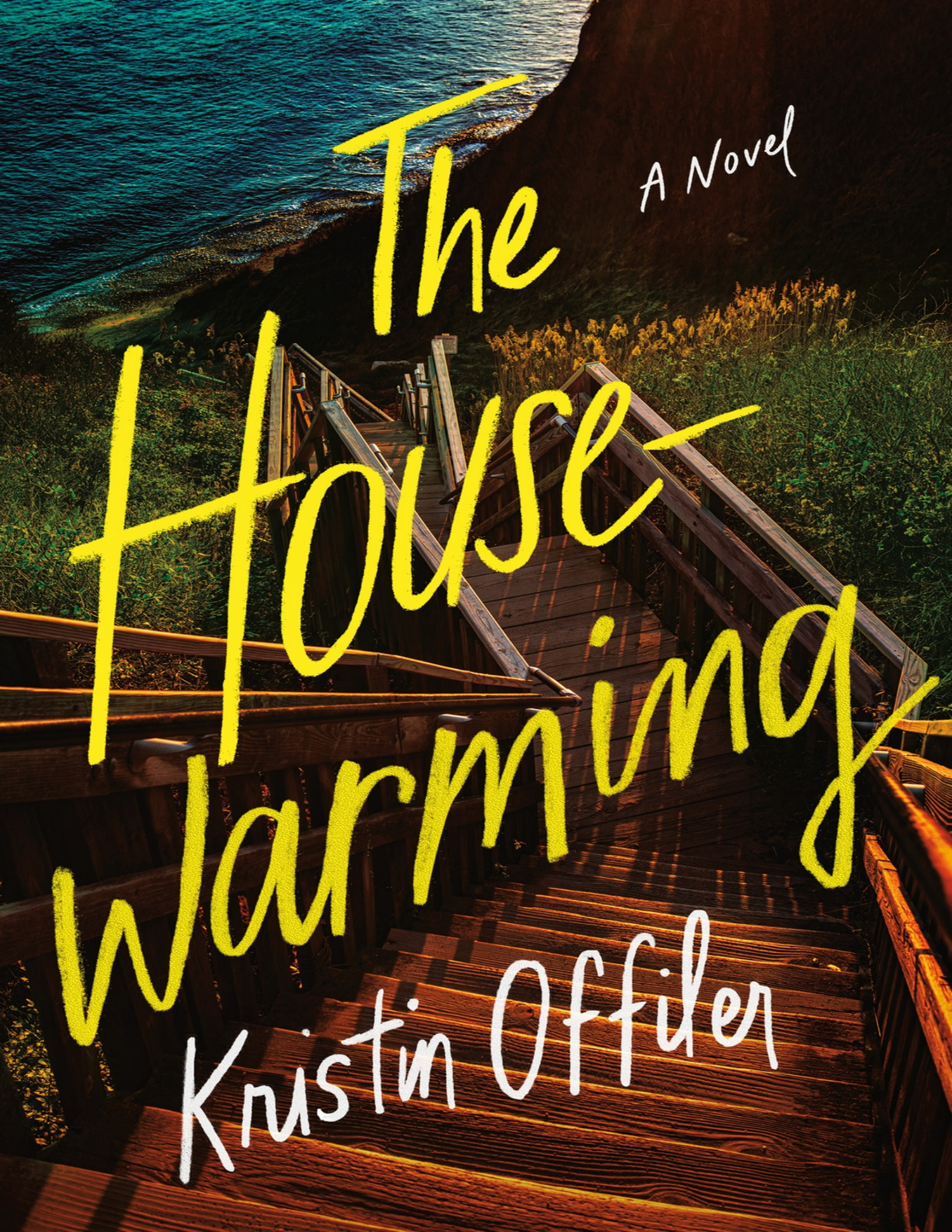




A Novel

The Housewarming

Kristin Offiler

The
House-
warming

The *A Novel*
House-
warming
Kristin Offiler

 THOMAS & MERCER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2025 by Kristin Offler
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle
www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Thomas & Mercer are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

EU product safety contact:
Amazon Media EU S. à r.l.
38, avenue John F. Kennedy, L-1855 Luxembourg
amazonpublishing-gpsr@amazon.com

ISBN-13: 9781662530920 (paperback)
ISBN-13: 9781662530913 (digital)

Cover design by Kimberly Glyder
Cover image: © MonaMakela / Getty



For Matt, my love

Contents

[Prologue: PATRICIA](#)

[Chapter One: CALLIE](#)

[Chapter Two: MEG](#)

[Chapter Three: TESS](#)

[Chapter Four: LINDSEY](#)

[Chapter Five: CALLIE](#)

[Chapter Six: MEG](#)

[Chapter Seven: TESS](#)

[Chapter Eight: LINDSEY](#)

[Chapter Nine: CALLIE](#)

[Chapter Ten: LINDSEY](#)

[Chapter Eleven: PATRICIA](#)

[Chapter Twelve: MEG](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: TESS](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: LINDSEY](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: CALLIE](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: MEG](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: TESS](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: LINDSEY](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: MEG](#)

[Chapter Twenty: CALLIE](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One: LINDSEY](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two: MEG](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three: TESS](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four: LINDSEY](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five: CALLIE](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six: TESS](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven: MEG](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight: LINDSEY](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine: CALLIE](#)

[Chapter Thirty: ZOE](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Prologue

PATRICIA

August 2014

A soaking rain fell for three days straight, so heavy it seeped through waterproof jackets and rubber boots. Swells crashed on the jetty, the ocean visibly angry as it thrashed the island. Discarded ferry tickets and crumpled paper coffee cups swirled in puddles at the feet of search-party volunteers, who, like a pack of hunting dogs, shook the rainwater off their backs as they looked for her.

Zoe Gilbert, a young local jeweler from the mainland, was missing after a weeklong vacation with friends. The details were scarce: She'd stayed behind after the rest of her group boarded the ferry to leave Block Island on Sunday morning, telling them she wanted one more day on the beach. She hadn't been seen or heard from since. Calls to her cell phone went straight to voicemail. Her bank account appeared untouched. Even her parents, with whom she was close, hadn't heard from her.

There was no evidence she'd left the island, and none that she was still there, either.

On Monday night, the day after she was last seen, her roommate realized Zoe had never returned home. Zoe's parents reported her missing, and by Tuesday afternoon, a search was organized on the island. The group trudged through the rain, asking vacationers and locals if they'd seen Zoe Gilbert, checking with businesses and private residences near the ferry landing for video footage. And mostly, hoping they would find her alive and

well in some remote corner of the tiny island, with nothing worse than a broken ankle and a mild case of dehydration.

Tuesday ended. They found nothing. The rain fell in sheets all night. They repeated the search on Wednesday, and again, no sign of her, no witnesses who recalled seeing her.

But on Thursday, once the sun rose and the storm finally blew out to sea, a pair of red heart-shaped sunglasses washed up on a stony beach at the base of the two-hundred-foot-tall Mohegan Bluffs. The lenses, scuffed and filmy with salt, reflected the morning sunlight and caught the eye of search-party volunteer Patricia Adele.

She pushed her own sunglasses up and crouched in a tidal pool to get a closer look at the glinting red hearts. Then she unfolded Zoe Gilbert's Missing poster, which she kept tucked inside the pocket of her shorts alongside a small notebook, and compared the sunglasses in Zoe's photo to the pair in front of her.

"I think I've got something here!"

She waved to the other volunteers searching this particular beach, accessible only by a 141-step wooden staircase nestled into the cliffside. She had volunteered to search here because she was fit enough for the trek—and because Zoe Gilbert's four friends were in the group.

Patricia had trailed them during the previous day's search, hopeful they'd talk to her about Zoe, but they hadn't noticed her. Patricia had hundreds of blog readers who would drop everything to read the inside scoop on an ongoing missing person case if she could get someone to talk.

The friends jogged over to Patricia.

"Oh, shit," the moody one said, her gaze landing hard on the sunglasses. The crooked name tag stuck to her tank top read *Lindsey*, and her dark hair was fixed in an unruly bun with a claw clip atop her head. Patricia had seen her quietly sucking back the small bottles of alcohol she kept in her bag when she thought no one was looking. "Could they be Zoe's?"

"Maybe. But this style is so common, right?" the quiet one, Meg, said. This was the first time in days Patricia hadn't seen Meg in tears. She cried as

if she wanted everyone to know she missed Zoe the most.

“Yeah, they sort of look like the ones she was wearing last week,” Callie, the rich friend, said with a downturn in her voice. “But it’s hard to tell.”

It was clear Callie had money, given her diamond-stud earrings and indestructible blowout, the soft twists of her blond ponytail bouncy and defiant against the elements. She carried a seemingly inexhaustible stack of Missing posters printed in full color on nice-quality cardstock. Whether it had to do with her wealth or her good looks or some long-ago established hierarchy, she was clearly in charge.

Callie bent down and lifted the glasses out of the sand.

“Cal, no—don’t touch them,” Tess said in a loud whisper. She wore a threadbare Ives Art Camp T-shirt and frayed jean shorts, her short hair pulled into a stubby ponytail. Patricia sensed something about Tess was stuck in the past. She’d heard the girls met as teenagers at the now-defunct Ives Art Camp, but why a twentysomething-year-old woman would still be wearing a shirt from her teenage days was beyond her. Unless Tess was clinging so tightly to the past, she couldn’t even let go of something as simple as a shirt.

“Who wants to call this in?” Patricia asked. Surely this discovery would earn her their trust. It could give her access to pose the questions she’d been dying to ask and tell Zoe’s story to her readers in a way that felt more human than the dry local news reports.

But instead, they looked at Patricia as if she had been made of ocean mist until that very second and were just registering her existence for the first time. Their collective attention dredged up a prickly memory for her: a pack of girls in the high school locker room cornering her because she’d snitched on them for smoking behind the gymnasium. The ringleader had shoved Patricia hard against the cool metal lockers and bruised the side of her face, hissing at her to mind her own business next time. And when the volleyball coach asked what happened to Patricia’s cheek, the girls lied.

She tripped over her own feet, one girl said before Patricia could answer.

You should really watch where you're going, another said to her.

Those girls had protected each other the moment someone sought the truth.

"I'm sorry, I don't think we've met," Callie said. Her brows knit together above her dark designer frames. "Do you live on the island? Or know Zoe?"

"No," Patricia said. "But I saw the story on the news and wanted to help. I'm a bit of a reporter. I mean, I have a blog where I write about missing people, but I've never had a chance to join a search firsthand like this. My readers are really interested in the details."

"Oh," Callie said. "Well, thank you for helping."

"You're going to call the detective, right?" Patricia asked. She gestured at Tess. "And she's right. You shouldn't touch the glasses. They could be evidence."

"We'll bring them to the detective ourselves," Lindsey said. "We're about to head back up."

"That's not how it works," Patricia said, coarser than she intended. "I'm sorry, I know you must all be so worried about Zoe. But look, I'm working on a blog post; maybe I can ask you some questions while we wait for the detective. Get some details about your trip. Hear from your perspective what happened."

"You can talk to the police if you have questions," Callie said. "We aren't giving interviews."

Patricia tilted her head. "Why not? You were the last people seen with her, and you just spent the entire week with her on the island. You're the best ones to speak about Zoe. I can send you the link to my blog if you want to see the kinds of cases I—"

Callie cut her off. "What part of 'we aren't giving interviews' wasn't clear?"

Then she turned, and the others followed as if pulled by invisible marionette strings, definitively slicing Patricia out of the group.

Patricia watched from a distance as they stood in a tight circle and passed the sunglasses back and forth, inspecting them. Except for Tess. She

held her hands away, refusing.

Their voices were drowned out by the waves crashing on the rocky beach. Patricia wished she could hear the conversation clearly. What were they saying? Why was Tess the only one unwilling to touch the sunglasses? Were they discussing what to do with those red frames? Did they need to make them disappear?

And, if their conversation was innocent, why not include Patricia herself, the only other volunteer on this beach—a twentysomething, like them—who was giving up her time to look for *their* friend? Why didn't they want her help spreading the word of their friend's disappearance?

Then she remembered cold metal against her cheek, the ringing silence in the locker room once she was alone, eyes burning with tears. The feeling of being punished for trying to do the right thing.

Her sense of justice ran too deep to sit this out.

"I'm calling the detective," she yelled over to them. "I'm sorry, but you're tampering with potential evidence. I know a thing or two about this stuff."

"We'll take care of it, thank you," Callie called back in a tight voice.

Patricia pulled her cell phone from her pocket and made the call. A distinct thrill filled her when the detective answered and she explained what she'd found.

"I'll be down shortly," he said. "For now, just leave them where you found them."

"I tried to," Patricia said.

She hung up and began planning what she would write about this discovery. *Her* discovery. Then she thought better of it. This deserved to be documented. She'd show her audience and let them feel like part of the action.

Patricia started recording with her phone and aimed it at Zoe's friends. She zoomed in on the red sunglasses in Callie's perfectly manicured hands. A cloudy tapestry of fingerprints covered the sunglasses now. They continued to discuss something Patricia could not hear, but with her phone, she

captured the shape of the words on their mouths. Maybe later she could decipher them.

Lindsey noticed Patricia recording them and glared at her.

“Stop,” Lindsey mouthed slowly and pointedly.

Patricia shook her head and kept recording. She wouldn’t be pushed so easily into minding her own business. Especially when her instincts told her not to look away.

Twenty minutes later, the detective climbed down the cliffside staircase and lumbered over the rocky beach to Patricia.

Zoe’s friends made their way over when they saw him arrive.

Patricia tried to catch their gazes, but they wouldn’t look at her. The detective mopped his red, sweat-drenched face with a wilting stack of brown paper napkins, then shoved them into the pocket of his khakis.

“This humidity is killing me,” he muttered, taking the sunglasses from Callie. “Okay. So, who found these, exactly?”

Patricia raised her hand. “I did. The glasses were right over there, sitting by that boulder in the sand.”

“Well, don’t get so excited,” he said as he whipped open an evidence bag and dropped them inside. “It’s an interesting find, but it’s not a person. They’re sending another group down this way to help you grid-search the beach. Hang tight.”

Patricia knew she should leave it at that if she wanted to salvage a chance at connecting with Zoe’s friends, but she couldn’t help herself. What they’d done was wrong.

“How will we know if this is evidence of a crime if they touched the sunglasses? Isn’t that contamination?”

“Ma’am,” the detective said, a trace of irritation in his voice, “there’s no reason to jump to foul play just yet. Sure, I’d prefer if no one touched these before I got here, but it isn’t going to make or break anything. We’re looking for a person right now. Not signs of a crime.”

"I know how important evidence preservation is," Patricia said. "If it's a clue, it's now compromised."

"You sound like you hope she's dead and there's a killer to catch," Lindsey said. "And why were you recording us? What the hell is your deal?"

"Just let it go," Meg murmured to Lindsey.

"No. I want to know," Lindsey said. "Sir, she was recording us on her phone. I want that video deleted."

"Lindsey," Callie said. "Chill."

Patricia didn't want to delete it. Especially if they wanted her to. What were they so worried about?

"Actually, I was trying to get service, not recording you. Paranoid much?"

"Tell you what," the detective said to Patricia, "since you found the glasses, why don't you come with me to log it back at home base. You can help me out, okay?"

She nodded and followed him slowly back up the rambling wooden staircase, casting a final glance at Zoe's friends. They stood near the water's edge, watching her. Happy to see her go, no doubt.

The detective struggled up each of the nearly 150 steps, giving her plenty of time to think.

He must have kids, Patricia thought. Probably daughters. He'd probably sensed the charge between her and them, and knew from experience how quickly tension could devolve into ugliness. Smart of him to pull her away, even though she would've preferred staying with the group and trying a little harder to crack them open. Even if they didn't like her, she had struck a nerve with them.

Sometimes a struck nerve was more telling than the words a person said out loud.

And that was fine. So they didn't like her. What did it matter? They were never going to befriend her. In fact, she had the distinct feeling these people were not Zoe Gilbert's friends, either. They were the worst kind of girls: phony, disloyal liars.

The kind of girls who'd keep each other's secrets.

A week later, Patricia Adele removed the skeleton of a tent from its protective bag and began feeding poles through nylon loops until it sprang to life. She staked the tent in a grassy corner of a public park that shared a property line with Meg's mother's house. From there, Patricia could keep an eye on the girls but technically wasn't trespassing. Inside her tent, she unrolled a sleeping bag and arranged her notebook, a handheld camera, and spare batteries on the ground. She opened her laptop and skimmed the flood of new comments on her most recent video with Zoe Gilbert's boyfriend. She let the video play while she read. Every time it played, she made another few cents. And if an ad ran on the video, a few dollars.

"People say when a woman goes missing, it's always the husband or boyfriend who did it," Patricia had said to Blake, her camera recording their interview from the sidewalk outside Meg's mother's house.

"I've heard that," he said. His tattooed arms were crossed tight across his chest. "It's not true now, though."

"Why should people believe that?"

"Because I'm out here trying to help. I wouldn't be helping if I was hiding something. Plus, I already talked to the cops. They didn't arrest me, did they? And I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"You're right. It does say something that you're willing to speak out. Unlike Zoe's friends, who won't talk to me," Patricia said. "Not since I started asking questions they don't want me asking. Do you know them well?"

Blake's eyes darted to the camera lens for a split second. Patricia caught an air of nervousness in his body language, but he corrected it quickly.

"I don't really know her friends at all," he said.

"So tell us where you were on the Sunday Zoe reportedly went missing."

"At home, all day and night. My roommate has already vouched for me. I haven't seen Zoe since the day she left for Block Island, a week before she went missing. Now it's been over two weeks. I can't believe she hasn't tried

to call or text me or anything. We didn't always talk every day, but almost." He paused, blinked rapidly, then cleared his throat. "But I wasn't the last one to see her. A lot of people saw her after the last time I did."

Blake was similar to the guys Patricia had liked in college: overly confident, slightly unkempt, happy to remind you he could do better if you turned him down. Probably allergic to real commitment but pissed if the girl they wouldn't commit to dated anyone else. She could read him. He was withholding something—but she didn't think he knew where Zoe was.

"Were things with you and Zoe serious?"

"Serious enough." He looked straight into the camera. "Zoe, baby, I miss you. Come home. At least call me if you see this. Let me know you're okay."

This is where Patricia had cut the footage. It was powerful to end on a hopeful note, to show Zoe's boyfriend pleading for her safe return. Something her friends hadn't done once.

New comments appeared on the video every few minutes. Patricia loved seeing her work gain traction.

I always say the husband/boyfriend did it but her BF is clearly innocent!!

Why aren't those girls being arrested right now? Silence = guilt.

My bro's friend went to school w/ Lindsey. DM me if you want to know more.

We all know how this goes: the last people to see a missing person are guilty. This isn't rocket science. BF didn't see her but friends did. HELLO??

Thank u, Patricia, 4 being Zoe's voice. Keep reporting what u find. Some1 will crack eventually and then we'll know the TRUTH.

Patricia peered out the mesh window of her tent at the sound of voices approaching. Her local blog readers gathered on the street, signs in hand. One person knelt to prop a teddy bear and a bouquet of flowers against the mailbox's wooden post. Another passed around battery-operated candles. They aimed their chanting at the house where Callie, Lindsey, Tess, and Meg were hiding.

Patricia stepped out of the tent to join them. She planted her feet just at the edge of the property, held up her camera with one hand, and spoke into the lens.

“Thank you all for your support as I cover Zoe Gilbert’s case. We’re having a great conversation in the comments section of my last video, the interview with Zoe’s boyfriend, Blake. Join us there and share your thoughts. I’m also happy to see so many of you still commenting on my first video from last week. I know the footage is a little grainy, but it’s been incredible to read the comments from body-language and lip-reading experts. Some of the interpretations of what Zoe’s friends were saying in that footage—and what their bodies were saying—are truly fascinating. And so many of you were upset to see Zoe’s friends handling the sunglasses, just like I was!

“But so far, the police haven’t been able to say with certainty if they’re Zoe’s sunglasses or not. My gut tells me they are, and that something happened to her on that secluded beach. There’s more to this story than meets the eye, and if you’re as determined as I am to find the truth, I encourage you to keep interacting with my videos and blog posts. Keep telling Zoe’s friends that the world wants the truth.

“None of this work would be possible without your generous contributions. So, if you like what I’m doing and want to play a part in getting justice for Zoe, click the link below this video and donate to my virtual tip jar. The highest contributor each day receives a special shout-out in my next video. Today we have Rita, with a two-hundred-dollar contribution! Thank you, Rita.”

Patricia stopped recording and turned to the house. The girls watched from an upstairs window, their mouths moving as they spoke to each other behind the glass. Patricia waved, and the curtain fell sharply in front of them.

The people on the street chanted in a steady cadence. “*Where is Zoe? Where is Zoe?*” Patricia slipped back inside her tent and uploaded her next video.