Jeff

Abbott

CUT AND RUN



Ellen who became Eve

This is how you disappear.

First you make sure you don't go anyplace where you ever went before, if you can help it. You like Vegas? Forget about slots and Wayne Newton for the next five years. Love shopping in New York? Uh-oh, no way, baby, your shadow don't darken Broadway. Because when you step out of life, when you step away from the world you made, you don't step back into any old footprint. No. That's where they look first.

So those many years ago, when I left Babe and my sons behind in Port Leo, I went to Montana. I can't stand cold weather, never liked it. I'm a coast girl, love the kiss of the sun on my skin. But coasts were forbidden to me right off. Babe knew I loved to fish and lie on the warm sands. I don't think I had ever said the word 'Montana' out loud before I ran. Not sure I could find it on the map, although I wouldn't mix it up with Wyoming, because I know Wyoming is square.

I changed my hair color to red, because back then nobody ever thought you dyed your hair red on purpose. You usually dyed it brown to get away from red. And I dropped the Texas drawl, fast. Tried to talk like a newscaster. Said 'you guys' instead of y'all, which was harder than it sounds. Told people I was from California, because it's full of people originally from somewhere else. And hid a loaded gun in an old suitcase because insurance is a necessary evil in this world.

Jim was useless and he didn't like the cold. He said it made his balls hurt. He was afraid to look for a job, saying that the Dallas papers would have put his face all over the news wires and the TV. I sure never saw jack-squat about him in the Bozeman paper.

Twice I drove over to the university library, where they took the *Dallas Morning News*, but after the first week of headlines like MISSING EXEC ALLEGEDLY EMBEZZLED HALF MILLION there was no talk of him, no pictures of him. The one picture they ran of him was when he got made SVP at the bank and his smile's too tight, his hair a little too big. And never a word about me. The library didn't take the Corpus Christi paper, where I might have been mentioned. So I wrote the headlines in my own mind: MOTHER OF SIX MISSING. It's less glamorous than embezzling. And ten times worse.

But, in those Dallas papers, never a mention of me in connection with Jim the embezzling banker. Which was how I liked it.

After reading the paper in Bozeman, I would drink a cup of coffee and smoke and try not to think about the boys. Not think about my four oldest going off to the movies with my friend Georgie, me kissing them for the last time and them not knowing it. Not think about my littlest babies, Mark and Whit, running around in the backyard, chasing each other and laughing, trying to get them settled for a nap in their beds, Whit standing on the stairs, saying he didn't want to nap, asking me where I was going. I put him back in the bed and I didn't look back. Cried once on the drive north, for twenty minutes, all I allowed myself.

If Whit had asked once more where I was going, maybe I would have stayed. I thought walking away from the boys would be easy, the shackles of their grasping little hands falling off my wrists and ankles. Hardest thing I ever did. I wanted for one terrible second to take one with me, take Whit, he was standing right there, a little mirror of my face. Finally one who looked like me after five copies of Babe. But then the police and Babe never would have given up on looking for me. Ever. And Jim wouldn't have wanted a toddler making the most of his terrible twos with us on the run.

Popping out six, you think that'd be seared into my head, pain and happiness hot to the touch, but with each passing day they seemed more like little ghosts, boys that belonged to someone else. I tried not to remember them because it's easier. I had a new resolve to make my life easier.

But easy was not Jim.

He started drinking one afternoon in my motel room, crying after the fifth of whiskey was half gone, moaning and bitching about missing the warm sun of Dallas, missing his favorite Mexican restaurants, missing his big-ass house in University Park, missing his old comfortable life he'd stolen from himself.

I watched him sip his whiskey. I lit a cigarette. I quit smoking when I had the boys and now I liked a little knife of flame in my hand.

'Shit, shit, shit,' Jim said. He had the soul of a poet.

Jim lacked, always, a certain self-control required for living in the world. He stole a half million from his bank, and now was too consumed by guilt and regret to move. If you're gonna take an action, be ready for your own reaction. I'd agreed to go on the run with him and I'd left a family behind. He'd left a coke-snorting bachelor life behind. I was coping a lot better than he was.

'I got to go in a few minutes,' I said. I worked at an old neighborhood bar, serving beers to Bozeman's inert. Nothing to do with money or bookkeeping, my old job from before I got married. My bar-crows were not question-askers. I liked it. Gave me a few hours' escape from Jim and his moods.

'Go,' he said. 'Go and I'll be fine.'

'Fine at the bottom of the bottle.'

'I'm depressed, Ellie.'

'I noticed.' I got up and made instant coffee for him, knowing he'd let it cool in the cup and then pour it down the sink.

'The money,' he said. 'I didn't just steal it from the bank.'

I waited, the instant coffee jar in my hand.

'I stole most of it from the Bellinis,' he said. 'Sort of.'

'Who are the Bellinis?'

'People I worked for. On the side. They're from Detroit.' He swallowed hard, ran a hand along his lips. 'I cleaned up money for them at the bank.'

'People from Detroit,' I said, 'with an Italian surname. You better be kidding me.'

'I'm not. They're gonna be looking for me.'

I sat down on the mattress. 'Why didn't you tell me this before?'

'I . . . thought you wouldn't come with me.' He took a deep

swig from the whiskey bottle, left a little amber drop sitting on his lip. He had the palest lips I'd ever seen on a live person.

'The money was evidence,' he said. 'Of me making it legit for them, transferring it through a series of accounts. The Feds would have nailed me. So . . . I took it.'

'Jim, maybe we should go back to Dallas, then. Give the money to the Feds. The mob's gonna chase you harder than the Feds ever will.'

He looked at me, and an ugly silence hung in the air and the frown on his face turned mean. He grabbed my wrist and flexed his thin fingers back and forth, digging his nails into my flesh, my veins and bones.

'Jim, stop. That hurts.' I kept my voice calm.

'You want to go back to Texas? That what you saying, Ellie?'

'It's one option. Let go of my hand, please.'

'You know what Tommy Bellini will do to me?' He tightened the vise grip on my wrist, grinning, like nothing would give him more pleasure than to break my bones. 'I won't be a smear on the wall when he's done.'

'Please let go.'

'You don't give a shit about what happens to me.' He pulled me into his sour breath. 'You missing those brats of yours?'

'No.' A cold sharpness slid along my ribs, my guts.

'You are,' he said. 'You're missing those brats of yours, you want to go home. You go home, you're gonna talk. About me.'

'You're drunk.' I grabbed the bottle of whiskey to bring it down on his head.

He stood, yanked the bottle away from me, let go of my wrist. Pushed me down onto the bed and I thought: *This doesn't do, not for one goddamned minute.*

'You get this straight, Ellen,' Jim said. 'You made your choice, you aren't going to see your kids again.'

'I know that.'

'You more than know it, you live it.' He took a hit from the bottle, worked the hooch along his gums and teeth like mouthwash, and he looked so sad and ugly and pathetic I nearly laughed at him.

'I don't want nothing to happen to those kids,' he said.

That burnt-smell silence got thick again. I quit rubbing my wrist.

'You threatening my kids, Jim?' I said it soft like I didn't quite understand, like it was an idea too left-field for human talk.

'You get an idea, Ellen, about calling the Feds, going back to Texas, I call a buddy of mine in Corpus. He's good at' – a pause – 'creating situations. Beaches are real dangerous for little kids. Cramps while swimming. Riptides.' He even gave me a smile, the drunk.

I may be a bad mother, but I'm still a mother, and I stared at him in rising horror as I rubbed my wrist. 'Don't do that, Jim. Please.'

'Then don't you screw with me, okay?' he said.

I let him believe I was afraid of him. 'They're little kids.'

'And you're the mother of the year.' Now I heard a twitch in his voice, shame that he'd had to resort to threatening children. He favored himself with another big gulp of Tennessee juice. 'So don't talk Texas. We stay here. The Bellinis aren't ever going to find us here.'

'Okay,' I said. But not okay. I headed for work and left him drinking. I wondered, what if he's not bluffing. The thought preyed on me like a fever. I decided to call Babe, tell him to take the boys away from Port Leo. Picked up a pay phone, dialed. No answer. I couldn't decide if that pissed me off or not. Shouldn't they all be sitting at home, waiting for me to call? I hung up, went to the bar, the start of one piledriver of a headache working underneath my forehead.

I didn't want to deal with Babe. You should solve your problems directly. That night was quiet at the bar and I had time to think, to construct four different plans and decide on one while I collected beer mugs and ignored a Giants baseball game showing on the television through a thin haze of cigarette smoke.

I returned to the dumpy motel, smelling of cigs and beer. Jim wasn't in my room. We have separate rooms. I insisted on it, trying to keep our new identities separate, too, but he liked to lie on my bed and wait for me.

I had a key to his room. He lay sprawled on his bed, passed out,

reeking of whiskey and onion and hamburger. A globby mess of French fries, greasy on a paper bag, lay on the table.

'Jim,' I said. 'You awake?' Poked at him with my fingers. In his cheek, his throat, his stomach, his crotch. Let my fingers linger on his sweet spot, see if there was any response to my tickle.

Nothing; a little dribble of spit tracked down from his mouth, drying on unshaven cheek.

'Don't you threaten my kids, you asshole,' I said.

He didn't move, gave off a rough, sour snore.

So I went back to my room. I opened the little suitcase under the bed and got the gun I'd bought on my way to Dallas from Port Leo, paying cash, using an assumed name. Wiped the gun carefully with an old T-shirt, then wrapped the material around the grip but not the barrel. I walked back down the hall. The silence of the motel pressed against my ears, the quiet of empty rooms. I stuck the gun in his slack, open mouth, nestled it between his teeth and gave the trigger a little squeeze.

I jumped at the sound, more than he did.

I carefully put the gun in his hand, unwrapped the T-shirt from around it, pressed his fingertips on the grip. I went back to my room. It was one in the morning. I waited for someone to respond to the shot, but the motel was still.

No distant whine of sirens approached. I took a shower, washing the bar smells out of my hair, and packed. We'd paid cash for the rooms, a week in advance each time, and were still good for two days. So I took the money Jim stole from the bank and the mobsters, and I drove the car we'd rented to an all-night diner. I ate fried eggs and toast heavy with strawberry jam, and drank coffee, watching the night against the windows go gray, then orange. Pretty, but not as pretty as the sun rising out of the Gulf. Once I thought I saw my sons' faces in the glass, little ghosts again, but it was all the nerve juice pouring through me. Missing the boys really badly but at the same time not wanting to see them, knowing that chapter of my life was closing. I smiled at the boys and their little blank faces vanished in the dark glass.

At seven that morning I drove to the Bozeman airport, left the rental car in the lot. On the radio there was nothing about a suicide

– or a murder – at the Pine Cone Motel. Jim is apparently sleeping in late. The maid won't show up to straighten the room until ten or so, and I'd left the DO NOT DISTURB hanger on Jim's door. She won't knock until two. Perhaps not until tomorrow. Our maid was not the poster child for initiative.

An hour later I was on a plane, flying to Denver under the name of Eve Michaels, the name I'd used since leaving Texas, with five hundred thousand in cash in my checked luggage, praying to God they don't lose my suitcase. It's mostly businessmen on this flight, not as crowded as I would like; I might be remembered more easily. A gap-toothed man next to me asked me what I do, flirting way too early in the morning. I want to say I abandoned my family and killed my rotten mean lover and stole his money. You? You sell insurance? That's fascinating.

But I don't, of course. I said I work in a bar and I'm flying to Denver to see my boyfriend, who's on the semipro wrestling circuit. Gap-tooth lost interest and I closed my eyes. Part of me still wanted to go home. Part of me didn't. And part of me worried that the men from Detroit Jim stole that money from won't stop because Jim's dead. They could come after me. It's funny, looking back now, I wasn't really too worried about the police. But this Tommy Bellini guy Jim was afraid of, he scared me.

A half million is a lot of money. But not enough to live on for the rest of your days, not in style. So I wonder if there's a deal I can cut that will open the right door for me, into a life a hell of a lot more up my alley than raising six kids.

I sat that whole flight with my eyes closed, playing out the different twists and turns my life could take in the next few days.

I didn't stay long in the Denver airport. Grabbed my precious checked bag and fixed my makeup, and rented a car.

I headed east through the morning Denver traffic. For Detroit. Babe and the boys know I hate the cold. But the cold's where Tommy Bellini's at. And I needed a new best friend.

Thirty years ago, I thought Montana would be the last time I would ever need to disappear. I was wrong.