

## I. Patty

### *Day of release*

My daughter didn't have to testify against me. She chose to.

It's Rose Gold's fault I went to prison, but she's not the only one to blame. If we're pointing fingers, mine are aimed at the prosecutor and his overactive imagination, the gullible jury and the bloodthirsty reporters. They all clamored for justice.

What they wanted was a story.

(Get out your popcorn because, boy, did they write one.)

Once upon a time, they said, a wicked mother gave birth to a daughter. The daughter appeared to be very sick and had all sorts of things wrong with her. She had a feeding tube, her hair fell out in clumps, and she was so weak she needed a wheelchair to get around. For eighteen years no doctor could figure out what was wrong with her.

Then along came two police officers to save the daughter. Lo and behold, the girl was perfectly healthy – the evil mother was the sick one. The prosecutor told everyone the mother had been poisoning her daughter for years. It was the mother's fault the girl couldn't stop vomiting, that she suffered from malnutrition. Aggravated child abuse, he called it. The mother had to be punished.

After she was arrested, the press swooped in like

vultures, eager to capitalize on a family being ripped apart. Their headlines screamed for the blood of ‘Poisonous Patty’, a fifty-something master of manipulation. All the mother’s friends fell for the lies. High horses were marched all over the land; every lawyer, cop and neighbor was sure they were the girl’s savior. They put the mother in prison and threw away the key. Justice was served, and most of them lived happily ever after. The end.

But where were the lawyers while the mother was scrubbing the girl’s vomit out of the carpet for the thousandth time? Where were the cops while the mother pored over medical textbooks every night? Where were the neighbors when the little girl cried out for her mother before sunrise?

Riddle me this: if I spent almost two decades abusing my daughter, why did she offer to pick me up today?

Connolly approaches my cell at noon sharp, as promised. ‘You ready, Watts?’

I scramble off my Pop-Tart of a bed and pull my scratchy khaki uniform taut. ‘Yes, sir.’

I have become a woman who chirps.

The potbellied warden pulls out a large ring of keys and whistles as he slides open my door. I am Connolly’s favorite inmate.

I pause at my cellie’s bed, not wanting to make a scene. But Alicia is already sitting against the wall, hugging her knees. She raises her eyes to mine and bursts into tears, looking much younger than twenty.

‘Ssh, ssh.’ I bend down and wrap the girl in my arms. I try to sneak a peek at her bandaged wrists, but she catches

me. ‘Keep applying the ointment and changing those dressings. No infections,’ I say, wiggling my eyebrows at her.

Alicia smiles, tears staining her face. She hiccups. ‘Yes, Nurse Watts.’

I try not to preen. I was a certified nursing assistant for twelve years.

‘Good girl. Díaz is going to walk the track with you today. Thirty minutes. Doctor’s orders.’ I smile back, petting Alicia’s hair. Her hiccups have stopped.

‘You’ll write me?’

I nod. ‘And you can call me whenever.’ Squeezing her hand, I stand again and head toward Connolly, who has been waiting patiently. I pause at the threshold and look back at Alicia, making a mental note to send her a letter when I get home. ‘One hour at a time.’

Alicia waves shyly. ‘Good luck out there.’

Connolly and I walk toward Intake and Release. My fellow inmates call out their farewells.

‘Keep in touch, you hear?’

‘We’ll miss you, Mama.’

‘Stay outta trouble, Skeeto.’ (Short for ‘Mosquito’, a nickname given as an insult but taken as a compliment. Mosquitoes never give up.)

I give them my best Queen Elizabeth wave but refrain from blowing kisses. Best to take this seriously. Connolly and I keep walking.

In the hallway Stevens nearly plows me over. She bears an uncanny resemblance to a bulldog – squat and stout, flapping jowls, known to drool on occasion. She grunts at me. ‘Good riddance.’

Stevens was in charge until I got here. Never a proponent of the flies-and-honey approach, she is vinegar through and through. But brute force and scare tactics get you only so far, and they get you nowhere with a woman of my size. Usurping her was easy. I don't blame her for hating me.

I wave my fingers at her coquettishly. 'Have a glorious life, Stevens.'

'Don't poison any more little girls,' she growls.

Strangling her isn't an option, so I kill her with kindness instead. I smile, the epitome of serenity, and follow Connolly.

The Intake and Release Center is unremarkable: a long hallway with concrete floors, too-white walls and holding rooms with thick glass windows. At the end of the hallway there is a small office area with desks, computers and scanners. It could be an accounting firm, if all the accountants wore badges and guns.

At the reception desk, the clerk's chair is turned toward the radio. A news program plays. *After a short break*, the reporter says, *we have the story of a baby boy gone missing in Indiana. Plus, could candy be tied to cancer? That's next on WXAM.* I haven't watched, listened to or read the news since my trial. The press destroyed my good name. Because of them, my daughter didn't speak to me for four years.

I glare at the radio. The chair swivels toward me, and I realize I know the clerk sitting in it. I privately refer to the bald and brawny man as Mr Clean. I met him five years ago. He flirted with me all day, asking what perfume I was wearing, while I batted him away. I'd feigned breeziness,

but internally I was seesawing between fury at the injustice of my verdict and fear of the next five years. I hadn't seen him again until now.

'Patty Watts?' he says, turning off the radio.

I nod.

'I remember you.' He smiles.

Mr Clean pulls a form from his desk drawer, then disappears into the storage room. After a few minutes, he comes back with a small cardboard box. He hands me a piece of paper. 'I need you to look through the inventory list and sign at the bottom to confirm you're leaving with everything you brought here.'

I open the box and glance through it before scribbling my signature.

'You can change back into your street clothes now,' Mr Clean says, gesturing to the bathroom and winking at me when Connolly isn't looking. I tip my head and shuffle away, clutching the cardboard box.

In a stall, I rip off the jacket with DEPT OF CORRECTIONS emblazoned across its back and dig into the box. After five years of prison food, my favorite pair of jeans, with the forgiving elastic in the waistband, is a little loose. I put on my Garfield T-shirt and a red sweatshirt embroidered with the initials of my community college, GCC. My old socks are stiff with sweat, but they're still better than the rough wool pairs I've been wearing. I pull on my white gym shoes and notice a final item at the bottom of the box. I pick up the heart-shaped locket and think about putting it into my pocket, but instead clasp it around my neck. Better for her to see me wearing her childhood gift.

I leave the bathroom and hand the empty box back to Mr Clean.

‘You take care of yourself.’ He winks again.

Connolly and I walk down the fluorescent-lit hallway of the Admissions Building toward the parking lot. ‘Someone coming to pick you up, Watts?’

‘Yes, sir. My ride should be here soon.’ I’m careful not to say who my ride is: though Rose Gold is twenty-three now, some people still imagine her as a sickly little girl. Some people would not be overjoyed to see us reunited. They don’t care that I stayed up all night monitoring her vitals during every hospital stay. They don’t know the depths of this mother’s love.

We stop at the door. My fingertips tingle as they reach for the push bar.

Connolly scratches his Tom Selleck mustache. ‘That pierogi recipe was a real hit with my in-laws.’

I clap my hands. ‘I told you it would be.’

Connolly hesitates. ‘Martha was impressed. She didn’t sleep on the couch last night.’

‘Baby steps, sir. She’s coming around. Keep reading that book.’ I’ve been coaching the warden on *The Five Love Languages* for the past few months.

Connolly smiles and looks lost for a second.

‘Now don’t get all emotional,’ I joke, slapping his shoulder.

He nods. ‘Good luck out there, Patty. Let’s not meet again, okay?’

‘That’s the plan,’ I say. I watch him stride away, his clown-sized shoes smacking against the linoleum. He hefts his bulk into an office and closes the door behind

him, and then there's nothing left to face but a spooky silence. Just like that, the Illinois Department of Corrections is finished with me.

I try to ignore the wild thumping in my chest. Pushing the door open, I walk outside into blinding sunlight, half expecting an alarm to sound or a red light to flash. But it really is that easy: enter a building, leave a building, no one minds. I can go to a movie or church or the circus. I could get stuck in a thunderstorm without an umbrella or mugged at gunpoint. I am free, and anything can happen to me. I stretch out my fingers and marvel at the breeze on this crisp November day. Shielding my eyes, I scan the parking lot for the old Chevy van. But it's a sea of sedans. No people.

She should be here any minute now.

I sit on the flimsy bench, scowling as the plastic protests under my weight. After several minutes of struggling to get comfortable, I stand. Back to pacing.

In the distance, my maroon van turns onto the long, single-lane road that leads to the Admissions Building. As it creeps closer, I do my best to flatten any frizzies and straighten my sweatshirt. I clear my throat, like I'm about to speak, but all I do is stare. By the time the van reaches the parking lot, I can make out my little girl's narrow shoulders and blond-brown hair.

I watch Rose Gold back into a parking spot. She turns off the engine and leans against the headrest. I picture her closing her eyes for a minute. The ends of her chest-length hair rise and fall with every unsuspecting breath. Rose Gold has wanted long hair since she was a little girl, and now she has it.

I read somewhere that the average person has a hundred thousand hairs on their head – more for blonds, fewer for redheads. I wonder how many strands it takes to fill a fist. I imagine pulling my daughter in for a warm embrace, twirling her locks through my fingers. I always told her she was better off with her head shaved. You're much less vulnerable that way – nothing to grab hold of.

Daughters never listen to their mothers.

When she lifts her head, her eyes meet mine. She raises her arm and waves like the Homecoming Queen on a parade float. My own arm glides into the air and mirrors her excitement. I spot the outlines of a car seat in the van's second row. My grandson must be buckled in back there.

I take a step off the curb toward my family. It's been almost twenty-five years since my last baby. In seconds his tiny fingers will be wrapped around mine.



## 2. Rose Gold

*Five years earlier, November 2012*

Sometimes I still couldn't believe I was allowed to read whatever I wanted. I rubbed the glossy magazine photos. A flawless couple held hands on a beach. A teenage boy with shaggy hair ducked into a waiting car. A radiant mother cradled her daughter as she walked the streets of New York. All of these people were famous. I knew the mother was a musician named Beyoncé, but I didn't recognize the others. I was sure most eighteen-year-olds would.

'Rose Gold?'

I started. My manager Scott stood in front of me. 'We're about to open,' he said. 'Can you put the magazine away?'

I nodded. Scott kept walking. Should I have apologized? Was he mad at me or just doing his job? Could I get written up for this? I was supposed to respect authority. I was also supposed to outsmart them. Mom always had.

I gazed at the copy of *Chit Chat* in my hands. I had been searching the tabloid for mentions of her. During her trial, they had written three stories about us. Now, on her first day in prison, they had nothing to say. Neither did the national newspapers. Mom's imprisonment was nothing but a splashy feature in our local paper, the *Deadwick Daily*.

I put the magazine back on the rack. Scott began clapping while he walked the store floor, yelling, ‘A smile is part of your uniform, people.’ I glanced at Arnie on Register Two. He rolled his eyes. Had I annoyed him? What if he never talked to me again? What if he told all our coworkers I was a weirdo? I looked away.

The security guard unlocked Gadget World’s doors. No one was waiting outside. Sunday mornings were quiet. I flipped on my register’s light. The big yellow ‘5’ didn’t illuminate. Mom always said a light bulb out meant something bad was coming.

The trembles in my stomach tightened. For the past year I had dreaded any big day of her trial: opening arguments, my testimony, the verdict, sentencing. But the reporters didn’t care that ‘Poisonous Patty’ was behind bars. No one but me had remembered it was her first day in prison. She’d still be free if I hadn’t gotten on that witness stand. I hadn’t talked to her since the arrest.

I tried to picture my mother – five feet five and stocky – in an orange jumpsuit. What if the guards hurt her? What if she made the wrong inmate mad? What if she got sick from the food? I knew I was supposed to be happy about these possibilities. I knew I was supposed to hate Mom, because people were always asking me if I did.

I didn’t want to imagine her in the present, covered with plum-colored bruises and growing pale from the lack of sun. I wanted to remember the mother I’d grown up with, the woman with broad shoulders and thick arms that could knead bread dough in minutes. Her hair was short and almost black, thanks to a cheap box dye. She had pudgy cheeks, a snub nose and a big smile that lit up

her face. I loved Mom's smile because I liked looking at her teeth: white and straight and neat, a mouth as organized as her file cabinets. But it was her pale blue-green eyes that won you over. They listened, they sympathized. They were kind and trustworthy without her saying a word. When her fleshy hand enveloped yours and she trained those aquamarine eyes on you, you were sure you'd never feel alone.

'Rose Gold, right?'

I started again. A Disney prince lookalike stood in front of me. I recognized him. He came in all the time to buy video games.

The teenage boy pointed at my nametag. 'Okay, I cheated. I'm Brandon,' he said.

I stared at Brandon, afraid anything I said would make him go away. He held eye contact – did I have something on my face? I grabbed his items off the conveyor-belt: a video game with a soldier holding a gun on its cover and four bags of peanut M&Ms.

Brandon kept talking. 'I go to Deadwick High.'

He was younger than me. I was already eighteen and had earned my high-school certificate.

'Okay,' I said. I was supposed to say something else. Why was someone as cute as Brandon talking to me in the first place?

'Did you go to DHS?'

I scratched my nose so my hand would cover my teeth. 'I was home-schooled.'

'Cool.' Brandon smiled at his feet. 'I was wondering if you'd go out with me.'

'Where?' I asked, bewildered.

He laughed. 'Like, on a date.'

I scanned the empty store. Brandon stood there, hands in his pockets, waiting for an answer. I thought of Phil, my online boyfriend. 'I don't know.'

'Come on,' Brandon said. 'I promise I don't bite.'

He leaned over the counter when he said this. Our faces were a foot apart. Tiny freckles dotted his nose. He smelled like boy soap. My heart started doing puppy jumps. I could finally get my first kiss. Did it count as cheating if you'd never met your online boyfriend in person?

Brandon winked, then closed his eyes. How was this so easy for him? I should close my eyes too. But what if I missed his mouth and kissed his nose? Eyes open, then. Should I use my tongue? The magazines said to sometimes use tongue. But not teeth. Never teeth.

My teeth.

I couldn't let him that close to my teeth. Plus, Scott might see us. Our faces were now inches apart. I had been leaning over the counter without realizing it. I was going to mess up. I wasn't ready. I jerked my head back. 'Not a great time,' I mumbled.

He opened his eyes and cocked his head. 'What'd you say?'

'I said it's not a great time.' I held my breath.

He waved me off. 'I didn't even suggest a time. Are you busy forever?'

I was never busy, but that wasn't the right answer. I cracked my knuckles and tried to swallow. My throat was dry.

Brandon raised his eyebrows. 'Are you gonna make me beg?'

I imagined spending the next forty-eight hours reliving every word of this conversation. I just had to get out before I screwed up. I tucked a strand of hair – short and stringy – behind my ear. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said to his T-shirt.

Brandon took a step back from the counter. His cheeks turned pink. I watched his smile morph into a sneer. I must have said the wrong thing. I flinched, waiting.

‘Are you busy pretending to need a wheelchair?’

My mouth fell open. My hand covered it.

‘And you think you can hide those teeth? They’re fucking disgusting. *You’re* fucking disgusting,’ Brandon hissed.

*Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.*

‘I only asked you out because my friend dared me,’ he said. On cue, an overjoyed boy popped out from behind Register Two. Tears began to well in my eyes.

‘Like *you* could reject *me*?’ Brandon scoffed, and strolled off with his plastic Gadget World bag. His friend high-fived him. The first fat tear escaped and rolled down my cheek.

As soon as they left, I speed-walked away from my register, ignoring Arnie’s stare. I thought about Maleficent and Jafar and Cruella de Vil and Scar and Captain Hook: the bad guys always lost in the end.

The break room was empty. I closed the door and locked it.

I hadn’t sobbed that hard since I’d heard my mother’s verdict two months ago.

After work I carefully drove Mom’s beat-up van nine miles to my apartment. I’d gotten my driver’s license two

months ago with the help of Mom's former best friend, Mary Stone, who had signed me up for a driver education course, then taken me to the Department of Motor Vehicles for my written exam and behind-the-wheel test. The DMV clerk said I was the first person to get a perfect score that month. Sometimes I got into the van and drove in circles around the block, just because I could.

I parked outside my apartment complex. Once I'd gotten the cashier job at Gadget World, Mrs Stone had also helped me search for cheap rentals in Deadwick. Sheridan Apartments was a rundown four-story building – Mrs Stone said it had been built when she was a kid. Sometimes I had little mouse visitors, but rent was less than four hundred dollars a month. Mrs Stone said this was a good starter home for me. I wasn't sure what I was starting.

I locked the car doors and headed toward the building. My phone vibrated in my pocket as I walked up the concrete path. I made sure to think of Brandon while I stepped on every crack.

Phil: *Chat tonight?*

Me: *Yes please, rough day.*

Phil: *What happened?*

Inside, I kicked off my boots and headed straight for the bathroom scale. Since moving out of Mom's house nine months ago, I'd gained thirty pounds. Recently my weight had plateaued. I looked down. Still 102.

I avoided the mirror as I left the room. I didn't have the energy to go through the whole routine. (Step One: Check whether the whitening strips were working. I rated every tooth on a scale of one to ten then recorded each tooth's score in a small notebook so I could track

improvements. Step Two: Use a cloth measuring tape to check how much my hair had grown. I'd tried fish-oil pills, Biotin and vitamins, but nothing worked: my hair still wouldn't grow any faster. Step Three: Scan myself from head to toe, body part by body part, and catalog the things I didn't like. I kept a running inventory in my head so I knew what needed to be worked on.) I tried not to do the routine more than once a day and avoided it altogether on bad days like this one. I turned off the bathroom light. I was hungry.

In the kitchen, I threw a frozen Tex-Mex mac-and-cheese dinner into the microwave and leaned against the counter. I read the meal description on the box and wondered what *chorizo sausage* tasted like. Since moving into my own place, I had lived mostly off cereal and frozen dinners. I'd been trying to teach myself how to cook, but I kept getting the timing wrong – burning vegetables or undercooking rice. I missed having someone around to prepare my meals, even when they were nutrition shakes, like PediaSure. Sometimes I lit little votive candles, like Mom used to, to make dinnertime fancy.

The microwave beeped, and I took out the mac-and-cheese. Still standing at the counter, I ripped the plastic wrap off the macaroni and dropped the pasta gently into my mouth, pressing the cool tines of the fork against my tongue. Curly noodles coated with pepper jack cheese slid smoothly down my throat, confident of their one-way travel. Breadcrumbs crunched between my molars. Then the spice hit me – chorizo had a kick to it! My eyes watered. Goosebumps popped up on my arms. I would never tire of all these new flavors.