THE LAST HOUSEWIFE

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Ashley Winstead



An Aries Book

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
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Head of Zeus
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

In the words of Patricia Lockwood: This is for every woman who isn't interested in heaven unless her anger gets to go there too.

Content warning: Suicide, rape, physical violence, sexual violence, trauma, self-harm, misogyny, gender essentialism, drug use.

PART ONE

Scheherazade, you careful actress

These are the stories I tell you to save my life.

I am naturally smooth and sun-streaked and fat-lipped in the exact way you like. (Picture me like this, dear husband, as I speak to you.)

You could have any of us. You could have so many, one right after the other. You're hardwired for it; it's the most natural thing for a man like you to take us, to plow through us, to discard. I am lucky you have chosen to keep me.

You ensure we are more than fed and sheltered, that we are rich and careless, and I am grateful. When you thrust, you reach a place deep inside me I could never reach myself.

In your arms I am safe and comfortable.

In your arms I am a good daughter and a good wife. Who has never cheated, never stolen, never offered herself to the god of sin for a single lap of pleasure. Who has never wanted something sick and troubling, who has never held her hands up to the light, watching them fill with dark, hot blood, thrill zipping her spine. Who would? Can you imagine?

These are the stories I tell you to stave off the night you will finally look at me from across the room, see the woman underneath the fiction—weaving, weaving madly—and lop off her head.

CHAPTER ONE

From a young age I could feel them watching. Could feel the weight of their eyes and their hunger pressing over my skin like the skimming fingers of a lover, or an appraiser, dragging a hand down the bones of a rare find. Like most women, I grew up with the looking, grew into it. So that even today, alone in the backyard, I can still feel those phantom eyes and shape my body to the audience. Carrying myself in ways that will please them, stretching out gracefully by the pool, back arched, eyes closed against the sun like a woman in a movie, an icon of mystery and elegance, as delicate and unknowable as Keats's maiden on the Grecian urn.

Always, before, it seemed obvious they were looking: on the street, in the grocery store, staring up from tables at restaurants. But lately, finding myself thirty and unexpectedly alone most of the time, I had begun to face certain facts. To wonder if the eyes of those men hadn't simply burned me deep enough when I was young, so the scars were still sparking years later, like a bad burn from the oven that feels alive

for days. Or maybe I'd snatched their eyes, a self-protective measure, buried them deep beneath my skin, and now I was watching myself. As a feminist culture writer—at least, a former one—these were possibilities I knew to consider.

Truthfully, I wasn't doing much considering these days. I'd quit my job writing for *The Slice* six months ago, trading in thousand-word essays with titles like "Why booty shorts and baby talk are fall's surprising feminist trends" for the chance to write my first novel. I'd been waiting my entire life to write the book—my alleged passion project—yet ever since I'd had the time and means to actually do it, I'd found myself without the aforementioned passion. Without any words at all, you might say. The trouble was the ending: I couldn't fathom it, and without that, the words wouldn't flow.

So instead of writing, I'd sunk slowly into the daily rhythms familiar to the other wives in our new Highland Park neighborhood: a gluten-free breakfast, followed by yoga or Pilates, then lunch with the girls, shopping (in person or online), dinner with the husband upon his return from work, wine and sex, maybe. But always, always, a grand finale of quiet contemplation when the lights went out, wondering how the days of one's newly useless life could dissipate so quickly, like grains of sand through an hourglass. How in a twist of irony one could become a piece of art rather than an artist.

Today I was a Hockney painting, awash in still, blue boredom, the pool in the backyard calm as a glass of water. The house behind me—ours, I suppose—massive and angular in the California style so popular here in Dallas, dramatic staircases bending away from the back balcony at harsh angles, like the house was a person on two bent knees, begging to be loved. My husband, Cal, said something about it reminded him of me. He thought it would make me happy.

You look happy, I reminded myself. *Especially from far away.* I

accentuated the point by smoothing sunshine-yellow polish over my toenails, chin resting on my knee like a child. I decided now was as good a time as any to indulge in my favorite entertainment these last six months.

Regrettably—but perhaps also predictably—I, like every other woman my age, had become addicted to true-crime podcasts. The attraction was obvious: a morbid fascination with our own mortality. But for me, there was also this: the host of *Transgressions*, my favorite podcast, was none other than Jamie Knight, my childhood friend. It had been years since I'd spoken to Jamie, and although I knew he'd become a journalist—there was never anything else for him—it had been such a surprise to see his name in the podcast description. Such an unexpected eruption of feeling when I pressed Play and heard his voice in my ears, warm and crackling. It had touched something in me deeper than nostalgia, and while I couldn't quite name the feeling, I knew enough about it to keep my interest in *Transgressions* a secret from the other wives and from Cal.

I dabbed polish on my pinkie toe and pressed Play on the latest episode, newly arrived this morning. Jamie's voice curled into my ears, the hills and valleys of his inflections as familiar as a map of home. "Welcome back to *Transgressions*, friends. I'm your host, Jamie Knight." A memory of him flashed in my mind: seventeen and newly a man, scruff shadowing his jaw, grinning at me cheekily from the driver's seat as he drove me home from school.

"This week's murder—" Jamie's voice caught, and immediately, I sat straighter. He cleared his throat. "Hits a little close to home. Actually, that's why I'm telling you about it at all. Because *technically*, the cops haven't decided whether to rule this death a homicide or suicide. I have my suspicions, and we'll get to those, but let's start with the facts. Two weeks ago, thirty-year-old Laurel Hargrove was found hanging from

a tree on the edge of the De Young Performing Arts Center on the Whitney College campus. It was her alma mater."

One minute, I was pressing the nail brush like a fan against my toe, spreading sunshine over the cuticle; the next, the bottle slipped from my hand into the pool, golden yellow snaking like spilled blood through the water.

Laurel Hargrove. Whitney College. It couldn't be. Laurel Hargrove was my best friend from college. It had been eight years since I'd talked to her, but back then, we'd sworn to run as far as possible from Whitney, from Westchester, from the entire state of New York.

And I'd done it. I'd worked hard to shut the door on the past, to keep it locked, fast and tight. *Don't let it in*, I warned myself, the instinct knee-jerk. All of my calm, blue boredom, my luxurious ennui, was replaced in an instant by visceral fear, my teeth sinking into my kneecap as if it were a leather bit to quell a scream.

"Laurel's death has all the markings of a suicide," Jamie said, his words coming faster now. "According to the police report—which I'm admittedly not supposed to have—she was hung by a rope, the kind anyone can buy at a hardware store. The furrow the rope created in her neck slanted vertical, breaking her hyoid bone and tearing her cartilage. Although some doctors have claimed injuries like Laurel's *can* occur with strangulation—you'll remember the media circus around Jeffrey Epstein's death—most agree these types of injuries occur more often in suicidal hangings."

I'd sworn to protect Laurel, years ago. How many things could you fail at in one lifetime? I felt as though I'd plunged into the pool after the nail polish, and now I was suspended underwater, pressure crushing me from every angle.

Jamie Knight, of all people, kept reciting the cold facts of Laurel's death, each detail so clinical, so…*familiar*.

I shot to my feet, pressing my hands to my mouth. Laurel's death was the twin of Clementine's, our best friend from college whose blood we would never wash from our hands. First Clem, now Laurel. Two hangings, both on campus, eight years apart.

It became hard to breathe. But even in the thick of shock, I had a sudden burst, a picture of what I must look like to anyone observing. Scene: *Beautiful Woman in the Throes of Grief.* Or: *A Portrait of Panic, All in Blue*.

"The Performing Arts Center meant something to Laurel," Jamie continued, telling me what I already knew. "According to the Westchester County police interview with her mother, Laurel was a theater nut and concentrated on costuming in college. Her mom said the Performing Arts Center was Laurel's favorite place on campus. As an undergrad, she tried to live as close as possible so she could save time going back and forth from rehearsals."

Yes, we'd worked hard to live in Rothschild. Laurel was a shy girl who worshipped theater, who lived to create costumes for Whitney's drama department. And we did everything for her because Clem and I loved her, and because to know Laurel was to want to protect her. In order to live in Rothschild's four-person suites, we'd needed to add someone to our three-person crew. We went searching, found a girl, and that was the beginning of the end. The consequences of those simple decisions—*make Laurel happy, find a fourth, give the girl a chance*—would reverberate forever.

"Putting these pieces together paints a picture of a woman who took her own life in a place that was meaningful to her," Jamie said. "In fact, Laurel's mother told the police that college was the last time she could remember Laurel being happy. So why discuss Laurel Hargrove's suicide on a podcast about unsolved murders?"

I bent down and snatched my phone, wishing I could talk back to him, yell across the distance. *Why* are *you, Jamie? Clem committed*

suicide, and it was so clearly, so irrevocably our fault. And now Laurel. What does it mean? What are you saying?

"One detail in the police report caught my attention," Jamie said, answering me. "And yes, I'm going to get in trouble for telling you this. But Laurel was discovered with lacerations all over her hands and arms, made roughly around the time of her death. None of them life-threatening, but cuts everywhere, fourteen in all. There aren't any pictures of her included in the police record—which is strange, by the way. But what the responding officer did note is that the cuts were thin, like from a razor blade. And they appeared in places you would expect if someone was defending herself. There's actually a question in the police report, written in the officer's notes, which he or somebody else later tried to scratch out. He wrote: 'Defensive wounds? But why, if suicide?' Why, indeed."

Thin cuts, like from a razor blade. This was too much. I rushed across the grass, blades bright and stiff under my feet despite the August swelter. Clutching the phone to my chest, I caught my reflection in the glass of the back door—wild-eyed, shoulders hunched—before I flung it open and slipped inside.

The frigid air-conditioning sucked the summer heat from my skin. I'd come inside to feel safe, contained. But one glance at the sweeping white ceilings, the gleaming kitchen, the sharp, modern furniture—all of it, my choices—and I felt suddenly wrong. Like I'd entered not a home but a museum, a mausoleum. A cold, beautiful place where things were laid to rest.

"One more thing," said Jamie, from the center of my chest. "I told you Laurel Hargrove's death hits close to home. Here's why. Years ago, I met her."

I jerked the phone away, studying the screen as if it were Jamie himself standing in front of me.

"When I was younger, I was friends with a girl who went to Whitney at the same time that I went to Columbia. The schools are an hour apart, so we'd see each other from time to time, usually after I'd begged her enough times to come visit. She and I had a…complicated relationship, to say the least. And she was friends with Laurel."

Me. Jamie Knight was talking about me.