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ALSO BY ASHLEY WINSTEAD

Midnight is the Darkest Hour

In My Dreams I Hold a Knife

The Last Housewife

This
Book
Will
Bury
Me

ASHLEY WINSTEAD



An Aries Book

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artists about grief, made me not only feel less lonely but made me feel that the subject of private tragedies turned public stories, and all the complicated, messy fallout of that—the “true crime phenomenon”—was worth tackling. While *This Book Will Bury Me* is not meant to be nonfiction, it is my utmost wish that I’ve reflected details of the cases referenced in this book accurately and respectfully. In the University of Idaho case, which is still ongoing, I pray that the courts deliver justice.

In addition to drawing inspiration from real cases, readers should know this book deals with the loss of a parent and includes scenes of violence and discussions of weight loss. Please take care of yourselves.

Sending much love,
Ashley Winstead

PART ONE

Here in the Dark,

We’re No Longer Strangers

1

IF YOU'RE READING THIS, CHANCES ARE LAST YEAR YOU FLIPPED on the news and saw me getting shoved to my knees in the dirt, hands wrested behind my back, gun-toting FBI agents swarming like ants around me into that three-story house. God only knows what the headline below my face must've read. Something about murder, something about shocking twists, underground conspiracies tied to the most famous crime spree in America. It was a provocative introduction, no doubt. It's not surprising you have questions. Especially since the story that's unfolded since that day has been riddled with plot holes, full of inconsistencies and unanswered questions. It's probably driven you more than a little bit mad.

You want me to break my silence and tell you the truth. Trust me, I know—I've gotten your letters, your pleas, and your death threats. Your hunger is legible and familiar. You want what I once wanted, that insatiable longing for answers, the most human of urges. It's what started my journey, too, after all. Our desire to order the unknowable, touch the unreachable, shine a light on what's hidden—it's universal. We're uncomfortable with ambiguity, with living suspended in the mess of the world.

Those people you saw the FBI shove to their knees beside me? They wanted answers as badly as I did. We used to live in the true-crime forums, typing away at our theories, poring through forgotten records, speculating about the angle of a knife strike or a bullet. We were like those Enlightenment scientists of old,

pushing knowledge into a new era, so confident in the human mind, our own possibilities. That's why we read and posted and tracked and obsessed. We thought we were edging closer every day to that shining city on the hill where all would be revealed and we would finally be at peace. Call it the City of Heaven, or Justice, or Absolution. Trust me, we really thought we'd get there. All the way up until the bitter end, when our experiment went so darkly south, exploding in our faces.

But I've gotten ahead of myself. A lot of people who weren't close to the story have been getting famous spreading lies, and you deserve the truth. Maybe you're a vulture, reading this simply to pick over my bones. Or maybe you're one of those rare people, curious and open-minded. Either way, I'm going to tell you the whole sordid thing. That's the point of a tell-all, isn't it? Time to let all the skeletons out of the closet.

But I'm going to do it my way. I promise it's for the best. Remember, I used to *be* you. I know you don't just want the cold, dry facts shoveled into your brain. You want to know *why*, how, what the weather was like that day. What kind of mood was in the air. The shoes they were wearing, what they ate for breakfast. Who they hated and who they crushed on. What the first blow must've felt like, the first sting of betrayal. You want to find the causal roots, trace them all the way back and all the way forward, treasure every detail. When it comes to stories like the one I've been holding—when it comes to mysteries like these, the kind they call crimes of the century—you want to savor it. You want as much color as you can get.

Trust me, by the time we're through, you'll bleed color.

Now let's begin.

My story starts with a body, just not the one you might expect.

2

ON THURSDAY, AUGUST 31, 2023, AT 10:45 P.M., I RECEIVED a phone call that would change my life. It was a characteristically muggy night in Orlando. The unrelenting heat that had baked into the soil all day wafted out of the dirt, making the night air feel microwaved. The party was at Afton Oaks, a popular apartment complex for University of Central Florida undergrads, one of which I was at the time. The crowd was large enough to spill outside, which meant the sliding-glass door that connected the kitchen to the backyard remained half-open all night, turning the inside into a sauna. I remember the sweat that dampened my neck and back, as if some part of me already knew what was coming. We were singing at the top of our lungs to “Gangsta’s Paradise” by Coolio, played at an ear-splitting volume, a song choice that now makes me cringe to recall. I was pressed shoulder to shoulder with Gabby Maldonado,¹ my best friend at the time, having the kind of silly, tipsy night a normal college student might have.

It should be stated that I was never a normal college student. Everyone at that party was a friend of Gabby's, and I was just doing my best to fit in. I'd transferred to UCF only the year before from a community college. I'd also started college two years late,

1. Not her real name. I've given “Gabby” a pseudonym to protect her from association with me.

making me a geriatric twenty-four to the other college seniors' twenty-two. These two facts together made me kind of a social leper, at least until Gabby took me under her wing. It wasn't that the students at UCF were cruel, only indifferent in the same way we all are—too self-obsessed and unobservant to notice much outside our little bubbles. I've learned that, even in the context of brutal crime, the human capacity for self-preoccupation is staggering, which is why you can get a case like Sarah Atman's, the college student who was murdered in the middle of campus, and yet there were no witnesses.² Anyway, UCF was massive, home to a whopping fifty-eight thousand undergrads. It was a city unto itself.

I'd been so lonely after transferring that I'd contemplated quitting, just packing up my dorm and heading back to my parents' house with my tail between my legs. I even practiced what I'd tell my dad. Then one day a girl who was friendly to me in psych class—we'd roll our eyes together whenever the professor said something cringey—asked if I wanted to grab lunch. Gabby turned out to be one of those rare people born with a tender heart that no amount of life could toughen, the kind of person we introverts thank God for. Soon she was dragging me out on weeknights to off-campus parties; and before I knew it, we had the kind of friendship I'd only witnessed on TV, the kind where two people are so close they're basically codependent. I'd always wanted to be codependent, so I decided to stay. Most of all, I was thrilled I didn't have to disappoint my dad. He never got to go to college, and everything he'd never gotten, he wanted for me.

The night of August 31, the party at Afton Oaks was themed

2 Or the case of Kitty Genovese, a woman stabbed to death in front of thirty-eight witnesses in Queens in 1964, none of whom called the police.

“Nineties Throwback,” hence the Coolio. Gabby looked ridiculous in oversized flannel; I wore a white T-shirt under a spaghetti strap dress like I'd seen on *Clueless*. We kept looking at each other and laughing, partly because of the outfits, partly because of the keg beer. And then my mom called.

Nowadays, I find myself wishing I could travel back to that moment—the second before I pressed Accept. Such a small action with such weighty consequences. Before that, my biggest worry was whether Gabby's friends would accept me like she had. Mark it in my history book, or whatever biographies the true-crime experts write about me. Afton Oaks, Orlando, Florida, August 31: the last time Janeway Sharp was innocent.

My mother was hysterical on the other end of the line. “Your father,” she sobbed. “Jane, I think he's had a heart attack. I'm in the car, following the ambulance to the hospital. Please, honey. I need you to pray.”

If you've never received a call like this, I'll try to explain. It's like being plunged into an ice bath. Your entire body goes on high alert, every cell awakening, every synapse firing, the same as if someone walked up and pressed a gun to your head. Your mind wiped of everything but the present and how to survive it.

“He's going to be okay,” I said, somehow. “Everything is going to be okay. I'll be there in two hours. Hold on.”

I believed it. There was no other choice.

Gabby insisted on driving me even though she was in the middle of a party, had never met my parents, and didn't like to drive. That was her soft heart at work. On the road, she stayed silent while I rocked back and forth in the passenger seat, whispering, “You're going to be okay, Daddy. You're going to be okay.” I hadn't called my father “Daddy” since I was young, but that was what came out, as if in my fear I'd somehow reverted back to being a little girl.

I must've repeated the phrase several hundred times as we drove. I was convinced that if I stopped saying it, the worst would happen, as if the mantra was the one thing staving off my father's ruin. I've since learned that in the face of disaster, even the most pragmatic among us often turn to magical thinking. So I rocked and whispered, sending those words out into the universe, into his ear and the ear of whoever was in charge, letting them know my father was loved and should be spared.

Don't you wish it worked like that—that love was any sort of protection?

Forty-five minutes into the drive my mother called again. This time, I saw her name and my chest filled with hope.

"Mom?"

"Jane..." Her voice was ragged. "He didn't wake up. They tried everything—"

"No. That's not true. He's okay."

"Jane—"

"He's going to be okay. He'll wake up."

"Stop it, Jane. I can't take it."

Later I would learn that bald-faced denial is a common response to grief. In fact, everything I did that night and would do and think over the following days and weeks was straight out of a textbook. It's funny—I felt so alone in my pain, felt my grief was so annihilating that I must be experiencing a level of devastation that had never been recorded. But every bit of what I felt had been rehearsed by a billion people over tens of thousands of years of human existence. Death is the one thing we all share. I was just the latest in line.

Even so, the person I was closest to, who'd loved me the deepest, had died, suddenly and unexpectedly, and nothing would ever be the same. It was because of this that the next chapters of my life would unfold in strange and fateful ways.

3

WHEN I ENTERED MY PARENTS' SQUAT STUCCO HOUSE, painted a typical South Florida sunny yellow, I found my mother sitting at the dining table in the dark, staring at nothing. She wore a cotton pajama dress; her purse was still slung over her shoulder. The house, normally tidy, was a wreck—armchairs and consoles pushed to the side, a lamp tipped over, as if a great force had run roughshod through it. The moment I turned on the light and saw her, I told Gabby to take my car back to Orlando. She protested, but I insisted. I was young and unschooled in death, but I still understood that what would happen next was too intimate for anyone outside our family to witness.

When the door closed, I fell to my knees, hugged my mother's legs, and sobbed. Being with her was both a relief and the last unraveling of my restraint. The sounds we made were otherworldly. We cried for so long I couldn't tell you how much time passed, only that light began to shine through the dining room windows.

In starts and stops, I got the story. I'll tell it to you the way I eventually learned to do it for witnesses: stripping the pain out, leaving only the pertinent details.

My parents had an exceedingly ordinary day. They both went to work, heated up leftovers for dinner—lentil soup, since they were on their vegan diet again—and then my father began to complain of stomach pain as they were getting ready for bed. It wasn't gone

by the time he'd tucked himself in with his reading glasses and a book, so my mom insisted on running to CVS to pick up some Pepto-Bismol. He told her not to go, but she insisted. She didn't want him to be in pain when a quick trip could solve it.

The closest CVS to their house is 1.9 miles away. She was gone for less than twenty minutes. When she got home, she called to him but received no response. She walked the short distance from the front door to their bedroom and found him lying in bed, his eyes wide open, his book resting on his chest. She didn't understand why he wouldn't talk back when she held up the CVS bag and said help was on the way. I imagine that's the moment she would wish herself back into if she could—those precious few seconds when she beheld my father and didn't yet realize anything was wrong.

But even her desire for everything to be okay couldn't shield her from the sudden realization that there were small bubbles of foam at the corners of my father's mouth. She dropped the plastic bag and rushed to him, crying his name, staring at his unblinking eyes, pressing her hands to his flesh, where no pulse beat. She screamed and called 911, performed CPR with the dispatcher on the line as the ambulance raced to the house. When the EMTs arrived twelve minutes later they burst through the door and swarmed my father, pushing my mother to the periphery, where she was both relieved and terrified to be relegated. Next to her feet lay the medicine for stomach pain, inert and ineffective, much too weak a cure for what had really happened.

They couldn't find a heartbeat or any signs of breathing. My mother thought that meant he would be defibrillated. The EMTs unfolded a gurney and strapped him to it, his weight requiring all three paramedics to shoulder him, and then they hustled the gurney back through the house. Mom thought that must've been when they bulldozed the furniture, but she couldn't be sure. She

leapt into her car and raced after the screaming ambulance, calling me and begging me to pray. She wasn't religious, didn't even know if she believed in God, but she thought if anyone could convince the universe to help her husband, it would be me, the accidental baby who'd made Daniel Sharp a father, the person who'd given him his first true taste of purpose.

The truth was, he'd been dead from the moment my mom walked in the house. She'd begged me to pray for him and I'd taken the responsibility seriously, refused to stop chanting, willing him to hold on, but the entire time he was already gone. I don't blame her for making me hope—I understood why she couldn't accept it. But I also couldn't stop thinking that he'd slipped away while I was singing at the top of my lungs at a stupid college party, and I'd felt nothing. When you love someone, you assume their passing from the world will hit you like a disturbance in the Force. My lack of awareness felt like a betrayal, a sign I hadn't loved him well enough.

By the time the first of Mom's friends heard what happened and arrived bearing food, they found her in the same spot at her dining table, and me curled in their bed, in the last place my father had been alive.

What does it feel like to lose a parent? As I stared at his bedroom wall, trying to imagine the last thing he saw in this world, I was overcome with the conviction that he was in fact lost, not dead. My father had grown up in a different era, a shy boy on a small farm in East Tennessee, in a town so rural and struggling most people who were born there never left. He'd been one of the rare ones to get out, reaching escape velocity by doing something nobody in his family had expected: the very hour he turned eighteen, my father marched into a navy recruiter's office and traded six years of his life for passage out. Despite the fact that he wasn't in good shape, known by his siblings as

“the Yoo-hoo King,” had never traveled outside the state, and had never even seen the ocean, the navy plucked him up. The quiet young man from the landlocked state turned into a sailor.

Two years later, at a naval base in fast-moving, noisy Naples—a very long way from home—jogging up a mountain that faced the Tyrrhenian Sea, only miles from Mount Vesuvius, my father ran into my mother, another navy sailor on her own journey of escape. You couldn’t have picked more different people: She was a New York City girl with fiery red hair and the ability to talk to anyone. He was a country boy, tall, dark, and as soft-spoken as she was bold. They fell in love immediately. Less than a year later, I was born. They were twenty-one-year-old kids in a foreign land trying to forge bigger lives, and they were as terrified of being parents as they were determined not to let me down. My dad used to say he experienced love at first sight twice in his life: the moment he saw my mother and, a year later, when I emerged in the hospital. Two lightning strikes of extraordinary luck in an otherwise unremarkable man’s life.

For the record, I never thought he was unremarkable.

My mother left the navy to raise me, but my father stayed, and over the years, even as we moved back to America and hopped back and forth from coast to coast, I grew used to the pattern of him: home for six months, then out to sea for six more. When I was young, he brought back foreign coins I’d rub between my fingers. I studied them carefully, as if they would whisper the world’s secrets.

That’s what it felt like, lying in his bed. Like my dad had gone away on one of his journeys, except this time, he’d gotten lost. That was the only way my brain could process his absence. And I knew that if I went missing, he’d go to the ends of the earth to find me. That’s what I needed to do for him. My heart screamed for it.

I rolled off the bed and ran to my mother.

4

SHE’D BEEN COAXED OUT OF HER CHAIR BY A NEW ROUND OF teary-eyed friends bearing casseroles. Rudely, I seized the first pause in their conversation to inject myself:

“Mom, where’s Dad?”

I’d startled her. “What do you mean? He’s at the hospital.”

“Can I see him?”

The two women my mother was talking to exchanged glances. Maybe it was an unusual request.

“No, honey, he’s...in the morgue, I think.”

The morgue. A cold, sterile place for people who were no longer people. I pictured my father there. How lonely.

“I need to see him with my own eyes.” I didn’t know how to explain that if I didn’t find him and lay my hands on him, I would never truly believe that he was dead and would spend my life searching for where he was hiding.

My mom blinked bloodshot eyes. She was exhausted, and I wasn’t making her life easier. “I don’t know how to make that happen, honey.”

One of the friends who’d been standing there interjected. “After the medical examiner performs the autopsy and they release Dan to a funeral home, you can ask for a visitation. They’ll, uh...” She cleared her throat. “Dress him and make him look presentable. There’s usually an extra cost.”