



BLOOD of my

Killing
is in
the
family

BLOOD

BARRY LYGA

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About the Book

Jasper Dent can't escape his family. Wherever he goes, whatever he does, his father's reputation hangs over him.

Because Billy Dent's not like other dads. He's a serial killer.

And now he's got Jasper's girlfriend in his clutches.

Billy must be stopped, against all the odds. Jasper knows he's the only one who can do it, the only one smart enough and quick enough to find him.

After all, it's in his blood.

BLOOD of
my
Killing
is in
the
family **BLOOD**

BARRY LYGA

For my parents. Ironically.



Part One



Up the Cliff

CHAPTER 1

Jazz opened his eyes.



Connie opened her eyes.



Howie opened his eyes.

CHAPTER 2

Jazz realized he had been floating. Floating in dreams. But the dreams weren't really dreams — not entirely. They were memories, filtered through a dream haze.

He'd seen himself in the Hideout again, with Connie. Telling her how happy it would make him to know that his mom had escaped Billy, rather than been killed.

He'd seen himself at his mother's grave, weeping for her at Connie's side.

And she wasn't dead, Jazz knew, both in and out of the dream. She wasn't dead; she was alive, and he'd said that would make him happy, but now he was hurt and he was angry and he was also — damn it! — happy at the same time because she was alive and that was great, but why didn't she, why, why, why didn't she take *him* —

Which is when he'd jerked awake, still in the dark, still locked in unit 83F. Cramped and stagnant, the place still reeked of formaldehyde and bleach, with a growing note of blood and meat. Nothing had changed.

Nothing except ...

He opened Dog's ancient cell phone again, burning precious battery life. The storage unit lit up with the image of his mother.

That part wasn't a dream. She's alive. She's really still alive.

For now.

He shivered. It was cold in the storage unit, but that wasn't the cause of his sudden chill.

Who did you come to New York to find? he had asked Billy, and Billy had answered with the photo.

She could be dead by now. Or tortured. Or anything, really.

"LET ME OUT OF HERE!"

The scream nearly ripped his throat to shreds; in the close echo chamber of unit 83F, it battered his eardrums. His heart skipped at the sound of his own voice, so raw and desperate. He hadn't even known he was going to scream until the words were out of his mouth.

Don't lose it, Jazz. Don't lose it. Stay in control.

But he couldn't stop himself. His leg had settled into a dull, forceful throb of pain, and he found he could maneuver well enough to get to the door of the storage unit, where he proceeded to howl and scream and pound at the door until the corrugated metal made his fists slick with his own blood.

He slumped down in the darkness. His hands were numb, but that — he knew — wouldn't last. The pain would find him.

The pain always found him.

Pain means you're alive. Pain is good. Pain is life.

It wouldn't matter soon. Soon enough, he would be dead. His makeshift bandage wouldn't keep the blood stanching forever. And if he didn't bleed out, he would die of infection. Or thirst.

According to the clock on the screen of Dog's phone, it had been less than fifteen minutes since he'd first seen the photo. Fifteen minutes to pass into a fugue state, to wake up again. Time was losing all meaning.

His mother stared back at him, caught unawares by Billy's prying, prospecting camera.

"Mom," he said, but it sounded wrong. After a moment, he realized why. She'd gone away when he was so young. And yes, he'd sometimes called her *Mom*, but most often he'd called her ...

"Mommy," he said, the word wrenched from him as though stuck fast.

“Mommy,” he said again, and wept.

CHAPTER 3

It wasn't a dream. It really was Billy Dent standing in front of her.

Connie shook her head to clear it, but the action only made a smallish pulse at the base of her skull become a throbbing headache that she couldn't ignore. She gasped with the pain of it, and Billy smiled.

"Just breathe in and out," he advised. "Only gave you a small dose. You should be clearin' up in no time."

Connie listened, but the headache didn't — it kept pounding at her, a tiny man wearing gigantic concrete boots stomping away inside her brain.

Oh, God, Connie, stop worrying about your headache.

She was tied to a chair, she realized, as she tried to put one hand to her head to steady the pulsating beat there. She flexed the muscles of her arms, back, legs. The chair was depressingly sturdy; the ropes confidently tied. Billy was no amateur.

The room was exactly as she'd expected from this rundown building's exterior — walls stained with mold and dirty water, floors dinged and marred with substances she didn't want to know. There was Billy, of course, lurking dead ahead, but off to her left, she could just barely make out the edge of a table, on which lay two cell phones: her own iPhone and some kind of cheap flip phone.

Billy looked different from the photos she'd seen of him over the years. He wore absurd muttonchops and a goatee trimmed to elongate his face. His hair was grayish brown, not dirty blond. It was the face she'd seen when the apartment door had opened, and she'd recognized him not

by his face, but by his *expression*, his evil glee, and that voice.

Her stomach lifted and lowered, then lifted again.

"I'm gonna throw up," she whispered.

Billy shrugged. "Ain't gonna stop you."

She wondered if she could aim her puke at Billy's shoes. She wondered what the punishment would be for vomiting on the world's most notorious serial killer.

She managed to keep her guts in check.

"It's called Darkene," Billy said suddenly. He had pulled another chair over and now sat on it, no more than two feet from her.

"What's called Darkene?" she asked. She could suddenly remember — with crystal clarity — Jazz's attempt to lecture her on surviving serial killers. She had screwed up most of the basics, but "keep them talking" was still on the list. Maybe if she kept Billy talking, someone would ...

"Stuff I shot you up with," Billy said.

Would ...

Connie couldn't remember being "shot up" with anything. The last thing she remembered was the door to the apartment opening. Seeing Billy there. Recognizing him — instantly — despite his facial hair and hair color. That drawl ...

"Well now, ain't you just the sweetest piece of chocolate I ever seen."

"Some kinda European version of Rohypnol," Billy went on. "They gone and put it in an alcohol solution to make it injectable, see? Found out about it on the Internet. And ain't that thing a marvel? You can find out anything about anybody. Amazing. Sure makes my job easier. Hell, when I started out, back in the day, you couldn't just push a few buttons and get what you needed. Had to do the *legwork* back then. More chances to get sloppy. Wouldn't go back to that for all the tea in China, darlin'."

At the mention of Rohypnol, Connie's gut surged again, and she only barely kept herself from throwing up. Roofies. The date rape drug. She —

"Oh, now, darlin'," Billy said soothingly, "you ain't thinkin' unkindly thoughts toward ol' Billy, are you?" He laughed. "It's all over your face. You thinkin' 'date rape drug' and you know I got certain, well, let's call 'em *predilections*, shall we? I ain't gonna lie to you — I have been known to engage in what the prison shrink calls 'nonconsensual liaisons' with certain ladies. And I'll tell you, Connie — if a single one of them women had been a real person or mattered in the slightest, there's a chance I might even regret it. But they weren't, so I don't."

He cleared his throat and leaned in close. "But you think real hard now, and you realize that your drawers are still on and I ain't taken a stitch of clothin' off you. Ain't done nothing untoward. Not to my boy's girl."

Except drug me, she wanted to say. And tie me to a chair.

Wanted to say. But couldn't. Wouldn't. She was six inches from the mouth of a man who had bitten the throat out of a woman. Six inches from a man who had cut the nipples off a victim and switched them with those of another. Six inches from the monster who stalked the earth in a suit of human flesh and blood, raping, torturing, and murdering.

She walked into Melissa Hoover's house with Jazz ahead of her and Howie behind her. Billy had been here. G. William told them that much on the phone. And then, suddenly, Jazz looked through a doorway and spun around and shoved at her and at Howie, shoved with more force than was necessary, as though he didn't care that Connie was his girlfriend, didn't care about Howie's hemophilia.

"You can't see this," he said. "You'll have nightmares for the rest of your lives."

He had never told Connie exactly *what* Billy Dent had done to poor Melissa Hoover. But Connie and Howie had waited outside as Jazz stalked the crime scene with G.

William and the cops. She'd seen a cop come outside and lean against the house, then hang — openmouthed — over a rosemary bush, as if begging his guts to let him puke. Nothing had come.

She'd watched the medical examiner go in, grim, and come out, gray-skinned and shaking his head.

Billy Dent didn't just kill people. He didn't just rape them. He *ruined* them. He *destroyed* them.

She was, she realized in a moment of stark, hot clarity, terrified.

Now was not the time for sass. Now was not the time to show how tough she was or to be a "strong woman." Now was the time to do or say whatever she had to do or say in order to survive this.

"I'm sorry I doubted you," she whispered.

Billy roared with laughter, slapping one knee. "Black girls!" he howled. "God love 'em! Where's the sass, girl? Where's the head toss and the attitude? You're disappointing me. I see on the TV how badass y'all are supposed to be, but here? Now? You ain't impressin' me. Not a credit to the African American species, if you don't mind my saying. More like a nothing-special colored girl. Beaten down like a slave, you know?"

He stood up with a hand behind his back, and when the hand came into view, it held a large, wicked knife.

"You think you're good enough for my boy, Conscience Hall? You think you got what it takes to be with him? Oh, that's right — I know all about you and him. I know. I first heard about it, I thought, 'Well, damn, Jasper's got himself some strange.' And I laughed — well, no. Didn't quite laugh. *Sniggered*."

Connie tensed. She couldn't keep her eyes from following the knife as Billy gestured with it. But her ears couldn't help hearing —

"Oh, no!" Billy said in mock chagrin. "Did he say *that word*? No, no, of course not. I said *sniggered*, Connie. Stop

being so sensitive. It's a real problem with your particular breed. I ain't sayin' that out of a sense of racial entitlement, you understand. I'm just speaking honest with you. I'm trying to help you."

He paused, and Connie realized — to her horror — that he expected a response.

"Thank you," she managed to say. "Thank you, Mr. Dent."

" 'Mr. Dent?' " Billy clucked his tongue. "Damn, girl, we're practically family, what with you spreadin' your legs for my son." He sighed heavily. "It's gonna kill my poor momma, if you 'n' Jasper get hitched, Connie. Don't mind telling you that. She ain't as progressive-minded as I am. Know what I mean?"

"Yes, Mr.... Yes."

"Call me Billy, darlin'." He tilted his head like a confused puppy, grinning, the knife dancing slowly back and forth in her field of vision, throwing off flares from the overhead light.

"Yes, Billy. I understand."

Billy nodded in satisfaction. "Good. Good." He started pacing now, still gesturing with the knife. And Connie's fear had abated enough that she began looking for a way out ... only to realize there was none. She could scream, sure, but this was Billy Dent — he'd have her throat cut before the first syllable passed her lips.

" 'Sniggering.' Perfectly fine word. Nothin' wrong with it. Won't hear ol' Billy usin' *that* word," Billy said, grinning. "Little old *niggling* thing like that? Drives people bonkers, it does. Why, it would be *politically incorrect* to say that! Insensitive! I say something like that, people might *really* hate me. Not just black folk, either. Got a lot of white folk get upset by it, too. But you want to know something? I'll tell you a secret, Connie. I'll tell you a secret, if you tell me one. Do we have a deal?"

What choice did she have? Connie nodded.

Billy considered. "You gonna live up to your end of the bargain?"

Another nod.

"You sure?"

Nod.

"Good. I don't want to be dealing with no *reneger*." He howled with laughter again, wiping tears from his eyes. He was out of control, helpless in the throes of his own idiotic, racist humor.

"I won't hold back," he told her. "Gonna tell you a good secret. All the details. I won't be ... *niggardly* about it." No laughter now as he sat across from her again, a wicked gleam in his eye.

Connie bit her bottom lip, hard. She'd made the worst mistake she could possibly make with him. *His idiotic, racist humor*, she'd thought. Nothing Billy Dent did was idiotic. Nothing was uncalculated or left to chance.

He's trying to get inside your head, someone said to her, and she was surprised — a little, at least — to find that it was Jazz's voice. That was new.

Once he gets inside your head, it's game over, Jazz went on. *Once he gets inside your head, you're dead*.

Billy did the head tilt again. "Thinkin', ain't you? Thinkin' way back in that head of yours. You're thinkin' that if you can keep me talking, maybe someone will come to rescue you." He did something extraordinary just then — he tapped his knife against his chin, the sharp, lethal point just under his mouth. Absentmindedly. As though he did this all the time to keep himself focused. Connie hissed in a breath in some sort of strange sympathy — the idea of that blade so close to her, *touching* her ...

He held the knife so casually, as if it were just an extension of his hand. *Does he have special ones?* she wondered. *Or will any old knife do?*

He winked at her, and in that moment, she knew she was doomed. Billy was in her head. He was playing two games

at once, talking to her while also sussing her out. Figuring out what would make her scream the most, maybe. Or possibly what would make her scream the best. He probably had a grading scale for screams, after all. And he knew how to take a victim from a one to a ten, no problem.

"So, here's my secret," he said. "Ain't much difference between me and one of you 'people' running around out there in the world. Ain't much difference at all, Connie. Truly. Know how I know?"

She shook her head.

"Well, I'll tell you. I performed ... Well, I performed what you might call an *experiment*, Connie. See, I got a whole lotta deaths to my name. Most of 'em are women. I guess you know that." He stroked his chin with his free hand.

"Got a lot of people sayin' I got, well, issues with women. Whole buncha experts thinkin' they can understand ol' Billy. But, damn, Connie. Damn! They don't know me! You think they know me?"

She shook her head again. Agreeing with Billy Dent had become absurdly easy.

"I love women, Connie. Truly, I do. Love my momma, for example. That's just one right there. But the problem here is that there just ain't a lot of real women in the world. Oh, I know you like to think there are. You like to walk around all day and see. You see these things, Connie. These creatures, these dolls. Pretty things, sometimes. They got long hair and they got a bosom and they got fine legs with a nice spot between 'em, but they ain't *real*, you hear me?"

He suddenly screamed: "YOU HEAR ME?"

"Yes!" she cried. "Yes, I hear you!"

"I DON'T BELIEVE YOU!" He brandished the knife before her eyes, the deadly point staring at her, unmoving, held so unbelievably still that it couldn't have moved less if Billy had been a statue.

"I believe you!" she yelped. "I really do! I swear, Billy! I swear!"

He chuckled and went from outrage to easygoing in less time than it took her to blink. The knife pulled back.

"You get it. I'm startin' to think maybe you're real, Connie. Maybe that's why my boy ain't cut you open yet. Might could be."

If I'm real, does he kill me? Does he let me go? Or does it even matter 'cause I'm black?

"Anyway, I tried this out. My little experiment. Scientific method, Connie. See, the newspeople, they sure loved talkin' about what I did and who I did it to and why. And I ain't gonna lie to you — my pride surely goeth before my fall because I was pretty dang fascinated with what they had to say. Read every story I could get my hands on." He dropped a sly, conspiratorial wink. "Even had one of them — whatchacallit — Google Alerts for a little while. Make sure I catch everything.

"So here's where the experiment comes in. Here's the secret, Connie: I purposely killed me some homely girls. Not many. I'm a man, after all, and I got my tastes and I ain't one to deny myself. But I picked out some girls who weren't nothin' to write home about, and I did 'em just as done as the others, and you know what?"

She shrugged. It felt offhand and deliberate and provocative, so she quickly added, "No. What?"

"I'll tell you what: The media reported on them *less* than on the others. Fewer pictures. Fewer words written. Less detail. Know why?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He leaned in even closer than before: Five inches, then four, then three, now his lips at her ear — right at her ear — and he could bite it off or even just suck her brain out because he was Billy Dent and maybe he could.

"Because," he whispered, his breath incongruously warm and soft in her ear, "*they* want to do the pretty ones, just like I do. They live through me, Connie. They want what I have. What I get. What I take. They don't have the guts,

though. For the blood and the bodies and the rape and the rest. So they just report on it. They tell you the details. And all the time, they wish it had been them. Holding them down. Cutting the clothes from their bodies. Doing all the rest.

"They all want it, Connie," he said, and leaned away from her, still grinning. "Nice secret, right?"

She remembered then the conversation she'd had. On the phone. The Auto-Tuned voice, goading her, telling her that when Connie died, there'd be no 24/7 memorial on TV. No follow-up reports.

What if it's just true that your life is genuinely worth less than a white girl's? the voice had asked.

"Like you said to me on the phone," she said, the words slipping out before she could stop them. "Some people are worth less than others." *To you*, she added mentally but didn't have the guts to speak aloud.

Billy pursed his lips. "Don't quite know what was said to you on the phone," he admitted. "Wasn't me you were talkin' to."

You're gonna die anyway, Connie. Might as well satisfy your curiosity. "So you have a partner?"

"A partner? In a manner of speakin', I suppose."

"Like the Impressionist. And the Hat-Dog Killer."

"Those peckerheads?" Billy said, heated. "You mockin' me, girl? The three of them ain't got two full gonads between 'em. Useful jackasses is all. Tools, like a wrench or a" — he held up the knife, surprised and delighted, as though he'd forgotten it was there — "or a knife!"

Three of them? she thought.

"But now it's your turn," Billy said. "Your turn to tell me a secret."

Connie's lips parted, but no sound came out. She could not move her tongue, which lay dry and heavy in her mouth, useless. She couldn't imagine a single secret, all of

a sudden. Nothing at all. Certainly nothing that would interest Billy Dent.

It doesn't matter, anyway. He's going to kill you no matter what you say.

"Cat got your tongue?" Billy asked.

"I don't have any secrets," she managed at last. "I'm sorry."

"Everyone's got secrets, darlin'. Everyone. And you and me, hell, we just met. This is our first time talkin'. You got a lot of secrets from me."

"You know who I am," she told him. "You know all about me."

"Secondhand," Billy said, sniffing at the very idea. He waved it out of the air like stink. "Other folks, tellin' me what they seen. I want to know *you*, Connie. *From you*." This time, he tapped his teeth with the knife, and for a single, glorious instant, Connie imagined throwing her weight forward, knocking into him, the knife skidding up those teeth, carving open his upper lip, sliding up into his nose, through the sinus cavity, into his brain —

But in the small glitch of time it took for the thought to occur to her, the moment was over.

"Tell me about my boy," Billy said. "About your first time."

"First time?" she asked dully. She felt like an idiot. First time *what*?

Billy smiled, and for a split second, Connie relaxed before she realized that Billy's smiles were artifacts of his derelict humanity, tools used to put prey at ease.

"Don't fiddle with me, girl. I been treating you humanely, but that can change real quick. Your first time. With Jasper. Tell me what it was like."

"We didn't!" Connie blurted out. "We haven't!"

Billy's expression and posture changed not one iota. But Connie knew — instantly — that she'd said the wrong thing.

"I —" she began, but Billy hushed her with a glance.

He moved the knife, lifting it to his eyes, then turned it slowly until every angle of it had fallen beneath his gaze.

"Is this a dagger which I see before me?" he said in a surprisingly accurate British accent. Connie blinked, unsure what to do or say in response, and then Billy darted forward and the blade was at the corner of her eye. She jerked away out of reflex, but Billy slapped his free palm against the side of her head, forcing her to stare directly into the blade.

"Is this the goddamn dagger?" Billy demanded in his familiar drawl. "Am I losing my mind, girl, or is this a knife I got in my hand?"

Connie whimpered.

"Answer me!" Billy yelled, his spittle flecking her cheek.

"It's a knife!" she yelped. "You have the knife!"

"And do you believe I will cut you and gut you if you lie to me? Do you?"

"I know you will!" she cried. "But I'm telling the truth!"

"I want to know!" Billy roared. "Tell me about your first time with my boy! Tell me, or I'll rip you open and cut you into little bitty pieces and let you watch yourself die!"

"We haven't!" Connie pleaded. "We haven't had sex yet! I swear to God!"

Billy exploded with a wrathful, rageful bellow. His free hand slid to the back of her head, and he grabbed a handful of her braids, yanking her head back. He came around to the front of her, straddling her, and moved the knife to her bare, vulnerable throat, pressing the edge of the blade against her flesh. There was pressure, but no pain.

Not yet.

"To *God*? You swear to God? You think God was watching or caring when I nailed that silly, crazy girl to the ceiling of that church in Pennsylvania? You think God was payin' attention when I slipped my knife inside her, when I found all her dark and bloody secrets? You think God gave a good damn when I popped out her eyeballs, easy as you please,

and fed 'em to the strays in the alley? Do you? Do you?" He licked his lips. "So if you're gonna swear to somethin', little girl, if you're gonna try to *persuade* Dear Old Dad, you best swear to something that *matters*."

Connie swallowed. What had been dry now went slick. She couldn't help it. She — she swallowed again. This time, there was pain along with the wetness of her own blood.

"I swear to you!" she whispered, trying to move her throat as little as possible. She was now raw and open there, keenly aware of how thin the skin was between the blade and her windpipe, the blade and her jugular. "I swear, Billy!" Tears dripped down her cheeks, slid over the curve of her jaw, and melded with the slippery blood.

Tears. She was used to a lifetime of tears doing *something*. Tears slowed down the conversation. Tears made people apologize. Sometimes tears just pissed off the other person, and he or she stomped out of the room.

She wasn't used to nothing.

For all Billy's demeanor changed, she might as well have been dry-eyed and not bleeding.

"You think I'm gonna believe that?" he asked. "Fine-lookin' girl like you? Sweet talker like my Jasper? You think I believe you could hold out? That boy could talk your legs open in no time, make you think it was your idea all along."

It's not me; it's him, she wanted to say. But would he believe that? Could Billy Dent believe the truth?

Billy began sawing the blade back and forth, almost gently. Connie felt her skin part.

"Please," she said. She didn't want to say it. She struggled with herself, ordered herself to shut up, to no avail.

Connie didn't want to beg for her life. She didn't want to do that. But she would. She knew it. She could feel it crawling up her throat like something that hadn't quite been dead when she'd eaten it. She would whimper. And cry. Her nose would run streamers of snot. And it would be

useless because that was the sort of thing you did to play on someone's pity, but Billy Dent had no pity. He was born without it, the way some people were born without detached earlobes or the ability to curl their tongues. Her tears and her pleas would do nothing to him, and she knew it, but she wouldn't be able to stop herself. She would beg and wheedle and swear and importune, and in the end, he would do horrible, horrible things to her, anyway.

Suddenly, he stopped with the knife and looked over her, over her head, his eyes marveling.

She realized that he was still holding her by the braids with his knifeless hand. Now he pulled them up and was gazing at them, almost in awe.

"I ain't never touched a colored girl's hair before," he said with a gentleness that both surprised and frightened her.

Touch my hair as much as you want. I don't care. Just let me live.

With a smooth motion, he removed the blade from her throat and sliced through one of her braids, almost at her scalp, cutting through the knotted hair with a swiftness that offered further proof — along with her bleeding throat — of the sharpness of the knife.

He took a step back and held the knife by its handle in his teeth as he — with quick efficiency and no fumbling — tied the severed braid around his right wrist.

Oh, God. A trophy. His trophy. Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus. I don't know what I did wrong; I was stupid to come here, but stupid's not a sin. I don't know what I did to get here, but I promise I'll never do it again. Please get me out of here, and I will never, ever do anything bad again as long as I live. I will be a good girl for the rest of my life.

Billy took the knife out of his mouth and studied the crimsoned length of the blade for a moment. Connie swallowed again, this time causing a stitch of flame to race along her neck where she was open to the air.

Her mind went blank. She had nothing in her. Nothing to say. Nothing to think. Nothing to pray.

And then she was literally saved by the bell.

The phone rang.



It was, Connie thought, bizarre to see Billy Dent answer the phone.

He'd been built up in her mind as the Boogeyman, the Creature, the Devil Himself. But when the flip phone on the table next to him buzzed, his eyebrows quirked for an instant like anyone else's, and he picked up the phone and said into it — politely — "Hello?"

Just like a human being.

Bizarre.

"No, you can't talk to Ugly J." Beat. "Well, I don't rightly care. Tell me."

Saved by the bell, she thought. *Saved by the freakin' bell*.

Connie flashed away from the oddly prosaic tableau of Billy Dent on the phone, back to the box she'd unearthed in his old backyard.

A bell. The bell. A bit of Poe surfaced from sophomore English: *the tintinnabulation that so musically wells / From the bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells, bells —*

Oh my God, I'm losing it.

Billy listened for a moment. His expression did not change from its studied, frozen neutrality as he said, "And you left him there?" and yet Connie felt as though the temperature in the room had dropped fifteen degrees. She fantasized that she could see her breath.

She tried not to get too excited about her temporary reprieve. Blood still ran down her neck and pooled in the hollow of her clavicle. She didn't have Jazz's intimate understanding of the fragility of the human body. How bad

was the cut? How much blood had she lost? How much would she lose?

Chill out, Connie. You're not Howie. If he'd cut your jugular or your carotid, you'd probably be dead or unconscious already.

Then again, maybe that was the Darkene talking. She knew Rohypnol could linger in the body.

"You left him there?" Billy repeated, again without heat, but then he spun the knife — still rubied and glimmering with a wet veneer of her blood — and jabbed it at the table, where it *thunked* into place, point down and vibrating slightly. Connie knew that would be the sound it would make if it hit her bones.

"You go nowhere," Billy said now. "Stay where you are, and don't even think of killing anyone else until I tell you it's okay." He paused. "If you want to be a Crow, you'll rethink arguin' with me." Another pause. "That's what I thought."

Billy snapped the phone shut and stared at it, small, black, and dead in his palm.

"Stupid son of a bitch," he said calmly, then dropped the phone to the table, snatched up the knife, and began methodically stabbing the phone, his face expressionless, his eyes fixated on the spot where the point of the knife cracked the plastic of the phone, then broke through, then finally crunched its way to the table again — *thunk*.

Connie's blood sloughed off the knife and onto the carcass of the phone; it looked like Billy had stabbed the phone to death.

I'm going to die. This is how I'm going to die, and this is where I'm going to die. Because I did all the stupid things you yell at stupid people for doing in stupid movies.

"Right," Billy said. "You."

He was staring at her, as though he'd just remembered she was here. With two steps, he was at her side, and then his fingers pressed against her neck, right where he'd cut

her open. Connie hissed in pain and pulled away. Billy thumped the top of her head with the side of his fist.

"Sit still."

He ran a finger along the gash. Connie sniveled.

"Quit it," he said coldly. "This is nothing. You ain't dyin'." He studied his bloodied fingertips for a moment, then licked one clean. Connie gagged.

"Thought it would taste different," he remarked, as though to himself.

He wiped his other fingers clean on Connie's shirt, quick and efficient, not pausing to linger at her breasts, as if she was nothing more than a towel to him.

"Ain't done with you yet," he told her. "You still owe me that secret. That memory of my boy. And I aim to collect. But right now, I got something important to do. So you'll have to sit still for me."

With no further preamble, Billy produced a handkerchief and shoved it in Connie's mouth before she could move or protest. Then he grabbed the back of her chair and rocked her onto the back legs. She went dizzy with the sudden movement and the lingering aftereffects of the Darkene. One-handed, Billy hauled her, backward, across the floor, the chair rattling, the legs scraping the hardwood as she went. He opened a door and dragged her in, righting the chair a few feet inside. Connie had only a moment as Billy stepped around her and over the threshold — she desperately fired her vision everywhere she could, even twisting her raw and abused neck to look around. Small room. Some kind of rubberized egg carton-looking stuff was stapled to the walls. The only furniture was a bed, covered with an unruly hump of blankets.

Standing in the doorway — the only source of light — Billy fixed her with a hard stare.

"Now, I got a couple chores on my list. While I'm gone, I want you to think about two things, and two things only: One, I want you to think about what I want to know, about

your first time makin' my kid happy. Second, you think about how persuasive I can be when I need to be. Got it?"

Connie nodded wildly.

Billy held up the wrist on which he wore Connie's severed braid. "I'm keeping you real close, girl. I'll be back for you soon."

And then he closed the door. The room went starkly, immediately black. There was the depressing and unmistakable click of a lock.

From outside, she heard Billy's footfalls on the floor. Then the apartment door. Then nothing.

Connie waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Billy had turned out the light in the outer room when he left, so there was only a bit of gray murk around the doorframe, light only in comparison to the pitch black around it. She looked down and could barely make out her own sleeves. So that was it, then.

Think, Connie. You have some time. Maybe five minutes, maybe five hours. Who knows. Use it. Now.

She wondered: Could she somehow hop the chair over to the bed she'd seen? Maybe there was a rough edge or an exposed screw or nail that she could use to saw through her ropes. As best she could tell, Billy had tied her by her ankles and wrists to the legs and arms of the chair, using what felt like coarse, thick rope. It chafed her skin at the wrists. She was bound tightly. She could move her feet a little and waggle her fingers, but that was it. At least she still had some circulation going.

Okay, Connie, enough with the medical exam. He could be right back. Get moving.

She took a deep breath through her nose (thank God the handkerchief was clean — it tasted only of fresh cotton) and pushed against the floor with all her might, hoping to lift the chair an inch or two. At the same time, she flung her weight back, toward the bed.

She teetered for a moment, then fell over backward, her entire body rattling with impact. Her head smacked against the floor, and she whooshed out all her air and a scream into the handkerchief, both muted, then tried to suck in another breath, couldn't, panicked, and began sucking on the handkerchief for a starry, terrified moment before her reflexes took over and she greedily snorted great wallops of air in through her nose, exhaling noisily, gustily.

Oh, crap. Crap. Now I'm screwed. Damn it.

Her head throbbed and pounded. Something wet ran along her cheek; her still-bleeding neck had squirted a little puddle on the floor, and in her contorted, breathless moments, she'd rolled into it.

Get up, Connie! Get up! Do it! Before he gets back! Figure this out! Now!

Her hammering heart threatened to burst. She forced herself to walk away from her own panic, imagining it as a boulder fallen in her path. Thank God for all that guided imagery and meditation she did. *Yoga saves lives*, she thought.

Stepped away from her own fear, she began to calm her breathing and bring her heart rate back to normal. She was, she knew, flooded with all kinds of endorphins and fear hormones right now. There was nothing she could do about that. She would have to take the best action she could imagine and hope that it was the right one.

First order of business had to be getting to the bed. It was the only thing in the room. It was the only tool she had.

She struggled for a moment, willing her restricted body to find a way to sit upright again, but it was fruitless. Then again ... why sit up? Could she somehow inch along the floor as she was? Thrash around just the right way and make it to the bed?

She took another deep breath. This wouldn't be easy. She couldn't rely on her legs or arms. She would have to use her core. She had a great core. The solitary yoga instructor