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Opening Extract from...

Sunset City

Written by Melissa Ginsburg

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SUNSET CITY

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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

to Chris

Where are the arrows that have bandages
Instead of feathers at their ends

BILL KNOTT

SUNSET CITY

CHAPTER ONE

It had rained hard through the night and now the water raced and swirled, overflowing the ditch in front of my building. Houston was always flooding, the whole city built atop paved wetlands. The storm kept the sky dark, and the streetlights glowed through the morning. I stepped into my rubber boots and splashed to the barbecue shack around the corner. I ordered a baked potato filled with butter and sour cream and bacon and slow-smoked brisket, then bought beer at the liquor store next door. On the walk home, the temperature began to rise and moisture thickened the air.

As I approached my building I noticed a guy on my landing. I didn't recognize him. I figured he must have the wrong apartment.

"Who are you looking for?" I called to him.

"Charlotte Ford," the man said.

He stood under the awning above my door, a curtain of rain enclosing him on three sides. He had rough, dark features: hooded eyes, strong jaw, and a blunt Irish nose that softened his appearance. I liked how he said my name.

"That's me," I said. "Have we met?"

"No."

He stood aside to let me out of the downpour. We crowded into the space, walls of water around us, while I dug for my keys. Rain fell from his hair onto his nose and he wiped it away. I smiled without meaning to, because he was so handsome and close. I got the door open and backed into the apartment, set my food on the front table.

"Detective Ash," he said. "HPD."

In an instant I thought of every law I ever broke, trying to figure out how much trouble I was in. Cops always scared the shit out of me—a reflex from the old days, from when I was dealing.

"You're Charlotte Ford?" he said.

I nodded.

"Could I come in?" he said.

"Okay," I said, pretending to be calm.

He stepped inside and glanced around. We were both dripping water on the floor. I took my shopping bags into the kitchen, stashed the beer and the food in the fridge. The detective followed and leaned against the wall, watching me. He took up too much space in the room. I felt claustrophobic, trapped. I was sweating in my raincoat, bright red rubber, its canvas lining dotted with unicorns.

"You know Danielle Reeves?" he said.

"Yeah, I know Danielle."

I should have figured it had to do with her. Danielle was my oldest friend, the only person in the world who understood where I'd come from. I'd hardly seen her in the last few years, but that didn't matter. I was ready to bail her out, lie, provide an alibi—whatever she might need. She was my friend. I would protect her.

"What happened?" I said.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," he said. "Danielle Reeves is dead."

"What?" I said.

"Danielle is dead," the detective repeated.

"Dead?"

"She was murdered," he said, watching me carefully. "Let's sit down."

We went to the living room and I sat on the couch. He took the chair by the window. A watery spill of streetlight outlined his face.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Yes."

"That's crazy. I just spoke to her."

"When was that?"

"Two days ago. Sunday evening. We met for a drink."

"And yesterday?" he said.

"Yesterday, no, I didn't see her. I haven't talked to her since Sunday."

"Where were you last night?"

"Here. It was raining. I didn't go out."

"Can anybody confirm that?"

I shook my head. He wrote in a notebook. I became aware of the shattering rain on the cars outside. I felt for a cigarette in the pocket of my raincoat. Water dripped from it and soaked the upholstery. I always took off my raincoat and hung it on the hook by the door. Why hadn't that happened? My mind rushed, confused, like the current in the gutter—I couldn't get hold of a thought.

I lit the cigarette, took a drag. The smoke hovered around my head, weighed down by humidity.

Ash said, "Danielle's mother tells me you and Danielle are old friends."

I tried to speak but my throat constricted, and I began sobbing. I observed myself, curious and dismayed. I didn't even understand the situation, yet here I was crying in front of a stranger. None of it made sense. My cigarette fell from my hands. The detective picked it up and stubbed it in the ashtray on the windowsill. A part of my brain thought of how I must look: no makeup, snot, the terrible sounds coming from my throat. I grew more and more embarrassed, which made it harder to compose myself. It took a while before I could breathe normally.

The detective stared at me like you would a sculpture, without caring what it thought. What he was saying about Danielle, it couldn't be real. It didn't make sense. She had already survived all the drugs and prison. She was finally doing okay.

"She can't be dead," I said.

"She is, Ms. Ford."

"Not murdered. It's ridiculous. If she was going to die it would've happened before."

"What do you mean?" the detective said.

"Forget it," I said.

He wrote in his notebook again and spoke. "Tell me about the night you saw Danielle."

"We met for a drink."

"Was that a regular thing?"

"Not exactly," I said. "We sort of lost touch."

"When?"

I looked away, said nothing. It was a few years back, in the middle of the drugs and her arrest, but I was not about to talk about that with this guy.

"When she went to prison?" he asked.

I hated that he knew that about her. I saw her from his

perspective—a stripper, a drug addict, a felon. I could see the judgment in his eyes, the dismissal.

"You don't understand," I said.

"What do I not understand?" he said.

"She's not a junkie or some stripper whore. That's bullshit."

"Ms. Ford, take it easy. I'm trying—"

"Leave her alone. You can't assume, because she went to prison—you don't know anything about her!"

I hadn't meant to stand up, or to talk so loud. The muscles in my legs tensed and trembled. I wanted to kick something, to run and run.

"Okay," the detective said. He stood, too. He didn't look friendly anymore. "Come with me," he said.

"Where? Why?"

"To the station."

"Are you arresting me?"

"Not unless I have to."

He took my arm and pushed me to the door, waited while I closed and locked it. We went to his car, a green SUV parked in the middle of the street, alongside the deep gutter. I stepped in a puddle and water filled my boots. He opened the passenger-side door and stood there until I got in. He silently steered to a strip mall on Richmond and parked in a lot full of cop cars. Inside he guided me past a cluster of uniformed guys and a roomful of desks. Benches lined one wall. A black kid, about fifteen years old, sat at one end, wrists cuffed, looking at the floor, at his untied shoes. Loud and ugly, the place banged against my eyes. The detective showed me into a dank windowless room with a table and a chair and a camera mounted inside a steel cage. The lights buzzed louder in here.

"Wait here," he said.

He left, closing the door behind him. The molded plastic chair was missing one of the bolts that attached it to the metal legs, and it rocked and bent as I shifted my weight. The walls were green concrete blocks, interrupted only by the door and a dark mirror across from it. I glanced at my reflection once—my face pale and bedraggled, strands of wet hair stuck to my cheek—and didn't look again. I kept thinking, I shouldn't be here. There's been a mistake. I got out my phone and tried to call Michael, my boyfriend. I wished I were with him in his cozy apartment, or back at home, or anywhere else, really. But it was no good, I couldn't get any cell reception.

A crack in the cement floor showed where the foundation had shifted. Damp seeped in and I remembered the rain outside. The ceiling lights hummed, muting the distant voices and ringing phones. No way could Danielle be dead. She was the most alive person I knew.

The detective came in with a chair and a manila file folder.

"I'm not interested in judging your friend. I'm not making any assumptions about her," he said. "You're wrong about that."

He opened his folder and slid some photographs across the table. One fell on the floor and I bent to pick it up. He watched me, his arms crossed, his foot tapping the floor.

"Nobody," he said, "no matter who they were, what they did, should go through this. It was terrible, what happened to Danielle. I am trying to find out who killed her. I'm not judging her. I'm looking for information."

I examined the picture in my hand. Meaningless shapes and colors arranged themselves and I saw a person, and blood. Lots of blood. My eyes went out of focus again and I dropped the picture. He handed me another one, a close up of Danielle's face, puffy and covered in brown blotches. I recognized her jawline, and her arm in the foreground of the photograph, bruised

and blotchy, the fingers curled. One long nail hung broken, still attached by glue to a corner of the nail bed. The photographs had been taken in a hotel room: a lamp, a seascape screwed into the wall. In places brown blood obscured everything.

"It was a blunt instrument," he said. "It was heavy."

The next one showed her chest, pushed in and misshapen. Her fake boobs sat on top of the wrecked body, intact, pointing the wrong way. Blood soaked her blouse.

"Broken ribs," he said. "The bone shards punctured her lung. She could have died from that or the blood loss, we're still trying to determine that. Some of the injuries are postmortem. Do you understand what that means, Ms. Ford? The person who did this kept beating her after she was dead."

I closed my eyes and tried to breathe. My mouth flooded with saliva.

"You're not gonna throw up, are you?" he said.

He grabbed the wastebasket and set it down next to me. I gripped the table's edge and stood. I had to get out, get away from those pictures.

"I don't feel right," I said, but I couldn't hear myself because of the traffic sounds loud in my ears. I saw white.

When I regained consciousness I seemed to be lying on the floor. I couldn't hear. Nausea circled my body. The detective stood far above me, and I watched a uniformed cop hand him some brown paper towels and a cup of water. My head hurt. My arm hurt. I touched my head and my fingers came away wet.

"I don't think it's bad," the detective said to the other cop. "The head always bleeds a lot." He knelt beside me and said my name. "Ms. Ford? Charlotte? Can you focus on my hand? Follow my hand with your eyes."

His features were indistinct, backlit by the paneled lights in the ceiling. I tried to speak but the sounds scraped.

"I'm gonna sit you up, okay?" he said.

The detective lifted me by the shoulders while trying to support my head. He held the paper towels firmly to my brow, where it hurt the most. I blinked, leaning against him, and tried to focus my vision. He propped me against the wall and straightened my legs in front of me.

"Go get a soft drink," he told the other guy. "And a candy bar."

The detective took some clean paper towels from the pile next to me on the floor and replaced the bloody ones. I didn't mind sitting there while he took care of me. As long as I wasn't looking at those pictures anymore.

"It shouldn't need stitches," he said.

The other cop came in with a Hawaiian Punch and a bag of animal crackers. The detective popped the top on the can and held it to my lips. "Small sips, Charlotte. Good. You're all right, you'll be fine."

He lifted the towel from my face and said, "Your color's coming back. Put your arms around my neck. I think you can get up now. Ready? I'll help you."

I leaned into him. He smelled like rain and skin with sharp spice underneath. He eased me into the chair, took my hands, and placed them in my lap.

"You hit the table on your way down," he said. "Drink."

I took another sip of punch.

"We'll get you home soon, all right? You faint a lot?"

"No."

"If you feel dizzy, lean over. Rest your head between your knees. Don't get up so fast next time."

"Okay," I said.

"I'm sorry about the pictures. You all right now? Enough to talk?"

I nodded.

"Okay. You haven't seen Danielle lately, until Sunday."

"Yeah."

"Why Sunday?"

I took a deep ragged breath and began.

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Ash listened as I told him what happened Sunday. Danielle's mother Sally had called me that morning and insisted that I come by her office. I was surprised to hear from her. I didn't even know she had my number. But I heard the urgency in her voice and agreed to meet. I was curious, I guess. That, and I had nothing else to do. It was my day off from the coffee shop where I worked, and I'd thought I'd spend it with Michael, but he wasn't answering my texts.

Sally always was hard to say no to. I drove to her office building, a glass tower that rose in the Houston sky. Sally stepped outside and waved. She was dressed in tailored shorts, low mules, and a printed jersey blouse. Even in casual clothes she looked intimidating, rich.

"Hi, Charlotte," she said. "Thanks so much for stopping by."

"Sure," I said. I had always felt awkward around Sally. "It's no problem."

Our footsteps echoed over the polished stone surfaces to a bank of elevators. We went to her floor and she led me past a set of double doors, a reception desk, and a pair of leather

couches. On the wall hung a series of photographs depicting various stages of the Rice Hotel revitalization project. Years ago, downtown was a deserted wasteland after five o'clock. No one believed that people might live there or go there at night. Sally's company had pioneered the downtown gentrification, changed the city, and made millions. Now urban lofts sprouted everywhere, even in the suburbs.

The air-conditioning froze my sweat, and goose bumps rose along my arms. We walked down the hall to her office. A huge window overlooked the building's atrium, filled with large leafy plants, ferns and birds of paradise. Filtered sunlight fell in patches on the sleek office furniture. "Have a seat," she said, indicating a pair of plush chairs. We each took one.

"How are you, sweetie?" she said. "How's school going?"

"I'm taking this semester off," I said. "Taking a break."

"I wish Danielle had gone to college," Sally said. "She never has done things the regular way."

"I guess not," I said.

"How is Danielle, anyhow?" She tried to sound casual. Soft lines showed around her eyes and mouth.

"Good, I guess. We don't really hang out."

Sally nodded. "I haven't seen her since before she . . . left," she said.

I ignored Sally's clumsy euphemism for prison. I wasn't surprised Danielle had stayed away from her. She and Sally had never been close.

"Charlotte, I need her phone number."

"You don't have it?" I said, surprised.

"She changed it. I have the old one, from when she was on my cell phone plan. We haven't talked in a long time."

I did know how to get in touch with Danielle—we'd run into each other at a restaurant a couple of months back and

exchanged numbers. But if Danielle wanted to avoid Sally, no way was I getting in the middle of it. I frowned, looking out the window. So strange to see all the tropical plants growing indoors. It seemed backwards.

"Charlotte, I know this puts you in an awkward position. But I really need your help. I need to get ahold of her. My aunt died."

"Gosh," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Well, she'd been ill a long time. The problem is, she left Danielle an inheritance. Now the probate lawyers need to talk to her, there's paperwork to do, and she's nowhere to be found. It's a bit embarrassing."

She said this last in a whisper, leaning forward, conspiratorial.

"Please help me," she said. As she spoke she slid a white envelope over to me.

"What's this?" I said.

"Open it."

Inside the envelope was a sheaf of hundred-dollar bills. I counted them twice—a thousand dollars.

"I know you can use it," Sally said. "I just need her phone number. Please."

There was no way I could pass up that much money. I searched through my phone for Danielle's number and read it off to Sally.

"Perfect, darling, thank you so much. I'll call her tonight, as soon as I'm finished up here."

"Thank you," I said. "For the money."

She stood. "Oh, sweetie. It's been lovely to see you. You get prettier and prettier. Can you find your way out?"

"Yeah, sure," I said.

She hugged me goodbye, smothering me again in her expen-

sive perfume, her aura of wealth and power. I hurried past the smooth stone walls of the lobby and out to the parking lot, with its clean painted lines slanting in parallels. I sat in my hot car for a minute, letting my skin thaw before turning the ignition. I felt dazed by the heat and the money in my pocket.

I texted Danielle immediately. *It's Charlotte. Have to see you. It's important. Drink?* She texted me back and we made plans to meet at six at a new bar called the Mockingbird.

Later I drove through traffic to the bar, which occupied a corner strip mall on Westheimer, along with a dry cleaners, one window-broken vacancy, and an accountant's office called Tax Mex. Inside I ignored the cheap specials and ordered Maker's, rocks; I was rich. Danielle showed up late, when I was on my second drink. She was gorgeous, as always, but in a weird, doll-like way: long streaked hair, too much makeup. Her tits looked bigger, fake.

"Charlotte, wow," she said. "It's nice to see you." She gave me a half hug, kissed the air near my cheek.

"You look great," I said.

"Thanks. So do you."

She ordered a peach martini from the bartender and I got another whiskey.

"So what's going on?" she said.

"Don't get upset."

"Uh-oh, Charlotte, what?"

"Your mom paid me a thousand dollars for your phone number," I said.

"What?"

"Yeah." I handed her Sally's envelope. "Here's your half."

She opened the flap and thumbed through the bills. "You gave her my number?" she said.

"Yeah. Because she gave me *a thousand dollars*."

"Does she want me to have this?"

"She doesn't know."

Danielle squinted at me. "Then why are you giving it to me?"

"I figured, worst-case scenario, you could use it to get a new phone. It felt weird to keep it and not warn you."

"Thanks."

"Free money, right? Why not."

She set the envelope on the bar and centered her drink on top of it. A sticky pink ring dampened the paper.

"Fucking Sally," she said.

"I know."

"She's ridiculous."

"I know," I said. "I would have given up your digits for a lot less."

"Shut up," Danielle said, laughing.

"Has she called you yet?"

"No. What does she want?"

"She wants to tell you your great-aunt died."

"Aunt Baby? God, we used to go to her place when I was little. She lived out in Tomball."

"She left you something in her will. You'll have to see the lawyer and sign papers, I guess."

"God, Sally *and* her lawyer? The worst."

"I'm sorry about your aunt."

Danielle shrugged. "I barely remember her. Still, it's sad, I guess. Anyways. It's great to see you. What have you been doing all this time? I'm surprised we haven't run into each other more."

"I guess I stay in the neighborhood a lot. I've been working at Common Grounds on Shepherd. The coffee shop."

"Oh, I know that place. I never go in there. So what else? Are you seeing anybody?"

I laughed. "All you care about is boys," I said. "But yes, yeah, I have a boyfriend. He's in a band, he's nice, we've been together about a year."

"Is it serious?"

"I don't know, maybe. Kind of serious, yeah. How about you? How've you been?"

She rested her hand on the edge of the bar. I'd forgotten her elegance, her perfect posture. Her wrists were delicate and freckled.

"I'm doing okay. Good, actually. It really is nice to see you. I can finally have a chance to say thank you for your letters."

I'd written to her in prison but never heard back.

"I wondered if you got them," I said.

"I got them. It was really nice of you. They cheered me up."

"Was it awful in there?" I asked. "I'm so sorry you had to go through all that."

"It was, yeah. I don't want to talk about it. But it was good in some ways, too. I got clean. It's been almost three years."

"That's great. I'm so glad," I said.

"I wanted to write you back," she said. "It was NA. They really pressure you to cut ties with the people you did drugs with. To make it easier to kick."

"It's okay," I said. "I mean, whatever helps, right?"

"Yeah."

We sipped our drinks for a minute.

"So what else have you been up to?" I said. "Since you got out?"

"First thing I did was go on a diet. I got fat in there."

"You did not. I don't believe it."

"It's true!" Danielle said. "They gave us mashed potatoes every fucking day. I gained like five pounds."

"Oh no, five pounds." I rolled my eyes.

"Charlotte, listen. I'm glad you texted me."

"Well, of course. How could I not?"

"No, I mean I missed you. A lot. I know I screwed things up."

"No more than me," I said, flustered. "You had bad luck, getting caught. I've missed you, too."

"You're so sweet," she said, putting her arm around me.

"We went through a lot of shit together. I'm glad you're doing okay now."

"Me, too," she said, turning to kiss me on the cheek.

A slim, dark-haired girl came up behind us. She looked about our age, mid-twenties, and pretty. Her lips twisted in a half smile.

"Aww, you guys are adorable," the girl said.

"Audrey, hey," Danielle said, letting go of me. "Charlotte, this is my friend Audrey."

I felt both relieved and irritated at the interruption.

"Hi," I said. "It's nice to meet you."

"You, too," Audrey said.

"Charlotte is my oldest, dearest friend," Danielle said. "We haven't seen each other in ages. We have to catch up."

"How about a drink?" Audrey said. "Another round?"

"Sure," Danielle said.

Audrey ordered whiskey, same as me. The bartender brought our drinks, sloshing Danielle's martini as he set it down.

Danielle turned to me. "Did you hear about Joey?" she said.

"No," I said.

"He got locked up. Out west. New Mexico, I think."

"Who's Joey?" Audrey asked.

"My boyfriend from before," Danielle said. "We used to, when we'd fuck, we used to try to come at the same time, and right at that second we would shoot each other up. I thought we'd get married. I never had anything like that with anybody else."

"That's insane," Audrey said. "You're insane."

"I loved him," Danielle said. "Fuck, I loved him. We were so in love it was crazy."

"Are you serious?" Audrey said. "Yeah, that's fucking crazy!"

"We were fucking romantic," Danielle said. She rubbed a mark on her French manicure. She was definitely getting tipsy. Showing off a little, too. I couldn't tell if she was trying to impress me or Audrey. Maybe both of us.

"Weirdo," Audrey said.

"Tell me," I said, "how do y'all two know each other?"

"From work," Audrey said.

"Don't tell her," Danielle said to Audrey.

"Don't tell me what?" I said.

"Yeah, don't tell her what?" Audrey said.

"You'll freak out," Danielle said to me.

"No, she won't," Audrey said. "You're being paranoid."

"Fine," Danielle said. "There's this guy named Brandon, he works at the cable access channel, Mediasource. He's a filmmaker and he does programming and stuff. We work with him on private projects. We're models."

"She's so weird about it," Audrey said. "We're not models, but they call it modeling. It's for a porn site. Videos."

"You're porn stars?"

"We're not *stars,*" Danielle said.

"Speak for yourself," Audrey said.

She tossed her hair and pursed her lips, arching her back in a pinup pose. I laughed.

"Wow," I said. "How does it work? You fuck people and there's a camera?"

"See?" Danielle said to Audrey. "She's freaking out."

"I'm not freaking out," I said.

And I wasn't. I wasn't even surprised.

"What's it like?" I asked Audrey.

"It's a job. It's work. There's a lot of waiting around, stopping and starting. The guys take forever. Or the Viagra wears off."

"Yeah," Danielle said. "And you have to look perfect no matter what."

"You have to try not to look bored," Audrey said. "Even though it's really boring. Mostly, anyway."

"It's easier than dancing," Danielle said. "At least you always get paid."

"Plus Brandon's nice," Audrey said.

"Yeah, he's not a douche bag like you'd think," Danielle said. "He also makes art movies. He's super talented."

"You should come to his screening," Audrey said. "He's showing one of his experimental films next week. There'll be a reception. Free booze."

"Sounds cool," I said. "What's the website called?"

"Can we talk about something else, please?" Danielle said.

"Come on," I said.

"SweetDreamz," Audrey said. "With a Z. SweetDreamz.net."

"It's a dumb name," Danielle said.

"So what?" Audrey said.

"I am totally looking it up as soon as I get home," I said, teasing.

"Come on, don't," Danielle said.

"Oh my god," I said. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding. I won't."

"You should, though," Audrey said.

Danielle rolled her eyes. "Enough. We have to go. We're meeting people for dinner."

I wondered if she was running away from the conversation. I decided not to bring up her job next time we met.

"Well, it's great to see you," I said.

"Me, too," Danielle said. "This was fun. I'll see you at the screening?"

"Sure," I said. "Text me the details."

Audrey rose and smiled.

"Bye," she said. "It was nice meeting you."

Danielle got up, swinging her handbag onto her shoulder. She left the envelope of cash on the bar.

"Hey, you're forgetting this," I said, picking it up. It was soggy with condensation from her glass.

"Keep it," she said.

"No. That's nuts."

"I don't need it. I don't want anything from *her*."

I recognized the tone she reserved for Sally, full of contempt. I knew her well enough to let the subject drop. I nodded, put the envelope in my bag, and waved goodbye. At least I'd tried. Not that I minded keeping the cash. Danielle was always weird about money. I guess it means something different when you grow up rich.

In the dank concrete police station Detective Ash asked me questions. As long as I kept talking he seemed pleased, and I didn't have to think about those photographs in the manila folder. As long as I kept talking, Danielle seemed alive.

"What was she doing in that motel room?" Ash said.

"I don't know."

"Was she seeing anybody?"

"She didn't mention anyone."

"Who did she meet at the motel?"

"I don't know," I said. "I told you everything she said."

"Was she turning tricks?" he said.

"What?" I said.

He regarded me with this patient unwavering gaze, oddly intimate.

"I don't know," I said.

"Did she ever do anything like that before?"

"Sort of," I said.

"Tell me about that."

"This was years ago," I said. "We were like nineteen."

"Okay."

"She had a job dancing at Dolls. This regular at the club, this rich guy, he was really into her. He offered to give her two thousand dollars to spend the night with him."

"What happened?"

"She did it. It was a lot of money. And he was nice. She liked him, too. I mean, she knew him, it's not like he was a stranger."

"What was his name?" he said.

"Tom, Tim, maybe. I can't remember."

"Where did they spend the night?" he said.

"A fancy hotel. He was rich."

"Was that the only time?"

"No, she saw him again. A few times, I guess. It didn't seem dangerous. Danielle felt like she'd pulled off a scam, in a way. All that cash in one night—she said it was easy."

I remembered thinking it wasn't that big a deal. I might have done the same thing, if I'd had the opportunity.

"Were there others?" he said.

"I don't know," I said. "We stopped hanging out."

"How did she get along with her mother?" he said.

"She didn't. Danielle hated Sally."

He waited for me to say more. I hesitated. Even if she was dead, they were still her secrets.

"Talk to me, Charlotte. You're helping Danielle by talking to me."

His hand touched my arm. His warmth in the cold room felt like a terrible kindness.

"Sally expected Danielle to go to some fancy school and join the Junior League or whatever. Danielle wasn't interested in that world."

The detective nodded, made some notes.

"What else?" he said.

"Isn't that enough?" I said.

"You tell me."

"Sally worked all the time. She was never around. They weren't close, that's all."

He kept me there a while longer, asking question after question, repeating himself. I went through the same information three, four times. I was too tired to cry. And finally, it ended. He called to the other cop, who walked me out to a squad car. Ash stood by the building with his arms at his sides while bugs danced under the yellow streetlight. It had stopped raining. The police car smelled of old socks, dirty plastic. I stared out the window the whole way home.