

ONE: THE ARTFUL EXECUTION

The November sky was dingy and bland, as early winter was in Missouri: not what it used to be, not what it could be—a lull. It hadn't gotten cold enough for the frequent rains to advance to snow, so the piles of leaves lining the streets sat fermenting and rank, like damp dogs. As Laurel accelerated out of the cultivated neighborhoods of St. Louis' inner belt and past the tired farms of empty soybean fields, it was tempting to pretend her undertaking was nothing more than another mundane, tedious task. She was simply checking an item off her to-do list, getting things done the way she knew best, one errand at a time.

She followed her GPS forty-five minutes to Festus, listening to a true crime podcast and fighting the awareness of her depravity as she exited the highway and turned right at the RV Discount Center toward State Road PP. She wasn't like the woman they were talking about on the radio, who methodically planned the execution of nineteen men. Laurel hadn't set out to destroy.

But evil rarely sprang fully-formed, did it, like Athena from Zeus' forehead? Its origins were subtle, often rooted in an initial, desensitizing action: the spurned lover slashed a tire, the fraternity pledge beheaded a chicken, or, in her case, the harried soccer mom ran over a deer. But those events, when seeded into mounds of resentment, led inevitably to a day such as this one.

For today was the day brutality was inducted into Laurel's steady, Midwestern life.

Today was the day she hired a hit man to kill the family pet.

Laurel stepped out of the car, zipping her white microfiber fleece tight around her neck, trying to ward off the frost in the air—or was that the ice in her heart? The story about the female vigilante she'd been following on NPR gave her the urge to narrate her own life accordingly: *Laurel turned her steely blue eyes upward. The November sky was dingy and bland, as early winter was in Missouri.*

She felt a sudden pain shoot across her thigh.

“Mother. . . fucker!” she exclaimed, staying in character. Laurel didn't typically give voice to the vulgar, but she felt she needed cursing to accompany her murderous persona.

She'd been standing there, looking at the trailer park, not noticing that her leg was still within the arc of the door when she swung it closed, losing a few layers of skin underneath the fabric of her jeans. She rubbed her leg, fury bubbling up inside her. If they'd bought the minivan this wouldn't have happened, she fumed. It was this *shitty ass* sedan with the massive, trapezoidal doors that was the problem—another example of Dave's immunity to common sense. Every time she parked in a lot she had to remember to warn the kids not to bang into the car next to them, and who could remember every *fucking* thing every *fucking* time? The last twelve years of her life had already been swallowed in vigilance, a constant state of maternal alert, making sure the children didn't fall, choke, drown, or color on someone's wall. On top of everything else, she had car doors to worry about.

One of these days the kids were going to ding an expensive convertible right at the moment the driver was walking up, and Laurel was going to find herself in the middle of a scene. The driver would yell at her, and she would gush apologies, trying to calm him down while the kids looked on, full of shame and confusion. Sure, they'd been careless, but kids made mistakes, only this driver wouldn't be the type of guy who had kids, or his kids would be older and he'd have forgotten the shifting boundaries of a child's existence, how a child is never totally aware where one door ends and another one begins. How life shouldn't always have to require such scrupulous attention every single second. We lived in a world where metal got dented, where dogs disappeared, and life went on.

That's why she refused to feel guilty about what she was doing today. She'd put up with enough. With Dave and his vetoing the minivan and controlling the money and deciding every major purchase they'd ever made and his whole entire freaking out over finances the last few years, his depression over lack of meaning and his utter detachment from their marriage—in essence his mid-life crisis, but which he refused to call a mid-life crisis—all the way back to the first sign of his deterioration: his insistence on getting a large, intimidating, alpha-male dog when the kids were still toddlers, so that Laurel had to spend years managing the poop produced by her children AND the enormous turds manufactured by said beast, while constantly monitoring the interaction between everyone to make sure the children--or, worse, one of their playmates--didn't lose a chunk of cheek, facial or otherwise, as a result of the dog's much-lauded but completely obsolete herding instincts.

Dave had refused to have him spayed, which might have calmed him down, not wanting to deprive him of his virility, though the wretched creature never had the good fortune to escape and mount a female in his entire life, and they'd never gotten around to breeding him. The irony was that now, at age ten, Chester had settled considerably, but it was too late. The bank account of good will had been depleted long ago, and Laurel felt an elemental repugnance to walking into her house one more time to find a steaming pile of shit on the dining room carpet. For, in his old age, irrespective of the fact that he knew better, Chester had regressed to his infantile habit of coming in from a long walk on the inviting expanse of grass and then choosing to crap inside.

It wasn't the animal's fault. Laurel suspected he was the physical manifestation of Dave's anger. But after all the pleading and begging and fighting and tolerating and ignoring and praying, she'd been unable to get her husband to even name his depression, much less address her 'ridiculous' complaints about the pet who might be manifesting his repressed rage and lost youth. She wasn't a monster, she told herself; she'd tried to have the dog adopted at first, secretly posting ads on Craig's list, to no avail. She'd even considered driving him out three hours to the Lake of the Ozarks and dropping him off in the middle of the woods, far enough that he'd be unable, she hoped, to navigate his way home. But Dave had had a chip put in him, she remembered, and it was the mental image of her drugging the dog and cutting the chip out with a paring knife that made her realize she had to do something drastic, before she did something drastic.

Drastic was here: it was the empty oil-splotched road that sprawled in front of her, lined with trailers and trashcans and folding chairs facing the street, left there from warmer days, to afford their occupants a view of the opposite trailer, or the algid, pitiless

trees, which might in the summer provide some shade, but now in the leafless cold only completed the appearance of a community waiting to be put out of its misery. There were indications of children having been present at one time—a small, rusted bike next to a vinyl high chair—but no actual life forms moving about that she could see.

As Laurel walked toward the furthest trailer, thinking that she should have parked closer, but not wanting the car to be remembered by neighbors later if the police questioned them, she tried to stop herself from visualizing zombies creeping out from behind barbecue grills and hot water tanks, converging on her slowly, inevitably. *The family of undead hadn't eaten in weeks, and in her white fleece and puffy brown vest, Laurel resembled nothing if not a human s'more.*

This morbidity in her was nothing new, but lately her sense of foreboding had been almost unbearable. She took a deep breath, trying to shake off her dread. There was something huge and sinister hulking in the yard at the end—right next to the very trailer she was headed for. It looked like a machine of some sort, but she didn't want to imagine what it did, with its sloping metal slide that extended from above the roofline ten feet toward a receiving bin on the ground. Like a guillotine.

She kept her head down and hurried to the front door, rapping on the screen and succeeding in rattling the aluminum back and forth more than actually producing a knock. She waited. No noises within. *Behind her, the shuffling gait of the zombies brought them closer still.*

“The hell you want?” The voice came from her right as someone emerged from around the side of the trailer.

She jumped. The man was walking right at her.

“You better have a warrant if you want to talk to me.”

“Mr. Gunner?” she squeaked.

He was tall and big-boned, like an old horse.

“Hah?” he demanded, not breaking his stride.

She stepped back. “I’m . . . I was looking for Mr. Gunner. . . I called?”

The man lumbered past her, batted open the door and went inside.

She waited a moment, unsure what to do next.

Then he leaned his head out, flipped his ball cap back so he could wipe a rag over his sweaty gray hair, and said, “You coming in, or what?”

Laurel had the sudden awareness that what she did next was going to change her life, but she wasn’t sure if that meant she’d end up dismembered in a ditch somewhere, or just have her home free of the daily putrid deposits of hate on her carpet.

Whatever the outcome, she thought, it’s worth it, and stepped inside.