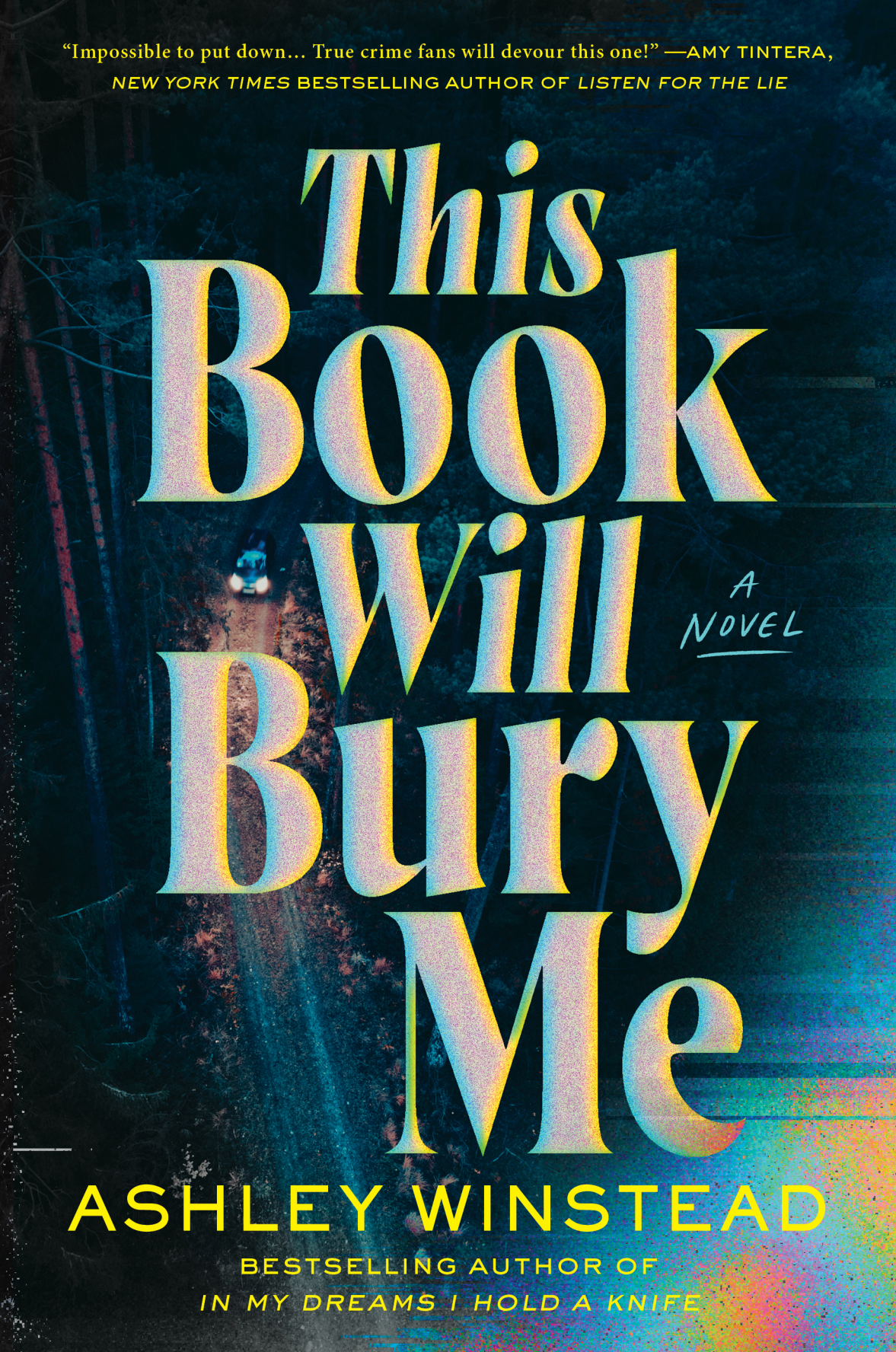


"Impossible to put down... True crime fans will devour this one!" —AMY TINTERA,  
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF LISTEN FOR THE LIE



This  
BOOK  
Will  
Bury  
Me

A  
NOVEL

ASHLEY WINSTEAD

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
IN MY DREAMS I HOLD A KNIFE

# PART ONE



*Here in the Dark,*

*We're No Longer Strangers*



IF YOU'RE READING THIS, CHANCES are last year you flipped on the news and saw me getting shoved to my knees in the dirt, hands wrested behind my back, gun-toting FBI agents swarming like ants around me into that three-story house. God only knows what the headline below my face must've read. Something about murder, something about shocking twists, underground conspiracies tied to the most famous crime spree in America. It was a provocative introduction, no doubt. It's not surprising you have questions. Especially since the story that's unfolded since that day has been riddled with plot holes, full of inconsistencies and unanswered questions. It's probably driven you more than a little bit mad.

You want me to break my silence and tell you the truth. Trust me, I know—I've gotten your letters, your pleas, and your death threats. Your hunger is legible and familiar. You want what I once wanted, that insatiable longing for answers, the most human of urges. It's what started my journey, too, after all. Our desire to order the unknowable, touch the unreachable, shine a light on what's hidden—it's universal. We're uncomfortable with ambiguity, with living suspended in the mess of the world.

Those people you saw the FBI shove to their knees beside me? They

wanted answers as badly as I did. We used to live in the true-crime forums, typing away at our theories, poring through forgotten records, speculating about the angle of a knife strike or a bullet. We were like those Enlightenment scientists of old, pushing knowledge into a new era, so confident in the human mind, our own possibilities. That's why we read and posted and tracked and obsessed. We thought we were edging closer every day to that shining city on the hill where all would be revealed and we would finally be at peace. Call it the City of Heaven, or Justice, or Absolution. Trust me, we really thought we'd get there. All the way up until the bitter end, when our experiment went so darkly south, exploding in our faces.

But I've gotten ahead of myself. A lot of people who weren't close to the story have been getting famous spreading lies, and you deserve the truth. Maybe you're a vulture, reading this simply to pick over my bones. Or maybe you're one of those rare people, curious and open-minded. Either way, I'm going to tell you the whole sordid thing. That's the point of a tell-all, isn't it? Time to let all the skeletons out of the closet.

But I'm going to do it my way. I promise it's for the best. Remember, I used to *be* you. I know you don't just want the cold, dry facts shoveled into your brain. You want to know *why*, how, what the weather was like that day. What kind of mood was in the air. The shoes they were wearing, what they ate for breakfast. Who they hated and who they crushed on. What the first blow must've felt like, the first sting of betrayal. You want to find the causal roots, trace them all the way back and all the way forward, treasure every detail. When it comes to stories like the one I've been holding—when it comes to mysteries like these, the kind they call crimes of the century—you want to savor it. You want as much color as you can get.

Trust me, by the time we're through, you'll bleed color.

Now let's begin.

My story starts with a body, just not the one you might expect.

# 2

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ON THURSDAY, AUGUST 31, 2023, at 10:45 p.m., I received a phone call that would change my life. It was a characteristically muggy night in Orlando. The unrelenting heat that had baked into the soil all day wafted out of the dirt, making the night air feel microwaved. The party was at Afton Oaks, a popular apartment complex for University of Central Florida undergrads, one of which I was at the time. The crowd was large enough to spill outside, which meant the sliding-glass door that connected the kitchen to the backyard remained half-open all night, turning the inside into a sauna. I remember the sweat that dampened my neck and back, as if some part of me already knew what was coming. We were singing at the top of our lungs to “Gangsta’s Paradise” by Coolio, played at an ear-splitting volume, a song choice that now makes me cringe to recall. I was pressed shoulder to shoulder with Gabby Maldonado,\* my best friend at the time, having the kind of silly, tipsy night a normal college student might have.

It should be stated that I was never a normal college student. Everyone at that party was a friend of Gabby’s, and I was just doing my

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\* Not her real name. I’ve given “Gabby” a pseudonym to protect her from association with me.

best to fit in. I'd transferred to UCF only the year before from a community college. I'd also started college two years late, making me a geriatric twenty-four to the other college seniors' twenty-two. These two facts together made me kind of a social leper, at least until Gabby took me under her wing. It wasn't that the students at UCF were cruel, only indifferent in the same way we all are—too self-obsessed and unobservant to notice much outside our little bubbles. I've learned that, even in the context of brutal crime, the human capacity for self-preoccupation is staggering, which is why you can get a case like Sarah Atman's, the college student who was murdered in the middle of campus, and yet there were no witnesses.\* Anyway, UCF was massive, home to a whopping fifty-eight thousand undergrads. It was a city unto itself.

I'd been so lonely after transferring that I'd contemplated quitting, just packing up my dorm and heading back to my parents' house with my tail between my legs. I even practiced what I'd tell my dad. Then one day a girl who was friendly to me in psych class—we'd roll our eyes together whenever the professor said something cringey—asked if I wanted to grab lunch. Gabby turned out to be one of those rare people born with a tender heart that no amount of life could toughen, the kind of person we introverts thank God for. Soon she was dragging me out on weeknights to off-campus parties; and before I knew it, we had the kind of friendship I'd only witnessed on TV, the kind where two people are so close they're basically codependent. I'd always wanted to be codependent, so I decided to stay. Most of all, I was thrilled I didn't have to disappoint my dad. He never got to go to college, and everything he'd never gotten, he wanted for me.

The night of August 31, the party at Afton Oaks was themed

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\* Or the case of Kitty Genovese, a woman stabbed to death in front of thirty-eight witnesses in Queens in 1964, none of whom called the police.

“Nineties Throwback,” hence the Coolio. Gabby looked ridiculous in oversized flannel; I wore a white T-shirt under a spaghetti strap dress like I’d seen on *Clueless*. We kept looking at each other and laughing, partly because of the outfits, partly because of the keg beer. And then my mom called.

Nowadays, I find myself wishing I could travel back to that moment—the second before I pressed Accept. Such a small action with such weighty consequences. Before that, my biggest worry was whether Gabby’s friends would accept me like she had. Mark it in my history book, or whatever biographies the true-crime experts write about me. Afton Oaks, Orlando, Florida, August 31: the last time Janeway Sharp was innocent.

My mother was hysterical on the other end of the line. “Your father,” she sobbed. “Jane, I think he’s had a heart attack. I’m in the car, following the ambulance to the hospital. Please, honey. I need you to pray.”

If you’ve never received a call like this, I’ll try to explain. It’s like being plunged into an ice bath. Your entire body goes on high alert, every cell awakening, every synapse firing, the same as if someone walked up and pressed a gun to your head. Your mind wiped of everything but the present and how to survive it.

“He’s going to be okay,” I said, somehow. “Everything is going to be okay. I’ll be there in two hours. Hold on.”

I believed it. There was no other choice.

Gabby insisted on driving me even though she was in the middle of a party, had never met my parents, and didn’t like to drive. That was her soft heart at work. On the road, she stayed silent while I rocked back and forth in the passenger seat, whispering, “You’re going to be okay, Daddy. You’re going to be okay.” I hadn’t called my father “Daddy” since I was young, but that was what came out, as if in my fear I’d somehow reverted back to being a little girl.

I must’ve repeated the phrase several hundred times as we drove.

I was convinced that if I stopped saying it, the worst would happen, as if the mantra was the one thing staving off my father's ruin. I've since learned that in the face of disaster, even the most pragmatic among us often turn to magical thinking. So I rocked and whispered, sending those words out into the universe, into his ear and the ear of whoever was in charge, letting them know my father was loved and should be spared.

Don't you wish it worked like that—that love was any sort of protection?

Forty-five minutes into the drive my mother called again. This time, I saw her name and my chest filled with hope.

"Mom?"

"Jane..." Her voice was ragged. "He didn't wake up. They tried everything—"

"No. That's not true. He's okay."

"Jane—"

"He's going to be okay. He'll wake up."

"Stop it, Jane. I can't take it."

Later I would learn that bald-faced denial is a common response to grief. In fact, everything I did that night and would do and think over the following days and weeks was straight out of a textbook. It's funny—I felt so alone in my pain, felt my grief was so annihilating that I must be experiencing a level of devastation that had never been recorded. But every bit of what I felt had been rehearsed by a billion people over tens of thousands of years of human existence. Death is the one thing we all share. I was just the latest in line.

Even so, the person I was closest to, who'd loved me the deepest, had died, suddenly and unexpectedly, and nothing would ever be the same. It was because of this that the next chapters of my life would unfold in strange and fateful ways.