

WHAT
LIES *a novel*
IN
THE
WOODS

"Clever and deliciously dark."

—ALICE FEENEY, bestselling author

of *Rock Paper Scissors*

KATE ALICE MARSHALL

What Lies in the Woods



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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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For all the wild girls who search for magic in the woods

There is a wilderness in little girls.

We could not contain it. It made magic of the rain and a temple of the forest. We raced down narrow trails, hair flying wind-wild behind us, and pretended that the slender spruce and hemlock were still the ancient woods that industry had chewed down to splinters. We made ourselves into warriors, into queens, into goddesses. Fern leaves and dandelions became poultices and potions, and we sang incantations to the trees. We gave ourselves new names: Artemis, Athena, Hecate. Conversations were in code, our letters filled with elaborate ciphers, and we taught ourselves the meanings of stones.

Beneath a canopy of moss-wreathed branches, we joined hands and pledged ourselves to one another forever—a kind of forever that burns only in the hearts of those young enough not to know better.

Forever ended with the summer. It ended with a scream and the shocking heat of blood, and two girls stumbling onto the road.

The way Leo Cortland told the story, he thought at first that the sound was some kind of bird or animal. His spaniel's ears perked, and she barked once, staring intently into the trees.

The truth was he knew right away that the sound belonged to a child. The story he told was a way to explain to himself why he stood for so long, unmoving. Why, when the spaniel lunged toward the noise, he hauled her back, wrapping the leash around his fist. Why he was starting to turn, to walk the other way, when the girls stumbled out of the woods, the two of them wild-eyed and whimpering and their clothes soaked with dark blood.

“What happened to you?” he asked, still in shock, still seized with the urge to get away.

One girl shivered and shook her head, wrapping her arms around her body, but the other spoke. Her voice was hollow and lost. “There was a man,” she told him. “He had a knife.”

“Are you hurt?” he asked, wishing that he had his gun, wishing that his spaniel had ever been a threat to anything but his shoes.

“No,” the girl said. When he told the story, Leo would linger on this part. The way she stared right through him, like there was nothing but a ghost behind her eyes. “But our friend is dead.”

This was the one part of the story that was Leo’s and Leo’s alone; after that, it belonged to everyone, and each found a different part to tell again and again, polishing it smooth. Some spoke of the bravery of the two of us who had stumbled to the road to find help, who despite the shock gave the description that would lead to the attacker’s arrest. Others focused on the monster himself, fascinated by his wickedness and his brutality, the darkened corners of his soul.

Our parents always spoke of the moment they found out—of hearing that three girls had gone into the woods and only two had emerged, knowing right away that it was their girls, because it was a small town and because they knew the way the wilderness called to us, the way we slipped down deer trails and searched for the tracks of unicorns beside the creek.

Knowing that three of us had gone into the woods. Not knowing which two had returned.

Others spoke of the young man who found the last of us. Cody Benham was walking through the woods with the search party—three dozen men and women, most of them armed, all of them angry. He spotted the small form lying sprawled over the rotting hump of a fallen tree, as if she’d tried to climb over it with her last failing strength. The rain ran over her, rivulets of blood-tinged water tracing lines down to the tips of her pale fingers.

He didn’t call out at first. He fell to his knees instead, all the breath going out of him. He pressed his face against her cold cheek.

Her fingers curled against the bark.

Some people talk endlessly of the miracle it was, when they carried that little girl, still breathing, from the woods. They praise her strength and her bravery. They remember the television image, the girl in a wheelchair with a scar twisting up her cheek like a knot in a tree, and how she nodded when the prosecutor asked her if the man who’d hurt her was in the room.

They told the story again and again, until they thought they owned it.

We tried to forget. We didn't tell the story.
Not the real one.
Not ever.

I tried to appear attentive as the couple across from me flipped through the binder of photographs, murmuring appreciatively. Normally, I'd say it was a good sign—except for the telltale tension in the bride-to-be's shoulders, and the way her eyes kept darting up to my face when she thought I wasn't looking.

My phone, facedown on the table, vibrated. I pressed the button to silence it without picking it up, resisting the urge to check who was calling.

"Your portfolio is really, really impressive," the bride said, fiddling with the edge of her paper napkin. "Really."

"I'm glad to hear that," I replied, mentally calculating how much I'd just lost on gas by agreeing to this meeting. I should have known better. The groom being the one to contact me, the way he'd specified, *I showed Maddie some of your photos*, when I asked if she'd seen the website.

"It's just," she began, and stopped. Her husband-to-be, an earnest-looking young man with a chin dimple and too much hair gel, put a hand on her wrist.

"Babe, it's exactly what you were looking for. You're always complaining about washed-out photos. You wanted someone who isn't afraid of color."

My phone started buzzing again. "Sorry about that," I said, picking it up to check the caller ID. Liv. I declined the call again and tucked it into my purse. Whatever the latest crisis was, and it was always a crisis, she'd have to wait a few minutes more.

"It's just," the bride said again. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, I don't want to sound totally awful. Your photos are really, really—"

"Impressive," I finished for her, smiling. When I smiled, only one side of my mouth went up. She flinched.

"Come on, Maddie," Husband-to-Be said—I couldn't remember his name. It was probably Jason. It was usually Jason, for some reason. The ones who trotted me out like a surprise, as if to shame their partners into

hiring me. It had mostly stopped happening since I tripled my prices, which magically turned my scars from a pitiable flaw to part of my edgy appeal.

“It’s all right,” I assured him. “It’s your wedding day, Maddie. Everything should be perfect.”

“Right,” she said, relieved that I *understood*.

“And if anyone isn’t perfect, you shouldn’t have to have them there,” I added. Her smile faltered.

“Your prices are very high,” she snapped, turning pink. “Maybe you should consider lowering them. You might get more business.”

I sighed. “My prices are high because my work is really, really good,” I said, parroting her words back to her. “I make sure that my photo is front and center on my website because I don’t want anyone to waste their time or mine. And now we’ve done both.”

I stood, picking up the binder. My coffee sat untouched on the table, but I had only ordered it to kill time while I was waiting for them to show up twenty minutes late. “I hope you have the wedding of your dreams, Maddie. Jason, nice to meet you.”

“My name’s Jackson, actually,” he muttered, not lifting his eyes past my chin. As I walked away I heard him whispering furiously to her. Just as the door swung shut, she burst into tears. I stopped on the sidewalk and shut my eyes, letting out a breath and telling myself to relax the muscles that had slowly tightened throughout my body.

The only thing worse than brides like Maddie was getting to the meeting only to discover that the client was a “fan.” Not of my photos, of course. Of the dramatic story my life had become when I was eleven years old.

I pulled my phone out of my purse. Liv hadn’t left a message, but that wasn’t surprising. She hated being recorded. We’d spent enough time with cameras shoved in our faces, and the clips still lived on the internet under names like GIRLS FOIL SERIAL KILLER IN OLYMPIC FOREST and SURVIVORS OF “QUINULT KILLER” ALAN MICHAEL STAHL SPEAK OUT.

Back then Liv had what her mom called “stubborn baby fat” and a round face made rounder by blunt bangs and a bob. In the years after, she’d sprouted up and slimmed down, and then she just kept vanishing by

degrees, melting away until you could count the vertebrae through her shirt. She made sure there wasn't enough of herself left to get recognized.

I didn't have the option. The scar on my cheek, the nerve damage that kept the corner of my mouth tucked in a constant frown—those weren't things I could hide. Changing my name had cut down on the number of people who found me, but I'd never get rid of the scars, and I refused to try to hide them. I kept my hair cut short and sharp, and I always photographed myself straight on. I described my style as unflinching. My most recent therapist had been known to suggest I was using honesty as armor.

As if on cue, the phone started buzzing again. This time I answered, bracing myself to talk Liv down from whatever crisis the day had brought. "Hey, Liv. What's up?" I asked brightly, because pretending it could be anything else was part of what we did.

She was silent for a moment. I waited for her. It would come in little hiccup phrases at first, and then a flood. And at the end of it I would tell her that it was going to be okay, ask if she was taking her meds, and promise I didn't mind at all that she'd called. And I didn't. I was far more worried about the day she stopped calling.

"I'm trying to reach Naomi Cunningham," a male voice said on the other end of the line, and I blinked in surprise.

"That's me. Sorry, I thought you were someone else. Obviously," I said, letting out a breath and sweeping windblown strands of hair back from my eyes. "Who's calling?"

"My name is Gerald Watts, at the Office of Victim Services. I'm calling about Alan Michael Stahl."

My mind went blank. Why would they be calling me now? It had been over twenty years, but— "Has he been released?" I asked. I remembered the word *parole* in the sentence. *Possibility of parole after twenty years*. But twenty years was eternity to a child. Panic bloomed through me like black mold. "Wait. You're supposed to call us, aren't you? We're supposed to be allowed to testify, or—"

"Ma'am, Stahl has not been released," Gerald Watts said quickly and calmly. "I've got better news than that. He's dead."

“I—” I stopped. Dead. He was dead, and that was it. It was over. “How?”

“Cancer. Beyond that, I’m not able to share private medical information.”

“Do the others know? Liv—I mean Olivia Barnes, and—”

“Olivia Barnes and Cassidy Green have been notified as well. We had a little more trouble getting hold of you. You changed your name.” He said it like it was just a reason, not a judgment, but I stammered.

“You can still figure out who I am, it’s not like I hide it, but it cuts down on the random calls and stuff,” I said. I’d had strangers sending things to my house for years. Or just showing up themselves, ringing the doorbell, asking to meet the miracle girl and gape at my face.

“I don’t blame you,” he said. “Him dying, it’ll get reported here and there. You might want to take some time off, if you can. Go someplace you won’t get hassled. Shouldn’t take long for the interest to die down.”

“I’ll be fine. It never takes long for some new tragedy to come along and distract everyone,” I said.

He grunted in acknowledgment. “Ms. Cunningham, if you need to speak to a counselor, we have resources available to you.”

“Why would I need to talk to a counselor?” I asked with a high, tortured laugh. “I should be happy, right?” The man who’d attacked me was dead. A little less evil in the world.

“This kind of thing can bring up a lot of complicated feelings and difficult memories,” Gerald Watts said gently. He had a grandfatherly voice, I thought.

“I’ll be fine,” I told him, though I sounded faint, almost robotic. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Take care of yourself,” he said, a firm instruction, and we said our goodbyes.

I stood at the curb, my toes hanging over the edge, my weight rocking forward. There was something about that feeling. After the attack, I’d had damage to the membranous labyrinth in my left ear. I’d had fits of vertigo. Years later, after it faded, I would stand like this, almost falling, and that

rushing feeling would return. But I was in control. I was the one who decided if I would fall.

I closed my eyes and stepped off the curb.

★ ★ ★

I was on my second glass of wine by the time Mitch came home. He dropped his messenger bag with the kind of dramatic sigh that always preceded a long rant about the soul-stifling horror of working in an office.

“You wouldn’t believe what a shit day I’ve had,” he declared, kicking off his shoes as he headed for the fridge. “Bridget is on my ass about every little thing, and Darrel is out sick *again*, which means that I have to pick up the slack. Fuck, all that’s in here is IPAs. I might as well drink grass clippings.”

“There’s a porter in the back,” I said, sipping my wine and staring at the wall.

“Thank God.”

I picked out patterns in the wall texture as Mitch cracked open the beer and dropped onto the couch next to me. I liked Mitch. There was a reason I liked Mitch. In a moment I would remember what it was.

I ran a finger along the rim of my glass, examining him. His hair flopped over his eye, too long to be respectable by exactly a centimeter, and he maintained a precise amount of stubble. We’d met at the gallery opening of my ex-girlfriend, forty-eight hours after she dumped me for being “an emotional black hole” and then demanded I still attend to support her. Mitch had stolen a whole tray of fancy cheeses and we hid in the corner drinking champagne and waxing faux-eloquent about tables and light fixtures as if they were the exhibit. It had been a bit cruel and definitely stupid, but it had been fun. *This man, I’d thought, is an asshole.*

So of course I’d gone home with him.

“And how goes the wedding-industrial complex?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said. I paused. “No, it wasn’t. The bride didn’t want a photographer with a mangled face.”

“Bitch,” he said matter-of-factly. “You’re wasting your time with those people.”

It was, more or less, what I'd said to her. But it meant something else, coming from him. "Today was a waste of time," I agreed. The whole thing felt so far away.

"You're better than this," Mitch said. His hand dropped to my knee, his head lolling on the back of the couch. "I mean, Jesus. You have actual talent. And you're spending your time on Extruded Wedding Product #47."

"I like what I do," I said evenly.

"It's beneath you."

"Okay." I wasn't interested in this argument, not again.

"All those women are so desperate to have their perfect day. I can't even imagine getting married. I just try to picture it, you and me at the altar and the tux and the floofy white gown, and it's like a complete parody. I don't see the point. Do you?"

"I don't see the point of marrying you, no," I replied, but he was already moving on. We were back to complaining about work—something about a jammed copier.

"I mean, *Jesus*, this job is going to kill me," he groaned when he'd finally wound down.

My glass was empty. I reached for the bottle on the coffee table and discovered that was empty as well.

"You polished that off by yourself?" Mitch asked, amusement with a rotten underside of judgment.

"An old friend of mine called today," I said.

"Bad news?" he asked. His posture shifted, canting toward me. Two parts comfort, one part hunger. That was the problem with writers. They couldn't help digging the edge of a fingernail under your scabs so they could feel the shape of your wounds.

My scars had climbed across the skin of half a dozen characters already. Sometimes he sublimated them into metaphor—gave a girl a faulty heart, a cracked mirror to stare into—but reading those stories, I could always feel his fingertips tracing the constellation of knotted tissue across my stomach, chest, arms, face. He'd gotten permission at first, but after a while it was like he owned the story just as much as I did.

The parts I'd told him, anyway.

“It was Liv,” I said.

“Having another one of her spirals?” Mitch asked knowingly.

I bristled. I hated Mitch talking about her like he knew her. They’d never even met. “I didn’t actually talk to her,” I said. I needed more wine. The bottle hadn’t been full when I started, and it wasn’t hitting me hard enough to blunt the edges properly.

Mitch reached for my hand. I stood and walked to the kitchen, pulling another bottle of red down and casting about for the corkscrew. Alan Stahl was dead. He would never get out. He would never come after me.

He’d promised to. After he was sentenced, he’d told his cellmate he was going to get out and slit my throat. Part of me had always been waiting for him to show up at my doorstep, ready to finish what had been left undone twenty years ago.

I set the knife against the rim of the foil and twisted. The knife slipped, the tip jabbing into my thumb. I swore under my breath and just put the corkscrew straight through the foil instead, pulling the cork out through it. Wine glugged into the glass, splashing up the sides. The bottle knocked against the glass and almost tipped it, and then Mitch was grabbing it from me, taking my hand and turning it upward.

“Naomi, you’re bleeding,” he said.

I stared. The cut on my thumb was deeper than I’d thought, and everything—the bottle, the glass, the corkscrew, the counter—was smeared with blood. I wrenched my hand free of Mitch and stuck my thumb in my mouth. The coppery taste washed across my tongue, and instantly I was back in the forest, the loamy scent of the woods overlaid with the metallic smell of my blood, the birds in the trees flitting and calling without a care for the girl dying below.

When I remembered it, I pictured myself from above, crawling over the ground, dragging myself up onto that log. I didn’t remember the pain. The mind is not constructed to hold on to the sense of such agony.

“Look at me. Naomi, come on. Look at my face,” Mitch said, touching the underside of my chin delicately, like he was afraid I would bruise. I met his eyes with difficulty. “There you are. What’s going on? If you didn’t talk to Liv—”

“I know why she was calling,” I said. I swallowed. It was mine until I said it out loud. Then it belonged to Mitch, too, and all the people he told, and the people they told. But of course the story already belonged to countless others—Cassidy and Liv and Cody Benham and whatever journalist found out about it first, and surely there would be some footnote article in the papers tomorrow, “QUINAULT KILLER” DIES IN PRISON.

“Naomi. You’re drifting again,” Mitch said. This was why I liked him. I remembered now.

“Alan Stahl is dead,” I said. “Cancer. He died in prison. He’s gone.” If I could say it in just the right way, it would make sense. Everything would fall into its proper order, and I would know how I was supposed to feel.

“Oh my God. That’s great news!” Mitch seized my shoulders, grinning. “Naomi, that’s *good*. I mean, I’d rather he be tortured every day for another twenty years, but dead is the next best thing. You should be celebrating.”

“I know. It’s just complicated,” I said, sliding past him. I grabbed a kitchen towel and pressed it to my thumb. The bleeding wasn’t too bad. It would stop soon.

“It must be bringing up a lot of trauma,” he said with a wise nod. And that was why I didn’t like him.

“Can you stop talking like you know what I’m going through better than I do?” I stalked to the hall closet, pawing through it one-handed for a bandage.

“You’ve never really processed what happened to you. You shy away from it in your work. You need to confront it head-on. This is a perfect opportunity. Turn it into the catalyst you need to really dig in. You could do a series of self-portraits, or—”

“Oh, for the love of God, Mitch, will you let it go?” I said. I found the package of Band-Aids and held it under my arm while I fished one out. Mitch moved in to help, but I turned, blocking him with my body. “I don’t want to turn my trauma into art. I don’t want *you* to turn my trauma into art.”

“You’d rather churn out identical images of identical smiling people and never create anything of meaning or significance?” he asked.

I slammed the closet door shut. “Yes. If those are my two options, I will take the smiling people. Who are not identical, and neither are the photos. They’re *happy*, so you think they’re beneath me. But you know what? It means a hell of a lot more to a hell of a lot more people than a story in an obscure magazine that doesn’t pay and never even sent you the contributor copies.” That was harsher than I’d intended, but I didn’t back down. I couldn’t. I was running blind through the forest, and the hunter was behind me. I could only go forward.

“I didn’t realize you thought so little of my work,” Mitch said stiffly.

“Whereas I knew perfectly well how little you thought of mine,” I snarled back. Then I pressed the heel of my hand to my forehead. “I’m sorry. Can we just pretend that I didn’t say any of that?”

“You’re under a lot of stress.” Translation: He’d find a time to bring this up when he could be the unambiguous victim. But I let him wrap his arms around me and tuck my head against his chest. I held my hand curled awkwardly, my thumb throbbing, as he made soothing sounds and stroked my hair. “Come on. Let’s drink. It’ll solve all our problems.”

I laughed a little, surrendering. I’d have a drink, and we wouldn’t fight, and Stahl would stay dead, and the past would remain the past, and no one would ever have to know the truth.

Then I heard it—the faint *buzz, buzz, buzz*. My phone was ringing in my purse. I maneuvered past Mitch in the narrow hall and got to it on the last ring. Liv—really Liv this time.

“Hey,” I said as soon as I picked up, Mitch trailing behind me.

“Naomi. I’ve been calling all day,” Liv said, fretful. I could picture her perfectly, folded up in the corner of her couch, wrapping her long black hair around her finger. “Did you hear?”

“About Stahl? Yeah. I heard.”

“I can’t believe he’s dead.” She sounded far away.

“I know. Liv, hang on.”

Mitch was standing too casually halfway across the room. I held up a *Just one minute* finger and slipped back through the hall into the bedroom, shutting the door behind me.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly when the door was shut. If I was a mess, I couldn’t imagine how Liv was holding up. “Have you talked to Cassidy?”

“A little. She texted. I haven’t ... I wanted to talk to you first,” Liv said carefully.

“About Stahl?” I asked.

“No. Not exactly.” She took a steadying breath. “I did something.”

“Liv, you’re kind of freaking me out,” I told her. “What do you mean, you did something? What did you do?”

Her words sank through me, sharp and unforgiving. “I found Persephone.”

I hadn't opened the box in years. Through several moves, assorted boyfriends and girlfriends, and three therapists, the box had remained in the back of one closet and then another, collecting stains and dents.

The corner of the lid had split, and my fingers came away dusty when I opened it. Most of the box was taken up with the quilt that the school had delivered to me in the hospital—a square of fabric from each of my fellow students and teachers, signed with get-well wishes. It smelled faintly of disinfectant, and there was a blood splotch dried to dull brown at one edge.

I am sorry you got murdered, Kayla Wilkerson had written. *Almost* was added in with a little caret.

There were cards, too. Some from the same classmates, some from locals, most from total strangers. They'd filled many more boxes than this, but after years of guiltily hanging on to all of them, I'd grabbed a fistful to keep and shoved the rest into trash bags, holding my breath the whole time.

Below the cards was the binder. I paged through, not really reading any of the articles. I knew them all by heart. There were photos, too, of me in the hospital and after. Some were snapshots, others professional, and in none of them did I recognize myself, even knowing it was me.

Toward the back was a photo of the three of us. It must have been on one of the days of the trial, given the somber way the other two were dressed: Cassidy in her polished Mary Janes and Liv in a dress with a lace collar—the same one she wore to church. I was wearing a faded Bugs Bunny T-shirt and jeans with holes in the knees. That meant that it was early on. Not long after, someone had pulled my dad aside and told him some of the money that had been flowing in—donations, money from the few interviews I did and the many my dad did—better go to getting me decent clothes. Cassidy's dad, Big Jim, was the one who made sure that it all got collected up in a trust, ensuring it went to my care and medical bills rather than Dad's twin habits of drinking and collecting broken junk.

We were smiling. Someone must have told us to, because I couldn't imagine us doing it spontaneously. Cassidy had the bright, practiced smile of the mayor's daughter, used to being photographed. Liv's smile was barely a tug at the corners of her mouth, her hands knotted together and her feet crossed at the ankle. She always had a vague look in the photos around that time. In the weeks after the attack she'd gone into her first major spiral, but they were still scrambling for a diagnosis and the meds weren't right yet, leaving her disconnected from herself.

And of course my smile was pitiable. My cheek was still bandaged up—presumably not from the original wound, but from one of the surgeries to attempt a repair to the damaged nerves and muscles, which had been at best semisuccessful. The downward pull of one side of my face had only served to make me seem more sympathetic. So did the wheelchair, which it would take me a few more months to go without consistently, mostly due to pain and sheer exhaustion.

Sometimes when I couldn't sleep I still counted them. Seventeen scars. Seventeen times the knife had plunged into me and slid back out again. I still could not understand how I had survived. People had told me over the years that I'd been blessed, brave, determined, fierce. I hadn't felt like any of those things. Survival had never even crossed my mind as a possibility or a concept. I'd crawled across the forest floor because in my blood loss-addled brain, I was trying to get away from the pain, like I could leave it behind if I got far enough.

One of the stab wounds had nicked the side of my heart, not quite puncturing the atrial wall. If it had been a millimeter deeper or farther to the right, I would have escaped the pain after all.

The door opened. Mitch crept in with a hangdog shuffle. "I'm sorry," he said, sinking down cross-legged beside me on the carpet. "You're right. I'm an asshole. Completely useless. Can you forgive me?"

"Okay," I said, and then I flashed him a quick smile. If I sounded half-hearted, he'd keep up the *Please forgive me* groveling as long as it took. "You're not useless, and you're not an asshole."

"Yes, I am. I'm a horrible boyfriend." He leaned his head against my shoulder. I sagged. I didn't have the energy to make him feel better right

now, but if I didn't he would keep this up all night, berating himself for his supposed failures.

"It's okay," I soothed. "You're so stressed out, and I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"I'm sorry," he said again. His fingertips trailed down my arm and played across my palm, and I shut my eyes. What was wrong with me? Mitch loved me. He wanted the best for me. Why couldn't I love him like I used to? "Who's Persephone?" Mitch asked.

I jerked, startled, and realized that Mitch was looking at my hand—at the bracelet wrapped around my fingers. It had been in the bottom of the box. I hadn't even known that I'd picked it up. It was simple: a discolored nylon string, knotted into a loop and strung with plastic alphabet beads that had faded and chipped until the letters were almost unreadable. But not quite.

"No one," I said. I tossed the bracelet back in the box, disturbed that I'd picked it up without noticing. *I can't tell you more. Not over the phone*, Liv had said.

"Then why do you have her bracelet?" he asked with a little laugh. "Let me guess. Elementary school crush. Your BFF. Your babysitter."

"I don't even know why that thing is in there," I said. I should have gotten rid of it a long time ago. I crammed the binder and the cards and the quilt back in the box. The things in that box were the very last possessions I'd taken with me when I left Chester. "Maybe I should throw it all out. Move on."

"You know, I don't think I've told you how fucking amazing you are," Mitch said. "You were eleven years old and you put a serial killer away. They had jack shit on Stahl without your testimony. You were a pint-sized badass, and I think holding on to things that celebrate that isn't a bad thing at all."

I shook my head. I hadn't been brave, just obedient—and terrified. Not of Stahl, but of failing. The police and the prosecutors and everyone else told me over and over again that I *had* to do it, that it was all on me.

We'd all identified Stahl, but there were questions about witness contamination with Liv and Cass. They'd given general descriptions right

away, but they'd seen Stahl on the news before the official ID. I'd been unconscious during the televised arrest, untainted. So while all three of us testified, my words counted the most. I *had* to do it. Otherwise none of his victims would have justice, and he was an evil, evil man, and did I want him going free?

"I'm going to go home for a while," I said. I hadn't been certain until I spoke the words out loud.

"Home? You mean Chester? Why?"

"You know. See my dad. See Liv and Cassidy."

"That makes sense," he said, nodding. "Go back to the beginning. Full circle and all of that. Get some closure."

What does that even mean, you found her?

I'll tell you, but only in person.

I'm not going back.

We owe it to her.

"Closure. Yeah. Something like that."