The Woods

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Extract

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Prologue

I see my father with that shovel.

There are tears streaming down his face. An awful, guttural sob forces its way up from deep in his lungs and out through his lips. He raises the shovel up and strikes the ground. The blade rips into the earth like it's wet flesh.

I am eighteen years old, and this is my most vivid memory of my father—him, in the woods, with that shovel. He doesn't know I'm watching. I hide behind a tree while he digs. He does it with a fury, as though the ground has angered him and he is seeking vengeance.

I have never seen my father cry before—not when his own father died, not when my mother ran off and left us, not even when he first heard about my sister, Camille. But he is crying now. He is crying without shame. The tears cascade down his face in a freefall. The sobs echo through the trees.

This is the first time I've spied on him like this. Most Saturdays he would pretend to be going on fishing trips, but I never really believed

that. I think I always knew that this place, this horrible place, was his secret destination.

Because, sometimes, it is mine too.

I stand behind the tree and watch him. I will do this eight more times. I never interrupt him. I never reveal myself. I think he doesn't know that I am there. I am sure of it, in fact. And then one day, as he heads to his car, my father looks at me with dry eyes and says, "Not today, Paul. Today I go alone."

I watch him drive off. He goes to those woods for the last time.

On his deathbed nearly two decades later, my father takes my hand. He is heavily medicated. His hands are rough and calloused. He used them his whole life—even in the flusher years in a country that no longer exists. He has one of those tough exteriors where all the skin looks baked and hard, almost like his own tortoise shell. He has been in immense physical pain, but there are no tears.

He just closes his eyes and rides it out.

My father has always made me feel safe, even now, even though I am now an adult with a child of my own. We went to a bar three months ago, when he was still strong enough. A fight broke out. My father stood in front of me, readying to take on anyone who came near me. Still. That is how it is.

I look at him in the bed. I think about those days in the woods. I think about how he dug, how he finally stopped, how I thought he had given up after my mother left.

"Paul?"

My father is suddenly agitated.

I want to beg him not to die, but that wouldn't be right. I had been here before. It doesn't get better—not for anyone.

"It's okay, Dad," I tell him. "It's all going to be okay."

He does not calm down. He tries to sit up. I want to help him, but he shakes me off. He looks deep into my eyes and I see clarity, or maybe

that is one of those things that we make ourselves believe at the end. A final false comfort.

One tear escapes his eye. I watch it slowly slide down his cheek.

"Paul," my father says to me, his voice still thick with a Russian accent. "We still need to find her."

"We will, Dad."

He checks my face again. I nod, assure him. But I don't think that he is looking for assurance. I think, for the first time, he is looking for guilt.

"Did you know?" he asks, his voice barely audible.

I feel my entire body quake, but I don't blink, don't look away. I wonder what he sees, what he believes. But I will never know.

Because then, right then, my father closes his eyes and dies.

Chapter 1

Three Months Later

I was sitting in an elementary school gymnasium, watching my six-year-old daughter, Cara, nervously navigate across a balance beam that hovered maybe four inches off the floor, but in less than an hour, I would be looking at the face of a man who'd been viciously murdered.

That should not shock anyone.

I have learned over the years—in the most horrible ways imaginable—that the wall between life and death, between extraordinary beauty and mind-boggling ugliness, between the most innocent setting and a frightening bloodbath, is flimsy. It takes a second to tear through it. One moment, life appears idyllic. You are in a place as chaste as an elementary school gymnasium. Your little girl is twirling. Her voice is giddy. Her eyes are closed. You see her mother's face there, the way her

mother used to close her eyes and smile, and you remember how flimsy that wall really is.

"Cope?"

It was my sister-in-law, Greta. I turned to her. Greta looked at me with her normal concern. I smiled through it.

"What are you thinking about?" she whispered.

She knew. I lied anyway.

"Handheld video cameras," I said.

"What?"

The folding chairs had all been taken by the other parents. I stood in the back, arms crossed, leaning against the cement wall. There were rules posted above the doorway and those annoyingly cute inspirational aphorisms like "Don't Tell Me the Sky's the Limit When There Are Footprints on the Moon" scattered throughout. The lunch tables were folded in. I leaned against that, feeling the cool of the steel and metal. Elementary school gyms never change as we age. They just seem to grow smaller.

I gestured at the parents. "There are more video cameras here than kids."

Greta nodded.

"And the parents, they film everything. I mean, everything. What do they do with all that? Does anybody really watch this again from beginning to end?"

"You don't?"

"I'd rather give birth."

She smiled at that. "No," she said, "you wouldn't."

"Okay, yeah, maybe not, but didn't we all grow up in the MTV generation? Quick cuts. Lots of angles. But to just film this straight out like this, to subject an unsuspecting friend or family member to that . . ."

The door opened. The moment the two men stepped into the gym I could tell that they were cops. Even if I didn't have a fair amount of

experience—I am the county prosecutor for Essex County, which includes the rather violent city of Newark—I would know. Television does indeed get some stuff right. The way most cops dressed, for example—fathers in the lush suburb of Ridgewood don't dress that way. We don't don suits when we come to see our kids perform quasi-gymnastics. We wear corduroys or jeans with a V-neck over a T-shirt. These two guys wore ill-fitted suits in a brown hue that reminded me of wood chips after a rainstorm.

They were not smiling. Their eyes scanned the room. I know most of the cops in the area, but I didn't know these guys. That troubled me. Something felt wrong. I knew that I hadn't done anything, of course, but there was still a little I'm-innocent-but-I-still-feel-guilty flutter in my stomach.

My sister-in-law, Greta, and her husband, Bob, have three kids of their own. Their youngest daughter, Madison, was six years old and in the same class as my Cara. Greta and Bob have been a tremendous help. After my wife, Jane—Greta's sister—died, they moved to Ridgewood. Greta claims that they had planned on doing that anyway. I doubt it. But I am so grateful that I don't question it much. I can't imagine what it would be like without them.

Usually the other fathers stand in the back with me, but since this was a daytime event, there were very few here. The mothers—except for the one now glaring at me over her video camera because she overheard my anti-video-cam rant—adore me. It is not me, of course, but my story. My wife died five years ago, and I raise my daughter alone. There are other single parents in town, mostly divorced mothers, but I get a ton of slack. If I forget to write a note or pick up my daughter late or leave her lunch on the counter, the other mothers or the staff in the school office chip in and help. They think my male helplessness is cute. When a single mother does any of those things, she is neglectful and on the receiving end of the superior moms' scorn.

The kids continued to tumble or stumble, depending on how you

wanted to look at it. I watched Cara. She was big on concentration and did just fine, but I suspected she had inherited her father's lack of coordination. There were high school girls from the gymnastics team helping. The girls were seniors, probably seventeen or eighteen. The one who spotted Cara during her attempted somersault reminded me of my sister. My sister, Camille, died when she was about this teen's age, and the media never lets me forget it. But maybe that was a good thing.

My sister would be in her late thirties now, at least as old as most of these mothers. Weird to think of it that way. I see Camille forever as a teen. It is hard to imagine where she would be now—where she *should* be now, sitting in one of those chairs, the doofy-happy-concerned-I'm-a-mom-first smile on her face, overfilming her own offspring. I wonder what she would look like today, but again all I see is the teenager who died.

It may appear that I'm somewhat obsessed with death, but there is a huge difference between my sister's murder and my wife's premature passing. The first, my sister's, led me to my current job and career projectory. I can fight that injustice in the courtroom. And I do. I try to make the world safer, try to put those who would harm others behind bars, try to bring other families something my family never really had—closure.

With the second death—my wife's—I was helpless and screwed up and no matter what I do now, I will never be able to make amends.

The school principal strapped that faux-concerned smile onto her over-lipsticked mouth and headed in the direction of the two cops. She engaged them in conversation, but neither one of them so much as glanced at her. I watched their eyes. When the taller cop, the lead cop for certain, hit my face, he stopped. Neither of us moved for a moment. He gave his head the slightest tilt, beckoning me outside this safe haven of laughter and tumbling. I made my nod equally slight.

"Where are you going?" Greta asked me.

I don't want to sound unkind, but Greta was the ugly sister. They

looked alike, she and my lovely dead bride. You could tell that they were from the same parents. But everything that worked physically with my Jane just doesn't quite make it on Greta. My wife had a prominent nose that somehow made her sexier. Greta has a prominent nose that looks, well, big. My wife's eyes, set far apart, gave her an exotic appeal. On Greta, the wide spacing makes her look somewhat reptilian.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Business?"

"Could be."

She glanced over at the two probable-cops then back at me. "I was going to take Madison to Friendly's for lunch. Do you want me to bring Cara?"

"Sure, that'd be great."

"I could also pick her up after school."

I nodded. "That might help."

Greta kissed my cheek gently then—something she rarely does. I headed off. The peals of children's laughter rolled with me. I opened the door and stepped into the corridor. The two policemen followed me. School corridors never change much either. They have an almost haunted-house echo to them, a strange sort of semisilence and a faint but distinct smell that both soothed and agitated.

"Are you Paul Copeland?" the taller one asked.

"Yes."

He looked at his shorter partner. The shorter guy was meaty with no neck. His head was shaped like a cinder block. His skin was coarse too, adding to the illusion. From around the corner came a class of maybe fourth graders. They were all red-faced from exertion. Probably had just come from the playground. They made their way past us, trailed by their harried teacher. She gave us a strained smile.

"Maybe we should talk outside," the taller one said.

I shrugged. I had no idea what this was about. I had the guile of the innocent, but the experience to know that nothing with cops is what it

appears to be. This was not about the big, headline-splashing case I was working on. If it had been, they'd have called my office. I'd have gotten word on my cell or BlackBerry.

No, they were here for something else—something personal.

Again I knew that I had done nothing wrong. But I have seen all kinds of suspects in my time and all kinds of reactions. It might surprise you. For example, when the police have a major suspect in custody they often keep them locked in the interrogation room for hours on end. You would think the guilty ones would be climbing walls, but for the most part, it was the opposite. The innocent ones get the most antsy and nervous. They have no idea why they are there or what the police mistakenly think they've done. The guilty often go to sleep.

We stood outside. The sun blazed down. The taller one squinted and raised a hand to shade his eyes. The Cinder Block would not give anyone that satisfaction.

"My name is Detective Tucker York," the taller one said. He took out his badge and then motioned toward the Cinder Block. "This is Detective Don Dillon."

Dillon took out his ID too. They showed them to me. I don't know why they do that. How hard can it be to fake those? "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Do you mind telling us where you were last night?" York asked.

Sirens should have gone off at a question like that. I should have right away reminded them of whom I was and that I wouldn't answer any questions without an attorney present. But I am an attorney. A damned good one. And that, of course, just makes you more foolish when you represent yourself, not less so. I was also human. When you are rousted by the police, even with all my experience, you want to please. You can't help that feeling.

"I was home."

"Anyone who can verify that?"

"My daughter."

York and Dillon looked back at the school. "That's the girl who was tumbling in there?"

"Yes."

"Anyone else?"

"I don't think so. What's this about?"

York was the one who was doing all the talking. He ignored my question. "Do you know a man named Manolo Santiago?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"Why only pretty sure?"

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yep," York said. He coughed into his fist. "You want us to maybe take a knee or kiss your ring or something?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Good, then we're on the same page." I did not like his attitude, but I let it slide. "So why are you only 'pretty sure' you don't know Manolo Santiago?"

"I mean, the name isn't familiar. I don't think I know him. But maybe it's someone I prosecuted or was a witness in one of my cases, or hell, maybe I met him at a fund-raiser ten years ago."

York nodded, encouraging me to blabber more. I didn't.

"Do you mind coming with us?"

"Where?"

"It won't take long."

"Won't take long," I repeated. "That doesn't sound like a place."

The two cops exchanged a glance. I tried to look as if I would hold my ground.

"A man named Manolo Santiago was murdered last night."

"Where?"

"His body was in Manhattan. Washington Heights area."

"And what does this have to do with me?"

"We think you might be able to help."

"Help how? I already told you. I don't know him."

"You said"—York actually referred to his pad, but it was only for effect; he hadn't written anything while I was talking—"that you were 'pretty sure' you didn't know him."

"I'm sure then. Okay? I'm sure."

He snapped the pad closed with dramatic flare. "Mr. Santiago knew you."

"How do you know that?"

"We'd prefer to show you."

"And I'd prefer you tell me."

"Mr. Santiago"—York hesitated as though choosing his next words by hand—"had certain items on him."

"Items?"

"Yes."

"Could you be more specific?"

"Items," he said, "that point to you."

"Point to me as what?"

"Yo, Mr. DA?"

Dillon—the Cinder Block—had finally spoken.

"It's County Prosecutor," I said.

"Whatever." He cracked his neck and pointed at my chest. "You're really starting to itch my ass."

"Excuse me?"

Dillon stepped into my face. "Do we look like we're here for a goddamn semantics lesson?"

I thought the question was rhetorical, but he waited. Finally I said, "No."

"Then listen up. We got a dead body. The guy is linked to you in a big way. Do you want to come and help clear this up, or do you want to play more word games that make you look suspicious as hell?"

"Who exactly do you think you're talking to, Detective?"

"A guy running for office who wouldn't want us to take this directly to the press."

"Are you threatening me?"

York stepped in. "Nobody is threatening anything."

But Dillon had hit me where I lived. The truth was, my appointment was still only temporary. My friend, the current governor of the Garden State, had made me acting county prosecutor. There was also serious talk of my running for Congress, maybe even the vacant Senate seat. I would be lying if I said I didn't have political ambitions. A scandal, even the fake whiff of one, would not play well.

"I can't see how I can help," I said.

"Maybe you can't, maybe you can." Dillon rotated the cinder block. "But you want to help if you can, don't you?"

"Of course," I said. "I mean, I don't want your ass itching any more than it has to."

He almost smiled at that one. "Then get in the car."

"I have an important meeting this afternoon."

"We'll have you back by then."

I expected a beat-up Chevy Caprice, but the car was a clean Ford. I sat in the back. My two new friends sat in the front. We did not speak for the ride. There was traffic at the George Washington Bridge, but we just hit our siren and sliced through it. When we were on the Manhattan side, York spoke.

"We think Manolo Santiago might be an alias."

I said, "Uh-huh," because I didn't know what else to say.

"You see, we don't have a positive ID on the victim. We found him last night. His driver's license reads Manolo Santiago. We checked it out. It doesn't appear to be his real name. We ran his prints. No hits. So we don't know who he is."

"And you think I will?"

They did not bother answering.

York's voice was as casual as a spring day. "You're a widower, Mr. Copeland, right?"

"Right," I said.

"Must be tough. Raising a kid on your own."

I said nothing.

"Your wife had cancer, we understand. You're very involved in some organization to find a cure."

"Uh-huh."

"Admirable."

They should only know.

"This must be weird for you," York said.

"How's that?"

"Being on the other side. You're usually the one asking the questions, not answering them. That's gotta be a little strange."

He smiled at me in the rearview mirror.

"Hey, York?" I said.

"What?"

"Do you have a playbill or a program?" I asked.

"A what?"

"A playbill," I said. "So I can see your past credits, you know—before you landed the coveted role of Good Cop."

York chuckled at that. "I'm just saying, it's weird is all. I mean, have you ever been questioned by the police before?"

It was a setup question. They had to know. When I was eighteen years old, I worked as a counselor at a summer camp. Four campers—Gil Perez and his girlfriend, Margot Green, Doug Billingham and his girlfriend, Camille Copeland (aka my sister)—sneaked into the woods late one night.

They were never seen again.

Only two of the bodies have ever been found. Margot Green, age seventeen, was found with her throat slit within a hundred yards of the

campsite. Doug Billingham, also seventeen, was found half a mile away. He had several stab wounds, but cause of death was also a slit throat. The bodies of the other two—Gil Perez and my sister, Camille—have never been found.

The case made headlines. Wayne Steubens, a rich-kid counselor at the camp, was caught two years later—after his third summer of terror—but not until he murdered at least four more teens. He was dubbed the Summer Slasher—an all-too-obvious moniker. Wayne's next two victims were found near a Boy Scout camp in Muncie, Indiana. Another victim was attending one of those all-around camps in Vienna, Virginia. His last victim had been at a sports camp in the Poconos. Most had their throats slit. All had been buried out in the woods, some before death. Yes, as in buried alive. It took a fair amount of time to locate the bodies. The Poconos kid, for example, took six months to be found. Most experts believe that there are others still out there, still underground, deep in the woods.

Like my sister.

Wayne has never confessed, and despite being in a supermaximum-security facility for the past eighteen years, he insists that he had nothing to do with the four murders that started it all.

I don't believe him. The fact that at least two bodies were still out there led to speculation and mystery. It gave Wayne more attention. I think he likes that. But that unknown—that glimmer—still hurts like hell.

I loved my sister. We all did. Most people believe death is the cruelest thing. Not so. After a while, hope is a far more abusive mistress. When you live with it as long as I have, your neck constantly on the chopping block, the axe raised above you for days, then months, then years, you long for it to fall and lop off your head. Most believed that my mother ran off because my sister was murdered. But the truth is the opposite. My mother left us because we could never prove it.

I wished Wayne Steubens would tell us what he did with her. Not to give her a proper burial or any of that. That would be nice, but be-

side the point. Death is pure, wrecking-ball destructive. It hits, you're crushed, you start to rebuild. But not knowing—that doubt, that glimmer—made death work more like termites or some sort of relentless germ. It eats away from the inside. You cannot stop the rot. You cannot rebuild because that doubt will just keep gnawing away.

It still does, I think.

That part of my life, much as I want to keep it private, was always picked up by the media. Even the quickest Google search would have brought up my name in connection with the mystery of the Vanished Campers, as they were quickly dubbed. Heck, the story still played on those "real crime" shows on Discovery or Court TV. I was there that night, in those woods. My name was out there for the finding. I was questioned by the police. Interrogated. Under suspicion even.

So they had to know.

I chose not to answer. York and Dillon didn't push it.

When we arrived at the morgue, they led me down a long corridor. No one spoke. I wasn't sure what to make of this. What York said made sense now. I was on the other side. I had watched plenty of witnesses make walks like this. I had seen every sort of reaction in the morgue. The identifiers usually start off stoic. I'm not sure why. Are they bracing themselves? Or does a smidgeon of hope—that word again—still exist? I'm not sure. Whatever, the hope quickly vanishes. We never make a mistake on the ID. If we think it's your loved one, it is. The morgue is not a place of last-minute miracles. Not ever.

I knew that they were watching me, studying my responses. I became aware of my steps, my posture, my facial expression. I aimed for neutral and then wondered why I bothered.

They brought me to the window. You don't go into the room. You stay behind glass. The room was tiled so that you could just hose it down—no need to get fancy with decor or cleaners. All the gurneys save one were empty. The body was covered with a sheet, but I could see the toe tag. They really used those. I looked at the big toe sticking out from

under the sheet—it was wholly unfamiliar. That was what I thought. I do not recognize the man's toe.

The mind does funny things under stress.

A woman wearing a mask rolled the gurney closer to the window. I flashed back to, of all things, the day my daughter was born. I remember the nursery. The window was much the same, with those thin strips of foil forming diamonds. The nurse, a woman about the size of the woman in the morgue, rolled the little cart with my little daughter in it close to the window. Just like this. I guess I would normally have seen something poignant in this—the beginning of life, the end of it—but today I didn't.

She pulled back the top of the sheet. I looked down at the face. All eyes were on me. I knew that. The dead man was about my age, early to midthirties. He had a beard. His head looked shaved. He wore a shower cap. I thought that looked pretty goofy, the shower cap, but I knew why it was there.

"Shot in the head?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How many times?"

"Twice."

"Caliber?"

York cleared his throat, as if trying to remind me that this wasn't my case. "Do you know him?"

I took another look. "No," I said.

"Are you sure?"

I started to nod. But something made me stop.

"What?" York said.

"Why am I here?"

"We want to see if you know—"

"Right, but what made you think I would know him?"

I slid my eyes to the side, saw York and Dillon exchange a glance. Dillon shrugged and York picked up the ball. "He had your address in his pocket," York said. "And he had a bunch of clippings about you."

"I'm a public figure."

"Yes, we know."

He stopped talking. I turned toward him. "What else?"

"The clippings weren't about you. Not really."

"What were they about?"

"Your sister," he said. "And about what happened in those woods."

The room dropped ten degrees, but hey, we were in a morgue. I tried to sound nonchalant. "Maybe he's a real-crime nut. There are lots of them."

He hesitated. I saw him exchange a glance with his partner.

"What else?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What else did he have on him?"

York turned toward a subordinate I hadn't even noticed was standing there. "Can we show Mr. Copeland here the personal effects?"

I kept my eye on the dead man's face. There were pockmarks and lines. I tried to smooth them out. I didn't know him. Manolo Santiago was a stranger to me.

Someone pulled out a red plastic evidence bag. They emptied it out onto a table. From the distance I could see a pair of blue jeans and a flannel shirt. There was a wallet and a cell phone.

"You check the cell phone?" I asked.

"Yep. It's a throwaway. The phone log is empty."

I wrested my gaze away from the dead man's face and walked over to the table. My legs quaked.

There were folded sheets of paper. I carefully opened one up. The article from *Newsweek*. The picture of the four dead teens was there—the Summer Slasher's first victims. They always started with Margot Green because her body was found right away. It took another day to locate Doug Billingham. But the real interest lay in the other two. Blood had been found and torn clothes belonging to both Gil Perez and my sister—but no bodies.

Why not?

Simple. The woods were massive. Wayne Steubens had hidden them well. But some people, those who loved a good conspiracy, didn't buy that. Why had just those two not been found? How could Steubens have moved and buried bodies so quickly? Did he have an accomplice? How had he pulled it off? What were those four doing in those woods in the first place?

Even today, eighteen years after Wayne's arrest, people talk about the "ghosts" in those woods—or maybe there is a secret cult living in an abandoned cabin or escaped mental patients or men with hook arms or bizarre medical experiments gone wrong. They talk about the boogeyman, finding the remnants of his burned-out campfire, still surrounded by the bones of children he'd eaten. They say how at night they can still hear Gil Perez and my sister, Camille, howl for vengeance.

I spent a lot of nights out there, alone in those woods. I never heard anyone howl.

My eyes moved past Margot Green's picture and Doug Billingham's. The photograph of my sister was next. I had seen this same shot a million times. The media loved it because she looked so wonderfully ordinary. She was the girl-next-door, your favorite babysitter, the sweet teen who lived down the block. That wasn't Camille at all. She was mischievous, with lively eyes and a sideways devil-may-care grin that knocked the boys back a step. This picture was so not her. She was more than this. And maybe that had cost her her life.

I was about to head over to the final picture, the one of Gil Perez, but something made me pull up.

My heart stopped.

I know that sounds dramatic, but that was how it felt. I looked at the pile of coins from Manolo Santiago's pocket and saw it, and it was as if a hand reached into my chest and squeezed my heart so hard it couldn't beat anymore.

I stepped back.

"Mr. Copeland?"

My hand went out as if it were acting on its own. I watched my fingers pluck it up and bring it to my eye level.

It was a ring. A girl's ring.

I looked at the picture of Gil Perez, the boy who'd been murdered with my sister in the woods. I flashed back twenty years. And I remembered the scar.

"Mr. Copeland?"

"Show me his arm," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"His arm." I turned back to the window and pointed to the corpse. "Show me his goddamn arm."

York signaled to Dillon. Dillon pressed the intercom button. "He wants to the see the guy's arm."

"Which one?" the woman in the morgue asked.

They looked at me.

"I don't know," I said. "Both, I guess."

They looked puzzled, but the woman obeyed. The sheet was pulled back.

The chest was hairy now. He was bigger, at least thirty pounds more than he was back in those days, but that wasn't surprising. He had changed. We all had. But that wasn't what I was looking for. I was looking at the arm, for the ragged scar.

It was there.

On his left arm. I did not gasp or any of that. It was as if part of my reality had just been pulled away and I was too numb to do anything about it. I just stood there.

"Mr. Copeland?"

"I know him," I said.

"Who is he?"

I pointed to the picture in the magazine. "His name is Gil Perez."