

CHAPTER 2:

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2020

Beer in hand, Susan watched the crowd two-stepping on the dance floor and thought how strange it was, everybody drinking and partying on a night that was all about a brutal murder. Pink and purple balloons and silver tinsel decorated the old wooden walls and the Stony Creek Boys were playing for free. This was the Crow Bar's biggest night since summer season.

Terri, Susan's best friend and fellow waitress at the diner, touched her shoulder. "Wanna dance?"

Susan started to say no without even thinking, but Terri leaned in closer and said, "Amy would want you to. She loved to dance."

It was true. Amy started dancing to country music when she was a toddler, and she would have loved this party. So finally Susan said, "Okay," and got up out of their booth.

People noticed within seconds. Three young women standing nearby – Amy's old childhood friends – smiled encouragement, and everybody made way for her. Susan honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd been out on a dance floor, and her bones felt stiff. But she told herself nobody would be judging her tonight.

Terri put her arms around Susan as the band turned it up a notch. Susan's feet began searching for the rhythm. She looked around the bar and saw the crowd facing toward her, clapping. Everyone she knew in the whole town was here, and it felt like they were all dancing with her.

She closed her eyes for a moment and swayed, listening to the twanging of the guitar. *I should be grateful for this party*, she thought. After all, the whole thing was for her benefit.

She looked up at the wall behind the bar. There was a huge photo of Amy from twenty years ago, when she was seven. It was blown up from a faded Polaroid, so it was a little fuzzy. But Amy's wide, gap-toothed smile and joyful spirit came through loud and clear. Her light brown hair fell to her shoulders and she wore a multicolored beaded necklace. If you got close you could see the individual beads: the purple dolphin, the pink duck...

This was Susan's favorite picture of her daughter. She'd taken it the week Amy was killed.

Terri whispered in her ear, "Here comes Evan."

Susan saw Evan Mullens dancing closer to her. Evan was fifty-seven, two years older than she was and freshly divorced. He'd moved back to town last year to run the Adirondack Folk School and seemed to like her. He came by the diner at least once a week and flirted with her, and Terri always said if Susan encouraged him just a little bit he'd ask her out.

He wasn't bad looking, either. But Susan was as out of practice with that as she was with dancing. So now she looked at Evan's big smile and red checkered shirt and gave him the briefest of smiles in return, then looked away.

She found herself facing her mother, sitting in a nearby booth drinking beer and bobbing her head to the music. Lenora waved to her, then leaned past her oxygen tank and shouted over the music, "Nice party, huh?"

Right, nice party. Despite herself, Susan felt a sodden mass of buried rage rise to life in her chest. What happened to Amy was her mom's fault—

No. Don't go there.

The song ended with a bang of drums and smash of guitars, and everybody cheered. Johnny, the longhaired, craggy faced lead singer, acknowledged the applause by taking off his

purple cowboy hat and giving a sweeping bow. He wasn't the world's greatest singer but made up for it with what Lenora called "vim."

He called out, "How's everybody doing this evening?"

The crowd whooped and hollered, and Johnny gave a big grin. But then he put up his hands. "Now as y'all know," he said, "these festivities ain't just about fun."

The crowd wasn't quite ready to get serious, so they gave Johnny some good-natured boos. "Shut up and sing!" one drunk guy on the dance floor shouted.

Johnny persisted. "We got a higher purpose tonight."

Now everybody turned quiet. The drunk guy started to shout his displeasure but somebody elbowed him in the side and he stopped in mid-yell.

"In honor of which," Johnny continued, taking the microphone off the stand, "I would like to call Susan Lentigo, Amy's mom, to the stage."

Susan hated speaking in public, but she'd had enough experience since her daughter's murder that she'd gotten okay at it. So now she smoothed her dark brown hair, adjusted her glasses, and took a deep breath to steady herself as she walked up to the small raised bandstand. She wasn't into clothes like she had been years ago, but she was glad she'd let her mom talk her into wearing her nice yellow shirt and putting on some makeup. The crowd clapped respectfully as she climbed the two steps and took the microphone from Johnny's hand.

"Hi, everybody," she said, but her mouth was too close to the mic and there was screeching feedback. She saw her mom wince.

Johnny stepped toward her to help out but she knew what to do. She held the mic a few inches further away and started over. "Hi, everybody." This time it worked.

She looked out at the crowd. Some of these people had known her all her life. They'd been here during her childhood, during her marriage, during her tragedy. Many of them had helped her search the woods for Amy.

Now they were helping her again. Every beer the bar sold tonight would help pay her way to the penitentiary in North Dakota next weekend.

"I want to thank each and every one of you for coming tonight," she said. She looked over at Parson Mary Parsons, sitting in a booth with a couple of women, in their sixties now, who had brought Susan casseroles every week for about a year after it happened. "I want to thank everybody from the church..."

Parson Parsons nodded solemnly, and one of the women dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex. Susan looked away. The last thing she wanted right now was to break down herself. She had to finish her speech.

She said, "Also all the beautiful ladies who work with me over at the diner..."

Terri, on the dance floor, called out, "We love you, Susan!" Terri had been a teenager when Amy was killed, had babysat for her.

Susan smiled briefly and kept going. "Also my wonderful neighbors..."

At a far booth Tom and Stacy, who lived in a trailer down the street and chopped wood for Susan, gave her a thumbs up.

Now she looked over at her mom. She knew her mom had tortured herself over what she had done, and didn't deserve the mindless anger Susan sometimes felt. "...And my mom, Lenora."

Lenora liked public attention a lot more than Susan did, and she'd had a few drinks. Her face brightened and she gave everybody a wave.

"Most of all," Susan said, "I'd like to thank Amy's best friends, Sherry, Kate and Sandy, for bringing joy into Amy's life when she was alive, and never forgetting her."

The three young women were still standing together by the dance floor, arm in arm. In their late twenties now, they had jobs, husbands, and kids.

They had lives.

They had everything Amy didn't.

Susan could still picture the four of them the summer before Amy died, practicing dance routines to Garth Brooks songs on her front porch. Seeing them here now was both sweet and agonizing. Evidently they felt the same way, because all three of them began to weep.

Susan turned away from them and looked up at the big photograph of her daughter behind the bar. "I believe Amy is here with us tonight," she said.

In the picture, Amy was missing one of her top front teeth. The tooth fairy had put two dollars under her pillow the very night before she was taken.

Susan turned back to the crowd. "It's been twenty long years. But now, in only seven days, next Saturday at five-thirty p.m., Amy will finally get justice. Thanks to you guys and your kind generosity, I will be there in North Dakota when the fucking Monster..." Susan's voice took

on a fierce intensity. "...who raped and murdered my daughter is sent to his much deserved reward, in hell, and my Amy can rest in peace at last."

Susan thought for a moment, realized she didn't have any more to say, and said, "Thank you." She handed the mic back to Johnny, stepped off the stage, and headed back toward her booth.

The adrenalin from speaking to the crowd was still running through her. She couldn't even feel her feet stepping on the cold, dark, wooden floor.

She passed Sherry, Kate and Sandy, and they all hugged her, one at a time. Slowly but surely everybody in the bar began applauding. The ones who had been sitting all stood up. Several people held out their hands for a high five, which she felt weird about, but she went ahead and high-fived them. The drunk guy on the dance floor high-fived her so enthusiastically he stumbled and fell over.

Johnny put down the mic so he could clap too. Then he picked it back up and said, "Susan, just make sure you take pictures, 'cause we all wanna see that sick bastard fry."

A woman yelled, "Hell yeah!", and everybody cheered.

Johnny continued, "Now there's about a hundred of us here tonight, and we've all been buying lots of beer—"

"No shit!" the drunk shouted.

"—which means Susan's already raised a lot of money for her trip. But it's a long way out to North Dakota, and I happen to know her old Dodge Dart needs a new set of tires. And then there's hotels and such."

He took off his big cowboy hat. "So even though times are hard for all of us, let's see what else we can do for this brave gal."

He put a twenty-dollar bill in the hat and gave it to the man closest to him. As the hat passed and money went in, the band began playing a slow ballad that Johnny had written last week, just for this occasion.

"Love of my life, storm of my tears," he sang. *"All of my sorrow over the years..."*

Finally Susan allowed herself to cry. She looked through her tears at all these people who cared for her, who had gathered here to help her. She and her mom had less than a hundred dollars to their names, but now she'd be able to make it to the execution. She'd been hoping for this day for so many years she'd almost forgotten what life was like before it happened.

She had lost not only her daughter but her husband, her soul mate, the only man she had ever loved.

Sometimes Parson Parsons talked to her about forgiveness. But she didn't give a fuck about forgiveness.

Maybe if the Monster – she never called him by his real name, she wouldn't give him that dignity – ever actually *asked* for forgiveness, if he ever quit lying and claiming he didn't kill Amy, then maybe she might feel a little something toward him besides pure red-hot rage.

She balled her hands into fists. The Monster had been there when Amy drew her last breath. Now Susan would be there while he breathed his last. She would put her face up close to the window so the last thing he saw in this life was her, and she would watch him die.

As she sat back down in her booth, Lenora walked up, rolling her oxygen tank with one hand and holding up a beer in the other. "Nice speech," she said. "Want another beer?"

God, her mom was so inappropriate. Except come to think of it, she wouldn't mind another beer. "Thanks," she said.

As she drank down a big gulp, she wondered how she'd feel next Saturday night, after the Monster got what he deserved. Would she finally be able to let go of what happened and "move on," like her mom was always telling her to do?

She knew her mom was right. She was only thirty-five when it happened. She could have gotten married again, even started a new family. Sure, she couldn't have her own kids anymore, but she could have adopted or had stepkids. God knows there were plenty of divorced men in Lake Luzerne who had hit on her over the years. Evan was far from the first.

But she couldn't help herself. She sometimes felt there was something stealing the air out of her, like she was chain smoking. Maybe it was just grief and guilt choking her spirit. But somehow, even twenty years later, the story didn't feel finished. She still had a feeling in her bones that she couldn't put her finger on, that didn't make sense, that there was something about her daughter's murder she had missed, and if she had noticed it at the time she could have prevented it.

But what did she miss? What could she have done?

The psychiatrist down at Albany Hospital had told her it was a common phenomenon: people feeling guilty after a senseless tragedy, trying to come up with some scenario whereby it wasn't just random but something they themselves had somehow caused. For some people, it was better to feel guilty than to feel like they had no control over what happened in their lives.

But even though she heard the psychiatrist's words, it made no difference. She went over the tragedy again and again in her head almost every night.

As Susan drank down her beer she replayed, once more, her daughter's final week on this earth.