

Night Road



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Dedication



I cannot deny that I was a helicopter mom. I went to every class gathering, party, and field trip, until my son begged me to please, please, stay at home. Now that he is grown and a college graduate, I can look back on our shared high school years with the wisdom that comes from distance. His senior year was without a doubt one of the most stressful years of my life, as well as one of the most rewarding. When I think back on it—and those memories were the inspiration for this novel—I remember so many of the highs and the lows. Mostly I think how lucky I was to live in a tight-knit, caring community where we supported one another. So, here's to my son, Tucker, and all of the kids who streamed through our house, lighting it up with their laughter. Ryan, Kris, Erik, Gabe, Andy, Marci, Whitney, Willie, Lauren, Angela, and Anna, just to name a few. And to the other moms: I honestly don't know how I would have survived without you. Thanks for always being there, for knowing when to lend a hand, when to offer a margarita, and when to tell me a hard truth. To Julie, Andy, Jill, Megan, Ann, and Barbara. Last, but certainly not least, thanks to my husband, Ben, who was always by my side, letting me know in a thousand different ways that in parenting, as in everything else, we were a team. Thanks to you all.



Night Road





Prologue



2010

She stands at the hairpin turn on Night Road. The forest is dark here, even in midday. Ancient, towering evergreens grow in dense thickets on either side, their mossy, spearlike trunks rising high enough into the summer sky to block out the sun. Shadows lie knee-deep along the worn ribbon of asphalt; the air is still and quiet, like an indrawn breath. Expectant.

Once, this road had simply been the way home. She'd taken it easily, turning onto its potholed surface without a second thought, rarely—if ever—noticing how the earth dropped away on either side. Her mind had been on other things back then, on the minutiae of everyday life. Chores. Errands. Schedules.

Of course, she hadn't taken this route in years. One glimpse of the faded green street sign had been enough to make her turn the steering wheel too sharply; better to go off the road than to find herself here. Or so she'd thought until today.

People on the island still talk about what happened in the summer of '04. They sit on barstools and in porch swings and spout opinions, half-truths, making judgments that aren't theirs to make. They think a few columns in a newspaper give them the facts they need. But the facts are hardly what matter.

If anyone sees her here, just standing on this lonely roadside in a pocket of shadows, it will all come up again. They'll remember that night, so long ago, when the rain turned to ash . . .

Part One



Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

—DANTE ALIGHIERI, *THE INFERNO*



One



2000

Lexi Baill studied a Washington State map until the tiny red geographical markings shimmied in front of her tired eyes. There was a vaguely magical air about the place names; they hinted at a landscape she could hardly imagine, of snow-draped mountains that came right down to the water's edge, of trees as tall and straight as church steeples, of an endless, smogless blue sky. She pictured eagles perched on telephone poles and stars that seemed close enough to grasp. Bears probably crept through the quiet subdivisions at night, looking for places that not long ago had been theirs.

Her new home.

She wanted to think that her life would be different there. But how could she believe that, really? At fourteen, she might not know much, but she knew this: kids in the system were returnable, like old soda bottles and shoes that pinched your toes.

Yesterday, she'd been wakened early by her caseworker and told to pack her things. Again.

"I have good news," Ms. Watters had said.

Even half-asleep, Lexi knew what that meant. "Another family. That's great. Thanks, Ms. Watters."

"Not just a family. Your family."

"Right. Of course. My new family. It'll be great."

Ms. Watters made that disappointed sound, a soft exhalation of breath that wasn't quite a sigh. "You've been strong, Lexi. For so long."

Lexi tried to smile. "Don't feel bad, Ms. W. I know how hard it is to place older kids. And the Rexler family was cool. If my mom hadn't come back, I think that one would have worked out."

"None of it was your fault, you know."

"Yeah," Lexi said. On good days she could make herself believe that the people who returned her had their own problems. On bad days—and they were coming more often lately—she wondered what was wrong with her, why she was so easy to leave.

"You have relatives, Lexi. I found your great-aunt. Her name is Eva Lange. She's sixty-six years old and she lives in Port George, Washington."

Lexi sat up. "What? My mom said I had no relatives."

"Your mother was . . . mistaken. You do have family."

Lexi had spent a lifetime waiting for those few precious words. Her world had always been dangerous, uncertain, a ship heading for the shoals. She had grown up mostly alone, among strangers, a modern-day feral child fighting for scraps of food and attention, never receiving enough of either. Most of it she'd blocked out entirely, but when she tried—when one of the State shrinks made her try—she could remember being hungry, wet, reaching out for a mother who was too high to hear her or too strung out to care. She remembered sitting for days in a dirty playpen, crying, waiting for someone to remember her existence.

Now, she stared out the dirty window of a Greyhound bus. Her caseworker sat beside her, reading a romance novel.

After more than twenty-six hours en route, they were finally nearing

their destination. Outside, a steel-wool sky swallowed the treetops. Rain made squiggling patterns on the window, blurring the view. It was like another planet here in Washington; gone were the sun-scorched bread-crust-colored hills of Southern California and the gray crisscross of traffic-clogged freeways. The trees were steroid-big; so were the mountains. Everything seemed overgrown and wild.

The bus pulled up to a squat, cement-colored terminal and came to a wheezing, jerking stop. A cloud of black smoke wafted across her window, obscuring the parking lot for a moment; then the rain pounded it away. The bus doors whooshed open.

“Lexi?”

She heard Ms. Watters’s voice and thought *move, Lexi*, but she couldn’t do it. She looked up at the woman who had been the only steady presence in her life for the last six years. Every time a foster family had given up on Lexi, returned her like a piece of fruit gone bad, Ms. Watters had been there, waiting with a sad little smile. It wasn’t much to return to, maybe, but it was all Lexi knew, and suddenly she was afraid to lose even that small familiarity.

“What if she doesn’t come?” Lexi asked.

Ms. Watters held out her hand, with its veiny, twiglike fingers and big knuckles. “She will.”

Lexi took a deep breath. She could do this. Of course she could. She had moved into seven foster homes in the past five years, and gone to six different schools in the same amount of time. She could handle this.

She reached out for Ms. Watters’s hand. They walked single file down the narrow bus aisle, bumping the cushioned seats on either side of them.

Off the bus, Lexi retrieved her scuffed red suitcase, which was almost too heavy to carry, filled as it was with the only things that really mattered to her: books. She dragged it to the very edge of the sidewalk and stood there, perched at the rim of the curb. It felt like a dangerous drop-off, that little cliff of concrete. One wrong step could break a bone or send her headlong into traffic.

Ms. Watters came up beside Lexi, opening an umbrella. The rain made a thumping sound on the stretched nylon.

One by one, the other passengers disembarked from the bus and disappeared.

Lexi looked at the empty parking lot and wanted to cry. How many times had she been in exactly this position? Every time Momma dried out, she came back for her daughter. *Give me another chance, baby girl. Tell the nice judge here you love me. I'll be better this time . . . I won't forget about you no more.* And every time, Lexi waited. "She probably changed her mind."

"That won't happen, Lexi."

"It could."

"You have family, Lexi," Ms. Watters repeated the terrifying words and Lexi slipped; hope tiptoed in.

"Family." She dared to test out the unfamiliar word. It melted on her tongue like candy, leaving sweetness behind.

A banged-up blue Ford Fairlane pulled up in front of them and parked. The car was dented along the fender and underlined in rust. Duct tape crisscrossed a cracked window.

The driver's door opened slowly and a woman emerged. She was short and gray-haired, with watery brown eyes and the kind of diamond-patterned skin that came with heavy smoking. Amazingly, she looked familiar—like an older, wrinkled version of Momma. At that, the impossible word came back to Lexi, swollen now with meaning. *Family.*

"Alexa?" the woman said in a scratchy voice.

Lexi couldn't make herself answer. She wanted this woman to smile, or maybe even hug her, but Eva Lange just stood there, her dried-apple face turned into a deep frown.

"I'm your great-aunt. Your grandmother's sister."

"I never knew my grandmother," was all Lexi could think of to say.

"All this time, I thought you were living with your daddy's people."

"I don't have a dad. I mean, I don't know who he is. Momma didn't know."

Aunt Eva sighed. "I know that now, thanks to Ms. Watters here. Is that all your stuff?"

Lexi felt a wave of shame. "Yeah."

Ms. Watters gently took the suitcase from Lexi and put it in the backseat. “Go on, Lexi. Get in the car. Your aunt wants you to live with her.”

Yeah, for now.

Ms. Watters pulled Lexi into a fierce hug, whispering, “Don’t be afraid.”

Lexi almost hung on too long. At the last second, before it turned embarrassing, she let go and stumbled free. She went to the battered car and wrenched the door open. It rattled and pinged and swung wide.

Inside, the car had two brown vinyl bench seats, with cracked seams that burped up a gray padding. It smelled like a mixture of mint and smoke, as if a million menthol cigarettes had been smoked within.

Lexi sat as close to the door as possible. Through the cracked window, she waved at Ms. Watters, watching her caseworker disappear into the gray haze as they drove away. She let her fingertips graze the cold glass, as if a little touch like that could connect her with a woman she could no longer see.

“I was sorry to hear about your momma passing,” Aunt Eva said after a long and uncomfortable silence. “She’s in a better place now. That must be a comfort to you.”

Lexi had never known what to say to that. It was a sentiment she’d heard from every stranger who’d ever taken her in. Poor Lexi, with her dead, drug-addict mother. But no one really knew what Momma’s life had been like—the men, the heroin, the vomiting, the pain. Or how terrible the end had been. Only Lexi knew all of that.

She stared out the window at this new place of hers. It was bold and green and dark, even in the middle of the day. After a few miles, a sign welcomed them to the Port George reservation. Here, there were Native American symbols everywhere. Carved orca whales marked the shop fronts. Manufactured homes sat on untended lots, many of them with rusting cars or appliances in the yard. On this late August afternoon, empty fireworks stands attested to the recent holiday, and a glittering casino was being built on a hillside overlooking the Sound.

Signs led them to the Chief Sealth Mobile Home Park. Aunt Eva

drove through the park and pulled up in front of a yellow and white double-wide trailer. In the misty rain, it looked blurred somehow, rounded with disappointment. Plastic gray pots full of leggy, dying petunias guarded the front door, which was painted Easter-egg blue. In the front window, a pair of plaid curtains hung like fabric hourglasses, cinched in the middle with strands of fuzzy yellow yarn.

“It isn’t much,” Aunt Eva said, looking ashamed. “I rent from the tribe.”

Lexi didn’t know what to say. If her aunt had seen some of the places Lexi had lived in her life, she wouldn’t have made excuses for this pretty little trailer. “It’s nice.”

“Come on,” her aunt said, turning off the engine.

Lexi followed her aunt across a gravel path and up to the front door. Inside, the mobile home was neat as a pin. A small, L-shaped kitchen sidled up to a dining area that held a yellow speckled Formica and chrome table with four chairs. In the living room, a plaid loveseat and two blue vinyl La-Z-Boys faced a TV on a metal stand. On the end table there were two pictures—one of an old woman with horn-rimmed glasses and one of Elvis. The air smelled like cigarette smoke and fake flowers. There were purple air fresheners hanging from almost every knob in the kitchen.

“Sorry if the place kinda smells. I quit smoking last week—when I found out about you,” Aunt Eva said, turning to look at Lexi. “Second-hand smoke and kids is a bad mix, right?”

A strange feeling overtook Lexi; it was birdlike, fluttery, and so foreign she didn’t recognize the emotion right away.

Hope.

This stranger, this aunt, had quit smoking for her. And she’d taken Lexi in when obviously money was tight. She looked at the woman, wanting to say something, but nothing came out. She was afraid she might jinx everything with the wrong word.

“I’m kinda outta my depth here, Lexi,” Aunt Eva finally said. “Oscar and me—he was my husband—we never had kids. Tried, just din’t. So, I don’t know about raising kids. If you’re gonna be—”

"I'll be good. I swear it." *Don't change your mind. Please.* "If you keep me, you won't be sorry."

"If I keep you?" Aunt Eva pursed her thin lips, gave a little frown. "Your momma sure did a number on you. Can't say I'm surprised. She broke my sister's heart, too."

"She was good at hurting people," Lexi said quietly.

"We're family," Eva said.

"I don't really know what that means."

Aunt Eva smiled, but it was sad, that smile, and it wounded Lexi, reminded her that she was a little broken. Life with Momma had left its mark. "It means you're staying here with me. And I guess you'd best just call me Eva from now on, 'cause that Aunt bit is gonna get old fast." She started to turn away.

Lexi grabbed her aunt's thin wrist, feeling the velvety-soft skin wrinkle in her grasp. She hadn't meant to do it, shouldn't have done it, but it was too late now.

"What is it, Lexi?"

Lexi could hardly form the two small words; they felt like a pair of stones in her tight throat. But she had to say them. Had to. "Thank you," she said, her eyes stinging. "I won't cause you any trouble. I swear it."

"You probably will," Eva said, and finally, she smiled. "You're a teenager, right? But it's okay, Lexi. It's okay. I've been alone a long time. I'm glad you're here."

Lexi could only nod. She'd been alone a long time, too.



Jude Farraday hadn't slept at all last night. Finally, just before dawn, she gave up even trying. Peeling back the summer-weight comforter, taking care not to wake her sleeping husband, she got out of bed and left her bedroom. Opening the French doors quietly, she stepped outside.

In the emergent light, her backyard glistened with dew; lush green grass sloped gently down to a sandy gray-pebbled beach. Beyond it, the Sound was a series of charcoal-colored waves that rolled and rolled,

their peaks painted orange by the dawn. On the opposite shore, the Olympic mountain range was a jagged line of pink and lavender.

She stepped into the plastic gardening clogs that were always by the door and went into her garden.

This patch of land was more than just her pride and joy. It was her sanctuary. Here, hunkered down in the rich black earth, she planted and replanted, divided and pruned. Within these low stone walls, she had created a world that was wholly defined by beauty and order. The things she planted in this ground stayed where she put them; they sent out roots that ran deep into this land. No matter how cold and bitter the winter or how driving the rainstorms, her beloved plants came back to life, returning with the seasons.

“You’re up early.”

She turned. Her husband stood on the stone patio, just outside their bedroom door. In a pair of black boxer shorts, with his too long, graying-blond hair still tangled from sleep, he looked like some sexy classics professor or a just-past-his-prime rock star. No wonder she’d fallen in love with him at first sight, more than twenty-four years ago.

She kicked off the orange clogs and walked along the stone path from the garden to the patio. “I couldn’t sleep,” she confessed.

He took her in his arms. “It’s the first day of school.”

And there it was, the thing that had crept into her sleep like a burglar and ruined her peace. “I can’t believe they’re starting high school. They were just in kindergarten a second ago.”

“It’s going to be an interesting ride, seeing who they become in the next four years.”

“Interesting for you,” she said. “You’re in the stands, watching the game. I’m down on the field, taking the hits. I’m terrified something will go wrong.”

“What can go wrong? They’re smart, curious, loving kids. They’ve got everything going for them.”

“What can go wrong? Are you kidding? It’s . . . dangerous out there, Miles. We’ve been able to keep them safe up until now, but high school is different.”

“You’re going to have to let up a little, you know.”

It was the sort of thing he said to her all the time. A lot of people gave her the same advice, actually, and had for years. She’d been criticized for holding the reins of parenthood too tightly, of controlling her children too completely, but she didn’t know how to let go. From the moment she’d first decided to become a mother, it had been an epic battle. She had suffered through three miscarriages before the twins. And there had been month after month when the arrival of her period had sent her into a gray and hazy depression. Then, a miracle: she’d conceived again. The pregnancy had been difficult, always tenuous, and she’d been sentenced to almost six months of bed rest. Every day as she’d lain in that bed, imagining her babies, she’d pictured it as a war, a battle of wills. She’d held on with all her heart. “Not yet,” she finally said. “They’re only fourteen.”

“Jude,” he said, sighing. “Just a little. That’s all I’m saying. You check their homework every day and chaperone every dance and organize every school function. You make them breakfast and drive them everywhere they need to go. You clean their rooms and wash their clothes. If they forget to do their chores, you make excuses and do it all yourself. They’re not spotted owls. Let them loose a little.”

“What should I give up? If I stop checking homework, Mia will stop doing it. Or maybe I should quit calling their friends’ parents to make sure the kids are going where they say they’re going? When I was in high school we had keggers every weekend, and two of my girlfriends got pregnant. I need to keep *better* track of them now, trust me. So many things can go wrong in the next four years. I need to protect them. Once they go to college, I’ll relax. I promise.”

“The right college,” he teased, but they both knew it wasn’t really a joke. The twins were freshmen in high school and Jude had already begun to research colleges.

She looked up at him, wanting him to understand. He thought she was too invested in their children, and she understood his concern, but she was a mother, and she didn’t know how to be casual about it. She couldn’t stand the thought that her children would grow up as she had, feeling unloved.

“You’re nothing like her, Jude,” he said quietly, and she loved him for saying it. She rested against him; together they watched the day brighten, and Miles finally said, “Well, I better get going. I have a surgery at ten.”

She kissed him deeply, then followed him back into the house. After a quick shower, she dried her shoulder-length blond hair, put on a thin layer of makeup, and dressed in jeans and a boatnecked cashmere sweater and faded jeans. Opening her dresser drawer, she withdrew two small wrapped packages; one for each of her children. Taking them with her, she walked out of her bedroom, down the wide slate hallway. With morning sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows, this house, constructed mostly of glass and stone and exotic woods, seemed to glow from within. On this main floor, every viewpoint boasted some decorating treasure. Jude had spent four years huddled with architects and designers to make this home spectacular, and her every dream for it had been realized.

Upstairs, it was a different story. Here, at the top of a floating stone and copper stairway, it was kidland. A giant media room, complete with big-screen TV and a pool table, dominated the east side of the house. Additionally there were two large bedrooms, each with their own en suite bathroom.

At Mia’s bedroom door, she knocked perfunctorily and went inside.

As expected, she found her fourteen-year-old daughter sprawled on top of the blankets in her four-postered bed, asleep. There were clothes everywhere, like shrapnel from some mythic explosion, heaped and piled and kicked aside. Mia was actively engaged in a search for identity, and each new attempt required a radical clothing change.

Jude sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked the soft blond hair that fell across Mia’s cheek. For a moment, time fell away; suddenly she was a young mother again, looking down at a cherubic girl with cornsilk hair and a gummy grin who’d followed her twin brother around like his shadow. They’d been like puppies, scrambling over each other in their exuberant play, chattering nonstop in their secret language, laughing, tumbling off sofa and steps and laps. From the very start, Zach had

been the leader of this pair. He'd spoken first and most often. Mia hadn't uttered a real word until after her fourth birthday. She hadn't needed to; her brother was there for her. Then and now.

Mia rolled over sleepily and opened her eyes, blinking slowly. Her pale, heart-shaped face, with its gorgeous bone structure—inherited from her father—was an acne battlefield that no amount of care had yet been able to clear. Multicolored rubberbands looped through her braces. “Hola, Madre.”

“It's the first day of high school.”

Mia grimaced. “Shoot me. Really.”

“It'll be better than middle school. You'll see.”

“Says you. Can't you homeschool me?”

“Remember sixth grade? When I tried to help you with your math homework?”

“Disaster,” Mia said glumly. “It could be better now, though. I wouldn't get so mad at you.”

Jude stroked her daughter's soft hair. “You can't hide out from life, Poppet.”

“I don't want to hide out from life. Just from high school. It's like swimming with sharks, Mom. Honest. I could lose a foot.”

Jude couldn't help smiling. “See? You have a great sense of humor.”

“That's what they say when they're trying to set up an ugly girl. Thanks, Madre. And who cares, anyway? It's not like I have friends.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No. Zach has friends who try to be nice to his loser sister. It's not the same thing.”

For years, Jude had moved heaven and earth to make her children happy, but this was one battle she couldn't fight. It wasn't easy to be the shy twin sister of the most popular boy in school. “I have a present for you.”

“Really?” Mia sat up. “What is it?”

“Open it.” Jude offered the small wrapped box.

Mia ripped open the box. Inside lay a thin pink leather diary with a gleaming brass lock.

“I had one when I was your age, and I wrote down everything that happened to me. It can help—writing stuff down. I was shy, too, you know.”

“But you were beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful, Mia. I wish you saw that.”

“Yeah, right. Zits and braces are all the rage.”

“Just be open to people, okay, Mia? This is a new school, make it a new opportunity, okay?”

“Mom, I’ve been going to school with the same kids since kindergarten. I don’t think a new address is going to help. Besides, I tried being open . . . with Haley, remember?”

“That was more than a year ago, Mia. It doesn’t do any good to focus on the bad things that happen. Today is the first day of high school. A new start.”

“Okay.” Mia tried gamely to smile.

“Good. Now get out of bed. I want to get to school early today, so I can help you find your locker and get you settled into first period. You have Mr. Davies for geometry; I want him to know how well you did on the WASL test.”

“You are *not* walking me into class. And I can find my locker by myself, too.”

Intellectually, Jude knew that Mia was right, but Jude wasn’t ready to let go. Not yet. Too many things could go wrong. Mia was fragile, too easily flustered. What if someone made fun of her?

A mother’s job was to protect her kids—whether they wanted it or not. She stood up. “I’ll be practically invisible. You’ll see. No one will even know I’m there.”

Mia groaned.