

WE  
WERE  
KING S

COURT STEVENS



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*We Were Kings*

Copyright © 2022 Courtney Stevens

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Interior design by Emily Ghattas

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Thomas Nelson. Thomas Nelson is a registered trademark of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Publisher's Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Stevens, Court, author.

Title: We were Kings / Court Stevens.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Thomas Nelson, [2022] | Summary: A twenty-year-old crime, an accelerated death penalty, and an elitist family cover-up forces eighteen-year-old Nyla to race against the death row clock to save her mother's best friend.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021032849 (print) | LCCN 2021032850 (ebook) | ISBN 9780785238485 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780785238478 (epub) | ISBN 9780785238492

Subjects: CYAC: Families--Fiction. | Secrets--Fiction. | Prisoners--Fiction. | Mothers and daughters--Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S74444 We 2022 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.S74444 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021032849>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021032850>

*Printed in the United States of America*

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 5 4 3 2 1

# PART I



## B E F O R E

**W**e're waiting to find out if Frankie will be executed. A strange day, to say the least. Frankie's a murderer *and* my mom's best friend. She's why we live in Kentucky, and why we live with Richard, and why the three of us—Mom, Richard, and me—are in the garage. This is where we will be until Jimmy the lawyer's call comes. The garage has the best cell reception and Mom's weight bench.

Mom heaves the sixth rep of two hundred and thirty pounds toward the rafters. Richard presses two fingers against the middle metal bar, totally focused on spotting her. I'm here because there's no way a sixty-nine-year-old man, even one in his condition, can lift that bar off her face if and when she drops it. Also because I have the newest iPad among the three of us and am in charge of social media. There's a chance Vox or the *Herald* or even someone local in the #OpposeADPA group will break the news before

Frankie's lawyer has a chance to get out of the courtroom and call. Word is there will be a verdict today.

Jimmy the lawyer has "high hopes" the appeal will be remanded back into the court and has told Mom not to worry. *"There wasn't enough evidence twenty years ago and there's not enough evidence now."* Plus, the judge is a Democrat who mostly opposes the Accelerated Death Penalty Act.

Mom exhales and shoves the weights upward. Again and again. She crosses ten reps—probably her personal best at this weight. Her face reddens, her veins thick and bulging; her dark hair is sweat-matted to her forehead. She strains words through gritted teeth, the bar at full extension. "If she'd been convicted at any other point in history . . ."

There's no response from Richard, only a brief glance at me. We know the refrain by heart. *"If she'd been convicted at any other point in history, she would not be facing lethal injection."* Or it's not likely she would. Kentucky had a moratorium on executions until recently. Criminals carrying death sentences tended to die of old age in the prison infirmary rather than with the whole country watching and in an uproar.

"Beth, take a rest," Richard urges.

Her elbows lock, the weights hovering in the air.

"We can't lose her," she whispers.

These same words seep from her nightmares. Mom and I share the upstairs Jack and Jill suite of Richard's house,

and even when both bathroom doors between us are closed, she wakes me up screaming. “*We can’t lose her*” is as constant as a snore.

The nightmares started on June 20 when the Accelerated Death Penalty Act was signed into law. The ADPA promised to save taxpayers thousands of dollars by taking criminals charged with especially heinous and brutal crimes and fast-tracking their executions. No more long appeals taxing the system. No more paying for non-great American citizens to be fed, guarded, and educated indefinitely. Following June 20, inmates on death row had thirty days to present a final appeal and then another thirty days to live if and when the appeal process failed. Across the country, families of victims and inmates are waiting on life-and-death news.

Everyone is wound up. The ADPA is front and center in the media. There are marches, assemblies, opinion pieces. You name a type of campaign and it’s happening everywhere, from the streets of New York City to the plains of Wyoming. I want to fast-forward the clock and find out what happens—even if it’s bad news. Especially since I don’t understand why Mom always says *we*.

“*We can’t lose her.*” “*We need her.*” We. We. We.

There’s no *we*. Frankie is her childhood best friend, not family, and Richard and I have never even darkened the doors of Floyd Penitentiary.

Mom’s strange obsession with Frankie is probably most unfair to Richard. Imagine you’re an old dude, feeding cats and working crosswords, and then this woman and her

daughter show up at your door. It takes a certain type of hero to keep his word from twenty years ago—“*If you ever need help, I'll be here.*” I'm not sure what led him to say that—they're aloof on their origin story—but at this point, I don't care. He's Richard and I love him.

The weights stay poised over her face. Teetering. “Let them drop, Mom,” I say.

“You're supposed to be scrolling.” Her words rush out with a staccato breath.

“And you're supposed to remember you're not a professional bodybuilder.”

Her elbows bend slightly and Richard guides the bar toward the cradle. I think she's done, but her chest bucks upward and with a primal groan she lifts the weights again. Arms quivering, she counts under her breath.

I can't watch anymore so I do as she instructed. The news breaks first on social media. Richard sees me wince and reads my mind. The call comes seconds later. *Jimmy Norton (Attorney)* appears on the screen.

“Answer it,” Mom says.

I leap out of my lawn chair, hit Accept on the phone, and hold it to her ear. Richard and I are frozen into our strange positions, each on either side of the barbell, the weights next to our faces as we bend to listen to Jimmy's three words: “Beth, I'm sorry.”

The weights clatter to the ground.

# CHAPTER 1

I know the story.

In June of 2000, Cora King, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Kentucky senator Rebecca King, went missing from her family's estate on Nockabout Island. Five months later, a local fisherman found what was left of Cora's body. The fish and the lake had stolen nearly everything from her. The medical examiner used her dental records for identification. The investigation centered on three individuals: Frankie Quick, the best friend; Ben Stack, the boyfriend; and Martin Jarvis, a previous boss / love interest who was later discovered to have died on the same day Cora disappeared. The case was automatically high profile.

Authorities landed on Frankie because she had a juvie record for assault (an assault on Martin Jarvis, no less). In the case of the *State v. Francis Quick*, there was no significant DNA evidence, no motive, no witness.

But it didn't matter.

Almost as fast as anyone could type the words *arrested*, *arraigned*, and *convicted*, Francis had a death sentence slapped on her. Everyone knew why: Cora was a senator's daughter.

That's the crux of the Wiki article plus added commentary from Mom.

I was eleven or twelve before I realized not everyone's mother had a best friend in prison. And not everyone's mother refused to travel over the weekend because she'd miss her Saturday visit to the penitentiary. And not everyone's mother funded a convicted felon's legal fees before she paid rent. Not even when I overheard one of the girls in my coding club tell another, "Her mom is friends with a murderer and my mom says I can't go over to her house to play," did it occur to me that Frankie's place in our life was an oddity.

By the time I turned thirteen, I'd done enough googling to consider myself an expert on the case, and that's when I sat Mom down during Richard's bowling night and said, "I get that Frankie probably didn't kill the King girl, and justice is a big deal, but, like, what's your part in this? Why the obsession?"

Mom reached across the table and twisted a lock of my hair around her finger and said, "She's my best friend."

"Yeah, but—"

"Nyla, we don't give up on people when bad things happen. We stick. And we stick when the rest of the world

makes up the BS the world makes up. You'll understand when you're older and feel that way about your own friends."

"You're the only one who gets to have friends," I said.

It was an automatic response. A reflex. I didn't even say it with attitude.

I watched my truth register—our countless moves before landing on Richard's doorstep, all the clubs and programs I'd gotten a few weeks into and then had to withdraw from, the constant lunchroom dilemma of where to sit. All in the name of helping Frankie. There were so, so many.

"Oh, Ny, baby. I'm sorry. Someday you'll understand."

"When is someday?" I had asked.

She hadn't answered and I quit caring and did my best to accept that Frankie was the most important person in Mom's life, and that's the way it was.

## CHAPTER 2

Mom is in bed. Richard's on the toilet. That leaves me to open the front door to the barrage of knocks.

Two women in heels, linen pants, and silky summer scarfs stand on the stoop. They're eager and hopeful in their perfect eyeliner and lash extensions. The square logo magnets on their cars identify two local news stations. One extends a microphone toward me; the other touches a button on the camera hiked over her dainty shoulder. "We're looking for Elizabeth King."

"I'm sorry, who?" I ask.

"This is the address of Elizabeth King, yes?" the blonde microphone girl asks.

"No," I say, not fully registering the question.

The camerawoman consults her notepad. "She goes by Wagner now. Beth Wagner."

I can't sync up truths and lies fast enough to convey

verbal responses or proper emotions. The instinct to yell, “Mom!” toward the upstairs bedroom is nearly overwhelming, but these women keep pounding me.

“Are you a member of the King family?”

“We’d love to interview Beth about the ADPA decision to execute Francis Quick for the murder of her sister, Cora.”

“Is Beth home and available to speak to us?”

*Her sister, Cora? Elizabeth King, not Wagner?* Anger flares red to a bright blue and I almost slam the door. I gather my wits. “No comment.” I step backward and collide with Richard. He reaches past me, grips the knob firmly, and gestures to the reporters that he will close the door whether they’re in the way or not. They move. The blonde’s voice comes through the crack. “We’ll leave our cards in the mailbox.”

Back against the door, I face Richard.

“Nyla,” he says.

If I had any doubts about what the woman said, they crumbled with Richard’s use of my name. From day one, Richard has called me Lion or the Lion King Kid. “It’s Ny-la, not Nala,” I’d respond, mildly annoyed, until the verbal routine grew into our unique, quasi-grandfather love language.

This is a different tone, far more fearful.

“Richard,” I say.

He stands, head bowed, no longer the man who strong-armed the door closed. He feels the singular question: *Is*

*Mom Cora's sister? And perhaps he feels the follow-up: Did you know?*

He wears a gentleman's cap and a bathrobe over swimming trunks he claims are more comfortable than anything else he owns. Patchy gray hairs poke from the top of the terry cloth, and wrinkled skin gathers prune-like around his collarbone. He won't meet my eyes.

Which I interpret as *Yes, she is* and *Yes, I did*.

"Gotcha," I say.

Richard is many things. A retired social worker, a Vietnam vet, a man who walks his cat on a leash. His house, our house, is pink on the street-facing side, the garage another glaring shade pinker; the orchidaceous paint job is a leftover gift from his ex-wife. He is enigmatic, kind, and probably my favorite person in the world. That he was capable of keeping this secret makes angry tears well up, but when he hugs me, I let him. His is the lie of a puppet, and I'd rather ream the puppeteer.

"Mom!" I raise my voice, hoping to rouse her. No response. I yell again at the top of the steps and again when I'm standing in front of her bedroom door. Nothing. I don't waste time knocking; I pry my way inside.

Upturned plastic crates and their contents cover the carpet. Stuff is everywhere, a messy nest for the mouse curled into the middle of the bed. The condition of the room gives me pause. Mom is a minimalist and compartmentalist by nature. Before the ADPA, much of her life stayed wedged into labeled twelve-by-twelve crates. "Mom," I say again.

A groggy voice comes from beneath the covers. “I’m sleeping.”

I rip layer by layer away until she is exposed.

I catch myself staring at her form. The woman before me is embarrassingly fit. These muscles are the rewards of protein shakes and wrist and ankle weights and a home gym makeover. I overheard a landlord call our last rental termination “The end of the Elizabeastan Era.” Lying here like this—pitiful and small and unwashed—is the ultimate antithesis of my mother.

She shields her eyes against the light. “Where’s Richard? What time is it?”

She means, *What day is it?*

Three days have passed since we got the news about Frankie and she hasn’t been out of the room except to pee. All food has been refused. Richard and I think she is drinking from the bathroom faucet. At all hours of the night, she rifles through things and listens to newsreels and videos about outcomes in the death penalty cases across the country.

Behind me, Richard climbs the steps in his careful one-step-at-a-time cadence. I am not sure whose side he will take when he reaches the top.

“Mom, you need to sit up and talk to me.” I smooth the skin on my forehead with the palm of my hand, all of a sudden unsure if she can handle my anger atop her grief.

“Why?” she asks, pulling several layers of covers back over her body.

She's sinking into herself and I'm tempted to let her. But the size of the lie drives me mercilessly forward. I tear the covers away and toss them onto the floor. Suddenly she's on her knees and reaching for the covers like a teenager in a pillow fight. "I asked you to leave me alone for a few days. *Bless.*" Her knuckles grow white as she clenches the fabric. "And I never ask either of you for anything. *Bless.*" I reach for the sheet and end up on the floor; she's back on the bed under her pile of cotton with only two eyes and wild, oily hair visible, like she's Oscar in his garbage can. "Why is that hard? *Bless.*"

*Bless* is the F-word of her curses.

I force myself to stand.

I curl my fingernails into the skin of my palms until the skin breaks.

I speak in a measured, calculated voice. "There are reporters at the door asking for Elizabeth King. Should I tell them you'll be down now, or do you need a few more weeks to wallow in your lies?"

## CHAPTER 3

What comes out of Mom's mouth can't be classified as a scream, cry, or yell. There's not a word that's guttural enough to convey the sound she makes, but there is one to describe her afterward: *unhinged*. Crates take flight. Drywall is damaged. Feathers are ripped from her pillows. She fights an opponent Richard and I can't see. I watch momentarily but I'm suffocated by her emotions.

Closing the door, I retreat to the kitchen. I need to get out of the house and think. Richard grips my forearm as I nick the keys to his car. "Get angry, not stupid, please? I can't fix this if you kill yourself driving like an idiot."

I nod and leave the house.

The street is empty and there's a full tank of gas in the Honda. I don't know where I should go, but I can't stay here. Not when I'm this angry. I'll hurt her rather than help me. I have a smidge of information and I need buckets and buckets of truth.

Windows down, moonroof open, a summer breeze tosses my hair around the edges of my shoulders as I exit the neighborhood. I need to drive at very illegal speeds, but my promise to Richard tempers my lead foot. I take the parkway ramp, knowing it'll be empty. As I drive, I can feel all my involuntary organs begging for attention. My lungs are tight. When I swallow, the taste is thick and bitter. Everything tingles during little aftershocks. I pound my fist against the wheel and on the second strike there's a stabbing pain in my finger.

I pull the Honda across the rumble strip and park on the shoulder to assess the pain. The finger's probably not broken, but the punch shattered my mother's sapphire and diamond ring. Part of the setting landed on the back seat; another is stuck in the carpet by the rear lift door. Two tiny diamonds are missing, their prongs bent. The white gold band is split where it was once sized.

We have been ejected from apartments, eaten beans and rice for weeks, and hawked nearly everything of value at one time or other over the years—but the ring and its matching earrings have never been on the chopping block. The earrings were from her father; the ring, a birthday gift from her granny.

I hold the remaining pieces in my palm.

I love the ring.

I loved what I thought it meant to my mother and that it was something she passed down to me.

That's when I cry.

## CHAPTER 4

I don't feel better when I stop crying; I merely run out of tears.

I want a rationale for why she lied.

The trouble with liars: *their* word can't set the story straight. Richard has been in our lives for four years. I need someone from twenty years ago, but we have no twenty-year friends, other than Frankie, and I'm not keen on being toe to toe with a felon. Even if I got up the guts to ask her questions, I am fairly sure Floyd has set visiting hours, and who knows what Frankie's new ADPA timeline did to her privileges. There could be more leniency, could be less.

My foot is heavier than the advised maximum speed and I blare Kelis (at a decibel that will likely result in a visit to an audiologist someday) and search for an answer. At ninety-five miles per hour I think not of a solution but of a possibility.

Mom didn't keep a person over the last twenty years. She kept an object. Her granny's ring. Not Beth Wagner's granny. Elizabeth King's granny. For once, being versed in Frankie's story helps me. Cassandra King. She's my starting place.

I type Nockabout into the GPS app. An address for *The Center, 414 Circle Dr., Nockabout Island, KY* pops up. I set the destination while the app adds a note about varying ferry schedules. I'll handle the ferry problem when I get there.

Waze routes should carry me through the small town of Columbia, which I discover is only forty-eight miles away. Nockabout's another twenty from there. Mom ran away from home, but she didn't run far. The Pilot is old enough there's no auxiliary cable. Worn out on rage-y music, I opt for the radio. Scan lands me near the lower 80s of the FM dial and a talk radio broadcast.

The DJ says, "Well, unless new evidence is found. Which, in the case of Francis Quick, would be unusual. This case isn't cold, people, it's frozen in twenty years of captivity and an assumption that the justice system is flawless. But what if the system failed Francis Quick? Isn't that a question worth asking before the ADPA saves us all a buck? Certainly a question I would want asked if it were me in the hot seat. And, friends, it could have been. I'm a Lone Valley boy myself. I worked summers at the Green River Marina, took a tour of the Center like every other high schooler in the county, and I knew the Kings. Not

well. But well enough. I never believed Francis Quick beat up Martin Jarvis, and I certainly don't believe she killed Cora King."

The minute I have enough signal to Google, I pull off the highway for a refresher on Nockabout. After minimal searches, I learn how to place Nockabout Island on the Kentucky map by locating the townlet of Lone Valley, nestled directly against the southern edge of Green River State Park, and then finding the speck of land parallel to Lone Valley's snaking shoreline. The lake stretches out like an elongated Chinese dragon, and Lone Valley sits midway along the underbelly. Google says it's home to 531 people.

An out-of-commission railroad bridge comes up in Google images when you enter Nockabout Island or Lone Valley, and every article that mentions the townlet or the island ends up as a story about Cora King or its well-respected methamphetamine recovery clinic called the Center (where I'm routing to) or a mine that shut down in the fifties. Some local personality had quipped, "We're known for murderers, miners, and addicts." According to the Wiki page, the mine is the wealth behind the King family.

The King family.

My family.

What led to Mom's excision? Is this the road she left on? Did she steal a car, drain her bank account, tell off her father, get kicked out? In my anger at being lied to, I've almost lost the primary thread of the story.

Her sister was murdered.

I don't have any siblings or dear friends. I lived elementary and middle school between clumps of fellow students, and then in high school I migrated between special interest clumps and proximity clumps—girls I ran with, kids in that one youth group, a guy three doors down from an old apartment, seniors who don't have their own cars and ride the bus. None of them felt worth keeping after I graduated; they were barely even worth Instagram selfies.

Mom's the closest thing to a best friend I've ever had. And yeah, I'm second to Frankie, but being second to someone who's never around isn't all bad. I never watch Mom choose Frankie over me. There are none of those high-stakes movie scenarios where Mom can save only one of us. Until this morning, being threatened by Frankie was a little bit like being threatened by Ozzy Osbourne. You know it's creepy, but creepy's not all up in your space.

Now I feel properly displaced.

Rattled in a way that makes me understand how Mom might have felt twenty years ago when she threw a suitcase in a car and left home for good. Like she'd swallowed a snake that slithered and stretched until its fangs sank deep in her heart and its rattling tail banged inside her brain. You want to put it behind you, but you can't because it's inside you.

What I thought I knew of Mom's childhood was already limited. In the previous narrative, her parents died before I arrived on the scene. She'd grown up across the Ohio River in Tell City, Indiana, her dad a cop, her mom a phone

operator at a trucking company. During late elementary school, they moved over to Kentucky and eventually to Lone Valley. In Mom's stories, college was the beginning of her life. I'd asked about kid things, of course— Did she like Happy Meals when she was my age? Did she sled when it snowed? Is granny bread called granny bread for a reason?—and she'd given roundabout answers that painted a thin, watery picture that might have belonged to anyone. By the time I was thirteen, nothing came of my probing except a heavily poured glass of wine, a long shower, and the Indigo Girls blaring beneath her bedroom door.

That was the most she talked about her parents.

Whose story was that? Some college roommate's?

She occasionally referenced Nockabout. More as Frankie's hometown than her own. Lying in the park, after we'd been evicted and before we moved in with Richard, I asked, "Mom, what about Nockabout? Couldn't we go there?" (I hadn't asked about my father's town because she'd told me from an early age, in no uncertain terms, that he was not and would not ever be part of our lives.)

"Oh gosh. Nockabout's beautiful, Ny. Simple. But beautiful. There are places in the state park that'll take your breath away, and I swear I've had to honk the horn to force the deer off the road. I'll bet I skipped a thousand rocks on the lake."

She'd sounded wistful.

"Let's go," I'd said, wondering where we might land for the night.

She had sighed and said, “I can’t go back there.”

There was no further explanation. She’d kindly asked me not to push—and while that had seemed deeply unfair, given the circumstances of us needing a place to sleep, I gave her space. Now I wish I hadn’t.



## CHAPTER 5

Richard rings as I'm passing a Walmart Supercenter in Columbia. His raised voice rockets through the receiver. "Where are you, Lion?" The next words are spoken through gritted teeth. "She's a blubbering mess."

"Good for her," I say.

"You've got a right to be furious, but I need ya."

"Thanks for the permission," I snap and then apologize. "Look, I'm almost to Nockabout. I'll be back tonight, but I need to get my head around this."

"Bad idea, Lion."

"Want to tell me why?"

"Nope."

Even from seventy miles away, I can see the canary's feathers poking out his mouth.

"Richard, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't care whether it's good or bad; it's the only idea I can stomach right now. Just handle her until I get back. Please."

“See you tonight.” He’s asking and also telling.  
His fatherly tone makes me ache with thankfulness.  
Humans are supposed to be born to two people who love  
them, and instead we are born and love is a roll of the dice.  
At least I’ve rolled sixes in Richard.



## CHAPTER 6

When I pictured the Nockabout Island Ferry, I imagined something far grander than its reality: a road ending in a graded ramp and a parking lot filled with broken concrete, weeds, and your basic small-town outdoor shopping strip. At the water's edge sits a floating shack with an aging sign about ferry services. Two round-trip routes during weekdays, three on Saturday, none for Sunday. Each trip is a dollar without a car and five dollars with. The little barge rocks in the water, its security chain clanking against the bow. I park, slide out of the sticky leather of the Honda, and stretch in the noonday heat.

Six fishing boats putter between our shore, the opposite shore, and what I can only assume is Nockabout. The island is smaller and closer than I expected. This town doesn't need a ferry; they need swimsuits. Or maybe a ramp and the *General Lee*.

The sun is high and orange, the sky swirling cotton-candy clouds across a bright blue horizon. Green River Lake is slicker than oil and prisms with a thousand diamond sparks. My mother didn't oversell the view; this sight is the epitome of craggy beauty that every Kentucky waterway seems to possess.

Unfortunately, the ferry is closed for another three hours. Someone has nailed a newly hand-painted, misspelled wooden sign to one of the dock posts: *Murder doesn't need your spectatership*. Evidently the press around the ADPA has brought renewed interest in the island's murderous history.

Up the hill, the three businesses in the shopping strip—Ned's Fine Jewelry and Pawn, Cecilee's Scissors: Dog Groomer Extraordinare, and Mary's Bait and Tackle—are hopping. While I'm debating who to speak with first, a young driver abandons her Chevy Equinox, engine running, and heads into Cecilee's with a dog under her arm. The simplicity makes me smile and, in a way, communicates more about Lone Valley than anything on Google ever could.

Three more cars glide down the hill and into spots near the ferry. Trying to avoid the appearance of a "spectater," I wing a flat stone across the surface and then another and another. Nearby, horns beep and a speedboat driver cheers at my next rock's ten skips.

"Hey," someone yells from the parking lot. "Hey, you." I turn around and a woman waves me to her car. She looks

normal enough. When I'm closer, she lowers her voice and asks, "Is this where the tour starts?"

"Tour?"

"The murder tour," she mouths. She looks through me, searching for something unseen. "The guy said to meet at the dock near the spectator sign. That's it, misspelled and all. But he said it was a group. I don't want to take my girls on a murder tour alone with a strange man." The older of her two girls bends low enough in the passenger seat to gaze up at me and wave. One of her long braids falls into a cup of water in the center console. She notices and sucks the liquid out of her hair.

"Right, the murder tour," I say, even though she clearly wants to keep it on the DL.

I'm overheard. A guy with a man bun waves at us. "I'm here for that too. I only have a check. You think he'll take that?"

The woman looks doubtful and holds up three fifty-dollar bills. "We're not taking any chances, are we, girls?"

I'm not sure what sort of schmuck runs a murder tour in a place like this, but I'm hedging my bets that he'll tell me about Granny King. I play along, hoping I don't need fifty dollars, because the only things in the Honda are a couple of plastic gas station mugs and Burt's Bees lip balm.

In the time it takes me to skip a second rock ten times, a small passenger boat docks and one more car arrives. No one exits their air-conditioned heavens until the guy in

the boat, who is carrying a honey-colored puppy under one arm and a yellow plastic sack in the other, leans against the “spectater” sign. The dog squirms and the guy kisses the wrinkle on her Lab-mix forehead before releasing her to run. She comes to me, sniffing, and I hear the guy calling roll. “Linda? Emily? Parson?”

The two girls with Linda make a total of five tourists. The guy looks over toward me and gives me a bro nod I take to mean that I’m welcome to join if I’m interested and have fifty dollars.

He says to the group, “I need to run my pup, Lucy, up to the hill to Ned and then you’ll have my full attention.” He sees the dog at my feet, strides over, leans into my ear, and says, “Act like my assistant and you can tag along for free.”

I’ve never been hit on in a way I could confidently think, *I’m being hit on*, until now. Given the emotions of the day, I’m too whiplashed to enjoy it, even on a small level. And I feel shallow that I’m willing to use his attraction to get my answers, but then again, he’s charging fifty bucks a pop for a murder tour.

When he returns, he huddles the group on the shore. “Don’t be shy. You’re in the right place. My name’s Sam,” he says. “Looks like everyone brought a life jacket.” They’re all wearing theirs and carrying cameras and iPhones in waterproof sleeves. Sam lifts an orange life preserver out of the boat and tosses it at me. “Got yours right here.”

“Thanks,” I say.

I need a ride to the island. I need information. And boom, up turns this strong-jawed, sun-kissed, dog-loving type. Who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth?

I note my co-tourists as we share first names with each other.

A middle-aged woman with bottle-colored red hair and wellies to match. Emily.

Then Man Bun. Parson. Twenty-five or so, wearing a vintage AC/DC T-shirt, khaki shorts, flip-flops, and a shark tooth necklace (which I really hope is sentimental rather than a fashion statement).

The remaining three: the mother, Linda, and her two daughters, one sixteenish, Ruth, and one eleven or twelve, Naomi. The threesome are painfully alike. Each has two brown braids that hang below their butts, straight black skirts that hit mid-calf, and Vans sneakers. All three have their iPhones out. Teen Braids faces Sam, likely recording him; Tween Braids takes a selfie with the group behind them. I feel the potential hashtags in her body language. #nockaboutisland #murderTour #thisiswhereithappened. The mom takes a picture of the “spectater” sign and smiles like a kid drinking sugar by the gallon.

Sam stands directly in front of his boat and addresses the crowd in a more formal voice. “As promised in the tour description, over the next two hours you will see firsthand the cabin where Cora and Francis hung out, along with Cora’s sister, Elizabeth.” It might be my imagination, but Sam pauses and looks at me—even though there is no way

he knows who I am—before he continues. “From there, you’ll be able to see the exterior of the King houses and property—”

I raise my hand and take a risk. “Will the grandmother be around today?”

“Yeah, we might catch a glimpse of Cassandra on her deck. Then we’ll head down to the beach to examine where the body of Cora King was discovered, and finally, up the hill to Frankie’s Camaro, which contains Cora’s blood, the one piece of real evidence used against Francis Quick in the trial. Now, are you ready to get the real story?”

I touch the tiny scab on my middle finger where Granny Cassandra’s ring lived and then I settle myself in Sam’s boat.