

THE TRAJECTORY OF A RANDOM CAMARO

Stella would still be alive if not for the crazy confluence of factors that, when one considered the probabilities, one-in-a-million, one-in-a-billion, made it seem like the work of some all-knowing orchestrator.

Stella's husband Hank had cut down the dogwood just two weeks prior. Had the tree been there, it might have blocked the Camaro. Stella had been in a chair in the southwest corner of the sunroom and had dozed off while reading. If her head had slumped to the other side of the armchair, she might have survived.

And there was the fence. Hank had started to rebuild it, as it had been assaulted in slow motion by creeping ivy over the years. So there was a part missing, big enough for a car. The tree. The fence. Either one would've slowed or altered the Camaro's trajectory, kept it from hurtling across the yard, over the dogwood stump—orange mole on the skin of perfect green lawn—and through the flimsy wall and windows next to which Stella slept with a book sprawled across her lap.

Hank used to think that if a possibility comes into your head, whether in fear or fantasy or just musing, it was precluded from actually coming true. That's what freaked him out. He'd imagined it when the dogwood was down and the fence removed: a car smashing through the wall of the sunroom where his wife often fell asleep while reading. Day Street sloped toward the house and meandered to the left of the yard, and too many people sped.

And he'd entertained a vague daydream of life as a widower: wild one-night stands with a parade of women who would find his bereavement unbearably sexy.

Once or maybe twice, and only as a passing fantasy.

But then it happened, so a part of him believed it was his fault: His superstition had worked in reverse. Instead of precluding it from happening, his imagination had caused it. Punishment by the universe. God or whatever. For an overactive imagination. That was one answer—though, notwithstanding the fantasia film-reel that was so often on overdrive inside his brain, he'd never actually done anything to hurt anyone. Much less Stella.

Hank called Stella's sister Poppy from the hospital.

At first, Poppy didn't consider the coincidences that had conspired to kill her sister. Such thoughts weren't available to her. No thoughts were available to her—just the raw fact of her only sister wrapped in so much bandage that there were no features visible. Her head swollen out like the elephant man's. Poppy wouldn't have known it was Stella if not for her feet and her hands. They'd had mani-pedis together the previous weekend, and Stella had chosen silver-blue polish.

Her toenails could've been Poppy's own. A tattoo of waves and fish swam around Poppy's left ankle and she wore a silver ring on each of her second toes, and Stella's were tanner, from gardening barefoot—but otherwise you wouldn't be able to tell them apart: long toes, the second one bent toward the big one like a skinny wife turning to kiss her chubby husband.

Hank hugged Poppy when she arrived at the hospital, unable to control his grief. But Poppy had already pulled the blinds on her feelings. She hugged him curtly and then got down to business. Until now, they'd been sharing Stella, and Stella—bright, easy, vivacious—had been the center of the Venn diagram that had described their lives. Without Stella, they'd both be cut loose.

Stella was on life support, and it was up to Hank and Poppy to decide, together, what to do. They didn't confer for long. There was no reason to keep her alive. Nothing would be left of her but the shell, and even if the body on the bed still had Stella's lovely feet, and you could hug her, it would be unfair and Stella would have hated it. *Let her go*, they both said, and each gave the other several minutes alone to kiss her feet and say goodbye.