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White is the Color of Mourning

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Kaitlin Michelle Manry

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Thesis Committee:  
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2011

The thesis of Kaitlin Michelle Manry is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

### Author's Note

This is a work of creative nonfiction. It is based on extensive interviews and thousands of pages of documents, including court records, police reports and newspaper clippings. To protect the identity of the people in this story, their names have been changed, as have some of details pertaining to events and locations.

## **Alice Greer – Part One**

I peered through the cracked windshield of my Honda Civic at a row of houses with trim yards, red tiled roofs, and front porches supported by columns. The hillside neighborhood reminded me of upper-middle class suburban housing developments in Maryland, where I grew up, but this had a decidedly Californian feel. In my hometown near the West Virginia border, tracts of colonials and split-level houses back pastures with cows, cornstalks and horses. On oak and dogwood lined streets, D.C. commuters in SUVs bunch behind slow-moving tractors. Here, in this suburb east of Los Angeles, palm trees wobbled in the breeze and orange trees blossomed beside backyard pools. Houses coiled around a manmade lake speckled with yachts; gated beaches were accessible only to neighborhood residents.

I pulled in front of Alice Greer's house and parked by the curb, cursing myself for not having washed the film of desert dust off my car. Leaving my wallet and GPS on the passenger's seat, I grabbed a notebook and three pens, and headed for the front door. I tried to walk naturally, to remain calm. "It's going to be OK," I told myself. "You're prepared."

Over the last seven years, I had interviewed dozens of people immersed in tragedy, people with pain so pronounced, so visceral, it scared "normal people" away. I met with mothers, like Alice, who had lost a child to murder, then I rushed back to the office to turn their misery into a story for the next morning's newspaper. If the details

were heartbreaking enough, I posted an online update – “Mother mourns murdered daughter.”

I have always been drawn to stories of suffering. As a child, I collected paperbacks by Lurlene McDaniel about teenagers battling rare diseases. The titles on my bookshelf included *Too Young to Die*, and *Goodbye Doesn't Mean Forever*. I carried them up into the branches of the trees in the forest that surrounded the home where I grew up and read until my mom clanged the dinner bell. Then I'd wipe my eyes on my shirt sleeve, scurry down and join my parents, brother and sister at the dinner table. We bowed our heads in prayer, and ate the meal my dad had rushed home from his banking office in Baltimore to prepare. We discussed the drama of the day – the antics of the kids my mom taught, my dad's overly long meetings, the addition of extra laps at soccer practice, Bs that should have been As, or the screaming match between my sister and me over a borrowed jean skirt.

In high school, I collected books about the Holocaust, and in college, after a semester in Zimbabwe, I read anything I could find on injustice in Africa – *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* by Philip Gourevitch, *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela, *King Leopold's Ghost* by Adam Hochschild.

During my family's annual summer vacation on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, I lay on the beach with a dog-eared copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. My sister and my mom, who were both reading *The Devil Wears Prada*, heckled me ruthlessly.

“It’s the summer, Kait,” my mom said. “Loosen up. Read something happy for a change.”

It’s not that I didn’t read happy books. I did, plenty of them. I knew happy. I understood the emotion. After teaching street kids in Harare for four months, I appreciated how privileged my life had been, and not just with money – my family lived comfortably without trips to Europe or fancy cars – but with plain good luck. When I was in middle school, my grandpa, who took me camping each summer, died of a brain aneurysm as he drove to his school reunion in Georgia. He was the only person I loved who had died. No one in my family had cancer or spent weeks in a hospital recovering from a car crash. Even Dusty, my family’s rawboned mutt, chased squirrels until he was put down at 18. We lived comfortably. I knew my mom’s childhood was not so placid. Her mother baked bread for a living and her absent father rarely worked. Maybe because of that, she took great care to make sure my siblings and I were sheltered, but not spoiled. We never met her father, and did not even know he existed until a few months before his death. Still, she made sure we knew how fortunate we were by sending us to fix up houses in Appalachia and enrolling us in a companionship program at the local nursing home. Each Christmas, she lugged us to the mall to buy gifts for poor kids at her school.

“Why don’t we just go to Marshalls,” I suggested. “It’s cheaper there. Why should we buy them clothes from the Gap when we hardly go there?”

“Kaitlin Michelle Manry,” my mom snapped. “These kids wear clearance clothes every day. How would you feel if all your clothes came from Goodwill? You have no idea how hard they have it. We’re going to the mall and buying them nice things.”



In college, I majored in journalism and sociology. I researched homelessness, criminology and family structure, and dreamed of writing exposes on battered women and malnourished kids for the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*. College had prepared me, I believed, to give voice to the voiceless. I learned to always spell names correctly, to double check ages and verify facts with multiple sources. I aced classes on copy-editing symbols, computer-assisted reporting and feature writing. I graduated with a 4.0 GPA in my major, much of the AP Style Book memorized, and an earnest belief that, through journalism, I could bring people together and make the world a better place.

Then I got my first job as a general assignment reporter for the *Daily World*, a 15,000 circulation paper in the wilting logging town of Aberdeen on the Washington coast. I remember driving over railroad tracks, past boarded up buildings and brawny dogs chained to trees, to a small clapboard house on an industrialized riverbank. An editor had sent me to try to interview Patricia and Robert Holmin. Gary Ridgeway had just confessed to murdering their daughter 20 years earlier. She was found, dead and tortured, on Mother's Day 1983 with a dead fish on her breast and ground beef in her palm. A wine bottle balanced on her body.

I had stumbled through phone interviews with grieving families before – parents who lost children to car crashes, war and disease. In college I spent hours on the phone with a woman whose bipolar son had just killed himself. We hung up late at night, and she called back a few minutes later to talk for another hour. That conversation, and the subsequent story, were emotionally difficult for me, but there is a certain distance that

exists on the phone, an inability to see or touch the other person. Driving to the Holmins' house, I longed for that distance.

I sat in my car longer than I should have, knowing I needed to get out, to knock on the door. I had a business card ready to hand to whoever answered, but no idea what to say. I imagined crying parents screaming at me for disrupting their mourning, for making a spectacle of their grief. I knew they wouldn't want to talk to me. Why would they? What could I possibly offer – the opportunity to cry in public? I was 22. I didn't have kids. I had never even been in love. Hiding in my car, trying to work up the nerve to get out, I realized for the first time I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. I wanted to turn around and head back to the office. I'd shrug my shoulders. "Sorry boss, they didn't want to talk." But I couldn't. TV crews were probably already driving down from Seattle. If anyone from the Holmin household wound up on the evening news, I'd be in trouble.

I made myself open the car door, forced myself to stand and walk across the gravel driveway, up the steps onto the front porch. A woman with long feathered hair and a weathered face answered. I do not recall what I said, though I'm sure it was awkward. What I remember, what I will always remember, is how she looked me over, lingering on my face, then stepped outside and joined me on the porch. "Call me Pattie," she said. She talked about hearing of her daughter's death on the evening news, about shopping for a scarf to bury her in that would cover the scar, about trying to go on and raise her 10 living children, but being unable to get past the murder.

Pattie cried as she spoke, and after a few minutes, her husband joined her on the porch. Robert Holmin was a barrel-chested man who had worked in shake mills and at an

Ocean Spray plant. Now, at 76, he was a custodian. "Still working," he said. "That's my therapy."

Robert tucked an arm around his wife. He said he had yet to make any sense of his daughter's murder.

"I don't think it's fair," he told me. "I've never mistreated the family. I've been 52 years married. And that's the way the cookie crumbles day by day."

The Holmins had spent two decades searching for closure, thinking it was just around the corner. First when their daughter went missing, then again when mushroom pickers found the body, later when police said they suspected she was a victim of the yet unnamed Green River Killer, again with Gary Ridgeway's arrest.

"We won't get closure until he's put away," Robert said, wiping his eyes. "That's it. That's the end of it."

I stood there, taking notes furiously, writing so as not to comprehend the words, to get them right. Still, I felt Robert and Pattie's grief seeping into my skin. I struggled to be professional, to remember to ask them to spell their names twice.

I drove back to the office with the radio off, replaying their words in my head and meditating on the idea of closure. "Can people ever get over something like this," I wondered. "How do they go on with life?"

I ran marathons. I traveled in Zimbabwe instead of Europe. At 21, while my friends clustered in Columbus and Baltimore, I moved across the country to a coast where I knew no one. My struggles were self-inflicted. It was all, I realized, so

superficial. Back at the office, I typed my story on deadline: 1,020 words to sum up 20 years of misery.

In the coming months and years, I thought of the Holmins often. I wondered if they ever found closure, if they still thought of their daughter every day. Each time I pulled up to another victim's house, Pattie's tear-streaked face flashed through my mind.

With time and practice, I got better at interviewing grieving families. There were so many. Dead kids and their killers kept finding me. Even after I switched newspapers and began covering education, every few months a child died in an accident or through violence, and I wrote about it. I still felt uneasy on the drive over, and there was still a moment of hesitancy before I knocked, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't easier. I cranked out the stories quickly, went home, made dinner, flicked on *The Daily Show* and downed a glass of wine. In the newsroom, I joined in crime scene jokes. I understood cop humor. Sometimes I caught myself laughing at bizarre deaths, and wondered how I could be so callous. I assured myself it was normal – a reporter's way of coping. If you don't laugh, you don't move on. And if you don't move on, you could never do the job.

I did not cry, not even once, over a death I wrote about. One mother whose teenage daughter died the day before led me into the girl's bedroom. Jeans lay crumpled on the floor. A half-empty bottle of Gatorade sat on the dresser. When death comes without warning, in neighborhoods where it is not the norm, reporters like me Hoover like vultures. Flashes of crying parents and makeshift memorials appear on the evening news. Sometimes these video-clips are replayed when the cases go to court. If the details are gruesome enough, or the victim especially young or likeable, we interview lawyers and

family on courthouse steps. And then it is over. We put the paper to bed and move on to the next crash, the next murder, the next doorstep.

Moving on is not the same as forgetting. Long after my stories were buried in the recycling bin, tossed out by all but the people in them, I wondered about the parents, about the brothers and sisters, about the murderers and their families. I imagined them tangled in cobwebs, with uncut hair and dust suffocating their clothes – modern day Ms. Havishams. I never went back to find out.

And still, I can't forget those jeans, still curved from a girl's muscular legs or Pattie Holmin's tears.

So I walked through California's desert heat, toward Alice Greer's house in an act of journalistic penance. I had quit my newspaper job and vowed to spend two years with the families of murder victims and with the murderers, finding out what happens when the news is over. I wanted to understand how people continue living in the midst of such pain. I was 29. My boyfriend and I were talking about settling down and having kids. I had yet to experience tragedy first hand. My grandfathers had died old and happy. My grandmothers were in their 80s, still going to church and organizing family dinners. I wrote about car crashes and murders, terminal illnesses and drownings monthly, but none of these things had befallen anyone I loved. It seemed unfair and I felt guilty. Circling the periphery of tragedy had made me somewhat paranoid. I ended every phone call to my parents with "I love you." I did not let my boyfriend leave the house if he was angry. I lectured him about driving slowly, and worried each time news of an accident crackled across the police scanner on the crime reporter's desks. I yelled if he got home late and

hadn't called to warn me. I refused to drive if I felt even tinges of tipsiness after a glass of wine. I sensed my good luck would end soon, and I had no idea how I would react when it did. There was something to be learned, I thought, from women who had buried their children and gone on living. I wanted to ask them how they managed the pain. I wanted to know if they forgave, if they ever found closure, if they felt any connection to the murderers whose names are forever linked with theirs. I wondered how time and circumstances had changed the killers. Did they think of the women whose children they had taken? What did they regret?

After seven years of daily deadlines, I was looking forward to lingering on a single story. I still thought of it as work, as something apart from me. But already the lines were blurring. Since I had quit my newspaper job, I did not have access to a work phone, so I called Alice Greer on my personal cell – a Maryland number I never gave to sources. I prided myself on my ability to separate my work life from my personal one. I did not check work e-mail at home. I did not watch TV news. Unlike many of my colleagues, I did not follow plumes of smoke and sirens to disaster sites when I was off the clock. I gave my cell number to Alice because I had just quit my reporting job and needed to be frugal. It made me uncomfortable, but I worried if I waited until I could afford a work phone, I would lose Alice as a source. Besides, I told myself, it was a small thing.

I smoothed my dress pants and straightened my jacket. Alice had agreed to meet with me. She invited me to her house. I should not have felt like a voyeur leaning out the window, gawking at a mangled car, but I did. I needed to make a good first impression. It

had taken dozens of phone calls and e-mails to lawyers, support groups, and advocacy organizations to find someone with such an old wound willing to pick it open in front of me, someone willing to share her story, knowing I would be asking the person responsible for her pain for his story too, knowing the story I wrote would belong to both the murderer and the victim.

A sign by the door read “Knock loudly.” I rapped with my knuckles, firm but not too hard. Inside I heard a dog barking wildly, then footsteps.

Alice opened the door and I quickly stuck out my hand. She was about my height, plump, with pale skin and wire-rimmed glasses. Short gray hair framed her face. A button with a girl’s photo was pinned to her emerald green shirt. The girl looked to be around 5 years old. She had silky brown hair that curled under at her chin and chubby cheeks bookending a toothy grin. A paisley blouse buttoned up around her neck. Under the photo a banner read “Leah Marie Smith. January 22, 1965 – December 6, 1976.”

“That must be Leah,” I said, pointing to the button. “She’s very cute.”

“Yes,” Alice said, caressing the plastic shield. “She had a nice smile.”

She held the door open and led me through a living room framed with Thomas Kinkadee paintings and studio portraits of smiling children.

“My grandchildren,” she said, noticing my gaze. I followed her to a dining room table cluttered with craft supplies and books.

“Excuse the mess. Hopefully it’ll all be gone this weekend after the garage sale.”

She collected a pile of papers and stacked them on the floor.

“Have a seat,” she said with a slight high pitched Maryland accent that reminded me of home. “What can I tell you?”

### **Gaithersburg, Maryland – December 1976**

Leah Smith held a burger with both hands, licking grease off her thumb as it dribbled toward the cuff of her favorite pale pink quilted coat. She strained to hear Jingle Bells playing over the loudspeaker in the mall outside the restaurant. Twenty-three more days to Christmas and Leah couldn't wait. It had always been her favorite holiday. Presents in front of the tree, stockings nailed to the mantel, a big dinner with her grandparents, aunts and uncles. She loved the bright twinkle of Christmas lights on dark nights, the poinsettias blooming on the church altar, the jubilant rise and fall of Christmas carols. On the weekend after Thanksgiving, as soon as wreaths and red satin bows had taken over the mall, Leah and her little brother, Sammy, took their turn on Santa's knee. Their mom, Alice Greer, already had the photo framed and sitting in their Gaithersburg apartment. She could track Leah's growth through photos with Santa. The first was taken in 1965, a month before Leah's first birthday. In the photo, Leah holds a stuffed turtle; her fine hair is reddish brown, her face plump and pale. Eleven photos later, Leah is wearing her pink quilted coat and her usual cheek-to-cheek smile. She appears to be squatting just above Santa's knee, like she was afraid that if she put her full weight on him she might crush his leg.



“Alright Leah, you almost done?” Alice asked from across the booth.

Leah nodded, then ate a few more French fries, lightly dipping each in ketchup.

“OK. Let’s go,” Leah said, wiping her mouth with a paper napkin.

She followed her mom into the mall. Walking side by side, their resemblance was striking. Leah and Alice shared the same porcelain skin, high cheek bones and rounded chin. They both had slender frames and eyes so brown they sometimes looked black in photographs. Leah’s chocolate brown hair curled under her chin in a bob, while Alice covered her stringy hair with a poufy brown wig that flared out around her ears. Wigs were in style. Some local banks even lured women in by offering a free wig to anyone who opened a checking account. Alice wore hers most days and placed it on a stand on her dresser each night. She jokingly called it Josephine.

As they walked through the atrium of the mall, Leah pointed to a Christmas tree draped in tinsel.

“It looks so pretty,” she said.

“I know,” Alice replied. “I love Christmas, too; but enough dilly-dallying. We have a lot of shopping to do. Let’s get cracking.”

They scoured the sale racks at Montgomery Ward and Hecht’s, filling bags and crossing items off the gift list Alice kept in her purse. Leah was finally at the age where she enjoyed shopping – trying on clothes and searching for bargains – and Alice relished spending this time together. As they headed back toward the mall entrance, Alice slowed in front of a jewelry store.

“Why don’t we go in?” she said, smiling at Leah.

Leah gazed at rows of diamond rings and ruby bracelets, her breath fogging the glass display case.

“Look over here at the birthstone jewelry,” Alice said. “Maybe it’s time you had something nice. I think you’re old enough to take care of it now.”

“Oh, Mom! They’re so pretty.”

“See that one,” Alice said, pointing to a gold ring topped with a chiseled red gem. “That’s garnet – January’s birthstone.”

“Look at how it sparkles,” Leah said.

“It is beautiful, Leah. Maybe you should ask Santa.”

Alice winked at her daughter. Leah was too excited at the prospect of a real ring to roll her eyes.

They arrived back at their apartment, arms weighed down with shopping bags. They threw the gifts on the sofa. Leah plopped down next to them and slipped off her Keds.

“I’m pooped.”

“Time for homework, Leah,” Alice chimed.

“Aw, Mom. I don’t feel like it. I’m too tired. And I don’t know how to do it anyways.”

“I bet Bryan would help you. Why don’t you go ask him?”

“I don’t wanna,” Leah pouted.

Alice gave her daughter the I-am-your-mother-and-you-best-do-what-I-say-right-now look. She wanted Leah and Bryan to get along. Alice had married Bryan three weeks

earlier, in a small ceremony at Silver Springs Baptist Church. Initially Alice was hesitant to hold the service in the same chapel where, at 18, she had married her high school sweetheart, but it was the church she grew up in, the only church she had ever known, and she could not imagine marrying anywhere else. Since the wedding Alice had been watching her children closely for signs of maladjustment. She wanted Bryan to become a second father to them, but worried that she was pushing too hard. Each time Leah raised her voice, or Sammy stared off while he was supposed to be doing homework, Alice worried she was to blame. She married too young, she divorced, she remarried. Guilt was part of motherhood, she realized, though that knowledge did not make it any easier. She dipped into her savings to send Leah to counseling sessions, and Sammy to a hospital where he could be tested for learning disabilities. He was there now, and Alice missed him.

Alice sighed watching her daughter stomp toward her bedroom, shoulders hunched.

A few minutes later, Bryan tapped on the door to Leah's room.

"I heard you may need help."

He eased himself onto the carpet next to his stepdaughter.

"So what's going on? What can I help you with, Leah?"

"It's economics. I read the chapter, I just don't see how I'm supposed to answer these questions. The answers aren't in here."

Bryan took the book from Leah and skimmed the pages.

“Look at question one,” he said. “OK, now why don’t you read this paragraph again. The answer is here, Leah.”

She followed along with her finger, mouthing the words.

“Oh yeah, I see it now,” she said, smiling sheepishly.

They worked side-by-side, leaning against the closet door. A few weeks earlier, Leah and her friend Peter Friot had squeezed into that closet while their parents were still at work. Tripping over shoes, dresses brushing against their foreheads, they kissed – a quick, nervous peck – while Leah’s best friend, Annie, giggled playfully outside the door. Since then, neither Peter nor Leah had brought the kiss up, and now Leah was interested in someone else. At 13, Peter was older than most of Leah’s friends. He went to Belt Jr. High, where she would go next fall. She could hardly wait. Leah knew other kids made fun of Peter for his glasses and the bulky book bag that hung on his back like a turtle shell. Everyone else just carried their books to school. Kids regularly tore Peter’s book bag from his shoulders and bandied it back and forth over his head, before inevitably heaving it into a mud puddle. Peter was kind of chubby, with shaggy brown hair that hung down over his pimply forehead. Still, he was always up for a game of hide-and-seek or tag and, since he lived just a few doors down, he and Leah played together frequently. They had seen each other in the yard and by the playground several times since their moment in the closet. They talked same as usual. The kiss was their quick, little secret. No one but Annie knew. Certainly Leah’s mom and stepdad didn’t have a clue. If they even suspected a boy had been over when no adults were home, Leah would have been grounded for weeks.

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Leah woke on December 5<sup>th</sup> to wind rapping on the window beside her bed. She burrowed under the comforter.

“Leah. Time to get up,” her mom called from the hallway in a sing-song voice.

Groaning, Leah scooted out of bed. She pulled on a sweater and jeans and joined her mom in the kitchen. Without Sammy it seemed kind of quiet.

“Don’t forget your hat and gloves today,” Alice warned before leaving for work. “WTOP says it’s supposed to be 11 degrees in Baltimore. That would be record-breaking cold. Bundle up.”

Alice bent over and kissed Leah’s cheek.

“Have a nice day. Be good. See you later.”

“Bye, Mom.”

Leah walked out the door. Seven hours later, she walked home shivering, hugging books against her chest and hiding her hands in her coat sleeves. Cold wind blew tears from her eyes and whipped her hair across her numb face. She flung open the door to her building and rushed inside. The apartments were a hodgepodge of brick and siding, designed to look like townhomes. From the outside, it looked like each door led to a single three-story house but, in reality, the doors opened onto apartment stairwells. Leah’s apartment was on the bottom level. Its three bedroom layout cut across brick and siding – what looked on the outside to be four townhomes.

Once inside the apartment, she tossed her books on her bed and considered her options. It was Friday afternoon and her mom wouldn't be home from work for another two hours. Leah knew she should start her homework. That's what she was supposed to do, but she had the whole weekend to get it done.

Leah wound her scarf around her neck, pulled on her gloves and dashed out the door. Frozen grass crunched underfoot as she jogged across the lawn. She slowed, shuffling across the icy road that separated the apartment complex from a row of two-story brick houses where Annie lived. Each had a big front porch and was identical except for the bicycles and hula hoops strewn on the lawns in the summer, and now by the Christmas lights twinkling like stars from trees, bushes and awnings.

Leah stamped on the doormat and knocked on Annie's door with her gloved hands. Annie joined Leah on the front porch.

"Hi. I'm bored," Leah said. "Do you wanna visit Peter with me? I hear he's got a cast."

The girls scurried across the road, over the lawn, past Leah's apartment. They stopped three doors down in front of building 12714. They opened the door and bounded up two flights of stairs, arriving, panting, in front of Peter's third floor apartment.

"Peter, it's Leah and Annie," they sang through the crack in the door. "Let us in."

They heard a thud and then, "OK. Coming."

A few thuds later, Peter opened the door leaning on crutches, his right foot encased in a cast that ended right below the knee. He smiled and propped the door open, thrilled to have visitors. Like Leah, he quickly decided that even a few minutes of

conversation was worth breaking the rules and risking getting caught by his mom with guests over. Besides, he had drafted a plan a few weeks ago and knew exactly where he would hide his friends if his mom ever came home early and he had to act fast. And of all days, today he needed company. A ninth grader had trailed him through the halls as Peter hobbled to his art class. The older boy repeatedly stuck his leg between Peter's crutches, trying to trip him. Peter responded by waving a crutch at the boy and yelling, over and over, "Leave me alone!" The principal wound up calling Peter's mom and Peter knew he was in for a talking to. Leah and Annie were just the thing to take his mind off the dread of a possible punishment.

"Hi guys," Peter said.

"Hi Crippled Prisoner," they said in unison, their noses crinkling with laughter.

"Ha. Ha. Very funny."

"Look at that cast. It's huge," Leah said. "Does it hurt?"

"Nah. Not really. It did at first. Not so much now. But it itches like heck."

Leah and Annie followed Peter into the living room and sunk into his mom's sofa. He sat awkwardly across from them on an easy chair, his cast dangling over the carpet.

They talked for a few minutes. Annie and Leah crumpling into laughter each time one of them said "Crippled Prisoner." Then it got kind of quiet.

"Do you want to see something cool?" Peter asked.

"Uh – yeah. Of course."

"OK. Stay here. I'll be right back," he said, disappearing into this mom's room.

He opened her closet, and reached into the pocket of her housecoat, pulling out a tattered, faded evening bag. He had discovered it a few months ago, riffling through his mom's room out of boredom after school. He had gone back to it many times. Always in awe that something in his mom's room, something in an ugly old purse, could wield such power, such gravity. That his mom could have something like this and keep it a secret. That he could live with it for 13 years and never know.

Peter plucked the .32 caliber pistol from the bag and held it briefly in his outstretched palm, the metal smooth and cool as a penny flattened on railroad tracks. He placed it in his jeans pocket so the faux wooden handle poked out a little, like the guns in John Bryan's holster. Peter hobbled back to the living room, laid his crutches on the floor and lowered himself into the chair across from Leah and Annie. They gaped as he pulled the pistol from his pocket.

"Is that real?"

"No way. It can't be."

Peter smiled and nodded.

"Yep," he said. He waved the gun around in his right hand, aiming at lamps, the table, the television. He notched the hammer back with his thumb. The girls' chatter muffled the soft click. He lowered his hand onto the chair's arm, so the gun pointed at the girls. With the gun in his hand, he felt tough. Way bigger than his five feet. The kind of guy other guys respect and girls want to date.

"Wanna see it shoot?" he asked.



Peter knew how to curl his pointer finger around the trigger and press until it gave. On a handful of occasions he had done just that pretending to shoot bad guys in his mom's room. Though without bullets nothing ever happened, the mere click of the trigger filled him with excitement, a rush like no other.

His hand balanced on the armrest, his lips still curled in a smile, Peter pulled the trigger and heard a pop that reminded him of lady finger fire crackers.

Leah slumped, then fell off the couch onto the carpet. She landed on one of Peter's crutches. At first, Peter thought Leah was goofing. Then he noticed a small red spot on Leah's left cheek, right under her eye. Someone screamed. Peter couldn't be sure who. Forgetting about his cast, Peter stood and started to walk toward Leah. He tripped and landed on the ground beside his friend.

He pressed his ear to Leah's chest. He couldn't hear anything. He put his hand a few inches from her mouth and felt the soft tickle of her breath. Blood trickled down her face, into her hair.

He looked over at Annie. She had gotten off the couch and was standing beside Leah. Her head pointed down at Leah, but it did not look like could see. Annie's eyes were hazed and unfocused.

"Help me move her off my crutch," Peter screamed.

Annie turned and ran from the apartment, leaving the door open. Peter tried to focus and remember the first aid lessons from Boy Scouts. How to splint a sprained ankle. How to make a tourniquet from a T-shirt. Nothing about bullet wounds. He stood and hobbled, his right leg dragging behind him, to the kitchen. Still holding the gun, he

called 911 and screamed at the operator. “Someone’s been shot. My friend’s been shot.”

He carried the phone back to the living room. He sat beside Leah and waited for help.

“Open your eyes. Please open your eyes Leah,” he begged, again and again, his voice breaking. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Please open your eyes.”

Leah’s legs jerked and her arms twitched, but her eyes remained closed.

“Stay still, Leah,” Peter cried. “I’m sorry. Please just stay still.”

Leah made small noises, soft grunts.

That’s good, Peter thought. She’s making noises. That’s a good sign. She’s gonna be alright.

A siren shrieked outside and, seconds later, men carrying medical kits barreled through the open door. They dropped to their knees around Leah.

## Alice Greer – Part Two

“What can I get you to drink – Pepsi, Sprite, coffee, tea, juice?” Alice asked.

“Water would be great,” I replied.

She padded into the kitchen, leaving me in the dining room with Lucy Girl, a yellow lab that would not stop barking. Lucy Girl examined me from a few feet’s distance, yapping, her tail dragging on the floor. I offered my hand to sniff. She took a step forward and growled.

“Lucy!” Alice yelled sternly from the kitchen. “She’s with me. Be quiet!”

“Don’t mind her,” Alice said, returning to the living room. “She’s just protective of me. She’s fine when I’m not here.”

Alice placed a dimpled glass of ice water on a coaster in front of me, and another by her seat. We chatted for a few minutes about Maryland, where we both grew up, and about our connections in California.

“Agnes gave me your number a while back and said I should call,” she said. “She said you were looking for someone who lost their child a long time ago.”

“Yes,” I said, hesitating, not wanting to rush into things. “I’m working on this project. I want to interview people who lost children to violence at various points in time. I have a lot of contacts in Washington, but not many here. I’ve been calling around to different organizations. That’s how I met Agnes.”

Alice nodded. I studied her face, trying to gauge whether to continue with my spiel. She looked OK – comfortable more or less. She wasn’t crying, and she held my

gaze when I spoke. But I worried that if I told her about the other part of my project she would get upset and refuse to participate. Getting interviews with inmates drowning in time seemed fairly easy. Finding mothers who would speak to me, knowing that I was also corresponding with their child's murderer, seemed like a tougher order. I worried that just vocalizing the words would cause mothers to judge me. I considered waiting and telling her at the end of our discussion, but that felt slimy. Just get it over with, I told myself.

“The other thing is that I also plan to contact the people convicted of the crimes I am writing about. Did Agnes tell you that? I know it's a lot to take in, but I want to be upfront.”

“Yes,” Alice said. Her voice remained the same solid line. “Agnes mentioned it. That's fine with me.”

I waited for her to continue. She didn't.

“Well, thank you so much for inviting me over. I'm sure this must be difficult for you. I can't even imagine.”

Alice's hands were folded on the table. So were mine. Condensation fogged the water glasses neither of us had touched. My notebook lay closed beside me. Self-consciously, I reached for it and turned back the cover to a fresh page. I took the cap off my pen.

“I'd love to know more about Leah. What was she like?”

Alice took a deep breath and looked down.

“I tell this story to strangers like it’s history. She’s been gone 33 years. She would have been 45 last month. She’s been dead three times longer than she lived. These are just numbers.”

“But what was your daughter like? What memories do you have of her?” I asked, thinking these questions would get Alice to open up. As a reporter, they were the first questions I asked grieving families in the aftermath of tragedy. They often would not want to talk about the death or the events leading to it, but people, even in the toughest times, usually want to share memories. They want people to feel their loss not through the gruesome details of death, but by appreciating what was lost.

Alice sighed. She seemed flustered.

“I went to a conference for Parents of Murdered Children in Denver. They told us to write the things we remember. I said, ‘My daughter’s been dead for 30 years, I can’t remember much.’ The woman told me, ‘Just write down what you remember. Write your memories.’ I felt awful. I couldn’t do it. So much time has passed. It’s not like she lived long enough to be an outstanding high school athlete. She wasn’t married. She didn’t have kids. She was just a little girl. It’s hard to remember things. She had a bright smile. She went to Baptist Church and was in the Baptist Auxiliary and she took majorette lessons. I still have her uniform.”

Alice looked at me, then down at the table. She seemed embarrassed, like she didn’t want to disappoint.

“Do you know Art Linkletter?” she asked, hopefully.

“I think I’ve heard of him.”

“He hosted the show, ‘Kids Say The Darndest Things.’ That’s probably before your time.”

“No. I’ve heard of it,” I said, rummaging through my brain for a memory that wouldn’t come.

“Well Leah took dance lessons at the Art Linkletter Dance Studio,” Alice said eagerly. “The founder of the Marriot – his daughter took lessons with Leah.”

“Really? That must have been exciting. Did Art Linkletter actually teach there?”

“I don’t think so, but his picture was everywhere.”

Silence.

“That’s really it,” she said, her voice shifting to a sadder octave. “She went to parades as a majorette. Other than that she was just a girl in a family. I remember when Bryan and I got married – it was the second marriage for both of us – we had our guests on back to our apartment after the ceremony for a small reception. We had our guests put their coats on her bed. Boy did that make her mad. All those coats on her bed. I told her, ‘It’s my wedding.’”

“With my first husband, we took a vacation to New York City. We visited the UN and the Statue of Liberty. I remember going to the World’s Fair in New York in ’64 and ’65, the last week before it closed. Leah cried for 30 miles on the way home from New York to Maryland. In old days, car seats sat between you and the driver. She got a tooth the next day.

“She was my first child, my parents’ first grandchild. Her dad’s mother had two boys, five grandchildren. Leah was the only girl. We loved her so much.”

She paused, as I scribbled notes in my steno pad.

“Do you want to know about what happened?” she asked.

“Yes, but we don’t have to do that right now. I imagine it’s really difficult for you. I can get most of that from other sources. I still need to look through newspaper archives. We can talk about something else.”

“It’s OK,” she said, seeming relieved. “I don’t mind. That’s telling history. That’s not hard.”

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### **Gaithersburg, Maryland – December 1976**

The first call came while Alice was across the hall chatting with co-workers in the Food & Drug Administration. She filed papers and arranged appointments on the fifth floor of an 18-story gray E-shaped building. Rows of sleek black windows reflected views of nearby offices, cars, and graves from the adjacent cemetery. She felt proud to work in such a modern building – one of the tallest in the Baltimore suburb of Rockville. But it was Friday afternoon and, like most of her co-workers, Alice was focused on tying up loose ends so she could start her weekend. Bryan, her husband of three weeks, would be at the office any minute to pick her up. They planned to stop by the Silver Sleigh on the way home for a Hummel figurine Bryan had ordered for Alice. Alice recently started collecting the cherubic porcelain characters and was looking forward to taking a new one

home. The collection was special for her and Bryan – a symbol of their romance. Bryan bought the first one a few months earlier at a gift shop outside of Texas. He and Alice were driving back to Maryland after a visit with Bryan’s daughter, Kimberly, when he unexpectedly pulled off the road, walked into a gift shop and returned with a figurine of a chubby little girl.

“Who collects Hummels?” Alice asked.

“Well I guess you do now,” he replied with a smile.

The Hummel they ordered from the Silver Sleigh was an early Christmas gift for Alice, and they wanted to pick it up together.

As Alice readied the office for the weekend, dropping off paperwork down the hall, the phone on her desk rang. Eventually, the police officer on the other end hung up.

He called again a few minutes later, while Alice waited in the lobby, her eyes trained on the street searching for Bryan’s new emerald green ’76 Grand Prix. One of her co-workers answered the phone.

“I’m sorry. She left for the weekend. You might try her at home.”

As EMTs rushed Leah out of the ambulance, into the emergency room at Suburban Hospital in Bethesda, Alice and Bryan were six miles away, perusing the aisles of the Silver Sleigh gift shop, hand in hand. Afterward, they stopped at a gas station. Bryan hopped out of the car into the freezing evening air to fill up the tank.

They pulled into their apartment complex’s parking lot between 5:30 and 5:45 p.m. – more than an hour after a bullet shattered Leah’s left cheekbone.



“Wow, look at all those police cars,” Bryan said, nodding at the black and whites crowding the spots in front of their building. “I wonder what’s going on.”

“I bet it’s the guy who lives upstairs,” Alice said in a low voice, as if anyone could hear her inside the car. “You know he’s always drinking – and he’s not a quiet drunk. He must have gotten into some sort of trouble.”

“Yeah, maybe he was caught driving drunk,” Bryan said.

“Or a bar fight,” Alice said. “They’re probably waiting for him to get home to arrest him.”

Bryan finally found an empty spot in front of a building several doors down. Alice shivered as she stepped out of the car. The breeze went straight through her pantyhose. The forecasts had proved correct. At 11 degrees, it was the coldest December 5<sup>th</sup> in history. Women’s work clothes were not designed for Maryland winters, Alice thought. Skirts and slacks were no good if all you could wear underneath were pantyhose. Long johns and wool socks just didn’t go with maxi skirts.

She walked in the glow of streetlamps and Christmas lights past police cars, her pumps clicking on the sidewalk. Uniformed men with flashlights huddled by patrol cars, whispering. Alice followed Bryan into their building, down a few stairs and into their apartment.

“Leah, we’re home,” Alice called. “Leah, where are you?”

The apartment was quiet.

Alice walked down the hall to Leah’s room. Her school books were strewn on the bed, but the room was quiet and as dark as the rest of the house.

“Where the heck is that girl?” Alice murmured, flicking on lights. “She’s gonna be in trouble.”

The only person Leah was allowed to play with afterschool without adult supervision was Annie. Alice picked up the phone and dialed Annie’s number.

“Hello,” Annie’s father said gruffly.

It was odd to hear him on the phone. In all the years the girls had been friends, David had never answered the phone when Alice called. It was always Annie or her mom, JoAnn.

“Hi. It’s Alice Greer. I just got home. Leah’s not here. Do you know where she is?”

“No I don’t,” he said. He hung up quickly, without saying goodbye.

“That’s so strange,” Alice said aloud, starting to worry. “Where could she be?”

Just then a knock sounded at the front door.

Alice exhaled, relieved.

“That must be her.”

She and Bryan walked together to entryway and pulled the door open, ready to confront Leah. Instead they found a man in a black police uniform and a man and woman in slacks and winter coats who introduced themselves as detectives.

Where is Leah? Alice wondered to herself, starting to panic. Why isn’t she here with them?

The two men motioned for Bryan to join them outside in the stairwell. The woman took Alice’s arm and guided her into the living room.

“Have a seat,” she said, gesturing toward the couch.

Alice eased herself onto the cushion. It sagged slightly under her weight. The couch was supposed to be off-limits from juice and milk and shoes, but children forget, or pretend to forget. The cushions had been flipped to hide stains, then again to hide bigger stains. In the evenings, after Sammy and Leah had finished their homework, sometimes they relaxed on the couch together and watched *The Muppets* or *Family Feud*. Sammy leaning against Alice’s shoulder; Leah’s lean legs stretched across Alice’s lap. Once the kids were in bed, Alice and Bryan snuggled on the couch, sipping white zinfandel and watching *Charlie’s Angels*. The sofa’s plaid print had faded, but it suited a family with two children. Now, Alice sat on the couch alone. She thought of Leah and Sammy, and wished they were there with her – watching *The Muppets*, munching on popcorn fresh from the stovetop.

“Are you Leah Smith’s mom?” the woman asked.

“Yes. What did she do – break a window?”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but she’s been shot. She’s at Suburban Hospital.”

“What are you talking about?” Alice asked shrilly. “I don’t understand?”

“We’re still investigating, but it looks like she was playing with some friends after school, Peter Friot and Annie Soron, and somehow a gun went off. I’m so sorry, but Leah’s not going to make it.”

In the hallway, confronted with the same news, Bryan, tried to keep a clear head.

“Can we take her to Baltimore Shock and Trauma Center?” he asked.

“No,” the detective said, shaking his head. “It’s too late. The bullet entered the brain and never left.”

Alice wanted to rush to the hospital. She needed to be with her baby, but first she called Leah’s father, Don Smith, then her parents. Alice knew she wouldn’t be able to make phone calls at the hospital, and they would want to see Leah. She had been the first girl on both sides of the family. Her father, grandparents, aunts and uncles adored her. Alice wanted them to have a chance to say goodbye. She made the calls in a daze, tears slipping down her cheeks. With each call, it became a little more real.

“Leah’s been shot. She’s dying,” Alice wailed. “No, this is not a joke. She was shot with a gun. You have to go to Suburban Hospital.”

She wound the phone cord around her wrist and stared through tears at the police officers, willing them to jump in and correct her – admit their mistake. “Smile, you’re on Candid Camera,” they’d say, and Leah would waltz through the door twirling her baton

The police officers huddled together in the entryway, their heads tilted down.

“We’ll escort you to the hospital,” one said.

“No. That’s OK,” Bryan said. “We know the way.”

A few minutes later, Alice and Bryan ran back outside to the car. Bryan drove fast, coasting through stop signs. Alice looked out the window; red, green and white Christmas lights flashed through the black, blurring with her tears.

Bryan dropped Alice off in front of the ER. She dashed into the hospital, but it wasn’t like in the movies, when people sprint into the ER and nurses immediately point them toward the room where a loved one lies dying. Papers had to be signed. Insurance

cards handed over. Room numbers verified. When Alice finally arrived at her daughter's door in the Intensive Care Unit, she wanted to believe that when she turned the knob Leah would wake up. She would get through this, just like she had gotten through tumbles from her bike and bruises from baton twirling.

“Please, God,” Alice prayed. “Please.”

Leah was stretched out on a gurney, her eyes closed. White tape pressed against her cheeks, like the white surrounding a circus clown's smile. It held a tube inside her mouth that snaked like an umbilical cord to a ventilator buzzing by the bed. There was a Band-Aid under her left eye. Just a Band-Aid. She looked like someone who was going to get better. Someone on the brink of recovery.

Alice stroked Leah's silky hair and cried. She gingerly touched her daughter's arms and her face, just as she had 11 years earlier the first time she held Leah.

Leah's father shoved the door open and charged in. Brushing against the white curtain that separated Leah from her roommate, another coma patient, he rushed to his daughter. At 5'11" Don Smith was strong and thin as a runner, with light eyes, fair skin and the same walnut colored hair as Sammy. He caressed Leah's pale hand with his calloused one. Tears slipped down his face.

“Sweet heart. It's your Daddy. I'm here baby. Wake up.”

“She doesn't look that bad,” he said hopefully to Alice. “There must be something they can try.”

A doctor in a blue scrubs walked in and introduced himself. He held a metal clipboard with one hand, and shook their hands with the other.

“The bullet entered her left zygomaticofacial foramen and went into the brain. It lodged there. We tried to save her, but there was too much damage. There’s nothing we can do. I have the x-ray if you’d like to see it.”

Alice nodded. Of course she wanted to see it. Working in human resources at the FDA, she hired people to read and administer x-rays. She knew the questions to ask, but since she had never been taught how to interpret x-rays, examining them was like trying to read a map in a different language. Still, what mother would not want to look inside her daughter for clues to the unexplainable?

The doctor clipped an x-ray onto a light board. Alice sucked in her breath, stunned. It was the first time she had seen her daughter’s bones. Alice knew Leah’s exterior intimately – the subtle cleft in her chin, the narrow ridge of her nose, the upper lip that curled slightly under when she smiled. The x-ray the doctor pointed to bore no resemblance to the girl Alice knew. Leah’s skull, round and white, looked dead already – a skeleton. Alice had not seen Leah without hair since she was a baby, and Alice could not comprehend that this bald skull belonged to her daughter.

“See that,” the doctor said, pointing to a leach-like smudge even whiter than the rest. “That’s the bullet.”

It was the size of a fingertip – so small, but clearly there, inside her daughter where it did not belong. Looking at that bullet, Alice knew. She wanted to believe in a miracle. She had attended Sunday school classes since she was a toddler. She could recite dozens of Bible verses by memory. She read stories about Jesus and the disciples aloud to Leah and Sammy and told them, “With God, anything is possible.” But standing by her

daughter's cot, looking at the x-ray, she knew. If Leah had been shot in the arm or leg, she would need therapy; she might even lose a limb, but she could survive. She could finish elementary school and move onto middle school in the fall. She could go to homecoming and prom and college. She could fall in love and, one day, have kids and grandkids. But a bullet in the brain was too much. People with bullets lodged in their brains do not wake up.

A nurse escorted Alice, Don and Bryan into a small white room. Their tears shone under the fluorescent lights. It was the first time Alice had seen her new husband cry. Bryan sat with his arm around Alice's shoulders. Don sat on the other side of Alice. She reached for his hand. The nurse cleared her throat.

"I need to ask if you would be willing to donate Leah's organs. We have a young mother who is on dialysis and needs a kidney to live. She has a two week old daughter. I know this is hard decision, but it will not affect your daughter's outcome."

"Can we have a few minutes?" Don asked.

When they were alone, Alice looked at her ex-husband. They had known each other since they were kids. They went to the senior prom together – he in a white tuxedo and she in a pale pink gown, cinched at the waist, she sewed in home economics class. White gloves extended past her elbows. They were so excited when Alice became pregnant that first time. Don thought the baby was a boy, but Alice felt otherwise. When Leah was born, with just a few strands of hair flattened to her head and a cry as certain as a quarterback's "hut", Alice wept with joy. Don was nervous at first, unsure how to raise a little girl. He didn't know how to make pigtails or tell fairytales, but in the end, it didn't

matter. Leah melted him – her tiny toes and fingernails pink and stunning as the broken seashells that cast a sparkly hue over the Maryland shore. Alice handled the girl stuff – the fluffy dresses and pink tights, the purses and buckled shoes – and Don taught his daughter to root for the Redskins and sled down snowy hills. Together, Alice and Don did all they knew to keep Leah safe and happy. They taught her the importance of crosswalks and the danger of strangers. Alice showed Leah how to delight at a Christmas tree miraculously decorated overnight, its limbs sheltering carefully-wrapped-packages. She enrolled Leah in the same Sunday school classes she had taken as a child, and on each of Leah’s 11 birthdays, Alice baked a cake, lit candles and sang the birthday song she had learned all those years ago in Sunday school. Don took Leah on long car trips that taught her to enjoy the unexpected. “Where should we go?” he’d ask. “Turn right. Now left. Right again,” Leah would say. Sometimes they’d drive for hours and wind up lost on curvy, country roads. Eventually Don would pull over. Leah would unfold a map, lay it across her lap and direct her dad, turn by turn, how to get back home. Now Alice and Don sat side-by-side in a hospital room, Alice, 31, Don, 32, confronting the remains of their only daughter.

“I think we should do it,” Alice said. “Leah would have wanted to help.”

Don nodded.

They discussed organ donation for a few more minutes. They both agreed Leah would want her kidneys to go to the young mother, but they weren’t sure about her liver and her corneas. Alice had never seen her daughter’s kidneys or felt her corneas. These people, strangers, would get a part of Leah unknown to Alice. They would have it



forever, while Alice was left with a hollow corpse. The idea made her queasy, but also somewhat hopeful. It was the only way part of Leah would go on. Leah was doomed. She would never grow up. She would never experience the joy of creating a life. Parts of her, though, could continue and enable other people to live. Alice went into the hallway and told the nurse they would donate what was needed.

Over the next several hours, Leah's grandparents, aunts and uncles arrived. Hospital staff, unaccustomed to having a young shooting victim in their care, tried to accommodate the deluge of visitors. Nurses opened up an empty exam room across the hall from the ICU. They dragged in chairs and brought up pots of coffee for the family. They kept the room open long after visitation hours ended.

"It's OK, honey," one nurse told Alice. "Take as much time as you need."

With the arrival of each visitor, Alice mourned anew. She escorted each person to her daughter's bedside. Some reached over and squeezed Leah's hand. Others just stood there looking at Leah. It felt like a funeral viewing.

Later in the evening, Annie's parents, David and JoAnn, arrived. JoAnn kept her eyes trained on the white tile floor. Her face was flushed and the skin around her eyes puffy. She seemed afraid to look up into Alice's face.

"We're so sorry," JoAnn said.

"What happened?" Alice cried, reaching for her friend's shoulder. "I still don't know what happened."

"We're not supposed to tell you anything," David said, gently pulling his wife closer. "The detectives told us not to. Something about an ongoing investigation."

“Was Annie hurt too?” Bryan asked.

“No,” David said.

“All they’ll tell me is Leah, Peter and Annie were together after school and Leah was shot,” Alice cried. “And now Leah is dying.”

JoAnn and David stood, quiet amid the beeps and rings of the hospital.

“Where’s Annie?” Alice asked.

“She’s at home,” David said. “We thought it best she not come.”

David guided his wife into Leah’s room. Alice watched from the doorway as they wavered by the bedside. JoAnn’s back shook with sobs. They left a few minutes later, and headed home to their daughter.

In order to harvest Leah’s kidneys, doctors had to administer two EKG tests, 13 hours apart, which meant Leah would be kept alive overnight. Sometime after midnight, a nurse came over and rubbed Alice’s arm.

“You might as well go home and get some rest, hon,” she said. “There’s nothing more you can do here. You’ll need your energy tomorrow.”

Alice nodded. She did not want to leave her daughter alone in this hospital, but the girl she knew was already gone and the truth of the nurse’s words struck Alice. Tomorrow she would need energy. Tomorrow Leah would die. She would have to tell her son that his sister was gone. She had to call the pastor, plan a funeral, find a gravesite. Alice returned to her daughter’s bedside one last time, and watched her chest rise and fall to the beat of machines.

“Goodnight Leah,” she said, choking on tears. “I’ll be back soon.”

Bryan led Alice out of the hospital, through the parking lot and into his Pontiac. He drove her to the Glenmont Police Station, a squat, brick building with offices and a few jail cells hidden in the back. Det. Saul Renner sat across from Alice. He wore a sports coat and tie, and looked at her face. His eyes did not swerve as he spoke.

“I got kids,” he said. “A boy and a girl. They’re around the same ages as your kids. I feel for you. I really do. And I understand you probably want to know everything, but we’re still investigating, trying to figure out what happened.”

“But you must have some idea.”

“Well, it looks like Peter Friot shot your daughter.”

“What?” Alice said, stunned.

“It was probably an accident – a kid playing with a gun, you know. But like I said, we’re still investigating.”

“Where is he?” Alice asked.

“He’s in custody, but I can’t tell you anything else. He’s 13 – still a minor. It’s against the law for me give you any more information. I have some questions for you though.”

Most of the questions seemed pretty routine. Leah’s school schedule, what she did in the afternoon, how she knew Peter and Annie. Alice began to trust Det. Renner. She sensed he truly wanted to figure out what had happened to Leah.

“Why were 11-year-old girls playing with a boy?” he asked.

Alice stiffened. She bit her lip. For a moment, she was too stunned to respond. I should have expected this, she thought. People will blame me. Am I a bad mother?

“It’s what kids do,” she said, her voice rising. “Kids play with their friends. Annie and Peter are Leah’s friends.”

“Ok, ok,” he said.

“And Leah wasn’t supposed to be over there. She was only allowed to play with Annie until I got home. I don’t know what happened.”

Before Alice left, Renner handed her a business card with his home number penciled on the back.

“If you need anything, you call,” he said. He hugged Alice and walked her and Bryan to the door.

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Alice sighed and looked across the table at me.

“I was really surprised to find out that Peter was older than Leah,” she said. “This kid was young, cherubic, a little chubby. I thought he was 8 years old. He used to come to my door and say, ‘Mrs. Smith, can Leah or Sammy come out and play?’ He was polite.”

“It must have been such a shock,” I said.

“Do you want to see a picture of him?”

“If it’s not too much trouble. I’d love to see what he looked like.”

“OK. I’ll be right back,” she said, standing for the first time in hours. “Do you want anything – more water, a soda, something to eat?”

“Not thanks. I’m fine.”

Alice returned a few minutes later with a big white binder, thick as a thumb is long. Studio photographs of Leah were arranged four square in a transparent sheath cover. Leah as a toddler, wearing an old-fashioned floral dress with lace sleeves. Her left hand pointed to her chest, as if to say – “it’s me” – while her eyes gazed to the side at someone off camera. Leah a year or two later in a paisley blouse and toothy grin. Leah at 11 in a maroon jumper and colorful ’70s style blouse, her hands posed on top of her brothers’. Sammy, still a toddler, perched on her lap, grinning. A close-up of the same photo zoomed in on Leah’s face – her mouth-open smile, her hair flipped out slightly, her eyes staring straight ahead.

Alice opened the binder and flipped through dozens of clear plastic pages, meticulously arranged. She passed over yellowing medical receipts from Leah’s brief hospitalization - \$78 for an endo-tracheal intubation, \$285 to remove Leah’s kidneys, spleen, pancreas and lymph nodes. Alice skipped over Leah’s death certificate and an insurance worksheet from Blue Shield.

“You’re so organized,” I said.

“What? I don’t feel organized. Look at this place,” she said gesturing to garage sale items piled on the table.

“Yeah, but you’ve kept such good records,” I said. “I can’t believe you have all this saved and organized so neatly.”

“This is the one thing,” Alice replied, patting the binder. “This is the only thing.”

She paused toward the end of the binder and flipped the book around so I could get a better look.

“That’s him,” she said, pointing to a black and white newspaper photo of a clean-cut young man wearing a three-piece suit with a vest, his hands apparently cuffed behind his back. His hair, which seemed like it should be dirty blond, was short and wavy. His eyes drifted down, away from the camera, but his lips pressed together in a slight smile. He looked to be around 13 years old.

The photo, in fact, was taken in April 1979, during the trial for Peter’s second crime – a crime that caught the attention of the national media and sent Alice into a new wave of mourning as she reevaluated the circumstances of her daughter’s death.

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While Alice and Bryan talked to Det. Renner, Peter sat on a cold, metal bench locked inside a cell a few yards away. Alice couldn’t believe that the polite little boy she had seen swinging from monkey bars and dashing around the apartment lawn was responsible for her daughter’s death. Alice did not think to ask Det. Renner if she could see Peter.

By the time she and Bryan arrived back at their apartment, the night seemed fully dark. Most of their neighbors had unplugged their Christmas lights. As Bryan unlocked their door, keys jingling, their neighbor appeared in the stairwell. He was a bartender at a D.C. night club and was just getting home from work.

“What’s with the police cars?” he asked.

“It’s Leah. She was shot,” Alice said. She had stopped crying. Black mascara smudges circled her swollen eyes.

Bryan and Alice followed the bartender into his apartment and told him about the police, the hospital, the kidneys to be transplanted. He listened, and poured alcohol into glasses, clinking ice cubes with a spoon.

Alice drank, not caring what it was, feeling the icy medicinal bitterness gliding down her throat, wishing it could numb her, like the anesthesia the doctors gave Leah. Alice and Bryan were usually careful drinkers – a glass of wine with dinner, an occasional cocktail. That night, they had several drinks.

This is bad, Alice thought, as she stumbled back into her apartment and fell into bed. What kind of mother gets drunk on the night her daughter dies? What have I done?

Alice woke at 3 a.m. after just an hour or two of sleep. She could smell the alcohol on Bryan, who was snoring beside her. Their bedroom was dark, but she could make out the pile of clothes on the floor, Josephine the wig on its stand on her dresser. She rolled onto her side and grabbed a slip of paper off the night stand. She squinted in the dark. “Det. Saul Renner.” A sense of dread washed over. It was not a dream. This is the day my daughter will die, she told herself. Get ready.

When she was pregnant with Leah, Alice read Dr. Spock’s “Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care” cover to cover. She learned how to lay Leah on her back in her cradle to prevent choking; how to swaddle her to keep her warm and quiet, and, most of all, how to trust herself, to trust that she had a mother’s instincts, that she was enough for her children, that she would raise Leah to be a confident, healthy, productive adult. Dr.

Spock wrote about the usual disasters that befall children – broken bones, temper tantrums, puberty. There was not a chapter on gunshot wounds.

Alice took a hot shower. She stood alone in the tub, crying as water beat down on her. She shaved her legs and painted her fingernails pink. It felt important.

At 6 a.m., while Bryan slept, she drove herself back to Suburban Hospital. Leah looked exactly as she had the previous night – eyes closed, a Band-Aid on her left cheek and a ventilator humming by her bedside. Alice’s heart fell. She spent most of the morning in a chair by Leah’s cot, stroking her daughter’s hand and mussing her hair. She ran her fingers over Leah’s face, trying to memorize contours.

A neurosurgeon marched in.

“Will you excuse me so I can check her vitals,” he asked.

“Yes, but I have some questions for you once you’re done,” Alice said.

“OK. I’ll be right out as soon as I examine her.”

Alice shuffled outside and waited for the confident clomp of his footsteps to return. She had asked to speak with him the previous night as well. A nurse paged him, but said he was at a Christmas party and couldn’t talk.

After 20 minutes, Alice pushed open the door to her daughter’s room. The doctor was gone. Later she found a nurse and asked her to track him down.

“He left a while ago,” the nurse said. “He signed Leah’s death certificate and left.”

Alice broke down.

“But he said he was going to come and talk to me,” she cried.



As dawn broke, Bryan and Don arrived. “We have to tell Sammy,” Alice said. They agreed that Alice should be the one who broke the news – she was his mother, after all, but Bryan and Don wanted to be there too. Together, they drove to the hospital where Sammy was being tested for learning disabilities. On the ride over, Alice tried to figure out the best way to tell a 7-year-old his big sister, the person he wanted to be exactly like, had been shot and was on life support. This was a moment that would change his life forever. Alice wanted to do it right, but she had no idea how. What would Dr. Spock say? she wondered. Alice wished she could call the psychiatrist she had been taking the kids to since the divorce. He would probably know the right thing, but there wasn’t time. Sammy would want to know what happened. He had watched enough G.I. Joe to know what guns were. If Alice explained that Leah had been shot, he might understand, but Alice did not want to scare him. She contemplated life support, how Leah looked OK, but was already gone. Sammy would not understand life support, Alice decided.

When they arrived, Alice gulped down air. She was still a mother, she reminded herself, and Sammy needed her right now. When she entered Sammy’s room, she knelt and hugged her son. With quivering hands, she pushed his walnut bangs out of his eyes. His hair had the same silky texture as Leah’s. Alice moved her hands to Sammy’s bony shoulders. She nudged him back a step, and looked into Leah’s deep brown eyes.

“Sammy honey, I have some bad news. There was an accident. Leah died. I’m so sorry, honey.”

Sammy squinted at his mom. He stared in her eyes, challenging her. She held his gaze. Don and Bryan knelt beside Alice.

“I’m so sorry, son,” Don said. Watching tears slip down his parents’ cheeks, Sammy began to cry. Alice held him against her chest, like she had when he was a toddler. She felt the warmth of his tears, the way his back heaved with each sob. They stayed there for a long time, until a nurse came over and said someone from Suburban Hospital was calling for Alice Greer. She let go and walked to the phone.

“Leah’s heart stopped beating. We had to jump start it. It’s working again, but we want to do the transplant soon.”

Frantic her daughter would die without her, Alice dropped Sammy off at an aunt’s house and rushed back to Suburban Hospital. As she paced the halls, Leah’s heart stopped twice more and had to be shocked back into rhythm. Even machines could not keep her alive much longer. If the transplant did not happen soon, her organs would not be viable, a nurse explained. Leah must be alive for her organs to be of any value. Without a heart, nothing survives. Time was tenuous, but the transplant could not occur until a second doctor signed Leah’s death certificate.

At one point, Alice overheard a doctor yelling, “I cannot sign her death certificate. I’m not qualified to do that.” How is possible, Alice wondered, that in a hospital full of doctors, there is no one to sign a death certificate.

A few minutes later, Dr. John Lord strode through the hallway. He had operated on Don’s back a while ago. He stopped in front of Don and stuck out his hand.

“Don, what are you doing here?”

“I’m waiting for you to sign my daughter’s death certificate.”

The doctor's grip weakened. His smile straightened. His gaze moved from Don to Alice.

"I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

Dr. Lord signed the paper. Moments later, the head of the transplant team arrived from the Naval Base in Annapolis wearing his Navy blue dress uniform. He introduced himself to Alice and Don.

"This is it," he said. "It's time."

He held the railing on one end of Leah's gurney, and Alice took the other end. Together, they wheeled Leah down the hall to the surgical room. When they reached the door, Alice leaned over and kissed her daughter goodbye.

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Alice looked at me, searching for words to sum up that day, to convey to someone who did not have children, what it was like to lose one, and to keep going.

"It is just absolutely amazing," she said, shaking her head. "I turned into a machine. I had decisions to make. I had calls to make. She was dying, but I was her mother. I made those decisions. I loved her so much, but there was nothing I could do to bring her back."

Alice started crying. Tears formed glossy tracks down her face. I put down my pen. I thought about reaching across the table to take her hand. I did not.

“I’ve met hundreds of people through Parents of Murdered Children,” she said, her voice high and crackly as a car trying to start. “Few had the opportunity to donate their children’s kidneys. Most murder victims don’t have life still going on when they are found. Usually when people are murdered there’s no one around. If he hadn’t called 911, she would have died without the possibility of getting help.”

She paused.

“I’ve never even thought of that. ... I have so many friends who don’t even know who killed their loved ones. People who are missing. As awful as it sounds, I know exactly what happened to Leah. She was not raped. She was not mutilated. She was not dismembered. She was not thrown out of an airplane. I know people who have all of that. Mine is simple.

“All I got back from Leah that she was wearing was a belt from her jacket, a pink quilted jacket. The belt was two inches wide with a buckle. I still have it.”

She flipped through the white binder, through yellowing receipts delicate as dried leaves. A carbon copy on Warner E. Pumphrey Funeral Home letterhead:

“Metal casket, white with gold trim,  
white crepe interior and stationary handles. ... \$779.00.

Obituary Notices:

Star (1) 22 lines @ \$1.03 per line	\$22.56
Post (2) 22 lines @ \$1.25 per line	\$55.00”

On the next page, a standard yellow invoice, with no business name:

“Payment on cemetery property	\$830.00
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Opening and closing grave and services rendered For interment of Leah M. Smith	\$195.00”
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Then, an invoice with the Bell Flower logo on top:

“Casket Piece

Turquoise Blue

And Aqua Flowers

B/B + Yellow Flowers

11 year old girl

Message:

Mommy, Daddy and ~~Sammy~~ Samuel

\$88.40”

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The days after Leah’s death were a blur of casseroles, decisions and regrets. Alice went to the funeral home that had organized services for her grandfather and uncle. She examined rows of caskets, big and sturdy as grown men, and ordered Leah a small, white version. She settled on Silent Night as the funeral hymn. Leah always loved Christmas. Alice went through her daughter’s closet, fingering the silky white fabric of Leah’s majorette skirt, the sequins stitched to her leotard, the soft fuzz of corduroys, the poufed sleeves of her dresses. She pulled out the ankle-length, flowing, floral print dress Leah had worn at Alice and Bryan’s wedding three weeks earlier. Alice took it to the funeral home and asked the undertaker to dress Leah. Alice returned to the mall where she and Leah had shopped the night before the shooting. Alice returned to the jewelry store and bought the garnet birthstone ring she had meant to buy Leah for Christmas. She took it to the funeral home for her daughter.

She visited Parklawn cemetery, where she and Bryan had recently bought plots for themselves on a shady section of the grounds that had not yet been developed. By the

time they needed gravesites, they assumed, the roads leading to their plots would be ready. A clause in the contract stipulated that if they lost a child under the age of 16, their plots would be moved to another section of the cemetery so they could be buried by their child. It was included in the contract as a safeguard, Alice assumed, for parents whose kids had cancer. It seemed impossible that that the clause would ever apply to her.

Leah's gravesite was on the gentle slope of a hill, beside a narrow, winding road. From the grave, you could look up the hill, through bare branches of frozen trees, and see the E-shaped outline of the FDA building where Alice worked.

Alice scheduled Leah's viewings on Monday – one in the afternoon and another in the evening. Sammy did not want to see Leah during the first viewing, and Alice did not push it. She wasn't even sure he should be at the funeral. She wanted Sammy to understand that his sister was dead, but she didn't know if it was a good idea to have him see her body. It devastated her just to think about it. Since Sammy's birth, he had been one half of a pair. Leah had been the other. They were grouped together in photographs and sat side-by-side at the dinner table. Leah watched out for Sammy when they played on the jungle gym outside the apartment. She taught him how to make snowballs and dangle from the monkey bars. Sammy even joined Leah's majorette troupe, though he was more like a mascot than a member. He carried the banner Leah twirled behind.

On the way to the evening viewing, Sammy leaned against Alice's shoulder.

"I think I can look at her now," he said.

At the funeral home, Alice enclosed Sammy's sweaty hand in hers, and led him to the casket. Sammy stood on tiptoe and peered down at his sister. Leah's head rested on a

satin pillow. Her glossy hair framed her face. Her eyes were closed. A Band-Aid under her left eye hid the bullet hole.

“Mommy,” Sammy said. “She looks OK. She looks like she’s sleeping. She just has a little bit of dirt on her face.”

The funeral was held the next day in the same chapel where Alice had wed first Don, then Bryan. Just a month ago, Leah had stood on the altar next to her mom in the same flowing dress she wore now, and watched Bryan become part of their family. Now she lay in a casket at the front of the church.

Alice had been attending services at First Baptist Church of Silver Spring as long as she could remember. Her family always sat in the front pew to the left of the altar. At Leah’s funeral, she didn’t want to pretend that everything was the same, so she sat with her son and husband on the right side of the church, a few rows back. It hurt so much to be in that chapel without her daughter. Leah had been coming here since she was a baby. Alice remembered how, as an infant, Leah’s cries had pierced through the preacher’s sermon. Embarrassed, Alice had quickly carried Leah up the aisle and out the door. Alice rocked her to sleep on the church steps. As a toddler, Leah played with the hymnals while the preacher preached. She’d collect all the hymnals from their pew and stack them beside her. When the choir started up, Leah would open a hymnal and start singing “Ooo, Ahhh”—pretending she could read the words. It always cracked Alice up.

Now, at Leah’s funeral, the hymnals sat, untouched, at the end of the pew. Alice took deep breaths. She tried to focus. She listened to the preacher talk about what a good girl Leah had been. He mentioned her role in the Baptist Auxiliary, and Alice was

overcome with grief. There was supposed to be so much more to Leah's life, she thought. She had always imagined Leah getting married in this chapel, with a long, white dress and a matching veil. Don would give her away, but she would be the person Leah ran to hug after saying her vows. It would be a moment they would treasure forever. Now, Alice studied the flowers on the altar. She had bought the aqua, blue and yellow piece that framed Leah's casket, and had selected a few other bouquets to be moved from the funeral home to the church, but there was a huge arrangement of all white flowers behind the pulpit that she did not recognize. There were roses, mums and gladiolas. Alice guessed it must have cost around \$75 – a lot of money. Who could it be from? she wondered.

While the organist played Silent Night, Alice began to bawl. Leah had always loved that song, and now it took on such a different meaning. Bryan helped her stand and gently nudged her into the aisle. She followed Leah's casket out of the church.

On the way to the cemetery, Sammy laid his head in Alice's lap and sobbed. She stroked his hair, feeling as helpless as she ever had.

After the burial, as Alice said her goodbyes to family and friends, she asked around about the arrangement of white flowers. She wanted to thank whoever had sent it, but no one knew. A few days later, unable to shake the image from her mind, she called Bell Flowers. The florist had been Alice's Sunday school teacher years ago.

"I know the arrangement you're talking about," the woman said. "They were ordered by Mrs. Friot" – the mother of the boy who killed Leah.



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Several hours into our conversation, the phone rang. Alice jumped up and answered.

“Hello.”

“Oh, Hi Bill. You’ll never believe what I’m doing right now. I’m being interviewed by a young woman from Maryland. ... I don’t know.”

“Kaitlin,” she said, turning to me. “What high school did you go to?”

“Linganore,” I replied.

“Linganore,” she said into the phone.

“Are you a Lancer?” she asked me.

I nodded.

“Oh, I can’t believe this. Bill, what year did Amy graduate?”

“Kaitlin, when did you graduate?”

“1998,” she repeated into the phone. “She’s a babe. She’s only 29. ... Oh here, you two talk.”

“She pushed the speaker phone button on and placed the phone on the table.

“Kaitlin, this is my brother, Bill,” she said.

“Hi,” I said tentatively.

“Hi, Babe,” a husky voice responded.

I had arrived at Alice's house at 10 a.m., expecting to stay for an hour or two at the most. As the clock ticked toward 3 p.m. and my hands grew shaky from note taking, I told Alice I had to leave. I had a meeting at 4 p.m. that I hadn't prepared for.

"OK," she said. "But before you leave, you have to look at this book my daughter, Amanda, made for me."

I joined her on the couch and she spread a professionally bound photo book over our laps. She flipped through generations of family portraits. Each member of the extended family had a page. In Alice's section, photos of her and Bryan documented their progression from thin, 30-somethings with feathered hair, to graying grandparents. There was Sammy, all grown up, with his son; Bryan's daughter, Kimberly, with her husband and baby girl, and Bryan and Alice's youngest child, Amanda, with her long, dark hair and sarcastic smile. Toward the end, there were two pages filled with photos of Leah.

"I cried the first time I saw it," Alice said. "I was so touched that they included Leah. It means so much to me."

Then she opened a genealogy book and showed me grainy black and white photos of her great grandparents, great aunts and uncles. On the page dedicated to Alice and her family, she lingered for a moment on the sole photo of Leah, then continued on.

She closed the book. We stood and hugged. Alice looked me over.

"Would you like to borrow my binder?" she asked. "I've never lent it out before."

"I would love to," I said. "I want to scan some of the documents. I promise I'll take good care of it."

"I trust you," she said. "Please be careful with it."

“I will.”

She put the binder in a silver Nordstrom bag, but did not hand it to me.

“Give me your address and your phone number,” she said. “I have your number somewhere, but just in case.”

I wrote my information on a piece of computer paper, like I was checking out a library book.

She read my information aloud.

“How long do you need my binder for?”

“How about two or three weeks?” I asked.

“Two,” she said.

“I’ll drop it off in two weeks, I promise.”

We stood in the doorway and hugged several times. Finally, she handed me the binder that held the remnants of her daughter.

“OK, Kaitlin,” she said. “I trust you.”

### **Alice Greer – Part Three**

It was not hard to track Peter Friot. When he came up for parole in 2006, Alice launched a campaign to keep him behind bars. Copies of dozens of letters she solicited from family, friends, and other parents with murdered children were laminated in the binder she lent me. Each letter identified Peter Friot as Maryland DOC inmate #128605. Alice told me Peter Friot had been locked up in Maryland Correctional Training Center for years. She had not seen him since he was escorted out of court in handcuffs following his second crime, but she was certain he was at MCTC.

Maryland Correctional Training Center is in Hagerstown, a rural community 40 minutes from my childhood home. It is the prison closest to my parents' house. I associate Hagerstown with the nauseating smell of hot dogs sold at the concession stand at the Hagerstown Junior College indoor track, where I spent long Saturdays in high school racing round and round in my red Lancers tank top and black butt huggers designed, I felt, to make teenage girls self-conscious. I also knew Hagerstown as home of the outlet mall my mom, sister and I pilgrimaged to each year before Christmas. In high school, my sister went on a field trip to the prison with her sociology class. I remember being jealous she got to go inside an actual prison. It seemed so hard core. I pumped her for details afterward, and loved listening to her whistling imitation of inmates' cat calls. "Hey blondie! Over here! I got something for ya."

"I didn't look," she told me. "The guards told us to look straight ahead and never make eye contact."

“Were you scared?” I asked.

“It was definitely creepy.”

From my apartment in California, I called the main switchboard at MCTC and was connected with an officer who confirmed that, yes, Peter Friot was in custody there. I called back a few minutes later and asked to be connected with the mail room.

“No self-addressed stamped envelopes,” the officer told me. “Don’t put anything in the letter or card. No stickers, just a straight letter. And be aware it will be read by staff.”

“Of course,” I said, thinking back to stories I had heard as a reporter of people sending inmates letters written with drug-laced ink.

I considered what to write for a week before I actually sat down at my laptop and started typing. Like with Alice, I wanted to make a good first impression. I wanted Peter Friot to write me back. I wanted him to agree to meet with me. Whatever I wrote would be there on paper, to analyze and reanalyze. I assumed he had plenty of time to devote to my letter, and I wanted it to be respectful and intriguing enough to warrant a response – a combination that was difficult because I did not know much about him, aside from the details of his crimes and stories Alice had told me of a cute, chubby neighbor boy. Friot was 47 now; he had spent two-thirds of his life locked up.

“Dear Mr. Friot,” I began. “I am writing with the hope that you will write me back and agree to meet with me in the near future.”

I briefly outlined my project, then tried to pique his curiosity with, “I am interested in your case and would very much like to speak with you. I have already

connected with other people involved with your case.”

I thought it was important that he know I had some experience writing about crime. I wasn't just some quack looking for a prison pen pal. Flipping through the yellowed newspaper clippings in Alice's binder, I could tell Peter had some experience with journalists. Being forced into the back of a police car in front of a hoard of photographers probably did not leave him with a fondness for the fourth estate, I figured. I teetered between accepting and distancing myself from my former profession. “I have written extensively about prisons and crime, both from the perspective of the accused and the victims,” I wrote. “I used to cover a 2,000-bed men's prison and enjoyed getting to know several inmates there.”

“Enjoy” was a stretch, but I was fascinated by the men locked inside the prison I used to cover in Aberdeen, Washington. Each time I visited, I questioned anew how a whole society, complete with its own rules and customs, could exist right down the road from Swanson's grocery, entirely out of sight of most Americans. The U.S. imprisons a far greater percentage of its population than any other country. According to the International Centre for Prison Studies, 743 of every 100,000 Americans are incarcerated. The country with the second highest imprisonment rate is Rwanda, with 595 of every 100,000 residents behind bars. There are fewer people in Latvia, Namibia and Slovenia than in our prisons. In the U.S., spending on criminal corrections is outpacing budget growth in education, transportation and public assistance – all areas except Medicaid spending. We pay for prisons, just like we pay for public universities. Yet even people who have never gone to college have some familiarity with college campuses and culture.

They watch football games in college stadiums, wear the colors of local colleges and attend ceremonies or events held on campus. People visit prisons for three reasons: to work, to see a loved one, or to be punished. People who don't fall into one of those three categories usually base their ideas of prison on stereotypical portrayals in movies, television and literature.

Whenever I visited Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Aberdeen, I felt like I was entering another country. Heeled shoes and exposed collarbones were outlawed. Femininity of any kind was suspect. I left my driver's license at the gate, passed through metal detectors and into a place where I could not pass for a local. As I walked, inmates hooted. They made the kind of exaggerated catcall whistles I thought only existed in old movies. They spoke in their own language – pruno (cell-made alcohol), fishing (dropping messages to other cells), chomos (child molesters). Their days revolved around movements, the opening and closing of gates that lead from one section of the prison to another. I filled my pockets with business cards and handed them to the inmates I interviewed about prison jobs and the GED program. I hoped to get some inside sources to clue me in on events the prison Public Information Officer never wanted to discuss – riots, contraband, rumors of correctional officers falling for inmates. I received a flurry of letters and several collect calls, mostly from men complaining about the so-called unjust difficulties of prison, and from those soliciting romance. I lined my desk with self-portraits inmates had tucked inside their letters. One photo of a guy with sleeves rolled up to his armpits stunk of musky cologne.

I closed my letter to Peter with:

“I would like you to know that I am genuinely interested in getting to know you. This is not a form letter that goes out to many inmates. I would like to enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope, but that is not allowed at your facility.

Thanks in advance for your consideration. I’d be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Kaitlin Manry”

I dated my letter March 17, 2010 and sealed it. Even though 2,000 miles and walls of barbed wire distanced me from Peter Friot, I did not want to give an inmate my apartment address, so I used the address of a university where I was taking a few classes.

“I might be getting some letters from prison,” I warned the receptionist. “Please set them aside for me.”

I put the letter in the mail, and waited.

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### **Gaithersburg, Maryland – December 1976**

Alice returned to work exactly one week after her daughter was shot. Everyone advised her to take more time off to mourn, but the apartment felt so quiet without Leah’s laughter and her assertive voice bossing her little brother around. The silence was more than Alice could bear. Even when Bryan was talking and Sammy watching cartoons in the living room, Leah’s absence echoed through the apartment. It was all Alice could



hear.

On her first day back to work, she found a sympathy card on her desk signed by everyone. The women in the office gathered around for hugs. “We are so sorry. If there’s anything we can do, let us know, honey,” they said in a single breath. After that, voices hushed when Alice walked by. When people needed to talk to her, to ask her to file some paperwork or look something up, they spoke quietly, as if a baby was sleeping nearby. No one laughed in her presence. Eyes lowered as she approached. When she walked to the bathroom, people ducked behind cubicle walls. And still, she heard their whispers.

“She was out shopping when Leah was killed. Can you believe it? Shopping.”

The man Alice shared a large desk with, came into the office one day and found Alice crying. His face flushed and he quickly pivoted out the door. When he finally returned, an hour later, he went straight to work shuffling papers. “You know,” Alice said, looking over at him, “It’s OK if I cry. It’s gonna happen. You don’t have to leave.” He always did, though.

From her desk on the fifth floor, Alice could look out the window and see the bare branches and glinting bronze markers of the cemetery where Leah lay under six feet of sod. The FDA building was the last on Fisher Lane. The road dead-ended a few yards from the office at the cemetery’s gothic gate. Alice missed her daughter constantly – the toothy smile Leah gave like a gift when she was caught off guard and forgot to be self-conscious; the tender voice she used with her brother while they sat cross legged on the carpet, a deck of cards between them, playing war, the way she twirled whenever she put on her majorette skirt. Leah loved the way the skirt billowed out around her waist, like a

figure skater's. She never tired of watching the silky fabric float around her body.

Alice wasn't big on acting. Even as a kid in church plays, she was always one of the angels, never Mary. But in the weeks after her daughter's death, she learned intuitively to mask her emotions. People acted strange enough around her already. When she lost what little control she had and wept, they either backed away or started talking. They seemed to believe they had to say something, as if their words could soothe her sorrow. If only it was that easy. They assuaged her with stories of dead grandmas and uncles battling cancer. "I know what you're going through," they said. She wanted to smack them. Alice did not know a single person who had lost anyone they loved to gunfire.

She had to remind herself not to frown, to pick her head off her desk. When her pain became too much to hide, she walked out of work, down the street to the cemetery gate. The cemetery's main entrance was a few miles away, but the groundskeeper had given Alice the key to the gate nearest her office. She used it nearly every day. Sometimes she visited on her lunch break. Sometimes she went after work. Sometimes she just got up and walked out of the office in the middle of the afternoon. When she wasn't at her desk or in the bathroom crying, Alice guessed her co-workers assumed she was at Leah's grave.

At the cemetery, Alice did not feel the need to act normal. People kneeling beside gravesites were expected to cry, and Alice did. She wailed. She sobbed. She lay her body over Leah's bronze grave marker. She did not worry about grass stains on her work blouses. Sometimes she talked to Leah. She told her about the family, how much Sammy

missed her, how much she missed her – and she apologized, for not being there to stop Leah from going to Peter’s house, for not seeing the danger lurking behind his shaggy bangs. She apologized for working too much and for divorcing Leah’s dad. She apologized for failing her daughter. A mother’s first responsibility is to keep her children safe. Dr. Spock knew how. It was instinct, he wrote. Even dogs know to protect their offspring. In this most basic tenant of motherhood, Alice had failed.

Alice had begun Christmas shopping weeks before Thanksgiving. Bags of blouses, skirts, underwear and warm winter clothes – all meant for Leah on Christmas morning – were shoved inside Alice and Bryan’s bedroom closet. Each morning and evening when she slid open the closet door and saw them, she thought of all Leah would miss. She remembered the way Leah methodically opened gifts. She’d slide her finger under the tape and unfold each corner of the paper before moving onto the gift box. This drove Sammy crazy. “Just open it already!” he’d shout, anxious for his turn with a gift. Sammy mistook Leah’s slowness for a lack of excitement. Alice knew better. Leah savored the suspense. Each corner of paper she unwrapped brought her a little closer to the unknown. Alice did not know what to do with Leah’s gifts. She could have moved them into Leah’s room, of course, but it didn’t feel right. It wasn’t Christmas yet. A week after Leah’s death, she pulled the bags from the closet and piled them into the car. Bryan followed her outside.

“Get in the passenger seat,” he said. “I’ll drive.”

They rode to the mall where Alice and Leah had shopped the night before the shooting. Bryan put his arm around his wife’s narrow waist, and guided her into

Montgomery Ward, to the customer service desk. He plopped the bags on the counter.

“We bought these things for our daughter,” Bryan told the salesman. “She was killed last week. Can we return them all at once, or do we need to go to each department?”

The salesman cleared his throat nervously.

“Um, let me go get someone who can help you.”

He returned a few minutes later.

“Follow me.”

He led them to another counter, to another salesman in a pressed white shirt. The salesman took each item from the bags, examining each tag. Alice listened to the click-clack of the buttons on the cash register and watched her daughter’s presents form a mound on the counter. A line formed behind them.

“It looks like we’re going to be here a while,” a woman said loudly.

Christmas music played overhead.

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Alice talked to Det. Saul Renner every few days. At first she called him, “Detective Renner,” then “Saul,” then “my detective.” Remembering one of his first questions – “Why were 11-year-old girls playing with a boy?” – still made her eyes water with anger, but she needed him. Her daughter was gone and she needed to understand why. Alice knew, of course, that there was no logical reason for a bullet to tear through

an 11-year-old girl while she played with her friends, but it had happened. A series of events had unfolded that ended in her daughter's death. Alice wanted to know those events. If she laid them down on a map and studied them, maybe she could find some clarity. Like constellations they could guide her so she could keep Sammy from dying too.

The updates were quick at first – rapid fire. Initially, Renner had said the shooting was probably an accident. Peter had gotten ahold of his mother's gun and accidentally fired a single shot. The newspaper story that ran in *The Washington Star* the day after the shooting said as much.

"An 11-year-old Gaithersburg girl was critically wounded yesterday when she was shot in the face while visiting a friend in his family's apartment, Montgomery County Police reported.

Police, who immediately declined to release the names of the children, said the girl remained in critical condition early today in Suburban Hospital. They said she was found lying in a pool of blood in the living room of the apartment as a confused 14-year-old boy stood holding the .22-caliber handgun.

The girl was taken to Suburban Hospital, where she was listed in critical condition in the intensive care unit with a gunshot wound under (sic) her left eye.

Although police refused to release the names of the youngsters, they did give this account of the shooting, which they have listed as an

accident: The 11-year-old girl was visiting her friend and neighbor, a 14-year-old boy, at his third-floor apartment at 12714 Viers Mill Road in Gaithersburg. The girl lived nearby, police said.

The youngsters were in the living room of the youth's mother's apartment about 4:30 p.m. when the shot rang out. The girl was sitting across the room from the boy when the gun discharged, police said.

Police were not immediately able to determine what the youth was doing with the gun."

Alice loved that line. What on earth could a 13-year-old boy possibly be doing with a gun in a Gaithersburg apartment that would give sense to her daughter's death?

"Don't mind the reporters," Det. Renner had told her. "They screw up. It's what they do." After reading that first story, Alice was inclined to believe him. There was no mention of Annie, and Peter's age was wrong. Before the shooting, Alice had assumed he was no more than 8, but he was, in reality, 13, not the 14 *The Star* reported.

*The Star's* first story on Leah's death ended with, "If they determine, as police say they believe, that the shooting was accidental, the youth will be released in the custody of his parents.

Parents of the youngsters could not be reached for comment last night.

So far, police say, the 14-year-old boy has not been charged."

Two days later, *The Star* released Leah's name, but not Peter's. The story, just three paragraphs long, said that Leah Marie Smith died at 2 p.m. on Saturday. It also said

she was “alone with the youth at the time in the boy’s apartment.”

That same day, *The Frederick News Post* described Leah’s death as a “homicide.”

Renner called Alice that morning to prepare her.

“Listen, sweetheart. We’re still investigating. We’re still talking to Peter, gathering evidence. But you should know it looks like the DA is going charge Peter with murder.”

Alice felt as if she had fallen into a hole and lost the ability to breathe. And yet, she stood, the phone wedged between her shoulder and right ear, its cord wrapped around her waist. She exhaled slowly.

“What do you mean, murder?”

“We don’t even know if it’ll stick. Sometimes the State Attorney goes for higher charges and then lessens them once they figure out the facts. We’re still trying to establish the facts. Remember that. But the thing that makes us think maybe it wasn’t an accident, is that Peter acted kind of off when we picked him up. Usually when it’s an accident the guy who did it is a wreck crying and carrying on. Peter didn’t cry – didn’t get emotional at all. His answers were kind of short. And the big thing is, turns out he knew there was a bullet in the gun. He put it in himself just before he shot Leah. A single bullet, but that’s all it takes.”

Rage overcame Alice. How fucking dare that little boy mess with Leah? How fucking dare he put a bullet in a gun? How fucking dare he pull the trigger? And, most of all, how fucking dare Helen Friot keep a gun and bullets in her home? Who does that? They lived in Gaithersburg, for Christ sake, not the ghetto.

On Monday, Dec. 6, a few blocks from Alice's work, Peter Friot was charged with murder and released to his mother on \$5,000 bail. The following day, *The Frederick News Post* ran a story about the charges. The article listed Mrs. Alice M. Greer as Peter Friot's mother.

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In early April, the receptionist at my school e-mailed me that I had a letter that appeared to be from prison. I picked it up the following day. It was in a standard, white business envelope, with an American flag stamp and a professionally printed return address label. The first line of the label read, "Peter E. Friot #128-605." To the left of his address was the outline of a star nestled inside a ring that read, "An It Harm None, Do As Thou Wilt Merry Meet, Merry Part, Merry Meet Again." I had never heard this phrase, and it struck me as an odd epigraph for an accused killer.

I walked into the hallway and tore open the envelope. Nerves roiled my stomach. What's your problem? I asked myself. It's just a letter. Usually, my nerves acted up before a marathon or public speaking. Since when did reading a letter make you nervous? Get over yourself.

I pulled out a neatly folded letter that looked every bit as professional as the one I had mailed him two weeks earlier. I was surprised, and a little unnerved, that it was typed. I didn't think inmates had computer access. Could he use the internet? I wondered. Had he googled me? Does he know I have family in Maryland? The letter was typed in



what appeared to be Times New Roman font. I read it leaning against the hallway wall.

“Dear Ms. Manry,

I do not know how I came to your attention, but I confess that my curiosity has been piqued. You say that your book deals with the results of what happened 32 years ago, and mainly on the aftermath, in regards to its effect on me, as well as others. I believe that is what I am reading here.

I admit that I find it more than slightly disturbing that you have ‘already connected with people involved’ in my case. My first question would have to be, just who these people are? As you may understand, I have been a mite out of the loop, socially speaking. My second question would have to be, just how in the Lord and Lady’s names did I come to your attention in the first place?! You have worked in journalism, and now you have left that behind, in order to pursue this book idea. I am forced to admit that I stopped reading newspapers many years ago. About 32 years ago, to be precise. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that I have never heard of you before now.

Yes I think I would like to hear a bit more from you about your book, and its intent. I’m sorry if I seem a bit stand-offish, but I have been burned before. I’ll go so far as to admit that the only reason I even considered writing you back was that you are out-of-state. I think I may safely assume that this isn’t another joke at my expense.

As to visits, well, let’s just let that go by for now. Honestly, I am not too keen on receiving any visits. I don’t know how they ran things at this 2,000 bed prison you mentioned, but about 8 years ago here, they started

strip-searching both going in and coming back out. I am, by nature, a private person. Being stripped randomly is something we all learned to accept, but this change was too much for me. Not that I was getting regular visits in the first place, mind you. But I told the two people who did drop by from time to time to stop. I also would have to admit that now I am not quite sure what the procedure would be to place you on a visiting list. They change things every so often around here. I'll have to think about this.

That said, I suppose that I have no great objection to corresponding with you. If I understand your intent, this may even prove to be beneficial to someone else, I suppose. If anyone can find anything of value, or interest in the flotsam and jetsam of my life, I suppose it's my duty to do what I can. Though I admit, I fail to see how. But then, that's why you are the writer. It's your job to sift the wheat from the chaff. I await your reply.

Sincerely,

Peter E. Friot #128-605.”

Reading his letter, I cringed. I must have sounded so arrogant to him. I had hoped he would be thrilled to get mail and share his story with me. This was not the grateful response I had expected. He seemed suspicious, and I couldn't blame him. Why had I told him that I used to cover a prison? I hadn't meant to sound like some big shot reporter. Or had I?

Friot's letter was so quirky. The phrase, “just how in the Lord and Lady's names,” seemed like something you'd only hear on Masterpiece Theater. I wasn't sure what to

make of his strip-search comment. Why had he chosen to share that with me? I wondered.

I had expected a handwritten letter, ripe with misspellings and grammatical errors. Instead, I had received a peculiar, but entirely intelligible, letter that smartly questioned my motives. This could go either way, I thought. At least he's willing to keep writing.

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That winter, sympathy cards arrived like snow in Alice and Bryan's mailbox. They accumulated in unopened drifts on the kitchen table. Every few nights, once Sammy was tucked into bed, Alice sliced into the cards. She preferred to read them in bouts, the same way she handled bills. Most of the messages were generic. Some people had printed their favorite Bible verse in the margins. Alice read each card, and placed them in a folder, just as she had the congratulations cards she received when Leah was born.

One night, half way through the pile, she pulled out a card with a Hallmark painting of a mason jar full of roses and the words "Thinking of You in Sympathy," in a flamboyantly curly, cursive script Alice had come to associate with sympathy cards. Inside, beside the boilerplate greeting, was a message that made her gasp.

*"Dear Mrs. Smith,*

*I am so emotional I cannot talk about the*

*terrible tragedy between us. I had to express our sympathy to you and your family at the loss of your daughter Leah. I did not know her, but she & Peter were friends. Of course, I know Peter would not intentionally hurt anyone, but there is no way of knowing how this tragedy will turn out for him. He has never been in trouble before, but he is charged as an adult. Right now, my every effort will be to help him. As a mother, I know you can understand that. I pray I am strong enough to do that.*

*May God bless dear Leah & you & your family.*

*Sincerely,*

*Helen Friot”*

Alice dropped the letter on the table, her hands shaking. “Bryan,” she cried.

“Bryan, come over here.”

He was behind her in seconds, massaging her shoulders and whispering, “shhh” in a soothing tone. He took the letter from the table and read it.

“How dare she,” Alice said. “How dare she write to me like that. How dare she compare her tragedy to mine. Her son is alive.”

“She’s out of line, Al. Totally out of line. Her son should be in jail.”

Alice stared at the letter for a long time. As much as it disgusted her, she could not stop looking at it. She wanted to get up, throw the card in the trash and move on with her grief. But the words had been written, and she had read them. The mother who had bought the gun that killed Alice’s only daughter wanted her understanding. Alice could not understand Helen Friot’s plea. Had Peter accidentally hit a baseball into Leah’s head and killed her, Alice might recognize Helen’s desire to support her son. But Helen Friot had bought a gun and bullets and left them in her apartment within easy reach of a child. If Helen Friot had not kept a gun in her house, Leah would be alive. Given the circumstances, Alice could not believe Helen had the nerve to ask for her understanding. After a long time, Alice got up and carried the letter to the trash bin. She lifted the metal lid, but could not bring herself to drop the card in. Eventually, she lowered the lid and tucked Helen’s letter in a folder with the police report and newspaper clippings.

On Dec. 24, once Sammy was in bed, Alice and Bryan strung lights and hung bobs on the Christmas tree. It sickened Alice to go on as if her life hadn’t stopped on Dec. 6. If it wasn’t for Sammy, she’d probably be lying in bed with a bottle of wine and the hope that she would sleep through Christmas. But Sammy had been through enough. He cried all the time now. He’d be tying his shoes or eating a bowl of Cheerios, and he’d just break down in sobs. “I can’t get the laces,” he’d say. Or, “I don’t like cereal anymore.” Alice hugged him more than she used to, but she worried that wasn’t good either. She didn’t want to stifle him. She stepped up his counseling appointments to twice

a week. She hovered over him constantly. She only allowed him outdoors to go to school or, on the rare occasions she felt up to it, to play outside while she sat on a park bench, watching. She had warned him not to go near Peter Friot. “If you see him, turn around and come straight home. You are not to speak to him under any circumstance.” Sammy deserved Christmas. So she wrapped his presents and piled them under the tree. She hung his stocking on the mantle next to hers and Bryan’s. She left Leah’s in the box.

That spring, Alice got pregnant. Her initial happiness at having a baby with a man she loved in a complicated, adult way – so unlike her first love – was quickly tempered with the familiar burn of guilt. How can I have another baby, she wondered, when my daughter is barely dead? Will people think this baby is a replacement, like how people get a new dog when the family pet dies? The due date was Dec. 10.

“That can’t be,” Alice told the nurse. “Is there any way to push it back?”

Every night as she lay next to her husband in bed, Alice silently prayed, “God, please do not let this baby be born on December 5<sup>rd</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>. Please. Please. Please.”

Alice was barely showing in May, when Peter Friot’s hearing began. The original adult murder charges had been dropped. He was being tried as a juvenile, which, she was told, meant considerably less time in prison.

“It’s just how it goes,” Renner said. “He put the bullet in the gun, but that doesn’t mean he meant to kill Leah. Two inches the other way, the wall would have a hole in it. Thirteen-year-olds aren’t exactly good at reasoning.”

Alice accepted this, as she had accepted the initial decision to try Peter as an

adult. Until Leah's death, she thought of Peter as a chubby, polite little boy. Unlike Helen Friot, she actually knew her child's playmates, and she hadn't noticed anything off with Peter. He should be held responsible for Leah's death, she believed, but whether that constituted decades in an adult prison or years in a boy's prison, she was unsure.

She took off work for the hearing, and arrived at the unassuming brick building on Bryan's arm. They met Don outside. In order for Don to attend the proceedings, Alice had asked the prosecutor to subpoena him. It was the only way he'd be allowed in the courtroom. In the eyes of the law, Bryan was Leah's father – even though he had never adopted her and only knew her a year. Alice felt sorry for Don. No one reached out to him after Leah's death. The police, the coroner, the doctors, the media, the lawyers – they all spoke exclusively to Alice and Bryan. It was as if Don's role in Leah's life had expired before Leah, but Alice knew that wasn't the case. Leah had always preferred her father. When Sammy was hurt, he ran to Alice. Even after the divorce, Leah called her father. She had always been a daddy's girl. When Leah was a baby – not even 2-years-old – Alice went into her bedroom one night and found the crib empty. Terrified, she ran into the living room, where Don was asleep on the couch, the TV still on. Leah was curled at his feet like a dog. She had somehow managed to escape from the crib and crawl to her daddy. Alice picked her up and returned her to the crib. A few minutes later, Leah crawled back into the living room, onto her daddy's feet.

After the divorce, Don had moved back in with his mother. He hadn't remarried and, as far as Alice knew, he wasn't dating anyone. Alice felt bad having Bryan there to lean on when Don had no one, so Alice was relieved to see Don's brother standing next

to him. As she leaned over to hug Don, she noticed how old he looked. He was only 33, but his hair was already graying. Alice self-consciously held her purse in front of her stomach.

The four of them walked into the courtroom together. Alice had expected a courtroom like the one on *Dragnet*, with polished wood chairs and a judge's throne that loomed above everything else. Instead, the room looked like an office without desks. Two folding tables sat with a space between them in the front of the room. A lone table was propped up behind them, and a few rows of folding chairs sat on the other side. She noticed Renner at one of the tables. He caught her eye and strode over. They hugged. He shook hands with Bryan and Don.

“He has to go,” he said nodding at Don's brother. “It's juvenile court. Just immediate family.”

Alice sat in the front row, with Bryan to her right and Don to her left. Peter and his mother arrived a few minutes later. Peter looked taller and slightly leaner than he had when Alice last saw him. In his tan suit and blue tie, he looked like a school boy on picture day. The Friots still lived three doors down, but Alice had not seen them since the snow had melted. She knew Peter had spent a month at the Maryland Children's Center being tested for God knows what. She found it ironic that the state paid for counseling and mental tests for the boy who killed her daughter, but not for Sammy, who needed help all the more because of Peter. It infuriated her, but there was nothing she could do about it. She had asked her detectives if the Helen Friot – or the state – would pay for Sammy's counseling. She was told it was impossible. Helen walked her son to the front



of the room, and put her hands on his shoulders, willing him into a chair at the table opposite Renner, next to a balding man Alice took for Peter's lawyer.

Alice glanced at Helen, then away quickly. She looks a mess, Alice thought. She should be on trial too. It was her gun, her ineptitude that had led to Leah's death. Alice had never especially liked Helen. She was older than the other mothers in the neighborhood. With short gray matronly curls and a thick frame, she looked more like Peter's grandmother than his mother. She worked as a secretary for the Montgomery County Council. Alice had heard from other women in the neighborhood that Helen's husband abandoned her when she was pregnant with Peter, and she had raised the boy alone. Rumor was that Helen had two older sons, but they had left home before the Friots moved into Alice's neighborhood.

Annie arrived flanked by her parents. Like Peter, she was dressed for church, in an ankle-length dress and a bulky pink sweater coat. Holding her mother's hand, Annie looked terrified, and Alice wished she didn't have to be here for this. Alice smiled at her.

The trial went by quickly. The assistant state attorney presented his case: a timeline, Peter's confession that he had loaded the gun, the shell casing found on the apartment floor. Alice cried as a cassette tape recording of Peter's 911 call played. "Hold still, Leah. Hold still," he kept repeating. My girl was alive, Alice thought, and I was not there. She was dying, and the only person she had was him.

Sitting in a folding chair at the front of the room, the medical examiner delivered the results of Leah autopsy. Cause of death: gunshot wound to the head. The judge then paused the hearing, and recommended that all the women leave the courtroom.

“You should never see the autopsy photos,” he said. “There’s no reason to.”

Alice left. Why should I look at those pictures? she thought. That’s not how I want to remember Leah. When she returned a few minutes later, the skin around both Don and Bryan’s eyes had swollen.

Annie was called next. She walked to the front of the room, her eyes leading her feet along the ground. In a barely audible voice, she recalled the events of Dec. 5: the walk to Peter’s house with Leah, Peter’s disappearance, his reemergence with a gun she didn’t think was real, the way he said, “Do you wanna see it shoot?” before Leah slumped to the ground.

“Now I know this is hard,” the assistant state attorney said, “but what did you do next?”

Annie looked into the audience at her parents, then down at her lap. She bit her lip. She paused.

“I ran,” she whispered.

As she spoke, Annie fiddled with the big barrel buttons on her sweater. By the time she was done, two had fallen off. Alice watched Annie’s fingers rub the buttons. She watched the way Annie moved the buttons from one hand to the other. Alice wondered if the sweater had been a Christmas gift. It was pretty, she thought. Leah would have liked it. Alice thought about the birthstone ring she had meant to give Leah for Christmas. It was on Leah’s finger now in a coffin a mile away from the court.

Annie’s mom, JoAnn, took her daughter’s place up front and talked about how, when she got home from work, Annie followed her though the house like a ghost.

“I knew something was wrong, but I couldn’t figure out what. Annie wouldn’t speak. That’s not like her. She followed me from room to room. It wasn’t until the police officer arrived that I realized what had happened.”

Peter’s attorney spoke mainly about his client’s youth and inability to reason.

“This tragedy was a horrible accident,” he kept repeating. “No one is at fault.”

Helen Friot talked about the gun.

“I used to live in D.C.,” she said. “I needed some protection. It was just me and the three boys. I haven’t seen the gun in years. I thought I threw it out.”

“But in fact, it was in a cosmetic bag in the pocket of your duster?” the state attorney said, during cross examination.

“Actually, you are incorrect. It was not a cosmetic bag. At one time, it was a lovely evening bag.”

Peter did not speak. He remained seated in his folding chair with his back toward Alice.

The hearing ended after a few hours, and the judge called for a recess so he could deliberate. A sheriff’s deputy guided Peter out of the courtroom. Everyone else mingled in the hallway or on the front steps of the court. Alice looked around to see what Helen was doing, but she had disappeared.

An hour later, they were called back into the courtroom. Peter was brought in last. Once he was seated, the judge began.

“As you all know, in juvenile court, defendants are found involved or not involved. We do not name specific charges and our sentencing varies considerably from

the adult system. Rehabilitation is the primary focus of juvenile court. Keeping that in mind, I find the defendant, Peter Edward Friot, to be involved in the death of Leah Marie Smith. This ruling would be similar to a charge in adult court of involuntary manslaughter with gross negligence.”

Both Alice and Helen cried. Peter looked around the room, seemingly oblivious. Involved, Alice thought. He certainly was involved. Guilty would feel better, but involved is something, at least.

She stepped out of the courthouse and squinted into the bright May sun. She spent the next day in bed, pillows pressed against the windows of her room.

A week after the hearing, she called Renner to find out when Peter would be sentenced. There was long pause.

“Alice, you missed it,” he said. “It was last Wednesday.”

“What!” Alice screamed. She heard the volume go up on the cartoons in the living room. “Sammy, turn that down!”

She opened the pantry door and squeezed inside, lacing the cord through the crack in the door.

“How is that possible? Why wasn’t I told?”

“I’m sorry Alice. I thought you knew.”

She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of onions and potatoes.

“Well, what was it?”

“Remember that in juvenile court, they focus on fixing the kids, not necessarily punishing them.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Alice said, cutting him off. “What was the sentence?”

“The judge ordered three things. One, that Peter’s grandmother come and live with them, so he’s not alone so much. Two, he go to counseling. Three, he join Boy Scouts.”

“You must be joking,” Alice shrieked.

“I wish.”

“My daughter is dead and he has to join Boy Scouts!”

“That’s why I pushed for adult court. I was afraid this kind of thing would happen.”

Alice, Bryan and Sammy continued living in the same apartment while they saved for a new place. Bryan was a contractor, and he had a new job coming up. He hoped it would bring in enough so they could afford an actual house. The Friots didn’t move either.

On Dec. 22, Alice gave birth to a girl, Amanda Lynn. Mother and daughter came home from the hospital on Christmas day.

Seven months later, on Monday, July 10, Alice ran into Peter at the apartment pool. She was sitting in a lawn chair with Amanda asleep in her arms, watching Sammy doggy paddle across the shallow end. She saw Peter – bare chested and thinner now, his hair bleached blonde from the sun – talking to group of boys she didn’t recognize. He was standing several yards away, near the deep end. She strained to hear his conversation. She could make out only two words: submachine gun and ballistic missiles.

“Samuel,” she screeched. “Out of the water. Time to go.”

As soon she got into the apartment, she called Renner. He hadn’t come into work yet. Around 3:30 he called back.

“Listen sweetheart,” he said. “I don’t know what you want me to do. It’s outta my hands. If you wanna talk to someone, try the Office of the State Attorney. Maybe they can check on his parole.”

It took her two days to finally get in touch with Peter’s parole officer.

“I can’t tell you anything,” she said. “He’s a juvenile.”

“He killed my daughter. I have a right to know what’s going on.”

“Actually, state law stipulates that. . .”

Alice cut her off.

“Is he still in counseling?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

After several minutes, the parole officer finally relented.

“He’s going to the therapist on Thursday. I’ll share your concerns.”

Peter went to therapy. Two days later, on Saturday, July 28, 1978, he was led from his mom’s apartment in handcuffs, taken to the same jail where he had been held after Leah’s death, and charged with the execution-style slaying of a tax assessor.

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In my second letter to Peter, I tried to clarify.

“I apologize I did not explain myself better in my first letter,” I wrote. “I wanted to touch base with you without bombarding you with details, but I can see how that may have been confusing for you. And I certainly did not expect you to have heard of me. I was not a famous journalist. I mentioned my previous job simply to give you an idea of my professional background.”

I told him more about my project, and confessed that I had spoken with only one person about his case: Alice Smith. I included a dozen questions, mostly about life in prison. I ended with, “Thanks again for your willingness to begin a conversation. I realize communicating with me is risky for you, and I sincerely appreciate your willingness to take that risk.”

His response arrived two weeks later. The letter was a single paragraph typed on a plain sheet of paper.

“Ms. Manry,

After talking to the few people whose opinions I trust and value, I have made a decision. As of this date, I have submitted the paperwork to have you placed on my visiting list. However, I must caution you, I am under the impression that there are separate rules regarding out of state visitors. I am trying to find out what exactly they are, if indeed they exist at all. Having had a background in corrections, I am certain that you know how it can be, rules changing from one month to the next. When I find out exactly what these supposed rules are, I will contact you. One hopes that my last letter reached you, though I have, as yet, received no reply from you. I look forward to working with you. Take care of yourself.

Blessed Be,  
Peter E. Friot #128-605.”



## **Julie Parra – Part One**

Julie Parra lived in the vast expanse of sun bleached land between Los Angeles and Riverside that I had yet to explore. Since moving to Riverside a few months earlier, I had made weekend road trips to the beaches of Santa Monica and the museums of LA. I sipped wine and listened to authors read in the dimmed aisles of Skylight Books, and drank organic lattes in the cafes that dotted Echo Park. This was the Los Angeles I was coming to know.

The bulk of the drive to Julie's house was familiar from these excursions – 36 miles on Highway 60. I passed the wooly mammoth statute perched on a hillside in Glen Avon, and drove in the shadows of billboards advertising casino concerts starring washed-out entertainers. I glanced at the Asian characters on strip mall signs facing the highway and passed a run-down shopping mall. Exiting onto Jacaranda Boulevard, I entered a part of Southern California I hadn't seen – a place where regular people raised their families. At the first stoplight, men hawking buckets of roses and carnations wove through traffic. Pizza joints, panaderias and Mexican grocers crowded strip malls. To get to Julie's neighborhood, I rounded a corner devoid of buildings. A ridge lined with a walking path blocked my view of what I assumed was a park that stretched for blocks. I later found out it buttressed a golf course from the rest of El Monte. Julie's house was just a few blocks away, amid cul-de-sacs of squat, ranch-style houses with compact yellowed yards. In the streets around her home, men and teenage boys washed their cars with buckets of soapy water, and children trotted by with basketballs.

Julie's house looked much like the other homes in the neighborhood. It was an older ranch-style house that reminded me of the 70s. Its paint – the yellow of plywood – had faded, and the awnings of the house nearly touched that of the homes around it. Children's toys lay scattered in the front yard. Christmas lights were stapled to the roofline. The anchored eagle of a Navy flag flapped above the front door.

Walking up the sidewalk, I heard a television on inside. I knocked on the wood frame of a screen door and heard a woman say, "Come in," then footsteps rising to meet me. The first thing I noticed about Julie was her height. She was a full head taller than me, with dyed mahogany hair that hung past her shoulders. She had a zaftig figure – curvy, but not fat. Her stature made her the kind of woman that left an impression. She wore jeans and a brown cotton long-sleeve shirt and walked through the house barefoot. Her mouth was painted with wine-colored lipstick, but otherwise her face looked natural.

I followed her into the kitchen, a narrow space of the sort I had grown accustomed to living in apartments. A painting of the Last Supper on a slice of wood hung near the stove. Crayons and sheets of paper lay on a table in the eating area next to an open box of half-eaten Little Caesars pizza.

"Jake, my son-in-law – Elizabeth's husband, works for Little Caesars. You want a piece?"

"I just ate. Thanks though."

We went into the living room and Julie flicked off the television.

"Hey, Leanna Star, come out here," she shouted.

A little girl traipsed out from a hallway and dove headfirst onto one of the three couches in the living room. She had tanned skin and shiny, almond-colored hair that bounced in a pigtail atop her head.

“Leanna,” Julie said. “I want you meet someone. This is my friend, Kaitlin.”

I waved and smiled.

“Hi, Leanna. It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Kaitlin is here because she is going to write about your mommy.”

I nodded, unsure what to say to this. I had read some newspaper articles about Elizabeth’s death, and knew that Leanna was the only witness. Less than two years ago, this little girl had watched her mother die. It was the kind of thing that was hard to fathom, the kind of thing that made me question everything I believed about people and God and humanity. I could not understand murder, but at least I grasped anger. Playing soccer, I often felt a satisfaction in muscling my way through a tackle that took out an opponent. In high school and college, I sometimes felt an uneasy pride injuring an opponent who had been on my back all game. “She’d had it coming,” I’d say. And though I had never gotten into a physical fight as an adult, there had been moments during arguments with boyfriends when I thought, “It would feel so good to hit him.” I never acted on the urge, and am embarrassed by it, but it gave me some tenuous recognition of the in-the-moment rage that might cause someone to lash out physically. I could not, however, begin to fathom the coldness that would enable someone to force a child to watch her mother bleed to death.

Leanna was 4-years-old now. Sprawled out on the couch, burrowing her face in pillows, she looked like an average kid. Every few seconds, she shifted her face towards us and peeked out. When we made eye contact, she giggled. She was playing shy – enjoying the act too much to fool anyone into believing she was weary of me.

The couch she lay on – the soft brown of a Labrador’s coat, faded on the cushions from heavy use – had belonged to her mother. Leanna lifted her head from the pillow and smiled. She climbed off the couch and playfully slunk toward us. She stood by Julie, but turned to me.

“My mommy went to heaven to be with Jesus,” she said.

I nodded and tried to smile.

“That’s right,” I said. “She did.”

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### **February 2008 – El Monte California**

“Hey, Elizabeth, get over here!” Julie Parra yelled to her daughter. “Check out the little ponies.”

She waved her arms, motioning Elizabeth toward a speckled pony that looked about as tired and old and she felt. Flies buzzed around its eyes and rear, but the pony just stood there, not even bothering to swat. He seemed resigned – and that was one attitude Julie couldn’t stand.

“Come on,” Julie said, shaking her head at the pony. “Where’s your fight? You have a tail and eyelashes. Use them.”

Elizabeth hobbled over leaning down toward Leanna. Elizabeth’s entire body seemed to extend from her daughter’s hand – a plant unfurling from a seed. Leanna toddled along, holding Elizabeth’s hand and reaching with the other toward every animal they passed.

“You talking to the horse, mom?” Elizabeth said. “You might be ready for the loony bin.”

Julie ignored her daughter and knelt beside Leanna.

“Look at the horseys, Star.”

Leanna reached out to pat the pony’s bony legs.

“Careful,” Elizabeth said. “Horses sometimes bite.”

“Horsey,” Leanna said.

“What do horses say?” Elizabeth asked.

“Grrr,” Leanna growled.

“No, baby. Horses say neigh,” Elizabeth said, drawing out the syllables and shaking her head like a horse.

Leanna laughed and shook her head like her mom.

“Horsey.”

Watching Elizabeth and Leanna together, Julie felt blessed in an ordinary, everyday miracle kind of way. Life could be tough, Julie knew, but, God, moments like this sure made it worth it. She had Elizabeth when she was only 17. Steve, her boyfriend

at the time – husband now, was a few years older and rebellious in the regular teenage ways – drinking, driving fast, hanging out with tough guys. He was not ready to be a dad, and Julie certainly didn't want a baby yet. She thought her whole world would end when her stomach began to harden and curve like a shield around her baby, but turns out having Elizabeth was the best thing that ever happened to her. And now, 22 years later, Elizabeth had a daughter of her own. She had gotten pregnant at 19 – too young in Julie's opinion, but again, it worked. Elizabeth and her husband, Jake, had rooted their lives to Leanna. Everything they did connected back to her somehow. Julie was filled with gratitude watching Elizabeth laugh with her daughter, her thumb gently caressing the soft fat of Leanna's backhand. There was a definite satisfaction to watching your daughter become a good mother.

“Mom, we have to have a petting zoo for her fifth birthday,” Elizabeth said. “Look how happy she is. Wouldn't that be cool? The kids could ride a pony and everything.”

Julie sighed.

“Really, Elizabeth? Where are you planning on having this party? I don't think a pony will fit in your apartment – and I don't want a zoo at my house. Why are you planning her fifth birthday already anyway? Let's get through her third first.”

They strolled through the petting zoo casually. Elizabeth chatted with other mothers there for the birthday party. Most were part of the Mommy and Me group she and Leanna belonged to. When she wasn't holding Elizabeth's hand, Leanna galloped through the zoo, giggling with glee each time she ran into a friend from Mommy and Me.

When she approached a new animal, Leanna whopped with the kind of amazement usually reserved for lions and elephants – not ducks and sheep. Elizabeth and Leanna had always lived near LA, on streets where graffiti and lemon trees far outnumbered farm animals. Julie too had spent most of her life near LA, but she felt some affinity with nature. Her father was half Indian, and back when she was young and her parents were still married, she had visited his family in the Midwest. She remembered the feel of tall grass tickling her legs as she chased horses she could never catch. That landscape – postcard beautiful and devoid of smog – was part of her, but she couldn't really claim it as her own. It was like walking through the Mexican market at Olvera Street. She recognized the aroma of carne asada and mole from her mom's kitchen, but she couldn't read the signs written in Spanish. Most vendors saw her pale skin and addressed her in English. "What can I get for you, Senorita?" And that's the way it was. When you spend your life in one place, you belong as much to the neighborhood as you do to your parents and grandparents. In that respect, both Julie and her daughter had been raised by the blue-collar neighborhoods surrounding LA.

"Look Leanna, a chicken," Elizabeth said, pointing to a clucking white hen strutting in the dirt.

"Birdy," Leanna said.

"Would you like to hold the chicken?" a young zoo employee asked.

Leanna let go of her mom and reached toward the feathers.

"Careful baby," Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth slipped off her black hoodie and draped it over her daughter's shoulders. It hung past her knees, almost dragging in the dirt. The man lowered the chicken onto Leanna's arm. She stood as still as Julie had ever seen her.

"Wow, Leanna! You have a bird on your arm," Elizabeth said. "Can you believe it? Hey, Mom, take a picture of us."

Julie fished the camera out of her purse and snapped a photo. In it, Leanna's mouth is agape. Her brown eyes seem bewildered as they gaze toward the camera. The chicken wobbles on her arm, tail feathers brushing against Leanna's ponytail. Elizabeth is squatting down, one hand on her daughter's waist and the other clamped on Leanna's forearm, steadying both Leanna and the hen. Elizabeth's shoulders are tanned and bare in a polka dot halter top. Her long hair, highlighted shades of brown, is pulled back in a poufy low pony tail. Her cheeks and plum lips are poised upward in a laugh.

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Julie held the image toward me as it flashed across a digital photo frame.

"It's the last picture taken of Elizabeth alive," she said.

Julie watched as the image disappeared and faded into a picture of Elizabeth wearing a strapless white gown, a sheer show wrapped around her shoulders and dried flowers in her hair. "Her wedding day," Julie said in a nearly flat, almost monotone voice. The picture waned into one of an exhausted Elizabeth in a hospital bed, holding a



baby wrapped in pink. Julie watched a few more photos pass by, then returned the frame to its place on a table beside the couch.

She pulled out her cellphone and fiddled with it for a few minutes until a photo appeared on screen – Leanna doing gymnastics kick on Elizabeth’s grave. Leanna is barefoot on the grave, one foot kicking toward the sun, the other planted on her mother’s name. Leanna is leaning back so her hands touch both grave and grass. Her teeth are visible through her smile.

“We were at a memorial service for Justice for Homicide Victims, and my granddaughter was playing hopscotch on the grave stones,” Julie said in the same calm voice. “I said, ‘No, Leanna. No, Leanna. You can’t play hop scotch here.’ I said, ‘Your mommy has a rock too. We’re going to go see it now.’ When we got there, my granddaughter was like, ‘Oh this is the most beautiful rock in the whole world.’”

Julie gazed at the photo and shook her head.

“I don’t want people feeling sorry for my granddaughter. Because she knows where her mommy is.”

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As temperatures dropped into the low 70s and the February sun dissolved in the wall of smog that blows east from Los Angeles each evening, Julie, Elizabeth and Leanna headed toward the parking lot. Elizabeth carried Leanna against her chest. Leanna was awake, but worn out. Her slender legs bobbed like buoys with each step Elizabeth took.

Julie carried Leanna's crumpled cardboard party hat. She was pretty sure that as soon as the car started, Leanna would fall asleep.

"Taco Bell for dinner?" Julie asked.

"I'm always game for Taco Bell," Elizabeth replied. A few steps later: "This party was so fun for the kids. I keep thinking about it for Leanna. I know she's not even three yet, but don't you think a petting zoo party would be perfect for her fifth? Can't you just imagine it? Goats and some chickens and maybe a pony. The kids would love it. Leanna would be so excited – you know she would. We're totally going to do it. Five is a big deal."

Julie shook her head.

"Get in the car."

After tacos, sure enough, Leanna fell asleep. When they arrived at the house, Elizabeth unbuckled Leanna and gently scooped her up and inside without waking her. Julie watched, impressed, and glad for once that she didn't have to hold the baby. Leanna was getting to be nearly as heavy as the bags of laundry Elizabeth and Jake toted to her house each week to wash. Julie loved having a granddaughter she could play with, but sometimes she missed the days when Leanna was so small – light as a bundle of tortillas. She knew Elizabeth did too. When Leanna was first born, Elizabeth carried her everywhere. The nurse said, "You gotta put her down eventually," but Elizabeth held on to her daughter. She refused to leave her in the crib Jake and Steve had rushed home from the hospital to build. Elizabeth was touched that her dad and husband had dropped their differences and passed a sleepless night piecing together bolts and beams into something

sturdy enough for a life. And still, Elizabeth cradled her daughter. Leanna spent her first few weeks swaddled by her mother's thick arms. Elizabeth held her, even at night, afraid if she put her in the crib something might happen. Only after a doctor diagnosed her with Carpal tunnel syndrome from too much lifting, did she agree to put Leanna in the crib to sleep.

Now Leanna was big enough to sleep in an actual bed. On the nights when Elizabeth and Jake wanted some time to themselves, Julie gladly tucked Leanna into Elizabeth's old bed. Leanna loved sleeping there, nestled beneath her mother's old blankets. "My mommy's room," she'd say.

"That's right, Star. This is where your mommy grew up."

And that is where Elizabeth laid Leanna to rest after the zoo trip. While Leanna dozed, Elizabeth joined her parents in front of the TV. Julie and Steve's other child, Lil' Stevie, was in and out. He had just enlisted in the Navy, and would be shipping out to boot camp soon. Julie had wanted him to go to college, but, as usual, he did not heed her advice. Now she was worried he would be sent to Iraq or somewhere in the Middle East. She wanted to spend every last minute with him, and kept trying to organize family dinners with aunts and grandparents, but it was tough with Elizabeth and Jake in Avocado Heights, and Lil' Stevie busy visiting all his pals. So on this evening, Julie was relieved to have them all under the same roof – however sporadically. She had always been close to her kids – Elizabeth especially. Elizabeth barely needed prompting to open up about her feelings, problems with Jake, even intimate stuff. Julie sometimes told her,

“That’s too much information, Elizabeth. I’m your mother, remember?” Lately, however, Elizabeth had been a little guarded and Julie wanted to figure out what was going on.

“How’s Jake doing?” she asked, trying to sound casual and not like a prying mother.

“He’s fine.”

“Where is he?”

“I dunno. At home, I guess.”

“Is Antonio there?”

“I don’t know, mom,” Elizabeth said tersely.

Julie worried about Elizabeth’s marriage. She had never really liked Jake. No one in the Parra family had. It’s not that he was abusive or anything like that, he just seemed a little dull – too slow to keep up with the Parras’ fast-paced jabs. Elizabeth could have done better, Julie thought. Jake came from a troubled family – Antonio, his cousin, had gone to jail for fighting with his stepfather. The whole family was splintered. No one from the family even came to Jake and Elizabeth’s wedding. That had stunned Julie. She hadn’t wanted Elizabeth to marry at 18 – and she tried to talk them out of it, but when they refused and threatened to go to city hall and get it over with, she and Steve caved. They rented the same chapel at Circus Circus in Las Vegas where they had wed. Elizabeth’s grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins flew to the Strip to watch Elizabeth and Jake exchange vows in front of Roman pillars. They didn’t necessarily support the marriage, but they loved Elizabeth and were there for her. Jake was moved that so many people from Elizabeth’s family came to the wedding. In his own quiet way, he seemed to

enjoy being part of this rowdy, vivacious crowd – and Julie felt sorry for him, that he did not have this kind of love from his own family.

Five years later, Jake and Elizabeth’s marriage was as tumultuous as it had ever been. Julie could not understand why – when they were having such problems – Jake had invited his cousin Antonio to live with them. Anyone with a half a brain could see it was a bad idea. Antonio Garcia still stank of jail. His own parents didn’t want him living at home and, for God knows what reason, Elizabeth and Jake agreed to let him crash on the couch in their two-bedroom apartment. He moved in five weeks ago and, as far as Julie could tell, he was still there, mooching off Jake and flirting with Elizabeth.

For the moment, Elizabeth appeared relaxed and content. She was reclining on the couch, her feet and flamboyantly painted purple toenails, propped in her father’s lap.

Maybe it’s good Jake’s not here, Julie thought to herself. Elizabeth could probably use some time alone.

But as the night progressed, Elizabeth spent less time with her family and more time in the corner, curled around the phone. Julie couldn’t make out her daughter’s words, just a soft slur. Julie hadn’t heard that secretive tone since Elizabeth was a teenager making plans to sneak out after dark. It worried her. What could Elizabeth be up to, she wondered.

“Who are you talking to?” Julie asked when Elizabeth returned.

“No one, just some friends.”

Later, Julie noticed Elizabeth and Lil’ Stevie whispering at the kitchen table. Julie strained her ears, but she could not hear what they were saying. A while later, as Julie

was getting ready for bed, she walked from room to room, looking for Elizabeth. She expected to find her on the phone somewhere, but Elizabeth was not in the house.

“Do you know where your sister is?” Julie asked Lil’ Stevie.

“She just went out for a little, Mom. I said I’d watch Leanna.”

“Well where did she go? It’s late.”

“I dunno, Mom.”

“Is Jake with her?”

“I said I don’t know.”

Julie went to her bedroom and tried to sleep, but she couldn’t. She kept thinking about Elizabeth. Where could she be at this hour? Julie wondered. And why didn’t she say she was leaving? She would have told us, unless she was going somewhere she knew we’d be mad about. Around 11 p.m., Julie was still tossing in bed when her cellphone rang.

“Uh, hi Julie, it’s Jake,” Elizabeth’s husband said in a blundering voice Julie thought made him sound stupid. “Do you know where Elizabeth is? She’s not home yet.”

The next morning, Elizabeth and Jake pulled up to the Parras’ house in their tattered maroon van like nothing was out of the ordinary. Elizabeth climbed out of the passenger’s seat carrying Speedy, their hyperactive Chihuahua. Julie met them on the front stoop, her hands on her hips. Elizabeth lifted the dog toward Julie. “Speedy missed you, Mom.”

“Where have you been, Elizabeth?”

Jake darted past them into the open door, a baseball cap pulled low over his brow.

“Nowhere, Mom. Where’s Leanna?”

Elizabeth nudged her way past Julie and followed Jake inside. She bent down and picked Leanna up in a hug. Julie watched from the doorway, frowning. She wanted to press Elizabeth and find out where she had been last night, but she figured it was futile. Elizabeth inherited stubbornness from her. It had been passed down from mother to daughter for generations in Julie’s family. Pressing usually did nothing but push Elizabeth farther into whatever current she had fallen into. So Julie gave up and resolved to enjoy the last day of the weekend with her family. Elizabeth and Jake kicked back. They napped in Elizabeth’s old bedroom and cheered on the Lakers as they trounced the Oklahoma City Thunder 105 to 98. Elizabeth and Jake seemed more relaxed than they had in a while. They high-fived when the Lakers scored and sat side-by-side on the couch, Elizabeth leaning slightly toward Jake. Maybe they’re not doing so bad, Julie thought, hopefully.

After the game, Elizabeth and Julie got up to grab sodas in the kitchen. As Elizabeth reached up to take a glass from the cabinet, the sleeve of her t-shirt inched up and revealed a bruise, dark and purple as twilight right before for the streetlamps cast a hazy glow.

“Oh my God! What happened?”

Elizabeth lowered a glass and quickly tugged her sleeve down to cover the bruise.

“It’s nothing, just a little bruise.”

“I know it’s a bruise, Elizabeth. How did it get there?”

Elizabeth shrugged.

“It’s no big deal.”

“That’s an unusual place for a bruise.”

On the living room TV, sports casters gave a play-by-play recap of the game.

Julie spoke over the noise. Elizabeth’s voice melded into it.

“So.”

“So, where were you last night? You didn’t have a bruise yesterday. I would have noticed. You were wearing a halter top, remember?”

“I said it was no big deal. I was at a party with a bunch of girls and got into a fight.”

“With a girl?”

“Yeah with a girl.”

Dread coursed through Julie. This kind of thing wouldn’t have surprised her five years ago, when Elizabeth was in her rebellious phase, but Julie thought Elizabeth had straightened herself out. When Leanna was born, Elizabeth gave up old friends, raucous parties and marijuana. She became a nurturing mother. As far as Julie knew, Elizabeth hadn’t gotten into a fight in years.

Standing there in the kitchen, looking down at Elizabeth holding her sleeve in place over her bruise, Julie felt like she had fallen back to the time when this kind of thing was routine.

Elizabeth was 15 then, sneaking out after dark, riding to raves in hand-me-down cars driven by lead sneakered teenagers. Elizabeth skipped so much school, Julie and Steve switched her from El Monte High School to Valley Continuation High – an



“alternative” school for kids who couldn’t cut it in the real thing. Julie hated seeing Elizabeth there, with pregnant girls and gangbangers, but she was willing to try anything to reach her daughter. For Julie, watching Elizabeth falter was like looking in a mirror at a painful reflection her teenage self. She and Elizabeth were so close, so similar, that each time Elizabeth screwed up and fell, Julie felt the pain of the blow on her own body. Julie had believed, as much as she believed in God and the importance of family, that if Elizabeth could only get through this rough spot and learn to harness her will, she would unearth a strength and determination that would spur her to college, a career and a family that respected her individuality.

Julie and Steve did everything they could think of to save their daughter. They sent her to a group home in Riverside, but withdrew her after two weeks when they realized she was parroting the other girls’ bad behavior – getting worse, not better. They joined a Tough Love support group and sat through lectures on boundaries and discipline. Someone there told them to file a missing persons report whenever Elizabeth disappeared at night. The next time Elizabeth snuck off, Julie called 911 and told the operator her daughter was missing and she needed to file a report with the police. She filed a half dozen more before Elizabeth turned 18. She met with Elizabeth’s teachers and asked them to e-mail her every time Elizabeth skipped class. Elizabeth protested by telling a state social worker that her parents physically abused her. Lil’ Stevie was called out of class at Abraham Lincoln Middle School and asked if his parents beat him. A few days later, Julie arrived home after work to find a social worker in the kitchen, interviewing Elizabeth.

“We don’t appreciate you coming in and talking to our daughter while we’re not here,” Julie said, trying not to scream. “How do I know you didn’t do nothing? You embarrassed my son at school, but thank you for coming. Feel free to investigate. Do you want to see the missing persons reports I filed? I’ll share those with you. How about the e-mails I sent to her teachers? I have those too.”

The investigation was dropped.

Another exhausted parent in the Tough Love group recommended a boot camp led by Marines who pledged to work troubled teens into submission. Julie and Steve enrolled Elizabeth despite her threats to run away.

“Run away,” Julie chided. “Try me. I’ll look for you, find you and bring you straight to boot camp.”

Julie pulled up at the end of the first day and found Elizabeth standing in a line with a dozen other kids, her jeans covered in dirt and her right hand lifted in a salute. As mother and daughter locked eyes, Elizabeth lowered all but her middle finger and wiped a fleck of mud from her face.

She climbed in the car glowering and slammed the door. “They ate my fucking Snickers and drank my Gatorade. They did it right in front of me. ‘Oh what do we have here? We told you to bring a simple lunch.’”

Julie drove home laughing.

“Hey, I told your dad just to pack a sandwich. Yell at him, not me. You knew the rules.”

A month into boot camp, something shifted inside Elizabeth. She got a job making sandwiches at Subway and invited the Marines to stop by after camp. She stopped sneaking out at night. Julie relaxed at work. Bad e-mails from Elizabeth's teachers had programmed her to fear the mail chime on her office computer. But the bad e-mails ceased, and good reports began trickling in. Elizabeth even won an award from the Marines for her turn-around. "She's a model student," they said. "A role model for other teens." Elizabeth was safe, finally. Julie fought for her daughter, and it seemed she had won.

Elizabeth resumed her old patterns. She visited her Grandma Honey's house in Riverside and accompanied her on trips to Kohl's and TJ Maxx. She painted her great-grandma's nails neon pink and babysat her younger cousins for free. She felt bad for them because their mom was in jail and their dad drank a lot, so they lived with their grandma. Elizabeth scoured the internet for cheap activities, then shuttled a carload of cousins to festivals and free movies at the theater. She drafted guest lists and menus for her family's annual Fourth of July and New Year's Eve parties. People gravitated to Elizabeth – her "Oh my gosh, no way! Me too!" amazement at coincidences, the way she'd talk to anyone, invite them over – "Come on. It'll be fun!" Her propensity to laugh at herself – "Oh my gosh, can you believe I just farted?!"

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“Boot camp turned her life around,” Julie told me. “We thought, that’s the beginning of it. It finally clicked. She became a leader. She got a special award for being one of the best in the group. She was thinking of becoming a medical assistant.”

We had been speaking for a few hours, sitting side-by-side on Elizabeth’s old couch. Steve and Jake popped into the room a few times, but Julie kept talking. Her voice never faltered or changed pitch. It was a flat line. Her gaze seemed foggy and off somehow. Even when she looked directly at me, I felt like she was looking somewhere else, like her eyes were not completely focused on me. She reminded me of a soldier in a military portrait. The military takes the pictures when troops enlists, and sends them to newspapers if the soldier is killed. Maybe because of this, most soldiers choose not to smile. Interviewing military spouses and parents, I have seen so many of these portraits displayed on mantels. The vagueness in the faces of the soldiers always makes me uneasy. There is no emotion. They have straight lips that appear neither solemn nor happy, and eyes that seem unnaturally wide and distant. When the photos are snapped, the soldiers are alive, but I cannot imagine the people in the portraits laughing and drinking a beer with friends, or changing their baby’s diaper. They seem devoid of some necessary element of life. That is how Julie seemed to me.

She had been off and on antidepressants, she said. When she wasn’t on medication, her moods spiraled. She cried loudly and frequently. Little things set her off: Elizabeth’s hair still tangled in the spine of a brush, a phone message from USPS asking Elizabeth to come in for a job interview, “Gimme more” coming across the radio. Every time Elizabeth had heard that song, she mimicked Britney Spears’ sultry voice and said,

“It’s Britney, bitch.” Once when Elizabeth and Leanna were at the house, the song came on and Leanna said, “It’s Britney, bitch.” Elizabeth and Julie were so shocked, they erupted in laughter and were unable to turn the moment into a teachable one for Leanna.

Julie’s temper had always been quick to ignite. Now it barely needed a spark. People’s inability to handle everyday problems infuriated her. When she found out a relative was using drugs, she screamed at him. “How dare you do drugs? Look at what I’ve been through. Did I slip and do drugs? No.”

“I have a new attitude,” she told me. “I don’t have time to bullshit. I get angry when I find out people aren’t making themselves better when they have shitty lives already. I can’t stand that. So I get disgusted with them. I don’t want no negativity.”

Julie’s psychologist wanted her to stay on antidepressants. They did not calm her, so much as quiet her. They helped her focus on work and all that needed to be done to prepare for a trial. Julie feared, however, that if she was on antidepressants during the trial, she wouldn’t cry as much and the jury might take her lack of outward emotion as a deficit of love for Elizabeth. She feared they would see her dry eyes and think Elizabeth was not worthy of love.

“I want the jury to see the real me,” she said.

So each time a new trial date was set, she went against her doctor’s recommendations and put away the Zoloft. Because judges kept setting trial dates, and lawyers kept requesting delays, Julie had been on and off Zoloft several times.

“Maybe things will be different after the court,” she said. “My friend told me she feels better after court. I want that. I want to breathe.”

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Jake, Elizabeth, Leanna and Speedy left the Parras' house together Sunday night. Julie turned on the porch light and watched them walk toward the van. Once Leanna was strapped into her car seat, and Speedy deposited on the van's fuzzy floor, Elizabeth slid into the passenger seat and waved at her mom. She fiddled with her ponytail, then closed the door. The van pulled away from the house, went around the corner and disappeared.

The next evening after Julie returned from a long day at her secretarial job – Mondays always felt longer than usual – her cellphone rang and Leanna's smiling face flashed across the screen.

"Hey Bird, What's up?" she said, greeting Elizabeth with her childhood nickname.

Julie had been walking toward the kitchen, but she turned around and plopped down on the couch, extending her legs. It felt good to be out of dress shoes and in socks.

"I'm stressed out," Elizabeth said. Julie sat up a little. Elizabeth's voice, usually upbeat and melodic, sounded shaky – maybe even frightened, or was it just tired? Julie couldn't tell.

"Antonio came over here and Jake isn't happy. Antonio's not supposed to be here anymore. He moved out."

"It's about time," Julie said, interrupting her daughter.

"No Mom, you don't understand. Jake is mad."

“Well he should be mad, Elizabeth. You guys have enough problems. I’ve seen how Antonio flirts with you. He should not be in your home.”

Julie had never liked Antonio Garcia. He was 34, unemployed and covered in tattoos – a trifecta Julie knew was not good for her daughter. Not that tattoos were inherently bad. Steve’s arms were laced with ink and Elizabeth had a few, but Antonio’s climbed out of his shirt collars, announcing his allegiance to the Azusa street gang, which had recently been in the news for a spate of killings allegedly ordered by the Mexican Mafia. Some of the victims were targeted because they were black.

In El Monte, gangs were as much a part of the scenery as taquerias and walnut trees. Teenagers in baggy, starched jeans, flat-soled Nike Cortez shoes and bandanas grew up in houses just like the Parras’ and strolled the streets at night, staking out neighborhoods for territory. During their annual New Year’s Eve party, the Parras always warned guests to stay inside because at midnight the sky filled with gunpowder and stray bullets. Steve even flirted with gangs when he was young, but that was decades ago – when gangs were more about showing off with the guys and fist fights than drug rings and guns. Julie urged her children to stay away from gangs, but she didn’t fear them like someone living in a more affluent suburb might. They were her neighbors, for better or worse.

Antonio was something else altogether though. With the husky build of an out-of-shape football player, he hovered over Elizabeth and Jake. He spoke in a soft clipped mumble meant to sound cool, detached, Julie thought. “Hey-ah .Wuz up,” he’d say, with his gansta accent. At the New Year’s Eve party, when the Parras first met Antonio, Steve

noticed and approved of the way he tailed Leanna around, stacking blocks with her and pouring juice in her plastic cup.

“He’s not that bad,” Steve told Julie later as they tossed paper plates and beer cans in trash bags. “What do you expect from a Garcia?”

Julie noticed the way Antonio leered at Elizabeth, his brown eyes following her, then sliding to the floor when he noticed someone watching him.

“He likes her,” she told Steve. “I can tell. And she might just be stupid enough to fall for him right now. You know she and Jake are having problems. The last thing they need is him lurking around.”

And that’s exactly what Antonio did. A few days after the party, he arrived at Jake and Elizabeth’s with a gym bag full of clothes. He didn’t enough money for an apartment, and his dad had apparently kicked him out. He said he wanted to get a job and start going to church, and so Jake and Elizabeth forfeited their couch and invited him to stay for a while.

Now listening to Elizabeth on the phone, Julie shook her head in disgust.

“Damn, Elizabeth,” she said. “You shoulda never let that fool into your house. Where is he now?”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth said, her voice still frantic. “Jake was gonna drop him off at his dad’s house, but he’s still not back and it’s been more than an hour. What could they be talking about? I bet they’re drinking.”

“You know Elizabeth, at least they’re not drinking at your place. Don’t worry about it so much. Go to bed. Is Leanna in bed yet?”



“Yeah, mom.” Elizabeth’s voice softened a bit. “She’s sleeping. She’s good.”

“OK then. I’ll talk to you later, Bird.”

“Bye.”

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“Any friend of my kids is a friend of mine,” Julie told me. “I try not to be judgmental.”

“What gave you the impression that Antonio was attracted to Elizabeth?” I asked.

“I could tell this guy Antonio had an attitude. No one believed me. They thought I was being a cautious mother. I talked to my daughter about it. She blew me off. ‘Oh no. We’re just friends.’ They came here to play pool, the two of them.”

Julie gestured to a pool table that sat in the center of a large open room, right off the living room.

“I called Elizabeth’s husband and said, ‘What are you doing letting your wife hang out with him?’”

A thud sounded somewhere in the house. Julie jumped up.

“Let me see what just happened.”

I watched her walk toward Leanna’s bedroom, crack open the door, then softly shut it. She peeked in another bedroom, then rejoined me on the couch.

“Everything’s fine,” she said. “So back to that day when they were playing pool. The baby was asleep. I was folding towels and came back into this room. Antonio was

whispering in Elizabeth's ear. I said, 'What the fuck's going on?' I cussed him out. I said, 'What the hell are you doing?'"

"What did Elizabeth do?" I asked.

"She got mad. I tried to block the door and make them talk to me, but she pushed past and they left."

Julie was quiet for a few moments. While I waited for her to resume, I watched photos of Elizabeth cycle through the digital frame. Seeing the photos change – Elizabeth's wedding day to the birth of her daughter, to the petting zoo – gave me a sensation of life. Here was a young woman going through life's milestones, getting older, surrounded by family.

"I told my daughter, if you're not happy with Jake, you come back here," Julie said suddenly. "You raise the baby and all here. Because Elizabeth, you don't leave your husband for his cousin. You don't cross those lines. She said, 'No. Jake is Leanna's dad.' She said, 'We're going to go out dinner on Valentine's Day.' She was excited. They didn't have much money and she got always got loved going out to eat. I told her to bring the baby over and we'd watch her."