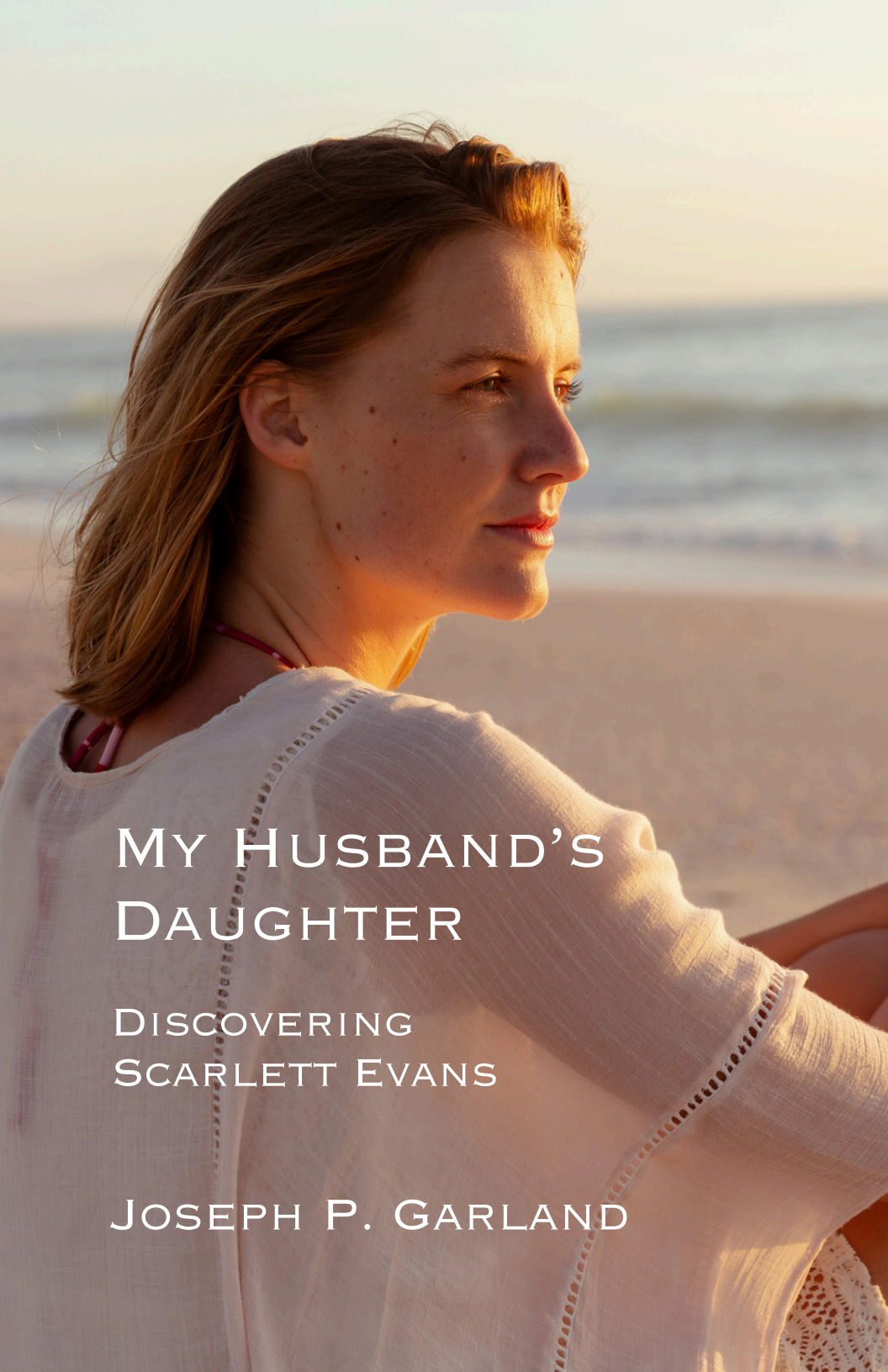

My Husband's Daughter

Discovering Scarlett Evans

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1

WHEN I STARTED UP the path to my white center hall colonial on a clear Friday about a month after the suicide of Keith, my ex-husband, a girl awkwardly stood when she saw me. She'd been sitting on my front step just in front of my door. A light green backpack was on the ground beside her. I slowed briefly as I tried to understand what was going on.

As she got up, she tightened her raincoat, a short ratty thing in blue, around herself. Seeing her, I resumed my pace, very confused. This was not normal and as far as I could recall I'd never seen this girl in my life. One thing was clear. She didn't look to be from Bronxville, my admittedly but subtly upscale suburb just north of New York City.

Still, she was just a kid looking out of place and didn't seem to pose any sort of threat. By the time I reached her, she was still precisely where she'd stood.

On closer examination, she was very much a *girl*. There was something about her that generated a wave of sympathy in me as I was trying to imagine why she had been sitting nervously on my front step on a spring weekday.

She looked to be fifteen or sixteen though I saw she'd gone to great efforts to present herself as older. She was tall for her age, though she slouched. Her skin was fair, even pale, and her round face was framed by hair that was a darkish brown with flakes of auburn and flowed well below her shoulders. She was wearing jeans with

holes in the knees above black high-top sneakers and there she was, looking down and rocking slightly to the right and left, waiting for me. I had never seen her before. I asked how I could help her.

"Are you Mrs. Owens?" she asked.

I nodded. Hearing that confirmed that she didn't know me, and I realized I had no idea why she was asking and suddenly was a little wary of her.

"Can I –" She looked down and then quickly up again. "Can I come in?"

She was very anxious, her words coming hesitantly. Somehow, I thought it would be cruel to say no or to make her stand in my front yard to tell me whatever it was that she wanted to tell me. So, I nodded and waved for her to follow me inside.

When I returned after getting two glasses of water, she was on the couch in the living room with her backpack on the floor and gripping her coat tightly against herself. She was very frightened, and I was still unsettled.

I handed one glass to her, and she swallowed about half very quickly before placing it on the coffee table. She was meticulous about it, making sure it was on the back cover of one of the *New Yorker*s piled there. She ran the back of her hand across her lips to dry them.

I tried to get comfortable in an armchair across from her, my own glass something of a prop for the bizarre happening and my eyes continuing to study her.

The silence was uncomfortable, so I spoke. "You know who I am. Who are you?" I tried to be as friendly as possible. She looked up at me and took a breath.

Without a word, she reached into the pocket of her raincoat and took out a somewhat crumpled envelope that had been folded in half, smoothing it on her thigh. After a pause and a glance at its front, she handed it to me.

I studied it as I turned it over between my finters. It was addressed in hand to Scarlett Evans in Rensselaer, New York. There was no return address but the postmark over a plain stamp showed that it had been sent a month earlier from a nearby suburban post office in the small city where Keith had lived after he'd left me. The date was the day before he killed himself. So somehow this was about him, and I knew it was not going to be pleasant.

The top of the envelope had been roughly slit open. Inside was a single white page, folded into thirds. I looked at her. She nodded, and I removed the letter. I recognized Keith's pigeonny handwriting.

Scarlett,

There is a truth I cannot take to my grave. I am your father. My greatest regret is my not having been able to support you in the way a father should support his daughter. You are my only child. Your mother has told me of your progress throughout, and how you are growing into a fine woman. I am proud of you.

I have become torn by guilt for what I have done. Not only to you and your mother but also to my own dear now ex-wife. She knows nothing of you or of your mother.

I fear that I will no longer exist by the time you read this except insofar as some small part of me

has become a part of you. I promise you that you will always have my love, wherever you might be.

Your ~~father~~ dad

His name was not on it, but there was no doubt it was his handwriting. After glancing briefly through it again and trying to maintain my composure about seeing his handwriting and understanding what his words meant, I refolded it and restored it to its envelope, which I handed back to Scarlett Evans. She didn't seem to have moved, and when she took it, she placed it on her lap and waited. She seemed relieved that I hadn't created a scene. She asked, quietly, "Is it true? Did he…?" Her voice trailed off.

"Yes, it's true. He…he committed suicide. He must have sent this the day before he did it." I cannot say why I was blunt. I think it was the product of my sudden realization that he'd cheated on me, at least once, in the very early days of our marriage. Days that I'd always thought were wonderfully happy ones.

Had he been there, I cannot say what I would have done but I could not vent my anger on the very nervous and perfectly innocent girl who was sitting across from me.

"So, he's really dead?"

The simple way she asked and the way her eyes studied me tethered me back to earth. I couldn't speak so I just nodded. Her calm seemed to crack, and I thought she might cry. She didn't. We were just two strangers suddenly and perhaps forever tied to one another from a moment of *indiscretion* by her father and my husband.

"He was your husband, then?" Again, her voice was calm. Perhaps she'd practiced what she'd say and how she'd say it.

"We were divorced," I said flatly. "I recognize the handwriting." I asked, "How did you find me?"

This Scarlett lifted and finished off her water. "May I have another?" I nodded and she was heading to the kitchen, carrying the envelope with her.

By the time she got back with her refilled glass, I was up, staring through the front window to the house across the street and the maple tree in front of it that was always so brilliant in October and when it bloomed it hid what was going on behind it. It was a peculiar thought, one I never had before, but it came to me with this child's news. And that house across and that tree and especially my house suddenly felt different with my husband's daughter in my living room. And not in a good way.

She gave a theatrical cough. I turned as she resumed her seat on the couch, placing the letter delicately on the coffee table. I returned to my chair and stared at it and then back at her.

I let her tell her story. For years, she said, she'd asked her mother who her father was, but that her mother claimed she didn't know. When she was old enough to understand, her mother told her that she was the product of a single encounter when she was working at one of the booths at a legal convention in Boston, her hometown. Back in those early days, when I was so happily married to Keith. During one of his many trips to Boston or Washington or Chicago about which I'd never given a second thought.

She interrupted the chain of what I was thinking.

"The letter said my mom told him things about me over the years and when I read that I thought maybe I should try to find information about him. I mean, that was the obvious thing to do. Right?"

She saw my expression and continued. "I can't say if it was more than that one time. The sex or whatever it was. I don't know how he connected with my mom after. She must have gotten his card or something and called him when she found out that she was pregnant."

"What about – ?"

"Abortion?"

I nodded after wading into this difficult territory.

"I asked her about it last year. She looked at me strangely. All she would say was that it was never an option for her and that had she done it, she wouldn't have me and that I mattered more to her than anything else in the world. She said she'd never regretted the decision even if it cost her her family."

"Family?" I asked.

"Simple enough. When they found out, they tossed her out. Never visited. Never called. I doubt they know my name or whether the product of the sin was a boy or a girl. Or even twins."

As for me, I didn't have any family left. No siblings and my parents had died in a car crash about five years earlier. There are a bunch of aunts and uncles and cousins out on the Island but we all faded away from each others' lives. Thus, it was Keith and me. And then it was just me.

But my own distance from my family was from neglect. Not…from malice.

"So," I said, "you've never met your grandparents?"

"Not my mother's folks, no. I can't say whether they're still alive."

She paused to let this settle over me, which it did, uncomfortably.

"I understand," was all I could muster, and I waited.

"As to my father, he must have actually cared about me in some way even if he didn't try to meet me. Keeping informed of what was going on with me in my life. And he might have wanted to meet me. I don't know."

She looked at me directly. "He says I was his only child."

I nodded.

"Maybe," I thought out loud, "that's why he took an interest in you." I couldn't say if this was true, but I couldn't say that it wasn't.

"I guess we'll never know," she said. "I mean, why would he care about the details of my life, you know?"

I'd long thought he agreed with me that we didn't want kids, so this was getting very confusing to me.

"My mom," she resumed, "had it rough. Her family, even her sisters, disowned her. She had to move and ended up in Rensselaer. She has a good job working for the County and was always bringing new boyfriends around. They'd last a while and then they were gone. Mitch, the current one, is easily the best of all of them and he's been with her…us for nearly a year.

"Anyway, after telling me again and again how she didn't know who my father was, I get this letter. I don't know if she would've given it to me. I don't know if he ever tried to contact me before and, you know, she'd

thrown the letters away. But I guess it could have been fate that I got home that day while she was still at work.

"So, I get this letter, and I open it and…you see what it says. So, she comes home, and I ask her about my father again. She's like wondering where that came from, and I just say I've always been curious. *'Do you know anything about him? Has he ever contacted you?'* Stuff like that. She again says it was just some rando thing from long ago and she doesn't even know his name except that he was some kind of lawyer in New York.

"I mean, that's not something you want your mom to drop on you, that she was kind of a…slut fucking a married guy on a business trip so of course I asked her whether he was married when I was conceived, which is how I put it, and she said he wasn't wearing a wedding band, but she was pretty sure he was cheating on some ignorant housewife keeping his dinner warm for him." She paused, looking slightly embarrassed. "No offense."

"If that's what she said, that's what she said," I assured her.

This didn't explain how she'd found me. So, I asked her again.

"Oh, that. I knew my mom was lying about not knowing who he was, from the letter, which of course I didn't show her. After that there was no letter for her, at least in the handwriting at the time because I checked every day when I got home. But from what he wrote, I figured there must have been something deeper between him and her. How did he know what was going on with my life? You see?

"My mom's not so tech savvy. I figured she must have used email and so the next day when I got home before she did, I checked her computer. I knew her password, of course, because half the time she needed me to help her when she was online. Se090107. My initials and birthday. Once I was in, I checked her email. Mostly it was spam and stuff.

"So, I just did a search for 'Scarlett' – it's not a common name and I always figured my mom got it from that movie –"

"Gone with the Wind?"

"Yeah, I guess that's it. Then I found an email chain about me. They used my name. Not many, every six months or so, from an obviously fake Gmail address. Just brief things every few months. Mostly her telling him news about me. It was pretty creepy.

"Suddenly, I found an email that he must have sent by mistake because it had what I figured was his real name. Normally it was just a KO. But there it was. Keith Owens."

These words made clear that it was my late husband.

"Yeah, that was him."

She said that with his name, it was just basic detective work on the internet. There were a few possibilities but when she narrowed it down by ages there were only two. One was in California, and one was actually in New Rochelle, which is only a few miles east of Bronxville and was his post-divorced city, although she did not know that at the time. It was also where the letter was postmarked.

She now had his address, so she took Amtrak to the city and then Metro-North, the local commuter train, to

New Rochelle but when she showed up, she was told he was no longer living there. A sympathetic doorman wrote down the house in Bronxville as a place where she might be able to find out more. My house.

"That's all he said. 'You might be able to get information there.'"

I asked her about her mother. Whether she was involved in her search.

She shook her head. "After I got the letter, I didn't say anything about it."

"What did you tell her about coming to find him down here?"

She shook her head again. "I didn't say anything. I just left a note after she and Mitch, my mom's boyfriend, left for work. I just did it. Instead of going to school I, like I said, took Amtrak to New York City. It's only a few hours. I left a note on the kitchen table saying I was off visiting a friend and that she shouldn't worry. That I'd be in contact as soon as I could."

She looked at her phone. "I guess she would have gotten it a few hours ago, but I blocked her and him on my phone, so I don't know if they've been trying to get in touch with me."

This bothered me. "You can't just leave her hanging like that. She is your mother, and she has a right to know where you are or at least that you're okay."

"I know." She got up and went into the kitchen and I went back to the front window, trying to get a handle on what was going on and what I was supposed to do with this sixteen-year-old.

She came back pretty quickly. I was still standing but now my back was to the window.

"Okay." She held out her phone. "I unblocked her and just texted that I'm staying away for a few days and am fine."

As she was finishing saying this, her phone buzzed. She lifted it and read the message.

"She says she wants me home now. That she and Mitch have been worried sick."

The phone buzzed again.

"She says at least to tell her where I am and with who."

It buzzed.

She read: "'I don't understand why you're doing this to us.'"

Another buzz. Again she read.

"'We both love you, you know that. Wherever you are, we'll come get you.'"

Another buzz.

"'If you tell us, you won't get into trouble. Otherwise, we'll have to report this to the police, and it won't go well for you.'" She looked at me. "I think Mitch dictated that last part. It's kind of cute when he tries to be my dad."

When the phone was quiet, she resumed her seat on the couch, lightly juggling it between her hands. I sat across from her. She looked at me. "What am I supposed to say? I just want to get away for a few days. Find out about my secret dad. What's wrong with that? And, yeah, I'm pissed that she never told me she knew who he is."

"I don't know you or anything about you," I said. "What did you expect when you came here?"

Her phone buzzed. She ignored it.

"I don't know what I expected. Maybe, I don't know, a kind word or something."

She stood.

"I'm sorry," I said. I was starting to get nervous. This whole thing was on the verge of spinning out of control, taking me with it. "You just came so out of nowhere and just dropped this bombshell in my lap."

"How do you think I felt when I got the letter?"

"Look," I said, trying to calm things a notch or two. "Let's take a breath here. I'm not saying anything more than that you came out of nowhere, okay. Right now, the issue is your mother. She loves you and is worried sick. You have to at least call her. Then we can figure out what to do. Does that make sense?"

"If you say so." She plopped back down on the couch.

"I do say so. Give me your phone and I'll text her that you're safe. Can you just do that?"

She looked at her phone and its now constant buzzing, which she ignored, as she did me.

I told her that she was putting me in a very difficult position. I didn't know her. While it seemed that with the letter she'd proven that Keith was her father, I couldn't be completely sure.

"I could get arrested," I said.

She looked up. "For what? I came here on my own. You have nothing to do with it. How can you get into trouble?"

"You're sixteen. I'm interfering with your mother's rights. She says she wants you home" – I nodded at her phone, still being juggled in her lap –"and how am I not kidnapping you if I prevent you from going back. Can't you understand that?"

"Wouldn't you take that chance for me?"

"I don't even know you." By verbalizing it, the threat to me felt infinitely more real and more dangerous.

"Let me speak to her," I said, straightening my arm towards her, palm upright.

"You're going to call her? I can't believe it. I just want to stay here for a day or two. Find out about my father. Is that asking too much?"

"You're sixteen. You have no choice. You have to go back."

For a moment, I expected that she was going to tell me to go fuck myself and then grab her backpack and be gone, which would still leave me in a vulnerable position, what with not complying with a sixteen-year-old's mother's wish. I kept my patience and kept my hand out.

I took a breath while Scarlett stared at me, her head shaking, and then slowly handing me her phone.

"Do you want to be on the call?" I asked. She shook her head and got up, heading to the kitchen.

I decided it was best to go to my bedroom. Scarlett wouldn't be going anywhere, at least until I came down with her phone.

Sitting on my bed, I hit CALL on the number connected to the text message. I had no clue as to how this would go or really what I would say. But it was ringing. It was answered before the second ring.

"Scarlett. Where are you?" I heard, a hint of a Boston accent and more than a hint of anger.

"It isn't Scarlett."

There was a pause.

"Who are you?" Her mother, whose voice had hardened when she'd heard what I said, put me on speaker, and I figured her boyfriend, this Mitch guy, was listening in.

"First, your daughter is fine."

"Let me speak to her."

The boyfriend chimed in. "Where is she?"

"I can't say but she's safe," I answered. I knew that sounded pretty bad and got up and started pacing to try to get my bearings better now that it was a two-on-one conversation.

He was getting angry. "Have you kidnapped her?" That's what I would have thought were I them given what I said. "I'll get the New York State Police and FBI in two minutes if you don't let her mother talk to her."

"I have not kidnapped her." I hoped they believed me. "Please calm down. Both of you. I…I knew her father."

"Her father?" Her mother's tone changed completely, from anger to confusion. "How does she know who her father is?"

"It's a complicated story but all I can say is that she found out and tracked him down and showed up about an hour ago. I told her she had to contact you to let you know she's safe and now I'm calling you so we can figure out what to do with her."

Her mother continued, "You know she's sixteen, right?"

"She told me that straight off." I was getting more relaxed as the conversation proceeded.

"And where's her father?"

I paused. There was no way around it. "He's dead."

"Dead? I can't believe it. Car crash or something?"

From the background I heard the boyfriend say, "Maybe that's why you didn't get the last check."

"Check?" I asked. "Was he sending checks?"

"She's his kid, okay. A condom broke and we hoped nothing happened. We were wrong. I kept the baby, and my family threw me out. I didn't know whether I should tell him, but I tracked him down at his firm and told him he was going to be a father.

"We did a paternity test. It confirmed it. But he didn't want to make it legal or formal or whatever, so I agreed to monthly checks. I trusted him and if he stopped sending them I could always sue."

This knocked the wind out of my sails. There was unassailable proof apparently. Then she twisted the knife. "He said he was married and last I heard he still is. Or was. Didn't want his bride to know. He was such a *gentleman*."

I did not miss the tone she used for that last phrase or the cruelty in the way she said it. *Bitch*.

"Look, I'm not saying he's not her father. I'm just asking." I was trying to get the conversation back under control.

"Look," she mimicked me. "I'm just saying he's been writing to me for information about her and sending checks every month for over fifteen years. Like clockwork. And then we didn't get anything last month or so far this month."

I took a breath and then said, "He killed himself."

There it was. He killed himself.

There was silence on the other end.

"What do you mean he killed himself?" She sounded shocked and I heard nothing from the boyfriend who, I

guess, didn't care how he died just that he and the gravy train were no more. The conversation had turned into one between me and Scarlett's mother.

"Just that. He left a brief note for me. And I just found out he sent one to Scarlett. Who I didn't know existed until an hour ago."

"So, he never told you?"

"Never."

"He sent a letter to Scarlett? To her? Do you have it?"

"She showed it to me. I…I recognized his handwriting."

"So, why'd he do it?" She sounded genuinely shocked.

"We were divorced for years. After I found out he cheated on me. Not with you. I never knew about that until Scarlett showed up just now. In the last few years. A couple of women down here."

"He said he was in a dead marriage."

"Well, it wasn't." *He said it was a dead marriage.* "I assure you that it wasn't *dead*. At least back then. Or at least I *thought* it wasn't."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean –"

"It hardly matters now," I said, though to me, of course, it did and to this woman and to her daughter it sure did. I couldn't dwell. I wanted this nightmare to be over, at least to the extent it could ever be.

I continued the conversation. "But back to him killing himself. It was about a month ago, and I have no idea why he did it."

I sank back down on my bed, recalling being told how his body was found with a note in his pocket asking that his mother Agnes and not me be contacted. The hurt of

that and his suicide disappeared more quickly than it used to. I went on.

"But this isn't about him. This is about Scarlett. She just showed up at my front door. She's a minor and I don't know what to do. So, I'm open to any suggestions you might have."

"Well just send her back. Where are you?"

"I'm not saying." The less I said about the particulars the better, though Scarlett would surely tell her exactly where I was. By then, though, I figured this incident would all be behind me. I told her that I could put her daughter on Amtrak and that that's how she got to me in the first place.

"You'd better," Mitch called from somewhere in the room. Calmer, her mother hushed him and said she'd appreciate my doing that. I told her I would and figured that would be that.

After I hung up, I went downstairs. I paused two or three steps before the bottom, trying to steady myself.

In the living room, I saw that Scarlett had helped herself to a glass of milk and some cookies and was sitting on the couch. I handed back her phone.

"You must be starved," I said, hoping to ease the mood at least briefly. "I'll order pizza, and we can talk."

"First. What did she say?"

I then sat beside her on the couch and took a deep breath. "Okay. She has the right to have you go back and so I told her I would put you on the train in the morning. I'll get a bedroom ready for you and things for the bathroom. I see you brought some stuff."

We both looked down at her backpack.

"But for now I'm getting pizza. How do you like it?"

The thought of focusing on pizza toppings seemed to calm her and her initial reaction to what I told her I was going to do. She asked for peppers and mushrooms so that's what we got.

* * * *

Was Scarlett getting any sleep? I couldn't say, though I doubted it. I did know that for a long time I wasn't getting any. The room was dark, with only a little bit of light peeking in through the windows. I was lying in what had always been my side of the large bed, staring at the slight shadows I could make out on the ceiling.

I was very surprised about what story she was telling me. It was not as though Keith had never cheated. But I thought that was only in the final years of our marriage.

I'd found out in 2022 that he'd had an affair or a fling or whatever it was with a younger woman who was on the periphery of our social circle. She and her husband had since moved away, and I'd discovered it only after stumbling on some messages he'd left open on a shared computer in the office at home.

I'd forgiven him for that betrayal. I didn't forgive him for the next, banal one with an associate at another law firm who dropped a dime on him to me when she called to confirm that his – *our* – marriage was dead and an utter fiction.

We got a quick, uncontested divorce, although he begged me to reconsider several times and suggested we could get counseling. But that ship had sailed.

I got the house as part of a fifty-fifty split of our assets, it being useful at least for this purpose that we'd decided not to have kids.

But *this*. This evidence that he'd cheated on me at least once and who knows how many other times with who knows how many other women. All in the first ten years, years during which *everyone* – me included – viewed ours as a great marriage. One of the best in town! The envy of the Western World! All a fraud.

So, Scarlet showing up on my doorstep, carrying with her the knowledge of what my husband had done years earlier, had carved out and destroyed large swaths of my *memory*.

And he'd never told me. Keith had never told me. He didn't even include a reference to this great secret in his suicide note to me. Her presence like a cruel joke he'd taken to his grave. My only comfort was that his daughter would be gone in the morning. Even if my knowledge of her would never disappear.

2

I HAD TOLD SCARLETT and her mother that she'd be coming up on the train in the morning, to Rensselaer, the city across the Hudson from Albany, pulling in in the early afternoon.

In the darkness, fighting for sleep, though, I realized that simply dumping her at a train station after her trip down was itself cruel, and that she didn't deserve it. Call me a fool but I decided I couldn't simply drop her at the nearby Yonkers Amtrak station and walk away. Her father, after all, did exist and was the husband I had loved for so many years, for all his faults.

I realized, too, that there was something to be said in favor of actually driving her up. She was a part of Keith, however that came about. I could speak to her. Get to know her, however fleetingly.

I had fallen into a deep sleep once I'd made the decision.

She was already in the kitchen when I was up. She wore what she'd had on the day before. An empty cereal bowl was on the table off to the side and a cup of coffee was in front of her. She looked up from her phone. She said she went to Amtrak's webpage and found a train that got into Rensselaer at 1:51. She said it left Yonkers at 11:44 and asked when we'd have to leave to make it.

"Give me a second to get some coffee," I said. She'd made it but it was thick as mud. I toned it down with a fair helping of milk. Standing with her back against the counter cradling her mug, I told her I'd drive her up.

"But don't tell your mother. I'm not sure I want her to know."

"Why are you going to drive me? I can just take the train seeing as you want to get rid of me as soon as humanly possible."

She turned from me and resumed her phone scrolling after she sat at the table in a small alcove by the back window. It's one of those small, round bistro tables with a pair of light metal chairs on either side. I sat across from her, gripping my mug. I wondered whether just dropping her off at the station would in fact be the best thing for all of us.

"Look, Scarlett. I don't know what I want. Okay? I know I *should* just drop you at the station and let you continue with your life."

"So why don't you?" she said to her phone, cutting me off brutally.

I took a sip of my barely tolerable concoction. At least it had plenty of caffeine. She raised her head to give me a glance.

I said, "I wish I knew. I don't. I really don't. But I'm going to drive you, if that's alright with you."

She harrumphed an *I guess*, her head dropping back to her phone, sitting in her lap. With my mug between my hands, I looked at her. She was just a kid. Like lots of the neighboring families. Teenagers heading out to school every morning. Coming home with their lacrosse or field hockey sticks over their shoulders, homes nearly all shared with both of their parents.

My thoughts were disrupted when she got up. "How long is the drive?"

I told her I'd look it up, but she said not to bother. With her elbows and ever-present phone on the table, her fingers whizzed around it until she said, "It says about two-and-a-half hours." She rotated the phone and flashed it to me though all I could see was a map with a solid blue line.

"So, if you want my mom to think I took the train, we have to leave here at about 11:15," she said. "Is that okay?"

I told her it was, and she said she'd text her mother to say when she'd be getting on the train and left the room. I cleared her bowl and cup and put them in the sink. I got myself my own bowl and poured some Special K in and covered it with milk and sat back down. I heard the front door shut. When I got to the dining room with its window that looked to the front, she was walking on the sidewalk to the right, her head buried in her phone with earbuds in and I went back to the kitchen to try to understand why I'd decided to further complicate my life.

* * * *

We were both quiet most of the way up. I didn't know what to say and was afraid that if I did say something it would be the wrong something and whatever I was trying to do – and I wasn't sure what that even was – would blow up.

For her part, she'd alternated between her phone and changing whatever Sirius was playing. She asked about me, where I came from and stuff, but I don't think she really cared. Still, I told her I was an only child who grew up in northern Westchester and went to Providence College, where I met her father. I worked on

the business side of a publishing house, and my parents had died in a car crash not so long before.

She seemed bored by my story. "What about him?" she asked. I told her that her father was a lawyer who had grown up in Bronxville and that he was an only child of parents who I didn't know or get along with that well but who ended up getting divorced.

"Why they'd get divorced?" she asked.

"His father was caught cheating, and his mother threw him out."

"Sounds familiar," she scowled and then returned to her phone. I took this as a sign that she didn't care to hear anything more.

After a long period of silence, we reached a long, flat stretch of the Thruway. She turned the music down, and I gave her a quick glance, which she returned.

She asked why we broke up and why he'd killed himself.

"As to the first, he was unfaithful," I said.

This got her interest.

"You mean with my mother?"

"No. That I just found out about when you showed up."

"Sorry, I guess, that I gave that secret away," she said, and I think she meant it, at least a little.

"It's not your fault. No, I'm talking about what happened in the last few years. He had a couple of affairs. I took him back after the first but kicked him out after the second."

"So, he wasn't a nice guy."

I thought about it for several seconds. Before the prior twenty-four hours, I would have said he'd just had

an idiotic mid-life crisis that cost both of us our marriage. But that was then. Now driving with his daughter? I couldn't rightly disagree with her assessment. I don't know if he'd ever really been a nice guy.

Still, I didn't have the job of making him look bad to his daughter. So, I said, "I wouldn't say that. I mean, yeah, he kept what happened with your mother and your very existence a secret, but he did try to help you."

"Short of actually being honest with me…And you."

I stole a glance at her. Her phone was now held, ignored, in her right hand and she was looking straight ahead. She was far more insightful, I realized, than I had been at her age.

"That was just a part of him," I said. "He was a good man in many respects, and I loved him for a very long time." I wondered whether I'd ever actually stopped loving him.

I could feel her looking at me and I started choking up a little for the first time since I'd found her at my door.

"So, why'd he off himself?"

Again, I stole a glance and just caught her eyes in a glimmer.

"I don't know. Why does anyone? Maybe it was a combination of what he did to me and what he realized he'd done to you. After all, he only wrote those two letters."

"Fuck," she said, nearly under her breath but loud enough for me to hear.

We were quiet until we reached an "Albany 20 miles" sign. "Thank God, we're almost there," she said, her eyes

again remaining fixed on her phone. "Look, don't feel guilty about not wanting to ever see me again. I understand."

"It's just that I have a lot going on right now and your appearance was something of a rather big surprise."

"An unpleasant one?"

"Honey," I said, "I never wanted kids. But I couldn't be your mother even if I wanted to. You know that."

"I'm not asking you for anything. I just wanted to find out about my dad. Is that asking too much?"

"It's not. But you just showed up late yesterday and you expect me to know what to do with you."

"So, you just toss me out."

"Come on, Scarlett. It's not as if you were sleeping on the street." I said that in a way that was far nastier and more condescending than I meant it.

"And would you have taken me in if I were?"

I stole a glance her way. *I really didn't know.*

She read the pause and said, "Never mind" and turned her head to look out the right side window at the trees lining the interstate and the occasional car or truck we passed.

It wore on me for a mile or so when there was a sign for a rest area. I pulled in.

"What are you doing? We don't have time," she said.

"We have time. I need to pee before we get there," I told her, which was the truth but also a reason to stop and try to gather myself for the final stretch of what had become one of the most disturbing episodes in all my life.

She got out and we went in together, keeping several feet between us as we walked.

I asked her whether she wanted something to eat. She said she was fine. She headed to the car while I got a Starbucks. She was pacing back and forth beside my Audi A6 when I got there.

Before I started my car, I asked her to look at me.

"I don't know what I'd do, okay?" I began. "This is new for me. It was bad enough when my former mother-in-law told me that my ex-husband had killed himself. Then you show up literally on my doorstep with this letter in which he confesses to being your father and I'm supposed to understand *anything*?"

I looked ahead and my hands had gripped the steering wheel. "I need time. To figure out what I want to have to do with you. If anything. I just don't know, Scarlett. And whether you want to have anything to do with me now that you've actually met me. The poor neglected housewife your mother makes fun of."

I started the car and was getting ready to resume our trip when she grabbed my wrist.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I really didn't. This letter came out of nowhere and suddenly my father has a name. I get this letter and figure out that he's about to off himself, that he'd probably done it by the time I got the letter. So, yeah, I had to do something about it and that was to find him and if he was really gone to meet and talk to you. And you turned it into some sort of family drama."

She let go of my wrist. "I just wanted to meet you. Maybe ask about him if he'd really done it."

This struck me very hard. "Think of it from my perspective. Can you do that for a minute?" I said, again more harshly than I intended. My brain and maybe even

my heart were all over the place with this girl, but I didn't know how else to deal with her.

"And have you given a fucking second to think about *my* perspective?" Her voice rose and then lowered. "Look, this was all a mistake. Just get me to the Amtrak station and leave me there and my mom will get me. You should have just let me take the train up and I'd already be forever out of your pitiful life, and you'd have saved a shit load of gas."

As I backed out of the space without offering her a response, her tone softened, as if she suddenly recalled something that in light of what she'd said might be awkward, but she soldiered on.

She asked whether I had a photo of her father. "I'd like to have one," she said. I realized, sadly, that there no photos of Keith displayed in the house. I'd put them in drawers after I threw him out and couldn't bring myself to look at them after he killed himself, let restore one or two to where they'd been in *happier days*. Then I hadn't thought to get one to show her and I think in all the angst she neglected to ask.

With her question, though, I pulled back into the parking space and grabbed my phone from the center console. After searching, I found, in the cloud, a casual picture of just him sitting on our patio. It looked to be maybe five years ago. He was smiling quite naturally and lifting his glass of wine towards me. It was a good picture. I showed it to her.

She studied it very hard and ran her finger across the screen but that emotion held for just a few seconds.

"That's fine," she said flatly. I texted it. Then we did get started, and we merged onto the Thruway and said

nothing for the rest of the trip. When I pulled up in front of the Amtrak station, I'd barely stopped before she was out of the car and throwing her backpack over her shoulder and heading to the station's door.

Neither of us said anything and she did not look back.

I parked and went into the station myself. In the end, I couldn't simply walk away without some attempt at closure.

It was about fifteen minutes before the train from Yonkers would be arriving. She was sitting on a bench, her head again in her phone, her earbuds in, and her fingers scrolling like mad. I stood so she couldn't see me, even if she looked up searching for her mother.

After ten minutes or so, she got up and approached a man and a woman. It looked to me like the woman wanted to hug her, but Scarlett ignored this and walked past them, heading from the station. That's when I left.

There was nothing for me to feel guilty about. She had a decent-enough home life as far as I could tell. It wasn't perfect but it seemed normal enough. We'd ended up with each other's phone numbers since I'd texted her a photo of Keith when she'd asked for one. That was it. I figured that this was an effective means to end the drama, much as my knowledge of her existence and that of my dead husband's betrayal from long before would never leave me.

3

ON A SATURDAY A few weeks after the bizarre and unsettling coming and going of Scarlett Evans, I was on a regular power walk with Erin Scott. I've known Erin since we were sophomores at Providence when we were thrown together in a sadistic seminar on Virginia Woolf. *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf*, indeed.

We'd taken turns reading sections of *A Room of One's Own* aloud to each other in a quiet corner of the library and that somehow helped us understand what was being said. From there we evolved into what is now known as BFFs.

For our junior and senior years, we shared a room off campus in a sprawling Victorian. Shortly before fall finals in our senior years, we met Keith and Tom Scott during a cram session at their frat house and by spring midterms Keith and I were an item and so were Erin and Tom.

Erin married Tom and I married Keith after we'd all moved to the city and then we ended up as near neighbors in Bronxville. Which explains why Erin was my frequent early-morning walking companion. And during a walk on that Saturday, my phone buzzed. It was a text from a 518 cellphone. I stopped to read it while she continued slowly ahead of me.

{Scarlett:} This is Scarlett Evans. I hope you remember who I am. Can I call you today?

As if I'd ever forget her. But calling me? I was shaken with no idea why she wanted to speak with me, especially after the particularly non-communicative conversation we had on the drive north. Still, if she wanted to speak to me I figured it had to be important. I responded:

{Cassie:} Of course. I'll be around all afternoon.

{Scarlett:} Around 2?

{Cassie:} Perfect. Speak then.

I put my phone back in my pocket and quickly rejoined Erin. She'd heard of Keith's later betrayals on a nearly as-they-happened basis, and I'd given her chapter and verse about the strange visit Keith's daughter had made and the unknown betrayal it revealed. And that she was gone from my life.

Frankly, I wouldn't have made it as well as I did without Erin, just as I would not have made it through the later pre-divorce betrayals by Keith without her.

As I rejoined her this time, I told her what Scarlett had said, and we speculated about what she could want. In the end, though, since there was nothing to do about it, we let it drop and resumed our normal, frankly banal talk as we plowed through the village's elegant streets beneath the green canopy of trees and the sparkling of birdsong.

My stomach, though, turned anxious.

I settled myself into my favorite chair in the spare bedroom I'd long since converted into my own little refuge. I'd taken an unusually long contemplative shower when I got back and made myself a chicken

salad sandwich and a fresh pot of coffee. I was sipping the coffee when, precisely at two, my phone rang.

Scarlett began by saying she'd gone out to a mall and was sorry if there was too much background noise. I assured her that it was fine.

"I'm afraid to tell anyone," she said right off, much to my surprise. We both understood that we hadn't parted on the best of terms.

"Tell what?"

"You have to promise me you won't tell anyone. Do you promise?"

I knew this was going to pull me back into her life like Michael Corleone but what choice did I have? So, I promised to keep her secret, whatever it was.

It was a flood of words, interrupted now and then as she needed to take a breath or, later, control herself. It was a teacher. The most popular teacher in school. He taught math and she'd been in his class for trigonometry as a sophomore and now for AP Calculus. He'd asked the class early on whether anyone was interested in a STEM career and she and a few others, all guys, raised their hands.

"He said he'd have a meeting with all of us after school that day in his classroom, so I went. I was the only girl and there were five or six geeky guys too. It was really great, and he was excited and he paid attention to us."

Me? I didn't like where this was headed and was uncomfortable that she was telling me about it. I interrupted, keeping my voice artificially steady. "What changed?"

"Well," she said and paused. "A few months ago, we had one of our meetings and he said we all had to focus on where we wanted to go to college. He gave us a hand-out with colleges with top STEM programs and told us to think about what our choices would be."

Scarlett said that he'd be in his office most afternoons if we wanted to talk about anything, "anything," she repeated. She had too much other afterschool stuff to do to boost her record – she told me her GPA was over 4 – and had only gone to his office once or twice after the invitation.

"One day after he'd passed around the results of a test, he stopped by my desk and asked me to come to his office that afternoon to discuss how I'd done. I got an A, of course, so I didn't know what he wanted but I went.

"He –"

I interrupted to ask his name, and she said it was Mr. Thompson and then resumed. He'd said she was very good but suggested he could help her with her college choices and applications if she really wanted to go in the STEM direction.

I suddenly felt my stomach gurgling, it being clear where this was heading and confirming that I was being dragged right back into her life and into this mess and into God knows what else. Then I said without really thinking it through: "Maybe I should just come up to do this face-to-face. Have you told anyone?"

"I'm scared that no one'll believe me. He's so popular."

"Your mom will believe you."

"What if she doesn't? What if Mitch doesn't? I can't tell them at least now. Since you asked" – I was afraid of this –"can you come up?"

* * * *

I cannot say how I survived before Waze. I'd left early Sunday morning, and the app managed to get me to a small parking lot for a greenery that ran down by the Hudson in Rensselaer. I again made good time and pulled in about ten before noon, noon being when we were to meet.

I had to walk down a slight slope to get to the benches close to the water and when I was nearly to the southernmost one, I spotted her. She was sitting alone on that isolated bench in a white blouse and a red cap, staring out across the river to a small World War II warship that was anchored on the Albany side.

I kept quiet as I approached, and she jolted when I said *Scarlett.* I wondered what thoughts I had interrupted. She stood and turned to me.

I'd only seen her the one time, when she'd been in that raincoat and torn jeans. Now, she had made an effort to look…serious.

I suggested we sit down or find a place to get lunch.

"Here is fine," she said, and I joined her as she sat back down. I asked her how she was, and she grunted a *fine* and we sat awkwardly for a minute. The view was calming and tranquil in its own way. It was clear that she was going to take a while to begin on her own, so I jumpstarted it.

We were close enough to be able to speak in low voices – though the nearest bench was maybe twenty

feet to our right – but not so close to make it feel inappropriate.

"What is it?" I asked. I turned to study her profile as she took a deep breath. She turned to meet my gaze.

She gave me details of her encounters with the teacher, Mr. Thompson. They were disturbing.

It had seemed innocent at first, but at some point the teacher said he'd be happy to give her some extra tutoring to make sure she got an A+ in his class and maybe help her improve her grades in her other subjects, particularly English, which was her great weakness, garnishing mostly B+s.

She turned to resume her looking across the river, gaining more confidence in telling me this as she went on. She kept her voice low but loud enough for me, and only me, to hear it.

"So, on the Thursday before last, he asked me to stop by his office. I said I had band practice, but he said I could come after, that he had a lot of work to do and would still be there. So, I get there a little after six and everyone's pretty much gone and instead of sitting at his desk, he sat in the chair beside mine."

She said he told her that she was one of the brightest students he'd had in his years of teaching. If she worked even harder than she was working, maybe she could get into MIT. He knew some tricks that would help improve her application.

"He put his hand on my thigh and said that I needed to believe in him the way he believed in me. *Will you do that?* he asked, and I said I would. He slapped my leg lightly as he got up.

"I thought it was great, helping me get into MIT. I'd never thought that was even possible. But if I can get in there, I can go where I really want to go, don't you think?"

I told her that I did think. having joined her in looking across the Hudson. She seemed to be waiting for something, and I obliged.

"He should not have done what he did with your thigh. That was way out of bounds. Was there anything else?" I asked, my anger building.

"He called me the next night. Friday. I don't think teachers are supposed to contact students like that, but he told me I was special and that we needed to keep our conversations to ourselves or the other kids would get jealous. It was no big deal, he said, and I didn't think it was.

"So, I was excited. He gives the class a spot quiz on Monday, and it was brutal. I didn't know half the answers and I was one of the better ones. We all were like what-the-fuck? afterwards. The next day, Tuesday, he's in front of the class and says that we don't have to worry, that the grades won't count. He says he only wanted to push us and see where we all were. He hands the results out and I have a C. No one gets even a B and most have big, red Fs and everyone's pissed."

Scarlett was relaxing but still anxious as she was simply reciting the facts to me and the last thing I wanted to do was interrupt her.

"On my exam, he wrote that he wanted to see me after band practice. So, I see him. Same deal with him sitting next to me and he puts his hand on my thigh and tells me he trusts me to keep a secret. Yeah, he trusts

me. He runs his other hand across my cheek and starts telling me how special I am. Of all the girls he taught, how special I am."

Her prior calmness in telling this story vanished. As I was trying to process her horror, I was oblivious to everything happening around me and it took me a moment to realize she'd gotten up and was heading to the path to the parking lot and presumably a bus stop or to wherever her house was.

I caught up to her before she'd gone very far. She was engulfed in tears as I tapped her shoulder. She turned very sharply to me, and I pulled her close and held onto the child, as she plainly was at that moment. My husband's child and I felt a world of emotion flood over me. I was truly and forever sucked back into her life.

She pulled away from me embarrassed. She ran the back of her hand beneath her nose to try to cut off her tears and her sniffles. Her eyes met mine. "Do you believe me?"

I did.

I asked why she hadn't told her mother. She didn't know why, she said. She said she had no friends she could really talk to about it and then thought of me, which was why she called me, and she said how glad she was that I didn't hate her and was willing to listen to her and be with her.

She had become something to me, though I didn't know what it was, and I couldn't leave her to figure out whatever was going on with her teacher.

She said she was sorry for doing this to me but again she didn't know where else to turn. "Everyone loves him, and no one will believe me."

As we started walking towards my Audi, she asked, "What should I do about college?"

It was an out-of-the-blue question, but changing the subject seemed to relax her. She was a high school junior, and I guess talking about what Mr. Thompson had said led her in this direction.

"Of course you're going, right?" She struck me as a very bright student, which is something that Mr. Thompson had used against her. A math whiz perhaps.

"My mom would kill me if I didn't." She let out a subtle chuckle and the mood had completely shifted. "Maybe MIT, now that Mr. Thompson suggested it. It might be too big and too competitive though. Plus, I'd need a ton of financial aid. We don't have anything. So probably one of the SUNYs."

"SUNYs?" I asked.

"You know. State University of New York. Between one of the big ones like Binghamton or a small one. Probably SUNY Albany though, so I can live at home."

"Do you want to live at home?"

"Not really. But I'd rather do that than have to borrow a zillion dollars."

Things got quiet. We had to get back to the purpose of my visit. We had reached my Audi and were sitting in the quiet. I said, "You know you have to tell your mother." Very matter-of-factly. Like saying it was raining out. *You know you have to tell your mother.*

"You okay?" I pushed.

"I know I do," she said.

I stole a glance at her. She nodded. "I'm okay. If she believes me –"

"I'm sure she will. You have to trust her. She's your mother."

"I know."

I started up the car. "Where do you want to go?" I imagined she didn't have many chances to get a ride wherever she wanted to go on a Sunday morning. She surprised me by saying it'd be nice to go for a drive for a little bit, which is what we did, crossing the river and heading up the Northway, feeling worlds different from that tension-filled drive up the Thruway that we'd shared earlier.

Somehow telling someone, perhaps *anyone*, about Mr. Thompson had temporarily liberated her. She was having fun with the music and chatting with me about things, most of which I knew nothing about. And more, she left her phone in her bag.

We were driving with the river to our right and the interstate had become a simple state road when Scarlett spotted an old-fashioned diner and asked me to pull in.

It was your basic New York diner, and we had lunch – a burger and fries for her and a grilled cheese with fries for me – sitting across from each other in a booth. We shared backgrounds in the way two people slowly feeling more comfortable with each other do.

Once I'd paid the check and left the tip – she'd thanked me for the lunch – we reversed our journey and headed back to Rensselaer. With each mile, though, some of the earlier heaviness in our talk returned. She'd pulled her phone out again, like some sort of security blanket.

"I'm just so scared," she said finally, looking down at her device.

"Of what?" I asked, though I knew.

"I know what Mr. Thompson did and I know what I felt but it's going to just explode if I tell anyone. Isn't it enough that I told you? Doesn't that get it off my chest? I can just keep my distance from him. I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it."

Again, I felt her looking at me. She had to face what had happened to her or who knew what the trauma, as it plainly was, would do to her.

"Can we just forget it? Not tell anyone? I won't go to his office again. Maybe I'm too sensitive. Too MeTooed. Just drop me off near my house and I'll make my own way home."

I remained silent.

We crossed into Rensselaer. There was a Mobil station, and I pulled into it, parking off near the car vacuuming contraptions. I turned the car off.

"This teacher did something he never should have done. You know it. I know it. He knows it. And your mother will know it when you tell her."

"What if I don't tell her?"

She was backtracking. But it wasn't my issue. Hell, she wasn't even my child. Still. She *was* a child. And she was my ex's daughter, and in some bizarre way she was now in some ways *my* responsibility.

I knew she needed to tell her mother. Telling me, a near stranger, wasn't enough. I didn't envy the conflicting feelings she was voicing but I knew she'd get control over them and would tell at least her mother.

"In the end," I finally said, "it's your call. But since you involved me in this, I'll be honest with you. I've never been harassed the way you were. Even in the old naïve days before #MeToo." Yes, seemingly happy days about which we all later learned were not so happy for some than we thought.

I told her that I was a simple Catholic white girl with a suburban upbringing. "But," I said with some vehemence, "I *know* you were groomed and abused. That's why you have to tell someone. It was wrong. It was abuse. And you're old enough to decide whether you're going to do anything about it."

"But it's over. I can take care of myself."

"That's just it. You're old enough to do something about it but not old enough to really take care of yourself. You ended up confiding in a stranger who lives a hundred and fifty miles away who didn't even know you existed until a month ago."

I started up the car. "I'm here for you either way. I don't really know anything about this. But, Scarlett, I think you need to deal with it head on. I'm not going to say there may be others he's done this to. I'm not going to say he needs to be stopped. This is about you and no one else. I'll support whatever you want to do and if it blows up, I'll be there for you as I expect your mother will too."

"You don't know her."

"I know enough about her that she was a single mother getting a few bucks from my no-good husband to help but still the one who brought you up with zero support and as far as I can tell she didn't do so badly at

that. So, I know enough to know that she's your mother and she'll take care of you, wherever you go."

She paused. I think she was a little embarrassed about throwing the most important person in her life under a bus.

"Okay," she said softly. "Take me home. But don't let her see you."

I dropped her off about a block from her house.