

HUMAN

AFTER ALL

A BECKER GRAY NOVEL



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PROLOGUE

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Home finally came into view. Valerie Hardy remembered thinking that an hour before she had crested the top of the steep hill just outside her family's property line. The sun set in the remote sky, and she could recognize her father's silhouette as he rode a tractor in the foreground. Between the two, she saw rolling hills, the sporadic forested areas surrounding the farm, cows grazing in the near field, and acre after acre of potato crops. She had pulled her Nikon camera with its 35mm lens from her army-green backpack and snapped a quick shot. A canvas of complete rural perfection highlighted with the varying shades of purple, red, and orange in an Idaho sunset laid out before her.

She remembered squealing with excitement running down the hill, thinking the photograph had been the best one she'd taken all day. Mountain bluebirds scared off their perches flew out of the branches of nearby western white pine trees and fluttered all around her. She had felt exhilarated, alive, and free.

But that was a faraway thought now. The envelope had changed everything. Plain, white, and ordinary in every way. But it wasn't.

Once at home, Valerie had bathed in a hot shower. The heat made her fair skin redden and the steam made her feel extra clean. She could feel her father's heavy footsteps moving throughout the house, a raised structure with crawl space beneath which ensured loud, hollow vibrations any time Jack Hardy walked around in his work boots. He was a large man. She had heard the farm workers describe him as thick. Most of the time he had a day's growth of facial hair on his tough face, which gave him a ruggedness she'd only seen in movies. He was the biggest, strongest man she'd ever known, but he had a gentleness that allowed her to crawl into his lap to kiss him goodnight or hear a story about his day. Most importantly, though, she could tell him about the great pictures she always took.

That was her plan that night after dressing – climbing into his big lap and telling him about the rabbit she'd seen inching out of its den that morning. Even more so, she couldn't wait to get his help developing the pictures. Valerie often went on what her mother called walkabouts that sometimes lasted all day and often after sunset. A fine photographer in development, Valerie took pictures of anything she thought would be beautiful on film. That desire spawned from when she was five years old and her father would flip through *Yosemite and the Range of Light* with her before naptime.

But now her father didn't have time to read to her.

After the shower, Valerie had pulled on her pajamas and rushed into the hallway from the bathroom. "Dad," she had called, "I've got a bunch of pictures for us to develop."

Her father replied, but whatever he said was muffled as it traveled from the other side of the house. She skipped back into her cluttered bedroom and retrieved the rolls of film from her backpack. Each in a capped black tube. That was when she had noticed it – the plain, white, ordinary envelope.

The envelope rested on her desk among dirty clothes, school notebooks, a used cup and plate, stacks of photographs she had taken, and a Hello Kitty lamp her mother, Marie, had given her for her fourth birthday. She recalled questioning who would be writing her. Valerie seized a shirt off the chair, wrapped it around her long, wet brown hair and squeezed, forcing the shirt to absorb water. She dropped it to the floor when she finished, concentrating fully on the envelope.

Her name and address on the envelope were written aslant with sloppy handwriting and her name was misspelled. That didn't stop her from tearing into the envelope and yanking out the piece of loose leaf paper.

Jack Hardy stepped into his daughter's bedroom entrance. "I thought I asked you to clean up your room." He didn't even look up from the electric bill to speak. "We'll do the pictures after dinner, okay?"

When he didn't get an answer, he raised his gaze and found Valerie frozen with what looked to be fear. Her shaky hands rattled the letter. "What's wrong, Val?" he asked.

Valerie held out the letter to her father. Tears welled in her eyes, but Valerie fought them back and swallowed hard, trying to be strong like her father. She cleared her throat, trying to keep her voice from cracking, and then said as evenly as possible, “A really bad joke, I think.”

Her father took the letter and read it quietly to himself. As he did, his face changed.

Sum men axe me to let them taist your tong. LSAY NO!!! I wants to shaiv your skin & raip you wif a nife. NO AGEN! Cut you open like a dear & draink your blud. NO! this i protect you from Valary not your father ME & I alwaiz will becuse men wont to hurt you & to saiv you we will hafta be to gether 1 dai & i cain't wait to taik you awai from your parents 4eva. Your father dont desurv you no wai. i do. i do i do & you do.

As Jack’s eyes rose from the paper, Valerie saw the same terror and confusion she had felt, and right then she knew the letter was no joke.

Her body felt instantly weak, and the tubes of film slipped from her hand, bouncing on the hardwood flooring and rolling to a stop under her dresser, left there in the shadowed darkness. All attention paid to the envelope and the letter. Always now the envelope and its contents. Never to the photographs, the dreams they held, or the excitement for the future. *Always that fucking envelope and letter.*