

Tethered

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TETHERED

AMY MACKINNON



CHAPTER ONE

I plunge my thumb between the folds of the incision, then hook my forefinger deep into her neck. Unlike most of the bloodlines, which offer perfunctory resistance, the carotid artery doesn't surrender itself willingly. Tethered between the heart and head, the sinewy tube is often weighted with years of plaque, thickening its resolve to stay. More so now that rigor mortis has settled deep within the old woman.

Each time I tug on that vessel, I think of my mother. I imagine other daughters are reminded of their dead parents whenever they hear the refrain from an old song, or feel the heft of a treasured bedtime story resting on their own child's nightstand. My trigger is the transformation of a battered corpse back to someone familiar. I was too young when she died to remember her scent, and I have no memory of her voice. But her wake—like the accident—plays in my head like a movie reel, some frames taut and crisp, others brittle, fluttery things. Though always her face is clear: before, after, and then after again at the funeral.

I remember my grandmother's friends clustered near the Easter lilies, whispering their doubts about my mother's eternal salvation. My grandmother, her frayed black slip hanging just beyond the hem of her dress, bringing me to kneel on road-burned knees before the casket (*don't*

look!) and then hurrying me along, leaving me alone in the family room. I remember holding fast to my doll, a gift from one of my mother's many boyfriends. He said he chose her because she resembled me. Even then I knew better. The doll was elegant and slight, with porcelain cheeks and delicate lashes, lips like my mother's and eyes that clicked shut when I laid her beside me at night. She wore a red flamenco dress, gold earrings I once tried to pierce through my own lobes, and a parchment calling card tied to her wrist, her name in curvy script: *Patrice*. But what I remember best of all from that day was Mr. Mulrey, the undertaker. The mourners huddled in an adjoining room, their fingers clinging to rosary beads, their souls lashed to prayers, their drumbeat-chants vibrating within me. I ran from that room, desperate to escape, and rushed headlong into Mr. Mulrey. He was standing in the doorway of my mother's room, filling it, appearing as bewildered as I felt. I clutched at his suit coat and he turned to me, hands worrying at his own set of beads. All of him stooped as if to avoid a raised hand: shoulders sunk, chin nearly resting on his chest, eyes buried deep beneath a low, dark brow meeting mine.

"I want to go home," I said. I told him about my grandmother's house, a place much like the funeral parlor with its heavy drapes and multitude of crucifixes, with long silences interrupted only by longer prayers. The way she pressed me to her bosom, suffocating with her old lady smell, vowing to protect me from my mother's fate. I fingered the thick gauze that bound my head and asked if he'd take me to where my mother was.

He pocketed his beads then and folded my hand inside his enormous one. We walked away from the hum of mourners and stopped within a few feet of where my mother lay tucked in a lit alcove at the far end of the room. She appeared pink and rested. Her usual red lips were softened with the palest shade of coral, her pillowy bosom hidden beneath a lace collar. But there she was. With candles casting hypnotic shadows against my mother's face, the room seemed kinder than the one I'd left earlier.

"Don't be afraid," said Mr. Mulrey, ushering me over to the coffin.

He allowed me to touch my mother for the first time since the accident. I stroked her hand, but it was hard and cold. So instead my fingers sought the fabric of her dress, knitting through her lace cuff as I spoke.

"I was sleeping when we crashed," I said. "Then I was shaking her and shaking her, but she wouldn't wake up."

He let me go on like that; at least I don't recall him telling me to hush. He simply knelt beside me, alongside my mother, listening. When I finished, he remained quiet.

"Mommy," I whined, poking her arm, clutching Patrice to me, her doll's eyes fluttering with each jostle. "I want to go home." I wanted to sleep in my own bed, not in Grandma's with her musty blankets and sharp toenails, with bedtime stories about mothers passing on to eternal damnation.

That's when Mr. Mulrey again took my hand in his. "She's dead." He brushed aside a lovely curl that flipped over my mother's brow where the worst gash had been to reveal the precise row of stitches he'd made with thread to match her flesh.

"Where's all the blood?" I asked, but he misunderstood. I'd meant the blood that concealed her face in our final moments together as we lay in the street. He tugged open her collar to expose three neat stitches in her neck, telling me how he drained her blood from the carotid artery and replaced it with formaldehyde that then hardened inside of her. In spite of myself, I was awed by his ability to erase the wounds, to help me see my mother again.

I kissed my doll's cheek and settled her against my mother, watching until Patrice's eyes trembled closed. I almost snatched her back. I wanted to. Instead, I unraveled the calling card twined to her tiny wrist and hid it at the very bottom of my dress pocket. It would be the only memento I had of my mother. When I started to cry, fingering the three stitches (*one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three, breathe*), Mr. Mulrey placed a hand on my shoulder and whispered, "Never mind what the others say. We're all sinners and all sinners are welcomed by God."

But I wasn't comforted by a god who couldn't give me back my mother; I found salvation in the undertaker who could. I suppose that's why I became one.

MY FINGER FINDS the carotid artery in the old woman's neck and plucks it through the throat. Against my powdered glove, her tissue appears more gray than it actually is. Cancer does that; it drains the color from a person's body as it drains the life, leaving the once vital carotid grizzled. Taking my scalpel once again, I slice the artery to empty it and turn my attention to what I imagine had once been a shapely thigh. I massage it before penetrating the slack skin with the syringe pump, straight into her femoral artery. A vibrant pink formaldehyde will restore the luster to her skin. Her sunken cheeks will need plumping, so I ready those syringes as well. Glancing at the bulletin board to a photograph her son gave me, I begin planning how I'll sculpt her face. It'll comfort her loved ones to be reminded of the woman she was before the cancer devoured her.

As her blood flows out and the embalming fluid flows in, I suture her mouth. People almost always die with their mouths open. Linus, the funeral director here, once said he thought it was because a person's soul was expelled with the last breath. I'm often reminded of that while threading the needle through my clients' lips. It seems a naive sentiment for a man who's lived as much as Linus. Most people in the town of Whitman and in the adjacent city of Brockton trust Linus to lead them to their next world because his is a sincere belief. I used to think it was an ideal born of good business sense. Looking up at the golden-hued portrait of Jesus gazing out over a moonlit village, and beyond to the woman lying before me, I realize I should have known better. Linus hung the painting in this workspace when he opened his funeral parlor more than forty years ago. The artist, whose signature I've not been able to decipher these past twelve years, christened it *The Shepherd*. When Linus showed me

around my first day, he said it reminded him that he and the dead were not alone. For me, it was never the case. I've always known I'm alone with the dead.

I remove my glove and take an ivory taper and a gardening book from a box I keep hidden in a nearby cabinet. After I check the dog-eared page, I return the book to its spot. I don't know why I keep these items hidden, except perhaps that Linus would misinterpret them as instruments of faith, evidence of my conversion. I fit the candle into its holder, strike a match, and then allow Mozart's Violin Concerto no. 5 to lift the dreariness of my basement workspace. The candle appears to flicker in time to the strings being plucked. This is the only time I listen to music.

As with all trades, there's a routine to mine. It's during this interlude, as the bloodletting begins but before the cleansing commences, that I perform this ritual of sorts. While Linus has his prayers to purge the soul, I bathe the body with music and candlelight. What with the clinical stainless-steel worktable, angled for maximum drainage, fluorescent lights, and frigid concrete floor, it seems only proper that there be some softening of the moment, some recognition of the life lived. It's not meant to be a send-off into another world, more a farewell from this one. Yes, a good-bye. A trip to where I don't know, the ground usually. Most times the deceased leave the embalming room propped in a somber coffin with satin pillows to comfort the bereaved. Then off to the freshly dug earth or, occasionally, a fired oven. Few go straight from the deathbed to the flame.

Though I would prefer to use a warm washcloth and sudsy water the way a mother would when welcoming a newborn at the beginning of life, the law requires I use an approved antiseptic and disposable sponge for this last bath. The gore of the blood draining and the odor of deterioration make this process difficult, but I simply recall the tenderness of that first bath and try to honor it.

As Piano Concerto no. 26 cues, I finish washing the old woman. I remove my gloves, turn off the music, blow out the candle. More gloves and

a cotton mask—sterile formalities in this most intimate of times—and then I lift the trocar from its hook on the wall. I insert the instrument into the small incision in her abdomen, just above the navel, and then turn on the suction. It's important for the aesthetics of the wake that all bodily fluids and soft organs be removed.

I wash her again with only the humming water pipes as an accompaniment this time, then cover her body in a sheet. She'll have to wait for her dress and pumps. Her son forgot to bring them when he dropped off her photograph. Though there's an armoire just outside this room filled with clothes to adorn the dead—high-collared dresses with modest hemlines and easy-access snaps, dark suits with starched shirts and Velcro back seams—most people prefer to dress their loved ones in something familiar. Though sometimes a daughter will shop a better department store for a demure dress that will rot in the ground, often with price tags still attached.

With the bathing finished, I plug in the rollers and fetch the makeup box and hair dryer from the closet. People tend to overlook this aspect of the preparation, but it's oftentimes what mourners remember best. Somehow it soothes them to know the dead are well coiffed. (I've never been able to wear makeup myself.) With her hair damp, I begin applying her makeup: thick layers of foundation to cover the few cancer ulcers on her forehead and chin, the spray of broken blood vessels along her nose, blush to liven her cheeks, and a shade of tangerine lipstick I found on her chest of drawers. Her scalp—pink again—runs like ribbons through her fine hair. The photograph shows a woman who preferred a few well-placed bangs along her forehead, the rest teased up and away to cover the bare spots toward the crown. I smooth the ends with hair wax, spray it all with extra-hold formula bought in bulk from the salon down the street, and then reach for my stylist's shears. I've learned over the years that a little more layering will add much more fullness.

Her preparation nearly complete, I turn to my instrument tray and remove the bouquet of morning glories from their wax paper and transfer

them to a jug of water. Years ago when I started my own garden, the book I turned to was *Nature's Bounty: The Care, Keeping, and Meaning of Flowers*. In addition to advising the novice gardener about natural compost and the buoyancy of evergreens in winter, it listed a variety of plants and their significance. So for the old woman, morning glories (*affection upon departure*). It seems an appropriate choice given her family's devotion.

I wash my hands a final time before turning off the lights; she won't mind the darkness. I take the stairs up to ground level, where the bodies are waked, leaving behind concrete slabs and glaring lights for ambient rooms filled with leather sofas and demure tissue boxes. It's a purgatory of sorts for the grief-stricken to gather and whisper their regrets to the dead and each other.

It will be empty now. Linus buried a middle-aged father of three this morning, and the old woman isn't to be waked until tomorrow afternoon. I begin to imagine the cup of tea I'll make in the cottage Linus leases me, hidden behind the wisteria-covered (*cordial welcome*) trellis that divides my life from this Victorian funeral parlor. Linus lives even closer. He and Alma share the two floors above the business; they have no trellis, no desire to keep away the dead. Looking around the parlor's sitting room, I sense something odd. But there's nothing amiss here; it's all the familiar colors from the palette Alma chose for their own living quarters: chocolate leather sofas, burgundy wingbacks, and creamy wainscoting peppered with brushed brass switch plates. I suppose it makes sense, their living among the dead.

I head to the entrance door and place my hand on the knob, eager for natural light upon my face, but stop when I notice something startle behind an abundance of calla lilies (*modesty*) on the foyer table. It's a little girl.

She runs one finger along the end table, a wisp of hair hiding her eyes. She's no more than eight, slight, and alone.

"Hello?" I say.

She flinches, looks toward me, but doesn't speak.

"Where's your father?" I ask.

She pauses and then raises a finger tucked beneath a faded pink sleeve, pressing it to her chest. “Me?”

I check to see if anyone else is in the room. “Are you here with your father? Did he bring your grandmother’s dress?”

She glances around before shaking her head.

“Who are you with?”

She gives me her back and begins to walk away. I’m reminded of the dozens of children who’ve passed through here, too stunned by events to be coherent, to be mindful of their elders—sins my grandmother would have forgiven with her boar’s-hair brush.

“Wait,” I call.

The girl becomes motionless. I peer around the corner to Linus’s office, but the door at the end of the hall is closed. “Is your family talking to Mr. Bartholomew?”

“The big guy?” She looks off as she says this. Her profile is quite lovely and I wonder what it’s like, to be pretty.

“Yes,” I answer. There’s a slight shift in her expression—a sense of relief, of recognition? I can’t be certain. Her eyes dart in and out behind those wisps.

“He always wears sweaters?”

Her skin appears oddly yellow under these forty-watt bulbs, or maybe it’s lost the sun-kissed luster of summer, become sallow the way mine does during New England’s waning autumn months and then blanched a dusky hue in the endless stretch of winter. Even her legs, bare beneath a denim skirt, have an odd pallor. When she speaks, I can’t help but stare at the gap between her two front teeth, the way her tongue catches in that space. Her hair, dark and fine, hangs in long curly spirals to her waist. I wonder if she cries when her mother combs it.

“So you know Mr. Bartholomew?”

“Linus lets me play here.”

I suddenly remember the single mother who moved into one of the

rentals down the street. Most nights I see the woman shuffling along the sidewalk with a child, both heading toward Tedeschi's corner store on the next block. Sometimes I'll catch the woman blessing herself as she passes the cemetery across the street from here, motioning her child away from the edge of the sidewalk, away from the only busy street in town. They walk in all weather, a cigarette dangling from the woman's lips, head bent, while her little girl skips ahead. The girl doesn't appear to know she's dancing alongside the dead. This must be her, the daughter.

I start to approach the child, then stop. "My name is Clara. Clara Marsh." She raises a hand near her mouth to nibble at her cuticles. "What's your name?" I ask.

"Trecie," she says. With her other hand, she fingers a day lily (*co-quetry*).

"Trecie?"

"Patrice, but everyone calls me Trecie."

A name, it's only a name. It means nothing.

"Does your mother know you're here, Trecie?" I check my watch. I have only a few hours of daylight left to warm me.

"No," she says, her eyes meeting mine for the first time. There's something peculiar about them. The color, so dark as if her pupils are melting, swirling, then shifting again, and the way her gaze remains steady. They seem to reach within me, prodding. "She's probably with Victor anyway. They fight a lot."

"I doubt she'd be very happy if she knew you played in a funeral home."

Even as I say the words, I know they aren't true. Trecie has the aura of the neglected: silently desperate, unnaturally composed. And there's something else I recognize, though I can't be sure what it is: the turn of her nose, the natural arch of her eyebrows, or that sense of aloneness even when in the company of others. Now it's clear she would never cry if her mother pulled a comb through a snarl.

I look to see if Linus's door is still closed, if he's meeting with a distraught family and can't be interrupted for something as innocuous as a forgotten child. I heard voices in there earlier.

"Are you sure Mr. Bartholomew lets you play here? Wouldn't you rather go to the playground with the other children? It's just down the block from Tedeschi's."

She shakes her bowed head, tucking back stray bits of hair that have come loose from behind either ear. "Nobody ever yells here." She jerks her head, suddenly beaming as she casts about the room. "I like the candles and the flowers and the chairs." She stops, then smiles again, revealing those teeth. "I think you like it too."

It's time to shoo her on, make her go home, but my beeper vibrates against my hip and my focus turns to the next tragedy. It's the medical examiner. Instead of the cup of tea I long for, there's a body waiting for me.

I glance at the girl before walking down the hall to Linus's office, wondering if it's safe to leave a wayward child there alone, what might be missing when I return. Pressing my ear against the door, listening for voices, there's only the scratch of writing. A brush of my knuckles against the oak panel and he calls out.

Linus is sitting at his desk, fountain pen poised over a sheaf of papers, and for a moment his mind remains with his work. His skin is a vivid shade of black, smooth and unlined, as if his has been a life untouched by tragedy. At an age when others begin to wither and fold, everything about Linus is lush and full: his cheeks, lips, and especially his belly, always plump from Alma's cooking. He's saved from appearing obese by his impressive height and excellent carriage. Still, he's a big man. His hair—gone gray now, though his mustache retains some of its color—is clipped close, his limbs are long and beginning to bend, gnarled at the fingers, and one must imagine the toes, from arthritis: osteo. I assume even in his youth his gestures were languid, intentional, backed by a remarkable physical strength. I've seen him lift bodies the size of tree trunks with little effort. It's easy to stand in his shadow. When he raises

his bowed head, his face softens into a smile, catching me in his circle of warmth. I take a step back.

"You didn't work right through lunch again, did you now? Lord, look at you, all skin and bones. Go on upstairs, Alma has some of that leftover turkey pot pie with that homemade cranberry sauce of hers."

"Linus, the M.E. called."

He drops his chin and mumbles a brief prayer before he speaks. "You call if you need me."

"I will," I say, though I never do. I turn to go, but the child. "There's a girl out in the mourning room. Trecie?"

"Trecie?" His face twists and he appears confused.

"Yes, about seven or eight, with long dark hair," I say. "She said you let her play here."

Linus's pen, a good one, is caught in midair and then twitches in his hand. It spasms there until he drops it and begins to massage the knotted joints of his fingers, his eyes never wavering. I wonder if he thinks I've lost my mind, but then he speaks. "She was paying me a visit just a little bit ago. She still here?"

I nod. "So it's all right, then?"

"Oh, yes," Linus says, his jowls lifting into a smile.

I close Linus's door and hear his chair creak as the latch tumbles into place. He begins to hum and then his bass drifts into song. Softly, for only his ears, but for mine, too, "*Was blind, but now I see . . .*"

For all the years I've known Linus, there's still much about him that confounds me. In our work, we're privy to the underside of humanity: the bludgeoned grandfathers with generous wills; the strangled girlfriends with dead babies nestled deep within their wombs; the many shaken infants. Yet again and again he seeks the humanity in people, though again and again he must be disappointed.

I head back to the room where Trecie is standing next to a silver candy dish brimming with peppermints in cellophane twists. I don't expect either the candies or the dish to be there when I return.

“You may have one,” I say. “Just one.”

Trecie doesn’t respond, just shakes her head. She walks toward the empty room where the bodies are waked, where the old woman will soon lie. Her funeral bouquets have already been arranged, and the upholstered folding chairs line the walls, set to receive her mourners. Trecie nears the space reserved for caskets, then abruptly plops down, cross-legged, her fingers encircling her naked ankles, her tiny feet hidden inside once white sneakers with faded cartoon characters.

“I like your hair. It looks like mine,” she says.

My hand goes to my head, grasping the hair pulled back in its elastic. It’s a thicket of wiry brown coils, *woolly*, my grandmother called it, not at all something to be admired. It hangs nearly to my waist, since salons aren’t a part of my routine. I haven’t worn it loose since the day of my senior-year portrait.

Trecie gathers her own between her hands to form a ponytail. “How do I look?”

“Pretty.”

She drops her hair and cups her chin in her hand as she regards me. “When you were a girl, did you wear your hair down?”

There’s a sore just above the nape of my neck, raw and sweet, obscured by the elastic. Without intending to, my finger goes there.

“Whenever it was long enough, I wore it up,” I say. She couldn’t know; it’s simply an innocent question. She continues to watch me, unblinking. “I have to leave now, so you should probably go.”

She hesitates, unraveling her legs, and then lifts herself, slowly. Trecie wanders back toward the foyer, her fingers skimming the funeral bouquets along the way; the flowers wave as she retreats. Then she stops. Pointing to the room we’ve just left, Trecie says, “Where do they go when you’re done with them?”

I must leave; I need to bring home the dead. And I don’t know how to speak to children, especially of such things. “To the cemetery, like the one across the street.”

She nods, though she doesn't move. "But where do they all *go*?" Her right hand finds its way back to her hair and she begins to twirl a section near the crown.

I'm mesmerized by the motion, distracted. I wonder what she means, and then I understand. True, this is a place that inspires such questions, and each time a child passes through here, inevitably he or she asks Linus or a family member. No one has ever thought to ask me. "Some people believe that after they die, they go to heaven."

She stops twisting her hair, her forehead wrinkled and mouth open. I've confused her. How to explain such a thing?

"Like perennials." I point to a lavender flower in one of the old woman's arrangements. "Irises lie buried during the coldest part of the year until they blossom in May. By late spring their flowers fall away, and the leaves die in the fall. All winter they lie dormant under the ground until the next spring. Then they come back to life and bloom again."

Trecie tilts her head and looks at the stained-glass window casting garnet speckles across the far wall. She resumes her twisting. "Is that what will happen to all those people in the cemetery?"

"No." I've made things worse. I try to imagine a world that would appeal to a child, a beautiful lie, and try again. "Do you have a favorite place?"

"Here."

"Isn't there someplace else? Somewhere special?"

"Victor took me to the Marshfield Fair once. I had cotton candy and got to see the whole town from the top of the Ferris wheel."

"Well, heaven's like that. You go there."

I brace myself for more questions I can't answer, preparing excuses and a quick exit, but she laughs, wrenching her hand free of her hair, taking several strands with it. "You're lying!"

I start backing out of the room, my beeper vibrating against my hip with each step. "No."

"Yes, you are. You die"—she smiles, snapping her fingers—"just like that."

I say the only words I know to say. “That’s what some people believe.”

Trecie looks at me again, and I’m reminded of Mr. Mulrey, of being seen for the first time. “Isn’t that what you believe?”

I feel in my pants pocket for the car keys, in my blazer for my cell phone. “You may stay here, but don’t go downstairs. That’s private. Only Mr. Bartholomew and I are allowed there. Do you understand?”

She catches herself before a smile parts her lips, and nods instead. It occurs to me as I hurry toward the hearse that Trecie knows this already. She knows because she’s been downstairs.