

Flames

THE RINGING PHONE reaches through the black caul of my sleep. My eyes open on red numbers—1:20 A.M.—and I leap out of bed and stumble into the kitchen. As I pick up the handset, I am fully awake.

“Mom? Are you there?”

“Marly, what’s wrong?”

“Mitch came home from the bar and I wouldn’t let him in and he kicked down the door.”

I ask if she’s okay, and she says that she is. I flip on the light and ask where she is now.

“I’m still here . . . in my apartment . . . waiting for the police.”

“Where’s Mitch?” Standing in my big kitchen, I look around me for a weapon, as if I could snatch it up and hand it through the phone line.

“He went up to the third floor, to Jared’s apartment, I think.”

“What happened? Did he hurt you?”

“Not really,” Marly says. “He pushed me and he was shouting. I told him I’d called the police, so then he stormed upstairs.”

“Why did you lock him out?”

Marly’s voice rises to a higher note. “He said he was going out to the bar. I asked him not to. I told him he couldn’t go to the bar and then come back here. I told him that if he came back here drunk, I wasn’t going to let him in.” Beneath the surface distress and frustration in Marly’s voice, I hear fear held in check, and all at once I know she is holding something back: Mitch has come home drunk before tonight and mistreated her. He has hit her, or forced sex on her, or abused her in some other way, and probably on more than one occasion.

Across my kitchen, on my butcher block, are my knives of various sizes, plus a twelve-inch sharpening steel with a heavy wooden handle. I shrink from the idea of thrusting a knife into a man’s chest, but I easily picture picking up the steel and bludgeoning Mitch with it.

“Do you have something you can use for a weapon?” I ask. “In case he comes back?”

“I don’t know, let me think.”

“What about your pepper spray?” I bought Marly a canister, along with one for myself, after a man flashed me at the state park.

“I don’t have it anymore,” Marly says. “I gave it to a friend.”

I tell her to go get her sharpening steel and to hide all her sharp knives at the back of a drawer and to keep the steel in her hand. I listen to her moving about, and then she says, “Okay, I’ve got the steel.”

“Did you hide the knives?”

A drawer squawks. “I’m doing that now.”

“What about the door to your apartment? Can you push it back into place?”

Marly says it’s not even a real door—just a piece of paneling left over from when they paneled the lobby, with a now useless deadbolt and chain attached—but she has leaned it across the opening to keep the cats from running out. I tell her to push the heaviest piece of furniture she can move up against it, and she says she has already pushed her big bookcase there.

“Okay, good. Keep your eye on the door while we’re talking, and don’t let go of the steel. If he comes back, tell him that you have a weapon and that he better stay out. And if he comes in, don’t wait for him to attack first—hit him over the head, as hard as you can. And don’t stop hitting until he leaves or stops moving.”

It feels unreal to be standing in my kitchen at one thirty in the morning and talking on the phone like this with my daughter, even though I’ve been through something similar with a friend whose ex-husband broke down her door twice. I wonder if I should hang up and jump in my car and race up to Grand Rapids; but it’s a forty-five minute drive from my house, and I’m afraid that, after I hang up, something else bad might happen. It makes more sense to stay on the line and talk with Marly and help her figure out what to do. If Mitch comes back downstairs and attacks Marly while we are talking, I can hang up and call 9-1-1 and tell them that Marly is in immediate danger. I try not to think of the worst-case scenario: that Marly might be murdered as I am standing in my kitchen, while I listen to her cries through the phone.

If I had a husband, or a boyfriend, he could be driving up to Marly's apartment while I talk with her. I can't call Marly's dad for help—Ray is living in California with his second wife. And I can't call Richard, whom I haven't seen since last month, when I told him, after he left me for the second time, that I wanted no more contact with him. And anyway, Richard always shrank from any kind of confrontation. I consider my father and my four brothers with a yearning sadness—they all live too far away to come to our aid. If I had a cell phone, I could be driving to Grand Rapids right now, drawing closer to Marly every moment and talking with her at the same time. But maybe rather than my going there, the best plan is for Marly to leave her apartment and drive to my house.

"Marly, I'm thinking you should just come down here."

"I can't. I have to wait for the police so I can tell them what happened and where Mitch is now."

"Can't the apartment manager do that?"

"I called Kirk, but he didn't answer. He never answers his phone."

"Did the police say how soon they'd get there?"

"No. But Wendell should be here soon. Before I called you, I called Wendell. He's working till two, and he said he'd come over the minute he gets off."

"Oh, good," I say. We've known Wendell for years—he's the older brother of one of Marly's friends from grade school. Wendell goes to Grand Valley State University during the week and tends bar in Grand Rapids on weekend nights.

A year or so ago, I suggested that Marly date Wendell instead of just being his friend. Wendell is sweet, smart, engaging, and levelheaded. Marly had smiled fondly when I spoke

Wendell's name and narrowed her eyes as if picturing him. "He looks like a Hobbit," she said.

"He does not," I protested. "He's not very tall and he's not super handsome, but he doesn't look like a Hobbit."

Marly had continued to smile with both affection and discernment. "Like Frodo," she said.

"Marly, you pick your boyfriends by looks too much, I think."

"Oh, like you don't? Not that I think your boyfriends look hot, at all, but you do—even that dorky bald guy with that terrible mullet."

"Okay, fine," I said. "Only date guys you think are really hot. But make sure they're good guys, too."

"Good guys, bad guys," Marly answered in a dreary sing-song, as if she were bored with the subject.

"What do you mean, Marly?"

She had hesitated. Then she said, "It's not so easy to tell all the time."

Thinking back to her words and her tone, I can hear the danger hidden in them. Mitch had been living with Marly then for about a year. He had lavished attention on her at first, calling her "honey" and "darlin'" and "baby" at every turn, gazing at her with what seemed to me false adoration. Marly gazed back as if hoping to believe him. Her boyfriend before Mitch was wholly undemonstrative, emotionally flat. Rico and Marly had lived together for fourteen months, but Rico never said that he loved her. Marly was lured away from Rico by Mitch, who told Marly he loved her almost as soon as they met. But Mitch's initial lavish attention soon became sporadic, and everything else about him has turned out to be sporadic, too, including

looking for work, going to work when he has a job, and helping out around the house. During the past year, Marly has asked Mitch to leave, again and again. But he says he doesn't have anywhere else to go.

Other than the attention he first paid her, I've never seen what Marly saw in Mitch. He has no evident ambitions, other than to someday buy another motorcycle, he drinks a lot and smokes, and he isn't even much to look at: small and wiry in an unhealthy way—wizened, almost, like an old man, although he claims he is only twenty-eight. He looks more like thirty-five, and his facial features make me think of a gnome. He has seemed pitiful to me, but not dangerous until now.

I ask Marly if she is keeping an eye on her doorway, and she says that she is.

“And you still have the steel in your hand?”

“Yes.”

“I just want you to be ready, in case he comes back.”

“I know. I will be.”

Marly and I continue to talk. I wish, but keep to myself, that she had barred Mitch in a less confrontational way, that she had locked him out in the daytime and when he wasn't drunk, and that she had done it with someone there to back her up: a male friend or the apartment manager or even me. I look across the kitchen at the clock. It is ten after two. “I wonder if I should have just driven up,” I say. “I'd be there by now.”

“Quiet, Mom,” Marly warns. “Someone's at the door.”

My breath seems to stop. I strain my ears for Mitch. Should I hang up, dial 9-1-1? But I can't make myself cut my connection to my child.

I hear a voice say, “Are you Marly?”

“Mom, the police are here,” Marly says. “I'll call you back.”

I ask her to call me right away, and she says okay, and then the phone goes silent.

I wander numbly around my kitchen. It is two twenty-five, and I'm scheduled to work the morning shift. I wonder if I should drive to Grand Rapids, spend the night with Marly, call the bus company, and leave a message that I can't make it in. They can get by with just two drivers in the morning. But Wendell is due to arrive at Marly's apartment any minute, and he is either going to stay with her there, or take her somewhere else. I'm not sure what I should do. Maybe I'm only hesitating to race up to Grand Rapids because it's forty-five minutes away and it's late and I'm tired and I'm supposed to be at my job in four hours.

I decide I better get ready to drive up to Marly's apartment. Since I might not have a chance to shower in the morning, I take off the T-shirt I went to bed in, lean over the bathroom sink, and wash my armpits. In my bedroom, I change my underwear, pull on a fresh T-shirt and my jeans and socks and shoes. Then I wander back out to the kitchen and stop beside my largest plant, whose leaves and vines spill down in lavish waves from the sink island to the floor. Most of the philodendron's leaves are pure green or green spattered with flecks of pale yellow and white, but one leaf near the top has a wide, triangular stripe of creamy white running through it, and for some reason it always lifts my spirits to rest my gaze on that rich, creamy triangle bordered by deep green.

I rub some of the dust from the white-striped leaf and see that all the leaves need to be wiped clean with a wet cloth: another chore I will never get around to, like sorting through my closets and steam-cleaning my carpets. As I finger the leaf, my thoughts stray to Richard: even though his second departure

has left me still feeling, after a month, as if a hole has been torn in my chest, it's nothing compared to how I will feel if Marly is taken from me. Losing my first child right after her birth is the hardest thing I've ever had to get used to; losing the only child I have left, after loving her all these years, would be more than I can take. I would murder Mitch. I would beat him to death with a baseball bat, even though I know that wouldn't really help.

Too tired to keep standing up or to pace, I pull out a kitchen chair and sit back down at my oak table. The phone rings again. I click it on and breathe in at the sound of my daughter's voice. The police have left, Marly tells me. They were there for only fifteen minutes. She sounds more frustrated than frightened. "They told me I have no right to lock him out because he lives here, too."

"What? Even though he's paying no rent and you've told him to leave?"

"They say that doesn't matter, that because he lives here, he has a right to come in, even if he has to break down the door."

"So, once you let someone live with you, you're stuck with him for good?"

"Apparently," Marly says.

"That's crazy."

"They say if he is violent, I can get a personal protection order, but until I have one, they can't do anything."

I ask her if the police at least went upstairs to Jared's apartment to have a talk with Mitch, and Marly says, no, they didn't, and now Mitch is up there getting drunker. I ask her how she knows this, and she says that Jared walked into the lobby while she was talking with the police, carrying a case of beer, and he walked right past the police and up the stairs. "And Mom," Marly says, "the police were really shitty to me.

They acted like I was the one who had caused all the trouble. And one of them said something really, really crappy. He said, 'Is this the first time you've called to report your boyfriend?' I said, 'Yes.' And he sneered at me and said, 'Well, it won't be the last time.' And the other one just stood there looking at me as if I were dirt."

"They have no right to act like that," I say. "They have no business talking and acting like that to anyone! What a couple of jerks. Did they at least help you fix the door?"

"No. They just strutted around with their guns and holsters like they were bored and had more important things to do."

"I thought police were being trained about how to deal with domestic violence."

"Evidently not in Grand Rapids."

I glance around at my quiet, empty kitchen. "Marly, why don't you come down here tonight?"

But she doesn't want to leave her cats, who can get around the door if they try, and anyway, she says, my house is no safer than hers, what with its puny locks and being way out in the country. Besides, Wendell should get there any minute, and he can help her rig up the door.

We continue to wait together on the phone. A few minutes later Marly lets out a happy cry: "Wendell's here!"

I hear them greeting each other. Then Marly says again, more quietly, "Wendell's here, Mom."

"Good! Can I speak to him?"

Marly hands the phone to Wendell, and I say hi to him and thank him for coming over.

"It's no problem," he says. "I'm glad to do it."

I ask him if he can spend the rest of the night with Marly, and he says sure, he plans on it.

“And if you leave, you’ll take her with you?”

“Yes,” Wendell says cheerfully.

“And if you stay, will you be able to fix the door?”

“We’ll patch it up somehow,” Wendell says. “I brought some tools from the bar.”

“Oh, great. And you’re going to stay there all night, or else take Marly with you?” I say, aware that I’m not sounding normal, that I’ve asked Wendell this already.

“Yes, I will,” Wendell says cheerfully and patiently. “Don’t worry, I won’t leave her by herself.”

I thank Wendell again and talk to Marly a little longer. She says they are going to stay at her apartment—she’s afraid that if she leaves, Mitch will come back and trash all her stuff. I make her promise to call me if they decide to go somewhere else, so that I’ll know where she is in case something else happens.

After Marly hangs up, I take off my jeans and my shoes and lie back down on my bed. But I’m unable to sleep. What if Mitch returns, reinforced by more beer and maybe a weapon, and murders them both? Maybe he already did, shortly after I hung up the phone. I won’t find out if that has happened until I hear from one of Marly’s neighbors or those worthless police.

Curled up on my side with my eyes closed, I can’t help wondering what I might have done wrong in raising Marly for her to reach this point. Maybe if her father and I had stayed together, or I hadn’t had so many boyfriends, she would now be in a healthier relationship. I’ve kept much of my love life to myself, and I’ve only once let a man spend the night when Marly was with me, but children know more than you tell them, more than you allow them to see. Still, while I’ve made some bad choices, I’ve made no really dangerous ones. I’ve never been physically harmed. Yet Richard’s breaking up with

me a second time knocked the wind out of my spirit and hurt as much as being beaten; it left my chest aching so much that it hurt to breathe. But whatever Mitch has done to Marly is surely worse. My mind approaches and then skitters away from what Mitch might have done to make Marly lock him out.

I rearrange my blankets and pillows again and settle back in and pray for Marly's safety, even though I don't believe that praying really works. Why should my prayers be answered, when so many mothers are forced to live with the suffering and even the deaths of their children? I wouldn't be the first mother to lose more than one child. Finally drowsiness overcomes me, and I fall into a deep but agitated sleep full of vivid, disjointed dreams.



MARLY CALLS ME at six, sounding cheerful. She is in a van with Wendell and also Amelia, a friend of Marly's who has a black belt in karate. They are driving across town to Amelia's apartment with Marly's cats, her camera, her photographs, her computer, and, as Marly phrases it, "anything and everything else of sentimental value." Marly tells me that Mitch came back at four in the morning and broke down the door again, but when he saw Wendell, he retreated upstairs, and Wendell once again repatched and replaced the door.

Marly spends the next two nights across town at her friend Amelia's apartment. On the third day, she starts off for Chicago, where her dad's parents live. She has been planning for some time to fly out to California to spend a week with her dad, first staying one night with her grandparents, who will drive her to O'Hare. But as Marly is heading for Chicago, driving south on 196, she calls me.

“Mom, my car is acting really funny.”

“What’s it doing?”

“It’s shaking, a lot.”

“What part of it is shaking?”

“All of it. It’s shimmying like crazy. It wasn’t too bad at first, but in the last ten minutes, it’s gotten way worse.”

“Well, you better not drive it to Chicago,” I say. “Where are you now?”

“On the expressway north of Saugatuck.”

“You better swing by here, and take my car.”

“Are you sure? The engine seems okay, it’s just the body.”

I tell her to leave her car with me, and I’ll take it in to work and have our bus mechanic check it over. Twenty minutes later, Marly pulls her gold hatchback into my driveway. As she gets out of her car, her bright, unnaturally red hair strikes me as too noticeable, too easy to spot. She’s been dying her hair fire-engine red ever since she was sixteen, and for the first time I fear that it’s not a safe color. Backlit by the sun, the tips of her hair glow like flames, as if her head is edged with fire. I want to suggest she wear a hood, or re-dye her hair a dull brown. But I think I’m likely over-worrying, and I don’t want to scare her further, so I don’t say anything.

I haven’t seen Marly since Mitch broke down her door, so I’m even gladder than usual for the chance to wrap my arms around her slender shoulders. As I rub her bare arm with my fingers and look at her face, I wonder, as I have many times before, if my desire to touch her skin and feel her warmth and see her open eyes is stronger in me because I held my other child only once, after her body was cold, and I only ever saw her with her eyes closed.

I send Marly off to Chicago in my white Accord and drive

her gold Civic in to work. Luckily it's only a five-minute drive—the car feels as if it might shake apart. Phil, the bus company's mechanic, says he'll take it for a spin while I'm out picking up passengers, and when I come back later for a break and ask him if he's found out what is wrong, Phil says, "The lug nuts on both front tires were loose. Some were so loose, I could turn them with my hand." Phil is a laid-back, peaceful hippie, almost impossible to rattle, but now he looks grave and more alert than usual. With the clean back of his greasy hand, he wipes the sweat from his brow. We are standing in the parking lot outside the bus garage.

"Could those lug nuts have come loose on their own?" I ask him. "Or did someone loosen them on purpose?"

"Who would loosen them on purpose?" Phil asks, squinting against the sun.

"Marly's ex-boyfriend," I say. "She locked him out of her apartment a few nights ago, and he broke down the door three times after that." According to Marly's apartment mates, Mitch had entered a third time, after Marly was gone, by splintering the door with a crowbar.

"Jeez," Phil says. "Some guys have a hard time taking a hint they're not wanted."

I smile sourly and tell Phil that, even though the manager finally kicked Mitch out of the building, he lurked around outside for the next few days, and during that entire time—for two days and two nights—Marly's car was parked in the untended lot next door.

Phil looks down at the ground and shakes his head.

"He could have killed her," I say, "if those wheels had come off at seventy miles an hour! That's probably what he was hoping for, the little bastard."

“Well, they could have come loose on their own, too,” Phil says. He asks if Marly has had any work done on her car lately, and I tell him that Mitch replaced the brakes a few months back.

“That’s probably what happened,” Phil says. “You said he’s a little guy, right? He probably didn’t have the strength to tighten the nuts all the way, and they slowly worked themselves loose.”

“He’s bigger than me,” I say, “and I’ve changed several tires on that car, and the nuts have never come loose.”

Phil shrugs. “Maybe he wasn’t as conscientious as you about getting them tight again. But anyway, I tightened them up good.”

I thank Phil. Then I say, “But don’t you think I should report this to the police? Marly could have been killed.”

“She could have,” Phil agrees. He looks up the street, toward the highway overpass, under which cars are thundering. “If she’d kept driving that car for much longer, the wheels would have disengaged. Not a good thing to happen when you’re barreling down the expressway.” But, Phil reiterates, Mitch didn’t necessarily do anything wrong on purpose, and even if he did, it couldn’t be proved, since his fingerprints could still be on the car from the brake job he had done.

That night, I call Marly’s dad and tell him about her car. Ray insists that Marly should not return to Michigan, that she should stay in California, at least for a while; she can get a job for the remaining two months of summer, and then go to college in nearby Arcata in the fall.

But Marly has an interview for a receptionist job at Planned Parenthood in Grand Rapids lined up for next week, and she doesn’t want to pass up that opportunity. “And besides,” she tells me over the phone, “I’d feel really bad if I let Mitch drive

me out of my apartment.” I agree with Ray that if staying a couple of thousand miles away is necessary to keep Marly safe, then that is obviously what she should do. But it’s impossible to know how much precaution is needed.



DURING THE WEEK Marly is away, I half-consider, half-fantasize about borrowing a gun from one of my hunter neighbors, learning to use it, and driving up to Grand Rapids and murdering Mitch. Maybe a feminist lawyer would take my case, and I’d go free, and if I did end up in prison, at least I’d have a lot of time to read. But I’d miss going for walks by the river and the lake, and I would hate being bossed or harassed by guards or other inmates. And I don’t really believe I have a right to kill Mitch, unless he murders Marly or hurts her badly.

Instead of borrowing a gun, I buy a cell phone; while it’s not much of an action, it seems better than doing nothing at all. Now, when Marly returns from visiting her dad, she can reach me wherever I am, twenty-four hours a day. If she needs my help suddenly, I’ll drop everything and race up to her while keeping her on the line.

Although I miss her, I dread Marly’s return from California. When I close my eyes at night, I see Marly’s gold hatchback hurtling down the expressway, its wheels flying off, the car skidding on its axles. Although Marly’s car is once again safe, a man who could demolish her apartment door and sabotage her car is capable of further endangerment. One day while I’m out buying groceries, I stop in a sporting goods store and buy two canisters of pepper spray, one to replace my old, unused canister and the other to replace the one Marly has given away. And on the morning after Marly returns from visiting her dad,

we drive from my house, each in our own car because we'll go our separate ways later, to meet for a consultation at the Center for Women in Transition.

The legal aide on duty, a blond woman in her late twenties, is a lawyer who volunteers at the center. She leads us to a conference room with a long table and closes the door behind us. Marly and I pull out chairs and take seats side by side. The lawyer, who introduces herself as Teresa, sits at the table's head and begins to ask Marly about Mitch and why she wants a personal protection order against him. Marly tells her about the incident with the door. Teresa asks, "And besides the door, were there other incidents?"

"Um, what do you mean?" Marly says. She is turned toward Teresa, sitting with her back slanted at me.

"Was Mitch abusive in other ways?" Teresa asks. She clicks her pen and waits, but Marly keeps quiet. "For instance, did he call you names, or make threats?"

Marly drops her gaze and her voice. "Not names," she says. "But he's made threats. He's said some really terrible things. Sometimes he would say something so awful that I couldn't really believe it. It was like something out of a gangster movie. I'd tell myself that I must have heard him wrong, because people didn't talk like that in real life."

"Can you remember what he said?" Teresa asks. She clicks her pen again and waits. Marly sits with her shoulders tense and hunched and her face half-turned away from me. Her bright-red hair, newly cut, makes her neck look pale and fragile.

"I know it's hard to talk about," Teresa says, "but the judge is going to want to know the details. You won't have to repeat any of this in court. I'm just taking a few notes, and then I'll help you fill out the request, and you'll take it to the court and

the judge will read it and make his decision. Does that sound okay?"

"Yes," Marly says. But she continues to look down at the table as if waiting for something.

Finally it occurs to me that she doesn't want me to hear her answers. "I'm going to go find a bathroom," I say, and I push back my chair and stand.

"Okay," Marly says brightly, sitting up a little, her shoulders lifting.

I leave the room, closing the door behind me. I find a bathroom and use it even though I don't really need to and then wander the center's halls. T-shirts of bright yellow, pink, lavender, white, and blue are pinned to the walls all along one hallway, each with a different woman's name hand-painted on it: **Sharon, Ashley, and Cathy; Maria, Katie, and Pam; Jessica and Christine.** In smaller writing, around the women's names, are handwritten messages: "**a wonderful mother,**" "**my dearest daughter,**" "**we love you,**" "**she will be missed forever.**" At the end of the line of T-shirts is a poster with an explanation: the names on the T-shirts are the names of local women who have been abused and killed by their husbands and ex-husbands, their boyfriends and ex-boyfriends. These T-shirts, the poster further explains, have been made by the children, mothers, sisters, and friends of the battered and murdered women. At the bottom of the poster is a list of statistics: **Domestic violence is the number one cause of injury to women in the U.S. One in three women are battered at some time in their lives. Four thousand American women are killed by their partners every year.**

I turn away from this hallway and make my way back to the conference room, stopping a few feet from the door so that

I can look in through its window without being seen. Marly is talking, and Teresa is listening intently, a yellow legal pad with a few scribbled notes before her. I fade back from the conference room door, walk down the hall in the opposite direction, and stop before another wall poster that reads in big purple letters: **NO ONE DESERVES TO BE SEXUALLY ASSAULTED**, and underneath, in smaller, black letters: **HELP AND SUPPORT ARE AVAILABLE**. Below this is a list of common reactions to rape: **fear, anxiety, shock, disbelief, helplessness, depression, anger, shame, embarrassment, self-blame, guilt, flashbacks, and isolation**. I read the rest of the poster, then return again to within a few feet of the window that looks into the conference room. Teresa is still sitting quietly, but her legal pad has been pushed aside. Marly is bent over a form composed of two pieces of paper joined at the center. She is writing quickly, words flowing from her pen. As I watch, she flips the double sheet over, which is filled with her tiny handwriting, and continues on the backside.

I fade back from the conference room door, and this time I wander the halls without looking at or reading what is on them, fretting and fuming, trying to not think of what Mitch might have done to my child. Maybe I should kill Mitch, rather than wait to see if the personal protection order will work. It's just a piece of paper. A lot of men ignore PPOs and continue to abuse and eventually murder their girlfriends and wives. Why should I wait to see whether Mitch will obey the order and stay away from Marly? Why should I give him another chance to do her harm? Marly's apartment mates didn't see Mitch during the week Marly was in California, and Marly has not seen or talked with him since the night she locked him out, but after Marly returns to her apartment, Mitch might show up again.

When I return to the conference room for a third time, Marly is still writing, but nearing the end of the fourth and last page of the document. I open the door and take the seat beside her, and she writes to the end of the page. “I’m done,” she announces, to Teresa and to me, it seems, as well as to herself.

I glance over at the form and her shaking hand. “Is this what you’ll give the judge?” I ask.

“Yes,” Marly tells me.

“Do you want me to read it?” I ask, thinking I can edit it, if it needs it—Marly is a terrible speller, and I want the judge to see her story clearly and to rule in her favor.

“No,” Marly says.

“Are you sure?” I press, leaning forward, not quite reaching out my hand. I also want to know what has happened to Marly, if she wants me to.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Marly says. “There’s no reason for you to see this.”

“Okay,” I murmur, folding my arms across my breasts, sitting back in my chair.

When Marly was three and six and ten and I would coddle her or hover, my father would admonish me: “When are you going to cut the cord?” My mom would defend me and, at the same time, gently tease me: “She’s cutting it. A little at a time.” At the Center for Women in Transition, we’ve reached another of those times. Is it harder for me to sit back and do nothing because right after my first child’s cord was cut, I was involuntarily sedated, and by the time I regained consciousness, she had died? But wouldn’t any mother, not just those who have already lost one daughter, string whole nets of cords around their girls to ensure their safety? Except no cords or nets are strong enough, and nothing and no one can be ensured.

Marly hands the form filled with her tiny handwriting to Teresa, who reads through the pages quickly, her eyes flickering, her lips thinning and tightening. When Teresa comes to the end of the statement, she looks up, her face grim. “You won’t have any problem,” she says. “The judge will grant you the order. Without question.”

We thank her, and I make out a donation check, and then we set off in our two cars for the Ottawa County Courthouse, which, according to Teresa, processes PPOs in a matter of hours, whereas the courthouse in Kent County, which encompasses Grand Rapids, can take as long as a week.

We park in a lot in downtown Grand Haven, a block from the courthouse, and Marly and I get out of our cars and walk toward the tall, old formal building. It’s a hot and gritty summer day, and as we stride down the street, squinting against the wind, I scan the other pedestrians and the passengers and drivers of the passing cars for Mitch’s face, my hand lightly gripping the canister of pepper spray in my pocket. Mitch can’t know we are here—Grand Haven is thirty or so miles from Grand Rapids and Mitch doesn’t know that we are about to process an order against him—but since we don’t know where he is, it’s easy to imagine him being anywhere, including on the same street where we are walking.

Just inside the courthouse door, a stern black woman sitting at the security desk asks us if we are carrying any weapons, and she rattles through a list that includes knives, guns, razor blades, pepper spray, ammunition, and explosives.

“Well, I have pepper spray,” I say.

“You do? You’re carrying it?” she asks, her eyes widened in disbelief.

“It’s in my pocket,” I say.

“Set it on the desk,” she orders, and in one motion, Marly and I each pull our pepper spray canisters out of our pockets and set them down in front of the woman. Lines above her eyes and around her mouth leap out sharply. “What are you doing, bringing those in here?” she asks loudly. Marly and I stare at her without responding. “What are you here for?” the woman demands, her voice echoing up and down the high-ceilinged hall.

I answer her quietly: “To get a personal protection order for my daughter.”

The woman looks between our two faces, and her own face softens. “Well, you can’t bring those in here,” she says, her voice lowered. “It’s illegal. Go take them back to your car, and then you can come in.”

Marly and I scoop up the canisters and return them to our pockets. Outside, walking toward the parking lot, we are smiling a little. It all seems so odd and unreal. The chances of our being attacked on this busy downtown street on a bright summer morning seem incalculably small. Yet on the short walk back to the courthouse, I feel unsafe without my pepper spray in my pocket and my hand closed around it, my thumb ready to press the nozzle.

The judge we need to see is in session, so we leave the form with his receptionist, who says the judge will look at it during his next break, and when we return from strolling the waxed, echoing halls a half hour later, the personal protection order is signed and ready to be delivered.

We leave the courthouse, and Marly heads back to Grand Rapids, to her apartment, while I drive back to my house. I had pushed for Marly to stay with me at least until the PPO was delivered, but she insisted that she was likely safer at her

own apartment, since Kirk has replaced the splintered piece of paneling with a standard, solid door complete with a heavy chain and dead bolt, and Amelia, Marly's black-belt friend, is going to stay with Marly the next few nights. One of Marly's apartment mates has found out where Mitch is staying, and Wendell and Amelia plan to show up there this afternoon, knock on the door, and hand him the PPO.

Marly calls me in the evening. "Wendell and Amelia delivered the PPO," she says. "Mitch started to read it. Then he crumpled it up and threw it on the ground. But that doesn't matter—as long as he touches it with his hand, it's considered served."

"But if he's angry, Marly . . . What if he comes looking for you?"

"Wendell and Amelia are here with me. And, like you say, Mitch is a coward. Plus, he really hated that time he spent in jail, and he's afraid of being put back in."

"He was in jail before?"

"Yeah, I told you. About ten years ago, for vagrancy, in Texas."

Two more days pass, without incident or news of Mitch. Then Marly hears that Mitch has gone to live with his sister in Lubbock, that she sent him money for a one-way bus ticket, and he left for Texas that same day.



MARLY INTERVIEWS for the receptionist job at Planned Parenthood along with over a hundred other applicants. She knows it's a long shot, given the tight job market and her minimal experience, and she isn't too disappointed when she finds out

that she hasn't been hired. For the past three years, off and on, she's been taking core classes and photography at Grand Rapids Community College, and although she loves photography, from the start she has been adamant about not wanting to rely on it for her bread and butter. "I just want to take photos of whatever I feel like," she has said more than once, "not perfect slices of strawberry shortcake, or women in their god-awful bridesmaids dresses." But recently, she's begun to consider photography of a different sort, and after she's passed over for the job at Planned Parenthood, she makes up her mind: she will become an X-ray technician; she will take pictures of people's bones for a living. And maybe, on the side, she'll combine X-ray technology with conventional photography to produce a new kind of art.

Marly starts searching online for programs close to Grand Rapids. One evening I'm checking the course listings of a college that has just opened near my house to see if they offer an X-ray tech degree when my eye stops on another course of study: veterinary technician. I think of all the pets and strays Marly has cared for over the years: the dozen or more cats; the baby bunnies, Uno and Dos; and the days-old baby possum. Her childhood love for animals has not abated, and the next time I speak with her, I mention the possibility of her becoming a vet tech.

"That's it!" Marly cries. "That's exactly it!" She investigates various programs, arranges for her school records to be transferred, and has her name placed on the waiting list of a vet tech program in Muskegon. Meanwhile, she finds another temp filing job and begins volunteering at an animal shelter.

One day I call her, as usual. "I helped adopt out another

kitten today,” Marly says. “A real sweet little boy, all gray. And that skittish orange girl who was found stinking of lighter fluid, with her face and body singed? She’s beginning to warm up. She really surprised me today. I was petting her, and she closed her eyes and leaned right into my hand.” Marly says that she and the other shelter workers are still looking for a name for the young orange cat that was doused with lighter fluid and, they suspect, intentionally set on fire. “I’d like to call her Flame,” Marly says. “Partly because of her color but mainly because of what happened to her. And we’re also considering Phoenix, and Baptism by Fire.” They’ve come up with other names, unrelated to the cat’s appearance or her circumstances, but none of them have stuck so far.

Marly and I chat on the phone a little longer. As we are hanging up Marly says, “So, Mom, how long are you going to keep calling me every day?” There is a smile in her voice, as well as a challenge. About a month has passed since she phoned me at 1:20 in the morning.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I guess I can stop.”

“You can keep calling me every day, if you want,” Marly says. “It’s up to you. But you can quit worrying now.”

We say good-bye, and I set down the phone. Wandering around my kitchen, I remind myself to not dwell on Marly’s splintered door, or the loosened lug nuts of her car, or the T-shirts at the center painted with the names of battered and murdered women. Instead, I think of the young orange cat that was set on fire but is now recovering. And I think of her potential names: Baptism by Fire, Phoenix, Flame. And in my mind I see Marly, surrounded by fire yet unsinged. Not Marly as she is now, with her mane of flaming hair, but when she

was just born: red-faced, wailing in protest, already struggling, already strong; twisting and kicking in the doctor's grasp even before the cord was cut; unlike her quiet sister, ready to take on the world.

