

HIDDEN BENEATH THE SHADOWS OF THE ROLLING HILLS

by Adam Drake

Adam Drake

adam@echowood.net

203.521.8213

CHAPTER ONE

“It’s a lacrosse game,” Jill twirled her pen between her index and middle fingers, “and I know nothing about lacrosse.”

“You don’t have to know anything about lacrosse,” Ed Masters, her editor and boss, said with the grumble and lack of emotion one gets after working the same job for a few decades.

“Parents want to read their kid’s name in the paper. They want to know who won. They want to know what the coach thinks. It’s not rocket science.”

“Yes, I get that, but I won’t know who won because I don’t know anything about the game.”

“Whichever team puts more balls into a net wins.”

“Isn’t that soccer?”

“Yes, but this one has sticks.”

“It’s like soccer with sticks. So, field hockey?”

“Yes, but without the skirts. Actually, who knows, maybe the boys are wearing skirts these days.”

Jill genuinely loved Ed. She loved his dry humor, the way he looked like he’d been ripped out of a 60s-era newsroom, and how every morning, without fail, he drank out of a mug that, years ago, once said, “I Hate Mondays” but time and dishwashers had reduced it to saying “I ate Mo.” While her actual father still lived back in her hometown of Rapid City, South Dakota, she liked to think of Ed as her East Coast dad. Ed and his wife, Susan, would invite Jill to their house for dinner once or twice a month. While Jill never passed up a home-cooked meal, especially on her reporter’s salary, she assumed it filled a void left by Ed and Susan’s kids,

who'd moved out years ago.

“Fine,” Jill capitulated, “But I’m not going to enjoy it.”

“It’s high school sports. No one enjoys it,” Ed said with the faintest of smiles, “O.H.H.S. 3:30. And interview the coach! Get a pull quote! And don’t hurt anyone’s feelings: kids or their parents!”

#

Jill Lubinsky had no intention of becoming a journalist for the *Oak Harbor Citizen*. Until two years ago, she didn’t know what or where Oak Harbor was. But here she was, driving her rapidly deteriorating Honda Civic through the tony streets of one of America’s wealthiest towns, on her way to report on one set of rich white kids playing against another group of rich white kids. Choosing journalism as a major in college was her first mistake. Thinking her weekly paycheck would be worth more than the paper it was printed on was the second. The third and perhaps most significant mistake was taking a job with the *Oak Harbor Citizen*.

The OHC was not the *New York Times*. Hell, it wasn’t even the *New York Post*. Jill’s name was on many captivating articles, such as “Tree Falls: Fence Damaged,” “Police Break-Up Teen Keg Party in Woods,” and who could forget “Storm Destroys Several Boats in Marina?” Jamie, the staff photographer (and part-time wedding DJ), would be deployed to take hard-hitting pictures to engage the reader fully. In-depth interviews would be conducted, asking witnesses what the tree sounded like as it fell or how much stress one endured knowing the *Eventide VIII* was sitting in pieces at the bottom of the harbor. And, without fail, twice a week, the *Oak Harbor Citizen* made its way online and into tidy piles in several local delis, coffee shops, and the *Oak Harbor Library*. She enjoyed her co-workers and learned from Ed, but she hated the stagnant feeling she felt every time she saw her by-line under some run-of-the-mill story.

Jill's youth and her penchant for off-the-rack casual clothing hid how doggedly resourceful, inquisitive, and intelligent she was. Like the state she now called home, her history had fashioned her into a dark horse that seemed to get what she wanted despite the obstacles and the sale-bought uniform standing in her way.

#

The glaciers that came from Canada 18,000 years ago dragged their icy fingers through the Connecticut landscape, pulling all manner of rock, soil, and debris along with them. When the ice finally melted, it left behind deep valleys, boulders the size of Buicks, and the harbor that gave the town its name.

The Paugussetts and Siwanogs, Native American tribes who once inhabited the land, farmed the future Oak Harbor, Connecticut's rocky fields, fished the quiet coves, and hunted all manner of wildlife throughout the area's dark forests.

When the Europeans arrived many years later, they fought the natives, forced them from their land, cleared cut their forests, used the rocks and boulders strewn across their farms to create thousands of miles of stone walls to cordon off their land, and pulled in fish and oysters from Long Island Sound by the net-load. Dirt roads were cut into the hills, and houses and buildings dotted the landscape like fleas on a dog.

Battles were fought with the British in the town as the Red Coats made their way up to Danbury during the Revolutionary War. With the new country finally established, the area remained relatively quiet until the 20th Century. The railroad brought trains from New York and Boston through town, and city-dwellers seeking more land and less pollution found solace in Oak Harbor's serenity. Artists took up residence and wrote bestsellers, acted in plays at the town theater, and created paintings that hung in museums around the world. They were followed by

financiers charmed by the acres of available land upon which to build their ego-driven palaces, and Oak Harbor quickly turned from rural to suburban.

Perhaps there was no greater measure of the town's history and character than Route 1. The road cut a horizontal line through Oak Harbor and was once the only option for cars traveling between New York City and Boston. At the turn of the century, this postal road housed farm stands, roadside taverns, and fueling stations. To alleviate traffic on Route 1 and to provide a quicker way from Boston to New York, the Merritt Parkway was built in the late 30s through the north of town; small stores, movie theaters, and gourmet restaurants popped up along Route 1 as the town slowly grew from a village. Interstate 95 plowed through a large swath of the southern part of town in the mid-50s, and slowly, Route 1 became a homogenized representation of America. Banks, pharmacies, national coffee brands, and supermarkets replaced anything unique along the road. And, in a few decades, Oak Harbor was almost like everywhere else.

Almost, that is, except for the residents. The commercial sectors of their town may have screamed middle America, but the houses of Oak Harbor's residents told a different story.

The prized stone walls were moved and rebuilt to be sturdier and taller. Hedges were neatly trimmed, and cul de sacs with signs marked "Private" were cut into the fields once home to deer, rabbits, and foxes. Property values increased, taxes ballooned, and soon Oak Harbor became a private haven sought out by the wealthy. Some places dismiss being called one of America's wealthiest towns, but Oak Harbor proudly held onto the moniker.

Towns like Beverly Hills, Palm Beach, and the Hamptons drew a particular crowd. People who wanted to be noticed, celebrities, socialites, and former politicians who kept publicists on retainer, needed to be seen at parties and enjoyed the star-struck reaction of commoners upon learning which town they lived in.

This was not Oak Harbor. The people of Oak Harbor wanted to keep their town under wraps. While Oak Harbor had its share of celebrities, socialites, and former politicians, they didn't want paparazzi hanging out in their bushes, tourists flocking to their restaurants, or scandals infecting the social harmony. If Beverly Hills was built for wealthy extroverts, Oak Harbor and many of the surrounding towns in Fairfield County were built for rich introverts. There were mansions hidden behind gates; yachts were docked in deep-water marinas, and six-figure SUVs roamed the twisting streets on their way to drop children at horseback riding lessons, dogs at stylists, and barely-wrinkled faces to botox needle farms. But the community silently agreed: be rich, stay rich, and keep your head down.

Despite the wealth, Oak Harbor was surprisingly liberal. Record donations were made from its zip codes to various democratic candidates. *Black Lives Matter* signs were placed prominently on well-landscaped front lawns. And education - a good, well-rounded education - was prized above everything else.

Of course, liberalism only went so far. Low-income housing initiatives were routinely rejected during town council meetings. The thought of students being bussed into Oak Harbor's respected public schools from larger, less-wealthy towns like Bridgeport and Norwalk made parents protest outside school board meetings. And, while all were welcome to enjoy the town's beaches, non-residents would have to pay half a week's salary just to set foot on the sand.

#

Jill was conspicuous because Jill didn't live in Oak Harbor. She'd found a small one-bedroom apartment in a still non-gentrified section of Stamford and made the twenty-minute drive to the Oak Harbor Citizen through the tree-lined canyon of an Art Deco bridge adorned Merritt Parkway. The drive allowed her to catch up on the day's real news - that was happening outside

her strange new world. Wars, politics, crime, those scars seemed to happen in another universe far away from the unblemished face of Oak Harbor.

On weekends, she'd hop on the Metro-North Commuter Train into New York City to see friends from college or take day trips down the Hudson River or up the Connecticut shoreline. No matter where she was, she kept a pen, a notebook, and a backup charger for her iPhone in her purse. She wanted to be prepared should something - anything - exciting and newsworthy happen. The closest she came was watching an SUV driving in front of her obliterate a deer on a backroad in Weston. The car lost a headlight and part of its grill. The deer lost half its face, most of its spinal column, and its life. She stopped to check on the driver, asked him some questions, took some notes, and went on her way. She sent the report, with the eye-grabbing headline of "Deer Struck on Weston Road," to Weston's local paper, but it never made it to print.

Pulling up to Oak Harbor High School, Jill was still amazed by the stunning campus. Most colleges didn't have landscaping this beautiful. This wasn't a school; this was a sanctuary. She drove through the parking lot and watched as a living, breathing *Vineyard Vines* catalog unfolded before her as teenagers, all dressed alike in light shades and subtle patterns, stepped into their hideously expensive cars and drove off into the maze of hedgerows and stonewalls behind her. Walking to the lacrosse field, she saw the pulchritudinous mothers arranged on the bleachers as if posing for an Annie Leibovitz spread. They held their venti matcha lattes, wore expensive shirts purposely designed not to look expensive, and subtly marveled at their perfectly rumpled pauper-chic jeans with custom holes torn into them by skilled and underpaid artisans in third-world countries. Jill subconsciously pulled on her jacket, hoping it would hide the Old Navy sweatshirt beneath it.

The moms saw her. They glanced briefly, giving off a sense of both judgment and

indifference. They then returned to discussions about divorces, face lifts, and how their children were destined to take over the world while Jill sat on the cold, uncomfortable bleachers observing silently.

A few fathers were scattered among the small crowd. Most were on their phones; some were conducting conference calls behind earphones while barely paying attention to the game. One, and there was always one, was a little *too* into the game and yelled repeatedly at the coaches, players, referees, and other parents but never aimed his disdain toward his son.

The game was played. Jill wrote terms such as “body check” and “off hip” into her notebook for use later when she was typing up her article. At some point, the game was over, and Oak Harbor won, though no one outside the players and that one dad seemed to care or notice. The moms collected their things and returned to warm cars to await their sweaty children. Jill interviewed the coach, who used more terms she didn’t recognize but scribbled them in the margins of her notebook to look up later.

She called Ed on her walk back to her car and told him she’d have the article tonight. He thanked her, told her not to spend too much time on it, and-

“Shit!” Jill interrupted, “Shit, shit, shit. I have to call you back, Ed.”

The rear bumper to Jill’s Civic was dented, mangled, and currently resting 10 feet from where it should have been. The right taillight was now a pile of reflective red dust behind her car, and several long metal gashes had been torn through her trunk as if Freddy Krueger had been trying to get inside.

“Shit!” She said again. She looked around, but no one in the increasingly deserted parking lot seemed to notice. She phoned the non-emergency number for the Oak Harbor Police Department, and the operator told her since no one was hurt and it wasn’t an emergency, she

should take photos of the damage and email them to the department.

“Aren’t you going to send someone out?” Jill asked with a hint of desperation, “Get a statement? See if they can figure out who did this?”

“Ma’am, take photos and send them to the department,” came the curt reply.

“But it’s my car-”

“Take photos and send them to the department.”

“But-“

“I’m sure your insurance will take care of it.”

“But-”

“Have a nice night.” Click.

Jill’s fingers bent into talons. The veins in her neck rose to the surface. She let out a frustrated yell and threw her purse into the car before walking into the middle of the parking lot to pick up what remained of her bumper, before tossing it into her backseat where it twisted and bent like a toddler trying to get attention mid-tantrum.

After settling behind the wheel, she noticed it - a small folded piece of paper tucked under her wiper. She got back out of the car, grabbed it, opened it, and saw that it only said “Sorry,” accompanied by a small smiley face with two tiny checkmarks for eyes.

“Fuck. This. Town,” she said, crumpling up the note and tossing it into her car.

#

Jill was 5 minutes away from Oak Harbor High School when a police cruiser came up behind her with a strobe of red and blue lights bouncing off her rearview mirror. She pulled over, sure she wasn’t speeding and assumed the cop would pass her by en route to stop someone who was. Yet, surprisingly, the cop pulled over, too, and got out of his car behind her.

“Shit,” she said, rolling down her window while pulling her registration out of her glove box. He approached, and she dutifully handed her ID and registration over, and he took them back to his cruiser.

Nervous, she tapped her steering wheel. She looked at the cop’s silhouette in her rearview mirror and wondered what he was doing. She never knew why the police took so long when handing out tickets. Her record was clean. He was letting her stew. Letting her think about what she’d done. What *had* she done? This was a mistake. She was often told she looked like Anna Kendrick. Maybe Anna Kendrick was wanted for a crime. Of course, Anna Kendrick wouldn’t be driving a piece of shit Honda Civic with enough miles on it to circumnavigate the globe six times. She quickly sniffed her sweatshirt. Had she worn this the last time she smoked pot? That was almost three years ago, and wait... wasn’t pot legal in Connecticut?

Tap, tap, tap. The cop’s knuckles rattled off Jill’s window. She rolled it down.

“You know,” he said, peering under his hat, “it’s illegal to drive with a missing taillight and, for that matter, a missing bumper,” the cop pointed to the bumper sitting behind Jill.

“Yes, I know, officer,” Jill tried to clear the strain from her voice, “It’s just that this happened a few minutes ago, and I-”

The ripping sound of the paper being removed from the cop’s pad cut her off.

“I’m letting you off with a warning, but get that fixed ASAP. It’s dangerous.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I’ll get it fixed right away. Thank you. Have a good night.”

The cop responded with only a double tap on her car door with the palm of his hand, then turned and walked back to his still-blinking car.

“Shit,” Jill said with relief.

CHAPTER TWO

Tracing Percy's lineage would result in a Keith Haring-esque display of curved lines, strange intersections, and dead ends. Mothers gave birth to both sons and cousins. Brothers were also uncles. The lines between grandparents and great-grandparents blurred into an inbred spaghetti of unchecked carnal desires. At the end of this tangled mess was a single strand: Percy.

Percy didn't know many words. He knew his name. He knew "park," "beach," and "ball." His favorite word, "walk," was etched so deeply in his canine brain that someone mentioning their "wallet" or a "walrus" would send his tail wagging. His journey to Oak Harbor resulted from natural disasters, lost paperwork, and dumb luck. He'd be born in a concrete water pipe near Metairie, Louisiana, a few years after Hurricane Katrina. He and three of his siblings were found and brought to a local shelter. Quickly, he was flown to another shelter in New Hampshire. While there, a clerical error indicated he was to be adopted through a shelter in Milford, Connecticut. The lovely lady who drove him the three hours south gave him biscuits and sang songs to pass the time. The shelter insisted they had no record of the dog, and he couldn't be housed there. But, upon seeing the pleading look on the gentle lady's face, they eventually acquiesced and allowed Percy to stay.

On the day Percy was officially adopted (and given the official name of "Percival"), he was introduced to the one human with the nice smile and the other human who gave good hugs along with their two more miniature humans. He licked every face he could get his tongue on, wagged his tail to show his appreciation, and spent the first hours inside his new house running from one end to the other in glee.

In conversation, friends of Percy's owners would take guesses as to what sort of breed he

was.

“Oh, he definitely has some lab in him.”

“You think so? I think he’s a hound.”

“I see some beagle.”

“From the looks of him, I’d guess he’s a retriever.”

Percy, who didn’t know who he was, nor did he care, was just happy to be warm and loved. He’d take long walks with the humans. He’d rest his head on the other human’s lap when she watched movies late at night. He played fetch in the large yard with the little humans and enjoyed running along the sandy beach when the days grew colder.

Many cars in Oak Harbor had stickers affixed to their trunks that talked about how much they love their dogs, usually a type of breed whose name sounded like a cookie or a candy bar. Sometimes, grandparents get in on the action and proclaim their undying love for their “grand dog babies.” Strangely, the correlation between those who place these stickers on their cars and their need to transform these same cars into reindeer with giant plush red noses on the front grill and stuffed antlers clasped to the front windows is remarkably high.

Percy’s owners had no such stickers on their cars. This wasn’t a result of their lack of love for their pet, but rather because the one sticker reserved for them: “Who adopted who?” was equally, if not more sentimental than the others. Percy didn’t notice, nor would he have cared if he was miraculously given the ability to read English. He didn’t need a sticker to assure him of his owners’ love for him.

He heard the jangle of metal tags on nylon webbing first. This caused his ears to perk up and start his heart racing. Quickly following this orchestra of canine happiness was an aria for Percy.

“Percy, let’s go for a walk!” Shouted the human from somewhere in the vicinity of his collar being rattled. He bounded down the stairs, drifting slightly into a table at the bottom as he regained traction on the hardwood floor.

Within microseconds, the collar was around his neck, a leash was in his owner’s hands, and the front door was opened. This ritual occurred daily, but it was never without incredible enthusiasm from Percy. His owner had a hat pulled over his ears, gloves on his hands, and a heavy jacket around his body. Excitedly, he spied the unmistakable shape of a tennis ball in his owner’s pocket. This would be a long walk followed by a trip to the park.

Percy’s first stop, as always, was a quick pee on the pine tree that stood at the bottom of his driveway. This was followed by short sniffs along the edge of his property to ensure other dogs hadn’t trespassed or food hadn’t been left accidentally for Percy to find. Coming up empty, he continued on the left side of his owner as they walked against traffic down the winter road.

The snow, slowly melting and now dirty with road debris, forced dogs and humans farther into the road than was usual. Percy stopped at various intervals to insert his snout into the snow and check for food and/or interlopers. Each time, his human pleaded with him to continue, and with a gentle tug on the leash, Percy complied.

In the distance, the squeal of tires sliding around a corner caused Percy to stand at attention. He looked at his owner for acknowledgment, and receiving a quick pat on the head, Percy knew it was safe to continue.

Another squeal. This time, it was closer. Percy’s owner looked around with slight concern, but seeing nothing, he continued leading them down the road, holding Percy’s leash tighter in his grasp.

The whine of the car’s engine pierced through the cold winter morning and caused birds

to leave their perches high in the trees. Percy felt the beast getting closer, and the fright on his owner's face caused Percy to let out a quick bark. Percy's leash was gripped tighter. His owner took another glance around. He tried to zero in on where this violent noise was coming from. And then, as if it were a monster finally free of its shackles, it came bounding around the snowy corner and targeted Percy and his owner.

Percy barked repeatedly. His owner held the dog tight and tried to shield the animal from the oncoming menace. When finally, it struck.

The car's side mirror smashed into Percy's owner's shoulder, sending him lurching backward and into the wet and brown snow. Percy's yelp could barely be heard over the roar of the car's engine. In the chaos, the leash flew out of the owner's hands and landed silently a few feet away while the car continued into the white oblivion.

The lack of that terrible sound made the world unnaturally quiet, as if nature had forgotten how to speak. The leafless branches were still. The clouds didn't move. The fine mist of snow and water that trailed behind the car settled down onto the road and the bodies of both man and dog.

As the moment's confusion settled, Percy saw his tennis ball roll down the street in the opposite direction of his owner. The slow moral calculations of the dog caused him to turn from the ball back to his owner and back to the ball again while evaluating which was more important. Finally, he settled on his owner, greeted with a rapid series of tongue licks on his snow-covered and pained face.

CHAPTER THREE

There had been eight until recently. Amy had to go. Her dismissal was one of non-celebration. One week, she was there. The next, she was not. The only pause about her departure was that, without her, the book club was down one minority, and that was Efe. This issue was quickly resolved when Kate suggested each group member donate to a local theater group, thus offsetting their depleted karma. With that, Amy was removed from the group text, and the book club moved on. Amy Walston no longer existed.

It was hard to pinpoint when it started to go badly for her, though most would say it began when she brought that bottle of rosé to the book club. This was not just any rosé, but one from a winery in upstate Connecticut. While a French rosé would have been preferred, especially one from Provence, the club would have settled for a Californian, Oregonian, or, at most, a Washingtonian. But a Connecticut rosé? That was an insult to good taste. Connecticut did many things well, but wine was not one of them.

Amy screwed up, and she knew it. Throughout the get-together, she stared as the bottle sat unopened on Esther's bar cart. While it was purchased with good intentions and general curiosity as to just what a Connecticut rosé would taste like, it was received with, at best, irrelevance and, at worst, disdain. After all, what did such a mediocre purchase say about Amy?

Amy's armor was cracked, and a flood of arrows was about to pierce her olive skin. The book club found other peccadillos of Amy's that grew the more they discussed them in hushed tones and over group texts. Each seemed to confirm the club's next move. She hadn't signed up for the PTA last year. She bought her last car used. She wasn't sure who Basquiat was when it was brought up during a book discussion.

Amy was somebody; she just wasn't one of them.

The fires were stoked. The drums of war were beating. Amy was as good as cooked.

The date, time, location, and title of the next book went out to the group text, and Amy was conspicuously left off it. She wasn't put on probation. She didn't get a second chance. There was no ceremony or funeral. In fact, Amy hadn't realized she'd been summarily dismissed until she ran into Jennifer 2 at *Whole Foods* a few weeks later.

"I wonder what Kate will pick for the next book," Amy said, her cart nose-to-nose with Jennifer 2's, "I hope it's a thriller. One I can sink my teeth into."

Jennifer 2, as always clad in athleisure wear with her brown hair pulled so tightly into a ponytail that it seemed to tug her eyebrows up toward her hairline, looked around to ensure no one saw her talking to Amy.

"That would be amazing," lied Jennifer 2, who had already read and discussed Kate's selection - a non-thriller - with the book club the week before.

"Well, I'm looking forward to whatever Kate picks."

"Me too," Jennifer 2 said and moved her cart around Amy's, "Good seeing you, Amy."

Something was off. Jennifer 2 was normally talkative, even inquisitive. But Amy couldn't fight the feeling that she'd just been given the brush off. Then a sinking feeling hit her. A feeling of dread. Of anger. Of hopelessness.

Amy quickly opened her phone, went to Jennifer 2's Instagram profile, scrolled past the square-cropped pictures of Jennifer 2 working out, her dog, and her kids, and saw it. A square of equal parts elegance and shame. In what was clearly Kate Jennings' house, all seven of the remaining book club members looking properly coifed while drinking French rosé and posing while "discussing" their latest book. Amy dropped her phone at the realization she'd been excommunicated.

Jennifer 2 sat in her SUV in the Whole Foods parking lot and called Efe.

“You’ll never guess who I just ran into,” Jennifer whispered as if Amy could pop out of the shadows at any moment, “Amy Fucking Walston.”

“No way,” Efe’s disembodied voice came through the car’s speakers, “How’d she look?”

“Needy.”

“Typical. Did she ask about book club?”

“She did!” Jennifer 2 raised her voice excitedly, “Girl, I did a bad thing.”

“What did you do?”

“I lied. I told her Kate hadn’t picked the next book.”

“Oh no, you didn’t. You’re bad.”

“I know. So bad. But what could I do?”

“Do you think she knows we dumped her?”

“No. That woman has no idea.”

Efe laughed.

“Hey, let’s get together this weekend. Apple picking or some shit.”

“Sounds good. Shoot me a text.”

“Perf. Ciao!” Jennifer 2 hit the talk button on her steering wheel, and the connection to Efe was cut. She looked around once again to make sure Amy hadn’t been within hearing distance, then started her car and drove away.

On the other side of the Whole Foods parking lot, Amy Walston sat in her used Range Rover, phone in hand, and rubbed tears away from her eyes. With a defeated yell, she deleted the “Book Club” group text from her messaging app.