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The Woman in the Window

A Novel

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The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive lowercase 'wm'.

WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

For Noah, who thought it sounded like a good idea

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Dedication

Prologue

Part 1

Chapter 1: The Lake
Chapter 2: The Lake
Chapter 3: The City
Chapter 4: Lizzie
Chapter 5: The Lake
Chapter 6: Lizzie
Chapter 7: The City
Chapter 8: Lizzie
Chapter 9: The Lake
Chapter 10: The City
Chapter 11: Lizzie
Chapter 12: The Lake
Chapter 13: The City
Chapter 14: The Lake
Chapter 15: Lizzie
Chapter 16: The City
Chapter 17: The City
Chapter 18: The City

Part 2

Chapter 19: Lizzie
Chapter 20: Lizzie
Chapter 21: Lizzie
Chapter 22: Lizzie
Chapter 23: Bird
Chapter 24: Lizzie
Chapter 25: Bird
Chapter 26: Lizzie

Part 3: Six Months Later

Chapter 27: Bird
Chapter 28: Lizzie

Epilogue

Acknowledgments
About the Author
Copyright
About the Publisher

Prologue

My name is Lizzie Ouellette, and if you're reading this, I'm already dead.

Yes, dead. Beyond the veil, passed-on and gone. A fresh-minted angel in the arms of Jesus, if you believe in that sort of thing. A fresh pile of chow for the worms, if you don't. I don't know what I believe.

I don't know why I'm surprised.

It's just that I don't want to die—or didn't, I guess, especially not like that. There one moment, gone the next. Erased. Obliterated. With a bang, not a whimper.

But like so many things I didn't want, it happened anyway.

The funny thing is, some people will say I had it coming. Maybe not in so many words, maybe not quite so out in the open. But give it time. Just wait. One of these days, maybe a month or two down the road, somebody will let it fly. Down at Strangler's, in that magic booze-emboldened hour before the neon Budweiser sign clicks off for the night and they turn on those death-glare fluorescents so that the barman can see what a mess everyone made, so he can swab down the sticky floor. One of the old-timers will toss back the dregs of his fifth or seventh or seventeenth beer, and stand up on unsteady legs, and hitch his sagging pants up to that under-the-gut sweet spot, and say, "It ain't like me to speak ill of the dead, but the hell with it—good riddance to her!"

And then he'll burp and shamble off into the restroom to splatter a poorly aimed piss everywhere but into the bowl. And with not so much as a meaningful look at the sink on his way out, either, even though his hands are crawling with a whole day's worth of dust and grit and grime. The old man with stains on his pants, dirt under his fingernails, a topographical map of busted capillaries racing over the strawberry bulb of his nose, maybe even a wife at home with a week-old yellowing bruise around her eye from the last time he hit her—well, he's the salt of the earth, of course. The hometown hero. The beating heart of Copper Falls.

And Lizzie Ouellette, the girl who started her life in a junkyard and ended it less than three decades later in a pine box? I'm the trash that this town should've taken out years ago.

That's how it is, in this place. That's how it's always been.

And so that's how they'll talk about me, once enough time has passed. Once they know I'm cold in the ground, or burned to ashes and scattered on the wind. No matter how terribly and tragically I died, old habits die harder. People can only pull their punches so long, especially when it comes to their favorite target, and even if the target isn't moving anymore.

But that part, that will come later.

Right now, folks will be a little bit kinder. A little bit softer. And a little bit careful, because death has come to Copper Falls, and with death comes outsiders. It wouldn't do to tell the truth, not when you don't know who might be listening. So they'll clasp their hands and shake their heads and say things like, "That poor girl was trouble since the day she was born," and there will be real pity in their voices. As if I had any say. As if I conjured trouble from inside the womb so that it was already there, waiting to catch me as I tumbled out, a sticky web that tangled up all around me and never let go.

As if the same people who are clucking their tongues right now and sighing over my troubled life couldn't have spared me from so much pain, if they'd spared just a little thought, a little grace, for their junkyard girl.

But they can say what they like. I know the truth, and for once, I have no reason not to tell it. Not anymore. Not from where I stand, six feet under, finally at peace. I was no saint in life, but death has a way of making you honest. So here's my message from beyond the grave, the one I want you to remember. Because it will be important. Because I don't want to lie.

They all thought I had it coming.

They all thought I was better off dead.

And the truth, the one I realized in that last, horrible moment before the gun went off, is just this:

They were right.

Part 1

Chapter 1

The Lake

Just shy of ten o'clock on Tuesday morning, the smoke from the junkyard fire on Old Ladd Road began to move east. The junkyard had been burning for hours by then. Unstoppable, marked by that putrid column, black and billowing, that could be seen for miles—but now the column was a front, pushed by the rising wind. The wispy points of its poisonous fingers crept down the road and went drifting through the trees, toward the lake, and toward the lakefront, which was when Sheriff Dennis Ryan sent his deputy, Myles Johnson, to start clearing out the houses there. Fully expecting to find them empty, of course. Labor Day was a month gone, and with it the tourist season, such as it was. The nights were longer now, and colder, tinged with the promise of an early frost. That last weekend, pleasant little curls of wood smoke could be seen drifting above the houses, as the folks staying there lit their little fires against the evening's chill.

The lake was quiet. No droning motors, no shouting kids. Nothing but the rustling of the wind, the musical trickle of water beneath the wooden docks, a single loon crying in the distance. The sheriff's deputy knocked that morning at six houses, six empty houses with locked doors and vacant driveways, until the speech he'd prepared about the evacuation order died in his mind from lack of use. There were only two houses left when he pulled up to number thirteen, rolling his eyes reflexively at the name spray-painted on the mailbox. For a moment, he even considered skipping this one, thinking to himself that if Earl Ouellette's junkyard burning to the ground was a solid start, then his daughter choking to death on its ashes would be an excellent finish. Only for a moment, of course; he'd assure himself of that later, as he drowned the day in a bottle of Jameson, drinking hard to dull the memory of the horrible things he'd seen. A fraction of a moment. Just a blip on the mental radar, really, and certainly not enough to count, for God's sake. What happened to Lizzie had happened hours before he even knew he'd be coming down the shore drive, which meant it couldn't possibly be his fault, no matter how much a small, guilty voice in the back of his mind kept suggesting otherwise. By the time he knocked, she was already dead.

Besides, he did knock. He did. He took pride in his job, in the badge he wore. Skipping the Ouellette house was just a petty impulse, an old grudge reminding him that it was still there; he wouldn't actually give in to it. And besides, he realized, staring at the mailbox, there was Dwayne, Lizzie's husband, to consider. Lizzie might not be alone in the house—or she might not be here at all. The couple sometimes had renters at odd times. More than sometimes. If there was one person who was likely to flout the norm, to let folks stay at the place past season just to squeeze a few more bucks out of the year, it was Lizzie Ouellette. Likely as not it would be some city folks with a high-priced lawyer who inhaled a lungful of toxic fumes, and then they'd all be in the shit.

And so, he pulled into the empty driveway at 13 Lakeside Drive, stepping out onto a thick blanket of pine needles that released their scent under his feet. He knocked at the door with the words "fire," "danger," and "evacuation" fresh again in his mind—and then stepped back abruptly when the door swung inward at the first knock. Unlocked, unlatched.

Renting to outsiders, out of season, was just like Lizzie Ouellette.

Leaving her door standing open was not.

Johnson crossed the threshold with his hand at his hip, thumbing off the safety on his weapon. Later, he'd tell the guys down at Strangler's that he knew something was wrong from the moment he stepped inside—making it sound like some sixth-sense sort of thing, but in truth, any of them would have known. The air in the house was off, not knock-you-on-your-heels bad, but stale and scented with the low, sick notes of something beginning to rot. And that wasn't all. There was blood: a trail of it, thick circular splats on the knotty pine floor just inches from his feet. The droplets, deep red and still glistening, skirted the corner of the cast-iron wood-burning stove, dribbled over the kitchen countertop, and ended with a smear on the edge of the stainless steel sink.

He moved toward it, fascinated.

It was his first mistake.

He should have stopped. He should have considered that a trail of blood ending in the kitchen sink must have a beginning worth exploring before he explored anything else. That he'd seen more than enough to know something was wrong, and that he should call in and wait to be told how to proceed. That he should not, for the love of God, touch anything.

But Myles Johnson had always had a curious streak, the kind that made caution a distant second thought. For most of his life, this had been a good thing. Eighteen years ago, as the new kid in town, he'd instantly earned the respect of his peers by testing the ancient, knotted swinging rope that hung in the north woods on Copperbrook Lake, grasping hold and leaping into space without hesitation, while the rest of the boys held their breaths to see if it would snap. He was the one who would wriggle into the crawl space under the house to investigate a family of opossums that had taken up residence there, or walk right up to the ancient clerk at the post office and ask why he was missing an eye. Myles Johnson would take any dare, explore any dark place—and until that morning, life had never given him a reason not to. The young officer who stood in the lake house that morning was not just an adventurous, inquisitive man, but still an optimistic one, buoyed by a subconscious certainty that nothing bad would happen to him simply because nothing bad ever had.

And the slick drops of blood, that ominous smear on the side of the sink, were too tantalizing a mystery to retreat from. He moved forward, skirting the blood on the floor, eyes fixed on the mess in the sink—because it was a mess, oh yes, and the smear was the least of it. As he got closer, he could see: it wasn't just blood but meat, a splatter of small chunks and shards and gristle. There was something pink and wet and stringy peeking from the dark hole of the garbage disposal, and a smell like the back room of a butcher shop. And as Johnson peered at it, stretched a hand toward it, he felt the first small stirrings of a warning in his gut, and sensed the unfamiliar whisper of a new, strange voice saying, *Maybe you shouldn't.*

But he did.

It was his second mistake. The one he'd struggle to explain to everyone from the sheriff to the forensic team to his own wife, who wouldn't let him touch her for weeks no matter how avidly he scrubbed his hands—and the one he could barely comprehend himself, after the fact. How could he explain? That even in those final moments, as he moved to extricate the thing from the sink, he was just following the explorer's instinct that had always served him well. That he was only curious, and still so sure that nothing bad could come of that.

After all, nothing ever had.

The pulpy pink thing in the sink glistened. In the bedroom at the far end of the house, a cloud of flies lifted briefly, disturbed by an unseen force, and then settled once again to their business—on a blanket, damp and stained with red, draped over the thing on the floor that didn't move at all. In the air, the subtle scent of decay grew more pungent by half a degree. And just shy of eleven o'clock on that Monday morning, as the smoke from the burning junkyard began to creep between the houses at the westernmost cove of Copperbrook Lake, Deputy Myles Johnson reached two fingers into the garbage disposal and pulled out what was left of Lizzie Ouellette's nose.

Chapter 2

The Lake

The woods surrounding Copperbrook Lake had once been home to a logging outfit, abruptly shut down thirty years ago after the operation dissolved into bankruptcy. All that remained were the caved-in skeletons of old shacks, the odd saw blade forgotten, rusted, and swallowed up by blackberry bushes or thick clusters of jewelweed. The clearings where logs were felled and stacked were slowly being taken back by the forest, odd patchy places full of scrub brush and saplings, sat at the end of rutted dirt roads to nowhere.

Ian Bird was not from around here. He took two wrong turns down those roads, cursing when they dead-ended, before he found the turnoff to the shore drive. He pulled off the road at the mailbox that marked number thirteen, nosing in behind a van belonging to the forensic team. Like him, the techs had been summoned by the state police—as soon as possible, even though they privately griped that it would surely be too late to keep the local cops from trampling all over the place, marring the scene, sticking their ungloved hands into places they didn't belong.

Like the garbage disposal: Jesus Christ. Bird groaned out loud thinking about it. It was the worst kind of mistake, but you had to feel bad for the poor bastard who'd done it. Barehanded, no less.

That little gem, severed nose in the sink, had gone out over the radio while Bird was still on his way, which meant that some busybody with a scanner had probably spread it clear to the county line by now. Not that it really mattered. In a place like this, with a case like this, the details always leaked. Bird had never been to Copper Falls, but he'd spent time in enough towns like it, and he knew how it worked. City cops had to battle a hungry press to keep information close; out here, you were up against something much more primal. The people who lived in places like this seemed to be tapped into each other's business on a cellular level, sharing secrets through some kind of collective consciousness, firing it straight from synapse to synapse like drones all plugged into a single hive. And the juicier the news, the faster it traveled. This story would have blown down the shore drive and end to end through town before Bird made his first wrong turn.

Maybe that was all right, though. The more widespread the horrifying details about the murder of Lizzie Ouellette, the harder it would be for the husband to hide. Even friends and family would think twice about sheltering a guy who'd cut off his wife's nose . . . if he'd done it, of course. It was early yet, and all possibilities had to be explored—but this had all the hallmarks of a domestic dispute, something deeply, horribly personal. It was as much about the missing pieces of the puzzle: no signs of forced entry, no valuables taken. And of course, there was the matter of the woman's mutilated face. Bird had seen savagery like that just once before, only that time, there were two bodies: a murder suicide, husband and wife side by side. The man had taken an axe to her, saving the bullet for himself. It was a cleaner end than he deserved, and an infuriating mess for the investigative team. They had spent weeks interviewing friends, family, neighbors, trying to pin down the why of the thing. All anyone would say was that they had seemed happy, or happy enough.

Bird wondered if Lizzie Ouellette and Dwayne Cleaves seemed happy enough.

If they were lucky, they'd catch Cleaves in time to ask him.

Bird drained the dregs of his coffee, setting his cup back on the console, and stepped out. The wind had shifted, pushing the smoke from the burning junkyard north across the lake, but a faint acrid odor still hung in the air. He took his time making his way up the driveway, taking in the scene—the house nestled among the pines, coming into view as he rounded the final curve. Beyond it, the lake glittered, its waters stirred by the wind. Over the rustling of the trees, the faint *ka-thunk ka-thunk* of waves hitting the underside of a dock could be heard. Sound carried out here. On a quiet night, a scream might be heard all the way across the lake, if there was anyone around to listen. But every place in shouting distance had been vacant last night. No witnesses. Which made the killer either very lucky, or very local.

Bird knew which one he'd put his money on.

Myles Johnson was outside the door, looking faintly green. He stepped aside at the sight of Bird's ID and pointed down the hallway, where a half dozen people were crowded outside the bedroom door. Bird recognized the local cops from their uneasy looks—in over their heads, but still not pleased to see an outsider in their midst.

The remains of Lizzie Ouellette were stretched on the floor beside the bed. One of the techs shifted his body as Bird peered through the doorway, offering a brief glimpse of the corpse. The rise of a hip with a pair of red bikini bottoms stretched taut over the bone, a bare shoulder where her shirt had pulled to the side, hair matted with blood. A lot of blood—he could see flecks of it on her naked skin, and a spreading stain on the carpet beneath. Flies were buzzing, but no worms. Not yet. She hadn't been here long.

Bird scanned the area around the bed, noting the crumpled quilt on the floor. More blood. The quilt was stained, but not soaked.

"She was underneath it," said a voice, and Bird turned to see the young deputy who'd admitted him into the house standing behind him, his broad shoulders nearly brushing either wall of the narrow space. He was twisting a dishcloth in both hands, gripping it hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

The nose guy.

"You're the one who found the body, then?"

"Yeah. I mean, I didn't know when I moved the blanket; I thought she might be, you know, alive, or . . ."

"Alive," Bird said. "That would be after you found her nose in the sink? Is it still there?"

Johnson shook his head as one of the techs emerged from the bedroom, pointing ahead down the hall as she passed.

"He dropped it," she said. "We bagged it. It doesn't look like much."

Bird turned back to Johnson.

"All right, Officer. It's all right. Tell me what you saw."

Johnson grimaced. "I followed the blood. There was a trail from the kitchen, after I found . . . you know. And I saw the blanket, with more blood. I could tell someone was under it. I pulled it away. I saw her. That's it. I didn't try to—I mean, once I saw her, I knew she was gone."

Bird nodded. "So he covered her before he left."

"He? You mean, like—" Johnson shook his head furiously, clutching the dish towel. "No, man. Dwayne wouldn't—"

Bird's eyes narrowed at the sound of the husband's first name. "Yeah? Where is Dwayne, then? Did you try texting him? Did he answer?"

Bird felt a small flush of satisfaction as Johnson's face went red. The thing about the texts had been just a guess, but it had clearly been a good one. Johnson and the deceased's husband weren't just on a first-name basis; they were friends.

Sheriff Ryan had been leaning against the wall throughout this exchange; now he stepped forward, laying a hand on Johnson's shoulder.

"Hey, it's a small town. We all know Dwayne, some of us from way back. But nobody's trying to get in your way. We all want the same thing, here, and my men will give you whatever help you need. We already sent a car over to his and Lizzie's place in town. Nobody home. Lizzie's Toyota is around back, and they had one other vehicle, a pickup—it's not here, so best guess is that wherever Dwayne is, he's got it. We put out the description. If he's on the road, he'll get picked up sooner or later."

Bird nodded back. "So they lived in town, and then this place is what, a vacation home?"

"Earl—that's Lizzie's father—it's his place. Or was. I think Lizzie pretty much took it over, spruced it up and started renting it out. To folks from away, mostly." The sheriff paused, shifting his weight, frowning. "That didn't go over with some of the other homeowners."

"What does that mean?"

"We're a close-knit community here. Most folks with places on Copperbrook like to do things by word of mouth, you know. Family, family friends. People with a connection to the community. The Ouellette girl listed this place on some website, so anyone could rent it out. Like I said, it didn't go over. We had some trouble, some neighbors upset."

Bird raised his eyebrows, cocking his head in the direction of the bedroom, the blood, the body. "How upset?"

The sheriff caught his tone and stiffened. "Not like you're thinking. I'm saying, some of the folks she had up here, we don't know who they were or what they might have been into. You'll want to look into that."

There was a long silence as the men stared at each other. Bird broke eye contact first, looking down at his phone. When he spoke again, he kept his tone mild.

"I'll be looking into anything relevant, Sheriff. You mentioned the victim's father. He lives in town?"

"The junkyard. He has a trailer there, or did. I doubt it survived the fire. Christ, I can't even imagine . . ." The sheriff shook his head, and Myles Johnson stared down at his hands, twisting and twisting the dishrag. Bird thought the thing would rip in half soon.

"The fire," he said. "That's the father's place? That's a hell of a coincidence."

"That's why I was here. The wind picked up, and I came around to tell folks to evacuate," said Johnson. "But the door—"

"Bird?" A forensic tech poked his head out of the bedroom, gestured with a gloved finger. Bird nodded, and made the same motion at Johnson.

"Let's have a look at her. Run me through it."

A moment later, he stood beside the corpse, reading aloud from the preliminary, scribbled notes someone had passed over for his perusal.

"Elizabeth Ouellette, twenty-eight years old . . ." He looked from the pad to the body, grimacing. The name was written in neat print, but the face was unrecognizable. The woman was lying on her side, her eyes half-lidded and dull beneath the blood-soaked hanks of gingery hair. They were the only part that still looked like what they had been; everything below was shredded, the kind of wound that some of the guys in the barracks referred to as "cherry pie." The missing nose was the least of it. Whoever had killed Lizzie Ouellette had put the barrel of something big under her chin—perhaps a shotgun, the one registered to and missing from the home she'd shared with Dwayne Cleaves—and pulled the trigger. The bullet had sheared her jaw away, obliterating her teeth and blowing the structure of the skull apart before exiting through the back of her head. A single pearly molar winked out from the mess, impossibly white and perfectly intact.

Bird grimaced, looking away, focusing on the rest of the room. There was a spatter on the wall, bone shards and brain, but he was still struck by the look of the place. Someone—the woman lying dead a few feet away, he guessed—had taken care with the decor. There was a threadbare but stylish oriental rug on the floor at the end of the bed, in a shade of faded blue that was echoed by the curtains that framed the picture window and the quilt, now stained with blood, that had covered the body. A pair of nice-looking lamps, brass or something like it, on matching bedside tables. A stack of old books artfully arranged on the dresser. Lake houses had a way of becoming a repository for mismatched furniture, old hunting trophies, novelty pillows with phrases like *GONE FISHING* emblazoned on them—Bird's own family had once rented a place up near the border that seemed to have a deer's head sprouting from every vertical surface. But this place was like something out of a magazine. He'd need to locate whatever website Ouellette had listed it on, but even now, he could imagine how enticing it must have looked to the city people browsing for a vacation getaway.

He turned back, bent toward the body. *Cherry pie*, he thought again. The dead woman's wallet, credit cards, and driver's license had been found in a purse on the dresser, but the face was a problem. And a question. He lifted his gaze to look around the room, from the techs to the sheriff to Johnson, who was now whispering quietly with two other, younger men who must also be local police.

"Who made the ID?" Bird asked, and in that moment, the energy in the room underwent a sudden, subtle shift. A stillness filled with uncomfortable fidgeting, the quick exchange of looks from man to man. The silence drew out a beat too long, and he stood, annoyed.

"Johnson? Sheriff? Who made the ID?" he repeated.

"It was, ah, sort of a joint effort," said a blond man who Bird didn't know. Johnson looked at the floor, biting his lip.

"A joint effort," Bird said, and there was another beat, another set of looks, before Johnson stepped forward and extended a finger, pointing down at the body.

"It's there," he said. Bird followed the pointing finger, and saw. He'd missed it at a glance, amid all the blood and the dark, fat bodies of the buzzing flies. The dead woman's shirt was bunched up toward her neck, and on the inner curve of a pale breast was a dark blob, the size of a housefly, but solid. And static. The flies rose in a hovering cloud; the spot stayed still. He squinted.

"Is that a mole?"

"Yes, sir," Johnson said. "Identifying mark. That's Lizzie Ouellette, no question."

Bird blinked and frowned, not enjoying the sense of having missed something, enjoying the changed energy in the room even less.

"You're sure about that," he said, and noticed that Johnson wasn't the only one nodding. He looked at the rest of the men. "All of you? You all know that well what Elizabeth Ouellette's breast looks like?"

Johnson coughed and turned red. "Everyone knows, sir."

"How?"

The question hung in the air, and Bird realized: the men were trying not to snicker. To snicker was an instinct, somehow, even now. He could see it, see them nearly quivering with the effort to hold it back.

Nobody wants to say it, he thought.

But incredibly, someone did. The blond cop, his mouth twisting just a little—not smiling, exactly; nobody could accuse him of smiling—met Bird's eyes and replied.

"How do you think, man?"

It wasn't a question.

Bird sighed and went to work.