



TWO GIRLS DOWN

'The suspense is relentless and the payoff is spectacular. Lead character Alice Vega is sensational.'

LEE CHILD

LOUISA LUNA

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JAMIE BRANDT WAS NOT A BAD MOTHER. LATER SHE WOULD TELL that to anyone who would listen: police, reporters, lawyers, her parents, her boyfriend, her dealer, the new bartender with the knuckle tattoos at Schultz's, the investigator from California and her partner, and her own reflection in the bathroom mirror, right before cracking her forehead on the sink's edge and passing out from the cocktail of pain, grief, and fear.

She was not a bad mother, even though she'd yelled at them that morning. It was Saturday, finally, and Jamie was embarrassed to say sometimes she liked the weekdays more, the predictable rhythm of her aunt Maggie's real estate office where she was the receptionist, the chance to drink coffee and read *Us* magazine online, thinking of the girls in school, which they actually liked for the most part. Kylie, the ten-year-old, might piss and moan over homework, but she loved the day-to-day operations of school—the hurricane of note passing and gossip. She was already popular, had already stolen makeup from Jamie's top dresser drawer and sent texts to boys from Jamie's phone. Bailey, eight, was just as sassy but loved school for the school part, reading and writing—especially vocabulary, the way words sounded and the rules that went with them.

The weekends were hectic, a blur of soccer games and ballet practice, playdates and every last minute crammed with errands: groceries, cooking, pharmacy (Kylie's allergies, Bailey's asthma), cleaning the apartment, dusting and Swiffering every surface to avoid allergies and asthma. And then meltdowns and screaming protests about the rules: one hour on the computer for non-school-related activities, half an

hour of video games, one hour of TV, all of which would be broken by Sunday night. Jamie would have to beg them to go to the housing complex playground, which the girls claimed was old, dirty, with two out of five swings broken and a sandbox that smelled like pee.

All Jamie wanted was to get to Saturday night. Then Darrell would come over and maybe the girls would go somewhere for a sleepover, or to Nana and Papa's. Maybe Jamie would let them play video games for a bonus hour in their room and take pictures with her phone just so she and Darrell could drink some beers and watch a movie that didn't feature a chipmunk or a princess. And if the girls weren't there, maybe they'd smoke a joint; maybe his hand would slide up her shirt and they'd end up naked on the couch, Jamie looking at him on top, thinking he is not perfect, he has funny teeth and always wears that leather jacket with the hole in the pit, but there are a few good qualities here. One large good quality: she would think and then she'd laugh, and Darrell would say, "What?" but then he'd laugh too.

But first, errands and then a birthday party for all of them. It was for a girl in Kylie's class, but it was one of those parties to which everyone was invited—siblings and parents for pizza, games, and cake in the family's big ranch-style house in a new development called The Knolls. Jamie didn't like the trend, these big free-for-all events, was worried because Kylie's birthday was in June and maybe she'd want the same thing. Jamie saw the problems coming at her like headlights: their apartment was too small for a party, her mother would never let her hear the end of it if she asked to have it at her parents' place, and the money, all that money, for that many pizzas plus gifts plus a new dress for Kylie and the new dress Bailey would have to have too.

"Why do you guys even have to come in?" said Kylie from the passenger side, eyebrows wrinkled up over her big hot-cocoa eyes, a sneer in her angel lips.

"Fine, we'll wait outside in the car," said Jamie.

"Everyone will see us," said Bailey from the backseat, anxious.

Jamie looked in the rearview, taking in Bailey's face, a palette of worry. How can she care so much about what other people think already? thought Jamie. She didn't want the girls to care; she missed the days when they were too little to worry about appearances or be

embarrassed, back when they would streak like hippies before jumping into the tub.

“We’re not waiting in the car, Kylie,” said Jamie. “Hey—won’t Stella Piper be there with her family? Bailey can play with Owen.”

From the corner of her eye Jamie saw her shrug, and felt the weight of it.

“They’re not friends anymore,” said Bailey.

“They’re not?” Jamie said to Bailey. “You’re not?” she said to Kylie.

“Why can’t you shut up?” Kylie said, craning her head around the seat to glare at her sister.

“Mom!” shouted Bailey, pointing.

“I heard it, Bailey.” To Kylie: “Don’t talk like that to your sister. Why aren’t you friends with Stella Piper anymore?”

Another shrug.

“She thinks Stella’s dumb. And her glasses are funny,” Bailey reported. “She says they make her look like a creature.”

“She’s been your friend forever, since you were in kindergarten,” said Jamie.

“I know,” said Kylie, hushed and hissing.

Jamie stopped third in a trail of cars at a light and said, “You shouldn’t be mean to someone just because they look funny.”

Kylie stared out the window.

“Someday someone might think you look funny, and then how’ll you like it?”

Kylie kept staring.

“Well?” Jamie took Kylie’s chin in her hand and turned her head. “Well?”

“I won’t like it.”

Jamie let go and looked up to see a policeman directing all the cars in her lane to the left.

“What’s this now?” said Jamie.

Bailey looked up over the seat.

“What is it? What’s happening?”

“I don’t know, for God’s sake,” said Jamie.

She pulled up even with the cop and rolled down the window.

“I need to go straight ahead to the Gulf on Branford.”

“Branford? That side of the highway’s closed for the parade, Miss,” said the cop.

“Fuck me,” Jamie said, remembering.

Spring Fest. The town’s annual parade of toilet-paper-covered floats and high school bands slogging their way through “My Girl.”

“Mom!” the kids shouted, embarrassed.

“Well, Officer, I’m about to run outta gas, so what do you recommend?”

The cop leaned into her window.

“Tell you what, I’ll wave you through to St. Cloud; then you can take a right to Route 1080 and you can get to the Hess over that way.”

Jamie pictured the route in her head and nodded. “That’d be just great, thanks.”

“No problem, ma’am,” said the cop, tapping the roof of the car.

Jamie drove the path laid out for her by the cop.

“I can’t believe you said the f-curse to the police,” said Kylie, a look of quiet shame on her face.

“I’m full of surprises,” said Jamie.

“Can we go past the parade? Miss Ferno’s on a float from her church,” said Bailey.

“What? No, we’re already late for this thing,” said Jamie.

She glanced at both of them. They stared out the window. Someday you’ll think I’m funny, she thought. Someday you’ll tell your friends, No, my mom’s cool. Once she said “Fuck me” right in front of a cop.

Finally, when they got to the Hess, Kylie asked, “Can we split a Reese’s?”

She had yet to outgrow an unwavering devotion to sugar—she would pour maple syrup over Frosted Flakes if you turned your head the other way.

“No, you’re going to have all kinds of crap at this party; you don’t need a Reese’s.”

Then the wailing began—you’d think someone was pricking their cuticles with sewing needles. Jamie held her head and leaned over the wheel, thinking she should have smoked the very last bit of resin in the pipe this morning. She didn’t like to drive stoned, but there wasn’t enough in there to mess her up proper, just enough to help her push through, get to the party where it might be acceptable to have a light beer at noon.

“Enough, stop it!” yelled Jamie, feeling her voice crack, the muscles in her neck tense up. “Fine, go get a goddamn Reese’s. Get me a coffee with a Splenda, please.”

She threw a five in Kylie’s lap.

“Go before I change my mind,” she said.

The girls unbuckled their seat belts and scrambled out of the car. Jamie watched them run into the mini-mart, heard the clicks of their dress-up shoes. She checked her makeup in the mirror and shook her head at herself, then went out to the pumps.

She continued to shake her head, thought, Jesus Christ, do I ever sound like her—her own mother, Gail—“Before I change my mind” and all those threats. First you swear you’ll never be like your mother; then you find yourself sending them to their room and grounding them, and occasionally, once in a while, you hit them once or twice too hard on the back after they say something rude.

Jamie got back in the car and blew air into her hands. Spring Fest my ass, she thought. It was the end of March and still freezing in the mornings and at night, although they’d had more than a few hazy warm days the past two months that fooled everyone into thinking spring was really here; even the black cherry trees were confused—fruit had prematurely formed on the branches, then iced over and broke off the next week in a storm.

The girls had been in the store a long time.

Jamie looked at the time on her phone. 11:32 a.m. They still had to go to Kmart for a gift for Kylie’s friend, which meant they would argue about the under-ten-dollar rule, then engage in negotiations until they got to an under-ten-dollar-without-tax agreement. If there was time, maybe Jamie could browse for something for her aunt Maggie, whose birthday was coming up. Maggie was fond of her, and Jamie didn’t really know why—maybe because she admired Jamie’s pluck, maybe because she’d been a single mother herself after Uncle Stu had left her for a girl in a massage parlor twenty years ago, and she knew how rough it was. Maybe because it was a way to piss off her sister, Jamie’s mother, which she enjoyed doing for a list of reasons either one would tell you all about if you asked them. Jamie ultimately didn’t care about the details since Aunt Maggie had cleaned up in the divorce and got her real estate agent’s license in short order, owned half a dozen homes in the Poconos

that she rented out to vacationers, and brokered deals between buyers and the new developments surrounding Denville.

“Goddammit,” said Jamie.

She got out of the car and jogged into the mini-mart, scanned the inside quickly and saw only one other person—a man, looking at a porn magazine.

“Hey,” she said to the fat boy behind the counter. He seemed too old for the braces on his teeth.

He jumped.

“You see two girls in here?”

“Yeah. They went to the bathroom in back.”

Jamie did not say thank you, walked past the guy with the porn and out the back door. She saw Kylie leaning against the cinder block wall, holding a Reese’s cup between her thumb and forefinger like a teacup.

“What the hell, Kylie?” said Jamie.

“She had to pee. She said it was an emergency.”

Jamie stormed past, rapped on the bathroom door and said, “Bailey, come on, let’s move it.”

“I’m washing my hands,” said Bailey from inside.

“You’re done. Let’s go.”

“I’m trying not to touch anything.”

Jamie almost smiled. She had been trying to teach them to line the toilet seat with paper towels, hover above the bowl, and turn the faucets on and off with their elbows in public bathrooms.

“I have Purell in the car. Come on.”

The door opened and Bailey came out. She looked at her mother and covered her mouth with her hands.

“We forgot the coffee!”

“It’s okay,” said Jamie. “Let’s go.”

They went back to the car and drove to the Ridgewood Mall without speaking, Kylie staring out the window, Bailey reading her school workbook. Jamie glanced at both of them and thought they looked nice. Bailey in a pink princess dress, Kylie in a black dress with a purple flower print and the sweetheart neckline that was a little too old for her, Jamie thought, but since it was a hand-me-down from her cousin, she could not complain. They are both so big, she thought, which makes me so old.

The parking lot was surprisingly not crowded, the first three or

four rows of the grid full but that was it. God bless Spring Fest, Jamie thought.

“So what does Arianna want?”

“Aren’t we coming in?” said Kylie, shocked.

“No way. I’m going in and out.”

“Come on. That’s so unfair!” they both said.

“Deal with it,” said Jamie. “What does she like?”

Kylie sighed. “She wants a sleeping bag.”

“I’m not buying her a sleeping bag. Does she like jewelry?”

Kylie nodded.

“Great. I’ll get her some bracelets.”

Jamie looked through her purse for her phone and her wallet, left the key in the ignition so the heat would stay on.

“Can we at least listen to music?” said Kylie.

“Yes, you can. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

Jamie got out and was about to slam the door when Bailey said, “Mom?”

“What?”

She looked up from her book and said, “Do you know you call a group of lions a pride, not a pack?”

Jamie stared at her, then at Kylie, who rolled her eyes.

“No, baby, I didn’t know that.”

She shut the door and left them.

Into the calm, controlled air of Kmart, pop music from ten years ago in her ears, she forced herself to stay focused. If she didn’t have a list, she had trouble concentrating in big box stores, got distracted by displays and sales. That was the point, wasn’t it, she thought, to turn you into a kid again who sees something shiny and wants it. When the girls were with her, a ten-minute trip turned into thirty minutes easily, everyone leaving with candy and gum and a tank top.

Jamie went to the toy aisles, skimmed over the bright boxes and tubes and balls to the girls section, Make-Your-Own-Headband, Home Manicure Kit, Bead-a-Necklace—she picked that one up; it was \$9.99. You got lucky today, Arianna.

She made her way to the cards and wrapping paper, grabbed a pink gift bag with tissue paper already lined inside and a white card dangling from the handle.

Then on her way to the checkout she stopped when she saw a sheer cowl-necked sweater on a sale rack. The tag read \$21.99. Nope.

At the register, she checked her phone (11:55). Oh who cares, she thought. It doesn't matter if you're late to this kind of thing; it's an open house. Suddenly she felt relaxed, realized her hands were in fists, holding the strings of the gift bag hostage in her fingers. The day opened up in front of her. The party would eat up a couple of hours, then maybe they'd stop by her parents' place, then she could pick up McDonald's for dinner, and then they could waste time until Darrell came over and she could send them to her room and let them watch TV in her bed.

It didn't seem that bad when she thought of it that way. Just some hours to fill.

She paid, picked up her bag, and left. Into the parking lot, back to her car, she sped up. Confused at first, she thought, This is my car. Checked the dent in the fender, the plate. No girls.

I'm going to kill them, she thought, took a breath too quickly and coughed, started talking to them in her head. Don't even tell me you can't tie it in a knot till we get to the fucking party, Bailey. Or you, was this your idea? she thought, picturing Kylie's face. You and your sweet tooth, looking for free samples.

Jamie looked around at the stores: Reno's Coffee, Morgan Housewares, StoneField Ice Cream. She ran to the latter, coughing like she was a smoker, entered through the doors. It was quiet and cold inside. A woman and two little boys and a baby in a car seat sat in a booth. The girl behind the counter had a ring in her lip.

"You see two girls come in here?" said Jamie.

"Yeah, they were just in here."

For a second they stared at each other.

"So where are they?" said Jamie.

Lip Ring shrugged.

"How should I know? They left a few minutes ago."

Jamie could feel the blood rush in her chest. She started to leave, then turned back and said, "Lemme ask you something: How the fuck do you eat with that thing in your face?"

She left and slammed the door before she could hear the answer.

Then Reno's Coffee—a couple, a man post-workout, everyone on his phone.

“Did you see two girls in party dresses?” she asked the people behind the counter. “Eight and ten years old. Did they come in to use the bathroom?” Then to the couple and the man: “Did you see two girls?”

They all said no.

She left, looked back at her car, still empty.

Then Morgan Housewares, Global Market, Eastern Sports. By the time she got back to Kmart it was 12:11, and the fear had become a rock in her throat.

“I can’t find my girls,” she said to the security guard. She put her hand to her lips after she said it, like she was trying to get the words back.

“Did you lose them in the store, ma’am?” he said. His double chin was strangled by his uniform shirt.

“No, they were in the car. I was in here. Now they’re gone.”

“We can page them in the store,” he said.

“They’re not in the store. I was in the store.”

“Maybe they came in to look for you,” he said.

“Yeah, okay. Yes, please, page them.”

She was standing in Customer Service with Geri the Customer Service Liaison and two other security guards when she heard the guard with the double chin’s voice say her daughters’ names: “Kylie Brandt, Bailey Brandt, please come to the Customer Service Center.”

Jamie watched people emerge from the aisles, calm, bored. It was not their daughters’ names in the air.

“You have bathrooms? Where are the bathrooms?” she said.

Geri pointed to the left.

“You can hear the loudspeaker in there too,” she said. Jamie couldn’t even see this woman; her face was a smudge with dull gray spots in the middle.

Jamie ran now through the white aisles, hearing the sound of her own wheezing and rationalizations as she talked to herself, “She had to pee, Bailey had to pee. Maybe one of them got sick from that Reese’s.”

She threw herself onto the door and into the bathroom, knocked on and pushed open every stall. A woman with a walker and a younger woman stood at the sinks.

“Did you see two girls? I can’t find my girls.”

The woman with the walker appeared not to understand. The younger woman said, “No, what did they look like?”

“They’re wearing dresses,” Jamie said, and ran out again, to the front of the store.

She passed the security guards and Geri, and now a small crowd of people looking and talking, to the front doors where she exited, ran into the parking lot, back to her car, which was still empty. She hit the hood with her hand and ran back to the store, where more people stood, watching her.

The face of a man with a mustache blurred in front of her, next to the guard with the double chin.

“Ma’am, I put out a Code Adam alert for the entire mall and called the police. Do you want to sit down?”

Jamie didn’t understand the words he said. He held out his hand, to guide her inside to a cushioned folding chair, where someone would bring her a glass of water.

Jamie didn’t take it. She dug her fingernails into her scalp and whispered, “My girls . . . my girls.”

They always think they won’t get caught, thought Cap. They want to get caught, Nell said to him once. Otherwise why do it? And Cap said, No one wants to get caught, not even the ones who feel guilty, and that is actually most of them. Not even Catholics. And you need a little bit of ego to think you’re the one who’s not going to get caught. That you’re the one guy who’ll fool his wife forever; you’re the one woman whose husband never asks too many questions. Maybe you are. Maybe you get to have it all—a sweet home life and something breathless and dramatic on the side. Maybe you deserve it, too. Maybe she’s a bitch and you never wanted to marry her in the first place. Maybe you never wanted to work this job in this trashy old town and drive this piece-of-shit car and have these screaming kids with cheese curl dust on their fingers. Maybe the only way it gets better is to have an hour with the waitress from the diner or the fresh young babysitter in a motel room or your car with the backseat folded into the trunk.

Maybe you’re just an asshole.

Cap had stopped flipping through the possibilities a long time ago. The truth was he didn’t care why they did it; it was just his job to catch them. A pocket-sized DVR tucked into a cigarette box, one full water

bottle, and one empty, black coffee in a thermos. Beaded seat cushion like the cabbies used to have back in Brooklyn when he grew up. Sometimes reading material but not for this kind of active surveillance, which usually took place over lunchtime or a coffee break. Passion doesn't take long.

His phone buzzed. It was a text from Nell: "Do u have anything 4 din in the house???"

Cap wrote back: "Let's order Justino's."

Nell wrote: "Sick of pizza. Chinese. I'll get mu shu."

Cap wrote: "Great."

Nell wrote: "(:)"

Sideways happy face. People are going to start putting sideways happy faces on their headstones, he thought. Here lies Max Caplan: Father, Ex-husband, Private Investigator, Disgraced Cop, :). Sideways happy face.

Definitely "Father" first on the headstone. Leave it to his daughter, Nell, he thought, to think of dinner at 5 p.m., not because she was hungry but because she knew he would have a bowl of cereal unless she took care of it. He told her not to worry because he was basically okay. He never went into how much he drank on nights when he wasn't working or when she was at her mother's, how he woke up in the middle of the night after passing out on the couch with the TV blaring.

The door to room 7 opened, and Cap propped the cigarette box up on the side mirror and tapped Record on the DVR. A man and a woman came out. The man had a belly that seemed to go all the way around his waist, like a life preserver, over his belt. The woman was, unfortunately, blond and trashy-looking, tight jeans and a spray tan. You couldn't fight the stereotype a little, lady? Cap thought as he watched it all through the screen. He zoomed in as much as he could on the couple, getting their entire bodies in the frame. You wanted to see the body language as much as the face, he'd found. Hands and hips and feet. If they didn't kiss you wanted to see how they touched, and if they didn't touch, if you could see every part of them, it was easier to see if they wanted to.

These two touched. The man had his hand on her elbow, her arm was around the life preserver, both of them talking with their mouths downward, whispering, thought Cap. The man said something, and the

woman laughed and then put her fingers to his lips, like she was shushing him. Playful, intimate. Then the woman got in her car and drove away, and the man watched her go. He walked across the lot to his car, and then sat in the driver's seat for a couple of minutes. He sat, and Cap sat. Cap watched him rub his face with the heels of the hands and then the fingers. Guilty, big guy? Then the man drove away. Cap tapped Pause.

“Oh, Mr. Svetich,” he said.

Watching another man cheat on his wife was exhausting. Cheating was one thing Jules could never accuse him of when they were married. He worked too much, drank too much, smoked too much (which was really hardly at all, but too much for her); he was emotionally unavailable and never wanted to talk about things. He was vaguely resentful and angry at Jules for bringing him not even to Philly but to a part of Pennsylvania where he was the only Jew in the room at any given function. Then he lost his job, and there was nothing vague at all about how resentful and angry he was.

Once he threw a beer bottle at the bathroom door when Jules was in there and wouldn't come out. He was always too tired. He didn't spend enough time with Nell. He snored and twitched when he slept. His pee aim was poor in the middle of the night. He had dandruff sometimes and rarely clipped his toenails. But he never cheated on her.

Cap put the camera in his pocket and drove away, heading home, to Denville. He stopped at the beer distributors close to his house, picked up a case of Yuengling for him and club soda for Nell. In the parking lot he walked past a guy who looked familiar, but in a town of fifteen thousand everyone looked familiar. At the grocery store you ran into the guy who cut your hair and the woman who'd served you an Irish Car Bomb on the house last weekend. At your kid's soccer game you saw the postman and the city councilman and the gal who handed out free samples in front of StoneField Ice Cream. The longer he was a cop, the more Cap thought this was not such a nice thing. He hated knowing people. The Iraq War vet who he used to shake hands with at bars eventually holed up in his house with a jug of vodka and a gun. The flirty waitress at Applebee's who left her newborn in the garbage in the restaurant bathroom. The former high school football star who OD'd

on oxy and Heineken. Keep your small towns, thought Cap. Give me a city where I don't recognize the corpse.

"Hey, Cap, right?" the guy in the beer distributors parking lot said.

Place him, place him, thought Cap. You've known him for a while because he looks older and fatter and redder now than he used to.

"It's me, Chris. Chris Morris."

School, parent-teacher conference a few years back. His daughter was the same age as Nell.

"Chris. How's it going? How's your daughter . . ."

Cap paused, struggled.

"Ruthie," said Chris, unoffended. "Yours is Nell, right?"

"Yeah, Nell."

"Mine's giving me a heart attack. Literally. I go for a checkup last week, my blood pressure's 140 over 90. He asks do I have more stress at work, am I eating more salt? I say no, I got a sixteen-year-old girl at home. He goes, that's it, then."

Cap nodded and smiled and did the man commiseration thing. He pictured himself and Nell playing Texas Hold'em at the kitchen table last Saturday night.

"Everything's a fight too. Tonight she's going to that dance, and it's like negotiating with the goddamn UN trying to get her home at a decent time."

Cap stopped him, held out two calm fingers.

"There's a dance tonight?"

"Yeah, over at St. Paul's. Nell's not going?"

"I don't know. Maybe she forgot to tell me."

"Watch that, brother. It's very convenient what they forget."

Chris kept talking until Cap said he was running late. They shook hands again. Cap put the beer in his trunk and drove away. Why hadn't Nell told him about the dance? The real question was, why wasn't she going? The even more real question: Why didn't she want to go?

It wasn't like she didn't have friends. Sophie Kenton and Carrie Pratt were always around, and now that guy, Nick, who was definitely gay even if he wasn't telling people yet. Why wouldn't they all go together?

She ran cross-country in the fall, played soccer in the spring, got mostly A's, played tenor drum in the marching band, organized student

trips to the local soup kitchen and the children's wing of the hospital. Cap thought she was beautiful, but she had inherited Jules's dramatic features, a long, distinguished face and nose. Jules, a Women's Studies professor at Lehigh, said Nell resembled a young Virginia Woolf. Cap knew teenage girls did not want to look like Virginia Woolf; they wanted to look like red-carpet movie stars, all lips and breasts and curved tan backs.

Cap was sure it was his fault, certain that the divorce four years ago had permanently damaged his daughter's self-esteem. They'd done the right things, sent Nell to a therapist; both he and Jules were careful to tell her it wasn't her fault, but still, always, shit got through. Cap truly believed there was nothing harder than being a kid. You were always an alien trying to learn the earth rules.

He pulled up to the house and sighed. It still made him sigh and sometimes laugh that he had gotten the house with all the ghosts. Jules got to move to a new condo with white carpeting and vertical blinds.

The place had come in handy when he started his business, though. He'd converted the mudroom and the den into a small office and had his clients come through the side door.

And more important, Nell liked it—she liked the three narrow floors and the bathroom fixtures modeled after the original ones that were installed when the house was built in the '20s, the dusty living room set and the small grave markers in the backyard for Elmer the parakeet and Nigel the goldfish. She even loved their crazy neighbor Bosch and his crazier mother, Iris. So every time Cap felt like putting his fist through the crooked kitchen doorframe and the sunken bottom stair, he thought of Nell under an old blanket, reading a book in the chair by the window while it rained outside.

He came through the front door and saw her in the kitchen, taking the lids off takeout containers.

"Hey," she called.

"Hey."

She examined the food with her arms crossed, reviewing the evidence.

"They forgot duck sauce, I think," she said.

"Christmas is ruined," said Cap.

Nell chuckled. It was an old joke.

“Got enough beer there, Dad?” she said, sitting down, picking out orange chicken bits with chopsticks.

“I’m not drinking it all tonight, Bug.”

He opened the fridge and heaved the case in. Took one out and opened it.

“How’d the stakeout go?”

“Good for me. Bad for Mr. and Mrs. Svetich.”

“That’s sad. Isn’t it sad?”

“Yeah, it is, of course it is,” said Cap. “Just the job, though.”

“What about the deadbeat dad?”

“Slippery guy. Hasn’t used a credit card or had a bank account in eight months.”

“Dirtbag,” said Nell.

“Generous word for it,” said Cap. “How was the parade?”

“Drumline’s solid,” she said, making a fist. “The flutes were all over the place—whatever. Try this,” she said, sliding a foil bag across the table.

Cap opened it and pulled out what looked like fried fish sticks.

“Mrs. Paul’s,” he said, taking a bite. “Shrimp, right? Is it shrimp toast?”

“Yeah, isn’t it good? I had it at Carrie’s house. Her parents are doing this pescatarian thing.”

“Pescatarian?”

“You know, just fish and vegetables, no meat.”

“Sounds boring,” said Cap.

Nell shrugged. “Who knows. They read some article.”

He watched her eat, use the chopsticks like a professional like he taught her. Jules with all her intellect couldn’t do it, tried until she got splinters in her fingers. There was a time toward the end of the marriage when Cap showed Nell how to pick up ice cubes with chopsticks, just so Jules would feel left out. How desperate and stupid, he thought later. If he were to title the last year of their marriage, it would be “Desperate and Stupid.”

“What’re Carrie and Soph up to tonight?” he asked.

Nell didn’t look at him, pushed her food around with the sticks. About to lie, Cap thought.

“Ridgewood, maybe,” she said.

She didn’t elaborate. She was good. Answer only the question asked. No additional information.

“I ran into Chris Morris at Valley,” he said. “Ruthie Morris’s dad.”

Nell laughed and pointed at him.

“I totally made you, Caplan.”

“What?” said Cap.

“Let’s go over the scenario,” she said, drawing an invisible chart on the table. “You run into Chris Morris, exchange hi-how-are-you’s; the conversation turns to your daughters, and somehow the subject of a dance at St. Paul’s comes up. He says, Ruthie’s going, isn’t Nell going too, and you act cool like, Oh maybe she just forgot to tell me about it. But you want to be subtle, and you figure I’ll crack if you ask about Carrie and Sophie’s whereabouts, because chances are they’ll be at the dance. Yes?”

Cap leaned back in his chair and smiled. How could you not love the critical mind of this girl? She was literally the best of him and Jules—smart, funny, honest, kind. How could she not have twenty boyfriends? His answer was that she was too good for them. Her answer, if she would ever share that with him, would be considerably more frustrating: that those little Proactiv-smearing, dubstep-listening, malt-liquor-drinking punks at school weren’t interested.

“What am I going to say next?” he said.

Nell thought about it.

“Why aren’t you at the dance, Nell?” she said.

“Pretty good.”

“So,” she said, leaning back like he was. “What do *I* say now?”

He shook his head. “You’re better at this than I am, Bug. I don’t know what you say.”

Now that the game was over, Nell suddenly seemed tired. They both started eating again.

“I didn’t feel like it. St. Paul’s guys are pretty dumb.”

“Dumber than DW guys?”

“No, but the St. Paul’s guys act like animals around girls. Actually, that’s doing animals a disservice. The St. Paul’s guys are totally socially disabled.”

“But Carrie and Sophie still went, right? They’re probably standing

in a corner making fun of people. You could be doing that, too. You're really good at that," said Cap.

"Okay, here's the thing—they might be standing in a corner making fun of people, but deep down they really want one of those guys to come over and talk to them, and they make fun of them so they can counteract the possibility that no one will come over and talk to them. So I didn't want to do that. It's depressing."

She had apparently thought this through. She did not seem sad.

"What about Ruthie Morris, does she stand in the corner too?" said Cap.

"Uh, no. Ruthie's on the dance floor, probably drunk, not wearing a bra."

"Really? Little Ruthie Morris?"

"Dad, she's not little anymore. She's not the brightest bulb on the tree. And there's a rumor she's into autoerotic asphyxiation."

Cap choked on a bite of spring roll and coughed, felt the air squeak around the blockage in his throat.

Nell found this hilarious and laughed. "Do you need the Heimlich?" she said.

Cap shook his head, drank half his beer in one sip, and recovered.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" he said.

"Autoerotic asphyxiation," she said, matter-of-factly. "When someone likes to get choked during sex."

"I know what it is," Cap said, holding his hand up like he was stopping traffic. "How do *you* know what it is?"

"I saw a *Dateline* about it."

"Really? A *Dateline*?"

"Yes, Dad, not a big deal."

Not a big deal. Cap didn't ask any more about the dance, or about braless Ruthie Morris. He pictured poor Chris Morris's face when and if he ever found out his little girl was into the rough stuff. Then he looked at Nell and was thankful.

Soon they finished eating. Nell put the plates in the dishwasher and went to the living room. Cap wrapped up leftovers, started another beer.

"What movie do you want to watch?" she called to him.

"How about one where someone crosses a mild-mannered guy and then he goes nuts and seeks revenge?"

“Okay.”

Cap put the containers in the fridge and heard the news coming from the other room.

“That doesn’t sound like a mild-mannered guy seeking revenge,” he said.

“There’s Junior,” said Nell.

Now he felt obligated to watch. He stood in front of the TV and saw his old boss on the screen: “All we have to say right now is that these two girls are missing, and if you have any information, call us, email us. You can remain anonymous.”

“What happened?” said Cap.

“Two sisters from Black Creek were kidnapped,” said Nell. She stared at the screen and moved her eyes back and forth like she was reading text. Cap knew her mind was spinning with possibilities.

“Have we seen the parents yet?”

“They showed the mother.”

“Custody dispute. I’m sure daddy has them. That’s what most of these are, Bug. They’re not even putting out an AMBER Alert yet.”

He took the clicker from her and changed the channel. He didn’t want his former boss and co-workers and two kidnapped girls and their devastated mother in his quiet house. He wanted his daughter and his can of beer and a mild-mannered guy seeking revenge. Case closed.

In a room in a house in Central California, a girl stood on her hands. She was too old to be called a girl anymore, thirty-three, but she still felt like one. Not in the good way of having her whole life in front of her. In the bad way of being able to see only the edges of things, to peek around the corners when what you wanted was a city planner’s blueprints of the whole block seen from above.

Her old boss in fugitive recovery, Perry, used to call it Little Bad and Big Bad. Little Bad was the teenager on the front porch with a Phillips screwdriver tucked into his pants. Big Bad was his daddy waiting inside with a loaded .38 and a pissed-off pit bull. There was always a worse thing that you couldn’t see, and it was closer than you thought.

She breathed through her nose the way they taught her when she

took three months of yoga. She'd quit because she couldn't do what they asked. Focus on your breathing, they said, stare at a point on the wall, picture a string floating up from the top of your head and your chakras glowing blah blah blah. She got sick quickly of the instructor's monologue, of the incense, of the women and their personalized mats. At the end when they all would lie on the floor in the corpse pose, she would look at the women around her, mouths open like fish, some actually sleeping with dumb smiles on their relaxed faces. Of the corpses she'd seen, none had looked so peaceful.

The dead were contorted like zombies; they had holes in their heads; they were kids with limp limbs.

So she quit, bought a book and learned on her own. Moved through the poses but didn't do them all. Practiced the handstand until she could do it. First against the wall, then in the middle of the room. First for two minutes, then five, then ten. Now fifteen minutes in the middle of the room at four or five in the morning when she woke up. Her head was not exactly empty, but this was the time when she felt the most pleasant, the most like the way people on the street looked, she thought. People she saw in the grocery store or the gas station. Pushing babies in strollers or walking in a pair, or just alone hurrying to their cars, tapping away on their phones. Even if they weren't smiling, even if they were yelling at their kids or worried about being late to work, she thought they had something on her, and she was never going to get it back.

She scissored her legs down and stood up straight. Rolled her head around. She checked the time on her phone. It was 4:28. The sky was navy blue outside. She could hear some birds.

She sat at her desk and opened her laptop, saw she had some new messages. Two junk, a message from her brother, and something she didn't recognize.

From mshambley@denvillearearealty.com. Subject: Missing Person Inquiry. The message read, "Hello Miss Vega, I read about you in regards to the Ethan Moreno case. I would like to speak to you about your services. My niece's daughters have disappeared. Please find my contact information below and let me know when is a good time. Sincerely, Maggie Shambley."

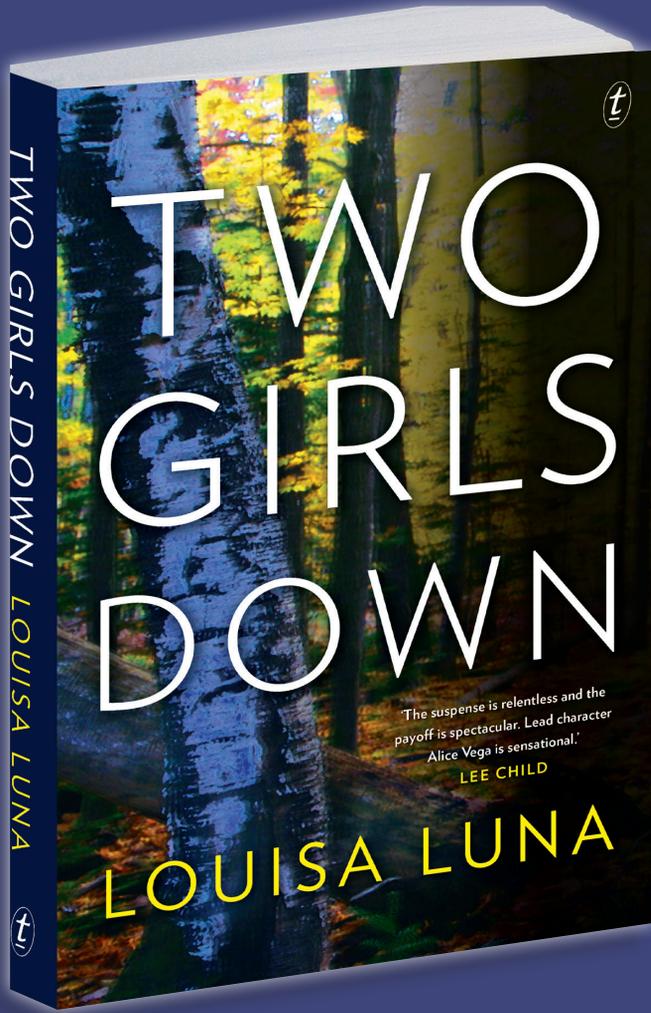
She looked at the street address and went online, typed “girls missing denver pa” and read three articles, saw half a dozen pictures of the missing girls, their mother, the parking lot where they were last seen.

She wrote: “Ms. Shambley, I am available now. Please call 916-567-1194. Best, Alice Vega.”

She left her laptop, took a shower, got dressed. She pulled a travel bag down from her closet and set it on the floor. She packed it with clothes and a small pouch with a toothbrush and floss. She opened the lockbox where she kept her Springfield and placed it in a foam-lined hard case along with two magazines of twenty rounds each.

Then she sat in the one chair at the kitchen table with her laptop and phone in front of her, her bag and the gun case at her feet. When Maggie Shambley asked how soon she could be there, she would say, “Tonight.”

She felt the muscles in her arms twitch from the handstand. The idea is you close your eyes and empty your head until you feel the life in everything, in the trees and the birds and the man you hate. Until you feel the peace. For Alice Vega there was never peace when she shut her eyes. There was always, always a fight.



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