

**She's accused of four murders.
She's only guilty of three.**

BLOOD SUGAR

A NOVEL

Sascha
Rothchild

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Sascha Rothchild

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Acknowledgments
About the Author

For Matt.

I knew when you first walked into the room, and I still know.

OCEAN

The waves weren't that big. But he was only seven, so even the smallest of chop towered over his drenched head. “Never turn your back on the ocean” was advice he would never hear. Instead he faced the shore, proudly gesticulating. His father was busy, drinking a sweating can of domestic beer and complaining to his group of friends about the lack of waterfront-zoning laws. His mother was busy looking at the stretch marks drifting across her once flat, smooth stomach. So neither noticed their son waving and smiling at them in the Atlantic Ocean, just thirty feet ahead.

At the moment he was going to give up on making eye contact with his parents and turn toward the blue-on-blue horizon, a crest crumbled and slapped him in the back, pitching him forward, facedown, forcing him to take a big gulp of warm salty water. He coughed. A new wave jostled him before he could regain his natural rhythm of breath, and then another. So panic started to set in. A panic with flailing arms, jerking legs, and lungs fighting against themselves, taking turns both hyperventilating and coughing. Soon, all his composure was lost. It seemed like the ocean knew he was in trouble, and was happy to take advantage. Toying with his fifty-four-pound frame.

The rest was easy. Too easy, really. I was a breaker away, watching it all, holding my head high above the water, my neck straining a little so I could see him struggle in the undulating foam. My first instinct was to help him. I was a strong swimmer. I could paddle over and prop him up and call out to an adult to get him safely to shore. Then a second instinct kicked in, if there can be such a thing as a second instinct. A calm resolve filled my chest,

followed by a burst of gold-glitter excitement that traveled to the tip of every limb. I dove under the water, eyes open. The sting felt good, a reminder that I was alive.

The ocean was murky, so it was hard to make out details, but I was able to see enough to grab on to one of the boy's slick, thrashing ankles. My hand was too small to get a good hold. He was only seven years old, yes. But I was only five.

Using both my tiny hands, I had just enough grip to pull him down. And hold him down. A calmer boy might have held his breath and kicked free. He was only inches from oxygen. But he wasn't calm. He was sucking in more and more water. Until he wasn't.

When I felt his leg go slack, I held on for ten more seconds. Just to make sure. Counting slowly backward. Like I learned in school. Like I did when I couldn't fall asleep at night because my brain was swirling with too many high-voltage thoughts to power down for the day. When I reached the count of one, I let go of his ankle and swam away. Flipping my back legs together in unison, like a mermaid tail. I wasn't so different from other five-year-old girls; I too loved mermaids.

When my own need for air became unbearable, I finally popped my head up a good distance from him. I searched the water until I saw his lifeless form being pushed closer to the shore, gently swaying with the seaweed. The ocean delivered him onto the sand, not wanting to play with a dead toy.

I didn't even need to scream. His mother was already doing that. Adults raced to him, rushed and frantic, unwilling to accept that time was no longer a factor.

My mother started shrieking for me to come back in, worried that drowning was somehow contagious. As I splashed to shore, I thought about how primitive adults were sometimes. And predictable. All the swimming kids were plucked back to land, held tightly in oversized once-bright tropical-patterned towels, now faded from years of use in the sun. For a brief moment, parents and children alike were not taking anything for granted. We all noticed details like the scratchy, hard corner edges of the

towels, the grace of a seagull gliding past the billowing clouds that hinted at the afternoon rain that would be coming, the beauty of the peeling pink and green pastel buildings lining the bright-sanded beach. The warmth of the air was only trumped by the warmth of skin hugging skin and the rise and fall of chests that housed healthy beating, living hearts.

As my mother held me, I waited for guilt to set in. But it never did.

PHOTOGRAPH

Twenty-five years later I sat in a small interrogation room inside the Washington Avenue branch of the Miami Beach Police Department. A cup of water was placed on my side of the table. The chair I was told to sit in was metal and flimsy. Light enough to pick up and swing around and throw at someone, but also light enough to not do much damage to property or person, if thrown. The table was also metal, but thicker and heavier and bolted to the concrete floor. There were some long scratches in it, of varying degrees of depth and age. Decades of frenetic doodles and cuts made by the people who had been trusted enough to hold sharp objects while sitting there.

I had my purse with me, which I hung on the back of the tin chair. A nice bag to show I was a professional working woman. But not so nice as to be flashy. And inside it, I had a few pointy items. A purple pen. A house key. Tweezers. A nail file. I also had my wallet in there, with identification confirming I was Ruby Simon. Miami Beach resident. Thirty years old. Five five. Organ donor. My weight a lie. Brown eyes. Brown hair, because auburn was not an option at the DMV. My hair was a deep pecan color dappled with copper. And so were my eyes. The reddish flecks in my nut-brown irises matched my mane perfectly. And this color coordination was the most striking thing about me, physically, and pulled my otherwise unremarkable face together. I thought about taking out my nail file and idly smoothing a few edges, to show how unconcerned I was about this whole thing. But it felt like it might read as too performative, so I kept my would-be weapons in my purse.

The man who gave me the water was Detective Keith Jackson. He lumbered into the seat on the other side of the table and placed a closed file folder in between us. No doubt a tactic to put me on edge. To make me squirm and worry about what could possibly be inside the folder. I refused to give in to basic interrogation techniques. I didn't squirm, but instead sat still. And looked at the man in front of me. He was handsome and weathered, maybe fifty. His head was completely bald and smooth. He had a nicely shaped skull. Symmetrical. And a small nick on his neck from shaving. As he settled in, I caught a glimpse of his ankle skin, peeking out over his black sock. His pants were a little too short for his well-over-six-foot height.

He slowly opened the folder. Making a real meal of pulling out four pieces of paper, which I could tell from the edges were all photographs. He looked at each one, hidden from my view, and then purposefully placed each facedown on the table, until all four were in a tidy row in front of me. He certainly wasn't concerned with seeming too performative. This felt like more of a game show than a police interview. *Behind photograph number one is either life in prison, or a brand-new living room set!*

Then he turned over the first photo. It faced me. A smiling seven-year-old boy, awkwardly posed, wearing a pressed collared shirt, stared up at me. An unease started gnawing through my ribs. I remembered that very school picture day so well because my big sister, Ellie, couldn't decide what to do with her hair for her own school picture. As I looked at the backs of the other three hidden photos, the gnawing gave way to an educated guess. If they were like the first, they were each of a different person. And I knew these four people had at least two things in common. One, they were all dead. And two, they all died within arm's reach of me.

To be clear, I'm not a sociopath. I've studied myself. I've felt empathy and sympathy. I've had long-lasting friendships and relationships. I've laughed so much so often that my obliques get sore like I've been rowing a boat. And I've cried too. At normal things like breakups, goodbyes, and manipulative commercials about cars with safe airbags. I've felt compassion. For the homeless. For the starving. For the lost. I'm also

extremely kind to animals. Even as a young child, I boycotted the evil elephant-using circus every year when it rumbled into town. To put it simply, I respected life. But Keith Jackson didn't know this. He stared me down, wanting to believe the worst of me, waiting for me to break.

After a pause long enough to make most people uncomfortable, the detective laid into me. He started by leaning back, away from the photos, a show of calm strength. He said, "I've been on the force twenty years. Before that I was in the army. And no one has ever died in front of me. Not one person. Soldier. Civilian. Cop. Criminal. Not a one. Sure, I've rushed junkies to the hospital while they overdosed. I've hauled my fair share of people with gunshot wounds into ambulances. And of course, when I'm called in to investigate a homicide, I'll see a corpse or two. But never has anyone had a freak accident and died while in the same room as me. Even my ninety-year-old grandma gracefully passed away when I was out of the house.

"But you. You have four dead people in your midst. At least. That I know about for sure. And one of them is your husband." He punched the word *husband*, to make sure it hit hard, in the air. I felt it. But did not flinch. He leaned forward, his broad shoulders hulking in, just a little. "How do you explain that, Ms. Simon?"

It was a valid question. And as I decided how I might respond to him, my mind raced back and all the details of my life that led me to this exact moment came to the surface. It was like *Remembrance of Things Past*, but instead of waxing poetic about my life while drinking a cup of tea, I had a cup of tap water. Which I was sure was given to me to acquire my DNA and fingerprints without a warrant. Before I answered him, I took a long sip, knowing my DNA and fingerprints were not going to help this homicide detective one way or the other anyway.

ELLIE

The boy in the photo, the boy I murdered, was named Duncan Reese. He was a bratty only child governed by the assumption that there was a limited amount of happiness in the world. So if some other kid was happy, it zapped Duncan of his own joy. Because of this toxic belief, he took it upon himself to sabotage the merriment of others. Joshua got a new bike. Duncan smashed it with a baseball bat. Vicky was chosen to play a piano solo for the back-to-school assembly. Duncan “mistakenly” broke the school’s piano while “horsing around” in the auditorium that morning. To celebrate his birthday, Griffin brought in chocolate chip cupcakes for everyone in his class. Duncan, not in Griffin’s class, decided if he couldn’t enjoy one, no one should. Claiming it was unfair, he flung the cheery red-and-orange-polka-dotted box into the school hallway, ruining all twelve cupcakes inside.

I was too young to be on Duncan’s radar, and although I was energetic and spirited, I rarely exuded actual happiness, so he never tormented me. It was my older sister, Ellie, who was his favorite target. Also seven, she was in his grade. They had known each other since prekindergarten, and each year the systematic bullying got worse. Ellie had ringlets of curly sunset-colored hair and big green eyes. Traits of beauty later in life, but in childhood, fodder for teasing. Lizard Eyes and Snake Head were her usual nicknames. Whatever. She didn’t lose sleep over it, especially since even crueller names existed for other kids in school. But Duncan took the teasing and added viciousness. He would often block her path in doorways, trip her on stairs, and drop insects he caught and trapped into her lap in class so she

would jump up, screaming, and look like a fool. He constantly threatened that he was going to hold her down and cut off each crimson curl, one by one. Or maybe, if he felt like it, yank them out instead. One day during a fire drill, he made good on his promise and actually ripped out an entire lock, leaving a bloody bald spot on her porcelain scalp.

Duncan swore it was an accident. He got off with a casual warning to play more gently, especially with girls. Victim-blaming starts young. It somehow became my sister's fault for being too delicate. Too breakable.

After that, I started to worry. She was not just my sister; she was also my best friend, my safe place, my idol, and my god. She was my prize possession. Ellie was, and still is, my favorite thing in the whole wide world. I feared Duncan would break her to the point of no repair. Ruin her forever. Because of Duncan, she was ashamed of her fiery hair, she rarely smiled, and she stopped playing dress-up and pretend with me altogether. She started to hate school, looked over her shoulder constantly, refused to use public bathrooms, and now had nightmares. Duncan was infecting even her most private moments. Her dreams. I could hear her through the walls, yelping in her sleep. Our bedrooms were connected by a bathroom that we shared, and her pitiful cries echoed across the black and white Art Deco tiles. Our parents' bedroom was far away, on the other side of the kitchen. So no one but me could hear Ellie's whimpering.

Years of therapy have taught me not to use the word *should*. It's empty and pointless. But fuck it. My parents should have taken more action against the bullying. The teachers should have protected Ellie and stopped it. The principal should have kicked Duncan out of school long before things got so bad. But none of them really saw it the way I did. Like Duncan's parents on the shore, they were all too wrapped up in their own lives to notice Ellie's confidence and sparkle fading away. Because to a great degree Ellie *was* my life, I was the one to clearly notice her descent into wishing to be invisible.

Before Duncan accelerated his engine of persecution, Ellie was vivacious, effervescent, kind, and giving. But not cloyingly sweet or desperate to make friends. She had her own strong opinions, one being that

poems should have to rhyme. But she was open to listening to others, and if anyone needed a fourth for box ball, even if she wasn't totally in the mood, she would jump in. She made any room she was in more appealing, always fun yet never frantic. Like a perfectly balanced scented candle. The opposite of Duncan, she believed joy was limitless, not a commodity to be stolen. The more others felt happiness, the more she felt it. So she tried to spread it around, multiply it until it filled the whole world. She smiled at the elderly who were so often ignored; she made nondenominational holiday cards for everyone on our block, including the grumpy divorced lady on the corner. She chatted with the school bus driver so he wouldn't feel left out of the conversations going on in the back.

And unlike most big sisters, she let me play in her room. I had a swing set in the backyard, toys of my own, a box of arts and crafts supplies, and plenty of colored pencils and construction paper to keep me occupied. But despite these distractions, I couldn't keep my hands off Ellie's perfume bottle collection. Each with a different magical shape and hue and smell. The mini crystal sculptures were so pretty all lined up on their little shelf. And, shockingly, even prettier all smashed on the floor.

I didn't mean to knock the biggest one over, causing a catastrophic crash. But once I did, I was mesmerized by the droplets of broken colored glass that smelled like flowers and candy. I reveled in the beauty of the destruction. I was so immersed, I didn't hear Ellie come home and into her room. She found me happily playing in the glassy potpourri. I looked up, embarrassed. I saw the betrayal and fury on her face and she burst into tears. "How could you?!" she screamed at me. I too burst into tears. I explained it was a horrible accident, but it all looked so pretty that I couldn't resist in making the best of it and playing in the aftermath of her perfume bottle massacre.

Ellie noticed my hand was bleeding. A shard of pink perfume bottle glass was lodged in the fleshy heel of my left palm. She removed the sliver and held a towel to the wound to stop the bleeding. She forgave me because she loved me more than she loved the glass bottles. She loved me as much

as I loved her. And together we carefully cleaned up the sharp, sweet-smelling, colorful mess.

Unlike Duncan, I would never intentionally destroy anything that brought her joy. And she saw me sobbing, and she knew that. So she grieved for her broken bottles, but didn't hold on to any anger toward me. That's how amazing she was. She could let go of resentment and see the best in people, if they had any best in them. And I did. I had a lot of best in me.

My parents knew Duncan Reese was rotten, and my mother happily predicted that he would end up working at a gas station one day, while my sister would be successful and fabulous. To my mother, it seemed, working at a gas station was the lowest of the low. But that prediction didn't help the situation at the moment. That didn't stop Ellie's scalp from bleeding. It didn't quicken the months and months it took for her curl to grow back and reach a length that suited the other curls. By the time Duncan would be working at said gas station, Ellie would be so beaten down and haunted that she would never bloom into being successful and fabulous. And she would never be happy, a quality my mother left out of the equation.

Both my mother and father, who were contentedly married and more often on the same page than not, believed children were little individuals, capable of making their own decisions. In a new world of "helicopter moms," they could have been best described as "submarine parents." Always there, a giant lumbering presence, but often unseen and too deep to be accessible. They felt more like helpful landlords than parental figures. Each raised in a controlling, unpleasant household, they allowed the pendulum to swing perhaps too far the other way when raising their own offspring. They wanted us kids to work it out on our own. Learn to interact with all kinds, fill our toolboxes with skills, like being social, using negotiation tactics, and problem-solving with guile. They would, however, pop up from the depths from time to time to give advice and guidance. They actually wanted us to talk to strangers. My mother would point out a guy in the park.

"Go say hello."

“To that man in the overcoat?”

“Yup. Give it a shot. Suss out for yourself if you like him or not.”

“But . . . why?”

“So you can learn to trust your own gut. If you don’t like him, walk away. Or run. But if you never make contact, you’ll never have your own barometer.”

My parents certainly weren’t perfect, but that was a lesson in self-preservation that has served me well. I know what I feel about people. Immediately. What to do with those feelings next is another question.

My parents never expected me or Ellie to rise above it all. We could lash out and complain and talk back, but we were expected ultimately to handle life and all its foibles and unfairness ourselves. So my parents didn’t hover. Instead they glided along the deep, and stayed out of the Duncan mess. I could not stay out of it. He was evil and he had to go. I saw an opportunity, and I took it. So that day on the beach, murder became another skill added to my toolbox. And once I saw how effective a tool it was, I kept it handy.

I was born with an inner strength that pushed me to help those who were weaker. In fact, just two weeks before that day in the ocean, I heard a pitiful squawking outside our den. I investigated, and in the grass behind the star fruit tree, I saw a small bird with a broken wing, trapped on the ground, bound by gravity like the rest of us. I gingerly scooped up the warbler and raced inside, hysterical. I yelled, “We have to do something!” My mother, effortlessly stunning, her long, wavy red hair barely tamed by a ribbon, put down the crossword puzzle and retied her thin sarong around her neck, as if to establish she was getting down to business.

“Grab the Yellow Pages,” she said. I did what I was told. She found what she was looking for, grabbed the phone, and dialed. After the first ring she handed it over to me, saying, “This is your discovery. Your patient. You should be the one to speak.”

I heard two more rings and then, “Bird Sanctuary. This is Benita.”

I was nervous. But spoke. “Hi, Benita. I’m Ruby. I found a bird.”

Not ten minutes later I was in the car, speeding to South Miami. My mother driving, me in the back seat holding the fluttering little soul gently

in my hands.

Benita was about the same age as my mother, forty. But she was plumper and softer. Round and slow and comforting, superficially better suited to work at a panda sanctuary. I handed her the wounded package and she said, “You’re a good girl. It takes a kind spirit to understand that even the most common bird deserves a chance at a full and fruitful life.” I gulped down the compliment and looked around at the tropical flowers, bright and open, vulnerable to the world but still unafraid. I sensed the lush trees were teeming with so much avian energy that it seemed the trunks themselves could fly away. And I peered into the large well-kept cages filled with hopping rehabbing feathered creatures, beaks stoic yet delicate all at once. This was a good place. The right place. So why were there tears in my eyes?

Benita understood I had bonded with my small ward and didn’t want to say goodbye. She pet my head, just like I had pet the bird’s minutes before, and said, “Don’t worry, you can come back and visit anytime.” I nodded and turned to leave, keeping my head held high, to help the pressure of tears lessen against the inside of my eyelids. Then Benita called after me. “Wait! What is your bird’s name?”

At that time, I was the youngest kid in first grade and had already been put in the gifted program at my elementary school. The IQ test they had me take seemed like a fun game. “Which shape doesn’t fit? Which pattern is interrupted?” I had an inquisitive nature and a natural ability to eavesdrop undetected, so the world seemed an endless orb of intrigue. I had an impressive vocabulary for my age (*encourage* and *fuchsia* being my latest word additions) and a very active imagination. Spinning yarns about princess unicorns who imagine human children are make-believe.

I don’t want to be misleading. I was not a genius any more than I was a sociopath. I was not a prodigy. I didn’t play the violin or chess, I didn’t understand computer code, I didn’t learn Japanese. I am smart, above average, but certainly not an anomaly. I was simply very advanced, especially verbally. Probably because I was the youngest in a family of wordsmiths, trying to keep up with everyone else.

But when asked to name the bird, I went blank. All my precociousness and creativity seeped out of me at an alarming rate because I was using up my energy fighting so hard to hold in my tears. After a beat of searching all the corners of my brain, all I could think to say was, “Mr. Bird.” My mother looked at me, surprised. Was I being ironic? Benita, not knowing anything about my above-average background, thought this was a totally acceptable name choice from a small child. “Wonderful. We will take very good care of Mr. Bird.”

And over time I did visit Mr. Bird. Eventually, once her wing healed, she was released back into the wild, but year after year I bonded with the birds that were forever residents, those who would never survive without human care. And I made that bird sanctuary my own sanctuary. A place to volunteer, to breathe, to take in nature. And also a place to hide one of my dark secrets deep in the trees. Detective Keith Jackson would never find it there. I was sure of it. Especially not now, all these years later.

I relaxed my jaw, to be sure not to show any signs of tension. I picked up the photo of Duncan, held it respectfully, and let out a resigned sigh. I looked at Detective Jackson, making direct eye contact but blinking enough to seem natural. I said, “I knew him. He drowned when we were really little. It was so terrible. Tragic. My whole school was totally freaked out.” I put the photo back, right where it had been on the table. And waited for what the clever detective would say next.