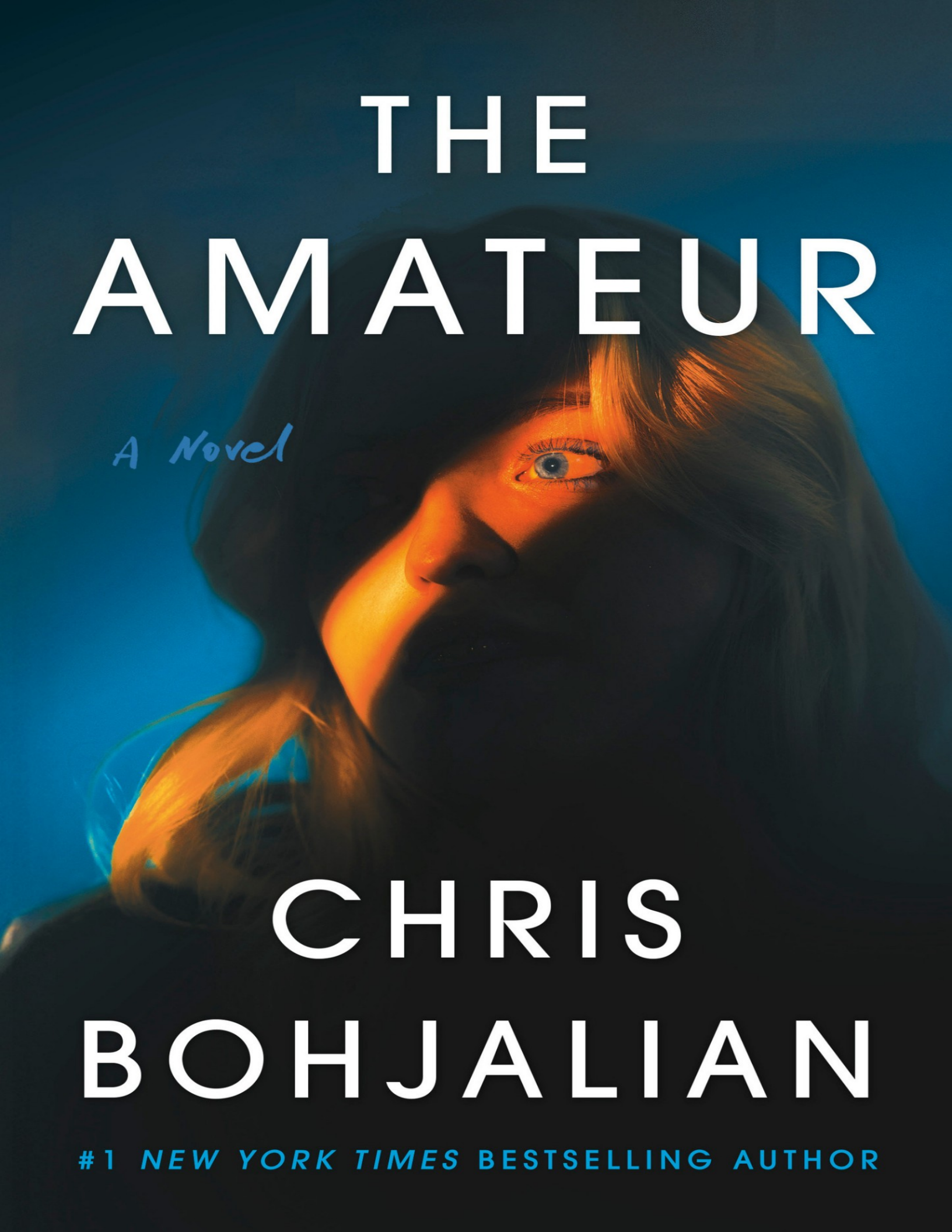




THE AMATEUR

A Novel

CHRIS
BOHJALIAN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE
AMATEUR

A NOVEL

CHRIS
BOHJALIAN



DOUBLEDAY
New York

FIRST DOUBLEDAY EDITION 2026

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bohjalian, Chris, [date], author.

Title: The amateur : a novel / Chris Bohjalian.

Description: First edition. | New York : Doubleday, 2026.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025018567 | ISBN 9780385551298 hardcover | ISBN 9780385551304
ebook

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3552.O495 A83 2026 | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20250429

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025018567>

Ebook ISBN 9780385551304

Cover photograph © Rekha Garton/Arcangel

Cover design by John Fontana

Book design by Casey Hampton, adapted for ebook

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The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland,
<https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

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CONTENTS

Dedication

Epigraph

PROLOGUE

PART ONE:

There Won't Be a Trial. There Will *Never* Be a Trial.

PART TWO:

The Season of Depositions

PART THREE:

The Trial

EPILOGUE

Acknowledgments

About the Author

For Victoria.
All ways. Always.

The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread.

—NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

A perfectly straight shot with a big club is a fluke.

—JACK NICKLAUS

PROLOGUE



It is neither virtue nor might that rules the world; it's luck. Practice does not make perfect, and the stars are but flickering blowhards—they know nothing because they are, in fact, nothing but gargantuan globes of hot gas. If you look to the night skies or astrological charts to divine the promise of tomorrow, please take note: the stars are little more than hot air.

Also? The stars we see are likely dead. Long dead. We are viewing but their shimmering ghosts, light-years after they have imploded.

Now...

There are usually (but not always) 336 dimples on a golf ball, their presence giving the small sphere greater lift and allowing it to fly farther after impact. An engineer might compare them to an airplane's wings. A golf ball usually weighs about 1.6 ounces. The cores vary, but the inside is likely to have some combination of rubber, plastic, titanium, tungsten, and chemical resins.

These are the sorts of recondite facts that matter.

Obviously, a golf ball is not a deadly weapon: it's not a crossbow or dagger or assault rifle. Balls—all kinds of balls—rarely kill people. (Excluding, arguably, balls as testicles. History is awash in testicle-fueled carnage.) Only one baseball player has ever died from a baseball, and that was a ball thrown by a pitcher, not hit hard by a bat: what's called these days the exit velocity, the baseball's speed sometimes nearing 115 miles per hour. Spectators, of course, have been killed by foul balls, but even that is rare. (In 2024, Topps, the renowned baseball card company, issued 108 special cards in honor of Judy McLean, a Tigers fan who was hit just above the left eye by a foul ball traveling 108 miles per hour at a game in Detroit. The selfie she posted online of the mesmerizing goose egg on her forehead went viral.) And while football is a demonstrably violent sport, the football itself—which isn't

even a ball, technically—is responsible for literally zero deaths. Same with basketballs.

Now, marbles? Those are orbs, and they kill. Over the centuries, the number of children who’ve choked on them and died or had their insides dammed up by one they managed to swallow would likely fill a cruise ship.

So, it’s the small balls that kill. Not the big ones.

Which brings us to Kenneth Foster, called Kenny by his friends and family and even the people who barely knew him. Pretend there’s a drone—the sort that takes photos, not the kind that rains down hellfire on soldiers and civilians in war zones—hovering with vertiginous aplomb above a swank country club just fifteen miles north of New York City. Right now, it is recording the no-man’s-land near the club’s side entrance (not the front entrance with its wide white Doric columns reminiscent of a Southern plantation) and the first tee of the golf course. The club is at the edge of a particularly mannered suburb. The year is 1978: decades before there actually might have been a drone wafting over this small world.

Still...

Nearby is an expansive green where members can roll a few putts before teeing off, a petite practice net in lieu of a driving range where members can work on their swing, and a pergola where the caddies wait to be called by the caddy master for what they refer to as a loop: the chance to carry bags or putters for members playing a round. The other caddies intimidated Kenny, but they didn’t mean to: this was not torment by intent or harassment by design. They certainly didn’t bully him; in truth, they hardly thought about him. But Kenny was seventeen, too young to understand that the other caddies were largely oblivious to him. That most people are largely oblivious to most other people around them.

And, of course, he was embarrassed when he caddied, as sometimes he did, for the fathers—and sometimes the mothers—of kids in his school. Parents of classmates. He’d been in that school only a year, arriving there the previous August from South Florida. But the caddy master knew the golfers

and sometimes thought he was doing everyone a favor by having Kenny carry the bags belonging to (for instance) Carolyn Eastburn's dad.

Oh, you're in my Carolyn's class? George Eastburn would ask the boy.

Yes, sir.

Are you a member here—your family, I mean?

No, sir. They don't play golf.

Ah, but you do?

The answer was fraught. Sometimes he lied, and so there were parents of some classmates who believed he caddied because he had a deep love for the game. And then there were those to whom, for whatever the reasons, he told a half-truth: he caddied for “book money” for college in a few years, as if the dollars he earned were not direly needed. Oh, but they were. They were.

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And he worried about seeing his classmates themselves, though that happened rarely. There were only a few who played golf, and there was never any reason Kenny would be at any part of the club other than the golf course. The pool and the tennis courts and the dining room and the snack bar? They all were off-limits to the caddies. When they went to the bathroom, they were expected to steer clear of the men's locker room or the one near the pro shop, but instead use the one off the kitchen frequented by the cooks and dishwashers and waitresses and cleaners.

Some of the other caddies were only a few years older than Kenny. They were students at the nearby college, a small place with Jesuit roots where the majority of the scholars lived at home and commuted rather than residing in one of the campus's two dormitories. Others were three or four times

Kenny's age, men who, in some cases, had over a decade on even his own father. These were the real pros, the grizzled old guys who caddied in the South in the winter and here in the suburbs of New York City in the summer. At least some of these men were alcoholics. All of them had lives that had unraveled in unexpected, unpleasant ways. After all, no fifty- or sixty-year-old man recalls thinking as a boy, *When I grow up, I sure hope I get to carry sixty pounds of golf bags for six miles for entitled doctors and lawyers and bankers—and, if I'm lucky, get to do it two times a day.*

It wasn't merely the idea that all the other caddies knew more about golf than Kenny did that made him nervous around them, though that was likely a factor. He hadn't played much golf, not even on Mondays, when the course was closed to members for maintenance and caddies were allowed to play for free. (Caddy Day, the club called it, as if it were an august celebration of the help.) It was really only those college kids who took advantage of the program. Nor was it the fact that he was the youngest caddy there, the only high school student in the pool. It was this: he feared that all the other caddies supposed he came from money because his family lived in the neighborhood with many of the club members, and that he didn't need the ten bucks a bag the way they did. Or the forty bucks for a foursome, when you managed four golfers on your own. (Like a one-man band, you carried two bags on your shoulders and a pair of putters in your hands; two of the four golfers rode in a cart, their bags hitched to the back, while two others walked the links beside you. You were expected to follow four balls and give four golfers their clubs. If you were Kenny, you always felt like Lucy Ricardo falling comically behind at the candy factory assembly line.) He suspected the other caddies, whether they were twenty years old or sixty, viewed him as a dilettante, a poseur, a faux-working-class fraud.

Which wasn't the case. Those rare moments they actually thought of him, they probably viewed him as a shy kid who was not a great caddy, but that didn't concern them because he was rarely given loops with members who knew the difference between a good caddy and a bad one, the members who actually benefited from the caddies who knew what they were doing.

The caddies who could recommend the right club, weigh in on the speed or contour of the green, find that ball that had sliced deep into the woods along the fifth and fifteenth holes. Kenny usually—again, not always, there were exceptions—got the newbies and the bad tippers, the newlyweds and the retirees who hit the course right after their lesson.

But Kenny did need the money. Maybe not the way the other caddies did, but his family sure as hell couldn't afford to belong to a club like this. He was seventeen, and most of the fifteen hundred bucks he hoped to earn that summer would go into his college fund, and the little that didn't would go for dime bags of weed.

Now, that day—the first Thursday in August—the sun was high, and the temperature was flirting with ninety. Kenny put down his book and bowed his head against the midday sun, staring for a long, languid moment at the grass between his legs, the voices of the dozen or so caddies behind him the burble of a small crowd before the curtain goes up at the theater. Then he closed his eyes. All of the caddies, like him, were waiting for a Thursday afternoon loop, and a second walk around the course. They were in the shade, sitting in folding chairs or on the two wooden benches beneath that pergola where the caddies waited to be summoned by the caddy master. Kenny was sitting on the ground outside the bower, using the pretext of a tan to allow himself the separation necessitated by his fear of them. He was facing that small driving range practice net, unaware—as was everyone—that there was a tear in the netting. It likely was new, the fraying fabric perhaps separating only that morning when years of golf balls slamming hard into that section had, apparently, finally torn two of the thin nylon cords.

The caddy master, a paunchy guy with the thick silver hair of a movie Bolshevik and a nose striated with clusters of spidery red lines, tended to allocate the loops based on seniority, except when a member had a favorite caddy or the member was such a fledgling, loser, or bad tipper that he'd call Kenny's name.

Or, on occasion, when the golfer was the parent of one of his classmates. Sometimes the caddy master would summon Kenny for them, too.

Brendan Bedford and his wife, Jill, were duffers. Perfectly nice people, sanguine about their future, but terrible golfers. Moreover, while Jill's bag was small, even for a woman's bag, Brendan's was a beast, the sort of expensive and needlessly heavy Redwood that a know-nothing neophyte like Brendan could be talked into by an enterprising salesman at the golf store. Brendan took a half day that Thursday, going to morning meetings at the liquor company headquartered on Park Avenue where he worked, but returning to Westchester on a lunchtime train and meeting his wife at the club, which they had joined only that spring, for watercress sandwiches in the dining room and then an afternoon round of golf.

Neither of the Bedfords was mean-spirited or a bad tipper, but they were beginners—one of whom had a leviathan for a bag. And so they were a perfect loop for Kenny Foster. Which was why the caddy master called his name. Or, to be precise, his last name. The caddy master always called the caddies by their last names. And so he yelled the name "Foster," shouting it out across the airless, humid expanse, leading the seventeen-year-old to look up from the grass, a reflex.

Which was a split second after a girl a mere thirteen months older than Kenny, a senior at his high school who was planning to start at Yale in less than a month, one of the only kids at the local high school who played golf, finished her follow-through at the small practice net. She was using a driver. A wood. She was practicing her drives with a tee, and she knew what she was doing. She was good. Very good. Had already met the coach of the women's golf team in New Haven.

There is no record as to how fast that 1.6-ounce golf ball with 336 dimples was traveling when it passed almost untouched through the hole in the netting, but it was likely speeding between 140 and 150 miles per hour. And it had traversed only fifteen yards when it slammed into the right side of Kenny Foster's head, shattering the temporal bone and causing a traumatic rupture of the middle meningeal artery in the brain: an epidural hematoma.

See? It is chance that pulls the strings. A hole in a net, a tee shot that's more line drive than moon shot, a name called into the air. A boy looking up.

Kenny brought his right hand to his head (some witnesses thought he was reaching for his ear, others his cheek), but his upper body was already wobbling like a struck bowling pin before it falls to the floor at the end of the lane. The pupil in his eye on the ipsilateral side—the side where the golf ball had smashed into his skull—was growing dilated. He toppled over into the grass, some of the caddies laughing because they were unaware of the severity of what they had witnessed, but then they would run to him. All of them would: they raced. Even the caddy master.

But already Kenny was losing consciousness, his breathing slowing then ceasing as a tsunami of blood flooded his skull. He was dead before the ambulance arrived.

I know because I was there.

I know because I was the girl who hit the golf ball.

PART ONE



**THERE WON'T BE A TRIAL. THERE WILL
NEVER BE A TRIAL.**

BAD LUCK'S HUMAN CONDUIT

I didn't go to Yale because, in part, I no longer wanted anything to do with golf, and I associated my acceptance there with the sport. I didn't have a golf scholarship, but the coach had encouraged me to come to New Haven, assuring me that I would make the team. Had it been a decade later, I might have been actively recruited. But that might be presumption on my part. Maybe I wasn't quite as extraordinary and rare as I liked to believe. In hindsight, I doubt I was even on the radar of the southern or western universities that took golf—especially women's golf—seriously.

Besides, after Kenny Foster's death, I was in no condition to study anywhere.

In a tony suburb of New York City in 1978, in a place like Tallmadge, a mere thirty-five minutes by commuter train from Grand Central, almost all of the houses were colonials, Tudors, and Georgians. The bedroom closet floors were awash in wing tips, penny loafers, and espadrilles. In that world, no one was going to propose therapy to deal with the trauma that comes when you kill someone with a golf ball. If you were a teen back then, the only sure ticket to a shrink was to try to kill yourself, and still your visits to the psychiatrist would be the darkest of family secrets. So, no one suggested that I might benefit from a little talk therapy. It didn't cross my anguish-addled mind any more than it crossed my parents' minds to bring it up. Would my

life have turned out differently if I had seen someone? Perhaps. But maybe not. I had plenty of other demons just waiting to emerge from the vault.

For instance, when I was fifteen, three years before I would kill Kenny Foster, I took my father's nine iron and smashed in the driver's-side window of the Ford Maverick in which a senior at the high school had tried to rape me. (I used my father's nine iron because his short game was already terrible. I sure as hell wasn't going to use one of my clubs.) The boy didn't succeed, but he did tell his friends that he had. I demolished the window in the country club parking lot, and it seemed to me at the time a reasonable, measured response: I wasn't denting the car, after all. The family would just need to have the window replaced. But the police investigated, and even though the district attorney and the family chose not to press charges, a photo the dad took of the vehicle made it into the local newspaper with a caption the editors clearly thought was gently comic:

Golf prodigy Mira Winston showed her competitive edge when she vandalized schoolmate Frank Pendleton's Ford Maverick at the Tallmadge Country Club. Rumor has it, he illegally moved his ball on the thirteenth green.

Remember, this was the mid-1970s, and I was considered a fiery sophomore girl who might someday be an LPGA great. No one, including me, was going to suggest his real crime was far worse, and shattering a window was hardly an overreaction.

It would be years before this would come back to haunt me.

"And you knew this Kenny Foster how?" my father was asking me, once his stupefaction that his daughter had killed a boy had begun to recede. He and my mother were sitting on my bed beside me late that afternoon, an hour of the day when usually my mother would have been drinking and making