

## PROLOGUE

My mother has few good qualities. The stick-to-itiveness required of moms, she doesn't have. I don't mean the kind of stick that keeps stay-at-homes dutifully watching muffins through an oven window. I'm talking about the adhesive that would have prevented her from dumping us unceremoniously.

No room for interpretation about that. That's what she did.

My youngest brother, George, would say she had to have given it some thought, since she announced it to us right before our summer break from school. It had to have occurred to her that having my three then-young brothers and me interrupting her incessant, one-woman wine tasting was not something she wanted for the summer of her tenth year of parenting. The encroaching ripples on her once dreamy thighs could have also figured heavily in her calculations about the life she was designing for herself.

Mr. Daniels from the property next door wasn't stopping by anymore, in his always polished, metallic blue Silverado, to chat about his Heffers or a new breach in the barbed wire fence that separated our ranches. To be honest, I missed the scent of sweaty road dust and English Leather Mr. Daniels would leave behind whenever he visited. I missed his grey eyes and dimpled smile and the deep cleft in his chin that made me wonder if he had to periodically clean it. Not that I had a crush on the tall, muscular, charismatic man with the fascinating facial landscape, and I swear I was not intrigued that he gave me my first disturbing tingles of looming adolescence. Mr. Daniels merely represented a tunnel under the barbed wire fence. That's all he was, and so I regretted it when he stopped coming by. I did not miss, though, the air of conspiracy that clouded the place when he and my mother would whisper to each other and chuckle.

Thank God Mr. Daniels left us.

I suspect my mother attracted a lot of attention wherever she went. A girl-next-door beauty capable of deploying a crippling glare and a friendly smile as if they were the opposite sides of a twirling coin, my mother gave off the scent of *wanting*. I saw it even as a small child in her complaints that nothing was ever right, and in her habit of making long, unblinking surveys out the kitchen window of the mountains in the distance. I knew from the way she ran her finger around the edge of her coffee cup that mother was contemplating possibilities. I know now none of them involved us.

My mother kept a note holder at the corner of the blue and white formica counter in prominent view of anyone walking from the entry hallway into the kitchen. The holder was a thin, four-inch metal post held upright by a red plastic cube about one-inch square. An alligator clip would hold a note from my mom, usually addressed to "Kids." We knew when Nanny Joan brought us home

from school and if we saw a note stuck in the alligator clip at the end of the post that mom was M.I.A. She would be out somewhere.

*"Went to the grocers. Be back tonight."*

*"Went to get the car fixed."*

*"At the hairdressers. There's food in the pantry."*

I remember when I was six, my eldest brother, Jackson, who was nine then, had concluded the notes were all lies, since our mother would never return with groceries, or a fixed car, or a new hairdo. Food was always in the house but through no effort by *mom*. Our Dad would make sure before he left on a business trip that he had stocked the pantry and cleared the refrigerator of moldy leftovers that our mother was not able to see as she reached for a cold bottle of white. Nanny Joan, probably the worst cook in all of Texas, became our sole source of daily nutrition - too often making us her *specialty* by thawing frozen peas and boiling hot dogs in the same water, at the same time.

"Doing it dis way," Nanny Joan would lisp, "The 'furlters get vitamins from duh peas."

Soon after Jackson's realization about the alligator-clipped notes, mother just dropped the pretense that she was out doing essential tasks. Instead she would leave notes that would serve as the best parenting she could muster.

*"Do your homework. They're the baby steps to success."*

*"Food in the pantry. Any dirty dishes you leave, I will put in your beds."*

(Seriously, she would do that.)

Six months before she left us, though, the notes stopped altogether, opening a cold void of not knowing where our mother was hiding from us. Although I wouldn't know it until I was much older, I was witnessing my childhood unraveling, and was speeding toward a signature event that would thrust me down a path that at some point years later would force me to want to tell this story.

My middle brother, Nathan, a little more than one year younger than I am, has a different theory of what happened that momentous day. He thought, and still does think, that Mom left because we were not the easiest of kids, in a group especially. Maybe she was missing the essential gene or that as yet unidentified chemical that makes mothers stay in spite of the maddening maelstrom of motherhood which is a challenging mix of euphoria, happiness, contentedness, complacency, disorientation, depression, and utter disdain. I would get it if she just couldn't take it anymore, because my mother was just not all there.

The other possible reason, though, for Mom's pivotal pronouncement is the one Jackson insists is right. He's convinced Mom hadn't planned leaving at all, that it had little to do with Daniels staying away, or her tapioca thighs, or children she didn't like. But rather it was a spontaneous decision, a demonic inspiration that she on a whim decided to give a whirl. There's ample proof

of that, Jackson claims. Mom took my brothers and me into the bedroom she had made out of my dad's home office, by shoving all his things to the other side of an imaginary line drawn right down the middle of the room. She sat on a cardboard box marked Armstrong family photos, on my father's side of the room, not caring that the box was tearing at its corners and that it would thrust her within minutes into an uncomfortable squat when the sides gave way. My mother would have orchestrated this event. The lighting would have been perfect, she would have had candy and tissues at the ready to convince and console, and she would have tested that goddamned box, as sure as her name was Susan Kulhany Armstrong, of the fastidious Amarillo Kulhanys.

Whatever her reason, Mom spoke to us with a seriousness that seemed to be trying to mask delight. The memory of the gleam in her eyes still reaches tender places within me, places that I'm always surprised are still fresh. I admit I can't remember Mom showing one inkling of remorse. While my brothers and I yelped like swine caught in the mass hysteria of being dragged to our slaughter house, she was her usual low-key. After all, she was a Kulhany of the Amarillo Kulhanys.

"Your mother is leaving for good," she stated matter-of-factly, speaking of herself in the third person as she always did. "So stop that crying, you hear? It will do you no darned good and it will only trouble your mother further. My mind is made up."

The punchline for me, that I cannot tell now without air getting trapped in my throat, is that my mother told us, "I only married your father fifteen years ago because I was mad at another man." Her swipe at my dad diminished us too, since we knew instantly that we were nothing more than the products of revenge. The words, as they rolled over perfectly lip-sticked lips, made her smile like she was relieved to have finally said it. I refuse to believe she didn't somehow enjoy ruining us, as certainly as I refuse to ever forgive her for it.

My mother has few good qualities, as you now can see. But her one memorable quality on display in full force that day was her ability to summarize human nature in pithy one liners.

"People are inherently bad," she would repeat at the news of a distant murder or in response to a television preacher's assertions to the contrary. She used that particular Kulhany axiom on that pre-summer day to explain away her decision to leave us. Being eight years old, I had room to hope that *inherently* really meant something else. My mother read my confusion.

"*Inherently*, Lizbeth, means *by nature*," she explained, her Texan accent elongating dictionary phonetics. Tears welled in my eyes. "That saying means we're bound to do bad things. It's what we do." Her job was done. I was inconsolable.

But as if she somehow knew what was to become of me, she gave me one last piece of Kulhany wisdom before she declared our meeting over. She pulled me outside into the hallway, with my brothers still whimpering inside the disaster area, and said, "Remember this, Lizbeth, history is not what happened."

My eight-year-old self hung on those words, hoping that she had been playing some convoluted trick on us all along, to perhaps teach us the difference between fact and fiction, good and bad, sane and bat shit crazy. But in retrospect, how could I have had hope when this was the same mother who thought her sayings were all the mothering we needed from her?

"History," she continued, "is the black and white truth, with lots of color added. People don't want the truth, they want a story, boring parts removed. So when you tell them your story, always keep it interesting."

At the time I could not come up with the appropriate response, which should probably have been something starting with, "What the fuck...?" But I get it now. I really do. And it's the one thing that keeps me wondering about my mother, strangely enough.

It's the one piece of bat shit crazy advice from my mother that's actually been useful, *"So when you tell them your story, always keep it interesting."*

So here I am, between these pages, trying to keep it interesting. The things that you'll read happened to me, Lizbeth Armstrong of the Durango Armstrongs. I have chosen to disguise the innocent who had to endure a kind of tumult that is still largely misunderstood, but I've added a good amount of color so that if the events could not be told as they were, the hurt and the anguish and the joys would be illustrated through a few fantastical settings.

The bottom line is that while I've changed and added a few things to keep it interesting, this story is inherently true.

## CHAPTER 1

My letters were always addressed to *Susan Kulhany of the Amarillo Kulhanys*. A bit of a dig, most certainly, since the chasm between Grandpa and Grandma Kulhany and their children was as wide as Palo Duro Canyon. While Grammer and G-Pa were as sweet and generous as Norman Rockwell grandparents, the Kulhanys had fallen off every possible VIP list in Amarillo after their youngest son, Kyle - my uncle whose idea of a greeting was rubbing his knuckle hard against my forehead - had been arrested for pilfering PTA proceeds. In Amarillo of that time, the vanquishment of an empire was not as simple as it is today. So it would also take the collapse of a wedding hall that Kulhany Construction had built, a company founded and run by Uncle Kyle, to thrust the family reputation to the gutter. Second-rate steel used throughout the building had relegated the family name to whispered conversations held under raised eyebrows. It was deserved, after all. One busboy had lost his legs, then his life, but that was only mentioned as a secondary casualty after the catastrophe that befell the bride - twenty, some would claim fifty, facial stitches, and a honeymoon suffered under gauze, sunglasses, and a broad brimmed hat.

"What a tragedy," the whisperers would conclude, more often than not forgetting Victor Martinez, the busboy who was no longer with us.

The family spent much of its emergency fund settling and battling lawsuits and of course repaying the A-PTA, leaving Kyle often singing a new version of his victory chant, sung at every gathering in a crescendo with his arms flailing and fists pumping, like a gospel hoedown, "The Kulhanys will rise again! Our will, we will. To the summit, we go again!" Kyle had promised to write full lyrics to the canticle, set to the Notre Dame fight song. He never managed to get to it.

My motivation for writing to my mother was more likely less about a Kulhany dig, though, and more about reminding her that *People Are Inherently Bad*, and that their badness reverberates into eternity.

I had no way of knowing if anyone was reading my letters to dear old mom. I wrote them, I comforted myself, to give my diary some weight to someone somewhere, like a message sent adrift - although I assumed, out of self-protection, that the envelopes would never be opened. I wrote home with the compulsion of teenagers who feel obliged to paint their sayings on an overpass. It's not about anyone really reading it or understanding deeper meaning, if there is any, it's about having a canvas. Any canvas.

The letter I sent today describes an event at the Pan Pacific Hotel in San Francisco. Talk about reverberations!

I found myself not being able to be seduced by the carefully-formulated, faux-Spring perfume misted into the hotel air, or the brown and blue velvet-covered walls in the hallway. I had always loved this hotel, walking distance from Union Square and a quick cab ride up Market Street from my favorite

place in the city. For a time, my favorite place in the world. The Cafe Du Nord restaurant. Years before, I had spent the entire music set - of a band playing a fusion of classic jazz with Brazilian influences, whatever that is - kissing David Starnes. I had committed the year after college to a *Find Yourself Tour* and had met David playing guitar and singing jazzy versions of Cole Porter outside the Castro Street Muni Station. I had never connected with anyone as strikingly cosmopolitan as David, having grown up in the milk toast suburbs of southern conservatism. I could not forget the first time David was shirtless in front of me. Smooth, tanned skin, a symmetrical face with electric hazel eyes, and my first sighting of what's now called a six-pack. David and I spent seven straight days kissing on street corners, forcing loose the sheets on my tiny hotel bed, and scraping together enough cash to see David's favorite performers playing jazz around town. The Cafe Du Nord was our fond farewell to our time together. We spent it as connected as we could be, and chanting the requisite vows to stay in touch.

When the cab brought me to the Pan Pacific, it made a brief trip up Market and I turned to catch a glimpse, if I could, of the Cafe Du Nord. That was my only thought of David. So much time had passed. I didn't wonder where he might be now because I didn't want to ever revise my memory of the young man and his six-pack. The boy who just couldn't get enough of the girl I had been. He needed to be frozen in that perfect state forever.

I trudged down the hotel corridor unsteadily, my feet sliding forward inside shoes that were a half size too big. "*Can feet lose weight?*" I worried to myself.

My legs were constrained by a tight, double-breasted, and shoulder-padded dress picked from 1990's clothing mementos deep inside my closet. I was looking for luck not a fashion statement when I had packed, and I picked it to wear that day because the dress reminded me of a happier time. I thought I needed as much good karma as fabric can bring. Plus, I knew my outfit would be outrageous to one person in particular. By my standards, my getup was a clothing blooper of astronomical proportions but it would be hours before my image in a mirror would signal how sad a mess I had become.

My eyes were blurry as I looked at the room numbers. My contact lenses did that after a face full of wind, or tears. There it was. Room 403. Etched in black letters in an oval of polished brass at eye level. I blinked away the blur and double-checked a sticky note I was carrying.

"Four oh three," I said, as if deciding whether I had the courage to knock on the door. "Oh boy," I snickered to myself uncomfortably, like the expression had double meaning.

Before knocking, I detected faint music coming from behind the door. It was a woman's voice singing to a distinctive dance beat. I recognized the relatively old tune from a bar I had visited with my husband, Mitch, just weeks before. I remembered the name of it when the song's title was sung as part of the lyrics. While the music was muffled, my brain filled in the rest of the words, "*Finally/ it has happened to me/ right in front of my face/ and I just cannot hide it...*"

Slivers of memory put together the first name of the singer, Cece, and the possible first letter of the last name. "*P or D. Doesn't matter,*" I thought to myself before knocking. I looked at my fist before it moved toward the door. Even pointing upward, veins bulged through the skin.

*"You're getting old, Lizzy. You can't take much more of this,"* I thought. The music coming from inside forced me to make my fist move.

*"...Meeting Mr. Right/ the man of my dreams/ the one who shows me true love/ or at least it seems..."*

The first knock nudged the door past the lock that was only slightly holding it in place. My second knock never made contact because the door was swinging open fast. My obsession with making sure that everything worked was rankled that this five-star hotel had failed to correct this obviously faulty door hinge.

All random thoughts vanished quickly, though, as soon as I blinked away further blurriness and could see inside the room. The singing was louder and coming from a bathroom, playing with a tinny echo having bounced off ceramic sinks and tiles. The beat thumped loudly enough to make lamps clink and loose items rattle on a mahogany desk. It was no longer an upbeat tune, seeing what I was seeing. My heart thumped hard, with the beat occasionally matching the music's rhythm. I couldn't summon a deep breath and had to settle for fast and shallow. The lyrics provided a sarcastic narrative to what I was feeling.

*"But now you've come along/ and brightened up my world/ in my heart I feel it/ I'm that special kinda girl..."*

"Special kinda girl," I muttered to myself.

One step into the room, I took a mental snapshot of each clue strewn throughout the place. The more I saw, the faster a chill moved up from the middle part of my back up to my neck. "*Something terrible has happened here,*" I kept trying to stop myself from thinking.

A pair of discarded men's shoes were on the floor, askew at the end of a pair of men's pants. For a second it looked like half a man's body could still be in them. Red was spilled on the carpet. "*Could that be blood?*" A man's jacket, shirt, and tie had been stuffed into the small waste basket. The unmade bed was littered with blades of many types - barber sheers, razor blades, and a pocket knife with a leather handle that I thought I recognized. When I walked around the bed, the blades reflected the bulbs underneath nearby lampshades, creating a macabre disco ball effect. The glare, strobing through my cloudy lenses, further disoriented me.

I saw women's clothes, strewn everywhere on the floor, with the tags still on them. There were bras, panties, lingerie, and panty hose of varying sizes. I could see, intermingled with the clothes, tubes of creams and makeup, powder and concealer, and red lipstick that had been stepped on, smeared deep into the carpet, and dragged into a wide slash. A trail of hair led like breadcrumb crumbs to the bathroom door. The light pouring from around it was flickering threateningly. At first, it seemed like someone was lurking behind it, ready

to pounce. But the movements matched the beat. The person was dancing. Somehow that frightened me even more.

One thing made the scene too much for me to take. It was a curling iron, still on and warping the placemat on the desk. *"That's the murder weapon,"* I warned myself, *"Get out now!"*

I stumbled backwards towards the door. *"Maybe this isn't 403 after all. Maybe it's the wrong hotel. Maybe I was struck by a bus and this is the coma dream. Maybe I'm dead and this is limbo. Please make it Limbo. At least there's hope in Limbo."* My mouth arched wide as if trying to form the word, *"Hello?"* or *"Help!"* Nothing came.

*"Finally/ it has happened to me/ right in front of my face/  
/ my feelings can't describe it/ finally/ it has happened to me/ right in  
front of my face/ And I just cannot hide it..."*

I knocked into the door and sent it crashing closed. For the first time I heard movement. The music abruptly stopped. Footsteps. Not deep and strong like steps taken with intent. But delicate, tentative tiptoes. Like someone preparing to strike. I couldn't help myself. I let out a long yell, *"Uhhhhh-hhhhhh!"* It was not a scream but more like a factory horn signaling the end of the day.

A scratchy woman's voice, more falsetto than authentic, sounded out from the bathroom. *"Don't move!"* The voice urged.

The bathroom door creaked open slowly in a grand reveal, but the light in the bathroom was spraying out, leaving the person in silhouette. Muffled steps now on the trashed carpet. Not a word from anyone. No one seemed to be breathing. Then... the dim lights from the bedside lamps illuminated the person who was moving slowly towards me. I froze...

The *murderer* had come face to face with me.

*"Never have I seen anything like it. Traces of familiar, gobs of grotesque, and a pit inside me I had never ever felt. It was like when I was seven and watched Mr. Daniels accidentally run over a newborn calf when backing up his Silverado. It was the first time I had ever seen the inside of something that had been living, a kind of rawness we're really not meant to see, I would hope. But here I was seeing someone turned inside out. It thrust me out of my body, in the way people speak about after witnessing a great tragedy. I could see myself standing there, and I knew my body was growing colder and was being drained of life. Or of what I thought my life would be.*

But here it stood. Inside out. And while I was forced to say it would be okay, I doubted it ever could. I welcomed the blood draining from my brain.

The next thing I remember, I was awakening on that bed, in the after wash of the temporary sedative that flows from unconsciousness. *"Please let that be a dream. Or a stroke. I'll take a stroke."*



After years of Sunday school and countless prayers to a God I still believed was out there somewhere, I decided to put Him to the test. *"Really, God, please make it be that I had a stroke and that was not real,"* I mumbled. *"Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name..."*

Then something happened that I would later interpret as a sign that God would not be coming. There was a knock on the door. It was forceful, enthusiastic. Someone was knocking, and eager to get into Room 403.

"God damn it, what now?" I yelled.

## CHAPTER 2

The memory of my father that will always be my go-to image of him is from the day we returned to Durango. I worry my memory is flawed, as all my memories would have become more so if I hadn't recorded them in my diary and, in turn, in letters to not-so-dear old Mom. But the one dramatic image I see now, especially when I hear his full name, *William Armstrong*, is established for me. I am convinced it's the truth.

The image comes from one year to the day after Mom left us for dead. We had driven to our new home in our Ford Econoline Super Wagon, a precursor to today's mini-van but much cooler, not only because it had not yet been classified in that humiliating mini-van category but because it was the longest van on the road and Dad had had it customized just for us. Felix, the guy at the auto body shop on Canyon Drive in Amarillo, had worked off a design my dad had painstakingly drafted on loose leaf paper. One night I had caught Dad in the kitchen working on what I suspect was an early drawing because he flipped over the page to prevent me from seeing it.

"Whatcha doing, Daddy?" I groggily asked.

"Nothin' to show you yet, baby," he said, "I'm makin' us a chariot. You'll see."

I could tell he was working on something special. He sported that look he always had when he experimented with "new food from around the globe" and served it to us in his usually ceremonious way. ("Tah-dahs" and a French beret or a chef's hat were not beyond him.) This night he had a few rulers neatly arranged in front of him, a manual pencil sharpener, No. 2 and No. 1 pencils, and a protractor that I suspect he had no idea how to use. If I allow myself to think now about how important the redesign of our Econoline was to him, I feel my tear ducts opening around my eyes. It was his tribute to us. Like with so many things he did, he was thinking of us first, in spite of a looming five-am alarm every morning before he went off to do his lawyering.

My dad would end up sparing no expense to outfit the van. The inside was like a cave - plastic side panels that looked like rocks, red fabric draped from the lights to look like torches, decals on the windows of stalagmites and stalactites, and plush beige carpet to resemble a dirt floor. All four of us had our own special sections. I had a pink shelf under the window, next to my designated seat in the back, with room for dollhouse furniture and three Barbies at a time. I would find a way, though, to cram a party of six onto the shelf. The van was also equipped with a more boyish blue shelf next to my youngest brother, George, who was my bench-mate. He would use it to hold a Mattel handheld electronic baseball game, desperately rudimentary by today's standards, and a complement of extra batteries. George would get jittery when his reserve would get down to two replacement batteries so Dad made sure to check his power status exactly every hundred miles on our way to Durango.