

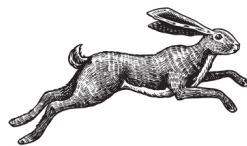
OUR CROOKED  
HEARTS



MELISSA ALBERT

*New York Times* bestselling author of *The Hazel Wood*

OUR CROOKED  
HEARTS



MELISSA ALBERT



FLATIRON  
BOOKS  
NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this  
Flatiron Books ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,  
and info on new releases and other great reads,  
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at  
[us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup](https://us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup)

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

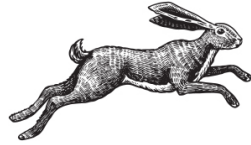
The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: [us.macmillanusa.com/piracy](http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy).**

**To my wonderful, fiercely loving mother,  
who is not the mother in these pages.  
If I ever wrote you into a book,  
you'd be a heroine.**

**A nightmare is witchwork.**

**—ELIZABETH WILLIS, “THE WITCH”**

# PART I



## CHAPTER ONE

### The suburbs

*Right now*

We were going too fast. Too close to the trees, weeds feathering over our headlights, whisking away.

“Nate.” I gripped the passenger seat. “*Nate.*”

Fifteen minutes ago we were at an end-of-year party, jumping up and down with our hands on each other’s shoulders, and all the time I was thinking, *I should break up with him. I should do it now. I have to break up with him now.* Then he cupped my face in his hands and told me he loved me, and I was too startled to tell even half a lie.

I followed him out of the house, over the lawn, into his car, still saying all the useless things you say when you’ve bruised someone’s ego and they think it’s their heart. He slammed too hard into reverse, then sloshed over the curb peeling away, and still it took me a block to realize he was drunk.

At a stoplight he fumbled with his phone. For a few taut seconds I considered jumping out. Then he was off again, an old Bright Eyes song blasting and the wind tearing it into pieces. The music stuttered as he swerved onto the single-lane road that wound through the forest preserve. Trees closed in and my hair whipped to fluff. I closed my eyes.

Then Nate shouted, not a word but a sharp, surprised syllable, cutting the wheel hard to the right.

The moment between swerving and stopping was weightless as a roller coaster drop. I rocked forward and my mouth clashed hard with the dash.

When I licked my teeth I could taste blood. “What the *hell!*”

Nate turned off the car, breathing hard, craning to look past me. “Did you see that?”

“See what?”



He opened his door. "I'm getting out."

The car was sprawled across the narrow strip between the road and the trees. "Here? Are you serious?"

"Stay if you want to," he said, and slammed the door.

There was a Taco Bell cup in the center console with an inch of meltwater in it. I swished it over my teeth and swung my legs out of the car, spitting blood onto the grass. My lip felt tender in the loamy air.

"Hey!" I called. "Where are you going?"

Nate was slipping into the trees. "I think she went this way."

"She? Who?"

"How did you not see her? She was standing in the middle of the road." He paused. "Completely naked."

My breath caught as I considered the paths you could take to end up in the woods at three in the morning, female, naked, and alone. Toothy grasses trailed over my shins as I waded in behind him. "Did you recognize her? Was she hurt?"

"Shh," he said. "Look."

We stood on a rise above the creek that ran through the trees, which could be shallow as a pan or deep enough to kayak in, depending on the rains. Just now it was somewhere in the middle, waist high and churning along beneath a gibbous moon. I knew it was about that high because the girl we were following was kneeling in it, submerged to her shoulder blades.

She was, in fact, nude. Hair center-parted and long enough that the moving water tugged her head back. I couldn't see her face, but the rest of her was an almost electric shade of pale. There was nothing nearby to signify she hadn't dropped to Earth from a star, or risen from a crack in a hill. No shoes on the shore, no cell phone on a balled-up shirt. The sight of her was out of a dream, almost.

Her hands were moving over her skin in this profoundly unsexual way, squeezing it, slapping it, like she was beating the feeling back in. She was making these guttural sounds I had no words for. Crying, I guessed.

I'd almost forgotten about Nate when he dug an elbow into my ribs and grinned, mean and quick. He thumbed his phone's flashlight on and held it

out like a torch.

Her head twisted and I saw that she was around our age, maybe a little older, eyes dilated and mouth still curling around the end of a smile. She hadn't been crying. She'd been laughing.

Nate meant to make her feel exposed, but I knew he was really doing it to me, because it was shitty and he wanted to be shitty to someone right now. I could've left him, but if I were her I'd be more scared of a dude by himself. And she might need help. I was ready to offer it when she spoke first.

"Come out." Her voice was low, smudged and hardened by some unplaceable accent. It rose into a singsong. "Come out, come out, whoever you are."

She rose like a backwoods Venus, dirty creek water running out of her hair, down her body, beading through her serious seventies bush. She whistled, piercing and clear. "I said show yourselves, motherfuckers."

She was naked, she was alone, she couldn't even really see us, but just like that we were the ones who were afraid. I felt the tremor in Nate as he saw how this was gonna go. "Fuck this," he muttered.

The girl stepped onto the bank. She was large-framed and underfed, her hair a sticking mermaid curtain, but the thing I couldn't look away from was how she held herself, without the barest awareness of her body. Like she was a baby, or a bird.

With a blunt suddenness she raised her arms, conductor style with their palms held flat. We flinched, both of us, because it seemed like something was supposed to happen. When nothing did Nate tried to laugh. It came out dry.

She dropped into a crouch. Eyes turned in our direction, feeling along the ground until her fingers found a fallen branch, thick and a few feet long. Hefting it, she stood. Nate cursed, shoving his phone into his pocket, and the girl stopped mid-stride. With its light gone she could see us, too.

"Ivy, let's go," Nate growled.

"Ivy."

The girl repeated my name. The word in her mouth was heatless, heavy. I squinted at her, confirming she was a stranger.

“What’s wrong with you? Come on!” Nate yanked my arm hard enough that my shoulder burned. Then he was stumbling away, swearing at every tree branch that swiped him, every divot in the ground.

Over my tank top I wore a washed-thin button-up from Community Thrift. I slipped free of it and tossed it in her direction before following him.

“Thank you, Ivy,” she said, when I was almost too far to hear.

When I reached the road Nate was back in the driver’s seat. He drummed his hands on the wheel. “Get in!”

I was cranked up and weirded out and scared enough to listen. The music restarted when he turned the key and we both reached to slap it off, then snatched our hands back as if any contact might burn.

I didn’t speak till we were out of the trees. “That girl. Did you hear the way she said my name?”

He shrugged, barely.

“Did she know me?” I persisted. I didn’t think I’d forget meeting a girl who looked like that, the colors of a lemon sucked dry.

“How am I supposed to know?” Nate asked sullenly.

I pulled the mirror down to inspect my lip and cursed softly. Already it stuck out like the peeled half of a stone fruit.

We drove the rest of the way in sticky silence. When Nate stopped at the end of my drive, I reached for the passenger door. He locked it.

I reared to face him. “*What?*”

He flicked the dome light on and sucked in through his teeth. “Oh, man, that looks bad. Look, I’m really sorry. Are you okay?”

“I’m awesome. Let me out.”

“Okay, but—” He swallowed. “What are you gonna tell your mom?”

I gaped at him. Cigarette behind his ear, peeping at me through those eyelashes that made older women smile and say, *What a waste, on a boy*. I started, helplessly, to laugh.

His posture went rigid. “What’s so funny?”

“You. You’re scared of my mom, aren’t you?”

“So what?” he spat. “You’re scared of her, too.”

I turned away, face burning. When I flipped the lock again, he relocked it. “Nate! Let me. The fuck. *Out.*”

Someone banged their fist on the driver’s side window.

Nate jumped, eyes going wide. I think he expected to see my mother out there. But it was my neighbor, Billy Paxton.

I peered up at him. Billy lived across the street from me, but we’d never really talked. Especially following a painful incident back in junior high, memories of which still had the power to make me stop what I was doing and wince. He’d been at the party Nate and I came from, and I’d pretended not to see him.

Nate rolled the window down, touching behind his ear to make sure he hadn’t dropped his cigarette. “What do you want, man?”

Billy ignored him. “Ivy, you okay?”

I leaned around Nate to see him better. “Uh, yeah? I’m fine.”

He put a hand to his mouth. There was a stripe of white paint over his forearm. “Did he do that to you?”

“Are you for real?” Nate squawked.

I felt, suddenly, like I might cry. It was the pain, I told myself. The adrenaline, fizzing away. “No, no. It was a ... car thing. I’m good.”

Billy watched me a little longer. He was too tall for it, bent practically in half to see into the car. “Okay. I’ll be right there.” He pointed at his porch. “Just so you know.”

“Thank you for your service,” Nate said sarcastically, but not until Billy was up the drive.

I wrenched the door open, slammed it behind me, and turned. “We’re broken up.”

“No shit,” Nate said, and gunned it down the street.

I lingered on the curb. My lip was throbbing, my body pounding with exhaustion, but it was laced with the feather-light euphoria of being *free*.

Billy cleared his throat. He was perched tensely on his porch, still watching me. Embarrassed, I lifted a hand.

“Sorry about that,” I told him.

“Sorry for what?”

He said it quietly enough that I wasn't sure I was meant to hear. I almost let it pass. Maybe it was the pain in my mouth—needling, insistent—that made me turn.

"I'm sorry you thought you had to step in," I said, more sharply than I intended.

Billy stared at me. Then he stood, shaking his head. "Won't happen again," he said, and disappeared into his house.

My eye went to the darkened second-story windows. One of them lit up a minute later and I looked away, regret and bottom-shelf vodka muddling queasily in my stomach. Time to get in bed, I figured. Before my night found one more way to go to shit.

Slow and steady I unlocked the front door, holding my breath as I opened it just wide enough to slide through. Then I let it all go in a strangled yelp, because my mom was sitting on the stairs waiting for me.

"Mom!" I dipped my head, bringing a hand to my lip. "Why are you awake?"

She leaned into the patch of moonlight falling through the window over the door. Her bright hair was tied up, her eyes safety-pin sharp. "Bad dream." Then she snapped to her feet, because she'd seen my mouth.

"What happened? Were you in an accident?"

My lip beat like a second heart. "No! I'm fine. I mean—it wasn't really an *accident*..."

The beam of her focus felt physical. "Tell me. Tell me *exactly*."

"Nate—swerved," I said. "His car went off the road."

"Then what?"

I thought of the stranger in the woods, slapping at her chalk-colored skin. "Then nothing. Then we drove home."

"That's it? That's all that happened?"

I gave a shallow nod.

"Okay." Her unnerving intensity was draining. The corners of her mouth twitched up, conspiratorial. "But Nate was drinking tonight, wasn't he?"

I swayed a little, trying to think. She'd seemed less dangerous a moment ago, when she was outright pissed. "Um."

She gave a curt *I knew it* nod. “Go to your room. Now.”

I edged past her, up the stairs and into my room. Skipping the lights, I fell onto my pillows and closed my eyes. When I opened them she was above me, pressing an icepack to my mouth with her scarred left hand.

“Did you hit your head?” Her usual reserve was back; she could’ve been asking for the time. “Do we have to worry about a concussion? Tell me the truth.”

I leaned into the icepack’s chill. When was the last time she’d tended to me like this? When I tried to remember, blankness pressed in like an ocean.

“My head’s fine,” I mumbled. I’d entered that terrible purgatory place where you’re still drunk yet somehow already hungover. “I told you, it wasn’t a big deal. Nate’s not even hurt.”

“He’s not hurt.” Her voice was soft, and veined with rage. “While *my* kid looks like a prizefighter.”

“Dana.” Suddenly my dad was there, hand on her arm, his steady shape blocking the light from the hallway. I fought to keep my eyes open as he stepped forward and she retreated, out of sight.

“We taught you better than this,” he was saying. “What made you get into a car with a drunk driver?”

“I don’t know.”

A heavy Dad sigh. “I’m getting a little tired of hearing that. Do you have any idea how much worse this could’ve gone?”

My eye kept catching on the ceiling fan spinning over his shoulder, trying drowsily to count the blades. “I don’t know,” I repeated. “Lots?”

I wasn’t being a smart-ass, not that he believed me. His voice went on and on, patient and pissed. By the time he’d finished impressing my stupidity upon me, I was half asleep. I dropped into blackout land and stayed there till morning, kicking off the first day of summer break with a hangover and a busted lip.

And a mystery, waiting on ice in the back of my brain. But days would pass before I’d see the girl in the water again.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The suburbs

*Right now*

My phone rang and the sound of it drilled into my dreams, disguised as the screech of Nate's brakes, as the scream I didn't have time to let go of, as the cry of some night bird flying above me, keeping pace as I followed a girl pale as a fallen star through the black woods. Finally it tugged me toward consciousness, sleep receding like salt water.

I lay there a second, blinking the images away. I *never* remembered my dreams. Ever. No one believed me when I told them that, but it was true. I peeked at my phone screen through one eye before answering.

"Look who's not dead." Amina's voice was acid bright. "Were my fifteen texts not enough? Did you need twenty?"

"Don't yell at me," I said pathetically. My mouth ached. The dream still coated my skin like Vaseline. "I had a long night."

I drained the water glass left by the bed, then told my best friend the story. The party, the breakup, the girl in the road. My failed attempt to sneak in. I could feel her getting worked up as I talked.

"I'm gonna kill him!" she said when I was through. "Did you see what he was drinking last night? *Absinthe*." Her voice dripped with good-kid horror. Amina had big tattletale energy. "To be fair it was probably vodka with green food coloring, but still. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Seriously."

"Yeah. You sound fine."

There was a note in her voice I couldn't quite read. "So? What's wrong with that?"

"Just ... you can be pissed, you know? You *should* be. He could've killed you."

“I *am* pissed,” I said. Wasn’t I? I poked at the feeling like it was a toothache.

She sighed. “Anyway. Nate sucks. I can’t believe your mom caught you coming in. Was it awful?”

I scrubbed at my eyes. “It was fine. Why is everyone so scared of her all of a sudden?”

Amina paused for what I assumed was comic effect, but when she spoke again her voice was darker. More direct. “You know you can always come to my house, right? If you ever need to.”

I already stayed at her place all the time. We used to switch off houses on Saturday nights, but a couple of years ago she’d started making excuses not to sleep at mine. She was one of those routine-addicted people—the multistep skin care, the specific tea made specifically by her father, the two pillows she had to bring with her just to fall asleep—so I hadn’t pressed. But now I frowned. “Yeah, I know. But why would I need to?”

Another pause, then: “This girl you saw. She was *naked*? Like, completely?”

I narrowed my eyes at the subject change, but again I didn’t press. “Yep.”

“Standing in the middle of the road.”

“I guess. I didn’t see that part, I was too busy worrying I was gonna die.”

Her voice dropped forty degrees. “I *will* kill him.”

“Not if my dad gets there first.”

“Or your mom. You know she’d help you hide a body.”

“She would’ve killed the body she’s forcing you to hide.”

“What I do find interesting, though,” she said craftily, “is the part where the hot guy from across the street came to your rescue.”

“Amina,” I said warningly.

“Yes?”

“Just ... don’t get too excited.”

“I never get excited.”

I laughed. “I’m going back to bed now. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” she said.



Before I could put my phone down it lit up with a text from Nate.

**In my life**

**why do I give valuable time**

**to people who don't care if I**

**live or die?**

Instagram poetry or sad lyrics? I refused to give him the satisfaction of googling it, but now I was too annoyed to sleep. I changed his name to NO in my contacts and headed to the bathroom to poke at my lip. My brother, Hank, walked in scratching his bare chest, then halted mid-scratch.

“What happened?” He shoved in next to me, peering at my lip in the glass. “Wait, is *this* why Dad was yelling at you in the middle of the night?”

I squinted at him in the mirror. “Way to ask if I’m okay.”

“I was coming to congratulate you for finally getting in trouble for once. I just thought it’d be for a *fun* reason.” He stared at my reflection. “You know what you look like? You look like that ridiculous dog from across the street, the time he ate a bee and his mouth blew up. Are you okay? What’d you do?”

I elbowed him away. “Ate a bee. Stop blowing your gross breath at me, it’ll stick in my hair.”

Hank *hahed* a big mouthful onto the crown of my head and walked away laughing. He’d been home from his first year of college for less than a week and already I was over it. No food was safe from him, and if anyone asked him to do anything—pick up his shoes, clean a dish—he whined about how he was on vacation. I wouldn’t get away with that shit for one hour.

“Ivy, you awake?” My dad’s voice drifted up from below. “Come down here a sec.”

I found him leaning against the kitchen counter in his appalling cyclist’s Spandex, shoveling granola into his mouth. He smiled at me when I walked in, then winced. “Oh, sweetheart, your lip. That little turd.”

I shrugged. Nate *was* a turd. He pounced on mispronunciations like a cat on a cockroach. He’d hold up his finger in the middle of a conversation, pull out a notebook, and start scribbling in it while you stood there like an asshole. *Sorry*, he’d say with this fake-apologetic smile. *I just had to get*

*this story idea down. Once I got a glimpse at one of these “ideas.” It said, Magical island where all men die but one. Object of sexual obsession/ascends to god?*

But he was the junior everyone had a crush on. Saying yes when he asked me out seemed obvious. He’d had all these ideas about who I was—that’s one of the perils of being quiet, people invent personalities for you—and I couldn’t admit even to Amina that I *liked* it. I liked the person he thought I was. Cool instead of faking it, aloof rather than worried about saying something stupid.

My dad must’ve mistaken my grimace for hangover agony, because he pressed his own cup of coffee into my hand. “Let’s talk about last night.”

“I messed up,” I said instantly. Dad was easy, he just wanted you to take responsibility. Hank would make excuses until he suffocated under the weight of his own bullshit, but I could play the game. “I had no idea Nate was drunk. He was supposed to be the designated driver.”

Dad nodded. “That’s a good start, but you still need to be aware. *You* have to stay vigilant, no one’s gonna do it for you. What happened last night...” He shook his head. “Sweetheart, that wasn’t like you.”

I could’ve agreed right then and walked away. But the words hit me funny. Maybe because I’d just been thinking about Nate telling me who I was. And getting it all wrong.

“It wasn’t like me,” I repeated. “What would you say *is* like me, then?”

“Hey, I’m just saying we’re lucky. We got a smart one. We never have to worry about you. Your brother, on the other hand.” He tipped his head and made a comical face, I guess to imply it’s funny when sons get into trouble. Daughters, not so much.

“Don’t get soft, Rob. I’m sure she can think of a dozen ways to give you a heart attack.”

My mom stood in the basement doorway. We both startled; neither of us had heard her coming up. Her hair was down and the white of her left eye was stitched with fine red threads.

“Dana.” My dad took a step toward her. “What were you doing in the basement?”

She ignored him. “How’s the lip, Ivy?”

The ibuprofen hadn't kicked in yet. It was killing me. "Fine."

My mom stepped closer to inspect my injury. Too close. There was an odd scent coming off her skin. Sharp, almost herbal. But it was early for her to have been in the garden.

Her eyes refocused on mine. "You're staying home today."

"What? Why?"

"Because," she said testingly, "you're grounded."

Her gaze flicked to my dad when she said it. She always deferred to him on parenting stuff, in this flat, ironical way. Like we were play kids in a play house that he insisted on taking seriously.

"I am?" I turned to my dad. "Am I?"

He looked uncertain. "If your mother says you are."

"But ... it's summer break. I didn't *do* anything."

"Well. You got in a car with a drunk driver."

"I didn't know he was drunk!"

"Next time you'll pay more attention," my mom said, then pursed her lips. "Please tell me you dumped his ass."

I felt flushed, irritated. And just the littlest bit triumphant. "Yeah. I dumped him."

"Good girl," she murmured, and started to leave the room.

"Hey." Gently my dad clasped her shoulder, turned her back to face him. "Are you getting a migraine?"

His voice was oddly accusing. And he was right, now I could see it. It had been so long since she'd had one. I'd forgotten the way the headaches made her mouth slacken, made the muscles around her eyes twitch. "I'm fine," she said. "It's fine. I already called Fee."

Fee was her best friend, basically her sister. Whenever my mom got one of her rare migraines, Aunt Fee brought over the gnarly vinegar brew they took instead of actual medicine.

"That's not what I'm..." He cut himself off, stepping away from her. "You know what, never mind. You'll do what you're gonna do."

He kissed the side of my head. "We'll talk more later. I'm heading out for a ride."

When the front door had shut behind him, I looked at her. “Is Dad mad at you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said shortly. “I’m heading upstairs.”

“Mom. Wait.”

I was getting greedy, I think. Having her wait up for me, punish me, give more than half a shit about my choice of boyfriend. It made me want more from her. I just wasn’t sure what.

“Last night, when I got in. You said you had a bad dream.”

She tipped her head. Not quite a nod.

I took a quick breath. “Was it about me?”

“Ivy.” Her voice was soft. Uncharacteristically so. “I shouldn’t have—it was just a dream.”

But I remembered how *awake* she’d looked last night, how nervy and alert, even before she’d seen my injury. “What was it about?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose, eyes fluttering shut. “Dark water, running water. And a...”

“A what?” My voice sounded faraway.

Her eyes snapped open. “Nothing.” She tried a smile. “Fee would tell me it means change. But for her that’s every dream.”

I didn’t smile back. I was seeing the girl in the woods again, crouching in the creek’s black water. “Hey, Mom,” I began, tentatively. “I—”

She shoved a finger into her eye socket. “Not now. Truly. I have to lie down.”

I let her go. Wondering like I always did what I could’ve said differently, to make her stay.