

Dark Places: A Novel

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I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ.

Libby Day was seven when her mother and two sisters were murdered in "The Satan Sacrifice of Kinnakee, Kansas." As her family lay dying, little Libby fled their tiny farmhouse into the freezing January snow. She lost some fingers and toes, but she survived-and famously testified that her fifteen-year-old brother, Ben, was the killer. Twenty-five years later, Ben sits in prison, and troubled Libby lives off the dregs of a trust created by well-wishers who've long forgotten her.

The Kill Club is a macabre secret society obsessed with notorious crimes. When they locate Libby and pump her for details-proof they hope may free Ben-Libby hatches a plan to profit off her tragic history. For a fee, she'll reconnect with the players from that night and report her findings to the club . . . and maybe she'll admit her testimony wasn't so solid after all.

As Libby's search takes her from shabby Missouri strip clubs to abandoned Oklahoma tourist towns, the narrative flashes back to January 2, 1985. The events of that day are relayed through the eyes of Libby's doomed family members-including Ben, a loner whose rage over his shiftless father and their failing farm have driven him into a disturbing friendship with the new girl in town. Piece by piece, the unimaginable truth emerges, and Libby finds herself right back where she started-on the run from a killer.

GILLIAN FLYNN's debut novel, *Sharp Objects*, was an Edgar Award finalist and the winner of two of Britain's Dagger Awards. She lives in Chicago with her husband, Brett Nolan, and a rather giant cat named Roy. Libby Day

Now

I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ. Slit me at my belly and it might slide out, meaty and dark, drop on the floor so you could stomp on it. It's the Day blood.

Something's wrong with it. I was never a good little girl, and I got worse after the murders. Little Orphan Libby grew up sullen and boneless, shuffled around a group of lesser relatives-second cousins and great-aunts and friends of friends-stuck in a series of mobile homes or rotting ranch houses all across Kansas. Me going to school in my dead sisters' hand-me-downs: Shirts with mustardy armpits. Pants with baggy bottoms, comically loose, held on with a raggedy belt cinched to the farthest hole. In class photos my hair was always crooked-barrettes hanging loosely from strands, as if they were airborne objects caught in the tangles-and I always had bulging pockets under my eyes, drunk-landlady eyes. Maybe a grudging curve of the lips where a smile should be. Maybe.

I was not a lovable child, and I'd grown into a deeply unlovable adult. Draw a picture of my soul, and it'd be a scribble with fangs.

It was miserable, wet-bone March and I was lying in bed thinking about killing myself, a hobby of mine. Indulgent afternoon daydreaming: A shotgun, my mouth, a bang and my head jerking once, twice, blood on the wall. Spatter, splatter. "Did she want to be buried or cremated?" people would ask. "Who should come to the funeral?" And no one would know. The people, whoever they were, would just look at each other's shoes or shoulders until

the silence settled in and then someone would put on a pot of coffee, briskly and with a fair amount of clatter. Coffee goes great with sudden death.

I pushed a foot out from under my sheets, but couldn't bring myself to connect it to the floor. I am, I guess, depressed. I guess I've been depressed for about twenty-four years. I can feel a better version of me somewhere in there-hidden behind a liver or attached to a bit of spleen within my stunted, childish body-a Libby that's telling me to get up, do something, grow up, move on. But the meanness usually wins out. My brother slaughtered my family when I was seven. My mom, two sisters, gone: bang bang, chop chop, choke choke. I didn't really have to do anything after that, nothing was expected.

I inherited \$321,374 when I turned eighteen, the result of all those well-wishers who'd read about my sad story, do-gooders whose hearts had gone out to me. Whenever I hear that phrase, and I hear it a lot, I picture juicy doodle-hearts, complete with bird-wings, flapping toward one of my many crap-ass childhood homes, my little-girl self at the window, waving and grabbing each bright heart, green cash sprinkling down on me, thanks, thanks a ton! When I was still a kid, the donations were placed in a conservatively managed bank account, which, back in the day, saw a jump about every three-four years, when some magazine or news station ran an update on me. Little Libby's Brand New Day: The Lone Survivor of the Prairie Massacre Turns a Bittersweet 10. (Me in scruffy pigtailed on the possum-pissed lawn outside my Aunt Diane's trailer, Diane's thick tree-calves, exposed by a rare skirt, planted on the trailer steps behind me.) Brave Baby Day's Sweet 16! (Me, still miniature, my face aglow with birthday candles, my shirt too tight over breasts that had gone D-cup that year, comic-book sized on my tiny frame, ridiculous, porny.)

I'd lived off that cash for more than thirteen years, but it was almost gone. I had a meeting that afternoon to determine exactly how gone. Once a year the man who managed the money, an unblinking, pink-cheeked banker named Jim Jeffreys, insisted on taking me to lunch, a "checkup," he called it. We'd eat something in the twenty-dollar range and talk about my life-he'd known me since I was this-high, after all, heheh. As for me, I knew almost nothing about Jim Jeffreys, and never asked, viewing the appointments always from the same kid's-eye view: Be polite, but barely, and get it over with. Single-word answers, tired sighs. (The one thing I suspected about Jim Jeffreys was that he must be Christian, churchy-he had the patience and optimism of someone who thought Jesus was watching.) I wasn't due for a "checkup" for another eight or nine months, but Jim Jeffreys had nagged, leaving phone messages in a serious, hushed voice, saying he'd done all he could to extend the "life of the fund," but it was time to think about "next steps."

And here again came the meanness: I immediately thought about that other little tabloid girl, Jamie Something, who'd lost her family the same year-1985. She'd had part of her face burned off in a fire her dad set that killed everyone else in her family. Any time I hit the ATM, I think of that Jamie girl, and how if she hadn't stolen my thunder, I'd have twice as much money. That Jamie Whatever was out at some mall with my cash, buying fancy handbags and jewelry and buttery department-store makeup to smooth onto her shiny, scarred face. Which was a horrible thing to think, of course. I at least knew that.

Finally, finally, finally I pulled myself out of bed with a stage-effect groan and wandered to the front of my house. I rent a small brick bungalow within a loop of other small brick bungalows, all of which squat on a massive bluff overlooking the former stockyards of Kansas City. Kansas City, Missouri, not Kansas City, Kansas. There's a difference.

My neighborhood doesn't even have a name, it's so forgotten. It's called Over There That Way. A weird, subprime area, full of dead ends and dog crap. The other bungalows are packed with old people who've lived in them since they were built. The old people sit, gray and pudding-like, behind screen windows, peering out at all hours. Sometimes they walk to their cars on careful elderly tiptoes that make me feel guilty, like I should go help. But they wouldn't like that. They are not friendly old people—they are tight-lipped, pissed-off old people who do not appreciate me being their neighbor, this new person. The whole area hums with their disapproval. So there's the noise of their disdain and there's the skinny red dog two doors down who barks all day and howls all night, the constant background noise you don't realize is driving you crazy until it stops, just a few blessed moments, and then starts up again. The neighborhood's only cheerful sound I usually sleep through: the morning coos of toddlers. A troop of them, round-faced and multilayered, walk to some daycare hidden even farther in the rat's nest of streets behind me, each clutching a section of a long piece of rope trailed by a grown-up. They march, penguin-style, past my house every morning, but I have not once seen them return. For all I know, they troddle around the entire world and return in time to pass my window again in the morning. Whatever the story, I am attached to them. There are three girls and a boy, all with a fondness for bright red jackets—and when I don't see them, when I oversleep, I actually feel blue. Bluer. That'd be the word my mom would use, not something as dramatic as depressed. I've had the blues for twenty-four years.

I put on a skirt and blouse for the meeting, feeling dwarfy, my grown-up, big-girl clothes never quite fitting. I'm barely five foot-four foot, ten inches in truth, but I round up. Sue me. I'm thirty-one, but people tend to talk to me in singsong, like they want to give me fingerpaints.

I headed down my weedy front slope, the neighbor's red dog launching into its busybody barking. On the pavement near my car are the smashed skeletons of two baby birds, their flattened beaks and wings making them look reptilian. They've been there for a year. I can't resist looking at them each time I get in my car. We need a good flood, wash them away.

Two elderly women were talking on the front steps of a house across the street, and I could feel them refusing to see me. I don't know anyone's name. If one of those women died, I couldn't even say, "Poor old Mrs. Zalinsky died." I'd have to say, "That mean old bitch across the street bit it."

Feeling like a child ghost, I climbed into my anonymous midsized car, which seems to be made mostly of plastic. I keep waiting for someone from the dealership to show up and tell me the obvious: "It's a joke. You can't actually drive this. We were kidding." I trance-drove my toy car ten minutes downtown to meet Jim Jeffreys, rolling into the steakhouse parking

lot twenty minutes late, knowing he'd smile all kindly and say nothing about my tardiness.

I was supposed to call him from my cell phone when I arrived so he could trot out and escort me in. The restaurant—a great, old-school KC steakhouse—is surrounded by hollowed-out buildings that concern him, as if a troop of rapists were permanently crouched in their empty husks awaiting my arrival. Jim Jeffreys is not going to be The Guy Who Let Something Bad Happen to Libby Day. Nothing bad can happen to BRAVE BABY DAY, LITTLE GIRL LOST, the pathetic, red-headed seven-year-old with big blue eyes, the only one who survived the PRAIRIE MASSACRE, the KANSAS CRAZE-KILLINGS, the FARMHOUSE SATAN SACRIFICE. My mom, two older sisters, all butchered by Ben. The only one left, I'd fingered him as the murderer. I was the cutie-pie who brought my Devil-worshipping brother to justice. I was big news. The Enquirer put my tearful photo on the front page with the headline ANGEL FACE.

I peered into the rearview mirror and could see my baby face even now. My freckles were faded, and my teeth straightened, but my nose was still pug and my eyes kitten-r...

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