


# THE 22 MURDERS OF MADISON MAY



A NOVEL

MAX BARRY

AUTHOR OF *LEXICON*

## ABOUT MAX BARRY



Max Barry is the author of numerous novels, including *Jennifer Government*, *Company*, *Machine Man*, *Lexicon* and *Providence*. He is also the developer of the online nation simulation game NationStates. Prior to his writing career, Barry worked at tech giant HP. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife and two daughters.

**TITLES BY MAX BARRY**

*Providence*

*Lexicon*

*Machine Man*

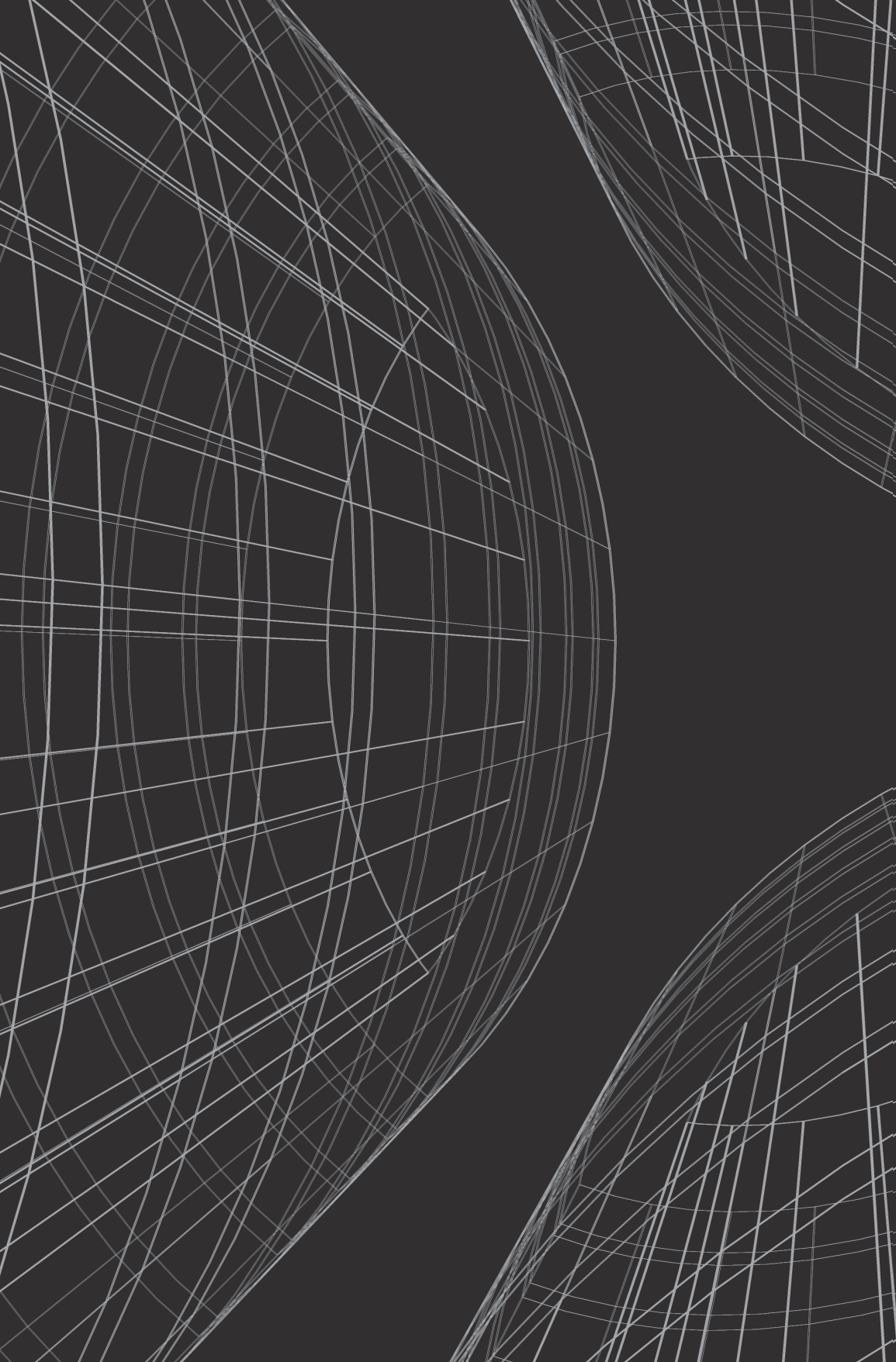
*Company*

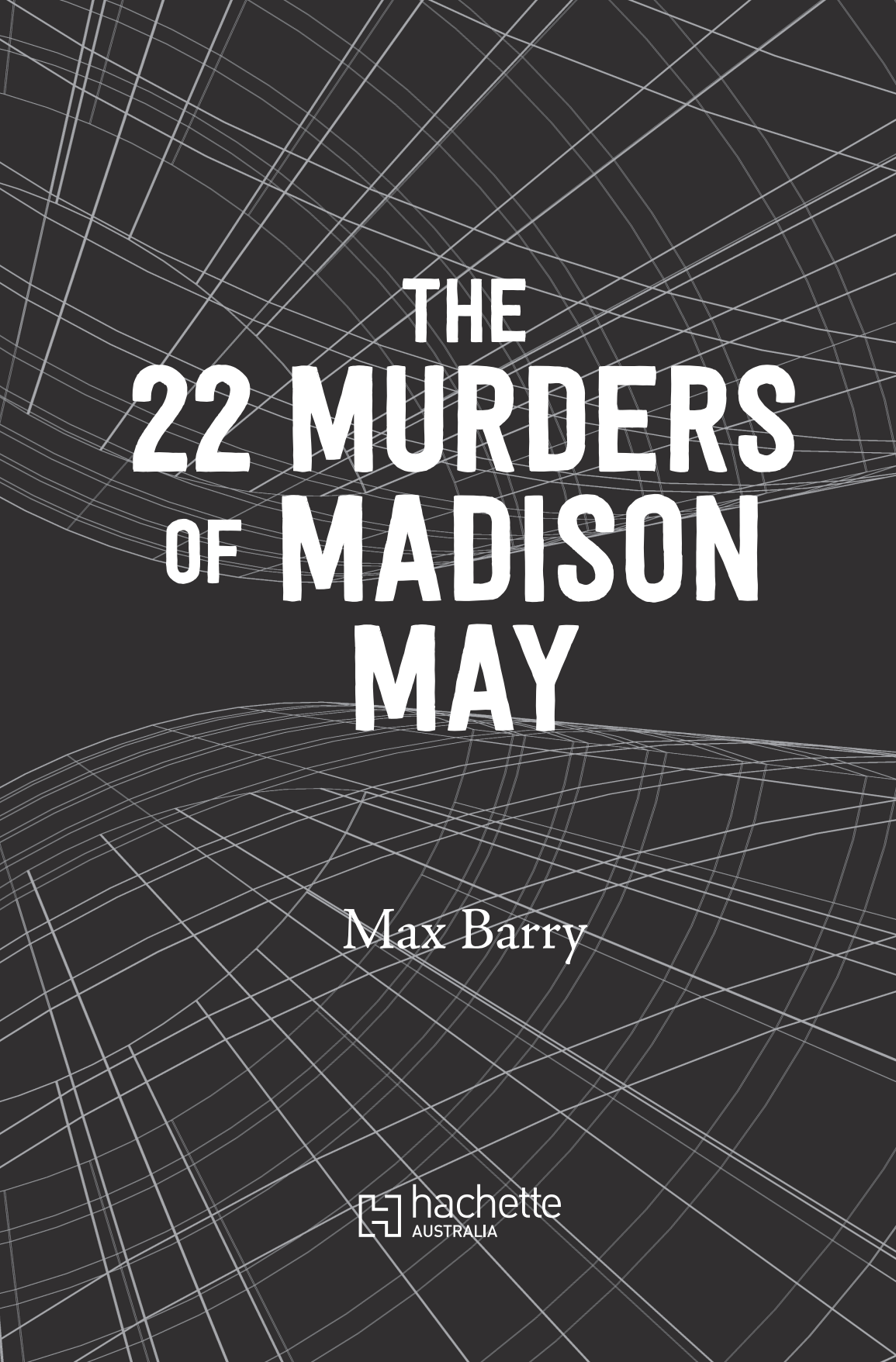
*Jennifer Government*

*Syrup*

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Max Barry

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For Finlay & Matilda





**SHE PULLED TO THE CURB AND PEERED THROUGH HER CAR WINDOW AT**

the house she had to sell. The mailbox was lying across the lawn in pieces, as if someone had taken a baseball bat to it. “Oh, come on,” Maddie said. The house was a dump. The mailbox had been one of the best things about it.

She retrieved her bag from the passenger seat, climbed out, and tugged down her dress. It was ninety degrees and humid. Her house’s best feature was spread across the earth. But she had brought her sneakers, which meant she wouldn’t have to do this in heels. She carried broken mailbox shards around to the side of the house and dumped them beside a pile of old wood and a deflated football. While she was picking clean the small lawn, she noticed two boys of about fourteen loitering on bikes outside the fence, so she straightened and waved to them.

“Bend over again,” said one of the boys. The other laughed.

She went into the house. It was dark. The walls leaned close. There was a fusty, hard-to-mistake, neglected grandma smell. But it was hers to sell, so she drew the curtains, drained the sink, and opened the back door. She set candles in strategic locations: hallway, bedroom, and a weird L-shaped space that she’d decided to call a

study. These were her special candles, which she'd found after an on-line search for *conceal stench*. She checked her watch. The candles were good, but for emergencies, she had another secret weapon: a spray can labeled *Just Like Cookies*. It was less convincing than the candles, closer to *Just Like Burnt Dirt*, but it worked faster. She moved from room to room, spraying in controlled bursts.

She was staring at a dark stain in the corner of the living room when a car eased into the cracked concrete driveway. "Shit," she said. She yanked off her sneakers, stuffed them into her bag, and squeezed her feet into stilettos. She swiped open her phone and keyed a playlist, SELL MUSIC, which was pianos and swelling strings, a little brass: classy, but also motivational. The car door thumped. She used her hand mirror to verify that nothing had gone horribly wrong with her face, then focused on reaching the front door without driving a heel through the floorboards.

The buyer was approaching the concrete front steps, removing his sunglasses, craning his neck to peer at something higher up. The drainpipe, she guessed. It wasn't actually attached to anything. She had meant to do something about that.

"Hi!" she said, and smiled, like: BZZZZT. The saying went *Location, Location, Location*, but at Henshaw Realty, it was *Teeth, Tits, Hair*—at least according to Maddie's mentor, Susie, who'd been selling houses for thirty years and presumably knew what she was talking about. BZZZZT: Head up, teeth out, shoulders back, little head tilt, hair falling to the side. She had long hair, red edging into auburn, which so far she had resisted blondifying. "I'm Maddie!" she said. "Thanks so much for coming."

The buyer shook her hand. He was about her age, early twenties, dimples, thin, but somewhat cute. Despite the heat, he was wearing a long-sleeved collared shirt over chinos. "I'm Clay," he said. "Wow, you're tall."

"It's the shoes."

He looked down, so she took the opportunity to turn one leg and do a little pose. When he met her eyes again, she went: BZZZZT.

"You're really pretty," he said.

She laughed and turned to let him follow her into the hallway. Too much BZZZZT. She would tone that down. "You're lucky," she called over her shoulder, as they entered the kitchen's chemical embrace of cookies-slash-burnt-dirt. "We've had a lot of calls about this house. You're the first to see it." Lies. Terrible lies.

"Is that right?" He had removed his sunglasses. Strong eyebrows. His hair was a little shaggy, not really her thing, but she liked the implication, that he had his own style. Went his own way. Was possibly uniquely into falling-down unrenovated 1960s clapboard two-bedrooms in Jamaica, Queens.

She collected her phone, which was tinkling piano noises. "Do you mind if I take your photo?"

"What for?"

"It's a security thing."

He seemed confused.

"It's silly, but we're meeting people alone, so they like us to—"

"Oh, of course. I get it."

She raised the phone. He straightened and smiled, a little BZZZZT of his own. He was kind of awkward. Beneath the dimples and the shaggy hair, she sensed a guy who wasn't comfortable with people.

She snapped. "Done," she said. "That goes to our office." Where they had his details from when he'd made the appointment. He was Clayton Hors, of Ulysses, Pennsylvania. Currently living with his parents, after dropping out of Carnegie Mellon, looking to start a new life with a move to the city, thanks to, Maddie was guessing, a push from the folks. She put down the phone. "Thanks."

"No problem. There are some bad people out there. You have to take precautions."

"I also know jujitsu." She did not. "So," she said, "I really love this window. You get so much light."

He nodded. "How long have you been selling houses?"

"About a year." He wasn't looking at the window. Although maybe that was a good thing: The backyard was thigh-high weeds and a quietly rotting shed.

"Is real estate your"—he searched for words—"long-term ambition?"

"Oh, I love houses." Technically the truth. Houses, she loved. Real estate, which, it turned out, was mostly about pressuring people into making decisions, not so much. She had been wondering lately whether she'd chosen the wrong career. For a long time, she'd dreamed about acting—never seriously committed to it, of course, because it was so impractical, like saying you wanted to be an astronaut, but if she was still thinking about it, did that mean something? That she should have been braver?

"You love this house?" he said, looking at the crooked cupboards, the blotchy curtains.

"Every house has something to love. You just have to look for it."

He smiled. A genuine smile. He had warmed up. "Well, good for you." He headed into the living room and she followed. "Although I'm a little surprised you're not an actress."

She stopped, startled.

He glanced back. "Sorry. I blurt out whatever I'm thinking. Is it okay if I look around by myself? I'll let you know if I have questions."

"Sure," she said, recovering. "Knock yourself out."

He moved off. She peered at a cupboard door that was hanging by one hinge, wondering if she could fix it. Susie, her mentor, would say: *Maddie, leave it. The house is shit. You can't make it not shit. Try to dress it up and all buyers will see is that you're lying to them.* It was true, Maddie supposed. But this kind of thing wasn't even about the

buyers. It bothered her on a personal level to see something that needed fixing and not fix it.

The *Just Like Cookies* was wearing off, so she moved about the house to deploy a few more tactical sprays. On a pass through the kitchen, she checked her phone, because she had a boyfriend, Trent, who was supposedly going to let her know whether he would be home tonight or out with friends. Nothing.

Clay appeared in the doorway. "I'm just gonna grab something from my car."

"Sure," she said.

He'd pushed up his sleeves. On his right forearm was a discoloration, a patch of purple, red, and yellow all mixed together, like an injury that wasn't healing right.

He caught her looking. "I have a dog. Goes kind of crazy sometimes."

"Oh," she said. What was she doing? Staring like an idiot. "I'm sorry."

"She has a good heart. Just doesn't always know it. I'll be right back."

He disappeared. She felt mad at herself. She moved to the living room and watched him open the trunk of his car. A nice one, a new black Chevrolet SUV. Rental sticker, so she couldn't infer anything about his finances. She returned to the kitchen and her musical phone.

He clomped back inside the house. After a few minutes, she called: "Everything okay?"

There was no answer, so she put down her phone and set out to find him. He wasn't in the hallway, nor the laundry—"laundry," with air quotes—a tight cupboard of rusted steel and water stains. He wasn't in the room she was calling a second bedroom, even though the only way you were getting a bed in there was upright. The hallway ran down the middle of the house; possibly they were circling

each other. But if so, he was being very quiet. She didn't think it was possible to move around this house without making a sound unless you were very intent on doing so.

When she entered the master bedroom, she found the curtains were closed. She had definitely opened those earlier. She reached to toggle the light switch, but of course there was no power; it had been disconnected months ago. In the gloom, she could make out a silver lump on the carpet: a case of some kind, possibly a toolbox. The lid was open, but it was facing the other way, so she couldn't see what was inside.

Her phone in the kitchen fell silent.

She turned. "Hello?"

The front door was ten feet to her right. It was open. Outside was a clear, bright day. Concrete path, low chain-link fence. The road was a cul-de-sac—rare in New York, a real jewel in this house's cardboard crown—so there was no passing traffic, but she could hear kids calling to one another, most likely the two who'd been out front when she arrived.

She had sent Clay's photo to her office. They had his details, which had been verified before she'd even come out here. Clay knew this. The security process was on her side.

She headed to the kitchen.

He wasn't there. Neither was her phone. That was less cool. "Hello?" she said again, more aggressively. "Can I help you?"

The outside noise fell away until she was standing in a closed-in bubble of quiet. The front door had closed, she realized.

*The wind. You opened all the doors and the breeze can be strong, can blow right through, slam a door—*

Only the back door wasn't open. None of the doors were open. And none of them had slammed. They had closed so softly she hadn't heard the click.

No breeze had blown her phone away, either.

She called: "Clay, my office has your information. They know who you are."

She was in an empty kitchen. The drawers were empty: no knives, nothing she could see to use as a weapon. Outside, though, were those kids. The house was clapboard; if she screamed, they might hear.

She bent down and unstrapped her stilettos. Whatever might happen next, she didn't want to face it on heels.

"Sorry." His voice floated toward her. "Sorry, Madison, I'm here."

She stayed where she was. "Do you have my phone?"

"I'm sorry, I needed it for a second."

"Why do you have my phone?"

Silence.

She opened her mouth to repeat the question. He appeared in the living room doorway. She tensed. She could be hitting the back door in about three seconds. Would it be locked? Would it stick? If so, he would catch her before she got out.

"I'm super-apologetic about this. I really didn't mean to freak you out." His palms were up to indicate his complete lack of threat. But he was moving toward her, one slow step at a time, which she did not like at all. She could see that discoloration on his forearm: the dog bites that weren't healing. A mix of old and new wounds, she realized suddenly. He'd been bitten over and over. By that dog he said he owned, who had a good heart but didn't always know it.

"Can you stop?" she said. "I am actually freaked out."

He stopped. "I'm really sorry to do it like this. I know how it looks. But I'm out of time."

"Can I have my phone back?"

He looked pained. "Unfortunately, no."

"Why not?"

"Madison, you have to trust me. I don't want to hurt you. I'm here for you." He began to edge toward her again.

"Stop. I want you to leave this house."



"I can't do that. I'm sorry. I need you to come to the bedroom."

The bedroom. Where the curtains were closed. Where a silver box sat in the gloom, facing the wrong way. She was not going to the bedroom.

He ran his hand through his hair. "This isn't going well. I'm sorry. I don't have time to explain."

She took a half-step to her right, just shifting her weight, and he leaned in the same direction. He was prepared to chase her, she saw. If she ran. If she tried to scream.

He said, "Please, please, just come to the bedroom."

She began to act. Not in the way she'd been thinking about before, for a stage, or a camera—the ordinary way, like when she met clients, or buyers, and had to be a slightly different version of herself for a while. For them, she was a sparkly, chatty Maddie, who was very interested in whatever you had to say and however long you wanted to take to say it. For Clay, she would be a person who did not need to be chased. She would be that person as completely as she could, until she saw the opportunity to be a person running for her life.

She nodded.

He exhaled. "Thank you. Thank you." He gestured, indicating for her to go past him. But that was a bridge too far, even for a person who did not need to be chased, and she hesitated. He nodded and backed away, making space. That was good. They were establishing trust. He was granting concessions, which she could abuse.

In the hallway, though, he stood with his back to the door. He gestured to the dark bedroom and she stared into his face but saw no other option. "Madison," he said, and pressed his hands together like a prayer. "I promise, I promise you can trust me."

She screams. Outside, the kids hear. Their heads turn in unison. Moments pass. Then they shrug and return to their bikes. It's a bad neighborhood; there are screams, sometimes.

No. Not this. She does not scream.

But she couldn't make herself enter that room. "Why?" she said, even though it was moot; he was close enough to seize her if he chose.

"I only want to talk. I swear to God."

She was terrified and possibly only seeing what she hoped for, but there was honesty in his face. She was a reasonable judge of character, from the acting: You learned what emotions looked like, which parts of the face moved when a person was envious, or sympathetic, or angry. Or lying.

She walked into the bedroom. Clay closed the door behind her. A thin shaft of light split the curtains and slashed across the carpet. The silver case sat in shadow, its mouth open to the far wall.

He moved to the curtain, opened it two fingers' worth, and peered out. Looking for . . . what? People, she guessed. Making sure no one was around. She reached behind her, seeking the door handle. She was only two closed doors to freedom. All she had to do was open this door, get out, fling it closed—this part was important!—so that it actually shut, and Clay would have to navigate the handle, and by then she could be pulling open the front door, and she would be outside, running, and, yes, it was a bad neighborhood, a terrible neighborhood, where there was every chance that no one would come to help, no matter how much noise she made, but it was her best option, she felt; it was far, far better than staying and finding out what was in the box.

Clay let the curtain fall closed. She tucked her hand into the small of her back before he could see. No one reaching for the door handle here. No, sir. No one who needed to be chased.

"I think we have a few minutes," Clay said. "I can tell you what's going on. But it won't be easy for you to hear. I need us to give each other a chance. All right?"

She nodded.

"Can you give me that chance?"

"Yes," she said, although she didn't like that: the push for affirmation.

"Like you said, your office knows who I am. They have my name, my photo." He held up his hands. "I've left fingerprints everywhere. Right?"

She nodded. Yes! These were excellent points. They could all agree that it would be crazy for Clay to do anything. There were security measures. Yes.

"So you can relax."

"Okay," she said. She was not relaxed. This situation had a long way to go before she would be anywhere near relaxed. But she was being agreeable.

He rubbed his hands together, a nervous gesture. He was still near the curtains. It was not completely impossible that she could get out the door before he reached her. "I'm just going to tell you. Madison, I'm not from this world."

*Oh, God*, she thought.

He came toward her. At first she thought he meant to take her hands, and that jolted her to her senses, because for a moment there she'd been snagged on the preposterousness of what he'd said: *I'm not from this world*—like, what did that mean, exactly, in what sense? But now she realized: the crazy sense.

The photo at the office didn't matter. The fingerprints didn't matter. He believed he was from another world.

"I've traveled here for you. Only for you, Madison." He hesitated. "How do you feel about that?"

She felt like vomiting from terror. But she said, "I'm . . . confused." Her tone was level, almost curious, and that was good; that was exactly what she wanted.

He glanced at the curtain again. When he next moved to the window, she was gone. She should have run the first time. "Of course you are. And scared, I bet. But you can trust me."

His face was hangdog, and here it was again, this weird insistence on her approval, even though he had all the power. It might be some-

thing she could use. For whatever reason, he cared what she thought, and if she were smart—if she didn't push too hard—she might be able to find a way to turn that against him. *I need us to give each other a chance*, he'd said. Maybe she could make him give her a chance.

"I . . . do feel like I can trust you," she said. "I don't know why."

His reaction was bigger than she'd expected: His loud eyebrows shot up and his mouth dropped open. "Really?"

"Yes," she said, rowing hard. "I felt that when we met. Maybe you remind me of someone I know?" No reaction. That was a swing and a miss. But he was waiting, his expression expectant, offering her another pitch. "Or . . . maybe we've met before."

*Whack.* A solid hit. His face lit up. "When do you think we've met?"

*Oh, Christ.* "I don't know. There's just . . . something."

"When?" he said again.

"College? High school?" But these were bad guesses, she saw. Not even close. She did something very brave and took a step toward him, *i.e.*, away from the door. A small deposit toward the hope of a future return. "Or something deeper. More spiritual."

He exhaled shakily. "You're right. We have met before. But not on this world."

She nodded. *Yes, of course, that's probably it.*

"All this . . ." He gestured to . . . the room, the curtains? No, no: the world, of course. "It's a drop in the ocean. There are more worlds. More than you can count. They look the same but they're not, not if you pay attention. And you're in all of them. Everywhere I go, you're doing different things. Every time I leave, it's to find you again."

He gazed at her. She felt required to ask a question. He'd just told her there were a bunch of worlds; of course, of course, she would have questions, if she took that seriously, and was not devoting most of her brain toward figuring out the location of the door handle. She said: "Why?" He didn't answer, and she thought maybe that had

been a bad question, but no, it wasn't that: He just wanted her to figure out the answer. "In these . . . other worlds . . . are we . . . together?"

He gave a rueful smile and shook his head. But that was the right answer, she thought. That was what he'd wanted her to say. "Sometimes I can't even get to see you. Sometimes I can get to you but it doesn't work out. There are people trying to keep us apart. People who move, like me." He glanced at the curtains again. "They're getting close."

She was interested in that: in people who wanted to keep them apart. She would like to meet them now, if that was at all practical. "Why do they want to keep us apart?"

"It's complicated. I'll explain on the way."

*On the way.* For a long moment she tried and failed to imagine what on earth that could mean. Then it hit her: His box was a portal. Inside would be a car battery or a dead opossum that he'd convinced himself was a transdimensional travel device, and he would hold her hands and ask her to close her eyes. Then: *Kazam!* They would be in another world. Which would look the same, according to him. So, very conveniently, there would be no evidence of whether they'd traveled or not. But all this was fine, Maddie realized, completely fine, because after that, he would want to leave the house, and then she could run.

"On the way to where?" she said, widening her eyes, like: *Interdimensional travel, how amazing.*

"I have a hotel room," he said.

*Ah.*

They said never let yourself be taken to a secondary location. That was where you got murdered. But she had to get out of this house. She would go with him, but not get in his car. "All right," she said.

He smiled. "I still can't believe you recognized me. That never happens."

She smiled back.

"I mean, never," he said.

She felt a touch of ice in her throat. Her smile felt welded to her face.

"You know, I love you, Madison. In every world. Even when you don't love me back."

"We should go," she said, "before those people arrive."

"Can I ask you something?"

She nodded mutely.

"Can I hug you?"

She said nothing.

"It's just, it's been so long. It kills me to get this close to you and not touch you." He spread his arms.

She reviled at the idea. She could shove him, she thought. He was standing in front of the silver box; she could move in for the hug, then push him over the box.

She moved toward him. She didn't know if she could really shove him. It was fine in theory, but dudes were always a little faster and stronger than you expected. It was easy to forget, but occasionally there was a situation, a game of mixed basketball, a guy getting out of hand at a party, which made you realize: *Oh, shit, they are quick.*

He spread his arms. His disfigured forearm caught the shaft of light and she saw it clearly: a mess of older scar tissue and newer bruising, a red scab that couldn't be more than a week old. None of it looked like it was made by a dog.

She stopped, unable to make herself approach any closer. He stepped forward and gently put his arms around her. She let it happen. He exhaled noisily. His cheek rested on her head. "This is nice," he said.

She could see over the lid of the case. She had been right earlier: It was a toolbox. It had levels. On each was a different kind of knife. It

was a box of gleaming metal and pain. She saw a space, as if something belonged there but was missing.

She began to tremble. "Shh," Clay said. "Shh." But she couldn't stop. His hands moved to her shoulders and pushed her back until he was holding her at arms' length. She couldn't help throwing fear-stricken glances at the box, and a smile crept along his lips. "Oh, Madison. You don't need to worry about that. That's only for if it doesn't work out. This time is different. Because this time you know me, don't you?"

She nodded.

"You felt a connection, right? As soon as we met?"

"Yes."

"Or," he said, "you were messing with me. Stringing me along." His fingers tightened on her shoulders. "Is that what you were doing?"

"No."

He gave a short, dismissive exhalation. "You know what I find crazy? There are so many of you. You're as common as dirt. I can find another tomorrow. But you always think you're so special. You're a real estate agent, for God's sake. But I gave you a chance, like I always do. I was honest with you and you lied to me."

She seized on this. "You said you didn't want to hurt me. You promised."

"I *don't* want to hurt you. But this . . ." His eyes ran down her body. "This isn't you. I can't stand to see you like this. I honestly can't."

She couldn't stop thinking about the space in the box. There was a missing tool and he had it somewhere.

She fled. Tried to. He had her before she'd so much as twitched, and she opened her mouth to scream and he jammed his forearm into it. Then his bulk followed, forcing her to the floor, knocking the breath out of her. She couldn't breathe, choked by his forearm, by the horrible puckered wound. When she tried to bite him, her teeth perfectly filled the indentations of his scar tissue.

He was reaching behind for whatever he had in his back pocket. "I hate that you make me do this," he said, and even as she struggled, she could see that he did indeed look regretful, like a man forced to put down a pet dog, one he'd loved that had turned rabid. The knife loomed, fat and wide and evil. "I really hate it."