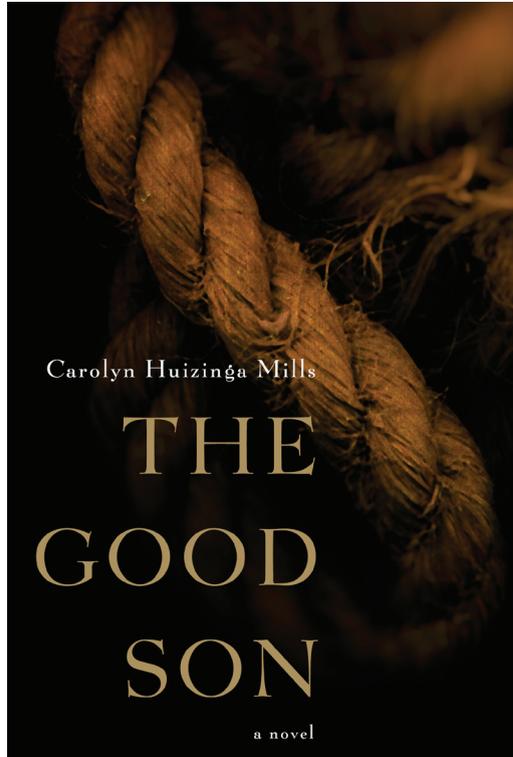


**Excerpt from *The Good Son*
by Carolyn Huizinga Mills**



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Chapter 6

My extra-long shower does at least temporarily take the chill out of my bones. As I'm towelling off, I glance at my phone and notice that I have a missed call from Jason. I'm anxious to talk to him because I don't want the weirdness from last night to linger, but first I need something to eat; I'm feeling light-headed.

I decide on an omelette. I don't have the energy to make anything more ambitious. I'm dicing a green pepper, half-listening to the news on the TV in the living room, when I hear a name that stops me cold. Still gripping my paring knife, I stand on the threshold to the living room, staring in stunned silence at the image of six-year-old Amy Nessor on the screen.

It's the same school photo they used when she went missing twenty-nine years ago, with her uneven blonde pigtails and her impish smile showing off the gap where her front tooth used to be. I remember this picture all too well — the slight tilt to her head, the plaid dress and lace collar — although I haven't seen it since I was a kid. My heart races as the news anchor explains in his ultra-calm voice that Amy Nessor's case is being re-opened. New evidence has emerged. There aren't many more details than that and the anchor quickly, too quickly, moves on to the next story. Amy's sweet, unsuspecting face is replaced by a protest taking place somewhere else in the world. People are shouting and punching the air, but I don't register any of it. The knife slips from my hand and as the handle strikes my foot, I'm jolted out of my stupor. I bend down to pick up the knife. Does Ricky know? What is he doing right now? He must be freaking out. I think of my mom and feel bile rise in my throat. This is going to kill her. This is absolutely going to kill her. With a rasping grunt that tears through my ribcage I

jam the thin blade of my paring knife into the kitchen doorframe. It wobbles there for an instant, like an accusation, before I pull it out and return to the kitchen where I drop the knife into the sink before collapsing onto a chair. My body has turned to Jell-O, but as much as I can't seem to stop shaking, a tiny part of me is relieved.

Lindell Drive, the street where I grew up and where my mom still lives, is a quiet street that butts up against the north end of the ravine. There weren't many kids sharing that short stretch of road during my childhood — just me and Ricky, the Nessor girls, and the Kinzie's baby. Later, there were twin boys, but I never knew their names. Most of the kids in our neighbourhood lived behind Lindell Drive, in the subdivision closer to the school, where the streets loop in cul de sacs, and where I used to play cops and robbers, although I stopped playing after Derek Weberson's accident.

The two of us were pedaling furiously down the same street, hearts pumping, when Derek veered toward the side of the road and crashed into the back of a parked pick-up truck. I watched him hit it and for a split second, there was no sound other than the echoing clash of metal on metal. Then Derek started to howl. In between wails, he took great shuddering breaths that terrified me more than the sound of his crying. I skidded to a stop and ran over to where he was lying sprawled on the asphalt, but I didn't know what to do.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He didn't answer; he just kept screaming.

I tried to lift his bike off him, but he screamed even louder as soon as I touched it, so I backed up and stared at him, waiting for someone else to come and help. It didn't take long. Mrs. Thomp-

son, who lived on the corner, came scurrying toward us with a tea towel thrown over her shoulder. She scooped up Derek's bike so quickly he didn't have time to protest. Then she sent Mike and Tommy, who had just come tearing around the corner on their own bikes, to get Derek's mom.

"What happened?" she said, turning to me.

"He ran into the back of the truck. He turned around to look behind us, then —"

"You're okay, you're okay," she said to Derek, who was still sprawled on the road. He hadn't even tried to sit up.

As more kids began to crowd around, Mrs. Thompson ordered everyone away. "Get on home," she said. "He doesn't need you gawking. Go on now!"

Derek's mom came racing down the sidewalk in her socks. "Is he okay? Oh god, please tell me he's okay." Mrs. Weberson knelt beside her son and smoothed his hair away from his forehead. At her touch, Derek began howling again and the sound swirled inside my head, making me dizzy.

I sank down onto the curb.

"The boys said he'd been hit by a truck," Mrs. Weberson said. She swung her head toward me, eyes frantic.

"No, no," Mrs. Thompson interceded. "He hit the truck. Right, Zoe?"

I nodded. I could feel hot tears dribbling noiselessly down my cheeks.

Mrs. Thompson helped Mrs. Weberson lift Derek into a sitting position and I watched as they hoisted him to his feet. His arms, which I later learned were both broken, dangled at his sides and he made the most pitiful sound as he stood. Mrs. Thompson steered Derek's bike to her lawn and laid it gently on the grass.

"You can come back for this later," she told him. "Or one of the

other boys can bring it to you.”

No one asked anything more of me. I waited until after Derek and his mother had gone before rising from the curb and walking my own bike home with the sound of Derek’s pain-filled shrieks reverberating in my ears.

My bike was getting too small for me anyway so it was easy to pretend that was the real reason I stopped playing cops and robbers. Instead, when I was outside, I spent most of my time hanging out on Lindell Drive, collecting rocks or bouncing a ball against the side of our house or just watching the neighbours from the safety of our porch.

The Nessors lived three doors down from us. They had two girls, Amy and Sabrina, who were both younger than I was and, as a result, not very interesting. I often saw Amy playing on her front lawn, or riding her tricycle down the sidewalk, while her mom sat on their front step bouncing Sabrina on her lap. If Amy hadn’t been so little, I might have made more of an effort to get to know her, to play with her, even. I might have paid more attention. And if I had? Would that have changed anything?

By the time Amy started grade one, I was in grade four. We both followed the same short route to school and back, but we never walked together. I might have been too shy, or maybe she was; whatever the case, I usually ended up trailing a few paces behind her as she sashayed down the street, her blonde pigtails swinging.

On the Tuesday before the Thanksgiving weekend, when I was walking home from school, Amy was about half a block ahead of me. Certain details about that afternoon are etched permanently into my brain; I remember that it was gloriously warm outside. As

I meandered down the sidewalk, the sun shone hard and bright, turning the trees that lined the street into a brilliant canopy of fiery colour: orange and red and glowing yellow. I was clutching a paper turkey that I'd made at school using a tracing of my left hand with my thumb as the turkey's head and my four fingers as feathers. On each of the fingers we had written something we were thankful for. I was excited to see Mom's reaction when she saw her name on one of those fingers, carefully spelled out in my best printing.

Amy Nessor strolled ahead of me, braids swishing. I lost sight of her momentarily when she turned onto Lindell Drive, but as I came around the corner, I saw her again, walking up to a light blue car that was parked between our houses. As soon as I saw the car, my throat constricted with a spasm of disappointment because it meant that Darius was over and he and Ricky were probably going somewhere. I wanted to show Ricky my turkey, too, because I'd put his name on my pinky finger and I thought it would make him happy. But then Amy pulled open the back door of the car and climbed in and I was flushed with the momentary relief that it wasn't Darius after all and that Ricky would get to see my turkey.

Except when I walked into the house, Ricky wasn't home. It was just my mom, setting out a snack for me. I handed her my special turkey and waited. She glanced at it without saying anything, then stuck it to the door of the fridge under a real estate magnet that covered more than half of the turkey's body. She asked about my day, absentmindedly, while peeling potatoes at the sink. I don't know if she even looked at what I'd written on those turkey feathers.

I decided I would point them out to her later, when Ricky was back. Then Mom would smile and tell me how sweet I was and I would fall asleep that night with her words brushing against my skin like a soft blanket.

After I'd had my cup of milk and a cookie, Mom sent me outside to play. The air was warm and still. I sat on our front step with my baseball glove in my lap hoping that when Ricky got back he'd agree to play catch. It wasn't often anymore that he spent time with me, but the afternoon was so nice, the weather so dazzlingly perfect, I thought there was a chance it just might happen.

It sickens me now to think about how much I prized those snatches of time spent with my brother, about how much his attention mattered. Especially how, even if it was just briefly, I considered him something to be thankful for.

Lindell Drive was particularly quiet that day as I sat outside waiting for my brother. Even old Mr. Lowell, who I usually saw out walking after school, whacking anything that was in his way with his cane, was nowhere in sight. He once sent my Hula Hoop sailing right into the middle of the road. "What's this thing doing here?" he'd yelled. "Waiting to trip me up? Keep your blasted toys off the sidewalk!"

Because the afternoon was so perfect, I expected more people to be out. Mrs. Kinzie, perhaps, pushing her stroller. Someone sweeping their steps. Mr. Lowell, definitely, shuffling along with his cane. Yet, on that particular Tuesday, it seemed there was no one outside but me. When Mrs. Nessor came out of her house calling Amy's name, it rang out loud and clear down the empty street.

Her call was met with silence. Spying me on the front step, my ball glove balanced on my knees, Mrs. Nessor walked over.

"Have you seen Amy?" she asked.

"She went in a car."

"She went in a car? What car? What do you mean?" Mrs. Nessor's eyes squinted in confusion.

"I saw her — I saw her get in a car," I repeated.

"Today? You saw her get in a car today?"

I wanted desperately to stand up and go inside. Mrs. Nessor's questions were too sharp and quick. I could feel tears springing to my eyes. "When I came home," I whispered.

"What?" Her eyes widened in alarm. Many of the details that followed have blurred over time, but I remember her eyes. Her frightened eyes searching my face, silently begging me to unsay what I'd seen. Her hands began flailing at her sides as she looked wildly up and down the empty street, and I watched her fingers as they fluttered then fell. "Zoe, what are you talking about? When did she get in a car?"

The front door opened and suddenly my mom was standing on the porch behind me. "Is everything okay, Janet?" she asked. I stood up quickly and tried to sneak past her into the house, but she stopped me with a firm hand on my shoulder.

"No." Mrs. Nessor's voice came out high-pitched and shaky. "I can't find Amy. And Zoe says ... Zoe said she saw her get into a car."

Mrs. Nessor had moved her hands to her face now, where they rested on her cheeks as she stared at my mother helplessly. Fear wafted from her eyes and mouth, furling around my feet, rooting me in place.

"Okay, okay," Mom said, and her voice sounded so calm, so confident. "Don't worry. We'll find her." Then, turning to me, she asked, "What did you see?"

Later, after the police had asked me over and over again to describe the car, to explain how exactly Amy had climbed into it — Could I remember anything about the driver? — and long after Mrs. Nessor had been escorted back to her house, I heard Ricky

come home. I had told the police everything I remembered, except for one tiny detail. Not once did I mention, that for the briefest of moments, I'd been convinced that the car I saw belonged to my brother's best friend.