



**AVALON HAYES, 2010**

Waiting for Geoffrey at the café in Barnes & Noble, I'd suffered through five pages of a book he'd said was about Marilyn Monroe. Wasn't sure that was even true. Didn't matter. I was a prisoner to these pages now -- at least tonight, while I hid out on his houseboat and recovered enough to go home.

He'd dropped me at the bookstore, Ada's favorite place in the world. When we were forced to go as kids, I spent all my time sipping coffee, turning pages of Teen Vogue. But Geoffrey said he had a few errands – having been interrupted today by my call. It seemed like the least I could do, give him an hour since I'd interrupted his day.

Still had doubts about Geoffrey, but I was more sure of him than anyone else I knew with a car and a place to hide. I should be grateful for his being the only person in my life I could call after being attacked by a psychopath. And yet, I'd doubted enough to do something just in case.

But at the bookstore, when he'd put the hundred bucks in my hand, saying he would be back in one hour, I felt guilty enough to do what he said – even if it was the last thing I would ever do.

“Buy whatever books appeal to you – no magazines. But buy this one title, for sure. Ask for it at the desk.”

He scribbled a title down, *Blonde* by Joyce Carol Oates, I noticed looking down at it.

I'd comply but had to express my opinion.

“A hundred dollars on books? Why? When will I read all this? I'm in school you know.”

“Consider yourself involuntarily enrolled in Geoffrey Chase's Book Club for Preliterate Teens. Go on. I have things to do.”

Maybe this was his way of being paternal. Considering what he knew of the events today, how my lying “parents” would behave if they knew about the pot and the boys, making me buy books seemed the lesser punishment. I opened the door of his CR-V and wandered into the bookstore. Could I even carry \$100 worth of books – much less read them?

Still, it felt good to concentrate on anything other than what happened today. To be alone in a store, knowing someone, back soon, was looking after me.

I was still rooting for Geoffrey Chase to turn out to be better than I hoped. That I'd be back tomorrow in my room, closer to my maybe father, tearing up a note I'd left under the ballerina lamp.

### **GEOFFREY CHASE, 2010**

“What does *sepia* mean?”

Simple question yet exactly the sort of dialogue I'd hoped when I'd assigned this book and sent her to buy more. My eyes were on the road, on the way to the marina, so I couldn't stop and look into her own to explain. Mine, if she had seen them, were twinkling, I'm sure.

“The reddish brown in vintage photographs, film.”

“Oh, like when Chuck and Blair kissed in the limo in *Gossip Girl*, and it all turned old school?”

“I’ll have to take your word for that.”

I’d chosen *Blonde*, not out of any great love for Joyce Carol Oates. I was no Mr. Camp. I’d been looking for something that could appeal to the interests and vanity of a teenage girl but literary. No *Gossip Girl*, *Nancy Drew*, *V.C. Andrews*, *Hunger Games* – no *Sex in the City* but something adult and sexual. Something thick with ideas we could discuss for hours. Something with words I could force her to look up in the dictionary, a book that would be an accomplishment to read, a book her mother would read.

I’d googled chick lit, college feminist lit, literature for adolescent girls, all producing woefully inadequate tomes I could not abide. Bonding through shared experiences, killing two birds (in this case, ignorance and intimacy) with one perfectly chosen novel, this was my objective. I had to be completely honest and specific in what I was looking for: a book for a basic little blonde girl evolving into a worthy companion. Finally, out of desperation, I’d googled “blonde book” -- the first Google search result was the perfect primer for a pretty face that housed such a pitifully neglected brain. (A crime for which, I, wholeheartedly blame you, Aster Price.)

The book had a picture of Marilyn Monroe on the cover. There could be almost no better signifier of success. Show me the average American teenage girl who doesn’t, in her glamour-addicted vulnerable heart, idolize Marilyn Monroe.

We’d come so far this week from near oblivion to a second chance – for me, a second chance at a second chance. Osho did not believe in fate, only creation. “There is no future if you don’t create it!” I hadn’t with Aster. Allowed circumstance to define who we became. We became strangers.

This week I’d fear Avalon and I would be soon strangers, too. Sitting in the shadows of trees, at the edge of the yard in my black Honda, Wednesday, staring at the bedroom, I knew after years of such reconnaissance, belonged to Aster (and her pious Boy Scout). It was completely dark. It seemed a sign.

Avalon’s room was completely illuminated. I saw tiny flits of shadows I knew were the traces of her movement taunting me inside of it. My replacement twirled inside there – withdrawing from me. I’d heard it in every syllable of her lifeless voice on the phone – completely checked out, moved on. Seemingly tired, and, yet here I watched her shadow dance about in this locked wooden box that held all of my unhappiness.

But I’d done my due diligence for years, remained at the ready. My second chance called today, humbled and broken. We pulled into the marina. My fiberglass and aluminum neighbors welcomed us home.

“What made you decide to live on a boat?” Avalon asked, peering at a neighborhood of a sort with which she was woefully unfamiliar.

“I met a mermaid once, when I was your age. Been trying to get back to her ever since.”

“You’re so freaking weird,” she was teasing, mischievously, but she was curious.

We got out of the car. She grabbed a small bag she’d acquired at her house, and I left my provisions I’d acquired while she was in the bookstore in the trunk. I’d come out later alone for those. No need for questions at this juncture.

Making our way past sailboats and yachts. Watched her appraising each, wondering which she would soon step inside. We paused before my Beneteau Swift. It hadn’t had many visitors over the two years since I’d acquired it after my father’s death. I could have bought a house with my inheritance, but as a boy I’d made a solemn vow I would own a boat. Become the pirate that Aster Price fantasized poetically about on a piece of blue lined paper I still had tucked away in a drawer on this very vessel.

“Does it have a name?”

*“First And Always.”*

“Wow.” She’d rolled her eyes but then inquired further, “What does it mean?”

It’s from a line of poetry, “You touch me first and always on this boat.”

She looked a little flushed. Had I possibly embarrassed her, a girl who’d sent an underwear picture to a French boy and ended up in the woods today with two others?

“Who wrote it, the poetry?”

“Oh, no one famous or anything.”

“Yeah, I mean, even if they were, I don’t really know any poets.”

Oh, Avalon, yes, you do. I changed the subject.

“Shall we?”

I helped her aboard our new home.

*ASTER PRICE, 1993*

*I'll tell you a story while you wait inside, a story I can speak of just once before I tuck it away, again, inside my heart, near you. A secret I'll hold long after you have made your fierce struggle out into my arms. It is the story of an ending of a girl and the beginning of another, a tale replete with villains and violence -- even a little vindication. The details have no hope of taking hold inside your still-forming little brain. But let your heart hold fast one essential truth: you saved us all with your little life. I will thank you in the privacy of own my heart for that great kindness every single day.*

*You have two fathers, one you'll never know. The darkest knight I ever knew who conquered me so completely I had neither hope nor desire to escape. He saw the dark princess beneath a mask of innocence, and he spoke to her with potent incantations. He was wounded, and he wounded me, and I allowed it.*

*I had been a girl who always thought she knew what she was: a writer, a reporter. So arrogant and sure of my own path, I abandoned it for pleasure in the woods, a charming young liar.*

*Lost and broken hearted, I ran away to Pensacola. Met a girl who fashioned an entire life out of making men pay for their desires -- a guide who introduced me to your father, her own pet lion, locked inside a cage. I paid no heed to teeth as he baited me to find the key and licked his lips.*

*Even though he bit and chewed and gnawed, left me scarred and nearly eaten alive, I will never regret my compliance because he gave me you. It's why I allowed him one final test, a test before you, my captive witness, smuggled inside that kingdom of darkness and neon*

*The door girl Kiera had actually laughed when she saw me.*

*"As if I'd let you in."*

*I had been expecting this sort of a reception after my illicit exit with your father. Even places as depraved as this had rules. I had not only violated them; I had flaunted it -- leaving with a customer. I was surely banned from working there, and I was only 18 and an unescorted female. There was no reason or chance for them to allow me in.*

*But I had thought ahead. This test was too important. I was sure he would not pass, but I knew, too well, the depths of my own depravity too. It would take this humiliation for me to finally have the strength to give up and go.*

*"I have drink money I never collected when I quit. Just call Dina up here, okay? I'll wait."*

*She wasn't sure if she could trust me. I tried to look as disinterested and nonthreatening as possible. It was my cut of the champagne sales from that last night, something I hadn't bothered with at the time -- not wanting to waste one extra minute in this palace of pretense. It'd occurred to me this morning as I wracked my brain for some usable excuse to get me inside -- to get close to him one last time.*

*She picked up the phone. I held my breath it wasn't security she'd called, on their way to escort us right back out to our car. I heard her say, "Send Mama out, when you can." At last what I hoped, counted on in my plan, a bachelor party of about 15 college guys fortuitously appeared through the door, surrounding Kiera and her desk, producing so many ID's. It was my chance. I'd hoped the Friday night traffic would provide this moment -- just enough for me to make those few essential steps to a vantage point I knew would give me all the information I needed to know.*

*A modicum of hope still existed as I stood at the top of the steps to the VIP, clearly visible to your father and his sinister companion. I hoped I would find a man going through the motions of enjoying a compulsory reunion to this naked kingdom. He'd have company, no doubt, but be, a little bored, half-interested. He'd let his eyes wander towards the exit, where his body ached to go, and he'd see me. Then the biggest smile would break through that cloudy face.*

*He would say his respectful goodbyes to his scary friend and take me away, the way he did once before, back to that big white bed in the brick house, without my clothes but with a new understanding. He'd hold me so tight it would bring tears to my eyes he would lick away. I would believe in him like never before, and I would reward him by telling him about you.*

*It would be a fairytale ending, for sure – if a naked one. But I've never pretended to be anything but a romantic. I knew, deep down inside, where you live, it wouldn't be the case. Yet, as I stood there as vulnerable as I'd ever felt, I did see such a man. A man half-heartedly sipping a glass of champagne, eyes wandering about as a tall brunette, unknown to me, long legs, loud, husky voice with a country twang attempted to engage him in conversation.*

*Sitting straight across from me, when his wandering eyes met mine, his face lit up with genuine delight at the recognition. He made a gesture calling me over.*

*It wasn't your father. It was Mickey the Tooth. Mickey the Tooth's murdering eyes leered, fingers patted the unoccupied seat on the couch beside him, inviting me to join. I shook my head and put my finger to my lips, a request for silence and complicity --without a thought as to who I was requesting such a favor from.*

*And he did comply. His eyes returned to his rented companion, left me to my last view I ever had of your father. Your father, laser focused on Ariel, the one with the braces, wiggling her bottom so gracelessly in a bubblegum thong and those silly pink Converse to the aptly titled Baby Got Back. His eyes did not leave that pink thong for a single second to ever notice me or Mickey, our exchange. That girl he could "never be interested in" mattered more than anything else, more than us.*

*I saw Dina headed over. The last thing I wanted was words with her or anyone in this place. I hurried out while Kiera shouted behind me, "Don't you want your money?"*

*I didn't want anything here.*

*After the test, I moved quickly. I went home to the little brick house and called the only person in the whole wide world I had left to help us make our retreat: your grandmother. Even though it was almost 9:00 at night, we hadn't talked once since I left for Pensacola, she hopped in her car and drove over the bridge to us. That's what it is to be a mother, something I'm starting to understand more and more each passing day.*

*We packed her Volvo with everything we could, first, all the essential souvenirs, my books, the lamp, the owl shelf and Daddy's. We'd manage to cram at least ninety percent of my things into that first load, talking while we worked. I'd filled her on some of the sad details. The fading bruises on my neck, she'd noticed, illustrated some more.*

*"We don't have to do all this tonight. We can come in the morning for the last of it. He's not going to come over until Sunday. I promise you that."*

*She nodded, exhausted, but looked a little skeptical.*

*"I guess, if you're sure, Aster."*

*"I'm tired, Mom. I know you are, too."*

*The one thing we had yet to discuss was you. I'd postponed it as long as I was able until we were heading to the car. I realized, inside the Volkswagen, sat your first book, a book I wanted nothing more than to curl up and read tonight in my own childhood bed. I had to retrieve it, but first I'd better explain. I handled it with my usual panache.*

*"Do you know any place still open where I can buy prenatal vitamins?"*

*My poor dear mother, I thought she might topple over right on the concrete steps. I actually grabbed her arm, and she was so silent for a second.*

*"I guess we'll be making that second trip tonight after all."*

*"Mother, I'm so tired —"*

*"I will not have my grandchild in this situation one more day. We'll finish here tonight. Tomorrow you'll thank me."*

*This is what I love about my mother. Anything you could throw at her was never a match, not even the darkest knight.*

*"I'll thank you now."*

*I hugged her, which we hadn't done in ages and felt so good it made me cry.*

*"All right, now. No time for that."*

*It was past midnight, by the time we'd loaded up the last of my things. All that was left was leaving the car key and house key, locking up and leaving. But the idea of lining up those two keys on the white counter top and walking to the door and locking myself out of this world that one last time seemed impossible suddenly.*

*"Aster, I think it's time. It's so late."*

*"I know, Mom. I just need a minute. Could you just wait for me in the car?"*

*"Sure. Just don't take too long, okay. You should really lie down."*

*"Okay."*

*She left and gave me room to breathe. It made me feel more hopeful about how life would be back in Gulf Point again.*

*Mom hadn't wanted me to leave a note.*

*"He doesn't deserve to hear anything from you. You owe him nothing. You don't want to encourage him."*

*All true, but the note wasn't for him. I needed to write a note for me. I knew if he came for me, in person, with those pleading dark eyes, I would never be able to resist. I didn't write an explanation. I wrote a plea:*

*"You don't need me. Please let me go."*

*I left it there, next to the keys. Choking on my emotions, I made the heavy-hearted steps to the door and twisted the lock that final time and left.*

*A+*

*After giving me a few days to pout and rest, your grandmother laid down the law. She'd woken me up, closer to lunch than breakfast, with this declaration:*

*"You've had enough time off. I'm marching you down there Friday to get your GED. So I'd pull out those manuals and get to studying 'cause you're going to be real embarrassed if you fail."*

*The old Aster would have thrown such a fit. And even now, I slept another half hour trying to ignore her, trying to return, at least in dreams, to that little brick house and your father and our big white bed we never had to leave. But even in the safety of my sleep, I couldn't get in there so easily now. It brought tears to my eyes to realize it, but I brushed them away and got up and started digging for my GED manual. Your grandmother was relentless, and I learned to be grateful for that.*

*Of course, I passed that test. But if you think your grandmother was going to allow me to return to my dark room to brood for your father and dream my life away, it's only because you haven't met her yet. As always, her plans included many steps, and as soon as I'd completed one, she was ready with the next.*

*"You know, I was talking to Mrs. Wallach on my walk the other day, and she told me her husband's architecture firm is looking for someone to job share a secretarial position there, two days a week. I think it could be the perfect thing for you. She knows about your condition and just enough about that horrible man so they wouldn't bother you with hurtful questions -- completely up to you, of course. I just think it would be good for you to get out of this house, get your mind off things. Have a little money in your pocket to buy some baby clothes and things."*



*Maybe it was the baby clothes that got me, but I had never been as excited about the prospect of a job since I started at The Gulf Point Guardian. It felt like a miracle, like coming back from the dead. I jumped up so quick from the couch not wanting to waste a second.*

*“Do you have their number?”*

*“No, I was just — “*

*“Well, let’s walk over there and tell them I want the job before they give it to somebody else.”*

*My mom was laughing at me, but she looked happier than she had in ages.*

*“Yes, ma’am. Let me get my shoes.”*

*A+*

*Five days later, on a Tuesday, I made the journey, reunited with the trusty old Sprint, to Pensacola to start my first day at WFG Architects. I wore my hair up in a bun and a long skirt. I was taking your grandmother’s advice to “try to blend in and not attract a lot of unwanted attention.” She didn’t have to say what I knew would be the case in a close-knit office in a small southern town: everybody’s going to know the new part-time teenage secretary is a knocked up teenager of ill repute. I didn’t need to broadcast my bad girl status any louder.*

*Everyone was polite, and my job was easy. Had my own desk. Phone traffic was light. Nobody seemed to mind if you read or doodled or even wrote a poem as long as you answered the phone by the second ring and typed a letter or memo when required. But at lunchtime, I was on my own. The women all kept a respectable distance and never socialized, much less invited me to the revolving chain of restaurants they chatted about loudly in earshot of my desk. The men all looked a little terrified to ride alone with me in the elevator.*

*Except for Neil. Each week that passed, I gave up, a little more, the futile, superfluous exchanges with others in the office. I was as integrated here as I would ever be. Then something completely unexpected happened: Neil Hayes began reaching out.*

*Neil Hayes was the new, young architect, hired only a year prior to my own arrival at WFG. He had shaggy dishwater blonde hair and the hint of a tan, the effortless good looks of a surfer but the quiet, misfit demeanor of a nerd. At 29, he had to be the youngest architect in this office by easily 20 years. He was from California but went to school at Tulane in New Orleans where Anderson Fuller (the F in WFG), an alumni himself, lured him to Pensacola with an internship and later a job.*

*I knew Neil’s biography so well for the same reason every other woman in this office did: he was the solitary object of sexual fascination we had, in-house, at WFG. Even permanently situated, as I was, on the social periphery, I overheard endless discussions of every newly gleaned factoid of his life, and I held on to them like every other female in this office. I was pregnant — not dead.*

*And there was one extremely telling detail of Neil's life told in the most hushed of tones I had to really concentrate to pick up: Neil Hayes was a Mormon and a former missionary. In a small office in the south full of Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists and a few Catholics, a Mormon was more than a curiosity. I had certainly never met one and wasn't even sure what it meant until I heard Sally Reuben, who made some horny commentary, being teased by Lorna Rice:*

*"Yeah, good luck with that. You know they don't have sex, right, until they get married?"*

*Lorna looked confused.*

*"Girl, I'm dead serious. He spent two years in Paris when he was 19 years old and didn't so much as go on a date or hold hands."*

*"Come on. How do you even know this?"*

*"Fuller told me. Neil told him. It's not natural."*

*By the time it finally happened, that fateful Wednesday, two weeks later, he'd been peppering me with small talk and flirty, shy smile. The worldly, experienced woman I now was should have seen it coming. But when Neil Hayes walked over to my desk and asked me to lunch, female jaws dropping everywhere around us, I was just as floored as everybody else. The mysterious handsome office saint asking out the teenage pregnant slut charity case. I can only imagine the chatter as soon we'd left.*

*I was so afraid to speak at lunch, afraid to say one dumb thing that would make him recognize the obviously insanity of his choice. He generously filled what would have been the awkwardst of silences with stories of his large family in Palo Alto (four brothers and a sister), his fondness for the Art Nouveau movement and an absolute obsession with one favorite (Klimt) and how this obsession evolved into a love of lines and architecture (particularly Beaux-Arts). And of all the programs in architecture he examined, only Tulane existed in a place full of such buildings he wanted to surround himself and a life he wanted to live.*

*He kept looking at me willing me to speak with his eyes – then asking out right. I kept my responses monosyllabic. I could listen to him talk all day. My life never felt less presentable. Should I start with dropping out of school, stripping or the being knocked up? I was curious in all this talk that he'd mentioned nothing of Mormonism or Paris. And so I finally asked him.*

*"You must have loved being in Paris then, the buildings? I can only imagine."*

*"How did you know about that?"*

*He had a coy little smile.*

*"You're a popular topic of discussion around the office."*

*He laughed, and I realized the irony of what I'd said.*

*"I'm sure I am as well."*

*He reached over and took my hand. I felt like a high school girl again being touched for the first time. Like everything that happened in Pensacola before had been a bad, dirty dream.*

*"How about we do this? I'll tell you about me, and you tell me about you. And we'll both be brutally honest, and then we'll really know each other and not a lot of gossip and supposition."*

*"I would like that."*

*"Okay. Good because it's your turn."*

*"I'm not sure it's a story that you'll like."*

*He smiled again.*

*"Well, I've got a really good feeling I'm going to like the ending."*

*"That's a little presumptuous, Mister."*

*I chided him gently though he wore the cockiness well. I felt a familiar tingle in the back of my neck.*

*"Hey. Don't blame me. I'm a Mormon. When the Holy Ghost is speaking in that still small voice, you gotta listen."*

*I had no idea what he was talking about. It sounded so silly I laughed out loud, and it felt so good to let go.*

*"You're a funny man."*

*"And you're the most classically beautiful girl I think I've ever seen."*

*And even though they were pretty words over a first lunch, I knew right then he had fallen for us. There would be weeks more of these lunches before our first official first nighttime date to his massive still unrenovated, newly purchased Victorian home. He made spaghetti, and we talked on the couch until we got tired. And then he made the surprisingly unMormon move of taking me up the stairs to bed.*

*I'll never forget as he undressed me, covered in goosebumps from the winter chill and my own shame over the changes in my body, his gentle touches and the way he looked at me like I was a piece of art -- how he let me call him daddy even though it was something I don't think he really understood.*

*I whispered under the covers when it was over, "Isn't this a sin?"*

*And he laughed a little before he whispered back, "You are my one sin. I get one."*

*"Is that how it works?"*

*"Maybe not. Maybe so. I can't let you go."*

*He was silent for a second. And then he brushed his lips against my ear and whispered again.*

*“Uh-oh. You know what this means?”*

*My heart lurched inside me, afraid I’d teased him right into never touching me again. My mouth went dry at the thought; my response was full of an anxiety I could not conceal.*

*“What does it mean?”*

*“It means I have to marry you.”*

*“Don’t I get a say?”*

*“Sure. What do you say?”*

*A month later, in his backyard, with a Mormon bishop trying not to stare at my burgeoning belly full of another man’s child, I said, “I do.” And after we had spoken our vows and he’d fed me cake, he pulled me close and whispered in my ear news that was the best wedding present I could ever imagine.*

*“I’ve been waiting to tell you. I’ve spoken to a lawyer. Once we’re married, if we say nothing contrary, I’m Avalon’s presumptive father. My name goes on the birth certificate, and she’s my daughter. Just like that.”*

*Just like that, Neil Hayes legally became your father. It was clear why we were who we were and still so destined to be together. Even your face resembled nothing of the dark knight whose child you biologically were. You always looked, from the very beginning, like a little blonde replica of me.*

### **AVALON HAYES, 2010**

Aboard the *First And Always*, Geoffrey showed me around. There was a little guest cabin where he said I could put my things and where I’d sleep tonight. He’d gotten some groceries and was preparing to cook something for us in its miniature kitchen.

I laid on the couch, not far away, relaxing in the sunbeams through the windows, after a hellish day.

He held up a bottle of red wine.

“Would you like a glass while I cook?”

I was shocked. Of course, I’d had a few drinks with Liesel Pomerantz, slumber parties, but I couldn’t imagine my parents ever offering me a glass of alcohol. Of course, I was raised by a Mormon so maybe my view of parenting was skewed. Still I was trying to be a good guest. Maybe the wine would make him comfortable to say what he had been holding back – the truth I’d been seeking since I met him.

“Okay.”

I had a headache mounting since the woods and anxiousness I couldn't shake. A drink did seem like it might help. If I could just make it through this night, get some sleep. In a presentable state, I could return home tomorrow a new person -- done with dangerous boys and lying. Geoffrey moved about the kitchen, opening cabinets and drawers while I thought about the rest of my life.

I'd kicked my shoes off as soon I'd found this couch. I was laid back, basking in the sunshine through the windows when he brought me the large glass of wine, a deep blood red. I sat up to take it and tasted it shyly.

"I'm so glad you called me today, Avalon. I'm sorry I couldn't save you before.

"That was my fault. I was lying to you."

I took another sip of wine. It felt good to be honest.

"It's okay. Today, we are starting over. The way it should be."

He grabbed his own glass off the counter and held it out to mine like a toast.

"Cheers to a new day."

I clicked my glass against his. We each took a sip. He turned to go back into the tiny kitchen, but the liquid courage was already loosening my tongue.

"Hey, did you know Neil Hayes is not my father?"

He turned back, blinked as if he was thinking.

"What makes you say that?"

"We did a blood typing test at school. It's impossible that he is."

He nodded at this information and drank. Waiting for his response, I sipped my wine, too.

"This was at Gulf Point?"

"Yeah, that last week. The day before I came to see you. I found out they were liars."

"Wow, that must have been a revelation."

I nodded.

He took another drink of his wine, and I took another sip. He was looking all around, not at me, and I started to shake with nerves. I wanted him to just say it. If we were being honest, now was the time. His lips started to move and I waited for the truth to come at last.

"Do you know who it is?"

Could he be this cruel? Or was he genuinely unsure?

“I don’t. My mom won’t talk about her past.”

“I see.”

I took another sip for courage and pushed it further.

“You knew my mother, right?”

He took a drink.

“Do you have any idea?”

The silence was excruciating. I took a big sip of wine to settle my nerves. I hadn’t really been on boats -- maybe all the wine was getting to me because I felt strange suddenly. I put the glass down and gripped the couch a bit. He leaned against the bar, silent. I wanted to scream I was so enraged. But I felt a wave of something else too – like I was beginning to ever so slightly spin. Though looking down I appeared to be in the same place. When I looked up at him, he was a blur, moving, rocking a little, but I couldn’t quite understand what he was doing. I’d have a handful of sips of wine, which was a lot for me, but I’d never felt like this before.

“Avalon, are you okay?”

The blur was moving towards me now, extending what I couldn’t make out until I felt it – an arm, guiding me to lie back onto the couch. The sun coming in through the windows felt like little warm licks on my face and neck that made me giggle until I realized the licks were gluing my eyelids shut and I couldn’t open them even as I heard him say --

“I am not your father, Avalon, though we will be many things for each other -- everything.”

### **GEOFFREY CHASE, 2010**

Avalon Hayes thought I was her father. What would you have thought of this development, Aster? I’d only learned it, ironically, laying her down in a drugged sleep inside her new home. Lacing her wine with sleeping tablets was not a rash act or something I enjoyed. It was essential to ensuring we make a speedy exit from this place of our mutual unhappiness.

I’d tried things the sane way – giving guidance from afar; letting her make choices. What had become of that? An assault in the woods that could have been so much worse. I may not have been her father, but I certainly had paternal feelings towards the girl – as someone should.

Where were you, Aster Price? Where was Neil Hayes? Had you provided your daughter with the appropriate emotional foundation, a healthy attachment perhaps she would not have called a man she only knew a couple of weeks in her greatest hour of need? True, I had the emotional advantage of being a potential father figure. And was that not a sign – some kind of divine intervention, at last, in the tragic life of Geoffrey Chase?

Of course, I did not want to be Avalon's actual father – for practical reasons – and I would make sure, in the coming days, that hypothesis was understood to be as false as it. Indeed, was. But I could do none of these things – pull up anchor, convey her to safety, explain my intentions – while she was a conscious, rebellious teenager at a busy marina.

I'd spiked her drink so she might rest while I brought in my last acquisitions for our journey away from this terrible place. I always kept my cash at hand, the boat fueled and ready. It was my nature to be prepared. I'd gone, in that hour, she acquired books at Barnes & Noble to the Super Walmart close by for even more groceries and some clothes I thought might fit in the girl's department, as much pink as possible, because I'm considerate. I wanted Avalon to be as comfortable as possible.

When she woke we would be deep in the bay, maybe even the Gulf if I were lucky – on our way anywhere that was not here. One day, she would understand and appreciate my choices. I didn't expect it to be today. I had grown into a realist.

### **AVALON HAYES, 2010**

I dreamed I was on a pastel painted rocking horse – the kind on a pedestal in the mall your dad lifted you onto, put quarters inside to jostle you back and forth a few minutes while strangers strolling by, stopped to watch. This one went faster and faster, bucking against me until I was afraid I would fall from it to the hard tiles below. I was screaming for it to stop, for my father, with a blurred out face, to lift me off the malfunctioning ride. Everyone around me was smiling then breaking out into laughter, even my fuzzy-faced dad.

I kept waiting for the fall – the marble looking tile ominous below, but, at least, whatever happened it would be over. I never fell. Just rocked back and forth, the rocking horse head and torso battering me ruthlessly while everyone enjoyed my distress.

I woke up with a start, screaming no, no, no -- not even knowing where I was. Looked about for a bit before I recognized the boat, slowly remembered how I got here. I saw Kurt's eyes in the woods, animalistic – more demon boy. It was hard to think of him as human in memory – even though I met him doing the most human thing in the world, going to school. What demon would subject himself to that?

I remembered how he hurt me – and the other there, how I'd run from them and called the only person I could, Geoffrey Chase.

He had brought me here. To have some dinner and spend the night – and it was night now, but something wasn't right. Had we had dinner? I didn't remember. My stomach felt hollow and churning – was there a storm? Were we were rocking? Where was Geoffrey?

And then it hit me – we were moving. My body ached from the drugs earlier and the wine, I guess, but I made it move towards a window to see some kind of clue as to our location. Everything was dark and water, lights in the distance, some stars and some from what was land but why weren't we there.

Apparently I screamed again because as I turned it was Geoffrey. He rushed to my side and held me.

"Shhhh. It's okay. We'll talk in a little while, okay."

"Where are we going? What time is it? How long have I been asleep?"

"Avalon, I must insist you calm down. Would you like another drink?"

"No." I spoke quickly, instinctively. Remembering now the wine and how oddly it had affected me – still affected me some. I felt foggy headed and confused, but things were coming more into focus.

He'd answered none of my questions so far. Growing more scared by the second, not wanting to make this situation worse, I changed my tone.

"Look, it's nice you took me out for a little cruise. Beautiful, really, but I have to be back in the morning. My mom's going to flip if I don't come home tomorrow." I kept my voice calm, but my hands were shaking. He grabbed one and brought it to his lips and kissed it.

"We're not going back there, tomorrow or ever."

He said it like a commandment, like my father when the discussion of something was over, and if you spoke again, you were going to be grounded. Tears streaming down my face, I begged him.

"Please, I want to go home."

"We are each other's home now."

I'd felt so silly writing that note, hiding it in the base of the ballerina lamp. At the time, it felt like writing it was betraying this man I'd treated shabbily and still ran to my rescue. Now, it felt like my only hope – the best instinct I'd had all day.

When I didn't show up tomorrow, how long would it take Ada to look there? Would she look there at all? It'd been years since we hid messages to each other in the ballerina lamp, but it was the only shared hiding space we once had. Everything depended on my sister.



## AMELIA PRICE, 2010

Would I have even been aware that Avalon was missing – much less be at Aster's house when the report was made? If not for Ada, I sincerely doubt it. I'd have been called eventually – the last resort. There would probably be search parties first. I don't know why Aster, her entire life, bristled so at the aid of her own mother, but she certainly did. My granddaughter on the other hand was another sort altogether – she called me as soon as she knew.

"Avalon's lied about being at Mary Nell's – no one knows where she is. A boy came over the other night, before she went missing, I peeked through my door – he looked very shady. I heard Mom arguing with her about it for a long time after he left. Today, she's gone."

Ada was my eyes and ears at my only child's place, and I tell ya' I couldn't be more grateful for it. It was why I was here – able to do what needed to be done.

"Look, ma'am," the officer was talking to my daughter, though sometimes she was the least helpful in a case like this, so guarded about everything. "We really need to know what the fight was about with your daughter? We've had someone contact the Klines, the boy lives with his mother. They didn't seem to have anything to hide. I know what you've said – but we don't see evidence of any mob connections. I don't think the boy's involved in this honestly. You know he's on house arrest?"

Thank God I was here, "Wait. Hold up. Did you just say Kline?"

The officer nodded.

"As in Jared Kline?"

"His son actually."

"Dear God, Aster, you haven't told them – did Avalon know?"

It was at this moment Ada ran in through the stairs.

"What? What is it Gigi?"

"I guess I'll do the honors then. Avalon is not Neil Hayes' biological daughter. She's Jared Kline's – as in Kurt's brother."

"Does Avalon know this?"

It was Ada, who'd of course been spying, interrogating her mother, who deserved it for not speaking the truth so long.

Aster broke down in tears shaking her head.

"Mom, do you know they did a blood typing experiment at school, the week she left? You probably don't. I saw her forge your signature, and I threatened her to tell if she didn't tell me what it was for."

"Oh, Lord, she probably knows at least part of the truth. Who knows what she thinks?" I was so worried for my oldest grandchild.

"Oh my God." My daughter covered her mouth thinking of the possibilities.

I looked at Ada, my only hope at getting more information in this house.

"Does your sister have a diary? And I know you know – no pussyfooting around. Who knows where she could be?"

Ada scratched her head and danced around thinking, anxious.

"I don't know. I doubt it. She doesn't like writing that much."

"Where would she hide things? Certainly you know that."

She jumped up and down, delighted with herself. "The ballerina lamp."

"My old ballerina lamp – with the twist off bottom?"

"Yes, Mom. Gigi told us about it when we were little – the hidden part, too."

"Of course, she did."

My daughter looked annoyed but more scared than her own, and we all ran up the stairs as fast as I'd run in some time into Avalon's room to the lamp she'd inherited from her mother. By the time I entered the room, Ada was already unscrewing it. Inside, there was a note, so scary and yet typical Avalon on ice cream stationery and in pink ink.



**ADA HAYES, 2010**

I'd made it to the note and scanned it quick – saw the important part about Mr. Chase and was really worried about handing it over with the part about the pot. You know Avalon was messed up on drugs to even include that. My dad was going to lose his mind. And yet none of this was important.

Avalon thought Mr. Chase, the guidance counselor at school, was her dad?

“Why does she think Mr. Chase is her dad?”

The police officer had entered the room and taken the note from me. The other women stood around him, all staring at it.

It was Gigi as usual that set things straight.

“Geoffrey Chase is a guidance counselor at the school? What world is this? You knew this?”

She was looking at mom who was crying and shaking her head.

“No, Mom, of course not.”

I helped fill things in for grandma.

“She doesn’t like to go to the school, Grandma. I think because she dropped out, you know. Sorry, Mom.”

My family was full of delicate creatures, my sister and my mother. Gigi and I were honest and rough. We had that shorthand with each other. It was working now. The police officer was on the phone with the marina while my grandma hugged mom and apologized for making her feel bad.

“Aster, honey, I know you’re ashamed of the path you took but I don’t know why. These lies and half truths are causing nothing but trouble.” Then Gigi turned to me and said a surprising thing.

“Your mother danced at Frank’s after she left high school because Geoffrey Chase perpetrated a hoax on this town involving a UFO. He did it because he was obsessed with your mother. At the time she was a journalist – not at the school, but The Gulf Point Guardian, my little prodigy.”

The policeman came over and interrupted us for a moment.

“So the “*First And Always*,” that’s Geoffrey Chase’s boat – it’s left the marina. It’s a live-aboard. We’re on the hunt for it.”

“You touch me first and always on this boat.” My mom whipped out this line, like reciting a poem, at the strangest time in the world. Except that obviously the name of his boat, *First And Always*, was in the line.

“Who wrote that?” I asked, grabbing onto a clue.

“I did.”

“You’re a poet?”

“Yes.” Then she turned to the police officer, concerned for Avalon but I think ready to change the subject as well, “Excuse me, don’t we have more important things to be doing besides talking about my writing and biography. My daughter is in a boat with a stalker.”

The police officer took my mom to sit down.

“Yes, and the Coast Guard is on it, ma’am. It’s a slow moving boat, they say. Chase had had quite a head start but we’ll be able to track them down. You need to sit down. None of us can go get in the water and find her. We sit by the phone and wait for the professionals.”

“Come on, Mom. Listen to what he said.”

Gigi went to make some tea, and I held Mom’s hand. “Avalon’s going to come home, Mom. She’s little but she’s tough.” I said it for my mom, and I hoped it was true.

### **AVALON HAYES, 2010**

Geoffrey was so quiet now. He’d always been such a talker since the first moment I knew him. Talking me into dual enrollment, the classes he wanted me to back, the rules he wanted me to follow, the nightly phone calls that were never long enough for him. Now, since I’d begged to go home, he seemed determined and focused on the operation of the boat – and not interested in any dialogue with me at all. His silence scared me as much as anything else.

I looked at the Swatch. It was 5:30. Certainly my mom had been in touch with Mary Nell by now and found out the truth. The question was -- had Ada found that note? I had no way of knowing. And without that note, nobody would have any idea of where to look for me.

They would probably be at Kurt’s house. With his house arrest, he might even be in jail. Though it was a satisfying thought, on a revenge level, it would only mean they wouldn’t know about Geoffrey. Nobody might be coming after us as we scooted farther and farther away from Pensacola to God knows where.

The silence and the afternoon sun was driving me mad. I’d climbed up top to where he was steering the boat, screaming as loud as I could right in the open until my throat hurt, and I couldn’t scream anymore. There was nothing but birds in the sky to hear me and the waves, the maddening waves. Geoffrey turned and looked at me cold, a disapproving gaze from his perch at the controls. He didn’t even seem worried just annoyed by my noise.

I’d never felt so hopeless, and I was making him mad. I had no idea how what Geoffrey was capable of? Kidnapping a minor for certain. He wouldn’t even look at me now. I was nothing. Maybe a mistake he’d throw into the bay or gulf – I had no idea where we were now. I’d never cared about geography, but it hit me as especially sad to drown in a body of water and not even know its name. A rage worked up inside me.

His back was to me lying over the railings – seemed dangerous with all this rocking though he stood so steady. I knew nothing about boats, and he knew everything. I felt like I was on another planet with an alien who refused to speak to me – who maybe thought I wasn’t even a valid life form now. Was he looking over those railings calculating my fall?

He leaned a little over the railing in an odd way, and I shuddered realizing he was peeing through the railings into the ocean before. Something about his freedom in doing this, with me here, it disgusted me but frightened me even more. What was going to happen next? His body looked lighter, relieving itself, like he could float away and before I thought another second about what it was that I was doing, gymnastics took over.

I was running like I used to towards the vault, my favorite even in gymnastics – a sport that had lead to cheerleading then replaced it. Sometimes I felt that was a mistake. As I ran towards his leaning body, I could hear my coach in my ear -- *faster, maximum power, shoulders down, block, block, block*. I missed vaulting. Coach said I had a natural talent.

Why he didn't hear me coming, I'll never know. I ran hard. He didn't – I know from the surprised sound he made when my flesh collided with his so hard, as he leaned over into the sun that he fell instantly. I'd moved with such abandon I almost fell myself, afraid to hold anything back, that my slight body would need all its power to alienate this monster. I had to hold on with all my might not to vault across the bars and into the water with him. Thanked god for every pushup I'd done in cheer and the upper body strength that saved me.

Prayed for something else to save me now. I'd done all I could do on my own. I needed my sister. If not, I might die on this boat of starvation when the food ran out because I certainly didn't know how to drive it. Maybe the boat would crash into something, and I might drown. I didn't know. But in this moment, I scurried to the cabinets, full of snacks – I chose Pringles – and proceeded to eat half a can then fell asleep on the couch. It was the first calm I'd had since I woken up drugged the second time in two days with a psychopath.

### AB+

Day turned to night before a new light shone above – a second moon brighter than anything I'd ever seen at night. It lit the water around the boat changing it from its flat unfathomable black to an ebbing collage from lapis to indigo as I huddled by the window in fright. The UFO stories were a part of growing up in Gulf Point – whether you believed them or not. They lived in a part of your brain, incubating until moments like this, in the dark, they took on their own life.

At cheer competition, when we had to introduce where we were from, we'd yelled out "Gulf Point, Home of the Gulf Point UFO's, Written About by Mulder on the X-Files!" The UFO's turned out to be a hoax – a lie but a lot of people had believed. Our little town became a part of UFO legend. The hoax occurred while my mom was in high school in Gulf Point. I'd ask her about it, but the subject fell into an ever-growing list of things she "would rather not talk about." I'd never believed in them before but in this moment, I wondered could it be true?

I heard the sound of propellers and then an actual voice from the sky telling me to come onto the deck of the boat with my hands in the air.

"Prepare to be boarded."

Terrified, I hurried to comply – climbing outside and putting my hands out as fast as I could. A man, with a gun was being lowered, another one right behind.

One spoke, “Where’s Chase?”

I could even speak. My mouth slack with fear. I pointed to the water.

I heard them yelling, “Overboard, man overboard.” One approached me and brought me somewhere to sit down.

“You’re okay. We’re going to bring you home.”

I finally broke down and let myself sob. I’d never been so happy to go home in my life.

### **ASTER PRICE HAYES, 2010**

Avalon turned 18 a few months later. We had her birthday party at the little brick house. The place was no secret anymore. I’d taken her there the day after she returned and told her everything – my whole life story, her life story. Confessed I was the stripper who had the affair with Jared Kline, who hid from him, with her new baby in suburbia.

I even confessed why I was afraid to tell her everything before, “I didn’t want you to be like me.”

“Mom, you’re wonderful. I didn’t even know the half of it.”

Avalon proved me wrong. My daughter managed to know everything and be her own person – nothing like her biological father or myself. She finished her first semester at college, a think I had never done. She’d dropped English Comp with forgiveness from the University when the situation with her half-brother was explained. But she was already talking about taking the class over the summer with a full load.

“I’m not a runner.”

“No, you’re not.”

I had been all my life, but my daughter inspired me to change. Before the fall, as Avalon prepared to continue her college education, she came to me alone, first, with a proposition.

“Mom, I’ve been thinking about the dorm thing. I don’t want to do it.”

A part of me was relieved at the idea of my daughter not leaving for college – even if the dorms were only twenty minutes away. But then a second thought occurred to me, and I hoped her experiences in the past weren’t affecting her dreams.

“Are you sure, honey?”

“I had another idea, kind of a compromise.”

“What is that?”

“I’d like to move into the little brick house – you could have my room here as your office. It’s so close, and it would be my own place, but I could walk over and you could, too.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. It was her birthright that place. If it belonged to anyone as much as me, it was her. I’d needed it when I needed to hide my writing, but Avalon inspired me not to do that anymore.

I nodded.

“I think it’s a perfect idea.”

“Can we tell Daddy tonight at dinner?”

It was my biggest fear of ever telling Avalon Neil wasn’t her father – that she wouldn’t see him that way after he had loved her so much. But after all of this, he was daddy again, and all was right in the world.

“I’ll tell him he’ll have to deal with me writing smut in the house.”

“Telling the truth is part of growing up.”

My daughter was very wise.

### **AVALON HAYES, 2010**

Let me tell you about the liars. I don’t know any -- anymore.



