

“JAW-DROPPING”

—Jessica Knoll

“MAGNETIC”

—Stephen King

“GRIPPING”

—Mary Kubica

THE A NOVEL
RETURN
OF
ELLIE
BLACK
EMIKO
JEAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

THE
RETURN OF
ELLIE
BLACK

A Novel

EMIKO JEAN

SIMON & SCHUSTER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To G & M.

Thank you.

I am shaken, but I still believe.

PROLOGUE

THIS IS HOW IT BEGINS:

With a girl running through a forest, her veins tight with adrenaline. She exhales in short, even bursts. There is dirt under her fingernails, fresh mud stains on her jeans, blood on her sweatshirt, and vomit on her breath.

Soon.

Soon she will be home.

Images surface. The one stoplight on Main Street. The chipped green shutters of her house. The weathered flooring of her father's commercial fishing boat.

In the distance, a horn blares and she ducks, covering her ears, the sound slicing through her skull like an anguished scream. The world shrinks and becomes abstract, too colorful and too bright. The horn recedes and the trees slowly refocus.

She counts her breaths as her heartbeat steadies. One. Two. Three. Then she counts her steps. Four. Five. Six. How many will it take for someone to find her? Seven. Eight. Nine. Her bones are heavy, her feet tired. She has traveled a long distance. Her shadow stretches ahead of her, as if she's chasing it—come and catch me. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Her body wavers. Maybe she should sit down. Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen. She pushes herself to keep going. The sun rises higher behind the gray clouds. The air smells of pine and resin. Like water and moss. Like life itself.

“Hey! Are you all right?” A pair of hikers—father and son—appear, rounding the corner of the trail. They wear overstuffed backpacks, rolled sleeping bags at the top, a pot hanging from the bottom of one, two metal cups from the other. The girl slows her pace and draws closer to them.

Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen.

The father places an arm across his son's chest to shield him from the girl, and she falters, caught in the chokehold of their gazes. The son's eyes are brown with tiny flecks of gold, and they remind her of someone she used to know. Her mind tumbles and trips back in time.

Tell me, what would you do for someone you love?

Anything. I would do anything.

The father clears his throat. "Miss, are you all right?" He studies her.

She imagines what he sees. Filthy skin. Tangled hair. Bony body. Bloodstained sweatshirt. She is something the world has chewed up and spit out.

The son's nose twitches.

"Miss?" the father says with more force this time. He takes a single, tentative step toward her.

The girl licks her dry, cracked lips and works to keep her voice steady as she answers, "Yes?"

"Are you all right?" the father asks again.

The girl blinks. Shakes her head. Stares into nothing. "No, I don't think I am."

"What's your name?"

"My name?" Who is she? What has she become? A vessel. To be carried. To be kept. To be filled.

"Yes, what's your name?" The father drags the words out.

The girl hesitates. Her name is stuck somewhere inside of her. Down in the deep, deep dark where she hid it. To be safe. Don't remember. Never forget. She squares her shoulders and reaches for it.

"Elizabeth," she says on a whoosh of breath.

She has not spoken those four syllables in forever. Her name. Her *real* name. The name her mother picked because it was classic and royal and carried all her hopes and dreams for her daughter—college, career, a family, happiness. Once, the girl had worn her name proudly, like a crown. Once, someone whispered her name back to her, love on their tongue.

With a final twist, the girl wrenches her whole name free. "My name is Elizabeth Black. I think I'm missing."

Chapter

ONE

CHELSEY WAKES TO HER PHONE ringing.

“No,” her husband, Noah, groans. “Make it stop.” The mattress squeaks as he shifts away from her.

Rising on an elbow, Chelsey fumbles for her phone on the nightstand. It’s a little after midnight. She silences the ringer and peers at the screen. “It’s work.”

“Somebody better be dead,” Noah mutters.

Chelsey smiles at Noah’s wry sense of humor. She is a police officer, a detective. Most likely, somebody is dead.

“Detective Calhoun,” she answers, switching on the light and moving to the edge of the mattress, a shiver racing up her spine. Spring in Coldwell Beach is always frigid. Summer, too. Residents are lucky if there are a few days above sixty-five degrees. This stretch of coastline in Washington is situated between two rocky bluffs and is known for its temperamental weather. Lewis and Clark marked it on their map as uninhabitable.

“Chelsey.” It’s her boss, Sergeant Abbott. She no longer blinks when he uses her first name. It doesn’t matter that he addresses her male counterparts by their last names. Doesn’t matter at all. “Got a call. A girl has been found.” Sergeant Abbott waits for a beat. “She identified herself as Elizabeth Black.”

At this, Chelsey does blink. Ellie Black. Alive? It’s been two years. She stands abruptly and switches the phone to speaker.

Noah flicks on his bedside lamp. A gold chain with two pendants hangs from his neck—twenty-one, his old basketball number, and a saint medallion. Chelsey

doesn't remember which, some spiritual warrior in the battle of good versus evil. "What?" He sits up and scratches at his beard.

She presses a finger to her lips and then fishes a pen and paper from the nightstand drawer while Abbott rattles off information. Hikers in the Capitol State Forest found Ellie Black. He gives her their phone numbers. Ellie has been transported to Legacy Memorial. No word yet on her condition. Chelsey googles the location. Olympia. Two hours southeast of Coldwell. "I want you at the hospital."

"I'm on my way." She yanks on her jeans.

"I've got Douglas heading toward the trail she was found on."

A slow, hot pause. Douglas. Sergeant Abbott's son. She has known him since they were children. Both their dads were cops. Chelsey's had been higher ranking, the police chief. And Doug's dad, still a uniform, not yet a sergeant, not yet Chelsey's boss. Doug is a couple years older than Chelsey. He fucked around for a few years before following in his father's footsteps. Abbott recently promoted his son to detective, same as Chelsey, though she'd logged more hours. Chelsey had no problem with it. Really. They rarely crossed turfs, anyway. She works in Family Services, and Doug in Narcotics.

She flashes back to one of the precinct picnics. Back when they'd been young. When Lydia, Chelsey's sister, had been alive. Doug had been in a group of boys making fun of Chelsey. Asked if she'd arrived in a bento box. Chelsey was adopted. Full Japanese. The rest of her family was fair-haired and milk-skinned. Even now, thirty plus years later, the memory is visceral. Watermelon spoiling in her stomach. Clouds covering the sun. Laughter bleeding away to tears shed quietly under an oak. After that, Chelsey walked with her neck bent, gaze pointed at the ground. A boyfriend once made fun of her for it, mimicking how she stooped. Chelsey has come a long way since then. Still she remembers Doug, her ex-boyfriend, and other people like them in the world, as arms trying to hold her down.

"Chelsey, you there?"

She swallows twice. "I'm here."

"If this is Ellie Black, I want the guy responsible found. I want an arrest, and I want it soon."

Chelsey bristles against the command but pushes the feeling away. “Got it.” She punches her arms through her shirt, keeping the phone in one hand.

“Media is going to be all over this,” he continues. “They’re going to be watching closely. I will be, too. No mistakes.”

“I’ll keep you posted.”

“Do,” he says.

Chelsey hangs up, finishes dressing, and ties her hair back in a tight low ponytail. Shoes. Where are her shoes?

“Did I hear right? Ellie Black has been found?” Noah follows her through the apartment. It is a nice place. Temporary. The walls are white. The ceiling popcorn. A couch. A dining table. Mostly Noah’s stuff. Including two framed *Battlestar Galactica* posters—one with a fist raised to the air with the words **SO SAY WE ALL** underneath and another a silhouette of a beautiful woman, a Cylon, that states **NEVER FORGET WHO THE ENEMY IS**. Chelsey and Noah are both sci-fi geeks.

“Hasn’t been verified yet,” she tells Noah.

It doesn’t happen often, but there has been a time or two over the course of Chelsey’s career when someone came forward, professing to be a missing child, all in the hopes of defrauding some grief-stricken parents out of their money. Ellie’s parents mortgaged their house to offer a fifty-thousand-dollar reward a few weeks after Ellie disappeared. The timing isn’t right for fraud, though. Ellie hasn’t been gone long enough to be physically unrecognizable. Two years, two weeks, and one day to be exact. Chelsey keeps a calendar with the anniversary marked.

“Jesus, what are the chances?” Noah pauses by the fireplace. On the mantel are photographs—one of Noah in a cap and gown the day he graduated with his master’s in Education. Another of him and his family at the rodeo—parents and all six kids in jeans and cowboy hats. A wedding picture from the courthouse where he and Chelsey eloped. And last, one of Chelsey as a teen, head to toe in camo, rifle slung over her shoulder, dead deer at her feet—her first kill. Her years at Coldwell High School had been filled with buckshot, stripping hide, and using a compass to navigate home.

Chelsey crosses the room to the kitchen, where remnants of the curry they had for dinner still spice the air. A safe sits atop the laminate counter. She spins the

dial; nestled inside are her gun and holster. Noah rubs the back of his neck. He's uncomfortable with firearms. Even though he grew up on a farm, shooting coyotes on the weekends. Even though he married a detective.

"I guess we won't be looking at houses tomorrow." He scoops her keys from the counter and hands them to her.

She fists the keys. "Sorry." The apology is half-hearted. They dated for a year and a half. Have been married for a little over six months and searching for a house since then. A place to settle down. Chelsey has found something wrong with each property.

"It's all right. I get it." But disappointment lingers in his eyes. *When you're married to a cop, there are hundreds of you in the relationship—you, him, and all his cases, their families,* Chelsey's mom used to say.

"I don't know when I'll be able to reschedule," she says.

He scratches his brow. "Don't worry about it." Again, a flicker in his expression. Is he tiring of this dance? Chelsey stepping back while he's stepping in. When they met, it had been the same way. Noah chasing Chelsey.

Peet's had been crowded that night two years ago. It was the eve of Chelsey's promotion to detective. Ellie Black would disappear the next day. Cops pounded her on the back, offering congratulations, asking to buy her a beer, but she'd refused. She'd already stayed too long. Noah bellied up to the bar, squeezing in next to her. *I'm Noah,* he introduced himself. *I just finished my master's in Education. I'm subbing at the high school but looking for something full time.*

Chelsey was always suspicious of someone who gave too much information.

I want to teach gym, physical education, he shouted over the noise.

Chelsey signaled Tim, the bartender, for her tab.

Noah pressed a hand against his chest as if offended. *You're leaving? Was it the gym teacher part?*

Nope, nothing against teachers, Chelsey said, scribbling her name on the check. Tim slipped a plastic bag of takeout in front of her.

Tell the chief I said hi, he said, eyeing Noah.

She thanked Tim, then slid her gaze to Noah. *I have to get dinner to my dad.* Her father was midway through chemo and sicker than a dog. Crankier than a donkey. Almost everything tasted like metal to him. He could only stomach hot

wings and Sour Patch Kids. She shoved her way through the bodies, Noah on her heels.

Let me come with you, he'd said outside, breath fogging in the evening spring air, hands jammed into his pockets.

She paused and leveled him with a stare. *I'm flattered, but I'm not interested in dating right now. My job is busy. My dad has cancer...* She waited for the C-word to do its work. Scare Noah off.

He puffed up with a smile. *Let me come with you*, he repeated. *I'll help.*

She scoffed. *Does it look like I need help?*

Nope. But those are usually the people who need the most help.

She did not want to like him. *You got some weird kind of savior syndrome?*

Only when it comes to pretty girls. He grinned then, white teeth flashing against his beard.

Fine. She let him come with her. Made him leave his car and drove them both, making sure her gun was visible. He whistled low when he saw the house. *Nice place*, he said, peering up at the gabled roof.

Come on. She unlocked the door. Her dad was on the couch, *Homeland* on the television.

Who the hell are you? her dad whistled out, seeing Noah. All his hair was gone, his cheeks sunken in, and his skin pallid. An oxygen tank rested nearby, the nose cannula discarded on a rose-colored cushion. Her mom had loved that couch.

Dad, she chided. *You're supposed to be wearing this.* She fitted the hose back around his head.

I asked a question, her father ground out.

This is Noah. He followed me home.

Her dad refused to shake Noah's hand. *Cancer, huh?* Noah said, dropping his arm back to his side. *The farm I grew up on, we had a horse with cancer. She liked these CBD pills the vet prescribed. Maybe that'll help.*

You comparing me to a horse, boy?

Chelsey didn't try to intervene. She waited to see how Noah would handle it. If he would ask for a ride back to the bar. She kept her coat on.

No, sir, Noah answered, straight-faced and stoic. *The horse was much nicer.*

Chelsey's dad gave a startled laugh, coughed up some blood, and offered Noah a seat.

Chelsey blinks away the memory and stares at Noah, keys loose in her hand now. "I have to go."

He pecks her cheek. "Be safe." It's what he always says. A futile request. As if she could stop a bullet or a fist or a car with a heavy-limbed drunk behind the wheel.

She jams her feet in her shoes and jogs down the stairs into the cool night. Noah waits at the top, leaning against the doorjamb. She keeps him in her line of sight as she climbs into her car, an Oldsmobile she inherited from her father. On the back window is a *Firefly* sticker. Noah had brought it to her on their third date. Over that dinner, she'd opened up to him about the responsibilities of being a cop. She'd unburdened herself.

They'd brought the leftovers to her father. Then, while her father slept, lost in the ether of pain medication, Chelsey walked Noah to his truck. He kissed her. The night was still, calm, satin black. She unbuttoned her blouse. He opened his car door. They climbed in, shed their clothes, ground their hips.

She'd fallen in love with him quickly.

For the most part, Chelsey shares everything with Noah. He knows about Lydia, her dead sister. He knows about her parents' divorce. He knows the day after Chelsey's eighteenth birthday, her mother skipped town to Scottsdale. He knows about her father's death, because he'd been there, standing by her as the cancer took him. And Noah knows about the house she inherited after he died, a place full of forty years of outdated furniture and bad memories.

But he does not know everything.

Behind the wheel, Chelsey gives Noah a wave, swallowing against the guilt, the fear. The slow drip of dread. She doesn't want to lose him but can't seem to hold on to him without letting go of something else. She starts the car, puts it in reverse, and backs away, Noah caught in the snare of her headlights.

Chapter

TWO

CHELSEY IS THIRTY MINUTES INTO the drive to Olympia before she unclenches her hands from the wheel. There isn't any traffic, save for the occasional semi. There aren't any streetlights on the two-lane road either. She flicks on her brights and settles deeper into her seat. This narrow strip of land is the only way in and out of Coldwell. One side is dark trees and gray cliffs glistening in the silvery moonlight, and the other a white-capped ocean guarded by a thin twist of metal. Someday a tsunami will wash out the road, and Coldwell will be stranded. She takes a breath. She knows the way by rote and can allow herself to sink now. To let go. To be lost in memory.

Ellie Black.

She remembers the initial call two years ago, the day after she met Noah. The radio's crackle and the dispatcher's scratchy voice announcing a seventeen-year-old girl didn't come home from sleeping over at a friend's house.

Chelsey had immediately pulled a U-turn onto Main Street and headed straight for the Blacks' house, winding through emaciated Coldwell. Chelsey couldn't recall when the town started to change. The erosion was slow, the act of water whittling away at rock. First, the staff at the schools was cut by thirty percent. Then the library closed. After that, the rec center. Once, when Chelsey was young, it had been bustling. Kids swam in the pool during the summer. Soccer in the fall. Played basketball in the winter. Crafts in the spring. Now, the building was boarded up, slowly succumbing to salt water and storms. And the kids? Forced to go online or into the woods.

The Blacks lived on the north side, in a neighborhood populated mainly by commercial fishing families and cannery workers. Houses crouched behind overgrown junipers, brown lawns, and chain-link fences.

Chelsey had knocked on the Blacks' door, the porch wet and squishy beneath her feet. Doug answered. He'd been in a uniform then, not yet promoted to detective. *Hey*. His smile was wide. He was young and dumb and too excited about the case. About being the first on the scene. *I started to take statements.*

Should have waited for me, Chelsey said.

His cheeks flushed salmon. *Sorry*.

Jimmy, Ellie's father, appeared, edging around Doug to introduce himself. *Jimmy Black*. He stuck out a hand, and Chelsey shook it.

Detective Calhoun, Coldwell PD.

Jimmy squinted at her. *How long have you been with the force?*

Chelsey's face worked against her. Unlined and surprisingly Asian. She saw it in Jimmy's expression, the doubt, the wondering if Chelsey was too young, too foreign. Did she even speak English? *I've served near a decade*, she said, her eyes downcast, then she flicked her gaze up. *I'd like to focus on Elizabeth. Should we talk about her?* Later on, she congratulated herself. She'd been cool. Focused. Even though it was her first case as detective. Even though her heart was pounding, an unnerving reckless beat. Sometimes she wondered at how small she felt. What hands had shaped her, worn her down.

That seemed to be enough for Jimmy. He let her in. *Thanks for coming, Detective.*

Call me Chelsey, she had said, shuffling into their living room. Kat, Ellie's mother, was there, seated on a faded blue velvet couch, an undrunk mug of coffee cupped in her hands. Jimmy sank down next to his wife, close enough to touch but not. Both held their bodies stiffly, as if to brace against a coming squall.

Chelsey settled into a worn-out plaid armchair across from them. *Tell me what's going on*, she said. *Dispatch said your daughter didn't come home.*

Doug posted himself near the door, hands on his belt, feet spread, and chest puffed out.

Kat peered down into her cup. *I tried calling Ellie*, she explained, a hollowness to her voice that Chelsey recognized as shock. You never think it can happen to

you. *Then I called India.*

Chelsey could see through to the kitchen, where a recycling bin overflowed with empty bottles—wine, whiskey, tequila. One of the cabinets was smashed in as if a fist had gone through it. Chelsey jutted her chin at the damage. *What happened to your cabinets?*

I put a hole through it, Jimmy offered calmly. *Too calmly? Got pissed.*

Before or after Ellie disappeared? The air in the room seemed to still, then pulsate. Kat hung her head. *In shame? Embarrassment? Fear?*

Before, Jimmy answered, low. *I got nothing to hide. You want prints? You want to search the house? Have at it.*

All right. I'd like to take a look around. Especially Ellie's room, but that can wait, Chelsey said. She placed Jimmy in the back of the line of suspects. She returned to Kat. *Who is India?*

Kat swallowed. *I don't know her well. Ellie doesn't have many friends. A week ago was the first time I'd heard her name. Thank god I insisted Ellie give me her phone number. Ellie was supposed to be staying the night at India's house. But India said the last time she saw Ellie was at some motel. They were having a party.* Kat placed her mug on the coffee table with an audible thunk. *I feel like I am in some alternate universe. How is this happening?*

There were many things to wrest a person away. But Chelsey decided to keep that to herself. Kat didn't have much more information, and Jimmy had been gone for work.

I'm sure Ellie will turn up. You know girls, Doug offered. *They get crazy ideas and run off all the time.* Chelsey's lips twitched, hating the implication that being born female made you automatically guilty of something.

Jimmy stood, his hands balling into fists. He was a big guy and kept a bat by the front door. *That's not her. That's not my daughter.* He advanced on Doug. *Ellie wouldn't just run away.*

Chelsey had been quick to step between them, all five feet nothing of her blocking the two men. At the same time, she clocked the bat, calculating how many steps Jimmy would need to take to grab it—three, maybe two. *Officer Abbott,* she said, *why don't you take a walk.* It wasn't a question.

S-sorry, Doug stammered, sticking up his hands. *Didn't mean any offense*. He backed out the door and hung out on the lawn, staring at his phone. Doug liked to make videos and post them on social media. Jesus Christ. He was the typical middle child, always eager to please.

Is it true what he said? Hope blazed in Kat's eyes. *Does this happen all the time?*

Statistics were Chelsey's best friend in situations like this. *Regarding girls in Ellie's age group, sixteen to twenty-one, they do come back eighty-one percent of the time*. She didn't add that the odds decreased to half a percent after twenty-four hours. Better to let things unfold as they would. *Now, tell me more about Ellie*.

Kat listed off several nonessential facts: *Ellie is headstrong. Stubborn at times. Her grades aren't great, but she's so bright. Jimmy, remember when she scored high on her writing exam in the fifth grade? She doesn't have a lot of friends, but her boyfriend, Danny, adores her*.

All these details to show how special Ellie was. Proof she deserved to be searched for, to be found. There was no way Kat could know a dollar figure was attached to each case. A careful calculation multiplied by parents' wealth, then divided by race and religion. The poorer and darker a girl, the less funds and time the department allocated to her rescue—after all, the public is a little less outraged when those types of girls go missing. Maybe Ellie's mom could sense it—some daughters were worth more than others. This was not a viewpoint Chelsey subscribed to. But it was a reality, even if she didn't want to believe it.

Chelsey searched Ellie's room and left soon after, promising to call when she had more information. It wasn't an emergency. Not yet. Ellie's shoe, cell phone, and blood hadn't been found yet. Kat hadn't cried yet, the type of gulping and sobbing that overtakes your whole body. And the Blacks' entire existence hadn't been distilled into a life lived one day at a time yet.

Still, Chelsey moved quickly through the regular procedure, interviewing everyone who had seen Elizabeth last. Starting with India.

Listen. Ellie and I have only hung out a couple of times. We had fun together, but we're not close, India had said through a rickety screen door. She had pale blond hair, the kind from a box, and a tiny silver nose ring that glinted in the light. Chelsey smelled booze on her, not fresh, but oozing out of her pores. India was hungover. *It was all Ellie's idea anyway*, she went on.

What was? Chelsey prodded. A seagull shrieked and landed in the yard.

The party. I provided transportation, that's all. I'm not her keeper.

Got it. The girl was more concerned with the possibility of being in trouble than the fact of Ellie's disappearance. *I don't care about the party. If you drank. Did drugs,* Chelsey assured her. *I just want to find Ellie.* That had mollified India enough for her to send Chelsey photos of the party. Chelsey pieced those photographs together to establish part of the timeline. Eleven thirty-one p.m. was the last moment Ellie was captured on film in the motel room. By eleven thirty-nine, she was gone. She was there, and then she was not, a butterfly dragged away in the wind.

Next, Chelsey questioned Daniel Partridge, Ellie's boyfriend. *I was home sleeping,* he'd stated, leg bouncing. They were in his house, at a little built-in table with wooden benches, stalks of wheat carved into the sides.

Is there anyone that can vouch for you? Chelsey stared at him without blinking. Lydia, her sister, used to call this her fox face. Most crimes are perpetrated by someone the victim knows. Danny seemed nice. But it was the nice guys you had to watch out for. The mean ones, they wore their crimes on their sleeves, carting them around with all their messy emotional baggage. Nice guys buried things deep.

Daniel's leg stilled. His eyes narrowed. *My folks were working, but my mom dropped off some dinner.* His parents owned a bar and restaurant on Main Street. A few months earlier, Chelsey remembered, the Fishtrap had been vandalized, the words REDSKIN and GO BACK TO THE RES sprayed on the front windows in neon orange paint. The Partridges were Chinook. They cleaned up the graffiti, installed security cameras, and hung their tribal flag in the windows.

I'd like to give your mother a call if you don't mind, Chelsey said. *Verify your story.*

Danny jumped from the bench and yanked open kitchen drawers until he found a scrap of paper and a pen from the local bait and tackle shop. He scribbled his mom's name and phone number and threw the paper down on the table like a gauntlet. *Have at it.*

Chelsey had offended him. But everyone was a suspect. She'd even tracked Kat and Jim. The way they gripped their cups. Too tightly? Too casually? What kind

of details did they offer? Were they too verbose or too vague? The truth tiptoes on a thin, narrow line.

Turned out, Danny had a reason to be defensive. He hadn't been home all night as he'd stated. He'd been lying. Hiding behind his outrage.

Then she'd interviewed the kids at the party, the teachers at Ellie's school. Reports vacillated about Ellie, from worse to worse. *She was such a fake, pretending to be rich*, a classmate said. *That girl? I always thought she'd get herself killed someday*, a teacher said, so self-righteous it made Chelsey want to vomit.

Rain splatters the windshield, and Chelsey jolts back to the present. She clicks on her wipers. She is closer to Olympia now. Closer to Ellie. Thirty minutes and she will be at the hospital. The knowledge tightens around her chest like a lasso. The highway widens into three lanes. There are more cars, semis, fast food restaurants, assorted motels, and gas stations. She glances at her phone, discarded on the passenger seat. She should call Jimmy and Kat.

Jimmy kept in touch with Chelsey. The last time she saw him was five months ago. He'd made a habit of visiting the precinct every now and again. Meandering in right when they opened, a carafe of coffee and a dozen donuts from Cottage Bakery in his callused hands. Last time, he'd presented them to Suzette at the front desk while making small talk, asking about her husband and grandchildren. He'd straightened when he saw Chelsey, and she led him back to a private room and closed the door. They sat across from each other, a table between them, and began their ritual. It was always small talk at first.

How are you doing, Jim?

All right, he said.

And Kat?

Oh, you know, she has her good days and bad days. Sam and her family will be moving here soon, and that's cheered her up a bit.

Ellie had an older sister, Sam. They'd been born ten years apart. Not close. Not like Chelsey and Lydia had been. She and Lydia may not have shared blood, but they shared everything else. *You're like two peas in a pod*, their mother used to say.

That's nice, Chelsey remarked.

What about you? How's that man of yours? I saw him quoted in the paper, taking his team to states. Noah had finished his first year teaching at Ilwaco High

School and coaching basketball, leading the team to the 2A state championship. He was devastated when they lost. Had gone with his brothers to his parents' cabin to brush it off.

Noah is good. Chelsey paused, knowing the question Jimmy had come to ask. Might as well get it out of the way. She viewed these conversations as akin to putting down an old dog. Why delay? *There haven't been any new leads, Jim,* she said gently. *You know I'd call you.*

Jimmy sighed and removed his baseball hat, cupping the bill between his palms. His hair stood up in little tufts of gray and brown. *Can I see it?*

Of course. Chelsey stood and retrieved the twelve-by-twelve corrugated box from evidence. She placed it on her desk and reminded Jimmy not to open any plastic bags. *It's still an open case.*

Jimmy nodded once. He knew the rules. It was always the same. First, he read the police report. Then the witness statements. Looking for anything Chelsey might have missed. Any scrap of information that could be the key to breaking Ellie's case wide open. Last, he peered at the physical evidence, handling each piece like a crumbling relic—one of Ellie's shoes, her cell phone with a cracked screen, gravel with blood on it, CCTV footage photographs pulled from the motel and the Pentecostal church next door, all of the parking lot where Ellie's things had been discovered. Semitrucks and scattered cars blocked any view of Ellie. Chelsey had chased down every owner of each license plate she could make out. Nobody had seen anything.

Just tell me you still believe she's out there.

Chelsey began to place the contents back in the box. Were these the last things Ellie held? What would these objects say if they could speak? What secrets might they whisper?

The case is still open. I won't stop searching until Ellie is found, she promised, because she did believe—it may have been silly, but she had to believe. She cut herself up on the razor's edge of hope.

Jimmy nodded solemnly and excused himself on a tremble. Chelsey let him go without another word. She'd learned enough to know Jimmy Black, like most men, required privacy when he fell apart.

Chelsey inhales, swimming free of the memories as she rolls to a stop at a red light. A sign for Legacy Memorial is posted at the intersection. It is time. She picks up her phone and dials the Blacks. It rings and rings. Two years. Two weeks. One day.

Ever since Ellie Black's disappearance, Chelsey has volunteered for any case involving violence against women. She always has plenty of work to do. All those beaten, all those bruised, all those maimed women are welcomed on Chelsey's shores. It is a type of atonement, Chelsey understands. She could not save Lydia. She could not solve Ellie's case.

The ringing stops, and the line picks up.

"Lo," Jimmy answers. A television blares in the background, but his voice is sandpaper rough with sleep.

"Hey, Jim, it's Chelsey. Is Kat around? I have some news." She waits for Jimmy to awaken Kat, and she thinks of their daughter. Sees Ellie in the spiral of her mind. There she is, standing in the shadow of a hollow curve. Silent. Waiting for her turn to speak.

Yes, it is time.