

TRUTH BE TOLD

A play by William Cameron



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Truth Be Told

Cast of Characters

Kathleen Abedon: 40's, a mother; white

Josepha (Jo) Hunter: 30's, a journalist; may be of any ethnic background

Synopsis

Kathleen Abedon is the mother of Julian Abedon who, one year earlier, allegedly carried out a mass shooting at a food warehouse that claimed the lives of 14 people, including Kathleen's husband and Julian's stepfather, Harlan Kenney. The shooting spree ended with Julian's apparent suicide. When true-crime writer Jo Hunter comes to town to interview Kathleen for a book on the shooting, Kathleen seeks to convince the skeptical journalist that her son was framed for the shooting.

At a time in our history when the truth is under daily attack, *Truth Be Told* explores the nature of objective truth and the ways in which we manipulate and distort it to serve our own ends.

Time

The late summer of a recent year

Place

A modest apartment in Mecklenburg, a small town in the eastern United States



Truth be Told is to be performed without an intermission.

Approximate running time is 95 minutes.

(**SCENE ONE.** Late summer. A modest apartment, combination living/dining room with a sectioned off kitchen. JO, 30's, casual chic, is setting up her work area on a small coffee table, where a laptop computer and a small black electronic device already sit. KATHLEEN, 40's, her attire a less than successful attempt at sophistication, stands waiting nervously.)

KATHLEEN

Would you like some coffee?

JO

Not just yet, Kathleen, thank you. Had two cups at breakfast. So...

KATHLEEN

You already told me that, didn't you?

(JO smiles at her, continues with her work. KATHLEEN points at the electronic device)
What's that?

JO

(picking it up and handing it to KATHLEEN)
Oh, that's the voice recorder. Remember we talked about—

KATHLEEN

Right...It's sticky.

JO

Sticky? Oh, maple syrup.

KATHLEEN

What?

JO

My five-year-old, Jake. He likes to play with the recorder.
(She takes it from KATHLEEN, touches it, laughs.)
Yesterday morning he insisted on recording himself eating breakfast. Waffles. We listened to it several times.

(JO laughs, KATHLEEN smiles.)

KATHLEEN

That's cute. Is Jake here in Mecklenburg with you?

JO

Oh, no. He's home with his daddy.

KATHLEEN

Is that hard? I mean, writing these books, don't you have to go away a lot?

JO

Quite a bit in the last year, that's for sure.

KATHLEEN

And Jake, he doesn't mind?

JO

I took him with me on my book tour last year. That was an adventure.

KATHLEEN

How so?

JO

Oh, it was my first book tour and I had no idea how hectic it would be. My agent tried to warn me but...I thought I was supermom.

(JO laughs, goes back to setting up her work area.)

KATHLEEN

So...what happened?

JO

Um, he lasted a few days and then...sent him home. Missed his daddy. They're good buddies. You should see 'em. It's sweet.

(JO smiles, goes back to work. Beat)

KATHLEEN

I liked your book. The *Evil Men* book.

JO

Thank you so much. Means a lot to me.

KATHLEEN

What's it called again?

JO

The Evil That Men /Do.

KATHLEEN

/Evil That Men Do, right. Did you make that up?

JO

It's from Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*. "The evil that men do lives after them;/The good is oft interréd with their bones."

KATHLEEN

What's that mean?

JO

Well, in the play, after Julius Caesar is assassinated, Marc Antony does a speech, very famous, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears." You've heard that, I'm sure.

(Short beat)

Anyway, he argues that when someone dies, we tend to remember only the bad, the evil that a person does. The good is buried with him. Forgotten.

KATHLEEN

Forgotten. Right. That's what happens. And that's why I liked your book, 'cause it...I mean, Aynesworth, that man you wrote about...I forget his first name.

JO

Robert.

KATHLEEN

Robert Aynesworth. I know he did those terrible things—murdered his wife and his little girl and he took his little boy on that boat, that voyage and then...terrible but... when you read about him, Aynesworth, you feel sorry for him, kind of. Not sorry but...like, sympathize, 'cause you know he had some good in him...somewhere. That's what I want to come out of this interview. I want people...when they read our book, I want them to feel something for my Julian. Not just hate and anger. I don't want the good to be forgotten. Because Julian deserves that, just like any other human being...

(Brimming with emotion, her voice cracks.)

...he deserves that.

(KATHLEEN nods, a bit shaky. JO crosses to her.)

JO

Are you OK?

(KATHLEEN takes a ragged breath, fighting tears.)

My being here, stirring all this up again, it can't be easy.

KATHLEEN

I just don't know if I can...I don't know.

JO

I understand. For me to ask you to share such painful memories, it must be...

(KATHLEEN sighs deeply, trying to regain composure.)

JO (cont'd)

Know what I hope? I hope that telling your story will allow you to find some peace. This is heavy lifting, I know, but it might feel good to talk about it. To share.

(Short beat. JO takes her hand.)

Look, I'm a mother, too. That is no small bond between us, believe me. And I really want to get to know Julian. I want to learn all I can about that boy you loved so much.

(KATHLEEN takes another deep breath. She is calmer. She smiles at JO.)

You ready to do this?

(KATHLEEN smiles and nods.)

Great. Where will you be sitting?

KATHLEEN

Wherever you want me.

JO

I want you where you'll be most comfortable.

(KATHLEEN crosses to a stuffed chair and taps it.)

KATHLEEN

Here.

JO

Perfect.

(KATHLEEN sits, JO sitting opposite her. JO puts the recording device on the table in front of KATHLEEN.)

KATHLEEN

Oh, um, how do I say your name again?

JO

You mean...Jo?

KATHLEEN

I thought it was...*Josepha*.

JO

Josepha. But just call me Jo. Everyone does. My parents were expecting a boy. Ready?

(KATHLEEN nods.)

Great. Now—

KATHLEEN

Oh, wait.

(KATHLEEN rises and crosses to a small desk, pulls out a stack of 5x7 index cards secured in a rubber band. She sits back in her chair.)

KATHLEEN (cont'd)

Ready.

(KATHLEEN takes the rubber band off the cards and starts to lay them out on a coffee table in front of her. She holds onto two cards stapled together. JO watches this suspiciously for a moment, turns on the voice recorder, and speaks into it.)

JO

My name is Josepha Hunter and I am here for my initial interview with Kathleen Abedon, mother of Julian Abedon. The date is September fifteenth. The time is 9:27 a.m.

(She smiles warmly at KATHLEEN.)

Now, I'd like to start with—

KATHLEEN

I want to start with this.

(KATHLEEN holds up the two index cards stapled together.)

JO

With what?

KATHLEEN

(She pulls on a pair of glasses and reads from the cards.)

On the morning of Friday August eleventh, last year, my seventeen-year-old son, Julian—

JO

Wait.

(KATHLEEN stops.)

I'm sorry, what are you reading, exactly?

KATHLEEN

I wrote this. I want to start with it, OK? Then you can ask me questions, but this really needs to be in the book, so—

JO

It needs to be in the book? What—

(KATHLEEN removes her glasses, looks at JO.)

You can read it, of course. I'm sorry if I—

KATHLEEN

(reads)

On the morning of Friday, August—

JO

But I need to stress that...what goes in the book is ultimately my decision. Mine alone. You understand that, right?

KATHLEEN

You'll want this in the book, I promise.

(She puts her glasses back on, reads)

On the morning of Friday, August eleventh, last year, my seventeen-year-old son, Julian Abedon reported for his summer job at the Eden's Bounty food warehouse here in Mecklenburg. There was gunfire. Fourteen employees of the warehouse, including Julian, died and another was seriously injured. This was a terrible tragedy and I, like so many other parents before me, have now lost a child to an act of violence. My son Julian had a difficult upbringing. His father died less than a month after Julian was born and he was raised by me, his mother, and his stepfather, Harlan Kenney.

(short beat)

Harlan Kenney is also deceased. Even though I married Harlan, I kept the name of Abedon since it was also the name of my only child. Julian was pronounced guilty for the killings at the warehouse. There was no trial, although an investigation revealed many facts—such as from survivors who claim they saw Julian firing a weapon. But these are only claims and it seems unlike Julian to do that and I knew him like no one else. The whole truth has yet to come out and I hope this book will correct that.

(KATHLEEN removes her glasses, puts the cards down. JO regards her for a moment, makes a few notes.)

JO

You don't mention how Harlan Kenney died.

(Beat.)

How did he die, Kathleen?

KATHLEEN

The official story is that Julian...um, shot Harlan at home before leaving for the warehouse.

JO

Nor do you mention that Harlan worked at the warehouse with Julian. He was his supervisor.

KATHLEEN

Yeah, but Harlan wasn't there when the shootings happened.

JO

No, he was already dead by that time. Julian had—

KATHLEEN

We don't know that.

JO

We don't know what?

KATHLEEN

That Julian shot Harlan.

JO

I'm...confused, um...are you saying that—

KATHLEEN

I'm saying that there are no witnesses to Harlan's murder. I was still at work. Night shift. Nobody saw it except for two people who are now dead. What I do know is that what everyone said Julian did—

JO

You mean murdering his stepfather or—

KATHLEEN

I mean everything. All of it.

JO

All of it?

KATHLEEN

All of it! It was...you didn't know Julian. I did and all those things that he...I mean, that they said he...it was very much unlike him—

JO

Just to be clear—

KATHLEEN

—*very much unlike him* and who knew Julian better than me? Nobody. That's what I'm saying.

JO

I see.

(Beat, as she makes a few notes.)

This is a departure.

KATHLEEN

What do you mean?

JO

It's different from what...you and I, in our earlier conversations...well, it always seemed to me that you understood that Julian was guilty.

KATHLEEN

I never said that. I never even thought that, not...completely.

JO

Oh.

(JO makes a note.)

KATHLEEN

You seem disappointed.

JO

Disappointed? No, I just want to be clear. Are you saying that Julian didn't—

KATHLEEN

I'm saying that nobody knows everything about...I mean, who could, but...there are questions.

JO

I agree. There are plenty of unanswered questions but—

KATHLEEN

You seem so disappointed.

JO

Don't be silly. I'm intrigued, really. Um...may I see your statement?

(KATHLEEN gives her the index card; she scans it, then reads aloud.)

Julian was pronounced guilty for the killings at the warehouse. There was no trial, although an investigation revealed many facts—such as from survivors who claim they saw Julian firing a weapon. But these are only claims... Only claims. So—

KATHLEEN

You never see his face.

JO

His face?

KATHLEEN

In the movie, the, uh, video, you never see his face. The shooter. Security cameras were broken so—

JO

One of two cameras in the worker's lounge was not working, yes, but—

KATHLEEN

It says so in the report. You only see the shooter from the back.

JO

That's correct.

(short beat)

Have you seen the video?

KATHLEEN

No. Have you?

JO

Yes.

(Beat.)

And you're right, you never see...the shooter's face. But we do see him from behind—

KATHLEEN

Just for a few seconds.

JO

Just for a few seconds, yes. But we clearly see him carrying the automatic rifle, the Remington Adaptive Combat rifle. On his waist, we see the Glock 19—

KATHLEEN

(a bit testy)

I know.

JO

Sorry, Kathleen, I'm just trying to understand. When you say these are only claims, what exactly—

KATHLEEN

Since one of the cameras was broken, you never see the shooter's face. So, the movie doesn't prove that it was Julian. It doesn't.

JO

I see.

(She makes a note, puts her pen down, and looks hard at KATHLEEN.)

Julian walks into the—

(KATHLEEN starts to protest)

The *shooter*...walks into the worker's lounge at 6:57 a.m. Shift change at seven, so it's crowded. Twenty-one people are present. The shooter opens fire. Thirteen die. One is seriously injured. Seven get away unharmed. Can we agree on that?

(KATHLEEN nods curtly)

All eight survivors identify Julian as the shooter. This is eyewitness testimony. Now, eyewitness testimony can be notoriously unreliable, but in /this case—

KATHLEEN

/Right. And a lot of times, eyewitnesses, they like...especially in a thing where there's lots of panic, they don't...I mean, you're scared. Who knows what you really saw? Right? Also, Julian, he was wearing those...

JO

Fatigues?

KATHLEEN

Fatigues, right. And he had on that hat. What do they call it?

JO

Field cap.

KATHLEEN

Right. So, Julian looked different—it's not like he went to work every day wearing fatigues and a field cap...right? Plus, I saw him in that, um, field cap a couple of times before that day...once he had it down so far over his face, I almost didn't recognize him, so...see what I mean?

JO

So, you acknowledge that Julian was wearing the fatigues?

KATHLEEN

Yeah. I mean...the shooter was.

JO

And when the police found Julian's body, a short time later, he was dressed in those same fatigues. Is that correct?

(Beat. KATHLEEN turns from JO.)

Kathleen, may I tell you something? About myself?

(KATHLEEN nods tentatively but does not look at JO.)

Some time ago, Jake, my little boy, he...um, he hit...someone. Another, you know...little boy. I saw it I happen, and it shocked me. How angry he got. How hard he swung his little fist. If someone had come to me and told me about it, I would've said, no, not my sweet little boy. No! But seeing it...that was different. And the guilt that I felt in that /moment—

KATHLEEN

/That's not what this /is about—

JO

/The guilt was so strong that, even though I'd seen it happen, my immediate impulse was to deny it. So, I understand how you could feel—

KATHLEEN

This is not about what I feel, it's about what I know! It's about the facts. There are facts in dispute.

JO

Fair enough, there are certainly facts in dispute. Tell you what, let's back up and start /over—

KATHLEEN

/Bob and Marie Shepard, you know who they were?

JO

The Shepards, from the warehouse, married couple, both—

KATHLEEN

Yeah. Julian liked them. They came to the house for cookouts a couple times and Julian, he...liked them. They were sweet with him, especially Marie, and...and Sally Riggs, same thing. Sally never came to the house but Julian, he liked her. He told me once how helpful she was, you know, with paperwork and stuff at the warehouse. But still, she was killed. Shepards, too. So why... if he liked them, why would he kill them?

JO

I don't know. What do you—

KATHLEEN

And nobody saw Julian shooting Harlan. No witnesses. Report doesn't say that. Just says he did it, but it was all, you know, circumstantial.

(JO starts to speak.)

And we don't even know for sure that Julian shot himself. Nobody saw it. No video cameras, nothing.

JO

The bullet that killed Julian came from his gun. The Glock-19 that he used to shoot Har—

(KATHLEEN starts to protest.)

—that he *allegedly* used to shoot Harlan. That same gun was used on Julian and that gun was found—

KATHLEEN

On the floor. Not in his hand like CNN said that day. The gun was found on the floor a few feet from Julian, but CNN said it was in his hand. Wrong! Lots of news things...reports that day were wrong, just wrong. Like, um...NBC, they said there were two, maybe three shooters and that some of the shots came from outside the warehouse, in the alley, and then /a man—

JO

/In the rush to get on the—

KATHLEEN

Let me finish! There was a man, an older man, he was in the alley during the shooting. And the news guy—the one on CNN, with the beard—he said that man from the alley was one of the shooters. He said so, right on the air.

JO

The man's name is Anthony Bova. He owns a carpentry studio across the alleyway. He heard the commotion and came running into the alley. And CNN eventually corrected the story by—

KATHLEEN

That's not my point!

(Beat)

JO

I'm sorry, Kathleen. What is your point?

KATHLEEN

Just that there are...questions. About...the gun in Julian's hand and the security cameras and...I don't know, but you add that to everything else, with CNN and the security cameras and the... the field cap and that man in the alley and Bob and Marie and... there are just all these questions and...

(She sighs in frustration.)

I'm not explaining it right. Alan could tell you better what—

JO

Alan? Who is Alan?

KATHLEEN

He's a...he called me. We've been...talking about what happened that day.

JO

I thought we had agreed that you would not talk to any other writers.

KATHLEEN

He's not a writer. Not like...you know. He just wanted to talk to me about that day. About my son.

(Takes a deep breath, then looks squarely at JO)

Alan said he wasn't convinced that Julian was guilty. See, and I'd been thinking all along that...well, it just never seemed like Julian to...especially that week 'cause he seemed...good. Happy almost. But then the police report came out and all the news people, they said Julian did it, and so...but it always bothered me. And then Alan came, and I said all this to him and...he believed me. And he said there was evidence, real evidence that Julian was... I forget what he called it...someone to blame.

JO

A scapegoat?

KATHLEEN

A scapegoat. Yes. And Alan's very smart. And he cares. I mean, he came all the way from Arizona to—

JO

Arizona? Wait, I hope you don't mean Alan Covington.

KATHLEEN

Do you know him?

(Beat)

JO

Alan Covington came to see you? He flew up here, came to this apartment and—

KATHLEEN

Yes.

JO

When?

KATHLEEN

Last Wednesday.

JO

Last Wednesday!? Five days ago?

(KATHLEEN nods.)

And so, this is all coming from Alan Covington? This new-found skepticism about Julian's guilt, about—

KATHLEEN

It's not new-found. I just told you, I always thought there were things that...like Sally Riggs and the Shepards! But then Alan, he said a lot of stuff I never thought about and realized or... Do you know Alan? 'Cause it sounds like you—

JO

I know who he is. I'm curious, did you tell Alan Covington that I was interviewing you for a book?

KATHLEEN

No.

(JO opens a laptop computer, clicks away.)

Look, Alan's a nice man. He...what are you doing?

JO

Do you have Wi-Fi in here?

KATHLEEN

I don't know, my computer died and I never got a new one, so—

JO

I'm not getting a signal.

KATHLEEN

Please tell me what you're doing.

JO

I'm trying to see if he's talked about you on his show or tweeted about you or—

KATHLEEN

I don't underst—

JO

Kathleen, you and I have an exclusive arrangement. That means you can speak to me and only me about the events of August eleven of last year and everything leading up to that date and since.

KATHLEEN

But—

JO

You cannot speak to another writer /or—

KATHLEEN

/Alan's not a—

JO

He has a radio show, a website, he's all over Twitter, shows up on Fox News all the time, and if he has already mentioned you in any context then we have a problem. My lawyer, my god, she'll throw a—

KATHLEEN

He listened to me! He cared about me, Alan did. And...and he told me things I had never thought of before. Like...like the gun not being in Julian's hand. 'Cause on CNN they said—

JO

What CNN said on the day of the shooting, as it was happening, has no bearing on the facts of the /case—

KATHLEEN

/Why /not?

JO

/—and for Alan Covington to suggest that it does is irresponsible at best and—

KATHLEEN

You've already decided, haven't you? You think Julian did it and you won't even /listen to—

JO

/ I just want you to /consider—

KATHLEEN

/You think Julian did it. As soon as I read my statement, you were all disappointed. It's like you don't even care about the truth, you just—

JO

I care deeply about the truth. That's why I'm here. That's why I became /a journal—

KATHLEEN

/Yeah, but if anything I say or...or Alan says doesn't match up /with—

JO

/No!

(short beat)

OK, I do have an opinion of what occurred on August eleventh, but I am not here to impose my beliefs on you. And by involving Alan Covington, we—

KATHLEEN

Alan is a nice man. I don't /understand why—

JO

/He is not a nice /man.

KATHLEEN

/He was nice to me!

(Short beat)

JO

Look, can I tell you something about Mr. Covington that you might not—

(KATHLEEN sighs, exasperated. Turns away.)

Do you remember the killings at the newspaper in Virginia, earlier this year? Six people shot to death by some—

KATHLEEN

I don't watch the news anymore.

JO

Well, then let me update you. Another mass shooting, six people dead at a newspaper, Richmond suburb. Alan Covington reacted to this tragedy by going on the radio and declaring that the six journalists who died 'had it coming'—never mind that one of them was a receptionist and another was a teenage intern—they all '*had it coming.*' And then when he gets called out on that, he suddenly claims that the shootings never happened at all. That no one died, they were 'crisis actors' or some such nonsense. The whole thing was staged by some liberal/anti-gun—

KATHLEEN

/Maybe it was. How do you know—

JO

I know because one of the men killed was a friend of mine. Graduate school. I went to his funeral—which they wanted to be open casket, by the way, but they couldn't because...

(She gestures to the side of her face.)

JO (cont'd)

His poor wife and his sweet little girl just...sobbing. Devastated. And I'm pretty sure they weren't play-acting just to piss off the NRA!

(Beat)

KATHLEEN

This was a mistake. Never should have said yes to this.

JO

Kathleen—

KATHLEEN

It does not feel good to talk about it. To share.

JO

We've barely gotten—

KATHLEEN

I think you should leave.

JO

Leave?

KATHLEEN

I can't do this book.

JO

We have a con/tract—

KATHLEEN

/Not anymore. I want you out of my home.

JO

You realize that if I leave, you'll have to return your advance.

KATHLEEN

But I need that money.

JO

Then the best thing for you to do is—

KATHLEEN

Can't they just send me another writer? Someone...nicer.

JO

Yeah, I get that a lot. No, sorry, Kathleen, but it doesn't work that way. I put this project together. There's nobody waiting in the wings. If you need the money—

KATHLEEN

I do, I gotta get out of this town. God, it's so...I just...need the money, I gotta get out of this town and start over.

JO

I understand.

(She pulls a tissue out of her purse and hands it to KATHLEEN, who wipes her eyes and crosses away. Pause, as JO watches her carefully.)

Kathleen...I'm sorry. I handled this badly. David, my husband, he says I'm too contrary. It's my degree in rhetoric, he says.

(She tries a self-deprecating laugh, but KATHLEEN is unmoved.)

This Alan Covington...thing. I've let it become personal and I'm sorry. I will talk to my lawyer tonight and...we'll figure it out. I'm probably just... Look, for now, let's just put it aside and...start over. Let's go back and explore Julian's childhood. What do you think? You can do that, can't you? Tell me your stories. Introduce me to your boy. Kathleen, please look at me.

(KATHLEEN lifts her head slowly, looks at her.)

I'm good at this. I want to tell your story. I...need to tell your story. And this book will tell the truth—the whole truth about Julian and the love that you had for that boy. We will bring all of that into the light and the good that existed in him, I promise you, will not be forgotten. May I please stay?

(Pause)

KATHLEEN

I need some coffee. Do you want some?

JO

Two sugars.

(KATHLEEN rises, crosses to the kitchen. JO sighs deeply. Blackout.)

(SCENE TWO. Ninety minutes later. Seated in her chair, KATHLEEN reads aloud from one of her index cards. Several index cards have been turned upside down and put in a separate 'discard' pile. JO sits across from her with a notebook.)

KATHLEEN

The death of my husband, George Abedon, was a devastating impact on us as a family. Julian was only a month old when George, his father, died in a car crash on his way home from work. It was raining, and he was trying to pass a truck carrying cars...

(She looks at JO)

You know, those trucks with the cars, like...all the cars piled up on the back? Know what I mean?

(JO nods, starts to speak but KATHLEEN barrels ahead.)

It was raining, and he was trying to pass a truck carrying cars, but he lost control of his car and it flipped over and went down a hill and crashed. He was killed instantly, and I know that the last thing to flash through his mind was his beautiful baby boy, Julian, who we named for George's beloved mother, Julia. It was a terrible personal tragedy for me. I received a settlement of money from the insurance company but it was not enough to pay for everything and so I had to get a job but also take care of my baby. It was a hard time for me. George's family helped some but not much as it was only his mother and his brother, and they didn't like me much, so I had to—

JO

Why didn't they like you?

KATHLEEN

Um...I kind of wanted to finish this part about George and then maybe you could ask me ques—

JO

Why didn't they like you, Kathleen?

KATHLEEN

George was...um, he...he kind of had to marry me. You know, cause—

(JO writes in her notepad)

I don't want that in the book. I mean it's not like he didn't love me, and we would have gotten married anyway even if...but his mother kinda blamed me, like I was the only one in the room, you know. Please don't put that in the book.

JO

So, you and George were only married a short time?

KATHLEEN

Five and a half months. But I loved George and he loved me and if he'd lived things would've been different...I mean, not that Harlan was...

JO

Not that Harlan was what?

KATHLEEN

Nothing, I... George and me, no matter what his mother thought about us, we were in love and if he hadn't died...that's all I'm saying.

JO

How long had you been seeing George before you discovered you were pregnant?

KATHLEEN

Um...see...that's not the kind of stuff I want in the book.

JO

How old were you?

KATHLEEN

Twentyyyy...um...thr...um, four. Twenty-four.

(back to the note card, reading)

George's family helped some but...I'll skip over here...ummmm...I had to get a job. I went back to work at J.C. Penney's where I had worked but quit right before Julian was born. But I—

JO

Kathleen, let's...um, could we just talk for a while?

KATHLEEN

I thought we were.

JO

We are. But...and I appreciate all the preparation you've done, but I also thought it might be a good idea for us to just chat. I'd like to hear what you have to say...off the cuff, as it were.

KATHLEEN

But I have it all written down.

JO

And that's very helpful, it is, but it's my job to coax out some thoughts and memories that perhaps you haven't explored on your own.

KATHLEEN

Like what?

JO

Like...well, you've got a new baby, you've just lost your husband, you go back to work. Who's looking after Julian?

(KATHLEEN thinks for a moment, then reaches for a notecard from her pile. JO pulls the pile away from her.)

JO (cont'd)

Just tell me.

KATHLEEN

(Waving the index card she is still holding.)

Like I said, *in here*...George's family helped some. His mother, but she was old, sick a lot. Kaylee, his brother's wife, she was sweet. I liked Kaylee and she was good with the baby but then they moved away so...

(She shrugs.)

JO

Did J.C. Penney's offer any kind of employee daycare or—

(KATHLEEN snorts derisively.)

And it would be a few more years before Harlan—

KATHLEEN

Right.

JO

So, there was no one. Except your mother.

(KATHLEEN shifts uncomfortably. JO checks a note.)

Your father, he—

KATHLEEN

Gone. He left when I was...don't even know. I was a baby.

JO

Have you had any contact with—

KATHLEEN

No.

JO

But your mother, she was still alive at the time, and she lived in the area, correct?

(KATHLEEN nods.)

So, you must have depended on her quite a bit for childcare, for—

KATHLEEN

I don't know if I want this in the book. About my mother.

JO

Why not?

(KATHLEEN doesn't budge. Beat. Change of tone, with a chuckle...)

JO (cont'd)

I suppose if someone was writing a book about me, I wouldn't want my mother in it either.

(JO laughs amiably, then sips her coffee, emptying the cup.)

KATHLEEN

How come?

JO

(As she rises and crosses to the kitchen.)

No, no, no. Big mistake to start me talking about my mother. Be here for a month.

(JO pours herself a cup of coffee.)

OK, refocus. Where were—

KATHLEEN

What was so horrible about her?

JO

(as she comes back into the room, sits.)

My mother? Oh, she wasn't horr...isn't horrible. She just...

(JO drops her notebook onto the table, takes a sip of coffee.)

OK, quick story but then back to work. Couple months ago. May. David, my husband, he teaches journalism at a small liberal arts college—you wouldn't know it, never heard of it myself until he got the job. Anyway, David's a wonderful teacher and he received an award. Outstanding faculty, very prestigious, big end of the year banquet. We hire a babysitter but three hours before the banquet, she cancels. Can't find anyone, last ditch, call my mother. "Mother, can you watch Jake for the evening?" "Yes, but your father can't drive, he has an infected foot." "Why can't you drive, Mother?" "Oh, I could never drive that far." Twenty-minutes. So, fine, I hire an Uber, picks her up, brings her to the house. And didn't I tell you not to start me talking about my mother?

(She laughs. KATHLEEN smiles politely.)

Anyway, she calls my cell a few times during the banquet. I probably should've answered but it's David's night, so I turn off my phone, listen in peace to David's brilliant and charming speech. When I turn my phone back on twenty minutes later, there are four increasingly hysterical messages from my mother. "Come home, come home, come home!" I call her back, she doesn't answer. Now, I'm starting to panic so I drag David away from his adoring colleagues and students, get home and...

(She laughs and shakes her head, sips her coffee.)

KATHLEEN

What was wrong?

JO

Jake wouldn't eat his lima beans. He refused to eat his lima beans because, let's face it, lima beans...are awful. We wouldn't even have them in the house if my mother didn't buy them for us. Anyway, to my mother, not eating your lima beans is a major crisis, worthy of frantic phone calls and a spanking. I mean, he did throw lima beans at her, but still, she spanked him, which we never do—

KATHLEEN

You've never spanked him?

JO

No.

KATHLEEN

Why not?

JO

I don't believe in spanking as a form of punishment for a small, defenseless child.

KATHLEEN

You didn't spank him after he hit that little boy?

JO

I've never spanked him.

KATHLEEN

Even on your book tour when he was getting on your nerves and—

JO

I never said he got on my /nerves—

KATHLEEN

/You sent him home. So—

JO

He missed his daddy. And I simply couldn't do my job with...look, this is irrelevant to the—

KATHLEEN

So, there was never a time when you got angry or annoyed with /him—

JO

/Kathleen, please—

KATHLEEN

And just smacked him on the bottom or—

JO

No.

KATHLEEN

—swatted his face or grabbed him and—

JO

No!

(Short beat.)

I'm sorry, Kathleen. I didn't mean to...I'm sorry.

(Tense beat. The two women look at each other for a moment. JO makes a note, takes a sip of coffee.)

OK. So, your mother—

KATHLEEN

(waving her notecard)

I'm just gonna go back to reading—

JO

No.

(JO snatches the notecard from her.)

I want to hear about your mother.

(KATHLEEN gives her an icy stare. JO checks her notes.)

She never married again. Talk about that.

(Beat. JO waits her out.)

Was she not interested? Did she date other men?

(Pause)

KATHLEEN

She wanted to get married again. Didn't 'cause of me.

JO

Because of you. What do you mean?

KATHLEEN

She always said if she hadn't had me, she coulda...you know...

JO

No, I don't know.

KATHLEEN

(a frustrated sigh, then...)

"I'm still a good-looking woman." That's what Mom'd say. Every day, seemed like. "I'm still a good-looking woman. I'm still vital." I hate that word. Vital. "Some man'd be lucky to

KATHLEEN (cont'd)

get his hands on a vital woman like me, let me tell you. And it woulda happened by now, wasn't for you. Wasn't for me havin' to drag you everywhere I go, havin' to spend all my money on...on hair curlers and..." 'Cept I don't remember her even trying to meet or go out with men or...well, this one man. For a while. Didn't last. Who could blame him? Jesus, she was...

(Short beat.)

I shouldn't be talking like this. It's terrible to speak ill of the dead.

JO

It's not terrible, Kathleen. Not if it's the truth.

KATHLEEN

It *is* the truth. I wouldn't make something like that up.

JO

Of course not, I didn't mean to suggest—

KATHLEEN

If you're not gonna believe anything I—

JO

I believe you. I was simply—

KATHLEEN

Boy.

(Beat. JO sets down her notebook, looks at KATHLEEN.)

JO

Kathleen, I'm very sorry that I snapped at you a moment ago. It was unprofessional and uncalled for. Can we agree that it's been a tense morning? Look...maybe we should take a short break and—

KATHLEEN

The whole world thinks I'm a monster.

JO

Oh, Kathleen, I don't believe—

KATHLEEN

I know what people think, OK. Everywhere I go, "There she is. The mother." Every time I leave the apartment—which I never do unless I absolutely have to. Never go anywhere in this miserable town. People just...

JO

They what?

KATHLEEN

They think I'm a monster!

(She chokes back a tear.)

The only person who's been even a little bit nice to me in all this time...Alan Covington. And you think he's a monster. But he's the only person who's treated me anything like a...like a human being. Like a friend.

JO

I would like to be your friend, Kath—

KATHLEEN

Don't say that. You just want me to tell you stuff so you can write your book and...and if you write that I hated my mother on top of everything else, then people are just—

JO

Did you hate her?

KATHLEEN

Stop it! I was good to her. At the end, when she was sick and dying and...mean and bitchy as she could be, which was pretty goddamn bitchy, I was there every day—every day! Feeding her, washing her, wiping her...ugh. But for me...or Julian, was she ever...no! Jesus, this one time...

(Short beat)

JO

This one time, what?

(KATHLEEN avoids her gaze.)

This one time, what, /Kathleen?

KATHLEEN

/I don't want the whole world thinking I hated my mother!

JO

Fine, then we won't use it in the book. But tell me.

KATHLEEN

If you're not gonna use it, why should—

JO

Because I think you want to tell me. Am I right?

KATHLEEN

I...

(Short beat)

OK, this one day after working at Penney's, I stop at my mother's to pick up Julian but when I get to the house, nobody's there except for my little boy. As I find out later, my mother goes out

KATHLEEN (cont'd)

to pick up her mail, falls down the front steps, breaks her ankle. Neighbors see her fall, call an ambulance, off to the hospital, but nobody—*nobody*—bothers to check inside the house where Julian was left alone for over four hours and he was only three years old. That woman just left him there. She didn't even think to call me at work or...or tell the people who came to help her, "My grandson's in the house." Something terrible could have happened. Somebody could've come in and...or he could've gotten scared and run out or fallen or hurt himself or... But, no, when I got there Julian was sitting sweetly and quietly with *Good Night, Moon*. His favorite book. He couldn't read yet, but I had read it to him so many times that he knew it by heart. "Good night bears, good night chairs, good night comb, good night brush, good night to the old lady whispering hush." And he kept saying that over and over. "Hush, mommy, hush. The lady whispering hush." And he wasn't scared, he hadn't gotten hurt or soiled himself or made a mess in her precious rattrap of a house. He was very brave. And I picked him up and he hugged me so hard, squeezed me so tight...and I never took him back in that house again, ever!

(Beat, as she fights tears)

Hush, mommy, hush. Over and over. Husshh. That was my little boy. *That* was my Julian.

(KATHLEEN is shaking with emotion. Pause.)

JO

Thank you, Kathleen.

(KATHLEEN looks at her, surprised by JO's genuine response.)

That story doesn't tell me you hated your mother. It tells me you loved your son.

(JO hands KATHLEEN a tissue. She takes it and wipes her eyes.)

May I use it in the book?

(KATHLEEN shrugs. JO smiles.)

I'll take that as a maybe.

(She makes a notation in her notebook.)

Tell me another story.

KATHLEEN

About my mother?

JO

About your son.

(KATHLEEN smiles at her, starts going through her index cards. BLACKOUT.)

(**SCENE THREE.** Two days later, late morning. Both women dressed more casually. KATHLEEN animatedly moves around the room as she tells her story. She carries an index card but, at present, is not reading from it. JO sits listening, taking notes.)

KATHLEEN

End of the school year, third grade—they had this, um...Spring Fling, they called it, so cute, and at each desk in the classroom, whoever sat at that desk had all their class projects and papers and drawings. But nobody's desk had as much...or as good, you know...as smart as Julian. All of his papers had A's on them and little stars and...um, you know, 'excellent' and 'very good' and...everything like that. His third-grade teacher, Mrs. Hoover, she loved Julian. That night, she told me what a good boy he'd been all year. Delightful little boy, she called him. Delightful.

(She sighs contentedly.)

That was a good year, that third grade year.

JO

And Julian was...how old?

KATHLEEN

He turned...um...nine in third grade.

(JO makes a note, then flips back in her book a few pages, looking for something.)

Right. February seventeenth. Ooh, that reminds me—that year, on his birthday, it was a Friday, I almost forgot this, and on Fridays Mrs. Hoover always had a special—

JO

Forgive me, Kathleen, but Julian's nine? When does his stepfather enter the picture? Earlier than nine, I thought.

(She goes to her computer, stays focused on her computer notes during the following.)

Let's see. Yes, you're...three years into your marriage to Harlan Kenney by this time, correct?

KATHLEEN

Um...I guess so.

JO

Hm. OK, let's back up a little and—

KATHLEEN

What I wanted to tell you, see, Mrs. Hoover, she—

JO

We'll get there, I promise. Before we move too far ahead, though, I think it's important we go back and fill in some gaps in the timeline—

KATHLEEN

(urgently, getting JO's full attention)

But every Friday, Mrs. Hoover, she'd have this special thing. Student of the week and on that day, Julian was named student of the week. On his birthday!

(She picks up her stack of note cards and shuffles through it.)

I must have written a card about it.

JO

Thank you. But right now, I think we need to move on to some other factors in Julian's life.

KATHLEEN

Like what?

JO

Harlan Kenney, Julian's stepfather. Can you tell me—

KATHLEEN

(as she flips through her pile of index cards, finds one, holds it up)

OK, we will, but one more story about—

JO

No, I want to hear about Har—

KATHLEEN

You're gonna love this. This happened that summer right after—

JO

No, we need to move on.

(KATHLEEN starts to protest.)

Most of Monday, all day yesterday, and nearly three hours this morning—and your stories are lovely, Kathleen. I promise they will go in the book, but there is other ground to cover. Now, Harlan Kenney, tell me how the two of you met.

KATHLEEN

Don't you know this already? From your research.

JO

(checking her computer)

No. I have the date of your wedding—December nine. Julian was...five, almost six. But I don't know how you and Harlan met.

(Beat. KATHLEEN reluctantly puts her index card down.)

KATHLEEN

Girl at work, Macie. She knew him from...around. Set us up. Thought we'd like each other.

JO

And did you?

KATHLEEN

Mm-hm.

JO

What was it about Harlan that drew you to him?

KATHLEEN

Um...He had a pretty good job with...um, benefits. I mean...he was nice to me and...you know, he bought me stuff. Dinner, flowers a few times. Shoes. We were out one night, and I walked past a shoe store and saw a pair of shoes I liked, and he said, "I'll buy 'em for you." And he did. I still have them.

(Beat. JO waits for more.)

I just knew that I needed to...find somebody because I was alone and had Julian.

JO

Who had been taking care of Julian when you were at work?

KATHLEEN

Daycare. Well...this woman, she and her daughter looked after kids in her apartment. Then Penney's kept cutting back my hours, so I got a second job cleaning offices at night but the lady, she didn't like having kids at night, so she charged more, and it was barely worth it after a...and it was lonely. I had Julian but that's all I had. Work and Julian. So, when Harlan said, "Let's get married," I said, "OK."

JO

How did Julian react to Harlan coming into your life?

KATHLEEN

Julian was five, never had a man in his life, all of a sudden...

JO

Did Harlan make an effort to—

KATHLEEN

Of course, he did. He bought him stuff. Harlan played hockey when he was a kid, thought maybe Julian'd like it, so he bought him a stick and some roller blades. No, didn't like that. So, Harlan took him to a baseball game. No, didn't like that. Football. No, didn't like that. But Harlan did try.

JO

Were there signs of trouble between Harlan and Julian early on?

KATHLEEN

What do you mean by trouble?

JO

Let me rephrase the—

KATHLEEN

No, just say what you mean.

(Beat)

JO

When did the abuse begin?

(KATHLEEN huffs out an angry laugh.)

KATHLEEN

I hate that word. Abuse. It's a fuzzword.

JO

A what?

KATHLEEN

A fuzzword, that's what Alan calls it.

JO

(as she makes a note)

Alan Covington?

KATHLEEN

I know you don't like him but even you gotta admit he has a point.

JO

About what?

KATHLEEN

Fuzzwords! Like abuse. That's a fuzzword because...what does it really mean, you know? People just say it, but we don't really even know what it means.

JO

I think we know what abuse /means.

KATHLEEN

/But you say it and it just gets people stirred up, you know, emotionally. And the TV people, Jesus, they love to do that, even when they don't know what they're talking about.

JO

(JO pulls a document from her file.)

Yesterday you told me that in first grade, Julian got into a lot of fights.

(KATHLEEN nods)

In second grade that seems to have escalated.

KATHLEEN

I never said that.

JO

I'm going by his school records.

(Reads from the document.)

Violent tendencies. Difficulty making friends. Angry little /boy—

KATHLEEN

/But by third grade, he had gotten better. At Spring Fling, Julian's desk had more things than any other kid.

JO

And where was Harlan during that third-grade year? There were periods of separation, correct?

(She pulls a sheet of paper from a file folder in front of her, looks it over)

The dates aren't clear; I'm guessing since the separations weren't legal and so not in the public /record—

KATHLEEN

/What are you asking me?

JO

Was Harlan living with you during Julian's third grade year?

(short beat)

Officially, his address at the time was the residence he shared with you at, um...Eight-one-four Palladium Road. Right?

(A terse nod from KATHLEEN)

But was he living there at the time?

KATHLEEN

I think so...part of it, anyway. I don't really remember.

(Beat. JO waits her out.)

I think he left...well, yeah, he did, he left...Thanksgiving, that year. There was a big... thing, blow-up at Thanksgiving, at his mother's and we...I can't remember but Harlan...

(She makes a vague gesture suggesting that he 'went away', shrugs.)

JO

What was the argument about?

KATHLEEN

What difference does it make if Harlan was living with us or not? It was just a really good year. Why can't the book just say that?

JO

There is compelling evidence that your son and your husband had a volatile relationship and we—

KATHLEEN

Like what?

JO

Well...Harlan's murder for one thing.

KATHLEEN

Nobody—

JO

It was brutal, Kathleen. Fifteen shots. Julian walked into the bathroom where Harlan /was showering and—

KATHLEEN

/Nobody /saw it.

JO

(continuous from above)
/—emptied his entire clip into /Harlan—

KATHLEEN

/Nobody saw Julian—

JO

(continuous from above)
—which suggests /to me that—

KATHLEEN

(continuous from above)
—pulling the trigger—

JO

Kathleen—

KATHLEEN

Nobody saw him do it!

JO

There is also the testimony of Emily /Murdock.

KATHLEEN

/Gimme a break. Emily Murdock. She makes all these claims about Harlan at the warehouse and how he did this to Julian and that to Julian ...but that woman, she's just pissed off at the world, 'cause...I mean, who could believe her? She'd say anything after—

(She stops herself suddenly, looks away.)

JO

After what? Being shot in the back and paralyzed from the waist down? Yeah, that'd piss me off, too.

KATHLEEN

What I'm saying is...OK, Harlan kicked Julian. That was her whole thing, right?

JO

There were other incidents that she—

KATHLEEN

Yeah, but CNN couldn't stop talking about the kicking.

JO

You don't think Harlan kicking your son is a—

KATHLEEN

He kicked him in the butt to get him going. Come on, he was seventeen, lazy. You know how kids are, they...so Harlan...what, you never saw anybody just...

(She kicks her leg to demonstrate.)

You know, "Get going," that kinda thing. Harlan did that around the house all the time so what's the—

(JO makes a note in her notebook.)

That is not abuse. But this Murdock woman, she tells the cops and next thing you know CNN's telling the whole world! "Troubled Boy's Violent History Revealed." That's what it said on the bottom of the screen. "Troubled Boy's Violent History Revealed" and I thought—no, I screamed at the TV, "That's my boy you're talking about! You don't know him, goddamnit!"

JO

But were they wrong in saying that Julian had a violent history? There's plenty to indi/cate—

KATHLEEN

/Stop it!

(Short beat)

I never should've let you in this house.

JO

Why did you?

KATHLEEN

I need the money.

(She angrily picks up her coffee cup and exits into the kitchen, leaving a shaken JO behind. JO takes a deep sigh, sets her notebook down. She turns toward the kitchen, about to speak, when she sees a framed photo on a nearby desk. She crosses to it, picks it up, studies it. After a silence, KATHLEEN reenters, stirring her full coffee cup.)

JO

Is this George?

(KATHLEEN stops, look at JO.)

With you and the baby? Julian, I presume.

(KATHLEEN nods. JO smiles and nods, goes back to the picture.)

He was a nice-looking man. Do you have a favorite photo of Julian I could see?

(KATHLEEN hesitates briefly but then puts her cup down and crosses to the same desk, opens a drawer, and pulls out a framed photo. She hands it to JO, who studies it.)

I can see you in Julian. The eyes.

KATHLEEN

I see his daddy.

JO

Mm-hm. The chin.

KATHLEEN

The smile.

JO

The smile, you're right.

(Beat. KATHLEEN crosses to JO, takes the first photo from her, looks at it.)

KATHLEEN

George used to rub his eyes this certain way. With the heel of each hand...

(She demonstrates.)

Like this. Julian did that. Exact same way. Always reminded me.

(She looks at the picture.)

JO

Jake likes to mow the lawn. He doesn't actually mow the lawn, but he has his own little toy mower and every time David cuts the grass, Jake's right behind him. "I help you, Daddy." They come in afterwards, down some Gatorade. David wipes his mouth with the back of his hand...

(She demonstrates.)

JO (cont'd)

...and then Jake wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

(She demonstrates.)

Exact same way.

(KATHLEEN smiles at her. Beat.)

Kathleen—

KATHLEEN

Who does Jake look like? You or David?

JO

Um...Well, let's see.

(JO retrieves a cell phone from her pocket, scrolls, holds it up for KATHLEEN to see.)

KATHLEEN

He's got your eyes.

JO

And his father's attitude.

(JO scrolls to another picture on her phone.)

And there's his daddy.

(scrolls again)

The three of us.

(KATHLEEN takes the phone from JO and looks hard at the photo for a moment; she looks over to the framed photo in her hand, then back to the phone.)

KATHLEEN

So, why'd he do it?

JO

Do what?

KATHLEEN

(Handing JO's phone back to her)

Why'd Jake punch the other little kid? Got angry, swung his fist really hard, you said.

JO

Oh.

(A beat as JO pockets her phone, crosses away)

He just...it was silly, really. The little girl, she was...I don't know if I can explain it, she was—

KATHLEEN

Little girl? You said it was a little boy.

(Short beat)

He hit a little girl?

JO

Yes. I was ashamed that he did it at all and the fact that it was a little girl, somehow made it...I don't know.

KATHLEEN

Troubled boy's violent history revealed.

(KATHLEEN gives JO a hard stare before taking the photos back to the desk. JO watches her carefully.)

JO

Kathleen, I'm sorry that I...

KATHLEENB

Lied to me?

JO

Yes.

(Beat)

I...I took Jake to this class, Playful Parenting. "Joining children in their world of play." Anyway, we played this game called 'robot' and one child is the robot and the other is the commander and the commander tells the robot what to do and where to go and then they switch, and the commander becomes the robot. But Jake would not switch. He would not be the robot. "No!" And I said, "Jake, honey, it'll be fun. Look, look at me" and I walked like the robot and he said, "No! No! Commander, commander!" and the little girl, his partner, she was, "my turn to be commander" and he said "No!" and she said, "My turn now" and he...hit her. Not just a harmless swat, no, he punched her in the face. Hard. Would've hit her a second time if I hadn't grabbed his hand away. Her little nose, blood started pouring out like somebody turned on a faucet, all over her perfect little pink outfit. Looked like this pint-sized Jackie Kennedy. She screams—'ahhh' and the mother—"Look what your little monster did to my baby!"

KATHLEEN

You didn't spank him then?

JO

No, we do not...I grabbed him. He just kept saying, "No. Commander, commander!" And I...before I even knew what I was doing, I grabbed him. "Why did you do that?" And I shook him.

(Clenching her fists, shaking "Jake" hard.)

"Why did you do that?!"

(She stops shaking.)

I was so ashamed. I immediately reached for him again, to hold him, to hug him. "Jake, honey, I'm sorry," but he pulled away. He...

(She folds her arms across her chest to demonstrate Jake's reaction.)

JO (cont'd)

And he had...

(She pats her biceps.)

...these red marks from where I...and by the time we got home, there were bruises. David asked me what happened, and I couldn't even... Jake finally said—just matter-of-factly, he said, “Mommy got mad.”

(Beat.)

Jake is the love of my life. But truth be told, I've always...

(She shakes her head, her voice trailing off.)

KATHLEEN

You've always what?

JO

Nothing, I...

(She takes a quick calming breath, faces KATHLEEN.)

Kathleen, please understand that when I ask about Julian or Harl...anything. I know it's difficult but...I am not trying to judge you. Believe me, I am in no position to judge anybody. But it's my job to ask these questions. If I don't ask the difficult questions, we're never going to get at the truth. And that's what I want. It's what we both want, isn't it?

KATHLEEN

Yes.

JO

Good.

(She sighs.)

Oh, good. Thank you, Kathleen, that makes me feel—

KATHLEEN

That's why you need to talk to Alan Covington.

JO

What?

KATHLEEN

He gave me his number. He can tell you what he told me about Julian and the shooting and all the stuff that CNN got wrong. I can't remember everything he told me and I'm no good at explaining so—

(Finding what she was looking for, she holds up a business card)

Here. Here's his number.

(She reaches in her pocket for her cell phone.)

He might not be there right now, but—

(She pushes a button. JO takes the phone from her.)

JO

No.

KATHLEEN

You said you want the truth. This is the truth.

JO

You and I still have a lot of work to do and—

KATHLEEN

What, you won't talk to him 'cause of your friend that got killed in Virginia? Is that it?

JO

Well, there is that, but—

KATHLEEN

But what?

JO

I just can't, Kathleen. I'm sor—

KATHLEEN

So, you're in no position to judge anybody except Alan Covington, is that it?

(short beat)

JO

OK, you want to know the truth, Kathleen? You want to know why Alan Covington really came to see /you?

KATHLEEN

/I know why he really came to see me. He thinks Julian was falsely accused /and—

JO

Day before he came to see you, he was in Big Stone Gap, Virginia at the Wallens Ridge State /Prison.

KATHLEEN

/So /what?

JO

/He spent the day with James Arthur Roland.

KATHLEEN

I don't know who /that—

JO

/Roland is the man who murdered my friend and five others at a Richmond newspaper. He claims he didn't do it. Well, *now* he claims he didn't do it, since Covington got involved. Pled guilty but now says he was framed by the federal /government.

KATHLEEN

/What's that have to /do with—

JO

/Weekend before that, Covington was in Saint Peters, Missouri with the parents of Nicholas Frank, teenager who murdered nine classmates during choir practice at his junior high school before shooting himself. Thanks to Covington, the parents are now convinced their son was recruited by an ultra-left faction of the—

KATHLEEN

How do you know all this? You /can't—

JO

/Private investigator.

KATHLEEN

You mean you spied on—

JO

Doing my job. You were the third person he came to see in four days, all for the same purpose. The Justice Project, that's what he's working on, although I think it needs a snappier title. The basic theory is that this rash of mass shootings—Richmond, Saint Peters, Mecklenburg, anywhere USA—it's all engineered by liberal extremists intent on overturning the second /amendment.

KATHLEEN

/I don't believe /you!

JO

/And here's how twisted this all is. Alan Covington doesn't even believe it himself. He just wants to piss off the NRA crowd, get them to listen to his podcast, go to his website, his online shop, buy his t-shirts, his gun paraphernalia, his custom camouflage outfits. It's all about money. And now you're part of it, Kathleen. Congratulations!

(Beat.)

I'm sorry if I sound...I am on your side, Kathleen, but I refuse to be associated with Alan Covington in any way. He's an opportunist and he—

KATHLEEN

What do you mean?

JO

I mean that he's taking selfish advantage of your situation /without —

KATHLEEN

/Then what /are you?

JO

/—concern for the truth or what is right or wrong or who he hurts or—

KATHLEEN

Then what...are...you? Aren't you taking advantage of my...of the situation by—

JO

Kathleen—

KATHLEEN

You're gonna make money offa me, aren't you? So, who's the one taking selfish advant—

JO

I'm also the one who arranged for you to receive a sizable cash advance. Has Alan Covington offered you money?

(KATHLEEN huffs, looks away.)

I didn't think so. A few minutes ago, you told me that you were doing this for the money. Fine. You want to keep the money, do not speak to that man again.

(Beat.)

Maybe we can't be friends, but do I have your best interests at heart, Kath—

KATHLEEN

Thank you so much. So glad to have you protecting me from opportunists.

(JO starts to speak.)

I won't talk to Alan again.

(KATHLEEN crosses to JO.)

But you need to know something. Alan Covington...he believed me. And he was nice to me.

JO

Kathleen, I—

(JO reaches for KATHLEEN's hand, but she yanks it away, moves quickly to her chair and sits.)

Would you like to take a break? Maybe order some lunch and—

KATHLEEN

I'm not hungry. Let's just get this over with.

(JO picks up her notebook and pen, faces KATHLEEN.)

JO

Tell me about Thanksgiving. Third grade.

(They look at each other for a long beat. KATHLEEN sighs, readies herself.)

KATHLEEN

Julian got sick. At the table.

JO

You mean he...threw up at the dinner table?

KATHLEEN

Yes.

(short beat)

Harlan's mother, Margaret...we were supposed to eat at two or three in the afternoon, but she took forever, and we ended up eating at five or...later and Julian was so hungry. All he'd had was a bowl of Fruit Loops for breakfast, but Harlan didn't want him to spoil his appetite, so he wouldn't let him have anything else before dinner. So, when Margaret finally served the turkey, Julian ate really fast and I guess he ate too much. Two helpings of cranberry sauce, then dessert. Margaret made this really good pecan pie, very sweet and sticky and Julian loved it and he said he wanted a second piece and Margaret, she was, "Oh, please, as much as you like, sweetheart. Grandma knows you love it." And she cuts this big piece, piles on all this whipped cream. And I tried to tell Julian to slow down but Margaret, she just... "oh, he's enjoying himself. Stop nagging him" and so I stopped but then...he ate too much too fast and he got sick. It went everywhere, it was... He was only eight, he didn't know better. Margaret, she's the one who should've been punished, the way she—

JO

Punished?

KATHLEEN

Harlan was angry. OK? Julian had, you know...he did eat too fast and I think Harlan might've even said for him to slow down and...don't have more pie. And that was just the kinda thing that could make Harlan get so...and so he made Julian...clean it up.

JO

The vomit?

KATHLEEN

Yes.

JO

Did you or Margaret help him to—

KATHLEEN

No. Harlan told us to...he asked us to leave the room. OK, here's why it wasn't abuse. It wasn't abuse because I didn't let it become abuse. I stopped it.

JO

How?

KATHLEEN

Like I said, Harlan told me to leave but I stayed right outside the door, so I could hear and...Harlan spanked him a few times.

JO

Did you stop it then?

KATHLEEN

No, because...OK, Harlan kept saying 'clean it up, clean it up' and Julian was crying which always made Harlan angry and Julian could usually stop but not this time, so...then I heard Harlan say, 'OK, if you're so hungry'...

(Choking back a tear)

Harlan wasn't bad at heart, but he could get so—

JO

If you're so hungry...what?

KATHLEEN

If you're so hungry...eat this.

(JO gasps)

And I knew what he meant, and I tried to open the door, but it was locked and so...so I ran around to the kitchen and came in that way and...I stopped it. Harlan, he was pushing Julian's face down in the...the mess on the table and Julian, he was crying, and I said, I screamed, 'STOP IT! STOP IT NOW!!!' And I pushed him, Harlan, I pushed him as hard as I could, and he fell back and hit his head on a chair and then I grabbed Julian and pushed him through the kitchen door and...that was it.

JO

Was Harlan hurt?

KATHLEEN

No. Just stopped him long enough for Julian to get out.

JO

Did Harlan retaliate in any way?

KATHLEEN

What do you mean?

JO

Did he try and punish Julian further? Did he...punish you?

KATHLEEN

No. He left.

JO

He left?

KATHLEEN

That night, after we got home. I told Harlan to leave.

JO

You threw him out?

KATHLEEN

Yes.

(A beat as JO looks at KATHLEEN with new admiration, makes a few notes.)

JO

This Thanksgiving episode wasn't mentioned in the official report.

(KATHLEEN shrugs.)

You didn't tell the police about it?

KATHLEEN

It had nothing to do with all that.

JO

Then why are you telling me about it?

KATHLEEN

Because you need to know that I stopped it. I took care of my boy. Just like after I found him all alone in my mother's house, I never took him back there again. I took care of my boy. Same with Harlan. I took care of my boy. Put that in the book.

JO

I will.

(JO makes a note.)

So, after Thanksgiving, Harlan moved out.

(KATHLEEN nods)

For how long?

KATHLEEN

That next summer. July, I guess. Harlan found the job at...he found a different job and wanted us to move there with him.

JO

And this was the supervisor job at the Eden's Bounty warehouse in Mecklenburg?

(KATHLEEN nods.)

Did you consider not following him to Mecklenburg? I mean, after the Thanksgiving episode, did you ever consider...leaving Harlan?

KATHLEEN

Harlan, he...he knew how upset I was about Thanksgiving and he was very sorry. He came to see me that spring and you could tell, he was...He just seemed kinda...pathetic and alone. But still, I told Harlan, "If we come back, Julian comes first."

JO

(as she writes it down)

Julian comes first.

(KATHLEEN nods.)

And what did Harlan say to that?

KATHLEEN

Oh, he agreed.

(Beat, as JO waits her out.)

A boy needs a father. I didn't have a father. I barely had a mother, so I know first-hand what it's like not to have any...and I wanted Julian to have what I never... What's so horrible about that?

JO

Nothing.

KATHLEEN

And it was a much better job that Harlan got, and for a lot more money. Not that that should be the only...or even the most important...but that matters, too. And he was a good provider, whatever anybody says about him, Harlan was a good provider. Plus, it was a new town. Here in Mecklenburg...which I thought'd be nicer...but still, it was a fresh start.

(JO makes a note)

And so, we got to Mecklenburg and we came to the new house—oh, I almost forgot, he bought us a new house. Bigger, with a yard, and a big kitchen and a nicer...everything. It was all just so much better than before. It just felt like...like a life. You know?

JO

Yes.

(Beat)

So, things...were better?

(KATHLEEN offers a wan smile, but then looks away.)

The reason I ask...We know about the fights when Julian was younger, first and second grade. Did they continue once you moved to Mecklenburg?

(JO waits KATHLEEN out for a long beat before pulling out a piece of paper.)

Fifth grade—suspended two days for fighting.

(She looks to KATHLEEN, who offers no response.)

JO (cont'd)

Sixth grade—suspended three days for fight—

KATHLEEN

That boy attacked Julian. He was defending himself.

JO

Tell me about it.

KATHLEEN

Kid jumped on Julian; Julian punched him.

JO

It was in gym class, wasn't it? Did the boy jump on Julian thinking it was part of a game or—

KATHLEEN

The boy attacked him. Julian fought back. Julian got thrown out of school. End of story.

JO

I see.

(She makes a quick note, refers to another sheet of paper.)

Also, in the sixth grade. Just before the holidays.

(KATHLEEN sighs, agitated.)

Julian is suspended again, this time for a week. For threatening a girl with a knife.

KATHLEEN

It was a box cutter.

JO

A box cutter?

KATHLEEN

From the warehouse. Harlan was always leaving 'em in his pocket, bringing 'em home. Julian found one, swiped it. But he didn't hurt that girl, didn't wanna hurt her. I think Julian...he liked her. A crush. Just trying to show off for her or something. Being stupid. Being a boy. Not like he punched her, watched her bleed all over her perfect little pink outfit.

(Beat, KATHLEEN watching JO carefully; JO purposely ignoring her, makes a note.)

JO

When these...violent episodes occurred, how did you handle it at home?

KATHLEEN

I talked to him. “You scared that little girl,” I told him. “Girls don’t like that. They don’t play same way as boys.” Julian never quite...figured out girls.

JO

Was Harlan involved in the disciplinary process?

KATHLEEN

I had a job, too, you know.

JO

Yes, I know. But what does that have to do—

KATHLEEN

Just saying that Harlan wasn’t the only one working. I had a full-time job. Still have it. Paper mill, Cedar Creek. Night shift. So—

JO

Why night shift? Couldn’t you—

KATHLEEN

Pays more.

JO

I see.

(She makes a quick note.)

If I may...Harlan was a good provider, no doubt. Why then did you need to work so much? Wasn’t his /income—

KATHLEEN

/Jesus, there’s a rich people question for you.

JO

I’m sorry. Um...let me back up. We—

KATHLEEN

I was working all night, sleeping all day. I just couldn’t always be there every time something went wrong. And Harlan, he was Julian’s father. So...yes, he...I mean, he had to do his share of the parenting, right?

JO

Of course.

(Beat as she makes a note.)

What did Harlan’s share of the parenting consist of?

(short beat)

Kathleen, what /did—

KATHLEEN

/Harlan tried his best to discipline Julian.

JO

By doing what?

KATHLEEN

Whatever was called for.

JO

For example?

KATHLEEN

He scolded him or...or grounded him.

JO

Physically, did he—

KATHLEEN

Just 'cause you don't spank your little boy, doesn't make it wrong.

JO

Aside from spanking, were there other physical punish—

KATHLEEN

I was working! I couldn't always be there. OK? I couldn't...And the fighting stopped. That little girl, that was the last time Julian ever hurt any—

(Short beat)

Fighting stopped. Unless you got some piece of paper that says different.

JO

I do not but I—

KATHLEEN

Ask me about something else.

JO

Something else? What do you—

KATHLEEN

I'm tired of talking about this. Ask me something else.

(JO puts aside the paper she is working from, pulls out another.)

JO

When did Julian get his first gun?

KATHLEEN

Why?

(JO waits her out.)

His twelfth birthday. Harlan bought Julian a pistol, a .22. Julian getting a gun...that was a good thing.

JO

How so?

KATHLEEN

'Cause for the first time ever, the two of them actually started spending time together. Going to the gun club, looking things up online and talking, really talking about... Why isn't that a good thing? And Harlan taught Julian the right and proper way to use a gun. He was very strict about it. Maintenance and...cleaning the gun and storing ammunition and...and safety! Treat every gun as if it's loaded. Never, ever point your gun at anything unless you intend to—

(Agitated, she stops herself. JO watches her carefully.)

But most important...they were getting along. Julian and Harlan, just like a boy and his dad, like I always wanted for him.

JO

I see.

(She makes a note.)

Did you ever worry that—

KATHLEEN

That's all I have to say about guns. Ask me something else.

(JO puts aside the paper she was just working from, pulls out the sheet she put aside earlier, reads it silently for a moment.)

JO

Did you read the coroner's report on Julian?

KATHLEEN

Cause of death, bullet to the brain. That's all I needed to know.

JO

So, you never read the full report?

KATHLEEN

What are you asking me?

JO

How did Julian break his fingers?

KATHLEEN

What?

JO

The coroner's report states that three fingers from Julian's left-hand had been broken years /earlier—

KATHLEEN

/No, no, that's not true.

JO

I have the report with me. I could read the section that—

KATHLEEN

Just tell me.

(JO closes her briefcase.)

JO

According to the report, three fingers on Julian's left had been broken approximately three or four years prior to his death. Julian would have been thirteen or—

KATHLEEN

I don't remember any broken fingers.

JO

According to the report, the fingers were never set properly /and so—

KATHLEEN

/I don't trust any report those police—

JO

This was the coroner's /report—

KATHLEEN

/I don't trust any of 'em. They're all just trying to make it look like Julian... And how can they... I mean, the coroner...after he's dead, how can he go back and...he can't!

JO

He can and he did.

KATHLEEN

And you're assuming, what, that Harlan broke Julian's /fingers?

JO

/No, I am not assuming /any—

KATHLEEN

/Could've been an accident, /you know.

JO

/Certainly could've been, but—

KATHLEEN

Ah, but that won't do for your book. Gotta be abuse if it's gonna make it /in the—

JO

/No, I am simply trying to find a corollary between the—

KATHLEEN

Ask me /something—

JO

/Julian's fingers would've been black and /blue.

KATHLEEN

/Ask me something /else—

JO

/The pain would've been excruciating—

KATHLEEN

If my son came to me like that, I knew enough to take him to the hospital, for chrissake, so stop telling me I didn't /take care—

JO

/I'm not telling you anything, /Kath—

KATHLEEN

/I was working. Night shift! You have any idea what it's like to work at...no, of course not, stupid question.

JO

Kathleen, /all I'm—

KATHLEEN

/Besides, Julian was a big boy, didn't come crying to me with every little ache and pain, so how /was I—

JO

/A thirteen-year-old boy breaks three fingers and doesn't come to his mother?! How—

KATHLEEN

You think it's so goddamn easy!? After what your little boy did to that girl, how can you—

JO

/Leave Jake /out—

KATHLEEN

/—criticize me or Harlan /or—

JO

/I am not criticiz—

KATHLEEN

You don't spank your little boy, think it's some kinda badge /of honor—

JO

/I refuse to let my son be part of this /conversation—

KATHLEEN

/How d'you know your husband doesn't spank him when you're out on your book /tours—

JO

/Kathleen, that's /enough!

KATHLEEN

/He could be smacking your boy around right now. Sounds like the little shit /could use—

JO

/Please—

KATHLEEN

Oh, forgot. You don't hit him, just grab him and shake!

JO

Please stop—

KATHLEEN

And now you're afraid to even go near him! Aren't you? That's why you sent him /home—

JO

Stop it!!!

KATHLEEN

My son is innocent! He is a victim, same as all the others. So, whether Harlan broke his fingers—which he didn't—or abu...did stuff to him or not, it doesn't matter! My son did not kill those people! He was a good boy. Nobody knew him like I did. Nobody!!!

(KATHLEEN sits back in the chair, spent, hand covering her eyes. JO crosses away. Silence.)

JO

I need...

(She tries unsuccessfully to take a deep breath.)

I need some fresh air.

(She crosses to a window. Another deep breath.)

Let's, um...let's take a break, maybe get some lunch and then we can—

KATHLEEN

I'm done for the day.

JO

No. We need a break, for sure, but—

KATHLEEN

I'm done for the day.

JO

We're already behind. We've wasted far too much time arguing and—

KATHLEEN

Come back in the morning.

JO

Kathleen—

KATHLEEN

And when you do, know what we're gonna talk about? Why Julian didn't do it. Gonna talk about all the evidence that Alan told me. And you will see, once and for all, that—

JO

I think it's an excellent idea. We can...we can work together to review everything Covington told you. But let's do it now, today, instead of wasting the entire after/noon—

KATHLEEN

/I'm done for the day!

(Beat)

JO

Fine.

(JO starts to pack her things.)

But there is still a lot to cover. We may have to extend the interview into the weekend.

KATHLEEN

Don't you need to get home to your little boy?

(JO is still for the slightest moment, then quickly finishes her packing. She looks at KATHLEEN with a tense, polite smile.)

JO

I really did enjoy the stories about Julian. The Christmas pageant story, that goes in the book, I promise.

(Beat.)

Kathleen, I'm sorry about the way things played out today. I—

(KATHLEEN deliberately moves away from her. JO crosses to the door.)

Get some rest.

(JO exits. KATHLEEN listens for JO to walk away. She walks into the kitchen, returns with a pen, and a new set of index cards, still in their cellophane wrapper. She pulls out a cell phone, and Covington's business card that she had earlier. She sits and dials the number on the card; she holds the phone to her ear. A voice comes on the other end of the phone.)

KATHLEEN

(into phone)

Hello, um...could I talk with Mr. Covington...Kathleen Abedon...Abedon, A-B-E... Mecklenburg, right...Oh, thank you...Yes, I'll hold.

(She waits, tearing the cellophane from the index cards with her teeth as she does so. Blackout.)

(SCENE FOUR. The following morning around 9:30. KATHLEEN has her stack of index cards in front of her. A stack of white papers also sits nearby. JO listens and takes notes. Both women drink coffee and there is an open box of expensive looking pastries.)

KATHLEEN

OK. The gun.

JO

Which one?

KATHLEEN

The handgun that was on the floor.

JO

The Glock-19.

KATHLEEN

Right. Alan told me that if Julian had shot himself with it, then the gun would stay in his hand. It'd be impossible for him to drop it, 'cause after he pulled the trigger there'd be...um...

(She refers to an index card, reads.)

An involuntary response, that's it. The fingers would like...clutch, you know, they'd grip the gun and hold onto it. But the gun was found, like, five, six feet away on the—

JO

Yes, but depending on the caliber of the weapon, the placement of the wound—it's entirely possible, even probable, for the gun to be found on the floor, as with...

(She notices KATHLEEN glaring at her.)

I'm sorry. Please continue.

KATHLEEN

(Checks her card.)

Plus, CNN said the gun was in Julian's hand, but it wasn't.

(KATHLEEN picks up a new index card. JO writes in her notebook.)

OK, Anthony Bova, the man...the carpenter, you know, who wandered into the alley during the shooting, remember him? CNN said he was one of—

JO

One of the shooters, yes, I remember.

KATHLEEN

Did you know he had a criminal record?

JO

No.

(KATHLEEN goes through her stack of white papers, hands one to JO.)

KATHLEEN

There. That's his mug shot. I never knew you could get stuff like this on the computer. Mugshots...did you?

JO

Yes. How did you get this? You said you got rid of your computer.

KATHLEEN

I went down to Mecklenburg Library.

JO

When?

KATHLEEN

Yesterday after you left. OK, so Bova was arrested three times for assault. Once for domestic...you know, hitting his wife; twice for hitting...other people, I guess.

JO

(looking at the document)

Twelve years since his last arrest. And the charges were dropped.

KATHLEEN

What difference does that make?

(JO shakes her head, shrugs)

The police didn't investigate him at all. They never even searched his workshop or his house. Seem weird to you?

(Before JO has time to answer, KATHLEEN picks up a new index card.)

OK, so there's that. Then two of the guys who worked at the warehouse also had police records. First, Michael McCoy. And Harlan didn't like Mike McCoy. Said he was lazy, late all the time. And I know that Mike McCoy owned guns 'cause he went to the same gun club Harlan and Julian did. So, here's someone that has a police record. Second, he has guns and, third, Harlan didn't like him. So, that's something, right?

JO

Except that Michael McCoy was not in the warehouse /that—

KATHLEEN

/He doesn't show up for work and on that same day, there's a shooting. Pretty weird coincidence, don't you think?

JO

What was Michael McCoy charged with?

KATHLEEN

He wasn't charged with anything. That's my—

JO

No, you said he had a police record, from before. What was his crime?

KATHLEEN

Oh.

(goes through her pile of papers, finds what she wants)

First time...assault, girlfriend.

(She hands JO that piece of paper. Finds a second sheet, reads from it.)

Second time...assault...girlfriend.

(She hands JO the second piece of paper. JO scans it.)

JO

Same charge, different women.

KATHLEEN

Welcome to Mecklenburg.

JO

How'd you find this website with the mug shots? Did you Google it?

KATHLEEN

Alan gave me the address.

JO

Last week?

KATHLEEN

Mm-hm. OK, so that's Anthony Bova and Michael McCoy, two suspects the police never investigated. Now—

JO

The police did investigate Michael McCoy. They found no connection.

KATHLEEN

That still leaves Anthony Bova.

JO

Who, like Michael McCoy, was not in the warehouse at the time of the shooting.

(Undaunted, KATHLEEN picks up a new index card.)

KATHLEEN

OK, the other warehouse employee with a criminal record. Ricky Skiff—

JO

Ricky Skiff was killed in the attack.

KATHLEEN

Right, but—

JO

Then how can—

KATHLEEN

Just let me. OK, Ricky Skiff was killed in the attack. But so was Julian. Single gunshot wound to the head—same way Ricky Skiff died.

JO

No. Ricky Skiff had multiple gunshot /wounds—

KATHLEEN

/No. Alan said...um...

(KATHLEEN checks her index card.)

Single gunshot wound to the head, same as Julian. So, he thinks it's possible that Ricky committed suicide /after he—

JO

/Alan is incorrect. Richard Skiff died from multiple wounds inflicted by the Remington ACR.

KATHLEEN

OK, so...then he coulda shot himself with the Remington. Why—

JO

He couldn't have shot himself multiple times, no. There were wounds to Skiff's torso, his neck, the back of his head. How could he have done that to /himself?

KATHLEEN

/But Alan said—

JO

Alan is wrong. Plus, the Remington—registered to Harlan Kenney, I might add—was ultimately found strapped across Julian's back. Skiff's body was some seventy-five feet away in the workers' lounge. If Skiff had shot himself, wouldn't you expect the gun he used to be lying right next to him?

KATHLEEN

Not if somebody moved it.

JO

Like who?

KATHLEEN

Like whoever was trying to make it look like Julian was the shooter.

(JO bites her tongue, writes a quick note.)

And here's the thing about Ricky Skiff—he was a criminal. He'd been in prison.

JO

Yes, I know all about Ricky /Skiff.

KATHLEEN

/He's on that...that list that /they—

JO

/Registered sex offenders, I know.

KATHLEEN

But the police didn't even investigate him.

JO

The report concluded that there was no connection between Skiff's activities and the /shooting.

KATHLEEN

/Yeah, but Alan says they never even searched his house or his computer or anything. So how can you trust the police and how can you trust that stupid report? Like the broken fingers. Jesus! Alan, he says there's no way the coroner could know all that about his fingers. He says—

JO

Wait. You discussed the coroner's report with Alan when he was here...last week?

(KATHLEEN, avoiding JO's gaze, examines her index card.)

The same report that, yesterday, you told me you'd never read?

KATHLEEN

I haven't read it, but, um...I just asked Alan about the broken fingers and he /said—

JO

/Last week?

KATHLEEN

Wait, um...let me...

JO

Because my impression, and I could be wrong, but yesterday it seemed as if you hadn't heard anything about the broken fingers. And yet you spoke to Alan about them...last week.

KATHLEEN

No. That's...I'm...Oh, I know what I wanted to...

(She quickly sifts through her pile of cards and yanks one out.)

OK, Emily Murdock—

JO

Wait, I'd like to clarify about the coroner's—

KATHLEEN

Just let me—

JO

I'm just confused about—

KATHLEEN

Emily Murdock!!!

JO

But... Fine. What about her?

KATHLEEN

OK.

(A deep breath.)

Emily, she has this reputation as being this really...OK, she was paralyzed. Which is real sad, don't get me...but everybody thinks she's so...but maybe she's not.

JO

Not what?

KATHLEEN

So perfect! Jesus. Nobody's willing to...to question anything she says and so if she says Harlan kicked Julian or...whatever and that's why Julian shot...see, nobody's willing to doubt her. That's all I'm saying.

JO

And you're telling me there is reason to doubt Emily?

KATHLEEN

Alan says there are stories about her.

JO

Stories?

KATHLEEN

Stories that Emily was...um, sleeping with Ricky Skiff and...that she...she posed for nude photos for him.

(Beat.)

JO

Where did these stories...originate, I wonder?

(KATHLEEN shrugs.)

Has Alan seen these photos? Have you?

KATHLEEN

Me, no. Alan, I don't...he didn't say if...I don't think so, no. But still, it changes things. 'Cause if Emily, if she was with Ricky, then that's...I mean, that's maybe why she's protecting him. See, Alan says—

JO

Protecting Ricky Skiff? How was she protecting /Ricky—

KATHLEEN

/By saying that Julian was the shooter.

JO

Oh, Kathleen.

KATHLEEN

What? Why isn't that—

JO

There were seven other surviving witnesses, all of whom claimed that Julian /was the—

KATHLEEN

/I'm not talking about them! I'm talking about Emily and—

JO

OK, OK, let me make sure I understand. Emily Murdock—married mother of twin daughters, was sleeping with Richard Skiff—sexual predator, and she posed nude/ for him.

KATHLEEN

/I'm not saying /she definitely—

JO

(continuous, with increasing anger)

/Skiff went on a rampage, shooting Emily in the back, paralyzing her from the /waist down.

KATHLEEN

/—or that Ricky was the shooter. /I'm just—

JO

(continuous)

/He then shot and killed himself—

(KATHLEEN starts to speak, JO barrels ahead.)

—multiple times, I might add—and now Emily is protecting the man who—

KATHLEEN

All I'm saying is the police never even looked at Ricky Skiff's computer to /see if—

JO

/Kathleen, /dear god!

KATHLEEN

(continuous)

/—there was anything to connect him to the shooting and so if dirty pictures of Emily were on his computer, /they—

JO

/Emily Murdock did not pose for nude photos for Ricky Skiff!

KATHLEEN

How do you /know?

JO

Because the painfully shy woman I spent three hours with yesterday after/noon—

KATHLEEN

/You met her?

JO

You threw me out, Kathleen. I had to find a productive /use for my—

KATHLEEN

/I'm not allowed to talk to Alan but it's OK /for you to—

JO

/I was doing my job!

KATHLEEN

Alan Covington knows all about you! He says that *Evil Men* book you wrote, it pissed off the family of the murdered woman 'cause it was so...so sympathetic to the killer. Family might even sue. Alan says you have a terrible reputation, and your publisher's pissed off ...Oh, and Alan said you don't understand anything about his project, the...Justice Project. That it's just a...a different...what's the...perspective on the same...and it's doing all kinds of good stuff, saving lives even, and you could never understand it. That's what Alan says. He knows all about you!

JO

And he told you all this yesterday afternoon. When you called him, immediately after I left?
(Short beat)

Right?

KATHLEEN

So what?

JO

After I specifically warned you against speaking with—

KATHLEEN

So what?! Alan told me if I didn't like you, all he had to do was snap his fingers and I'd have another book deal tomorrow. He even has a writer in mind, this woman who works for him and she'd write it from my point of view, with my opinions and my evidence and my truth!

JO

Get a good lawyer.

(JO jams the notebook she's holding into her briefcase and starts to pack up.)

KATHLEEN

Oh, stop trying to scare me. I'll just give you the money back and we can—

JO

It's not that simple, Kathleen. It's not just the money we paid you, it's also the money we've invested in this project. Research, legal fees, travel, private investigator. And, of course, damages for—

KATHLEEN

Damages? For what?

JO

(She stops packing, faces KATHLEEN)
Kathleen, when you violate a contract like—

KATHLEEN

I didn't violate anything, /I just—

JO

/You spoke with Covington. Violation. You want to nullify the contract without due cause. Violation. You insist on—

KATHLEEN

Sue me! I don't care! You can't possibly do anything to me that will make my life any more miserable than it already is. I know that's what you want, /but—

JO

/That is not what I—

KATHLEEN

Since the moment you walked through that door, you've done nothing but...but criticize me and judge /me—

JO

/I do not judge—

KATHLEEN

You judge me every time you look at me. And who are you, anyway? What, 'cause you went to...to graduate school and you're famous and you got this book with...Shakespeare, you think you're some...but you're not. You're just a sad, pathetic woman, afraid to touch her own little boy!

(Beat)

JO

So...you can see the truth when it suits you. Is that it, Kathleen?

(A beat, and then JO starts to pack up her briefcase; she continues to do so throughout the following. KATHLEEN watches for a moment.)

KATHLEEN

What are you doing?

JO

First, I'm going to get some lunch. Maybe that Italian place we ordered from yesterday if I can find it. Then I'm going to see Emily Murdock and—

KATHLEEN

Why?

JO

Well, if you're not going to work with me, I need to find a new angle for the book. I liked Emily and I'm sure she could use the money. She can't work anymore, and with her medical expenses going through /the roof—

KATHLEEN

/Wait. You mean you're still gonna write this book?

JO

Yes, of course.

KATHLEEN

No, you—

JO

That's not up to you, Kathleen. Excuse me.

(She reaches around KATHLEEN to pick up a few items for the briefcase.)

KATHLEEN

You can't use anything I told you. About Julian or Harlan or...or Thanksgiving or—

JO

We'll see.

KATHLEEN

No, you /can't!

JO

/Oh, and you might tell Mr. Covington that I will take all necessary steps to protect Emily Murdock from his absurd insinuations about her relationship with Ricky—

KATHLEEN

Wait! You would do that for...that woman who lied about my /boy—

JO

/She didn't—

KATHLEEN

She lied! And what else is she hiding? What /else—

JO

/I will not allow you or Covington to victimize that woman /further.

KATHLEEN

/She is nothing but a—

JO

Emily Murdock's life was devastated by your son—

KATHLEEN

No!

JO

(continuous)

—and now you want to drag her through the muck so you can preserve your pathetic lie.

KATHLEEN

It is not a—

JO

She has suffered enough!

KATHLEEN

What about me? I haven't suffered enough for you? Is that why you came here, to...to torture me, to...What about me?!!!

(JO starts to speak.)

You never once said you were sorry for my loss. I lost my son and my husband on the same goddam day in the worst possible...but nobody ever...nobody! Not even you. You say you want to be my *friend*, but, Jesus, you're just like everybody else, like all the...this goddamn town, I can't even...I go to the grocery store or...work or... even the library yesterday. People point and—"There she is, the mother." And the phone calls, and people throwing rocks at the house, and leaving dead animals on the...oh yeah, some asshole went to the trouble of killing thirteen rabbits and leaving the bloody bodies on my porch.

(JO gasps.)

Even after I move outta the house, move in here, they just keep...Jesus, the letters, the packages, they just keep...you wanna see?

JO

Kathleen—

KATHLEEN

(Moving to a small desk, opening a drawer.)

No, I think you need to see. I saved 'em for you. Thought they'd be good for the book.

(She reaches into the drawer and pulls out a stack of loose papers. She grabs one off the top and reads it.)

"Why didn't he kill you, too, you worthless cow?"

(She tosses the letter at JO, reads another.)

"Satan waits for you in the lake of fire and you shall be tormented day and night forever and ever."

(She tosses the letter at JO, pulls out another.)

Oh, here's a good one. Came last week.

(reads)

"How about I stick my .38 Special in your pussy and pull the trigger? Blow you in half, bitch."

(She holds it up for JO to see.)

Look, a visual aid!

(She tosses the letter at JO, reads another.)

"You call yourself a mother?"

(Her voice cracks on the word 'mother' and she lets out a scream of rage. JO moves towards her, but KATHLEEN throws the stack of letters at her and they go flying. She yanks the briefcase from JO's hand and flings it, the contents spilling out. KATHLEEN continues her rampage, knocking the voice recorder from the table, swiping at JO's

laptop, and grabbing JO's notebook and flinging it aside. JO goes to her, trying to calm her...)

JO

Kathleen—

(...but KATHLEEN shoves her away.)

KATHLEEN

He liked them. Sally Riggs, he liked Sally, he told me so, and...and Marie, he...why would he...if he liked them, why would he...And he was happy, that last week, he was...I walked past his room and he was on his bed in the dark and I said, "Julian, are you awake?" "Yeah, Ma." So, I went in and...and he gave me the sweetest kiss and hugged me so tight, like when he was a baby. So tight. "Are you OK, sweetheart?" And he said, "Yeah, Ma, I'm good." But then the next morning, he...

(She looks at JO and speaks clearly.)

I don't know why he did it. Can you tell me why?

(JO looks at her, unable to answer. KATHLEEN emits a sob, her legs giving out at the same time. JO rushes to her and manages to lower her awkwardly but gently to the ground. Choking back her tears, KATHLEEN continues.)

I loved him and I tucked him in and I bathed him and I held his hand when he crossed the street and I told him I loved him every day and I held him so tight, as tight as I could...and he got away from me. He got away...

(KATHLEEN sobs, JO holding her.)

Oh my god, all those people.

JO

Shhhh.

KATHLEEN

Those poor people. What did /I do?

JO

/Kathleen—

KATHLEEN

I let my boy down.

JO

Shhhh.

(JO cradles KATHLEEN, almost rocking her as she sobs. Pause.)

KATHLEEN

When you write the book, I want you to say that...say that Julian was happy those last days and I never could've imagined... Can the book say that?

JO

Yes.

KATHLEEN

And it needs to say... Julian was brave...can the book say that he was brave?

JO

Yes.

KATHLEEN

‘Cause he wasn’t scared at all. When I got to my mother’s house, he was sitting, sweet and quiet. “Good night bears, good night chairs...good night comb, good night brush, good night to the old lady whispering hush.” Hush, mommy, hush...hush...hush...hussshhh...

(JO rocks KATHLEEN gently as the lights slowly fade.)

END OF PLAY