

JODI PICOULT

Plain Truth



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First published in the United States of America in 1999 by Pocket Books,
A division of Simon and Schuster, Inc.

First published in Great Britain in 2004 by Hodder and Stoughton,
a division of Hodder Headline

This Hodder paperback edition 2007

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A Hodder paperback

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 340 93553 8

ISBN 0 340 93553 7

Typeset in Plantin Light by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham Ltd, Chatham, Kent

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Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

For my dad, Myron Picoult, who taught me to be an original.

There are not many men in the world who can sneeze like a duck, spy hales of bay, make very bad puns . . . and cherish their daughters so completely.

I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Once again, I find myself indebted to so many people: Dr Joel Umlas, Dr James Umlas, and Dr David Toub for their medical expertise; Dr Tia Horner and Dr Stuart Anfang for their explanations of forensic psychiatry and clinical interviews; Dr Catherine Lewis and Dr Neil Kaye, for helping me understand neonaticide; my father-in-law, Karl van Leer, who never once blinked when I called and asked about inseminating cows; Kyle van Leer, who saw a ‘cookie moon’ and let me borrow it; Teresa Farina for the fast transcriptions; Dr Elizabeth Martin, for finding listeria and leading me through autopsies; Steve Marshall, who took me ghost hunting; Brian Laird, for the troll story; Allegra Lubrano, for finding obscure legal statutes whenever I called frantically to ask ‘a quick question’; Kiki Keating, attorney extraordinaire, for making the time to come with me to Lancaster and spending all those nights hunched over the tape recorder, brainstorming testimony; and Tim van Leer, for everything. Thanks also to Jane Picoult, who wanted her own sentence this time, for her insight and guiding comments. Thanks to Laura Gross for the same, and for possibly being the only person in the publishing business who wants me to write *faster*. To Emily Bestler and Kip Hakala – here’s to the start of a beautiful relationship. And to Camille McDuffie – the third time’s a charm. I am indebted to the works of John Hostetler and Donald Kraybill, and to the people I met in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, without whom this book could not have been written: Maribel Kraybill, Lt.

Renee Schuler, and especially Louise Stoltzfus, a wonderful writer herself, whose contributions here were invaluable. Finally, many thanks to the Amish men, women, and children I met, who graciously opened their homes and their hearts and let me into their world for a little while.

I

I must be a Christian child
Gentle, patient, meek and mild;
Must be honest, simple, true
In my words and actions too . . .
Must remember, God can view
All I think, and all I do.

– Amish school verse

I

She had often dreamed of her little sister floating dead beneath the surface of the ice, but tonight, for the first time, she envisioned Hannah clawing to get out. She could see Hannah's eyes, wide and milky; could feel Hannah's nails scraping. Then, with a start, she woke. It was not winter – it was July. There was no ice beneath her palms, just the tangled sheets of her bed. But once again, there was someone on the other side, fighting to be free.

As the fist in her belly pulled tighter, she bit her bottom lip. Ignoring the pain that rippled and receded, she tiptoed barefoot into the night.

The barn cat yowled when she stepped inside. She was panting by now, her legs shaking like willow twigs. Lowering herself to the hay in the far corner of the calving pen, she drew up her knees. The swollen cows rolled their blue moon eyes in her direction, then turned away quickly, as if they knew better than to bear witness.

She concentrated on the hides of the Holsteins until their black spots shimmered and swam. She sank her teeth into the rolled hem of her nightgown. There was a funnel of pressure, as if she were being turned inside out; and she remembered how she and Hannah used to squeeze through the hole in the barbed wire fence by the creek's edge, pushing and angled, all knees and grunts and elbows, until by some miracle they'd tumble through.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun. And lying on the matted, stained hay between her legs was a baby.

Aaron Fisher rolled over beneath the bright quilt to stare at the clock beside the bed. There had been nothing, no sound to wake him, but after forty-five years of farming and milking, the smallest things could pull him out of sleep: a footfall in the corn, a change in the pattern of the wind, the rasp of a mother's tongue roughing a newborn calf.

He felt the mattress give as Sarah came up on an elbow behind him, the long braid of her hair curling over her shoulder like a seaman's rope. *'Was ist letz?'* What's the matter?

It was not the animals; there was a full month before the first cow was due to deliver. It was not a robber; there was too little noise. He felt his wife's arm slip around him, hugging his back to her front. *'Nix,'* he murmured. Nothing. But he did not know if he was trying to convince Sarah, or himself.

She knew enough to cut the cord that spiraled purple to the baby's belly. Hands shaking, she managed to reach the old scissors that hung on a peg near the pen's door. They were rusty and coated with bits of hay. The cord severed in two thick snips, and then began spurting blood. Horrified, she pressed her fingers to the ends, pinching it shut, wildly looking around for something to tie it off.

She rummaged in the hay and came up with a small length of baling twine, which she quickly tied around the cord. The bleeding slowed, then stopped. Relieved, she sank back on her elbows – and then the newborn started to cry.

She snatched the baby up and rocked it tightly. With her foot, she kicked at the hay, trying to cover the blood with a clean layer. The baby's mouth opened and closed on the cotton of her nightgown, rooting.

She knew what the baby wanted, needed, but she couldn't do it. It would make this real.

So she gave the baby her pinkie finger instead. She let the small, powerful jaws suckle, while she did what she had been taught to do in times of extreme stress; what she had been

doing for months now. ‘Lord,’ she prayed, ‘please make this go away.’

The rustle of chains awakened her. It was still dark out, but the dairy cows’ internal schedule had them rising at their individual stalls, their bags hanging blue-veined and round with milk, like full moons caught between their legs. She was sore and tired, but knew she had to get out of the barn before the men arrived to do the milking. Glancing down, she realized that a miracle had come to pass: the blood-soaked hay was fresh now, except for a small stain beneath her own bottom. And the two things she’d been holding when she fell asleep – the scissors and the newborn – were gone.

She pulled herself to her feet and glanced toward the roof, awed and reverent. ‘*Denke,*’ she whispered, and then she ran out of the barn into the shadows.

Like all other sixteen-year-old Amish boys, Levi Esch no longer attended school. He’d gone through the eighth grade and was now in that limbo between being a child and being old enough to be baptized into the Amish faith. In the interim, he was a hired hand for Aaron Fisher, who no longer had a son to help him work his dairy farm. Levi had gotten the job through the recommendation of his older cousin Samuel, who’d been apprenticing with the Fishers now for five years. And since everyone knew that Samuel was probably going to marry the Fishers’ daughter soon and set up his own farm, it meant Levi would be getting a promotion.

His workday started at 4:00 A.M., as on all other dairy farms. It was still pitch-dark, and Levi could not see Samuel’s buggy approach, but he could hear the faint jingle of tack and traces. He grabbed his flat-brimmed straw hat and ran out the door, then jumped onto the seat beside Samuel.

‘Hi,’ he said breathlessly.

Samuel nodded at him but didn’t turn, didn’t speak.

‘What’s the matter?’ Levi teased. ‘Katie wouldn’t kiss you good-bye last night?’

Samuel scowled and cuffed Levi, sending his hat spinning

into the back of the buggy. 'Why don't you just shut up?' The wind whispered at the ragged edge of the cornfield as they drove on in silence. After a while, Samuel pulled the buggy into the Fishers' front yard. Levi scuffed the toe of his boot into the soft earth and waited for Samuel to put the horse out to pasture before they headed into the barn.

The lights used for milking were powered by a generator, as were the vacuum pumps hooked up to the teats of the cows. Aaron Fisher knelt beside one of the herd, spraying the udders with iodine solution and then wiping them dry with a page ripped from an old phone book. 'Samuel, Levi,' he greeted.

He did not tell them what to do, because by now they already knew. Samuel maneuvered the wheelbarrow beneath a silo and began to mix the feed. Levi shoveled out the manure behind each cow, periodically looking at Samuel and wishing he was already the senior farmhand.

The barn door opened, and Aaron's father ambled in. Elam Fisher lived in the *grossdawdi haus*, a small apartment attached to the main building. Although Elam helped out with the milking, Levi knew the unwritten rules: make sure the old man carried nothing heavy; keep him from taxing himself; and make him believe that Aaron couldn't do without him, although Aaron could have, any day of the week. 'Boys,' Elam boomed, then stopped in his tracks, his nose wrinkled above his long, white beard. 'Why, we've had a calf.'

Puzzled, Aaron stood. 'No. I checked the pen.'

Elam shook his head. 'There's the smell of it, all the same.'

'More like it's Levi, needing a bath,' Samuel joked, emptying a fresh scoop of feed in front of the first cow.

As Samuel passed him with the wheelbarrow, Levi came up swinging and slipped on a slick of manure. He landed on his bottom in the ditch built to catch the refuse and set his jaw at Samuel's burst of laughter.

'Come on now,' Aaron chided, although a grin tugged at his mouth. 'Samuel, leave him be. Levi, I think Sarah left your spare clothes in the tack room.'

Levi scrambled to his feet, his cheeks burning. He walked past Aaron, past the chalkboard with the annotated statistics on the cows due to calve, and turned into the small cubby that housed the blankets and bridles used for the farm's workhorses and mules. Like the rest of the barn, it was neat as a pin. Braided leather reins crossed the wall like spiderwebs, and shelves were stacked with spare horseshoes and jars of liniment.

Levi glanced about but could see no clothing. Then he noticed something bright in the pile of horse blankets. Well, that would make sense. If Sarah Fisher had washed his things, they had probably been done with the other laundry. He lifted the heavy, striped blanket and recognized his spare trousers and jewel green shirt, rolled into a ball. Levi stepped forward, intending to shake it out, and found himself staring down into the tiny, still face of a newborn.

'Aaron!' Levi skidded to a stop, panting. 'Aaron, you've got to come.' He ran toward the tack room. Aaron exchanged a glance with his father, and they both started after the boy, with Samuel trailing.

Levi stood in front of a stool piled high with horse blankets, on top of which rested a sleeping baby wrapped in a boy's shirt. 'I . . . I don't think it's breathing.'

Aaron stepped closer. It had been a long time since he'd been around a baby this small. The soft skin of its face was cold. He knelt and tipped his head, hoping that its breath would fall into the cup of his ear. He flattened his hand against its chest.

Then he turned to Levi. 'Run to the Schuylers and ask to borrow their phone,' he said. 'Call the police.'

'Get out,' Lizzie Munro said to the officer in charge. 'I'm not going to check an unresponsive infant. Send an ambulance.'

'They're already there. They want a detective.'

Lizzie rolled her eyes. Every year that she'd been a detective-sergeant with the East Paradise Township police, the paramedics

seemed to get younger. And more stupid. 'It's a medical call, Frank.'

'Well, something's out of kilter down there.' The lieutenant handed her a slip of paper with an address on it.

'Fisher?' Lizzie read, frowning at the surname and the street. 'They're Amish?'

'Think so.'

Lizzie sighed and grabbed her big black purse and her badge. 'You know this is a waste of time.' In the past, Lizzie had occasionally dealt with Old Order Amish teenagers, who'd gather together in some guy's barn to drink and dance and generally disturb the peace. Once or twice she'd been called to take a statement from an Amish businessman who'd been burglarized. But for the most part, the Amish had little contact with the police. Their community existed unobtrusively within the regular world, like a small air bubble impervious to the fluid around it.

'Just take their statements, and I'll make it up to you.' Frank held the door open for her as she left her office. 'I'll find a nice, fat felony for you to sink your teeth into.'

'Don't do me any favors,' Lizzie said, but she was grinning as she got into her car and headed to the Fisher farm.

The Fishers' front yard was crowded with a squad car, an ambulance, and a buggy. Lizzie walked up to the house and knocked on the front door.

No one answered, but a voice behind Lizzie called out a greeting, the cadences of the woman's dialect softening her consonants. A middle-aged Amish woman wearing a lavender dress and a black apron hurried toward Lizzie. 'I am Sarah Fisher. Can I help you?'

'I'm Detective-Sergeant Lizzie Munro.'

Sarah nodded solemnly and led Lizzie into the barn's tack room, where two paramedics knelt over a baby. Lizzie hunkered down beside one EMT. 'What have you got?'

'Newborn, emphasis on the new. No pulse or respirations

when we got here, and we haven't been able to revive him. One of the farmworkers found him wrapped up in that green shirt, underneath a horse blanket. Can't tell if it was stillborn or not, but someone was trying to hide the body all the same. I think one of your guys is around by the milking stalls, he might be able to tell you more.'

'Wait a second – someone gave birth to this baby, and then tried to conceal it?'

'Yeah. About three hours ago,' the paramedic murmured.

Suddenly the simple medical response call was more complicated than Lizzie had expected, and the most likely suspect was standing four feet away. Lizzie glanced up at Sarah Fisher, who wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. 'The baby . . . it's dead?'

'I'm afraid so, Mrs Fisher.'

Lizzie opened her mouth to ask another question, but was distracted by the distant sound of equipment being moved about. 'What's that?'

'The men, finishing up the milking.'

Lizzie's brows shot up. 'The milking?'

'These things . . .' the woman said quietly. 'They still have to be done.'

Suddenly, Lizzie felt profoundly sorry for her. Life never stopped for death; she should know that better than most. She gentled her voice and put her hand on Mrs Fisher's shoulder, not quite certain what sort of psychological state the woman was in. 'I know this must be very difficult for you, but I'm going to have to ask you some questions about your baby.'

Sarah Fisher raised her eyes to meet Lizzie's. 'It's not my baby,' she said. 'I have no idea where it came from.'

A half hour later, Lizzie leaned down beside the crime scene photographer. 'Stick to the barn. The Amish don't like having their pictures taken.' The man nodded, shooting a roll around the tack room, with several close-ups of the infant's corpse.

At least now she understood why she'd been called down. An unidentified dead infant, an unknown mother who'd abandoned it. And all this smack in the middle of an Amish farm.

She had interviewed the neighbors, a Lutheran couple who swore that they'd never heard so much as raised voices from the Fishers, and who couldn't imagine where the baby might have come from. They had two teenage daughters, one of whom sported a nose and navel ring, who had alibis for the previous night. But they had agreed to undergo gynecological exams to rule themselves out as suspects.

Sarah Fisher, on the other hand, had not.

Lizzie considered this as she stood in the milk room, watching Aaron Fisher empty a small hand tank of milk into a larger one. He was tall and dark, his arms thick with ropes of muscle developed by farming. His beard brushed the second button of his shirt. As he finished, he set down the tank and turned to give Lizzie his full attention.

'My wife was not pregnant, Detective,' Aaron said.

'You're certain?'

'Sarah can't have more children. The doctors made it that way, after she almost died birthing our youngest.'

'Your other children, Mr Fisher – where were they when the baby was found?'

A shadow passed over the man's face, disappearing as quickly as Lizzie had marked it. 'My daughter was asleep, upstairs. My other child . . . is gone.'

'Gone, like down the road to her own home?'

'Dead.'

'This daughter who was asleep is how old?'

'Eighteen.'

At that, Lizzie glanced up. Neither Sarah Fisher nor the paramedics had mentioned that there was another woman of childbearing age who lived on the farm. 'Is it possible that she was pregnant, Mr Fisher?'

The man's face turned so red that Lizzie grew worried. 'She isn't even married.'

‘It’s not a prerequisite, sir.’

Aaron Fisher stared at the detective coldly, clearly. ‘It is for us.’

It seemed to take forever to get through milking all forty cows, and it had nothing to do with the arrival of a second battalion of police officers. Samuel closed the pasture gate after letting out the heifers and walked toward the main house. He should go help Levi sweep out the barn one last time for the morning, but this once it would wait.

He didn’t bother to knock. Just opened the door, as if the home was already his and the young woman inside at the stove also belonged to him. He stopped for a moment, watching the sun grace her profile and gild her honey hair, her movements quick and efficient as she fixed breakfast.

‘Katie,’ Samuel said, stepping inside.

She turned quickly, the spoon flying up in the batter bowl as she started. ‘Oh, Samuel. I wasn’t expecting you yet.’ She peered around his shoulder, as if she might see an army behind him. ‘Mam said I ought to make enough for everyone.’

Samuel walked forward and took the bowl, setting it on the counter. He reached for her hands. ‘You don’t look so good.’

She grimaced. ‘Thanks for the compliment.’

He drew her closer. ‘Are you okay?’

Her eyes, when they met his, were the jewel blue of an ocean he had once seen on the cover of a travel magazine, and – he imagined – just as endlessly deep. They were what had first attracted him to Katie, across a crowded church service. They were what made him believe that, even years from now, he would do anything for this one woman.

She ducked away from him and began to flip the pancakes. ‘You know me,’ she said breathlessly. ‘I get nervous around these *Englischers*.’

‘Not so many. Only a handful of policemen.’ Samuel frowned at her back in concern. ‘They may want to talk to you, though. They seem to want to talk to everyone.’

She set the spatula down and turned slowly. ‘What did they find out there?’

‘Your mother didn’t tell you?’

Katie slowly shook her head, and Samuel hesitated, torn between her trust in him to tell her the truth and the desire to keep her blissfully unaware for as long as possible. He ran his hands through his straw-colored hair, making it stand on end. ‘Well, they found a baby. Dead.’

He saw her eyes widen, those incredible eyes, and then she sank down onto one of the kitchen chairs. ‘Oh,’ she whispered, stunned.

In a moment he was at her side, holding her close and whispering that he would take her away from here, and to heck with the police. He felt her soften against him, and for a moment Samuel was triumphant – after so many days of being rebuffed, to finally come back to this. But Katie stiffened and drew away. ‘I don’t think this is the time,’ she chided. She stood and turned off the stove’s gas burners, then folded her arms across her middle. ‘Samuel, I think I *would* like you to take me somewhere.’

‘Anywhere,’ he promised.

‘I want you to take me to see this baby.’

‘It’s blood,’ the medical examiner confirmed, kneeling in the calving pen in front of a small, dark stain. ‘And placenta. Not a cow’s, from the size of it. Someone had a baby recently.’

‘Stillborn?’

He hesitated. ‘I can’t say without doing the autopsy – but my hunch says no.’

‘So it just . . . died?’

‘I didn’t say that, either.’

Lizzie sat back on her heels. ‘You’re telling me someone intentionally killed this baby?’

The man shrugged. ‘I guess that’s up to you to find out.’

Lizzie calculated quickly in her mind. Given such a small window between the baby’s birth and death, chances were that the perpetrator of the crime was the infant’s mother. ‘What are we talking? Strangulation?’

‘Smothering, more likely. I should have a preliminary autopsy report by tomorrow.’

Lizzie thanked him and wandered away from the scene the patrolmen were now securing. All of a sudden this was no longer an abandonment case, but a potential homicide. There was enough probable cause to get a warrant from a district judge for blood samples, evidence that might point a finger at the woman who had done this.

She stopped walking as the barn door opened. A tall blond man – one of the farm help – stepped into the dim light with a young woman. He nodded at Lizzie. ‘This is Katie Fisher.’

She was lovely, in that sturdy Germanic style that always made Lizzie think of fresh cream and springtime. She wore the traditional garb of the Old Order Amish: a long-sleeved dress, covered by a black apron that fell just below her knees. Her feet were bare and callused – it had always amazed Lizzie to see these Amish youth running down gravel roads without their shoes, but that was how they spent the summer. The girl was also so nervous that Lizzie could nearly smell her fear. ‘I’m glad you’re here, Katie,’ Lizzie said gently. ‘I’ve been looking for you, so that I can ask you some questions.’

At that, Katie moved closer to the blond giant beside her. ‘Katie was asleep last night,’ he said. ‘She didn’t even know what happened until I told her.’

Lizzie tried to gauge the girl’s response, but something had distracted her. She was staring over Lizzie’s shoulder into the tack room, where the medical examiner was supervising the removal of the baby’s body.

Suddenly the girl wrenched away from Samuel and ran out the barn door, with Lizzie chasing her to the farmhouse porch.

As reactions to death went, this was a violent one. Lizzie watched the girl trying to compose herself, and wondered what had prompted it. Had this been any ordinary teen, Lizzie would have taken such behavior as an indication of guilt – but Katie Fisher was Amish, which required her to filter her thoughts. If you were Amish, you could grow up in Lancaster County

without television news broadcasts and R-rated movies, without rape and wife-beating and murder. You could see a dead baby and be honestly, horribly shocked by the sight.

Then again, there had been cases in recent years; teenage mothers who'd hidden their pregnancies and after the birth had tied up the loose ends by getting rid of the newborn. Teenage mothers who were completely unaware of what they'd done. Teenage mothers who came in all shapes, all sizes, all religions.

Katie leaned against a pillar and sobbed into her hands. 'I'm sorry,' the girl said. 'Seeing it – the body – it made me think of my sister.'

'The one who died?'

Katie nodded. 'She drowned when she was seven.'

Lizzie looked toward the fields, a green sea that rippled with the breeze. In the distance, a horse whinnied, and another answered. 'Do you know what happens when you have a baby?' Lizzie asked quietly.

Katie narrowed her eyes. 'I live on a farm.'

'I know. But animals are different from women. And if women do give birth, and don't get medical attention afterward, they may be putting themselves in great danger.' Lizzie hesitated. 'Katie, do you have anything you want to tell me?'

'I didn't have a baby,' Katie answered, looking directly at the detective. 'I didn't.' But Lizzie was staring at the porch floor. There was a small maroon smudge on the painted white planks. And a slow trickle of blood, running down Katie's bare leg.

Ellie

My nightmares were full of children. Specifically, six little girls – two dark-haired, four fair, their knees sticking out beneath the plaid uniform jumper of St Ambrose’s School, their hands twisting in their laps. I watched them all grow up in an instant, you see; at the very moment a jury foreman acquitted my client, the elementary school principal who had molested them.

It was my biggest triumph as a Philadelphia defense attorney; the verdict that put me on the map and had my phone ringing off the hook with calls from other well-bred community icons hoping to dance through the loopholes of the law to keep their own skeletons in their closets. The night after the verdict came back, Stephen took me out to Victor’s Café for a meal so expensive we could have bought a used car instead. He introduced me to the maître d’ as ‘Jeannie Cochran.’ He told me that the two senior partners in his own firm, the most prestigious in the city, had invited me in to have a talk.

‘Stephen,’ I said, amazed, ‘when I interviewed there five years ago, you told me you couldn’t have a relationship with a woman that worked at your firm.’

He shrugged. ‘Five years ago, Ellie,’ he said, ‘things were different.’

He was right. Five years ago, I had still been building my career. Five years ago, I believed that the main beneficiary of an acquittal was my client, rather than myself. Five years ago, I could only dream of an opportunity like the one Stephen was offering in his firm.

I smiled at him. ‘So what time’s the meeting?’

Later, I excused myself to go to the bathroom. An attendant

was there, waiting patiently beside a tray of complimentary makeup and hair spray and perfume. I went into a stall and started to cry – for those six little girls, for the evidence I had successfully suppressed, for the attorney I wanted to be years ago when I first graduated from law school – one so full of principle that I would never have taken this case, much less worked so hard to win it.

I came out and ran the water to wash my hands. I hiked up the silk sleeves of my suit jacket and began to scrub, working lather between my fingers, into my nails. At a tap on my shoulder I turned to see the bathroom attendant handing me a linen towel. Her eyes were hard and dark as chestnuts. ‘Honey,’ she said, ‘some stains ain’t never gonna come clean.’

There was one more child in my nightmares, but I’d never seen its face. This was the baby I hadn’t had, and at the rate things were going, never would. People made fun of biological clocks, but they were inside women like me – although I’d never seen the ticking as a wake-up call, but rather as the prelude to a bomb. Hesitate, hesitate, and then – boom! – you’d blown all your chances.

Did I mention: Stephen and I had lived together for eight years.

The day after the principal of St Ambrose’s was acquitted, he sent me two dozen red roses. Stephen walked into the kitchen as I was stuffing them into the trash.

‘What did you do that for?’

I turned to him slowly. ‘Does it ever bother you? That once you’ve crossed the line, you can’t go back?’

‘Holy Christ, you’re talking like Confucius again. Just say what you mean, Ellie.’

‘I am. I just wanted to know if it gets you. Right here.’ I pointed to my heart, still hurting. ‘Do you ever look at the people sitting across the courtroom, the ones whose lives were ruined by a person you know is guilty as hell?’

Stephen picked up his coffee mug. ‘Someone’s got to defend them. That’s how our legal system works. If you’re such a bleeding heart, go work for the DA.’ He pulled a rose out of the trash can, snapped off its stem, and tucked it behind my ear. ‘You’ve got to get your mind off this. What do you say you and I head out to Rehoboth Beach and bodysurf?’ Leaning closer, he added, ‘Naked.’

‘Sex isn’t a Band-Aid, Stephen.’

He took a step back. ‘Pardon me if I’ve forgotten. It’s been so long.’

‘I don’t want to have this discussion now.’

‘There isn’t one to have, El. I’ve already got a twenty-year-old daughter.’

‘But I don’t.’ The words hung in the air, as delicate and arresting as a soap bubble the instant before it bursts. ‘Look, I can understand why you wouldn’t want to have the vasectomy reversed. But there are other ways—’

‘There aren’t. I’m not going to watch you poring over some sperm donor catalog at night. And I don’t want a social worker going through everything from my tax records to my underwear drawer trying to decide if I’m worthy enough to raise some Chinese kid who was left on a mountaintop to die of exposure—’

‘Stephen, just stop already! You’re out of control!’

To my surprise, he quieted immediately. He sat down, tight-lipped and furious. ‘That was unnecessary,’ he said finally. ‘I mean, Ellie, that really hurt.’

‘What?’

‘What you just said. God – you called me a fucking troll!’

I met his gaze. ‘I said you were *out of control*.’

Stephen blinked, then started to laugh. ‘Out of control – oh, God! I didn’t hear you.’

When was the last time you *did*? I thought, but managed to curb the words before I spoke them.

The law offices of Pfister, Crown and DuPres were located in downtown Philadelphia, sprawled across three floors of a modern

glass-and-steel skyscraper. I spent hours dressing for my appointment with the partners, discarding four suits before I found the one that I believed made me look most confident. I used extra antiperspirant. I drank a cup of decaf, afraid that the real stuff would make my hands tremble. I mentally plotted the route to the building in my mind, and left nearly an hour for travel time, although it was only fifteen miles away.

At exactly eleven o'clock I slid behind the wheel of my Honda. 'Senior partner,' I murmured into the rearview mirror. 'And anything less than \$300,000 a year is unacceptable.' Sliding my sunglasses on, I headed for the highway.

Stephen had left a tape in my car, a mix of what he liked to call his 'kick-ass' music, which he listened to when he was en route to litigations. With a small smile, I pushed it in to play, letting the drums and the backbeat thrum through the car. I turned it up loud, so loud that when I changed lanes precipitously, I could barely hear the angry horn of the pickup I'd cut off.

'Oops,' I murmured, flexing my hands on the steering wheel. Almost immediately, it jumped beneath my touch. I gripped it harder, but that only seemed to make the car buck like a mustang. A clear stream of fear pooled from my throat to my stomach, the quick panic that comes when you realize something has gone terribly wrong, something that it is simply too late to fix. In my rearview mirror I saw the truck looming closer, honking furiously, as my car gave a great shudder and stopped dead in the middle of sixty-mile-per-hour traffic.

I closed my eyes, bracing for a crash that never came.

I was still trembling thirty minutes later as I stood beside Bob, the namesake of Bob's Auto Service, while he tried to explain what had happened to my car. 'Basically, it melted,' he said, wiping his hands on his coveralls. 'The oil pan cracked, the engine seized, and the internal parts glommed together.'

'Glommed together,' I repeated slowly. 'So how do you separate them?'

‘You don’t. You buy a new engine. You’re talking five or six thousand.’

‘Five or six—’ The mechanic started to walk away from me. ‘Hey! What am I supposed to do until then?’

Bob glanced at my suit, my briefcase, my heels. ‘Get a pair of Reeboks.’

A telephone began to ring. ‘Shouldn’t you get that?’ the mechanic asked, and I realized the sound was coming from the depths of my own briefcase. I groaned at the recollection of my appointment at the law office. I was already fifteen minutes late.

‘Where the hell are you?’ Stephen barked when I answered the phone.

‘My car died. On the middle of the highway. In front of an oncoming truck.’

‘For Christ’s sake, Ellie, that’s why there are taxis!’

I was shocked silent. No ‘My God, are you all right?’ No ‘Do you need me to come help you?’ I watched Bob shake his head over the twisted intestines of what used to be my engine and felt a strange peace settle over me. ‘I’m not going to be able to make it today,’ I said.

Stephen let out a deep sigh. ‘Well, I suppose I could convince John and Stanley to reschedule. Let me call you right back.’

The line went dead in my hand. Absentmindedly I clicked it off, and then stepped up to my car again. ‘The good news,’ Bob said, ‘is that after you replace the engine, you pretty much have a brand-new car.’

‘I liked my old car.’

He shrugged. ‘Then pretend it’s your old car. With a brand-new heart.’

I suddenly saw the truck that had been behind me on the highway, swerving and beeping; the other cars that had parted around mine, a stone in a river. I smelled the hot, rippling asphalt that sank beneath my heels as I tiptoed, shaky, across the highway. I was not one to believe in fate, but this had been too close a call, too sure a sign; as if I literally needed to be stopped short before I realized that I’d been running in the wrong

direction. After my car had broken down I had called the state police and several service stations, but I had never thought to call Stephen. Somehow, I had known that if I needed to be rescued, I was going to have to do it myself.

The telephone began to ring again. ‘Good news,’ Stephen said before I’d even given a greeting. ‘The Big Guys are willing to see you today at six o’clock.’

That was the moment I knew I would be leaving.

Stephen helped me load my things into the back of my car. ‘I completely understand,’ he said, although he didn’t. ‘You want to take some time off before choosing your next big case.’

I wanted to take some time off before choosing whether I ever wanted to take another case, period, but that was beyond Stephen’s realm of belief. You didn’t go to law school and make *Law Review* and work in the trenches to land the trial of a lifetime, only to question your own career choice. But on another level, Stephen couldn’t accept that I might be moving away for good. I knew this because I felt the same way. In our eight years together we had not married, but we hadn’t separated, either.

‘You’ll call me when you get there?’ Stephen asked, but before I could answer, he kissed me. Our lips separated like a seam being ripped, and then I got into the car and drove away.

I suppose other women in my position – by this I mean heart-broken, at odds, and recently given a large sum of money – might have chosen a different destination. Grand Cayman, Paris, even a soul-searching hike through the Rockies. For me, there was never any question that if I wanted to lick my wounds, I would wind up in Paradise, Pennsylvania. As a child, I’d spent a week there every summer. My great-uncle had a farm there and progressively sold off lots and parcels of land until he died, at which point his son Frank moved into the big house, planted grass where the field corn had been, and opened a woodworking shop. Frank was my father’s age, and had been married to Leda long before I was ever born.

I couldn't begin to tell you what I did during those summers in Paradise, but what stayed with me all those years was the calm that pervaded their home, and the smooth efficiency with which things were accomplished. At first, I'd thought it was because Leda and Frank had never had children of their own. Later, I came to understand it was something in Leda herself, something tied to the fact that she had grown up Amish.

You could not summer in Paradise and not come in contact with the Old Order Amish, who were such an intrinsic part of the Lancaster area. The Plain people, as they called themselves, clipped along in their buggies in the thick of automobile traffic; they stood in line at the grocery store in their old-fashioned clothing; they smiled shyly from behind their farm stands where we went to buy fresh vegetables. That was, in fact, how I learned about Leda's past. We were waiting to buy armfuls of sweet corn when Leda struck up a conversation – in Pennsylvania Dutch! – with the woman who was making the sale. I was eleven, and hearing Leda – as American as me – slip into the Germanic dialect was enough to astound me. But then Leda handed me a ten-dollar bill. 'Give this to the lady, Ellie,' she said, even though she was standing right there and could have done it herself.

On the drive home, Leda explained that she had been Plain until she married Frank – who wasn't Plain. By the rules of her religion, she was put under the *bann* – restricted from certain social contact with people who were still Amish. She could talk to Amish friends and family, but couldn't eat at the same table with them. She could sit beside them on the bus, but not offer them a ride in her car. She could buy from them, but needed a third party – me – to transact the sale.

Her parents, her sisters and brothers – they lived less than ten miles away.

'Are you allowed to go see them?' I'd asked.

'Yes, but I hardly ever do,' Leda told me. 'You'll understand one day, Ellie. I'm not keeping my distance because it's

uncomfortable for me. I'm keeping my distance because it's uncomfortable for them.'

Leda was waiting when the train pulled into the Strasburg railroad station. As I stepped off, carrying my two bags, she held out her arms. 'Ellie, Ellie,' she sang. She smelled of oranges and Windex; her wide shoulder was the perfect place to rest my head. I was thirty-nine years old, but in Leda's embrace, I was eleven again.

She led me toward the small parking lot. 'You going to tell me what's the matter now?'

'Nothing's the matter. I just wanted to visit you.'

Leda snorted. 'The only time you come to visit is when you're about to have a nervous breakdown. Did something happen with Stephen?' When I didn't answer, she narrowed her eyes. 'Or maybe nothing happened with Stephen – and that's the problem?'

I sighed. 'It's not Stephen. I finished a very trying case, and . . . well, I needed to relax.'

'But you won the case. I saw it on the news.'

'Yeah, well, winning isn't everything.'

To my surprise, she didn't say anything in response. I fell asleep as soon as Leda pulled onto the highway, and woke with a start when she pulled into her driveway. 'I'm sorry,' I said, embarrassed. 'I didn't mean to conk out like that.'

Leda smiled and patted my hand. 'You spend as much time as you need to relaxing here.'

'Oh, it won't be for long.' I took my bags from the backseat and hurried up the porch steps behind Leda.

'Well, we're glad to have you, for two nights or two dozen.' She cocked her head. 'Phone's ringing,' she said, pushing open the door and rushing in to pick up the receiver. 'Hello?'

I set down my suitcases and stretched to work out the kinks in my back. Leda's kitchen was neat as a pin, just like always, and looked exactly the way I had remembered: the stitched sampler on the wall, the cookie jar in the shape of a pig, the

black and white squares of linoleum. Closing my eyes, it was easy to pretend I'd never left here, to believe that the most difficult choice I'd have to make that day was whether to curl up in an Adirondack chair out back or on the creaky swing on the screened porch. Across the kitchen, Leda was clearly surprised to hear the voice of whoever it was that had called. 'Sarah, Sarah, sssh,' she soothed. '*Was ist letz?*' I could only make out small snippets of unfamiliar words: *an Kind . . . er hat an Kind gfuna . . . es Kind va dodt*. Sinking down on a counter stool, I waited for Leda to finish the call.

When she hung up, her hand remained on the receiver for a long moment. Then she turned to me, pale and shaken. 'Ellie, I am so sorry, but I have to go somewhere.'

'Do you need me—'

'You stay here,' Leda insisted. 'You're here to rest.'

I watched her pull away in her car. Whatever the problem was, Leda would fix it. She always did. Putting my feet up on a second stool, I smiled. I'd been in Paradise for fifteen minutes, and I felt better already.