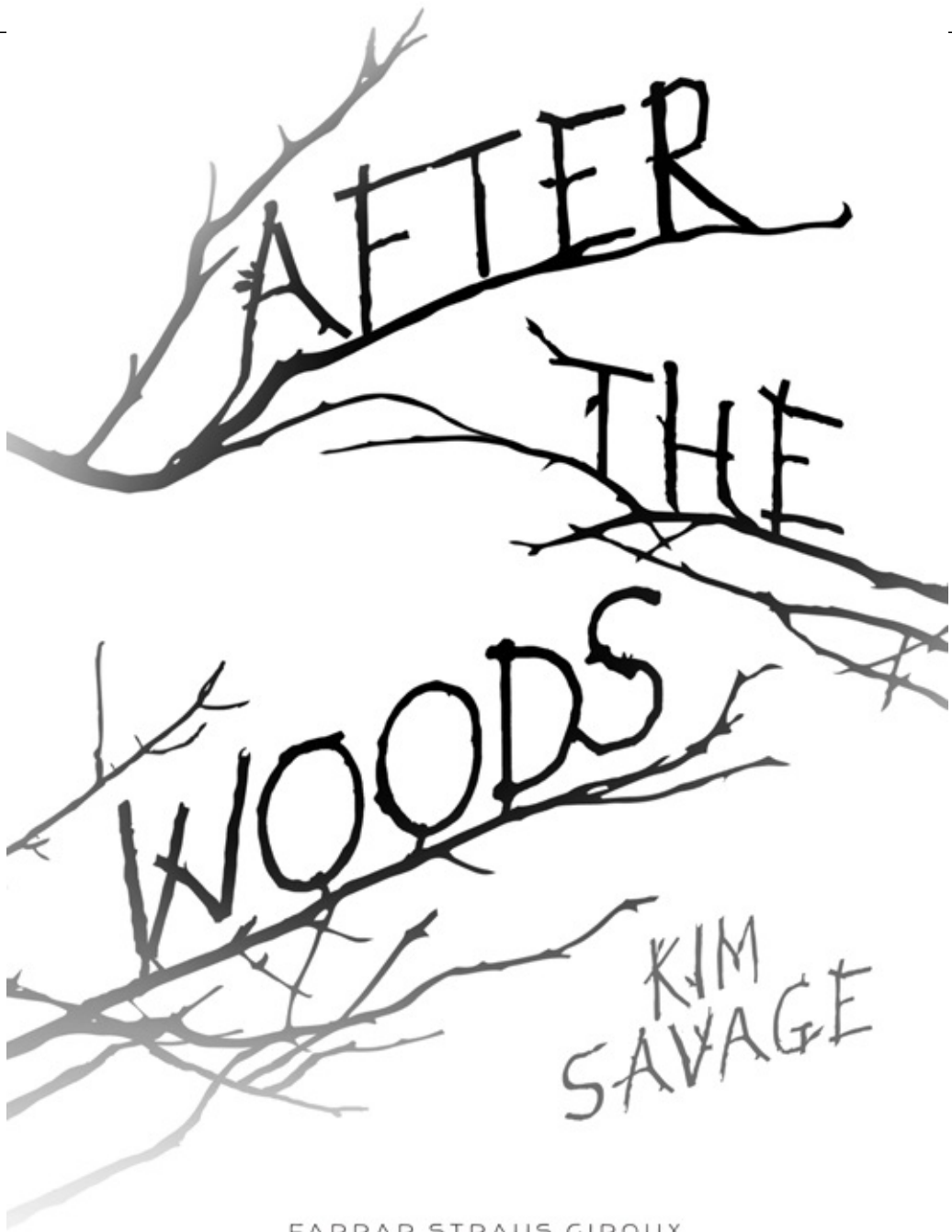


# AFTER THE WOODS

KIM SAVAGE





AFTER  
THE  
WOODS

KIM  
SAVAGE

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX  
NEW YORK

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*For Jackson, whose quiet bravery never makes headlines*

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*Keep her down, boiling water.  
Keep her down, what a lovely daughter.*

—“Seether” by Veruca Salt

*Truth has rough flavors if we bite it through.*

—George Eliot

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# PROLOGUE

November 22, 2013  
In the Woods

How can something so bright be so cold?

There's no use sharing my ironic observances about the sun. Liv's been barely responsive today, a aimless energy and distraction. I didn't want to run in the woods, but she insisted. Leaves crunch under my sneakers. A tingle in my earlobes warns of pain to come. We'll run like jackrabbits, like banshees, like Diana through the trees, with only an hour left of light.

Liv will. I'll do my best to keep up.

I finish my last quad stretch and find her staring at the trailhead. "We're losing light. Maybe we should bag it," I suggest.

Liv throws back her shoulders. "I need you with me."

"Of course. I'd never let you go alone." I bend at the waist and yank my laces tight, clumsy gloves. "Aren't you going to warm up? Oh right: you don't need to." I say it softly, tucking the envy behind a gentle chide.

"Have you ever felt like your heart is swollen inside your chest?" she asks.

I rise fast. "You *are* into him! You said it was just a party hook-up!" I exclaim.

"I'm not talking about Kellan MacDougall." The low curves of her cheeks flush. "What I mean is did you ever feel like you were on the brink of something?"

I follow her eyes past the poker-burned entrance sign, past the kiosk with maps under glass. Despite the desolation—no one runs at four p.m. in November after weeks of rain—the woods pulse. The canopy shatters fast-dropping light into glittering shards. A chipmunk skitters close to my foot and ducks into a hole. I know what Liv means. All day, I've felt a fullness, as though there's something waiting for me, today, tomorrow, soon. I start to say this but my words are lost to geese barking overhead.

Liv shakes off her trance. "We should go," she says, as she leaps up the railroad-tie steps like a deer, flashing pale calves. Speed is easy for her. We come to a puddle buzzing with damselflies and thick with icy rot. Liv jumps over and keeps going. The cold slows me, and I call for her to wait. Liv tosses a grin over her shoulder, the smile that forms her cheek into a shiny rubber ball. She's about to leave me. While I fight to match my breathing with my pace, Liv goes from zero to ten with no effort. We meet another pocket of water. Leap over, dig deep, keep going. She sprints ahead of me as I track her powder-blue jacket, leaves crackling in her wake. We're supposed to stay together. It's the only way my mother allows me to run in the woods, with its overgrowth and lonely trails winding across town lines and Indian ruins. But we run on, longer and farther than we should. I fight to catch up, and

get faster. Liv makes me faster.

Before the flat Sheepfold lies the Hill, a lump of stone and shrub covered by gravel. Today, the gravel will be frozen in the earth, making an ankle-turning hobnailed path. I'm about to call out, tell her to stop, but she breaks into a full-on sprint. I dig in, watch my footing, hop, and weave. My phone falls from my jacket pocket and lands with an ominous clap.

"Wait!" I call to Liv.

I squat. My quadriceps tingle and itch. "Got it!" I raise the phone to my nose; the earbuds dangle. A spiderweb of cracks spreads across the screen. I'm screwed. We need to go home. I wrap the cord around the phone and stash it away in my jacket. No way of avoiding the Hill. I throw my weight forward, and drive myself up, up, up, mounting the crest.

"Liv!"

Sunlight flashes between trees and blinds me. I blink through the pain until I see the man on top of the Hill. Liv. She writhes, kicking up gravel and leaves. The man shifts his weight rhythmically to keep himself pinned.

Liv is screaming.

I am screaming.

"Let her go!" My voice is strangled.

His eyes are red-streaked aggies.

"Who are you?" he bellows. He braces Liv with his forearm and reaches up his pant leg. Metal glints near his hand.

I scream, an animal sound.

He holds a knife at Liv's throat, eyes darting between us, but lingering on Liv. When she squirms, he pulls the knife away from her neck.

"Walk away and forget what you saw! Now, or her blood's on your hands!" His pitch wavers.

I shake my head slowly.

"I'll end her life, right here!"

I don't believe him.

He has a baby face and his head is small for his body. A slice of forehead, pink and smooth, peeks from under a black knit cap, and the buckles on his camouflage jacket clang as he fights to keep Liv from escaping.

Liv sobs. "Julia, please don't leave me!"

I feel my front pocket for my phone, the phone we take turns carrying in case someone gets hurt and we need help. Then I remember: my phone is cracked.

She's been my best friend since she gave me her cherry cola ChapStick in the sixth grade.

If I grab the scruff of his jacket and yank, I might move him, a little, maybe. Just enough so Liv can roll and run. We can run.

I step closer. A light flickers in his eyes. Greedy. He wants us both, but he can't hold two of us. He imagines we'll fight.

Liv's eyes flit over my face. Pleading.

ChapStick.



I rush him.

My fingertips graze his jacket as a glove clamps down on my ankle. I fall. My ankle snaps. The pain fills every space in my body. I hear someone howling. Me.

I turn my head. The view is different from the forest floor.

Liv rolls and scrambles to her feet. Liv is a powder-blue smudge, running and falling and running until the crashing fades.

The man stands over me, smiling. He has small teeth like a child.

“You’ll do.”

---

# ONE

## 353 Days After the Woods

Statistically speaking, girls like me don't come back when guys like Donald Jessup take us.

According to my research, in 88.5% of all abductions, the kid is killed within the first four hours. In 76% of those cases, it's within the first two hours. So when they found me alive after nearly two days, the reporters called it a miracle.

They liked it even better when they found out Donald Jessup didn't want me at first. He wanted Liv. But I took her place. Not only did they have a miracle, they had a martyr. In the eleven months since the abduction, more than half of the *Shiverton Star's* stories (so, thirty-two of them) have been about us. And Paula Papademetriou, who lives right here in Shiverton and anchors the evening WFYR News, still won't leave us alone.

Liv says we must move on.

It had rained a lot that November, and everyone's basement got water, and the high school gym flooded. The track warped in places where the water underneath forced it up, so the track team had to run in a pack all over town. Off hours and against coaches' rules, we trained in the woods.

I think Liv reminded Donald Jessup of a deer, all knees and angles and big brown eyes. In his sick mind he thought he was the Greek hunter-god Zagreus, his avatar in *Prey*, which he played 24/7 in his mother's house. *Zagreus* is the ancient Greek word for a hunter. My theory is Donald Jessup couldn't get enough of virtual *Prey* and decided to bring the action to life.

Liv doesn't let on that she used to be a bit of a gamer. Liv would never cop to knowing more about *Prey* than I do. It doesn't fit the perfect-girl image, the maintenance of which is her mother Deborah's full-time job. What little I know about *Prey* comes from my research—research that Liv wants me to stop. If Liv had her way, I'd have spent the last eleven months forgetting the woods ever happened.

Dr. Ricker, on the other hand, wants me to remember. Ricker is my new therapist, for better or for worse. The jury's still out on that one. Mom secured my first appointment the day we got home from the Berkshires. The trip started out as "a little time off" and lasted through the second half of my sophomore year and the whole summer. I felt like one of those nervous Victorian ladies hustled by my mother to the English countryside for a rest cure. Less than a week after the woods, and as soon as the cops gave us permission, Professor Mom announced a sabbatical, pulled me out of school, and closed up the house. We hightailed it out of Shiverton in time for Thanksgiving for two at the vacation home I hadn't seen since I was nine due to Mom's workaholic tendencies. Mom said holing up 135 miles away from Shiverton would allow the media frenzy to die down. Also, it would give me time to get myself together: stop melting down at the sight of trees and such (for the record, Western Mass was the last place I should have been. So. Many. Trees.). But clearly it was a reflexive act. She was verging

on a breakdown of her own, and needed to feel I was safe. After a while, between the homeschooling and our mutual lack of any friends, I actually looked forward to my visits with Patty Petty, RN, M.Ed., CSW. Dr. Petty (Call me Patty!) was supposed to cleanse me of the trauma that I don't totally remember. Her expertise is expressive arts therapy, which involved staging interpretative dances of my feelings about Donald Jessup (I refused). We mostly ended up making masks out of paper and chicken wire, and drawing in what she called my art journal. I went along with it, mainly because Mom, in a weak moment during one of my crying jags, gave me her word this would be the extent of my therapy. But her word is weak. Because here I sit, as I have for all of September and October, on Elaine Ricker's cliché of a couch, deciding how to screw with today's template for Fixing Julia.

At least Patty Petty didn't make me play with dolls. "Seriously?" I groan as Ricker reaches for the basket under her desk.

Ricker is convinced Donald Jessup did something to me that I can't talk about, so I'm supposed to show her. That's where the anatomically correct dolls come in.

The basket rests on her lap. There are girl dolls and boy dolls.

"I know this is an unorthodox approach for someone your age. But I'm asking you to be open-minded," Ricker says.

"Open-minded means willing to play with dolls?" I ask.

"Uncovering lost memories is key to developing a plan for treatment. It may take a long time, and it may be painful. This is a marathon, not a race."

I want to ask if she's ever met a cliché she didn't like. But I stuff it, deep into my bowels, feeding the thing I think of as the black in my belly. I don't want to rouse the black because I actually like Ricker, with her glossy bangs, funky glasses, and big man hands. But that's not for her to know.

Best simply to remind her who's in charge.

"So I've been thinking about Newton's Third Law. Of Motion. You know: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," I say.

Ricker tucks the basket under her desk. "You can't touch without being touched."

"Exactly. Here's the thing. Two people, call them X and Y, are pushed by another person. Call him ... D. No wait: call him Z." I smile and continue. "We'll call the push 'force A.' If person Z exerts force A on persons X and Y, then persons X and Y exert an equal and opposite force A back on person Z.  $A_{xz} = -A_{zx}$ . And,  $A_{yz} = -A_{zy}$ . You get pushed, you push back. Follow me?"

Her mouth parts, then shuts.

"Cool. So according to Newton's Third Law, how can Person Y not exert an equal and opposite reaction?" I say.

"You cannot compare individual responses to trauma," Ricker says.

"Work with me here."

She exhales through her nose. "Y wasn't pushed with the same force as X."

I sigh, throwing my boots up on the couch. "If you're more comfortable with dolls..."

"Let me be clearer then. Only one of you was abducted."

"A psychopath dropped into our lives. Mine and Liv's. It was worse for me, I get that. But is it healthy to just go on, with no questions? *Que sera, sera?*"

“There is no useful outcome for comparing your recovery to Olivia Lapin’s.”

“I’m not talking about recovery. I’m talking about basic, everyday behavior.”

Ricker scans her desk and settles on a small legal pad and a pencil. Her mouth twists as she scribbles for a second, then two.

I lean over my knees. “Are you sure that’s how you spell ‘*que sera, sera*’?”

I am a monster. She is trying to help me, and is probably the only person who can. Gosh knows I have a better chance talking with her than by mask making with Patty Petty, with her silver ponytail and turquoise and Wellies that smelled of manure.

“The most important thing to remember is that when an evil act is committed, the shame belongs to the perpetrator. Donald Jessup’s shame is not your shame—”

“And my strength is my survival. I covered that with Patty Petty,” I interrupt.

Ricker folds her swishy pant legs and leans back until her chair creaks. Dramatic leg swoops signal a change in tactic.

“It might help our progress to put a name on what you’re experiencing. The clinical term is post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.”

“That happens to me every month. I bloat and break out. One word: Motrin.”

Ricker doesn’t blink. “When a person experiences a physical threat, and the person’s response involves intense fear, helplessness, or horror, certain side effects can result for that person. I’d like to explore if you’re experiencing any of these side effects,” she says calmly.

“As a person?”

Her face is blank.

“Just checking.”

“Sometimes, the traumatic event is re-experienced over and over, in the form of dreams, or during the day, as intrusive thoughts. Do you have thoughts, Julia?”

“Never. I never think,” I say, grinning.

“Another feature is avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma.”

*Liv thinks I have the opposite problem.*

“Julia?”

“Still here. Not thinking.”

“Perhaps it would help if I gave you a specific example. Because the abduction happened during track practice, you might avoid running.”

“I still run. Like a madwoman. Like someone’s chasing me. Doh, bad joke. And in case you’re keeping count in your little notebook of the PTSD markers that I don’t have, that’s like the tenth negative.”

The cell phone on her desk buzzes.

“Restricted range of effect? That means you’re unable to have loving feelings where they previously existed,” Ricker says.

“Are you going to pick up? It might be one of your kids.”

She holds my eyes and turns the phone facedown. “Are you having difficulty feeling affection, Julia?”

“I’m as loving as ever. Ask my mother. You, I’m not so sure about, seeing as your kid might have an emergency and you’re not answering your phone.”

She pretends to write words, but draws small squares. “Irritability? Outbursts of anger?”

“Zen as ever. Ask my therapist.”

She blinks at the phone.

“Maybe I’m projecting my own experience, but you are freaking me out by not answering the phone. Answer it. Seriously. I don’t care.”

“Normally I would never allow an interruption on our time. But that was my emergency ringtone promise this will only take a second.”

“I won’t tell,” I stage-whisper.

Ricker says a deep hello, pressing the curve of her hand into her top lip as she listens. She sets the phone down and stares at it for a second.

“I was just yanking your chain about your daughter. Is everything okay?” I ask.

She smiles tightly at her lap, and when she looks up, she’s the composed Ricker again. “I apologize. Where were we? Oh yes. We know for sure that you have the final symptom: inability to recall aspects of the trauma. That said, I’d like to hypnotize you.”

“Whoa! What?”

“It will be like falling asleep. When you’re fully under, I’ll regress you to those lost moments.”

“Can’t we just wait for my memories to return?”

“It doesn’t always work that way. Repressed memories can stay repressed for a lifetime. They’re not like seeds. Shoots won’t rise from the ground without some nurturing,” she says.

“I’m not so sure of that. Ever hear of the yellow tansy? It’s the worst invasive plant in North America, and it grows better when ignored. Pretty, fragrant, and totally poisonous.”

“Once we understand the past, we can move forward.”

My master plan—to humor Man Hands while secretly rejecting her textbook dogma—suddenly seems wrongheaded. If she wants to understand what happened in the woods, we’re on the same page.

“I’m all for understanding,” I say.

The secretary’s light tap at the door signals Ricker’s next appointment is waiting. I lean across the couch, reaching for my bag on the floor.

“Julia,” Ricker says suddenly. “The reporters. They’ll be back.”

I sit up slowly, frowning. “Why would you say that?”

“Slow news cycle.” Ricker rushes over her words. “Or they might try to make a big deal out of the one-year anniversary. It’s less than two weeks away.”

“I’m aware.”

“You need to be prepared to reject them completely.”

“You make it sound as if I actually like the attention.”

“I simply want to be clear about where you should put your energy in the days ahead. The media is in the business of selling stories. Our business is healing you.”

I consider pointing out that, unlike the media, not one of the persons supposedly concerned with my healing has used the word *brave* to describe what I did. As in, *Brave Teen Saves Friend, Brave Girl*

*Fights Off Predator, or Lucky Teen Escapes Attacker Because of Brave Friend.* Nor do they take advantage of the delightful wordplay my name affords: *Meet Julia Spunk, a teen whose name suits her perfectly.*

“If your business is healing me, then isn’t it in your interest that I stay broken?”

“Maybe I’m not being clear. I’m advising your mother that you should stay away from all press.”

Deep in my belly, the black thing shifts. “I can handle it,” I insist.

“When it comes to the press, it’s your mother’s job to handle it. I know it’s hard to hear this, but the work we have to do is here, in this room.” She sits back and sweeps her hand in front of her head—“Here”—and her chest—“And here.”

She’s losing my favor fast. I roll my eyes so hard I see stars. “We’re done, right?”

Ricker nods, tucking her lips. I scramble off the couch and yank my cuff down to cover the metal doorknob, one of many tricks for never being cold again. The door opens and there is Mom, a shudder through her springy, dark curls.

“I apologize! It was me knocking,” she calls to Ricker, then leans in and says in her shrink-shout undertone: “I need a few minutes to catch up with Dr. Ricker, and I wanted to make sure she had time for me before her next appointment.”

“Sorry I used every minute. I won’t do it again,” I say.

Her smile falls. “You can’t think I minded.”

“I didn’t. I was teasing.”

“Oh!” She reaches to smooth my hair, then stops. “I won’t be long.”

I watch Mom slide through the door, a sliver of a woman, birdlike, with a small head and hollow bones. I take over her chair, feeling ungainly, stretch my legs, and scan the room, daring someone to say something. A fat kid with emo hair and a mole on his cheek points his phone at my head and takes a photo.

“For real? I’m right here!” I lean over my knees. “I. Can. See. You.”

He jams the phone into his jacket and rises, shuffling over to a receptionist talking into a headset. He begs her for the men’s room key, which she shoves through a glass arch. The last thing I need is this loser posting my photo for his pals to ogle. I trail him into the bathroom and kick open the door.

“Give me your phone.”

“This is the men’s room, freak!”

The black thing in my belly flicks. “Give it or I’ll send that mole to the other side of your face.”

“Here.” He holds it up. “Look, I’m deleting it.”

I swipe the phone from his doughy hand and pitch it over the stall wall. His eyes widen at the porcelain clatter, followed by a plop.

“What the...?”

I harden my gut. “Now it’s deleted.”

His mouth opens and shuts soundlessly. Finally, he stalks into the stall, reappearing with his dripping phone. “What do you even care if I send your picture to a couple of my friends?” He pulls paper towels from the holder on the wall. “It’s not like your face isn’t going to be back all over the

news by the end of the day.”

I remember Ricker’s weird warnings. What are she and this dork talking about? I squint at him.

He wraps his phone inside a mealy towel wad, shaking his head. “Who would ever guess that person, you’d be such a bitch?”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, if anything, I’d expect you’d be super happy. Grateful, even.”

“Grateful?” I hiss, my breath hot behind my teeth. “That’s rich.”

“Yeah, grateful. Most people would feel lucky they got out alive.”

I snort, an ugly noise that echoes off the stalls and lingers. “Thank you so much for putting everything into perspective for me, Moleman. What am I even seeing Elaine Ricker for? I could just come see you! But here’s the thing.” I poke his soft shoulder. “Dr. Ricker isn’t a fan of her patients showing up on the Internet. Pictures of them at her office and whatnot. It’s a violation of patient confidentiality. I wonder how she’ll take your little transgression. Drop you as a client, I imagine.”

He jabs his sausage finger in the air at me. “Oh man. Now I get it.”

“Sorry, too harsh? You prefer your abductees with cream and sugar?”

“You haven’t seen the news, have you?”

“I’ve *been* the news, Dough Boy. And I can tell you, it sucks. So no, I don’t watch much of it these days.”

The mole slides toward his ear in a sickening grin. “Then you don’t know about the body.”

\* \* \*

The video is at the top of the WFYT Web site. I tap Play on my phone’s touchscreen. Hometown gal slash-glamorous ladyanchor Paula Papademetriou ticks her voice down a notch, the way she does when she’s talking about Nor’easters, school shootings, and Liv and me: “A couple out walking the dog early this morning stumbled upon a body police believe to be eighteen-year-old Ana Alvarez, who went missing while jogging in the Sheepfold section of the Middlesex Fells Reservation in August of last year. Many are wondering about the involvement of a man arrested for an attack on two local girls in these same woods nearly one year ago.”

The cold and nausea come at once, like they sometimes do, and prickles erupt on my chest. I jam my phone deep in my pocket and take the back stairs one floor up, duck into the women’s room, and lock the door. I tug my cuffs down before pressing my palms against the chilly walls, and sway over the toilet, willing the black, or lunch, or anything to expel itself so I will feel better. Nothing comes.

*Get ahold of yourself, Julia. A body in the woods is just another fact.*

To normal people, researching facts about abductions, and then your own abduction, labels you a kind of morbid. But research soothes me. The methodical ordering of gathered facts is a beautiful thing, especially when I order them in ways that make me feel safe. If I put my hand over my head while I reread the facts I’ve collected in my Mead wide-ruled black marble composition notebook, my heart beats slower. I sway out of the bathroom and down the stairs, leaning outside Ricker’s waiting room. I slide down the wall. The carpet smells of cleaning chemicals and mud from shoes, but it’s not a totally unpleasant spot to sit. “You are good,” I whisper to myself, rubbing my knuckles across my

chest with one hand and feeling through my messenger bag with the other. I touch my notebook's hard taped spine, then a pencil. On a clean page, I draw a circle. Next to it, I draw a second overlapping circle of equal size.

My shoulders fall. I bury my head in the notebook, ignoring passing shins and murmurs.

In the first circle, I write JULIA. In the second circle, I write LIV.

The seed shape in the middle stares back at me, no longer a seed, but the pupil of a cat's eye. I draw a third circle above the first two, overlapping. It bisects the cat's eye. Inside the third circle, I write BODY. The three of us share a space, the bisected cat's eye, and it is small, but there's still room to write.

I wriggle my hand into my pocket for my phone and click on Paula Papademetriou's live feed. I'm too impatient to listen to her, though her perfect aubergine lipstick transfixes me for a second. Besides, I'm a faster reader than listener. In the transcribed story below, I scan for the word *pit*, but it's not there. In Ionian Greek, the word *zagre* means a "pit for the capture of live animals." The important word here is *live*. You can debate back and forth whether it's better to be killed or kept, but either way, a body popping up in the Sheepfold means old Zagreus was tweaking the mythology.

Liv is alive. I am alive. The body is irrelevant, Liv would say.

At the bottom of the page, I write PROBABILITY.

The probability of Liv and me stumbling across a deranged maniac in the woods was low: 1 out of 347,000. And stranger abductions are the most improbable, at 24% of all abductions, versus 49% by family members and 27% by acquaintances. So Liv's right when she insists what happened in the woods was a fluke, just a forgettable, little thing.

But if Paula Papademetriou is right, and Donald Jessup killed before? That makes us part of a bigger thing.

After PROBABILITY, I add a question mark.



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# TWO

## 354 Days After the Woods

I am disappointing naked.

Since the woods, kids stare at my naked body parts, hoping to spot scars that will reveal the thing Donald Jessup did to me. In gym, they stare at my arms and legs. I imagine it's a letdown that the marks aren't visible. But the real reason I prefer to dress in Sherpa layers is what I call cold avoidance. For me, cold—the kind that slips down your collar and swirls down your spine like a frost helix—is unstoppable. It sends me right back to the woods, and that can be inconvenient during, well, everything. In my first ten weeks back at school, I've concocted some excellent excuses to avoid changing into my standard-issue gym shorts and tee. Today, Ms. Dean isn't having it, possibly because today's excuse, Kuru disease, is found only among cannibals in remote New Guinea.

Liv warned me that my crazy clothes only fuel the gossip. Gossip, I will add, that doesn't seem to plague Liv. You'd think she'd get her share of stares, though I guess because she never took a break from school, and maybe because she wasn't *actually abducted*, she never generated my brand of buzz.

Lucky for me, something else has everyone's attention.

A bustle near the bleachers. Kellan MacDougall is getting shoved by his hockey pals into a pretentious freshman. He shoves them back. The girl giggles, knuckles pressed against her upper lip. Kellan barely makes eye contact with her, twisting the toe of his sneaker like he's grinding something into the parquet. She puffs her chest and tips her chin, spilling flat-ironed hair down her back. Her cheeks are the color of a pink apple. Kellan's a player; he even hooked up with Liv at a party the weekend before the woods, then never spoke to her again. It had to be awkward for him when his detective dad was assigned our case.

Kellan spies me as I end my walk to the door marked GIRLS. I hold his stare, making my eyes vacant. Apple Face follows his gaze, her eyes lashed. He's probably thinking we have some connection because his dad captured my abductor. Those days were smeary. I didn't deny myself his off the morphine pump meant for my ankle. By the time my head cleared, I was settled in my ivory tower on Mount Greylock, and Detective MacDougall had made his career by locking up Donald Jessup. I wonder how he felt when Donald Jessup killed himself by swallowing a pen spring in jail.

I lean my shoulder against the door with the GIRLS sign. GIRLS are flouncing creatures with satiny bows in their hair who circle maypoles and use their eyelashes to charm—a luxury for people who assume other people won't hurt them. I have let my charm shrivel. GIRLS are weightless, without black things in their bellies that coil and spring. Apple Face is a GIRL. Somehow, Liv is still a GIRL.

The door moves beneath my shoulder. I fall into Liv, pulling the door open from inside.

"I've been looking for you!" she says, stepping back and tugging her shirt down over her flat belly.

“Just giving the fans something to stare at,” I say, righting myself.

“You skipped lunch.”

“Not exactly. I had a strategically timed guidance office appointment—cum—wellness check-in.”

Liv smiles. “I’m familiar. But you’re going to have to face lunch someday. Like, tomorrow.” She parts a pack of wispy, wan girls—friends of my next-door neighbor, Alice Mincus—and stakes out a corner. They change clothes and tie their sneakers fast. I try to decide if it’s Liv they’re intimidated by or my weird factor, but Liv seems not to notice either way. When the last few scatter, she circles the locker room, yanking back shower curtains and checking under stalls. I watch, mystified. Liv usually pooh-poohs my paranoia, but here she is, feeding it. It’s like a minivindication. Satisfied there are no spies, she turns to me.

“They found a dead girl in the woods,” she says.

“I know. My mother told me last night.” After Moleman did. But no sense mentioning that.

“You knew? Why didn’t you call me?”

“I figured your mom talked to you about it.” As soon as it comes out of my mouth, I realize how ridiculous that sounds. If Liv glosses over what happened, Deborah Lapin shellacs it. Being preyed upon by a man who played dress-up in the woods is not in line with the image she has cast for Liv. I mean, I was trying to be better. More like you. Not get hung up on the past,” I add. That last line is a direct quote from one of our weekly e-mails while I was in the Berkshires, the ones that kept me sane and tethered to reality. While Patty Petty said let it all hang out, Liv gave me permission—really more of a directive—to let it go.

Liv brushes her hair back roughly behind one ear. It’s Liv’s hair, cornsilk-fine and aggressively highlighted, that guys always notice first. That and her boobs, full-blown by sixth grade. “I think that’s great,” she says, her eyes skipping around the room. “Moving forward and all.”

“Right? Ricker wants me to do hypnosis. She says unlocking my repressed memories is the way to heal. But then she avoids answering questions that might actually help me heal. To me that’s a contradiction. It’s like she wants me on one path: hers.”

Liv slides her jaw from side to side.

“I’m pretty sure Ricker got a call about the body right in the middle of our session yesterday. She tried to pretend it was her daughter, but I knew something was up,” I say. “So do you think Donald Jessup killed that other girl?”

Liv’s face goes dark. After the woods, my mother spun into action, jetting me out of town and hooking me up with Patty Petty, then Ricker. Deborah’s sole effort at supporting Liv was dragging her to speak with a local priest exactly once before signing herself into Valium rehab. I can be bitter about my forced removal, but at least what my mother did was in the realm of appropriate reactions for a mother.

Of course Deborah isn’t a mother, but a hedgewitch.

“How are things with your mo—”

“Eighteen is hardly a girl,” Liv says suddenly. “She was old enough to vote.”

“Everyone out!” Ms. Dean booms as she rounds the corner, sporting an unfortunate choppy new haircut. She stops short and knits her brows, making a lumbering mental calculation. I imagine she

recalling what she learned during meetings of the school's Incident Management Team.

"Are you ladies okay? Do you need, um, support?" she says.

"We are so okay!" Liv says, already out the door when Ms. Dean plants her ham-hand on my shoulder.

"You're not dressed." In her other hand is a balled-up pair of jersey-style Shiverton shorts and a T-shirt, my punishment for wearing jeans to gym. I accept them as Ms. Dean says that while she respects my need for time to readjust, there are no exceptions to the sweats rule. She's a softie for anyone with issues, always letting the cutters wear long sleeves to hide their razor scars. Still, I give her a nice piece of cold back, waiting until she leaves to drop my sweatercoat with a thump. Next, I shimmy out of my hoodie, unzip my fly, and yank off my jeans. A Henley button-down is the last layer standing before bra and bare skin. The locker room might be warm, but the gym is a drafty space with exposed beams that stretch to the ceiling like ribs. I tear the Henley over my head and wriggle into my shorts and extra-large tee. My white legs and arms make me look spectral. The Shiverton High girls' locker room is exactly the same as when it was built in the 1960s, with its faint smell of mildew and decadence of bad energy that lingers. Echoes of teasing banging around lockers, inadequacies stuck inside mirrors. Special pains inflicted by GIRLS onto GIRLS. But I'm not a GIRL anymore. I shake my hair out, press my lips together, and stride out, hand on belly, willing my serpentine friend—the black thing in my gut that Liv doesn't have and doesn't need, but I do—to rise and get me through this, the real, indoor, after-the-woods world.

Ms. Dean nods as I join the far end of the line for stretches. Liv has been absorbed among the slouchy-loud girls. I will not be absorbed. She smiles at me, hard and tight. I smile back anemically, hugging my elbows and rocking slightly, just enough to feel better and not look catatonic.

So. Cold.

My hands float up and bat at my ears, burning, as though I am outside, in the woods, but I'm not. I'm in the gym, with its faint smell of mold from last year's flood, and still the snowy flash spreads until the gym is white. The smell of night air and woodsmoke blooms around me. Now the rush, the sensation of plunging down a hole. I'm going and I can't stop.

What Ricker doesn't know is that I don't need hypnosis. Not when there's a trigger.

\* \* \*

*The joint shakes in his hand as he winds it. His tongue flashes to lick the paper. It falls in his lap.*

*"Shhhit!" His hands flutter.*

*"Are you okay?" I say. Begging, reasoning, and crying haven't worked. Empathy is the only thing I haven't tried.*

*"Been off-line too—too long—long," he stammers, patting his lap. "In the six hours I sleep sleep, time raiders plunder my camps, destroy my weapons, and take my prey. I set traps, everything, but nothing does any good. I hardly have any girls left. What's gonna happen when I'm gone for days? Can't play 24/7, I just can't. How'm I gonna get ahead after this? Phew, there it is." He lights the foil white pupa at his lips, a flame dancing at his trembling fingers, his inhalation like a long sip of water.*

*I take tiny breaths. Being a pot virgin, I have no idea if just being near the smoke will make me*

high, and the thought of losing my wits terrifies me. I wiggle away from the downwind. The movement triggers pain in my ankle, and I cry out. He looks at me quizzically.

He holds out the joint. "Want a hit?"

I shake my head wildly.

He shrugs. "Might help."

He takes softer drags, puffing and sucking, intimate sounds that make my privates clench. I'm hunched with a wave of revulsion. I stare hard at the outlines of trees and hills, trying to get back into my head and match their silhouettes with the woods I know in daylight. The fire between us burns a low flame, but it's enough for me to imagine my rescuers will see it and come. How long ago did Liv run away? Seven, eight, nine hours? Why hasn't anyone come?

"This was a mistake," he says.

I shift in my spot. If I am a mistake, I am less valuable to him. That feels dangerous.

"If you free me, you could go back to your game," I say, my voice small.

He giggles, teeth flashing in the dark like little pearls.

I force myself to mirror his laugh, but I sound like a hyena.

"What are you laughing at?" he says.

I stop laughing. "I'm not."

"Oh, what, was that an owl?" He laughs again, uncontrollably this time. "Was that an owl laughing in the woods?"

I become very still, trying to make myself shapeless so he'll forget I am a GIRL, because that feels like the most dangerous of all.

If only there were stars to count. Math, then.

1,133 divided by 2 equals 566.5.

8,349,179 divided by 7 equals 1,192,739.8 ... 6.

"Funny, isn't it?" he sputters, taking a last drag and flicking the orange stub into the darkness.

"Yeah!" I say, unconvincing.

"Here we are, you and me. Not what I expected. But something."

\* \* \*

"What happened to you?" Liv cries, her hand out, warding off others.

In nine months of e-mails, she never did ask me what happened in the woods.

Ms. Dean mouths my name in slow motion. A ring of pale faces crowd in over my crumpled body, their voices drifting, but I make out "swallow tongue" and "orange juice" and "so sad." Liv plans to help herself to avoid being shoved. Now she's arguing with the guy next to her. Ms. Dean's mouth moves again, but I can't hear her over my own breaths, loud as shotgun blasts.

I sit up. "I think I have a fever."

Ms. Dean dings my forehead with the nugget on her college ring. "You're burning up. Off to the nurse." She yanks me up light as paper and tosses me toward the exit.

The pack collapses, and Liv runs after me, grabbing my arm and whispering close to my ear. "It was like you went somewhere else. Where did you go?"

I look at her meaningfully.

“My God. You’re remembering.”

“Lately, yes.”

Ms. Dean turns to the crowd. “Nothing to see here but a girl with Kuru disease. Lapin, back in line.

Make teams for dodgeball!”

I smile lamely at the floor. There’s something grounding about having a gym teacher straight from central casting screaming about dodgeball, the purest form of Darwinian selection in any high school. Shane Cuthbert, slouched on a bleacher until now, rises on loose legs and strolls over. He wears the required sweats and a ratty T-shirt with a smiley face, its eyes Xs, its tongue hanging out. Some girls think Shane is hot, with his inky hair and unnaturally blue, Siberian husky eyes, but never me.

He stands behind Liv, thumbs jammed deep in his pockets. He’s always had a creepy thing for her. I glare at him above her shoulder.

Liv’s eyes flicker all over my face.

“A-hem,” Shane says, his nasal pitch cartoony.

Liv spins and he catches her wrist in the air, grinning, his eyes popping white.

“What do you want, Shane?” I say his name like a swear.

“Nothing you can give me, nutters. Weren’t you heading to the nurse?”

I check Ms. Dean’s coordinates. She’s already heading back toward us, overdeveloped forearm pumping.

“Whatever you’ve got, it better not be contagious. I don’t want my girl here catching it,” he says, snaking his hand around Liv’s waist.

I wait for Liv to twist away. Instead, she giggles.

*My girl?*

“Liv?” I rasp.

Shane’s lank hair brushes Liv’s cheek as he whispers something in her ear. She pulls away with a sour look, which he catches. She smooths it over with a quick smile. “You have a filthy mind,” she says, swatting his chest with a fist. He explodes in a pratfall, sharp knees and elbows, a bug on his back. He grabs her ankle. She squeals and tries to shake him off, like it’s the funniest thing in the world, so funny to get grabbed, but he’ll let go before the ankle snaps, because it’s Shane Cuthbert and not Donald Jessup and the panic lacing round my throat can stop now.

I’ve known Shane since kindergarten. He lives on the other side of Shiverton, where the walkways to tidy houses are lined with pansies in the summer and chrysanthemums in the fall. Every so often you pass by one where the windows are glazed yellow and a car sits on the lawn. Donald Jessup lives in one of those houses. His mother still does. Shane’s house is pretty nice, and by all accounts he’s lucky to have it, because he was adopted from a Russian orphanage where prostitutes dump their unwanted babies. His real name was Alexei, but his parents renamed him Shane. In elementary school Alexei-Shane couldn’t sit still, so by seventh grade doctors put him on a rainbow of pills. When he missed half of sophomore year, everyone said he’d been sent to McLean Psychiatric Hospital, and got thrown out when he stabbed an orderly in the hand with a jackknife.

Shane clambers up, shaking hair from his eyes. He laughs, at me or at nothing, and his lips pe

above a tooth lodged high on his gum. His hand settles on the small of Liv's back, steering her away. cry, "Wait," but it's barely a whisper.

Slowly, his hand moves to his left pocket, so much bigger than the right, to a rectangular bulge, so much like a folded knife. My throat tightens.

"Liv!"

They turn, his smile in profile with that one misgrown tooth.

Her eyes are worried. Is she afraid of what I'm going to say? Or that I'm remembering again?

"What is it?" Liv says.

*What is it? What?*

"I'll see you after school," I say. "I'll come over. We'll do ... statistics."

She cocks her head and squints like I'm daft. Then she laughs, not a real laugh, but like she knows other kids are watching. "Awesome. You can help me with independent and dependent events." As they turn back around, Shane slaps her hard on the butt.

Her shoulders clench. They stay. They do not fall.

I squeeze my elbows and hustle to the nurse's office. The nurse is missing, and this is good because I'm learning the memories might surge fast, but they also cool and crust. It's best to record them fresh. Except my notebook is in my locker.

I look around the sterile exam room wildly. Stealing a pen from the nurse's desk, I tear a sheaf of the roll of exam table paper, and write:

*Things I Know About Donald Jessup:*

- *Dopehead*

- *Losing his game*

- *Not what he expected (me)*

---

# THREE

## Later

Lamplight burns the side of my face. I close my stats book and flatten my cheek against the cool nubs of Liv's white crocheted bedspread.

"They're hard to explain. I think of them as nightmares, only during the day," I say.

"A daymare," Liv says.

"Right. And it's not like watching a movie. I smell what I smelled. Sweet smoke and leaves. Alive and dead things underneath the leaves; that's a musty smell. The rain smelled like metal. I taste things, too. The beef jerky he gave me. Blood."

Liv winces. "What were you remembering in the gym?"

"That first night. The night he and I were together. The night I escaped. The next day and night spent being hunted..."

Liv exhales loudly.

"Right. Sorry," I say, trying my best to "move forward and all." "It was after we stopped. We couldn't go farther because it got dark, and he was tired of dragging me. I could barely walk. And he wanted to smoke a joint."

Liv twists her hair hard near her ear. "Did the joint make him, you know, talky?"

"Mainly he was jonesing to play his video game. He was worried other players would steal his weapons and his prey." I raise myself on my elbows. "You know about Prey better than I do. That's what he was playing, in his sick mind. But you know that."

Liv ignores my mild dig, releasing her hair and winding it around her fingers again, tighter. "How do they happen? The daymares."

"A trigger sometimes. Sometimes nothing at all. This last time, it was the cold."

She drops her hair. "This last time? How often do they happen?"

"Too often. In Ricker-speak they're called intrusive." I don't mention that I haven't gotten around to telling Ricker I have them.

"Can you make them stop?"

I shake my head. "I haven't been able to yet."

"You never told me about them in your e-mails."

The back door slams and the old Victorian house quakes. Keys clatter in a china bowl, the antique rimmed with gold Greek keys on the hall curio. Liv groans and rakes her hair with both hands.

"Olivia!" Deborah screams up the stairs.

"Should we go?" I say.

"I need a minute," she says.

“Then it’s your turn,” I say quickly. “Speaking of things unmentioned: Shane Cuthbert? When did that start? And why?”

She tips her head forward until her hair waterfalls onto the desk, and kneads her scalp. “I’m just fooling around.” Her voice is muffled. “It’s not serious.”

“With Shane Cuthbert? You could have anyone!”

“Shane Cuthbert happens to be an exceptionally effective way of pissing off Deborah.”

“I heard he got thrown out of McLean for stabbing an orderly. Is that true?”

“How would I know?”

“You’re seeing him! He called you his girl.”

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Seeing Shane Cuthbert is not nothing. He’s always been obsessed with you. Even if it’s nothing to you, it’s something to him, I’m sure of that. What happens after you use him to piss off Deborah? How will you ever get rid of him?”

She draws her hands through her hair hard. “I know exactly what I’m doing with Shane.”

“Olivia! I know you’re up there!”

She flips her hair back. “Down in a second!”

Deborah murmurs something sharp below. Liv fans her fingers in front of her, examining hair like floss—lots of it—threaded through each set of fingers, catching the desk lamp light.

“Liv?”

She shakes her hands above the wire trash can under her desk.

“Your hair!” I say.

“Come down now, we have no time!” Deborah’s voice is clearer now; she’s moved to the giant mirror at the bottom of the stairs. Liv slowly pushes away from her desk and trudges down the bare stairs, her steps hollow, the runner long ago stripped to wood and staples and left that way. I wait wondering if I should bother to come, wondering if I want to. Slanted rain pelts the quarter moon shaped window. Barring Deborah’s box-of-chocolates persona (never know what you’re gonna get) I’ve always felt at home here, especially in the cool, quirky attic bedroom, with its secret eaves and its *Amityville Horror* window. Now the house seems as if the rain might poke straight through. Before the woods, Deborah constantly renovated the Victorian like it was another whole being she cared for in reverse proportion to how much she cared for Liv. Now the repairs have ground to a halt. Curlicues of yellow paint speckle the tops of shrubs overtaking the porch, worn silver in spots. Today, the front doorknob fell off in my hand.

I stash my book in my backpack and head for the landing.

“That idiot hairdresser took forever and it was pouring by the time I left, and I had to wear my hood, and now I have static.” From my spot, I can see Deborah leaning toward the hallway mirror, glaring at hair plastered against her cheek. “How will I ever fix this?”

“It gets worse if you touch it,” Liv says, taking the last few stairs.

“I’m going to have to leave it alone, because we have less than two hours, and I still need to write down what I’m going to say to that reporter. I am so perpetually *rushed*. You could have started your own hair while I was out; you know how to mix the chemicals by now. Honestly, everyone on the



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