THIS IS WHY WE LIED

Karin Slaughter is one of the world's most popular storytellers. She is the author of more than twenty instant *Sunday Times* bestselling novels, including the Edgar-nominated *Cop Town* and standalone novels *The Good Daughter* and *Pretty Girls*. An international bestseller, Slaughter is published in 120 countries with more than 40 million copies sold across the globe. *Pieces of Her* is a No.1 Netflix original series, *Will Trent* is a television series starring Ramón Rodríguez, on Disney+, and further projects are in development for television. Karin Slaughter is the founder of the Save the Libraries project—a nonprofit organization established to support libraries and library programming. A native of Georgia, she lives in Atlanta.

For more information visit KarinSlaughter.com

/AuthorKarinSlaughter

@SlaughterKarin

Also by Karin Slaughter

Blindsighted
Kisscut
A Faint Cold Fear
Indelible
Faithless
Triptych
Skin Privilege
Fractured
Genesis
Broken
Fallen
Criminal
Unseen
Cop Town
Pretty Girls
The Kept Woman
The Good Daughter
Pieces of Her
The Last Widow
The Silent Wife
False Witness
Girl, Forgotten
After That Night

EBOOK ORIGINALS
Snatched
Cold, Cold Heart
Busted
Blonde Hair, Blue Eyes
Last Breath
Cleaning the Gold (with Lee Child)

NOVELLAS AND STORIES
Like a Charm (Editor)
Martin Misunderstood

KARIN

Slaughter

THIS IS WHY WE LIED



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House,
39/40 Mayor Street Upper,
Dublin 1
D01 C9W8
Ireland

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2024
1

Copyright © Karin Slaughter 2024

Will Trent is a trademark of Karin Slaughter Publishing LLC.
Map © Karin Slaughter 2024

Karin Slaughter asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-862582-5 (HB)
ISBN: 978-0-00-862583-2 (TPB)

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and Bound in the UK using 100% Renewable Electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

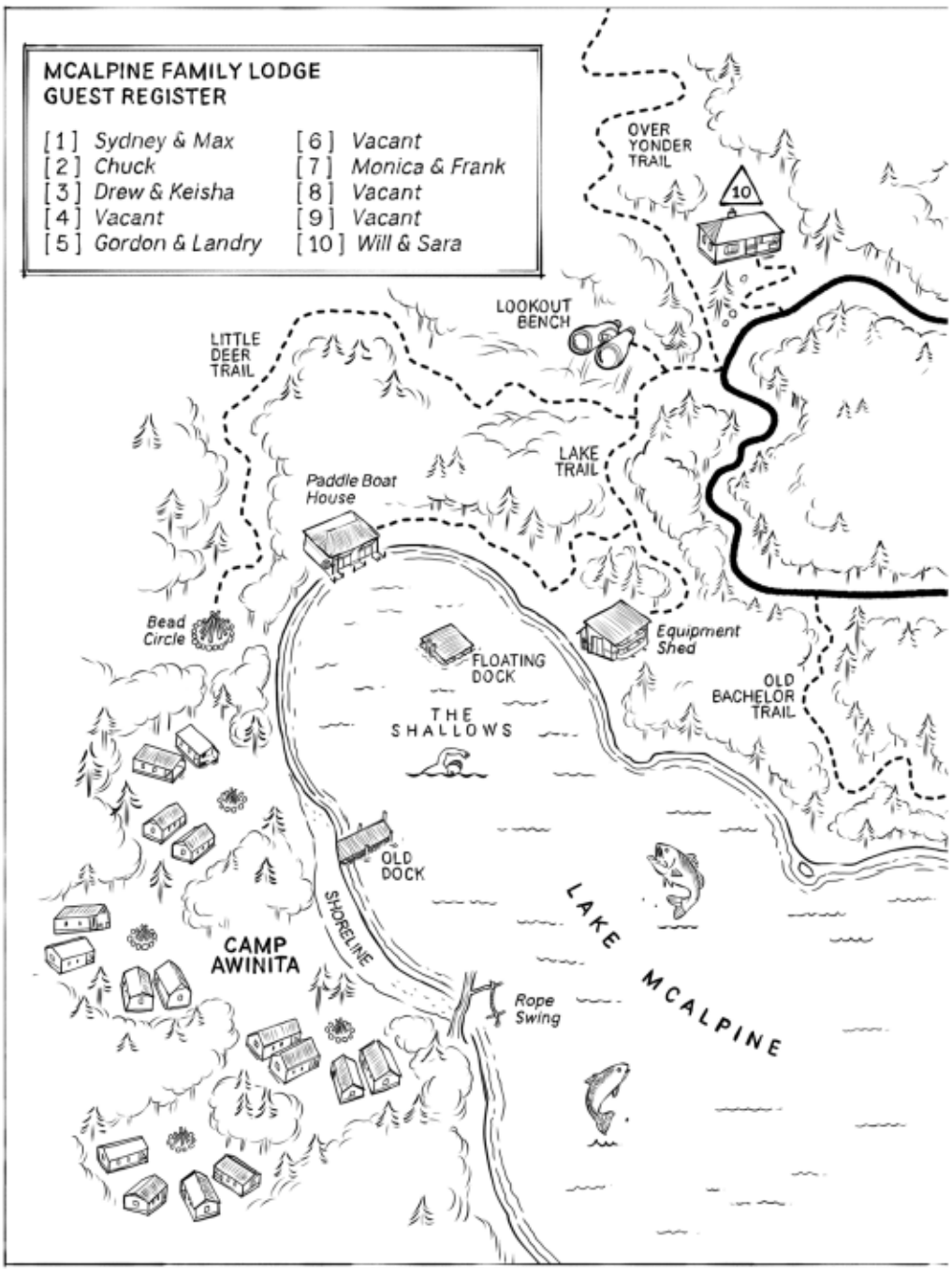
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



This book contains FSC™ certified paper and other controlled sources
to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

To David – for his unending kindness and patience


MCALPINE FAMILY LODGE
GUEST REGISTER
[1] Sydney & Max
[2] Chuck
[3] Drew & Keisha
[4] Vacant
[5] Gordon & Landry
[6] Vacant
[7] Monica & Frank
[8] Vacant
[9] Vacant
[10] Will & Sara
OVER YONDER TRAIL
10
LOOKOUT BENCH
LITTLE DEER TRAIL
LAKE TRAIL
Paddle Boat House
Bead Circle
FLOATING DOCK
Equipment Shed
OLD BACHELOR TRAIL
THE SHALLOWS
OLD DOCK
SHORELINE
CAMP AWINITA
LAKE MCALPINE
Rope Swing


JUDGE CECIL TRAIL
9
5
4
3
2
1
LOOP TRAIL
6
7
8
MAIN HOUSE
P
DOG LEG TRAIL
HORSE PADDOCK
CHOW TRAIL
VIEWING PLATFORM
DINING HALL
LOST WIDOW TRAIL
FISHTOPHER TRAIL
ACCESS ROAD TO TOWN
BACHELOR COTTAGES
Mini Falls
LOST WIDOW CREEK
MCALPINE TRAIL
WATERFALL
NOTE:
NOT TO SCALE.
McAlpine Family Lodge

PROLOGUE

Will Trent sat down at the edge of the lake to take off his hiking boots. The numbers on his watch glowed in the darkness. An hour away from midnight. He could hear an owl in the distance. A gentle breeze whispered through the trees. The moon was a perfect circle in the night sky, light bouncing off the figure in the water. Sara Linton was swimming toward the floating dock. A cool blue light bathed her body as she cut through the gently rolling waves. Then she turned, doing a lazy backstroke as she smiled at Will.

"Are you coming in?"

Will couldn't answer. He knew that Sara was accustomed to his awkward silences, but this wasn't one of those times. He felt speechless just looking at her. All he could think was the same thing everybody thought when they saw them together: what the hell was she doing with him? She was so damn clever and funny and beautiful and he couldn't even get the knot out of his shoelace in the dark.

He forced off the boot as she swam back toward him. Her long auburn hair was sleek to her head. Her bare shoulders were peeking out from the blackness of the water. She had stripped off her clothes before diving in, laughing at his observation that it seemed like a bad idea to jump into something you couldn't see in the middle of the night when no one knew where you were.

But it seemed like a worse idea not to follow the wishes of a naked woman asking you to join her.

Will took off his socks, then stood so that he could unbutton his pants. Sara let out a low, appreciative whistle as he started to undress.

"Whoa," she said. "A little more slowly, please."

He laughed, but he didn't know what to do with the feeling of lightness inside his chest. Will had never experienced this type of prolonged happiness. Sure, there were times that he'd known bursts of joy—his first kiss, his first sexual encounter, his first sexual encounter that had lasted more than three seconds, graduating from college, cashing an actual paycheck, the day he had finally managed to divorce his hateful ex-wife.

This was different.

Will and Sara were two days out from their wedding, and the euphoria he had experienced during the ceremony hadn't subsided. If anything, the feeling was heightened with every passing hour. She would smile at him, or laugh at one of his stupid jokes, and it was like his heart turned into a butterfly. Which he understood wasn't a manly thing to think, but there were things you thought and things you shared, and this was one of the many reasons he preferred an awkward silence.

Sara gave a *whoop* when Will made a show of peeling off his shirt before he stepped into the lake. He wasn't used to walking around naked, especially outdoors, so he ducked under a lot more quickly than he should've. The water was cold, even for mid-summer. Chills prickled his skin. He could feel mud unpleasantly sucking around his feet. Then Sara wrapped her body around his and Will had no complaints.

He said, "Hey."

"Hey." She stroked back his hair. "Have you ever been in a lake before?"

"Not by choice," he admitted. "Are you sure the water's safe?"

She thought about it. "Copperheads are usually more active at dusk. We're probably too far north for cottonmouths."

Will hadn't considered snakes. He had grown up in downtown Atlanta, surrounded by dirty concrete and used syringes. Sara had grown up in a college town in rural South Georgia, surrounded by nature.

And snakes, apparently.

"I have a confession," she said. "I told Mercy we lied to her."

"I figured," Will said. The incident between Mercy and her family tonight had been intense. "Is she gonna be okay?"

"Probably. Jon seems like a good kid." Sara shook her head over the futility of it all. "It's hard being a teenager."

Will tried to lighten things up. "There's something to be said for growing up in an orphanage."

She pressed her finger to his lips, which he guessed was her way of saying *not funny*. "Look up."

Will looked up. Then he let his head drop back as a sense of awe washed over him. He had never seen actual stars in the sky. Not stars like these, at least. Bright, individual pinpricks in the velvety black expanse of night. Not flattened out by light pollution. Not dulled by smog or haze. He took in a deep breath. Felt his heartbeat start to slow. The only sound was literal crickets. The only man-made light was a distant twinkle coming from the wrap-around porch on the main house.

He kind of loved it here.

They'd hiked five miles through rocky terrain to get to the McAlpine Family Lodge. The place had been around so long that Will had heard about it when he was a kid. He had dreamed about going one day. Canoeing, paddle boarding, mountain bike riding, hiking, eating s'mores by a campfire. That he had made the trip with Sara, that he was a happily married man on his honeymoon, was a fact that brought him more wonder than every star in the sky.

Sara said, "Places like this, you scratch a little bit under the surface and all sorts of bad things come out."

Will knew that she was still thinking about Mercy. The brutal argument with her son. The cold response from her parents. Her pitiful brother. Her total dick of an ex-husband. Her eccentric aunt. Then there were the other guests with their problems, which had been amplified by the liberal amount of alcohol poured at the communal dinner. Which reminded Will again that when he'd dreamed about this place as a kid, he hadn't anticipated that other people would be here. Especially one asshole in particular.

"I know what you're going to say," Sara told him. "This is why we lied."

That wasn't exactly what he was going to say, but it was close.

Will was a special agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Sara had trained as a pediatrician and was currently

serving as a medical examiner with the GBI. Both occupations tended to elicit long conversations from strangers, not all of them good and some of them very bad. Concealing their jobs had felt like a better way to enjoy their honeymoon.

Then again, saying you were one thing didn't stop you from being the other. They were both the kind of people who worried about other people. Particularly Mercy. She seemed to have the entire world against her right now. Will knew how much strength it took to keep your head up, to keep moving forward, when everyone else in your life was trying to pull you down.

"Hey." Sara hugged him closer, wrapping her legs around his waist. "I have another confession."

Will smiled because she was smiling. The butterfly in his chest started to stir. Then other things stirred because he could feel the heat of her pressing against his body.

He asked, "What's your confession?"

"I can't get enough of you." Sara kissed her way up the side of his neck, using her teeth to tease out a response. The chills came back. The feel of her breath in his ear flooded his brain with need. He let his hand slowly travel down. Her breath caught when he touched her. He could feel the rise and fall of her breasts against his bare chest.

Then a sharp, loud scream pierced the night air.

"Will." Sara's body had tensed. "What was that?"

He had no idea. He couldn't tell if it was human or animal. The scream had been high-pitched, blood-curdling. Not a word or a cry for help, but a sound of unrestrained terror. The kind of noise that made the primal part of your brain kick into fight or flight.

Will wasn't built for flight.

He held onto Sara's hand as they quickly made their way toward shore. He picked up his clothes, gave Sara her things. Will looked out over the water as he put on his shirt. He knew from the map that the lake spread out like a slumbering snowman. The swimming area was at the head. The shoreline disappeared into the darkness around the curve of the abdomen. Sound was hard to pin down. The obvious source of the scream was where the people were. Four other couples and a single man were staying

at the lodge. The McAlpine family was in the main house. Leaving out Will and Sara, the guests were in five of the ten cottages that fanned away from the dining hall. That brought the total number to eighteen people on the compound.

Any one of them could've screamed.

"The fighting couple at dinner." Sara worked the buttons on her dress. "The dentist was wasted. The IT guy was—"

"What about the single guy?" Will's cargo pants skidded up his wet legs. "The one who kept needling Mercy?"

"Chuck," Sara provided. "The lawyer was obnoxious. How did he get on the Wi-Fi?"

"His horse-obsessed wife annoyed everybody." Will shoved his bare feet into his boots. His socks went into his pocket. "The lying app guys are up to something."

"What about the Jackal?"

Will looked up from tying his bootlace.

"Babe?" Sara kicked over her sandals so she could slide them on. "Are you—"

He left the lace untied. He didn't want to talk about the Jackal. "Ready?"

They started up the path. Will felt the urge to move, picking up the pace until Sara started to lag. She was incredibly athletic, but her shoes were made for strolling, not running.

He stopped, turning to her. "Is it okay if—"

"Go," she said. "I'll catch up."

Will left the path, taking a straight line through the woods. He used the porch light as his guide, his hands pushing away limbs and prickly vines that caught at his shirt sleeves. His wet feet were rubbing inside his boots. It had been a mistake to leave the one lace untied. He thought about stopping, but the wind shifted, carrying an odor like copper pennies in the air. Will couldn't tell if he was smelling blood or if his cop brain was throwing out sense memories of past crime scenes.

The scream could've come from an animal.

Even Sara hadn't been sure. Will's only certainty was the thing that had made the sound was in fear of its life. Coyote. Bobcat. Bear. There were a lot of creatures in the woods that could make other creatures feel that way.

Was this an overreaction?

He stopped trudging through the overgrowth, turning around to locate the path. He could tell where Sara was, not by sight but by the sound of her shoes on the gravel. She was halfway between the main house and the lake. Their cottage was on the far end of the compound. She was probably trying to form a plan. Were there any lights on in the other cottages? Should she start knocking on doors? Or was she thinking the same as Will, that they were being overly vigilant considering what they both did for a living, and this was going to be a really funny story to tell her sister about how they heard an animal give a death cry and rushed off to investigate rather than having hot lake sex.

Will could not appreciate the humor right now. Sweat had pasted his hair to his head. A blister was rubbing on the back of his heel. Blood trickled from his forehead where a vine had ripped open the skin. He listened to the silence in the woods. Not even the crickets were chirping now. He slapped at an insect that bit him on the side of his neck. Something scurried in the trees overhead.

Maybe he didn't love this place after all.

Worse, at a very deep level, he blamed the Jackal for this misery. Nothing had ever gone right in Will's life when that asshole was around, dating back to when they were kids. The sadistic prick had always been a walking bad luck charm.

Will rubbed his face with his hands like he could erase any thoughts of the Jackal from his brain. They weren't kids anymore. Will was a grown man on his honeymoon.

He headed back toward Sara. Or at least in the direction he thought Sara had gone. Will had lost all sense of time and direction in the dark. There was no telling how long he'd run through the forest like he was tackling a Ninja Warrior set. Walking through the overgrowth was a lot harder without the adrenaline pushing him to run face-first into hanging vines. Will silently formed his own plan. Once he reached the path, he would put on his socks and tie his bootlace so he wasn't limping through the rest of the week. He would locate his beautiful wife. He would take her back to the cottage and they could pick up where they had left off.

"Help!"

Will froze.

There wasn't any uncertainty this time. The scream was so pronounced that he knew it had come from the mouth of a woman.

Then she screamed again—

"Please!"

Will bolted away from the path, running toward the lake. The sound had come from the opposite side of the swimming area, toward the bottom of the snowman. He kept his head down. Legs pumping. He could hear the blood rushing through his ears alongside the echo of the screams. The woods quickly turned into a dense forest. Low-hanging limbs slashed at his arms. Gnats swarmed around his face. The terrain suddenly dropped. He landed sideways on his foot. His ankle rolled.

He ignored the sharp pain, forcing himself to keep going. Will tried to get his adrenaline in check. He had to slow his pace. The compound was at a higher elevation than the lake. There was a steep drop-off near the dining hall. He found the back end of the Loop Trail, then followed another zig-zagging path down. His heart was still pumping. His brain was still reeling with recriminations. He should've paid attention to his instincts the first time. He should've figured this out. He felt sick about what he was going to find, because the woman had screamed for her life, and there was no predator more vicious than a human being.

He coughed as the air turned thick with smoke. The moonlight broke through the trees just in time for him to see the ground was terraced. Will stumbled into a clearing. Empty beer cans and cigarette butts littered the ground. Tools were everywhere. Will kept his head on a swivel as he jogged past sawhorses and extension cords and a generator that had been turned on its side. There were three more cottages, all of them in various stages of repair. A tarp covered one roof. Windows were boarded up in the next. The last cabin was on fire. Flames licked out between the log siding. The door was half-open. Smoke ribboned from a busted side window. The roof wasn't going to hold for much longer.

The screams for help. The fire.

Someone had to be inside.

Will took a deep breath before he ran up the porch stairs. Kicked the door wide open. A blast of heat snatched the moisture from his eyes. All but one of the windows was boarded up. The only light was from the fire. He crouched down, keeping himself below the smoke as he made his way through the living room. Into the tiny kitchen. The bathroom with space for a soaking tub. The small closet. His lungs started to ache. He was running out of breath. He inhaled a mouthful of black smoke as he headed toward the bedroom. No door. No fixtures. No closet. The back wall of the cottage had been stripped to the studs.

They were too narrow for him to fit through.

Will heard a loud creak over the roar of the fire. He jogged back into the living room. The ceiling was fully engulfed. Flames were chewing away the support beams. The roof was collapsing. Chunks of burning wood rained down. Will could barely see for the smoke.

The front door was too far away. He ran toward the busted window, jumping at the last minute, hurtling past falling debris. He rolled to the ground. Coughs racked his body. His skin was tight, as though it wanted to boil from the heat. He tried to stand up, but could only make it to his hands and knees before he coughed out a wad of black soot. His nose was running. Sweat poured from his face. He coughed again. His lungs felt like shattered glass. He pressed his forehead to the ground. Mud smacked at his singed eyebrows. He pulled in a sharp breath through his nose.

Copper.

Will sat up.

There was a belief among police officers that you could smell the iron in blood when it hit oxygen. This wasn't true. The iron needed a chemical reaction to activate the scent. At crime scenes, that something was usually the fatty compounds in skin. The odor was amplified in the presence of water.

Will looked out at the lake. His eyes blurred. He wiped away the mud and sweat. Silenced the cough that wanted to come.

In the distance, he could make out the soles of a pair of Nikes.

Blood-stained jeans pulled down to the knees.

Arms floating out to the sides.

The body was face up, half in the water, half out.

Will felt momentarily transfixed by the sight. It was the way the moon turned the skin a waxy, pale blue. Maybe joking about growing up in an orphanage had put it in his mind, or maybe he was still feeling the absence of any family members on his side of the aisle at the wedding, but Will found himself thinking of his own mother.

As far as he knew, there were only two photographs that documented the seventeen years of his mother's short life. One was a mugshot from an arrest that had taken place a year before Will was born. The other was taken by the medical examiner who had performed her autopsy. Polaroid. Faded. The waxy blue of his mother's skin was the same color as the dead woman lying twenty feet away.

Will stood. He limped toward the body.

He wasn't under any illusion that he would see his mother's face. His gut had already told him who he would find. Still, standing over the body, knowing he was right, etched another scar in the darkest place of his heart.

Another woman lost. Another son who would grow up without his mother.

Mercy McAlpine lay in the shallow water, rippling waves sending her shoulders into tiny shrugs. Her head rested on a cluster of rocks that kept her nose and mouth above water. Floating tendrils of blonde hair gave her an ethereal effect—a fallen angel, a fading star.

Cause of death wasn't a mystery. Will could tell that she'd been repeatedly stabbed. The white button-down shirt Mercy had worn at dinner had disappeared into the bloody pulp of her chest. Water had washed clean some of the wounds. He could see the angry gouges in her shoulder where the knife had been twisted. Dark red squares showed the only thing that had kept the blade from going deeper was the handle.

In his career, Will had seen more horrific crime scenes, but this woman had been alive, walking around, joking, flirting, arguing with her sullen son, warring with her toxic family, less than an hour ago, and now she was dead. She would never be able to make things right with her child. She would never see him fall in

love. Never sit in the front row as she watched him marry the love of his life. No more holidays or birthdays or graduations or quiet moments together.

And all Jon would be left with was the aching loss of her absence.

Will allowed himself a few seconds of sorrow before he summoned his training. He scanned the woods in case the killer was still around. He checked for weapons on the ground. The assailant had taken the knife with him. Will studied the woods again. Listened for strange sounds. He swallowed down the soot and bile in his throat. Knelt beside Mercy. Pressed his fingers against the side of her neck to check for a pulse.

He felt the quick jolt of her heartbeat.

She was alive.

"Mercy?" Will gently turned her head in his direction. Her eyes were open, the whites gleaming like shiny marbles. He made his voice firm. "Who did this to you?"

Will heard a whistling sound, but not from her nose or mouth. Her lungs were trying to draw in air through the open wounds in her chest.

"Mercy." He grabbed her face in his hands. "Mercy McAlpine. My name is Will Trent. I'm an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. I need you to look at me right now."

Her eyelids started to flutter.

"Look at me, Mercy," Will ordered. "Look at me."

The white flickered for a moment. Her pupils rolled. Seconds passed, maybe a minute, before she finally focused on Will's face. There was a brief spark of recognition, then a rush of fear. She was back in her body now, filled with terror, filled with pain.

"You're gonna be okay." Will started to stand. "I'm going to get help."

Mercy grabbed Will's collar, pulling him back down. She looked at him—really looked at him. They both knew that she would not be okay. Instead of panicking, instead of letting him go, she was keeping him here. Her life was coming into focus. The last words she had said to her family, the fight with her son.

"J-Jon . . . tell him . . . tell him he h-has to . . . he has to g-get away from h-huh . . ."

Will watched her eyelids start to flutter again. He wasn't going to tell Jon anything. Mercy was going to say her last words to her son's face. He raised his voice, yelling, "Sara! Get Jon! Hurry!"

"N-no . . ." Mercy started to tremble. She was going into shock. "J-Jon can't . . . he c-can't . . . stay . . . Get away from . . . from . . ."

"Listen to me," Will said. "Give your son the chance to say goodbye."

"L-love . . ." she said. "Love him . . . s-so much."

Will could hear his own heartbreak in her voice. "Mercy, please stay with me for just a while longer. Sara's gonna bring Jon here. He needs to see you before—"

"I'm s-sorry . . ."

"Don't be sorry," Will said. "Just stay with me. Please. Think about the last thing Jon said to you. That can't be the end of it. You know he doesn't hate you. He doesn't want you dead. Don't leave him with that. Please."

"F-forgive . . . him . . ." She coughed, spraying out blood. "Forgive him . . ."

"Tell him yourself. Jon needs to hear it from you."

Her fist twisted into his shirt. She pulled him even closer. "F-forgive him . . ."

"Mercy, please don't—" Will's voice broke. She was slipping away too fast. It suddenly hit him what Jon would see if Sara brought him here. This was not a tender moment to say goodbye. No son should have to live with the evidence of his mother's violent death.

He tried to swallow down his own grief. "Okay. I'll tell Jon. I promise."

Mercy took his vow as permission.

Her body went slack. She let go of his collar. Will watched her hand fall away, the ripples as it splashed into the water. The trembling had stopped. Her mouth gaped open. A slow, pained sigh left her body. Will waited for her to take another raspy breath, but her chest went still.

He panicked in the silence. He couldn't let her go. Sara was a doctor. She could save Mercy. She would bring Jon and he would have his last chance to say goodbye.

"Sara!"

Will's voice echoed around the lake. He ripped off his shirt, covered up her wounds. Jon wouldn't see the damage. He would see his mother's face. He would know that she loved him. He wouldn't have to live the rest of his life wondering what might have been.

"Mercy?" Will shook her so hard that her head lolled to the side. "Mercy?"

He slapped his palm against her face. Her skin was ice cold. There was no more color left to drain. The blood had stopped flowing. She wasn't breathing. He couldn't find a pulse. He had to start compressions. Will laced together his hands, placed his palms on Mercy's chest, locked his elbows, squared his shoulders, and pushed down with his full weight.

Pain sliced through his hand like a lightning strike. He tried to pull back, but he was caught.

"Stop!" Sara had come out of nowhere. She grabbed his hands, trapping them against Mercy's chest. "Don't move. You'll cut the nerves."

It took a moment for him to understand that Sara wasn't worried about Mercy. She was worried about Will.

He looked down. His brain had no explanation for what he was seeing. Slowly, he came back to his senses. He was looking at the murder weapon. The attack had been frenzied, violent, filled with rage. The killer hadn't just stabbed Mercy in the chest. He'd attacked her from behind, driving the knife into her back with such force that the handle had snapped off. The blade was still embedded inside Mercy's chest.

Will had impaled his hand on the broken knife.