



# LITTLE BRICK HOUSE

Kristin Garth

an Avalon Hayes mystery

sequel  
book

**ASTER PRICE HAYES, 2010**

It's easy to lose track of time in the little brick house -- especially on a Wednesday when Neil goes from the office to scout duties at the church. A passion overtakes me I cannot tear myself from until it reaches its perfect, inevitable end. As if time is a loop and I've gone so far into the past, I can't find my way back unless I make the entire circle.

I was almost afraid to peek today at the bedroom clock (5:35 p.m.). My girls had been home at least an hour and a half, full of questions and opinions, ready to overrule me on the weekly pizza night order (two pepperoni purists I'd produced). When I was a girl, I thought it was just me. Once I had daughters I'd realized all teenage girls are amateur detectives.

Sprinting as fast as I could, eight diagonal blocks, up the wooded front porch stairs, I hoped to sneak past shut bedroom doors towards my room. Rely upon that good old-fashioned teenage narcissism to save my afternoon.

*Must I have another interrogation?*

As I pulled open the front door quietly, gasping for breath, there was Avalon, on the couch, eyes trained on me. She'd had a horrific day. The fact I only now remembered solidified my position as the absolute worst mother in the whole world.

"Hi, sweetie. How did the rest of your day go?"

Before she could even respond (her face an answer), I'd thrown myself against her, wrapped an arm around to draw her close. Better late than never? I don't know who said it, but it was not a teenager. Definitely not one of my daughters. Avalon shook free immediately.

"Ew. You're sweaty, Mom."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I —"

"That was a very long run."

Worded innocuously, delivered with the venom of an accusation, it was clear my daughter suspected me of deception. She had good reason.

"I'm sorry. I just get going. Forget how to stop. I'm here though, all ears. Tell me everything."

"I can't go there anymore, Mom. I have to do dual enrollment. You must make Dad let me do it. I know you understand."

Because I was a high school dropout. That's what she meant – but she wasn't wrong. I did understand this compulsion maybe more than I understood any other problem either of my daughters faced.

It still made me a bit little sad. My fondest wish, since their birth, was that neither ended up anything like me. For years, I thought I succeeded.

"I do understand."

"Dad won't."

"We'll make him, okay? I promise."

"We have two days, Mom. I have to be registered by Friday or I'm stuck."

Her eyes were wild with panic. Today must have been worse than I thought.

"Look, he's with the scouts. By the time he gets home it'll be 9:00. He'll be exhausted. It's the wrong moment."

She looked like she might jump out of her skin.

"You don't get it, Mom. I don't have a lot of moments left."

"Don't be so dramatic, Avalon. Tomorrow, you're going to go first thing to that guidance counselor Mr. Davenport was talking about."

"Ms. Carruth."

"Right. Get all paperwork and facts about dual enrollment. We'll talk to Dad tomorrow. He's going to agree. I promise. Tell her you'll be back Friday morning with everything she needs, and she can you enroll you. You'll start Monday, okay?"

"What if he doesn't?"

"I promise he will. I have a tiny bit of pull in that department, you know?"

My daughter looked at me skeptically. Could I blame her for not trusting me?

"You swear?"

"Avalon, I just said I promised."

Her eyes roll ever so slightly. I knew she'd deny if I bothered to confirm, so I didn't. Just let it go. My daughter didn't trust me these days. I knew why.

"My life depends on you, Mom."

It sounded like a dramatic teenager thing to say; I knew it wasn't. It was a plea I'd wish I'd made years ago to my own mother instead of doing what I did.

"I swear to you Avalon I will not let you down."

She nodded that sweet, serious little face, granting me amnesty for past misdeeds and a new vote of confidence. Made me want to reward her with a confession, but it was too complicated. Telling one truth led to a far more painful other. I just smiled back and let my secrets sleep inside me one more day.

AB-

It'd been almost two years since I'd received the phone call about Jared Kline. Avalon not yet driving, the girls attending high school and middle school in a different county (even if it was only a 15 minute drive with traffic from our East Hill house), I was a full-time chauffeur. When the phone rang I answered it out of breath and a little impatient.

"Aster Price?"

"This is Aster Hayes, but, yes, that used to be my name."

"I'm sorry. That's right. My name is Harvey Poché. I'm an attorney with the law office of Pierce & Poché. You were acquainted with a man by the name of Jared Kline?"

Suburban housewife thoughts of children, commutes and grocery lists evaporated. Trembling in my kitchen at the mention of a name I hadn't heard, out loud, in years, guilt overwhelmed me for not immediately hanging up the phone and blocking the number.

"Yes?"

"Ms. Hayes, I'm sorry to be the bearer of what may be some surprising bad news and do it over the phone. We'll need to meet in person. I can go over everything then if you'd like, but I thought you'd want to understand the nature of the matter first."

"Yes, absolutely."

I knew nothing about this Mr. Poché. It was clear, though, he had more than a passing understanding of my dark relationship with Jared Kline. Though we spoke through the imposed modesty of the phone, I felt naked and ashamed.

"Mr. Kline passed this week -- suffered a massive heart attack, I'm sorry to say."

I was stunned. I'd done everything I could long ago to cut Jared Kline out of my life, but I never cut him out of my heart completely.

"That's -- I don't really know what to say."

Mr. Poché was quiet. Like he expected more. I was confused. Why was I even receiving a phone call now? As if he read my faults, he finally explained.

"Well, Ms. Price -- or Ms. Hayes, the reason I'm calling is I represent Mr. Kline's estate as executor. The majority of Mr. Kline's estate was left to his wife and to his teenage son. But there was a codicil, an amendment, I was instructed to deal with in as discreet a manner as possible. It seems, Ms. Hayes, Mr. Kline named you as a beneficiary in his will."

I struggled to hold the phone. The idea of Jared's death was enough to get my head around. Many years had passed since our time together, but I'd never known a man as alive. My head hurt as much as he once hurt my body.

"I don't understand."

"It's a piece of property, a small house in East Hill, 14 --"

"1412 Lee Street."

"Exactly, yes. He's titled it in your name. Had the estate pay the taxes for the year. We can go over other details when you come by my office to sign paperwork. I'll pass you off to my secretary in a minute to schedule a time next week, if that's convenient?"

His tone was matter of fact and ordinary, like dead men leaving houses to their former schoolgirl stripper teenage mistresses turned suburban housewives was just another Wednesday at the office.

"That fine. It's a shocking thing. I hadn't spoken to him in years. Did he leave any explanation?"

"There's a sealed letter addressed to you. Maybe it will make things more clear. You can pick it up next week. Unless you have questions, I'll pass you along to Carrie."

I was positively filled with questions and memories -- none appropriate to share with this stranger Harvey Poché. The contents of the letter and sharp images of the little brick house would consume my thoughts until I acquired them.

I searched through boxes at the back of my closet full of diaries and notebooks until I found the place I'd written it, a sonnet I written in 1992 about this house and this man:

Inside a house of brick with just a bed  
I wait for you without my clothes. A place  
we drove to on your lunch, a gift, you said.  
and waved a key you used to trace  
a line into my thigh so hard, it went  
from white to scarlet while your eyes went wild  
and dark. And then you kissed it while you rubbed it,  
smiled and whispered, "This is how I leave my mark."  
You slipped the key between my fingers, made  
me struggle with the lock -- "You have to learn" --  
Then rushed me past that empty room to bed  
with pink new sheets I knew I had to earn.  
Inside a house of brick with just a bed  
I wait without my clothes just like you said.

**A+**

Carrie had scheduled my meeting with Mr. Poché for the next Monday at 10:15. This left the weekend to discuss impending homeownership with Neil. There's no version of my narrative in which Neil is not an indisputable hero -- a man so devout I was his only rebellion. He married a girl with a past that would scare most away. To repay him, I'd tried my best for years to pretend none of it happened, that it was made up -- like one of my stories.

I never was a part of a UFO hoax or dropped out of school or danced topless for strangers or slept with a married man or ever lived in a little brick house; I pretended all of that. Maintained zealously a fiction my daughter was, in fact, his daughter and not a product of a decidedly unholy alliance begun in a gentlemen's club.

This house had come along, out of nowhere, and undone all of that. It's hard to hide a house -- futile to ignore what it represents. I dreaded the conversation with him but not enough to forego it. I wanted this house maybe more than anything ever.

"It could be a good investment property. We could fix it up, rent it out -- maybe sell it? Perhaps he felt guilty, Aster, as he should. I don't see why we shouldn't accept this as some sort of payment of support that is obviously due. I'm on board."

He meant child support. This reference was the closest Neil had come in years to an acknowledgment he wasn't Avalon's true father. The acknowledgment was almost as shocking to me as his hasty acquiescence to the house. We were moving to a place of honesty we'd never explored.

"No, I want to keep it, Neil."

“What do you mean keep it? You have a house, a much bigger house, it sounds like.”

“I’d like to use it as a writing studio.”

Now, his face looked grim. Fine to profit from this place and be done with it altogether. Wallowing in it was a different thing. I knew if I wanted this, I was going to have to fight for it.

“You encouraged me to write in the first place, once the girls were in school, and I felt lost. When I did, and you didn’t care for the subject matter, it was ‘Keep this away from the girls. They don’t need to be exposed to this.’ So I have. When I managed to get published, I did so under a pseudonym, kept everybody else safe and comfortable. Now, out of the sky, falls a place, eight blocks from this house where I can go and write and not have to stop in the middle of a sentence and cower like a criminal. And you don’t want me to have it?”

“It’s just painfully obvious, Aster, the girls and I are not enough.”

The girls were older now, involved in their own lives. He was gone so long with work and church. If I sat around and waited to be needed, I’d be the loneliest woman in Pensacola. He’d encouraged me to write. Only he had didn’t know Aster Price, the writer, who she really was. She was before his time.

“Like the girls and I are enough for you, Neil? You leave us twice a week to go to church, and I don’t guilt you for it.”

“You could come, too, Aster. I’d love nothing more than that.”

“Well, I’m not religious, Neil. You knew when you married me. You knew who I was.”

He was quiet. There was no disputing that fact, no matter how desperately he wanted to. He was defeated; he was just trying to figure out a way to be okay with it in his head.

"I don't even want the girls to know that this place even exists."

"That's kind of the point, Neil."

"Where will you tell them you're going?"

"I don't know. It's not very far. I'll just say I'm going for a run."

He laughed though was clear he found nothing about this at all funny, barely even tolerable.

“I guess you’ve got it all worked out then. Should I be worried you’re such a good liar?”

“I don’t lie to you, Neil. I never have.”

He didn’t look like that gave him much comfort.

**AB-**

On Monday, I arrived early at Harvey Poché's office to sign documents in a sloppy ponytail and workout clothes. Carrie escorted me into her boss's sparsely lit office. Mr. Poché greeted me in a professional, polite manner. His eyes though, when they met mine, betrayed they saw the real me through this suburban housewife disguise.

He explained gift taxes and property taxes. My hands trembling, I signed documents. All I could stare at was the keys on his desk.

"These belong to you."

He also reached for a business card and one more thing, the letter.

"I can use these right now?"

"Right now."

He looked amused at my naivety.

"I'm sorry. I thought there would be a closing date or something."

"Mr. Kline already titled the house to you. It's yours today, right now."

I took that key in my hand, wondering if it could possibly be the same one I'd left on that kitchen counter so many years ago. I longed to put it inside that stubborn lock again. If the house wasn't all my own before, it, indisputably, was now.

He slid the letter across his desk to me, his hairy knuckled fingers stretched tight across it. My own barely touched the edge to pull it free, to avoid our fingers touching. The plain white envelope, my name in nondescript black ink, felt hot and electric in my hands, eyes already on the door.

"We're about finished. You can read the letter in private."

"Of couse," I felt myself blushing.

I hurried out of his office off to read my letter. I had the perfect place in mind.



A+

Standing at the front door of the little brick house, my little brick house, jiggling the key in the lock, I felt 18 again. Looking around nervously, afraid of being seen, this time by my daughters and not Daphne Paugh, a girl from another life, I hadn't seen in decades -- a girl I used to take off my clothes with for men and money.

My girls were at school and would be for hours. They knew nothing about the girl I was, a girl came to Pensacola, taken a different name, a girl who lived for a short time in this little brick house.

No utilities inside yet, the place was darker than I remembered and empty. It was just the way it had been that first lunch when Jared led me by the hand back to that one essential giant bed. Would it still be there?

A handful of steps separated the empty living room to the bedroom where my answer awaited: of course, it was there. I climbed up onto what at least appeared to be the same white comforter (surely a replacement 16 years later and yet just as I remembered it) and rolled around, the teenager I would always be inside this place. Vision blurred from tears, I opened the letter from the darkest, dead knight.

*My Aster,*

*Once upon a time, there lived a tiny girl with a spirit as fiery as her hair, a girl who craved a beast. To love a beast is a terrible thing. Even when it loves you, it remains, hopelessly, a beast. its love tears and hurts and knows no bounds. Appetites, even it does not understand. It frightens a tiny princess until she hides herself away.*

*It wants nothing more than to tear apart the forest, find her and drag her back to its lair, something stops it: a note, "please let me go. Honoring it makes the beast feel something like a gentleman.*

*Sometimes it thinks of the words the girl jotted down so heartlessly, and the beast gets angry: "you don't need me." If you knew the way the beast cried, sweet girl, to read such mendacity, you would feel ashamed. If it could touch you, it would put you over his knee and make you see how badly you were needed and missed.*

*But your haunting eyes on these cold, dark letters means time has taken the beast away. It can touch you no more. Except like this. By summoning you to this place, a lair fashioned to trap and tame a young princess heart only to have her to rip out his own.*

*You slayed me, Aster Price, you wicked little princess. But know this: somewhere, somehow an old, dead beast smiles celebrating your return. I might have had to die to do it, but I got you back even if only to claim the spoils. Remember us here. This place always belonged to you.*

*Jared*

O-

Two years later, that letter still lives in a drawer of my desk in the little brick house where I write about passions so dark I may well be as wicked as Jared suggests. I fought for this place. Tomorrow, I fight for my daughter. When you're 17, you feel such powerful things you think you'll never get over for the rest of your life. And when you're 36, you find out you were right.

## Notecards of Geoffrey Chase's controversial UFO speech as presented to the Gulf Point High Speech 101 Class, 1991:

### PROOF OF THE PRESENCE OF UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS IN GULF POINT

On the night of Tuesday, September 1, 1992, at approximately 8:00 p.m., my brother, Jamison Chase and myself left home in the Greenway Estates subdivision to scout locations for a college film project on the Ruby Ridge conflict. We walked a half-mile from our home on Tindall Avenue, toward the rear of the subdivision, to a wooded area that frames the shores of Pensacola Bay. To give you a context of the area to which I'll be referring to today, I've created a map.

(Place map on easel) You will notice our house marked here, for easy identification, with an X. And this is the street on which we traveled, Dolphin Way. Dolphin Way dead-ends into woods that the green shaded area here indicate. These are the woods Jamison and I entered. The blue here on the other side of the green shaded area indicates Pensacola Bay. This object above the green here we will address shortly. For now, you will note that it is marked with a U.

The recording I will show you today begins as the camera is dropped. You see the camera hit the ground and some increase of light before it does, but once I pick up the camera, there is clear documentary evidence of a phenomenon I believe is truly undeniable. We will get to that shortly.

I was stunned for a moment by the light, and then I rotated my body so quickly in almost jumping motion -- barely able to maintain my balance. I suddenly knew I had to see my brother, unsure that he was there and okay. What was his reaction was to what was happening to the two of us then? He was standing there behind me looking straight up into the sky with his mouth wide open. I gathered my senses enough to drop to the ground and retrieve the camera which was, thankfully, still operational. I pointed it to the sky as the light had all but subsided and was able to capture footage of a retreating object that I will now show to you. (Press play on the VCR, and the tape will begin which is approximately a minute long and shows the unidentified flying object hovering in the sky and jerkily retreating away.)

+

As you have now seen, my brother and I unwittingly captured footage of what is clearly an unidentified object flying over the shores of Gulf Point on the night of Tuesday, September 1992 at approximately 8:30 p.m. This is now the second known sighting of UFOs following Jacob Nichols abduction the prior Saturday evening. It is without question that there is an alien presence in our city. By discounting citizens like my brother and I and Jacob Nichols, this alien presence is free to roam about our city acting out an unknown plan without any informed resistance by its human occupants. We now have knowledge, and we must resist. It is imperative all citizens be aware of this presence and diligent in their efforts to defend themselves from its questionable intentions.

*ASTER PRICE 1992*

*Before his speech Friday morning, I recognized something different about him. I was no authority on Geoffrey Chase. Having gone to school together for as long as I can remember, we'd never even spoken a word. Both took honors and AP English and History, had those classes together. Other than that, we didn't seem to have anything in common.*

*He was one of those quiet guys in that AV club crowd. Another trench coat with a video camera filming the school news and making dorky videos they took very seriously but nobody watched. Had an older brother who graduated when we were freshmen. If there was a superlative for "most likely to be a movie star," Jamison Chase would have won it hands down. When he'd played Sky Masterson in Guys and Dolls, every girl in school (myself included) considered drama as an elective.*

*Jamison was that older guy who said hi to you in the hallway, just to be nice. You'd read things into that stare for weeks until you saw him pick another freshmen girl and make her day (myself included).*

*Geoffrey Chase didn't have that way with girls. His dark hair was always a little slick, you could almost say greasy. Comically large glasses hid his face, as if by design, a costume. But why? A very poor choice for high school.*

*His shapeless array of jeans and t-shirt combos hung on him, no discernible shape, the way some people to dress to hide their weight. A strange concave posture, too – that creepy thing he did with his shoulders, rolling them forward, holding his back as if he was trying to shrink into a ball, be invisible.*

*Standing upright and confident, he looked so tall, as if he had grown inches overnight. Had to be one of the tallest guys in our class. Definitely never noticed that before. The glasses were gone. Suddenly it was impossible to ignore that those same angular, theatrical features composed a face not unlike his dreamy big brother.*

*As soon as I walked into third period, saw him laughing with Ms. Levin, I knew Geoffrey Chase had changed. Didn't even know it was him. My immediate thought, Oh, I wonder if we're getting a student teacher.*

*And then even more surprisingly, God, I hope so. He's hot.*

*All my fantasies were of being with older guys. When he turned a little in my direction, and I realized who it was, I swear I thought, You just called Geoffrey Chase hot.*

*I wanted to laugh at myself, but I was thinking of the Geoffrey Chase I knew before. Standing here in khakis and a tucked-in button down, ironed shirt and clean hair, Geoffrey Chase hadn't even opened his mouth yet, and I was into in him.*

*When Geoffrey finished his speech, the entire class was quiet until Grier Patterson, the other jock in class besides Daryl Boykins, broke the silence with a declaration that summed up what most of us were thinking: "Goddamn, I guess we're all screwed."*

*Ms. Levin completely lost her shit and told him to stay after class. Everyone looked to the one grownup in the room to determine how exactly scared we should be. She looked concerned, like she was thinking exactly how to respond in front of a classroom of impressionable, obviously nervous, minors.*

*"Thank you, Mr. Chase. Enthralling performance, confident execution, eloquent delivery -- all in all, very persuasive. Let's talk a little further after class, if you wouldn't mind staying behind as well." She delivered her lines like a question. It wasn't. She smiled when she said it, casual, like she just required his help with some electronics. There was something hesitant, though, in her eyes that didn't match.*

*God, I'd love to hear the content of that little talk.*

*Maybe I would. Outside the classroom door, I'd be eagerly waiting. Before he even finished speaking, I'd decided I was going to be having my own little chat with Geoffrey Chase. This was the article that would launch my career as a professional reporter.*

*As soon as I saw that video, I knew I was liberated from begging a woman-hater psychopath like Clark Ritchie to do his journalistic dirty work in the Bliss Ford case in the futile hope of a shared byline.*

*The key to my future was not a 12-year-old girl. I had newly hot geeks and aliens to work with now. The story and the byline would be entirely mine.*

*A-*

*Sadly, I could not hear the conversation inside of Room 312. It says something about the quality of student journalism at Gulf Point High I'd never spied on anyone inside of a classroom before. Never considered the thickness of its doors. Could not catch a peep.*

*I dared a quick peek in the glass rectangular window only once. Determined as I was to succeed in journalism, I was still a mortal teenager and Mrs. Anne Levin an infamously harsh disciplinarian. Her smoky, crackly, deceptively polite-toned "Ms. Price" called to me in my dreams, the kind where you can't get back to sleep.*

*Waiting until after Grier Patterson made a hasty exit, too intent on escape to notice my lurking, I gave Mrs. Levin and Geoffrey a second to engage, then risked a glimpse. Not much was visible in that second except for Geoffrey seated in a chair next to Mrs. Levin's desk, silent, and the jerky shakes of her wavy bob. She had a lot to say. I couldn't see her face or mouth at all. Geoffrey's was pale and humble.*

*Only other empirical evidence I had was their talk lasted eight minutes, according to my notebook Swatch I still wore religiously. No big fashion statement anymore, mine remained my favorite Christmas present ever, from mom, freshman year. One band had a composition book cover design. The other band looked like lined paper. The inscription on the package I'll never forget: "a notebook for our writer." My mom included my dead father via pronouns in all my gifts. It really felt like it was from him. I wore it almost every day and cursed my bare wrist when I forget it.*

*Geoffrey didn't look as confident when he came through the door. Rushing past me, I thought I might have to chase him down. Noticing me out of the side of his eye, though, he'd turned to me, tall again, a tremble in his gait I couldn't help but notice. Did Geoffrey Chase like me, too? That was oddly good -- and useful.*

*"Aster Price. Were you waiting for me?"*

*It was painfully silent in the hallway. Everybody was in class. Geoffrey seemed nervous outside of Mrs. Levin's room. It must have been her planning period since I had not seen a student enter during the longest eight-minute wait of my life. His eyes stayed trained on her door. Whatever the subject of their talk had been, it was not something he was eager to continue.*

*"Yes, Geoffrey. I needed to talk about your speech, for the paper -- an article, for the Guardian, I mean."*

*"Ah, okay," he smiled a coy grin, cooperative, but definitely a little nervous -- which I attributed to the clandestine nature of the chat, two rule-breakers brazenly skipping class.*

*He stepped closer, and I could smell him -- no obvious cologne, just clean, like Ivory soap. Closer, he looked more excited than nervous. He grabbed the top of my arm and leaned in, his voice a whisper and an order at the same time:*

*"You're going to have to come with me. We can't talk here." He nodded in the direction of Mrs. Levin's door, the kind of teacher who'd delight in breaking up this conversation and this tentative alliance before it began. If she did, I'd be sent to class no closer to an article after an irate scolding I didn't have time for. I nodded in agreement.*

*His hand dipped from my arm to take my fingers into his own, fingers easily twice as big as my own. We'd cut through Ms. Nobles' empty class, stepping through her backdoor before I realized I was holding hands with Geoffrey Chase, a development I would never have believed this morning.*

*Geoffrey looked both ways to make sure we were unobserved as we stepped out of Ms. Nobles' back door to the walkway behind the band building and the safety of a patch of three trees. We sat down in the middle of them obscured in their shade. Here, I felt safe to speak.*

*"I'm an intern at the paper now, The Guardian. Need a big story to be able to get started with my career, get a byline. Today when you told yours, I knew I'd found it. Are you willing to speak on the record?"*

*Even though we were sitting and the necessity for holding my hand had passed, he still hadn't let go. He exhaled for a second then smiled. With the speech and who knows what conversation he'd just had with an icon of intimidation at this school, Geoffrey Chase had been through a lot today.*

*Time was of the essence, but it didn't look like either of us was making it to fourth period. I could give him a minute. I gave myself a minute to just be a girl under a tree with a smiling boy holding her hand.*

*Studying my face with eyes as bright as they were dark, he pulled me out of myself. I really did forget my mission.*

*Then he spoke, "Why don't you come to the woods with me tonight? You could see where it happened. I'll bring my camera. Who knows what we'll see while we're there. Either way, I'll happily give you that interview, on the record. I very much want to help."*

*Can this day get any better?*

*"Thank you," was all I'd managed to say out loud.*

*"It's nothing. Do you need me to pick you up, or do you have a car?"*

*"Oh, I can get to your house, no problem. I have a car. I'll need directions."*

*"Yes. You take Dolphin Way to Tindall, and I'm at 413 Greenway Estates. I mean, I guess you know after today, but I'll draw you a map."*

*He had let go of my hand now, so he could pull off his backpack and extracted a crisp sheet of notebook paper and a pen and a textbook he used as a writing desk. He carefully drew a map with tiny, precise handwriting. I caught myself staring at his profile. He looked up suddenly. Heat dotted my cheeks. Could only hope my embarrassment wasn't as visible as it felt.*

*Maybe he couldn't see it, that I hadn't betrayed what a silly little girl I obviously was. Then he touched my cheek. He definitely noticed.*

*"Is 7:30 too early? I just want to be sure we have enough time."*

*His smile and his eyes confirmed this concern with time wasn't only about the article. It didn't bother me though. I had more on my mind than journalism as well. Ms. Karr's voice reverberated in head reminding me, "A young woman's priority must always be her career."*

*"Not at all." I'd have to race home after school and let mom know I had an interview for a real news story and not to worry about dinner. She'd have to be excited about that one. I didn't know what I'd say the article was about but definitely not UFOs. I'd think of something.*

*Then I'd need to find a payphone and attempt to get in touch with Brooke Newton. If I was going to be a UFO reporter, Brooke would be my natural mentor at the paper, not that narcissist crime reporter, Clark Ritchie. I certainly couldn't call from home, risk mother snooping. The last thing mom needed to overhear was me explaining to Brooke Newton I was off to meet a teenage boy in the woods to look for UFO's.*

*I had to convince Brooke I had a perfect followup to her story, if only she would deign to help out a fellow female and share a byline. She had been really nice to me so far. I felt sure any female journalist might would be happy to pull one over on Clark Ritchie.*

*My very important checklist was interrupted by the sensation of Geoffrey's face moving towards me, in slow motion, with the inevitability of an incoming train. He was going to kiss me, and there was no stopping it. Not that I wanted to, though I felt like I was losing control of my body in embarrassing ways. His arms wrapped around me and pulled me in close.*

*If it wasn't clear before the kiss, this boy wanted me, and I wanted him. I most certainly had an article, but, incredibly, also a date.*

## GEOFFREY CHASE, 1992

*"Jamison's not coming home for dinner, correct?"*

*"I assume not. Usually with Alyssa on the weekends. I'm not expecting him."*

*"Yeah, I figured."*

*"If he does call, I could suggest he stop by. I mean, if you wanted him to meet your friend or anything."*

*I'd told Mom about Aster but insisted no one make any kind of big deal.*

*"No, no. That's not why I was asking."*

*"Okay." Mom looked confused as if contemplating a puzzle made from the most familiar of pieces, but the edges had suddenly changed. I knew lots of people parents who clearly favored sibling over the other even when they tried very hard not to show it, a foreign idea in our house. My father was a quiet man whose interest in both of us was minimal (not cruel, just busy and introverted). My mother was a strict communist in her affections. She saw her sons as equals in strength, attractiveness, and intelligence even when confronted with empirical evidence pointing another way.*

*This became clear during a particularly dark period before junior year. I grew six inches that year, and the change in my physicality was nothing compared to the boost those inches provided to my psyche.*

*But this was August, before the spurt, when I was feeling particularly childlike, puffy, short and alone. My brother had brought home a string of girls, three, one more beautiful than the next. None turned out to be a keeper. To me, they were goddesses, hopelessly unattainable.*

*The second girl's name was Idina, small-boned, hair long and wild wrapping around her, obscuring her face and blousy sleeves of her peasant dresses almost like a veil. She looked like a poet, at least my horny adolescent idea of one. I was enthralled by her -- which made her moans, through the thin shared wall between Jamison's and my room, particularly torturous.*



*Nothing cataclysmic occurred -- nothing anybody else might have noticed. On the three occasions she graced the Chase household with her presence, Idina Peters simply gave me the gift of acknowledgement. One day, it was casual, sitting close on the living room couch forcing me to engage with her in an awkward conversation. The next time, she found me in my room, pushing open the cracked door and flinging her small body flat onto my bed.*

*Nonchalantly conversing, Idina laid there while I pretended to type on the computer, unable to think of anything but the delicate creature pressed against my suddenly embarrassing Star Wars comforter.*

*She was imitating Robin Williams' character from Dead Again, the disgraced therapist Cozy Carlisle, "You take what you've learned from this life and use it in the next. That's karma. Giggling at her cleverness, she'd rolled over on the bed.*

*When she did, I saw all the way up her dress. Instantly hard, afraid to move, I could not stop looking. Then I saw something else, above Idina, my mother outside my door.*

*Mom looked confused.*

*"Oh, here she is, Jamison. She was just talking to your brother."*

*Idina was off the bed, smoothing her dress, a graceful, practiced motion. My mother's eyes trailed from me to the back of Idina's long legs. She did not approve of whatever it was she'd stumbled upon.*

*Idina left to find my brother. Next week, my brother brought home a girl named Josie, and nobody ever said a word about Idina again.*

*Well, Jamison never said a word about her. My mom did. Days later, Jamison and Josie were quiet in his room, the door shut, as was my own, Mom pushed open the door and sat on my bed.*

*"Geoffrey, I cannot wait for the world to catch up to you because, believe me, son, it's going to. I can feel it. You have all the charms of your brother and more uniquely yours, just waiting to be seen by a girl with eyes only for you."*

*Embarrassing words from one's own mother. If I'm honest, though the obvious love I felt in the moment was gratefully received.*

*"Thank you, Mom. I appreciate that."*

*My brother was the more confident, handsome and witty version of me. I was the smarter one, but that doesn't get the weight it deserves with people. Even though I knew Aster wasn't "most people," it seemed I could only suffer by comparison. More and more, it seemed things were going my way -- which only served to bolster a growing feeling in my soul that this relationship was obviously meant to be. I was thankful to the universe for his absence tonight.*

*I looked at my watch. 4:18.*

*Clean your room. Find a desirable shirt. But, first, charge electronics!!!!*

*I must make a good show of things in the woods tonight. Prove I treated this mission with professionalism and respect -- even if I knew our chances of a UFO sighting were about as likely as my brother's chances of becoming a professional director.*

*Dare I test fate by stealing a condom from Jameson's room?*

*Even the thought smacked of hubris. Still, on a day as magical as today, the thought that powerful forces in the universe might be aligning to help this romance along didn't seem so far fetched. Who knew what we could find in the Gulf Point sky this evening?*

AB+

*The next painful watch check revealed it was only 4:52. Staying busy was not working. My only hope now was meditation practice to recover my peace of mind and strength.*

*I started my study of meditation sophomore year. It's a sacred act. I dabbled, at first, with transcendental meditation; found it lacking. Saying some phrase again and again in a static pose was as ineffective as it was downright boring.*

*Finally, a few weeks before school started sophomore year, in the stacks of the Gulf Point Public Library, I happened upon the teachings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh now known to most as Osho.*

*Of late, Osho's reputation is clouded by his rumored criminal activities. Looking at him through these blinders ignores the depth of the truths he presented to the world. I am not a person who is distracted or put off by controversy or rumor. After years of secret practice and discipline, his regiment of dynamic meditation had shown a profound change in my person for which I am indebted to him. That is proof enough to me of his intentions.*

*For years, I chose for my mantra a tenant of his as potent as it is efficient: "Be — don't try to become." For years, it echoed my struggle. Today, I outgrew its usefulness.*

*Today, I became a man. The mundanes would say I reached this junior year when I had sex with Julia Merchant, a college drama major who attended a party at our house Jamison threw while my parents traveled for their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But maturity and manliness are not tied to sexual promiscuity; that's just the chatter of the monkey mind.*

*I was, though, grateful for the experience. A pleasurable memory I reflect upon often. In fact, tonight, in stage five of my dynamic meditation, I showed the depth of my gratitude raising my hands above my head and engaging in a particularly vigorous dance.*

*It was my own private thank you to the universe for that gift of experience. Experience made me ready for tonight. I danced so long I failed to notice the obligatory fifteen-minute dancing stage ended a whole five moments ago. 6:47, and I still hadn't showered, and after this ecstatic performance I needed it. That's the power of meditation; it can take you right out of yourself like that even on the most important night of your life.*

## *ASTER PRICE, 1992*

*7:20, I pulled into Geoffrey's driveway. Still I rushed, like I was late, to gather my things and hurry down the path of concrete circles that led to his navy blue front door. Ringing the doorbell, I took a breath and tried to shake off my visible nerves I felt from my heart to my stomach.*

*God, I hope Geoffrey opens the door. I did not feel at all equipped for the necessity of parental small talk at the moment.*

*"Hello, Aster." It was Geoffrey, as I hoped. His pale blue shirt played against his dark eyes in a surprising way. It didn't calm my racing heart a beat. His smile seemed casual and aloof, but his eyes restless travelers, taking me in efficiently, with a cold detachment that made me shiver and temporarily lose all thought.*

*Geoffrey didn't seem nervous or awkward at all, just quietly in control. How was this possible? He took me by the hand and led me quickly through a set of rooms laid out like a maze. As we stepped through one, I caught a glimpse of his father, watching television, laid back in a brown leather recliner. We didn't stop, no introductions.*

*Then we stepped down a couple of carpeted steps into a hallway, past one shut door and into the next open one he promptly shut quietly behind us. He stood for a second pressing his hand flat on the door as if to insure we were sealed into this silent, tidy place.*

*I'd collapsed onto his bed without even thinking about what I was doing. Then after I did, I straightened myself up into my best professional posture (considering I was on the bed of a handsome, mysterious teenage boy) pulled my messenger bag off my chest, opened it and pulled out my tape recorder. He watched without speaking. I tried my best to look professional.*

*Pulling the plastic wrapper off a cassette tape, I extracted the tape and stuck it inside the tape recorder, and hit record. When I looked up this time, he was grinning, hands across his chest. I'm sure my nervous-virgin-in-a-cute-boy's-room-for-the-first-time energy amused him.*

*Some people are virgins because they want very much to hold on to something. I had never been that girl. I wasn't holding out for anything but the perfect, unavoidable sexual moment. In my heart, I was a whore, fantasizing about so many boys but afraid to be with a single actual one. It was a shameful truth I did hid in layered tops and cardigans. Worked out well before Geoffrey Chase.*

*Each calculated, studying glance of my body, each more brash and longer than the last made it clear he saw right through me completely now. My desire to feel his hands everywhere, to feel helpless beneath him, not knowing what was going to happen next, I could see him comprehending another detail of my thoughts with each intense stare.*

*Was I actually was going to blow this article off for sex with a boy? What was happening to me?*

*I was beginning to feel like a regular girl with impulses that could ruin everything. Ms. Karr would be so disappointed. I had to take control of the situation, while it was possible.*

*Looking at my watch, I began to speak: "It's 7:28 on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1992. I'm at the residence of Geoffrey Chase — you're 17, correct?" I guessed, not a clue of his birthday.*

*"Correct."*

*Taking a seat now at the other end of the bed, he looked amused though cooperative -- giving me lots of space.*

*"A Gulf Point 17 year old who," I continued, "along with his brother, witnessed a UFO in the woods behind his neighborhood on — what date was it again?"*

*"Well, it was Monday, so the 1<sup>st</sup>."*

*"Monday night. Tell me everything, from the beginning, about Monday night. You were with your brother"*  
*--*

*"With my brother scouting locations for a film" --*

*"And your brother, is he here? I probably should speak to him as well."*

*"Oh, no. He's not around tonight."*

*Why hadn't I thought before to request a meeting with the brother? Two witnesses to an event, and I'd only concerned myself with the one, the one I wanted to sleep with, no less. That left out half the story. It was a rookie mistake. Everything happened so fast today, but that was hardly an excuse.*

*Teenage hormones were causing me to make actual mistakes. Depressing when you thought about it, but I didn't have time to think. Still plenty for a story, if I didn't blow it.*

*When we finished, I turned off the tape recorder, pulled out the tape and returned it to its case inside the messenger bag between us now on the bed. Pushing the bag slowly to the left, out of his way was the best I could do as a signal. Couldn't even look him in the eye.*

*He didn't hesitate to move, close enough now our knees bumped as his hands took hold of either side of my face and brought my eyes to his. He kissed me again. The weight of his body as he hovered over me and the sudden weakness of my own knocked me back. The back of my head met the pillow, and I was beneath him in his bed. Then, as if I heard Brooke Newton reminding me in her own voice, I remembered the videotape and that I had to have a copy.*

*"Oh, Jesus. I'm sorry," I jumped up, pushing him off of me, disappointed in myself as he looked, "but I 'm supposed to be bringing a copy of that tape, the video of the UFO. I need it, a copy of it for the article."*

*I felt hot with embarrassment coming off like a little girl who can't make up her mind as to what she wants. I rationalized with myself that that was not at all the case.*

*My work here is very important.*

*I'm not sure I even believed myself at this point.*

*"I can make a copy. It would just take me a few minutes."*

*I wiggled a little beneath him, trying to find a way to get myself upright again. It was wasted effort until he moved himself enough to let me up. He had to think I was a total tease. In my mind, a coy retort crossed my mind about "business before pleasure," but it was almost comical to imagine anything spoken of such confidence and experience coming from such chaste and quivering lips.*

*My body was far behind my mind in such things. All I could manage was a, "Thank you" followed by a "Just want to make sure I have everything I need." The latter was so quiet I'm not sure he even heard it.*

*He was already off the bed and pulling a tape off his desk. I pulled down my top that had worked its way up a bit on my belly during the commotion of the kissing. He was unwrapping a blank tape from a multipack on a shelf and heading to his door.*

*"All the editing stuff is in Jamison's room so I'll be right back in just a few."*

*"Sure. Thank you for doing this," I'd pull my knees up to my chest until I realized how it probably made me look even more like I was 12. Then I dropped my legs over the side of the bed and leaned back a little, in a pose I hoped seemed more relaxed and mature, though I knew I was neither.*

*"It's no problem. When I get back, I'll grab the camera. We can head out to the clearing. I can show you where it happened, if you still want to see."*

*It was clear he thought my mind was changing now. It wasn't at all. "Yes. Of course. That was the plan, right. First, I'll just — where is your bathroom?"*

*He pointed me to the open door at the end of the hall and disappeared into his brother's room. In the bathroom, I got the water as cold as possible and splashed it on my face again and again, took a dozen or deep breaths. None of this managed to calm me or slow my heart rate at all.*

*Back in his room, I gathered my messenger bag across my chest. If we encountered something alien there again, I wanted to be ready. I was trying so hard in this moment to be an adult.*

*He rushed back into the room, impressively fast, with the two tapes now, one placed on his desk. The second, he dropped into my outstretched hand with a rough impatience I think he was otherwise trying to hide. I promptly deposited it in my bag. He quickly picked up his camera and a flashlight which he handed to me.*

*"Put this in your bag. We'll need it once we get to the path."*

*I opened the messenger bag and pushed the light inside and clicked it shut. He had moved over to the end of his bed where he was pulling a thick blue plaid flannel blanket out of a trunk. I noticed the downward gaze of his eyes at me as he threw it over his shoulder.*

*"To the woods then?"*

*His words were playful, and his lips were smiling, but there was nothing but flames for me in those dark eyes. Who knew what could happen in those woods? We might see a UFO or be taken away like Nelson the dog. What was certain was I was going there to be consumed tonight.*

*"To the woods."*

*Was I really ready for this fire?*

### **GEOFFREY CHASE, 1992**

*Past 9:00 when we left my house, my usually quiet neighborhood streets were uncharacteristically busy, walkers and whispered conversations. On Dolphin Way alone, we passed three different pairs of adults, like the universe was sprinkling chaperones everywhere. A little annoying, but it provided a nice break in the silent tension. Aster was so visibly nervous now she was trembling; though, in typical Florida September fashion, it had to be around 80 degrees outside.*

*The last couple we passed, where the streetlights grew more sparse, awkwardly stopped their chatter, stared at Aster and raised their eyes in my direction in a suspicious fashion. Clearly, Aster's palpable nerves and my transparent desire were transmitting, at least, to them a nefarious intent.*

*My mind raced, trying to determine the proper course of action, the right thing to say. I will admit her lack of confidence, at first, served to boost my own. As she grew weaker, I was growing stronger, almost like a vampire draining her tenacity and will though those were a couple of qualities of hers I most admired. The dynamic was reaching an almost uncomfortable level now. Any minute, I feared, she might run down this street and back to her car and out of my life, overwhelmed with the intensity of it all.*

*I needed to change things up. In The Book of Secrets, Osho offers a technique for relieving anxiety by saying one's own name again and again, reminding oneself that you are here. Being present releases one from the anxiety of excess thought.*

*We had come now to the circular curb at the end of the street that dead ends with the path into the woods. I wanted her to enter these woods with me present, willing and unafraid. I stopped, put the camera and the blanket down onto the grass above the curb. She stopped, too, and turned toward me.*

*Her chin down, her eyes didn't travel farther than my shoes. I couldn't see her face or her expression, but her wild little breaths told me everything I needed to know. I put one arm gently behind her shoulders and pulled her firmly but gently to my chest. Her breathing slowed a bit almost immediately. I rubbed her back. Then I spoke her name over and over softly and distinctly as she leaned even more into me now, "Aster, Aster, Aster."*

*Working with someone lacking in the shorthand of eastern philosophy, I was fudging the whole meditative exercise a bit, but it was totally working. I couldn't hear her breaths now, and the shaking was almost gone. Her arms were wrapped around my chest tightly now. She was as grateful as a kitten for the kindness. She was here.*

*"It's just right through here. It's a little ways down this path."*

*"All right." It was dark, but her eyes were meeting my own now, and her lips were smiling.*

*"Tell me something I don't know about you, the first thing that comes to your mind."*

*"I'll be 18 in 10 days."*

*I was blown away by this revelation. This little nymph who made me feel like a dirty old man, by the disparity in our physical sizes, was in fact almost half a year older than me?*

*"I don't believe it."*

*She giggled, "I wouldn't lie."*

*"So, wait, that makes you a Libra?"*

*"A Virgo."*

*A wicked smile crossed my face I couldn't even try to suppress.*

*"I know, the virgin. Pretty appropriate."*

*Not for much longer, I thought but kept to myself.*

*"When is your birthday?"*

*"April 3<sup>rd</sup>."*

*"No way."*

*A look of genuine astonishment crossed her face I couldn't decipher. Something about the date was significant.*

*"What is it?"*

*"That's funny. It's just — that's my father's birthday."*

*I wasn't sure how to take this, what to say. Didn't know her backstory sadly. In my years of careful study, from afar, I'd noticed a mother at school events, never a father. Always assumed he was out of the picture. Divorced?*

*“Are you two close?”*

*She smiled, but her gaze dropped again. I had tread on tragic ground. Knew it before she spoke.*

*“He died a long time ago, when I was three. It’s not — I don’t even remember him.”*

*Bending down, I pulled her close and wrapped my arms against her tight, felt her little breaths against my neck. Wouldn’t move until she pulled away. It was a prime example of how much you can learn about a person by asking just one simple question. When she finally stepped back, she’d peered down the darkness of the path and made a little cheeky nod towards it.*

*“We could use that flashlight.” I tapped that green messenger bag she was wearing, the one I couldn’t wait to dispense with.*

*“Oh, yeah. That would help.” She giggled a little, a sound I was overjoyed to hear. She poked her hand around inside the bag a second before retrieving the light and quickly turning it on.*

*Grabbing the camera under one arm and throwing the blanket over my shoulder, I offered her my hand to help her step over the curb onto the grass. And then we were off on this path in the woods.*

*As Osho says, “If it is nature, it will lead you to a blissful state of mind.” And certainly, for myself, I was there. I believed she was well on her way. I’m not sure what Osho would have to say about the UFO I concocted that had brought us here and the speech and the interview I gave tonight. I think, though, if he were given the proper context, he would have approved of where it had taken us.*

*Was I a bad man because I concocted a UFO to bring a beautiful young woman to nature, to a blissful state she would have otherwise not achieved? This is the beauty of eastern philosophy and why I love it so dearly. It allows for truths such as these. Buddha says, “The bad man is one who is inconsiderate of others.” Was I inconsiderate of Aster Price? Each of my actions this evening, and before, showed otherwise. Every step along this journey, I thought only of the other. By this criteria, the only criteria that meant anything to me, I could not be categorized as bad. I was now, though, without a doubt a man.*

## **AVALON HAYES, 2010**

The next day was a pep rally, but I didn’t bother wearing a uniform. Gone were my days of cheer – as sport or emotion. I owed Coach Appleton an explanation – she’d always been good to me, but it wasn’t to her office I raced. Didn’t dare the encounter with any cheermates, violent or virgin. I’d talk to Coach Appleton once I had an exit strategy from this miserable place until then I was in survival mode.

There was only one safe harbor for me now. Inside its pink-curtained quiet waiting area, I felt protected from the noise and snide laughter outside. Voices echoed off the glass along with a thud of flesh perhaps accidental or shoved – none of it a concern of mine now. The rose colored sofa, where I sat huddled at its edge, was a vacant universe I was grateful to have discovered. If only I could stay in guidance, on this rose-colored couch, all the time, maybe Gulf Point High would be bearable.



As if to remind me how over I was in high school, Gina Stevens, senior class treasurer and a witness to the blood test mess yesterday, apparently a student aid here, clocked in. Then she noticed me. Gina's freckled cheeks flushed and lips curved, a twinkle in her eye. A couple of days ago I would have assumed all of this to be only the beginning of a friendly exchange.

Those days of optimism were over. The smile was a smirk, as they all would be here. This reaction was completely expected now even by the politest politicians in this cruel school.

"Avalon Hayes?"

I looked up. It was the secretary, a woman I'd never met, never having been a kid in need of much guidance at this place. My life had been deceptively simple until yesterday. The future was a thing I didn't think about much. Now, all I wanted was to be in the future and get out of the pitiful present where I lived.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Chase will see you now. Through this door, around the corner, second door to the left."

"Mr. Chase?"

I'd thought I was here to see Ms. Carruth. That's what Mr. Davenport said, for sure. It's the name I'd asked for, out of breath, between the race from the parking lot and my rest on this heavenly couch.

"Mr. Davenport said it would be Ms. Carruth?"

The secretary, so lovely to me when I'd made it to this space, suddenly looked annoyed. It was one spiteful face too many. I hurried to explain, words against brimming tears.

"It's just that this is critical that everything is handled correctly. I'm behind on getting placed in dual enrollment. There's no time for mistakes."

Though not a single tear had fallen I knew the secretary saw them as her face softened towards me. She nodded towards a tissue box on her desk and spoke softly.

"It's all right, dear. Ms. Carruth oversees things, but Mr. Chase is the counselor assigned to you. He's very efficient. I promise he'll take care of everything. "

Her head indicated the door again.

"Just around the corner, second door to the left."

I grabbed the tissue and I headed into the hall, not at all sure what to expect. I passed several shut doors. After the corner, I saw a slice of light and heard a voice on the phone, the first noise I'd heard in what had to be the quietest hallway of the school.

Walking toward the light and standing in the doorway, I noticed a man I had, in fact, noticed before in the hallways, never knowing his name or business at the school. He wasn't the youngest teacher, or counselor here, but he was young and handsome enough to stand out.

He looked up to me as he finished his conversation on the phone. Something in his eyes, the intensity of them, made me feel on the spot.

"I'm sorry I can wait outside if you" –

"No, no, no," then he spoke to the phone. "Let me call you back after my appointment." The call ended without even a goodbye. He looked at me and smiled.

"Avalon Hayes?"

I nodded and headed to the chair in front of his desk.

"I'm Geoffrey Chase, Avalon, your counselor. Tell me something I don't know about you."