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sharp objects
A NOVEL

Gillian Flynn

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Contents

Chapter One

My sweater was new, stinging red and ugly. It was May 12 but the temperature had dipped to the forties, and after four days shivering in my shirtsleeves, I grabbed cover at a tag sale rather than dig through my boxed-up winter clothes. Spring in Chicago.

In my gunny-covered cubicle I sat staring at the computer screen. My story for the day was a limp sort of evil. Four kids, ages two through six, were found locked in a room on the South Side with a couple of tuna sandwiches and a quart of milk. They'd been left three days, flurrying like chickens over the food and feces on the carpet. Their mother had wandered off for a suck on the pipe and just forgotten. Sometimes that's what happens. No cigarette burns, no bone snaps. Just an irretrievable slipping. I'd seen the mother after the arrest: twenty-two-year-old Tammy Davis, blonde and fat, with pink rouge on her cheeks in two perfect circles the size of shot glasses. I could imagine her sitting on a shambled-down sofa, her lips on that metal, a sharp burst of smoke. Then all was fast floating, her kids way behind, as she shot back to junior high, when the boys still cared and she was the prettiest, a glossy-lipped thirteen-year-old who mouthed cinnamon sticks before she kissed.

A belly. A smell. Cigarettes and old coffee. My editor, esteemed, weary Frank Curry, rocking back in his cracked Hush Puppies. His teeth soaked in brown tobacco saliva.

"Where are you on the story, kiddo?" There was a silver tack on my desk, point up. He pushed it lightly under a yellow thumbnail.

"Near done." I had three inches of copy. I needed ten.

"Good. Fuck her, file it, and come to my office."

"I can come now."

"Fuck her, file it, then come to my office."

“Fine. Ten minutes.” I wanted my thumbtack back.

He started out of my cubicle. His tie swayed down near his crotch.

“Preaker?”

“Yes, Curry?”

“Fuck her.”

Frank Curry thinks I’m a soft touch. Might be because I’m a woman. Might be because I’m a soft touch.

Curry’s office is on the third floor. I’m sure he gets panicky-pissed every time he looks out the window and sees the trunk of a tree. Good editors don’t see bark; they see leaves—if they can even make out trees from up on the twentieth, thirtieth floor. But for the *Daily Post,* fourth-largest paper in Chicago, relegated to the suburbs, there’s room to sprawl. Three floors will do, spreading relentlessly outward, like a spill, unnoticed among the carpet retailers and lamp shops. A corporate developer produced our township over three well-organized years—1961–64—then named it after his daughter, who’d suffered a serious equestrian accident a month before the job was finished. Aurora Springs, he ordered, pausing for a photo by a brand-new city sign. Then he took his family and left. The daughter, now in her fifties and fine except for an occasional tingling in her arms, lives in Florida and returns every few years to take a photo by her namesake sign, just like Pop.

I wrote the story on her last visit. Curry hated it, hates most slice-of-life pieces. He got smashed off old Chambord while he read it, left his office smelling like raspberries. Curry gets drunk fairly quietly, but often. It’s not the reason, though, that he has such a cozy view of the ground. That’s just yawing bad luck.

I walked in and shut the door to his office, which isn’t how I’d ever imagined my editor’s office would look. I craved big oak panels, a window pane in the door—marked Chief—so the cub reporters could watch us rage over First Amendment rights. Curry’s office is bland and institutional, like the rest of the building. You could debate journalism or get a Pap smear. No one cared.

“Tell me about Wind Gap.” Curry held the tip of a ballpoint pen at his grizzled chin. I could picture the tiny prick of blue it would leave among the stubble.

“It’s at the very bottom of Missouri, in the boot heel. Spitting distance from Tennessee and Arkansas,” I said, hustling for my facts. Curry loved to drill reporters on any topics he deemed pertinent—the number of murders in Chicago last year, the demographics for Cook County, or, for some reason, the story of my hometown, a topic I preferred to avoid. “It’s been around since before the Civil War,” I continued. “It’s near the Mississippi, so it was a port city at one point. Now its biggest business is hog butchering. About two thousand people live there. Old money and trash.”

“Which are you?”

“I’m trash. From old money.” I smiled. He frowned.

“And what the hell is going on?”

I sat silent, cataloguing various disasters that might have befallen Wind Gap. It’s one of those crummy towns prone to misery: A bus collision or a twister. An explosion at the silo or a toddler down a well. I was also sulking a bit. I’d hoped—as I always do when Curry calls me into his office—that he was going to compliment me on a recent piece, promote me to a better beat, hell, slide over a slip of paper with a 1 percent raise scrawled on it—but I was unprepared to chat about current events in Wind Gap.

“Your mom’s still there, right, Preaker?”

“Mom. Stepdad.” A half sister born when I was in college, her existence so unreal to me I often forgot her name. Amma. And then Marian, always long-gone Marian.

“Well dammit, you ever talk to them?” Not since Christmas: a chilly, polite call after administering three bourbons. I’d worried my mother could smell it through the phone lines.

“Not lately.”

“Jesus Christ, Preaker, read the wires sometime. I guess there was a murder last August? Little girl strangled?”

I nodded like I knew. I was lying. My mother was the only person in Wind Gap with whom I had even a limited connection, and she’d said nothing. Curious.

“Now another one’s missing. Sounds like it might be a serial to me. Drive down there and get me the story. Go quick. Be there tomorrow morning.”

No way. “We got horror stories here, Curry.”

“Yeah, and we also got three competing papers with twice the staff and cash.” He ran a hand through his hair, which fell into frazzled spikes. “I’m sick of getting slammed out of news. This is our chance to break something. Big.”

Curry believes with just the right story, we’d become the overnight paper of choice in Chicago, gain national credibility. Last year another paper, not us, sent a writer to his hometown somewhere in Texas after a group of teens drowned in the spring floods. He wrote an elegiac but well-reported piece on the nature of water and regret, covered everything from the boys’ basketball team, which lost its three best players, to the local funeral home, which was desperately unskilled in cleaning up drowned corpses. The story won a Pulitzer.

I still didn’t want to go. So much so, apparently, that I’d wrapped my hands around the arms of my chair, as if Curry might try to pry me out. He sat and stared at me a few beats with his watery hazel eyes. He cleared his throat, looked at his photo of his wife, and smiled like he was a doctor about to break bad news. Curry loved to bark—it fit his old-school image of an editor—but he was also one of the most decent people I knew.

“Look, kiddo, if you can’t do this, you can’t do it. But I think it might be good for you. Flush some stuff out. Get you back on your feet. It’s a damn good story—we need it. You need it.”

Curry had always backed me. He thought I’d be his best reporter, said I had a surprising mind. In my two years on the job I’d consistently fallen short of expectations. Sometimes strikingly. Now I could feel him across the desk, urging me to give him a little faith. I nodded in what I hoped was a confident fashion.

“I’ll go pack.” My hands left sweatprints on the chair.

I had no pets to worry about, no plants to leave with a neighbor. Into a duffel bag, I tucked away enough clothes to last me five days, my own

reassurance I'd be out of Wind Gap before week's end. As I took a final glance around my place, it revealed itself to me in a rush. The apartment looked like a college kid's: cheap, transitory, and mostly uninspired. I promised myself I'd invest in a decent sofa when I returned as a reward for the stunning story I was sure to dig up.

On the table by the door sat a photo of a preteen me holding Marian at about age seven. We're both laughing. She has her eyes wide open in surprise, I have mine scrunched shut. I'm squeezing her into me, her short skinny legs dangling over my knees. I can't remember the occasion or what we were laughing about. Over the years it's become a pleasant mystery. I think I like not knowing.

I take baths. Not showers. I can't handle the spray, it gets my skin buzzing, like someone's turned on a switch. So I wadded a flimsy motel towel over the grate in the shower floor, aimed the nozzle at the wall, and sat in the three inches of water that pooled in the stall. Someone else's pubic hair floated by.

I got out. No second towel, so I ran to my bed and blotted myself with the cheap spongy blanket. Then I drank warm bourbon and cursed the ice machine.

Wind Gap is about eleven hours south of Chicago. Curry had graciously allowed me a budget for one night's motel stay and breakfast in the morning, if I ate at a gas station. But once I got in town, I was staying at my mother's. That he decided for me. I already knew the reaction I'd get when I showed up at her door. A quick, shocked flustering, her hand to her hair, a mismatched hug that would leave me aimed slightly to one side. Talk of the messy house, which wouldn't be. A query about length of stay packaged in niceties.

"How long do we get to have you for, sweetness?" she'd say. Which meant: "When do you leave?"

It's the politeness that I find most upsetting.

I knew I should prepare my notes, jot down questions. Instead I drank more bourbon, then popped some aspirin, turned off the light. Lulled by the

wet purr of the air conditioner and the electric plinking of some video game next door, I fell asleep. I was only thirty miles outside my hometown, but I needed one last night away.

In the morning I inhaled an old jelly doughnut and headed south, the temperature shooting up, the lush forest imposing on both sides. This part of Missouri is ominously flat—miles of unmajestic trees broken only by the thin strip of highway I was on. The same scene repeating itself every two minutes.

You can't spot Wind Gap from a distance; its tallest building is only three stories. But after twenty minutes of driving, I knew it was coming: First a gas station popped up. A group of scraggly teenage boys sat out front, barechested and bored. Near an old pickup, a diapered toddler threw fistfuls of gravel in the air as his mother filled up the tank. Her hair was dyed gold, but her brown roots reached almost to her ears. She yelled something to the boys I couldn't make out as I passed. Soon after, the forest began to thin. I passed a scribble of a strip mall with tanning beds, a gun shop, a drapery store. Then came a lonely cul-de-sac of old houses, meant to be part of a development that never happened. And finally, town proper.

For no good reason, I held my breath as I passed the sign welcoming me to Wind Gap, the way kids do when they drive by cemeteries. It had been eight years since I'd been back, but the scenery was visceral. Head down that road, and I'd find the home of my grade-school piano teacher, a former nun whose breath smelled of eggs. That path led to a tiny park where I smoked my first cigarette on a sweaty summer day. Take that boulevard, and I'd be on my way to Woodberry, and the hospital.

I decided to head directly to the police station. It squatted at one end of Main Street, which is, true to its word, Wind Gap's main street. On Main Street you will find a beauty parlor and a hardware store, a five-and-dime called Five-and-Dime, and a library twelve shelves deep. You'll find a clothing store called Candy's Casuals, in which you may buy jumpers, turtlenecks, and sweaters that have ducks and schoolhouses on them. Most nice women in Wind Gap are teachers or mothers or work at places like Candy's Casuals. In a few years you may find a Starbucks, which will bring

the town what it yearns for: prepackaged, preapproved mainstream hipness. For now, though, there's just a greasy spoon, which is run by a family whose name I can't remember.

Main Street was empty. No cars, no people. A dog loped down the sidewalk, with no owner calling after it. All the lampposts were papered with yellow ribbons and grainy photocopies of a little girl. I parked and peeled off one of the notices, taped crookedly to a stop sign at a child's height. The sign was homemade, "Missing," written at the top in bold letters that may have been filled in by Magic Marker. The photo showed a dark-eyed girl with a feral grin and too much hair for her head. The kind of girl who'd be described by teachers as a "handful." I liked her.

> Natalie Jane Keene
> Age: 10
> Missing since 5/11
> Last seen at Jacob J. Garrett Park, wearing
> blue-jean shorts, red striped T-shirt
> Tips: 555-7377

I hoped I'd walk into the police station and be informed that Natalie Jane was already found. No harm done. Seems she'd gotten lost or twisted an ankle in the woods or ran away and then thought better of it. I would get in my car and drive back to Chicago and speak to no one.

Turns out the streets were deserted because half the town was out searching the forest to the north. The station's receptionist told me I could wait—Chief Bill Vickery would be returning for lunch soon. The waiting room had the false homey feel of a dentist's office; I sat in an orange endchair and flipped through a *Redbook.* An air freshener plugged into a nearby outlet hissed out a plastic smell meant to remind me of country breezes. Thirty minutes later I'd gone through three magazines and was starting to feel ill from the scent. When Vickery finally walked in, the receptionist nodded at me and whispered with eager disdain, "Media."

Vickery, a slim fellow in his early fifties, had already sweated through his uniform. His shirt clung to his chest, and his pants puckered out in back where an ass should have been.

“Media?” He stared at me over looming bifocals. “What media?”

“Chief Vickery, I’m Camille Preaker, with the *Daily Post* in Chicago.”

“Chicago? Why are you here from Chicago?”

“I’d like to speak with you about the little girls—Natalie Keene and the girl who was murdered last year.”

“Jesus H. Christ. How’d you hear about this up there? Jesus Christ.”

He looked at the receptionist, then back to me, as if we’d collaborated. Then he motioned to me to follow. “Hold my calls, Ruth.”

The receptionist rolled her eyes.

Bill Vickery walked ahead of me down a wood-paneled hallway checked with cheap framed photos of trout and horses, then into his office, which had no window, which was in fact a tiny square lined with metal files. He sat down, lit a cigarette. Didn’t offer me one.

“I don’t want this to get out, Miss. I have no intention of letting this get out.”

“I’m afraid, Chief Vickery, that there’s not too much choice in the matter. Children are being targeted. The public should be aware.” It’s the line I’d been mouthing on the drive down. It directs fault to the gods.

“What do you care? They’re not your kids, they’re Wind Gap kids.” He stood up, sat back down, rearranged some papers. “I bet I’m pretty safe to say Chicago never cared about Wind Gap kids before.” His voice cracked at the end. Vickery sucked on his cigarette, twisted a chunky gold pinky ring, blinked in quick succession. I wondered suddenly if he was going to cry.

“You’re right. Probably not. Look, this isn’t going to be some sort of exploitive story. It’s important. If it makes you feel any better, I’m from Wind Gap.” *There you go, Curry. I’m trying.*

He looked back at me. Stared at my face.

“What’s your name?”

“Camille Preaker.”

“How do I not know you?”

“Never got in trouble, sir.” I offered a slight smile.

“Your family’s Preaker?”

“My mother married out of her maiden name about twenty-five years ago. Adora and Alan Crellin.”

“Oh. Them I know.” Them everybody knew. Money was none too common in Wind Gap, not real money. “But I still don’t want you here, Miss Preaker. You do this story and from now on, people will only know us for … this.”

“Maybe some publicity would help,” I offered. “It’s helped in other cases.”

Vickery sat quiet for a second, pondering his paper-bag lunch crumpled at the corner of his desk. Smelled like bologna. He murmured something about JonBenet and shit.

“No thanks, Miss Preaker. And no comment. I have no comment on any ongoing investigations. You can quote me.”

“Look, I have the right to be here. Let’s make this easy. You give me some information. Something. Then I’ll stay out of your way for a while. I don’t want to make your job any harder. But I need to do mine.” It was another little exchange I’d thought up somewhere near St. Louis.

I left the police station with a photocopied map of Wind Gap, on which Chief Vickery had drawn a tiny X to mark where the murdered girl’s body was discovered last year.

Ann Nash, age nine, was found on August 27 in Falls Creek, a bumpy, noisy waterway that ran through the middle of the North Woods. Since nightfall on the twenty-sixth, when she went missing, a search party had combed the forest. But it was hunters who came across her just after 5 a.m. She’d been strangled close to midnight with a basic clothesline, looped twice around her neck. Then dumped in the creek, which was low from the long summer drought. The clothesline had snagged on a massive rock, and she’d spent the night drifting along in the lazy stream. The burial was closed coffin. This was all Vickery would give me. It took an hour of questions to get that much.

From the pay phone at the library I dialed the number on the Missing poster. An elderly female voice identified it as the Natalie Keene Hotline, but in the background I could hear a dishwasher churning. The woman informed me that so far as she knew, the search was still going in the North Woods. Those who wanted to help should report to the main access road and bring their own water. Record temperatures were expected.

At the search site, four blonde girls sat stiffly on a picnic towel spread in the sun. They pointed toward one of the trails and told me to walk until I found the group.

"What are you doing here?" asked the prettiest. Her flushed face had the roundness of a girl barely in her teens and her hair was parted in ribbons, but her breasts, which she aimed proudly outward, were those of a grown woman. A lucky grown woman. She smiled as if she knew me, impossible since she'd have been a preschooler the last time I was in Wind Gap. She looked familiar, though. Maybe the daughter of one of my old schoolmates. The age would be right if someone got knocked up straight out of high school. Not unlikely.

"Just here to help," I said.

"Right," she smirked, and dismissed me by turning all her interest to picking the polish off a toenail.

I walked off the crunch of the hot gravel and into the forest, which only felt warmer. The air was jungle wet. Goldenrod and wild sumac bushes brushed my ankles, and fuzzy white cottonwood seeds floated everywhere, slipping into my mouth, sticking to my arms. When I was a kid we called them fairy dresses, I remembered suddenly.

In the distance people were calling for Natalie, the three syllables rising and falling like song. Another ten minutes of hard hiking and I spotted them: about four dozen people walking in long rows, sifting the brush in front of them with sticks.

"Hello! Any news?" called out a beer-bellied man closest to me. I left the trail and threaded my way through the trees until I reached him.

"Can I help out at all?" I wasn't quite ready to whip out my notebook.

“You can walk beside me here,” he said. “We can always use another person. Less ground to cover.” We walked silently for a few minutes, my partner occasionally pausing to clear his throat with a wet, rocky cough.

“Sometimes I think we should just burn these woods,” he said abruptly. “Seems like nothing good ever happens in them. You a friend of the Keenes?”

“I’m a reporter actually. *Chicago Daily Post*.”

“Mmmm…. Well how ’bout that. You writing about all this?”

A sudden wail shot through the trees, a girl’s scream: “Natalie!” My hands began sweating as we ran toward the cry. I saw figures tumbling toward us. A teenager with white-blonde hair pushed past us onto the trail, her face red and bundled. She was stumbling like a frantic drunk, yelling Natalie’s name at the sky. An older man, maybe her father, caught up with her, wrapped her in his arms, and began walking her out of the forest.

“They found her?” my friend called.

A collective head shaking. “She just got spooked, I think,” another man called back. “Too much for her. Girls shouldn’t be out here anyway, not as things stand.” The man looked pointedly at me, took off his baseball cap to wipe his brow, then began sifting the grass again.

“Sad work,” my partner said. “Sad time.” We moved forward slowly. I kicked a rusted beer can out of my way. Then another. A single bird flew by at eye level, then shot straight up to the treetops. A grasshopper landed suddenly on my wrist. Creepy magic.

“Would you mind if I asked your thoughts on all this?” I pulled out my notebook, wagged it.

“Don’t know I could tell you much.”

“Just what you think. Two girls in a small town …”

“Well, no one knows these are related, right? Unless you know something I don’t. For all we know, Natalie will turn up safe and sound. Hasn’t even been two days.”

“Are there any theories about Ann?” I asked.

“Some loony, some crazy man musta done it. Some guy rides through town, forgot to take his pills, voices are talking to him. Something like ’at.”

"Why do you say that?"

He stopped, pulled a package of chaw from his back pocket, buried a fat pinch in his gumline and worked it until he got the first tiny cut to let the tobacco in. The lining of my mouth began tingling in sympathy.

"Why else would you pull out a dead little girl's teeth?"

"He took her teeth?"

"All but the back part of a baby molar."

After another hour with no results and not much more information, I left my partner, Ronald Kamens ("write my middle initial too, if you will: *J*"), and hiked south toward the spot where Ann's body was found last year. Took fifteen minutes before the sound of Natalie's name drifted away. Ten more minutes and I could hear Falls Creek, the bright cry of water.

It would be hard to carry a child through these woods. Branches and leaves strangle the pathway, roots bump up from the ground. If Ann was a true girl of Wind Gap, a town that demands utmost femininity in its fairer sex, she'd have worn her hair long down her back. It would have tangled itself in the passing brush. I kept mistaking spiderwebs for glimmering strands of hair.

The grass was still flattened along the point where the body was discovered, raked through for clues. There were a few recent cigarette butts that the idle curious had left behind. Bored kids scaring each other with sightings of a madman trailing bloody teeth.

In the creek, there'd been a row of stones that had snagged the clothesline around Ann's neck, leaving her tethered and floating in the stream like the condemned for half a night. Now, just smooth water rolling over sand. Mr. Ronald J. Kamens had been proud when he told me: The townsfolk had pried out the rocks, loaded them in the back of a pickup, and smashed them just outside town. It was a poignant gesture of faith, as if such destruction would ward off future evil. Seems it didn't work.

I sat down at the edge of the creek, running my palms over the rocky soil. Picked up a smooth, hot stone and pressed it against my cheek. I wondered if Ann had ever come here when she was alive. Maybe the new generation

of Wind Gap kids had found more interesting ways to kill summers. When I was a girl, we swam at a spot just downstream where huge table rocks made shallow pools. Crawdads would skitter around our feet and we'd jump for them, scream if we actually touched one. No one wore swimsuits, it took too much planning. Instead you just rode your bike home in soaked shorts and halters, shaking your head like a wet dog.

Occasionally older boys, equipped with shotguns and stolen beer, would tromp through on their way to shoot flying squirrels or hare. Bloody pieces of meat swung from their belts. Those kids, cocky and pissed and smelling of sweat, aggressively oblivious of our existence, always compelled me. There are different kinds of hunting, I know now. The gentleman hunter with visions of Teddy Roosevelt and big game, who retires from a day in the field with a crisp gin and tonic, is not the hunter I grew up with. The boys I knew, who began young, were blood hunters. They sought that fatal jerk of a shot-spun animal, fleeing silky as water one second, then cracked to one side by their bullet.

When I was still in grammar school, maybe twelve, I wandered into a neighbor boy's hunting shed, a wood-planked shack where the animals were stripped and split. Ribbons of moist, pink flesh dangled from strings, waiting to be dried for jerky. The dirt floor was rusted with blood. The walls were covered with photographs of naked women. Some of the girls were spreading themselves wide, others were being held down and penetrated. One woman was tied up, her eyes glazed, breasts stretched and veined like grapes, as a man took her from behind. I could smell them all in the thick, gory air.

At home that night, I slipped a finger under my panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick.