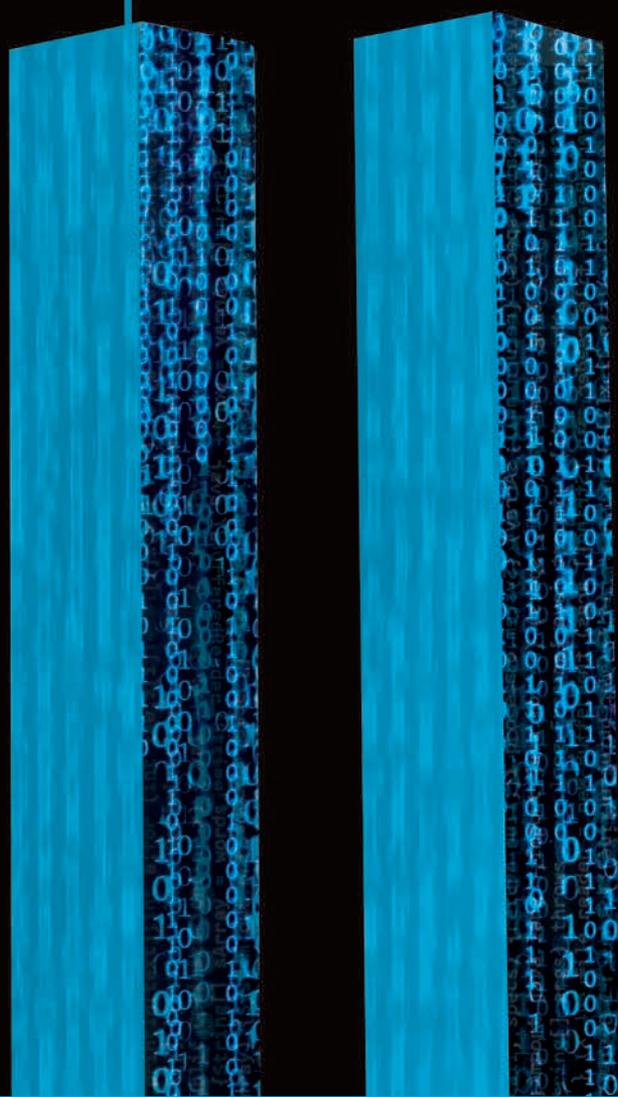


GEOFFREY GIRARD

# TRUTHERS



**They killed her. Killed all of them.**

This is what her father said.

Half a dozen times that she could remember.

When he was very tired. And high.

*They killed her. Killed all of them.*

*I'm sorry.*

He'd said it again two nights before they took him away.

**The police car that pulled up to her house that night didn't surprise or alarm Katie.**

It wasn't the first time; neighbors could be so nosy. She'd even seen her father arrested once (misdemeanor marijuana). But this night, there were *two* police cars. And a specially-marked SHERIFF'S OFFICE car.

And now a black car and a weird yellow van pulling up her driveway.

Her immediate guess was that her father was dead. Reeking of pot and/or beer and wrapped around some telephone pole. Or, worse and more likely, smashed into an SUV filled with some family who'd been racing on the tangled pathways of destiny toward this unhappy man for years. *It finally happened*, she thought.

And now, all these cars. All these people. Huddled in small circles up and down her driveway. People talking. Pointing. Organizing to fully include her in today's tragedy.

Katie stepped back from the window, the world quiet and still as she deliberated how to behave when they officially told her. Cry? Scream? Act surprised? She felt too disconnected from herself for real thought. Her brain unexpectedly empty, This-Space-for-Rent, entirely without the solutions that always came.

Finally, a knock at the door. *Thank God*, she thought. Because a knock was a sound and sound was something real and hinted at next steps. At least *a* next step.

She opened her front door slowly and a tall shadow filled the space behind.

"Kaitlyn Wallace?" the tall shadow asked.

She managed only a nod. It was as if Death himself had come to her door. Dropping by to explain all the complexities of the universe. She almost found the idea funny and might even have laughed if she weren't also so terrified.

Death leaned forward and, of course, became a man. Round face, gray goatee. No scythe or glistening black eye sockets. But a leather folder and a black baseball cap that said SHERIFF. "Sheriff Mathieson," he confirmed and asked if he could come in. More shadows hovered directly behind him. There was some discussion regarding whether she was a Kaitlyn or a Kate or et cetera, and she may have answered but wasn't really listening yet. Merely staring.

Outside, the nasty rainstorm that'd swept through had passed, its gloom and dankness trailing after. Some cops stood posted in her driveway. A half dozen neighbors confirmed their nosiness, their faces flush and hellish in the lone red light

revolving slowly atop one of the police cars.

The sheriff had entered her house, and then a half dozen other equally tall dark shapes—several men in suits, another cop, and a woman in plain clothes—followed him in and crowded her hallway as Katie was led to her living room. Already a guest in her own home.

"This is Gloria Dorsey," the sheriff said, introducing the woman. She was middle-aged, dressed like a modish school-teacher, and had short, jagged blonde hair. She looked eager to take over. "Ms. Dorsey is—"

"Is he dead?" Katie asked. She also wanted to take over, but still felt weirdly apart from her own words and movements.

The sheriff sighed, almost chuckled. "Oh, little lady, no, no. No."

"Your dad is fine," the Dorsey woman said. She'd taken a spot beside Katie on the couch, though Katie had no recollection of even sitting. Struggling for the reaction to the idea her dad was still alive proved as elusive as what she might do if he were dead. "He's perfectly fine. We should have told you that right away." The woman shot a look at the sheriff and his whole face tightened some.

Katie asked, "Is he in jail?"

"He's at a hospital," the sheriff replied. "Ventworth."

She'd never heard of it. Behind the sheriff, the others scurried around her house. Around it, through it, over it. Doing what, she had no clue. The cop had stayed back in the front hallway. And one man . . . This guy she'd not noticed before, now stood off to the side, in the entrance to the kitchen, watching. Watching her. And while all the others moved in a sort of intense frenzy, this guy looked perfectly calm. Chewing gum, even. Almost amused. Smiling?

"I don't understand," Katie said, looking away. Reality returning fast now, pursuing something they'd said. "You said he was fine. So why is he at the hospital?"

The sheriff and the Dorsey woman shared a look.

"There was an incident at work," Dorsey explained.

Work? Her dad was a maintenance-groundskeeper type for Park Services: cutting out honeysuckle, putting in new picnic tables, etc. What kind of incident would he—

"The doctors believe your father had a panic attack of some kind," said Dorsey.

"Nervous breakdown," the sheriff amended.

So, nothing to do with the honeysuckle. Of course not . . .

Katie thought about some of the things her dad had said to her recently. Stranger than usual, even. And, because it was tricky to separate them all, she also thought about some of the things he'd said for years. A "breakdown"? His whole damn life had been a breakdown.

"They don't know for sure what it was," Dorsey said, interrupting Katie's racing thoughts. "But he's going to spend at least tonight at the hospital." Pause. "Maybe longer. And he was worried about you here alone."

Katie made a face, calling Dorsey's lie. She'd spent most of her life alone in the house—this one and all the others before—while her father was off fishing or holed up in some nasty bar after work or God-knows-what. He wouldn't give one shit if she spent another night alone.

"We were worried," Dorsey corrected and then presented her most professional I-know-what-you're-going-through face before her next words: "You're a minor, Katie."

Finally, Katie realized what was going on.

Her dad was already at some hospital. They hadn't come for him.

They'd come for her.

### **There was no known next-of-kin.**

No grandparents or aunts or second cousins. No one. Only her dad. A.k.a.: the man imprisoned in some psychiatric hospital called Ventsomething.

So the Dorsey woman helped Katie collect her schoolbag and fill a county-supplied gym bag (said *BUTLER COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES* right on the side) with some clothes, then led her to the weird yellowy van. The sheriff followed.

Katie had gone on autopilot again. She had little memory of stepping outside or moving down the rain-stained driveway with Dorsey or getting into the van. She sat alone in the middle row of seats, while Dorsey shut the side door and then got in to drive. The night still swirling red. Neighbors still watching. Mrs. Lindhorst and Gary the Grouch. Their stares.

As the van pulled away with her in it, she noticed all the lights in her house were still on, the front door wide open, strange men still within.

"I want to see my father," Katie said.

"Soon," Dorsey replied from up front.

But she was lying.

# PRAISE FOR *TRUTHERS*

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