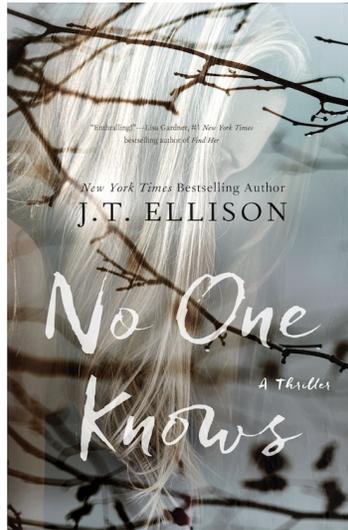


NO ONE KNOWS Exclusive Excerpt



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Part I

As contraries are known by contraries,
so is the delight of presence
best known by the torments of absence.
—Alcibiades

Chapter 1

Aubrey

Nashville

Today

One thousand eight hundred and seventy-five days after Joshua Hamilton went missing, the State of Tennessee declared him legally dead.

Aubrey, his wife (or former wife, or ex-wife, or widow—she had no idea how to refer to herself anymore), received the certified letter on a Friday. It came to the Montessori school where she taught, the very one she and Josh had attended as children. Came to her door in the middle of reading time, borne on the hands of Linda Pierce, the school's long-standing principal, who looked as if someone had died.

Which, in a way, they had.

He had.

Or so the State of Tennessee had officially declared.

Aubrey had been against the declaration-of-death petition from the beginning. She didn't want Josh's estate settled. Didn't want a date engraved on that stupid family stone obelisk that loomed over the graves of his ancestors at Mount Olivet Cemetery. Didn't want to say good-bye forever.

But Josh's mother had insisted. She wanted closure. She wanted to move

on with her life. She wanted Aubrey to move on with hers, too. She'd petitioned the court for the early ruling, and clearly the courts agreed.

Everyone was ready to move on. Everyone but Aubrey.

She'd felt poorly this morning when she woke, almost a portent of the day to come, but today was the last day of school before spring break, so she had to show, and be cheery, and help the kids with their party, and give them their extra-credit reading assignments.

From the second they arrived, her students buzzed around her. It didn't take long for Aubrey to catch the children's enthusiasm and drop her previous malaise. It was a beautiful day: the sun glowed in the sky, dropping beams through the windows, creating slats of light on the multihued carpet. The kids spun through the light, whirling dervishes against a yellow backdrop. She didn't even try to contain them; watching them, she felt exactly the same way. Breaks signaled many things to her, freedom most of all. Freedom to go her own way for a bit, to explore, to read, to gather herself.

But when her classroom door opened unexpectedly, and Principal Pierce came into the room, the nausea returned with a vengeance, and her head started to pound. Aubrey watched her coming closer and closer. Her old friend's face was strained, the furrows carved into her upper lip collapsed in on each other, her yellowed forefinger tapping against the pristine white-and-blue envelope. She needed to file her nails.

What was it about moments, the ones that start with a capital *M*, that made you notice each and every detail?

Aubrey reminded herself of her situation. The children were watching. Trying to ignore the stares of the more precocious ones scattered about the classroom, gifted youngsters whose sensitivity to the emotions of others was finely honed, Aubrey took the letter from Linda, handed off the class into the woman's very capable, nicotine-stained hands, and went to the ladies' room in the staff lounge to read the contents.

The letter was from her mother-in-law. Aubrey knew exactly what it contained.

She tried to pretend her hands weren't shaking.

She flipped the lid down on the toilet, locked the door, then sat and ripped open the envelope. Inside was a piece of paper folded into thirds, topped with a handwritten note on a cheery yellow, daisy-covered Post-it. Aubrey felt that added just the right touch. Her mother-in-law always had been wildly incapable of any form of tact.

There was no denying it now; her hands trembled violently as she unfolded the page. She looked to the handwritten note first. The words were carefully formed, a schoolgirl's roundness to the old-fashioned cursive.

*Aubrey,
For your records.
Daisy Hamilton*

Scribbled in print beneath the painstakingly properly written note were the words:

Joshua's Mother

Well, no kidding, Daisy. Like I could forget.

The sticky note was attached to a printout of an email. It was from Daisy's lawyer, the one who'd helped put this vehicle in motion last year, when Daisy decided to petition the courts to have Josh declared legally dead.

Aubrey fingered the scar on her lip as she read.

Dear Daisy,

Per our earlier conversation, attached please find a copy of the Order entered from the civil court today by Judge Robinson. As I explained to you on the phone, this Order directs the Department of Vital Statistics to issue a death certificate for your son, Joshua David Hamilton, as of April 19 of this year.

Now that this Order has been officially entered, we should take another look at the estate plan. Josh's life insurance policy will be fulfilled as soon as the declaration

is received, and I'd like you to be fully prepared if you plan to contest the contents. I will be forwarding you a final bill for my services on this matter in the next couple of days.

*Best personal regards,
Rick Saeger*

And now it was official.

In the eyes of the law, Joshua David Hamilton was no longer of this earth. No longer Aubrey's husband. No longer Daisy's son.

No longer.

Aubrey was suddenly unable to breathe. Even though she'd been expecting it, seeing the words in black-and-white, adorned by Daisy's snippy little missive, killed her. Tears slid down her face, and she crumpled the letter against her thigh.

Daisy was a bitch, always had been, and Aubrey got the message loud and clear.

Get over it. Get on with your life. And watch out, kid, because I'm coming for that life insurance money.

But just how do you move on when you can't bury your husband? Five years later, there were still no good answers to the puzzle of Josh's evaporation. One minute there, the next gone. Poof. Disappeared. Missing. Kidnapped, hit over the head, and suffering from severe amnesia, or—worse than the idea of his heart no longer beating—he'd chosen to leave her. Dead, but not dead. Without a body, how could they know for sure?

Damn you, Josh.

He *was* dead. Even Aubrey had to admit that to herself. It had taken a year to formulate that conclusion, a year of the worst possible days imaginable. As much as she hated to believe he was really gone, she knew he was.

Because if he wasn't, he would have let her know. He was the other half of her. The better half. The responsible half. The serious half.

For him to be taken, or to have run away—no. He would never leave her of his own volition.

Which meant he *must* be dead.

The circle that was her life, a snake forever eating its tail.

Aubrey didn't know the answers to the riddle. Only knew that one thousand eight hundred and seventy-five days ago, Josh had been nagging at her to hurry up and get in the car because they were late for one of his closest friend's joint bachelor/bachelorette party. That they'd had a serious fender bender on the way to the party, which resulted in the small white scar that intersected Aubrey's top lip in a way that didn't detract from her heart-shaped face. That they'd arrived at the hotel over an hour late, and Aubrey had offered to get them checked in while Josh went to find the groom and join the party. That he'd kissed her deeply before he went, making the cut on her lip throb in time with her heart. That he'd glanced back over his shoulder and given her that devastating half smile that had been melting her insides since she was seven and he was nine and he'd pushed her down on the hard playground asphalt and made her cry.

That she'd repeated the words of this story so many times it had become a mantra. To the police. To the lawyers. To the media. To Daisy. To herself.

Her world was broken into thirds.

Seven and seventeen and five.

Seven years before he came into her life.

Seventeen in-between years when she'd seen Josh almost every day. Seventeen years of joy and fury and love and sex and marriage and heartache and happiness. Of prepubescent mating rituals, teenage angst, young-adult dawning realization, the inescapable knowledge that they couldn't live without each other, culminating in a small wedding and three years of marital bliss.

Five years of After. Five years of wondering.

She thought they were happy. Late at night, in the After time, Aubrey would lie in their bed, still on her side, wearing one of his white oxford shirts

she pretended held the lingering bits of his scent, and wonder: *Weren't we? Weren't we happy?*

What was happiness? Where did it come from? How did you measure it? She'd always looked at the little things he did—from a sweet note in whatever book she was reading, to bringing her freshly-cut apples when she was vacuuming, or having a travel mug of hot Earl Grey tea waiting for her in the morning as she rushed out the door—as signs that he loved her. That he was happy, too.

But then he was gone, and she had to pick up the pieces of their once life, shattered like the reflective glass of a broken mirror on the floor.

Seven, and seventeen, and then five. Five years of emptiness, solitude, loneliness.

The State of Tennessee didn't care about any of that.

All the state cared about were the cold hard facts: one thousand eight hundred and seventy-five days ago, Joshua David Hamilton disappeared from the face of the earth, and now enough time had passed that a stranger had declared him legally dead.

* * *

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