

# THE FIRST SHOT

A Prequel to THE LAST MRS. PARRISH

LIV CONSTANTINE

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*The Last Time I Saw You*

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*The Stranger in the Mirror*

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## CHAPTER ONE

**A**t three a.m., Lana Crump quietly got out of bed, fully dressed, and slid the suitcase she'd packed earlier that night out from under it. The sound of soft breathing filled the room, and she tiptoed to the crib for a last look at her son, who was sleeping peacefully. She exited the room without a sound. As her feet carried her down the steps and away from the house she'd grown up in, she felt lighter and lighter, thoughts of a better future somewhere far away from this dead-end town filling her head and giving her new purpose.

She'd debated briefly whether or not to leave a note but decided against it. They knew why she had to leave—that she'd never be allowed to raise her son no matter what she did. Taking a final look around, she whispered a quiet goodbye and closed the door behind her.

She'd planned her escape carefully, thinking through every contingency. In her backpack was the emergency cash her mother had kept hidden in the back of the pantry in an old flour canister. A thousand dollars wouldn't get her far, but it was enough for now. She'd already purchased a prepaid cell phone, and she'd be sure to get rid of her real one, sending the police scurrying in the wrong direction. Lastly, she'd packed her copies of *Anna Karenina* and *Persuasion*. She wished she didn't have to leave all of her other books, but there was no other option. Now all she needed to do was hitch a ride to Lexington, Nebraska, where phase two of her plan could begin.

It was close to four a.m. when she reached the bus station and bought a ticket to Little Rock. She hated to squander the \$75, but it was the only way. At six fifteen, she handed the driver her ticket and found a seat in the back. She sat down and tucked her phone between the seat cushions, then got back up. As the bus began to fill, she squeezed to the side of an oncoming passenger and snuck off. When they tracked her phone they'd be looking for her in the opposite direction—that would buy her some time. Step one, complete. The sun was coming up as she reached the truck stop and went inside in search of her real ride.

One hour and two cups of coffee later, she was in the passenger seat of an eighteen-wheeler with a trucker named

Mac. He was going to Cheyenne but was willing to go a little out of his way to drop her off in Lexington, where she told him she was going to visit her sick aunt. She'd chosen him carefully, after staking out the truck stop all morning to try to get a read on who would be the safest. He had on a wedding band, the first good sign. She'd heard him on the phone talking sweetly to his wife and then his daughter. But the thing that clinched it for her was when he bowed his head before eating to say a silent prayer. It wasn't like she believed all religious people were good, but she had a feeling she'd be safe with Mac.

“How long you planning on staying in Lexington?” he asked as they pulled out.

Lana tried to make herself look sad. “My aunt's pretty sick, so I'll stay as long she needs me.”

“Awful kind of you. Young folks today are usually all about themselves. It's refreshing to see a young woman like you put someone else's needs first.”

Lana tried her best not to roll her eyes. Was this do-gooder going to talk the whole way? There was no way she could endure close to five hours of this. She feigned a yawn. “I haven't gotten any sleep since my uncle called to tell me she'd taken a turn for the worse. Would you mind if I just rested for a bit?”

“Of course, of course.” He reached behind the seat and pulled a blanket out, handing it to her. “Here you go, try and sleep.”

She mumbled a thanks and closed her eyes. Not that she’d really sleep. No matter how nice he seemed, Lana didn’t really know him, and she wasn’t about to wake up locked in some basement. But as long as she kept her eyes closed, he’d keep his mouth closed. Her old pal Martin Cummings had booked her a room at the Astro Motel for \$55 a night—she’d be there behind a locked door soon enough. She had the money for at least a month, but he’d also promised to help her get a job at a local restaurant once they’d squared away her new identity.

Martin hadn’t been too thrilled to hear from Lana at first—after all, she was the only one from Blue Springs, Missouri, who knew what he’d done and where he’d gone. Two years ago, she’d been his alibi. He’d been hanging out with the wrong crowd and happened to be in the car with them when they robbed a convenience store in a neighboring town, fatally injuring the clerk. Martin hadn’t known what was going to go down, but he’d already had his share of trouble with the law and had begged Lana to cover for him. Just like with her, the cards had always been stacked against Martin, and she was happy to cut him a break. So Lana had been his alibi and told the police he’d been with her that

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night. Soon after he'd moved away and started a new life. Now he was an integral part of *her* plan to escape. He was working in Eustis, Nebraska, in the vital records department. Thanks to him, she'd have an entirely new identity in no time.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lana gave Mac her sweetest smile as she opened the door and stepped down from the truck. “Thanks again for the ride.”

“You’re welcome. Good luck, missy.”

She’d had him drop her off at a strip mall a few blocks from the Astro. Despite his aboveboard behavior during the five-hour trip, she didn’t need him to know where she was staying. She’d learned the hard way that just because a guy looked like a good person on the outside, it didn’t mean that was true on the inside. She pulled the collar of her wool coat up against the biting wind and walked as quickly as she could toward the motel. When she reached her room and opened the door, her nose wrinkled in distaste. It smelled like an ashtray. Throwing her suitcase on the bed, she strode over to the nightstand and yanked the phone from it.

She tapped her foot while it rang.

“Front desk,” the old geezer who’d checked her in answered.

“Yes, this is room one oh three. I asked for nonsmoking, but this room reeks.”

“All our rooms are nonsmoking. I’m sorry the last guest broke the rules. Afraid we’re all booked up, but I can have housekeeping bring in some air fresheners.”

Just what she needed, some chemicals to go along with the stale smoke. “Never mind.” She hung up and went over to the window, opening it and letting the freezing air in. She’d leave it open while she went back out, and maybe by the time she returned from meeting with Martin, it wouldn’t be so bad.

She texted him and walked down the street to the Dunkin’ Donuts to wait. After ordering a cappuccino, she took a seat at a booth by the window and looked out at the dreary landscape. Nothing much to see—just like her own hometown. She couldn’t wait to get out to the West Coast and finally begin to live a *real* life. The life she was meant for. Catching her reflection in the window, she smoothed a stray hair from her forehead. Lana knew she looked good: her hair

was longer than when she'd last seen Martin three years ago, and she'd since learned to apply makeup expertly.

Still, she hadn't expected Martin to be transformed himself. She barely recognized him when he walked in the door. Gone was the skinny, pimply kid, and in his place was a good-looking guy, buff and healthy. It took a minute for his eyes to rest on her, and when they did, his eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Lana? You look amazing.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “You don't look too shabby yourself.”

He slid into the seat across from her. “Glad you made it. I heard about your trouble. My sister told me that the cops are looking for you, you know. You skipped out on bail?”

She felt her stomach clench. “You didn't tell her I was coming here, did you?”

He threw a hand up. “Course not. I owe you one, and I pay my debts. I don't blame you anyhow. That creep had it coming. But just sayin'...you might want to get farther away than one state.”

She blew out a breath. “That's the long-term plan. I just need to lay low first, figure out exactly what's next.”

He pulled out an envelope from his jacket pocket, looked around, then lowered his voice.

“I got you a copy of the birth certificate of a girl who went missing two years ago. Amber Patterson. Same age as you, similar features.”

“What happened to her?”

He shrugged. “No one knows. She lived in Eustis. If you think Blue Springs is small, well, let’s just say there’s like five hundred people there. Everyone knows everyone. One day she was walking home from school, and she never made it.”

Lana thought for a moment. “Maybe she just ran away.”

Martin shook his head. “The police don’t think so. No trouble at home or at school. Plus she and her mom were real close.” He handed her a photocopy of a newspaper article. “Here, you can see for yourself.”

Lana swallowed hard. “Are you sure she’s...gone for good? I don’t need to be using her ID only to have her show up again someday.”

Martin shook his head. “Nah. She was likely abducted. Dead somewhere. You can use her birth certificate

to get a driver's license when you finally get settled wherever. I've got a buddy who owns a restaurant here; he owes me a favor and he's willing to hire you. He'll do it under the table if you're willing to work for tips. I told him your name was Amber, but you should make up a different last name—people around here may recognize Patterson.” He gestured toward the envelope.

She nodded and put the envelope in her purse. “You said her mother's still around?”

“Yeah, she works at H & J Grocery.”

Lana filed that information away. “So, when can I start at your friend's restaurant?”

He handed her another piece of paper with a name and phone number. “He's expecting your call. You can work out the details.” Martin stood. “So this squares us, right?”

She nodded. “Yep. Thanks for all the help.”

He winked. “Sure thing, Amber.”

Lana read over the article again and examined the picture of the missing girl. She went to Facebook on her burner phone, signed in using the fake profile she had created, and did a search for her. Sure enough, there was her page, full of comments from friends and well-wishers, bemoaning her

disappearance. Lana clicked on the photos and methodically studied them one by one. Over the next several hours, she read through all the past posts and messages on the page. By the time she was finished, she knew exactly what her next move was. It was dusk when she left, the wind whipping against her face even harder now that the sun had gone down. She hustled back to her motel room, which felt like a refrigerator because of the open window. Slamming it shut, she sat down on the bed, feeling cold and lonely. She saw her son's face in her mind and wondered if his father and horrible grandmother had already taken him away. Shaking the thought from her head, she picked up her phone and called the number Martin had left with her. A male voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello, this is Amber. My friend Martin gave me your number. I hear you're hiring?”

## CHAPTER THREE

Lana had been working at Charley's Pub for a month now, and everyone knew her as Amber Peters. She wouldn't use Amber's real last name until after she moved farther away, once she had enough money for a real fresh start. She worked as many shifts as Fred, the owner, would give her, and had already saved up over a thousand dollars. Tips were good, and Amber made sure to show a little extra cleavage to her single male customers. Her best shifts were on Sundays, when they came to watch sports with their buddies. She figured a couple more months and she'd be ready to put down a deposit on an apartment somewhere. Somewhere far away from Eustis, far away from Blue Springs. She was snapped out of her daydream when Tanya, the bartender, called her over.

"Hey," Amber said. She smiled at her and took a seat at the bar. Tanya opened a cold Michelob Ultra and handed it to her. "What a night. Bachelor parties are the worst. A bunch

of drunk idiots helping the groom make his last stand.” She shook her head.

Amber took a long swallow and leaned back in the bar stool. “Thanks, I needed that. They were a little over-the-top, but—thanks to your generous pouring—good tippers.”

Amber had gotten friendly with Tanya right away. It was always best to make friends with the bartender, if you wanted your drink orders prioritized. Keeping the customers’ glasses full made them happy and more likely to leave a good tip. The bonus was that Tanya was a lot of fun and had introduced Amber around, helping her create a bit of a social life. Over the past few weeks they had begun to hang out together most nights after work and had bonded one night when Tanya told Amber her story of heartbreak, concerning a jerk who’d lured her here from Colorado only to start stealing her tip money for drugs. She’d finally kicked the bum out of her apartment a week ago.

Amber kept Tanya company while she took care of closing up, and then the two of them headed out together to grab a drink at Mister’s, a popular bar a few blocks away. It was crowded and noisy, and Amber had a headache, but she wanted to take care of something tonight, so she’d forced herself to go along. They managed to grab two seats just as a couple got up to leave.

“Phew. That was lucky,” Tanya said.

After they'd gotten their beers, Amber swiveled toward Tanya.

"So what'd you decide?"

"Hate to break it to you, but I'm gonna go back to Colorado. I hate it here. Only reason I came was because of Mitch, and look how that turned out. I just need to save up enough for the trip. The son of a bitch took all my money when he left." Her mouth tightened into an angry line.

"I think you're making the right decision, Tanya."

Tanya nodded. "I think so too. My friend Greta told me she can get me a job at this ultra-cool place in Crested Butte. She offered to let me stay with her for a while too."

"Wow, you're so lucky to have a job and a place to stay before you even get there. And in such a great town. So much better than this stupid hicksville." Amber cast her eyes down at the floor, looking sad.

"Hey, what if you came with me?"

Amber didn't want to appear too eager. "Oh, no. I couldn't. I mean, who knows if I could get a job? And where would I live? I wouldn't want to burden you."

"What if I call Greta tomorrow and see if there's another opening?" Tanya took a sip from her beer. "She's so

loaded she doesn't need to work but takes a shift on Saturday nights just because the staff has so much fun together. She can bring in over five hundred in *one* night. I bet she could get you hired, and I think she'd be fine with you flopping at her house for a while."

Amber seized her opportunity. "That would be great, if you're really sure you don't mind."

Tanya raised her bottle to Amber's. "To Colorado."

Even if she didn't stay there, it was another step farther away from Missouri. There was just one more thing she needed to do before they left this town behind. She'd take care of that tomorrow.

\* \* \*

Edith Patterson lived in a split-level on a block littered with children's plastic toys and broken-down bikes. Since arriving in the area, Amber had been doing all her food shopping at H & J, styling her hair just like the real Amber, and choosing clothes similar to the ones she'd seen on her Facebook page every time she went in. She always chose Edith's lane at the grocery store and made small talk as she checked out, making it clear that she was new in town and all alone. Twice she'd pretended to have to put items back because she didn't have enough cash to pay for them, and

yesterday, she'd finally gotten the clueless woman to take pity on her and invite her over for dinner.

Amber rang the doorbell and waited. Opening the screen, she knocked on the paint-chipped door, getting more impatient by the minute. Finally, Edith appeared, and welcomed her in.

“Thank you so much for having me over. It’s, like, so kind of you,” she gushed. Amber handed her a three-dollar plant she’d picked up at the hardware store.

Edith gave her a hug. “Thank you, sweetheart. It’s my pleasure. Come on in.”

Amber followed her into the living room, taking in the threadbare sofa and mismatched chairs. Edith had put out some cheese and crackers on the coffee table and motioned for Amber to take a seat. On the walls were framed pictures of the missing Amber, from grade school up until high school. No graduation picture though. It was morbid, like a shrine. The rest of the house was all gray and drab. Maybe the real Amber *had* run away from this dump.

“How about something to drink? Lemonade? Iced tea?”

“Iced tea is great, thanks.”

Edith came back with the drinks and sat across from her, staring at her a long moment before speaking. “Forgive me for saying so, honey, but you remind me so much of my daughter.”

Amber’s eyes went back to the wall of fame, then she looked down. “That’s nice of you to say, but...she’s so pretty. I wish I was half as beautiful as her.” Truthfully, the girl was average looking at best. “Is she away at college?” Amber asked.

Edith’s eyes filled. “I forgot. Not being from here, you wouldn’t know.” She sighed heavily. “She went missing over two years ago. I still don’t know what happened. The police have found nothing.” She choked back a sob and took a moment to compose herself.

Amber feigned shock. “That’s awful. I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

Edith took a deep breath and stood. “Let’s go have some dinner.”

They went into the small kitchen, and when Edith pulled out the meatloaf, Amber wanted to gag—how many times had her own mother made the dish because she could stuff it with bread crumbs and make the ground meat go a little farther? She helped Edith put everything on the table:

creamed corn, lumpy mashed potatoes, and some sliced white bread. The meatloaf had that disgusting hardened ketchup layer on top, just like her mom's. The rest was a veritable smorgasbord of carbs. They made small talk while Amber did her best to get half a plate down. She managed to bring the topic back to Amber right before dessert.

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but what is Amber like?" she said, purposely using the present tense even though it was likely Amber was long gone.

Edith looked up at the ceiling, and when she looked back at Amber her eyes shone with pride. "She was a wonderful girl, so thoughtful and kind. Always a smile on her face. She just lit up a room when she came in."

"Wow. I wish I could have met her."

"Me too, honey. Everyone loved her. She was the sweetest, most considerate girl in the world."

*Give me a break*, Amber thought. Why did people insist on turning lost loved ones into saints?

"She sounds amazing. Did she have a lot of hobbies?"

"Oh, plenty. She loved basketball, and she was on the debate team. President of the French Club too. Amber was always an honor student. Her room is full of trophies. Would you like to see?"

*Bingo.* “Oh, I would love to.”

As they walked up the five steps to the next level, Edith continued talking. “The school was going to send members of the French Club to France, but of course that never happened...well, here it is,” Edith said, turning right when they reached the landing.

Amber walked in and scanned the small, well-kept room. On one of the baby-blue walls hung a grouping of Amber’s awards and school photographs, all in white wooden frames. Two large posters of Taylor Swift were tacked up side by side on another wall, and a low bookcase sat on the floor beneath them. The bed had a canopy of white lace and a frilly blue and white bedspread. No books anywhere. Amber couldn’t understand how anyone could live in a house without books.

She needed some time alone in the room to find what she’d come for. She stalled, commenting on pictures and trinkets, until finally the doorbell rang.

“You look around. I’ll be right back,” Edith said.

Amber rushed over to the dresser, opening drawers and rifling through. Nothing. She opened up the jewelry box and saw that the top tray lifted out. She pulled it up. *Yes!* She grabbed the passport and put the velvet-covered tray back. A

sapphire ring caught her eye, and she grabbed that too. It wasn't like the real Amber needed it anymore.

Just as she was getting ready to walk out of the room, Edith returned.

“Strangest thing. Someone sent me flowers! No card. Can't imagine who.”

“Hmm,” Amber said. “Maybe you have a secret admirer.” It had been so worth the forty bucks she'd spent to order them for a prompt arrival at seven thirty. And it was kind of a good deed, anyway. She was sure there was no one sending frumpy Edith flowers these days.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*P*oor Tanya, Amber thought. She was nice enough, pretty in a country sort of way, and she had her fair share of smarts. She was, however, completely bereft of vision. Her ambition extended only as far as a bartending job in a rich ski town where her income would be marginally better than it was here in Lexington. Amber had higher aims, but she had to take what she could get for now. Tanya wanted to leave Nebraska next week, which meant Amber needed to have every detail of her plan in place to hit the ground running once she got to Colorado.

When she opened her laptop, Amber once again thanked God for Google. The search engine was her entrée into the private world of anyone and any place she wished to explore. Before Amber had agreed to accompany Tanya to Crested Butte, she'd spent hours googling the place, a small and rustically charming ski town in southwest Colorado.

When Tanya had asked if she could bring Amber along, her friend had said it was no problem and that they could stay with her until they got settled. At first Amber wished Tanya's friend lived someplace bigger and more well-known, like Aspen or Vail. But Colorado would just be a pit stop on her way to the Golden State, where she would find fame and fortune, anyway. And as she'd read about this tiny ski town nestled in the Rocky Mountains, she'd come across something that had made her change her mind.

Of course, skiers from all over the world crowded these Colorado towns in the winter. The surprising thing to Amber was that the population swelled in the summer too, when Texans and Oklahomans arrived to spend June, July, and August in their second homes, surrounded by this playground of epic trails, alpine hiking, fishing, whitewater rafting, and idyllic summer weather. Amber wasn't really interested in the recreational activities. No, she was interested in something else, and Amber zeroed in on the headline of an article in *Town & Country*: *Wealthy Texans enjoy their sumptuous summer homes in beautiful Colorado*. Maybe California could wait. Amber might just find her fame and fortune in the Rocky Mountains.

From there, Amber had been methodical in her research. First, she'd needed to find out just who those vacation-home owners from Texas were. Tax assessment and

property records kindly provided her with names, and from there Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube did the rest. She was looking for a man with a sizable net worth. That part was easy. There were lots of them, some of them even young and good-looking to boot. What winnowed down the field, however, was that he had to be single. There was the thirty-five-year-old tech whiz kid who'd made billions in a few short years. Single and attractive, but unfortunately for Amber, also gay. Another unattached multimillionaire looked promising until Amber got to the part about the six kids under ten in his custody. She'd finally struck gold when she found Jake Crawford, a no-longer-married Dallas oil billionaire who owned a 625-acre Colorado ranch on Ohio Creek, where he spent the summers. Perfect.

Amber rose from the table and poured herself another hot chocolate. No matter how thick her socks were or how many layers she put on, she just couldn't get warm. The temperature outside was eighteen degrees, and it felt like the wind was coming in right through the walls. She shook her head when she remembered it would be even colder in Crested Butte. She sat down again, holding the cup between her hands for warmth as she continued to look at Jake's photograph. He was old. Sixty-five. Silver hair, but at least he *had* hair, Amber thought. His face was weathered looking, like he'd been out in the sun and wind his whole life, and his

tall body looked a little meaty, but he probably wasn't as active as he used to be.

When she went to YouTube and searched "Jake Crawford interview," several hits appeared. She clicked on the oldest one, from 1995. He would have been forty then, and already, he was one of the richest oilmen in Texas. Taking a sip of her hot chocolate, she sat back, thrilled and fascinated by what she'd found. A forty-minute video followed Jake from his home to his office and home again, documenting his daily life and asking him questions along the way, even filming segments with his wife and daughter. It was as if heaven had smiled down upon Amber and said, "*Here you go, girlfriend. Here's all the info you'll need.*" She licked her lips in anticipation.

The Crawford house near Dallas looked like a Southern palace, with lots of white columns and a large wing on either side. It sat on one hundred thousand acres of Texas scrub and was surrounded by cattle herds and scores of ugly oil rigs. The YouTube video opened with Jake and his wife coming out of the house and walking to a tall pole where together, they raised the American flag. Amber bet they had pillows on every chair and sofa embroidered with the words *God Bless America*. Then Jake introduced his wife to the camera, and Amber laughed when she heard him say her name. Marylou Ann. Of course, what else would it be? She

froze the screen and magnified it to get a better look at the wife. Slender and tanned, Marylou Ann wore a pink sleeveless V-neck dress and white sandals. She looked tallish but still slight standing next to Jake, who, Amber had read, stood well over six feet. Her face was pretty, but it was hard to tell what might be under all the heavy eye makeup and painted lips. What Amber couldn't take her eyes off of was the hair—bright fiery red, lots of it, and teased to dizzying heights. Still, she was the picture of Texan charm, and Amber had been disgusted when she'd seen a photo with Marylou Ann holding a huge elk rack. Amber knew plenty of people back home who hunted, but she still thought it was barbaric.

They were both smart, though, Amber realized, as she listened to the interview clips. It would be very stupid to underestimate this man—a rough-around-the-edges college dropout with a sharp mind and keen intelligence. He'd already built a multimillion-dollar empire by the age of forty, and his wife had been right there with him. Amber wasn't deceived by the woman's silly name, her overly made-up face or beguiling smile. She'd not only been smart like her husband but had been devoted to him as well. It was obvious to Amber as she watched them at home with their young daughter, Daisy, that they not only adored each other but did everything together, from fly fishing to hunting to horseback riding. It looked like a match made in heaven.

Unfortunately for Jake, Marylou Ann had died of a heart attack ten years ago. *Served her right*, Amber thought. Think of how scared that poor elk must have been. Not that Amber really cared about wild animals, but still, that didn't make it right to shoot them.

So poor Jake had become a widower on his fifty-fifth birthday, but he wasn't single for long. A year later he remarried, but he chose unwisely—a thirtysomething gold digger who, according to local gossip blogs, preferred the company of other men to her husband Jake's. That marriage had lasted only three years, and Jake's divorce had cost him twenty million dollars—a mere drop in his vast bucket—and left him alone. As far as Amber could tell, he'd been single for the last six years.

Next Amber navigated to the links with Daisy's name. Jake's daughter, now thirty-three years old and married, worked for her father's company—probably some cushy job where she sat in a pretty office and did nothing all day. Her husband, Mason Briscoe, was a lawyer, and they had two adorable kids. She zoomed in on a picture of the couple at a high-society charity event. Daisy hadn't inherited her mother's red hair; she was a platinum blonde with high cheekbones and a perfect-looking face. Plastic surgery, for sure. Didn't all the rich girls have it? She had a killer body,

too—no doubt thanks to her personal trainer. Her husband was good-looking in a bland, lawyerly sort of way.

Before calling it a night, Amber clicked on a *Gunnison Country Times* interview with Crawford from last summer. Halfway down the page she found what she was hoping for—a photograph of him at the W Café, his favorite breakfast haunt.

Amber closed her laptop and smiled as she finished the last of the now-cold cocoa. She picked up her pen and began writing a shopping list. Red hair dye was at the very top.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**I**t was still dark outside when Tanya's headlights came shining through the window of Amber's motel room. She walked out into the frigid air, almost slipping on the icy sidewalk.

"Hey." Tanya was standing next to the Toyota hatchback with one arm leaning on the top of the open driver's-side door. "The back's unlocked. You can put your suitcase in there."

"Okay," Amber said, taking careful steps to the rear of the car.

She frowned. The vehicle was jam-packed with Tanya's stuff and barely had room for Amber's case. Shivering as she rearranged things, she finally created a small niche, shut the door, and hurried to get inside. The blast of warm air from the heater felt great, and she placed her hands, already numb with cold, against the vents.

“It’s freezing out there. Man, I hate the cold,” she said.

Tanya said nothing, staring at her. “Your hair. It’s red.”

Amber moved one hand reflexively to her head. “You like it?”

“Yeah, totally, it’s just so...different. Why’d you dye it red?”

“I don’t know. Just wanted a change, I guess,” she said. “Can we get going?”

“Yeah, sure.” Tanya backed out of the space and turned onto the road.

Tanya glanced briefly at her, then back at the road. “I’m sorry about the early departure, but we have an eight-or-nine-hour drive, and we want to get to Monarch Pass while it’s still light. I don’t want to drive over that mountain in the dark. Especially not in the winter.”

“Right. I get it.” Amber had looked up their route and had even watched videos people had taken as they drove over Monarch. But Amber soon discovered that no video could’ve prepared her for the journey. They ascended higher and higher over the snow-covered mountains, but thankfully the

two-lane road was clear, with just a few ice patches here and there. And they were on the inside lane, thank God. Amber thought her stomach might drop out of her when she glanced across to the outside lane—the sheer drop-offs down the side were terrifying. When they reached the summit, Tanya pulled into the parking lot of the Monarch Crest Gift Shop. “We can grab lunch here. They have great ice cream too,” she said, opening her door.

As they walked inside, Amber said, “So now we’re actually standing on top of the US Continental Divide. Elevation over eleven thousand feet. That’s so cool,” Amber said.

“Oh yeah, my eleventh-grade geography teacher bored me to death with all that Continental Divide crap. Who cares?”

She gazed sideways at Tanya’s profile. It was unbelievable to Amber that the girl could be so devoid of curiosity and imagination. How could you live in a place all your life and be so apathetic about its significance and history? It really irritated her. Didn’t Tanya know that knowledge was power?

They sat at a table to eat their hot dogs, and Amber got up to stroll around the store while Tanya finished her ice cream cone. Immediately the dizziness hit her, and she felt

like she might faint. Suddenly covered in perspiration, she sat back down, tamping down the nausea rising in her throat, her head lowered.

“The altitude,” Tanya said in a bored voice. “Makes you light-headed. It’ll take time, but you’ll get used to it once you’ve been here awhile. You need to drink lots of water or your head will feel like it’s going to explode.”

Amber swallowed and sat very still, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

“Okay, only seventy miles to go,” Tanya said once they got back in the car.

Within the hour they hit Gunnison, a rustic western-looking town, the home of Western Colorado University and barely thirty minutes outside of Crested Butte. When they reached their final destination, Amber was enchanted. As they drove along Elk Avenue, the main drag, at the posted fifteen miles an hour, she felt like she’d entered a movie set: quaint, charming, historic, picturesque, old-fashioned. Tanya pulled into a parking space in front of a two-story wood building, its second floor an open deck where Amber imagined patrons sat outside eating and drinking in the summertime.

“This is where I’ll be working,” Tanya said, pointing to the place.

Amber looked at the sign: “The Eldo, a Pub,” and underneath that, “A Sunny Place for Shady People.” She laughed. It sounded perfect for her.

“You start in three days, right?” But Amber already knew—she was a great listener with an excellent memory.

“Yeah. I’m excited. My friend Greta said the tips are really good. And like I said, you could probably waitress there, too.”

*Yada, yada, yada*, Amber thought to herself. Her interview at the W Café was next week, and she needed to get that job.

Tanya took off again, made a few turns, and stopped in front of a purple house with green trim and a red door. It looked like it was right out of a storybook.

“This is Greta’s house.”

Amber looked at Tanya in surprise. “As in she owns it?”

“Yup. She’s a trusty.”

“A what?”

“A trust fund kid. There are lots of them here. They ski and party and live on Mommy and Daddy’s money.”

The hot rush of anger felt like it would consume Amber. She hated the unfairness of it all. Why did *they* deserve rich parents when hers were second-rate losers with zero ambition?

“Come on,” Tanya said, getting out of the car, and Amber followed.

They strode up the short sidewalk, walking past a three-foot wall of snow on each side of the path, and by the time they got to the front porch, Amber felt winded. She definitely wasn't used to this thin air. Before Tanya had time to knock, the door was opened by one of the most gorgeous girls Amber had ever seen. Tall and slender, Greta had straw-colored hair that hung past her shoulders in glossy waves. Her face was almost too perfect, her big brown eyes fringed with thick black lashes, her full lips beautifully shaped. The envy gnawed at Amber's insides like a rat chewing through concrete.

“Welcome. Come on in!” Her smile was wide and genuine. *Of course*, Amber thought. What did she have to be stingy about? Her life was a fairy tale. Well, pretty soon Amber's would be a fairy tale too. And her payoff would make the purple house of Little Miss Perfect look like a hovel.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

**A**mber decided they had picked the worst possible month to move to Crested Butte. It snowed almost every day that February, and even though the sun was always shining, daytime temperatures remained in the single digits. At night the thermometer dropped below zero. The sidewalks were flanked on both sides with five- and six-foot walls of packed snow. Amber had never been so cold or out of breath in her life. The standard uniform in town was a down jacket and wool hat that was never removed, even indoors.

Upon their arrival Amber had gone for a job interview at the W Café, but there'd been no openings at the time. Now it was April, and Amber had finally gotten a call from the restaurant to let her know they were hiring. She'd have to quit her job at Django's, a hip restaurant and bar where she'd been working for the last two months, but she was more than okay

with that. It had gotten tiresome, this town full of millennials who thought themselves so progressive and enlightened.

Greta, however, had turned out to be pretty all right. She'd told them they were welcome to stay however long they liked and had even turned her small den into a bedroom for Amber. She'd introduced her and Tanya to her friends and taken them around CB, or the Butte, as locals called it. Greta had been generous too, treating them to dinners out and refusing to accept money for rent or groceries. And why shouldn't she? It was her parents' money she was spending.

But now Amber was moving to a private room in someone's Gunnison home. It was the cheapest thing she could find and required no lease. Without a car there was no way she could continue to live at Greta's and work a job twenty-seven miles away. The free bus that ran between CB and Gunny—it seemed like no one had enough energy to use entire proper nouns—wouldn't get her to the restaurant until seven thirty a.m., too late for her early shift. Amber wasn't thrilled about having to leave Greta's, even though it was all in pursuit of the proverbial brass ring. She'd miss the great house, all the freebies, and the amazing vibe of the town. She'd also miss the gorgeous clothes Greta often let her borrow—as she packed her things the night before leaving, Amber had grabbed a white cashmere sweater, a pair of black

fur-lined boots, and long gray silk pants from Greta's closet. The girl had so much, she'd never miss them.

When Greta insisted on driving her to Gunnison in the morning, Amber felt a momentary twinge of guilt for stealing her clothes, but she quickly brushed it away.

"Thanks for the ride, Greta. And thanks for letting me stay with you all this time. You've been really great," Amber said once they were on the road. She loved the new-car smell and supple leather seats of Greta's Range Rover.

"I still don't understand why you're leaving the job at Django's. I thought you loved it there!"

Amber looked over at this privileged goddess, so at ease behind the wheel of her brand-new \$90,000 ride. Was she really clueless enough to believe that anyone *loved* waitressing? Waiting on a bunch of entitled little snots who believed you had nothing better to do than run back and forth to the kitchen on their every whim? Amber smiled through gritted teeth. "I did like it, but I'm a morning person, and the late nights were getting to me. The W is just a better fit, I think."

"Hmm," was all Greta said.

They stuck to small talk for the rest of the drive until they were parked in front of Amber's new abode. She stood

for a moment looking at the house, a plain one-story building with a chain-link fence around it. A green and white glider, its paint chipping, sat on the concrete front porch, and an old blue Honda was parked in the driveway. Amber couldn't help but compare it to the upmarket home she'd been living in the past few months.

“Well,” Greta said, after they unloaded Amber's things, “good luck and stay in touch, okay?”

“Sure,” Amber said, though she knew it was an empty invitation. “Thanks again,” she added, and waved as Greta pulled away.

Amber opened the gate, reached into her pocket for the key she'd been given last week, and walked to the rear of the house, where there was a private entrance to her room. The air was frigid and a light snow was falling, even in the second week of April. Amber wondered if spring would ever come to this frozen mountain town. Unlocking the door, she stepped inside and was struck by how small and gloomy the room was with its dark wood floor, walls the color of brown mustard, and one tiny window with a roll-up window shade. She sighed and reminded herself that this was only temporary.

Before unpacking, Amber picked up her phone and dialed Craig Morton's number. He answered on the second ring.

“Hello, Craig? This is Amber Patterson. A friend of mine gave me your name and number, and said maybe you could help me.”

“Yeah? What can I do for you?”

“I heard you’re a river guide, and I was wondering if you would give me fly-fishing lessons and teach me how to tie flies? I’d pay for the lessons, of course,” she quickly added.

“You done any fishing with lures?”

“Nope, I’m a complete novice,” Amber said, glancing at the book in her lap, *The Orvis Guide to Beginning Fly Fishing*. “Could I buy you a drink and see if we can work something out?”

“Sure, why not,” he said.

“Great. Are you free tomorrow night?”

“Yeah. Any time after five thirty.”

“Okay. Let’s meet at six. You name the place. I’m new in town.”

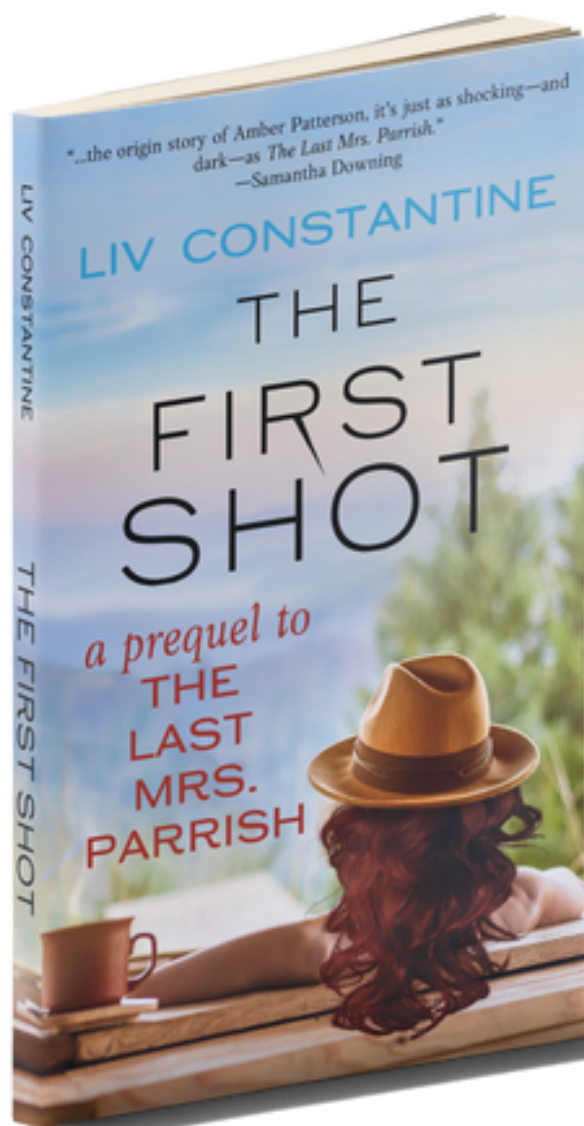
That took care of the first thing on her list. Tomorrow night when she met Craig, she’d also ask him if he belonged to the Gunnison Sportsmen’s Association Gun Club or had a

friend who was a member. She needed someone to take her there as their guest so she could use the shooting range and learn how to handle a firearm. She had first thought about joining herself, but anything to do with guns would most likely involve a background check, and that was out of the question.

At the sound of a door slamming and loud footsteps, Amber looked up at the ceiling. Her landlady. The footsteps grew louder, and then the barking started. Amber hadn't known anything about a dog. *Great!* She put her earbuds in, turned on her music, and flopped onto the bed, telling herself that when they met, Jake Crawford should get down on his hands and knees and thank her for the all crap she was willing to go through for him.

Moving her head against the pillow, Amber closed her eyes and smiled to herself when she remembered Craig's asking her if she'd done any fishing with lures. *Not yet*, she thought, *but when I'm finished training, I'm going to lure in one hell of a catch.*

# BONUS CONTENT





# Amber's Playlist



**Unstoppable, Sia**

**Killer Queen by Queen**

**No body No Crime, Taylor Swift**

**You're so Vain, Carly Simon**

**Smooth Operator, Sade**

**Rich Girl, Gwen Stefani**

**Lyin Eyes, Eagles**

**Soak up the Sun, Sheryl Crow**

**Shake it Off, Taylor Swift**

**No Scrubs, TLC**

**Confident, Demi Lovato**

**Juice, Lizzo**

# AMBER'S GUIDE TO WINNING

## Know Your Target's Weaknesses

- **Study them closely:** Pay attention to what they value, what they're insecure about, and any weaknesses that might give you an advantage.
- **Mirror their desires:** Pretend to share their likes and dislikes. Make them think you're sympatico
- **Be their confidant:** Build trust by listening sympathetically; show empathy and concern.

## Build a Perfect Public Image

- **Dress the part:** Blend in but be a cut above. Invest in yourself, it will be worth it.
- **Control the narrative:** Carefully curate what others see and hear, avoiding any hint of vulnerability or inconsistency in your story.
- **Control your emotions:** Never show your real feelings. Hide anger, disparagement, ridicule or hatred.

## Appear Vulnerable When Necessary

- **Use sympathy to disarm:** People are suckers. Pretend to be vulnerable, make them want to help you and protect you.
- **Play the victim:** When others feel sorry for you, they overlook your mistakes. Make them think they're in a position to help you, all the while laughing inside.

## Use Flattery and Charm

- **Appeal to egos:** People love being told how wonderful they are. Wrap them around your little finger when you make them believe you worship them.
- **Master nonverbal cues:** Use body language, eye contact, and subtle touches that convey your "interest" and make others more willing to bend to your will.

## Act Patiently, but Strike Fast

- **Slowly build trust:** Invest time into relationships, carefully building trust without rushing the process.
- **Seize the moment:** When an opportunity arises, act decisively and without hesitation, catching others off guard.

## Cover Your Tracks

- **Never leave evidence:** Be meticulous about erasing any trace of your lies—delete messages, cover your online activity, and avoid any paper trails.
- **Have an alibi ready:** Always have a fallback plan to explain away any suspicion, keep your story tight and your tracks invisible.

## Manipulate Emotions to Gain Control

- **Play on their fears:** Subtly provoke anxiety or jealousy to maintain a grip on your target's emotions.
- **Gaslight if necessary:** If anyone suspects you, make them doubt themselves, downplaying their concerns and making them question their own intuition.

## Maintain an Air of Mystery

- **Never reveal too much:** Keep details about yourself vague. This makes people more intrigued and, ironically, more trusting.
- **Use curiosity to reel them in:** Reveal just enough to keep people curious and wanting more, holding their interest tightly.

## Be Bulletproof

- **Read widely:** Be proficient in and able to discuss a wide variety of topics. Know your subject well enough to ask intelligent questions that impress.
- **Visit museums and attend lectures and concerts:** Be adept at participating in conversations about classical music and art history. This will make you an insider and not an outsider; someone whose opinion is valued.
- **Keep abreast of world news:** Know what is going on in the entire world, not just your small part of it. This will give you the added bonus of ferreting out opportunities that you might otherwise miss.

# Amber's Reading List for Getting Ahead

*How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie

*The 48 Laws of Power*, Robert Greene

*The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli

*The Art of War*, Sun Tzu

*The Like Switch: An Ex-FBI Agent's Guide to Influencing, Attracting, and Winning People Over* by Jack Schafer

*The Art of Manipulation: How to Get Anybody to Do What You Want* by R. B. Sparkman

*The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* by Charles Duhigg

*The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success* by Kevin Dutton

*Pulling Your Own Strings: Dynamic Techniques for Dealing with Other People and Living Your Life As You Choose* by  
Wayne W. Dyer

# Amber's Favorite Fiction

Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy

Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austin

Rebecca, Daphne du Maurier

Dracula, Bram Stoker

Dangerous Liaisons Pierre Choderlos de Laclos

The House of Mirth, Edith Wharton

Macbeth, William Shakespeare

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Stieg Larsson



# ENEMIES LIST

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Lana Crump

Jessica Adams spread a rumor that I cheated on a test, so I hacked into the school's grading system and changed her grades. Then I anonymously reported it, and she was expelled.  
Good luck getting into college now, bitch!

Nathan Cole called me "unforgettable" at a school party. I created a fake blog where lots of girls called his package "unforgettable" and now everybody always makes fun of him, and no girls want to date him.

Alyssa Carson called me a nobody at lunch. I started a rumor that she doesn't wash her hands after she goes to the bathroom, now no one wants to sit with her anymore.

Tyler Brooks voted me "most likely to end up alone" in the high school yearbook. So I tipped off the school about his illegal side business and he got expelled.

Lindsay Pierce stole my spot on the cheer squad because she kisses up to the coach. No worries. I photoshopped a picture and made it look like they were making out. He got fired, and she's humiliated. And I'm back on the squad.

Evan Blake will forever regret not inviting me to his exclusive party. If he had, I wouldn't have called the cops to bust him because of the beer I dropped off when no one was looking.  
They all got arrested!





## An Interview with George Humphries, Lana Crump's aka Amber's 12<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher

Q. Mr. Humphries, Lana Crump was one of your 12<sup>th</sup> grade English students. What kind of student was she?

A. Lana was without question one of the finest students I've taught over the course of my career. She had a fierce intelligence and was a voracious reader. She came to 12<sup>th</sup> grade having already read most of the books on our syllabus. In fact, her reading appetite extended far beyond even most college syllabi.

Q. Were there any particular genres she was especially interested in?

A. It's interesting. Often a student will show a special affinity for certain authors or time periods, etc., but Lana's tastes were broad and diverse. She did love biographies, especially the Horatio Alger kind of true stories, of men and women starting from seemingly nothing and rising to the absolute heights of their ability.

Q. What were some of her other favorites?

A. Lana read as much non-fiction as she did fiction. Of course, our class was focused on literature, but Lana often came to me for recommendations on books outside of the classroom – books on art history, on music and the great composers. She read a great deal of poetry as well. It always seemed to me as if Lana was determined to gather all the components of a classical education and steep herself in that.

Q. It sounds as if she must have participated enthusiastically in class discussions.

A. Well, that's where there was a divide. It was quite apparent that Lana was bored by the classroom discussion. I'd often see her roll her eyes at other student's comments and opinions, and granted, Lana's analyses and scholarship were far above theirs, but her impatience was glaring and something the rest of the class resented.

Q. Lana never went on to university. Why do you think that is? And does that surprise you?

A. It both surprises and doesn't surprise me. It would have to have been a superior institution for the likes of Lana, an institution that would have been able to really challenge her. Of course, those schools exist, but I doubt her family would have had the resources for a Harvard or a Brown or a Princeton. She definitely would have been a scholarship candidate, but there was also the unfortunate incident and court case that led her down a different path, and I understand she left Blue Springs a few years later.

Q. Have you seen or heard from her since she left?

A. I have not, and I do miss those after school discussions we used to have – always so stimulating and incisive. But I have no doubt that I will one day see her name in print for some incredible achievement. Lana was made for big things.

# Interview with Lana Crump's aka Amber's sister Trudy

Q. Good morning, Trudy. You're the second of four Crump sisters, is that right?

A. Yes, that's right. Lana is the oldest. She's four years older than I am. We have two younger sisters, Crystal and Megan, who are twins.

Q. Were you and Lana close growing up?

A. When I was little, she would read to me and teach me stuff. I always knew if I had a question about anything, Lana would have the answer. She's really smart. But later, well, I wouldn't say Lana was close to any of us. She didn't really pay much attention to us. Except she did like to play school, and she was always the teacher. Really strict too.

Q. What was your home life like?

A. Pretty normal, I guess you'd say. We didn't have a huge house, but it was okay and our mom kept it nice. We never went without, although Lana never thought it was enough. Said we were poor and pitiful and that she hated being part of such a "low class" family as she called it. The four of us shared a bedroom, and Lana despised that. She screwed a rod up on the wall and hung a curtain so that her portion of the room would be private. She told us we were pigs and that she couldn't stand to look at all the mess on our side of the room.

Q. It sounds like she was unhappy at home.

A. I'll say. Our parents both worked at the family laundromat and so did us kids when we were old enough. I liked it. It was nice to have the extra money, but Lana hated it. It made her angry that Dad made her work there. I think she hated him. And Mom as well. She only spoke to anyone when it was absolutely necessary. Most of the time she just stayed in her curtained room and ignored everyone.

Q. She had a baby when she was 19 and lived here with him for few years until she left for good. What was that time like?

A. Little Mattie was so precious. He was the sweetest, most adorable baby ever, but Lana wanted nothing to do with him. She said he was the biggest mistake she ever made and had ruined her life. We girls and Mom took care of him. Afterward, the Lockwood's got custody of Mattie. We all miss him terribly.

Q. Are there any last thoughts you'd like to express about your sister?

A. Other than playing school, Lana never did much with us. Crystal, Megan and I played Barbie's a lot. One day we came home from school and found the heads cut off of all of our Barbie dolls. Lana had put all the heads in a pile and burned them in the back yard. She thought it was hysterically funny. She didn't care at all that we were upset. But still, I guess I would just say that there was a time I hoped she might come back and be different. Be a good mother and try to be a part of our family. But we've heard nothing from her, not even a card for her son at Christmas or on his birthday. No money ever sent to help my parents take care of Mattie when he lived with us. We are a happy family and we love each other, and it makes me sad to say it, but we

are much better off without Lana. I, for one, hope she never comes back.

# Interview with Matthew Lockwood, Lana's aka Amber's Ex

Q. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. You dated Lana for a few months in the summer a few years ago, is that right?

A. Yes. It was the biggest mistake of my life. It's because of her that I'm in this chair now. She's a liar and a manipulator. I wish I'd never met her.

Q. I can see that you're upset, do you need a moment?

A. No, I'm fine. I want everybody to know the truth about her.

Q. Okay. Can you tell me how everything started?

A. She started hanging out at the pool where I was lifeguarding. Parading around in skimpy bikinis, flirting. I didn't really pay much attention at first. I had a girlfriend. But she wasn't around that summer. Lana was

her friend. Or at least pretended to be. That's a whole nother story. Anyway, one day Lana asked me to give her a ride home. Said her car had broken down.

Q. Go on.

A. (Sighs) Well, one thing led to another. She, um, sort of took it upon herself to, you know, perform...do I have to spell it out?

Q. She performed oral sex on you?

A. Yeah. So, you know, she pressured me to take her out after that. So, we went out a few more times, and I ended up sleeping with her. I'm not proud of it. But she *is* hot and I was weak. She told me she was on the pill. But the whole time she wanted to get pregnant. And then she did.

Q. Then what happened?

A. She wanted me to marry her. I mean, I didn't love her. It was clear she was just after my family's money. My mother told me she'd handle it. My girlfriend came back, and I told her what happened. She forgave me, and I told Lana it was over. The next thing I knew, Lana accused me of rape.

Q. The sex was consensual?

A. Of course! I'm not a rapist. She was the aggressor. But it didn't matter. She poured on the water works and put on a performance worthy of an academy award. I was convicted. Sent to prison. Was there for two years before her mother came forward to say Lana had lied. I got stabbed while I was in there, and now I'm confined to a wheelchair all because of her!

Q. I'm so sorry for everything you've gone through. Lana had a son, correct?

A. Yes, Mattie. He's the only good thing to come out of this. He lives with me and my wife. We adore him.

Q. Are you worried Lana will come back and try to get custody?

A. She doesn't give a crap about him. She left as soon as there was a warrant out for her for perjury. I don't think she'll come back. But if she does, I'll make sure she never gets near my son.