

Rachel

A single streak of white cloud marred an otherwise perfect blue sky as Rachel Krall drove her silver SUV on a flat stretch of highway toward the Atlantic Ocean. Dead ahead on the horizon was a thin blue line. It widened as she drove closer until Rachel knew for certain that it was the sea.

Rachel glanced uneasily at the fluttering pages of the letter resting on the front passenger seat next to her as she zoomed along the right lane of the highway. She was deeply troubled by the letter. Not so much by the contents, but instead by the strange, almost sinister way the letter had been delivered earlier that morning.

After hours on the road, she'd pulled into a twenty-four-hour diner where she ordered a mug of coffee and pancakes that came covered with half-thawed blueberries and two scoops of vanilla ice cream, which she pushed to the side of her plate. The coffee was bitter, but she drank it anyway. She needed it for the caffeine, not the taste. When she finished her meal, she ordered an extra-strong iced coffee and a muffin to go in case her energy flagged on the final leg of the drive.

While waiting for her takeout order, Rachel applied eye drops to revive her tired green eyes and twisted up her shoulder-length auburn hair to get it out of her face. Rachel was tying her hair into a topknot when the waitress brought her order in a white paper bag before rushing off to serve a truck driver who was gesticulating angrily for his bill.

Rachel left a larger than necessary tip for the waitress, mostly because she felt bad at the way customers hounded the poor woman over the slow service. Not her fault, thought Rachel. She'd waitressed through college and knew how tough it was to be the only person serving tables during an unexpected rush.

By the time she pushed open the swinging doors of the restaurant, Rachel was feeling full and slightly queasy. It was bright outside and she had to shield her eyes from the sun as she headed to her car. Even before she reached it, she saw something shoved under her windshield wiper. Assuming it was an advertising flyer, Rachel abruptly pulled it off her windshield. She was about to crumple it up unread when she noticed her name had been neatly written in bold lettering: *Rachel Krall (from the Guilty or Not Guilty podcast)*.

Rachel received thousands of emails and social media messages every week. Most were charming and friendly. Letters from fans. A few scared the hell out of her. Rachel had no idea which category the letter would fall into, but the mere fact that a stranger had recognized her and left a note addressed to her on her car made her decidedly uncomfortable.

Rachel looked around in case the person who'd left the letter was still there. Waiting. Watching her reaction. Truck drivers stood around smoking and shooting the breeze. Others checked the rigging of the loads on their trucks. Car doors slammed as

motorists arrived. Engines rumbled to life as others left. Nobody paid Rachel any attention, although that did little to ease the eerie feeling she was being watched.

It was rare for Rachel to feel vulnerable. She'd been in plenty of hairy situations over the years. A month earlier, she'd spent the best part of an afternoon locked in a high-security prison cell talking to an uncuffed serial killer while police marksmen pointed automatic rifles through a hole in the ceiling in case the prisoner lunged at her during the interview. Rachel hadn't so much as broken into a sweat the entire time. Rachel felt ridiculous that a letter left on her car had unnerved her more than a face-to-face meeting with a killer.

Deep down, Rachel knew the reason for her discomfort. She had been recognized. In public. By a stranger. That had never happened before. Rachel had worked hard to maintain her anonymity after being catapulted to fame when the first season of her podcast became a cultural sensation, spurring a wave of imitation podcasts and a national obsession with true crime.

In that first season, Rachel had uncovered fresh evidence that proved that a high school teacher had been wrongly convicted for the murder of his wife on their second honeymoon. Season 2 was even more successful when Rachel had solved a previously unsolvable cold case of a single mother of two who was bashed to death in her hair salon. By the time the season had ended, Rachel Krall had become a household name.

Despite her sudden fame, or rather because of it, she deliberately kept a low profile. Rachel's name and broadcast voice were instantly recognizable, but people had no idea what she looked like or who she was when she went to the gym, or drank coffee at her favorite cafe, or pushed a shopping cart through her local supermarket.

The only public photos of Rachel were a series of black-and-white shots taken by her ex-husband during their short-lived marriage when she was at grad school. The photos barely resembled her anymore, maybe because of the camera angle, or the monochrome hues, or perhaps because her face had become more defined as she entered her thirties.

In the early days, before the podcast had taken off, they'd received their first media request for a photograph of Rachel to run alongside an article on the podcast's then-cult following. It was her producer Pete's idea to use those dated photographs. He had pointed out that reporting on true crime often attracted cranks and kooks, and even the occasional psychopath. Anonymity, they'd agreed, was Rachel's protection. Ever since then she'd cultivated it obsessively, purposely avoiding public-speaking events and TV show appearances so that she wouldn't be recognized in her private life.

That was why it was unfathomable to Rachel that a random stranger had recognized her well enough to leave her a personalized note at a remote highway rest area where she'd stopped on a whim. Glancing once more over her shoulder, she ripped open the envelope to read the letter inside:

Dear Rachel,

I hope you don't mind me calling you by your first name. I feel that I know you so well.

She recoiled at the presumed intimacy of the letter. The last time she'd received fan mail in that sort of familiar tone, it was from a sexual sadist inviting her to pay a conjugal visit at his maximum-security prison.

Rachel climbed into the driver's seat of her car and continued reading the note, which was written on paper torn from a spiral notebook.

I'm a huge fan, Rachel. I listened to every episode of your podcast. I truly believe that you are the only person who can help me. My sister Jenny was killed a long time ago. She was only sixteen. I've written to you twice to ask you to help me. I don't know what I'll do if you say no again.

Rachel turned to the last page. The letter was signed: *Hannah*. She had no recollection of getting Hannah's letters, but that didn't mean much. If letters had been sent, they would have gone to Pete or their intern, both of who vetted the flood of correspondence sent to the podcast email address. Occasionally Pete would forward a letter to Rachel to review personally.

In the early days of the podcast, Rachel had personally read all the requests for help that came from either family or friends frustrated at the lack of progress in their loved ones' homicide investigations, or prisoners claiming innocence and begging Rachel to clear their names. She'd made a point of personally responding to each letter, usually after doing preliminary research, and often by including referrals to not-for-profit organizations that might help.

But as the requests grew exponentially, the emotional toll of desperate people begging Rachel for help overwhelmed her. She'd become the last hope of anyone who'd ever been let down by the justice system. Rachel discovered firsthand that there were a lot of them and they all wanted the same thing. They wanted Rachel to make their case the subject of the next season of her podcast, or

at the very least, to use her considerable investigative skills to right their wrong.

Rachel hated that most of the time she could do nothing other than send empty words of consolation to desperate, broken people. The burden of their expectations became so crushing that Rachel almost abandoned the podcast. In the end, Pete took over reviewing all correspondence to protect Rachel and to give her time to research and report on her podcast stories.

The letter left on her windshield was the first to make it through Pete's human firewall. This piqued Rachel's interest, despite the nagging worry that made her double-lock her car door as she continued reading from behind the steering wheel.

It was Jenny's death that killed my mother [the letter went on]. Killed her as good as if she'd been shot in the chest with a twelve-gauge shotgun.

Though it was late morning on a hot summer's day and her car was heating up like an oven, Rachel felt a chill run through her.

I've spent my life running away from the memories. Hurting myself. And others. It took the trial in Neapolis to make me face up to my past. That is why I am writing to you, Rachel. Jenny's killer will be there. In that town. Maybe in that courtroom. It's time for justice to be done. You're the only one who can help me deliver it.

The metallic crash of a minibus door being pushed open startled Rachel. She tossed the pages on the front passenger seat and hastily reversed out of the parking spot.

She was so engrossed in thinking about the letter and the mys-

terious way that it was delivered that she didn't notice she had merged onto the highway and was speeding until she came out of her trancelike state and saw metal barricades whizzing past in a blur. She'd driven more than ten miles and couldn't remember any of it. Rachel slowed down, and dialed Pete.

No answer. She put him on auto redial but gave up after the fourth attempt when he still hadn't picked up. Ahead of her, the widening band of blue ocean on the horizon beckoned at the end of the long, flat stretch of highway. She was getting close to her destination.

Rachel looked into her rearview mirror and noticed a silver sedan on the road behind her. The license plate number looked familiar. Rachel could have sworn that she'd seen the same car before over the course of her long drive. She changed lanes. The sedan changed lanes and moved directly behind her. Rachel sped up. The car sped up. When she braked, the car did, too. Rachel dialed Pete again. Still no answer.

"Damn it, Pete." She slammed her hands on the steering wheel.

The sedan pulled out and drove alongside her. Rachel turned her head to see the driver. The window was tinted and reflected the glare of the sun as the car sped ahead, weaving between lanes until it was lost in a sea of vehicles. Rachel slowed down as she entered traffic near a giant billboard on a grassy embankment that read: WELCOME TO NEAPOLIS. YOUR GATEWAY TO THE CRYSTAL COAST.

Neapolis was a three-hour drive north of Wilmington and well off the main interstate highway route. Rachel had never heard of the place until she'd chosen the upcoming trial there as the subject of the hotly anticipated third season of *Guilty or Not Guilty*.

She pulled to a stop at a red traffic light and turned on the car radio. It automatically tuned into a local station running a talkback slot in between playing old tracks of country music on a lazy Saturday

morning. She surveyed the town through the glass of her dusty windshield. It had a charmless grit that she'd seen in a hundred other small towns she'd passed through over her thirty-two years. The same ubiquitous gas station signs. Fast-food stores with grimy windows. Tired shopping strips of run-down stores that had long ago lost the war with the malls.

"We have a caller on the line," the radio host said, after the final notes of acoustic guitar had faded away. "What's your name?"

"Dean."

"What do you want to talk about today, Dean?"

"Everyone is so politically correct these days that nobody calls it as they see it. So I'm going to say it straight out. That trial next week is a disgrace."

"Why do you say that?" asked the radio announcer.

"Because what the heck was that girl thinking!"

"You're blaming the girl?"

"Hell yeah. It's not right. A kid's life is being ruined because a girl got drunk and did something dumb that she regretted afterward. We all regret stuff. Except we don't try to get someone put in prison for our screw-ups."

"The police and district attorney obviously think a crime has been committed if they're bringing it to trial," interrupted the host testily.

"Don't get me wrong. I feel bad for her and all. Hell, I feel bad for everyone in this messed-up situation. But I especially feel bad for that Blair boy. Everything he worked for has gone up in smoke. And he ain't even been found guilty yet. Fact is, this trial is a waste. It's a waste of time. And it's a waste of our taxes."

"Jury selection might be over, but the trial hasn't begun, Dean," snapped the radio announcer. "There's a jury of twelve fine citizens

who will decide his guilt or innocence. It's not up to us, or you, to decide."

"Well, I sure hope that jury has their heads screwed on right, because there's no way that anyone with a shred of good old-fashioned common sense will reach a guilty verdict. No way."

The caller's voice dropped out as the first notes of a hit country-western song hit the airwaves. The announcer's voice rose over the music. "It's just after eleven A.M. on what's turning out to be a very humid Saturday morning in Neapolis. Everyone in town is talking about the Blair trial that starts next week. We'll take more callers after this little tune."