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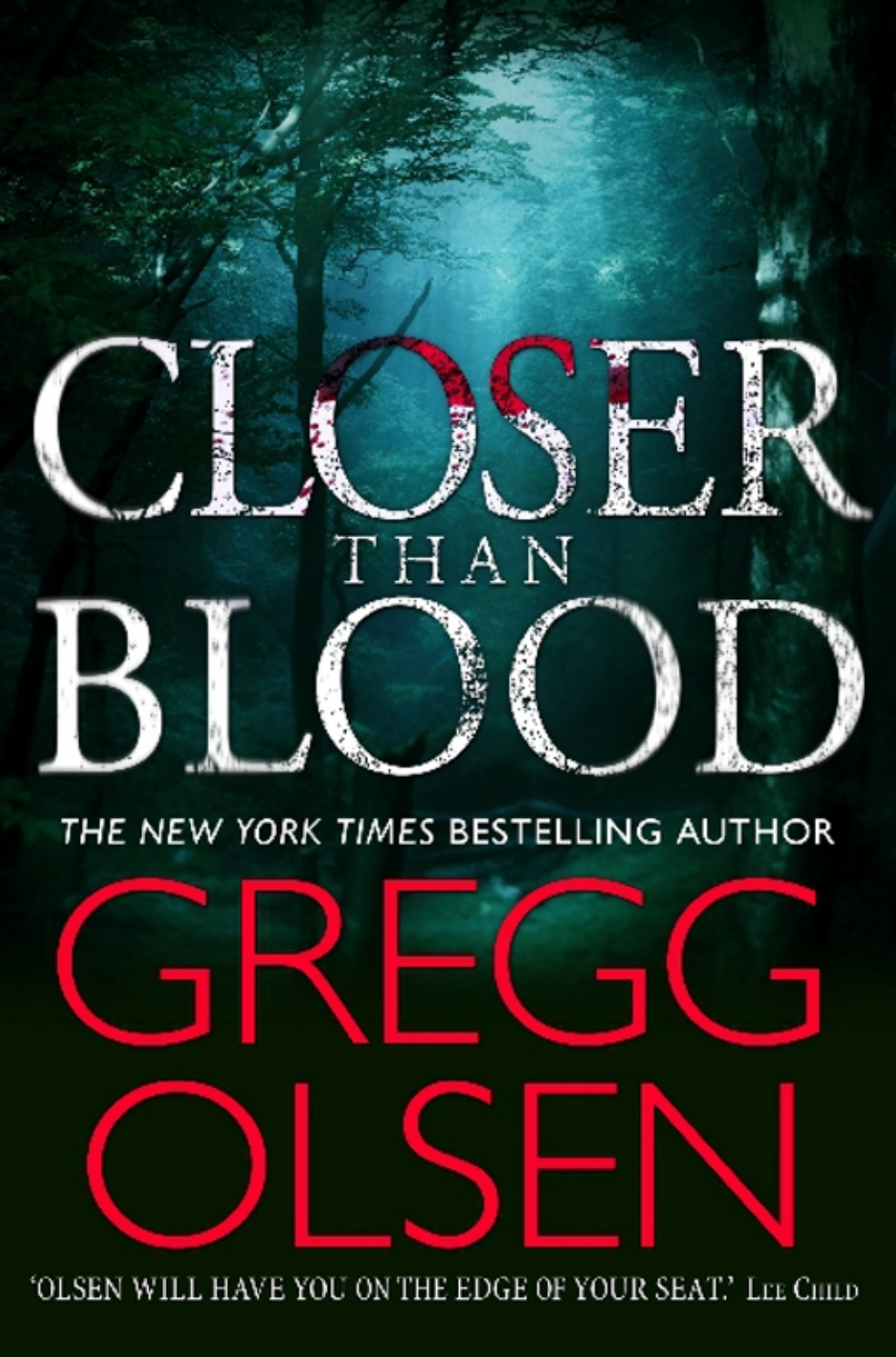
Closer Than Blood

Written by Gregg Olsen

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CLOSER
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BLOOD
THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTELLING AUTHOR
GREGG
OLSEN
'OLSEN WILL HAVE YOU ON THE EDGE OF YOUR SEAT.' LEE CHILD

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PROLOGUE

Kitsap County, Washington
Fifteen years ago

If Kitsap County's road engineers had wanted to seek careers as Disney Imagineers, they might have served up Banner Road as proof positive that their designs could deliver the requisite thrill. The ups and downs of the Bactrian-camel-on-'roids roadway were only matched by its highs and lows. The stomach-in-throat feeling that came with motion and speed was delivered there every day without fail.

Truth be told, the roller-coaster effect owed more to the topography of that stretch of the south county, which chases up and down the hills as it careens along a nine-mile path just east of Colvos Passage from Sedgwick Road to the Olalla Bay Bridge. At about its midpoint, near the intersection with Fragaria Road, was a spot locals had long dubbed the Banner Jump. The Jump was a patch of asphalt that eggs on the lead-footed, as it literally *begs* those who traverse it to fly. A quick descent down the hill is followed by a slight rise, and then another drop. Even at the posted speed of 40 miles per hour, a driver and passengers can feel that tickle in the tummy that makes some people queasy and little kids cry for more. For

as long as there have been teenagers with something to prove or fathers yearning to give their kids what they've wanted, there has been the invitation to push the pedal to the floor. Those with a '70s TV or film reference flash on the opening moments of *Starsky and Hutch* or possibly the famed chase sequence of *The French Connection*.

Kids called it "going airborne."

The Banner Jump was a buzz that required no alcohol to deliver the goods. No amusement park fee. Just a not-so-lazy drive past modest homes, equestrian estates with sprawling pastures, and mobiles, to and from Port Orchard. In rural places like South Kitsap County, cheap excitement was frequently the order of the day.

The thrill could be as short-lived as a spark.

A decade and a half ago, it was also quite deadly.

Mikey Walsh no longer cared what time it was. What *day* it was. *Where he was.* It was a week before Thanksgiving, and Mikey had little to be thankful for. He'd been tweaking for a week. Or maybe it was just three days. He'd never be able to swear to it. Not in court. Not anywhere. Crystal meth had been the solution to a problem of his own creation and he knew it. Certainly, it wasn't his fault that he hurt his back at a construction job site for a new Taco Bell in Bremerton, a half hour to the north. But the fact that he'd tested positive for drugs *was*. He'd violated his employment contract—and that meant he had no insurance, no compensation. Mikey sat in his double-wide mobile home on a twisty gravel road in South Kitsap and started to contemplate just how it was that he'd be able to get himself out of the debt that threatened to take over his life. As far as he could tell, he had two choices.

Cooking methamphetamine or turning his life over to God.

Mikey thought about it long and hard, and in a moment of weakness and despair, he did what any addict would do. He didn't choose God.

Crank, as most in his crowd called it, was like anything illicit. At first a thrill, then a curse. It kept him going when he wanted nothing more than to stop. Mikey was never a handsome figure, but bit by bit meth took every ounce of his youth. His hair thinned. His teeth yellowed. His eyes became languid pools of emptiness. When he wandered the aisles of the all-night Albertsons off Mile Hill Road in Port Orchard, everyone knew he was a tweaker. His empty stare, his bamboo limbs, and the fact that all he ever purchased was beer, chips, salsa, and wings were the giveaways that checkers make casual note of in the ceaselessly boring hours of a late shift.

The night everything changed for Mikey, he landed behind the wheel of his 1979 Chevy Silverado with a shudder and a thud. It was almost midnight when he found himself headed down Banner Road toward his mobile in South Kitsap. The roadway was shiny and he considered the possibility of frost. It was only for a moment. Meth impairs its users with a sense of invincibility, bravado, as it sends a steady flow of energy and false signals of well-being into a shell-shocked system. Mikey had been out on a drug run late that night, delivering, selling, and sampling his wares as he went from customer to customer swapping Baggies of drugs for crumpled twenties. He wasn't tired. Hell, he *never* got tired.

Down the long hill from the intersection at Willock Road, Mikey reached over and turned the knob to the defroster to clear the condensation off the pickup's cracked windshield. The combination of his watery eyes and the low skirting fog made it hard to see. His gaze returned to the road and he shook his head.

It couldn't be.

A girl was waving frantically from the center of the road just at the Banner Jump.

Jesus! You dumb shit! I'm going to kill you!

His eyes riveted to the figure in the roadway, Mikey slammed on the brakes.

Get. Out. Of. My. Way!

The Silverado's nearly bald tires laid a smelly patch of rubber and slid toward the shoulder. Gravel spit out from under its tires, and in that instant Mikey thought that he was going to meet his Maker. Not in the way that he'd imagined lately. Not in the flash of an explosion in the toolshed where he converted the raw materials—the very flammable raw household materials—that turned a toxic brew of chemicals into money. Making meth was part chemistry class flunkout and part short-order cook. Mikey had assumed that if he died young, it would be in a blaze of glory.

A literal blaze.

As he skidded to avoid the girl in the road, Mikey did what he hadn't done in a long time. He said a silent prayer.

The sound of branches scraped the side of his cab. The sparkle of broken glass glittered in the wet road like a busted snow globe. All came at him in the strangeness of slow motion. All came at him in the instant that he would later say was the beginning of a turning point.

The girl in the center of the road rushed at him. She was pulling at the handle of his door and he sat still and scared.

"We need help. Our friend's hurt. My sister might be hurt, too."

She was a teenager. Pretty. Scared. *Very scared*. Her words pelted him between big gulps of air. Mikey thought he detected the odor of beer, but he wasn't sure if he'd smelled himself or the remnants of a can of Bud that had ricocheted from the drink caddy on the floorboard to the passenger seat. Reflexively, he reached down and tucked the beer under the

seat. His priorities were warped by trouble, which followed him like a shadow. Trouble had been his soul mate. Personal disaster, his closest companion.

Mikey didn't need another dose. He didn't need a DUI.

The girl pulled open the driver's-side door and lunged at him. She was blond with ice blue eyes. Everything about her was stunning—the kind of girl who got noticed in a crowd. The kind of girl he might have asked out on a date if he hadn't ruined his life. A splash of blood trickled down from her temple, but otherwise she looked fine.

Scared, but oh-so-fine.

Mikey pulled back, but the seat belt held him in her grasp.

"What are you doing?"

"We need help! You have to help us."

The young man pushed himself from behind the pickup's steering wheel. He swung his legs to the ground.

His vision was fuzzy and he wiped his eyes with his palms as the girl dragged him to a silver '92 Taurus on its side. Steam or smoke poured from the car's crunched engine block. It was an instance in which there was no color. Shades of gray, black, silver. The girl's black shirt was wet and he looked closer at it.

Was it water? Blood?

More steam erupted from the stomped-beer-can Taurus.

"This is gonna blow!" he said. "We got to get out of here."

"Not without my sister, we're not," the girl said.

"Hey, I don't care about your sister. I care about being blown to bits."

"We need an ambulance. The sheriff!"

Mikey loathed the concept of wanting the sheriff in any proximity whatsoever. He had been arrested twice before and, despite the numbing haze of his addiction, he did not want to join the "Third Time's the Charm" club of tweakers and drunks.

He pulled back, but the panicked girl grabbed his wrist.

"Over here," she said. It was nothing short of a command. "Hurry! What's the matter with you?"

He looked over and rubbed his eyes as the second girl, hunched over a body, looked up. He shook his head. The second girl locked her eyes on his. He rubbed his eyes. Even in the dim glow of a broken headlight, it was apparent that she was a dead ringer for the first girl.

Was he seeing double?

"Get moving! You have to help!"

What he saw next, he'd never forget. And never speak about.

Who would believe a tweaker like him?

One of the twins leaned closer to another figure on the roadside, a teenage boy.

"Help," he said. "Help me, please."

Fifteen years later, Detective Kendall Stark looked at the e-mail that she'd printed out on the Kitsap County Sheriff's Department laser printer. It was brief, puzzling, and, the detective had to admit to herself, a little concerning.

THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE.

It was e-mailed to the Class of '95 reunion website.

"That e-mail you forwarded was interesting," she said, when she got Adam Canfield on the phone. Adam's various responsibilities with the reunion committee included managing the website.

"You mean the truth one from the Bible?"

"Yes. Any idea who sent it?"

"Nope. It came from a Kinko's copy center. Some loser from our class must work there."

"All right. See you at the next meeting."

She hung up and put the e-mail away. She wondered which one of their classmates had sent it and, more important, just what *truth* the writer had in mind.

Kendall had no idea that she was on the edge of a whirlpool, about to be sucked in.

CHAPTER ONE

Tacoma, Washington

It was close to midnight and Darius Fulton couldn't sleep. He found himself on the couch watching TV. He wasn't sure if it was the somewhat suspicious aioli he slathered on left-over crab cakes or the general malaise of his life. He was queasy *and* uneasy. He scrolled through the satellite guide. Hundreds of channels were listed there, but nothing was on. *Nothing good, anyway.* It was a cool spring night, the kind that made the inside of a historic North End Tacoma home chill down. *Fast*. Sometimes it felt like the walls were more colanderlike than solid. Outside, gusts shook the feathery tops of bright green pampas grass in front of his North Junett Street house, partially blocking the neighbors' view.

Oh, yes, the neighbors.

Darius had heard them arguing earlier in the evening. Since they'd moved in a year and a half ago, they seemed to never miss the opportunity to seize the attention of everyone within earshot and eyesight. New car. New landscaping. New this. *New that.* Darius had been divorced for more than a year and knew that his days of keeping up with anyone were long gone. At fifty-five, Darius was going to have to

make do with the residual trappings of the life he'd once known. Before the jerk with the Porsche scooped up his wife and left him in the dust.

He hoisted himself up and went to the kitchen, where he poured himself a glass of wine, dropping an ice cube into the slightly amber liquid. He didn't care if ice cubes in wine was some grand faux pas. *Hell, it was Chablis out of a box.* He returned to the couch and restlessly flipped through the channels before settling on an *Oprah* broadcast that celebrated all the things he'd need to do to have his "best life."

My best life was five, no, ten years ago, he thought.

Another sip. A guzzle. Ice cubes collided with his teeth. And he hoped that sleep would come right then and there on the couch that he and Greta had picked out together. That was back then. Then, when she still loved him. Then, when he was climbing the corporate ladder with the vigor and grit of a man who knew that he'd have the world in his hands. Always. Forever.

He thought he heard a sound at the door, and just like *that* his pity-party-for-one was over.

His ex-wife's cat, Cyrus, scooted under the dining table in the other room. How he loved that cat. At times, he found himself talking to him as if he were his only friend, a feline confidant. It was as if the silver tabby understood every word. Darius hoped that Greta would allow him one little consolation in the bitterness of their split. He wanted to keep Cyrus.

"What was that, Cyrus? Too late for a visitor," he said.

The cat stayed put, but cocked its head in that knowing way that cats do.

When he heard the sound a second time, Darius looked at his mantel clock and determined that he had not misheard.

Next, the sound of a fist bumping the rippled windowpane on the front door.

The glass is a hundred years old! Be careful! he thought,

Greta's admonition when he washed the windows coming to him.

Darius pried himself from the couch.

"Who'd be over at this hour?" he said, turning on the overhead lamp.

The glass door was smeared with red.

Jesus, what's happened?

He moved closer to get a better view. In that instance when reality is suppressed for a more plausible, a more *acceptable* scenario, he allowed himself to think that a bird might have lost its way in the dark, hitting the window and splattering blood. Yet at once it was obvious that there was too much red for that.

The bloody smear was a big red octopus on the center glass panel.

Or the shape of a human hand.

The underemployed, cat-loving executive turned the lock and swung the door open.

Wilting on the front steps was a woman in her nightgown. It must have been a white nightgown, but now it was red. She was lying there, shivering, making the kind of guttural sounds that people do as they fight for their last breath. He knew her. Tori Connelly lived in the Victorian across the street.

"Good God!" Darius said, dropping to his knees. "What happened to you?"

Tori curled in a defensive ball, lifted her damp head. Her hands were smeared with blood.

"Help," she said. "I need an ambulance."

"Of course," Darius said, his adrenaline pumping. "I'll call for one now."

"Not for me," she said. "My husband. Alex has been shot, too. We've both been shot. He needs help. Oh, God. Help me. Help *him*!"

"What happened?" Darius asked.

Her eyes were terror filled. “A man got in. Our security system is down. He got inside the house to rob us. He shot us. He shot Alex.”

Darius bent down and pulled her inside. It was all happening so fast. He was slightly drunk from the crummy wine he’d consumed, and he knew it. He wasn’t sure right then if he should go for his phone—charging in the kitchen—or get something to help stop Tori’s bleeding.

“Are you going to call for help? I need help, too!” Tori said.

He slammed the door shut and turned the deadbolt. The SOB who’d shot his neighbor was out there. His heart pounded and he thought of getting his own gun. But Greta had a thing against guns, so the firearm that he’d bought for protection was in a lockbox in the carriage house. He couldn’t get to it, even if he’d been under attack himself.

“Yeah, dialing now,” he said.

Tori began crying loudly, loud enough to be heard by the 911 dispatcher.

Darius knelt next to her as he gave his address. He looked into the woman’s fearful eyes. Her skin was white. Her eyes glazed over.

He pulled a knit throw from the sofa and pressed it into her bloody thigh.

“It’s my neighbor, Tori Connelly. She’s been shot. Her husband Alex Connelly’s been shot, too.”

The dispatcher confirmed the address and told Darius to stay calm.

“How’s Ms. Connelly doing?”

“Not great,” he said, his heart racing toward what he was sure would be a heart attack.

“What’s her color? Can she speak?”

“She’s pale, and, yes, she can talk. Please get someone here fast,” he said.

“Are you applying pressure to the wound?”

"Yes, I think so. I'm doing my best."

"They're on the way. Stay with me," the dispatcher said.

"Stay with me," Tori echoed. "Please stay with me."

"I'm not going anywhere," Darius said, gently touching her shoulder. "Hang on. You'll be fine."

He wasn't sure if he was unintentionally lying or hoping for the best. With the spatter of blood drenching her nightgown, it was hard to say just what her chances were.

CHAPTER TWO

Seattle, Washington

Lainie O'Neal awoke as the clock app on her iPhone rolled like an old-school digital alarm clock to 3:00 A.M. She drew in a breath and held it a moment before exhaling. It was an exercise that was supposed to return her to slumber. Once more. *Please*. Her eyes were wide open and the pinprick of light coming from the slit in the window shade found her like a searchlight's beam. Spring rain pelted the window.

Why now? Why can't I sleep? She took another breath. Something felt wrong. Lainie just couldn't get comfortable. She flipped the pillow over and over, on the hunt for the cool side. *As if that would matter*. Lainie shut her eyes with a decided force, almost a wincing action, which she knew was more than needed. Although the bedroom was chilly, she kicked her covers to the floor.

Whenever the first indication of insomnia hit her, as it had the night before, a twinge of panic came with it. She was never sure if the dreaded sleeplessness would last a night or a week. *Maybe longer?* She'd been through counseling. She'd seen a doctor. In fact, she'd seen *two*. Nothing worked.

She sat up and threw her legs over the edge of the bed. She cradled her face in her hands.

Lainie knew the reason for her insomnia, and no counselor or doctor could quite grasp what was so obvious to her.

For the past several days, she'd been thinking about Tori. More than usual. It was as if her twin sister wouldn't let her sleep. It was as if the twin she hadn't seen for years had her hand on her shoulders, shaking Lainie as she tried to fall toward that desperate and dark space.

I'm not going to let you. You better listen to me.

She went to the medicine cabinet, took an Ambien, and looked inside the pill bottle.

Only one more.

She checked the date. She had a week more on the prescription. She'd have to resort to an over-the-counter sleep aid to get her through refill time.

She drank some water and set down the paper cup.

The mirror swung shut, and the haggard face that met her gaze belonged to another.

Tori.

She shook her head, turned away, and looked back at the mirror.

She blinked. It was her own face.

Lainie steadied herself a moment.

Me.

She padded back to her tousled bed, hoping that the pill would work its magic and send her to the restful place she needed.

And not, she prayed, to the nightmares that visited her all too often.

Ten minutes later, the lid of darkness shut over her supine body.

* * *

Setting the stage was as crucial as it was easy. All one had to do was think like a crime scene investigator or a cop. Maybe a little like a nosy mother-in-law. The woman pondering that scenario had had a few of those to contend with, too. Ultimately, she knew that no detail was too frivolous. Even the mundane had to be considered, very carefully. The point of setting the stage was to ensure that *she* was in the final act.

The act that had her getting everything she ever wanted.

The plasma screen over the fireplace was playing *The O'Reilly Factor*. The man glued to the TV loved the political commentator's take on politics, business, and culture. He even drank from a "Culture Warrior" ceramic mug.

The woman considered the TV analyst an insufferable blowhard.

A chime from a grandfather clock sounded.

The woman felt the chill of the air from an open window as she stood nude behind the sofa.

"Babe, how about a piece of that pie?" he said, his eyes fixed on the screen.

"Right here," she said.

Yet there was no pie.

She put the barrel of the pistol to the back of his head and fired. Blood spurted like from a stomped-on ketchup packet. Specks of red dotted her glove-covered arm. There was likely more blood than she could see with the naked eye, but that was fine. She knew how to handle it. She'd planned for it. He gurgled a little, but it wasn't the sound of a man fighting for his life. That was over. It was the sound of air oozing from his trachea. He slumped over.

She made her way to the shower, which was already running. She pulled off the glove and set it inside a trash can lined with plastic. The water was ice cold by then. Even for

her, it had taken considerable effort to summon the nerves to do what she had wanted to do.

Gunfire was messy.

Blowback is hell.

Spatter matters.

And only time will tell.

It was a kind of verse that she'd conjured that moment, and she allowed a smile to cross her lips as the icy water poured over her. She looked down at her legs, long, lovely. Flawless.

But not for long.

The water had gone from crimson to pink to clear, swirling down the drain between her painted toes. She turned off the shower and reached for a towel. As she patted her face dry she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

Still lovely. Still rich. Even more so at that very moment than she'd ever been in her life.

She poked her arms through the sleeves of a sheer white nightgown and let the filmy fabric tumble down her body. This was part of setting the stage. Her augmented breasts—not freakishly so, just enough to arouse a man when she needed to—would protrude only slightly. She'd act modest and embarrassed, but if the cops on the scene were under fifty, they'd be looking where they shouldn't.

A distraction. One of many.

She poured a plastic cup of bleach down the shower drain and ran the water while she counted to ten.

Taking the trash can liner that held the glove and the empty plastic bleach cup nestled inside, she hurried back into the living room and surveyed the scene. Exactly seven minutes had passed since she pulled the trigger, propelling the slug into her unsuspecting . . . pie-wanting . . . TV-watching . . . husband. It was important to get on with it. The pool of blood around his head would congeal, and her story would not seem so plausible. She knocked the contents atop

the coffee table to the floor. Using her hip, she pushed over a potted button fern. A trickle of black soil scattered over the rug. A drawer in a sideboard was pulled to the floor. Knives fell like gleaming Pixy Stix.

It looked like a struggle. Not much of one, but one that could have taken place in the moments that she'd later describe.

Next, she put on a second rubber kitchen glove—the long kind that ran from fingertips to elbow—and picked up the gun. She was grateful for all the things that money could buy just then. Pilates. Yoga. Tai chi. She'd taken all those courses with the other rich bitches. They never accepted her, but that didn't matter. She wasn't there to get to know them. She was there to limber up. She bent down and twisted her shoulder as she pointed the gun at her leg and fired.

She didn't cry out.

Instead, she bit her lip and started toward the door. She was no longer concerned about blood and where it fell. In the throes of her imagined escape, there could be blood anywhere. *His or hers*. She left the door open, and started to pick up the pace by the koi pond that had been a labor of love, apparently, of the previous owners. She didn't love anything or anyone. Except, of course, a brimming bank account. She bent down, her nightgown now more red than white. She'd missed her femoral artery, of course. But she hadn't expected that much blood.

Good thing Darius is still up, she thought, looking up the walkway of the property across the street. The violet light of a TV slashed through the manicured foliage framing the window.

She tucked the gun into the plastic bag, dropped in a three-pound lead weight, and deposited all of it between lily pads in the pond. She dropped the bag containing the gloves into the storm drain on the street—it was a risk, but one that she'd take.

Each time she moved her leg, she let out a yelp. Then a scream. Finally she turned on the tears.

One notch at a time.

She caught a glimpse of a figure between the house and the hedge, and she smiled.

Lainie's eyes fluttered, struggling to open, weary slits reacting to light they wanted to avoid. She looked at her phone. It was now 4:00 A.M. She felt the chill of the early morning air and pulled up the sheet. Groggy from the pill, she had a million things to do in the morning . . . and she was going to look like hell. She reviewed her list as she tried to find her way back to slumber. *Just fifteen minutes more. Only fifteen.* There was an interview to conduct for an article she was writing for a blog, an overdue errand to the dry cleaner, and a ferry ride over to meet with the high school class reunion committee in Port Orchard. She exhaled, closed her eyes.

The dream shook her. They always did. Dark. Violent. Specific and ambiguous at the same time. They always led back to thoughts of her sister. Her heart pounded. She knew her dream had been a nightmare, but there was no way to analyze what it might have meant. If, that is, she was still the kind of woman who would do that sort of thing. She could not recall much about it . . . except the gun, the figure running . . . and the face that was hers when she looked in the mirror.