

Sharp Objects



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GILLIAN FLYNN

Gillian Flynn was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. The child of professor parents, Flynn was shy as a young girl and retreated into the world of books and writing. After receiving degrees from the University of Kansas and the prestigious Northwestern University, Flynn worked for years as a journalist and television critic, all the while penning her own stories in her spare time. With the publication of her critically acclaimed debut novel, *Sharp Objects*, in 2006, Flynn established herself as a major voice in the literary world. The themes and ideas she explored in her first book—violence, abuse, secrets and lies, and the false idea of the “innately good” woman—would go on to make her third novel, *Gone Girl*, a riotous bestseller and a veritable literary phenomenon. The novel sold two million copies in its first year and went on to be translated into forty languages, adapted into a major motion picture, and hailed as one of the most shocking novels in contemporary literature. Flynn currently resides in Chicago with her husband and two children, and has written the screenplay adaptations for both *Gone Girl* and the ITV series *Widows*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sharp Objects was an oddly prescient title when published in 2006, just a few years before true-crime books, television shows, films, and podcasts surged in popularity and exposed latent American fascinations and anxieties alike about the unknowability—and banality—of everyday evil. *Sharp Objects* was also situated at the beginning of a larger cultural obsession with media that dissected, in all their gory details, the minutiae of disturbing, confusing real-life crimes. Documentaries like *The Staircase*, *Making a Murderer*, and *Mommy Dead and Dearest* provide audiences with the sense that they’re on the “inside” of an investigation—they’re privy to shocking case details, and are allowed, in many ways, to act as a jury of one. *Sharp Objects* presents an escalating series of horrors, and through the use of an unstable and unreliable narrator, allows readers to pass judgement not just on the supporting characters and suspects but on Camille herself. The twist ending and morally ambiguous coda then subverts readers’ expectations—just as much true-crime media does—and forces them to reckon with their own prejudices, blind spots, and desires for clear-cut, open-and-shut ends for those who have done wrong.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sharp Objects is a contemporary literary thriller, but its deeper roots lie in the tradition of Southern Gothic literature. Honed and popularized by writers like Flannery O’Connor, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner, Southern Gothic fiction is set in the American South and often focuses on the disturbing and grotesque secrets just beneath the surface of Southern gentility. The town of Wind Gap, and the Crellin family more specifically, both serve as microcosms of the entire genre of Southern Gothic literature. Beneath a carefully constructed façade, there is anger, denial, cruelty, sadism, and sickness. Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* are just a few Southern Gothic novels whose twisted interiors inspired Flynn’s modern update on the genre. Furthermore, *Sharp Objects* in many ways predicted the resurgence of a major literary trend in the form of unreliable narrators and dark tales of female cruelty, such as Paula Hawkins’s *The Girl on the Train* and Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Sharp Objects*
- **When Written:** Early 2000s
- **Where Written:** New York City, New York
- **When Published:** 2006
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Mystery, thriller
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Wind Gap, Missouri
- **Climax:** Months after the arrest of Camille Preaker’s mother, Adora Crellin, for the murder of two Wind Gap girls (as well as Camille’s long-deceased younger sister Marian), Camille realizes that it is her teenage sister Amma—whom she has brought to live with her in Chicago—who was responsible for the murders all along.
- **Antagonist:** Adora Crellin, Amma Crellin, Alan Crellin
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

As Seen on TV. In 2018, *Sharp Objects* was adapted into a miniseries by the television network HBO. Starring Amy Adams, Patricia Clarkson, and newcomer Eliza Scanlen and directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, the series was praised for its lush, Southern Gothic visual sensibility, powerhouse performances, and unforgettable twist ending.

Real-World Experience. Gillian Flynn, whose novels feature mysteries, twists, and grisly crimes, has credited in interviews

and profiles her many years of experience as a freelance journalist with helping her to form the basis for her own work. Not only did Flynn's own reporting allow her to imbue her own work with a "pulled-from-the-headlines" sensibility, but she actually wrote much of *Sharp Objects* during her tenure at *Entertainment Weekly*.



PLOT SUMMARY

Camille Preaker works as a reporter at the *Daily Post*, an unremarkable newspaper in Chicago. When Camille's boss, Frank Curry, sends her to her hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri, to investigate the second missing girl there in less than a year, she is reluctant to return—the withdrawn, heavy-drinking Camille holds within her a wealth of trauma and pain related to the death of her younger sister Marian years ago. When Camille arrives, she pays a visit to the closed-off sheriff Chief Vickery, who is reluctant to talk about either case. After prodding the man, Camille learns that last year, nine-year-old Ann Nash was found strangled to death in a creek in the woods, with all of the **teeth** pulled from her mouth—now, ten-year-old Natalie Keene is missing, too. Camille pays a visit to her mother's house and asks to stay there for the duration of her assignment. Camille's family is Wind Gap royalty—her mother, Adora Crellin, is the heiress to a hog farm which produces two percent of the country's pork. Camille asks Adora where her thirteen-year-old daughter Amma is, and Adora says that she's upstairs sleeping. Camille sleeps fitfully and wakes up before dawn to head down to the police station. When Camille arrives downtown, she stumbles upon a horrific scene: Natalie Keene's body has been propped up on the street, and all of her teeth are missing from her mouth.

The day after Natalie's funeral, Camille goes downstairs to find her half-sister sitting on the porch playing with a four-foot dollhouse, an exact replica of Adora's sprawling Victorian manse. Though thirteen years old, with the blossoming body of a young woman, Amma is dressed like a young child. Camille realizes that she has seen Amma around town over the last several days with a gaggle of girls—always dressed provocatively and behaving strangely. Amma explains that when she's home, she's Adora's "doll"—when she's with her friends, she's "other things."

Downtown, Camille manages to talk to Vickery, but the two are quickly interrupted by Richard Willis, a detective from Kansas City who has been sent to investigate the murders. When Camille returns home, she undresses and looks over her own ruined body—she is a cutter who has **scarred** hundreds of words into every surface of her skin, save for her face and neck and the center of her back. Camille began cutting when she was thirteen and continues to feel her skin "scream" at her in moments of stress. The next day, Camille runs into Richard again, and the two strike up a deal. He asks Camille to help him

understand Wind Gap's violent history. In exchange, he offers to help Camille with her reportage. On her way home, Camille encounters Amma and her friends stealing flowers and gifts from where Natalie's body was found.

The following day, Camille runs into a group of her mother's friends at a restaurant. The women invite Camille to sit with them, and she overhears their gossip about the person the women suspect might be the murderer: John Keene, Natalie's teenage brother. A drunken Jackie warns Camille that Adora has been acting strangely lately. Camille then heads over to the Nash home to question Ann's parents, Bob and Betsy, about their daughter, whom they describe as headstrong and fierce before revealing to Camille that Adora was tutoring both Natalie and Ann in spelling. On the way home, Camille spots Amma putting around town in a golf cart. She follows Amma all the way out east to the hog farm, where she watches in horror as Amma sits down in front of a nursing pig and squirms with delight as the sow's piglets fight over her bloody nipples. The following day, Camille tries to question Natalie's mother, but is thrown out of the house when Mrs. Keene realizes that Camille is a reporter. John Keene's girlfriend, Meredith Wheeler, is driving past at that moment and offers to have John talk to Camille.

Meredith and John show up at Adora's house to talk with Camille. Over the course of their conversation, it emerges that John doesn't have an alibi for the night Natalie was killed, and Meredith—a popular cheerleader obsessed with her own image—is desperate to clear John's name. Camille has heard about both Ann and Natalie's headstrong personalities; John admits that he and his family moved to Wind Gap from Philadelphia after Natalie attacked a classmate with scissors, blinding her in one eye.

Camille and Richard spend the following day driving around together, and the two share a kiss. That evening, when Camille returns home, Adora is waiting for her downstairs, seemingly drunk. Adora confesses that she never loved Camille, and wishes it were Camille, not Marian, who had gotten sick and died. The next morning, Camille interviews Meredith, who reveals that Ann and Natalie were both biters—Natalie bit Meredith twice, and Ann even bit Adora. Camille meets up with Richard and asks whether he believes a man or a woman committed the murders. Richard says he thinks a man is responsible for the crimes—a woman couldn't have committed such abject violence. Camille reveals that she has learned that Ann and Natalie were violent biters, but when she refuses divulge who they bit, or why, Richard accuses Camille of stringing him along and leaves. The next day, Camille goes over to Richard's apartment to apologize. The two have sex—though Camille insists on keeping her clothes on to hide her scars. Later, Camille goes to a party with Amma and her friends. Amma gives Camille OxyContin and Ecstasy, and soon the two are tripping hard. That night, Camille allows Amma to fall asleep

in her bed, but Camille has a dream in which Marian appears to her and tells her that it's not safe in Adora's house. In the morning, Camille wakes up feeling awful. Adora comes into the bedroom and feeds her a blue pill. In a haze, Camille heads down the hall to Amma's room—Amma is sitting naked on the floor in front of her dollhouse, and after confirming that Adora gave Camille the "blue," warns Camille about what's to come. Camille realizes that Adora poisoned Marian to death—and is now doing the same to Amma. Camille rushes to Jackie's; Jackie admits that she always suspected Adora's responsibility for Marian's death, and urges Camille to leave town. Camille, still terrified of going back home, drives out to a bar on the edge of town. There, she finds a very drunk John Keene, who begs her to believe that he is innocent. Camille knows what it is like to lose a sister, and promises John she believes him. The two head to a motel together, where John and Camille have sex—John glimpses one of Camille's scars and demands to see them all, and she allows him to become the first man in fourteen years to see her naked body. In the morning, Richard and Vickery knock on the motel door—Adora called the police to report that Camille hadn't come home. Richard is shocked and dismayed to find Camille with John and refuses to accept her apology. Camille visits her old high school friend Katie, who was an aide at Ann and Natalie's school. Katie reveals that Amma was particularly awful to Ann and Natalie.

Camille finally goes home, and Adora offers her a large glass of bluish milk. Camille decides to take her mother's medicine again to prove to herself that she isn't crazy. Twenty minutes later, Camille begins vomiting. She rushes to the nearest hospital, where she demands to see Marian's old files. In them, she finds a note from a nurse who suspected Adora of Munchausen by Proxy syndrome—a condition in which a caregiver, usually a mother, inflicts illness upon another in order to gain attention and sympathy. Due to Adora's status in Wind Gap, the nurse was unable to convince anyone else to speak up. The distraught Camille stops at a payphone and makes a call to Curry, in which she confesses that she believes her mother killed Marian, Ann, and Natalie. After hanging up, Camille tracks Richard down at a local restaurant and accuses him of suspecting Adora all along. Richard says that he has obtained a search warrant and will be coming by tomorrow. Camille returns home, and Adora invites Camille up to her bedroom—a room Camille has long been forbidden from entering. As Camille enters, she marvels at the exquisite ivory floors. Adora invites Camille into bed with her and fixes her a drink, apologizing for not loving her. Camille swallows the drink and tells Adora that she will never forgive her for what she did to Marian.

Camille wakes up feeling fevered and weak, covered in her own sweat and urine. Adora helps Camille into the bathtub and feeds her more pills and blue milk. Camille's thoughts begin to blur, and she falls asleep in the tub—she is awoken by screams

sometime later, just as Richard bursts in through the door. He tells Camille that everyone needs to get out of the house and offers to take her to the doctor for testing. That evening, police find an exhaustive array of industrial-grade laxatives and emetics, illegal antibiotics, and horse tranquilizers in Adora's room—every single medication is found in Camille's toxicology test. Police also uncover a diary in which Adora details her "treatments" of Marian and admits to killing her when she "couldn't stop" making her ill. The police also find a pair of pliers in Adora's room, trace amounts of blood found on which belong to both Ann and Natalie. Adora is arrested for the murders, and Camille takes custody of Amma, bringing her back to Chicago to live with her.

Amma proves an exhausting charge—she is nervous, needy, and obsessed with female killers. She rejects therapy and demands that Camille buy her expensive furnishings for her dollhouse. As time goes by, Amma makes a friend at school, Lily, who comes over often. One night, Camille wakes up to find Amma standing over her, feverish and sweating, accusing her of liking Lily better. Amma then asks for Camille to care for her like Adora did—when Camille says they won't do things Adora's way, Amma sobs.

A few months later, Lily disappears on her way home from school, and is found dead a few blocks from Camille's apartment—with six teeth missing. Camille finds the teeth in Amma's dollhouse and realizes that Amma was using the teeth pulled from her victims' mouths to recreate the ivory floor of Adora's bedroom. The investigation in Wind Gap is reopened, and police find that Amma, along with three of her friends, killed Ann and Natalie. Adora is tried and convicted for the murder of Marian, while Amma is incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility. Camille visits her once, and during their conversation, Amma admits that when Ann bit Adora on the wrist, Amma became indignant about the ways in which she had tacitly agreed to suffer in exchange for Adora's love. Camille relapses, scarring the unblemished circle of flesh on her back, and moves in with Curry and his wife Eileen, who care for her and "parent" her well for the first time in her life. Camille finds herself worrying often about the night she cared for the sickly Amma—she enjoyed taking care of her younger sister, and wonders whether she has inherited "Adora's sickness" or whether she is, in spite of the horrors she's suffered, a kind person after all.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Camille Preaker – The novel's narrator and protagonist, Camille Preaker, describes herself as "trash from money"—the least-favorite daughter of the wealthy, cruel, controlling Adora Crellin. Camille has wrestled all her life with feelings of being

ugly, unloved, and unwanted. She turned to self-harm at an early age, turning her obsession with language and the desire to control it into a way of marking herself. Camille has covered her entire body in words made of **scars**—the words are alternately feminine (“cupcake,” “dumpling,” “cherry,” “petticoat”) and violent or self-loathing (“wicked,” “duplicitous,” “vanish”). During her childhood, she was forced to watch helplessly as her sister Marian descended into illness and eventually death. Camille has made a life for herself in Chicago as a mediocre journalist, though her self-hatred and alcoholism hold her back from professional success. When a murder and a disappearance in her hometown of Wind Gap bring her back home for the first time in years, Camille is forced to confront the demons from her past and bring to light horrible secrets about her sister’s death and her mother’s abuse. Camille ultimately realizes that her mother was responsible for Marian’s death due to Munchausen by Proxy syndrome, a psychological disorder in which an individual (usually a mother) seeks to gain sympathy and attention by creating illness in another (usually a child). Camille believes that not only was her mother poisoning Marian, but is now too poisoning Amma—and, possibly, hiding the fact that she killed both Ann Nash and Natalie Keene, whose deaths brought Camille back to Wind Gap in the first place. Conflicted, self-loathing, wry, brilliant, and obsessed with language and its capacity to harness the unclouded truth, Camille is in many ways an unlikable, unreliable, and difficult protagonist, and a shaded portrait of modern-day femininity in all its complications, contradictions, and unreasonable expectations.

Adora Crellin – Camille’s mother, Adora Crellin, is the matriarch of the wealthiest family in Wind Gap. Adora’s carefully constructed persona as a Southern belle hides the darker truths about her past and present. Raised by an abusive mother, Adora got pregnant with Camille when she was just a teenager and, despite the social stigmas at the time, kept the child and married Alan Crellin. Adora’s role as the owner of the town’s major source of profit—a gargantuan hog farm—gives her a kind of immunity to scandal. At the start of the novel, Adora is a nervous, traumatized woman desperate for control—her habit of plucking out her own eyelashes reveals a masochistic and self-destructive nature. She is shocked and not particularly overjoyed by Camille’s reappearance in Wind Gap, and dismisses Camille’s reportage on the murders of Ann and Natalie as lurid and cannibalistic. Adora and Camille have a contentious and hateful relationship, fueled by the pain and trauma both feel in the wake of the death of Marian—Adora’s second daughter who died when Camille was still a child. As the hatred between Adora and Camille reaches a fever pitch—with Adora threatening to physically harm Camille while simultaneously longing to tend to her wounds and ply her with medications—Camille realizes that her mother was making Marian sick all along, and is doing the same to her half-sister Amma. Believing Adora to have been responsible for Ann and

Natalie’s deaths, too, as she was tutoring both of the girls privately, Camille feels vindicated when Adora is arrested for all three murders—only to be filled with horror when she later realizes that Amma, not Adora, was behind Ann and Natalie’s deaths.

Amma Crellin – Amma Crellin is Camille’s thirteen-year-old half-sister. A mess of contradictions, Amma is the picture-perfect daughter when at home, dressing in little girls’ dresses and bows for Adora’s delight and spending hours meticulously working on a dollhouse designed to look just like her mother’s house. Amma, however, has a secret double life, the other half of which is filled with drugs, sex, and cruel machinations aimed at maintaining a complicated web of control over her school and friends. Amma purposefully subjects herself to her mother’s treatments and ministrations because she longs for the closeness being “sick” brings her and Adora—at the same time, she seeks to escape Adora’s clutches and exercise the dark mechanisms of control and intimidation she learns from her mother over the other girls in the neighborhood. During a drug-fueled romp through town, Amma confesses that she “hurts” to feel better—Camille thinks that her sister is referring to hurting herself, but in time an even darker truth comes to light. After Adora is arrested for the murders of Marian, Ann, and Natalie, Camille takes Amma to live with her in Chicago, believing her fragile and strange little sister to be in need of support. When Amma’s first friend in Chicago turns up dead, with six teeth missing, Camille realizes the horrible truth—Amma was responsible for Ann and Natalie’s deaths, having killed them for getting too close to Adora and then using **teeth** plucked from their mouths to make the ivory floor of Adora’s room in her dollhouse replica of the Crellin manse. Amma’s complicated desires for love, control, and submission—along with her fear of being shunned by others for what she has done—makes her not just one of the most complex characters in the novel, but in the mystery and thriller genres more largely.

Detective Richard Willis – Detective Richard Willis is a detective from Kansas City who has been brought to Wind Gap to assist in the investigation of Ann and Natalie’s murders. Richard is on the brink of a big break in his career, and somewhat selfishly hopes that solving the case in Wind Gap will allow him to make bigger moves back home. As he and Camille bond over their “outsider” status—and the information they can give one another—an attraction forms between them, and soon they begin sleeping together. Camille likes Richard, but because of her **scars** is afraid to ever let him see all of her. When Camille sleeps with John Keene, Richard feels betrayed, and refuses to see her any longer; however, when Camille submits herself to Adora’s ministrations in order to ingest poison that can be used as evidence against her mother, Richard is among those who comes to save Camille and Amma and lock Adora away. As Richard glimpses Camille’s scars for the first time, seeing her in

her mother's bathtub, he is repulsed; after the case is closed, Camille doesn't hear from him again, as she knew she wouldn't the second she saw the way he reacted to her scars. Symbolically, this shows that Willis is committed to the truth, unlike Camille, only to a certain extent—as long as it is convenient and serves him.

Jackie O'Neele – Jackie is Adora's oldest and ostensibly best friend in Wind Gap, a wealthy and pampered woman whose alcoholism and forays into plastic surgery are open secrets in town. Jackie and Adora have been feuding when Camille first arrives in Wind Gap, though the sweet—and often inebriated—Jackie treats Camille warmly, even inviting her to come to lunch and gossip with her and her friends. When Camille grows suspicious of her mother's involvement in the deaths of Ann and Natalie, whom she was tutoring—and begins to believe that her mother intentionally killed her perpetually sick younger sister, Marian, years ago—she seeks out Jackie, who more or less confirms the truth. Adora did kill Marian, and has gotten away with it for all these years—"A beautiful girl can get away with anything," Jackie says, "if she plays nice."

Ann Nash – Ann Nash is a nine-year-old girl who was found dead in a creek in the middle of the woods outside Wind Gap several months before the start of the novel. Ann had been strangled—and all of her **teeth** removed—when she was found by police. When Natalie Keene is murdered, the similarities between the girls' deaths spark an investigation. Natalie and Ann were both being tutored by Adora, and as Camille learns more about her mother's insidious secrets and murderous ways, she believes that Adora is responsible. Indeed, Adora is arrested for the girls' murders—but after Camille takes Amma to live with her in Chicago and a third little girl winds up dead with missing teeth, Camille realizes that Amma—threatened by her mothers' affection for Ann and Natalie—was the killer all along, and pulled their teeth in order to complete the ivory floor in one of the rooms of her dollhouse.

Natalie Keene – Natalie Keene is a ten-year-old Wind Gap girl who goes missing at the start of the novel, prompting Camille's boss, Frank Curry, to send her to her hometown to investigate. Within days of Camille's return to Missouri, Natalie Keene's dead body is found, posed like a doll, in the center of town. All of the girl's **teeth** have been removed—making clear the fact that Natalie and Ann Nash, who was killed and stripped of all her teeth just a few months earlier, are victims of the same killer. It is eventually revealed that Natalie harbored violent tendencies, and that her family had moved from Philadelphia to Missouri after Natalie brutally attacked and blinded one of her classmates.

John Keene – John Keene is Natalie Keene's older brother, who is a senior in high school. An emotional teenage boy, John Keene is soon singled out as a suspect in Natalie's murder, and becomes something of a pariah throughout Wind Gap. As rumors that John and Natalie were close in an "unhealthy" way

and it is revealed that John has no alibi for the night of Natalie's murder, pressure mounts, and John becomes even more emotional and withdrawn. As Camille's suspicions about Adora intensify, she seeks solace at a bar on the outskirts of town, and when she finds a drunken John Keene there, he begs her to believe that he had nothing to do with Natalie's murder. The two then go to a motel and sleep together; John Keene is the first man to ever see **Camille's scars**, but he does not recoil at the sight of them and instead allows Camille to feel seen, accepted, and even "exorcised."

Meredith Wheeler – Meredith Wheeler is John Keene's girlfriend, known throughout Wind Gap as "Little Miss Perfect." Desperate for popularity and recognition—and for the salvation of her own reputation—Meredith arranges on-the-record meetings between herself, Camille, and John, in order to clear her boyfriend's name and make sure everyone in town knows she's not dating a "fucking baby killer." Meredith's perfect façade and premeditated answers fade away, however, when she speaks with Camille alone, and she reveals that Ann and Natalie were not "angels" but troubled little girls with "serious tempers."

Marian Crellin – Camille's deceased younger sister, Marian, was a sickly child with whom Camille nonetheless forged a close friendship. Marian died when she was young, leaving Camille devastated and traumatized. It is eventually revealed that Adora herself killed Marian, sickening her through years of poisoning as a result of Munchausen by Proxy syndrome. Throughout the novel, Camille's memories of Marian resurface with increasing intensity, culminating in Camille eventually experiencing a vision of Marian telling her that it isn't safe for her to be in Adora's house any longer—a vision which Camille does not heed as she commits to exposing, once and for all, the truth of what her mother did to her sister.

Chief Bill Vickery – Chief Bill Vickery is the chief of police in Wind Gap. A rail-thin man in his early fifties, Vickery is committed to solving Ann and Natalie's murders quietly and within the community. He loathes the presence of outsiders, such as Detective Willis and Camille herself, fearing that they will paint an unflattering picture of Wind Gap for the rest of the world.

Frank Curry – Frank Curry is Camille's newspaper boss in Chicago. Frank refers to Camille both lovingly and teasingly as "cubby," as she is his favorite cub reporter. He teases Camille for being an underachiever, but at the same time truly wants to encourage her to do her best work and discover her voice. Frank and his wife Eileen are not just artistically but emotionally supportive of Camille throughout her harrowing trip with Wind Gap, and it is the two of them she calls when she is in trouble.

Alan Crellin – Camille's stepfather. A nervous and simpering man, he has enabled and turned a blind eye Adora's loathsome

and even dangerous behavior for years. He has been Camille's stepfather since she was a baby, but she has never felt comfortable referring to him as her father, and has always sensed an iciness between them.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Keene – Natalie Keene's mother and Mr. Keene's wife. The grieving woman hates reporters, and when Camille tries to interview her, she tells Camille that she is "disgusting" and "ugly."

Mr. Keene – Natalie Keene's father and Mrs. Keene's husband.

Eileen Curry – Frank's wife.

Bob Nash – Ann Nash's father, who actually agrees to talk to Camille on the record about his daughter's murder, as he is desperate for justice.

Betsy Nash – Ann Nash's mother and Bob Nash's wife.

Gayla – The Crellin family's maid, a former farm girl who traded in working on the hog farm for working for Adora directly.

James Capisi – A little boy who lives in Wind Gap and claims to have seen a woman dressed all in white grab Natalie Keene and pull her into the woods on the day of her disappearance.

Lily Burke – Amma's first friend in Chicago. After Amma notices Lily and Camille growing close, Amma kills Lily brutally, removing six of her **teeth** in order to complete the ivory floor of her dollhouse.

Katie – Camille's best friend from high school.

Angie – One of Camille's high school friends who never left Wind Gap.

Mimi – A wealthy, snobbish woman who was one of Camille's friends in high school.

Tish – One of Camille's high-school friends who never left Wind Gap. She was the nurturing "mother" of their friend group.

Becca – One of Camille's high-school friends who never left Wind Gap. She is uncomfortable with the fact that after many years, she still hangs out with the same group of women, whose interests have largely diverged from her own.

Jodes – One of Amma's neighborhood friends, eventually revealed to be her accomplice in murder. The weakest and most sensitive of the bunch, Jodes is often picked on by mercilessly by Amma, Kylie, and Kelsey.

Kylie – One of Amma's neighborhood friends, eventually revealed to be her accomplice in murder along with Jodes and Kelsey.

Kelsey – One of Amma's neighborhood friends, eventually revealed to be her accomplice in murder along with Jodes and Kylie.

Joya – Adora's long-deceased mother, a woman whose memory

looms larger than life throughout the town of Wind Gap. Joya was an unkempt, abusive, and possessive woman who physically and emotionally abused Adora.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



TOXIC MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

In many ways, the central theme of Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* is that of toxic mother-daughter relationships. Throughout the novel, Flynn uses Adora's literal poisonings of her daughters with homemade tinctures as an extended metaphor for the ways in which abusive mothers "poison" their daughters every day in small ways. Throughout the novel, Flynn uses the relationships between Adora and Camille, Adora and Amma, and even between Amma and Camille to argue that toxic mother-daughter relationships can indeed "poison" all other relationships the affected daughters and mothers pursue.

Adora Crellin is a refined Southern belle, a holdover from a near-extinct brand of womanhood that prizes propriety and gentility. The heiress to her family's hog-farming business, Adora has inherited more than material wealth from her parents—a victim of an abusive mother herself, Adora has had only toxic models of mother-daughter relationships and thus becomes a literally poisonous presence in her daughters' lives. Adora's second daughter, Marian, died when Camille was young—Camille and Adora both mourn the loss of their beloved, saintlike Marian, and the loss of the girl forever poisoned their relationship to one another. Camille's resentment of her mother—for loving Marian more than her, and for losing the one they both loved so dearly—is just one poisonous holdover from her difficult childhood, a childhood so painful that she moved away from the small, insular town of Wind Gap at first opportunity.

When Camille returns to Wind Gap to report on a murder and a disappearance—both of girls under the age of ten—she is reunited with her mother and her half-sister, Amma, whom she barely knows. As Camille begins to observe the strange, codependent relationship between Amma, who, at thirteen, still dresses in frilly child's clothes and allows Adora to baby her and "care" for her with homemade medicines and tinctures, she is reminded of Adora and Marian, and once again feels both left out and off-put by the closeness between the two. Eventually, it comes to light that Adora is poisoning the thirteen-year-old

Amma—just as she poisoned Marian to death years ago. Adora suffers from Munchausen By Proxy syndrome, a psychological disorder in which one inflicts pain or harm upon another in order to receive sympathy and adoration. Still clearly unable to cope with the toxicity in her own relationship with her mother, Adora poisons her own children in an attempt to control them and gain the love, sympathy, and attention of others—possibly to fill the void left by her own mother Joya’s abuse and inattention. Adora’s poisonings—which form the novel’s sickening climax when Camille, desperate to expose the truth, at last willingly allows Adora to “care” for her after years spent avoiding the treatments as a child—become Flynn’s metaphor for the poisonous ways in which some mothers infect, weaken, and even destroy their children in an attempt to cope with the toxicity that befell them in their own youth. Amma is revealed to have been willingly submitting herself to the poisonings for years, longing for the closeness she feels with Adora when she lets her mother tend to her. Flynn uses Amma’s willing compliance in her own poisoning, contrasted with Marian’s victimization—and Camille’s willful refusal—to show how children react in very different ways to the presence of such toxicity. Some welcome it, and even grow to crave it; some reject it and distance themselves from it; some don’t even know it’s there, and become hapless victims when their lives and welfare become consumed by it.

At the end of the novel, after Adora has been arrested for the murders of Marian, Natalie, and Ann, Camille takes Amma to Chicago to live with her. There, she begins trying to tend to her sister’s emotional wounds, enrolling her in therapy and trying to give Amma “assurance of [her] love” at every turn to make up for the pain Amma has suffered in Adora’s house. When Amma falls ill one evening, Camille finds herself tending to her feverish younger sister, who begs for Adora’s treatments—rubbing alcohol applied all over her body, for instance—only to break down in tears when Camille reassures Amma that they’re “not going to do it like [Adora] does it anymore.” Soon thereafter, another dead little girl turns up—Amma’s friend Lily—and Camille realizes that Amma, not Adora, killed Ann and Natalie back in Wind Gap, and pulled all three girls’ **teeth** in order to finish the ivory floor in Adora’s room of her dollhouse. Through her conversations with Amma, who is now in juvenile prison, Camille realizes how toxic her sister’s relationship with Adora was—and how it has “poisoned” Amma’s entire life. When Amma admits that she enjoyed killing her victims, Camille resignedly reflects on the fact that “a child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort.” Amma’s violence, cruelty, and numbness reflect the insidious nature of her toxic relationship with her mother, and how that toxicity has prevented Amma from developing correctly. Amma enjoys inflicting harm on others, the way Adora inflicted harm on her.

In the final lines of the novel, Camille reflects on the short time Amma lived with her in her Chicago apartment—when she

cared for her sister the night she fell ill. Camille is disturbed by the thought that she enjoyed caring for Amma not out of kindness, but because she has “Adora’s sickness.” Camille tells herself that she is “leaning toward kindness”—but the fear that Adora has poisoned not just Amma’s life and relationships, but Camille’s as well, keeps her up at night and makes her skin “pulse.” Centering her novel around a series of mother-daughter relationships that are quite literally poisoned is Flynn’s way of talking metaphorically about the toxic nature of abusive relationships. Closing the book out, then, by hovering above the lingering fear that Adora has poisoned Camille forever—and even passed on her “sickness” to her—is Flynn’s way of engaging an even larger metaphor about the heredity of violence and abuse, and the ways in which daughters stand to inherit the most toxic traits of their mothers.



ABUSE, VICTIMIZATION, AND CONTROL

Gillian Flynn explores the theme of abuse, victimization, and control through *Sharp Objects*’ three major characters: Camille, Adora, and Amma.

All three women are simultaneously victims of abuse and abusers of themselves, others, or both. Throughout the novel, Flynn uses Camille, Adora, and Amma and their crimes against themselves and others to suggest that victims often become victimizers in an attempt to reassert control over their stories, bodies, and lives.

Camille Preaker, a reporter and journalist, is the protagonist and narrator of *Sharp Objects*. Traumatized by a painful childhood and left feeling ugly, unloved, and unable to control her own story, Camille turns to self-harm, **scarifying words** onto every reachable surface of her body. Camille, victimized for years by her abusive mother, forced to witness the slow death of her sister Marian (a death which she, the text hints, subliminally understood was caused by her mother), and subjected to a gang rape in high school, suffers as an adult from serious traumas related to her painful past. In choosing to carve words into her skin, Camille is maiming and hurting herself but is also reasserting control over her own body—a body which so many others, including her own mother, abused and attempted to lay claim to. Camille’s self-harm is a double-edged sword, however. In reclaiming her body for herself, she is taking decisive action in reasserting her own agency—and yet the words she carves into her skin are often cruel and self-hating, pointing to a desire to further abuse, torture, taunt, and victimize herself either out of a learned pattern of toxicity or an acute self-loathing born out of feelings of worthlessness owing to her prior abuses.

Adora, the novel’s primary antagonist, is guilty of abuse towards all three of her children. Adora herself, though, is the victim of an abusive mother, and as the novel unfolds, Adora’s patterns of abuse and victimization are shown to have roots in the desire to exorcise her own trauma and establish control

over her children to make up for the lack of it she felt in her own childhood. Camille never met her grandmother—Adora’s mother, Joya—but when she returns to her hometown to report on the deaths of Ann Nash and Natalie Keene, she begins hearing about Joya’s influence in detail for the first time. She learns from her mother’s estranged friend Jackie that Joya was a cruel, domineering, and odd woman who used to wake Adora up in the middle of the night by pinching her, just to be sure that she was still alive. She abused Adora by sending her out into the woods in the middle of the night and forcing her to find her way home alone, and Jackie’s remarks about the woman’s unkempt appearance suggest that she was out of touch and perhaps even unhinged. The novel, told from Camille’s perspective, doesn’t voyage far into Adora’s inner world—Adora’s icy nature and detachment from Camille specifically also prevent much of Adora’s interiority from being revealed. What is clear is that Adora’s emotional cruelty towards Camille, physical abuse of Amma, and murder of Marian are all tied to her desire to control her children—not just their thoughts and desires, but the physicality and inner workings of their bodies. Adora wants no less than total dominion over her girls to make up for the lack of agency she had in her own childhood. Towards the end of the novel, Camille catches wise to her mother’s true motivations—and her murder of Marian—and decides to submit to her mother’s “care” once and for all. As Adora pumps Camille full of pills and potions, she remarks on her eldest daughter’s sudden compliance: “You were never such a good girl when you were little [...] You were always so willful. Maybe your spirit has gotten a bit more broken. In a good way. A necessary way.” This statement reveals Adora’s delight in having discovered how “broken” her own daughter is—Camille’s brokenness means that Adora can finally control her, and Adora sees this shift in Camille as a “good” and “necessary” thing—good and necessary, of course, for Adora’s own pathological need to exert control over her daughter’s bodies.

Amma, the victim of abuse at the hands of her mother Adora, lashes out in perhaps the most violent way of all three major characters: by becoming a murderer. Amma has spent her childhood in the shadow of the deceased, saintlike Marian, whom Adora privately mourns but never speaks of. Amma is also being subjected to the same ministrations Marian was. Whether she intuits that it was Adora who killed Marian is left rather ambiguous, but seeing as Amma electively chooses to let her mother poison her even after she figures out what Adora is up to, the girl must have some understanding of just how far her mother is capable of taking her “care.” Despite the abuse she suffers, Amma longs to be closer to her mother, and because Adora “likes to take care of [Amma]” so much, Amma lets her. She both resents and enjoys feeling like her mother’s plaything, but the anger and frustration that builds up during Adora’s ministrations soon takes on a dark, violent will of its own. When Adora begins tutoring two of Amma’s schoolmates,

Ann and Natalie, she starts loathing the girls for getting so close to her mother. When Ann—a notoriously rebellious little girl—bites Adora on the hand one day, it all becomes too much for Amma. She has witnessed someone retaliating against Adora’s attempts at control and getting away with it, and the realization that she has made herself into Adora’s puppet fills her with rage. Amma kills Ann and pulls her **teeth**, and, several months later, kills Natalie, too—Amma, Adora’s victim, has become a victimizer as a way of attempting to reassert control over her own life.

In a novel full of twists and turns, the theme of victims becoming abusers ties in seamlessly with Flynn’s larger examinations of the subversions, retaliations, and carefully-constructed facades which are all part of cycles of abuse and trauma. Camille, Adora, and Amma are part of a legacy of violence, cruelty, and rigorous control—each victims in their own way, they have each chosen to victimize themselves or others in a desperate attempt to make sense of the cycles of abuse that have defined all of their lives both together and apart.



REJECTING FEMININITY

Many of Gillian Flynn’s major works are concerned with what it means to be a woman, and what it means to reject the trappings of femininity—none more so than *Sharp Objects*. Throughout *Sharp Objects*, Flynn uses Camille, Amma, and Adora, who each reject femininity both consciously and unconsciously, willfully and passively, to argue that while the unwieldy burdens of femininity and stereotypically female roles and behaviors can actually prove dangerous in the lives of women, rejecting femininity can prove even more dangerous—suggesting that both prescribed femininity and the rejection of it only ever serve to entrap and endanger women.

Camille, the novel’s narrator and protagonist, is locked in a complicated battle with her own femininity—a battle best exemplified by the horrific self-inflicted **scars** covering her body. Camille’s scars take the form of words—a large percentage of which are highly feminine, such as “*cupcake*,” “*cherry*,” “*dumpling*,” and “*petticoat*.” Interspersed are other kinds of words—dark, self-hating words such as “*tragic*,” “*duplicitous*,” and “*wicked*.” On the canvas of her body, Camille wages a war with femininity. She indulges her feminine impulses but also berates herself for doing so, and seems unable to either surrender to her femininity or fully reject it. The presence of the scars allows—or forces—Camille to reject femininity in another major way. Her shame about her scars has prevented her from having intimate relationships with men over the years. In *Wind Gap*, she sleeps with two men—only one of whom she allows to see her scars—and is surprised and even blissful when one of them, John Keene, kisses each scar. Camille’s longstanding rejection of her sexuality—largely, the text

suggests, as the result of a gang rape she endured in high school—is yet another way in which she chooses to reject her femininity and wall herself off from the feelings of pain and worthlessness this aspect of womanhood once inflicted upon her.

At thirteen years old, Amma is just beginning to come into her own girlhood—in a very dangerous way. As she vacillates between wanting to embody and escape womanhood, her insecurity and indecision manifest as cold-blooded violence. At home, Amma is her mother’s “doll”—she dresses in frilly, feminine clothes, plays with a dollhouse, and allows her mother to coddle her, even though she knows that Adora is actually poisoning her. At home, Amma does not reject femininity—she leans into it, even at her own peril. Her acceptance of femininity and submissiveness at home leads to a desire for dominance and a more masculine way of moving through the larger world, however. As she explains to Camille, she has had a “weird” realization recently: “After [Adora] takes care of me,” she tells her sister, “I like to have sex.” Outside of the insular, toxic world of her home, Amma subverts and rejects traditional femininity. With her friends, Amma is a dominant, cruel, sex-crazed druggie. She uses sex with boys as a way of feeling empowered and in control. She is the ringleader of her group of friends, both the most physically and psychologically mature and the instigator of their run-ins with trouble. Amma’s unabashed plays at social and sexual dominance are more traditionally masculine traits—away from her mother’s domain, she rejects the femininity Adora has imposed upon her. Amma’s double life goes even deeper than just partying with her friends, however—at the end of the novel, it is revealed that Amma was responsible for the deaths of both Natalie and Ann. Though John Keene suspected her of their murders, and though Amma had established a questionable reputation for herself throughout *Wind Gap*, she evaded investigators’ interest because of her perceived femininity. The fact that both victims’ **teeth** were pulled suggested to police that a strong and psychologically detached person committed the murders—Vickery and Willis both outright assume that the killer had to be a man. Amma’s violent tooth-pulling suggests both immense physical strength and a pathologically detached psyche—two traits which are decidedly un-feminine in the public imagination, and which cement in full Amma’s rejection of the trappings of femininity.

Lastly, Adora’s rejection of femininity is tied to her rejection of her role as a mother. It is the duty of a mother to nurture and protect their children—in abusing, poisoning, and even killing her own children, Adora rejects this major tenet of womanhood and marker of her own femininity. Camille was Adora’s first child. Born out of wedlock, Camille presented a threat to Adora’s image of purity and traditional femininity, and Adora seemingly loathed Camille from birth. Adora was never warm to Camille, and never attempted to give Camille her potions

and tinctures, seeing how “willful” her firstborn was. At a pivotal point in the novel, Adora admits outright that she never loved Camille—though Adora’s darkest secrets, at that point, remains hidden, this bold statement is her first major admission that she has rejected her role as a mother and a large stake in her own femininity. It is eventually revealed that Adora murdered Marian through Munchausen by Proxy syndrome, a condition in which a person inflicts illness on another for attention. Adora is doing the same thing years later to Amma, and Camille finally catches wise when Adora manages to slip Camille a pill of her own design after Camille has a night of heavy drinking. Though Adora’s ambivalence towards Camille was one kind of abandonment of motherly duties, inflicting harm or even death on one’s child is a wildly different beast. Once the truth of Adora’s actions come to light, it becomes clear both to Camille and to Flynn’s readers that Adora, for all of her Southern-belle gentility and feigned frailty, has rejected her womanhood and femininity in the way she twists her role as a mother.

Through Adora, Camille, and Amma’s violent rejections of their femininity, Flynn suggests that in a world where femininity is compulsory and restrictive, the only way to break out of its bonds is through violence—and even then, the dangers and misery associated with prescribed femininity can never really be escaped. Femininity presents such a danger to these women—danger of losing their identities, danger of having their bodies weaponized against them, danger of being ignored or unappreciated—that they violently reject womanhood, and yet find themselves imperiled by other, even deeper dangers. Life as a woman, Flynn seems to argue, is full of dead ends; a woman is damned if she submits to prescribed modes of femininity, and she is damned if she doesn’t.



SECRETS, LIES, AND DISGUISES

A tangled web of deceit lies just beneath the surface in the town of Wind Gap, Missouri, and when Camille Preaker returns to the hometown she fled at first opportunity, she is horrified by how valuable a currency secrecy and deception still is there. As Camille reconnects with old friends, family members, and acquaintances and makes new ones as well, she finds that everyone—including herself—has something to hide. Through Camille’s journey to the “underworld” that is her hometown and back, Flynn argues that secrets, lies, and disguises have the power to destabilize and devalue not just interpersonal relationships, but entire communities.

Camille, Adora, and Amma are locked in a three-way game of cat-and-mouse throughout the novel, and the deceptions and false personas they adopt to shield themselves from one another eventually threaten their larger community. As the wealthiest woman in town—and the heiress of the hog farm that sustains its economy—Adora presents a front of

confidence, control, and savvy to the world while privately wrestling with the scars of her own childhood abuse at the hands of her mother, Joya: a pathological need for attention and praise, as well as the desire for control over the young female presences in her life. Adora's very name belies her desire to be adored, and yet she never gives any public indication of how desperate she is for attention and affection. When police raid the house at the end of the novel, however, they find her diary, and one of the entries—from the time of Marian's death—reads simply: "Marian is dead. I couldn't stop. I've lost 12 pounds and am skin and bones. Everyone's been incredibly kind. People can be so wonderful." Marian's death is, all at once, a casualty of Adora's masked desire for attention and kindness, a way for Adora to further delude herself into believing she is a beloved member of the community (when really her wealth isolates her from the majority of the town), and a destabilizing force in the social world of Wind Gap. As Adora's friends and fellow townspeople rally around her to comfort her, little do they know that they are fawning over a murderer, and giving an evil woman exactly what she wants.

Amma is perhaps the greatest pretender in the novel. A sexually adventurous, drug-loving child, Amma disguises herself as a "doll" and a simpering good girl while at home in her mother's house—or perhaps it's the other way around. Amma, like her mother, has a seemingly pathological need for attention and adoration. She gets it at home by dressing up in childish, ultra-feminine outfits and subjecting herself to Adora's poisonings, even as she is conscious of what her mother is doing to her—when she submits to Adora, Adora "cares" for her, and thus Amma feels both closer to her mother and in control of the suffering her mother is inflicting upon her. Out on the town, Amma adopts a fearless, persona—decidedly different from the little-girl behavior she affects at home, but grown from the same impulse—to attract attention and devotion from boys and friends through a combination of bullying, peer pressure, substances, sex, and intimidation. It is unclear for much of the novel which Amma is the real Amma—whether it is the defenseless, tantrum prone little girl obsessed with her dollhouse or the party monster she becomes when out with her friends. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that neither persona was the "real" one—Amma is, deep down, a ruthless killer and a pit of need, so detached from the act of causing others pain and suffering that she hardly thinks twice about murdering two of her classmates for getting too close to Adora, who was tutoring them in spelling. Amma's secrets and lies, then, are in many ways the most destabilizing in the entire novel: she tears a community apart, forever changes two families, and, it can be inferred, alters the entire financial and social topography of Wind Gap in allowing her powerful mother to take the fall—at least for a while—for her own crimes.

Camille's greatest deception is not necessarily an outward-facing one. She hides her physical **scars** from the world, but the

person she's attempting to deceive most intentionally is herself. Camille struggles with an addiction to alcohol, which she uses in conjunction with her self-harm routine in order to dull the pain of her unhappy childhood and her sister Marian's death. As the novel progresses, and as Camille spends more time navigating the fraught emotional terrain of her childhood home, it becomes apparent that Camille is actually using her self-destructive behaviors—not to mention the physical distance and façade of detachment she has placed between herself and her family—to hide a dark, awful truth she has been hiding from her years: her mother was responsible for Marian's death. After Camille and Amma spend a night out partying, Adora administers pills and potions of her own making to both girls. When Camille begins vomiting, and sees that Amma is too, she realizes that they are "sick just like Marian," and is ashamed that the "obvious[-ness]" of the truth eluded her, at least consciously, for so long. Camille, in moving to Chicago, drowning herself in alcohol and self-abuse, and distancing herself from her family and hometown, withdrew from the painful truth that was "obvious" and just below the surface, burying it deep down and preventing herself from ever having to confront it. In leaving her hometown, Camille in fact contributed to its destabilization. Camille was the only one "willful" enough to ever resist Adora—she never took Adora's medicines, and her contentious relationship with her mother prevented her from becoming a victim of Adora's Munchausen By Proxy. At the same time, Camille's innate facility with storytelling and her rebellious, perceptive nature could have led to the exposure of the truth about Adora years earlier—and, perhaps, could have spared Amma from her mother's disease and thus the town from Amma's violence.

In *Sharp Objects*, Flynn paints a portrait of a town profoundly shaken and forever changed by deception. The larger atmosphere in the town—a toxic commitment to keeping away outsiders and preserving the illusion of a kind of Southern gentility and moral purity that never, perhaps, existed in the first place—is further destabilized by the effects of the Preaker/Crellin family's secrets, lies, and games. Flynn uses Wind Gap as a metaphor for a larger social commentary on how secrecy and duplicity can reverberate throughout the world in wild ways.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



CAMILLE'S SCARS

Camille's scars, which cover her entire body save for one perfect circle of unblemished, smooth skin left in the center of her back, serve as a symbol throughout the novel for Camille's dedication to finding and naming the truth,

even as those around her—namely her mother, the evil and cunning Adora—seek to disguise themselves in secrets and lies. A self-described “cutter,” Camille insists that the wounds she inflicts upon herself have a “purpose”: her skin, covered with words, “screams.” The words that cover Camille’s body are alternately feminine (“*babydoll*,” “*cook*,” “*cupcake*,” “*kitty*,” “*curls*,” “*petticoat*,” “*cherry*,” “*dumpling*”) and violent, self-hating, or darkly aspirational (“*wicked*,” “*vanish*,” “*harmful*,” “*inarticulate*,” “*duplicitous*”). Cutting makes Camille feel “safe,” as she wrestles the power of language back into her own command and captures “the truth” about herself for herself.

At one point in the novel, Adora takes Camille and her half-sister Amma shopping for clothes. Knowing full well that her eldest daughter is covered in scars, Adora cruelly strands Camille in the dressing room with only strappy, revealing dresses to try on. When Camille comes out of the room, exposing her scars to her mother and sister, Amma is horrified, but Adora is simply disdainful of Camille’s choice to ruin her body and remarks that she hopes Camille can “stand [her]self.” At another point, as Camille and Adora have a drunken heart-to-heart—or the closest thing a heart-to-heart the two women, who revile one another, could ever have—Adora places a finger on the one unblemished piece of skin left on Camille and threatens to “carve [her] name there” someday. These two scenes—which involve Adora, the only person in the world other than Camille herself who knows the full truth about the scars’ existence—symbolize the forces of deceit and deception that mark Adora’s life and the striving towards truth (even if it’s ugly) that marks Camille’s. Deeply traumatized by her youth in Adora’s controlling, sterile, strange household, Camille has chosen to mark her body with words in hopes of exposing some kind of truth. Adora, who is threatened by the truth—as she has horrible secrets to hide, namely her Munchausen by Proxy killing of Camille’s younger sister Marian—seems to both want to expose Camille’s scars and at the same time mock and invalidate them, hoping to keep the truth Camille has, deep down, always known, from ever reaching the light.



TEETH

Ann Nash and Natalie Keene, the two little girls whose murders set the events of the novel in motion, are both found—months apart and in separate places—with all of their teeth pulled from their mouth. The violent and deliberate nature of the extractions, which would have required an enormous amount of force and dedication points (at least in the eyes of the investigators) to a large and disturbed suspect—a man, presumably, who wanted to defile and deform his victims in a grotesque way. Once the truth about the murders comes out, at the very end of the novel—after Adora has already been arrested for the crimes, when the truth about her Munchausen by Proxy murder of her daughter Marian is revealed and a pair of dainty pliers is found

in her house—it comes to light that Adora’s thirteen-year-old daughter (and Camille’s own half-sister) Amma was actually the one responsible for the deaths of Natalie and Ann, as well as the violent tooth extractions. Amma, who has for a long while been obsessed with perfectly matching the details of her four-foot-tall dollhouse to the specifications of her mother’s own home, needed the girls’ teeth to detail the ivory floors of her mother’s bedroom. When Ann and Natalie, both of whom her mother had been tutoring and paying extra attention to, got on Amma’s nerves, she killed them and plucked their teeth from their dead mouths, all in service of her own project.

The teeth, then, symbolize an overturning of femininity and the stereotypes of girlhood and womanhood. Because of the physical strength and emotional detachment officials decide must have been necessary for the murderer to remove the teeth, they focus only on male suspects, even throwing Natalie’s innocent brother John Keene into the mix. The detectives and policemen fail to believe that a woman could have been responsible for these crimes—let alone an “innocent” thirteen-year-old girl. Amma has proven herself to Camille to be a complicated figure whose femininity and innocence is largely a construct well before the shocking twist is revealed—Amma takes hard drugs, has sex with boys (and forces her friends to do the same), and dresses up like a little “doll” for Adora while putting on saucy outfits to go out on the town at night. Amma is both vulnerable to Adora’s ministrations and is complicit in them—even when her mother feeds her poisons that she knows will make her sick, Amma welcomes the concoctions, knowing that the bond between her and Adora will grow stronger the more readily she submits to her mother’s care. The teeth that Amma pulls from the mouths of her murder victims and then uses to decorate the floor of her dollhouse—a decidedly feminine and little-girlish project—are the most tangible symbol both of Amma’s rage and of her destruction of the expectations people have of women and little girls more specifically.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Sharp Objects* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞☞ When I was still in grammar school, maybe twelve, I wandered into a neighbor boy's hunting shed, a wood-planked shack where the animals were stripped and split. Ribbons of moist, pink flesh dangled from strings, waiting to be dried for jerky. The dirt floor was rusted with blood. The walls were covered with photographs of naked women. Some of the girls were spreading them selves wide, others were being held down and penetrated. One woman was tied up, her eyes glazed, breasts stretched and veined like grapes, as a man took her from behind. I could smell them all in the thick, gory air.

At home that night, I slipped a finger under my panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 14-15

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Camille is wandering through the woods, having split off from the search party combing the woods for the missing Natalie Keene. Camille, a walled-off, alcoholic reporter in her early thirties, has returned to her hometown of Wind Gap for the first time in years to report on the missing girl. As Camille walks the woods, she thinks back to her own girlhood—and the strange, dark feelings she wrestled with back then. Camille's past is shadowed in hurt and misery, and as the novel unfolds, Flynn will unspool the truth of Camille's trauma slowly and teasingly. As she closes out the first chapter with this passage, Flynn shows that Camille is no ordinary woman, and the novel will be no ordinary mystery—Camille's dark and decidedly unfeminine childhood fantasies are potent, frightening, and rooted in an eroticizing of victimization and control. The novel's early chapters are shrouded in secrecy, but through this profoundly strange and striking moment, Flynn offers an image that signifies several of the novel's major themes and concerns.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞☞ Alan, Adora, and Amma were all gathered in the living room when I returned. The scene was startling, it was so much like the old days with Marian. Amma and my mother sat on the couch, my mother cradling Amma—in a woolen nightgown despite the heat—as she held an ice cube to her lips. My half sister stared up at me with blank contentment, then went back to playing with a glowing mahogany dinner table, exactly like the one in the next room, except that it was about four inches high.

“Nothing to worry about,” Alan said, looking up from a newspaper. “Amma's just got the summer chills.”

I felt a shot of alarm, then annoyance: I was sinking back into old routines, about to run to the kitchen to heat some tea, just like I always did for Marian when she was sick. I was about to linger near my mother, waiting for her to put an arm around me, too. My mother and Amma said nothing. My mother didn't even look up at me, just nuzzled Amma in closer to her, and cooed into her ear.

[...]

When I was a child, I remember my mother trying to prod me with ointments and oils, homemade remedies and homeopathic nonsense. I sometimes took the foul solutions, more often refused. Then Marian got sick, really sick, and Adora had more important things to do than coaxing me into swallowing wheat-germ extract. Now I had a pang: all those syrups and tablets she proffered, and I rejected. That was the last time I had her full attention as a mother. I suddenly wished I'd been easier.

Related Characters: Alan Crellin, Camille Preaker (speaker), Marian Crellin, Amma Crellin, Adora Crellin

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 58-59

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Camille—already wrestling with feelings of being excluded and unwanted in her own family—stumbles upon a strange and slightly disturbing scene which nonetheless fills Camille with longing. Flynn uses this moment—in which Camille watches Adora tend to her younger half-sister Amma—to demonstrate the warped environment Adora has fostered in her house over the years and to show that in spite of having escaped a strange and potentially dangerous living situation, Camille still yearns for her mother's love and attention. Camille and Adora have—and have always had—a toxic relationship. Yet, even as an adult woman, Camille finds herself wishing that things were different—that she had, as a child, submitted to

Adora's twisted whims and tried to grow closer to the woman. Now, confronted with a scene that reminds Camille of her own childhood and her feelings of inadequacy compared to her dead sister, Marian, Camille feels herself reverting to childlike wishes and impulses: to be cradled and cared for, even by a woman whose dominion Camille fought so hard to escape.

●● I am a cutter, you see. Also a snipper, a slicer, a carver, a jabber. I am a very special case. I have a purpose. My skin, you see, screams. It's covered with words—*cook*, *cupcake*, *kitty*, *curls*—as if a knife-wielding first-grader learned to write on my flesh. I sometimes, but only sometimes, laugh. Getting out of the bath and seeing, out of the corner of my eye, down the side of a leg: *babydoll*. Pulling on a sweater and, in a flash of my wrist: *harmful*. Why these words? Thousands of hours of therapy have yielded a few ideas from the good doctors. They are often feminine, in a Dick and Jane, pink vs. puppy dog tails sort of way. Or they're flat-out negative. Number of synonyms for anxious carved in my skin: eleven. The one thing I know for sure is that at the time, it was crucial to see these letters on me, and not just see them, but feel them.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Directly after being confronted with the image of Adora babying thirteen-year-old Amma, Camille witnesses Amma throw a childlike tantrum over a mistake in her dollhouse, a perfect replica of Adora's sprawling Victorian manse. The combined—and contrasting—oddity of Amma's behaviors sets Camille on edge, and as she retreats upstairs to her bedroom, she examines the wounds she has inflicted on herself over the course of her life, since the age of thirteen—just after her younger sister Marian died. Camille's scars, one of the novel's most potent images, are a symbol both for her rejection of traditional femininity, having had it forced upon her by Adora for so long, and for her desire to regain control over her body and her relationship to language after suffering psychological abuse at Adora's feet for years.

Chapter 5 Quotes

●● “I'm sorry you had to see me that way, Camille,” Amma said. “Especially since we don't really know each other. I'm just going through a stage,” She flashed an overdone smile. “But now we're reunited. You're like poor Cinderella, and I'm the evil stepsister. Half sister.”

“There's not a speck of evil in you, sweetheart,” Alan said.

“But Camille was the first. First is usually best. Now that she's back, will you love Camille more than me?” asked Amma. She started the question teasingly, but her cheeks were flushed as she waited for my mother to respond.

“No,” Adora said quietly. [...]

“Because you love me,” Amina said, between mouthfuls of ham. The sick smell of meat and sweetness wafted over. “I wish I'd be murdered.”



“Amma, don't say such a thing,” my mother said, blanching. [...]

“Then I'd never have to worry again. When you die, you become perfect. I'd be like Princess Diana. Everyone loves her now.”

“You are the most popular girl in your whole school, and at home you are adored, Amma. Don't be greedy.”

Amma kicked me again under the table and smiled emphatically, as if some important matter had been settled.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker, Adora Crellin, Alan Crellin, Amma Crellin (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Amma—who is Adora's simpering little “doll” at home, but a reckless wild child when out with her friends—comes down to breakfast the night after her fevered tantrum to apologize to Camille. As Amma dreamily and almost manically delivers a stream-of-consciousness monologue to Camille, Adora, and Alan, she reveals some of the truth of who she really is: a “greedy” child obsessed with winning her mother's favor and the adoration of the larger Wind Gap community. Camille, who has seen both of Amma's “selves,” now glimpses a new part of her sister's personality: a raw and earnest desire for total devotion and ardor so complete that Amma would even go so far as to wish for death, if dying would make her more lovable to others—and more powerful.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ As a child, I don't remember ever telling Adora my favorite color, or what I'd like to name my daughter when I grew up. I don't think she ever knew my favorite dish, and I certainly never padded down to her room in the early-morning hours, teary from nightmares. I always feel sad for the girl that I was, because it never occurred to me that my mother might comfort me. She has never told me she loved me, and I never assumed she did. She tended to me. She administrated me. Oh, yes, and one time she bought me lotion with vitamin E.

For a while I convinced myself that Adora's distance was a defense constructed after Marian. But in truth, I think she's always had more problems with children than she'd ever admit. I think, in fact, she hates them. There's a jealousy, a resentfulness that I can feel even now, in my memory. At one point, she probably liked the idea of a daughter. When she was a girl, I bet she daydreamed of being a mother, of coddling, of licking her child like a milk-swelled cat. She has that voraciousness about children. She swoops in on them.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker (speaker), Marian Crellin, Adora Crellin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Camille reflects on her troubled relationship with her mother. The two have never been close, and, for a long time, Camille suffered in silence as she worried that her mother hated her specifically, and denied her affection and care on the basis of who she was. As she has gotten older, though, Camille has come to realize that there is a jealousy—and perhaps even a hatred—of little girls more generally nestled deep within her mother. Adora has a cruelty stewing inside of her that directly contradicts her doting, devoted front—though Adora puts on a show of grace, composure, and femininity, deep down she rejects all three things and even longs to “swoop in” on and mar the femininity of little girls. This secret part of Adora's personality, and the disguise that masks it, will prove integral to the novel as it unfolds, and as Adora's true proclivities and perversions come to light.

☝☝ I have one memory that catches in me like a nasty clump of blood. Marian was dead about two years, and my mother had a cluster of friends come over for afternoon drinks. One of them brought a baby. For hours, the child was cooed over, smothered with red-lipstick kisses, tidied up with tissues, then lipstick smacked again. I was supposed to be reading in my room, but I sat at the top of the stairs watching.

My mother finally was handed the baby, and she cuddled it ferociously. *Oh, how wonderful it is to hold a baby again!* Adora jiggled it on her knee, walked it around the rooms, whispered to it, and I looked down from above like a spiteful little god, the back of my hand placed against my face, imagining how it felt to be cheek to cheek with my mother.

When the ladies went into the kitchen to help tidy up the dishes, something changed. I remember my mother, alone in the living room, staring at the child almost lasciviously. She pressed her lips hard against the baby's apple slice of a cheek. Then she opened her mouth just slightly, took a tiny bit of flesh between her teeth, and gave it a little bite.

The baby wailed. The blotch faded as Adora snuggled the child, and told the other women it was just being fussy. I ran to Marian's room and got under the covers.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker (speaker), Marian Crellin, Adora Crellin

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

After reflecting on the idea that Adora perhaps hates and reviles little girls, Camille offers as evidence a memory from her own childhood. She recalls witnessing Adora secretly bite the cheek of a friend's baby—an action that perfectly summarizes Adora's desire to possess but also to punish youth, femininity, and vulnerability. Watching Adora bite the child scared the young Camille—and the memory continues to frighten and disturb her to this day. Camille has come to realize over the years that her mother is not the nurturer she pretends to be, but rather a kind of predator—and as Camille's stay in Wind Gap goes on, she will come to understand even more intimately just how far Adora's cruelty has gone.

☛ Most sows are repeatedly inseminated, brood after brood, till their bodies give way and they go to slaughter. But while they're still useful, they're made to nurse—strapped to their sides in a farrowing crate, legs apart, nipples exposed. Pigs are extremely smart, sociable creatures, and this forced assembly-line intimacy makes the nursing sows want to die. Which, as soon as they dry up, they do.

Even the idea of this practice I find repulsive. But the sight of it actually does something to you, makes you less human. Like watching a rape and saying nothing. I saw Amma at the far end of the barn, standing at the edge of one metal farrowing crate. A few men were pulling one pack of squealing piglets out of the stall, throwing another pack in. I moved to the far side of the barn so I could stand behind Amma without her seeing me. The pig lay nearly comatose on its side, its belly exposed between metal bars, red, bloody nipples pointing out like fingers. [...]

The piglets in the stall were swarming over the sow like ants on a glob of jelly. The nipples were fought over, bouncing in and out of mouths, jiggling tautly like rubber. The sow's eyes rolled up into her head. Amina sat down cross-legged and gazed, fascinated. After five minutes she was in the same position, now smiling and squirming. I had to leave. I walked, first slowly, then broke into a scramble to my car. Door shut, radio blasting, warm bourbon stinging my throat, I drove away from the stink and sound. And that child.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker (speaker), Amma Crellin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Camille has just followed Amma out to the hog farm that Adora owns, which produces over two percent of the country's pork and makes the Crellins millions of dollars each year. Camille has trailed Amma there in secret, curious about what the girl could possibly be doing all the way out there. Once Camille tracks Amma down inside the complex, however, she comes upon a horrific scene: Amma is watching a seemingly sick, exhausted sow nurse a brood of voracious piglets which may or may not even be her own, and is squirming with delight at the sight. Camille, who believes that seeing such animalistic violence is "like watching a rape and saying nothing," is beyond repulsed. This scene ties in with the novel's themes of rejecting femininity, abuse and control, and secrets and disguises. Its uncanny and macabre tenor is largely symbolic: Amma delights in seeing a wounded mother suffer while sustaining her children. As the novel unfolds, and Camille comes to realize that Adora is regularly

poisoning Amma with a wide array of pills, potions, and tinctures, Amma's desire to see something so violent towards a maternal figure makes sense—but at this point in the novel, its strange, confusing nature resonates primarily on a psychological level, and foreshadows Amma's increasingly dark and violent streak.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ "Camille, open the door."

"What's wrong with Camille?" Amma chimed.

"This won't work." The side zipper was sticking. My bared arms flashed scars in deep pink and purple. Even without looking directly in the mirror I could see them reflected at me—a big blur of scorched skin.

"Camille," my mother spat.

"Why won't she just show us?"

"Camille."

"Momma, you saw the dresses, you know why they won't work," I urged.

"Just let me see."

"I'll try one on, Momma," Amma wheedled.

"Camille . . ."

"Fine." I banged open the door. My mother, her face level with my neckline, winced.

"Oh, dear God." I could feel her breath on me. She held up a bandaged hand, as if about to touch my chest, then let it drop. Behind her Amma whined like a puppy. "Look what you've done to yourself," Adora said. "Look at it."


"I do."

"I hope you just loved it. I hope you can stand yourself."

She shut the door and I ripped at the dress, the zipper still jammed until my furious tugs yanked the teeth apart enough to get it to my hips, where I wriggled out, the zipper leaving a trail of pink scratches on my skin. I bunched the cotton of the dress over my mouth and screamed.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker, Amma Crellin, Adora Crellin (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 120-121

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Adora—retaliating against Camille after she realizes that Camille has been interviewing the Nashes about Ann—forces Camille to go clothes shopping, and shuts her in a dressing room with only revealing items of clothing to try on. Adora knows about Camille’s habit of cutting, and the scars with which she has covered her body—but Amma doesn’t. By putting Camille on the spot, Adora—knowing that Amma, desperate for love, favoritism, and affection, would make a scene once Camille was shown any attention—forces Camille to reveal her secret to Amma in the most humiliating and dehumanizing way possible, and then further shames her daughter for “what [she’s] done” in a public setting. It is all too much for Camille, who lets out an anguished, muffled scream as soon as her mother and sister are out of sight.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛ “You were always so willful, never sweet. I remember when you were six or seven. I wanted to put your hair up in curlers for your school picture. Instead you cut it all off with my fabric shears.” I didn’t remember doing this. I remembered hearing about Ann doing this.

“I don’t think so, Momma.”

“Headstrong. Like those girls. I tried to be close with those girls, those dead girls.”

“What do you mean be close with them?”

“They reminded me of you, running around town wild. Like little pretty animals. I thought if I could be close with them, I would understand you better. If I could like them, maybe I could like you. But I couldn’t. [...] And now you come back and all I can think of is “Why Marian and not her?””

Rage flattened immediately into a dark despair. My fingers found a wood staple in the floorboard. I jabbed it under my fingernail. I would not cry for this woman.

“I’m not so pleased to be left here anyway, Momma, if it makes you feel any better.”

“You’re so hateful.”

“I learned at your feet.” My mother lunged then, grabbed me by both arms. Then she reached behind me and, with one fingernail, circled the spot on my back that had no scars.


“The only place you have left,” she whispered at me. Her breath was cloying and musky, like air coming from a spring well.

“Yes.”

“Someday I’ll carve my name there.” She shook me once, released me, then left me on the stairs with the warm remains of our liquor.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker, Adora Crellin (speaker), Marian Crellin, Natalie Keene, Ann Nash

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 148-149

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Adora—drunk on amaretto sours—confesses that she never loved Camille, and blames Camille’s “headstrong” and willful nature rather than Adora’s own dark desire for control and dominance for all that has gone wrong between them. When she reveals that she sought to get close to both Ann and Natalie out of a desire to retroactively understand and repair her failed relationship with Camille, Camille realizes that her mother has become so obsessed with her inability to control Camille that she has become unhinged, and has sought to control random little girls with Camille’s disposition. As Camille and Adora continue arguing and sparring, Camille “flatten[s]” her misery and despair, having learned over the years that it will get her nowhere with Adora, and instead replicates the same combative, willful behavior that Adora is denigrating. In response, Adora turns violent. This exchange is important, as it will inform and complement Camille’s understanding of what really went on between Adora and the “headstrong” girls she tutored—the girls she couldn’t control or possess.

☛ “[Natalie] had serious problems. We looked for my earlobe, see if it could be stitched back on, but it was gone. I guess she swallowed it.” [Meredith] gave a laugh that sounded like the reverse of a gulp of air. “I mostly just felt sorry for her.”

Lie.

“Ann, was she as bad?” I asked.

“Worse. There are people all over this town with her teeth marks in them. Your mother included.”


“What?” My hands began to sweat and the back of my neck went cold.

“Your mom was tutoring her and Ann didn’t understand. She completely lost it, pulled some of your momma’s hair out, and bit into her wrist. Hard. I think there had to be stitches.” Images of my mother’s thin arm caught between tiny teeth, Ann shaking her head like a dog, blood blossoming on my mother’s sleeve, on Ann’s lips. A scream, a release.

A little circle of jagged lines, and within, a ring of perfect skin.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker, Meredith Wheeler (speaker), Adora Crellin, Natalie Keene, Ann Nash

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Camille interviews Meredith Wheeler—John Keene’s girlfriend—about what Ann and Natalie were really like. Camille has heard from some people around town (Chief Vickery, her mother’s friends, and Ann’s own parents) that both girls had a mean streak and weren’t as innocent and sweet in life as they now appear in death. Now, as Meredith reveals that the girls had “serious problems” with violence—and enacted that violence against the terrifying Adora—Camille begins to fear the worst. Camille’s conjuring of an image of the scar Ann might have left on Adora’s wrist mirrors the way Camille conceives of her own final “ring of perfect skin” in the middle of her back. Camille understands that for Ann to bite Adora would be something that Adora couldn’t abide, a profound violation—just like the violation Adora has threatened against Camille and her last patch of bare skin.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ “She likes to take care of me.”



“Great.”

“It’s weird, Amma said. “After she takes care of me, I like to have sex.” She flipped up her skirt from behind, flashed me a hot pink thong.

“I don’t think you should let boys do things to you, Amma. Because that’s what it is. It’s not reciprocal at your age.”

“Sometimes if you let people do things to you, you’re really doing it to them,” Amma said, pulling another Blow Pop from her pocket. Cherry. “Know what I mean? If someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you’re making them more fucked up. Then you have the control. As long as you don’t go crazy.”

Related Characters: Camille Preaker, Amma Crellin (speaker), Adora Crellin

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a dark and psychologically complex one, and features a rare moment in which Amma is genuinely rather than performatively self-reflective. She conflates the feelings of nurturing she gets when Adora “takes care” of her with the sexual desire she feels when she has sex—or, perhaps, feels that both things contain a kind of violence and violation. Either way, Amma is learning to eroticize suffering at a young age—something that deeply concerns and disturbs Camille, even as Amma vehemently insists that she is in charge of everyone around her, and only lets people “do fucked-up things” to her as way of conning them into believing they have control, when really, she’s the one with all the power and agency.

☝☝ “How do you lash out?” We were near my mother’s house now, and my high was in full bloom. My hair swished on my shoulders like warm water and I swayed side to side to no particular music. A snail shell lay on the edge of the sidewalk and my eyes looped into its curlicue.

“You know. You know how sometimes you need to hurt.” She said it as if she were selling a new hair product.

“There are better ways to deal with boredom and claustrophobia than to hurt,” I said. “You’re a smart girl, you know that.” I realized her fingers were inside the cuffs of my shirt, touching the ridges of my scars. I didn’t stop her. “Do you cut, Amma?”

“I hurt,” she squealed, and twirled out onto the street, spinning flamboyantly, her head back, her arms outstretched like a swan. “I love it!” she screamed. The echo ran down the street, where my mother’s house stood watch on the corner.

Related Characters: Amma Crellin, Camille Preaker (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

As Amma and Camille continue their walk home, Amma explains that she lashes out sometimes by “hurt[ing.]” Amma never says that she hurts herself—but given her obsession with Camille’s scars, and her fondling of them in this moment, Camille believes that Amma is referring to a self-harm practice of her own. Amma, giddy from numerous

hard drugs, doesn't allow Camille to connect with her in this somber moment—instead, she whirls off into the night, declaring that she “loves” to hurt. Amma’s macabre nature and dark tendencies have been hinted at the entire novel—now, as she outright admits that she loves pain, Camille realizes just how damaged her younger half-sister truly is. Camille, however, erroneously believes that Amma is hurting herself—as the novel continues to unfold, it will become clear that what Amma truly loves, though, is hurting others.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ “She gave me something that made me feel really groggy and sick,” I said.

“Blue?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, she likes that one,” Amma mumbled. “You fall asleep all hot and drooly, and then she can bring her friends in to look at you.”

“She’s done this before?” My body went cold under the sweat. I was right: Something horrible was about to happen.

She shrugged. “I don’t mind. Sometimes I don’t take it—just pretend. Then we’re both happy. I play with my dolls or I read, and when I hear her coming I pretend to be asleep.”

“Amma?” I sat down on the floor next to her and stroked her hair. I needed to be gentle. “Does she give you pills and stuff a lot?”

“Only when I’m about to be sick.”

“What happens then?”

“Sometimes I get all hot and crazy and she has to give me cold baths. Sometimes I need to throw up. Sometimes I get all shivery and weak and tired and I just want to sleep.”

It was happening again. Just like Marian. I could feel the bile in the back of my throat, the tightening. I began weeping again, stood up, sat back down. My stomach was churning. I put my head in my hands. Amma and I were sick *just like Marian*. It had to be made that obvious to me before I finally understood—nearly twenty years too late. I wanted to scream in shame.

Related Characters: Amma Crellin, Camille Preaker (speaker), Marian Crellin, Adora Crellin

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Adora has given both Camille and Amma a blue pill after the girls spent a long night out partying and taking hard drugs. Amma has attempted to cover for them by telling Adora that they ate bad chicken and got food poisoning—but it seems that Adora knows the truth, and is seeking to punish the girls with her own bad medicine. As Camille puts the pieces of the puzzle together, she finally understands that Amma’s fits and fevers are too reminiscent of Marian’s illnesses to be a coincidence—and she comes to recognize the truth that Adora is poisoning her and Amma just as she poisoned Marian years ago. Camille feels shame and anger at having either suppressed or denied the realization for so many years—and for having allowed herself and Amma to become Adora’s next potential victims in the process.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ “I know who did it, Curry,” I hissed. “I know it.”

“Well, that’s no reason to cry, Cubby. The police made an arrest?”

“Not yet. I know who did it.” *Thunk* on the dartboard.

“Who? Camille, talk to me.”

I pressed the phone to my mouth and whispered, “My mother.”

“Who? Camille, you have to speak up. Are you at a bar?”

“My mother did it,” I yelped into the phone, the words coming out like a splatter. Silence for too long.

“Camille, you are under a lot of stress, and I was very wrong to send you down there so soon after . . . Now, I want you to go to the nearest airport and fly back here. Don’t get your clothes, just leave your car and come home here. We’ll deal with all that stuff later. Charge the ticket, I’ll pay you back when you get home. But you need to come home now.”

Home home home, like he was trying to hypnotize me.

“I’ll never have a home,” I whimpered, began sobbing again. “I have to go take care of this, Curry.” I hung up as he was ordering me not to.

Related Characters: Frank Curry, Camille Preaker (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 230-231

Explanation and Analysis

After confirming with both Jackie and a nurse at the nearby hospital in Woodberry that Adora killed Marian as a result of her Munchausen by Proxy—a syndrome in which a caregiver inflicts illness or injury on another in order to attain attention and sympathy—Camille makes a tearful call to her boss, Frank Curry. Camille believes that not only did Adora kill Marian, but is also responsible for the deaths of Ann and Natalie, two willful and almost feral girls who were Adora’s tutoring students. Curry, who knows that being in Wind Gap is hard for Camille, believes upon hearing Camille’s words that Camille is experiencing some kind of mental break or anxiety attack. He tries to comfort Camille and lure her back home to Chicago, where she’ll be safe—but Camille, devastated and thoroughly worn out, proclaims that she’ll “never have a home.” Camille’s rejection of her mother’s home—and her inability to foster a healthy life for herself in Chicago—leaves her feeling completely alone in this moment as her world comes tumbling down.

☝ “Camille, if you could be any fairy-tale person in the world, who would you be?” Amma asked.

“Sleeping Beauty.” To spend a life in dreams, that sounded too lovely.

“I’d be Persephone.”

“I don’t know who that is,” I said. [...]



“She’s the Queen of the Dead,” Amma beamed. “She was so beautiful, Hades stole her and took her to the underworld to be his wife. But her mother was so fierce, she forced Hades to give Persephone back. But only for six months each year. So she spends half her life with the dead, and half with the living.”

“Amma, why would such a creature appeal to you?” Alan said. “You can be so ghastly.”

“I feel sorry for Persephone because even when she’s back with the living, people are afraid of her because of where’s she’s been,” Amma said. “And even when she’s with her mother, she’s not really happy, because she knows she’ll have to go back underground.” She grinned at Adora and jabbed a big bite of ham into her mouth, then crowed.

of Ann and Natalie, and has recently confirmed that Richard Willis does too—heads home for dinner on the night before she knows Richard is due to show up at the house with a search warrant. As Camille—weakened by her mother’s poisons, despairing over the realization that Adora murdered Marian (and probably two others), and disoriented by her own fatigue and misery—sits down to dinner, Amma goes off on a dreamy but violent tangent about her desire to become “the Queen of the Dead.” In the moment, her empathy for Persephone over her isolation, competing desires, and sense of doom seems to speak directly to Amma’s own experience of being isolated from her friends, torn between loving and hating Adora, and living in fear of being subjected to Adora’s “treatments;” once the novel’s twist ending is revealed, and it comes to light that Amma, not Adora, killed Ann and Natalie, the passage can be read in a new light. Amma is, quite literally, the “Queen of the Dead”—she has already been to the “underworld” (in other words, committed murder and ferried souls to the land of the dead) and in this way has made other “people” (her classmates and accomplices, not to mention herself) afraid of “where she’s been”—and what she’s capable of.

Related Characters: Alan Crellin, Camille Preaker, Amma Crellin (speaker), Adora Crellin

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 235-236

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Camille—who suspects Adora in the killings

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝ One night I woke to find Amma standing over my bed. “You like Lily better than me,” she whispered. She was feverish, her nightgown clinging to her sweaty body, her teeth chattering. I guided her into the bathroom, sat her down on the toilet, wet a washcloth under the cool, metallic water of the sink, wiped her brow. [...]

I poured two aspirin into my palm, put them back in the bottle, poured them back onto my palm. One or two pills. So easy to give. Would I want to give another, and another? Would I like taking care of a sick little girl? A rustle of recognition when she looked up at me, shaky and sick: *Mother's here*.

I gave Amma two aspirin. The smell made my mouth water. I poured the rest down the drain.

“Now you have to put me in the bathtub and wash me,” she whined.

I pulled her nightgown over her head. Her nakedness was stunning: sticky little girl's legs, a jagged round scar on her hip like half a bottle cap, the slightest down in a wilted thatch between her legs. Full, voluptuous breasts. Thirteen.

She got into the bathtub and pulled her legs to her chin.

“You need to rub alcohol on me,” she whimpered.



“No Amma, just relax.”

Amma face turned pink and she began crying.

“That's how she does it,” she whispered. The tears turned into sobs, then a mournful howl.

“We're not going to do it like she does it anymore,” I said.

Related Characters: Amma Crellin, Camille Preaker (speaker), Adora Crellin, Lily Burke

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 245-246

Explanation and Analysis

After Adora is arrested for the murders of Ann, Natalie, and Marian, Camille takes custody of Amma and brings her sister to Chicago to live with her. Amma, however, is stunted, confused, and spiteful after enduring years of violence, abuse, and suffering—she is desperate for the uncontested love and adoration Adora once showed her, and yet knows that that love only ever came at a price. When Amma fears that Camille has begun to like her new schoolmate and friend, Lily Burke, a little too much, she works herself into a fever and confronts Camille in the dead of night—more than a little bit threateningly. Camille seeks to comfort Amma, as she has been trying to for months—but

when Amma, missing Adora deeply and yet traumatized and frightened of receiving Adora's same “care,” demands Adora's methods and ministrations, Camille realizes that her sister is, perhaps, beyond comforting. Amma is embarrassed and ashamed to “want” Adora's care, and yet knows no way of connecting with a maternal figure other than subjecting herself to violence and abuse. Camille realizes that though she and Amma have a long way to go, the one thing she can offer her sister is the promise that things don't have to be as they were.

Epilogue Quotes

☝ “I was friends with them for a while,” she said finally, talking into her chest. “We had fun, running around in the woods. We were wild. We'd hurt things together. We killed a cat once. But then she”—as always Adora's name went unsaid—“got all interested in them. I could never have anything to myself. They weren't my secrets anymore. They were always coming by the house. They started asking me questions about being sick. They were going to ruin everything. She didn't even realize it.” Amma rubbed her shorn hair harshly. “And why did Ann have to bite . . . her? I couldn't stop thinking about it. Why Ann could bite her, and I couldn't.”

She refused to say more, answered only in sighs and coughs. As for the teeth, she took the teeth only because she needed them. The dollhouse had to be perfect, just like everything else Amma loved.


I think there is more. Ann and Natalie died because Adora paid attention to them. Amma could only view it as a raw deal. Amma, who had allowed my mother to sicken her for so long.

Sometimes when you let people do things to you, you're really doing it to them. Amma controlled Adora by letting Adora sicken her. In return, she demanded uncontested love and loyalty. No other little girls allowed. For the same reasons she murdered Lily Burke. Because, Amina suspected, I liked her better.

You can come up with four thousand other guesses, of course, about why Amina did it. In the end, the fact remains: Amma enjoyed hurting. *I like violence*, she'd shrieked at me. I blame my mother. A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker, Amma Crellin (speaker), Lily Burke, Natalie Keene, Ann Nash, Adora Crellin

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 250-251

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Camille reflects on her recent visit to the juvenile detention facility where Amma is being held, and will remain until she is at least eighteen. After Amma's classmate (and only friend) in Chicago, Lily, turned up dead with six teeth pulled, Camille realized that Amma—not Adora—had murdered Ann and Natalie, and pulled their teeth to furnish her dollhouse and replicate the ivory floors of Adora's bedroom. During the visit, Camille asks Amma about why she killed Ann and Natalie, and Amma provides a very articulate explanation. Unable to handle the fact that her own attempt to control and manipulate Adora—herself a master manipulator—had failed, Amma lashed out in hatred, anger, and resentment. Amma's need for adoration and devotion reached an indescribable boiling point, and Amma—having been “weaned on poison” both literal and figurative—knew no other way of coping with her feelings of abandonment, anger, and futility than to subject another human being to the worst cruelty and violence she could imagine.

☛ Sometimes I think about that night caring for Amma, and how good I was at soothing her and calming her. I have dreams of washing Amma and drying her brow. I wake with my stomach turning and a sweaty upper lip. Was I good at caring for Amma because of kindness? Or did I like caring for Amma because I have Adora's sickness? I waver between the two, especially at night, when my skin begins to pulse. Lately, I've been leaning toward kindness.

Related Characters: Camille Preaker (speaker), Adora

Crellin, Amma Crellin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 251-252

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage—the last lines of the novel—Camille admits that despite having unraveled the painful mysteries of her own past (and present) and beginning to move towards a brighter future, she is haunted by the fear that she is destined, through nature or nurture, to become as cruel, hateful, and destructive as her own mother. Camille is afraid of how much she liked caring for Amma—but rather than being able to see that her desire to take care of and dote upon Amma was borne out of a happiness at finally connecting with another human being, and finally being able to experience maternal instinct in a positive way, Camille fears that she has been poisoned by forces beyond her control. As Adora's poison has functioned as a larger metaphor throughout the novel for the ways in which abusive mothers “poison” their children, it stands to reason that Camille now fears a more metaphorical poisoning of her genes or disposition. As she attempts to work through this fear, though, she finds herself “leaning toward kindness”—either out of denial, or out of the realization that, in spite of all she has suffered, her own capacity for kindness is a miracle deserving of celebration. Flynn purposefully ends the novel on an ambiguous note—having posed such enormous questions about the nature of abuse, the utility of femininity (or the rejection of it,) and the ways in which trauma, pain, and cruelty are passed down through the generations, Flynn leaves the responsibility to ponder such questions entirely up to her readers.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

On a chilly May day in Chicago, journalist Camille Preaker works on a “limp[ly] evil” story about four children who were found locked in a room on the South Side of Chicago, forgotten and abandoned by their crackhead mother. Camille’s boss Frank Curry approaches her desk and tells her to come by his office when she’s finished.

Camille files her article and then heads up to Curry’s office on the third floor of the *Daily Post*, the fourth-largest newspaper in Chicago. Curry asks Camille what she knows about the town of Wind Gap, Missouri—her hometown—and Camille begins “hustling for [her] facts.” She states that it’s a town of about two thousand people, and that its main industry is hog butchering. Everyone who lives there, Camille states, is either “old money [or] trash.” When Curry asks Camille which she is, she cheekily answers that she’s “trash from old money.” Curry asks Camille “what the hell is going on” there, but Camille isn’t sure what he means. Curry asks if Camille has talked to her mother and stepfather lately, and she admits that she hasn’t.

Curry reveals that last August, a little girl was strangled in Wind Gap. Camille nods as if this is old information, but in reality, she hasn’t heard it before—she finds it “curious” that her mother never mentioned it. Curry tells Camille that yet another little girl has gone missing, and orders Camille to “drive down there and get [him] the story.” Camille instantly balks, begging to stay in Chicago, but Curry worries that their second-rate newspaper will always get “slammed out of” big local stories—he wants something fresh, something new, something no one else will be reporting on.

Sensing Camille’s abject fear, Curry tells her that if she doesn’t think she can return to Wind Gap, she shouldn’t—but advises her that the trip might be a good opportunity both to get a “damn good story” and “flush some stuff out” in the meantime. Camille gets up and heads home to pack.

Before the “story” at the heart of the novel even begins, Gillian Flynn opens with a glimpse of the protagonist, Camille Preaker, doing painstaking reporting on a story about evil inflicted upon children by their mother—foreshadowing the novel’s central preoccupation.



This passage sets up the fact that Camille has intentionally sought both physical and emotional distance from her hometown and her family. She is so removed from both the place and its people that she doesn’t have a clue as to what’s going on there.



Camille’s clear desire to avoid returning to her hometown at any cost is made plain in this scene—as is the fact that her relationship with her mother is full of both distance and suspicion.



This passage shows that Curry seems to know enough about Camille’s past to realize how difficult a return home will be for her—but his confidence in both her reporting skills and her inner fortitude is strong enough that he believes a trip back to Wind Gap could be successful and even healing.



Camille has no pets or plants to worry about while she's gone. She stuffs five days' worth of clothes into a duffel bag, and as she locks up her apartment, she looks around at its spare, cheap, uninspired furniture. The only decoration is a framed photograph of Camille's deceased younger sister, Marian, when she was about seven years old.

In a Missouri motel, Camille stuffs a towel around the shower drain and sits down in the filthy stall for a "bath." When she's done, she drinks bourbon and frets about what will happen when she arrives at her mother's place tomorrow. Curry has given Camille no budget for the article other than one night's stay in a motel, and at the thought of staying with her falsely polite, overbearing mother, Camille becomes anxious. She drinks herself to sleep, grateful for one last night on her own.

In the morning, Camille gets back into her car and continues south through the "ominously flat" and boring scenery of southern Missouri. When she arrives in Wind Gap, she heads straight to the police station to ask some questions. As she drives down Main Street, she spots the sad, spare small businesses that occupy its storefronts and marvels at how empty the sidewalks are.

Camille parks her car, gets out, and peels a MISSING poster off of a nearby lamppost. The homemade flyer shows "a dark-eyed girl with a feral grin:" it is the missing girl, Natalie Keene, who is ten years old. Camille prays that when she walks into the police station, they'll tell her that Natalie has been found, and she'll be able to turn around and head home.

When she walks into the station, however, Camille is informed that most of the town is out in the woods, searching the forest for Natalie. Camille sits and waits for Chief Bill Vickery to return from his lunch break, and when he does, he begrudgingly agrees to talk to her, despite hating the media. Bill Vickery is shocked that a reporter from all the way up in Chicago has heard about the other little girl's death and Natalie's disappearance—he doesn't want the story to "get out." Camille argues that some public awareness could be good and could even bring new information to light. When Vickery still seems loath to share any details with Camille, she mentions that she herself is from Wind Gap.

This passage, which allows readers a glimpse into Camille's sad apartment, shows that she has very few attachments and no interest in sustaining even the simplest of living things. Camille also has a profound attachment to the past, evidenced by the presence of a portrait of Marian, even in the absence of any other décor or homey touches.



This scene shows that Camille is a heavy drinker, and an adherent to ritual even when the circumstances aren't ideal. She doesn't care much for hygiene or wellness—in addition to the lack of décor or plants in her home, this trait serves to point out the ways in which Camille has rejected many traditional trappings of femininity.



Camille's surprise at discovering Main Street nearly empty indicates that something troubling is going on in Wind Gap—though a sleepy town to begin with, the total scarcity of people signals just how dire the situation there is.



The picture of Natalie Keene and her "feral" grin establish the little girl, right off the bat, as someone who, like Camille, is not a participant in traditional modes of femininity.



This scene shows the private struggle Camille is dealing with as she returns to Wind Gap. She has spent so long denying her attachment to the place and trying to forge ahead in life on her own—but when she returns here, she knows that she is only as good as her family's name. Luckily for Camille, her family has an important place in Wind Gap's past, present, and future.



Vickery asks Camille her name, and Camille introduces herself—then adds that her mother is Adora Crellin. Vickery admits he knows Adora and her husband, Alan—Camille knows that everyone in Wind Gap knows them, as they have “real money,” something uncommon in the small town. Despite knowing Camille is from Wind Gap—and is part of one of its wealthiest families—Vickery still declines to give her any information other than an X on a photocopied map of town indicating where the murdered girl’s body was found last year, and some basic facts about her murder.

Ann Nash was found dead at only nine years old on August 27th of last year in a creek in the middle of the woods—she went missing the night before, and was found, strangled with a clothesline looped around her neck, at five the next morning. As Camille goes over these small details, she marvels at how it took her a full hour of questioning to get this little bit of information from the Chief.

Camille decides to join the search party, and heads out to the woods. At the search site, four blonde girls are sitting on a picnic blanket—the prettiest of them all, a girl barely in her teens, asks Camille what she’s doing “here.” Camille thinks that the girl looks familiar, and assumes she is the child of one of her high school friends: the girl has a round, childish face, but also the large, full breasts of a grown woman.

Camille walks past the girls into the woods, towards the sound of people’s voices calling for Natalie. When Camille catches up with the search party, she begins walking alongside a man and asking him some questions about his thoughts on Natalie’s disappearance. He believes that her being missing isn’t connected to Ann’s murder—a murder he believes “some loony” passing through town must have committed. When Camille asks the man why he believes that, the man reveals that the killer—whomever he was—pulled out all of Ann’s **teeth**.

After an hour with the search party, Camille splits off and heads to the spot where Ann’s body was found last year. At the edge of the creek, Camille reaches into the water and remembers swimming in the stream as a young girl. She and her friends would occasionally see older boys, “equipped with shotguns and stolen beer” who had “bloody pieces of meat” strapped to their belts, tromping through the woods—these boys “compelled” the young Camille.

Vickery proves himself to be one of the few people in town not swayed by Adora’s influence. Camille leaves her meeting with him still feeling, in many ways, in the dark.



Confronted with the grisly details of Ann’s murder, Camille understands a bit better why Vickery doesn’t like discussing it.



This passage marks the first encounter Camille has with a young girl from Wind Gap—an encounter which no doubt forces Camille to remember her own girlhood here. As Camille observes how the girl’s body is a tug-of-war between girlhood and womanhood, Flynn shows Camille up against someone who has no say in her own femininity: the young girl’s form announces it to the world for her.



The fact that Camille must encounter the most disturbing detail of Ann’s death—the fact that all of her teeth were pulled—by word of mouth from a Wind Gap citizen rather than from the police contributes to the already-heavy atmosphere of secrets, lies, and cover-ups surrounding her return to her hometown.



Even as a young girl, Camille was intrigued and “compelled” by the brazenness—and indeed even the outright violence—of masculinity much more than she ever was by the careful, controlled world of womanhood.



When she was about twelve, Camille once wandered into a neighbor boy's hunting shed and found ribbons of meat dangling from the ceiling, waiting to be dried for jerky. The floor was covered in blood, and the walls were plastered with photographs of naked women in compromising—and frightening—sexual positions. That evening, after returning home from the shed, the young Camille masturbated for the first time, “panting and sick.”

By closing out the first chapter on this strange, voyeuristic, and slightly upsetting note, Flynn establishes both that Camille's past memories and perhaps present desires are dark and rooted in a place which rejects and reviles femininity and finds a “sick” kind of comfort, or even eroticism, in patterns of abuse and victimization.



CHAPTER 2

Camille abandons the search party and the woods altogether and heads for a local low-key country bar before stopping off at the home of the Nashes. She knows that the family had three girls—including the now-deceased Ann—and one boy, a six year old. Camille knocks back a couple of bourbons, anxious about having to confront the Nashes. She is not the kind of reporter who enjoys going through people's private lives.

Camille is in an odd line of work for someone with her personality—private and cagey herself, she resents having to tear apart people's private world and inner lives to get a good scoop. Camille respects secrets and boundaries.



Camille arrives at the Nashes' “homely” ranch house, where a little boy is riding a tricycle around the front yard. Camille gets out of her car and offers to give the boy a push, but the little boy is frightened and runs inside. Camille approaches the front door, just as a man appears there—she asks him if he's Robert Nash, and he tells Camille to call him Bob. Camille explains that she's a reporter with a Chicago newspaper and wants to ask him some questions about his daughter's murder. Camille braces herself for Bob to yell and slam the door in her face, but instead, Bob invites her inside the cluttered house and directs her to the bedroom.

Given Camille's revulsion towards her own profession, and the things it requires of her, she is surprised when one of her very first interview subject easily agrees to speak with her. Though Wind Gap loves its secrets, perhaps there are still some people here who want to live in the light and find the truth.



Camille and Bob sit down on opposite ends of the bed, and Bob almost immediately begins talking—Camille is grateful for his forthcoming nature. Bob explains that last summer, Ann had been obsessed with riding her bike. Bob and his wife only let her go around the block, but just before Ann started school, they agreed to let Ann ride to her friend's house just ten blocks away—she never got there. Bob tells Camille he believes there is a “sick baby killer” on the loose—he doesn't believe Natalie is simply missing.

The story of Ann's disappearance has a lot to do with control and constraint, and symbolically mirrors the ugliness and danger many women encounter when they go out into the world on their own.



Bob suggests that maybe a “homo” killed Ann. When Camille asks him why he'd say such a thing, he explains that Ann wasn't raped—and that this fact is the only “blessing” he and his family have. Ann was found strangled, with her **teeth** pulled, but without any other cuts, bruises, or scrapes. Bob says he'd rather Ann be killed than raped.

Bob's comments on his daughter's death reveal pain and sadness, but also an underlying misogyny. Bob feels that for a woman to be raped is a violence worse than death or disfigurement. As the novel progresses, and Camille's own skewed perceptions of what constitutes deepest violence are exposed, Flynn will continue to examine the ways in which womanhood is judged, commodified, and bartered.



Bob complains that no one has been any help to him or his family—Vickery is clearly in over his head, and a “big-shot detective” assigned from Kansas City is just a smug kid, biding his time until he can get out of Wind Gap for good. Bob shows Camille a picture of Ann, and explains that Ann was a “willful thing” and a tomboy who once chopped all of her hair off rather than allow her mother to put it in curlers. He muses that Ann must have given whoever killed her absolute “hell.”

After leaving the Nashes’, Camille begins the drive to her mother’s “massive” house at the southernmost end of Wind Gap. Situated in the “wealthy section” of town—a section which comprises three blocks only—Adora’s house is an elaborate Victorian manse complete with a wraparound veranda and a cupola.

Camille arrives at the house and rings the doorbell. It is just after 9:15, and Adora, rather than answering the door, calls from the other side to ask who’s there. Camille announces herself, and Adora opens the door, but doesn’t move to give Camille even a “limp” hug. Camille explains that she’s in town for business, and Adora invites her in, warning that the house is “not up to par for a visitor.” Inside, though, the house is perfect and pristine—fresh-cut flowers are in vases in the entryway, and the air is sweet and full of pollen.

Adora offers Camille a drink, and then asks where she’s staying. Camille awkwardly asks for permission to stay at her mother’s, and Adora acquiesces—though she chides Camille for not calling first. As Adora walks down the hall to fix Camille a drink, Camille studies her mother, who is only in her late forties. Adora’s pale skin glows, and her long blonde hair gives her the appearance of “a girl’s very best doll.”

Camille peeks her head out onto the back porch, where her wan, prim stepfather Alan is sitting and drinking. He greets Camille stiffly and formally, and then asks what has brought Camille to Wind Gap as Adora emerges onto the porch with Camille’s drink in her hand. Camille explains that she has come to cover Ann Nash and Natalie Keene’s stories for her paper, and Adora seems startled. She begins plucking at her own eyelashes—a nervous habit which Camille remembers well from her childhood.

Bob Nash seeks to control his daughter’s femininity even in death through his comments about how he’d rather her be killed than raped, but even so he admires the “willful” and decidedly unfeminine nature she espoused in life. This passage also shows a similarity between the tomboyish, headstrong Ann and the “feral” Natalie.



Camille’s complicated feelings for Wind Gap haven’t fully been excavated, but her family’s wealth, privilege, and therefore power in town are certainly a part of them.



Readers first glimpse Adora as an ultra-feminine woman whose default is self-denigration and deflection. It’s clear that there is not a lot of love between her and Camille, judging from Adora’s cool, unenthusiastic reception of her daughter.



Camille feels out of place in her mother’s house—it is not her home, and she doesn’t feel she has any right to be there or any reason to be there other than the convenience of having a place to stay. She is clearly transfixed—though perhaps not envious—of Adora’s obvious and refined femininity.



Adora is a nervous woman who either cannot handle hearing stressful or macabre news—or wants to affect the countenance of someone unable to handle such things.



Adora remarks that both Ann and Natalie's parents must be having a difficult enough time without Camille copying down their stories and spreading to the world noxious headlines such as "Wind Gap Murders Its Children." Adora tells Camille that she knew the girls, and is having a very hard time—when she asks "Who would do that," it's unclear whether she's referring to the girls' murderer or to whoever sent Camille to report on the crimes.

Adora asks Camille not to discuss her work and bring "that kind of talk" into the house while she's home. Camille asks how her half-sister Amma is, and Adora replies that the girl is upstairs sleeping. Camille, however, can hear footsteps scampering upstairs. Adora warns Camille that she needs to be extra-kind to Amma, as both Ann and Natalie were her schoolmates.

Camille gets a fitful four hours of sleep, full of stressful dreams about Adora feeding her an apple to stop her from dying. At five, Camille gets up and starts dressing—the search party is reconvening in the woods at six, and Camille wants to get another quote from Vickery before the day begins. She plans to head to the police station and wait for him to arrive.

As Camille pulls onto Main Street, she comes upon "a scene that ma[kes] no sense." An older woman is sitting splayed on the sidewalk, staring at the side of a building; a man is stooped over her. Camille wonders if the woman has had a fall or a heart attack, and gets out of her car to hurry over to them. As she approaches them, the older man begs Camille to call the police and an ambulance. She asks what's wrong, but then immediately spots what the man is talking about. In the foot-wide space between two shops, a "tiny body" has been propped up, aimed at the sidewalk. It is Natalie Keene, and she is missing all of her **teeth**.

Camille begins dissociating—she picks up what is happening around her in brief, strange flashes. She sees that there is a Band-Aid on Natalie Keene's knee, and notices faintly that Vickery has arrived on the scene, along with a second man whom Camille gathers to be the "big-shot detective" from Kansas City. The detective gets to work right away, coaxing the woman and older man's story out—they are husband and wife, the owners of a nearby diner, and found Natalie's corpse on their way to open up for the day.

The detective sends the couple to the station with Vickery to give official statements, and asks Camille to come as well. As she waits in a room to give the detective her story, she finds herself wishing she could put a fresh Band-Aid on Natalie Keene's knee.

Adora seeks to cut down and minimize Camille's work, and she villainizes not just Camille but all reporters in an attempt to invalidate her daughter's choices. This is a method of abuse and control—one with which Camille seems all too familiar.



Adora seems determined to shield both herself and Amma from any unnecessary information about Ann's murder and Natalie's disappearance. She thereby creates an atmosphere of secrecy and remoteness within the house.



Camille's dream, in which Adora is forcefully feeding her a healthful fruit, seems to indicate a desire for positive, healthy attention from her mother—but also a fear that Adora will only ever harm and control Camille.



The discovery of Natalie Keene's mutilated corpse confirms that she and Ann—both missing all of their teeth—have been killed by the same person. The case is now one of serial murder, and as Camille reels from the gory discovery, it must also occur to her that the stakes of her own personal assignment are now higher than ever.



The incident is too much for Camille to handle, and she begins losing her grip on time and reality as chaos begins to swarm around her. Camille—who has suffered the death of a younger sister at some point in her past—is clearly being re-traumatized by the discovery of yet another dead little girl.



Camille's instinct or desire to care for Natalie foreshadows the larger ways in which women caring for one another in futile ways will become one of the book's central motifs.



CHAPTER 3

The morning of Natalie Keene's funeral, Adora flits around the house getting ready. As Camille drinks coffee and watches her mother dart from room to room, she wonders at the fact that she has been in Wind Gap for days already and has still seen no sign of her younger sister Amma. Not to mention she's still failed to get a quote from the Keenes—or permission to attend the funeral as a member of the press. She decides to report from the service anyway.

The funeral, held at a local Catholic church, is completely packed. No children are present at the service. Natalie's mother and father lead the procession, crying quietly as they walk down the aisle towards the front of the church. Natalie's older brother, a boy of eighteen or nineteen, sobs outright. Camille slips out her notepad and begins taking notes, but Adora swiftly and quietly reprimands her, and she stops writing.

Natalie's mother eulogizes her daughter, and then a priest delivers a brief address in which he quotes the Bible verse which reads "An eye for an eye and a **tooth for a tooth**" before urging the mourners not to dwell on revenge, but rather to be good to one another in such a difficult time. Camille ruminates on the macabre intoning of "a tooth for a tooth" when Natalie had all of her teeth pried from her mouth. Outside the church, after the service, Camille sees the blonde girls from the woods hanging out in the parking lot.

After the funeral, mourners gather at the Keene's massive stone farmhouse. Camille doesn't approach the Keenes and announce herself as a reporter—instead, breaking journalistic code, she skulks through the house, gathering material for her article. She runs into a group of her old high school friends who never left Wind Gap—Katie, Angie, Mimi, and Tish. They interrogate Camille about whether she is married and has children before Jackie O'Neele—one of Adora's oldest friends—swoops in to save Camille from the gossipy group.

Both inside and outside of her mother's house, Camille is participating in—and perpetuating—an atmosphere of secrecy, uncertainty, and deception. The fact that she hasn't seen her half-sister since she's been in Wind Gap is intensely odd, and Camille's own desire to deceive others in order to fulfill her professional obligations is similarly off-kilter.



The atmosphere of grief and mourning—but also of fear—at Natalie's funeral is palpable. It barely seems to affect Camille, however, who puts work first—even though the situation is wildly inappropriate on many levels.



Things continue feeling not-quite-right as the funeral service carries on. The priest's address—one which mentions but then dismisses violence—seems pointed, and meant to disguise an attitude of retribution within one of forgiveness.



Camille seems to want to keep her identity hidden at the post-funeral gathering—but in a small town like Wind Gap, it's impossible for Camille to outrun her past or remain unnoticed.



Jackie has clearly just had a facelift, and she is covered in diamond jewelry. She wraps Camille in a hug, but rather than feeling comforted, Camille feels that the day is one uncomfortable reunion after another. Still, Camille reflects on her memories of Jackie, who was always more “at ease” with Camille than Adora herself. Jackie was the one to buy Camille her first box of tampons and advise her, when she was younger, about boys. Jackie reveals that she and Adora are in a fight, but she’s not sure what they’re fighting about—Jackie muses that perhaps she forgot to send Adora a card for some important occasion, or sent Adora a gardener whose services weren’t up to snuff. Jackie tells Camille—somewhat seriously—that Camille should call her up while she’s in town so that the two of them can talk.

That night, after formally calling the Keenes to discuss with them the piece she’s writing, Camille files a short, watered-down article in which the only quotes she’s able to use are either stolen from Mrs. Keene’s eulogy or taken from the “vitriol she spewed” at Camille over the phone when Camille admitted to being a reporter. Nevertheless, after reading her article, Curry orders a larger feature on the Keene and Nash families, and Camille is grateful for the chance to redeem herself.

Camille sleeps late on Wednesday, and even as the sounds of a phone ringing downstairs and a maid vacuuming outside Camille’s bedroom door intrude upon her rest, she tries desperately to stay asleep. When she can’t any longer, she gets up to grab a flask of warm vodka from her duffel bag, then gets back into bed and sips from it, longing to be unconscious again.

After a while, Adora knocks at the door and asks to come in, telling Camille that she has some lotion for her. Camille opens the door and accepts the tube of vitamin E lotion from Adora, noting that Adora believes that “slathering enough on will make [Camille] smooth and flawless again.” Camille is dressed only in a t-shirt, and can feel her mother’s eyes scrutinizing her arms and legs.

Camille asks if Natalie’s funeral was particularly hard on Adora—the unspoken connection with Marian’s funeral lingers in the air. Camille admits that she, too, still misses Marian, and had a hard time at the funeral, but Adora quickly switches the subject, asking Camille what she’s going to do today. Camille says she’s going to go over to the police station. Adora snaps at Camille and tells her not to say that while she’s staying here—she begs Camille to make up lies and say she’s running errands or seeing friends instead. Adora heads back downstairs, and Camille bathes, drinks another glass of vodka, and dresses.

As Camille reunites with Jackie, she feels a surge of emotions, old and new. Jackie was more of a mother to her growing up than Adora ever was—but this fact fills Camille with a sense of loss rather than one of warmth and affection for Jackie. When Jackie admits that she and Adora don’t talk anymore—but still seems to want desperately to talk privately with Camille—it becomes clear that perhaps there is something darker or deeper within Jackie’s request.



Camille is sort of flying by the seat of her pants in terms of her reporting in Wind Gap. She is not following journalistic ethics, and is just scraping by on a few reimagined quotes. Nevertheless, when Curry orders more work from her, she is relieved. When she first arrived in Wind Gap, Camille wanted to leave as soon as possible—now, though, she seems invested in having a chance to really turn over a new leaf and tell these girls’ stories truthfully.



In spite of her good news about work, Camille remains depressed and desirous of oblivion—she is daunted by the work, and surely the trauma, of what lies ahead.



This scene shows Adora scrutinizing Camille’s body. Flynn frames it as a more ordinary, stereotypical mother-daughter face-off about body image, but will soon reveal that there is something very unique and disturbing about Camille’s body.



In both Adora’s reluctance to talk about Marian and her desire to have Camille lie to her rather than reveal the truth of where she’s going, this scene shows just how desperately Adora clings to secrets, lies, and disguises. On the other hand, though Camille is able to face the truth, she must dull the pain of it with alcohol.



Out on the porch, Camille finds herself face to face with “a changeling.” She sees a little girl working intently on a huge four-foot dollhouse fashioned to look like an exact replica of Adora’s house. Camille recognizes the little girl as the prettiest of the four blonde girls she’s been seeing around town, and is shocked to realize that she’s been running into her little sister Amma all along.

Amma greets Camille happily, and when she senses Camille staring at her frilly sundress and matching hat, she sheepishly admits that she is wearing these clothes for Adora—“When I’m home,” she explains, “I’m her little doll.” Camille asks Amma what she is when she’s on her own, and Amma says only that she’s “other things.”

Amma turns back to her dollhouse, lamenting that some of the furniture needs reupholstering. She’s waiting, she says, for Adora to take her to the fabric store. Camille compliments Amma on the dollhouse and then heads down the steps towards her car. As she does, she turns back and can see Amma murmuring into Camille’s “room” of the dollhouse, “I hope you enjoy your stay here.”

Camille finds Chief Vickery a few blocks from the police station working on a dented stop sign. He tells her that he has nothing to say to her—he thinks that “a decent person would have quit [their job] before writing about dead children,” and accuses Camille of being an “opportunist.” Camille admits that she doesn’t feel very decent, but asks Vickery to see that some publicity might help get the case solved.

Vickery states that Wind Gap has already asked for help—and in exchange were assigned the hotshot from Kansas City who believes the murderer is “some crazed hitchhiker” when in reality, everyone in town knows that a stranger is not responsible. Camille, feeling the effects of the vodka, knows that Vickery is trying to tell her something big, but she can’t ask her questions fast enough. She attempts to get Vickery to reveal why someone from Wind Gap would kill kids—“off the record.”

Vickery tells Camille that Ann and Natalie were both violent girls, and Camille asks if he thinks that someone who didn’t like their behavior was targeting them specifically. Before Vickery can answer, though, a car pulls up beside them—it is the detective from Kansas City. As the men talk, Camille thinks that if they were in Chicago, she would introduce herself without hesitation—in Wind Gap, however, she stands “silent as a schoolgirl,” waiting for Vickery to make the introduction.

Camille’s first glimpse of Amma comes nearly a week into her stay in Wind Gap. Camille had pictured Amma as a young girl, not having heard or seen anything about her in years. Confronted with her sister’s blossoming womanhood (and apparently her attempts to hide it), Camille must reassess what she knows of Amma.



Amma has a dual personality, and seems to be living a double life—she is one thing at home, and something else entirely when out in the world. This contributes to the atmosphere of secrets, lies, and disguises within Adora’s house.



Amma’s fixation on her dollhouse reflects a compulsive need both to have everything be perfect—and to mirror Adora’s tastes, rituals, and routines.



Everyone sees Camille as a parasite—someone who profits off of tragedy. Camille, however, is just trying to get at the truth—her obsession with bringing the truth to light, and with doing so through language, will be further explored as the novel progresses.



Wind Gap is a very small town—with some very big secrets. Vickery can’t give Camille such a big statement on the record, but between the two of them, he can tell her that the murderer, most likely, walks among the citizens of Wind Gap.



This passage has a lot to say about rejections of femininity. Vickery basically states that Ann and Natalie were both violent, headstrong, unlikable girls—girls who rejected sweet, docile, youthful femininity. Camille, meanwhile, has built her life around rejecting the “silent” and passive femininity forced upon her in her youth—but back in Wind Gap she finds herself reverting to old patterns and minimizing herself for the comfort of those around her.



CHAPTER 4

Camille is at a local park, the last place Natalie was seen alive. Camille talks with a little boy who tells her that his friend James Capisi watched Natalie get stolen away into the woods by a woman in a nightgown while the two of them were playing Frisbee. James, the boy says, hasn't come out of his house since Natalie was taken right before his eyes. Camille asks where James lives, but the little boy won't tell her. She leaves and heads to a gas station instead, where she consults a phone book for the Capisi family's address.

Camille drives out to the poor end of town. People in this neighborhood work mostly at the nearby hog farm that Camille's family owns and profits over a million dollars annually from. The operation is a huge one, producing about two percent of the country's pork. The hog farm has left a legacy of poverty and trauma in Wind Gap, as workers must either work in the slaughterhouse or the manure pits. Camille parks out front of the Capisi house, approaches the screen door, and knocks. A child comes to the window—it is James. The boy is reluctant to answer Camille's questions, but she is persistent in interrogating him about Natalie's disappearance.

James tells Camille that the woman who took Natalie was "old like a mother," dressed in a white bed dress. She had white hair and white skin "like she'd never been outside before," and grabbed Natalie "real fast [...] like she was hugging her" before looking at James for a second, making a shushing motion, and disappearing into the woods with Natalie in tow. Camille asks James if he has told the police his story, and he says that he has—but they didn't believe him.

Camille heads to one of Wind Gap's eleven bars and drinks a bourbon while working on her notes from the day. After a while, the Kansas City detective sits down next to her and chides her for talking to a minor without obtaining parent permission—James Capisi's mother made a call. Camille says reporters have to resort to "aggressive" measures when the police shut them out of an investigation. "Kansas City" counters that police can't do their work with reporters in the way.

As Camille begins her investigative reporting in earnest, multiple bombshells come to light. First, Vickery's assertion that the girls were not well-liked in town and were perhaps targeted; second, this little boy's revelation that Natalie was taken, in broad daylight—by a woman.



Camille's family profits off the traumatization and subjugation of a large percentage of Wind Gap's population. While Adora, Alan, and Amma seem to ignore this fact up in their mansion, Camille can't help but realize that her family's success is directly tied to the misery of others.



As Camille gets James Capisi's story, she is fascinated—both by the fact that James attests that a woman, not a man, committed these horrendous and violent crimes, and by the fact that no one at the police station seems to be taking James seriously. The intrigue, secrecy, and indeed the mythological quality of the murders intensifies.



As Camille and "Kansas City" talk for the first time, one of the novel's central logistical oppositions takes form—Camille and the police are in a race to uncover and stitch together the truth.



The detective, sensing Camille’s frustration, offers to start over. He introduces himself as Richard Willis and asks that they call a truce. Camille, though, continues asking him about why the investigation hasn’t taken James Capisi’s story seriously—Willis says that he “can’t comment” on whether or not they believe him. Camille asks Richard some other questions, but he again insists he can’t comment. The two exchange friendly banter, and Richard admits he has been “desperate to talk to a nontownie”—after several months in Wind Gap, he is going stir crazy in the small, insular town. Richard asks to buy Camille a drink, and she asks him for a bourbon.

Richard brings back their drinks and begins chatting Camille up, but she’s feeling somewhat exhausted and responds curtly to all of his questions. When Richard asks if Camille wants him to leave, she is surprised to find that she doesn’t—something about him makes her “feel less ragged.” They ask one another about their lives, and Camille finds herself invested in Richard’s tales of crimes and murders he’s worked back in Kansas City. Richard admits that the Wind Gap murders—now the work of a suspected serial killer—are the biggest cases he’s worked, and Camille finds herself relating to the pressure he is facing.

When Camille returns home, she is startled to discover a familiar scene at the house—a scene that reminds her of “the old days with Marian.” Adora is on the couch, cradling Amma—who is dressed in a woolen nightgown in spite of the summer heat—and pressing an ice cube to her lips. Adora, sensing Camille’s alarm, tells her that Amma just has the summer chills. Camille is annoyed by an old but persistent desire to linger near Adora and try to get some attention from her, too.

Camille knows that her mother and Alan are both hypochondriacs, and that as a child, Adora used to ply Camille with ointments and oils—“homeopathic nonsense.” Camille most often refused the awful solutions, and once her sister Marian got sick, Adora became more concerned with her well-being than Camille’s.

Amma begins whining about her dollhouse—one of the patterns on the table legs is wrong. Adora reassures Amma that no one will notice, but Amma lashes out, irate that her table isn’t perfect. She begins screaming and throwing a full-blown tantrum. As Alan tries to calm her, she throws the miniature dining table onto the floor, cracking it into shards and then slamming it repeatedly until it’s in pieces. Camille, stunned, retreats to her room—she feels her skin “blar[ing]” at her, and states that her scars have a “mind of their own.”

Even though Richard and Camille have the same ultimate goal—solving the murders—bureaucracy and red tape complicate the way they can talk to and relate to one another. Despite this obvious barrier, there is an attraction between them, and neither can deny it.



Even as Camille tries to ward Richard off consciously—rejecting her own femininity and her attraction to him—something keeps pulling her towards him. When she realizes that they are in a very similar situation, in that both of their careers in some way hang on the work they do investigating these murders, she warms to Richard even more, sensing a kindred spirit in a town full of enemies.



Just as Camille finds a foothold and a comrade in town, the traumas and painful memories at home begin to escalate. The bizarre scene between Adora and Amma, odious as it is for Camille to behold, nonetheless stirs up some old desires and instincts within her—feelings she has repressed and rejected for years.



This passage establishes that the ways in which caregiving is conducted in the Crellin household is a little off-kilter—not to mention suspicious, given Marian’s horrible sickness and Camille’s strange dreams of being force-fed.



Amma’s anger at being unable to perfectly replicate Adora’s house—and, symbolically, Adora’s way of projecting femininity—is immense. Both childlike and frightening, Amma’s anger disturbs and upsets Camille to the point that it makes her own deep traumas rear their heads.



Camille reveals that she is a cutter—she makes her skin “scream.” She has covered her body in **carved words**—some feminine and simple, like *cupcake*, *kitty*, and *curls*, while some are negative, anxious, and self-denigrating, like *wicked*, *duplicitous*, and *inarticulate*.

Camille’s younger sister Marian died on Camille’s thirteenth birthday, and, that summer, Camille became “suddenly, unmistakably beautiful” and popular to boot. That summer, she began the cutting, and “adored” tending to herself and cleaning her bloody, self-inflicted **wounds**. To this day—though Camille has stopped cutting herself—the words “squabbl[e]” at one another, and Camille feels them calling to one another. There is only one circle of unblemished flesh left on Camille’s body—at the center of her back, which proved “too difficult to reach.”

Camille is unable to assign a medical term to her habit—all she knows is that cutting always made her feel safe, and allowed her to capture and track thoughts, words, and the “truth.” At the age of thirty, after **cutting the word** “vanish” into her neck, Camille checked herself into a psychiatric ward outside of Chicago. Her only visitors during her time there were Curry and her mother—whom she hadn’t seen, at that point, in half a decade. During Adora’s visit, she shamed Camille for harming herself when Adora had “already lost one child.” Camille realized then that it was “impossible to compete with the dead,” and vowed to “stop trying [to.]”

CHAPTER 5

The next morning, Camille joins Alan and Adora at the breakfast table, and they call for their housekeeper, Gayla, to bring Camille some breakfast. Camille only wants coffee, but Adora insists she eat. Alan and Adora apologize to Camille for Amma’s outburst the night before. Camille replies that the tantrum was “scary” to behold, and Adora retorts that Camille herself was not “placid” at that age. Camille isn’t sure whether Adora is referring to her **cutting**, her crying jags over Marian’s death, or the “overactive sex life” she’d embarked on, but she simply nods.

Flynn has held back until this crucial moment the fact that Camille is a prodigious self-harmer—perhaps as a way of symbolically reflecting the ways in which Camille tries to suppress her own pain and trauma. This revelation also demonstrates that Camille is something of an unreliable narrator—if she held this information back for this long, there’s a lot more she could be intentionally or unintentionally suppressing or repressing.



This passage reveals that Camille’s self-harm is directly tied to two things: both an attempt to wrest control over the pain and trauma she felt in relation to her sister’s death, and to a sly rejection of the beauty and traditional femininity that her body was forcing her into—almost against her will.



Camille’s cutting is also intimately tied to her desire to write down and thus possess words, and truths—as the novel progresses, this desire will be explored more intimately, and shown to be connected both to the toxic relationship between her and Adora and to the death of Marian.



Now that Camille has revealed the truth about her scars, other painful truths about Camille’s past come to light: as a child, she was reckless, promiscuous, and overemotional, and has sought to bury these things through self-harm, alcohol abuse, and a rejection of both her femininity and sexuality over the years.



Amma comes downstairs and apologizes rather overzealously to Camille for her tantrum. She explains that she's just "going through a stage" before turning to Adora and asking if Adora will love Camille more than her now that Camille is back. Adora quietly answers "no." Gayla brings Amma a plate of ham, and Amma pours honey on it before shoving mouthfuls of it into her face. She blithely states that she wishes she herself would be murdered—"when you die," she explains, "you become perfect." Adora reminds Amma that she is beloved by her family and popular in school, and warns her not to get "greedy."

Amma swishes around in her dress and explains that she has fashioned for herself a maiden cloak—she is going into the forest later with her friends to play Joan of Arc. Adora forbids Amma from going into the forest, and Amma stabs at her ham. Adora pointedly asks Camille how much longer she's planning on staying, but offers to come visit Chicago sometime later in the year. Camille remarks that all three of them would love the museums at the lake, but Adora fatalistically replies that after Ann's death in the creek, she can't enjoy "any kind of water anymore." Adora explains that she knew, and was fond of, both girls. Amma stands up with a little shriek and runs upstairs.

Camille asks Adora just how she knew the little girls, but Adora deflects her questions, accusing Camille of "attack[ing]" her rather than comforting her, and quickly leaves the room. Camille reflects on how dramatic Adora is, and how personally the woman takes "every tragedy that happens in the world." After Marian died, Adora didn't come out of her luxurious, ivory-tiled bedroom for a year—and she forbid Camille from ever coming inside.

Up in her room, Camille—with only two days left before Curry's deadline—tries to assemble what she has learned so far. The two murders, though undoubtedly committed by the same person, don't seem to make sense. She wonders why Natalie was taken in broad daylight, and whether James Capisi could have invented an image of an old woman after glimpsing a feminine-looking man in the woods. Camille muses that "women [don't] kill this way."

Frustrated by her inability to make sense of any of the clues and loose threads she's encountered, Camille decides to head out and find Richard Willis, hoping that his rational outsider's way of thinking about the murders will help calm her own mind.

The Amma who comes downstairs this morning is nothing like the violent, crazed Amma who threw a tantrum last night—still, there is something deeply macabre about the way Amma views and interprets the world around her. She clearly longs for attention, affection, and adoration, and plainly states that she would do anything—even die—to get it.



Amma leaves the breakfast table after she perceives two slights against her: first, Adora pays no attention to her carefully-constructed costume, and then Adora verbally laments the death of both Ann and Natalie. This shows that when attention is focused on anything other than Amma herself, Amma is psychologically unable to cope with what she perceives as Adora's inattention or outright rejection.



Any time Camille attempts to bring the truth—any truth, whether it's related to Ann and Natalie, to Marian, or to her own life—within the confines of Adora's house, Adora abandons her. This demonstrates Adora's aversion to the truth, which rubs up against Camille's fierce dedication to capturing it.



Even Camille, who has rejected traditional modes of femininity, has a hard time believing that a woman could really be responsible for the violent killings of Ann and Natalie.



Unable to get at the truth herself, Camille seeks out the only other person in town whose job it is to pick through the secrets and lies and bring the truth to light.



Camille finds Richard at a diner, eating waffles and perusing a high stack of folders. He explains that he's conducting a criminal history of Wind Gap, examining significant crimes and murders from its past. Camille begs him for some help—on the record or off—in getting a sense of objectivity about Ann and Natalie's murders. Richard proposes a deal: he will help Camille—and give her an official comment she can use on the record here and there—if she will use her insider knowledge of Wind Gap's secrets and lies in order to fill in the town's backstories for him.

Even though it's not “the straightest of deals,” Camille accepts and asks Richard—on the record—whether he really believes Ann and Natalie's murders were committed by an outsider. Richard answers that his investigation has “not ruled anyone out.” Off-the-record, however, Richard and Camille both concur that the murders don't seem like outsider crimes. Camille asks Richard if he has any “real suspects,” and in response, he asks to take her for a drink later that week so that she can “spill everything [...] about everyone in Wind Gap.”

Camille reflects on her own personal history in Wind Gap—a place she feels little allegiance to. She was born out of wedlock—her father was “some boy from Kentucky” who impregnated Adora when she was just seventeen. Camille's grandparents “grew angry twin tumors” at the news of Adora's pregnancy, and died within a year of Camille's birth. Alan, the son of Adora's parents' friends in Tennessee, began wooing Adora when Camille was still an infant, and they were married before Camille could talk. Though Camille was publicly considered Alan's child, she feels no personal connection to him—she sees him as being “as smooth and shallow as glass.” Camille never took Alan's last name, and she believes that Adora actually prefers for Camille and Alan to feel like strangers—she wants “all relationships in the house to run through her.”

Alan fathered Camille's sister Marian when Camille was just a few years old, and Marian was a sick baby from infancy, often enduring regular trips to the emergency room twenty-five miles away. Marian was on feeding tubes for most of her childhood, and when Marian finally died, Camille was “grateful in a way”—she felt that the frail Marian was not quite ready for the world. Adora, meanwhile, has turned her grief, over the years, into a “hobby.”

Richard knows that Camille, as a Wind Gap native who has rejected the town, is a valuable asset to the investigation. Richard's help is similarly valuable to Camille, and so they join forces in pursuit of the truth—though they still don't know each other well, and aren't sure how much they trust one another.



Camille and Richard, at the very beginning of their deal, are already on a slippery slope. Though they've entered an agreement to be transparent with one another, it's clear they're still hiding things.



As Camille looks back on her fractured past, it becomes evident just how much of her life has been in service to, and controlled by, Adora. Adora has not done anything, ever, to make Camille feel more wanted, more comfortable, or more in control of her own circumstances—as a result, Camille feels like a “stranger” in her own house, and devoid of any agency whatsoever as long as she's home in Wind Gap.



It makes sense that Camille has never fully recovered from Marian's death—Adora has honed her “hobby” of performative grief over the years, and has spent her life turning herself into a victim, leaving Camille alone to try and pick up the pieces and resolve her own traumas.



Camille decides to drive around town. At the end of Main Street, a makeshift “shrine” to Natalie has cropped up—as Camille passes it, she can see Amma and her three blonde friends “sifting” through the balloons, flowers, and gifts at the foot of the shrine and loading them into Amma’s purse. When Amma sees Camille coming, she and her friends link arms and begin skipping towards her. Camille notices how different Amma seems from the tantrum-throwing “doll” of the previous evening—she is dressed in a miniskirt and a tube top.

Amma asks Camille why she’s writing a story about “two dead girls who no one noticed to begin with.” Camille recognizes that Amma is trying to provoke her, but she can’t help feeling raw anyway. Amma wonders out loud if “he” is “killing all the freaks”—when Camille asks who “he” is, Amma replies, “Natalie’s brother.” One of the other girls, Jodes, adds that John Keene has “a little-girl thing.” The girls saunter off, bumping past Camille, who senses in Amma a desperation to prevent the two dead girls from getting more attention than her.

That night, Camille phones Curry at home and apologizes for not being able to make much headway. Curry tells Camille to persist—but then steers the conversation towards asking Camille if she’s taking care of herself. Camille admits that she feels “wrong.” She tells Curry that Wind Gap “does bad things to [her].” Curry urges her to keep it together, congratulating her on doing a good job so far—but reminds her that if she needs to get out, he will get her out.

CHAPTER 6

Though small towns, Camille says, usually cater to one kind of drinker, “everyone drinks in Wind Gap,” so there are many different places to drink. The one closest to Adora’s home is an expensive upscale French-style eatery called “La Mère.” Though Camille supposes the restaurant is meant to be named “La Mer,” French for “the sea,” its misspelling instead translates to “the mother.” Camille heads there for a drink and runs into Jackie O’Neele and a group of Adora’s friends. The women invite her over to their table to “gab” with them, and Camille reluctantly accepts their invitation.

The women ask Camille what it’s like being home, and they reminisce about their own childhoods spent visiting Adora at her house—one of them remarks that it’s the “same house [with a] different crazy lady running it” now. The women begin discussing Adora’s mother, Joya—they describe her creepy long and unpainted fingernails before one of them, Annabelle, changes the subject and asks Camille about her job reporting on the murders.

The sight of Amma and her friends rifling through the gifts that have been left in memory of Ann and Natalie tells Camille that Amma’s pathological need for attention and adoration runs deep enough that she is willing to steal from and perhaps even harm others—or at least their memories—to get it.



At home, Amma is blithe and wired, if a little odd—outside of Adora’s house, however, she is provocative and deliberately incendiary. She will say or do anything for attention—a warning sign which piques Camille’s interest in the girl.



This passage makes it clear that Curry knows enough about Camille to understand how hard being home is for her—implying that Curry is one of the only people in Camille’s life with whom she’s shared intimate details from her past. Curry wants to push Camille to be her best, but is careful to remind her not to put herself in a dangerous situation in the meantime.



The misspelling of the French restaurant’s name—and the fact that its name technically relates to motherhood—is representative of the omnipresent influence of mothers and motherhood in Camille’s life, or at least the portion of it in Wind Gap.



The women who purport to be Adora’s friends certainly don’t see her in a forgiving light, and even compare her to her apparently terrifying mother Joya. Camille wants to hear more about her family’s history, but gossip soon overtakes the conversation.



Camille asks the women who they all think committed the murders. Jackie says she believes Bob Nash, a “pervert” who always stares at her breasts in the grocery store, is responsible. Another mentions that John Keene has moved out of his parents’ house and into a carriage house in the back of his girlfriend Meredith Wheeler’s family’s home—one of the women asserts that John moved out because he is the killer.

Camille, remembering what Amma and her friends told her the other day, asks the women if John Keene really could be responsible—she mentions that she heard some gossip from some local teens. Jackie, thoroughly drunk, tells Camille that Amma is trouble. Another one of the women chimes in to add that Amma and all of her friends are sexually promiscuous. Camille attempts to steer the conversation back to John Keene, but Annabelle asks where Adora is and notes that she’s been acting “strange” lately. Jackie tells Camille that she needs to get back to Chicago—the “way things are” with Adora, she’s better off far away.

After brunch, Jackie’s words stick with Camille, and she wonders whether she really should get out of Wind Gap. Feeling buzzed from the wine, she pushes the thought to the back of her mind and decides instead to return to the Nash family’s house. Betsy Nash lets Camille inside, and Camille sits in the disheveled living room with Betsy and Bob as their remaining three children hover around like “ghosts.”

Camille asks Bob and Betsy what Ann was like in school, explaining that she hopes to paint a clearer picture of the girl for a longer, more substantial piece. Bob describes Ann as tough, and Betsy describes her as mouthy and defiant. As the two of them reminisce about Ann, Camille can see the other children, playing in the living room, begin to fight and smack each other, and Camille knows she has “shattered some delicate dynamic” in the Nash household.

As Betsy ushers the children into another room to calm them down, Camille continues asking Bob some questions about Ann’s rumored violent streak, and whether Ann would have gone off into the woods with a stranger—especially if the stranger were a woman. Bob maintains that a man is responsible for the crimes—he can’t picture a woman “doing all...that to a baby.” Bob suggests that John Keene, who has no alibi, might be guilty, and confirms that others in Wind Gap believe he might be responsible for both murders.

All of the women assume that men—particularly men who were close to both Ann and Natalie—are responsible for the murders. The idea that a woman could be responsible for such heinous violence doesn’t even cross their minds.



The women’s idle gossip takes a turn as they begin discussing the Crellin women. Amma is apparently a cruel—and promiscuous—terror, while Adora, according to Jackie, is deranged to the point of being potentially dangerous. Camille wants to hear more, but again, the women’s competing desires to dominate the conversation leave her in the dark.



Camille is still not doing her job according to any code of ethics—she shows up buzzed and unannounced at an interview subject’s house, and it’s only once she’s inside that she realizes the strange atmosphere she has walked into.



Both of Ann’s parents describe her as willful and loud, with a strong personality—not normally the terms parents of recently-deceased children use to describe their lost little ones.



Even in the face of James Capisi’s story, Bob Nash still cannot believe, even for a moment, that a woman could be responsible for such crimes. He would rather accuse one of the victims’ brothers than a random, faceless female.



Betsy appears suddenly in the doorway and announces that Adora is at the house. Adora breezes into the living room, apologizing to the Nashes for Camille's intrusion. Bob admits he had no idea that Camille was Adora's daughter, and Adora says he wouldn't—Camille isn't "the family type." Bob asks why Camille wouldn't have told him who she was—he reveals that Adora is a "very good friend" to their family, and she tutored Ann in English and spelling. Ann and Adora, Bob says, were very close.

Camille realizes that her mother hasn't, in fact, been overplaying her mourning—she really was close with both girls. Camille wonders why Adora was tutoring Ann; though Adora had helped out at Camille's school when she was young in order to get to know some of the other Wind Gap mothers, Camille thinks it strange for Adora to be helping out such a young girl from a less-advantaged family.

Adora tells Camille to leave—she's here on a "social visit" and has trouble relaxing around Camille "these days." Camille says she isn't finished talking to Bob, but Adora insists she is. Camille feels the word *punish* flash on her hip. She thanks Bob for his time and leaves without looking at Adora. She begins crying before she even gets to her car.

CHAPTER 7

Camille often feels weightless—like she doesn't exist, or like she could disappear forever without anyone noticing. She attributes this sense of weightlessness to the fact that she knows so little about her own past—she never knew her father, and doesn't even know how Adora and Alan met. Any questions she's ever asked Adora about their family's history are considered "prying."

Camille never felt close to Adora as a child—she doesn't think her mother ever knew anything about her, like her favorite color or food, and she herself never sought comfort from Adora. For a while, Camille convinced herself that the distance between her and her mother was a defense constructed after Marian's death—but now Camille believes that Adora has "always had more problems with children than she'd ever admit," and perhaps in fact hates and resents them.

Camille and Adora find themselves face-to-face at the Nashes'—and it's clear that both women's attempts to maneuver around one another within their small town are not going to work. Camille is shocked by the revelation that Adora was actually close with the girls—she'd thought her mother was just putting on airs.



This new revelation sets Camille on edge—she is suspicious of Adora's desire to connect with a little girl like Ann, who, by all accounts, was rebellious and headstrong and whose family is not in Adora's social circle.



Camille has returned to her hometown, and has had every aspect of her life, in turn, controlled by her mother. Camille cannot do the job she is here to do because of Adora's influence, and she is beyond frustrated.



In a low moment, feeling completely debased and controlled by Adora, Camille reflects on the tense relationship the two of them have always had—a relationship defined by distance and secrets.



Camille has wrestled, for a long time, with feelings of inadequacy and rejection. As an adult, she has learned to view Adora's apparent dislike of her not as a personal indictment—but as perhaps a larger, more insidious problem Adora has struggled with for a long time.



Camille has a memory in her head of an afternoon about two years after Marian's death, when Adora had a group of friends over for afternoon drinks. Camille was supposed to be upstairs doing homework, but secretly looked down on the gathering. One of the women brought a baby, and, at one point in the afternoon, Adora carried the baby through the house, cooing to it and bouncing it. Camille, looking down the stairs, watched as Adora kissed the baby on the cheek—and then bit it, causing it to wail.

After the debacle at the Nashes', Camille goes to another bar for a drink. She knows she has been consuming too much alcohol in Wind Gap, but tells herself she simply needs some "lubrication," a way to ease all the "sharp thoughts" in her head.

On the way home from the bar, Camille spots a little girl on a golf cart decorated with stickers—it is Amma. Amma is not headed home, though; she is traveling east. Camille decides to follow Amma and trails her very slowly. Amma continues past the farmyards and country houses on the east side of town and heads out towards the pig farm. Camille watches Amma "zip" through the gates of the hog plant, and then heads in herself, mentioning Adora's name to the security guard at the front.

Camille watches Amma park her golf cart and beeline past the slaughterhouse towards a big metal barn where the sows nurse their broods. Camille finds the entire operation "repulsive"—she believes working in a place where animals are used up, abused, and slaughtered "makes you less human." Camille watches Amma head to the far end of the barn and follows her carefully, trying to remain unseen.

Camille observes as Amma watches a "nearly comatose" female pig nursing her piglets. They swarm over the sow and fight over her bloody nipples as the sow's eyes roll up in her head. Amma sits cross-legged on the ground and stares intently at the scene. After a few minutes, Camille can see Amma smiling and squirming at the sight. Camille decides she has to leave—she needs to get away from the stench, the sound, and, most of all, Amma.

CHAPTER 8

The whole time she's been in Wind Gap, Camille has had little interest in Amma—but after what she saw at the farm, Camille finds herself fascinated by the girl. Camille is disturbed and intrigued by Amma's violent streak, and finds that it reminds her of the things she's heard about Ann and Natalie.

This memory from Camille's childhood perfectly distills what seems to be Adora's attitude towards children—a desire to possess them and lavish them with attention, but also a hint of cruelty or even hatred.



Camille continues to justify using alcohol as an escape from her problems, even as she recognizes that her problem is tipping into dangerous territory.



The secrets and subterfuge continue to unspool as Camille tries to quietly tail Amma through town towards their family's huge hog farm.



Camille views her family's hog farm as a disgusting, cruel place where inhumane practices are perpetuated, daily, for profit. She wonders what Amma could possibly be doing in such an awful place.



As Camille observes Amma delightfully watching this violent and sickening scene, she realizes that her younger sister delights in violence. The image of a group of piglets hurting each other—and even themselves—for a chance at some of their mother's milk is a stark picture, and a metaphor that foreshadows Amma and Camille's competition for their own mother's affection.



Camille has discovered darker and darker pockets of female behavior the longer she's been in Wind Gap—especially in its youngest residents.



Late one afternoon, Camille decides to try approaching the Keenes for more information about Natalie. She needs a quote for her feature, badly—if she doesn't turn up anything good, Curry will pull her out of Wind Gap. She drives to the Keene house and rings the doorbell—Natalie's mother answers the door and lets Camille in as soon as Camille says she wants to talk about Natalie. Camille feels guilty for not first identifying herself as a reporter.

Camille asks for a glass of water, knowing that a woman is less likely to throw someone out of her house once she's offered hospitality. Camille can tell that Mrs. Keene is staring at her, trying to figure out who she is—Camille knows that between morticians, priests, police, and mourners, Mrs. Keene has probably met more new people in Wind Gap in the last few days than she has since moving there.

When Mrs. Keene returns with Camille's water, the two make small talk for a few moments before Camille at last introduces herself as a reporter. Mrs. Keene's pleasant smile fades away, and though Camille begs Mrs. Keene for the chance to ask some questions, Mrs. Keene tells Camille to leave and never return. She tells Camille that she—and all reporters—are disgusting, ugly parasites before leading her to the door and forcing her out.

Standing slightly shocked on Mrs. Keene's doorstep, Camille barely notices when a girl pulls up alongside the house in a red convertible and calls out to Camille by name. The girl introduces herself as Meredith Wheeler—John Keene's girlfriend—and says she knows who Camille is, though she was "just a little goofball" when Camille was in high school. Because Camille was popular and beautiful as a teen, it doesn't surprise her that Meredith knows her. Meredith tells Camille that she'll be in touch—she'll find a way to get John to talk to her—and then zips away in her car.

That evening, Camille meets with Richard Willis at a restaurant in town. Camille recognizes the waitress as one of her old friends from high school, and there is a brief moment of awkwardness between them. Camille orders a beer, and when their waitress steps away, Richard comments that he can already smell alcohol on Camille's breath. She denies it and changes the subject, asking Richard what he wants to know about the town of Wind Gap—he replies that he wants to hear about its violence.

Camille has heard and seen violent things about Amma and Ann—and now wants to know the truth about Natalie. She knows that the Keenes don't like reporters, though, and is wary of what will happen if she identifies herself as such.



Camille is intentionally trying to deceive Mrs. Keene as she scrounges for a quote that will advance her article.



When Camille reveals the truth, Mrs. Keene responds exactly as Camille thought she would—by spewing hatred and vitriol, and making Camille feel bad and guilty about her work.



Whereas Mrs. Keene hates the press, the punchy and outgoing Meredith Wheeler seems to love idea of getting a moment in the spotlight—though Camille will soon come to see that Meredith has an agenda other than sharing the truth.



Richard is an odd figure—he both wants to go after the truth, and is okay watching it get swept under the rug. He allows Camille to deny her alcoholism, and yet uses her—as uncertain and untrustworthy a source as she may be—to get at the truth of what Wind Gap is like.



Every place has its own “particular strain” of violence, Richard explains, and he wants to know whether Wind Gap’s is open or hidden, widespread or personal. Camille is wary of making a “sweeping statement” about the town’s history of violence, but Richard suggests she name a violent incident remembered from childhood. Camille, not thinking, blurts out that she once saw a woman bite a child. As Richard asks her more questions about the incident, she panics and deflects, insisting she barely remembers the moment at all.

Richard asks Camille about the next incident she remembers—she says that when she was in the fifth grade, some boys cornered a girl at recess and made her put a stick inside of herself. Richard is disgusted but fascinated, and asks Camille to name more incidents. She says that once an eighth-grade girl got drunk at a high school party and “four or five guys” from the football team “passed her around” and had sex with her. Camille asks Richard if that “counts” as violence, and Richard is shocked to realize Camille herself doesn’t have the ability to recognize that it does.

Richard points out that the pattern of violence against women in Wind Gap might be connected to the attacks. Richard sees the act of **teeth-pulling** as tantamount to rape—at least in the eyes of the murderer. When Camille asks if their conversation is on the record, Richard warns her that if he sees himself quoted in her next byline, they’ll never speak again—which would be “really bad,” because he likes talking to her. Richard asks Camille if he can take her out for some fun—no “shop talk”—and Camille agrees.

Camille and Richard wind up in Garrett Park, swinging on the swingset. Richard mentions that a lot of high school kids party and drink in this park, and says he would’ve liked to know what Camille was like in high school. Camille thinks back on her own high school times in Garrett Park—it was where she gave her first blowjob, not long before her “wild night” at the football party. The story she told Richard about the eighth-grade girl sleeping with “four or five guys” was her story.

Richard asks if Camille was close to her mother when she was young, and Camille says she wasn’t. Richard asks if Adora ever hurt her, and Camille chides Richard for asking such a “bizarre” question—though privately she reels through her memories, realizing that though Adora never physically hurt her, Adora has, in a way, given her all of her **scars**.

Camille agrees to play Richard’s game, but—perhaps because of her intoxication—reveals more than she wanted to, and finds herself on the defensive as she struggles not to implicate Adora in Richard’s history of Wind Gap’s violence.



As Camille relays these horrible instances of sexual violence perpetrated against young girls, Richard realizes that Camille doesn’t even think these things are all that bad—causing him to wonder what, in Wind Gap, counts as “serious” violence. Camille’s inability to see these events for what they are is perhaps a defense mechanism—as it seems more than likely that they happened to her.



As Richard and Camille together hedge closer to the killer’s potential motivations for maiming Ann and Natalie so terribly, the conversation becomes both increasingly difficult—and increasingly valuable—to both of them.



In this passage, Camille confirms that at least two—and so probably all three—of the stories she told Richard were about her. Camille has been subjected to an extensive history of violence, but is unable to really allow herself to see the depths of what she’s suffered.



When the conversation gets a little too intense and far too personal for Camille, she lashes out—though Richard’s question forces her to admit that she has been subject to violence if not at Adora’s hands, then at least due to her influence.



Camille spots a truck rumbling up. Four girls climb out of it—Amma and her three blonde friends. Amma is sucking flirtatiously on a red lollipop, and as she approaches Richard and Camille, she greets the detective as “Dick.” As Camille studies the provocatively-dressed Amma, she finds herself feeling jealous and wishes the girls would go away.

As Amma begins teasing Richard and Camille about whether or not they’re dating—and whether Richard has heard any of Camille’s juicy stories from “back in the day”—Richard tries to help Camille into his car, away from the girls, but Amma sticks her lollipop into Camille’s hair. Camille grabs Amma’s wrist, and Amma, rather than squirming away, pulls herself in even closer to Camille. Amma taunts Camille, daring her to hurt her—“You could kill me right now,” she says, “and Dick still wouldn’t be able to figure it out.” Camille pushes Amma away from her and stumbles into Richard’s car.

CHAPTER 9

Camille wakes the following morning to an “angry sun.” She dresses and heads downstairs, where Gayla is helping Adora tend her rose garden. Without looking up, Adora calls to Camille and tells her that the two of them are going shopping in town—Adora and Alan are having a party next Saturday, and Adora is sure Camille needs a new dress. Camille tries to bring up Adora’s connection with the Nashes, but Adora deflects and continues pruning imperfect roses with a pair of pliers. When Adora instructs Gayla to throw the spare roses away, Camille offers to take them for her room, but Adora insists that they’re not up to snuff—when Camille presses the issue, Adora pricks her palms on some thorns, and accuses Camille of having caused her to bleed.

Camille, Amma, and Adora head into town to go dress shopping. When they walk into a store, Adora introduces Camille to the saleswoman as her third daughter. The saleswoman comments on the lack of resemblance between Camille and Adora, and Adora confirms that Camille doesn’t take after her much.

As the salesgirl swans around the shop collecting dresses for Camille to try on, Camille gets nervous—the dresses are all strapless or otherwise revealing. When the salesgirl asks if Amma is trying anything on, Adora insists that she isn’t ready for “these types of clothes,” and the salesgirl remarks on how grown-up Amma looks.

Camille has been getting closer to Richard and enjoying his company. When Amma shows up, Camille feels threatened—Amma and Camille compete for Adora’s attention, and Camille seems to feel she will have to compete with Amma for Richard’s, too.



Amma’s violence and vitriol in this scene is pointed and focused—she wants to make Camille feel humiliated and small. Her rage finds Richard, too, and she indicts his failure to solve the mysteries of her schoolfriends—though the source of her anger on this particular topic is more complex than it seems.



This passage shows how Adora—obsessed with perfection, just like Amma—can turn even the simplest disagreement into a personal attack. When Camille wants something that Adora doesn’t approve of, Adora accuses Camille of being intolerable and even inflicting harm upon her—when really, Adora hurt her palms herself, perhaps out of rage at her daughter.



Adora doesn’t want anything to do with Camille—in private, or in public, where she makes certain that nothing about Camille should reflect back on her.



Camille realizes that Adora is trying to make her feel uncomfortable, as retribution for some perceived wrong—her association with the Nashes, the roses, or something else—or simply to assert her control over her daughter.



Adora trails Camille to the dressing room and perches on a chair just outside. Camille, confronting the strappy dresses inside, knows that Adora is punishing her. As she tries on the dresses, she examines the exposed words on her skin, and calls out to Adora, telling her that none of the dresses will work. As Adora demands to see some of the options, Amma whines, asking why Camille won't show them any of the dresses. Unable to take it any longer, Camille bursts out of the dressing room, revealing her scars in full to her mother—and to the horrified Amma.

Back at the house, Camille walks straight into the kitchen. She wants to open up the cutlery drawer and look at her mother's knives, but when she goes to pull the drawer open, it sticks—Adora has padlocked it. Camille feels her skin growing hot, and decides to go upstairs and call Curry—as she does, though, the doorbell rings, and when she peers through the front door, she sees Meredith Wheeler and John Keene standing outside.

Meredith is dressed in a cheerleading uniform, and speaks in “wheedling tone[s]” as she introduces Camille to John—a beautiful, “almost androgynous” teen with thick black hair and full lips. Camille asks the two to sit in the living room while she fixes tea—before making drinks, however, she runs upstairs to make sure that Adora is in her room.

Camille makes some sweet tea and then sits down with Meredith and John. She tells John that all she wants is to get a fuller picture of Natalie, so that she can better describe her to her paper's readers. John admits that his mother would flip if she knew he was talking to Camille. Friction with his mother, he says, is the reason he moved into Meredith's family's carriage house, much to the dismay of Amma and her friends—one of whom is John's little sister, Kelsey—who previously used the house as a hangout.

As Camille begins asking John questions about Natalie, Meredith keeps interrupting to offer her two cents. When John says that Natalie tried to hang out with the local girls but found them “snotty,” Meredith chides him for being rude, as Amma is Camille's younger sister, but John volunteers that Amma and Natalie were actually friends for a while, and would play together in the woods. The two would come home, he says, “all scraped up and daffy.” The girls had some kind of falling out, and Natalie became friends with James Capisi.

Camille plays along with Adora's game for a while, but when things reach a breaking point, she decides to take back power in the situation. Adora has attempted to humiliate Camille, but Camille proudly bears her scars to Amma, reasserting her agency and invalidating—at least for a moment—Adora's power over her.



The incident at the dress shop leaves Camille feeling raw, embarrassed, and in pain—even though she was able to take control of the situation, she was still humiliated, and still forced to realize that her mother wants to take control over her life at any cost.



Camille has to conduct this interview carefully, as Adora has forbidden her from bringing anything related to the investigation into the house.



John seems to want to distance himself from his insular family, who have isolated themselves from reporters and attempted to keep details about Natalie under wraps. Camille senses a kindred spirit in John because of how he values the truth and wants to put an end to the secrets and lies surrounding the case.



The realization that Natalie and Amma were friends ties the three girls together, and perhaps causes Camille to question why Amma isn't sadder about the deaths of her schoolmates—one of whom was, evidently, her close friend for a period of time.



When Camille asks John about his lack of an alibi—he was out driving around town, he says, on the night Natalie was murdered—she empathizes with his feeling “claustrophobic” in such a small town and needing to “get lost for a little.” Meredith interrupts—she says that John was with her both nights, and is being “noble” to keep Meredith out of trouble. When John asks Meredith to be quiet, she tells him that she wants everyone to know the truth—she doesn’t want the town thinking her boyfriend is a “fucking baby killer.”

Switching the subject, Camille asks about Natalie’s violence back in Philadelphia. John admits that Natalie—a little girl with a temper—attacked a classmate up north with scissors. Natalie “ruined” the little girl’s right eye, but doctors were able to save the left one. John tells Camille that, though the incident was violent, Natalie showed remorse about it and saw a therapist for a year after the attack. Still, their family had to move “like criminals” to a new town and start fresh. John begins to cry as he laments that their family came all the way to Wind Gap just to lose Natalie.

That night, Camille receives a call from one of her old high school friends, Katie, who invites her out to Angie’s house for a “pity party”—a tradition in which their friend group watches a sad movie, drinks a bunch of wine, cries, and gossips. Camille begrudgingly agrees to go, and within an hour Katie arrives to pick her up.

At Angie’s house, Camille drinks and watches *Beaches* with her old friends. When the movie is over, the crying women talk about their children, their jobs, their husbands, and how unhappy they are. All of their concerns are completely alien to Camille, who excuses herself to the kitchen to slice some cheese. One of the other women, Becca, joins Camille in the kitchen, and they commiserate about feeling out of place.

When Becca and Camille return to the kitchen, the conversation has turned to Ann and Natalie—and how Amma and her friends always picked on both girls. When Camille defensively states that all girls at that age are awful to one another, the others accuse Camille of not being sad enough about the girls’ murders, and Tish, citing the Bible’s edict to “be fruitful and multiply,” speaks up to theorize that “part of your heart can never work if you don’t have kids.”

John and Meredith have together constructed a series of secrets meant to protect one another—not just from the police’s scrutiny, but from the gossipy and small-minded Wind Gap population’s scrutiny and judgement as well.



The revelation about Natalie’s violent past seems to paint a target on Natalie’s back. She was trouble back in Philadelphia—and was, ostensibly, trouble here in Wind Gap, too.



Camille doesn’t particularly want to attend her friends’ gathering, but considering how tense things are at home, it seems like a preferable alternative to remaining cooped up in the house all night.



Camille has rejected the kind of femininity that these women cling to—a weepy, vulnerable, performatively self-pitying kind of femininity. Camille has had to be tough all her life, and that has made her somewhat alien to these women—and them to her.



Camille finds that her onetime friends are trying to invalidate her status not just as a woman, but as a human being, because of the choices she’s made in rejecting traditional modes of femininity and living her life outside the confines of Wind Gap’s small-minded ideals.



Once Camille arrives home that evening, she feels the desire to cut herself. As she tries to fall asleep, she cannot shut out flashes in her mind: images of Bob Nash, Natalie's mother, her own younger self crying on the floor of Marian's bedroom, Natalie stabbing her classmate in the eyes, and lastly of Amma—a “woman-child” with dark desires. Camille weeps, unable to fall asleep.

Camille pulls herself out of her crying jag, trying to focus on thinking about her article. She hears a knock at the door, and Amma whispers her name. Camille lets Amma in, and Amma asks if Camille has been crying because of “her”—meaning Adora. Amma says she's sorry: she didn't know that Camille used to hurt herself. Camille accepts her apology. Amma then reveals that she's brought Camille a “present”—she holds out a joint, and tells Camille that smoking is better than drinking vodka. Camille accepts the joint, and Amma asks to see Camille's **scars** once more. Camille tells her she can't.

Amma tells Camille that she can be “nice” sometimes. “When everyone's asleep and everything's quiet,” she explains, it's easier to be kind. She reaches out as if to touch Camille, but then drops her hand and quickly leaves the room.

CHAPTER 10

Camille's most recent article, featuring extensive quotes from John Keene and a focus on James Capisi's overlooked testimony, goes to print. The morning the story comes out, Camille stays in bed as long as she can, ignoring the rising temperature in the bedroom and Gayla's repeated knocks, anticipating angry phone calls from readers and locals. The first call she gets, though, is from Meredith Wheeler, who complains about being left out of the story. Camille promises to interview Meredith the next time she does a story featuring more voices from Wind Gap. After a pause, Meredith tells Camille that she could tell her a lot of things about the Keenes—things that John would never say.

Out on the porch, Adora is tending to Amma, who is wrapped in a pink silk comforter and has a damp cloth pressed to her forehead. Adora feeds Amma toast off of a silver platter, which also bears tea and assorted bottles of medicine. As Camille passes by, Adora blames Amma's fever on Camille's presence, but Camille simply snickers—she heard Amma downstairs last night drinking and she knows the girl is hungover.

Camille is overwhelmed by how dark and strange everything in Wind Gap is. She is so disturbed by the collective weight of everything happening there that she breaks down.



Seeing Camille's scars has clearly affected Amma—she is both fascinated by them and pitying of Camille's pain. Amma knows more about Camille than Camille has realized and attempts to show off her knowledge of her sister's drinking problem—perhaps as a way of asserting power over Camille.



Amma seems to see being “nice” as too vulnerable—or perhaps too feminine—and rejects the performance of niceness when others can see her.



Camille wants to avoid the effect her article will have on the town, but she cannot. People have opinions about what's going on and what's being said—and Meredith Wheeler in particular longs to be painted in a very particular light, so much so that she's willing to reveal delicate secrets in exchange for Camille's attention.



Camille can hardly believe that Adora doesn't see what's really going on with Amma—she is almost amused by their codependence, and by Adora's blindness to Amma's imperfections.



As Camille walks downtown to where Natalie’s body was found, Richard pulls up alongside her and asks if the euphemistic “source close to the police” in her article was him. He is smiling, and asks Camille to get into the car—he needs a “Wind Gap tour guide,” and offers, in return, to answer three questions, completely and truthfully, off the record. Camille gets in, and Richard fastens her seat belt for her, telling her he has to “keep [her] safe.”

Richard has Camille take him to a series of “secret places” around Wind Gap. In the woods, they hike to an ancient and abandoned one-room schoolhouse near the creek where Ann was found—a high school hangout. As Camille shows Richard around the structure, he asks if she has a boyfriend back in Chicago. She asks whether he has a girlfriend, and he says he doesn’t. He asks Camille if she ever came to the schoolhouse to do bad things in high school, and she admits she did—Richard tells Camille that he wishes, for the first time, he’d gone to high school in Wind Gap. Richard kisses Camille, and she lets him.

Camille and Richard continue exploring the woods for the rest of the afternoon, discussing Ann and Natalie’s murders. When Camille asks if John Keene is a suspect, Richard confirms that he fits the profile: plus, he says, John is a teenage boy who has been “weeping it up all over town” when most teenage boys would rather die than cry in public.

Richard drops Camille at home that evening. Her skin is buzzing—earlier, they “got each other off like a couple of schoolkids,” and Camille wonders if she smells like sex as she enters her mother’s house. Adora is sitting on the bottom step drinking amaretto sours, dressed in a pink, puff-sleeved nightgown. She asks Camille to come sit with her, and Camille—feeling a “rattle [of excitement] from childhood” at the thought of time alone with her mother—accepts.

As Camille sits down, Adora says that she has “finally” realized why she doesn’t—and has never—loved Camille: Camille reminds her of her own mother, Joya, who never loved her. Camille insists that she always loved Adora—Adora was the one who never liked her. Adora insists that Camille was willful and spiteful as a child, always disobedient. Adora admits that she wonders why Marian had to die and not Camille.

Camille and Richard’s flirtation heightens—as does their ongoing bargain to trade important information with one another in service of their respective careers.



Though it seems, at first glance, strange that Camille and Richard are able to develop sexual feelings for one another in the midst of a grisly murder investigation, it does make sense that their attraction to one another is fueled by the air of secrecy and the clandestine bargain they’ve struck.



Richard believes that because John has been exhibiting a feminine trait in public, there is something off—and perhaps even devious—about him. Richard sees nontraditional gender roles as suspicious—which will come to have an important impact on the investigation as it continues.



Camille has just embraced her femininity in a new way by connecting sexually with Richard—as she returns home, though, she is confronted with an ultra-feminine image of her mother in a frilly nightie. Thrilled that they might at last be able to connect, Camille jumps at the chance for her mother’s attention.



Adora’s outright admission that she never loved Camille hurts, in spite of the distance between the two of them. Camille is shocked and hurt, pained to realize that her relationship with Adora was doomed nearly from the start.



Camille feels her rage “flatten” into despair and admits that she’s “not so pleased” to be alive either. When Adora calls Camille “hateful,” Camille retorts that she learned at Adora’s feet. Adora lunges for Camille, reaches behind her back, and touches the last spot bare of any **scars**. Adora tells Camille that one day she will “carve [her] name there” before releasing Camille and escaping upstairs.

Camille finishes off her mother’s amaretto sour and heads off to bed where she has disturbing dreams. She wakes the next day past noon feeling ill; she vomits, and then takes a bath. She feels her skin stinging, and worries for a moment that Adora has gotten to her—when she touches her back, however, it is still smooth.

Camille heads over to Meredith’s house, but Meredith isn’t there at all. Instead, she finds Amma and her friends lounging by the pool. Camille hides herself and watches Amma rub sunscreen lasciviously over her body while John Keene, sitting in the shade at the other end of the pool, watches her. When Amma calls John out for staring at her, John replies that he “like[s] to keep an eye” on Amma.

Camille decides to announce her presence and enters the pool area with a hello. She asks for Meredith, and John says she’s gone to the store to buy sugar. Camille asks John, quietly, how he’s doing, and when he replies that he’s not doing very well, she suggests he see a counselor. Amma, having overheard, agrees that he should—before any more little girls show up without their **teeth**. Amma slips into the pool, and John walks away into the carriage house. When Amma comes up from under the water, Camille asks why she’s being so cruel. Amma looks caught off-guard and admits that she doesn’t know. Meredith appears at the door and calls Camille inside.

Meredith—in a perfect outfit and hairdo—swans around the house, getting things ready for Camille and apologizing for the girls’ behavior. Before Meredith is really ready, Camille starts her tape recorder and asks about the gossip around town concerning John, and why people might think he’s responsible for the murders. Meredith says she believes John is innocent, and all of the claims against him are “idle gossip.” When Camille asks Meredith to tell her more about the girls, Meredith delivers a clearly-rehearsed line about the “darling” girls being “plucked from Wind Gap” by God himself.

Adora’s rage escalates and turns to violence when Camille indicts Adora’s performance as a mother. Adora will not have her control and supremacy within her own house questioned, and she threatens to physically harm Camille, if need be, to show her who’s boss.



Camille’s disturbing dreams about Adora blur reality—Camille is so terrified of Adora that she is frightened, for a moment, that her mother has victimized her in the night.



John’s comment to Amma could be interpreted as strange or even predatory—but as the novel unfolds, his motives for “keep[ing] an eye” on Amma will be made startlingly clear.



Amma seems to delight in tormenting John—in tormenting anyone, really—but the second Camille calls her out, Amma is visibly confused and shaken. Amma has been allowed to rule her friend group, and seemingly the town, with no one questioning her—Camille changes all that, leaving Amma uncertain and vulnerable.



Meredith has carefully rehearsed her answers to Camille’s questions—she wants to appear perfect, and in doing so to clear both her and John’s name from public suspicion. Meredith adapts traditional, accepted modes of femininity in order to make herself seem of unimpeachable character.



Camille calls Meredith out for lying, but Meredith confesses that John would hate her if she told Camille the truth. Meredith attempts to bargain with Camille about which quotes from her are used in Camille's next article, and it becomes clear that Meredith—just like Amma—simply wants attention. When Camille threatens to leave Meredith's quotes out of the article, Meredith decides to pony up and tell the truth: she thinks she knows why the girls' **teeth** were pulled.

Meredith reveals that both girls were biters—they had serious tempers, but rather than hitting, they bit. Meredith holds out her right hand and shows Camille a scar, which she alleges is from Natalie. She then pulls her hair away from her left earlobe to reveal that it is completely mangled—when Meredith slept over in the guest room at the Keene house one night, she woke up to find herself covered in blood, with her ear “on fire” and Natalie leaning over her, screaming.

Camille asks if Ann was as bad as Natalie, and Meredith replies that Ann was even worse. There are people all over town with Ann's bite marks on them—Adora included. Camille is shocked. Meredith explains that when Ann didn't understand something Adora was teaching her in their tutoring, Ann “completely lost it,” pulling chunks of Adora's hair out and biting her on the wrist so hard Adora needed stitches. Camille imagines, on her mother's wrist, “a little circle of jagged lines, and within, a ring of perfect skin.”

CHAPTER 11

Camille calls Richard one evening, and though he picks up, he tells her he's busy and asks to call her back. When he does, he tells her that he's been at the hospital in Woodberry, investigating a lead “of sorts.” Camille asks if the two of them can meet at the bar where they first shared a drink—she needs to ask him something straight, and she needs an answer, on or off the record.

Camille is three bourbons deep when Richard arrives at the bar to meet her, and when she sees him, she is so charmed and turned on that she barely even wants to talk “business.” When Richard asks her what her question was, though, Camille gets down to it. She asks him if, when he thinks of the person who killed Ann and Natalie, he has a specific person in mind—male or female. Richard says that he doesn't believe a woman would have killed the girls “this way.” Camille admits she is “freaking out,” and Richard asks her to let him help.

Meredith wants to steer the truth in her and John's favor—but is willing to compromise when Camille threatens to pull focus away from Meredith altogether. Meredith would do anything for attention—seemingly a compulsion among the women of Wind Gap.



Meredith's story seems to confirm that the girls' teeth were taken by someone who was a victim of their biting—the fact that she shares this information with Camille rather than police gives Camille a one-up on the investigation and a vital piece of information.



Camille is horrified and intrigued by the revelation that Adora was a victim of Ann's temper—and her teeth. The idea planted by Vickery—that someone in town might have murdered the girls in retribution for their unruly ways—meshes with Meredith's account in a cacophony of terror, and Camille begins to suspect the worst—that her mother could have killed the girls.



At this point, Camille doesn't care whether her conversations with Richard are usable for her article or not—she just wants to talk to one of the few people in town she can trust.



The central question of this murder case has been what kind of person would commit such heinous, personal violence. Though Camille is starting to have suspicions about who the murderer could be, Richard maintains his position—no woman could be capable of such violence.



Camille reveals what she has learned—that Ann and Natalie were violent biters. She tells Richard that she believes this is why their **teeth** were taken. Richard asks Camille to tell him who the girls bit, but she insists she can't say. Richard accuses Camille of “screwing around” with him and leaves the bar.

Camille wants to divulge the truth to Richard—but because the implications of it are too awful for her to fully consider, she balks.



When Camille gets home, Alan is waiting for her on the sofa. He tells Camille that she's making Adora ill, and that if conditions don't improve, he is going to have to ask her to leave. Alan accuses Camille of tormenting Adora by constantly bringing up Marian or discussing, in gory detail, the murders of Ann and Natalie. Camille insists she hasn't said anything about any of them to Adora, but Alan will not listen to her. Camille tells Alan that if he doesn't know by now that Adora is a liar, he's an idiot. Alan replies only that Adora had a hard life—her own mother, Joya, liked to “hurt her.” Camille assures Alan she'll leave as soon as she can.

This passage makes it clear that Adora has been telling Alan lies about Camille in order to gain sympathy from him, and perhaps to drive Camille out of the house—when Camille urges Alan to see the truth, Alan defends his wife, blaming Adora's erratic nature and cruelty on the abuse she suffered at the hands of her own mother.



Camille pours herself a drink and brings it upstairs to her bedroom, where she loses herself in memories of Marian, whom she adored. She creeps down the hallway to Marian's old room and wonders what it must have been like for Amma to grow up down the hall from the room of a dead sister she'd never met.

Camille has for so long been so absorbed in her own experience of Marian's death that she never stopped to consider what growing up in the shadow of a dead—and thus perfect—sister would do to Amma.



In Marian's room, everything is pristine. A set of clothes is laid out on the bed, and Marian's IV stand is still next to the industrial hospital bed and the heart monitor. Camille is “disgusted” that her mother has not “purged” the room of Marian's things—including her extensive collection of porcelain dolls, which stare lifelessly at Camille until she gets spooked and hurries back to her own room.

The fact that Adora has preserved Marian's room in perfect condition for upwards of fifteen years shows just how committed Adora is to grieving Marian as a “hobby”—and even perhaps finding comfort or joy in that grief.



Camille calls Curry—it has been three days since they last spoke, and nearly two weeks since she arrived in Wind Gap. She tells Curry that she's gotten a lot of information off the record, and once she secures official statements, she will file something great in a few days.

Camille wants Curry to know she's committed to doing a good job—Camille is desperately afraid to lose the article and have all she's put herself through the last few days be for nothing.



Curry encourages her to continue working hard, but continues asking about whether she feels the pressure of being home is too much and is impacting her “recovery.” Camille admits that being in Wind Gap makes her feel like a “bad person” before breaking down in tears. Curry comforts Camille, assuring her that she is a decent person. Camille feels the words “wrong, woman, [and] **teeth**” burning against her skin. Curry continues talking to her, telling her jokes and stories, and Camille pulls the covers up over her head and listens to his voice.

Curry is more worried about Camille herself than he is about the article—Camille is so unused to tenderness or concern that she forgets about how deeply Curry cares for her and finds a sense of incredible relief when she remembers.



CHAPTER 12

The next morning, Camille goes over to where Richard is staying, in Wind Gap's only apartment building. She brings a bottle of bourbon with her. Richard answers the door in his pajama and invites Camille into his messy temporary apartment. He apologizes for being rude, but warns Camille that in trying to protect her sources, she might be protecting the person responsible for the killings. Camille teases Richard, telling him to do just "a little work on [his] own." He tells Camille that he loves when she gets tough with him, and then kisses her. He begins tugging at Camille's clothes, but she insists that if they are going to have sex, they're going to do it her way—her clothes stay on.

Lying together in bed after sex, Richard and Camille continue discussing the case. Richard says he thinks John Keene is the murderer—he was close to Natalie in an "unhealthy way" and has no alibi to boot. Camille asks Richard to give her something on the record, and he in return asks who told her about the biting. Camille tells Richard that Meredith Wheeler told her that Natalie bit her earlobe off, and that Ann bit Adora on the wrist. Camille asks for Richard's on-the-record statement, but he refuses, and tells her they're doing things his way.

They have sex one more time, and then, in the late afternoon, Camille drives through the rain to Garrett Park, not wanting to go home. She sits in her car watching the rain fall until a car pulls up—Amma and her friend Kylie are inside, and they beg Camille to get in and come to a party with them. Camille refuses at first, but then considers her other dismal options and decides to throw caution to the wind and go along. In the car, Amma convinces Camille to take some OxyContin—as she sets the pill on the Camille's tongue, Amma calls Camille her "good girl."

By the time they arrive at the high school party in one of Wind Gap's largest mansions, Camille is feeling loose and "game." When Meredith and John Keene arrive shortly after their group, however, the party is infused with a scandalized, gossipy energy—Camille understands just how many people really think John Keene is the killer, and what outcasts he and Meredith have become.

Camille and Richard's unique power struggle—based on information and intellectual currency during their day-to-day dealings—translates into a similar teasing but very real negotiation of power dynamics in the bedroom. Camille has certain rules and boundaries she has developed in order to preserve the secret of her scars, and she will only give Richard what he wants if he acts within those bounds.



When Camille at last relents and tells Richard the information that he wants, he responds by upping the power struggle and refusing to give her a usable statement. Richard seems to like Camille a lot, but he is still attempting to wield power over her and subjugate her to his will.



The longer Camille has been in Wind Gap, the worse her decision-making processes have gotten. She has embarked on an affair with a detective in the case she's reporting, and is now partying—and doing illicit drugs—with her thirteen-year-old sister, endangering both her journalistic and moral credibility.



In some ways, attending the party does actually allow Camille to do some "reporting"—she is able to see what things in a certain part of town that would otherwise be walled off to her are really like, because Amma has brought her along.



Amidst the whispers and jeers from their other classmates, Amma greets John with a syrupy-sweet “Hiiii, murderer,” causing Camille to feel a rush of sympathy for the boy, but Amma quickly pulls her upstairs into a bedroom where her friends are playing a game in which they pass Ecstasy around in a circle using their tongues. When it is Amma’s turn to pass the pill to Camille, she uses her tongue to force the pill to dissolve. When the other teens protest that Amma cheated, she retorts that Camille could “use a little sunshine,” as she’s had “a pretty shitty life.”

Camille stands up to leave, realizing she needs to get away from the party before the ecstasy hits. Amma excitedly leaves with Camille, promising her that they’ll find a pool to swim in—when her friends Kelsey and Kylie try to join them, Amma forbids the girls from coming along, and tells them to go back to the party and “help Jodes get laid.”

Amma and Camille walk home hand-in-hand, enjoying the night air as their highs descend upon them. They discuss Adora, and Amma admits that she often hears her mother whimpering Camille, Marian, and Joya’s names in her sleep. Amma also states that every time Adora takes care of her, Amma always likes to have sex afterwards. Camille warns Amma that she shouldn’t “let boys do things” to her, but Amma retorts that sometimes, “if you let people do things to you, you’re really doing it to them.”

Camille tries to say more, but Amma changes the subject. She dreamily states how much she likes Adora’s room, and admires her “famous [ivory] floor,” which was featured in many home design and Southern living magazines years ago. As Amma continues telling Camille about her life, her friends, and the ways in which she’s constantly scrutinizing her own behavior, Camille begins to feel a deep kinship with Amma, even as she realizes how obsessed with power and adoration Amma is.

As if reading Camille’s mind, Amma admits that sometimes she’s “a little... off,” lashing out and “hurt[ing]” when things aren’t right. Camille believes that Amma is confessing to self-harm, and tells Amma that there are far better ways to deal with pain, boredom, and frustration than cutting. Amma, clearly at the apex of her high, screams out “I hurt” and “I love it!” as they approach Adora’s house.

Amma has been alternately sickly-sweet and downright violent with Camille—in this passage, she humorously embarrasses Camille while at the same time lavishing attention, affection, and drugs on her.



Amma has, at several points throughout the novel, thrown Camille under the bus in front of her friends—now, though, Amma rejects her friends in order to spend time bonding with Camille.



Amma’s worldview is revealed a little more fully in this passage. She eroticizes care and comfort, and at the same time sees sex only as a tool of control. Amma’s complicated way of relating to her friends, to boys, and to Adora is tangled up in her uncertain, half-formed notions of femininity, power, and submission.



Even though Amma’s twisted way of relating to Adora, to friendship, and to sex worries Camille, there are other things about Amma that remind Camille of herself—namely, how self-denigrating and obsessed with perfection and detail Amma has turned out to be.



This passage seems to point to the fact that Amma hurts herself when she feels “off”—but as the novel will later reveal, Amma’s way of dealing with her own pain is much less steeped in self-loathing and much more focused on securing revenge against those whom she feels have wronged her.



Camille keeps trying to talk to Amma about her confession, but Amma, claiming that Camille is her “soul mate,” only wants to dance, hug, and spin around. Camille agrees, and the two spin in circles until Camille pops her ankle against the curb and begins bleeding. The porch light goes on up the hill, and Amma quietly asks Camille if she wants to sleep in her bed. Camille imagines an idyllic scene, comfortably sharing a bed with Amma, before realizing she’s actually picturing old memories with Marian.

As Camille experiences a moment of ecstatic bonding with Amma, she worries about leaving Marian behind and betraying the memory of the sister she once loved.



Camille tells Amma that she doesn’t want to sleep in Amma’s room, and Amma asks instead if she can sleep in Camille’s. Camille says they should sleep separately, and Amma turns and runs towards the house. Camille, worried that Amma is going up to the house to rat on both of them, follows Amma, calling after her—Amma turns around and runs back towards Camille, smacking into her and knocking them both down.

Camille, knowing Amma, is afraid that Amma will weaponize what she sees as Camille’s rejection of her. Though she’s growing closer with Amma, Camille does not, even for a second, truly trust her.



Amma helps Camille up and gives her a ring that Adora gave to her once—now that Adora “hates” her, Amma says, she doesn’t want it anymore. When Camille assures Amma that Adora doesn’t hate her, Amma insists she does—just in a “different way” than she hates Camille.

Amma reveals that she, too, feels rejected by Adora—even though Camille has found herself looking at Amma and Adora’s relationship as one of unconditional, intense adoration.



The two girls quietly make their way to the house and up the stairs, and Camille invites Amma into her room. Camille peels her shoes and socks off and begins to undress—but feeling Amma’s stare, she decides to sleep in her clothes. She crawls into bed and closes her eyes, listening as Amma removes all of her clothes and crawls into bed, naked except for her panties. In the darkness, Amma asks Camille if she’s ever felt like she “hurt[s] because it feels so good [...] like you have a tingling, like someone left a switch on in your body [...] and nothing can turn the switch off except hurting.” Camille pretends to be asleep as Amma runs her fingers over the **scarred** word *vanish* on the back of Camille’s neck.

Amma, in this passage, is romanticizing—and perhaps even eroticizing—the feeling of doing harm, to oneself or perhaps even another. Amma is clearly obsessed with Camille’s scars, and has been since she first saw them. Camille feels violated and exposed as she falls asleep with the feeling of Amma’s fingers on her neck.



After Camille falls asleep, she has a dream in which Marian, sweaty and dressed in a white nightgown, comes to her and tells her that it’s “not safe” for Camille in Adora’s house.

Camille’s dream of Marian reflects her own worst fears—that something is very wrong in her childhood home.



CHAPTER 13

Camille wakes up late the next afternoon—her stomach and jaw hurt, and she runs to the bathroom to throw up. She then strips off all of her clothes and gets back into bed, but can't settle down. Her stomach roils and her ankle throbs and bleeds. She feels worried that Adora will have seen Amma and realized what the girls got up to the night before. Camille tries to tell herself that her anxiety and paranoia is just her coming down from the ecstasy, but she cannot quiet her mind. She worries that she has forsaken Marian for Amma and ignored the warning visited upon her in her dream.

Adora knocks at the door, and when Camille doesn't let her in, she slips a key into the lock and opens it. She tells Camille that Amma has told her everything—about the girls getting food poisoning from bad chicken. Camille backs the story up, deciding to run with Amma's lies. Adora quickly pulls the sheets away from Camille's body and inspects her inch by inch, feeling her glands and taking her temperature by placing her hands between Camille's legs. She jabs her thumb into Camille's wounded ankle and pokes at a contusion on Camille's head. She then cuts off the hair surrounding the head wound with a pair of scissors, warning Camille not to struggle lest she get cut.

After pouring rubbing alcohol on Camille's wounds, causing her "stunning" pain, Adora runs downstairs and returns with a glass of milk and a blue pill. She tells Camille that the milk is medicine, which will prevent infection and clear up the bacteria from the food poisoning. Camille relents, at last allowing Adora to lavish attention and care on her. Camille falls asleep and dreams that Adora is on top of her, spitting **teeth** into her hands.

Camille wakes up at dusk feeling dizzy and hot. She heads down the hallway to Amma's room and opens the door—Amma is on the floor, naked in front of her huge dollhouse. Amma asks what Adora gave Camille, and when Camille tells her that she took a blue pill, Amma says that Adora "likes that one." Camille asks if Adora gives Amma pills often—Amma says only when she's "about to be sick." Camille reels as she realizes the awful truth: Adora is poisoning her and Amma, just as she poisoned Marian to death years ago.

Camille gets dressed and tries to leave the house, but starts throwing up again, and Adora comes into the room to put her back to bed. Camille runs away from her mother, insisting she'll only be out a little while, and gets into her car, gunning it down the hill. She is not sure where to go or who to talk to—she suddenly realizes that she needs someone who knows Adora, and decides to find Jackie O'Neele.

Camille is a mess—not only is she dealing with physical and psychological symptoms from her night out which incapacitate her, but she is disturbed by the nightmare—or vision—she had in her sleep. She feels that in getting too close to Amma, she is forsaking her other sister's memory, but she cannot manage to keep herself away from the fascinating and dangerous young girl.



Adora is desperate to care for Camille the way she has been caring for Amma, but her "care" tilts towards violence as she roughly and methodically violates Camille's boundaries and privacy, assesses her body, and begins tending to her wounds rather brusquely.



Adora's care does not comfort Camille, though there is a part of Camille that has longed for Adora to take care of her all the life—instead, Adora's ministrations leave Camille feeling even sicker, and still subject to perturbing dreams.



When Camille, feeling horrible after Adora's pill, goes to check on Amma, she finally is able to put all the pieces together. She sees how groggy and ill she and her sister both are, and Amma's frank admission that Adora's pills are what often bring on her many sicknesses seals the deal—Adora is a murderer.



Camille does not want to surrender to her mother's care, and even though she's feeling terribly sick, she runs out of the house in order to get away from Adora—and perhaps find some answers.



Camille arrives at Jackie's house, where a girl she went to high school with opens the door and lets her in—she works as Jackie's maid. The girl seats Camille in the living room and goes off to get Jackie—when Jackie comes into the room, she tells Camille she looks awful, and asks her maid to bring them some cocktails. Jackie offers Camille a painkiller—she has been prescribed various narcotics by several doctors, who are treating her for arthritis and an autoimmune disease. Jackie expresses surprise that Adora hasn't "gotten herself on the sick track," too.

Jackie asks Camille why she's come over, and Camille says she wants to talk about Adora. She asks Jackie to explain Adora's past—Jackie recalls that Adora's parents, the Preakers, essentially ran the town once they founded the hog farm, and that Adora was a sickly child, "overly mothered" by the creepy, overbearing Joya.

Having Camille out of wedlock, Jackie muses, should have "ruined" Adora—but, Jackie says, "a beautiful girl can get away with anything if she plays nice." Jackie says that Adora was actually overjoyed to have Camille at first—Camille was the one thing her own mother couldn't "get at."

Jackie downs several pills, and Camille asks what kind of person Adora used to be. Jackie replies that "Adora devours you, and if you don't let her, it'll be even worse for you." Jackie points out what happened to Marian—and what's happening, right now, to Amma. Relieved to have someone confirm the truth, Camille asks Jackie what she thinks is wrong with Adora. Jackie says that Adora is sick—and what she has is contagious—before urging Camille to go. Camille gets up, apologizing for overstaying her welcome, but Jackie clarifies: she thinks Camille should leave Wind Gap, as it isn't safe for her here.

CHAPTER 14

Camille leaves Jackie's house, still reeling from the information she's just received. She wonders whether Adora was ever sick as a child—or whether Marian was truly sick throughout her own childhood. She wonders, too, about Amma's "sicknesses"—she is uncertain of whether Amma is really sick and in need of Adora's medicine, or if the medicine is what's making Amma sick in the first place. She wonders about her own sickness this morning—whether Adora's blue pill made her vomit, or lessened the effects she would've felt without it.

Jackie herself is something of a hypochondriac, but the ways in which she uses medicine seem to be more focused in blurring or blotting out her own life rather than infringing upon the lives of others. She seems to know what Adora's proclivities are, though, expressing surprise that Adora hasn't used her hypochondria for more furtive purposes.



Adora's abuse has roots in the abuse she suffered at the hands of her own mother—an overbearing woman without boundaries or respect for her daughter who subjected Adora to unknowable things.



Adora has "gotten away" with so much because she "plays nice"—she plays by Wind Gap's rules, and performs a certain role, which gives her power and immunity against suspicion and untoward accusations.



When Camille hears Jackie tacitly admit the truth—that she knows Adora has been responsible for "devour[ing,]" or in other words poisoning, not just Marian but Amma, too—she is shocked and horrified, but at last understands the depths of Adora's lies. Adora has been able to deceive an entire town—and has relegated those who would question or oppose her to silence, isolation, and even oblivion.



Camille has been confronted with the idea that Adora purposefully killed Marian, and is seeking to kill—or at least incapacitate—both her and Amma, too. This information is almost too horrible to fully accept, and Camille begins second-guessing everything she has learned, wondering whether anything she's ever taken to be true is in fact a lie.



Camille wants to call Richard, but is unsure of what to tell him. As she drives through town, she finds herself heading for a bar at the edge of town, near the hog farm. There, she finds a clearly-intoxicated John Keene. When she asks how he's doing, he replies that he's afraid both that Meredith will leave him and that he'll soon be arrested for two murders he didn't commit.

John tells Camille she's the only one who understands him, and asks her about her own dead sister—whether she's gotten over it, and how one moves on. Camille admits that she has been “ruined” by Marian's death, and feels relief at being able to say so. John tells Camille that he didn't kill Natalie, and she tells him that she already knows. John takes Camille's hand and tells her that she's beautiful.

In the parking lot, John fumbles with his keys, but then realizes he is too drunk to drive. Camille, who is not much more sober, drives John back to Meredith's but once they get there, John asks her to take him to a nearby motel. Camille obliges, and even pays for the room—inside, she hands John a cup of water, and he spots one of the **scars** on her wrists. He takes her arm and rolls her sleeve up despite her protests; once he sees a scar that reads “weary,” he admits he feels the same, and asks to see them all.

John pulls Camille's clothes off, and reads her **scars** word by word. He touches and kisses them, and soon he and Camille begin having sex. It is the first time in fourteen years that she has allowed a man to see her body.

Early the next morning, there is a knock at the door. Chief Vickery's voice calls from the other side—he asks if Camille is inside and demands she open up. Camille and John begin dressing frantically. When Camille opens the door, Vickery is there—and so is Richard. As he surveys the situation, he glares at Camille and tells her that Adora put in a call when Camille failed to come home for the night. Richard offers to take John home, but John says he'd like for Camille to take him. As Richard and Vickery walk away, Camille shouts after Richard, promising to call him later—Richard simply waves a hand over his shoulder.

Camille is seeking solace, though she doesn't really know how to find any. When she drives herself out to the dangerous part of town and finds John Keene, she encounters another exhausted, terrified soul—and a kindred spirit.



John and Camille find themselves drawn together through the sadness and loss they both share. Having both lost sisters, they are both victims of an isolating and indescribable pain—as they bond over that pain, an attraction begins to form.



Though Camille knows that a dalliance with John is wrong, they have been brought together by pain—and when he, in the motel room, at last sees the depths of her pain, he does not shy away from it, but longs to understand it better.



Camille has spent years rejecting her sexuality and femininity, but in John's arms, she feels seen, accepted, and understood.



Camille and Richard never declared themselves in a relationship, or even exclusive, so what she's done with John doesn't count, necessarily, as cheating—but she has still deceived and clearly hurt Richard, and she longs desperately to make things better.



Camille drops John off at his parents' house, and he tells her that she "saved" him. Camille tells John that he made her feel safe, too, and is surprised to find that she means it. Camille drives back to Main Street and goes into the police station, where she finds Richard and begins attempting to "deny deny deny." Richard, though, can see through her lies, and warns her that her sleeping with John looks bad for both of them. In order to apologize, Camille gets down on her knees and begins unzipping Richard's pants, but he tells her that "that won't do it," and kisses her gently before asking her to leave.

Camille naps in her car for a few hours—she is terrified to return home to Adora's house. She decides that she'll try to continue working on her story, even in her disheveled and miserable state. She drives to her old friend Katie Lacey's house—Katie is an aide at the grade school, and helped out in both Ann and Natalie's classes. Katie greets Camille happily and serves her sweet tea, making no mention of Camille's harried appearance. She offers to make Camille some lunch, but Camille gets right down to business asking questions about Ann and Natalie's history of violence. Katie reveals that Ann once stabbed Natalie in the cheek with a sewing needle, but that there didn't seem to be a reason behind the attack—"those two [...] didn't need a reason to strike out," Katie says.

Katie begins reminiscing about her and Camille's own high school years—and the way they bullied their less-popular classmates. Katie remarks that Amma is even worse than the two of them were in high school—she and her three friends "rule the school," and Amma is their ringleader. They force other girls into sex, and humiliate their female classmates for being fat, flat-chested, or anything in-between; anything not perfect. Camille is shocked to hear the depths of Amma's cruelty, and is even more upset when Katie reveals that "Amma fucked with Ann and Natalie a lot."

As Camille heads for home after interviewing Katie, she can't stop flashing from image to image of Adora—all ominous ones. She imagines her mother trying to "tend" to Ann and Natalie the way she tended to Marian and Amma—and though Camille tells herself that she's "crazy" to think what she's thinking, she also knows she'd be crazy not to.

Camille is so used to subjugating herself in order to attain any scrap of affection that she tries to make things right with Richard through a sexual act which involves her servicing him—Richard, sensing at last just how damaged Camille is, rejects her advance but makes it clear that he's not angry, and that there's nothing she needs to do to prostrate herself before him.



Camille's fear of returning home turns into motivation to continue uncovering more pieces of the larger puzzle plaguing Wind Gap. In interviewing Katie, she learns more about Ann and Natalie's violence—and is surprised to find that their violent streaks often turned them against one another. Their anger and uncontrollable desire to harm others was common knowledge in town—and a source of strain in their friendship with one another.



Camille's interview with Katie lets her know that not only were Ann and Natalie violent to one another, but that Amma, too, is cultivating a kind of violent dominance which mirrors Adora's. Everything is connected, somehow, and as Camille struggles to put the disparate threads of the case together, she is horrified by the depths of cruelty and deception that run throughout her family.



In light of all the information she has uncovered from Jackie and Katie, Camille is nearly certain of the truth: her mother is a killer, and would perhaps even kill for vengeance rather than attention.



CHAPTER 15

When Camille arrives back at the house, three little pink bikes are lined up on the porch. Upstairs, Amma has her friends in her room, and they are all shrieking with delight as they play with Amma's dollhouse. Amma asks Camille to come admire her dollhouse, and the other girls invite Camille in as well. Camille notices that Jodes is staring intently at the dollhouse as if she is attempting to "will herself inside."

Camille goes to her room and runs a bath, grateful to be alone as she slips under the surface of the water. When she comes back up, Adora is standing over her, offering her a glass of bluish milk. Camille willingly drinks it down, determined to find out, once and for all, whether her mother's concoctions are poison.

Adora leaves, and Camille waits in the bathtub for a while to see if she'll get sick. After several minutes, nothing happens, and Camille gets out of the bath and goes back into her bedroom, where Amma is waiting for her on the bed. Amma says she can't believe Camille "fucked a babykiller." Camille asks Amma to go away, claiming to be exhausted. Amma tells Camille that if she thinks last night was rough, she's in for something even "worse" now. Sure enough, twenty minutes later, the vomiting begins, and Camille runs to the bathroom several times each hour as green bile pours from her mouth.

Camille, realizing what is happening, carefully brushes her teeth and gets dressed. She goes downstairs and walks past Alan, who is sitting on the front porch. He tells Camille that however she's been treating Adora lately, it's working—Adora seems "much improved." Camille gets into the car and begins the long drive to the hospital in Woodberry, stopping several times to throw up out her window.

At the hospital, Camille waits for hours while nurses and various staff track down Marian's medical records. When Camille finally obtains the charts, she can hardly understand them—the thick files contain orders for involved blood work, brain scans, heart scans, endoscopies, and more. Many possible illnesses are listed, but Marian's charts contain no conclusive diagnosis.

This scene, in which Camille observes Amma and her friends playing with—and seemingly wishing they could live inside—her dollhouse, shows how badly the girls want to embody a certain vision of femininity, but alludes to the fact that they are perhaps haunted by what this desire means.



Rather than try to resist her mother's attempts to harm her, Camille leans into them, demonstrating her commitment to bringing the truth to light and casting aside all of the secrets and lies which have formed her life with Adora so far.



Amma seems to almost delight in the fact that more pain and suffering are coming for Camille—perhaps she is grossed out by the rumors about Camille and her friend's older brother, or perhaps she is just grateful to finally have a comrade in enduring Adora's abuses.



Alan's comment about Adora's state of mind having improved lately—since Camille started accepting her "care"—shows that Adora's happiness is directly tied to how sick her daughters are and how intensely she can control them.



Marian's charts hold detailed records of her treatments and hospitalizations, but hold no clear answers—they disguise the truth in a web of disguises and obfuscations.



Camille comes upon a piece of stationery written on pink paper, in a feminine hand, inserted into one of the files. The note, written by a nurse who attended Marian, states that the nurse believes there is in fact nothing wrong with Marian, who only exhibits signs of illness after spending time alone with Adora. For “political reasons,” the note states, no other nurses will sign their names to this letter.

Within an hour, Camille tracks the nurse who wrote the note to where she still works in the pediatric ward. Camille thanks the nurse for her note, but the nurse insists it didn’t do any good—her accusation of “MBP” nearly got her fired. The nurse explains that MBP—or Munchausen by Proxy—is a syndrome in which a caregiver, most often a mother, makes her child ill to get attention for herself. The nurse tells Camille that no doctors ever followed up on her report, and though the nurse was invested in Marian’s case, she was too exhausted by her own difficult life to push for action. She apologizes to Camille, but Camille is only angry with herself for taking so long to discover the truth—and for failing both Marian and Amma.

The nurse then asks Camille whether the “detective” is still on the case—she reveals, to Camille’s shock, that Richard Willis came by days ago and Xeroxed every single page of Marian’s files. The nurse asks if there is another little girl in Adora’s house, and Camille confirms there is. Beverly urges her to get Amma out as soon as possible.

On the way back home, Camille stops at a pay phone to call Curry. She can barely get any words out, though—she is sobbing too hard. She cries and wails, worrying Curry, before telling him that she knows who committed the murders. She whispers into the phone that Adora is the murderer, and, after a long pause, Curry suggests that Camille is cracking under pressure, stress, and trauma. He tells her to get on a plane and come home, offering to pay for her ticket—Camille replies that she will never have a home, and hangs up.

The revelation that Adora’s power in the town was, and is, so profound that no one at the hospital would speak out against her—even though she was, rather transparently, endangering her daughter’s life—shows just how much control Adora has.



Camille has uncovered the truth at last. Her mother, desperate for attention and sympathy, has been poisoning her daughters for years in order to feel more in control, like a better mother, and as if she is, perhaps, repairing (or replicating) the abuses she suffered in her own childhood. Camille is ashamed by her own ignorance and failure to see the signs—but Adora’s deception was so intricate and so complete, shrouded in her role as a mother, that very few could have ever seen the truth.



Camille is stunned by the revelation that Richard had already followed Adora’s trail—and was in possession of this information which, despite his and Camille’s “deal,” he did not bring to her attention.



Camille’s fear that she will “never have a home” stems from the realization that the place she conceived of as “home” was always a place of lies, deceptions, and abuses. Camille is uncertain of how she will ever move on from the traumas of her past—and her present—and even with Curry’s empathy and support, she doesn’t feel equipped to live anywhere in the world.



Camille tracks Richard down at a local restaurant and confronts him with all she has learned without even so much as a pleasant greeting. She tells him that she thinks that her mother killed Marian, Ann, and Natalie—and that she thinks Richard thinks so, too. She calls Richard “sick” and accuses him of using her to get information about Adora. Richard takes Camille outside, and drives her out to a spot overlooking the river. He explains that though he did originally try to get close to Camille because of Adora, he genuinely fell for her. He started getting a “hunch” about Adora after hearing James Capisi’s story—though he didn’t think a woman fit the profile for the crime, he started realizing that a woman desperate for total control—a woman “whose nurturing instinct had gone awry”—might be the culprit.

Camille’s story about the biting, Richard says, really focused things for him, and helped him to see that Adora might have killed the girls when she wasn’t able to dominate them by mothering them. Richard reveals that Adora has no alibi for the night of either killing, but without more evidence, there’s no way to arrest her—he reveals that the investigators are planning to disinter Marian and run some tests. Camille demands that Richard “leave [Marian] be.” Richard tells Camille that tomorrow he plans on obtaining a warrant to search Adora’s house—he believes she’ll have kept the **teeth**. Richard begs Camille to go home and have a “regular evening,” but Camille reveals that Adora has been drugging and poisoning both her and Amma. Richard asks why Camille didn’t say anything before—he could have had her tested, and the right results could lead to a break in the case.

Camille arrives home, where ham is being served for dinner. Adora carves the ham and serves everyone, explaining that she wants to enjoy one last family dinner before Camille leaves—they’re set to arrest her “little friend” John.

Amma wonders dreamily whether John will be executed and sent to the electric chair. Adora replies that he’ll be given a lethal injection and put to sleep like a cat. Amma eats her ham and asks Camille what “fairy-tale person” she’d most like to be. When Camille can’t think of an answer, Amma states that she’d like to be Persephone—the queen of the dead, who spends half her life in the land of the living and half in the underworld. Amma says that she feels sorry for Persephone, because even when she’s “back with the living, people are afraid of her because of where she’s been.”

Camille is intensely angry at Richard—for getting to the truth first, for keeping it from her, and for in this way humiliating Camille. Richard insists that he couldn’t share everything until he was certain—and that the largest roadblock to discovering the truth was rejecting his preconceived notions of femininity and coming to understand that a woman, against all odds, was the perpetrator of such ugly crimes.



The idea that investigators will need to literally dig Marian up is too much for Camille—and when Richard suggests that if Camille were to take in Adora’s poison and turn herself into a human toxicology report, Camille’s desperation to preserve her sister’s memory is put to the ultimate test.



Adora seems to be celebrating John Keene’s arrest. She is transparently gleeful at the idea that she has—at least, as far as she knows—escaped suspicion.



Amma’s dinner-table conversation topics mirror the breakfast-table conversation from earlier in the novel—Amma has no problem talking about death and the macabre, and Camille now understands why.



Amma continues talking fancifully about death, and even brings up Marian. When Amma asks Adora about Marian, Adora replies that “maybe [they] should have all ended with her,” before ringing the bell and calling for Gayla to take in the plates.

After a dessert of blood-orange sorbet, Adora invites Camille for a drink in her bedroom. Camille follows her mother up, amazed to be allowed in her mother’s room at last. Camille enters the room, examining closely the massive bed and the famous ivory floors which make the whole room glow. Adora gets into bed and beckons for Camille to get in, too; Camille obliges, reflecting on how fifteen years ago, in the wake of Marian’s death, all she wanted was to curl up in bed with her mother.

Adora pulls Camille close, strokes her hair, and hands her a drink. She begins telling Camille a story about how, when she was a little girl of eight, Joya drove her into the North Woods and left her there to find her own way home for no apparent reason. Camille asks Adora why she’s telling her this story, and Adora replies that when a child knows from a young age that her mother doesn’t care for her, “bad things happen.” Adora half-apologizes for never loving Camille, explaining that she wanted to, but found Camille hard to love—Marian, on the other hand, was easy.

Adora begs Camille to “need her” just once. Camille, wishing it all would end, agrees, and swallows her drink in one gulp. Camille tells Adora that she needed her all along, but in a “real way”—not a need created by Adora. Camille tells her mother that she will never forgive her for Marian, who was just a baby. Adora thoughtfully replies that Marian will “always be [her] baby.”

CHAPTER 16

Camille wakes up with bedsheets sheets stuck to her body. She is covered in her own sweat and urine. She feels feverish and weak, and immediately reaches for the trash can beside her bed to vomit into it. Adora comes into the room and ushers Camille into the bathtub, calling her “baby” as she strips her naked.

Adora, too, has a penchant for the macabre, even after all her protestations against Camille so much as breathing a word about Ann and Natalie.



Though Camille knows that her mother is bringing her upstairs to poison her, she can’t resist feeling a flash of yearning and enchantment as she at last steps into her mother’s beautiful, and long-off-limits, bedroom.



Adora’s killing of Marian seems to be an open secret, now, between these two women. Adora knows that Camille knows what is going on, and in many ways—shrouded as it is, still, in entendre and secrecy—this is the first frank conversation the two women have had throughout the entire novel.



Though Camille outright tells her mother that she knows what she did, and cannot forgive her, Adora seems lost in fancy or memory—in killing Marian, she has preserved her as her “baby,” and now with Camille seems to enter a similar psychological state in which she sees Camille, once again, as her precious little girl.



Though Camille is in a disgusting, miserable state, Adora continues fawning over her lovingly, clearly enjoying witnessing her daughter’s pain as it gives Adora the chance to enact her own fantasies of herself as a good, doting mother.



As Camille pulls herself into the tub she vomits again. Adora wets a towel with rubbing alcohol and wipes Camille's body down. Camille sinks into the bath, letting Adora pour cool water over her head and feed her more pills and milk. Camille defiantly takes all of Adora's medicine, wanting things to be "vicious." Things begin to blur as Camille's condition worsens—she cannot stop vomiting, and is faintly aware of Adora applying ice packs to her head and shoulders, and picking at the wound on her ankle with tweezers and rubbing alcohol. As she begins losing consciousness, Camille's thoughts run together: she feels grateful to at last be "cared for" and mothered.

Camille awakens to the sound of screams some time later, sitting in a half-full bath of lukewarm water. Camille pulls herself out of the tub and wraps herself into a robe just as Richard Willis busts in through the door, asking Camille if she's okay. As he stares at Camille's **scars**, Camille can see a war between laughter and fear on his face. Adora's screams echo up from downstairs, and Camille asks what's wrong with Adora. Richard asks if Camille is sick, and she says that she is. She asks if he found anything, and he says that he has, before explaining that everyone needs to leave the house. Richard offers to take Camille to the doctor, and she says that she hopes she has "enough poison left in [her.]"

By later that evening, the police have removed from Adora's lingerie drawer eight vials of illegal anti-malarial pills, seventy-two tablets of industrial-grade laxatives commonly used on farm animals, three dozen anti-seizure tablets, three bottles of ipecac, and one hundred and sixty one horse tranquilizers. Traces of all of these medications were found in Camille's toxicology test.

Police also discover a diary in Adora's hatbox, dating back to 1982. The diary's entries reveal Adora's decision to "focus on Marian," and Marian's ensuing sicknesses. Adora describes bribing hospital nurses in order to keep them from finding out the truth, and also depicts how "kind" and "wonderful" everyone in town acts towards her in the days following Marian's death—which only occurred because Adora admittedly "couldn't stop."

The most important piece of evidence police find is a stained pair of pliers shoved under the cushion of a love seat in Adora's room. DNA tests match the trace blood on the tool to both Ann and Natalie. The **teeth**, however, are not found anywhere in the house, and though Camille begs the police to continue searching the grounds and Adora's rose garden for them, they do not turn up anywhere.

Even at the height of her misery, there is a part of Camille that, in spite of everything, relishes the attention. Camille sinks under Adora's control for the first time in her life, and despite all of the pain and sickness it is causing her, she feels just a tiny bit of ecstasy at the brand-new feeling of being "mothered."



As Richard bursts in on Adora's sick, twisted fantasy, he sees the depths of her abuse—and the effects, new and old, it has had on Camille. Richard seems completely shocked by everything he's encountered at the Crellins' and unable to fully process what's happening: he is only able to focus on work, and what results in service of the investigation might be drawn out of Camille.



As Camille outlines just how dangerous the toxins Adora was pouring into her, Amma, and Marian, it becomes clear that Adora's only regard was for herself—her children were simply tools.



Adora admits, in the pages of her diary, to feeding off the attention others gave her. The feeling—which she never experienced in her youth due to her own abusive mother—was so intoxicating that she could not stop herself from continuing the abuse, even when it cost her the life of her daughter.



Though the pliers seem to indict Adora beyond any shadow of a doubt, the absence of the teeth—and the question of where someone like Adora, who kept an easily-discoverable cache of toxic potions, could have put them—disturbs Camille.



CHAPTER 17

On May 28th, Adora is arrested for the murders of Ann Nash, Natalie Keene, and Marian. Alan bails her out so that she can await trial “in the comfort of her home,” and Camille, meanwhile, takes custody of Amma. Two days after Adora’s arrest, Camille and Amma drive back to Chicago together.

Back in Chicago, Amma exhausts Camille—she is needy and anxious, constantly pacing around the apartment. Camille believes that Amma is burning off “all [the] extra energy” she has from not being bedridden several times a month due to Adora’s poisons.

By August, Amma has become “obsessed” with female killers, reading everything she can about violent women she considers “special.” Amma’s therapist tells Camille that Amma is probably trying to find a way to forgive Adora. After a couple sessions, Amma refuses to go back to therapy, and instead spends almost all of her time hard at work on her dollhouse. Amma demands that Camille buy her expensive figurines and furnishings for the dollhouse and becomes angry and violent when Camille refuses.

Alan sends money for Amma to attend private school, and Amma quickly makes a small group of friends who idolize her almost instantly. One of the girls, Lily, becomes a “fixture” at Camille’s apartment, and Camille enjoys Lily’s company. Once Amma notices how much Camille likes Lily, she grows quiet each time Lily visits, and soon begins shutting Lily out.

One night, Camille wakes up in the middle of the night to find Amma standing over her bed. Amma accuses Camille of liking Lily better than her. Camille notices that Amma is feverish, and guides her into the bathroom to place a washcloth on her head and give her aspirin. As she cares for Amma, Camille finds herself thinking of Adora, and wondering if she herself would “like taking care of a sick little girl.” Amma strips naked, demanding Camille wash her in the tub and rub her down with alcohol, the way Adora “does it.” Camille notices a scar on Amma’s hip. Amma begins crying, and Camille reassures Amma that they are not going to do things the way Adora did any longer.

On October 12th, Lily disappears on her way home from school—her body is found “propped tidily next to a Dumpster” three blocks from Camille’s apartment just a few hours later. Six of her **teeth** have been pulled. Hearing the news, Camille immediately calls the Wind Gap police department to confirm that Adora is in fact in her home.

Towards the very end of the novel, Camille replaces Adora as Amma’s mother figure—even in light of knowing what a difficult task she has in front of her.



Amma proves a difficult child—she is reeling from her past traumas, and figuring out what it means to live a life free of abuse and illness.



Amma’s coping mechanisms are unorthodox to say the least—her fascination with female perpetrators of violence, not to mention her continued obsession with perfection and her tendency towards intense anger when she doesn’t get her way shows that she is having trouble moving on from all that transpired in Wind Gap.



Amma remains jealous, and obsessed with securing the adoration and favoritism of others.



As Camille and Amma struggle together to reckon with what Adora’s abuses have done to them—individually and together—there is a lot of pain, anger, and resentment that they must work through. Amma seems both desperate to recreate Adora’s ministrations, and fearful of subjecting herself to them once again—this tension shows how dependent she has become on Adora’s poisonous mix of love and violence.



When Lily Burke turns up dead, murdered the way Ann and Natalie were, and Adora is nowhere near Chicago, the awful truth descends upon Camille—Amma, not Adora, killed Ann and Natalie and took their teeth.



Camille begins tearing through the apartment, looking under seat cushions and in drawers for evidence of Amma's guilt. Amma trails her "like an angry dog" the whole time. When Camille gets to Amma's room, she sweeps out the dollhouse room by room, ruining its contents. After removing the toy bed from Adora's "room" of the dollhouse, Camille and Amma both scream: the ivory floor is made out of **human teeth**.

In the aftermath of Camille's discovery, the investigation in Wind Gap reopens. Amma's friends Kelsey, Kylie, and Jodes admit to helping Amma with the murders of Ann and Natalie, in exchange for lighter sentences in a psychiatric hospital. The circumstances of each killing come to light: for Ann, the girls picked her up in their golf cart and took her to the woods, enjoying a tea party and dress-up before marching Ann towards the creek. The three blondes held Ann down while she struggled, biting Amma on the hip as Amma strangled her. It took Amma an hour to pull the **teeth**, after which the girls dumped Ann's body in the water, went back to Kelsey's house, and watched a movie while drinking wine out of Sprite bottles.

To get Natalie, Amma draped herself in a white sheet styled to look like a Grecian dress and powdered herself pale. Amma "spirited" Natalie through the woods and back to Kelsey's carriage house, where the girls together held her hostage for 48 hours, playing dress-up with her, shaving her legs, and feeding her in shifts. Again, when the time came, Amma strangled Natalie and pulled her **teeth**. At four in the morning, the girls drove Natalie's body in their golf cart to the center of town, where they propped her up.

Amma acted alone in killing Lily, Camille notes. Amma stunned Lily with a rock, strangled her, plucked her **teeth**, and cut her hair, then braided the strands into a rug for Camille's room in the dollhouse.

EPILOGUE

Adora is found guilty of murder in the first degree for what she did to Marian, and her lawyer begins planning an appeal. The Wind Gap house is abandoned—Alan has moved into an apartment near the prison where Adora is incarcerated. As the story spreads, "quickie paperbacks" detailing the lurid tale are published, and Camille is "showered with book offers." Curry pushes her to take one, but quickly backs off.

The realization that Amma killed Ann, Natalie, and Lily and used them for their teeth in pursuit of perfecting her dollhouse marks Amma as perhaps the most ruthless character in the entire novel—like Camille, she learned at Adora's feet.



As the truth, at last, comes to light in full, the horrifying details of the murders are thrown up against Amma and her friends' blasé attitudes towards the intense violence they perpetrated against girls who had once been their friends.



Amma's fanciful desire to be a Grecian goddess was given its murderous fulfillment when she took Natalie into the woods. The fact that Amma proceeded to hold Natalie hostage and torture her by grooming her—modeling her violence upon Adora's—shows just how deeply Adora's years of abuse affected Amma in the end.



Amma transfigured pieces of her female friends into accessories for her dollhouse—wickedly morphing them into parts.



Camille and her family's story is luridly commodified by others in a cruel bastardization of Camille's obsession with words, language, and telling the truth.



Camille receives a letter from John Keene. In it, he writes that he suspected Amma all along, and moved into Meredith's place to "keep watch." Camille doesn't hear anything from Richard—she knew, from the way he looked at her body when he saw her **scars**, that he would never contact her again.

Amma is locked up in a juvenile facility, and will probably be incarcerated well past her eighteenth birthday. Camille has only visited once, and though she promised herself before the visit that she would not ask about the killings, her questions began tumbling out as soon as she saw Amma. Amma admitted that she was friends with the girls for a while—they would run wild together in the woods, hurting and killing stray animals. When Adora, however, "got all interested" in Ann and Natalie, the girls started coming by the house and asking questions about Amma's sicknesses. Amma worried that the girls would "ruin everything," but the final straw came when Ann bit Adora—Amma couldn't stop thinking about "why Ann could bite [Adora]" while she herself could not. As for the **teeth**, Amma says that she only took them because she needed them to make the dollhouse "perfect."

Camille speculates that Ann and Natalie died because Adora paid attention to them. Camille believes that Amma, who allowed Adora to sicken her for so long in an attempt to control Adora in exchange for "uncontested love and loyalty," grew angry when "other little girls" entered the picture. Camille believes that this is the same reason Amma killed Lily—because she believed Camille liked her better. Camille is exhausted by trying to figure out her sister's motives, though, and in the end she believes that Amma just enjoys violence: "A child weaned on poison," Camille posits, "considers harm a comfort."

Camille reveals that she relapsed on the day of Amma's arrest. Though Curry and Eileen came over to provide support and comfort, Camille snuck a knife into the bathroom and used it to deface the last perfect circle of skin on her back—Curry broke into the bathroom just as Camille was about to "go for [her own] face." Curry and Eileen immediately helped Camille pack up her things, and then moved her into their home, where they could watch over her—and keep her away from sharp objects.

Whereas John demonstrates in his letter his steadfast commitment to the truth, Richard shies away from the truth of Camille, rejecting her upon seeing her traumas take shape on the canvas of her body.



As Amma reveals the full truth to Camille, she lingers both on her anger at Adora—and her desire to, through the dollhouse, replicate Adora's life and behavior. These competing impulses show just how thoroughly confused and victimized Amma was—when Adora's abuse left Amma with no way of retaliating, the sight of someone else taking action against Adora snapped something within Amma, leaving her in need of justice of her own and, still, a continued pursuit of ways to make Adora love her more than anyone.



As Camille further attempts to deconstruct her sister's motivations, she focuses on the idea that Amma and Adora entered into a secret, tacit agreement—Adora would get to do what she wanted to Amma as long as Amma would enjoy her favoritism. When that deal collapsed, Amma lashed out. At the end of the day, though, endless speculating cannot cover up the fact that Amma simply enjoyed hurting others because of what she learned from Adora.



Camille's narration has been so focused on everyone else that her own way of dealing with the intense pain and trauma of the truth has been avoided—but when she reveals that she relapsed, she symbolically admits that in light of such painful truths, her grasp on language as a coping mechanism broke down, and she sought to simply harm herself intensely and senselessly, ruining the "work" she'd done over the years to reclaim her body as her own.



Now, Camille says, she is learning to be cared for—she is learning to be “parented.” Eileen and Curry are gentle with her—they tuck her into bed each night, cook her meals, and sometimes even run a bath for her or brush her hair. It is now one year to the day that Camille has been back from Wind Gap, and Camille is starting to get better. She still often thinks, however, of the night Amma fell sick with fever. She wonders if she was good at caring for Amma because of kindness, or because she has “Adora’s sickness.” Though Camille wavers back and forth between the two, lately, she has been “leaning towards kindness.”

Camille cannot help but fear that more pain, abuse, and evil are predestined for her as she moves through life. It seems that she is afraid of the idea that she is still a kind person in spite of all she has suffered—and yet she desperately wants to believe that she has broken the cycle of her family’s long history of abuse, victimization, and toxicity, and can at last live her life in the light.





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