He turned toward the empty space beside him. It took a few moments for him to realize where he was. He closed his eyes, shook his aching head to clear it. Crystal was his best friend's mother. What the hell was he doing in her bed?

He thought he heard the sound of the front door open, then close again. *Oh God, please don't let it be Travis.* His eyes adjusted to the darkness. One event at a time, he remembered everything.

Fully awake now, he shot from the bed, rocking for a few seconds before he achieved balance, then hurried to the window. The moon hung over the mountaintop, its light silver and unforgiving. Crystal's driveway was empty. Whoever he'd heard, it wasn't

Travis. On the other side of the street, an engine started. This time the taillights were round. Definitely not Crystal's Escort. The car turned north on Oracle Road.

Matt let out the breath he'd been holding and glanced at the digital clock—its red letters told him it was 11:20 p.m. He needed to get dressed and leave. The dance ended in forty minutes and Travis would head home. He grabbed his tuxedo pants and shirt from the chair. His hands shook so hard he could barely work the fly and the button on his trousers. He slipped into his shirt, then sat on the edge of the bed. As if he had the flu, his head throbbed and his stomach felt queasy.

He rushed down the hallway toward the bathroom. And when he did, he saw the puddle of blood on the floor beside the bathtub.

He hurried across the room, jerked open the pale green shower curtain.

Crystal lay naked in a bathtub filled with blood-colored water. Her hair, her beautiful blonde curls, had been chopped off, shorter in some places than others, as if a small child had done it. Some of the curls were floating on top of the water.

For a strange moment, everything remained calm and slow.

Her head was propped against one of those blow-up pillows attached to the back of the tub with suction cups. The tint of her skin was pale and slightly blue. Crystal's eyes were open and staring straight ahead—looking at something he couldn't see. Blood splattered the white tiles that surrounded the tub. It dripped down them like wet paint. One of her hands flopped over the side of the tub. A single thick drop fell from her index finger into the crimson pond congealing on the linoleum floor. It covered her neck and shoulders. Tiny bubbles of frothy blood still oozed from the gash in her neck.

An empty Smirnoff bottle sat in a puddle of blood on the tub's rim beside a straight-edged razor blade.

The bathroom was so quiet. Nothing but the sound of his own breathing. He clenched and unclenched his hands. His body grew numb. "Oh no. Oh God, no," he said, the words thickening in the air in front of him. His head filled with strange sounds—the drone of insects humming, violinists tuning their strings. "What have I done?"

The contents of his stomach rose. He crouched in front of the toilet and heaved until nothing more came up. Then he started to rock, back and forth, muttering what he already knew was a useless prayer. *Please, just let her be okay.* He said it over and over like an unstoppable mantra. If only he could keep saying the words, maybe he could reverse this unthinkable thing.

Maybe she was still alive. He straightened up and stepped over to the bathtub to check Crystal's neck for a pulse. As he bent closer, he smelled the metallic scent of her blood as it mixed with her perfume and the stale, metabolized smell of alcohol seeping through her skin. He placed two fingers on her neck, searching for her carotid and pressed. His fingers slipped into the gaping hole. It felt wet and warm. He screamed and jerked them out. They were covered in blood.

He swiped his hand on the front of his shirt, then checked the other side of her neck for a pulse. *Please, just let her be okay.* Nothing. He shook her by the shoulders, then tried again. Still no pulse. At that moment, he stopped his mantra.

Though he knew she was dead, he held her hand—soft and still warm. It belonged to Crystal, who'd taught him to line dance, who liked hot buttered popcorn with cheddar cheese grated on top. Crystal, who was sometimes irresponsible and drank

way too much. Crystal, who'd cheered for him at bat in Little League, cheered just as loud as she had for her own son. Crystal, who'd always be sitting in a bathtub of blood. "I'm sorry." He squeezed her hand, then let go. "And I swear to you, Travis will never know what happened between us."

Struggling to his feet, he headed for the kitchen phone to call 911. Halfway to the bathroom door, he stopped. Blood smeared the front of his white shirt. And there was still blood on both his hands, drying beneath his fingernails. His body was slick with fear. He smelled it, tasted it, and felt it coming out of his pores like sweat. His mind told him to call the police, to tell the truth. His heart told him to keep his promise to Crystal. It was the last thing she'd ever ask of him.

He dropped his chin and stared at his shirt. Holy shit. If anyone saw him like this, they'd think he'd killed Crystal. The thought stopped him. Had he? Was he capable of doing something so heinous?

The bubble of panic in his throat got bigger. He hurried across the bathroom to wash his hands. There were more clumps of hair in the sink and a hardened blue streak of toothpaste. He used toilet paper to pick up the hair clumps and dropped them into the trashcan. Looking at the uncapped tube beside Crystal's toothbrush, he felt as if something had been cut out of his chest.

He grabbed the sides of the sink, stared at himself in the mirror. The face staring back resembled no one he'd ever seen before. Was it the face of a murderer? Had he just pushed someone else to her death? He shook his head—breathing in short gasps, like a swimmer gearing up for a plunge. His lungs burned as if he were being swept away by a strong current.

When the memory of his cousin's death surfaced, as it often did, Matt used his fists to hammer the stranger's face he saw reflected in the medicine cabinet. The mirror fractured, sending out long cracks in every direction. The face split into interlocking parts like an abstract puzzle. One jagged sliver fell into the sink, breaking in half. It left a black and empty space in what had once been the mirror.

He held onto the sides of the sink again and rocked slowly in front of it, still staring at the blood on his hands and under his fingernails. "You're all right," he said, but could barely hear the words, the sounds inside his head were so loud.

In his mind he saw himself letting go of the sink and getting as far away from this nightmare as possible. But it would destroy Travis to come home and find his mother like this. Matt had to intercept him.

He washed his hands, then rinsed the blood from the sides and bowl of the sink, recapped the toothpaste and tucked it into the medicine cabinet. He wrapped the shards of mirror in toilet tissue, careful to avoid getting his fingerprints on the glass, and placed them in the trashcan, jagged sides down. There were no towels in the bathroom, so he wiped his wet hands on his pant legs. Panic rolled in, sucked him under.

What should he do? Call the police? His father? 911? If he did, there'd be a recording of his voice and he'd have a lot of explaining to do. The police often suspected 911 callers. They might take his DNA. What if they found semen inside of Crystal? What if they matched it to Matt's DNA? If that happened, they'd know. It would be in the newspapers. It would hurt Travis. He couldn't let that happen.

He hurried back into Crystal's bedroom. Hands shaking, he sat on the edge of her bed and put on his socks and shoes. Then, as if he were someone else, running

through an obstacle course, he went into the kitchen and gathered the empty beer bottles. He took them out into the garage and carefully placed them in their cardboard carriers. Next he wiped the kitchen table, closed the open drawers, loaded the dishwasher, emptied the ashtrays, then made Crystal's bed with fresh sheets. He tossed the sunflower sheets into the washing machine and started the cycle, careful to wipe his prints from the lid and dial. With the same cloth, he wiped down the edge of the plastic shower curtain, then pulled it closed—the way he'd found it. For the most part, his fingerprints were easily explained. He'd spent almost as much time in Travis' house as his own.

Matt stood in front of the coffee table. He heard the candles guttering, smelled the wax melting. He blew them out, then picked up the clothes Crystal had discarded in the hallway beside the bathroom door. Folding them neatly, he then placed them on the chair beside her window. He grabbed her red cowboy boots from the living room and set them beneath the chair. It was the least he could do for Travis.

The clock on the stove read 11:45 p.m. The Narrow Way didn't allow opposite sex teenagers to spend unsupervised time together. Jennifer's parents would pick her up from the dance. That meant Travis would be leaving for home soon.

If Matt hurried, he could intercept him, convince him to spend the night with Matt and his dad. He raced into Travis' bedroom, jerked open the drawer where he kept his T-shirts. Surely he had a plain black or a dark blue one somewhere. Matt lifted the stacks of folded shirts until he found one, then ripped off the tuxedo and stained T-shirt, slipped Travis' shirt over his head, then grabbed his jacket from the kitchen chair and hurried outside.

On the back deck, insects clustered around the light fixture, high-pitched, insistent and frantic. The sound reminded him of Crystal's voice when she'd pleaded with him not to tell Travis. Why hadn't he agreed?

In the carport, Matt unlocked the trunk of his Mustang, a restored nineteen sixty-seven Grande that had been his mom's first car, and dropped both the jacket and the bloodstained shirt inside. Silence ballooned into the night air around him, a strange silence with a ticking heartbeat. Then he remembered the cufflinks. Crystal had tucked them into his shirt pocket. He checked. They weren't there. He plunged his hands into his pants pockets and then the tuxedo jacket. No cufflinks. He didn't have time to go back inside. He had to stop Travis from coming home.

When he climbed into the front seat, he looked out through the windshield, but the dome light inside the car and the darkness outside had changed the glass into a mirror. He turned away. His face was the last thing he wanted to see.