

One

Stillness

The house in Garden Valley was at the end of a meandering narrow road shaded by gray pines and blue oaks. The few properties were far apart and separated by clumps of scraggly brush as pale and crumbly as straw though it was still only June. The wood-sided house had not been well maintained; the yellow paint was faded and even worn through in places, and the white country shutters were flecked with spots. But the front yard was neat and there were no tools left carelessly about. No dog barked. The porch had a few hanging plants but no chair.

Inside the house, the girl sat on the floor, her arms wrapped round her legs so that her blonde hair fell loose about her like a curtain. She raised her head slightly so that just her eyes, blue as sky, peered out above her bare knees. Deputy sheriffs now swarmed throughout the house and yard, with another carload arriving every few minutes. She slowly got to her feet and watched as they moved about in what seemed like slow motion. Each of the men was large and sucked up so much space the front room seemed tiny, like a doll's house. A female deputy with copper hair pulled tight in a French braid watched her every move through opaque yellow eyes. But no one spoke to her, and there was nothing to distract her from staring at the figure lying still in a corner. Several large

black flies hovered low, moving in lazy, hypnotic parabolas. She did not recall ever seeing flies this large before, did not recall their insistent droning sound. How had they gotten inside the house, what acute sense of smell had led them here so instinctively?

The female deputy decided she'd drifted too close to an imaginary line. "Move away, ma'am."

Ma'am. She silently protested the word, thinking, I am nineteen years old, but she moved further away to the window. She walked lightly with a dancer's grace, her legs long in loose drawstring shorts and her arms strong and lean in a sleeveless white tee. A new stream of people arrived and one of them, not in uniform, took charge. He beckoned her, and not one, but two, deputies approached to escort her the few feet across the room. She had nowhere to look except directly at the body lying on the floor.

When she had first entered the room and had seen her mother sprawled in a heap, she had thought, oh my God, she has fallen, she has fallen and hurt herself. And she had instantly thought, it is my fault because I left her. It had taken several moments — even after seeing the ooze of pooled blood and her mother's eyes open and unseeing — before she had understood. Then her knees had given way, and she had screamed four loud screams as she scrambled, still on her knees, back out the front door, almost rolling down the steps.

Now her gaze fixed on her mother's bloody, disfigured head, and she again saw her mother's lifeless blue eyes. *Mother, O mother.* She bowed her head in a daze, and yet, because it was so shocking and unreal, she had no tears. Instead, her face, eyes, and throat felt gritty and dry in the summer heat.

"Miss Valle?"

She did not respond. She did not want to share this sad moment with a lie.

"Miss Valle, can you identify this woman is your mother?"

Then Terri felt laughter rise up from her gut like bubbling acid, and she had to turn away so she would not see their faces for she

would surely crumple into hysterics. The male officers imperceptibly moved back to give her space, but the female deputy looked at her stonily, not understanding and finding her laughter distasteful. Terri paid her no mind.

It was too ridiculous to be asked this, of all questions, here, now.

He tried again, "Can you tell us, is this Sandra Valle?"

Terri suddenly thought, as long as I do not say "Yes," then there is a chance there could have been some mistake that, even now, might still be fixed, and she smiled at all of them, irrationally, hopefully. But her smile again confounded the female deputy. Then the man who was not in uniform asked, "Who else could it possibly be?" Terri could not find an answer to his question, so at last she said, "Yes, yes, this is my mother." He started writing, and Terri spelled the last name so he would not, mistakenly, add a "y".

Now one of the deputies asked, "Is there someone you can call?"

Terri shook her head no. She didn't know which of her friends still lived nearby. And even if she could find someone, it would take an unbearably long time for anyone to get here. It was early evening, and in another hour the sun would set. It would be difficult for someone to drive the twisty hillside roads and find the house in the dark.

A bearded man wearing, of all things, a Hawaiian shirt over his potbelly, walked into the house. Despite his crude clothing, his movements were sharp and precise. He bent over the body and listened through a stethoscope for a heartbeat that wasn't there. He felt around the neck and jaw. "What time was the call?" he asked no one in particular.

"Coupla hours ago. You need it exact?"

His gaze caught Terri. The deputy understood. "Ma'am, you can't stay here; it's a crime scene."

"But ..." She looked at them in confusion. Why weren't they

telling her anything?

“Ma’am?”

She covered her face with her hands. She felt her shallow breath through her fingers.

Someone said, “You better take her somewhere.”

Terri looked up. “No. I’ll go”

Terri saw that her purse, a huge black hobo, was still lying where she’d dropped it, but, as she picked it up, the female deputy asked sharply, “Is that yours or hers?”

“Mine,” Terri answered, and when the deputy hesitated, she offered it to her. “See?”

She thought that the woman would hand it back as soon as she saw it was hers, but the deputy passed it to the man who was not in uniform. “Here, Detective.” The detective dumped everything out, pausing as he noticed her passport among its contents. Then he noticed there was something else. Widening a hole in the lining with his fingers, he drew out several loose hundred dollar bills. “Hold on, there’s more,” he said. “A lot more.” He looked sharply at Terri, his gaze lingering, as he shook out the rest of the bills onto the ground. The bills rose in an impressive heap. He put them in a plastic bag and her purse and passport in another. “You’ll get it back when we’re done,” he said.

A couple of the men shared glances. Terri sensed something had just changed. One of them glanced at her leg, which had a smear of blood from when she’d kneeled next to her mother, and suddenly he took several pictures of her.

The detective motioned Terri to gather the rest of her things. “Make sure you tell someone where you can be reached.”

The female deputy took it all in but said nothing. Terri was at the door when she heard the detective say, “Curious.” She turned around and saw that the detective was holding a business card plucked from the papers on her mother’s small desk. “S.F.D.A.” The alphabet soup meant nothing to Terri. “Curious,” he repeated

softly. She left.

Terri drove down the hill without direction until she realized she was headed to the river camp in Coloma. She wanted nothing more than to find a place next to a gentle part of the river and say quiet prayers. She was glad she knew the way, for by now it was past twilight and the road was narrow in places. She did not want to go back to San Francisco. She thought people she knew might be working at the camp and would let her stay. But when she pulled into the gravel lot, she saw it was filled with several expensive late model cars. She'd forgotten it was Friday, when the company offered overnight weekend rafting trips. She sat in the parking lot awhile amidst the parked cars, unsure what to do. Then she got out of the car and began picking her way down the dirt path towards the river.

The guests were noisy and laughing, and they were gathered around long picnic tables and a buffet set up by the camp guides. "Terri?" She did not look over, did not acknowledge anyone as she passed. "Hey, Terri!" But they were too busy tending to the guests to go after her, and she walked on alone as far as she could until the path met the river. Her eyes blinked darkness until the shadows became trees, bushes, and rocks.

Please ... she began. She closed her eyes, but no easy prayer came to mind. The river was quiet, hardly moving. *O mother, mother!* But she got no feeling from the river of any kind of answer. Her thoughts piled in on themselves, a jumble. In the moments when she first realized her mother had been killed, she'd thought wildly, this can't be, who had killed her? She had looked around the room and had thought, how could everything be so neat, so undisturbed? *Who had done this?*

She bent to her knees and felt the small smooth rocks on the ground. She suddenly realized this was the exact spot where she had first met Jack. She saw the large flat rocks in the river that had beckoned her that long ago morning. She picked up a tiny

flat stone and put it in the pocket of her shorts, then stood up, remembering:

It had been early April and the dawn sky had been ethereal blue. Terri had walked down to the river's edge while the others were still asleep in their tents. The water, when Terri had reached down to touch the shallows, was icy cold. She had stretched out her arms to gather in the lightening sky. Close to shore were two large flat rocks that she might stand on.

Now something was happening over by the camp. A disturbance, then a hush. Then her name, amplified by a bullhorn, over and over, bounced between the trees.

"TERESA. TERESA VALLE."

No, I am someone else, anyone else.

"WE KNOW YOU ARE HERE."

Flashlights played over the bushes around her, then caught her and fixed her in their white glare.

"SHOW US YOUR HANDS."

She was terrified but had the presence of mind not to make a sudden movement. She closed her eyes and stood still with her hands raised, her fingertips spread towards the sky.

♦ ♦ ♦

It was two days before someone came to talk to her. She was by herself in a cell with steel bars. The cell was empty except for a thin mattress on a cot that was bolted to the floor. The brick county jail was practically brand new, but the scratchy blanket they had given her smelled of cigarette smoke, even if no smoking was permitted. No, she said, there was no one she wanted to call. So they left her alone, and she lay on the cot and hours passed slowly.

One of the deputies came by and held up a local newspaper. "You're famous," he said. She saw the headline and quickly looked away.

They had not found the tiny stone at the bottom of her pocket,

and she held it in her palm, rubbing its smooth surface incessantly, remembering:

She was on a rock by the river's edge. There was another rock, large and flat, further out. She wondered if she might be able to jump to the other rock, then she visualized herself landing on it, and she knew she could reach it. She jumped and landed perfectly in the very center. The shimmer of reflected morning sun danced in the water around her.

She tried to keep the image of the river in her mind, but sometimes the vision changed, and, instead, she saw herself finding her mother:

— she saw herself entering the room and then saw her mother sprawled on the floor in a heap, motionless — then she saw the ooze of pooled blood and her mother's eyes open and unseeing — then she saw herself as her knees gave way and she screamed —

She sat bolt upright until the stark view of the cell chased the vision away. She tried to replace the ugly last picture of her mother and searched for another recollection. Terri remembered the last time when she had said she was leaving. Terri had suddenly touched her mother's hand, and when their hands had touched, her mother's eyes had flickered for the briefest moment before settling into a great sadness.

Please, please tell me.

What had she known, Terri wondered.

The expression in her mother's sad eyes.

Then her mother's eyes, pale blue and lifeless.

Then her own screams as she scrambled on her knees out of the room.

The scenes cycled over and over until she was glad when at last a deputy came to get her.

The deputy put her in handcuffs and watched her closely as they walked past the other cells to a small room where a middle-aged man was already sitting down. The deputy closed the heavy

door, leaving them alone.

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The man was short and roly-poly, and both his wispy orange hair and rumpled green cotton sports jacket needed straightening. He did not hold out his hand.

“Are they treating you all right?”

Terri said nothing; she was still in a daze.

“Call me right away if they don’t.” He handed Terri his card. John Kelly, Public Defender, El Dorado County. “That shouldn’t happen, but it does. And it looks like you will be here for quite some time.”

When Terri spoke, it was not to him but to herself. “I have to get out of here.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s unlikely. They think your behavior was erratic.”

“Erratic?” she repeated softly, staring into space. Reflexively, she put her palms together in a prayer position, her fingertips lightly grazing her chin. Her hands were beautifully shaped, the fingers long and slender, her nails unpolished. Now, at last, she looked at his face and saw he had been looking at her carefully the whole time. She did not look away but met his gaze evenly.

He softened his voice. “The D.A. is planning to ask for one million dollars bail.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’ll try to contest, but it’s pretty clear the D.A. will get what he wants.”

“I don’t understand any of this.”

“Then let me try to explain. A girl named Morgan ...”

“My roommate, in San Francisco.”

“... called the authorities when she didn’t hear from you. She thought maybe you had been in some kind of accident. She told them you were agitated, that was her word, agitated, when you left,

and that it had something to do with your mother. Apparently, she'd overheard part of an argument with your mother over the phone."

Terri looked down at her hands. They suddenly felt cold and looked mottled blue under the fluorescent light.

"So that was not helpful. And then, of course, they found quite a bit of money in your purse. Quite a bit. Which suggests —" he shrugged, "whatever they want it to suggest."

Terri said nothing, uncomfortable.

He continued. "Which brings us to the timeline. According to the medical examiner, your mother was murdered no more than one — at most, two — hours before your 911 call."

"OK."

"Well, did she have many visitors?"

"No. No one came by — ever."

"That's not helpful."

"How can I tell you anything if I don't know anything?"

"All right, but do you see the problem? It's a very narrow window."

"How is that my fault?"

Kelly was thoughtful as he regarded her with bottle-green eyes. "Did she abuse you?"

"No. She wasn't a lot of fun to be around; she was kind of a very unhappy person. But she never *abused* me."

"Would you like to tell me where you got the money?"

"No. You probably wouldn't find it — helpful."

He drummed his fingers a moment on the table, considering. "You've been here a couple of days. Why didn't you call anyone?"

"Well, the person I *would've* called, my mother, happened to be dead."

"You know, Miss Valle, if you are under the impression that this is some kind of game, let me disabuse you of that notion. I

don't know if you did this or not —” He held up his hand when Terri tried to speak, “And I don't want to know! But *you* should know this. Your entire future — maybe even your life — is at stake here.”

“I did *not* kill my mother. I did not kill anyone.”

He sighed and rose to his feet. “Look, I've got to be in court soon for another case.” He rang for the deputy. “But I'll be back for your arraignment, and we'll have a chance to talk more. I need to get some background about you.”

“That will be a complete waste of time.”

“Oh, you've got time. And don't worry about me, I get paid by the hour.”

The deputy opened the door. Kelly motioned for her to be silent, and she said nothing as the deputy led her back down the long corridor to her cell.

♦ ♦ ♦

Great, Terri thought. Background about *me*?

She smiled ironically, thinking of the college applications she had filled out. Write a personal statement. Tell us who you are. Well, she'd thought she'd known, and she had filled out the applications diligently. The university had even accepted her. But in the end, she'd chosen not to go. Not right away. Not if it meant leaving Jack.

She closed her eyes and brought her fists to her forehead. No, she would *not* think about Jack in this place. Think of anything else.

Her skin felt dirty and greasy, and her body smelled sour. They had brought her food, but it had made her sick even to look at it. She had not eaten anything for two days except for some orange juice that had an odd metallic taste.

They had brought her to this cell after they had made her hold something under her face and taken her picture. The booking

deputy had looked from the paperwork to her in surprise and said, “What the hell — ”

“It’s a mistake,” Terri had said, but she saw the deputy who led her in nod yes.

“Oh no,” he’d replied. “If they arrested you, they got it right.”

Terri had said nothing further and had just stared at him with sickening disbelief. They had fingerprinted her, pushing her fingers down hard on the cardboard paper.

They had taken her further inside the jail. A female deputy had patted her down. She’d made Terri open her mouth and then squat with her shorts lowered. There had been a mirror underneath.

And then the cell and the cold. She had lain shivering for what seemed like hours under the smoky blanket before realizing that her shivering was not because it was cold. All the time the same few seconds kept looping through her mind: opening the door and seeing her mother, then her mother’s staring eyes, and then herself as her legs gave way and she started to scream.

Now, after the hopeless talk with Kelly, the same scenes of finding her mother again began cycling, alternating with those of her arrest, relentless, speeding, faster.

I am going crazy, she thought.

Terri knew she needed to calm down, and she started breathing slowly to empty her mind of all her thoughts.

Breathe.

Her swirling thoughts started to slow and settle.

Breathe.

But would nothing take away the picture of her mother’s still eyes?

She inhaled deeply, and at last she felt a quietness close in about her. She exhaled and bowed her head. She remembered the tiny stone, and, as she gripped it tightly, she heard the sound of the river in her own heart.