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The Pocket Wife

Written by Susan Crawford

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THE POCKET WIFE

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For Ben, Jessica, Cara, and Katie

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If you think it long and mad,
the wind of banners
that passes through my life,
and you decide
to leave me at the shore
of the heart where I have roots,
remember
that on that day,
at that hour,
I shall lift my arms
and my roots will set off
to seek another land.

—Pablo Neruda, from "If You Forget Me"

THE POCKET WIFE

CHAPTER 1

The ambulance is still miles away when Dana awakens to the near dark of evening. It wails ribbon-thin in the smog over the highway as she opens her eyes where she lies sprawled across her couch in a suburb of Paterson, a stone's throw from Manhattan but a different world entirely. She wakes to a headache throbbing at the backs of her lids, a library book lying beside her. She sits up and reaches for the book, marking her place with a tiny corner fold, giving it a little pat as she sets it on the coffee table.

Lately she can read a novel in two hours. She has always been an avid reader, but these days she can read much faster. The colors, the conversations, everything is much more vibrant and inclusive, as if opening a book releases genies trapped inside. The scenes and people between their covers sometimes seem more vivid than real life, with their sunny, pearl-toothed characters, the witty conversation, the handsome stranger squeezed into a subway car or knocking about on the street. Sometimes, when she finishes a book at record speed, Dana feels a slight letdown, as if a good friend has hung up the phone in the middle of a conversation.

Sometimes her house seems quiet as a tomb with Jamie gone. She'd hoped her son would choose a school in New York, but instead he's chosen Boston College. He's packed his things and gone away, and although Boston isn't all that far, it seems to Dana that he's journeyed to the edges of the earth. "He could have gone to Idaho," her husband says when she complains to him, so she no longer does. Instead she bites her tongue, paints walls, and rearranges furniture; she reads books and lies awake at night and understands she wasn't ready to be alone with Peter in a house without their son. When she allowed herself to think of it at all in the months before Jamie left, she told herself they'd be like couples on TV, empty-nesters walking hand in hand across exotic beaches, cooking gourmet meals, and falling into bed. She sighs. Peter comes home late most nights and often doesn't even eat, let alone cook gourmet meals.

She struggles off the couch, crossing the room in tentative steps as the ambulance careens toward her neighborhood, its siren now a whisper in the heavy summer air of Ashby Lane. The afternoon comes back to her in tiny waves—her argument with Celia down the street, the way they both had far too much to drink, a faint memory of stumbling home to fall across her sofa in a deep, sangria-induced sleep. If Celia's not an alcoholic now, she soon will be. Lately she always has a glass in her hand, sloshing liquid here and there as she teeters on her high-heeled wedges. Dana rubs her temples and thinks she might point out the benefits of AA the next time she and Celia get together. The two of them could go to a meeting in Manhattan, nearby but more anonymous than the ones in Paterson. She'll offer. She won't push, though. They aren't close enough for that.

Her head throbs, and she remembers her aspirin is in the purse she left in her car when she ran down to Celia's house at breakneck speed. The front door is still ajar, and she pushes through the screen, grabs her purse from the front seat, and rummages

through it for the bottle. Outside, the ambulance is audible; its siren pierces the hum of traffic on the highway, and Dana glances up the street again, squinting in the thin light of a foggy evening. Something isn't right. She feels it, this offness of things, and seconds later the siren's wail is deafening. Standing by her car, she swallows the aspirin dry, watching as an ambulance rounds the corner and grinds to a halt in front of Celia's house. Three paramedics run toward the front door, where Celia's husband leans against the screen. Ronald. She can just make out the glare of light bouncing off his glasses as he throws the screen door wide. She doesn't stop to think; she hurries down the street, past the three houses between hers and Celia's, walking quickly on the hot concrete. By the time she gets to their yard, she's running, and her sandals slip in a wet spot, a puddle, as she turns in to the driveway. She falls against Ronald's car, throws her hands out hard against the hood to catch herself.

She rushes up the steps to the Steinhausers' and nearly collides with Ronald in the doorway. He looks at her, but he doesn't speak. He folds his arms over his chest as Dana slips across the threshold, where paramedics kneel on the new wood of Celia's recently renovated living room. Their heads are bowed as if they're praying, as if they're studying the grain of the bamboo floor, and Dana is aware of a pungent odor in the air, a smell she recognizes. "God," she says. "What—" And then she sees Celia.

"She wasn't breathing," Ronald says. He's whispering, as if his wife is only resting here across the foyer, her dark hair splayed out in a puddle of her own blood, as if he doesn't want to wake her. "I called 911," he says, uncrossing one arm long enough to point out the medics, crouched on either side of Celia, who lies pale and still, an oddly colored aura forming from the blood around her head, "but it was the strangest thing. I couldn't think of our address. It was only the old Wilmont one I remembered— 3189 Wilmont. From where I grew up," he continues, "in Cedar Rapids."

His voice buzzes like a fly. Dana pushes in close beside Celia and feels a sorrow so intense that for a moment she can't breathe. Her neighbor looks so small and helpless lying on the floor. She must be cold—she must feel lonely with only these strange men around her, and Dana reaches out her hand to smooth back Celia's hair.

"Hey!" The paramedic closest to her grabs her arm. "Get her outta here," he says to Ronald, but Dana is already backing away as Ronald says, "There was an accident on the highway. A texter. A stupid fucking texter! Two hours we waited, sitting in traffic while my wife was lying here bleeding to—"

"Got a pulse," one of the paramedics says, "but it's weak."

Ronald squats on the rug with his arms dangling loose at his sides. He squints at something under the sofa, and then he half crawls toward it. A phone. Celia's phone, Dana notices, and she is unpleasantly reminded of their argument earlier that day.

"We better get her to the hospital," one of the EMTs says. "We're losing her."

"No!" Ronald collapses sideways, nearly knocking Dana down. He crumples up like a flower on a broken stem, and she guides him to a chair, where he sits, his watery eyes riveted on the paramedics as they rush the stretcher through the door. Dana's crying, too, but in a distant, disconnected way. It isn't real at all, this pool of blood that used to be Celia, this assault on a room she helped redecorate, these booted men stomping through, barking orders, bruising the shiny bamboo with their muddy feet. *Get out!* she wants to tell them, but they're already running the gurney to the ambulance. Ronald streaks across the room and out the door.

"I'm riding with my wife!" he yells, but no one answers.

The ambulance wheels struggle and whir in the stones of the driveway; the siren shrieks. Celia's rescuers speed down Ashby Lane and disappear around the corner, heading for the hospital, but Dana knows from the way they looked at one another, from the way they were all business, that they think it's futile.

The paramedics are no sooner out the door than one set of shoes replaces another, all of them coming and going across the blemished, blood-smeared porch; policemen from an investigation unit scrape and scratch along the throw rugs in the living room, filling tiny plastic bags with items Dana can't quite see. They usher her outside, taking down her name, her address, who she is, what she's doing there, as if she's the one who is extraneous instead of all of them with their black gestapo boots, their cigarette breath. "We'll be in touch," they say.

Dana stands fidgeting on the Steinhausers' porch and takes a last look through the picture window at the living room, bright in the lights. She studies the drapes and squints at the cushions, as if the evidence is stuck inside the hard, rough cushion of the estate-sale chair or slumped along the corners of the couch—Celia would surely leave clues—and suddenly Dana feels certain she's the likely one to find them. In the house a cell phone jingles. A young policeman with red hair holds a phone up to his ear.

She and Celia were friends, neighbors, sharing piecrust recipes and gossip and yard-sale outings, an occasional languid conversation over coffee or an afternoon trek through the mall with bags in hand. But not secrets. Not until today. She closes her eyes, and images from that afternoon crowd her mind—sangria, bloodred in a glass; Celia's high, sand-colored shoes, the dog flopped beside the kitchen sink, a tiny rip in Celia's screen door; her own hand pushing on the thin wood bridge across its middle; her own feet on the sidewalk, on the street, on her driveway; Celia lying in a pool of blood, the broken vase beside her head, the kitchen knife just so above her hand. But there are gaps—the memories are quick, sharp images of sights and sounds, like puzzle pieces scattered on a slippery, shifting floor.

"She didn't make it," she hears the red-haired cop announce to the room at large. "The detective on the case'll be here in five." He lowers the phone and extends his boot, nudging the front door

shut. Dana hurries home, her heart pounding in her ears, her breath a ragged, frantic sound in the stifling summer night. The reality of her neighbor's death settles into her bones and splinters through her skin. Collapsing on her front porch, she hugs her knees, rocking back and forth on the harsh, hot cement, and images of Celia's sons flit across her mind—Tommy and John Jr., spending the summer with Celia's ex on Martha's Vineyard. They'll stay there now, of course; they won't come back—they'll probably never set foot on Ashby Lane again. Her tears spot the gray flat of the porch. They make her heart beat far too fast, all these losses, these holes inside her soul. Lately every aspect of her life is blowing off like petals in a breeze. She feels as if she's in a constant state of watching them fly away, of holding in her spread arms nothing more than empty stems of missing things.

She'll call Peter, she decides, and for a second she feels a tiny bit better. Despite what she learned about him from Celia today, her husband is still a quintessential lawyer—down to earth, even though lately he's become another empty stem, another missing thing. Dana sighs. He's late again.

"Hello." His voice is dull in the clamor of what sounds like an airport bar.

"Where are you?" she says, and there's a scratching sound as Peter shifts the phone.

"I'm in a meeting."

"Celia's dead," Dana says, and she thinks of hanging up, of leaving him with this earful of drama.

"What?"

"Celia's—"

"No," he says, "I heard you. I just . . . Jesus. *Dead?*"

"Dead. God. There was blood all over the—" Dana's voice catches. She stops.

"Listen. Let me . . . I'm just going to stick you in my pocket for a second till I can—you know—till I can get out into the hall and—"

"Wait!" she says, but all she hears are the scratching, shuffling sounds of cloth against the phone, and finally she hangs up.

It isn't the big things Peter does that make her want to leave him; it's more the smaller things, like sticking her inside his pocket in the middle of a thought—these demeaning, shrinking things he does that make her feel as trivial as a sneeze.

She sets the phone down and tries to piece together moments from the afternoon, to put things in some kind of order. She was there. She was involved in Celia's day, although she isn't sure exactly how. She had far too much to drink. And then the incredible death—the shocking, horrible, inconceivable death, sticking like a dagger in her heart. She closes her eyes and tries to remember the last thing she said to Celia. She thinks it was "I don't ever want to see you again."

CHAPTER 2

Love is such a muddle, Dana thinks, especially for people like her and Peter in lengthy, problematic marriages—difficult enough without neighbors butting in and, now, dying. Celia had served quite a nasty little tidbit to her that afternoon, amid a lot of drunken rambling, and Dana shoves it to the back of her mind to be dealt with later. The night is oppressive; tall buildings downtown trap the heat, leaking warm air into the suburbs even at nearly nine o'clock, and streaks of pink zig and zag through the gray sky. She leans back on her hands and squints, remembers that summer in New York, staring over the Hudson River at a pink sky. "Look!" she'd shouted, pointing.

"What?" Her companion was an earnest poet from the East Village.

"The sky! It looks like Oz if Oz were pink instead of green!"

The Poet had tucked his hair behind an ear, long hair, poetic hair, and puffed on the dying ash, the sweet heat of his pipe from Chinatown, exhaled his answer with a stream of smoke. "It's only the pollution," he said. "Good old New York filth." She hadn't married the Poet. She'd married Peter instead, his fresh

good looks, his blue-eyed blondness seeping underneath her skin, erasing nights spent with the dark, sad Poet in his room with the broken wall. Where is he now? she wonders sometimes, nights when the sky is streaked with pink and she is nothing but a pocket wife. She glances at the trace of color still clinging to the sky and thinks she might reread her son's collection of the Oz books—*Ozma* and *Glinda* and *The Patchwork Girl*—but it's too sad; it makes her think of the Poet and of Jamie growing up and moving off to Boston.

A set of headlights bounces over the small hill at the end of their street. Seconds later Peter's Lexus purrs in the driveway and Dana watches as he moves around inside it. The light of his Bluetooth fades away from his ear, dims in the dark car.

"I made a couple of calls from the office after we spoke," Peter says, talking as he tromps up the driveway. "Apparently Donald almost tripped over his wife in the entrance to their living room. It's a good thing Jamie's back at school. Until they find out what the trouble is, no one's really safe." His voice is strained; it splatters out around his breathing, his huffing and puffing. He stops beside where she sits, leaning back on her hands. "The police. Until they uncover what it is."

"What *what* is? And it's Ronald, by the way."

"What killed Celia." Peter fishes in his pockets for a cigarette, and Dana breathes in the sulfur smell of the spent match, the smoke she craves tonight, although she hasn't in years. It's only when her body speeds up and her mind click-clacks like a runaway train that she even thinks of cigarettes and now, suddenly, of Peter beside her in bed, the two of them smoking after sex a million zillion years ago.

"It isn't what," Dana points out. "It's who. It wasn't a meteor or a tractor that struck her down in the prime of her life. It was definitely a who." Her words sound silly, bouncing back at her from the thick night, and she crosses her arms over her chest. She

shakes her head to clear it, fighting the confusion, the helplessness of not remembering exactly what happened earlier that day. Surely Peter will notice; he is a lawyer after all. "I saw her right before she died."

He turns to look at her. She feels his eyes on the side of her face. "Oh, yeah? How come?"

"I was borrowing some sugar for dessert, but we didn't get that far. We started talking, and we just . . ." She inhales deeply, holding her breath. A sudden unexpected rage tickles the back of her throat.

"What about?"

"This and that." She almost says, *You!* She almost says, *We talked about the picture Celia took of you at a table in Gatsby's, leering down the blouse of your little tart of a secretary,* but she doesn't. Do people still say "tart," she wonders? She has always liked the word. It sounds like what it is.

"What were you going to make for dessert?" Peter puffs out a row of smoke circles and pushes himself up off the porch.

"Tarts," she says.

Peter snubs out his cigarette with the toe of a shiny, pricey shoe and stretches. "Let me put the car in the garage."

At first she'd thought Celia was crazy—that she'd doctored the photo somehow out of jealousy. Ronald seemed like such an unfun, squirrelly little guy, running to the sink to wash up after their introduction, his handshake like an eel sliding over her palm. Still, the hungry look in Peter's eyes was obvious, even in the totally inferior pixels of Celia's cell, so there was no denying what she saw, no matter how or why it came to sit amid the badly taken photos that rolled ad nauseam throughout the Pic File section of Celia's phone. "Look!" Celia had screeched that afternoon, stumbling across the room in her wedge shoes. Celia was only five-one

and had recently taken to pumping herself up on these silly shoes that, Dana thought, she hadn't mastered yet and so should save for emergencies.

"I'm looking," Dana told her. "They probably work together," and she vaguely remembers Celia making an unflattering, horsey sound and tottering back to the kitchen.

"They're working *you* together," she'd said.

Dana watches her husband from the front porch; she wishes she could talk to him the way she used to. If she could, she'd tell him that not remembering everything she did that afternoon terrifies her—these blank spots. She would say she's lately felt the familiar and unnerving energy of her madness nudging at the edges of her brain, pulsing against the backs of her eyes; she'd share with him the doubts and questions jammed inside her, but she doesn't. She can't. Celia's voice rattles in her brain, how she stood in the doorway to the kitchen, how she said, "Peter looked at me like he'd slit my throat if he had the chance." For a moment Dana sees a coldness in his eyes that makes her turn away.