Excerpt from transcript of *Reconsidered: The Chuck Buhrman Murder,* Episode 1: "An Introduction to the Chuck Buhrman Murder," September 7, 2015

Charles "Chuck" Buhrman had no enemies. A mild-mannered professor of American history at a small midwestern liberal arts college, Chuck was respected by his colleagues and well liked by his students. Each year, students in the History Department at Elm Park College held an informal vote to determine their favorite professor, and each year, Chuck Buhrman was crowned the winner. By all accounts, he was similarly well regarded in the community of Elm Park, Illinois, where he made his home. People recalled his participation in thankless volunteer projects like organizing the annual town Halloween parade, selling raffle tickets to support the civic arts center, and manning the cash register at the library rummage sale. Even his family life seemed picturesque: a young, beautiful wife and a set of adoring, well-behaved daughters.

Chuck Buhrman was living the American Dream. But then, on October 19, 2002, this popular and congenial man met an untimely end—shot at point-blank range in the back of the head in his own kitchen.

Warren Cave, the seventeen-year-old next-door neighbor, was arrested and charged with the murder. He was convicted and is currently serving a life sentence.

Chuck Buhrman's murder was a shocking, senseless crime, but at least justice has been served, right?

Right?

But what if Warren Cave *didn't* do it? What if he's spending his life in prison for a murder he did not commit?

My name is Poppy Parnell, and this is *Reconsidered: The Chuck Buhrman*

Murder. I'm going to spend the next several weeks investigating these questions and others that may arise. My goal? To take a hard, unflinching look at the scant evidence that might have convicted an innocent man, and to perhaps uncover the truth—or put to rest any lingering doubts—about what really happened that fateful night in October 2002. I hope you'll join me for the ride.

chapter 1

Nothing good happens after midnight. At least that's what Aunt A used to tell us whenever we begged for later curfews. We would scoff and roll our eyes and dramatically pronounce she was ruining our social lives, but over time I came to see the wisdom in her words. Trouble is the only thing that occurs between midnight and sunrise.

So when my phone rang at three o'clock that morning, my first thought was, *Something bad has happened.*

I instinctively reached for Caleb, but my hand grasped only cool sheets. Momentary panic fluttered in my throat, but then I remembered Caleb was three weeks into a trip overseeing aid workers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Still half asleep, I dimly worked out it was eight o'clock in the morning there. Caleb must have forgotten about the time difference or miscalculated it. Frankly, neither mistake seemed like him, but I knew how draining these trips were on him.

The phone rang again and I snatched it up with a hurried greeting, eagerly anticipating Caleb's familiar Kiwi accent, the soft rumble of his voice saying, "Jo, love."

But there was nothing. I sighed in frustration. Caleb's calls from abroad were always marked with exasperating delays, echoes, and strange clicks, but they had been particularly difficult on this trip.

"Hello?" I tried again. "Caleb? . . . I think we have a bad connection."

But even as the words left my mouth, I noted the lack of static. The connection was crisp. So crisp, in fact, that I could hear the sound of someone breathing. And . . . something else. What was that? I strained to listen and thought I heard someone humming, the tune familiar but unplaceable. A warning tingle danced up my spine.

"Caleb," I said again, even though I was no longer convinced my boyfriend was on the other end of the line. "I'm going to hang up. If you can hear me, call me back. I miss you."

I lowered the phone, and in the second before I pushed the disconnect button, I heard a hauntingly familiar feminine voice quietly say, "I miss you, too."

I dropped the phone, my hand shaking and my heart thundering against my rib cage. *It was just a bad connection,* I told myself. Those had been my own words echoed back at me. There had been no "too." It was three in the morning, after all. It hadn't been her. It *couldn't* have been. It had been nearly ten years; she wouldn't call me now, not like this.

Something bad has happened.

I grabbed the phone and checked my call log, but there were no clues, just a vague *UNKNOWN CALLER*.

Something bad has happened, I thought again before sternly ordering myself to stop. It was only Caleb, only a bad transcontinental connection, nothing that hadn't happened before.

But it still took me two doses of NyQuil before I could fall back asleep.

It was almost eleven by the time I woke, and in the light of day, the mysterious early-morning phone call seemed like nothing more than a bad dream. I fired off a quick, confident email to Caleb (*Sorry we had such a bad connection last night. Call again soon. xoxo*) and laced up my running

shoes. I paused in the doorway of the Cobble Hill brownstone to chat about the weather with the elderly woman who lived on the first floor, and then took off toward the Brooklyn Heights Promenade.

When Caleb and I moved from Auckland to New York two years ago, I had imagined that glamour would infuse even the most mundane aspects of our lives. I had expected to be taking in cutting-edge art on my walk to the train, browsing heirloom tomatoes alongside Maggie Gyllenhaal at the Brooklyn farmers market, and admiring the expansive view of the Statue of Liberty as I jogged across the Brooklyn Bridge. In reality, the most street art I saw was chalk-drawn hopscotch boards and the occasional spray-painted tag on a trash can. I never purchased heirloom tomatoes at the farmers market because their cost was laughably astronomical, and the only celebrity I ever rubbed elbows with was a Real Housewife (who, I should note, took vocal offense to the price of those same tomatoes). As for jogging across the Brooklyn Bridge, it remained a good idea in theory but a terrible one in practice. The bridge was consistently clogged with camera-touting tourists, bicycles, and strollers. I found I much preferred the calm of the Promenade, with its wide path, notable lack of tourists, and similarly impressive view.

I arrived home sweaty and invigorated with just enough time to shower and fix a sandwich before I had to leave for my afternoon shift at the bookstore. Growing up, I had imagined myself wearing a suit and heels to work every day (the exact outfit fluctuated with my mood, but often resembled those of Christina Applegate's character in *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*). I would have been shocked to discover my nearly thirty-year-old self wore jeans and Chuck Taylors to work; teenaged me would no doubt have considered it a failure. But while I might not be on the path I had once envisioned, I was largely content working in the bookstore. Early on in our tenure in New York, I had used a temp agency to find some administrative positions, but they'd made me want to tear out my hair, and then I discovered that the bookstore down the

street was hiring. I started with a few hours a week, supplementing the income with a part-time gig as a barista, but over the last couple of years, I had increased my hours until it was a full-time position. I loved every minute I spent in the bookstore, loved being surrounded by stories and helping patrons select titles. When things were slow, I read the biographies of American presidents and told myself that someday I would finally put the history degree I had earned online to use.

That afternoon I was working with Clara, whose gorgeous Ethiopian features and impressive collection of literary-themed T-shirts I envied. Vivacious and warm, Clara was the closest thing I had to a friend in New York. Sometimes we took a yoga class or a run together; sometimes she invited me to see some friend or another in an off-off-off-Broadway play or at a poetry reading. Earlier in the summer, Caleb and I teamed up with Clara and her now ex-girlfriend for Tuesday-night trivia at a bar on Court Street, and those nights had been the highlight of my week.

The ex-girlfriend had begun calling Clara again, and, as we shelved a new shipment of books, Clara asked my help in decoding their latest conversation. As we debated whether "see you around" meant "let's make plans" or "maybe we'll run into each other," the door chimed with the arrival of customers, and we both looked up.

I don't believe in signs. I don't put stock in destiny, I don't worry if a black cat crosses my path, and I've only had my tarot read for laughs. But if there ever was a time to believe in omens, it was that afternoon, the echo of the strange voice on the phone tugging at my memory, when a woman stepped into the bookstore with a pair of twin daughters. My vision tilted and my knees went weak; I had to clutch a nearby table to avoid collapsing.

"Hi," the woman said. "I'm looking for Nancy Drew books. Do you carry them?"

I nodded mutely, unable to tear my eyes away from the twins. It wasn't that they looked like us, not at all. They were blond with freckled

cheeks and big dark eyes—near polar opposites of our ink-colored hair and blue eyes. Beyond that, the girls were clearly at odds, sulking and exchanging the occasional blow behind their mother's back. Lanie and I never fought like that. Not until we were older, that is. But there was something about them, an emotional charge they carried that robbed me of my senses.

"Sure," Clara said, stepping around me to their assistance. "Let me show you."

I excused myself to the bathroom to avoid staring at the girls. I pulled my phone from my pocket and checked the call log again. *UNKNOWN CALLER*. What if it hadn't been Caleb? Could it have been Lanie? It had been almost a decade since I had spoken to my sister; something *had* to be wrong if she was calling me.

By the time I emerged from the bathroom, the twins and their mother were gone.

"I know, right?" Clara said sympathetically. "Twins always give me the creeps, too. Probably residual trauma from watching *The Shining* at the tender age of eight."

"*The Shining*?" I repeated, still shaken. I had read the book, but couldn't recall any twins.

"You're kidding me. You've never seen *The Shining*? My older brothers watched it all the time. They used to chase me around the house shouting, 'Redrum! Redrum!'" Clara smiled and shook her head affectionately. "Those assholes."

"I'm an only child," I said. "No siblings to force me to watch scary movies."

"Well, you're really missing out. What are you doing tonight? Unless it's something awesome, we're absolutely having movie night at my place."

I readily agreed, for some reason not wanting to be alone that night more than I'd ever admit, and the movie served as an effective distrac-

tion. That is, until I checked my email and saw Caleb had responded: *Sorry, love, didn't call last night. Internet signal has been too weak to make a call for days now. Things are going well here, work-wise. We're on schedule, should be home in another week or so. Will update soon. Would kill a man for a salad. Miss you bunches. Love you.*

Caleb's email chilled me more than the creepy happenings at the Overlook Hotel. If it hadn't been him on the phone, I was certain it was Lanie. A barrage of memories crowded my mind: Lanie spinning like a top under a night sky, sparklers held in each extended arm; Lanie slamming the bedroom door in my face, her eyes bloodshot and her mouth a grim line; Lanie pushing aside the covers on my twin bed and climbing in beside me, her breath warm on my cheek as she whispered, "Josie, are you sleeping?", never waiting for an answer before beginning to softly tell secrets in the dark.

"Josie-Posie, I have to tell you something," she had said on one such occasion, the timbre of her voice teeming with conspiratorial excitement. "But you have to promise me it stays between us. Anything said here in this bedroom stays between us, always."

"Always," I agreed, hooking my ring finger around hers in our secret sign. "I promise."

Lanie's secret had been that she had kissed the eighteen-year-old leader of our tennis day camp behind the municipal building that afternoon, a shocking revelation given that we were thirteen that summer and that she had somehow managed to charm the good-looking boy away from his duties. I had been scandalized, hissing something about our parents not being happy about that.

"They don't have to know," she said sternly. "Remember, between us. Always."

Always. Her voice was so clear in my mind. It had to have been Lanie. Would she call again?

And if she did, would I be ready to answer?

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The following afternoon, I was off from work and took the train to the Union Square Farmers Market. Once there, however, I was disenchanted by the crowds and the picked-over kale and pears, and I ended up doing my shopping at (the only marginally less crowded) Whole Foods. Sitting on the R train, balancing a couple of bags filled with frozen veggie burgers and overpriced but beautiful produce on my lap, I overheard someone say:

"Dude, have you heard about this Chuck Buhrman murder thing?"

Blood roared in my ears, and my vision went blurry. It had been more than a decade since I had heard my father's name, and hearing it casually tumble out of the mouth of a skinny teenager with a lip piercing made my stomach turn.

"Is that the podcast everyone is going on about?" the girl's friend asked. "I don't do podcasts."

"This is different," the first girl insisted. "Trust me. It's a fucking trip. This guy got convicted for murder, right? But the evidence was all, what do you call it, *circumstantial*. The biggest thing they had was the guy's daughter who claimed she saw it. But here's the thing: first she said she didn't see anything at all. So we know she's a liar. But what's she lying about? You've got to listen to it, man, it's addictive as fuck."

As the train slid to a stop at Court Street, the girl was still enthusiastically endorsing the podcast. I felt so blindsided that I doubted I could stand, let alone climb the subway stairs and, laden with groceries, walk the final stretch to our apartment. My knees buckled as I rose, but I managed to propel myself through the crowded underground hallways and up aboveground. In my dazed state, I used the wrong exit, emerging on the far side of Borough Hall, and walked two blocks in the opposite direction of home before I came to my senses. Reorienting myself, I managed to place one foot in front of the other enough times to reach home.

I slid my key in the lock and hesitated. I had spent the weeks since Caleb left hating the resulting stillness of our apartment. I missed his mild chaos. I found myself resenting the way everything remained exactly where I left it. Caleb's running shoes, trailing across the living room floor with shoelaces stretched out like tiny arms, hadn't tripped me in weeks. I was no longer finding half-drunk mugs of coffee in the bathroom, dog-eared books stuck between the couch cushions, or the clock radio softly playing classic rock to an empty bedroom. I could feel his absence in the lack of these minor domestic annoyances, and they tugged at my heart each time I entered our home.

But, with my hand shaking as it held the key in the lock and my father's name ricocheting around my brain, I welcomed the solitude of our apartment. I needed to be alone.

Dropping the groceries in the entryway, leaving the veggie burgers to slowly defrost on the ground, I rushed to my laptop. I typed my father's name into a search engine with trembling fingers. Bile climbed up my throat when I saw the number of hits. There were pages upon pages filled with a startling parade of news articles, opinion pieces, and blog posts—all dated within the last two weeks. I clicked the first link, and there it was: the podcast.

Reconsidered: The Chuck Buhrman Murder was splashed in bold red letters across a fuzzy black-and-white picture of my father. It was the headshot he had used for work, the one where he looked less like an actual college professor and more like a caricature of one, with his tweed jacket, crooked eyeglasses, and thick black beard. The faint twinkle in his eyes threatened to undo me.

Daddy.

I slammed the computer shut and buried it beneath a pile of magazines. When all I could see was Kim Kardashian staring up at me from the cover of a glossy tabloid I had shamefully bought waiting for the train

one day—more evidence of how everything fell apart without Caleb around—I was once again able to breathe normally.

My cousin Ellen didn't answer her phone when I called, and I left her a voicemail demanding that she tell me what she knew about the podcast. After twenty minutes of sitting on the couch willing my phone to ring, I gave up and began searching for tasks to distract myself: I put away the groceries, I wiped up the puddle the veggie burgers had left in the entryway, I ran a bath but then drained it before climbing inside, I started painting my toenails but abandoned the project after only three nails had been polished a gloomy dark purple.

Red wine was the only thing that helped. Only after sucking down a juice glass full of the stuff was I calm enough to revisit the podcast's website. I refilled my glass and pushed the magazines aside. Gingerly, I opened the computer.

The website was still there, still advertising a podcast that promised to "reconsider" my father's murder. I frowned, confused. There was nothing to reconsider. Warren Cave murdered my father. He was found guilty and he received his punishment. How could this Poppy Parnell, this woman whose name made her sound more like a yarn-haired children's toy than an investigative journalist, spin an entire series out of this? Taunting myself, I hovered my cursor over the *Download Now* button for the first of the two available episodes. Did I dare to click the link? I chewed my lip as I wavered, took another gulp of wine to steel myself, and clicked.

Ellen called just as Episode 1 finished downloading. Gripped by morbid fascination, I nearly declined the call in order to listen to the podcast, but I shook it off and answered the phone.

"Ellen?"

"Do not listen to that podcast."

I exhaled a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Is it bad?"

"It's trash. Sensationalized trash. That pseudo-journalist is turning your family's tragedy into a commodity, and it's disgusting. I have Peter looking into whether we can sue her for defamation or slander or whatever it's called. He's the lawyer; he'll figure it out."

"Do you really think he can do that? Put a stop to it?"

"Peter can do anything he puts his mind to."

"Like marrying a woman half his age?"

"Not really the time for jokes, Josie," Ellen said, but I could hear a hint of laughter in her voice.

"I know. It's just nerves. Please thank your esteemed husband for his help."

"I'll let you know more as soon as I do. How are you handling it?"

"Well, for starters, I wish I hadn't found out by overhearing a teenager on the train. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was hoping I wouldn't have to. I'd hoped it would all just blow over, but apparently America has an appetite for that brand of opportunistic, sensationalist reimagining of the truth."

"I can't believe this is happening. What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing," Ellen said firmly. "Peter's on top of this. And I'm still not convinced this won't burn out on its own. How much 'reconsidering' can she really do of an open-and-shut case?"

Even though Ellen emphatically warned me not to listen to the podcast, I remained tempted, the same way one was tempted to pick at a scab or tug at a torn cuticle until it bled. I knew nothing good could come from listening, but I wanted—no, I *needed*—to know what this Poppy Parnell person was saying. How could she possibly justify "reconsidering" my father's murder? And how could that be the premise for an entire series? I could effectively summarize the case in one sentence: Warren Cave killed Chuck Buhrman. End of story.

I topped off my wine and wished Caleb were home. I ached for the calming sensation of his big, warm hands on my shoulders, and his soothing voice assuring me that everything was going to be all right. I needed him to fix tea and turn on that odd reality show about toothless men making illegal whiskey. If Caleb were home, I would have been comforted and protected; I would not have been gulping wine alone in the dark, electric with terror.

And yet part of me was relieved by Caleb's absence. The very idea of having to tell him about the podcast, and thereby being forced to admit all the lies I had told, filled me with liquid dread. I desperately hoped Ellen was right, and that the podcast would fizzle out on its own before Caleb returned from Africa.

I didn't listen to the podcast, but I could not stop myself from obsessively Googling Poppy Parnell all night. She was in her early thirties, not more than two or three years older than myself. She was midwestern, like me, and held a BA in journalism from Northwestern. I also saw she had once run a popular crime website, and had a long list of bylines in publications like the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*. When I had exhausted that, I switched to an image search. Poppy Parnell was a thin strawberry blonde with angular features and wide, almost startled eyes—not conventionally attractive enough for television, but too pretty for radio. In most photographs, she wore too-large suit jackets and leaned forward, her mouth open and one hand raised, mid-gesture. Poppy looked like the kind of girl I would have been friends with a lifetime ago.

Scowling at Poppy Parnell's smiling face, I poured the rest of the wine into my glass. I reached out to slam the computer shut, but something stopped me. The podcast was still open in another tab.

Daddy.

Cursing Poppy Parnell and myself, I pressed *Play*.