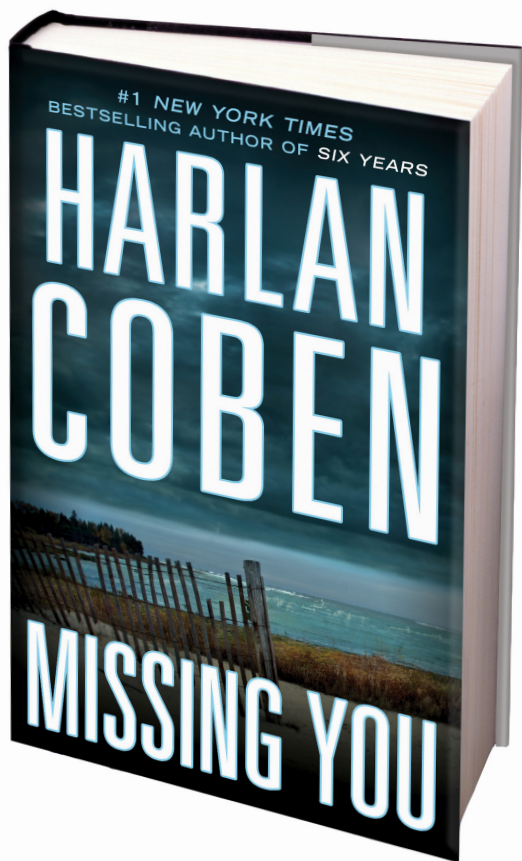


MISSING YOU

by HARLAN COBEN



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Chapter 1

Kat Donovan spun off her father's old stool, readying to leave O'Malley's Pub, when Stacy said, "You're not going to like what I did."

The tone made Kat stop mid-stride. "What?"

O'Malley's used to be an old-school cop bar. Kat's grandfather had hung out here. So had her father and their fellow NYPD colleagues. Now it had been turned into a yuppie, preppy, master-of-the-universe, poser asshat bar, loaded up with guys who sported crisp white shirts under black suits, two-day stubble, manscaped to the max to look un-manscaped. They smirked a lot, these soft men, their hair moussed to the point of overcoif, and ordered Ketel One instead of Grey Goose because they watched some TV ad telling them that was what real men drink.

Stacy's eyes started darting around the bar. Avoidance. Kat didn't like that.

"What did you do?" Kat asked.

"Whoa," Stacy said.

"What?"

"A Punch-Worthy at five o'clock."

Kat swiveled to the right to take a peek.

"See him?" Stacy asked.

"Oh yeah."

Décor-wise, O'Malley's hadn't really changed much over the years. Sure, the old console TVs had been replaced by a host of flat-screens showing too wide a variety of games—who cared about how the Edmonton Oilers did?—but outside of that, O'Malley had kept the cop feel and that was what had appealed to these posers, the faux authenticity, moving in and pushing out what had made the place hum, turning it into some Disney Epcot version of what it had once been.

Kat was the only cop left in here. The others now went home after their shifts, or to AA meetings. Kat still came and tried to sit quietly on her father's old stool with the ghosts, especially tonight, with her father's murder haunting her anew. She just wanted to be here, to feel her father's presence, to—corny as it sounded—gather strength from it.

But the douche bags wouldn't let her be, would they?

This particular Punch-Worthy—shorthand for any guy deserving a fist to the face—had committed a classic punch-worthy sin. He was wearing sunglasses. At eleven o'clock at night. In a bar with poor lighting. Other punch-worthy indictments included wearing a chain on your wallet, do-rags, unbuttoned silk shirts, an overabundance of tattoos (special category for those sporting tribal symbols), dog tags when you didn't serve in the military, and really big white wristwatches.

Sunglasses smirked and lifted his glass toward Kat and Stacy.

"He likes us," Stacy said.

"Stop stalling. What won't I like?"

When Stacy turned back toward her, Kat could see over her shoulder the disappointment on Punch-Worthy's glistening-with-overpriced-lotion face. Kat had seen that look a zillion times before. Men liked Stacy. That was probably something of an understatement. Stacy was frighteningly, knee-knocking, teeth-and-bone-and-metal-meltingly hot. Men became both weak-legged and stupid around Stacy. Mostly stupid. Really, really stupid.

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This was why it was probably a mistake to hang out with someone who looked like Stacy—guys often concluded that they had no shot when a woman looked like that. She seemed unapproachable.

Kat, in comparison, did not.

Sunglasses honed in on Kat and began to make his move. He didn't so much walk toward her as glide on his own slime.

Stacy suppressed a giggle. "This is going to be good."

Hoping to discourage him, Kat gave the guy flat eyes and a disdainful frown. Sunglasses was not deterred. He bebopped over, moving to some sound track that was playing only in his own head.

"Hey, babe," Sunglasses said. "Is your name Wi-Fi?"

Kat waited.

"Because I'm feeling a connection."

Stacy burst out laughing.

Kat just stared at him. He continued.

"I love you small chicks, you know? You're kinda adorable. A spinner, am I right? You know what would look good on me? You."

"Do these lines ever work?" Kat asked him.

"I'm not done yet." Sunglasses coughed into his fist, took out his iPhone, and held it up to Kat. "Hey, babe, congrats—you've just moved to the top of my to-do list."

Stacy loved it.

Kat said, "What's your name?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Whatever you want it to be, babe."

"How about Ass Waffle?" Kat opened her blazer, showing the weapon on her belt. "I'm going to reach for my gun now, Ass Waffle."

"Damn, woman, are you my new boss?" He pointed to his crotch. "Because you just gave me a raise."

"Go away."

"My love for you is like diarrhea," Sunglasses said. "I just can't hold it in."

Kat stared at him, horrified.

"Too far?" he said.

“Oh man, that’s just gross.”

“Yeah, but I bet you never heard it before.”

He’d win that bet. “Leave. Now.”

“Really?”

Stacy was nearly on the floor with laughter.

Sunglasses started to turn away. “Wait. Is this a test? Is Ass Waffle, like, a compliment or something?”

“Go.”

He shrugged, turned, spotted Stacy, figured why not. He looked her long body up and down and said, “The word of the day is legs. Let’s go back to your place and spread the word.”

Stacy was still loving it. “Take me, Ass Waffle. Right here. Right now.”

“Really?”

“No.”

Ass Waffle looked back at Kat. Kat put her hand on the butt of her gun. He held up his hands and slinked away.

Kat said, “Stacy?”

“Hmm?”

“Why do these guys keep thinking they have a chance with me?”

“Because you look cute and perky.”

“I’m not perky.”

“No, but you look perky.”

“Seriously, do I look like that much of a loser?”

“You look damaged,” Stacy said. “I hate to say it. But the damage . . . it comes off you like some kind of pheromone that douche bags can’t resist.”

They both took a sip of their drinks.

“So what won’t I like?” Kat asked.

Stacy looked back toward Ass Waffle. “I feel bad for him now. Maybe I should throw him a quickie.”

“Don’t start.”

“What?” Stacy crossed her show-off long legs and smiled at Ass

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Waffle. He made a face that reminded Kat of a dog left in a car too long. “Do you think this skirt is too short?”

“Skirt?” Kat said. “I thought it was a belt.”

Stacy liked that. She loved the attention. She loved picking up men, because she thought a one-night stand with her was somehow life changing for them. It was also part of her job. Stacy owned a private investigation firm with two other gorgeous women. Their specialty? Catching (really, entrapping) cheating spouses.

“Stacy?”

“Hmm?”

“What won’t I like?”

“This.”

Still teasing Ass Waffle, Stacy handed Kat a piece of paper. Kat looked at the paper and frowned:

KD8115

HottestSexEvah

“What is this?”

“KD8115 is your user name.”

Her initials and badge number.

“HottestSexEvah is your password. Oh, and it’s case sensitive.”

“And these are for?”

“A website. YouAreJustMyType.com.”

“Huh?”

“It’s an online dating service.”

Kat made a face. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“It’s upscale.”

“That’s what they say about strip clubs.”

“I bought you a subscription,” Stacy said. “It’s good for a year.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I don’t kid. I do some work for this company. They’re good. And let’s not fool ourselves. You need someone. You want someone. And you aren’t going to find him in here.”

Kat sighed, rose, and nodded to the bartender, a guy named Pete

who looked like a character actor who always played the Irish bartender—which is what, in fact, he was. Pete nodded back, indicating that he'd put the drinks on Kat's tab.

"Who knows?" Stacy said. "You could end up meeting Mr. Right."

Kat started for the door. "But more likely, Mr. Ass Waffle."

Kat typed in "YouAreJustMyType.com," hit the RETURN button, and filled in her new user name and the rather embarrassing password. She frowned when she saw the moniker at the top of the profile that Stacy had chosen for her:

Cute and perky!

"She left off *damaged*," Kat muttered under her breath.

It was past midnight, but Kat wasn't much of a sleeper. She lived in an area far too upscale for her—West 67th Street off Central Park West, in the Atelier. A hundred years ago, this and its neighboring buildings, including the famed Hotel des Artistes, had housed writers, painters, intellectuals—artists. The spacious old-world apartments faced the street, the smaller artist studios in the back. Eventually, the old art studios were converted into one-bedroom apartments. Kat's father, a cop who watched his friends get rich doing nothing but buying real estate, tried to find his way in. A guy whose life Dad had saved sold him the place on the cheap.

Kat had first used it as an undergrad at Columbia University. She had paid for her Ivy League education with an NYPD scholarship. According to the life plan, she was then supposed to go to law school and join a big white-shoe firm in New York City, finally breaking away from the cursed family legacy of police work.

Alas, it hadn't worked out that away.

A glass of red wine sat next to her keyboard. Kat drank too much. She knew that was a cliché—a cop who drank too much—but

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sometimes the clichés are there for a reason. She functioned fine. She didn't drink on the job. It didn't really affect her life in any noticeable way, but if Kat made calls or even decisions late at night, they tended to be, er, sloppy ones. She had learned over the years to turn off her mobile phone and stay away from e-mail after ten P.M.

Yet here she was, late at night, checking out random dudes on a dating website.

Stacy had uploaded four photographs to Kat's page. Kat's profile picture, a head shot, had been cropped from a bridesmaid group photo taken at a wedding last year. Kat tried to view herself objectively, but that was impossible. She hated the picture. The woman in the photograph looked unsure of herself, her smile weak, almost as though she were waiting to be slapped or something. Every photograph—now that she went through the painful ritual of viewing them—had been cropped from group pictures, and in every one, Kat looked as though she were half wincing.

Okay, enough of her own profile.

On the job, the only men she met were cops. She didn't want a cop. Cops were good men and horrible husbands. She knew that only too well. When Grandma got terminally ill, her grandfather, unable to handle it, ran off until, well, it was too late. Pops never forgave himself for that. That was Kat's theory anyway. He was lonely and while he had been a hero to many, Pops chickened out when it counted most and he couldn't live with that and his service revolver was sitting right there, right on the same top shelf in the kitchen where he'd always kept it, and so one night, Kat's grandfather reached up and took his piece down from the shelf and sat by himself at the kitchen table and . . .

Ka-boom.

Dad too would go on benders and disappear for days at a time. Mom would be extra cheery when this happened—which made it all the more scary and creepy—either pretending Dad was on an undercover mission or ignoring his disappearance altogether, literally out

of sight, out of mind, and then, maybe a week later, Dad would waltz in with a fresh shave and a smile and a dozen roses for Mom, and everyone would act like this was normal.

YouAreJustMyType.com. She, the cute and perky Kat Donovan, was on an Internet dating site. Man oh man, talk about the best-laid plans. She lifted the wineglass, made a toasting gesture toward the computer screen, and took too big a gulp.

The world sadly was no longer conducive to meeting a life partner. Sex, sure. That was easy. That was, in fact, the expectation, the elephant in the date room, and while she loved the pleasures of the flesh as much as the next gal, the truth was, when you went to bed with someone too quickly, rightly or wrongly, the chances of a long-term relationship took a major hit. She didn't put a moral judgment on this. It was just the way it was.

Her computer dinged. A message bubble popped up:

We have matches for you! Click here to see someone who might be perfect for you!

Kat finished the glass of wine. She debated pouring another, but really, enough. She took stock of herself and realized an obvious yet unspoken truth: She wanted someone in her life. Have the courage to admit that to yourself, okay? Much as she strove to be independent, Kat wanted a man, a partner, someone in her bed at night. She didn't pine or force it or even make much of an effort. But she wasn't really built to be alone.

She began to click through the profiles. You've got to be in it to win it, right?

Pathetic.

Some men could be eliminated with a quick glance at their profile photograph. It was key when you thought about it. The profile portrait each man had painstakingly chosen was, in pretty much every way, the first (very controlled) impression. It thus spoke volumes.

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So: If you made the conscious choice to wear a fedora, that was an automatic no. If you chose not to wear a shirt, no matter how well built you were, automatic no. If you had a Bluetooth in your ear—gosh, aren't *you* important?—automatic no. If you had a soul patch or sported a vest or winked or made hand gestures or chose a tangerine-hued shirt (personal bias) or balanced your sunglasses on top of your head, automatic no, no, no. If your profile name was ManStallion, SexySmile, RichPrettyBoy, LadySatisfier—you get the gist.

Kate clicked open a few where the guy looked . . . approachable, she guessed. There was a sad, depressing sameness to all the write-ups. Every person on the website enjoyed walks on a beach and dining out and exercising and exotic travel and wine tasting and theater and museums and being active and taking chances and grand adventures—yet they were equally content with staying home and watching a movie, coffee and conversation, cooking, reading a book, the simple pleasures. Every guy claimed that the most important quality they looked for in a woman was a sense of humor—right, sure—to the point where Kat wondered whether “sense of humor” was a euphemism for “big boobs.” Of course, every man also listed preferred body type as athletic, slender, *and* curvy.

That seemed more accurate, if not downright wishful.

The profiles never reflected reality. Rather than being what you are, they were a wonderful if not futile exercise in what you *think* you are or what you want a potential partner to think you are—or most likely, the profiles (and, man, shrinks would have a field day) simply reflect what you want to be.

The personal statements were all over the place, but if she had to use one word to sum them up, it would probably be *treacle*. The first read, “Every morning, life is a blank canvas waiting to be painted”—click. Some aimed for honest by telling you repeatedly that they were honest. Some faked sincerity. Some were highfalutin or showboating or insecure or needy. Just like real life, when Kat thought about it. Most were simply trying too hard. The stench of despera-

tion came off the screen in squiggly, bad-cologne waves. The constant soul-mate talk was, at best, off-putting. In real life, Kat thought, none of us can find someone we want to go out with more than once, yet somehow we believe that on YouAreJustMyType.com, we will instantly find a person we want to wake up next to for the rest of our lives.

Delusional—or does hope spring eternal?

This was the flip side. It was easy to be cynical and poke fun, but when she stepped back, Kat realized something that pierced her straight through the heart: Every profile was a life. Simple, yep, but behind every cliché-ridden, please-like-me profile was a fellow human being with dreams and aspirations and desires. These people hadn't signed up, paid their fee, or filled out this information idly. Think about it: Every one of these lonely people came to this website—signed in and clicked on profiles—hoping it would be different this time, hoping against hope that finally they would meet the one person who, in the end, would be the most important person in their lives.

Wow. Just let that realization roll over you for moment.

Kat had been lost in this thought, clicking through the profiles at a constantly increasing velocity, the faces of these men—men who had come here in the hopes of finding “the one”—blurring into a fleshy mess from the speed, when she spotted his picture.

For a second, maybe two, her brain didn't quite believe what her eyes had seen. It took another second for the finger to stop clicking the mouse button, another for the profile pictures tumbling by to slow down and come to a halt. Kat sat and took a deep breath.

It couldn't be.

She had been surfing at such a rapid pace, thinking about the men behind the photographs, their lives, their wants, their hopes. Her mind—and this was both Kat's strength and weakness as a cop—had been wandering, not necessarily concentrating on what was directly in front of her yet being able to get a sense of the big picture. In law enforcement, it meant that she was able to see the possibili-

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ties, the escape routes, the alternate scenarios, the figure lurking behind the obstacles and obfuscations and hindrances and subterfuge.

But that also meant that sometimes Kat missed the obvious.

She slowly started to click the back arrow.

It couldn't be him.

The image had been no more than a flicker. All this thinking about a true love, a soul mate, the one she would want to spend her life with—who could blame her imagination for getting the better of her? It had been eighteen years. She had drunk-Googleed him a few times, but there had just been a few old articles he'd written. Nothing current. That surprised her, had piqued her curiosity—Jeff had been a great journalist—but what more could she do? Kat had been tempted to run a more thorough investigation on him. It wouldn't take much effort in her position. But she didn't like to use her law enforcement connections for personal reasons. She could have asked Stacy too, but again, what would be the point?

Jeff was gone.

Chasing or even Googling an ex-lover was beyond pathetic. Okay, Jeff had been more than that. Much more. Kat absentmindedly touched her left ring finger with her thumb. Empty. But it hadn't always been. Jeff had proposed, doing everything right. He had gotten permission from her father. He had done it on bended knee. Nothing cheesy. He didn't hide the ring in a dessert or ask her on the scoreboard at Madison Square Garden. It had been classy and romantic and traditional because he knew that was exactly how she'd wanted it.

Tears started to well in her eyes.

Kat clicked the back arrow through a potpourri of faces and hairstyles, a verifiable United Nations of eligible bachelors, and then her finger stopped. For a moment, she just stared, afraid to move, holding her breath.

Then a small cry escaped her lips.

The old heartbreak came back to her in a rush. The deep stab of

pain felt fresh, as though Jeff had just walked out that very door, just now, just this very second and not eighteen years earlier. Her hand shook as she moved toward the screen and actually touched his face.

Jeff.

Still so damned handsome. He had aged a bit, graying at the temples, but, man, it worked so well on him. Kat would have guessed that. Jeff would have been one of those guys who got better-looking with age. She caressed his face. A tear leaked from one eye.

Oh man, she thought.

Kat tried to put herself together, tried to take a step back and gain some perspective, but the room was spinning and there was no way she was going to slow it down. Her still-shaking hand came back to the mouse and clicked on the profile picture, enlarging it.

The screen blinked to the next page. There Jeff stood, wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, hands in his pockets, eyes so blue you'd look in vain for a contact lens line. So handsome. So goddamn beautiful. He looked trim and athletic, and now, despite everything, another stirring started from deep within her. For a quick second, Kat risked a peek at her bedroom. She had lived in this co-op when they were together. There had been other men in that bedroom after him, but nothing ever came close to reaching the high of what she had experienced with her fiancé. She knew how that sounded, but when she was with Jeff, he had made every part of her hum and sing. It wasn't technique or size or anything like that that made the difference. It was—unerotic as it sounded—trust. That was what had made the sex so mind-blowing. Kat had felt safe with him. She had felt confident and beautiful and unafraid and free. He would tease her at times, control her, have his way with her, but he never made her feel vulnerable or self-conscious.

Kat had never been able to let go like that with another man.

She swallowed and clicked the full-profile link. His personal statement was short and, Kat thought, perfect: Let's see what happens.

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No pressure. No grandiose plans. No preconditions or guarantees or wild expectations.

Let's see what happens.

She skimmed toward the Status section. Over the past eighteen years, Kat had wondered countless times how his life had turned out, so the first question was the most obvious one: What had happened in Jeff's life that he was now on a singles website?

Then again, what had happened to her?

The status read: **Widower**.

Another wow.

She tried to imagine that—Jeff marrying a woman, living with her, loving her, and eventually having her die on him. It wouldn't compute. Not yet. She was blocking. That was okay. Push through it. No reason to dwell.

Widower.

Underneath that, another jolt: **One child.**

They didn't give age or sex and, of course, it didn't matter. Every revelation, every new fact about the man she had once loved with all her heart made the world teeter anew. He had lived a whole life without her. Why was that such a surprise? What had she expected? Their breakup had been both sudden and inevitable. He may have been the one to walk out the door, but it had been her fault. He was gone, in a snap, just like the entire life she had known and planned.

Now he was back, one of a hundred, maybe two hundred, men whose profiles she had clicked through.

The question was, What would she do about it now?

Chapter 2

Gerard Remington had been only scant hours away from proposing to Vanessa Moreau when his world went dark. The proposal, like many things in Gerard Remington's life, had been carefully planned. First step: After extensive research, Gerard had purchased an engagement ring, 2.93 carats, princess cut, VVS1 clarity, F color, platinum band with a halo setting. He had bought it from a renowned jeweler in Manhattan's Diamond District on West 47th Street—not in one of the overpriced larger stores but at a booth in the back near the Sixth Avenue corner.

Step Two: Their flight today would be leaving Boston's Logan Airport on JetBlue flight 267 at 7:30 A.M., touching down in St. Maarten at 11:31 A.M., where he and Vanessa would transfer to a small puddle-jumper to Anguilla, arriving on the island at 12:45 P.M.

Steps Three, Four, etc.: They would relax in a two-level villa at the Viceroy overlooking Meads Bay, take a dip in the infinity pool, make love, shower and dress, and dine at Blanchards. Dinner reservation was for seven P.M. Gerard had called ahead and arranged to have a bottle of Vanessa's favorite wine, a Château Haut-Bailly Grand Cru Classé 2005, a Bordeaux from the Pessac-Léognan appellation, at the ready. After dinner, Gerard and Vanessa would walk the beach barefoot, hand in hand. He had checked the lunar phase calendar and knew that the moon would be nearly full at the time. Two hundred

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eighteen yards down the beach (he'd had it measured), there was a thatch-roofed hut used during the day to rent snorkels and water skis. At night, no one was there. A local florist would line the front porch with twenty-one (the number of weeks they had known each other) white calla lilies (Vanessa's favorite flower). There would be a string quartet too. On Gerard's cue, the quartet would play "Somewhere Only We Know" by Keane, the song he and Vanessa decided would be forever theirs. Then, because they both liked tradition, Gerard would bend down on one knee. In his mind's eye, Gerard could almost see Vanessa's reaction. She would gasp in surprise. Her eyes would well up with tears. Her hands would come up to her face in astonishment and joy.

"You have entered my world and changed it forever," Gerard would say. "Like the most startling catalyst, you have taken this ordinary hunk of clay and transformed it into something so much more potent, so much happier and brimming with life, than I could have ever imagined. I love you. I love you with my entire being. I love everything about you. Your smile gives my life color and texture. You are the most beautiful and passionate woman in the world. Will you please make me the happiest man in the world and marry me?"

Gerard had still been working on the exact wording—he wanted it to be just right—when his world went dark. But every word was true. He loved Vanessa. He loved her with all his heart. Gerard had never been much of a romantic. Throughout his lifetime, people had a habit of disappointing him. Science did not. Truth be told, he had always been most content alone, battling microbes and organisms, developing new medicines and counteragents that would win those wars. He had been most content in his laboratory at Benesti Pharmaceuticals, figuring out an equation or formula on the blackboard. He was, as his younger colleagues would say, old-school that way. He liked the blackboard. It helped him think—the smell of chalk, the dust, the way his fingers got dirty, the ease of erasing—because in science, truly, so little should be made permanent.

Yes, it was there, in those lost moments alone, when Gerard felt most content.

Most content. But not happy.

Vanessa had been the first thing in his life to make him happy.

Gerard opened his eyes now and thought about her. Everything was raised to the tenth power with Vanessa. No other woman had ever moved him mentally, emotionally, and yes, of course, physically like Vanessa. No other woman, he knew, ever could.

He had opened his eyes, and yet the dark remained. At first he wondered if he was somehow still in his home, but it was far too cold. He always kept the digital thermostat set at exactly 71.5 degrees. Always. Vanessa often teased him about his precision. During his lifetime, some people had considered Gerard's need for order close to being anal or even OCD. Vanessa, however, understood. She both appreciated it and found it to be a bonus. "It is what makes you a great scientist and a caring man," Vanessa had told him once. She explained to him her theory that people we now consider "on the spectrum" were, in the past, the geniuses in art, science, and literature, but now, with medications and diagnoses, we flatten them out, make them more uniform, dull their senses.

"Genius comes from the unusual," Vanessa had explained to him.

"And I'm unusual?"

"In the very best way, my sweet."

But as his heart swelled from the memory, Gerard couldn't help but notice the strange smell. Something damp and old and musty and like . . .

Like dirt. Like fresh soil.

Panic suddenly seized him. Still in pitch-darkness, Gerard tried to lift his hands to his face. He couldn't. There was something binding his wrists. It felt like a rope or, no, something thinner. Wire maybe. He tried to move his legs. They were bound together. He clenched his stomach muscles and tried to swing both legs into the air, but

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they hit something. Something wooden. Right above him. Like he was in. . . .

His body started bucking in fear.

Where was he? Where was Vanessa?

“Hello?” he shouted. “Hello?”

Gerard tried to sit up, but there was a belt around his chest too. He couldn’t move. He waited for his eyes to get used to the dark, but that wasn’t happening fast enough.

“Hello? Someone? Please help me!”

He heard a noise now. Right above him. It sounded like scraping or shuffling or . . .

Or footsteps?

Footsteps right above him.

Gerard thought about the dark. He thought about the smell of fresh soil. The answer was suddenly so obvious, yet it made no sense.

I’m underground, he thought. I’m underground.

And then he started to scream.

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